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Raids held in West Bengal over MGNREGS 'fraud'

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The Enforcement Directorate has conducted raids across West Bengal in connection with a probe into alleged embezzlement of MGNREGS funds. » PAGE 2

Leave us out of your conflict, says Naga body

GUWAHATI
Claiming that the Nagas are increasingly becoming victims of an ethnic conflict they are not involved in, the United Naga Council has asked the Meiteis and Kuki-Zos to insulate their community from the violent clashes erupting in the State. » PAGE 2

Rahul plays down divisions within INDIA bloc

NEW DELHI
There are no desertions from the Indian National Developmental, Inclusive Alliance other than Janata Dal president Nitish Kumar, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi said on Tuesday. He added that Trinamool Congress chief Mamata Banerjee was very much of INDIA bloc. » PAGE 5

Hearing for wider Gyanvapi survey on Feb. 15

NEW DELHI
The Varanasi district court on Tuesday fixed February 15 to hear an application seeking a survey by the Archaeological Survey of India in the remaining cellars inside the Gyanvapi mosque. This comes days after the court allowed puja in one of the cellars of the mosque. » PAGE 6

Uttarakhand tables UCC Bill in Assembly

The UCC covers live-in relationships, divorce however, STs have been kept out of its ambit

Men, women to have equal rights in matters related to divorce; 'Halala' and 'Iddat' to end

Opposition says it has failed to understand the logic behind the urgency in tabling the UCC Bill

Ishita Mishra
NEW DELHI

In what he called a "historic moment", and the Opposition slammed as a "poll gimmick", Uttarakhand Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhama tabled the State's Uniform Civil Code (UCC) Bill in the Assembly on Tuesday.

If the Bill is passed, Uttarakhand will become the first State Assembly in independent India to enact a uniform law for all communities with regard to marriage, divorce, succession, and live-in relationships. However, the Scheduled Tribes, which constitutes 2.9% of the State's population, have been kept out of the ambit of this Bill.

In a dramatic start to the proceedings, Mr. Dhama strode into the Assembly with the Constitution of In-

dia in hand, accompanied by Finance Minister Prem Chandra Agarwal holding a copy of the UCC Bill whose cover page featured an image of a barefoot Lady Justice carrying the usual balance scales, but without her traditional blindfold, which is usually meant to indicate her impartiality.

'Historic moment'

After Mr. Dhama tabled the Bill, BJP legislators — who hold 47 seats in the 70-member Assembly — started chanting slogans such as "Vande Mataram", "Jai Shree Ram", and "Bharat Mata Ki Jai".

Calling it a historic moment, Mr. Dhama said that after the UCC Bill was passed, Uttarakhand would become the first State to implement uniform laws for all, adding that the legislation did not tamper with the traditions and customs of any reli-



Uttarakhand Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhama arrives at the State Assembly to table the UCC Bill, in Dehradun on Tuesday. ANI

gion, caste, or sect.

In fact, Goa also has a uniform civil code for people from all religions; after its 1961 liberation, it re-

tained the Portuguese Civil Code of 1867.

"Under the UCC, marriages will only take place only between one man and

one woman. The age of marriage has been set at 21 years for boys and 18 years for girls," said Mr. Dhama.

In matters related to divorce, men and women would have the same rights, he said, adding that this would end "evil practices" such as 'Halala' and 'Iddat'. The UCC Bill provides for a three-year imprisonment or a fine of ₹1 lakh, or both, for a person found committing 'Halala'.

'Poll gimmick'

Leader of Opposition Yashpal Arya said that he failed to understand the logic behind the urgency being shown by the BJP government in tabling the UCC Bill, calling it a "poll gimmick". "They expect us to read such a lengthy document, which was submitted a couple of days ago, and start the discussion. It looks like the government is trying to hide some-

thing," he said. "You have full majority to pass the Bill, but it would have been better to give the Opposition some time," he added.

If one person in a married couple changes his religion without the consent of the other, then the other person will have the full right to file for a divorce and maintenance allowance. It will also prohibit a second marriage if one of the spouses is alive. The Bill will make it mandatory to register marriages and divorces, failing which the couple concerned will be deprived of government facilities. In case of a divorce or domestic dispute the custody of any child up to five years of age will remain with the mother.

If a couple does not register their live-in status within a month, they can face a maximum punishment of up to three months imprisonment. Al-

so, if live-in partners share any false information during the registration, they will face imprisonment for up to three months or a fine not exceeding ₹25,000, or both.

All children equal

The children born out of such live-in relationships will be considered the legitimate children of the couple under the UCC.

The Bill also proposes to give equal rights in property inheritance to sons and daughters for all classes, with no distinctions between legitimate or illegitimate children, biological or adopted children, or children born through surrogacy.

After the death of a person, his wife and children will be given equal rights in his property along with the parents. Previously, only the mother had rights in the deceased's property.

Thinking of the King



With love: Artists from Gurukul Art School in Mumbai greets Britain's King Charles III on canvas. EMMANUAL YOGINI (RELATED REPORT ON PAGE 12)

T.N. backs Kerala suit in SC against Centre's move to 'stifle' States

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin wrote to his Kerala counterpart Pinarayi Vijayan on Tuesday, appreciating the State for moving the Supreme Court against the Union government's attempts to "stifle State governments" over finances, and further hoped to collaborate to address this "crucial challenge".

Mr. Stalin said Tamil Nadu faced a revenue shortfall of ₹20,000 crore per annum in comparison with the pre-GST regime, and that the Union had been refusing to extend the compensation regime.

Criticising the "discriminatory and unconstitutional attempts" pushed by the Centre, he said its intent seemed to be aimed at "crippling" States' abilities to raise resources and fund crucial developmental initiatives. This needs to be resisted by like-minded progressive States, he said.

Mr. Stalin said although this had been happening for quite some time, the situation had rapidly deteriorated in the past few years and there was a clear consensus emerging among progressive States that such indirect control over finances needed to be removed.

'Govt. misusing powers'
Endorsing that public debt to finance public expenditure of States was within the exclusive purview of the State Legislature as per the Constitution, Mr. Stalin said the Union government, however, had been misusing its powers under Article 293 of the Constitu-



M.K. Stalin



Pinarayi Vijayan

tion to restrict the borrowing space of the States.

"The prior consent from the Union government, mandated by this section, has been converted into a restrictive tool to limit deficit financing beyond the limits prescribed by the State FRBMs [Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management Act]," Mr. Stalin said.

As a result, the fundamental principle of fiscal federalism envisioned by the Constitution makers was under "grave threat", Mr. Stalin said and pointed out how such steps had caused a significant dent in the mobilisation of funds for Tamil Nadu.

The Union government had fixed the GDP growth for calculating the net borrowing ceiling at a mere 8% for 2023-24, despite Tamil Nadu consistently achieving about 15% nominal growth in the last two years. This had resulted in a loss of ₹6,000 crore in the borrowing space in the current year.

The mandatory condition of funding gross losses of State power distribution companies (Discoms), under the guidelines for additional borrowing for power sector reforms, has forced Tamil Nadu to provide

₹17,111 crore to Tangedco (T.N. Generation and Distribution Corporation) in the current year. "This has severely constrained our fiscal space this year and is likely to affect us in the future also," he said.

The "intentional delay" in approving the Chennai Metro Rail Phase-II project as a Central sector project had resulted in the "entire debt" of ₹33,594 crore for the project being included within the State's net borrowing ceiling, he said.

"These discriminatory and unconstitutional attempts are being pushed by the Union government at a time when the fiscal autonomy of the States has already been seriously curtailed by the implementation of GST," he said.

Mr. Stalin said he stood in full support of the government of Kerala's commitment to preserving fiscal federalism. "The government of Tamil Nadu is ready to extend its cooperation in this regard and we look forward to collaborate and synchronise our efforts to address this crucial challenge."

KARNATAKA TO PROTEST

» PAGE 2

CENTRE FLAYS KERALA

» PAGE 3

Massive explosion leaves 11 dead, 149 injured at firecracker factory

Mehul Malpani
BHOPAL

At least 11 people died and 149 were injured in a massive blast followed by a fire in a firecracker factory in Madhya Pradesh's Harda district on Tuesday. A rescue operation to find and extract workers still trapped in the debris of the collapsed building was interrupted by continuing explosions, and officials were forced to evacuate at least 100 houses in the vicinity.

A first information report (FIR) has been filed. A senior police officer said that one person has been



Tragic incident: Rescue personnel and residents gathered near the factory in Harda district following the explosion on Tuesday. AFP

arrested so far. He said that various teams have been formed to nab the others.

M.P. Chief Minister Mohan Yadav has formed a

high-level panel to oversee investigations. District officials said that a fire incident had previously occurred at the same factory

two years ago, and that the factory had been shut due to other violations four months ago, though they claimed that it had valid licenses. A State Congress leader said that the factory's owners, who are missing, are being protected by the government.

The CM directed efforts to oversee the rescue and to inspect other firecracker factories in the State. He announced ₹4 lakh in financial aid to the kin of the deceased, who were also promised ₹2 lakh by the Prime Minister's Office; the CM and PM each promised ₹50,000 and the injured as well.

'Trump is not immune from charges in Jan. 6 case'

Reuters
WASHINGTON

A federal appeals court on Tuesday ruled that Donald Trump does not have immunity from charges that he plotted to overturn his 2020 election defeat, bringing him a step closer to an unprecedented criminal trial.

A three-judge panel of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit rejected Mr. Trump's claim that he cannot be prosecuted because the allegations relate to his official responsibilities as President.

IN BRIEF



NCM seeks report from Delhi govt. on mosque demolition

The National Commission for Minorities (NCM) took a suo motu cognisance of a news report on the demolition of a mosque in Mehrauli last month, believed to be over 600-years-old. The commission asked the Delhi Chief Secretary to submit a report on the matter by February 15. The Delhi Development Authority on January 30 carried out an “unannounced” demolition of the mosque, with officials citing the action as part of the agency’s drive against encroachments. Following the demolition, the Delhi High Court had pulled up the urban body, seeking an explanation for their ‘anti-encroachment’ drive while addressing a plea by the Delhi Waqf Board.

Rajasthan appoints task force to identify new expressways

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government in Rajasthan has appointed a task force for identifying new expressways to connect more cities with the network of roads for fast movement of traffic. The new expressways will facilitate seamless transportation of people and goods and enhance tourism and economic development along the routes in the State. The identification and construction of new expressways was one of the promises made in the BJP’s manifesto for the 2023 State Assembly election. The task force was appointed after an approval by Deputy Chief Minister Diya Kumari, who holds the PWD portfolio.

Assam govt. footed ₹58-crore flight bills of CM and others

The Assam government spent more than ₹58 crore on hiring helicopters and chartered flights for Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma and other dignitaries since May 2021. Consumer Affairs Minister Ranjeet Kumar Dass on Tuesday told the 126-member Assembly that the State government incurred an expenditure of ₹58.23 crore on helicopters and chartered flights from May 2021 to January 2024. He provided the details while replying to Rajior Dal chief Akhil Gogoi, who sought to know how much the Chief Minister’s aerial travels cost the State. Mr. Gogoi had earlier accused Mr. Sarma of misusing State funds to hire helicopters and chartered planes.

Father of missing tourist from T.N. announces ₹1 cr. reward

Father of a tourist from Tamil Nadu announced a reward of ₹1 crore to anyone who finds his son who has been missing since an accident in Himachal Pradesh’s Kinnaur district, officials said on Tuesday. The car he was travelling in plunged into Sattuj river near Pangri Nallah on Sunday. The driver was killed in the incident while one tourist was injured and the other was still missing, they said. Vetri was one of two tourists from Tamil Nadu who fell 200 metres down into the river after the driver lost control over the vehicle. The ill-fated vehicle was on its way to Shimla from Kaza when the accident took place.

Leave us out of your conflict, Naga organisation tells Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities

Rahul Karmakar
GUWAHATI

Claiming that the Nagas are increasingly becoming victims of an ethnic conflict they are not involved in, an apex organisation of the Nagas in Manipur – the United Naga Council (UNC) – has asked the Meiteis and Kuki-Zos to insulate the community from the violent clashes erupting in the State. The UNC made the request to the two communities while issuing a list of atrocities committed against the Nagas both in the Meitei-dominated Imphal valley, as well as the hills, which are primarily inhabited by the Kuki-Zo people. The Meiteis, Nagas, and Kuki-Zos form the principal communities in Manipur. The Nagas, since the conflict between the Meiteis

and Kuki-Zos broke out on May 3 last year, had decided on a “position of neutrality”, declining to take a side. Caught in crossfire The first instance of the community being caught in the crossfire, however, took place on May 24, when four Naga women from Ukhrul were attacked by a mob in Imphal. A Liangmai Naga house was burnt down at Leimakhong on June 18, while a Maring Naga woman was shot dead in Imphal on July 16, the UNC said in a statement on February 2. A Liangmai farmer was beaten on Imphal-Tamei Road on September 5 for refusing to pay illegal tax, and a Naga leader was fired at in Kangpokpi on September 27, said the UNC, adding that three Tangkhul Naga men were beaten up



Several houses, including those of migrants from Bihar, Haryana, and Naga people, were set on fire by miscreants in Imphal last year. (Right) Kuki students staging a protest demanding justice as the conflict in Manipur entered its ninth month, in New Delhi on February 3. FILE PHOTOS

by armed groups in Imphal on December 3. On December 11, two Rongmei Naga girls were thrashed in Bishnupur Bazaar in Imphal Valley, and a Naga driver from Tamenlong received a similar treatment in Imphal. A week later, four Naga girls working at a beauty parlour in Imphal were abducted, the statement alleged. Within the space of two days in January, a Tangkhul boy and two Zeliangrong men were kidnapped from Imphal’s Mantripukhri and Bishnupur districts, respectively, the UNC said. If that were not enough, roads leading to Naga villag-



es have been cut off or blocked, and armed extremists and women have been checking, frisking, and extorting from Nagas along the National Highways in the hills. Radical groups and women vigilantes have been similarly frisking, looting, abducting, and extorting from Nagas in the Imphal Valley, the UNC pointed out. “Churches have been burnt and demolished, and sacrilegious acts committed inside religious places of worship by radicals in the name of waging war against a community,” it said. The organisation said

Siddaramaiah to lead ‘Chalo Delhi’ protest today

The Hindu Bureau
BENGALURU

The Karnataka Congress government led by Chief Minister Siddaramaiah will lead a ‘Chalo Delhi’ protest at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi on Wednesday against the Centre’s “disparity” in devolution of funds, non-release of compensation for implementing drought-relief work and denial of permission to implement irrigation-related projects in the State.



Siddaramaiah

curring losses of ₹1.87 lakh crore from 2017-18 by denying its due share in devolution of funds, special grants and under the centrally sponsored schemes, the government said. The letter also appealed to Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, who denied any discrimination in allocation of funds to Karnataka on Monday, to participate in the protest. The protest will aim at drawing the attention of the Union government and the people of the country to protect the interests of the State. “We were waiting patiently for the Union government to provide justice in the federal system. We were waiting for them to act as they promised in last year’s Budget,” the Chief Minister said.

Off to Delhi

Mr. Siddaramaiah, Deputy Chief Minister and KPCC president D.K. Shivakumar, Ministers and legislators of the Congress of the State left Bengaluru on Tuesday evening to stage the protest on Wednesday at 11 a.m. Perhaps, this is for the first time the entire team of State government is protesting against the Centre at the national capital. Mr. Siddaramaiah termed the protest as “apolitical” and wrote to members of both the Rajya Sabha and Lok Sabha, and Union Ministers from Karnataka, to take part in the protest to “fight for financial justice”. Karnataka in-

Shiv Sahay Singh
KOLKATA

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) conducted multiple raids across several districts of West Bengal on Tuesday in connection with an investigation into alleged embezzlement of MGNREGS funds. This is the first time the agency has conducted searches in connection with the MGNREGS irregularities. Funds to the scheme were stopped in December 2021 over ‘irregularities’. The ED searched the residence of a former block development officer (BDO) at Salt Lake, a former BDO’s home at Dhaniakhali in Hooghly district, and the office of a businessman in Chinsurah in Hooghly district. Wages imminent The searches come days after West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee announced that her go-



Members of Trinamool Mahila Congress taking part in a dharna against the Centre in Kolkata on Tuesday. PTI

vernment would release wages to 21 lakh MGNREGS workers on February 21. The Centre and West Bengal government have been at odds over release of MGNREGS wages. State Minister and senior Trinamool Congress leader Sashi Panja said the raids follow Leader of Opposition Suwendu Adhikari’s visit to Delhi. Mr. Adhikari was in Delhi on Sunday. “This is an attempt to divert public and media at-

nerjee took part in the sit-in on February 2 and 3. Party members will continue the demonstration until February 13. Mr. Adhikari said a large number of BDOs, MGNREGS supervisors and Trinamool Congress panchayat members are involved in MGNREGS irregularities. ‘Mired in graft’ “The reality is that the Trinamool Congress is deeply mired in corruption, with nearly every leader facing corruption allegations,” BJP spokesperson Samik Bhattacharya said. With the raids, the central investigation agencies have opened a new front against the Trinamool Congress leadership. On Monday, the agency moved the Calcutta High Court, seeking transfer of investigation of all cases pertaining to an alleged Rs 10,000-crore ration distribution scam in West Bengal from the state police to the CBI. tion from the Trinamool Congress’s ongoing dharna demanding clearance of dues to the State. This is a clear example of vendetta politics,” Dr. Panja said. The Trinamool Congress leadership is staging a dharna near the statue of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar on Red Road to press for immediate clearance of West Bengal’s dues by the Centre. Trinamool Congress chairperson and Chief Minister Mamata Ba-

Homes razed in Mumbai in demolition drive by BMC

The Hindu Bureau
MUMBAI

The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) carried out a demolition drive at Govandi’s Panchsheel Nagar near Tata Nagar in Mumbai on Tuesday. Residents of the slum area said 150 homes were razed without any prior notice. Yashodhara Salve, a member of Jan Haq Sangharsh Samiti, a collective of activists in the neighbourhood, said that the demolition work began at 2 p.m. and continued till 6.30 p.m. ‘Land for hostel’ Officials said that the slums encroached on land owned by the BMC and that the unauthorised structures were removed for a proposed hostel in the area. Affected residents said they have lived in the area for many years.

UCC to be introduced in U.P. at ‘appropriate time’, says Maurya

Mayank Kumar
LUCKNOW

Uttar Pradesh Deputy Chief Minister Keshav Prasad Maurya on Tuesday said the Uniform Civil Code (UCC) is one of the core ideological issues for the BJP and it will be brought in the country’s most populous State at an “appropriate time”. His statement came on a day the ruling BJP in Uttarakhand tabled a Bill on it in the State Assembly. Bringing uniformity in personal laws such as on marriage, divorce and inheritance regardless of people’s religion has been a core agenda of the BJP for long. The introduction of the Bill in the Uttarakhand Assembly has led to speculation that other party-ruled States may follow suit. Mr. Maurya in post on X also recounted the core

agendas of his party implemented by the Narendra Modi-led Centre. “The BJP government abolished Article 370 [abrogation of special status of Jammu and Kashmir], constructed a grand temple at Shri Ram Janmabhoomi [Ayodhya], and now the UCC has come in Uttarakhand,” he said. ‘States can’t bring UCC’ Meanwhile, Amroha Lok Sabha member Kunwar Danish Ali said the Uttarakhand government tabled the Bill in view of the Lok Sabha poll. “States have no right to bring the UCC. It comes under the purview of the Centre,” said Mr. Ali.

Akhilesh finally gets Cong. invite, will join U.P. leg of Rahul yatra

The Hindu Bureau
LUCKNOW

The Samajwadi Party (SP) on Tuesday confirmed the participation of its president Akhilesh Yadav in the Congress’s Bharat Jodo Nyaya Yatra when it reaches Uttar Pradesh, either in Amethi or Raebareli. “Our national president Akhilesh Yadav received an invitation from Congress chief Mallikarjun Kharge to join the Bharat Jodo Nyaya Yatra of Rahul Gandhi. Mr. Yadav, while congratulating the Congress, accepted the invitation for the Yatra which will enter U.P. on February 16 and is likely to participate when it reaches Amethi or Raebareli,” read a statement issued by the SP. The statement added the yatra in U.P. will successfully dovetail with the social justice movement and the PDA (Pichda, Dalit



SP chief Akhilesh Yadav

‘CWC better placed to decide on Mekedatu’

T. Ramakrishnan
CHENNAI

Cauvery Water Management Authority (CWMA) chairman S.K. Haldar on Tuesday defended the decision to refer back the Vennar sub-basin improvement project and the Mekedatu balancing reservoir project to the Central Water Commission (CWC) for further action. Mr. Haldar told The Hindu that the move was based on a decision taken at a previous meeting of the CWMA [held in December 2022] that “as a matter of principle”, both the Vennar and Mekedatu projects or any other project would be treated “on the same footing”. Besides, the CWC, with its multi-disciplinary machinery, was well-equipped to examine any irrigation project from all angles.

In zodiacal dust mystery, PRL Ahmedabad study points to a familiar source

Zodiacal light – visible from the earth as a faint, diffuse glow on completely dark nights – is sunlight scattered by interplanetary dust. This light is present throughout the path along which the Sun moves in the sky over a year. The source of this is an open question in astronomy

Unnati Ashar

Say you send a spacecraft into the outer reaches of the Solar System on a scientific mission. But on its way, somewhere around Mars, fast-moving dust particles hit its body, including the solar panels, chipping off little pieces. Fortunately the spacecraft is robust and it continues its journey towards Jupiter relatively unfazed. But the solar panels have suffered significant damage.

This is the fate that befell Juno, a spacecraft that NASA launched in 2011 to study the gas-giant Jupiter and its moons. Juno entered a polar orbit around the planet on July 5, 2016. But before it did, according to data reported in a 2021 paper by a group of researchers from Denmark and the U.S., dust particles struck the solar panels attached to the Juno spacecraft.

A pocket of dust

A scientist at the Physical Research Laboratory, Ahmedabad, decided to make the best of Juno's situation.

In a paper published in the *Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society*, Jayesh P. Pabari used the data in the 2021 paper to calculate the number of dust particles Juno might have encountered between 1 and 5 AU.

'AU' stands for 'astronomical unit', which is the distance between the earth and the Sun. Mars is at a distance of 1.52 AU and Jupiter at 5.2 AU from the Sun.

The 2021 paper reported a peak in the number of dust particles impacting Juno at 1.5 AU. Dr. Pabari used this data to calculate the flux of dust between 1 and 5 AU. (The flux is the number of dust particles flowing through a given area per second.) He found the flux at 1.5 AU to be 10-times higher than at other distances.

Scientists have known that this dust is the source of zodiacal light. Zodiacal light is sunlight scattered by interplanetary dust. From the earth, it is visible as a faint, diffuse glow on completely dark nights. Zodiacal light is present across the entire path of the ecliptic, which is the path along which the Sun moves in the sky over the course of a year.

Where could this dust be coming from? This is an open question in astronomy. In his paper, Dr. Pabari compared the flux of dust in the vicinity of Mars, and the number of particles escaping the two moons of Mars and concluded that these moons could be the dust source. He also found no other phenomenon in the neighbourhood of this area that could release as much dust.

Gods of dread and panic

Mars's two moons are called Deimos and



The Submillimeter Array radio telescopes at the summit of Mauna Kea, Hawai'i, with zodiacal light in the background. STEVEN H. KEYS (CC BY 4.0)

Phobos. Mars in Greek mythology is the god of war and the planet's moons are named for his twin sons, the gods of dread and panic, respectively. The American astronomer Asaph Hall discovered both of them in 1877.

Phobos is the bigger of Mars's two moons. It is drifting closer to Mars at a rate of six feet per century. Eventually, astronomers expect it will either crash into the planet or break up into a ring around it.

The most prominent feature on Phobos is a 10-km-wide crater named in honour of Hall's wife Angeline Stickney. In 1877, Hall had almost given up studying Mars's surroundings when Stickney – a mathematician – encouraged him to continue. He did so and spotted Phobos the next day and Deimos six days later. Stickney crater is in fact half as wide as the entire moon.

On its day-side, the temperature on Phobos is around -4 degrees C, while just a few kilometres away on the night side, the temperature often drops to an even-lower -112 degrees C. This large temperature difference (around 108 degrees C) arises because the surface of Phobos is covered with fine dust that lacks the ability to hold heat. Phobos also has no atmosphere that can trap heat.

Deimos is quite different: astronomers believe its actual surface is buried under



Juno launched by NASA in 2011 to study Jupiter entered orbit around the planet on July 5, 2016. But before it did dust particles struck the solar panels attached to the spacecraft. Data from the incident is being used to calculate the number of dust particles encountered

almost 100 metres of dust.

Dusty welcome

In his study, Dr. Pabari incorporated the shapes of the two Martian moons along with the gravitational effects of Mars, incoming and outgoing dust particles, the effect of spacecraft ejecta on the velocities of dust particles, and other parameters in his models of dust. Based on their output, he estimated the net rate of mass influx at Deimos and Phobos.

This in turn he combined with observational data and finally found a mechanism that could explain how Deimos and Phobos could be contributing to the zodiacal dust.

Micrometeorites are very small dust particles. They weigh no more than

one-ten-thousandth of a gram. But they can move really fast, and when they do they can pack a punch. Dr. Pabari found that such micrometeorites fly into Mars's moons just as they do into the earth. In the latter case, they burn up and disintegrate in the atmosphere. But Deimos and Phobos don't have atmospheres, which means most micrometeorites slam into their surfaces and kick up small clouds of dust.

These dust particles can easily escape Phobos and Deimos because of the moons' low gravity. (The more gravity a planetary body has, the more spherical its shape. Deimos and Phobos are not at all spherical.) In this way, Phobos has lost more dust.

The smaller of these dust particles escape into space whereas Mars's gravity pulls in the larger ones. The latter collect in the form of a dust ring around Mars. Over time, they drift closer towards or away from the planet but stay in orbit.

According to Dr. Pabari's work, a future mission to Phobos and Deimos could confirm his study's findings – especially whether they are really losing more mass than they are gaining and whether his calculations are correct. We can only hope the mission spacecraft's solar panels will be strong enough to withstand the moons' dusty welcome.

(Unnati Ashar is a freelance journalist.)

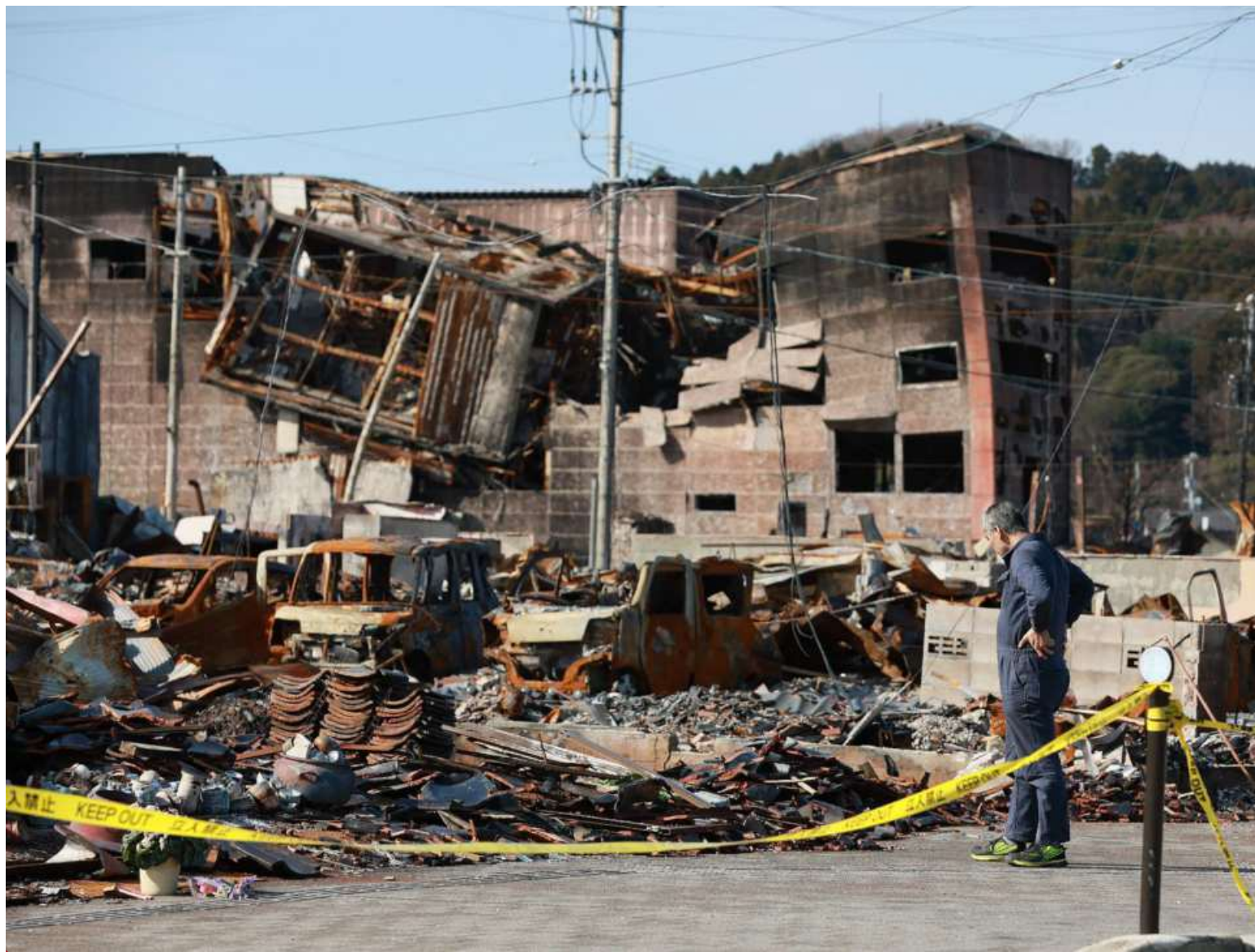
THE GIST

The study compared the flux of dust near Mars, and the number of particles escaping the two moons of Mars and concluded that these moons could be the dust source. No other phenomenon in the neighbourhood was found that could release as much dust

The study incorporated the shapes of the two Martian moons along with the gravitational effects of Mars, incoming and outgoing dust particles, the effect of spacecraft ejecta, and other parameters in models for the dust. From this the influx at Deimos and Phobos was estimated. This combined with observational data led to a mechanism that could explain how Deimos and Phobos could be contributing to the zodiacal dust

These dust particles can easily escape Phobos and Deimos because of the moons' low gravity. The smaller of these particles escape into space whereas Mars's gravity pulls in the larger ones

BIG SHOT



A locality of Asaichi Dori which was destroyed by fire in the city of Wajima, Ishikawa prefecture after a 7.5 magnitude earthquake struck Japan's Noto region in January. AFP

QUESTION CORNER

Mist-free wind screens

Q: When a piece of cloth soaked in a washing detergent is used to wipe the inside of a

vehicle's windscreen during rains, the windscreen does not become misty even if the windows are closed. Why?

A: Mistiness is caused by tiny droplets of water that scatter light and make the glass opaque.

Wiping the glass with a cloth which is soaked in a detergent leaves a residue which lowers the surface tension of the water droplets – enough to allow them to spread as a thin film.

The effect can be seen using a bar of soap to write on a dry bathroom mirror, according to an article in *New Scientist* magazine. Once the message is written on the mirror, it can be wiped dry to remove the excess soap and the writing then disappears.

However, when the steam from a hot bath or shower condenses on the mirror, the areas of writing do not mist up whereas the background does, and the message becomes visible again.



Mistiness is caused by tiny droplets of water that scatter light. GETTY IMAGES

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The severe erosion of fiscal federalism

On February 8, Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan will lead a protest in New Delhi against the Centre for "placing Kerala on a financial embargo". The Kerala government has accused the Centre of pushing the State into a severe financial crisis by imposing a limit on its borrowings. Kerala has moved the Supreme Court contending that the Centre's imposition of a Net Borrowing Ceiling (NBC) on the State, which limits borrowings from all sources, violates Article 293 of the Constitution. The wide array of constitutional issues that are now thrown open point at the severe erosion of fiscal federalism in the country.



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raise 'any loan', if 'any part of the previous loan' extended by the Centre is outstanding. The imposition of the NBC is done by invoking the powers of the Centre under Article 293(3).

On close scrutiny, the Centre's decision to include extra-budgetary borrowings by state-owned enterprises in the total debt of the State is constitutionally suspect. The Union Finance Minister justified the decision by relying on the 15th Finance Commission Report, which says, "Governments at all tiers may observe strict discipline by resisting any further additions to the stock of off-budget transactions and contingent liabilities which is against the norms of fiscal transparency and detrimental to fiscal sustainability. One very important purpose of our recommendation for higher borrowing limit to the Union and State Government is to foster transparency and to avoid build-up of non-transparent liabilities." Notably, the Finance Commission has not called for the inclusion of the debt of state-owned enterprises in the NBC.

Parliament does not have the power to legislate upon the 'Public Debt of the State' as this finds place in Entry 43 of the State List of the Constitution. Therefore, the power to make laws on, administer and determine aspects of the public debt of the State falls squarely on the State Legislature.

The State government raises another crucial argument that the balances in the public account of the State should not be included in the NBC. The State relies upon Article 266(2) of the Constitution which indicates that the money collected by the Central or State government, which do not pertain to the consolidated fund, can be brought under the head of 'public accounts'. Small savings, security deposits, provident funds, reserve funds and other treasury deposits constitute 'public accounts'. All activities related to public accounts fall within the domain of

the State Legislature and the Centre has no power to include the withdrawals from public accounts in the NBC.

State territory

The Kerala Fiscal Responsibility Act, 2003, which is enacted by the State Legislature, spells out the fiscal deficit targets for the State. It says that Kerala shall reduce the fiscal deficit to 3% of the GSDP by 2025-2026. When a State Act provides for budget management and fiscal discipline, it is not desirable to have external supervision on the finances of the State by the Centre. Under Article 202 of the Constitution, it is the State government that is tasked with determining the revenue and receipts and corresponding expenditure and with presenting the Budget of the State before the Legislative Assembly. Budget management of the State is the discretion of the State government. The territory occupied by the State executive and legislature cannot be ceded to the Union executive and Parliament in the name of fiscal management. Even otherwise, Kerala's fiscal deficit is reported to have significantly reduced to 2.44% and revenue deficit to 0.88% of the GSDP. In the Centre's case, the fiscal deficit is estimated to be 5.8% for 2023-2024.

The KIIFB was a novel idea in Kerala to fund infrastructure and development projects through extra-budgetary spending. But the State's responsibility to fund development work cannot come in the way of it delivering justice to pensioners and beneficiaries. If the Kerala Finance Minister is to be believed, not permitting the State to borrow will affect the State's spending on welfare schemes. This can lead to a catastrophic situation in the revenue-scarce State. The character of India's federalism is moving rapidly from cooperative to one that is destructive and annihilative. The borrowing restrictions are an example of 'annihilative federalism' at play.

What is net borrowing ceiling?

The NBC limits the borrowings of States from all sources including open market borrowings. The Centre has decided to deduct liabilities arising from the public account of the States to arrive at the NBC. In addition, borrowings by state-owned enterprises, where the principal and/or interest are serviced out of the Budget, or through assignment of taxes or cess or any other State revenue, are also deducted from the NBC.

Kerala is particularly agitated by the inclusion of debt taken by state-owned enterprises as the State's own debt. Major infrastructure projects initiated by the State government are funded by the government statutory body called the Kerala Infrastructure Investment Fund Board (KIIFB), primarily through extra-budgetary borrowings. Since the debt of KIIFB is now included in the NBC, the State government claims that it is not even able to fund pensions and meet expenses for welfare schemes. Is the Centre within its constitutional limits to impose such harsh conditions on the finances of States?

Determining State finances

According to Article 293(3) of the Constitution, the State has to obtain the consent of the Centre to

Borrowing restrictions on States are an example of 'annihilative federalism'

The BJP's new plank in Mandya

The removal of a saffron flag in a village in the district has sparked controversy

STATE OF PLAY

Laiqh A. Khan
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The political discourse in Mandya district, known as the sugar bowl of Karnataka, has long been dictated by the Cauvery issue or by Vokkaliga identity. The traditional rivals in the State, the Congress and the Janata Dal (Secular), have always shared the electoral spoils. With the exception of winning a by-election in 2019 from the K.R. Pet Assembly constituency, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has not won any Lok Sabha or Assembly seat in the district.

The party, therefore, is leaving no stone unturned to change this. Recently, a saffron flag with an image of Hanuman, which was flying from a 108-foot tall flagpole on government land in Keragodu village, about 12 km from the district headquarters, was replaced by the government with the national tricolour. The sensitive issue comes close on the heels of the BJP joining hands with the JD(S), a potent electoral force in the Vokkaliga heartland, to fight the Lok Sabha elections.

The saffron flag was replaced by the national flag amid strong protests on January 28. The local administration pointed out that permission had been given to a private trust to hoist either the national flag or the Karnataka flag on the flagpole.

A day later, the BJP took out a march from Keragodu to the Deputy Commissioner's office in Mandya. The march was led by the BJP's former national General Secretary, C.T. Ravi, and comprised mostly activists from the party and its frontal organisations such as

the Bajrang Dal and the Vishva Hindu Parishad. The activists sported saffron flags and shawls and shouted 'Jai Sri Ram'. JD(S) leader and former Chief Minister H.D. Kumaraswamy also turned up at the protest site near the Deputy Commissioner's office in Mandya wearing a saffron shawl.

At the protest site, Mr. Kumaraswamy shared the BJP's anger over the lowering of the saffron flag by the government. He blamed the Congress government, led by Chief Minister Siddaramaiah, for "communalising" the atmosphere. The next day, reacting to Mr. Siddaramaiah's accusations that the JD(S) leader, alongside the BJP, was inciting violence, he told reporters that he will not support illegal activities of the BJP. As Mr. Kumaraswamy's saffron shawl came under media glare, party supremo H.D. Deve Gowda felt that he could have instead sported the JD(S)'s colours. But he added that there was no need to read too much into it.

Clearly, the JD(S) leader appeared to be focusing more on countering the Congress, which had stormed the party's citadel in Mandya by defeating it in six out of seven constituencies during the 2023 Assembly elections. Even though the Mandya Lok Sabha seat is held by film actor Sumalatha, an independent candidate who had declared her support for the BJP after defeating Mr.

Kumaraswamy's son Nikhil during the 2019 polls, the JD(S) is expected to bargain hard for Mandya during its seat-sharing talks with the BJP.

With the BJP-JD(S) combine calling for a Mandya bundh on February 9, the Congress leaders see a political game plan by the BJP and its new-found political ally in the State to "polarise" voters before the Lok Sabha elections. The Congress has said that the BJP is trying to convert Mandya into another Hindutva laboratory in the State, after its experiments in coastal Karnataka.

Congress leaders in Mandya have also predicted that the flag row could boomarang on the BJP. Agriculture Minister N. Cheluvarayaswamy, who is also Minister in charge of the district, and Malavalli MLA P.M. Narendraswamy have argued that the bundh call is indirectly against the national flag that is now flying from the flagpole.

The flag row is not the first sensitive issue to rock Mandya in recent years. In the run-up to the 2023 Assembly elections, BJP leaders had similarly tried to build a narrative around Uri Gowda and Dodda Nanje Gowda. The party claimed that these Vokkaliga warriors had killed Tipu Sultan, the erstwhile ruler of Mysuru, even though there are no historical records to back this claim. The efforts failed to yield any electoral dividends.

However, unlike the past when the JD(S) strongly opposed the BJP's "communal" planks such as the hijab issue and the Uri Gowda and Dodda Nanje Gowda narrative, the regional party has now aligned with the saffron party. The alliance could either help the BJP-JD(S) combine or it could prove to be counter-productive like it did for the Congress-JD(S) alliance in 2019.

Maldives accelerates plan to lower dependence on India

The Chinese make up for the minor reduction in Indian tourists in the Maldives following the diplomatic row between New Delhi and Malé

DATA POINT

Sonikka Loganathan & Vignesh Radhakrishnan

In January, controversial tweets by deputy ministers of the Maldives on Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Lakshadweep led to a diplomatic row between the two countries. The consequences of this row have been two-fold. The tweets sparked a call by some Indians on social media to boycott the Maldives. This was an attempt by them to puncture the biggest money-maker for the Maldives, the tourism industry. Meanwhile, Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu strengthened ties with one of India's rivals, China. Just a few days after tensions between the Maldives and India flared up, Mr. Muizzu visited China, met with Chinese President Xi Jinping, and appealed to Chinese tourists to visit his nation in large numbers and reclaim the top spot in tourist arrivals, which they once held.

While the number of Indian tourists visiting the Maldives has declined marginally, Chinese tourists have swiftly filled this gap, resulting in an overall increase in tourist inflows, data show. Chart 1 shows the number of tourists who visited the Maldives in the first 35 days of 2023 and 2024. The number of Indians who visited the archipelago dropped marginally from 21,460 to 16,895 in the period considered. It is important to note that the decline cannot be entirely attributed to the boycott call as a considerable share may also have dropped their plans fearing repercussions of the ongoing row, among other reasons. Moreover, the number of Russian tourists also decreased from 26,305 to 22,577 in the period, so India is not an outlier.

The decline in Indian visitors did not have an impact on the overall number of tourists to the Maldives. In fact, if the first 35 days of 2023 and 2024 are compared, the

number of tourists went up slightly from 1,97,252 to 2,22,502. This increase is entirely due to the sudden surge in the number of Chinese tourists from just 6,563 to 25,303 in the period.

More worryingly, the impact of the diplomatic fallout has been felt by more than just the tourism industry. Generally, 20,000 to 40,000 medical tourists from the Maldives visit India annually for treatment (Chart 2). On January 13, Mr. Muizzu announced that the government's health insurance scheme will cover visits to the UAE and Thailand too, to "diminish reliance on a select group of countries". He made this announcement immediately after his return from China. He also said that a 100-bed hospital with Chinese aid will be built.

Mr. Muizzu and Mr. Xi signed key agreements, including agricultural schemes that would "end its [Maldives'] dependence on one country for imported staple foods such as rice, sugar, and flour" by growing them locally. Currently, the Maldives relies heavily on India for a number of products.

The Maldives imports over 95% of its granite, 40% of its steel bars and coils, over 30% of tubes/pipes, electric motors and cement, 65% of flat-rolled iron and stainless steel sheets, and over 50% of bulldozers from India (Chart 3). Moreover, it sources over 80% of rice, 60% of eggs, close to 30% of cattle meat, 50% of onions, melons and nuts, 25% of wheat, over 45% of crabs/shrimp/prawns and cabbages, and 40% of tomatoes from India. Essentially, the tourism boom in the Maldives – from food to stay – relies heavily on the supply of raw materials from India.

India exports 70% of its cabbages/cauliflowers, over 20% of eggs, over 10% of its melons and live animals and nuts to the Maldives. The archipelago's key agreements with China after the fallout with India threatens this mutually beneficial relationship, and gives China more sway in the Indian Ocean region.

Dragon checks in

The charts are based on data sourced from the UNcomtrade portal, India Tourism Statistics and the Republic of Maldives' Ministry of Tourism



Chart 1: Number of tourists who visited the Maldives in the first 35 days of 2023 and 2024

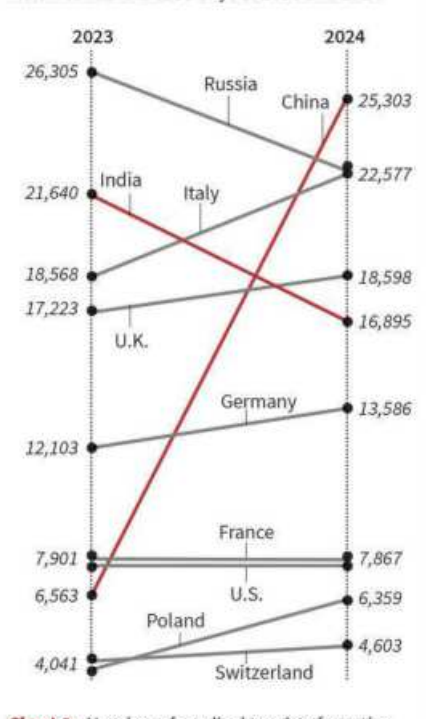


Chart 2: Number of medical tourists from the Maldives who visited India for treatments

Chart 3: The chart shows the value of items imported by the Maldives from India, between 2019 and 2021, in \$ (vertical axis). On the horizontal axis, India's share (%) in the Maldives' total imports, across commodities, is depicted

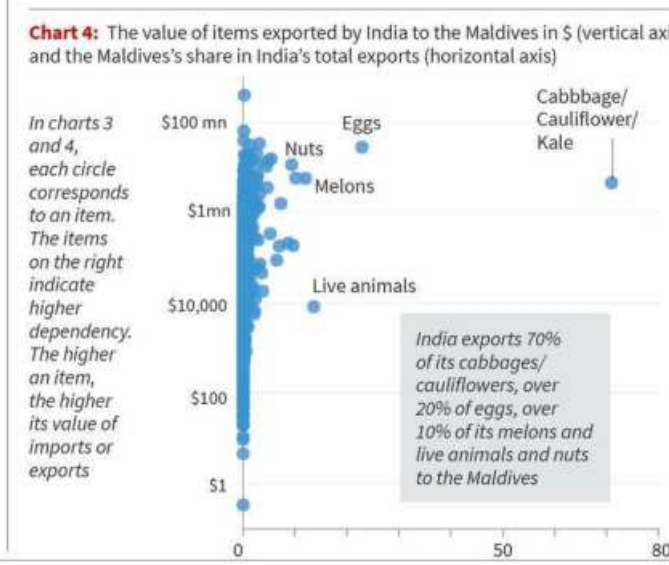


Chart 4: The value of items exported by India to the Maldives in \$ (vertical axis) and the Maldives's share in India's total exports (horizontal axis)

FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO FEBRUARY 7, 1974

Tokyo yields as gunmen seize embassy in Kuwait

Kuwait, Feb. 6: Men of the Japanese "Red Army" and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine seized the Japanese Embassy in Kuwait today and on threat of killing the Japanese Ambassador and other embassy staff, forced Japan to accept their demand for an airplane to carry four terrorists out of Singapore.

A Japanese Foreign Ministry spokesman in Tokyo said the Minister of Transport had ordered a Japanese Airlines plane conveniently located to reach Singapore to pick up the four guerrillas, who attempted to blow up a refinery in Singapore last week. Since then they have been holding three hostages on board a boat, demanding that they be flown out.

"We are prepared to send a plane to Singapore to carry the four to the country of their choice," a Foreign Ministry spokesman said. "We are ready to make our arrangements public."

Earlier, the Ministry said it had received a telegram saying Japan's Ambassador in Kuwait, the First, Second and Third Secretaries and an attaché were all hostages in the Embassy.

The Foreign Ministry said it did not know how many persons were involved in seizing the Embassy.

The gunmen seized the Embassy and shouted with bullhorns from the building encircled by Kuwaiti troops: "Do not interfere or we will execute our hostages."

Kuwait will not allow a landing by a Japanese airliner bringing commandos and their hostages from Singapore in return for release of Japanese diplomats held hostage here. It was stated by senior Kuwaiti Government officials tonight.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO FEBRUARY 7, 1924

Silver currency in Russia

London, Feb. 6: The "Daily Telegraph's" diplomatic correspondent says, in connection with the announcement that the Russian Soviet Government has decided to substitute silver currency for the present paper currency, that he understands that vast stocks of silver are at present held by American, British and other banks and Russia's new currency move may result in the early appreciation of the price of the metal.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

The number of sedition cases filed from 2018 to 2022

701 As many as 5,023 cases were lodged under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, Union Minister Nityanand Rai informed Parliament. He added that sedition cases against the State came down from 149 in 2021 to 68 in 2022. PTI

Number of fraudulent loan apps removed from Play Store

2,200 Minister of State for Finance Bhagwat. K. Karad informed Parliament that the loan apps were suspended or removed by Google between September 2022 and August 2023. PTI

Number of teaching positions vacant in Uttar Pradesh

85,152 Minister of State for Basic Education Sandeep Singh said that of the 4.17 lakh sanctioned posts, more than 80,000 posts were vacant in schools run by Uttar Pradesh Basic Education Council. PTI

The number of farmers enrolled under the PMKMY

23.38 in lakh. Launched in September 2019, the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Maandhan Yojana (PMKMY) is meant for old age protection and social security of Small and Marginal Farmers (SMFs). PTI

The passengers on the no-fly list in the last four years

247 Minister of State for Civil Aviation V.K. Singh said that 108 individuals were barred from flying by airlines in 2023. The passengers placed on the 'no-fly' list increased from 10 in 2020 to 66 in 2021. PTI

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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Understanding the delimitation exercise

What does delimitation mean and what are the constitutional provisions which deal with it? Why were the seats frozen as per the 1971 Census? Will the fresh exercise go against the federal principle, giving an advantage to certain States over others?

EXPLAINER

Rangarajan. R

The story so far:

The delimitation of constituencies for the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies is to be carried out on the basis of the first Census after 2026. The 2021 Census was originally postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequently due to delays on the part of the Central government.

What is delimitation?

Delimitation means the process of fixing the number of seats and boundaries of territorial constituencies in each State for the Lok Sabha and Legislative assemblies. It also includes determining the seats to be reserved for Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) in these houses. Article 82 and 170 of the Constitution provide that the number of seats in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative assemblies as well as its division into territorial constituencies shall be readjusted after each Census. This 'delimitation process' is performed by the 'Delimitation Commission' that is set up under an act of Parliament. Such an exercise was carried out after the 1951, 1961 and 1971 Census.

What is the constitutional requirement?

'Democracy' means 'rule or government by the people'. It follows that the government is elected by a majority with the broad principle of 'one citizen-one vote-one value'. The number of seats in the Lok Sabha based on the 1951, 1961 and 1971 Census was fixed at 494, 522 and 543, when the population was 36.1, 43.9 and 54.8 crore respectively. This broadly translated to an average population of 7.3, 8.4 and 10.1 lakh per seat respectively.

However, it has been frozen as per the 1971 Census in order to encourage population control measures so that States with higher population growth do not end up having higher number of seats. This was done through the 42nd Amendment Act till the year 2000 and was extended by the 84th Amendment Act till 2026. Hence, the population based on which the number of seats is allocated refers to the population as per the 1971 Census. This number will be re-adjusted based on the first Census after 2026. The boundaries of territorial constituencies were readjusted (without changing the number of seats) and seats for SC and ST were determined as per the 2001 Census and will again be carried out after 2026.

In a normal course of events, the delimitation process for the number of seats, boundaries of territorial constituencies and determining the reserved seats for SC and ST would have happened based on the Census of 2031 as it would have been the first Census after 2026. However, with the 2021 Census now being postponed and the year 2026 nearing, there have been talks about the impending delimitation exercise.

What are the issues?

The number of seats were frozen based on the 1971 Census in order to encourage population control measures. The population explosion that happened in our country during the last five decades has been uneven with some States like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan having a greater increase than States like Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. There are two options that are being discussed in the public domain with respect to the



GETTY IMAGES

THE GIST

Delimitation means the process of fixing the number of seats and boundaries of territorial constituencies in each State for the Lok Sabha and Legislative assemblies.

The number of seats in the Lok Sabha based on the 1951, 1961 and 1971 Census was fixed at 494, 522 and 543, when the population was 36.1, 43.9 and 54.8 crore respectively. However, it has been frozen as per the 1971 Census in order to encourage population control measures so that States with higher population growth do not end up having higher number of seats.

The population explosion that happened in our country during the last five decades has been uneven with some States like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan having a greater increase than States like Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh.

revised delimitation exercise based on the projected population of various States as of 2026.

The first is to continue with the existing 543 seats and their redistribution amongst various States (Table 1) and the second is to increase the number of seats to 848 with proportionate increase among various States (Table 2). It can be noticed in both these scenarios that the southern States, the smaller states in the north like Punjab, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, as well as the northeastern States are bound to be at a disadvantage when compared to the northern States of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. This may go against the federal principles of our country and may lead to a feeling of disenchantment in the population of the States that stand to lose in their representation. It also goes against the philosophy of freezing seats as per the 1971 Census with the States that have been better at controlling the population losing out on their political significance.

What are international practices?

In a federation like the U.S., the number of seats in the House of Representatives (the equivalent of our Lok Sabha) has been capped at 435 since 1913. The population of the country has increased almost four times from 9.4 crore in 1911 to an estimated 33.4 crore in 2023. The seats among the States are redistributed after every Census through the 'method of equal proportion'. This does not result in any significant gain or loss for any of the States. For example, based on the Census of 2020, the reapportionment has resulted in no change in the number of seats for 37 States. Texas gained two seats, five other States gained one seat each and seven States lost one seat each.

In the European Union (EU) Parliament which consists of 720 members, the number of seats is divided between 27 member countries based on the principle of 'degressive proportionality'. Under this principle, the ratio of population to the number of seats shall increase as the population increases. For example, Denmark with a population of around 60

Skew scenarios

Delimitation is the process of fixing the number of seats in each State for the Lok Sabha and Legislative assemblies. Article 82 and 170 of the Constitution provide that the number of seats shall be readjusted after each Census

Table 1: If the number of seats is retained at 543 and reapportioned among States based on the projected population in 2026

State	Number of seats at present	Number of seats projected	Net gain/loss
U.P.	80	91	11
Bihar	40	50	10
Rajasthan	25	31	6
M.P.	29	33	4
Tamil Nadu	39	31	-8
Andhra + Telangana	42	34	-8
Kerala	20	12	-8
Karnataka	28	26	-2
Punjab	13	12	-1
Himachal	4	3	-1
Uttarakhand	5	4	-1

Table 2: If the number of seats is increased to 848 based on the projected population in 2026

State	Number of seats at present	Number of seats projected	Net gain
U.P.	80	143	63
Bihar	40	79	39
Rajasthan	25	50	25
M.P.	29	52	23
Tamil Nadu	39	49	10
Andhra + Telangana	42	54	12
Kerala	20	20	-
Karnataka	28	41	13
Punjab	13	18	5
Himachal	4	4	-
Uttarakhand	5	7	2

Source: Based on Vaishnav et al, Carnegie endowment

lakh has 15 seats (average population of 4 lakh per member) as against Germany with a population of 8.3 crore having 96 seats (average population of 8.6 lakh per member).

What can be an ideal solution?

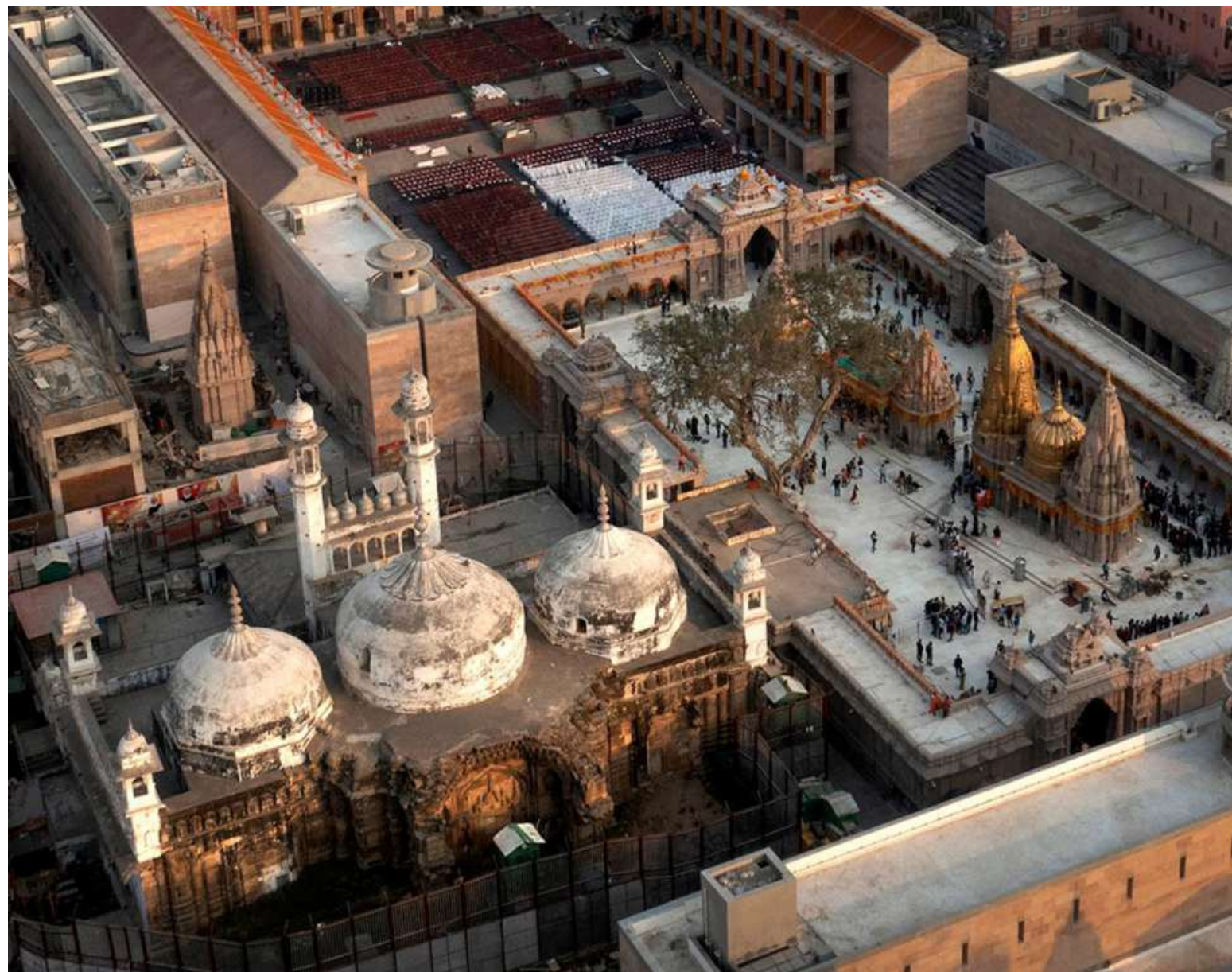
The issue arises because democratic and federal principles seem to be at loggerheads in the delimitation exercise as envisaged. However, they can be harmoniously reconciled by giving equal importance to both. The main work of a Member of Parliament is to legislate on 'Union List' matters like Defence, External Affairs, Railways, Telecommunication, Taxation etc. and hold the Central government accountable. Majority of the schemes of the Central government are implemented only by the State governments. Hence, the number of MPs in Lok Sabha may be capped at the present number of 543 which would

ensure no disruption in the present representation from various States. This will maintain and uphold the federal principle. The number of MLAs in each State may be increased in line with current population (without changing the number of Rajya Sabha seats) to address the democratic representational requirement.

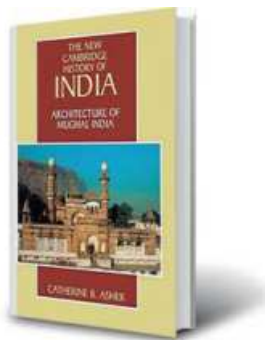
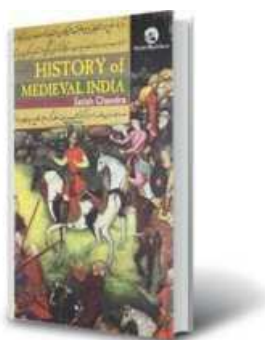
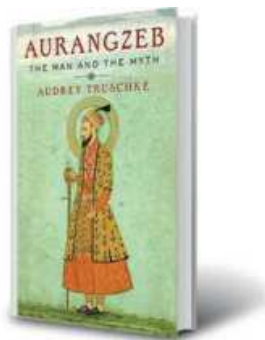
However, the most important reform for strengthening democracy is to empower the local bodies of panchayats and municipalities who engage with the citizens on a day-to-day basis. The devolution of powers and finances to these bodies must be significantly increased to strengthen democracy at grass root levels.

Rangarajan. R is a former IAS officer and author of 'Polity Simplified'. He currently trains civil-service aspirants at 'Officers IAS Academy'. Views expressed are personal.

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The remains of history: The Gyanvapi mosque, and the Kashi Viswanath temple on the banks of the Ganges in Varanasi.AP



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

K. Subrahmanian

“Ms. S. Patnaik, Baroda, wants to know the difference between I am reading a book about animals and I am reading a book on animals.”

“‘On’ is used when the book is written for specialists, academics in a scholarly style. ‘About’ is used when the book is written in an informal style for the general reader.”

*It was a lecture on China.
It was a seminar on the government’s fiscal policy.*

He spoke about the political situation.”

“Mr. V. Sundar, Lodhi Colony, New Delhi, wants to know the difference between ‘assumption’ and ‘presumption’.”

“‘Assumption’ is from ‘assume’ and ‘presumption’ is from ‘presume’. ‘Assume’ means ‘to take as being true, for purpose of argument or action’. You take as true something that has not been proved to be true.”

*Let’s assume that he visited India.
We had assumed that he would like this dish.*

“‘Presume’ means ‘suppose something to be true’, ‘take something for granted’.

I presume he is away in Calcutta.

You presume something when you feel that it is most likely, when you make a logical inference from the facts available.

He is presumed to have died in the accident.

Assumption is rather arbitrary, presumption is about what is likely.

Let us assume he is a liar.

I presume he is a liar.

You presume when there is at least some semblance of evidence, you assume for the sake of argument. In Law, presumption ‘is an inference as to the existence or truth of a fact not known for certain’. ‘Presumption’ also means ‘disrespectful behaviour that shows too high an opinion of oneself’.

It was presumption on his part to tell the teacher how he should teach.”

“Mr. B. Mohan Murali wants to know the meaning of ‘the rank and file’.”

“It means ‘common soldiers, not officers’. Figuratively, it means ‘the ordinary members of an organisation’. A good leader is one who can carry the rank and file with him.”

The rank-and-file workers revolted against the Party President.

“Rank’ has several meanings. One of them is the ‘number of soldiers drawn up in single line abreast’. One of the meanings of ‘file’ is ‘line of persons one behind another’. So ‘rank and file’ literally means ‘soldiers in line abreast and soldiers standing one behind another’. So soldiers as distinct from officers; from this we get the figurative meaning ‘followers as distinct from leaders’.”

“Mr. Paritosh Uttain, wants to know which of the following spellings is correct: (a) Czar (b) Tsar.”

“Both are correct. There is also a third one. ‘Tzar’. All these are acceptable. ‘Czar’ is the title of the emperor of Russia and ‘Czarina’ is the title of the empress.”

Published in The Hindu on January 8, 1991.

Temples and mosques as a marker to study the life and times of Aurangzeb

For the Mughal emperor, say historians, the decision to demolish a place of worship or not was often taken for political reasons; Benares became a place of interest for Aurangzeb because of anti-Mughal factions, ‘troublesome zamindars and Hindu religious leaders’

Ziya Us Salam

On February 2 this year, Muslims thronged the Gyanvapi Masjid in Varanasi in almost unprecedented numbers for Friday prayers. It was not out of a new-found love for the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb who is said to have built the mosque in the 17th century but a desperate bid to stand up for a mosque, now under increasing pressure from Hindutva forces. On the same day, local Hindus thronged for darshan at the cellar or ‘Vyasji ka tekhana’.

When and how did the masjid come up? Well, in one line, Aurangzeb demolished a temple on the land occupied by some recalcitrant zamindars and built a mosque to deprive the local warlords of their bastion. It did not start on that note though. Soon, after Aurangzeb replaced his father Shah Jahan on the Mughal throne, he is said to have shown great respect towards Brahmins and even requested them to pray for the well-being of the empire.

Political motives

Writing in *Aurangzeb: The Man and The Myth*, historian Audrey Truschke explains, “Hindu and Jain temples dotted the landscape of Aurangzeb’s kingdom. These religious institutions were entitled to Mughal state protection, and Aurangzeb generally endeavoured to ensure their well-being. By the same

token, from a Mughal perspective, that goodwill could be revoked when specific temples or their associates acted against imperial interests. Accordingly, Aurangzeb authorised targeted temple destructions.” Another noted historian, Richard Eaton, puts the figure around 12 for such temples. Amazingly, some time before he became the Emperor, Aurangzeb is said to have condemned any king who resorted to bigotry! A couple of years after assuming power, he issued a ‘farman’ in 1659 wherein he asked his officials not to disturb the Brahmins of Benares.

Expresses Truschke, “Writing in February of 1659 Aurangzeb said he had learned that ‘several people have, out of spite and rancour, harassed the Hindu residents of Benares and nearby places, including a group of Brahmins who are in charge of ancient temples there.’ The king then ordered his officials: ‘You must see that nobody unlawfully disturbs the Brahmins or other Hindus of that region, so that they might remain in their traditional place and pray for the continuance of the Empire.’” Indeed, of the tens of thousands of temples during his almost 50-year reign, most stood safe and secure when his reign ended in 1707. Unfortunately, the Benares temple was not among them.

Writing in *Architecture of Mughal India*, noted historian Catherine Asher, states: “The destruction of Raja Man Singh’s famous Vishwanath [Vishwanath] temple

in Benares was largely to punish Hindus, especially those related to the temple’s patron, who were suspected of supporting the Maratha Shivaji.” According to Asher, “The demolition of the Vishwanath Temple was intended as a warning to anti-Mughal factions, in this case troublesome zamindars and Hindu religious leaders who wielded great influence in this city.”

It is a point agreed upon by Truschke who writes, “Political events incited Aurangzeb to initiate assaults on certain Hindu temples. For example, Aurangzeb ordered Benares’s Vishwanath Temple demolished in 1669.” Incidentally, the temple had been built during the reign of his great-grandfather Akbar by Raja Man Singh. It was believed Man Singh’s great-grandson helped Shivaji flee from Aurangzeb’s court in 1666, and hence Aurangzeb’s wrath. A new Vishwanath temple was built on an adjacent site to the Gyanvapi Masjid by the Maratha ruler Ahilyabai Holkar in the 18th century.

In *History of Medieval India*, Satish Chandra provides a different take on the temple destruction. “He (Aurangzeb) began to look upon temples as centres of spreading subversive ideas.... Thus, he took strict action when he learnt in 1669 that in some temples in Thatta, Multan and especially at Benares, both Hindus and Muslims used to come from great distances to learn from the Brahmins.”

While there is concurrence on the temple’s destruction in 1669 among

Asher, Chopra and Truschke, architectural historian Madhuri Desai contends that the Viswanath Temple was only built in the 18th century, perhaps in a reference to Holkar.

Nine lives

In *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review*, Desai writes that the Viswanath temple was built long after the Gyanvapi Masjid and stands adjacent to it. The masjid, incidentally, is actually called Masjid Alamgiri or Jama Masjid; Gyanvapi being the name of the locality. Even today, some locals call it Gyanvapi wali Masjid or Masjid of Gyanvapi by the name of the neighbourhood. Surprisingly, there are two other Alamgiri Masjids in the vicinity, which, however, aren’t referred to as Gyanvapi.

Others believe the temple was built before the entry of Muslim invaders, probably in the 12th century and was first attacked by Qutubuddin Aibak, who later founded the Slave or Mamluk dynasty. The temple was rebuilt during Akbar’s reign by Raja Man Singh. It was once again demolished during Aurangzeb’s reign, they contend. As a three-domed mosque came up, a portion of the wall, facing the prayer direction, was kept intact as a warning to defiant elements.

Today, as the mosque is caught in the midst of a legal and social controversy, it is important to remember that it is a medieval monument, and a marker to study the life and times of Aurangzeb.

THE DAILY QUIZ

Charles Dickens was born on this day in 1812. Get your creative juices flowing, and test yourself on one of the greatest novelists in English literature

Sindhu Nagaraj

QUESTION 1

This is a collection of short pieces Dickens originally published in various newspapers and other periodicals when he started his career as a journalist. What is the name of the collection?

QUESTION 2

What is the term used to describe something reminiscent of Dickens and his writings, such as poor social or working conditions or comically repulsive characters?

QUESTION 3

This Dickens’ character is a wealthy spinster, once jilted at the altar, who insists on wearing her

wedding dress for the rest of her life. Name her.

QUESTION 4

Which writer and critic once remarked that Dickens’ *Great Expectations* was more seditious than Karl Marx’s *Das Kapital*?

QUESTION 5

Traditionally, this word means a person or object that behaves deceptively or dishonestly. However, in modern usage, this is most associated with the character Ebenezer Scrooge. What is the word? How is it referred to in his novella *A Christmas Carol*?

QUESTION 6

Name the two cities in Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*.



Visual question:

In this image, identify the character standing on the chair, and addressing the members of his club. Which novel is the character from?

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

- This Ritwik Ghatak film inspired K. Balachander’s *Arangetrām* in Tamil. **Ans: Meghe Dhaka Tara**
 - The other two films of a trilogy which dealt with the aftermath of the Partition of Bengal. **Ans: Komal Gandhar, Subarnarekha**
 - The Ghatak film one will associate with the phrase “pathetic fallacy”. **Ans: Ajantrik; The attribution of human feelings to inanimate things**
 - Ghatak won the Best Director award from the Bangladesh Cine Journalists’ Association for this film. **Ans: Titash Ekta Nadir Naam**
 - Name the Hindi film, scripted by Ghatak, which marked the directorial debut of Hrishikesh Mukherjee. **Ans: Musafir**
- Visual: Name the two actors in this image. **Ans: Anil Chatterjee, Supriya Choudhuri**
Early Bird: Sadhan Kumar Panda

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

Word of the day

Detritus:

the remains of something that has been destroyed or broken up; loose material (stone fragments and silt etc.) that is worn away from rocks

Synonyms: Debris, dust, rubble

Usage: Rotting food and detritus of every kind is scattered all around.

Pronunciation: bit.ly/detrismuspro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /dɪˈtʃaɪ.təs/

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

BANGKOK

Myanmar's Suu Kyi in 'strong spirits', says son citing her letter



Ousted Myanmar democracy figurehead Aung San Suu Kyi is in "strong spirits", her son said on Tuesday after receiving a letter from her. Suu Kyi was detained on the morning of the February 2021 coup that ended a 10-year experiment with democracy and plunged the Southeast Asian nation into bloody turmoil. AFP

TBILISI

Georgia denounces Russian plan for Navy base in breakaway region



Georgian President Salome Zurbishvili on Tuesday denounced a Russian plan to set up a Navy base in the breakaway Abkhazia region. Last October, as Ukraine stepped up attacks on Moscow's Black Sea fleet, Abkhazia's separatist leader Aslan Bzhania said he has signed an agreement with Russia for the base. AFP

ISTANBUL

Three die in 'terrorist' attack outside Istanbul's main court



The Turkish police on Tuesday shot dead two assailants from a leftist organisation, branded "terrorists" by authorities, who attacked a security checkpoint outside Istanbul's main court, killing one person and injuring five. The assailants were members of the Revolutionary People's Liberation Party-Front. AFP

MALINDI

Kenya cult leader charged with murdering nearly 200 children



A Kenyan court on Tuesday charged the leader of a starvation cult and dozens of suspected accomplices with murdering nearly 200 children in a forest near the Indian Ocean. Paul Nthenge Mackenzie is alleged to have incited hundreds of his acolytes to starve to death in order to "meet Jesus". AFP

King Charles's cancer was 'caught early', says PM Sunak

Agence France-Presse
LONDON

King Charles III's cancer was caught early, U.K. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said on Tuesday, after treatment began for the monarch who is just 18 months into his reign. Buckingham Palace has not specified the type of cancer afflicting the 75-year-old monarch.

Charles's diagnosis will prolong a frontline shortage of royals created by Charles's prostate procedure and the almost simultaneous hospitalisation of Catherine, Princess of Wales.

"Thankfully, this has been caught early and everyone will be wishing that he gets the treatment that he needs," Mr. Sunak said.

Trump is not immune from election subversion charges, rules U.S. court

Court rejects Trump's claim that he cannot be prosecuted because the allegations relate to his responsibilities as President; case is on pause until at least February 12 to give Republican presidential frontrunner time to appeal to U.S. Supreme Court

Reuters
WASHINGTON

A federal appeals court on Tuesday ruled that Donald Trump does not have immunity from charges that he plotted to overturn his 2020 election defeat, bringing the former U.S. President a step closer to an unprecedented criminal trial.

A three-judge panel of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit rejected Mr. Trump's claim that he cannot be prosecuted because the allegations relate to his official responsibilities as President.

"For the purpose of this



Latest blow: Donald Trump has repeatedly voiced his immunity claim on the campaign trail and social media. AFP

criminal case, former President Trump has become citizen Trump, with all of the defences of any other criminal defendant," the unanimous panel wrote.

"But any executive immunity that may have protected him while he served as President no longer protects him against this prosecution."

The ruling, which Mr. Trump is almost certain to appeal, rebuffs his attempt to avoid a trial on charges that he undermined American democracy and the transfer of power, even as he consolidates his position as the frontrunner for the Republican presidential nomination.

The case will remain paused until at least February 12 to give Trump time to appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Trump's lawyers argued that former Presidents were entitled to sweeping legal protections and could not be criminally prosecuted for official actions unless first impeached by the House of Representatives

and removed from office by the Senate.

Mr. Trump was impeached twice by the House, but each time Senate Republicans cast sufficient votes to acquit him of the charges.

Judges homed in on the broad nature of Mr. Trump's claim at a January 9 hearing, questioning a Trump lawyer over whether even a President who ordered military commandos to assassinate a political rival could escape criminal prosecution without initial action by Congress.

Mr. Trump has repeatedly voiced his immunity claim on the campaign trail and social media.

Blinken to push for Gaza truce during tour of West Asia

Associated Press
CAIRO

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken is on a diplomatic tour of West Asia on Tuesday, meeting Egyptian leaders as part of his efforts to secure a cease-fire in the Israel-Hamas war in exchange for the release of hostages.

Mr. Blinken's visit also comes amid growing concerns in Egypt about Israel's plan to expand the combat in Gaza to areas on the Egyptian border.

Mr. Blinken was meeting on Tuesday with Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi in Cairo.

Saudi Arabia's stand
Mr. Blinken said that Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler Mohammed bin Salman reiter-



Antony Blinken

ated an interest in ties with Israel but wants an end to the Gaza conflict and a pathway to a Palestinian state.

During his latest trip to the region, Mr. Blinken is seeking progress on a cease-fire deal, on potential normalisation of relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia, and on preventing an escalation of regional fighting.

Biden confuses Macron with ex-French leader Mitterrand

Agence France-Presse
WASHINGTON

U.S. President Joe Biden confused his French counterpart Emmanuel Macron with France's long-dead former leader Francois Mitterrand, in a speech that went viral in video footage on Monday.

Addressing a campaign event in Las Vegas on Sunday, the 81-year-old U.S. leader described Mr. Macron's reaction to a speech at a G-7 meeting in 2020.

Country misstated

As well as getting Mr. Macron's name wrong, he misstated the country he leads.

"And Mitterrand – Macron, from Germany – I mean, from France looked at me and said, said 'You know, what – why – how long you back for?'" Mr. Biden said, according to a

The 81-year-old U.S. President has made similar mistakes in the past, notably in September 2022

White House transcript.

Mitterrand was French President from 1981 to 1995, and died in 1996.

Viral video

Video of Mr. Biden's mix-up has been viewed thousands of times on X, formerly Twitter, and shared hundreds of times.

Mr. Biden has made similar public mistakes in the past, most notably in September 2022 when he called on a deceased congresswoman at a conference in the U.S. she helped organise.

"Jackie, are you here? Where's Jackie? I think she was going to be here," he

said, referring to Indiana representative Jackie Walorski, who had died a month earlier.

And in April last year, a White House transcript corrected Mr. Biden when he confused New Zealand's All Blacks rugby team with the Black and Tans, a British military force notorious for its involvement in the Irish War of Independence.

The transcript of his speech, given in a pub in Ireland, crossed out "Black and Tans" and inserted "All Blacks".

Trump's gaffe

Mr. Biden's predecessor and probable opponent in the November presidential election, Donald Trump, made a similar gaffe last month, confusing his party rival Nikki Haley with former House speaker Nancy Pelosi.

Healing touch

A man tends to his dog's burnt paw after forest fires in Vina del Mar in Chile. More than 131 people have died in the country so far. AP

India asks its citizens in Myanmar State to leave

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI

India on Tuesday asked its citizens in Myanmar's Rakhine State to leave the troubled-region immediately in view of deteriorating security situation.

In its first advisory following the spike in violence, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) asked Indians not to travel to the Rakhine State because of the prevailing situation, including disruption in telecommunication network and scarcity of essential commodities.

"In view of the deteriorating security situation, disruption of means of telecommunications, including landlines, and severe scarcity of essential commodities, all Indian citizens are advised not to travel to the Rakhine State of Myanmar," it said.

"Those Indian citizens who are already in the Rakhine State are advised to leave the State immediately," the MEA said.

Myanmar has been witnessing wide-spread violent protests demanding restoration of democracy since the military seized power in a coup on February 1, 2021.

The Rakhine State and many other regions have witnessed severe fighting between armed ethnic groups and the Myanmar military since October last year.

The hostilities between the two sides saw a rapid spike since November in several key Myanmar towns and regions near the border with India as well, fuelling concerns in New Delhi over the possible ramifications for security of Manipur and Mizoram.

Houthi's Uncrewed Surface Vessels are a new threat in the Red Sea

NEWS ANALYSIS

Dinakar Peri
NEW DELHI

The ongoing tensions in the Red Sea are seeing the emergence of a new trend, the increasing use of Uncrewed Surface Vessels (USV) by Houthis to target ships in the high seas. On Monday, U.S. military destroyed two explosive-laden USVs. The first instance of a USV use since the beginning of Houthi attacks on commercial shipping was in the first week of January, according to the U.S. military.

"CENTCOM Self-Defence Strikes On February



The first instance of the use of USV since the beginning of Houthi attacks on commercial shipping was in the first week of January. AP

5, at approximately 3:30 p.m. (Sana'a time), U.S. Central Command forces conducted a strike in self-defence against two Houthi explosive USVs. U.S. forces identified the explosive USVs in Houthi-

controlled areas of Yemen and determined they presented an imminent threat to U.S. Navy ships and merchant vessels in the region," U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) posted on 'X'.

On the measures in place to thwart such attacks, Indian Navy sources said that force protection measures are in place for both surface and aerial threats in case such a threat was to arise.

On January 4, Vice Admiral Brad Cooper, commander of the international Combined Maritime Forces and also head of U.S. Navy's Bahrain-based 5th Fleet, said the "low-profile" USV came within a couple miles of U.S. Navy and merchant ships and exploded. This he said was the first time the Houthis had used an USV, since the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war. Houthis had used USVs in the past. "We all

watched as it exploded. No more details on that for right now," he said then without getting into further details.

The second instance was on February 1, when U.S. forces noticed a USV "heading toward the international shipping lane" and shot it down which resulted in "significant secondary explosions".

Control measures

On the measures in place for such contingencies, a Navy source said all frontline ships have anti-drone systems fitted onboard. Indian Navy has close to 12 warships in the Gulf of Aden, North and Central Arabian Sea for anti-piracy

and maritime security duties, in the backdrop of Houthi attacks as well as increasing piracy incidents by Somali pirates.

"Whether manned or unmanned platform does not make much of a difference. Main aspect is the nature of the threat. There is detection by radar and optic sensors and there are gun mounts and close-in weapon systems among others in place," the source stated.

From a perspective of aerial or surface threats, there is constant radar surveillance, surface surveillance and there are fire control systems attached to them and also visual and optic sensors, the source

explained. In addition, when on deployment there are regular look outs as part of standard procedures, the sources said adding, "These cater to any surface and aerial threats."

However, these USV add another dimension of threat perception to commercial shipping which have in the last few months been targeted by missiles and one-way drones. With the continuing U.S.-led coalition attacks on Houthi military targets in Yemen as well as airstrikes against Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), Quds Force and affiliated militia groups in Iraq and Syria, there is no end to volatility in sight.



Vigil mode: International Atomic Energy Agency chief Rafael Grossi after a media briefing in Kyiv. AFP

'Security still fragile at Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant'

Associated Press
KYIV

Security at Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant remains fragile amid worrying recent staff cuts enacted by Russian authorities occupying the facility, which is one of the 10 biggest atomic power plants in the world, the United Nations nuclear watchdog chief said on Tuesday.

International Atomic Energy Agency chief Rafael Grossi, who is in Kyiv, said that his upcoming visit to the plant as the war approaches its two-year milestone will aim to assess the impact of recent personnel reductions after Russia denied access to employees of Ukraine's Energoatom.

"This huge facility used to have around 12,000 staff. Now, this has been reduced to between 2,000 and 3,000, which is quite a steep reduction in the number of people working there," Mr. Grossi said. "To man, to operate these very sophisticated big installations you need a certain number of people performing different specific functions."

"So far the situation is stable, but it is a very, very delicate equilibrium," he said.

Mr. Grossi's visit coincided with the arrival in the Ukrainian capital of the European Union's top diplomat, Josep Borrell, who said he was there to discuss military aid and financial support as well as Ukraine's ambition of joining the bloc.

The IAEA has repeatedly expressed alarm about the Zaporizhzhia facility amid fears of a potential nuclear catastrophe.

Mr. Grossi confirmed his team observed anti-personnel mines in some areas of the plant, another cause for concern that he needs to see with his own eyes.

Pak. voters wonder if polls will change the country mired in political turmoil

Forty-four political parties will compete for a share of the 266 seats; for the international community, a strong and stable Pakistani govt. means a better chance of containing any unrest; the country needs a govt. that can regain public confidence and deliver basic services, says political scientist

Associated Press
ISLAMABAD

Pakistan is holding parliamentary elections this week but many voters are disillusioned and wonder if the balloting can bring any real change in a country mired in political feuding, a seemingly intractable economic crisis and resurgent militancy.

Forty-four political parties will compete on Thursday for a share of the 266 seats in the National Assembly, or the lower house of parliament, with an additional 70 seats reserved for women and minorities.

After the election, the new parliament will choose the country's next Prime Minister. If no party wins an outright majority, then the one with the biggest share of Assembly seats can form a coalition government.

Many experts agree that in Pakistan's political landscape today, there really seems to be only one top contender for the post of premier - Nawaz Sharif, a three-times former Prime Minister who has returned to the country and been absolved of past convictions.

Mr. Sharif came back last October after four years of self-imposed exile in London to avoid serving prison sentences. Within weeks of his return, his



Ray of hope: Supporters of Pakistan's former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif attend a rally on the last day of the election campaign in Kasur, Punjab province, ahead of Pakistan's national elections. AFP

sentences were thrown out and his convictions overturned.

His archrival, former Prime Minister Imran Khan is behind bars and banned from contesting the vote.

And although Mr. Khan has a significant grassroots following, it's the intensity of his downfall and the ease of Mr. Sharif's return that have led many to believe the outcome has been already decided.

Nuclear-armed Pakistan is the fifth most populous country in the world and an unpredictable Western ally.

For the international community, a strong and stable Pakistani government means a better

chance of containing any unrest, addressing economic challenges and stemming illegal migration.

And though anything can happen on election day, both Mr. Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League and Mr. Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf have led lackluster campaigns over the past few weeks - something experts say only feeds into the general apathy among some 127 million eligible voters.

That could come back to haunt Pakistan's next government and set the stage for an even more intense brain drain and more political trouble ahead, as well as violent protests. And that in turn would only be-

nefit Islamic militants.

Mr. Khan's May 2023 arrest triggered destructive rampages on a scale unseen since the 2007 assassination of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto. Mr. Khan's supporters blamed the military for his demise and set about wrecking military buildings and property - a strong message of defiance in a country where the army wields huge influence.

The authorities responded with mass arrests, a crackdown on Mr. Khan's party, and the introduction of military trials for civilians. The clampdown appears to have broken some of that spirit, though a recent pre-election rally in the southern city of Kara-

chi showed that some were ready to fight for him.

Military affairs scholar Ayesha Siddiqi warns of more instability as the anti-establishment sentiment grows. "People are angry," Ms. Siddiqi said. "The dislike of the Army has increased tremendously, and it's more noticeable."

A year ago, Mr. Khan was still a free man rallying for a comeback while Mr. Sharif, ousted in 2017 over corruption allegations and banned for life from holding public office, was in London, seemingly out of the picture.

Now the tables have turned. Mr. Khan is in prison while Mr. Sharif's return and the abolition that followed - compounded with an election campaign he only launched on Jan. 15 - positioned him as the security establishment's preferred candidate.

Pakistan is not known for holding free and fair elections. Ballot-stuffing, voter intimidation and other forms of electoral fraud have been commonplace in the past.

First-time voter Noreen Khan, who works in an Islamabad beauty salon, said she holds little hope for a free vote and believes there is no way Mr. Khan's "party will be allowed to win".

Mr. Sharif's and Mr. Khan's sharp reversal of

fortunes fits the nation's cutthroat pattern of power-seeking politics.

Political scientist Samina Yasmeen at the University of Western Australia envisions negative repercussions for the already troubled economy if voters come out thinking Thursday's vote was unfair. "They won't trust the government," she said.

Talha Ahad, the founder of The Centrum Media, a Pakistani digital news network, said young people are not taking the election seriously. They believe "everything is fixed" and think there must be a deal with the military, and that why Mr. Sharif is back, he said.

Clerics and militant groups have long wanted to impose their interpretation of Islamic law, or Shariah, on everyday life in Pakistan, claiming Western ways and democracy don't work.

With mounting political divisions, a loss of trust in the government and the system, radical Islam could benefit in a country with a history of militancy, said Yasmeen, the political analyst.

Pakistan needs a government that can regain public confidence, create jobs and deliver basic services, she said. "People need that sense of safety," she added. "Without that, we're on a slippery slope."

Russia, China accuse U.S. of stoking West Asian tensions

Associated Press

Russia accused the United States on Monday of aggression against Iraq and Syria aimed at preserving its global dominance and salvaging the Biden administration's "image" ahead of U.S. elections. The U.S. retorted that its military response to unjustified attacks by Iranian-backed proxies against American forces is not only legal but will continue.

The exchange came at a contentious UN Security Council meeting called by Russia, Syria's closest ally, where both countries also said they did not want an escalation and spillover of the Israel-Hamas war. Many council members expressed fears of a growing West Asian conflict and urged de-escalation and stepped-up peace efforts.

Russia's UN Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia accused the U.S. of violating international law and continuing "to sow chaos and destruction in West Asia." He said violence by the U.S. and its allies has escalated from the Palestinian territories to Lebanon, the Red Sea and Yemen and is "nullifying international efforts to reestablish peace in the West Asia."

The Russian Ambassador claimed the U.S. is attempting "to flex muscles ... to justify and salvage the image of the current American administration ... in the light of the upcoming presidential pre-election campaign."

U.S. Deputy Ambassador Robert Wood countered that the U.S. has an absolute right to self-defence against attacks on American forces and the actions it has taken were "necessary and proportionate."

Chill block



Snow stop: Vehicles are stranded on a snow-covered expressway on the outskirts of Wuhan in central China's Hubei province. Widespread snowfall and freezing weather continued disrupting transport and stranding travellers amid the annual Lunar New Year travel rush. AP

Ethiopian PM plays down fears of war with Somalia over a planned naval port

Associated Press
ADDIS ABABA

Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has played down fears of a war with Somalia over his quest for sea access for his landlocked country, saying on Tuesday that Ethiopia is only interested in peace with its neighbour.

Ethiopia signed a memorandum of understanding with the breakaway region of Somaliland on January 1. The document has not been made public, but Somaliland says Ethiopia agreed to recognise its independence in return for a naval port.

The deal has rattled Somalia, which asserts that Somaliland is part of Somalia. Somalia's President has suggested he is ready to go to war with Ethiopia to prevent it from building a port there.



Abiy Ahmed

Addressing lawmakers on Tuesday, Mr. Abiy said he had "no intention" of going to war with Somalia. "To ensure the peace of Somalia, thousands of Ethiopians have died in Somalia," he said, a reference to Ethiopia's troop contributions to the African Union peacekeeping mission fighting the extremist group al-Shabab in Somalia.

"We are dying in Somalia because the peace of Somalia is the peace of Ethiopia. The development of

Somalia is the development of our country. We believe we are brothers," Mr. Abiy said. "We don't want to fight. We want to see a strong and prosperous Somalia that is a market for Ethiopian goods."

Mr. Abiy also sought to allay Egyptian fears over the hydroelectric dam Ethiopia is building on the Blue Nile. "We will share our resources, even in the future, but my hope is I expect them to accommodate our requests as well."

Ethiopia says the mega dam is essential for its development and claims it will have no negative effect on downstream Sudan and Egypt. Practically all of Egypt's 109 million people rely on Nile waters.

There have been several rounds of talks over the dam, but the sides have failed to reach an agreement to regulate its use.

Trump deploys his playbook against women who bother him

Associated Press
MAULDIN

Hillary Clinton. Nancy Pelosi. Kamala Harris. Liz Cheney. Carly Fiorina. And for now, Nikki Haley.

The former South Carolina Governor is the latest in a long line of women - historically some of Republican Donald Trump's most stubborn challengers - for whom the former President saves a special playbook. It's centered around intimidation, combined with a now-familiar brand of vulgarity, nicknames and other insults he deploys for men, too.

But where he tries to emasculate his male oppo-

nents, Mr. Trump works in put-downs about the appearance of women, their emotional balance and their intelligence. He mispronounces their names. He seemed to confuse two politicians who are women. And he questions their right to challenge him.

Mr. Trump's nickname for Haley, a Republican who served as his own Ambassador to the United Nations, is "Birdbrain."

"Who the hell was the impostor?" Mr. Trump railed after the New Hampshire primary against Ms. Haley, who acknowledged his victory but has refused to drop out of the GOP pre-



Out of control: The 'playbook' is centered around intimidation, combined with a now-familiar brand of vulgarity. REUTERS

sidential nomination fight. "When I watched her in the fancy dress that probably was not so fancy, I said, 'What's she doing? We won.'"

Ms. Haley, who lost in Iowa and New Hampshire

but has vowed to stay in the race through her home State's first-in-the-South GOP primary on February 24, shot back that Mr. Trump threw a "tantrum" because he feels threatened.

"It's not just that he's running against Nikki Haley," said Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers. "It's because she is even deigning to challenge him ... He goes after women for their appearance."

"You can do anything" to women when you are famous, Mr. Trump said on the "Access Hollywood" tape that threatened his 2016 campaign. And yet Mr. Trump defeated Ms. Clinton with 39% of women voters casting their ballots for him.

Ms. Haley, for her part, has mostly taken Mr. Trump's sexism in stride.

She said on Sunday that he was respectful to her when she served as his Ambassador to the United Nations, but now is "flawed."

She was a "nasty woman," did not look presidential and her voice gave Mr. Trump a headache - This is Mr. Trump's approach to women he sees as obstacles.

But the defining visual of Mr. Trump's approach to Ms. Clinton came at a debate two days after *The Washington Post* reported the contents of the "Access Hollywood" tape.

As Ms. Clinton answered questions, he loomed so close, she wrote later, "my skin crawled."

Few days after the debate, Mr. Trump appeared to hark back to the moment. "When she walked in front of me. Believe me, I was not impressed."

Laura Schroder, a 39-year-old mother of three, brought her children to see Ms. Haley recently at a Mauldin, South Carolina, rally. "He is very immature," she said of Mr. Trump, "and so clearly scared to lose to powerful woman."

Ms. Haley herself makes a similar argument, such as one jab to chide Mr. Trump for refusing to debate her.

"Man up, Donald," she says, "I know you can do it."

RBI drains liquidity via 2 VRRR auctions



First of sorts: This is probably the first instance of two VRRR auctions being conducted on the same day. REUTERS

K. Ram Kumar
MUMBAI

In a surprise move, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) conducted two one-day variable rate reverse repo (VRRR) auctions on Tuesday to drain out liquidity from the banking system and re-anchor overnight money market rates at a higher level.

Market players said this is probably the first instance of two VRRR auctions being held on the same day. In the first auction, the RBI received offers from banks to deploy funds for a day, aggregating to ₹27,538 crore against the notified amount of ₹75,000 crore. The RBI absorbed these funds at a weighted average rate of 6.49%.

Later, the RBI came up with a second VRRR auction announcement to suck out ₹50,000 crore (notified amount). At this auction, banks offered to park ₹41,804 crore. The RBI accepted these offers at a weighted average rate of 6.49%.

Gopal Tripathi, Head, Treasury and Capital Markets, Jana Small Finance Bank, said after the first VRRR auction, some banks would have still been left with surplus funds. So, they would have approached the RBI for deploying these funds. Hence, it conducted the second VRRR auction.

The overnight money market rate has slid to about 6.30% against 6.50% to 6.75% last week. So, the RBI seems to be trying to re-anchor the rate at higher levels in keeping with withdrawal of accommodation stance. The overall liquidity deficit in the banking system has shrunk to about ₹1.22-lakh crore as on February 5 against about ₹3.46-lakh crore as on January 24.

(The writer is with The Hindu businessline)

With solar industry in crisis, Europe in a bind over imports from China

Announcements of production closures are piling up, and the sector has warned half of its capacity could shut within weeks unless governments step in; governments and industry are split over how to help; Europe wants to grow local clean technology manufacturing

NEWS ANALYSIS
Reuters
STRASBOURG,
FRANCE/LONDON

Europe's green energy transition is stuck between a rock and a hard place.

A flood of cheap Chinese solar panel imports is driving record solar energy installations. But those same imports are crushing Europe's few local solar manufacturers.

Governments and industry are split over how to respond.

Record solar capacity
Europe just had a bumper year for green energy. European Union countries installed record levels of solar capacity, 40% more than in 2022.

The vast majority of those panels and parts came from China – in some cases, 95%, International Energy Agency data show.

Yet, the green energy boom hasn't helped Europe's few local solar panel manufacturers, which have hit a crisis point, crushed by cheaper imports and oversupply. Announcements of production closures are piling up, and the sector has warned half of its capacity could shut within weeks unless governments step in. Policymakers are scrambling to respond, but are split over how to do so.

Germany's own



Dark patterns: Solar installations on 340 hectares surround the village of Hjolderup, Denmark which consists of 12 households. REUTERS

German Economy Minister Robert Habeck wrote to the European Commission in November, expressing concern that the EU executive was about to slap trade restrictions on Chinese solar imports, a letter seen by Reuters showed.

"I have heard that the Commission may be intending to impose safeguard measures against imports of photovoltaic (PV) modules from China. I have very strong concerns about this," the letter said.

Mr. Habeck warned restricting Chinese imports could kill off Europe's rapid expansion of green energy and make 90% of the PV market more expensive. It risked bankruptcies among EU companies that assemble and install solar panels using imported parts, he said.

A spokesperson for Germany's Economy Ministry declined to comment on the letter.



The green energy boom hasn't helped Europe's few local solar panel manufacturers, which have hit a crisis point, crushed by cheaper imports and oversupply

planned support for the sector has been thrown into turmoil by a government budget crisis.

Elsewhere, Spain has not ruled out solar tariffs on imports of solar panel materials. The Netherlands wants to cover solar PV imports with the EU's carbon border tax, a government official told Reuters. And Italy last week announced a €90 million (\$97 million) investment in a PV panel factory in Sicily.

Germany's own

to EU measures already underway, including a law due to be finalised on Tuesday, which aims at fast-tracking permits for local manufacturing and giving products made in the EU, such as panels, an advantage in future clean tech tenders. On trade restrictions, Ms. McGuinness struck a cautious tone.

"Given that we currently rely to a very important degree on imports to reach EU solar deployment targets, any potential measure needs to be weighed against the objectives we have set ourselves when it comes to the energy transition," she said.

The industry itself is divided over the solution. So

Even local manufacturers say hopes of a competitive local industry are dim. Europe is in a "price war" with China, said Gunter Erfurt, CEO of Swiss panel maker Meyer Burger, which plans to close its loss-making German solar module factory, citing an absence of supportive European policies.

With some Chinese solar firms able to sell even below production costs, Europe is playing catch up.

"The solar industry in China has been strategically subsidised with hundreds of billions of dollars for years," Mr. Gunter Erfurt told Reuters.

lar manufacturers have urged governments to step in to buy up excess inventories of solar modules to ease the oversupply – and, if this cannot be done fast, consider trade barriers.

But the broader green energy industry is opposed to import curbs.

"You can't reduce dependency on China in the short term or you don't build the projects," Miguel Stilwell d'Andrade, CEO of Portuguese utility EDP, told Reuters.

Inflationary impact
He noted solar panel prices have climbed in the United States, which has duties on Chinese imports. "It is having an inflationary impact ... the price of panels is more than double that of Europe," he said.

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Tinkering with nature?



Not a sustainable model: Protesters hold placards during a demonstration against new genomic techniques as part of a wave of protest across Europe against green reforms, outside the European Parliament in Strasbourg, eastern France. EU Chief Ursula von der Leyen recommended the bloc bury a plan to cut pesticide use in agriculture as a concession to protesting European farmers. Farmers are demanding lower fuel taxes, better prices for products and an easing of EU environmental regulations. AFP

India to stay alert for 'hot money' after bond index inclusion: official

Reuters
NEW DELHI

India will monitor flows of foreign funds after its inclusion into JPMorgan's emerging market debt index and take steps to avoid 'hot money' that can trigger volatility in currency and bond markets, a senior government official said.

"We will keep monitoring it. And when necessary, steps will be taken," T. V. Somanathan, a senior Finance Ministry official told Reuters in an interview.

The aim will be to "prevent volatility or volatile inflows" but "never" to restrict outflows, Mr. Somanathan said, adding all possibilities are open to keep volatility in check.



Orderly flows: The aim will be to 'prevent volatility or volatile inflows' but 'never' to restrict outflows, says Somanathan. REUTERS

However, any talk about measures right now is "hypothetical."

Last year, JPMorgan announced it will include some Indian bonds in the Government Bond Index-Emerging Markets and its

bought securities worth ₹446 billion (\$5.37 billion).

Mr. Somanathan said the government's main concern with index investors was that some of these longer-term investors "come in passively and leave passively" and the exit does not always reflect economic conditions on the ground.

On government's borrowing, Mr. Somanathan said New Delhi was likely to raise nearly ₹200 billion through sovereign green bonds in 2024/25 fiscal.

"Within that total borrowing programme, some component is likely to be green bonds. Likely to be around the same level as last year but a final decision has not been taken."

Moon cargo like human ashes, drink containers spark legal debate

Reuters
WASHINGTON

An array of unconventional, privately-funded plans to exploit the moon, including as a site for human ashes and sports-drink containers, has gathered steam in recent years as NASA pushes to make Earth's natural satellite more accessible.

Concerns about possible gaps in U.S. oversight and legal questions about proper use of the moon have rocketed to the forefront.

Landers built by private companies and emerging space powers are expected in the next few years to join the U.S. flag and other vestiges of past programmes to the moon. Other initiatives could

include using the moon as a site for capsules of human remains, advertising sports drinks, and maybe, even a two-storey-tall Christian cross made of the moon's own dirt.

"We're just at the beginning of exploring the moon, and ... we need to be careful we're not contaminating it – not just with biological and chemical contamination but with litter," said Leslie Tennen, an attorney practicing international space law.

Human ashes
Among the payloads aboard a recent private moon mission by U.S. company Astrobotic – which ultimately failed to reach the moon's surface – were dozens of capsules of human ashes and a can of Ja-



Grey areas: The lack of guidelines has some eyeing possibilities. REUTERS

panese sports drink Pocari Sweat. The exact purpose of the can was unclear.

Under U.S. law, those items and anything else can go to the moon, as long

as the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration and other agencies certify a rocket payload's launch off Earth does not "jeopardise public health and safety ...

U.S. national security ... or international obligations of the United States."

The issue will gain more attention as the National Aeronautics and Space Ad-

ministration leans heavily on private companies to cut the costs of its trips to the moon. At present, there are no U.S. laws or standards outlining what is acceptable on the celestial body's surface. NASA envisions long-term moon bases and hopes to spur a competitive commercial marketplace.

Absence of norms
Lawyers with space-law expertise worry that the absence of regulations could pit U.S. companies against other countries operating on the lunar surface or spark international disputes over which private endeavors could be considered land appropriation or claims of sovereignty.

The lack of guidelines has some eyeing the possi-

bilities. Justin Park, a Washington, D.C.-based entrepreneur, wants to build a Christian cross on the moon as big as a two-storey building and made of hardened lunar dirt, an estimated \$1 billion undertaking he has discussed with U.S. lawmakers and Catholic organizations.

"Nobody owns the moon," Mr. Park said. "You don't want to stomp on traditions, but you can't hold the rest of the world back." Overly restrictive regulations for moon activities, he said, would "destroy an industry before it gets off the ground."

'Religious test'
Texas-based Celestis, which launches cremated human remains into space and had arranged the ash-

es on Astrobotic's Peregrine lander, drew ire from the Navajo Nation, which regards the moon as sacred and considered the company's memorial mission sacrilege.

Celestis CEO Charles Schafer said memorials of the dead in space are inevitable as more humans traverse the cosmos. "We don't make space mission decisions on the basis of a religious test," Mr. Schafer said. "I have a photo of 20,000 Buddhist monks celebrating our launch. So which religion rules?"

NASA officials overseeing the programme that helped fund Astrobotic's mission said they have no control over what firms put on landers, and that payload standards could be created in the future.

Sahaja revives promise with riveting fare

The 22-year-old, who stunned the top seed Kayla Day in the first round of the WTA tennis tournament in Mumbai, said she was really glad that she was able to pull it off since it was not only a big win for her at this point of her career, but also one which motivated her towards achieving more success

WTA

Kamesh Srinivasan

Stay calm and face the storm. If possible, be the storm for your rival!

That has been the guiding principle for Sahaja Yamalapalli who stunned the top seed Kayla Day in the first round of the WTA tennis tournament in Mumbai.

Two weeks of training and interaction with Ashley Hobson during her last stint of tournaments in the USA had made the 22-year-old Sahaja see her tennis in a different perspective. More importantly, she understood the meaning of staying in the moment, being aware of what was happening on court, thinking and playing smart, depending on the demands of the situation. She has learnt to enjoy the challenge thrown at her by every opponent and find her way.

Sahaja had beaten the 158th-ranked Ekaterina Makarova in winning her last title, the \$25,000 event in Solapur. However, after that she won one match in four tournaments in Navi Mumbai, Bengaluru, Pune and Indore.

Luckily, she not only got the wild card for the WTA event, but also had a long-time coach at the PBI in Bengaluru, Rituplawan Gogoi to travel for the event in Mumbai.

"He came to help me to get back my confidence and do some tweaks in my game because I was travelling without a coach for several weeks leading to Mumbai", said Sahaja. Understandably delighted to be able to play her best when facing her first top-100 opponent, Sahaja put things in perspective, expressing her gratitude.

Very high level

"I was happy and grateful to get this opportunity to play on the big stage. The level is very high. To be around these players, training with them, you get the confidence and belief that you belong here, I was telling myself that I can do this even though Kayla was first seed and top-100," said Sahaja.

To perform well one needs conviction in one's ability. "I just wanted to give everything out there and see what happens. In the end, when I got the match-points, I was shaking. Oh My God, am winning this! Am really glad that I was able to pull it off. It is a big win for me at this point of my career. This win is motivating. It pushes me to do better, train harder in practice. Go out there and get more wins," said Sahaja.

For many, the high quality of tennis



that Sahaja sustained for more than two hours and 30 minutes may have been a surprise, but Sahaja knew what she was capable of executing on the court.

"I know I can produce this quality of play. It is all mental. I was preparing myself, I can do this. Earlier when I was this close against a top-200 player, I did not come out on the winning side. At that time, I was a bit less confident. I wasn't sure that I could win that. This time all that experience helped me. I have the confidence to beat anyone," said Sahaja.

Quite remarkably, Sahaja tightened her game and built on her strengths to be able to match a top pro in her craft.

Augmenting fitness

"I have fitness and physical strength built over the years. My forehand has been my biggest strength in my game. Lately, I have been working a lot on the serve. I have big groundstrokes. My serve was only very decent. So I worked on it last

couple of weeks. Today, I was able to serve better than what I had in my earlier matches," said Sahaja.

To play great through the match is one thing, and to handle the climax well is really something.

"I did not play the second set well, made many unforced errors. She was solid. I was not hitting the ball well like I did in the first set. I was not able to control the points. I told myself that this had to stop. I can't let her dominate. Third set, I tried to go for it. Hit the balls I had to and not hold back. If I make it, I win, if I don't, it is ok. That match was on my racquet," recalled Sahaja.

Overcoming nerves

Missing two match-points, Sahaja overcame the nerves and could think clearly. "Anyone at that point would feel those nerves. At deuce, I said, I had to go for it. I was kind of holding back, hoping for her to miss. It was not going to happen

at this level. I had to take charge and create my opportunity. I was just going for it in the end," said Sahaja.

Anyone may be disheartened to face the top seed in the first round of a big event. But, Sahaja had waited for long to play Day.

"I had seen Kayla (Day), especially when I was in USA. I had watched a lot of her matches. I have been wanting to play her. I was kind of happy that I drew her. I wanted to see where I stand in terms of game level. I was thinking that this match would all come down to whether I make my shots or not. I had to stay in, step in, and hit those balls," said Sahaja.

Sahaja said she would continue to have fun on court and enjoy the challenge every opponent poses so as to achieve her goal for the season of getting into the qualifying events of the Grand Slams.

For sure, Sahaja and company promise exciting times ahead for Indian women's tennis.

THE GIST

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Anyone may be disheartened to face the top seed in the first round of a big event after the string of losses, but Sahaja says she had waited for long to play Day

Sahaja said she would continue to have fun on court and enjoy the challenge every opponent poses so as to achieve her goal for the season of getting into the qualifying events of the Grand Slams

Veteran and rising US women gymnasts all set to light up the 2024 Paris Olympic Games

Agence France-Presse
KATY

Superstar Simone Biles leads a list of veteran champions vying with a talented new generation aiming to make a US women's Olympic gymnastics team that could be one for the ages.

Biles, who dazzled in winning four gold medals at the Rio de Janeiro Olympics in 2016, returned last year from a two-year absence to win four world titles – taking her career tally to 23 as she battled back from the bout of the disorientating "twisties" that cut short her Tokyo Olympics campaign.

Sunisa Lee, who won Olympic all-around gold in Tokyo, and London 2012 all-around champion Gabby Douglas are also in training as what promises to be a hyper-competitive Olympic year gets underway.

Add in Tokyo floor champion Jade Carey and team silver medallist Jordan Chiles, two-time world all-around medallist Shilese Jones and two-time world team champion Skye Blakely, it is clear the US has plenty of experienced talent to draw on. "The depth this year is



actually really insane," said 17-year-old Joscelyn Roberson, who is hoping to be in the Paris 2024 conversation when Minneapolis hosts the US trials in June. "I honestly think this

will be one of the best teams the United States has ever had and one of the best teams that the world has ever seen," Roberson said on Sunday at a media opportunity during a USA

Gymnastics training camp in Katy, Texas. "So it'll be really cool to see. I honestly feel like the United States could make three teams and they'd all be amazing."

Roberson qualified for last year's World Championships and helped the US team win gold before her campaign was cut short by injury. Roberson has had Paris

2024 circled on her calendar for a while.

"Probably from like eight or nine (years old) I was, like, 'OK, so that's my year,'" she said.

"Ever since then I've been counting down the years."

Exciting

Now that it has arrived, she said, it's nerve-racking but exciting.

"It feels like any other season. But then you always have it in the back of your mind, like, 'Oh my gosh, at the end of the season I'll be trying to go to Olympic trials and the Olympics,'" she said.

Jones, who missed out on a Tokyo Games berth, said the arrival of youngsters like Roberson and fellow teenagers Tiana Sumanasekera, Zoe Miller, and Kaliya Lincoln, who all helped the US to Pan American Games gold last year, will make the path to Paris a tough one.

"There's babies coming up to teenagers to older athletes – that's me being one of them," Jones said.

"So it should fun. Honestly, I feel like we're already working really hard pushing off each other.

"It's going to be tough,

and I'm looking forward to it."

Big test

The first big test for many of America's hopefuls will be the Winter Cup held on February 23-25.

The Core Hydration Classic in May will be another key competition before the US championships on May 30-June 2, with the US trials from June 22-30.

Alicia Sacramone Quinn a former world champion who won team silver at the 2008 Olympics and is now part of the US women's elite team leadership, said she likes the mix of old and new blood.

But she cautioned it would be months before a team coalesces as the seasoned competitors she calls the "super seniors" ramp up their training and youngsters chase competitive experience. "I think the expectations are a case by case," she said.

"Right now each athlete's in a different point, either they're nursing some aches and pains or had an injury or they're a seasoned vet who doesn't need to be really ready for early spring meets.

"Each athlete's journey is their own," she added.