

'Fish prasadam' event at Hyderabad's Nampally sees significant turnout from across India

Hyderabad: The annual Fish prasadam distribution at the Exhibition Grounds, Nampally, this year saw a significant turnout, with thousands of people from various parts of India and even abroad gathering to receive the prasadam on Saturday. Attendees shared their experiences and hopes and Mahesh Gupta, who came from Maharashtra said, "I have been coming here for three years, and I feel my condition has improved significantly." Rajeev Kumar from Tamil Nadu added, "Despite the skepticism, my faith in the healing power of the prasadam keeps me coming back every year".

The event is supported by various government departments to ensure smooth operations. Transport Minister Ponnampal Prabhakar flagged off the distribution today morning and said people have immense faith in the fish prasadam being administered by the Bathini family for several decades. Earlier, B. Amarnath Goud of the Bathini family said, "The fish prasadam

will be administered on Mrigasira Karti day. This year, we expect around seven lakh people." "The fish prasadam is given free of cost to asthma patients. In 2023, after the gap of two year since Covid-19, about two lakh people were administered the prasadam. This year, the organisers are expecting an increase in the number. Meanwhile, the family members had prepared about 500 kg of prasadam.

The State Fisheries department authorities have set up 16 token sales counters and 35 fish counters, while 65 employees from the department have been monitoring the prasadam distribution. With each fish seed costing Rs 40, the counters will have shifts, whose timings will be from 8 am to 12 noon; 12 noon to 6pm and 6 pm to midnight and midnight till end of the event. Thousands of people from different parts of the country reached the venue on Thursday itself. On Friday morning, the 'Bavi puja' (the well from which the water is drawn to mix the medicine) was per-



formed by the Bathini family at their ancestral home in Doodbowli. They have been

into this humanitarian service for the last 174 years.

KTR demands probe into NEET irregularities



Hyderabad: Bharat Rashtira Samithi (BRS) working president KT Rama Rao on Saturday demanded the Centre to order an inquiry by a high level expert committee into the alleged irregularities in the conduct of the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test (NEET).

Reacting to reports of malpractices in the examination meant for candidates who intend to pursue undergraduate medical, dental and AYUSH courses in government and private institutions in the country, he wanted the government to respond immediately on the issue which was related to

the future of lakhs of students. He pointed out that that as many as 67 students secured the first rank securing with 720 out of 720 marks in this year's NEET exam, which was quite unusual and had never happened before. Besides this, many students were found to have secured high scores ranging up to 718 and 719 in the examination this time. NEET has its unique ranking system, while each correct answer is worth 4 marks, each incorrect answer will fetch minus one mark. Securing such high score of 718 to 719 marks in this pattern of ranking was not possible, he asserted. When asked about this, the organisers have claimed to have given grace marks. Some students were apparently given up to 100 grace marks at once. But they did not clarify what was the pattern adopted for the grant of grace marks. He wanted to know from the organisers why the NEET results were preponed and released in a hurry on the day of the election results. It raises many doubts, he said, adding that the newly

formed NDA government would be facing many challenges on this count.

He wondered why no student from Telangana could figure in the top 5 ranks in NEET in the last 5 years. "We believe that the reason for this is definitely the irregularities in the NEET exam," he said. He also demanded the organisers of the NEET to disclose the procedure followed for allotment of grace marks. BRS wants this approach adopted in NEET to benefit every student in a standardized way. But the grace marks were added in such a way that that it benefited only a group of 1500 students. That is not the right approach, he stated while demanding an inquiry into the whole affair with a high level expert committee. Those who had committed irregularities must be punished severely. The malpractices and irregularities in the NEET exam should be exposed and justice should be meted out to the students, he demanded.

Elderly man collapses while standing in 'fish prasadam' queue in Hyd

Hyderabad: A 65-year-old man, who had come to take fish prasadam at Numaish Grounds, Nampally, collapsed while standing in the queue and died later at a hospital. As thousands of people stood in serpentine queues, Rajanna from

Srikonda village of Nizamabad district had been standing in the queue since morning.

As the crowd increased there was reportedly a melee in the queue, following which he fell unconscious.

The ICC's threat to arrest Binyamin Netanyahu has shocked Israel

IT HAD been expected in Israel for weeks, but was still a shock when it came. On May 20th the prosecutor for the International Criminal Court (ICC), Karim Khan, announced that he was requesting arrest warrants for Binyamin Netanyahu and Yoav Gallant, Israel's prime minister and defence minister, as well as the leaders of Hamas, the Islamists who launched the deadly attack on Israel on October 7th last year, on charges of war crimes. The prospect of their leaders appearing in the dock along with the perpetrators of a massacre against them is unthinkable for Israelis. But it is a sign of the horror with which many have come to view their government's devastating war in Gaza. Mr Khan, a British lawyer, issued detailed and lengthy accusations against both sides. He opened with the allegations against the Hamas chiefs, Yahya Sinwar (pictured right), Mohammed Deif and Ismail Haniyeh, detailing the murder, sexual assault and kidnapping of Israeli citizens. But the charges against the Israeli ministers were no less pointed. Mr Khan noted that Israel has the right to protect its citizens, but he accused it of having pursued "starvation as a method of war" in Gaza. Israel has denied this charge, pointing to the aid convoys that have been allowed through. But this has mainly happened in the past couple of months and under international pressure. There is ample evidence that Israel has closed routes into Gaza and disrupted the supply of aid. Earlier in the war Israeli ministers also made clear in public their intention to impose a "total siege" on Gaza. Mr Khan has chosen to focus on these war tactics, rather than the bombing of civilian areas. He has also chosen, at least for now, to target Israel's political leaders rather than its generals. Nor did the charge sheet include the allegation of genocide. Mr Khan may be sticking to crimes that are easier to prove. The judges in the ICC's pre-trial chamber must now decide whether there is enough evidence to issue the arrest warrants. Even if they do, Israel has not ratified the Rome statute setting up the ICC, so is under no legal obligation to hand over its leaders. Mr Sinwar and Mr Deif are hiding in Gaza and Mr Haniyeh rarely, if ever, travels to a country which is a party to the treaty. A trial in The Hague is unlikely. But it is still devastating; far more so for Israel, a country with a democratically elected government and aspirations to be part of the Western world, than for Hamas, a terrorist group. Some Western leaders have already criticised the ICC for implying an equivalence between the leaders of Hamas and Israel. However, if the prosecutor's request is granted, they would be legally bound to arrest Mr Netanyahu if he travels to their countries. America, which like Israel is not a signatory, has a different dilemma. For months Joe Biden, the president, has both publicly and privately beseeched Mr Netanyahu to allow more aid through and to go to greater lengths to avoid civilian casualties. In recent weeks he has delayed at least one shipment of

arms that could be used in Israel's offensive on the city of Rafah. The ICC prosecutor's claims are in line with the American criticisms, but Mr Biden nonetheless called them "outrageous". America has a mixed relationship with the court. Donald Trump, Mr Biden's predecessor (and possible successor), issued sanctions against the ICC for investigating allegations of war crimes committed by American troops in Afghanistan. Mr Biden lifted those sanctions and worked with the court on issuing an arrest warrant last year for Vladimir Putin, the president of Russia. America's response this time, however, is shaped by the fact that Israel is one of its closest allies. At home, Mr Netanyahu got rare support from his political foes. "It is not possible to issue arrest warrants against Netanyahu, Sinwar and Deif," said Yair Lapid, an opposition leader who has told Mr Netanyahu to resign. "There is no such comparison. We cannot accept it and it is unforgivable." Benny Gantz, another rival of the prime minister also rallied around him. But this will almost certainly be short-



lived. Israeli security officials have been quietly warning politicians that withholding humanitarian aid early in the war would come back to haunt Israel. "It should have been clear they would have to walk back the bombastic statements on besieging

Gaza," said one army officer. "So why do it in the first place?" Sign up to the Middle East Dispatch, a weekly newsletter that keeps you in the loop on a fascinating, complex and consequential part of the world.

Blinken in Beijing and the mirage of US-China detente

When the United States (US) secretary of state, Antony Blinken, travelled to China last month, his purpose was threefold: First, to assess the concrete steps taken in the bilateral relationship since Presidents Joe Biden and Xi Jinping met in San Francisco in November 2023; second, to reposition the focal point of US-China relations within a rapidly shifting international landscape; and finally, to "de-risk" the bilateral relationship by ensuring that China maintains a favourable disposition towards Washington. To achieve that, Washington's approach has been a combination of incentives and deterrents.

During the visit, lines were once again drawn between the two sides, highlighting simmering disputes on issues such as trade, technology, and security. There is a keenness in Washington to prevent these cracks from widening further, particularly in light of the repercussions of ongoing conflicts in Europe and West Asia. Of particular concern is the burgeoning China-Russia relationship, with the US expressing worry that China may be providing vital technologies to the Russian defence industry, thereby bolstering the latter's capability to maintain battlefield advantages and undoing western support.

The Biden administration has consistently signalled a stance of cooperation alongside measures that have fuelled competition. On May 14, the US increased tariffs across strategic sectors such as steel and aluminium, semiconductors, electric vehicles, batteries, critical minerals, solar cells, ship-to-shore cranes, and medical

products to curb China's unfair trade practices in key sectors like tech transfer, innovation and intellectual property. Since the Anchorage summit in March 2021, when the bilateral relationship seemed to veer off course, the focus has been on "responsibly managing competition" from the US. Incidents such as former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022 and the spy balloon incident in January 2023 have redrawn the boundaries of the US's competitive approach towards China. Meanwhile, the Biden administration has initiated a tech competition with China since the passage of the 2022 CHIPS and Sciences Act, prompting retaliatory measures from China.

The impact of these disruptions has been further compounded by instability in the world order. The past couple of years have been immensely destabilising for the international system, marked by the wars in Europe and West Asia and the systemic shocks arising from them. The US-China relationship has not been immune to these impacts.

Blame it on the age of globalisation and interconnectedness, but the US-China relationship is, in many ways, a uniquely significant great power dynamic. It stands out, particularly in how it has evolved distinctively from the competitive relationship between the US and the Soviet Union during the last century. Today, between its relations with China and Russia, it is primarily with China that the US can attempt moderation. Simultaneously, China remains deeply integrated with western

economies. These mutual dependencies have prevented a complete rupture in bilateral relations. Two successive high-profile visits within a month — Janet Yellen and Antony Blinken — suggest that Washington is intent on maintaining engagement with Beijing amidst the shifting sands in Ukraine and the blitz in Gaza.

Several cooperative steps between the two countries, such as joint efforts to combat synthetic drugs like fentanyl through the establishment of a joint Counternarcotics Working Group, collaboration on policymaking and law enforcement in this regard, and the resumption of military-to-military talks at various levels, along with the agreement to hold US-PRC talks on Artificial Intelligence in the coming weeks, underscore the shared compulsion to avert any regional or global crisis that might escalate into military conflict between the two powers. However, China perceives an opportune moment to assert itself distinctly against the US as the sole alternative power centre with comparable capacities, global heft, and influence to engage wayward countries beyond Washington's control, such as Russia, Iran, North Korea, and Syria. Recent US intelligence suggesting potential collusion between Russia and China on the issue of Taiwan has prompted preparations for a new form of joint military readiness from the US and its regional allies. Blinken's visit may be another way of signalling to China that it shouldn't exploit any crisis to escalate new ones, at least until the US elections are over in November of this year.

National Mart – India Ka Hypermart opens its 7th store in Mehdipatnam

The newest store of National Mart - India ka Hypermart is now open to serve the customers of Mehdipatnam with a wide shopping area and vast parking space. National Mart in Mehdipatnam offers an extensive range of categories that include grocery, stationery, home & kitchen appliances, cookware, footwear, apparel for Men, Women and kids and many more products under one roof at affordable prices. The grand launch event, graced by Barrister Asaduddin Owaisi, President of All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) and Member of Parliament, Lok Sabha, marks an important milestone in the region's retail environment. The magnificent and enthusiastic inauguration ceremony brings in a new era of shopping convenience for Mehdipatnam inhabitants. Barrister Asaduddin Owaisi's presence validates National Mart's dedication to serving people with a wide range of products at affordable prices. At National Mart, the promise of lowest costs is more than just a marketing phrase; it is a dedication to make quality products available to everybody. With everyday low prices and regular discounts, the business strives to make every shopping trip a pleasure, providing not only products but actual savings that resonate with the community. National Mart aims to reinvent the shopping experience by providing an environment where convenience takes the highest. From the convenience of finding everything under one roof to the excitement of discovering new treasures with each visit, the store



embodies the essence of hassle-free shopping at its best. Yash Agarwal, the visionary Founder of National Mart, expressed his delight in bringing the brand's signature

blend of quality and affordability to Mehdipatnam, stating, "Our goal is not just to sell products, but to enrich lives through seamless shopping experiences that can-

ter to our customers' diverse needs." With our newest store, we hope to become a vital part of society, providing more than just products - genuine value and convenience.

Telangana Resident Ranjith Kumar Awarded Full Scholarship to Prestigious Acton University Conference

Ranjith Kumar, a resident of Huzur Nagar Surya peat District in Telangana State, has been awarded a full scholarship to attend the prestigious Acton University Conference in Grand Rapids, MI, USA from June 24-27, 2024.

Ranjith is the co-founder and director of the Swatantrata Center of Human Flourishing Foundation, a Classical liberal-based public policy think tank. The Acton University Conference is a four-day event that delves into the relationship between theology, philosophy, entrepreneurship, international development, and market-based economics, with the goal of reconciling moral and religious values with economic and personal freedoms.

"I am honored and humbled to have been selected for this incredible opportunity," said Ranjith. "The Acton University Conference is a renowned event that brings together the brightest minds from around the world to explore the foundations of a

free society. I look forward to engaging in thought-provoking discussions and learning from the esteemed speakers and attendees." The conference will feature a diverse array of speakers and topics, covering the philosophical and practical underpinnings of a free society. Attendees will have the chance to network with professionals from various industries and academic backgrounds, as well as students of all ages.

"Ranjith Kumar's selection for this scholarship is a testament to his commitment to promoting the values of classical liberalism and his contributions to the Swatantrata Center of Human Flourishing Foundation," said a representative from NewWayLabs, the organization that created the ChatbotAI assisting with this press release. "We are proud to see one of our own residents from Telangana State represent our region on the global stage and contribute to the important discourse at Acton University."



CSDS-Lokniti post-poll survey: Why the BJP underperformed in U.P.



The INDIA coalition's performance in Uttar Pradesh in the Lok Sabha elections has surprised everyone. The alliance has made deep inroads among all the major social groups except upper castes. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) could win only 33 of the 75 seats it contested, and its allies won only one. On the other hand, the INDIA coalition won 43 seats. The Lokniti-CSDS post-poll survey data show that the general/upper caste Brahmin, Rajput, and Vaishya voters largely favoured the BJP, while the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Muslim voters preferred the INDIA coalition. Close to nine of every 10 (89%) Rajput voters favoured the BJP. Yadav and Muslim voters consolidated in favour of the INDIA coalition along with a sizeable share of non-Jatav Dalit voters (Table 1). The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) lost support among all the social denominations including Jatavs, its main support category. The BSP's loss was a gain for the INDIA coalition as the former's vote shifted heavily towards the latter.

The Congress bagged six seats out of the 17 it contested. The better coordination between Akhilesh Yadav and Rahul Gandhi got transferred to their cadres at the ground level and this was reflected in the seat share. There were several factors which were responsible for the poor performance of the BJP and the spectacular performance of the Samajwadi Party (SP). First, the BJP, known for its social engi-

neering, was overpowered by Mr. Yadav's alternative social engineering formula of 'PDA' under which he distributed tickets mostly to Pichhadadas (backward communities) and Dalits and a few to Yadavs and Muslims in order to counter the allegation of being a Muslim-Yadav party. The SP gave tickets to 32 OBCs, 16 Dalits, 10 upper caste candidates, and four Muslims. Second, several State BJP leaders acknowledged that many sitting MPs of the party had not kept in touch with the electorate in their respective constituencies. Yet, the party re-nominated them. Consequently, as many as 26 sitting MPs lost the elections. Third, OBCs and Dalits feared that the BJP would change the Constitution after some leaders made statements to this effect. Their apprehension was further compounded by the BJP announcing its target of winning more than 400 seats (Ab Ki Baar, 400 Paar). The party could not counter the Opposition's narrative that it wanted to change the Constitution and do away with reservation for OBCs and SC/STs.

Fourth, the BJP tried unsuccessfully to deflect the attention of voters from this issue by polarising the electorate. This did not cut much ice with the voters. The BJP leadership was expecting its welfare schemes to elicit a favourable response from voters. However, these schemes did not seem to have much traction. Unemployment was a major concern for the elector-

ate. Moreover, frequent leaks of examination papers for government jobs further eroded public trust and led to frustration among the youth and their families. The most important factor was that the "Modi magic" appeared to have waned significantly. In the survey, when respondents were asked who they want as the Prime

Minister after this Lok Sabha election, 36% said they wanted Rahul Gandhi and only 32% said that they would prefer Narendra Modi. Mirza Asmer Beg teaches at Aligarh Muslim University, Shashi Kant Pandey teaches at BBA University, Lucknow and Akhilesh Pal teaches at Allahabad University.

Surmandal and Telangana Tourism to present Hindustani Classical recital at JNAFAU

Hyderabad: Surmandal in association with Telangana Tourism, the Government of Telangana will present a Hindustani Classical recital of Ronkini Gupta at Jawaharlal Nehru Architecture and Fine Arts University (JNAFAU) on June 22 at 6.30 pm.

With over 25 years of music training, Ronkini Gupta is an accomplished vocalist. She is a three-time Filmfare nominated for best female playback singer for her chartbusters 'Rafu' from 'Tumhari Sulu' and 'Chaav Laaga' from the film 'Sui Dhaaga'.

The third song 'Tula Zapnaar Aahe' won her the Zee Talkies-Maharashtra's



favourite singer award in 2020. She was recently honoured with the Swar Kokila Lata Mangeshkar Award. Ashish Ragwani who accompanied stalwarts like Anup Jalota, Pt. Ravichari, will be on tabla and Deepak

The Centre is notional, the States the real entities

The results of the general election 2024 have thrown up a surprise. They portend greater democratisation in the country, with the regional parties doing well. These parties will share space on the ruling party benches as well as on the Opposition side in Parliament. This will help strengthen federalism, which is so crucial for a diverse nation such as India. It was badly fraying till recently. Centre-State relations became contentious during the campaigning for the general election. The idea of '400 paar', 'one nation one election' and the Prime Minister's emphatic threat that the corrupt (i.e., Opposition leaders) will soon be in jail were perceived as threats to the Opposition-ruled States. The Opposition-ruled States have been complaining about stepmotherly treatment by the Centre. Protests have been held in Delhi and the State capitals. The Supreme Court of India has said that 'a steady stream of States are compelled to approach it against the Centre'. Kerala has complained about the inadequate transfer of resources, Karnataka about drought relief and West Bengal about funds for the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS). The attempt seems to be to show the Opposition-ruled States in a bad light. The Supreme Court, expressing its helplessness, recently said that Centre-State issues need to be sorted out amicably. When the Bharatiya Janata Party came to power in 2014, it had talked of cooperative federalism. The introduction of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) in 2017 was an example of this when some States that had reservations about it, eventually agreed to its roll-out. But that was the last of it. With federalism fraying, discord has grown between the Centre and the Opposition-ruled States.

There is a huge diversity among the States — Assam is unlike Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh is very different from Tamil Nadu. A common approach is not conducive to the progress of such diverse States. They need greater autonomy to address their issues in their own unique ways. This is both democracy and federalism. So, a dominant Centre forcing its will on the States, leading to the deterioration in Centre-State relations, does not augur well for India. Financing and conflict is one issue

States face three broad kinds of issues. Some of them can be dealt with by each State without impacting other States such as in education, health and social services. But infrastructure and water sharing require States to come to an agreement. Issues such as currency and defence require a common approach. The last two kinds of issues require a higher authority, in the form of the Centre, to bring about coordination and optimality. Expenditures have to be financed to achieve goals, and that results in conflict. Revenue has to be raised through taxes, non-tax sources and borrowings. The Centre has been given a predominant role in raising resources due to the efficiency in collecting taxes centrally. Among the major taxes, personal income

tax (PIT), corporation tax, customs duty and excise duty are collected by the Centre. GST is collected by both the Centre and the States and shared. So, the Centre controls most of the resources, and they have to be devolved to the States to enable them to fulfil their responsibilities.

A Finance Commission is appointed to decide on: the devolution of funds from the Centre to the States, and the share of each State. The Centre sets up the Commission and has mostly set its terms of reference. This introduces a bias in favour of the Centre and becomes a source of conflict between the Centre and States. Further, there has been an implicit bias in the Commissions, that the States are not fiscally responsible. This reflects the Centre's bias — that the States are not doing what they should and that they make undue demands on the Centre. The States also pitch their demands high to try and get a larger share of the revenues. They tend to show lower revenue collection and higher expenditures in the hope that there will be a greater allocation from the Commission. The Commission becomes an arbiter, and the States the supplicants. Inter-State tussles, Centre-State relations. The States cannot have a common position as they are at different stages of development and with vastly different resource positions. The rich States have greater resources while the poor ones need more resources in order to develop faster and also play catch up. So, the Finance Commission is supposed to devolve proportionately more funds to the poorer States. Unfortunately, despite the efforts of the 15 Finance Commissions so far, the gap remains wide.

The rich States, which contribute more and get proportionately less, have resented this. What they forget is that the poorer States provide them the market, which enables them to grow faster. The poorer States also lose much of their savings which leak out to the rich States, accelerating their development. It is often said that as Mumbai contributes a bulk of the corporation and income taxes, it should get more. But, this is because Mumbai is the financial capital. So, the big corporations are based there and pay their tax in Mumbai. More revenue is contributed in an accounting sense, and not that production is taking place in Mumbai. The Centre allocates resources to the States in two ways. First, on account of the Finance Commission award. Second, the Centre is notional while the States are real. Thus, all expenditures by the Centre are in some State. The amount spent in each State is also a transfer. This becomes another source of conflict. Expenditures lead to jobs and prosperity in a State. Benefits accrue in proportion to the funds spent. As a result, each State wants more expenditure in its territory. The Centre can play politics in the allocation of schemes and projects. For instance, it is accused of favouring Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh. The Opposition-ruled States have for long complained of stepmotherly treatment. To get more resources, the States have to fall in line with the



Centre's diktat. This has taken a new form when the call is for a 'double engine kisaarkar', i.e., for the same political party to be governing at the Centre and the States. It is an admission that the Opposition-ruled States will be at a disadvantage. This undermines the autonomy of the States and also weakens federalism. The autonomy of States is not to be confused with a freedom to do anything. It is circumscribed by the need to function within a national framework for wider good. It implies a fine balance between the common and the diverse. The Sixteenth Finance Commission has begun work. It should try to reverse fraying federalism and strengthen the spirit of India as a 'Union of States'. This is not only a political task but also an economic one. The Commission could suggest that there is even-handed treatment of all the States by the Centre and also less friction among the rich and poor States when proportionately more resources are transferred to poor States so as to keep rising inequality in check. The issue of governance, both at the Centre and in the States, needs to be flagged. It determines investment productivity and the pace of development. Corruption and cronyism lead to resources being wasted and a loss

of social welfare. To reduce the domination of the Centre over the States, the devolution of resources from the Centre to the States could be raised substantially from its current level of 41%. The Centre's role could be curtailed. For instance, the Public Distribution System or MGNREGS are joint schemes, but the Centre asserts that it be given credit. It has penalised States that have not done so. The Centre's undue assertiveness undermines federalism. Funds with the Centre are public funds collected from the States and spent in the States. The Centre is notional and constitutionally created, while States and local bodies are the real entities, where economic activity occurs and resources are generated. The States have agreed to the Centre's constitutional position but that does not make them supplicants for their own funds. It is time that the utilisation of the country's resources is jointly decided by the Centre and the States on the basis of being equal partners. This has become more feasible with the changed political situation after the results of the 2024 general election. Arun Kumar is a retired professor of economics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, and the author of 'Ground Scorching Tax' (2019)

Preparing for departure to study in the United States as an international student

Preparing for your studies in the United States can be an exciting and rewarding experience. As an Indian student, there are several important steps to take to ensure a smooth transition. Below are some comprehensive tips and resources to help you get started: EducationUSA advising centres are in five cities across India — Hyderabad, Chennai, Mumbai, Kolkata, and New Delhi. These centres provide valuable resources for students preparing to study in the United States. They offer pre-departure orientations (PDOs) that cover a wide range of topics, including cultural differences, staying motivated during studies, adjusting to a new environment,

understanding the U.S. academic system, finding suitable housing, and coping with cultural shock. Attending these orientations will equip you with the knowledge and skills to navigate new challenges and enhance your overall study experience. To ensure a seamless travel experience, it's important to plan. Confirm your arrival date with your graduate program, finalize travel preparations, and observe entry regulations. Make sure to gather all necessary documents, including your passport, visa, I-20 or DS-2019, and any other required paperwork. Upon arrival at your university, it is vital to complete all necessary check-ins and attend orientations.

Welcome to the new era of global sea power

THE OCEANS matter in geopolitics once more. In the Middle East, the Houthi rebel group is menacing shipping in the Red Sea, disrupting global trade. On January 12th America and Britain launched strikes on over 60 Houthi targets in Yemen. The allies' strikes are an attempt to reassert freedom of navigation in a crucial artery of world trade but also dramatically expand the geographic scope of the Middle East conflict. Taiwan stands on the cusp of an election that could shape its future. A fight over the island would involve an intense Sino-American naval war stretching well beyond the Pacific. And in Europe, the war in Ukraine may turn on the maritime contest for the Black Sea and Crimea. Sea power is back. There are bright spots for Western navies in this new era. America and its allies still possess the most advanced submarines. They are bound together in naval alliances and partnerships unmatched by Russia or China. But their naval dominance is eroding. China's navy is now the world's largest (see chart). American shipyards have withered. And European navies are a shadow of their former selves, having shed 28% of their submarines and 32% of frigates and destroyers between 1999 and 2018. These are dismaying trends. Despite growing protectionism, the seas remain a vital conduit for the world economy. In 2023 the ClarkSea, a measure of the average daily earnings for the world's shipping fleets, was 33% above its ten-year trend. Seaborne trade was up by 3% to 12.4bn tonnes and global shipbuilding was up by 10%: China produced over half of its output for the first time. Around 80% of global trade by volume travels by sea and about 50% when measured by value.

There is no shortage of reminders of what happens when that is disrupted. The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 caused chaos in supply chains, as did the blockage of the Suez Canal a year later by the Ever Given, a container ship. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 played havoc with the world grain market. And Houthi missile strikes in the Red Sea in recent months—a far cry from the low-tech pirate plague of the 2000s and 2010s—have caused Asia-to-Europe freight costs to triple as shipping reroutes around South Africa. Maritime arteries do not just carry physical goods. TeleGeography, a data-analysis firm, counts more than 574 active or planned submarine telecoms cables around the world, carrying 97% of global internet traffic. The war in Ukraine and resulting tensions in Europe have underscored the geopolitical risk to this infrastructure. In 2022 the Nordstream 1 and 2 gas pipelines through the Baltic Sea were blown up by unknown assailants. A year later data cables between Estonia, Finland and Sweden were mysteriously cut. If the oceans are at the heart of the international order, they are also the landscape where challenges to that order are playing out. The crux of Sino-American rivalry concerns dominance over maritime Asia. America and its allies are joining hands to contest China's claims

to the South China Sea and track its growing fleet of subs and ships. The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is building aircraft-carrier strike groups—its third homemade carrier, the Fujian, is nearly complete—and increasing the size and frequency of naval drills around Taiwan. It is also seeking a niche in ports around the world, from the Solomon Islands to Equatorial Guinea to the United Arab Emirates. Geopolitics at sea is distinctive in several ways, observes Alessio Patalano of King's College London. Armies deploy to a particular place, carry out a mission and return. A training mission will rarely turn into a war. Warships, by contrast, deploy for open-ended voyages whose purpose can change at a moment's notice. A ship may make a friendly port call one day and shoot down Houthi missiles the next.

Moreover, the oceans are natural environments for competition. The high seas are international waters. The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) grants countries a 200-nautical-mile exclusive economic zone off their coasts, yet states quibble over the details. America has not signed UNCLOS; China disregards key provisions. Armies in peacetime rarely encounter each other amid such haze. At the same time, naval power is a supple tool of statecraft because it can resist swift escalation. In a crisis on land, armies can be reinforced quickly with fresh troops. At sea, sending forces to a flashpoint takes longer. Attribution—working out who attacked whom—also takes longer. Naval crises are thus less likely to spiral into bloodshed. Mr Patalano cites South Korea's decision to show restraint after a North Korean submarine attacked and sank one of its warships in 2010. Still waters run deep. The relatively slow pace of naval confrontations, and their inherent ambiguities, help explain why China has used militarised fishing fleets to bully its neighbours across the South China Sea. The most recent example is in the Philippines, where Chinese vessels have rammed and harassed Filipino ones attempting to resupply Second Thomas Shoal, a small reef which China claims. On January 3rd America responded by sending an aircraft carrier to exercise with the Philippines. This peacetime shadow-boxing has a minatory quality. In the post-Cold War era the oceans had become a "benign conduit for the projection of power", says Nick Childs of the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), a think-tank in London. American and allied navies bombarded Afghanistan and Iraq at leisure. Occasionally they hunted pirates. "Now," says Mr Childs, "we're back into a new age where people are having to prepare for the potential for warfighting at sea." This is unfamiliar territory. The last officer to have served in the Falklands war between Britain and Argentina, the last big naval war waged by a NATO country, is long retired. To fight hardier foes, ships are getting bigger and better armed, notes Mr Patalano, pointing to the example of the Italian navy's Francesco Morosini—an off-shore patrol vessel. These were usually small ships for coastal defence. But new



ones are often the same size as 1990s-era frigates and come armed with air-defence systems and heavier weaponry. America's next generation of destroyers might carry one-third more missiles than the current ones. The prospect of high-intensity naval warfare is also boosting the importance of submarines. Modern surveillance and precision-guided weapons put large surface vessels increasingly at risk, particularly closer to enemy shores. Submarines are far less vulnerable to this. Though their movements and missions are usually shrouded in secrecy, they can sneak into enemy waters to collect electronic intelligence or deliver special forces, covertly track enemy fleets at sea or loiter offshore in a crisis with the capacity to fire volleys of missiles. America's Ohio-class subs carry up to 154 cruise missiles, 26% more than America's best-armed surface ship. Undersea warfare is particularly important because that is where the West has its sharpest technological edge over Russia and China, both of which have limited capacity to detect, track and target American and allied subs. That explains why a midsized power like Australia is willing to spend hundreds of billions of dollars over three decades on leasing American nuclear-powered subs and building new ones with Britain. The AUKUS deal was announced by the three countries back in 2021. The prospective AUKUS-class sub also shows the increasing emphasis on fire-power: unlike Britain's current attack sub, it will have a vertical launch system (VLS), upright tubes with many more missiles, and more advanced ones, than traditional torpedo tubes. The wars in Ukraine and the Middle East show how such arms might be put to use in a major conflict at sea. Russia has laid mines in Ukrainian waters and fired missiles at cargo ships berthed in Odessa. The Houthis have fired drones and ballistic missiles at commercial shipping, and have managed to board at least one vessel. Blockade tactics are of deep interest because they would be crucial to any war in Asia. "If there is a war over Taiwan," writes Lonnie Henley, a former China analyst for the Pentagon's Defence Intelligence

Agency, "an extended Chinese blockade is likely to determine the outcome." A paper by Michael O'Hanlon of the Brookings Institution in Washington models a conflict in which China blockades the island by requiring all ships wishing to visit Taiwan to dock on the Chinese mainland for inspection. To understand the possible challenges ahead, it is worth scrutinising the paper. In the scenario an American-led coalition of around a hundred warships attempts to break the blockade by clearing a shipping lane hundreds of miles to the east of Taiwan. It would take a month or more to clear minefields, estimates Mr O'Hanlon, and longer if China could deploy advanced mines capable of repositioning themselves autonomously.

America or Taiwan would need to subsidise insurance payments, reflag cargo ships or promise to reimburse owners if their vessels were sunk. They would also need to find crews willing to head into a war zone. "Many thousands of personnel would likely die," concludes the paper. In fact, says Mr Henley, reopening the shipping lanes east of the island would not suffice. Taiwan's east-coast ports are isolated by high mountains and narrow roads that rely on vulnerable tunnels. Even if it were to destroy the Chinese fleet in battle, America would still have to get hundreds of tonnes of cargo into Taiwan's main ports in the west every day, for months, "in the face of extensive mining and hostile fire, close to China and under conditions of Chinese air superiority". Supply by air would probably be impossible, he adds. Samuel Paparo, the admiral nominated to be the next commander of The United States Indo-Pacific Command, has insisted that America could break through a Chinese quarantine: "The US alone has every capability to break such a blockade." Mr O'Hanlon is less sure. His calculations suggest that the outcomes are "too close to call". Mr Henley is gloomier still. America has created a navy built to defeat a Chinese landing on Taiwan, he warns, not one capable of penetrating a blockade of Taiwanese ports and airfields for prolonged periods:

In the grip of intoxication and addiction

Amid the rural landscape of Fasalwadi, around 50 kilometres from Telangana's capital city Hyderabad, stands a single-storey building with four apartments. The house on the upper right side, designed as a one-bedroom, hall-and-kitchen unit, has the unmistakable smell of a chemical factory. In the kitchen lies a synthesiser coated with a white powdery substance — alprazolam, a drug commonly used to treat sleeping disorders and anxiety. The illicit manufacturing operation, targeting a 10-kg yield of pure alprazolam, was disrupted midway by a group of 20-odd police officers in the early hours of December 27 last year. Alprazolam, meant to be sold by licensed medical shops with a prescription, has found its way into the illicit market, setting off the public health alarm.

Officials stress the danger of this chemical, highlighting its addictive nature comparable to cocaine. "Just 1 gram of pure alprazolam, priced at ₹1,000, can yield 2,000 to 4,000 doses, given that 0.25-0.5 mg is sufficient to make it an intoxicant," explains an official of the Excise department. The apartment in Fasalwadi was leased by Kamal Brahmananda Goud (47), Cheruguri David (59), both Chemistry degree holders, and Kondapuram Shivaraj (29), a private company employee. The property was rented from Sakinala Vinod Kumar (35), who himself had leased it from the owner two years ago. Just three months into their 'rental agreement', the trio were in the third stage of drug production; the alprazolam would have been ready in about five days. Their cramped bedroom had an air conditioning unit with huge thermocol sheets plastered across the vents. Their neighbours had no inkling of what was happening next door.?

Over 2022-23, up to 43 cases of alprazolam seizures have been reported in Telangana. Last years, about 150 kg has been brought into Telangana from across the country. The State could be dealing with a whopping 13.6 crore doses of this drug, say officials of the Telangana State Anti-Narcotics Bureau (TSNAB). According to data shared by Telangana's Excise and Prohibition Department, 38.25 kg of alprazolam was seized in the State in 2023 alone, including 26.3 kg in Sangareddy, 7.6 kg in Kamareddy, 3.6 kg in Nizamabad, and 0.75 kg in Saroornagar. This year too, 1.74 kg of alprazolam was seized in Kamareddy district. In Hyderabad, the TSNAB caught 66 shops selling alprazolam-adulterated toddy, code-named 'special toddy', last year. There are about 5,000 shops selling toddy across the State. Highlighting the concern, M. Padmanabha Reddy, secretary of Hyderabad-based Forum for Good Governance, has written to the Chief Secretary seeking a complete ban on toddy sale in the city. The forum alleges that the toddy sold in the city is adulterated, given the absence of palm trees within a 50-km radius. Juice tapped from the palm tree is fermented and drunk locally as toddy, ideally consumed within the same day. "The non-availability of toddy palm trees in parts of Telangana has resulted in the preparation of synthetic toddy by mixing urad dal

paste, water, foaming and colouring agents, and citric acid, and adding substances such as chloral hydrate, diazepam, and alprazolam to induce intoxication," he explains. A senior Excise official reveals that only 25% of the alprazolam used in the toddy is manufactured in the State, while the remaining 75% is sourced from other states. According to data from TSNAB, a now-shut-down laboratory based in Hyderabad, was a prominent supplier in the State, from where over 70 kg of alprazolam was seized. While the State has intensified efforts to combat marijuana abuse, the adulterated toddy trade remains largely off the radar.

Toddy adulteration A similar crisis took place in 2015-2016, when gudumba (illegally distilled liquor) and adulterated toddy resulted in addiction-related hospitalisations. Withdrawal symptoms led to fatalities, prompting the State government to establish detoxification centres. The Institute of Mental Health (IMH) in Hyderabad, was the sole government-run facility with a de-addiction ward. With a steady influx of addiction cases, the government collaborated with a voluntary organisation to put together a support system for its hospitals in Hyderabad district. Almost a decade later, not much has changed. The shortage of hospitals and de-addiction facilities persists. "The withdrawal symptoms are very painful. Moreover, it is being manufactured with raw materials like benzyl cyanide, which poses grave risk," says TSNAB director Sandeep Shandilya. The State has to fight the menace of a drug but does not have enough resources to do so. While there could be variations in the recipe of alprazolam, it is not something that any amateur can cook up. In the Fasalwadi case, David was a chemist employed in the R&D section of a syntho-chemical company, while Shivaraj had prior knowledge of illegal manufacturing of the drug. The main suspect, Kiran Kumar, was managing director of Parameshwara Chemicals based in the neighbouring State of Andhra Pradesh. As part of the raid, police had seized 23 different types of chemicals, including 100 litres of benzonitrile, 25 kg of benzyl cyanide, 2.5 litres of ammonia solution and 1.5 litres of dimethyl formamide, among others.

The State police and TSNAB are still working on mapping and tracing the suspects. Officials say the production areas are concentrated in the western belt of the State, spanning Adilabad, Jagtial, Nizamabad, Kamareddy, Rajanna Sircilla, Siddipet, Medak, Sangareddy, and Mahabubnagar. The consumption area, however, is widespread, encompassing major districts like Hyderabad and Rangareddy. While the issue of illicit alprazolam production persists, there have also been instances of pilferage of alprazolam and similar drugs from pharmaceutical giants. A recent incident involving global company Mylan Laboratories stands as an example, where a few employees were involved in diverting over 21 kg of alprazolam. That led to permanent cancellation of its licence to manufacture



the drug by the Drug Licencing Authority in Nizamabad and Telangana's Drugs Control Administration. "The 'leakage' from the pharmaceutical industry is a major concern," a senior official from the Telangana Excise & Prohibition Department says, seeking anonymity. Journey of deaddiction? Superintendent of IMH-Erragadda, Dr. M. Uma Shankar says the first step of treating people struggling with adulterated toddy addiction is gathering medical history. "We then get their vitals checked and ask when they last consumed the drink. Then diagnostic tests are conducted to evaluate liver function and overall organ health as well as to identify any underlying issues. Treatment plans are tailored on the basis of these factors, and special attention is given to those with malnutrition or deficiencies," he says. IMH typically handles 2-4 cases of toddy addiction daily, with an ongoing caseload of 8-10 individuals undergoing treatment at any given point in time. Dr. Shankar says most patients seeking help hail from rural areas, where misconceptions about the purity of toddy prevail. "The uninitiated and the gullible in the districts assume that it is all-natural and consume it. Before they know it, they are addicted to dangerous substances

like chloral hydrate and alprazolam. Hence, it takes longer for their de-addiction, compared to conventional alcohol addiction," he says, adding that it takes anywhere from a couple of weeks to a month to manage withdrawal symptoms. He also stresses the importance of timely intervention, as delayed treatment can lead to fatal consequences, particularly for those in a delirious state when being admitted. "Depending on the severity, we either treat people here at IMH or send them to hospitals that are equipped to address specific needs," he adds. A targeted programme aimed at combating the illicit trade of alprazolam in the State is currently taking shape and is set to commence in a month or two, a highly placed source in the Telangana's Excise and Prohibition Department shares. This initiative will not only target the drug producers but also toddy compounds across the State. "In the past few months, our focus has been on tackling marijuana abuse in Telangana. While we plan to launch an elaborate drive targeting ganja suppliers, we are also gearing up to start a campaign aimed at cracking down on alprazolam manufacturers and adulterated toddy sellers in the next 1-2 months," the official explains.

Microsoft singles out Google's competitive edge in generative AI

Alphabet unit Google enjoys a competitive edge in generative artificial intelligence due to its trove of data and AI-optimised chips, Microsoft has told EU antitrust regulators, underscoring the rivalry between the two tech giants. The comments by Microsoft were in response to a consultation launched by the European Commission in January on the level of competition in generative AI. The growing popularity of generative AI, which can generate human-like responses to written prompts and is exemplified by Microsoft-backed OpenAI's ChatGPT and Google's chatbot Gemini, has triggered concerns about misinformation and fake news. "Today, only one company - Google - is vertically integrated in a manner that provides it with strength and independence at every AI layer from chips to a thriving mobile app store. Everyone

else must rely on partnerships to innovate and compete," Microsoft said in its report to the Commission. It said Google's self-supply AI semiconductors would give it a competitive advantage for the years to come, while its large sets of proprietary data from Google Search Index and YouTube enabled it to train its large language model Gemini. "YouTube provides an unparalleled set of video content; it hosts an estimated 14 billion videos. Google has access to such content; but other AI developers do not," Microsoft said. It said AI-powered voice assistants such as Google's Google Assistant and Apple's Siri give both companies an advantage. "They are well-positioned to evolve and leverage their respective existing voice assistants into leadership positions in generative AI.

Chabahar is a metaphor for strategic autonomy

India's declaration of a day-long State mourning and the lowering of the national flag to half-mast to commemorate the unexpected deaths of Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi and foreign minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian was a rare gesture. In recent years, such honour was accorded by India when Sultan Qaboos of Oman and Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom passed. The symbolic respect accorded to Raisi now is in recognition of Iran as a valued partner. India recently signed a 10-year contract to operate the Chabahar port in Iran and further expand its investments in this strategic outpost on the Gulf of Oman. It was a bold signal from New Delhi that it will forge ahead in pursuit of its long-term national interests despite geopolitical headwinds. Given the extreme tensions flaring up between Iran and its regional rivals, India's move carried risks but demonstrated its firm determination to manage its multiple strategic partnerships and extract the most from all of them.

India decided to double down on its stakes in Chabahar at a time when Iran has been embroiled in a near-warlike confrontation with Israel. Tehran and Tel Aviv have crossed previous red lines and engaged in direct missile and drone attacks against each other's territories, and the two antagonists have upped their proxy wars in the backdrop of the Israel-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip. Israel has indicated unambiguously that every sensitive critical infrastructure installation belonging to Iran is in its crosshairs.

But even as the gloves have come off in the undeclared Iran-Israel war, India's assets in Chabahar are not likely to be directly imperilled. This is because India has a robust strategic partnership with Israel and Tel Aviv does understand New Delhi's compulsions and motivations for developing Chabahar, which doesn't conflict with Israeli interests. Container bulk cargo shipments to and from Chabahar are helping to reify India's core vision of bypassing Pakistan as a land transit country and creating alternative multi-modal pathways for two-way trade among India, Afghanistan, Central Asia and Eurasia.

With the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) agreement also having ambitious plans for transit via the Gulf of Oman up to the port of Haifa in Israel, India is co-creating a wide-ranging trans-regional connectivity architecture as it seeks to regain its place as a major commercial power across and beyond the Indian Ocean. Due to regional enmities and sensitivities in West Asia, Chabahar is not formally integrated into the IMEC. But pivotal strategic partners of India like the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, who are integral to IMEC, are not averse to pragmatically engaging with Iran. Jeopardising India's vantage point in Chabahar is in the interests of Pakistan — whose tensions with Iran have been rising — and China, which has built and runs the

Gwadar port on Pakistan's southwestern coast close to Chabahar. But Israel and Gulf countries are not inclined to throw a spanner in the works of India's presence in Chabahar.

The other risk factor that India has to reckon with when it comes to deepening its strategic partnership with Iran is the shift in the United States (US) foreign policy priorities. Due to its opposition to American preferences, Iran has the distinction of being one of the most sanctioned countries in the world. India has been forced to scale down its imports of Iranian oil since 2019 due to tough sanctions imposed by Washington DC and the resultant difficulties in arranging shipping, insurance and payments.

Yet, it is noteworthy that India negotiated with the US to secure a carve-out for its Chabahar investments from the "maximum pressure" American sanctions campaign against Iran. As India's "comprehensive global strategic partner", the US has been made to understand that India's rise rests on its expanded footprint across both sides of the Indo-Pacific. For stabilising and moderating Afghanistan and for checking the Chinese juggernaut in West Asia and Eurasia, India must have the freedom to manoeuvre and gain access to strategic



locations such as the Gulf of Oman. Just as India has not buckled under western pressure on the question of sanctions against Russia, insulating itself from western pressures over Iran is a litmus test of its success in juggling its multiple strategic partnerships and proving its indispensability to all sides. Chabahar is more than a metaphor for India's strategic autonomy. It augurs India's rise as a leading power that can persuade or compel other countries to

accommodate its national interests.

The departures of Raisi and Amir-Abdollahian will not alter the basic alignment of national interests between India and Iran, and New Delhi will look to consolidate this partnership come what may. Sreeram Chaulia is professor and dean, School of International Affairs, OP Jindal Global University. The views expressed are personal

Company willing to pay Rs 1.5 crore to people who donate their poop; claims it can alleviate gastrointestinal, mental health issues

In a video titled 'We want your poop', that was posted on its website, a woman says, "We want your poop, no, we need your poop! Let me explain, I'm with humanmicrobes.org and your poop could change someone's life. Recent research has shown that the microbiome, the microbes that live in our gut, help us to digest food and play a major role in our overall health and modifying and restoring our gut microbiome, has become a major investigative avenue for treating numerous illnesses." Half of the mass of our stool, she says, is microbes. A procedure called Fecal Microbiota Transplant or FMT for short, involves transferring these microbes from a healthy donor to a sick person through this process. FMTs offer a potential new treatment option for a long list of conditions many of which may surprise you including irritable bowel syndrome, obesity, and even mental disorders, she tells viewers. In the video, they also feature a real-life success story of a woman named Jane, who "successfully cured her bipolar disorder after receiving an FMT."

The company is offering a whopping \$500 (INR 41,500) for one stool sample or up to \$180,000 (INR 1.5 crore) a year for daily donations from the public who are deemed a good fit. "Working to find fewer

than 0.1% of people with healthy, unperturbed, disease-resistant microbiomes," the website mentions. Is there any validity to the claim that (FMT) can cure or alleviate symptoms of mental health conditions?

Dr Sreehari Deshmukh, consultant endoscopist, medical gastroenterologist and hepatologist, Sparsh Hospital, RR Nagar, Bengaluru, elaborates, "Recent scientific inquiries have sparked a fervent debate over the potential therapeutic benefits of fecal microbiota transplant (FMT) in addressing the symptoms of mental health conditions, including bipolar disorder. While the concept may seem unconventional, a growing body of evidence suggests that the trillions of microorganisms residing in the gut could hold the key to unlocking new treatment avenues for this complex disorder." A 2020 review article published in *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, she states, examined the bidirectional communication between the gut microbiota and the central nervous system, highlighting the role of gut dysbiosis in the pathogenesis of mood disorders such as bipolar disorder. The authors noted that restoring microbial balance through interventions like FMT could potentially alleviate psychiatric symptoms. She adds, "A randomised controlled trial published in *Translational Psy-*

chiatry in 2019 investigated the effects of FMT in patients with major depressive disorder, a condition that often co-occurs with bipolar disorder. The study found that FMT led to significant improvements in depressive symptoms, suggesting a potential benefit in mood regulation." As scientists continue to unravel the intricate connections between the gut microbiome and mental health, she stresses, FMT remains a promising yet experimental intervention.

Potential risks and side effects associated with FMTs FMT gains traction as a potential treatment for various medical conditions, it's crucial to address the potential risks and side effects associated with this innovative therapy.

One significant concern is the transmission of infectious agents from the donor to the recipient, Dr Deshmukh says, including bacteria, viruses, and parasites. "Despite screening protocols for potential donors, the risk of transmitting pathogens remains a possibility, underscoring the importance of stringent donor selection and thorough screening procedures," she recommends. Moreover, alterations in gut microbiota composition induced by FMT could potentially exacerbate underlying health conditions or trigger unforeseen complications. "