



Knights or Nizams?

Shreyas' Kolkata take on Cummins' Hyderabad in the IPL final tonight WORLD PLAY >> 10

magazine

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Pure Politics, Bottom Line & Around the World

AS INDUSTRY FACES FIERCE COMPETITION...

Intense Price War Leaves Wearables Les Miserables

Prices of smartwatches, bluetooth earbuds at all-time low; sales rising but higher inventory a concern for companies

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Downward Trend

Avg Selling Price in India (in \$)



Excess stock also is leading to heavy discounting. Cos hope inventory to get cleared by Diwali. Source: IDC India



GfK says the ₹4,000-priced products still comprise 2/3rd of the market by value

Brands like Boat, pTron & Boulton have reported fall in profit in FY23, as per RoC filings

Profitability remains challenged with very low margins as it's a pure volume play: IDC

New Delhi: Prices of wearables such as smartwatches, bluetooth headphones and earbuds, and wristbands have crashed to an all-time low due to intense competition and deals such as buy one, get one free, companies and researchers said. Earbuds start at ₹400 and smartwatches at ₹999 for front-line brands, about half of what they were a year ago, they said. Although sales are rising, companies aren't able to clear out stock fast enough, they added. According to data from researcher International Data Corporation (IDC), the average selling price (ASP) of smartwatches and truly wireless headphones (TWS) has crashed five-seven times between 2019 and 2023 amid a price war. In the March quarter, ASPs of wearables fell 18% from a year ago.

Titan Co. chief executive, watches and wearables division, Suparna Mitra, told analysts earlier this month that manufacturers of wearables are faced with a buildup of stocks. "And so there is a lot of pricing pressure... they are operating at

much lower prices," she had said. "They want to clear out the stock..."

By the time the Diwali buildup happens, which is in August-September, we hope that this excess stock, which is leading to heavy discounting will settle down. Most industry executives said the drop in ASPs will continue as competition in the wearables market in India is the most intense

in electronics with over 200 brands vying for a slice of the market.

Boat co-founder and chief executive Sameer Mehta said as long as cheap but unreliable Chinese hardware is available from traders, this price decline will persist. "True differentiation around accuracy of all health and wellness parameters driven by stable hardware is the only way the industry will be back on track," he said.

Entry Segment Faring Well >> 7

MARUTI, TOYOTA MODELS GAIN TRACTION

Hybrids Catching up Fast with EVs

Hyundai, Kia plan launches as segment may overtake e-cars soon: Experts

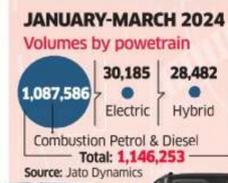
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Mumbai: Sales of cars and SUVs with hybrid transmission are growing quickly, narrowing their gap with electric vehicles in market share, thanks to Maruti Suzuki and Toyota Motor that offer several popular models with this option.

In the January-March quarter of 2024, hybrid vehicles accounted for 2.48% of the country's total passenger vehicle market, compared with 2.63% for EVs, according to data collated by consultancy firm Jato Dynamics.

With demand remaining strong, and automakers such as Hyundai Motor and Kia reportedly exploring the option to launch hybrid vehicles, industry experts expect this segment to overtake EVs in sales as early as this fiscal year. Currently, apart from Maruti Suzuki and Toyota, only Honda Motor in India sells hybrid vehicles, which come with an electric motor along with a fossil fuel-powered engine, making them low on emissions and high on fuel efficiency.

Improved Fuel Efficiency >> 7



TOP 5 HYBRID MODELS: SALES/UNITS

Innova	144,442
Urban Cruiser Hyryder	9,370
Grand Vitara	2,232
Invicto	1,210
Camry	754

TOP 5 ELECTRIC MODELS: SALES/UNITS

Punch	8,549
Tiago	5,704
Nexon	4,223
XUV400	3,886
Comet	2,300

HUMAN INTERVENTION STARTS AT INTERVIEW STAGE

Now, GenAI Bots Get a Big Say in Hiring

More cos are relying on AI tools for resume screening, skill assessment

Neil.Ghai@timesgroup.com

New Delhi: Your job application may get rejected before it reaches a human for review.

Companies across sectors are using artificial intelligence tools, including generative AI, for candidate sourcing, resume screening, skills assessment, predictive analytics and bias reduction in their recruitment process. Humans get involved only from the interview stage at some companies, while at some others, GenAI bots help managers conduct interviews. While there are several concerns, ranging from data privacy to risk of discrimination and inability to discover potential in candidates, HR executives say AI is making the hiring process quicker and more efficient for them. Professional services firm Genpact recently launched IMatch, a



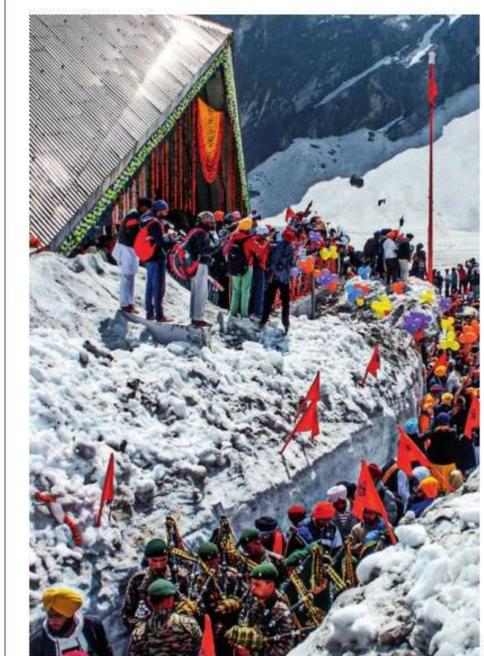
Advantages of GenAI tools

- Increase in recruiter productivity
- Speedier hiring process
- Flip side: Data privacy issues
- Discrimination risks
- Lack of soft skills evaluation

GenAI-based in-house resume parsing and job-matching engine.

Covering 40% of its new hires, AI tools have made the hiring process touchless till the interview stage, said Ritu Bhatia, Genpact's global hiring leader. Use of AI has resulted in a 15% increase in recruiter productivity, and an improvement in the speed to hire from 62 days to 43, Bhatia added.

Improved Productivity for Cos >> 7



No Stopping Them

Devotees during the opening of the Gurudwara Sri Hemkunt Sahib, in Chamoli district of Uttarakhand, on Saturday.



Director Payal Kapadia with the film cast during the closing ceremony of the 77th Cannes Film Festival, France, on Saturday.

Kapadia Scripts History at Cannes, Bags Grand Prix

As 'All We Imagine as Light' gets second-most coveted award, Indian filmmaker's movie receives rave reviews

Press Trust of India

Cannes: Filmmaker Payal Kapadia on Saturday scripted history as her spellbinding drama "All We Imagine as Light" won the Grand Prix award at the 2024 Cannes Film Festival.

The film bagged the award, which is the second-most prestigious prize of the festival after the Palme d'Or, during the closing ceremony of the 77th edition. Kapadia's feature directorial debut, which screened on Thursday night and has received glowing reviews in the international press, already registered its name in the history books after it became the first Indian film in 30 years and first ever by an Indian female director to be showcased in the main competition.

The screening of the film received an eight-minute standing ovation from the audience members. "All We Imagine as Light", a Malayalam-

Hindi feature, is about Prabha, a nurse, who receives an unexpected gift from her long estranged husband that throws her life into disarray. Her younger roommate, Anu, tries in vain to find a private spot in the big city to be alone with her boyfriend.

One day the two nurses go on a road trip to a beach town where the mystical forest becomes a space for their dreams to manifest, according to the plotline.

An alumna of the Film & Television Institute of India (FTII), Kapadia is best known for her acclaimed documentary "A Night of Knowing Nothing", which premiered at the 2021 Cannes Film Festival's Director's Fort-night side-bar where it won the Oeil d'Or (Golden Eye) award.

ACTRESS SENGUPTA SHINES

Meanwhile, Anasuya Sengupta, one of the lead stars of Bulgarian director Konstantin Bojanov's Hindi-language movie "The Shameless", also created history by bagging the Best Actress award in the Un Certain Regard category of the 2024 Cannes Film Festival.

Sengupta, who hails from Kolkata, is the first Indian artist to win the category's top acting honour, marking a significant milestone for India at the prestigious film gala.

Anora wins Palme d'Or >> 7

In Maha Realty Check, 20,000 Agents Grounded

Home Truths

Brokers must undergo training and clear a test

MahaRERA decision in January 2023, extended many times

Binding for all brokers from January 2024

Over 47,000 property brokers registered with MahaRERA

LICENCE CAN BE RENEWED IF BROKERS OBTAIN CERTIFICATE OF COMPETENCY WITHIN A YEAR

MahaRERA suspends registration of unqualified brokers, who have failed to receive certification

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Mumbai: The Maharashtra Real Estate Regulatory Authority (MahaRERA) has suspended the registration of more than 20,000 property agents, who did not obtain the certificate of competency from the regulator to provide the service or register the certificate on its website.

Real estate agents in Maharashtra must undergo training, clear a test and get the competency certificate from the regulator, failing which they will not be allowed to provide the service.

Earlier this year, the real estate regulator cancelled the registration of 13,785 agents for not renewing their licences

Real estate agents are a key link between homebuyers and developers. Usually, a potential homebuyer receives primary project-related information from these agents, and the regulator is trying to ensure that they are qualified to provide the service.

"It is essential for real estate agents to be well-versed with the Real Estate (Regulation and Development) Act, 2016," MahaRERA chairman Ajay Mehta told ET.

Eye on Developers Too >> 7

Phase 6: Voter Turnout 60% and Counting

The penultimate round of Lok Sabha elections 2024 wrapped up on Saturday closing polls to 486 of the 543 parliamentary constituencies - leaving just 57 seats in contest for the final phase of June 1. >> 2

What Holiday Plans? Indians Tripping on Last-Minute Rush

Spontaneous bookings up for domestic and international destinations by younger travellers with higher disposable incomes

Prachi Verma & Anumeha Chaturvedi

New Delhi: Indians are not only travelling more frequently but they are also doing it impromptu. Last-minute bookings are replacing booking months in advance for both international and domestic destinations, half a dozen experts at travel companies told ET.

Reasons: more visa-free destinations, lower average age of travellers, a rise in disposable incomes, and availability of spontaneous booking options. "We are observing a significant increase in last-minute bookings among Indian travellers," said

Bharatt Malik, senior vice-president, flights and hotel business, at travel platform Yatra Online.

"This is largely driven by the growing availability of flexible payment options (such as no-cost EMI and book now, pay later), which make spontaneous travel

more accessible." At Yatra Online, three out of 10 bookings are made within just three days of travel, and half the bookings are made within a week, Malik said. While booking early allows travellers to secure good deals, younger travellers increasingly prefer to keep

their plans flexible, which often gives a sense of excitement and adventure and also lets them take advantage of last-minute deals.

Taking the cue, Yatra has started offering exclusive discounts for last-minute travellers through its

'Last Minute Travel Deals' campaign. Thomas Cook India, which offers customised holidays to customers, said many people are now booking short-haul travels under 7-10 days of travel and long hauls in 15 days. "This was quite unheard of in the pre-pandemic era," said Rajeev Kale, president and country head for holidays, MICE and visa at Thomas Cook (India) Ltd. "The new age of travel has seen the emergence of a confident Indian," he said. "Add to this growing disposable incomes, the brag value of travel, and a doubling of new airports in the last ten years."



Attractive, Closer-to-home Options >> 7

TROUBLE LOOMS OVER AIRLINE'S REVIVAL PLAN

Pitti-Singh Out of Go First Race

Online travel platform EaseMyTrip's promoter Nishant Pitti and SpiceJet owner Ajay Singh are withdrawing their bid to acquire bankrupt airline Go First. >> 3

Phase 6: Turnout 60% And Counting

Anantnag keeps up J&K pace; 486 seats done, 57 left to go on June 1; Polls in 28 states and UTs now complete



Our Political Bureau

New Delhi: The penultimate round of Lok Sabha elections 2024 wrapped up on Saturday closing polls to 486 of the 543 parliamentary constituencies, leaving just 57 seats in contest for the final phase of June 1.

A 59.6% turnout was recorded as of 9 pm against the 64.97% of 2019. The 2024 figure is expected to improve as final polling numbers come in from the 58 states across eight states and Union Territories.

In keeping with past trends, West Bengal continues to lead the tally with a turnout over 77%. Jharkhand is next at 62% while Bihar and Uttar Pradesh persist in the 53%-54% range. National capital Delhi reported near 55% turnout while Odisha and Haryana touched near 60%. Both Haryana and Delhi voted in a single phase across ten and seven seats respectively and closed polls on Saturday.

A standard turnout was reported in the newly carved out Anantnag-Rajouri which clocked over 51% turnout—the highest in 35 years.

With this round, Jammu & Kashmir has also wrapped up parliamentary polls. Polling is also complete in General Elections for State Legislative Assemblies of Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Andhra Pradesh and 105 Assembly seats of Odisha State Assembly.

While polling was largely peaceful, sporadic incidents of violence were reported from some of the constitu-

encies in West Bengal. J&K saw PDP Chief Mehbooba Mufti hold a protest alleging that her party workers were being prevented from voting.

Phase 6 has also sealed the electoral future of several high-profile candidates from union ministers Dharmendra Pradhan and Rao Inderjit Singh to PDP's Mehbooba Mufti, former Haryana Chief Minister Manohar Khattar, former union minister Maneka Gandhi besides Congress Kanhaiya Kumar and Sushma Swaraj's daughter Bansuri Swaraj who are testing their luck in Delhi.

The bigger picture, however, will rest on whether BJP makes the kinds of gains in these seats as it did in 2019. The ruling party had bagged 40 of the 58 seats in 2019 and swept Delhi and Haryana while Congress could not win a single seat while its allies held on to five seats.

PARLIAMENTARY POLLS TURNOUT (%)



*2019 data is for corresponding seats of 2024 phases; *2019 phase-wise data is excl. Assam/Jammu & Kashmir; SAs of 9pm; Source: EC's Voter Turnout APP

Anantnag Sees 35-yr High Turnout at 53%

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Devsar: Anantnag-Rajouri parliamentary constituency spread across Pir Panjal mountains in Jammu and Kashmir has recorded around 53% voting till highest in the last 35 years.

With this the Lok Sabha elections on five seats of Jammu and Kashmir and one seat of Ladakh are over. This parliamentary election has seen an overwhelming participation of people in Kashmir with an average of over

50 percent of voting recorded across the Valley. Baramulla constituency recorded 59 percent voting. Srinagar Lok Sabha seat recorded 39 percent voting. On Jammu Lok Sabha seat 72.22 percent votes were polled, while in Udhampur 68 percent votes were polled taking the total percentage of voting across J&K to 58% in this LS election.

"We are voting to get some relief in our lives. Our business, employment and identity has been snatched from us," said Bashir Ahmad Kawa, 70, of Nussu area of Anantnag.

but it took a long time." State minister Chandrima Bhatnagar alleged that "Tudu went to a village polling booth and a woman was attacked and assaulted by the BJP candidate's security personnel".

Meanwhile, protests were seen in some other parts of the constituencies where polling was held.

AMID TURNOUT DEBATE IN THE FIRST 5 PHASES

EC Releases LS Seat-wise Turnout Data

Our Political Bureau

New Delhi: The Election Commission on Saturday released fresh data on all the five completed phases of Lok Sabha elections, complete with absolute number of voters for each parliamentary constituency, and denied any delay amid a simmering debate and court battles over the matter.

Saying that it had noted the "pattern of false narratives and mischievous design to vitiate electoral process", the poll panel asserted that it remains "fully committed to the highest level of transparency and involvement of stakeholders at every stage of the electoral cycle".

"Any alleged delay in the issue of press notes (with voter turnout data) of phase 1 does not mean that data was not available in the public domain all the time through the Voter Turnout App," the Election Commission of India (EC) said in a statement.

It emphasised that no alteration is possible in the number of votes polled.

"The process of collection and storage of votes polled is rigorous, transparent, and participative... The whole exercise of release of turnout data from the date of commencement of polls on April 19, 2024, has been accurate, consistent and in accordance with election laws and without any discrepancy whatsoever," the EC said.

The expanded data disclosure by the poll panel came a day after the Supreme Court refused to direct EC to release greater voter turnout details in the middle of the general elections.

"The poll panel said it feels "duly strengthened" by the Supreme Court's observations and verdict and therefore with a sense of "higher responsibility" towards electoral democracy, it has decided to further expand the format of release of turnout data to include the absolute number of voters in every parliamentary constituency.

VOTED IN 6TH PHASE



In First Five Phases

BOTTOM 10

STATE	SEAT	Turnout %	Ph
Bihar	Nawada	43.17	1
Rajasthan	Karauli-Dholpur	49.59	1
Uttarakhand	Almora	48.74	1
Madhya Pradesh	Rewa	49.43	2
Uttar Pradesh	Ghaziabad	49.88	2
Uttar Pradesh	Mathura	49.41	2
Jammu & Kashmir	Srinagar	38.48	4
Telangana	Hyderabad	48.48	4
Telangana	Secunderabad	49.04	4
Maharashtra	Mumbai South	50.06	5

TOP 10

Lakshadweep	Lakshadweep	84.16	1
Assam	Nagaon	84.97	2
Assam	Barpeta	85.24	3
Assam	Dhubri	92.08	3
Andhra Pradesh	Bapatla (SC)	85.48	4
Andhra Pradesh	Chittoor(SC)	85.77	4
Andhra Pradesh	Hindupur	84.69	4
Andhra Pradesh	Machilipatnam	84.05	4
Andhra Pradesh	Narsaraopet	85.65	4
Andhra Pradesh	Ongole	87.05	4

Bengal Sees Violence, Protests in Several Districts

BJP candidate Pranat Tudu hospitalised after being injured in stone pelting

Our Political Bureau

Kolkata: Violence was reported from several parts of West Bengal on Saturday amid close to 78% voter turnout in the eight constituencies of the state that went to polls in the sixth phase of the general election.

In Garbha area of Jhargram constituency, BJP candidate Pranat Tudu was hospitalised after being injured in stone pelting, allegedly by Trinamool supporters.

Tudu's security personnel sustained head injury.

Tudu had gone to a booth following complaints that voters were unable to cast their vote. Tudu's

vehicle was vandalised and the windscreen of a media vehicle was broken.

Tudu said, "I informed the EC and the district magistrate in the morning about complaints of the voters. He did not respond, so I reached the booth. After the violence erupted, I was told that the Quick Response Team was being sent,

but it took a long time."

State minister Chandrima Bhatnagar alleged that "Tudu went to a village polling booth and a woman was attacked and assaulted by the BJP candidate's security personnel".

Meanwhile, protests were seen in some other parts of the constituencies where polling was held.

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AFTER HC ORDER INVALIDATING SOME CASTES

NCBC May Delist Some of 37 Castes From Bengal on Central List

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New Delhi: Thirty seven castes from West Bengal, included in the Central List of Other Backward Classes (OBCs) by Congress-led UPA government before 2014 parliamentary elections, are now under the scanner of National Commission for Backward Classes (NCBC) and some may be delisted.

The move follows the order of Calcutta high court invalidating all OBC certificates issued by West Bengal government after 2010. Speaking to ET, NCBC chairman Hansraj Gangaram Ahir said, "We are scrutinising the Central List of OBCs to check if there are certain castes common in Central and State list. If their status is impacted by high court order, we will recommend they be taken off the Central List as well." Ahir said West Bengal had recommended inclusion of 46 castes in Central OBC list in 2011. Of these 46, proposals of nine castes were rejected. Ahir said, "In February 2014, right before the parliamentary elections, the government notified inclusion of 37 castes, including 35 belonging to Muslim community. Since these 37 castes are the only ones included from Bengal, we will examine the list now." If certain castes are found common and their OBC certificates have been invalidated, Ahir said the Commission will recom-

ending inclusion of 87 castes, including 80 belonging to Muslim community, in the Central OBC List. In 2023, it sought additional data from the state government. NCBC's observations have been included in Calcutta high court order. Ahir said, "The number of castes of Muslim community being added by West Bengal is mind boggling. I have observed even during hearings whether it is Bengal or Bangladesh. This practice may lead to real deserving castes not being included."

As per government guidelines, while the states have jurisdiction over inclusion of castes in the State List, it has to send its recommendations to the Centre for castes to be included in the Central List of OBCs.

mend to ministry of social justice and empowerment to remove them from the Central list.

NCBC has been red-flagging anomalies in implementation of reservation policy in West Bengal. After a field visit in February 2023, NCBC had found Rohingyas and Bangladeshi immigrants had got OBC certificates and taken reservation benefits. It has also held off

recommending inclusion of 87 castes, including 80 belonging to Muslim community, in the Central OBC List. In 2023, it sought additional data from the state government. NCBC's observations have been included in Calcutta high court order. Ahir said, "The number of castes of Muslim community being added by West Bengal is mind boggling. I have observed even during hearings whether it is Bengal or Bangladesh. This practice may lead to real deserving castes not being included."

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During SP Rule, Mafias Moved in Official Cars: Modi

Our Political Bureau

New Delhi: Prime Minister Narendra Modi raised the issue of erstwhile Samajwadi Party governments in Uttar Pradesh promoting mafias and facilitating their entry into legislatures. Speaking at a rally in Ghazipur where SP has fielded Afzal Ansari, sitting MP and brother of don Mukhtar Ansari who died of a heart attack in jail recently, Modi said mafia elements had a free run in the state before BJP came to power.

Modi charged SP and Congress with neglecting the development of Ghazipur and east UP, resulting in a life of misery for the people who lived a hand to mouth existence. Successive governments since the time of Jawaharlal Nehru had not paid heed to the demands raised by local leaders on the plight of the people in this region.

"During SP rule, the situation was such that mafias would move around in official vehicles with a red beacon light, issue open warnings to the government from open Jeeps, shoot their opponents in

public. UP became identified with riots," Modi said.

He took on SP Chief Akhilesh Yadav on poor law and order, saying he did not keep his election promises after coming to power.

"At one point, SP Shehzada (Yadav) had said that he would put a

stop to entry of mafias but then went and sat at the feet of these mafias. SP nurtured mafias and gave them election tickets," Modi said.

Mukhtar Ansari and slain don Atiq Ahmed had contested and won Assembly elections on a SP ticket. Ahmed even won a Lok Sabha election.

Earlier at a rally in Patliputra, Patna, the prime minister reiterated his charge that the INDIA bloc will take away a share of the reserved seats of SC, ST and OBC communities and give it to Muslims. He said the backward and extremely backward castes will be the worst sufferers.

THIRD EYE



VARANI SAHU

Missing From Scene During Polls

The Jharkhand BJP issued a show cause notice to party leader and Hazaribagh MP Jayant Sinha, asking him why he did not campaign for the party and did not vote. Sinha, a sitting MP from Hazaribagh, was denied a party ticket. Sinha responded by stating that no party leader had asked him to any of the gatherings or rallies in Jharkhand. He stated that he voted via a postal ballot.



On 'Educational' Campaign Trail

Nanveet Rana, the BJP Lok Sabha candidate from Amravati, suffered embarrassment while campaigning for the party in Delhi. Rana criticised the AAP of failing to deliver on its promise of Mohalla clinics during her address. She asked her audience whether they had seen any Mohalla clinics at all, hoping for a no. However, a few in the crowd acknowledged it. Rana was taken aback and answered that there were no physicians at the clinics, but someone in the crowd said doctors and drugs were present. The AAP and Congress said that Delhi residents have "educated" Rana.



Enter 'Tana Tana Tan' And 'Safachat Safachat'

In addition to allegations, politicians have used inane language throughout the contentious elections. Rahul Gandhi has been using the term Khata-khat khatakat in his speeches to demonstrate how effortlessly a Congress-led government at the centre will deposit money into women's accounts. Prime Minister Narendra Modi had his own opinion when speaking at a rally in Rae Bareilly, stating that the people of the constituency will send Congress candidate (Rahul) Khatakat home. Now, Tejaswi Yadav has chimed in, claiming the climate in Bihar was 'tana tana tan' and the BJP will be 'safachat safachat'.

Beyond The Clutter: India-US Ties Transcend Ongoing Differences

India explained why oil imports from Moscow are necessary to preserve global oil market stability, similarly Chabahar deal is also for regional stability which is valued by the US



HARSH VARDHAN SHRINGLA

A nation cannot choose its geography or its neighbours and their constraints. India's land borders at 15,200 km are double its 7,500 km coastline. Geographic and geopolitical factors ensure that 90% of India's trade by volume and 70% by value is through sea. Maritime channels of trade have, therefore, been a major concern for India.

Barriers to overland trade and movement have been particularly troublesome in connecting with Afghanistan and Central Asia, and beyond that to the Eurasian landmass.

India has supported multi-modal transport corridors to its east and west to try to bypass these bar-

riers. Investments in Sittwe Port in Myanmar and Chabahar in Iran are two examples of this strategy. Sittwe is a part of the Kaladan multi-modal project while Chabahar was linked to the Zaranj-Delaram highway that was built in Afghanistan.

India is also working on an India-Middle East-Europe (IMEC) corridor with the US, the UAE, Saudi Arabia and a number of European countries.

While the situation in Afghanistan and Central Asia has changed with the US withdrawal, the realities of India's geography remain. It is in this context that the agreement between Indian Ports Global Ltd. (IPGL) and the Port & Maritime Organisation (PMO) of Iran needs to be seen.

However, within hours of the Chabahar pact being signed, the US cautioned against engaging in business with Iran, citing the potential risk of sanctions. This statement triggered speculation about straining of US-India relations.

These statements should be placed in the proper perspective. Over the past decade, the India-US relationship has

significantly matured. This transformation has been marked by increased strategic cooperation, particularly in defence. \$4-b pact to buy MQ-9B armed drones reached in February is just the latest in the series that has seen defence trade jump the \$20-b mark since the year 2000 when defence trade between the two was negligible.

Some major developments in this relationship include the India-US

Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology (ICET), India joining the Artemis Accords in Outer Space, cooperation in semiconductors, in combat aircraft engines, and cooperation in ensuring the security of sea lines of communication in the Indian Ocean.

Furthermore, both nations have shown a unified front on global issues such as climate change and counterterrorism. High-level diplo-

matic engagements have further solidified this partnership, making it one of the most consequential relationships in the 21st century.

A measure of how far India-US ties have come is the unveiling of an ambitious roadmap to position India and the US as "trusted technology partners". The understanding institutionalises a framework to overcome regulatory barriers and export controls, particularly on the US side. The clinching of this understanding is seen as a significant milestone in India-US relations that have been on an upward trajectory for nearly 25 years.

It is only natural that two countries will have disagreements on certain issues. But the days of India and the US talking past each other are behind us. Given the present state of relations, when irritants arise, the two sides sit down to discuss and solve them.

For instance, when India decided to import oil from Moscow, despite reservations from Washington, India was able to explain the necessi-

ty of this decision to maintain stability in global oil markets. This pragmatic approach helped the US understand India's position.

Similarly, the Chabahar deal is not just about India's interests but also about regional stability and connectivity which is valued by the US.

By investing in the development of the Chabahar Port, India aims to improve connectivity with Central Asia and Afghanistan. This, in turn, will benefit the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), which has faced setbacks due to conflict in Ukraine.

India's actions mirror those of the US in 2015, when the P5+1 signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran. While the approaches may differ, both the Chabahar Port deal and the JCPOA share the twin goals of dissuading Tehran to continue with its nuclear programme and enabling Iran to integrate into the global economic system.

Given this, a more nuanced understanding of the situation is

required. India and the US have distinctly unique histories and, consequently, different approaches to engaging with other nations.

Washington for decades has dealt with treaty-based alliance partners. In contrast, New Delhi has traditionally guarded its independence through its non-aligned approach.

This difference in approach underscores the need for a more sophisticated understanding of the dynamics at play.

India and the US have agreed that their cooperation will serve "the global good". It is, therefore, important that the US understands that India's pact with Iran is a connectivity effort to bring prosperity. And that it is beneficial to the broader international community, in line with Washington's vision of a rules-based world order. The US has shown flexibility and maturity in its dealings with India previously—something that New Delhi expects will carry the relationship forward.

The author is former foreign secretary

BATS FOR STATUS QUO

RoadMin Against Hike in Project Lending Rates

Ministry of road transport and highways seeks stakeholders' views on RBI's draft rules requiring higher provisions

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New Delhi: The ministry of road transport and highways will bat for status quo in project finance lending rates even as it seeks views from all stakeholders on the potential impact of draft guidelines proposed by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), a senior official said.

"The ministry will oppose any change in the norms that would lead to a rise in lending rates and urge the central bank to ensure that cost and pace of infrastructure creation is not impacted in the country, the official told ET.

"RBI, as a regulator, will have to create that balance to ensure financial viability of road projects does not take a hit," the official said. The central bank earlier this month proposed tighter norms, re-

quiring lenders to allocate 5% of the project loan amount as general provisions during the construction phase, up from 0.4% provisions now.

The National Highways Authority of India (NHAI), under the road ministry, has held the first round of meetings with representatives from National Highway Builders Federation (NHBF) and is expected to hold subsequent meetings in the coming days to finalise the ministry's view on the draft proposal.

People aware of the deliberations told ET that the highway builders see a significant rise in financial burden on agencies executing highway infrastructure projects following RBI's proposal of 5% provisions.

"This could potentially hinder the flow of credit to deserving sectors and individuals, ultimately impeding economic progress and the de-

Firming Up Views



velopment of vital infrastructure projects," one of the sources told ET.

NHBF is of the view that the stringent timeline for compliance with the provisioning requirements and the

provision for funding cost overruns arising from date of commencement of commercial operations (DCCO) extensions could pose challenges for agencies, particularly in infrastruc-

ture projects with varying timelines and complexities. "It has suggested a phased approach to the provisioning requirements so as to provide more time for agencies to adjust to the new provisions and avoid sudden financial strains," the person quoted above said.

NHBF has also urged the central bank to re-evaluate the terms and conditions for funding cost overruns and has sought more clarity in the disclosure requirements to help highway builders streamline the reporting process without excessive administrative burdens.

"Ensuring a fair and sustainable approach for all stakeholders involved in highway infrastructure projects is crucial for the overall development and economic growth of the country," it had said.

CBDT Notifies Cost Inflation Index at 363 for FY25

NEW DELHI: The Central Board of Direct Taxes has notified the Cost Inflation Index (CII) reading at 363 for the financial year 2024-25 (assessment year 2025-26).

"This notification shall come into force with effect from the first day of April 2025 and shall, accordingly, apply in relation to the assessment year 2024-25 and subsequent assessment years," the board said in the notification.

The index is used for calculating long-term capital gains arising from the sale of immovable property, securities and jewellery after adjusting for inflation.

The finance ministry had notified the final CII for FY24 (assessment year 2024-25) at 348. The readings were 331 for FY23 and 317 for FY22. — **Our Bureau**

Singh-Pitti Consortium Pulls Out of Go First Race

No Longer in Fray Withdrawal of leading bidders leaves airline's revival plan in jeopardy

Our Bureau

New Delhi: Online travel platform EaseMyTrip's promoter Nishant Pitti and SpiceJet owner Ajay Singh are withdrawing their bid to acquire bankrupt airline Go First.

"After careful consideration, I have decided to withdraw from the GoAir bid in my personal capacity," Pitti said in a statement on Saturday.

Singh has also decided to pull out, people aware of the matter said. Singh could not be immediately reached for comment. A SpiceJet spokesperson did not respond to queries until press time Saturday.

"This decision allows me to better focus on other strategic priorities and initiatives that align with our long-term vision and growth objectives," Pitti said in a statement. "Our (EaseMyTrip's) commitment to delivering exceptional value and service remains unwavering as we continue to navigate new opportunities and challenges."

EaseMyTrip has written off its around ₹54 crore of dues recoverable from Go First.

The Singh-Pitti consortium's

pullout leaves the revival of Go First in jeopardy. They were the frontrunners for the troubled airline with a total bid of around ₹1,600 crore.

The second bid is from Sharjah-based Sky One.

Go First, formerly owned by the Wadia Group, shut business last year and is now embroiled in a legal battle with US aircraft engine manufacturer Pratt & Whitney at the Singapore Court of Arbitration in which the airline has claimed about ₹8,000 crore in compensation, blaming its bankruptcy to the failure of P&W engines that allegedly forced it to ground many aircraft.

Lenders to Go First and potential bidders have failed to arrive at a valuation for the bankrupt airline despite several rounds of discussions, making liquidation instead of a revival a more likely outcome, people aware of the development said. A Delhi High Court order in



April allowing lessors to repossess their aircraft has further dented hopes of reviving Go First, they said.

"The bidders are quoting a price which is far below the expectation of the creditors' committee," one of the persons said. "The committee believes that if they fight the case themselves, they will recover more money than the bid amount."

One of the persons involved with the consortium said since data on Go First employees is currently not available, there is a lack of detailed insight about the company.

"Moreover, now that the court has allowed repossession of air-

craft by the lessors, there is no certainty that the new owner will have any access to the airline's slots at airports or its international flying rights. So, the bidders are in a complete black box," the person said.

Singh-Pitti consortium's plan hinged on initially using 15 planes of Go First that are in flying condition to start operations for retaining airport slots and international rights.

An airport slot is a permission for take-off and landing at a specific time and date. These are set to lapse as Go First has been unable to use them for two consecutive summer and winter schedules.

'Tele Infra Sharing may Spur Gear Sharing Too'

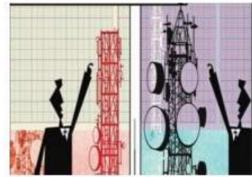
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Mumbai: The telecom regulator's proposal on giving separate authorisation for telecom infrastructure sharing without the need to pay separate licence fee could spur operators to share active equipment such as radio access network, antennas/transceivers, base stations, backhaul networks and controllers, experts said.

Telecom firms have been sharing passive infrastructure such as buildings, telecom towers, dark fibers and duct spaces, with the country emerging as one of the pioneers in infrastructure sharing, according to industry body Cellular Operators Authority of India (COAI).

However, this is not the case for active operational infrastructure except for a few projects.

"This is largely because for acti-



ve equipment sharing, the licence fee for both operators would double, and therefore, does not make a business case despite the cost savings promise," said Prashant Singhal, TMT emerging markets leader at EY Global.

The current scenario could change with Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (Trai) recommending creating a separate category under the unified licence for Digital Connectivity Infrastructure Provider (DCIP) authorisation. "...the proposed DCIP authorisa-

tion holder may create both active and passive digital connectivity infrastructure and share it with other TSPs and has to pay no license fee to the government," Trai said in its recommendations last month.

According to BEREC, a global body of European telecom regulators, active infrastructure sharing, excluding spectrum, could bring 33-35% savings in capital expenditure and 25-33% in operating expenses, more than the 16-35% savings from passive infrastructure sharing.

In India, for instance, a shared

Radio Access Network (RAN) deployment by RailTel and Cloud4xTel at nine railway stations in Mumbai brought savings of 50-60% for Bharti Airtel and Vodafone Idea, according to Cloud4xTel.

"It has also increased download speeds by 10-15x and even improved customer experience in surrounding macro sites by 16x for Airtel and VIL," said Kunal Bajaj, founder and CEO of Cloud4xTel.

"With usage surging 24% to 24.1GB monthly in 2023 (Nokia report), 5G's arrival only intensifies the pressure. Existing RAN deployment can't keep pace—5G's shorter waves require a denser network of micro cells, more than double what 4G demanded," he added.

"A lot of it depends on practicality and how differently operator networks have evolved. For instance, VIL has lot of dependency on 2G, whereas Airtel and Jio's 5G stacks are quite different," said Singhal.

Infy Average Bonus Drops to 60% in Q4

BENGALURU: Infosys, India's second-largest IT services major, has rolled out the quarterly performance bonus to employees at band six and below for the January-March quarter, according to an internal email communication ET has seen.

The average pay-out, according to several employees, has dropped to 60% for the final quarter of fiscal 2024. It had announced a variable bonus pay-out of 73% for the October-December period, 80% for the quarter through September and 75% for the first quarter of the fiscal year.

Employees at level 6 (PL6-manager) and below, barring those at the entry level, are set to receive pay-outs in the range of 55% to 85%.

Employees at PL 4, 5 and 6 will get an average of 70%, 65% and 57%, respectively, separate communications sent to select employees said. Only in exceptional cases has the company handed a bonus between 75% and 85%.

Infosys has informed employees about the final pay-outs through individual mails and the payment will happen along with the May salary, people in the know said.

Infosys did not respond to an email seeking comment.

— **KR Balasubramanyam & Beena Parmar**

Clarification

In response to a Page 1 story published on 24 May about SBI's decision to pass on to customers the higher costs on account of impending provisioning norms on infrastructure lending, the bank has clarified it is yet to come up with such a policy and would do so after the final guidelines from RBI.

Cos, Firm on Return to Office, Lend a Friendly Hand

Most companies show consideration for employees' need to work from home given need-based emergency

Sreeradha D Basu & Brinda Sarkar

Bengaluru: Amid growing return-to-office calls, several companies are giving employees the leeway for extended and expanded flexibility on a "need basis".

Requests for flexibility are being considered on grounds like caregiving responsibilities (children, parents, in-laws), personal health issues, challenges in relocating and for employees with disabilities.

In the post-Covid era, there is no going back to the "fixed" approach model, said Arvind Usretay, regional client manager—Asia at HR consultancy Mercer.

"Companies are attracting a variety of talent pools, including part-timers, returning mothers and people with special needs. Employers will hence be required to remain open to flexible working arrangements to ensure a healthy working environment," he said.

"Flexibility is a key attraction and retention element for top talent," Usretay added.

ITC, Uber, Panasonic, KPMG, Publicis Sapient and Mphasis are among companies that provide such flexibility on return-to-office mandates.

CASE-TO-CASE CALL
A manager with ITC's trade mar-

keting and distribution division told ET that she has been allowed to work out of Mumbai instead of her job location of Kolkata, as she has a young child and her husband is unable to relocate. She gets freedom in terms of the number of days she goes to office and ITC pays for her child and a caregiver to accompany her whenever she travels for work.

"It's a very enabling environment—a huge support and mental assurance," said the employee, who did not want to disclose her name.

"ITC has instituted a host of enabling policies including a hybrid work model based on the nature of the role as well as additional flexibility in work arrangements for expectant and young mothers," said Amitav Mukherji, ITC's head of corporate HR.

"Employees are also granted extended work from home on a case-to-case basis, especially in times of personal exigencies."

Flexible Workstation

In times of return-to-office, some cos offer extended/expanded flexibility to employees

How this works
Granted to employees on need/case-to-case basis

How it helps companies
Under circumstances such as caregiving responsibilities, personal illnesses/disabilities, inability to relocate

Builds perception as an employee-friendly organisation

Helps attract/retain key talent

For instance, at a major e-commerce company, which has otherwise taken a hard stance on return to office, several employees with caregiving responsibilities have been given relaxations. Employee needs in mind Kameshwari Rao, global chief people officer at Publicis Sapient, said the company gives exceptions for caregiving, including for elderly parents or in-laws. Employees with disabilities, or those



which is into manufacturing, sales and operations, Panasonic doesn't have a work-from-home policy. "However, on a case-to-case basis and in case of a genuine requirement, we offer the flexibility of a hybrid model," said Adarsh Mishra, chief HR officer, Panasonic Life Solutions India.

Uber has given more flexibility—even fully remote work—in some cases. "When employees ask for fully remote work, we consider the nature of the role and decide accordingly. There are others we have made accommodations for, where they need more flexibility for medical or caregiving purposes. Relaxations include redistributed work hours and temporary work arrangements where employees can choose to work out of their hometowns for a decided time period. Additionally, we have a four-week work-from-anywhere policy and a global caregiving policy," said a spokesperson from the cab-hailing company.

Mphasis offers remote work options to those who require it due to caregiving responsibilities, medical conditions, or other extenuating personal situations, said CHRO Ayaskant Sarangi.

As per KPMG's policy on remote working, a person can work from anywhere for up to five days in a quarter.

Viacom, Star India Move CCI for Merger Approval

Our Bureau

Mumbai: Reliance Industries Ltd (RIL) owned Viacom18 and Walt Disney's Star India have filed a combination notice with the Competition Commission of India (CCI) seeking approval for their merger deal, following the National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT) admitting their merger application.

In the May 24 notice, the parties assured CCI that the proposed transaction will not significantly impact competition in India and urged that precise market definitions be kept open.

"The proposed transaction will not cause any appreciable adverse effect on competition in India," said the notice. "Accordingly, the exact relevant market definitions for evaluating the proposed transaction may be left open."

On February 28, Star India and Viacom18 agreed to merge operations to form India's largest media and entertainment business, valued at \$8.5 billion. The merger will create a media giant with a combined topline of ₹25,000 crore based on FY23 numbers.

The parties have stated that the anti-competition watchdog can assess horizontal overlaps in India's audio-visual (AV) content, advertising space, AV content rights licensing, film production, broadband internet services, and broadcast TV channel distribution for ease of assessment. They have identified vertical linkages in the proposed transaction in the upstream mar-



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ket for AV content rights licensing, advertisement space supply and the upstream market for TV channel operation and distribution.

Apart from Star and Viacom18, other parties involved in the transaction are RIL and Star Television Productions, a subsidiary of Disney. The proposed transaction aims to enhance operational efficiencies, besides offering Indian viewers an unparalleled entertainment experience, by providing a competitive and world-class digital platform as well as a competitive scaled-up advertising platform for small and medium Indian businesses.

Legal experts had earlier told ET that the Star-Viacom18 deal is likely to go through intense CCI scrutiny since the combine will dominate both the TV broadcasting and streaming markets in the country with over 100 TV channels and two streaming platforms—JioCinema and Disney+ Hotstar.

Star-Viacom18 will have a large presence in live sports, including properties such as the Indian Premier League, International Cricket Council (ICC) events, Indian, Australian and South African cricket board fixtures, Pro Kabaddi, the Indian Super League, and the English Premier League.

Nazara Tech Clocks 43% Jump in March Quarter Profit

BENGALURU: Listed gaming and media firm Nazara Technologies has reported a 43% increase in quarterly profit after tax (PAT) from continued operations.

PAT for the March quarter of FY24 stood at ₹17 crore, while operating revenue came in at ₹266 crore, down by 8% from a year ago, the company said on Saturday.

For the full year, revenue was up 4.3% from FY23 to ₹1,138 crore while PAT from continued operations was 41% higher at ₹89 crore. The improvement in profitability was led by the firm's esports division, which houses businesses like esports and media firm Nodwin and sports news firm Sports-

keeda. The division saw earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation and amortisation (Ebitda) jump 71% in Q4 to ₹18 crore, and grow 51% to ₹63 crore in FY24.

OZIVA REPORTS ₹44-CR LOSS IN FY24
Oziva, a plant-based nutrition brand, posted a net loss of ₹44 crore on a turnover of ₹104 crore in the fiscal year ended March 2024, HUL, which owns a majority stake in the startup, said in its annual report. In FY23, Oziva had posted a net profit of ₹58.3 crore, as it benefited from a one-time gain of ₹95.5 crore during the year. Operating revenue was ₹99.3 crore. — **Our Bureau**

ANTARA SENIOR LIVING TO EXECUTE 1.3M SQ FT PROJECT Max Group Arm Ties Up with Hyd Realtor for Senior Living Project

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New Delhi: Antara Senior Living, a subsidiary of the \$4-billion Max Group, has signed an agreement with a Hyderabad-based developer to execute a 1.3-million sq ft senior living project.

Antara has two projects—one in Dehradun and one in Noida—and it recently added one in Gurugram after a gap of three years.

The company has tied up for another 1 million sq ft in Bengaluru as it increases focus on the southern market.

"We will have 450-500 apartments in the Bengaluru project and about 750-800 in the Hyderabad one. We have a waitlist in the existing projects and it is important to move to the next phase of expansion," said Rajit Mehta, CEO and managing director of Antara, told ET.

The company is also looking for tie ups in Chennai.

"We have seen that buyers are not hesitant anymore in buying senior living apartments. Even the children of buyers are happy to buy one such apartment for their parents for their safety," Mehta said.

According to real estate consultant Colliers, with close to 20,000



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units in the organised sector, current availability of senior housing in India translates into a 1% penetration rate, indicating a huge demand-supply gap.

In contrast, countries like the US, UK and Australia have established senior living markets with 6-7% penetration rate. Moreover, a lower population base also means significantly less demand supply gap in these matured markets.

Antara has also tied up with Max Estates to develop its first integrated senior living facility in Gurugram. The facility is proposed to be positioned as a unique "inter-generational" project in which Antara Senior Living will provide advisory services for design, conceptualisation, training and development of project personnel, besides advice on promotions, marketing and sales.

Black Route of Blue Monkey

Civil war in Myanmar and resultant anarchy in border areas have given a new life to the smuggling of wildlife—from marmoset monkeys to green anacondas—to India

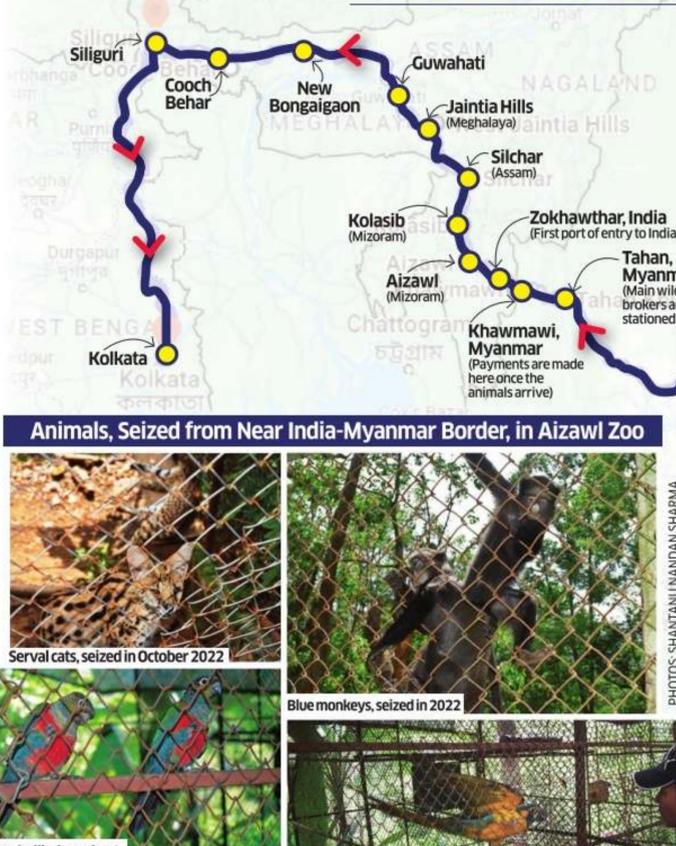
Shantanu Nandan Sharma | Along India-Myanmar Border

ATata Sumo snaking down the night road in Champhai, Mizoram, was flagged down by Assam Rifles for a routine interception on January 30. The cargo surprised everyone: Indonesian salmon-crested cockatoos, South American marmoset monkeys, lizards, snakes and even an Aldabra giant tortoise, native to the Seychelles. The vehicle was stopped roughly about 30 km from the Tiau River, the border between India's Mizoram and Myanmar's Chin state. Over the past three years, Champhai district has become a prime entry point for smuggled exotic wildlife, with about 800 animals seized and many more slipping through undetected. These creatures, primarily of African, Australian, and South American origin, are being brought in from Myanmar and then transported to some of India's metro cities. And with Myanmar embroiled in a civil war and areas bordering India falling to the rebels, these days it is free for all.

ANIMAL PLANET
The recent seizures of exotic animals in Mizoram, Assam, Meghalaya, and West Bengal have raised several critical questions. At the heart of it all is Zokhawthar, a bustling border town in Champhai district, and Khawmawi, a key trading hub on the Myanmar side of the border. This correspondent spoke to half a dozen Indian officers, local traders from both sides of the border, drivers and porters potentially involved in smuggling activities, and a Chin guerrilla leader, who now heads the police force in Khawmawi after the town's recent takeover by rebels. Some of their names are withdrawn to conceal their identities.

The burgeoning wildlife trade is reportedly run by kingpins based in two locations—Kolkata, and Tahan in Myanmar, located roughly 170 km from the Indian border, with a significant Mizo-speaking population. The animals' odyssey does not span continents. Regardless of origin, be it an African wildcat or an Australian albino wallaby, they are all bred and raised in Thailand before being transported to Tahan. Here, the illegal trade thrives. There are also unconfirmed reports that breeding also takes place in Tahan. Wealthy Indians who want to buy these animals reportedly connect with brokers and sellers through WhatsApp groups and Facebook pages. Once a deal is clinched, the ani-

The Smuggling Route



791
No. of exotic animals seized in the last three years in Champhai district in Mizoram alone

144
No. of exotic animals, birds and reptiles that are now in Mizoram's Aizawl zoo, which have been seized from smugglers from Myanmar

Exotic Animals Sent to Aizawl Zoo

- 2021: 32 (including iguana, macaw, purple-bellied lory)
- 2022: 178 (including serval cat, blue monkey, albino wallaby)
- 2023: 2 (green anaconda)
- 2024: 37 (including marmoset monkey, alibaba tortoise)

Animals, Seized from Near India-Myanmar Border, in Aizawl Zoo



Serval cats, seized in October 2022

Blue monkeys, seized in 2022

Crimson-bellied parakeet

Iguana

PHOTOS: SHANTANU NANDAN SHARMA

Macaw

mal is transported from Tahan to Khawmawi in Myanmar. "The price of a marmoset pair is about ₹4.5 lakh whereas a green anaconda fetches ₹2-2.5 lakh. Some python species are the costliest items. Prices are discovered through bidding," says a Champhai-based officer in the know, also adding that transactions take place both online and in cash. According to him, online payments for the animals are masked within other business dealings. "There are reports that Khawmawi also houses a couple of

has recently undergone a dramatic shift in power. In November 2023, a fierce battle resulted in Chin guerrillas wresting control from the Myanmar army. **BORDER TROUBLE** C Rohmingliana sheds light on the new reality. A sturdy figure in a black uniform emblazoned with 'Hualngoram Police' (referencing a Chin clan), he now leads the patrol force of Khawmawi. "I am like a DSP (deputy superintendent of police) in your country," he says when

asked about his rank in the Chin National Front (CNF). "I control 57 villages here," he says, "with a hint of pride. As the conversation turns to wildlife smuggling, he nonchalantly scrolls through his smartphone, displaying photos of his police unit's drug confiscations. "We are opposed to any form of smuggling to India—be it drugs or wildlife. But let's be clear: we are in the middle of a war. As we speak, our soldiers are fighting with the Myanmar Army just 35 miles away. I don't have the luxury to spare my forces to check wildlife smuggling," he adds. The border bustles with activity. Porters move freely back and forth between India and Myanmar, carrying goods across the bridge. On the Myanmar side, the border gate

Mae Sot, Thailand (A border point through which exotic species bred in Thailand farms enter Myanmar)
Source: Indian officials, local traders on both sides of the border, guards in check gates, drivers, porters, etc



Headloads of goods coming in from Myanmar to India

stands wide open, adorned with blue flags bearing the emblem of the Chin rebels—two hornbills. In contrast, the Indian checkpoint remains partially closed, although porters are permitted to pass. For the smugglers, noisy and aggressive animals are a liability, making them less desirable for trafficking. Reptiles, on the other hand, are highly sought-after due to their ability to survive for extended periods without food or water. For birds, careful planning goes beyond just transport. Smugglers ensure they have access to corn and fruit during the journey to keep them alive. The most common trafficking route is from Mae Sot in Thailand to Tahan via Mandalay. Payments are often made when the animals reach Khawmawi. Once in India, the cargo embarks on a circuitous route: Zokhawthar—Aizawl—Kolasib—Silchar (Assam)—Jaintia Hills (Meghalaya)—outskirts of Guwahati—New Bongaigaon—Cooch Behar—Siliguri—Kolkata. "According to our intelligence, most smuggled wildlife ends up near Kolkata, a city with a high concentration of brokers and buyers. Interestingly, some animals are kept there for up to a year to acclimatise to their new environment before being sold in other major cities like Mumbai, Delhi and Bengaluru," says another officer. "Wealthy buyers in these metros," says the Champhai officer, "have customised enclosures with controlled temperature to house their exotic acquisitions."

According to former Assam Police chief Bhaskar Jyoti Mahanta, a significant increase in the seizure of exotic animals coincided with the Covid-19 pandemic. "An upsurge of wildlife smuggling from Myanmar is a relatively new phenomenon. It emerged alongside the pandemic," he explains. A vivid illustration of this phenomenon came to light in July 2020. As lockdown restric-

tions started easing, authorities in the south Assam town of Silchar were shocked to discover a smuggled kangaroo among a collection of exotic animals. Margaret Lalramchhani, director of the Aizawl Zoological Park, paints a concerning picture. "Based on the influx of exotic animals surrendered to our zoo, 2022 stands out as the peak year for wildlife smuggling originating from Myanmar," she says. Though the number of seizures has come down since then, it still places a significant burden on the zoo administration and its resources. "Once the legal proceedings are completed after any seizure and confiscated animals are entrusted to our care, we prioritise quarantine procedures, as they could be carrying zoonotic diseases," she adds. Located on a 62-hectare hilly campus near Mizoram's capital, the zoo faces a unique challenge. The facility currently houses 144 exotic animals, birds, and reptiles—all confiscated from wildlife smugglers from Myanmar—a staggering number compared with its 192 native species. It's important to note that not all seized animals reach the zoo. In the January 30 seizure, for example, only 37 out of 49 animals survived transportation. Some animals die in the zoo as well. "Two spider monkeys, seized in Champhai in September 2022, have died. One of the monkeys, a male, died of snake bites a year later. His mate, a female monkey, apparently could not bear the loneliness and died sometime after. "Caring for these exotic animals presents a unique learning curve," says Bethsebi Lalremruati, an officer posted in the zoo. "For example, we initially struggled to understand why an albino Burmese python in our care wouldn't eat the rats and chicks we provided. It turned out that this particular variety has poor eyesight, a fact we weren't initially aware of."

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Shephali Bhatt

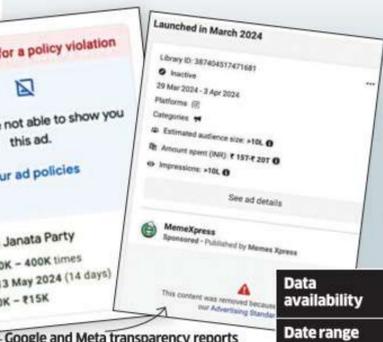
Abhishek Kumar finds himself consumed by Google and Meta's ad transparency reports. What are those, you ask? These are data-rich web pages providing vital information on political advertising. They display ads released by political advertisers on the two big-tech platforms, along with details like how big is the size of the audience the ads are meant to target, its demographics, how much money is spent on showcasing these ads and if any ads were removed for policy violations, among others.

These reports claim to enhance transparency and accountability of platforms as well as political advertisers during the ongoing Indian elections, said to be the world's most expensive poll so far, with anticipated spending of ₹1.35 trillion, as per the Centre for Media Studies. Digital campaigning is believed to form a significant chunk of this overall pie. Google Ads Transparency Center shows that between February 20 and May 19, 2024, BJP spent ₹78.5 crore on Google Ads and Display Network, while Congress shelled out ₹39.5 crore. Similarly, Meta Ad Library Report states BJP put ₹18 crore in advertising across its platforms in this period, compared with Congress's ₹10 crore. A senior fact-checker at Alt News, Kumar tracks these reports to gauge hate speech and misinformation in political ads. Despite the abundance of data to parse through, Kumar finds these reports often obscure more than they reveal, raising more questions than the answers they provide.

ILLUSION OF TRANSPARENCY
Transparency reports are essentially a way for big tech companies to alter the impression that they aren't doing enough on content moderation. However, with heightened scrutiny this year, when many countries, including Mexico, the UK and the US, head to the polls, researchers say these reports merely create an illusion of transparency, often circumventing the values they claim to uphold. Kumar notes that Meta Ad Library Report combines ads on social issues with political and election ads, complicating the filtering and analysis of political advertising. Meta also limits access to data to specific date ranges in its ad library report. "You can access data for customised date ranges by visiting a specific advertiser's page," he clarifies. "But this might be intentional because it is harder to scrutinise 500 advertiser pages instead of analysing the consolidated report." While much of Kumar's recent work has criticised Meta's moderation of advertising

Instead of Show & Tell, Big Tech Plays Hide & Seek

Ad transparency reports of Google and Meta, which should be providing vital information on political advertisers, are found wanting in many aspects



Google and Meta transparency reports

	Google Ads Transparency Center	Meta Ad Library Report
Data availability	From May 31, 2018	From Feb 21, 2019
Date range	Flexible, can check data in this period for any specific duration	Limited date range for political ads unless checked for specific pages/advertisers
Categorisation	Report only shows political ads; does not include surrogate ads by influencers and celebs	Report shows social, political, election ads, making it harder to filter political ads
Access	Limited data access on site, no CSV file	Limited access on site, CSV file access but unfit for monitoring video content
Policy violation	Doesn't show ad taken down for policy violation, or share the specific policy violated	Shows the ad taken down for policy violation, doesn't cite specific cause of violation
Third-party audit of report	Not allowed, you take their word for it	Not allowed, take their word for it

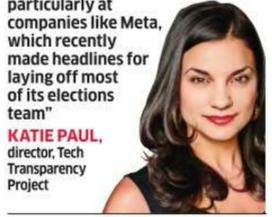
Source: ET Research, fact-checkers, academicians tracking misinformation and political advertising

content, he says Meta surpasses Google in transparency in some aspects: it allows users to view ads removed for policy violations, offering insights into specific breached guidelines. In contrast, Google only shows the removal of an ad for policy violations without displaying the ad or specifying reasons. "This makes you wonder if Google is running away from its responsibility," says Kumar. Further, Google's report does not show whether an ad is active or inactive, it only gives the date the ad was

last shown, he adds. "Unlike Meta, it does not provide a filter for active status, making it difficult to distinguish between active and inactive ads." Earlier this month, ET examined political ads on Google from April 19, when the Indian elections began, to May 12. The Google Ads Transparency Center logged 89,000+ political ads during this period. Among the recent ads, at least 188 were removed for violating ad policies. All these ads came from BJP. However, the limited ad display on the page (the site times out after loading roughly 3,000 ads) prevented a review of all released ads. Thus, determining which party had the most violations remains challenging. In an email correspondence, a Google spokesperson told ET, "Google is committed to maintaining transparency and integrity in political advertising. Only advertisers that have been verified through the Google verification process for election ads find a mention in our Transparency report. Advertisers are required to comply with all ad policies, which include a wide range of prohibited content, as well as editorial and technical standards. When we find ads that violate these policies, we block them."

Transparency reports must detail the process for reviewing and removing political ads as content moderation is increasingly driven by AI, particularly at companies like Meta, which recently made headlines for laying off most of its elections team

Election ad policies and verification requirements vary by region, the spokesperson adds. Google didn't disclose the number of ads removed for rule violations or which party had the most violations. If the transparency report allowed access to all ads, these questions wouldn't arise. This highlights a fundamental problem with transparency reports. "While all content is theoretically available, individuals can't verify it because the page times out after a point. The content isn't accessible as advertised," says Katie Paul, director of Tech Transparency Project (TTP), a US-based research initiative that aims to hold large tech companies accountable. Meta isn't much better in this regard. While it lets users download a CSV file to view data in a spreadsheet/Excel sheet, Paul says this method makes it harder to monitor video content. Looking at qualitative data beyond sheer numbers is crucial for TTP's work in understanding the impact of political hate speech. "I'm still recovering from the aftermath of the 2020 US election," says Paul. "Now, problematic content is more organised, with no pushback from the platforms. They don't disclose the review process for removed ads and increasingly rely on imperfect AI solutions for content moderation. Companies like Meta have even dismantled their elections team in an election year," she adds. Big tech platforms often blame the complications of managing data volume. "In 2024, not using their expertise to tackle these issues is a choice," Paul says. As they stand, the transparency reports are more like transparency theatre, says Prateek Waghe, executive director, Internet Freedom Foundation (IFF), India. "If you are not providing meaningful information, you are just putting on a show of transparency." The platform also needs to explain why it takes so long to take down certain ads, adds Waghe, referring to half a dozen recent political ads on Google that gained close to 400,000 impressions and stayed active for about 12 days—an excessive amount of time during elections. Platforms like Meta have also cut off access to data in the past. In August 2021, The Verge reported how



KATIE PAUL, director, Tech Transparency Project

Facebook had banned the personal accounts of academics from New York University's Ad Observatory project "who researched ad transparency and the spread of misinformation on the social network". Facebook said the group violated its terms of service by scraping user data without permission. But the academics noted they were being silenced for exposing problems on Facebook's platform, as per the article. Meta replied to an ET query on the topic with background information on its ad library but did not address specific questions. With no consistency of access and no third-party audits of these reports, the playbooks essentially goes thus: "I set the rules, I took the action, and you have to trust me," says Mishi Choudhary, founder of Software Freedom Law Center, India. "That doesn't inspire confidence," she adds. However, she is hopeful, like most researchers ET spoke to, that the EU's Digital Services Act will bring about standardisation to transparency reports and set rules that could become a global standard soon. Until then, platforms will continue to operate differently based on each country's regulatory requirements. An emailed query to the Election Commission of India on the topic did not elicit a response till press time. In countries without strict legal mandates, companies will continue to play fast and loose with transparency reports, according to Choudhary. "Look how better prepared Meta is for the upcoming US elections than it has been for India. The company claims it will be able to mark AI-manipulated ads by June," she says. But by then, the Indian elections—where AI deepfakes have reportedly flooded the political ad scene—will be over.

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The purpose of transparency reports was to assure the public that platforms are actively engaging in content moderation. But without independent verification of these reports, confidence in their accuracy and effectiveness remains lacking

MISHI CHOUDHARY, founder, Software Freedom Law Center, India



Vikas Dandekar

Dr Uday Ananth Pai, a Mumbai-based paediatrician, has been troubled by an ethical dilemma over the past few years. The doctor has seen an alarming rise in the use of a class of medicines that are not approved to be prescribed for infants and children. Yet, even while their reckless use is known to cause health complications, he says, there is no let-up.

A distraught Pai has finally decided to voice his views. He says doctors prescribe for children proton pump inhibitors (PPIs), medicines that are mostly used to treat heartburn or acid reflux in adults. Even among adults, these are used in worrying numbers and are not always prescribed for indications approved by regulators anywhere in the world.

PPIs are drugs that work by inhibiting acid secretions in the stomach. It brings fast relief in cases of peptic ulcers and episodes of gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD). GERD is stomach acids flowing back into the tube connecting the mouth and the esophagus. PPIs are available as tablets, capsules and injections and are becoming as ubiquitous as a Crocin to manage fever.

The reason for the popularity of PPIs among doctors and patients is not tough to gauge. With unhealthy lifestyles and dietary habits, acidity is common among Indians. While many brands of PPIs are sold almost over-the-counter, Pan, Pantop, Omez and Rablet fly off the chemist's shelves.

Pai has raised two red flags. First, he objects to irresponsible prescriptions by doctors. Second, he warns those who habitually pop such medicines. He says there are clear age-specific conditions that require a therapy and then there are cases for which we cannot give drugs like PPIs. He says pantoprazole is prescribed for children but warns that it cannot be recommended to anyone below the age of 1 year.

Pantoprazole leads in PPI categories. Amit Mookim, MD of IQVIA South Asia, which tracks prescription trends, says while many new brands have entered this segment, the top players have consolidated their positions. Pantoprazole and its combination products contribute nearly 50% of the market and are growing. One of the key factors driving increased usage, he says, is co-prescription

While many brands of PPIs are sold almost over-the-counter, Pan, Pantop, Omez and Rablet fly off the chemist's shelves. PPI provides fast relief, but going by the US FDA's guidelines, it is not safe beyond approved indications and an upper limit of six to eight weeks

of PPI molecules with amoxicillin & clavulanate fixed dose combination and paracetamol and its fixed dose combination, which has increased significantly over the last five years. Co-prescription refers to a medicine that a doctor adds to increase or suppress the effects of a drug used to address the actual illness.

PAN-INDIAN PROBLEM

The leading pantoprazole brands are Pan, Pantop and Pantocid. Sales of pantoprazole drugs in India stands at over ₹1,800 crore for the 12 months ending April 2024. Mumbai-based drug maker Alkem leads with its single-brand sales at ₹617 crore. The second spot is taken by Aristo's Pantop with sales of ₹370 crore, followed by Sun Pharma's Pantocid, with sales worth ₹289 crore.

Pai says PPI provides fast relief, but going by the US FDA's guidelines, it is not safe beyond approved indications and an upper limit of six to eight weeks. "There is data to back it up," he says.

Pai is not alone in pushing for a rational use of PPIs. Research papers have piled up that show overuse of PPIs can lead to adverse events.

A report in the *Indian Journal of Gastroenterology* last year detailed guidelines for optimising the use of PPIs. It says, "They (PPIs) are freely available and based on current evidence, use of PPIs for inappropriate indications and duration appears to be common. Over the years, concerns have been raised on the safety of PPIs as they have been associated with several adverse effects. Hence, there is a need for PPI stewardship to promote the use of PPIs for appropriate indication and duration."

Tarun Shukla

It is customary for airlines to allow people in wheelchairs, usually senior citizens, to board first. It's a fair practice and a polite gesture. You are old, tentative, you get to your seat and struggle to put your cabin luggage in the overhead bin. And then you sit back. You expect water and a cold towel, but what you don't expect is Rajesh Kapoor from Paharganj, Delhi.

He had been allegedly marking older people for a while and using priority boarding to get into the aircraft after senior citizens. Once they sit down, Kapoor gets up and quickly opens their suitcase and rummages through it, allegedly grabbing whatever valuables he can. He quickly zips the luggage back, sits down and enjoys cirrus clouds at 35,000 feet.

Kapoor had been allegedly doing this across different flight sectors till April 11. That's when a woman, travelling from Hyderabad to Delhi, complained to the police that jewellery worth ₹7 lakh had been stolen from her handbag. An investigating officer in Delhi joined the dots. Earlier, on February 2, another passenger had complained to the police that valuables worth ₹20 lakh had gone missing.

Kapoor was arrested on May 13 after the Delhi Police nailed him with the help of airport security cameras, airline data and call records. He allegedly took as many as 200 flights in less than a year, sometimes travelling multiple times in a day, using his dead brothers' cre-

The Flying Thief

How a frequent flyer allegedly stole goods worth a crore (and more) from cabin baggage on Indian flights

dentials and phone number. He would keep his own phone switched off, turning it on only once in a while.

Following his arrest, the Delhi Police said: "On sustained interrogation of the accused, he confessed his guilt in both the cases and several other cases and disclosed that he used to commit theft of jewellery

and other valuables in aircraft. He further disclosed that he used to target elderly female passengers carrying handbags and secretly stole their valuables."

If Kapoor paid ₹7,500 for his ticket on average, he may have spent nearly ₹15 lakh on these 200 flights, but the returns in just four cases of theft directly linked to him are worth nearly ₹1 crore, according to police data. Assuming that he got 50 paise per rupee from his fence (who "bought" the stolen material), Kapoor would still have pocketed ₹50 lakh. That's a 3x return on investment in two years.

Kapoor owns a hotel called Ricky Deluxe in Paharganj, has a money-changing business and a mobile phone-repair shop in Delhi.

Don't Pop That Pill Daily

Doctors are raising red flags about the reckless prescription of proton pump inhibitors that are used to treat acid reflux and heartburns. They warn that overuse of these drugs can have a slow and debilitating impact



According to the US FDA, PPIs are approved for the treatment of GERD, dyspepsia, erosive esophagitis, peptic ulcer and hypersecretory conditions such as Zollinger-Ellison syndrome and for managing certain inflammations. But in India those guidelines are seldom followed by doctors, pharmaceutical companies, or patients.

Take lansoprazole, a smaller category of PPI drugs, which had sales worth ₹118 crore (12-month MAT till April 2024). Cipla's brand Junior Lanzol had sales of ₹96 crore. The brand is prescribed for a wide range of conditions, including diarrhoea and gastroenteritis, acute upper respiratory infections, viral infections, constipation, fever and asthma. "Of the total prescriptions, only 18% were for approved indications," says an advisor in pharma marketing. On a lighter note, he says, "If

A recent study by the Indian Council of Medical Research shows pantoprazole among the most randomly prescribed drugs. A few other medicines examined from 7,800 prescriptions that were labelled as "unacceptable" include combinations of rabeprazole and domperidone

you are ill, you take pills and if you are not ill, take more pills."

USE, DON'T OVERUSE

While the overuse of such drugs is rampant, some experts say PPI works as a co-prescription drug. In cases where nausea or acidity is caused by a medicine, it may be needed. Mandar Kubal, an expert in respiratory drugs, says in malaria, chloroquine may cause nausea or vomiting and, therefore, a PPI with domperidone has a clear role.

Similarly, an orthopaedic expert may prescribe a PPI with the painkiller ace-

clofenac for sprain or backache. Doctors prescribe non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), but Kubal says these may lead to peptic ulcers. In such cases, he adds, short-term use of PPIs for three to five days is not unreasonable. "Other than by gastroenterology specialists, writing PPIs for the long term is not desirable," says Kubal.

In practice, such principles are not followed. A recent study by the Indian Council of Medical Research shows pantoprazole among the most randomly prescribed drugs. A few other medicines examined from 7,800 prescriptions that were

TOP PPI BRANDS

DRUG	BRANDS	COMPANY	MAT VALUE
in ₹ crore, April 2024			
Pantoprazole			1801.1
Pan	Alkem		617.7
Pantop	Aristo Pharma		370.1
Pantocid	Sun Pharma		289.1
Rabeprazole			471.1
Razo	Dr Reddy's		101.9
Rablet	Lupin		70.9
Veloz	Torrent Pharma		56.8
Esomeprazole			400.3
Sompraz	Sun Pharma		111.6
Nexpro	Torrent Pharma		105.6
Neksium	Pfizer		29.9
Omeprazole			284.0
Omez	Dr Reddy's		217.7
Ocid	Zydus Cadila		42.8
Omey	Intas Pharma		5.6
Lansoprazole			118.0
Juniorlanzol	Cipla		96.9
Lanzoprax	Macleods Pharma		7.0
Lanspro	Alkem		6.5

MAT: Moving annual total Source: Industry



DISEASES FOR WHICH PPI WAS PRESCRIBED IN THE PAST YEAR

- 1 Acute upper respiratory infections
 - 2 Diarrhoea/gastroenteritis
 - 3 Acid peptic disease/acidity/hyperacidity
 - 4 Low back pain/backache
 - 5 Dental caries
 - 6 Gastritis and duodenitis
 - 7 Viral infection
 - 8 Hypertension
 - 9 Gastro-esophageal reflux disease
 - 10 Respiratory tract infection
 - 11 Periapical abscess/pulpitis
 - 12 Disorders of teeth
 - 13 Gingivitis and periodontal diseases
 - 14 Allergic rhinitis
 - 15 Urinary tract infection
- Source: Industry

In 2019, the Drug Controller General of India issued orders directing drug producers to include a package insert that shows Acute Kidney Injury (AKI) as an adverse reaction caused by PPIs. But that is not seen as an effective countermeasure

used, they are known to reduce magnesium levels in the body that can predispose a person to muscle weakness, seizures and heart rate abnormalities. "Since the acidic environment of the stomach serves as a protective barrier against infections and use of PPIs disrupts that barrier, long-term use of these medications predisposes people to severe infections, especially those with underlying liver disease or cancer," says Philips. "The non-recommended use of PPIs is contraindicated in people with cirrhosis, especially a terrible condition called 'spontaneous bacterial peritonitis' which is associated with high risk of death in liver patients," Philips adds.

The excessive use of PPIs may also cause vitamin and iron deficiency and even possibly bone fractures. "PPIs have been notorious to cause a dreadful clinical complication in cirrhotic patients, called hepatic encephalopathy where brain failure happens in the presence of high ammonia and infections," says Philips.

However, Philips desists from creating fear among people. "The over-the-counter use of PPIs must be curbed or limited to less than 14 days while the actual reasons for abdominal complaints/symptoms can be sought and treated," he says.

Dr Pavan Dhole, a gastroenterology consultant in Mumbai's PD Hinduja Hospital, says he regularly sees patients who have been on PPIs for over a decade. Dhole and his senior Dr Philip Abraham are drafting a set of guidelines, taking lessons from their practice. Dhole says the bigger issue is the easy availability of drugs from medical shops without prescriptions.

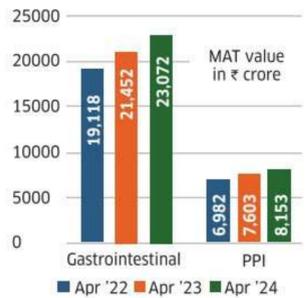
Almost 90% cases of bloating and gas are functional, but physicians are in a hurry to write medicines. "When patients see relief and no harm, popping pills becomes a habit," he says, adding that regulatory bodies should take action against the OTC sale of such medicines.

In 2019, the Drug Controller General of India issued orders directing drug producers to include a package insert that shows Acute Kidney Injury (AKI) as an adverse reaction caused by PPIs. But that is not seen as an effective countermeasure. Dhole says such inserts, literature or monographs carry everything from head to toe, but people pay little heed to them. Doctors, he says, should identify high-risk patients with underlying conditions such as diabetes or chronic kidney disease as there could be transient issues for them.

A few years ago, he says, PPIs came in strengths of 10 mg, but most drug makers have moved on to 20 mg, 40 mg and 80 mg pills. "Why was that change needed?" he asks. "For doctors, tapering off PPIs has now become tougher."

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GASTROINTESTINAL DRUGS MARKET VS PPI MARKET



MAT: Moving annual total Source: Industry

labelled as "unacceptable" include combinations of rabeprazole and domperidone.

Dr Cyriac Abby Philips, a hepatologist based in Aluva, Kerala, objects to the indiscriminate use of PPIs. Philips, who works at the Liver Institute in Rajagiri Hospital, says irrational prescriptions of "gas medications" such as PPIs are the reason why patients get "hooked on" to this seemingly benign but dangerous group of drugs. Known to be vocal, Philips has a strong following on X.

"Many physicians are to be blamed for the illogical and unwarranted use of this group of drugs in patients," says Philips. He admits that drugs such as omeprazole, esomeprazole, pantoprazole, lansoprazole, dexlansoprazole and rabeprazole are so potent that the World Health Organization has included them on the list of Essential Medicines. But their use, he says, beyond approved indications is where things may worsen. "People prefer self-medication for heartburn or indigestion symptoms such as fullness, bloating, stomach pain and excessive burping but it is recommended that PPIs be used for no more than 14 days," he adds.

Philips says when such drugs are over-

travel agents? Speaking to ET Prime, Usha Rangnani, deputy commissioner of police at the Indira Gandhi International Airport, does not rule out this angle. She says the police are investigating if there is some connection, like a common crew for the flights he took, etc, though the process is still at a "nascent stage".

"He is a habitual offender and is also into satta and gambling," says Rangnani. "Since we have caught him, many more people have reached out to me, saying their things were also stolen. We are investigating this further."

Kapoor allegedly honed his skills in trains. He reportedly began stealing in 2005, when he was around 21, travelling on India's massive train network and stealing from people's bags as they slept soundly. Kapoor allegedly took a break from stealing around 2018. It is quite possible that during this period Kapoor allegedly tried his hand at stealing from the very guests who stayed at his hotel, Ricky Deluxe, also called Ricky Dx. His family lived on the top floor of this hotel.

"Worst (hotel)...our money was stolen from the room while it was locked...Can't recommend anyone to visit ever again...In an emergency you can't expect any staff to cooperate," Omkar Kakeru wrote in his review in 2019, recalling his harrowing tale, like most of the 167 reviewers of this one-star-rated property on MakeMyTrip. Many even called the hotel a "sanctuary of rats" which extorted extra mon-

Kapoor reportedly used to board connecting flights, especially from Delhi that carry passengers arriving from busy international hubs like Chicago and New York to Indian cities such as Amritsar and Hyderabad

ey on check-outs. Some were even reportedly thrown out of the hotel before the check-out for no fault of their own.

"Worst experience as owner's family started fighting with each other and asked everyone to leave the hotel. It was difficult for us to manage the accommodation in the evening," Shivam Tiwari wrote in his 2023 review.

In 2022, Kapoor decided it was time to upgrade. He allegedly shifted his theft operations to flights, almost exclusively. He started taking what the Delhi Police call "premium" airlines like Air India and Vistara. Both are full-service airlines and fly abroad, with the former going all the way to the US and the latter to Europe.

Why did the cabin crew not smell anything fishy? They are supposed to be the gatekeepers of passenger luggage on flights. A senior airline official says the crew should have been more alert.

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professional," says a senior airline official, who does not want to be named.

A senior member of Air India's cabin crew, too, says he has never

Kapoor would opt for priority boarding. Inside the aircraft, he would allegedly select a target, often an elderly woman, open her cabin bag and steal valuables

heard of such a trick on a domestic flight. "On international [routes], there is an entire cartel. We never used to switch off the lights at night on Hong Kong flights from Delhi and Mumbai because of similar thefts," he says.

Why Hong Kong flights? "Many diamond merchants fly on that route," the crew member adds.

Could there be a cartel involved in this case, too? How did Kapoor get to know which would be an important connecting flight? Could there be collusion of airline officials or

China Ends Military Drills around Taiwan

BEIJING The Chinese military has ended its two-day joint drills surrounding Taiwan, stated to be the biggest and closest exercises held around the prosperous self-ruled island that China claims to be part of its mainland. The drills on Thursday and Friday were held in retaliation to Taiwan's new President Lai Ching-te's remarks rejecting Beijing's sovereignty claims over the island and tested the Chinese People's Liberation Army's ability to seize power. China views Taiwan as a rebel province that must be reunified with the mainland even by force. — Reuters

Boeing's 1st Astronaut Flight in June

CAPE CANAVERAL: Boeing is now aiming for its first astronaut launch at the beginning of June, after spending the past few weeks struggling with more problems on the space capsule. Officials for the company and NASA said Friday that intensive reviews indicate the Starliner capsule can safely fly two test pilots to the International Space Station, despite a propulsion system leak. The small helium leak was discovered following the first launch attempt on May 6 that was scuttled by an unrelated rocket problem now fixed. Engineers suspect a defective rubber seal the size of a shirt button, and say that even if the leak worsens, it could be managed in flight. — AP

'Elon Musk Plans to Build xAI Supercomputer'

NEW YORK: Elon Musk recently told investors that his artificial intelligence startup xAI is planning to build a supercomputer to power the next version of its AI chatbot Grok. The Information reported on Saturday citing a presentation to investors. Musk said he wants to get the running supercomputer up by the fall of 2025. — Reuters

'Anora' Wins Palme d'Or

From Page 1
US director Sean Baker's 'Anora' won the top award, the Palme d'Or. "All We Imagine As Light" is an Indo-French co-production between petit chaos from France and Chalk and Cheese Films from India. The main competition jury was chaired by filmmaker Greta Gerwig and also included Spanish director Juan Antonio Bayona, Turkish actor-screenwriter Ebru Ceylan, Italian actor Pierfrancesco Favino, American actor Lily Gladstone, Japanese director Hirokazu Kore-eda, Lebanese actor-director Nadine Labaki and French stars Eva Green and French actor Omar Sy.

G7 Criticise China, Warn of Escalation in Trade Disputes

Expressed concerns about China's comprehensive use of non-market policies, practices

Bloomberg
Stresa, Italy: China's engagement in the global system of commerce was roundly criticised by Group of Seven finance chiefs in a show of unity accompanied by a threat of further escalation. The club of rich-world ministers and central bankers concluded its gathering in the Italian lakeside town of Stresa on Saturday with a communique that cited the world's second-biggest economy by name and accused the country of hurting the economies of its trade partners. "While reaffirming our interest in a balanced and reciprocal collaboration, we express concerns about China's comprehensive use of non-market policies and practices that undermines our workers, industries, and economic resilience," they said. "We will continue to monitor the potential negative impacts of overcapacity and will consider taking steps to ensure a level playing field."

Those words of warning followed the Biden administration's announcement late on Friday to reimpose tariffs on hundreds of goods imported from China. The escalation in rhetoric could just be the prelude to further tensions if Donald Trump regains the White House in US elections later this year. America remains the key protagonist in pressuring China, though earlier in the week, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen stressed that G-7 participants from Germany, France and the European Union also harbored grievances. French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire was one participant pressing for a united front. "The issue of tariffs toward China is on objective fact, not a political choice," Italian Finance Minister Giancarlo Giorgetti, chair of the meeting, told reporters in a final press conference. "When the US, with its Inflation

Building Up

The communique says... G7 ministers accused the world's second-biggest economy by name of hurting the economies of its trade partners

The US, China and the EU are already preparing increasingly assertive trade measures

To monitor the potential negative impacts of overcapacity & take steps to ensure a level playing field

The US to allow tariff exclusions to expire on about half of 400 products that had been spared



Earlier, China signalled it's ready to unleash tariffs as high as 25% on imported cars with big engines

US Not Ready to Sign Pending Global Tax Agreement: Yellen

Bloomberg
Stresa, Italy: US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said the US won't sign an agreement to finalise a still-pending global tax deal until India and China agree to key unresolved issues. "India, in particular, has been a holdout and China has not really engaged very much in these negotiations at all," Yellen told reporters on Saturday. "We certainly need India and China to come on



board in order to get this done." About 140 countries signed on to the outline of a groundbreaking pact in 2021 to reform the way large multinational companies are taxed. Part

of the agreement creates a 15% minimum corporate tax to eliminate low-tax havens. A second portion, which remains unfinished, would take some of the taxes on profits that big companies pay in their headquarter countries and share that with countries where the companies generate revenue. But negotiators, led by the OECD, have struggled to polish off the details and get enough countries to sign a multilateral convention on implementing the deal.

Reduction Act, started this type of policy, this forced a reflection, also within the EU, on how to behave in these situations." Washington will allow tariff exclusions to expire on about half of 400 products that had been spared, the office of the US Trade Representative announced on Friday. A further 164 exclusions will be extended through May of next year. Earlier in the week, China signalled it's ready to unleash tariffs as high as 25% on imported cars with big engines, highlighting how tussles over automobiles — one of Europe's biggest industries — loom large in the current dispute.

Ukraine Satisfied on G7 Asset Plan Progress: Minister



Serhiy Marchenko

ITALY: Ukrainian finance minister Serhiy Marchenko said he's pleased with how Group of Seven talks have advanced on funding aid via profits gleaned from Russian assets. He spoke on Saturday after attending a meeting of the club in Stresa, Italy, that laid the groundwork toward an eventual accord on helping Ukraine at a summit of leaders next month. "I am satisfied with the progress," Marchenko told reporters, observing that G-7 finance ministers are "working very hard" on the matter. There's "enough time" to prepare a proposal for the leaders convening in June in southern Italy, he said, adding that he hopes that gathering will yield an agreement. Supporting Ukraine has been a key theme at the Stresa gathering, with the finance chiefs holding talks on how to secure critical economic assistance for Kyiv. — Bloomberg

How Sunak's Small Circle Forged Vote Plan that Shocked Cabinet

Bloomberg
London: Rishi Sunak gave his most senior ministers little more than an hour's notice of what he was about to tell the country and had already told King Charles III, that he had decided to call a snap UK general election for July 4. Chancellor of the Exchequer Jeremy Hunt was among those caught unaware. Foreign Secretary David Cameron, who'd had to cancel a visit to Albania just to make the meeting in Downing Street, expressed surprise, but said the decision "seizes the initiative, sets the agenda and forces the choice," according to people familiar with the conversation. Others were less convinced. Defence Secretary Grant Shapps shared reservations, the people said. Detecting the shock later in a meeting of the full Cabinet, Energy Secretary Claire Coutinho — a Sunak loyalist since their Treasury days — intervened to say the premier wasn't a politician who follows the consensus, whether on Brexit, pandemic lockdowns or net zero. Communities Secretary Michael Gove praised the move, quoting the Special Air Service motto: "Who dares

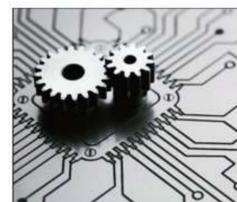
wins." Sunak ultimately headed into a downpour in Downing Street to speak the cameras. But the fact he presented it as a fait accompli signed off by the monarch, which the people said he did to ensure ministers couldn't make him change his mind, underscores the scale of the gamble he knew he was taking. Little more than 48 hours later, Gove had joined the scores of Tory MPs announcing that they were standing down after the election. Spokespeople for Sunak, Cameron, Shapps, Hunt and Coutinho declined to comment. The announcement was weeks in the making, and piecing together how it came about reveals that it's not only the Cabinet with reservations. The premier's closest aides argued opposing sides, and, while people familiar with the matter say everyone is now on the same page, some still don't want to be seen as responsible for pushing the snap election idea. It's far from the ideal basis for what will be a bruising six-week campaign against Keir Starmer's polling-led opposition Labour Party. He's already faced criticism for a presidential style that leaves little room for other Tory voices. If he doesn't deliver on his strategy to narrow the poll gap early in the campaign, the recriminations will likely engulf him alone.



Rishi Sunak

Entry Segment Faring Well

From Page 1
To be sure, the drop in prices has boosted growth in the entry segment. According to researcher GfK India, wearables priced under ₹2,000 expanded to 50% of the market last year, up from one-fifth in 2022. Core wearables continue to experience volume growth, driven by enhanced affordability and the widespread availability of feature-rich products, said Anant Jain, head of customer success, tech and durables, GfK. In 2023, the category registered 47% volume growth and 14% value growth from the year previous, he said. Smaller brands started gaining momentum in the second half of 2023 with products and packs that are copycats of established brands but much cheaper, said Vikas Sharma, IDC India lead analyst, smart wearables. "This forced the incumbents to lower the prices even further to remain relevant in the price war," he said. Honor's India licensee HTEch chief executive Madhav Sheth attributed the profusion of brands and the resultant price war to lower entry barriers unlike in mobile phones. "However, we expect ASPs will start moving up in the next one-two years as consumers want to move to better-experience products, which will lead to survival issues for several of the brands," he said.



Improved Fuel Efficiency

From Page 1
EVs have been the stars of the automotive market of late, driven by increasing awareness about vehicular pollution, but they now face competition from the hybrid segment. One of the biggest concerns for potential EV buyers has been the vehicle range, as there are still not enough battery recharge facilities, especially outside cities. Toyota is the leader in the hybrid vehicle segment. The Japanese automaker's self-charging hybrid electric vehicle technology gives vehicles the capability to run either on the electric mode or on fossil

fuels, or both. These vehicles, called strong hybrids, can cover 40% distance and 60% time on the electric mode with the petrol engine remaining shut. This improves fuel efficiency by 40-50%, lowers operating cost and reduce carbon emissions, said Vikram Gulati, executive VP at Toyota Kirloskar Motor, the local unit of the Japanese automaker. "It is quite encouraging to see the positive trend for the hybrid electric vehicle technology and growing customer acceptance as a practical mobility solution, which will further enable a smooth, clean technological shift into the future of carbon neutral society," said Gulati.

Food Bound for Gaza Rots as Egypt's Rafah Crossing Stays Shut

Rafah was a main entry point for humanitarian relief before Israel took control of it on May 6

Reuters
AL-Arish, Egypt: Some of the food supplies waiting to enter the Gaza Strip from Egypt have begun to rot as the Rafah border crossing remains shut to aid deliveries for a third week and people inside the Palestinian territory face worsening hunger. Rafah was a main entry point for humanitarian relief as well as some commercial supplies before Israel stepped up its military offensive on the Gaza side of the border on May 6 and took control of the crossing from the Palestinian side. Egyptian officials and sources say humanitarian operations are at risk from military activity and that Israel needs to hand the crossing back to Palestinians before it starts operating again. Egypt is also worried about the risk of Palestinians being displaced from Gaza.



EGYPTIAN OFFICIALS SAY... Humanitarian ops are at risk from military activity and that Israel needs to hand the crossing back to Palestinians

On Friday, Egypt and the US agreed to send aid via Israel's nearby Kerem Shalom crossing until legal arrangements are made to open Rafah from the Palestinian side, the Egyptian presidency said. That could ease the backlog of aid on the road between the Egyptian side of the crossing and the town of al-Arish, about 45 km (28 miles) west of Rafah and an arrival point for international aid donations, though too late to save some food supplies. One truck driver, Mahmoud Hussein, said his goods had been loaded on his vehicle for a month, gradually spoiling in the sun. Some of the foodstuffs are being discarded, others sold for cheap. "Apples, bananas, chicken and cheese, a lot of things have gone rotten, some stuff has been returned and is being sold for a quarter of its price," he said, crouching under his truck for shade. "I'm sorry to say that the onions we're carrying will at best be eaten by animals because of the worms in them."

Aid deliveries for Gaza through Rafah began in late October, two weeks after the start of the war between Israel and Palestinian militant group Hamas. The flow of relief has often been slowed by Israeli inspections and military activity inside Gaza, aid officials say. Supplies have been stuck in al-Arish or on the road to Rafah, incurring transport and storage fees. A global hunger monitor has warned of imminent famine in parts of Gaza, home to 2.3 million people.

ROTTEN EGGS
Since May 7, no trucks have crossed through Rafah and very few through Kerem Shalom, according to UN data. Just over 900 truckloads have entered Gaza in total since that date, compared to at least 500 trucks daily that the UN says are required. The amount of aid waiting in Egypt's northern Sinai was now very large, and some had been stuck for more than two months, said Khaled Zayed, head of the Egyptian Red Crescent in the area. "Some aid packages require a certain temperature... We coordinate on this with specialists who are highly trained in the storage of food and medical supplies," he said.

Improved Productivity for Cos

From Page 1
AI tools help analyse historical data, market trends and internal talent metrics, allowing companies to gain insights into emerging skill demands and talent availability, and develop recruitment strategies to address current and future talent needs. Simplilearn has been deploying ChatGPT — among other AI tools — for over a year to optimise job descriptions, craft proficiency assessments and conduct psychometric tests. "This enables us to reduce time on mundane tasks and improve productivity and efficiency," said the edtech firm's chief HR officer, Archana Krishna. According to Rajesh Bharatiya, chief executive of recruitment services provider Peoplefy, GenAI-based tools help customise the process; for instance to send a recruitment mass mailer based on each candidate's unique experiences and background. "Such customisation may require 10 times more time to customise manually," he said. Infrastructure development firm Welspun Enterprises uses a GenAI bot that assists its executives in taking interviews. "Our hiring efficiencies have

improved drastically. Before using the GenAI bot for interviewing, our selection ratio was 15%. Now this rate has increased to 55%, a 40% jump in my selection rate overnight," chief HR officer Rajesh Jain said, adding: "This is big." However, at the current stage of its development, experts believe there are certain pitfalls associated with deploying AI in hiring practices. These include ethical considerations about data privacy, algorithmic transparency and the risk of discrimination, lack of soft skills evaluation, bias amplification, and inability to discover potential.

Attractive, Closer-to-home Options

From Page 1
"Last-minute travel is a natural outcome, and our data reiterates this with almost 35% of bookings being within the short planning window," he said. Fueling this last-minute trend in international travel is the emergence of attractive, affordable options that are closer to home like Azerbaijan, Georgia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, etc. that represent frictionless travel with e-visas or no-visa entry, Kale said. Thomas Cook is seeing an exponential growth of 300%-600% for these almost borderless travel destinations. "We (Indians) are pretty last-minute travellers for domestic and even for international, unlike Europeans who plan their next holiday as soon as they finish one," said Rajesh Magow, CEO of travel company MakeMyTrip. At SOTC Travel, that also offers customised holidays, out of every 100 travellers, at least 30 are late or last-minute bookers. "While India

has been a traditional late booker market, with booking windows getting even shorter, we are now seeing a growing trend of last-minute travel," said Daniel D'Souza, president and country head for holidays at SOTC Travel. He cites the average age of travellers — which has dropped by about 10 years at SOTC — as one of the key reasons for this trend. Short-haul travel has become so convenient that weekenders (historically a short drivable distance away) now include Dubai-Abu Dhabi, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Malaysia, Mauritius, and Singapore, D'Souza said. At Yatra, popular domestic destinations include Goa, Kerala, and Jaipur. For international travel, visa-free destinations such as Thailand, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Vietnam, Bali, and Mauritius are in demand. "These trends highlight a dynamic change in travel behaviour, reflecting a preference for flexibility and convenience among Indian travellers," Malik said.

Eye on Developers too

From Page 1
"They must be knowledgeable about various aspects of the project and the industry, such as developer's credibility and about the projects, validity of land titles, RERA-compliant carpet area, commencement certificates received, and approvals from the local authorities." Despite providing several extensions to the deadline, around 20,000 agents are still unqualified and their approvals were revoked, Mehta said. The regulator will also not hesitate to cancel the registration of developers who continue to engage with unqualified agents, he added. Registration of these agents has been suspended for a period of a year: If they complete the training, obtain the certificate and upload it on the regulator's portal within a year, their licence would be renewed. If they do not complete this process within a year, their registration will be cancelled. They can reapply for a fresh registration only after six

months, and in the interim period, they will not be allowed to deal in real estate transactions, the regulator said in a notification. MahaRERA has more than 47,000 property agents registered with it since the inception of the regulator in May 2017. Earlier this year, it cancelled the registration of 13,785 agents for not renewing their licences. Separately, the regulator announced the procedure for de-registration of agents. For this, the agent needs to apply to Director (Registration), MahaRERA. Certain conditions will have to be fulfilled to get themselves de-registered. For example, the applicant should not be listed by promoters as their authorised real estate agents for any real estate projects. There should not be any pending complaints against the individual. They should have submitted yearly reports of the transactions facilitated for two years immediately prior to the de-registration application date. If it is not done, they should explain the reason.

Pharmaceuticals & Medical Devices Bureau of India (PMBI)
(Set up under the Department of Pharmaceuticals, Govt. of India)
Telephone: 011-49431800 | Website: janaushadhi.gov.in

INTIMATION OF CHANGE IN HEAD OFFICE ADDRESS OF PMBI

This is to inform to all Stakeholders and the General Public that the **Pharmaceuticals & Medical Devices Bureau of India (PMBI)** has shifted to new Head Office premises on 03.05.2024. The new address of PMBI's head office is as follows:

PHARMACEUTICALS & MEDICAL DEVICES BUREAU OF INDIA (PMBI)
B-500, TOWER – B, 5TH FLOOR
WORLD TRADE CENTER
NAUROJI NAGAR, NEW DELHI – 110029
TELEPHONE: 011-49431800

Any further communication with PMBI shall be made to the above-mentioned office address only.

CEO, PMBI

Imagine being the person in charge of the Ayodhya Ram Temple's functioning. From the big picture issues — monitoring the temple's construction — to more mundane topics — like ensuring adequate supply of coconuts and flowers, rack space for devotees' footwear, etc. are all under your purview.

Picture yourself as a station-master building the Ayodhya Dham railway station and managing the swanky new Vande Bharat or the Amrit Bharat Express train. Expand the station, improve service efficiency and revenue of station while arranging the train timetable and ensuring passengers are comfortable.

Find out what it would be like to be in the shoes of the legendary Tamil emperor Rajendra Chola. Immerse yourself in the world of the Cholas as they fight Sangrama, king of the Srivijaya coastal kingdom and the sworn enemy of Rajendra Chola, replete with high-speed

chases and stealth attacks.

Time for philosophy, Dharma or karma? What would you pick if faced with this question? You can find out as you sharpen your strategy by playing ancient Indian legends like Arjuna and Karna who face characters like Dushasana and Yamaraj and encounter interesting moral dilemmas along the way.

These are just some of the examples of what Indian gaming enthusiasts have access to today, thanks to developers coming up with games rooted in Indian history and culture. Steeped in nostalgia and full of folklore, these games provide users with a chance to experience the epics first-hand.

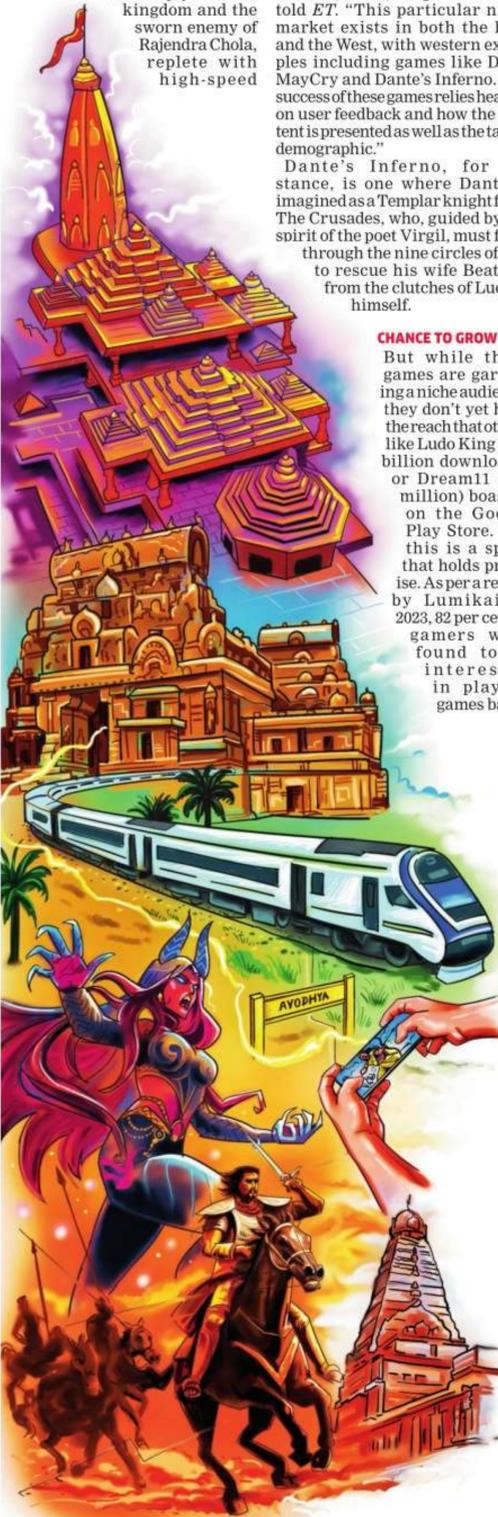
EAST MEETS WEST

"The growing market for games that appeal to religious and cultural sensibilities is drawing more developers to explore themes rooted in religion and culture," Utkarsh Shukla, CEO, Yug Metaverse, told ET. "This particular niche market exists in both the East and the West, with western examples including games like Devil May Cry and Dante's Inferno. The success of these games relies heavily on user feedback and how the content is presented as well as the target demographic."

Dante's Inferno, for instance, is one where Dante is imagined as a Templar knight from The Crusades, who, guided by the spirit of the poet Virgil, must fight through the nine circles of hell to rescue his wife Beatrice from the clutches of Lucifer himself.

CHANCE TO GROW

But while these games are garnering a niche audience, they don't yet have the reach that others like Ludo King (one billion downloads) or Dream11 (100 million) boast of on the Google Play Store. Yet, this is a space that holds promise. As per a report by Lumikai in 2023, 82 per cent of gamers were found to be interested in playing games based



Sacred Games

Stories and characters from various mythological sagas are coming alive on gaming consoles, allowing players to solve spiritual conflicts and relive ancient battles. **Dia Rekhi** decodes this world and their avenues for growth

on Indian mythology. The report also noted that 43 per cent of the non-gamers feel most inclined to start gaming if they are based on themes such as the *Ramayana*.

In 2022, Lumikai had said that 80 per cent of gamers showed a proclivity to play games based on Indian IP, and that 69 per cent of non-gamers claimed they would play an Indian IP-based game.

Saumya Singh Rathore, co-founder of WinZO Games, said that India now forms the largest gaming consumer base in the world, accounting for 20 per cent of the global user base and over 9.5 billion game downloads. She said the twin penetration of smart phones and affordable internet in small towns and rural areas is driving the demand for local, culturally familiar content.

"There is a strong affinity among Indian gamers for characters, game design, and narratives that resonate culturally," Rathore said. "This growing appetite for stories and characters set in an Indian context demands that Indian studios develop more games that offer world-class quality in technology, animation and user experience."

She said that as the online gaming sector in India booms, more games based on Indian mythology, history, culture, folklore, and characters will come out to cater to this rising demand both domestically and internationally. But while these themes are related and might seem like they fall under one umbrella, there is a big separation when it comes to spiritual games and those based on mythological and historical topics. Typically, mythological games are mostly card-based or first-person shooter games. Card games are technical and the shooter games generally appeal to a young male demographic. However, spiritual games are different as they are meant to appeal to all age groups.

"With advancements in technology, there is rapid growth in the market as players can now have a rich experience of these stories first-hand, compared to other genres."

— Prashanth Vijay, co-founder of Funstop Games

"The spiritual category of games uses a different narrative style, use of game characters and game mechanics," said Prashanth Vijay, co-founder of the Gurugram-based Funstop Games. "These games do not have a win/loss concept, nor do they depend on first-person-shooter kind of mechanics that a lot of mythological games deploy."

AN EXPERIENCE TO TREASURE

Vijay said user satisfaction is driven by unlocking new content, areas or

characters with a clean story-like narrative that makes for an enjoyable and memorable experience.

The spiritual games segment is fairly new and has seen a lot of traction recently. ET had reported in February about how the Ram Temple's Pran Pratishtha ceremony saw a slew of mandir-focused games, downloads increasing nearly two-fold and stoking excitement that the floodgates for religion-focused content had opened.

For example, the Shri Ram Mandir Game was launched in January 2024 and has over five million downloads listed on the Google Play Store. The company claims to have a monthly active users base of almost close to six million across app stores and other channels.

The app has been so successful for InfoEdge Ventures-backed casual gaming studio Funstop Games that it has opened up an entirely different vertical called Ayodhya Games purely to tap this segment. Recently, the studio launched the Vande Bharat Express game too.

India has been the largest market for these games with 90 per cent of the overall players being from the country, and Gujarat being the state with the highest number of players. "Gaming, sitting at the cross-section of spirituality, astrology, mythology and culture, is having its time under the sun right now," said Chinmaya Sharma, founder of InfoEdge Ventures. "Spirituality and mythology, when mixed with gaming, has made for a unique and surprising realisation that appeals to people of all age groups. Conventional perception would be that it appeals to middle-aged users only, but we are seeing not just millennial but also Gen Z users, which makes it a special cross-section of gaming where the target segment has exploded."

Abhaas Shah, co-founder of Kalaari Capital-backed Studio Sirah, which published the Kurukshetra: Ascension game, said that the movement towards going back to our roots is something that games like theirs benefit immensely from. He added that this sentiment is only likely to get stronger going forward.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWTH

"While there are very strong elements of spirituality explored in our game as well — like *dharma*, *atman* and *brahman* — we are not looking at the *aastha* (faith) and *pooja* (worship) bits of it," Shah said. "There is a great opportunity for game developers to build games around traditional Indian epics and folklore. We are in the process of developing our second game which is themed on Indian mythology again and is centred around the battle between the Devas and Asuras."

Kurukshetra: Ascension was launched last May and has 6,00,000 downloads already. Its maximum traction is from India, but Shah said they were also seeing great pick up in South East Asian countries like

Indonesia and Thailand.

Even for Ayelet Studio, which launched *Unsung Empires: The Cholas*, the maximum traction came from India and the US, though it found takers in places like Brazil, Russia, Mexico, Malaysia and China too. "The market for mythological games is very vibrant and diverse," said Abhaas Shah, creative director and studio head, Ayelet Studio. "Lots of people enjoy exploring these cool stories from different cultures around the world. Games like *Uncharted*, *Tomb Raider*, and *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* were huge hits because they let players explore these historical worlds. With advancements in technology, there is rapid growth in the market as players can now have a rich experience of these stories first-hand, compared to other genres."

FRESH AND RELEVANT

Sharma of InfoEdge said the possibility to have fresh content that is contextual and culturally relevant is exciting and unique for users. "With spiritual games, the advantage is that when done right, the games become even more relevant during certain auspicious periods," Sharma said. "For example, FunStop Games put out specific content on the game on the Shri Ram Mandir game on Ram Navami, which drastically improved their metrics. These small touches bring in relevance and a freshness to spiritual games and adds to their appeal."

He added that studios should look at creating "universes", much like how FunStop has done with its new Vande Bharat Express game that gives users a Tirth Yatra of a different kind. "The vision is to create a universe that dwells on topics related to India and its vast population," he explained. "The challenge is to make sure the games speak to each other so that FunStop is creating a universe, not a set of disparate games."

Taking a leaf out of that book, Shah said they were working on a second project that's based on the same universe but a very different genre. Similarly, Ayelet Studio is also working on its next project which is an action-adventure game, currently in the development process, which is set in Thanjavur and follows the journey of Rajendra Chola as he navigates challenges, battles and critical decisions to uphold his kingdom's legacy.

"This has a longer open world explorable map and deeper lore," Abraham said. "We are recreating the city of Thanjavur during the 11th century, where you get to experience the rich cultures, traditions and people that once thrived within its walls. We're setting up an optical motion capture studio called Ayelet Labs specifically for combat and cinematic scenes. This means we'll capture real-life movements to make our in-game battles and combat incredibly lifelike and dynamic." However, game development is an

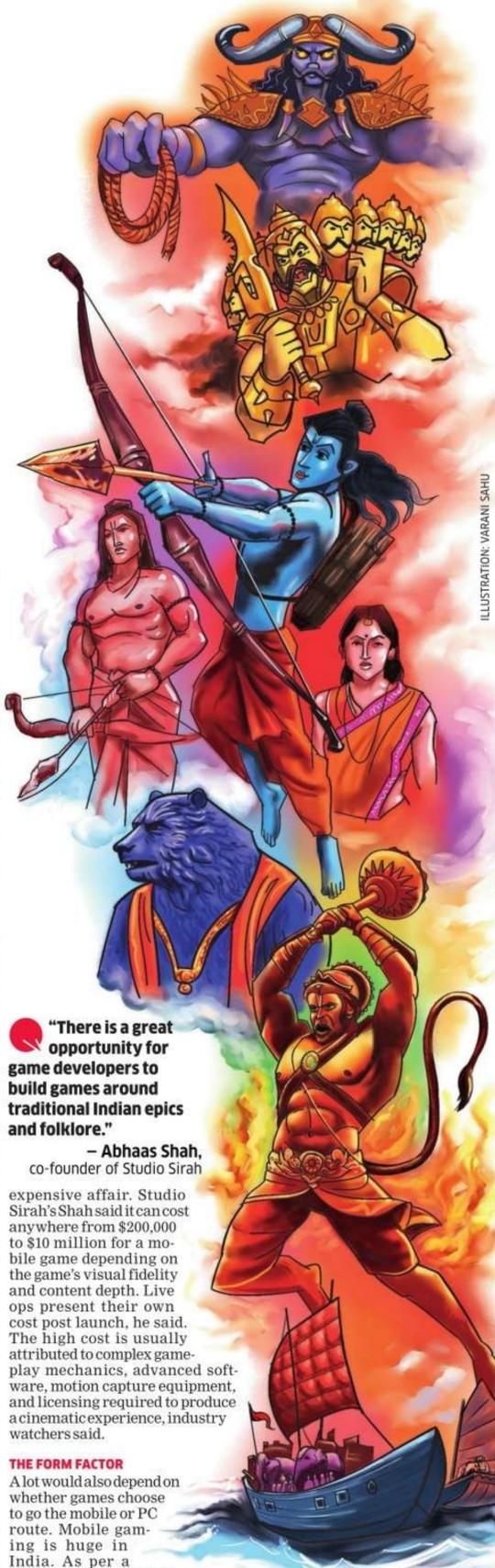


ILLUSTRATION: VARANI SAHU

"There is a great opportunity for game developers to build games around traditional Indian epics and folklore."

— Abhaas Shah, co-founder of Studio Sirah

expensive affair. Studio Sirah's Shah said it can cost anywhere from \$200,000 to \$10 million for a mobile game depending on the game's visual fidelity and content depth. Live ops present their own cost post launch, he said. The high cost is usually attributed to complex game-play mechanics, advanced software, motion capture equipment, and licensing required to produce a cinematic experience, industry watchers said.

THE FORM FACTOR

A lot would also depend on whether games choose to go the mobile or PC route. Mobile gaming is huge in India. As per a recent report by WinZO and Interactive Entertainment and Innovation Council (IEIC), India is the fastest-growing mobile gaming market, boasting of 17 per cent of the world's user base and over 9.5 billion app downloads. India's total mobile game downloads exceed the total downloads of the next two markets — the US and Brazil — put together. And while Shri Ram Mandir is targeting this very demographic, others like Studio Sirah have chosen to focus on the mobile gaming audience while also offering a PC version, and Ayelet Studio has decided to zero in on being a PC-only developer.

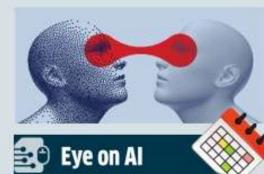
Experts said a keen understanding of the Indian gamer is also critical. "It is essential to acknowledge that the gaming medium presents unique challenges compared to traditional platforms such as online video and TV due to its distinct target audience," Shukla said. "The success of religious and cultural games hinges on the audience's reception. Notably, the gaming audience differs from that of platforms like TV. The latter tends to be older, which suggests a greater receptiveness to religious content."

SCARLETT JOHANSSON SUES OPEN AI FOR CLONING VOICE

Hollywood actress Scarlett Johansson slapped a lawsuit on GPT maker OpenAI for allegedly imitating her voice for its latest AI model GPT-4o.

The actress claimed that she had twice declined OpenAI chief executive Sam Altman's offer to clone her voice for the latest chatbot, which would be instrumental "to feel comfortable with the seismic shift concerning humans and AI", he statement said.

The voice in question, called "Sky", which OpenAI claims belongs to other professional actors and is not a mere imitation of Johansson. However, after her action OpenAI said it is "working to pause" Sky — the name of one of five voices that ChatGPT users can choose to speak with.



Eye on AI



MICROSOFT ANNOUNCES COPILOT+ PCs

Microsoft debuted a new category of AI personal computers called Copilot+ PCs with unique photographic memory which can find and remember what you've seen on screen, generate and refine images in real-time, provide live captions to videos, translate audio and even learn how to play a video game with conversational instructions. These are a new breed of PCs made for the AI era, featuring processors from Qualcomm that share architectural similarities and rivals Apple's M-series custom silicon. The big change under the hood is a shift to ARM-based architecture and the inclusion of

a neural processing unit (NPU) capable of delivering 40+ TOPS (trillion operations per second) that are connected to large language models, for all the AI heavy-lifting it needs to do both in tandem with the cloud, and on-device.

X SHALL MOVE TO NEW AI-BASED SYSTEM: MUSK

Elon Musk, executive chairman of social media giant X, revealed how AI will impact X's feed algorithm coming soon. While commenting on a user's post he said that the platform will soon move to a "fully AI-based post recommendation system" which will order replies, remove spam and enable full semantic search. X's AI model Grok is being trained on posts and comments from the social media platform. Musk has already rolled out the Grok 1.5 version.

STABILITY AI RUNNING OUT OF CASH

British AI company Stability AI, known for its image and video generation models, is fast running out of cash and is in urgent talks with a group of investors for a large equity

investment to inject funds, Reuters reported.

The company is facing heated competition from OpenAI after it released multimodal capabilities in its GPT-4o model and made it free for public use, unlike Stability which is a subscription service.

As per the report, Stability AI generated less than \$5 million in revenue and lost more than \$30 million in the first quarter and currently owes close to \$100 million in outstanding bills to cloud computing providers and others, the report said.

OLA MOVES IT WORKLOADS OUT OF MICROSOFT CLOUD

Mobility unicorn Ola and its group companies have moved its entire IT workload to its own Krutrim cloud within a week of announcing its exit, founder and CEO Bhavish Aggarwal said in a post on X.

"More than 2,500 developers have signed up! Will be working with everyone to get onto our cloud services over coming weeks," he wrote. The move was triggered after Microsoft-owned LinkedIn deleted Aggarwal's post on "pronoun illness" of AI models.

— Compiled by Himanshi Lohchab

Slowdown Hits Indian IT Companies' Campus Recruitments

Sameer Bakshi

As Indian IT services companies are battling macro uncertainty and tech spend slowdown, they have reduced their campus visits and applied brake on freshers hiring.

The IT service business model, which relies on pyramid structure with its base constituting young and less expensive employees, has been shrinking. In FY24,



both TCS and Infosys saw the share of young employees in their total headcount plunge to a

five-year low and a decadal low, respectively.

Pyramid optimisation is one of the tools that IT service companies use to boost their operating margins. With experts expecting tech spend revival at the fag end of this fiscal, Indian companies are likely to see an improvement in their share of young mass of employees from next year.

Infosys employees' age profile:

Employees age profile	FY24	FY23	FY22
Less than or equal to 30 years	54.7%	59.6%	59.6%
31-50 years	42.4%	37.9%	38.0%
Greater than 50 years	2.9%	2.5%	2.4%

TCS employees' age profile in India

Employees age profile	FY24	FY23	FY22
Less than or equal to 30 years	50.3%	52.9%	59.0%
31-50 years	48.4%	46.0%	40.0%
Greater than 50 years	1.3%	1.1%	1.0%

Michelin Chef Takes His Cuisine to Our Upper Atmosphere

Private guests on the 2025 space flight will enjoy an astronomic menu with a fitting price tag — \$495,000 per ticket

Ever since humans have journeyed to space, their meals there have proved to be nothing worth writing home about. But that could change after a Michelin-starred chef teamed up with a Florida-based startup to take fine-dining to outer space.

Sometime next year, six guests will board a spaceship, where they will enjoy an immersive dining experience served up by Danish chef Rasmus Munk.

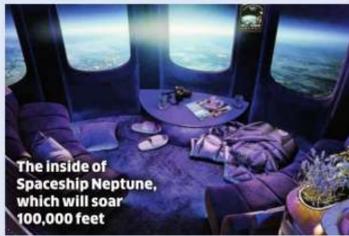


Munk will be on board and serve the meal himself from a small kitchen. He says his menu will be inspired by the impact of space innovation. "We want to tell stories through food," Munk says. "I think that will make an even stronger impact when you're up there and looking down."

PART OF THE EXPERIENCE

Spaceship Neptune is more of a balloon than a rocket. The company says a pressurised capsule will lift to an altitude of around 100,000 feet above sea level where guests will dine while watching the Sun rise over the curvature of the Earth. The trip will last six hours, and organisers are still in discussion with potential participants.

Organisers are promising an out-of-this-world experience for those with an appetite for adventure. But such an astronomic menu comes with a fittingly astronomic price tag — \$495,000 per ticket.



The inside of Spaceship Neptune, which will soar 100,000 feet

Rasmus Munk is planning glow-in-the-dark stars made from aerogel and jellyfish and is even working on an edible piece of space junk from a satellite

MEALS PAST

Munk's menu is expected to be a far cry from meals eaten by previous astronauts. The first man in space, Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, squeezed beef and liver paste from an aluminium tube.

To save on weight, astronauts aboard the International Space Station (ISS) usually dine on dishes packaged in rehydratable containers, including soups and casseroles.

There have been some exceptions. In 2006, French masterchef Alain Ducasse created special gourmet food that could be used for celebratory meals aboard the ISS. These included Mediterranean delights such as olives, tomatoes, quails and fish.

Though Munk is mysterious about his menu, he says he's planning to incorporate glow-in-dark stars made from aerogel and jellyfish protein. "We are also working on an edible piece of space junk from a satellite," he said.



- AP

Why Do We Have Imaginary Friends?



Calvin and Hobbes by Bill Watterson

They can entertain, help you navigate sadness, be a source of support and sometimes prod you to explore a dark side

The New York Times

In the new comedy *IF*, Ryan Reynolds plays a frazzled matchmaker who, with help from a young girl, unites humans with imaginary friends. John Krasinski, who wrote and directed the film, said he wanted to show his kids that the "magical world they've created, that place of such joy and hope and magic, exists. And you can always go back."

IF is one of five new movies that explore imaginary friends, in a variety of genres: Supernatural horror (*Imaginary*), adult comedy (*Ricky Stanicky*), children's animated fantasy (*The Imaginary*) and documentary (*My Secret Country*).

Mirror difficult emotions

Why the convergence? Marjorie Taylor, professor emerita of psychology at the University of Oregon, US, and an expert on imaginary friends, said she wasn't surprised, considering that pretend friends, as she calls them, have long been artistic catnip. "Imaginary friends are fascinating for people who write fiction because they are great vehicles for storytelling" about feelings and fears, said Taylor, whose book on imaginary friends, co-authored with Naomi R. Aguiar, is out this year.



IF features a furry purple creature named Blue

Imaginary friends can be purely for entertainment, but they can also mirror difficult emotions and stages in a child's life. If a family member is sick, for instance, an imaginary friend may get sick, too, a way to help navigate sadness and uncertainty. An imaginary friend can be a child or an adult, an animal or a creature or, as in the popular comic strip *Calvin and Hobbes*, a stuffed animal.

Research by Taylor and colleagues showed that as many as 65 per cent of

children have interacted with personified objects or invisible friends by the time they are seven. Some pretend friends are retained much longer.

Imaginary friends are considered ageless in both *IF* and *The Imaginary*, directed by Yoshiyuki Momose. Both films focus on how memories of imaginary friends — or "imaginaries", as they're called in *The Imaginary* — are what keep them alive as people age and become less needful of created worlds.

Manifestation of evil

Imaginary friends have long fuelled the horror genre, where unseen beings possess bodies and minds to all kinds of evil ends, a manifestation of and metaphor for mental illness. *Imaginary* uses the horror convention of a possessed toy — in this case a teddy bear named Chauncey — to explore the



dark side of imaginary friendships. Not all horror movie imaginary friends are pretend, though: In *Psycho*, Norman Bates had an imaginary friend, and she turned a shower into a bloodbath.

Adults don't have to be mentally unstable to have imaginary friends. Taylor said author Agatha Christie and choreographer Paul Taylor have talked about having unseen companions who were a source of support and inspiration throughout their lives.

In *Ricky Stanicky*, the imaginary friend is a grown man made up by three friends who pretend to call on him as cover when they want to lie about their whereabouts.

Are we in an imaginary friend golden age? Marlo McKenzie, director of *My Secret Country*, said her film was born in part by having worked at a homeless youth shelter where many children with backgrounds of abuse "weren't able to imagine a world where they were loved".

"Imagination," she said, "is way more important than we realise."

For years, Craig Steven Wright, an Australian cryptocurrency enthusiast, claimed to be Satoshi Nakamoto, the mysterious creator of Bitcoin. Then the courts got involved

The New York Times

For much of its existence, the cryptocurrency company nChain was governed by a golden rule of office politics: It was not a good idea to challenge Craig Steven Wright, the chief science officer.

At nChain's London offices, Wright, an Australian computer scientist, was treated as a sort of philosopher king. He wore three-piece suits and drove a Lamborghini. A middle manager would tape Wright's ramblings about obscure technical matters and then share the recordings with a staff of researchers, who were instructed to turn his musings into patents.

Wright's authority rested on a claim to a kind of divine significance — that he was the mysterious creator of Bitcoin.

THE ORIGINAL WHITE PAPER

In 2008, a person using the pseudonym Satoshi Nakamoto published a white paper explaining the basics of Bitcoin. Then, as abruptly as he had emerged, he vanished. Satoshi, who's known by his first name, controls an estimated 1.1 million Bitcoins, a \$75-billion stash that has sat untouched for more than a decade.

The mystery of Satoshi's identity has long obsessed crypto experts.

Wright has gone to extraordinary lengths to prove that he is Satoshi. He has presented himself as Bitcoin's inventor in interviews and social media posts. In lawsuits tried in three countries, he has testified that he wrote the original white paper. After a small-time crypto personality challenged his claims in 2019, Wright sued for defamation. He followed that up with an aggressive suit against software developers working to improve Bitcoin's code, accusing them of violating his intellectual property rights. "A few will be bankrupted, lose their families and collapse," he declared.

This year, several of crypto's most powerful companies mobilised to stop Wright from bringing cases. An influential group led by Coinbase, the largest US exchange, and Block, a company started by Twitter founder Jack Dorsey, took him to trial in High Court in London.

They were seeking a judicial declaration: We may never know for sure who invented Bitcoin, but it wasn't Craig Wright.

A FINANCIAL LIFELINE

Much of what is known about Satoshi Nakamoto comes from hundreds of messages he exchanged with early collaborators, including Gavin Andresen, an American software developer who helped promote Bitcoin in the media. In emails and forum posts, Satoshi wrote about his commitment to privacy and his frustrations with the financial establishment, while revealing little about his background.

Then in 2011, with no warning, Satoshi went silent, cutting off communication. "I wish you wouldn't keep talking about me as a mysterious shadowy figure," he told Andresen in their final exchange.

Hardly anyone had heard of Wright until 2015, when Andy Greenberg, a tech reporter, co-wrote an article for *Wired*. The article was based partly on private emails and transcripts supplied by an anonymous leaker: "I did my best to try and hide the fact that I've been running Bitcoin since 2009," Wright said in one transcript. "By the end of this, I think half the world is going to bloody know."

The article included a caveat: "Either Wright invented Bitcoin, or he's a brilliant hoaxer who very badly wants us to believe he did."

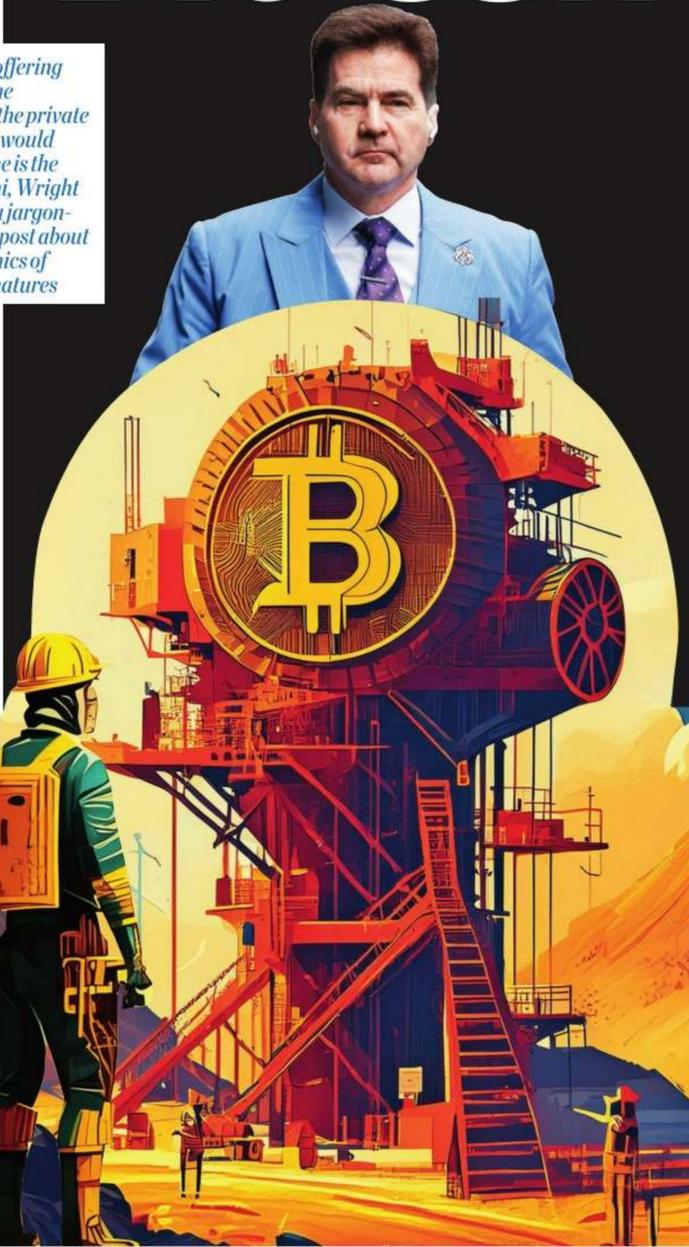
By early 2015, Wright was locked in disputes with the Australian tax office, which accused him of backdating documents and conducting "sham transactions", court records show.

CRYPTOGRAPHIC KEYS

A former colleague put him in touch with Calvin Ayre, an entrepreneur who had made a fortune in the sports betting industry and wanted to

The Man Behind Bit-Con

Instead of offering proof that he controlled the private keys which would show that he is the real Satoshi, Wright published a jargon-heavy blog post about the mechanics of digital signatures



AI GENERATED. IMAGING: ATUL BANDEKAR

invest in crypto. The two decided to publicise his Satoshi claim. The eventual deal included a loan of 2.5 million Australian dollars to resolve Wright's tax problems. It also made Wright the chief scientist of a new company, which would have "exclusive rights to Craig's life story".

But when the *Wired* article appeared that December, it drew a sceptical reaction. There was only one definitive way to prove that he had written the white paper: Satoshi would have access to cryptographic keys unlocking his Bitcoin stash.

In 2016, Wright's sponsors flew Andresen to London, hoping to secure the endorsement of Satoshi's old collaborator. In a hotel conference room, Wright gave a demonstration meant to show Andresen that he controlled Satoshi's private keys.

Soon, Wright was supposed to make the cryptographic proof public and end the Satoshi mystery forever. But when the day arrived for the big reveal, Wright didn't offer any proof. Instead, he published a jargon-heavy blog post about the mechanics of "digital signatures".

WHY CLAIM TO BE SATOSHI?

Even after Wright failed to produce the evidence, he retained a band of loyal online followers. He didn't have access to Satoshi's private keys, he claimed in court, because he had smashed a hard drive containing them; he described it as an impulsive decision, partly related to his autism.

Ayre stood by him, and in 2018, he and Wright launched Bitcoin Satoshi Vision, which trades at about \$70 per coin, a fraction of Bitcoin's price.

Rejected by much of the crypto industry, Wright pressed his claim to Satoshi-dom in the courts, pursuing litigation that Ayre helped finance.

"He seems to have enough money and backing from others that he can make good on his threats to ruin people financially by bringing expensive litigation," Steve Lee, a manager at Block, a company that Dorsey co-founded after Twitter, said in a court filing last year.

Lee was part of a coalition of prominent crypto companies called the Crypto Open Patent Alliance, or COPA, which was founded to stop patent rules from preventing the development of crypto technology. In 2021, Wright's lawyers asked COPA and its members to remove the Bitcoin white paper from their websites. COPA responded by suing Wright in High Court in London, seeking a ruling that he did not invent Bitcoin.

As the litigation intensified, Christen Ager-Hanssen, a venture investor, joined nChain and helped oversee Wright's legal affairs. Last year, he switched sides.

In an interview, Ager-Hanssen said Wright struck him as clever but delusional. He said, he found it hard to understand why Wright has spent so many years trying to prove that he invented Bitcoin. "I believe he thinks he deserves to be Satoshi," Ager-Hanssen said.

A JUDGE DECIDES

Dated August 2007, the notes on a Quill pad summarise a meeting that Wright held in which he discussed a new form of digital money. A list of follow-up steps mentions a "paper", set for publication in 2008.

"The notes were part of a cache of more than 100 'reliance documents' that Wright filed in High Court as evidence that he invented Bitcoin. A forensic expert hired by COPA, however, found that the documents had been doctored.

A sworn statement from Hamelin Brands, the parent company of Quill, revealed that the pad didn't go into circulation until 2012, four years after Bitcoin was invented. Wright took the witness stand in the first week of the trial and insisted that the company was mistaken about the provenance of its own pad.

The judge overseeing the proceedings, James Mellor, issued a ruling on the bench. "Dr Wright is not the person who adopted or operated under the pseudonym Satoshi Nakamoto," he said.

The mystery of Bitcoin's creation seems likely to endure. One morning, in the final stretch of COPA vs Wright, a blond man in a baseball cap shuffled into the gallery, taking a seat among a group of reporters before striking up conversation. Why had he shown up to Wright's trial? He leaned in to whisper a secret: He was the real Satoshi Nakamoto.

Are Goa's Pig Tales and Traditions Changing?

FOOD FABLES



VIKRAM DOCTOR

Goa and pigs have long been closely linked. The Portuguese probably didn't introduce them, given pork eating traditions in western India, in places like Mangalore and Coorg. But they would have encouraged their rearing, from familiarity with salt pork which fuelled their long sea voyages.

There was also, perhaps, the use that the Inquisition made of pork,

to identify Iberian Jews who claimed to have become Christians, but secretly maintained Judaic habits, particularly a revulsion from pork.

Domnic's Goa, an entertaining memoir by Domnic Fernandes, has a chapter on women who would raise a few pigs at home, feeding them on kitchen wastes and going to the houses that didn't keep pigs to collect their waste as well. This was mixed with easily available paddy husk, coconut cake (left after oil pressing) and the water from cooking rice. "Pigs were sort of wet garbage-cleaners," he writes.

Fernandes decorously skirts around another well-known source of sustenance for Goa's pigs, but it is gleefully invoked in *The Stoned Pig*, a magazine published in Anjuna's famous hippie scene. Starting with a "Full Moon Edition" in January 1975, it ran till 1978, featuring Oink,

a porcine mascot. It happily drew scatological parallels between its content and the contents of Goa's pig toilets, eagerly eaten by Oink's real-life counterparts. (The issues are now online, under the caption: "The freest magazine on the world's freest scene".)

Pig toilets aren't special to Goa. Pigs and dogs were possibly first attracted to human settlements to eat their wastes, of all kinds, one reason why both animals are often seen as unclean. But in parts of China and Korea, like Goa, the pig

The government is promoting pig farms, but local breeds like Agonda pigs are being replaced by the Large White (Yorkshire) and Duroc breeds here



Goans use pork in dishes like vindaaloo sarpotel



PIC: GETTY IMAGES

toilet was seen as a practical way of disposing waste (a variation, in Vietnam, had the toilet over a pond, where fish ate the waste). There is one model from China, from around 25-220 CE, and the character used for pigsty in Chinese script has also been used for toilet.

But this is not a system that is surviving modernity. The Chinese

authorities have pushed to abolish pig toilets, and in Goa too, Claude Alvares writes in *Fish Curry and Rice*, his definitive guide to Goa's changing ecology, "after the departure of the Portuguese, the administration began a campaign against pigloos". This was probably backed by Goans from outside the state, who often faced ridicule about these toilets. When they sent money home, replacing the pig toilet must have been high on the agenda.

Goa was still too rural to create a centralised sewage system, so the solution was septic tanks for each house. But Alvares notes that these were usually badly constructed because proper guidelines were not set for their design or approval. The only permission required was from medical officers, who simply measured their distance from water bodies, but didn't take into consideration if their size was adequate for the building.

Inevitably, in the late 1990s, sewage started overflowing and contaminating Goa's groundwater. The

Pollution Control Board framed guidelines, but these are proving inadequate in the face of increased construction. Roads are being torn up to lay water and sewage lines, but this won't match the scale of development, especially in remoter areas. The state is drowning in sewage.

As it happens, pigs are also disappearing from public sight. A few are still home raised, but the government is promoting pig farms where rearing happens in intensive conditions, with far more cruelty to the animals. Instead of recycling wastes, they are given specialised feeds, whose production has greater environmental costs. Local breeds like Agonda pigs are being replaced by the Large White (Yorkshire) and Duroc breeds suited for factory farming.

A chef friend tells me that their meat is much fatter, which suits international styles of cooking, but not traditional Goan recipes. Will the link between Goa and pigs remain when the conditions that created it have changed so much?

VITALS
Xavi: Barca President Will Have to Explain Why I Won't Continue as Coach
 Xavi Hernández said Saturday that he is leaving Barcelona with "a clear conscience" that he did his best after the club decided to part ways with the former player, but that it will be up to president Joan Laporta to explain why he is going. In his first news conference since Barcelona announced on Friday that Xavi would not finish the final year of his contract, the 44-year-old said that he will now "take a break" from coaching. "The president told me his reasons for why he thinks the club needs a change, and I can only respect that. I am a club man," Xavi said. "We shook hands, hugged and wished one another the best. From now on I will be just another fan. He will have to explain his motives." **AP**



UNITED 2 - 1 CITY
FA Cup Goes to the Other Manchester
 Manchester United saved their best performance of a mediocre season to the very end as they upset Manchester City 2-1 in the FA Cup final on Saturday to deprive their rivals of the double. With speculation swirling about the future of manager Erik Ten Hag, United ripped up the form book as first-half goals from teenagers Alejandro Garnacho and Kobbie Mainoo proved enough for them to lift the trophy for a 13th time. Premier League champions City, bidding to become the first club to win the double in successive seasons, had been on a 35-match unbeaten run in all competitions in open play. But they were well below their best in the first half, gifting Garnacho a 30th-minute opener before Mainoo made it 2-0. **Reuters**

MALAYSIA MASTERS
Sindhu Fights Past Busanan to Reach Final
 P V Sindhu on Saturday earned a shot at the Malaysia Masters crown after entering the women's singles final with a come-from-behind win over Thailand's Busanan Ongbamrungphan. Fifth seed Sindhu, who last won the 2022 Singapore Open and finished runner-up at the Madrid Spain Masters in 2023, rallied to prevail 13-21 21-16 21-12 against world No. 20 Busanan in a marathon semifinal that lasted 88 minutes to close in on the BWF World Tour crown. World No. 15 Sindhu will face world No. 7 Wang Zhi Yi of China in the summit clash. **PTI**

ARCHERY WORLD CUP
India Wins Women's Compound Team Gold, Mixed Team Silver
 The Indian women's compound team of Jyothi Surekha Vennam, Parneet Kaur and Aditi Swami grabbed their third successive Archery World Cup gold medal, while the mixed team added a silver at the stage two event on Saturday. The world No. 1 Indian compound team dominated Turkey's Hazal Burun, Ayse Bera Suzer and Begum Yuva right from the beginning and sealed the gold without dropping a set - 232-226 - in a lopsided final. Asian Games champion Jyothi, however, couldn't add a second gold to her kitty as she along with Priyanshu squandered an opening round lead to go down to the Team USA 153-155 in the compound mixed team final. **PTI**

Battle of Biryyanis

Kolkata and Hyderabad, both famous for the dish, vie for IPL bragging rights



REGARDLESS
Anand Vasu
 After a long, hot summer of cricket where it rained sixes and fours in a batsmen-friendly IPL, it has come down to this. The Sunrisers Hyderabad will take on Kolkata Knight Riders for this year's bragging rights. It was probably not the first pick of experts, pre-tournament, to make it to the final, but it was not the last. The primary reason for this is SRH's acquisition of Pat Cummins. As a bowler, Cummins is world-class, but his efficacy is highest in Test cricket. Cummins can hit a long ball but you would not go as far as putting him in the bowling all-rounder category. Cummins got the big bucks for his leadership. His captaincy of Australia has been marked by tactical acumen. His handling of bowlers, setting of fields and deployment of batsmen out of position had all helped move the game forward. But, more than this, it was Cummins' instinct to take care of his flock and get the best out of those who looked up to him that Hyderabad was banking on. Cummins' main task was to bring this team together. And he has delivered spectacularly. Travis Head unleashed hell as we know he can and Abhishek Sharma emerged as someone whom the Indian selectors will not be able to ignore for much longer. Nitish Kumar Reddy came up with the goods in the big moments, and he is that elusive character that Indian cricket is always on the lookout for - a batsman and medium pacer. T Natarajan re-emerged as someone who can bowl yorkers at will, literally the only way to stop batsmen from scoring in this edition of the tournament, very bowler unfriendly and only made worse with the Impact Player affording teams an extra specialist batsman. Add to these effervescent elements the stability and professionalism of Bhuvneshwar Kumar and Heinrich Klaasen and you have the answer to why the Sunrisers have mounted such a strong campaign and are worthy finalists. Across the sight screen at the MA Chidambaram Stadium in Chennai, the Knight Riders. And, shock horror, Shreyas had more resources at his disposal, possibly, but crucially also experience. The key was to harness the talent



their story is not dissimilar to the Sunrisers. Captain Shreyas Iyer has not had the best of times in the past. Recurring injuries have meant being in and out of the Indian team and stints at the National Cricket Academy (NCA) for rehabilitation. When Iyer did not play for Mumbai in the Ranji Trophy and subsequently got left out of India's central contracts list, his career graph hit a new low. But, those who have watched Shreyas from when he was young, vouch for his mental strength and his captaincy. Shreyas had more resources at his disposal, possibly, but crucially also experience. KKR ranks are filled with players who have had success not only in the IPL but in T20 leagues around the world. The key here was to harness the different talents in a manner that allowed them to pull as one. To turn Sunil Narine, the mystery bowler into a monstrous opening batsman, not just a disposable wicket but a key cog, was a masterstroke. Shreyas, with Gautam Gambhir and Chandrakant Pandit in the back room, had to sort out a formula that would allow KKR's diverse talents to understand the team goal and play towards it. At times, it was not even necessary that the players understood or saw the bigger picture. Such is the respect that Shreyas and Gambhir command, that a player would

Hyderabad was banking on Cummins' instinct to take care of his flock and get the best out of those who looked up to him

simply go out and perform a specific role, knowing that the management had his back, even if he had a bad day on the field. Before the Qualifier, Shreyas had this to say about what he demanded: "Three things that I am looking forward to win, win and win."

This might seem like stating the bleeding obvious, but it comes from a place of security, of confidence and achievement. When team trusts in a process and commits to it, and the results back this up, there's no reason why a captain would not talk the talk. But, the key element for both these teams going into the final is to take nothing for granted. With every passing year, teams are getting sharper at playing T20 cricket. The margins are narrowing and every single ball has become a conscious effort and event in itself. With that being the case, the role luck plays is undeniable. A small break can go a long way. Fortunately, these teams are led by mature individuals who are humble enough to acknowledge this. The only curiosity about the two teams that have reached the final of IPL 2024? Not one player from either team is in the Indian squad for the T20 World Cup. Welcome to the upside-down world of the shortest format of the game.

IPL FINAL	
KKR vs SRH	
MA Chidambaram Stadium, Chennai	
2	1
2012, 2014	2016
SEASON STATS	
15	16
MATCHES	
10	9
WINS	
3	6
LOSSES	
2	1
N/R	
10.6	10.5
RUN RATE	
HEAD TO HEAD	
18	09
KKR won by 8 wickets	2024
KKR won by 4 runs	2024
KKR won by 5 runs	2023
SRH won by 23 runs	2023
KKR won by 54 runs	2022
TOP SCORER	
SUNIL NARINE	TRAVIS HEAD
482	567
RUN	
37	43
AVERAGE	
179	192
STRIKE RATE	
1/3	1/4
100/50	
32/50	65/45
BEST BOWLING	
32/64	32/64
TOP WICKET-TAKER	
VARUN CHAKRAVARTHY	THANGARAJU NATARAJAN
20	19
WICKET	
19.6	22.9
AVERAGE	
8.1	8.8
ECON	
14.4	15.5
STRIKE RATE	
3/16	4/19
BEST BOWLING	



STUMP VISION
Boria Majumdar
 Watching the IPL with one eye on the upcoming T20 World Cup, starting next Sunday, poses a dilemma. As a tournament, it is great. But when you think of the Indians in the IPL, particularly those chosen for the T20 World Cup, a sense of unease sets in. In fact, in a fantasy XI based on IPL performances, only two Indians deserve a place. That tells you something about India's chances in the T20 World Cup. This Indian team doesn't appear formidable as the tournament approaches. This probably marks the first time in years that an Indian side is entering the World Cup with such little hype. The underdog tag could work in India's favour; less pressure isn't always detrimental and might help the team exceed expectations. Coming back to the fantasy XI, Travis Head and Sunil Narine are going to be the openers. While Head can single-handedly win a game, Narine, one of the best IPL players of all time, has had an unexpected

Bleeding Blue With Doubts

IPL performances of India's T20 World Cup bound players don't inspire much confidence

resurgence as a batter this year. Both can score at a rapid clip in the Powerplay and set the game up. Narine, with the ball, has also been exceptional. At No. 3 would be Virat Kohli, easily the best Indian batter in the tournament. He batted with flair and skill, and also improved his strike-rate in the second half of the season. Heinrich Klaasen has to be the No. 4. His ability to hit sixes makes him a nightmare for the opposition bowlers. A safe wicket-keeper, Klaasen is at his best at the moment. David Miller would be No. 5. Yet again a standout performer for Gujarat, Miller has been the franchise's Mr Consistent. His ability to soak in pressure and deliver in tough situations has time and again rescued his team. Andre Russell is the perfect fitness-wise, he is better than a year ago, and consistently picked up wickets this season. And when it comes to hitting sixes, few can match Dre Russ.



Only Jasprit Bumrah and Virat Kohli delivered for their teams in the IPL. **AP**

For another all-round option at No. 7, Sam Curran would be a handy pick. While he didn't have the best tournament by his own standards, he can still win games with both bat and ball. Despite not having a good season, Rashid

Khan can't be ignored. He is someone who can also make a difference with the bat as he did for Gujarat this season.

Among the pacers, Trent Boult has always been handy at the start of an innings and consistent throughout the season. Jasprit Bumrah walks into any team. The final spot has many contenders lining up, but none of them are Indians. And that's the real point. In this XI, aside from Kohli and Bumrah, no other member of the Indian World Cup squad makes the cut. Sanju Samson is a close contender for No. 4, but he can't leapfrog Klaasen.

In such a situation, how can one bet on India in the World Cup? How can one expect that Rohit, Hardik Pandya, Mohammed Siraj and the rest will all suddenly return to form? On what basis can there be hope that India will redeem themselves and avenge the 2022 T20 World Cup defeat or the 2023 World Cup final heartbreak?

It suggests that if India progresses beyond the semi-finals, it will be an effort beyond expectations. Perhaps for the first time in years, Indian fans aren't expecting much from the team. Maybe this is their chance. However, a deep dive just seven days before the tournament begins doesn't inspire confidence in India's chances, and that is the reality.

The Limitations, And Thrills, of The Monaco GP

The narrow track and large cars hinder overtaking, but, oh boy, do those tight roads make qualifying hair-raising



Monaco's narrow streets make it difficult for the drivers to manoeuvre their racers. **Getty Images**

Ask a Grand Prix driver whether Monaco is worthy of its place on the Formula One calendar, and the answer will usually be yes.

"That's even though the Grand Prix can often be less than thrilling. The track is so narrow and the cars so big that drivers rarely can pass, or overtake, each other. In the Formula E race there in April, drivers were able to overtake almost 200 times in their smaller cars. In last year's Grand Prix there were 22 overtakes, which can make the race professional.

Compared with 30 years ago, cars are about 3 feet longer and 600 pounds heavier, making them difficult to manoeuvre around the narrow streets of Monaco. Still, the race has a mystique. "For me, Monaco is the most iconic race of the season," Charles Leclerc of Ferrari said. "Obviously I'm Monégasque, so I'm biased, but it's the race that made me dream of becoming a Formula One driver. The qualifying effort on Saturday is incredible. None of the racetracks come close to what we feel on that qualifying lap, and how precise you need to be, how brave you need to be. It's something I really enjoy as a driver."

Monaco has history. This weekend's Grand Prix marks the 95th anniversary of its first race, in 1929. Its layout, a circuit described by Nelson Piquet, a three-time champion in the 1980s, as "like riding a bicycle around your living room," has changed little over time.

The configuration has 19 corners over a 3.7-mile lap. Reaching speeds up to 180 mph, drivers complete a perfect qualifying lap, in which they are on the track alone, racing against the clock, is the ultimate challenge.

The race itself is still a challenge. Over 78 laps, with almost 1,500 corners, there is no respite. The problem with Monaco is there is no room to expand the track to aid overtaking. Ideas to alter it have been discussed over the years, but there have been no changes. So the variables for overtaking are confined to strategy, an accident or rain, which has often created a spectacle that has affected strategy and resulted in accidents.

Michel Boeri, president of the Automobile Club de Monaco, the promoters of the Grand Prix, said that despite the near century-old heritage of the race, it was unique. "From the start, in 1929, we didn't have a choice but to do things differently because of the topography of our tiny 700-year-old principality situated between the mountains on one side and the Mediterranean Sea on the other," Boeri said in an interview. "Monaco is half the size of New York's Central Park. But where else can you race around buildings and yachts at 180 miles per hour, on streets where the speed limit is 30?"

In 2021, a FI survey of 1.67 million people from 187 countries, conducted by the research company Nielsen, in partnership with the Motorsport Network, highlighted Monaco's popularity, emerging as the fan favourite. That was no surprise to Boeri. "When people around the world think of golf, they think of the Masters in Augusta," he said. "When they think of tennis, it's Wimbledon. When it comes to Formula One, it's Monaco that comes to mind." **The New York Times**

Monaco GP
 CIRCUIT DE MONACO

Number of Laps	78
Circuit Length	3.337km
Race Distance	260.286km
Lap Record	1:12.909min

(Lewis Hamilton, 2021)
LIVE on FanCode, 6:30pm

An Open Field

Djokovic's shaky season and Nadal's fitness woes open window of opportunity at Roland Garros

Shrivathsa Sridhar
 Defending champion Novak Djokovic's erratic form, Rafa Nadal's fitness woes and untimely injuries to top-ranked youngsters have set up an uncertain French Open men's tournament with players on the fringe of Grand Slam success sensing a golden opportunity. Single-handedly carrying the flag for the "Big Three" last year following Roger Federer's retirement and in Rafa Nadal's prolonged absence due to a hip issue, Djokovic mowed down all challengers to nearly complete a sweep of the four majors. But the sparkling form that helped the 37-year-old go level with Margaret Court on 24 Grand Slam trophies has evaporated in the first five months of 2024 and tame defeats have hurt his rhythm ahead of his bid for a fourth Paris crown. Perhaps the biggest blow came in Rome earlier this month as Djokovic was thrashed by Alejandro Tabilo two days after a freak accident in which he was hit on the head by a fan's water bottle while signing autographs. "Everything needs to be better in order for me to have at least a chance to win (the French Open)," said Djokovic, who has failed to win a tournament in the first 4-1/2 months of the season for the first time since 2018. Adding to the minor crisis at the top of the men's game in recent weeks is a hip injury to Australian Open champion

Jannik Sinner that threatens to hamper the 22-year-old Italian's hopes of winning a second major and becoming the world number one. Spain's Wimbledon champion Carlos Alcaraz joined Sinner in skipping Rome and the 21-year-old is working his way back from a right forearm issue that also forced him out of Monte Carlo and derailed his Madrid title defence. His compatriot Nadal enjoyed a run to the fourth round in the Spanish capital but the 14-times Paris champion missed his favourite major in 2023 with a hip injury and faces a challenge to win the title again if he continues to play within himself. The 22-times Grand Slam winner returned to the tour after nearly a year in January but suffered another muscle problem and will hope for the best in what is likely to be his final French Open appearance in his farewell season. **With former champions far from peak form and the rigours of a busy tour taking its toll, talented players including Stefanos Tsitsipas, Alexander Zverev, Casper Ruud and Andrey Rublev have emerged as worthy contenders for a maiden Grand Slam title. Reuters**

French Open
 MAY 26 TO JUNE 9
 Stade Roland Garros, Paris
DEFENDING CHAMPIONS
 MEN'S SINGLES
Novak Djokovic
 beat Casper Ruud 7-6 (1), 6-3, 7-5
 WOMEN'S
Iga Swiatek
 beat Karolina Muchova 6-2, 5-7, 6-4

\$58.12 million
 Total prize purse
\$2.6 million
 Prize money for singles champions

LIVE on Sony Sports Network, 2:30pm onwards

0 The number of times Rafael Nadal has lost consecutive matches on clay courts in his career. He will face Alexander Zverev in the first round of the French Open; his previous outing was a 6-1, 6-3 loss to Hubert Hurkacz at the Italian Open on May 11.

5 The most Grand Slam final appearances by any woman in the 2024 French Open field. That is Victoria Azarenka's total; she is 2-3 in those finals. Iga Swiatek (4-0), Naomi Osaka (4-0) and Angelique Kerber (3-1) have all been to four major title matches.

There is a lot of pressure, especially when you play well and you already know that you can achieve this step, people are expecting it to happen again and again... but I wouldn't say I'm more nervous than usual... I'm also pretty confident with how I'm playing right now
IGA SWIATEK

Can Anyone Stop Swiatek?

The Polish star, already a three-time French Open champion, looks untouchable coming in to Paris

Martyn Herman
 The big question ahead of the French Open is not whether Iga Swiatek will win the women's singles again but exactly how many times the Pole will lift the Coupe Suzanne Lenglen before she calls time on her career. It looks almost impossible for any player to come anywhere near Rafa Nadal's record 14 French Open titles but such is Swiatek's domination on clay that she already looks on course to threaten the women's title record at a single Grand Slam. Still only 22, Swiatek is a massive favourite for this year's tournament where she could join a select group of players to have won the title at least four times in the professional era - Chris Evert (7), Steffi Graf (6) and Justine Henin (4). Martin Navratilova holds the professional era women's record for triumphs at one of the four majors with nine Wimbledon titles. With age on her side, and an all-round game that matches up on clay as well as Navratilova's did on grass, Swiatek certainly looks like dominating the Parisian dirt for years to come. Swiatek arrives in the French capital on the back of a 12-match winning streak on clay having rolled through Madrid and Rome and some are suggesting that the Roland Garros engraver might already start etching her name on the trophy. But world No. 1 Swiatek, bidding for a hat-trick of titles to go along with her maiden success in 2020, is not getting ahead of herself as she prepares for the year's second Grand Slam tournament. "Obviously I am confident. I feel like I'm playing great tennis. But it doesn't change the fact that I really want to stay humble and really focused on getting everything step by step. Grand Slams are different," she said in Rome after her win over world No. 2 Aryna Sabalenka. "There are seven hard matches that you need to win, so I don't take anything for granted. I'll just work hard as I did in Madrid and Rome and we'll see." "I'm number one so I'm the favourite everywhere if you look at rankings. But rankings don't play the matches." "The list of those with the capabilities to stop Swiatek is not a long one. Belarus's two-time Australian Open champion Sabalenka has emerged as her natural rival and held match points against her in the Madrid final this year before being outclassed in Rome. While Sabalenka's power tennis is not as effective on the slippery dust, she certainly has the weapons to blast through any opponent on any surface when her game is hot. "Even though I lost these two finals, I never focus on the past. No matter how many times I lose to the player, I know anyway if I'll be there, if I'll be fighting, I'll be focusing on myself, I know that I can get that win," she said. US Open champion Coco Gauff reached the French Open final in 2022 and has proved she can adapt to clay while former Wimbledon champion Elena Rybakina has also showed form on clay and will expect to go deep in the draw. **Reuters**