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AAP to move top court following Chandigarh poll

CHANDIGARH
The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) on Wednesday said it will approach the Supreme Court for an early hearing after failing to get any interim relief from the Punjab and Haryana High Court on its plea for setting aside the Chandigarh mayoral election. » PAGE 2

Bill on Kannada signboards soon: Siddaramaiah

BENGALURU
Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah said that a Bill will be introduced in the upcoming legislature session to make 60% use of Kannada mandatory in signboards of commercial establishments. » PAGE 3

Parliament breach accused allege torture

NEW DELHI
Five of the six people arrested in the Parliament security breach case told the Patiala House Court on Wednesday that they were given electric shock and forced to sign blank papers to confess their alleged crimes. » PAGE 6

Iran to 'decisively respond' to any U.S. strike

JERUSALEM
Iran threatened on Wednesday to "decisively respond" to any United States attack on the Islamic Republic following President Joe Biden's linking of Tehran to the killing of three U.S. soldiers at a military base in Jordan. » PAGE 12

ED arrests Hemant, Champai to take over as CM

Arrest in a land scam case comes after the JMM leader resigned as Chief Minister of Jharkhand

Transport Minister and five-time MLA Champai is elected as the leader of JMM Legislature Party

Hemant lodges FIR against ED officials saying the Delhi raid was an attempt to harass him

Amit Bhelari
PATNA

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) on Wednesday arrested Hemant Soren in a land scam case soon after he resigned as the Chief Minister of Jharkhand.

The resignation came after the ED officials questioned him for more than seven hours at his official residence in Ranchi. Jharkhand Governor C.P. Radhakrishnan has accepted his resignation. After a half an hour meeting with the Governor, Mr. Hemant was directly taken to the ED office in Ranchi.

He has challenged his arrest in the Jharkhand High Court. The hearing will take place on Thursday. Many tribal bodies issued a call for a bandh on Thursday to protest against

the arrest. Senior Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) leader and Transport Minister Champai Soren was elected leader of the Legislature Party soon after Mr. Hemant's resignation.

Mr. Champai is a five-time MLA from Seraikela. "Hemantji has resigned and we have submitted the letter of support to the Governor to stake claim to form the government. At present we have 43 MLAs and four are in hospital. We have the support of 47 MLAs. The Governor is yet to give the time to form the government. We have submitted the letter with the signature of 43 MLAs," Mr. Champai said after coming out of the Raj Bhavan.

To form the government, the ruling alliance needs 41 MLAs.

Earlier in the day, members of the JMM-led al-



Political twist: Hemant Soren, centre, tendering his resignation to Governor C.P. Radhakrishnan, right. Champai Soren is also seen. ANI

liance tried to meet the Governor to seek a parade of MLAs before him to prove the majority, but the Governor refused to meet them. "We are requesting the Governor to allow Mr. Champai to take oath as Chief Minister as we have elected him as the Legislature Party leader," said

Banna Gupta, a Cabinet Minister.

Mr. Hemant on Wednesday lodged an FIR against the ED officials. He named four ED officials - Kapil Raj, Deovrat Jha, Anupam Kumar and Aman Patel in the FIR. The JMM leader described himself in the FIR as a member of the

Scheduled Tribe, stressing that the search on his New Delhi premises on Monday was to harass and malign his name and his entire community.

"The purported search was done without my notice nor under my presence on January 29, 2024 at New Delhi by the above-named

persons. My family members and I have suffered and experienced immense mental, psychological and emotional harm because of the act committed by the above-named persons and unknown others who are not members of any SC or ST," Mr. Hemant Soren said. In the FIR, he has also dismissed the reports of seizure of car and cash from his New Delhi premises.

'Public humiliation'
"I have come to learn from the reports in the electronic media that the above-named persons have leaked selective misinformation that a blue BMW car seized from the said premises belongs to me and huge sums of illicit case belonging to me was found. I am not the owner of a BMW car and nor I

own any illicit cash. They have done it intentionally to humiliate me in public," Mr. Hemant Soren said.

A team of ED officials visited Mr. Hemant Soren's Delhi residence at Shanti Niketan on Monday for questioning. However, he was not found at his residence and remained "untraced" for 32 hours before he was spotted in Ranchi on January 30. The case pertains to the alleged purchase and sale of tribal land by forging documents between 2020 and 2022.

When Mr. Hemant Soren was being questioned, there was a law and order situation in the State capital Ranchi as workers of the JMM protested near the CM's house as well as near the Raj Bhavan.

CHAMPAI SOREN'S ROLE
» PAGE 4

Bloom time



Flowers in bloom on the premises of the Rashtrapati Bhavan in New Delhi on Wednesday during an exclusive media preview of Amrit Udayan, which is set to open for the public from Friday. SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

Imran Khan, wife get 14 years in jail

Agence France-Presse
ISLAMABAD

Former Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan was sentenced on Wednesday to 14 years in jail on a graft charge, a day after he was given a 10-year prison term in verdicts handed down a week before national polls.

Mr. Khan and his wife Bushra Bibi were found guilty of graft in a case involving gifts he received when he was premier.

REPORT ON
» PAGE 12



RBI curbs to render Paytm wallet and FASTag inoperative

Lalendu Mishra
MUMBAI

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) imposed additional curbs on Paytm Payments Bank Ltd (PPBL) on Wednesday, prohibiting it from operating its mobile wallet after February.

It has also been barred from taking further deposits or undertaking credit transactions or top-ups in any customer accounts, prepaid instruments, wallets, FASTags, or National Common Mobility Cards, after February 29.

However, it will be allowed to credit any interest, cashbacks, or refunds into these accounts at any time, and customers are also free to withdraw or use their balances in these accounts without restrictions. According to sources, the RBI's action will not impact the usage of the UPI channel used through the Paytm app, as this is owned by the parent company and not by PPBL.

Paytm, which is promoted by the Vijay Shekhar Sharma-led One97 Communications Ltd, did not respond to a query as to what operations could continue in the organisation.

The RBI has initiated action against Paytm following a comprehensive system audit report and subsequent compliance validation report by external auditors, which revealed "persistent non-compliances and continued material supervisory concerns in the bank, warranting further supervisory action", the central bank said in a circular.

The RBI had, on March 11, 2022, directed PPBL to stop onboarding new customers with immediate effect. However, it was found



RBI has barred it from taking further deposits or undertaking credit after February 29.

that the bank was continuing to onboard customers through an offline mode in violation of the RBI directive, necessitating further action. As per the RBI's fresh directive, the bank's customers can withdraw or use the available balance amounts in their accounts without any restrictions, including their savings bank accounts, current accounts, prepaid instruments, FASTags, and National Common Mobility Cards.

Nodal accounts
"No other banking services, other than those referred above, like fund transfers (irrespective of name and nature of services like AEPS, IMPS), BBPOU and UPI facility would be provided by the bank after February 29, 2024," the RBI said. The nodal accounts of One97 Communications Ltd and Paytm Payments Services Ltd must also be terminated by February 29. PPBL has been asked to settle all pipeline transactions and nodal accounts by March 15, with respect to all transactions initiated on or before February 29. No further transactions will be permitted thereafter.

Court permits Hindu prayers in Gyanvapi mosque's basement

Ishita Mishra
NEW DELHI

The Varanasi District Court on Wednesday allowed Hindu prayers to be offered inside the Vyas Ka Tekhana (sealed basement area) of the Gyanvapi mosque complex. The court directed the district administration to make arrangements to start the puja within seven days.

The Anjuman Intezamia Committee of Gyanvapi Masjid will challenge the order in the Allahabad High Court, according to the committee's counsel Merajuddin Siddiqui.

The All India Muslim Personal Law Board (AIMPLB), which is advising the committee, called the court's decision "totally unacceptable", drawing parallels to the opening of the locks at the Babri Masjid in 1986.

"It seems after esta-

ishment of Ram Mandir at the site of the Babri Masjid, many other mosques are being targeted, no matter how old they might be," Board spokesperson S.Q.R. Ilyas told *The Hindu*.

The order permitting prayers came on the last working day of judge Ajay Krishna Vishweshia, who has been hearing multiple pleas related to worship rights in the mosque. In this particular case, a September 2023 application filed by Shailendra Kumar Pathak, priest on the last working day of judge Ajay Krishna Vishweshia, who has been hearing multiple pleas related to worship rights in the mosque.

According to the petitioner, Hindu priests appointed by the Vyas family had performed daily rituals in the temple at this spot within the complex before 1993, till it was stopped on the orders of



Ground zero: Security personnel stand guard at the Gyanvapi mosque after a Varanasi court's verdict on Wednesday. PTI

the State government. However, an Anjuman Intezamia committee member, who did not wish to be named, contested the claim. "There has never been any puja conducted there. It is a baseless contention," he said.

"District Magistrate, Varanasi is directed to get puja, raga-bhog performed of idols located in the southern cellar of Gyanvapi Mosque. This would be done

through a priest nominated by Kashi Vishwanath Trust Board and plaintiff. Make proper arrangements of iron fencing etc. in 7 days for the same," reads the court order, of which a copy is available with *The Hindu*. On January 24, this court had ordered the Varanasi district administration to take over the possession of the southern cellar within the Gyanvapi mosque com-

plex. The next date of hearing in the matter is February 8, when the defendants, including the Anjuman Intezamia Masjid Committee that manages the Gyanvapi mosque, can file their objections.

'Not given a chance'
The AIMPLB said that the mosque committee was approaching the High Court with its appeal. "The case is likely to be listed tomorrow. The Muslim side was not given the chance to present its viewpoint by the district court. The judge gave the verdict on his last day in service," Mr. Ilyas said.

Reacting to the court's order allowing Hindus to worship in the basement of the Gyanvapi mosque, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad's international working president Alok Kumar said that the judgement was significant and has brought

happiness for the Hindu community. Mr. Kumar also expressed his hope that this order would be a precursor to an expeditious decision on the main suit as well.

In another important order pertaining to the Gyanvapi mosque, the Allahabad High Court has issued a notice to the mosque committee on a revision application filed to challenge the Varanasi district judge's order refusing to direct the Archeological Survey of India (ASI) to conduct a scientific survey of the wazukhana area of mosque.

The ASI has already conducted a scientific survey of the Gyanvapi complex in 2023, in accordance with the Varanasi district judge's order, to determine whether the mosque was constructed over the pre-existing structure of a Hindu temple.

INBRIEF



Snowfall disrupts normal life in Himachal, highways closed

Normal life was disrupted and 134 roads, including four national highways, were closed in Himachal Pradesh as the tribal areas and other high reaches received the first major snowfall of the year. Intermittent snowfall has continued since Tuesday night and more snow is likely as the local MeT office has issued an orange warning of heavy snow and rain at isolated places in five districts of Shimla, Kullu, Chamba, Kinnaur and Lahaul and Spiti on January 31 and February 1. About 15 cm snow has been recorded in the higher reaches of Shimla district since Tuesday night. PTI

U.P. govt. appoints acting DGP yet again, Akhilesh cries foul

The Uttar Pradesh government on Wednesday appointed Director General (Law and Order) Prashant Kumar as the acting State police chief, the fourth such appointment in a row over the past 20 months. Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav slammed the Yogi Adityanath government for the appointment of another "acting" DGP instead of making a permanent appointment. Mr. Kumar will replace incumbent acting DGP Vijay Kumar who is retiring on Wednesday. No full-time DGP has been appointed after the removal of Mukul Goel on May 11, 2022 for "not taking interest in departmental work and inefficiency". PTI

JJP betrayed Haryana's public by allying with BJP: Hooda

Haryana Congress MP Deepender Hooda at a rally in Haryana's Narnaud on Wednesday targeted the Jannayak Janta Party (JJP) — the junior partner in the BJP-led State government — for "betraying" the electorate by supporting the BJP, and reneging on its electoral promises, including the hike in the old age pension. "The JJP cheated its voters and supported the BJP in the name of an old age pension worth ₹5,100, which has not been implemented till date. In fact, the agreement between BJP and JJP was not for an old age pension, but for a free hand in corruption and loot," Mr. Hooda said, adding that several "scams" had taken place under BJP rule.

Sanjay Kundu reinstated as Himachal Pradesh DGP

Sanjay Kundu has been reinstated as the Himachal Pradesh Director General of Police (DGP), weeks after being transferred to the AYUSH department following a High Court order in a case filed by a businessman. A notification restoring him as the State police chief has been issued, officials said on Wednesday. His transfer order issued on January 2 has been withdrawn in compliance with a Supreme Court directive of January 12 that set aside the Himachal Pradesh High Court order to remove him as DGP over allegations that he tried to pressurise businessman Nishant Sharma. PTI

Chandigarh mayoral poll: denied interim relief by HC, AAP to move top court

High Court issues notices to Chandigarh administration, civic body, presiding officer, asks them to file replies within three weeks, adjourns matter till February 26; Congress, AAP stage protest

The Hindu Bureau
CHANDIGARH

The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) on Wednesday said it will approach the Supreme Court for an early hearing after failing to get any interim relief from the Punjab and Haryana High Court on its plea for setting aside the Chandigarh mayoral election.

The Congress and AAP, which jointly fought the poll, held a protest in Chandigarh. A police complaint was also filed on behalf of the joint mayoral candidate and AAP councillor, Kuldeep Kumar, against presiding officer Anil Masih, accusing him of tampering with ballot papers in Tuesday's election to favour the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) which retained all three seats. The combined Opposition also alleged that Mr. Masih took away the cast ballots and later tore them up. Both Mr. Masih and the BJP have denied the allegations.

On Tuesday, BJP's Manoj



Policemen evict Youth Congress workers protesting outside the civic body office in Chandigarh on Wednesday. PTI

Sonkar won the Mayor's election by securing 16 votes in the 35-member municipal corporation House while Mr. Kumar got 12 votes. As many as eight votes were declared invalid during counting, paving the way for the BJP's mayoral candidate to win the poll. BJP nominees Kuljit Sandhu and Rajinder Sharma were declared elected Senior Deputy Mayor and Deputy Mayor, respectively.

Mr. Kumar had approached the High Court, seeking fresh election under the supervision of a re-

tired High Court judge. He also sought an investigation by an independent agency into the "fraud" committed during the election process and presented a submission to restrain Mr. Sonkar from discharging his duties as Mayor.

'File reply'

A Division Bench of Justices Sudhir Singh and Harsh Bunger, which was hearing a plea filed by Mr. Kumar, issued notices to the Chandigarh administration, the municipal corporation, presiding officer Anil Masih

and the new Mayor Manoj Sonkar, among others, to file their replies within three weeks and adjourned the matter till February 26. Chandigarh administration senior standing counsel Anil Mehta told reporters that the court refused to give any interim relief to the petitioner. He added that the issue regarding the maintainability of the petition was still pending.

Saying that the party will move the Supreme Court, AAP leader and Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann told reporters that there is a video of the whole thing. He wondered why the Chandigarh administration required three weeks to prepare a report.

Samajwadi Party chief and INDIA coalition member Akhilesh Yadav also hit out at the BJP, saying the party "wins elections by rigging". Mr. Yadav claimed the people of Uttar Pradesh had chosen the SP in the 2022 Assembly poll but "the BJP changed the result in its favour".

(With inputs from PTI)

T.N. will not allow implementation of CAA, says Stalin

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin on Wednesday made it clear that the DMK government would never allow the implementation of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA).

Reacting to Union Minister of State Shantanu Thakur's statement that CAA would be implemented in seven days, not only in West Bengal but across the country, the Chief Minister, in a social media post, said that but for the support of the AIADMK, the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, which was against Muslims and Lankan Tamils, would not have become an Act.

Signature campaigns

Mr. Stalin said that even though the DMK was in Opposition back then, it joined hands with friendly parties and organised protests and signature campaigns against CAA. "We collected two crore signatures and sent them to the President. We also adopted a resolution [against CAA] in the Assembly after coming to power in 2021," he said.

The Chief Minister said that people were closely watching the BJP-led Cen-



M.K. Stalin

tral government's policies that were against communal harmony, and the "drama" of the AIADMK in support of the BJP.

Never allow CAA: EPS

Meanwhile, AIADMK general secretary Edappadi K. Palaniswami said that the party would never allow CAA. However, its MPs had voted in favour of the Bill in Parliament.

In a social media post, Mr. Palaniswami said that the DMK, which "stabbed the Muslims in the back" by remaining a silent spectator during the Coimbatore riots, was not fit to point the finger at the AIADMK.

Mr. Palaniswami further criticised the DMK for having supported the National Investigation Agency Act and the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, which "affect the minorities".

Mass marriage: fraud charge against officer, 8 beneficiaries in U.P.

Press Trust of India
BALLIA

An FIR has been registered against an assistant development officer of the Social Welfare Department and eight beneficiaries on charges of fraud in the Chief Minister's Mass Marriage Scheme, police on Wednesday said.

It is alleged that many people, who were already married, were married again in the mass marriage programme held at Maniyar on January 25.

The marriage of young men and women from poor families is being done under the Chief Minister's Mass Marriage Scheme.

Maniyar SHO Mantosh Singh on Wednesday said that an FIR was registered against Assistant Development Officer Sunil Kumar Yadav and eight beneficiar-

ies, including Archana, Ranjana Yadav, Suman Chauhan, Priyanka, Sonam, Pooja, Sanju and Ramita, on District Social Welfare Officer Deepak Srivastava's complaint.

Mr. Srivastava has said in his complaint that after the mass marriage was conducted under the scheme, it came to the fore that brides and grooms, who were already married were being married again.

An investigation committee was constituted on Monday. It was found that Archana of Manikapur village was married in June 2023, Ranjana Yadav and Suman Chauhan got married in March 2023, Priyanka got married in November 2023, Pooja got married a year ago, Sanju got married three years ago and Ramita got married in July 2023.

Offered Cong. 2 seats but they wanted more, says Mamata as Rahul's yatra enters Bengal

Shiv Sahay Singh
KOLKATA

On the day when Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra entered West Bengal, Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee targeted the party yet again, saying she had offered them two seats but the Congress wanted more.

"The Congress does not have even one MLA in the Assembly... I offered them two Lok Sabha seats, both in Malda, but they wanted more. So, I told them I will not share a single seat with them," Ms. Banerjee said at a gathering in Malda.

The remarks by the Trinamool Congress chairperson came at a time when the Congress was trying to mollify her after she decided to go it alone in the Lok Sabha election.

Accusing the Congress and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) of collu-



The broken rear window pane of Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's car which got damaged when sudden brakes were applied during the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra in Malda on Wednesday. PTI

sion to strengthen the BJP in the State, Ms. Banerjee asserted that only her party was actively opposing the BJP. The Congress should snap ties with the CPI(M), she added.

'Will hold caste census'

Mr. Gandhi, addressing a rally in Malda district, asserted that a countrywide caste census would be con-

ducted if the Congress were elected to power at the Centre in the upcoming Lok Sabha polls.

"We want social justice and the biggest aspect of delivering it will be a countrywide caste census. After we come to power at the Centre, we will conduct a caste census across the nation to find out the number of Dalits, tribals and peo-

ple from other backward communities," he said.

He also accused the RSS and the BJP of propagating hatred and violence.

Car damaged

As the yatra entered Malda district the car carrying Mr. Gandhi was damaged. Congress's West Bengal unit president Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury alleged that the vehicle was "pelted with stones", while Ms. Banerjee claimed that the incident took place in Katiar, in adjoining Bihar.

The Congress, on its official X handle, however, said the rear windscreen was damaged when sudden brakes had to be applied as a woman came in front of the vehicle in Malda.

Mr. Gandhi was not harmed, and TV footage showed him inspecting the damaged pane. (With PTI inputs)

Nitish Kumar's core EBC voters miffed at latest U-turn in Bihar, but root for Modi in LS poll

Amit Bhelari
NALANDA

Janata Dal (United) chief Nitish Kumar's latest U-turn of returning to the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in Bihar has not gone down well with the members of his core vote bank — the extremely Backward Classes (EBCs). However, in the run-up to the Lok Sabha election, they unequivocally expressed support for Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the NDA's return to power at the Centre.

Though Mr. Kumar has retained the loyalty of the Kurmis, the OBC community that he hails from in Nalanda district, EBCs in Assembly constituencies on his home turf aired their grievances against the JD(U) chief as well as the BJP, which extended support to him to become the Chief Minister for the ninth time

on Sunday.

According to the Bihar government's recent caste-based survey, the EBCs account for 36% of the State's population. In the past, this large chunk of voters has remained loyal to Mr. Kumar, allowing him to remain in power for 18 years.

Dinesh Thakur, 45, a resident of Kurmiya Bigha village, who hails from the Nai (barber) community, which falls under the EBC category, in the Hilsa Assembly constituency said even though the BJP has a hand in Mr. Kumar severing ties with the Mahagathabandhan (grand alliance), comprising the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), the Congress and the Left parties, he will vote for Mr. Modi in the general election.

Expressing his anger at the JD(U) chief, Mr. Thakur said he should not have formed another alliance. "People lose their charac-



(From left) Dinesh Thakur from Hilsa constituency; Ranjan Devi from Asthawan constituency; Dharmendra Kumar from Biharsharif constituency in Bihar's Nalanda district — Nitish Kumar's home turf. AMIT BHELARI

ter through frequent flip-flops. Nitish ji knew everything about the RJD before tying up with it. No doubt that he has done a lot of work to improve roads and power supply, but this U-turn was not expected from him," he said.

'No other option'

In the Islampur constituency, 30 km away, Kailash Thakur, 60, a member of the Nai community in Korawan village, said he has sympathy for RJD leader



and former Deputy CM Tejashwi Yadav, but there is no alternative to Mr. Kumar and the BJP in Bihar.

"Nitish did excellent work in his first and second terms, and brought a turnaround on every front. His downfall began in the third term when Modi ji became the Prime Minister. He has not been able to forge a stable alliance since then and kept on oscillating like a pendulum. But we don't have an option other than Nitish ji and BJP.



We sympathise with Tejashwi, but we want Modi ji at the Centre," he said.

Dharmendra Kumar, from the Mali (florist) community in the Nalanda Assembly constituency, said he is confused about whom to vote for now. "It was better to impose President's Rule followed by a fresh election if it was necessary to change the government. It seems there is no value for our vote. I am thinking of voting for the NOTA (none of the above)

option in the Assembly election. However, Modi ji is doing good work at the Centre," he said.

Jagarnath Vishwakarma, from the Lohar (blacksmith) community in the Biharsharif constituency, accused Mr. Kumar of playing with the emotions of voters and vowed to teach the JD(U) and the BJP a lesson in the Assembly election in 2025. He added that Mr. Yadav had raised genuine concern over the need to generate jobs and had fulfilled the promise after coming to power.

Ram Bachchan Sharma, from the Badhai (carpenter) community in Biharsharif, held both the BJP and the RJD responsible for Mr. Kumar's recurrent somersaults and termed him a politician with no ideology. "Why is everyone blaming Nitish and not BJP and RJD for always accepting him as their leader? BJP

should have gone alone in the polls because the people of our community are standing firm with Modi ji. There was no need to take him [Mr. Kumar]," he said.

Though women voters had words of praise for the Chief Minister, they also criticised his frequent shifting of loyalties. Ranjan Devi, a Dalit resident of Lakhnu Bigha village in the Asthawan constituency, said Mr. Kumar has given reservation for women in gram panchayats and cash benefits for girls who clear Classes 10 and 12, and graduation. "Nitish has done a lot for women, but he spoils the atmosphere by switching sides," she said.

Urmila Kumari, an ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activist) worker in Manorampur village, urged the government to raise the monthly wages of ASHA workers from ₹1,000 to ₹2,500, and praised Mr.

Modi for giving reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and State legislatures.

The Chief Minister, however, faces a tough challenge from first-time and young voters who favour Mr. Yadav. "Injustice has been done to Tejashwi Yadav. It is really sad that Nitish ji has cheated him again. He is a young leader and Nitish should have promoted him. The recent U-turn proves that Nitish cannot survive without the CM's chair, which will not remain with him forever," said Munna Kumar, a first-time voter and resident of Keshavpur village in Hilsa.

'Country in safe hands'

Shashi Kumar, a 22-year-old resident of the same village whose father, Jagendra Paswan, works as a mason, said though they are "looking for a change" in the State, the country is "in safe hands".

Communalism can't be countered with soft Hindutva, says Pinarayi Vijayan

The Hindu Bureau
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

The Left front is not averse to helping the Congress fight the Sangh Parivar where it is "relatively weak," Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan said on Wednesday.

"There are places where the Left front is relatively weak. In such places, we are not adamant that we will not help the Congress tackle the Sangh Parivar," Mr. Vijayan said while replying to the discussion on the Motion of Thanks to the Governor for his policy address in the Assembly.

Mr. Vijayan, however, drew attention to the dangers of abandoning Nehruvian secularism in favour of soft Hindutva. By insisting on visiting a temple in Assam on *Pran Pratishtha* day, what message did Congress leader Rahul Gandhi intend to send across, Mr. Vijayan asked.

"Can you counter extreme communalism with soft Hindutva," he asked. An uncompromising stand is imperative for protecting secularism and Constitutional values. It should be kept in mind that gimmicks and soft Hindutva would help communal forces, he said.

Mr. Vijayan alleged that Sangh Parivar forces were trying to exploit religious sentiments and continue in power by installing gods ahead of the elections.

The Chief Minister



Pinarayi Vijayan

slammed the BJP-led Union government for imposing a "financial embargo" on Kerala.

He reiterated the State government stand that Kerala has been deprived of more than ₹57,000 crore in revenue. This includes a dip in the revenue deficit grant of ₹8,400 crore and a reduction of ₹19,600 crore in loan approvals, he said.

The people of Kerala are aware of the attempts being made by the Centre to financially choke the State government which has given priority to social welfare and infrastructure development, he said.

'My hands are clean'

Mr. Vijayan said that his daughter Veena had started her company with her mother's retirement benefits. He was responding to the Opposition UDF's charges regarding Exalogic Solutions.

Mr. Vijayan said that his hands were clean and that the UDF charges were politically motivated.

Kerala Janapaksham(S) led by P.C. George merges with BJP

The Kerala leader says BJP will get at least five seats from the State in the Lok Sabha polls; BJP hopes the merger will help the party get some traction among the Christian community in Kerala

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Seven-time MLA and Kerala Janapaksham (Secular) chief P.C. George on Wednesday merged his party with the BJP, in the presence of Union Ministers V. Muralidharan and Rajeev Chandrashekhar and former Minister Prakash Javadekar in New Delhi. Mr. George was accompanied by his son, Shaun George, and other leaders of the party.

Mr. Javadekar and Mr. George both asserted that the BJP would get "at least five seats" from Kerala in the upcoming Lok Sabha polls.

Welcoming Mr. George



Grand entry: BJP chief J.P. Nadda welcomes Kerala Janapaksham (Secular) leader P.C. George in New Delhi on Wednesday. ANI

into the BJP fold, party national secretary Anil Antony said, "the merging of Janapaksham today will be the start of a historic trajectory in Kerala where the BJP will grow more and more, and contribute towards the Prime Minister's mission to transform India into a developed country."

Mr. Muralidharan characterised Mr. George as a "relentless fighter who has fought against nepotism and corruption of the Left Democratic Front (LDF) and United Democratic Front (UDF) politics of 'political adjustment' with the Left," adding that it will also "expose malicious propaganda unleashed against BJP amongst minorities."

Mr. Javadekar said Mr. George was a good speaker and a leader from the Catholic community and that the BJP was en route to winning "at least five seats."

The BJP hopes that this merger will help the party get some traction among the Christian community in Kerala.

Mehrauli mosque demolished over 'encroachments'

Alisha Dutta
NEW DELHI

The Delhi Development Authority (DDA) on Tuesday carried out an "unannounced" demolition of a mosque in Mehrauli believed to have been constructed over 500 years ago, with officials citing the action as part of the agency's drive against encroachments.

Mosque cleric Mohammad Zakir Hussain alleged that the authorities did not serve notice and that they were told to vacate the mosque as early as 5.30 a.m. by a group of officials.

A madrasa was also being run from the mosque premises, where 15 of the 22 students of the theological school were staying.

Cleric says no notice was served before the city tore down the over 500-year-old religious structure

Seminary tutor Mohammed Javed alleged, "They snatched our phones and asked us to step aside without even letting us pick up any of our belongings." Commenting on the action, a senior DDA official said the demolition was carried out following the Ridge Management Board's decision to remove all kinds of encroachment around Sanjay Van, a reserve forest in the southern part of the Ridge, an extension of the Aravali forest range.

Justice P.S. Dinesh Kumar appointed Chief Justice of Karnataka High Court

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Justice P.S. Dinesh Kumar was appointed Chief Justice of the Karnataka High Court, the Law Ministry said in a notification on Wednesday.

Justice Kumar, however, will have a tenure of less than a month as he retires on February 24. He is at present the Acting Chief Justice of the High Court after Justice P.B. Varale was elevated as a judge of the



Justice P.S. Dinesh Kumar

Supreme Court a few days ago. The Supreme Court Collegium had recommended his name to the government on January 19.

The Collegium had stat-

ed, "He has served the High Court of Karnataka with distinction since his appointment. In view of the fact that Justice P.S. Dinesh Kumar...has a short tenure, in terms of the Memorandum of Procedure, the Collegium resolves to recommend his appointment as the Chief Justice of the High Court of Karnataka."

The Ministry also notified the elevation of a judicial officer, Arun Kumar Rai, as a judge of the Jhark-

hand High Court.

The Law Ministry also notified that seven additional judges in three High Courts - Calcutta, Punjab and Haryana and Jharkhand - were confirmed as permanent judges.

An additional judge is usually confirmed as a permanent judge after a period of two years. However, one additional judge of the Calcutta High Court has been given more years' extension in the same rank.

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) Vice-Chancellor Santishree D. Pandit on Wednesday said most of the faculty appointments made to the institution since she assumed charge have been in the reserved categories and that she has found no dearth of candidates for these posts.

She also said that there was no "de-reservation" at JNU, and the university

was "proud of implementing the constitutional guarantees under the reservation policy as stipulated by the Ministry of Education".

The comments come after University Grants Commission (UGC) Chairperson and former JNU V-C M. Jagadeesh Kumar on Sunday clarified that there has been no de-reservation of reserved category positions in Central educational institutions and all backlog positions must be filled through concerted efforts.

More defects and deviations tumble out in Vigilance probe into Kaleshwaram project

B. Chandrashekar
HYDERABAD

Abdication of responsibility and callousness in execution of work by contract agency Larsen & Toubro led to the extensive damage to the Medigadda Barrage of the Kaleshwaram project in October last, turning the mega structure into a failure in just four years time, an ongoing inquiry by the Vigilance and Enforcement Department into the fiasco has found.

As the inquiry with the help of engineering experts makes headway towards a logical conclusion, more and more lapses are tumbling out. Irregularities and deviations from the prescribed norms are coming to light in the construction, periodic quality checks, inspection (supervision) and operational maintenance stages.

Compliance failures

"The abdication of responsibility in discharging of duties has taken place not just by the work agency but also by the Irrigation Department," highly-placed sources said.

The investigating teams of the V&E Department have unearthed compliance failures even in basic and routine processes in the execution of a major irrigation structure.

"We were shocked to find remnants (cement-concrete blocks) of the coffer dam, put up in the upstream before taking up construction of the barrage to enable smooth execution of the work, in the water-holding area at the barrage near the vents," a team member said.

The coffer dam was sup-

The making of a monumental mess

A loud noise is heard at the barrage on the evening of October 21, 2023



A huge crack that developed at the radial gate hoisting area in Medigadda Barrage of the Kaleshwaram project.

On-site engineers find out that multiple piers in Block 7 have been displaced

Cracks on the structure, including at the radial gates hoisting area, come to light

A team of National Dam Safety Authority (NDSA) inspects the damage at the barrage on October 24

In its report on November 1, the NDSA faults design, construction and maintenance of the structure

It suggests thorough sub-surface investigation to ascertain exact causes, and what remedial measures to take

State govt. orders Vigilance & Enforcement inquiry into the issue on January 9

V&E teams begin probe by conducting searches on irrigation offices linked to the Kaleshwaram project at a dozen locations

V&E probe ordered due to practical delays in constituting probe by a sitting judge of the High Court

posed to be fully dismantled after the construction of the barrage, with the area being thoroughly dredged to remove construction debris in order to ensure smooth flow of water. As it was not dismantled, water flow over the coffer dam picked up a sudden and strong pace, which could also have caused damage to the barrage.

The fact that the coffer dam was not dismantled was proved with an engineer concerned writing letters to the contract agency in February 2020 and again in February 2021 seeking removal of the temporary structure, even as the barrage was inaugurated in June 2019. The agency, it is learnt, replied to the engineer stating that the structure was dismantled, without actually doing so.

It is understood that the investigating agency is taking the help of the National Remote Sensing Agency to establish this fact by obtaining satellite imagery of the coffer dam area before, during and after the construction of the barrage.

Design change

Screening of documents by the investigating agency has further revealed that the design of the cement-concrete blocks meant to be placed in the downstream of the barrage to contain the damage to the basin (water flow) area was changed by the work agency without obtaining approval from the Irrigation Department.

"Inquiries revealed that the work agency sought the changes and oral instructions were given by higher-ups during a visit to the site," sources said.

A.P. govt. extends help to Telugus living abroad'

The Hindu Bureau
VIJAYAWADA

The State government is extending help to non-resident Telugus living abroad in every possible way, through the Andhra Pradesh Non-Resident Telugu Society (APNRTS), said the Society's president Venkat S. Medapati and CEO P. Hemalatha Rani.

Speaking at a media interaction on Wednesday, they spoke about the welfare services taken up by the Society for Telugus across the countries.

They informed that more than 2,20,000 NRTs had registered with the society, which had been extending welfare services through 28 plus programmes, reaching out to 2,55,000 beneficiaries. The society had 200 plus coordinators across the country and it had so far handled 2,02,093 calls through its 24/7 helpline.

The Hindu Bureau
BENGALURU

Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah said that a Bill will be introduced in the upcoming legislature session to make 60% use of Kannada mandatory in signboards of commercial establishments.

The Budget session is set to start on February 12. This followed Governor Thaawarchand Gehlot returning an Ordinance to this effect, which was

Work on six stopovers with added facilities for Sabarimala pilgrims on, says Minister

The Hindu Bureau
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

The development work of six stopovers with added facilities for pilgrims on the way to the Sabarimala Ayappa temple are going on, Minister for Devaswoms K. Radhakrishnan told the Assembly on Wednesday.

Replying to queries during Question Hour, Mr. Radhakrishnan said the stopovers were being developed at Nilackal, Erumely, Chirangara, Chengannur, Kazhakuttam and Maniyankode with funds from the Kerala Infrastructure Investment Fund Board (KIIFB).

He said that many of the developmental work depended on the Union government's clearance for the use of Central reserve forestland in the area.

Mr. Radhakrishnan slammed the alleged attempts to create apprehen-



Pilgrims waiting at Nilackal to reach Sabarimala. FILE PHOTO

sions in the minds of devotees and disrupt the Sabarimala pilgrimage through fake and misleading reports on online platforms.

"There was an unprecedented rush of devotees this season, with more than 52 lakh people taking the pilgrimage. On some days, there were isolated issues due to a large num-

ber of devotees queuing up. However, fake news was spread and claims were made about things that never happened to wilfully create problems during the pilgrimage," he said.

The State government has set aside ₹30 crore during 2023-24 to improve the facilities at Sabarimala, he said.

Furore over desecration of Tipu portrait in Raichur

The Hindu Bureau
YADGIR

A protest was staged in Sirwar of Raichur district on Wednesday following reports of desecration of a portrait of Tipu Sultan. A group of youth expressed anger over the incident. They put tyres on the main road and set fire to them. They demanded that the culprits be arrested immediately.

Tahsildar Ravi Angadi and Circle Inspector of Sirwar Shashikanth M. rushed to the spot and convinced the protesters to disperse by promising immediate arrest of the culprits. The tahsildar washed the portrait and offered 'puja'.

Superintendent of Police Nikhil B. told *The Hindu* that an FIR has been registered.

A police team has been formed to arrest the culprits.

Kannada signboards: Bill will be presented during upcoming legislature session, says Siddaramaiah

The Hindu Bureau
BENGALURU

Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah said that a Bill will be introduced in the upcoming legislature session to make 60% use of Kannada mandatory in signboards of commercial establishments.

The Budget session is set to start on February 12. This followed Governor Thaawarchand Gehlot returning an Ordinance to this effect, which was

passed by the State Cabinet.

Meanwhile, the Raj Bhanu office on X has clarified that the Governor had not "rejected" the Ordinance but only "returned" it to the State government "with advice to present it before both Houses of the State legislature."

Earlier in the day, Deputy Chief Minister D.K. Shivakumar had appealed to the Governor to reconsider passing the Ordinance. "Language is an emotional



Siddaramaiah

issue for Kannadigas. Neither the citizens nor any political party has

raised any concern regarding the Ordinance and hence I appeal to him to reconsider the Ordinance once again," he said.

'No political reason' Meanwhile, Kannada and Culture Minister Shivaraj Tangadagi dismissed any political reasons for Ordinance being returned by the Governor.

"Since the legislature session has been scheduled it has been returned so that it can be approved

by both houses of legislature. The ordinance had been sent on January 5, before the dates were finalised. Because the Governor was ill and was also travelling, he could not sign," said the Minister.

"There is no need to do politics in this regard. Governor will not act with any motive on issues of land, water and language concerning the State. The Ordinance has been returned due to technical reasons," he said.

When will status quo be restored on China border, Cong. asks PM

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Congress on Wednesday demanded an explanation from Prime Minister Narendra Modi as to how and when the status quo will be restored along the China border in eastern Ladakh. The statement comes a day after *The Hindu* reported a January 2 incident at Kakjung along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) where Indian graziers confronted China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) when the latter stopped them from accessing grazing land.

Congress general secretary Jairam Ramesh said in a statement that the video showing Indian shepherds in a confrontation with China's PLA once again exposed the hollowness of the Modi government's claims of stability at the LAC. "Shot in January 2024, the video shows PLA troops accompanied by an armoured vehicle harassing and blocking shepherds' access to grazing areas near Patrolling Points 35 and 36 in the Chushul sector that lie well within India's claim line.

Indian authorities have reportedly asked the shepherds not to return to the area," he said. The statement added that for four years, the Modi government has tried to cover up the worst territorial setback in six decades for India with its "DDLJ approach: Deny, Distract, Lie and Justify."

'Access denied'

"China continues to deny us access to 2,000 square km despite 18 rounds of military talks," the statement said. It also stated that the video is only the latest example of Ladakhi sources on the ground puncturing the Modi government's false narrative and the sources previously exposed how Indian troops have lost access to 26 out of 65 patrolling points and that the Modi government has agreed to buffer zones in which India cedes further territory.

"China continues to make inroads into Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Maldives, to which India is responding with social media campaigns and the banning of Chinese apps," the statement said.

Biden government 'continues to discuss' drone deal: embassy

U.S. officials responded to a report that lawmakers had blocked the deal with India, linking it to progress in the Pannun investigation; due to secrecy, it is not thus far known which American lawmaker(s) raised the objections

Sahasini Haidar
Dinakar Peri
NEW DELHI

The Biden administration "continues to discuss" the deal for high-altitude drones that was announced during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Washington in 2023, the U.S. Embassy spokesperson said, reacting to a report that U.S. lawmakers had placed a hold on the deal, linking it to the Pannun case. A report in the online news portal *The Wire* said members of the U.S. Congress have held up the U.S. government's request for approval ahead of its notification of the deal, which was earlier expected to be a formality, owing to their concerns over India's investigation into the alleged assassination plot against U.S.-Canadian Khalistani separatist leader Gurbang Singh Pannun in May 2023.

"We continue to discuss with U.S. Congress the potential sale consistent with



Aerial affairs: The MQ-9B will enhance the Indian Navy's surveillance over the Indian Ocean Region. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

standard processes and policies guiding such arm sales decisions," a U.S. Embassy spokesperson said here on Wednesday when asked to comment.

"As part of the standard process, the State Department routinely engages foreign affairs committees prior to formal notification to address questions from committee staff," a U.S. Embassy spokesperson added.

The report appeared days after a visit to Delhi by senior U.S. State Department officials, including Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia

Donald Lu, and the delegation is understood to have raised the need for New Delhi to show progress in the "high-level" inquiry committee set up by the Ministry of External Affairs on November 18.

In December 2023, a number of U.S. lawmakers spoke out at a Senate committee hearing on "Transnational repression: authoritarians targeting dissenters abroad", criticising the Modi government over the case, placing India along with Russia, China, and Iran on the issue. Foreign Relations Committee chair Ben

Cardin reacted to what he called "disturbing allegations against an Indian government official for involvement in planning to assassinate a U.S. citizen in New York who was critical of the Indian government", and invoked plans for a new "International Freedom Protection Act", to address the growing use of "transnational oppression by autocratic and illiberal states".

Another Senator, Chris Van Hollen, had suggested invoking a provision in the Arms Export Control Act to "prohibit arms transfers to any countries that are engaged in a consistent pattern of acts of intimidation, or harassment directed against individuals in the United States". Due to secrecy around the process, it isn't thus far known which U.S. lawmaker(s) raised the objections over the deal for 31 MQ-9B high-altitude long-endurance Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV).

It is among the top high-technology deals currently

in the pipeline between the two countries, in addition to the licensed manufacture of the General Electric F-414 jet engines in India by Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd. While the engine deal has been cleared by the U.S. Congress, the MQ-9B deal is still under process. As part of the process, the U.S. government and the Ministry of Defence will have to finalise the Letter of Offer and Acceptance, where details of equipment and terms of the procurement would be negotiated and finalised in accordance with the FMS programme, and the U.S. Congressional approval is required before the deal can be concluded.

The MQ-9B will significantly boost the Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities of the Indian Armed Forces, and also work in tandem with the U.S.-origin P-8I long-range maritime patrol aircraft, enhancing the Indian Navy's surveillance over the Indian Ocean Region.

UGC's issues guidelines for 'equitable opportunity'

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

After facing attacks from the Opposition parties and academics for proposing de-reservation in faculty appointments, the University Grants Commission (UGC) on Wednesday issued guidelines to provide "equitable opportunity" for the Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs).

The guidelines, prepared by an expert committee headed by Manikrao M. Salunkhe, have recommended setting up a SEDGs Cell in every higher education institution approved by the UGC for implementing policies and constitutional rights such as reservation, sensitising all stakeholders, monitoring, equalising access to inclusive quality higher education, ensuring respectful dignity, promoting egalitarian and constitutional values, and grievance redressal.

Improving equitable access through bridge courses, earn-while-learn, and outreach programme are other suggestions of the panel.

BSF nabs four smugglers along Pakistan border

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Border Security Force (BSF) personnel apprehended four Indian smugglers and seized a significant quantity of narcotics, arms and ammunition that was dropped by a drone in Punjab's Amritsar sector along the Pakistan border on Wednesday.

BSF officials developed the intelligence for more than a week and conducted reconnaissance of the probable dropping spot in advance. "After thorough assessment, operational teams of BSF laid an ambush in the suspected area on the evening of January 29," a BSF spokesperson said. A senior official said that the intelligence came from a Pakistani source.

Modi government targeting Opposition leaders: Congress

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Moments after the Enforcement Directorate (ED) arrested Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) leader Hemant Soren on Wednesday in a money laundering case, the Congress slammed the Narendra Modi government for targeting only Opposition leaders.

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge, in a post on X, said intimidating Opposition leaders by "using provisions of the draconian PMLA [Prevention of Money Laundering Act] is part of the BJP's tool kit". He said Opposition governments were being destabilised one by one.

"The one who did not go with Modi ji will go to jail. Forcing Jharkhand



The one who did not go with Modi ji will go to jail. Forcing Jharkhand Chief Minister Shri Hemant Soren by using ED is a blow to federalism

MALLIKARJUN KHARGE
Congress president

Chief Minister Shri Hemant Soren by using ED is a blow to federalism," Mr. Kharge said.

The Congress chief alleged that those who went into the BJP's washing machine had been cleaned white. "We will not be afraid. We will continue to fight in Parliament and on the streets," he added.

Former Congress chief Rahul Gandhi said that the ED, CBI and Income Department were no longer

government agencies but had become "BJP's 'eliminate opposition cell'".

"In its obsession with power, the BJP, steeped in corruption itself, is running a campaign to destroy democracy," Mr. Gandhi added.

The Central agency has also served a fresh summons to Aam Aadmi Party convener and Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal in connection with the Delhi liquor policy.

Champai Soren played active role in movement for creation of Jharkhand

Amarnath Tewary
PATNA

Champai Soren, Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) MLA who is set to succeed Hemant Soren as the Chief Minister of Jharkhand following the latter's resignation, is known for the active part he played in the movement for the creation of a separate State of Jharkhand.

The ruling alliance in the State elected Mr. Champai, 67, as the leader of the alliance soon after a team of Enforcement Directorate (ED) officials reached Mr. Hemant's residence on Wednesday for questioning him in an alleged land scam case.

Mr. Champai was later named for the post of Chief Minister.

Earlier, the name of Kalpana Soren, wife of Mr. He-



Champai Soren

mant, was also doing the rounds for the post of Chief Minister.

'Convincing governor' However, a senior JMM leader told *The Hindu* on telephone that the Governor would not have been convinced with the name of Ms. Kalpana "who is not the member of any House of the State Legislature and as the State Assembly elec-

tion is just 10 months away".

"The Governor may have sought the opinion of the Election Commission on the issue and get the whole thing mired in controversy. So we, at our meeting today, decided to elect Champai Soren as our leader and to be the next Chief Minister of the State," the JMM leader said.

Mr. Champai is the JMM MLA from the Seraikela constituency. He has held the seat since 2005.

Mr. Champai studied till Class 10 and is said to be quite popular among people of the Kolhan area.

'Tiger of Kolhan' He is also known as the "Tiger of Kolhan". The Kolhan area is one of the five divisions in Jharkhand comprising the districts of

East Singhbhum, West Singhbhum and Seraikela Kharsawan.

Currently Minister for Transport, Scheduled Caste & Backward Class Welfare, Mr. Champai is said to be close to Mr. Hemant's father and JMM chief Shibu Soren, who is popularly known in Jharkhand as "Guruji".

"We have chosen Champai Soren as the leader of the Legislature Party. We came to the Raj Bhavan to request the Governor for the oath ceremony," Jharkhand Minister Banna Gupta told mediapersons.

Congress MLA Rajesh Thakur said, "CM Hemant Soren has decided to resign. Champai Soren has been chosen as the new leader of the Legislature Party. All the MLAs are with us."

Rahul is taking 'fake credit' for Bihar caste census: Nitish Kumar

Amarnath Tewary
PATNA

Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar on Wednesday dismissed Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's statement that it was under pressure from his party that Mr. Kumar had conducted a caste census in the State.

Mr. Gandhi, while addressing a public meeting in Purnia in north Bihar, said the BJP had never wanted such a census. Mr. Kumar said it was "absurd to talk like this and an attempt to take fake credit". He also said that he would not go "anywhere from here [the BJP alliance]". He also took on the Opposition INDIA (Indian National Developmental, Inclusive Alliance) bloc and the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) leader Tejashwi Yadav on different issues.

"Has he [Rahul Gandhi] forgotten when the caste census happened? I conducted it taking nine politi-

cal parties together and met the PM. When I was told indirectly that the Centre cannot do this, I conducted it in the State, but he is taking fake credit, what can I do?...," Mr. Kumar told the presspersons in Patna.

The Bihar government had released the report on October 2, 2023, based on the caste survey it conducted during the previous *mahagathbandhan* government. Mr. Kumar slammed the non-BJP Opposition INDIA bloc for "doing nothing".

"Even seat distribution among allies has not been done yet. They were doing not even a single work," he said. Mr. Kumar, on January 28, joined hands with the BJP to lead the NDA government in Bihar again. He said that the new NDA government would seek a trust vote in the State Assembly on February 10, and the Budget would be presented on February 12.

Dense fog at Delhi airport delays over 300 flights

Jagriti Chandra
Jacob Koshy
NEW DELHI

A layer of very dense fog over the national capital has hit flight operations. It delayed 364 flights and led to 20 cancellations and six diversions at the Indira Gandhi International Airport. Nearly 213 departing flights and 159 incoming flights were delayed between 5.30 a.m. and 7 p.m. on Wednesday, according to flight tracking website *flightradar24*.

The maximum impact on flights was felt between 6 a.m. and 10 a.m. when the runway visual range was at its worst though there were delays through the day.

"General visibility was zero between 6 a.m. and 10 a.m. The runway visual range (RVR) was between 100 metres and 150 metres in this period. Later in the morning, visibility improved but there was still shallow to moderate fog, which along with rain and



A view from an aircraft of the fog-engulfed Indira Gandhi International Airport, in New Delhi on Wednesday. ANI

drizzle continued to hamper visibility," said R.K. Jenamani, senior scientist at the IMD.

An RVR of 125 metres is required for departures.

Landings can take place with RVR of upto 50 metres if an aircraft's navigation system is CAT IIIB compliant.

Mr Jenamani likened the fog seen on Wednesday at IGI to the last spell of severe fog seen on January 14 when at least 600 flights were delayed. The impact on flights was far more severe last time, said airline sources.

An IndiGo official said with hindsight, this time it

has taken steps to proactively cancel flights and the airline has also put together a team of senior leaders including the CEO to take pre-emptive steps after assessing weather forecasts and managing the flight schedule better.

The fog witnessed in Delhi and over several parts of northern India is due to low-level clouds from 'western disturbances,' which are rain-bearing storms.

"One more such western disturbance is expected over the next week," M Mohapatra, Director General, India Meteorological Department (IMD), said.

Top court upholds empowered panel on environment

Krishnadas Rajagopal
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Wednesday said India has myriad "regulators, bodies and authorities" engaged in protecting ecology, forests and wildlife, but their scrutiny has been felt to be "insufficient".

Their judgment, review, and consideration did not inspire confidence and therefore, then the court took up the issue and would decide the case," a three-judge Bench headed by Justice B.R. Gavai noted in a judgment.

The court said a need for "institutionalisation" had come with the emergence of regulators, bodies and authorities for environmental governance.

The Bench directed that bodies, authorities, regulators, and executive offices entrusted with environmental duties "must" function with certain "institutional features".

These included clear de-

marcation of their mandate, role and authority; public notification of their rules and regulations; framing of a clear procedure for application, consideration and grant of permissions, consent; norms for public hearing, appeals; accountability; and regular audits.

"Institutionalisation means that these bodies must work in compliance with institutional norms of efficiency, integrity, and certainty... these bodies constitute the backbone of environmental governance in our country. They need to function with efficiency, integrity, and independence. As duty-bearers, they are also subject to accountability," the judgment said.

The verdict upheld a government notification of September 5, 2023 constituting a permanent Central Empowered Committee to replace the 20-year-old *ad hoc* panel formed by the Supreme Court.

Congress launches Jai Jawan scheme to aid youth

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Congress on Wednesday launched a three-phase Jai Jawan campaign to provide "justice" to 1,50,000 youth who were selected for the armed forces but were not inducted after the launch of the Agnipath scheme.

Former party chief Rahul Gandhi launched the campaign and promised affected youth that he would raise this "injustice" at every forum. Around 1.5 lakh candidates selected for the Indian Army, Air Force and Navy between 2019 and 2022 were allegedly denied entry after the Agnipath scheme began.

There will be three phases in the Jai Jawan campaign - mass contact between February 1 and 28, then satyagraha at martyrs' memorials across the country from March 5 to 10 and the final phase will be padyatra between March 17 and 20.

'Modi government has lost the plot on structural reforms'

Former Union Finance Minister says no structural reforms have been carried out in the country since 2014; he says there is no credibility to the government's numbers, and the claim of a V-shaped economic recovery after the pandemic is flawed; in actual fact, it is a K-shaped recovery where a small section of the population has recovered sharply, but the big section has declined

INTERVIEW

P. Chidambaram

Prashanth Perumal

The Union government, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has not carried out any structural reforms, its boast about India becoming a \$5-trillion economy soon is misleading, and the government's economic growth figures are suspect, says former Union Finance Minister P. Chidambaram. Edited excerpts:

A few years ago in Parliament, you had emphasised the importance of enacting structural reforms similar to the 1991 reforms, and how no such reforms have been carried out by the current NDA government. Can you elaborate?

The major structural reforms were carried out between 1991 and 1996 when Dr. Manmohan Singh was the Finance Minister. After that, tax structural reforms were carried out between 1996 and 1998. Between

2004 and 2014, major structural reforms were done in the securities market and in some other areas. Since 2014, I cannot think of an area where there were structural reforms. There have been reforms and changes, but I can't put my finger on structural reforms. They will say GST is a structural reform, and I agree. But the GST laws have actually disrupted existing trade and structures. Similarly, IBC [the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code] is a structural reform. But look at the results: less than 20% of the bank loans or financial creditors' dues are being recovered through the IBC. Therefore, I think this government lost its plot on structural reforms. And in the last few years, they have done no structural reform at all.

Strong GDP growth numbers after the pandemic and particularly right now, despite the absence of reforms, have surprised a lot of people. How would you explain that?

The government boasted of a V-shaped recovery after the pandemic. But the deeper you drop, there will

be another vector where you rise. So if you fall, say 12%, and if you rise even 8%, it will look like a V; therefore, the V is not unusual. The question is what is the annual growth rate. What is the growth rate in per capita income? What is the growth rate in real wages? It's been established that the growth rate declined and, number two, per capita income has risen at a much lesser rate, and, number three, for the last four years, real wages have been stagnant. In fact, real wages of agricultural labour has actually dropped. Therefore, how can you call this a remarkable recovery? There is some recovery, but it is a K-shaped recovery. A small section of the population has recovered sharply, but the big section has declined.

But what about the current divergence between strong headline GDP growth on the one hand and other figures such as per capita income and real wages that don't paint such a bright picture of the economy?

If you believe the government's numbers, why does



the MoSPI [Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation] and the CSO [Central Statistical Office] constantly revise these numbers? There is no certainty about numbers at all. I can understand there is a first revision, a second revision, but they are constantly revising the numbers. And the last thing they did was change the base. Why change the base in the middle of your 10-year term? The NITI Aayog's numbers are totally suspect. It put out a poverty decline number which nobody accepts. Therefore, there is no credibility to these numbers.

You say in your latest

book that the BJP does not have the leaders or the vision to reset India's economic policies and add that other parties are not interested in resetting India's policies either. Would that include the Congress as well?

There is nobody in the government today who is able to think of policies which are going to benefit the economy over the next 10, 20 years. Is there anyone equal to Dr. Manmohan Singh? There's nobody. Can you name three officers in the government who are acknowledged as world-class economists? Therefore, there is no ta-

lent inside the government, and they suspect anyone from outside giving them advice.

We see the government often boasting about India becoming a \$5-trillion economy soon. But figures such as per capita income and real wages that reflect real living standards are not talked about. What is the Opposition doing to counter the government's narrative?

When the \$5-trillion goal was set, they said we will reach it in 2023-24. It's been pushed back to 2025-26. Now, the latest deadline is 2027-28. Reaching \$5 trillion is an arithmetical inevitability. Whether there is a government or not, whether we grow at 5% or 8%, you will reach \$5 trillion one day. The question is how long will it take to reach \$5 trillion at a 5% growth rate, and how long will it take to reach \$5 trillion at an 8% growth rate. All right, we are the fifth largest economy in the world and every day the government trumpets that we will soon become the third largest. That's again

another arithmetical inevitability. If you have 140 crore population going up to 160 crore, you will become the second largest economy. The point is, in terms of per capita income, we are something like 143. In the Global Hunger Index, we are 101.

You say the government is satisfied with 6% growth, 6% inflation and 8% unemployment.

If we grow at 8%, our per capita income will become that of a middle-income country, which is about \$12,000 to \$13,000 in X years. But if we grow at 6% or less, it will take much longer. In the 10 years of UPA (2004 to 2014), we grew at about 7.5% or 7.6% on average. Now the growth rate of these 10 years, 2014 to 2024, is only 5.7% or 5.8%. The difference may look small, but it makes a huge difference to how fast we will grow. If our government was there, we will work towards restoring 8% growth. They are also settling for 8% unemployment. If jobs are being created in the non-agricultural sector, why should the number of people dependent on agriculture as

a livelihood keep increasing. Instead of migrating from the agricultural sector to the non-agricultural sector, the numbers of the agricultural sector are rising in the last three, four, five years. Now the middle number: inflation. If you left it to the Reserve Bank of India totally, it may be able to bring down inflation in the 2% to 4% band. But the RBI is no longer as autonomous as it was.

You say that the fate of other countries that won Independence in 1947 should alert us to risks, and add that eventually economics trumps all other issues. What economic price will Indians be willing to pay?

Well, I hope so (that economics trumps other issues). Indians are already paying a price in terms of lower per capita income than they deserve to have, and lower wages. Indians are already paying a price for lower rate of economic growth. But the worst price India will pay is rising inequality. India is the only large country where the inequalities are increasing at a fast pace, yet nobody seems to be concerned.

India is fastest-growing major economy: Murmu

The vision for a developed India is not limited to economic prosperity alone, says President; she says centuries-old aspiration to construct the Ram Temple was a reality now

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

President Droupadi Murmu, in her maiden address at the new Parliament building to the joint session of the two Houses on Wednesday, said that for her government, the vision of a developed India was not limited to economic prosperity, and equal importance was being given to social, cultural, and strategic strengths. "Without them, the development and economic prosperity would not be permanent. The decisions of the last decade have also been taken with this objective in mind. Many more steps are being taken keeping this goal in mind," she said.

Amid thumping of desks by BJP members, she said the centuries-old aspiration to construct the Ram Temple was a reality now. Ms. Murmu was welcomed to the Lok Sabha chamber, where the joint session was convened, by Vice-President Jagdeep Dhankhar, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Parlia-



Different way: The Sengol was introduced in the parade welcoming President Droupadi Murmu to Parliament on Wednesday. When she addressed the joint session, the Sengol was kept in front of the Speaker's podium in the Lok Sabha. ANI

mentary Affairs Minister Pralhad Joshi. She said there came junctures in the history of civilisations which shaped the future for the coming centuries. "There have been many such defining moments in the history of India also. This year, on January 22, the country witnessed a similar epochal moment. After waiting for centuries, Ram Lalla has now been enshrined in his grand temple in Ayodhya," the President said. High-

lighting her government's role in promoting heritage tourism, she said that during the five days of consecration ceremonies, 13 lakh devotees have visited Ayodhya. On the subject of the economy, she said that amid serious global crises, India emerged as the fastest-growing major economy, consistently maintaining a growth rate of over 7.5% for two consecutive quarters. She said the Centre had ensured ma-

cro-economic stability. "We have seen India transform from 'fragile five' to a 'top five' economy. India's exports have increased from about \$450 billion to more than \$775 billion. FDI flows have doubled," she said adding that sales of Khadi and Village Industries products had increased by more than four times and the number of people filing income tax returns had increased from about 3.25 crore to about 8.25 crore. "Today, we have forex reserves in excess of \$600 billion," she said.

The President said that the Centre was laying stress on making farming more profitable. "Under the PM-Kisan Samman Nidhi scheme, farmers have received over ₹2.8 lakh crore so far. Over the past 10 years, there has been a threefold increase in easy loans for farmers from banks. Under the Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana, farmers paid a premium of ₹30,000 crore. In return, they have received a claim of ₹1.5 lakh crore," she said.

We will present full Budget once new government is formed after polls: Modi

Nistula Hebbar
NEW DELHI

Noting that this Budget Session will only see the presentation of an Interim Budget, as is customary in an election year, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said that he would present a full Budget once the new government has been formed, exuding confidence that he will return to power.

Greeting the media with a "Ram Ram" ahead of the Budget Session of Parliament which begins on Wednesday, Mr. Modi said, "As you all know, when polls are this close, the government presents an Interim Budget, and we too shall be following that tradition, and we will bring a full Budget once the new government is formed."

The Prime Minister added that Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman's Budget speech however, would offer broad direction on the vision and policies of the government. This being the first Budget session in the new Parliament House, Mr. Modi pointed out that its first order of business had been the Naari Shakti Vandan



Prime Minister Narendra Modi being greeted as he arrives to address the media on the first day of the Budget Session. ANI

Adhineeyum or the law to introduce reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies. He added that the tone set that day had continued to infuse the Republic Day celebrations on January 26, which saw significant participation of women in the parade.

Reflecting on the bitterness between the Opposition and Treasury benches in the Winter Session of Parliament, which saw the suspension of 146 MPs from both Houses, he said that "habitually unruly" MPs must introspect. "Those who have a habit of being involved in ruckus

and degrading the Constitutional values, all those honourable MPs must introspect in this last session of this term," the Prime Minister said. "Many MPs who spoke with a sense of engagement with serious issues are still remembered. Notably, no one remembers those who created ruckus. Even in the coming days, when anyone watches the discussions in the House, each and every voice emanated from the House will be revealed as a record of history," Mr. Modi added. The Budget Session of Parliament will continue till February 9.

Congress leaders meet to chalk out LS strategy

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Inflation, unemployment, alleged Chinese encroachment in Ladakh, fresh violence in Manipur, misuse of Central agencies such as the Enforcement Directorate against Opposition leaders, and hostilities faced by Rahul Gandhi-led Bharat Jodo Nyay yatra in Assam were among some of the issue that were shortlisted by top Congress leaders on Wednesday that the party would raise during the Budget Session of Parliament.

Sources said Congress leaders would raise these issues while participating in the Motion of Thanks to the President for her address to the joint session, and the Budget discussion as the government is unlikely to agree to separate discussions in the last session of the 17th Lok Sabha. Congress Parliamentary Party chairperson Sonia Gandhi had convened a meeting at her official residence on Wednesday evening. Party leaders, including Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge, Lok Sabha Chief Whip. K. Suresh, were among those who were present.

President's address to the joint session of Parliament sounded like propaganda for Prime Minister: Kharge

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Leader of the Opposition in the Rajya Sabha and Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge on Wednesday said President Droupadi Murmu's address to the joint session of Parliament neither had a vision nor offered a direction to the people, and only endorsed Prime Minister Narendra Modi. "The President's speech was only about praising

Prime Minister Modi and their government. It was a propaganda advertisement for PM Modi, and a political speech," Mr. Kharge told presspersons. "Maybe, the President was directed to speak in such a way that she followed in her one hour and 20 minutes long speech," the Congress chief added. He said the speech did not address how the Union government planned to reduce the prices of essential commodities to provide re-

lief to the citizens, and did not address the pressing need for job creation. Addressing a press conference at the All India Congress Committee headquarters, the party's deputy leader in the Lok Sabha, Gaurav Gogoi, and Rajya Sabha member Shaktisinh Gohil, pointed out that the President's address, prepared by the government, did not mention the promises that were made by Mr. Modi in the run-up to the 2014 and 2019 Lok Sab-

ha election, which included depositing ₹15 lakh in every bank account, generating two crore jobs every year, doubling farm income, and so on. Mr. Gogoi said the country expected the President to take note of the suspension of 146 MPs only because they were demanding their rights. "There was no concern shown in the address as to how democracy is being trampled in the country," he said. Separately, in a state-

ment, Mr. Kharge responded to Mr. Modi's comment on Opposition parties disrupting the proceedings of Parliament, and said that it was the BJP that "indulged in the 'disrobing of Parliament'". "Democracy in danger" "So, it is the BJP which has indulged in the cheerharan (disrobing) of Parliament, and not the Opposition. Democracy is in danger, courtesy the BJP," he alleged.

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Aam Aadmi Party leader Swati Maliwal, recently elected to the Rajya Sabha, had to take oath twice on Wednesday, the first day of the Interim Budget Session because she read the wrong text meant for nominated members. Slogan objected Rajya Sabha Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar also objected to the slogan "Inqui-



Swati Maliwal takes oath as the Rajya Sabha Member. ANI

lab zindabad" raised by Ms. Maliwal after reading out the oath, which was

considered "unwarranted sloganeering". Mr. Dhankhar said it was a solemn occasion and asked her to re-read the corrected text. Other members Along with Ms. Maliwal, N.D. Gupta of the AAP and nominated MP Satnam Singh Sandhu also took oath in the Rajya Sabha on the first day of the Budget Session. The AAP's Sanjay Singh, who is in jail, was not present for oath-taking.

IN BRIEF



KYC compliance deadline for FASTags extended till Feb. 29

The state-owned National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) on Wednesday extended the KYC compliance deadline for FASTags till February 29. On January 15, the NHAI said FASTags with valid balances but incomplete KYC will get deactivated by banks post-January 31. "Only 7 lakh multiple FASTags have been closed out of 1.27 crore. Hence, we are proceeding with extending the deadline by another one month," an official said. The agency also said that it was encouraging FASTag users to complete the 'Know Your Customer' (KYC) process of their latest FASTag by updating KYC under the RBI guidelines. PTI

700 one-stop centres set up across the country: Irani

Union Minister Smriti Irani on Wednesday said that one-stop centres to help women who have faced violence have been established in over 700 districts across the country and around 8.3 lakh women have received help through them. The one-stop centre is a scheme of the Women and Child Development Ministry set up under the Nirbhaya Fund and aims to support women facing violence in public and private spaces. Addressing the 32nd foundation day of the National Commission for Women (NCW), Ms. Irani lauded the mammoth effort of the emergency response service through the NCW 24x7 helpline for women.

NIA files two chargesheets in human trafficking case

The National Investigation Agency (NIA) on Wednesday filed two chargesheets naming three Bangladeshi nationals in a case involving the trafficking of persons of Rohingya and Bangladeshi origin into India as part of a large-scale network of traffickers. The persons arraigned in the chargesheets are Babu S.K., Shahabuddin Hossain, and Munna. According to the NIA, the "Tamil Nadu Human Trafficking" case accused were actively involved in creating forged Indian documents to conceal their true identity. It found that Babu S.K., in connivance with other accused, allegedly used to traffic and also received trafficked Bangladeshi nationals.

President clears names for 16th Finance Commission

Setting the stage for the Sixteenth Finance Commission to start its work soon, the Centre late on Wednesday notified the appointment of four full-time members for the panel, which is chaired by the first NITI Aayog Vice-Chairman and Columbia University professor Arvind Panagariya. Former Expenditure Secretary Ajay Narayan Jha, who was also part of the 15th Finance Commission, Annie George Mathew, former Special Secretary in the Expenditure Department of the Finance Ministry, economist Niranjana Rajadhyaksha and State Bank of India's Group Chief Economic Adviser Soumya Kanti Ghosh were named as members.

Bombay HC delivers split verdict on validity of Centre's fact-checking rule

The case will now be placed before a third judge chosen by the Chief Justice of the High Court; petitions questioned rules empowering the Centre to establish a fact-checking unit to identify fake, false and misleading information on social media platforms about the government's business

Purnima Sah
MUMBAI

A Division Bench of the Bombay High Court on Wednesday delivered a split verdict in a petition that challenged the Union government's Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Amendment Rules, 2023, which empower the Centre to establish a fact-checking unit to identify "fake, false and misleading information" on social media platforms about the government's business.

Justices Gautam Patel and Neela Gokhale pronounced the verdict on the

four petitions filed by satirist Kunal Kamra, the Editors' Guild of India, the Association of Indian Magazines, and the News Broadcasters and Digital Association (NBDA).

While Justice Patel ruled in favour of the petitioners, Justice Neela Gokhale disagreed and upheld the amendment. The case will now be placed before a third judge by the Chief Justice of the Bombay High Court. "There is a disagreement between us. We have passed separate judgments with divergent views. We were not able to concur," Justice Patel said.

Solicitor-General Tushar Mehta said the fact-checking unit would not be



There is a disagreement between us. I have held for the petitions and Justice Gokhale has held for the government. So... the matter will be heard afresh by a third judge
JUSTICE GAUTAM PATEL

notified for another 10 days. The court has given autonomy to the petitioners to submit an application (if need be) with the respective forum for further extension of the protection. The petitioners, in their rejoinder, said that intermediaries only have an "illusion" of choice once something is flagged by the

government.

Under the new IT rules, the government can ask social media platforms such as Facebook, X, Instagram and YouTube to remove any content/news related to the "business of the Central government" that was identified as "fake, false, or misleading" with the help of the FCU. An organisa-

tion appointed by the government will be the arbiter of such content, and if intermediaries do not comply with its decision, they may lose their safe harbour status under Section 79 of the IT Act, 2000.

Justice Patel questioned how the court can be expected to limit the scope of the word "information" defined under the IT Act. During the proceedings, Mr. Mehta said social media platforms did not have the liberty to do anything once content on their platform was flagged by the FCU. If a social media or news website continued to host flagged information, it would have to defend its stand in the court if any ac-

tion was taken against an individual involved in such social media posts.

The Internet Freedom Foundation, which assisted Mr. Kamra in filing the petition, said the plea had challenged the validity of the IT rules, arguing that the amendments are *ultra vires* to Section 79 of the IT Act. The petition also argued that the amendments violate the right to freedom of speech and expression under Article 19 (1)(a); they do not satisfy provisions of reasonable restrictions on freedom of speech and expression under Article 19 (2) and the amendments violate the right to practice and trade or profession under Article 19(1)(g).

Ex-MP asked to move out over daughter's post on Ayodhya

Samridhi Tewari
NEW DELHI

Congress leader Mani Shankar Aiyar and his daughter Suranya Aiyar have received a notice from the residents' welfare association suggesting that they vacate their house in the Jungpura area of south-east Delhi over a social media post condemning the consecration at the Ram Temple in Ayodhya.

The notice, issued by the Jangpura Extension Welfare Association (JEWA), urged them not to indulge in any kind of "rant" that may disturb the peace of residents or hurt their religious sentiments.

"As a Residents' Welfare Association [RWA] it is our responsibility to see that there is cordial relation between all the residents and we do not appreciate a resident rant which may disturb the peace in the colony or hurt religious sentiments of the residents," the notice said.

On JEWA's Facebook page, it says it is a registered society and a non-political organisation founded in 1951 with the objective to promote and encourage activities which are conducive to social, recreational, cultural, moral and intellectual development of the residents of Jangpura Extension.

RWA president suggests she move to another colony where people turned a blind eye to hatred

The notice, signed by JEWA president Kapil Kakar, said, "A hate speech and act by a resident like you Ms. Aiyar for announcing a three-day fast, in a peaceful locality where, mostly residents inhabiting here came from Pakistan after losing all their wealth and fortune, is highly unfortunate." Were she to think her actions were right, the notice said, Ms. Aiyar should move to another colony where people and RWAs "can turn a blind eye to hatred".

BJP leader Amit Malviya took to X to say, "This should serve as a message for everyone, who think abusing Hindu beliefs is par for the course."

However, the notice has not received a positive response in Jangpura's RWA network. Anil Goswami, secretary at the Jangpura RWA, said, "This notice has created a lot of tension in our neighbourhood. If one has problems with somebody's beliefs, we cannot keep issuing letters and notices like this."

Other members also shared similar views.

Parliament breach accused allege torture to admit to 'crimes', Opposition links

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Five of the six people arrested in the Parliament security breach case told the Patiala House Court on Wednesday that they were given electric shock and forced to sign blank papers to confess their alleged crimes and association with political parties. They have been charged under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967.

In their application moved in the court of Additional Sessions Judge Hardeep Kaur, the accused — Manoranjan D., Sagar Sharma, Lalit Jha, Amol Shinde, and Mahesh Kumawat — said that those who conducted the polygraph, narco and brain mapping tests on them had pressured them to name a political party or leader in connection with the case.

"...the accused were forced to sign about 70-odd blank pages at different places of each page. Also, they were tortured, given electric shocks to sign and confess the commission of crime under UAPA and their association with national political parties," the application said.

It added that each of the accused was asked about his current and old mobile



Manoranjan and Neelam Azad being produced at the Patiala House court in New Delhi. PTI

phone numbers and made to visit his respective telecom service provider's office for issuance of SIM cards of old mobile numbers and current numbers for reasons best known to the prosecution.

"During this illegal drill, accused persons gave their biometrics/signed for issuance of SIM cards and they were also forced to provide all their online social media account passwords, email account passwords and phone passwords," the application said.

Custody extended

After the hearing, Justice Kaur extended the judicial custody of all six accused till March 1. The court also scheduled the hearing for the application moved by the five accused persons to February 17, and directed

the Delhi Police to submit its response to the allegations.

Five of the six persons arrested by the special cell of the Delhi Police had given their consent for a polygraph test. While Sagar Sharma and Manoranjan also consented to narco analysis and brain mapping tests, Neelam Azad denied consent for all the tests.

On December 13 last year, two of the six accused, carrying canisters emitting yellow smoke, had jumped inside the House chamber from the visitors' gallery, leading to chaos and confusion. They were caught by the MPs and handed over to the police. The police invoked anti-terror provisions of the UAPA, and maintained the breach was a "well-planned conspiracy".

Now, police verification mandatory for visitors

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

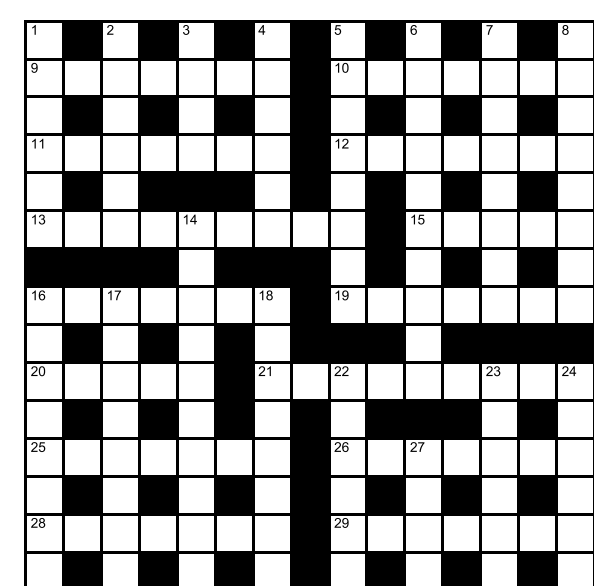
In the aftermath of the security breach during the Winter Session of Parliament, the Lok Sabha secretariat has issued a host of new rules for visitors, including mandatory police verification.

A parliamentary bulletin issued on Monday stated that MPs must send their requests for police verification of visitors at least three working days before the visit. Once the Lok Sabha or Rajya Sabha approves a visitor's pass, they will receive a QR code on their mobile phone. This QR code will have to be shown at the Parliament reception to enter the premises, along with their Aadhaar card. The visitor's biometric impression and photograph will also be captured, before they are issued a smart card to access the gallery.

Though photographs were captured earlier as well, biometric data has been newly introduced. While leaving the premises, visitors must return their smart cards; if they fail to do so, they will automatically be blacklisted and permanently debarred from entering the Parliament House precincts.

All group passes have been discontinued.

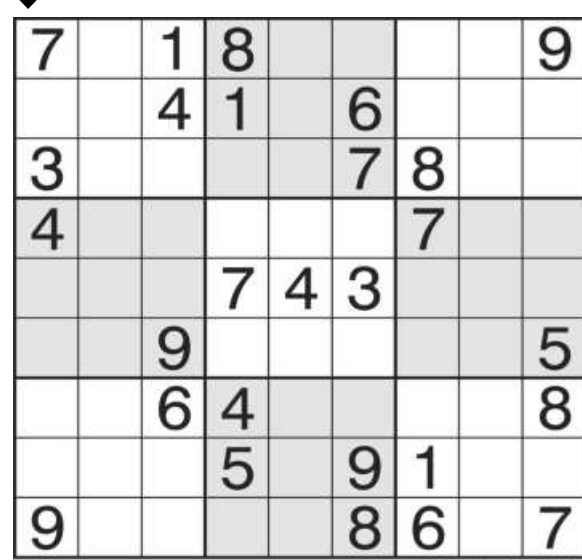
TH CROSSWORD+ 14086
(set by Arden)



- 16 French noble with six trillion income (7)
19 Opposing America right and left in discharge remaining (7)
20 Small fireplace providing warmth (5)
21 Oft-repeated jokes about Tesla head taking part in a game (9)
25 Small state faces a communist resurgence and depression (7)
26 State of one in our country (7)
28 Omitting without writing a portion (7)
29 Behind schedule on payment (7)
Down
1 The American did not arrest Frank (6)
2 Condemn a small public sector undertaking (6)
3 Coordinate with me quietly (4)
4 Inhabitant - the wine drinking one (6)
5 Insults a party in an island nation (8)
6 Could it be a sudden deluge? (10)
7 Something to eat during hearing in court (8)
8 A small picture - moving story about people on a small island (8)
14 Mathematicians' idea of play, they have a choice (4,6)
16 He lives miserably caught in between buses and trucks (8)
17 Wild mustard found daily on top of hair (8)
18 Terrible stench as one blocks entrances (8)
22 He invented the first device to stop random noise (6)
23 Drug and alcohol stashed in this place (6)
24 Caught when part of it was new, went up when part of it was old (6)
27 Contract work (4)

- Across**
9 One-third of Australia, not hard in there, but plain and simple (7)
10 Complete work before day's end - there is aversion (7)
11 Old money small child, play outside (7)
12 Cry to get fat (7)
13 Really easy to carry, I'm happy (9)
15 Huge number involved in ordinary game (5)

SUDOKU



DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★★★★

Solution to previous puzzle

R	A	D	I	A	N	C	E	T
E	O	N	R	S	O	U		
P	E	D	A	N	T	I	C	
L	G	O	G	A	A	D		
A	P	E	R		K	N	O	
Y	B	E	L	A		R		
T	A	L	E	N	T	F	A	T
S	L	E		O	A	D		
N	U	L	L	I	F		C	
O	R	E						
B	A	M	I	N	T	O	M	O
B	I	L	I	N	T	O	C	O
I	N	R	O	A	D	F	O	O
S	A	T					C	O
H	O	C	K	E			S	T

Solution to yesterday's Sudoku

1	4	3	8	5	7	2	6	9
5	2	8	9	6	3	1	7	4
6	9	7	2	1	4	8	5	3
2	8	9	4	7	5	3	1	6
3	6	4	1	9	8	7	2	5
7	1	5	6	3	2	4	9	8
4	5	1	7	8	6	9	3	2
8	7	6	3	2	9	5	4	1
9	3	2	5	4	1	6	8	7

FAITH

Surrendering to Lord Rama

"Angan nedhumadhil pudaisoozh Ayodhi" — Sri Kulasekhara Azhwar says that the name of the city of Paramapadha (the heavenly abode) is called Ayodhi. The Lord had descended on the city bearing the same name. He had manifested in the Sun race as Sri Rama with the divine lustre, like the rays of the Sun God.

Smt. Padma Ranganathan said in a discourse that He removes the ignorance of people who surrender at His feet (*Jeythyasritha Santhrasa: Dwanthavidwam Sanothaya*). The first sloka of Sri Raghuvvera Gadhya narrates His qualities.

Swamy Vedantha Desika in his Tamil work "Adhikara Sangraham" says how much ever we enjoy His divine grace, we will not be fully satisfied as His mercy abounds in the form of Sri Rangam temple (*Araadha Arul Amudham Podindha Koil*).

Brahma, the God of creation who came from the navel lotus of Lord Narayana, handed over the idol of Sri Ranganatha to Ikshvaku, the king of Ayodhya.

Lord Rama — the unconquerable — worshipped that Ranganatha and had given it to Vibhishana who helped Him.

Living beings who suffer from the scorching Sun will feel all comfort and coolness on seeing a park full of trees. Similarly, people who toil in the heat wave of samsara will get solace in worshipping Lord Rama through His cool breeze-like blessings.

Sri Vedantha Desika says "Oh Lord Rama, you have many great qualities, and I repeatedly prostrate at your divine feet" (*Namasthe Punasthe Nama*).

Scientists fuse brain-like tissue with electronics to make computer

The brain spends only 20 W to do the same amount of work that AI hardware would use about 8 MW to drive artificial neural networks. This difference by a factor of 400,000 is because, unlike AI hardware, brain cells store memory and process data without physically separating the two

Joel P. Joseph

Scientists have fused brain-like tissue with electronics to make an 'organoid neural network' that can recognise voices and solve a complex mathematical problem. Their invention extends neuromorphic computing – the practice of modelling computers after the human brain – to a new level by directly including brain tissue in a computer.

The system was developed by a team of researchers from Indiana University, Bloomington; the University of Cincinnati and Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Centre, Cincinnati; and the University of Florida, Gainesville. Their findings were published on December 11.

The study marks a significant advance in multiple areas of science and engineering. "It opens possibilities at the intersection of tissue engineering, electrophysiology, and neural computation," Thomas Hartung, a professor at Johns Hopkins University, in the U.S., said.

The work comes against the backdrop of the staggering rise of artificial intelligence (AI), itself founded on the development of artificial neural networks – brain-like networks of neurons except they're made with silicon chips – that can process large datasets that conventional computers struggle with.

Separating memory and processing

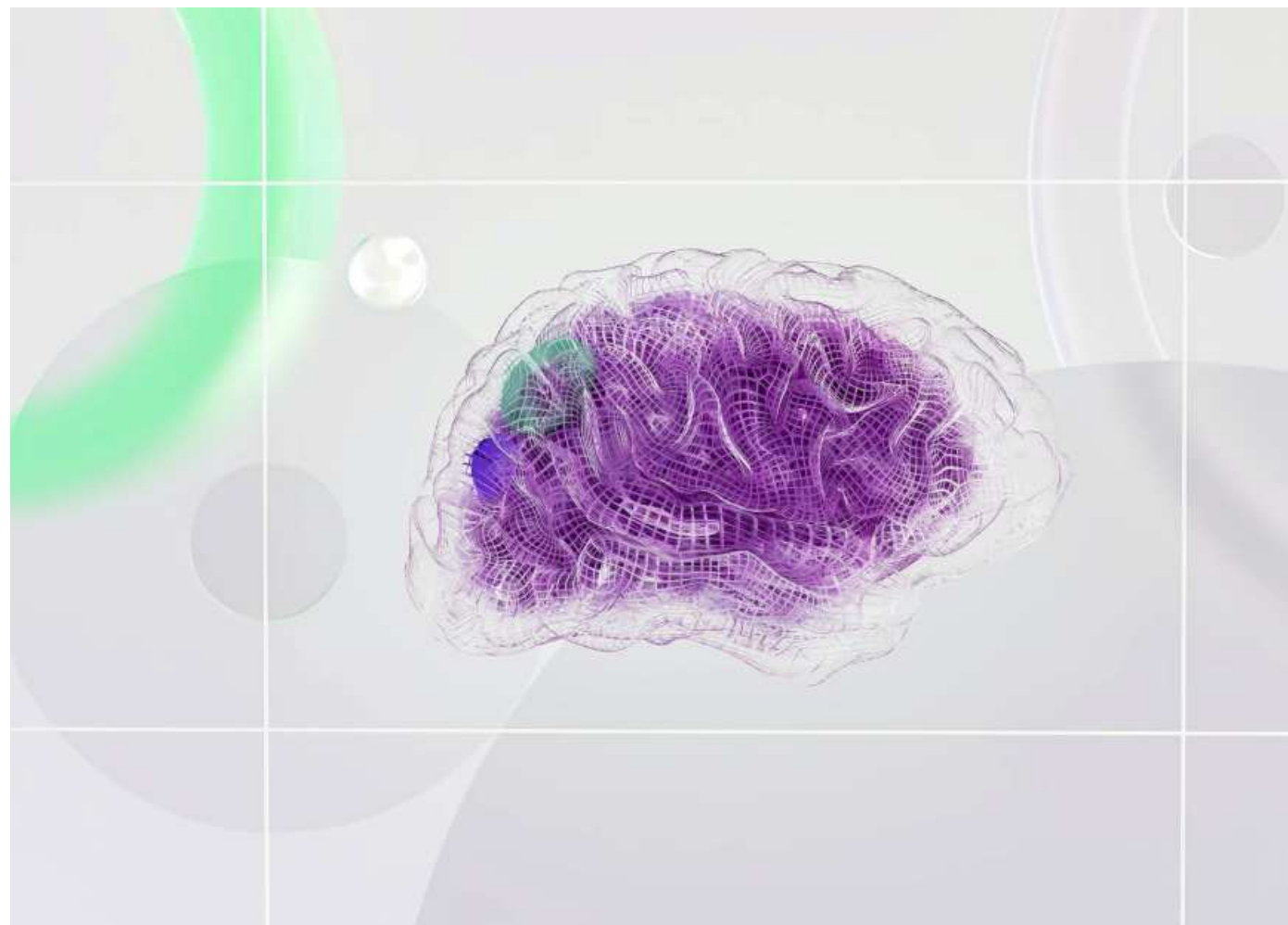
The hardware on which these neural networks run has a problem, however: the memory units and the data processing units are separate. When a neural network operates, the network will have to access the data in the memory unit, bring it over to the processing unit, and work on it – and it needs to do this many times over. If the problem is more complex, the time and energy demands increase further because the system will have to go back and forth between these units even more.

Scientists have tried to build more efficient neuromorphic chips that include some short-term memory, so they can avoid going back and forth just a bit. These chips have been used for applications like computer vision and speech recognition. But they can "only partially mimic brain functions, and there is a need to improve their processing capability and accounting for real-life uncertainty and improving energy efficiency," the authors of the new paper, published in *Nature Electronics*, wrote.

So scientists are now considering using a biological neural network: a network of live brain cells. As the authors described in the paper, the brain spends only 20 W to do the same amount of work that AI hardware would use about 8 MW to drive artificial neural networks made of silicon chips. This difference by a factor of 400,000 is because, unlike AI hardware, brain cells store memory and process data without physically separating the two.

An 'organoid neural network'

This new area of research, called *biocomputing*, uses biological components to perform computational processes. Last year, for example, a group of researchers from Australia cultured brain cells and trained them to play pong (a table-tennis-like videogame), in the process demonstrating the initial steps of long-term training. Their paper was



Brain cells have been connected to microelectrodes to form an organoid neural network. Representative image. GOOGLE DEEPMIND/UNSPLASH

published in the journal *Neuron*.

In the new study, the U.S. researchers used actual brain organoids to make an 'organoid neural network' and tested it to recognise speech and solve a complex mathematical problem.

Brain organoids are three-dimensional aggregates of brain cells. The scientists made them by extracting human pluripotent stem cells, which are cells that can develop to become almost any kind of cell within the human body, and made them into brain cells. Brain organoids that are aggregates of such cells have a mix of the different types of cells in the brain. In this case, they were neuron progenitor cells, early-stage neurons, mature neurons, and astrocytes (cells that maintain and protect neurons).

A three-layered computer

The team connected the brain organoid to an array of microelectrodes to form an organoid neural network, a type of artificial neural network containing a live organoid. The team then built this network into a system called a reservoir computer.

This machine contains three 'layers': input, reservoir, and output.

The input signals are routed to a reservoir, which is a black box – meaning its internal working can't be tracked – whose purpose is to convert the signals into mathematical entities that the computer can 'work on' to find solutions. The output is a simple readout from the reservoir.

In this system, which the team calls 'Brainware', the reservoir was the organoid neural network. It received inputs from the input layer in the form of electrical stimulation. The output layer was 'normal' computer hardware that had been modified to recognise Brainware's neural activity.

The researchers demonstrated



Brain organoids are three-dimensional aggregates of brain cells. Scientists made them by extracting human pluripotent stem cells, which are cells that can develop to become almost any kind of cell within the human body, and made them into brain cells

Brainware's abilities by predicting a Henon map – a mathematical function that draws a curve on a graph that can be chaotic or not depending on the values of two variables. Brainware could also tell which Japanese vowel an individual was voicing after 'learning' from 240 audio clips from eight speakers, over just two days. Its accuracy in the latter task was 78%, and without any external feedback on whether its inferences while learning were right or wrong.

'Foundational insights'

More importantly, Brainware was more accurate than artificial neural networks that lacked a short-term memory unit but slightly less accurate than those with one. But it achieved this comparable accuracy with less than a tenth of the training the artificial neural networks required. For example, to be able to predict a Henon map, Brainware went through four epochs of training but the artificial neural network went through 50 epochs.

In a commentary published alongside the study, Lena Smirnova, Brian Caffo, and Erik C. Johnson, all professors at Johns Hopkins University, wrote, "It may be decades before general biocomputing systems can be created, but this research is likely to generate foundational insights into the mechanisms of learning, neural development, and the cognitive

implications of neurodegenerative diseases."

Their system still has some limitations that the researchers have also acknowledged, but it's a start. Running Brainware requires technical expertise and infrastructure to maintain a biological neural network. Organoids form a relatively heterogeneous mix of cell types, so not all organoids function the same way. But efforts are underway to achieve more uniform cell mixes.

Are organoids conscious?

Further, although this was the first system to use a three-dimensional culture of brain cells, it interfaced with the input layer only along one surface of the organoid.

According to Dr. Hartung, who's working on using organoids and AI instead of animals to test new drugs, the next steps could include optimising methods to encode input, improving the viability or maintaining uniformity of organoids in longer experiments, and tackling more complex computing problems.

Brainware-like systems also confront us with ethical concerns. For example, Julian Kinderlerer, an emeritus professor at Delft University of Technology, the Netherlands, asked in a March 2023 article whether an organoid would have the same dignity as the donor of its cells. He also considered whether it would be fair to "use organoids in a mechanistic way without ... being aware of their state of consciousness".

Dr. Hartung nonetheless described the study as an "innovative and exciting proof-of-concept study of organoid intelligence, showing that brain organoids could be harnessed for adaptive reservoir computing."

(Joel P. Joseph is a freelance science journalist and researcher.)



Neuralink is one of Musk's many ventures. AP

Musk says first human has received Neuralink implant

Associated Press

According to Elon Musk, the first human received an implant from his computer-brain interface company Neuralink over the weekend.

In a Monday post on X, Mr. Musk said the patient received the implant the day prior and was "recovering well". He added that "initial results show promising neuron spike detection."

The billionaire, who co-founded Neuralink, didn't provide additional details about the patient. When Neuralink announced in September 2023 that it would begin recruiting people, the company said it was searching for individuals with quadriplegia due to cervical spinal cord injury or amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS).

Neuralink is one of many groups working on linking the nervous system to computers, efforts aimed at helping treat brain disorders, overcoming brain injuries, and other applications. There are more than 40 brain computer interface trials underway, according to clinicaltrials.gov.

Neuralink's device is about the size of a large coin and is designed to be implanted in the skull, with ultra-thin wires going directly into the brain

Neuralink didn't publish any additional statements acknowledging the human implant and didn't respond to requests for comment.

It had previously announced the U.S. Food and Drug Administration had approved its "investigational device exemption," which generally allows a sponsor to begin a clinical study "in patients who fit the inclusion criteria," the FDA said on January 30. The agency said it couldn't confirm or disclose information about a particular study.

Neuralink's device is about the size of a large coin and is designed to be implanted in the skull, with ultra-thin wires going directly into the brain. In its September announcement, Neuralink said the wires would be surgically placed in a region of the brain that controls movement intention. The initial goal of the so-called brain computer interface is to give people the ability to control a computer cursor or keyboard using their thoughts alone.

In a separate Monday post on X, Musk said that the first Neuralink product is called "Telepathy", which he said will enable users to control their phones or computers "just by thinking". He added that initial users would be those who have lost use of their limbs.

It's unclear how well this device or similar interfaces will ultimately work, or how safe they might be. Clinical trials are designed to collect data on safety and effectiveness.

Laura Cabrera, who researches brain science at Pennsylvania State University, said that even though Neuralink uses an innovative procedure – robotic surgery – to get the device in the brain, no one has implanted it before in humans and much remains unknown.

Brain surgery is "not a trivial thing," she said, pointing to significant potential risks such as brain haemorrhage or seizures.

THE SCIENCE QUIZ

Remembering the Space Shuttle Columbia disaster

Vasudevan Mukunth

QUESTION 1

On February 1, 2003, Columbia reentered the earth's atmosphere after nearly 16 days in orbit. During its launch, a piece of insulating foam had broken off from the shuttle's X and struck its left wing. As the shuttle descended, the damage led to a series of cascading failures that tore the vessel apart. Name X.

QUESTION 2

India-born astronaut Kalpana Chawla was a well-known member of the crew of seven onboard Columbia. With her was also Israel's first astronaut. Name him.

QUESTION 3

After the Columbia disaster, NASA hired the famous statistician _____ to

suggest improvements that would prevent such disasters in future. One of his complaints was that a PowerPoint presentation Boeing engineers had prepared – to explain the consequences of the foam damage to NASA – was visually disorganised and didn't convey what the engineers had concluded. Fill in the blanks.

QUESTION 4

In one change NASA instituted after the Columbia disaster, if the shuttle was damaged during its ascent or in orbit and the damage couldn't be fixed, the shuttle crew was to transfer its members to K and wait for a rescue mission. What is K?

QUESTION 5

_____ was the first Space Shuttle mission after Columbia, on July 26, 2005. During its launch, 16 pieces of foam were

again dislodged from X (in Q1). This time, the astronauts tried to fix the damage in orbit before returning safely. Fill in the blank.

Answers to January 30 quiz:

- Rules adopted in 1969 that require countries to respond to the WHO's declarations – **Ans: International Health Regulations**
 - Positive-sense refers to a genome that functions as this molecule – **Ans: mRNA**
 - Scientists who in 2023 received medicine Nobel for developing mRNA vaccines – **Ans: Drew Weissman and Katalin Karikó**
 - Chinese pulmonologist reported a new cluster of pneumonia cases on December 27 – **Ans: Zhang Jixian**
 - Drug developed to treat hepatitis C and with unproven ability to treat COVID-19 – **Ans: Remdesivir**
- Visual: **Spike proteins**
First contact: K.N. Viswanathan | Vikas Singh



Visual: Name this artist and his connection with Kalpana Chawla. MARKGOFF2972 (CC BY-SA 4.0)

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

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



Winners and losers

Elections in Pakistan go according to the script written by the Army

The back-to-back jail sentences former Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan was handed out in two different cases just a week before the February 8 parliamentary elections, show how roles have been reversed in Pakistan's convoluted political space dominated by the shadow hands of the establishment. In 2018, when Mr. Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) was elected to power, the Opposition Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and the Pakistan People's Party had accused the military of electoral rigging in favour of the former cricket star, who was the preferred choice of the generals. A year earlier, Nawaz Sharif, the PML-N leader, had to resign as Prime Minister over the Panama Papers allegations and later go into exile after his conviction and disqualification. Today, Mr. Khan has been disqualified and is serving lengthy sentences, while Mr. Sharif is back, leading the PML-N. Given the way how the military and other state institutions went after Mr. Khan and his party, there was little surprise in the court proceedings and the verdicts. On Tuesday, he was sentenced to 10 years by a special court in what is commonly called the 'Cipher case', on charges that he leaked state secrets, while on Wednesday, another court sentenced him and his wife to 14 years in the Toshakhana case, for keeping some of the gifts they had received while he was in power.

Mr. Khan was forced out of power in April 2022 after falling out with the military establishment. He accused the military and the United States of conspiring to oust him and, at a rally, waved a paper, purportedly a diplomatic cable sent by the then Pakistani Ambassador to the U.S. in 2022, as evidence, which came back to hit him as a violation of the Official Secrets Act. His lawyers complain that they were replaced by state attorneys in the middle of the case and that Mr. Khan was not allowed to give a proper defence in the 'Cipher' trial, which took place inside a jail. His arrest in May led to large-scale protests. But since then, the authorities have unleashed a systematic campaign to weaken the PTI — many of its leaders are in jail, while several others have left under pressure or are on the run. Recently, a court barred the party from using its iconic cricket bat symbol in ballots. Many PTI workers are contesting as independents. While Mr. Khan is in jail and his party is in tatters under state repression, Mr. Sharif seems to be enjoying the support of the invisible power centre in the electoral arena, which makes the elections look like a fixed match. Mr. Sharif might make a political comeback, but the real winner in the unfolding developments in Pakistan, which is grappling with enormous economic challenges, is the military and the real loser, the country's democracy.

Three generations

The Australian Open gave space to players from different eras

World tennis is a broad church. There is space for the time-defying geriatric stars, the calm and collected mid-career practitioners, and the rapidly blooming ambitious youngsters. The 2024 Australian Open was conclusive proof of this as Rohan Bopanna, Aryna Sabalenka and Jannik Sinner marched to victories. Of the three, fans could be forgiven if they did not anticipate Bopanna's triumph, despite the Indian having had one of his best seasons in 2023 — eight finals, two titles — and entering the competition as the World No.3. Bopanna had reached only two Grand Slam men's doubles finals before (US Open — 2010 and 2023) and had not gone past the third round in Australia over 16 previous visits. But the 43-year-old, partnering Matthew Ebden, conjured one of the most irresistible dashes to the crown to become the oldest man to win a Major. He also reached No.1 in the doubles rankings, again the oldest male to do so. Twice in the last five years, Bopanna was resigned to quitting. The loss of cartilage in his knees meant he could not train at optimal levels. But he found alternative techniques to spruce up his body, recalibrated his mind and renewed his focus, and ended up occupying the centre stage at an age when sportspersons are generally relegated to the margins.

Sabalenka's triumph in women's singles over the fast-rising 21-year-old from China, Zheng Qinwen, was an affirmation of the Belarusian's status as one of the game's biggest stars. The 25-year-old's defence of the title she clinched in 2023 was also proof of her consistency. She did not drop a set all fortnight, and in a women's field that has often been synonymous with a state of flux, she has now finished semifinal or better at six straight Slams. Sinner, in contrast, came with no such performance baggage, for he had only reached one Major semifinal earlier (Wimbledon 2023). But in the second half of 2023, by winning his maiden ATP Masters 1000 trophy (Toronto), reaching the final of the season-ending ATP Finals and carrying Italy to its first Davis Cup since 1976, he had acquired the reputation as men's tennis' next superstar. With a sensational comeback from behind five-set victory over Russia's Daniil Medvedev — a former World No.1., 2021 US Open champion and two-time finalist in Melbourne — Sinner only burnished these credentials. Ending 10-time titlist and World No.1 Novak Djokovic's 33-match winning streak in Australia should count among Sinner's greatest achievements. The 22-year-old now joins Carlos Alcaraz as this era's latest generational talent. It was apt that the first steps were taken at a tournament that highlighted inter-generational success.

What makes the India-France 'strategic partnership' tick

The French President, Emmanuel Macron, was the chief guest at India's Republic Day this year, making it his third visit to India, after his 2018 state visit and last year for the G-20 summit hosted by India. Coming within six months of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit on July 14, 2023, as the chief guest at France's Bastille Day, it is clear that the two countries do share a 'Strategic Partnership' that is special. It is no secret that United States President Joseph Biden had been invited initially and his visit was to be followed by a Quad summit that had been accepted by the Australian and Japanese leaders when Mr. Biden declared his inability to travel. The fact that Mr. Macron stepped in readily highlights the personal ties that he and Mr. Modi have established, and the importance they attribute to the relationship.

Origins of strategic convergence

French President Jacques Chirac was the chief guest at the Republic Day in 1998 when India established its first Strategic Partnership. In a significant statement, Mr. Chirac declared that India's exclusion from the global nuclear order was an anomaly that needed to be rectified. The 'Strategic Partnership' was tested when India undertook its series of nuclear tests in May 1998 and declared itself a nuclear weapon state. When compared to other countries, France was the first country to open a dialogue with India and displayed a greater understanding of India's security compulsions. It was the first P-5 country to support India's claim for a permanent seat in an expanded and reformed UN Security Council.

India and France have valued strategic autonomy, in their own fashion. India adopted non-alignment. After the Second World War, France was one of the founding members of North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in 1949 and hosted the NATO headquarters; it withdrew from its integrated military command in 1966 due to reservations over U.S. insistence on subordinating French nuclear deterrent to NATO and accepting any collective control that General Charles de Gaulle felt would dilute French sovereignty, forcing NATO to shift its headquarters to Brussels.

After the Cold War ended, both countries were quick to espouse the virtues of multipolarity. French discomfort with a unipolar system was clear when French Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine described USA as a 'hypermultipolarity' and openly spoke out in favour of multipolarity, forming a natural convergence with India's ambitions of seeking strategic autonomy. As a resident power in the Indian Ocean, France was quick to realise the geopolitical focus shifting from the Euro-Atlantic to the Asia-Pacific and decided on India as its preferred partner in the region.

Both France and India share a common trait of 'civilisation exceptionalism' and pride themselves on their 'argumentative intellectualism' but have wisely refrained from preaching to each other.



Rakesh Sood

is a former Ambassador to France and currently Distinguished Fellow at the Council for Strategic and Defence Research

Though part of the western world, France, as a non-Anglo-Saxon nation, found it easier and more natural to engage with India on equal terms.

Building the partnership

The nuclear dialogue, established in May 1998, grew into a broader strategic dialogue and was elevated to the level of the National Security Advisers. From the original three pillars of nuclear, space and defence, the agenda gradually expanded to include counter-terrorism, intelligence sharing and cyber-security issues. Convergence has also evolved on global challenges such as climate change, reform of multilateral development institutions, globally beneficial Artificial Intelligence, and as the joint statement indicates, ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza.

On the defence side, six Scorpene submarines have been built by Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders Limited with transfer of technology from the Naval Group. Technology sharing memoranda of understanding and acquisitions of short-range missiles and radar equipment were concluded. Joint exercises between the navies, air forces and the armies were instituted in 2001, 2004 and 2011, respectively. The government-to-government agreement for 36 Rafale aircraft, salvaged out of the prolonged negotiations for the original 126 which were at an impasse, has been concluded. Its offset target of 50% (nearly ₹25,000 crore), has helped in building up India's budding aerospace industry.

During Mr. Modi's visit to France last year, an announcement regarding a further acquisition of three more Scorpines with enhanced features of air-independent-propulsion and 26 Rafale M aircraft for India's new aircraft carrier was made, with negotiations to be concluded by the end of 2024.

Mr. Macron's visit saw the conclusion of a India-France Defence Industrial Road map that fits in with the goal of *atmanirbharta*. Tata Advanced Systems Ltd. and Airbus concluded an agreement to set up a final assembly line by 2026 for H125 civilian helicopters. A final assembly line for C-295 military transport aircraft has already been set up in Vadodara by the two partners. Collaboration between Safran, the Defence Research and Development Organisation and its Gas Turbine Research Establishment is being stepped up for designing, developing, and producing an aircraft engine for India's fifth generation aircraft (Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft) with 100% transfer of technology. This is a major step forward from the agreement concluded with the U.S. to permit technology transfer to HAL to produce the General Electric F-414 engine to power the Tejas Mk2 fighter aircraft. However, the GE engine is a 1990s design while the Safran project will entail defining parameters, co-designing, engineering, certification, in addition to production. Akasa Air has signed a \$5 billion agreement for over 300 LEAP-1B engines to power its fleet acquisition of

170 Boeing MAX aircraft. This engine is a Safran-GE joint venture product and together with Safran's Snecma engines powering the Rafale and Rafale M, sets the stage for it to set up maintenance, repair and operations in India.

Cooperation in the space domain began in the 1960s with French assistance to set up the Indian launch facility at Sriharikota but languished in later years because of export controls. The strategic dialogue helped restart this cooperation and the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) and the French Space Agency (CNES) now work on joint missions. The visit saw a new MoU being signed by NewSpace India Limited, a Government of India company under the Department of Space and the commercial arm of ISRO, and French satellite launch company Arianespace for collaboration on space launches. In addition, with France converting its air force into the French Air and Space Force and India setting up the Defence Space Agency, the two ministries of defence are looking to work together in optimising space domain awareness.

Broadening and deepening the partnership

The challenge for both countries has been to take the partnership out of the government domains into the commercial and civilian spaces. As a result, joint working groups on a range of subjects covering agriculture, environment, civil aviation, IT and telecom, urban development, transportation, culture and tourism have been set up over the years.

One of the success stories has been the growing number of Indian students going to France for higher education. A decade ago, it was less than 3,000 and today it is upwards of 10,000. The target is now 30,000 by 2030. The visa issue is being addressed with a five-year Schengen visa for Indians who pursue a post-graduate course in France. The operationalisation of the Young Professionals Scheme under the Migration and Mobility Partnership Agreement will help. Last year, the University Grants Commission revised rules regarding foreign universities setting up campuses in India. Sorbonne University, established in the 13th century, is globally renowned, and has had a campus in the United Arab Emirates since 2006. A campus in India should be identified as a priority objective.

There are nearly 1,000 French companies in India including 39 of the CAC 40 (the most influential benchmark of performance in the French economy) while nearly 150 Indian businesses have established a presence in France. In the past, Indian companies saw the United Kingdom as the entry point for Europe. Post-Brexit, France is an entry point for Europe and Francophonie!

'Strategic Partnership' does not require convergence on all issues but sensitivity so that differences, where these exist, are expressed in private and not publicly. This is where India-France ties, nurtured over the last quarter century, reflect maturity and resilience.

The partnership, which is now moving from government domains to commercial and civil spaces, reflects maturity and resilience

What is needed from a Governor is reticence

The Tamil Nadu Governor, R.N. Ravi, has recently been in the news for the wrong reason. Instead of confining himself to his role which requires that Governors steer clear of controversies, especially those unconnected with their constitutional duties, Mr. Ravi has waded into the minefield of interpretation of historical events which led to India's Independence. Even a Governor with a background of historical studies should avoid this. But Mr. Ravi was a student of physics who joined the Indian Police Service and spent long years in the Intelligence Bureau (IB). He has obviously felt that he had the expertise to publicly express his opinions on an important period of Indian history.

There has been no indication from Mr. Ravi that he has made a detailed study of India's national movement which, under Mahatma Gandhi's leadership, aimed at the comprehensive transformation of a feudal, largely obscurantist and hierarchical society along with the achievement of freedom from British colonialism. All the great leaders of the national movement played their part in this noble enterprise. In any event, it is intrinsically wrong for any constitutional authority to play up the role of some and denigrate that of others.

The Governor's view

Mr. Ravi has been reported as saying that the Quit India movement made little impact on the British decision to leave India. Instead, it was insecurity felt by the British at Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose forming the Azad Hind Government and its army (INA) and in 1946 by the Naval Mutiny and the Air Force Rebellion. Apparently, Mr. Ravi formed this view from his reading of IB files of the relevant



Vivek Katju

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period. He has also cited a conversation between British Prime Minister Clement Attlee and an acting Governor of Bengal in which Mr. Attlee said that the impact of 'non-cooperation' was minimal but that the British left because they felt 'insecure' after the 'Naval Revolt and the Air Force Rebellion'.

A clarification

Under criticism for his assertions and views, Mr. Ravi clarified that he had the 'highest respect' for Mahatma Gandhi. At the same time, he reiterated his views on the departure of the British from India. There is no doubt that the loyalty of Indian soldiers in the British Indian armed forces was a principal pillar of their rule in India. If not for the Indian soldiers who served in the armies of the East India Company, the British could not have conquered India. Most historians of the national movement also acknowledge that the INA and the naval mutiny shook British confidence in the loyalty of the Indian members of their army in India. And, obviously, after the Second World War, circumstances created by the national movement, Britain's economic weakening and the international situation simply did not permit them to even think of undertaking armed action to retain their rule in India.

Hence, Mr. Ravi was right in praising Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose's great contribution in achieving Independence. This is almost universally acknowledged. Despite the great ideological differences in leaders of the freedom movement none of them ever denigrated Netaji or the INA. Had that been so, would it have been possible for so many of the lawyers among them to come together to defend the three officers —

Prem Kumar Sehgal, Gurbaksh Singh Dhillon and Shah Nawaz Khan — at their court martial at the Red Fort in 1945-46? The great lawyer, Bhulabhai Desai, led the defence which included Tej Bahadur Sapru, Jawaharlal Nehru and Kailas Nath Katju. This writer would be forgiven for making a personal reference. As Katju's grandson and Sapru's great-grandson, he knows full well the enormous admiration that Netaji evoked in them.

It would not be out of place to quote from Katju's unpublished biography of the impact of the INA trial. He writes that because of them "The excitement in the country was intense and indescribable". He goes on to note, "I am firmly of the opinion that just as the murders in Jallianwala Bagh in 1919 laid the foundation stone of our national struggle, similarly the Indian National Army trials were the definite cause of the withdrawal of the British rule in India in August 1947. The British discovered for themselves that it was impossible for them to continue..."

The last word

It is obvious that Mr. Ravi feels that Netaji was not given due recognition for his contribution to the country's Independence by the Congress party because of Jawaharlal Nehru and his successors, and that this lapse has now been corrected. It is Mr. Ravi's right to feel so. What is not open to him while holding the office of Governor is to make his views public. Governors are also not expected to make comparisons, howsoever indirectly, of the impact of the actions of different leaders of the national movement. What is needed from Governors is reticence. As a former civil servant, Mr. Ravi should certainly know this.

A gubernatorial incumbent, such as the Governor of Tamil Nadu, ought to remember that airing his views in public is out of place

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Temple entry

The judgment by the Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court is good if religious tenets are observed well, in full faith, calmly and where the values are respected by all (Page 1, "Judge orders restrictions on non-Hindus in temples", January 31). The point is that we do have the obligation to follow the norms, faith rules and regulations of any body, religion, group in any

society.

A.J. Rangarajan,
Chennai

In reality, one hardly comes a non-Hindu who insists on or is interested in entering the inner sanctum of Hindu temples. A majority of foreign tourists visiting our temples do not get offended when they see the notice telling them not to go beyond a certain point in a temple's premises. Apart from them being picnic and

tourist spots, many Hindu temples have also been thrown open to cinema and serial shooting. 'Obscene' song and dance sequences are filmed here, which should stop.

M.R. Anand,
Virudavani, Uttar Pradesh

It is astonishing to have such a judgment as it seems to be wry, parochial and contrary to the universal brotherhood "*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* (world is a

family)' philosophy of the great Hindu saints. Instead, a general note can be put up: 'Only believers in Hindu faith are allowed entry'.

P.A.K. Murthy,
Chennai

The judgment is shocking especially in its insistence that an undertaking must be obtained from non-Hindus that they have faith in the deity and would follow the customs and practices of Hinduism and

of the temple. In contrast to this one has Christian churches that are kept open to the public, irrespective of caste, creed, community or religion to enter, remain seated and say their prayers in silence to the god of their choice and, go out with all solace and peace of mind they require. This verdict will only add another iron gate before god. Tharcus S. Fernando,
Chennai

Australian Open win

In a physical sport like tennis, injuries can be debilitating to and demoralising for any great player. So, it takes excellent mental strength to overcome those tough times and still shine. Rohan Bopanna's win, at 43, is a truly great achievement. He is a true inspiration for thousands of young children of the country. Jahangir Shaikh,
Mumbai

Finding light in Myanmar's darkness

Three years after an illegal military coup deprived Myanmar of limited democracy, the nation continues to fight its inner demons. Dubbed the 'sick man of Southeast Asia', it sees no light at the end of the tunnel as its military regime, the political class, and ethnic organisations persist with the violent conflict. This civil war has little hope of a clear victory for anyone.

Myanmar is a large multi-ethnic nation, located in a strategically significant neighbourhood. What happens in the country impacts its five neighbours: China, Laos, Thailand, Bangladesh, and India. Its fundamental tragedy lies in the historical reality that neither before nor during British colonial rule did it complete the task of nation-building – the crafting of a unified polity where its Bamar majority and a mixture of ethnic and religious minorities could live peacefully. Decades of military rule complicated the situation and the latest coup compounded it.

Triangular architecture

Two pillars of the power architecture – the political class and ethnic groups – are ranged against the third – the military; now, all three are facing trouble. The political class, represented by the unrecognised group called the National Unity Government (NUG), has defied the odds to assert itself through militia units called the People's Defence Forces. They have won many battles against the army, especially in rural Bamar areas. The NUG has articulated its vision of a 'federal democratic union'. But due to the regime's ruthless suppression, its leaders operate underground or from Thailand. Opponents dismiss it as an entity existing only in cyberspace, but it has some political weight.

The ethnic armed organisations have inflicted a heavy toll on the Myanmar military along the Thai border in the south-east and the Chinese border in the north-east. The victories secured at the end of



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2023 by the Three Brotherhood Alliance comprising the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, the Arakan Army, and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army shook the army as nothing else had done before. Yet, ethnic organisations remain divided: some oppose the army, some support it quietly, and some stay neutral. Besides, some anti-army factions are active only when they are assured of China's backing.

The most powerful pillar of the power architecture – Tatmadaw or the military – has never faced such a dismal situation. Most people are opposed to it, viewing it as a usurper and oppressor. Worse, it is seen as incompetent. Its failure to prevail over the resistance has weakened its morale. There is now considerable discontent within the military against its current leadership. The media reports that the days of Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing are numbered. Experts say that the second in command, General Soe Win, could assume leadership. Whether he has the right blend of firmness and resilience is not known.

Given this situation, it is not surprising that the international community has failed to help Myanmar. Various attempts by the United Nations, ASEAN, Japan, and Myanmar's neighbours have been unable to move the country towards reconciliation. In particular, that the military has resiled from the ASEAN's Five Point Consensus has dashed the region's hopes for a settlement.

India's interests, options

India's policy of maintaining cordial relations with the government while also supporting the cause of democracy has served both countries well and strengthened bilateral ties. But the situation now is different from the pre-coup years. When the polity worked in unison to make the experiment with hybrid democracy work, India was helpful. Now with divisiveness and violence as the nation's defining

features, this policy needs a review. India should balance its friendly ties with the military government while broadening the space for engagement with other stakeholders. At the same time, it must not interfere in Myanmar's internal affairs. Only then can India protect its national interests.

Several policy adaptations should, therefore, be considered. First, the inflow of refugees into Mizoram and Manipur has risen. There is also greater activism of Myanmar-based anti-India insurgents indulging in illegal activities along the border. This, in turn, has aggravated the security situation in Manipur. The refugee burden is a special concern for Mizoram. All this has compelled India to undertake fencing along the entire length of the border. Besides, the 2018 India-Myanmar agreement on the Free Movement Regime is under reconsideration.

Second, communication links with certain components of the resistance such as the Chin National Army, Arakan Army and the NUG need to be established, as they gain the upper hand in battles against the military in areas bordering India.

Third, a strong message of the need for cessation of violence and restoration of normalcy should be relayed to both the government and the resistance. The 'transition to a federal democracy', which India supports, can only come later. Fourth, India should consider convening a Peace Conclave of senior officials from the member states of the Quad and the ASEAN Troika comprising Indonesia, Laos and Malaysia. The conclave can make a dispassionate evaluation of the situation and offer Myanmar a blueprint and practical assistance in moving towards security and stability.

Finally, seeking immediate freedom for Daw Aung San Suu Kyi from her unjustified solitary confinement should be a key element in the calculus of the conclave. Ms. Suu Kyi, who is still the most popular leader, holds the key to unlocking a better future.

India should balance its friendly ties with the military government while broadening the space for engagement with other stakeholders. At the same time, it must not interfere in Myanmar's internal affairs

The political triad of the east

The Lok Sabha polls will determine the future of Mamata, Lalu, and Nitish

STATE OF PLAY

Shiv Sahay Singh & Amit Bhelari



Nearly 25 years ago, while participating in a debate in the Lok Sabha, Lalu Prasad had teased Mamata Banerjee for being denied the Railways Ministry, which Nitish Kumar had bagged in the Atal Bihari Vajpayee government that lasted a little over a year. Outraged at the allegations, Ms. Banerjee said that she never wanted the Railways Ministry. "Nahi manga to nahi milega (If you haven't asked then you won't get)," Mr. Prasad had said.

However, months later, when the Bharatiya Janata Party-led government under Mr. Vajpayee came to power again, Ms. Banerjee took over the Railways Ministry in October 1999 and remained on the job till March 2001 before she resigned.

In the years spanning the late 1990s and 2000s, Mr. Prasad, Ms. Banerjee, and Nitish Kumar were Railway Ministers for almost a decade. Even after Ms. Banerjee took over as Chief Minister of West Bengal in 2011, she appointed her trusted aides, Mukul Roy and Dinesh Trivedi, as Railways Ministers till September 2012, when she decided to walk out of the UPA-II government headed by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

There was a sort of competition among these leaders from the east to occupy the Railways Ministry and announce a plethora of railway projects for the electorate of their States. The Railways Minister could lay the Ministry's Budget in the Lok Sabha. This provided an opportunity for the all three of them to cement their political stature and ex-

tend their reach. The Railways had served as a vehicle for the political pursuits of all these three leaders who had risen to prominence in the 1970s and 1980s with their politics rooted in regional aspirations.

With the BJP coming to power in 2014 and the era of alliance politics coming to an end, the political triad of Mr. Prasad, Ms. Banerjee, and Mr. Kumar had little say over the Railways Ministry. The three of them came together on the question of federalism and Opposition unity. The relationship between them evolved and became more accommodating, highlighting the federal structure and regional aspirations.

Over the years, the West Bengal Chief Minister, however, became more comfortable in dealing with Mr. Prasad than Mr. Kumar. Ms. Banerjee has always been sceptical of Mr. Kumar and was not in favour of him being declared as the convener of the Opposition INDIA bloc.

With Mr. Kumar exiting the Opposition alliance and forming the government in Bihar with the BJP, Trinamool Congress leaders claim that their leader's proposal to nominate Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge as the convener of the INDIA alliance has saved the Opposition parties from a major embarrassment.

During the meeting of the INDIA bloc in June 2023, Ms. Banerjee touched the feet of

Mr. Prasad as a mark of respect in Patna. Political insiders believe that her strong presence at Opposition meetings and decision to name the bloc INDIA also irked Mr. Kumar.

There have been similarities and differences in their styles of functioning. Unlike Mr. Kumar, who has been guided by political opportunism, both Ms. Banerjee and Mr. Prasad have been practicing aggressive politics, mostly guided by their own political instincts. Mr. Prasad stopped BJP leader L.K. Advani's Rath Yatra in 1990, whereas Ms. Banerjee stopped the BJP juggernaut in the 2021 Assembly polls winning a decisive mandate for a third term.

The upcoming Lok Sabha polls will determine the future of these three political stalwarts of the east. Ms. Banerjee looks firmly in control, as the BJP's vote bank in West Bengal has receded since 2019. However, issues such as corruption and anti-incumbency pose challenges for her. For Mr. Prasad, who is not in the best of health, the challenge is to take on the Janata Dal (United) and BJP combine together and win the maximum number of seats in Bihar. Mr. Kumar, meanwhile, has to convince his core voters about his frequent switching of sides, including the latest U-turn on January 28.

West Bengal and Bihar together elect 82 MPs to the Lok Sabha. This political triad will play the biggest role in determining the political course of the east. Their personal styles of functioning may be different, but they have shaped the politics of the region for decades. The BJP leadership at the Centre as well as the Congress may ally with them or project them as political adversaries, but they definitely cannot ignore them.

An ethnic conflict characterised by brutality

In the 90 days following the May 3 violence, Manipur recorded only 16 conflict-free days

DATA POINT

Godhashri S. & Vignesh Radhakrishnan

A database compiled using news reported in the local media shows that Manipur witnessed conflicts almost every day in the three months after ethnic violence broke out on May 3, 2023. Such incidents, which were initially limited to the Kuki-Zo community-dominated Churachandpur district in the hilly areas, later spread to the urban valley districts of Imphal East and Imphal West and rural valley district of Bishnupur. Notably, such incidents in the Naga-dominated hill districts were relatively muted.

The violence, which continues sporadically even today, has displaced thousands of people including pregnant women and children. Local media reports also point out that hundreds of trucks which were carrying humanitarian aid were stranded or attacked in May, stalling relief for the victims.

The conclusions are based on data gathered by the Mapping Humanitarianism Initiative of the Centre for New Economics Studies, Jindal Global University. The group has used a mix of news reports in the local media and data provided by institutions working in the affected areas to map the violence. Also, data were collected from organisations which provided advocacy for entitlements under victim assistance schemes. An incidence of violence recorded by one source is verified by comparing the reportage with two or three other sources which reported on the same incident.

Chart 1 shows all the incidents of conflict and armed violence, both lethal and non-lethal, that occurred in Manipur following the eruption of ethnic violence on May 3, 2023. In the 90 days for which data were recorded, only 16 days recorded no incidence of violence. All the other days saw at least one

incident ranging from houses being torched, to cars being set ablaze, to bombs being set off, and gunfights between armed groups. These resulted in injuries and deaths of mostly civilians, followed by soldiers, forest officials, and fire service personnel.

Chart 2 shows the districts where such incidents were recorded. Each circle corresponds to a violent incident. The bigger the circle, the more the number of violent incidents. On May 3, Churachandpur was impacted the most, and continued to be the hotspot till the end of May. By the end of May, Bishnupur, Imphal West, and Imphal East became the focal points of the conflict. Incessant violence was also recorded for three months in Kangpokpi, Kakching, Senapati, and Thoubal.

Map 3 shows the regions of Manipur. The State can be classified into four regions – Valley Urban, Valley Rural, Hills-Kuki, and Hills-Naga. Valley Urban refers to all those areas in the valley where the urban population is 75% and more. Hills-Naga refers to areas in the hills dominated by the Naga tribes. The other areas in the hills are dominated by the Kuki-Zo.

When **Chart 2** and **Map 3** are read together, it becomes clear that the Naga-dominated north-eastern district of Ukhrul and north-western district of Tamenglong were largely spared of the violence. While violence did seep into the Naga-dominated southern districts, the number of incidents was relatively low. The clashes were mostly concentrated in the Meitei-dominated valley areas and Kuki-dominated hill areas.

The other facet of this violence is the attacks on humanitarian aid. **Chart 4** shows that in May alone, hundreds of trucks carrying essential commodities were stranded due to curfew/blockades or were attacked by miscreants. Data also show that by August last year, over 300 lactating mothers, about 100 pregnant women, and over 2,000 children were forcefully displaced.

Fire in the hills, fire in the valley

The charts are based on data sourced by the Mapping Humanitarianism Initiative of the Centre for New Economics Studies, Jindal Global University from local media and other trusted sources

Chart 1: The chart shows all the incidents of conflict and armed violence, both lethal and non-lethal, that occurred in Manipur in the 90 days following the eruption of ethnic violence on May 3, 2023

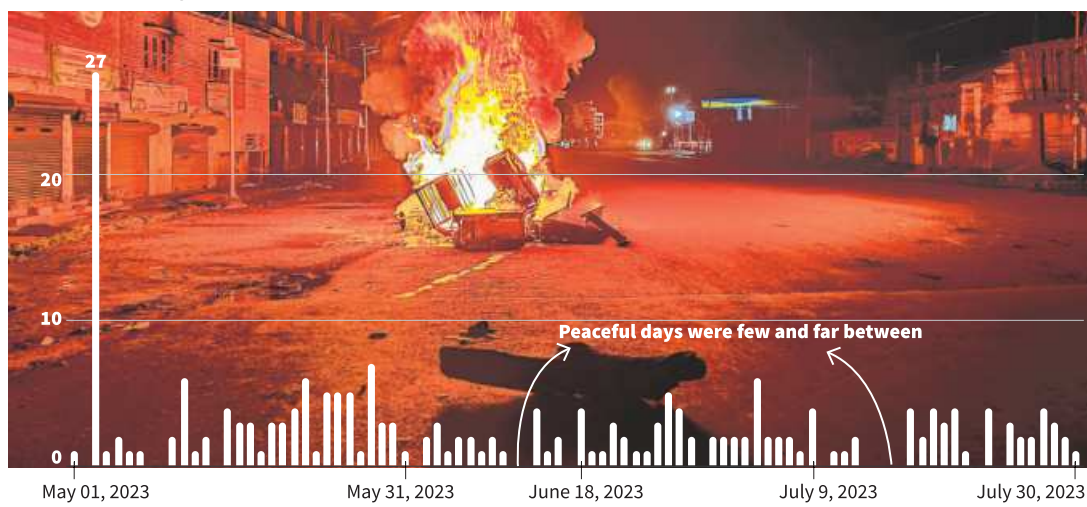


Chart 2: The chart shows, district-wise, the number of violent incidents. The bigger the circle, more the number of violent incidents. A violent incident can mean a solitary death or many persons getting injured in the same incident

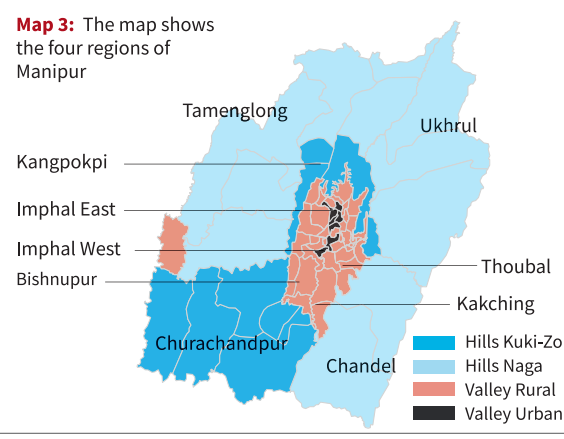
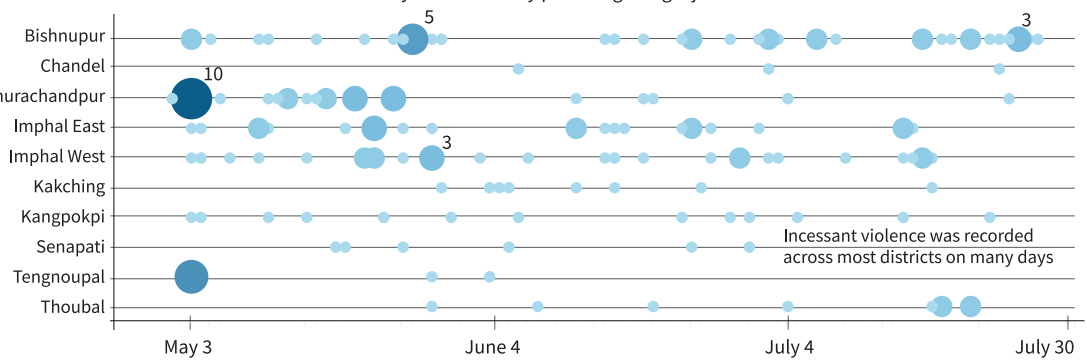
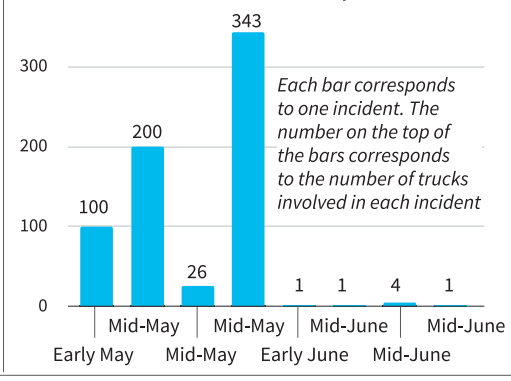


Chart 4: The chart shows the number of aid trucks stranded due to curfew/blockades or attacked by miscreants



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO FEBRUARY 1, 1974

Nixon tells Cong he won't quit

Washington, Jan. 31: A far from buoyant President Nixon went before a joint session of Congress last night to deliver the State of the Union address and, at the end of a 45-minute address which harked back to his accomplishments during his first five years in the White House and spoke hopefully of the agenda for the remaining "three years of my term", he dwelt briefly and emotionally on the state of his own periled Presidency. Asserting once again that he would not resign and calling for a speedy end to all Watergate investigations, he told those who have been demanding his resignation or impeachment: "One year of Watergate is enough." Adopting the defiant stance that has been his hallmark since he recently said that he "will fight like hell" to keep his job, and since his "Operation Candour" went awry, Mr. Nixon said that he would not walk away from the post to which he had been elected by the people. This declaration was greeted with cheers by his loyal Republican supporters, the members of the Cabinet and the President's family present in the chamber. But most members opposed to him, within as well as outside his party, pointedly refrained from applauding this declaration of resoluteness. Senators Sam Ervin of the Watergate Committee, Edward Kennedy, Muskie, and Brooke, House Majority Leader Thomas O'Neil and Mr. Peter Rodino who heads the Judiciary Committee which is considering Mr. Nixon's impeachment, sat woodenly throughout most of his speech.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO FEBRUARY 1, 1924

British Guiana Emigration

Vannarpet, Jan. 28: At a public meeting held at Vannarpet, under the presidency of Mr. S. Sankaranarayana, M.A., B.L., after a lecture by Mr. E.S. Sunda, B.A., B.L., of Madura on the sufferings of Indians in the British Guiana the following resolutions were passed: That pending the full report of the Kesava Pillai Deputation and publication of the Nunan Lukoo colonisation scheme it is resolved that no proposal regarding emigration to British Guiana ought to be countenanced by the Indian public. That the delayed publication of only a summary of Kesava Pillai's report and that too after Lukoo's arrival in India coupled with the withholding of the Fiji Report is a matter which creates suspicion and is one for urgent explanation by the Government of India.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

The growth of key infra sectors in December 2023

3.8 in percentage. The growth of eight key infrastructure sectors slowed to a 14-month low in December 2023 against the 8.3% in the year-ago period, according to official data. PTI

The fiscal deficit of India by end of December 2023

9.82 in ₹ lakh crore. The Union government's fiscal deficit touched 55% of the annual Budget target at December-end 2023, according to the Controller General of Accounts data. PTI

The Ethiopians who died of starvation in the last six months

400 People have died of starvation in Ethiopia's Tigray and Amhara in the last six months, Ethiopia's federal government said, a rare admission of hunger deaths by a federal body. AP

Vehicles purchased by Indians in the last decade: President

21 in crore. In the ten years before 2014, the number of vehicles purchased by Indians was 13 crore, President Droupadi Murmu claimed in her first address to a joint sitting of the two Houses in Parliament. PTI

The number of students to fall ill at a school in Thane

109 Students from Bhatsai in the Shahapur taluk, were rushed to a government hospital in Thane after showing symptoms of food poisoning. PTI
COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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Rising tensions in the Korean peninsula

What has led to the current aggravation of ties between North and South Korea? How is it affecting regional security and major power rivalries? How do North Korea's strategic capabilities stack up? Are ongoing conflicts playing a role in the escalation of tensions between the two Koreas?

EXPLAINER

Anand V.

The story so far:

There has been a notable uptick in provocative moves by North Korea and the subsequent rebuttals by South Korea and its allies. North Korea has rescinded its national objective of Korean reunification and has formally categorised South Korea as an adversarial state. The country has also ramped up the frequency and diversity of its missile tests, expanding its strategic capabilities. These actions were responded to by South Korea through joint military drills with the U.S. and Japan. The ongoing developments in the Korean peninsula have raised serious concerns about the deterioration of the international security environment and a deepening of major power rivalry.

What is the historical context?

The Korean peninsula was divided into two by the end of World War II, after imperial Japan who occupied the territory was defeated. The North went under the ambit of the Soviet Union and the South under the U.S., resulting in the creation of two ideologically different regimes which mirrored either sides of the Cold War divide. The Korean war (1950-53) broke out as a result of the North's attempt to take over the South – the first “hot war” of the Cold War. Decades after the cessation of active conflict and the end of the Cold War, the two countries are still divided over ideology and geopolitical leanings – the North being an authoritarian dynastic regime allied with China and Russia, and the South being a liberal democracy allied with the U.S. However, one of the biggest issues in the contemporary geopolitics of the Korean peninsula has been the question of North Korea's de-nuclearisation. Various efforts were made by the international community to stop and reverse North Korea's nuclear weapons programme.

North Korea's nuclear ambitions were held up for a brief period during 1994-2002, when the U.S. signed an “Agreed Framework” with the country for halting its nuclear programme in return for nuclear energy. The deal unravelled and North Korea went ahead with its nuclear test in 2006 after exiting from the nuclear non-proliferation treaty in 2003. However, in 2003 itself, another initiative started for de-nuclearising the Korean Peninsula, called the six party talks involving the two Koreas, China, Japan, Russia and the U.S. In 2005, the talks resulted in North Korea pledging to forego its nuclear ambitions, only to conduct its nuclear test the very next year. By 2009, talks had broken down, and North Korea emerged out of it with a vow to never return. Ever since Kim Jong Un took over power as the leader of North Korea, missile tests have been conducted on a yearly basis, with a notable and consistent increase in such tests.

There was an effort by the Donald Trump administration to discuss peace with North Korea and veer it towards de-nuclearisation. During 2018-19, the two leaders met on three occasions to pursue peace talks. However, the talks failed to take off, and Kim returned to developing and testing delivery systems. Over the past couple of decades, North Korea has demonstrated its nuclear weapons capability by testing the same six times. It has developed, tested and deployed delivery vehicles, space launchers and satellites, and has conducted provocative actions ranging from military drills to shelling South Korean islands and even threatening nuclear attacks. North Korea



Clean break: The Arch of Reunification, which was a symbol of hope for Korean reunification, appears to have been taken down in Pyongyang, North Korea. AP

supposedly has the ability to even target the U.S. mainland with its nuclear arsenal, and it has also become a major source of cyber-attacks across the world. South Korea, in turn has enhanced its military alliance with the U.S. and has become an integral part of the latter's wider alliance system, hosting not just U.S. troops, but also advanced missile defence systems.

What has led to recent aggravation?

Mr. Kim, in his address to the Supreme People's Assembly on January 15, proclaimed that he is scrapping the decades old North Korean goal of reunifying the South, and has rebranded the South as an enemy state. He ordered the rewriting of the North Korean constitution to reflect this new shift in the regime's thinking. The offices related to reunification were closed, and a landmark monument in Pyongyang portraying the reunification ideal was brought down. In addition to these moves, North Korea has also flexed its military muscle by testing multiple types of missile systems during the first month of 2024 itself.

One such important test was that of a solid fuelled missile carrying a hypersonic warhead. This is significant because major military powers across the world are on a race for developing, testing and deploying hypersonic weapons. These weapons can theoretically provide countries the capability to evade and even target the missile defence systems of their adversaries. The U.S., Russia, China, India and Iran are working on such hypersonic weapons, and North Korea could now join the club. The U.S., South Korea and Japan have conducted joint naval drills in response to the provocations by North Korea, featuring nine warships. The exercises were meant to enhance their joint effectiveness against North Korea's missile and underwater threats, as well as its illegal maritime shipment of arms. North Korea has alleged that these exercises are rehearsals of an offensive intent and not defensive drills. The nation subsequently tested its “Haeil-5-23” nuclear capable

underwater drone in retaliation to these joint naval drills. Pyongyang also tested its strategic cruise missile “Pulhwasal-3-31”, which could allegedly threaten critical American bases in Japan.

The current government in South Korea is a newly elected one led by the conservative President Yoon Suk Yeol. He has a hawkish view of North Korea unlike his predecessor Moon Jae-in. The Yoon government's strategy is to closely coordinate efforts with the U.S. and Japan to deter and counter North Korea's aggressive moves. In fact, the three countries in August 2023 met together at Camp David in Washington D.C., in a historic meeting to initiate a new era of trilateral cooperation. This is a significant step as South Korea and Japan, even though close allies of the U.S., and strong economic partners, have bitter political relations among them due to the historical legacy of imperial Japan's occupation of the Korean peninsula. In light of these developments, there is a high probability for tit-for-tat measures leading to unintended consequences. Hence, there is a growing concern among the international community that the tensions between North and South Korea maybe heading towards conflict.

What does the situation portend for international security?

The tensions in the Korean Peninsula are rising at a time when the world is witnessing the activation of historically rooted conflicts such as Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Palestine, while others like China-Taiwan and India-China are smouldering. This is indeed a significant concern as the key external stakeholders of the Korean peninsula are the very same nuclear powers who are locked in a global strategic competition – the U.S., China and Russia. Since there are alliances and nuclear weapons involved, a major conflict may be prevented from breaking out. However, as in the case of North Korea's torpedoing a South Korean warship or its shelling of a South Korean island in 2010, there are chances of

violent incidents or skirmishes.

Nevertheless, North Korea's deepening ties with China and Russia, and South Korea's increasingly firm entrenchment in the U.S. alliance system imply significant linkages with ongoing conflicts.

North Korea has drifted further into the camp of the Sino-Russian axis, as a result of the choices made by Mr. Kim. Russia has boosted its engagement with North Korea, especially in the wake of the Russia-Ukraine war. Mr. Kim visited Russia in September 2023 and met with Russian President Vladimir Putin. During the visit, Mr. Kim was invited to the Vostochny spaceport of Russia, where he was promised assistance in enhancing North Korea's space capabilities in return for arms supplies. This was preceded by Russia's Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu's visit to Pyongyang in July 2023, and was followed by the visit of Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's visit in October 2023. It is abundantly clear that North Korea is helping Russia with arms, including short range ballistic missiles for the latter's conflict with Ukraine.

China has always been consistently supportive of North Korea, being the single largest trading partner of the country. Even with rising tensions in the Korean peninsula, on January 26, China's Vice Foreign Minister Sun Weidong visited Pyongyang and expressed China's unwavering support to North Korea. At a time when the U.S. is preoccupied with conflicts in Europe and West Asia, Mr. Kim could have found the moment opportune to conduct provocative actions for bargaining with North Korea's adversaries as well as partners. Russia and China are on the same side when it comes to the Russia-Ukraine as well as the Israel-Hamas conflict. They have a lot to gain from North Korea creating a distraction for the U.S. by opening a “third front”.

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THE GIST

North Korea has rescinded its national objective of Korean reunification and has formally categorised South Korea as an adversarial state. The country has also ramped up the frequency and diversity of its missile tests, expanding its strategic capabilities.

The current government in South Korea is a newly elected one led by the conservative President Yoon Suk Yeol. The Yoon government's strategy is to closely coordinate efforts with the U.S. and Japan to deter and counter North Korea's aggressive moves.

North Korea has drifted further into the camp of the Sino-Russian axis. Russia has boosted its engagement with North Korea, especially in the wake of the Russia-Ukraine war.

FROM THE ARCHIVES



GETTY IMAGES

The great Indian Internet shutdown: how access to the world wide web is curtailed

The Internet is a source of information, entertainment, health care, education and livelihood. In 2020, the Indian economy suffered losses to the tune of \$2.8 billion due to 129 separate instances of Internet suspension, which affected 10.3 million individuals

Anandita Mishra
Tanmay Singh
Krishnesh Bapat

The Supreme Court on Tuesday questioned the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir about the non-publication of orders for the suspension of Internet services in the UT. In this article, dated September 15, 2021, the authors talk about the importance of the Anuradha Bhasin judgment and how restricting the internet could affect the economy.

In January 10, 2020, the Supreme Court of India held that access to information via the Internet is a fundamental right under the Indian Constitution. This was in the case of *Anuradha Bhasin vs Union of India*, where the top court also ruled that any restriction on Internet access by the Government must be temporary, limited in scope, lawful, necessary and proportionate. The Court reiterated that the Government's orders restricting Internet access are subject to review by Courts.

The expectation was that this decision would limit the instances of Internet suspension to only those exceptional situations where there is a public emergency or a threat to public safety – the legislatively mandated prerequisites for restricting Internet access. Unfortunately, these promises have remained unfulfilled. The year following the decision, India saw more instances of Internet shutdown than the year preceding it. India's Internet restrictions also accounted for more than 70% of the total loss to the global economy in 2020, and India remains infamous as the Internet shutdown capital of the world.

Recent restrictions

As we write this, the Government of the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) has restricted access to mobile data in the Valley of Kashmir. A few days ago, all Internet services had been shut down. These restrictions have been issued in the wake of the death of hardline separatist leader Syed Ali Shah Geelani. Similar restrictions have been ordered by the

government of Haryana in five different districts following farmers' protests that were organised there. While in these instances, the governments have published the orders restricting access, such publication remains an exception and not the rule despite the decision in *Anuradha Bhasin* (the Haryana orders are on social media but have not been uploaded on government websites).

According to an Internet shutdown tracker maintained by the Software Freedom Law Centre, in July and August, the government of J&K suspended Internet services on five separate occasions – in the districts of Baramulla, Pulwama and Shopian. The suspension orders for these instances have still not been uploaded on the government's websites. Even in May 2021, the government of J&K suspended Internet services on three occasions in these districts. In these instances, the orders were only published sometime in June 2021 after a significant delay. Although the J&K government is the most irreverent about Internet restriction, they are not the only culprits. Compliance with *Anuradha Bhasin* remains low in other parts of India as well.

Erodes trust

The importance of the publication of Internet suspension orders cannot be understated. Those aggrieved with the restriction cannot approach a court of law to question an order's legality in the absence of the order. At best, if they do, the court may direct the Government to produce the order, but this will allow the Government to delay production of the order until after the restriction has subsided. This enables the Government to get away with illegal restrictions. This non-publication of orders also undermines public confidence in the Government. The Internet is a necessity in this day and age, and restrictions without publicly disclosed reasons create a trust deficit.

There is also a deficit because the Union Government has also not done enough to give statutory recognition to the directions in *Anuradha Bhasin*. In 2020, it amended the Telecom

Suspension Rules, 2017 to limit Internet suspension orders to a maximum of 15 days. However, the amendment did not include an obligation on the Government to publish orders nor did it include the Supreme Court's direction to undertake periodic review of these orders.

Lack of awareness

As a result, the governmental non-compliance with the law is difficult to comprehend. One has to study the decision of the Supreme Court as opposed to simply looking at the rules to understand the obligations on the Government. The experience with Section 66A of the Information Technology Act has shown that if Supreme Court decisions are not statutorily recognised, the officials enforce the law incorrectly simply because of a lack of awareness. As an example, the State of Meghalaya in reply to an RTI application stated that it was not even aware of the judgment in *Anuradha Bhasin* even though eight months had passed since the Supreme Court's pronouncement.

Wide-ranging impact

However, Internet suspension also remains a problem independent of non-compliance with the directions of the Supreme Court. In 2020, the Indian economy suffered losses to the tune of \$2.8 billion due to 129 separate instances of Internet suspension, which affected 10.3 million individuals. The Internet is a source of information, entertainment, health care, education, livelihood and a platform for the members of Indian society to interact with each other and the world at large.

The harm – economic, psychological, social, and journalistic – caused by such suspensions outweighs any speculative benefits. Internet suspensions ought to be imposed in times of emergency and not to stifle the democratic exercise of the right to protest. In those times, the Internet is a necessity to seek help.

Moreover, it is also a tool to verify rumours, and enables individuals and the Government to disseminate the truth. On September 2, the government of J&K

restricted access to any form of communication on the ground that the 'provocative material on social media' could misguide the general public and result in a law and order situation.

A similar reason was stated to justify the Internet suspension in Karnal, Haryana. However, the Government will do well to recognise that offline rumours can also 'misguide the public', but the individuals will not have access to the Internet to determine the veracity of those rumours independently.

Internet restrictions are often justified on the ground that they are limited to mobile data services. These contentions also miss the point. According to a 2019 Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) report on Indian Telecom Services Performance Indicators, mobile device users (dongle and phone) constituted 97.02% of total Internet users. Only 3% of users have access to broadband Internet. These numbers are not likely to have changed significantly since then, since broadband Internet continues to be expensive. It follows from this that Internet restrictions also tend to adversely affect those from lower socio-economic backgrounds more.

Considering these issues, it is not surprising that the Supreme Court, in *Anuradha Bhasin*, permitted the Government to restrict Internet access only in limited circumstances. Parliament has also allowed these restrictions only in a public emergency or when there is a threat to public safety. Yet, to much dismay, Internet restrictions are much more common than desirable and cannot be challenged because of a lack of transparency.

More faithful compliance with the Supreme Court guidelines on the part of the executive government is needed to rid ourselves of the tag of the "internet shutdown capital" of the world and fulfil Digital India's potential.

Tanmay Singh is the Litigation Counsel at the Internet Freedom Foundation. Anandita Mishra is the Associate Litigation Counsel at the Internet Freedom Foundation. Krishnesh Bapat is a CCG Digital Rights Fellow hosted at the Internet Freedom Foundation



KEYWORD

The broken window fallacy

The idea was widely popularised by American economic journalist Henry Hazlitt

Prashanth Perumal

The broken window fallacy refers to the idea that economic destruction caused by natural and man-made calamities does not give any boost to economic activity as is commonly believed and in fact causes a net loss to society. The idea was first illustrated by French political economist Frederic Bastiat through the parable of the broken window in his 1850 essay "That Which is Seen, and That Which is Not Seen." The broken window fallacy is used to emphasise the idea of opportunity cost and the need to look beyond the obvious to find the true, often unintended, economic consequences of an action. The idea was widely popularised later by American economic journalist Henry Hazlitt in his famous 1946 book *Economics in One Lesson*.

Net loss

One of the versions of Bastiat's parable involves a shopkeeper whose careless son breaks a pane of glass. The unhappy shopkeeper is then consoled by spectators who tell him that his misfortune is nevertheless good fortune for the glazier who will now be able to sell a new pane of glass to the shopkeeper. The shopkeeper pays six francs to purchase a new pane of glass from the shopkeeper. If the shopkeeper's son had not broken the pane of glass, the glazier wouldn't have been able to sell glass to the shopkeeper and his business wouldn't have prospered. So, it is commonly thought, economic destruction can lead the way to economic prosperity. But Bastiat argues that this kind of reasoning ignores the fact that the shopkeeper could have spent the six francs on other goods such as shoes or books if his glass had not been broken by his son. So, the money spent on new glass comes at the cost of the shoes and books that the shopkeeper would have bought otherwise.

Similarly, let's say a country suffers a natural calamity such as an earthquake that causes widespread destruction. In the aftermath of the calamity, there is a rise in economic activity related to post-calamity reconstruction activities. This might seem to suggest that the natural calamity was an economic blessing in disguise as economic activity related to the reconstruction of damaged property has witnessed a boost. The cement industry and the steel industry, for instance, might witness increased activity as there is demand for their output to help build new homes in place of the damaged ones. However, this argument misses the fact that resources that are allocated towards building new homes could have been used towards other ends of society if there was no calamity in the first place. Thus natural calamities cause a net loss to the economy even though it might seem to the untrained eye that they offer a boost to economic activity. In other words, what is not seen by most people is the opportunity cost of the natural calamity.

The example of war

Keynesian economists have argued that the destruction caused by World War 2 gave a spur to economic activity as there was an effort to reconstruct damaged property and this, in turn, led to post-war economic prosperity. The problem with this argument is that, for one, war-torn countries would have been much better off if there was no destruction of life and property due to the war in the first place. If there was no war, the various resources that were used towards waging the expensive war would have been used to satisfy other ends of society. Secondly, the resources used after the end of the war to rebuild these damaged economies could have been used towards other ends if there was no war. So, in total, the war resulted in net loss to the economy.

THE DAILY QUIZ

The Union Budget of India is presented annually on February 1. A quiz on the Budget

Sindhu Nagaraj

QUESTION 1

The Government presents it on the first day of February so that it can be materialised before the beginning of the new financial year in April. However, until 2016, the budget was presented on a different day. When was it?

QUESTION 2

The railway budget of India was presented separately until 2016. It was merged with the general budget, ending decades-old practice. For how many years was the tradition of presenting it separately followed?

QUESTION 3

The Halwa ceremony begins a period where the finance ministry staff can emerge only once the Finance Minister completes her Budget speech on 1 February. This is done to ensure the secrecy of the budget. What is it called?

QUESTION 4

Until 2018, Finance Ministers carried the budget in a leather briefcase. Which Minister established this for the first time?

QUESTION 5

Who has presented the most number of budgets?



Visual question:

Identify this former Finance Minister. He is known for breaking a decades-old tradition. What is it?

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

- The reason January 27 is the International Day of Commemoration in memory of the victims of the Holocaust. **Ans: The Nazi Concentration and Extermination Camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau was liberated by Soviet troops on January 27 1945**
- The full form of Nazi. **Ans: Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei**
- The etymology of Holocaust. **Ans: Holocaust comes from the Greek holokauston, a translation of the Hebrew word 'olah, meaning: 'burnt sacrifice offered whole to God'**
- The other groups targeted by the Nazis apart from Jews. **Ans: The disabled, travelling communities such as the Roma and Sinti, and gay men**
- The first concentration camp in Nazi Germany was opened on this date. **Ans: March 22, 1933, at Dachau Visual. The connection between the pictures. Ans: The boy in the second picture is the young Forrest Gump, who was reportedly named after the first Grand Wizard of the Neo Nazi white supremacist outfit Ku Klux Klan (depicted in the first image) – Nathan Bedford Forrest**

Early Birds: Abhishek K. Singh| Vikas Singh

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

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

SANA'A

Yemen's Houthis fire missiles at U.S. warship, says rebel statement



Yemen's Houthi rebels fired "several" missiles at a U.S. warship in the Red Sea, they said on Wednesday, hours after the U.S. military reported shooting down a missile. "The naval forces of the Yemeni Armed Forces fired several naval missiles at the American destroyer USS Gravelly in the Red Sea," the Houthi statement said. AFP

GAZA STRIP

Israel floods Hamas tunnels as UN pleads for aid funding



Israel's Army has begun flooding Hamas's network of tunnels, which the military has dubbed "the Gaza metro", as intense fighting rages in Gaza, with the UN warning of the potential "collapse of the humanitarian system" in the territory after a funding row hit its Palestinian aid agency. AFP

MOSCOW

Russia sees NATO as 'threat', Kremlin says amid military drills



Russia views NATO as a "threat" and is taking measures to deal with it, the Kremlin said on Wednesday when asked about the alliance's large-scale military drills. Some 90,000 troops will take part in the NATO military alliance's Steadfast Defender-24 exercise, the biggest since the 1988 Reforger drill during the Cold War. AFP

BANGKOK

Thai court orders end to royal insult law reform campaign



Thailand's progressive Move Forward Party (MFP), which won most seats at the last election, was on Wednesday ordered to stop campaigning to reform the kingdom's tough royal defamation laws known as *lese-majeste* laws, as a top court ruled the policy was unlawful. The ruling could pave the way for MFP to be dissolved. AFP

Maldives chief prosecutor assaulted with hammer

Agence France-Presse
MALÉ

The top criminal prosecutor in the Maldives was recovering from an assault with a hammer on Wednesday, a rare attack against a public official in the upmarket archipelago tourist destination. Husain Shameem was on his way to work when an unidentified attacker pounced on him and injured his left arm, a police official said.

The main opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) said the attack was politically motivated. But police said they suspected a link to criminal prosecutions handled by Mr. Shameem. The attack came three days after violent scenes in Parliament when legislators rejected the appointment of three Cabinet posts.

Imran Khan gets 14 years in second jail term in two days

The former PM and his wife, Bushra Bibi, were found guilty of violating govt. rules by retaining and selling state gifts; Khan's lawyer dismissed the conviction as a violation of his basics rights

Associated Press
ISLAMABAD

Former Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan was found guilty of corruption on Wednesday and sentenced to 14 years, yet another blow to the imprisoned populist leader days before his political movement attempts a return to power in parliamentary elections. It was his second conviction in as many days and the harshest yet, and was the latest episode in the long-running battle between the powerful military and civilian leaders in the troubled Western ally.

Mr. Khan and his wife, Bushra Bibi – who was also convicted on Wednesday – were accused of retaining and selling state gifts in vio-



On the hook: Imran Khan and Bushra Bibi signing documents to submit surety bond over his bails in different cases. FILE PHOTO

lation of government rules when he was in power. In addition to his prison term, Mr. Khan was disqualified from holding any public office for 10 years.

His lawyer, Babar Awan, dismissed the conviction as a violation of Mr. Khan's basics rights said the former Premier was convicted

and sentenced in such a hurry that the judge did not wait for the arrival of his legal team. Mr. Khan, who in the waning days of his premiership began to challenge the country's military, was ousted from power in a no-confidence vote in April 2022. He now has more than 150 legal

cases hanging over him.

Still, the former cricket star remains intensely popular. Pakistan saw violent demonstrations – including ones that targeted military installations – after Mr. Khan's arrest last year.

Authorities have since cracked down on his supporters and his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party.

With Mr. Khan fighting legal battles, his rival, three-time premier Nawaz Sharif, has a clear path to a fourth term in office. Mr. Sharif himself was hobbled by legal cases and prison sentences, but the Supreme Court and other courts have acquitted him on all charges and scrapped a lifetime ban on politicians with criminal convictions from contesting elections.

Iran to 'decisively respond' to any U.S. strikes on nation

Associated Press
JERUSALEM

Iran threatened on Wednesday to "decisively respond" to any United States attack on the Islamic Republic following President Joe Biden's linking of Tehran to the killing of three U.S. soldiers at a military base in Jordan.

The U.S. has signalled it is preparing for retaliatory strikes in West Asia in the wake of the Sunday drone attack that also injured at least 40 troops at Tower 22, a secretive base in northeastern Jordan that's been crucial to the American presence in neighbouring Syria.

However, concerns remain that any additional American strikes could further inflame a region already roiled by Israel's ongoing war on Hamas in the Gaza Strip and the ongoing attacks by Yemen's Houthi



A satellite view of the U.S. military outpost known as Tower 22 in Rukban, Rwaished District, in Jordan. REUTERS

rebels on shipping in the Red Sea.

The Iranian warnings first came from Amir Saeid Irvani, Iran's Ambassador to the United Nations in New York. He gave a briefing to Iranian presspersons late on Tuesday, according to the state-run IRNA news agency.

"The Islamic Republic would decisively respond to any attack on the country, its interests and nationals under any pretexts," IR-

NA quoted Mr. Irvani as saying. He described any possible Iranian retaliation as a "strong response," without elaborating.

The Iranian mission to the UN did not respond to requests for comment or elaboration on Wednesday on Mr. Irvani's remarks.

Mr. Irvani also denied that Iran and the U.S. had exchanged any messages over the last few days, either through intermediaries or directly.

U.S. adds companies to Chinese military list

Reuters
WASHINGTON

The United States added more than a dozen Chinese companies to a list created by the Defence Department that highlights entities that are alleged to work with Beijing's military, a U.S. official said on Wednesday.

New additions to the list include memory chip maker YMTC, artificial intelligence company Megvii, lidar maker Hesai Technology and tech company NetPosa.

While being placed on the "Section 1260H" list doesn't involve immediate bans, it carries significant reputational risk for the designated companies and represents a stark warning to U.S. entities about the risks of conducting business with them. It could also add pressure on the Treasury Department to

While it doesn't involve immediate bans, it carries significant reputational risk for the companies.

In addition, the 2024 National Defence Authorisation Act added some teeth to the list, prohibiting the Defence Department under Section 805 of the law in coming years from contracting with any of the designated companies.

The updated list is expected to be made public later. Chinese Embassy in Washington did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Other firms added on Wednesday include China Three Gorges Corporation, China Construction Technology Co and Yitu Network Technology.

Ukraine says it hit airfield in Crimea; Russia differs

Reuters

The Ukrainian military claimed on Wednesday to have struck a military air base in Russian-occupied Crimea, while Moscow said it had thwarted the attack by shooting down missiles but some debris had hit a military installation.

Ukraine's Air Force commander Mykola Oleschuk thanked the military for conducting the operation, hitting Belbek airfield on the southwestern tip of the Crimea Peninsula near Russia's main naval base at Sevastopol.

The Russian Defence Ministry said fragments of Ukrainian missiles fell on the territory of a military unit in Lyubimovka, which is near the Belbek military air base. The incident caused no damage to "aviation equipment", it said.

Drying up



Historic drought: La Baells reservoir, which is only at 21% of its capacity, near Berga, north of Barcelona, Spain. Experts say the drought is driven by climate change and the entire Mediterranean region is forecast to heat up at a faster rate than many other regions. AP

U.S. has raised issue of buffer zone with Israel: official

Reuters
WASHINGTON

The United States has raised with Israel the issue of the establishment of a buffer zone in Gaza, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller told presspersons, adding that Washington opposes any reduction in the size of Gaza territory.

Asked about the raid on a hospital in Jenin and the destruction of a university in Gaza, Mr. Miller said at the moment, he had no update on an assessment of the raid.

However, he added that the United States had raised the issue of demolition of sites and Israel reported they were conducted only when they were sites from which terrorist activities were launched, plotted or planned.

Maldives turns to Sri Lanka for medical evacuation support

Meera Srinivasan
COLOMBO

The Maldives has sought Sri Lanka's assistance in medical evacuation services – mainly to transport patients to Colombo in air ambulances – amid a persisting strain with India.

Maldivian Minister of Transport and Civil Aviation Mohamed Ameen met his Sri Lankan counterpart Nimal Siripala de Silva in Colombo on Tuesday, and said on social media platform 'X', that Sri Lanka has agreed to help the Maldives with medical evacua-

tion. "We have specifically agreed upon creating a framework for immediate approval process between the Maldives and Sri Lanka on urgent requirements, specifically on med-evac flights," Mr. Ameen said in his post.

"They [Maldives] will use their air ambulances, this is to help keep this channel open and easy for any emergency medical treatment that Maldivians might need in Sri Lanka," Mr. de Silva told *The Hindu* on Wednesday morning. Sri Lanka and India are among the Maldives's close-



Maldivian Minister Mohamed Ameen, right, with Sri Lankan Minister Nimal Siripala de Silva, in Colombo on Wednesday.

est neighbours, and Maldivians have always had close ties in Colombo, a city they frequent.

The development comes amid President Mohamed Muizzu's apparent

efforts to expand and diversify the island nation's partnerships in medical evacuation. In December, he announced setting up an air ambulance service beginning March 2024,

and said it could help patients travel as far as Thailand. The need for prompt medical evacuation came into sharp focus earlier in January, when a Maldivian teenager died, reportedly owing to a delay in evacuation for emergency treatment.

Mr. Muizzu's efforts also assume significance at a time when Male and New Delhi grapple with strained ties, following controversial remarks made by Maldivian Ministers targeting India and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and a "Boycott Maldives" social

media campaign in India.

India's two naval choppers and a Dornier aircraft stationed in the Maldives have been involved in more than 600 medical evacuations – often from the atolls to capital Male –, search and rescue operations in the last five years, according to official sources in Male. Mr. Muizzu has set a March 15 deadline for New Delhi to withdraw its nearly 80 soldiers stationed in the country. New Delhi has said they were posted there chiefly to operate and maintain the helicopters and the aircraft.

Xi accepts credentials from Taliban envoy

Press Trust of India
BEIJING

China on Wednesday defended its President Xi Jinping receiving the credentials from the official of the Taliban-headed interim government in Afghanistan, saying it is a "normal diplomatic arrangement" and urged the international community not to exclude the Afghan militant group even though it is yet to respond to global concerns.

Mr. Xi on Tuesday re-

ceived the credentials of Ambassadors from several countries, including from Bilal Karimi, the Taliban-appointed Afghan Ambassador in what was termed the first diplomatic recognition of the Taliban government in Kabul, which is yet to get official recognition internationally.

"It's a normal diplomatic arrangement for China to receive the new Ambassador to China sent by the Afghan interim government," the Chinese statement said.



Refugees collect water at the Gorom Refugee near Juba, in South Sudan on January 26. REUTERS

Nearly eight million displaced by Sudan war: United Nations

Agence France-Presse
ADDIS ABABA

The number of people uprooted by the war between rival Generals in Sudan is almost eight million, the United Nations said on Wednesday.

UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi, who is on a visit to Ethiopia, called for "urgent and additional support to meet their needs", his agency said in a statement disclosing the numbers.

"I heard stories of heartbreaking loss of family, friends, homes and livelihoods," Mr. Grandi said in the statement.

The conflict between Sudan's army chief Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and his former deputy, Mohamed Hamdan Daglo, commander of the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces erupted in mid-April last year. Both sides have been accused of war crimes, including the indiscriminate shelling of residential areas, torture and arbitrary detention of civilians. Diplomatic efforts to end the violence continue but have failed to bear fruit, and numerous ceasefires have been broken.

"Without further donor support, it will be extremely difficult to deliver much-needed help to those who need it most," Mr. Grandi said.

Over 1,00,000 people have fled into Ethiopia, one of the six neighbouring countries sheltering the refugees, according to latest UN estimates.

The number of people who have gone to Chad since the war began crossed 5,00,000 last week, and an average of 1,500 flee into South Sudan each day, the UN statement said.

The war has killed at least 13,000 people, according to a conservative estimate by the Conflict Location and Event Data project.

The oasis city, at the centre of MBS's plan to transform the Saudi kingdom

The oasis city of Al-Ula in the Madina province of Saudi Arabia, once an important market along the historical incense route, sits at the centre of Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman's plan to steer the country away from dependence on oil and pilgrimage to match the beat of modernity

Nishtha Gautam
AL-ULA

"I bought my grandmother a gold necklace from my first salary and she changed her mind about me working alongside men."

Ghiwa (name changed), a tourist guide in Madina province of Saudi Arabia, adjusts her *niqab* as she answers a casually asked question about working women.

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, or MBS as he's popularly known, seems to have used Ghiwa's household tactic on a national level to herald an era of change in his country. The conservatives are bristling at his Vision 2030 for it breaks the shackles of traditional attitudes and performative religiosity.

In Al-Ula, a northwestern city in the Madina province, one can barely hear the muezzin's call for prayers. This oasis city, once an important market along the historical incense route, sits at the centre of MBS's ambitious plan to steer Saudi Arabia away from dependence on oil and pilgrimage and match the beat of modernity. Interestingly, Al-Ula is considered a "cursed" city in the Islamic worldview as its residents fell for idolatry and are thought to be punished by God for the same. MBS may have cheekily



Tourists seen in the city Al-Ula in the Madina province in Saudi Arabia. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

played on this reputation while setting up the Royal Commission for Al-Ula, which seeks to capitalise on the wealth of archaeological wonders in and around the city.

"Traditionalists say that a Muslim should avoid staying, eating, or drinking in Al-Ula. Hell, yeah!" Samir (name changed), a Pakistani-American tourist at the most expensive luxury resort in Al-Ula bursts out laughing. His wife and children are frolicking in the pool. Ever since it opened its doors for tourism, Saudi Arabia has been seeing a growing number of tourists who wish to explore the country beyond the pilgrimage sites. This interest in touring the country sits with its newly-forged idea of nationalism, which is not essentially linked with religion. Mohammad (name changed), a photographer from Riyadh, says,

"Change is good for our country. Saudi Arabia has been late in stepping along the course of time. But we are getting there". He proudly shares how his sisters were better at driving cars than many of his friends. "If a woman drives, she can handle household chores independently." Empowerment starts with convenience.

Focus on the 'other'

Saudi Arabia has been at pains to project a new image of friendliness towards the 'other', be it the Abraham Accords, easing of the visa norms, opening up the country for popular sport and entertainment events, or opening the first liquor store in Riyadh after seven decades. The Saudi Arabian establishment and common people are recognising the benefits of being welcoming towards the

'other' for it results in economic and geopolitical gains. Young Saudi Arabians are participating in this transformation process for the sake of individual liberties as well as in the name of nationalism.

"I want to travel the world, but I have a to-do list for my country. As a teacher, I am responsible for preparing the next generation to be capable of taking Saudi Arabia to the next level of development," says Ahmad (name changed), a young English teacher in the Madina province. He also shared how girls were performing much better than boys in academics. In the modernisation drive, young women are offered scholarships to study and train abroad to prepare them for the times ahead.

There is some obvious resistance. "Sometimes tourists say they don't

want a woman as their guide. We tell them to cancel their tour in that case. There are no refunds," winks Asra (name changed), a tourist guide in Al-Ula. She wore her ID card proudly over her *abaya*. Only her eyes and thumbs (for touchscreens of her phone and other gadgets) were uncovered. "My choice of attire is informed by tradition and not so much by religion," she adds.

Al-Ula's archaeological bounty could have been a cultural landmine of sorts given the implications of Aramaic inscriptions on the perception of the Koran. The authorities concerned are treading with caution while wresting power over the culture and society from the religious establishment. From the cursed city, Al-Ula is pacing towards becoming another Istanbul – a confluence of civilisations.

In the wake of the falling oil prices almost a decade ago, the seeds of top-down nationalist mobilisation were sown during the reign of King Abdullah. The desert is now showing signs of this crop. It is to be remembered, however, that top-down socio-cultural changes have not always worked as desired in Saudi Arabia. Like, in the case of the *Sahwa* (Islamic Resurgence) mobilisation in the 1970s and 80s, the religious leaders later began to challenge their political

benefactors on issues of foreign policy.

Foreign policy

The Saudi Arabian middle-ground approach in its foreign policy has worked well for it so far. The heat of the current Israel-Palestine conflict, too, has spared it. Under the almost unchallenged leadership of MBS, Saudi Arabian people are being encouraged to examine their uniqueness in the strife-torn West Asia and North Africa region. While countries like Jordan, Iraq, Yemen, Egypt, Syria, and Libya are strewn with devastated, often bombed out, historical sites, Saudi Arabia is preparing to stun the world with its antiquities of Al-Ula, Hegra, Tayma, and other sites still under excavation and exploration.

The resurrection of MBS's grandfather King Abdulaziz, who founded the third Saudi Arabian state and ruled the country from 1932 to 1953, in the form of the naming of airports and roads after him is significant. Just like the older king didn't rely on oil for nation-building, MBS wants to signal to the world that Saudi Arabia is relevant even without being a significant source of fossil fuel. His 'green' approach is gaining support in the young Saudi Arabian population.

(Nishtha Gautam is a Delhi-based writer and entrepreneur)

Farmers close in on French cities; police make arrests

Agence France-Presse
PARIS

French police arrested some protesting farmers on Wednesday as convoys of tractors edged closer to Paris, Lyon and other strategic locations in France, with many ignoring warnings of police intervention if they cross red lines laid down by ministers.

Farmers' unions, unimpressed by concessions offered by President Emmanuel

Macron's government, encouraged their members to fight on for higher incomes, less red tape and protection from foreign competition. "You are fighting this battle because if we don't fight, we die," Serge Bousquet-Cassagne, head of the Chamber of Agriculture in the southwestern Lot-et-Garonne department, told protesters headed for the wholesale Rungis market south of Paris, a key food distribution hub for the capital. The government has warned farmers to stay away from Rungis and large cities, with Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin saying officers stood ready to defend strategic spots. "They can't attack police, they can't enter Rungis, they can't enter the Paris airports or the centre of Paris," Mr. Darmanin told France 2 television. "But let me tell you again that if they try, we will be there."

Despite the warning, a convoy of tractors that started in the southwest of the country resumed its drive towards Rungis on Wednesday after spending the night at farms along the way. 18 people were arrested near Rungis for "interfering with traffic", a police source said.

Lost and found



Recovered art: A worker adjusts Austrian painter Gustav Klimt's *Portrait of Fraulein Lieser* in Kinsky auction house in Vienna on Tuesday. Believed to be the property of Henriette Lieser who was deported and killed by Nazis, the painting was lost for almost 100 years. REUTERS

State Duma approves Bill to confiscate assets of people 'discrediting' Russian army

Associate Press
MOSCOW

The Lower House of Russia's Parliament on Wednesday approved a Bill that would allow authorities to confiscate money, valuables and other assets from people convicted of spreading "deliberately false information" about the country's military.

After its swift passage in the State Duma, the Bill is now expected to quickly sail through the Upper House of Parliament and receive Russian President Vladimir Putin's signature.

Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin said the measure would strengthen the punishment for the "traitors who sling mud at our country and our troops" and "strip those scoundrels of honorary titles,



After its swift passage in the State Duma, the Bill is now expected to quickly sail through the Upper House of Parliament. REUTERS

confiscate their assets, money and other valuables."

'Extremist activities'

The new law would apply to people who are convicted of publicly inciting "extremist activities," calling for actions that would hurt the security of the state or "discrediting" the armed forces. Discrediting the Russian military became a criminal offense under a

law adopted as part of a sweeping government crackdown on dissent after Moscow sent troops into Ukraine in February 2022.

"Everyone who tries to destroy Russia, who betrays it, must suffer the deserved punishment and pay compensation for the damage inflicted on the country, at the cost of their property," Mr. Volodin said before Wednesday's vote.

Taiwan holds military drills amid growing concern over Chinese invasion

Associated Press
KAOHSIUNG

Almost every day, Chinese warships sail in waters around Taiwan and warplanes fly toward the island before turning back, raising questions on a surprise attack.

Taiwan's military conducted a two-day exercise at sea, on land and in the air this week to practice defending against such a surprise attack.

As journalists looked on from fast escort boats, a mine layer released at least a half dozen dummy mines from a chute in its stern. Later in the day, journalists

witnessed a simulated attack by China at a military base in the eastern county of Taitung.

Troops in red helmets representing the People's Liberation Army parachuted in, while Taiwanese army drones buzzed overhead. Taiwanese troops soon rolled onto the training course, fighting back with M60 Patton tanks, a model first introduced to the U.S. Army in 1959 but significantly upgraded by Taiwan. Taiwan is gradually replacing some of them with M1 Abrams tanks and the HIMARS rocket system, which the U.S. has also supplied to Ukraine.



Combat ready: Members of Taiwan's armed forces participate in a drill at a military base in Taitung on Wednesday. REUTERS

Maj. Gen. Sun Li-fang, the chief Defence Ministry spokesperson, told presspersons at Zuoying Naval Base in southern Taiwan that China's recent actions threaten to spark a conflict

that could have devastating effects on the entire region, where billions of dollars in trade pass the 160 kilometre-wide waterway separating Taiwan from China.

"Any unilateral irrational action could very easily escalate tensions and sabotage stability in the Taiwan Strait region," Maj. Gen. Sun said. "So the Chinese communists should immediately cease these sorts of undermining actions."

China claims the self-governing island of 23 million people as its own territory and says it must come under Beijing's control. The long-running divide is a flashpoint in U.S.-China relations. As relations between the rivals have deteriorated in recent years, fears have grown that America could get pulled

into a war if hostilities break out.

Taiwan's defence ministry, in a daily report, said that seven Chinese warplanes and four naval vessels were detected around the island in the 24-hour period ending on Wednesday. It also reported a Chinese balloon off its northern coast.

'Political hype'

A Chinese government spokesperson criticised Taiwan's government for "creating political hype" about recent balloon sightings. Chen Binhua from the Taiwan Affairs Office said that balloons are common

around the world, usually belong to private companies and are mostly used for civilian purposes such as weather monitoring.

The annual exercise comes less than three weeks after voters elected Lai Ching-te as their next president, giving a third straight four-year term to the independence-leaning Democratic Progressive Party, which is opposed by China.

The drills are aimed in part at boosting public confidence in the island's ability to defend itself, particularly during next month's Lunar New Year holiday.

IN BRIEF



Kalyan Jewellers posted 21.5% rise in PAT to ₹180.37 cr. in Q3

Kalyan Jewellers reported a 21.51% growth in consolidated profit after tax (PAT) at ₹180.37 crore for the December quarter. The company's PAT stood at ₹148.43 crore during the year-earlier period, the company said in a regulatory filing. Revenue from operations of the Thiruvananthapuram-based company grew 34.47% during the third quarter of the ongoing fiscal to ₹5,223.07 crore as against ₹3,884.09 crore in the year-earlier period. **PTI**

Sun Pharma Q3 net profit rises 16.52% to ₹2,524 crore

Sun Pharmaceutical Industries reported third-quarter consolidated net profit rose 16.52% to ₹2,524 crore from ₹2,166 crore in the year earlier. Gross sales grew 9.5% to ₹12,157 crore. India formulation sales saw a growth of 11.4% at ₹3,778.5 crore, while U.S. formulation sales grew 13.2% to \$477 million. Emerging markets formulation sales at \$252 million was lower by 2.3% and rest of the world formulation sales at \$214 million was a growth of 12.9%.

Kore.ai secures \$150 million investment from FTV Capital

Orlando-based Kore.ai, a player in enterprise conversational and generative AI platform technology, said it had secured \$150 million strategic growth investment. The funding was led by FTV Capital, along with participation from NVIDIA and existing investors Vistara Growth, Sweetwater PE, NextEquity, Nicola and Beedie, the company said. Kore.ai has its largest R&D centre in Hyderabad, where it employs about 1,000 people.

GST revenues rev up in January

GST collection rises to record second-highest monthly revenue of ₹1,72,129 cr. in January; January's revenues are 4.4% above December's ₹1,64,882 cr. collection, snapping a two-month streak of month-on-month contractions in the GST kitty

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

India's Goods and Services Tax (GST) regime delivered its second-highest monthly revenues of ₹1,72,129 crore in January, as per data collected by Wednesday evening and shared by the Finance Ministry.

While the ultimate overall GST tally for January is likely to be higher as taxpayers will be able to file returns till the midnight of January 31, the revenues reported till 5 pm reflected a 10.4% uptick, a tad faster than the three-month low of 10.3% in December.

Buoyant collections

January GST revenues reflect a 10.4% uptick, a tad faster than the three-month low of 10.3% in December

- The ultimate overall GST tally for January likely to be higher as taxpayers can file returns till midnight of January 31
- January marks the third month in the current financial year with collection of ₹1.70 lakh crore or more

Experts expect second highest ever collection to provide more space for next stage of GST reforms

On a sequential basis, January's revenues are 4.4% above December's ₹1,64,882 crore collection, snapping a two-month streak of month-on-month contractions in the GST kit-

ty. Experts said GST authorities' focus on completing audits and probes for past years' dues also provided a fillip to January's revenues which are linked to transactions undertaken

in December 2023.

"Notably, this is the second highest monthly collection ever and marks the third month in this financial year with collection of ₹1.70 lakh crore or more... Final collection for the month would be higher," the Finance Ministry said.

In April 2023, GST collections had crossed a record ₹1.87 lakh crore aided by year-end compliances, while October had clocked a tad over ₹1.72 lakh crore, the second-highest monthly inflow at the time.

"Coming on the Interim Budget eve, the second highest ever collections would provide more hea-

droom for embarking on the next stage of GST reforms," said MS Mani, partner at Deloitte India.

"During the April 2023-January 2024 period, cumulative gross GST collection witnessed 11.6% year-on-year growth, reaching ₹16.69 lakh crore, as against ₹14.96 lakh crore collected in the same period of the previous year," the ministry noted.

Of January's GST intake so far, the government has settled ₹43,552 crore to the Central GST pool and ₹37,257 crore to the State GST kitty from the Integrated GST collections during the month.

Core sector output growth slowed to a 14-month low in December

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Output growth of India's eight core sectors slumped to a 14-month low of 3.8% in December, compared with an 8.3% pace a year earlier and revised growth of 7.9% in November 2023.

Electricity generation, which has a 20% weightage in the Index of Core Industries (ICI), slipped to an eight-month low of 0.6%, while crude oil output shrank for the second successive month by 1%, the sharpest slippage since June 2023.

Yet, the ICI released by the Commerce and Indus-



try Ministry on Wednesday, was 5.9% above November's levels, and marked a nine-month peak in actual output levels. Coal production grew 10.6%, the slowest year-on-year uptick in six months, but output was at its highest level since April 2023.

Refinery products and steel output also hit their highest levels since April, despite annualised growth rates slowing sharply - with the former rising at a nine-month low pace of 2.6%, while steel grew at a 14-month-low rate of 5.9%.

Cement rebounds

Cement output recovered from a 4% contraction in November, to expand 1.3% in December and was a sharp 18.7% higher in sequential terms, with production levels at their highest since July.

Fertilisers production grew at a seven-month high rate of 5.8% with output levels also the highest

since May. Natural gas production grew at a three-month low rate of 6.6%.

The core sectors constitute a little over 40% of the Index of Industrial Production (IIP), which had clocked an eight-month low growth of 2.4% in November and those levels may persist in December as well.

Bank of Baroda chief economist Madan Sabnavis expects IIP to record a 2%-3% uptick in December, while ICRA chief economist Aditi Nayar pegged it in the range of 1% to 3%. The IIP numbers for December will be released on February 12.

Bank of Baroda Q3 PAT rises 19% to ₹4,579 cr.

The Hindu Bureau
MUMBAI

Bank of Baroda reported third quarter standalone net profit for the period ended December 31, 2023 grew 18.8% to ₹4,579 crore due to better asset quality.

Net interest income (NII) grew 2.6% YoY to ₹11,101 crore.

Cost of deposits increased to 4.96% as against 4.01% a year earlier, the bank said in a filing with the exchanges. Consolidated net profit stood at ₹4,789 crore as against ₹4,306 crore in the year-earlier period.

April-Dec. fiscal deficit at 55% of goal

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Union Government's fiscal deficit was ₹9.8 lakh crore or 55% of Budget target through the first nine months, as per Controller General of Accounts data, which showed a sharp pick-up in capital spending in December, doubling YoY to ₹88,000 crore after a two-month lull.

"As much as ₹3.3 lakh

crore needs to be incurred in the final quarter... to meet the capex target for the year, which appears optimistic relative to the ₹2.5 lakh crore recorded in the same quarter" of FY23, said Aditi Nayar, chief economist at ICRA.

Revenue expenditure growth of 2.3% between April and December was the slowest since 1998-1999, India Ratings & Research economists noted.

Maruti beats Q3 profit view on strong SUV sales

Reuters
BENGALURU

Maruti Suzuki India, the country's top carmaker by sales, reported a bigger-than-expected jump in Q3 profit on Wednesday, buoyed by strong demand for its sport utility vehicles (SUVs). Sales spiked during the festive season, which was largely in Q3.

Wipro said to be set to lay off several mid-level executives at Capco

The Hindu Bureau
BENGALURU

Wipro is said to have sent termination letters to an as yet unknown number of 'expensive mid-level executives' working at Capco, the London-based consulting firm the IT major acquired for \$1.45 billion in 2021, according to two people with knowledge of the

development. The move is part of a "trimming" to improve margins, said the people, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

"Aligning our business and talent to the changing market environment is a critical part of our strategy as we look to build a resilient, agile, and high-performance organisation," a Wipro spokesperson said.

Coromandel's board clears new plants in Kakinada

The Hindu Bureau
HYDERABAD

Agri inputs solution provider Coromandel International's board has approved setting up new phosphoric and sulphuric acid plants at its Kakinada fertiliser unit in Andhra Pradesh with an investment of ₹1,029 crore, as existing plant is fully utilised.

China's factory activity shrinks again

Reuters
BEIJING

China's manufacturing activity contracted for the fourth straight month in January, an official factory survey showed on Wednesday, suggesting the sprawling sector and the broader economy were struggling to regain momentum at the start of 2024.

The official purchasing managers' index (PMI)

rose to 49.2 in January from 49 in December, driven by a rise in output but still below the 50-mark separating growth from contraction. It was in line with a median forecast of 49.2 in a Reuters poll.

The data provides the first official snapshot of how the world's No.2 economy has started off the new year after a shakier-than-expected post-COVID recovery.

CUMI Q3 net inches lower to ₹112 cr. as revenue slides

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI

Carborundum Universal Ltd. (CUMI) reported consolidated net profit for the December quarter contracted marginally to ₹112 crore, from ₹113 crore in the year-earlier period.

Revenue from operations declined by 3.6% to ₹1,130 crore, of which abrasives accounted for ₹529 crore, ceramics ₹243 crore and electro-minerals ₹369 crore, the Murugappa group firm said in a statement.

The geopolitical situation continues to present an uncertain environment for the operations of the step-down subsidiary, Volzhsky Abrasives Works (VAW), Russia, including those arising from international sanctions and territory embargoes.

CUMI incurred capex of ₹154 crore. Its debt-to-equity ratio stood at 0.04. Cash and cash equivalents was at ₹342 crore.



L. Ganesh

Rane Engine Valve turned a profit of ₹3.5 cr. in Q3

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI

Rane Engine Valve Ltd. (REVL) posted a standalone net profit of ₹3.5 crore for the December quarter against a loss of ₹1.77 crore in the year-earlier period.

Revenue from operations rose 10% to ₹136 crore while cost of material consumed increased marginally to ₹57 crore from ₹52 crore, the leading manufacturer of engine valves, guides and tappets said.

Mainland companies listing on GIFT IFSC exchanges likely to see split in liquidity

Ashley Coutinho
MUMBAI

Companies listed on the domestic bourses that also choose to list on the GIFT IFSC exchanges could see a fragmentation of liquidity.

Foreign portfolio investors (FPIs) may prefer investing in shares listed on IFSC exchanges given the reduced currency risk and the potential tax exemption on capital gains from sale of shares, said experts.

Eligible foreign investors which are not FPIs can also invest in companies listed on IFSC.

"Indian public companies can now choose to raise funds from both local markets in INR and foreign markets at IFSC in foreign currency, supporting their global aspirations. GIFT-IFSC's regulatory framework enables transactions on stock exchanges in foreign currency, reducing currency risk and offering a secure and attractive investment climate," said Tushar Sachade, Partner,



Perfect choice: FPIs may prefer investing in shares listed on IFSC given reduced currency risk and potential tax exemption. THE HINDU

Price Waterhouse & Co.

Industry observers believe a dual listing could lead to split in market capitalisation of Indian companies and impact liquidity for resident investors, while providing additional avenues for FPIs to invest.

Market bifurcation

"A dual listing could lead to the bifurcation of the Indian capital market into a market for domestic and international investors. This may be detrimental to the resident domestic in-

vestors unless adequate safeguards are put in place," said Yashesh Ashar, Partner, Illume Advisory.

Mr. Ashar believes resident investors should be allowed to invest, at least to the extent of the current LRS limits. According to him, clarity would be required in terms of parity in pricing norms, calculation of market capitalisation, promoter shareholdings, maintenance of liquidity in both the exchanges (specifically in mainland exchanges for retail investors) and

swap of securities of one exchange for the other for foreign investors.

"Foreigners will have the choice of investing in shares listed on IFSC or on the mainland. Indian issuers can do a differential pricing for follow-on public offerings, and can potentially raise money at a higher valuation from foreign investors," said V. Balasubramaniam, MD and CEO of NSE IX.

Domestic liquidity

He believes domestic liquidity will be protected to the extent that resident investors are not permitted to invest in companies listed on the IFSC exchanges.

Indian companies listed on the mainland bourses can list on the IFSC exchanges via follow-on public offerings, offers for sale or qualified institutional placements, subject to SEBI approval.

"This will be through a framework that will be based on the principles of the depository receipt me-

chanism. So, a part of the shares will be held in the Indian depository and part will be in the IFSC depository," he said.

A working group report titled Direct Listing of Listed Indian Companies on IFSC Exchanges suggested the equity shares of Indian firms listed on IFSC exchanges be held directly by the shareholders in demat accounts maintained with the depository in IFSC. In the case of offer for sale, the shares will be transferred from the entities' demat account in domestic India to the shareholders' demat account in IFSC.

"If foreign investors are not able to find good secondary market liquidity for the shares listed on the IFSC, they will have the ability to transfer the shares from the IFSC depository to the Indian depository and sell the shares in the Indian domestic market," Mr. Balasubramaniam added.

(The writer is with The Hindu businessline)

NBFC Indel Money unveils ₹200-crore NCD issue

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI

Indel Money Ltd. announced the fourth public issue of secured redeemable non-convertible debentures with a face value of ₹1,000 each.

The issue includes a base issue size for an amount of up to ₹100 crore with an option to retain over subscription up to ₹100 crore aggregating up to ₹200 crore, said Executive Whole Time Director Umesh Mohanan.

The NBFC in the gold loan sector said the NCDs would offer a monthly return of 11.50% per annum and effective yield would be 12.25% per annum.

Indel Money will use the funds for the purpose of onward lending, financing and repayment/prepayment of principal and interest on borrowings of the company, he said. The issue closes on February 12 and the minimum application size is 10 NCDs.

MARKETS

MARKET WATCH

	WEDNESDAY	% CHANGE
Sensex	71,752	0.86
US Dollar	83.04	0.07
Gold	63,350	0.07
Brent oil	82.02	-0.20

NIFTY 50

	PRICE	CHANGE
Adani Enter	3142.00	50.90
Adani Ports	1207.65	20.30
Apollo Hosp	6352.95	43.15
Asian Paints	2957.85	3.75
Axis Bank	1067.75	13.65
Bajaj Auto	7667.55	101.15
Bajaj Finserv	1627.30	36.75
Bajaj Finance	6862.90	45.70
Bharti Airtel	1170.70	12.05
BPCL	502.35	-1.85
Britannia Ind	5198.40	106.65
Cipla	1351.00	35.90
Coal India	406.15	-3.60
Divis Lab	3670.60	118.90
Dr Reddys Lab	6121.15	280.20
Eicher Motors	3839.60	134.85
Grasim Ind	2175.00	48.85
HCL Tech	1576.00	16.70
HDFC Bank	1462.55	18.25
HDFC Life	576.60	1.60
Hero MotoCorp	4621.55	33.20
Hindalco	579.35	10.10
Hind Unilever	2481.55	22.90
ICI	1028.15	11.25
IndusInd Bank	1534.05	14.15
Infosys	1660.90	9.45
ITC	441.55	3.50
JSW Steel	818.65	6.65
Kotak Bank	1825.25	1.65
L&T	3479.75	-153.55
LTI Mindtree Ltd.	5448.55	95.75
M&M	1651.55	31.20
Maruti Suzuki	10186.90	235.25
Nestle India	2506.00	13.95
NTPC	317.50	2.05
ONGC	252.25	3.05
PowerGrid Corp	259.30	5.20
Reliance Ind	2853.25	38.00
SBI Life	1401.15	2.15
State Bank	640.50	13.75
Sun Pharma	1418.45	46.70
Tata Consumer Pro-	1118.00	-4.90
Tata Motors	884.20	25.35
Tata Steel	135.95	1.25
TCS	3815.95	15.40
Tech Mahindra	1333.65	15.80
Titan	3697.55	-38.20
UltraTech Cement	10167.35	203.75
UPL	537.70	2.45
Wipro	478.15	5.65

EXCHANGE RATES

Indicative direct rates in rupees a unit except yen at 4 p.m. on January 31

CURRENCY	TT BUY	TT SELL
US Dollar	82.84	83.16
Euro	89.69	90.03
British Pound	104.95	105.37
Japanese Yen (100)	56.07	56.29
Chinese Yuan	11.53	11.58
Swiss Franc	96.02	96.39
Singapore Dollar	61.81	62.06
Canadian Dollar	61.71	61.97
Malaysian Ringgit	17.50	17.59
Australian Dollar	54.53	54.75

Source: Indian Bank

WTO may put off decision on PSH till MC14



No breakthrough: A permanent solution to PSH is crucial as it will legitimise higher stockholding subsidies. REUTERS

Amiti Sen
NEW DELHI

The WTO is considering the option of putting off a decision on a permanent solution to public stockholding (PSH) for food security, being championed by India and many developing countries, till the next Ministerial Conference (MC14), probably in 2026, in case differences between members don't get resolved at MC13 next month.

Permanent solution

"India, together with the G33 developing countries group, the African Group and the ACP Group, however, are continuing to emphasise on standalone outcomes on PSH and special safeguard measure at MC13," per a Geneva-based trade official. The MC13 is scheduled on February 26-29 in Abu Dhabi.

A permanent solution to PSH is crucial for India and many other developing countries as it will legitimise higher subsidies for stockholding programmes such as the MSP, right now subject to a cap of 10% of production value.

A peace clause agreed to at the Bali MC 2013 gives many developing countries, including India, immunity against legal action from other members if PSH subsidies exceed the limit. But it is riddled with many conditions. On Tuesday, the WTO Committee on Agriculture's Chair circulated a draft text on a possible pact on agricultural issues at MC13 which members agreed to recognise as a basis for further discussion, though many said it was not perfect.

(The writer is with The Hindu businessline)

Energy traders, shippers grapple with Red Sea fallout as oil-freight costs swell

Longer travel times have tightened tanker supply, affecting shipments of naphtha from Europe to Asia and diesel from the East to Europe, according to traders; opportunity opens for U.S. refiners to fill gap in Europe; re-routing around Africa saps tanker supply in Asia

NEWS ANALYSIS

Reuters
SINGAPORE/NEW DELHI/LONDON

To avoid the Red Sea, the supertanker Grand Bonanza set out early in January on a roughly 40-day journey carrying 1.8 million barrels of Abu Dhabi crude for TotalEnergies from the United Arab Emirates all the way around Africa to France.

The trip will take at least two weeks longer than the normal route via the Suez Canal, and at about \$5.7 million, will cost nearly 80% more, according to estimates by a shipping source and data from LSEG and Kpler.

The French oil giant's booking of the Grand Bonanza illustrates how attacks by Yemen-based Houthi forces on Red Sea shipping, which had mostly affected container shipping, are now driving up costs and disrupting global oil trading.

Pricing pressures

A strike last Friday on a Trafigura-chartered fuel tanker underscored the risk. Energy producers and traders are weighing the higher prices of longer voyages around the Cape of Good Hope and using larger crude tankers to manage costs and risks,



Troubled lane: Houthi military helicopter flies over the Galaxy Leader cargo ship in the Red Sea. REUTERS

while buyers are demanding discounts to compensate for higher freight and war risk premiums.

Shippers are revising routes and refuelling points and accelerating cruising speeds, which burns more fuel and increases emissions.

"Unless the Red Sea disruption eases quickly, we should see some significant increase in the cost of delivered crude," said Stefano Grasso, a portfolio manager at 8VantEdge in Singapore.

European refiners are hurt by the increased shipping times that are driving up costs for their crude, but their margins are supported by a drop in competing product imports from the West Asia and India, traders said.



Rising freight and insurance costs, meanwhile, are constraining diesel and jet fuel shipments from Asia and West Asia to Europe

Longer travel times have tightened tanker supply, affecting shipments of naphtha from Europe to Asia and diesel from the east to Europe, they said.

"The recent rise in clean freight rates is boosting the prices of refined products in net importing regions, including diesel in Europe, naphtha and fuel oil in Asia, and gasoline in the U.S.," Goldman Sachs ana-

lysts wrote in a January 29 note. U.S. refiners benefit as they can send fuel products to Europe to replace supply from West Asia, said Mukesh Sahdev, head of oil trading at consultancy Rystad Energy, just as the U.S. did with natural gas, replacing Russian supply after Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. "The recent Red Sea attacks pose both a threat to EU refined products imports and an opportunity for the U.S. refining system to again fill the gap," he said.

East-West split

For European refiners buying Iraq's Basrah oil, rising import costs are dampening demand in the first quarter, traders said.

Costs to charter 1 million barrel-capacity Suezmax

ships to send Iraqi oil to Mediterranean refineries have climbed by \$2.50-\$3.50 a barrel for freight, while insurance has roughly tripled to between 10 and 15 cents a barrel, according to a trader with a European refiner.

Volumes of Iraqi crude heading to Europe have declined also because in the current backwarddated market, where near-term oil prices are higher than those in future months, cargoes lose value over the extra 20 days the ship is on the water.

In the other direction, sellers of Kazakhstan's CPC Blend crude to Asia are offering cargoes on Very Large Crude Carriers (VLCCs) via Africa instead of smaller Suezmax ships for economies of scale, traders said, although no deals have been struck yet for May arrival cargoes.

One deterrent is that VLCCs, which can carry up to 2 million barrels, are too big to dock at Russia's Novorossiysk port where CPC Blend is exported, which means cargoes must be transferred from smaller tankers to VLCCs, incurring additional costs. "I can see the market creating a clear east/west split. Basrah stays east, CPC stays west," a person involved in CPC oil trading said.

Meanwhile, TotalEnergies has provisionally chartered VLCC Amphion to load crude from Fujairah

to the United Kingdom on February 6-7, a shipping source said. The charter comes with the option of going via the Cape of Good Hope at about \$6.4 million or via Suez at about \$3.7 million. TotalEnergies declined to comment.

Tight ship supply is now hitting the Asian market. Last week, freight rates for a long-range (LR) tanker capable of carrying 6,70,000 barrels of diesel from South Korea to the U.K. jumped at least 30% to more than \$6 million, data from SSS Tankers showed.

That in turn has pushed up rates for smaller medium-range tankers by 20% for intra-Asia routes.

"We are seeing at least 70 tankers diverting to transiting via the Cape of Good Hope since the U.S.-led strikes began on 12 January," Vortexa analyst Serena Huang said, adding more are expected to be diverted with the escalation of tensions between the Houthis and U.S. forces.

Rising freight and insurance costs, meanwhile, are constraining diesel and jet fuel shipments from Asia and West Asia to Europe, traders said. Diesel shipments from India to Europe slumped roughly 80% in January, Kpler data showed.

A 50% jump in freight costs has likely shut opportunities for European refiners to export naphtha to Asia, traders said.

Buoyant data



Bright spot: People shop at a supermarket in the Manhattan borough of New York. U.S. consumer confidence beat expectations in January to reach its highest level since December 2021, with the public more optimistic than at any point since the Federal Reserve began raising interest rates. The Fed has increased interest rates to a 23-year high in a bid to tame inflation and bring it back towards its long-run target of 2%, pushing up borrowing costs across the country. AFP

State-backed 'national team' of investors piles in to prop China stocks

Reuters

A rescue operation is underway in China's equity markets with large and unusual flows into blue-chip funds suggesting a plunge by state-backed investors.

It is unclear exactly who is buying, or whether their pockets are deep enough to turn around the sliding market. But analysts say the purchasing pattern points to the so-called "national team" of state-backed investors, several of whom have said recently they have turned buyers.

The flow

More than \$17 billion flowed to four Chinese-domiciled exchange traded funds tracking the CSI 300



Cosmetic move: Analysts say problems such as lack of confidence in property ownership must be rectified to improve things. AP

index in the month to January 26, S&P Global Market Intelligence found.

It found only the S&P 500 - a market 18 times larger - has drawn greater inflows, receiving about \$20 billion, and that no off-

shore CSI 300 tracker drew comparably heavy buying.

Goldman Sachs said last week's domestic ETF inflows were the biggest since 2015. For example, assets under management of the E Fund CSI300 In-

dex ETF jumped more than 70% this month alone to \$11.37 billion.

Meanwhile, foreign investors sold 18.2 billion yuan worth of China stocks via the cross-border Connect scheme in January, the sixth consecutive month of net selling.

Signs of state-backed buying are the latest indication of increased official efforts to stem the decline and similar support in 2015 steadied markets - albeit temporarily.

Analysts expect state-sanctioned stock buying can only do so much and fundamental problems such as oversupply and a lack of confidence in property ownership must be rectified to improve things.

U.S. bitcoin ETFs raise questions over financial system risks

NEWS ANALYSIS

Reuters
LONDON/WASHINGTON

The launch of U.S. exchange-traded funds (ETFs) tracking bitcoin deepens ties between the volatile world of cryptocurrencies and the traditional financial system, potentially creating unforeseen new risks, some experts say.

The Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) this month approved 11 spot bitcoin ETFs from issuers, including BlackRock and Invesco/Galaxy Digital, in a watershed moment for a crypto industry dogged by bankruptcies and crime.

The SEC had long rejected the products citing in-

vestor protection concerns, but was forced to rethink its position after losing a court challenge brought by Grayscale Investments.

Crypto enthusiasts say the products will allow investors to more easily and safely gain exposure to bitcoin. But when approving the products, SEC Chair Gary Gensler warned bitcoin remains a "volatile asset" and that investors should be wary.

\$100 potential

The ETFs combined have around \$21 billion in assets, and could draw as much as \$100 billion this year alone from retail and institutional investors, some analysts predict. Bitcoin is down more than 6% since the products were launched.



Highly infectious: Some analysts say last year's U.S. banking upheaval showed that financial and crypto markets can transmit risks to one another. REUTERS

If widely adopted, the products could pose risks to other parts of the financial system during times of market stress by exacerbating bitcoin price volatility, or creating dislocations

between the price of the ETF and bitcoin, said some ETF experts, citing evidence from previous ETF volatility events.

Others said last year's U.S. banking upheaval

showed that financial and crypto markets can transmit risks to one another. Crypto lender Silvergate Bank, for example, liquidated following withdrawals sparked by the col-

lapse of crypto exchange FTX, which in turn stoked panic that contributed to the failure of Signature Bank, regulators have said. The collapse of Silicon Valley Bank, meanwhile, sparked a run on stablecoin USD Coin.

Interconnection risk

"As investors pour money into these products, you substantially increase the risk of much greater interconnection between the core of the financial system and the crypto ecosystem," said Dennis Kelleher, CEO of Better Markets, an advocacy group which urged the SEC to reject bitcoin ETFs, citing risks to investors and financial system.

Conceived in 2009 as an alternative payment mechanism, bitcoin is mostly

used as a speculative investment. Its daily average volatility is roughly 3.5 times that of equities, according to the Wells Fargo Investment Institute.

Bitcoin ETFs could "particularly exacerbate" that volatility in times of market stress, and other channels through which ETFs can create systemic risks, said Antonio Sánchez Serrano, principal economist at the European Systemic Risk Board, the EU's financial risk watchdog.

Those other channels include the decoupling of the ETF price from the underlying asset, which can cause stress for institutions heavily exposed to the products or which rely on them for liquidity management. "The differences with a plain-vanilla stock

ETF are simply too large in terms of embedded risks," Serrano wrote in an email to Reuters, referring to bitcoin ETFs, which he classified as complex.

Exchange-traded products that are complex, less liquid and highly leveraged have experienced stress in the past. In February 2018, a volatility-tracking exchange-traded note went bust amid a surge in volatility, causing investors \$2 billion in losses.

In 2020, COVID-19 shutdowns sparked a sell off in some corporate bond ETFs.

That stress would have spread to the broader fixed income market had the Federal Reserve not provided emergency support, an investment professional organisation, argued.

CHALLENGE

Indian conditions up there with the hardest, says Foakes



GETTY IMAGES

England's Ben Foakes feels Indian wickets are among the hardest. "In conditions like this, it's about trying to think on your feet and learn because it's not natural conditions (for me)... I've kept away a lot and kept to spinners, but I find that Indian pitches, with the variable bounce, are up there with the hardest," he said.

DEDICATION

A big fan of Bumrah's attitude towards Test cricket: Irfan



K.R. DEEPAK

Former India all-rounder Irfan Pathan said he was in awe of Jasprit Bumrah's dedication and attitude towards the traditional format of the game. "I have been a big fan of Jasprit Bumrah's attitude, especially in Test cricket, the way he has given priority to the longest format despite injuries," he said.

IN FORM

Ashwin retains the top position, Bumrah moves up to fourth spot



K.R. DEEPAK

Off-spinner R. Ashwin maintained the top spot while Jasprit Bumrah moved to the fourth position in the latest ICC bowling rankings released on Wednesday. Ashwin, who had a match-haul of six wickets in the opening Test against England in Hyderabad, is on 853 rating points. Bumrah climbed a spot to fourth.

PIRATES' BULLISH RUN

Patna ties with Bengaluru, extends its unbeaten run



SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Patna Pirates extended its unbeaten run at home as it shared points with Bengaluru Bulls in a pulsating 28-28 tie in the Pro Kabaddi League match at the Patilputra Indoor Stadium in Patna on Wednesday. Patna Pirates' Sandeep Kumar (14 raid points) and Ankit (eight tackle points) were the star performers.

Spotlight on Patidar, Sarfaraz and other additions for second Test

The Indians, after losing the opening match and beset by injuries to key players, find themselves in an unenviable position of having to do all the catching in a series they started as firm favourites

ENGLAND IN INDIA

P.K. Ajith Kumar
VISAKHAPATNAM

The four friends are waiting in front of England's dressing room, braving the afternoon sun, excitement writ large on their faces.

They are all from Devon, in the southwest of England, and are here for the second Test. They are delighted when Brendon McCullum smiles and waves to them.

"How is Jack Leach?" one of them shouts.

"You will see him," the man who is revolutionising Test cricket assures them.

The four men are overjoyed when Ben Stokes emerges and waves too. "These England cricketers are always nice to their fans, you know," says one. England has just finished their training at the Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy Stadium. Even as the white luxury team bus of England leaves, a similar one carrying the Indian squad arrives.

There is a bigger buzz, of course. And there are a lot of fans, too, as the players make their way towards the main ground.

After warming up and some catching practice,



Bracing up: Rohit led a practice session in which the Indians took part in all earnestness. K.R. DEEPAK

they head to the nets. Among the first to bat at the nets is Kuldeep Yadav. The left-arm leg-spinner could well be the front-runner to replace the injured Ravindra Jadeja who has played such a crucial role both with bat and his left-arm spin in the Indian Test team's remarkable success.

After his stint with the bat, Kuldeep would also bowl for quite some time. Even as captain Rohit Sharma, Yashasvi Jaiswal, and Shubman Gill, who is under a bit more pressure than most of his col-

leagues, are batting at the nets, one could see Rajat Patidar waiting patiently for his turn.

The top-order batter from Madhya Pradesh is, of course, one of the men in focus ahead of this Test match. He is a serious contender following the injury of K.L. Rahul.

Patidar had been added as a replacement for Virat Kohli, who pulled out from the team for the first two Tests because of personal reasons.

He had joined the squad ahead of the Hyderabad Test but had little chances

of making his debut.

Patidar does get to bat at the nets for a fairly long session. The other batter everyone seems to have been waiting for, Sarfaraz Khan, also gets to spend time at the nets. Washington Sundar and Saurabh Kumar, the two spinning all-rounders, too are in the spotlight.

These young men must be wondering what Friday has in store for them.

Like England's off-spinner Shoaib Bashir, who bowled at the nets, having pushed his visa nightmare behind him.

'Decision on Patidar or Sarfaraz with Dravid and Rohit'

P.K. Ajith Kumar
VISAKHAPATNAM

India is up against an in-form team that has been defying conventions with telling effect. The host goes into the second Test against England, which starts here on Friday, without two of its best batters, but batting coach Vikram Rathour is confident of a comeback to the five-match series.

"You keep learning from every game that you play and we could of course have done better in batting, bowling and fielding," Rathour said on Wednesday. "A lot of discussions and ideas are being shared. We are preparing well and hoping to do well in the next game."

For India to do well, the batting has to click, despite the absence of Virat Kohli and K.L. Rahul. Either Rajat Patidar or Sarfaraz Khan would be getting a Test cap.

Tough choice

"It will be a tough choice," Rathour said. "They are superb players and we

have seen how well they have done in domestic cricket in the last few years. On these kinds of wickets, I think they can really add a lot of value to the team. If we have to pick just one out of them, of course, it would be tough. But, that decision will be made by coach Rahul Dravid and captain Rohit Sharma."

Looking back at India's defeat in the first Test at Hyderabad, he admitted the batters could have shown a bit more discipline. "There is a difference between playing with intent and playing attacking cricket," he said. "I want them to play with intent. If there is the opportunity to score some runs, they should take it, but they need to decide by looking at the surface and conditions."

Rathour praised England's batting in the first Test. "They took their chances," he said. "Ollie Pope was exceptional. I haven't seen too many batters playing such a knock against our bowling."



Talking tactics: Dravid and Rohit have a few bold calls to take. K.R. DEEPAK

Crawley credits success to training camp in Abu Dhabi



In the air: Come Friday, England's spinners Hartley and Bashir may serve up more of India's own dose of medicine. K.R. DEEPAK

Sports Bureau
VISAKHAPATNAM

Zak Crawley is a vital cog in England's Bazball machinery. He has formed a successful opening partnership with Ben Duckett and they try to ensure the team is off to a quick start.

The Crawley-Duckett firm played its part in England's come-from-behind win in the first Test at Hyderabad. The visitors had arrived in India after a preparatory camp in Abu Dhabi and chose not to play any tour game.

The way they batted – especially Ollie Pope – suggested that their training must have been on the right track in the Gulf country. "It was exactly how we trained in Abu Dhabi," Crawley said at a press conference. "We had wickets there that turned a lot. It was a really good training camp for us, as we could control the conditions."

The sweep and the reverse-sweep worked wonders for England against In-

dia's quality spin trio at Hyderabad. "I think sweeping and reverse-sweeping when the ball is spinning is a good option," he said. "I think the reverse-sweep is more common for us, because they always seem to have two men out on the leg-side. If they had two men out on the other side, we'd probably play the sweep. The reverse-sweep comes probably just as naturally to us as the normal sweep."

Crawley believes the absence of K.L. Rahul and Ravindra Jadeja in the Indian side for the second Test will not make the task easier for England.

"We stick to what we do well, we are not too worried about what they are doing," he said. "Two very good players are missing, but two very good players are coming in. So that won't change anything for us too much. We will just try and play the same: read the conditions on day one and see what happens from then on."



Jay Shah. FILE PHOTO

Jay Shah reappointed ACC president

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI

The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) secretary Jay Shah was on Wednesday appointed president of the Asian Cricket Council (ACC) for a third consecutive term.

Shah's extension was proposed by Sri Lanka Cricket president Shammi Silva for the second time and the nomination was unanimously backed by all the members of the ACC at its AGM in Bali.

Shah initially assumed the role in January 2021, succeeding Bangladesh Cricket Board president Nazmul Hassan.

I am feeling better now, says Mayank



Back on his feet: Mayank, who reached Bengaluru on Wednesday, is in good health. PTI

N. Sudarshan
BENGALURU

Test cricketer and Karnataka captain Mayank Agarwal reached Bengaluru on Wednesday evening after his discharge from the hospital in Agartala. He will now undergo further treatment at a private hospital in the city.

"I am feeling better now. Gearing to come back. Thank you for prayers, love and support, everyone!" said Mayank on X before leaving the Tripura capital.

Mayank, who had a serious health scare when he consumed a toxic liquid that resembled water on board an Indigo flight bound for Delhi on Tuesday, is in good condition, sources confirmed.

The swelling around his lips is understood to have come down and he had no difficulty in drinking water and a tender coconut mix.

Tripura police will continue its investigation into the matter after a First Information Report was registered Tuesday evening.

Akhil Sheoran wins rifle 3-position bronze

Sports Bureau

Akhil Sheoran won the bronze medal in the rifle 3-position event as India topped the medals table in the shooting World Cup in Cairo on Wednesday.

Akhil shot the second best qualification score of 589 before finishing third behind Jiri Privratsky and Romain Aufrere. He beat qualification topper Oleh Tsarkov (590) of Ukraine.

India won two gold, three silver and a bronze to finish on top. Britain was second with two gold and a silver, while Germany followed with two gold and three bronze. Korea also won two gold medals.

Anjum Moudgil shot 587 and missed the chance to make the women's final of the 50-metre rifle 3-position event, on the basis of lesser number of inner 10s.

The results: 50m rifle 3-position: Men: 1. Jiri Privratsky (Cze) 462.9 (588); 2. Romain Aufrere (Fra) 460.5 (588);



Akhil Sheoran. FILE PHOTO

3. Akhil Sheoran 451.8 (589); 17. Deepak Kumar 585; 27. Niraj Kumar 582.

Women: 1. Seonaid McIntosh (GBR) 469.3 (589); 2. Chiara Leone (Sui) 464.5 (587); 3. Emely Jaeggli (Sui) 453.2 (589); 10. Anjum Moudgil 587; 21. Shriyanka Sadangji 584; 43. Priya Singh 580; **RPO:** Ayushi Podder 587.

Mixed skeet: 1. Qatar (Reem Al Sharshani, Rashid Al-Athba) 38 (144); 2. France (Lucie Anastassiou, Eric Delaunay) 36 (148); 3. Mexico (Gabriela Rodriguez, Luis Oliveros) 39 (141); 8. India-2 (Ganemat Sekhon, Muneek Battula) 139; 11. India (Raiza Dhillon, Anant Jeet Singh Naruka) 138.

'Sportstar Aces awards crème de la crème of sports honours'



Gavaskar.

Sports Bureau

India batting great cricketer Sunil Gavaskar, chairperson of the Sportstar Aces Awards, called the annual event the crème de la crème of sports awards in the country.

"For me, what the Sportstar Aces Awards mean is recognition of a person's achievement, the impact he or she has had on their sport, and the legacy and example they are setting for future generations. That's



Gavaskar.

why these awards are such a huge thing. There's a reason sportspeople take the time to come to this awards night every year. It's the crème de la crème of sporting awards in the country," Gavaskar said.

The Aces Awards is gearing up for its sixth edition, and the Indian batting great is elated to see the standards of Indian sports improving each year.

"Every year, the achievements get better and better. Some of these milestones

are staggering. The added benefit of being on this jury is being able to see other sports. Another thing is that now we have a wider field to choose from, and that is one of the most heartening parts of the exercise," he said.

Gavaskar revealed he is eager to meet the next set of winners and had an important message for those who will be honoured at the Aces Awards in Mumbai.

"My message is, firstly, congratulations on what you've achieved. To see the progress that every sport has made and how a new bar is being set every year is so heartening. I see India becoming a sports-mad country thanks to your performances. You are setting the trend not just in one sport but across multiple disciplines. You are the torch-bearers of the new generation of champions who will go on hopefully to win the Sportstar Aces Awards," he said.

IN BRIEF



FC Goa confirms Jhingan's right knee injury

ISL side FC Goa shared defender Sandesh Jhingan's injury update on Tuesday. He sustained an injury to his right knee during the Blue Tigers' third and final group-stage match against Syria in the AFC Asian Cup. Jhingan has been recommended not to participate in competitive matches by medical professionals after undergoing a thorough series of examinations. The club will consult with medical professionals to examine Jhingan's condition and find out the most effective course of action for rehabilitation.

Atletico signs defender Paulista from Valencia

Atletico Madrid confirmed the signing of Brazilian defender Gabriel Paulista from Valencia on Wednesday until the end of the season. Valencia said the 33-year-old centre-back had "reached a deal to end his contract" with the club. Paulista joined Valencia in 2017 from Premier League side Arsenal, playing 213 times for Los Che.

Srikanth moves to second round of Thailand Masters

K. Srikanth opened his campaign at the Thailand Masters badminton with a straight-game win over Chinese Taipei's Wang Tzu Wei in Bangkok on Wednesday. He won 22-20, 21-19 to enter the second round and will take on compatriot Mithun Manjunath, who defeated Hong Kong's Jason Gunawan 21-17, 21-8. S. Sankar Muthusamy Subramanian posted a 21-14, 21-17 victory over Leong Jun Hao of Malaysia. Malvika Bansod and Ashmita Chaliha cruised to the women's singles second round. While Ashmita defeated Wong Ling Ching 21-10, 21-16, Malvika beat Peru's Ines Lucia Castillo Salazar 22-20, 21-8.

Shinde & Cavalle-Reimers in Portugal quarterfinals

Vasanti Shinde and Yvonne Cavalle-Reimers of Spain beat Nefisa Berberovic and Elena Milovanovic 1-6, 6-4, [10-6] in the doubles first round of the \$40,000 ITF women's tennis tournament in Porto, Portugal.

Other results: \$25,000 ITF men, Hammamet, Tunisia: Maxence Bertimon (Fra) & Yannick Penkner (Aut) bt Dhananjay Singh & Neeraj Yashpaul 6-0, 3-6, [10-6].

Tyrrell Hatton joins the Saudi-funded LIV Golf

Tyrrell Hatton of England made it official on Tuesday by joining LIV Golf, giving the league another player from the top-20 in the world and filling out the new team led by Masters champion Jon Rahm. Hatton had been mentioned as a LIV Golf target ever since the Saudi-funded league signed Rahm in a surprising move toward the end of last year. The *Daily Telegraph* reported Hatton signed a bonus of £50 million.

Maharashtra takes the Khelo India Youth Games crown for fourth time

Tamil Nadu has its best-ever medal haul of the event, bagging a total of 98 while finishing second; Haryana third with 35 gold, 22 silver and 46 bronze

GENERAL

K. Keerthivasan
CHENNAI

Maharashtra bagged the over-all championships for the fourth time in six editions with 57 gold, 48 silver and 53 bronze for a total of 158 medals in the sixth Khelo India Youth Games here on Wednesday.

Tamil Nadu ended with its best-ever medal haul of the Games, bagging a total of 98 medals, including 38 gold, 21 silver and 39 bronze to finish second.

Haryana finished third with 35 gold, 22 silver and 46 bronze.

Tamil Nadu's Maaya Rajeswaran and R.S. Rethin Pranav bagged the boys' and girls' tennis singles titles.

The results: Football: Boys (final): Meghalaya bt Punjab 2-0.



Champions: Maaya and Rethin bagged the tennis singles titles. Right, the Manipur girls' football team is joy unbound after its victory on Tuesday. M. VEDHAN



Swimming: Boys: 200m butterfly: 1. S. Dhanush (Kar) 2:05.69s; 2. Yug Chelani (Raj); 3. Deva Neelam (AP).
50m freestyle: 1. Rishabh Das (Mah) 24.22s; 2. Heer Pitroda (Guj); 3. Lucky Ali Khan (Raj).
50m breaststroke: 1. Vidith Shankar (Kar) 29.51s; 2. Rana

Pratap (Jha); 3. Kevin Jinu (Ker).
4x100 freestyle relay: 1. Maharashtra 3:35.15s; 2. Karnataka; 3. West Bengal.
Girls: 200m butterfly: 1. Vritti Agarwal (TS) 2:22.89s; 2. Ritika Mahesh Bangalore (Kar); 3. Nirmayee Ambet (Mah).
50m freestyle: 1. Alefiya Saleh

Dhansura (Mah) 27.07s; 2. Vihita Lognath (Kar); 3. Jahnnabi Kashyap (Asm).
50m breaststroke: 1. P. Preshetha (TN) 34.91s; 2. Hiba Chougale (Mah); 3. M. U. Joyshree (TN);
1500m freestyle: 1. Vritti Agarwal (TS) 17:59.51s; 2. Aditi

Mulay (Kar); 3. Sri Charani Tumu (Kar).
Table Tennis: (finals) Boys: Singles: Ankur Bhattacharjee (WB) bt Priyanuj Bhattacharya (Asm) 11-6, 15-13, 11-7, 7-11, 7-11, 11-7.
Doubles: Divyansh Srivastava & Sarth Mishra (UP) bt Ankur

Bhattacharjee & Bodhisatwa Chaudhary (WB) 11-4, 12-10, 4-11, 7-11, 11-9.
Tennis: (finals) Boys: Singles: R.S. Rethin Pranav (TN) bt Cahir Warik (Mah) 6-2, 3-0 (ret'd.).
Girls: Maaya Rajeswaran (TN) bt Laxmi Siri Dandu (TS) 6-1, 6-3.

Qureshi likely to play singles on opening day

DAVIS CUP

Press Trust of India
ISLAMABAD

Aisam-ul-Haq Qureshi, Pakistan's most successful tennis player, does not play singles on the ATP Tour, but when national duty demands it, he willingly takes up the responsibility, and the Indian team might have to contend with him on the opening day of the Davis Cup World Group I tie, starting on Saturday.

The opening day of the tie will feature in two singles, and Aisam could play in one of those against either Ramkumar Ramanathan or N. Sriram Balaji, who will most likely play on Saturday.

Aisam, 43, had even played against Indonesia in the home grass court tie in September 2023. He also did the singles duty against Lithuania (2022), Japan (2021) and Slovenia (2020).

"I have always considered myself to play singles, but I don't do it every single time. I am preparing for everything, singles and doubles, and the same goes for everyone in the



Tricky customer: Pakistan's Qureshi will be tough proposition to handle for India. GETTY IMAGES

team. We will see. We have one more day of training," Aisam said.

Former Davis Cup captain Hameed ul Haq also reckons that if Aisam and veteran Aqeel Khan play the singles, the tie won't be a lop-sided affair.

"We have got some good results on grass but the Indian team is also very good on this surface. They know what is required. I feel India have better chances to win this tie but since Pakistan has two very experienced players in Aqeel Khan and Aisam ul haq Qureshi, if they play singles the contest will be tight," he said.

For the second consecu-

tive day, persistent drizzle disrupted Pakistan Davis Cup team's practice session, while the Indians were also forced to stay indoors on Wednesday.

Focus

Aisam said not getting to hit for two days in a row, indeed affects the preparations.

"Definitely, these things affect the preparations. At the end of the day, these things are not in our control. We need to focus on things we can control and prepare in best way possible. I am sure Indian team's training has also been affected but it is what it is," said Aisam.

It was like meeting my separated brother: Hameed on Zeeshan

Press Trust of India
ISLAMABAD

For Hameed ul Haq, meeting the Indian captain and coach Zeeshan Ali here was like reuniting with his separated brother.

More than 36 years have passed since he visited Bengaluru, but the former Pakistan Davis Cup captain vividly remembers how Zeeshan's father, the late Akhtar Ali, would take care of Pakistani players.

Hameed, now 62, still remembers the generous act of Indian player S. Vasudevan, who took him home when he was struggling to find accommodation in Bengaluru in 1987 when he had gone to the City to compete in a satellite tournament. He still remembers that the food in Delhi was as spicy as in Karachi.

Happy

Hameed is happy that an Indian team has come to Pakistan to play tennis.

"Now that I am meeting the Indian contingent here. It feels like I have met my own brothers, who got separated. Coach Zeeshan Ali is a very good friend of mine. His father Akhtar Ali



Lasting bonding: Hameed says Zeeshan's father Akhtar Ali used to help the Pakistan players a lot. PTI

also used to help us a lot. He was like our father and coach, he was helping the Pakistan players a lot," Hameed said.

"During the Asian Cup in Dubai, I had lost the semifinal to Zeeshan. I knew he was coming, I was waiting with excitement." Hameed, who played Davis Cup between 1984 and 1997, had travelled to Delhi for the Asian Games in 1982, and fondly shared memories of those days.

"I don't feel I am in a foreign land when I go to India. India is like Pakistan. The language, the food, the attires, everything is si-

milar. The spicy food that we have in Karachi, the same taste we got in Delhi too. Then in 1987, I played Satellite tournaments in Bombay, Bangalore and Trivandrum.

"I was facing problems in getting an accommodation, and Vasudevan learnt about it and took me to his home.

"There was a security concern, but Vasudevan said he did not care. I felt like I am staying at my own home.

"Whenever there was an issue, someone would stand up and find a solution for us."

Vishnu Saravanan books India's first sailing ticket to Paris

Sports Bureau
KOLKATA

Vishnu Saravanan became the first Indian sailor to book a quota place in the 2024 Paris Olympics.

The 24-year-old subedar from the Mumbai-based Army Yachting Node earned a net score of 125 and finished 26th among 152 participants from 53 nations in the 2024 ILCA7 men's World championships in Adelaide.

He was fifth among the sailors whose countries had not won a quota place and was the best ranked Asian after 10 races.

Seven quota places were available in the World championships in the one person dinghy competition.

Vishnu, a Hangzhou Asian Games bronze and a World under-21 bronze me-



Way to go: Vishnu will be the second Indian sailor after Farokh Tarapore to take part in multiple editions of the Olympics. FILE PHOTO

dallist in 2019, will become the second Indian sailor after Farokh Tarapore, who competed in the 1984, 1988 and 1992 Olympics, to take part in multiple editions of the Games.

Part of the four-member

Indian sailing team, Vishnu finished 20th in his event in the Tokyo Olympic Games.

In sailing, the quota place belongs to the National Olympic Committee (NOC).

Sri Lanka keen on Test revival against Afghanistan

CRICKET

Agence France-Presse
COLOMBO

Sri Lanka hopes to revive its flagging Test fortunes with new five-day captain Dhananjaya de Silva taking the helm for the one-off match against Afghanistan starting on Friday here.

The island nation is last on the World Test Championship rankings and its last match in October at the same ground saw a humiliating innings and 222-run loss to Pakistan, its worst ever home defeat.

de Silva, a middle-order batsman and handy off-spinner, takes charge ahead of a full tour slate for the year including a three-Test series in England. "Very excited about what is about to unfold with my cricket career. More so Sri



Historic occasion: Afghanistan's captain Hashmatullah (L) and Rahmat arrive in Colombo ahead of the Test against Sri Lanka. AFP

Lankan Test cricket going forward," de Silva said.

Three uncapped players are among Sri Lanka's 16-member squad as part of a generational refresh heralded by the appointment of different captains for the Test, ODI and T20 sides earlier this month.

Afghanistan has had less

chance to impress in five-day matches since being granted Test status in 2017.

The visitors landed in Colombo on Tuesday missing Rashid Khan who is recovering from back surgery. Qais Ahmad, who has featured in a single Test match, is his expected replacement.

'PGA, LIV should move forward together'

Associated Press
PEBBLE BEACH

Rory McIlroy wants golf put back together again as quickly as possible, saying on Tuesday that even winning one of the PGA Tour's signature events would feel cheapened because it didn't have all the best players in the world.

McIlroy also said he

would be opposed to any form of punishment for players who left the tour for LIV Golf and wanted to come back. "I don't think there should be a punishment. Obviously, I've changed my tune on that because I see where golf is and I see that having a diminished PGA and LIV Tour or anything else is bad for both parties."



Backing: McIlroy says he will oppose any form of punishment for players who left the Tour. AFP

Spirited England fans lapping up Test match experience in India

The English love Tests — now with the additional interest in how their famed Bazball ploy will fare against Rohit's men — and they are in the country to enjoy some good 'old fashioned' cricket



P.K. AJITH KUMAR

P.K. Ajith Kumar
HYDERABAD

January 28, 2024 will go down in history as one of the greatest days for the English cricket fan. Because Australia lost to the West Indies in the second Test at Brisbane and some time later, England stunned India in the first Test at Hyderabad.

"It was indeed a double delight," John Lever, the former England swing bowler who is heading a group of fans that have flown down to watch the Test series, told *The Hindu* with a laugh.

"And we all thoroughly enjoyed the match. It was one of the best Tests I have ever been to."

Lever, who had taken 10 wickets to lead England to an innings win against India on his Test debut at New Delhi in 1976-77, has been leading tours for the English cricket supporters around the country for years for a company called Spectate.

There are many such companies who take the fans and there are also a lot of people who tour on their own.

The English love Test cricket. This correspondent met two Englishmen who spent a considerable sum to watch India playing the recent Test series in South Africa. They both said it would have been difficult to get hotel rooms if England was playing.

Hyderabad hotels played host to hundreds of the visiting England fans over the last week. You could meet many of them at the airport waiting to catch their flight for Visakhapatnam.



Among them were the elderly couple from Worthing, a town in West Sussex, David and Deborah Marcus.

They will be watching all the five Tests. "I have also been to three rounds of Ranji Trophy matches," said David, who retired from writing software. "I saw Delhi playing Pondicherry, Rajasthan against Maharashtra, and Hyderabad versus Arunachal Pradesh."

He is absolutely delighted that England scored a stunning come-from-behind victory against India in the first Test. "This was certainly one of the best Test matches I have been to, but the one at Wellington, against New Zealand (which England lost by just one run) last year was more exciting, though I was disappointed

with the result, of course."

Some of the England fans had arrived well before the first Test started and you could spot them watching the players during the training sessions at Hyderabad. "We have all been looking forward to this series in India," said Luke Crosland, who came along with his friends Alex Gatt, Matthew Wild and Lewis Salmon.

Major boost

Crosland added that Test cricket certainly got a major boost back in England with Bazball. "I think it is really great and Test cricket has become more exciting."

The fans loved the atmosphere of the Test match, with big crowds on all the four days: the total attendance went past

100,000 and that is not something you wouldn't often find for Test matches in India.

"The atmosphere was fantastic and I was happy to find such big crowds," said Ian, one of the young England fans. "The stadiums haven't been this full in the other countries I have been to. It was nice that the organisers invited a lot of children. We got to see some excellent cricket. And it was brilliant to watch Ollie Pope bat; it was a special innings. I was also happy for Ben Foakes. And he put on more than 100 with Pope."

The fans weren't happy with the facilities at the stadium though. One of them said that it was difficult to get drinking water on the first day and even things like sun-screen were being confiscated inside the stadium.

There had also been complaints about the rest rooms. The arrangements certainly could have been better a much anticipated high-profile Test match like this.

The die-hard cricket fans - of the red-ball variety - from England would go to even smaller venues where even food may be difficult to find.

One has come across some of them during the Ranji Trophy matches at grounds across the country. Ian Jones and his wife Sue, for instance. (Sue died a few years ago). Mind you, Indian fans hardly come to watch domestic cricket.

A tour to India can, of course, be expensive for an England fan. "This tour should cost me about £6,000, but it has been worth it," said David. "Shrouds have no pockets."

THE GIST

▼ The total attendance for the Hyderabad Test went past 100,000

▼ The die-hard cricket fans - of the red-ball variety - from England would go to even smaller venues where even food may be difficult to find

Additional pressure gives me a boost to achieve more milestones

Our nation needs more of the kinds of platforms to produce many more athletes, like the ones in China where they take talent with potential from the school level and hone their skills, says the silver medallist in the 800m and 1500m events at the 2022 Asian Games

INTERVIEW

Harmilan Bains

Aryan Arun
BENGALURU

At the closing ceremony of the SFA Championships held at the Dravid-Padukone Centre of Excellence in Bengaluru, international track athlete Harmilan Bains held court. Harmilan, who won silver medals in the 800m and 1500m events at the 2022 Asian Games, spoke about her early days in sports, the added pressure of being from a sporting family, and her journey to the top.

You come from a sporting family in which both of your parents are professional athletes. Did that add pressure when you began your journey?

Yes, it was a lot of pressure when I started off. Athletics and sports were a vital part of my childhood since I was in the third grade. 'Just get me a medal in the Asian Games' was a phrase I heard often around my house.

My mother, as you know, won a medal at the Asian Games in 2002 and she wanted me to do the same as well, repeating history. So I decided to give them two medals! There was a lot of questioning done by my parents when my training sessions did not go to plan, and it was very difficult to answer these questions. According to me, the added pressure gives me a boost to achieve more milestones.

What do you think about the opportunities that upcoming talent in India receive, in contrast to the opportunities you had when you started off? How

important do you think these platforms and championships are for the next generation of athletes?

When I started in sports, I had a basic idea because I come from a sporting family. But the children and the adults in my village did not have an idea about what I was doing. I think these kind of platforms nowadays are great as children are educated from their school age. Look at what China is doing. They take talent with potential from the school level and hone their skills from the second or third grade. Our nation needs more of these kinds of platforms to produce many more athletes. When sports is strong, the nation is strong.

Social media plays a huge part in people's lives nowadays, especially if you are a sportsperson with a fan

following. How will you suggest maintaining a balance between the two?

Balancing this is not as difficult as people think it is. If you want to perform at the top level of sports, you have to follow a sense of timing in whatever you do. I fix my timings for social media and do not exceed that. I also tend to do shoots and other commercial activities only when it is off-season.

This is the time when sportspeople increase their mileage. As I am a middle-distance runner, I do long training sessions four times in a week, and pursue my other interests at other times, which include social media, travelling and shoots.

When the mid season comes, I cut off all these other hobbies, which might leave people thinking that there are different 'Harmilans' in the off and mid-season.



PTI