

Hospitals' PM-JAY fraud

After the introduction of the Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana, or PM-JAY Yojana, which covers medical expenses up to five lakhs and authorizes hundreds of hospitals, including private hospitals, to provide specialized medical services to patients, healthcare in Jammu and Kashmir has seen a dramatic improvement. While for the rest of India, the scheme is for people living below the poverty line, as a special case, every citizen of Jammu and Kashmir is entitled to enrol in the scheme, get the Ayushman Bharat card, and avail the benefits. With one stroke, gone are the days of months of tormenting waiting periods in Government hospitals for even minor operations. Information about each hospital empanelled is on the website, and one can easily pick and choose the hospital to avail of medical attention. There is also a feedback mechanism provided by the Gol, as after the hospitalisation and availing of the services, patients do receive calls to check on the authenticity and quality of the services, as well as to ensure no payment is taken from the patient. This PM-JAY scheme has been a blessing in disguise for poor as well as middle-class families who are no longer burdened or stretched financially to avail medical attention. Even in Government hospitals, nurses ensure Ayushman Bharat cardholders get their free medicine deliveries on time. The burden on Government hospitals has reduced a lot except in chronic cases, where it is always better to approach GMC Jammu or another specialised Government hospital for treatment. All diagnostics, from laboratory tests to ultrasound, CT scan, or MRI, are free of charge for hospitalised patients, but for outpatients, these test costs are not covered under the PM-JAY scheme. All said and done, this whole Ayushman Bharat Yojana is a win-win situation for all: patients get proper treatment free of cost, private hospitals get business, and Government hospitals get a bit of relief from their usual rush. But with every Government scheme, connen also get involved, and this PM-JAY scheme is no exception. Time and again, various private hospitals in Jammu and Kashmir are being penalised for fraudulent claims under PM-JAY. It is a serious matter that few white-coated men are indulging in such malpractices despite taking an oath to serve humanity. This is not the first time that thirteen hospitals have been suspended and penalties worth Rs. 1.77 crores imposed; this has happened in the past also, and some of these hospitals are repeat offenders. There seems to be a constellation of hospitals indulging in such shameful activities.

Taking advantage of patients and committing fraud in medical claims is a completely unacceptable norm, and the LG Administration must impose harsher penalties on repeat offenders; the suspension is insufficient punishment. The good work of administration has not to be dragged down by such incidents. A collegial gravitas action by the Medical Council of India on these heinous activities is also required. Need for more vigilance: sincere hospitals must be rewarded with recommendations on official sites, and defaulter ones must also be mentioned so that future patients know the credibility of these hospitals.

Substandard bridges

Jammu and Kashmir has seen unprecedented development under the present Gol and LG Administration, despite the financial crunch due to the COVID-19 pandemic. To ensure proper development, the Government of India has always provided more than enough budget allocation for a population-wise small Jammu and Kashmir in comparison to much larger states. Hundreds of kilometers of road connectivity and numerous bridges for better connectivity are under construction. The Administration repeatedly warns about work quality, but it appears that some feckless and obstinate members of the department are unconcerned about such directives. This time, it's a 4 crore bridge over the Hardkhari rivulet in the Haril area of Handwara, Kupwara district, that's cracked. Allegations of substandard material being used were levelled, but a lack of timely intervention ultimately led to cracks. This is not an isolated case, as this happened with the Devak Bridge at Utterbehni, the Sopore By-Pass Bridge, completed in 23 years but with cracks developing. There are no proper independent laboratories to check the quality of work, and the matter is further exacerbated by the delay in responses by investigating agencies. With no fear of action, the contractor-official nexus is working overtime to derail the engine of development. These bridges are important from a rural development point of view, and these kinds of delays are not expected now.

Harsha Kakar

Reports have emerged of defacing of Hindu temples in Canada and Australia by pro-Khalistan elements and of clashes between India supporters and pro-Khalistan groups from both these nations as also the UK. Voting in the so-called 'non-binding Khalistan referendum' has been reported from Italy, Canada, UK, Australia and Pakistan, all of which have sizable Sikh diaspora. India has raised its concerns to all these countries. Some arrests have been made on account of the violence and defacement, but no action has been taken against those conducting the referendum as it is claimed to be within democratic norms. Many voters in this fake referendum are regular visitors to India or have their roots on Indian soil.

Anti-India activities by so-called Khalistan activists have been abetted, funded and supported by Sikhs For Justice (SFJ), a US based group, which is also behind the non-binding referendum. SFJ was founded in 2007 intending for Punjab's secession from India and the creation of a separate 'Khalistan' state. The organization was outlawed in India in 2019. Interestingly, the proposed map of Khalistan only has Indian territory, leaving out Lahore and other areas of Pakistan, part of the erstwhile Ranjit Singh state. Lahore was the capital of Maharaja Ranjit Singh's empire. It highlights Pakistan's involvement behind the organization.

SFJ has limited global following. While the group claimed that 10-12,000 people participated in its referendum held in London in Nov 2021, reports state that numbers were far less. Similar inputs flowed from other places where these activities were conducted. Many Khalistan members are also reported to have participated in Pakistan sponsored protests on Kashmir in the US and UK. Even pro-Khalistan groups within India have been critical of the SFJ and its tactics. SFJ's attempts to disrupt national events in Delhi and other parts of the country have failed repeatedly. Canada is known for harbouring pro-Khalistan groups. The current Trudeau government in

The Khalistan movement

Ottawa has Khalistan supporters. It is backed by Jagmeet Singh's New Democratic Party (NDP). Jagmeet Singh is a known Khalistan sympathizer. Trudeau's India visit in 2018 was an epic example of a global leader being snubbed solely because his country supported anti-India groups. Apart from a formal meeting with the PM, which yielded nothing, there were no other official engagements.

The entire visit, funded by the Canadian taxpayer, comprised of photo-ops of Trudeau and his family at various tourist destinations, including the Taj Mahal. Even the Punjab Chief Minister, Amarinder Singh refused to interact with him.

With Pakistan reverting to narco-terrorism in the border states of Punjab and JandK, there is a need for better vigil and stalling its attempts to re-ignite Punjab before it gains steam. The region has witnessed growth and development which should not be permitted to be set back due to actions of a few.

The message from India was clear and firmly conveyed. His comments during the farmer's agitation, mainly to secure his political future, only froze relations further.

The Canadian foreign minister, Mélanie Joly, arrived in Delhi early this month seeking to mend ties, frayed over the past few years, thanks to Trudeau. During her meeting with foreign minister, S Jaishankar, the Khalistan issue was again highlighted. India firmly conveyed that the 'Khalistan issue is a matter of national security and Ottawa must take firm action' against them in

case the Canadian government desires Indo-Canada ties to be on track. India had also issued a travel advisory on hate crimes for its citizens traveling to Canada, conveying its displeasure.

The Khalistan movement, aiming to break the social fabric of Punjab, is funded by inimical elements, including the ISI. Within the country, apart from a few disgruntled elements, there are no takers. Most residents of the state have witnessed a rise in economic conditions and are least interested in being part of a defunct movement. Globally, the movement is also an attempt to gain control of Gurdwara's across the western world hereby influencing Indian diaspora.

There have been a few Khalistan linked incidents in India, none alarming, including an RPG (Rocket Propelled Grenade) attack on the Punjab Police Intelligence HQs and a blast in the Ludhiana court. The RPG attack was by a Pak based smuggler and terrorist, displaying Pak's intent to shift focus from Kashmir, where it has failed, to Punjab. There have also been reports of display of Khalistan flags and graffiti in parts of the country. The latest incident was just prior to Republic day this year in Delhi, over which two were arrested. A few individual incidents of shootings

have also been linked to them, including that of known rapper, Sidhu Moosewala.

The Government also claimed, in the supreme court, that the SFJ had infiltrated into the farmers agitation in 2020-21. Many Khalistan backing members of parliament from UK and Canada voiced their support for the protests. The Interpol also refused to act against Khalistan terrorists claiming that their activities have a 'political dimension.'

Many of those who participated in the sham referendum in Canada, Australia and England were Indian students with Indian passports. Inputs of participants are available through CCTV footage. Ideally, the Government should place them under scrutiny once they return home. Failure to act only adds to the belief that supporting secessionist movements, including when abroad, is possible. It also opens doors for them being brainwashed into joining organizations which operate against the state.

With Pakistan reverting to narco-terrorism in the border states of Punjab and Jand K, there is a need for better vigil and stalling its attempts to re-ignite Punjab before it gains steam. The region has witnessed growth and development which should not be permitted to be set back due to actions of a few. The state is currently facing growing unemployment and high rates of drug addiction. It was these concerns which resulted in a change in government. The centre and state must work to resolve these problems thereby stemming the movement.

Border states with discontent are more prone to being exploited by inimical nations. With Pakistan having failed in Kashmir, they will now seek to spread unrest in Punjab. Their long-term aim appears to have both Punjab and J and K in turmoil with elements working in tandem. They have few options other than supporting internal unrest as their economy falters and they remain dependent on global funding agencies. Currently the situation is under control but could escalate if not checked. India must strategize and act before it becomes too late.

The author is Major General (Retd)

Judicial Overreach-Stymieing Eco Tourism in Tiger Reserves

Col Satish Singh Lalotra

'One of the first conditions of happiness is that link between man and nature should not be broken'-Leo Tolstoy.

Responsible travel is not only better for our world; it is also more interesting and memorable. Responsible tourism is the future of travel. The above statement notwithstanding, a supreme court appointed panel (Central empowered committee), CEC has asked the union environment ministry to amend or withdraw the guidelines related to setting up Zoos and safaris within tiger reserves and wildlife sanctuaries to discourage the use of wild life habitat for tourism activities which are non-site specific. In its report submitted to the Supreme Court last month, the CEC also said that approvals given for setting up zoos and tiger safaris with in tiger reserves and protected areas should be withdrawn forthwith. Permission could only be given for activities involving rescue and rehabilitation of injured or incapacitated animals from the same landscape. The Supreme Court panel's observation came on an issue involving the establishment of a "TIGER SAFARI" in the 'Buffer zone' of CTR (Corbett tiger reserve) in Uttrakhand.

Looking at its face value, nothing can be more damaging and placing a restrictive environment both for the beast and a man to co-exist peacefully if these observations of CEC are implemented. According to the NTCA (National tiger conservation authority) guidelines issued in 2012, and amended in 2016&2019 tiger safaris can be established in buffer zone and fringe areas of a tiger reserve to reduce pressure of tourism in 'Core zones' and critical tiger habitats as also to foster awareness for eliciting forest support. To further jack up its case, the ministry said in June last year that the establishment of zoos over forest areas shouldn't be considered a non-forest activity, going away with the need for approval under the forest (conservation) act 1980. Only in exceptional cases the fringes of these 'Buffer zones' may be considered for the construction of a zoo on forest land. The above guide lines of NTCA /ministry of environment are generally

attuned to the prevalent rules world over, which further the cause of wildlife conservation. But then are the recent pronouncements by the Supreme court of India in tandem with those which are the norms world over to promote 'Ecotourism' in tiger sanctuaries?

Just to put the readers of this article in the right frame of understanding about what's a 'Core zone' and how does it differ from a 'Buffer zone' as also how the SC of India seems to be over reaching in its efforts of conservation of tiger sanctuaries a domain entirely of the ministry of environment and that of NTCA. 'Core zone' includes protected areas, as they act as a reference point on the natural state of ecosystems represented by the biosphere reserves. Core zone is where the actual forests exist and there are no villages inside this core zone. This zone is basically where the conservation of wild life and natural resources is strictly prohibited by the forest department. On the other hand a 'Buffer zone' is an area that surrounds or adjoins the core area where natural conservation alongside compatible human uses of the land or water is the order of the day. These might include activities such as 'Eco-tourism', recreation, sustainable agriculture and agro-forestry plus others. The 'Buffer zone' is where both villages and animals (tigers) co-exist. Hence core zone is actually a forest with abundant wildlife and the buffer zone with few wild life animals alongside with co-existing villages. Here we need to understand that animals are not aware of these zones and hence don't know where a core zone begins and a buffer zone finishes. They go where ever they want to go guided by their animal instincts. Therefore all this brouhaha about zones should be restricted to in fact 'Tiger sightings' whether in the core zones or the buffer zone as the case may be.

The CEC in its wisdom has castigated the NTCA for giving overriding preference to ecotourism by way of promoting tiger safaris rather than conservation of tigers. Nothing can be farther than truth in this case. In fact the CEC should have taken it with a pinch of salt its castigation when seen in the light of the fact that how can it impinge upon the professional way of thinking

and working of country's premier nature conservation authority which has honed its capabilities on the anvil of excellent conservation related results. The panel should be aware that it is these tiger safaris /jaunts which are money spinning machines both for the safari organizers as well as the tiger sanctuaries for sustainable development. As for the increasing man-animal conflicts arising in the buffer zone of various tiger sanctuaries of India, it is the unprecedented land pressure which is the casus-belli pitching face to face a tiger against a common villager compounded by the evil machinations of the land mafia which are operating with impunity in that area. Has the SC of India or the CEC come out with a blue print to reduce pressure on land in the buffer zones? Have any rehab plans chalked out for the hapless people living in these buffer zones of the country's tiger sanctuaries? In fact in places like Jim Corbett national park it is the local land mafia in active collusion with the builder's lobby who are parceling away the land in the buffer zone to quillible population and raking millions of rupees. What is the local state government or the Supreme Court's take in this regard?

The above corrosive activities of the interested parties have resulted into the restriction of the buffer zone further, thus putting a tiger in direct line of confrontation with a villager. It is not the tiger safaris or zoos which are coming in the way of tiger conservation, but the above actions as explained. Has the SC of India taken to Task various state governments of the country for their lackadaisical approach in pinning the land mafia operating in the buffer zones and put them under a scanner? I am sure the apex court of the country is aware that all these tiger sanctuaries dotting the countryside are also sustaining tribal population inhabiting these buffer zones. Few queries to the honourable members of the CEC through this article of mine will go a long way in dispelling the fog surrounding this vexed issue-

* How and in what manner is the CEC planning to sustain the various buffer zones of tiger sanctuaries in the absence of any concrete guidelines to reign in the land mafia operating with impunity over there?

* Has the CEC given any authentic solution to the ministry of environment to generate income in the event of these tiger safaris closing down?

* Has the SC of India appointed CEC given any road map to the ministry of environment to showcase the wildlife wealth of India to its citizenry in the absence of closing of the safaris? If not why not?

* Has the CEC given any recommendation to the ministry for additional financial grants to maintain these tiger sanctuaries in the wake of these safaris going kaput?

* What additional inputs have been given to the ministry to attract foreign tourists to show case India's tiger wealth who come all the way from various parts of the world?

* What road map has been charted out for the ancillary businesses connected with the zoos and safaris going bust?

* With the tribal population of Tharu ,Buxa, Korkus,Gonds, and Bhils already being evicted from their traditional habitats by the land mafias , the buffer zones which house max of these marginalized population would be under an additional pressure thus adding grist to the mill. How do we rehab them?

As if this was not enough the panel has even suggested the CZA(Central zoo authority) not to approve any fresh proposal for establishment of new zoos and safaris within tiger reserves ,wildlife sanctuaries ,national parks along animal corridors and animal dispersal routes. It goes without saying that all these guidelines already from part of charter of duties of CZA. Nothing new in it. But what is new is the sudden and new love in the form of judicial activism which instead of forming a bedrock of time and tested framework of rules for the smooth operation of various national agencies is proving the other way around. Time the apex body of judiciary pressed the pause button in flexing its muscles. No wonder world renowned writer Leo Tolstoy didn't say it in futility---

One of the first conditions of human happiness is that the link between man and nature should not be broken.

(The writer is a retired army officer)

Exploiting technology to undermine democracy

Asad Mirza

A recent disconcerting report based on an investigation carried by 30 global media outlets, including the Guardian and Der Spiegel, claims to have exposed a team of freelance units based in Israel, which disrupt elections and manipulate public opinion using disinformation campaigns.

Undercover reporters recorded a group of covert cyber influence specialists as they pitched their services for seeking fresh business, which involve using disinformation campaigns, false intelligence, hacks and blackmail to promote their clients' interests. The group, which calls itself 'Team Jorge', claims to have worked on dozens of presidential elections around the world and charges multimillion-dollar fees.

Undercover journalists who carried out the investigation included Gur Meggido (The Marker), Frédéric Métézeau (Radio France), and Omer Benjakob (Haaretz). The journalists were part of a collaborative investigation called 'Story Killers', which was coordinated by 'Forbidden Stories' - an international consortium of investigative journalists that pursue the work of journalists who have been killed or work under threat.

As reported, the covert units or contractors, used the pseudonym "Team Jorge," headed by Tal Hanan, who previously worked as an Israeli special forces operative, and was apparently caught in an undercover sting operation by the journalists posing as potential clients.

However, Tal Hanan denies any wrongdoing. But he allegedly told the reporters that his unit's services were available to intelligence agencies, political campaigns, and private companies, and that many European, African, Americans well as Central and South American clients had already used them around the globe.

Their modus operandi is said to involve creating thousands of fake social media profiles on Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook, Telegram, Gmail, Instagram, and YouTube. These fake accounts, which allegedly used profile pictures from real social media accounts, were also linked to credit cards and could be used to create thousands of bots that sent mass messages.

In one secretly filmed meeting quoted by the Guardian, Hanan is seen boasting that at present his team is now involved in one election in Africa, besides two other teams in Greece and the UAE. Boasting further, he said that his team has so far delivered 33 presidential-level campaigns globally, 27 of which were successful.

Hanan also reportedly boasted to the undercover reporters that he could hack the email and messenger services of election campaigners, and send messages to their contacts designed to damage their campaign.

The investigators found that Team Jorge's tech toolbox included "a platform of influence" called Advanced Impact Media Solutions or AIMS, which Hanan claims to have sold to the intelligence services of more than 10 countries.

The AIMS software is designed to create convincing avatars for social media campaigns. The avatars, or bots, use stolen photos of real people, operate on any social media platform, and can be connected to functioning Amazon and Bitcoin accounts. They also appear to have a longstanding presence online, including Gmail accounts and trite comments on celebrity YouTube videos, to give investigators the impression they are real people. In this regard Hannan told reporters that they relied successfully on imitating human behaviour.

Though nowadays most online accounts require phone number and email address verification to keep out bots like those deployed by

AIMS. But to overcome that there are websites available, which have been set up specifically to allow one-off SMS-verification services, for 50 cents or less. Many accounts such as Gmail and WhatsApp - can be registered with "verified" phone numbers. Apparently Team Jorge used a service called SMSpva.com for phone number verifications.

Keeping abreast of social media platforms checks, AIMS relied on residential proxies to reroute internet traffic from bots through peoples' homes so it appeared authentic, in order to avoid detection and shut-downs by social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook. This made it difficult for social media platforms to identify a coordinated disinformation campaign.

Verification and analysis of the recorded conversations by reporting partners Le Monde and the Guardian identified clusters of avatars, including those seen in Hanan's pitch presentations, that appeared to have been used for coordinated Twitter campaigns. Reporters found over 1,700 Twitter accounts connected to 21 AIMS-related campaigns, whose networks had produced tens of thousands of tweets.

In December last, during a in-person meeting with undercover reporters, Team Jorge showed off a new capability of AIMS: Artificial intelligence tools to generate fake news using specified key words, tone and topic.

The identities of Team Jorge members were shrouded in secrecy but reporters managed to piece together some background information on some members of the clandestine group. Some of it lines up with claims Team Jorge made about team members in calls with journalists.

One team member described his other colleagues as former senior information officers, for-

mer senior financial information and warfare experts, and psychological warfare specialists, all with intelligence services background.

Hanan indicated that he had orchestrated lobbying operations in the U.S. despite not registering as a "foreign agent", as required by law. He said he worked via consultants and companies that are already registered, and told reporters he had recently set up a public relations firm called Axiomatics to promote Team Jorge with "existing lobby groups."

During calls with undercover reporters, Team Jorge went into specifics about the technology they say the group uses to swing elections. They added that they have six offices and employ at least 100 people, emphasising that they draw on the backgrounds of colleagues with experience in the intelligence services. This pushes Team Jorge's activities far beyond the realm of public relations strategies that are commonly deployed in elections.

As far as the financial pickings are concerned, Team Jorge told the reporters they would accept payments in a variety of currencies, including crypto currencies such as Bitcoin, or cash. He said he would charge between \$6m and \$15m for interference in elections.

The information gleaned by the investigative reporters points to one rather disconcerting fact, that there are people out there and they would be there in future too, who would always be ready to interfere in other country's internal affairs and ready to subterfuge the democratic institutions.

But the bigger question is shall we just ignore them calling it sealing another frontier in the technology advancement or shall we start a campaign to ban such illegal and undesirable activities which may one day be able to destabilise the whole global democratic system?

(The author is a political commentator based in New Delhi.)