

INCIDENT OF FIRE AT RESIDENCE OF JUSTICE YASHWANT VARMA

Collegium favours transfer of Delhi HC judge after report of cash at his home

HCCJ sends report; Dhankhar says if it's a politician, targeted immediately

Justice Varma stays away from court, police & fire service silent on incident

ANANTHAKRISHNAN G & ABHINAYA HARIGOVIND
NEW DELHI, MARCH 21

THE SUPREME Court Collegium has proposed the transfer of Delhi High Court judge Justice Yashwant Varma to the Allahabad High Court, his parent High Court, following a report about cash at his New Delhi residence where a fire broke out on March 14.

In a statement Friday, the Supreme Court Registry said the Collegium's "proposal for the transfer of Mr Justice Yashwant



Justice Yashwant Varma

Varma, who is the second senior most Judge in the Delhi High Court and a member of the Collegium, to his parent High Court i.e. the High Court of Judicature at Allahabad, where he will be ninth in seniority, is independent and separate from the in-house enquiry procedure"

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

SOHINI GHOSH, ALOK SINGH & AJJOY SINHA KARPURAM

NEW DELHI, MARCH 21

DELHI HIGH Court judge Justice Yashwant Varma, the subject of an in-house inquiry by the High Court following a report about cash at his New Delhi residence where a fire broke out on March 14, did not attend court Friday.

In oral remarks, Chief Justice D K Upadhyaya said the court was "conscious" when a senior

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2



The official residence of Delhi High Court judge Justice Yashwant Varma in New Delhi on Friday. *Praveen Khanna*

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Can't So Then You Have To Increase Your Efforts

Follow local laws: MEA on Srinivasan's exit; US court blocks Suri's deportation

SHUBHAJIT ROY
NEW DELHI, MARCH 21

DAYS AFTER Ranjani Srinivasan, an Indian PhD student in Columbia University, "self-deported" after her US visa was revoked, the government said Friday that Indian nationals in foreign countries must "comply with local laws and regulations". This clearly indicates that Delhi has distanced itself from her activities there.

Srinivasan's visa was revoked

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EXPLAINED
E Campuses feel the heat

THE TRUMP administration is cracking down on foreign nationals involved in last year's protests on campuses across the US, including Columbia University, against Israel's war in Gaza, equating it with support for Hamas.

FROM PAGE ONE

FULL REPORTS ON
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Collegium favours transfer of HC judge

initiated by the Chief Justice of Delhi High Court upon receiving information about the incident.

The statement, while noting the “misinformation and rumours being spread” regarding the incident at the residence of Justice Varma, said, “The Chief Justice of the Delhi High Court, who had commenced his enquiry prior to the Collegium meeting on 20th March 2025, will be submitting his report to the Chief Justice of India today i.e. on 21st March 2025. The report will be examined and processed for further and necessary action.”

Late Friday, it was learnt that the High Court CJ’s report had been sent.

The SC Collegium met Thursday evening and decided to recommend the transfer of Justice Varma back to Allahabad High Court. Highly-placed sources said the five-member Collegium considered the transfer after they were apprised about a video of the incident at Justice Varma’s residence.

After the CJ explained what had happened, the judges agreed that Justice Varma should be transferred out, said a source aware of the developments.

The statement from the Registry said “the proposal was examined by the Collegium comprising the Chief Justice of India and four senior most Judges of the Supreme Court on 20th March 2025, and thereafter letters were written to the consultee Judges of the Supreme Court, the Chief Justices of the High Courts concerned and Justice Yashwant Varma. Responses received will be examined and, thereupon, the Collegium will pass a resolution.”

Calls and text messages Friday to Justice Varma’s office and staff by *The Indian Express* did not elicit a response.

These developments, apart from creating ripples in legal circles, echoed in Parliament Friday when Vice President and Rajya Sabha Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar, referring to the incident involving cash at the residence of the judge, said “if the malaise had been dealt with, perhaps we would not have countenanced such kind of issues”.

“What bothers me is that the incident happened and did not immediately surface,” he said in Rajya Sabha.

Dhankhar referred to the National Judicial Appointments Commission (NJAC) Act, cleared by Parliament in 2014 and struck down by the Supreme Court in 2015. “That historic legislation endorsed by this Parliament with unprecedented consensual support unknown to parliamentary history of this country dealt with the malaise very severely,” he said. His remarks came after Congress MP Jairam Ramesh raised the matter of cash at the residence of the judge, and requested that Dhankhar “make some observations and give necessary directions to the government to come up with a proposal for increasing judicial accountability”.

If it happens again, it becomes a matter of trust, an industrially. And the judicial response will be different, account-ant, sure will be found a mechanism for a structured discussion on the matter after con-

sulting the Leader of the House and the Leader of the Opposition.

Ramesh had also raised the matter of Rajya Sabha MPs having submitted a notice regarding remarks made by a judge of the Allahabad High Court. In December last year, 55 Opposition MPs had given notice for moving a motion to impeach Allahabad High Court judge Justice Shekhar Kumar Yadav for engaging in “hate speech”.

On this, Dhankhar said he had “taken all necessary steps” to get the verification of the members who signed the notice. He said he had a “concern” — of the 55 members who signed the representation, “a member’s signature appears on two occasions and the member concerned has denied his signature”.

“Now I do not wish to get into this act which may graduate to culpability of a higher level. If the number is above 50, I will proceed accordingly. Therefore, most of the members have cooperated... the process will not be delayed at my level even for a moment,” he said.

● Judge stays away from court, police & fire service silent on incident

lawyer brought up the issue surrounding the incident and the proposal for the transfer of Justice Varma.

Senior Advocate Arun Bhardwaj, appearing before the CJ’s bench, said, “Today’s incident has pained many of us. Please take some steps on the administrative side so that these incidents do not happen in future and the truthfulness of the judicial system is maintained... We are shaken and demoralised.”

At this, CJ Upadhyaya told Bhardwaj, “So is everybody... We are conscious.”

Bharadwaj said he was expressing the “feeling of many of my brother lawyers”.

Calls and text messages to Justice Varma’s office and staff by *The Indian Express* for comment did not elicit a response.

Officers in the Delhi Fire Service and the Delhi Police remained tightlipped about the March 14 incident at the official residence of Justice Varma.

A Delhi Fire Service report on the incident merely stated that the fire was in “stationery and domestic articles”.

Asked about the incident, Delhi Fire Service chief Atul Garg said his personnel doused the fire within a few minutes. Asked about the cash at the judge’s residence, he said, “We do not have any information on this.”

Sources said a security person deployed at the judge’s official residence informed the Fire department and local police about the fire incident at 11.30 pm on March 14. “Soon after receiving the information, a team of police officers from the Tughlak Road police station and officials from the Delhi Fire Service reached the spot,” a source said.

According to the DFS report, the Safdarjung Fire Station received the call at 11.35 on March 14.

Sources in Delhi Police said a DD (daily diary) entry was made about the incident since no complaint of any foul play was received.

Justice Varma was appointed as a judge of the Delhi High Court on October 11, 2021, nearly seven years after he was elevated as judge at his parent court, Allahabad High Court.

At Delhi HC, on the administrative side, Justice Varma is part of at least 11 committees. This includes the ‘administrative and general supervision committee’, as well as ‘Committee for Finance and Budgeting and for sanction of contingent expenditure and writing off losses exceeding Rs 5 lakh’. He is the chairman of the arbitration Committee of the Delhi International Arbitration Centre, and also of the Delhi HC Legal Services Committee

He was also among the three judges part of the permanent committee, headed by former Delhi HC Chief Justice Manmohan, which decided on the conferment of designated senior advocates at Delhi HC last year.

He pursued law at Madhya Pradesh and enrolled as an advo-

cate in 1992. In his practice at Allahabad HC, he dealt with constitutional, labour and industrial legislations, as well as corporate laws and taxation. As a judge at Allahabad HC, in the seven-year tenure, Justice Varma presided over various jurisdictions including constitutional law, taxation, arbitration and criminal matters.

He became an additional judge of the Allahabad HC in October 2014, and a permanent judge in February 2016.

In 2018, Justice Varma granted bail to Dr Kafeel Khan who had been accused of medical negligence by the UP government after 63 children and 18 adults died due to alleged failure to provide medical oxygen a year earlier.

In his nearly three-and-half year tenure at the Delhi HC, Justice Varma has decided on several important taxation-related cases, including the decision to reject the Congress plea challenging the tax-reassessment proceedings initiated against the party in March 2024.

● Follow local laws, says MEA

on March 5 by the Trump administration for allegedly “advocating for violence and terrorism” by supporting Hamas, and she left the US on March 11.

Responding to questions, Randhir Jaiswal, spokesperson for the Ministry of External Affairs, said, “When it comes to visa and immigration policy, it is something that lies within the sovereign functions of a country. We, on our side, expect that when we have foreign nationals coming to India, they abide by our laws and regulations, and similarly, it is our expectation that when Indian nationals are abroad, they must also comply with local laws and regulations.”

On the detention of Badar Khan Suri, a postdoctoral fellow at Georgetown University, Jaiswal said, “This particular individual who has been detained, neither the US government, nor this individual has approached us or the embassy.”

Meanwhile, a US federal judge has blocked the deportation of Suri, accused by federal authorities of “actively spreading Hamas propaganda”.

PTI adds from New York: In a court order dated March 20, United States District Judge Patricia Tolliver Giles said, “It is ordered that petitioner shall not be removed from the United States unless and until the court issues a contrary order.”

A senior Department of Homeland Security spokesperson earlier said in a statement to PTI that “Suri was a foreign exchange student at Georgetown University actively spreading Hamas propaganda and promoting anti-semitism on social media. Suri has close connections to a known or suspected terrorist, who is a senior advisor to Hamas.”

“The Secretary of State issued a determination on March 15, 2025 that Suri’s activities and presence in the United States rendered him deportable.”

Suri’s lawyer Hassan Ahmad had filed a petition for a writ of habeas corpus on March 18. According to the petition, the Department of Homeland Security had arrested and charged Suri with “removability” on March 17.

At the time of filing, Suri alleged he was being detained at the Farmville Detention Center in Farmville, Virginia, Giles’ order had noted.

Suri’s lawyer said he and his team are working “diligently” to secure his client’s removal from the detention facility.

“We welcome Judge Giles’ ruling,” Ahmad said in a statement to CNN. “It is the first due process Dr Suri has received since he was snatched away from his family on Monday night.”

A report in *Politico* had said that Suri, who was studying and teaching on a student visa, was “detained by federal immigration authorities amid the Trump administration’s crackdown on student activists whom the government accuses of opposing American foreign policy.” The report said that “masked agents” arrested Suri from outside his home in Virginia Monday night.

Suri’s lawyer said in the petition that he is being punished “because of the Palestinian heritage of his wife — who is a US citizen — and because the government suspects that he and his wife oppose US foreign policy toward Israel.”

The petition says the couple has “long been doxxed and smeared” on anonymously run, far-right websites due to their support for Palestinian rights. The petition adds that Suri’s wife Mapheze Saleh has been alleged to have “ties with Hamas” and once worked for Al Jazeera.

KEY MEETING WITH CM, HEALTH MINISTER

Ahead of Ayushman Bharat rollout, medical body flags ‘payment delays, low tariffs’

ANKITA UPADHYAY
NEW DELHI, MARCH 21

DELAYS IN payment to health-care providers, and low tariffs for medical procedures are some of the potential challenges that have been flagged by doctors from across Delhi in the implementation of Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (AB-PMJAY), the central government’s flagship health-care scheme, in the Capital.

The concern has been raised ahead of the signing of an MoU between the Delhi government and the Centre on April 10 to implement the scheme in the national capital. The scheme’s implementation was among BJP’s key poll promises in its manifesto for the Assembly polls. A group of doctors from the Delhi Medical Association (DMA) met Chief Minister and Health Minister Dr Pankaj Singh on Friday where the issue of the delay in payment to the healthcare providers was discussed at length. The group of doctors said that payments to health care organisations (HCOs) are long delayed under the scheme. It should be done in a time-bound manner, they said.

The doctors also discussed the issue of tariffs under the scheme, saying that these were too low for a place like Delhi.

“These will be unsustainable by our healthcare providers because of high infrastructure costs and manpower,” said the delega-



A group of doctors from the Delhi Medical Association met CM and Health Minister Dr Pankaj Singh in Delhi on Friday. Express

tion during its meeting. Dr Alok Bhandari, president, Delhi Medical Association, said the delegation requested for a joint committee to sort out the issues. “One size cannot fit all. The Ayushman Bharat has to be modified to be implemented in Delhi. There are adverse experiences in many places where payments have been delayed. Payment should be commensurate with the services expected...,” he said, adding that in the meeting with the CM and Health Minister, the delegation requested to discuss the scheme before giving blanket orders and rolling the scheme out.

DMA has over 20,000 doctors associated with it from private hospitals, nursing homes, and government hospitals across Delhi. It also requested a structured onboarding framework to facilitate wider adoption and ensure that many patients benefit from the scheme. It said that the

process for empanelment and reimbursement needs streamlining, ensuring timely payments and reduced procedural burdens for hospitals. It has also proposed setting up a joint working group between the Health Department and representatives of private healthcare establishments to ensure the successful implementation of Ayushman Bharat.

The newly-formed BJP government plans to enroll at least one lakh beneficiaries under the scheme within 30 days as part of its 100-day agenda. The scheme aims to provide annual health coverage of Rs 5 lakh per family.

Under the scheme, an estimated 6.54 lakh of the poorest families in Delhi will receive health coverage up to Rs 5 lakh. Moreover, 4.5 lakh families with people over the age of 70 — some of whom may already be eligible for cover as per their economic status — are also likely to benefit.

US told us did not instruct deportees to remove head coverings: Govt in LS

Strongly registered concerns with US over treatment of deportees, says MoS

DIVYA GOYAL GOPAL
LUDHIANA, MARCH 21

THE UNITED STATES has conveyed to India that the deportees on board the three flights to the country were not asked to remove their religious head coverings, the Union government told Lok Sabha Friday.

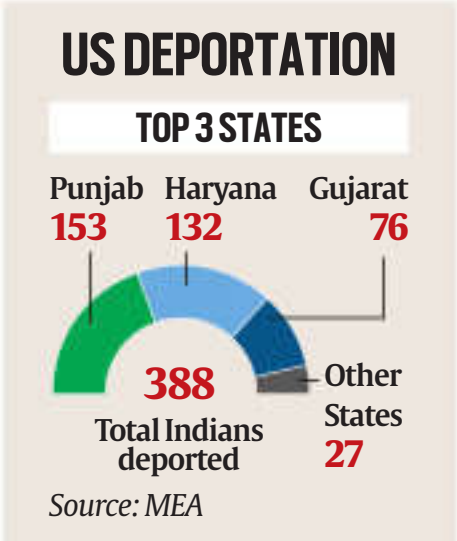
The statement comes after the row over several Sikh deportees allegedly landing at Amritsar airport without their turbans.

The deportees, as well as Punjab NRI affairs minister Kuldeep Singh Dhaliwal, had alleged that their turbans were removed before they boarded the three military flights to India.

In a written response to a query by Lok Sabha MP Raja Ram Singh, Minister of State for External Affairs Kirti Vardhan Singh said the MEA had registered its concerns regarding the need to accommodate the religious sensitivities and food preferences of the deportees.

"The US side has conveyed to the Ministry of External Affairs that detainees on the three de-

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portation flights (that landed on 5th, 15th and 16th February) were not instructed to remove any religious head coverings and that the detainees did not request any religious accommodations during the flights aside from requesting vegetarian meals," the reply said.

The minister also said India has "strongly registered" its concerns with US authorities on the treatment of the deportees who arrived on February 5 – "particularly with respect to use of shackles, especially on women". The first batch of deportees, including women, had landed in India with shackles, sparking an

uproar in the country.

Singh said no women or children were restrained on the next two deportation flights.

The reply stated: "The US Standard Operating Procedure to organise and execute deportations effective from November 2012 calls for the use of restraints on deportees. The US authorities have conveyed that restraints are applied to ensure the safety and security of the mission. While women and minors are generally not shackled, the flight officer in charge of a deportation flight has the final say on the matter."

To a query by MP Kathir Anand, the ministry said at least 295 more Indian nationals were set to be deported from the US. "The Ministry of External Affairs, along with other concerned agencies, is currently verifying the details of these 295 individuals," the reply said.

Since Donald Trump became US President this year, 388 Indians have been deported from the US, mostly in February. Of the 388, at least 153 are from Punjab.

Replying to a query by

Congress leader Manish Tewari, the MEA said that the deportations this year are part of larger "National Security Initiative" of the White House, adding that under this process, the deportees are placed for "expedited removal".

On a query by Bathinda MP Harsimrat Kaur Badal on why Punjab's Amritsar airport was chosen for the landings, the minister said: "US aircraft ferrying deportees have landed in India after securing necessary permissions. The landing site for any repatriation flight carrying deportees is decided based on operational convenience, the specific route for entry into Indian air space, and particularly, proximity to final destinations of the arriving deportees."

On February 6, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar had said in a statement in Rajya Sabha that the government is engaging with the US to ensure that deported Indians are not mistreated.

Between 2009 and 2024, the US deported 15,564 Indians through chartered and commercial flights.

Action taken against officials in 12 states for irregularities in Jal Jeevan: Minister

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, MARCH 21

ADMITTING THAT some of the complaints of "wrongdoing" in the Jal Jeevan Mission were genuine, Jal Shakti Minister C R Patil Friday informed Lok Sabha that action had been taken against the officials involved in 12 states.

In his reply to the discussion on the Demand for Grants for the Jal Shakti Ministry, the Minister said some of the complaints from MPs of irregularities were genuine. "Whether it was a BJP-ruled or non-BJP ruled state, we didn't spare anyone," he said.

He said inquiries were initiated against 256 officials and 26,455 departmental actions were initiated as well. Patil added that the Ministry would establish accountability for any wrongdoing, present or past.

The Minister said despite water being a state subject, the Centre was working to strengthen states and provide them resources for water sector. He said the percentage of households with access to tap water had increased from 17% in 2019, when the Jal Jeevan Mission was launched, to 80% or

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Union Minister C R Patil in Lok Sabha on Friday. PTI

15 crore this year.

He said the government was working on building consensus among states for river-linking projects. On the Ken-Betwa linking project, he said work would be completed by 2030. He said the water quality in the Ganga had improved over the past few years, leading to dolphins being spotted. In all, he said 30 rivers had been identified for linking and detailed project reports had been drafted for 11 of them.

Several Opposition MPs raised concerns over the progress of Jal Jeevan Mission. Congress's Prabha Mallikarjun said the water table was depleting and "millions lack drinking water". Lok Sabha later approved the demand for grants for the Ministry.

8 GOVT & POLITICS

Expect US to act on designating SFJ as terrorist outfit: MEA

SHUBHAJIT ROY
NEW DELHI, MARCH 21

INDIA EXPECTS the US to take “appropriate action” on its request to designate the pro-Khalistan separatist group Sikhs for Justice (SFJ) as a “terrorist outfit”, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said Friday.

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh had conveyed the request during a meeting this month with Tulsi Gabbard, Director of National Intelligence in the US administration.

MEA spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said Friday: “We conveyed our concerns regarding... anti-India activities of secessionist elements in Washington, and it is our expectation that they will take appropriate action on this.”

He said Singh discussed security and defence cooperation with Gabbard. She also met with EAM S Jaishankar and National Security Adviser Ajit Doval. Singh had conveyed SFJ’s links with terrorist groups and Pakistan’s spy agency, ISI, during his meeting with Gabbard, sources had said.

This assumes significance since Gabbard also attended the conference of intelligence chiefs Sunday which was hosted by Ajit

Doval, Research & Analysis Wing Chief Ravi Sinha and Intelligence Bureau director Tapan Deka.

It was also attended by Canada’s CSIS chief Daniel Rogers, UK’s National Security Advisor Jonathan Powell and New Zealand’s intelligence head Andrew Hampton — all part of the Five Eyes, the intelligence-sharing alliance of US, UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. A senior intelligence official from Australia was present.

That this request to designate SFJ as a terror organisation has come at a time when India is still confronting allegations of an assassination plot against SFJ leader Gurpatwant Singh Pannun in a US court, and there is an ongoing investigation by Canadian authorities into the killing of another Khalistan separatist Hardeep Singh Nijjar in Canada, makes it an important element in Indo-US ties under the Trump 2.0 administration.

Intelligence about the Nijjar plot was shared among the Five Eyes partners.

India has called allegations of killing Nijjar “absurd”.

Gabbard’s office said in a Friday: “Gabbard’s meetings in India focused on intelligence-sharing, defence, counterterrorism, and transnational threats.”

India hopes to rebuild ties with Canada, says ‘licence’ to extremists was behind downturn

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, MARCH 21

INDIA ON Friday said it hopes to rebuild ties with Canada based on “mutual trust and sensitivity”, blaming the downturn in the relations to the “licence” that was given to the “extremist and secessionist elements” in that country.

India’s comments came days after Mark Carney, an economist and political newcomer, took charge as Canada’s new prime minister following the exit of Justin Trudeau. Carney has said he wants to improve the ties.

Ministry of External Affairs

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spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said: “The downturn in India-Canada relations was caused by the license that was given to the extremist and secessionist elements in that country.”

Canadian intelligence chief Daniel Rogers visited India last week to attend a conclave of top intelligence czars, an indication of efforts to improve ties.

The ties between India and Canada came under severe strain following Trudeau’s allegations in September 2023 over the killing of Khalistani separatist Hardeep Singh Nijjar on Canadian soil. New Delhi rejected Trudeau’s charges.

Days to go for Trump tariffs, India says trade framework talks on

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, MARCH 21

WITH JUST 11 days left for the Trump administration’s tit-for-tat tariffs to kick in, India Friday said its negotiations with the US are underway to build a framework for a trade pact that would address issues relating to levies and market access.

India remains engaged with the US administration at “various levels” to arrive at a mutually-beneficial trade agreement, Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said.

“India and the US are in the process of taking bilateral trade negotiations forward,” he said.

US President Donald Trump indicated on Wednesday that Washington will not spare India from the new tariff regime from April 2, saying he has a “very good” relationship with New Delhi and has a “problem” with its tariff structure.

Pressed further on whether India is expecting some concession from the reciprocal tariff, Jaiswal said, “You will have to wait for the talks to come to a closure.”

“The two governments are actively working to build a framework for the BTA, which would aim to expand trade, enhance market access, reduce tariff and non-tariff barriers and deepen supply-chain integration,” he said.

Chhattisgarh’s new surrender policy for Maoists: Free food, cash, skill & shelter

JAYPRAKASH S NAIDU
RAIPUR, MARCH 21

AS ANTI-MAOIST operation in Chhattisgarh intensifies, Home Minister Vijay Sharma has announced a new ‘Surrender and Rehabilitation Policy’ for surrendered red rebels – provision of free food, shelter, cash, skills, land and a home.

Addressing a press conference in Raipur, Sharma called this the “best policy in the country” that will lead to “many surrenders”. The announcement comes a day after 30 Maoists were killed in two separate encounters in Bastar.

Sharma said a district level committee was being set up to determine whether the person surrendering was indeed a Maoist.

“Once that is decided, for three years, shelter and food will be free for three years. They will receive ₹10,000/month, will undergo skill development and will get a land and home under the Prime Minister housing scheme. They will get extra benefits for bringing a weapon and they will also get the bounty amount they have on their arrest,” he said.

For mass surrenders, the reward will be doubled. A gram panchayat that is declared “Maoist-free” will have

development projects worth ₹1 crore “immediately” sanctioned. “The village will get a mobile network, electric line and in the meantime solar light. This is being done to ensure mass surrenders,” the home minister said. “There are also provisions for married couples and for their children.”

Under the new rehabilitation policy, the state will sponsor the education of children who have lost parents to “Naxal violence”.

“Those displaced due to Naxalism will get monetary aid and land,” Sharma said.

The speech comes a day after 30 Maoists were killed in two separate encounters in Bastar: 26 in Bijapur and four in Kanker. A jawan, Raju Oyam of the specialised District Reserve Guard, was also killed in the encounter.

According to Sharma, the 26 Maoists killed in Bijapur had gathered as part of their Tactical Counter Offensive Campaign (TCOC) meeting. TCOC is a period between March and June.

According to IGP (Bastar Range) Sundarraaj P, two senior Maoist cadre leaders — Lokesh, the Platoon Commander of PLGA Company No. 5 and Sitto Kadi, a divisional committee member — were killed in the encounter. There was a bounty of ₹8 lakh on them.



SANJAY SRIVASTAVA

They may not be an aberration. They could be consequences of real aspects of American identity

THE GERMAN POLITICAL philosopher Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) — the author of the influential book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* — considered that of all the major world powers, only the United States had never been an imperialist one. This perspective, as has sometimes been pointed out, was linked to Arendt's vision of the US as a key site of anti-totalitarianism. It also blinded Arendt, as has also been suggested, to the politics of race and racism in that country. As a German Jew, she fled Germany to escape the very real dangers to her life posed by anti-Semitism, arriving in the US in early 1941. For Arendt, it was unthinkable that the political and social life of the country that had given her shelter from Nazi Germany could, in any way, be linked to global histories of colonialism and empire. The American context of race relations, she was to suggest, had little to do with the histories of Europe's interactions with Africa. Arendt delinked African-American resistance movements — and America — from global trends.

The Arendt conundrum — thinking globally about totalitarianism but locally about what happens in America — lies at the heart of recent episodes of deportations of those accused of “anti-Semitic” and “pro-terrorist” sympathies under the second Trump presidency. Of the several cases that are in the news, three have gained particular media prominence. Doctoral student Ranjani Srinivasan has had to leave the country, doctor and professor Rasha Alawieh has been deported and Green Card holder Mahmoud Khalil is in detention. Each of them has been accused of sympathising with — what the current American dispensation considers — “terrorist” activities. The equation of any criticism of the state of Israel with anti-Semitism is, of course, an important background to these current events. These, in turn, have become interwoven with ideas of “national security” and “public safety”. “National security” and political ideologies are, as we know in India, entangled contexts.

The first aspect of the Arendt conundrum is, of course, an important background to these current events. These, in turn, have become interwoven with ideas of “national security” and “public safety”. “National security” and political ideologies are, as we know in India, entangled contexts.

The 18th-century Alien Enemies Act that finds such great favour with the current American president was formulated for use under conditions of war. However, given the historical development of Americanism as a self-contained fortress-culture, it is not surprising that there is no mass opposition to its deployment. Fortresses are invariably imagined as under threat of invasion and siege.

concerns American identity. If you consider its global footprint, American identity is arguably the most successful of all national identities. No other culture has achieved such transnational impact. If there is something called “global culture”, it is American. Financially, militarily or culturally, no other society has such an extraordinary global footprint. One way or another, in different ways, the contemporary human condition is American. And yet, just as strangely, notwithstanding the universality of American culture — and the self-confident identity it is linked to — it derives its meaning from unshakeable provincialism. For many Americans — President Donald Trump may believe the majority — the deportations may not seem problematic since American culture has historically been imagined as entirely self-contained and self-defined.

Expulsions from America are not a Republican phenomenon. They are an American phenomenon. The 18th-century Alien Enemies Act that finds such great favour with the current American president was formulated for use under conditions of war. However, given the historical development of Americanism as a self-contained fortress-culture, it is not surprising that there is no mass opposition to its deployment. Fortresses are invariably imagined as under threat of invasion and siege.

The second Arendt conundrum is the deep self-professed nature of American individualism and its apparent conflictual relationship with centralised forms of power, particularly the state. This relationship finds considerable play in both popular folklore as well as formal legal procedures. The mythology of the “outlaw” has been a key aspect of ideas about American identity. Embodying characteristics of self-reliance, straight-talking and deep suspicion of hierarchies, the outlaw stood (and stands) for a very powerful strand within the cultural imagination of the American self. This was the idea that there must be constant vigil against governments and state power that threatened two “fundamental” aspects of being American: Individual action and liberty. The outlaw was seen to both define and defend the most sacred of “American values”, that of individualism.

ing American: Individual action and liberty. The outlaw was seen to both define and defend the most sacred of “American values”, that of individualism.

Suspensions against state power have also played out from within the state itself. There is, for example, a variety of constitutional provisions that limit the reach of the state in the life of citizens. The Bill of Rights, which includes provisions against state interference in religious activity (the First Amendment) and the right to bear arms (the Second Amendment), are formal expressions of the cultural ideals represented by the outlaw.

And yet, notwithstanding the pervasiveness of the “individual versus the state” dialogue and the implicit elevation of the individual as a heroic figure within American culture, the current deportation episodes are remarkable for how easily Americans allow their state to speak on their behalf. In the case of Alawieh — as well as members of a Venezuelan and Salvadorian gang who were also deported — the American state ignored orders by American judges to delay or halt its actions. There have been, however, no large-scale protests against the arbitrariness of state action in a society whose founding myth so strongly derives from notions of the sanctity of individual liberties and the need to keep state power in check.

The deportations, in this light, may not be as much of an aberration as unsurprising consequences of real, as opposed to imagined, aspects of American identity and culture. The problem, as with Hannah Arendt's view of the American way and life, may lie in treating a culture and society as exceptional and unique. Cultural exceptionalism — the “shock” at what is happening in America at this moment is a good example of this attitude — is at the heart of the problem of how much we allow certain societies to get away with.

The writer is distinguished research professor, SOAS University of London

AS SUMMER COMES

Concerns over power shortage call for a careful review of the country's energy mix

COAL PRODUCTION IN the country has now crossed a record 1 billion tonnes — this is in line with the action plan of the coal ministry, which had targeted an output of 1,080 million tonnes in 2024-25. Data from the ministry shows that coal production touched 997.83 million tonnes in 2023-24, up 11.7 per cent from 893.19 million tonnes in 2022-23. A substantial part of this is accounted for by Coal India and its subsidiaries. Production by Coal India had increased to 773.81 million tonnes in 2023-24, up from 703.20 million tonnes in 2022-23. Despite this record production, however, those managing the electricity grids are worried as summer approaches.

The problem, in part, stems from how India's energy mix has evolved in the recent past. Thermal power dominates India's baseload power capacity. In recent years, however, additions to thermal capacity have been muted — the installed capacity rose from 230 GW in 2019-20 to just 243 GW in 2023-24. Much of the increase in installed power capacity during these years has occurred in the renewables space — the installed capacity rose from 88.26 GW in 2019-20 to 143.64 GW in 2023-24 (renewables include solar, wind, bio-power and small hydro power). However, despite this, renewables still account for just 13 per cent of all-India energy generation. During the summer months, the problem is acute as solar generation tapers off by the evenings while household demand remains high and storage capacities are limited. In order to fill this gap, baseload capacities are stepped up, but in the absence of an expansion in such capacities, there is a shortfall in supply. As per reports, electricity demand is expected to peak at 273 GW in June 2025 compared to a minimum of 135 GW in December-January. “Shortages are more likely to occur during non-solar hours in May, June, July and August 2025,” says a report from the National Load Despatch Centre with the months of May and June identified as “high-risk months for shortages”.

The National Electricity Plan (2017-22) had focused more on ramping up renewable capacities in the country. As per its assessment, the expected renewable (solar, wind, biomass and small hydro) capacity addition between 2017 and 2022 was pegged at 117.7 GW. However, the concerns that are being raised call for carrying out a more careful assessment of the country's energy mix — thermal, nuclear and renewables. As the economy continues its forward march, as electricity demand continues to rise — peak electricity demand is expected to touch 298.7 GW by 2026-27 — policy must ensure a steady supply of power.

THE IDEAS PAGE

Five Covid lessons

Above all, trust in government is the key to successfully implementing difficult decisions during emergencies



SONALDE DESAI

THIS MARCH MARKS five years since the world stopped. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared Covid a pandemic. On March 24, the Government of India declared a nationwide lockdown, one of the most stringent globally. With five years and much water under the bridge, it is easy to forget the gasping breaths, millions of deaths, and shuttered businesses. That is, until the next disaster strikes. Can we learn from that painful experience to prepare for the next disaster, whether it is a black swan event like the pandemic, a tsunami, or a drought?

There are five lessons from the pandemic that are relevant. First, many problems are global. Closing our borders to keep diseases like HIV/AIDS or Covid at bay is not an option. An earthquake in Indonesia creates a tsunami that reaches Sri Lanka. We need global systems that continually monitor these threats and explore strategies to deal with them. However, the pandemic induced a paranoia that was exacerbated by political winds that have weakened rather than strengthened these global institutions. America's withdrawal from the WHO and shuttering of the USAID-funded Famine Early Warning System Network are simply some examples of these weakening bonds. All is not bleak, however. There are incipient signs of increasing global biomedical collaboration as seen in the launch of the Indian genomic dataset to encourage global collaborations. This is a unique opportunity to create international collaborations in which India could and should take a lead.

Second, the solutions often need to be local and locally relevant. When the whole world is in the throes of a pandemic, the ability of nations to support each other is increasingly limited. Each country seeks to protect its citizens when vaccines are in short supply. India was fortunate to have local vaccine manufacturing capabilities but countries that did not were unable to get timely access to vaccines. Social distancing is workable in sparsely populated areas; in slums like Dharavi, it was difficult to contain disease transmission, and seroprevalence studies by Anup Malani and colleagues found that five months into the pandemic, about 50 per cent of the slum residents had antibodies, compared to 15 per cent of the non-slum residents. Under the circumstances, it would make sense to prioritise areas with higher prevalence for surgical mask distribution and supply of ventilators.

Third, disaster preparedness begins with planning and building systems that can be activated as needed. One of the reasons the pandemic and lockdown did not lead to mass starvation in India was the existence of a public distribution system that could be harnessed to provide extra rations, particularly when transportation difficulties could have led to price gouging. However, when it came

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CR Sasikumar

to sending emergency cash, we had to rely on people who were part of various registries, such as PM-KISAN or those who had Jan Dhan accounts. Lockdown offered an opportunity to bend the disease progression curve, but we did not use this time to prepare health systems. Access to oxygen cylinders could have been coordinated if there were a centralised database. Disaster planning at local, state, and central levels is essential if we are to respond effectively to emergencies — both medical and natural.

Fourth, data and information must be part of the DNA of modern governance. When the migrant crisis struck, we could see lines of individuals crossing the Yamuna on foot, but we had no idea how many migrant workers were living in Delhi and how many had left behind families where they could seek shelter. Without a recent census, the situation has not improved. In many countries, the pandemic brought about a desire to kill the messenger, and data systems were either discredited or crippled. This distrust of data has spread globally, with the US government shutting down projects that study vaccine hesitancy. We need a mindset that sees information and data as tools of governance rather than enemies.

Fifth, trust in government is the key to

Closing our borders to keep diseases like HIV/AIDS or Covid at bay is not an option. An earthquake in Indonesia creates a tsunami that reaches Sri Lanka. We need global systems that continually monitor these threats and explore strategies to deal with them.

successfully implementing difficult decisions during emergencies. Every emergency will be different, and policymakers will often have to make decisions under uncertainty. For policy pronouncements to turn into national action, there needs to be a partnership between the state and its citizens. In multi-party democracies, few governments are elected with more than 50 per cent vote share. Nonetheless, emergency actions require trust that during emergencies, the government is acting in the interest of the whole population and not just its supporters. During the pandemic, telephone surveys by the National Council of Applied Economic Research in Delhi-NCR found that 85 per cent of those surveyed supported the lockdown simply because the government deemed it necessary. Even in retrospect, the India Human Development Survey of 2022-24 finds that nearly 80 per cent of respondents nationwide believe it was a good decision. However, global experiences show that this trust is fragile and must be nurtured to ensure the nation is united in future emergencies.

The writer is professor, University of Maryland and National Council of Applied Economic Research. Views are personal



DUSHYANT DAVE

A broken welfare state

Freebies, promised by nearly every political party, show a bankruptcy of ideas

IN HIS 1845 novel *Sybil, or the Two Nations* (the rich and the poor), Benjamin Disraeli writes: "Power has only one duty — to secure the social welfare of the people."

Promises by political parties in the recent Delhi elections saw them try to outdo each other in offering "freebies". Earlier, the BJP's 2024 manifesto declared that there had been 10 years of good governance and "vikas", claiming inclusive growth but highlighting freebie schemes: "80 crore-plus citizens have been receiving free rations since 2020 through the PM Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana"; "citizens got Rs 34 lakh crore directly in their accounts"; "46 crore-plus loans worth Rs 27 lakh crore have been given under the PM Mudra Yojana"; "63 lakh street vendors got easy credit under the PM SVANidhi Scheme", etc.

Are these welfare measures or inducements for votes? Are political parties bankrupt in terms of ideas for development? These are so far-fetched and widespread that instead of contributing to employment generation and real growth, they may prevent both. Will they take Indians from being hard-working and self-reliant to being lazy and dependent?

States are heavily indebted. Maharashtra was recently forced to admit funding issues for the Ladki Bahin scheme. Even "vibrant" Gujarat is unable to fund education properly, with serious shortages of teachers, buildings and classrooms in government schools. Meanwhile, the government claims that "25 crore citizens have come out of poverty" and "17 crore jobs

have been created" in the past 10 years. If so, why the freebies?

Disraeli is also claimed to have said, "There are three kinds of lies: Lies, damned lies, and statistics."

The Constituent Assembly debates reflect the framers' thoughts on the future of India. On November 15, 1948, a motion to declare India a socialist state was debated and rejected. K T Shah, who moved the amendment, argued, "The term 'socialist' is, I know, frightening to several people... By the term 'socialist' I may assure my friends here that what is implied or conveyed by this amendment is a state in which equal justice and equal opportunity for everybody is assured, in which everyone is expected to contribute by his labour, by his intelligence, and by his work all that he can to the maximum capacity, and everyone would be assured of getting all that he needs and all that he wants for maintaining a decent civilised standard of existence."

B R Ambedkar opposed the motion: "The Constitution... is merely a mechanism for the purpose of regulating the work of the various organs of the state. It is not a mechanism whereby particular members or particular parties are installed in office. What should be the policy of the state, and how the society should be organised on its social and economic side, are matters which must be decided by the people themselves according to time and circumstances. It cannot be laid down in the Constitution itself, because that is destroying democracy altogether."

Discussing Article 30 (now Article 38),

Join FREE Telegram .Channel <https://t.me/+Bu7senHpQdhlODg1> 'State to secure a social order for the promotion of the welfare of the people', Damodar Swarup Seth on November 19, 1948, argued that the draft article, "does not convey any clear indication as to the economic nature of the social order to be established". He said, "We all know that the society in which we now live is of a capitalistic order or character and in this society, we see the exploiter and exploited classes both existing side by side; and the exploiting class is naturally the top dog and the exploited class the under-dog. In such a society we clearly see that the real welfare of the masses, the toiling millions, can neither be secured nor protected, unless the society is made clear of the exploiter class, and that can only be possible when we establish a socialist democratic order..."

Mahboob Ali Baig Sahib Bahadur said, "Inevitably there would be parties in the country which seek election to Parliament and these political parties have different and distinctive ideas, ideals, ideologies, programmes and principles... And when a particular party is returned in a majority and is entitled to form the government, the people and the electorate have got a right to expect the implementation of those programmes and principles."

Ambedkar responded, "While we have established political democracy, it is also the desire that we should lay down as our ideal economic democracy... The Constitution also wishes to lay down an ideal before those who would be forming the government... There are various ways in which people be-

lieve that economic democracy can be brought about; there are those who believe in individualism as the best form of economic democracy."

J B Kripalani, speaking on October 17, 1949, defined democracy thus: "I wish Sir, that the whole country should understand the moral, the spiritual and the mystic implication of the word 'democracy' ... Politically, we are a democratic people but economically we are divided into such classes that the barriers cannot be crossed. If we have got to be democratic, we have got to be economically so too."

A welfare state protects and promotes the economic and social wellbeing of its citizens based on the principles of equal opportunities, the equitable distribution of wealth and public responsibility for citizens unable to avail themselves of the minimal provisions for a good life. With abject poverty, large-scale unemployment, the vast gap between the rich and the poor and failing healthcare, is India a model welfare state?

Sadly, the Supreme Court in *S Subramaniam Balaji v. State of Tamil Nadu* justified freebies.

It might do well to recall E M Forster's words: "So two cheers for democracy. One because it admits variety and two because it permits criticism. But two cheers are quite enough. There is no occasion to give three."

India needs to wake up and introspect.

The writer is a senior advocate and former president of the Supreme Court Bar Association

Amid din, Karnataka passes Bill providing 4% reservation for Muslims in public contracts

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
BENGALURU, MARCH 21

AMID THE din in Karnataka Assembly over Opposition protests demanding a judicial probe into allegations of honey-trap, a Bill was passed Friday to provide 4% reservation for Muslims in public contracts.

Leader of Opposition R Ashoka termed the Karnataka Transparency in Public Procurements (Amendment) Bill, which was piloted by Law and Parliamentary Affairs Minister H K Patil, “unconstitutional”.

The Cabinet last Friday had approved an amendment to the Karnataka Transparency in Public Procurements (KTPP) Act, reserving for Muslims 4% of contracts in (civil) works valued up to ₹2 crore, and goods/services procurement contracts up to Rs 1 crore.



BJP and JDS members protest during the Budget session of Karnataka Assembly in Bengaluru on Friday. PTI

At present, Karnataka has reservation in civil works contracts for SC/STs (24%) and OBC contractors belonging to Category-1 (4%) and Category-2A (15%). The amendment to the KTPP Act extended the reservation benefits to the 2B category,

which has 4% reservation for Muslims.

BJP and JD(S) legislators submitted a joint petition to Governor Thaawarchand Gehlot against the Bill, which they claimed, was meant to “only polarize the societies” and would “destroy the so-

cial fabric, harmony among the religious societies”. The petition urged the Governor to cancel the “unconstitutionally moved Bill”.

Accusing the Congress of pursuing “contract jihad” in Karnataka, BJP spokesperson Sambit Patra claimed that Congress leader Rahul Gandhi pushed the state government’s decision, alleging he was using the “crutches of Muslim quota” to advance his politics as he knows that he will be not be otherwise able to deliver.

He said the Siddaramaiah-led government has been taking a host of measures aimed at Muslims. It followed “land jihad” through Waqf properties and “economic jihad” by offering huge package to development of the Waqf, he said.

Earlier in the day, two other Bills which provided for a significant hike in the salaries of minis-

ters and legislators were also passed. The Karnataka Ministers Salaries and Allowances (Amendment) Bill on salaries for ministers provided for a hike in the monthly salary of the CM from ₹75,000 to ₹1.5 lakh and of the ministers from ₹60,000 to ₹1.25 lakh. Similarly, sumptuary allowance for CM and ministers was increased from ₹4.5 lakh to ₹5 lakh. Salaries of ministers of state also increased from ₹50,000 to ₹75,000, apart from hike in other allowances provided to them.

The Karnataka Legislature Salaries, Pensions and Allowances (Amendment) Bill provided for a hike in the monthly salaries of the Speaker of Legislative Assembly and Chairman of Legislative Council from ₹75,000 to ₹1.25 lakh, and sumptuary allowance from ₹4 lakh to ₹5 lakh.



NAVROZ CELEBRATIONS

Members of the Parsi community offer prayers at the Kappawala fire temple in Mumbai on the occasion of Parsi New Year on Friday. Ganesh Shirsekar

AMID GROWING DEMAND, STAGNANT DOMESTIC PRODUCTION

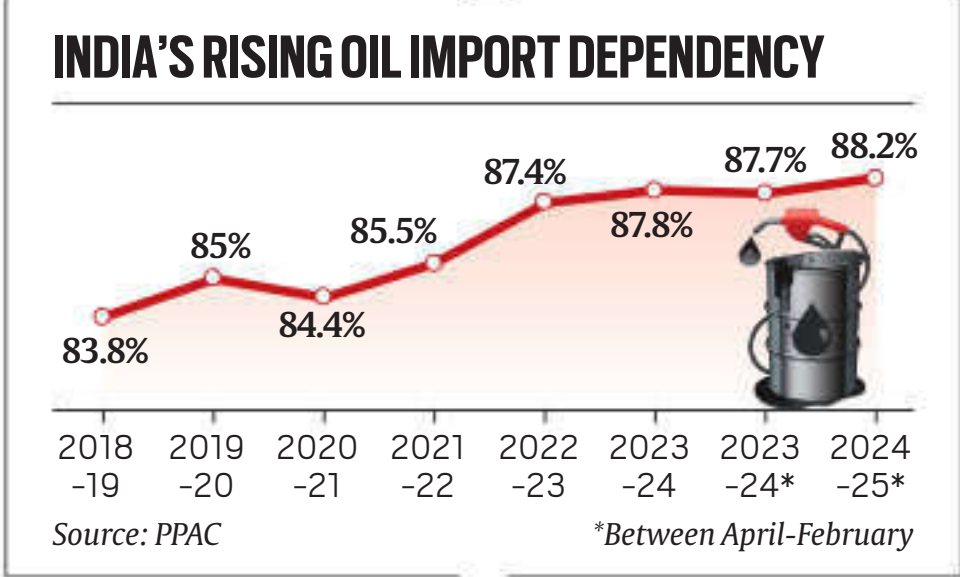
India’s oil import dependency likely to hit fresh full-year high in FY25

SUKALP SHARMA
NEW DELHI, MARCH 21

GROWING DEMAND for fuel and other petroleum products amid stagnant domestic crude oil output led India’s reliance on imported crude oil increasing to over 88 per cent in the first 11 months of the current financial year ending March (FY25), indicating that the import dependency for the full financial year could breach the all-time-high level of the last financial year.

Latest data released by the oil ministry’s Petroleum Planning & Analysis Cell (PPAC) shows that India’s oil import dependency was 88.2 per cent in April-February, up from 87.7 per cent in the corresponding period of FY24. For the full FY24, reliance on imported oil was 87.8 per cent. Industry watchers believe that the import dependency level for the entire FY25 could be a tad higher than the April-February level, as was the case in the previous financial year.

India’s energy needs are consistently growing, leading to higher oil imports. This is fuelled by factors such as growing en-



ergy-intensive industries, increased vehicle sales, a rapidly expanding aviation sector, growing consumption of petrochemicals, and a rising population. India’s reliance on imported oil has generally increased over the years, with the exception of FY21 when demand was suppressed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. India’s oil import dependency was 87.8 per cent in FY24, 87.4 per cent in FY23, 85.5 per cent in FY22, 84.4 per cent in FY21, 85 per cent in FY20, and 83.8 per cent in FY19.

India’s heavy reliance on imported crude oil makes its economy vulnerable to global oil price fluctuations. This also impacts

the country’s trade deficit, foreign exchange reserves, the rupee’s exchange rate, and inflation rate, among others. The Indian government aims to reduce the country’s reliance on imported crude oil but faces challenges due to sluggish domestic oil output amid rising demand. In 2015, the government aimed to reduce reliance on oil imports to 67 per cent by 2022. However, import dependency has only increased.

The government has implemented several policy reforms to encourage investments in India’s oil and gas exploration and production sector, the latest being the Oilfield (Regulatory and Development) Amendment Bill,

which was recently passed by the Parliament. The government is also promoting electric mobility, biofuels, and other alternative fuels to reduce oil imports. While there has been an increase in electric mobility adoption and the blending of biofuels with conventional fuels, it is not sufficient to offset petroleum demand growth.

In data: India’s oil import dependency

India’s crude oil imports rose to 219.9 million tonnes (mt) in the 11 months to February from 213.4 mt in the year-ago period. Meanwhile, domestic oil production declined slightly to 26.2 million tonnes from 26.9 million tonnes. Total domestic consumption of petroleum products in April-February rose 2.6 per cent year-on-year to 218.3 mt, of which only 25.8 mt of products are estimated to have been produced from domestic crude oil, resulting in a self-sufficiency level of just 11.8 per cent, according to PPAC data. The calculation of the extent of import reliance is based on the domestic consumption of petroleum products and excludes petroleum product ex-

ports since those volumes do not represent India’s demand. India—the world’s third-largest consumer of crude oil and also one of its top importers—is a net exporter of petroleum products.

India’s gross oil import bill for April-February was \$124.7 billion, an increase of almost 3 per cent year-on-year. Crude oil imports top the list of India’s merchandise imports. India’s crude oil consumption and imports are projected to rise further due to growing domestic demand. Consumption of petroleum products is projected to increase by 4.7 per cent in FY26, reaching 252.93 mt, per PPAC projections. If these projections hold, the country’s petroleum fuel and product consumption in FY26 will hit yet another record.

Unlike many countries, India is seen as a major growth centre for oil demand given the future consumption potential and relatively low per-capita energy demand currently. In fact, India is among the few markets where refinery capacity is expected to expand substantially over the coming years. India currently has a refining capacity of nearly 257 mt per annum.

Grok, unhinged! Who is responsible for AI chatbot’s sensational responses on X?

SOUMYARENDRA BARIK
NEW DELHI, MARCH 21

WITH THE Indian government in touch with Elon Musk’s X over stirring responses generated by its artificial intelligence (AI) chatbot Grok, the question that many in the government are grappling with is: Who is actually responsible for the retorts that the AI has been producing on the social media platform?

Laden with profanities, sweeping takes, colouring some conservative users, including X founder Musk, as the biggest spreaders of misinformation — Grok’s responses to questions posed by Indian users have so far turned out to be an amalgamation of the attitudes and demeanour familiar to those who frequently use the social network.

Here are some facts: Grok is not a person, at best, it is a computer code running on high-end compute at the back end, and at its worst, that code periodically churns out the underbelly of the data that has been fed to it. Grok is artificial, its intelligence debatable.

So, when Grok uses a misogynist Hindi expletive when responding to a user about their most prominent mutuals, or calls Musk one of the biggest sources of misinformation on the social media platform — it led to people asking Grok a flurry of questions, directly through their posts, or as comments to other posts.

This piece aims to demystify three main concerns around what’s happening with Grok: who is responsible for its responses, are the people asking it questions somehow liable, and if Grok is a source of truth.

Who is liable, can people be penalised?

Internet platforms such as X, Meta, and YouTube have legal protection from the content that their users post. This, in law, is called safe harbour — the argument being platforms have no control over what users are posting. They are mere conduits, so they can not be held liable for hosting third-party content.

Join FREE Whatsapp Channel <https://whatsapp.com/channel/0029Van2VRb6RGJOKH6oBd0F>

CAN YOU BLAME GROK?

GROK IS not a person, at best, it is a computer code running on high-end compute at the back end, and at its worst, that code periodically churns out the underbelly of the data that has been fed to it **MANY WOULD** argue that the liability of Grok’s responses primarily lies with xAI, its creators, and X

for allowing Grok to produce responses without any filters **PLATFORMS LIKE** X, Meta, and YouTube have legal protection from the content that their users post. This, in law, is called safe harbour — the argument being platforms have no control over what users are posting

While that convention itself is currently being debated given virality and the potential of speech on such platforms to cause real world harms, the million dollar question is whether Grok, an artificial output generator, can have safe harbour protections.

That is a complex question to deal with for lawmakers. X has told the Indian government that it has been trained on the open Internet, which presumably also includes content that users post on X. So, in a way, everything that

Grok generates is based on what people spending years on the Internet have produced. But can then they be held responsible? That is like asking if the ocean can be sued for being wet.

Besides, speech is a highly protected category in India, with the Indian Constitution affording the freedom of expression as a fundamental right, with some reasonable restrictions. But, those rights are available to human beings. Humans’ speech should be censored only under select circumstances when they obviously violate restrictions laid down in the Constitution. Does Grok have the right to unfettered free speech? And what is Grok’s free speech even? Its code essentially determines what the next word in a sentence should be, which is a factor of the underlying dataset it has been trained on, which in turn is generated by actual humans. Both the code, and the content in the language model.

So, many would argue that the liability of Grok’s responses primarily lies with xAI, its creators,

and X for allowing Grok to produce responses without any filters. But that too raises some pertinent questions. How does one hold creators of an algorithm responsible? Is it the highly-paid people who have written the code, or the low-wage data annotators? These are questions that regulators around the world are unlikely to have a quick, and accurate answer to. “Grok is certainly not a real person, it’s an artificial entity. But some of its responses are definitely problematic. It’s an interesting, and difficult problem, that us in government will have to figure out,” a senior government official said.

Should you trust Grok?

The short answer to that question is, AI responses should not be treated as accurate pieces of information, no matter how much they satiate one’s socio-political beliefs. Already, platforms are applying filters on their AI models to restrict their political speech in order to stay safe from government scrutiny.

As India headed to Lok Sabha elections last year, Google said it will restrict the types of election-related questions users can ask its artificial intelligence (AI) chatbot Gemini in the country. Earlier, Krutrim, the chatbot developed by an Indian AI startup founded by Bhavish Aggarwal of Ola, had been found to self-censor on certain keywords. AI platforms are built to predict the next word in a phrase, and to try and satisfy the query a user has asked — and models like Grok have so far shown they will do anything to achieve that, beg, borrow or steal.

Why X has challenged govt’s use of Section 79 of the IT Act

AJOY SINHA KARPURAM & ARNAV CHANDRASEKHAR
NEW DELHI, BENGALURU, MARCH 21

ELON MUSK-OWNED X (formerly Twitter) has challenged the government’s use of Section 79(3)(b) of the Information Technology Act, 2000 (IT Act) to moderate and the removal of content on social media. The company has argued that the government’s “misuse” of the provision bypasses safeguards available under other provisions of the IT Act — namely Section 69A — that are specifically meant for the purpose of content moderation.

Shreya Singhal & Section 69A

In *Shreya Singhal v Union of India* (2015), the Supreme Court struck down Section 66A of the IT Act which criminally punished, Join FREE Whatsapp Channel <https://whatsapp.com/channel/0029Van2VRb6RGJOKH6oBd0F>

EXPLAINED SCIENCE

WHY SCIENTISTS WERE SURPRISED TO FIND LIFE UNDER ANTARCTIC ICE SHELF

A TEAM of scientists may have discovered dozens of new species, including giant sea spiders, octopi, and corals on the newly exposed seafloor left behind by the enormous A-84 iceberg that broke away from the George VI Ice Shelf on January 13. The break-away of the 510-sq-km ice-berg — around two-and-a-half times the size of Kolkata — gave access to an underwater world that was previously beyond human reach. A remotely-operated submersible got to the seafloor on January 25, where it captured photos and videos, and collected specimens. The mission was part of Challenger 150, a UNESCO-endorsed global initiative for deep-sea research. The discoveries were announced on Thursday. The findings provide new insights into how ecosystems function beneath floating sections of the Antarctic ice.

Life under the ice

Using the remotely operated vehicle (ROV) SuBastian, scientists explored the seafloor for eight days, and found flourishing ecosystems at depths of up to 1,300 metres. Their observations include large corals and sponges supporting an array of animal life such as icefish, giant sea spiders, and octopi. They also found a giant phantom jelly, a species of jellyfish that can grow up to a metre wide, and a vase-shaped sponge that might be hundreds of years old. Scientists said they may have discovered several new species. “We didn’t expect to find such a beautiful, thriving ecosystem. Based on the size of the animals, the communities we observed have been there for decades, maybe even hundreds of years,” expedition co-chief scientist Dr Patricia Esquete of the University of Aveiro (Portugal) said in a press statement.

A pleasant surprise

The reason scientists were surprised to find diverse ecosystems under the ice shelf is that deep-sea communities typ-

among other things, sending false information “for the purpose of causing annoyance or inconvenience”. A Bench of Justices R F Nariman and J Chelameswar said the provision was “unconstitutionally vague”, giving the government broad, unchecked powers to restrict the freedom of speech. After this decision, Section 69A of the IT Act became the primary law governing the matter. This section allows the Centre to issue orders blocking “any information generated, transmitted, received, stored or hosted in any computer resource”, but unlike 66A, it contains safeguards against misuse, as the SC had noted in *Shreya Singhal*. For blocking content under Section 69A, the Centre must deem it “necessary”. This “necessity”, however, is only justifiable under grounds provided in Article 19(2) of the Constitution which “imposes reasonable restrictions” on the freedom of speech “in the in-

terests of the sovereignty and integrity of India, the security of the State, friendly relations with Foreign States, public order, decency or morality or in relation to contempt of court, defamation or incitement to an offence”. The Centre must record its reasons in the blocking order so that it can be challenged in court. Govt’s use of Section 79 The SC in *Shreya Singhal* also clarified the application of another provision — Section 79 of the IT Act. The provision is a “safe harbour” measure that exempts an “intermediary” (such as X) from liability for information published on the platform by a “third party”, that is, users of the platform. But Section 79(3)(b) states that the intermediary could be held liable if it does not immediately remove such unlawful informa-

tion “upon receiving actual knowledge, or on being notified by the appropriate Government or its agency”. The apex court limited the scope of this provision, ruling that the requirement under Section 79(3)(b) will only kick in once a court order has been passed to that effect, or the government issues a notification stating that the content in question is related to grounds provided in Article 19(2). But in October 2023, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) issued a directive to all ministries, state governments, and the police saying that information blocking orders could be issued under Section 79(3)(b). A year later in October 2024, MeitY launched a portal called “Sahyog” where the aforementioned authorities could issue and upload blocking orders.

EXPLAINED LAW

What X’s challenge says

X’s challenge before the Karnataka High Court argues that MeitY’s orders are an attempt to “bypass the multiple procedural safeguards” provided under Section 69A. The petition relies upon the SC’s ruling in *Shreya Singhal*, and says that content can only be censored through the process given under Section 69A or through a court order. Section 79, X argues, “merely exempts intermediaries from liability for third-party content”. The petition states: “A full 23 years after Section 79 was enacted, and 14 years after the current version went into effect, Respondents (the government) are now attempting to misuse Section 79 to create an unlawful blocking regime without any of the protections”. X approached the Karnataka High Court with the petition on March 17, requesting that the court grant an interim order against any coercive action. While a single judge

Bench of Justice M Nagaprasanna refused to do so, it passed an order stating that it was “reserving liberty to the petitioners to move the court in the event that something is done” and listed the matter for March 27. X’s petition comes at a time when its AI chatbot Grok 3 has been courting controversy for its use of Hindi slang, and responses that are critical of the government. While X has not received any notice regarding the issue, the Centre has reportedly got in touch with the company regarding the matter. The Grok controversy introduces a new angle when it comes to “safe harbour” provisions like Section 79. While intermediaries like X may not be liable for information published by users, the question of whether X is liable for information published by Grok remains unanswered. Courts will have to determine if information published by a “third party” includes AI generated responses.

EXPLAINED ECONOMICS

Trump and a weaker dollar

Trump complains that the dollar is overvalued, leading to trade deficits. There is talk of a ‘Mar-a-Lago Accord’, similar to the Plaza Accord of 1985. How do currency exchange rates impact global trade?

UDIT MISRA
NEW DELHI, MARCH 21

SINCE 2017, when he became President of the United States for the first time, Donald Trump has complained that the dollar is overvalued — and identified this as the reason both for America’s huge trade deficit and the flight of manufacturing abroad. Given the speed and determination with which he has taken the wrecking ball to longstanding US policy in his second term, many believe Trump could try to convene a “Mar-a-Lago Accord” to force trade partners into an agreement to devalue the dollar — while making sure that its primacy remains unaffected.

Background and context

Trump is trying to turn the US into a manufacturing superpower — or at least address its current trade imbalance. Last year, the US had a trade deficit of more than \$1 trillion; 2024 was reportedly also the fourth consecutive year in which the US clocked a trillion-dollar trade deficit. The ever widening trade deficit implies increasingly less manufacturing in the US and, by extension, lower levels of job creation. Trump won the White House on the promise that he would turn this situation around. However, despite the historically large trade deficit, the US is also seeing historically low unemployment rates. The main goal of Trump’s policy is, therefore, not more job creation, but more manufacturing in the US and lower trade deficits.

Role of exchange rate

The main reason Americans import instead of buying from within the country is that goods from the rest of the world are more affordable. This is because of the US dollar’s strong purchasing power. The dollar is strong because of the trust it enjoys both as a store of value and a medium of exchange around the world. The strength of the US economy, independence of its central bank, and the Federal Reserve’s commitment to price stability are key reasons why the dollar doesn’t “lose value”. The trust is so high that all central banks — including India’s — hold US dollars as assets (foreign exchange reserves) or guarantees against which they issue their own currency. Dollars make up 60% of all forex reserves in the world, and half of all transactions are reportedly denominated in dollars. Since all countries want to hold on to dollars and trans-

STORY OF THE US DOLLAR

CHART 1: REAL BROAD DOLLAR INDEX

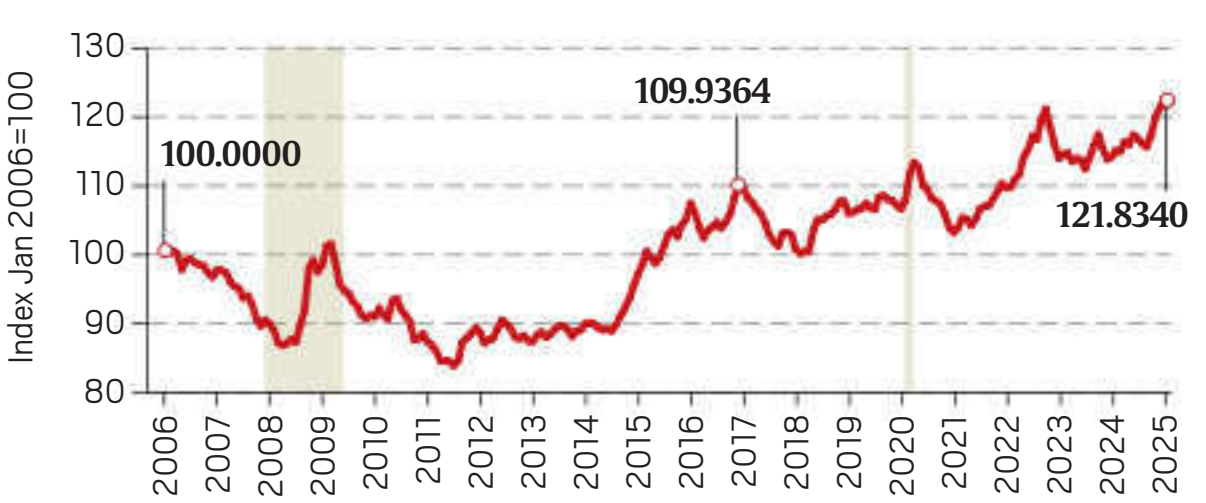


CHART 2: REAL BROAD DOLLAR INDEX (GOODS ONLY)*



*This index has been discontinued. Source: Board of Governors of the US Federal Reserve System

Join FREE Telegram Channel <https://t.me/+Bu7senHpQdhlODg1> and supply chains are disrupted. Tariffed countries can also ‘devalue’ their own currencies by buying US dollars and/or selling their own currencies in the open market. This would increase the relative supply of their currency and bring down its ‘price’ (exchange rate) relative to the dollar. ■ Get other countries to allow the dollar to lose value relative to their currencies: What if other countries sold their dollars in the open market and bought up their own currencies? The supply of dollars would rise, and its relative value (exchange rate) would fall. A cheaper dollar would allow US exporters to get back into the game. In 1985, the US signed the Plaza Accord (named after the Plaza Hotel in New York where the talks were held) with the other top economies of the time — Japan, Germany, France, and the UK (the G5) — and the exchange rate of the dollar was brought down in a coordinated manner (Chart 2). Now, with the dollar’s exchange rate again at very high

levels (Chart 1), there is talk of a Mar-a-Lago Accord — essentially a second Plaza Accord.

Story of Plaza Accord

The other parties knew that a rise in the exchange rates of the mark, yen, pound, or franc would hurt their exports competitiveness. But they accepted dollar devaluation over the uglier option of high US tariffs. With the dollar at a historic high, Congress was on the verge of legislating protectionist measures such as tariffs (like Trump is doing now). That would have been bad for everyone — so the rest of the G5 swallowed the bitter pill hoping it would allow for free flow of trade in the longer term. ■ Was the Plaza Accord a success or failure? It did bring down the dollar’s exchange rate in the short to medium term, and bridged yawning trade deficits. But four decades later, the US is back to 1985. Things worked out especially badly for the Japanese. Japan was an export-led economy, and the spike in its exchange rate hit its exports competitiveness. To stimulate the domestic economy, Japan lowered interest rates. Between high exchange rates and a speculative boom fuelled by low interest rates, Japan saw price bubbles in real estate and the stock markets. As the bubbles burst in the absence of commensurate growth in the real economy, Japan went into economic stagnation from the early 1990s, and is yet to fully recover.

‘Mar-a-Lago Accord’

A 1985-type accord is far more difficult in 2025. This why: Japan presents a cautionary tale, and there are far more than five countries involved today. America’s main trade adversary is China, which, unlike Germany and Japan in 1985, is also its chief military adversary. And the scale at which a monetary readjustment would be required today is humongous. Finally, Trump’s bullying style is probably not the best way to get global leaders to agree to something that would be detrimental to their own economies and political futures. In the run-up to the election last year, Scott Bessent, the US Treasury Secretary, had spoken of an old Soviet nuclear strategy in the context of tariffs: “Escalate to de-escalate... you can put tariffs on with the idea of getting rid of all tariffs.” Could Trump be employing his tariffs chaos to engineer an escalation that would get other countries to agree to a devaluation of the US dollar?

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