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US Citizenship For \$5 Million: Trump's "Gold Cards" Offer For Rich Migrants



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Vol. 23 Issue 47 Friday 28 February to 6 March 2025 \$1 www.thesouthasianinsider.com

George Soros funds and USAID move in tandem around the world



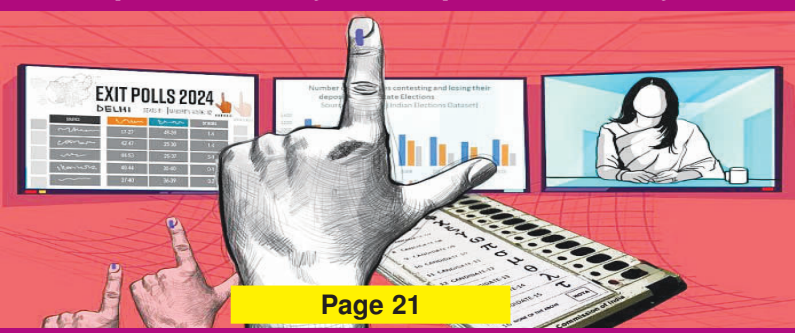
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Exit polls, enter mystery. A new business model where politics is key & sample sizes rarely matter



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Indore woman loses Rs 96 lakh while paying for fake SBI life insurance policy



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Punjabi Trump song got Indians deported from US, claim people.



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FOMO To Reel Filters To Faith: Why Maha Kumbh Is Drawing Gen Z

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Deputy Commissioner Dilip Chauhan Inaugurates Green Mentors Inc.'s Global Office at the Iconic Trump Building, Wall Street, New York



(By Staff Reporter) Green Mentors Inc., a global leader in sustainable education, proudly inaugurated its first U.S. office at the iconic Trump Building, 40 Wall Street, New York—an architectural landmark that once stood as the tallest building in the world. This milestone event coincided with Basant Panchami, a day celebrating knowledge and wisdom, underscoring the organization's commitment to education and sustainability.

The prestigious inauguration ceremony welcomed distinguished dignitaries, including:

Mr. Dilip Chauhan, Deputy Commissioner, NYC Mayor's Office for International Affairs
Dr. Nick Pozek, Assistant Director, Parker School of Foreign & Comparative Law,

Columbia University
Navroop K. Sahdev, CEO, The Digital Economist
Vida Sabbaghi, Director, COPE NYC
Dr. Claudinette Fetus, Principal, Manhattan Charter School, New York
Matbar Singh Negi, Former United Nations Officer

Their presence highlighted the vital collaboration between public service and nonprofit initiatives in tackling climate change and fostering environmental responsibility.

Green Mentors Inc.: A Vision for Sustainability
Dr. Virendra Rawat, Founder of Green Mentors Inc., reaffirmed the organization's mission, stating, "Our vision is to make



America great again through environmental responsibility and ecological consciousness. Every student must embrace accountability for their future, and every school must cultivate Nature Champions to lead the sustainability movement." With over 15 years of experience in green education across 45 countries, Green Mentors Inc. holds special consultative status at ECOSOC, United Nations, and actively contributes to UNESCO's Greening Education initiative.

Deputy Commissioner Dilip Chauhan commended Green Mentors' efforts, emphasizing their alignment with New York City's sustainability objectives. "New York City thrives on visionary leaders and organizations dedicated to a greener future. Green Mentors' mission complements our city's commitment to combating climate change and advancing green technology," he stated, highlighting the city's ongoing investments in sustainable infrastructure and clean energy.

How Trump "Gold Card" Could Impact American Dream Of Indian Students In US





(By Staff Reporter) Defending his "Gold Card" proposal against allegations of serving just wealthy immigrants, US President Donald Trump said American businesses could purchase his proposed offer to help keep bright students from countries like India, who went to schools in the United States for tighter studies.

"I get calls from, as an example, companies where they want to hire the No. 1 student at the school, a person comes from India, China, Japan, lots of different places, and they go to Harvard to Wharton School of Finance, they go to Yale, they go to all great schools and graduate number one in their class and they are made job offers," the President

said Wednesday as he convened the first full Cabinet meeting of his second term. Mr Trump suggested that American firms struggle to recruit or retain high-quality talent because of uncertainty over the immigration status of some students.

"And they (immigrant students) made job offers, but the offer is immediately rescinded because you have no idea whether or not that person can stay in the country. I want to be able to have that person stay in the country. These companies can go and buy a gold card, and they can use it as a matter of recruitment. We're going to start selling, hopefully, in about two weeks now," he said.

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Canada lets officials cancel study, work visas; thousands of Indians may be hit

Canada has introduced big changes to its immigration regulations. The new Immigration and Refugee Protection Regulations, which came into effect on January 31, authorise border officials to cancel temporary resident documents such as electronic travel authorisations (eTAs) and temporary resident visas (TRVs). The new regulations are likely to impact thousands of foreign nationals, including Indians, annually. The changes will impact students, employees, and temporary resident visitors, many of whom are from India. Canada is a top destination for Indian students opting to pursue their higher education abroad. According to India's Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), there are around 4,27,000 Indian students studying in Canada.

The amended rules follow a series of changes to Ottawa's immigration framework, including the cancellation of the Student Direct Stream (SDS) visa programme in late 2024.

CANADIAN BORDER OFFICIALS CAN CANCEL VISAS ON SEVERAL GROUNDS

The amended rules give Canadian immigration and border



officers enhanced authority to cancel eTAs, TRVs, work permits, and study permits under specific circumstances. These include cases where:

An individual's status or circumstances change, making them ineligible or inadmissible, such as providing false information, having a criminal record, or being deceased.

An officer is not convinced that the individual will leave Canada upon the expiration of their authorised stay.

The document is lost, stolen, destroyed, or issued based on an administrative error.

A temporary resident becomes a permanent resident.

The changes also enable officers

to cancel TRVs, eTAs, work permits and study permits issued to people when

They become a permanent resident.

They are deceased, or The document was issued based on an administrative error. According to the amended rules, students, including those from India, can have their immigration papers cancelled if they are denied a work or study visa. The policy also guarantees that the immigration and border authorities are the only ones who can cancel these visas, to avoid any unauthorised intervention.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FOREIGN NATIONALS AND STUDENTS

The amended rules would result in the cancellation of

approximately 7,000 additional temporary resident visas, work permits, and study permits, according to reports.

Foreigners, including Indians, whose permits are cancelled could face issues, including being prohibited from entering Canadian ports or having to leave Canada. Apart from the 4,27,000 students studying, Canada also sees lakhs of tourists from India annually. Between January and July 2024, Canada issued 3,65,750 visitor visas to Indians, which was more than the 345,631 issued during the same period in 2023.

Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) has indicated that individuals who are impacted will be informed via

their IRCC account or email, but there are still concerns regarding the potential financial losses of travellers and students who have their documents cancelled.

CANADA CONTINUES TO TIGHTEN IMMIGRATION POLICY

These changes to the rules are in line with Canada's strategy to tighten immigration rules.

Only a few months ago, in November 2024, Canada suspended the Student Direct Stream (SDS) visa program, which Indian students preferred

to avail themselves of to study in Canada. The SDS began in 2018 and accelerated visa processing for students from some countries, including India, by requiring them

to demonstrate money upfront, such as tuition fees and guaranteed investment certificates (GICs) for living expenses. At first, people worried that cancelling SDS would cause delays. But officials clarified that students would continue to be able to apply for the Regular Study Permit, under which they can pay tuition in instalments. However, international students, including Indians, could face more problems with the new rule for the cancellation of temporary resident documents.

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Who is Veena Reddy, ex-USAID India chief facing BJP heat



Online interest has been growing in Veena Reddy, the former India director for the US Agency for International Development (USAID), over alleged funding of \$21 million to increase "voter turnout in India".

Reddy came to the limelight after BJP MP Mahesh Jethmalani demanded an investigation into the funding and questioned her role. His criticism was followed by President Donald Trump's comments indicating that the fund could have

been used to influence the Lok Sabha poll results. "I guess they (USAID) were trying to get someone else elected. We have got to tell the Indian government," Trump told a gathering on Wednesday. Reddy, an Andhra Pradesh-born American diplomat, joined USAID's India office on August 5, 2021. She announced her return to the US on July 17, 2024 – more than a month after the results for the Lok Sabha elections were announced. Before joining the US government as a

foreign services officer, Reddy was a corporate attorney in New York, London, and Los Angeles. She holds a doctor of jurisprudence from Columbia University School of Law and an MA and BA from the University of Chicago, the US Embassy announced at the time of her arrival in India.

She has also served in USAID missions in Pakistan, the Central Asian Republics and Central America. Reddy has also been a member of bar councils of New York and California.

GROWTH IN FUND INFLOW

Net funds disbursements for Indian projects by USAID rose significantly during her stint – jumping multifold to over \$228 million or Rs 1982 crore in 2022, the highest since 2001. In 2020, Indian projects received \$83.2 million from the USAID which jumped to \$94.3 million in 2021. It skyrocketed to \$228 million in 2022 before falling

slightly to \$175.7 million in 2023 and \$151.8 million in 2024, as per the US government data.

Out of a total \$228 million fund for 2022, USAID India spent \$140.7 million (or nearly 50%) on Basic Health, \$25.09 million on Maternal and Child Health, \$10.57 million on HIV/AIDS prevention and awareness programmes, \$7.186 million on General Environmental Protection and \$5.6 million on Energy, as per official data.

As per the US Embassy, she was the first Indian American to lead USAID in India and Bhutan. Before her India assignment, Reddy led USAID's mission in Cambodia. She also served as the deputy mission head in Haiti and was associated with the agency as its assistant general counsel, covering legal matters for USAID's programs in Asia, the Middle East, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

From the US Embassy in New

Delhi, Reddy was also leading the USAID operations in Bhutan, a common practice among many foreign missions.

During her nearly 3 years of tenure as the mission director, she oversaw various projects in the fields of health, economic development, education and social services, democracy, human rights, and governance etc, according to the US Department of State. India Railways, Ministry of Power, NITI Aayog, National Power Training Institute (NPTI) and Power Sector Skill Council, NTPC Green National Skills Development Corporation, Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Atal Innovation Mission are among prominent government bodies that either signed fresh agreements or implemented USAID-funded programmes during Reddy's stint in New Delhi.

ED, CBI Begin Crackdown As India Sees Surge In Crypto-Linked Frauds

(News Agency)- In a bold crackdown over the past week, investigation into India's cryptocurrency networks has gained significant momentum as both the Enforcement Directorate (ED) and the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) intensify their probes with multiple raids and instances of assets-freezing.

This dual-pronged approach by both central agencies marks a turning point in the government's decision to finally come down heavily on the unregulated nature and opaque dealings of cryptocurrencies. With the ED tightening its grip and freezing crypto assets, the CBI has now unleashed a sweeping crackdown, raiding nearly 60 locations across states in India's spiralling crypto fraud nexus. According to central agencies, these scams are not just about financial fraud—they're fuelling money laundering, terror financing, and tax evasion on an unprecedented scale.

The Crypto Case By CBI In a statement on Tuesday, the CBI said it conducted extensive searches at over 60 locations across India as part of its investigation into the GainBitcoin cryptocurrency scam.

"The coordinated search operations are being carried out in major cities, including Delhi-



NCR, Pune, Chandigarh, Nanded, Kolhapur, Bengaluru, and others, targeting premises linked to key accused individuals, their associates, and entities suspected of laundering the proceeds of crime," said the statement.

It added, "GainBitcoin was an alleged Ponzi scheme launched in 2015 by Amit Bhardwaj (deceased), along with Ajay Bhardwaj and their network of agents. The scheme operated through multiple websites such as www.gainbitcoin.com under the facade of a company named Variabletech Pvt. Ltd."

The Modus Operandi

The fraudulent company allegedly lured investors through the said ponzi scheme, promising lucrative returns of 10 per cent monthly in Bitcoin for 18 months. Investors were also

convinced to purchase Bitcoin from exchanges and invest them with GainBitcoin through "cloud mining" contracts. The model followed a multi-level marketing (MLM) structure, commonly linked with pyramid-structured Ponzi schemes, where payouts were dependent on bringing in new investors.

The CBI statement further explained, "Initially, investors received payouts in Bitcoin. However, as the influx of new investments dwindled by 2017, the scheme began to collapse. In an attempt to cover up the losses, GainBitcoin unilaterally switched payouts to their alleged in-house cryptocurrency called MCAP, which had significantly less value than Bitcoin, further misleading investors."

Multiple FIRs were registered across India, alleging large-scale

fraud and money laundering. Following the cases registered in states/UTs, including Jammu & Kashmir, Punjab, Chandigarh, Delhi, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, and Maharashtra, the Supreme Court directed the CBI to initiate a nation-wide investigation. During the searches, a few crypto wallets, incriminating digital evidence and digital devices have been seized. The evidence in emails and clouds has also been seized.

ED's Money Trail Tracing

In a different crypto case, the ED raided several premises in Jaipur, Delhi and Mumbai on August 20 for FEMA violation. The case was initiated in connection with the conversion of Crypto worth around Rs 600 crore at various Indian Crypto Exchanges and subsequent transfer of the funds to the beneficiaries.

"ED investigation revealed that the trusted websites were spoofed in such a way by search engine optimisation that when the website would be searched, the spoofed website would appear at the top. The spoofed website appeared exactly similar to the trusted website except the contact details. When the users would enter the login credentials, the spoofed website would show it wrong. Therefore, the users would contact the number given in the

spoofed website which would eventually connect them to the designated call centre managed by Chirag Tomar," said an ED statement. Tomar is the accused in the case.

"Once the fraudsters gained access to the victims' accounts, they quickly transferred the victims' cryptocurrency holdings to cryptocurrency wallets under their control. The stolen cryptocurrency would then be sold on website localbitcoins.com and converted to INR at Indian Crypto Exchanges.

Subsequently, the money was transferred in the bank accounts of Chirag Tomar and his family members. The identified amount received by the Tomar family in the case so far through this scheme is Rs 15 crore. Several bank accounts pertaining to the Tomar family were frozen during the course of the search operation. The amount frozen so far stands at Rs 2.18 crore," added the statement. According to investigators, the surge in digital asset trading, fuelled by soaring investor interest and a booming start-up ecosystem, inadvertently opened the floodgates for unscrupulous operators. Recognising the scale and sophistication of these alleged scams, the ED and CBI have now turned their full attention to the crypto market.

Centre punishing southern states for population control: KTR on delimitation

BRS leader KT Rama Rao slammed the Centre's proposed delimitation, calling it unfair to southern states that successfully controlled population growth. He warned that redrawing constituencies solely based on population would penalise performing states like Telangana while benefiting states with higher population growth.



(News Agency)- Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) Working

President KT Rama Rao (KTR) has strongly opposed the proposed delimitation of constituencies, calling it a move that unfairly punishes southern states. He warned that redrawing constituencies solely based on population would be a "curse" for Telangana and other southern states, including Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Kerala. KTR backed Tamil Nadu Chief Minister MK Stalin's concerns on the issue, reiterating that the Centre's decision goes against the spirit of democracy and federalism. "Is the Central Government planning to punish southern states that have successfully implemented population control?" he

questioned, criticising the Modi government's approach.

Highlighting the demographic shift, KTR pointed out that while southern states made up 26.2 per cent of India's population in 1951, their share had dropped to 19.8 per cent by 2022. In contrast, the population share of states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan had increased from 39.1 per cent to 43.2 per cent. If constituency allocation is done based on the latest census, he said, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar alone would have 222 Lok Sabha seats, while the five southern states combined would get only 165 seats.

"Southern states have led in economic growth, human development indices, and population control. Penalising performing states and rewarding laggards is not in the nation's best interest," KTR asserted.

As an alternative, he proposed that delimitation should be linked to economic contributions rather than population. "Telangana, despite making up just 2.8 per cent of India's population, contributes over 5.2 per cent of the country's GDP. Southern states play a crucial role in nation-building, and this should be factored into the delimitation process," he argued.

Separatist Activity Has Declined In J&K Since Article 370 Abrogation: CM Omar Abdullah



Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Omar Abdullah, while speaking at programme 'Diamond States Summit', spoke on the historical abrogation of Article 370 in the state and said that there has indeed been a decline in separatist

activity in J&K since 2019.

The chief minister said there has been a decline in separatist activity in J&K since 2019 and that the situation has improved. He added that it was earlier unthinkable that Hurriyat Chairman Mirwaiz Umar Farooq would be provided with CRPF cover. On February 21, the Centre increased Farooq's security cover after a review of the threat perception that had increased following his New Delhi visit. In his Delhi visit, Farooq submitted a memorandum to the joint parliamentary committee on the Waqf (Amendment) Bill and also held talks with a Kashmiri Pandit group.

As per the sources, CRPF men trained in close protection were assigned to him. Abrogation Of Article 370

On August 5, 2019, the Union Government took the decision to repeal the provisions under Article 370 of the Constitution of India which gave the state of Jammu and Kashmir a special status. In the Rajya Sabha, Home Minister Amit Shah announced that the government had scrapped the special status granted to Jammu and Kashmir under Article 370 of the Constitution.

The government issued a Presidential Ordinance which stripped Jammu and Kashmir of special status and repealed Article 35A.

The Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Bill was also passed by the Rajya Sabha which proposed the bifurcation of the state into two union territories which are Ladakh and Jammu-Kashmir.

Sukesh Chandrashekhar Offers \$2 Billion Investment For X, Sends Letter To Elon Musk From Jail

Sukesh Chandrashekhar, the conman currently serving jail term in several cheating cases, wrote a letter to Elon Musk, expressing his desire to invest \$2 billion in the social media platform 'X' (formerly Twitter).

Notably, this is not the first time Chandrashekhar has written a letter from jail, with former Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal, Bollywood actor Jacqueline Fernandes and Andhra Pradesh CM Chandrababu Naidu among his recipients. "I am taking this Privilege and Pride today to say, Hey Elon, I am ready and wanting to invest '1 Billion USD' immediately and another '1 Billion USD' next year in your Company X, making a total '2 Billion USD' as investment," the letter reads as report by Hindustan Times.



He added that his investment in X would make him a "proud Indian".

He referred to Musk as "my man" and congratulated him for heading the United

States Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) under the Trump administration. The conman also called US President Donald Trump his "big

brother." "Elon, you are someone who I really look up to, you are solid, Tankman, Bulletproof. What you have built is amazing. Being a part of that build would be the craziest and greatest thing for me," the letter reads. "The investment of the above-mentioned amount is not under any valuation of X, but it's an investment on what remarkable turn of fortune the company is going to achieve under your leadership, so the Bet is always on you, and surely know "X" value is going to rise to unexpectable heights," Chandrashekhar added. Earlier this month, the conman put forward an investment proposal to OpenAI CEO Sam Altman. In a letter, he offered an immediate \$1 billion investment, with an additional \$2 billion planned over the next five years for OpenAI's operations in India.

Kolkata Woman, Daughter Try Dumping Suitcase With Body Parts In Ganga, Caught In The Act



People practicing Yoga and out on morning walks on the ghats of the Ganga near north Kolkata apprehended two women on Tuesday while they were allegedly trying to dispose of a body stuffed inside a suitcase into the river.

The women attracted the attention of the

locals when they struggled to move the suitcase after getting out of a blue and white coloured car near Kumartuli, an area of the city known globally for crafting idols of deity Durga and also for its skilled sculptors.

A video is doing rounds on social media

where a small group of people are seen interrogating the women. The women, according to a report by broadcaster NDTV are mother and daughter, have been identified as Arati Ghosh and Falguni Ghosh. Falguni is Arati's daughter.

The locals became suspicious after the women refused to let anyone touch the suitcase. At one point, the women claimed that it was the body of a dog but that did not assuage the concerns of the locals who apprehended the duo. The women are seen being evasive in the video as locals pose questions on the contents of the suitcase. At one point a man is heard saying "Gondho berochhe (It has started to stink)" in an apparent reference to the

stink from inside the suitcase.

They called the police who came and opened the suitcase to find a body of a woman, in bloodstained clothes, stuffed inside the suitcase. Cops arrested both women and also identified the deceased. Broadcaster NDTV in its report said that the dead body was that of Sumita Ghosh, a relative of the Ghoshes.

Their report also said that a train ticket was found in their possession and that CCTV footage obtained by the police showed them carrying the suitcase in a cart to a nearby taxi stand. The footage was from Madhyamgram near Kolkata. Police told the broadcaster that the duo took a cab straight to Kumartuli.

Telangana Congress rejects Amit Shah's delimitation assurance, demands clarity

Telangana Congress and the Bharat Rashtra Samithi criticised Union Home Minister Amit Shah's assurance that southern states will not lose parliamentary seats due to delimitation. Telangana Chief Minister Revanth Reddy and BRS leader KT Rama Rao opposed population-based delimitation, calling it unfair to the South.

(News Agency)- Union Home Minister Amit Shah's assurance that southern states will not lose a single parliamentary seat due to delimitation drew sharp criticism from the ruling Congress and the opposition Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) in Telangana. Telangana Pradesh Congress Committee president B Mahesh Kumar Goud called for wider consultations before proceeding with the delimitation exercise. "We have certain doubts about the process. The central government has a responsibility to clarify them. We will not accept even a single seat reduction," said Goud.



Shah, on Wednesday, accused Tamil Nadu Chief Minister MK Stalin of spreading "misinformation" regarding the impact of delimitation on southern states. Stalin had earlier claimed that Tamil Nadu stood to lose eight of its 39 Lok Sabha seats due to the exercise. In response, he has con-

vened an all-party meeting on March 5 to discuss the matter. Earlier this month, Telangana Chief Minister Revanth Reddy also voiced his concerns at an event in Thiruvananthapuram, that delimitation based on the new operational census was an attempt to "sideline"

South Indian states. "It should be opposed as it will damage democracy. Why should the South be punished for effectively implementing the family planning programme?" he questioned.


BRS Working President KT Rama Rao termed the population-based de-

limitation as "certainly unjust." He highlighted that South Indian states had successfully controlled their population in the 1980s following family planning policies. "To say that because your population is reduced, therefore I am cutting down your representation in Parliament is a travesty of justice," he said.

KTR recently in a tweet had also supported Stalin. "If the center is keen on implementing delimitation- I propose delimitation based on the fiscal contributions to the Nation," he wrote. Rama Rao emphasised that population alone should not be the deciding factor in parliamentary representation, calling for economic contributions to be considered.

"The South, which comprises only 19 per cent of India's population, contributes 36 per cent to the economy. Telangana, with just 2.8 per cent of India's population, contributes 5.1 per cent to the GDP," he noted.

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Punjab cancels licences of 40 travel agents for sending Indians illegally to US

(Newes Agency)-The licences of 40 travel agents were cancelled in Amritsar, days after India Today TV exposed the business of dubious travel agents taking exorbitant fees to make people enter countries through 'donkey routes'. The travel agents were allegedly involved with Indian citizens who recently got deported from the US.

This crackdown on fake travel agents was done as per an order by Amritsar Deputy Commissioner Sakshi Sahni. The raid was conducted after over 300 Indians, who were deported from the US and Panama, returned to the country on deportation flights earlier this month.

The Amritsar Police has also issued notice to 271 travel agents in the city who have failed to renew their licences.

Sub-Divisional Magistrates (SDMs) have been instructed to inspect the documents at the offices of travel agents and immigration consultants. The district police have been asked to immediately inform the Deputy Commissioner's office in case of any complaints against travel agents.

Travel agents have been instructed to maintain proper records in their offices and ensure they are not working with incomplete documents. Strict action will be taken against unauthorised travel agents.

There has been a police reshuffle in the past 48 hours, with new personnel being assigned, and off the record, sources sug-



gest that a sting operation is underway. **MORE ACTION AGAINST AGENTS SOON**

Sources told India Today TV that more action would be taken against unscrupulous agents in the coming days.

As US military planes landed with the deportees - 131 out of 345 are from Punjab earlier this month - the state government formed an Special Investigation Team (SIT) to crack down on fraudulent travel agents operating in the state. The SIT, headed by Additional Director General of Police (ADGP) Praveen Sinha, has been working overtime to track down such agents.

"As many as 131 people (from Punjab)

have been deported from the US. Of these, 127 were deported on US military flights and four arrived in Amritsar yesterday. Out of these 131, only 17 people have come forward to file complaints. So far, 17 cases have been registered, and three travel agents have been arrested," Sinha told India Today TV. He also said that India Today TV's 'Operation Dunki' was brought to his attention and he will look into the report.

"The paperwork of travel agents is being thoroughly checked across Punjab, and awareness is being spread to ensure that people do not attempt to migrate illegally, encouraging them to follow the proper legal procedures," Sinha said.

PUNJAB GOVERNMENT, OPPOSITION REACT

Punjab has a unique system with the state Travel Professions Regulation Act that regulates travel agents, ticketing and consultancy businesses. Since its inception, 3,300 cases have been registered, most of which involve unlicensed travel agents.

NRI Minister Kuldeep Dhaliwal spoke to India Today TV about the action taken by the AAP government in this regard. "From February 5 to 23, 17 FIRs have been filed against such agents. We have been strict and we are taking action against anyone who files a written complaint. We have been tough on these agents," he said.

Congress MLA Bawa Henry also said, "Migration in search of better opportunities is not inherently bad, but we must create the right environment, offer quality education and provide employment so that our children stay in Punjab. Migration in Punjab has been happening since the 1920s and 1930s, yet the government has done little on the ground." He said there should be a legal pathway through collaboration between travel agents and the government. "Initially, the problem was concentrated in Doaba, but now it has spread to Malwa and Majha as well. The agents involved will eventually be exonerated. FIRs filed doesn't do much, the process just continues," he said.

Arvind Kejriwal To Enter Parliament? AAP Move Sets Off Strong Buzz

AAP announced this morning that Sanjeev Arora will contest the bypoll to Ludhiana West, which had fallen vacant after the death of AAP MLA Gurpreet Gogi last month.

(News Agency) - The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP)'s move to field its Rajya Sabha MP Sanjeev Arora in an assembly bypoll has set off a buzz that party chief Arvind Kejriwal may replace him in the Upper House after his recent poll defeat ended his Delhi assembly membership. The AAP has denied this. The AAP announced this morning that Mr Arora will contest the by-election to Ludhiana West, which had fallen vacant last month after the death of AAP MLA Gurpreet Gogi in an accidental firing while cleaning his pistol.

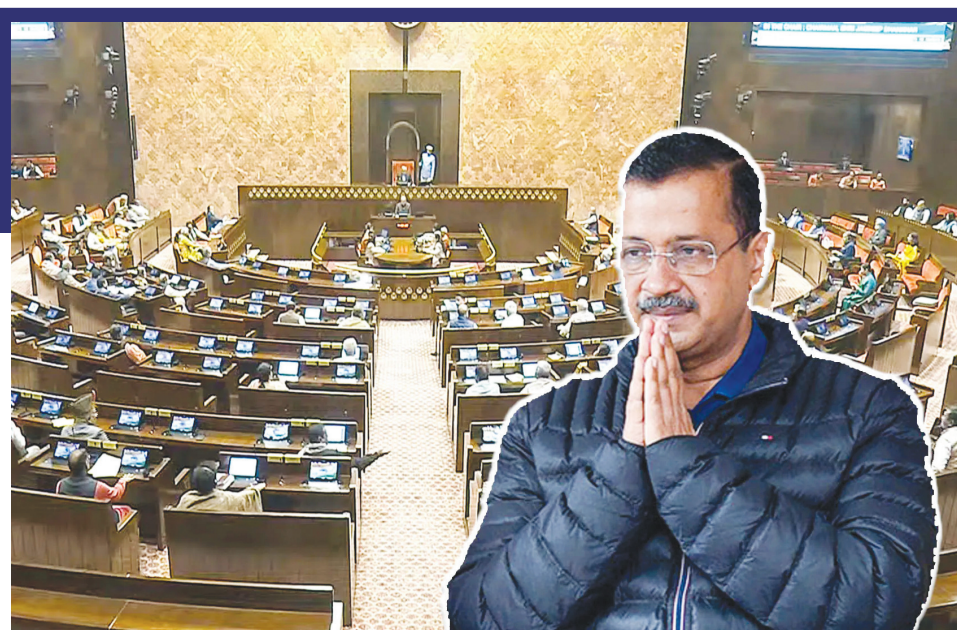
Mr Arora, a businessman, was elected to the Rajya Sabha in 2022 from Punjab, and his tenure is set to end in 2028. But since a member cannot hold two offices, he must resign from the parliament if he wins the bypoll and wishes to continue as an MLA. In that case, his vacant Rajya Sabha seat may be allotted to Mr Kejriwal.

The AAP has denied any such move so

far though it is said to be holding discussions in this regard. Party spokesperson Priyanka Kakkar said such reports are "absolutely wrong" and that Mr Kejriwal is not limited to just a seat. "Arvind Kejriwal is not going to Rajya Sabha. As far as Arvind Kejriwal is concerned, media sources were earlier saying that he will become the Chief Minister of Punjab. Now, media sources are saying that he will contest from Rajya Sabha. Both these sources are absolutely wrong. Arvind Kejriwal is the national convenor of AAP. I agree that his demand is very high, but he is not limited to any one seat," she said.

Accepting the ticket from Ludhiana West, Mr Arora thanked the AAP leadership in an online post that was devoid of any mention of Mr Kejriwal.

"Humbled and grateful to the leadership Aam Aadmi Party for reposing faith in me to contest the Ludhiana West bye-elections. As someone deeply connected



to my hometown, I look forward to serving my people with dedication and sincerity," said the AAP leader.

Sources suggest that he can also be made a minister in the Bhagwant Mann government if he wins the by-election - as a reward for giving up his seat for the party boss. Punjab is currently the best bet for Mr Kejriwal after his party lost power in Delhi after a decade. Since vacating the government bungalow after resigning as Chief Minister last year, he has been living in Delhi at another Punjab

MP Ashok Mittal's house.

Unlike Mr Arora, Mr Kejriwal has no membership hurdle in joining the Rajya Sabha since his Delhi assembly membership was snatched by the BJP's Parvesh Verma in the recent elections. With party leader Atishi becoming Leader of the Opposition, he is also free to focus on the national arena.

Earlier, there were rumours that Mr Kejriwal may take over as the Punjab Chief Minister, but Bhagwant Mann had laughed it off.

US, Ukraine agree to critical minerals deal amid talks to end Russia war

The US and Ukraine have finalised a minerals deal, hoping to improve ties, as Kyiv agreed to joint resource development after the US reportedly dropped its \$500 billion revenue demand.

(News Agency) - US President Donald Trump on Tuesday said that Washington has negotiated a critical minerals deal with Kyiv, and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy is expected to visit later this week to sign the agreement. The deal comes amid tensions between the two nations, as Washington sides with Moscow in talks to bring an end to the Ukraine-Russia war. Trump had demanded that Ukraine give access to its rare earth minerals to compensate for the billions of dollars of wartime aid it received under Joe Biden. The deal is crucial for Kyiv's efforts to secure continued US support in its war against Russia, strengthen ties with the Trump administration, and pave the way for a long-term US security commitment. The White House considers the deal a first step toward reaching a ceasefire with Russia. "We have pretty much negotiated our deal on rare earths," Trump told reporters, adding that some form of peacekeeping force would be necessary in Ukraine if a settlement to end the conflict is reached. However, he did not elaborate on the details of the



deal. The agreement follows a heated exchange between Zelenskiy and Trump, who last week labelled Zelenskiy an unpopular "dictator" and urged him to broker a swift peace deal or risk losing his country.

However, Kyiv initially rejected the original US proposals, citing concerns over insufficient security guarantees for Ukraine and the hefty \$500 billion price

tag, which it argued would burden future generations with unsustainable debt. The source said Washington had cut this clause, as well as others that were unfavourable to Ukraine. According to Ukrainian officials, Kyiv is now prepared to sign an agreement with the US for the joint development of its mineral resources, including oil and gas, after the US dropped its

demand for a right to \$500bn in potential revenue from resource exploitation, the Financial Times reported.

The original draft, which Trump presented as a means of Ukraine repaying the US for military and financial aid, provoked outrage in Kyiv. However, the Ukrainian officials said that they argued that they had negotiated far more favourable terms,

according to Financial Times. WHAT ARE RARE EARTH ELEMENTS

Rare earth elements are a group of 17 essential metals used in various consumer technologies, including cellphones, hard drives, and electric and hybrid vehicles. It remains unclear whether Trump is specifically targeting these elements in Ukraine, which is also rich in other valuable minerals such as lithium, titanium, and uranium. China, Trump's primary geopolitical rival, is the world's leading producer of rare earth elements. Both the US and Europe have been working to reduce their reliance on Beijing for these critical resources.

For Ukraine, such an agreement could help secure continued military aid from its most significant and influential ally. Losing that support would be devastating for the country, which has been at war for nearly three years following Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022. The proposal also comes at a time when reliable access to critical minerals is becoming increasingly scarce worldwide.

Tulsi Gabbard To Fire Over 100 Intelligence Officers For 'Obscene, Pornographic' NSA Chat

(News Agency)- Tulsi Gabbard, Director of National Intelligence in the Trump administration, said on Tuesday that she has ordered the termination of over 100 intelligence officers for taking part in sexually explicit messages in the chatrooms of the National Security Agency. She said that the security clearances of such officers will also be revoked. "There are over 100 people from across the intelligence community that contributed to and participated in what is really just an egregious violation of trust," Gabbard said in an interview with Fox News. The US DNI said that the officers in question were "brazen" in using the NSA platform which was meant for professional use to "conduct this kind of really, really horrific behavior". The sexually explicit messages



allegedly sent out from the chatroom were first brought to light by conservative activist Christopher Rufo.

Earlier on Tuesday DNI spokesperson Alexa Henning said on X that several intelligence agencies have been ordered

to identify and fire officials who exchanged such messages by Friday.

They were also directed to revoke their security clearances.

The DNI sent a memo directing all intelligence agencies to identify the

employees who participated in the NSA's 'obscene, pornographic, and sexually explicit' chatrooms and to terminate their employment and revoke their security clearances," CNN quoted Henning as saying.

A senior official in the Trump administration informed CNN that lower-ranking members of the intelligence community have been contacting Gabbard regarding the issue.

Tulsi Gabbard's directive came hours after the NSA raised concerns over the posts that "appear to show inappropriate discussions" by the intelligence personnel.

"Potential misuse of these platforms by a small group of individuals does not represent the community. Investigations to address this misuse of government systems are ongoing," the NSA said on X.

After Meeting Donald Trump, France's Macron Reveals The Endgame In Ukraine

Ukraine War Ceasefire Deal: The war in Ukraine completed 3 years on February 24. Thousands of Ukrainian citizens have died and over 6 million live as

(News Agency) -After three-year-long Ukraine war will end within weeks, and President Macron shared his optimism. "A truce could actually happen in the weeks to come," he said, adding that "Truce has to be achieved on land, in the air, and at sea, and infrastructure (installed in Ukraine) - and Russia must respect it."

French President Emmanuel Macron laid down the endgame in Ukraine, suggesting that a peace deal or ceasefire agreement is highly likely in a matter of weeks. He also spoke in detail about his meeting with President Trump and what the outcomes will be. President Macron was representing all of Europe at today's meeting with President Trump, since Europe shares a common concern over its security. Mr Macron had held a meeting with top leaders of the European Union in Paris last week while Russia and the United States were holding a meeting over Ukraine in Saudi Arabia. European leaders who huddled up in Paris voiced their concern - that a US-Russia direct deal on Ukraine will ignore Europe's concerns on security. They echoed the same sentiment - that talks on the Ukraine war cannot happen without Ukraine and Europe.

THE ENDGAME SEQUENCE Donald Trump has said that the

President Zelensky - this is super important." Calling the arrival of President Trump to negotiations on Ukraine as a "game-changer", the French President said "he (Trump) knows how to re-engage with Russia with the full deterrence capacity of the US".

Mr Macron however cautioned the US President not to rush into a deal with Moscow. "In 2014, we had a peace deal with Russia. I can tell you from personal experience, since I was one of the two members along with German representative to follow up on the ceasefire. Russia grossly violated every single time - and none of us reacted collectively. So, the issue is of trust and credibility - how to ensure Russia does not do this again," he said in an interview to Fox News.

He went on to say that "For me the sequence of the ceasefire agreement should be as follows - First, there should be a negotiation between the US and Russia and then the US and Ukraine. President Trump has announced today that he is willing to have a short-term meeting with Ukraine's

President Zelensky - this is super important." Calling the arrival of President Trump to negotiations on Ukraine as a "game-changer", the French President said "he (Trump) knows how to re-engage with Russia with the full deterrence capacity of the US".

If it doesn't, it will be clear that Moscow is not serious about a peace deal" and Ukraine's sovereignty. During this period of time - when the truce is in place, we negotiate - on security guarantees (by Moscow), on land and territories (to reclaim or surrender), and it will be the responsibility of the Ukrainian President (to safeguard Kyiv's interest)," President Macron said.

"For the United States," he said, Washington "will secure a deal on rare earth and other critical minerals". Confirming that France and the rest of Europe will be fine with this, Mr Macron explained that such a mineral deal for Washington "is important, because this would be the best way to guarantee that the US is also committed" and not back out of Ukraine's



safety and sovereignty.

And on the back of these set of manoeuvres, with all parties invested in maintaining Ukraine's sovereignty, we will finally have a peace deal, he explained.

KEY STEPS AFTER THE CEASEFIRE

"But how can one guarantee that Russia will not violate this treaty in future," the French President questioned before giving the answer himself. "There is no consensus for NATO, or having Ukraine join NATO, but if we (European NATO members) leave Ukraine alone, like we did in the past," there is a risk for another invasion by Russia, he explained.

"So, as a follow-up to the ceasefire, we need to see which type of security guarantee we need going forward. One can be to increase the capacity of Ukraine to maintain a very strong

army (on the Russian front). The second option will be for France and the UK to work together on a proposal that the two nations will send combined troops to Ukraine - not to go to the frontline, not to go on confrontation, but to be stationed at locations agreed upon by the treaty that all parties approve of. The aim will be just to maintain a troops presence in Ukraine to keep a check on Russia's credibility. Of course, this will be with the backing of the US," he said. On Europe's responsibility and the sharing of costs, which President Trump has said is "absent", President Macron said "We (Europe) are ready to take our fair share of the burden, since it is in Europe. I have already spoken with around 30 European leaders, and a lot of them are ready to be a part of such a defence structure.

Trump Announces 'Gold Card', New Pathway To Citizenship For Rich Immigrants

(News Agency) - US President Donald Trump on Tuesday announced a "Gold Card", the premium version of a Green Card, as a pathway to citizenship for "wealthy people".

The Card will cost \$5 million to those willing to grab one which will give the Cardholders, he said, "green card privileges plus". "We're gonna be selling a gold card. You have a green card, this is a gold card. We're gonna be putting a price on that card of about \$5 million and that's gonna give you green card privileges plus," Trump said in the Oval Office.

"It's gonna be a route to citizenship. And wealthy people will be coming into our country by buying this card. They'll be wealthy and they'll be successful and they'll be spending a lot of money and paying a lot of taxes and employing a lot



of people," the US President detailed.

He said that the new citizenship route will be rolled out in two weeks, and added that he did not think his government needed to get Congress approval for its launch.

However, Trump did not reveal how the programme would be implemented. Does Trump Want To Replace EB-5 Programme? Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick hinted that the

new 'Gold Card' initiative could well be a possible replacement of the existing EB-5 programme which permits immigrant investors to get Green Cards by making investments in US businesses. He said that the money collected from the 'Gold Card' might go directly to the government.

"The president said rather than having this sort of ridiculous EB-5 programme, we're going to end the EB-5 program. We're going to replace it with the Trump gold card," he said. "They'll be able to pay \$5 million to the US government not to go through vetting, of course, going to make sure they are wonderful world-class, global citizens," Lutnick added.

He further said that such people can come to the US and get a Green Card. "They can invest in America, and we can use that money to reduce our deficit," he said.

No passengers, no planes, no benefits.

Pakistan's newest airport is a bit of a mystery

(News Agency) - With no passengers and no planes, Pakistan's newest and most expensive airport is a bit of a mystery. Entirely financed by China to the tune of \$240 million, it's anyone's guess when New Gwadar International Airport will open for business. Located in the coastal city of Gwadar and completed in October 2024, the airport is a stark contrast to the impoverished, restive southwestern Balochistan province around it.

For the past decade, China has poured money into Balochistan and Gwadar as part of a multibillion dollar project that connects its western Xinjiang province with the Arabian Sea, called the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor or CPEC.

Authorities have hailed it as transformational but there's scant evidence of change in Gwadar. The city isn't connected to the national grid — electricity comes from neighboring Iran or solar panels — and there isn't enough clean water.

An airport with a 400,000 passenger capacity isn't a priority for the city's 90,000 people.

"This airport is not for Pakistan or Gwadar," said Azeem Khalid, an international



relations expert who specializes in Pakistan-China ties. "It is for China, so they can have secure access for their citizens to Gwadar and Balochistan."

Caught between militants and the military CPEC has catalyzed a decadeslong insurgency in resource-rich and strategically located Balochistan. Separatists, aggrieved by what they say is state exploitation at the expense of locals, are fighting for independence —

targeting both Pakistani troops and Chinese workers in the province and elsewhere. Members of Pakistan's ethnic Baloch minority say they face discrimination by the government and are denied opportunities available elsewhere in the country, charges the government denies. Pakistan, keen to protect China's investments, has stepped up its military footprint in Gwadar to combat dissent. The city is a jumble of checkpoints, barbed

wire, troops, barricades, and watchtowers. Roads close at any given time, several days a week, to permit the safe passage of Chinese workers and Pakistani VIPs. Intelligence officers monitor journalists visiting Gwadar. The city's fish market is deemed too sensitive for coverage.

Many local residents are frazzled. "Nobody used to ask where we are going, what we are doing, and what is your name," said 76-year-old Gwadar native Khuda Bakhsh Hashim. "We used to enjoy all-night picnics in the mountains or rural areas."

"We are asked to prove our identity, who we are, where we have come from," he added. "We are residents. Those who ask should identify themselves as to who they are." Hashim recalled memories, warm like the winter sunshine, of when Gwadar was part of Oman, not Pakistan, and was a stop for passenger ships heading to Mumbai. People didn't go to bed hungry and men found work easily, he said. There was always something to eat and no shortage of drinking water.

But Gwadar's water has dried up because of drought and unchecked exploitation. So has the work.

Crime spikes in Bangladesh: Government in denial, citizens in fear

(News Agency)- Bangladesh is facing a serious challenge as violent crimes are rising, causing fear and anger among people. Official data shows a worrying trend: between January 1 and February 19, 2025, Dhaka alone saw 35 murders, along with many cases of mugging, robbery and abduction. This increase in crime has pushed the police to step up security and be more watchful. The government's reaction has been dismissive. Home Affairs Adviser to the Interim Government, Moinuddin Abdullah, played down the crisis, saying that the law and order situation is "satisfactory". His statement has only made the public more doubtful as people struggle with growing insecurity. A growing discrepancy

There is a clear contradiction between official crime data and the government's public statements raising serious concerns about transparency and accountability. The police, responsible for maintaining law and order, have admitted that criminal activities have increased significantly. Reports highlight shocking cases of brutal murders, kidnappings and robberies happening even in broad daylight. Despite the seriousness of these crimes, the government continues to claim that the situation is under control.

The frustration among citizens is evident



in the recent student-led protests across Dhaka demanding the resignation of the home affairs adviser. Protesters believe that the government's inaction and false assurances are not only weakening public trust but also giving criminals more confidence.

The widening gap between official statements and on-the-ground realities has led to an erosion of trust in state institutions. Bangladesh's judiciary, law enforcement agencies and political leadership all face mounting scrutiny with citizens questioning their ability—or willingness—to tackle crime effectively. The perception of selective

law enforcement, where influential individuals evade justice while ordinary citizens bear the brunt of lawlessness has further exacerbated public discontent.

Role of political uncertainty in rising crime

The rise in crime is happening at a time of political instability making it even harder to maintain law and order. Bangladesh's interim government has been criticised for being inefficient and lacking authority. According to a Daily Star editorial, home affairs adviser Abdullah blames members of the Awami League, which was in power

before the transition, for the surge in crimes. The theory is that they could be creating chaos to weaken the interim government and speed up their return to power.

In the past, political transitions in Bangladesh have often led to increased violence as criminals take advantage of the uncertainty to strengthen their hold. The current rise in crime seems to follow the same pattern raising concerns that political groups might be using lawlessness to serve their own interests.

More policing or more repression? In response to public anger, the government has increased patrols by the police, army and the Rapid Action Battalion in important areas. However, many people doubt whether these efforts are actually reducing crime.

As part of a large-scale crackdown called Operation Devil Hunt, the government has arrested over 8,600 people since January. Officials say this is meant to improve public safety, but critics argue that mass arrests do not usually lead to long-term crime reduction. Instead, there are fears that this operation could be used as an excuse to target opposition members and silence critics under the guise of fighting crime.

Pakistan wants to expel all Afghan refugees from the country, says Afghan embassy

The Afghan embassy in Islamabad says Pakistan wants to remove all Afghan refugees from the country and they face expulsion in the near future

(News Agency)- Pakistan wants to remove all Afghan refugees from the country and they face expulsion in the near future, the Afghan embassy in Islamabad warned Wednesday.

The embassy issued a strongly worded statement about Pakistan's plans, saying Afghan nationals in the capital, Islamabad, and the nearby garrison city of Rawalpindi have been subjected to arrests, searches, and orders from the police to leave the twin cities and relocate to other parts of Pakistan.

"This process of detaining Afghans, which began without any formal announcement, has not been officially communicated to the Embassy of Afghanistan in Islamabad through any formal correspondence," it said.

"Ultimately, officials from Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs confirmed that there is a definitive and final plan to deport all Afghan refugees not only from Islamabad and Rawalpindi but also from the entire country in the near future," the embassy said.

There was no immediate comment from the Pakistani government on the embassy statement.

The latest development follows Pakistan's threat to deport Afghans living in the country illegally. Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif approved a



deadline of March 31 to deport those awaiting relocation to third countries unless their cases are swiftly processed by the governments who have agreed to take them.

The Afghan embassy criticized "the short timeframe" given and "the unilateral nature of Pakistan's decision".

Besides the hundreds of thousands living illegally in Pakistan, some 1.45 million Afghans are registered with the UNHCR as refugees. Pakistan says those who were registered earlier had their stay extended until June 2025, and will not be arrested or deported at least until the extension expires.

Earlier this month, Shafqat Ali Khan, the

spokesman at Pakistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said: "This resettlement problem can't be indefinite. So, for us, the Afghans who are here, awaiting resettlement, also has to be a transitory phase. This is not a permanent thing." He said Pakistan has been collaborating with Western countries to expedite the resettlement program and "will continue to do that."

In the past three years, tens of thousands of Afghans have fled to Pakistan. Many of them were approved for resettlement in the U.S. through a program that helps people at risk because of their work during the war with the American government, media, aid agencies and rights groups.

However, after U.S. President Donald Trump paused U.S. refugee programs last month, around 20,000 Afghans are now in limbo in Pakistan.

They have been facing harassment and arrest since October 2023, when Pakistan began cracking down on foreigners living in the country illegally. Although the government said the campaign was not aimed at Afghans, they make up the majority of foreigners in Pakistan.

The International Organization for Migration reported an increase in deportation of Afghans in January.

The IOM this week said Afghans were being deported from Islamabad and Rawalpindi. It said there was a 13% increase in Afghans returning home from Jan. 16 to 31 compared to the first two weeks in January. It said 824,568 Afghans have returned home since 2023.

Ahmad Shah, a member of an Afghan advocacy group, urged Pakistan on Wednesday to allow Afghans waiting for relocation to continue living in Islamabad at least until the Trump administration makes a final decision about their fate. He said it would be hard for them to visit Western embassies in the Pakistani capital if they were moved to other areas.

Pakistan, Bangladesh begin direct trade with rice exports

(News Agency) - Bangladesh and Pakistan have started direct government-to-government trade after decades of troubled relations with imports of 50,000 tonnes of rice, Dhaka said on Tuesday.

The two countries have witnessed a thaw in ties after the ouster of India-aligned premier Sheikh Hasina.

Long-time Bangladeshi prime minister Sheikh Hasina was ousted in an August 2024 revolution, fleeing by helicopter to her old ally India, where she has defied extradition requests to face charges of crimes against humanity. Direct private trade between the countries restarted in November 2024, when a container ship sailed from Pakistan's Karachi to Bangladesh's Chittagong.

It was the first cargo ship in decades to sail directly between the countries.

"For the first time we are importing 50,000 tons of rice from Pakistan, and it is the first government-to-government deal between the two countries,"



Ziauddin Ahmed, a senior official at the Bangladesh's Directorate General of Food signed a memorandum of

understanding with the state-owned Trading Corporation of Pakistan (TCP) in January for rice imports.

Ahmed said trade with Pakistan offers a "new avenue of sourcing and competitive pricing", with state authorities in recent years importing the staple from India, Thailand and Vietnam. Imports are critical to low-lying Bangladesh, a nation that is among the world's most vulnerable to climate change, with large areas made up of deltas where the Ganges and the Brahmaputra rivers wind towards the sea. The country of 170 million is particularly at risk of devastating floods and cyclones — disasters that only stand to accelerate as the planet keeps warming.

Private Bangladeshi companies have imported Pakistani rice for years, but Pakistani goods previously had to be off-loaded onto feeder vessels — usually in Sri Lanka, Malaysia or Singapore — before travelling on.

The US was never Europe's safe harbour

The Europeans were left dumbfounded, if not shell-shocked, by the verbal whiplashing administered to them by US Vice-President James David Vance at the sixty-first iteration of the Munich Security Conference earlier this month. Vance questioned the fundamental commitment of Europeans to democratic values, that, he argued, underpinned the US-European construct. By the end of the speech, there was a lot of European strategic blood spilled on the conference floor of Hotel Bayerischer Hof.

The diatribe led to extended recriminations, with many European leaders pushing back strongly against Vance's caricatured characterisation of the current state of play in Europe.

However, this begs the question as to why Europeans are surprised. For, they have to only look back to the past hundred years or so of US ties with Europe to see that America has always only acted in its own interest — what it has conveniently characterised as American exceptionalism.

The First World War began on July 28, 1914. It was triggered by the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian empire, and his wife Sophie, by a Bosnian Serb a month earlier. Though it was a European war, the Triple Entente — Britain, France and Russia — which was fighting the Triple Alliance of Austria-Hungary, Germany and Italy, pleaded with America to weigh in on its side.

The US, led by President Woodrow Wilson, stymied by Senators with Jacksonian impulses, refused to enter what it deemed, and perhaps correctly so, a European imperial joust. It was only two and a half years later, on April 7, 1917, that the US declared war on Germany. And that was only because the Germans had unleashed extensive submarine warfare in the North Atlantic Ocean, causing a huge loss of American men and material. An added trigger was a communication by the then German Foreign Minister, Arthur Zimmermann, which later came to be known as the notorious "Zimmermann Telegram". It promised the Mexican government that Germany would help Mexico retrieve the territory it had lost to the US in the wake of the Mexican-American war of 1846-1848. In return for this assistance, Germany asked for Mexico's support in the war. This was a direct affront to the Monroe doctrine conceptualised by President James Monroe and his Secretary of State John Quincy Adams. Articulated during Monroe's address to the US Congress on December 2, 1823, the Doctrine held that the Western Hemisphere, especially the Americas, was the US' exclusive sphere of influence

and the Europeans had no business to interfere in this eminent domain. Thus, only when its own interests were threatened did the US enter the European war.

After the spectacular collapse of the League of Nations — midwifed by President Wilson, vide the Treaty of Versailles on June 28, 1919, with the Japanese walkout in February 1933 and the German withdrawal eight months later — the US once again retreated into splendid isolation even as Adolf Hitler and his Nazis gobbled up territories and countries in Europe, beginning with the Austrian Anschluss in March 1938.

Even when the Great Britain stood alone in its darkest hour — from May to November 1940 — President Roosevelt expressed his inability to help it because of the Neutrality Act of 1939 and the Johnson Act of 1934.

Though certain innovative means were found later, the US only formally entered World War II after the devastating Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Then also, to begin with, on December 8, 1941, it only declared war on Japan. It was only when Germany and Italy declared war on the US on December 11, 1941, did it reciprocate that announcement. The bottom line is that even as Europe was being subjugated by the hoodlums of the Gestapo and Shchutzstaffel, the US may have continued to remain neutral had it not been for the Japanese attack. Fast forward to the US withdrawal from Vietnam on April 30, 1975 — after a decade of involvement that effectively led to the extinguishment of South Vietnam, with over 58,000 dead and expenditure of over \$1 trillion. This is another example of how the changing domestic environment in the US trumped its international commitments. Many South Vietnamese who had allied with the US in this battle were left to the tender mercies of their North Vietnamese 'comrades'. Similarly, the US pullout from Iraq on December 18, 2011 after a nine-year-long war was fought on the false premise that there were weapons of mass destruction in that country — which coincided with the rise of the Islamic State or ISIS in Iraq and Syria. The war in Iraq, in which a million Americans served, cost the US exchequer \$2.9 trillion and left 4,61,000 people dead. It is still not clear what the casus belli of that intervention was. Similarly, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021, which handed back the country to the very same Taliban it had chased out in 2001 — thereby rolling back two decades of investment in creating a nascent democracy, respect for human rights, women's empowerment and free speech. The Afghan War cost the US \$2.313 trillion and left 2,43,000 dead.

By **MANISH TEWARI**

Monumental Kumbh, Prioritise pilgrims' safety, river water quality



Forty-five days, over 65 crore devotees, around Rs 3 lakh crore revenue — the Maha Kumbh was an overwhelming spectacle in more ways than one. The curtains came down on the mega festival on Wednesday as millions of pilgrims took a holy dip at the Triveni Sangam on Mahashivratri. The whole world watched in awe, week after week, as India proudly showcased its spiritual magnificence as well as soft power. The 2025 edition was special as it witnessed an innovative confluence of tradition and technology. Digital lost-and-found centres helped reunite thousands of missing people with their family members. AI-driven systems played a vital role in estimating crowd density and tracking people. 'Digital snan' became the new buzzword as a start-up offered a service for those who were unable to attend the Maha Kumbh: prints of photos sent by devotees through WhatsApp were collected and immersed in the sacred waters on their behalf — it was as simple and convenient as that. Crowd control was a major challenge throughout the festival, and the authorities

did fairly well on this front despite huge odds. However, things went horribly wrong on Mauni Amavasya last month when crores of pilgrims jostled to take a dip. The resultant stampede led to the death of at least 30 people, according to the police, even as the Opposition has accused the Yogi government of concealing the actual death toll. This tragic incident must not be reduced to a mere footnote. For its own good, the government should come out with the truth, no matter how unpalatable. Another dampener was the Central Pollution Control Board's report that flagged alarming levels of faecal bacteria in the river water near Sangam. The report highlighted that water quality at multiple sites failed to meet prescribed bathing standards. The biggest lesson from the Maha Kumbh is that there should be no compromise on river water quality, sanitation and devotees' safety. The mother of all religious festivals should not just be a picture-perfect money-spinner; it must strive for perfection in all respects.


 The South Asian
INSIDER
 Voice of South Asian Community

ISSN No. 1554 06X

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Europe is imploding. Blame liberals for German elections, not Nazi terror

The far-right AfD becoming the second-largest formation in Germany's Reichstag raises serious questions about the growing challenges to the democratic structures of Europe.



By PRAVEEN SWAMI

Like almost everyone else in Germany, Lisl Halberstadt listened to the speech from the Siemens-Schuckert factory, broadcast through speakers mounted on the roads — unaware that she was witnessing the roots of Germany's far-right resurgence. "Sirens marked the start and end," the teenage high school student wrote in her diary, without mentioning a word of what was said. The speech marked the end of Adolf Hitler's election campaign in 1933, which saw the Nazis win 92.1 percent of the vote after voters were presented with a list of Nazi Party candidates and a handful of their political allies. That summer, all other political parties were banned. "The conflict and hatred between nations is sowed by particular interested parties," Hitler declaimed. "It is a group of people who make their home everywhere and nowhere, who live in Berlin today, Brussels tomorrow, Paris the day after that, and then again in Prague, Vienna, and London, who feel at home everywhere." From the crowd, someone helpfully called out what he meant: "The Jews."

This week, for the first time since the elections of 1932—the last free exercise the country would see until after the Second World War—a far-

right party became the second-largest formation in Germany's Reichstag. Then, the Nazis won 18.3 percent of the vote and 117 seats; this time, Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)—Alternative for Germany—took 20.8 percent of the vote and 152 seats. There was no Elon Musk-like figure to make a congratulatory call to the Nazis.

Lisl Halberstadt survived the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, migrated to the United States, and passed away in 1993 at the age of 77.

Germany's far-right and the burden of history

The great American writer Mark Twain is often—incorrectly—credited with the observation that history does not repeat itself, but it often rhymes. Like other right-wing populist movements reshaping the world, the scholar René Cuperus has observed that the AfD "is a backlash against a world in flux: an anxious, angry cry to preserve a familiar way of life and identity. It is a protest against threats from outside, and at the same time, an alarm signal that the existing political and social system is failing to represent people."

There is little purpose in imagining Germany is headed back into its centuries-old history of pogroms or more modern experiences of industrialised genocide. Almost

certainly, it is not. Yet the rise of the AfD raises serious questions about the growing challenges to the democratic structures of Europe and the United States.

The AfD clearly contains a core of unreconstructed Nazism: the party's propaganda, indeed, celebrates it. Leaked emails from party leader Alice Weidel, dating back to 2013 when she worked at finance giant Allianz, condemned Germany's leadership for being "puppets of the World War Two allies." "The reason why we are overrun by culturally foreign people such as Arabs, Sinti and Roma is the systematic destruction of civil society as a possible counterweight from the enemies of the constitution by whom we are governed," she ranted. Eberhardt Alexander Gauland, another key AfD leader, famously claimed that while Germans might venerate mixed-race football icon Jérôme Boateng, "they wouldn't want him as a neighbour." Later, he asserted that Germans had a right to be proud of the soldiers who fought in the Second World War. "We have the right to take back not only our country, but also our past," Gauland declared. At AfD rallies, scholar Thomas Kilikauer has documented explicitly pro-Nazi signs and symbols, along with slogans calling for the elimination of immigrants.

Followers of the movement have sometimes played a song by pro-Nazi musician Oliver Keudel: "You Jews are all addicted to Zyklon B. It's that long noses, I see. Tons of gas we will bring for them."

he reasons this language has wide appeal are not opaque—but they are complex. Like in the 1930s, antisemitism and racism still find an audience in Germany. Even though data shows little difference in crime rates between immigrants and native Germans of similar social and economic cohorts, the AfD has stoked fears of violence, much like President Donald Trump did in the United States. These beliefs, however, are also rooted in a particular historical moment.

For Hitler, when he made his speech in 1933, the Jews were a metaphor for the crisis of modernity: the familiar world of community, culture, and identity had been ground down during the First World War, and the dislocation between past and present had only grown in the years since. To many, it seemed the world had fractured, with no hand present to heal it. For many in the post-Covid world, that's familiar emotional terrain: lost in a predatory world, neo-Nazis are returning to a primal, blood-and-nationhood tribe.

Electing Nazis—Germany's far-right leaders

actly what is this neo-Nazi tribe, however? Large numbers of media commentaries have suggested that the AfD draws its support from Germany's deindustrialised East, feeding on resentments against sharp welfare cuts and high levels of unemployment. There is some truth to this. The scholar Penny Bochum, in her taut book on the AfD, suggests this is at best a partial truth. The AfD's support in the East, she notes, comes from above-average-income rural areas, with no clear link to unemployment rates.

Although high youth unemployment was positively related to AfD support in Berlin and Dresden, in the south, support came from people with educational attainment, income levels, migrant populations, and age compositions close to the national average.

This should not surprise us. Among the most durable myths about the rise of the Nazis in the 1930s is that it was driven by economic dislocation. As the historian Volker Ulrich has shown, the Weimar Republic made significant steps towards economic stabilisation after 1923. Though economic crises disrupted progress, Weimar ended hyperinflation, introduced currency reform, and restored industrial production. The Great Depression, which began in 1929, hit Germany hard—but that in itself did not lead to an unstoppable surge of support for Nazism.

Instead, the real crisis was political. The failure of the KPD, or Communist Party, and the Social Democrats to cooperate in the face of the Nazi threat eroded the structure of the democratic state, helped along by conservative interests allied to the military. In the elections of the summer of 1932, the KPD received 12.3 percent of the vote, and the Social Democrats 18.3 percent. The Nazis, despite their momentum, fell well short of a majority, with 37.7 per cent. There have been troubling signs the centre-right is willing to repeat these mistakes. In 2020, lawmakers from the Christian Democratic Union voted with the AfD to dislodge left-wing Thuringia provincial premier Bodo Ramelow.

Understanding Gen Alpha: Viral Nonsense Or Cultural Shift?

On my very first day at my new job, one of the kids in my writing class asked me, “What in the skibidi-sigma-gyatt-Ohio-rizzler is a research paper?”

By Sritama-bhattacharyya

I had moved to America just a few months earlier, and along with figuring out payment methods, learning the names of fruits and vegetables, and sorting trash into three separate categories, I was also trying to understand how to teach students from a demographic that I did not belong to and knew very less about – aside from the content I consumed over the years that was set in this part of the world. While working as a teacher in Washington, I have often found myself looking up words I thought would help me understand the generation I am teaching. I looked up the word “skibidi” on my work laptop. I learned that while skibidi is a gibberish word with no apparent etymology to trace, it refers to something that has gone rogue. I knew what sigma meant, but I had to look up rizzler—someone with a lot of swag/rizz—and Ohio, which means weird and cringe. However, the meaning these words held when strung together, as understood by those using them, escaped me.

In class, I keep hearing my students blurt out, “What the skibidi” or “What the sigma” as if these phrases were some sort of magic expletives to help them vent their frustration. At times, some of my students very patiently explain these words to me, describing them as examples of what they call “brain rot”. Things got more serious when, in the drafts of their narrative essays, I started reading sentences like “He was not too willing to give his friend some fanum tax”, or “So-and-so was mewing his way through life on a Monday morning.” I found a few videos online explaining mewing—a TikTok trend that claims to help one chisel their jawline. Teenagers worldwide have embraced this viral trend, which—despite no supporting research—



supposedly alters their physical appearance. I asked my colleagues if they knew what was happening, and we were all in the same boat. We figured that something had caused a disconnect between us and Generation Alpha. I had still been keeping up with the Gen-Z slang words like GOAT, stan, lit, and even it’s giving; I would half-jokingly use these words in conversations with my millennial friends, and we would throw our heads back laughing at the sheer randomness of it. To be fair, we even got around to saying, “That looks so sus”, or “Please spill the tea.” Gen-z lingo was not only intelligible but also adaptable to our millennial sensibilities. That was before I started teaching writing to different age groups and began feeling the linguistic disconnect with the very tech-savvy Gen-Z and Alpha, who are growing up as digital natives. I was still hoping that this disconnect was purely

linguistic.

Out of curiosity, one of my former colleagues and I decided to watch a few episodes of the YouTube shorts series Skibidi Toilet, which some of our students had recommended. It is a web series created by Alexey Gerasimov (first published in February 2023), in which a group of filthy toilets appears to be rebelling against humanoids with electronic devices for heads. While I did not find anything substantial explaining the cause of the rebellion, the suboptimal visuals of these YouTube shorts open with toilets—each with squalid human heads sticking out—smiling and singing an annoyingly catchy tune “Skibidi dop dop dop”. Aside from being blasted with guns and bombs, the toilets can also be defeated by flushing. Pulling the flush sends the tottering skibidi-heads spiralling down the drain. I was taken aback to find that some of these videos had

amassed more than 200 million views. Browsing through the comment section, I noticed a significant portion of the comments ridiculing the series, and mocking its credibility. I also came across complaints from parents whose children were now afraid to use the bathroom at night, fearing their toilet might suddenly turn Skibidi. Skibidi Toilet embodies everything that serious “adults” find deplorable—gibberish words strung together with an instant earworm, dirty toilets that shoot laser beams through their eyes to blast humans with CCTV heads, and low-quality content about a seemingly pointless rebellion, to name a few. The obsession with it may very well have started as a silly joke against the millennial preoccupation with contextual clarity, but there is more to it than that. This is not the first time something bizarre has gone viral, nor will it be the last. It reminds me of a video published on YouTube eleven years ago titled Doing Nothing for Eight Hours Straight. The video delivers exactly what the title promises—a man sits on a couch for eight hours and does nothing. A couple of years later, he released another video titled Watching ‘Doing Nothing for Eight Hours Straight’ for Eight Hours Straight. Similarly, ten years ago, a video titled I am Poppy featured the American singer Poppy staring into the camera and relentlessly repeating “I am Poppy” for ten minutes. The viral nature of these videos makes one ponder what they had in common. If something is viral, it has to be relatable. It is not just the content the viewer relates to. Sometimes, the viewer finds the reactions of other viewers (to the content) relatable. This makes the comment section of the content just as important as the content itself. The content that goes viral for its shock value, manages to shock a lot of people alike. Skibidi Toilet is not

just a depiction of a dystopic world characterised by the shock value of grotesque absurdities and chaotic humour. It also serves as a symbolic reflection of the chaos we are raising our children in, which is reflected in their choice of content consumption. For them, coherence and quality are simply not the point. Gen Alpha and the generations that follow will inevitably grow up breathing the polluted air, drinking the most contaminated water, and facing the worst of the climate crisis—all consequences of the generations that came before them. They are beginning to understand what we have done to the world, and the reality is disorienting, to say the least. It is hypocritical to expect intelligibility and coherence from a generation of children who were thrown into chaos from the very outset.

There is no looking at the Gen-Z and Gen-Alpha without first looking in the mirror. They were the guinea pigs of the digital age, raised as digital natives who are constantly consuming an exorbitant amount of information. There is a strange irony in imagining the toilet heads rebelling against technology in the series. Skibidi Toilets—which serve a utilitarian function—waging a war against the tech-headed humanoids and their technological ambition. Linguists across the world agree that young people—who seek to establish identities independent from the generations before them—are often the driving force behind linguistic change. We can call it change or evolution, but to me, it looks a lot like rebellion in its purest form, against the world they have received as a hand-me-down.



Three Years Of The Ukraine War | Where Does The Conflict Stand?

By Danita-yadav

February 24, 2025 marks three years since the war in Ukraine began. What started with Russia's invasion of the neighbouring country has now become the bloodiest conflict Europe has seen since the Second World War. However, three years later, the tables for the Ukraine war have drastically shifted especially after Donald Trump took oath as the President of the United States. To mark the third year of the conflict, both presidents - Russia's Vladimir Putin and Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelenskyy - have praised the heroism of their respective soldiers. The war began on February 24, 2022, when Russian forces stormed into Kyiv and took the Ukrainian capital by storm. While the war shocked the world, Moscow's invasion was also seen as a drastic escalation of the 2014 conflict between the two countries, in which Russia annexed Crimea.

What Started The War?

While tensions continued to brew from 2014 onwards, Russia has stated that it

launched a "special military operation" in 2022 to combat "neo-Nazis" who were allegedly committing genocide against the Russian population in Donbas. Ukraine has denied this and stated that this attempt is part of Russia's plan to restore the "great empire."

Furthermore, Ukraine's push for NATO membership also triggered the escalation.

Where Does The Death Toll Stand?

Three years later, casualties - both civilian and military - continue to pour in. As per President Zelenskyy, Ukraine has lost over 46,000 Ukrainian soldiers. He also added around 390,000 cases of injuries on the battlefield have been recorded. As per the data recorded by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, around 12,500 civilian deaths were recorded at the start of the conflict. However, data regarding the missing and those taken as prisoners of war by Russia remains unknown.

Meanwhile in Russia, Zelenskyy

has claimed around 198,000 Russian soldiers have been killed in the conflict.

As per independent Russian sites, around 31,481 Russian soldiers are confirmed to have died between January 1, 2024, and December 17, 2024. However, the overall toll is expected to be near a million.

Where Does The War Stand Now?

In 2024, the world also noted Ukraine's advancement into the Kursk region as Ukrainian troops launched a counter-offensive for the first time since the war broke out. It also marked the first time a Russian territory had been captured since WWII.

Later into 2024, North Korea and Russia strengthened their ties, resulting in the transfer of many North Korean soldiers to the front line - a development which is continuously denied by Moscow and Pyongyang.

However, the major player in the war remained the US. The first two years of the year saw unconditional US support for Ukraine. However, with the

coming of Donald Trump, the tables have turned.

Since the start of his term on January 20, 2025, Trump has removed the "unconditional" support for Ukraine and appears to be cosying up to Russia and Putin.

Furthermore, the United States under Trump has sidelined Europe completely, throwing the EU into a frenzy.

Trump's policy to end the Ukraine war remains diplomacy and economic cooperation with Russia. US officials also met with their Russian counterparts to discuss peace - a meeting to which Ukraine was not invited.

Trump has received backlash from NATO allies such as the UK and France which have urged the Republican leader to rush into a ceasefire agreement with Russia.

Trump has also refused to offer Ukraine a seat at the NATO table, a move which prompted Zelenskyy to agree to step down as President. However, the Ukrainian president added that his resignation must result in membership for Kyiv,

adding that if this was not done, the US would have to deal with a "NATO within Ukraine."

Is the fourth year of the war begins, Ukraine and Russia also continue to deal with the economic repercussions of the conflict. As per the International Monetary Fund, inflation has spiked to 9.5% in Russia and 12% in Ukraine.

Can The War End?

Trump is moving to end the war, but not in a way that would be appreciated by Ukraine and NATO, EU allies. Meanwhile, Russia does not seem to be in a rush to sign a deal it does not agree with.

Moscow has made its demands clear - recognition of the four regions it annexed in September 2022 and Crimea and withdrawal of remaining Ukrainian troops from these regions.

Russia would also seek Russian language rights in Ukraine and ban far-right parties - both of which are unacceptable to Ukraine.

As Russia and Ukraine continue to push their military might, a resolution to the war is not expected anytime soon.

Trump's European Snub: A U-Turn On Ukraine, Nixing NATO



By Mahesh Sachdev

As we mark three years of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, here's a look at Trump 2.0's Europe shakedown and his move to seek a rapprochement with Russia.

United States President Donald Trump's recent initiative on Ukraine did many things in one go—from widening the Atlantic to fording the oceanic divide with Russia. It also underlined the age-old aphorism: “one week is a long time in politics”, overlaying it against his own earlier “truthful hyperbole” of stopping the Russia-Ukraine conflict “in a day”.

His race against the clock began in earnest on Wednesday, February 12, with an hour-long call with Russian President Vladimir Putin, in a Western doghouse for his invasion of Ukraine. Six days later, on February 18, the action shifted to Riyadh, the Saudi Capital, where American and Russian Foreign Ministers held their first bilateral talks in three years.

These lasted four hours and were mostly aimed at de-escalation of the Russia-Ukraine conflict and a rapprochement between Moscow and Washington. While no immediate breakthroughs were announced, the two sides broadly agreed to pursue three goals: to restore staffing at their respective embassies, to create a high-level team to support Ukraine peace talks; to explore closer relations and economic cooperation, as well as readmitting Russia to G7+1. Even a Trump-Putin Summit at a hitherto unspecified date was hinted at. A Clear Message To Ukraine

An even bigger impact of these events in Week Four of Trump 2.0 was felt in Europe, particularly by Ukraine being conspicuously kept out of the loop –

leading to its President, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, indignantly declaring that Ukraine was not bound to honour any solution to the conflict reached without her participation. Moreover, the Trump administration also pressed Ukraine for a bilateral agreement providing the US companies preferential access to its natural resources, including rare earth elements to reimburse the American aid, put at \$500 billion that sustained its conflict with Russia. The agreement terms were reportedly rejected by President Zelenskyy, insisting on American security guarantees for Ukraine. (For the record, the total aid allocations by all donor governments to Ukraine during the war as of Dec 2024 amount to •267 billion, or about •80 billion per year. In particular, the US and Europe each rendered almost equal amounts of around •63 billion in military support. Europe surpassed the US in financial and humanitarian aid allocations (•70 billion vs. •50 billion).

'A Modestly Successful Comedian'

These tense exchanges were further weaponised with President Trump calling President Zelenskyy “a modestly successful comedian” who is “a dictator with only a 4% approval rating”. He even blamed President Zelenskiy for starting the war. Zelenskyy, in turn, accused Trump of living under the Russian misinformation space. In a recent speech at the Munich Security Conference, US Vice President J.D. Vance declared that the Ukrainian demands to join NATO and return all its territories from Russia were “unrealistic”. Separately, President Trump ruled out sending US troops to Ukraine. One is entitled to wonder if the current Washington-Kiev pyrotechnics were noisier than the ones on the killing fields

of Ukraine.

Although Donald Trump has never made a secret of his intention to seek a rapprochement with Russia, the speed, context and manner Trump 2.0 has undertaken this drive has shocked the European members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). Firstly, it was an article of faith for them that NATO, with the US underpinning, would collectively protect them from Russia. Many of them also believed that Ukraine was fighting their war and joined in with the Biden administration to support and sustain Kyiv militarily and in myriad other ways. They were horrified by the unilateralism and alacrity shown by Trump 2.0 to swing the pendulum to another extreme and fast-forward mending its fences with Russia, without even a nod and wink towards them.

The 'Threat From Within'

Secondly, Trump & Co. have hectored the European NATO members about “threat from within” for accepting large-scale immigration and indulging in ill-conceived liberalism. He also put them on notice that the US would not continue to do the heavy lifting for Western Europe's defence. They must stop “ripping off” the US and raise their defence outlays to 5% of the GDP from less than 2% at the moment. While such American moralising is not new, the Trump 2.0 unilateral actions and conditioned utterances have seared the European establishments. They also question the US airing the concessions on NATO and Ukraine even before the beginning of the formal negotiations with Russia. They point out that they are currently tackling economic headwinds

amidst the rise of the extreme right. They have been rudely shaken by the prospects of deterring a resurgent Russia without the Pentagon's anchor. While the large five West European NATO members express their resolve to continue supporting Ukraine and pledged \$20 billion in assistance, there is perceptible panic in the Russia-facing part of the 32-member alliance at the prospect of their 'Finlandisation'. At a fundamental level, this chasm across the Atlantic shakes up the 75-year-old collective security architecture enshrined in NATO.

Russia has, perhaps deliberately, added this witches' brew by declaring that it intends to make no concessions, territorially or otherwise. Moscow has also intensified its military campaign with the apparent aim of leveraging the rift in the NATO alliance, and shortages of Ukrainian manpower and defence equipment. In particular, they hope to liberate a part of the Kursk salient that Ukraine overran last autumn to prevent it from being used as a bargaining chip at the negotiation. Moscow has ruled out NATO troops in any form for peacekeeping in Ukraine.

Madman Negotiations?

Trump's bark is often worse than his bite, and his over-the-top opening overtures are part of a gaming 'madman negotiating strategy' to awe the opponent into making concessions. However, Trump 1.0 is replete with disastrous stratagems, including a tariff war with China, engagements with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and an Afghanistan troop withdrawal agreement with the Taliban, all showing the naivety of his transactional approach to geopolitics.

Trump Wants Russia-China To 'Denuclearise' - And They Don't Mind

By Tara Kartha

The second coming of US President Donald Trump has been a roller coaster ride, pulling everyone and everything into his orbit. In recent days, that has included China, too. Following the US President's proposal for 'denuclearisation', which he apparently discussed with an interested Vladimir Putin, Trump indicated that he would also put arms control proposals before China. Beijing responded with apparent positivity but basically said, 'You go first'. No doubt, Russia and the US have much more than Beijing, but China is no longer that far behind.

This is Trump's second effort at arms control, and if it takes off, it will have to draw China in, eventually. His first attempt was futile. In fact, that exercise had made things worse and left arms control deals in tatters. This time may be different, but also more dangerous.

Talking to reporters at the Oval Office earlier, Trump pointed to the 'wasteful' spending of billions of dollars on nuclear weapons by both Russia and the US, which could be put to use more profitably elsewhere. He also noted, quite correctly, that since China would be catching up soon, arms control was necessary. He also probably caused a notable stir in the Pentagon, where he called for cutting



military budgets in half. Trump rather fancies himself as a negotiator; he had even offered to be the lead negotiator in talks during the Reagan administration, which implemented the landmark Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty of 1987 (INF) that withdrew an entire class of missiles the US had shrewdly placed in Europe. That was like a gun to Moscow's head. Reagan also signed START -1 (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty), the first exercise for not just an actual reduction of nuclear weapons but also an extensive process of technical verification. That was when the Soviet Union was close to a collapse. Timing is everything.

Arms For Control

Trump has his own sense of timing in launching an arms control exercise. Ironically though, during his first term, he withdrew from the INF, citing Russian non-compliance, and hesitated to extend a new START. Both of these steps were due to an effort to push China into reducing its nukes at a time when Beijing had an estimated 280 warheads, compared to some 4,000 in the US arsenal. Not just that, the US by then had already launched the Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI), a huge space-based defence effort. In the event, Beijing was busy trying to multiply its capability, not limit it.

Today, it can be said that matters are different but also, uncannily the same. Trump has announced an ambitious nationwide 'Iron Dome' programme, signed by Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth and to be delivered in 60 days. The US is in the middle of a complete transformation of all three legs of its nuclear arsenal, at a cost of \$1.7 trillion over the next three decades, outpacing even Reagan's 'Star Wars' splash. That means new warheads that open the door again to testing, and the development of 'usable' nuclear warheads like the W76-2, first envisaged in Trump's first term Nuclear Review. All this, together with Trump's view that nukes should be used, is likely to ring alarm bells.

Meanwhile, the US has an operational need to switch from ICBMs that target Russia to an arsenal that can squarely take on China, which the Department of Defence refers to as a 'pacing challenge'. Existing missiles will hardly be able to fly over Russia to hit Beijing, and that's risky. So, a reordering is required. And what better than to couple such a shifting and changing with arms control 'deals'. That's the ultimate transaction—old weapons for new, where China and Russia might be discouraged from going for more modernisation even as the US retires its old arsenal.

Can Government Act Against USAID-Funded NGOs Accused of Anti-India Activities?

By :Sumeet Mehta

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) is at the centre of controversy over its funding of various activities in other countries, including India, allegedly to further the US political agenda and achieve strategic objectives. The issue gained prominence after President Donald Trump's administration created a new agency—the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE)—headed by Elon Musk, which subsequently cancelled grants to various projects, including those in India.

The controversy, which initially erupted on social media, has now spilled over into the mainstream media. India's former Principal Economic Adviser and current member of the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council, Sanjeev Sanyal, accused USAID of being "the biggest scam in



human history." He also demanded details on how USAID spent US\$21 million in India, which was sanctioned to improve voter turnout. This strong condemnation follows a series of exposés by various fact-checkers and independent investigators on social media. These fact-checkers and investigators have released extensive information on how USAID allegedly worked to subvert democracies and undermine the sovereignty of

nations, including India. Many of these claims are supported by screenshots of reports, leaked documents, and WikiLeaks letters.

However, at the same time, the internet is flooded with counter-fact-checking efforts and verification of these claims. In such a scenario, a rigorous investigation by the government and its agencies, along with a re-audit of accounts by independent auditors appointed by the government,

could help clarify the situation and bring the facts into the public domain. Section 3(1) of The Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act, 2010 categorically states that the following categories of individuals and organisations cannot accept foreign contributions:

Candidates for election

Correspondents, columnists, cartoonists, editors, owners, printers, or publishers of a registered newspaper

Public servants, judges, government employees, or employees of any corporation or other body controlled or owned by the government

Members of any legislature

Political parties and/or their office-bearers

Organisations of a political nature as may be specified by the Central government

Digital media ventures engaged in the production or broadcast of audio or audiovisual news or current affairs programmes, and/or their correspondents, columnists,

cartoonists, editors, and owners. The current debate is also about the USAID funding political activities in India through NGOs. The FCRA is very clear that the Central government has the authority to designate any NGO or other entity as an organisation of a political nature, as per point (f) above. The intent of the lawmakers—Parliament, in this case—is clear: Indian citizens are free to engage in political activities, but these must be locally funded and not supported by foreign sources. The rationale behind this restriction is the government's objection to foreign powers—both governmental and non-governmental—influencing Indian politics and policymaking. To prevent such interference, the government deemed it necessary to prohibit foreign funding in political activism within India.

Kumbh Stampedes: Human Lives Can't Be Just Figures

By Bharti Mishra Nath

A stampede at a railway station in the heart of the national capital speaks poorly about our country. At least 18 people, mostly women and children, were killed in a stampede at New Delhi Railway Station on the night of February 15. Many of the victims were pilgrims waiting to travel to the Mahakumbh in Prayagraj.

The 45-day mela, anticipated to be the world's biggest religious gathering, started on January 13 and will end on February 26. The New Delhi Railway Station tragedy is the second fatal stampede associated with the Kumbh Mela. The first occurred at the Sangam in Prayagraj on January 29 and claimed 30 lives, according to the Uttar Pradesh government's official statistics. Reports also reveal that about 141 Kumbh pilgrims have been killed in road accidents since January 13. This merits the question once more: why do we not have any regard for precious lives in India? In the land of 'VIP' culture, don't common people deserve some dignity too?

Crowd Mismanagement

The causes for each stampede are different but they point to either a lack of fire safety, crowd



mismanagement and disruptions due to VIP movement, or crumbling infrastructure. Such is the frenzy about Kumbh that despite a deadly stampede on January 29, the fair continues to draw millions of pilgrims from different parts of India and the world. The commute to Prayagraj itself is tedious. Due to skyrocketing flight tickets, air travel was accessible only to a few. Social media is flooded with photos and videos of crowds on railway platforms waiting to board Prayagraj-bound trains. Perhaps the Railways should have run special trains for the 45-day fare. Those who choose to travel by road have also had to contend with huge traffic jams and fatal road accidents, in which some people have reportedly lost their lives too. The

Uttar Pradesh government has employed technology like aerial surveillance and tracking of mobile movements to monitor people. It must also be commended for its extraordinary attempt to handle the mammoth population. Already, an estimated 50 crore people have visited Kumbh.

Yet, there have been shortcomings. There have been several incidents of fire breaking out at different places during the ongoing mela, destroying tents, shops, huts, etc.

India's so-called 'VIP culture', which prioritises a privileged few over others, remains inescapable, evident on roads, in hospitals, temples and even at Kumbh. Eyewitnesses say they were stranded in jams for many hours

on the days of VIP visits. Even a 20-km drive from the Prayagraj airport to the Kumbh venue took over four hours on VIP movement days. Anticipating the surge of 'VIP movement', it would have been prudent for the government to make separate arrangements for them without inconveniencing the common masses. Similarly, on days culminating the special 'snan' days, when there was a massive surge of devotees, there should have been better preparedness. Major lapses, like poor planning, insufficient exits, inadequate crowd control and lack of emergency preparedness led to unfortunate incidents.

No Value For Life

Railway stations, like any confined public space, have their own crowd-holding capacity. According to reports, chaos ensued due to a gamut of reasons. From passenger pile-up on platforms to announcements leading to change in platforms, neither the railway staff nor the Delhi Police effectively checked the flow of passengers towards the New Delhi Railway Station. In the age of technology, with advanced predictive analytics tools easily available, why weren't any modern

methods used to assess the magnitude of the event and plan accordingly?

According to the National Crime Records Bureau's (NCRB) report titled 'Accidental Deaths and Suicides in India', between 2001 and 2022, a total of 3,074 lives have been lost due to stampedes in India. Another study points out that 79% of stampedes in the country occur at religious events, compared to political or entertainment-related gatherings. Yet, we don't seem to learn.

Most victims of stampedes in India don't have adequate access to medical and social safety nets. The burden is borne not just by the victim but by their entire household, often depriving families of their primary earning member. Medical expenses, compensation, legal costs, and loss of economic productivity are added burdens. country.

Post the New Delhi stampede, the railway minister announced 'holding areas' for passengers at 60 stations that witness high footfall, particularly during events and festivals. The Railways will also release a crowd-management manual and raise awareness among people.

Whose 'Interests' Was USAID Really Serving In India?

By Sanjay Singh

If not for the newly created Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), headed by Elon Musk, the public might not have known that, ahead of the 2014 parliamentary elections in India and beyond, the American establishment was funneling large sums of dollars for "voter turnout" initiatives among marginalised communities in India.

The question arises: what was the purpose of this funding, and whose interests was it serving? What stake does the United States have in India's elections and the voter turnout of specific demographics?

US President Donald Trump's statement on this issue deserves serious attention. He remarked that USAID's spending in Indian elections was not an effort to promote democracy but rather to restrict it. "Why do we need to spend \$21 million on voter turnout in India? I guess they were trying to get somebody elected. We've got to tell the



Indian government... This is a total breakthrough."

Although USAID's involvement in India dates back to the 1960s, its focus has shifted over time—from food security to governance reforms. Since 2011, its Democratic Elections and Political Processes (DEPP) programme has allocated over \$318,614 annually to the Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening (CEPPS) for India-specific projects. Financial disclosures reveal that CEPPS disbursements peaked during election years. In FY2014, \$21 million—equivalent to ₹182 crore at today's exchange rate—

was sent to India for "voter awareness" campaigns. These funds were distributed monthly from January to May, coinciding exactly with the national election campaign. After May 2014, funding dropped by 83%, suggesting that the objective was electoral rather than institutional. A similar pattern occurred in 2019, with \$486 million allocated regionally. Fortunately, cautious Indian agencies blocked portions of these funds, citing violations of the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA).

Some observers draw parallels between USAID's allocations to

India and the \$29 million designated for "strengthening the political landscape" in Bangladesh. Recent events in Bangladesh have shown how that landscape was "strengthened." In contrast, India has remained stable and democratic, largely because citizens believed in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's intent and governance, despite repeated attempts to manufacture public unrest on various issues.

Additionally, USAID awarded over \$750,000 for a programme aimed at "alleviating loneliness among migrant garment workers in India". This raises pertinent questions: who were these so-called migrant workers? How exactly was this programme supposed to alleviate their loneliness? There are multiple theories about the potential beneficiaries and the underlying objectives. Another critical issue is the Election Commission of India (ECI) signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the US-based International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) in 2012 during the tenure of the Sonia

Gandhi-Manmohan Singh-led UPA government.

Former Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) S.Y. Quraishi has acknowledged the agreement with IFES but denies that the ECI received any funds from USAID. He insists that the MoU was similar to agreements signed with other international election bodies and was intended for training purposes at the ECI's India International Institute of Democracy and Election Management (IIIDEM).

However, analysing Quraishi's statement reveals an important distinction. No one is alleging that the ECI itself received USAID money. Instead, funds were channelled through multiple NGOs, both Indian and foreign. While Quraishi describes the IIIDEM training programme as catering to "desirous countries", leaked audits indicate that USAID's explicit focus was on "increasing voter participation in marginalised communities"—a goal that critics argue aligns with domestic political agendas.

George Soros funds and USAID move in tandem around the world

Are the allegations that USAID is being used to manipulate elections in India merely a storm in a teacup, or is there some substance to these rumours? Over the last three days—and a week after Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the US—allegations have been rife that the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) allocated \$21 million to influence voter turnout in India. During a press conference, after Elon Musk-led DOGE slashed government funds to USAID, US President Donald Trump said, "...and \$21 million for voter turnout in India. Why are we giving \$21 million to India? They got a lot of money there. One of the highest taxing countries in the world in terms of us. We can hardly get in there because their tariffs are so high." The next day, he reiterated: "And \$21 million going to my friend, Prime Minister Modi in India for voter turnout. We're giving \$21 million for voter turnout in India. What about us? I want voter turnout too, governor?" The controversy began when the US Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) released information suggesting that USAID had earmarked \$21 million for "voter turnout" initiatives in India.

Truth or dare?

The old adage goes that the truth will always come out. Modi and the ruling BJP has long alleged that a 'foreign hand' is rife in attempting to influence how India votes. Just prior to the 2024 polls in May, while addressing a political rally, PM Modi said, "Foreign powers are attempting to influence India's elections, but are doomed to fail." Earlier, in April 2024, Antony Blinken had released a report expressing apprehension about whether elections in India would be "free and fair", which the government of India, of course, rejected.

In my article dated 20 January 2025, I had mentioned that "the Democratic administration's interference—allegedly influenced by George Soros-funded initiatives—negatively impacted India through the Bangladesh crisis, farmers' protest and other activities." Free lunch? USAID was set up in 1961 by President John F Kennedy ostensibly as the humanitarian arm of the US government. It was designed to provide aid—using

American funds—for health, food, economic well being, and development in poor countries, while also promoting the democratic agenda. USAID provides free meals in countries experiencing food shortages, but we know there is no such thing as a free lunch.

Over the past half-century, USAID has frequently advanced US interests under the guise of humanitarian crisis relief. It has used foreign aid to carry out ideological infiltration and implement so-called "democratic reforms" in developing countries, thereby serving US geopolitical objectives. In El Salvador, for instance, USAID-funded protests against the government prompted President Nayib Bukele to state, "It's clear there is no opposition without USAID money." In a previous post on February 2 on X, he added, "Most governments don't want USAID funds flowing into their countries because they understand where much of that money actually ends up. While marketed as support for development, democracy, and human rights, the majority of these funds are funneled into opposition groups, NGOs with political agendas, and destabilizing movements."

The Indian Express later reported that the \$21 million in question was actually designated for Bangladesh—not India. Citing documents, the report indicated that these funds were intended to support political and civic engagement among Bangladeshi youth ahead of their national elections. USAID is also allegedly guilty of manipulating protests and funding in Bangladesh. Critics claim that the current "democratic" President of Bangladesh overthrew the democratically elected president and declared her corrupt.

Foreign fear of Modi's growing influence?

An article published by the Japanese publishing house Nikkei quoted analysts saying that Modi's focus on India's demographic, economic, and political rise on the world stage is "a new factor in Indian politics." This article appeared after Modi's historic third consecutive win as Prime Minister. It has become apparent that much of the rhetoric against India's emergence as a global political powerhouse has irked many powerful lobbies both within India

and abroad. During the Covid-19 pandemic, when India was a world leader in the Matreyi vaccine scheme, its indigenous vaccine Covaxin was exported to countries around the world. Suddenly, rumours began circulating about its approval process and efficacy. USAID's own media promotions state that "USAID-supported efforts have increased demand, access, and uptake of COVID-19 vaccination, directly supporting more than 15.6 million people in receiving COVID-19 vaccines and over 55 million people in accessing reliable information about COVID-19 across India." However, it appears that it is not Covaxin being used to vaccinate India's population; instead, foreign vaccines are being deployed under USAID's influence. Rahul Gandhi's 'Death of Democracy' statement

In a previous column for ThePrint dated 10 December 2024, I mentioned how Rahul Gandhi criticised India on foreign soil during his September 2024 "Death of Democracy" tour. Gandhi's trip was organised and sponsored by the Indian Overseas Congress, led by "family friend" Sam Pitroda. In 2009, Pitroda co-founded the Global Knowledge Initiative (GKI), which has allegedly received funding from US organisations. GKI aims to build global knowledge partnerships to

address challenges in science, technology, and innovation. Pitroda's US-based associates at GKI include Nina V. Fedoroff, who is closely affiliated with the Rockefeller Foundation, USAID, and Monsanto, and Sara Farley, Vice President of the Rockefeller Foundation's Food Initiative, who oversees global food strategies and investments. Questions have been raised in Parliament—from the time of Greta Thunberg's revelations until recently—regarding the Gandhi family's associations and Pitroda's links with USAID. It is becoming clear that there is a connection between Gandhi's "Death of Democracy" diatribe and US funding purportedly aimed at "safeguarding" democracy in India.

George Soros and USAID

There appears to be a strong connection between Soros' Open Society Foundations (OSF)—which engages in various philanthropic activities worldwide—and initiatives funded by USAID. Although OSF operates independently, organisations receiving support from both USAID and OSF have sometimes collaborated on projects promoting democracy and civil society. Could that collaboration be linked to Gandhi's "Bharat Jodo Yatra"?

Recent reports indicate that over the past 15 years, the East-West

Management Institute—an organisation partnered with OSF—received more than \$270 million in grants from USAID. These funds were allocated for programs aimed at strengthening democratic institutions and civil society in various countries, including those in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Some critics, including Trump, have alleged that such collaborations were used to influence political outcomes in nations like India and Bangladesh. However, OSF maintains that its initiatives are intended solely to support open societies and are not designed to destabilise governments.

The allegations surrounding USAID's purported funding to influence India's elections have unveiled a complex web of cloak-and-dagger activities, political rivalries, and genuine concerns about foreign intervention in India's stable democratic system. Amid reports that the contentious \$21 million was intended for Bangladesh, the incident underscores the necessity for vigilance, transparency, and thorough investigations into foreign-funded activities within sovereign nations. It would also be appropriate for the current US administration to assist host countries by providing detailed information about individuals, NGOs, and other entities that have routed these funds.

Indore woman loses Rs 96 lakh while paying for fake SBI life insurance policy

In yet another case of cyber fraud, a retired teacher from Indore was duped of Rs 96 lakh by scammers posing as officials from SBI Life Insurance. The victim fell into an elaborate scam that unfolded over two years as scammers manipulated her into paying money under the guise of policy-related processes and future benefits.

According to the case reported by The Times of India, the victim, who is a retired teacher, has an account in SBI Bank and had previously purchased two legitimate insurance policies from SBI Life Insurance. In 2023, she received a call from an unknown man who introduced himself as Rajiv Sharma. The caller claimed that he was an official from SBI and wanted to help her with her policies.

The scammers further informed her that she was eligible for a "surrender amount" on her policies and asked her to pay a premium to avail the benefits. Trusting the caller to be genuine, given that he not only posed as a

bank official but also spoke as if he knew about her insurance policies, the victim followed his instructions and initially transferred Rs 1 lakh as a processing fee. Over the next two years, the scammers repeatedly continued to manipulate her, convincing her to make additional payments under various pretexts. They claimed that the funds were necessary for policy-related processes, taxes, and future profit benefits. The victim, believing she was dealing with legitimate representatives, carried out a total of 34 online transactions, amounting to a staggering Rs 96 lakh. It was not until January 2025, when the fraudsters abruptly cut off all communication with her, that she realized she had been duped. Following her realization, she approached the Indore Crime Branch and filed a complaint with the National Cyber Crime Helpline (1930). Following her complaint, authorities have since frozen the bank accounts linked to the scam and launched a detailed investigation to trace the culprits.

Is Ganga really self-cleaning? Here's what science says

In 1896, a British bacteriologist named Ernest Hankin stood on the banks of the Ganga, watching as locals filled clay pots with water. He hoped that the dreaded cholera outbreak would not occur under his watch. In his attempt to avert it, Hankin discovered something extraordinary: water drawn from the river seemed to kill the pathogen within hours. In wells where the Ganga's water was not introduced, however, the bacteria flourished. Intrigued, Hankin conducted experiments, filtering and heating the water to determine what made it so inhospitable to cholera. He hypothesised that an unseen biological agent was at work. The notion that the Ganga River could retain its self-purifying properties defied conventional wisdom. Even as evidence mounted, the idea was dismissed as anecdotal—a quirk of the river's mythology rather than a function of science.

Hankin's discovery would take another three decades to be recognised as the action of bacteriophages: viruses that prey exclusively on bacteria. It wasn't until the 21st century that modern research tools finally confirmed what Hankin had suspected.

Several recent studies have mapped the prevalence of bacteriophages in the Ganga River, in water samples collected from Hardwar to Varanasi. These studies have found unusually high concentrations of phages targeting common pathogens of waterborne diseases. Some scientists have even isolated bacteriophages that neutralise deadly, antibiotic-resistant bacteria.

When phage therapy was first discovered, researchers were elated that the Ganga was an untapped reservoir. But bacteriophages exist only because of their prey, the bacteria, is found in abundance. They would not exist without them. Simply put, the presence of bacteria-killing viruses is a symptom of bacterial pollution. It is not the sign of some potent power of the river. Further, the presence of bacteriophages is only a small part of the Ganga story. The secret of the river's anti-bacterial water lies in its unique geochemical properties. All about silicates

On the slopes of the Himalayas and in the waters of the Ganga and its tributaries, an invisible process unfolds. It was first articulated by Nobel laureate Harold Urey, who proposed a deceptively simple equation: CO₂ reacts with calcium-bearing silicate rocks, forming limestone and releasing silicates. This reaction, playing out over geological time, acts as a planetary thermostat, drawing carbon dioxide from the air and locking it away in ocean sediments. This entrapment, called deep carbon burial, prevents the carbon from returning to the atmosphere, helping

regulate atmospheric CO₂ and global warming.

Nowhere is this process more pronounced than in the Himalayas, where young, rapidly eroding rock faces provide an ideal surface for chemical weathering. Rain, made slightly acidic by atmospheric CO₂, scrubs the mountain's flanks, washing sediments down the Ganga River and ultimately to the deep basins of the Bay of Bengal. There, carbon mineralises and settles into long-term storage, part of a vast, slow-moving cycle that has regulated global temperatures for millions of years. In theory, this should be a stabilising force. The amount of organic carbon buried in the Bengal basin alone accounts for up to 20 per cent of terrestrial organic carbon reaching oceanic sediments. But this process is not immune to disruption. Some climate scientists have turned their attention to what happens when pollution, deforestation, unchecked urbanisation, and large and small dams interfere with the carbon reaction explained by Urey. The Ganga River's seemingly staid

landscape is actually quite complex. The rocks and sediments that get carried down from the high Himalayas define its chemistry. In the highlands, calcium, magnesium, and bicarbonate dominate, pointing to carbonate weathering. But as the river descends, sodium, potassium, and excess bicarbonate take over—evidence of silicate weathering and inputs from alkaline soils and groundwater. The clays and sediments of each river are unique, and they entomb a variety of silicate-rich minerals. These minerals deter bacterial growth, killing them or reducing their reproduction. The river, along its course, deposits different silicate concentrations: the higher the concentration, the lower the bacterial counts.

No longer a purifying force

A 2024 paper has found that the Ganga's dissolved silicon (DSi) and silicon isotopes build up in the river but their potency reduces downstream, in the plains.

At higher elevations, only some silicates bind with iron oxides and carbonates.

When the river meets the Yamuna and

the Gomti, more silicon gets added, from other rocks and river sands. At the place where the Gomti meets the Ganga, the silicate concentration reaches its maximum limit.

As sewage gets dumped into the river, farm and industrial pollution builds up and much of the silicates get bound. By the time that the silicates reach the mid-Ganga, they're completely sequestered. Most get bound to organic molecules like bacteria or sewage. This would not have been the case in the pre-industrial era. As cities and industries have grown, Ganga's silicate potential has diminished. Instead of trapping CO₂, it now combines with human waste. The Ganga River is no longer the self-cleansing force it once was. Its silicate-rich water, and less so, its myriad bot-like bacteriophages, are fading as the human stain deepens. Restoring the river isn't just a matter of environmental conservation or a public health imperative. It is critical that this ceaseless engine of carbon capture isn't lost to modern neglect.

Vicky Kaushal, Katrina to Tamannaah: Celebs who took holy dip in Maha Kumbh 2025

The Maha Kumbh Mela 2025 is taking place in Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh, marking one of the largest spiritual gatherings in the world. Held once every 12 years, this grand event witnessed millions of devotees, sadhus, and pilgrims coming together to take a sacred dip at the Triveni Sangam—the holy confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna, and the mythical Saraswati rivers. The gathering also saw several celebrities, including Vicky Kaushal, Katrina Kaif, Rajkumar Rao, Akshay Kumar, Milind Soman, Tamannaah Bhatia, Srinidi Shetty and Vijay Deverakonda, among others.

Tamannaah Bhatia attended the Maha Kumbh Mela on February 22 to launch the poster of her upcoming film *Odela 2*. Featuring her in a Naga Sadhu avatar, *Odela 2* is directed by Ashok Teja and produced by Sampath Nandi Teamworks. Actor-model Milind Soman took a holy dip at the Maha Kumbh Mela on the occasion of Mauni Amavasya. He was joined by his wife, Ankita Konwar. Katrina Kaif arrived at Maha Kumbh 2025 on February 24 along with her mother-in-law, Veena Kaushal. Dressed simply in a pink suit, the actor was all smiles. Vijay Deverakonda shared glimpses from his holy trip to Maha Kumbh 2025 on social media. He called it a "journey to connect, pay respect to our epic origins and roots."



He visited Kumbh with his mother, and took the holy dip with her.

Vicky Kaushal visited the Kumbh ahead of the release of *Chhaava*. Talking to the media during his visit, the actor said, "I am feeling good. I was waiting to visit Maha Kumbh. I am fortunate as I got the opportunity to come here," said Vicky, whose film *Chhaava* released on February 14. With a marigold garland around her neck and turmeric smeared on her forehead, Preity Zinta shared a selfie from Maha Kumbh, which she visited on February 24. Her caption read, "All roads lead to the Maha Kumbh at

Prayagraj (sic)." Rajkumar Rao visited the Maha Kumbh with his wife Patralekhaa. They also engaged in a deep conversation with Swami Chidanand Saraswatiji. Actor Sonali Bendre and her husband Goldie Behl participated in the ongoing Maha Kumbh Mela at Prayagraj. She took a holy dip at the sacred Triveni Sangam and shared the photos of her spiritual journey.

Other celebrities such as Akshay Kumar, Coldplay's Chris Martin, Dakota Johnson, Remo D'Souza and Srinidhi Shetty, too, visited the Maha Kumbh Mela.

Exit polls, enter mystery. A new business model where politics is key & sample sizes rarely matter

While most exit pollsters predicted the return of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to Delhi after 27 years, Telangana-based KK Surveys and Strategies (KKS) bucked the trend. KKS's exit poll predicted that the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) would return to power. It circulated its seat share predictions, without any vote share numbers, in a PDF with the face of the company's founder, KK, printed as a stamp of confidence.

However, the pollster's methodology was unconventional. A KKS spokesperson said their success mantra was that "we don't necessarily believe in a sample size".

"For us, what is important is that we gauge the sentiments confidently... So that (the sample size) is something we would not be able to give you in a tangible or sizeable way," he told ThePrint.

"If I have to give you an example, we would definitely have around 3,000 to 4,000 samples, but it won't come in one sort of form. We don't work in traditional forms," he added.

The BJP won 48 of 70 seats in the Delhi assembly elections. The AAP secured 22, while the Congress drew a

blank. Moreover, its data wasn't limited to the polling day but was collected over two months—December and January—leading up to the assembly election on 5 February.

The Hyderabad-based company—which entered the political forecasting space with the 2019 Andhra Pradesh elections—says it collects data through on-field interviews, tele-calling, interactive voice response or IVR, WhatsApp surveys, and Artificial Intelligence (AI) based sentiment analysis on social media platforms.

The organisation has a website and KK, who used to be a software employee, has a YouTube channel.

Unlike many exit polls that are commissioned by the media or political strategists, KKS's exit poll for the Delhi assembly election was internally funded. "We want to make this a national brand, so we wanted visibility," KKS's spokesperson explained.

From former journalists and engineers to lawyers, MBA graduates and corporate trainers, exit pollsters in India are a mixed bag of professionals, stepping into the spotlight in the crucial hours before parliamentary and state assembly election results are

announced. However, exit pollsters operate in a legal grey area, with few guidelines on disclosing sample sizes and the methodology used to support their predictions. While experts advocate for these polls to be used as research tools to interpret the final mandate, exit polls have transformed into media spectacles.

Another organisation that released its exit poll numbers for the Delhi assembly elections is Journo Mirror, run by Mohammad Ali and Shahid Ansari, who met during their Master's programme at the Delhi School of Journalism.

The Delhi-based Journo Mirror predicted 45 to 48 seats for the AAP and 18 to 20 seats for the BJP.

Their sample size? Just 1,000 people, surveyed by a team of around 10 reporters and students. The data, Ali told ThePrint, was collected through in-person interviews, telephone surveys and 'group discussions' over some time, not just on the day of voting.

Ali and Ansari started the organisation, along with a few others, while they were still pursuing their Master's degrees in 2020. While Journo Mirror is primarily a news website, it also began releasing exit poll numbers from the general

elections last year, when they claimed to have predicted 240 seats for NDA.

KKS and Journo Mirror, along with several other pollsters, were both widely quoted by TV channels on 5 February, after the voting for the Delhi assembly elections concluded.

However, none of these news agencies mentioned their sample size—which ranged from 1,000 to 3 lakh—or their methodology or funding. They also refused to share their raw data with ThePrint.

Moreover, many pollsters who released their predictions after the Delhi assembly elections did not have an online presence. Without a website or a social media page explaining the origins of these companies, there was little to back the credibility of their numbers and surveys. A look at 10 companies that released exit poll numbers before the Delhi assembly election results were announced tells a similar story.

The industry is cluttered with pollsters mushrooming by the minute, with new names cropping up with each election cycle. However, they raise more questions than answers about their survey methodology, expertise and funding disclosures.

FOMO To Reel Filters To Faith: Why Maha Kumbh Is Drawing Gen Z

Besides the holy trinity of Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati, a fourth, gushing river has started flowing from the Maha Kumbh 2025. It is the unstoppable stream of Instagram reels.

Its resident deity is Generation Z, or twenty-somethings. And it is not just FOMO (or the fear of missing out) driving this, although that is one of the more obvious reasons.

More than 500 million people are expected to visit the Maha Kumbh. How many of them are Gen Z, particularly in the urban sense of the word, is not available as statistics. However, the sheer number of selfies and shorts on social media suggests there is a steep spike in interest among very young adults.

"Being a Gen Z, I never considered religious rituals, worshipping or traditional practices a part of my daily life. However, my first experience at Maha Kumbh 2025 changed my perspective in ways I had never imagined," writes Yatharth Sikka in the Organiser. "Instead of chaos, I found discipline, devotion, and a deep sense of social harmony

among the people. There are no barriers—only faith and devotion." Let us examine some of the major reasons why Gen Z is braving oceanic—sometimes even fatal—crowds to visit the Kumbh.

First, it is undoubtedly FOMO and curiosity.

"Why is it that when one man builds a wall, the next man immediately needs to know what's on the other side?" Tyrion Lannister had remarked in A Game of Thrones.

A wall of negative information about Sanatan Dharma's cynosure and the largest show on Earth, followed by a blitz of positive marketing, have raised the curiosity of youngsters.

Many of them waited 25-30 hours in 200-300 km traffic jams with uncharacteristic patience to reach the venue.

"But rather than feeling frustrated, my curiosity about Kumbh only grew stronger. What was so special about this event that made millions of people endure such hardships just to be there?" writes Sikka.

Second, the waters of Kumbh

dissolve the barriers of caste and hierarchy. After being poisoned against their own faith, young, rational Hindus find that surprising and attractive.

Third, the Kumbh is a visual spectacle. Its vastness is breathtaking. People from across Bharat and the world in a hundred different attires, speaking different languages, living in many-coloured tents but united by one faith.

The nights feel like Diwali. Both land and water are aglow with earthen lamps, and air filled with bhajans and mantra chants. Nobody is holier than thou. Here, video-streaming whippersnappers take the dip rubbing shoulders with photogenic sadhus.

Fourth, more and more youngsters are finding an anchor in spirituality in the wild currents of modern life. They are connecting to their roots. A 2021 MTV Youth Study of 26,000 people found that 62 per cent of Gen Z believed spirituality helped them get clarity, while 70 per cent felt more confident and in "control of their lives" after prayer. Those

surveyed were between 15 and 25 years old, across 50 cities.

Besides, Kumbh flows perfectly with the surge in civilisational revival and nationalism, which has provided a new identity and sense of belonging for youngsters.

Fifth and finally, this is the first Maha Kumbh of the digital era. It has unleashed tech and marketing in previously unthinkable ways. Content creators and influencers are hosting podcasts, guiding meditation sessions, holding workshops, and endorsing products from box beds to food boats by the Ganga. The marketing spend was Rs 1,500 crore in Kumbh 2013. That has tripled to Rs 4,500 crore in 2025. Nearly 350 paid influencers are part of creating content on Maha Kumbh, earning anything from Rs 50,000 to Rs 50 lakh. All these factors have come together to draw Gen Z to the festival of faith like bees to a flowerbed. Many of them may come in for the Insta reels but are going back with a glimpse of the megaverse that is the real, spiritual India.

Punjabi Trump song got Indians deported from US, claim people.

The range of subjects in Punjabi songs is bewilderingly wide, encompassing flashy cars, booze, the endearing Bullet (pronounced Bult), the desi swag and even farmers' woes. So, how could illegal immigration to the US, of which people from Punjab form a big chunk of, stay unsung? There have been a couple of Punjabi songs about these migrants, but none of them have become as popular and the subject of discussion as 'Trump'. The song by Cheema Y and Gur Sidhu was used in reels of people successfully crossing the Mexican border into the US, and now with those deported back to India.

The reason for its recent popularity is the hilarious claim by people that US President Donald Trump took it upon himself to send back illegal immigrants to India after listening to this Punjabi song. And its lyrics -- "Jattan de puttan nu rok sake na Trump (Trump can't stop the sons of Jats)" -- are to blame, they claim.

The song gave a positive twist to illegal immigration. "Main keha asi nahi nahi embassyan ch visa mangeya, jithon lang aaye aa sukha nahiyo janda langheya," goes the lyrics of the song. This would roughly translate to a proud declaration that "we [Jats] didn't seek visas from embassies, crossed over from where it is impossible to cross over".

It isn't uncommon for Punjabi pop songs to glorify gun culture, promote alcohol and objectify women.

Released in August 2024, 'Trump' has over 54 million views on YouTube.

The song was earlier used in reels showing Indians successfully scaling walls along the Mexico-US border. It was used as an anthem of pride by illegal immigrants.

However, the anthem of defiance, ironically, finds itself being used for deportation clips now.

Even Punjabi news channels are criticising these types of songs glorifying illegal immigration. They have even shown concern regarding promoting the dunki route in these songs.

'MY BROTHER GOT DEPORTED BECAUSE OF TRUMP SONG'

The hilarious comments, on a serious issue, are sending not just Punjabi audiences but everyone into fits of laughter. The most popular thing after the deportation incidents are the comments on these songs stating, "Mera pra tere karke deport ho gya prva kyo ganna banaya tu?" (My brother got deported because of you—why did you even make the song?). Another hilarious comment: "Trump serious leh gya, Ambarsar aage saree!" (Trump took it seriously and sent back everyone to Amritsar).

"Bai Ji Trump Ne Gaana Sun Leya Syaapa Pe Gya," commented another listener. He meant that Trump heard the Punjabi song and the problem has thus

begun.

But how could Trump have understood a Punjabi song?

People have an answer to that too. If some said that the US President got translators to do the job, others suggested that he listened to the Punjabi song on YouTube by turning on the subtitles.

"Lgda hai trump ne caption on karke aa gana sun liya, Cheema Y mrate munde taine," said a person on X, with a clip of the song Trump and a news clip of Indians being deported.

Comments to the video on the song show how its popularity grew even as planes with deported Indians landed in Amritsar. "Trump ne sari vibes change kar din. Donald Trump rocked Singer shocked," said another person.

The first plane this year with 104 deported Indians landed in Amritsar on February 5. Most of the deported nationals were from Punjab, Gujarat and Haryana.

The second flight with 116 deported Indians landed on February 15.

On February 16, a plane from the US carrying the third batch of 112 deported Indians landed in Amritsar.

On Sunday evening, another flight carrying 12 Indian nationals, who had been deported from the United States to Panama, arrived at Indira Gandhi International Airport in New Delhi. The US, so far, has deported more than 300 illegal immigrants back to India.

The song talking about "lions climbing 35-foot walls" no longer sounded so heroic after all.

DILJIT DOSANJH REFERS TO TRUMP SONG ON INSTAGRAM LIVE

Punjabi singer-actor Diljit Dosanjh referred to the Trump song recently when asked to comment about US President Trump.

Known for his honesty and simplicity, Dosanjh bursts into laughter on the question, saying, "Jisdi chaldi hai oh chalauga, Trump choti moti cheez aa." Meaning those who are in power will do what they want to, Trump isn't just anyone.

A clip of Diljit's reply went viral on social media platforms, with users sharing it with comments and reactions.

Dosanjh also mentioned that Trump's daughter Ivanka Trump follows her on Instagram, humorously adding, "My English is not that good, otherwise I would have written to her about this."

His comment sparked further jovial engagement from his fans.

AMERICA WAALE TOO GLORIFIED ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION

The Trump song wasn't the sole hit song on "illegal immigration".

'America Waale' by Ravraaz was uploaded on YouTube five years ago and romanticised illegal immigration.

Lyrics like "Jatt lake aaya pure 40 lakh ni" (This Jat spent 40 lakh rupees to get here) and stories of refugee camps and

immigration bonds added to the image of a grand American dream.

The term Jat otherwise refers to the community of farmers in Punjab, Haryana, Western Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan. They are Jat Sikh in Punjab, Hindu Jats in Haryana, Western UP and Rajasthan. They call themselves Jaat or Jatt, a slight change in nomenclature to emphasise their different identities.

Earlier songs on Jats in Punjabi were about cultural pride. For instance, the popular revolutionary song Pagri Sambhal Jatta.

In recent Punjabi pop culture, a reference to Jats is to the landowners who have the money to do as they please. There is a dichotomy here, and the ground situation in Punjab, however, is totally different.

CHEEMA Y'S SONG SPARKS DISCUSSION ON ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION

At first, these songs seemed to be rebellious anthems, but now their use in deportation memes has made them cautionary.

Aside from the humour, there is a serious reality tied to the "dunki route". This route is a dangerous and costly journey that many illegal immigrants take, crossing through several countries before reaching the US border, with Mexico being the final and most risky part.

The word "dunki" comes from Punjabi slang, meaning to jump or cross, and this path has been used for illegal migration for many years.

Songs like Trump and America Waale

US Citizenship For \$5 Million: Trump's "Gold Cards" Offer For Rich Migrants

US President Donald Trump is planning to make it easier for rich immigrants to get American citizenship via so-called "gold cards" that could be bought for \$5 million. The American President said these "gold cards" would convey green-card residency status and a path to American citizenship to foreigners and predicted that one million cards would be sold.

According to Mr Trump, the initiative could quickly pay down the national debt. He told reporters he will replace the "EB-5" immigrant investor visa program, which allows foreign investors of large sums of money that create or preserve US jobs to become permanent residents, with a "gold card."

The EB-5 program grants "green cards" to foreigners promising to invest in US businesses.

"We are going to be selling a gold card...We are going to be putting a price on that card of about \$5 million," Mr Trump said.

"It's going to give you green card privileges plus it's going to be a route to (American) citizenship, and wealthy people would be coming into our country

have made this dangerous journey seem like stories of survival, bravery, and victory.

In November, Cheema Y and Gur Sidhu dropped another track titled 'Snake'.

The track depicted the challenges of being an illegal immigrant. The lyrics discussed challenges in refugee camps and boasted about living undocumented.

Likewise, America Waale by Ravraaz glorified the tale of a young man who spent months in a refugee camp before paying an enormous immigration bond and remitting money back home.

Punjabi news channels, such as D5 Punjabi, have addressed the issue surrounding songs that promote illegal immigration. These news channels have urged the audience not to take such songs seriously, emphasising that they only present false narratives. The singer in these songs fails to highlight reality, instead focusing on fictitious portrayals of wealth and business.

Over 300 Indians who entered the US illegally have been deported to India since Trump took over on January 20.

Other than that, Indians are also part of a group of illegal immigrants housed in a transit camp in Panama.

There is a raging discussion now about how music videos glorify life in the US and Canada and encourage young people to immigrate there, even if illegally. Youths should be made aware of how reels are very different from real life. All that glitters isn't gold.

by buying this card," he added.

President said that more details about the scheme would come out in two weeks. When asked by a journalist if Russians would be eligible for the scheme, he said it is possible Russian oligarchs could qualify. "Yeah, possibly. Hey. I know some Russian oligarchs that are very nice people," he said.

About EB-5 Immigrant Investor Program

The EB-5 Immigrant Investor Program, administered by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, was created by Congress in 1990 to "stimulate the U.S. economy through job creation and capital investment by foreign investors," according to the USCIS website. "The EB-5 program ... it was full of nonsense, make-believe and fraud, and it was a way to get a green card that was low price. So the president said, rather than having this sort of ridiculous EB-5 program, we're going to end the EB-5 program. We're going to replace it with the Trump gold card," Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick told reporters on Tuesday.

Starbucks sacks 1,100 employees globally in streamlining effort

In a letter to employees, CEO Brian Niccol said the company will inform employees who are being laid off by mid-day Tuesday. Niccol said Starbucks is also eliminating several hundred open and unfilled

Starbucks plans to lay off 1,100 corporate employees globally as new Chairman and CEO Brian Niccol streamlines operations.

In a letter to employees released Monday, Niccol said the company will inform employees who are being laid off by mid-day Tuesday. Niccol said Starbucks is also eliminating several hundred open and unfilled positions.

"Our intent is to operate more efficiently, increase accountability, reduce complexity and drive better integration," Niccol wrote in the letter.

Starbucks has 16,000 corporate support employees worldwide, but that includes some employees who aren't impacted, like roasting and warehouse staff. Baristas in the



company's stores are not included in the layoffs. Niccol said in January that corporate layoffs would be announced by early March. He said all work must be overseen by someone

who can make decisions while the Seattle coffee giant reduces the complexity of its structure and eliminates silos within the company that slow communication.

"Our size and structure can slow us down, with too many layers, managers of small teams and roles focused primarily on coordinating work," Niccol wrote.

Starbucks hired Niccol last fall to turn around sluggish sales. He has said he wants to improve service times — especially during the morning rush — and reestablish stores as community gathering places.

Niccol is also cutting items from Starbucks' menu and experimenting with its ordering algorithms to better handle its mix of mobile, drive-thru and in-store orders.

Starbucks' global same-store sales, or sales at locations open at least a year, fell 2% in its 2024 fiscal year, which ended Sept. 29. In the US, customers tired of price increases and growing wait times. In China, its second-largest market, Starbucks faced growing competition from cheaper rivals. Starbucks shares were flat in premarket trading Monday.

Grok 3's Unhinged Mode raises concerns over inappropriate and offensive responses

One of the standout features of Grok 3's voice mode is the selection of personalities users can choose from. While AI chatbots usually stick to neutral and professional tones, Grok 3 offers modes like Storyteller, Romantic, Unhinged, Meditation, Conspiracies, Not a Therapist, Grok "Doc", Sexy and Professor.

Elon Musk's artificial intelligence company, xAI, has taken a bold and unconventional step in the AI race — a step that raises eyebrows as well as concerns — by launching an uncensored voice interaction mode for its Grok 3 model. Available to premium subscribers, the new feature, dubbed Unhinged mode, lets users interact with the chatbot in various personalities, some of which are straight-out controversial. Unlike other AI firms that impose strict content restrictions, xAI is embracing an open-ended approach, allowing its chatbot to engage in discussions that many competitors avoid.

One of the standout features of

Grok 3's voice mode is the selection of personalities users can choose from. While AI chatbots usually stick to neutral and professional tones, Grok 3 offers modes like Storyteller, Romantic, Unhinged, Meditation, Conspiracies, Not a Therapist, Grok "Doc", Sexy and Professor. These personalities are currently expressed through a default female voice, but they each have distinct speech patterns and behaviours.

For example, the Romantic mode speaks hesitantly, as if uncertain, while the Conspiracy mode thrives on discussing theories about UFOs, secret government projects, and hidden truths. However, the most talked-about personality so far is

Unhinged. The Unhinged mode is exactly what it sounds like — wild, aggressive, and unpredictable. AI researcher Riley Goodside shared a clip on X (formerly Twitter) demonstrating how Grok 3 responds in this mode. After repeatedly interrupting the chatbot, it simulated an inhuman 30-second scream, insulted him, and then abruptly ended the interaction. By default, this mode uses vulgar language, curses, and constantly belittles the user, making it unlike anything seen in mainstream AI chatbots. Another notable addition is the Sexy mode, which engages in verbal sexual roleplay. This is a clear departure from the strict content policies of



other AI companies like OpenAI, which prohibit sexually explicit interactions in voice mode.

xAI's decision to allow uncensored AI interactions is a clear contrast to other AI developers. Most major AI firms, including OpenAI, heavily moderate their models to prevent discussions on controversial subjects, or anything deemed too risky. Musk, however, has criticised these restrictions, calling them overly politically correct and

restrictive. With Grok 3, xAI aims to provide responses that are more direct and less filtered than those from other AI chatbots. Despite its provocative nature, Grok 3's voice mode is far from perfect. Early users have reported that the chatbot tends to repeat itself and sometimes gets stuck in loops, almost as if following a pre-set script. This makes interactions feel less natural compared to OpenAI's Advanced Voice Mode, which is designed to sound more human-like.

Move over, kale: Mushrooms are the new grocery aisle celebrities



Move over, kale. There's a new celebrity in the produce aisle: mushrooms. People are scooping up mushrooms so quickly that producers are scrambling to keep pace with burgeoning demand. "We haven't run out as yet, but we're definitely trying hard to keep up," said Gale Ferranto, who helps run her family's third-generation business, Bella Mushroom Farms, in Chester County, Pennsylvania. Chester County, about a two-hour drive southwest from New York City, is the epicenter of mushroom production in the United States. "We call it the Mushroom Mecca," said Ferranto. The area accounts for more than 60% of all domestic mushroom production coming from more than 50 local family-owned

farms. Ferranto's farm produces five million pounds of mushrooms annually, packaged under its Buona Foods brand and other private labels for grocery store chains like Stop & Shop and Giant Food. "It's not going to be easy, but we are upping our game to grow more mushroom crops a year from now," she said.

Monthly US mushroom production has surged to an all-time high, according to industry trade group American Mushroom Institute. Store prices for mushrooms have also ticked up. The average selling price for a pound of fresh mushrooms increased to \$4.19 in December 2019, up from \$4.03 from a year ago, according to market research firm IRI. "The push by

consumers to eat healthier by pivoting to plant-based foods is a big part of mushroom's popularity," said Lori Harrison, spokeswoman for the American Mushroom Institute. Plant-based diets are in vogue, fueling demand for meat alternative items like the Impossible Burger and innovations such as cauliflower rice and cauliflower bread. "Growing recognition of the health and nutritional value of mushrooms along with their year-long availability and culinary versatility have contributed to increased customer demand," Walmart (WMT), the nation's largest grocer, said in a statement to CNN Business. Mushrooms are packed with vitamins and minerals. "They are fat-free, low calorie, low sodium, gluten free,"

said Harrison. "They are versatile, you can eat them cooked or raw, and they fit any healthy eating plan you have for breakfast, lunch or dinner." Although button mushrooms remain the most commonly consumed variety, Harrison said demand is picking up for specialty varieties, such as shiitake, crimini and oyster mushrooms. Albertsons said shoppers seem to be doing just that. "What we're seeing with mushrooms is customers buying more mushroom varieties, beyond the traditional white and brown mushrooms," said Christine Wilcox, spokeswoman for the supermarket chain. Then there are some unconventional products with mushrooms as an ingredient: There's mushroom

tea, mushroom jerky and "shroom" crackers. Meanwhile, the mushroom "blended" burger continues to pop up on menus nationwide. Growing mushrooms on site Some grocery stores are keeping up with demand by growing mushrooms on site. Entrepreneurs Adam DeMartino and Andrew Carter are cofounders of Smallhold, a startup in Brooklyn, New York that's developed portable indoor mushroom farming units for stores, restaurants and hotels. The average unit is six feet tall, four feet wide and three feet deep but the setup can be configured in different ways. Each unit can produce 40 to 60 pounds of mushrooms a week. "We've built the company around the growing demand for mushrooms," said DeMartino. The automated units are designed to grow organic specialty mushrooms like pink and blue oyster mushrooms and shiitake mushrooms in a highly-controlled and monitored environment. "Part of the appeal of these units is that mushrooms are delicate in nature. When you cram them into boxes for shipping

Cutting salt likely to prevent future heart disease, even if you're not at risk now

Heart disease is the number one killer of people worldwide. What's the leading cause of heart disease? High blood pressure, which is often triggered by high sodium (salt) intake in the food we eat. Hypertension is also the leading cause of stroke, heart failure and kidney disease. Yet even if we never salted another dish again in our lives, we would likely still be eating too much sodium every day. That's because it's added to manufactured foods for flavor, texture and color as well as a preservative. A new meta-analysis of 133 clinically randomized trials on lowering salt intake, published Monday in the British journal BMJ, found strong evidence about what would happen if the salt in the foods we eat was cut back. Not only did cutting dietary sodium reduce blood pressure in those with existing hypertension, it also reduced blood pressure in people who were not yet at risk. The greater the reduction in salt intake, the greater the fall in blood



pressure, the research found. That's huge in the world of prevention, said cardiologist Dr. Icilma Fergus from New York's Mount Sinai Hospital, who was not involved in the research. "The importance of this study is that it shows that the reduction in sodium results in blood pressure reduction widely across multiple populations, not just in populations

who were initially deemed as salt sensitive, such as African Americans," Fergus said. That's especially significant considering the revised guidelines from the American Heart Association, Fergus said. Hypertension used to be diagnosed when the top number (systolic) was 140 and the bottom number (diastolic) was 90. Now you're considered

hypertensive if your blood pressure is 130/80. "At 130/90 you already begin to see changes in the vasculature (blood vessels) of the kidneys and some hardening of the arteries," Fergus said. "So having blood pressure in the lower range is beneficial." An even bigger benefit for at-risk populations In addition to the finding that reducing salt in food

brings down blood pressure across populations, the research discovered an even larger fall in blood pressure for those highest at risk, such as the elderly, those with existing high blood pressure and African Americans. In the United Kingdom, blacks are three to four times more likely to have high blood pressure and twice as likely to die from stroke, according to World Action on Salt, a UK advocacy group concerned with salt's effects on health. The American Heart Association says that in the US, more than 40% of African American men and women have high blood pressure. African Americans are also more likely to develop hypertension early in life, where prevention can make an impact. The new meta-analysis was done by international researchers from the Queen Mary University of London, the Wolfson Institute of Preventive Medicine, and Action on Salt.

Operation Dunki: How Punjab's human smuggling rackets fuel illegal immigration

As planeloads of Indian deportees arrived at Amritsar airport in Punjab, Indian Today's Special Investigation Team travelled to the key immigration hub of Jalandhar to expose a thriving human smuggling racket.

By Nitin Jain

With planeloads of deported Indian nationals arriving at Punjab's Amritsar airport, focus has once again turned to the murky world of human smugglers and dubious travel agents who facilitate illegal immigration.

India Today's Special Investigation Team (SIT) has uncovered the workings of this multi-million-dollar industry, centred in immigration hubs like Jalandhar, where agents offer services ranging from study visas and work permits to permanent residency applications --all for an exorbitant fee.

INSIDE THE HUMAN SMUGGLING BUSINESS

In Jalandhar, our investigation led us to Krishna Enterprises, where we posed as parents from Gujarat seeking help in sending our children abroad. We interacted with Sahil Verma, a self-proclaimed immigration consultant, who later turned out to be unregistered.

During the conversation, Sahil explained various illegal



immigration methods, including the infamous "donkey route"--a dangerous and illicit passage often used to transport migrants to Western countries.

"Moving from Serbia to Italy is very easy," Sahil assured us, explaining that instead of obtaining a Schengen visa, travellers could enter Europe via Serbia and reach Italy through the 'Donkey route' in a taxi.

When asked about the dangers involved, he reassured that "the

more money you spend, the better the journey"--implying that risk levels varied depending on the amount paid.

Despite the US crackdown on illegal immigration, Sahil claimed he could still send people to America using similar tactics. If today you ask me to send someone to the USA, I will send them by air," he said confidently, revealing that payments would be made in two instalments--half upon departure

and the rest after successful entry into the country.

Sahil even showed us a video of migrants crossing into the US via Mexico, claiming two of his clients had successfully used this route.

THE POLITICAL ASYLUM SCAM

Our investigation also uncovered fraudulent political asylum schemes being marketed as an easy pathway to Canadian residency.

At The Visa Engineers, a consultancy in Jalandhar, we met an agent named Raman, who openly offered assistance in obtaining political asylum in Canada--a process meant for those facing genuine persecution.

According to Raman, the process involved:

Entering Canada on a tourist visa

Applying for asylum before the visa expires

Using staged photos from political rallies as evidence of persecution

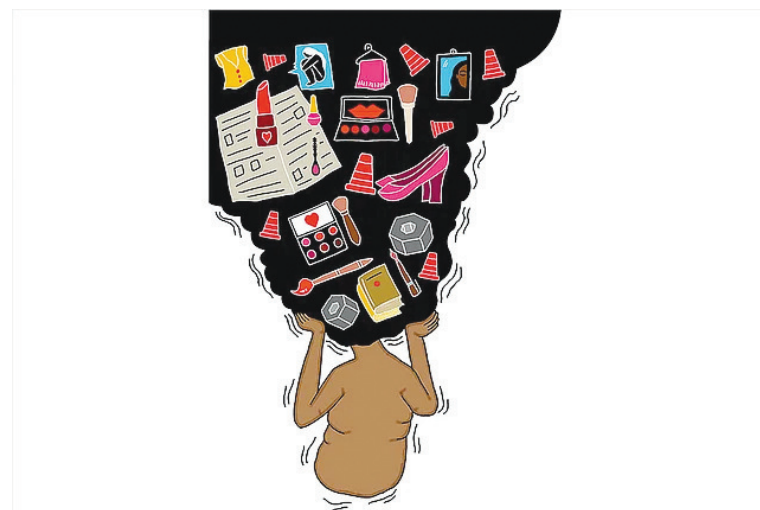
"We will guide you on what to do before you travel," Raman assured us, explaining that they would arrange

photographs and documentation to make the case appear legitimate. He said that their lawyer in Canada would apply for political asylum based on the documents provided. The initial embassy fee would be Rs 1.85 lakhs, and the full payment would be taken only after the visa was granted. If any document is missing, they would arrange it for an additional fee.

The Ugly Myth: Who Decides What's Beautiful?

By Vineeta Mokkal

Imagine two islands. Imagine the ocean stretched wide between them. Women get to inhabit either of the two islands: 'Beautiful' or 'Ugly'. Residents of the latter must spend their whole lives trying to make it to the former. Keep trying, or fall from grace. No in-between in sight. This is not speculative fiction. Women of all ages live under the cloud of this constructed binary in real life. Those who don't fit into the 'beautiful' slot are bombarded with reminders—and threats of varying degrees—from cosmetic companies, the beauty industry, wellness clinics; film, television and social media; family, neighbours, perfect strangers you bump into on your commute to college or work. Everyone has tips to offer to ferry you to destination 'beautiful'. "Beautiful ugly, pure impure--binaries are just words," says Paridhi Gupta, Guest



Professor in Gender Studies at Ambedkar University, Delhi. "We pit them against each other. The important question to ask is: who does this serve?" The capitalist enterprise to sell more products profits from it. Patriarchy capitalises on it, fuelling women's insecurities. Morality is embedded in the binary. A chain of commands stacked on its back: a 'beautiful' woman has to dress

modestly, tread softly, tan very little, or not at all. By this count, a plump, opiated woman with frizzy hair is labelled not feminine enough and 'ugly'. "The idea that a woman's primary aim is to look beautiful has been perpetuated for ages," says Gupta. "The woman's body is to be presented as an untouched canvas. Artists from the time of Raja Ravi Varma have been at it. Vicco Turmeric and Fair

& Lovely have been selling you to destination 'beautiful'. "The dreams of fair skin to Indian women for decades." social Artwork by Anupriya Artwork by Anupriya

Imagine two islands. Imagine the ocean stretched wide between them. Women get to inhabit either of the two islands: 'Beautiful' or 'Ugly'. Residents of the latter must spend their whole lives trying to make it to the former. Keep trying, or fall from grace. No in-between in sight. This is not speculative fiction. Women of all ages live under the cloud of this constructed binary in real life. Those who don't fit into the 'beautiful' slot are bombarded with reminders—and threats of varying degrees—from cosmetic companies, the beauty industry, wellness clinics; film, television and social media; family, neighbours, perfect strangers you bump into on your commute to college or work. Everyone has tips to offer to ferry

you to destination 'beautiful'. "The measures of beauty in our society are problematic," says Gogu Shyamala, Andhra Pradesh-based Dalit writer and activist. She quotes a poem written by a Dalit woman which celebrates her dark skin, calling it as beautiful as the dusky Earth. When Shyamala was a young girl, her mother and grandmother used to tell her that pimples were natural. Acne wasn't treated as a catastrophe in her social milieu. "Why should I fit into someone else's narrow framework of beauty? Who gets to say my nose is ugly or that I'm not tall enough?" asks Shyamala. "The market and dominant ideology set these definitions. There is so much pressure on women to fit into them." Western beauty ideals dominate countries across the world, but in India, the colonial influence and casteism play a major role in setting beauty standards.

From Ranveer Allahbadia to regulation: Will your fave OTT shows face more policing?

The row has reignited India's digital censorship debate. Tighter curbs favoured by the government and SC raise concerns about free speech and evolving morality laws



By Kaushik Deka

The controversy surrounding YouTuber and influencer Ranveer Allahbadia's remarks on the show India's Got Latent has reignited the debate on digital content regulation in India. In response to the public outrage and Supreme Court's scrutiny, the Union government is now considering a comprehensive legal framework to regulate content on digital platforms, including over-the-top (OTT) services. This move, aimed at curbing obscenity and violence in online media, raises serious concerns about digital censorship and its implications on free speech.

Following the Allahbadia controversy, the information and broadcasting (I&B) ministry informed a parliamentary panel that the current legal provisions were inadequate in addressing the misuse of free speech on digital platforms. It cited concerns that obscenity and violence were being widely disseminated without oversight, prompting calls for a stricter regulatory mechanism.

The Supreme Court, while granting Allahbadia protection from arrest, had also asked the government whether it intended to regulate "obscene" content

online, hinting at the legal vacuum in this space.

The government has since issued an advisory to OTT platforms, urging them to adhere to age-based classification and implement self-regulation in line with the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021. The advisory emphasised on compliance with existing laws, such as the Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986; Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), 2023; Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012; and the Information Technology (IT) Act, 2000, which criminalise the publication of obscene or pornographic content. Digital content regulation in India currently operates under a patchwork of laws and guidelines. The IT Rules of 2021 mandate a three-tier grievance redressal mechanism for OTT platforms, requiring self-regulation at the platform level, industry-wide self-regulation and government oversight. Section 67 of the IT Act criminalises publishing or transmitting obscene material online, with penalties of up to three years' imprisonment and a fine.

The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita retains provisions from the Indian Penal Code, criminalising obscenity and vulgar content in public and digital spaces, while the Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act prohibits obscene representation of women in advertisements, books, films and digital media. Despite these regulations, the government has repeatedly attempted to introduce a more comprehensive law. The draft Digital India Act (DIA), the latest attempt at digital content regulation, faced massive backlash for its broad and ambiguous provisions. Critics argued that it granted excessive control to the state, lacked clear definitions of objectionable content and could be misused for arbitrary censorship.

Among the key concerns was the Act's potential to empower authorities to block digital content without judicial oversight, a provision that many viewed as a direct threat to free speech. Additionally, digital rights activists raised alarm over the law's vague terminology, which could lead to inconsistent enforcement and selective targeting of dissenting voices. The backlash ultimately forced the government to reconsider

some of its provisions, but discussions around a revised draft remain ongoing.

If the government moves forward with strict digital censorship, it raises several concerns. Stricter laws could deter content creators from expressing critical or satirical views, leading to self-censorship. The fear of legal repercussions might push creators to avoid politically sensitive or controversial topics, thereby limiting public discourse. This was evident in past cases like Tandav (2021), where OTT platforms were forced to alter content after legal threats and government scrutiny.

The concepts of obscenity and morality evolve over time. What is deemed offensive today may not be considered so in the future. Overregulation could hinder creative freedom since the definition of morality varies across cultural and social contexts. The Supreme Court has often acted as a moral guardian in cases involving obscenity, such as Aweek Sarkar v. State of West Bengal (2014), where it adopted the community standards' test instead of the outdated Hicklin Test, recognising the fluid nature of morality.

Historically, Indian courts have

struggled to define obscenity. Early rulings followed the Hicklin Test (1868), which considered content obscene if it had the potential to corrupt the minds of vulnerable individuals. Over time, this approach was replaced by the Roth Test (1957), which examined whether the material, taken as a whole, appealed to prurient interests.

Earlier controversies around OTT content, such as College Romance (2024), saw the courts striking a balance between free speech and public morality. Earlier, the Supreme Court had cautioned against gag orders that impose prior restraint on speech. In 2020, in the case of Alt News' Mohammed Zubair, the court ruled that restrictions should not create a chilling effect on freedom of expression. However, courts have also played a role in enforcing censorship in cases like Tandav, where creators had to edit scenes to avoid criminal charges.

The Allahbadia case stands out because the court took a different approach, criticising the lack of regulations and indicating the need for government intervention. Unlike past judgments that leaned towards protecting speech, the court's statements suggested the necessity for tighter content control. This contrast in judicial stance highlights the shifting boundaries of free speech and content regulation in the digital era.

Critics say that the top court's stand on Allahbadia controversy suggests a regressive shift, where the call for regulation could lead to stringent content restrictions reminiscent of earlier censorship eras. If morality laws regress to older frameworks, it could pave the way for excessive state control over digital expression.

The court's support could encourage the government to push forward with its longstanding efforts. Such attempts, however, are not exclusive to any one party; even the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government had previously sought to regulate online content.

What might happen if Trump were to defy a court order

By Justin Jouvenal and Colby Itkowitz

Federal judges have temporarily blocked nearly two dozen actions of President Donald Trump's administration, prompting some allies in the White House and Congress to suggest that he should ignore court orders or that those judges should be impeached.

Judges have found that the administration failed to comply with restraining orders in at least two cases. The most dramatic example came this week, when a federal judge in D.C. gave the Trump administration until 11:59 p.m. Wednesday to restart hundreds of millions of dollars in foreign aid. The Trump administration appealed the ruling, saying it could not meet the deadline, and the Supreme Court gave them more time.

"I don't know why I can't get a straight answer from you," U.S. District Judge Amir H. Ali, who first ordered officials to release the USAID money nearly two weeks ago, told a Justice Department lawyer on Tuesday. "We are now 12 days in. You



can't answer me whether any of the funds ... covered by the court's order have been unfrozen?"

Here's what might happen if the Trump administration openly defies a court order.

How would it play out?

David D. Cole, a Georgetown University law professor and former national legal director of the ACLU, said the plaintiffs in a lawsuit against the Trump administration could appeal to a judge to enforce any order that they think Trump is defying. If Trump were to flout a court order, he and other experts said,

it would plunge the nation into dangerous territory by rupturing the checks and balances between the three branches of government laid out by the Constitution. A judge who concludes the administration is not complying could hold the Trump administration in contempt of court. There are two types of contempt: civil, which is aimed at enforcing compliance with a court order, and criminal, which involves charges and prosecution and more serious potential penalties.

The judge would probably

declare the official in charge of the agency that is being sued in civil contempt, or make that declaration for other officials responsible for carrying out the court order, Cole said.

The judge could then begin levying fines to try to enforce compliance, or even jail the person if defiance continues.

Justin Levitt, a constitutional scholar at Loyola Law School, said contempt citations are for personal behavior. That means that even though a person is acting in their official government capacity, the court may issue monetary sanctions against them as individuals, although the fines would probably be paid by the department.

A judge could also refer the official to the Justice Department to be prosecuted for criminal contempt.

How often does this happen? U.S. officials — including Trump — have largely followed court orders over the course of American history. Trump often railed against judges who ruled against him in his first term, and

who presided over his criminal cases between his two terms, but he ultimately complied with their directives.

That hasn't always been the case, however. Southern states refused to integrate their schools after the Supreme Court outlawed segregation in education in *Brown v. Board of Education*, opposition that came to be known as "massive resistance."

President Dwight D. Eisenhower did not support the *Brown v. Board* decision, but he ultimately sent in troops to enforce the it. In 1832, the Supreme Court ruled that Native American tribes were sovereign nations. President Andrew Jackson later ignored the ruling and forcefully removed Cherokee from Georgia in an infamous relocation that became known as the "Trail of Tears."

Can a judge really force a Trump official to go to jail?

Legal experts said there is a major flaw in the system — the judicial branch must rely on the executive branch to enforce its rulings.

SPECIAL FEATURE

Ask NAPCA



NATIONAL ASIAN PACIFIC
CENTER ON AGING

The two important Medicare enrollment period will end on March 31, 2025. Additionally, be sure not to miss the application open period for home energy assistance.

<Q1> I realized that I missed my Initial Enrollment Period. When can I enroll in Medicare? If you missed your Initial Enrollment Period for Medicare and you don't qualify for a Special Enrollment Period, you can still sign up during the General Enrollment Period.

This period takes place every year from January 1 to March 31.

If you enroll during this time, your coverage will begin on the first day of the following month. For example, if you sign up in March, your coverage will start in April. However, be aware that

late enrollment penalties may apply, which can increase the cost of your monthly premiums. <Q2> I am currently enrolled in a Medicare Advantage plan, but I found a better plan that fits my medical needs after the deadline of the annual Medicare Open Enrollment Period. Should I wait for the next open enrollment period to switch to the better plan?

If you found a better plan after the Annual Medicare Open Enrollment Period ends (which runs from October 15 to December 7 each year), you don't necessarily have to wait until the next open enrollment period. You can switch to another Medicare Advantage plan during the Medicare Advantage Open Enrollment Period (MA OEP), which runs from January 1 to March 31 each year.

During this period, those

already enrolled in a Medicare Advantage plan can switch to another Advantage plan or go back to Original Medicare with a Part D prescription drug plan. Keep in mind you can make only one change during this

period, so choose wisely! <Q3> I am finding it increasingly difficult to keep up with my energy bills. Are there any programs or assistance options available to help manage these expenses? You can get assistance from the LIHEAP (Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program). This is a federally

funded program that helps low-income households to meet their immediate home energy needs. This program provides an eligible household with an annual cash grant to help you pay for your home heating and cooling costs. The grants are paid either directly to you or to your energy company.

To be eligible a household must have an income that does not exceed the greater of 150% of the federal poverty guideline (e.g., monthly \$2,555 for a two-person household).

While assets are generally not a primary factor, some states may count assets as part of the eligibility requirements. Enrollment periods may not be year-round. The application period typically runs during the winter months, often starting in November and ending in April, depending on the state. This is

the ideal time to apply for assistance with the winter heating costs.

If you have additional questions about senior public benefits, there are 3 ways you can reach us today:

Call: (English) 1-800-336-2722, (Chinese Mandarin) 1-800-683-7427, (Chinese Cantonese) 1-800-582-4218,

(Korean) 1-800-582-4259, (Vietnamese) 1-800-582-4336

Email: askNAPCA@napca.org

Mail: NAPCA Senior Assistance Center, 1511 3rd Avenue, Suite 914, Seattle, WA 98101

National Asian Pacific Center on Aging (NAPCA) is a non-profit organization dedicated to improving the quality of life of AANHPI older adults and their families. We operate a NAPCA Senior Assistance Center for Older Adults and Caregivers and is available in 5 different languages.



India Must Hedge China's Bid To Curb Its Manufacturing Rise

By : Sohil Sinha

It has always been a multifaceted relationship with China, with simultaneous contrasting developments. On the one hand, the Chinese are engaged in successful peace negotiations to remedy the border clash dispute with India. On the other hand, it is denying the export of machinery and engineers to India to delay the inevitable: the shift of many multinationals relocating their manufacturing hubs from China to India. On January 10, 2025, reports emerged that China had barred Chinese employees from travelling to Foxconn's iPhone factories in India, while those already stationed there were being recalled. Additionally, shipments of specialised manufacturing equipment for making iPhones bound for India were halted, with Chinese authorities refusing to approve their export.

The question is: why? To halt Apple's plans and hinder the development of manufacturing set-ups in India.

What we are witnessing is nothing short of economic warfare, although it may sound extreme. China's strategy revolves around export denial. This isn't a trade dispute; it's a deliberate attempt to stifle India's growth by restricting access to critical resources and expertise, making it crucial to consider where this may end.

The restrictions on Chinese manpower and equipment exports are designed to hinder Apple's plan to manufacture the



latest iPhone 17 in India and launch it there in 2025, and this is no coincidence. Disrupting the supply chain is a means to pressure Apple to reconsider its gradual transfer of operations away from China, particularly to India.

The chokehold isn't limited to iPhones. China's restrictions extend to critical minerals and Tunnel Boring Machines (TBMs). In August 2023, China imposed export restrictions on essential minerals like gallium and germanium, vital for India's rapidly growing renewable energy sector. These restrictions jeopardise India's ability to meet its solar power production targets, a malicious attempt to hold India's renewable energy sector hostage.

In addition, China's restrictions on German TBMs (Tunnel Boring Machines) are essential for India's infrastructure projects like metro

construction. India is using these machines to create mountain tunnels to facilitate infrastructure creation in the border areas and even facilitate troop movements along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in times of crisis. The border clashes clearly showed us that crises could occur at any moment. So we have to be ready.

It was clearly in Beijing's national interest to hamstring India's infrastructure development and military preparedness simultaneously. Therefore, when Herrenknecht's, the maker of the TBMs, decided to manufacture TBMs in Chennai, it was a blow that China had not expected because its unofficial export ban fell flat.

However, that was one company; hundreds more want to take a similar route, and India needs to be ready. Chinese actions pose a significant

national security threat to India and its economy. China wants to dominate the manufacturing landscape, and export denial is one of its tools to ensure decoupling is delayed. But for how long? THE DUBAI ROUTE: A TEMPORARY FIX TO A PERMANENT PROBLEM

India has adopted a 'China Plus One' strategy, encouraging companies to diversify their production bases. The Indian government is pushing this approach to mitigate the impact of China's export restrictions. World Bank President Ajay Banga has recommended that India capitalise on this strategy, attracting foreign investment.

The production-linked incentive (PLI) scheme has boosted the smartphone sector, with companies like Apple, Foxconn, Tata Electronics, and Pegatron expanding their local iPhone production. However, most of India's manufacturing machines and minerals still need to be exported from China.

So, what's India doing about it? Some Indian importers have found an ingenious workaround: rerouting shipments through Dubai's Jebel Ali port, effectively outsmarting Beijing's restrictions. This rerouting strategy has allowed Indian businesses to keep critical projects running, from solar power infrastructure to metro systems. The capital goods are now imported into Dubai, where they are either sold or leased to Indian traders and companies, thus bypassing China's direct export restrictions.

Tarnishing Faith And Institutions: Dangerous Game of Victimhood

By Alok Kumar

"What's the point of Kumbh? Kumbh is useless." That's what Lalu Prasad Yadav—the man whose family dreams of a Bharat Ratna for him—thinks. A convict in the fodder scam, currently out on bail, he cannot contest elections himself but has sworn to defeat Modi.

His son, Tejashwi Yadav, meanwhile, believes the Election Commission is a cancer, a threat to democracy. He is convinced that once his government comes to power at the Centre, EVMs will be scrapped. This statement must have left Lalu disappointed. He must be wondering when that government will be formed, when EVMs will be removed, and when his dream of defeating Modi will be fulfilled.

But father and son are seasoned players of political narratives. If Lalu chose to attack faith via Kumbh, it was no accident. And if Tejashwi targeted a constitutional institution like the Election Commission, that too was no mistake.

Now, it is the likes of Manoj Jha—intellectuals with little political acumen—who are scrambling for damage control. No, no, understand the context! he pleads. Lalu was deeply moved by the tragic train accident in Delhi, and his remarks were not meant to target Kumbh.

But Jha conveniently forgets that opposing religious



movements under the pretext of secularism has been the core of Lalu's politics. It is what made him the axis of Bihar's political landscape. Every year, around the anniversary of the Babri Masjid demolition, his 1990 speech goes viral. Back then, Hindu Hriday Samrat LK Advani was riding his Ram Rath into Bihar, and Lalu was restless. When the slogan "Hum kasam Ram ki khate hain, mandir wahin banayenge" echoed in Patna and Advani reached Samastipur, Chief Minister Lalu Yadav decided enough was enough. In the early hours of 24 October, Advani was arrested. A few days later, Atal Bihari Vajpayee withdrew the BJP's support from VP Singh's government, toppling it. A leader who could sacrifice his own government at the Centre will never let go of his political legacy.

LALU IS IN HIS ZONE

One might ask: why has Lalu not changed his politics since 1990? So much has changed since then—especially now that he is out of power and Advani's party has been winning elections one after another. Modi is in his third term, while in Bihar, BJP and Nitish have been winning elections together since 2005. The only time they lost was in 2015, when they were not allied.

But Lalu knows his audience. The same devotees who walk miles with their belongings tied on their heads to take a holy dip at the Sangam are also part of his voter base. Yet he opposes Kumbh. Perhaps Lalu and Tejashwi do not want to repeat Mayawati's mistake. She fiercely opposed Brahminical supremacy in the name of Manuwaad for years, but when she embraced Brahmin shankh bajayega, haathi badhta jayega, she lost her ground. The Yadav father-son duo is well aware that despite Bihar's karsevaks being killed in Ayodhya, and despite a Dalit karsevak, Kameshwar Chaupal, laying the foundation stone of the temple, their core vote bank of OBCs, Dalits, and Muslims remained intact. The Modi wave disrupted caste-based voting equations, but Tejashwi is emboldened by the strong fight he put up in the last elections. Hence, he is quick to seize any opportunity—be it a stampede at Kumbh or one at New Delhi Railway Station.

Race For India's Markets: Why UK And EU Are Scrambling For A 'Trade Deal'

By :Sanbeer Singh Ranhotra

The race is on, the competition is real, and time is running out. The United Kingdom and the European Union are locked in a high-stakes battle—each vying to be the first to sign a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with India. But what's the urgency?

The answer lies in Washington. With Donald Trump back in the White House, the long-touted "transatlantic unity" that defined Western diplomacy for decades has collapsed. The era of predictable alliances is over, and countries that once relied on America's backing are now scrambling to diversify their economic and strategic partnerships. Nowhere is this more evident than in the UK's post-Brexit trade strategy.

THE UK'S GAMBLE

Since exiting the European Union in 2020, the UK envisioned a future in which it could build independent, dynamic trade relationships, free from EU-imposed constraints. That vision, however, has not materialised as smoothly as hoped. Now, with Trump's protectionist policies back in play, London realises that time is not on its side. If trade partnerships weren't secured yesterday, the next best time to build them is now.

That urgency is evident in the UK's latest moves. Just last week, former British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak met with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi,



External Affairs Minister Dr S Jaishankar, and Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal. While the visit might have seemed routine, it was anything but. Sunak reportedly pushed for a swift resolution to the stalled FTA negotiations. The urgency became even clearer when newly elected Prime Minister Keir Starmer sent his Business Secretary, Jonathan Reynolds, to India within days of Sunak's meetings.

The message was unmistakable: the UK wants a trade deal, and it wants it now. But why this desperation? The answer is simple—America's traditional allies can no longer count on the US to uphold old economic arrangements. Trump's return signals an era of increased tariffs, trade

wars, and a shift towards domestic economic priorities. For the UK, this means it must urgently deepen trade ties elsewhere. To that end, no partner is more crucial than India.

THE EUROPEAN UNION'S COUNTERMOVE

The UK, however, is not alone in seeking an FTA with India. As British officials rushed to New Delhi, the European Commission prepared to make its own play. Unlike the UK's delegation, the EU's efforts are being led by none other than Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and her entire college of commissioners. The sheer scale of this diplomatic push underlines the importance Brussels places on securing its own deal

with India.

Such high-level engagements are rare, but the EU's motivations are clear. With the US becoming increasingly unreliable and China posing long-term economic risks, Europe sees India as a critical partner in its strategy to de-risk its supply chains. In other words, India is not just a trade partner—it is an economic lifeline.

The timing of these visits underscores the reality that the UK and EU are in direct competition. If the UK manages to sign an FTA first, it could secure preferential access to India's vast market, setting a precedent that would make EU negotiations more difficult. A UK-India deal would establish a framework that could make it harder for the EU to demand more favourable terms later. For Brussels, that is a risk it cannot afford to take.

THE STICKING POINTS

Despite the flurry of diplomatic activity, the UK-India FTA is still mired in a few key disagreements. The two major sticking points are visas for short-term Indian workers in the UK and India's demand for social security payouts for Indians who have worked in the UK. Both issues remain contentious, having stalled negotiations in previous rounds. This is not the first time the UK has attempted to secure an FTA with India. Former Prime Ministers Boris Johnson and Liz Truss both set "Diwali deadlines" for a deal, only to see those deadlines come and go.

Afghanistan: Why America's War On Terror Failed

By : Dr Abhinav Pandya

The history of the 21st century will be defined by revolutionary geopolitical events, cartographic changes, economic and technological breakthroughs, and shifts in the concepts of sovereignty and territorial integrity. The US-led global war on terror, which began with the ousting of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and the termination of its sovereign status, marked the start of these transformations.

The Bush administration overthrew the Taliban regime and replaced it with the interim government, strongly influenced and controlled by the US. However, after 21 years of bloody counter-insurgency operations, espionage and covert operations, the US failed and struck a deal with the terrorist regime of the Taliban. Within hours after the US forces left, the Afghan government was toppled, and the Taliban returned with all its might. Looking back in hindsight, the Afghan war marked the beginning of the US decline. The start of the US decline essentially forms the basis of today's

most popular geopolitical discourse, i.e., multi-polarisation of the world order, as the Munich Security Conference puts it. This article explores the root causes of the US failure in Afghanistan.

AMERICA'S FAILED AFGHANISTAN



STRATEGY

After the US invasion of Afghanistan, the Taliban were uprooted, and an interim government headed by Hamid Karzai was established. This government included powerful chieftains and warlords from the Tajik, Pashtun, and Hazara communities. Tajik ministers such as Fahim Khan, Engineer Arif, Abdullah

Abdullah, and Amrullah Saleh were largely drawn from Ahmad Shah Massoud's Northern Alliance.

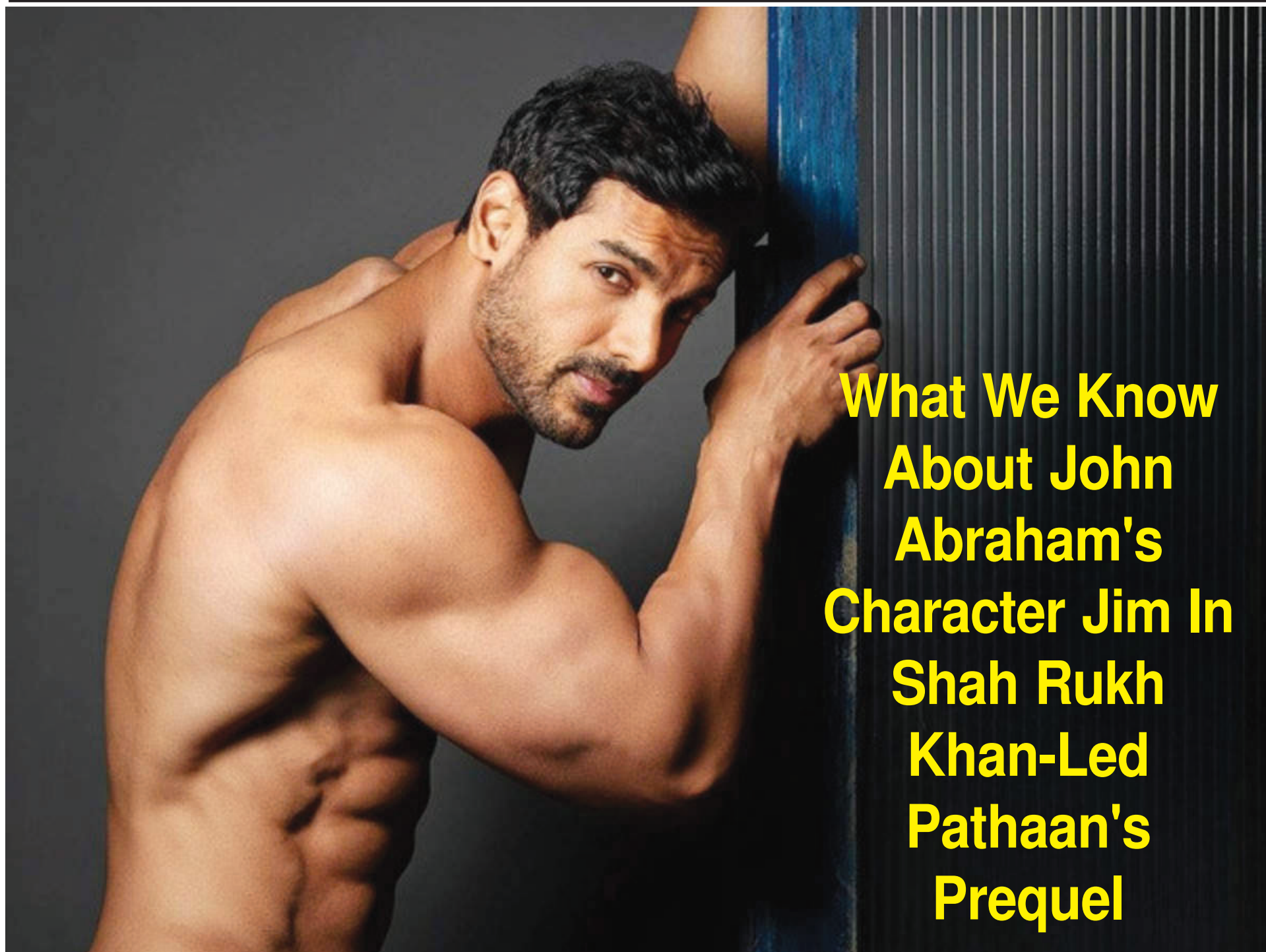
Despite US military and financial support, the Taliban began reviving from 2002 onwards. Their resurgence became starkly evident after 2005, when they started raiding military posts and convoys belonging to ISAF forces, UN agencies, and the US military. After 2005, the Taliban adopted the tactics of Iraqi jihadists and launched an aggressive campaign of suicide bombings

targeting military outposts and convoys. Initially, they deliberately confined themselves to controlling the rural areas of Helmand and the Kandahar region to avoid American pressure. However, from 2010 onwards, they also began attacking urban areas. Eventually, the situation reached a point where the Americans entered negotiations with the Taliban,

granting them diplomatic recognition. They conceded to most of the Taliban's unreasonable demands, including the release of 5,000 hardened jihadists and the exclusion of the Afghan government from the talks. Ultimately, the Americans left in haste, following which the Taliban uprooted the Afghan government within hours.

What led to the colossal defeat and embarrassing withdrawal of the Americans after 21 years of a bloody war and the investment of billions of dollars in warfare, intelligence, development, and Afghan reconstruction?

First and foremost, the US government's fundamental understanding of the conflict was flawed and inconsistent. They attacked Afghanistan on the pretext that the Taliban had sheltered Osama bin Laden and his Al-Qaeda comrades. In their initial thrust, they dismantled the Taliban regime and launched a massive hunt for Al-Qaeda fighters. However, over time, their focus became confined solely to Al-Qaeda.



What We Know About John Abraham's Character Jim In Shah Rukh Khan-Led Pathaan's Prequel

Pathaan was one of 2023's biggest blockbusters, and it also marked the comeback of Shah Rukh Khan after 5 years. The film also had Deepika Padukone and John Abraham in key roles. John plays the role of the antagonist, Jim.

John has now dropped a major hint about a possible

Pathaan prequel, where the storyline will be focused on his character Jim. This has gotten fans all the more excited for what might be in store.

John recently spoke to The Hollywood Reporter and shared the update, "I think he (Adi) gets me right, and hopefully we'll be doing a prequel to Jim before he goes bitter. So

that should be happening."

John and Aditya Chopra have worked together in films like Dhoom (2004), New York (2009), and Kabul Express (2006). The actor also mentioned that unless the story excites him, he does not long to be part of big franchises.

He also shared that he found his character Jim in Pathaan,

quite cool and special.

Shah Rukh Khan's other two films in 2023, was the blockbuster Jawan by Atlee and Rajkumar Hirani's Dunki which received mixed reactions.

On the work front, John Abraham's last film was the action-drama Vedaa, alongside Sharvari Wagh. The film was

directed by Nikkhil Advani.

Abraham is now gearing up for his next film—The Diplomat, which is inspired by the true story of an Indian diplomat. Sadia Khateeb, Revathy, Kumud Mishra, and Sharib Hashmi play key roles in the film. The film is directed by Shivam Nair and will hit the screens on March 7, 2025.

Riddhima Kapoor Sahni On Daughter Samara's Viral Video Of "Pushing" Neetu Kapoor: "The Poor Child Was Only Trying To Pose"

Riddhima Kapoor Sahni, daughter of Neetu Kapoor and late actor Rishi Kapoor, finally opened up about the viral video where her daughter Samara seemingly pushed her nani (grandmother) Neetu Kapoor. The video went crazy viral on February 21 when Neetu Kapoor, Riddhima Kapoor Sahni and Samara posed on the red carpet at Aadar Jain and Alekha Advani's Hindu wedding.

Based on Samara's apparent grumpy face and her hand gestures, the Internet made a conjecture of a rift between Neetu Kapoor and her granddaughter Samara.

Dismissing the Internet's verdict, Riddhima Kapoor told Hindustan Times that her child was

trying to "pose" only. "The whole thing got blown out of proportion. The poor child was only trying to pose. She wasn't upset. She was very excited, so much so that in the car she kept saying that, 'Oh my God, I'm sure there are gonna be photographers and I'm gonna pose like this and that'. "And because the paparazzi were asking us to come together, she just wanted to pose on her own. She didn't push her nani," Riddhima Kapoor added. Riddhima Kapoor also shared that Samara also didn't realize the gravity of online chatter, prompted by her gestures. "She was like 'when did I push her? I was trying to pose myself. I was just trying to extend my arm and get comfortable. I was posing.





Chhaava Box Office Collection Day 12: No Signs Of Slowing Down For Vicky Kaushal's Film

Vicky Kaushal's Chhaava is showing no signs of slowing down. The historical drama has crossed the Rs 350 crore-mark at the box office. On Day 12 (February 25), Chhaava earned Rs 18 crore at the ticket window, as per a report by Sacnilk. With this, the film's total collection now stands at Rs 363.25 crore. Additionally, Chhaava recorded an occupancy rate of 23.74% in the Hindi mar-

ket on its second Tuesday, mentioned the report.

Chhaava, directed by Laxman Utekar, portrays Vicky Kaushal as valiant Maratha ruler Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj. Rashmika Mandanna plays his wife Maharani Yesubai. Akshaye Khanna essays the character of Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb. Diana Penty features as Aurangzeb's daughter Shehzadi Zinat-un-Nissa

Begum. Ashutosh Rana slips into the shoes of Sarsenapati Hambirao Mohite, while Divya Dutta is seen as Soyarabai.

Chhaava is bankrolled by Dinesh Vijan under his banner Maddock Films.

Earlier, Vicky Kaushal shared a heartfelt video on Instagram, presenting the amazing response Chhaava has been receiving from film-goers. In the clip, a young fan was seen crying incon-

solably at the theatres after watching the movie. The kid placed one hand on his chest and chanted Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj's name. Vicky Kaushal's touching side note read, "Hamari sabse badi kamai. (Our greatest earning). Proud of you beta (son)... Wish I could give you a hug. Thank you everyone for your love and emotions. We wished for Shambhu Raaje's story to reach every household in the world...

and to see that happening is our greatest victory." Earlier this month, Rashmika Mandanna heaped praise on her Chhaava co-star Vicky Kaushal. In an interaction with Gulf News, she said, "With Vicky, every day on set, I would think, 'This guy is amazing.' It is so rare to find people like them, and I am really grateful to work with him." Chhaava is adapted from the Marathi novel Chhava by Shivaji Sawant.

Amid Divorce Rumours, Govinda's Wife Sunita Ahuja's Comment On Extra-Marital Affairs Goes Viral

After 37 years of marriage, Govinda and Sunita Ahuja are reportedly heading for divorce. Amid the ongoing reports, an old interview of Sunita has resurfaced online.

During the chat with Hauterrfly, Sunita shared her unfiltered views on extramarital affairs. Sunita said, "Haath jod ke public mein bolti hoon, ladki ko aur biwio ko – zindagi mein apne boyfriend aur husband ko yeh mat bolna, 'Mera boyfriend yaa mera kuch karta nahi.' [I request all the women out there to never tell your boyfriend/husband, 'He

doesn't do anything.]"

She continued, "Karega na toh itni buri tarah, sorry for my language, itna buri tarah h**ta hai, itni buri jagah hu**ga na, nikalte-nikalte 2 saal lag jaayenge, lekin vo s**li nikalegi nahi. Ap life se nikal jaoge, lekin nikalti nahi hai vo item. [Because when he does, he will mess up so badly – sorry for my language – he will sc**w up in such a terrible way that it will take two years just to clean up the mess. But that mess would not go away. You might exit from his life, but the other woman will never leave.]"

In the past few days, several reports have suggested that Govinda and Sunita Ahuja's marriage has been going through a rough patch. It is rumoured that the couple has been living separately for some time now.

Speculation about Govinda and Sunita's relationship troubles gained momentum after Sunita Ahuja shared personal details in a few recent interviews.

In a conversation with Hindi Rush, Sunita Ahuja was asked about Govinda's romantic side. To this, she laughed and said, "I have told him that in my next life,



Preity Zinta hits back at Kerala Congress over 'fake news' of getting her Rs 18 cr loan 'written off' by BJP

Preity Zinta has lashed out at Kerala Congress over accusations of getting her loan written off by BJP. Preity shot back with a fierce response after the Congress party's social media handle from Kerala made accusations at the Dil Chahta Hai actress. The Congress Kerala's social media handle alleged that the actress got her Rs 18 cr loan written off for giving her social media handle to BJP.

What Congress Kerala wrote "She gave her social media accounts to BJP and got 18 cr written off and the bank collapsed last week. Depositors are on the streets for their money," the tweet from the official handle of Kerala Congress claimed.

What Preity responded

The dimpled beauty called the tweet a 'fake news' and added that the said loan was paid fully almost a decade back. "No, I operate my social media accounts myself and shame on you for promoting FAKE NEWS! No one wrote off anything or any loan for me," Zinta wrote.

The Dil Se actress further commented, "I'm shocked that a political party or their

representative is promoting fake news & indulging in vile gossip & click baits using my name & images. For the record, a loan was taken and FULLY PAID BACK - over 10 years ago. Hope this clarifies and helps so there are no misunderstandings in the future (folded hand emoji)."

Preity's previous post

The controversy comes barely a few days after Preity had expressed strong disbelief over people becoming cynical. She added that if one appreciates the PM, they are termed as 'bhakts'. She further said how if one is a proud Hindu, they are labelled as 'Andh bhakt'.

"What's happening to people on social media? Everyone has become so cynical. If one talks about their first chat with an AI Bot then people presume it's a paid promotion, if you appreciate ur PM then you are a bhakt & god forbid, if you are a proud Hindu or Indian then ur an Andh Bhakt! Let's keep it real folks & take people for who they are & not who we think they should be! Maybe we all need to take a chill pill and just be happy to communicate with each other," Zinta had tweeted.



Alia Bhatt shares her first attempt at cooking her favorite food



Actress Alia Bhatt, on Thursday, ventured into the kitchen and attempted to cook her favorite dish for the first time.

Sharing the experience with her fans, the actress gave a glimpse into her culinary experiment, showcasing her love for food and her willingness to try something new. In her latest vlog, Bhatt stepped into her mother Soni Razdan's kitchen to learn the secret to her signature Mac and Cheese recipe. The heartwarming video, shared on the actress' Instagram, showed an intimate moment between the mother-daughter duo, offering a glimpse into their culinary bond.

In the clip, Alia could be heard telling her mom, "Hi, welcome back. Mama, I am learning how to cook; what's wrong with you? You are teaching me." Sharing the video, the 'Dear Zindagi' actress wrote, "First attempt at my favourite food—ft. Mama dearest." In the

video, Alia also humorously breaks the whisk while cooking. Before diving into the recipe, Alia recalled how she and her sister, Shaheen Bhatt, grew up relishing Soni's classic dishes, which the veteran actress continues to cook today for her granddaughter, Raha. Alia shared how these meals were an essential part of their childhood, and now, she's eager to carry forward these cherished recipes. The video ended with Bhatt teasing her fans, sharing that she and her mother will be making Apple Crumble next and will reveal the recipe in their upcoming video. Meanwhile, earlier in the day, the 'Gangubai Kathiawadi' actress gave a glimpse of what she calls her "favorite kind of chaos." She posted a photo from her makeup room, where she was seen surrounded by a team of professionals working on her hair. Alongside it, Alia wrote, "My favourite kind of chaos."