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7 Indians who faced death row in Qatar return home

Indian officials escort seven of the eight former Navy personnel to New Delhi in passenger flight | Prime Minister Modi to visit Qatar tomorrow on his way back from UAE, announces Foreign Secretary | Both sides maintain secrecy over details of the case owing to its 'sensitive' nature

Kallol Bhattacharjee
NEW DELHI

Eight Indian Navy veterans who had been in Qatari custody since August 30, 2022 were released on Sunday in Doha. Indian officials escorted seven of the eight former death row prisoners to New Delhi by a passenger flight during the early hours of Monday. The development was followed by the announcement that Prime Minister Narendra Modi will visit Qatar on Wednesday afternoon on his way back home from the United Arab Emirates where he will pay a two-day visit dur-

ing February 13-14. "We are happy to have seven of those Indian nationals back. The eighth Indian has also been released and we continue to work with the Qatar government to see how quickly his return to India would be possible," said Foreign Secretary Vinay Mohan Kwatra. The details of the case in which the men were arrested were not shared with the media by either side while the Indian officials maintained that the case was "sensitive".

The men were given the death penalty by a lower court in Qatar on October 26, 2023. Subsequently, a court of appeals in Doha

struck down the death penalty on December 28.

Diplomatic issue
The case of the eight Indian Navy veterans kept India-Qatar relation on tenterhooks as the matter became an issue of diplomatic tug of war and their cause of the arrest was never publicised.

The men had earlier appealed against the death sentence of a lower court in Doha that was subsequently commuted to a sentence of varying periods for the eight individuals. Appreciating the decision of the Qatari legal authorities to release the Indians, Mr. Kwatra said,



Comes to fruition: The eighth person in the case has also been released by Qatar. Foreign Secretary Vinay Mohan Kwatra said the government will work with the Qatar government for his return. ANI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi "personally supervised all developments".

Earlier, there were expectations that the eight men would be freed ahead

of Ramzan or Id. However, the announcement has come a day prior to Mr. Modi's UAE visit.

While Mr. Modi's visit to the UAE was announced

earlier, the announcement of his Qatar visit was made by Mr. Kwatra at a special media interaction held here.

Qatar is a major supplier of energy to India and at least eight lakh Indian workers are employed in the Gulf country which continues to be a major source of foreign remittances to the Indian economy.

Ties on track

Despite the case involving the eight Indian Navy veterans, economic ties have remained on track and recently the two sides signed a \$78 billion LNG deal that extended an existing

agreement on supply of liquefied natural gas till 2048. "The bilateral relationship between India and Qatar that has been steadily growing includes a comprehensive span, including political ties, trade and investment linkages," Mr. Kwatra added.

The *Hindu* had published earlier that both the United Arab Emirates and Qatar hold around 3,000 Indian prisoners in their prisons and the prisoners in the Gulf region hold more than half of the total Indian prisoners in foreign jails.

'DID NOT ACT ON TIME'
» PAGE 5

INSIDE



Ashok Chavan quits Congress, may join BJP

MUMBAI
Former Maharashtra Chief Minister Ashok Chavan resigned from the Congress on Monday, ending his family's long-standing association with the party, amid growing speculation over his intention to switch to the BJP. » PAGE 2



Imprisoned T.N. Minister resigns from Cabinet

CHENNAI
Jailed Tamil Nadu Minister without portfolio V. Senthilbalaji, who was arrested in 2023 by the Enforcement Directorate in an alleged money laundering case with its roots in an alleged cash-for-job scam resigned from the Cabinet on Monday. » PAGE 4

Haldwani land will be used for police station: CM

HALDWANI
Days after the violence in Uttarakhand's Haldwani over the demolition of a madrasa and mosque that left five dead, Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami on Monday said a police station would be built on the land "freed from encroachment". » PAGE 5

67 Palestinians killed, 2 Israelis rescued in Gaza

RAFAH
Israeli forces rescued two hostages early on Monday, storming a heavily guarded apartment in a densely packed town in the Gaza Strip and extracting them under fire and covering airstrikes that local officials said killed at least 67 Palestinians. » PAGE 12

NDA govt. wins Bihar confidence vote; Opposition stages walk out

Amarnath Tewary
PATNA

The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government led by Chief Minister Nitish Kumar won the floor test in the Bihar Assembly on Monday with the support of 129 MLAs. Three legislators of the Opposition Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) voted in favour of the government amid a walkout by all non-NDA MLAs. The government needed the support of at least 122 MLAs to win the majority test in the 243-member Assembly.

Ahead of the trust vote, Bihar Assembly Speaker and RJD leader Awadh Bihari Choudhary, who had earlier refused to resign, was removed with 125 MLAs voting in favour of the motion and 112 opposing it. Deputy Speaker Maheshwar Hazari of the JD (U) then chaired the House.

After the House passed the resolution for the removal of the Speaker, Mr. Kumar moved the motion seeking trust vote for the new NDA government he had formed with the BJP on January 28. The motion was passed 129-0 through



Power point: Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar being greeted by his deputies Vijay Kumar Sinha and Samrat Choudhary after the NDA government won the trust vote in the Assembly on Monday. PTI

voice vote after the Opposition walked out from the House.

Before the trust motion, Governor Rajendra Vishwanath Arlekar addressed the joint session of the House amid occasional chants of "Jai Shri Ram" by BJP legislators.

The Opposition RJD MLAs shouted slogans of "Tejashwi Yadav zinda bad" when the Governor mentioned works done by departments such as Edu-

cation and Health, held by RJD in the previous government.

The NDA, comprising the BJP, Janata Dal (United), Hindustani Awam Morcha (Secular), and an Independent MLA, had support of 128 MLAs while the Opposition *Mahagathabandhan* (grand alliance) of the RJD, Congress, and Left parties had the support of 114 legislators. One MLA of Asaduddin Owaisi's All Indian Majlis-e-Itte-

hadul Muslimeen (AIMIM), Akhtarul Iman, was undecided.

During the floor test, JD (U) member Dilip Kumar Ray was absent and party MLA Hazari did not vote as he was in the Chair. Three MLAs from RJD - Prahlad Yadav, Nilam Devi and Chetan Anand - switched sides to vote in favour of the NDA.

TEJASHWI SLAMS NITISH
» PAGE 5

T.N. Governor Ravi refuses to read out customary address

Pon Vasanth B.A.
CHENNAI

Tamil Nadu Governor R.N. Ravi on Monday triggered a fresh row in the ongoing rift between him and the State government by refusing to read out the customary inaugural address of the Legislative Assembly for 2024 and at one point walked out of the House.

Mr. Ravi announced his decision after reading the first paragraph of the address prepared by the government that wished "happiness, prosperity and well-being" in the new year and quoted a couplet from *Tirukkural*.

Later in the day, the Raj Bhavan, in a release, said the Governor "with due regard to the constitutional proprieties expressed his inability to read the address as it contained numerous passages with misleading claims and facts and reading them would have amounted to Governor's address becoming a constitutional travesty".

After Mr. Ravi tersely ended his speech by citing reasons to justify his stand, Speaker M. Appavu read the prepared address in Tamil in entirety in the Governor's presence.



Governor R.N. Ravi arriving at the State Assembly. R. RAGU

Later, the Assembly unanimously adopted a resolution proposed by the Leader of the House and Water Resources Minister Duraimurugan. As per the resolution, the Speaker said only the prepared text of the speech as provided to the members and nothing else will go on the records of the Assembly. This was similar to a decision taken by the House last year when the Governor skipped certain portions of the address and also made certain extempore remarks. Mr. Ravi walked out of the House when Mr. Duraimurugan, upon being called by the Speaker, rose

to propose the resolution.

Remarks 'expunged'

Prior to calling Mr. Duraimurugan, Mr. Appavu made certain remarks on the short speech made by the Governor. However, at a press conference in his chamber later, he said both the Governor's remarks and the remarks he himself made stood "expunged".

In its statement, the Raj Bhavan blamed the Speaker for launching a tirade against him in the Assembly instead of playing the national anthem.

'ADDRESS' FLAYS CENTRE
» PAGE 2

Sharif, Bilawal start coalition talks in Pak.

Reuters
ISLAMABAD

Pakistan's two largest political parties were on Monday wrangling over who will be the Prime Minister after an inconclusive poll last week forced them to join forces and try to form a coalition government. Independent candidates backed by Imran Khan formed the largest group of 93 members in parliament.

FULL REPORT
» PAGE 12

Retail inflation eased to 3-month low of 5.1%; food prices sticky

Vikas Dhoot
NEW DELHI

India's retail inflation eased to a three-month low of 5.1% in January from 5.7% a month earlier, with food price rise cooling a bit to 8.3% compared with 9.5% in December 2023.

January's headline inflation pace is slightly higher than the 5% average projected by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) last week for the current final quarter of 2023-24.

Any interest rate cut hopes will have to wait till at least August if not longer, as the Central bank ex-

pects inflation to average 5% in the April to June quarter as well, before it hits its stated inflation target of 4% in the next quarter.

Food inflation sharp

While overall inflation faced by urban consumers dropped to 4.92% from 5.5% a month ago, food inflation remained sharp at 9%, sliding a tad from 10.4% in December. By contrast, rural consumers faced food inflation of 7.91% in January, down from 9% in December, but their overall price rise pace was higher than their ur-

ban counterparts at 5.34%.

On a month-on-month basis, the Consumer Price Index (CPI) dropped 0.11% while the Consumer Food Price Index fell 0.73%. A year ago, in January 2023, CPI inflation stood at 6.52%, while food price inflation stood at 6%.

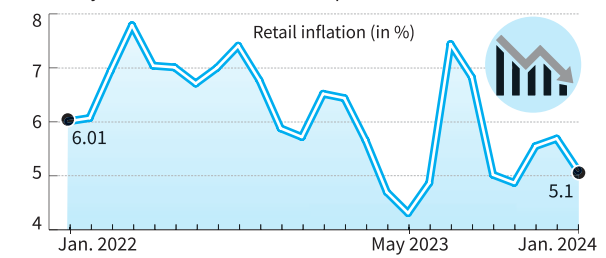
Among food items, vegetables inflation remained above 27%, just slightly below the 27.6% recorded in December.

The price rise in pulses also cooled marginally from 20.7% in December to 19.5% in January.

Cereals and spices inflation saw slightly better

Cooling down

India's retail inflation slowed to a three-month low of 5.1% in January on the back of lower food prices



moderation, dropping from 9.9% and 19.7% in December to 7.8% and 16.4%, respectively. Fruits inflation also fell from 11.1% to 8.65% in January, while

milk prices rose 4.6% compared with 5.1% in December.

Inflation in eggs, however, picked up pace to touch 5.6% in January, as did su-

gar and confectionary price rise which hit 7.5% from 7.1% a month earlier.

Weaker upticks

Most non-food items continued to see weaker upticks in prices compared to food items, with personal care and effects that had clocked a 7.3% rise in prices in December, dropping below 6%. Education inflation inched up a tad from 4.77% in December to 4.93% in January, but the pace of rise in healthcare costs dropped from 5.1% to 4.8%.

Half of the 22 major States for which the Na-

tional Statistical Office calculates inflation rates registered a price rise below the national average of 5.1%, with Delhi recording the lowest inflation of 2.56%, followed by Madhya Pradesh (3.93%), Kerala (4.04%), and Tamil Nadu (4.12%).

On the other hand, five States reported inflation of over 6%, breaching the RBI's tolerance threshold for price rise. Those States are Odisha (7.55%), Telangana (6.34%), Haryana (6.24%), Gujarat (6.21%), and Karnataka which witnessed 6.1% inflation in January.

IN BRIEF



Sisodia gets interim bail to attend niece's wedding

A Delhi court on Monday granted three-day interim bail to senior AAP leader Manish Sisodia, arrested in the excise policy case, to attend his niece's wedding. Special Judge M.K. Nagpal granted the relief to Mr. Sisodia from February 13-15. The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) had arrested the former Delhi Deputy Chief Minister on February 26, 2023 over alleged corruption in the formulation and implementation of the now-scrapped Delhi Excise Policy 2021-22. The Enforcement Directorate (ED) arrested him on March 9 from Tihar jail in a related case of money laundering. PTI

Body of ex-Chennai mayor's missing son recovered in H.P.

Days after the ill-fated vehicle in which former Chennai mayor Saidai Duraisamy's son Vetri Duraisamy, 45, was travelling fell into the Sutlej river in Himachal Pradesh, his body was recovered on Monday, the police said. "The divers recovered the body of Vetri Duraisamy, around 3 km downstream from the spot where the vehicle fell into the river on February 4. The body was sent for post-mortem to Indira Gandhi Medical College and Hospital in Shimla," said Kinnara's Deputy Superintendent of Police (Headquarters), Naveen Jalta. Mr. Jalta said the body will be handed over to the family after the post-mortem.

Delhi HC quashes JNU PhD student's rustication

The Delhi High Court has quashed an order by Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) rustinating a PhD student for two semesters and declaring her "out of bounds" from the campus. In its order, dated February 7, the court set aside the action taken by the university against Swati Singh, a student at the Centre for Russian Studies, calling it an "unsustainable breach of the statutory protocol". The order to rusticate Ms. Singh was issued on November 8, 2023, after a proctorial inquiry found her guilty of allegedly manhandling a woman security guard and misbehaving with other guards at the gate of the JNU Convention Centre in August that year.

Mithun discharged from hospital, to resume shooting

Veteran actor Mithun Chakraborty got discharged from hospital on Monday afternoon, with the BJP leader asserting that he was "absolutely fine" and would soon resume shooting for upcoming films. Mr. Chakraborty, 73, was admitted to a private hospital here on February 10, after he complained of severe chest pain. He underwent a series of clinical tests, including an MRI, a senior official of the medical facility said. Earlier in the day, senior doctors and therapists had reviewed his health condition. "There is actually no problem, I am absolutely fine. I have to keep control of my food habits," the popular actor said. PTI

Governor's 'address' delivered by Speaker flays Centre on GST, funds

The speech prepared by State govt., which R.N. Ravi refuses to deliver in the House, highlights Tamil Nadu's achievements under the present regime and urges the Central government to release relief funds for cyclone and flood-affected areas

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI

The speech prepared by the Tamil Nadu government for Governor R.N. Ravi's address to the Assembly, which he refused to read, was critical of the Centre on the GST regime and the non-release of funds for the Chennai Metro Rail project.

Besides, the government vowed that it will never allow the implementation of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act in the State, citing the "grave threat" that the ideal of unity in diversity faced. It also highlighted the need for funds to mitigate the devastation caused by the recent cyclone and floods in Chennai, Thoothukudi and other regions of Tamil Nadu.

A majority of the 48-page speech, subsequently read out in Tamil by Speaker M. Appavu, focused on the achievements of the State under the present DMK government and over the past decades in various spheres. They included the State's real economic growth of 8.19% in 2022-23, which was higher than the



Dramatic day: The Assembly session under way at the Secretariat in Chennai on Monday. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

nation's growth, the State's high rank in NITI Aayog's Export Preparedness Index, investments attracted through the Global Investors Meet, conduct of the Khelo India Youth Games, and various welfare measures like Kalaignar Magalir Urimai Thittam (KMUT) and the Chief Minister's Breakfast Scheme, which have made the State "a model for the entire country".

While appreciating the preparedness of the State government and the relief efforts made after Cyclone Michaung and the torrential downpour in southern districts in December last year, the speech empha-

adequate compensation till the new system could generate revenues equivalent to those of the pre-GST era. However, the termination of the GST compensation regime by the Union government by June 2022 meant that the State was facing a revenue shortfall of ₹20,000 crore per year. "We urge the Union government to continue the compensation regime," the speaker read.

'Broken promise'

The address expressed disappointment that the Union government had reneged on its promise to provide its share as per a 50:50 equity arrangement for phase II of the Chennai Metro Rail project by delaying approval for more than two years, while according sanction for similar projects in other States at the same time. "We urge the Union government to approve the project as originally envisaged," it said.

Citing the line, *Yaadhum oore yaavarum kelir*, from a poem by Kaniyan Poongundranar, the speech said Tamils had embraced universal brotherhood since the

Sangam era, and this continued to serve as a guiding light for the government. "While the ideal of unity in diversity is facing a grave threat in our nation, this government remains steadfast in its commitment to protect and preserve the communal harmony in the State," it said. Stating that the government stood with minorities and the Sri Lankan Tamils, the speaker stressed that it will never permit the implementation of the Citizenship Amendment Act and vowed to take all necessary measures in this regard.

The address pointed to the request made by Chief Minister M.K. Stalin to Prime Minister Narendra Modi to take up a caste census along with the national decennial census, which has been delayed since 2021.

Urging the Cauvery Water Management Authority to come up with a scientific formula for the sharing of water, the speech said the State government shall take all necessary measures to prevent the construction of a new dam by Karnataka in Mekedatu.

'Governor could have refrained from coming to Assembly'

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI

Governor R.N. Ravi could have chosen not to come to the Assembly if he felt that the text of his customary address prepared by the State government was against his conscience, Law Minister S. Regupathy said on Monday.

Addressing the media at the Secretariat after Mr. Ravi refused to read out the prepared speech, Mr. Regupathy said if the Governor raised objections to the text, claiming that it was not the truth, the State government was prepared to give a response.

The Governor's actions would only strengthen the Opposition-led INDIA bloc in the northern States, he said.

The Minister said Tamil Nadu was leading in various spheres, which was evident from the data. "This only shows that the Governor did not have the heart to accept it," he claimed. According to him, the Chief Minister was respecting Constitutional authorities, and hence, the State government was "putting up" with the Governor's actions.

Less than 1% of Gujarat budget earmarked for OBCs: Cong.

Press Trust of India
GANDHINAGAR

The Opposition Congress on Monday termed the BJP government in Gujarat as "anti-OBC" for allegedly allocating less than 1% of the 2024-25 budget outlay for the segment that represents 52% of the State's population.

Speaking in the Assembly during the general discussion on the State budget, Congress Legislature Party leader Amit Chavda demanded caste census in Gujarat. "Recently, there was a controversy about whether PM Narendra Modi belongs to the OBC category. I don't want to go into that. But, I want to say the BJP government's policies have been anti-OBC ever since Modi was the CM. You have allocated only ₹2,900 crore for the OBCs out of a total budget of ₹3.32 lakh crore for the 2024-25," Mr. Chavda told the House.

BJP announces its 2 candidates for RS polls from Rajasthan

The Hindu Bureau
JAIPUR

The Bharatiya Janata Party on Monday announced its two candidates for Rajasthan for the upcoming Rajya Sabha biennial elections for three seats in the State. The ruling BJP is set to get two of the seats, while the Opposition Congress will get one, on the basis of their respective strength in the State Assembly.

The two BJP candidates are State vice-president and former Minister Chunnilal Garasiya and former Sumperpur MLA Madan Rathore. Mr. Rathore was elected an MLA twice, in 2003 and 2013, and served as BJP's Deputy Chief Whip in the Assembly. He was earlier the chief of Pali Central Cooperative Bank.

Mr. Garasiya, a low-profile BJP leader hailing from Udaipur district, is the tri-

bal face of the party. He was elected an MLA twice, in 1990 and 1993, from Udaipur Rural constituency and he served as a Minister of State for Tribal Area Development. He was also national president of the BJP's Scheduled Tribe Morcha.

The BJP has 115 and the Congress 70 MLAs in the 200-member State Assembly. A minimum of 67 votes will be required to win one Rajya Sabha seat in the event of a contest.

Ex-PM's term ending

The terms of office of Congress MP and former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and BJP MP Bhupendra Yadav will come to an end on April 3. Besides these two, one Rajya Sabha seat has become vacant after the resignation of BJP's Kirodi Lal Meena following his victory in the 2023 Assembly election.

Assam govt. wants to curb evangelism, working to bring anti-polygamy law in State: CM

The Hindu Bureau
GUWAHATI

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Monday said that his government wants to curb evangelism in the State apart from aligning a proposed anti-polygamy law with Uttarakhand's Uniform Civil Code (UCC).

On February 10, the Assam Cabinet approved the Assam Healing (Prevention of Evil) Practices Bill, 2024, to address the issue of fraudulent magical healing practices in the name of treatment. The Bill prescribes imprisonment and fines for engaging in illegal practices under the guise of treatment or magic healing.

"Magical healing is a dicey subject used to convert tribal people. We are going to pilot this Bill because we believe the religious status



Chief Minister Himanta Sarma in Guwahati on Monday. PTI

move inspired from the UCC announced by the Uttarakhand government.

Meanwhile, a radical Hindu group named Kutumba Surakshya Parishad, translating into Family Safety Council, has asked church-run schools in Assam to remove all Christian symbols that it claimed are used subtly to influence students for conversion.

Ultimatum to schools

The group set a 15-day deadline for missionary schools from February 7 to remove the idols and photographs of Jesus and Mary apart from churches located within their compounds. Denying the charges of conversion, Guwahati-based Archbishop John Moolachira said threats from radical groups have made it difficult to manage school and educational activities.

Ex-Maharashtra CM Ashok Chavan quits Congress, casts shadow on its fortunes in RS polls

Abhinav Deshpande
Shoumojit Banerjee
MUMBAI/PUNE

In a jolt to the Congress in Maharashtra, former Chief Minister Ashok Chavan resigned from the party on Monday, casting a shadow on its fortunes in the Rajya Sabha polls in the State slated for February 27.

The move came amid growing speculation about the 65-year-old leader switching loyalties to the BJP, and days after senior State Congress leaders Milind Deora and Baba Siddique quit the party to join the ruling *Mahayuti* alliance, comprising the BJP, Shiv Sena and NCP.

Mr. Chavan, along with a few Congress MLAs, is expected to join the BJP in the presence of Union Home Minister Amit Shah later this week. Speculation is rife that he may se-

cure a Rajya Sabha berth. However, the leader said he has not decided to join any party yet. "The decision to quit is a personal one. I will clear my stand on joining a party after 48 hours," he said, adding that he is not in touch with any Congress MLAs.

Mr. Chavan, son of the late Defence Minister and two-time State Chief Minister, Shankarrao Chavan, submitted his resignation to State Congress chief Nana Patole. The veteran politician, who represented the Bhokar Assembly constituency, also met Assembly Speaker Rahul Narwekar and tendered his resignation as an MLA.

Later in the day, Mr. Chavan refuted claims that the White Paper recently tabled in Parliament prompted him to resign. It had mentioned the Adarsh building scam due to



Ashok Chavan addressing mediapersons outside his residence in Churchgate, Mumbai, after quitting the Congress on Monday. PTI

which he had to step down as Chief Minister in 2010.

Six seats in State

Of the six Rajya Sabha seats in the State, the BJP, with 104 MLAs in the 288-member Assembly, will stake claim to three seats, while its allies in the government - NCP and Shiv Sena - will claim one each. The Sena has 39 legislators, while

the NCP claims to have the support of 41 MLAs. The Sena and the BJP also have the support of several Independent legislators.

While the Congress, which has the largest strength (43 MLAs) in the Opposition Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) alliance, was expected to win the sixth seat, Mr. Chavan's exit has cast a cloud on its hopes.

While Congress leader Prithviraj Chavan and the party's Solapur MLA, Praniti Shinde, claimed that the party's flock remains united, BJP State chief Chandrashekhar Bawankule said there is no need for his party to split the Congress to win the sixth seat.

"I do not think Mr. Chavan's exit will impact our fortunes in the polls. The BJP is trying to portray the Congress as an unstable party, but we are strong. These are the BJP's tactics of pressure and blackmail," Ms. Shinde said.

Mr. Bawankule clarified that there is no proposal yet that Mr. Chavan will be sent to the Rajya Sabha if he joins the BJP. "I do not think there will be much of a contest in the RS polls. The BJP has the numbers to win three seats, the Ek-nath Shinde-led Sena camp and Ajit Pawar's NCP

have the numbers to win one seat each. The Congress can win the remaining seat by taking support from the Sharad Pawar-led NCP and Uddhav Thackeray's Shiv Sena (UBT)."

Asked about Mr. Chavan's potential entry into the party, senior BJP leader and Deputy Chief Minister Devendra Fadnis said, "Aagey aagey dekho hota hai kya (Wait and watch what happens). I learned about Mr. Chavan from the media. However, I am confident that a few key figures will switch to the BJP."

There is strong speculation that three more Congress MLAs - Mohan Hambarde, Jitesh Antapurkar, and Vishwajit Kadam - are likely to leave the party.

Not surprising: Patole

The news of the resignation, however, did not come as a surprise to the

State Congress chief. "It has been in the works for years, and the high command has been informed about it repeatedly. Nanded district, Mr. Chavan's hometown, has a significant population of Muslims and Dalits, traditionally strong supporters of the Congress. While leaders may change, our grassroots cadre remains intact," Mr. Patole said.

The State Congress president, who rushed to Delhi after the development, said the current political battle revolves less around ideology and more around apprehensions of the ED, CBI, and I-T Department. "It's clear that the primary concern seems to be investigative agencies and nothing else," Mr. Patole said.

The discord between Mr. Chavan and Mr. Patole likely influenced his decision, a senior leader from

Congress said. "Mr. Chavan always expressed dissatisfaction with Mr. Patole's role as State party chief, his decisions, and consistently held him responsible for the fall of the erstwhile MVA government," the party leader said.

Congress general secretary (communications) Jairam Ramesh, without naming Mr. Chavan, said an exit by betrayers "opens up vast new opportunities to those whose growth they have always stunted".

'BJP low on confidence'

Addressing a rally at Chhatrapati Sambhajnagar, the Shiv Sena (UBT) president said Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the BJP have low self-confidence ahead of the Lok Sabha election. Mr. Thackeray also questioned their need to relentlessly poach leaders from Opposition parties.

IN BRIEF



Greyhounds' commando electrocuted in Telangana

A commando of the Greyhounds, the anti-naxal force of the Telangana Police, died after he accidentally came in contact with a live wire, suspected to be laid by poachers to kill wild animals, during a combing operation in Nasturpalli forest area in Jayashankar Bhupalpally district on Sunday night. The deceased commando was identified as A Praveen, 30, from Adilabad district. He was part of a squad that was out on a regular combing operation, sources said.

Three killed, 14 injured as SUV collides with lorry in A.P.

Three persons were killed and 14 were injured when a sport utility vehicle (SUV) in which they were travelling collided with a cement-laden lorry in Sri Sathya Sai district of Andhra Pradesh on Monday. According to the police, the SUV was overloaded with 20 persons. They were returning to Dasappanapalem village in the district after attending a wedding at Agili. The SUV and the lorry collided head-on at a high speed on the highway, they said.

11 fishermen rescued after boat catches fire mid-sea

As many as 11 fishermen have been rescued reportedly after their fishing boat caught fire in the mid-sea while they were engaged in fishing off Uppada coast in Kakinada district of Andhra Pradesh. The incident occurred at around 3.30 p.m. on Monday. Kakinada District Fisheries Officer K. Krunakar Rao told *The Hindu*, "In the early hours of Monday, a crew of 11 fisherfolk went for fishing in a boat belonging to Surada Ramarao of Uppada village.

Telangana devotees robbed in Ayodhya

The Hindu Bureau
KARIMNAGAR

A group of devotees from Telangana's Karimnagar district, who had gone to Ayodhya to worship at the Ram temple, were reportedly robbed of their gold chains weighing about 1,200 grams in a crowded street on Sunday.

According to the devotees, miscreants have snatched away their gold chains while they were walking through a main street on their way to the temple. They reportedly staged a sit-in near police station seeking action by the police to trace the chain-snatchers and recover their stolen gold chains.

Lacking safety net



Cause of concern: The carcass of an Olive Ridley turtle was found on the R.K. beach in Visakhapatnam. Visitors have been finding carcasses of the endangered species. The deaths are attributed to trawling activities and pollution from industries among others. K.R. DEEPAK

Highway robbery gang busted; five from Maharashtra among 8 held in Anantapur

The Hindu Bureau
ANANTAPUR

The Andhra Pradesh police on Monday arrested five members of an inter-State gang, known as "Parthi Gang" of Maharashtra, allegedly involved in highway robberies and stealing petrol from fuel filling stations in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Maharashtra. Two 12-wheeler lorries, diesel cans, hand pumps, and pipes, all worth more than ₹40 lakh, and ₹3.5 lakh in cash were seized from them.

After preliminary investigation, the police also arrested three people hailing from Anantapur district on charges of purchasing the stolen oil stocks from the



Police officials after seizing trucks and petrol cans used for selling fuels to unauthorised petrol retail dealers. X/@APPOLICE100

gang. Superintendent of Police K.K.N. Anburajan said the arrested members have been identified as Siva (21), Balaji Naik Wadi (40), Baba Nandu Shinde (21), Madhav Suresh Pawar (20), and Ashok Dharma Jadav (55), all hailing from Dharashiv district of Maharashtra.

The other accused are Gaddam Gangeswar (28), Gaddam Nagesh (41), and Jgadeesh (40), hailing from the district.

The accused, who used to work as daily wagers, hatched a plan to become rich quickly, the SP said while describing the modus operandi of the gang.

The members would hire lorries periodically and target petrol pumps on the outskirts of the highways in three States.

By parking the lorries about 100 metres away, the members would strike at petrol pumps at midnight. They would break open the underground oil tanks, and draw diesel and petrol using hand-pumps. They would transport the stolen oil in cans in the hired lorries. The stocks would be sold to unauthorised retailers on the roadside and petrol using hand-pumps. They would threaten the staff on duty at the petrol pumps at knife-point if the latter tried to resist.

PM flex boards, selfie points will not be put up at Kerala ration shops: Pinarayi

The Hindu Bureau
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

Calling the Union government's directive to display signboards and flex boards with photographs of Prime Minister Narendra Modi at ration shops across Kerala an "election stunt", Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan told the Kerala Assembly on Monday that the State government will inform the Union government of its decision not to implement the directive.

The government will also consider informing the Election Commission about the directive, he said, after making an intervention while Food and Civil Supplies Minister G.R. Anil was replying to ques-



The Chief Minister says that he will inform the Election Commission about the directive. FILE PHOTO

tions related to the matter. "The public distribution system and ration shops have existed in Kerala for long. But the Union government has now issued an unprecedented directive at a time when the Lok Sabha elections are nearing, surely with an inten-

AAP's PAC to meet today as talks with Congress drag on

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Aam Aadmi Party's political affairs committee (PAC) will meet on Tuesday to decide its candidates for the Lok Sabha poll, amid talks with the Congress on seat sharing in Delhi remaining inconclusive so far.

According to AAP sources, the party's highest decision-making body will hold discussions on candidates for Gujarat, Haryana, and Goa.

Senior party leader Gopal Rai on Monday said that discussions over seat-sharing in Delhi are still on with the Congress which sends seven members to

the Lok Sabha.

Talks between both parties, which are part of the Opposition's INDIA bloc, for seats in the capital have dragged on for over a month now. Leaders of both parties had met on January 12 last time.

While speaking in Punjab during an event on Sunday, Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal had claimed that people of the city have decided to vote for his party candidates in all seven seats, stoking speculations that both the Congress and AAP may go solo in the Capital.

Earlier, both Opposition alliance partners had decided against a tie-up in Punjab.

Blast in firecracker storage unit for temple fete kills two

25 persons injured and 50 houses severely damaged in explosion near Kochi; Collector says temple authorities had not taken permission to store or display firecrackers; four booked

The Hindu Bureau
KOCHI

Two persons were killed and over 25 others were injured in a blast that ripped through an illegal firecracker storage unit at Choorakadu during the festival at Puthiyakavu Devi Temple in Thripunithura near here in Kerala on Monday.

The explosion occurred around 10.30 a.m. at the unit housed in a single-storey building of the temple administration at Nadama Thekkumbhagom village. The stored items were meant for a fireworks display on Monday evening.



A vehicle damaged in the explosion at a temple firecracker storage unit in Thripunithura in Kochi. H. VIBHU

The deceased were identified as Vishnu, 27, a native of Thiruvananthapuram, who was reportedly part of the team of workers assembling firecrackers, and Divakaran, 55.

The Department of Fire and Rescue Services and the police say that a possible short circuit from a van that was carrying raw materials for the firecrackers may have triggered the

massive blast.

Nearly 50 houses in the vicinity were severely damaged.

The Hill Palace Police booked Sajeesh Kumar, the Puthiyakavu devaswom president; Rajesh, devaswom secretary; Sathyan, treasurer; and Adarsh, who had taken the contract for supplying the firecrackers. Adarsh was critically injured in the incident.

Ernakulam Collector N.S.K. Umesh said the temple authorities had not taken permission from the district administration for storage of firecrackers and display of fireworks.

CMRL case: Centre files statements in HC

The Hindu Bureau
BENGALURU

Illegal payments to the extent of ₹135 crore to various political functionaries of Kerala State and certain other entities, including Exalogic Solutions Pvt. Ltd., a company owned by Veena T., daughter of Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, by Cochin Minerals and Rutile Ltd (CMRL) necessitated a probe by the Serious Fraud Investigation Office (SFIO), the Centre told the Karnataka High

Court on Monday.

A statement was submitted before the court during the hearing on a petition filed by Exalogic.

"An offence of such scale and grave nature that directly affects public interest would merit an investigation by the SFIO," it said.

Justice M. Nagaprasanna, reserved the order on the petition. Further, the Centre has alleged that Exalogic has "not come to the court with clean hands" and has "tried to mislead the court by making incorrect statements".

4 arrested in U.P. for issuing 'fake' halal certificates

The Hindu Bureau
LUCKNOW

The Uttar Pradesh Special Task Force on Monday arrested four office-bearers of the Halal Council of India (HCI), an organisation allegedly issuing fraudulent halal certificates.

Those arrested were Maulana Habib Yusuf Patel, the head of the organisation; Zakir Hussain Chaudhary; Maulana Muidshir Sapadia and Mohammad Tahir, all hailing from Mumbai.

In November 2023, after enforcing a ban on the production, storage, distribution, and sale of halal-certified food products, Uttar Pradesh transferred the investigation of a case registered at the Hazratganj police station in Lucknow against four firms, including HCL, for alleged irregularities in certification of products, to the STF.

Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha (BJYM) office-bearer Shailendra Kumar Sharma had alleged that some companies certified cer-

tain products fraudulently to increase their sale among people from a certain community for monetary gains. An FIR was registered under various Sections, including 120B (criminal conspiracy), 384 (extortion), 420 (cheating), 467 (forgery), 468 (forgery for purpose of cheating), 471 (using as genuine a forged document) 153A (promoting enmity between different groups) and 298 (intent to hurt religious feelings) of the Indian Penal Code (IPC).

Four convicts in Soumya murder case granted bail

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Delhi High Court on Monday granted bail to four convicts serving life imprisonment for the murder of TV journalist Soumya Vishwanathan.

Noting that Ravi Kapoor, Amit Shukla, Baljeet Malik and Ajay Kumar had been in custody for 14 years, the court suspended their sentence till the pendency of their appeals challenging their conviction.

Forest officials fail to capture Wayanad elephant on day 2

The Hindu Bureau
KALPETTA

For the second day on Monday, the Rapid Response Team of the Forest Department encountered difficulties in the search for the wild elephant Belur Makhna that trampled a farmer to death in Wayanad, Kerala, on Saturday.

Forest officials spotted the animal at the Mannundi forest area, but the animal entered a swampy area inside the forest, hindering the efforts to tranquillise it.

Though the tracking team again spotted the animal at the Chempakappara forest, it could not be tranquillised due to the thick undergrowth in the area, a source said.

Residents spot tiger near Pulpally in the district; officials camping at the site

As many as 2,000 frontline forest staff, including the Rapid Response team from the sanctuary, Nilambur South Forest Division, and Mannarkad North Forest Division, were mobilised for the operation. Four trained elephants and a forest veterinary team also attended the combing.

Meanwhile, the sighting of a tiger in a human habitat at Vadanakkavala, near Pulpally, on Monday morning triggered panic among the residents.

A farmer and his wife who were working on their

plantation saw the tiger chasing a wild boar into their plantation.

A team of forest officials rushed to the spot and found the tiger inside the plantation. They are camping at the site.

Karnataka offers help

Karnataka Minister Dinesh Gundu Rao said that his government would give all help to mitigate the human-wildlife conflict in Wayanad.

Speaking after inaugurating a public meeting at Kalpetta on Monday in connection with the Samaragni march led by the Congress, he said as the issue was a sensitive and difficult one, coordination between the governments was the need of the hour.

Supreme Court to hear plea in Sena dispute case

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Monday agreed to hear on an early date the question of maintainability of an appeal filed by Shiv Sena Uddhav Balasaheb Thackeray (UBT) against the Maharashtra Assembly Speaker's decision to dismiss disqualification petitions against Chief Minister Eknath Shinde and supporting MLAs, while holding them as the "real" Shiv Sena, on January 22.

Appearing before a three-judge Bench headed by Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud, senior advocate Kapil Sibal, appearing for Shiv Sena (UBT) leader Sunil Prabhu, submitted that the petition needed to be heard urgently by the court.

Senior advocate Harish Salve, appearing for one of the respondents, said an identical petition was filed by the Shiv Sena (UBT) camp in the Bombay High Court. It was still pending.

Mr. Salve questioned how the same appellant could agitate an identical cause in two different courts at the same time.

Chief Justice Chandrachud said the case would be listed soon by the top court.

Talks with Centre break down, farmers set to march to Delhi

Farmer leaders say Union Ministers did not offer any assurance on MSP guarantee during their meeting in Chandigarh; they said the protests will begin at 10 a.m. today; Delhi Police impose Section 144 for a month to prevent gatherings

A. M. Jigeesh
NEW DELHI

With the second round of meeting held on Monday with Union Ministers Piyush Goyal and Arjun Munda in Chandigarh failing, farmers belonging to the Samyukt Kisan Morcha (SKM-NP), a splinter group of Samyukt Kisan Morcha (SKM), have decided to continue with the 'Delhi Chalo' protests as planned on Tuesday. The leaders said the protests will begin at 10 a.m.

The farmer leaders said that the Centre failed to give any assurance on their demands during the five-hour-long meeting. The bone of contention was an assurance on guaranteed Minimum Support Price (MSP).

"The Ministers did not give us any assurance on MSP. The talks collapsed. We will continue our protests," K.V. Biju, a senior farmer leader told *The Hindu* after the meeting.

Other other demands – freedom from debt, hiked import duties on all agricultural products, cancel-



Heavy fortification: Multi-layered barricading in place on Monday to seal the national capital's borders to prevent farmers from entering the city. SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

lation of all free trade agreements and other deals with the World Trade Organisation (WTO), suspending privatisation of electricity boards, a ban on Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and corporatisation in agriculture, and a pension for farmers – remained unanswered as well.

"The Centre has taken an adamant stand. We have no other way before us than continuing the protests," said SKM-NP leader Jagjit Singh Dallewal.

Senior SKM-NP leader Shiv Kumar Kakka, Kisan Mazdoor Sangharsh Committee general secretary Sarwan Singh Pandher and Punjab Minister for Administrative Reforms and NRI Affairs Kuldeep Singh Dhalliwal were also present in the meeting.

Mr. Pandher said the Centre was trying to buy time. "We want the Centre to implement the assurances given to us two years ago. But they said they still want time," he added.

Meanwhile, police forces in Haryana, Uttar Pra-

des and Delhi have strengthened the security at Delhi's border, expecting the presence of large numbers of farmers.

The Delhi Police have imposed Section 144 of the CrPC for one month.

An order issued by Delhi Police Commissioner Sanjay Arora, which came into effect on Monday, would be enforced until March 12.

Farmers from Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and Haryana are expected to enter Delhi during their march.

(With inputs from Samridhi Tewari)

Tight security in Haryana as farmers begin Delhi journey

The Hindu Bureau
CHANDIGARH

With thousands of farmers and farm labourers from Punjab determined to lay siege to Delhi on Tuesday in an attempt to force the government to fulfil their demands, the Haryana government has established multiple layers of barricades to stop them from passing through the State.

The government has imposed traffic restrictions and security has been intensified, especially at entry points from Punjab, which include Ambala-Shambhu border, Khanauri-Jind and Dabwali.

Nails, barbed wire, concrete blocks, boulders and anti-riot vehicles are at hand along with water cannons. Mobile Internet services have already been suspended in Ambala, Kurukshetra, Kaithal, Jind, Hisar, Fatehabad and Sirsa.

Jailed Minister Senthilbalaji resigns from T.N. Cabinet

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI

Jailed Tamil Nadu Minister without portfolio V. Senthilbalaji, who was arrested in June 2023 by the Enforcement Directorate in an alleged money laundering case, resigned from the Cabinet on Monday.

While well-placed sources in the government confirmed that he had sent his resignation to the Chief Minister from the Puzhal Central Prison, at the time of filing this report, there was no official communication.

Cash-for-job scam

The case has its roots in an alleged cash-for-job scam in the Metropolitan Transport Corporation (MTC), which took place when he was the Transport Minister (2011-15) in the Jayalalithaa Cabinet.

Before his arrest, Mr. Senthilbalaji was holding the plum portfolios of Electricity and Excise and Prohibition. Chief Minister M.K. Stalin had retained him as Minister without portfolio and allocated the subjects to two other senior colleagues.

Last month, while hearing his bail petition, the Madras High Court had questioned the propriety behind Mr. Senthilbalaji



V. Senthil Balaji

continuing to be a Minister without portfolio despite having been imprisoned for over 230 days in a money laundering case booked by the Enforcement Directorate (ED).

Justice N. Anand Venkatesh had wondered how a person could be allowed to continue in the Cabinet even after incarceration for so long when even the last grade employee of the State is deemed to have been suspended from service if he/she remains incarcerated for more than 48 hours in a criminal case.

The judge recalled that even the first Division Bench of the High Court led by its Chief Justice Sanjay V. Gangapurwala had in September 2023 observed that a Minister without portfolio is a Constitutional travesty even though the law does not permit a court to order removal.

Exam hurdle



Supporters of the Tipra Indigenous Students Federation block railway tracks on the outskirts of Agartala on Monday. The protesters demanded that the students be allowed to write their Kokborok language papers either in Roman or Bengali script in the upcoming Class 10 and 12 State board examinations. They later called off the protest, following an assurance from the State government. PTI

Bengal Governor visits Sandeshkhali, promises justice for women victims

Shiv Sahay Singh
KOLKATA

A tense situation persisted at Sandeshkhali as several women from the area on Monday approached the visiting Governor, C.V. Ananda Bose, with allegations of molestation by Trinamool Congress members.

The women alleged atrocities by the local Trinamool leadership, including the absconding Sheikh Sahajahan. They expressed fear of being subjected to "more torture" after the Governor left, if the local leaders were not arrested.

The women had also put up posters against the police. Some of them demanded the deployment of Central forces in the area.

"I am not here only as the Governor but also as your brother. It is the duty



Venting out: West Bengal Governor C.V. Ananda Bose meets a woman affected by the violence in Sandeshkhali, on Monday. ANI

of the brother to ensure protection to sisters," Mr. Bose said. He had cut short his visit to Kerala and arrived in Kolkata on Monday, going straight to Sandeshkhali in North 24 Parganas district.

Describing the developments in the remote island as "shameful", the Governor assured action against the perpetrators of atrocities. "We will ensure that honour and dignity of the

women are restored and violators are brought to book," Mr. Bose told journalists at Sandeshkhali.

"What I saw was ghastly, shocking, shattering to my senses. I saw something which I should never have seen; I heard many things which I should never have heard," he said.

The West Bengal Police have set up a 10-member committee for the women to lodge their complaints.

Six BJP MLAs suspended

KOLKATA

Six MLAs of the BJP, including Leader of Opposition Suwendu Adhikari, were suspended from West Bengal Assembly on Monday for staging protests and demanding a statement by CM Mamata Banerjee on the Sandeshkhali issue.

Meanwhile, they ruled out any communal angle to the allegations.

BJP MLAs stopped

During the day, 67 MLAs of the BJP – led by Leader of Opposition Suwendu Adhikari – were stopped on the way to Sandeshkhali.

They left the State Assembly in a bus but were stopped near Science City under the jurisdiction of Kolkata Police.

Cong. leaders meet to discuss seat sharing for Lok Sabha polls

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI

Congress leaders on Monday met at the residence of party chief Mallikarjun Kharge to discuss the finalisation of seat-sharing arrangements with various parties of the INDIA bloc.

Sources said the Congress president discussed with Sonia Gandhi the names of party candidates for the upcoming Rajya Sabha elections. Ms. Gandhi and party treasurer Ajay Maken are among the likely candidates, they added.

The former Congress president is the frontrunner for the Rajya Sabha seat from Himachal Pradesh that will fall vacant after BJP chief J.P. Nadda's tenure ends this April. Her name is also doing the rounds for a Rajasthan seat

as former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's tenure is about to end.

The Congress is yet to announce any candidate for the biennial elections for 56 seats from 15 States. It has to name candidates for seats from the States of Karnataka, Telangana, Himachal Pradesh, Rajasthan and Maharashtra. The last date for filing nominations is February 15.

The Congress is finalising seat-sharing talks with other like-minded parties, including DMK in Tamil Nadu, JMM in Jharkhand, RJD in Bihar and NCP and Shiv Sena in Maharashtra.

Besides, sources said, Congress is in the final stages of talks with the National Conference, whose leader Farooq Abdullah has been summoned by the ED in a PMLA case.

Two celebrity MPs among nine who missed opportunities to speak in LS

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Two of India's most volatile film stars, Sunny Deol and Shatrughan Sinha, who have made a name for themselves with high-octane dialogue delivery in movies, did not utter a single word in the outgoing Lok Sabha. In total, nine of the 543 members did not speak a word in Lok Sabha, six of whom are from the BJP and four of them belonging to Karnataka.

Speaker's outreach

Speaker Om Birla had, as per sources, meticulously reached out to the members who had not had an opportunity to speak in Parliament. "The Speaker, for example, had approached Mr. Deol, at least twice, calling him over, extending special opportuni-



On mute: The Lok Sabha proceedings under way during the Budget Session of Parliament in New Delhi on February 10. ANI

ty to him, to utilise the various opportunities offered including Zero Hour when any issue of national importance can be raised, to speak. But he could not be moved," a senior Parliamentary official said.

Mr. Deol represents Gurdaspur Lok Sabha constituency. Mr. Sinha was elected from Asansol seat in West Bengal in a bypoll in 2022 on a Trinamool ticket, after singer Babul

Supriyo, who was elected from the seat on a BJP ticket, switched to the Trinamool Congress.

The other member from West Bengal is Dibyendu Adhikari (Tamluk Lok Sabha constituency). Mr. Adhikari is the younger brother of Suwendu Adhikari, the current Leader of the Opposition in West Bengal State Assembly.

The four members from Karnataka who fall in this

category include, B.N. Bache Gowda (Chikkaballapur), Anantkumar Hegde (Uttara Kannada), V. Sreenivasa Prasad (Chamrajnagar) and Ramesh C. Jigajinagi (Bijapur). All the four are from BJP.

BJP MP Pradhan Baruah elected from Lakhimpur in Assam and BSP's Atul Kumar Singh elected from Ghosi are the other two members in the list.

While six MPs have had at least written participation – by moving questions or making written special mention submission, three members – Mr. Jigajinagi, Mr. Singh and Mr. Sinha – have the distinction of making no contribution in written or oral form in Parliamentary proceedings. Mr. Jigajinagi has been unwell for a long time and Mr. Singh has been in jail for a significant part of the term.

Spoke to party MLAs, cadre on decision to join NDA: RLD chief

The Hindu Bureau
LUCKNOW

Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) president Chaudhary Jayant Singh on Monday confirmed that his party will contest the upcoming Lok Sabha election with the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA). Mr. Chaudhary said the decision was taken after consultation with the MLAs and party leaders.

"I talked with my MLAs and workers before taking the decision [joining the NDA]. It is not that we did this after a lot of planning or thinking for a long time. We had to decide in a short period due to circumstances. When the Bharat Ratna was conferred on [former Prime Minister] Chaudhary Charan Singh, we were pleased; this respect



Jayant Chaudhary

is not only for our family but also for the farmers, youth and poor across the country," said Mr. Singh, the grandson of the former Prime Minister, when asked by presspersons about some RLD MLAs being unhappy over the decision.

The RLD chief made the announcement on the birth anniversary of party founder and his late father, Chaudhary Ajit Singh.

Will stop Modi juggernaut in Bihar: Tejashwi Yadav

RJD leader asks if the Prime Minister can guarantee that Nitish Kumar will not switch sides again; he comes down hard on the Chief Minister for snapping ties with the grand alliance in the State

Amit Bhelari
PATNA

Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) leader Tejashwi Yadav on Monday came down hard on Bihar Chief Minister and Janata Dal(U) leader Nitish Kumar for joining hands with the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA).

Launching a scathing attack on Mr. Kumar for snapping ties with the *Mahagatbandhan* (grand alliance), Mr. Yadav quoted the Chief Minister as saying “*Mann nahi lag raha tha* (was not liking it)” after tendering his resignation.

“We were not with you to sing and dance to entertain you, we had supported you to do work,” Mr. Yadav said. The RJD and the Congress were part of the grand alliance.

The RJD leader said he had never witnessed a person taking oath as Chief Minister nine times, of which three were in a single term. Mr. Yadav also criticised BJP leader Vijay Kumar Sinha, saying that he too had



Hitting out: RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav and others after the Nitish Kumar-led NDA government won the trust vote in Assembly. PTI

made a new record of sorts by becoming Deputy Chief Minister, Speaker, and Leader of the Opposition in the same term.

‘Respectable person’

He compared Mr. Kumar to King Dashrath (father of Lord Ram) and warned him to be aware of the “Kaikayi” in his fold.

“Nitishji was always a respectable person for me and will remain respectable in future as well. Many

times, he used to tell me that I was like his son, and I too respected him as my guardian. I used to respect him like King Dashrath who always promoted me. There must be some compulsion the way Dashrath had in form of Kaikeyi due to which he deserted you. You should be aware to find who is Kaikeyi in your team,” Mr. Yadav said.

He stressed that the people of Bihar wanted to know the reason for the

frequent flip-flops.

“When you had snapped ties with the BJP you said that you will prefer to die rather than be with the BJP. You had also said that you are not interested in becoming Prime Minister and your only goal was to unite Opposition to defeat the dictatorship government of the BJP in the 2024 Lok Sabha poll,” Mr. Yadav said.

The RJD leader said the BJP MLAs always make big claims about “Modi ki guarantee” and asked whether Prime Minister Narendra Modi can guarantee that Mr. Kumar would not make another U-turn.

Mr. Yadav said he would now stop the juggernaut of Mr. Modi in Bihar.

Mr. Yadav hit back at the Chief Minister for saying that he took credit for the developmental work in the State.

“What was wrong in taking credit for the work as being the largest partner in the alliance? Will BJP not take the credit if they did any work in the government?” Mr. Yadav said.

On the draw



MIKA AZIZ

Kejriwal, Mann visit Ram Temple

The Hindu Bureau
LUCKNOW

Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal and his Punjab counterpart, Bhagwant Mann, visited the Ram Temple in Ayodhya on Monday.

“I had the divine darshan of Ramlala at the Ram Temple today with my parents and wife. Bhagwantji and his family were also present. Together, we prayed for the progress of the country and the welfare of all humanity,” Mr. Kejriwal said on X.

Odisha to give ₹1,000 to all PDS families

Satvasundar Barik
BHUBANESWAR

In the backdrop of upcoming elections, the Naveen Patnaik government on Monday announced to provide one-time livelihood assistance of ₹1,000 in cash to each of the over 95.90 lakh families covered under the Public Distribution System (PDS).

The government also declared launch of ‘SWAYAM’ under which ₹1 lakh of interest-free bank



Naveen Patnaik

loans will be provided to all rural unemployed youths aged between 18-35 years (18-40 years for special ca-

tegor) for initiating new business venture. It is to be noted that 95.90 lakh families comprising 3,35,98,401 members have been covered under the PDS in the State. The government will spend ₹959.05 crore towards the payment of assistance. The State government had disbursed similar assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The government has also decided to provide free of cost two jute carry bags

of 20 kilogrammes and 10 kg capacity to each of the PDS families for their daily use at a cost of ₹278.69 crore.

As far as ‘SWAYAM’ scheme is concerned, rural youths having family income less than ₹2 lakh are eligible for receiving ₹1 lakh loan. To cover 1 lakh eligible rural youths initially, the government would spend ₹448 crore out of its own budget and the scheme will be operational for a period of two years.

80% of people have not benefited from BJP rule, says Rahul

Shubhomoy Sikdar
RAIPUR

Criticising the BJP’s focus on religious symbolism, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi said on Monday that while the ruling party spoke of “Hindu Rashtra”, nearly 80% of the population had not benefited from its rule.

Addressing the public in Korba, Chhattisgarh during the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra, Mr. Gandhi said the marginalised and backward classes who formed 74% of the population as well as the poor from the general castes who accounted for another four to five percent were being denied opportunities under the current regime.

Ram Temple ceremony

He questioned the absence of these groups at the Ram Temple inauguration ceremony in Ayodhya, contrasting it with the pre-



Congress leader Rahul Gandhi during the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra in Korba. ANI

sence of the rich and the influential people.

“The BJP talks about Hindu Rashtra. Seventy-four per cent are not getting anything, poor from the general castes are not getting anything. You tell me, at the Ram Mandir inauguration, did you see any poor, even one,” he asked.

They have been left to starve; they have conceded defeat, Mr. Gandhi said.

Congress cuts short yatra in U.P., cites Board exams

The Hindu Bureau
LUCKNOW

The Congress on Monday announced its decision to reduce the duration of Rahul Gandhi-led Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra in Uttar Pradesh in view of the Board exams for Classes 10 and 12. The yatra will now skip most of western Uttar Pradesh.

It will enter State on February 16 and exit on February 21.

“Due to the board examinations, we have decided to cut short the yatra. We don’t want students to face inconvenience. The Yatra will now end five days earlier,” Shah Nawaz Alam, president of the minority wing of the State Congress unit, told *The Hindu*.

Samajwadi Party (SP) president Akhilesh Yadav is scheduled to join Mr. Gandhi in Amethi or Rae Bareilly to address a public meeting during the yatra.

Days after violence, Dhama says police station will be built on land recovered in Haldwani

Ishita Mishra
HALDWANI

Days after the violence in Uttarakhand’s Haldwani over the demolition of an allegedly “illegally built” madrasa and mosque that left five persons dead, Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhama on Monday said a police station would be built on the land “freed from encroachment”.

In another development, the Haldwani Municipal Corporation served a recovery notice to Abdul Malik, the owner of the madrasa and mosque at Banbhoolpura demolished by the administration on February 8, demanding ₹2.44 crore in damages. The notice issued by the Haldwani Municipal Corporation stated that Mr. Malik, who the police say is mastermind of the violence, has to deposit the amount to the civic body within three days (February 15). He has been fined for damage to



People held on charges of taking part in the violence being taken to a hospital for medical check-up, in Haldwani on Monday. PTI

vehicles including tractors, goods carriers, etc., and equipment such as helmets and crowbars.

“After our teams demolished the structures built by you illegally on government land and were returning back, your supporters engaged in arson and damaged/destroyed/looted properties of the Municipal Corporation and caused loss to government property. Pay the amount within the due date or the

amount will be recovered as per the law,” the notice issued to Mr. Malik, who has been arrested, states.

Speaking at a rally in Haridwar, Mr. Dhama said the government wants to send a clear message to anarchist elements that those who try to disturb the peace of “*Devbhoomi*” (Land of Gods) will not be spared. “There was a garden in Banbhoolpura which was encroached upon. That encroachment

has been removed and several acres of land was recovered,” said Mr. Dhama.

“From the banks of the mighty river Ganga, I announce that a police station will be built at that place,” Mr. Dhama said.

Meanwhile, the police also suspended arms licences of 127 persons of Banbhoolpura to avoid the misuse of the weapons in case of any untoward situation.

‘Normalcy returning’

With Haldwani city showing signs of returning to normalcy, the district administration and the police conducted a peace meeting with representatives of all communities. People demanded relaxation of the curfew in Banbhoolpura too but District Magistrate (DM) Vandana Singh said the administration will assess the law and order situation before announcing any relaxation.

Markets and education-

al institutions in the city opened on Monday while curfew was lifted in the rest of Haldwani late on Saturday. People were seen crowding food joints and parks as businesses operated as usual.

Five persons died and 14 were critically injured when violent clashes broke out between the police and residents in Haldwani’s Banbhoolpura area on February 8 after a team of district administration attempted to demolish an “illegal Madrasa and mosque” in the area. Miscreants allegedly ghe-raoed the police station, pelted stones on officials, torched vehicles and public property, after which shoot at sight orders were issued and curfew was imposed in the town.

Over 100 police personnel, including women, were injured in the violence, officials said. Three FIRs have been lodged and 30 persons arrested so far.

Court extends ED remand of Hemant Soren by three days

Press Trust of India
RANCHI

A special PMLA court on Monday extended the Enforcement Directorate (ED) remand of former Jharkhand Chief Minister Hemant Soren by three days in a money laundering case linked to an alleged land scam, lawyers said.

Mr. Soren, the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) executive president, was on February 7 remanded to five days of ED custody by the special PMLA (the Prevention of Money Laundering Act) court.

He was arrested on January 31 after a seven-hour grilling by the Central investigative agency in the money laundering case.

Congress welcomes release of ex-Navy personnel, but says govt. didn’t ‘act on time’

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI

The Congress on Monday welcomed the release of eight former Indian Navy personnel by Qatar, even as the party accused the government of failing to act on time and letting the situation become serious.

In a post on X, Congress general secretary Jairam Ramesh said, “The Indian National Congress joins the entire nation in its relief and happiness that the eight former Indian Navy personnel earlier sentenced to death by a court in Qatar have been released and are back home.” “It sends its greetings and good wishes to them and their families,” he said.

Senior Congress leader

It says had the govt. acted on time, then these months of uncertainty would not have arisen

and former Minister of State for External Affairs Shashi Tharoor said the release of the Indians was “a huge relief”. “It’s a huge relief – and a matter of quiet celebration for all Indians – that eight of our compatriots who were sentenced to death in Qatar have been freed & returned home. Congratulations to all those who worked quietly behind the scenes for their release,” he said.

Congress spokesperson Supriya Shrinete said the eight people should not have been sent to jail in the

first place. “We welcome this (their release) and are relieved that they have returned to their families but why did the situation reach this far. Their families, the country did not know under what case they were being tried for...so why did the situation become so serious in the first place,” she said.

Congress MPs had also raised the issue in Parliament but the government ignored it, she alleged.

“If the government had acted on time then these two-three months of uncertainty that were faced when they were sentenced to death would not have arisen. Every time you (government) fail and when a solution is arrived at, then it is claimed as a victory,” Ms. Shrinete said.

BJP govt. has given more jobs than preceding govt. did in 10 years: Modi

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday said his government has given 1.5 times more jobs in its 10 years than the previous dispensation did in the same duration.

Handing over recruitment letters to government jobs to more than one lakh youngsters via video conference during a Rozgar Mela programme, Mr. Modi castigated the previous government for taking an inordinately “long time” to complete recruitment exercises.

The Prime Minister said his government brought transparency and was working to ensure that recruitment was done in a time-bound manner.

Youngsters now believed that they all had equal opportunity and



Job market: Candidates after receiving appointment letters during ‘Rozgar Mela’, in Jammu on Monday. PTI

could find a place for themselves in the government system through hard work and talent, he said.

Mr. Modi asserted that the measures taken by his government, be it a scheme for rooftop solar power for one crore homes or the massive investment in infrastructure, have been creating a lot of employment opportunities.

search and innovation. Highlighting the far-reaching impact of connectivity, Mr. Modi spoke of new markets, expansion of tourism, new businesses and the creation of lakhs of jobs due to this.

“Investment in infrastructure is being ramped up to accelerate development,” he said, adding that ₹11 lakh crore had been earmarked for investment in infrastructure in the recent budget.

Mr. Modi said 40,000 modern coaches like those used in the Vande Bharat trains would be manufactured and included in normal trains to increase convenience and comfort for passengers.

Accusing previous governments of not paying due attention to the railways, he said the entire sector was transforming now.

IN BRIEF



SC extends interim bail granted to Minister's son

The Supreme Court on Monday extended the interim bail granted to Union Minister Ajay Kumar Mishra's son, Ashish Mishra, in the 2021 Lakhimpur Kheri violence, which claimed eight lives. A Bench of Justices Surya Kant and K. V. Viswanathan directed the top court registry to obtain a report from the trial court on the progress of the case and adjourned the matter. On September 26, 2023, the SC had relaxed the bail conditions of Mishra to enable him to look after his mother and for the treatment of his daughter. The case pertains to an incident of violence on October 3, 2021 at Tikunia in Lakhimpur Kheri district of Uttar Pradesh. PTI

NCB busts international drug cartel, arrests nine accused

The Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) has busted an international drug cartel having links in and around Delhi, Rajasthan, Punjab, and Dubai. Among those involved were Indian, Mexican, Canadian, and British nationals. The agency has arrested nine persons, including three alleged Mexican Meth chemists. Based on a tip-off, its Delhi zonal unit had seized about 2.95 kg of methamphetamine at DHL on January 17. "During further course of investigation, two consignors of the parcel were apprehended from Jaipur. The arrested persons disclosed that they collected Meth from a Delhi-based trafficker on a regular basis and used to send the parcels to Australia, as per the direction of their handler," said the agency on Monday.

Press bodies condemn attack on journalist

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Press Club of India and the Indian Women's Press Corps on Monday demanded action against those involved in the attack on senior journalist Nikhil Wagle allegedly by the members of a political party in Maharashtra's Pune on February 9. They also sought withdrawal of criminal charges against the journalist.

"We appeal that the draconian charges against Mr. Wagle for promoting enmity, mischief, and defamation be dropped and urge the Maharashtra government to ensure that the perpetrators of violence are sent a strong message. No one should be allowed to get away with violence," they said in a statement.

Appointing Deputy CMs not a breach of Constitution: SC

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Monday dismissed a petition challenging the appointment of Deputy Chief Ministers in States on the ground that no such position exists in the Constitution.

A three-judge Bench headed by Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud found no harm in the appointment of Deputy Chief Ministers, reasoning that they were after all Members of Legislative Assemblies (MLAs) of the States and Ministers of State governments.

"Deputy CM's are first and foremost Ministers in the government of the State. A person who holds the office of the Deputy Chief Minister must at any

Hygiene, sanitation rating system for hotels, resorts, homestays yet to take off

States silent on Swachhata Green Leaf Rating, which was launched in November last year by the Union Tourism Ministry; Centre exploring ways to incentivise scheme to encourage participation

Sreeparna Chakrabarty
NEW DELHI

A government-initiated rating system for the hospitality sector, aimed at ensuring world-class hygiene and sanitation at hotels, resorts, and homestays, has become a non-starter, with no State opting for it so far.

Barring a pilot project in Jammu and Kashmir, there has been no response from the States or the Union Territories despite the Union Tourism Ministry sending three communiqués so far, the last one being in the first week of February, sources said.

The ranking scheme – Swachhata Green Leaf Rating – was launched in November last year by the Union Tourism Ministry in collaboration with the Department of Drinking Water and Sanitation.

As part of the initiative, the State teams of Swachh Bharat Mission-Gramin (rural) and the Tourism Department are to organise workshops on the concept, process, and desired outcomes for the stakehol-



The rating system envisions to voluntarily engage the hospitality sector and contribute to sustainable tourism practices in India. PTI

ders. Owners and operators of the lodging services are encouraged to adopt good practices for improved and safe sanitation facilities, faecal sludge management, segregation of solid waste at sources, and promotion of alternatives to single-use plastic.

Safe sanitation

According to the concept paper of the scheme, it is proposed to launch the Swachhata Green Leaf Rating system at all hospitality facilities in the country with or without restaurants.

ble tourism practices in India," the vision statement of the document read.

A senior official of the Tourism Ministry told *The Hindu* that the government was exploring possibilities to incentivise the scheme at some point to encourage participation.

Rural areas

The official said that efforts would be made to focus on the rural areas, where hospitality units such as homestays, bed and breakfast facilities, small restaurants, and tea shops would be made aware of the scheme. They will also be helped with low-cost technologies.

A three-tiered committee system has been proposed for the implementation of the scheme, beginning with a Verification

Sub-Committee formed by the Sub-Divisional Magistrate for on-ground verification, followed by a District Committee, which the District Collector will chair, and then a State-level committee, headed by the Chief Secretary.

"We envision this rating system which is sought to be achieved through public participation to voluntarily engage the hospitality sector and contribute to cleaner and more sustaina-

SC extends interim stay in investigation against ED officer

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Monday extended its stay order of criminal proceedings by the Tamil Nadu Directorate of Vigilance and Anti-Corruption (DVAC) against Enforcement Directorate (ED) officer Ankit Tiwari in a graft case.

A Bench headed by Justice Surya Kant ordered the interim relief to continue even as Tamil Nadu government sought time to file a response to a petition filed by the ED against the State.

The Central agency has challenged the proceedings against Mr. Tiwari. It has argued that the action against Mr. Tiwari, an ED officer in Tamil Nadu, was a tit-for-tat by the State for money laundering and corruption cases lodged by Central agencies against Ministers and ensuing raids on them. It has sought a transfer of the case from DVAC.

Tamil Nadu, represented by Additional Advocate-General Anand Tiwari, has stated that Mr. Tiwari was caught red-handed accepting a bribe of ₹20 lakh from a doctor in Dindigul district.

On January 25, the top court had stayed both the DVAC and the ED from probing the case against



Tamil Nadu government seeks time to file response to a petition filed by the ED against the State.

Mr. Tiwari. The Bench had directed the material collected so far in the investigation to be placed on record before it.

On Monday, Mr. Tiwari sought two weeks for Tamil Nadu to file a response to the ED petition.

On January 25, the top court had suggested a mechanism to screen if political vendetta or vindictiveness was not the actual reason behind Centre unleashing the ED on officials and Ministers in non-BJP-ruled States.

"We should explore a fair and transparent mechanism or a body which will look into the inter-State ramifications and keep intact the object of punishing the guilty while preventing vindictive arrests," Justice K.B. Viswanathan, on the Bench, had proposed in the previous hearing.

A cafe of opportunities opens in Kolkata

The eatery is operated by 16 young adults who have either grown up in rescue homes or have intellectual disabilities; to attract patrons, the cafe plans to hold open mic events, art exhibitions

Bishwanath Ghosh
KOLKATA

On the face of it, 'Opportunity Cafe' could pass off as yet another eatery in a city that loves food, but the place is one of its kind, considering it is run by young people who otherwise rarely get to join the social mainstream.

Young adults who have intellectual disabilities or have grown up in rescue homes are the ones responsible for the functioning of this non-profit cafe that opened last month on Dum Dum Road.

"The most satisfying part so far of setting up this cafe was the six months of rigorous training before the inauguration. Our society



New world: Opportunity Cafe was opened last month on Dum Dum Road in Kolkata. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

usually believe or are rather made to believe, that children with disabilities are not capable of doing anything. But I've seen these young adults transform during the training. One of the boys never spoke, but is now able to talk," Sidhant Ghosh, founder-secretary

of the Rescue and Relief Foundation, and the person behind the cafe, said.

There are 16 young adults who are running Opportunity Cafe. Nine of them – six men and three women – are affected by conditions such as autism and Down's Syndrome,

and are either orphans or come from poor families. Of the seven others, five belong to a foundation-run home that shelters girls rescued from trafficking, and two are children of sex workers.

"Those with mental disabilities have no idea what it means to earn money – they are working for the joy of what they are doing, and that in turn gives us a lot of joy," Mr. Ghosh said. "They are the chefs, they are the waiters, they also clean up – they run the entire place."

"Our entire income will go towards empowering the young people who benefit from the foundation," he said.

To attract patrons, the cafe plans to hold open mic events, art exhibitions, and workshops.

Efforts on to clear Aadhaar hurdle in Assam: CM

The Hindu Bureau
GUWAHATI

Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Monday said efforts were on to enable some 27 lakh people in Assam, who have been unable to acquire Aadhaar cards as their biometrics were locked during the process of updating the National Register of Citizens.

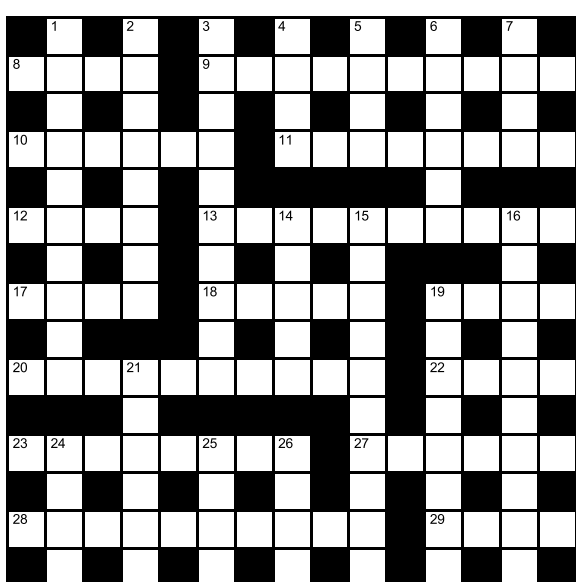
Mr. Sarma, in response to a question in the State Assembly, said he hoped "something positive" would emerge from his consultations with the Centre, but his government may have to approach the Supreme Court for a solution.

The apex court has been monitoring the NRC updating exercise, in limbo since the complete draft was published in August 2019.

THE CROSSWORD+ 14096

(set by Vidwan)

To solve this puzzle online, get access to our crossword site. @ <https://qr.go.page.link/jjpTn>



Across

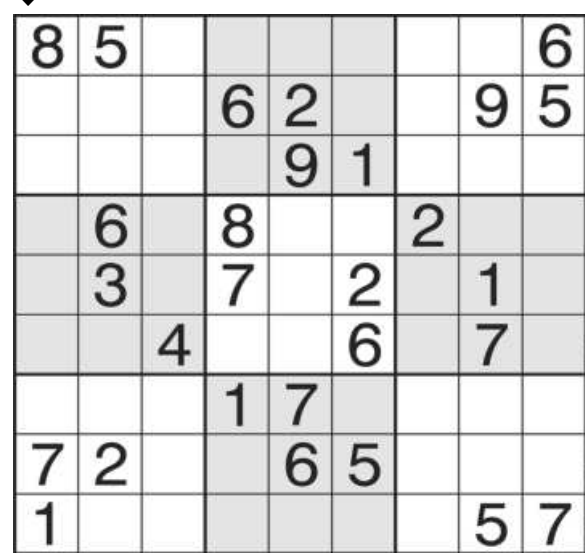
- Temper of snubbed old kid (4)
- All of evil and no suffering? What Cupid makes us do! (4,2,4)
- Shy cop's unstable, disturbed man (6)
- Leader's confused! Right time for warning! (3,5)
- Sensible wife is source of enlightenment (4)
- Men chatted about disconnect (10)

- Tell tales about fellow human (4)
- Source of black soil, as stated (5)
- Very universal source of life (4)
- Singer! Entice her completely! (10)
- Fix in a crooked line (4)
- Follow large abandoned plane for aerial combat (8)
- Nothing hot instead of a sweet (6)
- Cocaine molecule in short can be efficient (10)
- Working continuously! Lying around is undesirable! (4)

Down

- So, it's a lilt composed about 21st of June? (10)
- Be around! Side-kick will get bruise on the face! (8)
- Modest comrade oddly seen in friendly surrounding (10)
- Almost certain about Left's disgrace (4)
- Tamil defines, encapsulates light (4)
- Love small chaotic obstacle race (6)
- More than complete (4)
- Some adult or child showing light (5)
- About only three schooled in logical manner (10)
- Number one in mad rush wings naked! That is wholesome! (10)
- No end to anguish! Starts anew at heart! Becomes cheerful! (8)
- Not the extreme hurt (6)
- Timelessly feel sound of pain (4)
- Invested millions for Thailand's opening match (4)
- Thank you to company providing a crunchy snack (4)

SUDOKU



DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★☆☆☆

Solution to previous puzzle



Solution to yesterday's Sudoku



FAITH

Vasant Panchami

In his Saraswati Vandana poem, Suryakant Tripathi Nirala says, "O mother tear apart the shackles of darkness in our heart And let a river of light flow absorbing differences and darkness". This is very relevant at the onset of Vasant Panchami, a festival with immense religious and social significance in our society, said Prof. Kumool Abbi in a lecture.

It is the festival of Saraswati puja in West Bengal, Tripura, Assam, Odisha and Bihar and many other places. Goddess Saraswati is the embodiment of knowledge, art, music, aesthetics and harmony. In the Shanti Parv in the epic Mahabharata, she is called the mother of the Vedas. The effulgent Saraswati illumines and removes nescience and darkness. Vasant Panchami is commemorated on the Magh Sud, that is the fifth day of the bright lunar fortnight (Sukla paksham) of the month Magha in the lunisolar calendar.

In many parts, Vasant Panchami heralds the end of winter and the beginning of spring. It signifies a preparation for Holi and a readiness for the harvesting of crops. This is when yellow mustard flowers are in full bloom. The occasion is celebrated with sounds of dhol, the pulsating bhanga, flying of colourful kites, the making of yellow rice and wearing yellow coloured clothes.

In south India, the festival is known as Shiv Panchami. In Gujarat, songs of Radha and Krishna are rendered with fervour. In Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh Lord Siva and Parvati are worshipped.

Earth-wide telescope confirms black hole's shadow is 'real'

The Event Horizon Telescope is a global network of radio telescopes that work together. In 2019, it produced the first image of a black hole, the one at the centre of the M87 galaxy. The network has confirmed what it observed and shared evidence of movement in the black hole's neighbourhood

Tejasri Gururaj

Scientists have unveiled new details of a colossal black hole 53 million lightyears away first photographed by the earth-wide Event Horizon Telescope (EHT) in 2017. The feat provided the first visual evidence that black holes exist, confirming a fundamental prediction of general relativity.

In a new paper published on January 18, EHT scientists have reported capturing details at the level of the behemoth's event horizon – the boundary beyond which light from the other side can't reach an observer – showcasing the formation of a distinct ring around it.

The EHT's previous run had revealed the black hole's 'shadow', a result of the event horizon's gravitational effects and a signature of its presence. The picture also helped constrain the black hole's mass and find that its size and shape align with the predictions of the general theory of relativity. The image was hailed at the time as a matter of "astonishment and wonder" for revealing "a part of the universe that was off limits".

The new data, obtained after improving the telescope's coverage and resolution, reiterated the shadow's size and shape.

"The primary finding is the confirmation of the black hole 'shadow'," Venkatesh Ramakrishnan, a postdoctoral researcher at the Finnish Centre for Astronomy with the European Southern Observatory, wrote in an email to *The Hindu*. "So this shows us as a first step that we are not biased towards making the black hole appear."

Dr. Ramakrishnan has been part of the EHT collaboration since 2017.

Many telescopes as one

The EHT is not a single telescope but a worldwide network of radio telescopes that work together to study a common object in space. They benefit from a technique called very-long baseline interferometry, where the data each telescope collects about the object is correlated with data from the others using extremely precise clocks.

In this setup, the maximum distance between the telescopes defines the network's resolution.

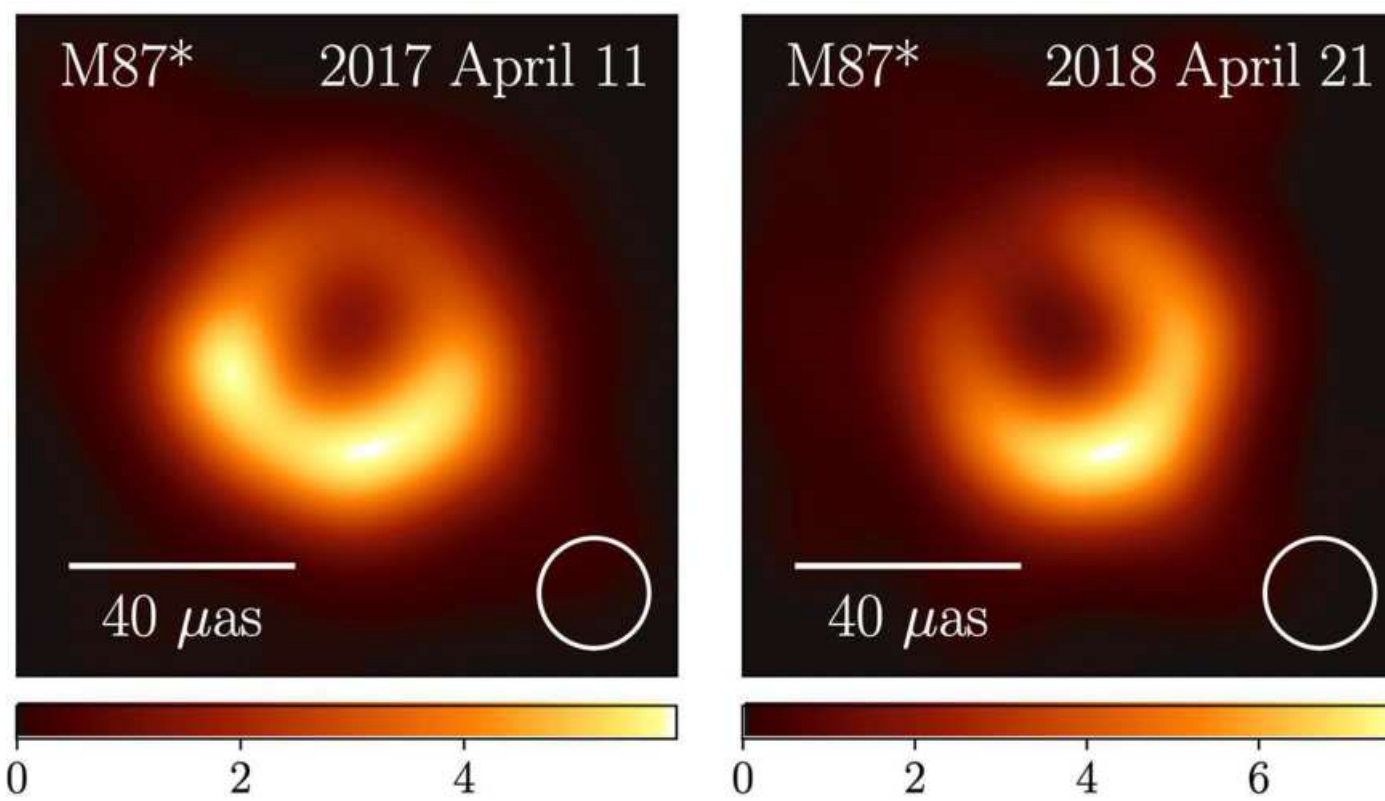
In 2017, the EHT reported detecting a bright, asymmetric ring of light consistent with the presence of a supermassive black hole. Independent analyses of EHT data also supported the ring's presence.

Based on these observations, scientists improved the EHT by increasing its data-recording rate, its ability to track spatial information, and by adding the Greenland Telescope to the array. The last one "improved the resolution of the EHT in the north-south direction," Dr. Ramakrishnan said.

Piecing the data together

In the new campaign, the EHT had nine stations gathering data across six observation days in April 2018, in four frequencies.

Then the scientists correlated the datasets with each other to increase the



The images of the black hole in the M87 galaxy captured by the Event Horizon Telescope in 2017 (left) and 2018. The scale shows the brightness temperature in billions of kelvin. A&A 681, A79 (2024)

signal-to-noise ratio. This task and subsequent processing happened at centres in Germany and the U.S.

When comparing the 2017 observations with the new results, they observed significant changes in the closure phase – a measure of the relationship between three telescopes in an array.

Specifically, they found that the way telescopes worked together during the 2018 observations differed from that during the 2017 observations. In this difference, scientists can track shifts in the configuration or structure of the black hole.

The team further used general relativistic magnetohydrodynamic (GRMHD) simulations to create models of the M87 black hole. These models incorporate the way the black hole's gravity influences spacetime around it using Einstein's theory of general relativity. By comparing the simulated black hole with the actual one, scientists gained valuable insights into the intricate dynamics near the event horizon, such as an effect called lensing.

Gravitational lensing

The findings confirmed the presence of an asymmetric ring structure approximately 42 microarcseconds wide. This is like observing a grain of sand from 25 km away.

They also revealed its diameter hadn't changed much between observations in 2017 and 2018 – meaning the black hole's gravity bent light consistently over time to form the observed ring.

This is in line with prediction from the general theory of relativity that light around a black hole is strongly lensed. Objects with a lot of mass bend spacetime more around them. When light travels in this region, its path is bent in the same way a magnifying glass does. Images carried by the light thus appear to be



The EHT image helped constrain the black hole's mass and determined that its size and shape align with the predictions of the general theory of relativity. The image was hailed for revealing a part of the universe that was considered off limits

larger than they really are, and this phenomenon is called lensing.

This is also why, as the team found, the ring's southwest corner appears brighter than other parts. The black hole is rotating, dragging the spacetime around it along the direction of its rotation and rendering more light in some areas.

In technical parlance, the observations matched predictions for a shadow formed by lensed emission around a Kerr black hole (i.e. a rotating black hole) with a mass of around 6.5 billion times that of the Sun.

The M87 galaxy is also associated with a prominent jet of high-energy particles extending from the black hole into space. Scientists believe the jet is connected to the black hole's accretion disk, a belt-like structure of matter spiralling into the black hole.

Scientists observed that parts of the accretion disk and the jet appeared to be shifted by about 30 degrees between 2017 and 2018 – meaning these structures had changed their position or orientation over time.

"The 30-degree change can be attributed to the spin of the black hole," Dr. Ramakrishnan said. "Now this can't be firmly established yet from two images taken two years apart, but such an expectation was already established in a paper published a few years ago."

This shift is involved in a complex

interplay between the accretion disk and the formation of the jet. For example, models like the GRMHD suggest the observed shift could correspond to variations in the magnetic field structure. This in turn can render observable changes in the radiation emitted by matter in the disc.

By studying these subtle changes, scientists gain valuable insights into the hidden physics that controls the relationship between the accretion disk, the jet, and the magnetic environment around the black hole.

Room for more

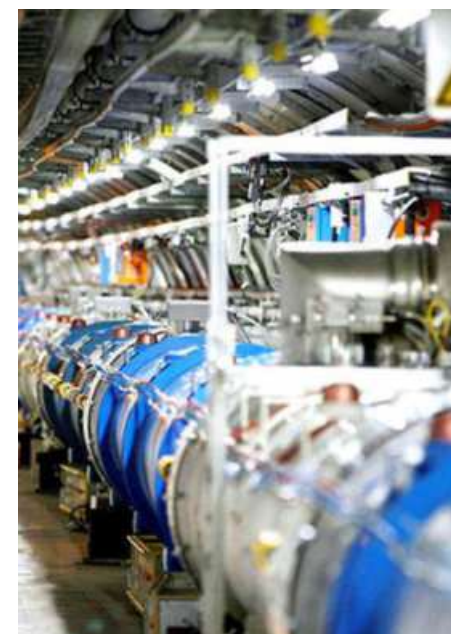
Running the EHT to photograph black holes millions of lightyears away is a time-consuming task requiring meticulous observations.

The new results have reaffirmed the features of the black hole reported in 2019, including a very stable ring-formation process and other physical characteristics. The findings also were consistent across two observation periods and multiple frequencies, speaking to their reliability.

Examining how we measure the ring's diameter shows that our observational techniques are continually improving. Image-based techniques to study objects in space tend to underestimate diameters compared to direct modelling methods. And the EHT's finer measurement of the ring's diameter suggests this gap between the two techniques is closing. Future work could further reconcile the discrepancy and the EHT's overall performance.

Dr. Ramakrishnan also said the telescope collaboration is planning "a so-called 'movie project' in 2026, when we will track the black hole over a month or two to see the brightness changes along the black hole".

(Tejasri Gururaj is a freelance science writer and journalist.)



The LHC at CERN near Geneva, Switzerland. REUTERS

Scientists plan to build even larger atom-smasher by 2040

Associated Press

Scientists at the world's largest atom smasher have expressed confidence about moving forward with a multibillion-euro project to build a larger and more powerful particle collider that could help unlock more mysteries of the universe.

Leaders of the European Organisation for Nuclear Research, or CERN, said planning is on track for its envisioned Future Circular Collider, which is estimated to cost 15 billion Swiss francs (\$17.2 billion) and will probably start operating in a first phase by 2040.

But nothing is certain yet, aside from the interest from mostly European and Western countries that bankroll CERN, which is home to the Large Hadron Collider.

That project is perhaps best known for helping confirm the subatomic Higgs boson in 2012 after a decades-long quest for what was described as "the missing cornerstone of physics."

The aim is to boost energy levels of the particle collisions to 100 TeV, or 100 trillion electron volts, about eight times more powerful than the Large Hadron Collider's 13 TeV

"The Future Circular Collider is a possible facility. I'm saying 'possible' because we are today at the level of feasibility study. It's not yet an approved project," said Fabiola Gianotti, the CERN director-general.

She said review committees had not turned up any "technical show-stoppers" for the project so far.

She touted the proposed collider as "a wonderful instrument to improve our understanding of fundamental physics" and a driver of innovation in areas like cryogenics, superconducting magnets, vacuum technologies and detector-instrumentation technologies that could offer socioeconomic benefits for society.

However, the science that the future collider could generate remains largely unknown.

"It's true that at the moment we do not have a clear theoretical guidance on what we should look for," Gianotti said.

The laboratory that already houses what CERN leaders call the world's biggest machine uses a network of magnets to accelerate particles through a 27-kilometre underground loop along the French-Swiss border and slam them together, capturing and interpreting the results of the collisions to help explain how fundamental physics works.

A briefing last week on the new collider included some proposed changes to the original plan announced in 2019. Among them: the loop will be 91 kilometres instead of the 100-kilometre circuit first envisioned.

But they still aim to boost energy levels of the particle collisions to 100 TeV, or 100 trillion electron volts, about eight times more powerful than the Large Hadron Collider's 13 TeV.

THE SCIENCE QUIZ

V886 Centauri: a star unlike any other

Vasudevan Mukunth

QUESTION 1

Scientists believe the star V886 Centauri is composed mainly of carbon and oxygen, has a hydrogen atmosphere, and a dense crystal core. And given the core's probable size, on February 13, 2004, the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics (CfA) declared it the universe's largest _____. Fill in the blank.

QUESTION 2

Researchers at CfA conferred a nickname to the core of V886 Centauri drawn from a song by The Beatles. What is the nickname? The song is from the album 'Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band'.

QUESTION 3

V886 Centauri is a pulsating X star. There are many subtypes of such stars. V886 Centauri for example is of type Y. The primary component of X is electron degenerate matter. Y is distinguished by light from it appearing to pulsate with a period between half a minute and 25 minutes. Name X and Y.

QUESTION 4

The bodies of stars can oscillate in different ways. Name the branch of science that studies these oscillations. Based on such studies, astronomers reported in 2004 that around 90% of the mass of V886 Centauri may have crystallised, meaning the crystal component weighed at least 5,100 billion billion kg.

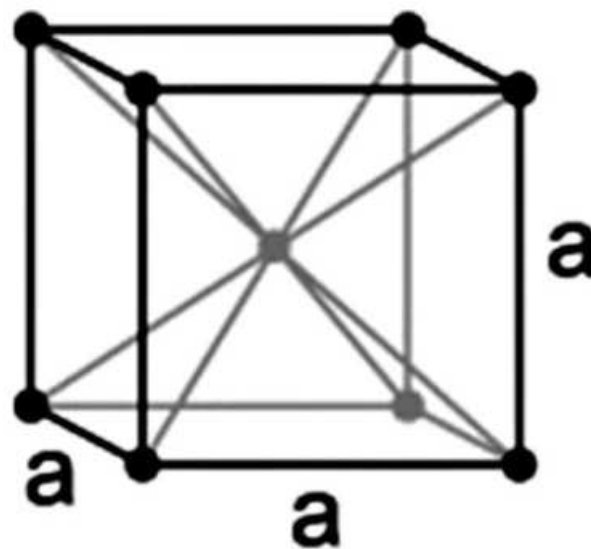
QUESTION 5

While V886 Centauri may be the largest

_____ in the universe (see Q1), what is its largest counterpart (so far) on the earth named? It was discovered in South Africa on January 26, 1905.

Answers to February 8 quiz:

1. Crew of the Skylab 4 mission – Ans: Gerald Carr, Edward Gibson, William Pogue
 2. Skylab 4 mission was first to record this with a space-borne camera – Ans: Solar flare
 3. How the press mischaracterised the incident for which Skylab 4 became famous – Ans: Strike
 4. At least one astronaut onboard this facility would have to be a veteran – Ans: ISS
 5. Skylab 4 mission record broken by Salyut 6 EO-1 – Ans: Longest human spaceflight
- Visual: Pogue Seiko
First contact: K.N. Viswanathan



Visual: The internal structure of V886 Centauri has been designated K, depicted here. This refers to one of three possible cubic structures the repeating unit of a crystal can have. Name K. DANIEL MAYER, DR08B (CC BY-SA 3.0)

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

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



Pakistan in turmoil

Instability will follow any attempt to subvert the mandate for Imran Khan

Pakistan's elections, on February 8, were not held on a level-playing field. Former Prime Minister Imran Khan, arguably the most popular politician, has been in jail since May 2023, facing multiple cases and serving convictions. His party, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), was barred from using its symbol on the ballot paper, forcing it to field independent candidates. Many of its leaders were also in jail or on the run, while others were forced to quit politics or defect to another party. What Pakistan saw in the run-up to the elections was a systematic effort by powerful quarters to dismantle Mr. Khan's political vehicle. Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N) leader Nawaz Sharif, once the nemesis of the army, who returned from exile in London, led his party's campaign with the establishment's blessings. But if the generals thought these measures would destroy the PTI's political leverage and catapult their favourites to power, they were proven wrong by voters. Independents won 101 of the 265 seats (93 went to PTI-linked candidates), the PML-N secured 75 seats while the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) won 54, and the Karachi-based Muttahida Qaumi Movement-Pakistan took 17. To form a government, 134 seats are needed.

This does not mean that the PTI, whose independent candidates form the largest bloc, would be able to form the next government. When it was evident that no bloc had an absolute majority, Nawaz Sharif called on every party, barring the PTI, to form a unity government. With Army Chief Gen. Asim Munir backing Mr. Sharif's call, what followed was an in-principle agreement between the PML-N and the PPP "to work together for political stability". All these developments point to political manoeuvring aimed at stitching together a unity government that will keep the PTI and Mr. Khan out of power. The independents could also come under pressure to switch to the coalition parties. The PTI, which has already alleged electoral irregularities, has called for street protests, triggering memories of the widespread clashes in May 2023 after Mr. Khan's arrest. The military may have wanted to turn the page of Mr. Khan's challenge and create a new political reality through the electoral process, but the results have underscored his popularity and public anger towards the establishment. For a long-term solution, the generals should make peace with Mr. Khan and allow the spirit of the results to prevail — an unlikely outcome. As political parties that finished second and third are moving ahead with their plans with blessings from the establishment, public discontent and distrust would remain the unresolved issues. With the PTI's challenge from the streets, Pakistan could face another cycle of instability and chaos.

The real travesty

A Governor who profoundly disagrees with State govt. should not stay in office

The Governor's customary address to the legislature at the first session of every year is being increasingly politicised. More often than not, those responsible for such unseemly controversies overshadowing the solemn occasion are the incumbents in Raj Bhavan. In the latest instance, Tamil Nadu Governor R.N. Ravi has expressed his inability to read out the address prepared by the DMK-run government, citing what he termed "misleading claims and facts" in numerous passages. Reading them out, he claimed, would have made the Governor's address "a constitutional travesty". Compounding this constitutional mischief with a partisan claim, he sought to make much of the fact that the national anthem is played only at the end of the address and not at the beginning also. Anyone who understands the Governor's role in a parliamentary democracy will know that it is the one declining to read out the address prepared by an elected government who reduces the address to a travesty. Governments are run by parties that contest elections on a political platform, and it is only to be expected that they would seek to trumpet their achievements, real or exaggerated, in policy statements. It is the role of the political opposition and the people to judge the content of the address, and not that of the Governor.

A simple test to ascertain the tenability of Mr. Ravi's claim that he declined to read out the customary address on factual and moral grounds is to raise the question whether either the President or a Governor in a Bharatiya Janata Party-ruled State would ever do so. He did not spell out what exactly the misleading or factually wrong points were, but it is not constitutionally sustainable to claim that the Governor's address should contain no criticism of the Centre or make no policy pronouncements against the Centre's policies. However, his point that the Speaker should not have launched a tirade against him after reading out the Tamil version of the Governor's prepared speech is justified. Such conduct by constitutional functionaries detract from the Assembly's dignity. The larger issue is still the propensity of Governors to act as political agents of the ruling party at the Centre. It is an unfortunate feature of India's constitutional system that the country is never short of grey eminences eager to occupy gubernatorial office, but once appointed, they are equally eager to enter the political thicket. It is as if they believe that their duty is to obstruct and undermine State governments run by political adversaries. The real travesty is not in a formal address containing questionable claims, but in a Governor who disagrees profoundly with its policy while remaining in office.

Gandhiji breathed his last in 1948 with 'Hey Ram' on his lips. Lord Ram was an influence on Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi since his childhood. As the Mahatma noted in his autobiography, that being of the Vaishnava faith since birth, visiting the temples of Rama and Krishna was his habit. But the temples did not instil faith in the boy Gandhi. He noted, "But what I failed to get there, I obtained from my nurse, an old servant...Rambha, that was her name, suggested as a remedy for this fear, the repetition of Rama-nama (the name, Rama)." It became an infallible remedy for him for the rest of his life. However, the Rama-nama which he refers to is no longer the idol to be found in a temple, nor a recitation as a ritual. Instead, it was something deep within the heart.

Rooted in spirituality

Gandhi brought religion into politics. But his religion had its roots in spirituality. Gandhian scholar Raghavan Iyer notes in his book, *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi*, that Gandhi sought to make politics religious and religion practical. In this effort, he built upon a neglected strand of Indian tradition — the path of karma yoga or spiritual realisation through social action. This was action of the kind associated with classical heroes such as Rama and Janaka, and reaffirmed in modern India by Vivekananda and Aurobindo.

Gandhi aimed to work for the purification of politics and reform formal religion. He gave new meaning to Rama, Rama-nama and *Ramarajya* in his discourse. His own journey of continuous self-purification was by chanting Rama-nama from the depth of his heart in the form of prayer.

In the *Harijan*, issue dated March 18, 1933, Gandhiji referred to three questions raised by an 'iconoclast schoolmaster' and answered them.

The first was: "Is it necessary for a Hindu, following the life of Shri Ramachandra, also to go and see his image in the temple? Is *darshan* better than action?"

The second: "If we bow our head or join our hands before a living person, he replies in return, but the image does not. Then what is the use of doing it? What is the use of writing letters to one who never replies?"

The third: "The person, whose image a Hindu adores, might have committed some wrongs in his lifetime. Will not the adorer be harmed by



Sudarshan Iyengar

is a Gandhian scholar, a former Vice-Chancellor of Gujarat Vidyapith, Ahmedabad, a university founded by Mahatma Gandhi in 1920, and also the co-author of the book, 'Abundant Love', a long form conversation with Satish Kumar, the founder of Schumacher College in the United Kingdom

The politicisation of religion, which does not augur well for the country, is the reverse of what Gandhi stood for

copying those wrongs, which he is likely to copy if he worships his image?" [*The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Volume 54, pp.111-112, Art.125-Posers]

Gandhi held it unfortunate that Rama who should be inside the self is sought in the image. Yet, Gandhi would not disturb the "simple faith" that saw Ram only in the temple. Gandhi's response was as follows: "It is not necessary for any Hindu to go to a temple to worship (the image of) Ramachandra. But it is for him who cannot contemplate his Rama without looking at his image in a temple. It may be unfortunate, but it is true that his Rama resides in that temple as nowhere else. I would not disturb that simple faith."

But deed, or action, was more important than the *darshan*. Mute worship constitutes the letter to god. God is not only in the temple. Gandhi wrote that he did not make any distinction between temple, mosque and church.

On the third question, he wrote, "Though my reason and heart long ago realised the highest attribute and name of God as Truth, I recognise Truth by the name of Rama. In the darkest hour of my trial, that one name has saved me and is still saving me" [*The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Volume 54, p.112].

In all of Gandhi's speeches, articles and letters, Rama, Rama-nama and Tulsidas's *Ramcharitmanas* (Ramayana) have been mentioned, commented on and invoked hundreds of times.

Gandhi's Rama

Who is Gandhi's Rama? Is he a Hindu god? He has clarified this several times. In his prayer meeting on April 4, 1946, at Birla House, Delhi, Gandhi said the following. "I laugh within myself when someone says that Rama or the chanting of Rama-nama is for the Hindus only, and that how can Mussalmans (Muslims), therefore, take part in it? Is there one God for the Mussalmans and another for the Hindus, Parsis or Christians? No, there is only one omnipotent and omnipresent God. He is named variously, and we remember Him by the name which is most familiar to us. My Rama, the Rama of our prayers, is not the historical Rama, the son of Dasaratha, the King of Ayodhya. He is the eternal, the unborn, the one without a second. Him alone I worship, His aid alone I seek, and so should you. He belongs equally to all. I, therefore, see no reason why a

Musalman or anybody should object to taking His name. But he is in no way bound to recognise God as Ramanama. He may utter to himself Allah or Khuda so as not to mar the harmony of the sound" [*The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Volume 83, p.364].

Gandhi knew the deep and serious implications of upholding Rama as a role model and Rama-nama as a cure for all ills in India where people from many religions live and where the Hindu-Muslim conflict is more than a century-old and the schism was deepened by the British with intent. Hence, he was always careful not to visit temples, mosques and churches. But he used the symbols from Hindu traditions and the religion to which he was born.

In 1929, at a public meeting in Bhopal, he said, "I warn my Muslim friends against misunderstanding me in my use of the word *Ramarajya*. By *Ramarajya*, I do not mean Hindu Raj. I mean by *Ramarajya*, a divine raj, the Kingdom of God. For me, Rama and Rahim are one and the same deity. I acknowledge no other God but the one God of Truth and righteousness." This was Gandhi's religion in politics and public life.

Gandhi further wrote: "Whether the Rama of my imagination ever lived or not on this earth, the ancient ideal of *Ramarajya* is undoubtedly one of true democracy in which the meanest citizen could be sure of swift justice without an elaborate and costly procedure. Even the dog is described by the poet to have received justice under *Ramarajya*."

The present day

It is important to record Gandhi's Rama, Rama-nama and *Ramarajya* in today's context. The politicisation of religion is the reverse of what Gandhi stood for. It does not augur well for the country. The Prime Minister of a country, which by its Constitution is a secular state, should have sent enormous good wishes on the occasion of the consecration of the Ram Temple built on the basis of a judgment of the Supreme Court. India claims to be a multi-religious and multicultural society and a Prime Minister appearing partisan to one religion, notwithstanding his religion, faith and dedication, has not sent out healthy signals. This is a celebration in a place where Gandhi's Rama is not likely to be found.

Through The Billion Press. E-mail: editor@thebillionpress.org

A global alliance to bridge the gender equity gap

Equality and inclusion are the cornerstones of India's development journey. The New Delhi Leaders' Declaration, which was adopted at the G-20 under India's presidency, is testament to this commitment. By prioritising inclusion at the centre of focus areas such as socio-economic empowerment, bridging the digital divide, driving climate action, ensuring food security, nutrition, health, and well-being, among others, the declaration underlines the need for advocating a growth agenda that is driven by women-led development.

At the World Economic Forum in January this year, India took the mission for gender equity several steps ahead with the launch of the 'Alliance for Global Good - Gender Equity and Equality'. This multi-stakeholder initiative has placed India centre stage for accelerating the socio-economic cause as it will have a sustained global impact. With the Alliance, India has managed to transition the two buzzwords, equity and equality, to the working agendas of stakeholders around the world.

Bolstering governance

Mainstreaming gender equality and equity has been a key development area for the Government of India for over a decade now. The passage of the Women's Reservation Bill last year, ensuring reservation of a third of seats for women in Parliament and the State Assemblies, is a revolutionary tool for women's empowerment and is expected to contribute extensively to improving the processes of India's governance. Allocations of nearly \$27 billion under the gender budget in 2023-24 are a manifestation of the commitment of the government to advancing women-led development.

There has been an increase in India's female labour force participation rate, from 23.3% in 2017-18 to 37% in 2022-23 (data from the annual



Chandrajit Banerjee

is Director-General, Confederation of Indian Industry

India's launch of the Alliance for Global Good - Gender Equity and Equality is a step towards enabling 'equity' and 'equality'

Periodic Labour Force Surveys). Female enrolment in higher education has gone up by 28% in the last 10 years. In terms of enrolment in science, technology, engineering, mathematics (STEM) courses, the share of women is a significant 43%, which is one of the highest enrolment rates in the world. Even within rural India, there is a participation of over nine crore women in 83 lakh self-help groups, improving the socio-economic conditions in rural areas. All these provide a glimpse of women-led development that India is witnessing.

An Indian contribution at Davos

I am happy to observe that global leaders are now acknowledging the success of these initiatives and learning from our success stories, be it in space exploration, sports, entrepreneurship or even in United Nations peacekeeping operations around the world. The changes are there for all to see. The enthusiasm around the We-Lead Lounge set up by the Ministry of Women and Child Development and the Confederation of Indian Industry at Davos, saw global interest and curiosity. It served as a platform to have many meaningful deliberations around how the world can contribute, join, and drive inclusive development. The Alliance for Global Good - Gender Equity and Equality now serves as a platform to channelise the resultant enthusiasm and intent into action at the global level.

The Alliance, anchored by the CII Centre for Women Leadership, guided by the Minister of Women and Child Development, Government of India and supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, will have a global network of experts, think-tanks, industry and country leadership that will drive collective actions to augment women empowerment. The partnership of the World Economic Forum as a network partner in this initiative, is testament to the global

relevance and the global resolve to drive growth that is inclusive and equitable.

With an overarching goal to share and develop scalable and practical solutions for advancing women-led development in the areas of ed-tech, medical capacity building, and delivery of health interventions for women, learning and skill development, agrotech, women enterprise development and unlocking capital to enable stronger gender outcomes, the Alliance brings together stakeholders on this critical global development agenda. India's leadership in these areas is proven, gaining the label of "pharmacy of the world". India's digital prowess is also well known. The alliance is yet another example of leadership, as India accepts responsibility to provide shared direction to stakeholders globally.

An opportunity

For industry across the globe, this is an opportunity: to share some of the practices that we have developed to advance the entry and growth of women in the workspace; to invest in proven programmes and initiatives and enable them reach scale, and to work collectively to make inclusion a business conversation. It is also an opportunity to learn and develop solutions with the global community consisting of industry, think tanks and investors to advance our commitment to increased engagement and leadership of women within the economy, through increased access to health care, education opportunities and economic opportunities.

Given India's abiding commitment to '*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* - One Earth, One Family, One Future' and its continued efforts towards *Sabka Saath, Sabka Prayaas, Sabka Vikaas*, this Alliance for Global Good - Gender Equity and Equality is poised to be a force to reckon with on all gender-related issues.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Farm issue

Scriptures say that as god shuts one door he opens another. On magnanimity that is similar, even as the government fortifies the Delhi borders for the farmers' march, its Agriculture Minister has gone on record to say that the government is keeping its mind open on talks with them. If this time around the barricades on the borders are seen to be far deeper and more intimidating than those during the earlier agitation, it is only fair to hope that the government is willing to keep its mind open far wider than before. But then why at all the barricades, if the government is confident

of its persuasive powers and its avowed concerns for the farmer?

R. Narayanan,
Navi Mumbai

The farmers' demand for guaranteed minimum support prices has remained unaddressed for long. The talks have failed again and it is strange that the government which acts in many ways, with surprise moves — as seen in recent times with the election in mind — has not come forward to accept their legitimate demands. The backbone of the economy in this country is agriculture and the ruling party is very likely to lose a chunk of votes from this distressed

community if its demands are not met.

N. Visveswaran,
Chennai

Heaping blame

Even after a decade in power, it is unfortunate that the Prime Minister and others in his government still blame the Congress for deficiencies in governance. The charge this time is that the "Cong. [is] dividing people on lines of caste, religion: PM" (Inside pages, February 12). This should be read in reverse. It is actually the NDA government led by the BJP that is engineering a divisive policy on caste and religious lines. This is very clear from the line in Parliament that the temple

consecration in Ayodhya could usher a new era that would make generations proud. How will this event solve people's problems? How convenient it is to ignore the burning ethnic issue in Manipur, inflation and unemployment! If the government has made a record increase in MSP for farm produce, then why are farmers on a rally fired up on this issue? The Opposition is not strong enough to point out the deficiencies in the BJP's

policies. People should analyse these before voting.

D. Sethuraman,
Chennai

Title regained

The Australian U-19 cricket team's win demonstrates its dominance in ICC competitions. But our boys did play well and their poise and maturity versus South Africa in the semifinal were a "show stopper" ('Sport' February 12).

K. Akash,
Chennai

Corrections & Clarifications

The story titled "Ahalan Modi": large turnout expected at PM's diaspora event in UAE" (February 12, 2024) erroneously referred to the spokesperson for the event as Nisha Singh. It should have been Nishi Singh.

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The state of the Indian economy today

The state of the Indian economy today and its prospects have to be based on mathematics and statistics. We can get a reality check on the economic growth rate by examining the three conclusions that emerge today based on data published by the National Statistical Office. This helps us analyse the Modi government's economic performance as disclosed in Parliament and subsequently published in the media.

What the data say

First, India's GDP growth rate declined annually from 2016-17, and fell below 3.5% in the fourth quarter of 2019-20. This four-year continuous decline from a 7% growth rate to 3.5% rate has never been acknowledged by the government. Second, it is essential to recognise that since 2020, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's widely publicised 'vikas' or development model in reality achieved the so-called "Hindu rate of growth" in GDP, which had been "achieved" during the Congress's socialist period of 1950-77. Third, in P.V. Narasimha Rao's and Manmohan Singh's tenures as Prime Minister, India departed from the socialist path and the GDP growth rates rose for the first time to 6%-8% per year and over a 15-year period i.e., between 1991-96 and 2004-2014 (with the usual cyclical ups and downs). That is, it took Rao and Dr. Singh to understand and reform the Indian economic system, reduce state participation, and increase incentives for capital and labour providers, and achieve a higher and faster growth rate.

What is alarming since Mr. Modi assumed office is the serious and continuous decline in the GDP growth rate. The decline had begun in 2016 and continues even today. The Modi government has thus failed to structure economic policy coherently. Incoherence prevailed during the 2014-2023 period and will perhaps continue in the future as well.



Subramanian Swamy

is former Union Minister of Commerce and Law and Justice

Post-COVID-19, we hear that the growth rate of GDP is around 6% + annually. But this is misleading because what is not disclosed is that the growth rate includes recovery as well, since 2020-22

Furthermore, not only has the GDP growth rate been declining since 2016, but brazen announcements of rosy predictions were and are being published annually in the media, with outrageous claims made by Mr. Modi. One such claim made in 2019 was that India will become a \$5 trillion economy by 2024. This implied a doubling of the GDP in five years or, in other words, a 15% annual growth rate of GDP. There has been no policy structuring presented to achieve this aim nor has anyone in the government shown willingness to debate it on public fora.

Post-COVID-19, we hear and read in the media that the growth rate of GDP is around 6% + annually. But this is misleading and deliberately so because what is not disclosed is that the growth rate includes recovery as well, since 2020-22. Hence, if we calculate the GDP growth rate between 2019-20 and 2022-23, two normal years, it works out to less than 4% per year for the period. The Modi government was elected democratically. Hence, it is obligated to disclose facts transparently to the people.

In this decade of weak demand and relatively excess supply, resources mobilised by the government should be largely through indirect taxes and also through the liberal printing of currency notes to generate demand from non-rich citizens. The annual interest paid on fixed-term savings in the bank accounts of the middle class should be higher, at 9% or so. The interest rates on loans issued to small and medium industries should be no more than 6% on the loans. These essential reforms need to be carried out to generate non-inflationary demand.

A new economic policy

"Modinomics" has been an unstructured flop. No announced macroeconomic goal has been achieved by the government till date. Thus, India urgently needs a new economic policy that is based

on clearly structured and stated objectives and priorities, and a strategy to achieve the targets, with an intelligent and transparent resource mobilisation plan to finance the policies. At present, from the Finance Ministry, we only have an incoherent hotchpotch of public announcements with no accountability.

The market system is not a free-for-all or ad hoc measure. It is structured with rules of transactions. A market system with transparent and minimal regulation works since the principal drivers are incentives and domestic savings whose deployment for innovation pushes the factor productivity and thus the GDP growth rate. Even a totalitarian state such as China understood this. During Deng Xiaoping's tenure as paramount leader, it allowed the socialist economic system to die, and the economic market-based system to wash in, even while maintaining the system of political dictatorship.

The trade-offs through affirmative action, social security, and safety nets are essential for creating a stake for the poor in the system and level the playing field to create hope, ensure transparency, accountability, trusteeship [philanthropy] as well as corporate governance to legitimise profit-making that will drive the market system. Deregulation should also not mean that we reject government intervention for safety nets, affirmative action, market failures, and creating a level-playing field.

Democratic institutions have to be empowered to guard against public disorder arising from rapid deregulation, as it happened in Russia post-1991. Russia underwent chaos and misery, which meant dictatorship returned for the Russians, and with it came a loss of human rights and democratic values. The current slow slide to autocracy would lead to what has happened in Russia.

Telangana's education paradox

While gross enrolment ratio in school is poor, students do well in competitive exams

STATE OF PLAY

Serish Naniseti
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Telangana presents a rare paradox in the education sector. Its students perform exceptionally well in the All India Joint Entrance Examination every year. In 2023, 11 out of 43 students scored 100 percentile, the highest among all States. But the Annual Status of Education Report for 2022 makes for grim reading. The State also has the highest share of students in the 14-18 group who are not in the education system. Ironically, the students from the State who crack national competitive exams are from the same age group.

Other States with poor social indicators are better off than Telangana. While 22.1% of children in the age group of 14-18 in Telangana were out of the education system, the national average was 13.2%. School students in the State don't have skills that match their counterparts in other parts of the country. For instance, nationally, 43.3% of students could do basic arithmetic calculations, while in Telangana, only 19.75% could do so in the 14-18 age group.

Low investment in education by successive governments lies at the heart of the problem. The State has 3,274 junior colleges of which only 420 are managed by the State government. But it has 1,349 privately run junior colleges, most of them in urban areas. The result is that many students have to travel long distances to reach college. The State also runs other residential junior colleges and facilities, but the admission for them is through a competitive exam. This also keeps a high

share of students out of the education system.

The interim Budget presented by the incumbent Congress government appears to recognise both the quality of education and the funding gap for the sector. "Our government's biggest priority will be school education. Apart from providing the required funds for various facilities and schemes on a regular basis, the government has decided to set up digital classrooms in the schools," said the Finance Minister, Mallu Bhatti Vikramarka, in his maiden Interim Budget speech. Funding has been raised from ₹18,955 crore, earmarked in the 2023-24 Budget, to ₹21,839 crore – a substantial increase of 15.21%. But this is not enough. Telangana has consistently under-spent on the education sector over the past decade. The budgetary outlay for education in 2014-15 was 10.89%. If the State had maintained the same pace of sectoral outlay, the education budget for 2024-25 should have been ₹30,044.53 crore.

When the Telangana Rashtra Samithi came to power, it used the slogan of 'KG to PG' free education for the poor. But the investment required to fulfil the promise was never made. The State managed to build only one show-piece facility in Sircilla, the Assembly constituency of former Municipal Administration and Urban Development minister K.T. Rama Rao. Even this was

not developed with State funding, but with monies under Corporate Social Responsibility from a building conglomerate.

NGOs in the State have been highlighting the abysmal state of educational infrastructure by sharing information and photographs of schools without boundary walls and of cattle roaming around in dysfunctional washrooms. The high dropout rate among girls of the 14-18 group is directly linked to the absence of hygienic toilet facilities.

The quality of education has been affected by the slow pace of recruitment in the education sector which has scuppered the hopes of lakhs of aspiring teachers. In 2019, the State government appointed eight serving Indian Administrative Service officers as in-charge vice-chancellors as an ad hoc measure after the tenure of the vice-chancellors ended. The universities which had IAS officers as vice-chancellors included Kakatiya University, Jawaharlal Nehru Technological University-Hyderabad, and Osmania University. Only in May 2021 did the universities get academicians as full-fledged vice-chancellors. It was clear that the State cared little about educational institutions.

One of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals is to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all". It is clear that Telangana will not achieve this goal in time. It will also be unable to achieve the goal of ensuring 50% Gross Enrolment Ratio goal in higher education by 2030, a stated goal of the Union government. It is time for the Telangana government to follow through on its promises in education.

A record number of global voters exercise right in 2024

Many countries have a low score in the index that measures free and fair polls; India ranks somewhere in the middle

DATA POINT

Rebecca Rose Varghese & Vignesh Radhakrishnan

Over 50 countries in which close to 45% of the people in the world reside have gone to the polls or will go to the polls this year. This only includes those countries which conducted or will conduct national-level polls this year or are part of the nations which choose the European Parliament. Countries conducting local elections have been ignored. With the world's population on the rise and many countries having elections this year, estimates indicate that 2024 could see the highest number of votes polled in history.

Most of these elections are concentrated in Asia, Europe, and Northern America. Some countries from Africa and South America also choosing their leaders this year. **Map 1** shows the countries which are going to the polls or have already completed elections this year. The countries in Europe that are only voting for the European Parliament and are not choosing their country's government have been highlighted with a different colour.

An assessment of how free and fair the elections are in these countries shows that democracy is on the retreat in many of them. Only a few countries showed improvement in this area. To measure the fairness of elections, **Chart 2** arranges countries according to their scores in the free and fair elections index 2022. This is prepared by the V-Dem Institute based on expert assessments. It captures the extent to which election violence, government intimidation, fraud, large irregularities, and vote buying are absent in a country. It ranges from 0 (least free and fair) to 1 (most free and fair). The bigger the size of the circle in the chart, the higher the voting population of the country.

Comoros, the archipelagic

country in Africa, fared the worst in the 2022 index. According to news reports, President Azali Assoumani was re-elected for the fourth term in January. The Opposition termed the poll "fraudulent". Voter turnout was very low at 16% as the Opposition boycotted the polls. Countries in the subcontinent including India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan were either middling or in the lower half of the index. The two major parties in Pakistan are fighting over who will be Prime Minister, with Imran Khan, one of the candidates for the post, in prison. On the day of the polls, there was a mobile Internet shutdown and the results were delayed. Recently, a Mayor election in Chandigarh, India, was heavily criticised by the Supreme Court for the manner in which a BJP candidate was declared as winner. In the videos, the presiding officer appears to be defacing ballots which the Chief Justice of India called a "mockery of democracy".

Fellow Asian countries such as Russia, Uzbekistan, Indonesia, Cambodia, and Mongolia also rank relatively low in the index. Earlier this month, in Russia, Boris Nadezhdin, who opposes the invasion of Ukraine, was not accepted as a candidate for the presidential election in March. Of the one lakh signatures of supporters he is supposed to get to prove his worth as a candidate, 9,000 were rejected by the Election Commission as invalid. India, with a score of 0.53 is right in the middle of the index.

Chart 3 shows the change in the free and fair elections index between 2012 and 2022. Comoros, India, Hungary, Bangladesh, Poland, and El Salvador are among the countries where the index has deteriorated the most in the past decade. Only countries which showed at least some degree of decline in the index or improvement are depicted in the chart. Uzbekistan, Romania, and Togo are countries which have shown improvement in the index in the last decade.

Democracy on the decline in many nations

The data for charts were sourced from Our World in Data, International IDEA, World Bank and the Association of World Election Bodies



Map 1: The map shows the countries going to the polls or have already completed elections in 2024

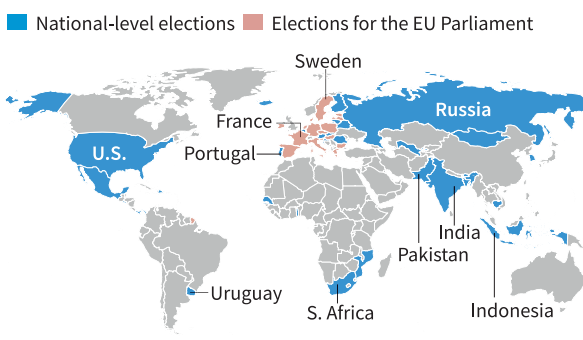


Chart 2: The chart shows the free and fair elections index, 2022. The bigger the size of the circle, the higher the voting population of the country

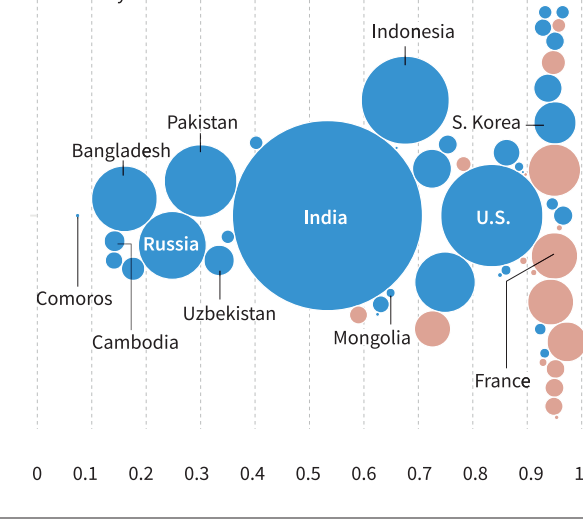
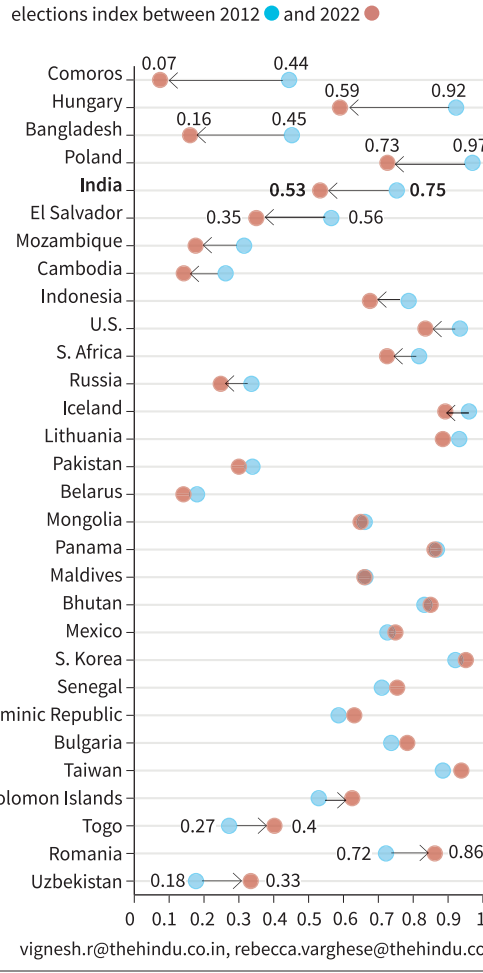


Chart 3: The chart shows the change in the free and fair elections index between 2012 and 2022



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The *Hindu*

FIFTY YEARS AGO FEBRUARY 13, 1974

Trunk automatic exchanges for more towns

Madras, Feb. 12: Trunk Automatic Exchanges (TAX) would be installed at Coimbatore, Madurai and Tiruchi during the Fifth Plan, Mr. Janakiraman, Post Master General, Tamil Nadu Circle said here to-day.

Mr. Janakiraman said besides this, the capacity of the TAX at Madras would also be increased. Already Bangalore and Coimbatore had been connected to this, providing inter-dialling facility.

Work had also been commenced on the coaxial scheme linking Coimbatore, Tirupur, Erode, Salem and Bangalore. A similar scheme to link Madurai with Virudhunagar, Tirunelveli, Tuticorin, Nagercoil and Trivandrum had also been approved. Madras would also be linked with Tiruchi via Pondicherry.

These systems were likely to be completed during the Fifth Plan.

A microwave scheme linking Madurai, Kodaikanal, Theni and Coimbatore was expected to be completed during 1974-75, he said.

Mr. Janakiraman said a wide-hand microwave project linking Madras with Bombay and Trivandrum via Bangalore, Mangalore and Panjim would be commissioned by 1976-77. Under this project, a spur route linking Madras with Tirupathi had also been provided and expected to be commissioned during 1974-75.

Mr. Janakiraman said the number of new Savings Bank accounts in October 1973 was 19,000 and it shot up to 50,000 in November of the same year. The deposits had also risen from Rs. 2.5 crores in April 1972 to Rs. 5.4 crores in November 1973.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO FEBRUARY 13, 1924

New Railway in East Africa

Nairobi, Feb. 12: Sir Robert Coryndon opened at Eldoret on Monday the new Uasin Gishu Railway, which has been completed as far as Eldoret. The Governor's train got through with the greatest difficulty owing to rains and the line not yet being open to traffic. But its completion marks a great forward step and rewards the energy and patience of hundreds of settlers in the Uasin Gishu area.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

The number of people SpiceJet airline plans to lay off

1,000 The airline has around 9,000 employees and is looking at reducing the strength by 10-15%, an official said, adding that layoffs are necessary to reduce costs and annual savings could be up to ₹100 crore. PTI

The primary schools in Gujarat with just one teacher

1,606 "The State government had said in March 2022 that nearly 700 schools were functioning with just one teacher. Today, that number stands at 1,606..." Congress MLA Shailesh Parmar said. PTI

Palestinian minors killed due to Israel's war in Gaza

12,300 Minors made up about 47% of the total number of 28,176 Palestinians killed so far, the Health Ministry said on Monday. About 8,400 women were also among those killed. AP

The decline in India's vegetable oil imports in January

28 in percentage. The country's vegetable oil imports declined to 12 lakh tonnes in January from the year-ago period. The SEA said prices of edible oils may go up this year due to lower production, global economic issues and supply constraints. PTI

The death toll due to a landslide in the Philippines

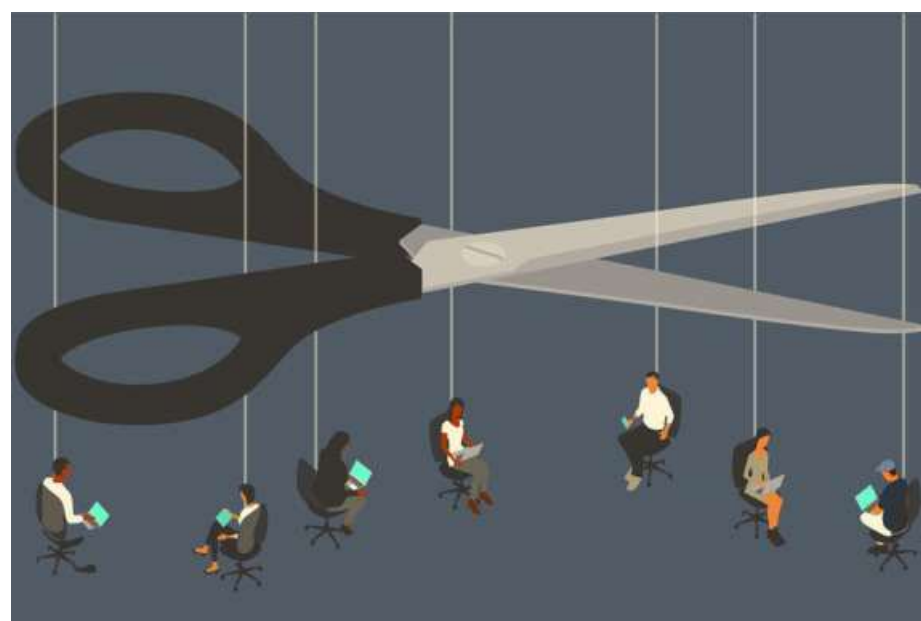
68 The landslide buried three buses and a jeepney waiting for employees of a gold mining firm and 55 nearby houses. Rain has pounded parts of Mindanao, triggering dozens of landslides and floods. AFP

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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Decoding India's economic realities-II

The Finance Minister has claimed that 1.4 crore youth have been trained under the 'Skill India Mission'. However, data shows that these skilled youth are not gainfully employed. Such excess supply of skilled workers in the economy is working as a dampener on wage and earnings growth



ECONOMIC NOTES

Prasenjit Bose
Indranil Chowdhury
Samiran Sengupta
Soumyadeep Biswas

This is the second of a two-part series on the Union Budgets under the UPA and NDA governments.

The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) regime has done little to address the major supply side factors driving food inflation, beyond imposing ad hoc export bans. While cash transfer schemes like PM-Kisan or the distribution of free foodgrains to poorer households can provide much needed income support and relief, they can neither improve agricultural productivity nor modernise storage and marketing of food items like vegetables, pulses and cereals, whose prices are driving food inflation today. The only method conceived by the NDA to address these issues was to facilitate a wholesale corporate takeover of India's food and agricultural economy by enacting three farm laws in September 2020, which had to be eventually rescinded following a year-long protest by north Indian farmers. Since then, the NDA-II government has remained as clueless as the UPA (United Progressive Alliance)-II was, in dealing with food inflation and agriculture.

The second problem with UPA's growth story was that while exports grew rapidly, imports grew even faster, partly due to rising global crude prices, which worsened the current account balance and increased external vulnerability. During the NDA regime, both export and import growth declined, which impacted economic growth adversely but improved the external trade balance. Further, during the NDA decade, net FDI inflows increased as a share of GDP but remittance inflows, which remained significantly higher than net FDI inflows, declined compared to the UPA decade. The end-result has been mixed.

The fall in India's foreign exchange reserves during NDA-I could be reversed during NDA-II, but the rupee has continued to depreciate vis-a-vis the dollar. The rupee-dollar exchange rate, which fell from ₹43 to ₹60 per dollar during the UPA rule has fallen further to ₹83 during NDA's tenure. In the context of the post-pandemic surge in global inflation last year, the rupee depreciation has only imported the inflationary trend into the domestic economy.

The problem of NPAs

The third problem with UPA's higher growth and private investment phase was

that it led to rising big ticket corporate defaults, initially concealed through debt restructuring, which ultimately left a huge pile of legacy Non-Performing Assets (NPAs) in the banking system. The Modi government is claiming credit for restoring the health of Public Sector Banks (PSBs) by reducing the Gross Non-Performing Assets (GNPA) stock significantly. The fact remains that while cumulative NPA reduction under the NDA rule through all recovery channels, including the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code was around ₹10.8 lakh crore (till March 2023), NPA write-offs have amounted to over ₹14.8 lakh crore in the same period (Table 1).

The PSBs, which accounted for over ₹10.65 lakh crore of these NPA write offs had to absorb substantial losses because of NPA provisioning, making net losses between 2017-18 and 2019-20. Simultaneously, since 2017-18 massive doses of capital was infused into PSBs and financial institutions like the EXIM Bank, the Industrial Development Bank of India (IDBI) and the India Infrastructure Finance Company Limited (IIFCL), in order to bail them out. As disclosed in the Receipt Budgets, the Centre's total debt burden on account of these recapitalisation bonds have increased to ₹2.90 lakh crore by 2023-24, and their annual interest expense of over ₹19,000 crore is being met through the central government's revenue expenditure since 2019-20. Bank recapitalisation under the UPA rule, which was of a much smaller magnitude, was audited by the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG), covering the period between 2008-09 to 2016-17. However, bank recapitalisation executed under the NDA rule has not been audited by the CAG so far. Such an audit is necessary to evaluate the massive NPA write offs by the PSBs and conclude whether private sector debt defaults have been subsidised through the public exchequer.

Income and employment

The efficacy of Union Budgets needs to be judged in terms of their impact on the lives of ordinary people. The Finance Minister has claimed in the Budget speech that under NDA rule "people are living better and earning better, with even greater aspirations for the future. Average real income of the people has increased by fifty per cent." However, how true is this claim? Official data shows that real per capita income in India, estimated by the inflation-adjusted Net National Income (NNI), registered a growth of 50.3% during the ten years of UPA rule (Table 2). During NDA's ten year rule, real per capita income grew by 43.6%, reflecting a slowdown in inflation adjusted income growth across India.

UPA vs NDA: macroeconomic indicators

The efficacy of Union Budgets need to be judged in terms of their impact on the lives of ordinary people. These tables look at the average income and employment status of the average Indian citizen

Table 1: Macroeconomic Indicators

	UPA-I 2004-05 to 2008-09	UPA-II 2009-10 to 2013-14	NDA-I 2014-15 to 2018-19	NDA-II 2019-20 to 2023-24
Banking Sector				
Bank Credit Growth Rate % (Annual Average)	27.2	16.7	10.3	10.3
Aggregate Bank Deposit Growth Rate % (Annual Average)	20.6	15.0	10.3	9.8
Gross NPA of Scheduled Commercial Banks (₹Crore) (End of Period) #	68328	264381	936474	571546
Total NPA Recovery of Scheduled Commercial Banks (₹Crore) #	139451	324191	598981	479881
Total NPA Write-Offs of Scheduled Commercial Banks (₹Crore) #	8500	55002	639980	842414
External Sector				
Net Exports of Goods & Services (Exports less Imports) % of GDP (Annual Average)	-3.4	-5.2	-2.8	-2.2
Real Export Growth % (Annual Average)	18.9	8.9	3.5	6.4
Real Import Growth % (Annual Average)	21.7	6.4	5.1	7.5
Net FDI Inflows % of GDP (Annual Average)**	1.0	1.1	1.4	1.3
Inward Remittances % of GDP (Annual Average)	3.3	3.5	2.9	3.1
Forex & Exchange Rate				
Foreign Exchange Reserves % of GDP (End of Period)##	23.3	16.3	15.1	17.4
Rupee Dollar Exchange Rate (in ₹) (End of Period)	50.9	60.1	69.2	83.0

*CPI-IW till 2008-09, CPI-Combined for Subsequent Periods # GNPA and NPA movement estimates are till March 2023. **4-Yr Average for NDA II (2019-20 to 2023-24) ## Forex Data till January 2024

Table 2: Per Capita Income & Growth

	UPA I & II		NDA I & II	
	2004-05	2013-14	2014-15	2023-24
Nominal Per Capita Income (NNI) (in ₹)	25987	79118	86647	185854
Real Per Capita Income (NNI) (in ₹)	45611	68572	72805	104550

Table 3: Employment, Unemployment & Earnings

	NSS 68th Round - 2011-12	PLFS 2017-18	PLFS 2022-23	Variation	
	(A)	(B)	(C)	(B-A)	(C-B)
Unemployment Rates (%)					
Unemployment Rate % (CWS)	3.7	8.9	5.1	5.2	-3.8
Unemployment Rate % (Usual Status, ps + ss)	2.3	6.1	3.2	3.8	-2.9
Unemployment Rate % among Youth (15-29 Yrs) (Usual Status, ps + ss) - Rural	4.9	16.6	8	11.7	-8.6
Unemployment Rate % among Youth (15-29 Yrs) (Usual Status, ps + ss) - Urban	9.2	20.6	15.7	11.4	-4.9
Educated Unemployment Rate % (Secondary and Above, 15 Yrs+) (Usual Status, ps + ss) - Rural	4.7	11.5	6.6	6.8	-4.9
Educated Unemployment Rate % (Secondary and Above, 15 Yrs+) (Usual Status, ps + ss) - Urban	5.1	11.3	8.4	6.2	-2.9
Status in Employment (Usual Status, ps + ss)					
Share (%) of Self-Employed in Usually Employed - Rural	55.9	57.8	63	1.9	5.2
Share (%) of Self-Employed in Usually Employed - Urban	42	38.3	39.6	-3.7	1.3
Share (%) of Regular Wage/Salaried in Usually Employed - Rural	8.8	13.1	12.2	4.3	-0.9
Share (%) of Regular Wage/Salaried in Usually Employed - Urban	43.4	47	48	3.6	1
Share (%) of Casual Labour in Usually Employed - Rural	35.3	29.1	24.8	-6.2	-4.3
Share (%) of Casual Labour in Usually Employed - Urban	14.6	14.7	12.4	0.1	-2.3
Informal Sector (Usual Status, ps + ss) (Rural + Urban)					
Share (%) of Workers engaged in Agriculture	48.9	44.1	45.8	-4.8	1.7
Share (%) of Workers in Usual Status (ps + ss) employed in Informal (P&P) Non-Agricultural Enterprises	37	38.2	40.3	1.2	2.1
Share (%) of Regular Wage/Salaried Employees without Social Security Benefit in Non-agriculture sector	55.4	49.6	53.9	-5.8	4.3
Average Monthly Earnings (Rural + Urban) (in ₹)					
		Apr-Jun, 2018	Apr-Jun, 2023	Growth (%)	
Average Monthly Wage Earnings from Casual Labour work other than public work*	n.a.	5741	8547	48.9	
Average Monthly Earnings of Regular Wage/Salaried Employees	n.a.	16847	20039	18.9	
Average Monthly Earnings from Self-Employment	n.a.	12304	13347	8.5	

*Calculated from data on average earnings per day and actual days worked in a week

Source: Union Ministry of Statistics & Programme Implementation

The NDA government often cites the annual Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) findings to claim a reduction in the unemployment rate between 2017-18 and 2022-23. However, comparable estimates from the NSS 68th round on Employment and Unemployment Situation in India, shows that unemployment rates, estimated by both current weekly status and adjusted usual status, grew very sharply between 2011-12 to 2017-18 (See Table 3). Moreover, while the unemployment rates declined between 2017-18 and 2022-23, the open unemployment rates of 2022-2023 were still higher, not only vis-a-vis the NSS 68th round of 2011-12, but compared to all the eight previous NSS rounds conducted since 1972-73. The open unemployment rates have never been so high in India in the last 50 years. Unemployment was particularly high among the urban youth aged 15 to 29 years and among those with an educational level of secondary and above. Within those employed, the share of casual workers show a declining trend both in rural and urban areas, while the proportion of self-employed have increased progressively. In 2022-23, self-employed workers and helpers in own account enterprises made up 63% of the rural labour force and almost 40% of the urban labour force. The share of regular wage/salaried workers has declined in rural areas and increased in urban areas between 2017-18 and 2022-23. However, the share of those without any social security benefit has increased within the salaried workers category.

Even as agriculture's share in Gross Value Added (GVA) has declined to 14.4% in 2023-24, there has been an increase in the share of workers engaged in agriculture between 2017-18 and 2022-23. The share of workers engaged in informal non-agricultural enterprises has also increased since 2011-12. These trends in employment status from the PLFS data point towards growing informalisation of the labour force, contrary to official claims of increased formalisation.

Skilled but not employed

The Finance Minister had claimed in the Budget speech that the government's "Skill India Mission" has trained 1.4 crore youth and 54 lakh youth have been up-skilled and reskilled. However, the dashboard in the official site of the PM Kaushal Vikas Yojana shows that out of 1.10 crore certified candidates, only 24.51 lakh, that is around 22%, have been "Reported Placed". Such excess supply of skilled workers in the economy and growing informalisation is working as a dampener on wage and earnings growth. PLFS data further show that the average earnings of casual labour in non-public work to be ₹8,547 in 2022-23, that of self-employed workers to be ₹13,347 and that of regular wage/salaried workers to be ₹20,039. While casual labourers' average earnings has grown by around 49% in five years since 2017-18, and regular wage/salaried workers by 19%, average earnings of self-employed workers rose by 8.5% only in five years. With annual retail inflation rate averaging 6% during NDA-II's tenure, less than 2% annual growth in average earnings for the self-employed clearly indicate a decline in their real earnings. 57% of India's labour force engaged in self-employment, are certainly not "living better and earning better", as the Finance Minister would want us to believe. It is their hopes and aspirations that stand betrayed.

Prasenjit Bose is an economist and activist; Indranil Chowdhury teaches economics at PGDAV college, DU; Samiran Sengupta and Soumyadeep Biswas are data analysts at CPERD Pvt. Ltd

LOKINITI-CSDS

The political preferences of first-time voters in Delhi

Data suggests a significant preference for the Bharatiya Janata Party among first-time voters when it comes to running the government at the national level. The study also dissects specific issues that resonate with the younger generation

Lokniti Team

A recent study done by the Lokniti-CSDS among 1,290 first-time voters (47% young men and 53% young women) in Delhi, delves into the intricate realm of their political preferences. The study not only explores their choice of party for governance at both national and State levels but also dissects the specific issues that resonate with the younger generation. Recognising the strategic importance of engaging with this group, political parties are actively initiating efforts to reach out to millions of first-time voters. This outreach seeks not only to establish a connect but also to secure their support for the upcoming 2024 Lok Sabha elections.

On governing States and the nation
The data suggests a significant preference for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) among first-time voters when it comes to running the government at the national level. The BJP has a substantial lead with 70% support, indicating a widespread belief among first-time voters that the BJP is best suited for national governance. The Congress and the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) lag significantly behind in this context (Table 1). However, when it comes to governance at the State level, particularly in Delhi, the dynamics shift. AAP secured the preference of 49% of the youth, closely followed by the BJP at 33%. Meanwhile, the Congress garnered a minimal mention, with only 3% of young voters expressing support for the party (Table 1).

Upon examining specific issues relevant to the youth, it becomes evident that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) stands out as the preferred choice for addressing youth-related challenges and creating employment opportunities. In contrast, other political parties have limited support in this regard. Interestingly, a notable three in ten voters expressed that no party adequately prioritises these critical issues (Table 2). However, when it comes to providing quality education, a distinct competition emerges between the AAP and the BJP. An almost equal number of young voters perceive both parties as strong contenders in this crucial area.

On gauging young respondents' opinion on the Narendra Modi government we asked them what work done by the Modi government did they like the most. Development emerged as the most appreciated aspect, garnering 20% approval, followed by 11% acknowledging the government's efforts in protecting religious interests. Other mentions include 6% approval for maintaining law and order, 5% for initiatives to enhance women's security, and 4% each for reducing unemployment, improving education, and aiding the underprivileged (Table 3).

On the contrary the most disliked work of the Modi government reveal diverse concerns. For 17% of first time voters it was an increase in communalism. Following closely, 15% expressed discontent with the issue of price rise, while 12% were critical of the government's handling of increasing unemployment. A 3% disapproval rate is observed for multiple aspects, including a



Table 1: The best party for running the country and Delhi

	Party best for.....	
	Running the government in the country	Running the government in Delhi
BJP	70	33
Congress	7	4
AAP	5	49

Note: Rest gave other responses or did not respond

Table 2: Party best for specific issues

Which party is the best..	BJP	Congress	AAP	No party
Focusing on the problems of the youth	44	13	14	26
Generating employment opportunities	45	11	10	30
Providing quality education	40	6	41	11

Note: Rest gave names of other parties

Table 3: Standout achievement of the Modi govt.

One work done by the Modi government that you liked the most	(%)
Development	20
Protect my religion/religious interests	11
Good law and order situation	6
Worked for improving women's security	5
Reduced unemployment	4
Improvement in education sector	4
Worked for the benefit of the poor	4
Improvement in health services	3
Reduced corruption	3
All other work combined	26

Note: Rest did not respond

Table 4: Most disliked work of the Modi Government

One work done by the Modi government that you disliked the most	(%)
Communalism has increased	17
Price rise	15
Increasing unemployment	12
Corruption has increased	3
Did not work for the benefit of the poor	3
Situation of education sector is not good	3
Crimes against women have increased	3
All other work combined	18

Note: Rest did not respond

With the recent inauguration of the Ram Mandir at Ayodhya, first-time voters were asked how they felt about the construction of the new temple. More than two thirds (67%) expressed a deep sense of pride and another one sixth (15%) indicated being somewhat proud, suggesting an overall positive mood

Table 5: Opinion on the caste Census

Should the caste census be conducted in India	(%)
Yes	48
No	46

Note: Rest did not respond

Table 6: Opinion on the construction of the Ram Temple

How proud do you feel that a Ram temple has been constructed in Ayodhya	(%)
Very proud	67
Somewhat proud	15
Not much proud	8
Not at all proud	8

Note: Rest did not respond

Table 7: Opinion on the significance of the inauguration of Ram Mandir

Opinion on the celebration plan for the inauguration of the Ram Mandir	(%)
The grand celebration for Ram Mandir was necessary	46
It was for vote bank	48

Note: Rest did not respond

Table 8: The vote choice of first-time voters

Vote Choice	(%)
BJP	65
Congress	8
AAP	7
Other parties combined	4
Did not reveal	16

rise in corruption, the belief that the government did not work for the benefit of the poor, concerns about the education sector, and the increase in crimes against women (Table 4).

On the temple inauguration
In exploring the perspectives of first-time voters on critical issues, we inquired about their opinions on the caste Census and their stance on the inauguration of the Ram Mandir.

With respect to the caste Census, the data indicates an equal divide regarding the need for conducting a caste Census in India. While 48% favoured the idea of conducting a caste Census, 46% believed it to be unnecessary (Table 5).

With the recent inauguration of the Ram Mandir at Ayodhya, we asked first-time voters how they felt about the construction of the new temple. More than two thirds (67%) expressed a deep sense of pride and another one sixth (15%) indicated being somewhat proud, suggesting an overall positive mood. However, there was a notable one sixth – 8% who reported not feeling much pride, and an additional 8% expressing no pride at all regarding the construction of the temple. (Table 6).

A further question was posed regarding the significance of the grand celebration, questioning whether it was truly essential or if its inauguration was strategically aligned with the upcoming 2024 Lok Sabha elections to secure a favourable vote bank. On this matter, the younger generation expressed divergent opinions, with a nearly equal split between those viewing it essential and those asserting its connection to political motives (Table 7).

Upon examining the vote preferences of the young who are planning to vote in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections, two thirds (67%) expressed their intent to vote for the BJP. The Congress party garnered the preference of 8%, while AAP secured the support of 7%. The collective mention of all other parties amounted to 4%. Notably, 16% of respondents chose not to disclose their voting intentions. The findings of the study emphasise the continuously growing popularity of Mr. Modi, a discernible factor that significantly shapes the voters' preference in favour of the BJP.

A study by the Lokniti-CSDS research team which includes Vibha Attri, Sanjay Kumar, Suhas Palshikar, Sandeep Shastri, Jyoti Mishra and Abhinav Pankaj Borbora. This is the second of a two-part series on first-time voters in Delhi.



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

K. Subrahmanian

“Mr. R. V. Reddy wants to know the meaning of ‘studied indifference’.”
“ ‘Studied’ is used here as an adjective. It means ‘carefully considered, intentional, deliberate’.”

What bothered me was his studied indifference to what I said.
He is a very arrogant man. What you saw yesterday was his studied humility.”

“Mr. V. N. Jindal, Ganeshganj, Lucknow, wants to know the meaning and pronunciation of ‘charade’.”

“A charade is ‘a game in which each syllable of a word or phrase is acted out by one team while the other team tries to guess the word or phrase’. When you play the game, you have to perform several acts to convey the meaning of the word or syllable. The whole thing very often looks funny and absurd. From this, we get the figurative meaning ‘ridiculous pretence’.”

The parties had made up their minds about their position. The negotiations were a charade.

The “ch” in ‘charade’ is pronounced ‘sh’ as in ‘shall’; the first ‘a’ is pronounced like the ‘a’ in ‘India’, the second ‘a’ as in ‘path’; the final ‘e’ is silent. The stress is on the second syllable. In American English, the second ‘a’ is pronounced like the ‘ai’ in ‘paid’, ‘laid’.”

“Miss K.S.L. Maduri, Nagappanagar, Chromepet, Madras, wants to know the meaning of ‘kid-glove approach’.”

“A kid-glove approach is a gentle, considerate approach.
He tried the kid-glove method but it didn't work.”

“Kid’ had several meanings. One of them is ‘a young goat’. The leather from the skin of a young goat is also called ‘kid’. It is used for making gloves, shoes, etc. It is noted for its softness. So a ‘kid-glove’ is a soft glove. A kid-glove approach is a soft approach.”

You must handle him with kid gloves.
“Kid’ also means a child. This is used in informal English. In American English, it is also used as an adjective to mean ‘younger’.”

She is his kid sister.
“To kid’ means ‘to deceive, to fool in a playful way, to tease’.”

She kidded him about his Hindi.
Don't kid yourself into thinking that you can pass the examination without any preparation.

“Kiddie’ or ‘kiddy’ also means ‘a small child’. The two words are used in informal English.”

“Mr. R. Chandrasekhar wants to know how to use the word ‘scoff’.”

“ ‘Scoff’ means ‘to speak contemptuously of religion or objects of respect, to jeer or mock at something’.”

He is noted for scoffing at rituals.
“Scoff’ is also used as a noun.
Ignore his scoffs.”

In British English, ‘scoff’ is also used in informal English to mean ‘to eat greedily and fast’.

Who has scoffed all the food?
Someone must have scoffed the biscuits.
It is used as a noun also to mean ‘food’.
I am hungry. Where is the scoff?

The ‘c’ in the word is pronounced ‘k’ and ‘o’ as in ‘long’. ‘Scoff in the sense of ‘to eat greedily’, ‘food’ is used in British English and is slang.
Published in The Hindu on January 29, 1990.

THE DAILY QUIZ

In the interim Budget, the Finance Minister announced that Lakshadweep would get funds to improve its infrastructure. How well do you know India's major islands?

Radhika Santhanam

QUESTION 1
This island once flourished as a major port for trade in Gujarat and is now connected to the mainland via two bridges. It is among the least populated districts in India. It is known in conjunction with another district; the two together formed a Union Territory. In 2019 they were merged with a neighbouring UT.

QUESTION 2
The majority of the people on this island are Muslim. Many people here speak Malayalam with a mix of Arabic. There is a tradition of matriliney in this place. Which island is this?

QUESTION 3
This island was named after a marine

surveyor and shared the name of one of the main characters of the popular sitcom Friends. It was renamed in 2019 after an Indian nationalist. Name it.

QUESTION 4
The Great Nicobar is the southern most part of the Nicobar islands archipelago. Two tribes inhabit this place. One of them is the Nicobarese. Name the other

QUESTION 5
This Chief Minister was an MLA of this island, which is also known as the first island district of India. Name him.

QUESTION 6
This is a barrier island. As it is located close to the equator, it is synonymous with innovation and exploration and is a launch site. Name it.



Visual question: Identify this Railway bridge which was the longest sea bridge in India until the opening of the Bandra-Worli Sea Link in Mumbai.

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

- Name the three recipients of the Bharat Ratna in 1954. **Ans: C. Rajagopalachari, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Sir C.V. Raman**
 - The shape of the Bharat Ratna and the two images on the medallion. **Ans: Peepul leaf with a Sun on the obverse side and the State emblem of India on the reverse**
 - The two non-Indian citizens who got the Bharat Ratna. **Ans: Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan and Nelson Mandela**
 - The third woman to be given the Bharat Ratna posthumously. **Ans: Aruna Asaf Ali**
 - The two awardees who went on to become the President of India. **Ans: S. Radhakrishnan and A.P.J. Abdul Kalam**
 - As of February 11, 2024, who are the four living recipients of the award. **Ans: Amartya Sen, C.N.R. Rao, Sachin Tendulkar and L.K. Advani**
- Visual: Identify him. **Ans: Dhondo Keshav Karve**
Early Birds: C. Saravanan| Nitesh Rai| M. K. Sudhakar| Pradeep Kumar Nama| Savinder Bharat

Word of the day

Quirk:
a strange attitude or habit; a narrow groove beside a beading (used as a noun)

Synonyms: crotchet, oddity, queerness

Usage: It was a quirk of fate that brought them together.

Pronunciation: bit.ly/quirkpro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /kwɜːk/

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

KYIV

Kremlin, Musk deny Ukraine claim of Russian Army's use of Starlink



REUTERS

The Kremlin on Monday rejected Ukraine's claims that Russian troops fighting on the frontline were using Starlink terminals. Starlink, owned by Elon Musk's SpaceX, is a network of satellites in low Earth orbit that can provide Internet to remote locations, or areas whose normal communications infrastructure is disabled. AFP

LONDON

U.K.'s Rwanda plan is incompatible with rights obligations, say MPs



AFP

The U.K. government's latest legislation to revive its controversial plan to send migrants to Rwanda is "not compatible" with the country's rights obligations, a watchdog panel of British lawmakers said on Monday. The British parliament's own Joint Committee on Human Rights said in a new report that it had various concerns. AFP

DUBAI

Houthi fire missiles at ship bound for Iran, the rebels' main supporter



REUTERS

Yemen's Houthi rebels fired two missiles at a ship bound for a port in Iran on Monday, causing minor damage but no injuries to its crew. The attack on the Marshall Islands-flagged, Greek-operated bulk carrier *Star Iris* shows just how widely the Houthis now target ships travelling through the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden. AFP

WASHINGTON

Hospitalised Pentagon chief Lloyd Austin hands duties to deputy



REUTERS

U.S. Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin was admitted to a critical care ward with a bladder issue after he transferred his duties to his deputy Kathleen Hicks on Sunday, the Pentagon said, as he battles prostate cancer. The latest health scare came weeks after it emerged that Austin, 70, had kept previous hospital stays secret. AFP

Political parties in Pakistan wrangle over premiership

Talks between PML-N and PPP reach nowhere as both parties want their candidate for top job; Shehbaz Sharif and Bhutto Zardari are being touted as PM-contenders by both parties

Reuters
ISLAMABAD

Pakistan's two largest political parties were on Monday wrangling over who will be Prime Minister after an inconclusive election last week forced them to join forces and try to form a coalition in a parliament dominated by independents.

Former Prime Ministers Imran Khan and Nawaz Sharif both declared victory on Friday, with independent candidates backed by the jailed Mr. Khan forming the largest group of 93 members of a total of 264 seats for which results were declared.



Obstacle course: Supporters of Imran Khan block a motorway as part of their protest against alleged poll rigging on Monday. REUTERS

However, Mr. Khan cannot become Prime Minister from jail and his grouping cannot form a government as they nominally ran as independents as his party was barred from standing.

Mr. Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) was the largest recognised party with 75 seats and the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) of Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, the son of

assassinated former premier Benazir Bhutto, was second with 54.

The two parties opened formal talks late on Sunday to form a coalition government. PML-N and PPP officials, however, said their talks were snagged over which leader would take the top job. However, a PML-N source said it was "most likely" that Shehbaz Sharif, 72, who held the post for 16 months until August, will be chosen.

The PPP has always maintained Bhutto Zardari as its political scion, and if successful, the former Foreign Minister will become Pakistan's youngest premier since his mother Benazir.

67 Palestinians killed, two Israelis rescued in Gaza raid

Associated Press
RAFAH

Israeli forces rescued two hostages early on Monday, storming a heavily guarded apartment in a densely packed town in the Gaza Strip and extracting them under fire and covering airstrikes that local officials said killed at least 67 Palestinians.

Israeli military spokesman Read Adm. Daniel Hagari said special forces broke into a second-floor apartment in Rafah under fire at 1:49 a.m. on Monday, accompanied a minute later by airstrikes on surrounding areas. He said Hamas militants were guarding the captives and that members of the rescue team shielded the hostages with their bodies as the battle erupted.

The plight of the hostage-



Mourners react following the death of Palestinians in Israeli strikes in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip on Monday. REUTERS

es has profoundly shaken Israelis, and the rescue in Rafah briefly lifted the spirits of a nation still reeling from Hamas' cross-border raid last year that started the war.

Israel has described Rafah — a city on the southern edge of the Gaza Strip where 1.4 million Palestinians have fled fighting elsewhere — as the last re-

maining Hamas stronghold in the territory and signaled that its ground offensive may soon target the city.

In Gaza, the operation unleashed another tragedy in a war that has killed 28,340 Palestinians in the territory, displaced over 80% of the population and set off a massive humanitarian crisis.

Stop delivery of F-35 parts to Israel, says Dutch court

Associated Press
THE HAGUE

The Netherlands must stop delivering parts for F-35 fighter jets used by Israel in the Gaza Strip after a Dutch court on Monday ruled there was a "clear risk" the planes would be involved in breaking international humanitarian law.

The Appeals Court in The Hague sided with a group of human rights organisations that argued the parts contributed to violations of law. "The court therefore orders the State to put an end to the further export to Israel within 7 days". The U.S.-owned F-35 parts are stored at a warehouse in the Netherlands and shipped to several partners, via existing export agreements.

Maldives parliament votes to postpone general election

Meera Srinivasan
COLOMBO

The Maldives' parliamentary election, which was scheduled for March 17 this year, is set to be postponed after the legislature voted to defer the polls, citing the Ramadan month.

The People's Majlis or parliament on Sunday voted for the amendment to the country's General Elections Act to commence the parliamentary election ten days after the month of religious significance in the Sunni Muslim nation.

The opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) and its breakaway, The Democrats, together backed the amendment, citing concerns over a possible drop in voter turnout during the month of fasting and prayer from March 10, 2024, to April 9, 2024.

According to local media reports, MDP legislator Mohamed Shifau proposed the amendment, which was approved with 46 votes in the now 80-member House. Most government MPs abstained from voting, Male-based publication *The Edition* reported.

Constitutional validity However, the development has raised questions over the constitutional validity of postponing the elections to mid-April. Speaking to media persons in Male on Sunday, a senior official of the Election Commission of Maldives raised concern over this.

"When the Bill says 10 days after Ramadan, that barely allows us enough time to complete the exercise within the 30 days stipulated in the Constitution," he was quoted as say-



Mohamed Muizzu

ing, in *The Edition*.

Meanwhile, the MDP has had to put its earlier pledge, to impeach President Mohamed Muizzu, on hold after the government moved the Supreme Court on the matter.

Muizzu's impeachment The MDP had based its decision to impeach the incumbent on his foreign policy moves "putting the Indian Ocean Region in danger", and his "attempts to curtail" the legislature.

The MDP, which has 42 seats in the 80-member People's Majlis, joined forces with The Democrats — with 13 seats — and was confident of its numbers. However, the top court suspended a recent amendment to the standing orders that permitted vacant seats from being included while counting total votes.

Although the development gave some political reprieve to President Muizzu, his government faces major economic challenges. In its recent report, the International Monetary Fund noted that the Maldives is at high risk of debt distress. More recently, the country's Inland Revenue Authority flagged a significant shortfall in government revenue.

Redemption from Guantanamo



Two former prisoners, arrested 20 years ago and held at the U.S. detention centre in Guantanamo Bay, arrive in Kabul on Monday. They were among the hundreds of suspected militants captured during the U.S.'s 'War on Terror' and held in the secretive prison in Cuba. AFP

Rwanda Army using surface-to-air missiles in east DR Congo, says UN

Agence France-Presse
GOMA

The Rwandan Army supporting M23 rebels in an escalating conflict in eastern DR Congo is using sophisticated weapons such as surface-to-air missiles, according to a UN document seen by AFP on Monday.

Amid intensifying fighting in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), a "suspected Rwandan Defence Force (RDF) mobile surface-to-air missile (SAM)" was fired at a UN observation drone on last Wednesday without hitting it, the confidential report said.

"External military intelligence from France sup-



A suspected Rwandan Defence Force SAM was fired at a UN observation drone in DRC on last Wednesday. FILE PHOTO

ports assessment that the suspected WZ551 6x6 IFV mobile SAM system is Rwandan," it added.

Attached to the report are two aerial images in which a six-wheeled armoured vehicle is visible

with a radar and missile launcher system on the roof.

The photos were taken by the targeted drone about 70 km north of the city of Goma, in rebel-held Rutshuru territory.

The UN's MONUSCO peacekeeping mission says in the document it has "no past reporting of known armed groups possessing the training, capital or resources to operate and maintain a mobile SAM system".

It added that it "indicates an escalation of conventional force conflict in eastern DRC".

The document notes that M23 and the Rwanda Army have used numerous weapons against aircraft and also have in their armoury anti-aircraft guns and MANPAD mobile air defence systems.

Such weapons pose a high risk to all DRC government and UN aircraft in the region.

Unionist party pushes back against Irish unity referendum

Sriram Lakshman
LONDON

The leader of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) of Northern Ireland pushed back against the assertion of Irish republicans from Sinn Fein that Northern Ireland would have a referendum on reunification with the Republic of Ireland before 2030.

"Well, look, how would you expect Sinn Fein to react to a document that says 'Safeguarding the Union' and is coloured red, white and blue?" DUP leader Jeffrey Donaldson told the foreign press in London as he held up a copy of the agreement with the U.K. government, whose cover had the same colour scheme as the Union Jack.

Following its publication on January 31, the DUP agreed to enter into a power-sharing agreement with Sinn Fein to govern Northern Ireland, bringing the devolved government back to life after two years. The DUP had quit the arrangement in 2022, unhappy with post-Brexit trading arrangements between Northern Ireland and the rest of the U.K.

The new government, which came together on February 3, is led by the politically equal posts of First Minister (Sinn Fein's Michelle O'Neill) and Deputy First Minister (the DUP's Emma Little-Pengelly).

"Of course they're going to talk about United Ireland to reassure their base," Mr. Donaldson said, pointing out that Sinn Fein, while being the largest party in Northern Ireland, gets less than 30% of the vote. In the last elections for the Assembly or Stormont,

Sinn Fein beat the DUP by two seats to get 27 seats with a 29% vote-share as opposed to the DUP's 21.3%.

Mr. Donaldson, whose DUP party is unionist, or wants to be part of the U.K., said the U.K. offered a "far more inclusive" context than a united Ireland could and that consistently it was only 30% of those surveyed in polls who were for Irish unification.

Survey results

A December 2022 Ipsos poll for the *Irish Times* showed 27% of Northern Irelanders surveyed wanted to be part of a united Ireland, while 66% of those surveyed in Ireland wanted Northern Ireland to join their country.

The 1998 Good Friday Agreement, which brought peace to the island of Ireland after three decades of violent struggle, mandates that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, a British functionary, will call for a 'border poll' on Irish reunification if it is "likely" that the majority of those voting would vote for a united Ireland.

Sinn Fein, formerly the political wing of the militant Irish Republican Army (IRA), has been polling ahead of other parties in Ireland. However, its lead dipped to a three year low (28%) in an *Irish Times*/Ipsos poll last week. "Challenge is something I embrace," Sinn Fein leader Mary Lou McDonald said last week in London, as she acknowledged her party would reflect on the poll numbers and work harder.

Mr. Donaldson said he believed Northern Ireland would still be part of the U.K. in 25 years.



French Foreign Minister Stéphane Sejourne, centre, with German and Polish counterparts in Paris on Monday. AP

'Weimar Triangle' to join hands against disinformation

Agence France-Presse
PARIS

Top diplomats of France, Germany and Poland were set on Monday to launch a joint initiative to fight disinformation attacks.

Paris, Berlin and Warsaw are hoping to ramp up cooperation and reinvigorate the so-called "Weimar Triangle" format initially created in 1991 to enable concerted European action.

The trio will meet at a historic chateau outside Paris as Polish Prime Minister and former EU chief Donald Tusk visits France and Germany on Monday to tighten Warsaw's cooperation with Paris and Berlin.

French Foreign Minister Stéphane Sejourne will host German counterpart Annalena Baerbock and Radoslaw Sikorski of Poland at the Chateau de La Celle-Saint-Cloud just outside Paris.

Mr. Sejourne said at the weekend that France, Germany and Poland would unveil a new cooperation agreement to combat foreign disinformation operations, particularly those originating in Russia.

The Ministers were expected to also report on Moscow's new information attacks against the three countries. "Our three countries have been victims of the same destabilisation strategy," Mr. Sejourne said in an interview with French regional daily *Ouest-France* published on Saturday.

Kremlin critics say Russia has for years used troll factories and fake news websites to spread disinformation in the West.

Yemen peace process on hold as crisis grows in Red Sea after Houthi attacks

The Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen have been fighting a Saudi-led coalition since March 2015, months after they seized the capital Sanaa and most of Yemen's population centres; negotiations for an end to the war were gaining ground before being derailed by the attacks on vessels in the Red Sea

Agence France-Presse
DUBAI

As Houthi attacks roil the Red Sea and Western air raids target the rebels, moves to end Yemen's long-running war are at a standstill, threatening further woe for a country on its knees.

As recently as December, painstaking negotiations were gaining ground and the UN said the warring parties had agreed to work towards "the resumption of an inclusive political process".

The Iran-backed Houthis have been fighting a Saudi-led coalition since March 2015, months after they seized the capital Sanaa and most of Yemen's population centres, forcing the internationally recognised government south to Aden.

Hundreds of thousands of people have died in the fighting and from indirect causes such as disease and malnutrition. More than 18 million Yemenis need "urgent support", according to the UN's humanitarian agency OCHA.

Hostilities slowed considerably in April 2022, when a six-month, UN-brokered ceasefire came into effect, and they have remained at a low level since. But Houthi attacks on



Gathering strength: Houthi recruits parade in a show of force in Sanaa, Yemen on February 8. REUTERS

Red Sea shipping and American and British retaliation have thrown the peace process "up in the air", said Farea Al-Muslimi, a research fellow at Chatham House's Middle East and North Africa Programme.

In solidarity

The Houthis, who say they are acting in solidarity with the Palestinians in Gaza, have launched dozens of attacks on ships in the vital maritime route since November.

Seventeen of their fighters were killed in recent re-

prisal strikes, according to the insurgents.

"Peace in Yemen requires international and regional commitments different than those that exist now," Mr. Muslimi said. "The path to war had been closed, but now the door to hell has reopened."

Top Houthi official Hussein al-Ezzi this month acknowledged "obstacles" on the path to peace, which he blamed on the U.S., Britain, and the Yemeni government.

But "Riyadh and Sanaa have the courage to overcome these difficulties", he

told a press conference, without elaborating.

However, Majid Al-Madhaji, of the Sanaa Center for Strategic Studies think-tank, said that with the flare up in the Red Sea, "a peace plan no longer has a place on the discussion table".

In December, the UN special envoy for Yemen, Hans Grundberg, said there was progress towards a roadmap that would resolve key issues such as agreeing to pay civil servants working under the Houthis, and resuming oil exports.

However, the Saudi-backed Yemeni government is now angling for an "opportunity to reverse the balance of power" in its favour, Mr. Madhaji said.

Last month, the deputy leader of the government's presidential council even called for foreign backing for a ground offensive to back up the U.S.-British air strikes against the Houthis.

Terror group

In mid-January, Washington redesignated the Houthis a terror group, having lifted the designation in 2021 to aid humanitarian efforts and promote diplomatic endeavours.

But "the idea that we (the U.S.) would now build up the anti-Houthi forces to the point where they could renew the fighting, I think is simply not in the cards", said Gerald Feierstein, a former U.S. Ambassador to Yemen.

"We are not going to go down that route," he said. The U.S. is "under a great deal of pressure not to do anything that is going to undermine the (peace) negotiations," Mr. Feierstein added.

General Joseph Votel, former head of U.S. Central Command, also downplayed the possibility of "a major fight", saying Washington has more pressing issues, not least the Israel-

Hammas war.

"Resolving the situation in Gaza, and restoring some type of deterrence with Iran to me would be much higher priorities," the retired general said.

U.S. ally Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, has engaged in a delicate balancing act as the world's biggest oil exporter tries to extricate itself from the intractable war on its doorstep.

It has not joined a U.S.-led naval coalition to deter Houthi attacks on shipping and expressed "great concern" following the first round of strikes by the U.S. and Britain, calling for "restraint".

Riyadh "will watch from afar to what extent Washington will go, but it will not engage in any battle with the Houthis unless they target its lands", said Mr. Muslimi.

But even with Saudi Arabia staying out of the flare-up, the path towards peace in Yemen remains elusive, according to Mohammed Al-Basha, a Yemen expert for the U.S.-based Navanti research group.

"The international community is less likely to support a Yemeni peace plan due to concerns about rewarding the Houthis for Red Sea attacks, thus freezing the UN-led and U.S.-backed peace process," he said.

Ukrainian refugees face lasting exile as Russia's war enters its third year

Agence France-Presse
VIENNA

Iryna, Maryna, Katya – three generations from one family – fled their home in southern Ukraine just after the war started, hoping to return quickly.

But two years later, these hopes are fading.

Just a few days ago, a fresh attack blew off the roofs of many buildings in their home city of Mykolaiv.

"Ukraine's future is not clear. I think that the war will not stop, even in one or two years," said Maryna Troshchenko, 43, while showing photos of the damage sent to her by relatives still living in the port city.

Ms. Troshchenko, her mother and her daughter, who all now live in Vienna, are among six million Ukrainian refugees, marking the biggest exodus in Europe since the Second World War, according to



UNHCR puts the number of Ukrainian refugees at 6 million, marking the biggest exodus in Europe since the Second World War. AFP

the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Germany and Poland host the largest populations, with about one million Ukrainian refugees in each country.

Incessant bombings and a lack of progress on the front make their return in the short term increasingly improbable.

'Dilemma of waiting'

At refugee help organisation Diakonie in Austria, workers note that many

Ukrainian refugees have decided to try to settle after being paralysed by the "dilemma of waiting" to return home. "For a long time, it was very difficult for them to decide how to proceed further," Sarah Brandstetter, deputy at Diakonie's Ukrainian refugee advice centre, said.

"Two years later, the situation has changed – people are now planning to stay in the country. They have their children here in schools. They want to

build a future for themselves," she added.

But the initial surge of solidarity is running out of steam in some places.

In Austria – which hosts some 80,000 Ukrainian refugees – "the increase of energy costs and high inflation was a game changer", according to Christoph Riedl, a migration and integration expert at Diakonie.

In neighbouring Germany, anti-migration discourse is also on the rise amid a spike in the number of asylum-seekers from outside of Europe, weighing heavily on reception capacities.

Until March 2025, under EU rules, Ukrainians are eligible for temporary protection, a status allowing them access to the labour market, housing, and social and medical assistance.

But what is next, experts wonder. Mr. Riedl said the EU should agree now on a lasting status.

Shades of the north



Vast canvas: Aurora borealis, commonly called the northern lights, illuminate the sky above the village of Akaslompolo in Kolar, beyond the Arctic Circle, in Finland on Sunday. AP

Failure of security apparatus on Oct. 7 leaves Israelis distrustful and vulnerable

Agence France-Presse
TEL AVIV

Since she moved to Israel, Marie-Lyne Smadja had been confident the state would protect her, but Hamas's October 7 attack made her doubt whether she can count on the authorities to keep her safe.

The plight of relatives and supporters of hostages held by Hamas militants as well as of residents of the border area has haunted Israeli society, threatening to unravel what many view as the fundamental contract between the government and its citizens.

"I'm frightened," said Ms. Smadja, 62, an unfamiliar feeling for the French-

Israeli teacher and education researcher who had survived three attacks since making Israel her home more than four decades ago.

'Lost trust'

"We lost trust," she said in a Tel Aviv square which has been the focus for protests by families of the 250 people kidnapped on October 7.

More than 75 years after it was founded in erstwhile Palestine as the homeland for the Jewish people in the aftermath of the Second World War and the Holocaust, Israel remains a refuge to many.

But the unprecedented Hamas attack has shat-

tered that sense of security in a way multiple wars and decades of conflict had not. And while Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has repeatedly vowed to rescue the remaining hostages, negotiations in recent weeks have failed to produce results.

Militants on October 7 seized about 250 hostages. Israel in an overnight raid rescued two, but has said that 130 remain in Gaza including 29 believed to be dead.

To Carmit Palty Katzir, whose brother is held in Gaza and whose mother was freed during a November truce, the state has not kept its part of the security bargain. In return for join-



Growing unrest: Israelis take part in a protest calling for the release of hostages held by Hamas in Tel Aviv on Sunday. REUTERS

ing the military, being productive members of society and "raising children next to the border" with Gaza, "the state provides us with security", Mr. Katzir said at a recent rally in

Tel Aviv. "On October 7, this contract was broken."

In order to restore trust, families of hostages believe the government must bring back their loved ones.

Ms. Smadja, one of the founders of Women Wage Peace, a grassroots movement calling for a negotiated solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, said that "on October 7... Israel lost." "Israel made a colossal mistake in terms of security, intelligence and the military," she said.

The Israeli military said documents its forces had seized pointed to "years of preparation" by Hamas militants, right under the nose of Israel's intelligence services. Hamas's attack on southern Israel left more than 1,160 people dead, most of them civilians, according to a tally based on official figures.

Israel retaliated with a

relentless military offensive on Hamas-ruled Gaza that has killed more than 28,000 people, most of them women and children, according to the territory's Health Ministry. According to Nitzan Perelman, a doctoral student in political sociology at France's CNRS research centre, October 7 was a "turning point" for Israelis.

The military's "inability to react" and a slow response from numerous government agencies "tarnished the image of the state in the eyes of society, causing a significant rupture", she said. A study by Israeli think-tank Adva found that Israeli communities near Gaza had been

subject to financial "abandonment" even before the devastating attack on the area. State funding for border towns and villages fell drastically after Mr. Netanyahu returned to power in late 2022, Adva said in a report.

It noted that development and security budgets fell from 137.8 million shekels in 2022 to 99 million shekels for 2023-24.

As the war has raged for more than four months, protesters have increasingly made the case for early elections and a new government they feel they can trust. To Ms. Smadja, once the hostages are back, there will be time for "political reckoning".

IN BRIEF



Paytm confirms resignation of director at banking arm

Paytm on Monday confirmed media reports of an independent director at its banking arm having resigned. Manju Agarwal resigned from the board of Paytm Payments Bank on Feb. 1 due to personal commitments, the company said in an exchange filing. The payments firm on Friday said it would form an advisory committee on compliance and regulatory matters, a week after India's central bank ordered Paytm Payments Bank to wind down most of its operations. REUTERS

SC issues notice on GST's anti-profiteering provisions

The Supreme Court on Monday issued notices to the Union of India, the GST Council and the Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs, on the constitutional validity of anti-profiteering provisions under the GST regime. The court was urged to examine the issue by advocate Abhishek Rastogi on the ground that the provisions cannot be endless and they are manifestly arbitrary and vague in the absence of a methodology to determine the extent of deemed profiteering.

Chemplast Sanmar reports ₹60 cr. Q3 standalone net loss

Chemplast Sanmar Ltd. reported Q3 standalone net loss of ₹60 crore against a net profit of ₹57 crore in the year-earlier period due to dumping by China and other countries. Revenue from operations slid to ₹439 crore from ₹630 crore, the specialty chemicals manufacturer said in a statement. "Q3 performance ran into heavy weather due to further correction in PVC prices on account of dumping from China and other countries," said MD Ramkumar Shankar.

'Low-cost airline SpiceJet to cut jobs, save \$12 mn annually'

Reuters
BENGALURU

Indian low-cost carrier SpiceJet said on Monday that it has started adopting measures to reduce its workforce, aiming at saving ₹1 billion (\$12 million) annually.

According to a media report, the cash-strapped airline would lay off 1,400 staff, or around 15% of its 9,000-strong workforce.

No confirmation

The carrier, however, did not confirm the number of jobs being cut.

SpiceJet said it took the measures as part of its tur-



naround and cost-cutting strategy following fund infusion to help in the revival of its grounded planes.

The airline, once India's second-largest, has so far raised ₹7.44 billion as part of a ₹22.50 billion fundraising effort by selling shares and warrants.

CG Power forms JV to set up chip assembly unit

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI

Murugappa Group firm CG Power and Industrial Solutions Ltd. (CG Power) has entered into a joint venture with Renesas Electronics America Inc. (Renesas) and Stars Microelectronics (Thailand) Public Co. Ltd. (Stars) for setting up an outsourced semiconductor assembly and testing (OSAT) facility in India.

CG, Renesas and Stars have agreed to invest \$205 million, \$15 million and \$2 million respectively towards equity capital, representing 92.34%, 6.76%, and 0.90% respectively, the TII subsidiary said in a regulatory filing.

DGAQA approves localising Airbus C295 parts, assembly

The Hindu Bureau
HYDERABAD

Airbus Defence and Space (ADS) quality management system for the C295 aircraft has received Directorate General of Aeronautical Quality Assurance (DGAQA) approval to produce detailed parts and sub-assemblies in India.

It is a significant step in the comprehensive quality assurance roadmap agreed between ADS and DGAQA for the C295 Make in India programme. ADS is working with Tata Advanced Systems Ltd. to produce detailed parts and sub-assemblies at various locations in India.

Industrial output witnessed mild recovery in December

Manufacturing sector's growth picks up pace from a seven-month low of 1.2% to 3.9%; 12 of the 23 segments tracked by the IIP recorded an up tick in Dec., which was double the number in Nov.

Vikas Dhoot
NEW DELHI

India's industrial output growth recovered from an eight-month low of 2.4% in November 2023 to 3.8% in December 2023, with the manufacturing sector's growth picking up pace from a seven-month low of 1.2% to 3.9%.

A dozen of the 23 manufacturing segments tracked to compute the Index of Industrial Production (IIP) recorded an up tick in December, double the number of sectors that grew in November.

In recovery mode

Industrial output growth recovered from an eight-month low of 2.4% in November 2023 to 3.8% in December 2023

Consumer durables production recovered in December, albeit aided by a 11.2% dip recorded a year earlier

Consumer non-durables also bounced back from a 3.6% contraction in November to rise a moderate 2.1% in December



Consumption demand to remain soft as past interest rate hikes and RBI regulations dampen credit growth

Consumer durables production recovered from a 5.4% contraction in November to grow 4.8% in December, albeit aided by

a 11.2% dip recorded a year earlier. On a sequential basis, durables' output jumped 7.75% from November 2023 levels, which

'No review on the cards for Paytm Payments Bank curbs'

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Dismissing the prospects for a review of the decision to impose curbs on Paytm Payments Bank's operations after February 29, Reserve Bank of India (RBI) Governor Shaktikanta Das said on Monday that the banking regulator takes such decisions after serious consideration and in public interest, not in a casual manner.

Speaking after a meeting of the RBI's central board, Mr. Das stressed that protecting customers and maintaining financial

Shaktikanta Das says the RBI took the decision after serious consideration, not in a casual manner

stability are prime considerations for the central bank's actions.

Mr. Das reiterated that the central bank will issue an FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) document this week to allay concerns of the payment bank's customers and ensure they don't face any inconvenience due to the curbs. Last month, the RBI had directed the payments bank

to cease taking fresh deposits and a few other key operations after February 29, citing "persistent non-compliances and continued material supervisory concerns in the bank."

"We take all decisions after a lot of consideration and analysis. It's not as if we decide today and start reviewing it tomorrow," the Governor said, indicating that a review of the curbs on the entity is not on the table. "Decisions are not taken in a casual manner. These decisions are taken in the most serious manner in public interest."

marked the lowest production levels since June 2021.

Consumer non-durables also bounced back from a 3.6% contraction in November to rise a moderate 2.1% in December. Output levels were, however, 13.1% higher than November.

Noting that the average IIP growth in the Oct.-Dec. 2023 slowed to 5.9% from 7.8% in the previous quarter, CRISIL's Dharmakirti Joshi said consumption demand is expected to remain soft as transmission of interest rate hikes and RBI's regulatory measures dampen credit growth.

LIC increases stake in SBI Cards to 5.02%

The Hindu Bureau
HYDERABAD

Life Insurance Corporation of India's (LIC) shareholding in SBI Cards and Payments Services crossed 5% with the insurer, as an investment function, acquiring recently a little more than three lakh shares in the non-banking financial company at an average cost of ₹716 per share.

The shareholding has risen from 4.99% to 5.02% (47,410,710 to 47,711,794 equity shares) following the open-market purchase.

'Pilots calling in sick forced Akasa Air to cancel 10 flights'

Forum Gandhi
NEW DELHI

Pilots on 'sick leave', weather and operational reasons reportedly led to a number of cancellations and delays in Akasa Air flights in the last 48 hours.

As per data, at least 10 Akasa Air flights were cancelled on February 10 and 12, while 17-18 other flights were delayed. While the airline expressed regret, it simultaneously underlined that it now has 600 pilots and there was no shortage. Vinay Dube, founder and CEO, Akasa Air, asserted that the airline did not have shortage of pilots. "Akasa Air is sufficiently

staffed with over 600 pilots, enough to operate more than double the size of our current fleet," he said. Akasa Air, with an average on-time performance (OTP) of 83.7% in 2023, had at least 17 flights delayed on February 11, sliding its average OTP to 73.5%. At least 25 flights had late landings.

According to information, over 10 flights were cancelled on February 11 and 12. Sources said the issue was due to some pilots calling in sick. The airline operates 800 weekly flights making it approximately 115 daily flights.

(The writer is with The Hindu businessline)

Dr. Reddy's R&D facility secures U.S. FDA's VAI stamp

N. Ravi Kumar
HYDERABAD

A little over two months after it issued Form 483 with three observations to a research and development centre of drugmaker Dr. Reddy's Laboratories in Hyderabad, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has classified the inspection as voluntary action indicated (VAI).

The development that effectively means no further escalation as well as closure of the inspection, conducted in December, saw Dr. Reddy's shares on Monday closing 2.95% higher at ₹6,333.8 apiece on the BSE. Intra-day, the share had touched a 52-week high of ₹6,390.

"In furtherance to our December 8 intimation on the U.S. FDA inspection of the company's R&D centre (Integrated Product Development Organisation or IPDO) in Bachupally, Hyderabad, we wish to inform that the U.S. FDA has classified the inspection as voluntary action indicated," Dr. Reddy's said in a filing.

VAI is one of three classifications the regulator assigns to facilities as a part of the inspection process. According to U.S. FDA, no action indicated (NAI) classification means no objectionable conditions or practices were found during the inspection, while official action indicated (OAI) means regulatory and/or administrative actions are recommended. VAI means objectionable conditions or practices were found, but the agency is not prepared to take or recommend administrative or regulatory action.

After index play, BSE may look to breathe life into stock derivatives

Ashley Coutinho
MUMBAI

After finding its feet in index derivatives, the country's oldest bourse BSE is gearing up to dip its toes in stock derivatives.

"Stock options and futures are very much on our radar," the bourse's MD and CEO Sundararaman Ramamurthy told *businessline*. "But we want to stabilise Sensex and Bankex derivatives offerings first before we embark on working on the segments."

The exchange has not officially set a timeline or spelt out a gameplan for stock derivatives, where it has little to no turnover currently. Its immediate goal is to ramp up institutional participation in index derivatives instead.

"Currently, we have 60 foreign portfolio investors trading Sensex derivatives; many more can trade on this segment. We are also revamping our co-location facilities, which will help boost volumes in both the cash and derivatives segments," he said.

While the exchange insists any product launch or revamp will be dictated by market needs and member needs, the buzz on the Street is there has been a nudge from the market regulator to look at the segment. An e-mail sent to SEBI did not get a response.

BSE relaunched its weekly Sensex options product last year with a Friday expiry. Bankex expiry was shifted to Monday. Within months, BSE has wrested a 13% market share in notional turnover in index derivatives. This is expected to inch up to 18-

RuPay, UPI rolled out in Mauritius, Sri Lanka

The Hindu Bureau
MUMBAI

RuPay cards and Unified Payments Interface (UPI) connectivity between India and Mauritius, as well as UPI connectivity between India and Sri Lanka were established on Monday to deepen financial integration and to facilitate digital payments among citizens of the three countries, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) said.

An Indian traveller to Mauritius will now be able to pay a merchant in Mauritius using UPI. Similarly, a Mauritian traveller will be able to pay a merchant in India using the Instant Payment System (IPS) app of Mauritius.

Further, with the adoption of RuPay technology, the MauCAS card scheme of Mauritius will enable banks in Mauritius to issue RuPay cards domestically. Such cards can be used at ATMs and PoS terminals locally in Mauritius as well as in India. "Indian RuPay cards would also be accepted at ATMs and PoS terminals in Mauritius," the RBI said in a statement.

The digital payments connectivity with Sri Lanka will enable Indian travellers to make QR code-based payments at merchant locations in Sri Lanka using their UPI apps. The projects had been developed and executed by NPCI International Payments Ltd. (NIPL) along with partner banks / non-banks from Mauritius and Sri Lanka, under the guidance of RBI.

MARKETS

MARKET WATCH

	MONDAY	% CHANGE
Sensex	71,072	-0.73
US Dollar	83.00	0.08
Gold	63,150	-0.23
Brent oil	81.81	-

NIFTY 50

	PRICE	CHANGE
Adani Enter.	3169.75	-45.45
Adani Ports	1249.35	-22.15
Apollo Hosp.	6614.45	177.10
Asian Paints	2953.80	-2.15
Axis Bank	1046.70	-4.70
Bajaj Auto	7829.95	45.10
Bajaj Finserv	1557.25	-13.70
Bajaj Finance	6569.15	-85.35
Bharti Airtel	1118.70	-1.55
BPCL	590.45	-23.85
Britannia Ind.	4970.20	-1.30
Cipla	1434.75	-5.00
Coal India	432.80	-23.40
Divis Lab	3740.15	87.85
Dr Reddy's Lab	6333.50	177.65
Eicher Motors	3871.85	30.90
Grasim Ind.	2147.35	-21.15
HCL Tech	1666.95	36.35
HDFC Bank	1390.00	-13.60
HDFC Life	577.20	-6.80
Hero MotoCorp	4687.50	-221.35
Hindalco	582.45	-8.85
Hind Unilever	2385.65	-38.50
ICI Bank	996.10	-14.60
Indusind Bank	1447.15	-39.10
Infosys	1680.10	10.75
ITC	406.85	-8.65
JSW Steel	811.50	-0.25
Kotak Bank	1709.55	-32.90
L&T	3299.55	-25.00
LTMindtree Ltd.	5516.50	-63.20
M&M	1660.45	14.05
Maruti Suzuki	10709.70	-23.15
NestleIndia	2459.05	-8.95
NTPC	316.15	-8.75
ONGC	257.90	-9.65
PowerGrid Corp	270.30	-2.70
Reliance Ind	2904.70	-16.80
SBI Life	1436.00	-3.70
State Bank	707.90	-17.35
Sun Pharma	1534.45	-0.35
TataConsumerProduct	1122.20	-7.05
Tata Motors	911.60	-3.40
Tata Steel	137.40	-3.90
TCS	4120.70	-13.00
Tech Mahindra	1318.80	-7.75
Titan	5985.25	-6.35
UltraTech Cement	9963.85	18.10
UPL	458.40	0.45
Wipro	501.45	11.00

EXCHANGE RATES

Indicative direct rates in rupees a unit except yen at 4 p.m. on February 12

CURRENCY	TT BUY	TT SELL
US Dollar	82.80	83.12
Euro	89.20	89.54
British Pound	104.52	104.93
Japanese Yen (100)	55.54	55.76
Chinese Yuan	11.51	11.56
Swiss Franc	94.56	94.93
Singapore Dollar	61.54	61.79
Canadian Dollar	61.50	61.74
Malaysian Ringgit	17.36	17.45
Australian Dollar	53.97	54.19

Source: Indian Bank



Next target: Stock options and futures are very much on our radar, says BSE MD and CEO Sundararaman Ramamurthy. REUTERS

20% in the coming months, according to analysts.

Lot harder

Reviving the moribund stock-derivatives segment may be a lot harder, given higher volatility and lower depth. "The segment typically has large holders of stocks who influence prices either way. Only evolved traders dabble in stock derivatives - either those who are well-informed or long-term holders with a definite view," said Deepak Jasani, Head - Retail Research, HDFC Securities.

Rival NSE currently offers over 180 stocks in index derivatives but BSE may offer a much lower number to begin with, said market watchers. It remains to be seen if BSE will offer any incentives to members for trading in stock derivatives considering that the exchange has stopped doing so in the index derivatives segment. "It will not be easy to make inroads in the stock F&O segment, unless there's enough differentiation. This could be in the form of weekly or fortnightly expiry contracts or options on options, a se-

cond-order derivatives product sold in the U.S.," said Rahul Sharma, Director & Head - Technical & Derivatives Research, JM Financial Services. Average daily turnover of stock futures for December at NSE stood at ₹1.26 lakh crore while that for stock options at ₹9,016 crore. "Sensex and Bankex derivatives trading has attained critical mass and become commercially viable.

Higher foreign participation will bring in bulk buyers and sellers. The regulator, too, has hinted it is in favour of having two strong exchanges, and not lopsided competition. All this bodes well for BSE," said Alok Churiwala, a stock broker.

That said, he reckons kickstarting the stock derivatives segment may well take a year or more.

"More competition will help in shoring up market volumes, bring in wider participation and provide arbitrage opportunities for traders," added Mr. Sharma.

BSE shares have surged over 400% in the past year. (The writer is with The Hindu businessline)

Banks hunt for alternatives to CA deposits



Code Red: Shrinking CA deposits is a drag on bank's net interest margins. GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

K. Ram Kumar
MUMBAI

With the government's fund management becoming efficient with the adoption of the JIT (just-in-time) principle, banks' float is declining, forcing them to scramble for alternatives to their depleting current account (CA) deposits.

The Centre has adopted the JIT principle for fund release in all payments, including Centrally-sponsored schemes, reducing funds with banks.

Dip in CA deposits

CA deposits of all scheduled commercial banks declined to 10.13% of overall deposits in 2023 from 10.43% in 2022, per the RBI's *Report on Trend and Progress of Banking in India*. Lower CA is a drag on banks' net interest margins.

Dinesh Kumar Khara, Chairman, State Bank of India, observed with the government adopting the JIT system for cash management, the current account float had shrunk. However, the SBI is not vulnerable as it had already diversified its options in terms of raising current account deposits.

Referring to the build-up in the government's surplus cash balances to an average of ₹3.9-lakh crore post the December Monetary Policy, Soumya Kanti Ghosh, Group Chief Economic Advisor, SBI, said, "We expect wide-ranging ramifications on the banking system liquidity... Pertinently, system liquidity slips into deficit when the government is not spending, whereas it improves to a surplus mode when government spending resumes."

(The writer is with *The Hindu businessline*)

Robot invasion hit a bump in 2023 as North American economy cooled

Demand pullback occurred in automotive-related industries, which made up about half of the market last year, as well as sectors such as food and metals manufacturing; for robot makers, selling existing machines has been hampered by worries about softening economy and excess inventories

NEWS ANALYSIS

Reuters

North American companies ordered about a third fewer robots last year as worries about a slowing economy and higher interest rates made it harder to justify buying the advanced machines, the first hiccup in five years in what has been a steady progression of the robot invasion of the region's workforce.

"When the economy isn't great, it's easier to delay purchases," said Jeff Burnstein, president of the Association for Advancing Automation, an industry group that tracks robot orders.

Companies bought 31,159 robots in 2023, a drop of 30% over the year before, the largest drop in percentage terms since 2006 and largest drop ever in net units, according to the group, known as A3. The pullback occurred in automotive-related industries — which made up about half of the market last year — as well as other sectors such as food and metals manufacturing.

Orders in the fourth quarter hit 7,683, an 8% drop from the same period a year earlier.

Slowing robot orders came even as some companies announced initiatives to develop more advanced



Slowing demand: Firms bought 31,159 robots in 2023, a drop of 30% from 2022, the largest drop in percentage terms since 2006. REUTERS

versions of the machines. Robotics start-up Figure said last month it forged a partnership with Germany's BMW to deploy humanoid robots in the carmaker's South Carolina factory to take on certain physical tasks. Electric-vehicle maker Tesla also has a humanoid robot in development.

Softening economy

But for many robot makers, selling existing machines has been hampered by worries about a softening economy and the excess inventories built up during the COVID-19 pandemic. Universal Robots, a Danish maker of small, flexible robots, recently reported its revenue fell 7% last year, to \$304 million.



Slowing robot orders came even as some companies announced initiatives to develop more advanced versions of the machines

Universal's President, Kim Povlsen, told investors: "2023 was characterized by a difficult economic and business environment for many of our core customers with global industrial activity slowing in the first half of the year."

Robot sales boomed during the COVID-19 pandemic — as producers scrambled to use the machines to churn out goods

amid a dire labour shortage. Indeed, 2022 marked a record year for orders, according to A3's data.

To be sure, robots are just one type of equipment companies need, and other gauges of spending have held up better in the U.S. Orders for non-defence capital goods, excluding aircraft — a measure closely watched by economists to track trends in business spending — rose 1.7% last year, according to the Commerce Department, suggesting that investments in more basic types of equipment remained close to steady as the economy defied expectations of a sharper slowdown.

Dave Fox, President of CIM Systems Inc., a Noblesville, Indiana, company

known as an integrator that assembles robotic systems for customers, said his business started off strong last year but then slumped.

"Several big projects got pushed into this year," said Mr. Fox. "There were definitely a few customers who brought up their concern about where the economy is headed. And interest rates probably didn't help." Mr. Fox estimates his business volume fell 30% in 2023, compared with the year before.

Mr. Fox said some customers who delayed orders are now asking for updated quotes, which is a good sign for business in the months ahead. But he said it is too early to say whether business will re-

turn to lofty pandemic levels.

A3's Burnstein said most robot producers he speaks with are optimistic that business will pick up during the second half of this year.

Mr. Burnstein said the industry has largely worked its way through the distortions caused by the pandemic.

During the crisis, many companies put in extra orders for robots because they worried about receiving deliveries amid production delays and a breakdown in global supply chains. "There's still this feeling that companies were buying in advance of their needs (in 2022)," said Mr. Burnstein, "so a lot of companies now have inventory to work through before they order a lot of new robots again."

Joe Gemma, chief revenue officer of Wauseon Machine, a systems integrator in Ohio, agreed there was an inventory glut that distorted the business. "A lot of us were ordering extra inventory," he said. "Our customers were too."

Mr. Gemma said an ongoing shortage of labour in the U.S. means the robot business will continue to thrive. "I was at a plant recently that normally has 600 people working in production — and they have 140 open positions," he said. "Almost every place we go, there's still a workforce challenge."

Taking stock



Getting ready: Highland cattle are prepared for sale at the 133rd Annual Spring Show and Sale in Oban, Scotland. Highland cattle are awarded for Best Overall Male and Female, Young Handler and the John Crilley Memorial Cup, followed by auction of the animals. GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

India examining reworking of Merchant Shipping Act

Abhishek Law
NEW DELHI

India is looking at reworking its Merchant Shipping laws as it replaces the existing eponymous Act of 1958. The new provisions will look to include up-to-date international maritime conventions to which the country is a party; allow for easier registration of ships under Indian flag by NRIs, overseas citizens of India, corporates, including limited liability partnerships; enable electronic registration of vessels and granting recognition to e-documents like log-books, record books.

Merchant shipping refers to activities that are carried out for commerce



Easier resolution: Proposed under the new provisions is a three-tier dispute resolution mechanism. K.R. DEEPAK

rather than for defence or warfare.

Changes to the law that have been proposed are currently being deliberated with the Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways being the nodal

ministry.

Proposed under the new provisions is a three-tier dispute resolution mechanism. It will look to resolve disagreements arising between ship-owners and salvors (those engaged

in salvaging ships lost at sea), and also between seafarers and owners or masters or agents of ship.

The resolution mechanism will look "to make the award of the shipping master enforceable instead of enforcement by a Magistrate," an official aware of the new draft rules told *businessline*.

Ambiguous terms like 'abandoned vessels' have been defined, while the new rules call for action against 'unsafe vessels' too. "The Central government has been empowered to direct port authorities and others to take steps in respect of abandoned vessels," the official said.

(The writer is with *The Hindu businessline*)

Gas booming for UN COP29 host Azerbaijan

Agence France-Presse
PARIS

Following the UN's COP28 climate talks in oil-fuelled Dubai, the COP29 conference is headed for the historic cradle of oil, Azerbaijan, which is in the midst of a gas boom.

The former Soviet republic of 10 million people brimming with hydrocarbons is on track to increase its gas production by 35% in the next 10 years, contrary to efforts to contain global warming.

Despite the last COP in the United Arab Emirates ending with an unprecedented call to 'transition' away from fossil fuels, an analysis by the NGO Global Witness based on data from Rystad Energy shows that the upcoming COP29

host aims to hike its gas production from 35 billion cubic metre (bcm) in 2024 to 47 bcm in 2034.

The forecast covers actual production figures, estimates from approved developments, as well as confirmed reserves not yet being exploited. They exclude condensate, a liquid form of gas.

"Azerbaijan is ramping up its gas production when the world urgently needs to kick its fossil fuel habit," Patrick Galey, senior investigator at Global Witness, told AFP.

Long history

The country, a member of OPEC+, has a long history with hydrocarbons, which make up half of its economy. In the 13th century, the explorer Marco Polo wrote



Crucial cog: Azerbaijan is a 'small player' compared with major oil giants like the U.S., Russia and Saudi Arabia, but it plays an important role "for Southern Europeans at least," says Swapnil Babele. AFP

of black gold gushing from the ground. But today, it is gas that is surpassing its declining oil fields.

In the 2030s, gas is expected to represent more

than half of fossil fuel production in the country, according to Rystad Energy data reported to AFP.

Its exports to Turkey, Europe, Georgia and Iran

have already multiplied threefold since 2015.

Baku's expanding gas production is fuelled mainly by the Shah Deniz project, one of the biggest gas

fields in the world, discovered in 1999 along the Caspian Sea and operated by BP, while other projects like Umid-Babek and Absheron will increase their output. The Absheron field, which began production in July, is operated by Jocap, which includes national oil and gas firm Socar, as well as France's TotalEnergies and Adnoc, the national Emirati firm that was cause for controversy at the last COP.

Replacing Russia

The UAE, host of COP28, had designated Sultan Al Jaber, the head of Adnoc, to preside over the UN conference, a choice which angered NGOs and certain countries.

The scene is set to be similar in 2024 with COP be-

ing presided over by the former Socar executive, Mukhtar Babayev, Minister of Ecology and Natural Resources.

The country is a "small player" compared to major oil giants like the United States, Russia and Saudi Arabia, but it plays an important role "for Southern Europeans at least", said Swapnil Babele, an analyst at Rystad Energy.

To replace Russian gas, Europe turned to Azerbaijan, whose share of imports grew from 2% in 2021 to 4% in 2023, according to Eurostat.

After Azerbaijan's seizure of the Armenian Nagorno-Karabakh enclave, these supplies were criticised by MEPs, who lamented the EU's timid reaction to Azerbaijan's of-

fensive and called for the suspension of negotiations on the gas agreement signed in 2022.

The objective of that agreement was ambitious: double gas exports to 20 bcm by 2027.

The main obstacle to meeting that potential "is their pipelines' capacity", according to Mr. Babele.

Baku exports its gas through a southern European gas corridor, a network of pipelines that reaches Europe via Georgia and Turkey, including the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP).

Its capacity could be doubled but only with hefty investments that would require "long-term commitments" from European gas operators, according to Rystad.

TOUGH COMPETITION

India have real battle on their hands, says Ian Chappell



K.R. DEEPAK

Former Australia skipper Ian Chappell feels England under Ben Stokes will give India tough competition in the remainder of the Test series but backed the hosts to win it. "As the home side India should eventually win a tough series, but it has a real battle on their hands," Chappell wrote in his column for *ESPNCricinfo*.

REJUVENATED

England arrives in Rajkot after week-long break



K. R. DEEPAK

Fresh from a one-week break in their pre-series base Abu Dhabi, the England cricket team on Monday returned to India for the remainder of the five-match rubber against the hosts, which is locked at 1-1 after two games. The England team landed in Rajkot — venue for the third Test — on Monday evening.

LESS THAN IDEAL

Maxwell opens up about Adelaide night fiasco



AFP

Ending up in hospital after a late-night party in Adelaide was "less than ideal," conceded Glenn Maxwell about the headline-grabbing incident last month. "I think probably it affected my family a little bit more than it affected me. And obviously that incident was less than ideal, and the timing," Maxwell was quoted as saying.

ON COURSE

Pink Panthers ease past Yoddhas to seal a semifinal spot



SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Arjun Deshwal top-scored with 20 raid points to help Jaipur Pink Panthers thrash U.P. Yoddhas 67-30 and secure a semifinal spot in the Pro Kabaddi League Season 10 in Kolkata on Monday. In another match, Bengal Warriors got one step closer to the qualification bracket with an easy 46-34 win over the U Mumba.

Rahul ruled out of Rajkot Test, Padikkal named as replacement

The former will continue his recovery process at the NCA to be match-fit for the fourth Test, says BCCI secretary Jay Shah

ENGLAND IN INDIA

Amol Karhadkar
RAJKOT

Devdutt Padikkal, the stylish left-handed bat, has received his maiden call-up after K.L. Rahul — his Karnataka senior — has been ruled out of India's third Test versus England, to be played here from Thursday.

"Rahul has reached 90% of match fitness and is progressing well under the supervision of the BCCI Medical Team," Jay Shah, the BCCI secretary, wrote in a statement.

"He will continue his recovery process at the National Cricket Academy (NCA) in Bengaluru to be completely match-fit for the fourth and fifth Test."

Rahul and Ravindra Jadeja — both of whom had missed the second Test after getting hurt during India's loss in Hyderabad last

month — had been named in the squad for the last three Tests pending fitness clearance.

While India's squad that reassembled here on Sunday had its first training session at the stadium on Monday, Rahul is understood to have undergone a fitness test at the NCA. With the selectors and the team-management, in consultation with the BCCI medical team, deciding to not risk a player, the selection committee unanimously zeroed in on Padikkal being given a maiden Test call-up.

Interestingly, chief selector Ajit Agarkar witnessed Padikkal's sensational 151 for Karnataka against Tamil Nadu in the Ranji Trophy's high-profile southern derby over the last four days.

It is understood that Jadeja appeared to be fit during Monday's net session which was played behind closed doors, with no media person being allowed to



In his element: A superb 151 in the Ranji Trophy may have clinched a spot for Padikkal. M. VEDHAN

watch the team train.

It will be interesting to see if Padikkal is made to wait for his India cap, with Sarfaraz Khan being the front-runner to replace Shreyas Iyer in India's mid-

dle-order. Sarfaraz was brought in as Rahul's replacement ahead of the second Test and has been retained in the squad with Shreyas being dropped. Meanwhile, England

leggie Rehan Ahmed was stopped from exiting the Hirasar airport — on the outskirts of the Kathiawari city — due to lack of multi-entry visa upon England's arrival here on Monday.

England's squad spent the week-long break in Abu Dhabi before arriving here on Monday. It was noticed that Rehan had a single-entry visa so the England squad waited at the airport in the afternoon before the formalities were completed.

It is understood that with the help of local authorities, Rehan was granted a two-day visa at the earliest and the remaining paperwork will be completed well in time before the scheduled start of the match.

Leach ruled out

Rehan will be crucial to England's plans with Jack Leach, supposed to be the leader of the spin attack, having been ruled out of the remainder of the series. After sustaining a knee injury in Hyderabad, Leach missed the Visakhapatnam Test and has headed back home. The England camp has not named a replacement for Leach.

Reuters
NAIROBI

World marathon record holder Kelvin Kiptum and his coach Gervais Hakizimana died in a traffic accident on Sunday, former Kenyan Prime Minister Raila Odinga said on social media platform X.

Kenya's minister for sports Ababu Namwamba said on X, "Devastatingly sickening!! Kenya has lost a special gem. Lost for words."

Kiptum, 24, set the world record at the Chicago Marathon in October with a time of 2:00:35 to surpass the record of 2:01:09 set by his compatriot Eliud Kipchoge in Berlin in 2022.

Kiptum smashed the London Marathon course record earlier last year and was determined to make magic again in Chicago as he sped up through the 35-kilometre mark before thrusting his arms in the air to cheers from the crowd down the final stretch.

"We are shocked and



Kiptum. GETTY IMAGES

deeply saddened to learn of the devastating loss. On behalf of all World Athletics, we send our deepest condolences to their families, friends, teammates and the Kenyan nation", said World Athletics president Sebastian Coe.

"It was only earlier this week in Chicago, the place where Kelvin set his extraordinary marathon world record, that I was able to officially ratify his historic time. An incredible athlete leaving an incredible legacy, we will miss him dearly," added Coe.

Ramkumar claws his way back to get past Janvier

BENGALURU OPEN

N. Sudarshan
BENGALURU

Ramkumar Ramanathan fought back from the brink, from a set and three match points down, to beat France's Maxime Janvier 6-7(4), 7-5, 6-4 and enter the second round of the dafa-News Bengaluru Open ATP Challenger, here on Monday.

The wild card entrant's stay in the singles draw at the Garden City seemed set to end the same way as it had last week in Chennai — with a first-round defeat.

But the 29-year-old clawed his way back miraculously for only his first main draw match win since November 2022.

On the day, fortunes swung back and forth in the opening set as Ramkumar and Janvier couldn't calibrate their games to match the pomp of the immaculately laid KSLTA courts inside the leafy and pristine Cubbon Park.

The duo traded breaks early on and the contest inevitably slipped into a tie break.

Once there, Ramkumar made the first move, going up 4-1. But Janvier reeled off six straight points to pocket the set.

In the second stanza, the two kept pace with each other until one bad service game at 4-5 saw Ramkumar staring down



Houdini act: Ramkumar turned it around after being a set and three match points down against Janvier. SUDHAKARA JAIN

the barrel. However, he saved all three, levelled at 5-5 and broke to go 6-5 up.

That last return game showed his heightened confidence, especially the fierce slapped return to bring up the break point.

Ramkumar carried that belief, first to hold serve to take the match into the decider and then break Janvier's serve in the third game of the third set.

From there on, there

was no looking back for the Indian.

Australian Bernard Tomic entered the main draw after defeating Jonas Forejtek of Czech Republic 6-4, 6-2 in the final qualifying round.

The results (first round): Ramkumar Ramanathan bt Maxime Janvier (Fra) 6-7(4), 7-5, 6-4; Moez Echargui (Tun) bt Duje Ajdukovic (Cro) 6-2, 6-4; Gauthier Onclin (Bel) bt Giovanni Fonio (Ita) 6-4, 1-6, 7-6(5).

Vijay Amritraj — star of the night and toast of the gathering

K.C. Vijaya Kumar
CHENNAI

It was a night of elegance, nostalgia and celebration as Chennai raised a toast to one of its favourite sons, a national icon and global ambassador, all rolled into one. At the Leela Palace here on Monday, Vijay Amritraj was feted for his elevation in to the International Tennis Hall of Fame, which most among the assembled gathering felt came a touch late to a man who deserves all the accolades and more.

A tennis icon, broadcaster, actor, champion of social causes and sports administrator, Amritraj is a star of many parts. However, deep down he is a quintessential Chennai boy with academic roots in Don Bosco School and Loyola College. And this was the return of the native as the who's who of this Southern metropolis rallied around to cherish him.

Tamil Nadu's Minister for Youth Development and Sports Welfare Udhayanidhi Stalin effusively lauded the sporting legend to set the tone for a night of appreciation. Chess maestro Viswanathan Anand said: "Whatever I tried to do, Vijay had been there before."

Amritraj's India teammate Ramesh Krishnan spoke about the deep ties between the two families



Vijay Amritraj.
FILE PHOTO: SUDHAKARA JAIN



Whatever I tried to do, Vijay had been there before
VISWANATHAN ANAND

and elder brother Anand elaborated about a childhood of dreams and naughty streaks.

The night truly belonged to Amritraj who thanked the audience with his customary wit and grace, and said: "I owe it to my parents, they were two ordinary people who did extraordinary things with me."

And to cap it all, Boris Becker sent across a video message and said his prefix 'boom boom' was coined by his friend Vijay. It was that kind of night, of delicate verbal drop shots coated with an enduring affection.

Indian women go down to China again, no stopping the Dutch juggernaut

FIH PRO LEAGUE

Uthra Ganesan
ROURKELA

It finally came down to a penalty stroke and the scoreline read 2-1 in favour of China as the Indian women's hockey team began the second leg of its FIH Pro League matches at the Birs Munda Stadium here with yet another loss on Monday but it wasn't as close a game as the result would suggest.

Possession to India, control and game to China — that was the story of the night as the host, after an initial 10-minute period of intense pace and intent gradually slipped behind even as China dictated the direction for large parts of the game.

Starting quickly and with purpose, India had the upper hand early on and kept the pressure on the Chinese defence with repeated circle entries, one of them seeing Vandana Katariya's backhand pass from close to the backline being deflected in by Sangita Kumari for the lead.

China got one of its own towards the end of the first 15 Quarter through veteran Bingfeng Gu's penalty corner. But once the teams settled down, China's defensive structure held firm against all Indian attempts



Strikeforce: Bingfeng netted both the goals for China.
X@FIH_HOCKEY

that slowly went from purposeful to off target to desperate.

India had the ball for long periods without actually appearing threatening, running all around without being able to get into the circle post break. The Chinese appeared content going for the counters and then falling back into their respective zones to cut off space and induce turnovers but barring a few half chances, they didn't have much to show either. It was one of those games where both teams relied more of mistakes from the opponent.

Breached

The Indian defence, after being effective for long, finally slipped in the 53rd

minute when the ball hit Monika on the goalline off China's 4th PC, conceding a penalty stroke and Bingfeng had no difficulty putting it past Savita. India had a PC two minutes later but was unable to convert, remaining an area of concern for the team.

The Dutch juggernaut, meanwhile, continued to roll on with the World No. 1 side registering a 4-0 win against USA, scoring twice on either side of half time and finding ways to get the goals despite the Americans negating their PC advantage.

The results: Netherlands 4 (Fay van der Elst 21, 56, Freetje Moes 16, Felice Albers 36) bt USA 0; China 2 (Bingfeng Gu 14, 53) bt India 1 (Sangita Kumari 7).

IN BRIEF



Argentina eliminates Brazil, books Paris Olympics spot

Argentina secured its spot at the men's football tournament at the upcoming Paris Olympics by beating defending champion Brazil 1-0 on Sunday, a result which also eliminated its bitter rival. In the decisive South American Olympic qualifier, Leandro Goudou scored the winner for the Argentina Under-23 team. He headed a cross from Valentin Barco past goalkeeper Mycael in the 78th minute in Caracas.

Haller hits winner, Ivory Coast pips Nigeria for AFCON title

Sebastien Haller scored a dramatic late winner as host Ivory Coast fought back to beat Victor Osimhen's Nigeria 2-1 in Sunday's Africa Cup of Nations final in Abidjan. Nigeria looked set to repeat its 1-0 victory over the Ivorians at the Ebimpe Olympic Stadium during the group stage when captain William Troost-Ekong rose to head in the opener late in the first half. However, Franck Kessie equalised just after the hour mark and Haller turned in Simon Adingra's cross in the 81st minute to spark wild celebrations among the sea of orange in the Abidjan stands.

The results, final:
Nigeria 1 (Troost-Ekong 38) lost to Ivory Coast 2 (Kessie 62, Haller 81).

Bellingham expected to be out for at least two weeks

Real Madrid midfielder Jude Bellingham is expected to be sidelined for at least two weeks because of an ankle injury. Real said on Sunday that Bellingham was diagnosed with a sprain in his left ankle. The club said "his recovery will be monitored," without setting a timetable for his return. The England international is set to miss Tuesday's Champions League round-of-16 match at Leipzig, as well as upcoming Spanish league games. The return match against Leipzig is on March 6. Bellingham sprained his ankle after it was stepped on by Girona's Pablo Torre early in the second half.



Kansas City Chiefs wins the Super Bowl

Kansas City Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes won his third Super Bowl MVP award after leading the Chiefs to a thrilling 25-22 overtime victory over the San Francisco 49ers in Las Vegas on Sunday.

TN-Karnataka clash goes down to the wire, ends in a thrilling stalemate

Pradosh, Indrajith and Vijay Shankar help take the home side within striking distance of the target before finishing 17 runs behind

RANJI TROPHY

S. Dipak Ragav
CHENNAI

ATamil Nadu-Karnataka game is one of the marquee clashes on the domestic calendar. True to its billing, the two sides dished out a humdinger that went down to the wire before ending in a stalemate at the M.A. Chidambaram Stadium here on Monday.

TN, chasing 355 on the final day of the Ranji Trophy clash, came within striking distance of the target before finishing 17 runs behind, while Karnataka was two wickets away from a win.

However, the match would not have gone so deep if not for half-centuries from Pradosh Ranjan Paul (74), B. Indrajith (98, 194b, 3x4) and Vijay Shankar (60), which kept the hosts in the hunt despite facing stiff odds at the start of the day. A lot depended on Indrajith for TN to have a chance of even salvaging a point on a pitch assisting



Anchor: Indrajith was nimble on his feet and held fort at one end, building vital partnerships. M. VEDHAN

spinners, and the 29-year-old rose to the occasion.

Indrajith was nimble on his feet, especially off the backfoot against the tweekers and held fort at one end, building partnerships with Pradosh and later Vijay Shankar – with whom he added 125 runs for the sixth wicket.

Overnight batters Pra-

dosh and opener Vimal Khumar played out the first hour without trouble after resuming the day on 36 for one. Pradosh looked fluent and hit a flurry of boundaries, as TN managed 114 runs in the first session. The left-hander targeted the square boundary with consecutive ramp shots over the slips

off V. Kaverappa. He reached his half-century with a sweep to the fence off Hardik Raj.

However, just 10 minutes before lunch, the 23-year-old poked at a delivery from Vyshak and was caught at slip.

At 199 for five, Indrajith and Vijay Shankar needed to bat out nearly 34 overs.

The former hit a few boundaries before Vijay joined the act with a swept four and six, forcing the visitors to go on the defensive by bowling negative leg-side lines with nine fielders on the ropes. The duo ran a lot of twos and reduced the target to 97 off the last 15 mandatory overs.

Mayank Agarwal's men

took the new ball with 41 needed off the last five and got a breakthrough when Indrajith was run out trying to steal a single, two short of a well-deserved century.

In the next over, Vijay Shankar was caught at long-on off Vyshak, and TN's charge ended at that point, but not before putting on a show that added lustre to this famed rivalry.

The scores:

Karnataka — 1st innings: 366.
Tamil Nadu — 1st innings: 151.
Karnataka — 2nd innings: 139.
Tamil Nadu — 2nd innings: Vimal Khumar c Padikkal b Shashi Kumar 31, N. Jagadeesan c Padikkal b Vyshak 8, Pradosh Ranjan Paul c Padikkal b Vyshak 74, B. Indrajith (run out) 98, M. Boopathi Vaishna Kumar lbw b Hardik Raj 19, M. Mohammed c Manish b Hardik 15, Vijay Shankar c Mayank b Vyshak 60, R. Sai Kishore (not out) 7, S. Lokeswar c Manish b Kaverappa 1, S. Ajith Ram (not out) 5, Extras (b-7, lb-9, w-4); 20; Total (for eight wkts in 105 overs): 338
Fall of wickets: 1-14, 2-75, 3-142, 4-177, 5-199, 6-324, 7-329, 8-330
Karnataka bowling: Kaverappa 15-1-62-1, Vyshak 22-2-71-3, Shashi Kumar 36-7-89-1, Samarth 8-0-14-0, Hardik Raj 24-0-86-2.

RANJI TROPHY SCORES, ROUND 6, DAY 4

Elite: Group-A: At Jaipur: Saurashtra 328 & 234/6 decl. in 64 overs (Sheldon Jackson 49, Arpit Vasavada 74 n.o.) bt Rajasthan 257 & 87 in 28.4 overs (Dharmendrasinh Jadeja 7/32)
Points: Saurashtra 6(22), Rajasthan 0(19).
At Pune: Maharashtra 208 & 371 in 121.5 overs (Digvijay Patil 68, Kedar Jadhav 40, Ankeet Bawane 84, Dhanraj Shinde 40, Aditya Thakare 5/54) lost to Vidarbha 552 & 28/0 in 6 overs.
Maharashtra 0(11), Vidarbha 7(27).
Group-B: At Vizianagaram: Andhra 261 & 429/9 in 145 overs (Ricky Bhui 129, Shaik Rasheed 85, Nitish Kumar Reddy 53 n.o., Saurabh Kumar 5/116) drew with Uttar Pradesh 198.
Andhra 3(25), Uttar Pradesh 1(13).
At Raipur: Mumbai 351 & 253/6 in 82 overs (Bhupen Lalwani 59, Ajinkya Rahane 56 n.o., Ajay Mandal 5/65) drew with Chhattisgarh 350 in 106.1 overs (Amandeep Khare 143, Tushar Deshpande 5/121).
Mumbai 3(30), Chhattisgarh 1(13).
At Thumba: Kerala 363 & 265/6 decl. bt Bengal 180 & 339 in 87.4 overs (Abhimanyu Easwaran 65, Shahbaz Ahmed 80, Karan Lal 40, Jalaj Saxena 4/104).
Kerala 6(14), Bengal 0(12).
At Guwahati: Assam 405 & 100/1 in 14.2 overs (Parvej Musaraf 52 n.o.) bt Bihar 207 & 292 in 121 overs (Piyush Singh 103, Rahul Singh 5/49).

Assam 6(8), Bihar 0(5).
Group-C: At Chandigarh: Chandigarh 356 & 359/3 decl. in 74 overs (Shivam Bhambri 98, Arslan Khan 147, Manan Vohra 74) drew with Tripura 438 & 121/3 in 34.4 overs (Bishal Ghosh 44, Bikramkumar Das 58 n.o.).
Chandigarh 1(5), Tripura 3(17).
At Surat: Railways 297 & 208 bt Goa 200 & 242 in 65.2 overs (Suyash Prabhudessai 67, Akash Pandey 9/71).
Railways 6(18), Goa 0(4).
At Mohali: Gujarat 339 & 290/8 decl. bt Punjab 219 & 111 in 39.4 overs (Priyajitsingh Jadeja 5/39).
Gujarat 6(19), Punjab 0(9).
At Chennai: Karnataka 366 & 139 drew with Tamil Nadu 151 & 338/8 in 105 overs (Pradosh Ranjan Paul 74, B. Indrajith 98, Vijay Shankar 60).
Karnataka 3(24), Tamil Nadu 1(22).
Group-D: At Dharamshala: Delhi 264 & 381/6 decl. bt Himachal Pradesh 319 & 250 in 76.4 overs (Rishi Dhawan 65, Himanshu Chauhan 5/63).
Delhi 6(14), HP 0(4).
At Indore: Madhya Pradesh 454 bt Baroda 132 & 270 in 98.3 overs (Shashwat Rawat 105, Kulwant Khejroliya 5/34).
MP 7(26), Baroda 0(23).
At Cuttack: Uttarakhand 342 & 203/8 decl. bt Odisha 169 & 214 in 91.4 overs (S. Senapati 61, Deepak Dhapola 5/74).
Uttarakhand 6(14), Odisha 0(12).

Barcelona escapes with a draw against Granada

EURO LEAGUES

Reuters
BARCELONA

A double by Barcelona winger Lamine Yamal helped his side salvage a 3-3 draw at home to relegation-threatened Granada in a roller-coaster LaLiga match on Sunday.

Xavi Hernandez's side is third in the standings on 51 points, five behind second-placed Girona. Yamal put the host ahead after 14 minutes with a tap-in into an empty net after Joao Cancelo's cross found him at the far post.

Equaliser
Granada equalised two minutes before half-time thanks to Ricard Sanchez's powerful volley into the top corner.

The visitor grabbed the lead in the 60th minute



Sneaking through: Yamal saved Barcelona the blushes. AFP

with an easy finish by Facundo Pellistri before Robert Lewandowski made it 2-2 as he scored from Ilkay Gundogan's pass three minutes later.

Towering header
Ignasi Miquel restored Granada's lead with a towering header in the 66th minute, but Yamal levelled again with a long-range strike for

his second of the night ten minutes from time.

The results:
LaLiga: Sevilla 1 (Romero 15) lost to Atletico Madrid 0; Barcelona 3 (Yamal 14, 81, Lewandowski 63) drew with Granada 3 (Sanchez 43, Pellistri 60, Miquel 66).
Serie A: Genoa 1 (Malinovskyi 51) lost to Atalanta 4 (De Ketelaere 22, Koopmeiners 55, Zappacosta 90+10, Toure 90+13); AC Milan 1 (Hernandez 25) bt Napoli 0.

Focus on men's team, Sindhu as India chases glory

BADMINTON

Press Trust of India
SHAH ALAM (MALAYSIA)

Thomas Cup champion India will look to recreate the magic when it chases the elusive crown at the Badminton Asia Team Championships, which will mark the return of P.V. Sindhu from injury.

It won't be a walk in the park for the Indian men's team, which will face China and Hong Kong in its Group A league matches. However, India, led by H.S. Prannoy, Lakshya Sen and the pair of Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty, will back itself to finish in the top two and make it to the knockout stage. The women's team, led by Sindhu, got the rub of green as China is the only other team in Group 'W' and India is already assured of a knockout berth.

City and Real Madrid again looking best in Europe

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Associated Press
LONDON

The Champions League narrative is so often about Manchester City and Real Madrid.

The past two champions of Europe were the only teams to sweep through the group stage with six wins. They also are first in action on Tuesday when the most prized competition in club football resumes in the round-of-16.

Man City is away to a Copenhagen team playing in the knockout stage for the first time in 13 years and Madrid is at Leipzig for the first leg.

The two teams favoured to lift the trophy warmed up with comfortable wins on Saturday. Erling Haaland confirmed his return



Huge miss: Bellingham, suffering from an ankle injury, may not feature in the round-of-16 clash against Leipzig. REUTERS

to form after an injury with both goals in Man City's 2-0 win over Everton, his first since Nov. 28.

Haaland has a Premier League-leading 16 goals and Madrid's Jude Bellingham has a LaLiga-best 15 after also scoring twice in a 4-0 rout of second-place Girona, which is owned by

the same Abu Dhabi group as Man City. But Bellingham has an ankle injury.

The schedule: Round-of-16: RB Leipzig vs. Real Madrid, Copenhagen vs. Manchester City (both matches at 1:30 a.m. on Wednesday); PSG vs. Real Sociedad, Lazio vs. Bayern Munich (both matches at 1:30 a.m. on Thursday).



Triumphant: Gokulam players celebrate the second goal. K. RAGESH

Gokulam beats Lajong, climbs up the table

I-LEAGUE

P.K. Ajith Kumar
KOZHIKODE

Gokulam Kerala's homecoming proved a memorable affair on Monday night. The former champion won a crucial I-League encounter against Shillong Lajong 2-0.

In what was Gokulam's first home match in two months, Sourav and Matija Babovic were the scorers.

Gokulam is now on 23 points, five behind the leader Mohammedan Sporting. Two other teams – Real Kashmir and Sreenidi, which has played a game less – are also on 23.

In the second half, substitute Matija Babovic slotted home an excellent pass from captain Alex Sanchez from inside the box to seal Gokulam's victory.

The result:
Gokulam 2 (Sourav 45+4, Matija Babovic 72) bt Lajong 0.

Jordan scores a brace, Punjab silences Blasters

ISL-10

Stan Ravan
KOCHI

Life without midfield magician Adrian Luna is turning out to be tough for Kerala Blasters. The spark was missing as the side went down to Punjab FC 1-3 in the Indian Super League at the Nehru Stadium here on Monday with the visitor's Colombian forward scoring two of those goals.

It was only Punjab's third win this season and saw it climb to ninth spot in the table while the Blasters remain on the third rung.

The stadium was not even half full, probably the fans missed their most popular player Luna and the deafening roar which usually sends rivals into a shell was missing.



Catch me if you can: Jordan found the net either side of the half-time break. NITHIN KRISHNAN

That perhaps worked in Punjab's favour. For though, KBFC dominated a major part of the opening half and even took the lead in the 39th minute through its defender Milos Drinic, whose left-footed shot appeared to bounce inside the line, Punjab fought back and after gaining the lead choked the home side with a strong defence.

Jordan sidestepped Pritam Kotal for the equaliser

shortly before the break after receiving a long pass from Madih Talal, and later made the most of a deflection from goalkeeper Sachin Suresh to give Punjab the lead with a header.

And just before the end, Luka Majcen added one more off a penalty for a Blasters handball.

The result:
KBFC 1 (Drinic 39) lost to PFC 3 (Jordan 42 & 61, Majcen 88-pen).

There have been standout displays by quite a few players: Kanitkar

Head coach of the India U-19 team which lost in the final of the World Cup believes that a couple of them can make it to the senior level



GETTY IMAGES

THE GIST

▼ Captain Saharan, who plays for Punjab, ended the tournament as the highest run-getter with 397 runs

▼ No. 3 batter Musheer was the team's most consistent performer with the bat and ended with 360 runs

▼ Sachin revelled in the role of a finisher, and left-arm spinner Pandey snared 18 wickets

Press Trust of India BENONI

India U-19 head coach Hrishikesh Kanitkar is confident that at least a couple of players from the 2024 batch, that ensured a fifth consecutive final appearance for the record five-time champions, will go on to play for the senior team.

Although five-time champion India lost the final to Australia by 79 runs, players like skipper Uday Saharan, Musheer Khan, Saamy Pandey and Sachin Dhas were impressive throughout the tournament.

"Definitely (the future of India is very

bright). As a bowling side and as a batting side, there have been stand out performances by quite a few players.

"They have shown maturity in tough situations and that bodes well for Indian cricket," Kanitkar said at the post-match press conference on Sunday.

Saharan, who plays for Punjab, ended the tournament as the highest run-getter with 397 runs.

His stature grew as the tournament progressed. He scored a century against Nepal before playing a match-winning 81 in the semifinal against South Africa.

Number three batter Musheer, the younger brother of prolific Mumbai batter Sarfaraz Khan, was the team's most

consistent performer with the bat and ended with 360 runs.

The two other stand-out players were Sachin, who revelled in the role of a finisher, and left-arm spinner Pandey, who snared 18 wickets.

Sachin showed temperament, a pre-requisite for the highest level.

The Indian team has always been an age-group powerhouse and the U-19 World Cup has presented stars like Virat Kohli, Yuvraj Singh, Mohammed Kaif, Suresh Raina, Shikhar Dhawan, Rohit Sharma, Ravindra Jadeja, K.L. Rahul, Rishabh Pant, Shubman Gill and Yashasvi Jaiswal to name a few.

"Every time there are a couple of

guys who step up either in the IPL or the Indian team. I'm sure there will be a couple, but there is great competition back home," Kanitkar added.

Squad members Arshin Kulkarni and Avansh Rao went into the U-19 World Cup having already secured IPL contracts.

Kanitkar feels playing in the U-19 World Cup provides the players with an insight into how playing at the senior level is.

"For the players great journey, everything is highlighted, these performances matter, they are under the scanner. They get used to these situations. They know what expect and are prepared when they play higher cricket," said the 49-year-old head coach.

Safety worries for balconies ahead of the Paris Olympic Games

Agence France-Presse PARIS

Real estate experts in Paris have warned about the danger of people cramming on to balconies around the City to catch a glimpse of the Olympics in July and August.

The National Real Estate Federation (FNAIM) has alerted local authorities to the risk of collapses and accidents unless balconies that are often designed for two or three people are checked beforehand for their structural soundness.

The issue is set to be particularly pressing for residential blocs that overlook the river Seine, which athletes will sail down during a spectacular opening ceremony being planned by organisers on July 26.

"We need to be absolutely sure that the balconies can take the weight and that handrails are well sealed in to avoid any sort of incident," Olivier Princivalle, head, FNAIM in the Paris region, said.

Rare but sometimes deadly

Accidents involving balconies are a rare but sometimes deadly occurrence in France, with two people left seriously injured in the southeast of Paris in May last year when their fifth-floor balcony gave way. Four people died in the central City of Angers in 2016 when a balcony collapsed during a party.

The Paris Olympics from July 26 to August 11, followed by the Paralympics from August 28 to September 8, are set to take place at locations across the City of Light



SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

where many buildings are hundreds of years old.

The issue of balcony safety underlines the immense organisational complexity faced by local authorities as they prepare the first Games in Paris in 100 years.

The opening ceremony – the first time a summer Olympics has begun outside of a stadium – represents a huge challenge for French police who have been asked to secure a 6km stretch of the river that will be used during the parade.

The Paris police department said that checking balconies did not fall under its responsibilities, but it was working with the industry and its partners to address the issue.

Under French law, building owners or managers have

responsibility for checking their structures, but "something can slip through the cracks", a French source with knowledge of the preparations said on condition of anonymity.

Advance warnings about security and transport restrictions during the Games have led many Parisians to plan holidays during the event, sometimes in order to rent out their homes for high prices to foreign visitors.

"Don't leave this summer, don't leave! That would be a mistake," Mayor Anne Hidalgo urged the City's inhabitants on Sunday as she inaugurated the only new permanent Olympics sports arena to be built in inner Paris. "It's going to be incredible."

What's the next step for Qatar's Asian Cup star Akram Afif?

Associated Press DOHA

With his flowing curls and thrilling attacking play, it was no surprise that Akram Afif was likened to Liverpool star Mo Salah at the Asian Cup.

With eight goals, including a hat-trick in the 3-1 win over Jordan in the final, the Qatar forward was the leading scorer and most valuable player as his team won back-to-back titles.

But once the celebrations are over, Afif will return to Al Sadd in Qatar, rather than a team from one of Europe's top leagues.

Europe beckons?

In reality, he is a long way off the quality of Salah – one of the world's top players. But based on his performances at the Asian Cup, it is hard to imagine Afif couldn't make a career for himself outside of his homeland, even if not at one of Europe's leading clubs.

Is it simply the case that in an age when scouting networks have never been more extensive, Afif has slipped through the net? Not quite.

After all, he was a youth player with Villarreal at the start of his career and had spells in Spain and Belgium before returning to his homeland.

That move doesn't seem to have stopped him from developing his game.

He outperformed the likes of Tottenham's Son Heung-min and PSG forward Lee Kang-in at the Asian Cup, and, unsurprisingly, the



AP

question of whether he would look to try again in Europe was a consistent theme during Qatar's run to the title.

"It's not me who has to decide, other parties have to decide," Afif said after the final.

"There are so many factors. I'd love to become a professional (in Europe). If it's meant to be, it's meant to be." The 27-year-old Afif was part of Qatar's Aspire Academy, which develops athletes. He joined Villarreal in 2016 and had loan spells with Sporting Gijon in Spain and Eupen in Belgium.

He returned to his homeland to Al Sadd in 2018 and the following year won the Asian Cup with Qatar, providing 10 assists, a tournament record.

Those performances didn't pave the way for a high profile move and he was part of Qatar's disappointing performance at the 2022 World Cup as the host nation was eliminated after three-straight losses in the group stage.

As a whole the Asian Cup showcased the talent that lies outside of elite club football in Europe. Iraq's Aymen Hussein was the second highest scorer.

Of the two finalists, only one player was based in Europe – Jordan's Mousa Tamari, who plays for Montpellier in France.

It points to the possibility that there is talent in parts of Asia that remains largely untapped in terms of scouting from Europe.