



Licence to Kill Joy

Licensing issues are disrupting content consumption in social media and streaming platforms

DEEP DIVE >> 5

magazine

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ED to Now Press for Speedy Trial in Delhi Excise Policy Case

Having arrested Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal and BRS leader K Kavitha, the Enforcement Directorate (ED) is likely to push for commencement of trial in the Delhi excise case after filing chargesheets against the two. **Raghav Ohri** reports.

Bharat Ratna for Ex-PMs, 2 Others Posthumously

President Droupadi Murmu on Saturday conferred Bharat Ratna on former prime ministers PV Narasimha Rao and Chaudhary Charan Singh, agriculture scientist MS Swaminathan and former Bihar CM Karpoori Thakur, posthumously.

'MS, OpenAI Plan \$100b Supercomputer Project'

GETTING FUTURE-READY Biggest AI supercomputer Stargate, which will be built as part of data centre project, is likely to be launched in 2028

Reuters
Microsoft and OpenAI are working on plans for a data centre project that could cost as much as \$100 billion and include an artificial intelligence supercomputer called "Stargate" set to launch in 2028, The Information reported on Friday.
OpenAI did not immediately respond to Reuters' requests for comment.
Rapid adoption of generative artificial intelligence technology has led to sky-rocketing demand for AI data centres capable of handling more advanced tasks than traditional data centres.
The Information reported that Microsoft would likely finance the project, which is expected to

be 100 times more costly than some of the biggest existing data centres, citing people involved in private conversations about the proposal.
The proposed US-based supercomputer would be the biggest in a series of the companies are looking to build over the next six years, the report added.
"The Information attributed the tentative cost of \$100 billion to a person who spoke to Altman about it and a person who has viewed some of Microsoft's initial cost estimates. It did not identify those sources.
Altman and Microsoft have spread the supercomputers across five phases, with Stargate as the fifth phase. Microsoft is working on a smaller, fourth-phase supercomputer for OpenAI to

Data Safe House

Microsoft, OpenAI are looking to build supercomputers over the next 6 years

Supercomputers have been spread across phases



Two cos are in the middle of third phase

Stargate, the biggest one, will be rolled out in 5th and last phase

New project will be designed to work with chips from different suppliers

be launched around 2026, according to the report.
Microsoft and OpenAI are in the middle of the



third phase of the five-phase plan, with a significant portion of the cost for the next two phases involving acquiring the needed AI chips, the report

said.
AI chips are often sold at high prices. Chip company Nvidia CEO Jensen Huang told CNBC earlier in March that the latest "Blackwell" B200 artificial intelligence chip will be priced between

\$30,000 and \$40,000.

Microsoft had also announced a duo of custom-designed computing chips in November last year. The report said the new project would be designed to work with chips from different suppliers.

"We are always planning for the next generation of infrastructure innovations needed to continue pushing the frontier of AI capability," a Microsoft spokesperson said in an emailed statement to Reuters. The spokesperson did not comment directly on the report about the planned launch of the Stargate supercomputer.

Expenses for the plan could exceed \$115 billion, more than triple Microsoft's expenditure last year on capital spending for servers, buildings and other equipment, the report stated.

COMPLAINTS FILED WITH EQUAL EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITY COMMISSION

American Techies Allege Bias for Job Loss at TCS

Say H-1B visa holders hired to replace them; IT co calls charges meritless, misleading

Our Bureau

Bengaluru: A group of American software engineers, who claim to have lost their jobs to lower-paid Indian workers at IT major Tata Consultancy Services, has triggered the latest fracas in the episodic battle between India's high-profile software exporters and US workers who have long accused these firms of "discriminating" in favour of overseas engineers.

Since December 2023, nearly 22 Americans have filed complaints with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) accusing TCS -- India's largest software exporter -- of terminating their employment on short notice and replacing

In Eye of a Storm

22 US techies have accused TCS of bias over hiring of Indian visa workers since Dec 2023

They have filed complaints with EEOC accusing T firm of terminating their employment on short notice



TCS, Infosys recruited 6,000 in 2021-22
In 2024, H-1B applications jumped more than 50% to over 700,000

them with lower-paid Indian immigrants holding temporary work visas, the Wall Street Journal reported on Friday.
The EEOC is responsible for enforcing federal laws that prohibit discrimination against job applicants or employees based on race, colour, religion, sex, age, disability, or genetic information.
People in the know of the matter told ET that the "concerned employees were terminated af-

ter going through a performance improvement plan (PIP). And the termination was purely on their performance and cannot be categorised as discrimination."
Even as the Tata Group subsidiary termed the latest allegations as "meritless and misleading", the flare-up has turned the spotlight firmly on the fractious issue of US H-1B work visas for foreign skilled workers.

Stringent Checks & Balances >> 7

ALTERNATIVE FUEL TECH TO PUSH SUSTAINABILITY

In the Green Race, Auto Cos Hop on Powertrains

Lijeep.Phillip@timesgroup.com

Mumbai: Carmakers in India are increasingly navigating a mix of powertrain technologies from petrol to hybrids to electric, driven by policy initiatives, tougher emission norms and changing customer preferences, among others.

Automakers said alternative fuel technologies such as electric, hybrids, compressed natural gas (CNG), biogas and flex fuel need to coexist with traditional fuel options of petrol and die-

sel to support the transition to cleaner and more sustainable transport options.

"This fragmentation has led to different auto companies dominating different emerging segments even as most automakers have a sizeable portfolio of petrol and diesel models.

Maruti Suzuki, for example, leads in CNG and hybrids but has no presence yet in electric while homegrown Tata Motors leads in electric vehicles (EVs) and has a strong presence in CNG but lacks hybrids, data collated by Jato Dynamics show.

'Complex Interplay' >> 7

Powertrain Type	Estimated volumes (FY24)	Maruti	Hyundai	Tata	Mahindra	Kia
ICE	3,033,145	14	9	7	7	3
CNG	618,459	14	3	4	-	-
BEV	103,499	-	2	4	1	1
Mild Hybrid	435,366	6	-	-	3	-
Active Hybrid	91,984	2	-	-	-	-
Total	4,282,453					

Source: Jato Dynamics

DoT asks Telcos to Stop USSD Call Forwarding

The Department of Telecommunications (DoT) has asked telecom operators to deactivate USSD (unstructured supplementary service data)-based call forwarding service from April 15 in a bid to curb fraud and misuse. Mobile users avail of the USSD service by dialling codes on their keypads. >>> 3

'Meta Can't Stall Reopening of Privacy Probe'

Meta Platforms cannot delay the US Federal Trade Commission from reopening a probe into alleged privacy failures by its Facebook unit while the firm pursues a lawsuit challenging the agency's authority, a US court ruled on Friday. Meta had not shown its challenge was likely to be successful, the court said. >>> 7



Many Hues, One Easter Basket

A woman sorts coloured and decorated Easter eggs ahead of the Christian holiday in Arbil, the capital of Iraq's autonomous Kurdistan region, on Saturday.

TAXPAYER-FRIENDLY MOVE

Nod of Top CBIC Officials a Must for GST Probe



The indirect taxes body has made prior approval of high-ranking officials of the level of Principal Commissioner or above mandatory for any goods and services tax investigation, search or questioning in cases concerning big industrial houses or multinational corporations or related to sensitive matters having national implications. The Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs, firmed up Saturday, also allowed taxpayers to approach designated officials of the rank of principal commissioner in case of a grievance in a probe. The move comes following a directive from FM Nirmla Sitharaman to the CBIC board to adopt a more taxpayer friendly approach. >>> 3

BONDING EXERCISE

Brands Latch on to Snapchat Lingo with Gen Z in Mind

Snappy engagement tools are prompting more cos to use social messaging app in ad strategies

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Chennai: Consumer brands in India focusing on Generation Z are increasingly including Snapchat in their advertising strategy, as they look to use the appeal of the platform's filters and visual-first approach to nudge buyers in this age group to spend more.

Although Instagram and YouTube remain the platforms of choice for mass digital advertising, Snapchat is increasingly becoming the social messaging app that brands are using to focus on Gen Z, or people in the age group of 12 to 27 years.

"I see more and more brands which are targeting Gen Z utilising Snapchat in their advertising strategies, especially brands like Tira, Lakme and MamaEarth," Srikant Rajasekharuni, CEO and co-founder of Red Matter Technologies (RMT), told ET.

India has Snapchat's largest audience. In May last year, Snapchat had said its monthly active users in the country had topped 200 million. India

also leads as the country with the largest Snapchat advertising audience, ahead of the US, Pakistan, France, and the UK, according to WARC's latest platform report. "Snapchat has emerged as one of the best platforms to reach out to Gen Z in a captivating manner, not just for impressions sake but because of all their engagement tools, such as filters, which is why it is becoming more important in the media and advertising mix of brands," Rajasekharuni said.

Expanded Base >>> 7



Schooling Fin Agents on 'Saving Money' Takes Poll Position

Institutions advise business correspondents on rural trails not to carry cash beyond ₹50,000 to avoid seizure by cops, election officials

Sugata.Ghosh@timesgroup.com

Mumbai: Far from the world of electoral bonds and chatter of cities, the men and women who carry cash from distant villages, riding two-wheelers along dusty roads, often run into over-zealous poll officials and suspicious cops who seize the money.

Despite identity proofs and proper documents, like a letter from a bank or micro-lending firm, to back the legitimacy of their cargo, the cash could be confiscated. The money, once proved genuine, would be released only later, at the intervention of the court or a senior government official.

No one wants to deal with such harassment -- neither the financial institutions nor their field agents and 'business correspondents' (BC) who collect cash from villagers paying loan EMIs. Sometimes, though, the arrangement may not be all that kosher if dodgy

agents choose to carry unaccounted cash or act as couriers of political parties while on official duty. So, to avoid delays, inconvenience, and a brush with the law, field officials and BCs are being told to put on their best behaviour, besides being "strongly discour-

aged" to carry cash beyond ₹50,000 during the weeks of election. While unlike others, these agents are technically allowed to move more money (given the nature of their business), it is difficult to put across the point to a flying squad of cops and election officers who are

clueless of the micro-lending business model. "Sometimes, they just don't listen or understand. That's because they are unaware of how BCs and MFI people work. So, agents may have to carry less cash, do multiple trips," said a senior person of a large BC firm which works with multiple banks and lenders.

As part of a 'standard operating procedure' of Microfinance Industry Network (MFIN), an organisation that works with regulators and stakeholders to promote micro-finance, the agents are being reminded to refrain from politically sensitive comments.

Document Checklist >>> 7

Dos and Don'ts

SOP tells field officials to

Avoid travelling in any political party vehicle and identifying with any party

Refrain from politically sensitive comments

Carry ID, self-KYC, acknowledgement of the copy of the letter to the Chief Election Officer



BC, MFI field agents help in financial inclusion

The cash they carry is loan repayment

DELHI EXCISE POLICY CASE

Kejriwal and Kavitha in Custody, ED to Now Press For Speedy Trial

Significantly, AAP is likely to appear as accused in upcoming chargesheet

Raghav.Ohri@timesgroup.com

New Delhi: Having arrested Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal and BRS leader K Kavitha, the Enforcement Directorate (ED) is likely to push for trial in the Delhi Excise scandal after filing charge sheets against Kejriwal, Kavitha and co-accused, said people in the know.

The federal agency will soon file its prosecution complaint (equivalent of a charge sheet) against Kejriwal, Kavitha, co-accused and is likely to seek commencement of trial. Significantly, Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) is likely to appear as an accused in the upcoming chargesheet, said people in the know.

In that eventuality AAP will become the first political party to be arrayed as an accused in a case of Prevention of Money Laundering

(PMLA). Earlier, SC had recorded 'assurance' given by CBI and ED that trial in excise case will be concluded within six to eight months

As reported by ET on January 7, ED will invoke Section 70(1) of PMLA to make AAP an accused in the case.

As per the section: "Where a person committing a contravention of any of the provisions of this Act or of any rule, direction or order made thereunder is a company, every person who, at the time the contravention was committed, was in charge of, and was responsible to the company, for the conduct of the business of the company as well as the company, shall be deemed to be guilty of the contravention and shall be liable to be proceeded against and punished accordingly."

The federal agency, in its remand paper, had alleged AAP is the major



Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal in New Delhi on Thursday—Rajesh Mehta; BRS leader K Kavitha (R)—File photo

FIRST PARTY AS ACCUSED

AAP will become the first political party to be arrayed as an accused in a case of PMLA if it is charged by ED

beneficiary of the proceeds of crime generated in the Delhi liquor scandal. Part of the proceeds of crime to the tune of ₹45 crore (approx) has been utilised in the election campaign of AAP for Goa assembly in 2022... In this manner, AAP has committed the offence of money laundering through Arvind Kejriwal and the offences are covered by Section 70 of the PMLA.

People in the know added that the agency is likely to push for commencement of trial so that it can be concluded within a short period. "The objective is not just to keep the investigation open but to kick-start the trial so that the accused can be convicted", said a senior government official on the condition of anonymity.

It might be mentioned here that the Supreme Court while dismissing Delhi's former Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia's bail plea, had recorded the "assurance" given by the investigating agencies- CBI and ED- that the trial in the Delhi excise policy scandal will be concluded within six to eight months.

NOT CROSS-QUESTIONED WITH ANYONE: GEHLOT

ED Questions Delhi Minister Kailash Gahlot

Our Political Bureau

New Delhi: The Enforcement Directorate (ED) on Saturday questioned Kailash Gahlot, Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) leader and Delhi's transport minister, in connection with the state's liquor policy case.

People in the know said Gahlot was part of the group of ministers that gave directions to Delhi's excise department to restructure the state's excise policy. People in the know said Gahlot was questioned about his connection with Vijay Nair, AAP's then communication-in-charge and a co-accused in the case.

According to the ED, Nair was residing in the official bungalow allotted to Gahlot. After his questioning, Gahlot told reporters that he was residing in his private residence in Vasant Kunj and Nair was living in the bungalow allotted to him.

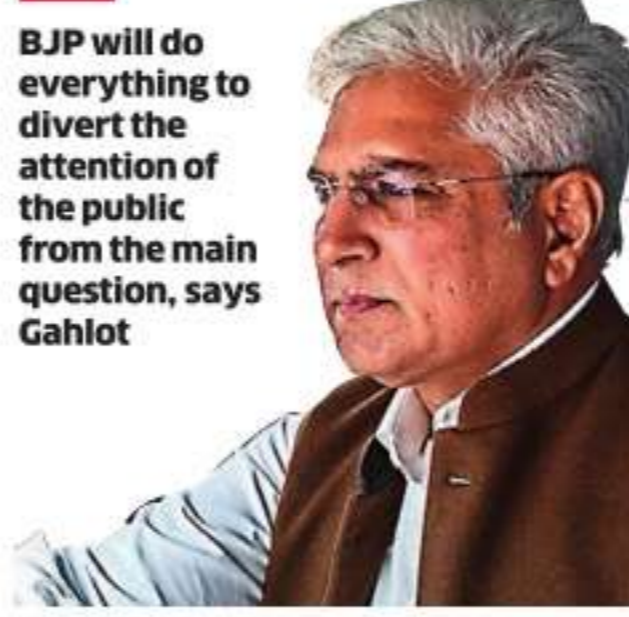
Gahlot claimed that he was not cross questioned with anyone. Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal is currently in the custody of the ED for alleged involvement in the case. He will be produced before a local court on April 1.

Gahlot told reporters that he was never part of the Goa election campaign.

"The BJP will do everything to divert the attention of the public from the main question. The BJP has not yet answered why Shri Chandra Reddy, the prime accused, was given bail in this case. We all know that several raids were conducted but it could not show even one small piece of paper as recovery for evidence," said the Delhi Minister.

Earlier this month, in its first remand paper, the ED had described Kejriwal as the "kingpin and key conspirator" in the excise policy case.

BJP will do everything to divert the attention of the public from the main question, says Gahlot



AT RASHTRAPATI BHAVAN

Prez Confers Bharat Ratna on Ex-PMs, 2 Others Posthumously

New Delhi: President Droupadi Murmu on Saturday conferred Bharat Ratna on former prime ministers P V Narasimha Rao and Chaudhary Charan Singh, agriculture scientist M S Swaminathan and former Bihar chief minister Karpooi Thakur, posthumously at the Rashtrapati Bhavan.

The country's highest civilian honour to Rao, Singh, Swaminathan and Thakur was received by their kin.

"As the ninth prime minister of India, P V Narasimha Rao led far-reaching economic reforms. Earlier in his youth, he had taken an active part in the freedom struggle, especially against the misrule and oppression in the Nizam-ruled Hyderabad.

Former PM Chaudhary Charan Singh's grandson Jayant Chaudhary—ANI

MS Swaminathan's daughter, Nitya Rao, accepting the honour from Prez

Karpooi Thakur's son, Ram Nath Thakur, accepting award from Prez

Former PM Chaudhary Charan Singh's grandson Jayant Chaudhary—ANI

Our Political Bureau

He was known for his command over several languages and literature," the Rashtrapati Bhavan said in a post on X. On behalf of Rao, Bharat Ratna was received by his son P V Prabhakar Rao.

On behalf of Chaudhary Charan Singh, Bharat Ratna was received by Jayant Chaudhary, his grandson Singh, a Jat leader from western Uttar Pradesh, was prime minister between July 28, 1979, and January 14, 1980.

On behalf of former Bihar CM Karpooi Thakur, Bharat Ratna was received by his son Ramnath Thakur.

Bharat Ratna was also conferred upon agriculture scientist M S Swaminathan posthumously. Swaminathan's daughter Nitya Rao received the award.

FOR OPPOSITION RALLY TODAY



Former Jharkhand chief minister Hemant Soren's wife, Kalpana Soren, with Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal's wife, Sunita Kejriwal, in New Delhi, on Saturday—PTI

On behalf of former Bihar CM Karpooi Thakur, Bharat Ratna was received by his son Ramnath Thakur.

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Former PM Chaudhary Charan Singh's grandson Jayant Chaudhary—ANI



Ansari Laid to Rest in Home Town Amid Tight Security

Our Political Bureau

Lucknow: Gangster-turned-politician Mukhtar Ansari was buried in his native town Yusufpur amid tight security on Saturday with tens of thousands of supporters and locals turning up for the funeral procession.

Ansari's mortal remains had been brought from Banda to Ghazipur late on Friday night and were placed at his family house in Yusufpur in Mohammadabad. He was laid to rest in his ancestral Kali Bagh burial ground.

There was heavy deployment of police and paramilitary forces to ensure the funeral took place without any untoward incident. The police had to struggle a bit to contain the hordes of people who wanted to enter the cemetery to offer soil to the grave as part of rituals.

Ghazipur MP and Mukhtar's older brother Afzal Ansari, too, appealed to people to maintain peace. Ghazipur district magistrate Arayaka Akhaur said the funeral was videographed and action will be taken against those who raised slogans since the Model Code of Conduct was in place.

Overall, the funeral took place peacefully.

The writer is a former Director General, Election Commission of India

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THIRD EYE

Carrying Paper by Plane

There was a lot of confusion in the Samajwadi Party over the candidate from Rampur and Moradabad Lok Sabha seats. On March 27, the last date for nomination, the party finally decided to field Mohibullah Nadvi of Jama Masjid, Parliament Street, Delhi. On the last day, a chartered plane was booked to send the nomination form from Lucknow to Moradabad. From Moradabad, it was taken by road to Rampur.

Fear of Wife!

So, looks like everyone is scared of their wives. Recently at a media event Maharashtra deputy CM Devendra Fadnis proved the same. Amruta Fadnis, Devendra Fadnis's wife, had once revealed how her husband used to leave home in disguise to meet Eknath Shinde during the latter's rebellion. Fadnis later said that his wife's remark had caused problems for him politically and added in jest that only if he could put a cello tape on her mouth, but said that he does not have the courage to do so.

Brand Ambassador for Pork

Assam agriculture minister Atul Bora's love for pork is such that he can have a kg a day, he says. Bora, who is also the president of Assam Gana Parishad, declared that he can be made brand ambassador of pork meat. Interestingly, the Assam cabinet recently has approved the policy for commercialization of the poultry sector. The policy will bridge the demand-supply gap in the state's poultry products, thereby reducing dependency on imports and ensuring a stable, affordable supply for the people of Assam. The interventions include facilitating access to finance, strengthening infrastructure development, enhancing quality standards, and promoting research and development.

ASKS PM, BJP TO CLEAR AIR ON 'AIR INDIA SCAM' CHARGE

Cong Questions CBI Clearance for Patel

Our Political Bureau

New Delhi: The Congress has questioned the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) closing a case against Praful Patel in the BJP-alleged irregularities in leasing aircraft for Air India, alleging that the former civil aviation minister is being let off for joining the ruling alliance after splitting NCP.

The main opposition party has re-cycled BJP's 2014 election material, alleging a "Rs 30,000-crore Air India scam" and blaming Patel for it, and asked Prime Minister Narendra Modi to come clean on his past statements against the UPA regime over the alleged "Air India scam" as well as BJP's allegations against Patel over purchasing a Mumbai property allegedly from terror accused Iqbal Mirchi's family.

"Months after Praful Patel joined the BJP alliance in Maharashtra by splitting NCP, the CBI filed a closure report in a 2017 case of corruption, alleged by the BJP in its 2014 'Chargesheet'," Congress leader Pawan Khara said at an official briefing here on Saturday.

In the document, BJP had said, "This whole scam is approximately Rs 25,000-30,000 crore."

The CBI investigation had alleged



FILE PHOTO

that in 2006, Patel abused his position as the union aviation minister to lease several aircraft for five years to Air India to benefit private players, Khara said. "Not only this... In 2019, BJP made some vile allegations against Praful Patel claiming that 'he was involved in a property deal with 1993 Mumbai bomb blasts accused Iqbal Mirchi'. We ask, what happened to that ludicrous allegation, now?"

At the press briefing, AICC displayed a washing machine and a packet of washing powder and made a mock show of how leaders facing corruption charges were laundered of the charges once they sided with BJP and named 21 leaders as examples including Himanta Biswa Sarma, Narayan Rane, Praful Patel, Ajit Pawar, Chhagan Bhujbal, and Ashok Chavan.

BJP LASHES OUT AT CONGRESS FOR MISLEADING PEOPLE ON I-T

Cong Got Cash From Nath: Govt Sources

Our Political Bureau

New Delhi: Income-tax department searches in April 2019 revealed that Congress party received crores of rupees in cash from Megha Engineering and party leader Kamal Nath among other government insiders alleged.

The total receipts in cash by the main opposition party between 2013-14 and April 2019 was to the extent of Rs 626 crore, they claimed.

Cash receipts from Megha Engineering were for contracts awarded to the company, the sources alleged.

"The cash from Kamal Nath was from an alleged corruption scam run by him, which involved collection of bribes from a number of people including senior bureaucrats, ministers and businessmen, they alleged.

The I-T department has established and corroborated these cash receipts in multiple ways such as documents found during search, WhatsApp messages and statements recorded, the government sources claimed.

BJP on Saturday criticised Congress for disregarding I-T rules and misleading the public when actions were taken accordingly.

"After the high court rejected the Congress petition, they resorted to demonstrations to spread falsehoods," party spokesperson Zafar Islam



FILE PHOTO

said. He emphasised that ever since Congress received the notice from the income-tax department for the payment of tax, they have been in a state of panic.

After all the reassessments before March 31, 2024, the liability of the Congress party will likely increase from Rs 1,823 crore to approximately Rs 4,000 crore, Islam said.

He said the I-T department provides all the necessary documents outlining the discrepancies leading to the imposition of additional taxes.

"Congress ignored the matter initially and didn't take cognizance and when rebuked by the high court, Congress started protesting," Islam said. "I want to know whom Congress is protesting against, whether it's the income-tax department or the high court," he added.

There was heavy deployment of police and paramilitary forces to ensure the funeral took place without any untoward incident. The police had to struggle a bit to contain the hordes of people who wanted to enter the cemetery to offer soil to the grave as part of rituals.

Ghazipur MP and Mukhtar's older brother Afzal Ansari, too, appealed to people to maintain peace. Ghazipur district magistrate Arayaka Akhaur said the funeral was videographed and action will be taken against those who raised slogans since the Model Code of Conduct was in place.

Overall, the funeral took place peacefully.

The writer is a former Director General, Election Commission of India

Showing Red, Yellow Cards Early Ensures Fair Poll Play



Akshay Rout

On March 16, hours after the announcement of the Lok Sabha polls, the Election Commission directed the central and state governments to remove unauthorised political advertisements from public spaces. On March 20, the Commission, following reports of non-compliance, asked for confirmation of full compliance by 5 pm the next day. This would suggest the narrow window and urgency that election managers had, that other stakeholders may fail to appreciate.

FAST ACTION

On March 18, the EC transferred the home secretaries of Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh

and the Director General of Police in West Bengal. Several DMs and SPs belonging to four states were transferred on March 21. One witnessed a spate of such transfers during the recent series of five assembly elections.

THE CRITICAL CODE

These directives mark the coming into effect of the model code of conduct (MCC). In six decades of its existence, the code constructed by the consent of political parties, has become the face of the conduct of elections. Some provisions may have the backing of the law. The code exercises moral authority to keep campaign behaviour on track. Often, the EC is judged by the way it enforces this code.

Besides spelling out the desired conduct for parties and candidates, and seeking to stop hate speeches, caste or religious appeals, criticism of private life, the code stipulates conduct for meetings, processions, and polling days. It now includes guidelines on election manifestoes, asking for more credible promises

after concerns over freebies.

LEVELLING THE FIELD

A sizeable part of MCC applies to the party in power. Ministers cannot combine official work with electioneering. There can be no grants or announcements, no ad hoc appointments, no foundation stones laid and no undue preference in guest houses and hiring of public facilities. The Cabinet secretary and state chief secretaries have been asked to make sure that official vehicles are not used for political activity, and photographs of political functionaries removed from official websites. By deflating the official apparatus attached to a minister, the attempt is to make him an equal, and not more than equal.

The Election Commission prides itself on having zero-tolerance against any damage to the level playing field. Action has been taken against a Union minister from Karnataka for alleged MCC violation. The Commission directed immediate stoppage of delivery of WhatsApp messages to the public on the

Centre's Viksit Bharat campaign. This week, it put two seniors in the biggest two national parties on notice, for reported comments affecting dignity of women. This should be an assurance to those worried about the advantage of the party in power.

DELIVERED IN STATE POLLS

EC notices to two top-ranking leaders during state polls had an effect. One of them was a chief minister

CITIZEN VIGILANCE

The EC has come up with cVigil or citizen vigilance mobile application that supports recording, reporting and resolving complaints of model code violations and about distribution of freebies, cash, li-

quor, etc. Complaints are legally sustainable and can remain anonymous. In 10 days since the model code came into force, over 53,000 complaints have come through cVigil and most of them disposed of. In the last five assembly polls, 48,300 violations were reported through the application, 21,500 of which were for putting up posters without permission. Others were for campaigns during ban period, hate speech, unauthorised use of speakers and vehicles. Over 5,800 complaints were related to the distribution of liquor, money and freebies. More than 80% of these cases were resolved within the 100-minute timeline promised by the EC. The Commission has been seeking citizen collaboration through this platform to prevent election misconduct.

WORDS FAIR AND FOUL

Politicians are often skilful demagogues; they resort to allegations, satire, sarcasm, and innuendo in building a discourse that triggers people. The MCC that disallows provocative statements and abusive language becomes easy casualty in the process. The Commission has noticed trends "destabilising the decorum of political discourse". Surrogate or indirect violations have emerged as bigger worries than direct violation. Earlier this month, after studying the pattern of past MCC violations, the Commission warned political parties against such surrogate means.

The writer is a former Director General, Election Commission of India

Businesses Must Build a Stronger and Inclusive India: Ambani



MUMBAI Reliance Industries chairman Mukesh Ambani on Saturday said the business community has the responsibility to build a stronger and more inclusive India.

Addressing an event organised by the Gems and Jewellery Exports Promotion (GJEP) here, the chairman and managing director of Reliance Industries also exuded confidence that the industry will reach its goal of touching \$100 billion in exports in the next few decades. "All of us collectively in the business community have a responsibility to build a stronger, better and more inclusive India to fulfil the vision and the goal that our PM has set for us, that of a Viksit Bharat, a fully developed India in the next decades," he said.

Ambani congratulated the gems and diamonds industry for the work they have done over the past few decades to reach \$40 billion in exports and create over 50 lakh jobs in the country. —PTI

DoT Asks Telcos to Deactivate USSD-based Call Forwarding Service from Apr

Our Bureau

New Delhi: The Department of Telecommunications (DoT) has asked telecom operators to deactivate USSD (unstructured supplementary service data)-based call forwarding service from April 15 in a bid to curb fraud and misuse.

"It has been decided by the competent authority that all licensees shall discontinue the existing USSD-based call forwarding services with effect from 15.04.2024 till further notice," DoT said in a recent notice.

This follows growing reports of fraudsters convincing mobile phone users to activate call forwarding to other phone numbers through the USSD service, so as to be able to steal confidential information, such as one-time password (OTP). "All existing subscribers who have activated USSD-based call forwarding service may be asked to reactivate call forwarding services through alternative methods to ensure that such services are not activated without their notice," it said.

Mobile users avail of the USSD service by dialling codes on their keypads. It is often used for checking prepaid balance or the IMEI (international mobile equipment identity) number.

The service can also be used for activating unconditional call forwarding services, which DoT said is being misused for unwarranted activities.

Enabled by AI, Phishing Becomes Quite Simple

Cyber attacks are increasingly getting the better of people and their emotions as more fall prey to hackers

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Mumbai: Nitin's attempts to schedule an appointment with a doctor he had found online had proved fruitless. He had almost given up on the phone numbers that had popped up in the online search, when he received a call.

"The person claimed to be from the doctor's office and asked him to download a mobile application (app) and fill his personal details to complete the appointment process. Before Nitin realised that something was amiss, he had lost ₹47,000 from his savings bank account. He had been 'phished'.

Such online attacks—called 'phishing'—that rely on human interaction, are on the rise. They are easy to execute and are getting increasingly sophisticated because of the use of artificial intelligence (AI). Also called 'social engineering attacks', these practices don't require complex hacking and rely on psychological manipulation of human emotions. Phishing is the most common

Only Principal Commissioners or Higher Officials can Probe into GST, Other Sensitive Matters: CBIC

Apex indirect taxes body also allows taxpayers to approach designated officials of principal commissioner's rank in case of grievances

Our Bureau

New Delhi: The Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs (CBIC) has made prior approval of high-ranking officials of the level of principal commissioner or above mandatory for investigation, search or questioning in GST (goods and services tax) related matters concerning large industrial houses, multinationals and those with national implications.

In the guidelines, finalised on Saturday, the apex indirect taxes body also allowed taxpayers to approach designated officials of the rank of



principal commissioner in case of a grievance in an investigation. ET has seen a copy of the guidelines.

The move follows a directive from finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman to the CBIC board to adopt a more taxpayer-friendly approach and minimise possible instances of harassment. Industry has, in the recent past, repeatedly flagged growing instances of harassment under GST.

Tax officials must take prior written approval of the zonal principal chief commissioner, if they have to initiate investigation or action under GST in matters that are already before the GST Council.

"In case the reasonable grievance persists, the (Principal) Commissioner may consider meeting, by appointment, the taxpayer," according to the guidelines, a copy of which is with ET.

Prior written permission has also been mandated in matters of interpretation seeking to levy tax on any sector, commodity or service for the first time, whether in central excise or GST.

In matters concerning interpretation of the law, the zonal principal chief commissioner will have to make a reference to the policy wing of CBIC before the earliest due date of issuing show cause notice.

"Each investigation must be initiated only after the approval of the Principal Commissioner," CBIC said in the guidelines.

The guidelines also state that an investigation initiated must reach a conclusion at the earliest and not later than one year. In case there isn't sufficient evidence, the officials must file a closure report. "It is not necessary to keep investigation pending till limitation in law approaches," the apex indirect taxes body said.

The guidelines were prepared after taking into account complaints and suggestions from the taxpayers.

MAHARERA RECOVERS ₹125 CR IN LAST 14 MONTHS

Realtors' Bank Details Set to be Included in Recovery Warrants

Move expected to alleviate financial burden on homebuyers who have suffered delay

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Mumbai: The Maharashtra Real Estate Regulatory Authority (MahaRERA) has decided to make it mandatory for real estate developers to include their bank account details in the recovery warrants forwarded to the revenue department to enhance the efficiency of compensation recovery processes.

This strategic measure is expected to alleviate the financial burden on homebuyers who have faced delays or discrepancies in their property transactions, the authority said.

The move will help streamline identification and attachment of property developers' bank accounts by the revenue department, facilitating the retrieval of their owed compensation.

By mandating the disclosure of developers' bank account information, MahaRERA said it aims to bolster accountability and ensure timely restitution for affected parties within the real estate sector.

The move assumes significance in the backdrop of homebuyers across the country raising concerns regarding non-compliance

or delay in enforcement of recovery orders issued by the authorities against defaulting developers.

MahaRERA has recovered over ₹125 crore from defaulting property developers as compensation for homebuyers in the last 14 months. This takes the total recovery by the real estate regulator to over ₹160 crore and makes it the only regulator in the country to recover quantum of such dues.

In January 2023, MahaRERA had appointed a retired additional collector to recover compensation on behalf of troubled homebuyers.

The regulator has so far recovered nearly ₹160 crore linked with 237 complaints in 117 real estate projects. It has issued 1,095 warrants seeking to recover a total ₹661.15 crore.

From across the state, the highest number of warrants were issued to developers of projects in the suburban Mumbai district. A total of 434 warrants from 114 projects have been issued to recover ₹298 crore. So far, ₹71.06 crore has



been recovered through 75 warrants related to 40 projects.

Pune is the second highest with 239 warrants to recover ₹181.49 crore from 123 projects. Out of these, 55 warrants worth ₹38.90 crore from 35 projects have been recovered, the authority said.

When misconduct is suspected, the regulator conducts thorough hearings involving all relevant parties and subsequently issues directives to developers to reimburse or refund the required amount, including interest, within a specified timeframe.

When the developer fails to comply with these orders and defaults on compensation payments, the intervention of the district collector's office is required to ensure the retrieval of the outstanding sum.

Under Section 40(1) of the Immovable Property (Regulation and Development) Act, 2016 and Provisions of Maharashtra Land Revenue Act, the collector's office has the power to recover the arrears. Hence, the recovery warrants are sent to the concerned collectors' office.

Net Leasing of Office Space up 44%

NEW DELHI Net leasing of office space rose 44% annually in this quarter across eight major cities on higher demand from corporates for expansion of their businesses, according to Cushman & Wakefield. According to data released on Saturday by real estate consultant Cushman & Wakefield (C&W) India, the net leasing of office space stood at 115.14 lakh (11.5 million) square feet (sq ft) during January-March as against 80.09 lakh (8 million) sq ft in the year-ago period. "This is the third-highest level recorded in the last five years, demonstrating a robust appetite for office space among businesses," the consultant highlighted.

Net absorption or leasing rose in Bengaluru, Mumbai, Delhi-NCR and Chennai but fell in Pune, Hyderabad, Kolkata and Ahmedabad. "We haven't witnessed 20 million square feet of gross leasing being recorded for two consecutive quarters in recent history. This strong performance may signal a shift and has the potential to become the new standard for the Indian market," Anshul Jain, CEO—India & Southeast Asia at C&W, said.—PTI

Vikram Aggarwal in Talks to Buy Chennai's Clarion Hotel for ₹180 cr

Sobia Khan & Anumeha Chaturvedi

Bengaluru | New Delhi: Prominent Chennai hotelier Vikram Aggarwal is in advanced stages of acquiring a three-star Clarion Hotel in Chennai in a deal estimated to be valued at approximately ₹180 crore, two people familiar with the matter said.

The Clarion Hotel President, situated on Radhakrishnan Salai Road near the city centre and Marina Beach, has 129 rooms.

The transaction is set to be finalised in June, they told ET.

"The acquisition involves the purchase of a stressed asset from one of the top banks in the industry," one of them said.

VVA Hotels Pvt Ltd, a prominent hospitality firm led by Aggarwal, confirmed that it was in the process of acquiring the property but declined to comment on the size of the deal.

It currently manages two upscale hotel properties in Chennai—Fortune Select Palms, a business hotel with 129 rooms in the IT corridor of suburban Chennai, and Radisson Blu, a five-star hotel in the city.

The hospitality industry witnessed hotel transactions worth ₹3,290 crore in 2023, as per data shared by JLL Hotels & Hospitality Group.

Nihat Ercan, CEO of APAC at JLL Hotels & Hospitality Group,



FILE PHOTO

told ET last year that India should see a year-on-year increase in hotel investments this year.

The Indian hospitality sector continued to experience year-on-year growth in performance in the quarter ended December, driven primarily by a substantial increase in the average daily rate (ADR) of 14.6%, compared with a year earlier, according to JLL's Hotel Momentum India (HMI) Q4 2023 report.

As per JLL, the momentum from the last quarter is expected to carry forward into 2024, supported by the wedding industry, corporate and social MICE demand, and the growing significance of religious tourism.

Business travel is also anticipated to rebound by the end of the first quarter of 2024 as companies hold their year-end meetings.

CURBING UNHEDGED EXPOSURES

New RBI Norm Could Affect Exchange-Traded FX Derivatives

Bloomberg

Mumbai: India's central bank is said to have confirmed that exchange-traded currency derivative contracts linked to the rupee can only be offered for hedging purposes after confusion that unhedged trades were allowed for positions below \$100 million.

The regulator clarified to the Commodity Participants Association of India (CPAI) in a March 28 email that anyone undertaking such contracts involving the rupee without an underlying exposure would be in violation of foreign exchange rules, according to people familiar with the matter. They asked not to be identified as the email isn't public.

CPAI had written to the Reserve Bank of India seeking clarification on its January 5 circular that said stock exchanges may offer contracts for the "purpose of hedging contracted exposure."

The circular stated that positions up to \$100 million are allowed without having to establish underlying exposure across all currency pairs involving the rupee and combined across all stock exchanges. Still, those entering exchange-traded currency derivative, or ETCD, contracts must show proof of a corresponding unhedged exposure if asked.

The move could potentially lead to a large loss of volume in a growing segment of the nation's foreign exchange market. Brokers in the currency futures sector say speculators and arbitrageurs form a large part of the market and the current understanding was that underlying exposure wasn't required for trades up to \$100 million.

The central bank's original rule in 2008 said ETCD contracts can be undertaken to "hedge an exposure to foreign exchange rate risk or otherwise." The cen-



REUTERS

tral bank in its clarification said the rules were revised in 2014, according to the people.

The new rules come into effect on April 5.

RBI didn't immediately respond to a emailed request for comment outside of normal business hours.

"We genuinely feel derivatives market includes many, including hedgers, speculators and arbitrageurs," said CPAI President Narinder Wadhwa. "We are in talks with the authorities including RBI, SEBI and the finance ministry," he said.

Average daily turnover in currency futures stood at ₹41,290 crore (\$5 billion) in FY23 compared with ₹10,290 crore in FY17, National Stock Exchange of India data showed. The daily average in FY24 dropped to ₹29,630 crore, based on data till the end of February.



AFP

A Swiss Desert

Thick sand dust blown in from the Sahara brings a yellowish appearance to the sky above the vineyard terraces of Lavaux, on the banks of Lake Geneva, on Saturday. According to models used by meteorologist Roman Brogli, quoted by Switzerland's Keystone-ATS news agency, an exceptional quantity of sand dust reaching some 180,000 tonnes has arrived over Switzerland



ANIRBAN BORA

Who Moved My Monument?

Shantanu Nandan Sharma

In the bustling enclave of Kotla Mubarakpur, Kanchan Ranjan has not heard of Inchla Wali Gumti, a relic from Delhi's medieval past. A musician of a local band, Ranjan, 62, says he was born and brought up there, an urban village sandwiched between two upmarket pin codes of the capital city—South Extension and Defence Colony.

"I remember seeing a greater number of monuments here in my childhood. The houses then had just one or two floors. It is quite likely that such a gumti (guardhouse) must have been encroached upon and razed to the ground," he says, before guiding this correspondent through the alleys to two 15th century gumbads or tombs. The frenetic expansion of Kotla Mubarakpur is palpable, with balconies of some buildings standing perilously close to walls of Gol-protected monuments such as Kala Gumbad (tomb of Kale Khan) and Mubarak Shah's tomb.

Earlier this month, the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) began the process of delisting 18 untraceable monuments, including the gumti in Mubarakpur, a kos minar (a Mughal-era highway milestone) in Gurgaon, a copper temple in Arunachal Pradesh, a 12th century temple in Rajasthan and a banyan grove in Varanasi with remains of ancient buildings.

While the mysterious disappearance of monuments is bound to spark concern, a big question surfaces on how to safeguard India's historical treasures amid chaotic urban development and inadequate and lopsided allocation of funds.

In a notification dated March 8, ASI said these monuments had "ceased to be of national importance", inviting feedback on any objections to this classification. While the custodian of India's heritage has not explicitly stated that the notification was related to missing monuments, there is ample evidence, including past statements in Parliament, that suggest how all these 18 monuments plus possibly a handful of more relics are untraceable on the ground.

ASI has delisted 18 untraceable monuments—from a minar in Gurgaon to a copper temple in Arunachal. How can archaeological treasures be protected amid chaotic urban development and inadequate allocation of funds?

UNPROTECTED SITES

According to ASI's records quoting the Gazette of India, Calcutta, Inchla Wali Gumti, for instance, was declared as a protected monument over a century ago—in March 1918. While 15 of the 18 monuments on the list have been protected from pre-Independence period, the rest—two fort inscriptions, one each in Jaipur (Rajasthan) and Satna (Madhya Pradesh), and a temple at Baran in Rajasthan—were classified as protected monuments only in the 1950s.

"Is ASI supposed to excavate, or is it supposed to protect? Can it hope to accomplish both objectives simultaneously? If the answer is yes, does ASI possess adequate human and financial resources for protection? Clearly not," says Bibek Debroy, a history buff and chairman of the Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister (EAC-PM).

An EAC-PM report "Monuments of National Importance: Urgent Need for Rationalization", released last year, highlighted several problems "plaguing" the current list of National Importance (MN). The issues, the report indicates, include minor monuments and movable antiquities find-

ing berths on the list, plus inadequate and geographically skewed expenditure on the upkeep of monuments. The report is co-authored by EAC-PM member and writer Sanjeev Sanyal.

India had 3,697 MNI, protected by ASI and funded by the central government under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, 1958 (amended in 2010), according to Union Minister for Culture G Kishan Reddy's reply in Rajya Sabha in December last year. The number is now 3,679, as shown in ASI's website, as 18 are "missing" and have been declassified.

Based on 2019-20 data, the EAC-PM report calculated that the budgetary allocation for conservation, preservation and environmental development "works out to a paltry sum of ₹11 lakh per MNI." It then adds another dimension: distorted allocation of funds for some states. "Compounding the problem of inadequate allocation and expenditure is the issue of imbalance in geographical distribution of funds for the protection of monuments," the report adds, highlighting how the city of Delhi with 173 monuments receives more allocation than Uttar Pradesh with 745 monuments and Maharashtra with 286 monuments.

ET's questionnaire to ASI has remained unanswered at the time of going to press.

LOST PAST

Aditya Pratap Deo, historian and associate professor in St Stephen's College, Delhi, says it is hardly a mystery that haphazard urbanisation has a role in the disappearance of select monuments of national importance. "How do monuments go missing? Whom to blame? The role of ASI has been rather myopic, inadequate and weak," he says, arguing that India needs "a robust, decentralised, foresighted, open-minded, professional-minded and consultative ASI".

Regarding funds, did GoI allocate money for monuments that didn't exist on the ground? There is no ready answer to this though various surveys and audit reports in the past have confirmed one thing: ASI does not have a foolproof database of monuments that they protect.

Back in 1998-99, an ASI survey found that as many as 35 monuments were missing on the ground. But there was no significant follow-up to this intriguing piece of statistics until 2013 when the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) decided to physically inspect 1,655 of those monuments. What it

found out was startling: as many as 92 protected monuments were missing.

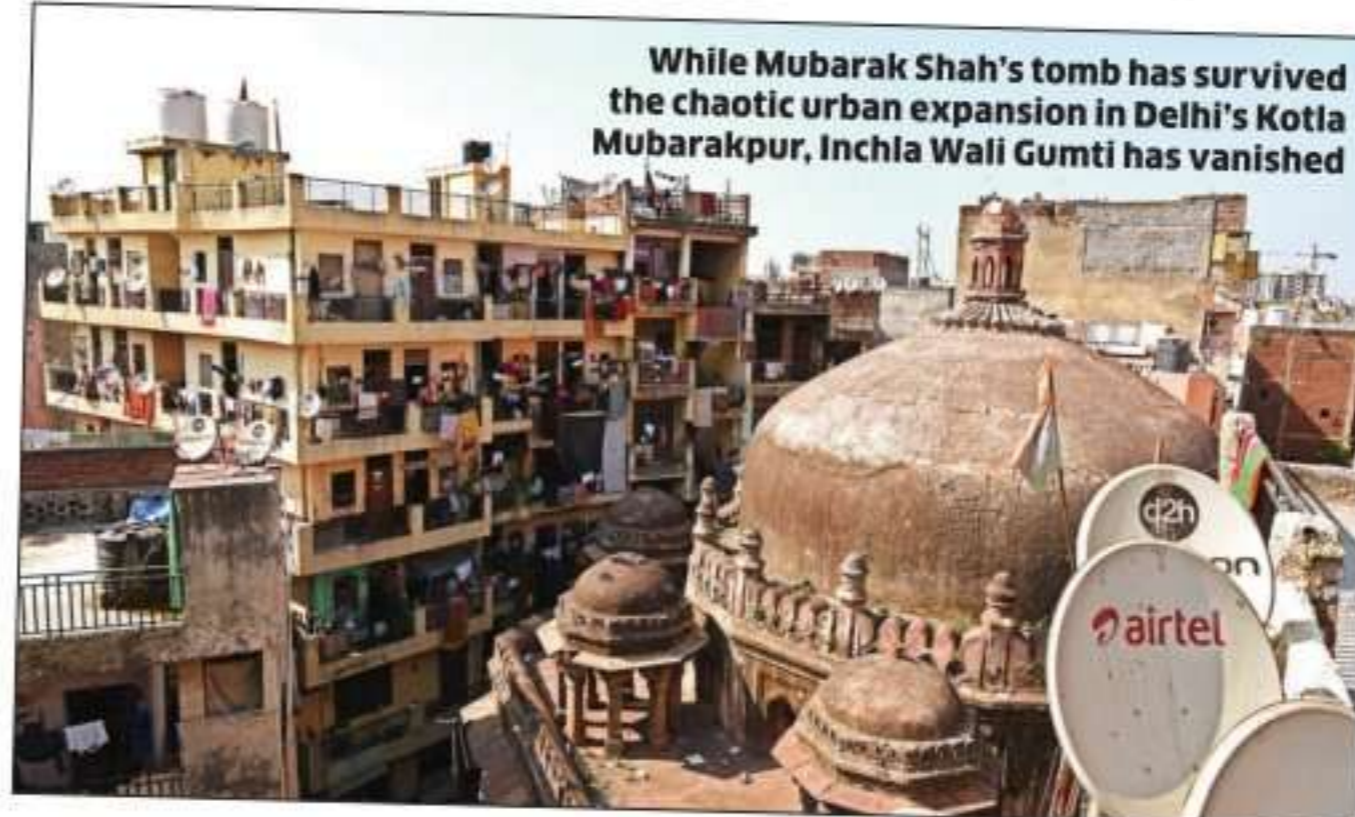
In a scathing report, CAG said ASI did not have a reliable database of protected monuments under its jurisdiction. "During our inspections, we found that 131 antiquities were stolen from various monuments/sites and 37 antiquities from site museums. However, the efforts of the ASI to retrieve these items were completely ineffective," the national auditor said in its report.

The CAG report further noted encroachments in around 546 centrally protected monuments, with 46 encroachers being none other than government departments or agencies. For instance, the Municipal Council of Bharatpur in

Sanjib Kumar Singh, former archaeologist and current director of Ram Katha Museum in Ayodhya, says the problem is not lack of laws and regulations. He cites some instances to argue that ASI does move court against encroachments. "Very often courts allow the status quo in these cases. So, encroachments continue for decades. To my mind, special courts should be set up to expedite heritage-related cases. Also, citizens need to understand that we must keep heritage alive," he says.

According to ASI's data shared in Rajya Sabha in December last year, it allocated ₹380 crore to 24 states and Union territories in 2022-23 for conservation, preservation and environmental development of MNI. Out of that, Uttar Pradesh secured ₹64 crore, up from ₹16 crore in 2018-19, a four-fold rise in four years. The allocation tripled for Madhya Pradesh and doubled for Maharashtra during the same period. The money earmarked for Delhi plateaued at around ₹30 crore.

According to Debroy, protecting monuments is not something the government alone can do. "We need to figure out a



While Mubarak Shah's tomb has survived the chaotic urban expansion in Delhi's Kotla Mubarakpur, Inchla Wali Gumti has vanished

ASHWANI NAGPAL, VARANASI SARHU

Rajasthan encroached upon a moat surrounding a fort wall to build a drain.

The ministry of culture, however, contested some of the findings of CAG. In a written reply to a Rajya Sabha question on December 18, 2013, the then Union culture minister Chandresh Kumar Katoh listed 14 monuments from cities such as Hyderabad, Delhi and Lucknow as "monuments affected due to rapid urbanisation and completely encroached upon," adding that these should not be treated as "missing". According to the minister, only 24 of 92 monuments categorised as "untraceable" by the CAG were indeed missing. Some were submerged under reservoirs but were technically traceable. All the 18 monuments, which the ASI downgraded earlier in March, figure on this list of 24 missing monuments.

In August last year, the GoI informed Rajya Sabha that 74 monuments (out of 92) were "traced".

way to tap corporate interest in our history, heritage and culture," he adds.

Can there be a sincere effort from India Inc to cherish and maintain the nation's cultural heritage? Chairman of RPG Enterprises Harsh Goenka says corporate India with its organisational capabilities can do a lot more for the country's heritage sites. "Adopt A Heritage is a welcome initiative by ASI which opens an avenue for corporates to collaborate with the government through the CSR (corporate social responsibility) route," he says. "A cleaner, safer and more engaging heritage site will draw higher footfalls which will in turn create greater economic activity around it."

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LOST FOUND. LOST.

1998-99 An ASI survey found 35 monuments missing on the ground

2013 CAG's performance audit said 92 Monuments of National Importance (MNI) were missing

2016 GoI informs Rajya Sabha that only 24 MNI have remained untraceable

Jan 2023 EAC-PM lists 24 missing MNI in a report

Aug 2023 GoI informs Rajya Sabha that 74 monuments out of 92 have been traced

THE MISSING EIGHTEEN

- Copper Temple, Arunachal Pradesh
- Kos Minar No.13, Gurgaon, Haryana
- Kos Minar, Karnal, Haryana
- Inscription in Bachhaun fort, Satna, MP
- Barakhamba Cemetery, Imperial City, Delhi
- Inchla Wali Gumti, Kotla Mubarakpur, Delhi
- A 12th century temple, Kota, Rajasthan
- Inscription in Fort, Nagar, Rajasthan
- Kutumbi area 13/16 nalis, Almorah, Uttarakhand
- A banyan grove with traces of ancient buildings, Varanasi, UP
- Closed Cemetery Katra Naka, Banda, UP
- Gunner Burkill's Tomb, Rangoon, UP
- Cemetery, Gaughat, Lucknow, UP
- Cemeteries, at mile 6.8, Jahraila Road, Lucknow, UP
- Tombs, Lucknow-Faizabad, Lucknow, UP
- Remains of three small linga temples, circa 1000, Mirzapur, UP
- Telia Nala Buddhist ruins, Varanasi, UP
- Tablet on the Treasury Building, Varanasi, UP

Source: ASI, CAG, Rajya Sabha, EAC-PM

The Original Green Drivers

The early adopters of electric cars in India are still passionate about EVs and sustainability

Lijee Philip

Saumya Prasad, an ecologist, had been happily driving around Dehradun in an e2o, Mahindra's first electric car that was launched in 2013, for years. Then one day, in late 2022, three of the cells in his battery pack gave away. The company no longer supported the spares Prasad needed to fix the vehicle. The 46-year-old made a decision few would. He hired a truck to move the vehicle all the way to Bengaluru where Zarryl Lobo, an e-car aficionado, had what she needed. The old-generation electric cars can be repaired by replacing individual cells that have degraded within the pack, unlike the new EVs whose battery packs are completely sealed.

"From Lobo, I got the cells that matched my car," says Prasad. The entire process, including hauling the car to Bengaluru and back, cost her more than ₹1 lakh. But she was soon back to driving in the hills and has clocked more than 14,000 km in her done-up vehicle. Prasad has taken a precaution as well. She has installed an active cell balancer, which reduces the chance of an individual cell degrading. With this, Prasad believes she can drive her e2o for another 10-15 years. Cars, she says, should be driven for as long as they are drivable. It is a belief many early adopters of e-mobility share.

In Bengaluru, Anand Vedula, a 38-year-old engineer, has been an e-driver all along—he started with an e-bike and followed it up with an e2o in 2016. He did not give up his electric car even when his residential society did not allow it to be charged on the premises. He charged the car at a relative's place a few blocks away. Not only is an electric car low on maintenance, Vedula says his small car is best for slow-speed driving in Bengaluru traffic.

"The running cost works out to be less than a rupee for a kilometre," he says. However, the battery needs replacement and he is hopeful that Lobo, again, will help.

Lobo is one of the few people who collect parts from scrapped electric cars and refurbish them. His Xtra Reinforced Plastics is the destination for many early e-drivers when their old vehicles run into trouble. Lobo started servicing Reva cars in 2016, and e2o in 2018. He has serviced close to 300 cars.

Prasad and Vedula belong to a close-knit community of early electric car owners who aren't willing to trade their old vehicles or beliefs for a fancy new four-wheeler.

Some stick to their old electric cars even when they buy new ones. Gurgaon-based Sanjay Gupta, 60, is a pilot who has a small

fleet of EVs. He bought his first electric car, Reva, way back in 2002. In 2005, he upgraded to Reva i. In 2013, he bought the e2o, powered by lithium-ion battery. Last year, he bought the BYD Atto 3 and this year a Tata Punch.

MISSION ZERO EMISSION

The early EV owners are deeply interested in sustainability. It was their growing concern about climate change and the ecological impact of conventional vehicles that pushed them to be among the early adopters of electric mobility. "Electric vehicle is the future. It will drastically bring down our dependence on crude oil," says Gupta.

Ranjan Ray—an architect who relocated from Delhi to Bhubaneswar a couple of years ago as his kid suffered from breathing issues

due to the air pollution in the capital city—knows the importance of a clean environment. He is an early adopter of the e2o. About a decade ago, he wanted to buy a small environment-friendly car. Then the only option was the two-door e2o, which cost upwards of ₹8 lakh. Luckily, Mahindra came out with a scheme where one paid for the car upfront, with a monthly rental for the battery over the next five years. "So, I paid ₹5.5 lakh for my first e2o and ₹1.8 lakh over five years to Mahindra that took the entire responsibility of the battery," he recalls. Later Ray would team up with PlugInIndia, a community of EV users, to design RE:CHARGE, India's first app to locate charging stations. Ray says health and well-being of the people around him are paramount and EVs make it possible.

The early adopters took the plunge, trusting the technology, and formed communities to serve as brand ambassadors. They have provided valuable feedback on how to make products better for real-world use, paving the way for the mainstreaming of EVs, says Vivek Srivatsa, chief commercial officer, Tata Passenger Electric Mobility, the largest player in the electric PV space.

If the early adopters fuelled the initial spike in EV sales, many price-sensitive consumers have been generally slow to make the transition and pay a premium over ICE vehicles.

Atul Gopal, a Pune-based teacher, says some early adopters of EVs are often not worried about price and are willing to compromise on features for the sake of sustainability. Gopal bought a second-hand e2o for ₹7 lakh when a new car was priced at ₹8 lakh.

KV Suresh, a 70-year-old consultant engineer from Noida, bought his e2o in December 2013. It was billed from Bengaluru for ₹8.7 lakh. At that point, he could have got a Suzuki



RANJAN RAY, 44, architect
Has a Tata Nexon EV and two e2o

"Health and well-being of people are paramount and EVs make it possible"

Dzire petrol for ₹5.5 lakh. Since then, he has clocked close to 1.6 lakh km, with the original battery pack. "I have had no major issue with the car. Regular service and a suspension overhaul have kept it going. My last visit to the service station was in late 2021," says Suresh.

Gopal, who is part of PlugIn, says parts of scrapped cars are sold at cheap rates. This helps EV owners as many of their cars develop issues with battery and onboard chargers over the years. However, many of them know their way around their vehicles and can take care of minor issues. When the onboard charger of Prasad's car developed a snag, she fixed it herself.

Industry watchers say electric vehicles are beginning to make economic sense. Now there is price parity between electric and ICE vehicles which will fuel the purchase of electric PVs and increase their penetration, which is now a mere 2%.

The Indian market is shifting from early adopters. People are choosing EVs as their primary vehicle, marking the maturity of the ecosystem, says Srivatsa.

Now it is not just the eco-conscious who are going for EVs. The vehicles are technologically superior than many conventional cars and provide better comfort and acceleration.

Too Much on ASI's Plate

Protecting monuments can't be left to govt alone. We need to figure out a way of tapping corporate interest



BY INVITE

BIBEK DEBROY
Chairman, Economic Advisory Council to the PM

The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) proposes that 18 monuments should cease to be "nationally important". The background is the 1958 Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, which allows the Union government to declare some monuments and archaeological sites as "national". Once this is done, responsibility for protecting it devolves on the Union government. For others, under the seventh schedule, there are always state governments.

In June 2022, a Rajya Sabha Standing Committee submitted a report to Parliament. According to this, there are 3,693 centrally protected monuments and 4,508 state-protected ones. Obviously, a country with such a rich historical heritage should have many more. But there is also the other obvious question. Does declaring a monument as "national" ensure protection? Other than the Standing Committee's report, there are two others—CAG's 2013 performance report and EAC-PM report of January 2023.

ASI WAS SET UP IN 1861. IS IT SUPPOSED TO EXCAVATE, OR IS IT SUPPOSED TO PROTECT?

These establish:

(1) Despite being declared "national", some monuments are "lost". No one knows where they are, though after CAG's trenchant critique, ASI recovered some "lost" ones. They were found. When the EAC-PM report was being drafted, I sent off one of our young researchers (KR Jayasimha, a coauthor of that report) on a wild goose chase to track down Barakhamba Cemetery in Delhi. He failed and this cemetery is on that list of 18. It remains lost.

(2) There is no rationale behind describing something as "national". For instance, a tablet on a treasury building in Varanasi was described as a "national monument". It has vanished too and is on the list of 18.

Movable antiquities also become "monuments". Without thinking about it, colonial era lists were simply implanted. Examples are graves and cemeteries of many British soldiers and officers. Ditto for grave and cemeteries of dynasties that ruled from Delhi before the British. Hence, in the present list, there is geographical bias, with Uttar Pradesh accounting for the bulk. There are Kos Minars too, which marked out a distance of one krosah along the Grand Trunk Road. Some have vanished, others will, as national highways expand. The point is, should these be national monuments?

All three reports underline the need for rational and objective criteria to classify a monument as "national", implicitly reviewing the existing list. One hopes ASI's March 8, 2024, notification is the thin end of the wedge to do precisely that.

(3) All three reports highlight ASI's inability to adequately protect a monument, once it has been declared as national. If this cannot be done in Delhi, imagine what happens elsewhere. On a tangential note, there has been smuggling of cultural artefacts from India, often from ASI sites. Since 2014, several stolen idols have been returned.

(4) ASI was set up in 1861. Is it supposed to excavate, or is it supposed to protect? Can ASI hope to accomplish both objectives simultaneously? If the answer is yes, does ASI possess adequate human and financial resources for protection? Clearly not. It is easy to argue that ASI's revenue streams can be augmented through higher ticket fees and events. Even if this is done, it may not suffice. Perhaps the answer lies in empowering the National Monuments Authority. Today, this has a very ambivalent and ambiguous relationship with ASI. In the last resort, protecting our monuments is everyone's responsibility. It is not something the government (in this case the Union government) can do alone. We need to figure out a way of tapping private, and even corporate interest, in our history, heritage and culture.



ANAND VEDULA, 38, engineer
Has an e-bike, Yo Speed, from Electrotherm and a Mahindra e2o

"The running cost of my car works out to be less than a rupee for a kilometre"

It won't be difficult to achieve a penetration of 5%, says Chetan Maini, the man behind India's first electric car, Reva. "We are seeing a shift from early adopters. Even smaller cities are throwing up the numbers," he says.

A recent McKinsey report sheds light on the factors propelling the growing interest in EVs among consumers. Environmental impact takes centre stage, followed by lower cost of total ownership and reduced engine noise, as key benefits of an EV. This attests to a shifting consumer landscape in the ownership of automobiles where sustainability ranks among the top criteria in purchase decisions.

Despite the increasing consumer demand for sustainable options, challenges such as range anxiety, limited charging infrastructure and high initial costs persist. The difficulties were greater when the original green drivers began their journey and yet nothing could faze them.

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SANJAY GUPTA, 60, pilot
Has a Mahindra e2o, Tata Punch, BYD Atto 3

"EV is the future. It will drastically bring down our dependence on crude oil"



ILLUSTRATION: ZAHID

Shephali Bhatt

Paromita Deb Areng is frustrated with the content consumption experience on digital platforms. Recently, someone told her that the sound in one of her Instagram Reels was not working. Areng, a beauty products consultant from Pune, had used a trending audio clip from Instagram's music library to enhance her video's reach. "Instagram offered to replace the now unavailable song on the app, but the new audio failed to update as well," says the 43-year-old. Muting audio ended up silencing her voice in the video, thus impeding its reach. Areng says this problem isn't unique; many creators are avoiding library audio for this reason. Her frustration extends to streaming services. Unable to find older Korean dramas on Netflix, she subscribed to another streaming service, Viki, only to find those shows "unavailable in our region". She was surprised to encounter geo-restrictions especially since the Korean government recently declared India the biggest market for Korean content last year. Areng has since come to understand that these issues are due to complications in licensing agreements with content producers that grant platforms the right to publish content they do not own. However, that awareness doesn't necessarily ease her exasperation. "You feel short-changed because you are willing to pay to consume content legitimately and yet are being forced to look for alternatives that often expose your system to security risks." She makes a valid argument. At least 46% of users of virtual private network (VPN) globally opt for it to access streaming services, and 26% do it specifically to access region-locked entertainment, as per a report from Forbes Advisor published in August 2023. Eight years ago, when global streaming services like Netflix and Prime Video arrived in India, they promised access to a vast and continuously expanding content library. The "digital video-on-demand" branding created an unrealistic expectation that the content would be universally and permanently available. Over the years, snippets from popular international shows circulating on social media have only fuelled the craving for diverse content. Ironically this very desire has now shattered the illusion of seamless access as licensing-led curbs increasingly constrain users trying to watch anything and everything in the cloud. Similarly, music's pivotal role in social media content has inadvertently exposed people to the vagaries of licensing disputes in the music industry, which end up restricting the use of songs on platforms like Spotify and Instagram.

We have deals across the music community in more than 150 countries. However, our partnerships are always subject to change and our library of licensed music may shift as a result"
SPOKESPERSON OF META

OTT BORDERS

As a result, a growing number of users are expressing discontent with their consumption experience. "It's annoying that I can't do Prime Video Watch Party with my friends in India even when I'm in the country, just because I have a US-registered Prime account," says Anmol M, a 27-year-old software engineer based in San Francisco. In the US, he watches *Koffee With Karan* on Hulu because Hotstar isn't available there. However, the show airs on Hulu a day later, he says, by which time his friends back home have already seen and made memes out of it. A decade ago, when Anmol moved overseas, there wasn't a lot of content from India that he followed. "Very little existed in the first place," he says. But now, he experiences FOMO for Indian content. Some Indians abroad, like Soumya Wadhwa, compile a list of shows to watch during visits back to India due to this fear of missing out. "I

Kill Joy

From songs that stop playing to shows that refuse to stream, licensing issues are disrupting content consumption in social media and streaming platforms

How Users Are Impacted

MUSIC

► Certain songs don't play on audio-streaming apps in some regions

► Some pieces of music from Instagram's audio library do not play in certain regions

► Film songs in a web series stop playing when music licence expires

CONTENT

► Various seasons of a show are available on different OTT platforms

► Different dubbed versions of a movie are available on different OTT platforms

► Old shows and movies leave platforms after licence expiry

► Shows are unavailable to watch in certain countries due to geo-restrictions

Licence Numbers

45% Share of watch time for Netflix in H1 2023

Source: What We Watched: A Netflix Engagement Report, Dec 2023

\$9 bn Licensing fee paid by Spotify to music labels and publishers in 2023

Source: Spotify annual report "Loud & Clear"

26% Share of users who use VPN globally to access region-locked entertainment

Source: Forbes Advisor, 2023

3-5 years Period for which licensing rights to new movies are generally given to a streaming platform

Source: Streaming platforms and film producers

IT'S BUSINESS Why do platforms operate like this, you ask?

The short answer: It's nothing personal, just business. "Around 80% of content rights, excluding those of major studios and their projects, are handled by sales agents," says GK Tirunavukarasu, CEO of ProducerBazaar, a content IP rights exchange marketplace. "Producers distribute their movies through these brokers, who then allocate different licences to several players in different territories for varying prices. It's more beneficial for them to sell individual rights rather than in bulk."

Dealing with content in both domestic and international markets involves at least 40 IP rights, including gaming rights, dialect rights, sequel rights, among others. "If the producer isn't clued in to who is acquiring which rights where, it can lead to chaos [read: legal notices and lawsuits] due to the legalities of adhering to each contract," adds Tirunavukarasu.

Entertainment lawyer Priyanka Khimani highlights how new services often are either clueless or feign ignorance about content licensing costs. She cites homegrown short-video platforms from the post-TikTok ban era, some of whom neglected music licensing payments until labels took legal action.

In 2023, Spotify paid \$9 billion to music labels and publishers in licensing fees, according to its annual report, "Loud & Clear". Khimani, who specialises in media rights, says much of the behind-the-scenes efforts contributing to this figure often escape the general audience. "Disputes between artists, labels and third parties cause delays in closing deals, which could potentially result in takedowns and song unavailability on platforms like Spotify and Instagram. Failure to arrive at a deal can result in catalogues being taken down from a platform, like it happened with Universal Music Group that has removed almost its entire cata-

logue from TikTok recently," she adds. An instance of content licensing issue that can escape the viewer is the use of third-party music in films and OTT shows. For instance, in Season 3 of an ALTT show, *Dil Hi Toh Hai (2020)*, several Sony Music tracks that were featured prominently in some episodes initially, seem to have been replaced with instrumental music, even though the characters are still lip-syncing to songs like "Hawayein" and "Say Shava Shava". This could have happened due to a gap in coverage of rights or changes to ownership of the music. Emails to ALTT, formerly ALTBalaji, and Sony Music did not elicit a response till press time.

Negotiations for music licensing occur across platforms and labels in various territories, with no standardised rates, relying solely on relationships and track record. "It's truly the Wild West," says Khimani. Instagram has now started flagging audio affected by licensing changes. In an email, a Meta spokesperson tells ET, "We have deals across the music community in more than 150 countries... However, our partnerships are always subject to change and our library of licensed music may shift as a result."

Movies are shifting platforms, too. Streaming rights for new movies are typically for three-five years. So, crime thriller *Andhadhun (2018)* shifted from Netflix to Prime Video recently.

Each platform offers various subscription tiers in India and globally, potentially expanding our audience. We will see how the strategy unfolds. It's a valuable learning experience for me"
NIRANJAN REDDY, producer of *Hanu-Man*

The 2016 Aamir Khan-starrer *Dangal*, which was on Netflix India initially, can now only be rented on Prime Video and Apple TV (or bought on the latter).

The latest content-licensing contracts are now allocating different language/ dubbed versions to different platforms. *Hanu-Man*, the Telugu blockbuster from January and one of the highest grossing movies of the year so far, has been released in Hindi on Jio Cinema while the original Telugu version has gone to ZEE5. By April 5, its Tamil, Kannada and Malayalam dubbed versions will be on Disney+ Hotstar. K Niranjan Reddy, producer of the film, says, "Each platform offers various subscription tiers in India and globally, potentially expanding our audience. It's promising; we will see how the strategy unfolds. It's a valuable learning experience for me." Last week, Reddy closed a contract for the film's Japanese dub with English subtitles through a local vendor in Japan, he tells ET from the US.

This constant movement of content across platforms renders Google searches for locating content unreliable and time-consuming, says Basireena Basheer, a product manager at a B2B media & security firm in Bengaluru. However, she defends platforms' decisions to not disclose reasons for content unavailability. "Many avoid mentioning geo-restrictions to discourage VPN use, given the abundance of online guides on circumventing geo-blocking." Reasons for unavailability typically tend to be vague to avoid direct mention of any regulatory role (if applicable) in geo-restriction, she adds.

Streaming platforms are increasingly focusing on expanding their original content library to avoid licensing hassles. However, licensed content remains vital for growth; 45% of Netflix watch-time in H1 2023 was dedicated to licensed content, per the company's engagement report. Some players are trying to find ways to improve communication around licensing woes. Viki has an option to petition to get a show in your region. Netflix has introduced the "Leaving Soon" tag for short-lived titles. "Perhaps, an 'Available from' tag to provide a tentative timeframe for accessing content could help. I'd be thrilled if there are categories like 'Available after general elections'," for instance, says Basheer, only half-jokingly.

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Fight for Fifteen

Can BJP break its southern jinx outside Karnataka? Here are 15 seats the party is pinning its hopes on:

INDULEKHA ARVIND
ANDHRA PRADESH

TIRUPATI (SC)
Incumbent MP: Dr M Gurumoorthy (YSRCP)
Up Against: Velagapalli Varaprasad Rao (BJP)
The constituency hosting the temple town was allotted to BJP under its alliance with Telugu Desam Party and Jana Sena. A former bureaucrat, Rao is the Tirupati MLA and joined BJP as recently as March 24, triggering murmurs of dissent. Analysts like Telakapalli Ravi don't expect a marked improvement in BJP's performance in AP (its vote share was less than NDA's in 2019). Still, Rao did win this seat in 2014—on a YSRCP ticket.

PATHANAMTHITTA
KERALA
Incumbent MP: Anto Antony (UDF)
Up Against: Thomas Isaac (LDF), Anil Antony (BJP)
Congress leader AK Antony's son, Anil, is contesting as a BJP candidate and hopes to woo the minority Christian votes as well as BJP's traditional voters in the seat which is home to the Sabarimala temple. But the contest against three-time MLA Anto and former finance minister Isaac will not be easy. State BJP head K Surendran, however, told ET he is "100% sure" the party would win this and another nine seats in Kerala.

THIRISSUR
Incumbent MP: TN Prathapan (UDF)
In the Fray: VS Sunil Kumar (LDF), K Muraleedharan

COIMBATORE
TAMIL NADU
Incumbent MP: P Ramaswamy Natarajan (CPM)
In the Fray: K Annamalai (BJP), Ganapathi B Rajkumar (DMK), Singal Ramachandran (AIADMK)
The industrial hub will see a high-octane contest, thanks to the candidature of BJP's provocative state president from there. For the party, this is a priority seat—it won here in 1998 and 1999 in the wake of serial bomb blasts in the city, a point Modi emphasised in his recent roadshow.

SOUTH CHENNAI
Incumbent MP: Thamizhachi Thangapandian (DMK)
Up Against: Tamilisai Soundararajan (BJP), J Jayavardhan (AIADMK)
The former BJP state president quit her gubernatorial assignment in Telangana to jump into the poll fray in the prestigious constituency. Making it a rare contest between two female candidates, she will take on incumbent Thamizhachi Thangapandian of DMK, which has won the seat five times. Making it a three-cornered fight will be Jayavardhan, who won in 2014.

TIRUNELVELI
Incumbent MP: S Gnanathiraviam (DMK)
In the Fray: Nainan Nagenthiran (BJP), M Jansi Rani (AIADMK), Robert Bruce (INC)
Nagenthiran, sitting MLA from Tirunelveli and former AIADMK legislator, began his campaign even before his candidature was announced by BJP. The southern TN constituency, dominated by the Nadar community, was once an AIADMK stronghold but no more. Incensed by Bruce's candidature, a former Congress MP had filed nomination as party candidate, but it was rejected.

MODI ON THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL IN COIMBATORE

PUDUCHERRY
Incumbent MP: V Vaithilingam (INC)
Up Against: A Namassivayam (BJP), G Thamizhvendhan (AIADMK)
The Union territory is expected to see a straight fight between BJP and Congress, where the incumbent will take on home minister Namassivayam, who has family links with Chief Minister N Rangasamy. Namassivayam moved from Congress to BJP in 2021, when the Congress government was toppled.

TELANGANA

CONSTITUENCY: ADILABAD (ST)
Incumbent MP: Soyam Bapu Rao (BJP)

In the Fray: Godam Nagesh (BJP), Athram Sakku (BRS), Athram Suguna (INC)
In Adilabad, one of the four seats it won in 2019, BJP denied the ticket to its incumbent and gave it instead to ex-BRS MP Godam Nagesh, due to infighting. BJP hopes to cash in on the inroads it has made in tribal areas in Adilabad—it won four seats in Adilabad in the 2023 assembly polls, points out Ajay

ADILABAD (ST)
NIZAMABAD
ZAHIRABAD
KARIMNAGAR
MALKAJGIRI
SECUNDERABAD

ZAHIRABAD
Incumbent MP: BB Patil (Defected from BRS to BJP)
Up Against: Gali Anil Kumar (BRS), Suresh Kumar Shetkar (INC)
Sitting MP BB Patil, an industrialist, was part of the exodus from KCR's BRS to BJP in March and got the ticket to contest a day after. In 2019, Patil won the constituency, which lies near the border with Maharashtra, but the margin was only 6,000-odd votes. Incidentally, BRS candidate Kumar switched from INC, ahead of the assembly polls.

MALKAJGIRI
Incumbent MP: Revanth Reddy (INC)
In the Fray: Eatala Rajender (BJP), Shambhupur Raju (BRS), Patnam Suneetha Mahender Reddy (INC)
A prestigious constituency, Malkajgiri was held by Revanth Reddy, current CM, in 2019. The contest will be no less intense now, with former BRS minister Eatala Rajender snagging the ticket from BJP and the PM holding a roadshow there. The CM will be closely involved in this fight in which Patnam Suneetha Reddy, ex-BRS, will represent INC.

NIZAMABAD
Incumbent MP: Arvind Dharmapuri (BJP)
Up Against: Bajireddy Govardhan (BRS), Tatiparthi Jeevan

REDDY (INC)
Nizamabad delivered a shock defeat to former CM KCR's daughter, K Kavitha, at the hands of first-timer Arvind Dharmapuri in 2019. The region's turmeric farmers, agitating for better prices and a turmeric board, played a key role then, with over 170 of them contesting in the polls. The PM announced the setting up of the board last year and the party won two of seven assembly seats in the constituency.

SECUNDERABAD
Incumbent MP: G Kishan Reddy (BJP)
Up Against: T Padma Rao (BRS), Danam Nagender (INC)
A seat held by BJP for two consecutive terms, the urban constituency will see a Union minister—Reddy—facing off against two sitting MLAs. While Padma Rao is a four-time MLA from Secunderabad, Nagender, an MLA from one of Secunderabad's assembly seats, switched from BRS to Congress in March.

ZAHIRABAD
Incumbent MP: BB Patil (Defected from BRS to BJP)
Up Against: Gali Anil Kumar (BRS), Suresh Kumar Shetkar (INC)
Sitting MP BB Patil, an industrialist, was part of the exodus from KCR's BRS to BJP in March and got the ticket to contest a day after. In 2019, Patil won the constituency, which lies near the border with Maharashtra, but the margin was only 6,000-odd votes. Incidentally, BRS candidate Kumar switched from INC, ahead of the assembly polls.

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IS THAT A SUBTLE SULK GROWING ON THE FACE OF 'THE HAPPIEST NATION ON EARTH'?

Declared saare jahan se achha on the happiness matrix for the seventh year running, Finland has another emotion growing among its citizens: worry. Here's a case study

START TO FINNISH



SANJOY NARAYAN

Helsinki: On a cold and grey Wednesday morning in Kallio, Helsinki's vibrant Bohemian northern district, a long breadline snaked down Helsinginkatu and then up Kustaankatu. Nearly 500 people were waiting in the freezing queue for the weekly handout of free food.

Breadlines became a familiar phenomenon in Finland since the recession years of the early 1990s. It's looming again. In 2023, GDP declined 0.5% and Finland's central bank says while inflation is easing and households' purchasing power rising, GDP

could contract by a further 0.2% in 2024. On the same Wednesday morning, the UN-sponsored World Happiness Report (WHR) declared Finland as the happiest country in the world for the 7th year running. As in the past, other Nordic countries, Denmark, Iceland, and Sweden were cheek by jowl to Finland.

Seven years of being 'the happiest' is probably exhausting - media coverage of WHR was bereft of any hyperbole or exuberance. The largest newspaper, Helsingin Sanomat, ran a terse report with a photo that showed Finnish kids playing ice hockey. And, in a post on X, Finland's newly-elected president Alexander Stubb listed his three reasons why Finland is #1: nature, trust, education. To which, one comment said, 'Please tell that to Aki Kaurismäki, he doesn't seem to know that!' Kaurismäki, of course, is Finland's best-known director whose films are known for their melancholic themes.

Finnish media gave short shrift to the ranking because there are other matters of concern. Ongoing strikes by labour unions have disrupted life across the country. They are protesting Finland's right-wing government's proposed labour reforms, which



KHUD KHUSHI? SCENE FROM AKI KAURISMÄKI'S 'FALLEN LEAVES' (2023)

they believe would undermine workers' rights and degrade working conditions. The government, which is battling high public debt, is also slashing unemployment subsidies and housing assistance.

This year's WHR asks people from 143 countries to rate their lives from 0 to 10. It also considers six other parameters: social support (welfare and benefits), income, health, freedom, generosity, and low cor-

ruption. Finland and the other Nordic countries fare very well on all of those. Finns, especially, accord much value to nature and that lakes, forests, and clean air and water-enrich quality of their lives.

Yet, you'll hear chortles and snorts when you ask Finns about their happiness ranking. Disbelief is another reaction. 'To many of us, it seems like fake news,' gufaws Teemu Aman, 45, a dental technician. Aman

Prez Alexander Stubb listed his 3 reasons why Finland is #1: nature, trust, education. 'Please tell that to Kaurismäki!' read a reply

thinks the survey doesn't consider more complex factors that have an impact on life like mental health. He points to Finland's high rates of depression and loneliness because of highly fragmented families.

In 2020, more than 400,000 Finns received social insurance compensation for prescription antidepressant meds. And latest estimates suggest that around 1 mn people (of 5.5 mn population) are diagnosed with mental health issues that include depression, anxiety, and bipolar disorder.

Finland has low marriage and high divorce rates. An estimated 1.5 mn people live alone. 'Factors like loneliness are not reflected in the happiness study,' says Aman. Adds Kira Selin, 59, a healthcare entrepreneur, 'Abundance of nature, safety, quality of education and social welfare contribute to a happy life. But are Finns emotionally happy? Perhaps not.'

This year's happiness report notes that in Finland (as in many other countries), older people appear happier than the young. Under-30 re-

spondents rank Finland 7th, not 1st. Many young Finns feel their lives are getting harder. Quality of education in Finland is still among the world's best, and individuals enjoy more freedom of choice. But things are changing. Says Lotta Näri, 25, Helsinki University student, 'The world we face is more uncertain and less hopeful than the previous generation. There is far greater competition and pressure.'

Last week, the media's focus was not on happiness but something not unrelated to it. Finland's fertility rate has dropped to a historic low of 1.25. If it isn't at least 2.1, in the next 90 years, number of native Finns could drop to below 1 mn. Also, Finland is an ageing nation. In 2023, people aged 65-plus were 23.6% of the population. In 2035, it could become 28%.

These trends turn the attention to whether Finland needs more work-age immigrants, and whether its healthcare facilities can match future demands. These are problems that the 'happiest country' must now ponder.

FILM FATALE



ANNA MM VETTICAD

Is the Critic Wrong Or Right? Neither, Dear Film Fan

Let's not seek validation in reviews, but get informed, especially of other PoVs

'Ah, this review aged well, didn't it?' This sardonic remark landed in the comments section below my review of Chidambaram's latest film, Manjummel Boys, some days back. The implication was clear. In the weeks since I wrote a middling critique with the headline, 'Thinly written, inconsistent but ultimately rewarding survival drama,' the Malayalam film has gone on to become a pan-India hit. This reader had enjoyed MB, and expected me, as a critic who had not gushed over it, to be embarrassed by its box-office triumph.

Honestly, sarcasm and mild mockery from a film fan feel like politeness in comparison with the abuse and threats that reviews tend to attract, the misogyny aimed at women critics, and across-the-board personal attacks, which includes targeting a critic's minority religious identity. Still, this reader's relatively tame message merits scrutiny, since it highlights a prevailing confusion about the purpose that film criticism serves.

A critic is not an astrologer. The job of a critic is not to predict box-office destinies, but to provide informed analysis, with perspective on the socio-political and cultural context in which a film has been made, in addition to the track record of the team behind it, and other factors.

The task before a critic is not merely to address the question she is most often asked, 'Did you like this film?' but to articulate with clarity her reasons why. If a review presumed to foretell a film's box-office fate, then, of course, it should be deemed not to have 'aged well.' If that's not what the critic did though, then by dissenting divergent opinions, you risk losing out on one of the great joys of being a passionate cinephile: the joy of intelligent debate.

As it happens, few things have the potential to enrage human beings as much as disagreements over religion, sports or cinema. The psychology at play is worth examining. Many audience members interpret a negative or lukewarm review of a film they loved as a personal affront. This could partly be explained by the sense of possessiveness some tend to develop towards their favourite art and artists.

Beyond this though lies a defensiveness evident in social media commentary, drawing-room conversations and elsewhere, arising from an assumption that the critic is arrogant, and is somehow belittling them by thinking differently.

This mindset is also reflected in a compliment most commonly bestowed on critics by those who respect their work: 'Your reviews are usually right.' Is there a right or wrong in these matters? Well, sure, if a reviewer makes factual errors or is illogical, does not bother to substantiate statements, or lacks knowledge.

For the most part, however, as I tell well-meaning friends when they say, 'Your reviews are usually right,' they must consider if what they mean is, 'Your reviews usually match my opinions of the films I see,' because they subconsciously seek validation from reviews and feel uncomfortable when they don't get what they are looking for.

In short, you are right because we agree. (I know, I know, I hear you - it would be simpler to quietly accept the compliment.)

The beauty of art is that it is subjective. You may deem Mona Lisa an ordinary, over-hyped painting. You may be bored by Satyajit Ray and Federico Fellini. And you would be neither right nor wrong. You would just be you.

We will all be more relaxed when we recognise that our reactions to films are governed by the sum total of our life experiences, our varied social locations, our politics, our knowledge and our tastes. A good film critic is just a professional who has chosen to devote themselves to a study of cinema, and all of us - critics and laypersons - are enriched when we listen to, instead of feeling threatened or slighted by, viewpoints that challenge us.

The writer is author of *The Adventures of an Intrepid Film Critic*

'Parlez-Vous Na'vi?' 'No, Kreegah Bundolo!'

Conlangs - constructed languages - in books and movies create whole new worlds and peoples free to (mis)communicate

JUGULAR VEIN



JUG SURAIYA

The observation that America and England are separated by the Atlantic Ocean, and have a common language, endorses the opinion that humans are the only species with the verbal ability to miscommunicate with each other. Closer home, another tongue-in-cheek example may be found in peninsular India's wariness of Hindi as a wolf in Sanskrit clothing.

Despite such instances of language building barriers instead of bridges, humans have a gift of tongues, and concoct fictional dialects at the drop of a chat. Conlangs, or constructed languages, continue to be a growing industry in literary and cinematic realms. Linguists create these fictive forms of speech to add authenticity to exotic environments and cultures, distinguish between different groups and communities, and give the reader or viewer an immersive experience by opening magic casements on the foam of 'perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn', as the poet put it.

Conlangs not only have vocabularies - Na'vi, the invented idiom for

James Cameron's Avatar films, set in the habitable satellite of the Alpha Centauri star system, Pandora, reportedly contains some 2,000 words - but also grammar and syntax rules.

Conlangs can be amalgams of words taken from real languages, such as Arabic, Turkish, and Hebrew, as in the film versions of Frank Herbert's 1965 SF novel, Dune, in which the Fremens who inhabit the desert planet Arrakis, speak Chakobsa.

Na'vi derives phonemes, distinctive sound patterns, from Polynesian and African lingual systems. Conversely, like the Dothraki and High Valerian tongues used in the Game of Thrones series, adapted from George RR Martin's novels, A Song of Ice and Fire, conlangs can be made up, just as Klingon was in Star Trek.

Conlangs need not have geographical or zoological boundaries. Underpinned by the minor consideration that he'd never visited the African continent, Edgar Rice Burroughs devised a primate

patois for his equatorial African jungle-dwelling protagonist John Clayton, Lord Greystoke, Tarzan of the Apes, whose anthropoidal wry cry before visiting GBH on sundry adversaries was 'Kreegah bundolo!' which in human speech could be rendered as, 'Boy, are you gonna get your lumps and then some!'

Long before conlang was coined, JRR Tolkien devised several invented languages for his Lord of the

Rings epic, including Sindarin, spoken by Elves, Khuzdul, spoken by Dwarves, and the Black Speech of malign Mordor.

The leading light of conlangs, however, might be deemed to be Lewis Carroll: 'Twas brillig and the slithy toves/ Did gyre and gimble in the wabe./ All mimsy were the borogoves./ And the mome raths outgrabe.'

Seldom has jabber been more wacky. Or, as Humpty Dumpty mansplains to Alice, 'When I use a word it means just

what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less... the question is which is to be master - that's all.'

But if conlangs can be confounding, conlangs, such as Cockney rhyming slang, can be perplexing. East End Londoners have created an argot all their own to deceive outsiders. A 'titter' refers to a hat, being derived from 'tit for tat' which rhymes with hat. A 'China' means a friend, as 'china plate' rhymes with

mate, as in pal. A 'pork pie' is a lie, and a 'tea leaf' is a thief. Language, mainly coded language, is an affirmation of identity and belonging. When asked why he had not emigrated to more tax-friendly environs than Britain like a few of his well-heeled compatriots, John le Carré recounted an anecdote - which would merit a Smiley, as in George - about a customer in his local pub who asked for a gold watch and was served a glass of Scotch whisky. 'Gold watch/Scotch' stands for rhyme, if not reason.

Idiomatic usage can, however, have its pitfalls. In 1963, when JFK made his famous 'Ich bin ein Berliner' speech to show solidarity with the German city that had been divided by the Berlin Wall, he didn't realise that the term he'd used referred not only to a citizen of Berlin but also to a popular local comestible, a dual usage, which left many bemused as to why the Leader of the Free World was proudly proclaiming that he was a kind of German jam doughnut.

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Language, mainly coded language, is an affirmation of identity and belonging. When asked why he had not emigrated to more tax-friendly environs than Britain like a few of his well-heeled compatriots, John le Carré recounted an anecdote - which would merit a Smiley, as in George - about a customer in his local pub who asked for a gold watch and was served a glass of Scotch whisky. 'Gold watch/Scotch' stands for rhyme, if not reason.

Idiomatic usage can, however, have its pitfalls. In 1963, when JFK made his famous 'Ich bin ein Berliner' speech to show solidarity with the German city that had been divided by the Berlin Wall, he didn't realise that the term he'd used referred not only to a citizen of Berlin but also to a popular local comestible, a dual usage, which left many bemused as to why the Leader of the Free World was proudly proclaiming that he was a kind of German jam doughnut.

mate, as in pal. A 'pork pie' is a lie, and a 'tea leaf' is a thief.

And Citizens, the Real Delhi Liquor 'Scam'

The city's voter-tippers may have overconsumed electoral politics and missed the real peg

RED HERRING



INDRAJIT HAZRA

While India, if not I.N.D.I.A., has found its *de facto*, if not *de jure*, main opposition leader, a far quieter, but arguably as important, event takes place today: it's the last day for all hotels, clubs and restaurants, along with wholesale and other distributors of the nation's capital city to renew their liquor licence if they want to keep plying the good - or even middling - stuff to Delhi's fine measturers of pegs and pints.

As what regularly happens in India's version of democracy in action, the opera of party politics has once again overwhelmed and overtaken consumer concern. And lest 'consumer' sounds petty, the much-hallowed voter is first a consumer of goods and services 12 months a year, 7 days a week, and only then a fellow hustings-hustler for about twice every five years. And yet, the 'beauty' of this electoral Ram leela is that even the consumer puts his or her needs and grievances aside, and becomes (be)sotted with the seasonal-episodic limited series of The Great Indian Election Show (press on 'Skip intro'). As a wise man once said, 'When the wise man points at the moon, the idiot looks at the (vote-in)ked finger.'

Notwithstanding hosting global events like the much-toasted G20, and the 3-day Burrp Festival that started this Friday - the city's 'biggest beer festival' at the Garden of Five Senses near Saket - Delhi's consumers of alcohol are arguably the worst served among India's metros. Since the scrapping of the 2021-22 li-

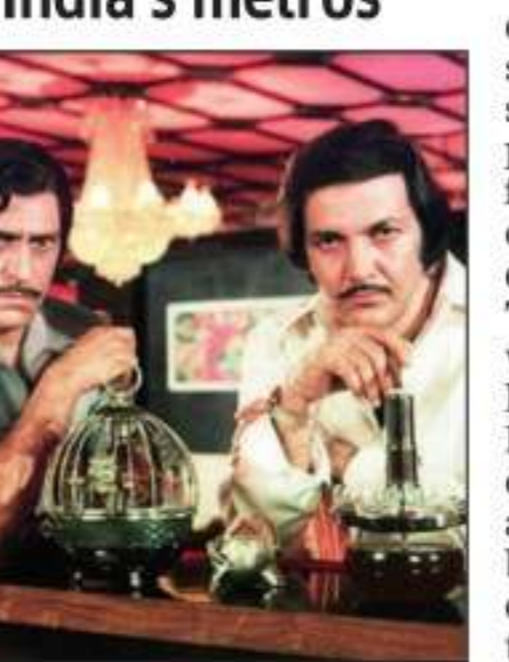
quor policy of the Delhi Excise Department on July 31, 2022 - by which the AAP government had, for six months since November 2021, allowed private players (L-7 retail vendors) to sell liquor, including using perfectly legit tricks of the trade like discounts and special offers - buying alcohol from stores have, in many places in Delhi, returned to early 2000-era mayhem.

If teetotalers among you could, for one minute, keep aside your 'Beta, daaru peena burri baat hain' and 'Vendors breed corrupt benders' concerns, and treat alcohol buyers of Delhi as one among many other segments of evolving consumers of New India, you could sympathise with the buying experience of liquor - think Lagavulin 16 and Chiclean MontGras Intriga Cabernet Sauvignon 2018, and not just 'Haywards 5000' and 'Hercules' - having plummeted after the 'gov vends-only' kanoon kicked in again since September 2022.

And as in politics, choice has become a casualty, even as the very same 'choice' is tom-tommed as the calling card for a Viksit-ing Bharat. With competition (sic) in Delhi's liquor retail industry now 'extended' for the third time to Indra Gandhi 'nationalised banks' level, the city's tippers will continue to see local brands crowd out larger, wider, higher ones that are increasingly available to consumers elsewhere.

Yes, the fate of Delhi's CM - and the electoral effects of his elevation as 'Bonnie ka Clyde', now hangs on how the courts view his involvement in a liquor policy that reportedly saw 'commissions' from a southern comfort coterie of private vendors for AAP's funding. But why in the name of Baba Bhaironath - residing deity of Sri Kilkari Bhairon Temple next to Purana Qila, where it's custom to serve alcoholic beverages as prasad - will Delhi's oenophiles and malt connoisseurs, beer-aucrats and Netflix tippers have to bear the brunt of a panga that only has a tenuous peg with their sense of representative politics?

Despite hosting global events like G20 and The Burrp Festival, Delhi's alconsumers are the worst served among India's metros



THEY'RE MAKING ALL OF US LOOK BAD

indrajit.hazra@timesgroup.com



Gross Outfits, Not Gross At All

Have you heard the latest ... gross outfits?

Ah, the latest fashion craze! It's the epitome of casual chic, where comfort reigns supreme and mismatched night suits are high fashion. Basically, anything goes if you can pull it off in style.

Sounds fun, but why is it trending? Chinese youngsters in Wuhan are turning the office into a cozy paradise. Why shell out for suits



and ties when you can rock your favourite PJs and fuzzy slippers to work? It's like they're saying, 'Why dress to impress when you can dress to de-stress?' Move over, Milan Fashion Week - Wuhan's bringing comfy chic to the forefront!

So, it's kind of a fashion rebellion? Sort of, a legacy of Covid-era. The CozY generation wants to maintain its unique identity and adopt a relaxed approach towards life. Basically, it's a mix of WFH and WFO.

But there must be critics too...

Sure thing! So, yeah, some people are all, 'Oh, it's so unprofessional to wear home clothes to the office, blah blah'. But come on, if everyone's still getting their work done and a couple of folks are happier in their sweatpants, why rain on the parade? I mean, who cares if someone's wearing his lucky dinosaur PJs to meetings if he's still crushing those spreadsheets, right? Let's just embrace the cozy chaos and call it a day!

Text by Lijee Philip



ET Sunday Crossword 0057

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32

ACROSS

- 1 Doctor's drunk working without night light (4, 4)
- 2 Many columns are so openly disregarded nonetheless (6)
- 3 Extra benefits from special shots in billiards (4-4)
- 4 Completely consumes American energy drink (4, 2)
- 5 Steer round New York stone (4)
- 6 What's used when the police fly over ultimately? (10)
- 7 Somehow Vera and I get into terrible mess, utterly lost (13)
- 8 Trained guests have no time for rea-
- 9 soned conjecture (8, 5)
- 10 Source of blood cells - 1 million found in old tomb (4, 6)
- 11 Despotism ruler in Amritsar (4)
- 12 Dutch aren't outwardly passionate (6)
- 13 Cancel play with Greta Garbo - Greek pulled out (4, 8)
- 14 EU chief accepts a French guy who's ineffective (6)
- 15 Emergency! Foreign leader's trapped in arts centre (3, 5)

DOWN

- 1 This style of music is fun to play -
- 2 insert disc (6)
- 3 Old song retains appeal for non professionals (5)
- 4 Take up space in land north of Plymouth for instance (4)
- 5 Eccentric policeman doing desk jobs? (7)
- 6 Girl stands on old rope (5)
- 7 Fag-ends turning up in river used in labs (4, 5)
- 8 Left late (8)
- 9 Henry provided institute with sound kit (2-2)
- 10 No intro to 'West Side Story' heroine's song (4)
- 11 Ancient creature wandering in Goa? I dunno (9)
- 12 Perch, and what might catch it (3)
- 13 Struggle with opinion (4)
- 14 Film a new member staggering about (8)
- 15 Regular parts of metal ring reveal merit (4)
- 16 What to say when leaving unruly dog? Obe! (7)
- 17 You are texting man? It's really important (6)
- 18 Guy in charge is hard to control (5)
- 19 Small investment sounds expensive to a Parisian (5)
- 20 Classic wear's not normal in some Pacific islands (4)

US Updates Export Curbs on AI Chips, Tools to China

WASHINGTON The Biden administration on Friday revised rules aimed at making it harder for China to access US artificial intelligence chips and chipmaking tools, part of an effort to hobble Beijing's chipmaking industry over national security concerns. The rules, released in October, seek to halt shipments to China of more advanced AI chips designed by Nvidia and others as Washington cracks down on Beijing over concerns its advancing tech sector could help boost China's military. The new rules, which run 166 pages in length, go into effect on Thursday. They clarify, for example, that restrictions on chip shipments to China also apply to laptops containing those chips. — Reuters

US Congress Bans Staff Use of Copilot: Report

NEW YORK The US House of Representatives has set a strict ban on congressional staffers' use of Microsoft's Copilot generative AI assistant, Axios reported on Friday. "The Microsoft Copilot application has been deemed by the Office of Cybersecurity to be a risk to users due to the threat of leaking House data to non-house approved cloud services," the House's Chief Administrative Officer Catherine Szpindor said. "We recognise that government users have higher security requirements for data. That's why we announced a roadmap of Microsoft AI tools, like Copilot, that meet federal government security and compliance requirements that we intend to deliver later this year," a Microsoft spokesperson said. — Reuters

Stringent Checks & Balances

►► From Page 1
In 2024, around 700,000 people applied for the 85,000 H-1B visas granted each year with applicants chosen through a lottery process. This was an over 50% jump from over 400,000 applications received in 2023. To be sure, American technology giants such as Amazon and Microsoft are among the biggest recruiters of H-1B visa holders, having picked up more than 10,000 such employees in FY22. In comparison, India's IT services majors including TCS and Infosys hired almost 6000 H-1B holders in the same period, showed analysis by the National Foundation for American Policy (NFAF), based on data from the USCIS H-1B Employer Data Hub. Experts are of the view that "the H-1B programme is very stringent and has strict checks and balances that make it very hard to have discriminatory employment practices". Moreover, US labour laws are quite stringent and if found guilty companies can face stringent action including being blacklisted.

"Given the stature of TCS in India and in the US and the public attention, it is difficult to believe that TCS could violate labour laws or engage in discriminatory actions," said Poorvi Chothani, founder and managing partner, LawQuest, a Mumbai-based immigration and employment law firm.

SAME WAGE PROGRAMME
She pointed to the wages under the H-1B programme being set at the same level as that for similarly qualified employees (including US workers) situated in the same position at the same place of employment, adding that "replacing US workers does not give TCS any economic advantage."
Responding to an emailed query on the issue, a representative for TCS, said, "Allegations that TCS engages in unlawful discrimination are meritless and misleading."

Meta Cannot Delay US FTC from Reopening Privacy Probe: Court

Meta has not met its heavy burden of showing entitlement to an injunction pending appeal, says court

Reuters
Washington: Meta Platforms cannot delay the US Federal Trade Commission from reopening a probe into alleged privacy failures by its Facebook unit while the company pursues a lawsuit challenging the agency's authority, a US court ruled on Friday.
The Washington, DC-based US Court of Appeals for the DC Circuit in its order found that Meta had not shown its challenge was likely to be successful. The court said Meta has "not met its heavy burden of showing entitlement to an injunction pending appeal".
The same appeals court panel on



March 12 denied a separate request by Meta in a related case to pause the FTC's probe, which was announced last year, despite Meta's objections that it already paid a \$5 billion fine and agreed to a range of safeguards. The FTC wants to tighten an existing 2020 Facebook privacy settlement to

DATA ISSUE
The FTC wants to tighten an existing 2020 Facebook privacy settlement to ban profiting from minors' data

ban profiting from minors' data and expand curbs on facial recognition technology. The agency has accused Meta of misleading parents about protections for children.
Meta, which has denied misleading parents about privacy risks, sued the FTC in November in a broad consti-

tutional challenge against the agency's ability to be both an investigative body and an adjudicative one. Meta said among other things that allowing the FTC action to move forward would violate its right to a trial by jury. The FTC and Meta did not immediately comment.
Friday's DC Circuit order addressed Meta's appeal of a March 15 order by US District Judge Randolph Moss in Washington refusing to halt the agency's probe. Moss in his decision said Meta had not overcome the FTC's "strong" public interest in scrutinizing Meta's privacy controls.
The FTC has accused Meta in an antitrust lawsuit in Washington of abusing its power in the social media market to crush or buy rivals.

US SEES PA AS A KEY PART OF ITS PLANS FOR POST-WAR GAZA

US Welcomes New Palestinian Govt Post Political Reform Call

AP
Jerusalem: The United States has welcomed the formation of a new Palestinian autonomy government, signalling it is accepting the revised Cabinet lineup as a step toward Palestinian political reform.
The Biden administration has called for "revitalising" the West Bank-based Palestinian Authority (PA) in hopes that it can also administer the Gaza Strip once the Israel-Hamas war ends. The war erupted nearly six months ago, triggered by an October 7 Hamas attack on southern Israel. In a statement late Friday, US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said the United States looks forward to working with the new group of ministers "to deliver on credible reforms."
"A revitalised PA is essential to delivering results for the Palestinian people in both the West Bank and Gaza and establishing the conditions for stability in the broader region," Miller said. The Palestinian Authority administers parts of the Israeli-occupied West Bank. It is headed by



A man walks past pro-Palestinian murals on the International Wall in support of Gaza, in Belfast, Northern Ireland. — Reuters

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, who has not faced an election in almost two decades.
The United States sees the Palestinian Authority as a key part of its preferred plans for post-war Gaza. But the authority has little popular support or legitimacy among Palestinians, with many viewing it as a subcontractor of the occupation be-

cause of its security cooperation with Israel in the West Bank. Earlier this month, Abbas tapped Mohammad Mustafa, a US-educated economist, as prime minister.
On Thursday, Mustafa named his new lineup. It includes relatively unknown technocrats, but also Abbas' interior minister and several members of the secular Fatah movement he leads. Several of the ministers are from Gaza, but it's not clear if they are currently living there. The Islamic militant group Hamas, a rival of Abbas, drove his security forces from Gaza in a 2007 takeover. The United States wants a reformed Palestinian Authority to return and administer Gaza, an idea that has been rejected by both Israel and Hamas.
A major challenge for the Palestinian Authority should it be given a role in administering Gaza, will be reconstruction. Nearly six months of war has destroyed critical infrastructure including hospitals, schools and homes as well as roads, sewage systems and the electrical grid. Air strikes and Israel's ground offensive have left more than 32,000 Palestinians dead, according to local health authorities. The fighting has displaced over 80% of Gaza's population and pushed hundreds of thousands to the brink of famine, the UN and international aid agencies say.
The war began after Hamas-led militants stormed across southern Israel on October 7, killing 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and taking about 250 others hostage.

3 UN Observers, a Translator Wounded in Lebanon

Reuters
Beirut: Three United Nations observers and a translator were wounded on Saturday when a shell exploded near them as they were carrying out a foot patrol in south Lebanon, the UN peacekeeping mission said, adding it was still investigating the origin of the blast.
The UN peacekeeping mission known as UNIFIL, as well as unarmed technical observers known as UNTSO, are stationed in southern Lebanon to monitor hostilities

along the demarcation line between Lebanon and Israel, known as the Blue Line. Lebanese armed group Hezbollah has been trading fire with the Israeli military across the Blue Line since October in parallel with the war in Gaza. UNIFIL said on Saturday that the targeting of peacekeepers is "unacceptable" and that the wounded staff had been evacuated for treatment.
Two security sources had earlier said the observers were wounded in an Israeli strike outside the border town of Rmeish. The Israeli military denied involvement in

A CLOSE WATCH
The UNIFIL as well as UNTSO are stationed in southern Lebanon to monitor hostilities along the demarcation line between Lebanon and Israel

the incident. "Contrary to the reports, the IDF did not strike a UNIFIL vehicle in the area of Rmeish this morning," the military said in a statement.
Lebanon's caretaker Prime Minister Najib Mikati spoke with UNIFIL commander Aroldo Lozano, condemning the "targeting" and wounding of UN staff in southern Lebanon, according to a statement from Mikati's office. The mayor of Rmeish, Millad Alam, said that he had spoken with the Lebanese translator and confirmed his condition was stable.

Expanded Base

►► From Page 1
According to the WARC Media forecast, Snapchat will see a 13.7% year-on-year jump in advertising growth in 2024, compared with just 0.1% increase in 2023. Its advertising spend is expected to touch \$5.2 billion this year.
"Although dwarfed by the billions using platforms like TikTok and Instagram, Snapchat has seen its base and reach expand, especially regarding unique audiences among younger cohorts," WARC said in its report. "DAU (daily active users) growth in North America remained flat while the rest of the world's users grew 19%."
Snapchat's parent company, Snap, has been aggressive in the Asia Pacific market. It hired Meta's former India head Ajit Mohan as president of Asia Pacific. Last year, it hired Google executive Pulkit Trivedi as its India managing director.
Trivedi told ET that India accounts for about 20% of Gen Z globally, and that this audience consumes technology in a very different way than audiences from the older age groups

and is looking for newer ways to engage with brands.
"All brands and businesses are trying to find ways to engage with young audiences," he said. "This is particularly true for brands in the ecommerce, fashion, beauty and personal care, food tech and gaming space. Our early conversations to find deep partnerships with some notable players include Myntra, Ajo, Dream11, Meesho, Loreal."
But it isn't just the big brands, even new-age startups like Deciml aren't wanting to be left behind. The app enables small investments with every spend and initiates youngsters into the smart investment ecosystem. "For an app like ours, which relies heavily on the young adults to mid-career professionals' age group, Snapchat is an interesting platform to target," Aditya Malhotra, head of growth at Deciml told ET. "We are working on reaching out to this audience through Snapchat more extensively because it provides young brands with an opportunity to experiment and run engaging campaigns to appeal to younger users and build brand recall and loyalty."

Document Checklist

►► From Page 1
They are also advised not to get into arguments with political representatives, any party leaders and district administration, and ensure that no political party banner is placed in the centres where meetings are held with borrowers.
The SOP circulated among micro-lenders, also advises not to maintain unusually high amounts of cash at their branch premises. While loans are disbursed online, borrowers mostly repay in cash which field agents collect and carry to the nearest branch of the micro-lender before depositing it in a bank. Earlier this month, Sa-Dhan, an association of micro and impact finance companies, circulated lists of MFJ institutions with electoral officers while assuring that its members have been advised that "personnel carrying official cash under any circumstances shall not carry any other cash of third-party agencies/individuals." The MFJ SOP also instructs the agents to avoid travelling in any political party vehicle and identifying with any party. "The problem is how



do you sensitise lakhs of BC and MFJ agents across the country? They may end up doing something without realising the implications. It means unnecessary trouble," said a banking industry official.
"Even ATM vans carrying cash have faced problems in the past," said the person. To avoid hassles, all cash carrying officials are being told to carry their organisation's ID and self-KYC, a copy of the organisation's registration certificate, and acknowledgement of the copy of the letter to the Chief Election Officer. Besides, they should also keep a record of how much cash has been recovered along with a list of borrowers who paid.

'Complex Interplay'

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Mahindra & Mahindra has electric and mild hybrid models but no CNG while Korean carmakers Hyundai and Kia have a presence in CNG and electric but no presence in hybrids.
"The Indian car market's powertrain landscape is not a one-size-fits-all scenario; it's a complex interplay between established technologies like petrol and diesel, the strategic adoption of alternatives like CNG and hybrids, and the ongoing development of electric vehicles," said Ravi Bhatia, president of Jato Dynamics.
"As the market evolves, carma-

customers are increasingly choosing alternate fuel options with the intent of economical as well as more eco-friendly drive. Customers are starting to prefer electric and hybrid vehicles because of their lower running costs, they said.
Additionally, regulatory nudges — the central government, for example, has set a target of 30% EV contribution to sales across vehicle segments by 2030 — are pushing manufacturers to launch more models in these segments.
Maruti Suzuki will be producing its first EV in 2024-25 with the introduction of eVX in the mid SUV category, its senior executive director Shashank Srivastava said. It plans to have six EV models by 2030-31, he said.
Growing charging network is helping boost customer confidence in EVs. However, supply chain, battery costs and charging infrastructure have to significantly improve before fully electric cars can take off in a big way, industry insiders said.



HYBRIDS BRIDGE TRANSITION
Hybrids are seen as a bridge for the transition from traditional fuels to electric. Toyota and Maruti Suzuki are pitching strong hybrids to retail as well as fleet customers, who may not be ready to make the shift to fully battery-powered vehicles.
According to Srivastava, Maruti's powertrain break-up in 2030 will be 15% electric, 25% hybrid, and the balance a mix of gasoline, CNG and flex fuel, or flexible-fuel vehicles that can run on more than one type of fuel. Currently, CNG vehicles account for about 26% of total sales of the country's largest carmaker. As many as 14 out of its 17 models have CNG options, Srivastava said.
The Indian market now boasts of a diverse range of CNG models, with more than 20 variants available across different body types and price points, offered by various OEMs.
The proliferation of CNG refuelling stations across the nation has also been a game changer, industry insiders said.

Canada's Trudeau on Back Foot over Carbon Tax

The levy is scheduled to rise from \$48 to \$59/metric tonne of carbon from April 1

AFP
Ottawa: Polluters should pay up, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau insists. But pressure is mounting to scrap his signature climate policy, a federal levy on CO2 emissions, as ordinary Canadians see the law increase their own cost of living. The levy, applied to a myriad of fossil fuels used by both industry and consumers, is scheduled to rise from Can\$64 to Can\$80 (US\$48 to US\$59) per metric tonne of carbon on April 1, in a bid to see Canadians slash their total carbon emissions by 40-45% below 2005 levels by 2030.
But it's adding to household costs at the same time that people are feeling the bite from inflation. Seven provinces have asked the government to pause or cancel the increase, which would add about three cents per liter (quarter gallon) to the price of gasoline.
Newfoundland Premier Andrew Furey — a liberal from Trudeau's own party — was the latest this month to join his conservative peers in seeking a reprieve "at least until inflation stabilises". Saskatchewan, meanwhile, is refusing to collect and remit the tax to Ottawa. In some ways Trudeau has already caved to pressure, issuing in October a three-year exemption of the tax on home heating oil. The Atlantic region, where 24 Liberal House of Commons seats are at stake, benefits the most from the change. In parliament recently a mushroom farmer's hefty gas bill became the focal point of sparring match between Trudeau and his main rival, conservative leader Pierre Poilievre — who vowed to "axe the tax" if he defeats the Liberals in elections next year. Mike Medeiros paid Can\$16,668.39 for the federal carbon tax on his February natural gas bill that hit a total of Can\$62,441.95.
His Osgoode, Ontario, farm employs 160 workers producing 200,000 pounds of mushrooms per week, and uses 1.3 million cubic meters of natural gas per year to sterilise and control the heat and humidity in 50 growing rooms. By contrast, the average Canadian home uses 2,400 cubic meters of gas. By the time the carbon tax increases to \$170, set for 2030, "our carbon tax costs for heating alone will be half a million dollars," Medeiros told AFP. "I can't absorb that cost". Ottawa has rolled out more than 10 climate plans since 1990 but all have failed to achieve their goals, mak-

KEY CONCERNS
Canada's soaring cost of living is the top concern for 56% of Canadians in a poll, while climate change matters for 31%

ing Canada an outlier among G7 nations, with its greenhouse gas emissions rising 13.9% to 670 megatonnes from 1990 to 2021.
The environment commissioner in November said its latest efforts could also fall short of the 2030 target, despite government assurances. According to the Angus Reid Institute, a public opinion research group, Canada's soaring cost of living is the top concern for 56% of Canadians, outweighing climate change, which polls as the top concern for 31% of respondents.
And 40% of those polled want the carbon tax abolished versus only 27% who say it should increase as planned. Ottawa waitress Rima Sab, 54, said she doesn't like paying the federal levy, but supports it.
"The carbon tax sucks. But climate change sucks more," she said. "If we don't do something now, what will be left for my kids?" During a visit to oil-rich Alberta, Trudeau called out "short-term thinker politicians" opposed to the levy that is projected to account for one third of Canada's emissions reductions, telling reporters "doing the right things today... will deliver a better future."
In a letter to wayward provinces, he said carbon pricing is "the most efficient way to reduce emissions across the economy" while adding only 0.1% to inflation. Most Canadians get a carbon rebate or "more money back than they pay," he added, while "the devastating effects of floods, wildfires and droughts are escalating costs annually" for all. On the heels of Canada's worst ever fire season that saw over 45 million acres scorched and 200,000 people displaced last summer, 2024 disaster preparations have already started — months earlier than usual.



Dutch Hostage Drama Over, Armed Suspect Arrested

AFP
Ede, Netherlands: A hostage drama in the Netherlands that lasted several hours ended without bloodshed on Saturday as all four hostages were freed and police took the suspect into custody.
Authorities said there was no reason to suspect a "terrorist motive" for the ordeal, which took place at a night spot popular with young people in the central Dutch town of Ede. Police said they received reports of a potential hostage situation at 5:15am (04:15 GMT) at the Cafe Petticoat, with local media saying a "confused" man burst in as staff were clearing up after a party.
The man was armed with "several knives" that he showed to the hostages, prosecutor Marthynne Kunst told reporters at a news conference in the town hall.

Police are also investigating a black backpack he was carrying with him, amid reports that the hostage-taker had threatened to use explosives. Authorities later confirmed there were in fact no explosives in the backpack.
Police spokesman Anne Jan Oosterheert said officers were on the scene within minutes, immediately opening negotiations with the man. "Luckily that all went well," he said, declining to offer details of the negotiations. The suspect is known to the police and has a previous conviction for threatening behaviour. Investigations are under way as to his motive and psychological state, Kunst said.
"Great respect and appreciation for police, emergency services and special forces who brought the hostage situation... to a successful conclusion," said outgoing Prime Minister Mark Rutte.

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92.72.70.70.50
98.22.88.25.66

The Marvel of DPI's Expanding Universe

It's been 14 years since the first Aadhaar number was issued, a decade since the Unified Payments Interface (UPI) was designed. Ever since, the digital public infrastructure universe has been expanding. **Suraksha P** looks at where the tech will go from here

Aadhaar, the 12-digit individual identification number, has been issued to more than 139 crore people so far, covering almost the entire population of the country in nearly a decade-and-a-half since its launch. India's foundational digital identity programme, launched in 2014, has been revolutionary for the social and economic inclusion it spurred. Alongside, the pace of digital payment adoption has been equally striking. Unified Payments Interface (UPI) transactions are expected to exceed 100 crore transactions per day by FY27, as per a report by PwC India, which expects UPI to dominate the retail digital payment landscape, accounting for 90 per cent of transaction volumes over the next five years.

While Aadhaar and UPI are the most popular digital public infrastructure (DPI) to have come out of India, which are being hailed globally, there are several others taking shape. These include the likes of Account Aggregator, Open Network for Digital Commerce, and Open Credit Enablement Network (OCEN).

India's Digital Public Infrastructure, which has received a big fillip, due to the Jan Dhan-Aadhaar and Mobile trinity, has not just increased access and inclusion for the country's poor but is also now trying to fix pressing issues related to sustainability and AI compute power.

There are dozens of lesser-known digital public goods (DPGs) and digital public infrastructure that have also been developed and deployed in India, many of which are being adopted globally. Digital Public Goods Alliance (DPGA) is an initiative endorsed by the UN secretary general that facilitates the discovery and deployment of digital public goods. Ricardo Miron, chief technology officer, DPGA, told *ET* that there are currently 38 DPGs that state they have been developed fully (16) or partially (22) in India. There are 54 DPGs that state they have been developed in India at different scales.

SOLVING PROBLEMS, DIGITALLY Kanya Chandra, chief strategy officer of CDPI, said several DPGs are India-based and the pace at which new DPGs are being developed continues to be very high. "India Stack has proven to operate successfully at scale with hundreds of millions of users. It thrived in challenging contexts such as power outages, connectivity gaps, low technical capacity, literacy in remote areas, etc," Chandra said.

Pramod Varma, former architect of Aadhaar, told *ET* that the DPI narrative in last year's G20 highlighted three core areas: identity, data sharing and payments (UPI and Aadhaar-enabled payment system). On the DPI front, India will continue to lead, said Varma, citing the example of Bhashini, an initiative to build a national public digital platform for languages to develop services and products for citizens by leveraging the power of artificial intelligence. "I am confident that the DPI agenda for our internal domestic digital transformation will continue. I don't see any country doing so much digital transformation across sectors, which is very comprehensive, even in other parts of the world," Varma said.

WHEN DPI MEETS AI

DPI thinking can also be used to democratise AI, or only one or two very large companies will end up controlling AI, Varma said. This includes democratising AI's computing infrastructure, for instance with people+ai's Open Cloud Compute project and the government's India AI Compute Capacity, envisioned to erect an AI computing infrastructure by deploying over 10,000 GPUs through strategic public-private collaborations.

It also includes democratising of datasets, for instance, through the government's India AI Datasets Platform that will streamline access to quality non-personal datasets for AI innovation, and also the democratisation of language models.

If India manages to democratise these three — computing infrastructure, data sets and language models — a more vibrant AI innovation ecosystem can be developed, quite like the UPI playground, Varma said, rather than everyone using OpenAI or Google's platforms.

An example of this is Bhashini, which was launched before ChatGPT became popular. "We launched an idea that AI's digital language barrier in India should be removed. AI was used as a tool to bring voice, text translation and optical character recognition into the picture. EkStep and Chennai-based AI4Bharat invested in it as a DPG, and worked with MeitY for the Bhashini mission, which has now become quite popular to remove AI-driven language barriers," Varma explained.

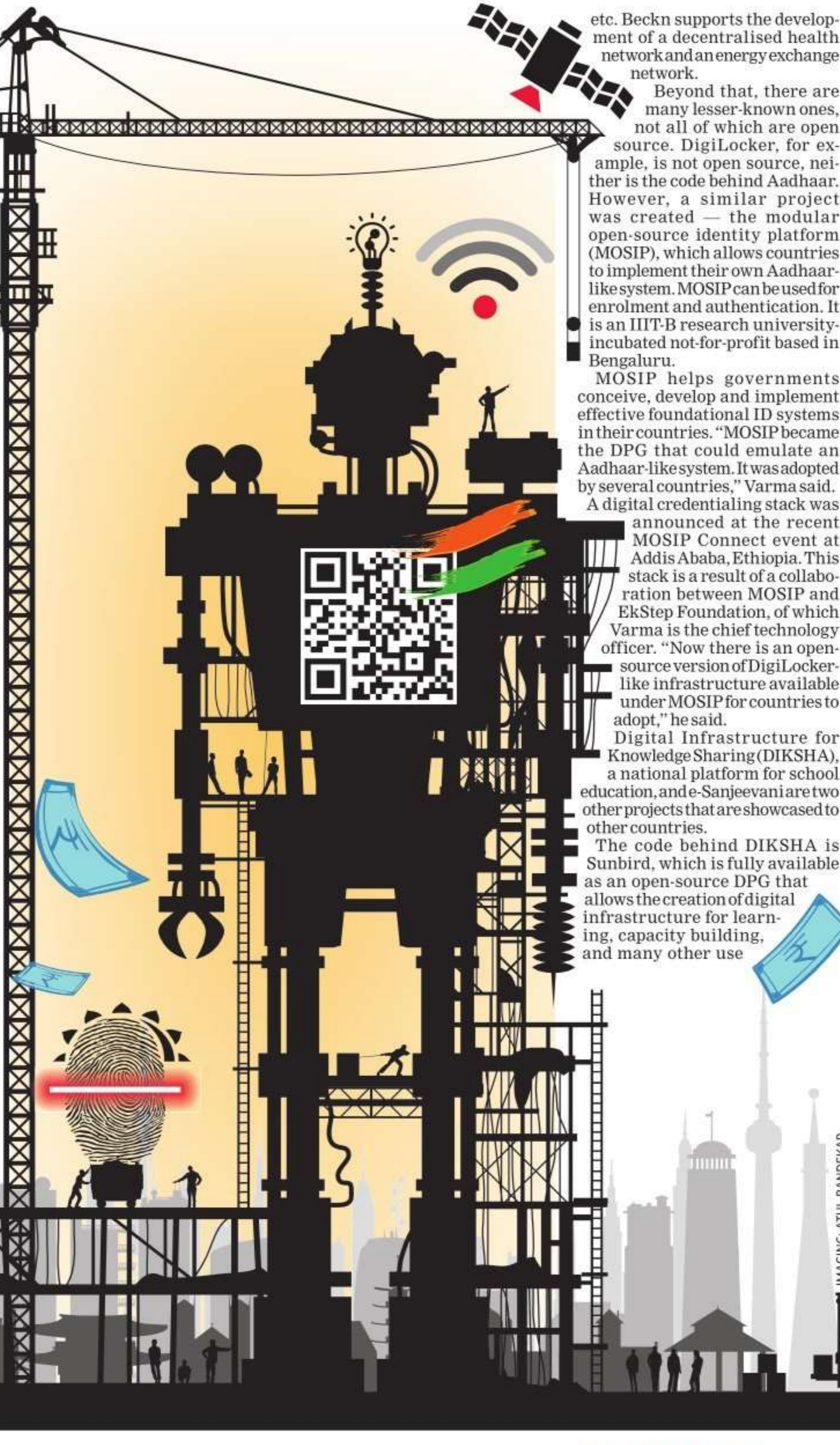
Now, imagine AI being applied to UPI. "UPI will become accessible to another 200 million people because they can make voice-based payments. AI can supercharge our investments — be it ONDC, Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission (health stack, prescription writing, e-Sanjeevani), agriculture or education (DIKSHA)," he said.

PHILANTHROPIC FUNDING

Chandra said India's potential to develop DPGs continues to be substantial, and that they should be given more philanthropic funding and government support to encourage its development.

These projects have emerged due to a collaboration between a range of global philanthropies and donors, such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF), Norwegian Agency for Development (NORAD), CoDevelop Foundation (a pooled fund of the Rockefeller Foundation, BMGF, Wellcome Trust, Nilekani Philanthropies) and others.

Many of these open-source projects have been referenced and deployed in development projects led by the World Bank, United Nations Development Programme, and several national agencies — indicating a large degree of global cooperation.



etc. Beckn supports the development of a decentralised health network and an energy exchange network.

Beyond that, there are many lesser-known ones, not all of which are open source. DigiLocker, for example, is not open source, neither is the code behind Aadhaar. However, a similar project was created — the modular open-source identity platform (MOSIP), which allows countries to implement their own Aadhaar-like system. MOSIP can be used for enrolment and authentication. It is an IIT-B research university-incubated not-for-profit based in Bengaluru.

MOSIP helps governments conceive, develop and implement effective foundational ID systems in their countries. "MOSIP became the DPG that could emulate an Aadhaar-like system. It was adopted by several countries," Varma said. A digital credentialing stack was announced at the recent MOSIP Connect event at Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. This stack is a result of a collaboration between MOSIP and EkStep Foundation, of which Varma is the chief technology officer. "Now there is an open-source version of DigiLocker-like infrastructure available under MOSIP for countries to adopt," he said.

Digital Infrastructure for Knowledge Sharing (DIKSHA), a national platform for school education, and e-Sanjeevani are two other projects that are showcased to other countries.

The code behind DIKSHA is Sunbird, which is fully available as an open-source DPG that allows the creation of digital infrastructure for learning, capacity building, and many other uses.

The account aggregator (AA) network facilitates the sharing of personal and business information like GST transactions, income tax records and bank transaction statements securely and digitally.

The open specifications published by the Sahamati Foundation, a not-for-profit industry alliance of the AA ecosystem, allow other countries to implement consented real-time data sharing or a variant of it. BG Mahesh, chief executive of Sahamati, told *ET* that around three lakh consents are processed daily. The cumulative number of consent requests fulfilled so far has crossed 50 million. Around 80 per cent of consents fulfilled have been used to access credit. Since the launch, AAs have facilitated the credit disbursement of more than ₹20,000 crore, with MSMEs receiving a significant share.

If a consumer or a business provides consent to a licensed AA to ask a financial information provider for data like GST returns, the encrypted data is shared with financial information user like

a bank or a lender, who can determine the creditworthiness of the customer after taking their consent. "We are pleased with the progress of the AA ecosystem and look forward to a faster adoption of use cases by all regulated financial institutions. By 2027, we estimate the amount of data pulled through AA to be nine billion annually," Mahesh said. "Account aggregator apps should be able to tell an individual when their data was shared — for loan, insurance or wealth management. Photocopies of bank statements and PDFs need not be shared. It reduces fraud, data leakage, as data is shared directly between banks, insurance companies and mutual funds without middlemen. Around 150 financial information providers are live as of now, and 50 million bank accounts have been linked on AA."

The code behind Mission

cases. It is listed on the DPGA registry as well. Sunbird is spearheaded by EkStep Foundation, along with many other partners, to fulfil its education mission to enhance access to learning. Sunbird powers the national digital education stack, enabling the creation of learning content, assessments and teacher training programmes.

The code behind Mission

Growing India's digital economy

As per the Digital Public Goods Alliance (DPGA), there are currently 16 DPGs that state they have been developed fully in India, and 22 DPGs that state they have been partially developed in India.

Out of the 54 registered DPGs deployed in India, 61% or 33 have been partially or fully developed in India.

16 DPGs developed fully in India: Care, DIGIT, Everwell Hub, VaccineLedger, Sunbird Obsrv, DICRA, IntelHealth, Sunbird SERVE, Feluda, SPICE, MEDPlat, CREDEBL, Dalgo, Avni, Sunbird, cQube

22 DPGs partially developed in India: Lexisitus, CommCare, Torkel Opsahl Academic EPublisher, Kolibri, Drupal, Android FHIR SDK, Code Your Future, Data exchange agreement protocol suit for auditable, privacy-preserving data transactions in dataspace, Aam Digital, Glific, Modular Open Source Identity Platform, Primero, Uwazi, Fedora Linux, LibreOffice, Bahmni, Mautic, Open Health Stack, Mifos X, Apache Fineract, OpenMRS, OpenSRP

54 DPGs state they have been deployed in India at different scales: Care, DIGIT, Lexisitus, CommCare, Torkel Opsahl Academic EPublisher, Everwell Hub, Rights Tracker, Connect For Life, Janssen Project, Kolibri, Drupal, VaccineLedger, Synthesia, OpenStreetMap, Moodle LMS, farmOS, Open Foris Collect, PlantwisePlus Factsheet Library, Sunbird Obsrv, DICRA, IntelHealth, Orthanc, Sunbird SERVE, Ushahidi, Feluda, GovDirectory, MEDPlat, CREDEBLE, Android FHIR SDK, Data exchange agreement protocol suit for auditable, privacy-preserving data transactions in dataspace, Aam Digital, KoboToolbox, DHIS2, African Storybook, Glific, OpenFn, Dalgo, Avni, MET Norway Weather API, Oky, Sunbird, Uwazi, Fedora Linux, cQube, ODK, LibreOffice, Bahmni, TrueNAS, Mautic, Open Health Stack, Mifos X, Apache Fineract, OpenMRS, RapidPRO

SOURCE: DPGA

Karmayogi, a system for bureaucrats to learn and collaborate, is also built on Sunbird. iGOT Karmayogi is an online learning platform being developed as a part of India Stack for capacity building of government employees.

Sunbird RC also enables the conversion of any certificate into a verifiable credential and the generation of any kind of configurable registry. It is now integrated into other DPGs such as DIVOC, MOSIP, etc.

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The code behind Mission

LEADING IN DPI, NOT DPG

The agriculture ministry is coming out with a stack on what is being planned and reimaged through DPI, and pieces of the puzzle include the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi, an initiative that gives farmers up to ₹6,000 a year as minimum income support.

"However, when it comes to DPGs, India can improve its exports in an institutionalised manner. We don't do it well, frankly," Varma said.

Estonia, for example, has set up and invested in creating a sales-like arm for education, sales and consulting around the world for its X-Road, which is a DPG. "I don't see India doing that level of packaging. Open-sourcing is the best we do, but beyond that, we may not be doing enough. While we speak about India Stack etc, it is not institutionalised propagation," he added.

This is when a few other countries, including China, have full-fledged machineries to sell, convince and fund investing in physical infrastructure and human resources. But India does not have an external-looking digital ambassador, and Varma said we could do with more organised digital diplomacy.

Also important is for India not to be its own competitor. "We should collaborate and fund more MOSIP-kind of projects rather than seeing it as a competition," Varma added.

Today, MOSIP is serving more than 110 million people as a global DPG issuing trusted foundational identifications, currently at different stages of adoption in 17 countries. "We will fragment our ecosystem if DigiLocker sees MOSIP's credential stack as competition. We need to support our independent open-source efforts because they have all originated in India, rather than doing everything through the National Informatics Centre and the ministry of electronics and information technology (MeitY)," he said.

MeitY's DigiLocker is an e-wallet for storing government-issued documents. "We should encourage philanthropy funds and tie-ups with institutions like IIT-B to make them the spokespersons for creating DPGs, rather than the government trying to create, maintain and propagate DPGs," he added.

The government can then leverage the work done by IIT-B, CDPI, EkStep Foundation and eGov Foundation (which developed DIVOC), instead of isolating them.

FUTURE PLANNING

DPI thinking can also be used to democratise AI, or only one or two big companies will end up controlling AI

instant, real-time government-to-person payments to various destination accounts, including mobile money and bank accounts. Additionally, G2Pconnect offers a suite of specifications to make a combination of DPGs or private systems interoperable.

The health claims exchange protocol (HCX) facilitates real-time settlement of health insurance claims via an open reusable specification.

Digital Infrastructure for Verifiable Open Credentialing (DIVOC), built to issue verifiable certificates, offers capabilities for producing verifiable, machine-readable vaccination credentials.

Beckn Protocol, which forms the basis for Open Network for Digital Commerce (ONDC) is open source. It provides an open network for discovery and fulfilment across e-commerce, transport, mobility,

Liv Marte Nordhaug, chief executive, DPGA, told *ET* that, as clear from the figures on contribution, India is a tremendously important country for the DPGA and the DPG ecosystem.

OPEN-SOURCE DPGS IN PLACE Chandra pointed out that a vibrant open-source ecosystem of projects has emerged building on the learnings of India Stack, which countries, departments and agencies around the world may use to implement similar infrastructure.

For example, the eSignet operating system can be used for providing identity verification and single sign-on capabilities on top of any existing digital identity system.

Project Inji supports the development of eWallet or eLocker apps for managing multiple credentials. OpenG2P DPGs facilitate

Apple bites the AI pie

The tech giant's annual developer conference is likely to focus on artificial intelligence



AI GENERATED

AABHAS SHARMA

Microsoft can't stop talking about it. Google doesn't miss a beat to mention it either. Meta gets in overdrive modetalking about it. Even Amazon drops it wherever it can. Yet, Apple curiously avoids it. Or that's what the company has judiciously done so far. But all that might change soon.

The 'it' here is AI and in the last year the hottest buzzword in tech has been conspicuously absent from all things Apple — at least when it comes to talking about it. It's not that Apple's averse to AI. In fact, it's been secretly sprinkling AI magic into its gadgets for years, making them some of the coolest tech toys

on the block.

Still, Apple avoids the term 'artificial intelligence' and prefers 'machine learning', which is AI but with a fancier name. However, all that is expected to change on June 10, 2024 — the day Apple's annual developer conference commences.

ON THE CARDS

Sometimes, perception does matter, and it seems like Apple's been lagging in the AI race. Google and Microsoft are already out there, playing chess with fancy AI chatbots, while Apple's still fiddling with Siri. However, forget creating its own chatty AI companion, Apple is supposedly cooking up a bunch of new AI-powered features to make your iPhone life easier. Whispers suggest Apple might even team up with the big guys in AI — Google, OpenAI, or Baidu.



The headline act of WWDC is generally iOS — the software update which powers billions of iPhones across the world. Rumour has it that Apple will heavily integrate AI into Messages, make Siri smarter than ever (though don't hold your breath on that), update its iWork suite of apps with AI, and more. The upcoming iOS 18 update is being called the iPhone's biggest makeover ever, and AI could be at the heart of it all. Don't be surprised, though, if Apple still doesn't utter the two magic words as frequently as Google, Microsoft and Meta do.

XAI'S GROK TO BE ENABLED FOR ALL PREMIUM X USERS

Billionaire Elon Musk took to his social media platform X

to make the announcement earlier this week. The Grok AI bot was so far available only to Premium+ subscribers. xAI is also set to launch Grok version 1.5 to early testers and existing users on X in the coming days. The upgraded bot is said to have enhanced performance with regards to coding and math-related tasks.

WHITE HOUSE WANTS SAFEGUARDS FOR FEDERAL AI USE BY DECEMBER

US federal agencies will have to publish lists of AI systems they use and how they manage risks, appoint a 'chief AI officer', etc.

"When government agencies use AI tools, we will now require them to verify that those tools do not endanger the rights and safety of the American people," US vice-president Kamala Harris said. The administration wants this to serve as a model for global action.

AMAZON CONCLUDED ITS \$4-BILLION INVESTMENT IN OPENAI RIVAL ANTHROPIC

E-commerce and cloud major Amazon announced the second tranche of its investment in AI unicorn startup Anthropic, committing \$2.75 billion in it, in a bid to up its AI edge. It had previously invested \$1.25 billion in September.

— Compiled by Annapurna Roy

PICS: AFP, GETTY IMAGES



John Galliano was born Juan Carlos Galliano-Gallien to working-class parents in Gibraltar

A Moral Conflict at the Heart of a Galliano Chronicle

One of the fashion world's greatest talents went from stardom to hitting rock bottom

The New York Times

What moral lapses should genius be permitted? John Galliano, the bad boy of fashion, seemed determined to find out.

He was a fashion-world Icarus: A prodigious talent who soared high, then crashed to earth in 2011, losing his reputation and his position as creative director of Dior, after a series of highly publicised drunken, racist and anti-semitic tirades. He would rise again, but the path back was steep.

A film, directed by Kevin Macdonald, chronicles this roller coaster of a career, while exposing some of the less beautiful side of the fashion industry — the toll it exacts from even those it most glorifies.

RIISING STAR

Galliano proved himself a genius early on, designing not just clothes, but hallucinogenic visions, alive with colour, movement, texture and, above all, stories. Skyrocketing out of Saint Martin's School of Art in London in 1984, he produced a dazzling graduation collection called 'Les Incroyables', inspired by an 18th century French fashion movement. In the film, renowned fashion journalist Hamish Bowles calls it one of the five greatest runway shows he's ever seen.

Galliano's star rose quickly. He attracted backers, key editors, a slinky entourage and a bevy of glamazons. After a stint at Givenchy, Galliano ascended to the jewel in the crown: Dior.

In Galliano's hands, fashion blossomed into alternate universes. For one Dior collection, he reimagined ancient Egypt, dreaming up golden pyramidal dresses, gem-encrusted makeup, jacked head-dresses, Nefertiti crowns and Tutankhamen masks.

For his 'clochard' (or 'beggar') show in 2000, Galliano drew inspiration, he said, from homeless people he saw while jogging along the Seine river. The collection featured clothes resembling piles of newspapers, accessories made out of objects like whiskey bottles. The show ignited mass demonstrations and accusations of cruel indifference to social problems,



For one Dior collection, he reimagined ancient Egypt



'Les Incroyables', inspired by an 18th century French fashion movement

For his 'clochard' (or 'beggar') show, Galliano drew inspiration, he said, from homeless people he saw while jogging

TROUBLED PAST

John Galliano, the darling of the international beau monde, was actually the invention of the boy born Juan Carlos Galliano-Gallien, to working-class parents in Gibraltar. Aware of being gay from early childhood, he kept his sexuality a secret. Juan Carlos took refuge in make-believe and drawing. "It was nicer in my head," Galliano explains.

Different kinds of pressures preceded Galliano's now-famous, drunken outbursts in a Paris bar: "You are so ugly. I don't want to see you," he said to one woman, using anti-semitic language and insulting her clothes and body. In a second incident, Galliano declared, "I love Hitler," adding, "People like you would be dead today."

Today, Galliano, now sober, blames drugs and alcohol for these episodes, claiming to have no recollection of them. He has been through a trial, gone to rehab and met with rabbis,

Social media is full of influencers promoting fitness fads, but following the wrong regimen may be unhelpful or even dangerous. Here's how to separate fads from fiction



The New York Times

A new trending workout seems to emerge periodically, almost like a flavour of the month for exercises. Each one guarantees a healthier, stronger, even happier you. While there's no doubt that a vigorous and regular fitness regimen will help in improving your stamina, in the same way that a healthier diet and better sleep will have you feeling more energised, a lot depends on the details of each routine.

For instance, there's a viral challenge named "75 Hard" which promises to improve your mental toughness if you work out for 45 minutes twice a day — while also sticking to a diet and drinking four litres of water a day. Another, known as 12-3-20 (not to be confused with 12-3-30 or 25-7-2), claims to transform your body through a cardiovascular workout.

Often, however, these strategies are "misleading at best and dangerous at worst", said Victoria Sekely, a New York-based physical therapist, who cautioned that they may not only leave you feeling worse but may also lead to injury or burnout.

Here's how you can identify which exercise fads will help you reach your goals and which may set you up for disappointment.

A REALISTIC STARTING POINT Many fads are designed by people who already have a routine in place, and so, may not be suitable for beginners. Influencers don't know where you are starting from. "The person on social media giving you advice doesn't necessarily have any background other than their own anecdotal experience," said Heather Milton, a New York-based clinical exercise physiologist.

If you have never worked with heavy weights, for example, doing a daily kettlebell swing ladder could cause injury. And though some plans do not dictate the type or intensity of exercise, starting a plan involving an hour of exercise a day can be overwhelming. Instead, Milton recommends starting simply, with 150 minutes of moderate activity per week. And more importantly, define for yourself what is moderate, rather than taking someone else's word for it. "Each person has individual needs based on genetics, medical history, injury history and body type," Milton said. These factors affect our

ability to do different exercises and determines how beneficial they will be, she said.

FOCUS ON THE PROCESS

Viral workout plans often work off a simple equation: Do a certain activity for a certain number of days to achieve a certain result.

Experts call these results — faster running time or more pullups — a performance goal (or end goal). But to get there, focus on what they call process goals: Smaller, achievable steps, such as improving technique, said Carla Meijen, an Amsterdam-based sport and exercise psychologist.

One process goal is listening to your body. Bringing awareness to your workouts is far more important for longevity and resilience than staying on a rigid



course in the short term, experts say. If you find yourself having an off day and slogging through a workout, instead of berating yourself, look at it as a chance to build a process goal by working on mental toughness.

Many fads are designed by people who already have a routine in place, and so, may not be suitable for beginners. Influencers don't know where you are starting from

HAVE REST DAYS

For many programs bound by the number of days, the challenge is a daily commitment, no days off. If you skip a workout in the "75 Hard" challenge or do not follow your diet, for instance, you're supposed to start over from Day 1.

Although this might work for some people, most need time off for their body and mind to recover, Sekely said. "You can't build muscle, or get stronger or faster without rest and recovery in the picture," she said. "It's physiologically how our bodies work."

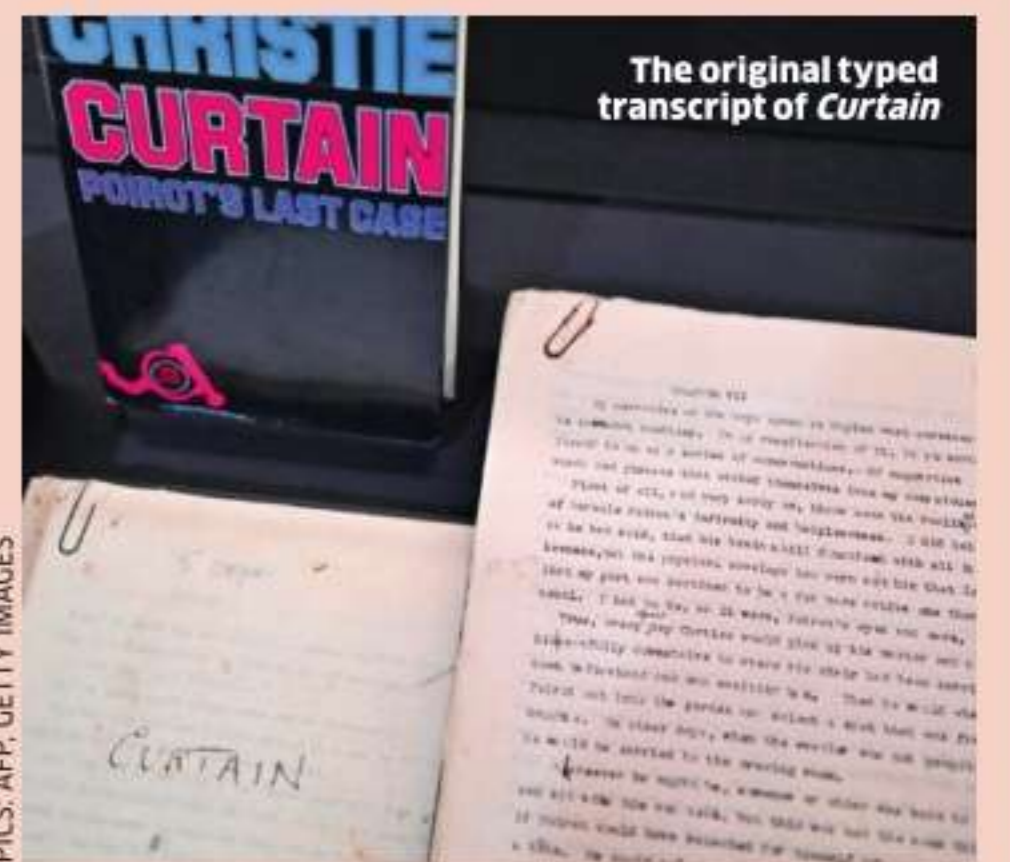
HOW TO JUDGE SUCCESS?

Before and after photos can help many plans go viral. But be wary using your appearance as a measure of success. There is no singular "fit" body type and our bodies do not react to exercise in the same way, Milton said.

More sustainable goals are about how you feel — aiming to get stronger, build endurance, gain flexibility, etc. But much of this comes with patience and steady work, which are not usually the emphasis of a fitness fad.

"Habits are made by doing really simple, easy things, slowly introducing them into your way of living," Sekely said. "When we let go of perfection, we can actually make progress."

Poirot Farewell Unveiled At New Crime Exhibition



The original typed transcript of Curtain

A manuscript of the final Hercule Poirot novel — in which the fabled Belgian detective dies — which was kept for decades in a bank vault, is on display in a new exhibition that delves into the heart of crime fiction.

The cover of the fragile manuscript has the book's title, *Curtain*, written in capital letters by author Agatha Christie, along with her name and address — Greenway House, Devon, southwest England.

Christie wrote it in the early 1940s, at the height of World War II, in case she didn't survive. "She wrote it as a nest egg for her daughter Rosalind, 'something to cheer you up when you come back from the funeral'," said Nicola Upson, curator of the exhibition, titled 'Murder by the Book'.

As it turned out, Christie went on to write many more Poirot novels before her death in 1976, just four months after *Curtain* was published.

But with the final instalment already written, fears that Poirot's demise might be leaked dictated that the manuscript be kept under lock and key.



Agatha Christie wrote *Curtain* in the early 1940s, at the height of World War II, in case she didn't survive

"It's Poirot's last case and she wanted that to come out after her own death and for the royalties from it to benefit her daughter," said Upson.

Poirot's fate, when it was finally revealed in 1975, was seen as so culturally significant that it was marked by a front-page obituary in *The New York Times*. "It was published four months before her own death in January 1976, so when you read Poirot's final words, they do read a bit like Christie's farewell to her readers, there's a poignancy to it," Upson added.

— AFP

Crispy Tofu For Your Next Dinner Party

Make the tofu's true flavour shine with this simple recipe

The New York Times

Method

1. Drain the tofu, then slice each block crosswise into eight even slabs (so you have 16 in all).

2. Place on a sheet pan or plate in a single layer, cover with a clean kitchen towel and freeze until firm, up to 24 hours. Remove from the freezer and let thaw completely.

3. When ready to cook, place another sheet pan in the oven on the middle rack, then heat the oven to 425 degrees.

4. Pat the tofu dry with the towel, gently pressing on each slab to squeeze out some of the water within.

5. When the oven is heated, remove the hot sheet pan and

- Ingredients**
- 2 (400-gm) blocks of firm or extra-firm tofu
 - 1/4 cup canola or vegetable oil
 - Coarse kosher salt or flaky sea salt
 - Your favourite dipping sauce (optional)



drizzle all over with the oil. Add the tofu slabs in a single layer. (You should hear them sizzle.)

6. Bake for 35 to 40 minutes, flipping the tofu and rotating the pan halfway through, until deeply crisp and golden brown on both sides. Season immediately with salt and serve hot, with your choice of dipping sauce, if you'd like.

Try Going Soft on Eggs this Easter

FOOD FABLES



VIKRAM DOCTOR

One of the most amazing pieces of German engineering is a bell-shaped metal mould attached to a rod with a mobile steel ball. The mould is held over the narrow end of a soft-boiled egg, the ball is raised to the other end of the rod and released. It hits the mould with a force of 0.6867 Newtons, just enough to crack the eggshell so the top comes off cleanly and the

contents can be dug out and eaten.

Germans aren't alone in their love for soft-boiled eggs; Singapore's *kopitiam* (coffee-shop) style eggs are served with a dash of soy sauce and pepper. France has many recipes structured around *oeufs mollets*, most notably one which suspends them in savoury jelly. Scotch eggs envelop them with minced meat. Japanese ramen includes a soft-boiled egg whose creaminess subtly helps enrich the broth.

Indians eat eggs scrambled with onions, tomatoes and coriander, or stir-fried with *kheema*. We hard-boil and cook them in curries. We make them into omelettes, stuff them into rolls, or dunk them in gravy. We fry and serve them with

cheese and chillies on toast in the newly-popular Eggs Kejriwal. We make bizarre variations (fried with Fanta!) that are condemned or celebrated on social media.

What we don't like is to just soft-boil them. The British made

soft-boiled eggs in India since they were seen as nutritious for children. They were served in egg-cups with toast strips, called soldiers, to dunk in the runny yolk. They lingered in the army and in some families, like upper-class Parsis, but this tradition has also



PICS: NYT, GETTY IMAGES

faded. It has been years since I've seen an egg-cup in use.

In *Eat Not This Flesh* (1994), Frederick J Simoons's study of food taboos, he notes that "though raw eggs are offered to snakes and snake gods in South India, even people who eat eggs are revolted by the thought of consuming a raw egg or a soft-boiled one". We prefer eating eggs which are as transformed from that state as possible, ideally invisible in cakes, or broken up or hard-boiled. Just not too moistly reminiscent of the animal fluids that formed it.

In *The Home Book of Indian Cookery* (1955), written by Leon Petit, a European chef who worked in India, he notes that "in India, eggs come in very different sizes".

This would complicate making soft-boiled eggs since they depend on precise timing for their particular size. Kurush Dalal, who combines being an anthropologist with running a catering company, suggests another reason for the aversion: "Eggs take time to collect

and bring to market in India, increasing chances of contamination. It's simply safer to cook them well.

The growth of the poultry industry, while fraught with problems, has brought standardisation in sizes and safer supply chains. With basic precautions and by carefully watching the clock, you can make a good and safe soft-boiled egg. Those repulsed by egginess should consider that the longer eggs cook, the more hydrogen sulfide they release, the source of that off-putting smell.

A soft-boiled egg has little eggy aroma. What it does have is plenty of luscious, creamy texture that is wonderful with just salt and pepper, but also serves as a great backdrop for other strong-tasting ingredients — truffles and caviar for those who can afford

them, but even just herbs or cheese are great. Padaria Prazeres, an excellent, newish café and bakery in Goa makes a sublime egg sandwich with just soft-boiled eggs, mayonnaise, mustard and a few other ingredients, served oozing out of slices of good bread.

Bomras, Goa's beloved Burmese restaurant, also makes a version of Scotch egg with a spicy pork coating that conceals a perfectly set soft-boiled egg. A vegetarian version could easily be made, maybe with coarsely crushed cooked dal. Soft-boiled eggs could make *khichdi* even creamier and more sustaining. There are so many ways Indians could adapt this technique, and Easter, with all its egg symbolism, might be the time to try.

