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## INSIDE



### Union govt. bans two factions of J&K outfits

**NEW DELHI**  
The Union Home Ministry on Wednesday declared two factions of the Muslim Conference, Jammu and Kashmir (MCJK), led by Abdul Ghani Bhat and Ghulam Nabi Sumji, respectively, as "unlawful association" under the UAPA. » PAGE 4

### 'South Korean President to visit India this year'

**NEW DELHI**  
South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol is expected to visit India this year and the two countries are hopeful of concluding ongoing negotiations to upgrade the CEPA existing between the two countries, said South Korean envoy Chang Jae-bok said on Wednesday. » PAGE 4

### NDA now four short of Upper House majority

**NEW DELHI**  
The results of the Rajya Sabha elections on Tuesday have put the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) just four short of the majority mark of 121 in the 240-member Upper House of Parliament. This is likely to have far-reaching implications for domestic politics. » PAGE 5

### Gaza death toll nears 30,000; truce draws close

**GAZA STRIP**  
Fighting raged on Wednesday in the besieged Gaza Strip, where the reported death toll neared 30,000 while mediators from Egypt, Qatar and the United States who have been trying to find a path to a ceasefire insist a deal could be just days away. » PAGE 12

# Himachal govt. fights for survival amid crisis

Congress govt. passes State Budget via voice vote after 15 BJP legislators including LOP expelled | Congress moves disqualification notice against six MLAs absent from voting; Speaker reserves order | Signalling crisis, Minister Vikramaditya Singh announces resignation, withdraws it within hours

**Vikas Vasudeva**  
**Sandeep Phukan**  
CHANDIGARH/NEW DELHI

The Congress government in Himachal Pradesh managed to survive the immediate threat to its existence on Wednesday, passing the Budget for 2024-25 in the State Assembly after suspending 15 BJP lawmakers, including Leader of the Opposition Jairam Thakur.

The Budget Session was adjourned *sine die* (indefinitely) soon afterwards, a day before it was scheduled to conclude. Speaker Kuldeep Pathania reserved his order on a disqualification motion against six Congress MLAs who were absent from the vote passing the Budget.

In another twist to the current crisis, Minister Vikramaditya Singh announced — and then took back — his resignation, bringing the

leadership tussle in the party to the fore. Mr. Singh is the son of the former Chief Minister, the late Virbhadra Singh, and Himachal Pradesh Congress Committee chief Pratibha Singh. He withdrew his resignation within hours, after the party sent out mixed signals.

**'Weighing all options'**  
Chief Minister Sukhvinder Sukhu sounded conciliatory, making a "Vikramaditya is like my younger brother" reference in Shimla; in Delhi, however, the party only said that it was weighing all options.

Congress communications chief Jairam Ramesh asserted that the party would not hesitate to take tough actions to save its government and protect the mandate of the people of Himachal Pradesh.

The State was pushed into political turmoil on Tuesday, when Abhishek



Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu, D.K. Shivakumar, Bhupesh Baghel, Bhupinder Singh Hooda and Rajeev Shukla in Shimla. PTI

Singhvi, the ruling Congress party's nominee for the State's sole Rajya Sabha seat lost the election to the Bharatiya Janata Party's Harsh Mahajan after six Congress MLAs voted in favour of the BJP, threatening the survival of their own government.

In damage control mode, Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge deput-

ed Bhupesh Baghel, Bhupinder Singh Hooda, and D.K. Shivakumar as the All India Congress Committee's (AICC) observers, asking them to submit a report after talking to all the party MLAs and finding out their grievances.

Mr. Kharge is also said to have spoken to former party chief Rahul Gandhi and party general secretary Pri-

yanka Gandhi Vadra on the Himachal Pradesh developments.

The Chief Minister told presspersons in Shimla that the Budget had been passed in the Assembly, insisting that the government would complete its five years as the conspiracy to topple it has been foiled.

Mr. Sukhu dismissed reports that he had quit the

Chief Minister's post. He added that a disqualification motion had been brought against the six Congress MLAs who had cross-voted in favour of the BJP in the Rajya Sabha polls, by being absent during the cut motion during the passage of the Budget in Assembly.

As the Assembly witnessed chaotic scenes, the Speaker, Mr. Pathania, suspended 15 of the 25 BJP MLAs amid an adjournment. The remaining 10 BJP MLAs staged a walkout and in the absence of any Opposition, the Budget was passed with a voice vote. The government would have technically lost the confidence of the House if it had failed to pass the Budget.

"They had to pass the Budget somehow, otherwise the government would have fallen. For this, they had only one way to reduce the number of BJP

MLAs, and today 15 MLAs were suspended without any reason," Mr. Thakur alleged.

Addressing a press conference at the AICC headquarters in Delhi, however, Mr. Ramesh accused the BJP of attempting "Operation Lotus" in the hill State to dislodge the Congress government. "The Congress will not hesitate to take some tough steps as the party is our priority

He also said that accountability would be fixed for the cross-voting in the Rajya Sabha poll that ensured the loss of the party's nominee.

Party general secretary Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, who was one of the main campaigners in the December 2022 Assembly polls, alleged that the BJP, which had failed to stand with the people of the State when hit by a natural disaster, now wants to push it into a "political disaster".

## Dynamic collaboration



**Security drill:** The Indian Army and the Japan Ground Self Defence Force at Mahajan Fieldfiring Range village in Bikaner for a two-week military exercise 'Dharma Guardian'. ANI

## India asks U.S. to probe pro-Khalistani groups

**Suhasini Haidar/ Vijaita Singh**  
NEW DELHI

India raised its demand that pro-Khalistani outfits in the U.S. be investigated for instigating violence against India, as senior officials met for the India-U.S. Homeland Security Dialogue on Wednesday, that reviewed ongoing cooperation in counter-terrorism and security.

The two sides also focused on curbing the rampant increase in narcotics trafficking, particularly of the drug Fentanyl. During the dialogue, both sides reviewed ongoing cooperation in counterterrorism, the Home Ministry said.

**FULL REPORT**  
» PAGE 4

## Manipur Police lay down arms to protest abduction of officer



Arambai Tenggol gained prominence after the ethnic conflict between the Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities in Manipur. FILE PHOTO

**Vijaita Singh**  
NEW DELHI

Police personnel across the Meitei-dominated valley districts of Manipur laid down arms on Wednesday to protest against the abduction of a police officer by members of Arambai Tenggol (AT), a radical Meitei outfit.

On Tuesday, around 200 armed men stormed the residence of Additional Superintendent of Police Moirangthem Amit in Imphal East, seeking the release of Robin M., chief of Arambai Tenggol's Sekmai unit, who was arrested earlier in the day for allegedly snatching a vehicle from a petrol pump. "In the midst of the incident, the Additional SP and one of his escorts were abducted by the armed miscreants. They were later rescued from Kwakeithel Konjeng Leikai area and admitted to Raj Medicity for medical treatment," Manipur Police said in a post on X.

A police official said the force's morale was down. "None of the civil society groups have come out in our support. Our hands are tied, we are stopped from taking action against the miscreants. Our own people are not supporting

us. The police officer who was attacked is also a Meitei," the official said.

Police said the "armed miscreants" vandalised household property at the police officer's residence, after which additional security forces were rushed to the spot. In the resulting police action, two people, sustained injuries.

AT, a relatively new outfit that gained prominence after the ethnic conflict between the Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities that started in Manipur on May 3, 2023, enjoys tremendous support among the Meitei people, a government official said. "It is not that AT members are not being arrested. Cases under the anti-terror UAPA are also being registered against them but they have the support of the local people. In some cases, they are also let off by the courts," said the official.

The government official said that there are "many strings attached" when it comes to action against AT members. "We have to tread cautiously as any small incident here can lead to a mass uprising. There are also apprehensions that a police officer may be lynched or shot dead," the official said.

# BJP demands Congress-led Karnataka government's resignation amid row over 'pro-Pakistan' sloganeering

**The Hindu Bureau**  
BENGALURU

A day after supporters of Rajya Sabha election winner from the Congress, Syed Nasir Hussain, allegedly raised pro-Pakistan slogans in the corridors of the Vidhana Soudha, the BJP on Wednesday demanded the resignation of Chief Minister Siddaramaiah-led Congress government for "providing protection to pro-Pakistani and anti-India elements". It also demanded National Investigation Agency (NIA) probe into the incident. The Legislative Council

also witnessed turmoil over the incident.

State Home Minister G. Parameshwara said in the Assembly that the police had registered a case, and if the FSL report proves that a supporter had indeed shouted pro-Pakistan slogans, action would be initiated.

**'Shielding the accused'**  
In the Legislative Assembly, Leader of the Opposition R. Ashok raised the issue and said that the government has been "shielding the accused" involved in the alleged incident and that an inquiry had not been initiated.



BJP legislators protesting in the Legislative Council against the alleged slogan incident, in Bengaluru on Wednesday. SUDHAKARA JAIN

Alleging a "complete breakdown of law and order in the State", he said Mr. Hussain had not even condemned the incident. The Congress should

have suspended the newly-elected MP, he added. The BJP members also took out a protest march from the Legislators' Home to the Vidhana Soudha and

entered the House shouting slogans against the Congress. Speaker U.T. Khader too condemned the incident and told the government to take the issue seriously and punish the person who raised the slogan in the interest of the State and the nation.

**'Punishment by law'**  
Responding to the furor, Dr. Parameshwara said: "If the FSL report indicates that the person shouted pro-Pakistan slogans, then we will punish that person. We will punish him as per the law. We are not protecting anyone. Investigation is under way."

Dissatisfied with the reply, BJP members trooped into the Well of the House and raised slogans against the Congress. The Speaker adjourned the House for the day.

Meanwhile, the BJP is also getting ready to meet Governor Thaaawarchand Gehlot on Thursday and submit a petition to him seeking dismissal of the State government. After the Assembly was adjourned for the day, Mr. Ashok told presspersons that the BJP would continue its protest against the government till the person who shouted the slogan was arrested.



## IN BRIEF



## HC rejects Hemant's plea to participate in Budget session

The Jharkhand High Court on Wednesday rejected former Chief Minister Hemant Soren's petition seeking permission to attend the ongoing Budget session of the Assembly. The session started on February 23, and will conclude on March 2. Mr. Soren, who was arrested by the ED in a money laundering case last month, had filed an application before the High Court on Friday, seeking permission to participate in the session. After hearing the arguments, Justice Sujit Narayan Prasad had on Monday reserved his order. The court had earlier allowed Mr. Soren to participate in the trust vote on February 5. **PTI**

## Punjab Cong. holds tractor rallies in support of farmers

The Punjab Congress on Wednesday held tractor rallies in many parts of the State in solidarity with the ongoing farmers' agitation over their various demands. The party condemned the death of a farmer at Khanauri inter-state border. Punjab Pradesh Congress Committee president Amarinder Singh Raja Warring led a tractor rally in Amritsar's Ajnala. Speaking to the media, Mr. Warring slammed the Bhagwant Mann government for not lodging an FIR into the death of farmer Shubhkar Singh at Khanauri. The party also demanded an FIR against persons of Haryana government responsible for alleged atrocities against farmers. **PTI**

## Handle terror attack victim's case with sensitivity, Bombay HC tells Housing Department

The Hindu Bureau  
MUMBAI

The Bombay High Court on Wednesday directed the Maharashtra Housing Minister to consider a request by a 26/11 Mumbai terror attack victim who has been asking for a home under the economically weaker section (EWS) scheme.

A Division Bench comprising Justice G.S. Kulkarni and Justice Firdosh Pooniwalla asked the Housing Department to consider Devika Rotawan's plea as an exceptional case and handle it with sensitivity so that "basic human rights are not violated in the case".

## 'Genuine case'

The court said: "You are not getting hundreds of such claims. This is one such case which may require consideration. When



a genuine case is presented before the department, the same would certainly require more sensitivity."

In her plea, Ms. Rotawan said she suffered a bullet wound in the 2008 terror attack for which she had to undergo multiple surgeries.

She continues to suffer from the after-effects of the injury and has to undergo periodic treatment. Ms. Rotawan was a material witness in the 26/11 case that led to the conviction

## Modi hits out at Congress, Pawar; says packages for farmers used to be looted

PM claims that before 2014 there were chaos in India's rural hinterland, and that the parties that make up the Opposition INDIA alliance were completely apathetic to the plight of farmers

Shoumojit Banerjee  
PUNE

Holding the erstwhile Congress-led UPA government responsible for the woes of farmers in Maharashtra's Vidarbha region, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday claimed that earlier packages declared in the name of farmers used to be siphoned off before it could reach the beneficiaries.

Addressing a massive rally at Yavatmal in Vidarbha region, Mr. Modi took thinly-veiled jibes at former Union Agriculture Minister and NCP leader Sharad Pawar.

## 'At the press of a button'

"When parties in today's INDIA alliance had a government at the Centre, the Union Agriculture Minister at that time was from Maharashtra [alluding to Mr. Pawar]. Then, packages in the name of Vidarbha farmers used to be declared in Delhi, but they were looted before the mo-



PM Modi with Maharashtra CM Eknath Shinde and Deputy CMs Devendra Fadnis and Ajit Pawar in Yavatmal on Wednesday. **PTI**

ney ever got to the farmers. Poor, farmers and the adivasis did not get anything. Today, I pressed one button, and ₹21,000 crore of PM Kisan Samman Nidhi reached the accounts of crores of farmers. This is Modi's guarantee," said the Prime Minister, who inaugurated a slew of irrigation projects and other development works aimed at farmer households in the arid Vidarbha and Marathwada regions.

He was addressing

around one lakh members of women's self-help groups (SHGs) during the rally held in Yavatmal's Bhari village. Significantly, Mr. Modi had visited Yavatmal just before the start of the 2014 Lok Sabha election as well.

Mr. Modi alleged that the Congress governments in the past had, for decades, kept 100 major irrigation projects hanging fire of which the majority were in Maharashtra, particularly in Vidarbha.

He claimed that before 2014 there was chaos in India's rural hinterland, and that the parties that made up the Opposition INDIA alliance today, were completely apathetic to the plight of farmers in the country.

## 'BJP will win 400 seats'

Expressing confidence that the BJP-led NDA would exceed 400 seats in the upcoming Lok Sabha election, Mr. Modi said that the large numbers of "mothers and sisters" in the crowd proved that the entire Vidarbha region had decided that the NDA would achieve a thumping victory in the election.

Alleging that it was the Congress that had kept the adivasis backward and did nothing for the farmers, the PM credited his party with the completion of several pending water projects in Maharashtra, stating that the Nilwande project was completed by the BJP after 50 years, as was the Tembhu lift irrigation project.

## BJP observers for 23 Maharashtra LS seats named

Shoumojit Banerjee  
PUNE

Girding up for the upcoming Lok Sabha election, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has announced a list of 46 observers for 23 Lok Sabha constituencies in Maharashtra.

Two 'inspectors' have been appointed for each of the 23 constituencies that the party had won (of the 25 it contested on) in the 2019 general election in Maharashtra. The list of observers include sitting MLAs like Maharashtra BJP top guns Girish Mahajan and Radhakrishna Vikhepatil; Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha MPs like Manoj Kotak and Medha Kulkarni, as well as Ministers, former Members of Parliament and office bearers.

Sources said there would be a meeting of the observers on Thursday.

Former State Minister Pankaja Munde, known for her disaffection with the party high command, has been given the responsibility of overseeing the North Mumbai Lok Sabha seat, presently represented by Gopal Shetty, who won the 2019 general election with a colossal margin of 4.65 lakh votes - the highest



Pankaja Munde has been given the responsibility to oversee the North Mumbai seat.

margin achieved by a candidate in the State.

Ms. Munde, who was not nominated for the Rajya Sabha in the recent polls, has been gunning for a Lok Sabha candidature.

Maharashtra Minister Girish Mahajan, who has been entrusted with the Mumbai North-East constituency, is being tipped to contest the Raver Lok Sabha constituency in Jalgaon.

Likewise, State Forest Minister Sudhir Mungantiwar, whose name is being floated for candidature from Chandrapur Lok Sabha constituency, has been appointed as observer for Beed seat.

Manoj Kotak, the sitting MP of Mumbai North-East, has been entrusted with the responsibility of the Nagpur seat.

## Dalit boy cremated after case registered against 5 policemen

The Hindu Bureau  
LUCKNOW

Silai Baragaon village under Milak police station limits in Rampur district of Uttar Pradesh remained tense on Wednesday after a 17-year-old Dalit boy, Sumesh Kumar, was killed and two others injured in a clash over installation of a board with B.R. Ambedkar's photo on Tuesday evening on a disputed plot.

The deceased boy's family, which sat on a protest, performed the last rites on Wednesday only after a case was registered against the SHO and four police personnel under sections including 302 (murder) of the Indian Penal Code and sections of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act.

Rampur police said the clash occurred between

two groups on Tuesday and a team led by the Deputy Collector and circle officer reached the spot. One group was trying to install a board with the picture of Ambedkar and the other group opposed it claiming that the land was village commons, said Moradabad Divisional Commissioner Aujaneya Kumar Singh.

The deceased boy's brother alleged in a video that went viral that two police officers opened fire at the behest of the other group and Sumesh was passing through the area when a bullet hit him, killing him instantly.

Dalit leader and Azad Samaj Party chief Chandra Shekhar Aazad, who was on his way to Rampur to meet the victim's family, was stopped at Sambhal. Congress leader Udit Raj condemned the incident.

## Madras High Court dismisses ex-Minister Senthilbalaji's bail plea in money laundering case

Mohamed Imranullah S.  
CHENNAI

The Madras High Court on Wednesday refused to grant bail to former Minister V. Senthilbalaji in a money laundering case, in which he was arrested by the Directorate of Enforcement (ED) on June 14 last year, after observing that he continues to wield a lot of influence on the State government.

Justice N. Anand Venkatesh dismissed the petition, but directed the Principal Sessions Court in Chennai to complete the trial within three months, by conducting the proceedings on a day-to-day basis, since the petitioner has been in judicial custody for more than 250 days.

The judge agreed with Additional Solicitor-General A.R.L. Sundaresan, assisted by Special Public



V. Senthilbalaji

Prosecutor N. Ramesh for ED cases, that the petitioner had resigned from the Cabinet just a day before the hearing of the present bail petition early this month and not before that. "The fact that he continued to hold the position as a Minister for nearly eight months and, that too, without a portfolio, when he was in the jail, shows the tremendous influence of the petitioner and the importance that is given to

him by the State government," the judge wrote.

Even after resigning from the Cabinet, "he continues to be an MLA belonging to the same party which is running the government in the State of Tamil Nadu and therefore, without any hesitation, this court holds that the petitioner continues to wield a lot of influence on the government," Justice Venkatesh added.

## 'Tampering possible'

Since the money laundering case had been booked on the basis of a cash-for-jobs scam involving State transport corporation officials who had been arrayed as witnesses by the ED, the judge said there was every possibility of these witnesses being influenced and the evidence being tampered with if the petitioner was let out on bail.

## Villagers mourn Kasganj tractor deaths, but stuck with few transport options

Samridhi Tewari  
ETAH (U.P.)

Surrounded by wheat fields as far as the eye can see, the village of Kasa in Uttar Pradesh has been plunged into a deathly silence. Some of the hamlet's residents, mostly women, sit with their eyes lowered outside the red-bricked house belonging to Rubi Devi, who has just received her six-year-old son's body from a government hospital in Aligarh. He was among the 24 people who died after a tractor-trolley overturned and fell into a pond in Kasganj district on Saturday.

"I began trembling when I first laid eyes on Vidyant's body. Only a few days ago, he was playing in the fields. When I heard the news of the accident, I hoped the doctors could

save him. But here I am today, holding his cold body," Ms. Devi said, clenching her fist tightly around her sari's pallu in an attempt to hold back her tears.

But Kasa is just one of the villages grieving the loss of its residents. The tractor-trolley had carried over 30 people hailing from the villages of Banar, Khariya, Rauri and Kasa, all located in Etah district. They were headed towards a ghat in Kadarganj, over 120 km away, to take a dip in the Ganga river to mark the festival of Magh Purnima.

The man who drove the tractor-trolley, 42-year-old farmer Satan Singh, also hails from Kasa. He lost four members of his family in the accident - his mother, wife, daughter-in-law, and grandchild. "I lost eve-



Injured and broken: A survivor of the tractor-trolley tragedy recuperates in his village (left); neighbours console a woman who lost her six-year-old son in the incident. **SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA**

rything in a day. The damage cannot be undone," he said, standing hunched in his now-empty house.

"I was driving the tractor. As we were approaching Daryaganj, the wheel bearing broke down and we lost balance. I tried to slam the brakes from one side, but it didn't work and the vehicle toppled from the road and fell into an

eight-foot-deep pond," Mr. Singh added.

The villagers, before the accident occurred, had been sitting on a plastic cover atop the tractor-trolley. When the vehicle toppled, the ones perched on the edge of the tractor fell to the ground and got out alive. Others, however, were thrown into the pond, and finding them-

selves trapped in the pond bed, could not climb out. Within a span of seven or eight minutes, most of them, facing breathing difficulties, fell unconscious.

"I tried to move the tractor-trolley out of the pond. There were farmers nearby, but nobody came to help. After 20 minutes or so, police officials came and extricated the vehicle

from the pond, but by then, there were just bodies left," Mr. Singh said.

Among those who survived was Rajpal, a 50-year-old farmer from Kasa. He had been one of the lucky few sitting on the edge of the tractor, while his wife, Meena, had been in the middle.

"I hit the ground before the tractor fell into the pond. When the bodies were removed, I pressed Meera's chest to get as much water out from her body as I could. I thought I could save her. I didn't know she was already dead," Rajpal rued.

Villagers told *The Hindu* that they often choose the tractor-trolley as a medium of transport for its easy accessibility and affordability. "It costs about ₹1,000 to reach the Ganga via a jeep, which only carries seven

persons. An auto will also cost a similar amount, but will only carry four persons. Buses are a hassle because one must change at several points. A tractor, though, fits 30-35 people. One just has to cover the cost of diesel, which too gets divided," a villager said.

But despite being the preferred mode of travel, similar tragic accidents have taken place in the past too, despite the State government issuing orders preventing the use of such vehicles to transport people. The orders, however, lack any on-ground follow-up, thus doing nothing to deter the people from using these vehicles to travel to their destinations.

"There is a systemic problem here. Public transport is not easily accessible, so in the farmlands,

the villagers have no option but to use tractor-trolleys. Since the vehicles are carrying a large number of people, solutions need to be found to prevent such mishaps. It is unfortunate that these accidents keep happening, but these trolleys, registered for agricultural and commercial use, keep ferrying people," Additional Transport Commissioner P.S. Satyarthi told *The Hindu*, adding that the law only exempts labourers, who are allowed to use tractor-trolleys to reach a project site so that the vehicle can be used for work at the same site.

He added that the State government should work on providing a more efficient transport network in villages. "Bus routes should be revised to access remote areas so people can commute easily," he said.



# Time has come to drive out DMK from T.N.: PM

Narendra Modi says the Centre could not implement many of its ambitious projects in the State, including AIIMS in Madurai, because of the State government's non-cooperation with it

**L. Srikrishna**  
TIRUNELVELI

The time has come to drive out the DMK from Tamil Nadu, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said in Tirunelveli on Wednesday.

Speaking at a public meeting, he said the Centre could not implement many of its ambitious projects in the State, including the AIIMS in Madurai, because of the non-cooperation of the DMK government.

He said the BJP, under the leadership of its State president K. Annamalai, would replace the DMK and deliver good governance. "This is Modi's guarantee," he added.

The DMK and its allies were keen on promoting their own interests, unmindful of the need to take development to the nook and corner of the State. "For instance, the father [Chief Minister M.K. Stalin] is anxious to promote his son as the next political heir," but the BJP would protect the interests of your [people's] children," he said.

Mr. Modi said the BJP had made a Dalit functionary from Tamil Nadu (L. Murugan) a Union Minister. He could not win in an election from Tamil Nadu; but, in a gesture of affection towards the people of Tamil Nadu, the party sent him to the Rajya Sabha from the Hindi heartland (Madhya Pradesh), and "he is serv-



**For the people:** Prime Minister Narendra Modi greets the public at a meeting held at Palayamkottai in Tirunelveli on Wednesday. PTI

ing the country efficiently", he said. The BJP's 10-year rule raised the country's image among world leaders, he said.

Indian Air Force Group Captain Pilot Abinandan Varthaman was held captive for about 60 hours by Pakistan, but he was freed unharmed, he said. Likewise, eight former Indian naval officers were awarded death penalty in Qatar, but the Union government got them released.

He also touched on the diplomatic relations with Sri Lanka, explaining how Indians secured the release of five fishermen.

## Development of T.N.

The Prime Minister said the BJP would work with the sole aim of developing Tamil Nadu and urged the people to give the BJP a hands-down victory in all the Lok Sabha seats in the

nagar, which had not witnessed any substantial progress would have world-class infrastructure soon, he added.

The country was inching closer to many developed nations in many areas, including renewable energy. In the next five years, he wished to see India among the top three nations. Hence, Tamil Nadu should not be lagging behind any more and join mainstream development, he said.

The BJP had a comprehensive plan for the country for the next five years and Tamil Nadu is on the list for a massive changeover. The party would cross the 400-mark in the Lok Sabha election with the support from the electorate here, Mr. Modi said.

Thanking BJP workers and members of the public for their support to his 'En Mann, En Makkal' yatra taken out in all 234 Assembly constituencies, Mr. Annamalai said the next 60 days would be crucial for all the right-thinking people. "I want each one of you to work hard and strengthen the hands of our PM Narendra Modi," he said.

Union Minister L. Murugan said that when the BJP took out the 'Vel' yatra, the party won four seats in the Assembly. With the completion of Mr. Annamalai's 'En Mann, En Makkal' yatra, the party should romp home with 40 seats, he added.

coming election. "I promise I will return more to you. Trust my words," he said. During the last two days of his tour in Tamil Nadu, he was able to observe that the people from different walks of life came closer to the BJP, in a sign that the other parties (DMK) did nothing tangible, but only enriched themselves, he said.

## New infrastructure

The Prime Minister said that despite the DMK rule, the Union government had brought new infrastructure to the State. The Tirunelveli-Chennai (Vande Bharat) Express was a classic example, he said. Virudhunagar district had been earmarked for development of a PM-MITRA Textile Park.

Many more southern districts, including Tirunelveli, Thoothukudi, Ramanathapuram, and Virudhu-

# PM Modi inaugurates country's first indigenous hydrogen fuel cell ferry

**The Hindu Bureau**  
KOCHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi flagged off India's first indigenously built hydrogen fuel cell ferry boat in virtual mode here on Wednesday.

The vessel has been built at the Cochin Shipyard. The pilot vessel is a 24-metre catamaran which can carry 50 passengers. It also has a fully air conditioned space for passengers. It will make urban mobility smooth and easy, according to a release issued by the Cochin Shipyard Limited (CSL).



**Brand new:** Built by the Cochin Shipyard, the hydrogen fuel cell ferry boat can carry up to 50 passengers. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

The launch of the vessel was part of a major programme organised in Thoothukudi in Tamil Na-

du to mark the laying of the foundation stone for a ₹17,300-crore project in the district. The vessel

built at the CSL underscores the pioneering step for embracing clean energy solutions and aligning with the nation's net-zero commitments, he said.

## To boost connectivity

The hydrogen fuel vessel has fully home-grown technology and it can be replicated in other parts of the country for urban mobility application, according to the CSL.

Mr. Modi also said that the various rail projects launched on Wednesday will further boost connectivity between south Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

# 'Can't compare Singur, Nandigram protests'

**Press Trust of India**  
BANKURA

Rubbishing the BJP's attempts to draw parallels between anti-land acquisition agitations in Nandigram and Singur in the past and those currently taking place in Sandeshkhali, Trinamool Congress chief and West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee insisted that the two cannot be conflated. Ms. Banerjee was, however, careful not to name Sandeshkhali directly while making the observation.

"Each place has its own characteristics, so do not compare one with the other," she said while speaking at the administrative re-

view meeting held at Khatra in Bankura.

"Do not make the mistake of inciting violence. I do not want any bloodshed or any incident of torture anywhere. I have never supported any wrongdoing and I never will. Even if some wrong was unknowingly committed somewhere, I don't support that either," she said.

While the Nandigram and Singur agitations had, back in 2007-08, catapulted Ms. Banerjee to power against the erstwhile ruling Left Front in the State, the BJP suggested that the current Sandeshkhali agitations signified the turning of tides against Ms. Banerjee this time around.

# IUML announces its candidates in Kerala

**The Hindu Bureau**  
MALAPPURAM

The Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) here on Wednesday announced its candidates for the 2024 Lok Sabha elections.

While the incumbent Lok Sabha member from Ponnani, E.T. Mohammed Basheer will contest from Malappuram, M.P. Abdusamad Samadani, who now represents Malappuram, will contest from Ponnani.

IUML State president Syed Sadikali Shihab Thangal announced the candidates after a high-level party meeting here on Wednesday. The IUML is contesting the polls in an

alliance with the Congress in Kerala. Of the 20 Lok Sabha seats in Kerala, the Congress is contesting 16. Two seats are with the IUML, while the Kerala Congress and the Revolutionary Socialist Party are contesting one each.

The IUML decided to drop its strident demand for a third Lok Sabha seat and instead accepted a Rajya Sabha seat. A decision on the Rajya Saba seat would be taken later, Mr. Thangal said.

He said that sitting MP Nawas Kani will contest from Ramanathapuram in Tamil Nadu.

Party workers who gathered at Panakkad welcomed the announcement.

## IN BRIEF



### Forest dept. officials rescue sloth bear in Shivamogga city

Karnataka Forest department officials successfully rescued a sloth bear, aged about six to eight years, that was spotted strolling in the residential locality of Vivekananda Badavane in Gopala, Shivamogga city, on Wednesday morning. Local people spotted the animal in the area around 5.30 a.m. A resident suffered minor injuries when the animal pounced on him. The officials captured the animal after firing a tranquillizer dart at it. A decision to release the animal back to the forest area would be taken after assessing its health condition.

### ED attaches assets of 'antique dealer' Monson Mavunkal

The Directorate of Enforcement (ED) has provisionally attached movable and immovable properties worth around ₹1.88 crore of alleged conman and self-styled antique dealer Monson Mavunkal and his family members. The assets were attached for being proceeds of crime under provisions of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act, 2002. The ED probe revealed that he had cheated various persons in the guise of a collector of antiques and artefacts, which did not have the antique value as claimed by him.

### Denying entry to farmer: NHRC issues notice to Metro

The National Human Rights Commission on Wednesday issued notice on Karnataka Chief Secretary and Managing Director of Bengaluru Metro Rail Corporation Limited over the case of a farmer who was stopped from boarding a Metro train by an official at the Rajajinagar station, citing his 'untidy' clothes. According to reports, the farmer arrived with a sack of goods on his head at the security point for the Metro station, where an official stopped him. The NHRC's action comes after a video of the incident went viral on social media.

### Kerala HC refuses to cancel actor Dileep's bail

**The Hindu Bureau**  
KOCHI

The Kerala High Court on Wednesday declined to interfere with an order of the Ernakulam Additional Sessions Court which rejected a plea of the Crime Branch for cancelling the bail granted to actor Dileep, accused in the 2017 actor sexual assault case.

Justice Sophy Thomas, while disposing of the petition, observed that "if the bail is cancelled at this juncture, it may lead to further litigations, which may frustrate the trial which is about to be completed... Let the trial be completed and the case be disposed of at the earliest."

### Water woes



**Tough times:** Children on their way to fetch drinking water, supplied by Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board at Rajarajeshwari Nagar zone in Bengaluru on Wednesday. Many areas in the city are facing severe water shortage. K. MURALI KUMAR

# 'Age of admission to Class 1 in Kerala will remain 5 years'

**The Hindu Bureau**  
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

Age of admission to Class 1 in Kerala will remain five years, State Minister for General Education V. Sivankutty has said.

Any sudden change in the minimum age of admission to six years will create social problems, the Minister said at a press meet here on Wednesday. The Union Ministry of Education had a few days ago written to States and Union Territories to fix six years as the minimum age of admission to Class 1 this year.

The Ministry's latest missive, dated February 15, is the third time that States and Union Territories have been asked to align the age

**The Centre had written to States to fix six years as the minimum age of admission to Class 1 in line with NEP**

of admission to Class 1 at six in line with the National Education Policy (NEP).

Similar notices were issued last year and in 2021 in the wake of the NEP launch. The Ministry's directive also points to the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, that covers education of children from the age of six to 14.

Last year too, the State had decided against raising the minimum age. Then,

the Minister had said the government would bring clarity on the issue in the next academic year on the basis of the M.A. Khader Committee report on school education.

However, the Minister on Wednesday said the State had good school enrolment numbers and few dropouts. Also, children here joined kindergarten at the age of three and by the age of five, were ready to join Class 1. In such a context, there was no need to delay their Class 1 admission by a year.

States had a right to take decision on matters of education, and Kerala has decided to stick to the age of five for school admission, the Minister said.

# Will adopt declaration on Special Category Status for A.P.: Cong.

**The Hindu Bureau**  
VIJAYAWADA

The Congress in Andhra Pradesh will adopt a declaration on Special Category Status (SCS) at its proposed Tirupati meeting scheduled on March 1, to bring the crucial issue back into focus, says APCC president Y.S. Sharmila.

Addressing the media here on Wednesday, Ms. Sharmila said the party would adopt the declaration at the same place and venue from where Prime Minister Narendra Modi had made a promise to the people of Andhra Pradesh on granting the SCS and other projects that find

mention in the A.P. State Reorganisation Act, 2014.

"The Congress believes in balancing welfare and development," Ms. Sharmila said, pointing to the 'Indiramma Abhayam' scheme announced by the party at its recent Anantapur meeting.

"The SCS is important for the development of our State. It is our right," she said, launching a scathing attack on the YSR Congress Party and the Opposition Telugu Desam Party "for placing the crucial issue on the backburner to further their selfish motives."

She said both the regional parties used the SCS only to garner votes.

# SC extends protection to BRS leader from coercive action by ED

**Press Trust of India**  
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Wednesday extended till March 13 the protection it had granted to Bharat Rashtra Samithi leader K. Kavitha from any coercive action in a money laundering case lodged by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) in connection with the alleged Delhi excise policy scam.

A bench comprising justices Bela M Trivedi and Pankaj Mithal extended the operation of its earlier order and said the matter will now be taken up for further hearing on March 13.

The ED had issued summons to the BRS leader on February 21 seeking her presence on February 26. However, Ms. Kavitha did not appear before the probe agency.

## Excise policy case

The ED has alleged that Kavitha was a part of liquor cartel 'The South Group' which paid kickback of ₹100 crore to Delhi's ruling Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in return for favours under the now-scrapped excise policy for 2021-22.

The top court had on February 5 extended the protection to Ms. Kavitha, the daughter of former Telangana Chief Minister and BRS chief K Chandrashekar Rao.

She approached the apex court with an application seeking directions to restrain the ED from calling her by way of a notice or summons under section 50 of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) during the pendency of her petition.



## Mizoram Assembly adopts resolution against border fence

The Hindu Bureau  
GUWAHATI

The 60-member Mizoram Assembly on Wednesday adopted a resolution against the Centre's decision to fence the India-Myanmar border and scrap the Free Movement Regime (FMR) agreement with the civil war-torn neighbouring country.

The FMR allows residents along the 1,643-km border between the two countries to travel up to 16 km in each others' territory without any visa and stay for a limited period.

In the resolution moved by Mizoram Home Minister K. Sapdanga, the Centre was urged to reconsider its decision and take steps instead to ensure the Zo ethnic people can live together without a fence dividing their ancestral land.

The dominant Mizos of Mizoram, the Kuki-Zomis of Manipur, the Chins of Myanmar and the Kuki-Chins of Bangladesh belong to the Zo ethnic group.

"The British geographically divided the Zo ethnic people who have inhabited [present-day] Mizoram and the Chin Hills of Myanmar for centuries together, once under their own administration. We have

been dreaming of reunification and cannot accept the India-Myanmar border imposed upon us," Mr. Sapdanga said.

The scrapping of the FMR was unacceptable too, he added.

The Minister said the Union government has not yet intimated the Mizoram government about its plan on erecting the border fence and suspending the FMR but the statements of Union Ministers make things apparent.

On February 6, Union Home Minister Amit Shah said the India-Myanmar border would be fenced. His announcement on scrapping the FMR to "maintain the country's internal security and demographic structure of the Northeastern States" followed two days later.

Attributing the Centre's move to the demands of the Manipur government after ethnic clashes between the dominant Meiteis and Kuki-Zomi people broke out in May 2023, Mr. Sapdanga said national security cannot be an excuse for fencing the border and scrapping the FMR.

Of the four States bordering Myanmar, Mizoram, and Nagaland are opposed to the fencing plan. Manipur and Arunachal Pradesh are in favour of it.

## India asks U.S. to probe pro-Khalistani groups

Both sides review ongoing cooperation in counter-terrorism and security domains; they also discuss the need to curb illegal immigration, human trafficking, money laundering

Subhasini Haidar  
Vijaita Singh  
NEW DELHI

India raised its demand that pro-Khalistani outfits in the U.S. be investigated for instigating violence against India, as senior officials met for the India-U.S. Homeland Security Dialogue on Wednesday, that reviewed ongoing cooperation in counter-terrorism and security. The two sides also focused on curbing the rampant increase in narcotics trafficking, particularly of the drug Fentanyl, that the U.S. has been grappling with.

"During the dialogue, both sides reviewed ongoing cooperation in counter-terrorism and security domains, which has been a key pillar of the India-U.S. strategic partnership. In this context, they discussed steps that can be taken to bolster bilateral efforts to combat terrorism and violent extremism, drug trafficking, organised crime and ensure transportation security," the Home Ministry said in a statement after the talks.

The Indian delegation was led by Home Secretary



Strategic ties: Indian and the U.S. officials during the Homeland Security Dialogue in New Delhi on Wednesday. X/@PIBHOMEAFFAIRS

Ajay Bhalla and the U.S. delegation was led by Kristie Canegallo, Acting Deputy Secretary, U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

According to the statement, the two sides also spoke about the need to curb illegal immigration and human trafficking, money laundering, cybercrimes, and misuse of the cyberdomain for illegal activities, including terror financing. The official statements made no mention of the ongoing investigation in the U.S. over the "assassin for hire" case where the

U.S. agencies have accused an Indian national purportedly working for a senior Indian security official to organise the assassination of Sikhs for Justice (SFJ) chief and pro-Khalistan separatist U.S. national Gurbatwant Singh Panun. The External Affairs Ministry had announced in November that a high-level panel would investigate the allegations, but there has been no further development announced, although both sides are believed to be in touch to discuss the case regularly. India's counter demand

## Govt. bans 2 factions of Jammu & Kashmir outfit under UAPA

The Hindu Bureau  
NEW DELHI

The Union Home Ministry on Wednesday declared two factions of the Muslim Conference, Jammu and Kashmir (MCJK), led by Abdul Ghani Bhat and Ghulam Nabi Sumji, respectively, as "unlawful association" under the anti-terror Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA).

Union Home Minister Amit Shah posted on X that "these outfits have been engaging in activities against the sovereignty and integrity of the nation". Both factions have been banned for five years. The two groups, which are a constituent of the Mirwaiz Umar Farooq's All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC), have not been active for several years.

In 2017, Prof. Abdul Ghani Bhat, who had been the head of the APHC, was removed as the president of the Muslim Conference after meeting with the Government of India's special representative, the late Dineshwar Sharma, and expressing his willingness to talk to the Centre. He is considered to be a moderate and the group has negligible presence.

Ghulam Nabi Sumji, a former MLA, resigned in



Amit Shah

1989 to join the Hurriyat.

A notification by the Ministry said the MCJK-B, chaired by Bhat, has linkages with banned terrorist organisations and has supported terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir. It said that members of the MCJK-B have been indulging in generating feelings of hatred and disaffection against India to separate Jammu and Kashmir from the Union of India, and its leaders have raised funds through various sources, including Pakistan and its proxy organisations, for perpetrating unlawful activities, including supporting terrorist activities and sustained pelting of stones on Indian security forces.

The MCJK-S, the outfit chaired by Ghulam Nabi Sumji, is known for its anti-India and pro-Pakistan propaganda, the Ministry said in its notification.

## Nagaland govt.'s efforts to regulate coal mining hit Article 371A wall

Rahul Karmakar  
GUWAHATI

Article 371A of the Constitution of India has been the major hurdle in the Nagaland government's efforts to regulate small-scale illegal coal mining activities in the State.

Specific to Nagaland, Article 371A has special provisions guaranteeing the protection of land and its resources apart from the Naga customary law and procedure.

The coalition government headed by Chief Minister Neiphiu Rio has been under pressure to regulate coal mining activities after six miners died in an explosion in a rat-hole mine near Ruchyan village in the Wokha district on January 25.

On Tuesday, Mr. Rio and Deputy Chief Minister T.R. Zeliang told the Nagaland Assembly that Article 371A had impeded ensuring scientific mining of coal across five districts in the State: Longleng, Mokokchung, Mon, Tuensang, and Wokha.

According to the State's Geology and Mining De-



A coal mining site in Mon district of Nagaland. FILE PHOTO

partment, 45 coal mining licence holders operate in these districts.

Raising the issue during the second day of the Assembly's Budget session, National People's Party MLA Nuklutoshi Longkumer said numerous illegal and unscientific coal mining operations were posing a serious threat to human and environmental health in Nagaland.

The Chief Minister agreed but attributed the difficulty in making these mines accountable to the special Constitutional provisions for the State and the prevalent land-holding system giving ownership to the community. "Reclaim-

ing mined areas has become important. Contractors and businesspersons conducting mining activities should bear the responsibility for land reclamation by filling up the rat-hole mines and planting trees rather than leaving it barren," he said.

He added the department concerned should be holding contractors violating mining guidelines accountable.

Mr. Zeliang also said the unique land rights conferred under Article 371A have made regulating illegal coal mining activities more challenging. "Residents in coal-bearing areas depend on illegal mining

for sustenance and they need to be educated on the adverse effects of such activities," he said.

Data from Nagaland's Geology and Mining Department say the State has 492.68 million tonnes of coal reserves but dispersed erratically and inconsistently. Nagaland's coal mining policy, first notified in 2006, allows rat-hole mining as the coal deposits are too scattered for large-scale and coordinated operations. Leases called small pocket deposit licences are awarded to individuals.

According to the Geology and Mining Department's Principal Secretary, Himato Zhimomi, rat-hole mining can be undertaken only with the consent of the departments concerned, including that of Forest and Environment.

Officials claimed the State government awarded several rat-hole mining leases with proper forest and environment clearances and definite mining plans. This has not stopped people from operating such mines illegally.

## Nepal-India official dialogue silent on landmark Pancheshwar project

Kallol Bhattacharjee  
NEW DELHI

More than a month after India and Nepal signed the agreement on long-term power sharing, the two sides have not managed to make any forward movement on the stalled negotiations over the landmark Pancheshwar Multipurpose Project (PMP).

On Wednesday, Foreign Secretary Vinay Mohan Kwatra met his Nepali counterpart Sewa Lamsal here. A press note issued on this meeting mentioned the two sides discussed "multifaceted cooperation", but it did not include any reference to the PMP, which is by far the biggest bilateral power project conceived between the two sides.

Ms. Lamsal's visit to Delhi took place just days after Nepal's Foreign Minister N.P. Saud visited New Delhi to take part in the annual Raisina Dialogue. Subsequently, Mr. Saud also visited the Ram Temple in Ayodhya. Ms. Lamsal, who met External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, is scheduled to participate in the



Awaiting consensus: External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar with Nepal Foreign Secretary Sewa Lamsal in New Delhi on Tuesday. ANI

8th Asia Economic Dialogue 2024 being organised by the External Affairs Ministry and the Pune International Centre on Thursday. "During the meeting, the two Foreign Secretaries held discussions on the entire range of multifaceted cooperation between India and Nepal and also followed up on the 7th India-Nepal Joint Commission Meeting which was co-chaired by the External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar and the Foreign Minister of Nepal H.E. N.P. Saud in Kathmandu last month," the Ministry said in the press note.

After the Joint Commis-

sion Meeting, the two Ministers witnessed the exchange of an agreement between the two governments on long-term electricity trade. The agreement aims to increase export of Nepali power to India to the level of 10,000 MW over a period of 10 years. However, the Pancheshwar Multipurpose Project is aimed at generating around 6,480 MW energy (to be divided equally between two sides), along with water for irrigation of 1,30,000 hectares of land in Nepal and 2,40,000 hectares of Indian territory, respectively. The two sides were expected to iron out differences

over the detailed project report (DPR) but the necessary discussion within the team of experts under the Governing Body of the Pancheshwar Development Authority has not been held till now.

It is understood that the project is stalled because the Indian and the Nepali sides are unable to come to a consensus on sharing of benefits. While electricity is divided equally, India gets the lion's share of irrigation and flood control benefits. On the other hand, Kathmandu feels water is "white gold" and India should pay Nepal for it. India cannot accept this claim as it challenges India's understanding of other water-based treaties, including the Indus Waters Treaty with Pakistan. A seasoned observer said, that India should find a way to compensate the Nepalese in a satisfactory manner.

However, the discussion to kickstart the Pancheshwar project will require political courage and bureaucratic foresight on both sides, which is yet to emerge.

## S. Korean President to visit India this year: envoy

Dinakar Peri  
NEW DELHI

South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol is expected to visit India this year and the two countries are hopeful of concluding ongoing negotiations to upgrade the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) existing between the two countries, said South Korean envoy Chang Jae-bok said on Wednesday.

"During the last round of talks on CEPA upgrade held in January in Delhi, negotiators on both sides have committed to conclude talks within this year. Possibly before the visit by

our President, we hope to conclude the negotiations," Mr. Chang said in a press interaction.

On the possible timing of the Mr. Yoon's state visit, the South Korean Ambassador to India stated, "We will have an in-depth discussion on it after the election, but hopefully the visit will happen within this year."

The existing CEPA was made in 2009 and it became effective in 2010.

Negotiations between the Ministry of Commerce of Korea and the Ministry of Commerce and Industry of India, for an upgraded CEPA were held in 2016 and 2017 but halted during



South Korean Ambassador to India Chang Jae-bok.

the pandemic. On the ease of doing business, Mr. Chang told presspersons, "We wish Indian authorities would work harder to make business environment more friendly to Korean businesses." He said the South Korean President had raised the issue of

more friendly conditions and doing business in India during the bilateral meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi. "We hope India will respond positively," Mr. Chang remarked.

External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar is scheduled to pay bilateral visits to South Korea and Japan from March 5 to 8.

In Seoul on March 5 and 6, he will co-chair the 10th India-Republic of Korea Joint Commission Meeting (JCM) with his counterpart Cho Tae-yul. During the visit, Mr. Jaishankar is also expected to meet Korean dignitaries, heads of think tanks and members of the Indian community.

Mr. Chang said there will be discussions on defence, defence production and also economic cooperation. The Minister will also discuss regional and global issues, he stated.

On the 2+2 dialogue at the Vice Minister level that has been at the planning stage for long, Mr. Chang said that efforts are still on. Talks may first start at the Joint Secretary level and then upgrade to the Vice Minister level, he said.

He added, "We are going to launch Korea space administration very soon and we are looking to cooperate with the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) in low orbit satellites."

## House of Uttarkashi tunnel rescuer demolished in Delhi

Satvika Mahajan  
NEW DELHI

The Delhi Development Authority (DDA) on Wednesday demolished the house of Vakeel Hasan, a member of the rescue team that brought out 41 workers trapped in the collapsed Silkyara tunnel in Uttarakhand's Uttarkashi in November last year.

According to the authority, it had conducted the demolition drive to remove encroachments from its acquired land in Khajuri Khas village in north-east Delhi. It was part of

planned development land, DDA officials said.

Speaking to *The Hindu*, Mr. Hasan said, "We were not given any notice of the demolition. The area we live in is a regularised colony. I built my house in 2012-13 but DDA came suddenly at 9 a.m. and pushed us out of our home."

"My wife and I were not at home, DDA officials came, only my three children were present", he said.

"I do not know where to go now. When I reached the spot, I was taken to the nearby police station, and

they took away my phone."

North-East Delhi MP Manoj Tiwari said: "I have already investigated the matter. I will ensure that Mr. Hasan gets compensated through the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana."

According to sources in the DDA, the land was acquired by the authority for some development project, and it was encroached upon.

However, the details of the matter are still unclear. DDA member and AAP leader Somnath Bharti said he would also look into the matter.



# RS poll outcome puts NDA just four short of majority mark in the Upper House

The BJP-led alliance now has 117 seats in the 240-member Upper House of Parliament; BJP gained two extra seats in Himachal Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh due to cross-voting by Congress, SP MLAs

**Nistula Hebbar**  
NEW DELHI

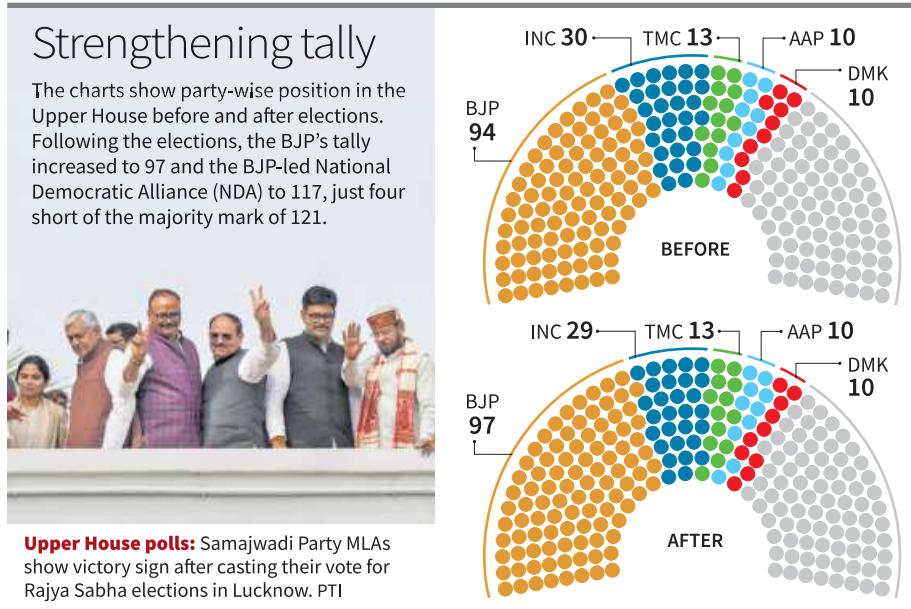
The results of the Rajya Sabha elections on Tuesday have put the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) just four short of the majority mark of 121 in the 240-member Upper House of Parliament. This is likely to have far-reaching implications for domestic politics.

The BJP gained one extra seat each in Himachal Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh.

The NDA, since 2014, has enjoyed a majority in the Lok Sabha and have had no trouble in the passage of Bills. However, it has faced hurdles in the Rajya Sabha.

In March 2015, the government had to face the ignominy of seeing amendments moved by the Opposition to the President's Address over corruption and black money being passed.

Since then, the NDA has kept several neutral parties such as the Biju Janata Dal



(BJD) and the Yuva Jana Samikha Rythu Congress Party (YSRCP) with it when contemplating tricky pieces of legislation.

In these set of biennale elections to the Rajya Sabha, the BJP saw 28 of its MPs retiring, and was expected to win back exactly the same number. However,

because of cross-voting by Himachal Pradesh's Congress MLAs and Samajwadi Party MLAs in Uttar Pradesh it netted two extra seats.

The new seats take the BJP's tally in the Rajya Sabha to 97, including five nominated members, and that of the NDA to 117.

The Congress has 29 members, followed by the Trinamool Congress with 13, the DMK and the AAP with 10 each, the BJD and the YSRCP with nine each, the BRS with seven, the RJD with six, the CPI(M) with five, and the AIADMK and the JD(U) with four each.

## BJP requests EC to videograph voting at all polling booths

**The Hindu Bureau**  
NEW DELHI

Ahead of the Lok Sabha elections, the BJP has requested the Election Commission (EC) to ensure that the voting process at all polling stations is videographed, and polling booths are set up at high-rise housing societies to help urban voters exercise their franchise.

In a memorandum submitted to the poll body on Wednesday, the BJP also urged it to consider reforming the approval process for political parties' media content to make it faster, arguing that this would allow them adequate time to plan their campaign.

Its other demand was that the EC should ensure that there is no ambiguity in the rule regarding putting flags and making wall paintings by party workers at their homes during election campaigns.

### 'Gaps remain'

The memorandum, submitted to the EC by a BJP delegation comprising Union Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw and party national general secretary Arun Singh, said that though these issues have been

### Party asks Election Commission to set up polling stations at high-rise housing societies too

raised by it in the past and the EC has strived to address them, "gaps still remain and these gaps need an immediate resolution ahead of the general elections".

Speaking to the media, Mr. Vaishnaw said that the delegation urged the poll panel to set up booths at high-rise apartment complexes in urban areas as much as possible so that eligible voters at such residential buildings could exercise their franchise.

"CEOs/DEOs may be directed to call special meetings of political parties to inform them of setting up new polling stations and other arrangements so as the residents in these societies are informed and assured accordingly," the memorandum said.

"Our second request was that video recordings be done at 100% polling booths [during the elections]," Mr. Vaishnaw said, adding that at present, videography is done at 50% polling booths only.

## INBRIEF



### Army normalising atrocities against civilians: Mehbooba

Former J&K Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti on Wednesday accused the Army in South Kashmir's Kulgam of "beating up" a civilian and "normalising atrocities". Ms. Mufti, also president of the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP), identified the civilian as Mushtaq Ganai from Nigeen Pora in Kund in south Kashmir's Kulgam. "Ganai was beaten up by Army men from the Kanchloo camp. Mushtaq bore the brunt of this inhuman treatment because his brother happened to be a militant killed decades ago," Ms. Mufti said, in a post on X. She alleged that this incident doesn't stand in isolation and is one of many where such atrocities are being normalised and committed by men in uniforms on a regular basis.

### BSP leader Shah Alam alias Guddu Jamali joins SP in U.P.

Two-time former MLA and Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) leader Shah Alam alias Guddu Jamali on Wednesday joined the Samajwadi Party (SP) in Lucknow in the presence of party president Akhilesh Yadav. Mr. Jamali, who wields influence in his home district of Azamgarh, served two terms as an MLA between 2012-2022 from the Mubarakpur Assembly seat and polled more than 2.66 lakh votes as a BSP nominee in the 2022 Lok Sabha byelection from the Azamgarh seat. Mr. Jamali said that in the present circumstances, the SP is the force in U.P. standing for the democratic rights of every citizen. Mr. Jamali's induction is seen as an attempt by the SP to strengthen the prospects of the party in Azamgarh where the Muslim community is influential electorally. In the 2014 parliamentary poll, Mr. Jamali polled over 2.66 lakh votes, while SP founder Mulayam Singh won the seat securing 3.40 lakh votes.

### Auroville celebrates 56th founding anniversary

Auroville celebrated its 56th founding anniversary with the traditional dawn fire communion at the amphitheatre adjacent to the Matrimandir on Wednesday. According to Auroville sources, thousands of people gathered around the bonfire in collective meditation. For the community, it marked an occasion to step into a new year with renewed commitment and dedication to the founding idea of the universal township founded by The Mother, spiritual associate of Sri Aurobindo, on February 28, 1968 as a place where men and women of all countries live in peace and progressive harmony.

## On the draw



## CBI summons Akhilesh Yadav as witness in U.P. mining case

**The Hindu Bureau**  
NEW DELHI

The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) has summoned Samajwadi Party supremo and former Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Akhilesh Yadav on Thursday for recording his witness statement in connection with an illegal minor mineral mining case registered in January 2019, an agency official said on Wednesday. Mr. Yadav and his former colleague, Gayatri Prajapati, held the mining portfolio in the State during the

### Between 2012 and 2016, it is alleged that the public servants had allowed illegal mining of minor minerals in Hamirpur

check period. The CBI had registered the case following a directive from the Allahabad High Court. Among those named in the case are the then Hamirpur District Magistrate B. Chandrakala, mining officer Moinuddin,

mining clerk Ram Ashrey Prajapati, leaseholders Ramesh Kumar Mishra, Dinesh Kumar Mishra, Ambika Tiwari, Sanjay Dixit, Satyadev Dixit, Ramavtar Singh, and Karan Singh, and excavator Adil Khan.

Between 2012 and 2016, it is alleged that the public servants had allowed illegal mining of minor minerals in Hamirpur. They illegally gave fresh leases for mining of sand, renewed the existing leases and also permitted "obstructed period" to the existing leaseholders.

## Congress, RJD want defectors disqualified in Bihar Assembly

**Amarnath Tewary**  
PATNA

Bihar Congress president Akhilesh Prasad Singh on Wednesday met Assembly Speaker Nand Kishore Yadav seeking the disqualification of MLAs who have defected from the party.

The Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) has also said that it would seek disqualification of those who had defected.

On Wednesday, Congress MLAs Murari Prasad Gautam and Siddharth Saurabh, along with RJD MLA Sangita Kumari, switched sides to sit with the NDA block inside the State Assembly. Earlier, when the newly formed NDA government was seeking the trust vote on February 12, three RJD MLAs - Chetan Anand, Neelam Devi and Prahlad Yadav - had switched sides to vote in favour of the NDA and sat on the Treasury Benches.

"The BJP is misusing its power to offer inducements to the MLAs or issue threats through agencies like the CBI and the ED. We condemn the poaching of our MLAs, of whom Murari Prasad Gautam, till recently, was a Minister," Mr.



Singh told presspersons after he led a delegation of party legislators to meet the Speaker. Mr. Gautam had been the Panchayati Raj Minister in the previous Mahagatbandhan government, which comprised the RJD, the JD(U), the Congress, and three Left parties.

Congress Legislature Party leader Shakil Ahmed Khan, who was part of the delegation, described the defectors as gaddars (traitors) and said they had been "stripped of party's primary membership".

All the defecting Mahagatbandhan MLAs have maintained silence over their next steps. However, there are reports that they would be joining the BJP to contest the 2025 Assembly election.

## Court grants bail to Rabri, 2 daughters in land case

**Press Trust of India**  
NEW DELHI

A Delhi court on Wednesday granted bail to former Bihar Chief Minister Rabri Devi and her daughters Misa Bharti and Hema Yadav in the Railways' land-for-jobs case.

Ms. Misa Bharti, the eldest of RJD president Lalu Prasad and Ms. Rabri Devi's children, is a Rajya Sabha member from Bihar.

Special Judge Vishal Gogne granted relief to the three after the Enforcement Directorate (ED) did not oppose the bail applications.

The Central probe agency submitted that considering the serious nature of the case, stringent conditions should be imposed on the accused while granting them bail.

The counsel for the accused submitted that since the investigating agency did not find it necessary to arrest them during the investigation, there was no plausible reason for the court to deny them the relief of regular bail now.

The judge directed them to not contact, influence or coerce any persons connected with the case.

## Manipur's Naga MLAs seek new Minister for Tribal Affairs

**The Hindu Bureau**  
GUWAHATI

Manipur's Naga MLAs have asked Chief Minister Nongthombam Biren Singh to appoint a new Minister for the Tribal Affairs and Hills Development Department "rendered defunct due to the absence" of incumbent Letpao Haokip.

Manipur has 20 Assembly constituencies reserved for Scheduled Tribes. Ten are represented by the Nagas and the other 10 by those belonging to the Kuki-Zo community. People from the Kuki-Zo community have been caught in an ethnic conflict with the non-tribal Meiteis since May 2023.

Mr. Haokip, a Bharatiya Janata Party MLA, belongs to the Kuki-Zo group. In a joint letter submitted to the Chief Minister on Wednesday, the Naga MLAs said the people have been facing difficulties due to the prevailing unrest in the State.

"In this hour of crisis, we would like to appeal you to kindly look into the matter of the functioning of Tribal Affairs and Hills Department which has been rendered defunct

due to absence of the Hon'ble Minister of Tribal Affairs and Hills, Government of Manipur for the last 10 months," the letter read.

### 'Crucial hour'

The Naga MLAs said the department "is becoming more crucial in this hour of crisis to look after the needs and development of tribals and the hill areas to bring overall peace and progress" in the State.

"Therefore, we would like to request you to appoint (a) new Tribal Affairs and Hills Minister in charge to look after the affairs of tribals and hills efficiently and effectively," they wrote.

Seven of the 10 Kuki-Zo MLAs are from the ruling BJP. They left the Meitei-majority Imphal Valley soon after the ethnic violence broke out on May 3, 2023. They said Imphal had become a "valley of death".

Of the 10 Naga MLAs, five are from the Naga People's Front and two are from the National People's Party - both members of the BJP-headed NDA. Two belong to the BJP and one is an Independent.

## Top Spanish official likely to pitch deal for submarine

**Dinakar Peri**  
NEW DELHI

As Germany pushes for an inter-governmental agreement for the sale of six advanced conventional submarines to India, a top defence official from Spain - the second contender for the Indian Navy's tender - is scheduled to visit Delhi next week.

Spanish Secretary of State for Defence Amparo Valcarlos is scheduled to visit India on March 7 and 8 and the submarine deal is likely to be high on the agenda of the talks she is scheduled to hold with her Indian counterpart Defence Secretary Giridhar Aramane, according to diplomatic sources.

Germany's Thyssenkrupp Marine Systems (TKMS) and Spain's state-owned Navantia are the only two firms who meet the criteria to submit bids for the Navy's mega-deal for six P-751 submarines, expected to cost upwards of ₹43,000 crore, the deadline for which finally ended in July 2023. Navantia has tied up with Larsen & Toubro (L&T) while TKMS has teamed up with MDL, the only two Indian companies that have been short-



Spain's Navantia is one of two firms that meet the bidding criteria for the Navy's deal for P-751 submarines. S80FLIGHT.NAVANTIA.E5

listed. The deal is being processed under the strategic partnership model of the defence acquisition procedure.

As reported by *The Hindu* earlier, Germany has presented a government-to-government proposal to India for the sale of six submarines and a high-level team was here to discuss it in January.

According to the partnership agreement between Navantia and L&T, the Spanish firm will design the P-751 submarines based on its S80 class of submarines, the first of which was launched in 2021 and was delivered to Spanish Navy last November, while L&T will be responsible for actually constructing the submarines.

The P-751 acquisition

process ran into rough weather over several issues, including one of the specifications requiring that the submarine on offer should have a proven Air Independent Propulsion (AIP) module with an endurance of two weeks.

The submitted bids are currently being evaluated. Some preliminary assessment has happened and Navantia showcased its progress on proving its AIP module, according to a source who stressed that Spain was willing to do a complete technology transfer. Its AIP is a next generation module with higher efficiency.

Spain will also provide governmental guarantees as Navantia is a state-owned shipyard, sources said.



## IN BRIEF



## ED, CBI are at liberty to arrest Sheikh Shahjahan: Calcutta HC

The Calcutta High Court on Wednesday clarified that the Enforcement Directorate (ED) and the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) are at liberty to arrest absconding Trinamool Congress leader Sheikh Shahjahan. The agencies told the Bench of Chief Justice T.S. Sivagnanam and Justice Hiranmay Bhattacharyya that they had serious reservations about the West Bengal Police probing the allegations against Mr. Shahjahan. The Bench proceeded to clarify that the agencies were free to arrest the leader. "A person, who is an elected representative of the public and elected to the office to head the Zilla Parishad, cannot be permitted to abscond. He cannot evade law," Chief Justice Sivagnanam observed.

## ED freezes ₹123 crore kept in bank accounts of NIUM India

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) has frozen about ₹123 crore, kept in the bank accounts of NIUM India Private Limited allegedly on behalf of Singapore-based shell entities, in connection with a case involving illegal online loans, gambling, and betting apps. The action has been taken following searches at 10 locations in Mumbai, Chennai, and Cochin last week. The agency suspects that the frozen amount is part of the proceeds of the alleged crime. According to the the Central agency, the accused had floated many shell entities in India and used them to divert the funds to the shell companies floated in Singapore.

## 'Good local governance is the cornerstone of democracy'

The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India, Girish Chandra Murmu, on Wednesday said good local governance that relied on the core principles of transparency, inclusivity, and accountability, was the cornerstone of grassroots democracy. "It is at this level that the aspirations, concerns, and needs of the people are most felt and addressed. It is here that local level planning of developmental programmes are undertaken," Mr. Murmu said adding that "these bodies are the first ones to respond to calamities and pandemics and are vital for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals". He was speaking at the international conference on 'Strengthening of Grassroots Democracy'.

## Senior journalist Satish Nandgaonkar passes away

Senior journalist and former Chief of Bureau of *The Hindu* in Mumbai, Satish Nandgaonkar, passed away on Wednesday. He was 53. Survived by his wife Anjali and son Ahan, Nandgaonkar had an extensive career, and was currently associated with *Hindustan Times*. He worked at *The Hindu* from January 2015 till the end of 2016. Beyond journalism, he was associated with Mumbai's oldest surviving film society and film festival, Third Eye Asian Film Festival. Nandgaonkar was also co-founder of the Media Foundation of India.

## 3,300 kg of drugs seized off Gujarat coast; 5 held

It is the biggest offshore seizure of narcotics in the country; NCB, Navy, Gujarat ATS conducted a joint operation to intercept a dhow on Tuesday; cache estimated to be worth about ₹1,200 crore

Dinakar Peri  
Devesh K. Pandey  
NEW DELHI

A joint operation by the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB), the Navy, and the Gujarat Anti-Terrorism Squad on Tuesday led to the seizure of about 3,300 kg of drugs from a dhow in the Indian Ocean about 60 nautical miles off the coast. Five foreign nationals with suspected Pakistan links were also arrested. It is the largest-ever offshore drug seizure in the country.

The contraband, including 3,110 kg of hashish, 158.30 kg of crystalline powder methamphetamine, and 24.60 kg of suspected heroin, is estimated to be worth about ₹1,200 crore. Preliminary findings indicate that it was being smuggled through the Chabahar port in Iran.

Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Wednesday posted on X: "Pursuing PM @narendramodi Ji's vision of a drug-free Bharat, our agencies today achieved the grand success of making the biggest offshore seizure of drugs in the nation... the historic success is a testament to our govt's



Big catch: Preliminary findings indicate that it was being smuggled through the Chabahar port in Iran. INDIAN NAVY/X

unwavering commitment to making our nation drug-free..."

NCB Director-General S.N. Pradhan told presspersons that the operation codenamed 'Sagar Manthan-I' was one of the five such recent exercises undertaken in association with sister agencies like the Navy, the Coast Guard, intelligence and drug enforcement agencies, and police of various States, and was made possible through the Centre's initiative to set up the National Narcotics Coordination Portal in 2019.

NCB Deputy Director-General (Operations) Gyaneshwar Singh said the agency initially got a tip-off

further action.

"One Thuraya [satellite phone] and four mobile phones, along with the boat carrying drugs, have been seized. The drug packaging material bears the print 'Ras Awad Foods Co, produce of Pakistan'," Mr. Singh said.

The agency will be taking the help of its counterparts in other countries during the further investigation.

Smuggling of narcotics was among the top concerns flagged at the Goa Maritime Conclave (GMC) last October. Information sharing for Maritime Domain Awareness has emerged as a major focus area among the Indian Ocean littoral states to counter such common threats on the high seas.

Termed the surge in illegal drug trafficking through sea routes as one of the "most dangerous and grave menace" to maritime security in the IOR, Anil Kumarsing Dip, Commissioner of Police of Mauritius, had said at the GMC that inadequate information sharing among countries of the IOR impeded collaborative efforts against drug trafficking.

The Navy mobilised its P-8I long range maritime patrol aircraft and mission-deployed warship, following which the boat was intercepted. The vessel was towed to Gujarat's Porbandar by the warship for

## Incidents at Gujarat law university 'really scary': High Court

Mahesh Langa  
AHMEDABAD

The Gujarat High Court on Wednesday expressed its dismay at the "incidents of molestation, rape, discrimination, homophobia, favouritism, [and] suppression of voices" which have taken place at Gujarat National Law University (GNLU), Gandhinagar, according to a fact-finding committee's report. The court directed that a competent authority must now consider the report.

The report, submitted in a sealed cover to the Division Bench of Chief Justice Sunita Agarwal and Justice Aniruddha P. Mayee, was described by the court as "really scary". The Bench is hearing a *suo motu* public interest litigation (PIL) plea based on a newspaper article dated September 22, 2023.

According to the article, a student of GNLU suffered mental trauma due to the harassment meted out to him because of his sexual identity, while another accused a batchmate of raping her.

The court had earlier directed the university to reconstitute its fact-finding committee, set up to inquire into the alleged incidents. The new committee is headed by Justice Harsha

Devani (ret'd) of the Gujarat High Court.

One of the victims stated that "a politically influential person" was trying to see to it that no police complaint was made. The report also mentions allegations against certain faculty members, the Registrar, and the Director of the university, which needs a high-level inquiry, the Bench said.

An Instagram post about the alleged atrocities was forcibly removed through the intervention of GNLU and the faculty warden of the girls' hostel, the court observed, noting that the university had objected to the Instagram posts, which brought to light the ordeal faced by the two students, and had adopted an adversarial approach towards them.

## Tarnished image

"That is the scariest part of the report. After parents, teachers and faculty in a residential college play the role of parents... They have taken the post as something meant to tarnish the image of the university," the court said.

A competent authority should consider the fact-finding report, the court said. It posted the matter to March 12.

## Govt. employees to go on strike from May 1 for OPS

A. M. Jigeesh  
NEW DELHI

A platform of trade unions and associations working among 28 lakh employees of the Union government, including the Railways and Central Public Sector Undertakings, and more than three crore employees and teachers with the State governments have decided to go on an indefinite strike from May 1 demanding the restoration of the old pension scheme (OPS).

The steering committee of the platform, the Joint Forum For Restoration of Old Pension Scheme (JFROPS), has unanimously decided to serve strike notices on March 19 to respective administrations.

The convener of the JFROPS and general secretary of All India Railwaymen's Federation (AIRF), Shiv Gopal Mishra, told *The Hindu* that the deci-

## All unions, except the pro-government Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh, will join the indefinite strike

sion to go on a strike was taken after discussions with the Union government over the issue collapsed.

"We wrote letters to Prime Minister and Finance Minister urging them to restore OPS. We have also been raising this issue in the Joint Consultative Machinery meetings, but the government ignored our demands and we are now forced to go on an indefinite strike," he said.

Strike ballots were held at the Railways, various departments, and PSUs under the Centre and unions. "Government employees have waited for 20

years patiently by observing protest programmes without hampering the functioning of the government. Recently, Judicial Pay Commission has recommended defined and guaranteed pensions for judges. Why the government employees are discriminated?" asked C. Sri-kumar, general secretary of All India Defence Employees Federation.

He added that the strike was imposed on the employees since the government was insensitive towards their genuine grievances and that all unions, except the pro-government Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS), would participate in it.

Asked what would happen if the model code of conduct comes into force, Mr. Mishra said they wanted the issue of OPS to be discussed during the elections.

## Collision between 2 planes averted at Mumbai airport

Jagriti Chandra  
NEW DELHI

A major accident was averted at Mumbai airport last week after an Air Astana aircraft took a wrong turn and entered an active runway where an Air India plane was accelerating towards it for take off.

At 3 p.m., on February 22, an Airbus A320 aircraft of Air Astana was preparing to take off for Almaty when, instead of taking a taxi way parallel to the active runway to queue up behind other planes for its turn to take off, it took a wrong turn and entered a taxiway that intersected the runway under use.

As the Air Astana aircraft crossed the active runway, Air India's Airbus A319 aircraft had already started to speed up for take off for its flight to Doha. After reaching a speed of 40 knots, and upon seeing



A senior DGCA official said that they are investigating the incident. FILE PHOTO

another aircraft intersecting its path, the aircraft rejected take off and staved off a possible collision. The Air Astana plane though continued to move on the wrong path.

At the same time, an IndiGo aircraft approaching the airport from Nagpur aborted landing and performed a go-around to make another attempt for landing, according to witness and aviation photographer Aneesh Bapaye.

The incident led to a delay of one hour in Air India's departure.

A senior DGCA official said they were investigating the incident, but refrained from commenting on what was the likely cause. Such incidents have to be reported by the airlines involved as well as the Air Traffic Controller, but according to a senior DGCA official, none had done so.

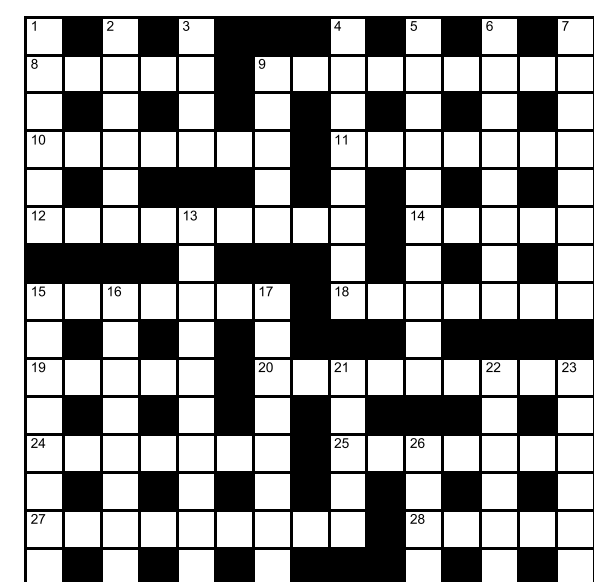
Mumbai's Chhatrapati Shivaji International Airport sees between 42 to 44 aircraft movements per hour. Since it has two intersecting runways, which can't be used simultaneously, the airport sees severe congestion forcing aircraft to often hover for 30 to 40 minutes to get a clearance for landing.

The Ministry of Civil Aviation had asked the airport to cut two aircraft movements per hour.

THE CROSSWORD+ 14110  
(set by Saral)

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

SCAN TO PLAY

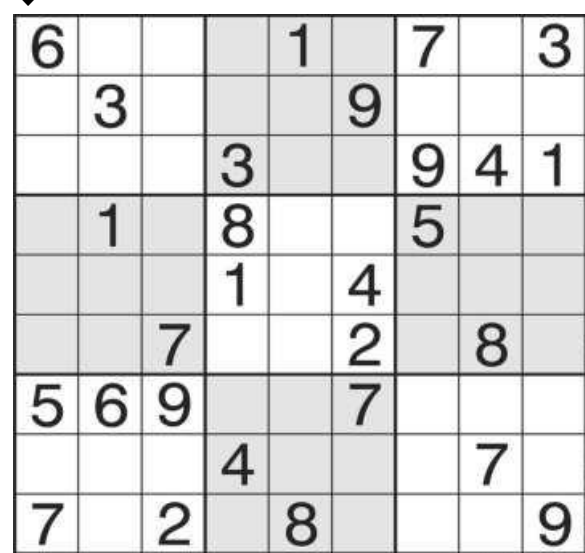


- 14 Suggested rewriting name with title essentially (5)  
15 Keep notice dividing plot, say near lake (7)  
18 Presents meetings covering extremities of operation (7)  
19 It's me arranging articles (5)  
20 Shift coach missing international game (9)  
24 King in fury beheaded soldiers (7)  
25 Sailor buys objects (7)  
27 Police officer in park probing area (9)  
28 Most mock at English marks (5)

## Down

- 1 Submits cases without introduction (6)  
2 Newly-wed crossing grand arch (6)  
3 Move prison (4)  
4 Anxious son rejecting ice-cream, say (8)  
5 Queen with team about to enter camps for therapies (10)  
6 Ruling party getting short time worker (8)  
7 Mule carrying excellent, old fire-proof material (8)  
9 Relative in French city going around eateries primarily (5)  
13 Rust inside abandoned factories (10)  
15 Institute restrained by erratic absurd rules (8)  
16 Encroachment in health resort breaking lock (8)  
17 Free time for boy? Can read and write (8)  
21 Change early theory now and then (5)  
22 Cat's eyelid covered by round lump (6)  
23 Steals byzantine ornament (6)  
26 Danger of reckless skier losing point (4)

## SUDOKU



DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★☆☆☆

## Solution to previous puzzle

INPUBLIC ACROSS  
UNAHIREW  
ACILITY ADIMVIEW  
LETTERE OA  
CEREMONIES LUTE  
FRAGMENT CHEERS  
L S O R  
CUTOUT DOCKSIDE  
NS OK U  
UFOSTWOOTHERE  
R I A R O B L  
DOGTREEDADONIS  
Z I O I C M S  
TEASET EXHIBITS

## Solution to yesterday's Sudoku

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

## FAITH

## Divine manifestation

Arjuna is a learned personality. He knew about Lord Krishna. To understand more about the Lord, he raised some points of doubt. Valayapettai Sri Ramachariar said in a discourse that God's reply through the Bhagavad Gita clarified Arjuna's questions.

The repeated birth and death of human beings is based on past deeds (karma) that were with blemishes and sins. How can God choose to be born in that sinful and blemishful birth? He may be born, but His birth is not influenced by karma, and He is ever blemishless (*Nikhilahaeya Prathiyaneeka*). Lord Krishna tells Arjuna that both of them have taken several births, but he (Arjuna) does not know them, whereas Lord Krishna knew everything of Arjuna's and His (*Bahoonime Vyatheethani* – Bhagavad Gita CH-IV-sloka 5).

What is His nature? The nature of His being is full of sattva guna (virtuous qualities) and untainted by rajo guna and tamo guna.

What is the reason for His birth? Though the Lord is birthless and of immutable nature, He is born out of His own free will (*Sankalpa*) (*ajopi samavayayatma*-CH IV-6).

When is He born? Whenever there is a decline of dharm and an uprise of adharma, He incarnates Himself (*Yadaha Yadhahi Dharmasya*-CH IV-7).

What is the motive of His incarnation? For the protection of the good and destruction of the wicked (*Parithra-naaya Sadhumam*-CH IV-8)

The person who comes to know the truth of His divine manifestation does not get rebirth (*Janna karma cha mey* CH IV-9).



# The rocky vista of medicinal cannabis that research is bringing into view

The frequency and potency of cannabis use have exploded over the last two decades, partly because of the surge of interest in cannabis as medicine. If India were to ever decriminalise cannabis, policymakers should ensure that vulnerable groups are protected against its detrimental effects

Alok Kulkarni

The cannabis plant (*Cannabis sativa*) has long been of interest to psychiatrists for its perceived effects on mood and cognition.

There is currently significant research interest in using cannabis-based compounds to manage and/or treat schizophrenia and cannabis-use and heroin-use disorders.

Recently, researchers at the University of British Columbia in Canada floated a new clinical trial to examine whether cannabidiol could be used to treat bipolar depression. Given the paucity of agents to treat depressive episodes in bipolar disorder, this trial has the potential to uncover a novel treatment to treat the debilitating depression associated with the condition.

The major psychotomimetic agent in *C. sativa* is a compound called delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC). There is growing interest in another cannabinoid, cannabidiol (CBD), which may have antipsychotic, anti-inflammatory, and neuroprotective properties. The plant's flowering parts are more potent than its leaves.

Marijuana is a combination of buds and leaves of pollinated female plants, and is usually cultivated outdoors.

## The cannabinoid system

The human cannabinoid system has two cannabinoid receptors, called CB1 and CB2. The naturally occurring substrate of the CB1 receptor is anandamide, a compound whose name comes from the Sanskrit word 'ananda', meaning bliss.

CB2 is found in the spleen and testes and to a lesser extent in the central nervous system (CNS). CB1 is found diffusely throughout the CNS. The CNS is involved in the release of various neurotransmitters, including dopamine, noradrenaline, and serotonin. CB1 is like a traffic cop: it controls the levels and activities of other neurotransmitters. The CB1 receptor is relevant to the drug's mind-altering effects. To stimulate these receptors, our bodies produce molecules called endocannabinoids. These are endogenous: they occur naturally within the body. The endocannabinoid system (ECS) comprises a dense network of chemical signals and cellular receptors. The cannabis plant works its effect by hijacking this machinery.

The cannabinoid system modulates a host of bodily functions, including pain, memory, psychomotor control, sleep, and appetite. THC in particular has acute effects on motor control and impairs fine movement. High doses of recreational cannabis use can disrupt short-term memory. Impaired attention is believed to be mediated by another part of the brain called the hippocampus, which is involved in memory and learning. This might indicate a possible role for THC in the extinction of bad memories in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

In his 2001 book *The Botany of Desire*, Michael Pollan wrote humans have cultivated and co-evolved with the cannabis plant for thousands of years. He argued that the act of forgetting is important to humans and that cannabis helps us achieve this, especially when we don't want to be overloaded with traumatic memories. A 2022 animal study also found preclinical evidence that molecules targeting the ECS could be



Jurisdictions around the world are legalising the medical use of cannabis; some have also legalised recreational use. Many of them are in the West but other countries are taking note as well. DREW TAYLOR/UNSPASH

used to treat PTSD.

## The rimonabant debacle

Since ECS regulates hunger, it was thought that blocking the CB1 receptor could result in weight loss.

There is a well-established association between THC exposure and a craving for high-fat, high-sugar foods.

On this basis, in 2006, Sanofi-Aventis marketed a CB1 blocker called rimonabant in Europe as an anti-obesity drug. But while it did cause weight loss, it carried a risk of depression and suicidality and was eventually withdrawn.

Nonetheless, THC and synthetic cannabinoids are also being used to stimulate appetite in people with HIV-AIDS and cancer.

The anti-nausea property of THC is useful to ameliorate nausea associated with chemotherapy. Cannabinoids are also used to treat acute and chronic pain syndromes. Nabilone, a synthetic cannabinoid, has been shown to ameliorate chronic neuropathic pain, headache, and fibromyalgic pain. Sativex, which contains both THC and CBD, has been used to manage pain associated with multiple sclerosis.

One debate among psychiatrists is whether THC can be addictive. Animal studies have found evidence of addictive responses whereas the evidence for humans is more uneven. Many users also don't increase their use of THC once they have reached some sort of plateau.

This is probably because THC has a great ability to dissolve in fats and oils, ensuring it remains in the brain for weeks. It is excreted only slowly upon cessation of heavy regular use. As a result, THC cessation doesn't have the same rapid, dramatic withdrawal symptoms associated with nicotine and alcohol. Known withdrawal effects include sleep difficulties, loss of appetite, weight loss, restlessness, irritability, and anger.



There is evidence for a consistent association between cannabis use in youth and later psychotic symptoms

## Effects on anxiety and mood

The mood effects of cannabis are complex. Early reports of the compound being effective for some people with treatment-resistant depression are not supported by rigorous studies. This said, many studies on the mood effects of cannabis have reported an association with depression.

There has been little scientific scrutiny of cannabis in relation to bipolar disorder, despite its widespread use by people with this condition. One 2009 study was able to conclude that people with bipolar disorder who used cannabis had more manic relapses, adhered less to medications, and had worse psychosocial outcomes compared to non-users. Research has also found that cannabis use can independently increase the risk of bipolar disorder and/or advance its onset in some individuals.

Indeed, while cannabis can have psychotic effects on anybody upon consumption, the individual predisposition depends on their experience with the drug, the context in which it is consumed, and crucially, how prone the individual is to psychosis.

For example, one 2018 study sought to understand the rates of conversion to schizophrenia and bipolar disorder in those who had already been diagnosed with substance-induced psychosis. Around 48% of cannabis users converted to either schizophrenia or bipolar disorder within three and four years, respectively, of having received a diagnosis of substance-induced psychosis.

People with established psychotic illnesses, such as schizophrenia, have a very high predisposition to manifest psychotic symptoms when imbibing cannabis, despite it being on anti-psychotic medication. Cannabis use in youth can also advance the onset of schizophrenia by seven to eight years in genetically vulnerable individuals.

There has been a long-standing debate in psychiatry: whether people who have used cannabis and have later developed schizophrenia manifest the disorder only because they used cannabis. As of today, there is high-quality evidence for a consistent association between cannabis use in youth and later psychotic symptoms.

## Policy-making and legislation

As things stand, *C. sativa* is also the most widely used illicit drug worldwide. The frequency and potency of cannabis use have also exploded in the last two decades, prompting broader debates about the decriminalisation of cannabis.

This is partly because of the resurgence of interest in cannabis as medicine. Jurisdictions around the world are legalising medical use of cannabis; some have also legalised recreational use. Many of them are in the West but other countries are taking note as well. If India were to ever decriminalise cannabis, policymakers should ensure it isn't commercialised and that there are protections against use by children, adolescents, and those with established mental illnesses – the populace most vulnerable to the detrimental effects of cannabis.

(Dr. Alok Kulkarni is a senior interventional neuropsychiatrist at the Manas Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences at Hubli in Karnataka. He received the IMH Marshall Fellowship in Mood Disorders from the University of British Columbia, Vancouver.)



Jacarandas are not known to bloom this early in Mexico City. REUTERS

## Early bloom of the jacaranda sparks furious climate debate in Mexico

Reuters

Every spring, the streets of Mexico's capital are painted purple with the flowering of thousands of jacaranda trees. Their spectacular colours not only attract the eyes of residents and tourists but also birds, bees and butterflies that find food and shelter in them.

But this year something changed. Some jacarandas began blooming in early January when they normally awaken in spring. The early onset bloom has set off alarm bells among residents and scientists in Mexico City, where the trees have become an iconic, photogenic mainstay of city streets.

Local scientists have begun investigating how widespread the early-bloom phenomenon is, but they point to climate change as the first culprit.

"They are starting to flower in January, February, which is winter, when it is not yet their time," said Constantino Gonzalez, a researcher at the Institute of Atmospheric Sciences and Climate Change Research at the National Autonomous University of Mexico.

Dr. Gonzalez explained that in order to

## In January alarm spread when social networks started to publish photos of jacarandas and began to wonder about the effects of climate change

draw a correlation between climate change and the early flowering of jacarandas, his team needs a representative sample and compare blooms year to year. To do this, he has started to lead a group of young people who are collecting data throughout the city and using satellite imagery.

He noted rising temperatures caused winter in the Mexican capital to end early this year, in mid-January, instead of late March when it is supposed to end.

Tatsugoro Matsumoto, a Japanese landscape architect who settled in Mexico in the late 19th century, advocated for jacarandas over the Japanese cherry trees former Mexican President Pascual Ortiz had planted in the city.

Since then, the tree has become a staple for Mexico City's nine million inhabitants.

In January alarm spread when users on social networks started to publish photos of flowering jacarandas and began to wonder about the effects of climate change.

"Like never before (...) people have started to say 'this is serious, it's real' and it's no longer just a polar bear floating adrift," said Cristina Ayala, biologist and doctor in Sustainability Sciences. "It is very good that people are beginning to become aware of what climate change is going to bring to us as urbanites."

Although they are not native to Mexico, for Ayala, jacarandas fulfil an important function for the city. They attract more hummingbirds and bees than many native trees, so a change in flowering could lead to a decrease in these populations.

"One would like the jacarandas to bloom all year round," said Alex Estrada, a resident of the Mexican capital, while observing a tree that was beginning to turn purple. "But something is not right here: jacarandas in winter?"

For feedback and suggestions for 'Science', please write to [science@thehindu.co.in](mailto:science@thehindu.co.in) with the subject 'Daily page'

## THE SCIENCE QUIZ

### Leap days: four years' worth of unaccounted time

Vasudevan Mukunth

#### QUESTION 1

There are approximately 365 days in a calendar year. The earth actually takes 365 days, five hours, 48 minutes, and 46 seconds to go around the Sun once. What is the latter length of time called?

#### QUESTION 2

Over four years or so, the additional five hours, 48 minutes, and 46 seconds accumulate to become an additional day, which the calendar accounts for by adding an extra 'leap' day. What are days added to calendars to keep the latter in step with a natural phenomenon called?

#### QUESTION 3

In the Gregorian calendar, a leap day is added to February every four years

as long as the year is divisible by 100 but not by 400. In the \_\_\_\_\_ calendar, a leap day is added every four years without skipping any. Fill in the blank.

#### QUESTION 4

Historically, there have been two popular ways to define the duration of a month – X and Y – both of which track the moon's revolution once around the earth. In X (also the answer to Q1), the revolution is tracked relative to the positions of stars. Name Y, which tracks the revolution relative to the earth and the Sun.

#### QUESTION 5

The moon's orbit around the earth is an ellipse. The shape of the orbit changes such that the locations of the orbit's perigee and apogee go through a full rotation every 8.8 years. What is this phenomenon, which results in an

anomalous month, called?

Answers to February 27 quiz:

1. Mineral source of tungsten named for the amount of tin its extraction demands – **Ans: Wolframite**
2. Tungsten has the highest value of this property among elements – **Ans: Melting point**
3. Tungsten has the highest value of this property among elements present in living beings – **Ans: Atomic number**
4. Country that came under pressure during World War II for its tungsten exports – **Ans: Portugal**
5. Tungsten bars are used to counterfeit bars of this metal – **Ans: Gold**

Visual: ITER

First contact: K.N. Viswanathan | Princi Verma | Yogapriya Karthigeyan | Abhishek Sharma | Shamim Mondal



Visual: Name the ruler depicted on this coin dating from around the first century AD. His ascension to kingship is widely considered to be the start of the Shaka era of the historical Hindu calendar.

Please send in your answers to [science@thehindu.co.in](mailto:science@thehindu.co.in)





## Lives and livelihoods

India must have protocols in place to protect emigrants from conflicts

In its first such confirmation, the government has conceded that Indians have been recruited by the Russian Army and positioned inside the Ukrainian border in land now under Russian control. The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) says a “few” Indian nationals had signed up for support jobs, as military helpers and loaders, something the government actively discourages. It said that the Indian Embassy had pressed Russia for their “early discharge”, and denied accusations by the families that Indian officials had not been responsive. Despite evidence that dozens of Indians have joined the war, lured by on-line advertisements and middlemen promising lucrative jobs, the government failed to make any statement, but spoke only after a series of reports in *The Hindu*, that included news of the death of a man from Surat who was hit by a Ukrainian drone-operated missile. An early acceptance of the problem, and more awareness drives against those duping Indians may have deterred others from signing up and facing harm. The government must also investigate the networks of unscrupulous recruiters who charge high fees from Indians seeking jobs abroad without fully explaining the nature of work. The truth is that even after awareness of their menial roles in a war zone, they have few options. Having spent their family’s savings or availed of loans, the men cannot return without earning some of it back.

The government must review its procedures for countries in conflict, updating the list of 18 “Emigration Check Required” countries, so that the contracts of Indians travelling abroad for such work are vetted more thoroughly, they are advised better and also provided protection. Given that Nepal, Pakistan and Bangladesh face similar issues, it may help to seek more regional cooperation in thwarting the networks that market unsafe employment opportunities. The MEA’s pleas to “stay away from conflict” are clearly insufficient. It is equally disturbing that the government has green-lighted recruitment drives to other conflict zones, including, more recently, Israel, for Indian construction and elder-care workers to replace Palestinians who have been denied entry to the country since October 7. More broadly, the numerous cases of Indians travelling to dangerous zones internationally, or even undertaking arduous journeys as illegal immigrants, reflect the deep economic distress and job shortages in India. While there are few quick fixes to such entrenched economic issues, the government must evince more empathy for the situation many find themselves in, putting more comprehensive protocols in place for emigrants, and support structures for those in peril.

## Strength vs reason

The Bill to grant reservations for Marathas may not pass judicial muster

The legitimacy of any demand for a change in public policy lies in the rationale behind it and not in the strength in support for it. There is a reason why even after States have bowed down to popular demands for reservation to social groups which were not considered backward earlier, their actions have been reversed or nullified by the higher judiciary. This has been true of previous pieces of legislation passed by the Maharashtra government to grant reservation to the Maratha community. Yet, the community’s political dominance is evident in the fact that the State Assembly unanimously passed a Bill on February 20, granting Marathas 10% reservation in education and government jobs. This is the third time in a decade that such legislation for the community has been passed; earlier, there was the Socially and Educationally Backward Classes Act, 2018 under the Bharatiya Janata Party-Shiv Sena-led coalition. The two pieces of legislation are similar, but the current Bill is based on a report by the Maharashtra State Backward Class Commission, which expands the total quota for reservations to 72% with the inclusion of 10% for Marathas after the application of a “creamy layer” criterion. This also includes 10% reservation for “Economically Weaker Sections” focusing on the poor among the Maratha community.

It is understandable why the political class in Maharashtra has chosen the easier, even if legally dubious, path of expanding the reservation pie. The other alternative of treating Marathas as a backward class community and providing reservations from within the 19% quota for OBCs was always going to be a problem with OBC groups expressing opposition. But the legislation is bound to face problems if and when it is challenged in the Supreme Court. The top court had struck down the 2018 Act in May 2021 by citing the Indra Sawhney judgment (1992) that limited reservations to 50% and also held that only the Union government is empowered to identify socially and educationally backward classes to include them in the central list to avail reservations. Yet, the Court’s November 2022 judgment upholding the 10% quota for EWS, over and beyond the 50% limit, has opened a Pandora’s box. The vagaries of addressing demands of politically dominant groups such as the Marathas, which have stratifications due to significant intra-community variations in terms of income and educational outcomes, suggest a case for a comprehensive socio-economic census alongside the delayed decennial Census. Such a census will establish the true nature of backwardness and discrimination across States and could even clarify a new means of providing affirmative action based on the data while staying true to principles of social justice.

Riddled with contradictions, the Indian economy neither offers conclusive evidence of a stellar performance nor of a collapse. Evaluating economic performance could provide challenges for both the government and the Opposition.

As the country braces for the next general election, claims and counter-claims on the performance of the economy have been a prominent theme for discussions. The government, to establish the superiority of economic management in the last decade, often highlights three aspects of performance.

First, the size and growth of gross domestic product (GDP), which is projected to become the third largest in the near future and has registered high growth rates in comparison with other emerging economies (at least in the past few quarters). Second, the number of people who have moved out of poverty, which it claims is the highest in recent times – attributed to the prudent implementation of inclusive policies. Third, the soaring stock market indices, which it claims is opening up avenues for entrepreneurship and wealth creation. The numbers regarding the second claim are dubious with little scope for independent analysis. It is one that has produced multiple narratives, often contradicting the tall claims of growth and wealth creation.

### ‘Shining India’

Apart from GDP growth, a number of high frequency indicators are used to buttress the argument of the economy moving to a higher growth trajectory. Passenger car sales, domestic air passenger traffic, increase in demat accounts, UPI transactions and the sale of high-end mobile phones and luxury homes are indicators often used to highlight the outcomes of sustained growth. These have helped to create a ‘premiumisation’ narrative – that is, consumers are now buying products that are more expensive and the emergence of this class of consumers is an indication of the upward income mobility of sections of the population that have gained from higher economic growth. It is true that some of these indicators mentioned above have seen an upward trend. For example, passenger car sales from April 2023 to January 2024 clocked 3.42 million units. If the same trend continues, total sales by the end of this financial year might clock an all-time high of 4.1 million units. Interestingly, the average selling price is ₹11.5 lakh, up from ₹7.65 lakh in 2018-19, a 50% increase. Similarly, the number of domestic air passengers is set to cross an all-time peak of 141.6 million recorded in 2019-20. The financial sector has also recorded a tremendous increase in volumes and values.



M. Suresh Babu

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Growth indicators co-exist with many indicators that reveal the distressed side of the economy but a clear picture will emerge by 2030, the deadline year for the Sustainable Development Goals

Investments in mutual funds through systematic investment plans crossed the ₹18,000 crore mark last month. The number of demat accounts increased from 39.4 million in December 2019 to 143.9 million in January 2024. These growth indicators, however, co-exist with numerous indicators that reveal the distressed side of the economy, which is a feature of a dual economy.

### Dual and divergent

Economic dualism, in terms of a broad definition, refers to the coexistence of two or more economic systems. A dual economy is formed by the coexistence of subsistence agriculture and cash production of industrial goods for the international market. The dual nature of the Indian economy emerges when we examine another set of indicators alongside much-acclaimed growth performance. The persistence of dualism has forced the government to resort to two major welfare policy initiatives.

First, in November 2023, the government extended the free food grain distribution programme (under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana) for five years, beginning from January 1, 2024 to cover 81.35 crore beneficiaries in the country. According to the United Nation’s world population dashboard, India’s population is now a little over 1,428 million. If 813 million people are to avail free food grains from the government, it constitutes 57% of the population. When the economy grows and such a large share of the population depends on free food grains from the government, it indicates that the benefits of growth are not trickling down to the other half of the economy, where dualism persists.

Second, in an era of high growth, the demand for work under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) has been the highest. The growth of rural jobs under MGNREGS shows a 11% increase in this fiscal until December, compared with the corresponding period in the previous financial year. Between April-December 2023, 231.34 crore person days were generated across all States. This is higher than the number of person days generated between April-December 2020 when COVID-19 and the lockdown caused a spike in the unemployment rate and increased demand for MGNREGS.

While official data for the period 2022-23 claims a decline in unemployment, it also shows that 45% work in the agriculture sector. In another instance, the response in Haryana and Uttar Pradesh to advertisements for skilled workers for jobs in war-hit Israel highlights the intensity of a latent unemployment crisis.

The dual structure of the economy is stark

when we examine rural incomes. Agriculture and non-agriculture rural real wages grew at 8.6% and 6.9% per annum during 2019-10 to 2013-14. However, during 2014-15 to 2018-19, growth of real farm and non-farm wages decelerated to 3.3% and 3% per annum. In the last five years, 2019-20 to 2023-24, the annual growth rate of real rural wages has become negative for both agriculture (-0.6%) and non-agriculture (-1.4%) workers. The slow growth of rural incomes and its role in perpetuating dualism is corroborated by the level of indebtedness among households. According to the All India Debt & Investment Survey, the incidence of indebtedness was about 35% in rural India, that is, 40.3% among cultivator households and 28.2% among non-cultivator households. While it is 22.4% in urban India, that is 27.5% self-employed households and 20.6% other households.

The surge in demat accounts has to be seen in line with the explosive growth in stock options trading. According to a Bloomberg report, in 2023, Indian investors traded a whopping 85.3 billion options contracts. No other country trades such humongous volumes of options contracts annually. In 2023, the United States traded 11.2 billion options contracts, while Brazil traded only 2.4 billion. The surge in options trading among retail investors is a matter of concern as instead of following conventional methods such as investing in stocks and mutual funds for long-term wealth building, diving into speculative trading. More worrisome is the fact that the average time an Indian trader holds an option is less than 30 minutes, according to data from mutual fund provider Axis Asset Management Co. According to a study by the Securities and Exchange Board of India (January 2023), 90% of active retail traders lose money trading options and derivative contracts. Further, investors collectively lost nearly ₹44,848 crore in the year ending March 2022.

### SDG targets

During the period 2024-29, India is expected to cross the \$5-trillion mark and is likely to become the third largest economy in the world. However, by 2030, the world will be approaching the deadline to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). Given the present scenario, a number of countries are likely to be falling behind in achieving the targets. The extent of India’s slippages in achieving SDG targets would expose claims of the growth and size of the economy. The Janus-face of the economy needs to show at least a tendency towards convergence by then.

The views expressed are personal

# The economic case for investing in India’s children

It might seem self-evident that India’s children deserve economic investment, given the country’s focus on demographic dividend, education and jobs. But, somehow, early childhood education has remained both under-invested and under-explored over decades. It is often trivialised, as child’s play, or limited to the household domain, perhaps because it has traditionally been women’s work. With the increasing focus by the government on women-led development, including a new survey by the Ministries of Women and Child Development and Labour (announced on January 30) on working women, care work and early childhood are finally being seen as part of the critical work of running a country.

### Focus earlier in the life cycle

The argument for increased investment in early childhood care and education (ECCE) is a basic one – human resources are the bedrock of a nation, and early childhood is the bedrock of a human being. Slowly, but surely, the Indian developmental state has fostered and catered to parental aspirations for education, targeting first access, crossing 100% gross enrolment ratio at the primary level, and now quality, with an increased focus on measuring learning outcomes. There is also realisation that India’s young learners are struggling: a large number of Standard three learners are unable to read Standard two text or do basic subtraction.

This has prompted a shift to focus even earlier in the life cycle, i.e., children under six, leading to initiatives such as the Ministry of Education’s National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy (NIPUN) Bharat for foundational literacy and numeracy, and the Ministry of Women and Child Development’s (MWCD) Poshan Bhi Padhai Bhi to improve ECCE quality through the Anganwadi system.

The interim Budget 2024’s promise of



Sanjana Manaktala

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Apurva Desai

is a civil society professional in the early childhood and policy space

There needs to be increased investment in early childhood care and education

expediting the upgradation of Saksham Anganwadis and providing Ayushman Bharat services for Anganwadi workers, Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA), and helpers is encouraging.

In 2023, the outlay for teaching-learning materials tripled, increasing from approximately ₹140 crore to ₹420 crore per annum, assuming 14 lakh Anganwadi centres, catering to India’s poorest eight crore children under six. For context, the 2024-25 budgeted expenditure on centrally sponsored schemes, which form a substantial part of Centre-State fiscal transfers, is ₹5.01 lakh crore. Of this, the Anganwadi system is allocated about ₹21,200 crore, which is more than rural roads (₹12,000 crore) and irrigation (₹11,391 crore), but less than the National Education Mission (₹37,500 crore) and the National Health Mission (₹38,183 crore). The Department of Higher Education receives around ₹47,619 crore, for a total of approximately four crore enrolled learners, who undoubtedly come from the more privileged sections of Indian society.

### The Anganwadi system

Recent research provides further cause for expanding allocation and expenditure by the Centre and the States. Quasi-experimental impact evaluations using existing survey data have proven cognitive and motor skills improvement in Anganwadi-attending children over others, particularly reducing gender and income-related gaps. According to a study in 2020, children exposed to the Anganwadi system from ages zero to three go on to complete 0.1-0.3 more grades of school. Evidence at the individual-level is building, but the macroeconomic implications remain underexplored.

To determine what to spend on – infrastructure, capacity building, materials, and staffing – it is necessary to match the micro to the

macro, the amounts in paise to the amounts in lakh and crore. Estimates are required of the potential gains to GDP from the proven individual benefits of strong ECCE: improving women’s physical and mental health, lifespan, public health expenditure, children’s educational attainment, their physical and mental health, and even social unrest.

Nobel Laureate Heckman’s Perry Preschool study found that children who received high quality ECCE grew into less violent adults – stronger socio-emotional skills built early might even help prevent later student suicides.

### Need for research in India

There is also a clear need for systematic rigorous research in the Indian context, building on the work of leading academics on the macroeconomic and social implications of early childhood development. In order to formulate evidence-based policy, it is critical to understand the opportunity cost of inadequate allocation of material resources, money, and high-quality talent to the early childhood sector. International researchers, including at the University of Chicago and Yale University, have suggested a 13% annual return on investment for every dollar invested in early childhood, but that is in the American context. India needs similar longitudinal studies exploring the impact of early childhood care, including the Anganwadi system, which remains the world’s largest public provisioning system for ECCE.

Children born in 2024 will be five years into adulthood by 2047, India’s 100th year of independence and the target year for Viksit Bharat. The path from developing to developed countries, like the Asian Tigers, is paved with human development investment, and the earlier it is the better. If we want India’s women to work and India’s children to thrive, investing in ECCE is the way forward. It is child’s play.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Space programme

It is important that the Indian astronaut-designates remain focused as it is easy to get carried away by fame and stardom. Political propaganda must be kept at bay. Undoubtedly, it is the support of the government which is important in this mission, but there is a need to keep such projects politically neutral and let ISRO take the lead.

Kirti Wadhawan,  
Kanpur

### Court’s contempt notice

It is gratifying that the Supreme Court of India has issued a contempt notice against Patanjali Ayurved (Inside pages, “Supreme Court issues contempt notice to Patanjali, MD Balkrishna”, February 28). There are many allegations of the firm violating, with impunity, the Drugs and Magical Remedies (Objectionable Advertisements) Act. Inaction by the Union and some State governments so

far has only lent credence to rumours of the company’s alleged political clout. It is hoped that the top court will take the case to its logical conclusion as there has been the dissemination of misleading information on health, disease and treatments.

Kurian Mathew,  
Kochi

The Court’s mention of the company’s advertisements needs comment. The advertisements are only

symptomatic of a deeper malaise plaguing the official approach to Ayurveda. Knowledge systems that do not undergo timely

evidence-informed revisions tend to become surreal in assuming their possibilities. This surreality then gets misused as a lucrative

commercial proposition by interested parties. The problem can be tackled only if the AYUSH Ministry takes quick steps to overhaul Ayurveda by making its theories and practices as evidence-informed as possible. Till such time this happens, Ayurveda will continue to be misused as a business proposition or abused as a pseudoscience by denigrators.

Dr. G.L. Krishna,  
Bengaluru

### Corrections & Clarifications

In the report headlined “Spotlight back on cross-voting and whips” (February 28, 2024), the last sentence should be corrected to read: “If the Speaker takes action and disqualifies ... the majority mark would be 32, just two less than Congress’s current strength.”

In the report titled “Ladakh gets recruitment body for non-gazetted posts” (February 28, 2024, some editions), there was an erroneous reference to the Kashmir Democratic Alliance. It should be corrected to read as Kargil Democratic Alliance.

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# India's fight against rare diseases

The tragic death of 19-year-old child actress Suhani Bhatnagar from dermatomyositis, a rare disorder that causes inflammation in muscles, came in the same month as Rare Disease Day, which is marked today. The last day of February every year is consecrated to support crores of individuals who, because of their rare medical conditions, have long been neglected and stigmatised.

According to the World Health Organization, rare diseases afflict 1 or less per 1,000 population. Barely 5% of the over 7,000 known diseases worldwide are treatable. Most patients typically receive only basic treatment that alleviates symptoms. Some require exorbitantly priced antidotes and supportive medication throughout their lives, which they can't afford.

**Rare diseases in India**  
India accounts for one-third of the global rare disease incidence, with over 450 identified diseases. These range from widely known ones such as Spinal Muscular Atrophy and Gaucher's disease to lesser-known ones such as Mucopolysaccharidosis type 1 and Whipple's disease. Roughly about 8 crore-10 crore Indians suffer from one rare disease or another; over 75% are children. Yet these diseases are largely overlooked. Resource constraints apart, India languishes near the bottom on awareness, diagnosis, and drug development for rare diseases.

After many nudges from the courts, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare formulated a national policy to treat rare diseases in 2017 but withdrew it in 2018 owing to "implementation challenges" and confusion regarding disease coverage, patient eligibility, and cost-sharing. A revised policy, the National Policy for Rare Diseases (NPRD), was announced in 2021, but problems persist. We still don't define "rare diseases", a failure the policy attributes to a lack of sufficient data, as if regular data collection and epidemiological assessments are



**Shashi Tharoor**

is third-term MP (Congress) for Thiruvananthapuram in the Lok Sabha and the Sahitya Akademi Award-winning author of 25 books



**Shashank Shekhar**

is his Legislative and Legal Adviser

Resource constraints apart, India languishes near the bottom on awareness, diagnosis, and drug development for rare diseases

not the government's job.

Timely and accurate diagnosis is indispensable for the robust management of any disease, yet for rare disease patients, it takes an average of seven years for their conditions to be diagnosed (if at all). Physicians are generally unaware of how to interpret the signs and symptoms; healthcare professionals must be trained to improve their diagnostic accuracy. Expectant mothers with a history of rare diseases in their family must undergo mandatory pre-natal screening and post-natal diagnosis and care.

Less than 50% of the 450-odd rare diseases identified in India are treatable. Worse, treatments approved by the Drugs Controller General of India are available for just about 20 rare diseases and can be availed only from Centres of Excellence (CoEs). Since CoEs are few (12), unevenly distributed, and uncoordinated, late diagnosis, inadequate therapies and lack of timely availability are the norm.

Funds are a major challenge too. The Budget's allocation for rare diseases, although increasing over the years, remains low at ₹93 crore for 2023-2024, with previous years having seen reductions of up to 75% from the Budget Estimate stage to the Revised Estimates and an even worse reduction of 90% in actual expenditure. Under the NPRD guidelines, up to ₹50 lakh is allowed per patient, which will be disbursed to the concerned CoE. As chronic rare diseases usually require lifelong management and therapy, this amount is woefully inadequate. Consequently, the CoEs are wary of beginning any treatment that they may need to suspend later, leaving them vulnerable to judicial action from patients and their kin.

The confusion shows in the fund utilisation. For instance, more than ₹47 crore of the ₹71 crore financial assistance allocated to the 11 CoEs for the current year remains unused. There is no parity between CoEs, with Mumbai exhausting all its funds (while treating only 20 of 107 patients) and Delhi utilising less

than 20%. And in a classic case of abdication of governmental responsibility, NPRD has urged the CoEs to crowdfund to treat rare disease patients. A portal with over 1,400 registered patients has collected less than ₹3 lakh in three years. Can crowdfunding ever be a sustainable national policy?

**The way forward**

Admittedly, the situation is not easy for the government, and to its credit, India has at least recognised rare diseases. However, the efforts are far from satisfactory. It is imperative for the Central government to frame a standard definition of rare diseases, increase budgetary outlays, dedicate funding for drug development and therapy, and increase the number of CoEs while also ensuring better coordination and responsible utilisation of funds. State governments must introduce social assistance programmes and develop satellite centres under the CoEs. Public and private companies could be co-opted for funding; CSR initiatives and partnerships can be leveraged to meet shortfalls.

Finally, the issue of exorbitant drug prices and availability must be addressed. Last year, the government waived off GST and customs duty on medicines for rare diseases. But this exemption applies only to drugs which are to be "imported for personal use" and not to the ones commercially available in India. Given the exorbitant prices, how many patients can afford to import these life-saving drugs? Rare diseases cannot be left to market forces: there just aren't enough market incentives for drug manufacturers. The government must incentivise domestic manufacturers under the Production-Linked Incentive Scheme, reduce clinical trial requirements in appropriate cases, and look into options such as repurposed drugs and bulk-import. But first, it must withdraw GST on life-saving drugs. February 29 reminds us that we can find a way around the rarest of problems.

# The nagging problem of Katchatheevu

Though fisherfolk want to resume fishing in the islet, India cannot allow it

**STATE OF PLAY**

**L. Srikrishna**  
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Katchatheevu islet, a part of Sri Lanka and located about 14 nautical miles from Rameswaram in Tamil Nadu, is back in the limelight for the wrong reasons.

On February 17, fishermen associations in Ramanathapuram district announced that they were boycotting the annual two-day festival, scheduled for February 23 and 24, at the St. Anthony's Church in the uninhabited islet. Every year, this event brings together the people from both sides of the Palk Bay separating India and Sri Lanka. The fisherfolk also announced that they would observe an indefinite strike. These decisions were a mark of protest against the Sri Lankan government's continuing arrests of Indian fishermen on charges of poaching.

**Shift in approach**

Though the response of the Sri Lankan authorities is not new, there seems to be a shift in the way the island nation's judiciary treats those accused of poaching. In February, Sri Lankan Navy personnel arrested 42 fishermen belonging to Rameswaram and Thangachimadam in Ramanathapuram, as well as other regions in India, in two separate incidents. A Sri Lankan court sentenced five of those fishermen to prison terms of between six months and two years, for the repeat offence of poaching. While ordering the release of the rest, the court warned that they would have to serve a jail term if they were caught again. "The fishing community of Ramanathapuram district was shocked by this," said fisher leader P. Jesu Raja.

According to one version,

the original shrine of the Church was built by the Ramnad Diocese more than 100 years ago. As per the Sri Lankan Navy records, it was constructed in 1901. Though it was taken over by the Jaffna diocese after India ceded Katchatheevu to Sri Lanka in 1974, the two countries organise the festival together. In recent years, people from other States such as Karnataka have also been attending it.

Over the last 15-odd years, it has been a practice for the Church authorities to extend an invitation to the Verkodu parish, which, in turn, seeks applications from pilgrims. On producing valid documents, pilgrims are allowed to cross the Palk Strait using trawlers. Their actions are monitored by Central and State agencies such as the Customs and the Police. Apart from exchanging pleasantries and gifts, pilgrims from both sides also pray for improved relations between the two countries.

This year, the agitating fishermen and their families in Ramanathapuram argued that it wouldn't be fair for them to participate in a festival held in Sri Lanka when their own "brothers" were in jail in the neighbouring country. They were staying away from the celebrations to show solidarity, they said.

Whenever fishermen from Tamil Nadu are arrested in Sri Lanka, India's High Commission in Colombo and Consulate in Jaffna provide consular

and legal assistance to the imprisoned fishermen and work towards their early release. New Delhi has been asking Colombo to treat the fishermen issue as "a purely humanitarian and livelihood concern." It says both sides should ensure that force is not used under any circumstance. Even though the Sri Lankan authorities release the fishermen as a matter of routine, they do not return the impounded fishing vessels. The Ramanathapuram fishermen believe that this adds insult to injury. This time too, vessels were impounded and not returned.

**Resolving the issue**

For about 10 years, the fishermen have been hoping that their issue will get resolved. Sushma Swaraj, as External Affairs Minister, had even organised a high-level meeting of fishermen from both the countries to work out a solution. "But this could not deliver results fully due to various political developments," Mr. Jesu Raja said.

Now, sections of the fisherfolk expect the Indian government to impress upon the Sri Lankan government to allow fishing activity in Katchatheevu, as was the practice in the past, and also retrieve the islet since the population of fishermen in Sri Lanka who depend on the Palk Bay is smaller compared to those from Tamil Nadu. But the Central government, which assured Sri Lanka that it would abolish bottom trawlers in a phased manner, hopes that the fishermen will diversify their activities to include deep sea fishing, seaweed cultivation, and open sea cage cultivation. If the fishermen are to do this, the deep-sea fishing scheme, which has been a non-starter so far, will have to be revised with liberal norms to ensure greater participation.

# Luxury cars in India saw a 30% increase in the last 5 years

In recent years, the preferred brands are BMW, Lamborghini, Porsche, Jaguar Land Rover, and Mercedes-Benz

**DATA POINT**

**Rebecca Rose Varghese & Vignesh Radhakrishnan**

The number of luxury cars in India recorded a sharp increase in the last five years, an analysis of vehicle registration data shows. Nearly 5 lakh luxury cars have been registered till date in India across various Regional Transport Offices, according to the Vahan portal. Of them, close to 30% were registered in the 2020-2024 period. This number is significantly high considering that the first two years in this period coincided with the pandemic and various sections of the economy were still in the recovery phase in the following two years.

For this analysis, certain manufacturers were termed luxury brands based on reports published in various credible news portals. The selection includes the following manufacturers: Lamborghini, BMW India, Porsche, Jaguar Land Rover, Mercedes-Benz, Volvo, Bentley Motors, Lexus Motors, Rolls Royce, Ferrari India, Audi AG, Aston Martin, Maserati, Acura Legend and Alfa Romeo. In some cases, the price of cars was also considered.

Table 1 lists the luxury brand-wise number of cars registered in India till date (A), the number of cars registered between 2020 and 2024 (B), and the share (B as a % of A). As stated earlier, the registrations of 30% of all the luxury cars were done between 2020 and 2024. However, while some brands have gained popularity, others have not. For instance, over 40% of all the BMWs registered till date were purchased in 2020-2024; in contrast, the corresponding share for Audis was 7%. Similarly, 52% of Lamborghinis, 33% of Porsches, 30% of Jaguar Land Rovers, and 29% of Mercedes-Benz cars registered till today were purchased in 2020-2024. In contrast,

the corresponding numbers were 10% for Rolls Royce cars, 13% for Bentleys, 8% for Ferraris, and 4% for Aston Martins. This shows that preferences have gone through a significant change in the past four years.

There were also significant variations among States. Chart 2 shows the number of luxury cars registered till date across various States along the horizontal axis. The farther to the right, the higher the number of luxury cars registered in the State. Maharashtra leads the list by a wide margin with more than 94,000 such cars registered in the State till date. This is followed by Karnataka (56,396 cars), Delhi (49,971), Gujarat (42,101), and Tamil Nadu (40,423).

While absolute numbers are important, a comparison with non-luxury cars registered in the States provides a better picture. For this purpose, one luxury car registered in a State for every 1 lakh non-luxury cars is plotted on the vertical axis of Chart 2. The higher the State in the chart, the higher the luxury car concentration. Cars manufactured by Maruti Suzuki, Tata, Honda, Hyundai, and Toyota were considered non-luxury. For instance, in Maharashtra, for every 1 lakh non-luxury cars registered, there are 1,200 luxury cars. Notably, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Delhi, Tamil Nadu, Haryana, and Goa had a similar concentration of luxury cars. In the Union Territories of Chandigarh and Puducherry, the concentration was much higher. This was due to lower road tax and other fees, which significantly reduced the prices of such cars.

Table 3 shows the same information as in Table 1 for States with a high number of luxury cars. Of the 154 Maseratis registered in India, 78 are in Tamil Nadu. Of the 723 Aston Martins registered in the country, 618 are in Karnataka. Maharashtra leads in registrations of Rolls Royce cars and Delhi leads in registrations of Alfa Romeo and Acura Legend.

## Hot wheels

The data for the charts were sourced from the Vahan Dashboard

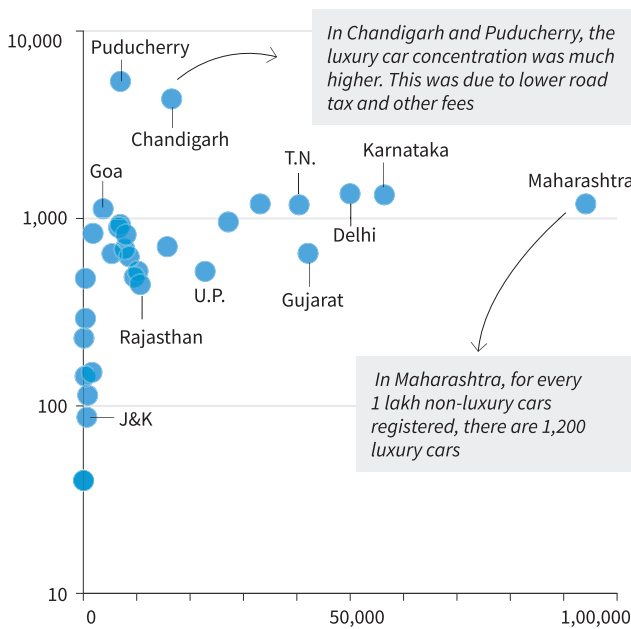
**Speed and comfort:** Luxury cars manufactured by Lamborghini passing through ECR in Chennai. M. KARUNAKARAN



**Table 1:** The table lists, luxury brand-wise, the number of cars registered in India till date (A), no. of cars registered between 2020 and 2024 (B) and the share (B as a % of A)

Luxury car	A	B	B/A (%)
Lamborghini	518	269	52%
BMW India	1,59,539	64,056	40%
Porsche	6,811	2,263	33%
Jaguar	35,406	10,473	30%
India	4,94,067	1,42,523	29%
Mercedes	1,74,187	49,662	29%
Volvo	47,621	10,819	23%
Bentley	1,046	139	13%
Lexus Motors	38	4	11%
Rolls Royce	962	92	10%
Ferrari India	878	72	8%
Audi AG	66,082	4,639	7%
Aston Martin	723	32	4%
Maserati	154	3	2%
Acura Legend	42	0	0%
Alfa Romeo	60	0	0%

**Chart 2:** Number of luxury cars registered till now (horizontal axis). One luxury car registered for every 1 lakh non-luxury cars (vertical axis)



**Table 3:** This table shows the same information as in Table 1 for States with a high number of luxury cars. Luxury brand-wise no. of cars registered till date (A), no. of cars registered between 2020 and 2024 (B) and the share (B as a % of A)

Luxury car	Delhi			T.N.			Maharashtra			Karnataka			Gujarat		
	A	B	%	A	B	%	A	B	%	A	B	%	A	B	%
Audi AG	5326	416	8	6047	385	6	11679	580	5	9679	451	5	7098	452	6
BMW India	13872	4708	34	15994	6709	42	32912	12492	38	18659	7951	43	12700	4608	36
Jaguar	4826	774	16	1293	620	48	6016	1889	31	4154	1042	25	2765	1170	42
Mercedes	22821	4718	21	12833	3612	28	37390	10458	28	15243	4805	32	14760	4444	30
Volvo	1758	451	26	2981	0	0	4488	1724	38	6537	1228	19	4099	1335	33
Ferrari India	71	6	8	591	4	1	87	44	51	14	2	14	5	3	60
Rolls Royce	179	13	7	82	2	2	240	54	23	55	5	9	17	3	18
Bentley	218	22	10	49	13	27	156	64	41	38	11	29	37	4	11
Porsche	715	226	32	416	228	55	968	425	44	1331	248	19	595	196	33
Lamborghini	48	19	40	49	21	43	159	109	69	49	22	45	20	0	0
Maserati	11	0	0	78	1	1	12	0	0	11	0	0	1	0	0
Aston Martin	24	11	46	8	3	38	26	7	27	618	3	0	3	0	0
Acura Legend	42	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Alfa Romeo	60	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Lexus Motors	0	0	0	2	0	0	13	4	31	8	0	0	1	0	0

**FROM THE ARCHIVES**

**The Hindu**

**FIFTY YEARS AGO** FROM THE FEBRUARY 28, 1974 EDITION AS 1974 WAS NOT A LEAP YEAR

## Facelift for Rly. stations

New Delhi, Feb. 27: The Railway Minister, Mr. L.N. Mishra, in his budget speech in the Lok Sabha to-day said that a special programme of improving the cleanliness and appearance of important stations was in progress. This would make the Railways present an image worthy of its being the premium public sector undertaking in the country.

Varanasi station, one of the important centres of pilgrimage, is being given a facelift at an estimated cost of Rs. 65 lakhs. Some of the other important stations on which work is in progress are Bombay V.T., Bombay Central, New Delhi and Delhi, Kanpur, Madras Central, Bangalore, Gauhati, Nagpur, Aligarh, Rae Bareilly, Gorakhpur, Bhopal, Hyderabad, Poona Darbhanga and Patna.

Mr. Mishra said that a number of amenities for passengers at stations and in trains have also been proposed in the budget. The expenditure on passenger and other users amenities has been maintained at Rs. 4 crores per year.

He said the travel concessions available to the students, teachers, athletes and farmers continue to be provided during the current year. The running of special trains for educational tours, started in May 1973, had been made a regular feature. A concession of 50 per cent in third class fare, free kitchen car and free travel for cooks was provided in such trains.

The Railway Minister said that provision for a number of amenities for the Railway staff has also been made in the budget. About 5000 quarters were being built every year for the staff. For this purpose Rs. 7.96 crores had been provided for 1974-75, he said.

**A HUNDRED YEARS AGO** FEBRUARY 29, 1924

## Belgian Premier's resignation

London, Feb. 28: The fall of the Belgian Government which has caused consternation in Government circles in Paris, creates an interesting European situation on account of its international implications just when reparations seem to be entering a decisive stage. The Opposition came from different quarters and was based on diverse grounds, but the most formidable assault proceeded from a combination of Socialists and Flemish Democrats who for a long time have decried the occupation of Ruhr and feared the convention would lead to further subservience to France.



# Text & Context

THE HINDU

## NEWS IN NUMBERS

**The record high narcotics seized off the Gujarat coast**

**3,300** in kg. The source of the drugs is the Chabahar Port in Iran, the NCB said. The seizure is estimated to be between ₹1,200 and ₹2,000 crore in the market. PTI

**The rate by which Jharkhand has hiked the power tariff**

**7.66** In percentage. Under the new rates, domestic consumers in rural areas will pay ₹6.30 per unit, up from ₹5.80, while urban consumers will pay ₹6.65 per unit, up from ₹6.30. PTI

**The increase in flights that Air India Express will operate**

**40** In percentage. The low-cost carrier will operate more flights next fiscal on the back of fleet expansion. Air India Express currently operates 350 daily flights and has a fleet of 69 planes. PTI

**The number of Palestinians killed due to the war in Gaza**

**30,000** 91 more were killed in an overnight Israeli attack, health ministry said. Nearly 1.5 million people are packed into the city of Rafah. AFP

**The amount disbursed under the YSR Rythu Bharosa-PM Kisan**

**1,294** in ₹ crore. ₹1,078 crore funds have been disbursed to more than 53 lakh farmers at the rate of ₹2,000. PTI

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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## On irregularities in vertical devolution

Agitations by different State governments in New Delhi have highlighted many disquieting issues in the practice of fiscal federalism in India. In light of this, the 16th FC must take initiative to correct historical wrongs in vertical devolution through compensations to the States

## ECONOMIC NOTES

R. Ramakumar

The recent agitations by the governments of Kerala and Karnataka, and the support extended by several State governments, have highlighted many disquieting issues in the practice of fiscal federalism in India. These agitations show that the newly constituted 16th Finance Commission (FC) would have to proceed seriously and innovatively to justly address complaints of increasing vertical and horizontal inequalities in devolution.

Within the domain of vertical devolution – that is the sharing of resources between the Union and States – there are two disturbing trends that need urgent redressal. First, the Union government has sought to keep an increasing share of its proceeds out of the divisible pool so that they need not be shared with States. Secondly, it has also not been devolving the shares of net proceeds to the States as mandated by successive FCs.

**The shrinking divisible pool**

The net divisible pool, or net proceeds, is that part of the gross tax revenue from which a share would have to be vertically devolved by the Union to all States. Such shares are assigned by each FC for a five-year period. Earlier, all corporation taxes and customs duties were fully absorbed by the Union, and only income taxes and excise duties were shared with the States. However, with changes over the years, culminating in a constitutional amendment in 2000, all taxes of the Union were added to the net proceeds. But there was a catch – cesses and surcharges under Article 270 and Article 271 were kept out of the net proceeds. In the past, such exclusion of cesses and surcharges were based on specific FC recommendations. But the amendment in 2000 provided a constitutional basis for it. Presently, the net proceeds consists of the gross tax revenue after the deduction of cesses, surcharges and the cost of collection of taxes.

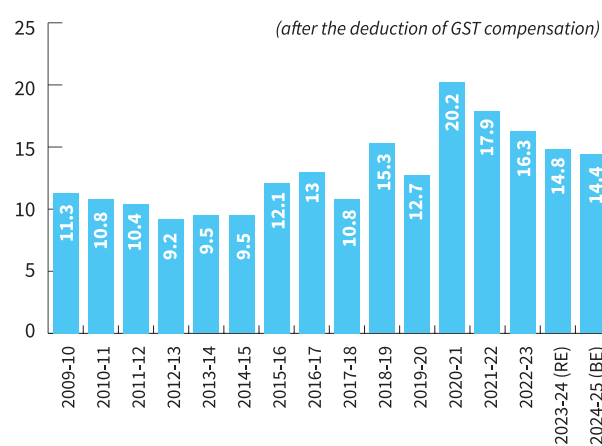
Over the past decade or more, several cesses and surcharges were introduced by the Union government. When the Goods and Services Tax (GST) was initiated in 2017, the expectation was that many cesses and surcharges would be discarded and subsumed into the GST system. On the contrary, new cesses and surcharges continued to be introduced, and many old cesses and surcharges remained outside the GST system. For instance, the Agriculture Infrastructure and Development Cess was introduced as recent as in 2021-22. Similarly, when the Health and Education Cess was introduced in 2017-18, it just replaced the Primary Education and Secondary Education cess on direct taxes. The expansion of cesses and surcharges have led to the exclusion of an increasing share of the gross tax revenue from net proceeds. Interestingly, there is conflicting information released by the government on the quantum of cesses and surcharges. In December 2022, responding to a question raised in the Rajya Sabha, the government stated that the share of cesses and surcharges in the gross tax revenue was 18.2% in 2019-20, 25.1% in 2020-21 and 28.1% in 2021-22. But responding to another question in the Lok Sabha in March 2023, the government stated that the corresponding shares were 15.6% in 2019-20, 20.5% in 2020-21 and 18.4% in 2021-22.

To obtain more accurate estimates of cesses and surcharges, this article uses disaggregated data from budget

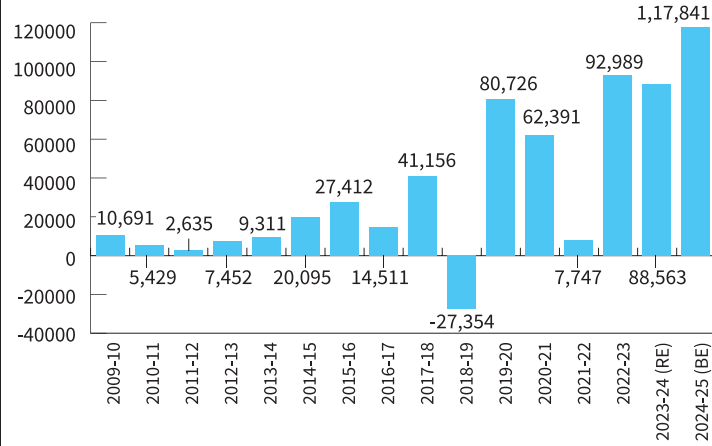
### How much funding do States get from the Centre?

The net divisible pool is that part of the gross tax revenue from which a share would have to be vertically devolved by the Union to all States. These charts explain how they are actually distributed versus entitlements

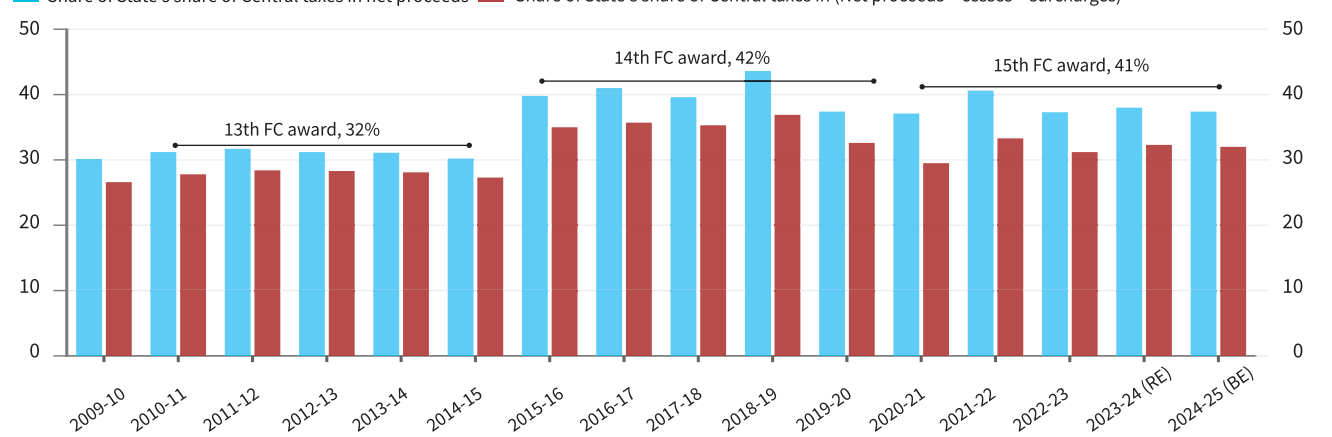
**Chart 1:** The share of cesses and surcharges in the gross tax revenue from 2009-10 to 2024-25, in %



**Chart 3:** Difference between the entitlement of all States as per FC awards and actually devolved State's share in central taxes from 2009-10 to 2024-25, in ₹ crore



**Chart 2:** Share in central taxes of States in the divisible pool and share of cesses and surcharges in the gross tax revenue from 2009-10 to 2024-24, in %



Source: Budget documents, Ministry of Finance, Receipts Budget

documents between 2009-10 and 2024-25. The collection of each type of cess and surcharge was separately recorded and added up, after giving due consideration to their occasional abolishment and/or merger with other taxes. The total collection of cesses and surcharges rose from ₹70,559 crore in 2009-10 to ₹6.6 lakh crore in 2023-24 (RE) and ₹7 lakh crore in 2024-25 (BE). These collections include the GST compensation cess, which is given to the States as per statutory requirements. If we deduct the GST compensation cess, the collection of cesses and surcharges rose from ₹70,559 crore in 2009-10 to ₹5.1 lakh crore in 2023-24 (RE) and ₹5.5 lakh crore in 2024-25 (BE). Considered as a share of the gross tax revenue, cesses and surcharges fell from 11.3% in 2009-10 to 9.5% in 2014-15, but then rose to 15.3% in 2018-19, a peak of 20.2% in 2020-21 and 16.3% in 2022-23. As per the tentative figures for 2023-24, cesses and surcharges are estimated at 14.8% of the gross tax revenue, which is still higher than the corresponding shares in 2009-10 or 2014-15 (see Chart 1).

Between 2009-10 and 2023-24, a cumulative total of ₹36.6 lakh crore was collected by the Union government as cesses and surcharges. An additional ₹5.5 lakh crore is projected to be collected as cesses and surcharges in 2024-25. This amount was not shared with States and was used solely by the Union government.

**Rise in tied transfers**

The Union government may argue that a part of this amount was used to finance centrally sponsored schemes and central sector schemes, while another part was used to provide non-plan grants or capital transfers to States. The problem, however, is that such transfers are not untied as is the case with the devolution of State's share in central taxes. In

### Even when State governments contribute a lion's share in implementing a central project, the Union government often tries to usurp credit

centrally sponsored schemes, about 40% of the cost must be borne by the State governments. Even in central sector schemes, the contribution of the Union government is often meagre, and the State governments are forced to contribute significantly larger amounts to run the schemes meaningfully.

Even when State governments contribute a lion's share in implementing a central project, the Union government often tries to usurp credit by insisting on displaying the Prime Minister's photograph or other forms of labelling. Recent disputes over labelling in the Ayushman Bharat wellness centres is one such example. Similarly, several grants given to the States are contingent on fulfilment of conditionalities – and some of these conditionalities include the insistence on labelling. Finally, most capital transfers given to the States are loans, which must be repaid to the Union government

The bottom line is that none of the transfers to the States outside the FC recommendations are either unconditional or suitable to meet their context-specific needs. Instead, they tend to reaffirm a centralising tendency in the fiscal realm – one that effectively tends to push the Union-State relationship into a patron-client relationship. Any purported deviation from the guidelines or a failure to meet the imposed conditionalities can lead to the denial of such resources.

The share of States in central taxes is, thus, a gold standard in any assessment of fiscal federalism. It is a matter of deep worry, then, that the Union government

increasingly pays less of untied transfers to States and retains more of the gross tax revenue as cesses and surcharges. The substitution of such untied transfers with central schemes does not ameliorate the loss; instead, it inserts rigidities in Union-State relations and ends up diluting the spirit of cooperative fiscal federalism.

**The CAG indictments**

Cesses and surcharges have also been subjected to critical scrutiny by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG). All cesses must be transferred to a reserve fund in the Public Account of India after their collection. In its reports the CAG has uncovered numerous instances of either non-transfer or short transfer of the collected amounts to the respective funds. A CAG report in 2023 noted that if ₹52,732 crore was collected towards the Health and Education Cess in 2021-22, only ₹31,788 crore (or 60%) was transferred to the reserve fund of Prarambhik Shiksha Kosh. The Research and Development Cess must be transferred to the Fund for Technology Development and Application. A CAG report in 2019 noted that the total collection of Research and Development Cess between 1996-97 and 2017-18 was ₹8,077 crore, but only ₹779 crore (or 9.6%) was transferred to the Fund.

The Swatchh Bharat Cess must be transferred to the Rashtriya Swachhata Kosh. The extent of short transfer to the Kosh between 2015-16 and 2017-18 was ₹4,891 crore. The extent of short transfer between 2010-11 and 2017-18 under the Road Cess was ₹72,726 crore and under the Clean Energy Cess was ₹44,505 crore.

Non-transfers and short transfers of cesses defeat the logic of their collection. It also reaffirms the view that cesses and surcharges are just a ruse to divert increasing quantum of funds away from the divisible pool to meet other financial

requirements of the Union government.

**Deviations from FC recommendations**

Speaking in Parliament on February 8, 2024, the Union Finance Minister claimed: "whatever the Finance Commission has recommended [as the rate of devolution], I follow it to the last word". How robust is this claim?

We have seen that a significant portion of the gross tax revenue is retained by the Union government as cesses and surcharges. One may disagree with such a retention, but it has some basis in constitutional provisions. However, what has happened to the recommendation of the FCs that a certain share of the net proceeds must be shared with all States? These shares were stipulated as 32% by the 13th FC (2010 to 2015), 42% by the 14th FC (2015 to 2020), and 41% by the 15th FC (2020 to 2025).

Annual estimates of net proceeds can be obtained by deducting cesses, surcharges, and costs of collection of taxes from the gross tax revenue. These estimates of net proceeds can be compared against the "States' share of central taxes" in each year to check if they amounted to the FC-stipulated percentage of the net proceeds. It turns out that the Union government has not been sharing even the FC-recommended shares of net proceeds with the States. The States' share of central taxes as a percentage of net proceeds was below the recommendations of the respective FCs for most years (see Chart 2). The average of the annual shares of devolution was 31.1% during the 13th FC period, 40.3% during the 14th FC period and 38.1% during the 15th FC period. The shortfall was widest during the ongoing period of the 15th FC, for which the claim of "to the last word" has been offered.

If we add cesses and surcharges to the net proceeds – to create a revised divisible pool – the share of devolution would fall even further to 28% during the 13th FC period, 35.1% during the 14th FC period and 31.7% during the 15th FC period. What do these shortfalls vis-a-vis FC recommendations amount to in quantum terms? Between 2009-10 and 2024-25 (BE), the cumulative amount not devolved to the States was ₹5.61 lakh crore (see Chart 3). The total amounts not devolved to the States were ₹44,922 crore during the 13th FC period, ₹1.36 lakh crore during the 14th FC period and a whopping ₹3.69 lakh crore during the 15th FC period (including 2024-25 BE). The failure to devolve these funds to States must be treated as a striking constitutional impropriety.

**The agenda of reform**

To conclude, sharing of resources from the divisible pool, and the extent of cesses and surcharges, must be matters of critical importance for the 16th FC. The FC must take initiative to correct historical wrongs in vertical devolution through compensations to the States. It must instruct the Union government to publish accurate estimates of "net proceeds" in the budget documents. It must also arrange to provide shortfalls in devolution over the last decade as a lump sum untied grant to States. On its part, the Union government must legislatively act to have strict limits on the collection of cesses and surcharges; cesses and surcharges should automatically expire after a short period and must not be rechristened under another name. Apart from addressing rightful complaints on the inequalities in horizontal devolution, the stance of the 16th FC on vertical devolution would be critical to the survival of fiscal federalism in India.

R. Ramakumar teaches at the School of Development Studies, TISS, Mumbai.



BIBLIOGRAPHY



GETTY IMAGES



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

K. Subrahmanian

“Mr. K. George Philip, Maharaja’s College, Ernakulam, wants to know whether it is correct to say ‘Professor Mr. John.’”

“No. ‘Professor John’ is correct. ‘Professor’ is not followed by ‘Mr.’”

“Mr. A. Shanmugasundaram, Nehru Street Chitilaapakkam, Madras, wants to know ‘why landed property is called real estate and what is so real about it’”

“‘Real estate’ or ‘real property’ means ‘land, buildings, etc.’ ‘Real estate’ is immovable property. It is real in that you can see it. It is not imaginary. In law, real estate or real property is contrasted with ‘personal property.’ ‘Personal estate’ or ‘property’ is ‘property owned by a person, except land or income from land, that passes to his heir.’ You can see ‘real estate,’ you can only make a guess at ‘personal estate.’”

“Mrs. S. Sarada, Kendriya Sanskrit Vidyalaya, Tirupati, wants to know what a person who hates men is called.”

“‘Misandry’ means ‘hatred of men.’ A ‘misandrist’ is a hater of men. A ‘misogynist’ is one who hates women. ‘Misogyny’ is hatred of women. A ‘misanthrope’ is a hater of mankind. ‘Misanthropy’ is hatred of mankind.”

“Mr. R. Murali, Chittur-Palakkad, wants to know the meaning of the idiom ‘bull in a china shop.’”

“‘China’ refers to ‘fine, baked and glazed white clay, porcelain.’ Cups, saucers and plates made of ‘china’ are also called ‘china’.”

*Please keep the china away from the reach of children.*

A bull when it gets into a china shop will knock things down. The idiom ‘a bull in a china shop’ means ‘a rough and careless person in a place where skill and care are needed,’ a person who is lacking in tact and gentleness where they are needed. A Chinese shop is a shop in China or one owned by ‘a native or descendant of a native of China.’ A china shop is a shop where you have chinaware. When you refer to the country, ‘C’ should be capitalised; when you refer to the crockery, ‘c’ should not be capitalised.”

“Ms. Annie George, Chalakuzhi, Tiruvalla, wants to know the meaning of ‘Young Turk.’”

“‘A Young Turk’ is a young person who wants to bring about radical changes to the established order. ‘The Young Turks’ were originally a revolutionary party formed in 1908 in Turkey to transform the decadent Turkish Empire. The party remained a dominant force until the end of the First World War. From this, we get the figurative meaning ‘a political radical, a member of a rebellious group in a political party’. It also means ‘a violent child or youth.’ This is an offensive term. When it is used in this sense, ‘y’ and ‘t’ should not be in capital letters. It is difficult to cope with that young turk.”

*Published in The Hindu on April 9, 1991*

# Practice and law: debating aspects of the Muslim personal law

Writers analysing practices like talaq, khula and nikah halala, find that the concepts are often misunderstood and misused for narrow political and social gain, to the detriment of the community it attempts to serve – women

Ziya Us Salam

Last week, the Assam Government quietly repealed the Assam Muslim Marriages and Divorces Registration Act, 1935. Following the decision, Muslim marriage or divorce registration can happen only through the Special Marriage Act. The decision was widely criticised in political circles, but the fact remains that the Muslim personal law, and inevitably, Muslim marriage, divorce, maintenance and inheritance, have been in the public eye in recent years. They have all been the subject of study for academics and authors alike, ranging from Asghar Ali Engineer who analysed the Muslim personal law threadbare through a series of writings to seasoned legal writer Tahir Mahmood whose works on the subject manifest his redoubtable scholarship, and, of course, Salman Khurshid who has never shied away from putting pen to paper when it comes to Muslim issues.

Various options

There are a couple of books by Khurshid which merit abiding attention. In his book, *Triple Talaq*, Khurshid talks of the possible political repercussions of the Supreme Court verdict in the *Shayara Bano versus the Union of India* case, popularly called the Triple Talaq judgment. Without equivocating, Khurshid writes, “There are people on

one hand who selectively choose aspects of the judgments to advance some political goal...In recent years, perhaps as the outcome of intensively divisive politics, a growing number of people have misgivings about Islam....Perhaps this judgment, building upon the earlier one of Justice Badar Ahmed of the High Court of Delhi in the Masroor Ahmed case, will somewhat clear the air. However, there is much that remains untouched for the present, such as nikah halala and polygamy, both of which are grievously misunderstood, and perhaps even misused.”

Talking of various form of divorce options in Islam, Furqan Ahmed puts it lucidly in *Triple Talaq: An Analytical Study*, “In Islam, matrimonial alliance is a social contract. It can be dissolved when it ceases to serve the values and purpose of living and co-existing together. A deeper study of the institution of marriage and divorce in Islam shows that the marital tie is to be respected and to be continued till the possible extent....The dissolution is a last resort. When the dissolution is initiated by the husband it is known as talaq. When it happens at the instance of wife it is termed as khula. When the parties mutually agree for it, it is referred to as mubarat. On certain grounds, court orders to dissolve the marriage. This form of divorce is known as faskh. The Dissolution of Muslim Marriages Act, 1939 provides nine

grounds on the basis of which a woman can seek divorce from the court.”

Writing in ‘Religion and Law Review’ (published by Institute of Objective Studies), Lucy Carroll reiterates, “All schools of classical Islamic law recognise that the husband has a right to dissolve the marriage extra-judicially by the unilateral pronouncement of talaq. They also recognise other means of extra-judicial termination of marriage in the khula and mubarat form of divorce through mutual consent.” Carroll, however, believes, the husband’s consent is necessary for khula, something other luminaries do not always agree with.

Unconditional rights

Among them is Tahir Mahmood who writes in *Uniform Civil Code: Fictions and Facts*, “Islamic law effects a beautiful equilibrium between the divorce rights of men and women. It is a great folly that we have practically withdrawn from our women the right of khula, little caring for the fact that denying them this right on a footing equal to talaq, is absolutely un-Islamic....The women’s right to khula is, like a man’s right to talaq, wholly unconditional.”

Khurshid in *Triple Talaq* talks of the contentious Shah Bano verdict too, quoting from Surah Baqarah, verse 241 on maintenance allowance for divorced women. He writes dispassionately about Mahr, and how a woman is entitled to it in

lieu of consideration for marriage besides referring to the ‘beard Hadith’ case decided by Justice Thakur in 2016.

Incidentally, right since that case, which ruled that Muslims working in the Indian Air Force cannot grow a beard, various aspects of Muslim law have been argued in the Supreme Court. In 2017, we had the Triple Talaq case by a five-judge Bench headed by Justice Khehar followed by the Babri Masjid case in 2019. The final verdict is awaited in the women’s entry to masjid case while petitions on nikah halala and polygamy are still pending.

Be it in the legal arena or literary circles, various aspects of Muslim lives are under scrutiny. As Tahir Mahmood writes in *From the Heart* (a collection of his speeches compiled by Saif Mahmood), “Today, in our beloved country, minorities feel and actually find themselves insecure. It is tragic that in our sacred land...established rights of minorities are now being observed only in violation – and the pious norm of the protection of rights of minorities continues to be denigrated as ‘appeasement’ of minorities.”

That, however, is only one facet. The other is quoted by Mahmood himself, writing, “The tragedy of the Muslim society today is that it is rightfully proud of its glorious law on women’s rights but at the same time blissfully oblivious to the nearly total supersession of that law by actual practice.”

THE DAILY QUIZ

A balancing rock is a naturally occurring geological formation featuring a large rock or boulder, resting on other rocks. A quiz on various factoids about the same

Vasudevan Mukunth

QUESTION 1

\_\_\_\_\_ are large rocks balanced on a small point on a surface such that even a little touch could send them rocking back and forth. (Something stronger will tip them over.) Fill in the blank with the name for such rocks. Hint: A popular X-Men character has the same name.

QUESTION 2

Name the southern African country whose banknote – including one representing a currency value with 14 zeroes – featured a geological formation called Balancing Rocks. This is a natural formation consisting of rocks piled on one another, all finely balanced.

QUESTION 3

When visiting this area in north-central Australia, the Scottish-Australian explorer

John Ross said: “This is the Devil’s country; he’s even emptied his bag of marbles around the place!” He was referring to the many balancing rocks here. Name the reserve set up to protect these formations, including one of the world’s oldest religious sites.

QUESTION 4

There are many balancing rocks located in India. For example, the \_\_\_\_\_’s \_\_\_\_\_ balancing rock is a popular tourist attraction in Mahabalipuram, Tamil Nadu. Fill in the blanks. Hint: One blank is the name of a Hindu deity and the other alludes to a particular favourite of his.

QUESTION 5

The \_\_\_\_\_ Pagoda in Myanmar is a popular site of Buddhist pilgrimage. It is built on a large balancing rock at the edge of a hill. Local legend holds that the rock itself is balanced on a strand of the Buddha’s hair. Name the pagoda.



Visual question:

Name this famous balancing rock weighing 300 tonnes, considered by the city of Tandil to be its symbol. On February 29, 1912, it dropped from its precarious position and broke. WIKIPEDIA COMMONS

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

- This Indian physicist is best known for this theory. **Ans: Satyendra Nath Bose, Bose-Einstein condensate**
  - This scientist pioneered the investigation of radio microwave optics. **Ans: Jagadish Chandra Bose**
  - This scientist is considered the father of the Indian nuclear programme. **Ans: Homi J. Bhabha**
  - This scientist is known for his contributions to the discovery of nitrite chemistry. **Ans: Prafulla Chandra Ray**
  - Name the scientists who have received the Nobel Prize in medicine, physics and chemistry. **Ans: C.V. Raman, Har Gobind Khorana, Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar, Venki Ramakrishnan**
  - Meghnad Saha was known for this theory. **Ans: Saha ionization equation**
- Visual: Identify this scientist and the fields she was known for. **Ans: Janaki Ammal, Botany and Cytology**
- Early Birds: P.N. Moorthy| Amaan| Yogapriya Karthigeyan| Abhay Krishan

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

Word of the day

**Stodgy:** heavy and starchy and hard to digest; out of fashion; old fashioned; excessively conventional and unimaginative and hence dull

**Synonyms:** stick-in-the-mud, foggyish, mossy, stuffy

**Usage:** I attended her stodgy dinner party. It was awful.

**Pronunciation:** bit.ly/prostodgy

**International Phonetic Alphabet:** /ˈstoʊ.dʒi/

For feedback and suggestions for Text & Context, please write to [letters@thehindu.co.in](mailto:letters@thehindu.co.in) with the subject ‘Text & Context’



## ACCRA

## Members of Ghana parliament pass controversial anti-LGBTQ Bill



REUTERS

Ghana's parliament voted to pass a controversial Bill to severely restrict LGBTQ rights on Wednesday. The Bill still has to be validated by the President, which observers believe is unlikely before a general election in December. But President Nana Akufo-Addo has said gay marriage will never be allowed while he is in power. AFP

## STOCKHOLM

## Orlov's sentencing is an attempt to 'silence' Putin's critics: Nobel body



AFP

The Nobel committee said on Wednesday the sentencing of human rights campaigner Oleg Orlov in Russia to a prison term was an attempt to "silence" critics. Orlov, a key figure of the Nobel winning Memorial group, was sentenced to two-and-a-half years in jail for denouncing Russia's invasion of Ukraine on Tuesday. AFP

## BELFAST

## 'Northern Ireland amnesty breaches human rights law'



REUTERS

A U.K. law granting immunity to combatants involved in decades of sectarian violence in Northern Ireland breaches the European Convention on Human Rights, a Belfast court ruled on Wednesday. Victims of the violence had challenged the law, which received royal assent in September despite widespread opposition. AFP

## WASHINGTON

## Mitch McConnell to step down as Republican leader in U.S. Senate



AFP

Veteran U.S. politician Mitch McConnell, 82, said on Wednesday he would step down as leader of the Republican Party in the Senate later this year, ending his tenure as the longest-serving Senate leader. "I stand before you today, Mr. President and my colleagues to say this will be my last term as Republican leader," he said. AFP

## Google CEO dismayed by errors from Gemini AI app

Agence France-Presse  
SAN FRANCISCO

Google CEO Sundar Pichai on Tuesday slammed "completely unacceptable" errors by its Gemini AI app, after gaffes such as images of ethnically diverse World War II Nazi troops forced it to stop users from creating pictures of people.

The controversy emerged within weeks of Google's high-profile rebranding of its ChatGPT-style AI to "Gemini". Social media users mocked Google for the historically inaccurate Gemini-generated images, such as U.S. senators from the 1800s that were ethnically diverse and included women.

In a letter to his staff, Mr. Pichai said Google's teams were working "around the clock" to fix these issues but did not say when the image-generating feature would be available again.

## Gaza death toll nears 30,000, while truce could be just a matter of days

Qatar says it is hopeful, but not necessarily optimistic regarding truce talks; Hamas says the deal might see the Israeli military leave 'cities and populated areas', allowing the return of some displaced Palestinians and humanitarian relief

Agence France-Presse  
GAZA STRIP

Fighting raged on Wednesday in the besieged Gaza Strip, where the reported death toll neared 30,000 as mediators insisted a truce in the Israel-Hamas war could be just days away.

The Hamas-ruled territory's Health Ministry reported another 91 deaths in overnight Israeli bombardment in Gaza, while UN agencies sounded the alarm on dire humanitarian conditions and food shortages.

Mediators from Egypt, Qatar and the U.S. have been trying to find a path to a ceasefire amid the bitter fighting, seeking a six-week pause in the nearly five-month war.

After a flurry of diplomacy, mediators said a deal could finally be within



Static existence: Children sit in a destroyed car in Rafah on Wednesday amid ongoing battles between Israel and Hamas. AFP

reach – reportedly including the release of some Israeli hostages held in Gaza since Hamas's October 7 attack in exchange for several hundred Palestinian detainees held by Israel.

Qatar was "hopeful, not necessarily optimistic, that we can announce something

before Thursday, Foreign Ministry spokesman Majed al-Ansari said on Tuesday.

U.S. President Joe Biden said a day earlier that "my hope is by next Monday we'll have a ceasefire", but "we're not done yet".

Mr. Ansari also cau-

tioned that "the situation is still fluid on the ground".

Doha has suggested the pause in fighting would come before the beginning of Ramzan, the Muslim fasting month which starts on March 10 or 11, depending on the lunar calendar.

## Hamas's demand

Hamas had been pushing for the complete withdrawal of Israeli forces from Gaza – a demand rejected outright by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. But a Hamas source, speaking on condition of anonymity, said that the deal might see the Israeli military leave "cities and populated areas", allowing the return of some displaced Palestinians and humanitarian relief.

Israel's military campaign following the October 7 attack has killed at least 29,954 people in Ga-

za, mostly women and children, according to the latest Health Ministry figures.

The war was triggered by the unprecedented Hamas attack on southern Israel that resulted in the deaths of around 1,160 people, mostly civilians.

Militants also took about 250 hostages, 130 of whom remain in Gaza, including 31 presumed dead, according to Israel.

Since the war began, hundreds of thousands of Gazans have been displaced within the narrow coastal territory.

Nearly 1.5 million people now packed into the far-southern city of Rafah, where Israel has warned it plans to launch a ground offensive.

Those who remain in northern Gaza have been facing an increasingly desperate situation, aid groups have warned.

## Pak. President may face the heat for not convening House

Press Trust of India  
ISLAMABAD

Pakistan President Dr. Arif Alvi's refusal to summon the newly-elected National Assembly for its first session may lead to "legal consequences", senior leaders of the PML-N and PPP have warned.

On Monday, Mr. Alvi rejected a move from the caretaker Parliamentary Affairs Ministry to summon the first session of the newly elected National Assembly on February 29.

Mr. Alvi, known for his closeness to jailed former Prime Minister Imran Khan, has maintained that all reserved seats be allocated before the summoning of the session in which newly-elected members of the National Assembly will take oath.

The Prime Minister's Office (PMO) on Tuesday rejected the objections raised by Mr. Alvi, stating that constitutionally, the first National Assembly session should take place within 21 days after the elections, and the President could summon the session before the expiry of the deadline, the Dawn newspaper reported.

Under Article 91 of the Constitution, the mandated date for the first session of the National Assembly is February 29.

The Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) Chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari on Tuesday warned that several cases will be made against Mr. Alvi for "abrogating the Constitution".

## Arif Alvi has said all reserved seats be allocated before summoning the National Assembly

Mr. Bilawal said that two cases would be filed against Mr. Alvi. The first would be for dissolving the National Assembly when a no-confidence motion was moved against the then-Prime Minister Imran Khan in 2022, and the second would be for abrogating the Constitution by not convening the National Assembly session.

He, however, asserted that his party had no plans to impeach the President.

Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) Leader Ishaq Dar also said Mr. Alvi abrogated the Constitution by not summoning the National Assembly session and would face legal cases.

Asserting that if "sense prevailed", the President would convene the session, Mr. Dar urged the Law Ministry, National Assembly Secretariat and other departments to summon the session by Thursday as per the Constitution.

After the denial by Mr. Alvi – a close aide of jailed former Prime Minister Imran Khan and a former senior member of his party – National Assembly outgoing Speaker Raja Pervaiz Ashraf decided to convene the lower house of Parliament session on February 29.

## 'Greek tragedy'



The relative of a victim mourns as she lights a candle during a memorial service of the first anniversary of Greece's deadliest rail crash, which killed 57 people, in Tempe, about 376 km north of Athens, near Larissa city in Greece on Wednesday. AP

## 'Uncommitted' votes take the sheen off Trump, Biden's wins

Associated Press  
DEARBORN

U.S. President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump won the Michigan primaries on Tuesday, further solidifying the all-but-certain rematch between the two men – yet early results from the State were highlighting some of their biggest political vulnerabilities ahead of the November general election.

A vigorous "uncommitted" campaign organised by activists disillusioned with Mr. Biden's handling of the war in Gaza was making headway. It had already far surpassed the 10,000-vote margin by

which Mr. Trump won Michigan in 2016, a goal set by organisers of this year's protest effort.

As for Mr. Trump, he has now swept the first five States on the Republican primary calendar.

But there were early signs that Mr. Trump was continuing to struggle with some influential voter blocs who have favoured former UN Ambassador Nikki Haley in previous contests.

Ms. Haley's strongest performance on Tuesday night came in areas with college towns like Ann Arbor, home to the University of Michigan, and suburbs around Detroit and Grand Rapids.



Target achieved: The vote had far surpassed the 10,000-vote margin by which Donald Trump won Michigan in 2016. REUTERS

For Mr. Biden, the notable percentage of "uncommitted" voters could signal weakness with parts of the Democratic base in a State he can hardly afford to lose in November. Mr. Trump, meanwhile, has underper-

formed with suburban voters and people with college degrees, and faces a faction within his own party that believes he broke the law in one or more of the criminal cases against him.

Michigan has the largest concentration of Arab Americans in the nation. More than 3,10,000 residents are of West Asian or North African ancestry.

## Attempt to placate

Both the White House and Biden campaign officials have made trips to Michigan in recent weeks to talk with community leaders about the Israel-Hamas war and how Mr. Biden has approached the conflict, but those leaders have been unpersuaded.

A robust grassroots effort began just a few weeks ago to encourage voters to select "uncommitted" as a way to register objections to the death toll caused by

Israel's offensive.

That push has been backed by officials such as Democratic Representative Rashida Tlaib, the first Palestinian American woman in Congress, and former Representative Andy Levin.

"Uncommitted" votes were hovering around the 15% mark needed to qualify for delegates statewide. It was too soon to say whether the campaign would collect delegates locally.

In a statement, Mr. Biden did not directly acknowledge the "uncommitted" effort. Instead, he touted the progress his administration has achieved for Michigan voters.

## Associated Press

The funeral of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, who died earlier this month in a remote Arctic penal colony, will take place on Friday in Moscow after several locations declined to host the service, his spokesperson said.

His funeral will be held at a church in Moscow's southeast Maryino district on Friday afternoon, Kira Yarmysh said on Wednesday. The burial is to be at a nearby cemetery.

Navalny died in mid-February in one of Russia's harshest penal facilities. Russian authorities said the cause of his death at age 47 is still unknown, and the results of any investigation are likely to be questioned abroad. Many Western leaders have already said they hold Russian President Vladimir Putin responsible for his death.

Ms. Yarmysh spoke of the difficulties his team encountered in trying to find a site for a "farewell event" for Navalny.

Writing on X, formerly known as Twitter, she said most venues said they were fully booked, with some "refusing when we mention the surname 'Navalny,' and one disclosing that 'funeral agencies were forbidden to work with us.'"

Ivan Zhdanov, the director of Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation, said the funeral was initially planned for Thursday – the day of Putin's annual address to Russia's Federal Assembly – but no venue would agree to hold it then.

"The real reason is clear. The Kremlin understands that nobody will need Putin and his message on the day we say farewell to Alexei," Mr. Zhdanov wrote on Telegram.

In an interview with the independent Russian news site Meduza on Wednes-



Yulia Navalnaya

day, Mr. Zhdanov said authorities were pressuring Navalny's relatives to "have a quiet family funeral".

"They are again black-mailing relatives and saying: either hold a quiet family funeral, or nothing will really work out for you," Zhdanov said.

Shortly after the announcement of the funeral plans, Navalny's widow, Yulia Navalnaya, addressed European lawmakers in Strasbourg.

Speaking at the European Parliament, she confirmed that her husband would be buried on Friday and expressed fears that the police might interfere.

"I'm not sure yet whether it will be peaceful or whether police will arrest those who have come to say goodbye to my husband," she said.

## Innovative ways

She appealed to the European Parliament to be "innovative" in its approach to the Russian President and those close to him.

"You cannot hurt Putin with another resolution or another set of sanctions," she said, urging lawmakers instead to "apply the methods of fighting organized crime, not political competition."

She asked the parliament to investigate "financial machinations" and "mafia associates" in their countries and "discreet lawyers and financiers who are helping Putin and his friends to hide money."





**Cracked up:** A farmer looking at his crop in a dry rice field in southern Vietnam's Ca Mau province on Feb. 23. AFP

## Vietnam's 'rice bowl' cracks in extreme heatwave

**Agence France-Presse**  
HANOI

Southern Vietnam, including business hub Ho Chi Minh City and its "rice bowl" Mekong Delta region, suffered an unusually long heatwave in February, weather officials said on Wednesday.

Several areas of the delta are also suffering drought and farmers are struggling to transport their crops due to low water levels in the region's canals.

The intense period of heat began on February 9, meteorologists said, with temperatures reaching up to 38°C – an "abnormal" high for February in southern Vietnam, which usually sees hot weather peak at around 39°C in April or May.

In Ca Mau province, at the tip of the Mekong Delta, farmer Hong Chi Hieu said that "severe drought" had made the earth "very, very dry" and caused problems using the waterways.

"Most of us grow rice here. We have quite a bumper crop this year but the dry canals are badly impacting the transportation of our harvest," he said.

Le Dinh Quyet, chief forecaster at the Southern Meteorological and Hydrological Administration, said the *El Nino* weather phenomenon and the general impact of global climate change were contributing to the unusually long dry spell, which is still going on.

Globally, 2023 was the warmest year on record, according to the World Meteorological Organisation. It warned last month that this year could be even hotter because the naturally occurring *El Nino* climate pattern, which emerged in mid-2023, usually increases global temperatures for one year afterwards.

# Gaza's population one step from famine while aid trucks get looted: UN officials

Officials from the UN humanitarian office and food and agriculture organisations paint a dire picture of 2.3 million people in Gaza by saying they face crisis levels of food insecurity and are staring at a breakdown of civil order as humanitarian supplies are scarce; Israel blames UN for lack of aid

**Associated Press**  
UNITED NATIONS

At least one quarter of Gaza's population – 5,76,000 people – are one step away from famine and virtually the entire population desperately needs food resulting in some aid trucks being shot at, looted and overwhelmed by hungry people, top UN officials said on Tuesday.

The officials from the UN humanitarian office and the UN's food and agriculture organisations painted a dire picture of all 2.3 million people in Gaza facing crisis levels of food insecurity or worse, and civil order breaking down especially in the north where food and other humanitarian supplies are scarce.

And as grim as the picture is today, UN humanitarian coordinator Ramesh Ramasingham told the UN Security Council that "there is every possibility for further deterioration."

He said that in addition to a quarter of Gaza's population close to famine, 1 in 6 children under the age of two in northern Gaza are suffering from "acute malnutrition and wasting," where the body becomes emaciated.

Carl Skau, deputy executive director of the World Food Programme (WFP), said that is "the worst level of child malnutrition anywhere in the world." And he warned that "if



**On their own:** Palestinians carry bags of flour they grabbed from an aid truck near an Israeli checkpoint in Gaza City on February 19. REUTERS

nothing changes, a famine is imminent in northern Gaza" – the initial target of Israel's military offensive following Hamas's surprise attack in southern Israel on October 7 that killed some 1,200 people and led to about 250 being taken captive. In the latest example of the breakdown of civil order, Mr. Skau said WFP resumed deliveries to northern Gaza for the first time in three weeks on February 18, and hoped to send 10 trucks a day for seven days to address immediate food needs and provide some reassurance to people that sufficient food would be arriving.

But on both February 18 and February 19, he said, WFP convoys faced delays at checkpoints, gunfire and other violence and the

looting of food. "At their destination, they were overwhelmed by desperately hungry people," he said.

### 'Sheer desperation'

Mr. Skau said "the breakdown in civil order, driven by sheer desperation, is preventing the safe distribution of aid – and we have a duty to protect our staff."

As a result, he said, WFP has suspended aid deliveries to the north until conditions are in place to ensure the security of its staff and the people receiving assistance.

Maurizio Martina, the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO)'s deputy director general, described the horrific state of farmland, greenhouses, baker-

ies and irrigation systems that are essential to produce, process and distribute food. Since October 9 – two days after the Hamas attacks – "the government of Israel's reinforced blockade has included stopping or restricting food, electricity and fuel supplies, as well as commercial goods," he said. This has affected the entire food supply chain in different ways, Mr. Martina said.

As examples, he said, severe restrictions on fuel shipments are crippling water supplies and the functioning of desalination plants, with the water supply at only 7% of pre-October levels. Fuel shortages have also crippled the production and delivery of food and electricity, and seriously hampered the

ability of bakeries to produce bread, he said.

Mr. Martina said the collapse of agricultural production in the north is already happening and in the most likely scenario will be complete by May. And as of February 15, over 46% of all crop land in Gaza was assessed to be damaged, he said.

### Alarming figures

The FAO official presented more alarming figures from Israel's offensive – a high number of animal shelters and sheep and dairy farms destroyed, over one-quarter of water wells destroyed, and 339 hectare of greenhouses destroyed. And he said the war has also heavily impacted the harvest of olives and citrus fruits, a key Palestinian money earner.

As for animals, Mr. Martina said, many livestock owners report substantial losses, all poultry have likely been slaughtered, and as many as 65% of calves and 70% of beef cattle are assumed to have died.

Israel's deputy UN Ambassador Brett Miller told the council that while fighting Hamas, it is doing "all it can to care for civilians," and is working constantly to ensure the entry of humanitarian aid from numerous countries and UN agencies. Since the October 7 attacks, he said, Israel has facilitated the delivery of 2,54,000 tonne of hu-

manitarian aid including 1,65,000 tonne of food. "There is absolutely no limit – and I repeat there is no limit – to the amount of humanitarian aid that can be sent to the civilian population of Gaza," he said.

Mr. Miller countered that 20 bakeries throughout Gaza are producing over 2 million pita breads a day. He accused the UN of refusing to deliver aid to northern Gaza, and some UN officials of trying to shift the blame to Israel.

In recent days, Mr. Miller said, 508 trucks have been waiting to cross into Gaza with Israeli approval. "So where is the UN and its aid agencies? How can it be that Israel is libelously held responsible for a situation that is clearly the UN's fault?" he asked.

Mr. Ramasingham, Mr. Skau and Mr. Martina all had a similar response: The first step to eliminating the looming threat of famine is a ceasefire so humanitarian workers can enter Gaza.

"If nothing is done, we fear widespread famine in Gaza is almost inevitable," Mr. Ramasingham said, and the Palestinian death toll which has reached almost 30,000 "will have many more victims." That figure from the Gaza Health Ministry does not distinguish between civilians and combatants, though the UN says the majority are women and children.

## UN troops start pull-out from restive DR Congo

**Agence France-Presse**  
KAMANYOLA

The United Nations was to kick off on Wednesday the withdrawal of MONUSCO peacekeeping forces from the Democratic Republic of Congo by handing over a first UN base to national police.

The DRC demanded the withdrawal despite UN concerns about rampant violence in the east of the country.

Kinshasa considers the UN force to be ineffective in protecting civilians from the armed groups and militias that have plagued the east of the vast country for three decades.

The UN Security Council voted in December to accede to Kinshasa's demand for a gradual pullout by the MONUSCO mission, which arrived in 1999.

The UN force currently fields around 13,500 soldiers and 2,000 police across the three eastern provinces of Ituri, South Kivu and North Kivu.

The "disengagement plan" is due to take place in three phases with completion depending on regular assessments.

The first base to be handed over is at Kamanyola, on the border with Burundi.

Phase one is to see the departure of military peacekeepers from South Kivu by the end of April and civilian staff by June 30.

Before May, the UN force is to leave its 14 bases in the province and hand them over to DRC security forces.

The withdrawal comes with North Kivu facing the resurgent Tutsi-led M23 rebels who have seized swathes of territory.

## Red dawn



**Furious fames:** A wildfire that prompted evacuations burns in the distance outside of Shattuck, Oklahoma, U.S. on Tuesday. REUTERS

## Amid Russia war, Zelenskyy co-hosts summit in Albania seeking to shore up support

**Associated Press**  
TIRANA

Ukraine's President co-hosted a summit with Albania's government on Wednesday that is meant to encourage further support for Kyiv by southeastern European countries, as signs of fatigue grow two years after Russia's full-scale invasion.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy arrived in Albania before midnight on Tuesday on the latest stop in an international tour that saw him in Saudi Arabia earlier on Tuesday to push for a peace plan and the return of prisoners of war from Russia.

Mr. Zelenskyy on Wednesday called Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama "Ukraine's unwavering friend" in a message on X, adding the two would "discuss defence and political



Volodymyr Zelenskyy

cooperation, support for the Peace Formula, and security agreements."

"I will propose supporting Ukraine's efforts to achieve just and lasting peace, as well as organising the Global Peace Summit in Switzerland," he said, referring to the summit.

He said that all Western Balkan countries and Ukraine deserve to be members of the European Union and NATO.

"The European Union and NATO have provided Europe with the longest and most reliable era of security and economic development, and we are all equally worthy of being a part of the European and Euro-Atlantic communities," he said in his speech at the summit.

He said that Kyiv wanted "international law and global stability to be based on truly multilateral and transparent processes."

Mr. Rama wrote on Facebook that he was proud to welcome Mr. Zelenskyy for "a solidarity meeting and to further the commitment of our democracies against Russian aggression."

Albania, a NATO member since 2009 and a candidate for EU membership, has voiced its full support for Kyiv against Russia's invasion.

## Hong Kong's plan for new national security law triggers civil liberty fears

**Associated Press**  
HONG KONG

As Hong Kong moves toward enacting a new national security law, four years after Beijing imposed a similar law that all but wiped out dissent and vocal pro-democracy media in the semi-autonomous Chinese city, concerns are spreading among the city's international business and media communities.

Critics say the legislation will make Hong Kong's legal system increasingly similar to that of China, but the government argues it will affect only a "small mi-

nority" of disloyal residents.

Businesses and journalists fear that broad provisions on state secrets could criminalise their day to day work.

The Basic Law, the city's mini-constitution, requires it to pass a home-grown national security law. But previous efforts to pass such a law were defeated by a massive protest that saw them as efforts to erode the civil liberties Beijing promised to keep intact in the former British colony for 50 years after it returned to Chinese rule in 1997.



**Loud voices:** Members of the League of Social Democrats protest outside Central Government offices in Hong Kong on Tuesday. AFP

However, following a year of massive pro-democracy protest that rocked the city in 2019,

China's rulers took harsh measures to impose control. Under Beijing's 2020

National Security Law, many of the city's leading activists were arrested and others fled abroad. Several vocal media outlets were shuttered. Large protests have been absent in the city in the post-pandemic era. That law targeted politically active Hongkongers, but businesses and journalists are worried that the local law could bring more China-style surveillance and censorship to Hong Kong.

The city's many companies are concerned about how the new law could affect handling economic data or exclusive research,

said George Chen, Hong Kong-based managing director for American policy consulting firm The Asia Group.

### 'State secrets'

A public consultation document proposed criminal prosecution for unlawfully disclosing state secrets, echoing the broad definition of secrets used in China, which covers economic, social and technological developments among other areas.

In response to questions from *The Associated Press*, the government said in an email that the legislation

targets "an extremely small minority of people who endanger national security," insisting that normal business people, individuals, organisations and the media sector "will not unwittingly violate the law."

It is not clear when the government will table a Bill in the legislature. A one-month public comment period ends on Wednesday, and the government has said it intends to pass the law this year. With the legislature packed with Beijing loyalists following an electoral overhaul, it is expected to pass easily.



## IN BRIEF



## Chemplast Sanmar begins production of paste PVC resin

Chemplast Sanmar Ltd. has commenced commercial production at its new speciality paste PVC resin facility in Cuddalore at an investment of ₹360 crore. "The 41,000 tonnes per annum paste PVC project will further cement our position as the leading paste PVC producer in India, taking our capacity to about 1,10,000 tonnes per annum," said MD Ramkumar Shankar. The total demand for paste PVC in the country is estimated at 1.6 lakh tonnes per annum, he said.

## Reliance arm to sell Elephant House beverages in India

Reliance Consumer Products, the FMCG arm of Reliance Retail Ventures, said it had tied up with Sri Lanka-headquartered Elephant House to manufacture, market, distribute and sell beverages under the Elephant House brand in India. Elephant House is owned by Ceylon Cold Stores plc, a subsidiary of John Keells Holdings plc. Under Elephant House brand, it manufactures and sells a wide range of beverages such as Necto and EGB (ginger beer).

## SyenApp rolls out 'private search and shop' application

Chennai-based start-up SyenApp announced the roll-out of its private search and shopping platform in India. "SyenApp is a privacy-focused shopping app that guarantees data privacy. Unlike other apps or web browsers, it does not let anyone track user data and prevents targeted advertising," said founder and CEO Mani Subrahmanyam. With encrypted search and 'cookie-less' experience, users can shop for products and brands in private, he added.

## 'I-T's faceless assessment has given great relief to tax payer'

Faceless tax assessment platform has improved ease of doing business by reducing discretion of officers, says Sitharaman; lauds Bengaluru's taxpayers for contribution to overall tax buoyancy

The Hindu Bureau  
BENGALURU

The I-T Department's faceless tax assessment system, aimed at improving ease of doing business, had reduced discretion of officers, made grievance redressal quicker and overall improved taxpayers' perception about the department, Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman asserted on Wednesday.

"With this system, the taxpayers have found great relief and the redressal of grievances has gotten faster," Ms. Sitharaman said.



Up and running: Despite some teething troubles initially, the system is well settled and working now, Ms. Sitharaman said. PTI

"The faceless assessment platform was also brought in so that the discretion of an officer does not impact taxpayers," she added.

"Despite some teething troubles initially, the system today is well settled and working now," Ms. Sitharaman observed.

Sitharaman observed.

Central Processing Centre of the faceless tax assessment platform for the entire country was located in Bengaluru, Ms. Sitharaman said the tax payers of Bengaluru, both individual and corporates, had contributed significantly to revenue buoyancy.

"Your contribution is relentless. There has never been a dip. So thank you very much Bengaluru for keeping that momentum up," the Minister said.

## 'Q3 GDP growth may be 6.7-6.9% on poor farm sector show'

Press Trust of India  
MUMBAI

The Indian economy is likely to grow at 6.7-6.9% in December quarter FY24 as compared with 7.6% growth in the second quarter on poor performance in the farm sector, SBI Research said in a report on Wednesday.

The report came on the eve of the release of official GDP data for Q3 FY24.

India retained the tag of the world's fastest-growing major economy, with its GDP expanding by a faster-

The forecast is lower than RBI's 7% for Q3 FY2024. SBI Research has projected Q4 GDP growth at 6.8%

than-expected rate of 7.6% in September quarter on booster shots from government spending and manufacturing.

The 6.7-6.9% growth forecast by SBI Research is lower than the Reserve Bank's 7% for the quarter. SBI Research has projected Q4 GDP growth at 6.8%.

## RIL, Disney to merge India media business

The Hindu Bureau  
MUMBAI

Reliance Industries Ltd., Viacom18 Media Pvt. Ltd. (majority-owned by RIL's TV18 Broadcast), and The Walt Disney Company signed binding agreements to form a joint venture which will combine the businesses of Viacom18 and Star India in the country.

Viacom18 would be merged into Star India through a court-approved scheme of arrangement, and RIL would invest ₹1,500 crore into the JV. The venture is eyeing growth in India's fast-expanding OTT market.



Mukesh Ambani

panding OTT market.

"The transaction values the JV at ₹70,352 crore on a post-money basis, excluding synergies. After completion of the above steps, the JV will be controlled by RIL," the entities said in a joint statement.

## RK Swami IPO price band fixed at ₹270-₹288 per ₹5 share

The Hindu Bureau  
MUMBAI

Integrated marketing services company R K Swamy Ltd. has set an Initial Public Offering (IPO) price band of ₹270 to ₹288 per equity share with a face value of ₹5 each.

Bids can be made for a minimum of 50 equity shares and in multiples of 50 shares thereafter. The IPO will open Monday, March 4, 2024 for subscription and close on Wednesday, March 6, 2024.

The IPO comprises a fresh issue of equity shares aggregating up to ₹173 crore and an Offer for Sale of up to 87,00,000 equity shares by selling shareholders. At the upper price band, the size of the IPO



Srinivasan K. Swamy

is ₹423 crore.

The net proceeds from the fresh issue are proposed to be used for funding working capital requirements amounting to ₹54 crore, funding capital expenditure to be incurred for setting up a digital video content production studio ₹10.9 crore, funding investment in IT infrastructure development of the company and its material subsidiaries (Hansa Research Group Private Ltd.

and Hansa Customer Equity Private Ltd.) ₹33.3 crore; and funding setting up of new customer experience centres and computer aided telephonic interview centres ₹21.7 crore and general corporate purposes.

"In the future we will grow in a different direction thanks to the investment we will be making in infrastructure. We are raising ₹173 crore and a portion of that will be invested in a digital studio. Since there is no rate card in digital, we can charge based on creativity and it will provide better margins. In the future there will be revenue top up. So the future direction would be better than what it is today," said Srinivasan K Swamy, CMD, R K Swamy Ltd.

## Zaggle joins hands with EaseMyTrip

The Hindu Bureau  
MUMBAI

Zaggle Prepaid Ocean Services Ltd., a SaaS FinTech player, has tied up with travel tech platform EaseMyTrip (EMT) to expand in the corporate travel space.

The company said it would further strengthen its position by forging alliances with more travel management companies in the near future.

"We have over time realised that this is a specialised area, and we are better equipped for integrating with partners like EMT and others to be able to offer a full-fledged stack of travel solutions through our platform using APIs," Avinash Godkhindi, MD & CEO, Zaggle, said in an interview.

## At SEBI's nudge, AMFI asks MFs to restrain flows into small/mid-cap funds

Suresh P. Ivengar  
MUMBAI

Taking a cue from SEBI, the Association of Mutual Funds in India (AMFI) has directed trustees of asset management companies to put in place measures to protect investor interest in mid- and small-cap funds due to the froth building up in this segment of mutual fund schemes.

In a communication to mutual funds, AMFI said froth is building up in the small/mid-cap segments, and there have been continuous flows into these mutual fund schemes.

'Ensure policy'

"Trustees, in consultation with the Unitholder Protection Committees of the AMCs, will ensure that a policy is put in place to protect the interests of all investors," it said. It stated that AMCs and fund managers should take appropriate and proactive steps to safeguard investors, such as attempting to restrict inflows and rebalancing portfolios.

Steps should also be taken to ensure that investors are protected from the first-mover advantage of redeeming investors, it said.

"The policy approved by Trustees should be disclosed on each AMCs' website in 21 days," said AMFI. Interestingly, SEBI had approved three small-cap new fund offers, which raised ₹2,353 crore in the December quarter.

FOMO syndrome

In January, inflows into small-cap funds more than doubled to ₹3,257 crore



Market froth: In January, inflows into small-cap funds more than doubled to ₹3,257 crore against ₹1,393 crore in Dec. REUTERS

against ₹1,393 crore in December, while that in mid-caps was up 48% at ₹2,061 crore against ₹1,393 crore.

Mukesh Kochar, National Head of Wealth at AUM Capital, said the 'fear of missing out' syndrome is pushing investors to these segments as they have outperformed the entire market in the recent past.

With both segments in an overbought zone, fund managers are finding less reasonable opportunities to invest, and it makes sense to restrict fresh inflows, he added.

The assets under management (AUM) of small-cap schemes increased 89% to ₹2.48-lakh crore in January compared with ₹1.31-lakh crore in the same period last year, while mid-cap AUM was up 58% at ₹2.90-lakh crore (₹1.83-lakh crore).

Shrey Jain, Founder & CEO of SAS Online, a deep-discount brokerage platform, said four small-cap schemes have already restricted inflows, which reflects the proactive stand of mutual fund houses. Investors need to take a five-year view while investing in small/mid-cap funds with a staggered investment strategy, he added.

## Sensex, Nifty fall over 1% ahead of U.S. inflation data

The Hindu Bureau  
MUMBAI

Key benchmark stock indices on Wednesday fell more than 1% led by losses in heavyweight stocks. The S&P BSE Sensex fell 1.08%, or 790.34 points, to 72,304.88. The Sensex stocks which lost the most included Power Grid (4.43%), Maruti (2.94%), IndusInd Bank (2.93%), M&M (2.68%) and Wipro (2.68%).

The NSE Nifty-50 index too fell 1.11%, or 247.20 points, to 21,951.15.

"Indian equity indices moved into the red today ahead of the much-awaited U.S. inflation reading during the week," said Avdhut Bagkar, Technical and Derivatives Analyst, StoxBox. "A slew of strong economic data along with inflation that has proven to be sticky has resulted in traders dialling back their initial expectations of deep and early interest rate cuts from the Fed," he added.

"The heaviest selling today was seen in heavyweight banks, auto, power and metal stocks. All 13 sectors were in the red," Mr. Bagkar observed.

## MARKETS

## MARKET WATCH

	WEDNESDAY	% CHANGE
Sensex	72,305	-1.08
US Dollar	82.91	-0.02
Gold	62,900	-0.07
Brent oil	83.43	0.46

## NIFTY 50

	PRICE	CHANGE
Adani Enter.	3219.00	-83.30
Adani Ports	1299.50	-29.95
Apollo Hosp.	6362.35	-258.25
Asian Paints	2794.35	-65.20
Axis Bank	1074.20	-4.85
Bajaj Auto	8188.65	-274.85
Bajaj Finserv	1584.50	-16.10
Bajaj Finance	6498.70	-57.55
Bharti Airtel	1128.75	-1.25
BPCL	609.30	-15.75
Britannia Ind.	4887.80	-16.55
Cipla	1477.00	-10.45
Coal India	434.20	-7.20
Divis Lab	3518.35	-21.45
Dr Reddys Lab	6428.05	-21.55
Eicher Motors	3863.75	-139.00
Grasim Ind	2186.00	-18.80
HCL Tech	1651.90	-4.90
HDFC Bank	1409.40	-10.75
HDFC Life	580.60	-1.00
Hero MotoCorp	4375.05	-55.00
Hindalco	504.40	-5.25
Hind Unilever	2421.55	16.25
ICI Bank	1046.20	-14.00
IndusInd Bank	1449.20	-43.85
Infosys	1671.25	-7.65
ITC	408.30	-2.85
JSW Steel	798.60	-20.35
Kotak Bank	1683.60	-23.15
L&T	3470.20	-36.25
LTI Mindtree Ltd.	5409.95	-32.75
M&M	1901.65	-48.95
Maruti Suzuki	11152.80	-347.85
Nestle India	2570.90	-27.80
NTPC	333.30	-2.80
ONGC	265.75	-3.60
PowerGrid Corp	279.55	-12.95
Reliance Ind.	2911.25	-60.05
SBI Life	1540.20	-2.50
State Bank	742.50	-7.35
Sun Pharma	1573.85	-8.90
Tata Consumer Product	1167.95	-15.65
Tata Motors	958.05	-4.65
Tata Steel	140.75	-3.45
TCS	4118.95	14.55
Tech Mahindra	1285.85	-10.20
Titan	3594.70	-59.15
UltraTech Cement	9804.95	-146.15
UPL	475.90	-8.70
Wipro	517.70	-13.75

## EXCHANGE RATES

Indicative direct rates in rupees a unit except yen at 4 p.m. on February 28

CURRENCY	TT BUY	TT SELL
US Dollar	82.72	83.04
Euro	89.47	89.82
British Pound	104.60	105.01
Japanese Yen (100)	54.89	55.11
Chinese Yuan	11.49	11.54
Swiss Franc	94.01	94.38
Singapore Dollar	61.44	61.69
Canadian Dollar	60.93	61.17
Malaysian Ringgit	17.33	17.41
Australian Dollar	53.74	53.96

Source: Indian Bank

## Domestic production of chips is next big space: MeitY official

Press Trust of India  
MUMBAI

Domestic manufacturing of semiconductors is the next big space and many companies are expected to venture into this segment, S. Krishnan, Secretary, Ministry of Electronics & Information Technology (MeitY) said on Wednesday, adding that a \$2 billion digital economy is what India seriously needs.

'Faster pace'

Speaking virtually at the India Digital Summit (IDS) 2024, Mr. Krishnan said the digital economy was expected to grow at a faster



S. Krishnan

pace in the next few years.

"Semiconductors is the other big space. More companies are likely to come into the space... Our interest in semiconductors is open," he said adding that in the next 5-10 years semiconductor manufacturing in the country was expected to come up in a big way.

## 'Number of ultra-rich in India increased 6% in 2023 to 13,263'

Press Trust of India  
NEW DELHI

The number of Ultra-high Net Worth Individuals (UHNWIs) in India increased 6% annually to 13,263 last year on rising prosperity and the number of affluent would grow further to reach nearly 20,000 by 2028, according to Knight Frank.

UHNWIs are defined as individuals having a net worth of \$30 million and more.

Real estate consultant Knight Frank India released "The Wealth Report 2024" saying the number of UHNWIs in India grew

from 12,495 individuals in 2022 to 13,263 in 2023. The number of UHNWIs in India is expected to expand to 19,908 by 2028 from 13,263 in 2023.

Knight Frank India MD Shishir Bajjal said "In a transformative era of wealth creation, India stands as a testament to thriving prosperity in the global economic spectrum. A remarkable surge in its UHNWI population, catapulting by 50.1% within the next five years is an indication of this phenomenon." 90% Indian UHNWIs are expecting to witness an increase in their wealth during 2024.



## 'Rich nations give 200 times more farm sops'



**Expedite process:** India sought to finalise a permanent solution to public stockholding at MC13. PTI

**Amiti Sen**  
NEW DELHI

India has submitted that per-farmer subsidies provided by some developed countries were up to 200 times that of developing countries, and there was a strong case for establishing a level-playing field for millions of low-income farmers by starting the reform process with finding a permanent solution to public stockholding (PSH) for food security.

The submission was made at the ongoing 13th WTO Ministerial Conference in Abu Dhabi.

"In the negotiating session on agriculture on Tuesday, India made a strong and compelling argument to finalise the permanent solution to public stockholding (PSH) and deliver this outcome at MC13, as this has been pending for 11 years," as per a statement issued by the Commerce Department.

### Sequential approach

Proposing a sequential approach to the overall reform process in agriculture, India said first and foremost, the permanent solution to the PSH has to be delivered as it already had a past mandate. After that, it was important to protect the treaty-embedded Special and Differential Treatment provision allowing flexibilities to the developing nations. "After that, if any discussion on reduction of domestic support commitments take place, the process should start with eliminating subsidies for countries who provide massive subsidies on a per-capita basis," Department added.

(The writer is with *The Hindu* businessline)

# Lessons a regulator can draw from an eagle, the symbol of Roman empire

There are several natural characteristics of eagles that a regulator could profitably imbibe and nurture; a regulator, the regulatory framework is merely a tool; having a pragmatic and adequately-empowered framework is not enough; the way this tool is used determines its effectiveness

### COMMENT

**Pratip Kar**

Through the ages, the eagle has come to symbolise courage and strength. It was a prominent symbol used in ancient Rome, especially as the standard of a Roman legion.

In Indian mythology, Garuda is a divine eagle-like sun bird and the king of birds, a personification of courage. So, from the window of a hotel in Mumbai overlooking the Arabian Sea, the imagery of the eagles freely spreading their wings and soaring high in bold protestation of beauty and confidence, or gliding down gracefully in a majestic swoop, strangely came to be associated with my mind with a strong, confident and independent regulator. I believe eagles have a few natural qualities, which any regulator, irrespective of domain of operation, would do well to acquire.

**Strength, independence** Eagles in all cultures, through the ages, have been regarded as symbols of strength, courage and freedom. Their beauty and proud independence aptly symbolised strength and freedom. Strong and fiercely independent should also be how a regulator needs to be perceived by

**Clarity, focus** Eagles naturally have immense clarity of vision. Their visual acuity is much more than us, which enables them to spot potential prey from a very long distance. If you ever see an eagle sitting at a height, you will notice the bird, with its head tilted, watches closely what is happening below, around, and above it. The eagle sits still. When it flies, it surveys a very wide area, searching for its prey which, once spotted, is not



**Name of the game:** Focus should be on the success of the process and not on the fear of failing. REUTERS

the constituency of the regulator. This perception must arise from the promptness, boldness and consistency of its actions.

The regulator will then be respected and feared and do its appointed jobs effectively.

### Clarity, focus

Eagles naturally have immense clarity of vision. Their visual acuity is much more than us, which enables them to spot potential prey from a very long distance. If you ever see an eagle sitting at a height, you will notice the bird, with its head tilted, watches closely what is happening below, around, and above it. The eagle sits still. When it flies, it surveys a very wide area, searching for its prey which, once spotted, is not



Eagles have a few natural qualities, which any regulator, irrespective of domain of operation, would do well to acquire

### lost sight of.

The regulator is not a natural creature; what an eagle naturally possesses, the regulator needs to deliberately develop and assiduously nurture by recruiting the right talent, honing personnel skills through continuous training and using technology extensively to strengthen surveying and surveillance power. The personnel responsible for surveillance of

the jurisdiction of the regulator must be, like the eagle, aware of what is happening around, be on constant vigil for miscreants and not lose sight of them.

### Fearless, determined

Eagles are fearless hunters. They do not surrender to the size or strength of the prey. To be successful in its job, the regulator must be fearless and undaunted by the size of the problem or the people and powers behind it. Focus should be on the success of the process and not on the fear of failing. To give an example from the organisation - Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) - with which I was associated since its inception: when SEBI decided to in-

roduce new practices by abolishing age-old entrenched practices which made the stock market inefficient, vested interests opposed them tooth and nail and lobbied intensely against the SEBI but the SEBI went ahead and successfully executed them. The stock market benefited.

### Tenacious defenders

Eagles are tenacious defenders. They don't lose sight of prey and will not leave till they have sufficient hold over it, even if it means coming back again.

Once the regulator has identified a problem or any dysfunctional practice within its purview, it should look for viable solutions, doggedly pursue implementation with the courage of conviction even if the solutions may require surgical or non-surgical interventions or result in temporary disruptions.

### Training personnel

We are all familiar with eagles' aggressive nature; but not often aware of their natural patience and ability to train the eaglets early on, to fly and hunt, often, throwing challenges before them. It is important for the regulator to give enough attention to training of their newly-recruited personnel before they join the force and whet their skills and update their knowledge with focussed periodic training. A regula-

tor must grow its people to enable them to reach their full potential.

### Sustained vitality

Nature has imbued the eagles with vitality. They can soar high and fly for long hours before resting on a treetop. Rain and storm do not cover them; rather the wings use storm and strong winds to rise to greater heights. This naturally conserves their energy.

The organisation of the regulator must have sustainable vitality and energy. Its leadership and personnel must have the drive, be motivated and, in turn, motivate the employees. A moribund organisation does not make an effective regulator.

For a regulator, the regulatory framework is merely a tool; having a pragmatic and adequately-empowered framework is not enough. It is the way this tool is used that determines the effectiveness and efficiency of the regulator. In that process, acquiring some of the natural qualities of the eagle would add new winds to its sail.

(Till 2006, the author was an Executive Director of Securities and Exchange Board of India, which he joined at its inception in 1988, a Consultant to the World Bank and IFC; an Independent Director, Senior Advisor to Deloitte Tohmatsu Touche LLP India. pratipkar21@gmail.com)

## Food for thought



**Hunger pangs:** Members of the social movement, 'Movimiento Evita,' move stew from a kitchen during a protest, led by Minister Sandra Pettovello, outside the Human Capital Ministry headquarters demanding Argentine President Javier Milei provide food for the hundreds of kitchens working for the needy in Buenos Aires, on Wednesday. AFP

## China solar industry's growth to stall in 2024 amid overcapacity

**Reuters**  
BEIJING

China's solar capacity growth could slow in 2024 to 31%, a solar manufacturing association said on Wednesday, after a record 55% increase last year as the industry struggles with renewable power overcapacity and curtailment.

China has the world's largest renewable power capacity but its breakneck expansion has put a toll on its transmission systems, forcing some plants to curb output, a condition known as curtailment.

The world's largest producer of solar modules and other components could add 190 gigawatts (GW) of new solar capacity in 2024



**Stressed out:** The breakneck expansion in China's renewable power capacity has put a toll on its transmission systems. AFP

under a conservative growth estimate, down from a record-breaking 216 GW in 2023, Wang Bohua, honorary chairman of the China Photovoltaic Industry Association (CPIA) said. Under a more optimistic

scenario, the industry could build as much as 220 GW, all but flat with last year, Mr. Wang said.

CPIA's deputy secretary Liu Yiyang said that last year's 55% growth in solar capacity had caught the in-

dustry by surprise, exceeding previous forecasts.

Mr. Wang's presentation showed that at least 38.8GW of planned photovoltaic (PV) manufacturing capacity has been cancelled or suspended, as well as 3.2GW of other solar components.

Jin Lei, director at the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, said some planned investments have been cancelled or paused as a result of the overcapacity, which has pushed solar component prices to historical lows and led to job losses.

A CPIA analysis of 62 listed solar PV companies found that 19 are in the red, five more than last year.

# Major firms still failing to tackle deforestation: Global Canopy

**Agence France-Presse**  
PARIS

Many global brands with supply chains linked to tropical forest loss do not have a single deforestation policy, said non-profit research group Global Canopy, adding that 10 years of monitoring showed voluntary action from industry "has failed", in a report published Tuesday.

From land clearance for cattle farming to palm oil plantations, there is growing recognition of the human-driven threats to the world's forests and the importance of protecting them in the fight against climate change and devastating biodiversity loss.

Almost 200 countries at the COP28 climate talks last year gave their support

to the goal of halting and reversing deforestation by 2030.

The Forest 500 analysis by Global Canopy, noted "pockets of progress" from a handful of leading brands. But 10 years after it first began its annual monitoring of a rolling selection of firms with the biggest impact on tropical forests, the organisation said companies and the financial institutions that fund them are still falling short.

Of the 257 companies and financial institutions that have been in the Forest 500 for the past decade, 61 - 23% still have not published a single commitment on addressing deforestation, it said.

"Voluntary action has failed and we can't rely on it any further to achieve



**Clear danger:** There is growing recognition of the human-driven threats to the world's forests. AFP

deforestation free, conversion free and human rights abuse free supply chains, we do need to see regulation," said Emma Thomson, who led the research. "In terms of what we

need to see, for the next 10 years, we need to see rapid action, rapid implementation and real change," Thomson told AFP.

The group welcomed new deforestation legisla-

tion from the European Union, urging the bloc to go further and the United States and Britain to speed up their own legislation.

But Global Canopy said only 1% of firms in its analy-

sis are currently on track to be compliant with the new EU rules.

The Forest 500 report provides a snapshot of 350 companies and 150 financial firms whose operations and investments it says have an oversized impact on tropical forests.

It looks particularly at whether companies have stated policies on beef, leather, soy, palm oil, timber, pulp and paper - commodities linked to the majority of tropical deforestation.

### Public pressure

In this year's analysis, the report found 187 companies and financial institutions - 37% do not have a publicly available deforestation commitment, compared to 40% last year.

According to the report, three institutions that provide the most finance to companies in Global Canopy's ranking without having any deforestation commitments are JPMorgan Chase, Bank of America and Mitsubishi UFJ Financial.

Even among the 246 companies with at least one deforestation commitment, the report said some 63% had not published sufficient evidence that their actions match their intentions, citing firms like Adidas, Starbucks and Gap.

For example, despite having commitments for timber, leather, pulp and paper, furnishing giant Ikea lacked evidence for the proportion of its leather or paper that actually met these commitments,

the report said.

For leather, the report said, Ikea also has no published details of how it monitors suppliers. Ikea was not immediately available for comment.

Overall the report said while public pressure had caused firms to make concerted efforts to address deforestation linked to palm oil, the widespread impacts of the cattle sector was given far less focus.

"Beef production in particular is the largest driver of tropical deforestation, it is a really significant issue," said Ms. Thomson.

"We don't want to move attention from palm oil to cattle - then deforestation can start to creep into other commodities, it needs to be more attention on all of them."



## INCREDIBLE TALENT

### Renuka set the tone for RCB by controlling PowerPlay: Molineux



K. MURALI KUMAR

Renuka Singh has managed to control the Powerplay period by providing early breakthroughs and stopping run-flow with her swing bowling, says team spin all-rounder Sophie Molineux. "Renuka has been incredible in both games and playing against her for India, she's just so reliable and it's great to be on the same team as her," she said.

## UPWARD MOVE

### Jaiswal and Jurel soar high in ICC Test rankings



VIJAY SONEJI

Yashasvi Jaiswal advanced towards a top-10 spot in ICC rankings for Test batters by climbing three spots to 12th while Dhruv Jurel leapfrogged 31 places to 69th. Joe Root moved up to third. He also climbed to fourth among all-rounders. R. Ashwin narrowed the gap with top-ranked bowler Jasprit Bumrah to 21 rating points.

## TAKING CONTROL

### Adair's five-for puts Ireland in a strong position



FILE PHOTO

A first five-wicket haul in Tests for Mark Adair put Ireland in a strong position after the opening day against Afghanistan in Abu Dhabi. **The scores:** Afghanistan 155 in 54.5 overs (I. Zadran 53, K. Janat 41 n.o.; Adair 5/39) vs Ireland 100 for four in 31 overs (C. Campher 49, H. Tector 32 batting). **Toss:** Afghanistan.

## ADMIRATION

### I tried to watch Zaheer to develop the art of reverse swing: Anderson



K.R. DEEPAK

James Anderson said he has learned a few elements of pace bowling, including reverse swing, from Zaheer Khan. "Zaheer Khan was someone I used to watch a lot to try and learn from. How he used the reverse swing, how he covered the ball when he ran into bowl, that's something I tried to develop on the back of playing against him."

# Kiran powers Warriorz to a resounding win against MI

The 29-year-old's 31-ball 57 at the top of the order and her 94-run partnership with Healy was too good for Sciver-Brunt's side for which Matthews' half-century goes in vain; Harris, Deepti take UP past the finish line



In a hurry: Kiran's aggressive approach exposed the chinks in the Mumbai Indians' armour. K. MURALI KUMAR

## WPL SEASON 2

**Mayank Chaudhary**  
BENGALURU

Just when the defending champion Mumbai Indians seemed invincible again, UP Warriorz put the brakes on its campaign, riding on an authoritative fifty from Kiran Navgire (57, 31b, 6x4, 4x6) for a seven-wicket win in the Women's Premier League here at the M. Chinnaswamy Stadium on Wednesday.

Kiran opened with Alys-

sa Healy in place of Vrinda Dinesh who was injured while fielding.

The 29-year-old Kiran spared none as her superlative shot selection both off front foot and back foot helped her race to a half-century off 25 deliveries. She fell to Amelia Kerr, but her 94-run opening stand off 55 deliveries with Healy already had taken the game away from MI.

After conceding 17 off her first over to Kiran, Issy Wong came back strongly to remove Tahlija McGrath (1) and a set Healy (33). It wasn't enough as

Grace Harris and Deepti Sharma took Warriorz home with 21 balls to spare.

Earlier, Hayley Matthews' knock (55, 47b, 9x4, 1x6) and late cameos from Kerr and Pooja Vastrakar took MI to 161 for six after being put into bat.

MI missed the services of two consistent performers, Harmanpreet Kaur and Shabnim Ismail, due to a niggles.

After a slow start, Matthews and Yastika Bhatia dealt in boundaries, putting on 50 for the opening wicket before Harris re-

moved the latter for 26.

Stand-in-captain Nat Sciver-Brunt's stay in the middle was brief, as she sacrificed her wicket in a run out to save Matthews in the 13th over.

Matthews brought up her half-century in 44 deliveries. She swept Deepti for a four, taking MI past 100 in 14 overs before holing out to Harris off Rajeshwari Gayakwad.

Pooja and Kerr added 29 off 19 balls for the fourth wicket before Wong and S. Sajana took MI past 160, but it was not enough against the Kiran storm.

## SCOREBOARD

## MUMBAI INDIANS

Hayley Matthews c Harris b Rajeshwari 55 (47b, 9x4, 1x6), Yastika Bhatia c Rajeshwari b Harris 26 (22b, 3x4, 1x6), Nat Sciver-Brunt run out 19 (14b, 2x4), Amelia Kerr lbw b Deepti 23 (16b, 1x4, 1x6), Pooja Vastrakar c Deepti b Ecclestone 18 (12b), Issy Wong (not out) 15 (6b, 1x4, 1x6), S. Sajana b Anjali 4 (2b, 1x4), Amanjot Kaur (not out) 0 (1b); Extras (w-1): 1; Total (for six wks. in 20 overs): 161.

## FALL OF WICKETS

1-50 (Yastika, 7.6 overs), 2-92 (Sciver-Brunt, 12.5), 3-105 (Matthews, 14.4), 4-134 (Kerr, 17.5), 5-150 (Pooja, 18.6), 6-161 (Sajana, 19.5).

## UP WARRIORZ BOWLING

Anjali 4-0-38-1, Harris 4-0-20-1, Ecclestone 4-0-25-1, Deepti 4-0-40-1, Rajeshwari 4-0-38-1.

## UP WARRIORZ

Alyssa Healy c Saika b Wong 33 (29b, 5x4), Kiran Navgire st. Yastika b Kerr 57 (31b, 6x4, 4x6), Tahlija McGrath lbw b Wong 1 (4b), Grace Harris (not out) 38 (17b, 6x4, 1x6), Deepti Sharma (not out) 27 (20b, 4x4); Extras (b-1, lb-1, w-3, nb-2): 7; Total (for three wks. in 16.3 overs): 163.

## FALL OF WICKETS

1-94 (Kiran, 9.1), 2-97 (McGrath, 10.2), 3-98 (Healy, 10.4).

## MUMBAI INDIANS BOWLING

Sciver-Brunt 3-0-30-0, Saika 2-0-17-0, Wong 3-0-30-2, Matthews 3-0-32-0, Kerr 4-0-34-1, Pooja 1-3-0-18-0.

**PoM:** Kiran; **Warriorz won by seven wickets with 21 balls to spare;** **Thursday's match:** RCB vs DC, 7.30 p.m.

# Will Gujarat Giants be able to engineer a turnaround in its fortunes this season?

**Mayank Chaudhary**  
BENGALURU

Is it too early to write off the Gujarat Giants?

After finishing at the bottom of the WPL 2023 standings with just two wins, the Giants find themselves in the pit again with losses to Mumbai Indians and Royal Challengers Bangalore this season.

A significant overhaul – releasing 11 players from the 19-player squad ahead of the WPL 2024 auction – has not had the desired result.

## Hefty price tag

Acquisitions of Australian talent Phoebe Litchfield and Kashvee Gautam for a hefty price tag of ₹3 crore haven't turned out to be a real coup.

Days before the tournament opener, Kashvee – the most expensive uncapped Indian – was ruled out.

The return of skipper Beth Mooney, who suffered an injury three deliveries into the inaugural season, was a positive.

However, with the team not finding its feet, the promise that Mooney's comeback proposed has also hit a wall.

At the core of the matter is an unstable team composition.

In the first game against



Underwhelming: Beth Mooney's return was supposed to spur Giants, but things haven't gone to plan. K. MURALI KUMAR

MI, Mooney paired up with Veda Krishnamurthy as the latter opened for the first time in a 15-year career across high-profile T20 tournaments. The move failed miserably as Veda perished for a duck.

Against RCB, Harleen Deol joined Mooney despite her fledgling credentials as an opener, averaging 11.25 with a strike-rate of 67.16. She never got going either, scoring 22 off 31.

All-rounder Tanuja Kanwar, the side's only shining light, finds herself batting at number nine. A middle order which comprises Litchfield and experienced all-rounders Ashleigh Gardner and Kathryn Bryce, haven't clicked in unison just yet.

The team has also failed to rekindle some of the only positives from its previous campaign.

## Wolvaardt yet to play

Laura Wolvaardt, who replaced Mooney last season, has yet to make the eleven. Sneha Rana, the leader in Mooney's absence, has had a forgettable start (12 runs and 0/39 in two matches).

Though team balance may appear as an overused term at times, MI and Delhi Capitals have batted for it, and their priorities reflect in the outcomes.

While the Giants are only getting started, they must buckle down quickly before the leaders dash into the playoffs.

# Shreyas, Kishan dropped from BCCI central contract

**Amol Karhadkar**  
MUMBAI

Shreyas Iyer and Ishan Kishan, who were members of India's ODI World Cup squad, have been stripped off the BCCI's central retainer for 2023-24.

The list of 30 men's cricketers was announced by the BCCI secretary Jay Shah on Wednesday. "Shreyas Iyer and Ishan Kishan were not considered for the annual contracts in this round of recommendations," Shah stated.

While the statement does not specify the reason, the BCCI administration, along with the team-management and the selection panel, has been extremely unhappy with Kishan and Shreyas over their reluctance to participate in the Ranji Trophy. Despite repeated directives, Kishan did not feature in the Ranji Trophy, instead preferring to train in Vadodara along with his franchise captain Hardik Pandya after returning midway through India's tour of South Africa.

After being omitted from India's Test squad after the second Test against England, Shreyas did not turn up for Mumbai in the



Out of favour: Shreyas and Kishan's non-compliance in playing in the Ranji Trophy may have cost them dear. K. MURALI KUMAR

Ranji Trophy. On Tuesday, he made himself available for the Ranji semifinal versus Tamil Nadu.

"The BCCI has recommended that all athletes give precedence to participating in domestic cricket during periods when they are not representing the national team," Shah reiterated in the statement.

Despite being eligible for a pro-rata contract, *The Hindu* understands that the duo will not be offered a retainer at all as disciplinary action and to set a strong example for the cricketers who have been increasingly prioritising

the Indian Premier League over other competitions.

Without a BCCI contract, the duo will also be unable to have BCCI's medical cover and will be able to access the BCCI training and rehab infrastructure only through their respective State association.

## A first

For the first time, the BCCI has offered fast-bowling contracts for five pacers who are not among the list of 30 centrally contracted players. They include Akash Deep, Vijaykumar Vyshak, Umran Malik, Yash Dayal and Vidwath

Kaverappa.

Among the list of 30 contracted cricketers, K.L. Rahul, despite a mysterious quad injury at the moment, Mohammed Siraj, Shubman Gill, Kuldeep Yadav and Yashasvi Jaiswal have been the big gainers.

Jaiswal makes an entry into the contracts fold in Grade B, while Kuldeep has been promoted from Grade C to B. The remaining trio has been promoted from Grade B to A on the back of their performance in the previous contract cycle. Left-arm spinner Axar Patel and wicketkeeper Rishabh Pant who has been working hard on a comeback since his road accident almost 15 months ago, have been moved from Grade B to A.

In an unchanged fee structure, Grade A+ cricketers will earn ₹7 crore, while the ones in Grade A, B and C will take home ₹5 crore, ₹3 crore and ₹1 crore, respectively.

As per the convention, any non-contracted cricketer – except Shreyas and Kishan – who will play a minimum of three Tests, eight ODIs or 10 T20s during the contract period is eligible for a contract on a pro-rata basis since the date of his eligibility.

## Making the grade

The BCCI, on Wednesday, announced the Annual Player Contracts for Team India (senior men) for the 2023-24 season (October 1, 2023 to September 30, 2024)



<p><b>Grade A+ (four):</b> Rohit Sharma, Virat Kohli, Jasprit Bumrah and Ravindra Jadeja</p>	<p><b>Grade C (15):</b> Rinku Singh, Tilak Varma, Ruturaj Gaikwad, Shardul Thakur, Shivam Dube, Ravi Bishnoi, Jitesh Sharma, Washington Sundar, Mukesh Kumar, Sanju Samson, Arshdeep Singh, K.S. Bharat, Prasidh Krishna, Avesh Khan and Rajat Patidar</p>
<p><b>Grade A (six):</b> R. Ashwin, Mohd. Shami, Mohd. Siraj, K.L. Rahul, Shubman Gill and Hardik Pandya</p>	<p><b>Fast bowling contracts have also been recommended for Akash Deep, V. Vyshak, Umran Malik, Yash Dayal and Vidwath Kaverappa</b></p>
<p><b>Grade B (five):</b> Suryakumar Yadav, Rishabh Pant, Kuldeep Yadav, Axar Patel and Yashasvi Jaiswal</p>	

**Note:** Dhruv Jurel and Sarfaraz Khan, who have played two Tests each so far, will be inducted into Grade C on a pro-rata basis if they take part in the Dharamshala Test against England from March 7 to 11

## THE PROMOTIONS

■ Rahul, Siraj, Gill (Grade B to A)

■ Kuldeep (Grade C to B)

## THE ADDITIONS

■ Yashasvi Jaiswal (Grade B)

■ Rinku, Tilak, Ruturaj, Dube, Bishnoi, Jitesh, Mukesh, Prasidh, Avesh, Patidar (Grade C)

## THE DEMOTIONS

■ Axar (Grade A to B)

■ Pant (Grade A to B)

## THE OMISSIONS

■ Shreyas Iyer (Grade B)

■ Ishan Kishan, Umesh, Dhawan, Deepak Hooda, Yuzvendra Chahal (Grade C)

# Paltan ease past Pirates, meet Steelers



Tough as steel: The solid Haryana side dethroned Jaipur.

## PKL-10

**Saikat Chakraborty**  
HYDERABAD

Puneri Paltan crushed Patna Pirates 37-21 in Pro Kabaddi League Season 10's first semifinal at the Gachibowli Indoor Stadium on Wednesday.

Paltan captain Aslam Inamdar and raider Pankaj Mohite each scored seven points, but the night belonged to Mohammadreza Chiyaneh.

The towering Iranian, playing against his former team, chipped in with five vital tackle points.

After an evenly matched contest in the first 10 minutes, the table-topper

upped the ante, inflicting an all-out on Pirates around the 16th minute and extending its lead to 20-11 at half-time.

Paltan maintained their intensity in the second half, achieving another all-out on Pirates shortly after the break.

In the summit clash, Paltan will face Haryana Steelers, which dethroned Jaipur Pink Panthers 31-27.

Known for their defensive play, the Steelers took the attack to Pink Panthers, thanks to their raiding duo of Vinay and Shivam Patare.

Jaipur's defence had no answer to Haryana's raiders, as the duo scored 18 points with Vinay scoring 11 of them.



**IN BRIEF**



**Japan, Australia women clinch Paris Olympics football spot**

Japan punched its ticket to the Paris Olympics women's football competition with a 2-1 win over North Korea in Wednesday's qualifying second leg in Tokyo. The two sides drew 0-0 in Saturday's first leg on neutral ground in Saudi Arabia, setting up a winner-takes-all showdown for one of the two Asian berths at the Games. In Melbourne, veteran Michelle Heyman scored four first-half goals as Australia crushed Uzbekistan 10-0 to seal its place at the Paris Games.

**Williams' 400m indoor record won't count: officials**

The blistering 44.49s 400m indoor time set by Canadian teenager Christopher Morales Williams last weekend will not be ratified as a world record due to an issue with the starting blocks, US officials said on Tuesday. The United States Track and Field and Cross Country Coaches Association (USTFCCCA) made the announcement in a post on X. However, it Although describing Williams' run as an "all-time world best", the USTFCCCA said the teenager's time won't count as an official world record because of the starting blocks used in the race at a collegiate meeting in Arkansas on Saturday. The 19-year-old University of Georgia student blasted to victory ahead of JeVaughn Powell (45.61) and Chris Robinson in 45.62 in Saturday's race. Initially, Williams' time was believed to have broken the previous world mark, but the world record will remain the 44.52 set by American sprinter Michael Norman in March 2018. Reports in the USA on Tuesday said the starting blocks used in the race did not comply with World Athletics regulations governing the ratification of world records. According to the rulebook, blocks must be linked to a World Athletics "start information system" which monitors reaction times.

**Ashi tops rifle 3-position event with a world-record score**

**SHOOTING**

**Sports Bureau**

Ashi Chouksey was in brilliant form as she topped the women's 50-metre rifle 3-position event, with a world-record score to boot, in the National shooting selection trials in Bhopal on Wednesday.

The 21-year-old Ashi shot 597 out of 600 in qualification, one point better than the world record shared by Jenny Stene of Norway and Sagen Maddalena of USA, and won the final with 461.8. She was 4.3 points ahead of second placed Vidarsa Vinod who had 588 in qualification. Himani Poonia placed third ahead of Lajja Gauswami, Priya, Dhyaneshwari, Heena Gohei and Surabhi Bharadwaj.



**Podium finish:** Vidarsa Vinod, topper Ashi Chouksey and Himani Poonia in the rifle 3-position event. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

In the 25m women's sports pistol, Asian Games gold medalist and multiple World Cup gold winner, Rahi Sarnobat topped with 33, three points ahead of Jaspreet Kaur. Olympian Annu Raj Singh placed third, ahead of Anisa Sayyed, Shital Desai, Kirandeep Kaur, TS Divya and Esha Singh.

**The results: 10m air rifle: Men:** 1. Arjun Babuta 252.5 (630.6); 2. Sri Karthik Sabari Raj 252.2 (634.2); 3. Yash Vardhan 230.8 (632.0). **25m sports pistol: Women:** 1. Rahi Sarnobat 33 (583); 2. Jaspreet Kaur 30 (579); 3. Annu Raj Singh 27 (577). **50m rifle 3-position: Women:** 1. Ashi Chouksey 461.8 (597); 2. Vidarsa Vinod 457.5 (588); 3. Himani Poonia 446.5 (585).

**Reds need 'miracles' after injury woes: Klopp**

**Agence France Presse**  
LONDON

Jürgen Klopp claimed Liverpool needs "miracles" to get his walking wounded back in time to boost its quadruple bid. Klopp's side defied a host of injuries to win the League Cup 1-0 against Chelsea in Sunday's final at Wembley.



**All is not well:** Gravenberch's injury has added to Liverpool's mounting fitness crisis. GETTY IMAGES

But Liverpool midfielder Ryan Gravenberch added to the club's mounting fitness crisis when he was stretchered off in the first-half. Gravenberch will miss at least two matches, starting with Wednesday's FA Cup fifth round tie against Southampton at Anfield. Wataru Endo is also a doubt for the visit of the Championship promotion chaser Southampton after he left Wembley on crutches and wearing a protective boot.

That leaves Klopp without 13 first team players, including Mohamed Salah, Darwin Nunez and Dominik Szoboszlai, as the Reds try to add the Premier League, FA Cup and Europa League to last weekend's silverware. "We need miracles with a few players. I don't want to rule them out for too long," Klopp told reporters on Tuesday. "But it is tough and go with a lot of players who were not available for the final: Darwin, Mo, Dom - we have to see what they can do (on Tuesday). In an ideal world you'd think about these kind of things but we obviously don't live

**Sathish and Aakarshi in second round at German Open**

**Press Trust of India**  
MULHEIM AN DER RUHR

India's Sathish Kumar Karunakaran and Aakarshi Kashyap progressed to the second round of the men's and women's singles competition at the German Open Super 300 badminton on Wednesday.

**The results:** **Men:** Sathish Kumar Karunakaran bt Misha Zilberman (Isr) 21-18, 19-21, 21-19. **Women:** Aakarshi Kashyap bt Polina Buhrova (Ukr) 21-23, 21-17, 21-11. **Doubles:** Amelie Lehmann & Cara Siebrecht (Ger) bt Rutaparna & Swetaparna Panda 21-17, 10-21, 21-14; Goh Soon Huat & Lai Shevon Jemie (Mas) bt Ashith Surya & Amrutha Pramuthesh 21-12, 21-11; Treasa Jolly & Gayatri Gopichand bt Hsu Yin-Hui & Lin Jihui Yun (Tpe) 18-21, 21-11, 21-13.

in an ideal world so we will see when the players arrive and they get checked."

Klopp is likely to have to rely on a number of the younger players who made such an impression at Wembley, with 19-year-olds Bobby Clark and James McConnell likely to start against Saints.

Although the pair have made just one start apiece in cup competitions this season, Klopp has faith in their ability to step up. "First and foremost, they don't have to show anything. Our boys played in youth teams and under-21s and only came up recently and trained with us: absolutely nil experience but a lot of talent and they showed that."

**Energetic Yuta Shimizu knocks out the top seed Benjamin Bonzi**

In doubles, Arjun Kadhe and Jeevan Nedunchezhiyan defeat the Koreans Seongchan Hong and Soonwoo Kwon in straight sets

**DELHI OPEN**

**Kamesh Srinivasan**  
NEW DELHI

Yuta Shimizu played energetic strokes with admirable accuracy to beat the top seed and former world No. 42 Benjamin Bonzi 7-5, 6-4 in the pre-quarterfinals of the Dafa News \$82,000 Delhi Open Challenger tennis at the DLTA Complex on Wednesday.

Bonzi was erratic, and thus every time he tried to fight back by breaking Shimizu's serve, he was unable to capitalise on the opening. He did fight bravely, saving match points, but it only stretched the contest a little more.

In comparison, the short-built Shimizu



**Focused:** Shimizu converted six out of seven break-points to make it a straight forward affair against Bonzi. KAMESH SRINIVASAN

pounced on the chances that came his way, and converted six of seven break points to make it a straight forward affair.

In the quarterfinals the 24-year-old Shimizu, ranked 235, will take on Enrico Dalla Valle of Italy. There was a further

blow to the event, as the Pune Challenger champion and the third seed, Valentin Vacherot of Monaco gave a walkover to Cole-

man Wong of Hong Kong. Vacherot had been drained of energy in a long-drawn first round against qualifier Jonas Forejtek of the Czech Republic.

The Indian challenge in doubles was sustained by the second seeds, Arjun Kadhe and Jeevan Nedunchezhiyan, who beat the Koreans Seongchan Hong and Soonwoo Kwon in straight sets.

The champions of the first two Challengers in Chennai and Bengaluru, top seeded Saketh Myneni and Ramkumar Ramanathan were not at their best and were beaten in straight sets by Jakob Schnaitter and Mark Wallner of Germany.

The Germans will face another Indian pair of Nitin Kumar Sinha and Manish Sureshkumar in the quarterfinals. However,

there was no such luck for Rithvik Bollipalli and Niki Poonacha as they went down 9-11 in the super tie-break against another alternate team, Rifki Fitriadi and Ryuki Matsuda.

**The results (pre-quarterfinals): Singles:** Yuta Shimizu (Jpn) bt Benjamin Bonzi (Fra) 7-5, 6-4; Enrico Dalla Valle (Ita) bt Federico Gaio (Ita) 7-6(5), 6-1; Coleman Wong (Hkg) w/o Valentin Vacherot (Mon); Tristan Schoolkate (Aus) bt Goncalo Oliveira (Por) 6-3, 7-6(4).

**Doubles:** Jakob Schnaitter & Mark Wallner (Ger) bt Saketh Myneni & Ramkumar Ramanathan 6-4, 6-4; M Rifki Fitriadi (Ina) & Ryuki Matsuda (Jpn) bt Rithvik Bollipalli & Niki Poonacha 7-6(5), 4-6, [11-9]. Piotr Matuszewski (Pol) & Matthew Romios (Aus) w/o Enrico Dalla Valle (Ita) & Goncalo Oliveira (Por); Arjun Kadhe & Jeevan Nedunchezhiyan bt Seongchan Hong & Soonwoo Kwon (Kor) 7-6(5), 6-3.

**Kerala beats Arunachal, enters quarterfinals**

**SANTOSH TROPHY**

**Sports Bureau**

Kerala beat host Arunachal Pradesh 2-0 in a final stage Group A league match of the 77th National Football Championship for the Santosh Trophy at the Golden Jubilee Stadium, Yupia, Arunachal Pradesh on Wednesday.

Forward Muhammed Ashiq S. and substitute Arjun V. found the target once in each half to secure the full quota of points for Kerala, which secured a knock-out quarterfinal berth with the result.

**Second win**

This was the second win in four matches for Kerala, which tallied seven points and remained in the third

spot after the penultimate round of the group league action. Arunachal Pradesh crashed out of the competition.

Kerala quarterfinal berth was confirmed after Goa held last year's runner-up Meghalaya to a goalless draw in the final match of the day.

Goa tallied eight points from two wins and as many draws to remain in se-

cond position while it was the end of the road for Meghalaya.

Earlier, Services picked up its third win by beating Assam 2-0 and tallied nine points to remain at the top. Assam, which has two wins in four matches, remained at fourth spot with six points and also qualified.

The top four teams from each group progress to the

quarterfinals. The final group league positions will be decided after the fifth and final round's action on March 1.

**The results: Group A (round 4):**

Kerala 2 (Muhammed Ashiq S. 35, Arjun V. 52) bt Arunachal Pradesh 0. Services 2 (T. Bidhyasagar Singh 44, Christopher Kamei 50) bt Assam 0; Goa 0 drew with Meghalaya 0.

**Mumbai Meteors hammers Calicut Heroes**

**Sports Bureau**  
CHENNAI

Mumbai Meteors thumped Calicut Heroes 15-13, 9-15, 21-19, 15-12 in the Prime Volleyball League in Chennai on Wednesday. Shubham Chaudhary was named the Player of the Match.

**Conway out, Ravindra in for NZ ahead of 1st Test against Australia**



**Back at it:** Ravindra, who missed the second and third T20s against Australia with a knee injury, is fit to play from Thursday. AFP



**Ruled out:** Conway suffered a thumb injury while keeping wicket in the second T20 last week. AFP

**NZ VS AUS**

**Associated Press**  
WELLINGTON

Devon Conway has been ruled out but Rachin Ravindra has been cleared to play for New Zealand in the first Test against Australia starting at the Basin Reserve on Thursday.

Conway suffered a thumb injury while keeping wicket in the second

Twenty20 international between the teams on Friday last week. While initial scans suggested there was no fracture, additional tests in Wellington in recent days have found there is damage to Conway's left thumb.

Conway will have further tests later in the week. Meantime, Will Young open the batting with Tom Latham in Conway's place.

Henry Nicholls, who was dropped from the New

Zealand team ahead of its two recent tests against South Africa - both victories - has been recalled to provide reinforcement for the batting lineup.

Ravindra missed the second and third Twenty20s against Australia with a slight knee injury but is fit to play from Thursday. He scored a maiden double century in the first innings of the first test against South Africa.

Daryl Mitchell is also

available after missing the South Africa series with a foot injury.

Captain Tim Southee said New Zealand will settle on its match lineup after assessing conditions at the Basin Reserve where the pitch usually is green at first but good for batting.

New Zealand will decide whether to go into the match with four seamers or to include spin-bowling allrounder Mitchell Santner.

**David Hemp and Andre Adams to coach Bangladesh cricket team**

**Agence France Presse**  
DHAKA

Bangladesh on Tuesday named former Glamorgan cricketer and Bermuda international David Hemp as the batting coach of the national men's team for two years.

Former New Zealand all-rounder Andre Adams will join the team as bowling coach for the same du-

ration, the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) said in a statement.

The duo will begin their tenure with the home series against Sri Lanka in March, the BCB said.

Hemp, 53, who scored more than 15,000 runs in First Class cricket for Glamorgan, Free State and Warwickshire, and represented Bermuda in 24 ODIs, is currently in charge

of Bangladesh's high-performance team.

He was the head coach of the Pakistan women's team from 2020 to 2022, and was also the head coach of the Victoria State women's team and the Melbourne Stars in the Women's Big Bash League.

New bowling coach Adams, 48, who replaces South African great Allan Donald in the role, repre-

sented New Zealand in 47 matches across all formats.

He also worked as the New Zealand bowling coach in the recent Twenty20 series against Pakistan, and was Australia's assistant coach in the 2022-23 series against South Africa. Former Sri Lanka batsman Chandika Hathurusinghe is currently the head coach of the Bangladesh men's team.



# Niki Poonacha, a doubles star, shining bright in singles too

In playing three top-class players back-to-back and competing on level terms, the 791st-ranked player showed that he belonged to the big league

**Kamesh Srinivasan**

It is a delight to watch two-time National tennis champion Niki Poonacha play. Especially so when he is competing in singles against high-quality players, tuning his focus to a greater degree, and unleashing his best game, fuelled by the innate ability to fight hard.

The 28-year-old Niki caught everyone's attention by beating the country's No.1 Sumit Nagal for the loss of seven games in the Challenger in Pune. Nagal, with his quicksilver feet, was often found rooted to the ground as Niki struck fluent winners. It was a shock for Nagal who had entered the top-100 rank for the first time and had been on a high, winning the Challenger in Chennai and making the semifinals in Bengaluru the earlier fortnight.

It was not a surprise though as Niki proved in the next match when he had the 218th-ranked Dane Sweeny at his mercy, leading 5-2 and having two match-points in the decider, in the quarterfinals. Perhaps, Niki wavered a bit, and Sweeny just swooped in on his chances like an eagle and won dramatically, clinching the eventual tie-break.

Niki had won a three-setter in the first round through a third-set tie-break against the 215th-ranked Goncalo Oliveira of Portugal who has 16 singles titles and 38 doubles titles.

In playing three top-class players back-to-back and competing on even terms, the 791st-ranked Niki showed that he belonged to the big league.

## Happy with game and fitness

"I am pretty happy with my performance. I played some of my best tennis in the Pune Challenger. It shows that I can compete against these Grand Slam players. Sumit [Nagal] had qualified and beat top-25 player Alexander Bublik at the Australian Open. Dane Sweeny had also qualified in Melbourne and lost in five sets to world No. 22 Francisco Cerundolo of Argentina. I am happy with my game and fitness to be able to compete with them," said Niki.

It was clear that Sweeny had stepped up his game at the crunch and Niki wilted under pressure after fighting hard for more than two hours and 30 minutes.

"Against Sweeny, I didn't get my first serve in as much as I did in my previous two matches. Yet, I was able to go toe-to-toe with him and had two match-points. That showed that I can play even off the ground, when my biggest strength was not working," said Niki, looking at the positive side of the disappointment.

Coach Borna Bikic of Croatia, who has worked wonders with Niki's game and fitness in the last two years, was able to find the reason for the loss.

"Niki didn't play match-points up to his game character. He was a bit softer and didn't press enough. Overall, Niki played a good tournament. It was unexpected timing, with known potential," said Borna.

Niki has been doing well in the doubles circuit, winning two Challengers with S.D. Prajwal Dev and Divij Sharan, and taking his doubles rank to 138. He was part of the Davis Cup team in the tie against Pakistan in Islamabad and made his debut memorable with a singles win.

"I won't say that I am happy, as we all know that we can and will do better. Work is yet to be done. Our goal for Niki is top-10 in doubles, and make him compete



SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

in singles qualifiers in the Grand Slams. The most important aspect is to keep Niki healthy and happy," said Borna.

The coach assured that the singles play would be kept as a priority, striking a fine balance with doubles which helps Niki compete at a higher level on a regular basis.

Quite understandably, Niki was all praise for his coach who travels with him and has transformed him in a big way.

"In the last two years or so, my coach has changed my entire game. From the

start, I was an aggressive player. But no one taught me or trained me to use my strengths this well. Borna has transformed me into a very good, all-round player. I am able to serve well, volley well, and I was able to match Sweeny from the back court and match his game style," said Niki.

Niki had thrived at the Rohan Bopanna Academy in Bengaluru to reach a certain standard that saw him win National titles, and also the second of his ITF men's singles titles. He had to move on, and was fortunate to find Borna.

"In August 2021, I met him in Tunisia. Later in 2022, when I wanted to move, Borna was in India. I went to train with him. It was a brave move for me at that time, but it proved good," recalled Niki.

With the scarcity of quality singles players who can compete at the top, Indian tennis does scream for a singles programme, the way Rohan Bopanna has set up the 'Dream Doubles' project.

"Yes, the doubles programme is helping a lot of players and many are improving very fast. That is impressive. In singles, we definitely need a program. But it could be a bit more expensive than it is for doubles. Hope we get it started soon", Niki said.

Niki is happy with his Davis Cup debut on grass in Pakistan. With the top two players – Nagal and S. Mukund – focused on the Tour and skipping Davis Cup, Indian tennis really understood the need to groom quality singles players to jump in for national duty when required.

"It was my first time on grass. I was happy to win my match and help India to 4-0. It definitely makes me go more after my singles. I am looking forward to the next Davis Cup tie. If I can get my rank up, I can be in the team," observed Niki.

Niki is clear about what he needs to do, to grow as a tennis player.

"I have the game, and I need to work on the physical part. I have to work on the mental side as well. I was one shot away from winning the match against Sweeny. Even after I missed the two match-points, I had to serve it out. I couldn't deliver when needed. I think I need to improve the mental side of my game. On the physical side, I want to reach a stage when I am able to play four or five matches without having to take a pain killer," said Niki.

He is overwhelmed with gratitude for his parents Kaliyanda Bopaiah Poonacha and Veena, apart from his brother Kusalappa who is settled in Canada.

"I thank my family for the unconditional support. Without them, I wouldn't have reached here. They sacrificed a lot for me. They never asked me a question. They always push me a lot to never give up. When I was 27, and ranked 600 something in singles, and not much in doubles, my parents never questioned whether it was right for me to stick to tennis. In contrast, they always said, 'this is your life, you have to give it everything. We believe in you. You just need to focus and play your best'. Now, I feel that I am in the right path, in a better position than before, I want to thank them for supporting me so strongly," said Niki.

The doubles game is helping Niki break even on the financial side, but he is determined to make his singles game tick and thrive, despite the financial constraints.

Niki does play his game in a very enjoyable fashion. He electrifies the atmosphere with his vibrant game that makes the fans chant his name!

## THE GIST

Coach Borna Bikic has worked wonders with Poonacha's game and fitness in the last two years

The Croatian says the goal is a top-10 rank for Niki in doubles and make him compete in singles qualifiers in the Slams

Niki feels that the Dream Doubles programme is helping a lot of players and many are improving very fast

