

O HERALDO

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Trump, Musk, Modi and the curious case of \$21 million

In the world of political spectacles, few recent incidents have sparked as much outrage as the claims surrounding a \$21 million US government grant intended for "voter turnout" in India. The firestorm was ignited by a social media post from Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), which suggested that USAID (the United States Agency for International Development) had allocated millions of dollars to influence India's elections. The claim quickly gained traction, fuelled by none other than President Donald Trump himself, who used the opportunity to attack both USAID and its foreign aid initiatives.

At the heart of this controversy lies a masterful mix of miscommunication and political manoeuvring. In its original post, DOGE falsely asserted that USAID had canceled a \$21 million grant for "voter turnout in India" as part of President Trump's broader cuts to foreign aid. The idea of foreign governments meddling in another nation's democratic process - especially when it involves the US - is, of course, a serious accusation. Yet, as investigations soon revealed, there was no such grant intended for India in the first place.

Documents accessed by the Indian Express and reports from The Washington Post exposed the truth: the \$21 million in question was not directed toward India's elections, but instead, to a non-profit organization supporting political engagement in neighbouring Bangladesh. Despite this clear evidence, the claims made by Musk and Trump had already stoked significant unrest in India, especially among the ruling BJP and its supporters.

The suspicion of foreign interference has given the BJP perfect scope to amplify the accusations. For years, the BJP has accused international civil society organizations and human rights groups, accusing them of attempting to undermine India's sovereignty. This latest incident was swiftly seized upon as proof that foreign actors were trying to interfere in India's internal affairs, specifically by targeting the country's election process. Amit Malviya, head of the BJP's IT cell, proclaimed that Trump's claims confirmed an attempt to "influence the Indian election and install someone other than Prime Minister Modi."

Meanwhile, other prominent BJP leaders, including Vice President Jagdeep Thakur and Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, voiced their deep concern about the alleged interference.

However, the reality was that these claims were entirely unfounded. The \$21 million mentioned in the DOGE post was part of a much larger funding initiative for Bangladesh, not India. The Washington Post reported that US officials were as puzzled by the claim as anyone else, stating that no such program had ever existed in India. In fact, USAID had not funded any electoral-related programs in India since 2008. As a result, both the Indian Express and The Washington Post have thoroughly debunked the allegations of foreign interference in India's democratic process.

Yet, the impact of these claims has been significant, particularly in the political landscape of India. The allegations served as a perfect tool for the BJP to accuse the Congress party of being complicit with foreign powers. Congress, on its part, used the opportunity to fire back, accusing the BJP of spreading "fake news from America" to discredit the opposition. Congress spokesperson Jairam Ramesh described the incident as a "comedy of errors," emphasizing that the BJP had been quick to jump on a completely false narrative.

Trump continued to echo the false claim at multiple events, going so far as to suggest that the funds were intended to "get somebody else elected." What's more troubling, however, is the role of social media and its ability to rapidly spread misinformation. Musk's X platform (formerly known as Twitter) has become a breeding ground for political claims, and DOGE's influence, paired with Musk's own public support of Trump's positions, created a perfect storm. Musk has even taken to boasting that DOGE is "feeding USAID into the wood chipper," further legitimizing the baseless accusations.

Meanwhile, some members of India's civil society expressed concern about the longer-term consequences of the controversy. Fears grew that the BJP might use the allegations of foreign interference as a pretext for further cracking down on non-governmental organizations and foreign-funded projects in India. After all, the government has already made it difficult for certain international organisations, such as Amnesty International and Greenpeace, to operate freely within the country.

What this saga highlights, above all, is the peril of unchecked political rhetoric in the digital age. The manipulation of facts—whether intentional or not—can have significant consequences, not only within the borders of the country in question but also on a global stage. In India, where both national pride and electoral politics are deeply entwined, misleading claims of foreign interference risk further eroding trust in both domestic institutions and foreign relations.



JOHN DAYAL

The political wars and the whimsy of India's women chief ministers

Delhi's new Chief Minister Rekha Gupta's public oath-taking ceremony at the historic Ram Lila grounds draws attention to women chief ministers in the country, past and present, who have made waves with their often-explosive politics and left a deep impact on contemporary history.

India has seen 18 women chief ministers so far, from the first, freedom fighter Sucheta Kriplani, to Rekha Gupta of the BJP and her predecessor, Aam Aadmi Party's Atishi. Notable names include Nandini Satpathy of Odisha, Goa's Shashikala Kakodkar, and Mehbooba Mufti of Jammu and Kashmir. Some, like Anwara Taimur of Assam, have been all but forgotten.

Four women stand out for their sheer guts and survival instincts: J. Jayalalithaa, Mamata Banerjee, Mayawati, and Sheila Dikshit. These women, often defying social norms, became formidable political figures.

Dr J Jayalalithaa of Tamil Nadu was perhaps the most charismatic, transitioning from a celebrated film career to a dominant political force. Born on February 24, 1948, in Mysore, Karnataka, she was introduced to cinema by her widowed mother. Her success in Tamil films, particularly alongside M G Ramachandran (MGR), made her a household name.

MGR founded the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) in 1972 after splitting from the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK). Recognising Jayalalithaa's popularity, he inducted her into the party in the early 1980s. She was nominated to the Rajya Sabha in 1984, and after MGR's demise in 1987, she positioned herself as his political heir. The AIADMK, under her leadership, secured a decisive victory in the 1991 elections, making her the State's youngest and first female Chief Minister.

Her tenure saw welfare initiatives such as the "Cradle Baby Scheme" to combat female infanticide and the establishment of all-women police stations.

However, extravagant displays of wealth, such as during her foster son's 1995 wedding, led to criticism and AIADMK's 1996 electoral defeat. She returned to power in 2001, 2011, and 2016, cementing her legacy.

Her first tenure was marred by corruption charges, leading to a conviction in 2014. Though acquitted by the Karnataka High

Court in 2015, her reputation remained tainted. In September 2016, she was hospitalised for fever and dehydration. The secrecy surrounding her hospitalisation and subsequent death on December 5, 2016, at 68, led to speculation and controversy.

Mayawati, former Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, lacked Jayalalithaa's charisma but emerged as a formidable Dalit leader. Born on January 15, 1956, in Delhi, her political career was shaped by Kanshi Ram, founder of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). Her rise symbolised the empowerment of Dalits, challenging traditional caste hierarchies.

Mayawati served as Uttar Pradesh's Chief Minister four times (1995, 1997, 2002-2003, and 2007-2012). Her social engineering strategy united Dalits, Brahmins, and other communities, leading to a full-majority government in 2007. Dalits and marginalised groups credit her tenure for improved law and order.

However, controversies followed her. She accused Samajwadi Party leader Mulayam Singh Yadav of conspiring to attack her in the 1995 "Guest House" incident. Her tenure was also marked by corruption allegations and extravagant expenditure on statues and memorials of Dalit icons, including herself. Critics saw this as self-aggrandisement, while supporters viewed it as symbolic empowerment.

Mamata Banerjee of Bengal, like Mayawati, is a political survivor. Born on January 5, 1955, in Kolkata, she started as a Youth Congress activist, battling the then-ruling Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI-M). In the 1984 general elections, she defeated veteran Communist leader Somnath Chatterjee, becoming one of India's youngest parliamentarians.

She served in Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao's cabinet, but found her rise within Congress blocked. In 1998, she founded the All India Trinamool Congress (AITC), initially aligning with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). She later joined the Atal Bihari Vajpayee-led cabinet, handling key portfolios with administrative skill.

Back in Bengal, she continued her grassroots activism, leading movements against the CPI(M)'s land policies, notably in Singur and Nandigram. These campaigns resonated with the masses and led to the 2011 State elections, where the AITC-led alliance ended the Left Front's 34-year rule. Banerjee became Bengal's first female Chief Minister on May 20, 2011.

Fourteen years later, she continues to hold power, facing opposition from both the BJP and the CPI(M). Her governance has seen major infrastructural projects, social welfare schemes, and employment programs. However, allegations of corruption and political violence persist.

Sheila Dikshit, Delhi's longest-serving Chief Minister, transformed the national capital over her 15-year tenure (1998-2013). Born on March 31, 1938, in Kapurthala, Punjab, her political career began in the 1980s. She was elected as an MP from Kannauj in 1984 and served as a minister in Rajiv Gandhi's cabinet.

In 1998, she was appointed President of the Delhi Pradesh Congress Committee and led the party to victory in the Assembly elections, unseating the BJP. Her governance was marked by infrastructural expansion, particularly the Delhi Metro, which revolutionised urban transport. The Metro's success inspired similar projects in other cities.

Her tenure also saw improvements in roads, flyovers, and public transport, making Delhi a more liveable city. However, the 2011 Commonwealth Games were marred by corruption allegations, damaging her reputation.

The 2013 Delhi elections saw her defeat by Arvind Kejriwal's Aam Aadmi Party, ending her 15-year rule. Though she later contested elections in Uttar Pradesh and was briefly appointed Kerala Governor, her political career never recovered.

These four women faced unique challenges but have also left an indelible mark on governance. From Jayalalithaa's 'Amma' for girl child and families, to Mayawati's Dalit empowerment, Banerjee's grassroots mobilisation, and Dikshit's urban reforms, each has shaped her state in distinct ways.

(John Dayal is an author, Editor, occasional documentary film maker and activist.)

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Groundwater depletion linked to quakes

Early on February 17, an earthquake of a magnitude of 4.3 reportedly jolted Delhi. Surprisingly, many claimed they had never felt such a strong jolt before. Fortunately, the earthquake did not result in fatalities.

However, the city's infrastructure remains vulnerable. Research has shown that Delhi's seismic activity is influenced by human activities such as irrigation and urbanisation, which impact groundwater levels.

Studies suggest that pumping out groundwater can trigger earthquakes by reducing pressure in the underlying rocks.

Most of these quakes occurred within the upper 25 km of the Earth's crust, making them shallow earthquakes.

The link between groundwater extraction and seismic events has been observed worldwide. In Goa following reports of 60-70 illegal borewells found at Chimbhel, the Water Resource Department (WRD) has directed officials to investigate the matter and see to it these wells are disconnected.

Several construction activities in the State have put a huge pressure on groundwater availability. Digging of borewells and transportation of water without the permission of the groundwater

Sovereignty in tatters

The concept of sovereignty is relatively a new phenomenon in history, the primal instinct to extend borders and encroach on a neighbour's land has never really left the human psyche.

There can be no better example of this than Ukraine, 20 percent of whose territory is now under Russian occupation.

The peace talks initiated by Russia and the US on the neutral territory of Saudi Arabia to end the war ironically do not have any representative from Ukraine, the sufferer.

This could point to a nefarious plan by the two superpowers to divide up the former USSR

constituent between themselves with the Ukrainians being declared persona non grata. Trump's utterances on acquiring Greenland, merging Canada into USA as the latter's 51st State, annexing the Panama Canal and other assorted hyperbole are ominous signs that the world order or whatever is left of it is sought to be criminally upended by two rogue presidents.

It was after World War II that sovereignty and respect for territorial integrity were codified and enshrined in international law, but countries have only paid lip service to the concept of a self-governing supreme

letterstotheeditor

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tries lacking military muscle would be buried 6 feet under.

Vinay Dwivedi, Benaulum

Exorbitant Metro fare hike

There has been widespread discussion in Bengaluru about the Metro fare hike and how exorbitant it has been.

The counter arguments from the Metro Rail & government have been that the increases are necessary to recover costs and that the raise in fare is coming after 5/7/12 years as variously stated.

There is also the duality that is being debated as to who is responsible for the fare hike, the Centre or the State government.

Let us answer the last question first. The Metro Rail is a Central Government establishment and is operated by the Centre though the State government may have a stake in it.

Therefore, any fare hike is squarely in the Centre's court. Now, let us come to the philosophy of assigning fares for public transportation systems.

All around the world very rarely do public transportation systems run at a profit.

people'sedit

PREVENTING DIGITAL FRAUDS

CHANDER GUPTA

Payments through digital mode have now become mainstream. We now make payments of various kinds of bills viz. mobile phone bills, landline phone bills, electricity bills, credit card bills etc., sitting anywhere anytime through our smartphones.

Online shopping is done and payments thereof made digitally through the smart phones. Funds can also be transferred likewise. To facilitate all this, mobile wallets have emerged as another medium of digital payments. First, you have to transfer money from your bank account to mobile wallets for spending from it thereafter.

Digital payments can be made even without mobile wallets directly on a service provider's app with your debit/credit card or internet banking. It has become very convenient. However, with the proliferation of digital payments, online frauds have also mushroomed scaring people away from the digital.

Previously, a family member has been duped by way of two debits of Rs 49,999 and Rs 49,000 from her account by online fraudsters. The modus operandi adopted will be worth narrating for the benefit of stakeholders. An SMS was purportedly received from a reputed mobile wallet company warning that the funds in the wallet will be blocked unless a call was made on a given mobile number for sorting out KYC-related issues. The unsuspecting/gullible user called that number. The person on the other side, pretending to be the representative of the reputed mobile wallet company asks the caller to download an app 'Quick Support'.

My unsuspecting relative not only downloads the app as directed but also tells the code number to the 'representative' of the mobile wallet company. By doing so, my relative unknowingly gave remote access to her mobile to the online fraudster. She was further directed to transfer Rs 100 from her bank account to her mobile wallet. Her compliance enabled the fraudster to capture her debit card credentials. Now that the fraudster had the debit card credentials and remote access to my relative's mobile phone for viewing OTPs, two quick debits of Rs 49,999 and Rs 49,000 happened in my relative's bank account. The OTP SMSes on my relative's phone, which by virtue of remote access fraudster could also see and apply, alerted my relative too. She got a sense of what was happening and switched off her phone immediately and rushed to the bank to get her Debit Card blocked. Further damage was averted.

Online frauds are cyber crimes in which the victims and perpetrators can be hundreds or even thousands of miles apart. Police stations work on the basis of territorial jurisdiction. It should not be difficult for agencies and banks to trace the money. After all, money has travelled through banking channel only. The recipient account and account holder can be identified. There was an SMS, meant to trigger this chain of transactions, which mentioned a mobile number also. SMS and mobile numbers cannot be anonymous. However the possibility of being easily traced does not deter tricksters from making easy money. It may lead to the inference that the culprits have been escaping the clutches of law.

A pan India dedicated agency should be created to prevent/ detect such sort of crimes lest people lose faith in digital payments. Not only should the siphoned money be recovered, but the culprits should be nabbed to face the law also.

Primarily, the motive is to provide transportation as a public convenience or good and hence the fares charged are kept low and to barely recover costs.

Even sometimes the government steps in to subsidise the fares so that the commuter is not overly burdened. This applies to Metro Rail and also underground kinds of public transportation systems.

Thus, one would think that the Metro Rail management in Bengaluru needs to re-think its fare policy. The other thing is that costs keep changing year by year and hence it is the responsibility of the service provider of the transportation systems in this case the Metro Rail to try and recover these costs at reasonable intervals say annually or bi-annually.

Letting recovery go beyond that is irresponsibility on the part of the service provider since as we have seen in the present case, the commuter is overburdened and looks for alternatives. It was reported that the footfalls in the Metro Rail have dropped by around 100,000 since the fare hike.

This defeats the very purpose of the mass transportation system. The above principles of pricing would apply across India for all public and mass transportation systems.

Srinivas Kamat, Mysore