



'FOMENTING TERRORISM'
Centre extends ban on SIMI for 5 years

NEWS » PAGE 4



BEATING RETREAT
R-Day fete concludes in capital

NEWS » PAGE 6



BACKWARD CLASSES
2011 caste census data not helpful: Kerala in SC

STATES » PAGE 3



ECONOMIC AGENDA
Growth mania can be injurious to society

Growing inequality is a matter of concern

EDITORIAL » PAGE 8



INJURY BLOW
Jadeja, Rahul ruled out of second Test

SPORT » PAGE 16

INSIDE



'Dictatorship is inevitable if Modi re-elected'

BHUBANESWAR
The upcoming Lok Sabha election will be the last election in India if Prime Minister Narendra Modi is re-elected, Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge said here on Monday. » PAGE 4

Elections to 56 Rajya Sabha seats on February 27

NEW DELHI
The Election Commission on Monday said that elections to 56 Rajya Sabha seats would be held on February 27. Among the seats that will go to the polls are those held by BJP president J.P. Nadda and nine Union Ministers. » PAGE 4

Opposition mulls impeachment against Muizzu

COLOMBO
The Maldivian Democratic Party, the main Opposition party in the Maldives holding a parliamentary majority, is preparing to submit an impeachment motion against President Mohamed Muizzu in Parliament, stepping up its challenge to the Executive in the legislature. » PAGE 12

Iran, Pakistan to work jointly to improve security

ISLAMABAD
Pakistan and Iran on Monday agreed to work together to improve security cooperation in the wake of deadly air strikes by Tehran and Islamabad earlier this month that killed at least 11 people, marking an escalation in their fraught relations. » PAGE 12

Soren 'untraced' as ED team visits house

Agency officials camp at Jharkhand CM's Delhi residence for more than 12 hours

Soren sends a letter to the agency saying it is 'motivated by a political agenda'

Officials monitoring Delhi airport, say they will camp at the house till he returns

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI/PATNA

A team of Enforcement Directorate (ED) officials visited the Delhi residence of Jharkhand Chief Minister Hemant Soren on Monday for questioning him in connection with a land fraud case. While the ED team, which camped at the house for more than 12 hours, said the CM could not be located, Mr. Soren later sent a letter to the agency saying it is "motivated by political agenda". The ED teams will be at the residence till Mr. Soren returns, the sources said, adding that authorities are also keeping vigilance at the Delhi airport.



Long watch: Tight security outside Jharkhand CM Hemant Soren's Ranchi residence on Monday. PTI

The ED had questioned Mr. Soren at his official residence in Ranchi on January 20 in connection with the case and had issued

fresh summons asking him to confirm his availability for questioning on either January 29 or 31, sources said.

Officials of the Central probe agency, accompanied by Delhi Police personnel, reached Mr. Soren's residence at Shanti

Niketan in South Delhi around 9 a.m. and were still there after 9 p.m.

They moved out briefly from the premises at 8 p.m. and checked a BMW car parked there before going back inside without replying to queries from the media.

Meanwhile, in an email to the federal agency on Monday, Mr. Soren alleged that the issuance of summons to him was "wholly vexatious and in colourable exercise of powers given by the statute."

'Reeks of malice'
"Preserve video recording of seven-hour questioning [of January 20] to make available to the Court of Law," Mr. Soren said, while

agreeing to record his statement at his residence at 1 p.m. on January 31.

Citing the upcoming Assembly session scheduled between February 9 and 29, Mr. Soren said that, under the circumstances, the ED's insistence to record a further statement on or before January 31 "reeks of malice".

While the Chief Minister's Office refused to discuss the development, Jharkhand Governor Radhakrishnan said he was keeping a watch on the situation in the State.

The case pertains to alleged purchase and sale of tribal land by forging documents between 2020 and 2022. (With inputs from PTI)

Centre pegs GDP growth at 7% in 2024-25

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Ahead of the Interim Budget, a Finance Ministry report on Monday pegged India's real GDP growth at closer to 7% in 2024-25 with "considerable scope" to outpace 7% by 2030, adding that the economy will hit \$5 trillion in the next three years. Prefacing a review of the economy's "journey in the last 10 years", Chief Economic Adviser V. Anantha Nageswaran said "not all growth is equal" and marginal utility of 7% growth when the world is struggling to grow 2% is "higher" than 8-9% growth achieved with the global economy rising 4%.

FULL REPORT
» PAGE 14

War dance



Yemen's Houthi rebels attend a rally in solidarity with the Palestinian Hamas movement's armed resistance against Israel in the capital Sanaa on Monday, amid continuing battles between Israeli forces and Hamas in Gaza. AFP

In top court, DGP flays bid to paint T.N. govt. as 'anti-Hindu'

Krishnadas Rajagopal
NEW DELHI

In response to a petition alleging that an "oral" order was issued by Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin to ban the live telecast and conduct of religious events in connection with the consecration of the Ram idol at the Ayodhya temple on January 22, State Director-General of Police Shankar Jiwala on Monday told the Supreme Court that a deliberate attempt was made to portray the State government as "anti-Hindu".

The petition was filed by a Chennai resident, Vinoj Pannerselvam, who was represented by senior advocate Dama Seshadiri Naidu and advocate G. Balaji in the court.

In a brief hearing, a Bench headed by Justice Sanjiv Khanna gave the State of Tamil Nadu 15 days



Shankar Jiwala

to separately file a counter-affidavit.

When Mr. Naidu requested permission to file a rejoinder to the State's counter-affidavit, Justice Khanna said the "event [consecration] is already over... do not push it further".

No interference
Tamil Nadu Additional Advocate-General Amit Anand Tiwari submitted that the case was pending in the Madras High Court

and the petitioner should approach it. In his separate counter-affidavit, Mr. Jiwala told the Supreme Court that live telecasts of the temple ceremony, and religious events were held across the State without any interference from the police or authorities.

Mr. Jiwala said 252 events, both indoor and outdoor, were held in Tamil Nadu. He said the petitioner was under the influence of an "illusion and false interpretation of reality".

"The allegations that the CM had orally instructed not to allow any ceremony or function including the *annadhanam*, organising bhajans about Prabhu Ram, on the auspicious occasion of January 22, the day of *pran pratishtha* of Ram Janmabhoomi, are totally baseless and false," the DGP said in his response.

Judge vs judge: SC takes over case from feuding Calcutta HC justices

Krishnadas Rajagopal
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Monday transferred from the Calcutta High Court to itself a case of medical admissions with the help of fake caste certificates in West Bengal, after conflicting orders led to one Calcutta High Court judge slinging mud on another.

A five-judge Bench of the Supreme Court, headed by the Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud and four senior-most judges, had to take *suo motu* cognisance of the happenings, and convened on Saturday to stay proceedings in the High Court.

The proceedings took an ugly turn when one of the judges, Justice Abhijit Gangopadhyay, sitting as a

A five-judge Bench on Monday directed that the transferred case be listed before it after three weeks

Single Judge Bench, made personal allegations of political bias against Justice Soumen Sen, who presided over the Division Bench which stayed his order to transfer the case to the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI).

The five-judge Bench led by Chief Justice Chandrachud on Monday directed the transferred case to be listed before it after three weeks.

Senior advocate Kapil Sibal, for the West Bengal government, drew attention to fact that Justice

Gangopadhyay had made personal comments in his judicial order against Justice Sen.

Justice Gangopadhyay had accused Justice Sen of using his office to "act" in favour of the ruling dispensation in West Bengal.

"The learned judge continues to take matters of this kind. He will continue to do such things in future also... You have to intervene," Mr. Sibal submitted.

The Chief Justice cut short Mr. Sibal, saying, "You have made your point." He said the Bench did not want to comment on the orders of either the Single Judge or the Division Bench of the High Court.

The Chief Justice said restraint was necessary as the dignity of the institution of the High Court had

to be protected. "Anything we say here should not impinge upon the dignity of the institution," Chief Justice observed.

Mr. Sibal said Justice Gangopadhyay was even "attending rallies".

Senior advocate A.M. Singhvi interjected to obliquely draw attention to the fact that the top court had to similarly intervene in April 2023 in orders passed by Justice Gangopadhyay in connection with the West Bengal school job-for-bribe scam case.

The Supreme Court declined a plea to intervene in the allocation of cases to Justice Gangopadhyay, saying that was entirely the domain of the Chief Justice of the High Court of Calcutta.

INS Sumitra foils hijack attempt on Iranian-flagged vessel in Gulf of Aden

Dinakar Peri
NEW DELHI

A swift response by an Indian Navy ship, *INS Sumitra*, deployed in the Gulf of Aden ensured that a hijack attempt was quickly resolved, ensuring safe release of an Iranian-flagged fishing vessel and its crew.

"*INS Sumitra*, on anti-piracy operations along the East coast of Somalia and the Gulf of Aden, responded to a distress message regarding hijacking of an Iranian flagged Fishing Vessel (FV) *Iman*. The FV had been boarded by pirates and the crew taken as hostages," the Navy said in a statement on Monday.

"*INS Sumitra* intercepted the vessel, acted in accordance with the established Standard



To the rescue: The fishing vessel that was released from pirates following *INS Sumitra's* intervention in the Gulf of Aden. PTI

Operating Procedures to coerce the pirates for safe release of crew along with the boat and ensured successful release of all 17 crew members along with the boat."

The fishing vessel was subsequently onboard and released for onward transit, the Navy said.

Piracy, which has van-

Indian coast and the vessel is currently off the Somali coast.

In the second instance in the north Arabian Sea in early January, Indian Navy marine commandos secured and safely evacuated all 21 crew members, including 15 Indians, from the merchant vessel *Lila Norfolk* after it came under a hijacking attempt.

Enhanced surveillance
In response to these incidents, the Navy has substantially enhanced maritime surveillance efforts in central and north Arabian Sea and augmented force levels. It currently has some 12 warships deployed on anti-piracy and maritime security operations in the Arabian Sea and Gulf of Aden.

School headmaster arrested for 'pledge against Hindu deities'

The Hindu Bureau
RAIPUR

A 60-year-old government school headmaster in Chhattisgarh's Bilaspur district was arrested on Sunday for allegedly hurting religious sentiments by administering a pledge to people "not to worship Hindu gods" and to embrace Buddhism.

On January 22, Ratalal Sarovar, the headmaster of a primary school in Bhari village, allegedly administered the pledge to a group of people. A clip of the incident surfaced online prompting a complaint by a Bajrang Dal activist, and the subsequent police action. In his complaint, the activist said Mr. Sarovar's actions hurt the sentiments of followers of Sanatana Dharma.

Mr. Sarovar was booked under Sections 153A (promoting enmity between different groups on grounds of religion, race, etc., and doing acts prejudicial to maintenance of harmony) and 295A (deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings of any class) of the Indian Penal Code.

Mr. Sarovar's family said the pledge was part of the 22 oaths prescribed by B.R. Ambedkar for conversion to Buddhism, and that the issue had been blown out of proportion. "My father was only reiterating the pledge at a community event and those who joined did so of their own free will. There was no coercion. He did not intend to hurt anyone's feelings," Manoj Sarovar, his son, said.

Banked on 2011 caste census report to revise BC list: Kerala

Govt. tells SC that data were not helpful; State is facing contempt proceedings for 'disobeying' judicial orders to revise its Backward Class list to ensure equitable distribution of benefits

Krishnadas Rajagopal
NEW DELHI

The Kerala government told the Supreme Court on Monday that it had pinned its hopes on a caste census held by the Centre in 2011 to identify socio-economic Backward Classes in the State, but the data proved "not at all helpful".

The State is facing contempt proceedings in the Supreme Court for "wilfully disobeying" judicial orders to periodically revise its Backward Class list in order to ensure equitable distribution of the benefits of reservation in public employment.

While States like Bihar have held its own caste sur-



vey ahead of the Lok Sabha election, Kerala, through its Chief Secretary Venu V., recounted about months spent waiting for a copy of the report from the Centre and even blamed the tough orders of COVID for not conducting its own caste survey and revision of Backward Class list.

In its response, the State, represented by advo-

The report was not at all helpful for identification of Socially and Educationally Backward classes in Kerala. It doesn't contain any socio-economic data

KERALA'S RESPONSE IN SC

cate Nishe Rajen Shonker, said that since the data on socio-economic classes were already compiled by the Centre in 2011, "The State government was of the opinion that the same be collected from the Centre". The Centre was equally bound to conduct a caste survey and identify Backward Classes.

The response said the

State had requested the Centre on November 4, 2022, for a copy of the 2011 caste survey data report in order to identify Backward Classes in Kerala. The report was forwarded to the Kerala State Commission for Backward Classes chairman only in May 2023.

"The report was not at all helpful for identification of socially and educationally backward classes within the State of Kerala. The report does not contain any socio-economic caste data, whatsoever," it said. The response came in a contempt plea filed by an NGO, Minority Indians Planning and Vigilance Commission Trust.

The case is coming up for hearing on February 6.

INBRIEF



Modi to visit Tiruppur in Feb. to launch BJP's poll campaign

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will visit Tiruppur in Tamil Nadu at the end of February to launch the BJP's campaign for the Lok Sabha election, according to the party's Tiruppur unit. "Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Tiruppur is confirmed. The Prime Minister will take part as the chief guest in the last public meeting marking the culmination of the 'En Mann En Makkal' padayatra of Tamil Nadu BJP president K. Annamalai. The meeting will serve as the launch pad for the Lok Sabha election," a press release issued by the Tiruppur unit of the BJP said. A meeting to discuss the arrangements for the Prime Minister's visit was conducted by the party on Monday. The BJP's State general secretaries, A.P. Muruganandham and Malarkodi, and other senior functionaries of the party took part in the meeting.

SC dismisses A.P. govt. petition against Naidu's bail

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Monday refused to intervene in the Andhra Pradesh High Court decision to grant bail to the TDP chief and former Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister, N. Chandrababu Naidu, in the Amaravati Inner Ring Road scam case.

A Bench of Justices Sanjiv Khanna and Dipankar Datta, with an eye on parity, noted that an appeal against another accused in the same case was dismissed

by the court in 2023. Citing that order, the Bench then dismissed the State government's plea in which it had challenged the High Court order of January 10 giving relief to Mr. Naidu.

'Likely to prejudice'

The State government, represented by advocate Mahfooz A. Nazki, in its appeal had argued that the High Court had unnecessarily, in a bail matter, "delved deep into facts of the case and rendered findings that were not only



N. Chandrababu Naidu

factually incorrect but are also likely to prejudice the court below during the trial".

The State said the case involved the "elaborate scheme set up by Mr. Nai-

du, a former Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, and the second accused who was the State Minister for Municipal Administration and Urban Development between 2014 and 2019".

It argued that contracts for preparation of the master plan for the capital city and capital region, which included the Inner Ring Road (IRR) in the capital region of Andhra Pradesh, were "awarded to a foreign private entity on a nomination basis, fraudulently making it appear that it was based on a govern-

ment-to-government memorandum of understanding". "The alignment of the IRR was manipulated in such a way that certain close associates of the respondent (Naidu) received windfall pecuniary gains, on a quid pro quo basis and at the expense of the State exchequer with the respondent being the ultimate beneficiary," the appeal said.

'Corruption evident'

The State had argued that the actions of the accused persons "very evidently

amounted to corruption, as well as offences such as cheating and criminal breach of trust by public servants". The prosecution argued in the Supreme Court that Mr. Naidu was the "primary architect of the entire scam, and is the ultimate beneficiary of all the windfall gains being made by parties as a result of his manipulation of the alignment of the IRR".

"Being the former Chief Minister, he is taking steps to derail the investigation," the criminal appeal in the Supreme Court said.

154 doctors died of COVID-19 in Tamil Nadu, says IMA

A total of 154 doctors died of COVID-19 during the first and second waves of the pandemic in Tamil Nadu, according to data published by the Indian Medical Association (IMA). The IMA is observing January 30, 2024 as 'COVID Martyrs Day'. In view of this, the association published State-wise data on the number of doctors who died of the infection.

According to the data, a total of 1,596 doctors died of COVID-19, including 757 during the first wave and 839 in the second wave. In Tamil Nadu, 90 doctors died during the first wave and 64 during the second wave - among the highest in the country, after Bihar (155), Delhi (150), Uttar Pradesh (145) and West Bengal (145). The IMA has already submitted a representation to the Central government urging it to extend assistance to the families of such doctors in the private sector as well.

On the mend



Under repair: The Archaeological Survey of India has taken up the restoration of the 432-year-old Charminar in the old city of Hyderabad on Monday. Tourists are unable to get a full-size view of the monument at present. NAGARA GOPAL

Court to consider plea to ban Netflix documentary based on Jolly Joseph case on Feb. 3

The Hindu Bureau
KOZHIKODE

A court here will consider on February 3 a petition moved by the second accused in the Koodathayi serial murder case, M.S. Mathew, to stop the screening of the documentary *Curry and Cyanide - The Jolly Joseph Case* on Netflix.

The hearing, expected to begin on Monday, was postponed by judge S.R. Syamala. Mathew moved the plea on January 16 alleging that the circulation of fake information related to the case in the form of serials and TV reports was unfair and illegal even be-

Circulation of fake information on case even before verdict in the form of serials unfair, says accused

fore the verdict was pronounced. In his petition, he argued that a Malayalam TV channel and a few online media channels were largely involved in telecasting false and objectionable content related to the case.

A few months ago, a team of forensic experts too had expressed similar concerns over the featuring of key witnesses and investigating officers in the

Netflix series, ignoring the trial. According to them, it was setting a wrong precedent.

The team behind the production is, however, maintaining silence.

In a similar complaint, the Kerala High Court had earlier stayed the telecasting of a Malayalam serial based on the incident.

It was between 2002 and 2016 that the chain of six suspected murders took place in Koodathayi in Kerala. Jolly Joseph is the prime accused. On October 5, a SIT arrested Jolly and two others who were accused of murdering the six by serving them poisoned food.

TTD approves its budget for 2024-25, pegs revenue at ₹5,141.74 crore

The Hindu Bureau
TIRUMALA

The Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam (TTD), on Monday, approved its budget for 2024-25, projecting an estimated revenue of ₹5,141.74 crore.

The temple *hundi* topped the table with an estimated income of ₹1,611 crore followed by the interest earned on investments which was pegged at ₹1,167 crore. While the sale of prasadam is likely to fetch an income of ₹600 crore, the revenue income earned via the sale of darshan tickets is estimated at ₹338 crore, *arjitha seva* amounts up to ₹150 crore, other capital receipts ₹128 crore, *Kalyanakatta* receipts ₹151.5 crore, loans and advances to employees, earnest money deposit (EMD), security deposits amount up to ₹246.39 crore, trust receipts ₹85 crore, rent, electrical and water charges receipts ₹60 crore, and publications ₹35.25 crore. Besides this, an income of ₹203.5 crore via sale of agarbattis, toll fees and educational institution receipts is also expected.

Expenditure allocation

On the expenditure front, a major chunk of ₹1,733 crore was allocated for human resource payments, followed by material purchases at ₹751 crore, corpus and other investments at ₹750 crore, engineering capital works at ₹350 crore, maintenance works at ₹190 crore, loans and advances to employees, EMD, security deposits at ₹166.63 crore, among others.

Narsa Reddy, APCC ex-chief, passes away

The Hindu Bureau
HYDERABAD

Senior Congress leader and former Andhra Pradesh Congress Committee (APCC) chief P. Narsa Reddy passed away in Hyderabad on Monday. He was 92.

Reddy hailed from Nirmal in erstwhile Adilabad district. He entered the Assembly of undivided Andhra Pradesh in 1962. He won again in 1967 and 1972 from the Nirmal constituency.

He was the Irrigation Minister in the Jalagam Vengal Rao Cabinet in 1977-78 and also held the Revenue and Legislative Affairs portfolio. Reddy also had a stint as the MP for Adilabad from 1989 to 1991.



P. Narsa Reddy

Speaking on his contributions, the Telangana Congress leaders recalled how the 1/70 Act to provide lands exclusively for the tribals in Agency areas was a key contribution of Reddy.

Telangana Chief Minister A. Revanth Reddy said the veteran's demise was a big loss to the party.

Kerala Finance Minister hints at steps in Budget to energise economy, attract private investment

Tiki Rajvi
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

Finance Minister K.N. Balagopal will seek to balance expectations in Kerala Budget for the 2024-25 fiscal with measures aimed at driving economic growth and revenue inflow in the face of fiscal constraints while preserving the pace and breadth of the Left Democratic Front (LDF) government's social welfare commitments.

Mr. Balagopal, in a pre-Budget chat with *The Hindu* on Monday, said the public can expect steps aimed at enlivening the economy and the job market in the new fiscal. He also hinted at announcements designed to bolster



the government's commitment to draw private investment to key sectors.

Mr. Balagopal is scheduled to present the Budget for the 2024-25 fiscal in the Kerala Legislative Assembly on February 5. "The LDF government has already been promoting private investment, but would like to step up the pace. For instance, the Viz-

Govt. has been promoting private investment, but would like to step up the pace... We believe confidence level [of investors] has improved

K.N. BALAGOPAL
Kerala Finance Minister

hinjam international seaport is going to open up a world of opportunities. You have here a port that will be one of the biggest, and you need people to invest. We believe the confidence level [of investors] has improved," he said.

The Budget is likely to explore measures for raising additional revenue for the State, Mr. Balagopal in-

dicated. The State government had recently constituted a high-level panel with the mandate of exploring "innovative measures" to mobilise additional resources.

Liquor, petrol cess In the 2023-24 Budget, Mr. Balagopal had announced cesses on liquor and petrol and diesel for a 'social security seed fund' to help meet its social security pension commitments. The levies are likely to continue, given the fiscal pressures on the government.

On whether the Budget would see an increase in the social welfare pensions, Mr. Balagopal said the LDF government can hike them from the month-

ly ₹1,600 to ₹2,500 provided the Centre restored approximately ₹57,400 crore, the annual cut, on an average, suffered by the State in Central transfers and loan approvals.

Mr. Balagopal noted that the Union government's attitude towards Kerala will continue to be the "biggest challenge" in the new fiscal. "It is evident that Kerala's problems are not on account of poor financial management. Since 2017, the State has been deprived of ₹1.07 lakh crore in its gross borrowing limit," he said.

Mr. Balagopal also said that the Centre should announce a stimulus package to energise the national economy.

Nitish holds first Cabinet meeting of new NDA govt.

The Hindu Bureau
PATNA

Chief Minister Nitish Kumar convened the first Cabinet meeting of the new National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government in Bihar on Monday.

The meeting decided to reschedule the Budget Session, which will now begin on February 29 instead of February 5. A letter seeking approval to reschedule the session has been sent to the Raj Bhavan.

Deputy Chief Ministers Samrat Choudhary and Vijay Kumar Sinha and other Ministers were present at the meeting.

Sources in the government said the Cabinet would be expanded in two or three days keeping the social equation in mind.

‘Change Speaker’

Senior BJP MLA Nand Kishore Yadav has issued a notice for a no-confidence motion against Assembly Speaker Awadh Bahari Choudhary, who is an RJD MLA.

The notice states that since a new government has taken power, the House does not have confidence in the present Speaker. The notice has signatures of several MLAs, including Hindustani Awam Morcha (Secular) chief Jitan Ram Manjhi.

After the Cabinet meeting, Mr. Samrat Choudhary and Mr. Sinha addressed a press conference where they thanked the BJP for the opportunity to become Deputy Chief Ministers.

With JD(U) back, NDA will have to balance seat aspirations of allies

Unlike in 2019, the alliance has more players in the mix, including Hindustani Awam Morcha, Rashtriya Lok Janata Dal, 2 factions of Lok Janshakti Party; BJP assures them of promised seats

NEWS ANALYSIS

Sobhana K. Nair
Nistula Hebbar
NEW DELHI

The re-entry of the Janata Dal(U) into the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in Bihar changes the equations in the BJP-led front, with smaller parties such as the Lok Janshakti Party (Ram Vilas) led by Chirag Paswan expected to get fewer Lok Sabha seats in the Lok Sabha election. Bihar has 40 seats.

In 2019, the BJP and the JD(U) contested 17 seats each, while six were allotted to the LJP. However, this time, with the Hindustani Awam Morcha (Secular), led by Jitan Ram Manjhi, the Rashtriya Lok Janata Dal (RLJD) of Upendra Kushwaha, and two factions of the LJP in the mix, the allies could feel the squeeze.

BJP president J.P. Nadda has assured allies which had been part of the NDA before Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar switched sides for the fifth time, that commitments made to them will be honoured.

According to sources, before agreeing to participate in Mr. Kumar’s swearing-in on Sunday, Mr. Pas-



Delicate balance: The JD(U) had been allotted 17 seats in the 2019 elections; this time around, the BJP might expect it to make some concessions to accommodate other allies. PTI

wan, who flew in with Mr. Nadda from Delhi to Patna, insisted that the BJP give him a clear assurance that his faction of the LJP will be given the six seats that the party contested in the 2019 election. He also sought to reserve the Hajipur Lok Sabha constituency for himself. The BJP, however, will have to strike a balance between Mr. Paswan and the breakaway faction headed by his uncle and Union Minister, Pashupati Nath Paras.

Speaking to *The Hindu*, Mr. Paswan, whose politics in the past five years had been centred on opposition to Mr. Kumar, said he was happy that the NDA government was in power

and expressed hope that the vision of the allies would also be incorporated in the government’s policy. “In 2019 too, we had the JD(U) on board and we managed to amicably fix the seat-sharing formula between us. The conversation on the division of seats has started on a positive note and I believe it will be finalised soon,” he said. Yet, he sounded a word of caution, saying if Mr. Kumar were to pursue the “policies” that he was critical of under the new government, then he would not hesitate to speak out.

According to senior sources in the BJP, the party has said that the RLJD will be given three Lok Sabha

seats, the same number as in 2014, when Mr. Kushwaha, as president of the Rashtriya Lok Samata Party, had been an NDA ally.

The HAM has already been accommodated at the State level with Mr. Manjhi’s son Santosh Suman Manjhi being made Minister. “Another Ministry may be offered to the party and perhaps one Lok Sabha ticket as well,” a source said.

The appointment of two of Mr. Kumar’s detractors – Samrat Choudhary and Vijay Kumar Sinha – as Deputy Chief Ministers indicated that the BJP will push for concessions from the JD(U) to balance the equations.

Conspiracy to end SC, ST, OBC quota: Congress

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Congress on Monday demanded the resignation of University Grants Commission (UGC) Chairman Mamidala Jagadesh Kumar over the now-withdrawn draft guidelines for de-reservation of posts in higher education for Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs). Congress leader Rahul Gandhi, in a post on X (formerly Twitter), called it a conspiracy to end reservations for these groups.

“In the new draft of the UGC, there is a conspiracy to end the reservation given to SC, ST and OBC categories in higher education institutions. Today, out of approximately 7,000 reserved posts in 45 Central universities, 3,000 are vacant, and of which only 7.1% are Dalit, 1.6% are tribal and 4.5% are backward class professors. The BJP-RSS, which have even talked about reviewing reservation, now want to snatch the jobs of the deprived classes from such higher education institutions,” he alleged.

Mr. Gandhi’s post was contrasted with the ‘clarification’ from Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan that not a single post would be de-reserved. “There is no scope for ambiguity about reservations after the introduction of the Central Educational Institutions (Reservation in Teachers’ Cadre) Act, 2019,” he added.

INBRIEF



Narwekar gets more time to rule on disqualification pleas

The Supreme Court on Monday extended the deadline for the Maharashtra Assembly Speaker Rahul Narwekar to decide on the disqualification petitions against the breakaway Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) faction headed by Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar from January 31 to February 15. Solicitor-General Tushar Mehta, for the Speaker’s office, informed a Bench headed by Chief Justice D.Y. Chandrachud that the tribunal would conclude disqualification proceedings on January 31 and would need three weeks to “dictate” its order. Senior advocate A.M. Singhvi, for petitioner Sharad Pawar loyalist Jayant Patil, said three weeks for dictation of an order was just too much. “My Lords may give the Speaker a week,” Mr. Singhvi suggested. The Supreme Court gave the Speaker time till February 15.

Manesar land case: ED takes statement of ex-Haryana CM

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) on Monday recorded the statement of former Haryana Chief Minister Bhupinder Singh Hooda in connection with the Manesar land scam case. The ED investigation was based on a First Information Report (FIR) registered by the Gurugram police, which was later re-registered by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) in 2015. It was alleged that in conspiracy with some Haryana government officials, private builders had acquired about 400 acres of land at throwaway rates, which caused a loss of about ₹1,500 crore to the previous owners in Manesar, Naurangpur and Lakhnoul villages.

UCC committee will submit report on February 2: Dhami

Uttarakhand Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami on Monday said the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) committee formed by the State will submit its final report to the government on February 2 and soon after, the State will table it in the upcoming Assembly session. “The committee formed to prepare the draft of the UCC will submit the same to the State government on February 2. We will implement the UCC in the State by bringing a Bill in the upcoming Assembly session,” Mr. Dhami wrote on X. He also mentioned that his government was committed to implementing the UCC in accordance with the vision and principles of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

NHRC issues notice to Telangana government

The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) on Monday issued a notice to the Telangana government over an incident in which a policewoman dragged a girl student by her hair. The matter came to light when the video clip of the purported incident in Ranga Reddy district went viral on social media.

The incident happened on January 24 during an agitation by some students of Professor Jayashankar Telangana State Agricultural University against the State government’s decision to allocate 100 acres of land belonging to the university for construction of a new High Court complex.



Rahul Gandhi waves at supporters during the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra, in Kishanganj. PTI

In Bihar leg of yatra, Rahul slams Modi, stays mum on Nitish switching sides

Amit Bhelari
PATNA

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi’s Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra on Monday reached Bihar, where he addressed a rally in Kishanganj district. In his speech, he slammed Prime Minister Narendra Modi and demanded a caste-based census across the country but failed to speak about Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar’s shift to the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) from the Indian National Developmental, Inclusive Alliance (INDIA).

Mr. Gandhi termed Bihar “the land of social justice”, and said the country was “looking at the people of Bihar” because no one else understood social justice better than the people of the State.

“At the time when the BJP and RSS [Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh] talk about dividing the country on basis of caste and religion, apart from spreading

hatred, the Congress party is focusing on spreading love, respect and brotherhood,” he said.

Mr. Gandhi said he added the word “nyay” (justice) to the name of the yatra because the poor in the country were unable to get economic and social justice. He said the country’s economy “has been handed over to a few billionaires” under Mr. Modi’s leadership. “Airports, ports, infrastructure, hospitals, and universities... everything is being handed over to two or three industrialists,” he said.

He said the Central government did not help the poor, labourers, or farmers and that the doors of banks were closed for the poor “but they are always open for industrialists at the behest of the Prime Minister’s Office”.

He stressed that everyone had the right to know the exact population of OBCs, minority communities, tribal and general classes, and for that,

caste-based census was a “revolutionary step”.

The yatra in Bihar started from Seemanchal region, currently a stronghold of the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) and the Congress. The yatra will cover 425 km over four days in the State before heading to Jharkhand.

Seemanchal, situated in north Bihar, comprises four districts: Purnea, Katihar, Kishanganj and Araria. In the 2019 Lok Sabha election, the NDA won three seats and the Congress one. Then, the JD(U) had been a part of the NDA.

The Katihar and Purnea Lok Sabha seats are now with the JD(U), Araria with the BJP and Kishanganj with Congress. It is significant that the Seemanchal region has a 47% Muslim population, which augurs well for the Congress and RJD. The four districts represent 24 Assembly constituencies and Seemanchal therefore holds significance for the 2025 Assembly election too.

Patna court summons Udhayanidhi on Feb. 13

The Hindu Bureau
PATNA

The Special Court for MP/MLA cases in Patna has directed Tamil Nadu Minister Udhayanidhi Stalin to appear before it on February 13 in connection with the *Sanatana Dharma* case.

A complaint was filed against him before the Chief Judicial Magistrate Court in Patna on September 4, 2023, by an advocate. It said Mr. Udhayanidhi’s remarks had hurt the religious sentiments of Hindus. At a conference in Chennai on September 2, he said, “Just like dengue, mosquitoes, malaria or coronavirus need to be eradicated, we have to eradicate *Sanatana [Dharma]*.”

Nitish’s exit will have no impact on INDIA bloc, says Jairam

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Taking a swipe at Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar for his frequent switching of loyalties, Congress leader Jairam Ramesh on Monday joked that the Bihar Governor was surprised to see Mr. Kumar within 15 minutes of his swearing-in.

“When he came back halfway, the Governor was shocked as not even 15 minutes had passed. However, this time it was to collect his muller that the Chief Minister had forgotten in the Raj Bhavan,” Mr. Ramesh said in a post on X.

Interacting with reporters in Bihar’s Kishanganj after the Bharat Jodo Nyay

Yatra entered the State, Mr. Ramesh mocked the Janata Dal(U) chief as “Aaya Kumar, Gaya Kumar”.

Mr. Ramesh said that Mr. Kumar’s exit won’t have any impact on the Indian National Developmental, Inclusive Alliance (INDIA). “It will not have any impact on INDIA alliance...absolutely no impact. This is typical of Nitish Kumar,” he said.

He said that Mr. Kumar’s “betrayal was masterminded by the Prime Minister.” “A large number of people participated in the padayatra held in Araria [Bihar] today under the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra. The people of Bihar are welcoming the Yatra with great enthusiasm,” he said.

Governors of T.N., Kerala and Telangana competing for media attention: Minister

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI

DMK leader and Law Minister S. Regupathy on Monday alleged that there was an indirect competition among the Governors of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Telangana to hog the media limelight. He accused them of functioning like spokespersons of the BJP, forgetting that they were Governors.

In a statement, he said that Tamil Nadu Governor R.N. Ravi was suffering from “media mania” disease and functioning in a manner aimed at getting media coverage on a daily basis. “There seems to be an indirect competition

among Mr. Ravi, Kerala Governor Arif Mohammed Khan and Telangana Governor Tamilisai Soundararajan to get the attention of the media. They are continuously criticising the State governments only to get media attention,” he alleged.

Reacting to Mr. Ravi’s allegation of corruption in the implementation of the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana in Nagapattinam district, Mr. Regupathy said that if the Governor needed any clarification on the issue, he could have approached the government. “Is it fair on the part of the Governor to air his criticism through the media? What is the basis for his al-



S. Regupathy

legation,” he asked.

To Mr. Ravi’s claim that a concrete structure among huts in Keezhvenmani was a symbol of shame, Mr. Regupathy said that it was constructed by the CPI(M) in memory of 44 Dalits who were burnt to death by casteist forces. “What fault has the Gover-

nor found in the structure? Does he want to remove the huts around the memorial,” he asked.

The Minister said that the Governor should visit Ayodhya, where the BJP government had spent thousands of crores of rupees to construct a temple for Lord Ram, to see firsthand the living conditions in the area. “The people of the country have not forgotten the green screen used by the BJP government to hide the dwellings of the poor in Gujarat when global leaders visited the State. Let the Governor concentrate on his job,” he said. Mr. Regupathy recalled how the Governor retracted his remarks on

‘Tamilagam’ and Mahatma Gandhi’s role in India’s freedom movement, in the face of criticism.

“Though he is the Governor of Tamil Nadu, he has not done anything worthwhile for the State. He has not used his powers to get any schemes for the State. Instead, he is creating problems for the Chief Minister, who is doing everything he can to help the people of his State,” the DMK leader said.

He said that the Governor’s efforts to ‘save’ the Vice-Chancellor of Bharathiar University, and his delay in granting assent to the Bill banning online rummy had raised doubts over his functioning.

IN BRIEF



Committee examining Bill on marriage age gets extension

A parliamentary committee examining a Bill seeking to raise the age of marriage of women from the present 18 to 21 has been given another extension to table its report. The Budget Session of Parliament beginning January 31 is the last session of the present Lok Sabha before the election is announced. The committee will now finalise its report by May, following the four-month extension, while the term of the 17th Lok Sabha ends on June 16. The Prohibition of Child Marriage (Amendment) Bill, 2021, which was introduced in the Lok Sabha and remains pending there, is likely to lapse when the tenure of the House ends in June. PTI

Gujarat HC should properly train magistrates: top court

Having termed as "grossest of contempt" the police remand of a businessman granted anticipatory bail, the Supreme Court said on Monday it will ask the Gujarat High Court to impart proper training to magistrates. Voicing displeasure over the police remand of the Gujarat-based businessman, the top court on January 10 issued notice to police officials and a judicial magistrate of Surat on a contempt petition filed by the man. The top court was informed it had on December 8 last year granted anticipatory bail to Tusharbhaj Rajnikantbhai Shah but was remanded in police custody from December 13 to 16, 2023 in a cheating case. PTI

Stop mentioning religion or caste of litigants in cases: SC

The practice of mentioning caste or religion of litigants in court cases must be shunned, the Supreme Court has said while directing its registry and all other courts to stop it forthwith. A Bench of Justices Hima Kohli and Ahsanuddin Amanullah directed all High Courts to ensure that the caste or religion of a litigant does not appear in the memo of parties in any petition before HCs or subordinate courts under their jurisdiction. "We see no reason for mentioning the caste/religion of any litigant either before this Court or the courts below," the Bench said, while allowing a transfer petition in a marital dispute pending before a family court in Rajasthan. PTI

Ahead of JEE, student found dead at her home in Kota

An 18-year-old student was found dead at her home in Kota, a coaching hub in Rajasthan, on Monday. She was to give the Joint Entrance Examination for admission to the IITs and the NITs. She was facing study-related stress and found herself unable to tackle the exam, Deputy Superintendent of Police Dharmveer Singh said. Her father is a security guard at a private bank in the city, he said. The family hails from a village in Jhalawar district and has been staying in the city for the past three years. On January 23, a 19-year-old was found dead in his hostel room in Kota. (Those in distress can reach out to Sanjivini for help at 011-4076 9002) PTI

Setting sun, evocative tunes set the mood

President, Vice-President, and PM among top leaders in attendance for Beating Retreat where music bands of the Army, Navy, and IAF played 31 foot-tapping Indian tunes; for the first time, the CRPF had a women-led band; celebrations ended with the popular tune of Sare Jahan se Acha

Samridhi Tewari
NEW DELHI

As the sun began to set on Monday, the Raisina Hills echoed with enthralling Indian tunes played by military and paramilitary bands during the Beating Retreat ceremony in the national capital.

"Beating retreat" is a military tradition which dates back from the days when troops disengaged from battle at sunset. The drumbeats recall the days when troops, billeted in towns and cities, were recalled to their quarters at an appointed time in the evening.

The ceremony creates a mood of nostalgia for the times gone by. It marks the culmination of the Republic Day celebrations.

The music bands of the Army, Navy, Indian Air Force and Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF) played 31 foot-tapping tunes.

The ceremony began af-



Military bands perform during the Beating Retreat ceremony at Vijay Chowk in New Delhi on Monday. PTI

ter the President and Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, Droupadi Murmu, arrived in a traditional colonial-era horse-drawn buggy. The tri-service chiefs welcomed the President. Vice-President Jagdeep Dhankhar, Prime Minister Narendra Modi,

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud, several Union Ministers, and senior officials were present.

It all began with the band's Shanknaad tune, followed by enthralling tunes such as Veer Bharat, Sangam Dur, Deshon Ka

Sartaj Bharat, Bhagirathi, and Arjuna by pipes and drums band. The public clapped to every beat, while some recorded the moment on their phones.

Akshay and Ritu have travelled all the way from Bengaluru and Mumbai to attend the Republic Day ce-

lebrations. "The ceremony is something we have been seeing for a very long time, and every time we did, it felt unreal. The energy cannot be matched," Mr. Akshay said.

Women-led band

For Mr. Akshay, the highlight was the CRPF's women-led band, which was a first.

"The tri-services formations were beautiful, especially the lighthouse and the symbol of Indian Army, with crossed swords - it was powerful," he said.

Delhi resident Parampara Sharma said: "The Navy had a formation of Mission Chandrayaan. It was unexpected. The beats were all Indian and were new, that too was a surprise. I am attending the ceremony after a gap of eight years, sitting here with my family I felt nostalgic. It brought back so many memories," Ms. Sharma said.

The CAPF bands played Bharat Ke Jawan and Vijay Bharat among others. The

Indian Air Force band played Tiger Hill, Rejoice in Raisina and Swadeshi.

The Navy band played several tunes, including INS Vikrant, Mission Chandrayaan, Jai Bharati and Hum Tayyar Hain.

With new and unique formations, the Army band played Faulad Ka Jigar, Agniveer, Kargil 1999 and Taqat Watan among others. The massed bands then played the tunes Aye Mere Watan Ke Logon and Drummers Call.

The event ended with the ever-popular tune of Sare Jahan se Acha. The public sang the National Anthem, and the National Flag was taken down.

Residents of Tilak Nagar in Delhi, Shalini, and her nine-year-old daughter, Madhuri, visited the ceremony for the first time. "It has been a dream to see this, and finally I am here. It was magical," she said. The mother-daughter duo said it was beautiful to see the Rashtrapati Bhawan lit up in different colours.

Make yourself able to withstand pressure, PM advises students

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi interacted with students, teachers, and parents at the Bharat Mandapam here on Monday during the 7th edition of Pariksha Pe Charcha.

The programme is a movement driven by Mr. Modi's efforts to bring together students, parents, teachers, and the society at large to foster an environment where each child's unique individuality is encouraged and allowed to express itself fully.

Dania Shabu from a private CBSE school in Oman and Mohammed Arsh from government-run Sarvodaya Bal Vidyalaya, Burari in Delhi raised the issue of addressing external factors such as cultural and societal expectations contributing to added pressure on students.

Mr. Modi highlighted the role of teachers in mitigating the impact of added pressure from external factors upon students, and also pointed out that parents have experienced this from time to time. He sug-



Rapt attention: Narendra Modi interacts with students at Pariksha Pe Charcha 2024. ANI

gested making oneself capable of handling pressure and preparing for it as a part of life. He also suggested assessing stress levels and moving forward by gradual increment so that the student's ability is not hampered by it.

'Avoid comparison'

During the interaction, he addressed the issue of competition and challenges during a student's life.

The Prime Minister pointed out that often the seeds of unhealthy competition are planted in the family situations leading to perverse competition among siblings. He asked parents to avoid comparison among their children.

Foreign Secretary arrives in Bhutan amid focus on India's neighbours

Suhasini Haidar
Kallol Bhattacharjee
NEW DELHI

Close on the heels of the appointment, or "Dakhyen", ceremony for Bhutan's new Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay and his Cabinet on Sunday, Foreign Secretary Vinay Kwatra arrived in Thimphu on Monday for a three-day visit.

The visit comes amid other moves by the Modi government within the neighbourhood, including hosting the new Bangladesh Foreign Minister in Delhi next week, hosting the Indian Ocean Conference with Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe, issuing visas for Pakistani diplomats ahead of elections on February 8 in Pakistan, as well as External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar's visit to Nepal earlier this month.

Mr. Kwatra is expected to discuss bilateral ties with his counterpart, meet Mr. Tobgay and the newly appointed Foreign Minister D.N. Dhungyel, and call on King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck.

Mr. Tobgay, who was



Nimble diplomacy: Foreign Secretary Vinay Kwatra with Bhutan Foreign Secretary Aum Pema Choden in Paro, Bhutan. PTI

last in office from 2013 to 2018, was elected with a big majority in elections this month. In particular, the Foreign Secretary will discuss how best to take India-Bhutan cooperation forward on the Gelephu mega 'Mindfulness City' project, the site for which Mr. Kwatra had previewed in July 2023. Discussions on the progress expected between Bhutan and China on the border talks, after they signed a 'Cooperation Agreement' on the delimitation and demarcation of their boundary in October 2023, are on the agenda, and Mr. Kwatra is also expected to invite Mr. Tobgay to visit India in the next few weeks.

"The visit is in keeping with the tradition of regular high-level exchanges between Bhutan and India," the Ministry of External Affairs stated, announcing Mr. Kwatra's visit on Monday.

New Delhi is also expecting a visit from Bangladesh Foreign Minister Hasan Mahmud on February 7, the first high-level visit from Dhaka since the re-election of Sheikh Hasina's Awami League for a record fourth term. Senior Awami League leaders, including Minister of Road Transport Obaidul Quader, have "appreciated" India's support to Bangladesh during the elections. Both countries are also expected to dis-

cuss security issues along the Bangladesh-Mizoram border as well as the situation in Myanmar's Rakhine province and the future of Rohingya refugees taking shelter in Bangladesh.

After the visit, Dr. Jaishankar will fly to Perth, Australia for the Indian Ocean Conference, organised by the India Foundation and hosted by India, Sri Lanka, Singapore and other regional countries, where Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe, Fiji Prime Minister S.L. Rabuka, and several Foreign Ministers are among the speakers.

Meanwhile, sources confirmed that India and Pakistan exchanged assignment visas for dozens of diplomats, diplomatic staff and family members to serve at each other's High Commissions in Islamabad and Delhi on Monday as well. India had sent its Charge D'Affaires (CDA) Geetika Srivastava to Pakistan in August 2023, and has now accepted the appointment of Saad Warraich as Pakistan's CDA, to replace Aizzaz Khan, who is currently officiating as Deputy High Commissioner.

CROSSWORD 14084 (set by Vidwan)
To solve this puzzle online, get across to our crossword site. @ https://qrqo.page.link/jjpTn
17 Boyfriend was in trouble (5)
19 Sounds like tick? East European one! (5)
21 Bear's bendy weapon (5)
23 Large place like Mahe provides cotton fibre (5)
24 Man's address is possibly royal (3)
25 Endlessly press for discharge (3)
26 A longer route avoiding Panama Gulf (5)
28 Small, firm and mostly fresh cake (5)
29 Small picture about ultimate material (7)
31 One serving coffee in Zanzibar is Tanzanian (7)
33 Said to be first rule (9)
34 University replaces very device that controls flow rate (5)
Down
1 Philosophers toss their curls (9)
2 Foolishly suing Indian state can be exhausting (5,2)
3 Hot sex is a rage (3)
4 One light kind of structural element (1-4)
5 Drink and eat liberally (3)
6 Having circular movement during high-energy rallies (5)
7 Ape a friend having sex (7)
8 Expression of fear? Yes...of an ex-USA President (5)
12 Try and sample to evaluate basically (5)
14 Ancient German characters go with emphases on both sides (5)
18 Almost complete place of calm (5)
19 Malt and this game could be matchless (5)
20 Patronise this derby perhaps for operations research (5,4)
22 Staple batsman, mostly playing as opener for India (7)
24 No principle backing the marriage ceremony (7)
25 Appear suddenly, quietly with ordinary young dog (3-2)
26 One with tact makes room at the top (5)
27 Small fit for fur (5)
30 Exceed limit (3)
32 Title in some measure for evangelists (3)

SUDOKU
2 1 4
8 7 5 9
2 9 1 5 8
9 4
8 6 5 7 2
3
5 6 9 3
6 3 8
DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★☆☆☆
Solution to previous puzzle
Solution to yesterday's Sudoku
3 5 1 8 7 9 6 4 2
6 7 4 1 2 5 3 8 9
8 2 9 4 3 6 1 5 7
9 8 6 2 5 7 4 1 3
7 1 2 3 8 4 5 9 6
4 3 5 9 6 1 2 7 8
5 9 7 6 1 2 8 3 4
2 4 3 5 9 8 7 6 1
1 6 8 7 4 3 9 2 5

FAITH
Tyagaraja's Rama bhakti
Internalising Rama, as shown by Saint Tyagaraja, by focusing one's faculties upon Him and chanting his name, is guaranteed to help realise the Lord and attain moksham, said Suchithra Balasubramanian in a discourse. He lived his entire life exemplifying Rama bhakti. Born in Tiruvrur, not a day passed without his immersing himself in Rama's stellar qualities.
He had no other ambition but to serve the Lord, sing His praises and chant His name: he chanted Rama nama 96 crore times. For Tyagaraja, life on earth was not defined by material quest, but by the spiritual goal of total supplication to the highest power.
Throughout the ages, the average person is governed by basic wants, but Tyagaraja strongly believed that one's mission should be to conduct oneself in such a manner as to receive Rama anugraham. His musical compositions were a free flowing river of devotion, appealing to Him for His grace. In the famous kirtanai, Patti viduva radhu, he makes a fervent appeal, Aputtina nade nija bhaktini meda katti guttu cederaka brociceyi. (Having constrained me, like a knot in the neck, with true devotion to You from the day I was born, and having protected my honour from being compromised, it is not proper to leave the hand of this Tyagaraja, Your servant, having held it). One might wonder if devotion alone is enough to get by in this world, and Tyagaraja proved it to be so. His life continues to teach ordinary people to walk the path of a virtuous life, despite trials and tribulations, by invoking the name of Rama.

What is Humboldt's enigma and what does it mean for India?

While we expect diversity to decrease away from the tropics, mountains are an exception. This is the essence of Humboldt's enigma. But scientific evidence has been hard to acquire, requiring the use of complex analytical methods and large datasets, but is still incomplete

V.V. Robin
Naman Goyal

Where is biodiversity concentrated? Explorers and naturalists have been asking this question for centuries. Many have also been curious why some areas are more biodiverse than others.

One of them was Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859) - a polymath who recorded observations on various natural phenomena across the fields known today as geography, geology, meteorology, and biology.

Once, when exploring South America, he recorded the distribution of plants on a mountain. He also noted how climates were similar across various mountains in different parts of the world - but where specific features occurred on a mountain varied with elevation.

From his various studies, Humboldt suggested there was a relationship between temperature, altitude, and humidity on one hand and the occurrence patterns of species - or their biodiversity - on the other. His example of choice was the Chimborazo mountain in Ecuador, which has today become an important illustration of mountain diversity.

Two centuries later, a group of biogeographers - scientists who explore the relationship of diversity with geography - used modern tools to take another look at the drivers of biodiversity.

Based on their findings, they proposed their own version of the link between biodiversity and mountains and called it Humboldt's enigma.

What is Humboldt's enigma?

The world's tropical areas receive more energy from the Sun because of the earth's angle of inclination. So the tropics have greater primary productivity, which then facilitates greater diversity: more ecological niches become available, creating more complex ecosystems and greater biological diversity.

The proponents of Humboldt's enigma have held that the earth's tropical areas by themselves don't contain all the biodiverse regions, that many areas outside the tropics are highly biodiverse. These places are mountains.

Indeed, while we expect diversity to decrease away from the tropics, mountains have been an important exception. This is the essence of Humboldt's enigma. But scientific evidence has been hard to acquire, requiring the use of complex analytical methods and large datasets of various taxonomic groups - and even then remains an incomplete exercise.

A simple way to think of Humboldt's enigma in India is to consider the biodiversity in our tropical areas, south of the Tropic of Cancer passing through Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. These areas are supposed to be the most diverse in the country. The Western Ghats plus Sri Lanka biodiversity hotspot lies in this zone.

However, the eastern Himalaya are much more diverse. Some scientists have even suggested this part of the mountain range is the second-most diverse area of perching birds in the world. For river birds, the eastern Himalaya may be the most diverse.



A view from one of the Shola Sky Islands. PRASENJEET YADAV/WWW.SKYISLAND.IN (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

To understand how this might be possible, let's turn to the modern understanding of Humboldt's enigma.

What drives biodiversity?

The history of the earth, its geography, and the climate are the main drivers of mountain diversity. And different biodiversity at different locations is the result of changes in how these factors have intermingled over time and space.

We know mountains host two processes that generate biodiversity. First: geological processes, like uplifts, result in new habitats where new species arise, so the habitats are 'cradles'. Second: species on some climatologically stable mountains persist for a long time, so these spots are 'museums' that accumulate many such species over time.

Coastal tropical sky islands (mountains surrounded by lowlands), like the Shola Sky Islands in the Western Ghats, are a good example. Here, old lineages have persisted on the mountain tops as climates and habitats fluctuated around them in the lower elevations. This is the reason some of the oldest bird species in the Western Ghats, such as the *Sholicola* and the *Montecincla*, are housed on the Shola Sky Islands.

Sometimes, the same mountain can be both cradle for some species and museum for others, depending on the species' ecologies.

The northern Andes range - including Chimborazo - is considered the most biodiverse place in the world. If we start from the foothills of the Andes and climb, we're going to encounter different temperatures and rainfall levels that support everything from tropical evergreen biomes in the lower elevation to the alpine and tundra biomes near the top. Such a large variation over short distances supports the immense



The more heterogeneous the geological composition of mountains is, the more biodiverse they are.

biodiversity found in mountain regions - and worldwide.

Another critical factor in biodiversity formation is geology. The foundations on which mountains are erected often differ from those on which low-elevation regions rest.

Scientists have found that the more heterogeneous the geological composition of mountains is, the more biodiverse they are. Around the world, all mountains with high biodiversity have high geological heterogeneity as well, especially in the tropics. Even in tropical regions, where we expect higher biodiversity, some mountains with a lower variety of rocks are relatively less biodiverse. We also know plants are influenced by the type of soil, which depends on the type of rocks in that area. So high geological heterogeneity often produces unique habitat patches on mountains within similar climate regimes, and promotes diversification.

Against this backdrop, what drives biodiversity in the eastern Himalaya? Climate dissimilarity is still one crucial factor, something Humboldt also indicated based on his observations of the Chimborazo and understood to be a paradigm. Researchers have also found some groups of birds to have evolved elsewhere and dispersed to the Himalaya, resulting in higher diversity there.

What do we still not know?

Multiple factors drive diversification and the Humboldt's enigma in different

parts of the world. Then again, scientists have also advanced more than a hundred different hypotheses on how diversity varies in different parts of the world, and they contend with the enigma in different ways. This article simply presents the big picture.

An important limitation of scientists' attempts to explain biodiversity patterns is the lack of fine data on where species occur. For now, birds are the best-described group around the world, and their diversity patterns suggest mountains play a defining role.

We need more research. In India in particular, several areas are under-studied. We can't expect to understand a place's true biodiversity unless we also use modern tools like genetics. For example, why don't the Eastern Ghats have any endemic passerine birds? The most likely answer is that scientists haven't studied them for more than a century, especially with modern tools.

Some national programmes are trying to address these gaps, including the National Mission on Himalayan Studies, the National Mission for Sustaining the Himalayan Ecosystem, and the National Mission on Biodiversity and Human Wellbeing. They need to be strengthened, bolstered by the will to support basic research on diversity.

Humboldt's enigma is perhaps one of many puzzles of mountain biodiversity - and our backyards are excellent places to study them, to find answers to global problems of climate and landscape change.

(V.V. Robin is an associate professor studying bird ecology using genetics and bioacoustics, and Naman Goyal is a PhD student working on the diversification patterns of birds - both at IISER Tirupati.)



Image manipulation had been used to enhance results. GETTY IMAGES

Research fakery is uncovered at cancer centre

Associated Press

Allegations of research fakery at a leading cancer centre have turned a spotlight on scientific integrity and the amateur sleuths uncovering image manipulation in published research.

Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, a Harvard Medical School affiliate, announced January 22 it's requesting retractions and corrections of scientific papers after a British blogger flagged problems in early January.

The blogger, 32-year-old Sholto David, of Pontypridd, Wales, is a scientist-sleuth who detects cut-and-paste image manipulation in published scientific papers.

He and other champions of scientific integrity are keeping researchers and science journals on their toes. They use special software, oversize computer monitors, and their eagle eyes to find flipped, duplicated and stretched images, along with potential plagiarism.

In a January 2 blog post, Mr. David presented suspicious images from more than 30 published papers by four Dana-Farber scientists, including CEO

When a journal retracts an article, that usually means the research is so severely flawed that the findings are no longer reliable

Laurie Glimcher and COO William Hahn.

Many images appeared to have duplicated segments that would make the scientists' results look stronger. The papers under scrutiny involve lab research on the workings of cells. One involved samples from bone marrow from human volunteers.

The blog post included problems spotted by Mr. David and others previously exposed by sleuths on PubPeer, a site that allows anonymous comments on scientific papers.

Dana-Farber said it already had been looking into some of the problems before the blog post. By January 22, the institution said it was in the process of requesting six retractions of published research and that another 31 papers warranted corrections.

Retractions are serious. When a journal retracts an article that usually means the research is so severely flawed that the findings are no longer reliable.

Barrett Rollins, research integrity officer at Dana-Farber, said in a statement: "Following the usual practice at Dana-Farber to review any potential data error and make corrections when warranted, the institution and its scientists already have taken prompt and decisive action in 97% of the cases that had been flagged by Sholto David."

Microbiologist Elisabeth Bik has been sleuthing for a decade. Based on her work, scientific journals have retracted 1,133 articles, corrected 1,017 others, and printed 153 expressions of concern, according to a spreadsheet where she tracks responses to her reports.

Technology has made it easier to root out image manipulation and plagiarism, said Ivan Oransky, who teaches medical journalism at New York University and co-founded the *Retraction Watch* blog.

Others doing the investigative work remain anonymous. Together, they have "changed the equation" in scientific publication, Mr. Oransky said.

"They want science to be and do better," Mr. Oransky said. "And they are frustrated by how uninterested most people in academia - and certainly in publishing - are in correcting the record."

For feedback and suggestions for 'Science', please write to science@thehindu.co.in with the subject 'Daily page'

THE SCIENCE QUIZ

COVID-19 pandemic brought out the best in scientists

Vasudevan Mukunth

QUESTION 1

On January 30, 2020, the World Health Organisation declared the COVID-19 outbreak to be a 'public health emergency of international concern'. Name the rules, first adopted in 1969, that require the WHO's member states to respond swiftly in response to such a declaration.

QUESTION 2

The virus that causes COVID-19, SARS-CoV-2, is a positive-sense single-stranded RNA virus. The 'positive-sense' refers to a genome that functions as a _____ molecule. The virus uses this molecule as a template based on which a cell, like in the human body, can 'manufacture' more copies of the virus. Fill in the blank.

QUESTION 3

Name the two scientists who won the Nobel Prize for medicine/physiology in 2023 for the work that laid the foundations for the fastest vaccine development programme in history to mitigate the effects of the pandemic.

QUESTION 4

Name the Chinese pulmonologist who recorded a cluster of pneumonia cases on December 26 and reported it to the Chinese Centres for Disease Control (CCDC) the next day. Based on her report, one company sequenced genomes from these patients and reported a "novel coronavirus" to the CCDC.

QUESTION 5

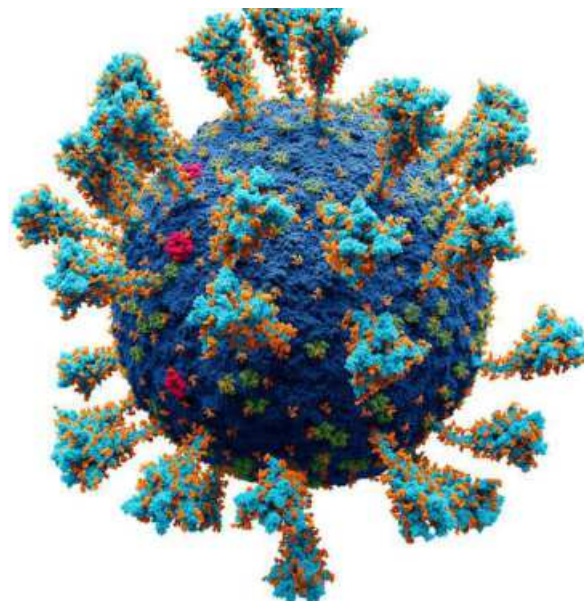
As COVID-19 spread in waves worldwide, researchers considered repurposing existing drugs to treat infections. Of these, four popular ones were

hydroxychloroquine, ivermectin, _____, and ritonavir. None of them have a proven ability to treat COVID-19. Fill in the blank with the name of a drug whose primary purpose is treating hepatitis C.

Answers to January 25 quiz:

- Collective name for chains of carbon atoms - **Ans: Polymers**
- India's national adhering organisation for chemistry - **Ans: Indian National Science Academy**
- Famous example of a aromatic hydrocarbon first synthesised by August Kekulé - **Ans: Benzene**
- Organic compound with the IUPAC name pyridine-3-carboxylic acid - **Ans: Vitamin B3 (nicotinic acid)**
- Name for the moiety of a molecule that influences its behaviour in a chemical reaction - **Ans: Functional group**

Visual: **Technetium sestamibi**
First contact: K.N. Viswanathan | Tadar Sahi | Priyamvada Verma | Shiva Nigam



Visual: This is a model of SARS-CoV-2. What are the turquoise 'blossoms' rooted in the virus's envelope (blue) called? PUBLIC DOMAIN

Please send in your answers to science@thehindu.co.in

Early nutrition impacts cognitive development

Stunting irreversibly affects not just the height, but also the cognitive development of a child. While the long-term impact of early childhood stunting on educational levels is recognised, the processes by which it results in lower educational achievements, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, are not well understood. A deeper insight into the underlying mechanisms is crucial for formulating effective policies to enhance educational outcomes in these contexts.



Aditya Sinha

is Officer on Special Duty, Research, Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister

The study done in Ethiopia and Peru provides an understanding of how stunting really affects cognitive ability. It found that stunting at approximately age 5 is negatively related to executive functions measured years later. This relationship remains strong even when accounting for household fixed effects. These are a statistical technique used to control for unobserved factors that are constant within a household but differ between households. This method allows researchers to focus on the effects of variables like stunting on outcomes such as cognitive development by comparing individuals within the same family.

The findings also suggest that the impact of stunting on working memory might occur as early as age 5, influenced by vocabulary development. These results add to the body of literature that connects early nutrition with educational achievement.

Empirical studies have shown that women's height and educational attainment are strong predictors of child stunting in India. Interventions that improve these can indirectly contribute to better nutritional outcomes in their children.

These findings have implications for India as they underscore the critical importance of early childhood nutrition as a determinant of cognitive development and later educational outcome. India is addressing stunting in two ways. First, Poshan Abhiyaan and Integrated Child Development Services have played a significant role in addressing the issue of stunting. With the objective of reducing malnutrition in districts with the highest burden, Poshan Abhiyaan focuses on enhancing the utilisation and quality of Anganwadi services to ensure holistic development and adequate nutrition for pregnant women, mothers, and children.

Second, studies, including those by Spears (2013), found that improved sanitation reduces the

incidence of diarrhoea and stunting. Investments in clean water and sanitation infrastructure are crucial. India has been addressing these with the Jal Jeevan Mission and the Swachh Bharat Mission.

Three key strategies

To markedly improve child nutrition and combat under-nutrition in India, three key strategies can be the largest needle movers. First, promoting early breastfeeding, along with continued breastfeeding for two years, coupled with appropriate complementary feeding starting at six months, is essential. This not only prevents stunting but also fosters optimal child development. Government initiatives, such as the Mother's Absolute Affection Programme, need expansion to provide comprehensive lactation support and create breastfeeding-friendly environments. Leveraging mobile technology to educate mothers about the criticality of exclusive breastfeeding in the first six months is also vital. At the same time, improving maternal nutrition is crucial, as healthier mothers have healthier babies.

Second as children grow, diversifying their diet becomes crucial. India should implement and scale up community-based complementary feeding programmes. These can educate parents about the importance of adding a variety of foods to their child's diet after six months of age, focusing on locally available, nutrient-rich food options.

Finally, adding an extra Anganwadi worker to each Anganwadi centre could help. Studies, including a randomised trial in Tamil Nadu, have shown that extra staff can double preschool instructional time and improve math and language scores and reduce child stunting and severe malnutrition. This approach promises better developmental outcomes for children and creates substantial employment opportunities.

Garnering votes, statue by statue

Jagan Mohan Reddy is leaving no stone unturned to fetch votes

STATE OF PLAY

G.V.R. Subba Rao
subbarao.gavaravarapu@thehindu.co.in



Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy unveiled a 206-foot-tall statue of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar at Swarajya Maidan in Vijayawada on January 19, in what is being seen as an attempt to attract the votes of the Scheduled Caste (SC) population in the Assembly and parliamentary elections due later this year.

"This towering statue reflects Ambedkar's immense contribution to India's social, economic, political and gender landscapes," Mr. Reddy said while inaugurating the Statue of Social Justice. "Even a century later, his visionary words echo, steering the nation towards progress. Recognising his enduring principles, our government has woven them into our 'Navaratnalu' initiatives," he added.

The SC community constitutes about 19% of Andhra Pradesh's population. The YSR Congress Party (YSRCP) contested the general elections for the first time in 2014. It won 13 seats from the SC segment out of the total 29 it contested. In 2019, the party won 33 SC and ST seats. In comparison, the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) managed to win only one SC seat in 2019. Despite its success with the SC community over the years, the YSRCP is leaving no stone unturned, especially given the alliance between the TDP and the Jana Sena Party.

While inaugurating the statue, Mr. Reddy said, "Untouchability doesn't mean mere physical distance but disinterest and unwillingness in hand holding the oppressed people as well. The Opposi-

tion's unwillingness to support the YSRCP government's endeavours for socio-economic change in society, as perceived by Dr. Ambedkar, was nothing but untouchability in another form," he said.

There have been several attempts in Andhra Pradesh to garner votes by installing statues. Politics too has been played over the installation of such statues. In 2011, the statue of a Chief Minister of combined Andhra Pradesh, Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy, was installed near the Police Control Room in Vijayawada. The base of the structure was a replica of the Polavaram Project. The cost of installing the statue was borne by the Rajagopal Foundation, which was then headed by Vijayawada MP from the Congress, Lagadapati Rajagopal. He was one of the participants of the padayatra taken out by Reddy, which is said to have brought the Congress back to power in 2004. In 2015, the statue was removed by the then TDP government, which claimed that it was obstructing traffic. After returning to power, the YSRCP reinstalled the statue.

Earlier, in 1995-96, Rajasekhara Reddy visited Vijayawada as Congress Legislature Party leader to unveil the statue of Congress MLA Vangaveeti Mohana Ranga Rao (Vangaveeti Ranga). Vangaveeti Ranga was seen as a champion of the dominant Kapu com-

munity. The cost of installing the statue was borne by his followers in the Congress. However, Vangaveeti Ranga's widow, Ratnakumari, who was a TDP MLA, opposed this. She even preempted Reddy by getting her son Radhakrishna, then a teenager, to unveil the statue. Vangaveeti Ranga's statues can be seen not just in Vijayawada, but as far as composite East and West Godavari districts. Ranga's statues are fewer in number in the city compared to those installed in the rural areas of Krishna and Godavari districts.

When N. Chandrababu Naidu planned to install a statue of former Chief Minister N.T. Rama Rao on the Godavari ghats, it led to a controversy. Mr. Naidu also planned to construct a 125-foot Ambedkar statue at Amaravati and laid the foundation stone for it in April 2016. The TDP government planned to construct an Ambedkar memorial, comprising a statue, a park, a convention centre, a Buddhist meditation hall, and a library. But when the government changed, the project was shifted to Vijayawada. As sentiments were running high in Amaravati, a statue of Buddha came up overnight in the city soon after the bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh.

Installing statues does not ensure victory, however. In Telangana, for instance, when the previous Bharat Rashtra Samithi government installed a statue of Ambedkar in Hyderabad, it did so with much fanfare. But it lost the elections soon after. To compete with the YSRCP, the Opposition parties in Andhra Pradesh are now promising to install statues of N.T. Rama Rao across the State, if voted back to power. This, they hope, will fetch them Kamma votes.

Majority use Digi Yatra unknowingly or under compulsion: survey

Only 15% of the survey respondents said that they used the facility knowing the benefits of it

DATA POINT

The Hindu Data Team

A majority of air travellers who flew out of Delhi using Digi Yatra, the biometric boarding system that helps in processing passengers at select airports, did so unknowingly or were compelled to use it. A relatively small number of people signed up for the system knowing the benefits it offered. Moreover, a significant share also said that they had not signed up for the service and always took the normal queue.

These conclusions are based on a survey conducted by LocalCircles on its online portal. The portal received 21,000 responses from citizens who flew out of Delhi airport in the last six months. Over 60% of the respondents were men and the rest were women. Only Indian citizens who were registered with LocalCircles were allowed to participate in the survey, which was published on January 27.

The Digi Yatra facility has come under severe criticism in recent days. Last month, many passengers complained on social media about how their biometric data was collected without their consent at various checkpoints in airports. The scheme was rolled out in December 2022 as a voluntary programme. However, 15% of the respondents in the LocalCircles survey said that they signed up for the facility as there was no "regular queue", as shown in **Chart 1**. Chart 1 shows answers to the following question in the survey: "When you travelled by air in the last six months, how did you sign up for the Digi Yatra programme?"

Last week, responding to a letter from Trinamool Congress MP Saket Gokhale raising the privacy concerns of travellers, the Minister for Civil Aviation, Jyotiraditya Scindia, said that the process is voluntary and the consent of the passenger a prerequisite. Survey data show that 29% signed up for it

without knowing that the queue was meant for Digi Yatra. Among the rest of the passengers, 41% did not use the app, while 15% used it knowing the benefits it offered.

Though Digi Yatra was first launched in Delhi, along with Bengaluru and Varanasi, over a year ago, 85% of the passengers who flew out of Delhi in the last six months said that the organisations responsible for Digi Yatra are not doing an effective job of educating citizens about the app. **Chart 2** shows answers to the following question in the survey: "Are the Ministry of Civil Aviation and its affiliated organisations doing an effective job of educating citizens on Digi Yatra (information shared by citizens, its usage, risk and benefits) before they sign up?" Only 15% said that they were aware of the risks and the benefits of the scheme.

While the above data is limited to the passengers who flew from Delhi, as the facility has now been expanded to 13 more airports, the seriousness of the issue has amplified. The number of passengers across airports who have used the facility has surged since its introduction in December 2022. As shown in **Chart 3**, the total number of passengers who used the facility increased from 1.6 lakh by February 2023 to 17.5 lakh by June 2023 to over 90 lakh by December 2023.

The total number of downloads of the Digi Yatra app also shot up from just 10 lakh in June 2023 to 35 lakh in December 2023 (**Chart 4**). Recent news articles also show that the Civil Aviation Ministry is thinking about using Digi Yatra for international travel as well.

There have been reports of heavy traffic in busy airports such as Delhi. This has led to chaos at the terminals. This validates the need for a hassle-free, paper-less system such as Digi Yatra. However, it is a matter of concern that a high share of passengers were compelled to use it or were unaware of the process.

Convenience at a cost

The data for the charts are sourced from a LocalCircles survey and the Ministry of Civil Aviation



Chart 1: When you travelled by air from the Delhi airport in the last six months, how did you sign up for the Digi Yatra programme?

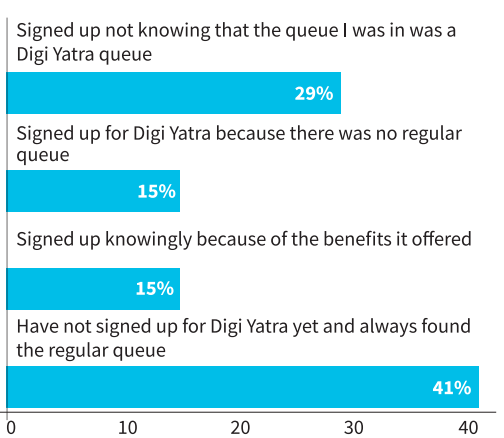


Chart 2: Are the Ministry of Civil Aviation and its affiliated organisations doing an effective job of educating citizens on Digi Yatra (information shared by citizens, its usage, risk and benefits) before they sign up?

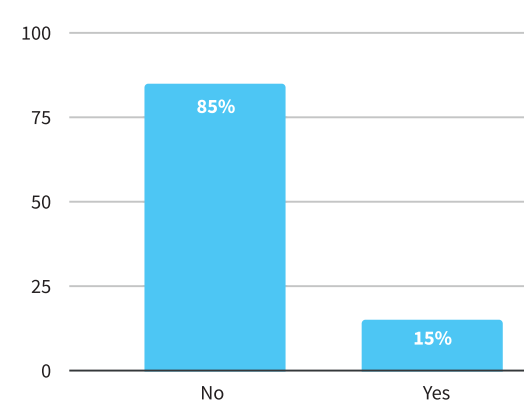


Chart 3: The chart shows the total number of passengers who have used the Digi Yatra process since December 1, 2022

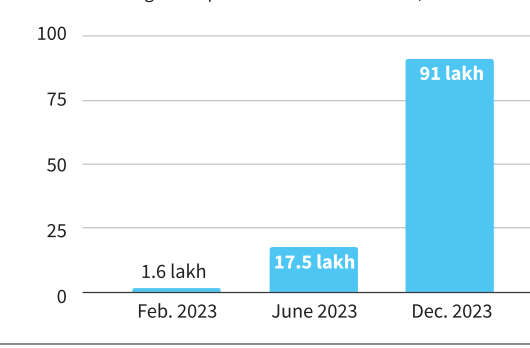
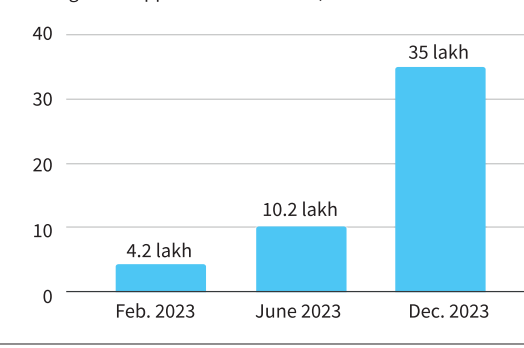


Chart 4: The chart shows the total number of downloads of the Digi Yatra app since December 1, 2022



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO JANUARY 30, 1974

Indo-Sri Lanka accord on the stateless

New Delhi, Jan. 29: India and Sri Lanka have finally settled the problem of the people of Indian origin in the island by agreeing to divide equally the remaining 150,000 persons not covered by the 1964 Shastri-Sirimavo Pact.

The joint communique issued to-day at the conclusion of Mrs. Bandaranaike's visit disclosed that Sri Lanka will confer its citizenship on 75,000 of these persons, while India will take back the other 75,000.

The two Prime Ministers, Mrs. Gandhi and Mrs. Bandaranaike, who had detailed discussions on all aspects of this long-standing problem noted with satisfaction that with the full implementation of the 1964 agreement and the present one relating to the remaining 150,000, India and Sri Lanka would have finally settled the question of all persons of Indian origin there. The wording of the communique fully reflected the feeling of relief on either side that the most serious irritant in Indo-Sri Lanka relations had been removed at last.

The joint communique also stated that "satisfactory progress" had been made during these discussions on Kachativu and other related issues. It was agreed at the talks that a decision would be taken "in the very near future" regarding the sea limit in the historic waters dividing India and Sri Lanka between the Palk Straits and Adam's Bridge.

Though it has not yet been officially disclosed, it is generally known that the two Prime Ministers have agreed to resolve the question of Kachativu on the basis of a fresh delimitation of the territorial waters which would automatically settle the issue without going further into the historical claims of either side to this disputed islet.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JANUARY 30, 1924

Third expedition to Everest

Leafield (Oxford) Mid. Jan 28: Brigadier General Bruce, leaves for India on Wednesday to command the new expedition which will attempt the ascent of Mount Everest in the coming spring. This will be the third assault on the world's highest mountain and it will be the second time that Mr. Bruce has been in command.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Mobile subscribers added by Jio in the month of November

34.5 in lakh. Reliance Jio cemented its market lead while rival Bharti Airtel gained 17.5 lakh new wireless users, according to TRAI data. Vodafone Idea, however, slipped further by losing 10.7 lakh subscribers in November. PTI

The share of Indians still using biomass for cooking

41 in percentage. Indians relying on wood, cow dung or other biomass as cooking fuel, emit around 340 million tonnes of carbon dioxide into the environment every year, which is about 13% of India's greenhouse gas emissions. PTI

The U.S. issued record number of visas to Indians in 2023

1.4 in million. The U.S. embassy said that there was a 60% increase in visa applications from Indians compared to 2022. Process improvements and investments in staffing have brought down appointment wait times for visitor visas. PTI

The increase in gold imports from April to December

26.7 in percentage. India's gold imports, which have a bearing on the country's current account deficit, increased to \$35.95 billion during April-December of this fiscal. India is the world's second-largest gold consumer after China. PTI

The nuclear reactors Ukraine will build as war hits power supply

4 Ukraine will begin building four new nuclear reactors to compensate for Russia's seizure of the country's largest nuclear plant. The new reactors would be at the Khmelnytskyi nuclear power plant in western Ukraine. AFP
COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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Pros and cons of simultaneous elections

What are the various benefits of holding Lok Sabha and State elections at the same time? How would simultaneous elections go against the federal character of the Constitution? What are international practices on the same in other Parliamentary democracies?

EXPLAINER

Rangarajan.R

The story so far:

A High-Level Committee (HLC) headed by Ramnath Kovind, former President of India, was constituted in September 2023 to examine the issue of holding simultaneous elections for the Lok Sabha, State Legislative Assemblies and local bodies of all States. The HLC has invited responses from political parties, the Law Commission and other groups on the proposal to hold simultaneous elections.

What is the background?

During the first four general election cycles in 1952, 1957, 1962 and 1967, the elections to the Lok Sabha and State legislative assemblies were held simultaneously. However, due to the subsequent premature dissolution of the Lok Sabha on seven occasions and the premature dissolution of legislative assemblies on various occasions, the elections to the Lok Sabha and various State assemblies are held at different times. In 2019, only four States had their assembly elections, along with the Lok Sabha. The idea of simultaneous elections has been mooted in the past by the Election Commission of India (1982) and the Law Commission (1999).

What is the case for simultaneous elections?

The desirability of simultaneous elections can be discussed from the perspectives of cost, governance, administrative convenience and social cohesion. Firstly, it is estimated that the cost of holding general elections to the Lok Sabha is around ₹4,000 crore for the Central government. Each State assembly election would also cost considerable amount of money according to the size of the State. While this is the official expenditure of the government, the expenditure by parties and candidates are manifold times higher. Simultaneous elections would entail a reduction in these costs.

Secondly, there are at least 5-6 State elections that happen every year. This results in political parties, including Ministers, being in 'permanent campaign' mode, which acts as a hindrance to policy making and governance. Further, the Model Code of Conduct that is enforced during the election process ranges usually from 45-60 days where no new schemes or projects can be announced by the Centre and concerned State governments.

Third, administrative machinery in the districts slow down during the election period with the primary focus being the conduct of elections. There are also paramilitary forces that are withdrawn from the locations in which they are posted and deployed to the concerned State for the smooth conduct of elections. Frequent elections every year have an impact on administrative efficiency.

Lastly but very importantly, high-stake elections each year in various States result in polarising campaigns by all parties in order to win the elections. This trend has exacerbated in the last decade with the advent of social media thereby creating and deepening the fissures in our multi-religious and multilingual country.

What are the challenges involved?

There are tangible benefits that accrue due to simultaneous elections. However, there are also significant issues that surround such a proposal both from democratic and constitutional perspectives.

India is a federal country of

India's democratic behemoth

While there are tangible benefits that accrue due to simultaneous elections, there are also significant issues for such a proposal both from democratic and constitutional perspectives

Table 1 shows when the term for the Assemblies of each State ends, and the number of months that would be curtailed if simultaneous elections are held in these States in June 2024.

State	Term ends	No. of months
Karnataka	May 2028	-47
Meghalaya	March 2028	-45
Nagaland	March 2028	-45
Tripura	March 2028	-45
Himachal	Jan. 2028	-43
Gujarat	Dec. 2027	-42
U.P.	May 2027	-35
Goa	March 2027	-33
Manipur	March 2027	-33
Punjab	March 2027	-33
Uttarakhand	March 2027	-33
Puducherry	June 2026	-24
Assam	May 2026	-23
Kerala	May 2026	-23
Tamil Nadu	May 2026	-23
West Bengal	May 2026	-23
Bihar	Nov. 2025	-17
Delhi	Feb. 2025	-8
Jharkhand	Jan. 2025	-7
Haryana	Nov. 2024	-5
Maharashtra	Nov. 2024	-5
Andhra	June 2024	0
Arunachal	June 2024	0
Odisha	June 2024	0
Sikkim	June 2024	0
Chhattisgarh	Jan. 2024	5
M.P.	Jan. 2024	5
Rajasthan	Jan. 2024	5
Telangana	Jan. 2024	5
Mizoram	Dec. 2023	6

Table 2 shows the number of Lok Sabha seats, Assembly representatives, urban local wards, and elected panchayat representatives for each State.

State	Lok Sabha seats	Assembly seats	Urban local wards	Elected panchayat representatives
U.P.	80	403	10,440	9,13,417
West Bengal	42	294	2,938	59,229
Maharashtra	48	288	7,489	2,40,635
Bihar	40	243	3,322	1,36,573
Tamil Nadu	39	234	12,448	1,06,450
M.P.	29	230	7,626	3,92,981
Karnataka	28	224	7,125	1,01,954
Rajasthan	25	200	8,160	1,26,271
Gujarat	26	182	1,374	1,44,080
Andhra	25	175	3,903	1,56,050
Odisha	21	147	2,092	1,07,487
Kerala	20	140	3,529	18,372
Assam	14	126	910	26,754
Telangana	17	119	3,587	1,03,468
Punjab	13	117	3,163	1,00,312
Chhattisgarh	11	90	3,234	1,70,465
Haryana	10	90	1,649	70,035
Jharkhand	14	81	1,120	59,638
Delhi	7	70	280	-
Uttarakhand	5	70	1,134	62,796
Himachal	4	68	560	28,723
Arunachal	2	60	59	9,383
Manipur	2	60	306	1,736
Meghalaya	2	60	164	-
Nagaland	1	60	371	-
Tripura	2	60	324	6,646
Goa	2	40	226	1,555
Mizoram	1	40	242	-
Sikkim	1	32	51	1,153
Puducherry	1	30	116	-

sub-continental proportions. Various States have their own unique set of issues that are significantly different from one another. The Union and State governments have their respective powers and responsibilities towards the electorate as per the division of powers under the Constitution. Conducting elections simultaneously to the Lok Sabha and all State assemblies would result in national issues overshadowing regional and State specific issues. National political parties would have a significant advantage over regional parties on account of this mechanism. This would be detrimental to the federal spirit of our country which has been declared as a basic structure of the Constitution. Elections also serve as an effective feedback mechanism for governments in power. There have been many policies that have been initiated by various Central and State governments in the past due to such electoral feedback. If elections are held only once in five years, it can affect this process.

Apart from the federal and democratic issues discussed above, simultaneous polls will also require constitutional amendments. India is a parliamentary democracy where the governments at the Centre and the State need to enjoy majority in the Lok Sabha and the Legislative Assembly respectively. The duration of these houses is five years but it may be dissolved earlier if the party or coalition in power loses majority, and no alternative government can be formed. It may also be dissolved prematurely by the council of ministers in power to seek an early election. Further, State legislative assemblies can also be dissolved by imposing President's rule under Article 356 of the Constitution. Having a fixed tenure of five years for the Lok Sabha and State assemblies will therefore require

constitutional amendments to Articles 83, 85, 172 and 174 that deal with the duration and dissolution of Lok Sabha and Legislative assemblies. It will also require the amendment of Article 356.

What are the various recommendations?

The reports of the Law Commission (1999), and the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Personnel, Public Grievances, Law and Justice (2015), have dealt with the issue of simultaneous elections. The Law Commission had also submitted a draft report in 2018. The highlights of these discussions and recommendations can be summarised as follows – (a) the elections to the Lok Sabha and nearly half of the State assemblies may be clubbed together in one cycle, while the rest of the State assembly elections can be held in another cycle after two and half years. This will require curtailing or extending the tenures of existing assemblies that will entail amendments to the Constitution and the Representation of the People Act, 1951; (b) any 'no-confidence motion' in the Lok Sabha or Legislative Assembly should be mandatorily accompanied by a 'confidence motion' for the formation of an alternate government. If for any unavoidable reason, the Lok Sabha or State Assembly is to be dissolved prematurely, the duration of the newly constituted House should be only for the remainder period of the original House. This would act as a deterrent for MPs and MLAs pushing for premature dissolution of the House. It would instead encourage the members to explore the possibility of forming an alternate government through feasible realignments; (c) the bye-elections necessitated by death, resignation or disqualification of

members can be clubbed together and conducted once in a year.

It may be noted that Parliamentary democracies like South Africa, Sweden and Germany have fixed tenures for their legislatures. The elections to the National Assembly and provincial legislatures happen simultaneously in South Africa every five years, with the President of the country being elected by the National Assembly. The Prime Minister of Sweden and the Chancellor of Germany are elected by their respective legislatures every four years. A lack of confidence against the German Chancellor can be moved only by electing a successor.

What can be an ideal solution?

There is a lack of consensus among various political parties about the conduct of simultaneous elections. The ideal middle ground may be to conduct the Lok Sabha election in one cycle and all State assembly elections in another cycle after two and a half years. The rest of the recommendations as discussed in the previous section with respect to the formation of an alternative government in case of the fall of an incumbent government, the duration of the newly constituted houses being only for the remainder period in case of premature dissolution and, the clubbing of bye-elections to be held once every year may be adopted through suitable amendments. This will ensure that the major benefits of simultaneous polls are achieved without compromising on democratic and federal principles. If all political parties are taken into confidence, this may be achieved over the next decade and continued thereafter.

Rangarajan. R is a former IAS officer and author of 'Polity Simplified'. Views expressed are personal.

THE GIST

During the first four general election cycles in 1952, 1957, 1962 and 1967, the elections to the Lok Sabha and State legislative assemblies were held simultaneously.

It is estimated that the cost of holding general elections to the Lok Sabha is around ₹4,000 crore for the Central government. Each State assembly election would also cost considerable amount of money according to the size of the State.

Conducting elections simultaneously to the Lok Sabha and all State assemblies would result in national issues overshadowing regional and State specific issues. National political parties would have a significant advantage over regional parties on account of this mechanism.

CACHE



GETTY IMAGES

Improving battery technologies for speedy EV adoption

The projected growth of the Indian Electric Vehicle (EV) market is dependent on advances in battery technology translating to better economics and enhanced user experience. However, today's Li-ion batteries still leave a lot to be desired

Sandeep Rao

Last year was a good year for Electric Vehicles (EV) in India with sales recording a 50% growth compared to 2022. While actual volumes remain small (6% of vehicles registered in 2023), the industry is poised for phenomenal growth with the Indian EV market expected to reach \$100 billion by 2030. The heart of an EV is its battery – with the battery system accounting for 40% of the vehicle cost. The projected growth of the EV market is dependent on advances in battery technology translating to better economics and enhanced user experience (longer range, faster charging and improved safety).

The lithium battery

Almost all EVs on the road today are powered by lithium-ion batteries. It consists of two electrodes (an anode and a cathode) separated by a liquid electrolyte. Lithium atoms in the anode give up electrons which travel to the cathode through an external wire – this stream of electrons provide the current which powers the motor of the vehicle. Simultaneously, lithium ions (now positively charged from loss of an electron) travel through the electrolyte to reach the cathode. During charging, the process is reversed with lithium ions being forced to travel back through the electrolyte to the anode.

There is a good reason why lithium is the material of choice for EV batteries. Lithium, the lightest solid element known to man, has a high propensity to give up its electron. Its small size enables the lithium ion to efficiently travel between

electrodes through the electrolyte. This translates to lighter and smaller batteries with an ability to store large amounts of energy. However, today's Li-ion batteries still leave a lot to be desired. Its energy density while high compared to earlier battery technologies, pales in comparison to petrol. Batteries are still slow to charge (compared to the few minutes it takes to fill petrol at a pump). There is a need to make batteries more affordable and increase their life-span. And then there are environmental concerns primarily related to the mining of lithium and other elements (such as cobalt, nickel).

On improving the battery

The efforts toward improving the EV battery can be broadly classified into three approaches. The first approach retains the basic structure of the lithium-ion battery while making tweaks to the electrodes. An ideal electrode should be light weight; store a lot of lithium; provide sufficient pathways for lithium to easily enter and exit the electrode (=> higher voltages and faster charging); and be made of materials that are cheap, non-toxic and easily available. But invariably there are trade-offs involved. For example, Tesla uses cathodes based on Nickel-Manganese-Cobalt (NMC) and Lithium Iron Phosphate (LFP) in their batteries. While NMC batteries have high energy density and thus provide longer range, LFP batteries have longer life, better stability, are less toxic and have faster charging times.

Another approach to improving battery performance involves deploying sensing and control infrastructure around the battery to increase safety, extend battery

life and speed-up charging. For instance, a temperature sensor can be installed to detect dangerous conditions and shut down the battery, preventing a fire. Monitoring parameters such as internal temperature, voltage and current and appropriately modulating the charging current and voltage can result in faster charging while maintaining battery life. This can be understood using a simple analogy. Charging a battery involves moving lithium ions from the cathode to the anode. This is akin to moving a bunch of kids from one classroom to another through a common door. Left to themselves the kids are likely to jump across benches and rush to the door – potentially damaging furniture, resulting in crowding around the door and slowing down movement. A couple of monitors to control the kids can result in faster movement with lesser damage. A Battery Management System (BMS) consists of sensors to measure parameters such as temperature, voltage and current; electronic circuitry to control the battery; and a compute engine to process the sensor data and issue appropriate control commands. Advances in battery management and charging algorithms are generally easier to deploy since they do not involve any fundamental changes to the battery chemistry.

Paradigm shifts

There is considerable effort being invested in approaches that promise quantum jumps in battery performance. One such approach is the Solid-State Lithium Battery (SSB), which seeks to fix two common drawbacks in prevalent batteries. The liquid electrolyte used in EV batteries is highly flammable. The SSB

replaces this with a heat resistant lightweight solid electrolyte. Further, the anode of an EV battery consists of a carbon based porous/layered scaffolding (typically graphite) – which houses lithium atoms (a crude analogy is water stored in a sponge). The carbon scaffolding provides the required stability during charging and discharging, as lithium is reactive. However, the solid electrolyte in an SSB provides sufficient structural stability and good separation between the anode and the cathode, that the carbon scaffolding is no longer needed at the anode. This can significantly reduce the weight of battery and also improve charging speed. If SSB's live up to their promise, consumers can expect EVs that travel further with a single charge, are faster to charge and are safer across a wider range of temperatures, sometime before the end of this decade.

India has a good eco-system that can support further progress in EV batteries – an expanding market, an environment that supports start-ups, friendly government policies, and successful home-grown EV companies (Ather, Ola Electric). Further, fundamental research in material science at India's premier universities (IIT-Madras and Mumbai) and government research labs promotes innovation. The semiconductor industry in India (Texas Instruments included) is also contributing advanced sensors and processors that will power the next generation of BMS. So, if you are an entrepreneur looking for a next start-up idea, or student/researcher looking for an area of specialisation, battery technology is something that you could consider.

(The author is with Texas Instruments)

THE DAILY QUIZ

Please send in your answers to dailyquiz@thehindu.co.in

Some significant events occurred on January 30. Here is a quiz on observances, birthdays and everything else that happened on the day

Abhinaya. K

QUESTION 1

A film written, directed and starring Charlie Chaplin premiered on this day in 1931. Often considered his magnum opus, the film marked the first time Chaplin composed a film score for one of his own productions. Identify the film.

QUESTION 2

Across the world every year the last Sunday of January is observed as _____ Day to raise awareness about this disease. In India, it is observed on January 30. Identify the disease?

QUESTION 3

An Indian politician and Independence activist who was jailed during the Quit India Movement was born on this day in

1910. He served as Governor of Maharashtra and is also one of the individuals credited for ushering in the Green Revolution. Name the politician.

QUESTION 4

The legendary band performed their last live gig, known as the 'rooftop' concert, on this day in 1969 for a limited audience. Last year, they came together for one last song with the help of AI which gained millions of views on YouTube. Which is the band?

QUESTION 5

One of the first memorial museums established in India on Mahatma Gandhi, houses many key artifacts related to the leader including the garment worn by the leader on the day of his death. He was shot and killed on January 30, 1948. Where is the museum located?



Visual question:

Identify the man with Former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi who is the inventor of a 3-D combination puzzle. He filed the patent for his famous invention on this day in 1975.

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz:

- The bodies the Supreme Court replaced in 1950. **Ans: The Federal Court of India and the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council**
 - The motto of the SC. **Ans: Yato Dharmastato Jayah' (Whence Justice, Thence Victory)**
 - The current strength of judges in the Supreme Court. **Ans: 34 judges including the CJJ**
 - The Supreme Court is shaped as this. **Ans: In the shape of a balance with a pair of the Scales of Justice**
 - The black bronze sculpture installed in 1978 in the Supreme Court portrays this. **Ans: It portrays Mother India sheltering the Republic of India represented by the symbol of a child holding an open book said to uphold the laws of the land**
 - The record the Kesavananda Bharati versus State of Kerala case holds. **Ans: With 13 judges it was the largest-ever Bench constituted at the SC**
- Visual: Identify this woman. **Ans: Fathima Beevi**
Early Birds: K.N. Viswanathan| Ashraf Basha| Amartya Vikram Singh| Prashant Nain| Vinoth A.R



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

K. Subrahmanian

"C. H. Vijayawada wants to know whether the following sentence is correct: 'Both the chief minister as well as his rival attended the meeting'."

"You can say 'Both the chief minister and his rival attended the meeting'. You can also say 'The chief minister as well as his rival attended the meeting'. 'Both' and 'as well as' don't go together. 'Both' means 'the one as well as the other'.

*Both Ram and Ahmed came.
Both of them came. Both came.
They are both fine.
Both Ram and Ahmed are good students. Ram and Ahmed are both good students.*

The negative of 'Both of them are good' is not 'Both of them are not good'. It would mean that one of them is good. The negative is 'Neither of them is good'. Neither of them came to the meeting. 'Neither' means 'not one and not the other'. 'As well as' means 'in addition to (being)'.

Ram as well as John came to see me yesterday.

*He was kind as well as sensible.
Ram as well as John is kind to me.*

In 'both' and 'as well as' two things are involved. In 'both', the emphasis is on the two things together; in 'as well as', you want to emphasise a second thing besides a thing already mentioned. The difference is a difference in emphasis."

"Mr. N. Subramanyam and Mr. P. N. Rao of Berhampur want to know the meaning of the idiom 'Heads I win, tails you lose'."

"It means you lose in any case. 'Head' here means the picture on one side of a coin. Tail is the other side of the coin. You toss a coin to decide which of the two alternatives is to be followed. When you say 'heads' and the coin falls with the head facing you, you win; otherwise, the other person wins. When you say 'Heads I win, tails you lose', you win all the time. It is a grossly unfair deal."

"Ms. S. Kaur, Ludhiana, wants to know how to use 'worry at'."

"You worry about something. *He is worried over this problem.*

"To worry at' is 'to keep attempting to conquer or persuade'. When you worry at a problem, you keep on thinking of ways of solving it.

He worried at the minister to get an LPG dealership."

"Mr. D. K. Bhatnagar, Dibrugarh, wants to know the difference between 'odious' and 'odorous'."

"Odious" means 'hateful, detestable, most unpleasant'.

*He is an odious liar.
I have nothing to do with that odious woman.*

"Odorous" means 'having a smell, especially a pleasant one'. This is a literary word.
Published in The Hindu on December 11, 1990.

Word of the day

Maelstrom: a powerful circular current of water (usually the result of conflicting tides)

Synonyms: Vortex, whirlpool

Usage: She found refuge from the whirling maelstrom.

Pronunciation: bit.ly/maelstrompro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /meɪlˈstrʌm/, /-stɹʌm/

For feedback and suggestions for Text & Context, please write to letters@thehindu.co.in with the subject 'Text & Context'

UKRAINE

Ukraine to build four nuclear reactors as war hits power supply



REUTERS

Ukraine's energy ministry said on Monday that it will begin building four new nuclear reactors this year. Energy Minister German Galushchenko said in televised comments that all four new reactors would be at the Khmelnytskyi nuclear power plant in western Ukraine, eventually making it the largest in Europe. AFP

DOHA

Qatar inks 15-year deal with Bangladesh for gas supply



REUTERS

Qatar has signed a deal with U.S.-based Excelerate Energy to supply Bangladesh with natural gas for 15 years, state-owned QatarEnergy said Monday. Doha will supply Excelerate with one million tonnes of liquefied natural gas a year to be delivered to floating storage units in Bangladesh over the 15-year period starting in January 2026. AFP

RUSSIA

Putin formally registered as presidential candidate



AFP

Russia on Monday officially registered incumbent Vladimir Putin as a candidate for the presidential election in March, a vote that he is all but certain to win. The Central Election Commission said it had registered Putin, who nominated himself, as well as right-wing firebrand Leonid Slutsky as candidates for the vote. AFP

SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa's ruling ANC suspends membership of ex-President Zuma



AFP

South Africa's ruling African National Congress (ANC) said on Monday it had suspended the membership of former President Jacob Zuma after he announced he would vote for another party in this year's general election. Mr. Zuma said last month he would campaign for the new uMkhonto we Sizwe (MK) party. REUTERS

Maldives main Opposition party mulls impeachment against President Muizzu

The Maldivian Democratic Party, which has 42 seats in the 80-member Majlis, appears to have joined forces with the Democrats, a breakaway faction with 13 seats, against the ruling People's National Congress; Opposition says Muizzu is 'alienating' the country's 'most long-standing ally' India

Meera Srinivasan
COLOMBO

The Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), the country's main Opposition party holding a parliamentary majority, is preparing to submit an impeachment motion against President Mohamed Muizzu in Parliament, stepping up its challenge to the Executive in the legislature.

"We have the numbers," Andhun Hussein, deputy leader of the MDP parliamentary group, told *The Hindu* over the phone.

The development coincides with a showdown between Male and New

Delhi, in the wake of controversial remarks made by Maldivian Ministers, and a shrill "Boycott Maldives" call on Indian social media, and President Muizzu issuing a March 15 deadline to New Delhi, for the removal of Indian troops.

On what prompted the move for an impeachment motion, less than three months after President Muizzu was sworn in, the Opposition politician pointed to "two primary reasons".

"The President is putting the Indian Ocean Region in danger with his policies, and he is not letting Parliament function properly, using money power



Bitter hostility: The development coincides with a showdown between Male and New Delhi. REUTERS

and with the backing of the military," Mr. Hussein said, a day after Parliament or People's Masjid witnessed violent clashes between legislators from the ruling camp and the Opposition. They sparred over parliamentary approval of Presi-

dent Muizzu's Cabinet.

The MDP, which has 42 seats in the 80-member People's Majlis, appears to have joined forces with the Democrats – with 13 seats – formed by its breakaway faction, following former President Mohamed Nash-

eed's fallout with President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih last year. In an indication of the two sides finding common cause, the MDP and the Democrats recently issued a joint statement slamming President Muizzu for "alienating" the Maldives' "most long-standing ally". Meanwhile, at least 12 MPs from the MDP have crossed over to the ruling People's National Congress, boosting its presence in the legislature to 16 MPs, Maldivian news portal *Awaz* reported on Sunday.

With parliamentary elections scheduled for March 17, President Muizzu has a crucial test ahead.

Without adequate Parliament backing, he will not be able to pass legislation or implement policies.

The MDP's parliamentary primaries are scheduled to be held on February 3. "We will decide the date of submission of the [impeachment] motion against the President once the primaries are over," Mr. Hussein said. "We cannot change our geography, we cannot bring China closer to us. India is our closest neighbour, friend, and family. Whether it's about sourcing food or medicines, we cannot do without India. We live in peace because of India's neighbourhood first policy."

Fierce battles in Gaza after Jordan attack kills three U.S. troops

Agence France-Presse
GAZA CITY

Deadly fighting and air strikes rocked besieged Gaza on Monday, a day after an attack that killed three U.S. troops in Jordan heightened fears of a wider regional conflict.

Israeli bombing of the Gaza Strip killed 140 people overnight, including 20 members of one family, said the Health Ministry in the Hamas-run Palestinian territory.

The Israeli Army said its troops had "encountered and killed dozens of armed terrorists in battles in central Gaza". Ground forces backed by tanks have focused combat operations on the coastal strip's main southern city of Khan Yunis.

In the latest efforts to broker a new ceasefire, CIA chief William Burns met top Israeli, Egyptian, and Qatari officials in Paris on Sunday, but no breakthrough was reported.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office said the talks were "constructive" but pointed to "significant gaps which the parties will continue to discuss this week".

U.S. President Joe Biden sent Burns to try to negotiate the release of remaining hostages in exchange for a ceasefire, a security source has confirmed.

On Sunday, a drone attack on a remote base in Jordan, near the borders with Iraq and Syria, killed three U.S. troops and wounded 25 others, the U.S. military said.

Is Biden's policy towards the Israel-Hamas war working?

NEWS ANALYSIS

Stanly Johny

The drone attack by Iran-backed Shia militias on a U.S. military logistics hub in Jordan, along the border with Syria, in which three American service persons were killed and dozens more injured, is the deadliest assault on U.S. forces in West Asia since the Hamas-Israel war broke out on October 7.

When Israel launched an all-out attack on Gaza, after Hamas's cross-border raid killing at least 1,200 Israelis, mostly civilians, the Joe Biden administration adopted a two-fold approach – to let Israel continue its war with America's military assistance and diplomatic protection while simultaneously working to prevent the crisis from escalating into a regional conflict. Three and a half months later, Israel's war is far from over, while the crisis has already spread across the region.

Support for Israel

Even when casualties rose in Gaza and international pressure mounted on Israel to halt the attacks, the Biden administration continued to back Israel's war. It vetoed a UN Security Council Resolution that called for a humanitarian ceasefire and voted against back-to-back resolutions in the UN General Assembly that were critical of Israel's war and occupation.

Israel's war has killed over 26,000 Palestinians (mostly women and children), wounded more than 60,000 and displaced roughly 90% of Gaza's 2.3 million population. The International Court of Justice, the UN's top court,



Joe Biden

last week ordered Israel to take measures to prevent genocidal acts by its forces in Gaza. Yet, the Biden administration hasn't even called for a ceasefire.

On the other side, to prevent the crisis from escalating, Mr. Biden sent his top diplomat Antony Blinken several times to the region. Mr. Blinken held multiple rounds of talks with Arab leaders with whom the U.S. has substantial diplomatic leverage. However, the problem the U.S. faced was that it lacked a similar diplomatic leverage with Iran. And the main security challenge came from Iran-backed militias in West Asia.

The U.S. faced two kinds of attacks. One, the Islamic Resistance Forces, the Shia militias based in Iraq and Syria, carried out at least 150 attacks against U.S. forces and bases in the region since October 7. Two, Houthis, the Shia rebels of Yemen, started attacking commercial vessels in the busy shipping lanes of Red Sea, directly challenging the U.S.'s ability to provide security to global shipping. America's response was typical – it carried out retaliatory airstrikes in Syria, Iraq and Yemen.

The U.S. has conducted at least half a dozen strikes in Yemen, targeting Houthi positions. But the Houthis still attack ships in the Red

Sea. Airstrikes alone hardly deter home-grown militias. The Houthis have survived seven years of Saudi bombing and are controlling swathes of Yemen's territories, including its Red Sea coast. According to a report in the International Crisis Group, Houthis' attacks on the Red Sea in "solidarity with the Palestinians" are popular among their base in Yemen and help them recruit new fighters.

Chances of escalation

The U.S. strikes on Shia militias in Iraq and Syria were also not immediately effective as the drone attack in Jordan showed. America's airstrikes are spreading the fire instead of boosting its own deterrence. The U.S. has some 2,000 soldiers in Iraq, 3,000 in Jordan and up to 1,000 in Syria, who are close targets for the vast network of Shia militias, which Iran has built across the region, from Iraq to Syria to Lebanon and Yemen.

Three and a half months since the Israel-Hamas war began, Israel is far from meeting its declared objectives – dismantling Hamas and freeing hostages. U.S. intelligence estimates that only 20-30% of Hamas fighters were killed in three months, while 80% of Hamas's vast tunnel networks in Gaza remain intact, according to American media.

As long as the war continues, the chances of further regional escalation are high, with the U.S. being drawn deeper into the West Asian vortex at a time when it wants to pivot away from the region to focus on its more conventional challenges in the Indo-Pacific and Eastern Europe.

Fiery spirit



People dressed up as demons brandish a stick with fireworks during the traditional Correfoc festival in Spain. The festival is a night of revelry in which people in demon and devil costumes run through the streets scaring people with fire and fireworks. AFP

Iran, Pak. to work jointly to improve security after tit-for-tat air strikes

Associated Press
ISLAMABAD

Pakistan and Iran on Monday agreed to work together to improve security cooperation in the wake of deadly air strikes by Tehran and Islamabad earlier this month that killed at least 11 people, marking an escalation in fraught relations between the neighbours.

The development came after the top Iranian diplomat, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, held talks in Islamabad with his Pakistani counterpart, Jalil Abbas Jilani. The Iranian Foreign



Moving together: Iranian diplomat Hossein Amir-Abdollahian (left) with his Pakistani counterpart Jalil Abbas Jilani in Islamabad. AFP

Minister also met with Pakistan's caretaker Prime Minister Anwaarul-Haq-Kakar.

Iran-Pakistan ties were dramatically imperilled on

January 17, when Iran launched air strikes in Pakistan's restive southwestern Baluchistan province.

Angered over the strikes, Pakistan recalled

its ambassadors from Tehran and launched air strikes against alleged militant hideouts inside Iran, in the Sistan, and Baluchistan province.

At a news conference, Mr. Amir-Abdollahian and Mr. Jilani said they would work through existing channels in their leadership, diplomatic, and military levels. Mr. Jilani said the two countries were able to bring the "situation back to normal in the shortest possible time" after the airstrikes because both sides had agreed to resume dialogue to resolve all issues.

Pak. election won't end strife, warns rights activist

Agence France-Presse
ISLAMABAD

Pakistan's pre-eminent rights activist describes the upcoming election as a messy melodrama staged by an emboldened military, unlikely to bring down the curtain on a cast of crises plaguing the country.

Millions of people will vote in polls in less than two weeks, in a campaign marred by allegations of pre-vote rigging with the Opposition heavily suppressed.

"I don't see Pakistan's problems going away after this election," said Munizae Jahangir, co-chair of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. "We're headed towards the next mess that nobody will know how to fix."

The lacklustre election campaign feels like a sideshow compared to the backstage drama between jailed ex-Prime Minister Imran Khan and the military kingmakers who once backed him. Mr. Khan was ousted in 2022 in a parliamentary no-confidence vote he claims was orchestrated by the country's powerful generals.

"They have a schizophrenic relationship with Imran Khan," Ms. Jahangir said of the military brass.

"Nobody can predict what the military is going to do because they first make up all these leaders and then they demolish them."

Despite the drawbacks, Jahangir is clear about the need for an election, with polling day already delayed by months under a caretaker government considered a puppet of the military.



Rishi Sunak's government also plans to gradually raise the minimum age to buy cigarettes. AFP

U.K. to ban vapes, control e-cigarettes aimed at children

Associated Press
LONDON

The British government says it will ban the sale of disposable vapes and limit their cornucopia of flavours in an effort to prevent children from becoming addicted to nicotine. It also plans to stick to a contentious proposal to ban today's young people from ever buying cigarettes.

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak is due to announce details of the plan on Monday.

It is currently illegal to sell vapes or tobacco to children under 18 in the U.K., but officials say that youth vaping has tripled in the past three years, and that cheap, colourful disposable vapes are a "key driver."

As well as banning disposable vapes, the government says it will "restrict flavours which are specifically marketed at children" and ensure that manufacturers put vapes in "less visually appealing packaging." "As any parent or teacher knows, one of the most worrying trends at the moment is the rise in vaping among children, and so we must act before it becomes endemic," Mr. Sunak said.

"The long-term impacts of vaping are unknown and the nicotine within them can be highly addictive, so while vaping can be a useful tool to help smokers quit, marketing vapes to children is not acceptable."

Mr. Sunak's government also said it will push on with a plan announced last year to gradually raise the minimum age to buy cigarettes, so that no one born after Jan. 1, 2009 can ever legally buy them.

The plan is modeled on a proposal in New Zealand that was scrapped late last year after a change of government in that country.

ASEAN cautiously hopes for progress on Myanmar, South China Sea conflicts

Foreign Minister of Laos, which has taken over this year's leadership of the Association of South East Asian Nations, says it is a good sign that the Myanmar junta chose to send a high-level representative to attend the meeting of Foreign Ministers of the bloc for the first time since seizing control

Associated Press
LUANG PRABANG

China's increasingly assertive posture in the South China Sea and escalating violence in Myanmar topped the agenda for Southeast Asian diplomats at their meeting in Laos on Monday, with the Laoian Foreign Minister expressing guarded optimism that progress could be made this year on both acrimonious issues.

Laoian Foreign Minister Saleumxay Kommasith told presspersons that Thailand was moving ahead with plans to provide more humanitarian assistance to Myanmar, where more than 2.6 million people have been displaced by civil war.

He said it was a good sign that the military leaders who seized control of Myanmar in February 2021 from the democratically elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi had for the first time sent a high-level representative to attend the meeting of ASEAN Foreign Ministers in the historic city of Luang Prabang in Laos.

"We feel a little bit optimistic that the engagement may work, although we have to admit that the issues that are happening in Myanmar will not resolve overnight," Mr. Saleumxay said. "I think there is probably a small light at the end of the tunnel."

Myanmar has been pro-



Warm welcome: Laoian Foreign Minister Saleumxay Kommasith, right, with Myanmar's ASEAN Permanent Secretary Marlar Than Htaik in Luang Prabang on Monday. AFP

hibited from sending its Foreign Minister or any political representative to high-level ASEAN meetings since the end of 2021, when it blocked the group's envoy from meeting with Ms. Suu Kyi. Instead, it has sent non-political representatives to lower-level working meetings but has refused to send anyone to high-level meetings.

In Laos, however, it sent a Foreign Ministry civil servant, ASEAN Permanent Secretary Marlar Than Htaik, which Mr. Saleumxay called "a positive sign."

Landlocked Laos, which has taken over this year's rotating ASEAN leadership, is the bloc's poorest nation and one of its smallest, and many have expressed skepticism about

how much it can accomplish while the crises mount.

Different perspective

Still, it is the first ASEAN country that shares a border with Myanmar to serve as chair since the military took control of the country, giving it a perspective different from that of previous chairs.

Laos has already sent a special envoy to Myanmar for meetings with the head of the ruling military council and other top officials in an attempt to make progress on ASEAN's "five-point consensus" plan for peace.

The plan calls for the immediate cessation of violence in Myanmar, a dialogue among all concerned parties, mediation by an

ASEAN special envoy, provision of humanitarian aid through ASEAN channels, and a visit to Myanmar by the special envoy to meet all concerned parties.

The military leadership in Myanmar has so far ignored the plan, and the violence and humanitarian crisis has been growing at a rapid pace.

Singaporean Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan told presspersons after the meeting that it was "helpful" to have a representative from Myanmar attend again, but that he would not say he was optimistic that Myanmar would take concrete steps to implement the plan.

"If you take reference from the past, it can sometimes take a very long time for positive change to oc-

cur," he said. "I do not want to raise hopes or expectations unrealistically."

Mr. Saleumxay said ASEAN would continue to push for full implementation of the consensus while also increasing humanitarian support.

"We think humanitarian assistance is the priority for the immediate period of time when implementing the five-point consensus," he said. "We welcome in this regard the efforts by the Thai government to ... try to create a humanitarian corridor where support and assistance can be provided to all Myanmar people."

Communist Laos is one of the ASEAN countries with the closest ties to China, and some have speculated it may look to its giant neighbour for help in dealing with the crisis in Myanmar, where Beijing also wields considerable influence.

China has said it will not interfere in the internal affairs of other states, however, and it is also unknown whether it taking on such a role would be acceptable to other ASEAN members.

Maritime dispute

ASEAN members Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei are locked in maritime disputes with China over its claims of sovereignty over the South China Sea, one of the world's most crucial waterways for shipping. Indone-

sia has also expressed concern about what it sees as Beijing's encroachment on its exclusive economic zone.

An estimated \$5 trillion in international trade passes through the South China Sea each year, which has led China into direct confrontations, most notably with the Philippines and Vietnam.

The ASEAN meeting in Laos came on the same day that Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. was meeting with officials in Vietnam, among other things to discuss the ongoing tensions in the South China Sea.

The Philippines has been looking for more support from its ASEAN neighbours amid increasingly tense hostilities with China, which many worry could escalate into a broader conflict that could involve Washington, Manila's longtime treaty ally.

China and ASEAN agreed in 2002 and 2012 to a declaration on conduct in the South China Sea, seeking to "enhance favorable conditions for a peaceful and durable solution of differences and disputes," but there has been little sign of adherence to that in recent years.

In Luang Prabang, the group "underscored the importance of the full and effective" implementation of the declaration, according to a statement issued by Laos after the talks.

Hong Kong to allow recognition of China rulings

Agence France-Presse
HONG KONG

A new law which will allow Chinese courts to enforce their rulings in Hong Kong in commercial and civil cases took effect on Monday in the finance hub.

The arrangement will allow for the two-way recognition of court judgments in Hong Kong and China for civil or commercial lawsuits - should the parties apply for it. The former British colony has a common law system distinct from China.

But observers have said the legal firewall between Hong Kong and China has gradually eroded as Beijing tightens its grip on the city after the enactment of a national security law in 2020 designed to quell dissent. The new measure would lead to "a higher degree of certainty and predictability", officials have said. Major exemptions to the new arrangement include judgments about insolvency as well as maritime and arbitration matters.

Officials have stressed that crossover recognition is optional and the decision is up to the parties to a lawsuit.

"Mainland judgments will not automatically take effect in Hong Kong, and assets in Hong Kong will not be confiscated by the mainland directly after the arrangement has come into operation," a Department of Justice spokesperson said last week.

The new arrangement was the product of a 2019 agreement between Hong Kong's Department of Justice and the Supreme People's Court of China, officials said.

Contaminated catch



Spilling over: People fish next to a drainage that flows into the Paraguay River in Asuncion, Paraguay on Sunday. AP

Italy unveils plans to curb migration while investing in energy at Africa summit

Agence France-Presse
ROME

African leaders gathered at a Rome summit on Monday to hear Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's much-hyped plan for the continent, aimed at transforming Italy into an energy hub - and stopping migration.

Far-right leader Meloni, who came to power in 2022 on an anti-migrant ticket, has vowed to reshape relations with African countries by taking a "non-predatory" approach inspired by Enrico Mattei, founder of Italy's state-owned energy giant Eni.

The so-called Mattei Plan hopes to posit Italy as a key bridge between Africa and Europe, funnelling energy north while exchanging investment in the south for deals aimed at curbing migrant departures across the Mediterranean Sea.



Italy's PM Giorgia Meloni with African Union chief and Comorian President Azali Assoumani at the Senate in Rome on Monday. AFP

Ms. Meloni said the plan would initially be funded to the tune of 5.5 billion euros, some of which would be loans, with investments focused on energy, agriculture, water, health and education.

Representatives of over 25 countries attended the summit - dubbed "A bridge for common growth" - on Monday at the Italian senate along with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and representa-

tives of UN agencies and the World Bank. Ms. Meloni told them that Europe and Africa's "destinies" were interconnected and she was determined to cooperate "as equals - far from any predatory temptation, but also from that charitable approach to Africa that is ill-suited to its extraordinary potential for development".

There was no reference to Italy's colonial past in Libya, Ethiopia, Eritrea and what is now Somalia.

Japanese moon probe back to work after sunlight reaches its solar panels

Associated Press
TOKYO

A Japanese moon explorer is up and running on Monday after several tense days without the sunlight it needs to generate power.

Japan's first lunar mission hit its target in a precision touchdown on January 20, but landed the wrong way up, leaving its solar panels unable to see the sun.

But with the dawn of the lunar day, it appears that the probe has power.

The Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) said on Monday that it successfully established communication with the probe on Sunday night, and the craft has resumed its mission, taking pictures of the moon's surface and transmitting them to the earth.

Engine failure

After a last-minute engine failure caused the Smart Lander for Investigating Moon (SLIM) to make a rougher-than-planned landing, JAXA used battery



Rise and Shine: The Smart Lander for Investigating Moon seen on the lunar surface in an image released by JAXA on Jan. 25. REUTERS

power to gather as much data as possible about the touchdown and the probe's surroundings. The

craft was then turned off to wait the sun to rise higher in the lunar sky in late January.

With power, SLIM has continued work to analyse the composition of olivine rocks on the lunar surface with its multi-band spectral camera, seeking clues about the moon's origin and evolution, the agency said.

Earlier observations suggest that the moon may have formed when the earth hit another planet.

A black-and-white photo posted by JAXA on social media showed the rocky lunar surface, including a rock the agency said it had

named "Toy Poodle" after seeing it in initial images. The probe is analysing six rocks, all of which have been given the names of dog breeds.

Slim chances

SLIM is expected to have enough sun to continue operations for several earth days, possibly until Thursday. JAXA said it's not clear if the craft will work again after another severely cold lunar night.

The SLIM landed about 55 metre away from its tar-

get, in between two craters near the Shioli crater, a region covered in volcanic rock. Previous moon missions have typically aimed for flat areas at least 10 km wide.

SLIM carried two autonomous probes, which were released just before touchdown, recording the landing, surroundings and other lunar data.

The landing made Japan the world's fifth country to reach the moon surface, after the U.S., the Soviet Union, China and India.

'Brokers divided on extended trading hours'



Close look: Deliberations are still underway on extended trading hours, says Ms. Buch, PTI

Ashley Coutinho
MUMBAI

The Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) is looking at segregation of settlement of retail and proprietary trades to ensure there is no netting of the two categories.

Brokers are permitting access to clients through the prop account for a variety of reasons including wanting to fund their margin, SEBI Chairperson Madhabi Puri Buch said on Monday. "The industry has made a representation to us that that there are different revenue models that brokers have and some of them may look like they are misused but they are not. We will analyse this in a balanced way to separate the wheat from the chaff," she said.

With respect to extended trading hours for the market, SEBI said that there were divergent views among the broking community and there was a lot of deliberation that was still going on. "It's a divided house and we have not yet reached the stage of getting views from investors," she said.

The NSE had planned to extend trading hours by three hours for index derivatives by March, as per reports. SEBI was moving towards onsite inspections for brokers that would be automated.

She said the Industry Standards Forum (ISF), which was in the pilot stage, would eventually be made part of the permanent regulatory architecture. She said the Brokers ISF had done a commendable job in the past four months in giving implementable recommendations on standards and guidelines of implementing regulatory directives.

(The writer is with The Hindu businessline)

China's growth model pushes Beijing into more trade confrontations

China's overcapacity fuels trade tensions, says former WTO chief; low household demand in China pushes goods into other markets; rising debts, export reliance hurt growth potential, according to analysts; European Union worried about credit being funnelled towards China's manufacturers

NEWS ANALYSIS

Reuters
BEIJING/FRANKFURT

Swiss solar panel maker Meyer Burger is facing the brunt of competition from China and is warning it may have to close its loss-making production plant in Germany unless the government steps in with financial support.

"Chinese manufacturers are deliberately selling goods in Europe far below their own production costs," Chief executive Gunter Erfurt told Reuters.

"They can do this because the solar industry in China has been strategically subsidised with hundreds of billions of dollars for years."

Growing alarm over Chinese industrial overcapacity flooding the European Union (EU) with cheap products is opening a new front in the West's trade war with Beijing, which kicked off with Washington's import tariffs in 2018.

Brussels' trade policy is also turning increasingly protective against the global ramifications of China's production-focused, debt-driven development model. Throughout last year, China's policymakers flagged their intention to make domestic demand a more prominent growth driver to wean the world's



Clear intent: 'Beijing's resource reallocation is likely for pushing exports up the value chain,' REUTERS

second-largest economy off its decades-long reliance on infrastructure and the property sector.

Diversification of resources

But China has diverted financial resources from real estate to manufacturers rather than households, raising overcapacity concerns, deepening factory-gate deflation, and prompting a EU investigation into EV sector.

China's path leads to more trade conflicts, warns Pascal Lamy, former head of the World Trade Organization (WTO), now distinguished professor at China Europe International Business School.

"This is not sustainable," Mr. Lamy said. "Overcapacity will inevitably lead to a problem."



Growing alarm over Chinese industrial overcapacity flooding the EU with cheap products is opening a new front in the West's trade war with Beijing

"We have come to the realisation that this is a structural problem and it stems from the fact part of the Chinese production system is not driven by market behaviour, but by Chinese Communist Party-directed investment."

That model has led to industrial overcapacity in China's major sectors such as steel, and more recently, in EV and high-tech goods. China's trade partners are

hitting back. U.S. has imposed trade tariffs on China, and wants to cut off Beijing from high-tech chips to slow its technological and military advances. It is also ramping up infrastructure and industrial investment at home.

The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) forecasts China's battery manufacturing capacity outpacing demand by a factor of four by 2027, as its EV industry continues to grow.

Outside the auto industry, Brussels is seeking to cut reliance on China for materials and products needed for its green transition. Beijing is conducting its own anti-dumping probe into EU brandy.

India imposed anti-dumping duties on some Chinese steel in September

2023, adding to other trade barriers and investment curbs that have halted planned projects from Chinese automakers.

Michael Pettis, senior fellow at Carnegie China, estimates that if China were to grow 4-5% annually in the next decade while maintaining current economic structure, its share of global investment would rise to 38% from 33%, while its share of global manufacturing would rise to 36-39% from 31%.

To accommodate that, other major countries would have to allow their economies to lose some of their investment and manufacturing share, he wrote in a December note.

"Even without the geopolitical tensions of recent years and policies in the United States, India and the European Union ... this would be highly unlikely."

Moreover, given more borrowing would be needed to sustain China's high investment levels for another decade, China's total debt ratio would have to rise to 450-500% of GDP from about 300% currently, Mr. Pettis estimated.

"It is hard to imagine that the economy could tolerate such a substantial increase in debt," he said.

To be sure, China's rebalancing goal has been stymied in part by a faltering economic recovery as transferring resources to households would bring

even more near-term pain.

However, George Magnus, research associate at Oxford University's China Centre, says China's inability to increase domestic consumption means it relies on other countries importing more of its goods.

"It's a zero-sum game. If imports go up, then that's substituting for domestic production," Mr. Magnus said, adding the West will "become more politically feisty about that."

Some economists argue Beijing's resource re-allocation towards the manufacturing sector is aimed primarily at moving exports up the value chain rather than merely selling bigger volumes of goods.

Xia Qingjie, economics professor at Peking University, says European and U.S. attempts to re-industrialise economies would be expensive due to higher labour and capital costs and "take a long time."

"But they cannot restrict China's technological advance."

William Hurst, professor of Chinese development at the University of Cambridge, doubts China is making the right bet in this regard. He argues Beijing's push to advance sectors such as aviation, biotech and artificial intelligence has not been sufficiently successful to either push technological boundaries in those industries or generate more employment.

Unhealthy confrontation?



Testing patients: A man rides a bicycle past a placard which reads "Taxi driver, a job, a passion, not an option", as taxi drivers take part in a demonstration against a health insurance project law of "patient carpooling" by blocking access to the airport in Toulouse, southwestern France. Cab drivers blocked several major roads across France in a bid to secure renegotiation of patient-transport conditions from the French health insurance system, with traffic moving at a snail's pace in Paris, Marseille and Bordeaux. AFP

'S&P could cut Israel's credit rating if conflict expands beyond Gaza'

Reuters
JERUSALEM

Israel's sovereign credit rating could be cut if the war with Palestinian Islamist group Hamas expands to other fronts, but if this does not happen it should be able to weather the war's economic fallout if it makes needed budget changes to offset higher spending, an S&P Global Ratings director said.

S&P in October affirmed Israel's 'AA-' rating but revised Israel's outlook to "negative" from "stable", citing risks that the Israel-Hamas war could spread more widely with a more pronounced impact on the economy and security situation in the country.



Note of caution: If Israel's security and geopolitical risks increase that could lead to a downgrade, says S&P's Rybnikov. AFP

"The negative outlook on the ratings implies that we currently see at least a one-in-three chance of a downgrade over the next one to two years," Maxim Rybnikov, director of EMEA Sovereign & Public

Finance Ratings at S&P, told Reuters in e-mailed comments.

He said that if Israel's security and geopolitical risks increase due to an escalation of the conflict – a direct confrontation with

Hezbollah in Lebanon or Iran – that could lead to a downgrade.

"We could also lower the ratings if the impact of the conflict on Israel's economic growth, fiscal position, and balance of payments proves more significant than we currently project," Mr. Rybnikov said. He said S&P projects Israel's economy will grow by just 0.5% in 2024 with a cumulative budget deficit of 10.5% of GDP in 2023-2024 "but there are downside risks to the assumptions." The cabinet this month passed a disputed 2024 budget with amendments adding 55 billion shekels (\$15 billion) of spending. It still needs Parliamentary approval.

HK court orders Evergrande to liquidate as \$300-bn debt plan fails

Associated Press
HONG KONG

A Hong Kong court ordered China Evergrande, the world's most heavily-indebted real estate developer, to undergo liquidation in the wake of a failed effort to restructure debt of \$300 billion owed to banks and bondholders that fuelled fears about China's rising debt burden.

Judge Linda Chan said it was appropriate for the court to order Evergrande to wind up its business given a "lack of progress on the part of the company putting forward a viable restructuring proposal" as well as Evergrande's insolvency.

China Evergrande Group is one of the biggest of a series of Chinese developers that have collapsed since 2020 under official pressure to rein in surging debt the ruling Communist Party views as a threat to China's slowing economic growth.

But a crackdown on excess borrowing has tipped the property industry into crisis, making it a drag on the economy, as scores of other developers ran into trouble, their predicaments rippling through financial systems in and outside China.

Containing risks

Global financial markets were rattled earlier by fears an Evergrande liquidation could cause global shockwaves. But Chinese regulators said risks could be contained. Only a few billion dollars of Ever-



Reality bites: Real estate drove China's economic boom, but developers borrowed heavily as they turned cities into forests of apartments and office towers. AFP

grande's debt was owed to foreign creditors.

It's unclear how the liquidation order will affect China's financial system. Evergrande's Hong

Kong-traded shares plunged almost 21% early Monday before they were suspended from trading. But Hong Kong's benchmark Hang Seng index was

up 0.8% and other property developers saw gains in their share prices.

China's largest real estate developer, Country Garden, gained 2.9% and

Sunac China Holdings jumped 4%. Some other property companies logged moderate declines.

The Shanghai Composite index dropped 0.6% while Shenzhen's A-share index fell more than 2%.

Attempt at 'refining'

Evergrande gained a reprieve from the Hong Kong court in December after it said it was attempting to "refine" a new debt restructuring plan of more than \$300 billion in liabilities. It could appeal the ruling. Fergus Saurin, a lawyer representing an ad hoc group of creditors, said Monday he was not surprised by the outcome.

"The company has failed to engage with us. There has been a history of last-minute engagement

which has gone nowhere."

Evergrande CEO Shawn Siu told Chinese news outlet 21jingji that the company feels "utmost regret" at the liquidation order. He emphasised the order affects only the Hong Kong-listed China Evergrande unit. The group's domestic and overseas units are independent legal entities, he said. Mr. Siu said Evergrande will strive to deliver properties to buyers.

Asset disposal

"If affected, we will still make every effort to ensure the smooth advancement of risk resolution and asset disposal, and still make every effort to advance all work fairly and in accordance with the law."

Evergrande first defaulted on financial obligations

in 2021, just over a year after Beijing clamped down on lending to property developers in an effort to cool a property bubble.

It's also unclear how the liquidation order will affect Evergrande's vast operations in the Chinese mainland. As a former British colony, Hong Kong operates under a legal system that is separate, though increasingly influenced by, communist-ruled China's.

Real estate drove China's economic boom, but developers borrowed heavily as they turned cities into apartments and office towers. That pushed total corporate, government and household debt to the equivalent of more than 300% of annual economic output, unusually high for a middle-income country.

IN BRIEF

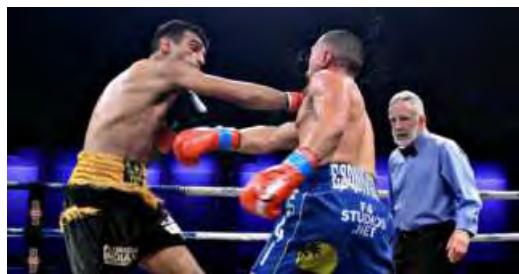


Nadal's 2007 French Open racquet sells for \$118k

Rafael Nadal's championship point-winning racquet from his 2007 French Open final victory over Roger Federer was sold for more than \$118,000 at an auction on Monday, ranking among the highest-priced such memorabilia. Nadal beat Federer 6-3, 4-6, 6-3, 6-4 in the 2007 final in Paris to win his third Grand Slam title. It was previously housed in the Australian Tennis Museum prior to its recent closure. Previous highest individual tennis racquet auction sales include Nadal's 2022 Australian Open racquet at \$139,700, Billie Jean King's 'Battle of the Sexes' racquet at \$125,000, and Djokovic's 2016 French Open racquet sold for \$107,482.

India makes FIH Hockey5s World Cup quarterfinals

Maninder Singh struck four goals as India mauled Jamaica 13-0 in its third and final pool match to enter the quarterfinals of the FIH Hockey5s Men's World Cup in Muscat on Monday. Maninder's goals came in the second (two strikes), 28th and 29th minutes. Manjeet (fifth, 24th), Raheel Mohammed (16th, 27th) and Mandeep Mor (23rd, 27th) struck a brace each while Uttam Singh (fifth), Rajbhar Pawan (ninth) and Gurjot Singh (14th) were the other goal-scorers.



Jangra wins intercontinental super featherweight title

Mandeep Jangra, a 2014 Commonwealth Games silver medallist, won the US-based National Boxing Association (NBA)'s intercontinental super featherweight title after defeating American Gerardo Esquivel with an unanimous decision at Toppenish City, Washington.

Korda beats Ko in playoff to win LPGA Drive On title

Reigning Olympic golf champion Nelly Korda parred the second playoff hole to defeat New Zealand's Lydia Ko and win the Drive On Championship in Miami on Sunday for her ninth career LPGA title. Korda closed her round eagle-birdie for the second consecutive day to force a playoff, then outlasted Ko.

LIVE TELECAST

Men's U-19 CWC: India vs New Zealand, Star Sports 1 (SD & HD) & Hotstar, 1.30 p.m.
PKL: Star Sports 2 (SD & HD) & Hotstar, 8 p.m.
Premier League: SS Select 1, 2 (SD & HD) & Hotstar, 1.15 a.m. (Wednesday)

Sonam shoots air rifle silver as Janssen tops the chart

Sports Bureau

Sonam Maskar finished with silver in women's air rifle after being edged out by Germany's Anna Janssen by 0.9 points in the shooting World Cup in Cairo on Sunday.

Nancy Mandhotra also made the final with an impressive qualification score of 633.1 but missed the chance to win a medal by 0.2 points. In the women's 25-metre sports pistol final on Monday, Simranpreet Kaur Brar ended fifth after topping qualification with 586.

Rhythm misses final
Rhythm Sangwan shot 582 and missed the final by one point while Manu Bhaker, the Olympic quota winner in the event, shot 580 for the 14th spot. In men's skeet, Munek



It was a day to remember for Sonam. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Battula shot 74 out of 75 to be among the leaders. Three shooters had a perfect 75 and Munek was on par with four others.

Abhay Singh Sekhon (72) was in the 19th place while Anant Jeet Singh Naruka, was in 53rd spot with 67.

In women's skeet, Raiza Dhillon (68), Areeba Khan (67) and Ganemat Sekhon (67) were lying in the 17th to 20th spots.

TN has turned it around and is sitting pretty

Jagadeesan's spell-binding double and triple tons in the last two games, along with fine showing by the bowling unit, have catapulted the Sai Kishore-led team to the top of its group

RANJI TROPHY

S. Dipak Ragav
CHENNAI

Following its comprehensive innings victories in the last two matches against Railways and Chandigarh, Tamil Nadu finds itself on top of Elite Group-C at the midpoint in the Ranji Trophy campaign after four games, tied on 15 points with Karnataka.

It is a good turnaround for the team after losing to Gujarat from a position of strength in the opening fixture and having only one point after the first two encounters.

In the two matches at home in Coimbatore, N. Jagadeesan came up with spellbinding knocks – with a double and triple century – against Railways (245 n.o.) and Chandigarh (321), respectively.

With Pradosh Ranjan Paul and B. Indrajith also scoring tons in the last game, the TN batting lineup appears in good shape.

Standout performer

On the bowling front, pacer Sandeep Warrier has been the standout performer.

Guest pacer Kuldeep Sen, who played for the first time this season

against Chandigarh, was in nice rhythm. The team will hope the former MP player, alongside M. Mohammed, can support Warrier in the remaining fixtures.

Similarly, spinners – skipper Sai Kishore and Ajith Ram – showed their potential on helpful surfaces at home.

However, in an evenly matched group where only the top two teams will qualify, Sai Kishore's men can ill-afford any slip-up starting from its next game against Goa.

Fortunately, the team will play two tough opponents – Karnataka and Punjab – at home in Chennai and Salem, respectively, which should give it an edge.

Momentum

"We got the much-needed momentum in these last two matches. I think confidence in cricket is important and allows you to express yourself. Going into the next half, how we show up in difficult moments will define the campaign," said Sai Kishore.

If Tamil Nadu can continue the form it showed in the last two outings, it looks well-placed to qualify for the knockouts of the country's premier domestic tournament for the first time since 2016-17.



Great going: Jagadeesan in a rich vein of form augurs well for Tamil Nadu. M. PERIASAMY

RANJI TROPHY SCORES, ROUND 4, DAY 4

ELITE: Group A: At Ranchi: Vidarbha 204 & 374/9 decl. bt Jharkhand 150 & 120 (Umesh Yadav 4/43). **Points: Vidarbha 6 (19), Jharkhand 0 (3).**
Rohtak: Haryana 195 & 211/6 decl. in 67 overs (Nishanth Sindhu 70, Ashok Menaria 59, P.C. Dadhe 5/60) drew with Maharashtra 194 & 96/2 in 18 overs (A.R. Bawane 50 n.o.).
Haryana 3 (17), Maharashtra 1 (11).
Delhi: Services 536/7 decl. drew with Saurashtra 462 in 139.5 overs (Kevin Jivrajani 52, Vishvarajsinh Jadeja 88, Cheteshwar Pujara 91, Arpit Vasavada 71, Chirag Jani 48, A.P. Sharma 4/105). **Services 3 (9), Saurashtra 1 (10).**
Group B: Mumbai: Mumbai 198 & 320 in 88.1 overs (Shivam Dube 117, Shams Mulani 63, Mohit Avasthi 49, Aaqib Khan 4/58) lost to U.P. 324 & 195/8 in 69.5 overs (Aryan Juyal 76, Karan Sharma 67 n.o., Tanush Kotian 5/58). **U.P. 6 (11), Mumbai 0 (20).**
Raipur: Andhra 431 & 150/2 decl. bt Chhattisgarh 262 & 193 in 59.4 overs (Kd. Eknath 76, Amandeep

Khare 67). **Andhra 6 (15), Chhattisgarh 0 (11).**
Patna: Kerala 227 & 220/4 in 61 overs (Sachin Baby 109 n.o.) drew with Bihar 377. **Kerala 1 (5), Bihar 3 (5).**
Group C: Agartala: Karnataka 241 & 141 bt Tripura 200 & 163 in 55.2 overs (Sudip Chatterjee 82, Vidwath Kaverappa 4/44).
Karnataka 6 (15), Tripura 0 (8).
Group D: Cuttack: Odisha 138 & 425/8 decl. bt Himachal 176 & 149 in 57.4 overs. **Odisha 6 (9), Himachal 0 (3).**
Mohali: Delhi 147 & 264/9 decl. bt Uttarakhand 239 & 165 in 79.3 overs (Akhil Singh Rawat 63, Himanshu Chauhan 5/39). **Delhi 6 (7), Uttarakhand 0 (7).**
Vadodara: J&K 457 & 193/7 in 76.4 overs (Shubham Khajuria 40, Sahil Lotra 63 n.o., Mahesh Pithiya 5/82) drew with Baroda 383. **J&K 3 (11), Baroda 1 (20).**
PLATE: Vallabh Vidyanagar: Mizoram 359 & 237/9 decl. in 56 overs bt Meghalaya 281 & 124 in 58.4 overs (K.C. Kariappa 4/48). **Mizoram 6 (15), Meghalaya 0 (14).**

Head of State security for Indian Davis Cup team

Press Trust of India
ISLAMABAD

A bomb disposal squad will sanitise the Islamabad Sports Complex every morning, and two escort vehicles will shadow the Indian Davis Cup team during its travel as part of the multi-layer security arrangement, which is usually accorded to the Head of State.

The Indian squad has travelled to Pakistan for the first time in 60 years, and the Pakistan Tennis Federation (PTF) is keen to

ensure that there are no security issues. The PTF is following the security plan that has been approved by the International Tennis Federation (ITF).

The Indian contingent, which has five players, two physios and two AITA officials, arrived here on Sunday night.

Aqeel Khan, one of the finest tennis players from Pakistan, said the Indians should explore the city, if they are comfortable. "If they can't move out and see the city, they can visit the restaurants," he said.

India will look to continue its winning ways when it takes on New Zealand

UNDER-19 WORLD CUP

Press Trust of India
BLOEMFONTEIN

Defending champion India, off to the best possible start with three wins on the trot, will look to keep the juggernaut rolling when it takes on New Zealand in the super-six match of the U-19 World Cup here on Tuesday.

Having qualified for the super-six stage as Group-A leader, India will also have the advantage of playing at the Mangaung Oval on Tuesday – the same venue that it has played all its

three matches so far.

New Zealand, on the other hand, move here from East London and will have to adapt quickly to the conditions.

India notched up easy wins against Bangladesh, Ireland and USA.

The best thing about the Indian team is that at least one or two batters had raised hands and taken responsibility to score runs.

Skipper Uday Saharan has played impactful innings and will look to continue in the same vein.

New Zealand finished second in Group-D with two wins from three games.

The Kiwis' batting lineup has struggled in the tournament. While they were able to eke out a narrow one-wicket win over Afghanistan while chasing a modest 91, they succumbed to a 10-wicket loss to Pakistan after being bowled out for 140.

Against a formidable India line-up, the onus will be on the Kiwi batters to complement the bowling department.

Both sides will also keep an eye on the Net Run Rates as each of the teams will carry forward the points and NRR earned against fellow Super Six qualifying teams.

Martinez's strike helps Inter go back on top of Serie A

EURO LEAGUES

Reuters
FLORENCE

Inter Milan reclaimed the top spot in Serie A as it beat fifth-placed Fiorentina 1-0 on Sunday courtesy of an early header from Lautaro Martinez.

Inter, crowned Italian Super Cup last week, now has 54 points, one ahead of second-placed Juventus which has played one game more.

Fiorentina thought it had taken the lead when forward M'Bala Nzola nutmegged visiting goalkeeper Yann Sommer in the 11th minute but the Angola striker was ruled to be off-side.

Martinez put Inter ahead three minutes later, nodding in a corner from a tight angle.

Barren run

Fiorentina has not won any of its Serie A games in 2024, losing two and drawing one.

Lazio's four-game Serie A winning streak came to an end as it was held to a 0-0 draw by champion Napoli as both teams struggled to create opportunities in a clash between last season's top two sides.

In the LaLiga, Samuel Lino and Memphis Depay in each half to give Atletico Madrid a comfortable 2-0 home win over Valencia, which moved Diego Simeone's side to third in the

standings. Atletico with 44 points is level with Barcelona but ahead on goal difference. Real Madrid is second on 54 points, one behind Girona which has played a game more than its nearest rivals.

The results:

Serie A: Fiorentina 0 lost to Inter Milan 1 (Martinez 14); Lazio 0 drew with Napoli 0; Monza 1 (Colpani 31) bt Sassuolo 0; Verona 1 (Suslov 45+2-pen) drew with Frosinone 1 (Kaio Jorge 58).
LaLiga: Cadiz 0 lost to Athletic Bilbao 0; Sevilla 1 (Romero 24) drew with Osasuna 1 (Budimir 55); Atletico Madrid 2 (Lino 45+5, Depay 57) bt Valencia 0.
Bundesliga: Union Berlin 1 (Hollerbach 62) bt Darmstadt 0; Borussia Dortmund 3 (Fuellkrug 6-pen, 72, 90+1-pen) bt Bochum 1 (Schlotterbeck-og).

Paris Masters indoor tennis to have a new venue

Associated Press
PARIS

The Paris Masters indoor tennis tournament will move to a new location starting from next year, the French tennis federation said on Monday.

The tournament is moving from its long-standing home at the Bercy Arena to a larger venue at the Paris La Defense Arena, increasing the capacity from just under 17,000 to 23,000.

The FFT said the courts will be bigger and better than at the Bercy Arena, where the smaller courts were criticized by players last year. Jannik Sinner, who won the Australian Open on Sunday, pulled out during the Paris Masters last November in a scheduling protest.

Prithvi claims singles title at the Australian Open Deaf championship

TENNIS

Kamesh Srinivasan
NEW DELHI

India's Prithvi Sekhar had a memorable outing in the Australian Open Deaf Championships, winning the singles title and finishing runner-up in doubles, partnering Glen Flindell, in Melbourne on Sunday.

"It was great to win the singles title beating Gabor Mathe of Hungary, to whom I had lost in the semifinals last year. I had a shoulder injury then. This time I was better prepared and very motivated," said Prithvi.

It could have been a double crown for Prithvi and partner Glen, but for them missing their chances from being up 6-0, 5-2 against Mathe and Esah



Memorable outing: Prithvi with his reward.

Hyat in a league match. "We had a match point on deuce, and a few other chances but we made mistakes", recalled Prithvi, about the 6-0, 5-7, [7-10] loss in the second league match. The duo won the third league match easily to take the runner-up trophy.

"I prepared well and played with superb intensi-

I had five days of training before my event in Melbourne with other Indian players

ty and proper tactics against every opponent. I had the rhythm and momentum to win all my singles matches," said Prithvi who dropped one set in five matches.

Prithvi, who witnessed a lot of matches featuring top players at the Australian Open, also watched Rohan Bopanna, Sumit Nagal, Anirudh Chandrasekar and Vijay Sundar Prashanth in action.

"I had five days of training before my event in Melbourne with other Indian players," said Prithvi, who could not watch Bopanna

and Matthew Ebden playing the doubles final, as he was busy with his own matches.

Better performance
Prithvi, who competes in the regular ITF men's circuit, is confident of performing better in the future thanks to the morale-boosting accomplishment in Melbourne.

The results:
Singles (Final): Prithvi Sekhar bt Gabor Mathe (Hun) 6-1, 6-3; **semifinals:** Prithvi bt Mike Laurent (Fra) 6-2, 6-2; **league:** Prithvi bt Esa Hyat (GBr) 6-7(4), 6-2, [10-7]; bt Oliver Grave (Fra) 6-0, 6-3; bt Marino Kegl (Slo) 7-6(3), 6-4.
Doubles (league): Prithvi & Glen Flindell (Aus) bt Marino Kegl (Slo) & Oliver Grave (Fra) 6-0, 6-1; Prithvi & Glen lost to Gabor Mathe (Hun) & Esa Hyat (GBr) 6-0, 5-7, [7-10]; Prithvi & Glen bt Mike Laurent (Fra) & Andy Vasquez (Ecu) 6-2, 6-3.

Her roots in Puducherry, Prithika is France's top hope in Paris 2024

I want medals in the singles, doubles, and mixed doubles at the Worlds and Olympics and want to do something great; I want to be one of the best players in history; I love this sport, and I think I can do something good, says the 19-year-old paddler

Jonathan Selvaraj

With some of the world's top players featuring, there are no easy matches at the WTT Star

Contender in Goa. Playing her first match in the women's singles category, Prithika Pavade looked to be making an early exit. Prithika was down two games before she held her nerve and fought back with a 9-11, 9-11, 10-12, 11-7, 11-3 win. It's a result that set Prithika out for a clash against South Korea's Nayeong Kim with a place in the quarterfinals up for grabs. Prithika eventually lost 6-11, 11-9, 9-11, 9-11.

The win is an important one for Prithika. It's her first at the WTT Star Contender in Mapusa. She had competed at the 2023 edition of the tournament but had lost out in the qualification first round.

It's not just Prithika who hopes she does well in India. It's all of France's table tennis fraternity. With the Paris Olympics just a few months away, much is expected of Prithika, born and raised in the Parisian suburb of St. Dennis, who at World No. 33, is France's top-ranked women's singles player. Still only 19 years old, Prithika has had a solid start to the year. She made the round of 32 at the WTT Star Contender in Doha and is coming off a quarterfinal win at the Europe Top 16 – a knockout competition for Europe's top players.

But while she has wins elsewhere, there's more reason for Prithika to value the victory in Goa. Although she was born and raised in Paris, Prithika has Indian roots. "I'm very happy to be in India. It is a special place for me," she says.

It's not uncommon to have players of Chinese origin rise to the top ranks in their adopted countries. At the European Top 16 tournament, for instance, six of the 16 entrants are of Chinese descent. The tournament incidentally was won by Prithika's compatriot Jia Nan Yuan, who learnt her sport in China before migrating to France. As a player of Indian descent, Prithika is a bit of an oddity.

Prithika's parents are from Puducherry, an erstwhile territory of France in India. "They moved to France in 2003, and I was born in 2004," she says.

Prithika picked up the sport of table tennis when she was about six years old. And it was almost inevitable that she did. Although her father Vijayan Pavade worked at the George V Hotel in Paris, he had been a table tennis player in his youth in Puducherry. "My father wasn't a national-level player, but he still had good skills. When I was six, he took me to a gymnasium that was about two minutes from our apartment. There was a table there. My dad was the one who first chose table tennis for me. But he never forced me to stick to it, and later on, it became my choice because I just fell in love with the sport," she says.

She was a precocious talent. "I think within a year, I was starting to beat my dad. Of course, he wasn't a serious player



at that time because he had to do his job and work to provide for his children, at that time. But I got my foundation from him. He never told me, but I think he was happy. He always tried to push me to be a better player. At first, I was playing for fun, but I realised I was good at it when I was about 11 years old, and I first won the (Under 14) French Championships. Then it slowly became clear that it is what I wanted to do," she says.

Olympic dreams

According to local news reports around that time, there were over 70 journalists who were crammed in Prithika's apartment looking to interview the young Indian-origin girl who had just won a national title. But Prithika's graph has only risen steadily ever since. At 16 years old, she won the European U-21 title and the same year, became one of the youngest-ever French Olympians when she qualified for the Tokyo Olympics.

"That was probably the greatest moment of my life," she says. A close second, she says, was when she became the senior French national champion in 2022.

With a lot more experience now,



I'm super excited. It's the biggest event in almost every sport. I think our generation is very lucky because it's crazy to have the Olympics at home

Prithika has high hopes for the Paris 2024 Games. "I'm super excited. It's the biggest event in almost every sport. I think our generation is very lucky because it's crazy to have the Olympics at home. My first school and my first club in the same city. I will be a little nervous, but the most important thing is to enjoy the moment," she says.

While Prithika, as her nation's top women's singles player and with France guaranteed a team quota, will almost certainly be a part of the singles tournament in Paris, perhaps her best chance of a medal is in the mixed doubles. She is paired alongside fellow teenager Felix Lebrun, who at 17 and world-ranked eight, is considered one of the most promising prospects in the game.

French allegiance, so-so Tamil

While her future is fairly determined at this point, with her Indian origins and the fact that she is higher ranked than any player from India (India's top-ranked women's singles player Manika Batra is ranked 38th in the world), Prithika admits she's been asked about switching allegiances to the land of her father's birth.

The thought never crossed her mind though. "I was born in France. I've lived there all my life. Of course, India will always have a special place in my heart, but I've spent all my life in France," says

Prithika, who's currently studying Chemistry and environmental science at university.

That doesn't mean she doesn't stay in touch with her Indian heritage. "I've been to India twice for holidays with my family. My grandma and grandfather are still in Pondicherry (Puducherry). I went last summer to Pondicherry, and I even trained in the club my father played at. And of course, I played a tournament in Goa last year," she says. She thinks she could do more though.

"I can understand a little Tamil. My parents still speak to me in Tamil, but I answer in French. I'd like to think I'm fluent in French. I can speak English, and my Tamil is so-so. I can probably learn some more," she says.

While language can be hard, the one thing she's completely at home in India is the food. "The thing I loved the most in India is the food. My mom is a great cook. In France, she cooked a lot of Indian food. I've even started to learn how to cook Indian food. My favourite food to cook is mutton biriyani," she says.

There are other characteristics about her that Prithika feels are Indian. "I'm a bit introverted and calm. I've always felt that was the Indian part of me," she says. Where her personality comes through though is on the table. There, Prithika doesn't want to be seen as a great 'Indian-origin' player but just as someone exceptional.

"This Olympics is special, but I am still quite young. I have a long career, and I want to win medals in the European championships. I want medals in the singles, doubles, and mixed doubles at the Worlds and Olympics. I want to do something great. I want to be one of the best players in history. I love this sport, and I think I can do something good. It's in my hands," she says.

THE GIST

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Meghalaya in the process of building a vibrant sports ecosystem

M.R. Praveen Chandran

A medalless campaign in the 37th National Games in Goa last year was a reality check for Meghalaya. The poor show ruthlessly exposed the limitations of the North Eastern State where sports always took a backseat. As neighbouring States like Manipur, Assam and Sikkim became visible entities on the sporting map of the country, Meghalaya was not even a tiny speck.

Other than football, the State didn't have much of a sporting pedigree and failure to win a single medal in the multi-discipline event in Goa wasn't surprising.

Sports in Meghalaya was centred around Shillong where facilities were pretty much basic. The Sports Authority of India (SAI) doesn't run any of its elite training schemes in the State. The



lack of resources, combined with shortage of coaches and non-existent grassroots-level development, saw the State lag far behind the neighbouring Manipur where SAI runs many of its successful schemes.

The Meghalaya government, under Chief

Minister Conrad Sangma, has finally woken up to the need to build a solid sports ecosystem in the State. The government, as a first step, decided to give priority to sports and increased the budgetary allocation for it. The State government, along with Meghalaya State Olympic

Association (MSOA), has tied up with Edge 10, a sports firm run by former Australian Olympians Ian Campbell and Robert Kabbas, to identify and nurture talent. The government also realised the need to develop infrastructure in other districts.



The fifth Meghalaya Games which was held in Tura recently was an important milestone in the history of the State. It was for the first time that a multi-discipline games was held away from the capital Shillong, Tura, which is the district headquarters of West Garo Hills, became only the second district in the State to have a synthetic track. The P.A. Sangma Sports Complex, built at a cost of ₹127.7 crore, houses a State-of-the-art football stadium where the opening and closing

ceremony of the Meghalaya Games were held. The complex will also have two indoor stadiums, a gymnasium, a swimming pool besides facilities for conducting table tennis, squash and badminton events.

"Meghalaya will be hosting the 40th National Games which we were supposed to hold this year. But States who have been allotted the 38th and 39 Games haven't hosted it, so we have time to get the infrastructure in place. We have used Meghalaya Games to test our

capability and to improve infrastructure in the Tura district which will also host a big number of events in the National Games. We are working closely with the State government to improve the standard of sports. The government has agreed to most of our proposals. The government has raised the cash incentives for sportspersons winning medals in nationals and international events. It has also increased the budget allocation for sports. We have tied up with Edge 10 to nurture talent and it will be a game-changer for us," said John F. Kharshiing, the Working President of MSAOA.

The elite pathway programme to nurture talent was devised by the former Olympians from Australia. Around 15,000 children between the ages of 10 to 18 from 12 districts underwent a test battery. A dozen kids who passed

the eligibility test were inducted into the programme.

Schooling, boarding and lodging of the children were taken care of by the government. SAI and the government provided coaches and, with backup of the analytic team, the children will receive year-round training in Shillong. Campbell will oversee the progress of trainees for three years. Weightlifting, boxing, taekwondo, judo, football and athletics are identified as some of the core sports where Meghalaya can excel. Already a couple of athletes from the programme showed promise by winning medals in the North East Olympic Games held recently in Manipur.

"We are trying to build quantity and only through it quality will come. It is a long-term process and we may see results in 10 years," said Kharshiing.