





MODI SEEKING VOTES FOR SHAH AS HE WILL RETIRE AFTER TURNING 75 IN 2025: KEJRIWAL

# Modi Will Jail All Opposition Leaders And Then End Politics of BJP Netas: Kejriwal

Our Political Bureau

New Delhi: A day after Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal got interim bail to campaign for the Lok Sabha elections, the AAP convenor accused Prime Minister Narendra Modi of attempting to "crush" not only the opposition but also his own party's leadership to propagate the idea of "One Nation, One Leader".

Addressing a press conference, which resembled an election rally with supporters crowding AAP headquarters on Deen Dayal Upadhyay Marg, Kejriwal said: "Why did you arrest Kejriwal? With this arrest you have given a message to the country — if I can arrest Kejriwal, I can arrest you also, I can arrest anyone."

He said the Prime Minister was on a very dangerous mission. "This mission is called 'One Na-



**POLL CALL 2024** Kejriwal and Mann during a road show in New Delhi—IANS

tion One Leader". He wants to finish all leaders through this. The entire opposition will be put behind bars and then he will finish the politics of BJP leaders," he said, adding: "If they win the election, you take it in writing on an affidavit from me, Mamata didi will be behind bars, Uddhav Thackeray, Tejaswi Yadav, MK

Stalin — everybody will be behind bars. I am here to beg from 140 crore — save my country, save my India from this dictatorship."

Planked by the top leadership of his party, including Punjab chief minister Bhagwant Mann, Rajya Sabha MP Sandeep Pathak and Delhi ministers Gopal Rai, Atishi and Saurabh Bharadwaj, Kejriwal said: "They ask us who is the PM candidate of the INDIA bloc? Today, I ask the BJP — who will be your PM? Next year on September 17, Modi ji will be 75 years old. Modi ji had made a rule that anyone who is above 75 will retire. They retired Advani ji, Sumitra Mahajan ji, Murlu Manohar Joshi ji

and Yashwant Sinha ji. If their government comes to power, within two months they will dispose of Yogi. Then who will become PM? Amit Shah. Modi is not seeking votes for himself but for Amit Shah. But will Amit Shah fulfil the guarantees of Modi?"

Trying to address the BJP's demand that he quit and not try to run the government from jail, Kejriwal said: "It wasn't any greed for power or chief minister's chair that I didn't quit. It is my fight against the dictatorial powers. It will become so easy for them — they lose an election, imprison the CM and make him quit and the government falls. In fact, Hemant Soren ji shouldn't have resigned. He should have run the government from jail."

Kejriwal began the day with a visit to a Hanuman temple with his wife. This was followed by the press conference. Later, he held roadshows in Mehrauli and Krishna Nagar.

Shah will take over from Modi the next year; Yogi will be disposed of like Advani, Joshi and others, says Delhi CM

## Will Not Visit Raj Bhavan, Guv Must Resign: West Bengal CM

Our Political Bureau

Kolkata: Demanding the resignation of West Bengal governor CV Ananda Bose, chief minister Mamata Banerjee said on Saturday that she would never go to the Raj Bhawan or sit next to Bose as she felt "sitting beside him is a sin".

Banerjee's statement comes in the backdrop of an allegation of molestation levelled against him by a female employee of the Raj Bhawan. Speaking at an election rally at Hooghly, the Trinamool Congress supremo said she would never visit the governor at the Raj Bhawan. "If he calls me, I will stand on the road and talk to him," she said, adding: "Hon'ble governor, you must resign. Who are you to torture a woman?"

Everything is not out yet, the CM said, referring to the allegation. "I have received a full video and a pen drive. It is full of scandals, several scandals," she claimed.

## THIRD EYE

### Left Searching For Space

After returning to Congress from BJP on LS poll eve, prominent politician Chaudhury Birender Singh and his then MP son Brijendra Singh found themselves in limbo. After winning his Hissar seat on BJP symbol, ex-IAS babu Brijendra was supposed to receive a Congress ticket, but AICC Congress gave it to Hooda loyalist Jai Prakash. A little bird said neither AICC nor Haryana party brass supported Brijendra when Congress CEC chose Haryana candidates.

### All Eyes on Maken's Move

AAP and Congress supporters in Delhi are asking when Ajay Maken, a prominent Delhi Congress leader, will launch a full campaign for the seven LS candidates. Since Maken, a former Delhi CM and now a Karnataka Rajya Sabha MP, was a staunch critic of AAP and CM Kejriwal and had commented on the 'Sheesh Mahal scam' on renovating CM Kejriwal's official residence, they are waiting to see how much the AAP-Congress deal has reformed him and how much his much-laboured Rajya Sabha entry has 'mellowed' him.

### Wearing Faith on Sleeves

Sharad Pawar and his family have never worn their faith on their sleeves throughout their decades in power. Sharad Pawar and daughter Supriya Sule claim progressivism. Anti-superstition groups in the state have used the Pawar family as poster boys. At least till now. Sule told a campaign narrative about a snake that landed on her father as he slept and made him Chief Minister eight days later. Naturally, progressive family members had crimson faces.

CITING DIFFERENT REASONS TO SUPPORT UBT, MINORITIES SEEN SUPPORTING THE PARTY ACROSS THE STATE

## Muslims Shun Apathy for Uddhav Sena

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Pune: In February, while addressing a party worker meeting in Mumbai, former Maharashtra chief minister Uddhav Thackeray said the Muslim community is coming with Shiv Sena because their brand of Hindutva is different from BJP's brand of Hindutva. "Our Hindutva strives to light stoves in the homes while BJP's Hindutva works on burning houses," he said.

Three months later, his words have found resonance on the ground. For the first time, Muslims are siding in large numbers with Uddhav Thackeray with many saying they feel reassured of equal treatment under his faction of Shiv Sena.

Sena founder Bal Thackeray was called a 'Hindu Hriday Samrat'. Now, his son is emerging as the new symbol of inclusive politics in Maharashtra, beating even Congress.

Abdul Karim Salar, president of Iqra Educational Society in Jalgaon that runs several educational institutes, said there is a change in Muslim

perspective vis a vis Uddhav Thackeray. "Bala Saheb Thackeray used to give inciting speeches which made Muslims uncomfortable. With Uddhav Thackeray I have felt that he never spoke anything to incite communal conflicts," he said.

In Jalgaon Lok Sabha seat, BJP's Smita Uday Wagh is pitted against Karan Pawar of Shiv Sena (UBT) faction.

Salar feels that for the first time Muslims would line up to vote for Uddhav Thackeray's Shiv Sena in Jalgaon. "The recent statements by the PM and this so-called numbers of increasing Muslim population have not gone well within the community. Last time even a percentage of Muslims voted for the BJP. But this is not going to be the case (this time)," he said.

The rising popularity of Uddhav Thackeray among Muslims can be felt across the state. People from the minority community cite different reasons for it.

Mohammad Asif, Malegaon central zone president of Shiv Sena (UBT), is an old Shiv Sainik. When Eknath Shinde parted ways with the party, he went to meet Uddhav Thackeray. "I was the vice president of Shiv Sena minority wing. I told Uddhav ji to restructure the minority wing. He said there will not be such a wing as there can't be any division among Shiv Sainiks. This touched my heart," Asif said.

Malegaon comes under the Dhule parliamentary seat where BJP is pitted against Congress. "Even if there was a Shiv Sena candidate, people from minority communities would have voted in large numbers," he added.

Khalil Abbas, a social activist based in Malegaon who also writes for Urdu newspapers, said Muslims in the area have moved ahead from the Malegaon

blast of 2008. "There is some resentment among the people as those accused are out. But society has moved beyond this," he said.

According to Abbas, there are reasons for Muslim community to repose faith in Uddhav Thackeray. "When he was the CM, there was this controversy about the use of loudspeakers for Azaan. Despite several allegations, he didn't ban use of loudspeakers. This was a surprise from Muslim community and they took it positively," he said.

Abdul Hussain Malik, 31, who runs a steel furniture shop in Dhule, said Uddhav Thackeray speaks of 'Sarva dharma sambhav'. "Sabko sath le kar chalne ki baat karte hain (He talks of inclusivity taking everyone along)," he said.

Malik recalls that during the Palghar lynching incident in 2020 when two Sadhus got killed, several political parties tried to give it a communal colour. "As a chief minister, he stood firm with reality and denied any communal angle in the case. We felt good as someone is there who considers every citizen as equal," he said.

KUMAR SUCCESSFULLY BROUGHT UPPER CASTES, PARTICULARLY BHUMIHAR, AND OBC UNDER ONE PLATFORM IN MUNGER

## Munger to Test Nitish Kumar's Hold on OBCs, Especially Own Caste Kurmi

RJD has fielded a strong OBC here in Anita Devi, wife of convicted criminal Ashok Mahto, against NDA's Rajiv Ranjan

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Maranchi (Munger): The Munger Lok Sabha seat is all set to test the popularity of chief minister Nitish Kumar among the OBCs, particularly his own caste Kurmi.

Reason: Opposition RJD has fielded a strong OBC candidate here in Anita Devi, wife of convicted criminal Ashok Mahto. Mahto is a Kurmi and Devi a Dhanuk. Dhanuk and Kurmi are a socio-politically united combination.

Now, out of the five assembly seats under the present Munger Lok Sabha seat, two — Barh and Mokama — were part of the erstwhile Barh Lok Sabha constituency represented by Nitish Kumar for five terms in the past.

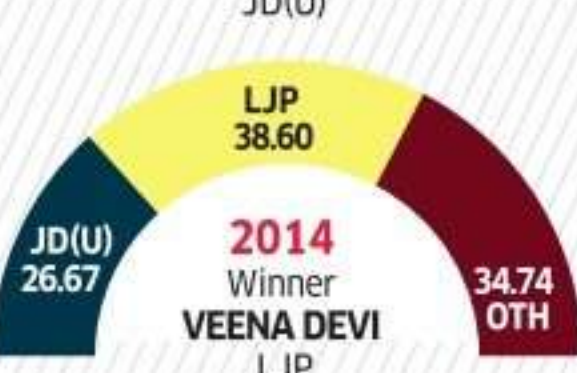
Kumar successfully brought upper castes, particularly Bhumihar, and a section of the OBC under one political platform.

RJD is now looking to make a dent into this caste combination.

The NDA candidate, sitting MP Rajiv Ranjan aka Lalan Singh, who is close to Nitish Kumar and belongs to the Bhumihar caste, is said to be spending sleepless nights to keep intact his party's support base in this constituency. Singh was elected to the Lok

### MUNGER Lok Sabha Results

**VOTE SHARE (%)**



Sabha from here in 2009 and 2019 and was also the national president of the JDU (U) in the past.

"RJD aims to break the political combination of the voters of Bhumihar and Kurmi castes in the 2024 LS polls," one Tarun Kumar from Maranchi area of Mokama town told ET. "Nitishji's development model united them. His development model always remains helpful to bring a strong political combination of upper castes, Kurmi-Dhanuk and most backward castes in this area accommodating Nalanda, Nawada and Munger," he said.

RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav, during his election campaign here, has already given enough indications about his party's attempt to consolidate OBC votes in favour of Anita Devi.

So, JDU (U) is not leaving anything to chance for protecting its social support base here. BJP's prominent OBC faces such as Shambhu Sharan Patel and several JDU (U) leaders including Harish Sahni, Madan, Sahni, Rampriti Mandal, and Damodar Raut are camping in Munger LS constituency to keep intact NDA's

social support base.

JDU (U) is focussing on MBC voters who also matter in this seat. The party has tasked MLC Neeraj Kumar to camp in Mokama. On Friday, Neeraj was busy in Maranchi area to mobilise MBC voters. He met several women voters, gathered at a shop, who were unhappy with the JDU for not getting the piped water distribution networks in areas dominated by MBCs.

Neeraj gave patient hearing to their problems. He immediately talked to the officers concerned and assured them that they would soon get a water connection. Neeraj also reminded them of the contribution of the CM in the socio-political empowerment of the MBC voters. "Now, people from the MBCs get elected to various posts in the Panchayati and local bodies. You have a special place under the Nitish government," he told the women voters. Talking to ET, Neeraj said there is no place for "caste and criminalisation" in Munger.

"Apart from the development model of Nitish Kumar, the rule of law matters for voters here," he said.



## Arjun Munda Facing Another Cliffhanger in This Reserved Seat

Union minister's principal challenger is Congressman Kalicharan Munda

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Khunti: "He is sitting at home now. There is no construction work currently, and he doesn't hold a regular job," said Krishna Puri, as she prepared an omelette at her makeshift roadside 'dhaba' at Bichna village, about 70 km from Ranchi. Her husband, a mason, has been out of job for more than a month, and they rely on her only source of income—the dhaba.

She thought long and hard when asked about the government schemes. "Piped water?" she said. "No. Housing?" "Yes, I filled the form under Awas scheme a number of times. But now the state government has come

up with a new scheme and we will surely get it," she said.

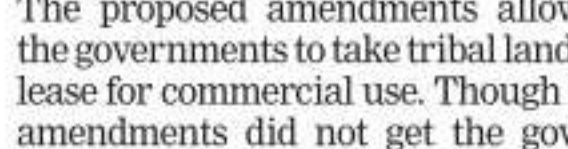
Khunti, the epicentre of the Pathalgadi movement, which saw tribals assert their right to land between 2016 and 2020, presents a challenging electoral turf — central minister Arjun Munda is fighting to protect BJP's track record; his principal challenger Congressman Kalicharan Munda is contesting to save his family legacy; and expelled JMM former MLA Basant Longa and Pathalgadi activist Babita Kachchap are queering the poll pitch.

The ST reserved constituency has been at the heart of a number of key announcements of the Modi government, including the PM Janjati Adivasi Nyaya Maha Abhiyan (JANMAN) scheme which is particularly for the vulnerable tribal groups (PVTGs). It has also been a showcase constituency since it is home to Birsamunda's village Ulihatu, which is about 90 minutes' drive from Ranchi.

What reverberates the most till now is the Pathalgadi movement, which

### Khunti Lok Sabha Results

**VOTE SHARE (%)**



saw stone plaques come up outside villages, declaring them sovereign territory and prohibiting the entry of outsiders. This resistance continued when the Raghubar Das-led BJP government in the state sought to amend the Chhota Nagpur Tenancy Act and the Santhal Pargana Tenancy Act. The proposed amendments allowed the governments to take tribal land on lease for commercial use. Though the amendments did not get the govern-

nor's assent, the region still bears the scars of the crackdown on activists.

"No party has done anything here for us. If the BJP government tried to take our land, Congress and JMM have not said a word on this," said Avinash (name changed), a tribal who did not want his village to be identified. "They haven't moved to withdraw cases against tribals registered by the BJP government."

This sentiment may get Kachchap some votes as she is being seen as the voice of the tribals fighting for their "Jal, Jangal, Zameen".

"The poverty is visible as the entire constituency is dependent on farming. Prakash, a resident of Khunti, said, "We have fields, but since the region does not have ample water, we grow only one crop. We cannot subsist on that for the rest of the year."

The situation is forcing farmers to turn to cannabis farming, which is illegal. Another villager admitted that it happens, but quickly added, "We

that if we take action our vote bank will get antagonized," Modi said.

May 11 also marks the anniversary of the Pokhran-II nuclear tests. Modi recalled the event and its impact.

"On this day, 26 years ago, the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government conducted the nuclear tests at Pokhran, showing how a patriotic dispensation functions," he said.

Former union minister Mani Shankar Aiyar had said in April that Pakistan should be treated with caution as it is also a nuclear power. Congress has distanced itself from his remarks.

During his election campaign, Modi also slammed Odisha Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik, saying he is throwing a challenge that the BJD leader will not be able to name the districts of the state. He said the people have suffered for several years under BJD rule and sought "just five years" to set things right in Odisha. The state is also holding its Assembly polls along with the 21 Lok Sabha seats.



BCCL

terror attacks," the prime minister said at a public meeting in Odisha. Campaigning in Odisha, Modi held election rallies in Kandhamal, Bolangir and Bargarh. He also addressed a rally in Chatra, Jharkhand.

"The country cannot forget that instead of teaching a lesson to terrorists, Congress used to hold negotiations with them. They did not have the courage to act against the perpetrators. And why? Because Congress and INDI Alliance felt

SANDIPAN BHUMRE HAS BEEN FIELDIED BY SENA (SHINDE)

## AIMIM MP Jaleel Tries to Keep Seat From Khaire of UBT

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Aurangabad: For over four decades, Chandrakant Khaire raised the slogan—Khan pahije ki baan pahije—to project himself as a Hindutva leader out to protect the interests of the community in the communally-sensitive Lok Sabha seat of Chhatrapati Sambhaji Nagar (formerly Aurangabad).

The slogan—meaning do you want a Khan or do you want a bow and arrow—did seem to work, for Khaire won four Lok Sabha terms from 1999 to 2019 as a nominee of the (undivided) Shiva Sena, which had the bow and arrow symbol.

The polarisation of the electorate though did not favour him in the 2019 election, which he lost to All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) candidate Imtiaz Jaleel.

Khaire and Jaleel are once again pitted against each other, but this time the dynamics have changed.

Khaire has ditched his pet slogan and turned 'secular'.

"He came here and told us that we should forget whatever has happened in the past," Sayed Anis, who runs a provision store in Moti Karanja area of Aurangabad city, said referring to the communal clashes the city suffered in the past.

Khaire is contesting the polls this time as a nominee of Shiv Sena (UBT).

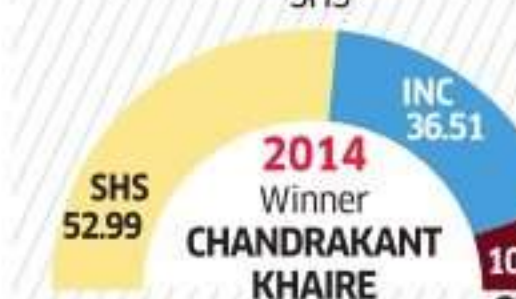
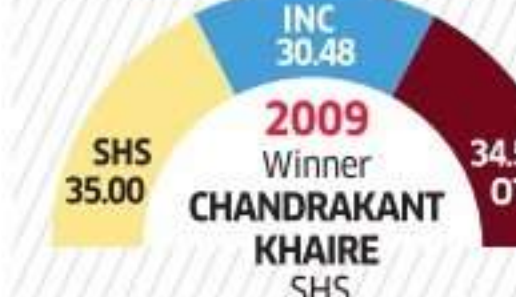
Khaire suffered a narrow defeat in 2019, losing to Jaleel by around 4,500 votes. The defeat was largely seen as an aberration as the Hindu community vote that Khaire counted on got divided between him and Harshvardhan Jadhav, a former MLA from Kannad. Jaleel, on the other hand, also got the dalit community votes as he had fought the election in alliance with Prakash Ambedkar-led Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi.

The presence of two more prominent candidates has also turned the contest multicornered this time. Jadhav is contesting as an independent and state minister Sandipan Bhumre has been fielded by Shiv Sena (Eknath Shinde).

While Khaire is confident that he would be able to defeat Jaleel this time around, things have changed considerably on the ground. Jaleel has now made inroads into the constituency and people across the board are lauding his work.

### AURANGABAD Lok Sabha Results

**VOTE SHARE (%)**



"In so many years we haven't got an MP like Jaleel, he is building a 400-bed hospital in Aurangabad. He is approachable, he is unlike other politicians," said Dharmapal Awastharmol, a resident of Satara Parisar.

When quizzed on Jaleel's AIMIM being accused of playing communal politics, Awastharmol says, "He is the right man in the wrong party".

Yusuf Ahmed, who runs a water cooler shop in Lakadmandi, said Jaleel has done good work.

Sayed Anis from Moti Karanja area, however, has a different take. "He has not done any work on roads here. Yes, he has done roads in other areas but not here. We have not found him approachable," said Anis.

While the Shiv Sena has fielded Bhumre, he does not have a connect in the constituency and is seen as an outsider. Bhumre, however, is relying on the fact that of the six assembly constituencies that form the Chhatrapati Sambhaji Nagar Lok Sabha constituency, three have Shiv Sena MLAs and two have BJP MLAs.

Former independent MLA Harshvardhan Jadhav has again muddied the matters but he may not get the same margin—283,000 votes—that he got in 2019. The majority of the votes he secured in 2019 were from the Maratha community, which is now miffed with the BJP, and may vote for Khaire now.



Prestige Estates CEO Resigns, Co Revamps Senior Management

Our Bureau

Mumbai | Bengaluru: Realty developer Prestige Estates has rejiggered its senior management following the resignation of chief executive Venkata Narayana K, who is moving out to start a real estate fund.

Narayana had assumed the role of the CEO in August 2017. Prior to that he was its chief financial officer (CFO) and company secretary.

The company named Amit Mor as the group CFO.

No replacement has been announced for Narayana, but it appointed business heads for each vertical and geography.

Swaroop Anish has been named executive director and CEO of the residential segment & business development, while Juggy Marwaha will be the CEO of the office segment and Mohammed Ali will head the retail segment as its CEO.

Other appointments include Suresh Singaravelu (executive director & CEO, hospitality segment), Tariq Ahmed (executive director & CEO, West India), Nayeem Noor (executive director, Liaison), V Gopal (executive director, projects and planning) and T Arvind Pai (executive director, legal).

The next generation of the promoter's family is actively involved in the business and will shape its future, the company said in a news release.

Executive director Faiz Rezwan is responsible for overseeing construction and execution of projects, including key aspects such as procurement, contracting and value engineering.

Zayd Noaman, also an executive director, is tasked with business development and will oversee corporate finance and strategic investments.

The Bengaluru-based real estate firm has completed 288 projects spanning a developable area of 172 million square feet. It also has 56 ongoing projects, for a total developable area of 86 million sq. ft.

Two M3M Group Cos Denied Land Parcels in Noida for Poor Pricing

Our Bureau

New Delhi: The Uttar Pradesh government has cancelled the allotment of two land parcels in Noida to M3M Group subsidiaries Lavish Buildmart and Skyline Propcon, saying the companies were allotted the land at a "non-competitive rate".

M3M had paid over ₹1,000 crore for the land parcels in Noida's Sector 72 and Sector 94.

The move comes as a big blow for M3M, which is already facing Enforcement Directorate investigations. It also puts home buyers in a quandary as both the projects were launched and parts of them sold.

"Both the land parcels were allotted on the basis of a single bid, where the bidders quoted just ₹5 lakh more than the reserved price," Anil Kumar Sagar, principal secretary — infrastructure and industrial development department, UP, said in an order issued on Friday. "It is clear that there was not proper competition and both the land parcels were allotted to a single company at a non-competitive rate."

M3M had announced an investment of ₹700 crore in developing luxury retail and penthouses as part of a commercial project in Sector 72. The investment included ₹250 crore land cost and ₹450 crore construction cost.

It had also launched M3M The Culinian in Sector 94. Spread across 13 acres with over 4 million square feet of saleable area, M3M had said it would invest ₹4,000 crore in the project, including land cost.

The developer had got all the approvals for the two projects, including registration from the Real Estate Regulatory Authority (RERA).

JSW Steel's Crude Steel Output Stays Near Flat in April

NEW DELHI | JSW Steel's consolidated crude steel production in April remained almost flat at 21.21 lakh tonnes (LT).

Consolidated output was 21.13 LT in April 2023, JSW Steel said in a filing on Saturday. In India, the company produced 20.55 LT crude steel against 20.33 LT a year ago. Production of JSW Steel USA — Ohio fell to 0.66 LT in April from 0.80 LT in the year-ago period. JSW Steel is the flagship business of the \$23 billion JSW Group. —PTI

Measures in Place to Meet Peak Power Demand: Govt

Demand projected to scale to 235 GW and 240 GW during day in May and June, respectively, states the ministry of power

Press Trust of India

New Delhi: The government has taken adequate measures to meet the estimated 235 GW peak power demand in May and 240 GW in June, according to an official statement.

"With various measures, we have been able to successfully meet the peak evening power demand of 224 GW during April 2024," the Ministry of Power on Friday.

The power demand is projected to peak at 235 GW during the day-time and 225 GW during evening hours for May and 240 GW during day-time and 235 GW during evening hours for June 2024, it said in the statement.

The power ministry has estimated around 260 GW of peak demand during this summer season. Elaborating on the measures, the ministry said section 11 directions



V SAHU

ROBUST QUARTERLY PERFORMANCE

Strong Revenue Pushes ABB India Net Profit Up 87% in Q1

Our Bureau

Mumbai: Electrification and automation major ABB India has posted an over 87% rise in net profit at ₹460 crore in the quarter to March, on the back of higher revenues.

The company follows a January to December financial year.

It had posted a profit after tax of ₹245 crore in the corresponding period of the previous fiscal year.

During the quarter, consolidated revenues came in at ₹3,080 crore, up 28% from ₹2,411 crore in the year-ago period.

"We announce a strong start to 2024, building on our robust performance from Q4 of 2023. The increased demand for technologically superior solutions, coupled with the government's capital expenditure focus on new-age themes such as energy efficiency, decarbonisation and digitalisation has significantly driven our order momentum," ABB India said in a statement on Friday.

During the quarter, the company had an order backlog of ₹8,932 crore, up from ₹7,170 in the year-ago quarter. Total orders surged to ₹3,607 crore, the highest for the first quarter in the last five years.

"Growth in orders underline the success of our multi-diversified portfolio to capture different cycles in the market segments. The quarterly growth was led by our electrification and process automation business areas, which more than offset the temporary customer decisions sluggishness in motion and robotics and discrete automation business areas," the company said.

ABB India's scrip ended at ₹7,128, up 2.76% on BSE Friday. Benchmark Sensex ended 0.36% higher. The earnings were announced after market hours.



HEMANT L

Eicher Motors Q4 PAT Rises 18%

NEW DELHI | Eicher Motors on Saturday reported an 18% increase in consolidated profit after tax to ₹1,070 crore for the fourth quarter ended March 2024, driven by higher sales.

The company posted a profit after tax of ₹906 crore in the same period last year.

Total revenue rose 12% to ₹4,256 crore in the January-March quarter of FY24 compared with ₹3,804 crore in the corresponding quarter of 2022-23, Eicher Motors said in a statement.

Royal Enfield, the two-wheeler division of the company, recorded sales of 2,27,925 motorcycles in the fourth quarter, up 6%

from 2,14,685 units in the year-ago period.

For fiscal 2024, the company reported a 37% rise in PAT to ₹4,001 crore against ₹2,914 crore for FY23.

The company's revenue from operations grew 14.5% to ₹16,536 crore from ₹14,442 crore recorded in FY23.

During the last fiscal, Royal Enfield's registered sales rose 9 per cent to 9,12,732 units from 8,34,895 units in 2022-23.

The company said its board recommended a final dividend aggregating to ₹1,396.41 crore at ₹51 per share for the financial year ended March 31, 2024.

Finolex Standalone Profit Grows 2% on Higher Revenues

NEW DELHI | Pipes maker Finolex Industries has posted about a 2% rise in standalone profit after tax to ₹161.4 crore in the March 2024 quarter on the back of higher revenues.

It had posted a profit after tax of ₹158.3 crore in the corresponding period of the preceding fiscal, the company said in a statement on Saturday.

Total income from operations during the quarter under review also rose 8.27% to ₹1,235.4 crore from ₹1,141.06 crore in the year-ago period, it added.

EBITDA fell 3.91% to ₹208.9 crore in the last quarter compared with ₹217.4 crore a year ago.

Prakash P Chhabria, Executive

PropEquity Net up 10% in FY24 on Better Income

NEW DELHI | PE Analytics, which runs real estate data platform PropEquity, has reported 10% increase in consolidated net profit at ₹11.6 crore for the last fiscal on better income.

Its net profit stood at ₹10.6 crore in the preceding year.

According to a regulatory filing on Friday, total income grew 37% to ₹44.1 crore last fiscal from ₹32.3 crore in 2022-23.

Samir Jasuja, founder and CEO of PropEquity, said: "We have done reasonably well in FY24, with 10.4% growth in our profits before tax (PBT) compared with the preceding financial year. Our overall revenues also continue to rise 37% to ₹44.1 crore."

He said the valuation business vertical has performed well as revenue grew 106% since the last financial year.

"We are adding new verticals in the valuation business which are auto valuations and plant and machinery valuations in FY25, which will help grow our business manifold," he said.

have been issued to gas-based power plants besides coal-based units to make full capacity available for electricity generation.

The optimisation of hydropower generation has made available an additional 4 GW for meeting the demand during May and June.

Further, the shifting of planned maintenance and minimisation of partial and forced outages of thermal power plants have made

available another 5 GW for the summer season, the ministry said.

Besides, power generated from wind is expected to increase by 4 GW to 5 GW during May and June.

"With these measures in place and the current generation trend...it is expected that the power demand would be adequately met both during the day and during night hours in the summer months of May and June 2024," the statement said.

IIHL to Pay ₹211 cr Extra to Lenders

From Page 1

The Hinduja Group confirmed that it had got the regulator's consent.

"We are happy to acknowledge the receipt of approval from Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDAI) yesterday on the auspicious occasion of Akshay Tritiya. The approval is subject to certain 'regulatory, statutory, and judicial' clearances/compliances," an IIHL spokesperson said in an email.

"IIHL stands committed to working towards obtaining the same as soon as possible and aims to close this transaction by the NCLT's stipulated date May 27."

The National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT) had given its nod to a ₹6,661 crore resolution plan proposed by the Hinduja Group's Indusind International Holdings Ltd (IIHL).

The court has directed IIHL to make the payment by May 27, subject to all necessary approvals. Additionally, the Hinduja Group entity will be required to pay an extra ₹211 crore to lenders, which will be adjusted against the capital infused by them in Reliance General Insurance to maintain its solvency margin.

"IIHL is prepared to pay Reliance Capital's lenders within 48 hours of receiving the insurance regulator's approval," IIHL chairman Ashok Hinduja had told reporters a week ago.

Under the plan, IIHL BFSI Holdings (Mauritius), in which it will hold 51%, while other group companies will collectively hold the remaining 49%.

IIHL BFSI (Mauritius) will float a 100% subsidiary, IIHL BFSI (India) Ltd, which, in turn, will hold a 100%



ISTOCK

stake in Reliance Capital, formerly an Anil Ambani company.

"These changes in the holding structure will necessitate a fresh approval from RBI from the fit and proper point of view," said one of the persons cited above.

Reliance Capital will hold 74% of Reliance General Insurance, and the balance 26% will be held by Asia Enterprise, a Hinduja company. In the case of Reliance Nippon Life Insurance, Asia Enterprise will hold a 26% stake and Reliance Capital will retain 25%.

Nippon currently has a 49% stake. Ashok Hinduja had said the plan is to grow the life and non-life businesses and start health insurance operations.

Y Nageswara Rao, the administrator appointed by the Reserve Bank, had admitted claims worth ₹25,345 crore from lenders as of January 10, 2024. The company has a cash balance of about ₹300-400 crore, which will be distributed among lenders.

Heat-reflecting Windshields Deployed



ISTOCK

From Page 1

At Volvo Car India, "we prioritise comfort and safety through cutting-edge heat and UV protection technologies like infrared-reflecting coatings on our sunroofs," said MD Jyoti Malhotra.

"This blocks about 80% of solar heat gain to ensure optimal cabin temperatures,"

Audi India said heat-reflecting windshields and side glass are deployed in several models such as the A8, Q8, R55 and the e-tron EV, though not silver-based coatings specifically. The increased thermal load from larger EV battery packs makes effective cabin cooling solutions even more essential.

"For extreme conditions like the current heat wave, windshields and sunroofs with silver-based coatings can decrease cabin air temperatures compared to conventional glazing and customers are now demanding comfortable cabin environments," said a senior executive at a glass and window solutions company.

Metallised coatings are just the beginning when it comes to high-tech automotive glazing solutions for extreme weather, said Ravi Bhatia, regional director of Jato Dynamics.

"Increasing use of head-up displays, 5G connectivity and even integrated antennas will necessitate coatings to control solar heat," he said. Managing heat will become paramount for glass suppliers and they'll be pushed to create more sophisticated coatings combining solar control and electromagnetic properties, Bhatia said.

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Anti-Azure Posts by Aggarwal

From Page 1

In turn, Aggarwal said the Ola group of companies would move their businesses inhouse.

"Since LinkedIn is owned by Microsoft and Ola is a big customer of Azure, we've decided to move our entire workload out of Azure to our own @Krutrim cloud within the next week..." Aggarwal said in a post on microblogging site X.

"Any other developer who wants to move out of Azure, we will offer a full year of free cloud usage. As long as you don't go back to Azure after that," he wrote.

Aggarwal's combative announcement comes just days after Krutrim AI, the artificial intelligence unicorn founded by him, opened up its cloud infrastructure and cloud services for business. Krutrim Cloud will be offering GPU-as-a-service on its AI computing infrastructure, allowing enterprises and developers to train and fine-tune their models, according to the company.

PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE Aggarwal also took aim at prevailing business models in his post



Bhavish Aggarwal

BCCL

on Saturday. "Data should be owned by the creators instead of being owned by the corporates who make money using our data and then lecture us on 'community guidelines,'" he wrote.

Ola will help build a digital public infrastructure (DPI) social media framework similar to Unified Payment Interface (UPI) to counter what Aggarwal termed as "LinkedIn's monopoly".

"The only 'community guidelines' should be the Indian law. No corporate person should be able to decide what will be banned," said the 38-year old technology founder.

In February, Union IT Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw had told the Rajya Sabha that the government would introduce legislation and take other steps to ensure social media platforms are more accountable for any slanderous content posted on their platforms.

In a series of posts following LinkedIn's actions against his post, Aggarwal intensified his protests. "Dear @LinkedIn this post of mine was about YOUR AI imposing a political ideology on Indian users that's unsafe, sinister," he said.

Aggarwal's vocal protests drew support from peers such as Unacademy founder Gaurav Munjal, as well as several other users of LinkedIn.

Microsoft's Azure cloud platform, adding that Azure would also power and market the former's connected car platform Ola Play. Azure competes with the likes of Amazon Web Services and Google Cloud in India. In FY23, Microsoft's India entity reported a 39% rise in operating revenue to ₹19,229 crore, partly helped by rising demand for Azure and for its AI services to enterprise clients.

Besides providing cloud services, Aggarwal's Krutrim AI has also launched standalone mobile apps for the Krutrim AI assistant used by end consumers. These are similar to the apps offered by OpenAI for ChatGPT and Microsoft for Copilot. OpenAI is also backed by Microsoft.

Meanwhile, both Ola Cabs and Ola Electric are bound for the public markets. While Ola Electric is awaiting approval from the markets regulator after submitting its draft listing papers late last year, Ola Cabs is undertaking restructuring and retreating from international markets as it attempts to improve profitability before a market listing.

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Product Innovation in Niche Categories

From Page 1

Deepak Shahdhpuri, MD of venture capital firm DSG Consumer Partners, said: "There is no connection between someone who is 18 years old and incumbent brands. There is zero emotional connection."

DSG has backed brands such as Chat Point, Sleepy Owl Coffee, Sleepy Cat and Epigamia among others.

"In the old days...it was difficult to build awareness, distribution was hard, and the only brand you got were the brands you saw," Shahdhpuri said. "Now, all the brands are starting from scratch. You have to earn the right to be purchased — that's the starting point."

That's not easy in the highly competitive D2C industry where scores of new brands are mushrooming across segments. Overall, D2C startups raised nearly \$1.8 billion in 2023 across 113 deals. In the first quarter of calendar 2024, such startups received \$395 million through 45 transactions, according to data sourced from Venture Intelligence.

Titan Capital's Bahl said the younger generation is now immersed in a vast array of content through platforms like YouTube and Instagram, fostering a burgeoning desire for new experiences alongside increasing incomes. "This convergence of factors fuels a curiosity to explore emerging brands that were previously unheard of. Additionally, there's a sense that traditional brands, once revered by the

ir parents, no longer resonate as deeply with them," he said.

The change in consumer behaviour is taking place as a result of both the messaging being crafted by these brands as well as product innovation in niche categories, according to investors and founders.

"The incumbents did not innovate much in the space for the last 20-30 years," said Chaitanya Ramalingowda, cofounder of Wakefit that sells mattresses and furniture. "Even if they did, those innovations were superficial, such as changing the outer cover of the mattress for aesthetic appeal or altering the colour of wardrobe doors, without improving the product or reducing prices."

Wakefit is backed by Peak XV Partners and Elevation Capital among others.



GETTY IMAGES



If Facebook was the dominant online platform in the 2014 election, it was WhatsApp in 2019. In 2024, YouTube has emerged as the primary channel of digital campaigning for political parties, leaders and critics

Shephali Bhatt

It has been a pretty hectic month for Vijeta Dahiya. The YouTube content researcher has been analysing political themes for infotainment creator Dhruv Rathee, working late nights to help him produce videos on topics concerning Election 2024. "Yesterday, I managed to rest a bit after working 34 hours on a four-part election series, with very little sleep in between," says Dahiya. The long hours are worth it, he says. "I think these videos are creating a massive on-ground impact. They bring up ideas like democracy and accountability of elected leaders."

Dahiya can see people's enthusiasm reflected in the sudden surge in subscribers over the past month, along with better likes-to-views ratio and a higher number of comments on videos even when the content is critical and not celebratory.

According to data from analytics firm Social Blade, Rathee gained 2.5 million subscribers on YouTube in April alone. He has 19.4 million subscribers overall, accumulated over a decade-long journey. Similarly, since January, television journalists-turned-digital news influencers such as Ravish Kumar and Abhisar Sharma, who are known for creating political content on YouTube, have seen a significant bump in monthly views on their channels—a rise of 175% and 115%, respectively, according to data from Social Blade. This is, in many ways, the YouTube election.

Dahiya, a writer-filmmaker from Haryana, sees this as a break from the 2019 election for which WhatsApp was the primary channel of digital campaigning. "That period was marked by a flood of fake news and it continues to flourish, making it harder to trace who is receiving what kind of messaging," he says.

The "WhatsApp Forward Era", he says, may have inadvertently paved the way for the YouTube wave in this election. "WhatsApp remains critical for propaganda factories that prefer to work in stealth mode, but someone has to openly call out their misinformation and disinformation," he says. This is where YouTube steps in. It has over 500 million active users in India, nearly equalling the reach of the Meta-owned WhatsApp in the country.

Besides critics and dissenters of the government, political parties, too, have actively built a presence on YouTube in the past year, says Talha Rashid, political strategist and co-founder of Discourse Consulting. Many party leaders have launched YouTube channels to share live streams, rally videos, interviews and more, alongside collaborating with digital influencers for podcasts.

A Rest of World report from February noted a two-to-four-fold increase in YouTube subscribers of several political leaders like Raghav Chadha (AAP), Shivraj Singh Chouhan (BJP) and Revanth Reddy (INC) in the second half of 2023. At the time of going to press, AAP had 6.26 million subscribers on its YouTube channel, 360,000 more than the ruling BJP's 5.9 million. Congress trailed behind the two on YouTube with 4.77 million subscribers. Representatives of these political parties did not respond to ET's request for a comment.

In 2019, parties mainly utilised WhatsApp for targeted digital messaging, with one major party reportedly creating over 200,000 WhatsApp

# The YouTube Election

groups for this purpose, says Rashid. This time around, the focus has shifted to producing videos to shape the narrative. Instead of crafting visual and textual messages exclusively for WhatsApp forwards, there's a trend of circulating 30-second clips from YouTube videos via the platform.

Rashid says each general election cycle over the last decade has had a different dominant platform for political engagement. "In 2014, Facebook emerged as a central hub for political activities, with parties utilising pages and events for rallies. Facebook even issued alerts on polling day," he recalls.

## TUBE OF THE TIMES

The transition from Facebook to WhatsApp and now YouTube indi-

**Besides critics and dissenters of the government, political parties, too, have actively built a presence on YouTube in the past year**  
**TALHA RASHID, co-founder, Discourse Consulting**

cates how shifts in people's internet habits often shape the role of social media in electoral processes. The rise of YouTube as a dominant platform for building election narratives and critiquing can be attributed to the TikTokification of content consumption and the emergence of video-editing apps for smartphones, says Meghnad S, a YouTube user who focuses on politics, society and the internet on his channel, Meghnad. A general dissatisfaction with the coverage of important civic issues in prime-time TV news may have also contributed to a surge in news consumption on YouTube, he adds.

Further, the deluge of WhatsApp forwards, along with the platform's campaigns and efforts to combat fake news, might have contributed to the

decline in the popularity of "WhatsApp University". "Anecdotally, I've observed increased scepticism towards WhatsApp forwards, particularly in urban areas. There have been instances where members of political party-created WhatsApp groups have called out misinformation being propagated within those groups," says Meghnad.

WhatsApp offers some data to support this. Since 2019, it has set a limit on forwarding messages and channel updates to just five chats at once. In an email, WhatsApp told ET: "The limits imposed on 'forwards' have reduced the spread of 'highly forwarded messages' on WhatsApp by over 70%." In 2022, the app added new limits for forwarding messages to groups, where messages that have the "forwarded label" can only be forwarded to one group at a time, rather than five.

The improvement in internet speeds and the low cost of mobile data have made video browsing on YouTube and elsewhere seamless and more affordable. According to a survey by cable.co.uk covering 200 countries, the average global cost of 1 GB of mobile data has plunged by 68% from \$8.8 to \$2, between 2019 and 2023. India ranks 7th on the list of countries with the most affordable mobile data plans, with Israel, Italy and Fiji topping it.

Shahana Sheikh, a PhD candidate at Yale University who is studying election campaigns, says that some of her findings from 2022 foreshadowed the current YouTube trends. "About one and a half years ago, I surveyed over 400 party functionaries from various levels in BJP and SP in Uttar Pradesh. Less than a quarter reported using YouTube for party purposes, including campaigning," she says. In contrast, among the nearly 2,000 voters who used smartphones, surveyed in the same context, the share of daily YouTube users matched that of daily



WhatsApp users. She found this to be the case for both male and female smartphone users. "Political parties seem to have understood the power of YouTube as a platform to reach voters using video content," adds Sheikh.

## WHERE'S THE MONEY GOING?

The transition is also impacting party expenditures on political advertising. Between February 5 and May 4, 2024, both BJP and Congress allocated more funds for Google Ads for videos alone, than they did for Meta Ads across ad formats. BJP spent ₹50.4 crore on Google Ads for video content, more than three times what it spent on Meta Ads across all formats—₹15.4 crore. Similarly, Congress spent ₹24.5 crore on Google Ads for video content and ₹8.1 crore on Meta Ads across various formats during the same period. These expenditure details were obtained from Google's

**Most influencers on YouTube do not disclose paid partnerships for political content. Cultural references in local languages make it harder to detect misinformation**  
**ROHINI LAKSHANÉ, technologist**

**WhatsApp remains critical for propaganda factories but YouTube has become the platform where you could openly call out their misinformation**  
**VIJETA DAHIYA, YouTube content researcher**

While YouTube solves the traceability issue in terms of checking misinformation, it has its challenges, says Rohini Lakshané, technologist and interdisciplinary researcher. "On YouTube, a lot of promotional videos of political parties involve influencers who do not disclose paid partnerships. Many of them are in local languages, using cultural references that make it harder for the platform to detect misinformation," she says.

According to YouTube, violative content made up 0.11-0.12% of views on its platform in Q4 2023. However, Lakshané quotes a recent study from Tech Global Institute that found that 85% of political content uploaded by Indian influencers across different platforms did not disclose it as sponsored content.

Further, being an open platform isn't always an advantage. "The government, a major regulatory body for these platforms, could potentially request the closure of critical channels," says Srinivas Kodali, an independent researcher from Hyderabad studying digitisation in India. "An open platform is thus susceptible to easy control," he adds. Additionally, he questions whether people can access quality content on YouTube when most platforms serve as echo chambers. Kodali says that if the Data Protection Act is implemented before the next election, platforms may face increased pressure to combat hate speech, potentially driving most election-related content underground. While he anticipates AI and deepfakes to dominate the digital battleground in the next polling season, the impact of regulations on social media's role in the electoral process remains uncertain.

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## Poll

**2014: The Facebook Election**

- Facebook issued polling day alerts
- Political parties created FB pages
- Parties had FB events to announce rallies

**2019: The WhatsApp Election**

- Parties created WhatsApp groups for political messaging
- Personalised campaign was delivered to groups/individuals
- There was unchecked fake news, misinformation

**2024: The YouTube Election**

- Party leaders have YouTube channels
- They have podcasts with digital influencers
- Critical political channels see a meteoric rise

## Spends on Political Ads in Feb 5-May 4, 2024 (₹)



## 2024 Highlights

### Advantage YouTube

- Easier to check misinformation
- Alternative for audience fatigued by TV news

### WhatsApp Still Strong

- Biggest distribution channel
- Accessible to less tech-savvy audience

# Hello, We Have a Complaint

Chinese smartphone companies looking to expand their footprint face a loud adversary—Indian retailers

Subhrojit Mallick

The Chinese smartphone companies, which are facing pressure from the Indian government to localise operations, are staring at a loud adversary—mobile phone retailers. While the brands are looking to expand their footprint and tap the country's hinterland, retailers, big and small, are up in arms, alleging low margins, unrealistic targets, insufficient supply of stocks and piling up of dues.

Retailers in South India, for instance, have been protesting against OnePlus, with some refusing to stock units from the brand. Others have pushed back against Xiaomi's sub-brand POCO, and Realme over the availability of stocks in the grey market and have even urged government authorities to cancel their trade licences.

In the case of OnePlus, retailers have alleged that the company takes more than nine months to clear pending dues, when the industry standard is much shorter. They demand higher margins and increased supply of stocks. "Various brands take time, ranging from one week to one month, to settle claims with retailers. But OnePlus takes nine months on average, and as we speak, we have claims pending from February 2023. They also give the lowest trade margin—4%," says Subhash Chandra L, MD of Sangeetha Mobiles, a leading retail chain with over 800 stores in south India.

This is not the first time retailers have clashed with smartphone brands, but their voices have become louder at a time when the offline segment is commanding the lion's share of the \$40 billion Indian smart-

phone market. According to Counterpoint Research, the offline segment cornered 64% of shipments in Q1 2024, up from 56% in the previous quarter, a sign that smartphone brands are looking at brick-and-mortar stores to chart their growth.

"Offline retailers have realised that they are now in a position to dictate. They are pushing hard against what they feel are unfair practices because they are in a dominant position," says Ajay Sharma, an industry veteran who held top roles in Micromax, Karbonn and HTC.

This has resulted in constant bickering between retailers and smartphone brands which had earlier positioned themselves as online-first and were operating mainly through e-commerce platforms. With consumer preferences shifting towards premium products, the brands are opening more retail stores, investing in in-

store promoters and appointing national and regional distributors. That's when the problems started.

## STING IN THE RETAIL

Why are brands targeting offline retail now?

Year 2023 ended with flat growth for the smartphone market. There are signs of recovery, but instead of volume-heavy budget phones driving demand, premium phones have become the growth

driver. The iPhone has been one of the highest-selling handsets in the last two years, with no signs of slowing down. The average selling price of smartphones has been going up for three years, rising 14%, in 2023, year-on-year, to \$255. The share of premium segment has gone up from 6% in 2022 to 10% in 2023, and is expected to continue growing this year, according to research firm IDC.

Xiaomi, which used to see much of its business in the budget segment, has stated its ambition to crack the premium and luxury segments. Its rivals like Realme, Motorola and Transsion, too, are trying to position themselves in the premium segment.

"The premiumisation trend has pushed smartphone brands, which were happily online-centric, to expand their retail footprint—to be present at a retail store in a shopping mall, where customers can get a touch-and-feel experience. That's where a company's promoters can convince a customer to buy their offering, luring them with big-ticket features and financing schemes," says Tarun Pathak, research director, Counterpoint Research.

Brick-and-mortar stores, which were battered by lockdown restrictions during the pandemic, should have welcomed this. Then why are retailers not happy?

## Retailers' Complaints

- OnePlus**
  - Its claim settlements are pending for a year
  - Low trade margin of only 4%
  - Poor distribution network
- Poco**
  - Not all models are available for stocking
  - Limited distribution
  - Sale of products through illegitimate channels
- Realme**
  - Products in grey market before official sale

## Share of Shipments in Offline Channels Rises

	Offline Channel Shipment Share	Online Channel Shipment Share
Q1 '23	56%	44%
Q2 '23	58%	42%
Q3 '23	51%	49%
Q4 '23	56%	44%
Q1 '24	64%	36%

Source: Counterpoint Research

## PHONE IS RINGING OFF THE HOOK

Highlighting OnePlus's retail operations, Chandra of Sangeetha Mobiles says the company allows retailers to pick up stocks only when they pay in advance. Phones are then shipped from its factory to retailers. It takes at least six days for stocks to reach Sangeetha Mobiles' hundreds of retail stores across south India where OnePlus does not have distributors or warehouses.

"It's a ridiculously loss-making proposition for retailers, and we are better off not selling OnePlus devices," says Chandra, who is joining a demand for a boycott of the brand.

TS Sridhar, president of Organised Retailers Association (ORA), says OnePlus has promised retailers that it will settle all claims by mid-May and will also hold discussions to increase trader margins.

In a written response to ET, OnePlus spokesperson says it remains in active communication with retail bodies to address their concerns: "We are constantly in touch with them to identify solutions that benefit all parties, most importantly one that benefits our consumers."

Refuting claims by retail bodies that the company does not have a good distribution network, it says it operates through various channels, including its own experience stores, e-commerce platforms and large-format retail stores like Reliance Digital, Vijay Sales and Croma. It has announced a partnership with Jio Mart Digital, Reliance's electronics distribution arm, to sell its entire portfolio at over 63,000 retail stores in India.

Retailers are also protesting against Poco, which had promised to distribute its products nationwide through distributors, but remains absent in retail stores. In a letter to the company, All India Mobile Retailers Association alleges that the brand is colluding with e-commerce platforms to distribute products through unauthorised channels, bypassing distributors and evading taxes. "This encompasses situations where both aggregators and students buy in bulk using credit cards and distribute to retailers without proper documentation or legitimate in-

voices, as the brand doesn't utilise official channels," said the retailer association.

Poco did not respond to emails seeking comment on grey market practices. However, in a recent statement, country head Himanshu Tandon said the company is working with legitimate channels, including strategic partnerships with Jio Mart Digital as its official offline distributor for mainline retail partners.

In the case of Realme, retailers allege that even before its new phone, Realme P1, was launched, the model had flooded the grey market. ORA wrote to the brand: "We have been informed by the directors of Realme that the above model would be launched on April 22. But the grey market is already flooded with stocks of the above model, and the product has found its way into the retailer's shelves." Realme did not respond to ET's emails seeking comments.

Smartphone brands generally respond to retailer demands, promising to fix issues and coordinate better. Heads of retailer associations are often invited to launches and factory visits, and are granted regular meetings with top leadership.

This time, industry experts point to a Catch-22 situation. While increasing margins and supply are necessary for the retail expansion of brands, the high cost over-

heads of retail channels are eating into their profits, especially at a time when there is growing government pressure on them to improve profitability.

"The cost structures of both business models are slightly different. In online business, the cost structures are slightly more competitive because you don't have a large infrastructure of logistics, deliveries and warehousing, which the partner platform takes care of. In the retail world, the business model is a little more expensive, because there are margins, multiple layers of distribution, in-store branding and promoters, which add to the cost," says Sudhin Mathur, smartphone industry consultant and a former MD of Motorola.

Smartphone industry consultant Sharma says the only way for brands to increase margins is to raise prices, which is not easy in a highly competitive industry. "Brands would like to maintain the status quo, but the status quo seems to be unacceptable to sellers," says Sharma.

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Indian spice companies are feeling the heat in the global market—while Hong Kong and Singapore have recalled some products, US has rejected a number of shipments. The regulator needs to act fast to reassure customers at home and abroad

Shantanu Nandan Sharma

It was just a routine food surveillance exercise in Tsim Sha Tsui, a shopping hub known for its hotels and restaurants overlooking the Victoria Harbour in Hong Kong. The Centre for Food Safety, a government entity, collected samples of spices from some retail outlets. Unexpectedly, the test revealed the presence of a pesticide, ethylene oxide, in four products of two popular Indian spice brands—MDH's Madras Curry Powder, Sambhar Masala and Curry Powder, and Everest's Fish Curry Masala. It had a domino effect across the region even as countries across the globe sat up and wondered if there was a pesticide in their curry. The authorities in Hong Kong swiftly directed vendors to remove the items from shelves and stop their sale. Within a fortnight, the Singapore Food Agency ordered a local importer, SP Muthiah & Sons Pte Ltd, to recall Everest's Fish Curry Masala from the city state and went as far as advising people who had consumed it and had health concerns to "seek medical advice".

Indian spice companies are feeling the heat in the global market. Australia is contemplating a course of action and has not ruled out a recall. The Maldives, amid diplomatic tensions with India, has gone a step further and banned the sale of Everest and MDH products. The US, a key importer, has ramped up inspection and rejected a number of Indian spice shipments due to salmonella contamination.

Experts believe that timely action by Indian regulators and the cleaning up of the domestic spice market are essential to regain trust across the border, a prerequisite for the country's spice industry to achieve the goal of \$10 billion export by 2030.

India is both the biggest consumer and exporter of spices. Called the spice bowl of the world, it cultivates more than 75 spices. The country's spice exports in FY23-24 were valued at \$4.25 billion. The major spices exported from India include chilli powder, cumin, turmeric, "curry powder and paste", cardamom, pepper, coriander and nutmeg.

"In order to reestablish credibility in the global market, India needs to clean up its domestic production system through regular inspection, tests, etc," says Jayant Dasgupta, former Indian ambassador to the World Trade Organization (WTO). "If we improve the quality of our domestic spice market, our export quality will also see an improvement," he says, adding that major spice exporters probably source ingredients from smaller producers that cater to domestic markets.

Estimating that the recent dispute could affect spice exports worth \$700 million, a report published by Delhi-based think tank, Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI), said last week that the overall situation called for "a fundamental shift in how India handles food safety", adding that transparency, stringent enforcement and clear communication are critical "to maintain the integrity of its exports and domestic products alike".

According to Dasgupta, the European Union, known for its strict standards, must have taken note of the dispute by now. "We may hear from the bloc soon," he says, adding that if the EU detects an anomaly in an agricultural product, it will immediately destroy the affected consignment rather than return it, a measure for which it invokes select WTO provisions.

WHAT NEXT?

The trajectory of the present controversy may largely depend on the response of other prominent importers. China, India's primary spice destination, with imports totalling \$928 million in FY24, has so far remained silent.

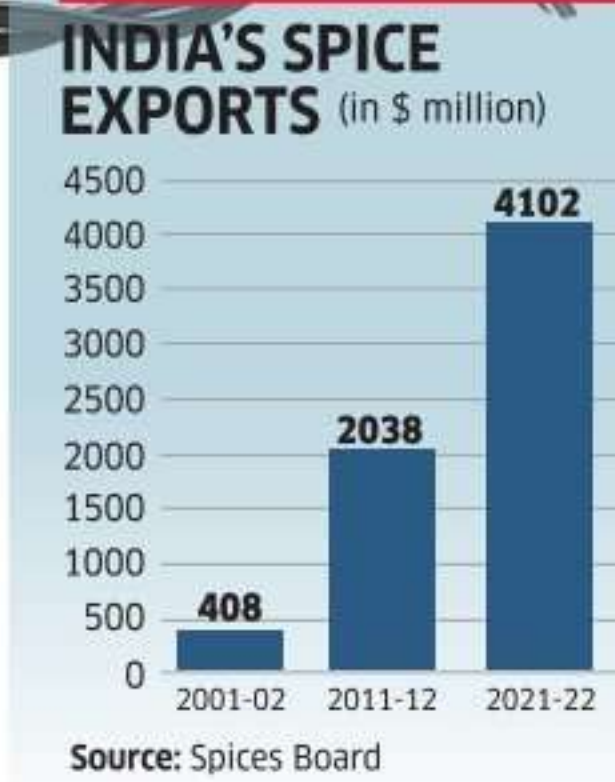
Australia has not dismissed the possibility of recalling certain spice products from India. In an email response to ET's query, a spokeswoman of Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) says they are aware of "the potential contamination of spice products from India" as well as the action taken in Hong Kong and Singapore. "We are working with federal, state and territory food enforce-

ment agencies to determine if further action is required in Australia (e.g. a food recall)," she adds, adding that "ethylene oxide is not permitted to be used as a treatment for foods sold in Australia".

Everest, which produces more than 10 million spice packets a day and exports to over 60 countries, says that some nations do demand a treatment by ethylene oxide, which is basically "a gas and not an ingredient that can be added to any product", adding that the pesticide is primarily used to control microorganism and pathogens in food products to achieve a longer shelf life.

In a written reply to ET's queries, a company spokesperson says, "Everest Fish Curry Masala, which became a matter of controversy, was one of 33 products that were sent for trial and testing in the Hong Kong market. The food safety authorities asked to recall only one product." The spokesperson says the company had to accept the recall as their local importer "did not wish to confront the authorities".

Reiterating that the spices which the company sells in India and abroad are safe, the spokesperson says the ethylene oxide treatment is not used for domestic items. "In an international market, the products go



TOP 10 INDIAN SPICES EXPORTED IN FY2023 (in ₹ cr)

Chilli	10,445
Cumin	4,193
Spice Oils	4,085
Mint Products	3,573
Turmeric	1,666
Curry Powder/Paste	1,416
Cardamom	875
Pepper	726
Coriander	665
Other Seeds	480

Source: Spices Board

through ships, ports and long travel days in the sea, and our consignment has to go through adverse weather conditions. Accordingly to avoid any adverse effects on the products, a few countries like the US and Canada prefer ethylene oxide sterilisation over other methods for food safety".

The acceptance of ethylene oxide differs in different geographies. In the US, it is allowed to a level whereas it is banned in spices for domestic consumption in India. In

Singapore, as stated in a Singapore Food Agency statement issued on April 18, "it is not authorised for use in food" but "can be used to fumigate agricultural products to prevent microbial contamination".

ET did not get any response from MDH, the other exporter at the centre of the controversy. Earlier, the company's statement, as reported by news agency PTI, said the allegations were "baseless, untrue" and "lack any substantiating

evidence". "The Spices Board is trying to address these problems in a transparent manner," says board member S Thirumurugan, who is also a cardamom grower in Theni, Tamil Nadu.

Finally it did. In a nine-page circular dated May 7, the Spices Board, a regulatory authority promoting the export of Indian spices, advised exporters to "identify EtO as a hazard" and take measures "to ensure the absence of EtO and its metabolites in spices and spice products throughout the supply chain". The agency under the Union ministry of commerce and industry further said, "Exporters shall test raw materials, processing aids, packaging materials and finished goods for EtO contamination. It advised the firms to "perform a root cause analysis" if they detected it, to avoid future recurrence.

Another member of the Spices Board and director of Assam-based spice company Sigma Spice Industries, Gautam Ghosh, says there are meticulously crafted protocols both for exports and domestic markets. "At Sigma, we sign an agreement with a supplier only after it agrees to meet our parameters. Once a consignment arrives, we do some basic tests in our own labs," says Ghosh, whose company, which caters only to the domestic market,

EVEREST RESPONDS

'Ethylene Oxide is Used for Sterilisation. Many Countries Demand It'

A spokesperson of India's leading spice exporter Everest responds to ET's queries on the recall of its Fish Curry Masala by Hong Kong and Singapore. Edited excerpts

On the recall of its product by Hong Kong and Singapore:

A recall is a very standard process followed in the food industry by all countries, and it does not mean the brand has been banned. Everest is not banned in Hong Kong, Singapore or any other country.

On the presence of high levels of ethylene oxide in its products:

Many major countries demand ethylene oxide (EtO) treatment. It is basically a gas and not an ingredient. EtO is largely used by food companies and pharma companies for sterilisation purposes. It is primarily used to control microorganisms and pathogens in food products, for a longer shelf life.

On the details of the recall:

Everest Fish Curry Masala, which became a matter of controversy, was one of 33 products that were sent for trial and testing in the Hong Kong market. In Hong Kong, the food safety authorities ordered the recall of only one product and passed the remaining 32 products. Our local importer did not wish to confront the authorities. Hence they accepted the recall process in Hong Kong. Singapore never tested the Fish Curry Masala. They only followed the Hong Kong recall order.

On whether ethylene oxide is present in its domestic products:

The spices we sell in India do not require or undergo EtO treatment. In an international market, the products go through ships, ports and long travel days in the sea, and our consignment has to go through adverse weather conditions. Accordingly, to avoid any adverse effects on the products, a few countries like the US and Canada prefer EtO sterilisation over other sterilisation methods for food safety, which is a common norm globally. Every country has its own parameters and we treat products based on the importer's request to meet the norms of the respective importing country.

has set up laboratories in Guwahati and Jorhat in Assam and Varanasi in UP.

The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), a regulator mandated to check the standards of food articles consumed in the country, has recently said that it has been collecting samples of branded spices and dismissed reports that it allowed high levels of pesticide residues in spices and herbs.

However, widespread production of illicit and inferior spices is a concern in India. Last week, the Delhi Police seized 15 tonnes of spurious spice powder from factories in Karawal Nagar. While busting the masala racket, the police also recovered rotten rice, spoiled pearl millets and wood dust that were used to make adulterated spice powder.

These have been disastrous signs for India's spice trade whose exports have climbed steadily from \$408 million in FY2002 to \$4.2 billion now. During the 14th World Spice Congress held in Navi Mumbai last September, officials said India's spice export is expected to reach \$10 billion by 2030.

The spice route to India is a couple of millennia old. Romans undertook voyages to India mainly for spices. Under the Romans, Alexandria became the greatest commercial centre of the world and "was also the leading emporium for the aromatic and pungent spices of India," according to Britannica.

If that legacy has to endure, regulators have to put their foot down and spice companies have to clean up their act.

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Vanishing Vanaspati

While the consumption of vanaspati has drastically declined, it still occupies a big fat role in the calculation of WPI

Jayashree Bhosale

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, one of the main responsibilities of a young Rupinder Sodhi was to keep an eye out for the arrival of a truck that would carry tins of vanaspati to the ration shop at Sector 1, RK Puram in Delhi. "I used to keep watch on the arrival of the truck with supplies of Dalda and Rath vanaspati and would immediately inform the entire neighbourhood to rush to the ration shop before the stocks got exhausted. We had to stand in long queues to get our monthly quota of about 5 kg vanaspati," recalls Sodhi, who is now in his 60s. Long after playing the vanaspati watchman, Sodhi went on to work at Amul, the largest dairy cooperative which is also a top producer of ghee, for more than 40 years and retired as its managing director.

The golden vanaspati, the Indian term for hydrogenated vegetable oil, looks like ghee but isn't. However, it is much cheaper than the dairy fat.

In the 1930s, it arrived in Indian kitchens in cans of Dalda, the first and most popular brand of vanaspati in the country. It became an integral part of Indian cooking in the 1950s and '60s.

Even today, vanaspati has the highest weightage in the basket of cooking oils, whose prices are monitored by the government to

calculate the Wholesale Price Index (WPI). However, in the past one and a half decade, the consumption of vanaspati has declined—from around 6% of total cooking oil consumption in 2010-11 to about 3% in 2022-23.

While there are many brands of vanaspati—Rath, Anchal, Gagan, Scooter, Raag, Gemini, Nature Fresh, Shakti Bhog and Rasoi, among others—Dalda became a generic word for it.

GOLDEN FAT

Dalda was brought to the market of pre-independent India by a British company called Lever Brothers, which is today known as Unilever. The cheaper alternative to ghee became such a kitchen staple in free India that the government had to ration it. Even today, there is a huge difference between the prices of ghee and vanaspati; while ghee is available for ₹540 a kilo, the latter costs just ₹90.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the government supplied imported cooking oils at subsidised rates to licensed vanaspati manufacturers. The price of vanaspati was controlled by the government to make it affordable to consumers. There was even a government company, the Hindustan Vegetable Oils Corporation (HVOC),

to make vanaspati.

Sachin Ranka, a third-generation wholesaler of grains and cooking oils in Ahmednagar, Maharashtra, recalls that even 20 years ago, consumption of vanaspati was very common. "Ghee was consumed by the middle class upwards. Every grocery list for wedding feasts included 7-8 tins of 15 kg vanaspati. Now the demand has drastically come down."

Bharat Mutha, a wholesaler of cooking oils in Nashik, Maharashtra, says that when vanaspati consumption was at its peak, there were hardly any companies selling ghee. It was available only in the unorganised sector. Then, in the 1960s, Amul started selling ghee. Still, its consumption was limited to the upper classes in big cities. It was only in the 1990s, post liberalisation, that packed and branded ghee became increasingly available to consumers.

As disposal income grew, consumers moved away from vanaspati, says an Adani Wilmar spokesperson. Industry veterans recall that vanaspati, which Indians had embraced as a modern means of cooking, came to be associated with the food of the poor. "The distribution of vanaspati through the public distribution sys-



tem (PDS) was one of the reasons for its association with the poor," says Mutha.

Devendra Shah, chairman of Parag Milk Foods, which launched ghee under the Gowardhan brand in the late 1990s, says, "The first thing to change with an improvement in lifestyle is food. As disposable income grows, people upgrade their food. With growing incomes, people started shifting from vanaspati to packed ghee."

REFINED IS FINE

Then came imported refined oils. Although India was heading towards self-sufficiency in food grains and milk with green and white revolutions, it was facing a shortage of cooking oils. The widening gap between the demand and supply of cooking oils in the 1990s led to the gov-

ernment incentivising the import of refined oils, which proved to be the single biggest factor responsible for the slow death of the vanaspati industry. "Refined oils replaced vanaspati in making jalebis and every other Indian sweet. Refined palm oil became especially popular with halwais and the hotel industry," says Mutha.

A government report from 1997, which discussed the losses faced by HVOC, observes that the production of vanaspati suffered after the industry was delicensed in July 1991. "The consumer preference is gradually shifting from vanaspati to refined oils. The per capita demand of vanaspati has fallen and that of refined oils has risen. Almost 40% of the vanaspati industry is lying idle in India. Edible oil was placed under OGL (open general licence) by the Government of India in March 1995. Its free import has further added to the competition," it says.

Former Amul man Sodhi, who is now the president of the Indian Dairy Association, says, "After the liberalisation of the economy, everyone started manufacturing ghee and it became a commodity. There was no mar-

gin in it. This forced the MNCs, which could not operate at thin margins, to exit this category. By the 1970s, refined cooking oil had come to India and people started realising that it was better than vanaspati."

Along with the influx of cheap refined oils and the growing availability of ghee in the organised sector, controversies and rumours spread, and vanaspati fell off the kirana list. "There were rumours that vanaspati was made from animal fat or beef tallow. This made vegetarians desert vanaspati," says Mutha.

Pune-based Sunanda Desale, who is in her 60s, says, "We used to have vanaspati just like ghee about 10-15 years ago. We spread it on chappati, added a spoonful to rice and made sabudana khichdi with it. But we started hearing that it had animal fat. It was also not considered to be good for the heart."

OUT, TRANS FAT, OUT

This was the time when people became aware of trans fats that can clog arteries. And there were high levels of trans fats in hydrogenated vanaspati. Doctors started advising people to avoid food made in 'dalda' aka vanaspati, which led to a further decline in its consumption.

The Food Safety Standards Authority of India went on to say trans fat in vanaspati should be limited to 2%. The scourge of trans fats also forced leading vanaspati brands, including Dalda, to



The decline in the household consumption of vanaspati has not reversed. But it continues to be used in processed foods and the baking industry

announce that their products were now free of unsaturated fatty acids. Despite these efforts, the decline in the household consumption of vanaspati has not reversed. However, it continues to be used as margarine in processed foods and the baking industry.

The cooking oil industry has been pleading with the central government to take note of the change in consumer preferences and revise the weightage of oils in the edible oil basket of WPI. The Solvent Extractors' Association (SEA), which represents the cooking oil industry, recently wrote to the central government: "The consumption pattern of edible oils has totally changed in the last few years. Price sensitivity and availability are the top factors that have led to a change in the consumption pattern of cooking oils, followed by health factors." According to SEA, the consumption of cooking oils has increased from 162.71 lakh tonnes in 2010-11 to 251.78 lakh tonnes in 2022-23, up by 154%. Meanwhile, the consumption of vanaspati has fallen from 9.89 lakh tonnes to 7.5 lakh tonnes, down by 24% during the same period.

The tables have turned: ghee and butter are now hailed as healthy cooking fats. "A lot is being written about ghee in the US. This has increased the demand for its export," says Shah of Parag Milk Foods.

Dairymen Sodhi says the Indian consumer's choice of cooking fat has come full circle—from home-made ghee to vanaspati to refined oils and back to ghee.

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# PADMAAVAT KE DIRECTOR-SAAB, A GOOD DOSE OF SECULAR FEMINISM THIS TIME?

With Heeramandi, Sanjay Leela Bhansali has joined the Hindi cinema patriotism game, only to refute it – hurrah! But coming from a filmmaker who has depicted crude clichés before, it seems too scripted – boo!

## FILM FATALE



ANNA MM VETTCAD

*Solomon Grundy, Born a filmmaker on Monday, Feminist on Tuesday, Patriarchal on Wednesday, Liberal on Thursday, Islamophobic on Friday, Othering on Saturday, Normalising on Sunday, That is the tale Of Solomon Grundy.*

With due apologies to the English nursery rhyme's anonymous creator, my mind spontaneously adapted it after I watched Sanjay Leela Bhansali's Heeramandi, the largely bland Hindi-Urdu series on Netflix this week.

Heeramandi is set among the tawaifs of Lahore during the Quit India movement. When viewed in isolation, there is much to commend in the stances Bhansali is evidently taking on the show. For instance, his decision to set the story in Lahore, rather than any other part of undivided India where nawabs and nautch girls were to be found.

Lahore is now in Pakistan, a country that has been obsessively portrayed in nationalist Hindi cinema as a 'dushman desh' filled with glutinous monsters intent on swallowing Kashmir. Propaganda is a psychological game that employs word and image associations to manipulate a people. By showing Heeramandi's tawaifs repeatedly advocating for 'mulk' (country), 'mitti' (land), 'vatan' (homeland) and 'azaadi' (freedom) – all catchwords of patriotism in Hindi cinema – Bhansali joins the game to refute it.

The motherland on this show is India. But love for her is being expressed by women of a city that went to Pakistan after Partition. They don't fit the stereotype of the evil Pakis-



SO, WE HOLD THIS POSE TILL HIS NEXT MOVIE?

tani that dominates popular Hindi cinema. These are women who look like us, sound like us, bleed like us when struck by British weapons. They *are* us. How then can they be the Other?

Heeramandi is also overtly feminist in its depiction of these self-respecting, intelligent women who, despite their marginalisation, contradict the stereotype of the hapless oppressed Muslim woman prevalent even in contemporary India.

These multiple subversive strands in the film are overshadowed, unfortunately, by Bhansali's tendency to prioritise visual grandeur over characterisation – he seems to look upon people in scene with the eye of an interior designer arranging furniture – and by his wildly inconsistent politics.

Odd days: glorifying sati.  
Even days: empowering women characters.  
Odd days: demonising Muslims.  
Even days: busting anti-Muslim clichés.

## The film's subversive strands are eclipsed by its focus on visual grandeur than characterisation

Heeramandi cannot offset the damage wrought by that other Bhansali directorial venture, Padmaavat (2018), which remains one of Hindi film's biggest box office grossers. At a time when Islamophobia in India has turned into a din, Bhansali chose to pander to majoritarian forces in Padmaavat. Alauddin Khilji (Ranveer Singh) and others in Padmaavat were painted as animalistic creatures literally tearing into meat and women, in keeping with the right-wing view of Muslims as savages, while the infidelity of the lustful but well-mannered Hindu king (Shahid Kapoor) was pitched as romance.

A procession of tawaifs defying the British in Heeramandi unwittingly harks back to the carefully choreographed procession of women, led by a perfectly-styled Deepika Padukone, heading to their customary suicide in Padmaavat's jauhar scene.

Jauhar was a Rajput practice requiring women to jump to their deaths in a fire to escape rape by an invading army. It was based

on the understanding that a husband has an exclusive right to his wife's body, and if his property were to be utilised by a third party, then it must be deemed as soiled beyond redemption and therefore, discarded.

In an India that continues to devalue women who have been raped, Bhansali chose to romanticise jauhar in Padmaavat through a voiceover; and his framing of that scene almost as a glamorous fashion parade.

Feminism and minority rights are commitments, not passing fancies. If a filmmaker alternates between progressive and regressive values in his works, it is logical to wonder whether those values stem from conviction, or the audience he has chosen to please on a given day.

Spare me the liberalism and feminism of Heeramandi. They mean little when coming from the Bhansali who also made Padmaavat.

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

## RED HERRING



INDRAJIT HAZRA

## Big Wobbles May Be Temporary, But the Tempos Are Forever

'Ambani-Adani' sending vans with cash to Congress is an odd image to pull out

There are very few things as fascinating as the Big Wobble. I saw it in front of my eyes at Bernabé Stadium on late Wednesday night – relax HR, I was WFH (watching from home) – when the ever-so-dependable hands of Bayern Munich goalkeeper Manuel Neuer spilled an easy-peasy save, resulting in the sprayed ball being tapped into the net like a billiard ball by Real Madrid striker Joselu to equalise with two minutes left in regulation time.

Till the 88th minute, Bayern had seen itself 'within pinching distance' of reaching the Champions League final to face their German arch-rivals Borussia Dortmund. But then, Big Wobble struck.

Once Big Wobbled, you saw Teutonic calmness – yes, that's a Pitroda-esque ethnological cliché, so kill me – give way to decapitated chicken panic. And sure enough, with 10 minutes of added time, a double-espressoed Real Madrid tucked in the winning goal and called in the fat lady to sing. Final scoreline: Real 2 Tropicana Munich 1.

As it happens, earlier the same day, there was another Big Wobble. For anyone who cares to acknowledge strange messaging in BJP these days, at an election rally at Karimnagar in Telangana, the prime minister accused Congress of striking a deal with 'Ambani-Adani' to make 'shehzada' – that is, the prince formerly known as Rahul Gandhi – stop his usual tirade against the Thompson and Thomson of India Inc. Especially visual was the question that BJP's guarantor presented to the crowd: 'Were tempos filled with currency notes sent to Congress?' Narendra Modi channelled his inner Gabbar, asking, 'Ambani-Adani se kitna maal uthaya hai?'

To charge one's principal opponent of getting paid by corporate fat cats so as to refrain from casting slurs against those very corporate fat cats is usually seen as a mild rhetorical device used for political virtue-signalling by everyone but Che t-shirt-wearers. That Modi was overturning the usual narrative of Gandhi – that BJP was in league with AA, making the central government a Deewar-flavoured 'suiited-booted sarkar' – would have been chuckle-inducing...

...were it not for the fact that Modi had just conjured up the image of AA doing unto Congress what Congress usually accuses AA of doing unto BJP: filling tempos with dubious cash. (Interestingly, 'tempo' is the generic name given in India to open-back vans originally manufactured by the Hamburg-based Vidal & Sohn Tempo-Werke that shut shop in 1977.) Who needs electoral bonds when you have tempos?

Effectively, Modi was accusing AA of bribing Congress to make Gandhi shut up. Or let me rephrase: Was Modi accusing AA of bribing Congress to make Gandhi shut up? Congress response was, unsurprisingly, very Congress-like. Party men trotted up instances since elections were announced – the duration that the PM said Gandhi had been mum about any AA-Gol nexus – of their boss bringing up the 'government-industrialists complex'. They even made the by-now quite reasonable demand in ED-CBI season that Enforcement Directorate and CBI look into AA possibly laundering money on the back of open vans.

Modi's 'sudden' lurch towards national socialism – or critique of crony capitalist behaviour – may well be seen by his admirers as a clever countermove to hit two birds with one stone: one, get rid of any 'suiited-booted' connotation during this poll season that his government may reek of for some non-attar-applied nostrils; two, come across as a more relatable Thomas Picketty of Indian politics than any entitled member of the opposition.

But what about AA? Even if you believe that the PM picked up the phone and called A and A, telling them, 'Listen, I'll have to badmouth you a bit for a bigger cause. Don't mind,' people are liable to wonder well after the hurly-burly's done and the electoral battle's lost and won, where AA stands in the scheme of things. And more importantly, where a BJP government stands in its dealings with India Inc in general, and AA in particular.

Whether BJP forms the next government or not, we may have just witnessed a Great Wobble. Every time AA interacts with a future government, we shall now see tempos.

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## GOT YOUR DIGITAL DOPPELGÄNGER YET?

Digital clones – AI-created replicas of yourself – can take multitasking to a whole new level. But hang on a second...

### DATA CRUNCHER



ATANU BISWAS

Recently, I found one of my acquaintances giving expert opinions on two TV channels simultaneously. Both, I reasoned, can't be live programmes. Or, is that possible in today's tech-driven world?

Last year, Wall Street Journal columnist Joanna Stern wrote an article, 'I Cloned Myself With AI. She Fooled My Bank and My Family'. Even though AI Joanna was able to trick the voice biometric system on her credit card, the automated system asked for additional verification when a video intern for WSJ called and did her best Joanna impression.

Influencer Caryn Marjorie launched CarynAI, a speech-based chatbot, last year. CarynAI functions as a 'virtual girlfriend' and has a voice and demeanour like Marjorie in real life. People actually paid \$1 a minute to chat with CarynAI.

This chatbot reminds me of the 2013 SF romantic drama film, Her. The Spike Jonze film follows Theodore Twombly (Joaquin Phoenix), who develops a relationship with Samantha (Scarlett Johansson), an AI virtual assistant personified through a female

voice. Things get eerie down the way.

Humans are creating their own digital clones out of their desire to become many. Several companies are offering clones at a 'low price'. This represents a paradigm shift in how people engage in their personal and professional lives. Today, audio-video footage will suffice to make a clone in place of DNA. Information from various sources, including podcasts, videos, and texts, is amalgamated to create a replica that can mimic the user's speech, voice, ideas, and even humour.

The term 'digital thought clone' was first used by Jon Truby and Rafael Dean Brown in a 2021 paper, 'Human digital thought clones: the Holy Grail of artificial intelligence for big data'. The paper describes the evolution of digital cloning into a more advanced

personalised form that consists of a 'replica of all known data and behaviour on a specific living person, recording in real time their choices, preferences, behavioural trends, and decision-making processes'.

Such a digital clone can communicate with your loved ones, respond to emails, and manage your social media accounts. Creators, influencers, and business professionals are meticulously crafting clones of themselves with startling, lifelike precision.

Music producer Raymond Ithanga Jr a.k.a. Illmind launched All His Wisdom, a 'smart and intuitive' AI-powered clone that advises aspiring producers. Deepak Chopra developed a life-like AI version of himself for Zoom calls. Your GP is probably making plans right now to in-

crease his practice by setting up a Chat GPT2 dead ringer.

So, are we moving towards an era when many people can receive individualised instruction from 'many' coaches and experts at a significantly reduced cost? Will politicians and CEOs have digital doubles to attend separate meetings simultaneously? Could election campaigns make good use of such digital doubles by being in many places at the same time without the sameness of media coverage?

And what about ordinary people? Can four of me divide the load and work on a meeting, teach my students, write this column and watch a movie? As Truby and Brown explain in their paper, the commercial Holy Grail for profit-seeking big data firms and advertisers, who have commoditised forecasts of digital behaviour data, will be digital thought clones.

As almost identical AI counterparts take on human duties, there are, of course, significant worries about identity theft, job displacement, and decline of genuine (sic) human connection. Will individual coaches and teachers become obsolete? Should important biometric information, such as voice and physical characteristics, be accessible to create these clones?

Can machines be trusted to operate, given the plethora of available parameters? Can a Joe Biden clone meet up with a Benjamin Netanyahu clone to talk about the Israel-Iran conflict without officially talking? What if Dr Jekyll's AI clone acts as Mr Hyde? And when will your clone remain your clone? He or she could one day jolly well turn around and say that you are his/her clone.

*The writer is professor of statistics, Indian Statistical Institute (ISI), Kolkata*

## When will your clone remain your clone? He or she could one day say that you are his/her clone



WELL, IT'S STILL IN A KBC BETA STAGE

## Of Fans & Fanatics, and Being Loud 'n' Proud

Pride in pursuing an interest has become so fervent that achievement's secondary

### WORD COUNTS



TUSHAR GORE

Fervent enthusiasm in sports and politics is nothing new. Religion was the original activity of choice for displaying fanatical interest. The dictionary defines the word fanatic as 'a person with obsessive interest in and enthusiasm for a particular activity'. The Latin root for fanatic is fanum – temple – which explains the original association of the word with religious passion.

There are silent fanatics who keep their firmly held positions to themselves. There is also a proud display of such enthusiasm, evident in fan behaviour during major events. Lately, a similar type of behaviour is noticeable in other pursuits. People used to be enthusiasts, amateurs, dilettantes, and aficionados and casually pursued hobbies and time-pass activities without much fanfare and publicity. Not anymore. There is zeal and enthusiasm in all such dabbling.

Moreover, this is not silent fervour. Here is an intense pride about having this focus. And this pride about the pursuit is expressed so fervently that just the pursuit and interest are made out to be an achievement in themselves and become a distinguishing personality trait. I know someone zealously proud of his affection for, and interest in, Indian classical music. Any actual achieve-

ment and competence in the field of interest seems secondary.

This recent rise in 'fervent dilettantism' has multiple causes that include an increase in disposable income, and the rise of social media. The first allows for a substantial investment in pursuing non-income-generating activities. The second enables broadcasting one's activities and satisfies the desire to stand out.

Playwright and scholar Purushottam Laxman Deshpande – affectionately known as PL in English and PuLa in Marathi – described similar behaviour in his satirical essay on the characteristics of Pune, the inhabitants of Pune.

In his 1990 essay, which succinctly and hilariously dissects the Maharashtrian identity and the differences between citizens of Mumbai, Pune, and Nagpur (Mumbai, Pune, and Nagpur), PL jokes that one trait that sets Pune apart is their fiery pride for their city and aspects of Pune life.

He further observes that the point of pride need not only be consequential facts, such as Pune's association with Shivaji,

or its link with leaders such as Lokmanya Tilak. There is legitimate pride even for seemingly mundane aspects, such as the number of the local community's Ganesh idols in the immersion procession line during Ganesh Chaturthi.

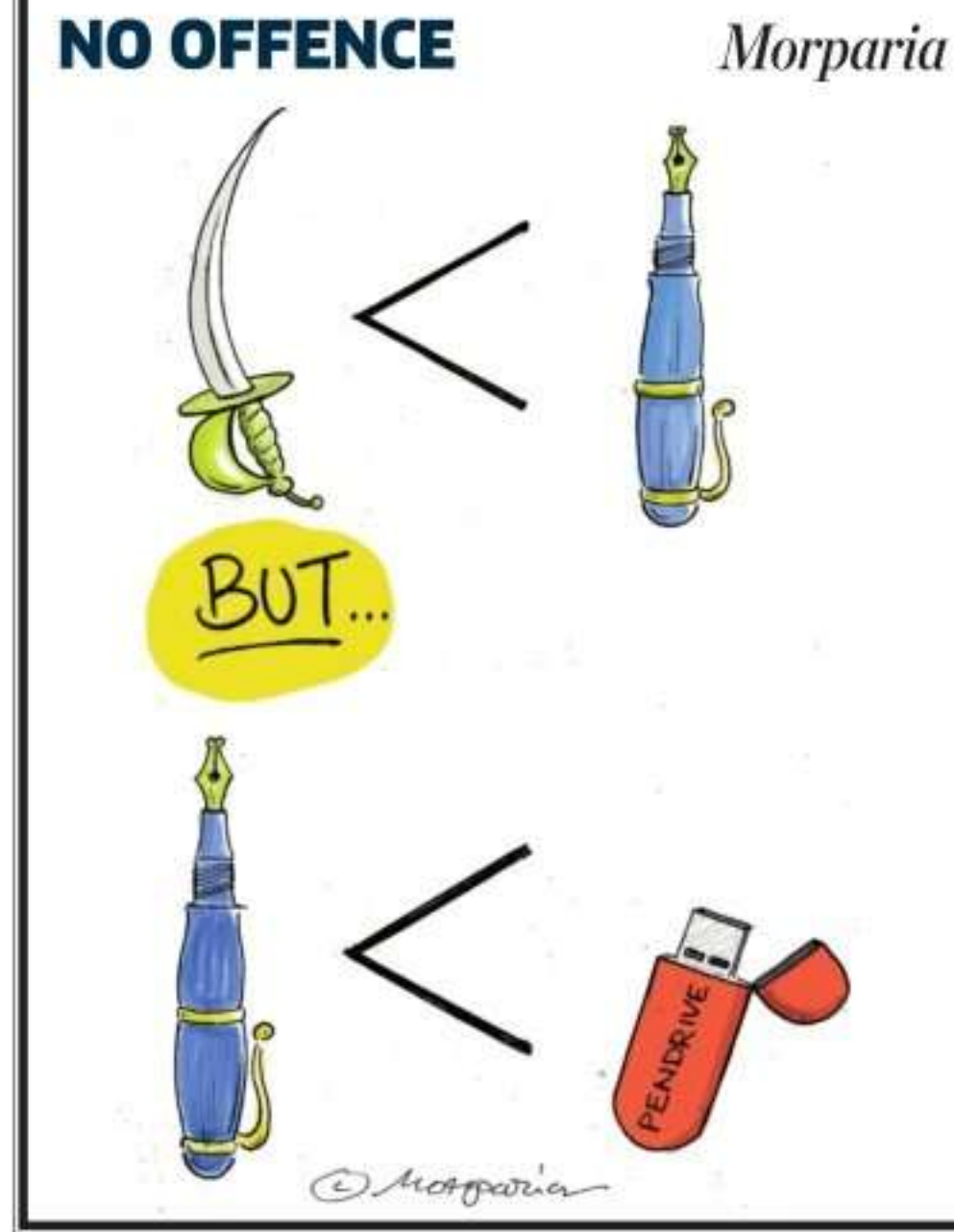
Besides the inherent satisfaction of having this point of pride, such self-regard serves another purpose and enables another Punekar characteristic – as noted by PL, the ability to debate and challenge any topic and point of view. For example, taking pride in 'indigenous' games to question and criticise the importance shown to cricket. Or, to take pride in Gopal Agarkar as a reformer and freedom fighter during the birth celebration of Tilak or Mohandas Gandhi.

Despite such passionate differences about myriad topics, Pune-kars have skillfully managed a long history of peaceful existence. This Pune mindset will be in much demand, as there is growth in groups interested in – proudly interested in – a wide variety of activities, such as photography, model railroads, single malt, antiques, etcetera etcetera.

Pune was the administrative centre of the Maratha empire. At its zenith, it covered a large part of modern India – from Punjab to some parts of Tamil Nadu, and from Rajasthan to Odisha. (Yet another matter for Pune-kars to be fiercely proud of.)



WHAT PUNJAB LEARNT FROM PUNE



### And? What did it say?

The director of the lab which did the analysis told The New York Times that one lock of his hair had over 250 micrograms of lead per gram of hair while another had 380 micrograms. Normal level is supposed to be less than 4 micrograms of lead per gram of hair.

### Whoa! Was he drinking lead?

That's not inaccurate. One likely source of lead is thought to be cheap wine. During the composer's time, lead acetate used to be added to poor quality wine to improve the taste. And Beethoven is supposed to have drunk about a bottle a day, believing it to be good for his health. Even on his deathbed, he had a few spoonfuls of wine, fed by his friends, with the best of intentions.

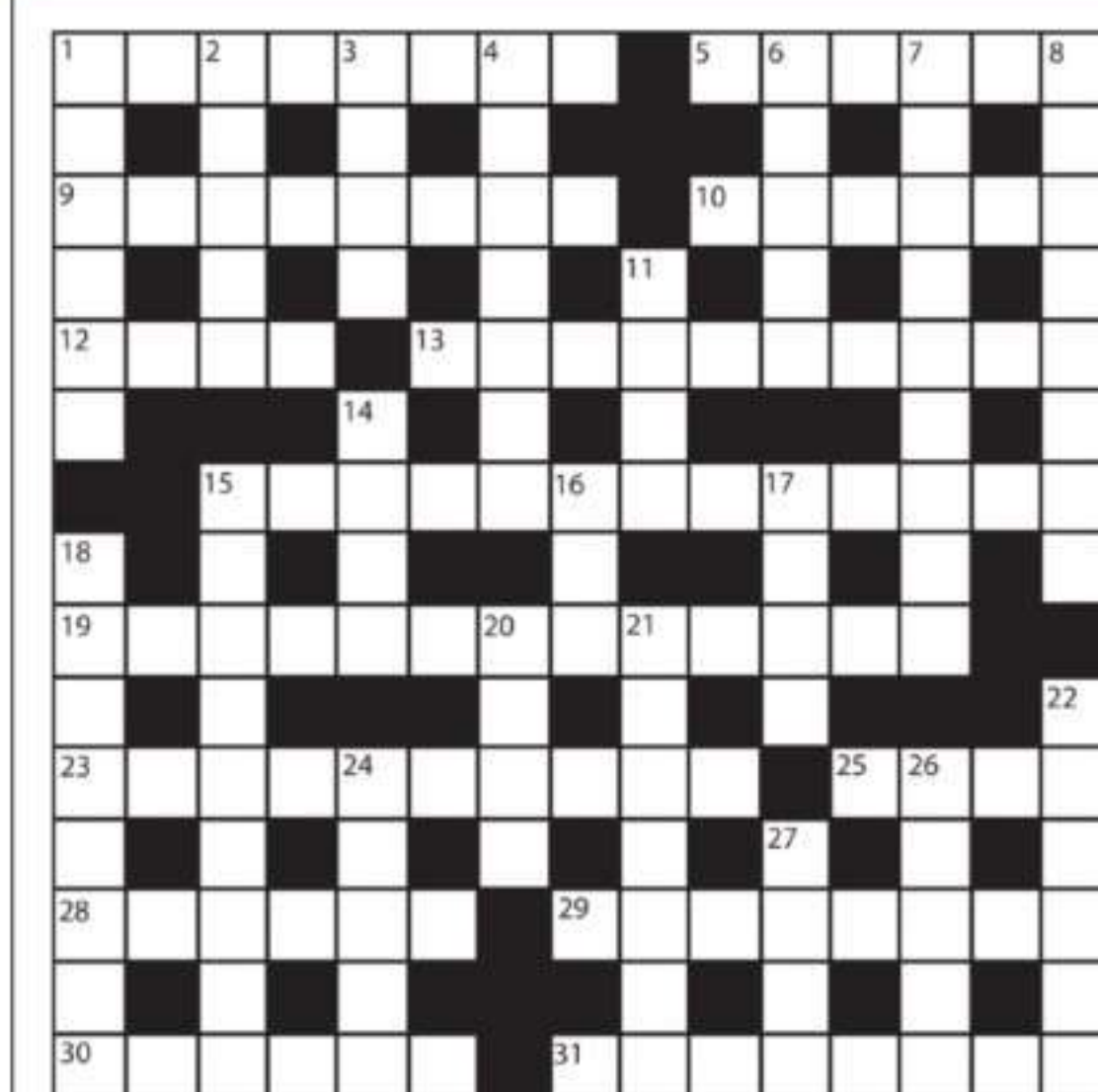
### Ouch. Did that cause his deafness?

Yes, experts say it's very likely that this is what led to the deafness, since it would have affected his nervous system. In later years, he also took a lot of medicines, many of which would also, unfortunately, have contained lead.

*Text: Indulekha Aravind*

## ET Sunday Crossword

0063



### ACROSS

- It's hard to handle doctor duly drinking mulled wine (8)
- Reptile's again on the loose round youth centre (6)
- Narrow-minded priest's half eaten stewed 10 without one (8)
- Long to return to eat a good Scottish speciality (6)
- Fusses over mixer (4)
- Bean and lentil split on it? (5,5)
- Mike and Tom often worked with girl in time of crisis (6,2,5)
- Accidental remarks interpreted as

### DOWN

- His pup is out of control and cocky (6)
- sinful pride (8,5)
- Coach tour isn't designed to take in castle and river (10)
- Apartment's lost its sparkle (4)
- Sand in a rough beard (6)
- Badminton contestant has more moves at front of net (8)
- Naughty boys nick money left for icon (6)
- A fellow celebrated getting start of ceremony moved (8)

- Bizarre writer pulled up blankets (5)
- Irritable editor, heartless guy (4)
- Scorn director said to be in trouble at home (7)
- German story-teller resurrected holy object (5)
- Gas ran out tragically for Jason's crew ... (9)
- ... sailors in the drink (8)
- Singer takes part in royal tournament ... (4)
- ... surrounded by some pyramids (4)
- Marshall Rimmel sat in state of upheaval (9)
- Talless fish in barrel (3)
- Tease jerk church banned (4)
- A supporter's keeping endless cereal for folk in Mali, say (8)
- Feature of columnar chapel? (4)
- Performance cancelled? Put on a personal display (4,3)
- A representative in Dublin has unit made up (6)
- What 29 did on ring-and where he did it? (5)
- Restrict student at US college I housed (5)
- Man, for instance, Elsie almost upset (4)

27. I see.  
28. I see.  
29. I see.  
30. I see.  
31. I see.



### Flash Floods Kill Hundreds in Afghanistan

**ISLAMABAD:** Flash floods from seasonal rains in Afghanistan have killed hundreds of people and injured a "substantial number," a Taliban official said on Saturday. The floods hit the northern region of the country. The province of Baghlan bore the brunt of the deluges on Friday with officials preliminary reporting at least 50 people as dead. — **AP**

### Ex-Malaysian PM's Wife Sued over \$346m

**MALAYSIA:** 1Malaysia Development Bhd. is among companies that are suing the wife of former Malaysian prime minister Najib Razak for allegedly obtaining over \$346 million worth of luxury goods through misappropriated funds. The companies are asking Rosmah Mansor to give up the luxury goods in her possession and pay \$346 million. — **Reuters**

### Musk's Starlink Disrupted by Solar Storm

**NEW YORK:** Starlink, the satellite arm of Elon Musk's SpaceX, warned on Saturday of a "degraded service" as the Earth is battered by the biggest geomagnetic storm due to solar activity in two decades. Starlink owns around 60% of the 7,500 satellites orbiting Earth and is a dominant player in satellite internet. — **Reuters**

## Top Priority for Business Continuity

» From Page 1

As cyberthreats continue to evolve in sophistication and frequency, organisations must prioritise cybersecurity to safeguard sensitive data, protect against cyberattacks, and ensure business continuity, said Tony Buffomante, global head of cybersecurity and risk services at IT firm Wipro. To hire "cybersecurists", the Bengaluru-based company is tapping into the global talent market, he said. The company has more than 9,000 cybersecurity specialists and 12 global cyber-defence centres in 60 countries, and invests in training and upskilling initiatives to ensure that employees stay abreast of the latest security trends, technologies and best practices.

The skill sets that companies are looking for in cyber experts include proficiency in programming languages and an understanding of computer networking, operating systems, and cloud computing.

#### TOP THREAT TO COS

At least two recent surveys cite cyber risks as the biggest threat facing organisations today. According to PwC's 2023 Global Risk Survey, 38% of organisations feel highly or extremely exposed to cyber risks. In Aon's latest Global Risk Management survey, cyberattack/data breach is the No.1 risk facing Indian businesses, up from the seventh position in 2021.

HDFC Bank is scaling up in the areas of digital, application programming interface (API), cloud, data protection and cyber resiliency, amid the emerging and evolving threat landscape, regulatory and customer expectations and new tech trends.

"Security-embedded digital is the future as it not only involves internal IT assets but also the vendor-regulatory ecosystem. This is an area where we are focusing right now so that customers can transact safely and securely," said Sameer Ratolikar, senior executive vice-president and chief information security officer at the country's largest private sector lender.

API security is going to be a focus area where the bank is looking to hire senior and mid-level professionals. Securing customer data, especially after the enactment of the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, is now a must, and securing business-sensitive data is going to be an important area, he said.

FOR DATA CENTRES ALONE, FIRMS SET TO SPLURGE UP TO \$60B OVER THE NEXT FEW YEARS

## Tech Giants Start to Treat SE Asia Like Next Big Thing

Bloomberg

**New York:** Long considered a tech hinterland, Southeast Asia is fast emerging as a center of gravity for industry.

The CEOs of Apple, Microsoft and Nvidia are among the industry chiefs who've swung through the region in past months, committing billions of dollars in investment and holding forth with heads of state from Indonesia to Malaysia. Amazon just this week took over a giant conference hall in downtown Singapore to unfurl a \$9 billion investment plan before a thousands-strong audience cheering and waving glow sticks.

After decades of playing second fiddle to China and Japan, the region of about 675 million people is drawing

### Taking Stock



#### DRIVING FACTORS

- China turns more hostile to US firms
- India remains tougher to navigate politically
- Silicon Valley is setting its sights on business-friendly regimes and fast-growing talent pool
- The advent of AI is spurring tech leaders to pursue new sources of growth

more tech investment than ever. For data centres alone, the world's biggest companies are set to splurge up to \$60 billion over the next few years as Southeast Asia's young populations embrace video streaming, online shopping and generative AI.

Traditionally welcoming to Western investment, the region's moment has arrived as China turns more hostile to US firms and India remains tougher to navigate politically. Silicon Valley is setting its sights on business-friendly regimes, fast-

growing talent pool and rising incomes. The advent of AI is spurring tech leaders to pursue new sources of growth, laying the digital infrastructure of the region's future.

"Countries like Singapore and Malaysia are largely neutral to the geopolitical tensions happening with China, US, Ukraine and Russia," said Sean Lim, a managing partner at Singapore-based NWD Holdings, which invests in AI-based projects and other areas.

"Especially with the ongoing wars,

this region has become more attractive."

Take Tim Cook and Satya Nadella, who last month embarked on their biggest tours across Southeast Asia in years. The investments they pledged are set to help turn the region into a major battleground between the likes of Amazon, Microsoft and Google in future frontiers such as artificial intelligence and the cloud.

The region's growing workforce is making it a viable alternative to China as a centre of talent to support companies' global operations. As its governments pushed for improvements in education and infrastructure, it's become an attractive base for everything from manufacturing and data centers to research and design.

"The governments are pro cross-border investments and there's a deep talent pool," said NWD's Lim.

Southeast Asia has also become a sizeable market for gadgets and online services. About 65% of Southeast Asia will be middle class by 2030, with rising purchasing power, according to Singapore government estimates. That'll help more than double the region's market for internet-based services to \$600 billion, according to estimates by Google, Temasek Holdings Pte and Bain & Co.

## Israel Orders New Evacuations in Gaza's Last Refuge of Rafah

The UN warns that Israel's planned Rafah invasion will cripple humanitarian operations

AP

**Rafah, Gaza Strip:** Israel ordered new evacuations in Gaza's southern city of Rafah on Saturday, forcing tens of thousands more people to move as it prepares to expand its military operation closer to the heavily populated central area, in defiance of growing pressure from close ally the United States and others.

Israel's military also said it was moving into an area of devastated northern Gaza where it asserted that the Hamas militant group has regrouped.

Israel has now evacuated the eastern third of Rafah, which is considered the last refuge in Gaza. The United Nations and others have warned that Israel's planned full-scale Rafah invasion would cripple humanitarian operations and cause a disastrous surge in civilian casualties. Rafah borders Egypt near the main aid entry points, which already have been affected. Israeli troops have captured the Gaza side of the Rafah crossing, forcing it to shut down.

US President Joe Biden has said he



A woman and boy walk with belongings past barbed-wire fences as they flee from Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip on Saturday. — **AFP**

will not provide offensive weapons to Israel for Rafah. On Friday the US said there was "reasonable" evidence that Israel had breached international law protecting civilians in the way it conducted its war against Hamas — the strongest statement yet that the Biden administration has made on the matter.

In response to the US report, Ophir Falk, foreign policy adviser to Is-

rael's prime minister, told the AP that Israel acts in compliance with the laws of armed conflict and the army takes extensive measures to avert civilian casualties, including alerting people to military operations via phone calls and text messages.

More than 1.4 million Palestinians — half of Gaza's population — have been sheltering in Rafah, most after fleeing Israel's offensives elsewhere.

The evacuations are forcing people to return north where areas are devastated from previous Israeli attacks. Aid agencies estimate that 110,000 had done so before Saturday's order, which adds a further 40,000.

"What should we do here? Do we wait until we all die on top of each other? So, we've decided to leave. It's better," said Rafah resident Hanan al-Satari as people rushed to load mattresses, water tanks and other belongings onto vehicles.

"The Israeli army does not have a safe area in Gaza. They target everything," said Abu Yusuf al-Deiri, earlier displaced from Gaza City.

Many people have been displaced multiple times, and there are few places left to go.

#### VIOLATED INT'L LAW

**US President Joe Biden has said he will not provide offensive weapons to Israel for Rafah**



## Khosla Loses Bid to End California Beach Access Suit

Bloomberg

**New York:** Billionaire venture capitalist Vinod Khosla was dealt a new setback in his 15-year fight to block public access through his private property to a popular surfing spot south of San Francisco.

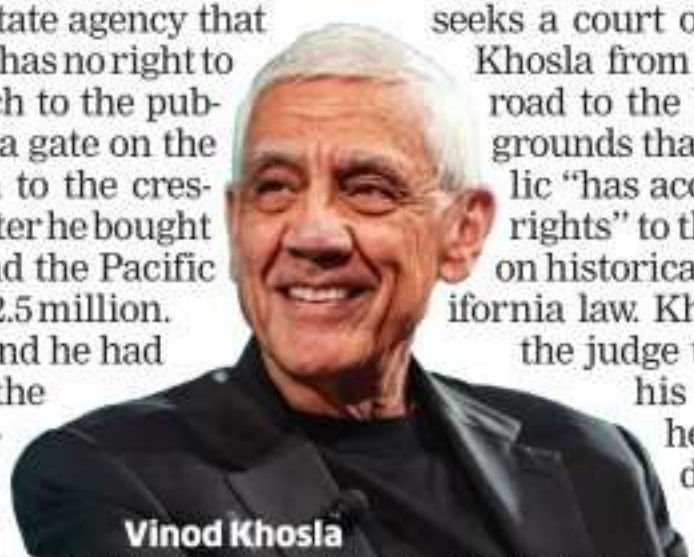
A California state judge issued a tentative ruling on Friday denying Khosla's request to throw out a lawsuit brought by a state agency that says the billionaire has no right to close Martins Beach to the public. Khosla erected a gate on the road leading down to the crescent-shaped cove after he bought the property around the Pacific beach in 2008 for \$32.5 million.

His lawyers contend he had the right to do so as the property owner unless he was offered proper compensation.

He fought all the way to the US Supreme Court, which refused in 2018 to take up his appeal of a lower-court ruling in favor of the Surfrider Foundation.

In Friday's tentative ruling, Superior Court Judge Raymond Swope said state officials had provided enough support for their claim of public access to move forward with the case they filed in 2020.

The State Lands Commission seeks a court order barring Khosla from blocking the road to the beach on the grounds that the public "has acquired access rights" to the land based on historical use and California law. Khosla can ask the judge to reconsider his ruling at a hearing Monday in Redwood City.



## Higher Retention Rate

» From Page 1

This is leading to more women working from offices and on night shifts, and companies prefer female cab drivers for scheduled drops of these employees who work late hours, said Balasubramanian A, vice president and head of consumer and ecommerce at TeamLease Services.

"Usually if it's a male driver, the company would send a security guard to accompany women employees which is an extra cost, but with women cab drivers, this is not a challenge," said Balasubramanian. "It is a smart and cost-efficient option too." The demand is mostly concentrated in metro cities, he added. However, women



still account for just about 1% of the 1.72 million pool of cab drivers. Data show southern and western parts of the country are employing more female drivers than in the North, where it may still be a taboo for women to drive cabs or commercial vehicles, said experts. Besides, there are safety concerns for the female drivers

themselves in many regions, especially in the North.

There is also a spike in demand for female two-wheeler riders from delivery companies, which are facing monthly attrition of as high as 40% among their delivery personnel. Women, they have found, are likely to stay in the job more than men. Though it is hard

to get women on board, once they join it is easy to train them and their retention rate is higher, said Balasubramanian. Attrition among women is almost half that of male riders. But hereto, of the estimated 7 million two-wheeler riding executives who deliver ecommerce and other orders, women account for under 1%.

#### TRAINING AND UPSKILLING

Several companies are investing in training and upskilling women in driving skills.

In fiscal 2024, Maruti Driving Schools, which are run by the automaker's dealers, trained more than 355,000 people and over 44% of them were women.

Ashok Leyland, through its partnership with the Delhi government's 'Mission Parivartan', has trained 180 women, several of whom are now employ-

ed as bus drivers with the Delhi Transport Corporation, said Raja Radhakrishnan, the commercial vehicle maker's president-human resources. Separately, Ashok Leyland last year provided specialised training covering diverse driving conditions to 100 women.

MG Motor India and the Vadodra Police have a partnership wherein women are provided with a platform to learn driving skills and basic soft skills. MG also helps women get driving licences and facilitates female drivers get employed through ride-hailing firms and car-rental agencies. Employee transportation company Moto Business Service India, a subsidiary of Yamaha Motor, has trained several female drivers on electric two- and four-wheelers, said chief operating officer Venkatesh Krishnamoorthy.

## Swedish Host City Braces for Eurovision Final

More than 10,000 pro-Palestinian campaigners staged a non-violent protest ahead of semi-final



Pro-Palestinian demonstrators gather for a protest against the participation of Israeli contestant Eden Golan ahead of the final of the Eurovision Song Contest in Malmö, Sweden, on Saturday. — **AP**

Reuters

**Malmö, Sweden:** Swedish host city Malmö geared up for the Eurovision grand final on Saturday as excitement mingled with the tension of heightened security threats and political protests over Israel's participation.

The 68th version of the song contest, which is always billed as non-political, is taking place against the backdrop of the devastating Israeli military campaign in Gaza, triggered by Hamas' deadly October 7 attack on Israel.

A festival of tongue-in-cheek kitsch and ephemeral tunes, the contest has been thrust into the arena of political conflict with protesters, online and on the streets of Malmö, calling for Israel to be excluded from the competition.

Bookmakers have Croatia's Baby Lasagna, real name Marko Purišić, 23, with "Rim Tim Tagi Dim", a song about a young man who leaves home aspiring to become a "city boy" with better opportunities, as front-runner to win the contest.

Israeli solo artist Eden Golan, 20, and her song "Hurricane" also qualified for Saturday's final with betting odds on Friday showing her emerge as one of the leading contenders to win. The list of favourites also includes Swiss rapper and singer Nemo, 24, performing "The Code", a drum-and-bass, opera, rap and rock tune, about Nemo's journey of self-discovery as a non-binary person.

Other nations high on betting list include France, the Netherlands, Italy, Ukraine and Ireland, while streaming data from Spotify has also suggested a chance for host nation Sweden.

The world's biggest live music event, the Eurovision Song Contest is estimated to have drawn around 100,000 visitors to Malmö, Sweden's third-biggest city, while many millions more in Europe and further afield tune in for the broadcast.

Eurovision organisers resisted calls to exclude Israel over its military campaign in Gaza, arguing the competition is non-political, though they did demand that Israel tweak the lyrics of its entry, origi-

nally titled "October Rain", to remove what they said were references to the October 7 attack.

The lyrics were altered, allowing Israel to take part, and Golan characterises her song as a strong power ballad that describes a person going through a storm of emotions. Some booing was heard from the crowd before, during and after Golan's performance in the semi-finals on Thursday, but also applause and Israeli flags waving, according to a Reuters journalist in the auditorium.

In central Malmö, more than 10,000 pro-Palestinian campaigners, including climate activist Greta Thunberg, staged a non-violent protest in the hours ahead of the

semi-final, waving Palestinian flags and shouting "boycott Israel". A smaller group of pro-Israeli supporters, including members of Malmö's Jewish community, also staged a peaceful demonstration in the city, defending Golan and her right to take part in the contest. More demonstrations are planned for Saturday and again expected to draw thousands of protesters. There will also be an alternative music festival in the city that has billed itself as the "genocide-free song contest".

Protesters have complained of double standards as Russia was banned from Eurovision in 2022 by European Broadcasting Union (EBU) after several broadcasters called for the country to be expelled following its invasion of Ukraine.

The 26 contestants in Saturday's grand final include 10 from each of the two semi-finals of the past week, as well as the "big five" countries — Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Spain — and host country Sweden.

"Of course people want to express their own opinions and stuff like that. But for us, you know, it's just a dream and an honour to be a part of Eurovision," Marcus Gunnarsson, of duo Marcus & Martinus that is representing Sweden, said.

## IMF Doubts Cash-strapped Pak's Repayment Capacity

**Islamabad:** The IMF has said that Pakistan faces major debt-repayment challenges and expressed serious doubts over the cash-strapped country's capacity to repay the global lender, according to a media report on Saturday.

The Washington-based bank's assessment of Pakistan's economy came as an IMF support team reached the country on Friday to hold talks with officials here after Islamabad requested a fresh bailout package under the Extended Fund Facility (EFF). "Pakistan's capacity to repay the fund is subject to significant risks and remains critically dependent on policy implementation and timely external financing," Geo News cited the lender as saying in its staff report.

"Exceptionally high risks — notably from delayed adoption of reforms, high public debt and gross financing needs, low gross reserves and State Bank of Pakistan's net FX derivative position, — could jeopardise policy implementation," read the report. — **PTI**

## Vendor Registrations Soon

» From Page 1

The renewable energy ministry recently shifted to a new portal and will soon start the national vendor registration process.

The PM Surya Ghar: Muft Bijli Yojana, which has an outlay of Rs 75,021 crore, entails implementa-

tion through power distribution companies and vendors with rationalised subsidies and collateral-free loans. Registrations under the scheme crossed the 10-million mark within a month of its launch. Of the registered consumers, almost 800,000 have applied for installations.

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# South Side Story

Chennai has long lived in the shadows of Bengaluru and Hyderabad, its more cosmopolitan sisters from the South. But with these two metropolises reaching saturation levels, the Tamil Nadu capital has spotted an opportunity to make its move. Accordingly, it has put into motion a plan to lure multinationals and position itself as the new tech city of the South.

Thanks to latest sops offered by the state government, Chennai is now among the locations global firms are eyeing to set up their tech bases and global capability centres (GCCs).

High-quality English-speaking talent, a thriving industrial ecosystem and the latest round of government incentives could entice multinationals, experts say. "We are seeing a slow movement to Chennai, as it is catching the attention and fancy of companies, which was not the case previously. Earlier, it used to be among the top five or six most preferred cities. But it's part of the shortlist now — not because of the incentives but because of the administration, talent, connectivity and other benefits," said Lalit Ahuja, founder and CEO of ANSR, a leading firm that helps multinationals set up GCCs in India.

A case in point is German athletic apparel and footwear brand Adidas setting up a GCC in Chennai, its first and only GCC in Asia outside China. Last year, firms such as Hapag Lloyd and United Parcel Service entered Tamil Nadu, while Bank of America, Standard Chartered, Amex and Citi are all expanding.

## EVOLVING NUMBERS

Besides financial companies such as banks and automotive firms, manufacturing, pharma, tech and product companies in the fintech space are all considering setting up centres in Chennai.

**"Chennai is catching the attention and fancy of companies, not because of government incentives but because of benefits like administration, talent and connectivity."**

— Lalit Ahuja, founder and CEO, ANSR

As of March 2023, there are around 2,740 GCC units in India, according to data from Zinnov, a management consulting firm that works with GCCs in India. Of these, Chennai accounts for just about 10 per cent. FY24 numbers are yet to be disclosed.

"Chennai's GCC ecosystem ranks fifth in India, with more than 259 existing centres that employ over 150,000 skilled professionals. This growth is being fuelled by the government's definitive involvement through key policy initiatives like 'Guidance Tamil Nadu'. These initiatives, including incentives on land cost, training, innovation labs, etc., will have a tangible, positive impact on the ecosystem," said Nilesh Thakker, president, Zinnov.

Of the 10 GCCs that were set up in India in Q4, only one was based in Chennai — by Hitachi Energy,

the Nasscom report said. Hitachi Energy plans to house 2,500 energy transition technologists with post-doctorate, doctorate and post-graduate degrees specialising in grid automation, transformers, high-voltage and grid integration.

"Tamil Nadu is one of the country's most industrialised states with enormous business potential, accounting for 15 per cent of doctorates and 11 per cent of post-graduates. Chennai is at the centre of this growth, gaining prominence as an innovation and R&D hub in the country. Its robust infrastructure, skilled talent pool in the region, and conducive business environment attracted us to set up our operation in Chennai in 2007 for R&D and innovation on a small scale. Today, Hitachi Energy is leveraging these characteristics and the immense talent pool for its largest Global Technology and Innovation Centre (GTIC) in Chennai," said N Venu, MD and CEO, India and South Asia, Hitachi Energy.

City	# of GCC Units
Bengaluru	823
Hyderabad	327
Pune	334
Mumbai	350
NCR	433
Chennai	259
Kolkata	214
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,740</b>

SOURCE: ZINNOV

ET had reported in March that amid increasing interest among overseas firms to set up their tech centres in India, the Tamil Nadu government decided to incentivise firms to be the preferred choice to set up shops here. In its state budget, the TN government also said that it will provide a payroll subsidy for the creation of high paying jobs in new GCCs. Industry experts see this as a booster to help the southern state compete with Bengaluru and Hyderabad.

## REAL ESTATE AND ADMINISTRATION

This is also reflective of the strong movement in GCC-focused real estate in 2023. A report by Knight Frank India in March showed that such transactions dominated more than half of the office volume

**"The biggest advantage of Chennai is the availability of technology and domain talent at scale. Because of this, financial services, healthcare, manufacturing, automotive, telecom and logistics companies are making a beeline for the city."**

— Ramkumar Ramamoorthy, partner, Catalinics

Can a slew of attractive sops from the state government and a competitive workforce turn Chennai into a hub for GCCs, positioning the state as a healthy alternative to Bengaluru and Hyderabad?

Beena Parmar & Annapurna Roy report



AI GENERATED

## Chennai's GCC push

Tamil Nadu Government to incentivise monthly salaries of over ₹1 lakh with subsidy of 30% in the 1st year, 20% in 2nd year and 10% in the 3rd year

Of the around 2,740 GCC units in India, Chennai accounts for 10%, as per March 2023 numbers from Zinnov

Of the 10 GCCs set up in Q4 FY23, one was based in Chennai — Hitachi Energy

Total 6.02 mn sq ft across 71 deals in FY23, highest from BFSI companies at 30%

GCC-focused real estate transactions in 2023 were over 50% of the office volume deals in Chennai

deals in Chennai

during 2023, totalling 6.02 million sq ft across

71 deals. The highest metrics were from BFSI companies at 30 per cent followed by manufacturing and other service sectors. About 57 deals were recorded in 2022, totalling office space of 2.18 million sq ft.

Ramkumar Ramamoorthy, a partner at Chennai-based consulting firm Catalinics, said that Tamil Nadu is the most urbanised state and has the highest gross enrolment ratio (GER) in higher education among all major states in India. And because it has always been a metro city, it has received robust talent service from other parts of the state. Besides, it also has a strong academic culture and demonstrated administrative stability too. However, GCCs are not a new

**"Chennai's GCC ecosystem ranks fifth in India, with more than 259 existing centres employing 150,000 professionals. This growth is being fuelled by the state government's involvement and key policy initiatives."**

— Nilesh Thakker, president, Zinnov

phenomenon for Chennai, Ramamoorthy quickly added. "About 30 years ago, the earliest enterprise GCCs — such as Citibank, Bank of America, American Express and Dun & Bradstreet — established their headquarters in Chennai. In the

intervening years, however, other locations such as Bengaluru and Hyderabad stole a march over Chennai," he pointed out.

Moreover, the IT revolution in the 1990s backed by heavy sops helped Bengaluru and Hyderabad attract firms quicker.

Ramamoorthy, who is also a former CMD of Cognizant India, sees subsidies as a demonstration of Tamil Nadu's commitment to attracting the world's most progressive companies to establish their GCCs in the state, irrespective of their size and industry they operate in. "The biggest advantage for Chennai over other cities is the availability of technology and domain talent at scale. It is for this reason that the biggest names across industries — financial services, healthcare, manufacturing, auto, telecom and logistics — have made a beeline for Chennai," he added.

## BEYOND BENGALURU

It's also important to note that companies beyond Fortune 500 and Global 2000 have started establishing their GCCs in India today. But given Bengaluru's reputation for being a GCC and tech talent hub, the city has become both space and talent saturated. This is especially true post the Covid pandemic, with engineers now more comfortable working from their hometowns.

Global software giant IBM Software's senior vice-president

**"Its robust infrastructure, skilled talent pool and conducive business environment attracted us in 2007. Today, we're leveraging these characteristics for a global technology and innovation centre in Chennai."**

— N Venu, MD and CEO, India and South Asia, Hitachi Energy

(products) Dinesh Nirmal recently told ET that hiring is not as swift as they would like it to be in Bengaluru. "It is harder to hire and retain talent in Bengaluru," he had said.

ANSR's Ahuja added, "Corporates don't set up GCCs for incentives. They are not the primer driver. Incentives do help, but the core is talent, connectivity, ease of setting up business there."

In this regard, the incentives offered by the TN government can't be enough. "They help from an entry perspective, but won't give you a huge amount of money over a longer period. Typically, if you look at the characteristics of a GCC, once you set it up, like a services company, projects can come and go, but the GCC is there to stay in perpetuity. You don't move its location [depending on incoming projects]," he explained.

He added that a lot of incentives are designed to help companies set up their bases, but that over a longer period of time, these will wither away.

## THE SHORTLISTING PROCESS

Typically, a company aiming to establish GCCs will go through an exhaustive and sophisticated location selection process, based on not just talent but also a cultural match. "You may have service partners in a particular location and so firms would want to create that connected ecosystem; the city needs to be expat friendly; travel should be easy for people on both sides of the fence; it should have international connectivity, etc.," Ahuja added.

So, even if Chennai has the incentives and there are good managers in place, the question remains if people will move there from Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Delhi, etc. "People are relatively resistant. If there was a mobility index, locations like Bengaluru, Hyderabad, even Pune, will rate way higher, as these are more cosmopolitan locations. Chennai gets very hardcore on that front," Ahuja added, pointing out that several technology majors such as Amazon, Tesco and Walmart continue to be based in Bengaluru, where the ecosystem is bottoms up.

In order to attract firms, Ramamoorthy said, Tamil Nadu should focus on its core select industries, such as financial services, health sciences, manufacturing, transportation/supply chain — irrespective of scale — given the deep domain capability across banking, insurance, healthcare, pharma, industrial engineering, automotive, logistics and transportation.

He said that many companies in these industries are driving R&D and innovation from their GCCs, enabling technology transfer and know-how, and contributing to academic enrichment in the state through faculty development, curriculum and program curation, among others.

"The biggest incentives that the state provides any GCC include high-quality talent at enviable scale, rich domain capability in key industries of focus, a service-oriented work culture, an ecosystem of thriving industries and next-generation startups. Any other incentive is only the icing on the cake," he added.

## APPLE'S CHIP GAME TO POWER DATA CENTRES AND NEW IPAD

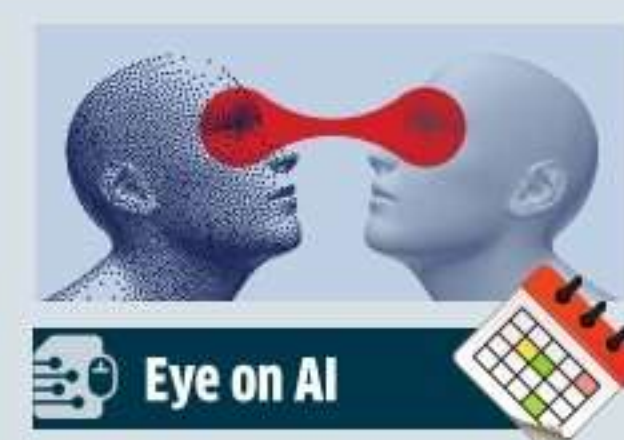
This year, Apple will roll out some of its AI features through data centres integrating its own AI chips. It is putting its AI chips into cloud computing servers to process advanced AI features that will be rolled out in its devices.

Apple also introduced the M4 chip, its next generation silicon, in the new iPad Pro upgrade. It said this makes the new iPad Pro "an outrageously powerful device for artificial intelligence". It said that the neural engine in the M4 chip is more powerful than any neural processing unit in any existing AI PC (personal computer). Further, the iPadOS has advanced frameworks that help developers leverage the neural engine to run powerful diffusion and generative AI models on device.

## META LAUNCHED NEW GEN AI TOOLS FOR ADVERTISERS

Facebook and Instagram parent Meta launched enhanced generative AI features for advertisers, such as full image and text generation. Advertisers can now create full image variations inspired by their original ad creative with text overlay, building on capabilities to generate new backgrounds around product images and expanding images to better fit multiple surfaces.

In the coming months, advertisers will also be able to provide text prompts to better tailor the creative variations



Eye on AI

offered. The features will be rolled out globally by the end of the year, and Llama-3, its latest gen AI model, will be integrated for enhanced ad performance, the company said.

## OPENAI JOINED THE C2PA STEERING COMMITTEE

ChatGPT maker OpenAI joined the steering committee of the Coalition for Content Provenance and Authenticity (C2PA), a digital content authentication standard used to prove that a piece of content comes from a particular source.

"As generated audiovisual content becomes more common, we believe it will be increasingly important for society as a whole to embrace new technology and standards that help people understand the tools used to create the content they find online," OpenAI said.

Earlier this year, the company began adding C2PA metadata to all images created and edited by its latest image model Dall-E 3, as well as in ChatGPT and the OpenAI API. It will do so for its video generation model Sora.

## US LOOKS TO BLOCK CHINA'S ACCESS TO ADVANCED AI MODELS

US lawmakers introduced a bill to make it easier for the Joe Biden administration to control exports of AI models to prevent them from getting into the hands of international bad actors.

The US commerce department was mulling regulations to restrict exports of proprietary closed source AI models, Reuters reported.

The Biden administration, which over the past two years took steps to curb the export of AI chips to geopolitical rival China citing security reasons, is now looking to safeguard US AI software capabilities from China and considering placing guardrails around the country's most advanced AI models.

## MICROSOFT AND OPENAI LAUNCHED \$2-MN FUND FOR AI LITERACY FOR VOTERS

Software giant Microsoft and ChatGPT maker OpenAI announced that their \$2-million Societal Resilience Fund would go towards AI education of voters.

"It is more important than ever to provide tools and information that will help people navigate an increasingly complex digital ecosystem and find authoritative resources," Microsoft said in a blog. The fund will provide grants to organisations like Coalition for Content Provenance and Authenticity (C2PA), International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, and Partnership on AI. "Our shared goals are to combat the growing risk of bad actors using AI and deepfakes to deceive the voters and undermine democracy," Microsoft said.

— Compiled by Annapurna Roy

# The Rise Of The Finternet

A new model proposed by Nandan Nilekani and Agustín Carstens envisages multiple financial ecosystems interconnected with each other

Suraksha P

## High-Level Finternet Architecture

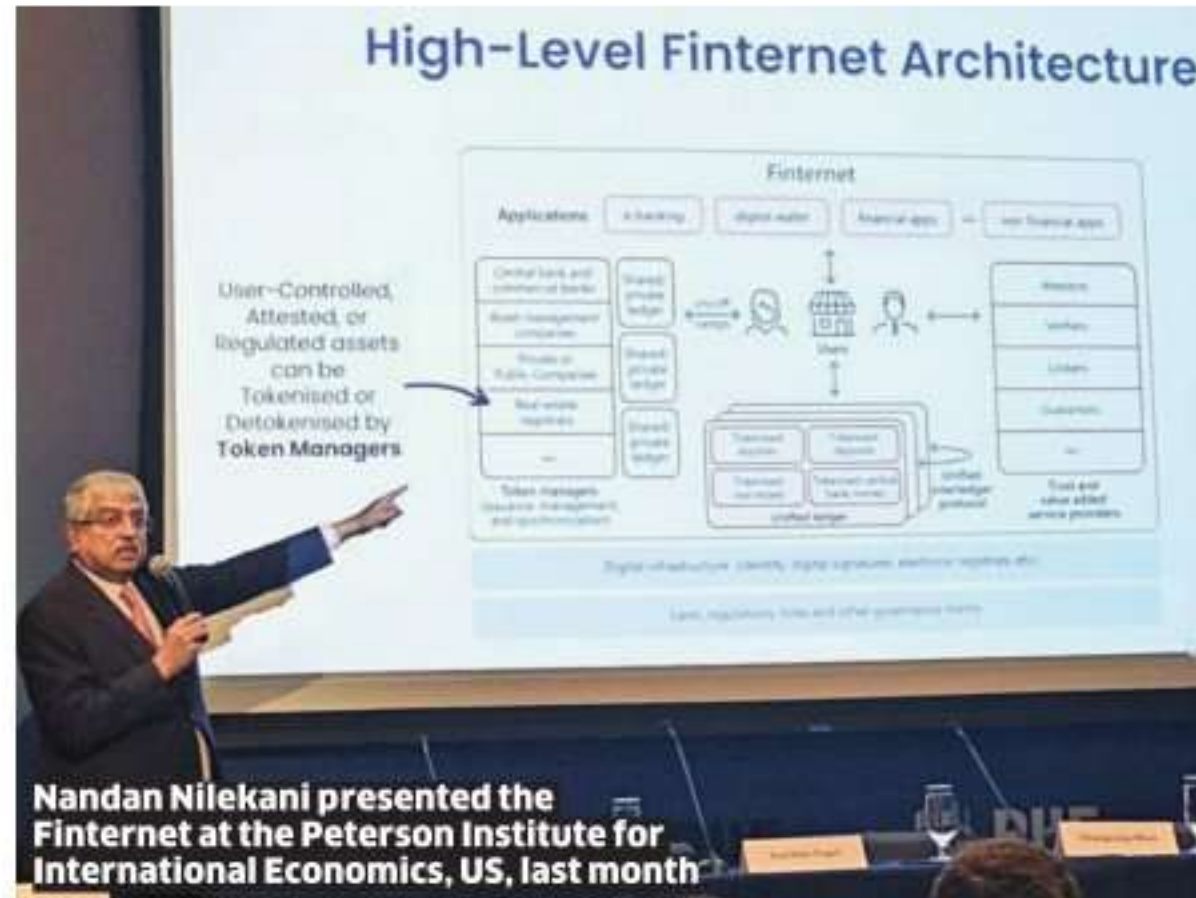
"I am delighted to announce the Finternet, co-authored with Agustín Carstens, which presents a visionary framework for empowering individuals and businesses by placing them at the centre of their financial lives," tweeted Nandan Nilekani, co-founder of Infosys and founding chairman of the Unique Identification Authority of India, on April 16. The new term soon took the internet by storm.

But what is Finternet? Multiple financial ecosystems interconnected with each other is called Finternet. The system has been proposed by Carstens, who is the general manager of the Bank for International Settlements (BIS), and Nilekani through a recent working paper of BIS.

"We foresee a system in which individuals and businesses could transfer any financial asset, in any amount, at any time, using any device, to anyone else, anywhere in the world," Carstens told ET over email. "Financial transactions would be cheap, secure and near instantaneous. And they would be available to anyone," he added.

## EASY ACCESS

The building blocks for the Finternet combine technological advances with sound governance. "One is the ability to create a digital representation of physical assets, like a bond, property or savings in a bank. These digital tokens are brought together on programmable platforms that can trigger automated actions, such



Nandan Nilekani presented the Finternet at the Peterson Institute for International Economics, US, last month

as payment that triggers the sale of an asset," he further said.

Designed to empower individuals and businesses by placing them at the centre of their financial lives, Finternet advocates for a user-centric approach that lowers barriers between financial services and systems, thus promoting access for all. The proposed system uses technologies such as tokenisation and unified ledgers, with an underlying economic and regulatory framework, to expand the range and quality of financial services.

"This would reduce the complex processes that happen behind-the-scenes today and make transactions slower and expensive. Another key feature is the framework. Central banks would remain at the core of the system, ensuring trust in money,

but (like today) work closely with commercial banks," said Carstens, who was the Governor of the Bank of Mexico from 2010 to 2017.



PIC: GETTY IMAGES

The idea is revolutionary from a tokenisation standpoint, he said at the BIS Innovation Summit 2024 that was held from May 6 to May 8.

"Tokenisation allows us to change the way we do financial transactions," he said. Instead of having piecemeal steps to complete a financial transaction, you package all together in the form of tokens, and you just exchange tokens, he explained. "To get to that degree of simplicity, you must do many complex things. This is where technologies come into play," he said.

## THE ROAD AHEAD

Robust regulation and supervision are needed to make sure money retains its value and that the Finternet does not provide a means to bypass laws or exploit regulatory loopholes, Carstens told ET.

Regulation checks could be built in; compliance checks could take place in moments rather than days, he said. Nilekani and Siddharth Shetty did not respond to ET's requests for a comment.

Shetty is a technology advisor of Bengaluru-based non-profit Foundation for Interoperability in Digital Economy, who worked with the BIS team to put together the Finternet paper.

The problems that plague the financial system today, in terms of speed, cost, products, and availability of different products and services, need a multifaceted approach to solve them, said Shetty at the BIS Innovation Summit.

The characteristics of safety and interoperability must be plugged in right from the start, he said. The Finternet, much like the internet, can be made available to eight billion people and 300 million businesses, if it is universal, he said.



The Man Who Never Says No to Zendaya



Law Roach and Zendaya at the 2024 Met Gala

Celebrity stylist Law Roach opens up about quitting the profession and working only on his own terms

The New York Times

Last March, Law Roach seemed to be at the peak of his career as a celebrity stylist. He had won the first stylist of the year award from the Council of Fashion Designers of America, and was working with Zendaya, Celine Dion, Anya Taylor-Joy and Anne Hathaway, among others. Then, out of the blue, he announced on Instagram that he was quitting.

"The politics, the lies, and false narratives finally got me!" he wrote. "You win ... I'm out."

There were rumours that he had called Priyanka Chopra Jonas fat. Another rumour said he had thrown a tantrum because Louis Vuitton wouldn't seat him next to Zendaya in the front row. It was quite a dramatic career pivot then.

This year, on May 6, Roach dressed Zendaya, a host of the Met Gala. The same day, he made his debut as a judge on a new TV show. Roach has a how-to book coming out. And he is plotting a certification course for would-be stylists that will essentially mass-market and formalise his approach.

Edited excerpts from an interview:

Were you surprised by the reaction to announcement?

The first two, three months were really hard. So much of who I was depended on what I was doing, and I felt like I didn't know who I was. I was just tired. Also, my nephew died the year before. He was three, and he fell out a window the day before Thanksgiving. I never had time to grieve because I was working. So, I went through this grieving process for him and for my career. I went through guilt, thinking that people who look up to me were going to see me as a quitter.

But you chose to announce that you were quitting. Was it because you think stylists don't get enough respect?

I felt like every time I came into a room, I had to prove myself. I changed the trajectory of people's careers, their visibility, but I still have to argue for what I think is the best look.

"Not saying that we [Roach and Zendaya] don't argue, because we do fight. But I know my place. I know she's the boss, and she also has enough respect and love for me to let me be the boss sometimes"

You don't seem that retired.

I'm the most unretired retired person. But everything I'm doing now is on my own terms. I've been saying no to a lot of unhappy people. Except Zendaya. I can't say no to her.

Zendaya has been your client since she was 13. Do you tell her what to wear?

We call each other fashion soulmates. We also refer to our relationship as "big ideas, small details".

Not saying that we don't argue, because we do fight over things. But I know my place. I know she's the boss, and she also has enough respect and love for me to let me be the boss sometimes.

What mistakes have you made along the way?

My first year, I made \$120,000. I thought I was rich, to be quite honest, but nobody had ever tapped me on my shoulder and said, "Hey, most of that has gone into taxes." So, I spent \$100,000. And then I got into tax debt. I owed \$65,000. The only reason I knew is because I went to an ATM and there was no money in there.

The Austrian Spa Town That Shaped Beethoven's Music

The night Ludwig van Beethoven's monumental Ninth Symphony rang out in a Vienna concert hall for the first time almost exactly two centuries ago, the great German composer was anxious for all to go well.

He needn't have worried. The audience erupted into spontaneous applause during the performance, but Beethoven was already so hard of hearing that he had to be turned around by a musician to notice it.

While he was born in Bonn in 1770, Beethoven spent most of his life in Vienna after moving there as a 22-year-old.

Despite receiving repeated offers to relocate, the legendary composer never left Vienna, where he had found his home away from home, surrounded by supportive fans and generous patrons. "It was the society, the culture that



Despite receiving repeated offers to relocate, the legendary composer never left Vienna, where he had found his home, surrounded by supportive fans and generous patrons

characterised the city that appealed to him so much," said Ulrike Scholda, director of the Beethoven House in Baden, Austria.

The picturesque spa town just outside Vienna deeply shaped Beethoven's life — and the last symphony he would complete, she said.

"In the 1820s, Baden was certainly the place to be", with the imperial family, the aristocracy and a who's who of cultural life spending their summers there, Scholda said.

THE FINAL SYMPHONY

Beyond his hearing loss, Beethoven also suffered from various health problems ranging from abdominal pains to jaundice, and regularly went to Baden to recuperate. Enjoying long walks in the countryside and bathing in Baden's medicinal springs helped

him recover, while simultaneously inspiring his compositions.

In the summers leading up to the first public performance in 1824, Beethoven stayed at what is now known as Baden's Beethoven House, which now serves as a museum. It was there that he also composed important parts of his final symphony.

A letter Beethoven sent from Baden in September 1823 details the pressure he felt to finalise the symphony to please the Philharmonic Society in London which had commissioned the work, Scholda said.

Upon completing the symphony in Vienna, weeks of intense preparations followed, including an army of copyists duplicating Beethoven's manuscripts and last-minute rehearsals that culminated in a premiere on May 7, 1824.

— AFP

From pyramid schemes to scammy texts, explore how the world of true crime has ensnared many, through these films, TV shows and podcasts

Art of the Con

The New York Times

There are so many true crime offerings dedicated to scams, frauds and con artists that it can be overwhelming. Many of these are astonishing stories documenting financial, medical or romantic deceptions. But the most surprising part is how painless it can appear to be to lay traps, and how many people — regardless of personal circumstances — take the bait.

Here are four picks across television, film and podcasts that stand out, all of which underscore what can unfold when a hunger for money, power or prestige is put above all else.

OPERATION VARSITY

BLUES: THE COLLEGE ADMISSIONS SCANDAL

The end of the academic calendar is an appropriate time to revisit one of the most outrageous education scandals in recent years: A \$25-million bribery scheme that prompted a federal US investigation called 'Operation Varsity Blues'. The mastermind behind it was William Singer, a basketball coach-turned-college admissions counsellor who ran a criminal enterprise that opened a path for wealthy people to have their children accepted by elite varsities under the guise that they had earned entry based on academic or extra-curricular excellence.

Test scores were doctored, for example, and athletic credentials were fabricated in ludicrous ways. Dozens of powerful people were accused and arrested, most famously actors Felicity Huffman and Lori Loughlin, both of whom served time in prison.

In this 2021 film, director Chris Smith puts a fresh spin on reenactments, long the lifeblood of true-crime television and films, by re-creating full scenes and pulling dialogue directly from wiretaps. Matthew Modine (*Stranger Things*, *Oppenheimer*), who plays Singer, and other actors bring it all to life.

LULARICH

This four-part 2021 series unpacks the glitzy, extravagant rise and the equally staggering fall of the billion-dollar clothing giant Lululemon. The company — a multilevel marketing business known for its bright, patterned leggings (think neon kitties and kaleidoscopes of pizzas) — was built on the backs of an army of saleswomen (often stay-at-home mothers and wives) trying to make their own income. They were lured by promises of independence, flexibility and jaw-dropping

bonuses, all wrapped up in a culture of social media influencing and hollow feminism.

The company has been embroiled in numerous legal battles, including class-action lawsuits. A lawsuit filed by the Washington state attorney general in 2019, and settled in 2021, accused Lululemon of being a pyramid scheme that had swindled thousands of associates out of millions of dollars.

The creators of this docuseries interviewed people, former present (the company is in business), most interestingly, founders, Mark and DeAnne Stidham, who revealed that, despite everything, they hadn't stopped selling the dream.

SEARCH ENGINE: WHO'S BEHIND THESE SCAMMY TEXT MESSAGES WE'VE ALL BEEN GETTING?

On this 70-minute episode, we hear from Zeke Faux,

SOUR GRAPES

As an antidote to some of the heavier fare above, this 2016 documentary from Reuben Atlas and Jerry Rothwell is both a palate cleanser

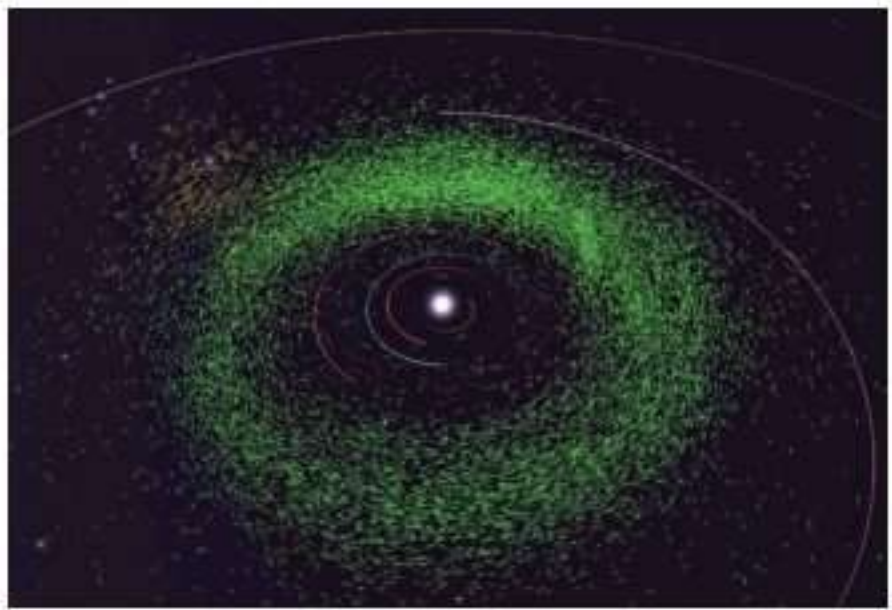
and a boggling ride through the inner sanctums of the ultra-wealthy.

It tells the story of Rudy Kurniawan, an unassuming young man who's called both, a "geeky young guy that likes wine" and "the Gen X Great Gatsby".

Kurniawan engineered what was possibly the world's biggest wine fraud, duping some of America's richest leaders. The film transports viewers back to the boom times leading up to the 2008 financial disaster, particularly the rare wine auction scene. In 2006 alone, Kurniawan sold \$35 million worth of the stuff.

The most surprising part is how painless it can appear to be to lay traps, and how many people — regardless of personal circumstances — take the bait

Killer Asteroid Hunters Spotted 27,500 Overlooked Space Rocks



The New York Times

A few years ago, a team of researchers dedicated to finding asteroids swirling around in our solar system came up with a new trick: Instead of scanning the skies for these killer rocks, they wrote an algorithm that would sift through old pictures of the night sky.

In April, they revealed a big bounty: 27,500 solar system bodies. That is more than the number discovered by all the world's tele-

scopes last year. The finds include about 100 near-Earth asteroids, the space rocks that pass within the Earth's orbit. While none of the 100 appear to be on a collision path with

Earth soon, the algorithm will be a key tool in spotting future dangers. Most of the space rocks lie in the main asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter.

Others, known as Trojans, are trapped in Jupiter's orbit. The search also found some smaller worlds farther out, beyond Neptune.

METHODS OLD AND NEW

Historically, astronomers spotted new planets, asteroids and comets by photographing the same night sky multiple times. The pattern of distant stars and galaxies remain unchanged, but objects much closer move noticeably within a few hours. Multiple observations of a moving object, called a 'tracklet',

sketch its path and provide enough information to give astronomers a good idea of where to look and pin down its orbit.

The algorithm used in the current research, Tracklet-less Heliocentric Orbit Recovery (THOR), is able to connect a dot of light seen in one image with a different dot of light in a different image taken on a different night — sometimes by a different telescope — and figure out that these two dots are actually the same object, usually an asteroid.

Celebrating How Shellfish Helped Humans Evolve

FOOD FABLES



VIKRAM DOCTOR

The second Sunday in May is Mother's Day in many places, but in Nerul, a village close to the mouth of the Mandovi river in Goa, it's time to celebrate clams. The sands of the riverbed and shore are ideal places to find *tisriyo*, small but very tasty shellfish. A village tradition has grown of gathering, cleaning and cooking *tisriyo* on this day. It isn't a religious event, though the local

priest is happy to give blessings.

This is excellent, because shellfish should be celebrated in India far more than they are. North Kerala loves mussels and Indian oysters are now found in upmarket restaurants, but given the length of our coastline, we hardly seem to do justice to shellfish. They tend to have an unclear reputation, perhaps because they are found in mud and are often filled with it, or because some species can occasionally be toxic, depending on the waters from which they have been filtering food.

Shellfish have often been left to marginalised communities, as Dalit writer Urmila Pawar recalls in her memoir *Aaydan: The Weave of My Life*. She writes of how women from her community would forage along coasts for oysters, make a small fire and place the shells on it, eating them as they opened. Foragers like this would have known the seasons



when they were safe to eat and how to leave the smallest ones, so they could grow and reproduce.

In recent years, there have been complaints from parts of Goa, like Chicalim bay, of hordes descending on the sands to collect shellfish indiscriminately, attracted by the prospect of making easy money by

The human species has been gathering and eating shellfish from shores since prehistoric times. Shellfish literally helped us spread across the world

harvesting *tisriyo*, because they have become popular in Goan fish thali restaurants. These 'outsiders' are blamed for endangering the shellfish, though polluted water and unrestrained sand mining seem more likely to cause problems.

The post-Covid period saw a particular boom in harvesting, possibly because shellfish flourished in the relative peace that the sands enjoyed during lockdowns. Watching the harvesters wade through the mud, feeling around for the shells seemed to recall something really ancient. In *Dinner with Darwin*, Jonathan Silverman's study of how food and evolution have interacted, he notes how the human species has been gathering and eating shellfish from shores since prehistoric times: "Mounds of discarded seashells punctuate the historical records followed by our species as we travelled along the coastlines of our planet."



Shellfish literally helped us spread across the world.

Silverman notes that shellfish are rich in the omega-3 fatty acids needed for brain development, so they also helped transform us physically. Unlike fish, they don't need boats to catch them and unlike land-based plants and animals, littoral species like shellfish are less susceptible to droughts and other vagaries of weather. They can be eaten raw or, as roasted, which helps open them up, with the shells serving as natural utensils. In Richard Wrangham's *Catching Fire*, his book on how cooking helped create us as a species, he writes of how tribes like "the Yaghan of Tierra del Fuego used mussel shells to catch the drips from a roasting seal or to hold whale oil". Goa is now promoting mussel

farming, which has already taken off in Kerala. Instead of the rocks on which they are naturally found, they are grown on ropes hung in the sea from rafts. Mussels, which were a minor food in Goa, are becoming increasingly available. But this shouldn't be at the expense of *tisriyo*, and some of the suggestions made after the rush for harvesting in Chicalim have been constructive, like enforcing periods when harvesting has to stop, or preventing the really small juveniles from being harvested.

Festivals like Nerul's could also be used as a way to educate people about shellfish. Perhaps in centuries to come, heaps of shells excavated in Goa could be proof of how much we valued and gained from *tisriyo*.



