



COMMENT

Prof I.S. Saluja

Adieu 2018

As I sit down to pen the last editorial comment of the year for The Indian Panorama, a few days before the end of the year, on December 27 evening, to be exact, my thoughts go to millions across the world who suffered on account of Nature's fury, or were subjected to man's inhumanity, in 2018. I think of the wild fires in California which, besides causing colossal damage to property and displacement of people, caused hundreds of deaths. The earthquake and Tsunamis which struck Indonesia on two occasions in 2018, mowed down hundreds of lives and caused huge damage to property. The volcanic eruptions in some parts of the world were responsible for much loss of life and property. Then, all the storms and hurricanes in US and elsewhere, mudslides and floods in Japan, dust storm in India, and many other natural calamities in various parts of the world played havoc with human life.

I am also reminded of the destruction and misery caused by man which is much greater in proportion than Nature's wrath could cause. In the armed conflicts across the world hundreds and thousands of lives have been lost. Wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen have killed thousands. In 2018 alone, some 40,000 have lost life in Afghanistan; 5000 in Iraq; 30000 in Syrian Civil war; 25000 in Yemen. Then there are many countries having internal conflicts which caused a heavy loss of human life, besides bringing misery to many more.

Mass shootings in USA in 2018 which included shootings in schools and public places, numbered more than 300 and claimed lives of thousands who ranged from schoolgoing small kids of 5 to old people.

On this day, I remember all those who fell to Nature's fury or man's madness and pray for their souls. For all the sufferings of the people affected by the unfortunate incidents of 2018, I have deep regret and great sympathy. For all their sufferings, I have prayers to make that it does not happen again with God's own people.

I have also to make an appeal to rulers all over the world to always keep in mind that their first obligation is to people and their wellbeing. Let them not sow the seeds of conflicts to satisfy their ego and please themselves. Let them work to ensure that peace alone prevails.

However, let me add, 2018 has not only been a year of terrible suffering for many; there have been considerable achievements and accomplishments to be proud of. Scientists and technologists made new discoveries, including that there is mineable ice on Mars, and there is a way to grow vegetables without earth or daylight. Many more. And many more in various other spheres.

We will follow up with details of what 2018 meant to the world, in our New Year special edition next week.

For now, it is adieu 2018.

We wish our Readers a Happy New Year

Ambassador Navtej Sarna given a warm send off : Harsh Vardhan Shringla succeeds

WASHINGTON (TIP): Indian Ambassador to the United States Navtej Sarna was given a warm send off on December 13th, as diplomats from both the countries praised the Trump administration and the state of bilateral relations. Sarna, who took over as Ambassador in November 2016, ends an illustrious 38-year foreign service career.

In an extraordinary move and to showcase the strength of the ties that bind the two countries, the farewell was hosted by the State Department at Blair House, opposite the White House, a residence reserved for heads of state during visits to this country. Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of

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Navtej Sarna (left) and successor Harsh Vardhan Shringla

President Trump says US can't be world's policeman



WASHINGTON (TIP): Defending his decision to withdraw troops from the war-torn Syria, US President Donald has Trump said America cannot be the world's policeman.

President Trump and First Lady Melania secretly left Washington on Christmas night and visited Iraq on Wednesday, December 26 to deliver holiday greetings to US combat troops. President Trump and the First Lady travelled to Iraq late on Christmas night to visit with our troops and Senior Military leadership to thank them for their service, their success, and

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US President Donald Trump (File photo)

The New Year Special Edition will hit stands on January 4th

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Queens Indian American community extends a reception to Melinda Katz

RICHMOND HILL, NY (TIP): The Queens Indian American community organized a reception to Melinda Katz, the Queens Borough President who is completing two terms this year.

Melinda is now eying the post of District Attorney of Queens. It was a public relations exercise for Melinda who is admired for her work, in particular by the Punjabi community.

A Punjabi community leader Jarnail Singh

Gilzian who owns the famous banquet and Restaurant Richie Rich in Richmond Hill hosted the reception which was attended by a large number of community leaders from Queens and Long Island.

The more prominent amongst them who also spoke on the occasion included Mohinder Singh Gilzian, President of Indian Overseas Congress, Harbans Singh Dhillon, former Election Commissioner, Gurdwara Sikh Cultural Society, Harpreet Singh Toor, former

Chairman, Gurdwara Sikh Cultural Society, Satnam Singh Parhar, Former President, India Association of Long Island, and Bhinda Begowalia, President of Begowal Society. Each speaker spoke highly of Melinda and pledged support in her bid for District Attorney of Queens.

Speaking on the occasion, Melinda spoke of her work as Queens Borough President. She pledged her support to the community which had always supported her. She thanked

Jarnail Singh Gilzian for organizing a reception to enable her to reach out to a large number of her supporters and voters.

Earlier, on her arrival, Melinda was welcomed with a bouquet presented to her by Jarnail Singh Gilzian's family.

During her more than an hour- stay, Melinda went around meeting everyone individually and obliging them with photographs.

Prof. Indrajit Saluja emceed the event.



Melinda Katz is received with bouquet by Jarnail Singh Gilzian, his wife (right) and other members of family



Jarnail Singh Gilzian and Melinda Katz



Melinda Katz addresses the gathering. Seen to her right is Jarnail Singh Gilzian



Sections of the gathering



Gilzian family with Melinda



Melinda Katz poses for a photograph with community leaders

Indian Teen Siblings die in US Home fire



The three deceased teenagers attended French Camp Academy in Choctaw County

NEW YORK (TIP): Three young siblings from Telangana died in a fire on Sunday, December 23 night at the home of an American family they were staying with. The three, all missionary students, were guests for the holidays with the family in a suburb of Memphis, Tennessee.

Aaron Naik, 17, Sharron Naik, 14 and Joy Naik, 15, were killed along with 46-year-old Kari Coudriet, the owner of the two-storey home. The fire broke out around 11 pm and left much of the building charred. Only Kari's husband Daniel Coudriet and their son Cole, 13, survived the fire, according to a statement by the Collierville Bible Church.

The three deceased teenagers attended French Camp Academy in Choctaw County. "Friends and family, please be in prayer for Pastor Naik and his wife. They sent their three precious children to America from India to complete their education and during the break a fire took their lives. They have been a blessing to the French Camp community and are loved by our whole town. I cannot fathom the grief of their parents as I know how much our town is grieving", Town of French Camp wrote in a Facebook post.

Indian American philanthropist Dr. Kiran C. Patel offers tuition-free education in Florida

TEMPLE TERRACE, FL (TIP): Indian American entrepreneur and philanthropist Dr. Kiran Patel in this northern Tampa suburb will provide free quality education to students from the area and beyond through a new state-of-the-art charter school.

The construction of Dr. Kiran C. Patel High School will be completed in the summer of 2019 and classes will begin in August. Ground for the more than 60,000-square-foot school, which will include a 11,000-square-foot gymnasium, was broken on December 13. The \$20 million high school building, located on a 32-acre plot near the University of South Florida, will be funded fully by the Tampa-based philanthropist.

The groundbreaking in the waning days of the year marks the end of a hectic 15-month period for Patel and his wife, Dr. Pallavi Patel, during which they committed approximately a quarter-billion dollar for various philanthropic causes and made their second billion-dollar-plus exit from health insurance business in a decade and a half.

In September 2017, the Patels had committed a whopping \$200 million - the single largest donation by an Indian American to date - to Nova Southeastern University (NSU) in Fort Lauderdale. The gift, the largest in the university's history, will impact healthcare delivery in the United States, India and globally.

Like the NSU donation, the latest philanthropic commitment also focuses on an area that's close to the Zambia-born Patel's heart, education. In fact, a vast majority of Drs. Kiran & Pallavi Patel Family Foundations'



works globally - including in the United States, India, Africa and the Caribbean - have been in healthcare and education.

Noted Indian American entrepreneur and philanthropist from Tampa, Dr. Kiran Patel is the Chairman and President of Freedom Health, Inc. and Optimum Health, Inc. in Florida. He sees philanthropy as his responsibility and passion. Dr. Patel built the WellCare Management Group which he sold in 2002 to a private equity group. The Patel's have used these proceeds to continue their generous philanthropic work in the Tampa Bay community. Recently, Dr. Patel purchased the former Clearwater Christian College property

and has plans to create a college of osteopathic medicine to attract more doctors to this area. Their non-profit organization, the Kiran and Pallavi Patel Foundation for Global Understanding, funds a number of initiatives in health, education and culture. It even offers an annual scholarship to the underprivileged youth in the United States.

As longtime residents of the Carrollwood community, the Patels have been giving back to the Tampa Bay area for decades. In addition to their previous accomplishments, Dr. Patel served as an accomplished Cardiologist and his wife, Dr. Pallavi Patel specialized in Pediatrics.

Indian-Origin Man gets reduced sentence for drunken drive killing



Jaynesh Chudasama jailed for 13 years for killing three teenage boys (in the pic) in an accident in January has been given relief of two-and-a-half years on his sentence

LONDON (TIP): An Indian-origin man who was jailed for 13 years for killing three teenage boys in an accident in January has been given relief of two-and-a-half years on his sentence.

Jaynesh Chudasama, 29, admitted to driving at more than two-and-a-half times over the alcohol limit on January 26 evening, when the fatal collision occurred near a bus stop at Hayes in west London.

Traces of cannabis were also found in the car hire worker's system following his arrest.

At the latest hearing, the Court of Appeal concluded that there had been an error in sentencing him to 13 years behind bars for the crime and cut his sentence down to 10 and-a-half years instead to take his guilty pleas into account.

"Prior to consideration of his guilty pleas, this was a case for the maximum sentence of 14 years. The appropriate discount for the pleas, however, was

not one third but one quarter," said Judge Brian Leveson at a judgment hand-down hearing, during which the victims' families shouted slogans opposing the ruling.

"The death of each of the victims in this case is a disaster and tragedy of almost unimaginable proportions for them, their families and their friends. We have read many statements about the catastrophic impact each has had on so many lives. No sentence of the court can assuage that loss," the judge noted.

The trial had heard how Harry Rice, 17, George Wilkinson and Josh McGuinness, both 16, were instantly killed as they were hit by Chudasama's speeding car while on their way to a friend's birthday party. Family members of the boys were among around 30 members of the public who attended the Royal Courts of Justice in London for the decision and chanted "disgrace" as the judgment was handed down. The judge had to move the hearing to a different court room due to the disruption. Besides his jail sentence, Chudasama will also be disqualified from driving for 12 years and three months and have to pass an extended driving test.

He had been described as a "coward" in court for trying to escape the scene, leaving his victims to die on the road, but was chased down and caught by the boys' friends.

Despite the efforts of paramedics, all three boys were pronounced dead at the scene. Photographs from the scene showed the smashed wreckage of a car, including a caved-in fence.

Some of the victims' relatives believe the crash was deliberate and want Chudasama charged with murder.

Indian-Origin Police Officer shot dead in California

NEWMAN, CA (TIP):

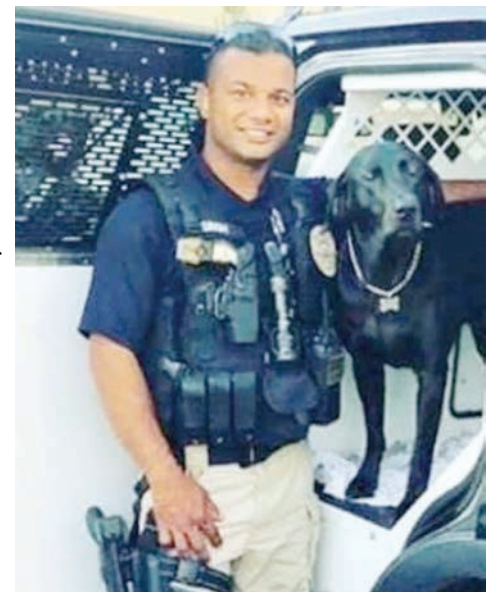
An Indian-origin police officer in California has been killed after being shot by an "armed" unidentified gunman. Corporal Ronil Singh was shot and killed while conducting a vehicle stop at the intersection of Merced Street and Eucalyptus Avenue shortly before 1:00 am on December 26.

Approximately three minutes after initiating the stop he radioed dispatch that shots had been fired. Responding officers found Corporal Singh at the scene suffering from multiple gunshot wounds. He was transported to a local hospital where he succumbed to his wounds.

The subject he stopped fled the scene and remains at large. Police have launched a manhunt to find the suspected gunman. They also shared images on Facebook in the hopes that someone will spot the suspect. The suspect's vehicle has been recovered. The Stanislaus County Sheriff's Department says police agencies throughout California and out of state have been alerted.

33-year-old Singh had served with the Newman Police Department for seven years. Newman is located in Stanislaus County in central California, east of San Jose. He had previously served with the Merced County Sheriff's Office and the Turlock Police Department.

The Stanislaus Sworn Deputies Association has established a Corporal Ronil Singh, Newman PD Memorial Fund.



33-year-old Singh had served with the Newman Police Department for seven years



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H1-B Visa regulations bring 'good news' for Indian students



NEW YORK (TIP): The US should select the "very best" among the applicants under the H-1B visas, the Trump administration told lawmakers Thursday, December 27, asserting that it was determined to ensure that the temporary work permits, most sought by Indian IT companies, do not harm domestic workers.

The H1B visa, popular among Indian IT companies and professionals, is a non-immigrant visa that allows US companies to employ foreign workers in specialty occupations that require theoretical or technical expertise.

The technology companies depend on it to hire tens of thousands of employees each year from countries like India and China.

Perhaps no other visa category has received as much attention in recent years as the H-1B, as reports of abuse of the program have caused outrage among the public, Homeland Secretary Kirsten Nielsen told members of the powerful Senate Judiciary Committee during a Congressional hearing.

"No qualified hardworking American should be forced to train their H-1B replacement, and then let go," she said.

"The number of H-1B petitions routinely exceeds the statutory cap, and among that pool of petitions, we should endeavor to select the very best for the privilege of coming to the United States for work," Nielsen said.

The Department of Homeland Security seeks to ensure that American workers are not pushed aside for the promise of cheaper, foreign labor, and the employers, recruiters or any of their agents do not exploit foreign workers, she said.

The Trump administration has stepped up its measures to detect employment-based visa fraud and abuse, but certain nonimmigrant visa programs need reform in order to protect American workers better, she said.

"While current law only requires it for certain employers, which are few in number and can easily meet the wage and degree exemption, all employers should be required to certify that they have made a good faith effort to recruit US workers before filing an H-1B petition and have offered jobs to qualified and available American applicants," Nielsen said.

Although current law prohibits some H-1B employers from displacing US workers, there are loopholes that must close, she told the members of the Senate Judiciary Committee.

"We have to make sure the H-1B program does not harm American workers who may be as qualified and willing to do jobs that foreign workers are imported to fill," she said.

As per US President Donald Trump's 'Buy American, Hire American Executive Order, the Department of Homeland Security is reviewing current guidance and regulation for opportunities to protect American workers while also providing good faith employers the opportunity to recruit H-1B workers where needed.

"This balance is consistent with the statute and President Trump's priorities. We also seek to work with Congress to make legislative changes that would provide more protections to the United States workforce," Nielsen said.

Officials: Explosion at Astoria Con Ed plant

QUEENS, NY (TIP): An explosion at an Astoria Con Edison substation knocked out power at LaGuardia Airport on Thursday, December 27 night, lit up the night sky for miles in any direction with flashes of brilliant blue and yellow light, and rattled New Yorkers across a wide area, a Newsday report said.

In tweets, the NYPD and Con Ed said they were responding to the explosion, which caused a brief fire at the plant at the corner of 20th Avenue and 31st Street.

Con Ed officials described what happened at the plant, which is just to the southwest of LaGuardia Airport.

Uh, the sky over Astoria right now...
pic.twitter.com/mSWS8T2lxU

- Jesse Spector (@jessespector) December 28, 2018

#FDNY units have responded to 1740 31 St in Astoria. The incident is under control. There are no injuries reported, and no fire.

- FDNY (@FDNY) December 28, 2018

"There was a brief electrical fire at our substation in Astoria which involved some electrical transformers and caused a transmission dip in the area," the tweet said. "We're currently investigating the cause of the incident."

Shortly after the explosion, multiple videos posted on Twitter showed the night sky in the area around the plant light up with blue and yellow flashes. Multiple television news reports said there were sporadic power outages.



A transformer explosion at the Astoria East & North Queens Con Ed plant, the NYPD said, lit up the sky around 10 p.m. on Thursday.
Photo Credit: @JesseSpector via Twitter

In a tweet, Mayor Bill de Blasio said: "What we know: - Light was caused by electrical surge at a substation. - No current fire, no injuries. - MTA has power, but there are delays on the 7 train. - Power coming back on at LGA but expect delays. - Con Ed evaluating outages now. More soon."

Port Authority advised travelers to allow for extra time because of the power outage at LaGuardia Airport.

In a tweet at about 10:30 p.m., airport officials reported partial flight operations.

"Many flights are departing, some are not. Please check flight status with carrier," the tweet said.

Multiple television news reports said

passengers on planes approaching the airport said LaGuardia Airport buildings were in the dark.

At 11 p.m., the airport said in a tweet that the power was "operational" at all terminals.

The NYPD advised residents to avoid the area of 20th Avenue and 31st Street where the power plant is located.

"The lights you have seen throughout the city appear to have been from a transformer explosion at a Con Ed facility in Queens," the NYPD said in a tweet just before 10 p.m. Thursday. "The fire is under control, will update as more info becomes available."

In a tweet, NYPD Chief of Department Terence Monahan said there were no injuries.

Monthly South Asian B2B Networking event Launched

New York South Asian Chamber of Commerce (NYSACOC) launches monthly business to business networking event with a kickoff event in Hicksville NY., Dec 4th, 2018

NEW YORK (TIP): NYSACOC launched a monthly Business to Business Networking event in Hicksville in an effort to strengthen the South Asian Business community in NY. Town of Oyster bay Deputy Supervisor Mr Gregory Carman along with Deputy Commissioner of Planning and Development connected with local business owners and made a promise to help the business owners in the Town succeed.

The event was attended by over 120 business professionals and govt. officials and was held and sponsored by Cheers Bar & Grill of Hicksville.

President of Chamber Dilip Chauhan said "Networking is not about just connecting people. It's about connecting people with Passion for community, people with ideas, and people with opportunities." he also added that chamber will help our community by helping new business owners with difficulty in opening business and working together with bringing Government and prospective entrepreneurs and also helping minority and women-based business to grow in government contracting opportunities.

Also Chamber will allow entrepreneurs to connect with other business owners and successful entrepreneurs, as well as mentors who will provide their valuable time to help new businesses and businesses established already to help them grow and provide some tips of successful business and future vision



NYSACOC Officials -Dr. Sheetal Desai, Farrah Vaswani, Nadia Parvez, Paresh Shah, Mehak Mahmood, Nehal Trivedi, Dilip Chauhan President of Chamber, Shan Shaheen Chairman of BOD, Junaid Bawney, Harry Malhotra, Jose Jacob and Zeb Pirzada.

Chairman of NYSACOC Shan Shaheen said " We are here for you, we are here to help you, educate you and advocate for you."

About New York South Asian Chamber of Commerce

New York South Asian Chamber of Commerce (NYSACOC) mission is to advance and promote the economic growth that open the government and business resources to South Asian business owners in New York. We will advocate their issues with respective government agencies, along with providing technical and educational support to South Asian American businesses by building a relationship between local community organizations, govt. agencies, community leaders and

South Asian businesses that rests on a solid foundation. Such a foundation that rests on respect for each other's cultures and values; and overall acceptance of each other's legitimate needs, concerns, interests, and objectives.

Officials of Chambers are:

Dilip Chauhan -President, Shan Shaheen- Chairman, Junaid Bawany Senior Vice President, Harry Malhotra Deputy Chairman BOD, Jose Jacob -Vice President, Board of Directors are Rizwan Qureshi , Nehal Trivedi, Mehak Mahmood, Nadia Pervez, Paresh Shah, Satnam Singh Parhar, Amita Karwal, Farrah Vaswani, Aurangzeb Pirzada, Seni Popat, Sheetal Desai and Raj Shah.

(Press Release)



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Being a good neighbor

India must shed its zero-sum style foreign policy-making, and work towards South Asian integration



By Happymon Jacob

“Whichever way one looks at it, India's neighbourhood policy is at a critical juncture: while its past policies have ensured a steady decline in its influence and goodwill in the region, the persistent absence of a coherent and well-planned regional policy will most definitely ensure that it eventually slips out of India's sphere of influence. India's foreign policy planners therefore need to reimagine the country's neighbourhood policy before it is too late.”

“The Narendra Modi government's neighbourhood policy began exceptionally well with Mr. Modi reaching out to the regional capitals and making grand foreign policy commitments. But almost immediately, it seemed to lose a sense of diplomatic balance, for instance, when it tried to interfere with the Constitution-making process in Nepal and was accused of trying to influence electoral outcomes in Sri Lanka. While India's refugee policy went against its own traditional practices, it was found severely wanting on the Rohingya question, and seemed clueless on how to deal with the political crisis in the Maldives. Despite their characteristic bravado and grandstanding, the BJP government's foreign policy mandarins looked out of their depth”, says the author.

If South Asia is one of the world's least integrated regions, India is one of the world's least regionally-integrated major powers. While there indeed are structural impediments (posed by both India and its neighbours) in fostering regional integration, the most significant handicap is New Delhi's ideational disinclination towards its neighbourhood. Successive regimes have considered the neighbourhood as an irritant and challenge, not an opportunity. Seldom have India's policies displayed a sense of 'belonging to the region or a desire to work with the neighbourhood for greater integration and cooperation. Today, we have become even more transactional, impatient and small-minded towards our neighbourhood which has, as a result, restricted our space for maneuver in the regional geopolitical scheme of things.

AT A CRITICAL JUNCTURE: Whichever way one looks at it, India's neighbourhood policy is at a critical juncture: while its past policies have ensured a steady decline in its influence and goodwill in the region, the persistent absence of a coherent and well-planned regional policy will most definitely ensure that it eventually slips out of India's sphere of influence. India's foreign policy planners therefore need to reimagine the country's neighbourhood policy before it is too late.

The Narendra Modi government's neighbourhood policy began exceptionally well with Mr. Modi reaching out to the regional capitals and making grand foreign policy commitments. But almost immediately, it seemed to lose a sense of diplomatic balance, for instance, when it tried to interfere with the Constitution-making process in Nepal and was accused of trying to influence electoral outcomes in Sri Lanka. While India's refugee policy went against its own traditional practices, it was found severely wanting on the Rohingya question, and seemed clueless on how to deal with the political crisis in the Maldives. Despite their characteristic bravado and grandstanding, the BJP government's foreign policy mandarins looked out of their depth.

While it is true that 2018 seems to have brought some good news from the regional capitals, it has less to do with our diplomatic finesse than the natural course of events there. The arrival of an India-friendly Ibrahim Mohamed Solih regime in Male has brought much cheer, and the return of Ranil Wickremesinghe as Sri Lankan Prime Minister is to India's advantage too. Nepal has reached out to India to put an end to the acrimony that persisted through 2015 to 2017. Bhutan, Myanmar and Bangladesh are also positively disposed towards India, though the relationship with Pakistan continues to be testy and directionless. What this then means is that New



Delhi has a real opportunity today to recalibrate its neighbourhood relations.

LESSONS FROM THE PAST: First, let's briefly examine what should not be done in dealing with a sensitive neighbourhood. For one, India must shed its aggression and deal with tricky situations with far more diplomatic subtlety and finesse. The manner in which it weighed down on Nepal in 2015 during the Constitution-making process is an example of how not to influence outcomes. The ability of diplomacy lies in subtly persuading the smaller neighbor to accept an argument rather than forcing it to, which is bound to backfire.

Second, it must be kept in mind that meddling in the domestic politics of neighbor countries is a recipe for disaster, even when invited to do so by one political faction or another. Preferring one faction or regime over another is unwise in the longer term. Take the example of incumbent Sri Lankan President Maithripala Sirisena. There was a great deal of cheer in New Delhi when he took office in January 2015 (with some saying India helped him cobble together a winnable coalition) after defeating Mahinda Rajapaksa, considered less well disposed toward India. However, Mr. Sirisena's political transformation was quick, as were India's fortunes in Colombo, at least temporarily.

Third, New Delhi must not fail to follow up on its promises to its neighbours. It has a terrible track record in this regard.

Fourth, there is no point in competing with China where China is at an advantage vis-à-vis India. This is especially true of regional infrastructure projects. India simply does not have the political, material or financial wherewithal to outdo China in building infrastructure. Hence India must invest where China falls short, especially at the level of institution-building and the use of soft power. However, even in those areas China seems to be forging ahead. India must therefore invest a great deal more in soft power promotion (and not the Hindutva kind of outreach). To begin with, India could expand the scope and work of the South Asian University (SAU), including by providing a proper campus (instead of allowing it to function out of a hotel building) and ensuring that its students get research visas to

India without much hassle. If properly utilized, the SAU can become a point for regional integration.

LOOKING FOR CONVERGENCE: Finally, while reimagining its neighbourhood policy, New Delhi must also look for convergence of interests with China in the Southern Asian region spanning from Afghanistan to Nepal to Sri Lanka. There are several possible areas of convergence, including counter terrorism, regional trade and infrastructure development. China and India's engagement of the South Asian region needn't be based on zero-sum calculations. For example, any non-military infrastructure constructed by China in the region can also be beneficial to India while it trades with those countries.

A road or a rail line built by China in Bangladesh or Nepal can be used by India in trading with those countries.

Going forward, New Delhi must invest in three major policy areas. There needs to be better regional trading arrangements. The reason why South Asia is the least integrated region in the world is because the economic linkages are shockingly weak among the countries of the region. The lead to correct this must be taken by India even if this means offering better terms of trade for the smaller neighbours. While it is true that long 'sensitive lists' maintained by South Asian countries are a major impediment in the implementation of SAFTA, or the South Asian Free Trade Area, India could do a lot more to persuade them to reduce the items on such lists. Second, several of India's border States have the capacity to engage in trading arrangements with neighboring countries. This should be made easier by the government by way of constructing border infrastructure and easing restrictions on such border trade.

Resurrect SAARC

Second, India prefers bilateral engagements in the region rather than deal with neighbours on multilateral forums. However, there is only so much that can be gained from bilateral arrangements, and there should be more attempts at forging multilateral arrangements, including by resurrecting the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

Third, India must have a coherent and long-term vision for the neighbourhood devoid of empty rhetoric and spectacular visits without follow up. We must ask ourselves, as the biggest country in the South Asian neighbourhood, what kind of a region do we want to be situated in, and work towards enabling that.

(The author is an associate professor at the Jawaharlal Nehru University and the author of 'The Line of Control: Travelling with the Indian and Pakistani Armies')

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Robert Mueller is the most unknowable man in Washington



By Roxanne Roberts

“
Bob Mueller is doing exactly the right thing by simply focusing on this investigation and trying to determine the truth,” says Panetta. “I don’t know what the final result is going to be, but I have a sense that whatever that final report shows that people are going to thank Bob Mueller for the way he handled this.”

“More than anything, silence has come to define Mueller. He’s become a meme, a cartoon superhero or supervillain, more powerful with every word he does not say”.

Special counsel Robert Swan Mueller III is the second-most famous man in Washington. Time Magazine just ranked him No. 3 on their Person of the Year list, after crusading journalists and President Trump. It is impossible to spend a day in this town without hearing or reading Mueller’s name. He will go down in history, for better or worse, as one of the pivotal figures of the Trump era.

All this for a man who seldom speaks and is rarely seen. He is omnipresent and absent, inescapable but elusive, the invisible yang to Trump’s gold-plated yin.

“Mueller’s silence has invited noisy speculation from partisans,” writes Time. “To critics on the right, he is an overzealous prosecutor drunk on power and roaming beyond his mandate in a bid to drum Trump out of office. To liberals, he is a crusading hero who won’t quit until he brings the President to justice. The public narrative of Mueller’s investigation this year has often described its central character more as myth than man.”

Such is the peculiar nature of Washington that a powerful man who shuns the spotlight should become an object of fascination, and the specific character of Mueller - an old-school WASP indifferent to entreaties for speeches, interviews and photo-ops. More people have seen Robert De Niro playing Mueller on “Saturday Night Live” than have seen the special counsel himself.

“I always joke that Bob Mueller has turned down more interview requests in his career than most people in Washington ever get in the first place,” says Garrett Graff, author of “The Threat Matrix: Inside Robert Mueller’s FBI and the War on Global Terror” and Mueller’s de facto biographer. “Contrary to every single thing that the president tweets today, Mueller is and always has been probably the most apolitical nonpartisan person in the city. He does everything that he can to avoid the public spotlight and anything even slightly resembling politicking.”

Mueller is content to be known and respected within a very small circle of close friends and colleagues. That’s rare in a town filled with former high school class presidents with enough egos to “float battleships,” as former senator Alan Simpson put it. Politicians love cameras - and Twitter feeds, Instagram and more - but Mueller’s only public statement as special counsel came on May 17, 2017, the day he was appointed: “I accept this responsibility and will discharge it to the best of my ability.”

More than anything, silence has come to define Mueller. He’s become a meme, a cartoon superhero or supervillain, more powerful with every word he does not say.

“Like all the FBI directors I have known, including myself, Bob is not about to try his case or run his evidence by the court of public opinion,” says William Webster, the only man to head both the FBI and the CIA. “That’s not how our FBI works. It’s not how Bob Mueller works. It might make for good tv ratings, but it leaves too much open for misunderstanding and, in my opinion, creates a circus atmosphere around critically important cases.”

Kenneth W. Starr, the independent counsel investigating President Bill Clinton, had a different approach: He spoke to reporters during his five years in that job in hopes it would help Americans better understand the reasons for the investigation.



Mueller. Mueller. Mueller. Mueller. Mueller. Mueller. Everywhere, at any hour, it's Mueller time.

“Relationships between prosecutors and the press are inherently difficult and sensitive,” he says. “A federal prosecutor wields important powers and thus should always be held accountable by the American people. That accountability carries with it, in my view, a role for providing public information .??. without transgressing important limitations - especially the protection of grand jury secrecy.”

Mueller, says Starr, may have been chastened by former FBI director James B. Comey’s “inappropriate public relations approach” and wants the charging documents to speak for themselves. “All things considered, I think he has followed a wise strategy, albeit at the expense of a more complete public understanding of his important work.”

Leon Panetta, former White House chief of staff and head of the CIA, says there’s another reason for Mueller’s silence: He doesn’t want to give President Trump any ammunition that could compromise the case. “He really feels that the integrity of the investigation has to be protected and not allow the president to undermine it.”

Mueller is not instinctively somebody who plays the political game, says Panetta, who has known the prosecutor for years. “He didn’t even particularly like to testify before Congress, but he knew that he had to do it. He really thought that those who were out there in the press were only undercutting their position rather than strengthening it.”

In fact, Mueller - by temperament and professional experience - has always preferred to be judged by his deeds, not his words. He grew up in Princeton, a childhood of privilege and private boarding schools, where self-aggrandizement and promotion were considered poor form. His stints as a Marine platoon leader during the Vietnam War and as a federal prosecutor emphasized teamwork rather than any individual effort. During his 12-year tenure as head of the FBI, he rarely appeared at public events and turned down virtually all the A-list invitations that came with that title.

During his trip to the Capitol to brief Congress in June 2017 - one month after becoming special counsel - Mueller and his team navigated back hallways and stairwells to avoid the media. There have been only three widely circulated sightings in the wild since then: One photo of Mueller standing on a street corner in March, one in July with Mueller and Donald Trump Jr. both waiting to catch a flight at Gate 35X at Reagan National Airport and one of Mueller and his wife in September at the Genius Bar in Georgetown’s Apple store, where they were getting help with a laptop.

The dearth of images led to this plea by Slate staff writer Heather Schwedel earlier

this year: “Why are we clamoring for new Mueller pics like paparazzi stalking Jennifer Aniston? Because every time his investigation into Russia’s interference in the 2016 presidential election makes news - which is a lot these days - sites like Slate must use the same photos of Mueller we’ve been using since this past summer .??. Our nation’s poor photo editors are stuck with a cache of boring, already-used shots of one of the most newsworthy figures of our political moment.”

Who is Robert Mueller?

By now, it goes without saying that Mueller and his prosecutors run the tightest ship in Washington. No interviews, no leaks, no whispers, no jokes, no nuthin’. In August, members of his team were spotted by the press waiting for a Shake Shack delivery at an Alexandria hotel during Paul Manafort’s trial. Shake Shack, huh? joked a reporter. Peter Carr, Mueller’s spokesman, would not even confirm the order.

Mueller rarely ventures outside his temporary office in a nondescript federal building. Even in his most public role before this, as head of the FBI, Mueller only appeared in public when it was important to the bureau. Most photos of him are from testimony to the Senate several years ago. His last speaking appearance (announced before he was named special counsel) was in May 2017 at the graduation of his granddaughter from a small boarding school in Massachusetts.

“One of the things that I think is important in understanding him is understanding the perspective that he brings to this job,” says Graff. “If you got him in a moment of candor, he would say that this is no more than the third-hardest job that he has ever had after the Marines in Vietnam and after being FBI director in the wake of 9/11. In that sense, the photo of him at the Apple Store is indicative of a lot: He’s just continuing to lead his life. His life has always been under the radar and non-showy, and that’s exactly how he has comported himself as special counsel.”

Mueller’s private life is even more circumspect. It is possible, after following the bread crumbs of his biography, to determine his comings and goings. He lives in a gated community in Georgetown with his wife of 52 years, Ann. They have two daughters, Melissa and Cynthia, seen only when they attended his 2001 confirmation hearing as head of the FBI. The couple regularly attends services at an Episcopal church in downtown Washington. They both play golf, although Ann’s the better golfer of the two.

And they have a weekly dinner date, usually at their favorite Italian restaurant a few miles from their home. The Muellers have been regulars for years, typically sitting unnoticed behind the bar in the back of the room. How, in this age of smartphones and cameras, does Mueller pull that off? Slip in a side door? The owner, as did everyone contacted for this article, declined to comment.

In fact, virtually everyone within Mueller’s orbit refused to talk about him. “I’ll pass along your request, but she never returns calls about Mueller,” explained the assistant of a lawyer who worked for him many years ago. “The people that he has surrounded himself with throughout his career are temperamentally very like him,” explains Graff.

contd on page 32

3G, 4G services shut down in Bangladesh ahead of elections

DHAKA (TIP): Hours before election campaigning in Bangladesh comes to a close, 3G and 4G services were shut down on mobile phones across the country as part of what was seen as enhanced security measures.

Elections will be held on December 30 in Bangladesh, where the ruling Awami League party, led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, is facing an anti-incumbency challenge from the Jatiyo Oikyo Front, an Opposition alliance led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party — whose leader Khaleda Zia is in jail on corruption charges.

Late on Dec 27, Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) asked all mobile network operators to block their 3G and 4G services across the country instantly. Only 2G services (both voice and data) will remain active. The order will be in place until further instructions are given. Earlier on Dec 27, Awami League president and Bangladesh PM Hasina urged all party leaders and activists to guard polling centres across the country.

“You’ve to guard every polling centre so that they (the BNP-Jamaat alliance) can’t conduct terrorist activities, because they haven’t changed their character... They believe in militancy and terrorism,” she said.

Calling upon all to stage a vote revolution, Jatiyo Oikyo Front chief Kamal Hossain said on Thursday, “We won in the past; we’ll achieve victory this time, too. December 30 will be another Victory Day after December 16,” he said at a press conference. Bangladesh celebrates Victory Day on December 16 to commemorate victory over Pakistani forces in the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War;

Meanwhile, journalists covering the December 30 national election will be able to use motorcycles, the Election Commission announced. The EC withdrew the ban on motorcycles a week after imposing it, following severe criticism from journalists. (PTI)

Indonesia raises alert, widens danger zone around volcano

CARITA (TIP): Indonesia raised the danger level for an island volcano that triggered a tsunami on the weekend, killing at least 430 people in Sumatra and Java, and widened its no-go zone.

The country’s volcanology agency on Dec 27 increased the Anak Krakatau volcano’s alert status to the second-highest and more than doubled the exclusion zoneto a 5-kilometer (3-mile) radius. The eruption on Saturday evening caused part of the island in the Sunda Strait to collapse into the sea, apparently generating tsunami waves of more than 2 meters (6 1/2 feet). Most tsunamis are caused by earthquakes.

The government has warned communities in the strait to stay a kilometer (less than a mile) away from the coastline because of the risk of another tsunami triggered by Anak Krakatau’s eruptions. A navy vessel was expected to pass by the island, which could give scientists more information about the risks of a second collapse.

“There’s still a chance of a landslide, even under the sea level or on the sea level,” said Rudy Sunendar, head of the Energy Ministry’s Geology Department. “Based on the satellite imagery interpretation, there is collapse of some area of Mount Anak Krakatau,” he told The Associated Press at the volcano’s monitoring post.

Saturday’s disaster struck without warning, surprising people in a country that regularly suffers landslides, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. No earthquake shook the ground beforehand, and the waves surged inland at night on a holiday weekend while people were enjoying concerts and other beachside activities.

Indonesia’s tsunami warning system relies on land seismometers and buoys connected to tidal gauges and is not equipped to detect underwater landslides. The system, in any



case, has not operated for years because the buoys have been vandalized or not maintained because of low funding.

Heavy rains and high seas have hampered the search for victims. Some bodies were found at sea and at least 159 people are missing.

On Dec 27, residents of badly affected Banten province on Java island were searching through the debris of destroyed or damaged homes for anything salvageable.

“I’ve lost everything I have, my house and all belongings inside it,” said farmer Muhamad Sarta.

“I just hope for some help from the government,” he said. “Hopefully there will be some repairs. I have nowhere to go. I have no money. Whatever I had was lost in the water.”

Radar data from satellites, converted into images, shows Anak Krakatau shrunk dramatically following Saturday’s eruption.

Satellite photos aren’t available because of

cloud cover but radar images from a Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency satellite taken before and after the eruption show the volcano’s southwestern flank has disappeared.

JAXA’s post-eruption image shows concentric waves radiating from the island, which experts say is caused by its ongoing eruptions.

Dave Petley, head of research and innovation at Sheffield University who analyzed similar images from a European Space Agency satellite, said they support the theory that a landslide, most of it undersea, caused the tsunami.

“The challenge now is to interpret what might be happening on the volcano, and what might happen next,” he wrote in a blog.

Anak Krakatau, which means Child of Krakatau, is the offspring of the infamous Krakatau volcano that affected the global climate with a massive eruption in 1883. (AP)

Pak says Kartarpur corridor ‘high point of diplomacy’ for Imran Khan govt



ISLAMABAD (TIP): Pakistan on Dec 27 described the Kartarpur corridor as the “high point of diplomacy” for the Imran Khan government while admitted that there was “no progress” on the contentious issues with India. Foreign Office spokesperson Mohammad Faisal also said that the Kashmir issue remained “on top of Pakistan’s priority”.

At the weekly media briefing here, Faisal said that the Kartarpur

corridor was the “high point of diplomacy for Pakistan’s new government, along with Afghan (peace) developments.” He said Prime Minister Khan in a letter to his Indian counterpart Narendra Modi in September gave a detailed roadmap to move forward but New Delhi failed to reciprocate.

Faisal said that despite India’s refusal to start a dialogue, Pakistan went ahead with the groundbreaking of the Kartarpur corridor. Prime Minister Khan in November laid the foundation stone for the corridor linking Gurdwara Darbar Sahib in Pakistan’s Kartarpur — the final resting place of Sikh faith’s founder Guru Nanak Dev — to Dera Baba Nanak shrine in India’s Gurdaspur district to facilitate visa-free movement of Indian Sikh pilgrims.

“It was very positively received all around the world, especially by the Sikh community. We are actively working to develop infrastructures at Kartarpur,” Faisal said.

Faisal said, however, there was “no progress” on contentious issues with India and the Kartarpur corridor was the only positive development. “We were not successful...we made an effort but they were not reciprocating. You can say it was not successful,” the spokesman said.

Condemning the violence in Kashmir, he said Pakistan would “observe Kashmir Solidary on February 5, 2019 in London where the foreign minister will be present.” Faisal said 341 Pakistani prisoners were in India, including 154 civil prisoners and 187 fishermen. He said 12 civil and 33 fishermen have completed their jail terms and Pakistan is working to bring them back. To a question about India’s role in the Afghan peace process, Faisal said, “India has no role in this”. Faisal said Pakistan wanted to develop peaceful ties with all neighbours and Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi’s four-nation visit this week was to explore the possibility of a win-win framework for regional connectivity, economic development with the objective economic growth and prosperity. (PTI)

Afghanistan postpones presidential election

KABUL (TIP): Afghanistan’s presidential election, initially scheduled for April, will be postponed for several months to allow time to fix technical problems that surfaced during October’s parliamentary elections, officials said December 26.

More time is needed to verify voter lists and train staff on a biometric identification system designed to reduce fraud, said Abdul Aziz Ibrahim, deputy spokesman for the Independent Election Commission.

Parliamentary elections were fraught with delays after the few staff trained on the biometric system did not show up at the polling booths and countless registered voters could not find their names on voter lists. Polling had to continue for a second day after hundreds of polling stations opened several hours late. Several legal complaints have been filed to challenge the results. No new date for the presidential election has yet been set.

The last presidential election, held in 2014, was mired in controversy and widespread allegations of fraud.

The two leading candidates, Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, fought a tight race that went to a second vote. But before the results of the runoff could be announced, Abdullah alleged massive vote fraud and warned of widespread protests.

John Kerry, the then US secretary of state, interceded and helped cobble together a unity government and convinced the election commission to hold off on announcing the results of the runoff, which Ghani seemed poised to win.

Ghani was named president and Abdullah was given a newly created title of Chief Executive. The arrangement was intended to last only two years but has continued up to the present, resulting in a government marked by deep divisions that has struggled to combat a resurgent Taliban.

The postponement of the election could give more time for U.S. efforts to end the 17-year war. US peace envoy Zalmay Khalilzad has crisscrossed the region several times since his appointment in September, reportedly meeting with the Taliban on several occasions.

Khalilzad has said he would like to see the Taliban and the Afghan government devise a “roadmap” before the April vote. Both sides have said that was an unrealistic deadline. (AP)



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Harsh Vardhan Shringla appointed Ambassador of India to the US



1984-batch Indian Foreign Service career diplomat Harsh Vardhan Shringla succeeds Navtej Sarna who has retired

WASHINGTON (TIP): Harsh Vardhan Shringla, presently High Commissioner to the People's Republic of Bangladesh has been appointed as the next Ambassador of India to the United States of America. The 1984-batch Indian Foreign Service diplomat succeeds Navtej Sarna.

Harsh Vardhan Shringla's diplomatic career spans over 30 years in which he has held various positions in New Delhi and in Indian missions in Paris, Hanoi and Tel Aviv. Before his assignment in Bangladesh, he served as Ambassador of India to the Kingdom of Thailand. He has also served in France (UNESCO); USA (UN, New York); Vietnam (Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City); Israel and South Africa (Durban).

Shringla has served in the Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi as Joint Secretary (Director General) responsible for Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and the Maldives. He has also headed the United Nations Political and SAARC Divisions in the Ministry. Earlier, he served as Director of the Northern Division dealing with Nepal and Bhutan and as Deputy Secretary of the Europe West Division.

Harsh Vardhan Shringla has graduated from St. Stephen's College, Delhi University and has worked in the Corporate and Public Sectors in India prior to joining the Indian Foreign Service. He has pursued a course in conflict prevention in Columbia University, New York, a subject on which he has published an international paper. He has also published Papers on economic diplomacy and the Indian diaspora.

Shringla is expected to take up the assignment shortly, the Ministry of External Affairs said in a press release.

Former Consul General of India in New York, Riva Ganguly Das, presently Director General of Indian Council for Cultural Relations, has been appointed as new High Commissioner to Bangladesh.

Indian American Democrat Ro Khanna supports Trump on troops withdrawal

WASHINGTON (TIP): Indian American Democrat Ro Khanna, a fierce critic of Donald Trump, has come out in support of the President's decision to pullout US troops from Syria and Afghanistan, saying his party colleagues should not pile on without offering an alternative vision.

The 42-year-old Congressman, who represents Silicon Valley, has surprised many by coming out in strong support of president's decision to withdraw American troops from Syria and his reported plans to bring back nearly half of the 15,000 of his troops from war-ravaged Afghanistan.

Khanna said that he is doing so in the national interest.

"A few days ago, I was with Trump as he signed one of my bills. I said Mr President, China has not been in a war since 1979. If we want to win the race against them, we should not get bogged down in war. He nodded and then observed that they have enriched themselves without firing a shot," Khanna wrote.

Khanna, who is on the Armed Services Committee, was re-elected for the second term in the November mid-term elections.

"President Trump is receiving an onslaught



Khanna said that he is doing so in the national interest

of criticism for his decision to withdraw troops from Syria and Afghanistan. Congressional Democrats should not pile on without offering an alternative vision," he wrote. He said that though the president's desire on troops withdrawal should be

applauded, but he should be challenged to assemble a team that does so with better planning.

"We should applaud the president's desire to put an end to these interventions but should challenge him to assemble a team that does so with better planning and diplomacy. We should articulate a foreign policy doctrine of responsible withdrawal that prioritizes restraint and human rights," he said.

Khanna said that Trump's instincts as a candidate of ending the war and bringing troops home were spot-on.

"There should be a short timeline for bringing home our troops to allow for a smooth transition. We should engage in direct talks with the Taliban and seek a negotiated settlement, involving regional actors such as Pakistan, Iran, Russia, China and India," Khanna said. However, his open support and praise of Trump has angered his own party colleagues. The entire Democratic leadership has rallied behind the outgoing Defense Secretary James Mattis for his opposition to Trump's move on Syria and Afghanistan.

The decision to withdraw troops from Afghanistan has not been officially announced yet.

The US-India Chamber of Commerce organizes Seminar on Economic Reforms and Fresh Strides in US India Relations



Ms Neeta Bhushan, Consul General of India, Chicago, Dr. Ajit Pant, Dr. Prakasam Tata, Ms. Nicki Anderson, President/CEO, Naperville Area Chamber of Commerce, Mr. Amit Jhingran, CEO, State Bank of India, Chicago, Commissioner Frank Avila, Commissioner, MWRD with invited guests

CHICAGO, IL (TIP): The US India Chamber of Commerce, Midwest organized its "2018 Annual Gala Dinner" on December 07, 2018 at Ashyana Banquets, Downers Grove, Illinois. The theme of the event was "The New India-Recent Economic Reforms and Fresh Strides in US India Relations". The event was graced by Ms. Neeta Bhushan, Consul General of India, Ms. Nicki Anderson, President/CEO, Naperville Area Chamber of Commerce, Mr. Amit Jhingran, CEO, State Bank of India, Chicago, Commissioner Frank Avila, Commissioner, MWRD. The event was also attended by distinguished guests Pastor Larry Bullock, CEO, US Minority Contractors Association, Ms. Malini Vaidyanathan, Manager Midwest, Air India and Dr. Bharat Barai a prominent Physician and Indian Community Leader from Indiana and many other industry leaders, entrepreneurs, business owners and professionals.

Mr Porus Dadabhoy made the initial welcome and invited the gathering to take their seats and invited Dr. Ajit Pant, President of the Chamber to address the gathering.

In his address Dr. Ajit Pant gave a brief description of the activities of the Chamber and explained the "Future Vision of the Chamber". He also discussed the chosen theme and mentioned that the recent far reaching economic changes made in India as well as the latest progress in US India relations needed to be discussed so as to create positive awareness among the Indo American Community.

Consul General of India Ms Neeta Bhushan spoke on the topic Transforming India. She mentioned that over the last 4 and half years the Government of Prime Minister Modi had accelerated the reform process and brought a number of changes which had resulted in world class infrastructure, introduction of bullet trains, up gradation of urban as well as rural connectivity, ports, airports etc. The make in India policy had led to increased jobs for the youth. The policies of startup India, Mudra scheme had spurred greater entrepreneurial spirit as well as economic activity in the country. IMF had described India as an Elephant that has started to run. The growth rate of 7.2 percent was amongst the highest in the world.

The rating agency Moody has enhanced its rating from Stable to positive. In terms of Ease of doing business India ranked 77 and could soon be in the top 50. Reforms such as Goods and services tax, Bankruptcy and Insolvency code had been welcomed by the companies in a big way. It was easier for companies to get construction permits pay taxes and trade across borders. Access to sanitation has increased to over 90 percent. Ayushman Bharat or the Pradhan Mantri arogya yojna launched in sept 2018 has already seen a large number of beneficiaries. Atal pension Yojana.

(Read full story on www.theindianpanorama.news)

President Trump is destabilizing the economy, says Krishnamoorthi



Krishnamoorthi pledged President Trump to end the shutdown

WASHINGTON (TIP): Indian American Congressman Raja Krishnamoorthi, representing Illinois' 8th District, heavily criticized President Donald Trump in response to new developments threatening the nation's and Illinois' economies as a result of the government shutdown predicated on President Trump's demand for a border wall that was supposed to be paid for by Mexico in the first place:

"President Trump is destabilizing and hobbling an already wobbly economy to fulfil only half of a campaign pledge he has made since 2015. After abandoning a bipartisan budget compromise the Senate passed last week unanimously, the President has shut down the federal government to appeal to a shrinking minority of Americans and right-wing talk show personalities. Instead of having Mexico pay for the border wall as the President has promised since 2015, he is asking for as much as \$5 billion from taxpayers for a wall that will not accomplish its stated goal and which most Americans do not want.

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In a first, 4 South Asian Americans appointed chiefs of staff on Capitol Hill

WASHINGTON, D.C. (TIP): At first there were none, and now there are four. The 116th U.S. Congress, scheduled to convene on Jan. 3, will have four South Asian and Indian-American chiefs of staff in U.S. lawmakers' offices in Washington, D.C., according to a report by Aziz Hanifa in India Abroad.

These unprecedented number of appointments, though made only by the progressives among the Democrats, have been hailed as a boon to diversity in the legislative branch.

Perhaps the most significant of them all was the recent appointment of Rohini Kosoglu as the new chief of staff to Kamala Devi Harris, the first Indian-American U.S. Senator, who represents California and is mulling a run for the presidency in 2020.

Kosoglu, who is Sri Lankan American, currently deputy chief of staff, will replace Harris' longtime aide Nathan Barankin who is leaving to run Harris's Fearless for the People PAC (Political Action Committee), a move that signals preparations for her launch of a presidential bid.

Announcing Kosoglu's elevation as chief of staff, Harris said, "Rohini has been an invaluable leader on our team as we've fought for our shared values and the best of who we are as a country during these first two years."

Kosoglu, who has been a Congressional staffer for over a decade in the U.S. Senate and prior to joining Harris when she was elected to the Senate in 2016, served as policy director and senior adviser to Sen. Michael Bennet (D-Colo.) and legislative aide to Sen. Debbie Stabenow (D-Mich), said, she is "proud to continue to work alongside Sen. Harris as we fight to protect health care and civil rights, and economic opportunity for working families."

An alumna of the University of Michigan and the George Washington University, Kosoglu now becomes the only Asian American currently to serve as a U.S. Senator's chief of staff.

Meanwhile, Ven Neralla, Congresswoman Pramila Jayapal's deputy chief of staff is joining Congressman-elect Andy Levin as the Michigan Democrat's chief of staff and on Dec. 3, Jayapal announced that she had named former senior Obama administration official Gautam Raghavan, currently executive director of the Indian American Impact Project & Fund, as her new chief of staff.

Raghavan, who also currently serves as an advisor to the Biden Foundation, served as vice president of policy for the Gill Foundation, the nation's oldest funder of LGBTQ Civil Rights Advocacy.

From 2011 to 2014, Raghavan served as President Barack Obama's liaison to the LGBTQ community as well as the Asian American & Pacific Islander community, and from 2009 to 2011, as Acting White House Liaison for the U.S. Department of Defense and as Outreach Lead for the Pentagon's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" Working Group.

The Honolulu, Hawaii-born and raised Neralla, before coming back to Capitol Hill to work for Jayapal in 2017, served for eight years as a political appointee in the Obama administration, most recently as senior advisor for House Appropriations and Global Health at the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

He previously served as Director of Congressional Affairs for the Research, Education, and Economics bureau and the National Institute for Food and Agriculture at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

Neralla also spent eight years on the Hill as legislative director to Rep. Barbara Lee (D-Calif.) and earlier on the staff of the staff of



From top left, Rohini Kosoglu, new chief of staff to Sen. Kamala Devi Harris; Ven Neralla, new chief of staff to Congressman-elect Andy Levin of Michigan, Gautam Raghavan, chief of staff to Washington Congresswoman Pramila Jayapal and Saikat Chakrabarti, chief of staff to Congresswoman-elect Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York.

Rep. Peter DeFazio (D-Ore.).

The fourth South Asian American chief of staff is Saikat Chakrabarti, a Silicon Valley techie and Harvard University alumnus, who was campaign manager to now Congresswoman-elect Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and comes to D.C. with her to run her office.

Chakrabarti co-founded Mockingbird, an online tool for wireframing websites and web applications and then built up the product team at the payment processor Stripe, before leaving Silicon Valley to jump into the political fray in 2015 as director of organizing for Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders's presidential campaign in 2015-2016.

He then co-founded and served as executive director of Justice Democrats, a political action committee and among the candidates they supported was Ocasio-Cortez, ending up as her campaign manager and being a catalyst in her upset victory over Democratic incumbent Joe Crowley in New York's Queens district.

Moh Sharma, president of the Congressional Asian Pacific American Staff Association, who also recently took over the reins of the South Asian Bar Association, D.C. Chapter, told India Abroad, "It is very exciting to see more AAPI (Asian American and Pacific Islander) and in particular South Asian American chiefs of staff working in the 116th Congress."

Sharma, one of the senior-most Congressional staffers, who is currently a senior policy adviser and the director of outreach and member services for the House Committee on Small Business, noted, "Diversity adds value and it is great to see the South Asian staff in more leadership positions in the 116th Congress."

In an interview with India Abroad, Don Bell, one of the authors of the recent report, 'Racial Diversity Among Top U.S. House Staff,' by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, a D.C.-based think tank, said, "We've seen some notable gains when it comes to senior level positions both in the House and Senate and we certainly commend those members for making diversity and inclusions as a piece of their staffing."

Bell acknowledged that the promotion of Kosoglu "is particularly great," and described it "as a meaningful moment for the Senate, although they've certainly a long way to go in making sure that senior staff in the Senate are truly reflective of all Americans."

He reiterated that "Rohini's appointment for a state as diverse as California by Sen. Harris is certainly an important moment," and also lauded Jayapal, Ocasio-Cortez and Levin for "taking the wonderful step," of appointing Raghavan, Chakrabarti and Neralla as their chiefs of staff.

Bell said, "So far, we've seen more senior hires among Democratic members, but I've also seen some diverse hires among Republican members too. I think people are starting to recognize that it's not enough to have diverse coalitions to win elections - you need people at the table making policy decisions for their communities."

The Joint Center's report had found that although people of color account for 38 percent of the U.S. population, they constitute only 13.76 percent of all top staffers in the House of Representatives, and that of the 329 personal offices of white representatives, only 16 (less than 5 percent) are led by chiefs of staff of color. Six of those work for Democrats; 10 for Republicans.

The report defines top, key or senior staff to include: chiefs of staff, legislative directors, and communications directors in the Washington, D.C. personal offices of House members; chiefs of staff, policy directors, and communications directors in the top four leadership offices of each political party; and staff directors assigned to full committees.

It said in the personal offices of white Democratic lawmakers, fewer than 8 percent of top staff are people of color, even though these offices represent districts that are, on average, more than 37 percent populated by people of color. Just more than 2 percent of white Democratic lawmakers' top staffers are black, the report said.

In the personal offices of white Republican lawmakers in the House, only 3 percent of top staff are people of color, even though these members represent districts that are, on average, 26 percent people of color. Less than 1 percent of these members' top staffers are black, the report said.

It said, nearly three-quarters of House members - 313 - have no top staff of color and that more than one quarter of the House, 114 members, do not have any top staff of color even though they represent districts that have more than 33 percent people of color living there.

The report said: "Hiring top staffers of color is not an act of charity. It is the right thing to do, and it results in better public policy."

Kapil Sharma, an erstwhile Congressional staffer in the 1990's, who was a senior aide to Rep. Frank Pallone (D-N.J.), the founder and co-chair of the Congressional Caucus on India and Indian Americans, and then later went on to work for then Sen. Robert Torricelli (D-N.J.), said, "It's great how we went full circle. In the 90's we had several Indian Americans who were in senior leadership positions."

"We then went through a drought and now we have four," said Sharma, now vice president, government and public affairs for Wipro, North America, said, "The goal should now be to avoid a future drought of members of our community serving in key staff positions in Congress."

Anurima Bhargava, another longtime community activist and former senior Obama administration official who served in the Department of Justice's Civil Rights Division, recently appointed by Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) said, "It is incredible to have these new chiefs of staff - who will shape the agenda and the environment within key Congressional offices - contribute their considerable wisdom and perspective to address the most pressing and difficult challenges to our well-being and democracy."

She said, "We need Congressional and campaign staff - just as we need members of Congress - who bring broad and rich experience and judgment to the political process, and who understand how to build and represent strong and diverse communities."

Harin Contractor, who resurrected the Washington Leadership Program founded by India Abroad founder and publisher Gopal Raju, said, "The fact we are seeing four Desi chiefs of staff and a number of other top staffers of Indian origin hired in the coming Congress is an incredible sign of progress."

Contractor, a WLP alumnus himself, who along with another alumna Nisha Jain, rebooted the program in 2009 after it gone dormant for a few years following Raju's demise, said, "The goal of the Washington Leadership Program is to develop more leaders in the policy/politics space and for these individuals to breakthrough to the highest positions on the Hill is promising."

"Over the last two decades we have seen one or two chiefs from time to time, whether it was Mini Timmaraju, Neil Dhillon, or Rohit Kumar, but for this to happen at once is unprecedented."

Contractor said, "The four members that hired South Asian staffers also represent areas with a high desi population," and added, "We need to ensure this continues and our community needs to be vocal to push Members to hire and promote senior staffers from our community."

"Take Georgia as an example, the 6th and 7th Congressional districts outside Atlanta have some of the largest South Asian populations in the country, but Congressman Bob Woodall, Congressman Price, and Congresswoman Handel never hired a top staffer of South Asian descent."

Contractor said, "I personally hope Congresswoman Lucy McBath and Congressman Woodall do so in the coming year. Far too many Members are okay with hiring South Asian staffers for entry-level or mid-level positions, but not for the positions of influence like chief of staff, legislative director, or communications director, our numbers are few and far between."

"The WLP will continue to identify, train, and build a pipeline of policy and political leaders, but the community needs to push Members to hire talented individuals from our community, so we can ensure we have a voice at the table," he said.

INDIA BANS KHALISTAN LIBERATION FORCE

NEW DELHI (TIP): A year after attacks against RSS leaders and attempts at revival of militancy with support of ISI were traced to the Khalistan Liberation Force (KLF), the Ministry of Home Affairs has now banned it.

In a notification issued on Wednesday, MHA added KLF as the 40th organisation to the banned list which also includes four other Sikh extremist groups - Babbar Khalsa International, Khalistan Commando Force, Khalistan Zindabad Force and International Sikh Youth Federation.

KLF has been banned under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) for committing and promoting various acts of terrorism in India as well as recruitment of youth for terrorist activities in the country.

"The KLF was engaged in killing of innocent persons and police officers, several bombings on civilian targets in India, collection of funds for terror activities through extortion, kidnappings, bank robberies, etc., and assassination attempts of important government functionaries, says the official circular.

According to sources, the National Investigation Agency (NIA) gave detailed recommendations earlier to ban the organisation that came into existence in 1986 with the objective of establishing an independent Khalistan. A five-member KLF module was busted by the Punjab Police which resulted in resolving two cases relating to planting of IEDs in Nabha.

Another KLF module was busted in Gurdaspur and four terror accused arrested for conspiring to disrupt communal harmony in the state by targeting a specific community.

Earlier, on November 7, 2014, Jalandhar police busted a KLF/Khalistan Zindabad Force module of four members and arrested the KLF chief along with legal arms and ammunition.

In its proposal, the NIA claimed that the KLF, revived by now dead Harminder Singh Mintoo in 2010 is being run by UK and Pakistan based terrorists with funding from several countries, including UK, UAE, Pakistan and Australia. The NIA in its charge sheet named some NRIs and British national Jagtar Singh Johal alias Jaggi for conspiring to carry out attacks in India.

Source: The Tribune

Govt mulling farm package ahead of 2019 Lok Sabha polls

NEW DELHI (TIP): Under attack for the agrarian crisis, the government is contemplating several incentives, including a big financial package, to woo farmers ahead of the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, according to sources.

The government's likely announcement of incentives to boost rural income will come following feedback given by BJP leaders and MPs, besides other stakeholders, they added.

Sources said the Agriculture Ministry has prepared a road map and made a presentation to Prime Minister Narendra Modi suggesting both short and long term "sustainable" solutions to various issues that are impacting farmers and causing agricultural distress in the country.

Lok Sabha passes triple talaq bill amid protests

Congress, AIADMK call for deliberation by select committee, walk out before voting

NEW DELHI (TIP): The Lok Sabha on Thursday, December 27 passed The Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Bill, 2018, after a heated debate. The opposition Congress and All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) staged a walkout before the voting.

The two parties through their floor leaders, Mallikarjuna Kharge and P. Venugopal of the AIADMK had earlier opposed the Bill during the debate and asked that it be referred to a Joint Select Committee for consideration rather than be debated and passed. However, Law Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad asked members to pass the Bill citing humanitarian considerations with regard to Muslim women suffering under triple talaq.

The Bill to make the practice of triple talaq among Muslims a penal offence was introduced in the Lok Sabha on December 17 to replace an ordinance issued in September. Under the proposed law, giving instant triple talaq will be illegal and void, and will attract a jail term of three years for the husband. The fresh bill is proposed to supersede an earlier bill passed in the Lok Sabha and pending in the Rajya Sabha.

In the face of strong objections by the opposition, led by leader of the Congress legislative party in the Lok Sabha, Mallikarjuna Kharge, Mr. Prasad in his reply said as many as 477 cases of triple talaq have been reported since January 2017 with over 200 coming after the Supreme Court verdict declaring Talaq-e-Bidat as void. He explained the penal provision in the Bill as a deterrent, stating, "deterrent is also important while combating a crime."

"I am surprised that this House says that triple talaq is wrong but that it wants to keep silent on combating it. When penal provisions were introduced for the Anti-Dowry Act, this House passed such a Bill, penal provisions are there in the Domestic Violence Act as well and this House passed it. So why that objection with regard to this Bill?" asked Mr Prasad.



He said he had incorporated several suggestions made by the opposition during the debate last year on the Bill, including removal of the clause that neighbors of the victim could file a case. "Conditions for bail and mediation have also been added to the Bill as suggested by members," he said.

The Congress' attack during the debate was led by president of its women's wing Sushmita Dev who said the Bill would do nothing to ameliorate the condition of Muslim women other than saddling them with a criminal case.

"This law is not about empowering Muslim women; it is about criminalizing a Muslim man," Ms. Dev said.

N.K. Premachandran of the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) who also moved several amendments said his "strong objection was to the fact that the Bill criminalizes a civil wrong when it is not so among statutes regarding Hindu personal law or even [for] Christians."

Anwar Raajhaa of the AIADMK demanded to know why Muslim men were being singled out for punishment under penal provisions. He also said educational and social backwardness was responsible for the condition of Muslim women far more than triple talaq. "Who will provide maintenance to

the wife if the husband is in jail?" he asked.

'Targeting minorities'

All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) chief Asaduddin Owaisi in an impassioned speech, accused the government of wanting to "go after" Muslim men. "Why have you decriminalized homosexuality and criminalizing triple talaq? Because it would be used against us. Sexual minority got choice in Section 377, then why not religious minorities," Mr Owaisi said. "If your faith is your faith, then my faith should also be my faith. Your (Government) intentions are not clean. You can bring your own law, but we will not forfeit our religion," Mr. Owaisi said.

The government also saw ministerial interjections by Minister for Minority Affairs Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi and Textile Minister Smriti Irani. "There should be fear in the hearts of those who commit this crime, and the tendency to sell fatwas (religious interpretations) on the streets like vegetables should stop. This country runs on the Constitution and not Sharia law," Mr. Naqvi said.

The Bill was passed after the Congress and AIADMK walked out and will now be tabled in the Rajya Sabha. *Source: Agencies*

TIES BETWEEN INDIA AND CHINA BACK ON NORMAL TRACK: REPORT

NEW DELHI (TIP): Ties between India and China have returned to a "normal track" and there have been positive developments like Beijing giving market access to Indian products, but much is yet to be done in addressing the widening trade deficit, official sources said.

Relations between the two countries were severely hit by the 73-day face-off between the Indian and Chinese armies at the strategically sensitive Doklam tri-junction in the Sikkim sector last year.

Sources told news agency Press Trust of India that the political relationship between the two countries not just restored, but heightened in the past one year.

At the same time, they said India was seriously concerned over China's Belt and Road Initiative and the way international norms and standards in giving contracts under the project were being flouted.

The sources also told news agency PTI that India expects China to walk the talk on the issue of giving market access to Indian products. "The positive development is that relations with China have returned to the normal track," said a senior official, while summing up India's diplomatic engagement in 2018.



Calling the Indo-Pacific a major area of India's interest, the sources said that New Delhi was keen to talk about it with

Beijing and the issue was likely to figure regularly in bilateral talks between the two nations.

They said that there was no total unanimity between India and the US on all issues relating to the Indo-Pacific and that New Delhi wants all major powers to be engaged over key matters.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping have held bilateral meetings three times and also had an informal summit in Wuhan this year, which the sources described as "unprecedented".

They said the second informal summit between the leadership of the two countries is likely to be held in the second half of 2019.

On partnerships with leading powers, the sources said India's ties with the US proceeded on a positive track, while "significant trust" has also been built with Russia.

The sources reiterated that the so-called 'China-Pakistan Economic Corridor' or 'CPEC' is a direct challenge to India's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

India has been strongly opposing the so-called 'CPEC', which is part of the Belt and Road Initiative, as it passes through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir.

Over 90% electoral bonds sold are of Rs 10 lakh, Rs 1 cr

BJP gets Rs 210 cr of Rs 222-cr bonds sold in FY18; donors remain anonymous

NEW DELHI (TIP): Notwithstanding the aim to bring in transparency in funding to political parties by giving an alternative to cash donations, the latest data reveals that after six rounds of sale of electoral bonds, donors continue to be anonymous, as the norms allow them to remain secretive.

Sources reveal that as per the data, despite being available in five denominations - Rs1,000, Rs10,000, Rs1 lakh, Rs10 lakh and Rs1 crore - more than 90 per cent of electoral bonds were sold in the top two units, which apparently were purchased by big business houses.

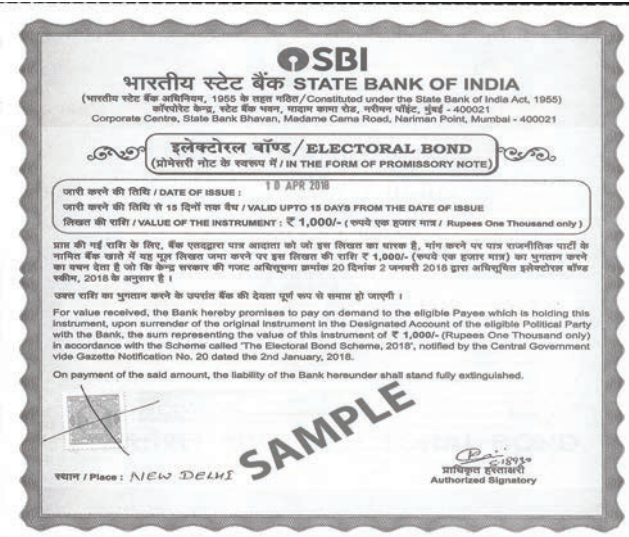
It is also learnt that the total number of bonds sold in six phases were 2,134 of which 2,007 went for higher denominations of Rs10 lakh and Rs1 crore, as they were mostly bought in metros like Mumbai, Hyderabad, Kolkata and the national capital.

Incidentally, for financial year 2017-18, the ruling BJP in its declaration to the Election Commission said it received an income of Rs210 crore from contribution through electoral bonds. Sources said during this period (2017-18) electoral bonds worth Rs 222 crore were sold. Therefore, it is clear from the figures that almost 95 per cent of the total bonds went to the BJP account.

On several occasions, experts and even the poll panel raised the issue of secrecy norm in the electoral bond, saying it will only cement the nexus between political parties and corporate donors.

As the government, while notifying the electoral bond scheme, had claimed it envisaged total clean money and substantial transparency coming into the system of political funding, the Election Commission had raised concerns and had written to the Law Commission in May 2017 over amendments in the Finance Act, 2017, which brought about changes in the Income Tax Act, the Companies Act, 2013, and the Representation of People Act, 1951, to enable the launch of the electoral bonds scheme.

Former Chief Election Commissioner OP Rawat is also



reported to have talked about grey areas with respect to electoral bonds. "Earlier, we had expressed concern regarding transparency and the possibility of shell companies, which can buy electoral bonds," he had said.

Donation process

- Electoral bonds are available in five denominations: Rs 1,000, Rs 10,000, Rs 1 lakh, Rs 10 lakh and Rs 1 crore
- Bonds will not carry the name of the payee and will be valid for 15 days
- Can be used to donate funds to registered parties only
- Can be encashed only through that party's bank account

Denomination Bonds sold

- Rs 1 crore: 950
- Rs10 lakh: 1,057
- Rs 1 lakh: 25
- Rs 10,000: 0
- Rs 1,000: 2

Source: Tribune

SAJJAN KUMAR LIKELY TO SURRENDER BEFORE COURT ON DECEMBER 31

NEW DELHI (TIP): Former Congress leader Sajjan Kumar is likely to surrender before a court here on December 31 to serve the life imprisonment awarded to him by the Delhi High Court in a 1984 anti-Sikh riots case.

"We will comply with the high court's judgment," his counsel Anil Kumar Sharma told PTI.

The counsel said Kumar's appeal in the Supreme Court challenging the high court verdict is not likely to be taken up for hearing before December 31.

The 73-year-old former Congress leader was sentenced to life for the "remainder of his natural life" by the Delhi High Court on December 17 in a 1984 anti-Sikh riots case.

The case relates to killing of five Sikhs in Raj Nagar Part 1 area in Palam Colony in South West Delhi on November 1-2, 1984 and burning down of a gurdwara in Raj Nagar Part 2. Riots had broken out after the assassination of then prime minister Indira Gandhi on October 31, 1984 by her two Sikh bodyguards.

The high court had on December 21 rejected Kumar's plea seeking extension till January 30 to surrender.

The former Congress leader had sought more time to surrender, saying



he had to settle the family affairs related to his children and property and also needed time to file appeal in the Supreme Court against the high court verdict.

Sharma said they had removed the objections in their appeal filed in the apex court but since the court was on vacation till January 1, it was not likely to be taken up for hearing by December 31 and also the chances of mentioning for urgent listing of the appeal were not there. The Supreme Court will open on January 2 after the winter break.

"We have removed the objections and the appeal in the apex court has been numbered. At present, there are no benches in the Supreme Court. Even if we mention the matter for urgent hearing, the registrar will decide

whether it will be heard by the bench. No time is left now," Kumar's counsel said.

He said they were yet to engage a senior counsel who would represent Kumar before the apex court.

The former Congress leader had on December 22 approached the Supreme Court challenging the high court's judgment.

Senior advocate HS Phoolka, who is representing the riots victims, had earlier said that they had already filed a caveat in the apex court to pre-empt any ex-parte hearing in favour of Kumar.

The high court had set aside the trial court's 2010 verdict which had acquitted Kumar in the case. The six accused, including Kumar who was a Member of Parliament at that time, were sent to be tried in 2010.

The high court had also upheld the conviction and varying sentences awarded by the trial court to the other five-- former Congress councillor Balwan Khokhar, retired naval officer Captain Bhagmal, Girdhari Lal and former MLAs Mahender Yadav and Kishan Khokhar.

All six, including Kumar, were directed by the high court to surrender by December 31, and not leave Delhi in the mean time.

Source: PTI

FIRST TIME AFTER 2013 FREEZE, PAKISTAN GETS SPACE AT GUJARAT SUMMIT

NEW DELHI (TIP): For the first time since 2013, business delegations from Pakistan will be attending the biennial Vibrant Gujarat Global Summit scheduled to be held this time from January 18-20, 2019, the organisers confirmed. According to records reviewed by The Indian Express, at least seven delegations from different regions of Pakistan are expected to take part, making it the largest contingent ever from the country at the summit.

They are among the 52 delegations representing commerce and trade bodies from various countries who have confirmed their participation for the Global Conclave of International Chambers, which is one of the events at the summit.

In 2013, a 22-member delegation from Karachi Chamber of Commerce and Industry had arrived for the summit and attended a pre-event buyer-seller meet on January 9-10. However, with bilateral tensions rising following the killing of two Indian soldiers in a ceasefire violation at the Mendhar sector of J&K's Poonch on January 8, the delegation left without attending the main summit on January 12-13.

INDIA SNUBS PAK, SAYS KARTARPUR NO DIPLOMATIC MOVE, BUT LINKED TO FAITH



NEW DELHI (TIP): India on Thursday underscored there was no change in Delhi's approach towards Islamabad and viewed Kartarpur corridor development as one of culture and faith.

Stating that it was PM Narendra Modi who called up Imran Khan to congratulate him on being elected the Pakistan PM, sources said a meeting between External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj and her Pakistan counterpart Shah Mahmood Qureshi was called off after the killing of policemen in J&K as it showed there was no discerning change in Islamabad's approach towards New Delhi. The sources said for India, the corridor was not a diplomatic move but one related to culture and faith. Earlier in the day, Pakistan described the corridor as the "high point of diplomacy" for the Imran Khan government while admitting that there was "no progress" on the contentious issues with India.

Source: The Tribune

BJP sets ball rolling for 2019, appoints in-charge for 17 states

NEW DELHI (TIP): After a rather dismal performance in recent Assembly elections, the BJP on Wednesday set the ball rolling for the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, appointing in-charge for 17 states, including Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Chandigarh, Telangana and the three states it lost to the Congress- Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh. Haryana's Finance Minister Capt Abhimanyu has been give the charge of Chandigarh's one seat and also Punjab, where the BJP normally contest three of the 13 constituencies, leaving the major chunk for ally Akali Dal. Meanwhile, Union minister Thawarchand Gehlot will oversee the affairs of Uttarakhand and its five seats and tested state leader Tirth Singh Rawat Himachal Pradesh's four constituencies. But for key state Uttar Pradesh, which sends as many 80 MPs to the Lok Sabha and where regional parties-Mayawati-led SP and Akhilesh Yadav's SP-are posing a serious threat to the BJP prospects, Amit Shah has sent key lieutenants Govardhan Jhadapia, a Gujarat leader, Dushyant Gautam, a party vice president, and Narottam Mishra from Madhya Pradesh.

Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back From NJSO

By Mabel Pais

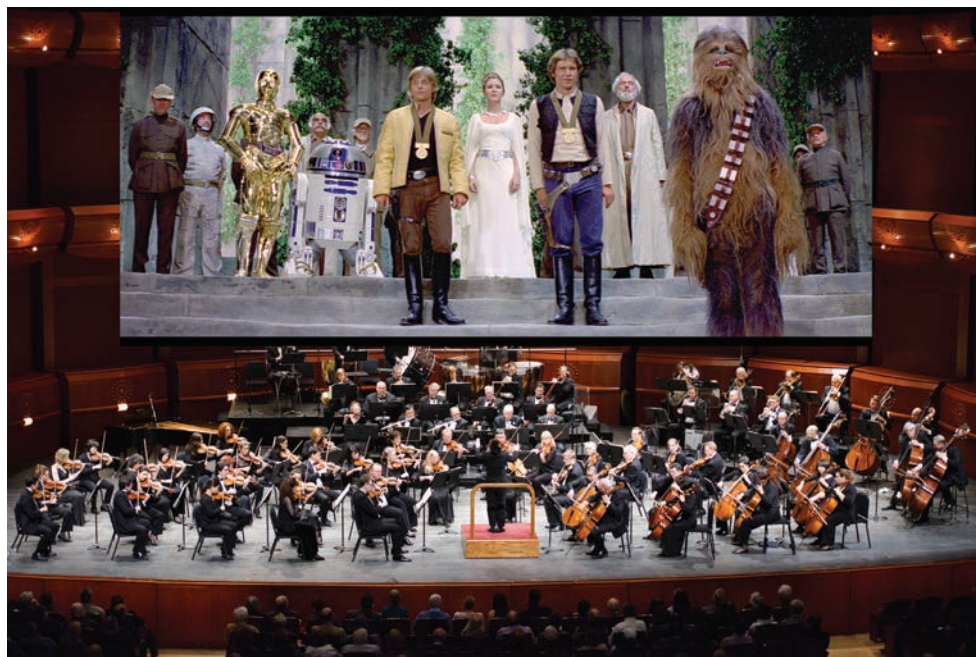
The New Jersey Symphony Orchestra (NJSO) presents screenings of the iconic film *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back* with Oscar®-winning composer John Williams' scores performed live in Red Bank, Newark and New Brunswick.

Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back - Jan 3-6, 2019

Fans will be able to experience the scope and grandeur of these beloved films in a live symphonic concert experience at the Count Basie Center for the Arts in Red Bank on January 4, New Jersey Performing Arts Center on January 5 at Newark and The State Theatre New Jersey on January 6 in New Brunswick.

Since the release of the first *Star Wars* movie nearly 40 years ago, the *Star Wars* saga has had a seismic impact on both cinema and culture, inspiring audiences around the world with its mythic storytelling, captivating characters, groundbreaking special effects and iconic musical scores composed by Williams.

After the destruction of the Death Star, the Empire has regrouped with Darth Vader leading the hunt for Luke Skywalker. *Star Wars* and the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra join forces for *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back* in concert, featuring the



NJSO/movie screen composite shot.

in Newark or call 1.888.GO.NJPAC (888.466.5722).

Tickets for January 6 performance are available from State Theatre New Jersey online at stnj.org, or in person at 15 Livingston Ave in New Brunswick or by phone

Concert Series (Episodes IV-VII), *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Fantasia*, *Pixar In Concert*, *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, *Alice In Wonderland*, *Frozen*, *Ratatouille*, *The Pirates of the Caribbean series (Episodes I-IV)* and *Silly Symphonies*, which last year

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For more information, visit njsymphony.org or email information@njsymphony.org. Tickets are available for purchase by phone at 1.800.ALLEGRO (255.3476) or on the Orchestra's website.



Scenes from *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back*



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PROGRAMS

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Tickets for the January 4 performance are available from the Count Basie Center for the Arts online at thebasie.org, or in person at 99 Monmouth Street in Red Bank, or by phone at 732.842.9000.

For tickets for the January 5 performances, visit njpac.org, or in person at 1 Center Street

at 732.246.SHOW (7469).

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Legendary composer Williams is well known for scoring all eight of the *Star Wars* saga films, beginning with 1977's *Star Wars: A New Hope*, for which he earned an Academy Award for Best Original Score. His scores for *The Empire Strikes Back*, *Return of the Jedi* and *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* and *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* were each nominated for Oscars for Best Original Score.

For more information on iconic John Williams, visit johnwilliams.org.

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Disney Concerts is the concert production and licensing division of Disney Music Group, the music arm of The Walt Disney Company. Disney Concerts produces concerts and tours and licenses Disney music and visual content to symphony orchestras and presenters on a worldwide basis.

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The Count Basie Center for the Arts is New Jersey's premier center for the cultural arts, dedicated to fostering powerful, inclusive artistic experiences and creative exchange of ideas. The Basie mission is to inspire, educate and entertain through its distinct and engaging cultural and artistic offerings that reflect the diversity of the region.

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(Mabel Pais writes on *The Arts & Entertainment, Social Issues, Spirituality, and Health & Wellness*)

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PRIYANKA CHOPRA, NICK JONAS' JODHPUR WEDDING PICS GET A SIMPSONS MAKEOVER

Priyanka Chopra and Nick Jonas are currently in London, celebrating Christmas with their loved ones. In the meanwhile, two pictures from their twin wedding ceremonies in Jodhpur have been converted to look like they belong in the world of the popular American sitcom, The Simpsons. Priyanka took to Instagram to share the pictures.

In one picture, which is from her Christian ceremony, she is dressed in a white Ralph Lauren gown while Nick sports a tuxedo, as Nick's dad Paul Kevin Jonas Sr officiates the ceremony. In the second, Priyanka is dressed in a red Sabyasachi lehenga while Nick has a sherwani on.

It is not clear, however, if the pictures will be used in any upcoming episode or not. It may be noted that the said cartoons have been created by Italian web artist Rino Russo (Hindu wedding) and Stefano Monda (Christian ceremony) respectively. While it is not clear if Russo works for Simpsons, Monda's Instagram page clearly states "Not associated, sponsored by Fox or other programs".

Meanwhile, Priyanka posted another picture, of her family, from their family Christmas eve celebrations and wrote: "Love you family #famjam #christmaseve."

Bollywood star Aditi Rao Hydari has joined the list of luminaries' vocal against the prevalent culture of sexual harassment in the industry by sharing her own #MeToo experience.

The 34-year-old Padmaavat actor addressing the India Today Conclave South 2018 in Visakhapatnam shed light on the unwanted advances she encountered upon her entrance into the industry.

"I remember when I started, I was extra-naïve because I came from a protected background. I didn't know that the rumours were true, that things like this did happen. And honestly, I have not had such a bad time. I had one incident which actually didn't harm me very much. But yes, I did lose work because I was given a choice - it's either this or this. For me, it was a no-brainer. I had to walk away," she stated.

She went on to add: "I think you should speak about something only when you are ready. And when you don't talk about it, people are like, 'Oh, they were paid off' or 'oh, they were silenced.'"

Moreover, the actor revealed how the injustice had affected her personally as well as in her professional life: "I did lose work and I cried about it. I didn't regret it but I cried about it because I felt so upset that this was true and this is how girls are treated. I was

FATIMA SANA SHAIKH OPENS UP ABOUT LINK-UP RUMOURS WITH AAMIR KHAN

Ever since Fatima Sana Shaikh made a smashing debut in Nitesh Tiwari's sports drama Dangal, whispers have been doing the rounds that something is brewing between her and her co-star Aamir Khan. When Fatima landed a second film, Thugs Of Hindostan, with Aamir, the rumours only intensified.

In an interview with an entertainment website, Fatima admitted that she was really bothered by the link-up. "It's very weird. My mother keeps on watching TV and the other day she showed me 'Your photo has come' and I was like 'Read the headline to know what's written.' I used to get disturbed and I felt like I should explain myself," she said.

The actress added, "If someone accuses you of something, the first instinct is to come out and tell, 'Listen, why do you think it is like this?' If you are an aggressive person, you will attack. If you are a submissive person, even then you will talk about it." However, Fatima is no longer affected by the rumours. "Now, I do not feel the need to explain because I feel no matter what you do, people will talk about you. 'Logo ka kaam hai bolna woh bolenge.' No point getting affected by it. People, who write these things, are the people who will meet me nicely. I know it's their job but I hope they sleep well," she said.

On the work front, Fatima is currently shooting for Anurag Basu's next, which is rumoured to be the sequel of Life In A Metro.

Fatima Sana Shaikh, who has worked opposite Aamir Khan in Dangal and Thugs of Hindostan, has opened up about the link-up rumours that have hounded them for years



I lost work and I cried about it: Aditi Rao Hydari on her #MeToo story in Bollywood

like, how dare someone speak to me like that! For about eight months [after the incident] I didn't get work, but I feel that decision made me stronger in my intention about the kind of work I wanted to do."

"I think that everybody should do what they need to do, when they think it is right. That is what empowering a person is. This #MeToo movement is turning that on its head and taking that power away by putting these conditions and saying, 'You must speak. If you don't, that means you are giving in,'" she concluded.

Aditi said that though her experience with sexual harassment in the film industry wasn't as severe as the accounts of other women, it still made her lose work for eight months





HAYLEY ATWELL'S NUDE PICTURE LEAKED ON X-RATED SITE

It's being claimed by hackers that they have leaked naked images of Hayley Atwell online, who is known for Marvel's Agents Carter and Captain America.

An image of the 36-year-old British actress is reported to have been posted on a "seedy" website which reveals a "selfie" of Hayley Atwell in the nude. It's further said that additional naked images of Hayley Atwell will be released. It's also said the comments made by the website are too raunchy to print.

The image is said to only feature half her face and is a pic of herself in the bathroom, which also includes her buttocks.

The UK's Daily Star reports that it is likely Atwell will take action over the alleged hacking and notes sharing intimate shots of someone without their consent is a crime under revenge porn laws in England and Wales.

According to the site's industry insider, "This is a nightmare for Hayley. In recent years she has hit the big time in Hollywood, so this is the last thing she will have wanted to happen."

Hayley Atwell recently starred in Disney's Christopher Robin and has Blinded by the Light coming out next month.

The leak follows the massive 2014 Hollywood leak of naked images featuring X-Men's Jennifer Lawrence, Jessica Jones' Kristen Ritter, Kate Upton, Victoria Justice, Ariana Grande, Spider-Man's Kirsten Dunst, Hope Solo, Yvonne Strahovski, Teresa Palmer, Mary E. Winstead and others.

It hasn't yet been revealed how the Hayley Atwell naked images have been leaked by hackers.

Hayley Atwell rose to stardom playing Peggy Carter in 2011's Captain America: The First Avenger, 2014's The Winter Soldier, appearing in episodes of Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D., being featured in Avengers: Age of Ultron, Ant-Man, the Marvel TV Agent Carter ABC series that lasted for one season, and she also most recently appeared in The Avengers: Endgame trailer. Fans have been speculating that Atwell's Peggy Carter and Chris Evans' Captain America might get some sort of sendoff in The Avengers: Endgame as well.

NATALIE PORTMAN OPENS UP ABOUT BEING SEXUALISED AS A CHILD ACTOR

Being famous comes with its own hazards. After spending about 25 years in the show business, Hollywood actor Natalie Portman on Tuesday said that being sexualised as a child star made her feel unsafe.

The 37-year-old actor who made her debut at the age of 13 in 1994's 'The Professional' at the Women's March last January, revealed that her first ever fan mail was a rape fantasy written by a man.

Reflecting on it further, Portman said, "I understood very quickly, even as a 13-year-old, that if I were to express myself sexually I would feel unsafe and that men would feel entitled to discuss and objectify my body to my great discomfort."

She added that she felt like she has to cover herself up to ensure that she is respected by others, "I felt the need to cover my body and to inhibit my expression and my work in order to send my own message to the world that I'm someone worth of safety and respect," she added.

However, this was when she was just a teenager. Today the actor says she has come to terms with the situation. "I know I was sexualized in the ways that I was photographed or portrayed, and that was not my doing. That becomes a part of your public identity," People quotes Portman as saying.

The academy award winner, whose past credits include 'Annihilation', 'Black Swan' and 'A Tale of Love and Darkness' will be next seen in Jude Law starrer 'Vox Lux'.

The film tells the story of a pop star (played by Portman) who survived a school shooting as a young girl and is still dealing with the aftermath of the horrifying incident.

"She is such a wild character, but she's also someone I felt was a real person, who is the product of this life that has happened to her," Portman said about her character in the movie.

The flick is slated to release on February 23 in the US.



Keira Knightley considered quitting Hollywood after early breakdown

Actress Keira Knightley almost turned her back on Hollywood for good after suffering a mental breakdown during her early rise to fame.

The Pirates of the Caribbean star recently admitted she cracked under the pressure of blockbuster fame at the age of 22 as photographers followed her everywhere, hoping to get snaps and video footage of the young Brit in the middle of a meltdown.

In the candid interview with The Hollywood Reporter in October, she revealed the media mauling forced her to retreat from the limelight and take a year off.

"I was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), because of all of that stuff," she explained. "I went deep into therapy and all of that, and she (the therapist) said, 'It's amazing, I normally come in here and have people that think people are talking about them and they think that they're being followed, but actually they're not. You're the first person that actually that is happening to!'"

Now Knightley, 33, has confessed that at the urging of her loved ones, she seriously considered quitting acting for good to escape the unwanted intrusion in her personal life, but she ultimately refused to let the tabloids and paparazzi bully her into giving up her dream job.



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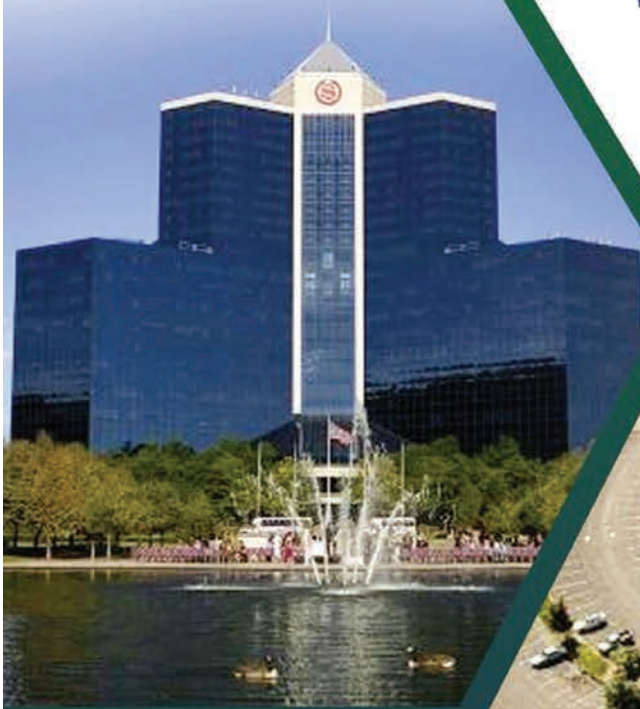
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#MeToo movement: Wave of sexual abuse allegations shakes Argentina

BUENOS AIRES (TIP): For months, Claudia Guebel could only tell family and friends about a traumatising encounter with a colleague in Argentina's Senate.

At the beginning of this year, she said, Pedro Fiorda, a senator's chief of staff, grabbed her violently by the arms like a "hunter who catches prey". Then, she felt his tongue inside her mouth. The terror that seized her made those minutes seem eternal, she said.

"I didn't know how to react, I was paralysed," said Guebel, a congressional aide who previously worked for the same senator.

In December, she was finally moved to file a formal complaint with judicial authorities after actress Thelma Fardin publicly accused actor Juan Darthes of raping her in 2009 when she was 16 and he was 45. Writers, politicians and journalists expressed support for Fardin on social media.

"With Thelma's statements, everything was awakened in me," said Guebel, 52.

Fiorda could not be reached for comment by The Associated Press, and Darthes says he is innocent.

But Guebel is now part of a wave of women who have come forward in the South American country with sexual misconduct accusations in what has inevitably been compared to the (hash)MeToo movement in the United States, where the worlds of media, business, entertainment and politics have been roiled by allegations against powerful men.

Women say they are also taking a cue from "Ni Una Menos", an Argentine grassroots movement that emerged in 2015 and spread globally. The movement has drawn thousands into massive demonstrations against femicide and violence against women in Argentina, where a bill attempting to legalise abortion was defeated in August.

"For a while in Argentina we have been witnessing a paradigm shift ... where the voices of women are beginning to be heard, understood and, most importantly, accompanied by others," said Fabiana Tunes, executive director of the National Institute for Women in Argentina, who said the accusations by Fardin lent the movement more visibility.

On December 11, the actress announced she had filed a criminal complaint in Nicaragua, where she says she was raped by Darthes in a hotel during a promotional tour for "Ugly Duckling", a children's television series. Darthes, who has since moved to his native Brazil, has denied the allegation. Three other women also have accused him of harassment or abuse.

"We are all very shocked," said Sabrina Cartabia, Fardin's lawyer. "It is opening up the possibility of talking about something very painful."

In Argentina, there is no national registry of victims of sexual abuse. But a survey found that 45 per cent of the 2,750 students polled at public and private universities in Buenos Aires reported suffering physical or psychological abuse and 9 per cent had suffered sexual abuse. The survey was published in a 2016 report by UNICEF Argentina. Another poll conducted by the Argentine Management Society of Actors found that 66 per cent of actresses said they had suffered some type of harassment or abuse while exercising their profession. (AP)

Syria faces brittle future, dominated by Russia and Iran

BEIRUT (TIP): Turkey is threatening to invade Syria to eradicate Kurdish fighters. Syrian forces are rolling toward territory the Americans will soon abandon. Israel is bombing Iran-backed militias deep inside Syria. And Russia could soon move to crush the last vestige of the Syrian anti-government insurgency.

The Syria that the U.S. military is vacating on President Donald Trump's orders is a Balkanized version of the country that plunged into a calamitous civil war nearly eight years ago.

Now, with the U.S. troop withdrawal and the demise of the insurgency against President Bashar Assad, Iran and Russia will be even freer to flex their power in Syria.

"Welcome to the post-American Middle East," Richard N. Haass, a longtime diplomat and president of the Council on Foreign Relations, said in a Twitter post on Dec 26.

A look at the changing complexities of the Syria conflict:

What could postwar Syria look like?

After years of bloodshed set in motion by the Arab Spring protests that had inspired hope for democratic change, the most likely Syrian future, Middle East analysts project, is a far more brittle version of what existed before the war: Assad leading a repressive government puppeteered by Russia and Iran.

Both countries are longtime allies of Assad's. By rescuing him with Russian airpower and Iranian manpower, they have embedded themselves even further.

Shiite Iran, which competes with Sunni powers led by Saudi Arabia for influence across the region, has sent tens of thousands of Iranian and proxy fighters to Syria. It is building Shiite shrines and strengthening Shiite militias that it hopes to use as leverage against Israel.

Russia, which already exerted considerable political influence in Syria, holds sway over its foreign policy, military and security services. That is part of the price Moscow exacted for having protected Assad, a brutal autocrat once described by Western leaders as finished.

What do Russia and Iran get in return?

Although they may find staying in Syria costly, frustrating and unpopular back home, Russia and Iran have secured an advantage from outlasting the United States: regional clout.

For both countries, this is "the dream scenario," said Daniel Benaim, a fellow focusing on the Middle East at the Center for American Progress, a liberal research group in Washington. "They get to tell the story that they've been telling to every actor on the ground — America's friends and America's foes alike — that America is no longer a reliable partner in the Middle East."

Why were U.S. soldiers in Syria?

Two thousand Americans were deployed in northeast Syria, collaborating with Kurdish-led forces to wipe the Islamic State from the area. But that partnership angered neighboring Turkey, which sees the autonomy-minded Kurds as a dangerous enemy.

How — or even if — the fight against the Islamic State in Syria will now proceed remains unclear: An estimated 30,000 Islamic State adherents are believed scattered in the country.

Many experts anticipate that a hasty U.S. pullout could spawn another major battle, either as Turkey moves to crush its Kurdish foes, or as Assad's forces retake the northeast, or both.



It is possible that the Kurds and Assad could come to a deal first. If not, a new round of fighting could send new waves of refugees — Kurds and others — fleeing toward Iraq in a new round of mayhem that could also help incubate the Islamic State's revival.

"That's absolutely a possibility, the risk of total chaos," said Aron Lund, a Syria analyst and fellow at the Century Foundation, a think tank, "when the thing that's been keeping the situation stable — not saying it was good or bad, but stable — just disappears in a puff of smoke."

Who will occupy the territory vacated by the Americans?

According to the Institute for the Study of War, Russia, Iran and Iran-backed militias, including the Lebanese Shiite group Hezbollah, are well-positioned to seize territory in northeast Syria abandoned by the United States. They occupy 29 nearby positions, according to the group, and a further seven across the Iraq border.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which tracks Syria's war via a network of citizen monitors, said Sunday that the Syrian government had dispatched thousands of fighters toward the Islamic State's last patches of territory in the northeast.

What remains of the anti-Assad insurgency?

The last major redoubt of the rebels opposed to Assad are crowded into Idlib province in northwestern Syria, neighboring Turkey. Russia may help Assad's forces retake the province eventually. But Russia also is expected to first negotiate with Turkey, which has supported anti-Assad groups and has a vested interest in what happens along its border with Syria.

How have the changes affected Israel?

Analysts say Iran can now link Shiite partners in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon in a unified front against Israel. In Syria, Iran and Hezbollah aim to strengthen a military presence near the Golan Heights, annexed by Israel after it was captured in the 1967 war.

Israel has made clear it will not tolerate an increased threat from Syria, which the Israelis demonstrated Tuesday with airstrikes near Damascus.

The Russians, who have good relations with Israel, have tacitly allowed it to conduct such operations in the past. Still, the Kremlin protested Wednesday what it called Israel's "gross violation" of Syrian sovereignty.

How is Iran changing Syria?

The Iranian-led Shiite partnership in Syria faces a basic shortcoming: few Shiites in a Sunni-majority country. Still, Iran has extended

its influence among both Syrian fighters and civilians.

In some parts of Syria, Iran has distributed cash to pay for housing to people displaced by the war; in others, it has established Shiite shrines that, according to the Observatory, have drawn visitors from Iran, Iraq and Syria.

Defying the Syrian government's historic secularism, Iran and Hezbollah have infused parts of the country with a strikingly religious tint. It was rare in the past, for example, to see celebrations for Ashura, a major Shiite holiday, in non-Shiite areas of Damascus. Now, however, Ashura parades and rituals are much more visible.

Some soldiers in the historically secular Syrian army have become more religious after joining Iran-backed Shiite militias. Others have switched to such militias for nonreligious reasons. Fighters in Iran-backed groups receive better pay and more days off than the army offers, and joining a Shiite militia does not necessarily mean converting to Shiism. But it is a marked shift from the old way.

"It's no longer purely secular," said Ali Rizk, a Beirut-based analyst who writes about Iran. He said Iran and Hezbollah have spread their Shiite beliefs among some of the Syrian forces. "It's only human — after all, these units were coordinating with each other, fighting side by side."

Are Russians welcomed in Syria?

Russia has cemented ties with Syrian leaders, strengthened relations with Turkey and eclipsed the United States as the power to contend with in the Middle East.

The Russians have also demonstrated a canny understanding of Syrian sensitivities — dispatching military policemen from Russia's predominantly Sunni Muslim Chechnya region, for example, to negotiate rebel withdrawals and keep the peace in Sunni areas retaken by Assad's side.

On a visit to the formerly insurgent-held southern suburbs of Damascus in October, three Russian military policemen were patrolling with a green armored vehicle that bore the Russian flag. Syrians greeted them in Arabic, sometimes throwing in a "privyet" — "hi" in Russian.

Many have welcomed the Russians, preferring them to the government's security enforcers or to Shiite militiamen backed by Iran. Those in the area who still opposed the government said they were heartened in the spring, when a YouTube video showed Russian military policemen arresting Syrian soldiers accused of looting. Then, in June, when Shiite militiamen arrested two Sunni men, the Russians pressured the militias into releasing them, residents said.

(the new york times)

Sikh group hosts Christmas feast for homeless inside Birmingham railway station

BIRMINGHAM (TIP): A Sikh charity group on Christmas Eve hosted a feast for 200 homeless people inside a train station in Birmingham, England. Midland Langar Seva Society (MLSS), an organisation run by Randhir Singh Heer and Parmjit Singh, converted a part of the New Street Station in Birmingham into a temporary dining area with rows of tables and chairs.

Speaking to The Indian Express, Parmjit Singh said, “We served langar to over 200 homeless people in Birmingham among other food items. Their joy and happiness knew no bounds. This is the true spirit of Christmas — to serve those who are in need. The homeless people have no one to provide them with food. We decided to rope them in the celebrations so that they do not feel left out.”

The all-vegetarian feast included tomato soup, roasted vegetables and cakes and custard for dessert. The guests also received gifts from Santa Claus who distributed winter wear donated by the local community.

Parmjit also said that the concept of Guru Nanak’s langar is not limited to any religion or festival.



“We keep distributing langar on a daily basis but here, the idea was to do it for the homeless. The volunteers prepared delicious food and served the homeless people we had invited to the station,” he said.

In June this year, the society had won the

prestigious Queen’s Award, the highest honour given to local volunteer groups across the UK to recognize the outstanding work done in their own communities. Currently, the society serves langar in 17 cities across the UK. (The Indian Express)

To stop a new Ebola outbreak in Congo, four health workers put their lives on the line

LUSEGHE CONGO (TIP): Democratic Republic of Congo — Four health workers threaded their way cautiously down a steep valley in their rubber boots, into a forest so thick and so tall that the air around them turned suddenly cool, trying to reach a remote village in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo where a woman had recently succumbed to Ebola.

Dr. Kasereka Bernardin, a vaccinologist, looked over his shoulder, made the sign of the cross, and acknowledged that the lethal virus was not his most immediate fear “We’re scared of the Mai-Mai,” he said, using a local term for militias, his forehead lightly beaded with sweat. “We’re afraid they might kill us.”

The trip had already been delayed by clashes between government forces and a militia group in the surrounding Kanyihunga district, an emerging hot spot in a new outbreak of Ebola, and nerves were on edge. The team — an epidemiologist, two contact tracers and Bernardin — had not been able to line up guarantees of safe passage from the militia leaders, or even to make contact.

As concerned as they were about security, however, with every passing hour, the doctors were even more fearful that the deadly virus could spread to the entire village, Luseghe — or, worse, expand beyond its borders.

There have been many hopeful advances recently in the battle against the deadly Ebola virus. A vaccine is now available, and experimental treatments appear to be helping to save lives. With international help, Congo was able to quickly snuff out an earlier outbreak in its Équateur province this year.

Yet eastern Congo, teeming with no fewer than 100 armed groups, has been gripped by near-constant conflict since the uprising that led to its independence in 1960, as well as the

1994 genocide in neighboring Rwanda and the civil war soon after that eventually established the regime of Joseph Kabila.

Millions are thought to have died from the chronic violence, many of them at the hands of government forces. The insecurity is frustrating efforts to combat this latest Ebola outbreak — now the second largest in history, after one that tore through West Africa from 2014 to 2016, claiming 11,310 lives — making the current crisis almost entirely manufactured.

Ebola still kills most of the people who contract it. Since the outbreak here was declared in August, health officials have recorded 583 confirmed and suspected cases as of December 25. About a third of the patients have recovered, while 354 have died.

Congolese health officials and their international partners expect the fight against Ebola to drag on well into next year. The biggest worry is that, unchecked, the epidemic could reach Goma, the regional capital. “If it hits Goma, we’re done for,” said Dr. Jean-Christophe Shako, the director of a local Ebola response team whose tasks require negotiating with the militia so that health workers can enter their territories and have their safety guaranteed. The city sits on a busy border with Rwanda and has an international airport that could disperse the disease globally.

Venturing into militia territory

The people in the Ebola zone are deeply suspicious of outsiders, whether government soldiers or health workers, and they often shun visitors, sometimes threateningly. Before setting off for Luseghe, the health workers discussed the security risks animatedly, and particularly whether it was

safe to bring along two Western journalists.

They finally decided it was safe enough, and as we headed toward Luseghe, we could not help but wonder what sort of greeting we would receive.

Leaving Butembo, a bustling city in eastern Congo, the shops quickly give way to woods. The region is mountainous, with plunging valleys packed with eucalyptus, avocado and banana trees, their broad leaves blocking sunlight from the dark entrails of the forest.

The vegetation grew so dense that it was hard to see more than a few feet in any direction to make out what — or who — might be lurking there.

At length, as the road dwindled, the soldiers and police officers who had been escorting us turned around. From there, we would proceed to Luseghe on foot and without escort, as the health workers needed to show their neutrality to the villagers.

As we approached Luseghe, we had reason to be apprehensive. Ordinary citizens are routinely brutalized by armed groups but equally by government forces, who are accused of exacting illegal taxes and raping and killing civilians with impunity. Many of the Mai-Mai began as self-defense groups formed to protect villages against marauding soldiers. Civilians often do not know whom to trust, and end up fending off all outsiders. When the police recently tried to take an infected two-week-old baby from his family, the child’s grandmother charged out of her house with a machete and threatened to kill them. Suspicions have been compounded by local opposition politicians who have exploited the crisis ahead of national elections this month, spreading rumors that Ebola was concocted by the government to exterminate them. (NYT)

Iraqi lawmakers criticize Trump visit as blow to Iraqi sovereignty

BAGHDAD (TIP): Iraqi political and militia leaders condemned US President Donald Trump’s surprise visit to US troops in Iraq on Dec 26 as a violation of Iraq’s sovereignty, and lawmakers said a meeting between Trump and Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi was canceled due to a disagreement over venue.

Sabah al Saadi, the leader of the Islah parliamentary bloc, called for an emergency session of parliament “to discuss this blatant violation of Iraq’s sovereignty and to stop these aggressive actions by Trump who should know his limits: The US occupation of Iraq is over.”

The Bina bloc, Islah’s rival in parliament and led by Iran-backed militia leader Hadi al-Amiri, also objected to Trump’s trip to Iraq. “Trump’s visit is a flagrant and clear violation of diplomatic norms and shows his disdain and hostility in his dealings with the Iraqi government,” said a statement from Bina.

Abdul Mahdi’s office said in a statement that US authorities had informed Iraq’s leadership of the president’s visit ahead of time. The statement said the Iraqi prime minister and US president talked by telephone due to a “disagreement over how to conduct the meeting.”

Iraqi lawmakers told Reuters that the pair had disagreed over where their planned meeting should take place: Trump had asked to meet at the Ain al-Asad military base, an offer which Abdul Mahdi declined.

Trump’s visit comes amid a backdrop of escalating tensions between Washington and Tehran, as Washington seeks to counter Iran’s sway in the Middle East. The formation of Iraq’s government has stalled as well amid intensifying discord between the Islah and Bina blocs.

Falih Khazali, a former militia leader turned politician allied with Bina, accused the United States of wanting to increase its presence in Iraq. “The American leadership was defeated in Iraq and wants to return again under any pretext, and this is what we will never allow,” he said.

Bina said Trump’s visit “places many question marks on the nature of the US military presence and its real objectives, and what these objectives could pose to the security of Iraq.”

While there has been no full-scale violence in Iraq since Islamic State suffered a series of defeats last year, some 5,200 US troops train and advise Iraqi forces still waging a campaign against the militant group. Islah is headed by populist Shi’ite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. Sadr has long opposed the US presence in Iraq since the US-led invasion toppled Saddam Hussein in 2003. He led two uprisings against US forces in Iraq and is one of the few Shi’ite leaders to also distance himself from Iran. Iraq’s Shi’ite militias, also known as the PMF, many of which are supported by Iran, oppose the presence of US troops in the region. The PMF was made formally part of the security forces this year after helping the military defeat Islamic State in Iraq in 2017.

Qais al-Khazali, the leader of the powerful Iran-backed Asaib Ahl al-Haq militia said on Twitter, “Iraqis will respond with a parliamentary decision to oust your (US) military forces. And if they do not leave, we have the experience and the ability to remove them by other means that your forces are familiar with.” (Reuters)

FOLLOW THIS THREE-STEP SKINCARE ROUTINE

You've heard a lot of contradicting advice on how to care of your skin. The fact is, one's skin needs changes with the seasons. So let's not forget the importance of caring for your skin type, too! After all, the last thing you want to deal with is acne, breakouts or allergies. More often than not, skincare seems a lot more complicated than it has to be. If you're confused, and can't figure out why your skin isn't cooperating with you, we suggest you take a step back and get down to the basics.

Sometimes, something as simple as 1-2-3 can be just what the dermatologist ordered! And when going back to the basics, it's best to stick to one brand that's ideal for your skin, and get the basic kit from there. A little goes a long way. You'll see!

Cleanse

It's no secret that cleansing is the first and most important step in a healthy skincare routine. If you're living in a city, there's little chance that you won't encounter dust, grime and pollution on a regular basis. Hence, this is one step you shouldn't skip out on. That said, understand your skin type also goes a long way in ensuring your skin gets exactly what it needs. After all, using a good cleanser is non-negotiable as it will do some heavy lifting, and suck off impurities to prevent clogged pores, irritation and acne.

Tone

While most of you will agree that



cleansing is the most important step in your skincare routine, toning is perhaps the step that given the least importance. Think of toning as cleaning+. Why? It's a sure-shot way to enhance the effects of your cleaner, as it serves to purify pores, reduce their appearance and maintain a healthy pH balance of your skin. What this basically means is that toning your skin will lead to no inflammation. Moreover, there won't be excessive dryness or overproduction of sebum.

Hydrate

The key here, is hydrate. While your skin may already feel soft and supple after steps 1 and 2, in order to lock in moisture, make sure to hydrate your skin thoroughly. In fact, we think you should opt for a hydrating moisturiser to improve the water levels in your skin and restore your skin's natural bounce. You really can't go wrong with this. Besides, it's the easiest way to get baby-soft skin.



MASCULINE FACES PERCEIVED AS MORE COMPETENT THAN FEMININE: STUDY

Faces that are seen as competent or talented are perceived as more masculine than feminine, say researchers while noting that this can pose a threat to social justice.

In the study, the team from the Princeton University in the US were interested in identifying the "visual ingredients" that influence how we perceive competence from individuals' appearance.

They found that participants perceived more competent faces as more confident and more masculine, impressions that are not explained by attractiveness.

"Our research sheds light on the pernicious gender bias in how we perceive others -- we judge masculine looking people as competent, a judgement that can affect our leadership choices," said DongWon Oh, researcher from the varsity.

Importantly, research also showed that individuals with more competent-looking faces are more likely to be elected as high-ranking politicians such as the heads of large companies.

"Problematically, how competent someone appears does not guarantee their actual competence," Oh said.

"Needless to say, these gender biases pose a threat to social justice, creating unfair environments for everyone," Oh noted.

In an online experiment, participants involving a small group rated how competent the faces were, while others rated their attractiveness.



The results, published in the journal Psychological Science, showed that the faces designed to look more competent were rated as such, and rated as more attractive.

Another online experiment revealed that when participants were asked to identify faces as either male or female, they tended to rate more competent faces as male and less competent faces as female.

The study suggests that competence and masculinity are correlated components of first impressions based on appearance.

FOOD CORNER

CHICKEN CURRY

Ingredients

2 Tbsp Oil, 1 tsp Ghee, 1 Cup Onion paste, 1 Tbsp Garlic paste, 1 Tbsp Ginger paste, 1/2 tsp Turmeric powder, 1 tsp Salt, 1 Cup Tomato Puree, 2 tsp Coriander powder, 1/2 tsp Red chilli powder, 2 tsp Cumin powder, 1 tsp Garam Masala, 6 Nos Chicken leg pieces, 1 Cup Coriander leaves, 1/2 Cup Water

Method

- In a large saucepan heat oil and ghee together over a medium flame.
- Add onion paste and cook for a minute or two to get a golden pink color.
- Then add ginger and garlic paste. Mix well.
- Cover the pan and let it cook for few minutes to get a little thick paste. Make sure the paste doesn't burn.
- After it has cooked, open the pan and add turmeric powder along with salt. Stir well until it appears as a yellow thick paste.
- Add tomato puree and cook for a minute.
- Add coriander powder, red Chilli powder, cumin powder and Garam Masala.
- Put the chicken leg pieces in the gravy and cook for 5 minutes.
- Make sure that chicken is well coated and then add coriander leaves.
- Add some water to it and bring it to the boil for about 2 minutes.
- Transfer this curry to a pressure cooker.
- Give it 4-5 whistles for the chicken to get soft.
- Cook more if it is not cooked properly.
- Put the curry in a serving bowl. Garnish with fresh coriander leaves and serve hot.



AMLA: SUPERFOOD FOR BEAUTIFUL SKIN

Amla is one of the most ancient fruits now recognized as one of the richest natural sources of vitamin C. The desi superfood can fight off cough, ulcers, constipation, manage diabetes, cholesterol and give you amazing skin and hair. One of the most remarkable and popular qualities of amla is its impact on skin.

Eat it Raw

Since the fruit is quite bitter, it can get quite hard to ingest all by its own. However, there are people who do that too. Raw amla is the best way to make most of its nutritious and beauty benefits. To have them raw, wash the Indian gooseberries and cut them in small pieces. You can dip them in honey or sprinkle some chaat masala to make it more palatable.

Juice It

The most palatable way to have amla without losing its benefits according to experts is by juicing it. Amla juice is considered to be an effective home remedy to manage diabetes, cholesterol levels, weight loss and is used to treat cold and cough. The health beverage is quite easy-to-prepare. You just have to blend the chopped amla with water. Filter and discard the pulp. If you happen to have amla powder, you just have to mix the powder with water and you are good to go.

Face Mask

You can combat majority of regular skin and beauty woes with easy DIY amla face packs. For a smooth and radiant skin, you can mix amla powder, honey and yogurt to make a quick face mask. Leave it on till it dries (approximately 15-20 min) and then rinse it off with cold water.

'VILLAINS' CAN INFLUENCE YOU TO BUY HEALTHY FOODS: STUDY

People are likely to pay more for a healthy food item if the label features a negative character, say scientists who found how pictures of villains and heroes on product packages can influence buying behaviour. Researchers from Brigham Young University (BYU) in the US also showed that indulgent foods with hero labels would be more compelling than the same foods shown with villain labels.

"If someone wants an ice cream bar and it is packaged with a hero on the label, the kind and benevolent character makes the indulgent product seem less vice," Masters said.

"But a product that is already healthy, like water, would benefit more from villain labelling because it makes the water seem more edgy and exciting," said Tamara Masters from BYU.

In one experiment, half the participants saw an image of a Fiji bottle of water and half saw an ice cream bar.

The description of the water bottle was either "Villainous Spring Water—unforgiving, cunning, and dangerous" or "Heroic Spring Water—patient, courageous, and with integrity."

The ice cream bar also showed one of the two descriptions. The results revealed that the participants were willing to pay more for the bottled water when it was offered with a villainous label than a heroic label, and they were willing to pay more for the ice cream bar shown with the hero label.

The researchers also tested their hypothesis in the real world by setting up a sampling table for cheese curds in a grocery store.



They changed the sign describing the cheese curds throughout the day to show images of either Luke Skywalker or Darth Vader with the words "Healthy and Nutritious" or "Tasty and Decadent."

The participants sampled the cheese curds and then wrote how much they would be willing to pay for a package of 10 curds.

The data revealed that consumers were willing to pay an average of USD 3.45 when the curds were described as healthy and nutritious with a picture of Darth Vader, but they would pay only USD 2.17 with the same description accompanied by an image of Luke Skywalker. Conversely, when the curds were described as tasty and decadent, consumers were willing to pay more when the picture showed Luke

Skywalker. The researchers also studied grocery store sales data to determine if consumers followed the pattern with their purchases.

They tracked sales of a vice product, Betty Crocker fruit snacks, that were packaged with either a heroic image of Scooby Doo or a villain from Star Wars.

They found that consumers favoured the hero labelling with the vice product, with 289 Scooby Doo sales compared to 156 Star Wars sales.

"We see hero and villain labelling everywhere we go, and people don't realise how they use these labels to justify their buying decisions," Masters said. "People may want to be healthy and spend less, but they still want something that is exciting, and the right labelling can make this possible," he said.

Source: PTI



Antibiotic overuse is high in common urology procedures

Antibiotics are being overused in patients undergoing common urological procedures, which exposes them to potential harm including an increased risk of infection by C. difficile bacteria, researchers warned.

Clostridium difficile, often called C. difficile, is a bacterium that can cause symptoms ranging from diarrhoea to potentially fatal inflammation of the colon.

The study showed that almost 60 per cent of patients were prescribed antibiotics in a way that did not follow the American Urological Association (AUA) guidelines, which recommends that antibiotics should be given for no more than 24 hours following most urological procedures.

"This study shows that antibiotics are often continued for several days after common urologic procedures, even when there is no clear indication for antibiotics," said lead author Daniel Livorsi from the University of Iowa in the US.

"Reducing unnecessary antibiotic use in this setting is just one example of how physicians can be better stewards of antibiotics," said Livorsi.

It is common for patients undergoing a urological or any other surgical procedure to be given antibiotics as a precaution to prevent a surgery-related infection. However, overuse of antibiotics can promote antibiotic resistance, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

For the study, the researchers investigated whether urologists are following the AUA guidelines for prescribing antibiotics. They manually reviewed the medical records of 375 patients who had one of three common urological procedures.

The findings, published in 'JAMA Network Open', showed that 217 patients (58 per cent) were prescribed antibiotics in a way that did not follow the AUA guidelines.

The most common deviation from the guidelines involved antibiotic-prescribing after the procedure: 211 patients (56 percent) were given antibiotics for longer than 24 hours following a procedure, the team said. In fact, patients were often given antibiotics for three to five days following a procedure instead of the 24 hours or less that the guidelines recommend, the team added.

The study did not investigate why urologists are prescribing antibiotics for longer than recommended after a procedure.

Source: IANS

Exercise, healthy diet may improve brain power in elderly

Just 35 minutes of walking or cycling three times a week along with a healthy diet may improve brain power among the elderly, a study claims.

The study, published in the journal Neurology, found that regular exercise and a healthy diet improve the heart and cardiovascular health and with this improvement in "neurocognitive functioning" can also be seen.

"You're improving brain health at the same time as improving heart health," said James Blumenthal, a clinical psychologist at Duke University in the US.

"I don't think there is another study that looked at the separate and combined effects of exercise and diet in slowing cognitive decline in patients who are vulnerable to develop dementia in later life," said Blumenthal.

The team included 160 adults who were suffering from high blood pressure or other heart disease risk factors.

These adults never exercised and had some degree of cognitive impairment such as difficulty concentrating or remembering or making decisions.

The average age of these individuals was 65 years and two thirds of them were females.

One group was put on the DASH diet or diet that prevents high blood pressure (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension). DASH diet reduces salt and fat and sugar rich foods and increases fruits and vegetables and whole grains in diet.



This group was not encouraged to exercise but was asked to adhere to the diet.

The second group was asked to exercise regularly but their diet was not regulated. For the first three months these individuals did non-strenuous exercises thrice a week.

This included a 10 minutes warm up and 35 minutes of continuous walking or stationary cycling. For the next three months they exercised at home with periodic supervision.

The third group was asked to follow a regulated DASH diet and also made to exercise at least thrice a week.

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NASA TO CONTINUE FLYING ASTRONAUTS ON RUSSIAN SOYUZ: REPORT

NASA is likely to continue flying its astronauts on the Russian Soyuz vehicle even after US commercial crew vehicles arrive, media report said.

However, nothing has been signed officially yet, an agency spokesperson said.

"Bill Gerstenmaier and senior NASA leadership have stated their intention to have US crewmembers on Soyuz vehicles after 2019 and (to have) Russians on US crew vehicles," Stephanie Schierholz, who works in public affairs at NASA Headquarters in Washington, was quoted as saying to Space.com on Tuesday.

Gerstenmaier is the associate administrator for human exploration and operations for NASA.

The US space agency retired its space shuttle program in 2011 and has relied on Russian vehicles since then to go to the ISS. The US space agency has an agreement with Russia to fly crews on Soyuz through at least 2019, and some of those crewmembers are already announced, the report said.

NASA has partnered with two commercial crew providers—Boeing and SpaceX—to bring vehicles for crews online. While SpaceX announced its first uncrewed test flight of the Dragon human spacecraft in 2019, Boeing is expected to launch its own uncrewed flight in the following months. Once these vehicles are certified for flight, astronauts will ride them to the ISS.

In August, NASA revealed the names of nine US astronauts who will fly on the first certification flights for Boeing's Starliner and SpaceX's Dragon. *Source: IANS*

IBM develops fingernail sensor that uses AI to monitor health

IBM researchers have developed a first-of-a-kind "fingernail sensor" prototype that uses Artificial Intelligence and machine learning to monitor and analyse human health as well as disease progression.

The wearable, wireless device continuously measures how a person's fingernail bends and moves, which is a key indicator of grip strength.

Although skin-based sensors can help capture things like motion, the health of muscles and nerve cells, and can also reflect the intensity of a person's emotional state, these can often cause problems, including infection with older patients.

But the new system uses signals from the fingernail bends such as the tactile sensing of pressure, temperature, surface textures.

"Our fingernails deform -- bend and move -- in stereotypic ways when we use them for gripping, grasping, and even flexing and extending our fingers. This deformation is usually on the order of single digit microns and not visible to the naked eye," said Katsuyuki Sakuma, from IBM's Thomas J Watson Research Center in New York.

The new device, reported in the journal *Scientific Reports*, consists of strain gauges attached to the fingernail and a small computer that samples strain values, collects accelerometer data and communicates with a smart watch.



SMALL CHANGES IN OXYGEN LEVELS HAVE BIG IMPLICATIONS FOR OCEAN LIFE

Even slight levels of ocean oxygen loss, or deoxygenation, have big consequences for tiny marine organisms called zooplankton, according to a study.

Zooplankton are important components of the food web in the expanse of deep, open ocean called the midwater, said researchers from the University of Rhode Island in the US.

Within this slice of ocean below the surface and above the seafloor are oxygen minimum zones (OMZs), large regions of very low oxygen, according to the study published in the journal *Science Advances*.

Unlike coastal "dead zones" where oxygen levels can suddenly plummet and kill marine life not acclimated to the conditions, zooplankton in OMZs are specially adapted to live where other organisms—especially predators—cannot.

However, OMZs are expanding due to climate change, and even slight changes to the low oxygen levels can push zooplankton beyond their extraordinary physiological limits.

"Although the animals in the ocean's oxygen minimum zone have adapted over millions of years to the very low oxygen of this extreme and widespread midwater habitat, they are living at the very limits of their physiological capability," said Karen Wishner, a professor at University of Rhode Island. "Our research shows that they are



sensitive to very small changes in oxygen, and decrease in abundance when oxygen gets just a little bit lower," Wishner said.

The research team found more natural variability in oxygen levels in the OMZ than previously known.

This has a direct effect on the distribution of many types of zooplankton because, as the team discovered, the organisms respond to a less than one per cent reduction in oxygen levels.

While zooplankton have had millions of years to adapt to conditions in the OMZ, these low oxygen zones may expand rapidly due to climate change, leading to major unanticipated changes to midwater ecosystems.

For example, an expansion of the OMZ into shallower waters may make zooplankton more susceptible to predators like fish.

If this leads to a zooplankton population crash, it will have impacts all the way up the food chain, researchers said.

"Further loss of oxygen in ocean waters is predicted in the future as a result of global warming, and these animals may be unable to adapt and persist," Wishner said.

"They are important components of the food web of oceanic ecosystems, and their loss could potentially impact top predators, including whales and commercially important fisheries," said Wishner. *Source: PTI*

New laser sensor to help combat counterfeit oil



Researchers have designed a laser-based sensor that can detect counterfeit olive oil labelled as extra virgin or protected designation of origin.

The tool, described in the journal *Talanta*, can distinguish between apparently similar oils that present notable differences in quality.

This is possible thanks to the use of laser diodes, because the fluorescence emitted by adulterated oils is slightly different to that of pure extra virgin olive oils.

The 3D-printed tool is inexpensive both to use and to manufacture, said researchers at the Complutense University of Madrid (UCM) in Spain and the Scintillon Institute in the US.

"Other clear advantages of our tool include the possibility of conducting on-site analyses, because the equipment is the size of a briefcase and therefore portable, and of generating results in real time," said Jose S Torrecilla, a senior lecturer at the UCM. The tool offers the olive oil sector a means to tackle a problem that generates large economic losses, researchers said.

"The quality of olive oil is recognised nationally and internationally. It is therefore necessary to protect this quality and combat the fraudulent activities carried out with increasing frequency and skill in the sector," they said.

TOYOTA WANTS TO PUT A ROBOT FRIEND IN EVERY HOME

Toyota Motor Corp. has sold enough cars to put one outside every Japanese home. Now it wants to put robots inside.

Well-known for its automated assembly lines, Toyota sees a not-so-far-off future in which robots transcend the factory and become commonplace in homes, helping with chores -- and even offering companionship -- in an aging society where a quarter of the population is over 65 and millions of seniors live alone.

Machines have become much smarter in the last decade or so. Yet, every attempt to build one that can do simple things like load a washing machine or carry groceries encounters the same basic, physical problem: the stronger a robot gets, the heavier and more dangerous it becomes. What Toyota has going for it are \$29 billion in cash reserves, a new artificial intelligence research center and a well-respected inventor, Gill Pratt, heading its effort.

"This is a company with so many resources that you can never ignore them," said Morten Paulsen, a Tokyo-based analyst at CLSA Japan Securities Co., who's covered the robotics industry for decades.

Toyota has been experimenting with robots since at least 2004, when it unveiled a trumpet-playing humanoid with artificial lips, lungs and movable fingers that could accompany an actual human orchestra.

US oil prices rise to claw back some ground, but oversupply worries persist

US oil prices rose on Friday to claw back some of the ground they lost in the previous session, but growth in U.S. crude stockpiles and ongoing concerns about the global economy kept markets under pressure.

U.S. West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude futures <CLc1>, were up \$1.37, or 3.07 %, at \$45.98 per barrel at 0042 GMT, having earlier rising as high as \$46.05 per barrel. They ended Thursday down 3.48 percent, or \$1.61, at \$44.61 a barrel.

Brent crude <LCOc1> had yet to trade. It dropped 4.24 % or \$2.31, the day before to settle at \$52.16 per barrel.

Oil prices fell to their lowest in more than a year on Thursday, a day after their biggest one-day rally in two years, pulled down by worries about the global economy and a supply glut.

Stephen Innes, head of trading for Asia-Pacific at futures brokerage Oanda in Singapore, said crude prices had been pressured by slowing economic growth “coupled with the expectation of strong U.S. production in the new year”.

U.S. crude inventories for the week to Dec. 21 rose by 6.9 million barrels to 448.2 million barrels on increased refinery output, according to data released on Thursday by industry group the American Petroleum Institute. Official U.S. government data is due on Friday.

The United States has emerged as the world's biggest crude producer, pumping 11.6 million barrels per day (bpd) of crude, more than both Saudi Arabia and Russia.



Meanwhile, Russian Energy Minister Alexander Novak said on Thursday that rising protectionism and the unpredictability of the U.S. administration had greatly contributed to global oil price volatility over the past two years.

Novak also said Russia would cut its crude output by between 3 and 5 million

tonnes in the first half of 2019 as part of a deal between producers

Earlier this month, the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and its allies including Russia, agreed to curb output by 1.2 million bpd starting in January in a bid to clear a supply overhang and prop up prices.

Source: Reuters

Amazon's record holiday sale shows consumers still have appetite for spending

Amazon.com Inc. reported a record-breaking holiday season as shoppers loaded their online baskets with items from Echo speakers to Calvin Klein clothes, suggesting consumer optimism isn't being deterred by a tumbling stock market.

The internet retailer said “tens of millions of people worldwide” signed up for its Prime service, which offers free two-day shipping on millions of items as well as video and music streaming. In the US alone, more than 1 billion items were shipped for free using Prime, Amazon said in a statement Wednesday.

The U.S. was already headed into a blow-out Christmas shopping spree, as Americans are benefiting from higher employment and wages, fuelling higher household cash flow. Consumers seemed to be merry despite a S&P 500 Index that has tumbled, a government shutdown that's entering its fifth day and ongoing trade tensions with China.

Amazon wasn't the only one benefiting from an insatiable consumer appetite. Mastercard Inc. and Visa Inc. rebounded after four days of declines. Mastercard said holiday sales increased 5.1% to more than \$850 billion this year, the strongest growth in the last six years. Online shopping saw gains of



19% compared with 2017, according to Mastercard SpendingPulse. Brick-and-mortar retailers also gained. Nike Inc., Macy's Inc., Kohl's Corp. and PVH Corp. were all higher mid-morning in New York.

People bought “millions more” of Amazon's own devices compared with last year, including the new Echo Dot speaker and the Fire TV Stick, the Seattle-based company said. At the same time, Amazon said more than 50% of items sold in its stores came from small

and medium-sized businesses.

Among the most popular items under the Christmas tree were the LOL Surprise! Glam Glitter Series doll, Bose Corp. wireless headphones and clothes from Carhartt Inc. Other popular brands bought through Amazon's Prime Wardrobe service, which allows consumers to fill a box with selected items and return anything that they don't want, included PVH Corp.'s Calvin Klein, and Hanesbrands Inc.'s Champion.

Source: Bloomberg

GOVT INFUSES RS 2159 CR IN UNITED BANK OF INDIA

NEW DELHI (TIP): State-owned United Bank of India said the government has decided to infuse Rs 2,159 crore in the bank as part of Rs 28,615 crore capital infusion to be done in about half a dozen banks.

The Finance Ministry had informed the bank about the capital infusion on December 26, United Bank of India said in a regulatory filing.

"The bank proposes to secure the shareholders' approval to the proposed preferential allotment by a Special Resolution by convening an Extraordinary General Meeting shortly. Till such time all formalities are completed and allotment made, the amount shall remain in Share Application Money Account," it said.

According to sources, government has decided to pump Rs 28,615 crore into seven public sector banks (PSBs) through recapitalisation bonds soon.

Out of these seven PSBs, Bank of India, is likely to get the highest amount of Rs 10,086 crore, followed by Oriental Bank of Commerce, which might get Rs 5,500 crore through recapitalisation bonds, sources added.



GOLD PRICES FALL, BREAK 3-DAY RISING STREAK

NEW DELHI (TIP): After rising for three straight sessions, gold prices on Thursday declined slightly by Rs. 50 to Rs. 32,450 per 10 grams at the bullion market in the national capital, due to weak trend overseas, reported news agency Press Trust of India (PTI). Silver, however, witnessed a jump of Rs. 525 to Rs. 38,650 per kg on increased buying by industrial units and coin makers. Weak trend overseas and lacklustre demand from local jewellers put pressure on the yellow metal in the domestic market, reported the agency citing traders. In Delhi, gold of 99.9 per cent and 99.5 per cent purities lost Rs. 50 each to Rs. 32,450 and Rs. 32,300 per 10 grams, respectively. Sovereign gold rose by Rs. 100 to Rs. 25,100 per piece of eight grams. The precious metal had gained Rs. 100 in the previous session.

Globally, gold inched higher on Thursday as global growth worries and volatility in stock markets boosted demand for the safe-haven metal, but gains were capped by a sharp rebound in equities, reported news agency Reuters.

Spot gold was up 0.1 per cent at \$1,268.21 per ounce in intraday trade, after hitting its highest since June 19 at \$1,279.06 in the previous session. US gold futures fell 0.2 per cent to \$1,271 per ounce.

HDFC GROUP OVERTAKES TATAS IN MARKET CAPITALISATION

NEW DELHI (TIP): HDFC group, with just five firms under its fold, has outpaced Tata group to become the country's largest conglomerate in terms of market capitalisation, a sign of financial firms' rising clout in the eyes of investors. HDFC Bank, in fact, is only the third company in Indian corporate history to cross the Rs 5-lakh crore market capitalisation threshold.

At Wednesday's close, the market capitalisation of HDFC group stood at Rs 10.40 lakh crore, which is Rs 1,185 crore more than that of Tata Group, according to Bloomberg data.

The steel-to-software conglomerate was valued Rs 2.5 lakh crore higher than the HDFC pack as recently as September 2018. Mukesh Ambani-led Reliance group is third in market cap ranking at Rs 7.06 lakh crore.

Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) accounts for two-thirds of the group's market valuation. HDFC Bank has a share of 55 per cent in its group's market capitalisation. Excluding TCS, Tatas have lost about a quarter of their value so far in 2018, with Tata Motors plunging 60.4 per cent.



Shree Ganeshaya Namah

Bejan Daruwalla is world's most famous astrologer today. He appears regularly on world wide TV shows. Bejan who has been a professor in English, has authored a number of books on astrology. India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi, on March 29, 2012, lunched one of Bejan's books, '2012- End of the World? Bejan contributes to a number of journals and newspapers in many parts of the world which include Berkley Communications (London) Times of India (Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai) and The Indian Panorama (New York and Texas). Bejan's predictions have mostly been correct and people the world over rely on his predictions.



Bejan Daruwalla is available for astrological consultations. He can be reached at info@bejandaruwalla.com and on phone

**011-91-8141234275
www.bejandaruwalla.com**

WEEKLY HOROSCOPE DECEMBER 31, 2018 - JANUARY 6, 2019

Aries:

Ganesha says you live large. You look at major expansion. Business folk will be signing important deals. This is also a good time for creative folk who can monetize their talents. The self-employed garner lucrative freelance opportunities. You are also in a philanthropic mode. Your heart strings are pulled and you take time out to help with the less fortunate. You are also attracted to higher philosophies and may go searching for gurus or delve into yantra, tantra and mantra with great passion.

Taurus:

This is new energy. You want to be a winner in life and not a whiner. You are inundated with domestic responsibilities. You are concerned about the health of a parent or sibling. If it is chronic problem, it could turn critical. There are misunderstandings and secret deals. Parents, siblings, cousins and distant relatives want your time, and it is not all pleasant. Ganesha blesses you.

Gemini:

'The three grand essentials to happiness in this life are something to do, something to love, and something to hope for,' said Joseph Addison, the writer. As you go down memory lane, you look for all three. You realize that there are no regrets, but some aspects of your life need tweaking. This is also a powerfully creative phase. Writers, painters, singers and actors do exceedingly well. There is powerful bonding too as you take intimacy to ethereal heights.

Cancer:

'The miner does not sit at the top of the shaft waiting for the coal to come bubbling up to the surface. One must go deep down, and work out every vein carefully,' said Arthur Sullivan, the composer. You realize that finally it is only hard work that pays. Hard work is inspiration; it is genius. Nothing else matters. You have to get down to the slog. All else is an excuse. Ask me. How do you think I write my books? It is sheer hard work, dedication and belief.

Leo:

You look for intense and powerful experiences to learn more about yourself and the inner workings of the world and your relationship to it. This is a propitious time for serious study or investigation. You go inwards and examine your motivations. If something doesn't fit in you are prepared to make the necessary changes. There are powerful transformative and regenerative energies in your life now.

Virgo:

There is a lot of movement. There could also be international travel. You impress everyone with your ability and confidence. The employed are enriched with pay hikes and perks. You earn the respect of your peers and seniors. You also stand your ground in an affirmative yet non-antagonizing manner. You make innovative and bold plans and excel in all types of negotiations. You are also filled with compassion and help out anyone in need with material, spiritual and emotional largesse.

Libra:

You are charged and raring to go. The destination is not too clear but you are all dressed for the party. The big question is: Where is the party? And are you invited? But you are ready to gatecrash. This is a great phase for personal relationships. You are able to express your love and affection easily. You also get large doses of love in return. You seek them out and maybe plan an outing together.

Scorpio:

Your energies are high and scattered. You want to accomplish a great deal, and that is the problem. You want to do too many things at the same time. In the end, you don't achieve much because your substantial energies are diffused. Emotions also drain you. There is a dichotomy between your home and your professional life. You will have to bridge that to be more effective.

Sagittarius:

You are spurred by ambition. You don't want the crumbs. You want the big things of life. You want to reach the summit of Everest. The ordinary, everyday life is not for you. You are restless, as naked ambition overpowers you. You are filled with energy, positivity, determination and confidence. You want to reach the acme in your chosen field of activity. You realize that your limitations were of your own making and that you have it in you to be able to make a significant mark in life.

Capricorn:

The rebel in you wants expression. You are independent and rebellious and will not listen to anyone. You are in a hurry and are impatient. You want to float like a butterfly and possibly sting like a bee. You want to do away with shackles like duties and responsibilities. You want to be the wild child of the great plains all over again. You want to visit your childhood and relive the days of innocence. You want to be carefree and irresponsible.

Aquarius:

There is significant progress in your life. There is hard work and success. You make new discoveries as new windows open in your life. The adrenaline is pounding and you are filled with a sense of excitement. Your communications with others is excellent and you are brimming with startling new ideas and creativity. You think out of the box as new aspects of life open up all around you.

Pisces:

You are an overdrive. You are on a bull run and nothing can stop you now. Work is going on well and on the personal front there could be health issues that need attention. You will also be looking for freedom from constructing relationship. There are also domestic issues to handle, like children's education and the possibility of a child leaving home for higher studies. Ganesha watches over you and that is a big load off your back.

NAVAGRAHAS: THE NINE PLANETARY GODS

Just as many ancient civilizations had their own versions of astronomy, Hindus had their own version from very ancient times. The Hindu astronomy, whose origins are in the Vedas, is based upon the configuration of the nine planets (grahas) and their collective influence on the world in general and each individual in particular.

Depending upon where these planets are located at the time of a person's birth, Hindus believe that the possibilities and potentialities of his life and energies are determined well in advance. Just as many other concepts in Hinduism, the word graha has multiple meanings. The Upanishads describe the senses as grahas, since they are the grasping (grahnam) ones. The deities that preside over them are called atigrahas, or their controllers. For example the mind and the breath are considered atigrahas because you can control your senses with their help.

Who are Navagrahas?

The nine planets are collectively known as Navagrahas. They are worshipped in Hinduism for good luck or to overcome adversity, bad luck or misfortune arising from past karmas or birth related defects (dhoshas). They are found in most Hindu temples either grouped together on a panel or on a pedestal in commonly visible areas of the temple. Devotees usually propitiate these gods before offering prayers to the main deity in the sanctum sanctorum of the temple. Of the nine deities, seven are named after the planets in the solar system, and correspond with the names of the seven days in the week of the Hindu calendar.

Rahu and Ketu

The remaining two deities are actually demons who managed to gain a place in the pantheon through an act of trickery. Their names are derived from either comets or from the dark and somewhat hostile planets of the solar system (Neptune and Pluto). Depending upon their location in the planetary system and their association with the remaining deities, they are deemed either auspicious or inauspicious.

Significance in astrology

The nine planetary gods have a great significance in Vedic astrology. Hindu astrologers draw the birth charts of individuals based upon their position at the time of their birth. Depending upon where they are located in the astrological chart at a given time, they exert positive or negative influence upon people and their destinies. The position of Sani, Rahu and Ketu are especially considered important. If their positions are not favorable, astrologers suggest remedial measures to pacify the planets and ward off their negative influence.

Navagraha temples

While Navagrahas are usually found in many temples as subordinate deities, there are some temple which are exclusively built for them where they are worshipped as the main deities. One such temple is the Navagraha temple located on the banks of the river Kshipra in the outskirts of Ujjain, a famous pilgrim center of Saivism in central India. Some times we also come across temples built exclusively for only one of the Navagrahas such as the temples built for Surya and Sani in many parts of India. For example, there is a famous temple of Sani near Hindupur, which is frequented by many devotees.

Description of Navagrahas

A brief description of each of the Navagrahas is given below:

SURYA (SUN): He is the Sun god, also



called Ravi. In the company of the other planets, he generally stands in the center facing east, while the other planets stand around him in eight different directions, but none facing each other. He rides a chariot that has one wheel and pulled by seven white horses. The seven horses symbolically represent the seven colors of the white light and the seven days of the week.

CHANDRA (MOON): Also known as Soma, and probably because of his waxing and waning qualities, in the images he is never depicted in full. We see him with only his upper body from chest upwards, with two hands holding one lotus each, riding upon a chariot drawn by 10 horses.

MANGALA (MARS): Also called Angaraka, Mangala is a ferocious god with four hands. In two hands he holds weapons, generally a mace and a javelin, while the other two are held in abhaya and varada mudras. He uses ram as his vehicle.

BUDHA (MERCURY): We generally see him depicted with four hands, riding upon a chariot or a lion. Three of his hands hold a sword, a shield and a mace respectively, while the fourth one is held in the usual varada mudra (giving gesture).

BRIHASPATHI (JUPITER): Brihaspati also known as Brahmanaspati is the teacher of gods and is praised in many hymns of the Rigveda. He is generally shown with two hands, seated in a chariot driven by eight horses. The eight horses probably represent eight branches of knowledge.

SUKRA (VENUS): Sukra is the teacher of the demons and the author of Sukraniti. He is generally shown with four hands, riding upon a golden or a silver chariot drawn by eight horses. Three of his hands hold a staff, a rosary, a vessel of gold respectively while the fourth one is held in varada

mudra.

SANI (SATURN): Sani is a turbulent and troublesome god who makes and breaks fortunes by his influence and position in the planetary system for which he is invariably feared and especially worshipped by those who believe in Hindu astrology. He is generally shown with four hands riding upon a chariot, or a buffalo or a vulture. In three hands he is shown holding an arrow, a bow and a javelin respectively while the fourth one is held in varadamudra.

RAHU: His image resembles that of Budha (Mercury) in some respects but both gods differ fundamentally in their nature and temperament. He is generally shown riding a dark lion, in contrast to the white lion of Budha. But just like the other god, he carries the same weapons, namely a sword, a javelin and a shield in his three hands, while his fourth hand is held in varadamudra.

KETU: In Sanskrit Ketu (Dhuma ketu) means comet. The scriptures describe him as having the tail of a serpent as his body, a description which very much matches with his connection to the image of a comet. However in the images, he is usually shown with a poke marked body, riding upon a vulture and holding a mace.

Symbolism

Of the nine planets, only seven are actually gods and the other two, Rahu and Ketu are demons. The seven are usually spoken as planets, while the two are compared to comets and the like, having a shadowy influence upon the destinies of people. The names for the seven days in the week are derived from the planetary gods. As can be seen from their names, some of the deities included in the Navagrahas are actually Vedic gods. Most likely, the concept of Navagrahas may be a later Vedic concept.

The Navagrahas are not mentioned in the early Upanishads. The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad speaks of eight grahas and eight atigrahas in the body as the grasping deities (sense-organs) and overseeing grasping deities (sense-objects). The eight grahas who are mentioned in the Upanishad are the incoming breath (prana), speech, tongue, eye, ear, mind, hands and skin. Their overseeing grasping deities are apana (downward breath), name, taste, color, ear, desire and touch.

We do not know whether this earlier Vedic concept of grahas in the body subsequently underwent a transformation to fit into the Puranic narratives. The Navagrahas are not actual planets in the modern sense, although they are called planets. They are deities in the Cosmic Person (Purusha), with corresponding presence in the microcosm of every living being. Their positions in the body as well in the world influence the course of events both at the universal and individual planes.

The Navagraha concept justifies the idea that creation is a projection of God and its different aspects are interrelated and exert influence over each other. In the body they facilitate the working of individual karma, while in the macrocosm, the unraveling of collective karma as well as the fate of the world. Their association with the days in the week also suggest that they are manifestations or aspects of Time (Kala) only.

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"If Hindus don't maintain Hinduism, who shall save it?"

"If India's own children don't cling to their faith, who shall guard it?"

"Indians alone can save India, and India and Hinduism are one."

Books and Journals as Gifts



By Harbans Lal,
Ph.D. D.Litt. (Hons).

“

I hope that you must be sick of receiving fashion magazines and Hollywood magazines as New Year gifts. They contribute little to today's problems of humankind. A journal issue on the subject of the Guru Granth scripture and another on ghalughara of 1984 will be excellent reading material for you, your family and your friends.

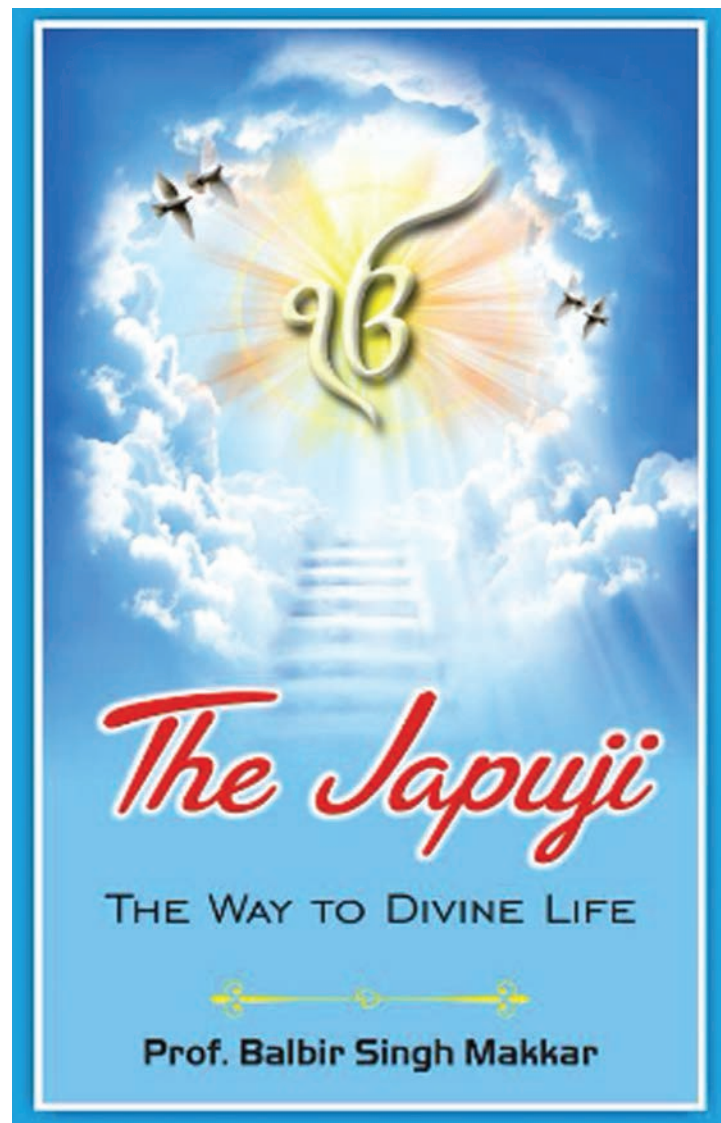
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Although every day is an occasion to exchange gifts, the new year is a unique opportunity to do so according to Western culture.

While thinking of gifts, it came to my mind that why not, this year, I share gifts of spiritual values. That way, we may create an occasion of sharing Guru's Wisdom as a new year's gift. Sharing grace and blessings of knowledge with the people around us should be a pride privilege. This is especially true on days like New Year Day.

Following this idea, I am presenting you my gifts. These are selected publications as gifts for you all, my friends, and your friends. They are all through the courtesy of the generous writers and publishers. You may feel free to share them with your friends. That should make your next year more meaningful and overwhelming with intellectual pleasure.

Everyone asks this question: "How to be truthful and live a life of goodness". Guru Nanak answers this, and other similar issues in his treatise translated and expounded most recently by Prof. Balbir Singh Makkar of Guru Nanak Dev University, Professor Devinder Singh Chahal of the Institute of Understanding Sikhism and Dr. Kulbir Singh Thind, MD.



https://seekingwisdomblog.files.wordpress.com/2018/12/Japuji_Makkar_12-2-2018.pdf

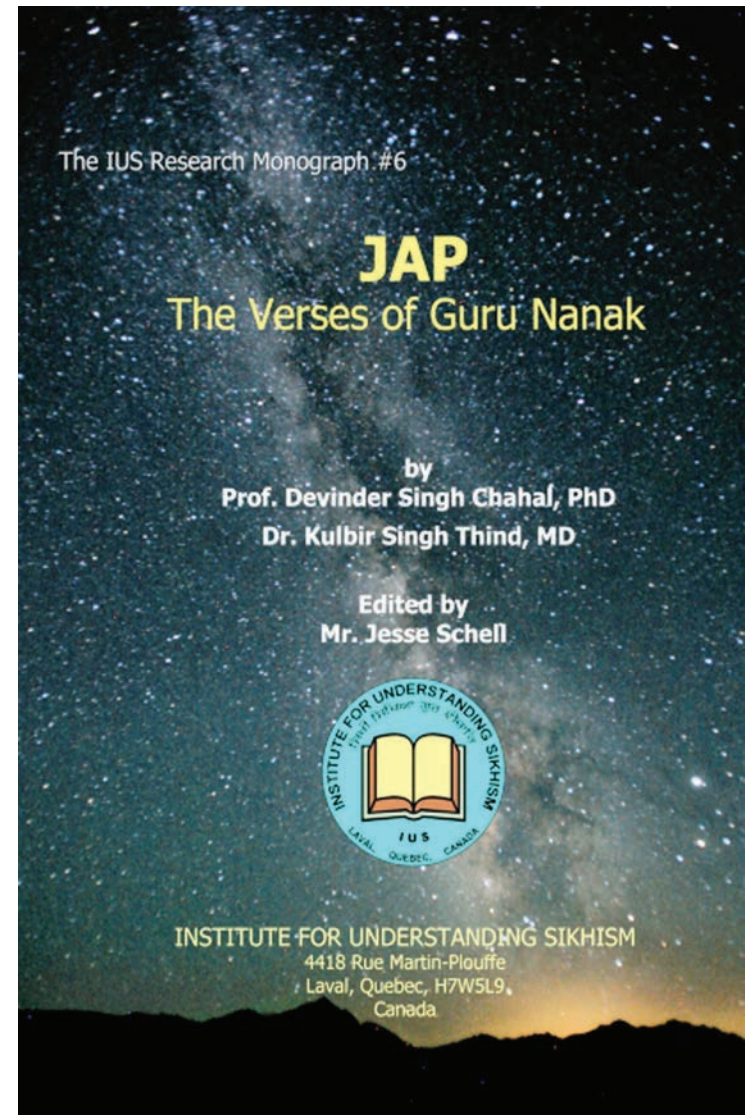
Among the world scriptures, the Japuji is considered Guru Nanak's original composition, thereby qualifying it to be the essence of Sikh thoughts and Sikh teachings. Some find it an inspiring prologue to the universal Sikh scripture, the Sri Guru Granth Sahib, as the Japuji prefaces it.

On this account, the Japuji has attracted the attention of theologians and scholars alike so that they rendered it into many world languages including Arabic, Russian, Chinese, Japanese, Spanish, Hebrew, all the European languages, and so on, and over a hundred translations into English.

The Punjabi translations dated back to the times of Guru Arjan Dev (1563 -1606); and an Arabic rendering going back to the times of Guru Nanak (1469-1539). We are indebted to Dr. Rattan Singh Jaggi and Raja Mrigindra Singh for exploring many of them and giving us a comparative overview.

With a few exceptions, the available translations are regurgitations of what has been published centuries ago. Then, some versions were just devotional, others were outlines of the philosophical traditions of the time, and still, others were the interpretations of a class of god-men and clerics who toed the themes of their times when religions

were replete with Man-Made rituals, superstitions, and beliefs in occult traditions.



https://seekingwisdomblog.files.wordpress.com/2018/12/jap2016_DS_Chahal.pdf

Until the advents of the Guru Nanak Dev University (Amritsar), the Punjabi University (Patiala), and alike, the god-men were devoid of modern education and were ill-trained to interpret Sikhism to the millennial generation. Instead, they propagated ethnocentrism and blind faith in the local lingua franca that benefited them by promoting their commercial and political interests or enterprises. Their compositions were devoid of modern exegesis of the scripture, or the practices of Sikhism as a more contemporary global dharma or religion that was initially founded for the benefit of the whole humanity. The illiterate kept on harping on the ancient concepts of orthodox schools of ancient philosophy.

More recently, Sikh academia felt challenged to the necessity of interpreting the Japuji for the Millennials. They began to make welcome efforts. I recall with appreciation, the translation and commentary of Japuji by Dr. Diwan Singh and his contemporaries as the very first ones in the new series. Professor Makkar's rendition and that of Dr. Devinder Singh Chahal are the most recent contributions.

Both of the recent translations in English are included here as the New Year gifts to all of you. Please feel free to share with your family and friends.

I hope that you must be sick of receiving fashion magazines and Hollywood magazines as New Year gifts. They contribute little to today's problems of humankind. A journal issue on the subject of the Guru Granth scripture and another on ghalughara of 1984 will be excellent reading material for you, your family and your friends. I have permission to distribute these issues widely free of cost for your reading and hopefully subscribing when you realize their worth.

Send all communications to:

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(The author is Professor Emeritus & Chairman, Dept of Pharmacology & Neurosciences, University of North Texas Health Science Center, Professor Emeritus, Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, India, and President, Academy of Guru Granth Studies)

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Donald Trump finally hews to ritual of meeting troops in harm's way

IRAQ (TIP): President Donald Trump once opined that it wasn't "overly necessary" for him to visit troops in danger zones abroad. But with the lights of Air Force One out and window shutters drawn, the president did just that, slipping into Iraq at night to greet US service members and show that his norm-busting presidency would hew at least to this tradition.

Addressing troops at an air base in western Iraq Wednesday, Trump defended his decision

to pull forces from neighbouring Syria, declaring of Islamic State militants: "We've knocked them out. We've knocked them silly."

His appraisal is at odds with that of military officials, aides and allies who consider IS a diminished but deadly force. His defence secretary and envoy to the anti-IS coalition quit after Trump blindsided much of the national security establishment with his call.

Trump had faced criticism for not yet

visiting US troops stationed in harm's way as he comes upon his two-year mark in office. George W. Bush made four trips to Iraq and two to Afghanistan as president; President Barack Obama made four to Afghanistan and one to Iraq.

Such trips are typically unannounced and the subject of extreme security. Trump's was no exception as he flew overnight from Washington, spent three-plus hours on the ground and stopped at Ramstein Air Force

Base in Germany for refuelling and to greet service members in a hangar there before leaving.

Trump told his audience in Iraq that the decision to withdraw the roughly 2,000 troops from Syria illustrated his quest to put "America first."

"We're no longer the suckers, folks," Trump said at al-Asad Air Base, about 100 miles or 60 kilometres west of Baghdad. "We're respected again as a nation." (AP)

contd from page 1

Ambassador Navtej Sarna given a warm send off : Harsh Vardhan Shringla succeeds

State for South and Central Asia, Alice Wells told the gathering that President Trump calls India a "true friend," and pointed to the two years during which the "Indo-Pacific" region was renamed, And Secretary of State Mike Pompeo "has characterized the U.S.-India bilateral relationship as one deeply bound by our shared values," Wells is quoted saying in news reports, at the event attended by top White House and State Department officials.

Both Wells and Sarna dwelt on the accomplishments of the past two years, the highlight of which was the state visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi; as well as the inauguration of the new 2+2 Dialogue on security and strategic priorities

"Under your leadership, our countries have negotiated and finalized a landmark communications compatibility and security agreement, which makes our military cooperation more profound and advanced. We have also taken significant steps to build on India's status as a US major defense partner, including elevating India to strategic trade authorization, tier one status," Wells is quoted saying in a Financial Express news report. She also praised Sarna for engaging the 3-million strong Indian-American community in the U.S., to strengthen relations.

Sarna noted that the "personal chemistry" between Modi and President Donald Trump "were so strong" and "so, so evident," resulting in the joint statement which would set the chart for bilateral relations in coming months

"We have found a huge amount of understanding for our political space, for our strategic autonomy, for the needs of our economy, for our role, for our taking into account our art history and our regional position vis a vis several other countries," Sarna is quoted saying, adding that the two countries had found ways to serve their own national interests and still grow the relationship.

Seasoned diplomat Harsh Vardhan Shringla, a 1984-batch Indian Foreign Service diplomat will succeed Navtej Sarna.

"He is expected to take up the assignment shortly," the Ministry of External Affairs said in its statement today.

At present, Mr Shringla is serving as the Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh.

Incidentally, his place in Dhaka is being taken by a senior diplomat Riva Ganguly Das, who was Consul General in New York only 2 years ago . She is presently Director General of Indian Council for Cultural Relations.

President Trump says US can't be world's policeman

their sacrifice and to wish them a Merry Christmas," White House press secretary Sarah Sanders said in a tweet.

Trump delivered a speech to around 100 uniformed service members at an air base west of Baghdad where he defended his decision to pull American troops out of Syria.

"The US cannot continue to be the policeman of the world," Trump said after he addressed American soldiers. He said the US could use Iraq as a regional launching pad to carry out operations against the IS and Syria.

Lok Sabha passes Triple Talaq Bill

The two parties through their floor leaders, Mallikarjuna Kharge and P. Venugopal of the AIADMK had earlier opposed the Bill during the debate and asked that it be referred to a

Joint Select Committee for consideration rather than be debated and passed. However, Law Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad asked members to pass the Bill citing humanitarian considerations with regard to Muslim women suffering under triple talaq.

The Bill to make the practice of triple talaq among Muslims a penal offence was introduced in the Lok Sabha on December 17 to replace an ordinance issued in September. Under the proposed law, giving instant triple talaq will be illegal and void, and will attract a jail term of three years for the husband. The fresh bill is proposed to supersede an earlier bill passed in the Lok Sabha and pending in the Rajya Sabha.

In the face of strong objections by the opposition, led by leader of the Congress legislative party in the Lok Sabha, Mallikarjuna Kharge, Mr. Prasad in his reply said as many as 477 cases of triple talaq have been reported since January 2017 with over 200 coming after the Supreme Court verdict declaring Talaq-e-Bidat as void. He explained the penal provision in the Bill as a deterrent, stating, "deterrent is also important while combating a crime."

"I am surprised that this House says that triple talaq is wrong but that it wants to keep silent on combating it. When penal provisions were introduced for the Anti-Dowry Act, this House passed such a Bill, penal provisions are there in the Domestic Violence Act as well and this House passed it. So why that objection with regard to this Bill?" asked Mr Prasad.

He said he had incorporated several suggestions made by the opposition during the debate last year on the Bill, including removal of the clause that neighbors of the victim could file a case. "Conditions for bail and mediation have also been added to the Bill as suggested by members," he said.

The Congress' attack during the debate was led by president of its women's wing Sushmita Dev who said the Bill would do nothing to ameliorate the condition of Muslim women other than saddling them with a criminal case.

"This law is not about empowering Muslim women; it is about criminalizing a Muslim man," Ms. Dev said.

N.K. Premachandran of the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) who also moved several amendments said his "strong objection was to the fact that the Bill criminalizes a civil wrong when it is not so among statutes regarding Hindu personal law or even [for] Christians."

Anwhar Raajhaa of the AIADMK demanded to know why Muslim men were being singled out for punishment under penal provisions. He also said educational and social backwardness was responsible for the condition of Muslim women far more than triple talaq. "Who will provide maintenance to the wife if the husband is in jail?" he asked.

'Targeting minorities'

All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) chief Asaduddin Owaisi in an impassioned speech, accused the government of wanting to "go after" Muslim men. "Why have you decriminalized homosexuality and criminalizing triple talaq? Because it would be used against us. Sexual minority got choice in Section 377, then why not religious minorities," Mr Owaisi said.

"If your faith is your faith, then my faith should also be my faith. Your (Government) intentions are not clean. You can bring your own law, but we will not forfeit our religion," Mr. Owaisi said.

The government also saw ministerial interjections by Minister for Minority Affairs Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi and Textile Minister Smriti Irani. "There should be fear in the hearts of those who commit this crime, and the tendency to sell fatwas (religious interpretations) on the streets like vegetables should stop. This country runs on the Constitution and not Sharia law," Mr. Naqvi said.

The Bill was passed after the Congress and AIADMK walked out and will now be tabled in the Rajya Sabha.

(Agencies)

contd from page 9

Robert Mueller is the most unknowable man in Washington

"And he has a good set of longtime friends in D.C. that he primarily socializes with. He's someone who draws a pretty firm line between work and home in terms of socializing. Part of the answer is just that the people around him don't share the things that they do with him. And he has developed a series of places that he likes to go where I think that privacy is respected - and they're also not the trendiest restaurants on 14th Street where he would be recognized."

Even the press has been unwilling to cross Mueller's invisible line. Salt Lake Tribune reporter Thomas Burr tweeted that he saw Mueller in June: "Gotta love DC. Walk into restaurant, run into the special counsel." But Burr declined to say which restaurant, despite a flurry of responses to the tweet.

Some of this is respect for Mueller. Some of this is the fear of unintentionally providing a piece of information that could compromise the Russia investigation. And some of this is just fear for Mueller himself. Given the heated rhetoric surrounding President Trump - and a gunman who shot up Comet Ping Pong over the Pizzagate conspiracy theory - friends and colleagues are reluctant to say anything that could harm him in any way.

"Bob Mueller is doing exactly the right thing by simply focusing on this investigation and trying to determine the truth," says Panetta. "I don't know what the final result is going to be, but I have a sense that whatever that final report shows that people are going to thank Bob Mueller for the way he handled this."

We asked Mueller's spokesman if he had a response to .??. well, anything. "We appreciate your reaching out," replied Carr. "But we'll decline comment at this time."

(Source: Washington Post)

contd from page 12

President Trump is destabilizing the economy, says Krishnamoorthi

The President stubbornly keeps pushing for a wall to protect himself from the far right's criticism. America needs enhanced border security using smart technology and border agents treated with respect by not being forced to work without pay during the Christmas holidays", he said.

Krishnamoorthi pledged President Trump to end the shutdown for the health and stability of nation's economy. "The stock market is in a record freefall, he is attacking the independence of the Federal Reserve, and Treasury Secretary Mnuchin called leading banks in an unsuccessful effort to stabilize the markets, all at a time when working families across the country are relying on a strong economy to start 2019. The Trump shutdown is a self-inflicted wound that puts our economy and these families in jeopardy and that damage will only grow worse if the President drags this shutdown out to January 3rd and into the new Congress."

He also feels that the shutdown will lead to thousands of Illinois workers being furloughed.

"Some 6,200 federal workers in Illinois are being furloughed or forced to work without pay over the Christmas holidays, and tours of the Lincoln Home in Springfield have stopped during the 200th birthday of the State of Illinois. The President needs to stop playing the role of the Grinch and start showing the American people he can fulfil his responsibilities as the Commander-in-Chief."

Darjeeling, nestled among rolling mountains, is a perfect destination for outdoor enthusiasts. Popular places to visit include Tiger Hill, Batasia Loop and the War Memorial, and the Himalayan Zoological Park and Snow Leopard Breeding Center. What should you bring home? Tea, tea, and more tea—and beautiful local handicrafts.

Darjeeling Himalayan Railway

The Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, also referred to as the DHR, and lovingly called the 'Toy Train', is a 2 feet narrow gauge train that runs between New Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling, in West Bengal, India. The construction of this 88-kilometre long railway line took place between 1879 and 1881, and a ride on this train route has been a coveted experience ever since. A journey in this Toy Train has amazing sights on display. Passengers on the train witness pleasing mountain views and pass by villages and local shops on the way, with children merrily waving at them. The pace of the train is so slow that local children often hop and off the moving train. Modern diesel engines that are now used are however faster and more powerful. A ride in the much-loved train is an opportunity only few would like to miss.

The Darjeeling Himalayan Railway provides significant transport links between various parts of the Darjeeling hills and lower plains and is a piece of sheer engineering inventiveness and vision. How else can a small steam engine pull mini coaches up the steep mountains by overcoming almost unfeasible curves and gradients? This is perhaps why the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway was declared as a World Heritage Site on 2 December 1999 by UNESCO. Later on, two more railway lines were added, and the site came to be known as the Mountain Railways of India. A ride on such a heritage transport is no doubt a relaxing and charming one but is also prestigious because this train is what once provided the first and most important mountain transportation link in the country.

The Toy Train Joyride

The joyride from Darjeeling up to Ghum and back is a two-hour round trip that covers a total distance of 14 kilometres. Located at the height of 2225.7 metres above the sea level, Ghum is the highest altitude station on the entire DHR track. The train stops for 10 minutes at the Batasia Loop, where it makes a loop around a beautiful and well-maintained garden. From here, one can easily get a bird's eye view of the Darjeeling town, and the snow-capped Kanchenjunga peaks. The War Memorial in honour of the Gorkha soldiers is also located here, in the centre of the garden. The train also stops for 30 minutes for a visit to the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway museum. This museum is located on the station premises and boasts of having the oldest toy train engine safely preserved here.

Tiger Hill

Lying at an altitude of 2590 meters and a distance of 13 kilometres away from the Darjeeling, Tiger Hill is most famous for its splendid sights of the morning sunrise from where you can see the peaks of Kanchenjunga illuminate before the sun is seen at lower elevations. The magnificent view of snow-capped mountains sitting amidst cotton clouds attracts tourists to Tiger Hill from all over the country. Interestingly, this is also the summit of Ghoom, which is the highest railway station in the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

This vista point of Tiger Hill is a pristine natural beauty where you can enjoy the virgin charm of Darjeeling in its most endearing form. At sunrise, the peaks of Kangchenjunga are illuminated before the sun is seen anywhere else in the city, which is

DARJEELING: THE QUEEN OF HILLS



an amazing thing to experience. Another notable thing of beauty here is the pristine natural beauty of Tiger Hill, which is enveloped in gentle verdant foliage coupled with sublime clouds in the background. The fresh morning air as you make your way to the summit is a refreshing experience away from the banter of city life.

Batasia Loop

Perhaps one of the most picturesque train routes in all of Darjeeling, the Batasia Loop is a lush green toy train pathway that is meant to minimise the elevation of the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway. The unique design of this magnificent attraction allows the track to wrap around itself through a hilltop tunnel. One of the most enchanting aspects of the Batasia Loop is its unmatched natural beauty which is a wonderful sight to behold. Located on Hill Cart Road (NH 55), you can enjoy a panoramic view of the Darjeeling in all its verdant glory.

Situated in Ghum which is about 5 kilometres from Darjeeling, the Batasia Loop was commissioned for construction in the year 1919. A memorial dedicated to the Gorkha soldiers of the Indian Army who laid down their lives during the war of Indian independence is situated close by as well. Batasia Loop rises from the midst of emerald carpets of mountain vegetation and overlooks the snowy peaks of Kanchenjunga on one side as well. Endearing flowers line the way, which makes a trip through this attraction a must after you have witnessed the fascinating sunrise of Tiger Hill. The view of the train tearing past the white of the clouds and deeper into the green beauty of the terrain is a refreshing and enchanting expedition which should not be missed.

Japanese Peace Pagoda

As you climb up from Clubside along



Gandhi and AJC Bose roads, you see this glistening white structure standing out - that's the Peace Pagoda. The Peace Pagoda,

one of the 70 odd such structures built under the guidance of Japanese monk Nichidatsu Fujii, is worth a visit during the daily pujas.

AUS 151 ALL OUT, BUMRAH PICKS SIX WICKETS

MELBOURNE (TIP): Jasprit Bumrah scalped his sixth wicket of the day as Australia was dismissed for 151 in reply to India's 443/7 declared in the first innings of the third Test in Melbourne.

Jos Hazlewood was the last Australian wicket to fall as he is castled by the India pacer. Meanwhile, India did not opt to enforce the follow-on.

On day 2 of the Test match, Cheteshwar Pujara produced yet another classy hundred, combining with captain Virat Kohli (82) to put India in command. After India declared at 443/7, Australia responded with 8/0 in six overs. Pujara was the dominant figure of the day for India with his second century of the series, a dogged, faultless 106 off 319 balls which helped India consolidate the good start they had got yesterday.

However, it was Pujara's slowest century in Test cricket yet, coming off 280 balls. India's scoring rate today was a shade over 2.82 runs an over, significantly higher than the 2.41 they recorded yesterday in scoring 215/2. The overall scoring rate was 2.61 an over.

Kohli's record

Kohli's knock helped him to a personal milestone as he surpassed Rahul Dravid for the highest number of runs in a calendar year in overseas Tests. Dravid had notched up 1137 overseas runs in 2002, while Kohli now has 1138 overseas runs this year.

Pat Cummins was the pick of the Australian bowlers, with 3/72 in a back-breaking effort of 34 overs.

It was a solid batting effort by the Indians, something that was emphasised endlessly by Kohli in his pre-match statements. What stood out for the visitors was the patience they showed in the first two sessions, which ultimately left them in an assured position at close.

Pujara 100

In the morning session, Pujara scored



his 17th hundred as India reached 277/2 at lunch. Starting at the overnight 215/2, India looked ready for another hard day's grind, with Kohli reaching his 20th Test half-century, off 110 balls, in the very first over of the day.

The two batsmen scored quickly in the first hour and kept the scorecard ticking over, before Australia went back to their tactic of choking the flow of runs.

Cummins bowled another wonderful spell, extracting more out of the pitch than any other Australian bowler, and he beat the edges of both batsmen on a couple occasions, but without luck. Lyon bowled with a predominantly leg-side field and into the batsmen. His duel with Pujara was entertaining as the batsman kept turning him to the onside again and again, whilst stepping out on occasion to play him through the offside.

After lunch, Kohli-Pujara took their partnership to 170 runs before the game turned. The skipper took medication for back trouble and then stepped up the scoring, striking Mitchell Starc for two fours in the 123rd over. But going for another boundary, he cut a short ball cut

straight to third man.

Three overs later, Pujara got a delivery from Cummins that kept a tad low and knocked back his stumps, and India were suddenly reduced to 299/4. Rahane then took charge and played a breezy knock, not allowing the Australian attack to get on top. In comparison, Rohit was more sedate and took his time at the crease.

Dropped catches

After tea, India were helped by a string of fielding errors by Australia. The home side missed three easy catches, all off Nathan Lyon (1/110), in what proved to be a frustrating 48 overs from him. First, in the 147th over, substitute Peter Siddle dropped Rohit (on 15) at backward square leg. Next ball, Ajinkya Rahane (on 32) got lucky when Travis Head was caught napping at short leg when the ball sailed past him.

Rishabh Pant (39) played an uncharacteristically defensive innings, and the only aerial stroke he played was in the 159th over off Lyon, when Cummins dropped the catch at long on. He was on 15 then.



Bumrah breaks 39-year-old Indian record at the MCG

MELBOURNE (TIP): Fast-bowler Jasprit Bumrah has added a new feather into his illustrious cap after he broke a 39-year-old Indian record during the third day of the third Test against Australia at the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG) on Friday.

Bumrah was chief architect of Australia's top-order collapse in the first two sessions of the day and because of his exploits, the star pacer has now surpassed Dileep Doshi to take the top spot in the list of most wickets taken by an Indian bowler in debut calendar year.

Travis Head became Bumrah's 41st scalp of the calendar year after he was comprehensively castled by the India pacer. Before this, Bumrah had picked up the wickets of Marcus Harris and Shaun Marsh in the first session of the day.

Following Bumrah's dismissal of Head, former Australia skipper Michale Clarke heaped praise on the Indian seamer and said that he will go onto become the top-ranked bowler in the longest format as well.

"He (Jasprit Bumrah) must be a great guy to play with and to captain. He doesn't mind the pressure or the expectations. He wants to learn and is a workhorse. Not too long before he will become the best bowler in the world," Clarke said while commentating during the match for the official broadcasters.

New Zealand Vs Sri Lanka



BOULT TAKES 6 WICKETS FOR 4 RUNS IN 15 BALLS TO DISMANTLE SRI LANKA

CHRISTCHURCH (TIP): A sublime six-wicket haul by Trent Boult and half centuries from Tom Latham and Jeet Raval gave New Zealand a vice-like grip on the second Test against Sri Lanka in Christchurch on Thursday.

At the close of the second day, New Zealand were 231 for two, holding a commanding 305-run lead in their second innings with eight wickets in hand.

Sri Lanka's hopes of taking the series-deciding Test were severely dented in a 15-ball master class of swing bowling from Boult when he took six wickets for four runs.

It gave New Zealand a 74-run first-innings lead, which Latham and Raval extended to 195 with a century opening stand.

Kane Williamson and Latham added a further 68 for the second wicket until Williamson played a lazy shot to Lahiru Kumara and was caught at first slip for 48.

At the close of the second day, Latham was on 74 with Ross Taylor on 25. Latham, who starred in the first Test with an unbeaten double century, has faced 213 deliveries.

He received a life on 32 when he top-edged Suranga Lakmal to fine leg where the ball slipped through the fingers of a diving Dushmantha Chameera.

Shastri hits back at Aus commentator for jibe against Mayank Agarwal

MELBOURNE (TIP): India head coach Ravi Shastri hit back as Australia commentator Kerry O'Keefe for his unsavoury comments against opener Mayank Agarwal during the first day of the third Test at the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG).

O'Keefe — who was commentating for the official broadcasters — had taken a dig at debutant Agarwal by saying that he scored a triple century against Railways 'canteen staff' in the Ranji Trophy.

"Apparently, he (Mayank Agarwal) got a triple (ton) against the railways canteen staff," O'Keefe said on-air. Agarwal had hit a scintillating triple century (304*) against Maharashtra while playing for Karnataka at the Maharashtra Cricket Association stadium in Pune in the 2017 edition of the Ranji Trophy.

After the completion of day two of the Test, Shastri was called by the official broadcasters for an interview with respect to India's position in the MCG Test and that is when the India coach 'delivered' a message to O'Keefe from Agarwal.

"Let's not take it from (Mayank Agarwal). India could have easily been three down for 80 and it would have been a different ball game," Shastri told Fox Sports.

"He dug deep and he's got a message for Kerry — when you do open your canteen, he wants to come and smell the coffee. And



Mayank Agarwal sparkled on his Test debut with a fine 76.

he wants to compare it to the ones back home in India. Is the coffee better here in your canteen, or the one back home?"

Legendary Australia spinner Shane Warne, who was seated on the right of O'Keefe, burst in laughter upon hearing Shastri's words.

O'Keefe had already apologised for his remarks after he received heavy backlash from fans on social media.

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