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Doing Everything To Improve H-1B Visa Process, Green Card Backlog: US

(Sai Bureau)-US President Joe Biden is doing everything he can to improve the H-1B visa process, 'green card' backlog and other issues related to the country's legal immigration system, the White House has said.

The H-1B visa is a non-immigrant visa that allows US companies to employ foreign workers in speciality occupations that require theoretical or technical expertise.

"One of the steps, if we look at the H-1B visa process, we have taken action to improve that and the process and backlog for lawful permanent residents (green card) who are eligible to become US citizens," White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre told reporters at her daily news conference on Wednesday. She was responding to questions about the feeling among a section of Indian Americans that the president is not putting as much effort on addressing the woes of legal immigrants as he is doing for illegal immigrants. Biden heads to the southern border with Mexico in Texas on Thursday. "Just last month, for example, as a part of our efforts to strengthen the integrity of our immigration system and reduce potential for fraud, the DHS published a final rule relating to H-1B visa," Jean-Pierre said.

"So, the changes promote fairer and more equitable outcomes and, so, we will



continue our work to improve the system within our authorities and that has certainly been a priority," she said and added that the administration takes that "very seriously" and is continuing to do everything that it can to improve the visa process.

The US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) has announced the launch of myUSCIS organisational accounts that will allow multiple people within an organisation, as well as their legal representatives, to collaborate on and prepare H-1B registrations, H-1B petitions and any associated Form I-907, Request for Premium Processing

Service.

A new organisational account is required to participate in the H-1B Electronic Registration Process starting in March 2024, the USCIS said. "We are working expeditiously to address any technical issues that may arise for legal representatives whose accounts migrated when they logged into their online account on or after February 14, 2024, including impacts on cases other than H-1B filings," it said. The initial registration period for FY 2025 H-1B cap will open at noon Eastern on March 6, and run through noon Eastern on

March 22.

During this period, prospective petitioners and their representatives, if applicable, must use a USCIS online account to register each beneficiary electronically for the selection process and pay the associated registration fee for each beneficiary, its media alert said. Starting with the FY 2025 initial registration period, USCIS will require registrants to provide valid passport information or valid travel document information for each beneficiary. The passport or travel document provided must be the one the beneficiary, if or when abroad, intends to use to enter the US if issued an H-1B visa. Each beneficiary must only be registered under one passport or travel document. "In March, we will launch online filing of Form I-129 and associated Form I-907 for non-cap H-1B petitions. On April 1, USCIS will begin accepting online filing for H-1B cap petitions and associated Forms I-907 for petitioners whose registrations have been selected," the federal agency said. To help guide organisations and legal representatives through the new process, the USCIS had launched the Tech Talks sessions in February 2024. During these sessions, individuals can ask questions about the organisational accounts and online filing of Form I-129 for H-1B petitions.

NRI woman smothered in Punjab over 'insurance money', body kept in freezer

(Sai Bureau)-Rajdeep Kaur, a US citizen originally from Punjab, was allegedly murdered by her in-laws in Kapurthala's Nano Mallian village, a media report said. The murder of the 32-year-old NRI took place on the night of January 19, and the

with the murder case.

"It is believed the woman was murdered as she had hefty life insurance coverage," The Tribune quoted Sultanpur Lodhi DSP, Babandeep Singh, as saying.

The post-mortem examination report, received on January 23, cited "asphyxia due to smothering" as the cause of Rajdeep's death.

The murder became more disturbing when it emerged that Rajdeep's in-laws stored her body in a freezer at Sidhwa Dona village for two days before informing the Sultanpur Lodhi police.

Someone informed Rajdeep's parents, who reside in the UK, of her death through a telephone call. Concerned about the circumstances of their daughter's demise, her mother, Nirmal Kaur, travelled to India and lodged a complaint with Sultanpur Lodhi police on January 25.

Rajdeep's family alleges that she was subjected to constant torture by her husband, who pressured her to transfer all her property in his name for immigration purposes. Nirmal Kaur, expressing her suspicions, stated, "My daughter was called to India based on a lie about a wedding. It was a plan to kill her."



police suspect the motive was to claim her hefty life insurance money.

Rajdeep, a mother of a five-year-old boy, arrived in Kapurthala on January 12. She was brought to India on the pretext of a relative's wedding, according to a report in The Tribune.

Rajdeep's husband, Manjinder Singh, is living illegally in the United States and hoping to obtain a green card.

Her in-laws, Daljit Kaur and Jagdev Singh, were arrested by Sultanpur Lodhi police for alleged complicity in the crime.

Furthermore, Rajdeep's husband, Manjinder Singh, who is still in the United States, has been charged in connection

Top Indian-American White House official accused of creating 'toxic' environment

(Sai Bureau)-An Indian-American White House official who was tasked with addressing the opioid epidemic is facing being accused of creating a "toxic" work environment.

Rahul Gupta, a director at the White House, was named by several former and current officials of the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP).

They blamed the 'drug czar' for "significant staff turnover and widespread discontent", according to Politico. Politico mentioned nine unnamed people, familiar with the office operations, who described Gupta as "egocentric and 'prima donna' preoccupied with his public profile."

These accusations have come at a time when the office is facing significant staff departures. At least eight top officials and several others have resigned in recent months, according to Politico. The departures have left the office without enough top officials, as roughly around 75 people have left the office. The departures have made it hard for them to meet important deadlines.

"When everybody leaves, it can't be 'everybody is the problem,'" one of the unnamed former officials was quoted as saying. "On some level, you might be the problem," reported the Politico.

An ONDCP official told Politico that the office's "critical mission to address the overdose epidemic is deeply personal to Gupta: from his decades of work as a

physician treating patients with substance-use disorders, to leading the public health response efforts in ground zero of the opioid crisis in West Virginia." "Gupta remains laser-focused on the office's work to strengthen life-saving public health services, prevent illicit drugs from reaching our communities,

and meeting with Americans across the country to strengthen our whole-of-society response," the official said.

Rahul Gupta, a physician with over 25 years of experience, was appointed to the ONDCP by President Joe Biden in 2021. He also worked as the Health Commissioner for two West Virginia governors and was a professor of medicine taught at several universities. Gupta was initially praised for his qualifications but later alleged that he had fallen short of expectations.



British-Indian couple face extradition for smuggling Indian medicines to US



(News Agency)-A British-Indian couple faced charges in a London court on Tuesday for allegedly smuggling unapproved medical drugs from India to the US. They are fighting the US government's bid to get them extradited. Kiranjit Ghuman, 45, and Sukhijit Singh Ghuman, 46, who lives on a 23-acre estate in Nottinghamshire, England, were taken into custody last year based on a US extradition request. Appearing at Westminster magistrates' court, the couple confirmed their identities and birthdates. Their extradition hearing is

scheduled for three days starting September 16.

As part of their bail conditions, the couple must remain at home from midnight to 6 am. Their passports, US green cards, and Kiranjit's Indian ID card have been confiscated by police.

Additionally, Sukhijit must surrender any Dubai identity card. They are required to report to the police station every Wednesday, stay at home overnight, and refrain from applying for travel documents or leaving the country.

Each has submitted £150,000 as security

deposit.

The US aims to get them extradited to face accusations of smuggling medical drugs into the country, distributing unapproved drugs across various states, and involvement in health care fraud, wire fraud, and unlawful distribution of medical drugs. The allegations suggest they orchestrated the smuggling of medical drugs from India to the US for cancer and rheumatology patients treated at medical clinics owned by Sukhijit, who is the chairman and CEO of Octavian, in California and Arizona.

Sukhijit, a British Sikh, returned to the UK from the US in 2023.

The couple have denied the charges and are contesting the extradition bid.

During the court proceedings, Peter Caldwell, representing the US, mentioned the complexity of the fraud related to medical products and medicines crossing US borders.

"This is a rather involved fraud concerning the supply of medical products and medicines across US borders. So there is some evidence to be served relating to prison conditions in California and medical evidence," said Caldwell.

The next hearing is scheduled for July 30, as directed by district judge Briony Clarke.

Indian accused in US of evading duties on jewellery worth millions of dollars



(Sai Bureau)-An Indian jeweller based out of Mumbai and New Jersey has been indicted on allegations of illegally evading customs duties on millions of dollars' worth of jewellery imported into the United States. He is also facing accusations of running unlicensed money transfer operations.

Monishkumar Kirankumar Doshi Shah, 39, was nabbed over the weekend and brought before US magistrate judge Andre M Espinosa in Newark federal court on February 26. He managed to secure release on a \$100,000 bond but with strict conditions, including home detention and

location monitoring. The charges against Shah include one count of conspiracy to commit wire fraud and one count of operating an unlicensed money transfer business. According to the court documents, it is stated that between January 2015 and September 2023, Shah schemed to dodge customs duties on jewellery shipments from Turkey and India to the US.

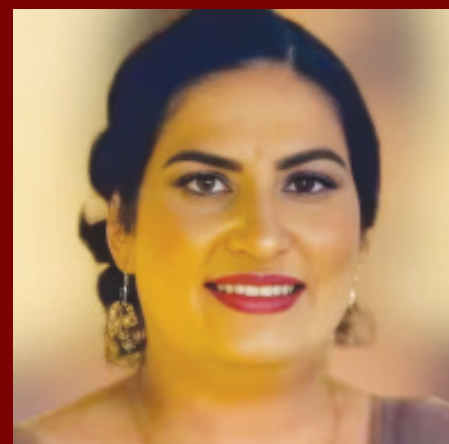
According to court documents, Shah sent goods from Turkey or India, which would have attracted a 5.5% duty if sent directly to the US, to one of Shah's companies in South Korea.

Shah's partners in South Korea allegedly tweaked the labels on the jewellery to make it appear as if they originated from South Korea, thus avoiding the duty. These altered shipments would then be sent to Shah or his customers in the US. In addition to this, Shah stands accused of creating fake invoices and packing lists, and instructing his customers to do the same, to falsely claim that the jewellery was ordered from Turkey or India by his South Korean companies. It's further alleged that from July 2020 through November 2021, Shah allegedly operated multiple jewellery companies in New York City's Diamond District, including MKore LLC, MKore USA Inc, Shah collected cash from customers and used jewellery companies to convert the cash into wires or checks.

Shah would sometimes get over a million dollars in cash in a single day. For providing these services, Shah purportedly charged a fee, according to the court documents.

Prosecutors point out that none of Shah's or his associates' companies were registered as money transfer businesses with authorities in New York, New Jersey, or the Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (FinCEN).

Indian-origin man gets life sentence in Canada for stabbing wife to death



(News Agency)-A 40-year-old Indian-origin man was awarded life in jail in British Columbia, Canada, for stabbing his wife to death.

Navinder Gill killed his wife Harpreet Kaur Gill in December 2022. They had three children together, all under 10.

British Columbia's homicide investigation team has announced that Navinder would not be eligible for parole for 10 years. The sentencing took place on February 21. "Incidents of intimate partner violence have a profound effect on families and communities," Integrated Homicide Investigation Team (IHIT) spokesperson Sergeant Timothy Pierotti in a statement.

"We're thankful for the great work being done by Surrey RCMP (Royal Canadian Mounted Police) Victim Services and the Ministry of Children and Family Development who continue to support the family and the community," Pierotti added. The attack took place at their residence in Surrey, shortly after 9 pm on December 7, 2022.

Harpreet, 40, sustained multiple stab wounds and died in a hospital despite life-saving efforts of first responders. Navinder was arrested on December 15 by the Integrated Homicide Investigation Team (IHIT). He was charged with second-degree murder on December 16, 2022.

He pleaded guilty to his wife's murder on June 22, 2023.

During the court proceedings last June, the lawyer argued that his client had made a mistake. "He was very remorseful in court today. It's a very tragic incident, that's all I can say," lawyer Gagan Nahal said.

Harpreet worked as a teacher and raised three children - all below the age of 10.

Her parents and brother, living in India, are struggling and concerned about the future of their grandchildren.

Harpreet's parents have reportedly sought legal advice regarding their custody

Bhagwant Mann Slams PM Modi as master of phraseology

By JAG MOHAN THAKEN- Chandigarh, India- Taking a jibe over PM Narendra Modi's one nation, one election stance, the Punjab Chief Minister, Bhagwant Mann said that why Modi is not pursuing the agenda of one nation, one education. He said that there is a huge parity in the education being imparted at convent schools and the government schools but unfortunately no one has ever paid heed to it. Bhagwant Singh Mann said that Modi who is master of phraseology has only befooled the people by coining slogans like ache din and others.

The Chief Minister said that previous governments at the centre and state played friendly matches with each other to plunder public wealth. He said that they robbed people more than Britishers people had no other option except electing them again and again. Bhagwant Singh Mann said that but now in the form of AAP people have found a catalyst of change in the country and people are rejecting BJP and Congress by opting for AAP.

Bhagwant Mann said that our great freedom fighters had envisioned a classless democracy where elected representatives will work as real servants of people to ensure their wellbeing. However, he bemoaned that in the last 75 years these elected representatives have turned into political executives by irrelevantly drawing huge salaries and pensions from the state exchequer. Bhagwant Mann said that the entire burden of this facility to these leaders was on the taxpayers as their money was wasted on ensuring multiple pensions to these leaders instead of being used for the public welfare.

The Chief Minister, while addressing the gathering after dedicating/ laying foundation stone of the projects worth Rs 283 crore at Nakodar (Jalandhar), on Wednesday, said that the Lok Sabha



MP elected from Jalandhar last year has worked tirelessly for the welfare of the people and the development of the district. He said that the festivals of joy had ceased to take place during the previous regimes. Bhagwant Singh Mann said but the atmosphere has changed after the AAP government has assumed charge in the state.

CM Mann said that it is a matter of immense pride and satisfaction that 90% consumers in the state are getting zero power bill due to pro-people decisions of the state government. He said that to impart quality health services to people, the state government has set up 664 Aam Aadmi Clinics in Punjab adding that 150 more such clinics will be dedicated to the people of the state very soon. Bhagwant Singh Mann said that around one crore people have so far availed the facilities of free healthcare in these clinics adding that this is a new revolution in the healthcare sector adding that efforts are afoot to give a facelift to this sector.

The Chief Minister said that in the coming budget no new burden will be levied on the people of the state and the pro-people

budget will give impetus to ongoing development of the state. He said that the move is aimed at ensuring that people are immensely benefited from it, adding that no stone will be left unturned for the well-being of the common man. Bhagwant Singh Mann said that strenuous efforts are being made to benefit every stratum of society and this will provide dividends in the coming days. He said that the traditional parties are envious of him because he hails from a common family and is working tirelessly to ensure welfare of people. Bhagwant Singh Mann said that these leaders had always believed that they have divine right to rule the state due to which they are not able to digest that a common man is running the state efficiently. He said that these leaders have befooled the people for a long time but now people are not getting swayed by their misleading propaganda.

Bhagwant Mann said that in the coming two or three days he will expose the big leaders of the state who had used the state exchequer for their personal use. He said that these leaders had

mercilessly plundered the wealth of Punjab for which they will be duly punished. Bhagwant Singh Mann said that in the coming days the ugly faces of these leaders will be unveiled before the general public for their sins.

The Chief Minister said that since 2022 the so-called big leaders of the state have been sent to political oblivion by the people. He said that these leaders had mercilessly looted the people during their tenure during which people had ousted them. Bhagwant Singh Mann said that these arrogant leaders have been trounced by the people due to their anti-people stance.

Taking a jibe over the 'Punjab Bachao Yatra' of Akali Dal, the Chief Minister said that the real name of this gimmick of Akali Dal is 'Parivar Bachao Yatra' adding he dared the Akali leaders to explain that after looting the state for 15 years, from whom they are trying to save the state from. He said that the Akalis have plundered the state mercilessly besides bruising the psyche of Punjabis emotionally and patronizing several mafias in the state. Bhagwant Singh Mann said that people are well aware of the dubious character of the Akalis and Badal family due to which their theatricals won't work now.

The Chief Minister said that the people have not forgotten the dubious role of Akali Dal as they had allowed the sacrilege of Sri Guru Granth Sahib ji besides patronizing the drug trade in the state. He said that the hands of Akali leadership are drenched with the blood of Punjab and Punjabis adding that people will never forgive them for these sins. Bhagwant Singh Mann said that time has come when people must teach them a lesson by routing them out during the ensuing Lok Sabha polls. Bhagwant Mann said that in the coming days the industrial sector will also be given cheap power for which the state government is already working on it. He said that this will boost industrialisation in the state and open new avenues of employment for the coming days.

Bhagwant Singh Mann said that this will put the state on a trajectory of high growth and give fillip to overall development of the state.

The Chief Minister also announced that an investment facilitation centre will be soon opened in Jalandhar to facilitate the industrialists and traders of the Majha and Doaba region. He said that this will facilitate the traders and industrialists in a big way by ensuring that they don't have to go to Chandigarh for their petty work. Bhagwant Singh Mann said that every decision of the state government is aimed at ensuring the welfare of every section of society.

RJD MLA invites Nitish Kumar to join Mahagathbandhan rally in Patna on March 3

(News Agency)-RJD MLA Bhai Virendra on Wednesday verbally invited Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar to join

the Mahagathbandhan rally scheduled to be held at Patna's Gandhi Maidan on March 3. Virendra, the RJD MLA from Maner in Patna district, was present at the portico of the Bihar Assembly when Nitish Kumar and Deputy CM Samrat Choudhary arrived there.

Before entering the Assembly, Virendra told Nitish Kumar: "Leave NDA and come to the rally of Mahagathbandhan at Gandhi Maidan on March 3. We will wait for you."



While Nitish Kumar did not react to the remarks, Samrat Choudhary remained silent for a few seconds before

telling Virendra, "You share an old relationship with CM Nitish Kumar. So, leave the RJD and join the NDA." Recently, six MLAs of the Mahagathbandhan in Bihar, including four from the RJD and two from the Congress, had joined the NDA.

RJD supremo Lalu Prasad, his son Tejashwi Yadav, Rahul Gandhi, Left leaders Dipanker Bhattacharya, Sitaram Yechuri, D. Raja and others are expected to be present for the

March 3 Mahagathbandhan rally.

Retired Varanasi judge appointed ombudsman of university in UP

(News Agency)-Ajay Krishna Vishvesha, the district judge who handed over the basement of the Gyanvapi Masjid in Varanasi to Hindus for worship on the last day of his working career, has been appointed the ombudsman of a public university in Lucknow.

Vishvesha retired from service as Varanasi district judge on January 31.

He has now been appointed Lokpal

(ombudsman) for a tenure of three years, at the Shakuntala Misra National Rehabilitation University — a government-run university with Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath as chairperson.

The university Lokpal is tasked with settling the grievances of students.

Brijendra Singh, the university's

assistant registrar, confirmed that Vishvesha had been appointed as Lokpal for three years.

University Spokesperson Yashwant Viroday said Vishvesha was appointed in accordance with the recent guidelines issued by the University Grants Commission (UGC), which mandated that each university should appoint an ombudsperson for the redressal of student grievances.

Viroday said the UGC guidelines mandated that the Lokpal should be a retired vice-chancellor, retired professor or a retired district judge.

The "first priority should be given to a judicial person," he added, citing UGC guidelines.

Vishvesha will be the university's first ombudsman.



Four KGMU doctors suspended on ragging charges



(News Agency)- The King George's Medical University (KGMU) has suspended four senior resident doctors amid allegations of ragging juniors. The suspended doctors are deployed in the respiratory medicine department of the KGMU.

The complaint filed by 15 junior doctors, some of whom were women, stated they were mentally harassed by their seniors. The anti-ragging cell of the university conducted a probe. The first-year students lodged a complaint with the University

Grants Commission's anti-ragging cell, alleging mental torture by their seniors. This torture involved being assigned night duties without breaks and having to work beyond established guidelines, which, they say, significantly hampered their ability to focus on studies. KGMU spokesperson, Professor Sudhir Singh, said on Thursday that a three member committee — led by VC Professor Sonia Nityanand, along with proctor Professor Kshitij Srivastava, and dean of academics Professor

Amita Jain — investigated the matter.

The committee found the accused guilty based on prima facie evidence. Professor Singh added that all seniors have received a strict warning to refrain from similar actions.

Dr Singh said, "One of the senior residents has been suspended for three months and three others for one month in connection with the incident." The complaint was filed with the national anti-ragging helpline that diverted the case to KGMU authorities.

Sheikh Shahjahan's arrest: Political slugfest erupts in Bengal

(News Agency)- A political slugfest erupted in West Bengal over the arrest of Sheikh Shahjahan, the Trinamool Congress leader and accused mastermind of the January 5 attack on the ED and CAPF sleuths. The ruling Trinamool Congress has given full credit to the police for accomplishing this arrest and reiterated its earlier stand that the arrest was possible only after the division bench of Calcutta High Court's Chief Justice T.S. Sivagnanam cleared the legal hurdles for accomplishing the arrest.

A couple of hours after the arrest, Trinamool Congress spokesman Kunal Ghosh claimed that the observation of the court was that the police could not perform as it should have. "Courtesy, the Trinamool Congress general secretary Abhishek Banerjee, the court has removed the legal hurdles and henceforth the state police have done what is necessary," Ghosh claimed.

At the same time, he has demanded that the CBI should now act in arresting the leader of opposition in West Bengal, Suwendu Adhikari in relation to Narada video scam and superstar Mithun Chakraborty who was the former brand



ambassador of chit-fund entity Alchemist Group.

"I hope that initiatives will now start for the process of arresting Brij Bhushan accused of sexually harassing the women wrestlers. Let ED be active in

grabbing the bank loan defaulters," Ghosh said.

Claiming that Trinamool Congress was trying to glorify the police when in reality the arrest was prompted by the Calcutta High Court's strong observations

in the matter, former CPI(M) legislator from Sandeshkhali Nirapada Sardar said since the beginning he has been saying that Shahjahan was in Sandeshkhali only.

"Since the very first day I had been saying that Shahjahan was in Sandeshkhali after being witnessed by the local people except the local cops. I had also been saying since the beginning that he will not be arrested unless the Trinamool Congress gives the green signal for his arrest. Now after the ruling party has felt that time has come for his arrest and it happened," said Sardar, who was recently arrested by police on charges of instigating the local people, especially women against the

local Trinamool Congress leader and was released on bail following strong observations of the Calcutta High Court.

Virtually echoing Sardar, BJP's former national vice-president and party Lok Sabha member Dilip Ghosh said that the police were aware of the whereabouts of Shahjahan and were actually giving shelter to him. "Now the cops had no other option but to arrest him. Previously when people approached the local police with complaints against him the cops even denied registering FIRs," Ghosh said.

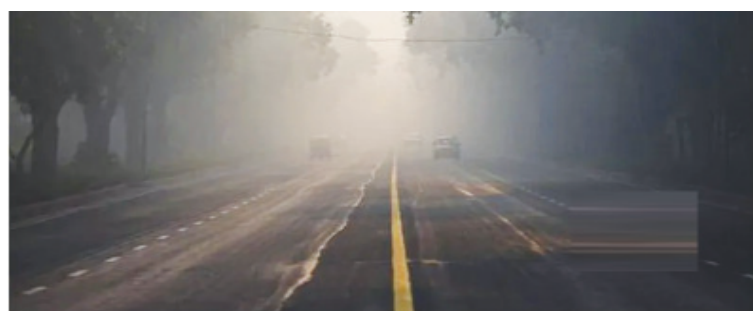
Governor C.V. Ananda Bose expressed satisfaction over the arrest. "I am happy that things are moving in the right direction finally," said Bose.

Delhi records minimum temp of 11.4 degree Celsius

(News Agency)-The national capital on Thursday recorded a minimum temperature at 11.4 degrees Celsius, seasonal average, the India Meteorological (IMD) Department said.

The IMD predicted that the maximum temperature on Thursday is likely to hover around 25 degrees.

The weather department said that there will be "mainly clear



sky becoming partly cloudy towards evening or night".

Meanwhile, the overall air quality

AQI across the city fell under the 'moderate' levels on Thursday.

In the Anand Vihar area, at 8

a.m., PM 2.5 levels were recorded to be in the 'poor' category standing at 210 and PM 10 reached 174 or 'moderate', according to the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB). The Air Quality Index (AQI) between zero and 50 is considered 'good'; 51 and 100 'satisfactory'; 101 and 200 'moderate'; 201 and 300 'poor'; 301 and 400 'very poor'; and 401 and 500 'severe'.

Posing as girl on Snapchat, man blackmails minor to share objectionable pics



(News Agency)- A 27-year-old man was nabbed from Uttarakhand for allegedly impersonating as a girl while tricking and blackmailing a minor

girl to share her obscene images on social media site Snapchat, a Delhi Police official said on Thursday. The accused has been identified

as Subhan Ali, a resident of Udham Singh Nagar, Uttarakhand.

Police said that on February 20, the father of the complainant, who is a minor school going girl, lodged a complaint regarding harassment, and blackmailing of her daughter on the threat of sharing her nude photos and video.

He further told police that her daughter studies in school and she used the smart phone for taking online classes. "One day, his wife saw her phone and found obscene video and photos of his daughter on Snapchat and they reported the matter," said a senior police official.

Immediately, the matter was taken up and it was found that

the alleged person impersonated himself as a girl to the victim on Snapchat and started chatting with her.

"He used to play a game of 'Truth and Dare' and he dared her to be in an obscene condition. The victim got in his trap and the accused got her naked photos and video. Later the accused had continuous chats with the victim and obtained more such photos," said Deputy Commissioner of Police (southwest) Rohit Meena. he accused insisted her for chats and extended threats if she did not follow his instructions.

"Accordingly, a case under section 354 D of the IPC and 12 POCSO Act was registered and

investigation was taken up," said the DCP.

During the probe, important leading information were obtained from Snapchat and Google and thorough technical analysis was done in which a mobile number was found active at Udham Singh Nagar, Uttarakhand.

"On February 24, raids were conducted at possible locations of the accused in Udham Singh Nagar, Uttarakhand and the accused was apprehended," said the DCP.

On interrogation, he admitted og his involvement in the crime. "One smart phone through which he committed an offence was also recovered from his possession," the DCP added.

Court rejects petition challenging maintainability of suit on Teele Wali Masjid

(News Agency)-- The court of additional district judge has rejected the revision petition of Muslim parties challenging junior court's order on maintainability of a civil suit seeking rights to offer prayers at Lord Shesh Nagesh Teeleshwar Mahadev Mandir, situated on the compound of the Teele Wali Masjid along river Gomti in Uttar Pradesh's state capital.

Additional district judge Narendra Kumar (III) passed the order on Wednesday on a petition filed by advocate Nripendra Pandey and others.

Maulana Kari Sayyed Shah Fazlul Mannan had filed the civil revision petition challenging the order passed on September 6, 2023, by civil judge (south) ordering that the suit of Hindu parties was maintainable.

Advocate Nripendra Pandey had



filed the suit in court on February 15, 2023, seeking permission to offer prayers at the Lord Shesh Nagesh Teeleshwar Mahadev Mandir.

The civil court (junior division) will

now hear the application seeking rights to offer prayer at the 'temple'. Advocate Abhay Srivastava represented Hindu parties in court and advocate Ritesh Rastogi represented the

state government.

Another application seeking survey of Teele Wali Masjid will come up for hearing on March 2 in the court of additional district judge.

Originally, lawyer Hari Shankar Jain had filed this case in the civil court in Lucknow in 2013 seeking survey of the mosque. The case has been pending since then.

Muslim litigants had challenged the case in the court of additional district judge stating that it is not maintainable. Hindu litigants had claimed that the Teele Wali Masjid was 'Lakshman Teela' constructed by Lakshman, younger brother of Lord Ram. They urged the court to allow survey of the mosque campus, especially the area that was annexed by the mosque committee in 2013 by erecting a boundary wall.

The suit also claims that the Tieshwar temple exists inside the mosque and that the entire complex is the place of Sheshnag Dudheshwar Mahadev.

ED questions veteran BJD leader over money laundering charges

(News Agency)--The Enforcement Directorate (ED) officials on Wednesday questioned senior Biju Janata Dal (BJD) leader and former Odisha minister Prafulla Samal over his alleged involvement in a case related to financial irregularities at a private engineering college in Bhadrak district. The enforcement agency had earlier issued summons against the Bhandaripokhari MLA, Samal, and his son Prayaskanti, directing them both to appear before it for questioning on the matter.

The college — Barapada School of Engineering and Technology, is under the control of a registered society.

Samal, a six-time MLA, was elected to the

state assembly from Bhadrak for the first time in 1990 on a Janata Dal ticket.



He also held several ministerial positions during his long political career.

On Wednesday, he was grilled for more than eight hours by the officials at the ED

office in the Nayapalli area of the city here. "Whatever questions the ED officials asked, I answered them all," Samal told mediapersons after the marathon grilling.

ED had earlier carried out searches at 10 locations in Bhadrak and Bhubaneswar on February 15 under the provisions of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act, (PMLA), 2002, on the charges of misappropriation of the registered society's money by forgery and cheating.

ED has been investigating the matter on

the basis of FIRs registered by the Bhadrak Police.

"ED investigation revealed that Prayaskanti Samal and others of Barapada School of Engineering and Technology (BSET) society were allegedly involved in misappropriation of society money by forgery and cheating. Prayaskanti Samal with other associates of have engaged in the embezzlement of crores of rupees by way of financial irregularities," said an ED source.

The central agency sleuths have seized Rs 9 lakh in cash along with a Toyota Fortuner car worth around Rs 40 lakh during the search operations.

UP cop thrashes priest for 'going slow' with wedding rituals



(News Agency)- A police constable allegedly thrashed a priest for performing wedding rituals at a slow and elaborate pace. The priest had been called in to solemnize the marriage of the constable. The incident took place in the Nigohan area of Lucknow on Wednesday. According to reports, the marriage of constable Sonu Jatav, posted at the Nigohan police station, was being solemnized with the daughter of one Om Prakash Prajapati. Tension arose when Jatav asked the priest Vivek Shukla to hurry up with the rituals. The priest refused to hurriedly wind up with the ceremony and this angered the cop who thrashed the priest in the presence of the guests. When Shukla's brother Sachin tried to intervene, he, too, was beaten up. Jatav also threatened the priest and his brother with dire consequences if they dared to report the matter to police. Additional deputy commissioner of police, south zone, Shashank Singh said that an FIR has been lodged against the constable and investigations were on.

UP: Woman held for killing husband over extra-marital affair

(News Agency)- A woman allegedly killed her husband with a grinding stone in Ismailganj in Lucknow after she suspected him of having an extra-marital affair.

DCP (north) Abhijit R Shankar said that the police have taken the woman, identified as Rekha, into custody and an FIR under IPC sections 302 (murder) and 201 (concealment of evidence) has been registered against her following a complaint lodged by her daughter Puja Shah.

He added that the body of Surendra Shah (47) who owned a tea shop at Ismailganj, was recovered from outside his flat in Vaishali Enclave.

Puja Shah said that Rekha had killed her father following an altercation on Wednesday.

Puja said that her father was having an extramarital affair which led to strained relations with her mother.

"The argument between them



escalated into violence and my serious head injuries in the mother hit my father with a attack and was left bleeding grinding stone. He suffered outside his flat," she added.

SP leader's brother shot dead by 'visitors'

(News Agency)- Mohammad arrived on motorcycles, Yusuf, brother of Samajwadi possibly engaging in a Party (SP) youth wing leader, conversation while seated in Mohd. Kala, was shot dead in the office premises before carrying out the attack.

Baghpat on Wednesday, police Baghpat Assistant said. The assailants

had come to visit Yusuf, who is a property dealer, and were having tea when they suddenly opened fire at him. They shot him in the head and chest. Kala said, "We had been alerted about the attack by a local over the phone but it happened before we could take any action."

He added that about two years ago, Yusuf was attacked near a brick kiln on Saroorpur Road. A case has been registered against unknown assailants but no arrests have yet been made.

Kala said that the assailants

Superintendent of Police, Narendra Pratap Singh, said, "We were informed that two unidentified youth had committed the murder and fled the scene. During questioning, the victim's relatives provided information about certain disputes. We are carrying out the investigation from all possible angles."



J&K braces up for heavy rain & snow



(News Agency)- J&K braced up for another spell of heavy rain and snow beginning Thursday night as weather office issued adverse advisory to people. A Meteorological MeT office

statement said that a wet spell is beginning in the union territory from February 29 evening. Rain and snow over widespread areas is

expected to occur till March 3. Weather will show signs of improvement from March 4 onwards.

People living in avalanche prone areas are advised not to venture out unnecessarily. Srinagar had 2.1, Gulmarg minus 5.6 and Pahalgam minus 4.4 as the minimum temperature.

Leh town in Ladakh region had minus 8.1, Kargil minus 12.8 and Drass as minus 17.9 as the minimum temperature.

Jammu city had 9.5, Katra 8.6, Batote 4.3, Bhaderwah 1.4 and Banihal 5.4 as the minimum temperature.

Bengal not safe under Mamata: Amit Malviya on Shahjahan's arrest after 55 days

(News Agency)-The BJP on Thursday slammed the Bengal government over the delayed arrest of Sheikh Shahjahan, and said the state was not safe under Mamata Banerjee. Amit Malviya, in-charge of BJP's National Information & Technology Department and Co-in charge of West Bengal, in a post on X said, "After defending Shahjahan Sheikh on the floor of West Bengal Assembly, a red faced Mamata Banerjee, left with no



option, finally allowed WB Police to arrest the TMC leader, accused of sexual violence, murder, land grab and assault on government officials in #Sandeshkhali.

"Shahjahan's arrest, more than 50 days after he went in the hiding, a day before the PM arrives in Bengal and post Calcutta High Court's tough stricture, raises several questions on Mamata Banerjee's predatory politics.

The Government Really Is Spying On You — And It's Legal

The freakout moment that set journalist Byron Tau on a five-year quest to expose the sprawling U.S. data surveillance state occurred over a “wine-soaked dinner” back in 2018 with a source he cannot name.

The tipster told Tau the government was buying up reams of consumer data — information scraped from cellphones, social media profiles, internet ad exchanges and other open sources — and deploying it for often-clandestine purposes like law enforcement and national security in the U.S. and abroad. The places you go, the websites you visit, the opinions you post — all collected and legally sold to federal agencies. In his new book, *Means of Control*, Tau details everything he's learned since that dinner: An opaque network of government contractors is peddling troves of data, a legal but shadowy use of American citizens' information that troubles even some of the officials involved. And attempts by Congress to pass privacy protections fit for the digital era have largely stalled, though reforms to a major surveillance program are now being debated. On today's episode of POLITICO Tech, Tau and I discussed the state of our personal privacy and the checks on all this government surveillance. I asked what differentiates the U.S. from authoritarian states like China when it comes to data collection, how our digital footprints will impact policy areas like abortion and what broader implications we can expect for civil liberties. He didn't sugarcoat his responses.

“Any nightmare use for data you can think of will probably eventually happen,” Tau said. “It might not happen immediately, but it'll happen eventually.”

The following interview has been edited down for length and clarity. Listen to the longer interview with Tau on today's episode of POLITICO Tech, available on Apple, Spotify and Simplecast.

Tell me about this dinner. Why did it leave you so freaked out that you had to write a whole book?

This source described essentially a world in which the government had figured out that it could buy the geolocation data of cellphones, millions, possibly even billions of cellphones, mostly collected through apps or online advertisers, and it could use it in a surveillance program. And that's what the Pentagon was experimenting with. It would eventually stand up and become a full-fledged program within the DOD. It would also expand to other government agencies like DHS. And it was a peek into a whole new way of doing surveillance that I hadn't thought about.

The data that you're talking about in this book, a lot of times it's not data that's collected through traditional legal channels or even through cyberattacks, but rather

the government purchasing it from companies that have scraped it from mobile phones, ad exchanges, social media. What difference has that made in terms of both what the government knows about people and also how it uses that information?

A lot of these companies that I profiled in the book are virtually unknown to the average American. I think everyone knows what Google has about them. I think everyone knows what Facebook does. But these are companies, tiny, obscure data brokers, in some cases massive billion-dollar companies, but very little public-facing presence and almost no direct consumer relationship. Some of these companies focus on consumer data. Some focus on social data. Some focus on movement data.

Companies often claim that this data is collected with your consent and that it's completely anonymous. But is that true?

When you dig deep into those claims, you'll realize that neither is really true. That, for the most part, yes, perhaps there is some clause in a privacy policy that says that location data may be resold to other entities, but generally speaking, those privacy policies indicate that it will be sold for commercial purposes or for targeted advertising. Rarely, if ever, do they mention that there might be a government buying it; there might be some public safety entity or military unit using this data. So the second main claim that a lot of these vendors make is that the data is anonymized, that they've stripped it of names or addresses that could reveal who a phone belongs to, say, in a geographical movement set. And that isn't true either, because where your phone spends its evenings, for example, is likely the address of its owner, and it can be cross-checked against other property records. And in many other kinds of data sets, there's ample evidence that you can be re-identified even if your name is not in them.

How much tension did you find there is within the government when it comes to the accessibility and use of this data?

I don't want to give the impression that these government programs are poorly run or are violating the civil rights and civil liberties of Americans day to day. That isn't the case that I found in my reporting. However, it's certainly true that there is this tension between the United States being a society that's privacy-oriented, that's skeptical of the government, and the public safety and national security missions of all these government agencies. Lawyers and program managers and elected officials have to try to balance the fact that this data is out there. It's available for purchase. It's something that Home Depot can use to target ads. And the question that gets asked over and over again inside government is, if Home Depot can use it to target ads, why can't we use it for our very important national security or public safety mission?

By STEVEN OVERLY

There's a Good Reason Haley's Still Running – And It's Not Trump's Legal Problems

Nikki Haley's presidential campaign started as an excellent adventure, but it now appears to many Republicans to be a bogus journey. Why is she still in the race after six consecutive stinging defeats?

I have a theory: The answer might be buried in the Republican National Committee's rules and their potential effect on her voice at the July convention. Haley will arrive in Milwaukee in possession of a cache of delegates — how many is unclear; at the moment, she has 20. The rules don't simply give power to a candidate based on the number of delegates they possess. Candidates cannot have their names placed into nomination, and thereby get television airtime at the convention, unless they have a plurality of delegates in at least five states.

That threshold makes a big difference for Haley in terms of her clout — if any — at the convention. Modern political conventions have morphed into four-day long infomercials for a nominee whose identity has long been known. Every winner wants to use that platform to broadcast a structured, convincing message. Do that right and you can give your candidacy a significant, and perhaps decisive, bounce in the polls. But that requires ensuring that there are no fights, or alternative messages coming from the convention floor — something winners cannot fully control. Defeated candidates can still deploy their delegates to obstruct the winner's will by posing contentious amendments to the party platform or by using their nominating speeches to criticize the nominee. That

can become news, and prospective nominees will cut deals to prevent that from happening. Against that backdrop, Haley's continued campaign makes a great deal of sense. The more delegates she can acquire, the more power she can exert on the floor. And the more power she can exert on the floor, the stronger hand she has to deal from to get concessions from former President Donald Trump on things she cares about, such as U.S. support for NATO. Indeed, given that the party did not even write a platform in 2020, simply insisting that it draft a new one for this election might be a significant request.

Of course, winning at least five states will be hard, owing to her deep weakness with conservative Republicans. She almost certainly can't win any state where the rules limit the electorate to registered Republicans. She's also unlikely to win any caucus state because those events tend to draw the most committed — and ideological — party members.

Yet there are a number of states voting on or before Super Tuesday that suit her. How? Haley's best chances will be in those that are both more moderate than Iowa or South Carolina and that are either open to all registered voters or which permit registered independents to vote in the GOP primary. And they need to have larger shares of college educated voters, Haley's only consistently strong demographic thus far. Her travel schedule until Super Tuesday seems perfectly aligned with this strategy. She first held two rallies in Michigan in advance of that state's primary. She then headed to Minnesota for a Minneapolis event.

By HENRY OLSEN



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The Looming Irrelevance Of The Bahujan Samaj Party

By Bharti Mishra Nath

Is the exodus of leaders from the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in Uttar Pradesh a signal of the decline of the once-powerful political entity symbolised by the giant elephant? In yet another major setback ahead of the general elections, Lok Sabha MP Ritesh Pandey resigned from the Mayawati-led BSP and joined the BJP on February 25. Reports suggest that three more BSP MPs are poised to follow suit before the general elections, with another BSP MP considering a switch to Jayant Chaudhary's Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD). Previously, Ghazipur MP Afzal Ansari had already secured a Samajwadi Party (SP) ticket from the same seat, while Amroha MP Danish Ali, suspended by the BSP for anti-party activities, is set to join the Congress. Another BSP MP from Jaunpur joined Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra on February 25. Consequently, out of a total 10 MPs in 2019, Mayawati's party may end up with retaining only two.

It appears that BSP leaders, in a last-ditch effort to salvage their political futures, are fleeing to safer havens, leaving the once formidable party in a state of limbo. Following the seat pact



between the SP and the Congress in Uttar Pradesh, BSP leaders fear diminished electoral prospects as the contest shifts into a direct confrontation between the BJP-led NDA and the SP-Congress combine. Despite disappointment from both INDIA bloc parties and her own party leaders, Mayawati has remained steadfast in her stance that the BSP will contest the upcoming elections alone, notwithstanding its previous alliance with SP-RLD in 2019, which yielded 10 seats.

Disconnect With People Behind The Decline

The BSP's decline has been in the making for a long time now. In the 2007 assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh, the party secured 206 seats, garnering over 30% of the votes. This success was largely

attributed to Mayawati's ability to forge an unlikely alliance between Brahmins and Dalits, securing a majority. However, subsequent elections saw a steady decline, with the BSP winning only 80 seats in 2012, down to 19 in 2017, and finally just one in 2022, in the 403-seat Uttar Pradesh assembly. In 2022, for the first time, its vote share dropped to just 12.88%. In the Lok Sabha, the BSP's fortunes mirrored this descent, plummeting from 21 seats in 2009 to zero in 2014. The alliance with the SP-RLD in 2019 provided a brief respite, resulting in 10 seats. Notably, its vote share remained consistent between 19% and 21% in 2014 and 2019.

Changing Friendships

Rank opportunism and shrewd manoeuvres have defined

Mayawati's political career. Riding on the promise of political empowerment for Dalits, Muslims, and other marginalised social groups, she served as Uttar Pradesh chief minister four times, aligning with different parties at different times. These electoral alliances were strategically formed to benefit the BSP, with tie-ups being discarded once they no longer served its interests. Even in 2019, Mayawati terminated the alliance with the SP's Akhilesh Yadav, her arch-rival, despite its electoral gains, leading to the BSP winning only one seat in the 2022 assembly elections while contesting alone. The SP in contrast got 111 seats.

"While there is no denying the fact that the BSP is no longer a potent force in Uttar Pradesh and has been reduced to a minor player in the electoral arena, it will be a grave mistake to think that the party could be ignored. A party that still has around 13 per cent vote share may not be able to win many seats but it can definitely influence the outcome of the polls," says Sanjay Pandey, a political analyst.

BSP's Loss, BJP's Gain

Two factors have contributed to the BSP's slide. Firstly, the BJP has succeeded in attracting Dalit

voters on a large scale through its Hindutva agenda and various welfare schemes, leading to a disillusionment with the BSP. This disenchantment paved the way for smaller caste parties, such as the Suheldev Bharatiya Samaj Party (SBSP) and the Nishad Party, to eat into the BSP's base. The emergence of alternative Dalit leaders, such as Chandrashekhar's Azad Samaj Party, further fractured the BSP's support base. Leaders like O.P. Rajbhar, Dara Singh Chauhan and Swami Prasad Maurya left in search of greener pastures, significantly denting the BSP's core support base.

Muslim voters, too, have oscillated between loyalty to the SP and the Congress, perceiving these parties as better-equipped to challenge the BJP. The BSP's decision to contest alone further diminishes its appeal, resulting in a shift of Muslim votes to the SP-Congress alliance.

"Dalit vote of the BSP will mainly shift to the BJP. Muslims may move to the SP-Congress alliance as there is no third alternative. Though BSP may not be in a winning position, it will still try to keep its vote share intact," says J.P. Shukla, a senior political analyst based in Lucknow.

China's Growing Support for Taliban Has Grave Implications for Regional, Global Security

By: Arun Anand

China-Taliban relations have taken an interesting turn with the People's Republic of China (PRC) recently recognising an envoy from Taliban-led Afghanistan in Beijing. In an official ceremony, Bilal Karimi, a former Taliban spokesperson was recognised by Beijing as the official Taliban envoy to Beijing and received his credentials, making China the first country to do so since the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in 2021. However, instead of recognising this as Beijing's official recognition of the Taliban regime, its foreign ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin described it as a "normal diplomatic arrangement." Since the Taliban takeover, no country has given the radical Islamist group's government a formal recognition. The Taliban regime has continued with its radical policies that have been reflected in the imposition of new laws on women. The international isolation and non-recognition faced by the Taliban is primarily due to its repeated human rights violations. However, China, even though falling short of official recognition, has been engaging with the Taliban even prior to its takeover of Kabul



in August 2021. It is important, therefore, to look into the strategic interests that govern the China-Taliban relations. During the first Taliban regime (1996-2001), China maintained its relations with the Taliban, although it did not give diplomatic recognition as sought by the Taliban. During this time, China sought assurance from the Taliban that it would not provide Afghan territory as a base for terrorist attacks on China. Despite the official non-recognition, delegations from China visited Kabul and delivered shipments

of arms and spare parts to Afghanistan via Pakistan and Chinese telecommunications firms such as Huawei and ZTE. China, for long, kept its distance from Afghan affairs. Though it covertly supported America's 'War on Terror' in Afghanistan, it also increased its engagements with Taliban following the then-US President Barack Obama's announcement of ending US combat missions in Afghanistan in 2014. This engagement with the Taliban was driven

mainly by China's long-term security concerns related to the ETIM or TIP, which Beijing designates as a terrorist organisation. ETIM, whose aim is to establish an independent (and Islamic) Uyghur state in western China, had set up its base in Afghanistan in 1998, during the Taliban regime.

Notwithstanding the official recognition of the Western-backed transitional administration in Afghanistan that toppled the Taliban regime in 2001, Beijing continued to nurture its ties and increased the intensity of the engagements from 2014 onwards. This was reflected in China's proactive role in mediation between the former Afghan government and the Taliban. Interestingly, China managed to be a gainer in the mediation by ensuring that it has access to whosoever forms the government. Chinese engagement was extended to peacekeeping efforts between Pakistan and Afghanistan in 2017, as the relations between the two neighbouring countries sharing controversial borders deteriorated. Chinese intervention led to China-Afghanistan-Pakistan, a trilateral dialogue, the same year.

Himachal Crisis-Congress Evens Score, But Can It Stop Rebellion?

By Amitabh Tiwari

The Congress party seems to have successfully exacted revenge on the six Himachal MLAs who cross-voted and helped the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) candidate, Harsh Mahajan, win the Rajya Sabha elections held recently. Assembly Speaker Kuldeep Singh Pathania, who disqualified the rebel MLAs, has left them with the option of appealing in courts or contesting by-polls. Additionally, with party leader Vikramaditya Singh - son of the late Himachal Pradesh Chief Minister Virbhadra Singh - changing his mind after discussions and deciding not to resign for now, it looks like the Congress high command with its damage control measures has managed to ensure that the government survives for the time being and doubts about its continuity subside. With these disqualifications, the strength of the House has been reduced to 62. Of them, the Congress has the support of 34 MLAs, including the Speaker. The simple majority mark now has been reduced to 32, and the Congress has a wafer-thin majority. Along with three independents, the BJP enjoys



the support of 28 MLAs.

Disqualified For Absence

Notably, the six rebel MLAs who cross-voted had protection against disqualification as parties cannot issue whips for elections to the Rajya Sabha. However, they have been disqualified for being absent during the Budget session and not following the directions of the party to vote in favour of the passage of the Finance Bill, under the provisions of the Tenth Schedule.

While a section within the Congress preferred a conciliatory approach towards these six MLAs for the sake of saving the government, another section wanted strict action to set a precedent.

Quelling Further Discontent

For the continuity of the government and its smooth operation, the Congress now needs to ensure that there is no further rebellion. After all, it doesn't have a big cushion to fall back on-it's a strength of 34 against a simple majority of 32. The party also needs to woo back the three independents who switched loyalties to the BJP in the Rajya Sabha polls.

The disqualified MLAs, meanwhile, have two options: approach the High Court for relief or accept the Speaker's order and contest by-polls as BJP members.

The Court Route Could Be Long And Protracted

In court, the six MLAs can argue against the disqualification order with various reasons - they didn't

get sufficient time to reply, the Speaker acted under pressure from the Congress, they were not able to make it to the House in time for voting on the Budget Day as they had some other pressing issues, they are not bound by whip in the Rajya Sabha polls, et cetera, et cetera. The courts may or may not intervene immediately.

Such a process could linger for months, or even years, as cases that fall under the Tenth Schedule are tricky, with the Speaker enjoying many discretionary powers. We saw that in the case involving Shiv Sena-NCP MLAs in Maharashtra.

If ultimately, the disqualification order is not stayed by the High Court or the Supreme Court, then the MLAs would be out of the legislative process. Until the case is decided, the Election Commission cannot order by-polls.

The Risk Of Not Getting Re-Elected

The second option - contesting by-polls on a BJP ticket - entails a risk. Data analysed by the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) reveals that of the 357 MLAs who defected to contest fresh elections, 170 (48%) won. Though in by-

elections to assemblies, the success rate of defectors was much higher, with 39 (81%) of the 48 defectors getting re-elected. Overall, there's a possibility that not all six MLAs will get re-elected again.

It's also not clear whether the MLAs have been disqualified for the remainder of the assembly's term and whether they are barred from contesting by-polls. The Tenth Schedule has a big lacuna, wherein there is no difference between disqualification and resignation. Under both cases, the MLA concerned can contest by-elections.

During the Karnataka crisis in 2019, the Speaker took a controversial decision of disqualifying 17 MLAs (of the Congress and the Janata Dal-Secular) for the rest of the assembly's term. This was done so that they could not contest bypolls to seek re-election and enjoy the alleged rewards offered by the opposition BJP to lure them away from the Congress-JD(S) alliance. The Supreme Court, however, struck down the Speaker's decision calling it unconstitutional, and declared the MLAs eligible to contest by-elections to the assembly.

India Maintains a Fine Balance in the Global North-South Equation

By: Kanwal Sibal

India is taking the "leadership" of the Global South but is also strengthening its ties with the Global North. (One could also speak of East and West). This fits into India's policy of "re-balancing" its external relations. The North is seeing a growing shift of political and economic power towards the East. This shift is being accelerated by India's rise, after that of China.

This widens India's foreign policy options. As a "leader" of the Global South, with a fast growing economy and a view of the North that differs radically from that of China, the North is reaching out to India much more than before. India sees the North as indispensable for its economic growth and technological advance and is therefore reaching out to it with a clear sense of its self-interest. This explains India's expanding ties with the US in various domains, including defence. The US is now India's biggest trade partner, including trade in services. India has signed an FTA with Australia and is negotiating FTAs with the UK and



the EU, though with Canada it has been put on hold because of political differences. This explains also that while India is a member of BRICS and SCO it is also an increasingly active supporter of Quad and a proponent of the Indo-Pacific Concept, both opposed by China and Russia.

The North may not be happy with India's "leadership" of the Global South as it erodes its traditional dominance of this part of the world, but it sees India as a safer partner

in the power transition that is taking place than China which has made deep inroads into the Global South through its Belt and Road Initiative, its financial power, and its position as the manufacturing hub of the world and the world's largest exporter. China is projecting a development model based on its own authoritarian, non-democratic, highly controlled and monitored political and economic system that it believes is more suited to

the developing world, whereas India is demonstrating that democracy can deliver.

In this context, the rhetoric of "shared values" between India and the West becomes useful to both sides, although both are aware that "values" were never a determining factor in relations between India and the West in the past when the US and its G 7 allies fuelled Maoist, Communist Party controlled China's economic and technological rise even as democratic India was sanctioned for years. India wants a reform in the structures of international governance dominated by the West for centuries, including after 1945. The rhetoric is that all nations are equal but the UN Security Council has in-built, formalised inequality with five permanent members with veto rights. The composition of the UNSC does not reflect either the shifts in power that have occurred in recent decades away from the West or the increase in UN membership from 45 originally to 193 today. The developing countries

need more representation in the UN Security Council if it is to retain legitimacy already severely eroded. The World Bank and the IMF, dominated by the West, need to be reformed too.

India seeks a reform of the international order to reflect the realities of today. This position no doubt pits it against the entrenched power and privileges of the West. However, the logic of India's position is not unappreciated in countries like France, for instance, as there are concerns in the UN system as a whole about the survival of multilateralism in international affairs. As a democracy, India's quest for more power within the international system is seen as less of a challenge than non-democratic and authoritarian China's quest for an alternative order based on its hegemonic ambitions reflected in its illegal sovereignty claims, challenge to US power and propositions like the Global Security Initiative, the Global Development Initiative, and the Global Civilisation Initiative.

Indian Diplomacy is Finally Getting its Due After Decades of Neglect



By: Sanbeer Singh Ranhotra
WHY THE SUDDEN RISE OF INDIA'S GLOBAL DIPLOMATIC FOOTPRINT IS NO COINCIDENCE

Indian foreign policy and the heights it has grown to in recent years has become a raging subject of discussion not just within the country, but around the world. Diplomatic circles are realising that India is now a country on a mission. Gone are the days when India chose “non-alignment” as its biggest foreign policy tool. In an increasingly multipolar world, India can no longer afford to remain oblivious to the power blocs that exist. Contrary to the principles of non-alignment, what is increasingly needed is for India to align with all poles in the world and reap the most out of all such diverse relationships. It is no coincidence, therefore, that India is today a country which has a robust and critical partnership with the West, even as it continues buying Russian oil and refers to Moscow as its “best friend”, while simultaneously projecting itself as a leader of the Global South. The 2024 Global Diplomacy Index brought out by the Lowy Institute has some fascinating details which capture the scale of the effort currently underway to make India a diplomatic heavyweight in the world. For starters, the Index has recognised India as the country with the fastest-growing diplomatic network in the world. Together with Türkiye, India has the fastest-growing network of any

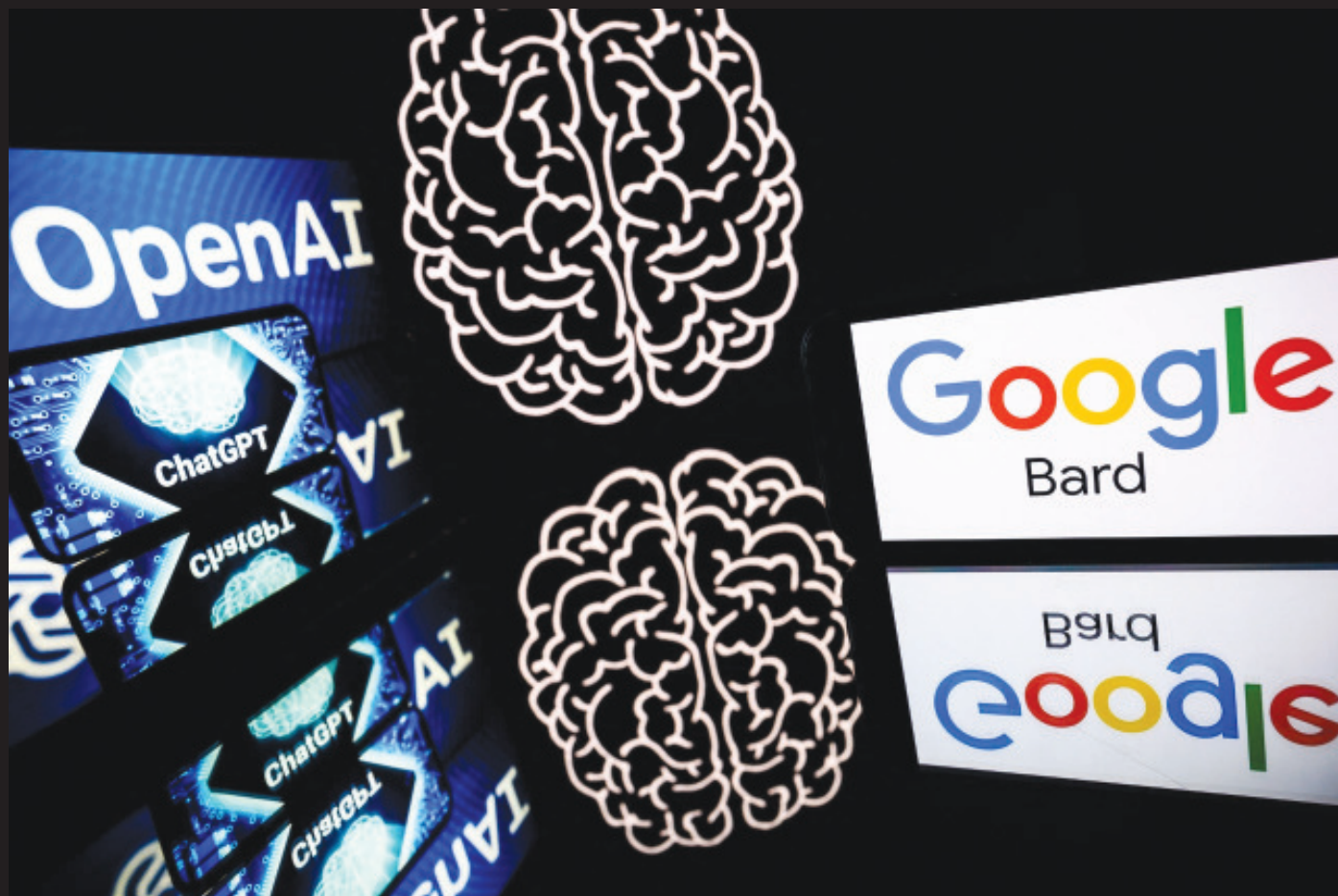
Index country, adding 11 new diplomatic posts since 2021. Almost three-quarters of these new posts are in Africa alone. India's diplomatic footprint is most pronounced in Africa, Asia, and Europe, and it is represented in every country in Asia, Eastern Africa, and the Indian Ocean Region. However, the annual index has noted that India has “limited diplomatic representation in the Pacific,” operating only two posts among the Pacific Islands Forum members. The expansion of India's diplomatic footprint runs parallel to its global stature and influence receiving a major fillip in recent years. For decades, India's foreign service was plagued by understaffing and limited global exposure. It does not take a genius to recognise the fact that today, when India says something on global or multilateral platforms, the international community takes note. That was not the case as early as, say, 15 to 20 years ago. Back then, India was just any other third-world country that the international community and “powers that be” could ignore. Today, the world has learnt that it needs a fundamentally different approach and strategy to interact with a new and resurgent India. The fact that India's diplomatic resurgence is happening under Narendra Modi – who his detractors accused of having no knowledge of foreign policy – is nothing short of poetic. Today, the Narendra

Modi-S Jaishankar power duo is together unleashing a new brand of Indian diplomacy before the world. Whether it be standing up to the West when need be, or challenging China, or even telling Vladimir Putin that this is not an era of war – India has come to command a level of respect and influence internationally that was previously unheard of. India itself recognises the importance of having a presence in all parts of the world. However, a perennial problem that prevented India from reaching a diplomatic crescendo was the acute shortage of experienced personnel in its foreign service. In October last year, the Union Cabinet took a much-needed decision to address this very issue. As a result of the Cabinet approving a cadre review and restructuring proposal of the Indian Foreign Service (IFS), the country's diplomatic cadre strength will go up by 215 new officers in the next five years. Here is an interesting statistic: The annual visits by senior government officials to countries with Indian missions have surged from approximately 9-10 in 2014 to 35-40 in 2023. As a result, there is a significant demand for more specialised personnel, both in foreign missions and in South Block. The Modi government unveiled plans to open nine more Indian missions in the next few years and also to meet the growing need at current missions. This restructuring comes 19 years

after the last restructuring of the IFS cadre in 2004. The restructuring will not only boost the intake of IFS officers at the initial stage but will also establish new positions to meet the expanding requirements of the foreign service. According to the Ministry of External Affairs, over the past few years, the annual recruitment into the Indian Foreign Service has typically ranged from 30 to 35 individuals. Currently, the service comprises approximately 850 officers responsible for overseeing 193 Indian missions and posts abroad, as well as various positions within the ministry in India. While the number of IFS officers stands at 850, the total strength of India's diplomatic bureaucracy scales up to over 2,700 if Grade B officers recruited from the Staff Selection Commission (SSC) are counted. This number is in stark contrast with China's well above 7500 diplomatic staff and the USA's 14,000 plus. Heading the effort to overhaul and strengthen India's foreign service and diplomatic muscle is Dr S Jaishankar, the country's External Affairs Minister – a career diplomat recognised as one of the best in the world at present. While the expansion of the foreign service and the making of new missions and diplomatic outposts in various parts of the world is one component of India's broad strategy, the other is aiding developing and underdeveloped

countries. To that effect, India has so far offered 308 lines of credit (LOC), worth about \$32.02 billion to various partners in Asia and Africa. These funds have supported more than 600 development projects in sectors such as infrastructure, power, connectivity and health across countries of the Global South. About \$17.06 billion has gone to countries in Asia, \$12.15 billion to those in Africa and \$2.81 billion to countries elsewhere. In Asia, New Delhi's “Neighbourhood First” policy remains at play, as is evident from the grant assistance projects with countries such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bhutan. Importantly, between 2014 and 2020, India's LOC to its neighbours had increased fourfold, going from \$3.27 billion to \$14.7 billion. The largest concessional credit given by India to a country has been to Bangladesh, worth about \$8 billion. Apart from its immediate neighbours in the Indian subcontinent, perhaps no continent is as important to New Delhi's growing diplomatic and economic heft as Africa. The highlight of India's G20 presidency will always remain the inclusion of the African Union into the powerful group. Today, India is Africa's third largest trading partner after the European Union and China. Trade between both sides has risen 18 per cent since 2003 and reached \$103 billion last year. Indian products now represent 6.3 per cent of Africa's total imports. India is also the second largest lender in Africa. 42 African nations received about \$12 billion or 38 per cent of all credit extended by India in the last 10 years. Meanwhile, total Indian investments in Africa stand at about \$70 billion, with the goal being to take the figure past the \$150 billion mark by 2030. Importantly also, over the past nine years, India has opened 25 new embassies and consulates across the world, and 18 of these are in Africa alone. That makes India's diplomatic expansion in the African continent quite visible. It represents a resolve on New Delhi's part to become a major player in Africa, while also challenging powers that have only their vested interests at heart and are looking to exploit the continent's resources.

How AI Is Already Transforming the News Business



The news business is falling apart and here comes AI to finish the job — at least that's what some worry. AI isn't the first and is surely not the last technology to upset the journalistic status quo. The telegraph and then the telephone allowed reporters to file dispatches from blocks or thousands of miles away. The Linotype machine obliterated the labor-intensive craft of hand-setting type in the 1880s. Radio moved news instantaneously. Computers replaced the Linotype, displacing thousands of skilled production workers.

The early vibrations of AI have already been shaking the newsroom. One downside of the new technology surfaced at CNET and Sports Illustrated, where editors let AI run amok with disastrous results. Elsewhere in news media, AI is already writing headlines, managing paywalls to increase subscriptions, performing transcriptions, turning stories in audio feeds, discovering emerging stories, fact checking, copy editing and more. Felix M. Simon, a doctoral candidate at Oxford, recently published a white paper about AI's journalistic future that eclipses many early studies. Swinging a bat from a crouch that is neither doomer nor Utopian, Simon heralds both the downsides and promise of AI's introduction into the newsroom and the publisher's suite. Unlike earlier technological revolutions, AI is poised to change the business at every level. It will become — if it already isn't — the beginning of most story assignments and will become, for some, the new assignment editor. Used effectively, it promises to make news more accurate

and timely. Used frivolously, it will spawn an ocean of spam. Wherever the production and distribution of news can be automated or made "smarter," AI will surely step up. But the future has not yet been written, Simon counsels. AI in the newsroom will be only as bad or good as its developers and users make it.

This interview was conducted over Zoom and online and has been edited for length and clarity.

Your report maintains that far from being a technology of the future, AI is already in the newsroom.

It's not just in the newsroom, it's in news organizations more broadly, and newsrooms are one part of that. If you consume news on a phone or computer and get any kind of article recommendation, in most cases, that is AI and machine learning. The end user is less aware of the use of AI in journalism in the production of news, like discovering information in very large datasets, which we've seen with the Panama Papers, which helps investigative reporters find stories in these big reams of data. Or something fairly common, like recording me and then having AI transcribe it.

Other specific uses?

The Daily Maverick in South Africa feeds original long-form content into AI systems that spits out summaries in bullet point form. In the days before AI, you would have to have a journalist write that summary and write those bullet points. Another is you can have articles read to you by an AI-generated voice. Instead of reading on your phone, or if you're visually impaired, having a synthetic voice read to you becomes possible with the help of technology, and also possibly at scale. What sort of road

map for the adoption of AI in newsrooms do you see? Do you see expanded use in crunching big data sets? Grinding out formula stories like corporate earnings reports? AI illustrations? AI copy desks? It will be an ongoing appropriation, but at different speeds, owing to the individual needs, capabilities, cultural mindsets and resources of different news organizations and newsrooms. So, an organization with a strong footprint in data journalism will likely use AI to drive more or deeper coverage on this front, whereas a newsroom that is focused mainly on churning out superficial fluff pieces will likely use it to that end.

Uses that will cut across are those that all newsrooms share in some ways. AI transcriptions are already standard, and everyone needs to copy edit or reformat content for different products and channels, or illustrate and visualize content — so these uses will increase. The same for content recommendation or dynamic paywalls. This was already on the rise, and I would be very surprised if this did not increase in the future. What is going to be really interesting — and most difficult to predict — are the more creative ways newsrooms will find to serve their audiences with the help of AI, not just in terms of good journalism that people will actually want to consume (and pay for), but also in formats that especially younger or currently underserved audiences will find appealing. What can human journalists do that AI can't?

Things like gaining someone's trust, building up a connection to a source, maybe over months, maybe over years in some cases, which might not even lead

anywhere in the beginning and then at one point you call them up and they say, I have a piece of information for you. That's not something any AI system can do at the moment because it relies on human interaction and building rapport over a longer period of time. That's not something you can do from typing a prompt into ChatGPT. You have to have boots on the ground, with their eyes and ears and going around and seeing what's happening.

How will AI improve journalism?

That AI will improve journalism is not a foregone conclusion. If managers and editors decide to use it to help reporters do their work in a better way, that would be a quality improvement. But the decision has to be made to use the technology for that end. It's not something that happens automatically. The opposite is also possible if you're a news organization mainly interested in reaching lots of people, but not necessarily interested in quality journalism, as was the case in the recent CNET's example [in which the site published shoddy AI-written pieces]. It basically comes down to what news organizations decide what to do with it.

Publishers might use it to boost quantity, not quality?

Any increase in efficiency and resources will generate an increase in resource consumption. AI can allow journalists to spend more time on the really valuable tasks. You can automate transcription with AI, make summaries with AI. But instead of giving you time to do more in-depth stuff, your editor might have you write 10 stories a day instead of five because technology speeds you up. It's not necessarily all driven by technology, even though technology enables these different scenarios.

How should journalists relate to the current AIs? As a knowledgeable colleague? A sometimes reliable source? Or a lousy intern who fakes most assignments given to him?

The answer to this question depends on the kind of AI system we are talking about as there is no one single AI at work in news organizations. Instead, AI is best understood as an assemblage of different techniques, systems and approaches used in different places and for different tasks. I also try not to anthropomorphize them: They are computer systems. Admittedly, very good ones, but they are not human. But if we whittle this down for the sake of argument to journalists and how they make use of chatbots such as Bard, Claude or ChatGPT, caution is advised. The underlying large language models are nondeterministic by nature — so you can get different outputs even with the same prompt and they are prone to errors.

Sandeshkhali: A Heartbreaking Story Tainted by Whataboutism

By: Adit Kothari

Prior to January 5, 2024, Sandeshkhali was a relatively unfamiliar village nestled in the suburbs of West Bengal. However, the village burst into national spotlight when personnel from the Enforcement Directorate (ED) were heckled, attacked and their vehicles vandalised by supporters of a certain Sheikh Shahjahan. The ED sought to question Shahjahan in connection with an enormous Rs 10,000 crore Public Distribution System (PDS) scam, involving the siphoning off of subsidised food grains and their illegal sale in the open market between 2012 and 2021.

Earlier, in October 2023, the ED had arrested State Minister Jyoti Priya Mallick, which eventually led them to this relatively remote village, located 75 km from Calcutta, to interrogate Shahjahan regarding transactions amounting to Rs 2,000 crore routed through Dubai via Bangladesh.

The ED was attacked despite them having informed the local police station in Bongaon. The police in Kolkata under the Trinamool Congress-run government also filed a case against the ED for breaking into



Shahjahan's residence, while the accused was on the run. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to discern something deviously amiss in shielding Shahjahan. Even if the state machinery is not complicit in his disappearance, they are certainly to be held responsible for encouraging it. As a consequence of these events, what came to light in the public domain was the apathetic plight of women who became casualties of TMC politics and sexual violence in Bengal.

The ED raid exposed Bengal's darkest secret when women in Sandeshkhali came forward, armed with sticks, brooms and farming tools, vociferously protesting against the TMC strongman and his aides, alleging institutional rape of marginalised

and voiceless women. The protesting women demanded the arrest of Shahjahan's aides, Shiba Prasad Hazra and Nurul Islam also known as Uttam Sardar.

Ever since the suffering and shrieks of the desolate women surfaced onto the public domain, all we've seen the government do is either defend the absolutely indefensible or deflect the issue under the pretext of whataboutery. On social media especially, the brazen hypocrisy of the many pro-TMC voices was flabbergasting as they resorted to mindless whataboutery, downplaying the fiasco, while raking up cases of violence or injustice against women in other parts of India (mostly BJP-ruled states). What was more shocking

about it was that many of the advocates of such a narrative were well-respected women. Their arguments had one summary – everybody is doing it, so why the focus on this institutionalisation of rape coming to light. It is said that “rape has often been described as an unpreventable evils of war – the unfortunate consequence of men taking advantage of chaos”. India's conscience must take into account that West Bengal is not in a state of a conventional war, but one where the once oppressed has now become the oppressor. This fiasco wouldn't have blown out of proportion if the TMC, along with the state enforcement agencies, which sadly has lost all credibility and face, would have simply come out and tried to defuse the situation at its very inception by pushing for Shahjahan to be arrested at any cost and themselves demanded for a joint investigation to provide relief and assurance to the victims. Yes, there would have been the obvious political mudslinging from the various state opponents like the Left, Congress and of course the BJP, but nothing damaging to the credibility of the TMC and its leaders. By unreasonably blaming the victims and accusing them of being RSS

workers/ political affiliates of the opposition, the TMC has proven its quality of politics. On February 20, as the Calcutta High Court ordered the removal of Section 144 imposed, paving the way for Suvendu Adhikari, Leader of the Opposition from the BJP, to visit ground zero at Sandeshkhali, a new controversy erupted when social media and TV media went abuzz with viral clips of SP Jaspreet Singh (IPS 2016 batch) yelling at Agnimitra Paul, MLA from Asansol, accusing BJP workers of calling him a Khalistani. With the farmers' protest looming high at the corridors of Delhi, in a jiffy, everyone seemed to have forgotten about Sheikh Shahjahan or the incompetence of the West Bengal Police which has failed to apprehend the main protagonist at the centre of this mayhem for over 50 days. The fact remains that political violence has been a problem in Bengal for generations, and Sandeshkhali is just the tip of the iceberg regarding the growing problems of the TMC. Shahjahan is one of many influential strongmen who switched allegiance from the Left to the TMC when the winds changed in favour of the latter post-Singur and Nandigram.

After Maldives, 'India Out' Campaign in Bangladesh

By: Arun Anand

Soon after Bangladesh conducted its 'Jatiya Sangsad Election', the country started witnessing the emergence of a new motivated campaign called the “India Out” campaign. This campaign is on the lines of a similar campaign carried out in Maldives in the latter half of 2021 and also during its election campaign last year by the then-Opposition (and present incumbent) Progressive Party of Maldives. It had opposed former President Solih's “India First” foreign policy.

Feeding anti-India sentiments, especially among radical Islamists, seems to provide fuel for the India Out campaign in Bangladesh. The campaign, carried on social media, seeks to boycott Indian products sold in Bangladesh for “meddling” with Bangladesh's national election that brought Sheikh Hasina to power for her fourth consecutive term. Anti-India sentiments have



been there amongst the radicals in Bangladesh for quite some time. But these are being scaled up now, especially amongst radical Islamists and those in opposition to the Sheikh Hasina government. Bangladesh's main opposition party — Bangladesh National Party (BNP) — had boycotted the national election, as their demand for the election to be conducted under a caretaker government was not met.

Allegations of possible election irregularities had been doing rounds prior to polls. BNP had given a call for an election boycott with some backing from Western countries.

India, however, maintained its consistent stand of looking at elections as a country's internal matter. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's swift congratulations to Sheikh Hasina and Bangladeshi people for the

“successful conduct of elections”, in contrast to the reservations expressed by the West, seemed to have further aggravated anti-India sentiments. A reflection of that was seen during the India-Australia Cricket World Cup final match in November last year where some Bangladeshi youth were witnessed celebrating India's loss.

The India Out campaign in Bangladesh seems to be orchestrated by Pinaki Bhattacharya, an exiled physician who left Bangladesh in 2018 following alleged harassment by government security forces. There are also voices on social media that the campaign is probably funded by Chinese agencies akin to one in Maldives since India and China are both involved closely with the present government, especially in infrastructure projects. As one can recall, in mid-January, soon after the election results, Bhattacharya

launched the #BoycottIndia campaign on social media, urging his followers on Facebook to “shatter the chains that bind us”, which was responded favourably by many in Bangladesh. The campaign backed by the Bangladeshi diaspora is further encouraged by Opposition parties, mainly exiled leaders in London, and radical forces who preserve the sentiment that the national election had foreign interference (from India) that played a major role in bringing Hasina regime back to power, a trend claimed to continue since 2014 national election. The unqualified support from India to the Awami League government raised suspicion among anti-Awami League factions about India's role in compromising with Bangladesh's democracy and sovereignty, which culminated in many natives joining the call for boycotting Indian products.

Modi Dives Right In For A Win, Congress Continues To Tread Water

By Shubhabrata Bhattacharya

On Sunday, Narendra Modi scuba-dived into the deep sea to pray at a Mahabharata-era temple at Bet Dwarka. Many see it as yet another pre-poll religio-cultural outreach, invoking Krishna this time, a month after the Ram Temple Pran Pratishtha in January. Rahul Gandhi, meanwhile, packed his bags for a trip overseas, perhaps to deliver his 'Mann ki baat' to audiences in Cambridge, England.

There has been much speculation over Rahul's Lok Sabha constituency. The Communist Party of India (CPI) has announced that the president of the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW), Annie Raja, wife of CPI general secretary D.Raja, will contest from Wayanad—a clear indication that the Left and the Congress are not partners in the I.N.D.I.A bloc as far as Kerala is concerned. Rahul may try to regain Amethi from Smriti Irani, or he may contest from another seat in the South.

Rahul's Trip Is Confusing

Rahul's Yatra 2.0 has been paused for the duration of his



sojourn. This after it hit a crescendo with Rahul being accompanied by Samajwadi Party's (SP) Akhilesh Yadav in Agra, in what many saw as the highest point of the march. Trinamool Congress (TMC) chief Mamata Banerjee shunned the Yatra in West Bengal; her government didn't even extend the usual courtesies, something even a hostile BJP regime in Assam had not shied from. Rashtriya Janata Dal's (RJD) Tejashwi Yadav drove Rahul's Jeep on the last day in Bihar, while Akhilesh rescinded his promise to join as Rahul entered Uttar Pradesh. Priyanka Vadra, too, stayed away initially, citing health issues. Over the past

weekend though, having successfully negotiated seat-sharing deals with Akhilesh, she joined the Yatra in Moradabad. And Akhilesh followed suit in Agra..

With Rahul flying overseas now, his party members may be left wondering about his seriousness towards preparing for that battle royal called the Lok Sabha election, the dates for which are scheduled to be announced in the coming weeks.

The Tashkent Visit

Back in October's state elections last year, when the Congress was defending its incumbency in

Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan and trying to regain power in Madhya Pradesh, Rahul Gandhi's sudden flight to Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, had stumped his supporters. No reason was assigned for this air dash in the midst of such a heated poll season. The presence in Tashkent during that very period, of Henry Kissinger and George Soros-linked US strategist Samantha Power, whose credentials as an expert on political instability are well-known, created a buzz.

At Cambridge now, Rahul will confabulate, among others, with his Chicago-based mentor Sam Pitroda, who, a day before the Republic Day had addressed a virtual press conference to question the credibility of India's election machinery (during which he brushed aside a question on Congress wins in Himachal Pradesh and Karnataka state polls).

Indira Gandhi's 'Foreign Hand' Obsession, And The Irony Former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was obsessed with her suspicions of a threat from a 'foreign hand'. Soon after her

March 1971 election win, which was refurbished by her dismantling of Mohammad Ali Jinnah's Pakistan and the liberation of Bangladesh, Gandhi had begun fearing a destabilisation engineered by a 'foreign hand'. The overthrow of the popularly elected regime of Salvador Allende in Chile in 1973 accentuated those fears, and so did the assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rehman on August 15, 1975. Against this background, her grandson's frequent powwow today on foreign soil with experts on political instability is ironic. The despair evident in the Opposition ranks on the eve of the general elections this year is unprecedented. Seat-sharing talks have been running into hurdles, with many regional parties intent on showing the Congress its place in their respective turfs. In effect, by belittling the Congress, the I.N.D.I.A bloc parties are, in a way, effectively fulfilling the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) task of shaping a 'Congress-mukt Bharat'.

Byju's, Paytm Payments Bank crises are a wake-up call. But govt intervention isn't the answer

By RENUKA SANE

Some of India's most promising startups are in the process of falling from grace. A few days ago, Byju's CEO Byju Raveendran had a public spat with shareholders who wanted him ousted from his position. Byju's current valuation, at less than \$2 billion, is 90 per cent lower than its \$22 billion valuation in late 2022. The Ministry of Corporate Affairs has also decided to expedite the inspection report on Byju's. Similarly, Paytm Payments Bank is under regulatory scrutiny for alleged violations in its business.

This, of course, is not just an Indian scenario. A few months ago, in November 2023, Sam Bankman-Fried was convicted of defrauding customers of his cryptocurrency exchange. Earlier, in May 2023, Elizabeth Holmes began her prison sentence for defrauding investors in her biotech startup, Theranos. These and other

similar events in the last few years raise questions about governance in private markets. We've not yet discovered the answers, but this is a good time to revisit some of the questions. Consumer protection vs investor protection The narrative around startups seems familiar. There is a superstar genius who thinks out of the box and is not afraid to push boundaries. But these daring strategies can often border on the illegal, either in the form of misappropriation of investor funds, or outright lying to and intimidating customers. The day of reckoning comes soon enough, and everyone is left wondering, what was the board doing? Why were large institutional investors sleeping at the wheel?

At the outset, it is useful to distinguish between two types of misdemeanours.

The first is where the startup defrauds its investors (shareholders), which are

typically large VC funds. In a startup ecosystem, there is no "public shareholding" that needs to be protected, unlike in a public market. The firm may have an excellent product offering, but the founder may be inflating the company's books, or embezzling funds. Private capital has the ability and the levers to inspect the company and demand higher standards. It also has the legal means to sue the startup founder for breach of contract.

The second type of misdemeanour is where the startup defrauds customers by lying to them about the product or engaging in unethical sales practices. The firm's books may be very sound, and the shareholders may be getting excellent returns on their capital. This is no different from a large financial firm mis-selling products to unsophisticated consumers. The issue of consumer protection is distinct from that of shareholder



protection, and will have a different diagnosis and subsequent response.

Complications of shareholder protection

The first thing to realise about startups is that most will fail. Their very objective is to try outrageous new ideas that have a high chance of failure. Venture capital firms invest in these 'mad' ideas knowing that about eight out of ten will fail, but the two that succeed will make up for the failures. In this environment, where a 'genius' founder pursues a blue-skies idea backed by

generous venture capital, the board is often seen as an ally for the company's growth, not a bulwark against potentially fraudulent practices. In a traditional firm, the board plays a "control" function. But in a startup, the board often focuses on developing the product or increasing scale.

Additionally, VCs also negotiate a seat on the board to monitor how their money is being spent, and to potentially add value to the firm. A startup has several funders, who often join at different stages and may have different motives.

Ideology is dead. Rajya Sabha cross-voting shows politics is a livestock market now

By VIR SANGHVI

All politicians are not low-lives. Many are hardworking, decent and honest. But enough of them are sleazy enough to remind me how they have schemed their way around the new rules and the supposed checks and balances that have tried to ensure Indian democracy remains effective and fair.

Just take the drama that accompanied this week's Rajya Sabha elections. In Himachal Pradesh, where the Congress has a substantial majority, it seemed clear that its candidate, the noted and respected lawyer Abhishek Manu Singhvi, would win.

But Singhvi and his allies always had their doubts. Why, they asked, had the BJP put up a candidate who had no chance of winning? Obviously, the BJP knew something the Congress didn't. In other words: the Singhvi camp wondered if their opponents were confident of buying or otherwise 'persuading' enough Congress MLAs to vote against Singhvi and for the BJP. I thought the Singhvi camp was



being pessimistic or unduly cautious. But when the votes were counted on Tuesday, it turned out that they were absolutely right. The BJP won over enough Congress MLAs to even the score. Ultimately, the tie was settled by a draw of lots, which Singhvi lost.

How can anyone lose a Rajya Sabha election in a house where the Congress has 40 seats and the BJP only 25?

Well, the phrase "money power" may offer a clue.

The Rajya Sabha club

Something similar happened in Uttar Pradesh, where several Samajwadi Party MLAs defied the party whips and voted for a BJP candidate. Even in Karnataka, the one state where

the Congress has competent political managers, there appears to have been some dodgy cross-voting, but this time in favour of a Congress candidate. The logic of electoral democracy suggests that there should be no cross-voting. And for many years after Independence, there was, in fact, very little cross-voting. Then, money entered the picture. Rich people decided that the Rajya Sabha was a club they would like to join. Accordingly, they began buying up MLAs to smooth their way in.

In those days, it was hard to tell exactly who voted for whom, so the millionaires had no difficulty exploiting the secret ballot.

In 1998, when the Rajya Sabha

seemed in danger of becoming just another club that every sleazy billionaire could buy entry into, the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government decided that it was time for a change in the rules.

In India, we follow a two-fold principle. When it comes to voting in direct elections where the entire population is involved—say, elections for MPs, MLAs, corporators, etc.—we insist on a secret ballot. But in legislative chambers, where Bills are to be voted on, we do not insist on secrecy. The voting is open.

The Rajya Sabha election fell halfway between the two kinds of votes. It elected MPs but the electoral college was not based on universal franchise: only MLAs could vote.

The Vajpayee government decided that perhaps voting for Rajya Sabha candidates had more in common with voting on Bills than with general elections. So, the secret ballot was abolished and voting became public.

Many liberals objected to this. The late Kuldip Nayar argued that the abolition of the secret ballot was wrong and filed a case that went all the way to the Supreme

Court.

I rarely disagreed with Kuldip Nayar on issues of importance. But in this case, I thought he was wrong. If MLAs had to vote openly, I believed they would be less blatant about greedily accepting money in exchange for their votes. The Supreme Court agreed and the voting for the Rajya Sabha elections stopped being secret.

Ah, I said to myself. We have now ended the menace of money-fuelled Rajya Sabha elections. So, I imagine, did Arun Jaitley and most of the others in the Vajpayee government who had argued for this change.

Motivated by greed

For a while, it seemed we were right. But judging by this week's secret auction of votes, it looks as though we overestimated the dignity and self-respect of some of our legislators. It has now got to the stage where some politicians will sell their votes, even if they know that they are going to be found out. They simply don't care what people think. For many of them, the word 'shameless' does not exist in the dictionary.

Putin Needs to Feel the Pain

By EDWARD FISHMAN and KEVIN BRUNELLI

In the wake of Alexei Navalny's suspicious death in an Arctic prison and to mark the second anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Biden administration on Friday unveiled a new round of sanctions on Russia that included more than 500 targets. The Treasury Department declared the penalties amounted to "the largest number of sanctions imposed since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine." Among the targets were Russia's domestic payment card network, the state-owned shipping firm Sovcomflot and more than two dozen firms based in countries outside of Russia—including in China, Serbia, and the UAE—that have helped Russia source parts for its military-industrial complex.

Impressive as the penalties seem, when it comes to sanctions, quantity does not equal quality. Despite some



valuable steps in the right direction—steps that could do serious damage to Russia's military supply chain—the sanctions need to go much farther to check Putin's full-on war economy. The sanctions reveal that the White House is committed to enforcing existing sanctions but still reluctant to embrace the risks required to meaningfully tighten the screws on the Kremlin, such as penalties that would sequester Russia's oil revenues or secondary sanctions that would fully isolate Russia

from the global financial system. This is a problem, because as Russia makes gains on the battlefield—and desperately needed military aid for Ukraine remains stuck in Congress—Putin needs to understand that the costs to his economy will rise as long as his brutal war continues.

Lest there be any doubt, the United States and its allies have not yet maxed out sanctions on Russia. From the beginning of the war in Ukraine, the West has tried to walk a fine line: to hit Russia

with "the most severe sanctions that have ever been imposed" (as President Biden called them) while largely sparing Russia's most valuable export, oil. Even the vaunted sanctions on the Central Bank of Russia and the country's two largest banks, the most ambitious penalties imposed by the United States and its allies to date, included a loophole for all transactions "related to energy." That loophole remains in place today.

The price cap that the G7 imposed on Russian oil exports in December 2022 has helped reduce the Kremlin's oil revenues, perhaps by as much as \$50 billion. But the policy was deliberately structured so that it applies only when Russian oil is sold or shipped to market with the aid of Western services, which gave Russia a powerful incentive to build its own end-to-end supply chain for oil exports and doomed the policy to a short shelf life. Indeed, within just a few months

of the price cap taking effect, Russia found ways to soften the blow. To reduce its reliance on Western shipping companies, Russia has tapped into an ever-expanding "shadow fleet" of oil tankers, estimated at anywhere from 600 to more than 1,000 vessels. It has also substantially reduced its dependence on Western maritime insurance: Western protection and indemnity (P&I) coverage was used in only 25 percent of Russian crude oil shipments in December 2023, down from nearly 80 percent the previous April. All the while, the United States has repeatedly maintained that Russia can continue to sell oil for any price that it wishes—so long as it does not use Western services. The United States has stuck with this narrow conception of the price cap for fear of destabilizing oil markets and causing friction with the main buyers of Russian crude, including China and India.

On the border, voters want action, not photo ops

It's an election year, which means it's the season for campaign stunts. The goal of these gimmicks is to prove a candidate is strong where they are very, very weak. Upholding that proud tradition, President Joe Biden is headed to the border on Thursday — and so is former President Donald Trump. Unfortunately for Biden, these stunts usually don't help very much. Bob Dole spent the closing days of the 1996 campaign on a frantic 96-hour tour before losing to former President Bill Clinton. Sen. John McCain suspended his 2008 presidential campaign to address the Wall Street crash before losing to former President Barack Obama. Hillary Clinton embarked on 2016 cross-country van tour to show a common touch before losing to Trump.

Perhaps Biden's stunt will end up differently. What makes it curious, however, is that he's visiting Texas the same day as Trump.

I'm a lifelong resident of Arizona, and border-state voters have heard a lot of talk, but haven't seen much action. Politicians have had their photos taken in every dusty city and desert town in my state, from Douglas in the east to Yuma in the west. Yet the unlawful migration remains unchecked.

Tucson has witnessed a 182% increase in encounters this fiscal year compared to last. But Texas seems to command the most media attention, making it the ideal location for a photo-op.

The president's only other visit to the border was a year ago, briefly stopping in El Paso before racing back home. This time, he's going to Brownsville, Texas, a city located adjacent to the Gulf of Mexico and a relatively sleepy stretch for migrant traffic.

Trump, meanwhile, will be about 300 miles to the

northwest in Eagle Pass, Texas. This small community became famous for some of the highest numbers of illicit border crossings. It makes up part of the Del Rio sector, an area that recorded 71,000 arrests in December alone. Eagle Pass has become a flashpoint between the administration and Texas Gov. Greg Abbott. He has deployed Texas National Guard troops to address the overflow of undocumented migrants, and recently announced plans for an 80-acre military base in the area to house the troops.

Why is Biden visiting now, after all but ignoring the border since his inauguration? The answer is simple: disastrous polls.

The president's job approval has fallen to 38%, according to Gallup. A significant factor in this drop-off is his handling of immigration, which is at an all-time low approval of 28%. And the disdain is bipartisan. A slim majority of Democrats (55%) still support Biden on border security, but this shows a drop of seven points from the last poll published in August.

And the top issue for voters? You guessed it. When asked about the most important problem facing America, immigration was number one, garnering 28%. This is an increase of eight points from a month ago. Biden also faces increasing pressure from Democratic governors and mayors who are panicked over the migrant influx. This week, New York City Mayor Eric Adams said the city needs to amend its "sanctuary city" law so that migrants who commit felonies can be turned over to Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

In January, Illinois Gov. JB Pritzker wrote to Abbott in a newspaper ad, begging him to stop bussing migrants north.

Add to this the spate of alleged crime committed by people who recently crossed the border, from the attack on New York City Police Department officers, to the tragic killing of a Georgia nursing student.

Their panic is understandable. The US is just eight months from an election, and angry voters love to turn out incumbents. But a brief campaign stunt in Texas won't change their minds.

The president plans to "discuss the urgent need to pass the Senate bipartisan border security agreement," according to a White House statement released Monday. This means Biden's true aim is to cast the blame on his political opponents.


"He will reiterate his calls for congressional Republicans to stop playing politics and to provide the funding needed for additional U.S. Border Patrol agents, more asylum officers, fentanyl detection technology and more," the statement said. Meanwhile, Trump will surely blame Biden for the border crisis.

But neither so-called "leader" will do anything to actually, you know, fix the border crisis. It's far easier to glower for the cameras.

Earlier this month, Trump persuaded Senate Republicans to reject a proposed compromise, all but ending hope of legislative action prior to Election Day. In reaction, the House GOP impeached Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, a move sure to die in the upper chamber.

If Biden wants to improve his standing with voters, a Brownsville photo won't cut it. He needs to stop posing and start acting. Whether he likes it or not, his predecessor allowed far fewer migrants into the country with the same laws on the books.

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Baba Ramdev in Trouble. India's Supreme Court has temporarily banned Patanjali advertisements

The Supreme Court rapped Baba Ramdev-owned Patanjali Ayurved on Tuesday (27 February), imposing a temporary ban on the company's advertisements on medicines. The apex court also pulled up the Centre for inaction against Patanjali's "misleading and false" advertisements that claim to cure different diseases.

Noting the "entire country was being taken for a ride", the top court said in an interim order that Patanjali "cannot advertise or market any of their medicinal products which they claim would treat ailments specified in Drugs and Magic Remedies (Objectionable Advertisements) Act", Newsland reported. What is the case against Patanjali and what did the Supreme Court say? Let's take a closer look.

Case against Patanjali Ayurved

A two-judge bench of Justices Hima Kohli and Ahsanuddin Amanullah was hearing a plea filed by the Indian Medical Association (IMA) in 2022 accusing Patanjali of carrying out a smear campaign against modern medicine and COVID-19 vaccination. In August 2022, the top court had questioned Ramdev for allegedly attempting to discredit allopathy and its doctors during COVID-19.

Last November, the top court ordered Patanjali to immediately stop its "false and misleading advertisements". At the time, a bench presided by Justice Amanullah had recorded a statement from Patanjali counsel that "henceforth there shall not be any violation of any law(s), especially relating to advertising or branding of products manufactured and marketed by it and, further, that no casual statements claiming medicinal efficacy or against any system of medicine will be released to the media in any form" and said that the company "is bound down to such assurance". The apex court had also threatened to impose a fine of Rs 1 crore for every false claim made in the company's ads about products curing ailments.

Supreme Court's temporary ban on Patanjali ads

On Tuesday, the Supreme Court issued a contempt-of-court notice to Patanjali Ayurveda and its founders Baba Ramdev and Acharya Balkrishna for allegedly violating the court's previous order by continuing to propagate false and misleading claims, reported Bar and Bench. We issue notice to show cause (to Ramdev and Acharya Balkrishna) as



“Patanjali courted a row last year for allegedly using a non-vegetarian ingredient called ‘Samudra Phen’ (cuttlefish) in its dental product, Divya Dant Manjan, which had a green label indicating that it is vegetarian.”

to why contempt of court proceedings should not be initiated against them. Reply to be filed within two weeks,” the order said.

The court also “cautioned...the respondent and its officers...from making any statements adverse to any system of medicine in the media (both print and electronic) in any form as undertaken by them on the last date”. Senior advocate PS Patwalia, appearing for the IMA, had earlier in the day told the apex court that Patanjali had continued to advertise the efficacy of its medicines.

Slamming the Central government, Justice Amanullah asked what actions were taken by the Ministry of Ayush since the plea was filed two years ago.

The entire country has been taken for a ride! For two years you wait when Drugs Act says this is prohibited?” Bar and Bench cited the apex court as saying.

Additional Solicitor-General KM Nataraj, representing the Centre, said the government would file a detailed reply as it had to coordinate with various departments for verifying the claims.

The court had earlier asked the Central government to hold discussions and give suggestions to curb such ads.

Patanjali's many controversies

This is not the first time that Patanjali has found itself in the middle of a row. Since its launch in 2006, the company has seen a meteoric rise that has often been marred by controversies.

In June 2020, the company stirred a major controversy after its co-founder Ramdev claimed to have found a 'cure' for COVID-19. Initially after the launch of 'Coronil and Swasari', the AYUSH ministry had asked the company to stop advertising the product until it had reviewed the documents submitted by the firm.

In February 2021, Patanjali said its Coronil has received certification from the AYUSH Ministry as per the World Health Organization (WHO) norms as a drug that can be used as a "supporting measure in COVID-19" and as an immuno-booster.

However, the United Nations health agency said later it had "not reviewed or certified the effectiveness of any traditional medicine for the treatment of COVID-19."

Patanjali courted a row last year for allegedly using a non-vegetarian ingredient called 'Samudra Phen' (cuttlefish) in its dental product, Divya Dant Manjan, which had a green label indicating that it is vegetarian. In 2015, Patanjali launched its instant noodles in the aftermath of the Maggi noodles fiasco in the country.

Patanjali's Atta Noodles featured a Food Safety and Regulatory Authority of India (FSSAI) licence number on its packets. However, FSSAI's then-chairperson Ashish Bahuguna rejected it, saying: "How can licence be given for a product that has not been approved? I do not know how the licence was procured." Patanjali was later issued a notice by the government for violating food safety norms.

The company's product called 'Divya Putrajeevak Beej', which claimed to treat infertility, was being "sold by some (Patanjali) pharmacies as medicine that can guarantee the birth of a boy" in 2015, ThePrint reported. In 2016, the Canteen Stores Department (CSD), the retailing platform for India's defence forces, suspended the sale of Patanjali's amla (gooseberry) juice from its stores it was deemed unfit for consumption. Ramdev has also landed in a soup for his previous remarks. In 2006, he claimed that yoga can cure AIDS, leading to the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare denouncing the statement. Doctors had also rebuked Ramdev's "irresponsible" claim that yoga can cure cancer. "If he says a cure for cancer and AIDS is available, he might be misleading patients who may refuse treatment on the basis of his statement and suffer."

Pankaj Udhas: The End of an Era

The 1980s was a musically different era. A teenager back then, this writer was among those thousands present in a public concert during Durga Puja in Patna's Gandhi Maidan in the middle of the night. Pankaj Udhas, a rising star of ghazals and popular music, was expected to perform soon. The crowd cheered loudly after the news of his arrival at the venue was announced. A small group of restless young men rushed towards the stage to watch and hear him sing at close quarters. After these individuals found their desired place or accepted their inability to do it, Udhas took the stage. 'Deewaron Se Milkar Rona', 'Ghungroo Toot Gaye', 'Sabko Maloom Hai': he performed his popular gems one after the other, and those present sang along with him. It was a night to remember. Udhas appeared on the musical scene in the early 1980s when the popularity of the ghazal was on the rise in India — once again. Pakistani maestro Mehdi Hassan had a dedicated fan following in the country. Ghulam Ali, another brilliant performer from Pakistan, had loyal fans as well. A couple of months younger than Ali, the inimitable Jagjit Singh's velvety voice mesmerised ghazal listeners everywhere.

Udhas took his first few steps along with a few other gifted Indian ghazal singers. Among them was Talat Aziz, whose impressive debut album 'Jagjit Singh presents Talat Aziz' was released in 1980. Aziz's following increased significantly after 'Zindagi Jab Bhi,' his song from Muzaffar Ali's film Umrao Jaan (1981). Peenaz Masani's debut album, 'Aapki Bazm Mein' featuring the haunting 'Dil Mein Rakhlo' was a 1981 release. Many new music lovers were getting attracted to ghazals, in other words, and the timing of Udhas's arrival could not have been more appropriate.

Born in Rajkot, Gujarat, in 1951, Pankaj Udhas was the youngest among the three Udhas brothers, who aspired for careers as singers in their young days. The first one to experience some success was his eldest brother Manhar Udhas, who sang the hit duet 'Loote Koi Man Ka Nagar' with Lata Mangeshkar in the Hrishikesh Mukherjee film Abhimaan (1973). Nirmal, the second brother, is a good singer as well. Pankaj, the youngest, made an impact after the release of Aahat, his debut album, in 1980. Well-composed and hummable, a few songs from Aahat went on to get the kind of recognition they richly deserved. 'Yeh Alag Baat Hai Saqi',

the first song on the album's 'A' side, became hugely popular. However, 'Tum Aaye Zindagi Main' was the first song that Udhas had recorded for the album. Written by his friend Sheikh Adam Aboowala, 'Tum Aaye...' was the perfect example of his liking for simple lyrics in his compositions.

Many listeners embraced variety in popular music in the 1980s. While Aahat introduced a new ghazal singer to the masses, Nazia Hassan and her brother Zoheb delivered 'Disco Deewane' (1981), an album responsible for increasing the appetite for non-film pop music overnight. The quality of film music had declined, but Khayyam composed the soundtrack of Umrao Jaan (1981), whose captivating songs became simultaneously popular. The non-film ghazal had rediscovered its mass appeal, too, a boon for an artist like Udhas.

Initially trained in classical music and passionate about the ghazal form, Udhas learned Urdu and eventually started performing ghazals in concerts. He released more than 50 albums and also sang for Hindi films in a long career. The artist's songs had two trademark qualities: melodies an alert listener picked up quickly and accessible lyrics

that revealed his desire for reaching out to the masses. His career as a ghazal singer had many highlights, such as 'Thodi Thodi Piya Karo', 'Aap Jinke Kareeb Hote Hain' and 'Sharab Cheez Hi Aisi Hai' that became a permanent feature of his concerts. Popular as a performer in concerts, the impeccably dressed singer cast a spell on the listeners whenever he appeared on the stage.

An article on Udhas will be incomplete without any mention of 'Chithhi Aayi Hai' from Mahesh Bhatt's Naam (1986), whose moving lyrics appealed to the Indian diaspora. While 'Chithhi Aayi Hai is', without a shade of doubt, his most popular song, he also sang other hit film tracks, such as 'Aaj Phir Tum Pe' in Feroz Khan's Dayavan (1988) and 'Na Kajre Ki Dhaar' in Rajiv Rai's Mohra (1994). Udhas's last film song, 'Raat Bhar Tanha Raha' in Raja Bundela's Dil Toh Deewana Hai (2016), was an ordinary effort. The film failed, and the song did not find many listeners on its own either. A Padma Shri recipient in 2006, Pankaj Udhas's death at 72 marks the closure of a significant chapter in Indian popular music. What will live on forever are his songs, which will be heard and loved by every fan of ghazals — now and in future.

'Thank You PIA': Pakistani air hostesses fly to Canada, and 'vanish'

A note saying, "Thank you, PIA (Pakistan International Airlines)," was found in a Toronto hotel room after a search.

An appreciation note, like this, is what a flight attendant would expect to find from a flyer after a nice and cosy flight.

However, the note saying, 'Thank you, PIA', was actually written by an air hostess, and not a satisfied flyer. The note was from Maryam Raza, who worked with the PIA and had landed in Toronto on a flight from Islamabad on Monday (February 26) but didn't report for duty on her return flight to Karachi a day later.

When authorities looking for Maryam opened her hotel room, they found her PIA uniform with the 'Thank you, PIA' note, reported Dawn.

Maryam Raza isn't the lone example of a PIA crew member landing in Canada and vanishing into thin air. In fact, she was just following a trend.

Maryam's disappearance comes just a month after PIA flight attendant Faiza Mukhtar's disappearance in Canada in January 2024.

Faiza Mukhtar, who was rostered to fly back to Karachi a day after landing in Canada "did not board the flight and disappeared", said PIA spokesperson Abdullah Hafeez Khan.

PIA CREW MEMBERS SEEKING CANADA ASYLUM SINCE 2018

The disappearances of crew members, Maryam and Faiza, actually follow a worrying trend for the PIA, which is itself battling financial and credibility losses.

The disappearance of Maryam marks the second such instance in 2024. It's probably no longer the PIA that Jacqueline Kennedy called, "Great people to fly with", in 1962. That has become the slogan of PIA since then.

In fact, Pakistan isn't the same Pakistan of the 60s. Surviving on loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and international doles, Pakistan has seen record brain drain in 2023. Unsure about their future in Pakistan, skilled professionals have been leaving the Islamic Republic in hordes.

The trend of Pakistani flight attendants disappearing after crewing a flight to Canada started back in 2019 and has picked up recently, according to aviation news website

Simple Flying. However, The Media Line, a 'Mideast'-based news website, claims to have received information about PIA flight attendants seeking asylum in Canada and other countries as early as 2018.

7 PIA CABIN CREW MEMBERS 'VANISHED' IN CANADA IN 2023

Last year, 2023, at least seven flight attendants of the PIA are said to have disappeared after landing in Canada, according to media reports.

Technology and cricket big wins for billionaire Ambani in Disney tie-up

A Disney-Reliance assets merger in India will create a media giant far bigger than all its rivals, boosting billionaire Mukesh Ambani's entertainment ambitions with streaming tech prowess and lucrative cricket rights.

Disney (DIS.N), opens new tab and Reliance on Wednesday put a value on their joint TV and streaming assets business of \$8.5 billion. Ambani's Reliance (RELI.NS), opens new tab and its affiliates will own more than 63% of the merged entity, with Disney owning 37%. The merged group, boasting 120 channels and two streaming platforms, will be India's no. 1 TV player, followed by home-grown Zee Entertainment (ZEE.NS), opens new tab which has 50 TV channels in India's thriving \$28 billion media and entertainment market. In streaming, Disney's Hotstar is India's largest with 38 million paid users. Netflix and Amazon Prime Video do not disclose their India numbers, but industry analysts estimate they have 20 million and 6.5 million paid users, respectively. Reliance's JioCinema is largely free and doesn't disclose user numbers, having started a premium paid offering just last year.

As its rivalry with Disney grew before the merger, Reliance heavily promoted JioCinema, instantly becoming popular with its free cricket streaming offers. But it also faced user ire on social media for regular technology glitches.

"India's media industry has historically not invested much in tech innovation. Reliance will gain from the streaming and cloud-related tech innovations of Hotstar," said Shashi Shekhar Vempati, former CEO of Indian state-run broadcaster Prasar Bharati. "Hotstar is ahead of JioCinema on many aspects of tech. It is better at making intelligent viewing recommendations based on a user's watching history and is more mature at showing live content to a very large number of concurrent viewers without glitches," he added. A Disney source, who declined to be named because they are not authorized to speak to the press, told Reuters the company's streaming service in India has over the years mastered a so-called server side ad insertion technology which allows them to monetize and target users on a large scale with ads during live content streaming.

As War Enters Third Year, World's Losing Interest in Ukraine

As the Russia-Ukraine war enters its third year, news from the front is missing from daily newspapers. Gaza has pushed Ukraine onto the back pages. Casualty figures in Ukraine are ignored, while those of Gaza grab attention. The UN Security Council no longer passes or even attempts to pass resolutions seeking peace in Ukraine or accusing Russia, while major powers veto those on the Israel-Hamas war including where Israel or Hamas is blamed for the conflict. Pictures of the destroyed town, Avdiivka, captured by Russian forces recently, are missing from social media sites, while damages to hospitals of Gaza are prominent. The world has learnt to ignore Ukraine. Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the Ukrainian President, has assumed the role of a dictator, backed by the US and its allies, while Putin already was one. It is currently two dictators fighting for their own survival, while their people die. Vladimir Putin's popularity remains high, while Zelenskyy, desperate to stay relevant, attends every global event requesting for funds, while turning a blind eye to the devastation of his country. The Ukrainian army is struggling to stay afloat, with mercenaries drying up, while the Wagner army, now backed by the Russian state, continues to hire them from third world countries. Ukraine remains an expendable proxy for the West. The Ukrainian army is compelled to pull people off the street and send them into the war zone with little training, while the Russians have employed approximately a third of their military power. Western powers are pumping Ukraine with weapons and ammunition while Iran and North Korea, alongside China, provide Russia with armaments and drones. Sponsors of Ukraine are slowly pulling back, funding fatigue setting in. The loss of Avdiivka is possibly because Ukraine faced shortfalls in arms and ammunition largely blocked by the US House of Representatives. The only gainers of the conflict are armament industries, garnering maximum funds allocated for Ukraine. With US funds slowly drying, pressure mounts on Europe to fill the gap, which it cannot.

Peace talks are nowhere on the horizon as the war is directed not by Kiev but Washington and London, which determines what approach Zelenskyy should take. The grandiose plans of the west to bleed Russia economically, compelling its breakup and drawing it into a second Afghanistan have faltered. Washington led crippling sanctions on Moscow did dent the Russian economy but hit Europe equally. Large parts of the world refused to adhere to US sanctions on Moscow, India included. Exports of Russian oil and gas continue as before, enabling Russia to fund its campaign. A report published by the Finland-based Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air in February this year, mentioned that India has increased its purchase of Russian crude by 13 times, implying India is partially financing the Russian campaign. The belief that Ukraine will save Europe from Russia's future onslaught is not being bought by anyone anymore. The war is largely fought on Ukrainian soil with limited impact on Russian assets. Military lessons to be drawn from the war have been collated. Initially it was believed that the age of tanks has passed but that was wrong. Armoured warfare would continue albeit with change in tactics, structure and redesigning of tanks. However, what came to the fore was innovative employment of drones, UAVs, loitering munitions, long range artillery, missiles and other instruments of non-contact warfare. Cheap drones can now destroy equipment costing hundreds of millions of dollars. These will dominate future conflicts. Both sides had the opportunity to test their counters against these weapons. It also signalled the end of short, intense conflicts. Finally, if a nation has allies, war-like stores would always be available, even if the domestic military industry lacks production capability, especially as most weapon systems are of a common calibre. What has been most pronounced is the huge loss of lives on both sides, hundreds of thousands. Ukraine has lost a generation. This

could all have been avoided had the west opened its eyes post the Russian annexation of Crimea as also heeded its warnings on expansion of NATO. However, these were ignored, setting the stage for the current conflict.

Talks pushed by Turkey for a ceasefire were dumped at the last minute under directions from the west which hoped to draw Russia into a deeper war. For major powers, it is their long-term goals which count, loss of lives implies nothing. The fact that this is being repeated in Gaza on the pretext of ensuring the destruction of Hamas is another issue.

Yes, a major benefit of the war was that Europe's eyes opened and nations began investing in enhancing their military capabilities. Russia achieved what Trump had attempted in his first presidency and failed, which was increasing Europe's spending on defence. For Russia, Finland and Sweden have moved from being neutral to NATO members, bringing NATO to its doorstep. Just what it had sought to avoid, has happened.

Rebuilding Ukraine would cost trillions of dollars as would Gaza. While Gaza may be funded by the oil-rich Middle East, possibly with conditions, who would fund Ukraine. Neither Europe nor the US can pump unlimited taxpayers' funds into its reconstruction. Ukraine has been pushed decades behind in development.

Russian military aims have been achieved while those of Ukraine and the west remain. Putin is open to talks but without losing the 20% of Ukraine, largely the mineral rich parts, which he currently controls.

At the end of the day, Putin has come out stronger while Zelenskyy survives by overriding all opposition. The west has no power to dictate its terms on Russia. Forthcoming elections in the US could alter the scenario forcing talks on Putin's terms, which would restrict expansion of NATO as also Moscow holding onto territory it controls.

While Russia would claim victory by displaying it captured Russian speaking parts of Ukraine, Kiev would project it managed to stall the powerful Russian army. Economically both have suffered, Ukraine much more.

Trinamool's Sheikh Shahjahan sent to 10 days' police custody after arrest

Sheikh Shahjahan, the Trinamool Congress strongman accused of sexual violence and land grab by several women in West Bengal's Sandeshkhali, was arrested on Thursday morning after 55 days of absconding and has been sent to 10 days in police custody.

The 53-year-old Trinamool leader was picked up from the Minakhan area in North 24 Parganas, where he was hiding with his associates. Shahjahan was produced in a court in Basirhat at around 10:30 and was remanded to police custody for 10 days. Following the remand, officials announced that the West Bengal CID has taken over the investigation into cases lodged against Shahjahan Sheikh. The Trinamool leader has been arrested in a case of assault on Enforcement Directorate officers during a raid on January 5, senior police officer Supratim Sarkar said. Sheikh Shahjahan Arrested | Latest Developments Sheikh Shahjahan has been arrested on complaint by the Enforcement Directorate and charged under Section 147 (punishment for rioting), 148 (rioting, armed with deadly weapon), 149 (unlawful assembly), 353 (assault or criminal force to deter public servant from discharge of duty), 427 (offence of mischief), 323 (voluntarily causing hurt), 506 (criminal intimidation), 34 (common intention), and provisions under the Prevention of Damage to Public Property Act. Following the arrest, the protesting women

in Sandeshkhali, who have been demanding action against Shahjahan, celebrated the arrest by sharing sweets. The locals came out in the streets as they distributed sweets and danced in joy as they celebrated.

A large number of women in Sandeshkhali had accused Shahjahan Sheikh and his supporters of land-grab and sexual assault under coercion. The riverine area has been embroiled in a series of protests for more than a month, demanding the arrest of Sheikh and his accomplices.

After his arrest, the Trinamool Congress (TMC) on Thursday suspended Sheikh Shahjahan from the party for six years. TMC MP Derek O'Brien announced the decision and said, "We have decided to suspend Sheikh Shahjahan from the party for six years. As always, we walk the talk. We have set examples in the past. We are doing so today."

The Enforcement Directorate on Thursday moved the Calcutta High Court seeking an urgent hearing on the case filed in connection with the January 5 assault on the probe agency.

The High Court said the arrested TMC leader did not "deserve any sympathy". It added that it would hear on March 4 Sheikh Shahjahan's four pending bail pleas filed in a lower court over the attack on ED officials. It also said 42 cases were registered against him.

The High Court on Wednesday had directed that the Trinamool Congress leader can also be arrested by the CBI, the Enforcement Directorate (ED). However, additional Solicitor General of India SV Raju, appearing for the ED, expressed apprehension that if the state police arrest Sheikh, there is a likelihood of the case being diluted by the state police.

West Bengal BJP president Sukanta Majumdar, commenting on the arrest, said that the Mamata Banerjee government was "forced to take action due to the continuous agitation by the BJP". Leader of Opposition Suvendu Adhikari said, "This is not arrest, this is a mutual adjustment" and said Shahjahan will get "5-star facilities in jail". Trinamool MP Santanu Sen said Shahjahan's arrest was delayed due to the "stay order" and added the arrest proves that "our government follows 'rajdharm' in an administrative manner" and the "BJP should learn 'rajdharm' from the TMC." Abhishek Banerjee had said that the Police were unable to arrest him due to the court's stay order. He has been arrested within 3-4 days of the removal of the stay order," the Trinamool leader asserted. West Bengal Governor CV Ananda Bose asserted that the time has come to put criminals, who are ruling the roost in parts of Bengal, behind bars. "This is the beginning of an end. We have to put an end to the cycle of violence in Bengal. In parts of Bengal, the goons are ruling the roost."

'India Out' campaigns simmer in Bangladesh amid election fallout

(News Agency)- Amid allegations of Indian interference in national elections, there's a call to boycott Indian goods in Bangladesh.

Last week, a supplier for the Indian consumer goods giant Marico faced a chilly reception in Dhaka's Panthapath area. Grocery shops, usually eager to stock their shelves with its hair oil, cooking oil, body lotion and other products, refused to take new deliveries. "Sales of Parachute oil, a Marico bestseller, have plummeted to almost zero in recent weeks," local shopkeeper Aman Ullah said. "Indian products just aren't moving. We're stuck with unsold stock and won't be restocking."

Another shop owner who requested anonymity revealed a deeper reason: "I don't want to sell Indian products any more." He cited YouTube videos advocating a boycott of Indian goods, which he wholeheartedly supported. Simmering anti-India sentiment in Bangladesh has boiled over in the past decade, culminating in public displays such as celebrations in Dhaka last year after India's loss in the Cricket World Cup final.

But after last month's elections in Bangladesh, in which Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina secured a fourth term while the opposition boycotted the polls,



a massive "India Out" campaign was launched, alleging Indian interference in Bangladesh politics.

The Bangladeshi diaspora and opposition groups have fuelled this anti-India movement and advocated boycotts of Indian products. This movement mirrors similar campaigns in the Maldives, where Mohamed Muizzu capitalized on anti-India sentiment to win the presidential election.

In Dhaka, the campaign was launched against the backdrop of India's traditionally strong ties with Hasina's

government and its strained relationship with the opposition, leading many to believe India favoured the status quo.

Exiled Bangladeshi physician Pinaki Bhattacharya, who fled alleged government harassment in 2018, has emerged as the key figure in this burgeoning social media movement accusing India of interfering in Bangladesh's recent elections to keep Hasina in power.

Through his more than two million followers across social media platforms, Bhattacharya launched the

#BoycottIndia campaign in mid-January, urging them to join "this monumental endeavour". His call, emphasizing love of homeland and determination to break free from perceived shackles, resonated with thousands. The anti-India movement has surged online, fuelled by user-generated content. Photos of crossed-out Indian products like Amul butter and Dabur honey are circulating alongside barcode identification tips to boycott these goods. A single post highlighting the 890 prefix used in barcodes for Indian products garnered more than 1,000 shares, showcasing the movement's online reach.

Why did the campaign gain traction?

The Indian High Commission in Dhaka declined Al Jazeera's request for a comment on this anti-India campaign.

At a Mumbai forum on January 30 with Indian External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar, attendees raised concerns about India's foreign policy amid perceived shifts in regional dynamics, particularly the growing pull of major rival China on neighbouring countries like Bangladesh and the Maldives. Jaishankar downplayed concerns about foreign policy shortcomings but conceded the competitive reality. He pointed out that China's geographical proximity naturally grants it influence over neighbouring countries like the Maldives, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.

Sri Lanka settles US\$20 million Iranian oil debt with tea

(News Agency)-Cash-strapped Sri Lanka said on Wednesday it had exported tea worth US\$20 million to Iran to partially repay its US\$251 million oil debts, with Colombo saying Tehran's visiting foreign minister had expressed "satisfaction" at the deal.

"So far, US\$20 million worth of tea has been exported to Iran under the barter trade agreement," Sri Lankan Prime Minister Dinesh Gunawardena's office said in a statement after talks with Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian.

The tea-for-oil deal was agreed upon in December 2021, but exports were delayed by Colombo's economic crisis that forced then-president Gotabaya Rajapaksa to step down in July 2022. The barter deal allows sanctions-hit Iran to avoid having to use up scarce hard currency to pay for imports of popular tea.

It also allowed Sri Lanka to pay with tea, as the country was short of foreign currency.

Sri Lankan officials have previously said that the tea-oil swap did not break US sanctions on Iran, since tea was a food item and the deal did not involve Iranian blacklisted banks.

The island nation defaulted on its US\$46 billion foreign debt in April 2022 and



secured a US\$2.9 billion International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout early last year.

Ceylon tea, known by the island's colonial-era name, made up nearly half of Iran's consumption in 2016. However, the proportion has declined in recent

years. The barter deal comes as Sri Lanka sent a new restructuring proposal to dollar bondholders through its adviser Lazard as the South Asian nation seeks to complete overhauling its defaulted debt, according to people familiar with the matter. A counter proposal to a bondholder group's offer in

October for a 20 per cent haircut and the issuance of macro-linked bonds was conveyed through Lazard, the people said, declining to be named because negotiations are private. They did not elaborate on the details of the offer.

Government representatives may travel to London soon to meet Sri Lanka's commercial creditors, one of the people said. The nation's dollar bonds made up four of the top 10 performers in emerging markets Wednesday, with notes maturing 2026 up one cent to 53.4 cents on the dollar, according to data compiled by Bloomberg. Completing the overhaul of Sri Lanka's US\$27 billion of foreign debt is critical to ensure financing from the IMF bailout keeps flowing. President Ranil Wickremesinghe said this month that authorities expect to complete the restructuring within the first six months of the year.

Calls to Sri Lanka's treasury secretary, junior finance minister and central bank governor went unanswered. Representatives of the bondholder group and Lazard weren't immediately available for comment.

The government had already struck restructuring deals with official creditors, including China, India and the Paris Club as well as with holders of its local debt.

Pakistan's Army Firmly in Command Despite Election Rebuke

(News Agency)-Pakistan's voters expressed their disillusionment with the nation's powerful military in a surprising election result earlier this month. But the army is still poised to have more control from behind the scenes than ever — and reviving the economy will be its ultimate test. The military, which has ruled Pakistan directly or indirectly for most of its modern history, is set to make all important decisions on foreign policy and security for the country's new government and have a more expanded role in running the nation's economy, a person familiar with the matter said. Shehbaz Sharif

The army is consolidating power as Pakistan faces the worst inflation in Asia, a crippling debt load and the need to negotiate another bailout from the International Monetary Fund. Observers are largely pessimistic that a weak coalition propped up by the military will fare any better than similar governments in the past. While the army "definitely has more credibility" than



politicians, "it has not shown historically a strong grasp or understanding of what needs to be done," said Yousuf Nazar, a former Citigroup Inc. banker and author of *The Gathering Storm: Pakistan*. Pakistan's military and Sharif's party did not respond to a request for a comment. In 2022, the military admitted that it had interfered in the country's politics - but vowed not to do so anymore. Last year, interim Prime Minister Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar did not rule out future intervention given the

weakness of the country's civilian institutions.

Pakistan's two old-guard political parties — controlled by the Sharif and Bhutto clans — agreed last week to form a government, breaking an almost two-week impasse after an inconclusive election on Feb. 8. The elected lawmakers will meet on February 29 in the first session of National Assembly that will select a prime minister with former premier Shehbaz Sharif expected to take the job.

The move thwarts the former

premier Imran Khan, who fell out of favor with the military and ended up in jail. His party colleagues were forced to run as independents, and still won the most seats but fell short of an outright majority. Khan's party did better than most surveys, which is seen as a sharp rebuke of the military's attempts to sideline Khan and engineer the elections to their desired outcome.

The new coalition regime "will be entirely reliant on the goodwill of the military to be able to stay in place," said Omar Warraich, a political commentator and special advisor at Open Society Foundations, an organization that gives grants in support of civil society. The army can easily bring it down if it disagrees on policy, he said. That has been the story for much of Pakistan's history since independence in 1947. Khan himself, for instance, was widely seen as backed by the generals when he came to power in 2018. But the relationship soured when the

former cricketer tried to influence military appointments, leading to his ouster. Shehbaz was anointed as his successor. His brother Nawaz, a three-time former premier, also had a history of being backed and then deposed by the military, including once in a coup. Shehbaz has been conciliatory with the military, including publicly praising army chief Asim Munir. During his time in office, Shehbaz's government passed two bills to give the military more power. One criminalized criticism of the armed forces; the other gave the security forces unlimited power to arrest any individual they deem a threat.

Pakistan set up a Special Investment Facilitation Council in June, during Shehbaz's term, to promote foreign investments and spur growth. One of the council's members is the army chief, Munir. Its immediate aim has been to increase foreign direct investment to \$5 billion. So far no major deals have been signed.

China rolls over \$2 billion loan to Pakistan, finance minister says



(News Agency)- China has rolled over a \$2 billion loan to Pakistan, caretaker finance minister Shamshad Akhtar confirmed in a response to Reuters on Thursday. The \$2 billion loan was due in March and has been extended for one year, Geo News which first reported the news said, citing sources in the Pakistan finance ministry. Beijing had communicated the decision to Islamabad, it

added. Pakistan's cash-strapped economy is struggling to stabilise from a financial crisis and secured a \$3 billion standby arrangement from the International Monetary Fund last summer.

Pakistan's vulnerable external position means that securing financing from multilateral and bilateral partners will be one of the most urgent issues facing the next government, ratings agency Fitch said last week.

Pakistan's former premier Imran Khan and his wife plead not guilty in another corruption case

(News Agency)-Pakistan's imprisoned former Prime Minister Imran Khan and his wife pleaded not guilty Tuesday in a graft case alleging they accepted a gift of land from a real estate tycoon in exchange for large sums of laundered money, officials said.

The case is the second to indict Khan and his wife, Bushra Bibi, over acts of corruption allegedly committed while the former cricket star turned Islamist politician was in office.

Prosecutors accuse the couple of using their family's charity to set up a university on land gifted to them by tycoon Malik Riaz. In return, the businessman was allegedly given 190 million British pounds (\$240 million) in laundered money that was returned to Pakistan by British authorities. Khan, who was ousted in a no-confidence vote in parliament in April 2022, is currently serving multiple prison terms and has some 170 legal cases pending against him on charges ranging from corruption to inciting people to violence and



terrorism. The couple earlier was convicted in a graft case on charges of selling state gifts while in office. Khan has denied wrongdoing and insisted since his arrest last year that all the charges against him are a plot by rivals to keep him from returning to office. He was barred from running in the Feb. 8 parliamentary elections in which his rivals from the Pakistan Muslim League party, or PML-N, emerged as the largest presence in the National Assembly, or lower house of the parliament. Khan's rival, former Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, is on track to form a coalition government when the parliament meets for its inaugural session. Khan's party on Tuesday announced nationwide protests on

Saturday against alleged rigging in the election.

That came hours after Khan was brought before the judge at the high security court set up inside Adiala Prison in the garrison city of Rawalpindi, where he is serving his prison terms concurrently. Bibi, who is imprisoned at the couple's home in Islamabad, was brought to the court in a security convoy. The judge adjourned the proceedings until next month, Khan's legal team said. Separately, Khan and Bibi have been sentenced to seven years in prison each on charges that their 2018 wedding violated marriage laws, allegedly because insufficient time had lapsed between Bibi's previous divorce and their union.

Raashii Khanna goes ethnic as she promotes 'Yodha' in Hyderabad

Actress Raashii Khanna on Wednesday gave some major ethnic fashion goals, oozing elegance in an olive green ensemble.

The actress, who will be soon seen in the action thriller 'Yodha' alongside Sidharth Malhotra, took to Instagram, where she enjoys 10.8 million followers, and shared a series of pictures from the film's promotion in Hyderabad.

The pictures featured Raashii wearing a mirrored sleeveless olive green coloured blouse, and a green lehenga with a golden border. The lehenga had birds, trees, and some animals imprinted on it. She completed the look with a matching dupatta.

For the makeup, Raashii opted for nude brown lips, kohl rimmed eyes, thick brows, and a black bindi. Her hair is tied in a low bun. She sported silver accessories — a choker necklace, bangles and earrings.

Raashii, who made her acting debut with a supporting role in the 2013 Hindi political spy thriller film 'Madras Cafe', captioned the post: "#yodha in Hyderabad".

The latest outfit and look of Raashii received love from her fandom. One user said: "Queen of South", another said: "stunning gorgeous mesmerising".

A fan commented: "Divine Goddess".

'Yodha' is directed by Sagar Ambre and Pushkar Ojha, and also stars Disha Patani.



Rebecca Ferguson fled set sobbing after 'idiot' actor screamed at her



Actress Rebecca Ferguson, who is known for her work in 'Mission Impossible' films and 'Dune', shared that she fled a set in tears after her co-actor "screamed at" her.

The 40-year-old actress, who started her career as a teen in a Swedish soap opera, opened up about her trauma over the event on a new podcast, reports 'Female First UK'. Rebecca said the incident happened because of an "absolute idiot" actor and she'll never act alongside again. She said during an appearance on the 'Reign with Josh Smith' show, "I remember there was a moment and this human being was being so insecure and angry because this person couldn't get the scenes out." Rebecca further mentioned, "I think I was so vulnerable and uncomfortable that I got screamed at. But because this person was number one on a call sheet, there was no

safety net for me. So no one had my back. And I would cry walking off set."

As per 'Female First UK', Rebecca added the unnamed co-star — who she confirmed was not Tom Cruise or Hugh Jackman, would also ask her questions such as: "You call yourself an actor?" and "This is what I have to work with?" in front of the cast and crew.

Rebecca added: "I stood there just breaking".

She also opened up about how no senior bosses on the film came to her aid and she ended up standing up for herself a day after the actor's tirade.

The actress told them, "You get off my set".

She added: "I remember being so scared. I looked at this person and I said, 'You can f*** off. I'm gonna work towards a tennis ball. I never want to see you again'."

Rebecca added things calmed down after her confrontations, saying: "It was great from that moment, but it took so long for me to get to that."

Raveena Tandon is a picture of elegance in white saree for wedding

Actress Raveena Tandon, who is an avid social media user, on Wednesday shared some elegant pictures of herself wearing a beautifully embellished white saree for a wedding.

Raveena treated her 8.5 million fans to absolutely enchanting pictures of herself from a wedding.

The series of photos shows

Raveena posing in a garden, wearing a white saree with pearl embellishment. For the makeup, Raveena opted for — glossy pink lips, black eyeliner, kohl-rimmed eyes, and highlighted cheeks. Her hair was parted from the

centre and tied in a low bun, with white flowers on it.

The actress, who was recently seen in the web series 'Karmma Calling', sported an emerald green and white choker necklace, matching ring, earrings and a maang tika. She gave the tune of 'Tum Se' from the Shahid Kapoor and Kriti Sanon-starrer 'Teri Baaton Mein Aisa Uljha Jiya'. The post is

captioned as: "Wedding whites..." On the professional front, Raveena next has 'Ghudchadi', and 'Welcome to the Jungle'.



Warner Music Group CEO bets big on MENA, signs up Nora Fatehi



Actress Nora Fatehi, who was recently seen in the Vidyut Jammwal-starrer film 'Crakk', has been welcomed by Robert Kyncl, the CEO of the Warner Music Group, after she inked the deal with the global record company.

The partnership will promote Nora's global music career, working with teams in the US and across the world. Nora is a part of his MENA (Middle East and North Africa) expansion plan. Robert Kyncl, CEO, Warner Music Group, said: "Nora is an extraordinary talent, electric performer, and cross-cultural superstar whose music reflects the rich diversity of her background. Her passion and ambition are infectious and we're excited to help her reach new audiences, places, and heights across the globe."

Nora will remain signed with T-Series for her Bollywood projects.

The actress, who is based in India, was born in Canada to a family of Moroccan heritage. She went on to become the first Arab-African artist to hit one billion views on a single music video on YouTube.

Talking about the partnership, Nora had earlier said: "I've enjoyed great success in

my career so far, but this deal is a significant step forward in my musical journey, a new chapter in my international career! My ambition is to be a global music star and performer, connecting with fans all over the world. I want to use my

diverse cultural background to create music and dance that brings everyone together! I'm excited to work with Warner Music to leverage their experience and expertise to help me fulfil this goal."



Alan Ritchson talks about why he lost 'Thor', 'The Hunger Games: Catching Fire' roles

Actor Alan Ritchson has talked about why he lost two major roles in 'Thor' and 'The Hunger Games: Catching Fire'.

The 41-year-old actor is looking back at his career and talking about what led Marvel to not star him in the main role that went to Hollywood star Chris Hemsworth.

"I didn't take it seriously," Ritchson told Men's Health of his audition for the superhero movie, reports deadline.com.

"I was like, 'They'll throw me the part if I look like the guy; nobody really cares



about acting."

After his audition for the 2011 film, the casting members told his team that he didn't have "the craft" for the role. Ritchson had previously played the superhero Aquaman in the 'Smallville' series. Later on, Ritchson auditioned for the role of Finnick Odair in 'The Hunger Games: Catching Fire', which went to Sam Claflin.

However, it was about his age this time and not his "craft". The actor was told that at the age of 30, he was too old to play the character.

Badshah all praise for Mouni Roy as he raps for Emraan Hashmi's 'Showtime'

Rapper Badshah's new track 'Class' for the Emraan Hashmi-starrer series 'Showtime' featuring Mouni Roy is the perfect blend of glamour and romance. The song brings Badshah and Mouni together on the screen for the first time.

The 1:36 seconds song is all about glamour, bling and Mouni's hot moves in a sleeveless blingy backless dress with hues of maroon, yellow and green. Her look is completed with thigh-high purple boots.

There are several glimpses from the show in the music video also featuring Emraan, Rajeev Khandelwal and Shriya Saran.

Presented by Sony Music, 'Class' is sung by Diesby, Badshah and Nikhita Gandhi. Talking about the song, Badshah said: "When I was approached to write a rap song for 'Showtime', I agreed without a doubt because of my love for the movie industry. Working with Diesby and Nikhita was creatively satisfying and I thoroughly enjoyed the collaboration.

"The song showcases the glitz and glamour of the film industry. What I was looking forward to with this song was

working with Mouni as it was my first collaboration with her, and we had a blast shooting the song. She is not only a great actor, but an effortless dancer too, who perfectly added the glam factor to the song and enhanced it."

Badshah added: "I also share screen space with Emraan and have been a fan of all his songs ever since. The track is groovy, soft and has some amazing beats and I hope the audience enjoys it." Mouni said: "This was the first time I worked with Badshah. We wrapped the song shoot very quickly. We rehearsed a couple of times and the final shot was a one-take. Badshah

and I shared great camaraderie onscreen. In fact, I wanted to dance a little more and the song to be a bit longer. I hope to work with him again."

Produced by Dharmatic Entertainment, created by Sumit Roy, and directed by Mihir Desai and Archit Kumar, the series also stars Mahima Makwana, Vishal Vashishtha, Neeraj Madhav, Vijay Raaz and Naseeruddin Shah in key roles.

'Showtime' is set to release on Disney+ Hotstar on March 8.



Adele put on voice rest after struggling to hit certain notes



The 'Rolling in the Deep' singer, Adele needs some rest as constant performances have strained her, and her voice.

Adele has been advised to put her vocal chords on rest. This happened after she struggled to hit certain notes during her Las Vegas residency, reports 'Female First UK'. The 35-year-old singer is currently busy with her 'Weekends With Adele' show in Las Vegas but revealed in her latest run of shows at Caesars Palace that her lack of sleep had stopped her from being able to hit certain notes.

As per 'Female First UK', she jokingly compared her current vocal technique to that of Ursula from 'The Little Mermaid'. The singer told the audience: "I'm sure you can hear it in my talking voice and my singing voice. Your girl was tired. I didn't sleep very well. And Ursula from the ocean has come from my chest tonight. I can't hit my headnotes

properly. I didn't sleep very well and my chest is on fire. Straight after this show I am going on voice rest."

The 'Someone Like You' songstress, who has 11-year-old son Angelo with ex-husband Simon Konecki, recently bragged to the audience that she could "easily" drink far more than them even though she has cut back on alcohol since becoming a mother as she wondered whether her penchant for alcohol came from the fact that her British culture is home to a number of rockstars.

Adele said: "I do like a drink. I can't lie. (I have) definitely cut it back, especially since I've become a mum and I've become a professional artiste, but easily, easily, easily could drink any one of you under the table. And maybe it's the Brit in me. But the stability that this has given a bunch of basically rockstars that are working and including the crew and everybody like that is second to none. And it's given us peace of mind."

Shahid Kapoor says Bollywood doesn't accept outsiders, talks about mistreatment



Shahid Kapoor recently appeared in 'No Filter Neha' where he spoke about how the Hindi film industry does not readily accept outsiders. The son of Shekhar Kapur and Neelima Azeem, the actor considered himself an 'outsider' too as he had come from Delhi to Mumbai. He also recalled being mistreated. Reminiscing about his early days, Shahid recalled, "When I entered the industry, I realised it's like a school. Bahar waale ko aasani se accept nahi karte ye log, inko bada problem hota hai ke tum aa kaise gaye ander (They don't readily accept outsiders. It's a big problem for them – how did you manage to get in)?" He also spoke against Bollywood camps and facing mistreatment and said, "I don't like this campy thing. I feel that people who want to creatively collaborate with each other, should. People are comfortable with each other, should. But that doesn't mean you diss other people or put other people down or you close the doors to other people. And I think that that's something which does happen in this fraternity. Maybe I don't have the qualities to be a campy person. I was from Delhi, came to Mumbai, and I wasn't accepted in my class. I was the outsider because of my different accent, and I faced mistreatment for a long time." He also spoke about how he started making friends and added, "I would be in a new building, trying to make friends with people who didn't know me. I went to Shiamak (Davar) and college, where I finally felt accepted and had my own group before becoming an actor with 'Ishq Vishq Pyaar Vyaar' in 2013." Shahid Kapoor was recently seen in 'Teri Baaton Mein Aisa Uljha Jiya' alongside Kriti Sanon.

After Bobby Deol, THIS Actor Will Play Dangerous Villain In Ranbir Kapoor's Animal Park?

After the massive success of Animal, fans are eagerly waiting for the film's sequel, Animal Park. However, if a recent report is to be believed, Sandeep Reddy Vanga's Animal 2 might bring bigger surprises for audiences. Recently, Instant Bollywood reported that the director is likely to get Vicky Kaushal on board for the sequel of his blockbuster movie.

Reportedly, Vicky Kaushal is being considered for a negative role in Animal Park. While there is no official confirmation regarding this as of now, it will be interesting to see Vicky's on-screen clash with Ranbir. In the first part of the movie, it was Bobby Deol who played the negative lead and his fight sequences with Ranbir were widely loved by all. It should also be noted that Vicky Kaushal's Sam Bahadur clashed with Ranbir Kapoor's Animal at the box office in December 2023.

Animal 2 aka Animal Park was officially announced in December 2023 when it was announced that Sandeep Vanga and Bhushan Kumar have joined forces to bring forth the highly anticipated sequel. Sharing the news on its official Instagram handle, T-Series wrote, "It's a partnership built on trust, fueled by creative freedom, and fortified by an unbreakable bond.



Producer Bhushan Kumar and Director #SandeepReddyVanga unveil the next cinematic wonders—Prabhas' Spirit, Animal Park, and an Allu Arjun saga—the chapters that follow the monumental success of Kabir Singh and #Animal." "The kind of freedom he gives in terms of my creativity and the liberty

to choose any song makes me feel at home at T-Series, and there is nothing more than that a director needs," the director also shared.

Released on December 1, 2023, Animal revolved around a man and his toxic relationship with his father. The film showed Vijay (played by Ranbir) as an

anti-hero who would go to any lengths to protect his father, including gun down 200 people with machine gun. However, despite his efforts, he struggled to get a seal of approval from his emotionally unavailable father (played by Anil Kapoor). The film earned over Rs 900 crore at the box office.

Reliance, Disney announce merger, Nita Ambani to head merged entity

Reliance-Disney media deal: Nita Ambani will be the chairperson of the merged entity, while Uday Shankar will serve as the vice chairperson.

Reliance Industries Limited and Walt Disney Company have officially signed a binding agreement to merge their media businesses in India. This sets the stage for the establishment of an \$8.5 billion (Rs 70,352 crore) media and entertainment powerhouse, surpassing any other entity in the industry.

Nita Ambani, wife of billionaire Mukesh Ambani, will be the chairperson of the merged entity as reported earlier, while Uday Shankar will serve as the vice chairperson, announced the companies in a joint statement. Reliance went on to say that as part of the pact, the media undertaking of Viacom18 will be merged into Star India Private Limited ("SIPL") through a court-approved scheme of arrangement. Simply put, the joint venture (JV) will bring together the operations of Viacom18 and Star India, with Viacom18's media division merging into Star India Private Limited through a court-approved scheme of arrangement.

Following the completion of the merger, the JV will be predominantly controlled by RIL, with 46.82 per cent ownership held by Viacom18 and 36.84 per cent by Disney.

This indicates that Reliance and its affiliates will together hold more than 60 per cent (majority) stake in the company. Reliance has agreed to invest Rs 11,500 crore in the JV. Additionally, Disney may also contribute certain additional media assets to the JV, subject to regulatory and third-party approvals. The merged media entity is poised to become a dominant force in both television and digital streaming in India, integrating renowned media assets across the entertainment and sports domains.

"The JV will be one of the leading TV and digital streaming platforms for entertainment and sports content in India, bringing together iconic media assets across entertainment," the companies said in a joint statement.

Notable brands such as Colors, StarPlus, StarGOLD, Star Sports, and Sports18 will be brought under one roof, alongside access to highly anticipated events through platforms like JioCinema and Hotstar. The JV anticipates reaching over 750 million viewers in India and catering to the global Indian diaspora.

Collectively, the combined Reliance-Disney entity will boast 120 TV channels



and two streaming platforms, positioning Ambani as a more formidable competitor against rivals like Japan's Sony, India's Zee Entertainment, and Netflix in the \$28 billion media and entertainment sector.

Reliance eyes expansion, Disney gets relief The deal comes at a crucial juncture for Disney, which had been struggling in India. Disney's decision to merge with Reliance comes after a prolonged battle to retain users in its struggling Indian streaming business, worsened by significant financial strain from hefty payments for Indian cricket rights. Moreover, the agreement coincides with Disney's global efforts to streamline its operations. Bob Iger resumed his role as Disney CEO in November 2022, just under a year after stepping down, and

has since reorganised the company to enhance cost efficiency.

Meanwhile, for Reliance, the creation of the JV will help it expand its footprint further in India's rapidly growing media and entertainment domain.

Commenting on the deal, Mukesh Ambani said, "This is a landmark agreement that heralds a new era in the Indian entertainment industry. We have always respected Disney as the best media group globally and are very excited at forming this strategic joint venture that will help us pool our extensive resources, creative prowess, and market insights to deliver unparalleled content at affordable prices to audiences across the nation. We welcome Disney as a key partner of Reliance Group."

Sony PlayStation employee loses job after 13 years of service, says it is time to build something new

Sony recently announced major layoffs, affecting about 8 percent of the PlayStation team. Amidst this, an ex-PlayStation employee shared his journey with Sony after working with the brand for 13 years.

Sony Interactive Entertainment recently left hundreds of employees worried when it announced its decision to cut about 8 percent roles in the PlayStation team and completely shut its London studio. The move affected about 900 people globally, and they are now sharing their side of the story on the popular job search platform LinkedIn.

One such ex-PlayStation employee shared how he had been working with Sony for over a decade and was laid off as part of the latest round of job cuts at the company. The ex-employee mentioned that he also relocated for the role. PlayStation employee loses job after 13 years In his LinkedIn post, the former PlayStation executive mentioned that he started working with Sony Network Entertainment back in 2011 in Los Angeles. He then revealed that through a series of brand changes and a shift in business strategy, he ended up



supporting

PlayStation Network. Subsequently, he moved to the Bay Area and became fully absorbed into the PlayStation team. He also shared that the Sony Network and Sony Computer Entertainment divisions had merged into Sony Interactive Entertainment and added

that he had supported Qriocity, PlayStationMusic, PlayStation Video, the launch of PS4, PlayStationVue, and PS5, amongst all the other countless products and services under the PlayStation family. Talking about his layoff, the man expressed that unfortunately, that chapter

was now done. He added that he relocated to Los Angeles again where it all started and said that it was time to "build something new."

Jim Ryan on layoffs

Meanwhile, Sony had announced the layoffs decision via a blog post titled "Difficult News About Our Workforce." Jim Ryan, President and CEO, Sony Interactive Entertainment, said in the blog post that the PlayStation community means everything to the team, and hence, he felt it was important to update everyone on a difficult day at their company.

"We have made the extremely hard decision to announce our plan to commence a reduction of our overall headcount globally by about 8% or about 900 people, subject to local law and consultation processes. Employees across the globe, including our studios, are impacted," Ryan wrote.

Homegrown Addverb unveils India's 1st assistive dog robot

Leading homegrown robotics company Addverb on Wednesday unveiled India's first-ever assistive dog robot named 'Trakr' at LogiMAT India 2024. Along with 'Trakr', the company unveiled an advanced medical collaborative robot (cobot) for rehabilitation and imaging, named 'Heal' and a cobot designed to enhance operational efficiency and safety, named 'Syncro'.

"Trakr's agility, Heal's medical advancements, and Syncro's collaborative prowess promise to redefine operational standards. We're proud to offer solutions that not only enhance efficiency but also cater to diverse industry needs, marking a milestone in flexible automation," Sangeet Kumar, Co-founder & CEO, Addverb, said in a statement.

According to the company, 'Trakr' represents a technological



milestone, engineered for agility and perception. Its versatility extends across

industries such as construction, oil exploration, Defence, and security.

Operating autonomously, 'Trakr' excels in facility inspections, patrols, and surveillance, making

it a pioneering addition to any workforce, it added.

'Heal' transforms healthcare with an innovative approach to rehabilitation and imaging.

Specialising in collaborative human-robot interactions, it focuses on physical and rehabilitation therapy for stroke patients and aids in remote imaging procedures like ultrasound and MRI scans.

'Syncro' is engineered to work alongside humans in shared spaces, the company said.

Boasting advanced safety features, adaptability, and ease of use, it finds application across diverse tasks from manufacturing to logistics.

Launched in 2016, Addverb provides smart end-to-end robots for warehouses and industrial automation.

LTIMindtree, IBM join hands to explore quantum computing innovation

Tech major IBM on Wednesday announced that global technology consulting and digital solutions firm LTIMindtree has joined its Quantum Network to explore quantum computing innovation for the benefit of its global clients across multiple industries.

LTIMindtree is the first Indian Global System Integrator (GSI) to join the IBM Quantum Network.

The company will also collaborate with the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Madras, which is also an IBM Quantum Innovation Centre, on joint quantum research and workforce development.

"We are looking forward to providing technology support for LTIMindtree's joint research and educational engagements with IIT-Madras, our first IBM Quantum Innovation Centre in India," Scott Crowder, Vice President of IBM Quantum Adoption and Business Development, said in a statement.

LTIMindtree will have access to IBM resources,



including the company's global fleet of quantum computing systems over the Cloud, software, and associated expertise.

This move is a strategic step towards LTIMindtree helping their customers benefit from the

transformative value of quantum computing technologies, the company said.

"These collaborations are more than an innovation milestone; they're an important step towards a future where quantum computing could help solve increasingly complex problems faster and more efficiently," said Aan Chauhan, Chief Technology Officer, LTIMindtree.

In addition, the company mentioned that LTIMindtree plans to establish a series of long-term projects, including applied research toward business and societal problems, quantum computing workshops, and research grants.

Video gaming company EA to lay off about 670 employees

Popular video gaming company EA (Electronic Arts) is laying off 5 per cent of its workforce, or nearly 670 employees. The company's CEO Andrew Wilson said that the move is to "streamline our company operations to deliver

industry," Wilson wrote in a memo to staff.

The job cuts will support EA's "strategic priorities and growth initiatives."

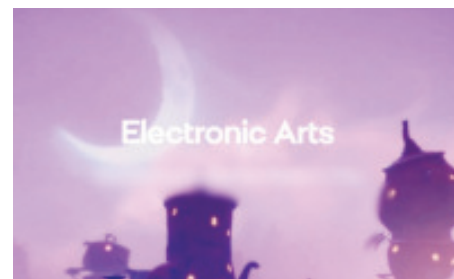
"We are continuing to optimize our global real estate footprint to best support our business,"

Wilson said.

In March last year, EA had laid off around 6 per cent of its workforce amid global macro-economic uncertainties.

At the time, Wilson had told employees that as the company drives

greater focus across its portfolio, "we are moving away from projects that do not contribute to our strategy, reviewing our real estate footprint, and restructuring some of our teams". Earlier this week, Sony announced to lay off about 900 employees in its PlayStation division, or 8 per cent of its workforce.



deeper, more connected experiences for fans everywhere."

EA had about 13,400 employees as of 2023, according to media reports.

"We are also sunseting games and moving away from development of future licensed IP that we do not believe will be successful in our changing

7 in 10 digital devices people use saw ownership drop globally in 2023: Report

About seven out of ten digital devices people use have seen an ownership drop globally in 2023, a new report said on Wednesday. According to data presented by Stocklytics.com, tablets, gaming consoles, and VR devices took the worst hit.

"Consumers worldwide showed

that having a smartphone became even more prevalent last year. According to the Digital 2024 Global Overview Report, mobile phones and smartphones were the only devices, except for smartwatches, whose ownership rate increased year-over-year," the researchers said.

All other digital devices, including PCs, laptops, tablets, game consoles, smart homes, TV streaming, and VR devices, saw their ownership rates drop.

As per the report, only 4.4 per cent of internet users aged between 14 and 64 owned a VR device in 2023, or 21.4 per cent

less than a year before. This huge ownership rate drop shows the hype around VR devices has stopped, the researchers noted.

Tablets witnessed the second-largest ownership decline in 2023. After surging in the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, global tablet demand dropped to far less

impressive numbers. The report mentioned that only 30.9 per cent said they owned a tablet last year, or 8.3 per cent less than a year before. Game consoles follow VR devices and tablets with almost a 6 per cent year-over-year drop and a 19.1 per cent share among internet users in 2023.

Trouble In Congress 'Paradise': Why the Himachal Rajya Sabha Shocker Was Waiting To Happen

By: Pallavi Ghosh

The last time Harsh Mahajan was seen inside the Congress headquarters in Shimla was in July 2021 — after the death of Virbhadr Singh, the former Chief Minister of Himachal Pradesh. That day, Mahajan looked forlorn. Not only because of the loss of his friend and mentor but also because of the realisation that the Congress had little use of him. Eventually, Mahajan parted ways with the party just before the state elections, towards the end of 2022.

After Tuesday's Rajya Sabha elections, Mahajan is back in political reckoning and how! Fighting the election as a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) candidate, he bagged the lone Rajya Sabha seat in the hill state in what is seen as a big surprise that has put a question mark on the stability of the Congress government of Chief Minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu. Mahajan defeated Congress nominee Abhishek Manu Singhvi in a draw or lots after the contest was tied at 34-34. The Congress has 40 MLAs in the 68-member state assembly and enjoys the support of three Independents. But Tuesday's surprise outcome came on the back of cross-voting by six of its MLAs.

That Mahajan was the wildcard entry of the BJP should have made the



Congress take note and buckle up. The 69-year-old former state minister knows the inside out of Himachal politics. Several veteran Congress leaders swear by him and are said to have been in touch with him. In fact, a considerable number of state MLAs say that Mahajan was more open to meeting them than Sukhu.

There were warning signs of the disaster that the Congress faced in the Rajya Sabha polls. One of the most recent examples was when Vikramaditya Singh (son of Virbhadr Singh)

expressed his keenness to visit Ayodhya for the January "pran pratistha" ceremony of the Ram Lalla idol, in defiance of the party line. He and his mother Pratibha Singh were said to be unhappy with Sukhu's coronation as the CM. They were placated by the Gandhis, but discontent simmered among their supporters. In fact, the loyalists of the late Virbhadr Singh expected Pratibha Singh, and not "outsider" Singhvi, to be the Congress nominee in the Rajya Sabha polls.

And much before that, there was trouble

surrounding the cabinet formation by Sukhu. The state's Kangra belt, which gave the Congress 10 MLAs, got only two ministers even as Shimla district got more. Pratibha Singh had voiced her displeasure on the matter. In another sign of unease in the Congress government, former journalist and deputy Chief Minister Mukesh Agnihotri is said to have been not in sync with Sukhu. In the context of the Rajya Sabha polls, the problem for the Himachal Congress was that Sukhu could not stand up to the Gandhis and advise them not to nominate an outsider as a Rajya Sabha candidate. The development — which came just months ahead of the Lok Sabha elections — once again exposed the weakness of the party and its first family who seem to have lost the grip on a state that they repeatedly called a "paradise". Tuesday's result could also diminish Sukhu's stature, with the Congress leadership failing to keep its flock together. Knives will be out as Sukhu faces intense scrutiny. Worse, the days of his chief ministership could be numbered, with the BJP claiming Sukhu's government is in minority. Flaunted by the Congress as a bus driver's son who rose to the CM's post, Sukhu finds himself off the track now.

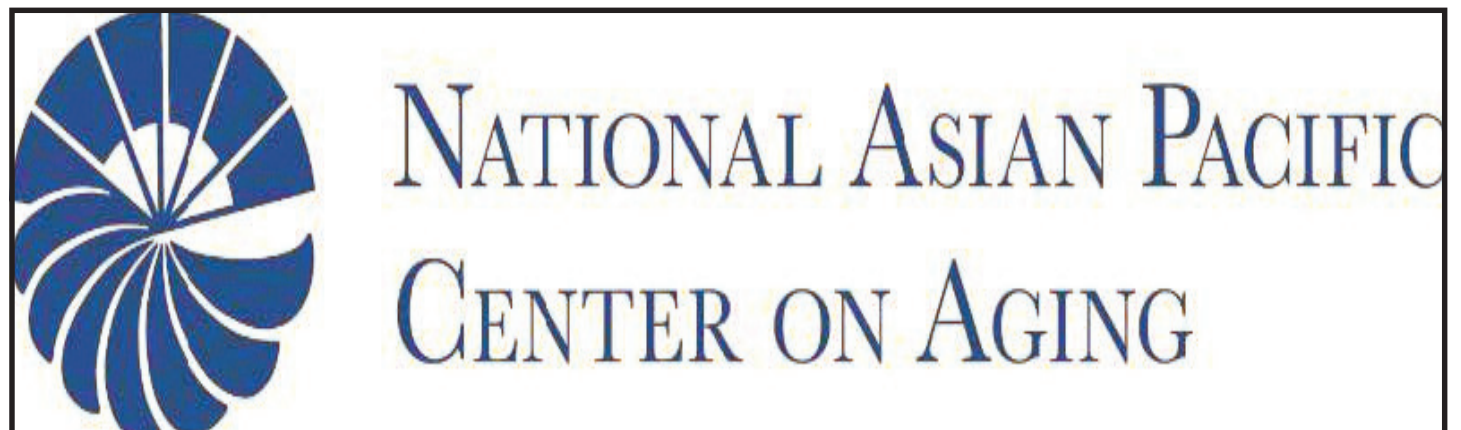
Q&A with NAPCA

<Q1> How much income do I need to earn to get 1 Social Security work credit in 2024? Do I have to work all year to earn credits?

Credits are based on your income for the year. Each year the amount of earnings needed to earn one credit goes up slightly as average wages increase. In 2024, you earn 1 Social Security and Medicare credit for every \$1,730 in covered earnings. You must earn \$6,920 to get the maximum 4 credits for the year. You might work all year to earn 4 credits, or you might earn enough for all 4 in much less time. You must earn a certain number of credits to qualify for Social Security benefits. No one needs more than 40 credits for any Social Security benefits.

<Q2> I have retired and am receiving Social Security Retirement. Can I still apply for Medicaid and SSI? I heard there is an income and asset limit. I own a house and a car. I also have life insurance.

You can get SSI or Medicaid if you are qualified based on income and assets threshold by each state. One house and one car are exempt, but some life insurance is counted as an asset. The monthly maximum federal amounts for SSI in 2024 are \$943 for an individual, or \$1,415 for a couple. Some states may provide SSP (State Supplementary Payment) on top of the federal standard. For example, if you



live in California and have no income, the monthly maximum payment would be \$1,182 for an individual, or \$2,022 for a couple. If your income has been increased, it would reduce your SSI amount. Note that the SSA has a special rule to calculate income. The most accurate way to find out whether you are eligible or not is to submit the application and receive the eligibility result through Social Security Administration. Please contact us if you have any questions.

<Q3> How much can I earn and still get benefits in 2024?

You can get Social Security retirement or survivors benefits and work at the same time. However, there is a limit to how much you can earn and still receive full benefits. If you are under full retirement age for the entire year, SSA deducts \$1 from your

benefit payments for every \$2 you earn above the annual limit (\$22,320 for 2024). In the year you reach full retirement age: Up to the month before you reach your full retirement age, SSA deducts \$1 in benefits for every \$3 you earn above a different limit (\$59,520 for 2024).

Beginning with the month you reach full retirement age, your earnings no longer reduce your benefits, no matter how much you earn.

SSA will recalculate your benefit amount to give you credit for the months SSA reduced or withheld benefits due to your excess earnings.

<Q4> I read in the news that COVID-19 cases are on the rise recently. Is the latest vaccine still effective in protecting us? COVID-19 activity is currently high. JN.1 is now the most widely circulating

variant in the US and globally and may be intensifying the spread of COVID-19 this winter. COVID-19 infections, hospitalizations, and deaths have increased in recent weeks. Hospitalizations reached 32,861 in the week ending January 13 2024. In that same period, deaths went up by 10.3%, with COVID-19 deaths accounting for 4.3% of total deaths in the US.

Current COVID-19 vaccines are expected to increase protection against JN.1.

As of January 13 2024, only 21.5% of adults reported having received the updated COVID-19 vaccine. Only 40.9% of adults aged 65 years and older reported having received this vaccine, which is concerning given that they are at higher risk of hospitalization or death from COVID-19.

From Fair To Glow-Is Indian Fixation With Light Skin Finally Over?

By **Bharti Mishra Nath**

Colourism, the bias against individuals with darker skin tones, has long plagued Indian society. The erroneous belief that darker-skinned individuals are somehow inferior and less desirable than their fairer counterparts has persisted for centuries. This fixation on fair skin has long been exploited by the rapidly expanding skin whitening product industry since the 1980s, which sought to portray 'fairness' as the epitome of beauty. However, recent data by Nielsen indicates a decline of 3% in the volume of fairness creams in 2023, compared to the previous year. The overall skincare industry in India is pegged at ? 15,800 crore in 2023. Fairness creams currently hold approximately 25% of the skincare market, according to the report. Does this signify a shift away from the obsession with fair skin? Or is it something else? To analyse this, it is imperative to delve into the magnitude of the fairness cream industry and the kind of patronage it enjoys.

The Obsession With Fairness

Triggered during the rule of the Caucasian British and further perpetuated by class divisions, the preference for fair skin became deeply entrenched in the psyche of the Indian populace. This preference had originally led to the use of bleaching products. However, the Indian market - more



particularly, women - had been eagerly waiting for a skincare product that would help them meet the societal ideal of a 'fair bride', often advertised in matrimonial columns.

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In 1975, Hindustan Unilever Ltd (HUL) responded to this demand by introducing 'Fair & Lovely', promoted as a safe alternative to bleaching. This face cream, promising fairer skin in six weeks, resonated with women fixated on lighter skin tones and quickly became a cornerstone of the Indian cosmetic market. Subsequently, numerous other brands, such as Emami, L'Oréal, Ponds, and Neutrogena, entered the segment with their own offerings with products that emphasised anti-tanning and anti-pollution properties. Television commercials in the 1980s furthered discriminatory messages, suggesting that darker-skinned individuals faced challenges in securing employment or marriage proposals unless they attained fairness through the use of these creams.

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'In the Name of Lord Ram...': Who Are the 7 SP MLAs Who Cross-voted During Rajya Sabha Polls in UP?

By: Oliver Fredrick

"Hum antaratma ki awaaz ke saath jayenge (I will go with my conscience), will vote in the name of Lord Ram," said SP MLA Manoj Kumar Pandey, while casting his vote in the Rajya Sabha election on Tuesday. His voice was not the only "voice of dissent" heard in the House, as the BJP swept the polls in Uttar Pradesh by the winning eight seats while the SP won two. There were six others who joined the queue and listened to their antaratma, leading to cross-voting in the polls.

Rakesh Kumar Pandey, father of MP Ritesh Pandey who recently switched to the BJP from the BSP; Abhay Singh, Rakesh Pratap Singh, Vinod Chaturvedi, Pooja Pal and Ashutosh Maurya were other SP MLAs who ditched their boss Akhilesh Yadav and cross-voted in favour of the BJP. Maharajji Prajapati, meanwhile, did not show up.

These seven MLAs also skipped the crucial dinner meeting called by Akhilesh on the eve of the polls. As seven MLAs cross-voted for the BJP, Akhilesh on Tuesday said the party's decision to field a third candidate was a "loyalty test" to identify the rebels.

"Our third seat in the Rajya Sabha was actually a test to identify the true comrades and to know who was with the PDA at heart and who was against the backward classes, Dalits and minorities by conscience. Now everything is clear, this is the victory of the third seat," he said in



a post on X.

Here is all you need to know about the MLAs who failed the "loyalty test":

Manoj Kumar Pandey: The SP MLA from Unchahar in Raebareli district resigned from the post of party chief whip amid the voting for 10 Rajya Sabha seats in UP on Tuesday. He won the previous assembly elections in 2022 by defeating BJP candidate Amarpal Maurya by a margin of 6,621 votes, and has held this seat since the first election after its creation in 2012. Manoj was a cabinet minister in the previous Akhilesh Yadav-led government. He was born in Raebareli and completed his graduation from Kanpur University's Feroze Gandhi College.

Rakesh Kumar Pandey: The MLA from Jalalpur constituency was born and brought up in Kotwa Mohamadpur in UP's Ambedkar Nagar district. He is an agriculturist by profession and has two sons. His son Ritesh Pratap Pandey is an MP from Ambedkar Nagar

constituency. Rakesh's political career picked up in 2002, and he has been MLA from 2002 to 2007 and also served as an MP from Ambedkar Nagar from 2007 to 2014. In January 2022, he left the BSP and joined the SP following which he won Jalalpur in the 2022 state assembly elections by defeating the BSP's Rajesh Singh with a margin of 13,630 votes.

Abhay Singh: The MLA represents Gosainganj assembly constituency in UP's Ayodhya district. Singh is a graduate from the University of Lucknow and is an agriculturist by profession. He had defeated BSP candidate Indra Pratap Tiwari in the 2012 assembly elections, but lost the seat in 2017. In 2022, he was fielded by the SP, and he defeated BJP's Arti Tiwari, who is the wife of MLA Indra Pratap Tiwari, by a margin of 13,079 votes.

Pooja Pal: She is the wife of former Allahabad West MLA Raju Pal, who was allegedly murdered following the defeat of Mohammed Ashraf in the 2004 elections. Subsequently, Ashraf, who was named the key accused in the case, became the MLA. But, in the 2007 assembly polls, Ashraf was defeated by Pooja. After the murder of Umesh Pal, the key witness in the murder case, along with his two security guards on February 25, 2023, she made a formal request for Y+ security in a letter to chief minister Yogi Adityanath.

Rakesh Pratap Singh: He is the MLA from Amethi's Gauriganj assembly constituency. Born and brought up in Mau district, Singh completed his schooling from Pratapgarh. He has served three terms as an MLA from Gauriganj. In the 2012 assembly polls, he defeated his closest rival Mohammed Nayeem of the Congress after securing 44,287 votes. In 2017, he won again by defeating Nayeem with a margin of 77,915 votes. On October 31, 2021, he resigned from the BJP government and, in 2022, defeated BJP's Chandra Prakash Mishra by a margin of 6,963 votes. In May 2023, he was booked for allegedly attacking the husband of BJP's Gauriganj municipality chairperson on the premises of a police station.

Ashutosh Maurya: The MLA represents Bisauli constituency. Maurya has been an MLA for a single term. He lost his seat in the 2017 assembly elections to Kushagra Sagar, a BJP candidate.

Gangs of Ghazipur: Why a Murder in August 1991 Casts a Shadow on This Lok Sabha Seat in Uttar Pradesh

By: Anindya Banerjee

The Samajwadi Party and Congress have formally entered a seat-sharing deal in Uttar Pradesh, ahead of the Lok Sabha elections, in which the Akhilesh Yadav-led party and its smaller allies will contest 63 of the state's 80 seats. The question whether the votes will transfer to each other remains, but the spotlight has been on Ghazipur where a gang war that resulted in an assassination on August 3, 1991, casts an ominous and uncertain shadow.

The Ghazipur Lok Sabha seat is with the SP, where Akhilesh has already announced gangster Mukhtar Ansari's brother Afzal Ansari as the candidate. Being in alliance, will the Congress create roadblocks for the SP candidate? One would argue, won't the Congress leadership rein in such elements? But, what if the Uttar Pradesh Congress chief has grudges to grind?

State Congress president Ajay Rai was born in Varanasi to Parvati Devi Rai and Surendra Rai in a Bhumihar Brahmin



family. Both his parents were natives of Ghazipur district and, hence, Rai has a long-standing connection here and with the Ansaris that dates back to the 90s and has its roots in the 80s. In the 1980s Uttar Pradesh, the competition of two rival gangsters Brijesh Singh and Mukhtar Ansari,

was well known. Ajay Rai was considered to be close to Singh, while Mukhtar considered Singh as his biggest enemy. And, in the bloody world of gang wars, a friend of your enemy is also considered your enemy. By that virtue, the enmity between Ajay

and Mukhtar became apparent.

Then came the fateful day of August 3, 1991, when Ajay's elder brother Avday Rai was shot multiple times outside his house by a group of unknown men who came in a car. A young Ajay took his brother to hospital, but he was pronounced dead. He, however, strongly believed that it was Mukhtar who had sent the shooters that took his brother from him. Ajay lodged an FIR and fought a long legal battle of 32 years that resulted in a Varanasi court finding Mukhtar guilty of the murder of Avday Rai, and awarded him a life sentence. Now, the lingering question is, will Ajay seek votes for the brother of someone who murdered his brother in cold blood?

The entire region of Ghazipur, Varanasi, Balia and Mau has a significant Bhumihar presence as well, and see Afzal Ansari as anti-Bhumihar for the 1991 murder. The SP is wary that Ajay may end up helping the BJP candidate in Ghazipur because blood runs thicker than water and dearer than politics.

There's a Good Reason Haley's Still Running — And It's Not Trump's Legal Problems

Nikki Haley's presidential campaign started as an excellent adventure, but it now appears to many Republicans to be a bogus journey. Why is she still in the race after six consecutive stinging defeats?

I have a theory: The answer might be buried in the Republican National Committee's rules and their potential effect on her voice at the July convention. Haley will arrive in Milwaukee in possession of a cache of delegates — how many is unclear; at the moment, she has 20. The rules don't simply give power to a candidate based on the number of delegates they possess. Candidates cannot have their names placed into nomination, and thereby get television airtime at the convention, unless they have a plurality of delegates in at least five states.

That threshold makes a big difference for Haley in terms of her clout — if any — at the convention. Modern political conventions have morphed into four-day long infomercials for a nominee whose identity has long been known. Every winner wants to use that platform to broadcast a structured, convincing message. Do that right and you can give your candidacy a significant, and perhaps decisive, bounce in the polls. But that requires ensuring that there are no fights, or alternative messages coming from the convention floor — something winners cannot fully control. Defeated candidates can still deploy their delegates to obstruct the winner's will by posing contentious amendments to the party platform or by using their nominating speeches to criticize the nominee. That can become news, and prospective nominees will cut deals to prevent that from happening. Against that backdrop, Haley's continued campaign makes a great deal of sense. The more delegates she can acquire, the more power she can exert on the floor. And the more power she can exert on the floor, the stronger hand she has to deal from to get concessions from former President Donald Trump on things she cares about, such as U.S. support for NATO.



Indeed, given that the party did not even write a platform in 2020, simply insisting that it draft a new one for this election might be a significant request.

Of course, winning at least five states will be hard, owing to her deep weakness with conservative Republicans. She almost certainly can't win any state where the rules limit the electorate to registered Republicans. She's also unlikely to win any caucus state because those events tend to draw the most committed — and ideological — party members.

Yet there are a number of states voting on or before Super Tuesday that suit her. How? Haley's best chances will be in those that are both more moderate than Iowa or South Carolina and that are either open to all registered voters or which permit registered independents to vote in the GOP primary. And they need to have larger shares of college educated voters, Haley's only consistently strong demographic thus far. Her travel schedule until Super Tuesday seems perfectly aligned with this strategy. She first held two rallies in Michigan in advance of that state's primary. She then headed to Minnesota for a Minneapolis event. Both upper Midwestern states are known for their relatively moderate politics and have no party registration, allowing



independents and stray Democrats to cast Republican ballots. The fact that Marco Rubio won Minnesota's 2016 caucuses surely adds credence to Haley's thought that it might be in play. Haley jetted to Colorado this week, another moderate state with a high level of educational attainment that allows registered independents to cast Republican ballots. Her rally's location — Centennial, in the Denver suburbs — speaks volumes about her target audience. Centennial has a median household income of nearly \$125,000, according to the Census Bureau, with over 61 percent of adults 25 and older having at least a four-year college degree.

A best case scenario there would be to replicate Joe O'Dea's nine-point win over a MAGA opponent in the GOP's 2022 Senate primary. O'Dea won large margins in the Denver metro area and the state's liberal college and ski counties to drown out his foe's rural strength. Then Haley streaks to Utah, which holds a caucus on Super Tuesday. That appears to be a strange choice until one recalls that Mormons strongly opposed Trump in 2016. He finished third in that year's GOP contest, garnering only 14 percent. He'll do much better than that this year, but there's enough lingering discontent among members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to give her an outside shot. After that, she's back to the East Coast where she holds rallies in North Carolina, Virginia, and the nation's capital. D.C. is probably her best bet to win because it's the headquarters of the anti-Trump GOP elite. Rubio and John Kasich combined to get nearly 73 percent here in 2016. If Haley can't win here, she can't win anywhere. Virginia and North Carolina offer more longshot chances at victory. Trump barely beat Ted Cruz in North Carolina's 2016 contest, with Cruz winning many

of the state's urban areas. Haley's rallies will be in Charlotte and Raleigh, the state's two biggest cities that have seen an influx of newcomers, and the fact independents can vote also works to her favor. The Old Dominion is on the target list for two reasons: there's no partisan registration and a lot of anti-Trump Republicans. Haley will rally in Richmond and Falls Church, another upper income, high education place that broadly mirrors the broader D.C. suburbs. Marco Rubio handily won metro Richmond and D.C.'s Virginia suburbs in 2016 and nearly carried the state. She clearly hopes Rubio and Kasich voters — and perhaps more than a few non-Republicans — can deliver an upset win.

Her final scheduled events are in especially telling locations. One will unfold in Needham, Massachusetts. Needham makes Centennial look like a slum from the wrong side of the tracks. Its median household income exceeds \$200,000 and over 80 percent of adults have a four-year degree or better. Then comes a rally in Vermont, where moderate Phil Scott is one of the few Republican governors to have endorsed her. Massachusetts, neighboring Vermont and Maine all allow independents to vote in their Super Tuesday contests and typically prefer more moderate Republicans. Haley will be betting they will make a final stand despite the odds against her.

Winning five of these states is a huge stretch, but it's not impossible. Pull it off and she has the strength she needs to negotiate the terms of her departure with Trump. She won't get much, but anything tangible gives her something to crow about — and perhaps a springboard for future elections?

Perhaps Haley has no grand strategy, just a desire to keep going and hope for the best. But win or lose, Haley will soon have to end her guerrilla struggle. Whatever her intent, it's much better for her to exit with a negotiated peace than an unconditional surrender. Soon we'll see whether she has the leverage to get something from the master of the deal.

'The Investment Firms Leave Behind a Barren Wasteland'

A journalism professor blames Wall Street for the newspaper industry's collapse.

The great American newspaper ain't what it used to be. At practically every newspaper in the country except for a fortunate few, hard times have reduced page count, eliminated news beats and resulted in the layoffs of thousands of journalists.

The hardest hit, Margot Susca reports in her new book, *Hedged: How Private Investment Funds Helped Destroy American Newspapers and Undermine Democracy*, have been the chain newspapers — Gannett, GateHouse, Lee Enterprises, et al. — purchased and squeezed by private equity firms like Alden Global Capital. Nationwide, the percentage of newspapers owned by private equity rose from 5 percent in 2001 to 23 percent in 2019; they include such storied titles as the Chicago Tribune, the Orange County Register and USA Today, as well as scores of smaller papers. Some papers have been reduced to zombie versions of their former selves as the new owners have shaved them down to minimize costs, depriving readers of the comprehensive coverage they enjoyed in the golden age of newspapers.

Susca, an American University professor of journalism and a former newspaper journalist, writes that these new owners have turned their backs on what she thinks is the true purpose of newspapers — to serve democracy — in their pursuit of greed. For a taste of the book, see this excerpt in Neiman Reports.

As someone who's covered the industry's growing travails for some time, you can detect a bit of skepticism from my questions. Is Wall Street really to blame for the fall of newspapers? By the end of our conversation, she was asking me, "Did you just brush up on your Milton Friedman?"

This interview was conducted in person and via email and has been edited for length and clarity.

Without using the dust jacket, give us the dust jacket pitch for *Hedged*.

The book investigates the last 20 years of ownership and investment in the American chain newspaper industry. Through entities like hedge funds and private equity firms, this investor class continues to dismantle the one institution meant to give voice to average citizens in our democracy. I



ultimately reveal an industry rocked less by external forces like lost ad revenue and more by ownership and management obsessed with profit and beholden to private fund interests that feel no responsibility toward journalism or the public it is meant to serve.

How and why did newspapers become distressed properties?

Newspaper executives pressured by private equity investors chose mergers and acquisitions as the strategy to face the digital future. It stacked debt as advertising losses also mounted. But before and after the recession, investment firms and the private equity divisions of Wall Street banks created conditions that left newspaper chains hamstrung and in debt for billions of dollars after a wave of acquisitions and consolidations. Different private firms then profited off newspaper bankruptcies or debt financing.

What encouraged the private equity firms to acquire distressed newspaper chains? Why didn't the equity crowd buy and strip newspapers before the mid-2000s financial crisis?

In the 1990s, newspaper stocks were the golden goose of any portfolio. Newspapers were steadily profitable earning margins of up to 30 percent. Why fix what isn't broken? But that also hurt innovation, as those who could read the tea leaves wanted investment but were thwarted by those who wanted to stay sailing those calm seas. A former editor from the St. Louis Post-Dispatch told me that in 2003, he went to editors at a time they were earning 25 percent profit

margins and said they would need to cut into that profit to dedicate a team to the digital transition. They refused.

This period is what UMass scholar Gerald Epstein calls "financialization," alongside the rise of the hedge fund and private equity class. Consider between 2006 and 2016, investment in the hedge fund industry globally skyrocketed from \$1 trillion to \$5 trillion.

If newspapers are as commercially viable as you seem to imply, why haven't we seen moves by investors to preserve and improve them?

I hope you didn't come away from the book thinking my core takeaway is that newspapers are in great financial shape. The point of the book is that if private investment funds kept their paws off these papers, our local newspaper ecosystem would be better off. In 2021, the U.S. newspaper industry generated \$20.9 billion in revenue with profit margins just below 4 percent. That's down from its wonder years, but it's hardly a knockout.

We have seen moves to protect newspapers, but this investor class is not the group taking the initiative. Advocates, philanthropists, and researchers are working diligently to find solutions and new business models to preserve newspapers, understanding after this period of overharvesting how damaging this investor class has been to the chain newspaper marketplace. The Portland Press Herald has just been purchased by the Maine Trust for Local News, an offshoot of the

nonprofit National Trust for Local News. Almost a year before, the Chicago Sun-Times newspaper switched to nonprofit status and became a subsidiary of Chicago Public Media. The Salt Lake Tribune was a trailblazer when it switched to nonprofit status in October 2019. We have the Philadelphia Inquirer and the Lenfest Institute. None of these initiatives were made possible because a group of Wall Street investors sat around a boardroom table before dinner at Cipriani and said, "Let's create better local journalism."

Non-private equity firms like Newhouse have made similar cuts in their newspapers. Does that indicate that private equity isn't that much of an outlier?

Calling private equity an outlier oversimplifies the role both private equity and hedge funds have played in the chain newspaper market over the last two decades, and it plays into the same tired conventional wisdom that ad losses alone are responsible for all of the newspaper industry's problems. I also think it lets private investment funds off the hook for the severe damage they have done to the local newspaper marketplace. Private equity investors in the early to mid-2000s pressured newspaper managers at publicly traded chains, including Tribune, Journal Register and Knight Ridder, to make disastrous decisions. Rather than choosing innovation or investing in digital or even trying to compete head on with Craigslist, newspaper chains

chose mergers and acquisitions as a strategy to stave off revenue losses. As the ad losses mounted and the Great Recession hit, servicing the debt from those mergers and acquisitions was like taking a sprinkler to a raging wildfire. Then, hedge funds that specialize in distressed debt or in financing targeted the newspaper chains that were forced to declare bankruptcy. Alden Global Capital stayed on as an owner. Alden owns two chains, MediaNews Group and Tribune, which spiraled after its 2008 bankruptcy after just a year of ownership from private equity billionaire Sam Zell. Cerberus and Apollo are in the market as lenders. Chatham Asset Management bought the McClatchy chain in 2020.

Explain the concept of "overharvesting" by the equity owners of chains that you describe in your book.

Overharvesting is my tinkering with harvesting, which is a term coined by the late data journalism pioneer Phil Meyer. Overharvesting suggests that a news organization or newspaper chain exists solely to maximize shareholder profits or line private investment funds' pockets rather than to keep citizens informed, and in the process of reaping the profits, the investment firms leave behind a barren wasteland. I certainly recognize that profit has been part of American newspapers as long as we've been a country, but profit in the name of democracy looks much different than profit made in spite of it.

Is the private equity purchase of newspaper chains the cause of their ruination or the effect?

Private investment funds are directly responsible for major problems at the newspaper chains I studied for the book. That includes GateHouse, Gannett, Journal Register, Knight Ridder, McClatchy, MediaNews Group and Tribune. These funds played different roles in these chains, but the roles they played when taken together over a 20-year period proved disastrous. Private investment firms have exerted various levels of influence over corporate newspaper firms as institutional investors or managers or as part of other complex financing and debt restructuring after blockbuster mergers and acquisitions.