

23rd July, 2021

NEWS JUICE

Intelligent Compilation from The Hindu, Indian Express & others along with News Background

NEWS HEADLINES

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What is News Juice?

BY PREPMATE



1. What is the adult film racket in which Raj Kundra is arrested?

Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Polity & Governance

Businessman Raj Kundra, husband of actor and businesswoman Shilpa Shetty, was arrested by the Mumbai Police on Monday in connection with an adult film racket. What is the case, and does Kundra face any other similar case?

What is the case in which Raj Kundra has been arrested?

On February 4 of this year, the Mumbai police said they had arrested five people for allegedly forcing women into porn movies. They would promise these aspiring actresses, who came to Mumbai from various parts of the country, roles in web series. However, on the day of the shoot, they would change the script and threaten the women to expose themselves. If the women refused, they were asked to foot the bill for the shooting preparations.

Once the movies were shot, the accused made them available on mobile apps, offering subscriptions on the lines of mainstream OTT platforms. They would then put up advertisements on social media platforms. Since pornography is illegal in India, this too was against the law.

How and where were these movies shot?

According to the police, it would normally be a daylong shoot at a rented bungalow on the outskirts of Mumbai, like Madh Island. There would be minimal staff of five to six people who would double up as directors, dialogue writers, locations scouters and web app developers. These apps became especially popular during the lockdown, with some having a subscriber base in lakhs, said the police.

What does the police say was the role of Raj Kundra?

There were two aspects of the police probe. One was nabbing those who produced these porn shows and the other focused on those who broadcast these clips. Some of these production houses broadcast from servers outside the country.

One such UK production house, found to be uploading such content, came under the police scanner and its executive Umesk Kamat was arrested. An officer said that it was Kundra's alleged connection to Kamat and the company that uploaded such pornographic content that landed him in trouble.

Are any other similar cases pending against Kundra?

Kundra had applied for anticipatory bail last month in connection with a case registered by the Maharashtra Cyber police last year. In that case too, the cyber police had registered an FIR against various platforms which they said were involved in showcasing pornographic content. The court is likely to decide on the anticipatory bail application next week.

Source: The Indian Express

2. A compromise amid uncertainty

Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Economics

For now, the risk has receded that the United Arab Emirates (UAE), said to hold the world's largest untapped crude reserves, might quit the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). The end to the UAE's weeks-long impasse with Saudi Arabia, one of the world's biggest crude exporters, and Russia, a non-OPEC state, was brought about by Sunday's deal. Under its terms, the UAE's demand for an increase in its oil output quotas, in recognition of its higher production capacity, has been conceded. The baselines have also been raised for Saudi Arabia, Russia, Iraq and Kuwait.

The compromise

The bloc will now step up crude production by 400,000 barrels a day starting in August. The deal will extend until the end of 2022. The output boost is in response to rising oil prices in the wake of the rebound in economic activity following the easing of lockdown restrictions and increased COVID-19 vaccinations in different parts of the world. Sunday's deal has also extended until the end of next year the broad terms of the unprecedented production cuts the bloc enforced in April 2020. The cartel cut oil production by 9.7 million barrels a day (mbd) as oil demand fell from 100 mbd to 91.1 mbd and prices plummeted from \$70 in January 2020 to around \$20 in April. The bloc has since gradually rolled back these steep cuts and hopes to return production to pre-pandemic levels by the end of 2022. The UAE has played hard ball during the bloc's attempts to deal with the pandemic-induced price volatility. In December, when OPEC+ tried to ease production cuts, the UAE insisted that members who diluted the original output reductions should compensate through even steeper cuts, following its own example. Thus, while the internal rift has been resolved for now, the danger cannot be ruled out of an increasingly economically and politically assertive UAE flexing its muscle. Any potential break with the bloc would undoubtedly prove far more consequential for the OPEC than the 2019 exit of Qatar.

Bilateral relations between the traditional allies, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, have been especially strained since the UAE established diplomatic ties with Israel last year and withdrew troops from the Saudi-spearheaded war in Yemen the year before. A more recent arena of tension is the tariffs Riyadh has imposed on imports from the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council. Saudi Arabia will now exclude from the GCC tariff agreement goods made by companies with a workforce of less than 25% of locals and industrial products with less than 40% of added value after their transformation process. Home to a predominantly migrant population, the move could hit the UAE especially hard.

Peak in oil demand

The latest OPEC compromise echoes growing recognition of the delicate balance between competing domestic and global priorities. Foremost is their eagerness to maximise the

returns on their substantial hydrocarbon resources, amid growing speculation of a peak in oil demand within sight. The OPEC, echoing other assessments, forecast in 2016 that a strict implementation of the Paris climate accord could see the demand for oil peak by 2030, owing to the proliferation of alternative fuels and electric cars. Conversely, its report last year pins hopes on population growth and expansion of the middle class for continued increase in oil demand. The International Energy Agency (IEA), which in 2016 forecast a continued rise in oil consumption until the 2040s, has more recently hinted at about 5% rise or fall relative to the demand before the pandemic within a decade. The OPEC's other concerns are the stabilisation of world oil prices without jeopardising national expenditure programmes, and the diversification of economies in anticipation of the unfolding global energy transition. Unity would be of the essence amid this uncertainty.

Source: The Hindu

3. The politics of snooping

Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Polity & Governance

The Pegasus storm is only the latest — though perhaps the most widespread and sophisticated — among many snooping scandals in Indian politics. In past scandals, governments have fallen, Chief Ministers have resigned, CBI inquiries have been ordered, and the Supreme Court has been moved. But in many of these earlier cases, the alleged infringement of privacy and misuse of the powers of interception were far less flagrant — and in some cases, minuscule — compared to the en masse apparent misuse that is being revealed in the global media investigation called the Pegasus Project.

A spyware like no other

The change in surveillance technology over the decades has been frightening. The trepidation of those who may fear their conversations are being listened to, has increased manifold with, for instance, the development of the revolutionary spying software with 'zero-click' technology that the Israeli company NSO offers.

Intelligence agencies the world over have always relied heavily on "listening in" technology as against human intelligence. Before the advent of mobile telephony, it was conversations on telephone fixed lines that were being snooped upon — and those who feared they might be intercepted would strain their ears for the faint whirring sound of tape recorders or the call drops that ensued. There was a joke that if you wanted to beat the old-fashioned snoops, you made your confidential telephone calls very early in the morning. Reason: the headphone-wearing listeners, who mostly belonged to the Intelligence Bureau, would not have reported for duty!

Later, with the use of off-air or "passive" interception equipment, people would look out for the strange car or van parked close to their homes or workplaces. Again, those who feared their conversations might be picked up, found simple solutions (many important people

still do!) such as creating enough sound disturbance for the off-air equipment to receive only garbled conversations.

The illegal use of off-air equipment was in the news towards the end of the tenure of former Army Chief General V K Singh in 2012, when he and his detractors traded charges of mounting surveillance equipment to spy on each other.

But what do you do if a spyware like Pegasus is implanted in your mobile phone seemingly without leaving a trace, and it continuously streams out all of the phone's audio, video, and text content?

Snooping over the years

Over the years, snooping scandals in India have emerged through the outing of a variety of material. It could be the leak of interception orders (leading to the resignation of then Karnataka Chief Minister Ramakrishna Hegde in 1988); the physical sighting of intelligence operatives (which led to the fall of the Chandra Shekhar government in 1991); the leak of audio tapes (Tata Tapes, first reported by The Indian Express in 1997); or the leak of entire transcripts on pen drives of a target put under lawful interception (Radia Tapes, 2010).

There have been other scandals such as the leak of the secret letter written by then Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee to then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, informing him that he suspected his office was being bugged (reported by The Indian Express, 2011); and the "snoopgate" in Gujarat (2013), when audio tapes, recorded allegedly at the behest of then Chief Minister Narendra Modi's aide Amit Shah, of purported conversations of a woman architect were leaked.

There was also the leak of BlackBerry Messenger (BBM) messages recovered by Income Tax officials from the laptop of meat exporter Moin Qureshi. (The Indian Express, 2014).

At that time, BBM services were considered impenetrable to surveillance — just as messaging services like WhatsApp, Telegram and Signal, which promise end-to-end encryption, were, until recently, considered safe. From 2019, however, when the first Pegasus surveillance lists were published by The Indian Express, the Internet-based messaging platforms are no longer seen as being entirely safe.

In the present case involving Pegasus, metadata comprising thousands of telephone numbers, belonging to targets of the government clients of NSO, has been leaked.

The fallout of leaks

A review of some of these past scandals provides lessons in the manner in which agencies that purchase spyware have been upgrading their arsenal with increasingly expensive equipment and software.

It also shows the manner in which the politicians of the day have reacted when confronted with evidence of violations — while many stepped down taking moral responsibility in the past, more recently, they have tended to mostly brazen it out.

RAMAKRISHNA HEGDE: The then Chief Minister of Karnataka stepped down on “moral grounds” in 1988 after details emerged of wire-taps on 50 individuals, including journalists and dissidents within the Janata Party. Subsequently, the authorisation given to the state police for the tapping too was made public, completing the ignominy of the Chief Minister.

CHANDRA SHEKHAR: While Rajiv Gandhi, who was Prime Minister at the time, was exultant at the exit of Hegde, three years later he had his own surveillance moment. The Congress had propped up Chandra Shekhar’s Samajwadi Janata Party government. The tenuous relationship between the two leaders dived sharply after two policemen belonging to the Haryana CID were apprehended allegedly keeping vigil outside Rajiv’s house.

The former Prime Minister was furious, and even though Chandra Shekhar offered a probe by a Joint Parliamentary Committee, Rajiv decided to pull the plug on the government. Chandra Shekhar resigned, and nothing much was heard about the “snooping” incident subsequently.

Even when an investigating agency has been empowered to carry out an inquiry into cases of surveillance, nothing conclusive has ever been proven in terms of, for example, who leaked the tapes or transcripts.

Tata and Radia Tapes

The Tata Tapes were the first instance of the leak of a large volume of intercepted conversations. The tapes dealt with conversations of industrialists Nusli Wadia, Ratan Tata, and Keshub Mahindra, and the attempts to get the Centre to intercede in the manner in which the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) was extorting money from tea estates, including those owned by the Tatas.

Then Prime Minister I K Gujral ordered a CBI inquiry into the audio tape leaks but shortly thereafter, the inquiry was closed “for want of evidence”. The question of who or which agency ordered the telephone taps on the industrialists was never conclusively answered.

More than a decade after the Tata Tapes, hundreds of conversations of corporate lobbyist Niira Radia were leaked in 2008. The difference was that the route of the interception and the secret written communications between the Income Tax Department and the CBI that preceded the phone tapping were in circulation before the contents of the conversations were made public.

The other difference was that this was the leak of an authorised interception (renewed three times as per procedure) in connection with the 2G telecom scam, but it triggered a huge brouhaha. The result: for years, monitored by the apex court, the CBI attempted to

find “criminality” in the contents of the Radia Tapes, but failed. Radia herself quit public relations, but the message from that episode remains starkly true: that no conversations are safe, and anything can leak.

Source: The Indian Express

4. Pegasus of myth — and the horse in the sky

Relevant for GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Science & Technology

Back in 2019, when most people first heard of the spyware Pegasus, The Telegraph quoted NSO Group co-founder Shalev Hulio as describing the company’s flagship creation as the “Trojan horse” that could be sent “flying through the air to [break into] devices”.

Before this, Pegasus had always been the constellation that looks like a winged horse in the northern sky.

“The constellation is visible all year round, except from late March to late April, and when monsoon clouds are thick overhead. In Indian astronomy, its name is Mahashwa,” said Aniruddha Deshpande of the Jyotirvidya Pratisthan in Pune, among the oldest associations of amateur astronomers in India.

Look out for four stars forming the corners of a large square — the Great Square of Pegasus — with a small triangle of stars in one corner, and you will be able to trace the figure of the winged horse in the night sky.

In the mythology of ancient Greece, Pegasus, whose name comes from pegai, the Greek word for waters or springs, was the war horse of Zeus, the ruler, protector, and father of both gods and humans.

When Zeus went into battle, it was Pegasus who carried his arsenal of thunder and lightning. Pegasus never left Zeus’s side, even when the gods appeared to be at a disadvantage. For his loyalty, Zeus rewarded Pegasus by making him a constellation in the sky.

In another account of Pegasus, the horse was born from the blood of Medusa after she was slain by the hero Perseus. Pegasus was captured by the warrior Bellerophon, who rode it to a couple of heroic battles before flying on it to Mt Olympus, the abode of the gods.

Enraged by this audacity, Zeus contrived to make Bellerophon fall off the horse to earth, where a thorn bush left him blind and in misery. Bellerophon’s steed Pegasus, however, kept going until he reached the heavens and became a constellation.

Source: The Indian Express

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