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INSIDE



Fear of defeat is visible on Modi's face, says Stalin

CHENNAI
A day after Prime Minister Narendra Modi said that it was time to drive the DMK out from Tamil Nadu, DMK president and Chief Minister M.K. Stalin said that the PM had been repeatedly visiting Tamil Nadu, but the fear of defeat was visible on his face. » PAGE 2

Manipur Police accuse radical outfit of extortion

NEW DELHI
In the first official confirmation of the havoc being caused by a radical Meitei group, the Manipur Police on Thursday said that Arambai Tenglo was engaged in many "anti-social activities", such as assaulting civilians, snatching vehicles public and extortion from businessmen. » PAGE 4

Indian technical team reaches the Maldives

NEW DELHI
The Centre on Thursday confirmed that a team of Indian technical personnel have landed in the Maldives to replace military troops that have been operating aircraft there, indicating a compromise between India and the newly elected Maldives government. » PAGE 5

Pak. swears in new members of Parliament

ISLAMABAD
Pakistan's National Assembly swore in newly elected members on Thursday in a chaotic scene, as allies of jailed former Prime Minister Imran Khan and members of his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party protested the February 8 election which their claim was rigged. » PAGE 12

6 Congress rebel MLAs disqualified in Himachal

Speaker takes action against MLAs who had cross-voted in favour of BJP in RS election

Disqualification on the grounds of absence from Assembly when the State Budget was put to vote

Disqualified MLAs to move SC; AICC team says the government will complete its term

**Vikas Vasudeva
Sandeep Phukan
CHANDIGARH/NEW DELHI**
Mid the ongoing political turmoil in Himachal Pradesh, six Congress legislators, who had cross-voted in favour of the BJP in the Rajya Sabha elections on February 27, were disqualified from the Assembly by Speaker Kuldeep Singh Pathania on Thursday.

The ground for disqualification, however, was their absence from the Assembly when the State Budget and the Finance Bill were being put to vote, defying a party whip to vote in favour of the government.

The disqualified MLAs were: Rajinder Rana, Sudhir Sharma, Inder Dutt Lakhampal, Devinder Kumar Bhatoo, Ravi Thakur and Chetan Sharma. By evening, the information about their seats lying vacant was put up on the Assembly's website.

Mr. Rana, a three-term MLA, said they would move the Supreme Court against the disqualification as many of his colleagues did not even get a proper notice from the Speaker's office.

The motion for disqualification was moved by State Parliamentary Affairs Minister Harshwardhan.

Internal committee

A team of All India Congress Committee (AICC) observers — Bhupinder Singh Hooda, Bhatupesh Baghel and D.K. Shivakumar — told the media in Shimla that Chief Minister Sukhvir Singh Sukhu had taken responsibility for Abhishek Singhvi's defeat in the Rajya Sabha elections.

Asserting that the Congress government would complete its term of five years, the AICC observers announced that a six-member coordination committee would be set up



Political crisis: Himachal Pradesh Chief Minister Sukhvir Singh Sukhu, Congress State president Pratibha Singh, and Karnataka Deputy Chief Minister D.K. Shivakumar in Shimla on Thursday. ANI

to sort out internal differences.

"Amid talk of leadership change because of growing complaints from MLAs against Mr. Sukhu's style of functioning, the Chief Minister on Thursday invited party legislators for a breakfast meeting at his official residence.

"The Congress government is there and Mr. Sukhu is the Chief Minister. All the MLAs want the Congress government for five years," Mr. Shivakumar said, when asked if the party would replace the Chief Minister after the Rajya Sabha fiasco.

Backing of MLAs

Sources told *The Hindu* that Mr. Sukhu, who had called himself a *yodha* (warrior), clearly conveyed to the team of AICC obser-

vers that he had the backing of at least 10-12 MLAs and changing him before the Congress takes a vote of confidence would be detrimental to the party's interest.

The Chief Minister's response is part of a pushback from him after he was blamed for the Rajya Sabha debacle. Sources said Mr. Sukhu had recently met Rahul Gandhi during the

Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra in Uttar Pradesh.

The State was pushed into political turmoil on Tuesday, when Mr. Singhvi, the ruling Congress party's nominee for the State's sole Rajya Sabha seat, lost the election to the BJP's Harsh Mahajan after six Congress MLAs voted in favour of Mr. Mahajan, threatening the survival of their own government.

Sensing the collapse of the government, the Congress high command rushed the three observers while party general secretary Priyanka Vadra also worked behind the scenes. Her message was to take everyone along but come down hard on discipline.

Mr. Shivakumar said that the central observers had spoken to Mr. Sukhu, party MLAs and State unit chief Pratibha Singh individually and all differences had been ironed out. "All the MLAs have assured and taken an oath to work to-

gether to save the party and the government," he said.

However, many believe that the Congress has merely deferred its problems. If there is no stay on the disqualification by a court, under Section 151A of the Representation of the People Act, 1951, the Election Commission is duty-bound to conduct by-polls to Assembly constituencies of Dharmsalaha, Lahul-Spiti, Sujangpur, Barsar, Kulehar and Gagret within six months. "With the disqualification, the Congress government has put itself in an uncomfortable position. Whenever the Assembly by-polls are held, which could be along with the Lok Sabha polls as well, the Congress would have to put its best foot forward to win the seats again, which could become a difficult task amid the ongoing display of factionalism," said a party leader, who requested anonymity.

Ready to rumble



Latest addition: The Navy's newly inducted MH 60R Seahawk multi-role helicopters seen at INS Garuda in Kochi on Thursday. The Navy is set to commission MH 60R, which is capable of firing torpedoes, missiles and Advanced Precision Kill Weapon System rockets. The self-protection suite on the helicopter comprises chaff and infrared flares, which can be deployed automatically upon detection of threat. TULASI KAKKAT

GDP growth estimate for current year raised to 7.6%

**Vikas Dhoot
NEW DELHI**

Making a flurry of revisions in the economy's growth estimates, the National Statistical Office (NSO) on Thursday raised India's real GDP growth estimate for this year to 7.6% from the 7.3% projected last month. It also scaled down its 2022-23 to 7% and raised its 2021-22 estimate from 9.1% to 9.7%.

The Gross Value Added (GVA) in the economy is projected to rise 6.9% this year, with the NSO downgrading last year's GVA growth to 6.7% from 7%. GDP growth for the first two quarters of this year was raised to 8.2% and 8.1%, further rising to 8.4% for the October to December 2023 quarter (Q3).

Economists expressed surprise that GVA growth in Q3 slid to just 6.5% from revised estimates of 8.2% and 7.7% in Q1 and Q2, respectively. Concerns also persisted about private consumption, which grew 3.5% in Q3 from 2.4% in Q2.

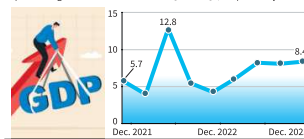
The full-year growth estimate was downgraded to 3% from the 4.4% reckoned in early January.

Struggling farm sector

Farm sector GVA growth slipped into a 0.8% contraction in Q3, and the full year is now expected to register a mere 0.7% rise, compared with 4.7% in 2022-23. Chief Economic Advisor V. Anantha Nageswaran said he expects the farm sector to recover next year, adding that industrial growth had lifted growth this year. Acceleration in GVA growth from three key sectors has helped: construction, up 10.7%; manufacturing, which is up 8.5%

Growth expands

India's gross domestic product grew by 8.4% in Q3 FY24, quickening from 8.2% and 8.1% in Q1 and Q2, respectively



Core sector growth slows to 15-month low in Jan.

**Vikas Dhoot
NEW DELHI**

Output growth in core sectors fell to a 15-month low of 3.6% this January, driven by a contraction in fertilizer and refinery production along with

base effects from 2023 when the core sectors had grown 9.7% in the same month. However, absolute overall output levels were at a 10-month high.

FULL REPORT
» PAGE 14

104 killed as Israeli forces attack aid spot in Gaza

**Agence France-Presse
GAZA STRIP**

At least 104 people were killed in Gaza on Thursday when Israeli forces in Gaza opened fire on Palestinians scrambling for food aid at the city's western Nabulsi roundabout.

"Trucks full of aid came too close to some army tanks that were in the area and the crowd, thousands of people, just stormed the trucks," the witness said, declining to be named for safety reasons. "The soldiers fired at the crowd as people came too close to the tanks."

The office of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu also said many of the dead were crushed by the trucks when they



Displaced Palestinian children wait to receive free food at a tent camp in Rafah city on February 27. REUTERS

were "overwhelmed by people trying to loot".

Aerial images released by the Israeli army showed what it said were scores of Gazans surrounding aid trucks in Gaza City.

and Hamas militants could be just days away. U.S. President Joe Biden said that a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas was now unlikely to happen by Monday — the timeline that he had predicted earlier this week.

UN humanitarian chief Martin Griffiths said he was "appalled at the reported killing and injury of hundreds of people during a transfer of aid supplies" and warned "life is draining out of Gaza at terrifying speed". Saudi Arabia strongly condemned what it called the "targeting" of unarmed civilians while Italy called for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza to facilitate more humanitarian aid.

The incident adds to a Palestinian death toll from the war which the Ministry earlier on Thursday said had topped 30,000, and dampens hopes that a truce deal between Israel

IN BRIEF



HC rejects CBI plea against Indrani Mukerjea docuseries

The Bombay High Court on Thursday gave the go-ahead to the Netflix documentary series, 'The Indrani Mukerjea Story: Buried Truth', and rejected the CBI plea to pass a stay order on the release. A Division Bench of Justices Revati Mohite Dere and Manjusha Deshpande watched the documentary series and said it found nothing 'prejudicial' in the series that could cause serious concerns on the ongoing trial in the Sheena Bora murder case in which Ms. Mukerjea is booked as a prime accused by the CBI. The court said, "We initially thought there may be something and hence we also watched the docuseries. Public perception is the least of our concerns."

Kashmiri scribe arrested for supporting militants' released

Kashmiri journalist Asif Sultan who was arrested for allegedly providing logistical support to militants, has been released after a five-year detention, officials said on Thursday. Mr. Sultan was released two months after the Jammu and Kashmir High Court in December last year quashed his detention order under the Public Safety Act. The court had said the authorities "did not follow the procedural requirements in letter and spirit". Officials said Mr. Sultan's release was delayed because the jail authorities at Ambedkar Nagar district jail in Uttar Pradesh were awaiting clearance letters from Kashmir's home department. PH

Court rejects Goyal's interim bail, allows cancer treatment

A special court in Mumbai on Thursday refused to grant interim bail to Jet Airways founder Naresh Goyal, arrested in a money laundering case, but permitted him to undergo cancer treatment at a hospital of his choice for two months. Goyal (74), who is lodged in Arthur Road jail in central Mumbai, had sought to be released on interim bail to undergo treatment for cancer. Special judge for cases under Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) M.G. Deshpande permitted Mr. Goyal to undergo treatment for the illness at Tata hospital or any other hospital of his choice for a period of two months. Last month, Mr. Goyal was permitted by the court to undergo tests at a private hospital. PH

ED attaches property linked to former U.P. MLA, wife

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) has provisionally attached a commercial property worth ₹10.7 crore owned by a former MLA from Uttar Pradesh's Bhadohi constituency and his wife, a former Member of the Legislative Council. The ED probe is based on a First Information Report (FIR) registered by the Handia police in Prayagraj. The police had last year filed two charge sheets against former MLA Vijay Mishra and his wife Ramlali Mishra for allegedly accumulating assets worth ₹36.07 crore disproportionate to the money generated through known sources of income. According to the agency, its investigation revealed that the former MLA had been a history-sheeter and ran a mafia cartel.

Fear of defeat is visible on PM Modi's face, says Stalin

In a letter to party cadre, the CM of Tamil Nadu urges them to work towards defeating the BJP in the Lok Sabha election, and to take the list of the national party's 'conspiracies' to the people

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI

After Prime Minister Narendra Modi said that it was time to drive the DMK out from Tamil Nadu, DMK president and Chief Minister M.K. Stalin on Thursday said that the Prime Minister had been repeatedly visiting Tamil Nadu, but the fear of defeat was visible on his face.

"Prime Minister Modi is visiting Tamil Nadu frequently. The fear of defeat is visible on his face. It is manifesting as anger on his face. The Prime Minister has slandered the DMK and the DMK government," Mr. Stalin said.

"The Prime Minister's speech, in which he claimed that the DMK would be crushed and destroyed, has brought disrepute to the post he holds. The history of Tamil Nadu shows what happened to those who were looking to crush and destroy the DMK," Mr. Stalin said, in a letter to party cadre.

The DMK president said that he, however, would not say that the BJP would not live on. "Our *Kaiginar* [late DMK leader Karunanidhi] did not groom us like that. The BJP has the right to remain in the democratic set-up as a political party. I wish that the BJP becomes a good Opposition party, as it has failed as a ruling party," he said.

Taking exception to Mr. Modi's claim that the DMK government was obstructing Central government schemes in Tamil Nadu, Mr. Stalin said, "Are we blocking them from opening the AIMS [in Madurai]? Are we blocking the [Chennai] Metro rail projects?"

Mr. Stalin said that his party opposed the National Eligibility-Cum-Entrance Test (NET) as it was crushing poor people's dreams of pursuing medical education. He asserted that his party would oppose the National Education Policy 2020 which, he said, was an "obstruction".

Referring to his party's



Confident stand: Chief Minister M.K. Stalin says that the disturbances caused by the BJP to parties of the INDIA bloc only meant that the Opposition's victory was almost certain. FILE PHOTO

opposition to the three farm laws (since withdrawn) which, he said, was against farmers, and the Citizenship (Amendment) Act that was "against minorities and Sri Lankan Tamils".

Mr. Stalin said that the DMK was being open about opposing such proposals. "[Prime Minister] Modi, who did not give the State government the funds it was entitled to, prevented it from taking loans, and even failed to provide flood relief, cannot find fault with the DMK," Mr. Stalin said.

Calling upon his party cadre to take the list of the BJP's "conspiracies" to the people of Tamil Nadu, Mr. Stalin said, "People are aware. We only have a duty

to remind them. We have to win all 40 seats in Tamil Nadu and Puducherry [in the Lok Sabha election]."

The disturbances caused by the BJP to political parties of the INDIA bloc only meant that the Opposition's victory was almost certain at the national level, he said. He called upon his party cadre to work towards ensuring that there was a change in government at the Centre. That would be his "birthday gift", he said. Referring to the Lok Sabha election, he said, "The INDIA bloc should win so that fascism could be defeated and communal politics could be brought to an end." Mr. Stalin called upon his party cadre to gear up for the "democratic war" in which the BJP government at the Centre should be removed from power.

Floral tributes

A party release said that Mr. Stalin would pay floral tributes at the memorials of late DMK leaders and former Chief Ministers C.N. Annadurai and M. Karunanidhi on his birthday on March 1.

He would also pay floral tributes at the memorial of late Dravidar Kazhagam founder 'Periyar' E.V. Ramasamy.

'Abki baar, 400 paar' slogan coined not by BJP, but people to bring NDA back to power: PM

Mehul Malpani
BHOPAL

The slogan 'Abki baar, 400 paar' (This time, above 400) was not coined by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) but by the people in order to bring the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government back to power at the Centre, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on Thursday. He was virtually addressing the 'Viksit Bharat, Viksit Madhya Pradesh' programme, which is part of the Centre's 'Viksit Bharat Sankalp Yatra'.

"Today, there is only one thing being heard everywhere: 'Abki baar, 400 paar'. It is for the first time that the people themselves have raised a slogan like this to bring back its beloved government," Mr. Modi said. The BJP has set



PM Modi virtually inaugurates and lays the foundation stones of projects worth over ₹17,550 crore during the 'Viksit Bharat, Viksit Madhya Pradesh' programme, in New Delhi on Thursday. ANI

a target for its NDA alliance to win more than 400 seats in the Lok Sabha election, and is aiming for 370-plus seats for the party alone.

The Prime Minister inaugurated and laid the foundation stones of projects worth more than ₹17,550 crore in the State related to sectors such as irrigation, rail, road, power,

and industry. He also inaugurated a Vedic clock in Ujjain, the Vikramaditya Vedic Ghari, based on the Hindu *panchang* as well as the Cyber Telsit project of the State government.

"We are entering the poll fray to make the nation the third-largest economy in the world during the third term," he said.

Bhim Army chief seeks probe into Dalit boy's killing after 'forcible cremation' of body

Mayank Kumar
LUCKNOW

Bhim Army chief Chandra Shekhar Aazad on Thursday demanded a probe by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) into the killing of 17-year-old Dalit boy, Sumesh Kumar, alleging that the police "forcibly" cremated the body on Wednesday.

Sumesh was killed in a clash between two groups over the installation of a board with B.R. Ambedkar's photo on Tuesday on a disputed plot in Silai Baragan village under Milak police station limits in Uttar Pradesh's Rampur district. The deceased boy's brother alleged in a video 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. Two

Talks complete on all 48 Lok Sabha seats, says MVA

Shoumojit Banerjee
PUNE

The leaders of the Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) said on Thursday that seat-sharing talks on all 48 Lok Sabha seats were complete.

Congress leader Balasah Thorat announced this after a meeting of top party leaders with those from the Uddhav Thackeray-led Shiv Sena (UBT) and Sharad Pawar-led Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) at Mr. Pawar's residence in Mumbai today. He said an announcement on the formula would be made soon.

"It is not important which party contests how many seats. Our seat-sharing formula is based on elective merit," said Mr. Thorat, while refuting suggestions that the Sena (UBT) would be given the maximum number of seats.

Earlier, Shiv Sena (UBT) spokesperson Sanjay Raut reiterated there were no differences within the MVA, including Prakash Ambedkar's Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi.

Mr. Raut told reporters that discussions were held only on seat-sharing in Thursday's meeting and there was no talk on individual candidates. A final meeting of MVA leaders would be held later to an-

A final meeting of MVA leaders would be held later before announcing the names of all candidates and constituencies

nounce candidates and constituencies.

"A blue-print has been prepared by the MVA, which includes the Shiv Sena (UBT), the Congress, the Sharad Pawar-led NCP, the Uddhav Thackeray-led Shiv Sena (UBT), and the Left parties. The MVA is an important constituent of the MVA. We have received no proposal to field Manoj Jarange-Patil on the Jalna seat from the VBA," he said. Mr. Raut said that if a party within the MVA wanted to nominate some individual in particular, then it was their concern. On Wednesday, Mr. Ambedkar had not attended the MVA's seat-sharing meeting at the Trident.

He instead sent a list of demands through his representatives which included fielding 15 OBC candidates and three candidates from religious minorities on as many Lok Sabha seats besides Mr. Jarange-Patil's nomination from Jalna. He denied that VBA's demands would cause any discord.

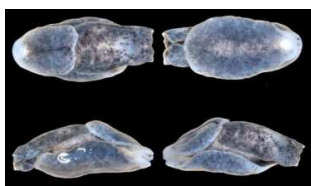
ZSI names a newly discovered sea slug after President Murmu

Specimens of *Melanochlamys droupadi* were found in Digha on the West Bengal coast and Udaipur on the Odisha coast, researchers said

The Hindu Bureau
BHUBANESWAR

The Zoological Survey of India (ZSI) has named a new marine species of head-shield sea slug with ruby red spot which was discovered from West Bengal and Odisha coast after President of India Droupadi Murmu.

This species belonging to *Melanochlamys* genus was discovered from Digha of West Bengal coast and Udaipur of Odisha coast. The new species of head-shield sea slug, which is found nowhere else in the world, has been



Melanochlamys droupadi, a head-shield sea slug with ruby red spot. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

named *Melanochlamys droupadi*.

Species of the genus *Melanochlamys* are characterised morphologically by a

short, blunt and cylindrical body and a smooth dorsal surface with two dorsal equal or unequal shields, named the anterior cephalic and

posterior shield.

In a statement, Dhriti Banerjee, ZSI director, said, "The species was confirmed by examination of morphological, anatomical and molecular characteristics. It is a small invertebrate with a maximum length up to 7 mm, brownish black in colour with a ruby red spot in the hind end, shell inside the body, hermaphrodite, normally crawling on the intertidal zone, which left the crawl mark behind them in the sandy beaches."

"Their reproduction apparently occurs between November and

January. The locality was designated as Hospital Ghat, Old Digha, which is just 50 metre away from Marine Aquarium Regional Centre, Digha. The type specimens were deposited in Marine Aquarium and Regional Centre, Digha and Estuarine Biology and Regional Centre, Gopalpur," she said.

According to ZSI, species of this group are generally distributed in temperate regions of the Indo-Pacific Oceanic realm but three species are truly tropical distributed. *Melanochlamys papillata*

from the Gulf of Thailand, *Melanochlamys bengalensis* from West Bengal and Odisha coast and the present species.

A paper published by ZSI researchers Prasad Chandra Tudu, Sheikh Sajan, Smrutirekha Acharya and Anil Mohapatra says live *Melanochlamys droupadi* animals continuously secrete transparent mucus to form a sheath that prevents sand grains from entering parapodial space. It crawls beneath smooth sand to form a moving capsule where the body is rarely visible, the paper said.

J&K's liquor revenue soars, record bid for Qazigund licence

The Hindu Bureau
SRINAGAR

As liquor license revenue soared to highest ₹2,280 crore in Jammu and Kashmir, the bidding for south Kashmir's Qazigund vendor set a record in a recent auction, with the highest bid at ₹5.23 crore.

Official figures suggest that the auction of liquor licences has crossed previous records by fetching ₹2,280 crore as revenue this year, compared to ₹1,777 crore in 2022.

The bid for the Qazigund license at ₹5.23 crore is followed by a ₹3.14 crore

bid for Udhampur's Ramnagar, officials said. They said 38 liquor shops are yet to be auctioned.

"The bidding figures in Kashmir come as a surprise because the Valley is considered a conservative society and Islam, the main faith practiced by the locals, forbids the consumption of liquor."

"Transparent process" "The allotment of JKEL-2 vendors, commonly known as wine shops, is being conducted in a completely transparent and secure mode through J&K Bank," an official said.

Kerala HC acquits all but one in CPI(M) leader murder attempt case

The Hindu Bureau
KOCHI

The Kerala High Court has acquitted five Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh/Bharatiya Janata Party workers who were arraigned as accused and convicted in a case relating to the attempt to murder CPI(M) leader P. Jayarajan at his Kathirur residence near Thalassery in August 1999.

Justice P. Somarajan passed the verdict earlier while allowing the appeals filed by five convicts — P. Sasi, Elamthottathil Manoj, Jayaprakashan, Kadichery Aji alias Ajith Kumar, and Koyyom Manu alias Manoj, against the order of the Thalassery Sessions Court in 2007.

The court also dismissed the appeal filed by the State government against the acquittal of three accused — Kunyil Shanoob, Koveri Pramod, and Thykandy Mohan. The fifth and eighth accused had passed away while the appeal was pending and nobody turned up to represent them. The court, however, upheld the conviction of the remaining two accused — Chirukandath Prasanth in the case. But the court reduced the 10-year rigorous imprisonment awarded to him to one-year simple prison.

The court observed that there was failure on the part of the prosecution to show and prove the involvement of accused in the alleged commission of offence.

OBC panel submits caste census report in Karnataka

Over 400 castes have been newly identified in the State; the commission has recommended classifications for castes based on the socio, economic, and educational status of communities

The Hindu Bureau
BENGALURU

The long-pending final report of the Socio-economic and Educational Survey (caste census) of Karnataka was submitted to Chief Minister Siddaramaiah here on Thursday. Karnataka State Commission for Backward Classes chairman K. Jayaprakash Hegde and its members submitted the report.

The report includes recommendations made by the commission for the purpose of reservation in education and employment, besides targeted schemes for communities



The caste census report being submitted to CM Siddaramaiah by the commission head, K. Jayaprakash Hegde (second from right).

that remain backward. Sources said that the commission had recommended classifications for castes based on the socio, economic, and educational status of communities. While 1,351 castes and sub-castes had been listed out before the survey com-

menced, the exercise revealed the existence of more than 1,820 castes/sub-castes, the sources said.

More than 400 castes were newly identified in the State, owing to migration from other States, the sources added.

Mr. Hegde said while they had taken the data collected in the survey by the previous commission, led by H. Kantharaj, a fresh report had been prepared. In the run-up to the Assembly election, the Congress had promised to accept the caste census report. Mr. Siddaramaiah had also reiterated it on multiple occasions.

Question papers of U.P. board exam go viral; police complaint registered in Agra

The Hindu Bureau
LUCKNOW

The District Inspector of Schools, Agra, on Thursday, petitioned the police to register a First Information Report (FIR) against the centre superintendent of an inter-college and others for making viral the question papers of Mathematics and Biology of the Class 12 Uttar Pradesh board exam.

"Today, at 3.11 p.m., in a WhatsApp group named All Principals Agra, the question papers of Mathematics and Biology were made viral in between the examination. On inquiry, it came to our notice that a computer operator working at Antar Singh Inter College, Agra, did the act. Hence, I request you to register an FIR against him and centre superintendent Rajendra Singh, static magistrate Gajendra Singh and others, so that the sanctity of the examination is maintained," reads the plea submitted by Dinesh Kumar, District Inspector of Schools, Agra, to the Fatehpur Sikri police station.

It was also marked to the Opposition V.D. Sathesean said the CPI(M) "emasculated" the Lok Ayukta by passing a law that vested the political executive with the power to review, accept or reject the anti-corruption ombudsman's decisions. The BJP-Central government fast-tracked the process, he alleged.

to the President for consideration, of which only the Lok Ayukta Bill received Rashtrapati Bhawan's nod. Meanwhile, Leader of the Opposition V.D. Sathesean said the CPI(M) "emasculated" the Lok Ayukta by passing a law that vested the political executive with the power to review, accept or reject the anti-corruption ombudsman's decisions. The BJP-Central government fast-tracked the process, he alleged.



AKHILESH YADAV
Samajwadi Party chief on X.

The future of the youth and children of Uttar Pradesh has become bleak due to the way papers from competitive examinations to Uttar Pradesh Board are continuously being leaked during the rule of BJP government

way papers from competitive examinations to Uttar Pradesh Board are continuously being leaked during the rule of the BJP government. Now the image of BJP has been completely tarnished not only among the youth but also among the children who will vote for the first time and also among their parents. The BJP is actually against the family system. The anti-family BJP can never know the pain of how family members sacrifice their lives to educate their children and how paper leaks cause mental frustration in children," wrote Mr. Yadav on X.

Mr. Reddy also launched a no-holds-barred attack against the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and BJP, setting the template for Congress's campaign in the Lok Sabha elections in Kerala. Mr. Reddy drew an equivalence between the LDF government and the Bharatiya Rashtra Samithi. "Both are inherently corrupt like the BJP," Mr. Reddy said.

Presidential nod for Lok Ayukta Bill is victory for Kerala, blow for Khan: LDF

The Hindu Bureau
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

The Left Democratic Front (LDF) on Thursday sought to portray the Presidential assent for the Kerala Lok Ayukta (Amendment) Bill as an oblique critique of Governor Arif Mohammed Khan's "obstinate refusal" to sign laws passed by the Assembly.

Law Minister P. Rajeeve and Minister Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)) State secretary M.V. Govin-

dan portrayed the Presidential nod for the Lok Ayukta Bill as a victory for the government and a let down for Mr. Khan.

However, Raj Bhavan stressed its stance on X with the post: "It is informed that the Hon'ble President of India has withheld assent to three Bills which Hon'ble Governor Shri Arif Mohammed Khan had referred to Rashtrapati Bhawan for consideration".

These included the Kerala University Laws (Amendment) Bill seeking to divest the Governor of the power of the Chancellor of State universities. The President also withheld assent to another university Bill that aspired to expand the search committee to appoint Vice-Chancellors.

Rashtrapati Bhavan was also yet to approve another law relating to the administration of AIJ Abdul Kalam Technological University. Raj Bhavan said Mr. Khan had sent seven Bills

to the President for consideration, of which only the Lok Ayukta Bill received Rashtrapati Bhawan's nod. Meanwhile, Leader of the Opposition V.D. Sathesean said the CPI(M) "emasculated" the Lok Ayukta by passing a law that vested the political executive with the power to review, accept or reject the anti-corruption ombudsman's decisions. The BJP-Central government fast-tracked the process, he alleged.

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IN BRIEF



Telangana BRS MP Ramulu and supporters join BJP

A day after BJP leader K. Laxman claimed that many BRS MPs were waiting to join the saffron party, sitting member from the Nagarkurnool Lok Sabha constituency and former Minister P. Ramulu, along with his followers, joined the BJP in New Delhi on Thursday. Senior BJP leaders hailed Mr. Ramulu as a dedicated Dalit leader known for his tireless work for the poor. The BRS MP said he decided to join Prime Minister Narendra Modi's team for the development of the nation, State and his constituency.

Telangana govt. to fill up 11,062 posts in Education dept.

The Telangana government has released a mega District Selection Committee (DSC) notification for filling up 11,062 posts in the Education department. Chief Minister A. Revanth Reddy released the notification along with Education department officials on Thursday. The notification follows a similar notification to fill up (4,957) direct recruitment teacher posts under various categories in government and local body schools in the State issued on February 26 this year. The notification announces relaxation of age limit for certain categories of applicants.

Death of student after ragging; main accused held

The prime accused in the Wayanad ragging episode, which reportedly led to the suicide of a 20-year-old veterinary college student, was arrested from Palakkad on Thursday. The police identified the arrested as K. Akhil from Pattambi in Palakkad. J.S. Siddharth, a second-year student at the College of Veterinary and Animal Sciences, Fookode, was found hanging in the hostel bathroom on February 18. Six of the 18 accused in the case were arrested on Wednesday. Eleven of the 12 main accused are still absconding.

Rhythmic ritual



Steps and beats: Theyyam artists performing at the Chala Kadankottu Makkam Bhagavathi temple in Kannur district on Thursday. PTI

Deadline for 60% Kannada usage in signboards extended

The Hindu Bureau
BENGALURU

The Karnataka government announced that the deadline for installation of 60% Kannada signage in all commercial establishments has been extended by two weeks. Earlier, the deadline was February 28.

On Thursday, Deputy Chief Minister and Bengaluru Development Minister D.K. Shivakumar posted on X: "Considering that it takes time to change the signage, government has decided to extend the deadline given to commercial establishments by two more weeks so that the 60% signage in Kannada rule can be followed."

The State government had mandated the use of 60% Kannada on signboards in commercial establishments in a gazette notification on February 26.

Decision brings relief In an order issued on Wednesday, the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) announced that if the name board rules were violated, effective from Thursday, the business licenses would be suspended and that such commercial establishments would be sealed.

The latest decision by the Karnataka government has brought some relief to commercial establishments.

Amid row, tourist resorts at Rushikonda in Vizag inaugurated

The Hindu Bureau
VISAKHAPATNAM

The controversial resorts constructed on top of Rushikonda, a hill abutting the sea, were formally inaugurated by Andhra Pradesh Tourism Minister R.K. Roja here on Thursday.

It was a low-key affair as several cases pertaining to the structure were pending adjudication in the Andhra Pradesh High Court.

After the inaugural ceremony, Ms. Roja claimed that the construction of the facility had begun after obtaining the CRZ approval in 2021. All other permissions and NOCs were obtained gradually, she added. "Since Visakhapatnam is a developing city, the



Low-key affair: The structure built on the Rushikonda hill in Visakhapatnam inaugurated on Thursday.

State government has decided to develop the resorts with international standards and world-class facilities in the place of Haritha Resorts that existed earlier," Ms. Roja said. Addressing the media outside the venue, IT Mi-

nister Gudivada Amarnath said, "The government has two plans — either to use the facility as a tourism resort, or as a CM's camp office as suggested by a three-member committee. The government will take a stand soon."

BJP asks Governor to recommend dismissal of govt. in Karnataka

The Hindu Bureau
BENGALURU

Accusing the Congress government in Karnataka of failure to comply with the law and order norms as well as upholding of constitutional values, the Opposition BJP petitioned Governor Thawar Chand Gehlot to recommend dismissal of the government to the Centre.

A delegation of BJP legislators, led by Leader of Opposition R. Ashok, took the political fight against the Congress government, with respect to the alleged raising of 'Pakistan zindabad' slogans in Vidhana Soudha, beyond the legislature. They marched to the Raj



BJP legislators protesting in the Well of the House while Karnataka CM Siddaramaiah addresses the Assembly on Thursday.

Bhavani to petition the Governor after boycotting the legislature session to protest against delay in arresting those who allegedly raised slogans while celebrating the victory of Congress leader Nassir Hussain in the Rajya Sabha polls.

Accusing the Congress government of trying to hush up the issue by asking the authorities probing the case to file closure reports, the BJP delegation demanded that the issue be probed by national agencies, like the NIA or the IB.

West Bengal Police arrest Trinamool's Shahjahan

Strongman from North 24 Parganas sent to 10-day police custody over an attack on ED officials; party suspends him for six years; BJP terms the arrest 'scripted'; Sandeshkhali sees celebrations

Shiv Sahay Singh
KOLKATA

Controversial Trinamool Congress leader Sheikh Shahjahan was arrested by the West Bengal Police on Wednesday night over an attack on officials of the Enforcement Directorate (ED) last month.

The Trinamool leader, against whom multiple allegations of land grab and sexual assault have been levelled by villagers at Sandeshkhali, was sent to police custody for 10 days by a court in North 24 Parganas district on Thursday.

Hours after the arrest, the Trinamool suspended the party strongman from North 24 Parganas for six years.

Sandeshkhali has been on the boil since the first week of February after villagers held violent protests seeking action against Mr. Shahjahan and other local party leaders.

While Trinamool leaders Shibu Prasad Hazra and Uttam Sardar, who were facing sexual assault charges, were arrested by the police, Mr. Shahjahan had evaded security agencies



In the dock: Trinamool leader Sheikh Shahjahan being brought to a court in North 24 Parganas, West Bengal, on Thursday. PTI

after". (These BJP leaders have been facing allegations of corruption.)

Mr. Modi is expected to visit the State on Friday. The police refuted allegations that they did not "deliberately" arrest the Trinamool leader.

As regards the fresh complaint filed against Mr. Shahjahan by the villagers, Supratim Sarkar, the Additional Director-General (South Bengal) of the West Bengal Police, clarified that if a complaint was filed over a case that occurred two to three years ago, it would take time to probe the

same. During the day, the police also arrested Amir Ali Gazi, an associate of Mr. Shahjahan, who is wanted in a case of sexual assault.

Villagers celebrate

As soon as the news of the arrest reached Sandeshkhali, the villagers started celebrating. Sweets were distributed and women hugged each other.

They sought stringent punishment for him. Leader of the Opposition Suwendu Adhikari and BJP MLA Sankar Ghosh visited Jellakali in Sandeshkhali and rejoiced with the villagers.

The State BJP said the arrest was scripted. "He will get a five-star facility in jail and get to use phones to control the area. As long as the Central agencies do not catch hold of him, nothing will change," Mr. Adhikari said. State BJP president Sukanta Majumdar said the arrest was a "face-saving" act by the State's ruling dispensation.

The CPI(M) leadership, led by State secretary Mohammad Salim, took out a rally in Sandeshkhali and called the arrest a "conspiracy".

Manipur Police accuse radical outfit of extortion, assault

Vijaita Singh
NEW DELHI

In the first official confirmation of the havoc being caused by a radical Meitei group, the Manipur Police on Thursday said that Arambai Tenglog said that Arambai Tenglog was engaged in many "anti-social activities", such as assaulting civilians, snatching vehicles from public and government officials, and extortion from businessmen.

The group, which enjoys the support of the Meitei people in the valley areas, gained prominence after ethnic riots between the Meitei and the tribal Kuki-Zo people erupted in the State on May 3, 2023.

Two days after Arambai Tenglog members attacked a senior police officer, the State Police said in a statement that the outfit was garnering false support from the public in the guise of protecting the people but was actually committing many anti-social activities and criminal acts.



The statement by the Manipur Police comes days after Arambai Tenglog members abducted an officer. REUTERS

Kangpokpi had requisitioned reinforcements from the Assam Rifles, amid the possibility of a "widespread" breach of peace due to movement of armed miscreants and underground outfits".

The presence of the Indian Army and other Central security forces would be enhanced in the wake of the "Manipur Police being targeted", the police said. "Combining operations will continue in the days to come and no one responsible for such criminal activities will be spared. People should cooperate in police work", they added.

On February 28, the local administration in the valley and hill districts of Imphal, Bishnupur, Thoubai, Churachandpur, and

ing two vehicles from a government oil depot.

The police described the incident as "unprecedented and unprovoked".

On Thursday, a head constable, identified as A. Kanan Singh, who allegedly helped the Arambai Tenglog, and a constable, identified as A. Kanan Singh, who allegedly helped the Arambai Tenglog, were arrested. The police department said it is not expected from a member of a disciplined force like the police department.

"The Manipur Police Department highly condemns the incident of life attempt on one of the Additional Superintendent of Police (Operations), Imphal West, other police officers and men in the evening of February 27 by members of Arambai Tenglog. During the incident, the family members of Moirangthem Amit Singh were also intimidated by firing bullets, besides vandalising houses and properties," the police said.

The officer was also abducted, beaten, and later released after intervention by the department. "In connection with this incident, numerous concocted narratives are being circulated on various platforms, including social media, leading to character assassination of the said officer and the police department as a whole. In this regard, it is important for right thinking people to understand the origin of events which have led to this unprecedented and unprovoked incident," the statement said.

The police said that on the afternoon of February 27, information was received about two cars being stolen by armed miscreants from the government oil depot.

"Based on this information, the said officers, namely M. Amit Singh, Inspector P. Achaoba Meitei, and other teams had conducted search and interdicted the two vehicles

Vaishnav's election to RS sets off speculation over BJD-BJP camaraderie

Satyasundar Barik
BHUBANESWAR

Amid growing signals of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) coordinating their future activities, the regional party has announced elaborate celebrations on the occasion of the 108th birth anniversary of Biju Patnaik, father of Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik, on March 5. Incidentally, Prime Minister Narendra Modi is set to speak at a public gathering in Jajpur district on the same day.

The camaraderie between the two parties was on view in the recent Rajya Sabha elections, with the BJD deciding not to put up a third candidate, in order to ensure the election of Union Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnav, even though the party had the numbers. Odisha's ruling party announced that it was supporting Mr. Vaishnav's name in the larger interest of the State.

Mr. Modi's likely presence in Odisha on March 5 has further fuelled speculation about closeness between the two estranged alliance partners.

After formation of the BJD in 1997 following the



Partnership: Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Odisha CM Naveen Patnaik during an event in Sambalpur in January. ANI

death of Biju Patnaik, the regional party had chosen the BJP as its ally and ran a coalition government until 2009.

Fissures over riots
Anti-Christian riots in Kandhamal district in 2008 triggered fissures and the BJD parted ways with the BJP, going on to contest the concurrent 2009 Assembly and Lok Sabha elections separately.

However, over the years, the regional party has always lent support to the BJP in Parliament for passage of Bills or election of candidates to constitutional positions such as President and Vice-President. Mr. Vaishnav's election on February 20 is only

the latest instance of such cooperation. While a senior BJP leader told *The Hindu* that the two parties could even stitch a formal alliance before election dates are announced, other leaders refused to speak on the issue.

On Thursday, the BJD leadership asked party cadres to celebrate Biju Patnaik's birth anniversary in all constituencies. "All elected public representatives, party's office-bearers and those who love Biju Patnaik would remember the great statesman, freedom fighter and symbol of selfless service and hold public meetings," party chief and Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik instructed in a signed letter.

Illegal mining case: Akhilesh fails to appear before CBI

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI/LUCKNOW

Samajwadi Party chief and former Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Akhilesh Yadav on Thursday failed to appear before the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) to record his witness statement in connection with an illegal minor mineral mining case.

Mr. Yadav, through his lawyer, reportedly told the agency that he would not be able to join the probe due to prior commitments, but promised all possible cooperation.

The agency had registered the case on the Allahabad High Court's direction. The then Hamirpur District Magistrate, B. Chandrakala; mining officer Mooinuddin; and mining clerk Ram Ashrey Prajapati were named along with several lesser officers. It was alleged that during 2012-16 the public servants had allowed illegal mining of minor minerals in Hamirpur.

Speaking to presspersons in Lucknow, Mr. Yadav described the CBI as a wing of the BJP.

"Summons before [Lok Sabha] polls, they [CBI] act as provokers [wing] of the BJP. I have replied to the papers that I had received," Mr. Yadav said.

Mizoram govt. will not collect biometric data of refugees: CM

The Hindu Bureau
GUWAHATI

The Mizoram government will not collect the biometric details of refugees from Myanmar and Bangladesh in the State, Chief Minister Lalduhoma told the Assembly on Thursday.

According to Mizoram's Home Department, 32,221 people displaced by the civil war in Myanmar and 1,167 people fleeing alleged ethnic persecution in Bangladesh have taken refuge in the State since February 2021. Mizoram is also housing some 9,000 internally displaced people, mostly from strife-torn Myanmar.

The previous Mizo National Front (MNF) government had conducted training and appointed nodal officers for the purpose, but later decided not to collect biometric and bio-



Lalduhoma

graphic details of the refugees as it would "amount to discrimination against people of our blood".

"I told the Union Home Minister that the portal used for collecting biometric details is meant for deporting illegal immigrants. Our government, thus, decided not to collect the biometrics of the people from Myanmar and Bangladesh," the CM said.

Stay orders of HCs won't lapse automatically: Supreme Court

Krishnadas Rajagopal
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Thursday said it could not unnecessarily fiddle with well-thought-out interim orders of High Courts staying criminal and civil proceedings. A Constitution Bench headed by Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud said the top court had no power whatsoever to declare that a stay order passed by a High Court after due application of mind would automatically expire within six months.

The five-judge Bench was deciding a reference made to it about the correctness of a 2018 judgment in *Asian Resurfacing of Road Agency vs CBI*. A three-judge Bench, in 2018, had held that interim orders would get vacated by default after six months

unless their period of operation was extended periodically.

"Putting such constraints on the power of the High Court will also amount to making a dent on the jurisdiction of the High Courts under Article 226 of the Constitution, which is an essential feature that forms part of the basic structure of the Constitution," Justice A.S. Oka, who authored the lead opinion, held.

In his concurring opinion, Justice Pankaj Mishra, an Associate Judge on the Bench, agreed that a "reasonable stay order, if not specified to be time bound, would remain in operation till there is a decision in the main matter or until and unless an application is moved for vacation and a speaking order is passed".

The Bench further clarified that the top court can-

not "normally" fix time-bound schedules for High Courts or trial courts to dispose of pending cases. The reasons for pendency may vary from court to court.

"The situation at the grassroots level is better known to the judges of the courts concerned. Orders fixing the outer limit for the disposal of cases should be passed only in exceptional circumstances to meet extraordinary situations," it held.

The judgment made it plain that the Supreme Court had no absolute power of hegemony over the High Courts. The Bench highlighted that the top court's seemingly invincible power under Article 142 of the Constitution to do "complete justice" did not extend to excessive interference in orders passed by High Courts after due consideration.

TADA court acquits Tunda in 1993 serial train explosions case

The Hindu Bureau
JAIPUR

Abdul Karim Tunda, the main accused in the 1993 serial train blasts case, was acquitted by a special Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act (TADA) court in Ajmer on Thursday.

He is currently serving a life term in another case.

Two persons were killed and several injured in the blasts on five trains in Lucknow, Kanpur, Hyderabad, Surat, and Mumbai on the first anniversary of the Babri Masjid demolition.

The court sentenced two other accused, Irfan, alias Pappu, 70, and Hamiduddin, 44, to life imprisonment for the offence of planting bombs.

Tunda, 81, is said to be a close aide of wanted terro-



Abdul Karim Tunda

rist Dawood Ibrahim. The CBI, which was in charge of the probe, could not prove the case against Tunda beyond reasonable doubt.

The CBI had clubbed all the cases against the accused and sent them for trial to the TADA court in 1994.

Tunda is now serving a life term after his conviction in a 1996 bomb blast case by a court in Haryana.

End pact with Kuki-Zo groups, Manipur Assembly tells Centre

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

As the Manipur Assembly on Thursday passed a resolution to urge the Union government to abrogate the suspension of operations (SoO) pact with Kuki-Zo insurgent groups, in effect since 2008, suspense prevailed over the extension of the agreement.

The 10 Kuki-Zo-Hmar legislators were not present in the Assembly when the resolution was passed.

The pact was signed in 2008 by the United Peoples' Front (UPF) and the Kuki National Organisation (KNO), an umbrella of 24 insurgent groups, the Union Home Ministry, and the Manipur government. The annual extension of the pact lapses on Thursday.



N. Biren Singh

A source said that the Manipur government did not send its representative

to a meeting called to formalise the extension of the pact for the next year. The Ministry officials did not respond to queries from *The Hindu* regarding the status of the agreement.

Manipur Chief Minister N. Biren Singh said the resolution was aimed at ensuring peace in the region.

"The 12th Manipur Legislative Assembly on the second day of its fifth session, unanimously resolved to urge the Cen-

tral Government to completely abrogate the SoO pact with all the Kuki-Zo militant groups. This decision comes in the interest of ensuring peace and security in the region," he wrote in a post on X on Thursday.

Former Chief Minister O. Ibobi Singh and leader of the Congress party the SoO pact had been signed between the Assam Rifles and some Kuki militant groups in 2005.

The agreement was signed in the wake of the Kuki-Naga clashes of the 1990s when hundreds were killed.

First technical team from India arrives in Maldives

External Affairs Ministry confirms that the group will replace military troops operating advanced light helicopters and other aircraft for the country, marking a climbdown on New Delhi's stance

Suhasini Haider
NEW DELHI

The government confirmed on Thursday that a team of Indian technical personnel have landed in Maldives to replace military troops that have been operating aircraft there. The development indicates a compromise between the Narendra Modi government and the recently elected government led by President Mohamed Muizzu on the contentious issue of Indian troops stationed in the archipelago that had become the target of the "India Out" campaign run by the ruling party.

"The first team of technical personnel to operate the advanced light helicopter at Gan has reached Maldives. It will replace the existing personnel that were until now operating this platform. So, that is where we are," said Ministry of External Affairs Spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal in response to questions about the move, that was first announced by the Maldivian government on Wednesday. Mr. Jaiswal did not indicate the number of troops being replaced in the first batch of a total 88 Indian military personnel understood to be stationed in the Maldives.

The confirmation also marks a major climbdown by New Delhi that had ear-



Rough weather: The advanced light helicopter that India provided to the Maldives for operations. FILE PHOTO

lier refused to withdraw the troops, including in 2018 when former President Abdulla Yameen had demanded the removal of Indian military personnel on several occasions, even refusing to extend their visas. After Mr. Yameen was defeated in elections by President Ibrahim Solih, the issue had subsided, but was revived as a campaign plank by Mr. Muizzu, who won elections in November 2023 and made the removal of Indian military personnel a "priority".

Ahead of 'deadline'
The announcement on the first batch of replacements comes ahead of the March 10 "deadline" that the Maldives government had reportedly given India after PM Modi met with President Muizzu in early December, and the leaders

sequently, the Ministry had said that the troops would be replaced by "competent technical personnel", but refused to comment on whether they would be civilian or military.

The differences over the issue of stationed troops had led to other acrimonious exchanges between the two countries in January, and Maldives had skipped a key security conference in Mauritius, for the Colombo Security Dialogue, and downgraded its presence at the Indian Ocean Conference in Perth. With the first step towards resolving the contentious issue seemingly taken, India and Maldives indicated that they were restoring progress in some of their other areas of strategic cooperation.

On Sunday, India, Sri Lanka and the Maldives completed the latest round of biennial trilateral maritime exercises called "Dosti-16" held between their coast guard services. Speaking at the inauguration of the exercises, where Bangladesh participated as an observer, Maldivian Defence Minister Mohamed Ghassan Maumoon said that the Muizzu government "places the highest priority on ensuring that close relations, peace and stability is maintained between Maldives and neighbouring nations".

Attacks on BSF personnel by criminals may be raised during Bangladesh talks

Vijaita Singh
NEW DELHI

India is expected to raise the issue of violent attacks against Border Security Force (BSF) personnel perpetrated by criminals along the eastern border in a meeting with Border Guards Bangladesh (BGB) scheduled in Dhaka next week.

At the next round of bi-annual Director-General (DG) talks between the BSF and BGB, the Indian delegation is also likely to raise the incidents of "breach of fence" and entry of Bangladesh nationals through illegal means. Smuggling of arms, narcotics and gold is likely to be on the agenda. The Indian delegation will be led by BSF DG Nitin Agarwal.

According to data available with *The Hindu*, since 2018, as many as 204 BSF personnel deployed along the Bangladesh border have been injured by miscreants.

"The criminals, who also include their Indian accomplices, use firearms, country-made bombs, sharp-edged weapons and also use stones and banniboo logs to attack the personnel. In 2023 alone, 40 BSF personnel were injured. Since the last round of talks with BGB officials in May 2023, 60 such cases of attacks against BSF and civilians have been reported," a senior government official said.



On vigil: Border Security Force personnel on patrol near the India-Bangladesh border in Agartala, Tripura. FILE PHOTO

India adopted a non-lethal weapon policy in 2011 after Felani Khatun, a 15-year-old girl from Bangladesh, was shot dead by the BSF while she was entering India along the Cooch Behar border in West Bengal. Photographs of the teenager's body that remained hanging on the barbed wire fence for several hours before being brought down created a huge public outcry in Bangladesh.

BSF officials say that they often came under violent attack by cattle smugglers active along the border and the non-lethal weapon policy was an impediment to their operational capabilities. The BSF personnel use regular weapons as and when the situation demands but the proportion of non-lethal weapons is much higher among total firing incidents along the border.

Data suggest that 2023 saw the least number of firing instances by BSF com-

pared to the last six years. In 2023, while 287 rounds of ammunition were fired from regular weapons, those by non-lethal weapons which include stun grenades, chili grenade, pump action guns and blank fires stood at 2,924 rounds.

The guidelines
According to the Joint Indo-Bangladesh Guidelines for Border Authorities, 1975, it is the duty of the border guarding forces on both sides to prevent the entry of armed civilians up to 150 yards on either side. The BGB delegation will be apprised that since the last round of talks with BGB officials in May 2023, as many as 262 incidents of breach of fence have been reported. Since 2017, a total of 3,090 such incidents have been reported.

Since 2018, as many as 17,637 Bangladeshis nationals were intercepted by the BSF along the eastern border while 3,342 individuals were caught in 2023.

'20 Indians sought help to return from battlefield'

Kalol Bhattacharjee
NEW DELHI

India on Thursday for the first time categorically stated that "around 20" Indians had reached out to its embassy in Moscow seeking help in returning home. The External Affairs Ministry's official spokesperson, Randhir Jaiswal, said India was in contact with Russia to bring back the Indian nationals from the zone where Russian and Ukrainian forces are clashing.

"We have an understanding that 20-odd people are stuck. We are trying our level best for their early discharge. We have issued two statements, which you saw. We have also told people not to venture in the war zone or get caught into situations which are difficult," Mr. Jaiswal said.

The Ministry had earlier stated that all such cases concerning Indian workers stuck in the war zone near the Ukraine border had been taken up with the Russian authorities and that, as a result, several had been released. But on Thursday, Mr. Jaiswal gave the numbers of Indians who are still caught in the difficult situation. "We are in regular touch with Russian authorities both here in New Delhi and also in Moscow," he said.

The Hindu had carried a report that at least three Indians had been forced to fight as "army security helpers" for the Russian side.

Cabinet nod for ₹24,420-cr. subsidy for P&K fertilizers

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Union Cabinet on Thursday approved the nutrient-based subsidy (NBS) rates for the upcoming kharif season for Phosphatic and Potassic (P&K) fertilizers and the inclusion of three more fertilizer grades under the NBS scheme.

The Centre said tentative budgetary requirements for the scheme would be about ₹24,420 crore.

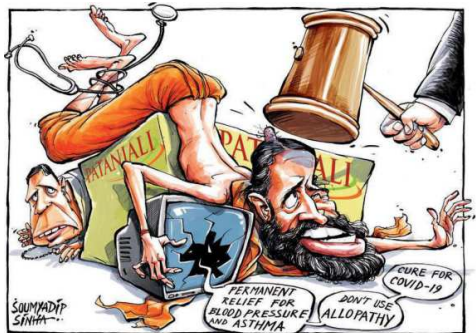
The subsidy on nitrogen has been fixed at ₹47.02 per kilogram, phosphatic (P) at ₹28.72 per kg (₹20.82 per kg in 2023 rabi season), potassic (K) at ₹2.38 per kg, and sulphur (S) at ₹1.89 per kg. The subsidy on nitrogen, potassic, and sulphur was the same in the 2023 rabi season too.

The Supreme said in a release that the decision would ensure the availability of fertilizers to farmers at subsidised, affordable and reasonable prices and rationalisation of subsidy on P&K fertilizers in view of recent trends in the international prices of fertilizers and inputs.

"Inclusion of three new grades in NBS will support in promoting balanced soil health and offer alternatives to the farmers to choose fertilizers fortified with micro-nutrients as per the soil requirement," the release added.

Mr. Thakur said with this subsidy, DAP which is sold currently at ₹1,350 per bag (50 kg), will continue to be available at the same rate in the upcoming kharif season. He said the rate of Murriate of Potash (MoP) will also remain unchanged at ₹1,670 per bag and the rate of NPK will be ₹1,470 per bag.

On the draw



LS polls: DMK allots two seats each to CPI, CPI(M); Cong. seeks higher share

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI

The DMK on Thursday finalised seat-sharing talks with the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) for the upcoming Lok Sabha election, and allotted two seats each to both the parties.

However, the constituencies are to be decided later. The decision was arrived at during a meeting between the Left parties at

the DMK's head office. An agreement was signed between DMK president and Chief Minister M.K. Stalin and State secretaries of the CPI(M) and the CPI - K. Bakrakrishna and R. Mutharasana - to allot the seats.

In the 2019 general election too, both the Left parties had contested from two seats as part of the DMK-led alliance.

Meanwhile, Tamil Nadu Congress Committee (TNCC) president K. Selvaraj said that he

hoped that the DMK would allot more seats this time to the national party.

'Strong ties'
He was responding to seat-sharing queries by media persons at Sathyamurthi Bhavan here. He said that the ties between the DMK and the Congress were strong, and Mr. Stalin and Congress leader Rahul Gandhi were like brothers. "We are holding talks and we will decide (on seat-sharing)," he said.

Asked whether he had hoped that the DMK would give at least nine, plus one, seats like in 2019, Mr. Selvaraj said: "I have hope that they [the DMK] will give more than that." He said whether talks were on discreetly, he said that the talks were transparent. Pointing out that seat-sharing between the parties was finalised only in March for the 2019 Lok Sabha election, he said there were days left to decide on the same for this election.

Top court dismisses Vedanta plea to reopen copper plant in Thoothukudi

Krishnadas Rajagopal
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Thursday dismissed an appeal by Vedanta Sterlite to reopen its Thoothukudi copper plant closed six years ago on grounds of pollution, endorsing the public's right to health over sheer industry gains. A three-judge Bench headed by Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud upheld a Madras High Court decision of August 2020.

Permanent closure
The High Court had confirmed the closure of the Thoothukudi plant. Anything else would have been sheer obnoxiousness of their plain duty to the public, the court noted. "We are conscious of the fact that the unit has contributed to the productive assets of the nation and providing employment and revenue in the area," the Chief Justice said. But equally relevant,



A three-judge Bench headed by C.J. D.Y. Chandrachud upheld a Madras High Court decision of August 2020. FILE PHOTO

Chief Justice Chandrachud noted, were the principles of sustainable development, public trust, and finally, that a polluter should pay.

Not 'exculpated'
The top court noted that the 2013 judgment had clarified that TNPCB was well within its powers to order the closure of the plant if need be. The top court had never "exculpated" Vedanta

from its liabilities of its past environmental violations.

Upholding the High Court decision of August 2020, the Supreme Court said it was both legally and factually comprehensive. The High Court had decided the case after hearing it for 42 days.

Chief Justice Chandrachud said the High Court was right to determine the question of renewal of permission for operation of the copper plant, and not limit its examination to just the circumstances of the closure of the plant in 2018.

The court refused to exempt the advertisement made by the High Court against TNPCB for allowing the plant to violate environmental norms right under its nose for so many years.

"The High Court was justified in making observations with regard to the lack of alacrity on the part of TNPCB in its discharge of its duties," Chief Justice Chandrachud observed.

Jacob Koshy
NEW DELHI

The Union Cabinet approved a ₹75,021-crore package for the 'PM Surya Ghar: Muft Bijli Yojana' (PM Free Electricity scheme) to promote rooftop solar (RTS) installations in India.

The scheme envisages providing 300 units of "free electricity" every month to one crore households. However, it was not immediately clear how the scheme officially unveiled on Thursday would result in free electricity to one crore households.

The Centre will fund, an accompanying press statement from the Union Power Ministry says, 60% of the cost for installing 2 kW (kilowatt) systems and 40% of the cost for systems of 2-3 kW capacity.

Systems of higher wattage will not be eligible for central subsidy. "As current benchmark prices," this will mean ₹30,000 subsidy for 1 kW

systems, ₹60,000 for 2 kW systems and ₹78,000 for 3 kW systems or higher," a press statement from the Ministry noted.

Applying for subsidy
As a next step, households will apply for subsidy through a Central portal and be able to select a suitable vendor for installing a rooftop solar system. The national portal will assist the households in their decision-making process by providing relevant information such as appropriate system sizes, benefits calculator, vendor rating, etc.

For the remaining costs, households will be able to "access collateral-free low-interest loan products of around 7% at present for installation of residential RTS systems up to 3 kW," the release noted. This implies that minus the Central subsidy, the rest of the installation expenses have to be borne by the aspirant consumer. Power Minister R.K.

Singh, had explained the financing of the scheme differently in an interaction with reporters, as reported by *The Hindu*, on February 3. He had said that public sector units, affiliated to the Ministry, would be reaching out to "eligible" households and install the rooftop solar systems for free.

Repaying loans
The PSU, or its affiliated agency, would be responsible for taking out a loan to finance the component not funded by the Central subsidy. This loan would be repaid to the bank by consumers selling surplus power produced back to the grid. In his interaction, he said that "60% of the cost of installation will be subsidised by the Centre. For the rest, [a Central] public sector unit will take a loan [from a bank] and will repay from the cost of electricity (used by the household) over and above the 300 units."

IN BRIEF



₹30-lakh penalty on Air India over passenger's death: DGCA

The Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA), has imposed a penalty of ₹30 lakh on Air India for the death of an 80-year-old passenger from a cardiac arrest after a delay in providing him a wheelchair at the Mumbai airport, earlier this month.

Railways removes loco pilot from service for 'negligence'

The Northern Railway has removed from service the loco pilot of a freight train which ran about 70 km on its own from Jammu's Kathua to Punjab's Unchi Bassi, saying his "negligence" could have resulted in a "major incident" causing loss of lives.

Don't segregate prisoners on basis of caste, religion: govt.

S. Vijay Kumar CHENNAI

The Union government has taken a serious view of some States discriminating against prisoners on the basis of their caste and religion and assigning them work accordingly. Saying that it was unconstitutional, the Union Home Ministry wrote to the Chief Secretaries of all States and Union Territories urging them to ensure that their Jail Manuals did not contain any discriminatory provisions.

Going by the provisions of the Model Prison Manual, 2016, periodic health check-up of prisoners should be conducted. Besides, health check-up or screening of prisoners for infectious diseases, including sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), and Hepatitis should be done.

Healthcare provisions Stating that the medical care of prisoners was one of the significant concerns of prison management, the Ministry said it had been sending advisories from time to time to ensure that due importance was given to the physical and mental well-being of inmates.

India's leopard population rises to 13,874; M.P. on top

Forest surveyors cover nearly 65 lakh km looking for carnivore signs across 20 States; man-animal conflict is likely the reason for decline in the big cat population by 22% in Uttarakhand, says report

Jacob Koshy NEW DELHI

India's leopard numbers rose by 8% from 12,852 in 2018 to 13,874 in 2022, according to a report made public by the Environment Ministry on Thursday.

While the highest number of leopards were reported in Madhya Pradesh (3,907), only three other States reported over 1,000 animals each - Maharashtra (1,985), Karnataka (1,879) and Tamil Nadu (1,070). While Uttarakhand reported a 22% decline in the big cat numbers - reportedly due to poaching and man-animal conflict, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and West Bengal saw a collective 150% rise to 349 animals.

The survey covered 20 States of India, and focused on about 70% of the animals' expected habitat, which are India's tiger reserves and protected forest areas. Unlike tigers, which are largely confined to forest reserves, leopards are far more adaptable and tend to be found in significant numbers in villages and sometimes, even in cities.



On the prowl: Leopards are very adaptable and tend to be found in significant numbers in villages and sometimes, even in cities. ANI

report. The analysis - coordinated by the Wildlife Institute of India - only looked at forest areas where a similar survey was done in 2018. The Shivalk hills and the Gangetic plains recorded 3.4% yearly decline, while Central India and the Eastern Ghats, the Western Ghats and the hills of the north-east, and the Brahmaputra flood plains recorded growth of 1.5%, 1%, and 1.3% per annum respectively.

Habitat conservation "About a third of the leopards are within protected areas. When we conserve tiger reserves, we also conserve leopard habitat," said Qamar Qureshi of the Wildlife Institute of India and one of the authors of the

tively. "The population in the last four years is stable, which also indicates the growth is minimal and in comparison to tigers, leopard population is likely getting impacted by people in multiple use areas," the report added.

Leopard numbers have declined in Rannagar forest division (Uttarakhand), where tiger numbers have shown a very steep growth in the past four years. About 65% of the leopard population is present outside protected areas in the Shivalk landscape. In Uttar Pradesh, both leopard and tiger numbers have increased, the report noted.

Forest surveyors travel 6,41,449 km for carnivore signs and prey abundance estimation. Camera traps were deployed at 32,803 locations, resulting in 47,80,881 photographs.

The sharp rise in numbers reported out of the northeastern States were the result of a "sampling artefact", said Dr. Qureshi, meaning that previous years saw very little of a systematic survey and fewer cameras installed.



Fatal fall: The pick-up van that overturned in an accident at the Shahpura area of Dindori district on Thursday. AFP

14 killed as pick-up van falls into valley in Madhya Pradesh

The Hindu Bureau BHOPAL

Fourteen people were killed and more than 20 injured when an overloaded pick-up van overturned and fell into a valley in Dindori district of Madhya Pradesh on Thursday. Eight women and a 16-year-old boy were among the deceased.

The incident took place around 2 a.m. when the passengers were returning from a function in Mandla district. The driver lost control of the vehicle and it fell into the valley.

Minister Sampatiya Ulikey said the victims hailed from the tribal community. "The Chief Minister has given directions for a high-level inquiry into the acci-

dent," she told presspersons.

Dindori Superintendent of Police Akhail Patel said the driver and owner of the vehicle had been arrested. A case has been registered under Section 304 (II) of the IPC, he said, adding that the vehicle's fitness certificate and insurance had expired in 2022.

President Droupadi Murmu and Prime Minister Narendra Modi expressed grief over the incident. The Prime Minister's Office announced an assistance of ₹2 lakh to the kin of each of the deceased and ₹50,000 for the injured.

Chief Minister Mohan Yadav also announced an assistance of ₹4 lakh to the kin of each of the deceased.

Armed forces likely to get non-functional upgrade benefit

Dinakar Peri NEW DELHI

In a move to address one of the core anomalies of the Services with their civil counterparts in the government, the Centre has decided to grant non-functional upgrade (NFU) benefit over which a legal battle has been going on for some time.

"The government has taken a decision to inform the court in the next hearing that the armed forces will also be given NFU," an official source said.

NFU entitles all officers of a batch who are not promoted to draw the salary and grade pay that the seniormost officer of their batch would get after a certain period. The Sixth Pay Commission had granted NFU to most officers of Organised Group 'A' services but not the military. However, the Seventh Pay Commission (SPC) gave a

Lancet study shows obesity rates going up across world

Ramya Kannan CHENNAI

Obesity rates among children and adolescents worldwide increased four times from 1990 to 2022, while obesity rates among adults have more than doubled, a new study published in The Lancet has revealed.

The total number of children, adolescents and adults worldwide living with obesity has surpassed one billion. In total, 159 million children and adolescents, and 879 million adults were obese in 2022.

Form of malnutrition Along with the declining prevalence of people who are underweight since 1990, obesity has become the most common form of malnutrition in most countries, said the paper that analysed global data estimates.

The study was conducted by the NCD Risk Factor Collaboration (NCD-RisC),



Obesity has become the most common form of malnutrition in most countries. GETTY IMAGES

the study in India. V. Mohan, Anjana Ranjit and Guha Pradeepa, who were also instrumental in the countrywide INdiab study, are co-authors.

Coexisting conditions Dr. Mohan said that in India, both obesity and underweight continue to co-exist. "We have also seen, as part of the INdiab study that both abdominal obesity and generalised obesity are increasing in the population, with of course variations in rural areas."

As per The Lancet paper, in India, the obesity rate increased from 0.1% in 1990 to 3.1% in 2022 for girls, and 0.1% to 3.9%, for boys.

In the prevalence of obesity category for girls and boys, India ranked 174th highest in the world in 2022. Among adults, the change was starker: in women, the obesity rate increased from 1.2% in 1990 to 9.8% in 2022 and in men from 0.5% to 5.4%.

CROSSWORD 14111 (set by Bruno)

Crossword puzzle grid with numbers 1-23.

- Across 1 One found in peat, a source of sustainable energy? (6) 4 Engineer at Academy has place that is turned over and battered (4-2) 9 "beep"! A canine's killed husband! (4) 10 Source of energy from good ole' earth perhaps - man's surrounded by it. (10)

SUDOKU 14111

Sudoku puzzle grid with numbers 1-9.

- 11 Rodent's crazy appearance - going backwards (6) 12 Start of April through end of August, setter's on flight (8) 13 Odd folkly number captivated white boxer (5) 15 Bar lacking entrance to path (4) 16 Peeled kernel for eagle (4) 17 Cream pie starting to decompose after setting - enjoy the pleasure right now (5,4) 21 Dispatching delivery with turn - covered hip and glanced from the top (8) 22 Condition to withdraw from horror and hostility (6) 24 Owns vehicle? (10) 25 Slender object broke off at the end (4) 26 Animal grabbing a rodent's head and another body part (6) 27 Law diploma? 100 for \$1000! (6) Down 1 Lifebuoy's mostly made with green energy (7) 2 Remote cycling path (5) 3 Asian-American devotee goes to India to obtain good husband (7) 5 Overturned evidence used to arrest, often hanging, native (6) 6 Black art - crowd regularly went crazy for a way to predict the future? (5,4) 7 Female bird holding up plant for female bird (7) 8 increase in temperature of volatile star with a halogen-iodine- in the middle (5,4,4) 14 One source of energy to get crushed powder (4,5) 16 Extracted from zibeth - an old source of energy (7) 18 Herald crested around? (7) 19 Corkscrew went spiraling in end of bottle (7) 20 Refuse to take responsibility for one's depressing surrounding (6) 23 Heavenly body, but no love or rhythm (5)

FAITH Tattvas underlying avatars

The Vedic observation "ajAyano bahudhA vijAyate" shows us that Lord Narayana takes many avatars. In the Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna says to Arjuna: bahunI mae vyutIAni jAmnAni, meaning that He has taken many births. Thus, apart from the well known 10 avatars, the Lord took many more avatars. In each, His glory shone more and more.

He became like a well polished ruby, said M.A. Venkatrishnan in a discourse. So His greatness becomes more evident because of His avatars.

When we are born, we tend to sink lower and lower, because of our thoughts and deeds. The merit of shining through successive births, belongs solely to Him.

In the Gita, Krishna says: jAmna karma cha mE dvyaAm Eva yo vetI tattvata, tyaktvA dEham punar jAmna naiti mAmEva so'juna.

In this verse, Krishna says that His avatars and His deeds in those avatars are unique and flawless. He who understands the tattva of His avatars will never be reborn. In other words, he who understands avata tattva attains moksha. Thus, it is clear that His avatars have deep philosophical meanings.

Thirumangai Azhwar sang in praise of 86 Divya Desams. Forty-seven of these verses sung only by him. But he also praised the Lord's vibhava avatars.

Commentator Peria Vachan Pillai observed that Thirumangai Azhwar spoke of vibhava avatars to show the Lord's Supremacy, and spoke of His archa forms to show His simplicity.

Despite policy backing and funding, care for rare diseases not optimal

World Rare Diseases Day gives us a chance to reflect; despite the pace of development in the recent past, it is important to evaluate the needs of the community. It is also important to evaluate policy against implementation, to see if the goals are being achieved and target groups are benefiting

Ramya Kannan

In the field of rare diseases, in India, what did not happen for 20 years, was dramatically hustled through over the last couple of years. Consider this: the first National Policy on Rare Diseases was issued in March 2021, providing a comprehensive national approach to prevention and management of rare diseases. It was nearly a dream come true for patients living with rare diseases and their families – the policy also factors in ways to lower the exorbitant cost of treatment, and boost indigenous research. The policy also envisages the creation of a national hospital based registry of rare diseases, an intervention as crucial as funding for treatment itself, as it will provide rich epidemiological data to define the extent of the problem in India and decide optimal funding for research in rare diseases too. The Rare Diseases Policy also focuses on creation of Nidan Kendras for early screening and prevention, as well as plans to strengthen extant secondary and tertiary health facilities at Centres of Excellence.

And yet, this World Rare Diseases Day (February 29) does give us occasion for pause; despite the stupendous pace of development in the recent past, it is important to periodically evaluate the needs in the community, and tailor requirements to meet those demands. It is also important to evaluate policy against implementation, to see if the goals are being achieved and the target groups benefiting from the intended gains.

What is a rare disease?

But first, a bit of the eyes of the rare diseases scenario here: In India, it is estimated that there are between 7,000-8,000 rare diseases, but less than 5% have therapies available to treat them. But, taken as a whole, rare diseases affect nearly 1/5th of India's population, educated extrapolations indicate. A rare disease is one that is loosely defined as occurring infrequently in the population, and as such, what constitutes a rare disease varies from nation to nation. The World Health Organisation defines rare disease as an often debilitating lifelong disease or disorder with a prevalence of 1 or less, per 1,000 population.

However, different countries have their own definitions to suit their specific requirements and in the context of their own population, health care system and resources. For instance, in the U.S., rare diseases are defined as a disease or condition that affects fewer than 200,000 people in the country (6.4 in 10,000 people). The European Union has its own definition – affecting no more than 5 in 10,000 people. India currently does not have a standard definition – but the Organisation of Rare Diseases – India, has suggested that a disease is to be defined as rare if it affects 1 in 5,000 people or less. The National Policy statement itself lays out: The landscape of rare diseases is constantly changing, as there are new rare diseases and conditions being identified and reported regularly in medical literature. Apart from a few rare diseases, where significant progress has been made, the field is still at a nascent stage.

Notwithstanding the rather significant



An event held to create public awareness on rare diseases, in Mysuru on February 25, 2024. SRIRAM MA

developments, and a number of patients benefiting, the progress on the field still is at an infantile stage. The Union Government in May 2022 had allocated ₹50 lakh per patient for the treatment of all rare diseases across the country. How well was that utilised? We did not know until recently when Sashi Tharoor, Member of Parliament raised a question in the Lok Sabha, during the budget session, about the number of Rare Diseases patients enrolled with the Centres of Excellence across the country, and the details of the allocation and utilisation of funds by the different Centres of Excellence across the country during the last three years and till date, year-wise. The answer was quite disappointing. As per the data shared in response to the question, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare disbursed to all the Centres of Excellence a sum of approximately ₹109 crore in the last three years. However, the total funds utilised so far is only approximately ₹53 crore. A whopping 51.3% of the total funds allocated are still sitting pretty, while patients are losing lives with no access to treatment. There are now 12 Centres of Excellence, and of the 11 centres that data is available for, only three CoEs have utilised over 90% of the funds allotted to them, and one Centre in the honourable mention, late 80 percentile mark.

Underutilisation of funds

Clearly the CoEs are not compelled by the sense of urgency that patients desperately seeking avenues for funding life-saving treatment are. Manjit Singh, founder and president of the Lysosomal Storage Disorder Support Society says: "The underutilisation of allocated funds and the plight of patients who have exhausted their treatment allocations underscores the critical need for action. By advocating for these key initiatives, we aim to catalyse change, driving the CoEs to prioritise rare disease treatment and securing long-term funding support from the government for those in need."

Speaking on behalf of patients, he adds: "We are driven by a dual mandate -



Gynaecologists and paediatricians are more aware about rare diseases, and people have started looking at birth defects, more clearly and having genetic screening performed

to build urgency among Centers of Excellence (CoEs) for the immediate treatment of all eligible patients and to demand sustainable funding for Group 3 conditions. We believe that every rare disease patient deserves timely access to life-saving treatments, and we are committed to ensuring that this becomes a reality. Our efforts are not just about improving access to care; they are about saving lives and empowering individuals to lead fulfilling, meaningful lives despite the challenges posed by rare diseases. Also, the state governments need to pitch in here through budgetary allocations specifically for the treatment of eligible rare disease patients."

The key asks of rare diseases patient advocacy groups, among the strongest lobbies in the health care sector now, are to build urgency on the part of the CoEs to start treatment of all eligible patients and build a continuum of care with sustainable funding support for conditions that necessitate long term care and treatment, classified by the National Policy as Group 3 diseases.

There are, reportedly, 10 patients, children, from across the country who have already exhausted their ₹50 lakh allotment, and are currently running from pillar to post seeking continuation of their treatment. These patients need sustainable funding and continued treatment support to survive and lead normal lives.

Screening for disease

S. Suresh, managing director of MedicScan, is a senior radiologist who pioneered the argument for genetic testing for rare

diseases, with a rare, nearly evangelical zeal. Two decades ago, he had made the point that it was important to set up pre-natal scan centres in the public health set-up, to take the possibility of early detection, already available in the private sector, to the larger public. He acknowledges with relief that finally, an epidemiological transition might have happened.

The change came with awareness generation and really hard work by advocacy groups. Organisations and parents put effort and energy into this, taking the battles to the courts and the streets. Gynaecologists and paediatricians are more aware about rare diseases, and people have started looking at birth defects, doing gene testing etc, besides vastly improved neonatal intensive care unit services in hospitals across the country leading to earlier and more accurate detection. What's left, is to take care of the patient, he adds.

Not just that, Dr. Suresh has also been advocating for a national registry that people can report rare diseases to. "The list of rare diseases needs to be really clarified. But that is a tall order, we possibly will never be able to put all rare diseases inside. The most common ones, which are reported periodically, should be there in the list. But the registry would be a starting point at least."

It will have a registered cohort of rare diseases detected across the country and will be able to provide an idea of the geographic distribution of rare diseases. In addition to this, he is pushing the envelope on setting up a single centralised laboratory for detection of rare diseases for the entire country that will be able to perform enzyme assays and molecular gene testing.

While a hospital-based National Registry for Rare Diseases has been initiated by the Indian Council for Medical Research by involving centres that are involved in diagnosis and management of rare diseases, it needs to be pushed through and actualised, he adds. Through example, is also trying to promote another model for delivery of care for children suffering from rare diseases.

At the Voluntary Health Services hospital, in Chennai, which he heads, plans are afoot to establish a comprehensive centre with multiple experts to take care of the child for a few days at a stretch, so that the primary care giver can have some downtime.

"Once there is a child with a rare disease, one of the parents is completely tied to the child. In most cases, it is the mother. It is only fair that we give them some respite for a day or two, so that someone else, can take over the care of the child for those days. We are trying to establish such a centre at VHS, we already have a rehabilitation centre, paediatric palliative care unit, and along with that, we want to build capacity for a multi-specialty clinic that can provide this respite to the mothers. Besides, it will also help forming a support group among parents, and be one centre where we can examine the patients and chart up plans tailored to each child's (and caregivers') requirements," he says.

(ramya.kannan@thehindu.co.in)



ASHAs conduct a rally to raise awareness among people on the importance of polio drops, in Vijayawada on February 29, 2024. K.V.S. GIRI

Experts suggest ASHA-like cadre for mental healthcare

Serena Loesch M.

Could the south of India see the repurposing of the Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA) into a community health worker who is paid, not incentivised, and can provide support to persons discharged from a psychiatric facility? Or can a similar cadre be created to take up community mental healthcare? Vikram Patel, Paul Farmer Professor and Chair, Department of Global Health and Social Medicine, Harvard Medical School and R. Thara, vice chairperson, Schizophrenia Research Foundation (SCARF), explored the possibility of having a cadre similar to ASHAs to take community mental healthcare forward. Noting that he had visited many District Mental Health Programme (DMHP) sites around the country, Dr. Patel said that DMHP was purely a medication programme. "There is nothing community – based, and no rehabilitation," he said. There is no psychosocial intervention, added Dr. Thara.

Elaborating on community mental health, Dr. Thara said it meant involving the local community, all community stakeholders – teachers, doctors, panchayat leaders or talashidars. "We have trained a number of community-level workers, mostly women. They have empathy, they have acceptance in the community, and if you train them, they play an excellent role in detection, in facilitating care and follow-up, and delivering some psychosocial intervention. We have ASHAs, but you cannot overburden them, but we can have a similar cadre of health workers," she said.

It is important to identify an existing cadre of women – whatever name they go by in every State – and get them to do mental health work

SCARF started 'Manam Inidru', a programme in which women from self help groups were trained in the basic principles of mental health and counselling. If they came across persons with mild symptoms, they took them to a counsellor or to the DMHP, she said.

Dr. Patel observed: "The (Indian) government is among the first governments in the world to embrace the community health worker movement, and on a massive scale. It is an environment ready for a change. We could say that maternal, new born and child health (MNCH) issues, which dominated the ASHA movement, are no longer major concerns. Lets say Tamil Nadu does not need ASHAs for maternal and child health, Kerala does not need it, and Karnataka probably does not either. So, could the south of India see the repurposing of the ASHA into a community health worker who is paid, not incentivised....Could these States pioneer this kind of support such that every person who is discharged from a psychiatric facility – whether in the public or private sector – based on where they live, is allocated a local community health worker to support them?"

Dr. Thara said it was important to identify an existing cadre of women – whatever name they go by in every State – and get them to do mental health work. Agreeing that asking ASHAs to do more without taking something off their plate would not work, Dr. Patel said: "For now, let's say someone like ASHA. The southern States are in the best place as the disease burden profile has almost moved to non communicable diseases. Therefore, the ASHA or frontline workers' best place now is to manage chronic conditions."

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THE SCIENCE QUIZ

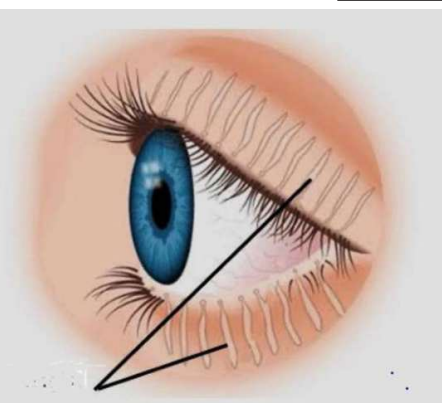
How well acquainted are you with your face?

Anjali Srivastava

- human body that is attached at only one end?
- QUESTION 1**
_____ is the strongest muscle in the human body relative to its size and is located in the jaw. What is the name of this powerful jaw muscle?
- QUESTION 2**
While our nose and ears continue to grow throughout our lives, there's a part of our face that maintains the same size from birth. Which facial feature defies the growth pattern and remains constant in size?
- QUESTION 3**
What is the only muscle in the

- human body that is attached at only one end?
- QUESTION 4**
The human face has various muscles responsible for facial expressions. What is the term for the muscle that surrounds the eyes and is often referred to as the "crow's feet muscle" due to its activation during smiling?
- QUESTION 5**
Humans are capable of producing a wide range of facial expressions, and one muscle is essential for creating smiles. Which muscle, often associated with happiness, is responsible for elevating the corners of the mouth?

Visual question: Identify these tiny, sebaceous glands found along the edge of the eyelids, they secrete oil to coat the eyes, preventing it from drying out. Can you name these essential glands, vital for eye lubrication and health?



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

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An extra berth

The Rajya Sabha elections have allowed dissidents to find their voice

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won 30 of the 56 Rajya Sabha seats which are set to fall vacant in April, from 15 States, with the results announced on February 27. The party won two more seats than what its numbers in the State Assemblies would have allowed, by brazenly engineering cross voting by legislators from the Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh and the Congress in Himachal Pradesh. One BJP MLA in Karnataka crossed over to the Congress side. With six MLAs lost to the BJP, who have since been disqualified by the Speaker of the Assembly, the Congress government in Himachal Pradesh is tottering on the edge. Abhishek Manu Singhvi of the Congress and Harsh Mahajan of the BJP got 34 votes each and Mr. Mahajan was declared winner through lots. The Rajya Sabha polls brought the disenchantment within the Congress with Chief Minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu out to the fore. Vikramaditya Singh, a rebel Minister, announced his resignation, only to retract his statement. The Congress is making efforts to save its government, but the crisis is far from over. In Uttar Pradesh, seven Samajwadi Party legislators voted for the BJP, leading to the party winning an additional seat. It is not the first time that the BJP has fished in troubled waters to gain an extra berth in the Rajya Sabha. In 2017, Congress strategist Ahmed Patel managed to win by a whisker in Gujarat; and in 2020, the rebellion against the Ashok Gehlot government in Rajasthan happened on the eve of elections to the Upper House.

The BJP now has 97 members in the Upper House, and, along with the allies, is just four short of the majority mark of 121 in the Rajya Sabha, where the current strength is 240. While successive victories in the State elections have helped the BJP improve its position, growing from 78 members in 2019 to 97 at the end of the five years, the party has never shied away from pushing the boundaries of normative politics to increase its strength. The gap between the BJP, the single largest party in the Rajya Sabha, and the Congress, which has just 29 members, is far too wide to be bridged any time soon. The other Opposition parties too have only a limited presence with the Trinamool Congress at 13, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and the Aam Aadmi Party with 10 each, the Rashtriya Janata Dal with six and the Communist Party of India (M) with five. In past parliamentary sessions, the Opposition members were frequently suspended whenever they sought to question the government, making Parliament a theatre of the government's unilateralism.

A respite

Trump gets legal relief as challenges to his candidacy recede

Former United States President Donald Trump appeared to receive a measure of legal succour from the country's Supreme Court after it agreed to hear in mid-April the arguments for and against his right, as an erstwhile serving President, to immunity from federal criminal prosecution for allegedly subverting the 2020 presidential election. This means that a trial is unlikely before May and a decision on the case could be returned by the end of June, the time when final rulings for the current session of the court are expected. The court's move adds considerably more time to the calendar of prosecution cases against Mr. Trump, and has effectively spoiled the plans of Special Counsel Jack Smith, leading these cases for the Justice Department, who had urged back in December last year that the Justices immediately take up the case, without any other intermediate court action. Earlier in February, a three-judge panel of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit had ruled that Mr. Trump did not enjoy sweeping immunity from federal prosecution, a legal setback for his defence team, which was appealed. Now, the Supreme Court has ruled that the lower court's ruling against Mr. Trump will remain on hold until it decides the issue. In an alternative scenario the Justices might have declined Mr. Trump's request to pause the case, which would have given Mr. Smith the option to proceed more quickly with the prosecution in the election subversion case, improving the odds of a trial before the presidential election in November.

There is a plethora of legal cases against Mr. Trump, including four criminal indictments, all of which will be impacted by the timing of the ruling on presidential immunity. Notably, the Supreme Court Justices also appear poised to reverse a ruling by the Colorado Supreme Court that banned Mr. Trump from being on presidential ballot under a constitutional provision precluding those aiding an insurrection from holding high office in government. Other than the legal morass that looms on the horizon in light of the delaying tactics employed by the Trump defence team, the battle over prosecuting Mr. Trump has laid bare the fault lines in American politics, with voters divided on his capabilities and the potential risks he poses. Democrats and Republicans have come up short in terms of finding any credible alternatives in terms of nationally popular leaders, making the 2024 election Mr. Trump's to lose. Therein lies the true malaise at the heart of the American Dream today — the lack of a vision that could unite all Americans under a single political banner. This will require leaders who are able to take on the weight of the U.S.'s position as a global power, and one that provides for all its people regardless of their identity.

E-evidence, new criminal law, its implementation

The three newly-enacted criminal laws, the Bharatiya Nyay Sanhita (to replace the Indian Penal Code), the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (to replace the Code of Criminal Procedure) and the Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam (to replace the Indian Evidence Act) are to come into force on July 1, 2024. At the same time, Section 106(2) of the Bharatiya Nyay Sanhita (BNS), which prescribes 10 years imprisonment for fatal accidents if they are not immediately reported to the police, has been put on hold, as notified by the Central government.

The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) and State governments are preparing for a smooth transition. While some changes have been made in the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNS) in connection with investigation and police functioning, a few new offences and some changes introduced in the BNS, the contents of the Indian Evidence Act, 1872 have changed little as far as the Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam (BSA) is concerned. The scope of secondary evidence has been slightly broadened and some changes have been made in the provisions relating to electronic evidence in the BSA.

Clarity on electronic record There is some precision in the definitions section. An illustration to the definition of "document" (which includes electronic and digital records) says that an electronic record on emails, server logs, documents on computers, laptop or smartphone, messages, websites, locational evidence (should have used the term information in place of evidence), and voice mail messages stored on digital devices are documents.

Similarly, there is clarity in the provision dealing with primary (electronic) evidence (Section 57) in the form of Explanations. One of such four explanations says that where a video recording is simultaneously stored in electronic form and transmitted or broadcast or transferred to another, each of the stored recordings shall be primary evidence. This may help the investigating agencies in fixing culpability of a cyber-criminal even if he destroys his original electronic record to deny the allegations as it may be collected from other sources without its value getting diminished.

Section 63, which deals with admissibility of electronic records, includes terms such as 'semi-conductor memory' and 'any communication device' for better visibility. However, this does not change the impact of the provision because the definition of 'electronic form' given in the Information Technology (IT) Act, 2000 includes information generated, sent, received or stored in 'computer network'. Similarly, the definition of 'computer network' in the IT Act is comprehensive and includes



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'communication device'.

It is relevant to mention that the computer (primary) memory, that is; random access memory (RAM) and cache memory, is nothing but semi-conductor memory which is essential for the quicker working of a computer. Though it is volatile in nature, this memory may reveal very important information if electronic devices are recovered and seized in 'power-on' condition.

Admissibility of electronic records

The law on the admissibility of electronic records is settled. Though there are some changes in Section 63 of the BSA (which is equivalent to 65-B of the Indian Evidence Act), the ratio of the Supreme Court judgment in *Arjun Panditrao Khotkar vs Kailash Kushanrao Gorantyal & Ors.* (2020) will still equally apply to the new provisions. In this case, the Court held that the required certificate under Section 65-B(4) — now Section 63(4) of the BSA — is sine qua non for the admissibility of electronic record. The other provisions with regard to admissibility of secondary evidence will not apply to electronic records as Section 65-B of the IE Act starts with a non-obstante clause (i.e., notwithstanding anything contained in this Act) and Section 65-A and Section 65-B are a complete code by themselves. The non-obstante clause of the Indian Evidence Act is retained in the BSA.

The Court had said that if the required certificate could not be secured from the person in possession of an electronic device, an application could always be made to a judge for the production of such a certificate from the person concerned in cases where such a person refuses to give it.

The Court held that though such a certificate should generally be submitted with all other documents at the time of filing the police report and latest before commencement of the trial, non-submission of such certificate in time is a curable defect. Since Section 65-B (and Section 63 of the BSA now) does not speak of the stage at which such a certificate must be furnished to the court, the court may in appropriate cases allow the prosecution to produce such a certificate at a later point of time without causing any prejudice to the accused in trial. The Court also held that when it is impossible to obey the law, the alleged disobedience of the law is excused. In other words, if it is impossible to produce the required certificate, the court can exempt the mandatory production of the certificate.

Section 63(4) of the Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam requires the certificate to be signed by two persons instead of one as required under the Indian Evidence Act — the first by the person in charge of the computer or communication device or the management of the relevant activities, and the second, by an expert. A standard format of

the certificate is also prescribed in the Schedule to the BSA. The expert has to verify the certificate by stating that a particular hash value is obtained by applying a particular hash algorithm. A hash function means an algorithm mapping or translation of one sequence of bits into another, generally smaller, set known as "hash result" such that an electronic record yields the same result every time the algorithm is executed with the same electronic record as its input making it computationally infeasible to reconstruct the original electronic record from the hash result produced by the algorithm. Though no notification has been issued by the Central Government under the IT Act with regard to hash algorithms for encryption for the secure use of electronic medium, the standard format of certificate lists 'SHA1, SHA256, MD5 and Other (legally acceptable standard)' as applicable hash algorithms.

Whereas MD5 (Message Digest5) and SHA1 (Secure Hash Algorithm) are known to have some vulnerabilities, SHA256 is considered more secure and, therefore, be used by the agencies to ensure integrity of the data.

Preparedness to adopt new format

While expert certification may help the court in admission of electronic records, it is going to increase the workload of cyber laboratories. There is hardly any crime that does not use a smartphone nowadays. Many crimes are also solved with the help of call records and location information. However, if every certificate is to be signed by an expert, the workload will suddenly increase as many cyberlabs may not be equipped with sufficient manpower. Some cyberlabs (such as in Chhattisgarh) are not even notified under the IT Act to give expert opinion on electronic records.

It would have been reasonable had expert opinion been called for only when the integrity of the seized electronic record is disputed by the opposing party during trial. The courts may, in such cases, always ask for expert opinion. It could have been sufficient had the investigating officer ensured that one of the hash algorithms was applied and the message digest was attached with the certificate before it was collected.

There needs to be a general awareness drive now about the modes and methods of encryption, particularly for private agencies which install closed-circuit televisions on their premises or use other electronic devices for security purposes. Simultaneously, the time before July, must be used by the enforcement agencies to ensure that the required infrastructure is in place to take on the added responsibilities.

The views expressed are personal

Some changes have been made in the provisions relating to electronic evidence in the Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam, which is to replace the Indian Evidence Act

Understanding the world of the informal waste picker

On March 1, International Waste Pickers Day, waste pickers across the world will pay homage to fellow pickers who were murdered in Colombia in 1992. The world of the informal waste picker, — who is an often-forgotten, hyper-marginalised worker cohort in the waste value chain ecosystem, and an indispensable but invisible part of waste management systems in India — needs to be understood.

The International Labour Organization defines the informal sector in waste management as "individuals or small and micro-enterprises that intervene in waste management without being registered and without being formally charged with providing waste management services". These workers are the primary collectors of recyclable waste, playing a critical role in waste management and resource efficiency by collecting, sorting, trading and sometimes even reinserting discarded waste back into the economy. Yet, they face systemic marginalisation due to non-recognition, non-representation, and exclusion from social security schemes and legal protection frameworks.

What data shows

While reliable estimates of informal waste pickers are difficult to come by, the Centre for Science and Environment reported that the informal waste economy employs about 0.5%-2% of the urban population globally. Many are women, children and the elderly, who are often disabled, are the poorest of the urban poor, and face violence and sexual harassment without being registered and without being formally charged with providing waste management services'. The Periodic Labour Force Survey 2017-18 indicates that there are nearly 1.5 million waste pickers within India's urban workforce, with half a million being women.

On average, an individual waste picker collects between 60 kg to 90kg of waste a day in an eight to 10 hour span of time, often undertaking hazardous work without safety equipment. Their poor health, irregular work, low income, and regular harassment are compounded by their

subordinate position in the caste hierarchy. Their health issues include dermatological and respiratory health issues apart from regular injuries. Waste pickers suffer existential precarity. Municipal sector participation in municipal solid waste management, by design, alienates them, aggravating their vulnerability and loss of rights over waste picking. As noted by the Alliance of Indian Waste Pickers (AIW) 2023 report, private actors employ expensive machinery, offering competitive rates to waste generators such as households and businesses, which marginalises informal pickers and forces them into hazardous waste picking, such as scavenging from dump sites. This worsens their health risks, compromises income, and lowers social status. Private players and municipal authorities often cordon off dump sites, pushing them into further vulnerability.

Extended Producer Responsibility

Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) has gained traction in India as a means to enhance plastic waste management. It transfers the responsibility of waste management from municipal authorities and holds commercial waste producers accountable. EPR appears seemingly promising, with potential for social inclusion for waste pickers and other informal grassroots actors. In practice, however, as noted by Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO), EPR redirects waste away from the informal sector, threatening large-scale displacement of informal waste pickers.

The AIW has observed that EPR guidelines in India identify several stakeholders including the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB), producers, brand owners, industry, industry associations, civil society organisations, and, of course, citizens themselves. But it is unclear whether these stakeholders include informal waste pickers, or their representing organisations. Although the Solid Waste Management Rules 2016 mandate the inclusion of waste pickers in municipal solid waste

management systems, they are evidently missing in the prioritisation. The EPR Guidelines 2022 published by the Ministry of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change have blatantly ignored the role of informal waste pickers in waste management and recycling.

Plastic Treaty and a just transition

Globally, waste pickers collect and recover up to 60% of all plastic which is then recycled, as in the 2022 World Economic Forum report. Despite their crucial role in sustainable recycling, their work is rarely valued and they struggle to earn a decent living. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and Pew reports state that in 2016 alone, informal waste pickers collected 27 million metric tonnes of plastic waste (59% of all plastic material collected for recycling), preventing it from ending up in landfills or the ocean. But they also have to bear burning plastic fumes and consume water and air tainted by microplastics. When we endorse the UN resolution to end plastic pollution, to create a legally binding agreement by 2024, the treaty must ensure a just transition for these workers.

The role of waste pickers in successful plastic management has emerged as a critical factor as India's per capita plastic waste generation rises. As mentioned in a recent CPCB report, January 6 is plastic overshoot day for India — a country that is already among the 12 countries responsible for 52% of the world's mismanaged waste. The EPR mechanism holds producers responsible for plastic pollution, but only involves large recycling units, bypassing an entire workforce responsible for transformation of waste to recyclable material.

Waste pickers possess traditional knowledge around handling waste, which could strengthen the EPR system and its implementation. In this context, we need to rethink the formulation of EPR norms, while also addressing how to integrate millions of informal waste pickers into the new legal framework.

The views expressed are personal



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Despite their key role in the waste value chain ecosystem, waste pickers face systemic marginalisation, severe health hazards and exclusion from legal protection

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

In Himachal Pradesh

It is a pity that the fate of the Congress government in Himachal Pradesh, one of the few States the party is in power in the country, is hanging by a thread (Page 1, February 29). It is quite common these days for leaders in the Opposition not to pause and to jump to

any ruling party without bating an eyelid and announce that the move is in the interests of the people of his/her constituency'. It is a pity that a party like the BJP, which boasts being a party with moral values, encourages this. The BJP's slogan of a 'Congress-mukt

Bharat' appears to be taking shape with a 'Congress-yukt India' (filled with Congress leaders) under its "Operation lotus".

Remarks and politics

It is appalling to hear unpalatable remarks being made by the Prime Minister of the country — "Time has come to drive DMK out, says PM" (Page 1, February 29). No one can forget the arrogance exhibited by the

Corrections & Clarifications

In the opening paragraph of a report regarding Mizoram Assembly's resolution against border fencing (February 29, 2024), there was an erroneous reference to the 60-member Mizoram Assembly adopting the resolution, it should have been 40.

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powerful ruling Congress party during the general election in 1967 and the poll outcome. The national parties should not forget that they have no presence of their own in Tamil Nadu and need the support of the Dravidian parties. P.N.K. Murthy, Chennai

Should Minimum Support Price be legalised?



Lakhwinder Singh
is Visiting Professor, Institute for Human Development, New Delhi, and former Professor and head, Economics Department, Punjab University, Patiala

PARLEY

In February 13, groups of farmers began a march to New Delhi, to press for fulfilment of their demands, which include a legal guarantee for purchasing crops at Minimum Support Price (MSP) and India's withdrawal from the World Trade Organization (WTO) which, they allege, places pressure on the Centre for drafting policies for procurement and MSP. While the Centre has fixed MSP for 23 farm commodities, it is implemented mostly for rice and wheat mainly because India has vast storage facilities for these grains and uses the produce for its public distribution system (PDS). The Union government has repeatedly asserted that a legal guarantee for MSP will not be possible. Should MSP be legalised? Siraj Hussain and Lakhwinder Singh discuss the question in a conversation moderated by A.M. Jigeesh. Edited excerpts:

Are the protests for a legalised MSP justified?

Lakhwinder Singh: These protests have been building up over time. In 2018 too, we saw tens of thousands of farmers from Maharashtra take to the streets. But their demands are perhaps not being listened to seriously, whether by State governments or the Central government.

There is a context to this. India introduced economic reforms in 1991 with a promise that we will soon become industrialised and the rural workforce will move from the agricultural to the industrial sector. More than 30 years later, agriculture has been squeezed in many ways but no one is talking about this agricultural crisis.

One of the most important demands of the farmers protesting this time is a legal guarantee for MSP. The public distribution system (PDS) gave support to farmers and ensured national food security. Now, India is expected to shift from food security to nutrition security. A legal guarantee for MSP for 23 crops is perhaps the way to do this. The farmers also want India to exit the WTO. We are in a phase of de-globalisation. When we have food shortages, for instance, the government imposes a ban on exports of food items (in defiance of the WTO). In a way, the demand of the farmers is in consonance with what the government does.

Siraj Hussain: The farmers are rightly concerned about low prices of various crops. But their demands will not be accepted by any government in a hurry. We need a detailed, thorough review of agricultural trade policies and production and also what will happen to agriculture in the next 20-25 years.

After the 2020-21 protests, the government took seven months to set up a committee to look into this issue of MSP. More than a year and a half later, the committee has not even submitted



Farmers carry paddy saplings in Nadia, West Bengal. PTI

an interim report.

Should MSP on all these crops be legalised? And will MSP survive without public procurement?

SH: The mandi system in the form of APMCs (agricultural produce market committees) is functional only in a few States. In most others, it is not functional. Less than one-third of the crop production in India is traded through mandis; the rest is sold by marginal farmers to village traders. So, even if MSP becomes legalised, it will be difficult to implement it because there is no record of who is buying and selling and at what rate. The government cannot be buying all the 23 crops - even for wheat and rice it faces lot of difficulties in procurement.

LS: Legalisation of MSP is in national interest. A large number of farmers sell commodities in informal markets. The government wants to make transactions digital and formal, so this is in consonance with the government's aim. Also, the gross fixed capital formation in the agricultural sector after the 1991 reforms has gone down tremendously. Farmers are in distress. Legalising MSP is the answer. Let me add that the government is not expected to buy all the 23 crops. But if at least 5-10% of the produce is purchased, it would be a marginal intervention and stabilise the prices.

Is it possible to extend the MSP system to the entire country, especially for subsistence farmers, as the government claims?

SH: Yes. Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and Odisha have shown that the procurement system can be expanded. Even in Bihar, West Bengal, and Tamil Nadu, procurement of rice has increased over the last few years. But that is not the question. The question is whether the government should be procuring so much. It has



Less than one-third of the crop production is traded through mandis; the rest is sold by marginal farmers to village traders. So, even if MSP becomes legalised, it will be difficult to implement it because there is no record of who is buying and selling and at what rate.

SIRAJ HUSSAIN

been procuring 50-60 million tonnes of rice. Is that a good policy regime? The root cause is PDS and now the government has made it free. That means that the government will continue to procure large quantities of wheat and rice.

Another concern is that legalised MSP will result in high prices affecting the consumers.

SH: I do not think it is possible for any government to procure all the commodities. It is not possible for the government to fix an MSP for everything. The basic question is how to ensure a remunerative price to farmers. My view is that it should be a State by State policy. Every State has a different regime. In Punjab, for instance, a price payment deficiency system is possible because the mandi system is well developed and the distance between two mandis is only 6 km, whereas at the all-India level it is 12 km. The States and the Centre should be talking to one another. Experts have to come up with a policy which will ensure that farmers receive a fair and remunerative price.

Another question which you should be asking macroeconomists is on food inflation. The government must also look after the interests of consumers. They have to try and balance the policies of import, export, and domestic MSP.

LS: When the government is not interested in legalising MSP and intellectuals are not interested in discussing these issues, fear is created among consumers that they are going to be fleeced. And a binary is created of farmers and consumers. The government is an intermediary, which has to protect the rights of both consumers and producers.

The most striking issue is food inflation. The local prices at which farmers are selling their produce are very low and do not cover the major costs involved (in production). On the other hand, consumers are facing huge price rise. Legalising MSP will reduce inflation, protect consumers, and give a relatively reasonable income to the farmers.

Also, regulating markets is important. The government has withdrawn from the regulatory mechanism and therefore in unorganised markets, intermediaries are active and creating inflationary pressures on the economy.

Farmers are also worried about input cost calculation methods such as A2+FL and C2+50%. What could be the best mechanism to calculate the input costs?

LS: The idea of C2+50% cost has come from industry. Agriculture requires remunerative prices. I think the C2 estimation of costs for agricultural crops is going to be almost comparable with other prices which we have in various sectors of the economy.

SH: There have been several suggestions, including a report by Dr. Ramesh Chand, about certain changes in the methodology of calculating the cost of cultivation. Those changes have not yet been decided. The problem is whatever price you fix, you are not able to ensure the A2+FL price. Sometimes, the price is so low that it is below the cost of cultivation.

The answer is not easy to find. The government cannot be deciding the prices of every agricultural commodity. Many farmers and organisations prefer selling to corporates because there used to be a lot of glut of at one point of time. Now, at least there are some large buyers. So, we can't say that corporates should be completely prevented from purchasing and storing agricultural commodities.

Are cooperatives an alternative to help farmers?

SH: Cooperatives have been successful in certain sectors. For example, in the milk sector, they brought the White Revolution in Gujarat. It was due to the failure of cooperatives that the government came up with the idea of farmer-producer organisations (FPOs). Now, we are going back to cooperatives. Any form of aggregation which can help the farmers in realising better prices is welcome. But both cooperatives and FPOs have been captured by influential vested interests in rural areas. If cooperatives can create storage structures where the farmers can store their produce at reasonable prices to reap the benefits of higher prices in the off season, they are welcome.

LS: When we have to look for alternatives, we cannot rely on a single intervention. If you want to promote cooperatives, bring in a law and storage capacity. Government-supported cooperatives have failed because of corruption. This organisation has a future, but we need a legal framework within which they can flourish. And they need supportive infrastructure.



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NOTEBOOK

The silent architects behind compelling stories

Regional reporters are indispensable to all English language journalists

Abhinav Deshpande

As a journalist covering Maharashtra, I often travel across the State. These assignments involve more than just researching and packing a bag. The first step is to contact the local police, activists, academics, and journalists from other organisations. Speaking to various people provides reporters with context to the issue being covered, different perspectives, and, critically, nuance.

In this process, I have encountered many people who I consider the silent architects behind the most compelling stories. They are regional journalists. I try to meet many of them in person, but most of our interactions have largely been over the phone. These journalists have an in-depth understanding of the local landscape and have connections in every nook and corner. They remain behind the scenes and rarely seek recognition. They offer invaluable guidance and insights and don't expect to be quoted or mentioned in the final piece. They help simply because they share the story that the goal of shining a torch on truths that might otherwise remain obscured.

Recently, I interacted with Bhagwat Taware, a regional journalist from Beed, and Kailash Tawar, an insurance agent and farmer from Chhatrapati Sambhajnagar, where I went to report on farmer suicides. They had taken time off their routine work to help me comprehend the issue and engage with more people. They travelled with me in their respective districts.

It is not just reporters from the metros and from English language publications who seek their assistance; foreign journalists rely heavily on them too. They are the sources we cannot do without. They even take pride in seeing their contributions acknowledged indirectly when the journalists who report the story that they helped unearth receive awards.

Beyond their role as information pro-

viders, these people also extend hospitality. They treat us as guests.

"Recognition isn't what I'm seeking. What's important to us is that you've travelled all the way from Mumbai to shed light on the struggles that the people here face. Your report will be read by people in Delhi who will know that their government here obscures data," Mr. Taware explained to me on our way to a village.

At times, I feel that they take my reporting more seriously than even I do. During our interactions with the families of farmers who had passed away in Chhatrapati Sambhajnagar, Mr. Tawar, having grasped my interviewing style, initiated the conversation himself and prepared the interviewees for the camera. He even asked me to interview one farmer's family, which was not scheduled, saying, "They have an interesting story to tell".

In February last year, when I visited Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu to report on how a woman and her family were left shattered by the gruesome killing of a nine-year-old tribal boy in a case of the stragman sacrifice, Krunal Talor, a local journalist who had covered the case extensively, accompanied me to the victim's family's house and even played the role of translator.

It is not always journalists who help in such ways. Local taxi drivers are essential allies during these assignments. Their knowledge of the region, understanding of the local culture, and adept navigation skills make them indispensable companions. While they may not be wielding pens or cameras, their contributions are often seen in the stories I tell.

To write stories, reporters need to form connections, understand realities, and find voices that deserve to be heard. Journalism is not a solitary endeavour; it is a collaborative exercise in which many people play a vital role and deserve to be acknowledged and appreciated.

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PICTURE OF THE WEEK

A water crisis



The scorching heat in Karnataka over the last few weeks and the spectre of hotter days ahead have raised concern over depleting water levels in the Krishnaraja Sagar (KRS) reservoir, which is the main source of drinking water for major cities and towns in the region. The water level at the KRS on February 28 was 90.23 feet against the maximum reservoir level of 124.80 ft. This is the lowest since 2018 for the month of February. M.A. SRIRAM.

FROM THE ARCHIVES



FIFTY YEARS AGO MARCH 1, 1974

Additional taxation

New Delhi, Feb. 28: The Union Finance Minister, Mr. Y.B. Chavan to-day proposed additional taxation yielding a net amount of Rs. 186 crores for 1974-75. The budgetary gap of Rs. 311 crores has thus been reduced to Rs. 125 crores. The following are the changes in indirect taxes. Levy of auxiliary duties at a rate of 10 per cent of the effective basic duty on

unmanufactured tobacco, cigarettes, smoking mixtures, plywood and cement, at 20 per cent of the effective basic duty on dyestuffs, optical bleaching agents, gases, rubber products and plastics at 33 1/3 per cent of the effective basic duty on paints and varnishes and at 50 per cent of the effective basic duty on aerated waters, glycerine, cosmetics and toilet preparations. Substantial rise in basic excise duties in respect of "special boiling point" spirits, raw naphtha intended for methanol and petrochemicals, benzene, etc. used for a variety of purposes.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MARCH 1, 1924

Pudukotah Council

Pudukotah, February 28: Mr. P.K. Kunnhuri Menon the Dewan understood to have made ready various Bills of a social character for discussion by the new Legislative Council that will come into being shortly in the place of the existing Representative Assembly and the Legislative Assembly and the Legislative Advisory Council.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

The number of junior doctors on strike in South Korea

10,000 About 80% of the trainee workforce protested against government plans to sharply increase medical school admissions. **AFP**

The athletes expected to be part of the 2024 Paris Olympics

14,500 The keys to the Paris 2024 athletes' village were officially handed to the Olympics organisers as President Emmanuel Macron visited the site. **REUTERS**

The investment for a semiconductor plant in India

15.2 In \$ billion, India approved the setting up of three chip-making units taking the country a step closer to its goal of becoming an electronics powerhouse. **REUTERS**

The worth of Poland's defence agreement with the U.S.

2.5 In \$ billion, Poland signed an agreement with the U.S. for the delivery of an integrated anti-aircraft and anti-missile defence command system. Poland is spending 4% of its GDP on defence this year. **REUTERS**

Palestinians shot dead for rushing toward aid trucks

50 The incident added to a Palestinian death toll that topped 30,000 in nearly five months of war. The Israeli army said it was checking reports of the incident. **AFP**

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On cross-voting in Rajya Sabha elections

Why were six Congress MLAs who cross-voted in the Himachal Pradesh Rajya Sabha elections disqualified from the State's Legislative Assembly? What does the Tenth Schedule specify? Why is an open ballot used during Rajya Sabha elections?

EXPLAINER

Rangarajan R

The story so far:

The Rajya Sabha elections in the States of Uttar Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh and Karnataka witnessed cross-voting by MLAs belonging to different parties. This has once again raised concerns about the sanctity of the election process.

How are Rajya Sabha elections held?

As per Article 80 of the Constitution, representatives of each State to the Rajya Sabha are elected indirectly by the elected members of their Legislative Assembly. The polls for Rajya Sabha will be required only if the number of candidates exceed the number of vacancies. In fact, till 1998, the outcome of Rajya Sabha elections were usually a foregone conclusion. The candidates nominated by various parties, according to their strength in the Assembly, used to be elected unopposed. However, the June 1998 Rajya Sabha elections in Maharashtra witnessed cross-voting that resulted in the loss of a Congress party candidate.

In order to rein in the MLAs from such cross-voting, an amendment to the Representation of the People Act, 1951 was carried out in 2003. Section 59 of the Act was amended to provide that the voting in elections to Rajya Sabha shall be through an open ballot. The MLAs of political parties are required to show their ballot paper to the authorised agent of their Party. Not showing the ballot paper to the authorised agent or showing it to anyone else will disqualify the vote. Independent MLAs are barred from showing their ballots to anyone.

What does the Tenth Schedule state?

The 52nd constitutional amendment introduced the 'anti-defection' law through the Tenth Schedule in 1985. This



In a crossfire: Himachal Pradesh Chief Minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu casts his vote for the Rajya Sabha Elections in Shimla on February 27. **ANI**

Schedule provides that a member of a House of Parliament or State legislature who voluntarily gives up the membership of their political party or votes against the instructions of their party in a House are liable for disqualification from such House. This instruction with respect to voting is issued by the 'whip' of a party.

However, the elections to Rajya Sabha are not treated as a proceeding within the Legislative Assembly. The Election Commission, drawing reference to Supreme Court judgments, had issued a clarification in July 2017. It specified that the provisions of the Tenth Schedule, with respect to voting against the instruction of the party, will not be applicable for a Rajya Sabha election. Furthermore, political parties cannot issue any 'whip' to its members for such elections.

What have the courts ruled?

The Supreme Court in *Kuldip Nayyar versus Union of India* (2006), upheld the system of open ballot for Rajya Sabha elections. It reasoned that if secrecy becomes a source for corruption, then transparency has the capacity to remove it. However, in the same case the court held that an elected MLA of a political party would not face disqualification under the Tenth Schedule for voting against their party candidate. He/she may at the most attract disciplinary action from their political party. The Supreme Court has also held in *Ravi S. Naik and Sanjay Bandekar versus Union of India* (1994), that voluntarily giving up membership under the Tenth Schedule is not synonymous with only formally resigning from the party to which the member belongs. The conduct of a

member both inside and outside the house can be looked into to infer if it qualifies as voluntarily giving up membership.

It may be noted that the six Congress MLAs, who cross-voted in Himachal Pradesh, have been disqualified under the Tenth Schedule for defying the party whip and being absent during the passage of the Budget in the Assembly.

What can be the way forward?

It is to uphold the higher principle of free and fair elections and its purity that the court upheld the system of open ballot for Rajya Sabha elections. However, the instances of cross-voting in the last decade have defeated the intent behind this procedure. It would be wishful thinking to expect any further amendments to strengthen the Constitution or laws against such voting practices since ruling parties' benefit from such unprincipled tactics.

The Supreme Court nevertheless in the case relating to the Chandigarh Mayoral election had observed that it will not allow democracy to be murdered. Cross-voting in Rajya Sabha elections is a serious threat to democracy. The court may therefore initiate a *suo moto* Public Interest Litigation in this matter or take it up when the order by the Himachal Pradesh Speaker disqualifying the six MLAs eventually comes up before it on appeal. It may, in that process, review its own order in the *Kuldip Nayyar* case in light of its judgment in the *Ravi Naik* case.

Voting by an MLA against his/her political party in a Rajya Sabha election may well be construed as a strong reason to infer that the member had voluntarily given up membership of such party. If the court decides so, this would be a valid ground for disqualification under the Tenth Schedule. It would hopefully act as a deterrent against such cross-voting in the future.

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

THE GIST

As per Article 80 of the Constitution, representatives of each State to the Rajya Sabha are elected indirectly by the elected members of their Legislative Assembly.

In order to rein in MLAs from cross-voting, an amendment to the Representation of the People Act, 1951 was carried out in 2003. Section 59 of the Act was amended to provide that the voting in elections to Rajya Sabha shall be through an open ballot.

The Election Commission had clarified in July 2017 that the provisions of the Tenth Schedule, with respect to voting against the instruction of the party, will not be applicable for a Rajya Sabha election.

Is NATO membership in the cards for Ukraine?

Why is the North Atlantic Treaty Organization still wary of admitting the war-torn country to the alliance?

Garimella Subramaniam

The story so far:

Western powers joined Ukraine last weekend to mark two years of Russian aggression on its territory, as concerns grow that the conflict could spread into Europe. On the other hand, Jens Stoltenberg, secretary-general of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), sounded optimistic on the inevitability of Kyiv joining the military bloc. However, that question appears unlikely to elicit consensus among member states any time soon.

What was the reason for the Russian invasion?

In 2008, NATO leaders declared their intention to admit Georgia and Ukraine to the bloc, although no timelines were indicated. The step must have been provocation enough for Russian President Vladimir Putin, who has been steadfast in his opposition to NATO expansion,

especially into the heart of the former United Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR). Within months, President Putin sent tanks rolling into Tbilisi. In 2014, Moscow annexed Ukraine's Crimean peninsula and in February 2022 launched a full-scale war on the nation. If Kyiv is admitted now it would automatically kickstart NATO's Article 5 mutual defence provision, which stipulates that an attack on one member would be construed as an attack against all. Indeed, nothing less would reassure Kyiv, which gave up its nuclear arsenal in exchange for security guarantees by the U.S. and the U.K.

What is the status of the war now?

The most immediate concern is the severe depletion in Ukraine's artillery ammunition on the battlefield, which poses a challenge to hold back Russian troops along a 1,500 km frontline. According to the country's defence minister Rustem Umerov, the current shortfall, which has already increased Ukrainian casualties, allows Kyiv to fire

barely a third of the absolute minimum of some 6,000 rounds of artillery shells it needs daily. On the other hand, according to western intelligence, Russian land forces have sustained an estimated 2,00,000 deaths and injuries since the onset of the conflict. Moscow achieved a breakthrough when Ukraine withdrew from the strategic city of Avdiivka, ascribed by the country's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to acute shortages in Kyiv's artillery firepower. The latter's withdrawal from Avdiivka is reportedly the first major victory for Russian forces since the capture of Bakhmut city.

What has been the U.S.'s role so far?

While the U.S. has been the largest arms contributor to the war effort, a \$60 billion aid bill to Ukraine has been stalled in Congress. The Republican-dominated House of Representatives have refused to approve the financial package, citing former President Donald Trump's pressure tactics. Hardline Republican voices have grown louder in arguing that

it is about time that Europe took full responsibility for its own security and worked as an equal partner with the U.S.

What about the EU?

The 27-nation bloc recently overcame Hungarian hurdles to finance a €5 billion deal over four years to the Ukrainian economy. But governments are now squabbling over ways to top-up the €12 billion European Peace Facility (EPF) they had established to support Ukraine's war effort, funded by national contributions outside the bloc's common budget. Germany insists that the value of the weapons it supplies bilaterally should be factored into contributions to the common pool, while others feel that this would shrink the fund's volume. Moreover, some countries want that expenditure from the EPF to support the bloc's defence industry.

What is the road ahead?

It appears to be a pretty long one. Ukraine's full NATO membership is not on the table yet. For the time being, NATO has sought to assuage Ukraine's concerns by formalising current mechanisms of cooperation, which would empower Kyiv to call emergency meetings and ensure greater participation. President Putin's likely victory in a sham election in March and Mr. Trump's possible return to power later this year presents a predicament hard to contemplate for Ukraine.

The writer is Director, Strategic Initiatives, AgnoShin Technologies.

THE GIST

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IN THE LIMELIGHT



A screengrab from the trailer of *Aatmapamphlet*.

How 'Aatmapamphlet' engages with caste through the eyes of a teenager

The film gives the audience a chance to imagine the Dalit body outside caste constraints, wherein the character is allowed to explore popular heroic attributes that make him bask on screen as a lovable figure

Harish S. Wankhede

The revolutionary call for 'annihilation of caste' appears to be stalled today. Instead, contemporary democracy has witnessed grand celebrations of people's ethnic and social belongingness. Even in academic circles, it is acknowledged that differences based on gender, race, nationalities, languages, etc. are extremely difficult to erase and therefore a greater secularisation of these identities would be a better option. Differences need to be appreciated and conventional hierarchies and inequalities that persist due to it should be made nominal. However, caste identities in India are yet to receive such possibilities. Though caste is part of the democratic and public discourse, it creates anxiety and paranoia, especially among the groups that are identified with 'low caste' markers. The hope that Dalit-Bahujan groups can be assertive about their caste identities, without the fear of discrimination and harassment, is still unachievable.

Setting the scene

The much-appreciated Marathi film *Aatmapamphlet* (2023), recently released on Zee5, is an impressive interlocutor in this discussion. It places the question of caste, mainly the neo-Buddhist identity, at the centre of the narrative without making it the prism to understand social trouble, caste divisions and violence. The audience see Ashish (Om Bendkhale), the Dalit protagonist, as a playful, witty teen who narrates his life's journey in the midst of the country's socio-political turmoil during the 1980-90s. It creatively highlights the possibility of secular socialisation of caste identities.

Director Ashish Avinash Bende's film is creative and bold. It opens with a humble acknowledgement that the audiences are not going to witness any historical spectacle about iconic personalities (subject of autobiographies), but that the film is a peripheral story of 'normal' beings that find the meaning of their existence in the shadows of significant historic events like the assassination of Indira Gandhi, the announcement of the Mandal Commission Report and the Babri Masjid demolition. In the backdrop of such major events, the film pushes the audience to engage with the beautiful love story of Ashish and Shrishti (Pranjali Shrikant).

Ashish is a likable teen who is deeply infatuated with Shrishti. He is assisted by his four mischievous classmates (a beautiful 'brotherhood' is formed) to achieve a breakthrough in his quest to find love. Till this part, the story has no novelty as many such teen romances are already available. The shift in the narrative begins as we witness the distinct social locations of the characters. The girl belongs to the Brahmin caste whereas the lover boy is from a Dalit/neo-Buddhist family. In addition, his four friends are from different communities, mainly Muslim, Maratha, Brahmin and Kunbi.

Once the caste identities of the characters are revealed, it is obvious to the audience that they should now expect the narrative to enter the zone of social and communal anxieties, building a plot around social antagonism and caste discrimination, revealing the brutal domination of the social elites at the climax. Interestingly, no such turn is taken. Instead, the caste and social question are addressed through heartfelt emotions of the young boys, showcasing its pitiable need in healing emotional

heartaches.

A heartfelt depiction

Though Ashish understands the complexities of caste boundaries and social rules, he perpetually ruptures these rigidities by acting as a free and aspirational being. Such portrayal of a Dalit character is unusual as Marathi cinema often utilises conventional stereotypes of Dalits as victim (*Court*, 2014), stigmatised beings (*Fandry*, 2013) or struggling angry youth (*Mukta*, 1994). The possibility to imagine the Dalit body outside caste constraints, wherein the character is allowed to explore popular heroic attributes that make him bask on screen as a lovable figure, has not been portrayed much. Importantly, the film also shows the other characters as equally free from their social compartments and caste-based stereotypes. They are inattentive towards the caste question and operate in social spaces with the virtues of civility and care. Such depiction is surely fictional and dramatic, but because the narrative is presented through the heart of a teenager, it appears absolutely honest.

The film talks about the profound connection between youthfulness, teenage absurdities and their innocent imaginations of the world. Such an atmosphere disturbs the logic of adult 'common-sense' as it often fails to examine life beyond routine social actualities. It shows that social and communal anxieties can be resolved by giving more importance to love, friendship and kindness. The experiences of mundane small happy moments, the joy of innocent friendly conversations, the beauty of longing for a loved one are presented with sentimental honesty and graceful courage.

Such warmth and wisdom in storytelling has been the hallmark of Marathi parallel cinema (remember *Shyamchi Aai* (1953), *Shwaas* - India's official entry to Oscar in 2004, *Fandry* (2013), *Killa* (2014), etc.) and *Aatmapamphlet* shall be placed in the same constellation. At times, it also reminds us of the legendary film *Forrest Gump* (1994) that also celebrates similar sentiments of love and innocence in tremulous times. The film is a comic drama but not in a conventional way as the audience can feel the satirical wallop that educates and entertains without making much noise. The performances beautifully capture teenage emotions while the realistic screenplay further elevates the cinematic experience.

Unrealistic?

On the flip side however, one can see that the overload of fiction and fantasy in the narrative surpasses or hazes real social lives and thus disallows the audience to engage and experience the brutal actualities that often torment the lives of Dalits and other marginalised communities. There is a possibility of making cinema that deeply engages with social conundrums, not necessarily to give a humanistic judgment on it, but to unravel episodes of social guilt, depression and conflicts under which a large section of the population has been engulfed till date. *Aatmapamphlet* escapes that route and invites the audience to examine the same site with the emotional force of teenage kids. This is a wonderful cinematic experience and more such innovation in fiction and drama will elevate the intellectual caliber of artistic cinema further.

The writer is Assistant Professor, Centre for Political Studies, JNU, New Delhi



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

K. Subrahmanian

"Ms. Sunita Pandey, Varanasi, wants to know how to use 'levity'."
"Levity means 'lack of serious thought. Frivolity, unbecoming jocularity.' His boss dislikes him for his levity."
'Levity' is the opposite of gravity which means 'seriousness, solemnity, the quality of being grave.' Some rise to great heights through their gravity and some others fall through their levity."
"Mr. M. Jonathan Jebari, Sheik Dawood Street, Erode, wants to know the difference between 'navy' and 'navvy.'"
"The navy" refers to 'the whole body of a state's ships of war, including crews and the maintenance system'. A navy is a labourer employed in building or excavating roads, canals, etc. This is used in British English. The 'a' in 'navy' is pronounced like the 'a' in 'take'. The 'a' in 'navvy' is pronounced like the 'a' in 'man'

"Mr. Janarthanan, Tiruchi, wants to know the origin of tiffin."
"Tiffin" was used for the first time by the British during their stay in India. Now it is used in English to mean a light meal or snack taken at midday or in the middle of the morning. In India, it is used to mean any light meal or snack. 'Tiffin' is from 'tiffing', meaning drinking, and it was extended to eating. 'Tiff' is 'a little drink of weak liquor or punch'. 'To tiff' is to take a little drink. 'Tiff' or 'tiffing' is no longer used in English. 'Tiffin' also is used only occasionally by native speakers in Britain. It is widely used in India. There is another word 'tiff' which means a petty quarrel or a fit of peevishness."
"Ms. V. Geetha wants to know the difference between 'debate' and 'discussion.'"

"When you discuss something with another, you exchange views. By exchanging views, you get better ideas, your doubts are clarified. A debate is a formal argument between two opposing parties. It is also a discussion where each party wants to prove by argument that it is better. In discussions, you seek clarity. In debates, you seek victory."

"Mr. R. V. Raman, Nehru Nagar, Chrompet, Madras, writes: 'The meaning of 'gen' given is absolutely correct, but would you be kind enough to entertain a further amplification of the same? I served as an aircraft mechanic in the Royal Air Force in the early forties (I am retired now for over 18 years). In the flying squadron that I served, the daily ritual was a 'pre-flight' briefing before commencement of the day's sorties. The first information to be given to us for a pre-dawn flight was GEN by the CTO (Chief Technical Officer) which literally meant the number of serviceable aircraft crash tenders and other technical matters and also the remedial measures taken to be taken. Thus GEN (we understood then and even now) was 'general engineering news'. In course of time, GEN lost its engineering importance but came to mean something important. It was a common practice to refer to any person as a 'gen man' or 'gen kid', meaning that he knew his stuff. Some of our wartime air force technicians living or dead will bear me out on this.'"

Published in *The Hindu* on April 16, 1991.

THE DAILY QUIZ

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

Ameen Sayani, one of the most recognisable voices on Indian radio, passed away last week in Mumbai. A quiz on his life

Radhika Santhanam

QUESTION 1
Binaqa Geetmala, hosted by Sayani, was a weekly countdown show of the top songs from Hindi cinema. It was the most popular radio programme during its run of 42 years. Binaqa was a popular toothpaste these days. The subsequent incarnations of the show were also renamed after an oral hygiene brand. Name the brand.

QUESTION 2
For a long time, Binaqa Geetmala was broadcast from which country's radio, which Sayani's brother was the producer of? And why was this decision taken?

QUESTION 3
In which language did Sayani host Binaqa Geetmala?

QUESTION 4
Sponsored by Cadbury India, this show began in 1972 and was hugely popular. In 1992, it became a TV show on Zee TV before moving to other channels. Today, most people associate this show with the Trinamool Congress MP Derek O' Brien. Which show is this, which Sayani also hosted after his brother died?

QUESTION 5
This actor once said that he had gone to a commercial broadcasting firm for auditions but they were too busy to attend to him. That is why he didn't become a broadcaster and became an actor instead, he said. The 'they' he was referring to was Ameen Sayani and his wife, Rama Mattu. Sayani later said that if he had auditioned this actor, he would have "been on the streets." Who is this actor known for his baritone?



Visual question: Identify this famous playback singer who is in the photo with Ameen Sayani.

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1. These are large rocks balanced on a small point on a surface such that even a little touch could send them rocking back and forth. **Ans: Logans**
2. Name the southern African country whose banknotes featured a geological formation called Balancing Rocks. **Ans: Zimbabwe**
3. The reserve set up to protect the many balancing rocks in Australia. **Ans: Devil's Marbles Conservation Reserve**
4. This balancing rock is a popular tourist attraction in Mahabalipuram, Tamil Nadu. **Ans: Krishna's Butterball**
5. This Pagoda in Myanmar is a popular site of Buddhist pilgrimage. **Ans: Kyaiktiyo**
Visual: Name this famous balancing rock. **Ans: Piedra Movediza**
Early Birds: K.N. Viswanathan/J. Rajmohan/V. Saheni/George

Word of the day

Adumbrate: describe roughly or briefly or give the main points or summary of; give to understand

Synonyms: sketch, outline, insinuate, intimate

Usage: He wrote several articles that adumbrated the emerging political movement.

Pronunciation: bit.ly/adumbratepo

International Phonetic Alphabet: /ædʌmbreɪt/

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



A five-day strike at the Eiffel Tower this month brought attention to the monument's bad state of repair. REUTERS

Ailing Eiffel Tower dragged into Paris city hall power play

Agence France-Presse
PARIS

The Eiffel Tower, attacked by rust and well behind on its maintenance schedule, has taken centre stage in a power struggle between the Paris Mayor and her main rival, the French Minister of Culture.

A five-day strike at the Eiffel Tower this month drew attention to the monument's bad state of repair. Unions said the iconic monument was doomed unless its owner, the city of Paris, made massive funds available to get it back into good nick. The tower's creator, Gustave Eiffel, recommended at the time of its inauguration in 1889 that it should be painted every seven years to keep inevitable rust at bay. But the 300-metre iron structure has not been given a full paint job since 2010.

Unions said during the strike there were "several corrosion points... visible", which were "signs of a worrying deteriorating of the monument".

Local associations have warned of "safety problems" if the rust is left unchecked. The protests prompted France's recently-appointed right-wing Culture Minister, Rachida Dati, to weigh in.

She said left-wing Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo should ask for the Eiffel Tower to be given "historical monument" status. Unusually for such a high-profile site, it does not already have that protection. The classification, Ms. Dati said on X, would give the French government the power to override the city of Paris and "undertake construction work, by force if necessary". "The Eiffel Tower is not sufficiently protected", she said. Ms. Dati had recently confirmed that she wants to run for Paris Mayor in 2026, having failed to dislodge Hidalgo in the 2020 election for the powerful post.

Agonising wait for Sudanese refugees at crowded UN camps

Since civil war broke out in Sudan last April, UN-run transit centres in Renk of South Sudan have been overwhelmed by an uninterrupted refugee influx; nearly 8 million people, half of them children, have been displaced since the start of the war

Agence France-Presse
RENK

A new truck arrives in the South Sudanese town of Renk packed with dozens of elderly men, women and children, their exhausted faces betraying the strain of their traumatic journey out of war-ravaged Sudan.

They are among more than half a million people who have crossed the border into South Sudan, which is struggling to accommodate the new arrivals.

Renk is just 10 kilometres from Sudan, where fighting broke out in April last year between army chief Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and his former deputy Mohamed Hamdan Daglo, commander of the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF).

Since then, Renk's two UN-run transit centres have been overwhelmed by an uninterrupted influx of frightened people, fleeing for their lives.

The journey is rife with danger, said Fatima Mohammed, a 33-year-old teacher who escaped with her husband and five children from El-Obeid city in central Sudan.

"The bullets were entering our house. We were trapped between crossfire in our own street. So we understood that we needed to leave for the good of our kids," she said, describing the situation in Su-



Long road: Sudanese Refugees get off a truck at a Transit Centre in Renk, South Sudan on Feb. 13, AFP

dan as "unsustainable".

It took them five days to make their escape, with Sudanese soldiers and RSF fighters "making (it) difficult for us to leave the country".

"They took all our phones at one checkpoint, a lot of our money (at) another one. We saw abuses happening at those checkpoints," she said.

Since the start of the conflict, nearly eight million people, half of them children, have been displaced, inside and outside Sudan.

Around 5,60,000 of them have taken refuge in South Sudan, according to the United Nations, which estimates that around

1,500 new arrivals turn up in the country every day.

Many spend months waiting in the transit camps, hopeful that someday soon they will be able to return home.

Iman David fled fighting in Sudan's capital Khartoum with her then three-month-old daughter, leaving her husband behind.

'Hopes to go back'

"It was supposed to be a short stay, but I am still stuck here in Renk after seven months," the 20-year-old said.

"My hope is to go back to Khartoum and reunite with my husband but I don't know his fate."

The war has claimed the

lives of thousands of civilians, according to UN figures.

Around 25 million people, more than half of Sudan's population, need humanitarian assistance.

While around 3.8 million children under the age of five are suffering from malnutrition, the United Nations says.

While many in Renk long to return home, others hope to travel onwards to the town of Malakal in Upper Nile State, which is also hosting a huge number of refugees.

At Renk port, hundreds of people lined up under the oppressive glare of the midday sun, waiting hours to hop aboard the metal

boats which make the trip at least twice a week.

As she waited, Lina Juna, a 27-year-old mother of four, said that her final destination was the South Sudanese capital Juba.

"I have nothing to do in Juba, no family members or friends, no business or work to take care of because I have spent all my life in Sudan," she said.

"But I still expect Juba to be much better than Khartoum," she added, recalling days spent struggling to find food as heavy fighting rocked the city.

Several hours later, she managed to board a boat, one of two carrying some 300 people each.

"Today is a good day for us," said Deng Samson, who works for the International Organisation for Migration.

Monsoon concerns

"Some weeks we have seen ourselves completely overwhelmed," he said, adding that the approaching monsoon made him nervous.

"We are truly afraid of what will happen when the rainy season comes, with waters rising from the river and disrupting the normal functioning of the port."

With up to 10 trucks and buses turning up in Renk every day, the UN is trying to mobilise the international community, launching an appeal for \$4.1 billion this month to respond to the most urgent humanitarian needs.

Army assault kills Chad opposition leader

Agence France-Presse
NDJAMENA

A leading opponent of Chad's ruling junta chief has died in an army assault on his party headquarters ahead of a May election when he was set to be the main rival to his cousin and transitional President Mahamat Idriss Deby Itno.

Yaya Dillo Djerou died on Wednesday "where he had retreated, at the headquarters of his party. He didn't want to surrender and fired on law enforcement," said government spokesman Abderraman Koukamallah, who is also Communications Minister, said.

The prosecutor general earlier spoke of "dead including Yaya Dillo" without detailing the circumstances.

Roadblocks and heavy security were in place on Thursday around the party's headquarters in Chad's capital where the army carried out the assault the previous day.

Dillo, who led the opposition Socialist Party Without Borders (PSP), was accused of having led an attack against the offices of the internal security agency overnight on Tuesday to Wednesday. That came after the arrest of a PSP member accused of an "assassination attempt against the president of the supreme court".

Speaking to AFP on Wednesday, Dillo had denounced the involvement in the incident, denouncing the claim as a "lie" and politically motivated.

Row erupts in Australia over 'traitor' politician

Agence France-Presse
SYDNEY

Australia's government faced angry demands on Thursday to name a "traitor" former politician accused of having "sold out" the country to a foreign power.

In an extraordinary public revelation, Australia's Director-General of Security Mike Burgess said a spy team from an unidentified country had cultivated and recruited a former Australian politician.

"This politician sold out their country, party and former colleagues to advance the interests of the foreign regime," the spy chief said in a speech in Canberra on Wednesday.

Australia is a member of the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing group that includes the U.S., Britain, Canada and New Zealand - making it a target for operatives from countries such as China and Russia.

Mr. Burgess, who runs the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, said the unidentified former politician had been recruited "several years ago". The person had even proposed bringing a Prime Minister's family member into the "spies' orbit", a plan that did not proceed, he said.

The former politician did, however, organise an overseas conference at which spies posing as bureaucrats targeted participants for recruitment, eventually obtaining security and defence information from an academic, Mr. Burgess said. The remarks unleashed speculation in the media about demands for the former politician to be identified.

Art for sale



Gallery assistants position the Portrait of Princess Diana by U.S. artist Andy Warhol, created from synthetic polymer and silkscreen ink on canvas, during a photocall ahead of the 20th Century & Contemporary art auction at Phillips auction house in London on Thursday. AFP

Experts report Nicaraguan 'systematic human rights violations' to UN council

Agence France-Presse
GENEVA

Driven by a desire to squelch critical voices, Nicaragua's President Daniel Ortega and his entourage have committed systematic human rights violations "tantamount to crimes against humanity," a group of UN-mandated experts said on Thursday.

In a report presented to the UN's Human Rights Council (HRC) in Geneva, they said Mr. Ortega, his Vice President and wife Rosario Murillo, and other high-level officials "should be held accountable."

"Violations, abuses and crimes have been perpetrated not only to dismantle active opposition efforts, but also to eliminate critical voices and dissuade, in the long term, any new organisation and



Daniel Ortega

hundreds of real and perceived opponents since then any shuttered more than 3,500 religious and other NGOs - often also seizing their assets. Managua views the 2018 protests as part of an attempted coup promoted by Washington, and claims they were funded by NGOs.

Mr. Ortega, a 78-year-old former Marxist firebrand sanctioned by the U.S., has governed Nicaragua since 2007, winning three successive reelections and tightening his grip on key state institutions. He and his wife now have "total control" over the judicial branch, according to the report.

The last election took place in November 2021 with Mr. Ortega's main rivals in jail alongside dozens of other government opponents and critics.

Journey of Chinese science fiction from suspected niche to cultural export

Associated Press
CHENGDU

For a few days in October 2023, the capital of the science fiction world was Chengdu, China. Fans traveled from around the world as Worldcon, sci-fi's biggest annual event, was held in the country for the first time.

It was a rare moment when Chinese and international fans could get together without worrying about the increasingly fraught politics of China's relationship with the West or Beijing's tightening grip on expression. But three

months later, much of that goodwill turned sour as a scandal erupted over allegations that organisers of the Hugo awards - sci-fi's biggest prize, awarded at Worldcon - disqualified candidates to placate Chinese censors.

The event embodied the contradictions that Chinese science fiction has faced for decades.

Geopolitical obstacle

In 40 years, it's gone from a politically suspect niche to one of China's most successful cultural exports, with author Liu Cixin gaining an international follow-



Popular choice: Copies of The Three-Body Problem, whose Netflix adaptation streams from March, at a bookstore in Beijing. AP

ing that includes fans like Barack Obama and Mark Zuckerberg. But it's had to overcome obstacles created by geopolitics for just as long. With a big-budget

Netflix adaptation of his *The Three-Body Problem* set to drop in March, producers with the same showrunners as *Game of Thrones*, Chinese sci-fi

could reach its biggest audience yet.

Chinese sci-fi's journey abroad started with another convention in Chengdu three decades ago, but politics rarely derailed that one before it could get off the ground. China's oldest sci-fi magazine *Science Fiction World* planned to host a writers' conference in the city in 1991. But as news of the brutal crackdown on student protesters in Beijing's Tiananmen Square circled the globe in 1989, foreign speakers were dropping out. The magazine sent a small delegation to the Worldcon 1990,

hosted in The Hague, to save the conference. In the end, a dozen foreign authors attended the conference. It was a small start, but it was more than anyone could have imagined a few years earlier.

China's growing sci-fi fandom was devouring translated works from abroad, but few people abroad were reading Chinese stories. Mr. Liu Managed to change that. A soft-spoken engineer at a power plant in the province of Shanxi, his stories were hits with genre fans. But *The Three-Body Problem*, first serialised by

Science Fiction World in 2006, reached a new level of popularity, says Yao Haijun, the magazine's editor-in-chief.

Unanticipated success

But no one could have anticipated the critical and popular success. In 2015, Mr. Liu became the first Asian author to win a Hugo Award for a novel.

Mr. Yao continues to believe in sci-fi's role as a bridge between cultures, even in turbulent times. "As long as there is communication," he says, "we'll be able to find some things in common."

IN BRIEF



Kotak Mahindra Bank unveils 'Smart Choice Gold Loan'

Kotak Mahindra Bank Ltd. (KMBL) has announced the introduction of "Smart Choice Gold Loan" for customers. "Unlike other credit products which have stringent eligibility criteria, gold loan has a simpler application and disbursal process," KMBL said in a statement. "By utilising gold as a collateral, borrowers can enjoy lower interest rates compared with conventional credit, translating to savings during the course of the loan tenure," the lender said in a statement.

TVS Holdings plans to redeem NCRPS on March 25

TVS Holdings Ltd. announced that its 9% cumulative non-convertible redeemable preference shares (NCRPS) would mature on March 25 and would be deactivated from trading. March 13 had been fixed for paying the full and final redemption amount of ₹10 per NCRPS and coupon payment at 9% per annum on the redemption value per NCRPS, the supplier of aluminium die-castings said in a regulatory filing. The NCRPS shall stand redeemed on March 25.

Shriram Automall generates ₹150-cr. transactions in Utsav

Shriram Automall India Ltd. (SAMIL) generated transactions worth ₹150 crore during its 13th anniversary SAMIL Utsav, with more than 120 auctions conducted in 120 cities across India. The latest edition attracted about 24,000 customers across cities on a single day. The event generated transactions worth more than ₹150 crore with the disposal of 7,900 vehicles and equipment and other assets, the leading physical, pre-owned marketplace for vehicles and equipment said.

Tata to build India's first fab as Cabinet approves ₹1.25 lakh cr. of chip facilities

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Union Cabinet on Thursday approved three semiconductor proposals totalling ₹1,25,600 crore, and to be located at Dholera and Sanand in Gujarat, and Morigaon in Assam.

The Dholera and Morigaon facilities would be built by Tata Electronics Pvt. Ltd. and Tata Semiconductor Assembly and Test Pvt. Ltd. The former would be India's first full-fledged fabrication unit with capacity to produce 50,000 "wafer starts" — the initial form of silicon chips — per month.

The announcement marks a milestone in India's efforts to kick-start a



Ashwini Vaishnav

semiconductor ecosystem as while most of the current investments through government subsidies and Productivity-Linked Incentive schemes have only yielded less sophisticated packaging plants that rely on raw and intermediate material from other sources, fabrication is a more fundamental, expensive

India begins second part of critical minerals auction worth \$362 bn

Reuters
NEW DELHI

India began the second part of its critical minerals auction worth \$362 billion, Mines Minister Pralhad Joshi said on Thursday.

A total of 18 blocks of critical and strategic minerals, including graphite, tungsten, vanadium, cobalt and nickel, among others, will be auctioned in eight States, a government statement said. Seventeen mineral blocks have been put up for a composite license, while one is for a mining lease. It added. A composite license includes a license to ex-

18 blocks of critical minerals including cobalt, nickel and graphite, will be auctioned in 8 States

mine a block and mine it afterwards. Mineral blocks are being auctioned in Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh, and the southern states of Andhra, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. Arunachal Pradesh and Rajasthan are also on the list. The first round of auctions was launched in November last year, in a move to drive the country's clean energy push.

Govt. capex shrank 40.5% in January leaving fiscal deficit at 64% of target

Centre has room to ramp up revenue and capital spending in February and March, but capital expenditure targets may not be met, reckon economists; government seen 'comfortably' on track to meet revised deficit goal of 5.8% of GDP for FY24

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Centre's capital expenditure contracted by a sharp 40.5% in January to ₹47,600 crore, from ₹80,000 crore a year earlier, while the fiscal deficit hit 64% of the revised estimates for 2023-24 by the end of the month.

With just two months to go in the financial year, the government was likely to miss its capex target and was also behind on its revenue expenditure plans, but appeared comfortably on

Spending squeeze

Govt. shrinks January capital expenditure by a sharp 40.5% to ₹47,600 crore containing 10-month fiscal deficit at 64% of RE

- Overall fiscal deficit stood at ₹11 lakh crore by January
- Full-year capex likely to undershoot by at least ₹50,000 crore; ICRA's Nayyar
- Less than 70% of planned expenditure met at agriculture, consumer affairs ministries; BoB's Sabnavis



track to meet the revised deficit goal of 5.8% of GDP, economists reckoned. "With ₹2.3 lakh crore left to be incurred in Fe-

bruary and March to meet the full year target for capex, we expect the capex to undershoot by at least ₹50,000 crore," said ICRA

chief economist Aditi Nayyar. Gross tax revenues needed to rise just 6% over these two months to hit the 2023-24 goal and corporate taxes were likely to surpass last year's collections, Ms. Nayyar reckoned.

Bank of Baroda chief economist Madan Sabnavis noted that only about 75% of the total planned expenditure for the year had been incurred in the first 10 months, so the scope for higher expenditure in the last two months was very high. "This also gets reflected in the high cash balances of the government

observed this month," Mr. Sabnavis noted.

'Food subsidies'

Interestingly, less than 70% of planned expenditure had been achieved in the ministries of agriculture and consumer affairs, which deal with outlays on the PM Kisan scheme and food subsidies, he said, adding the rural development ministry had similar spending levels as well.

The overall fiscal deficit stood at ₹11 lakh crore by January, lower than the ₹11.9 lakh crore over the same period in 2022-23.

January core sector growth slows to 15-month low, output at 10-month high

Vikas Dhoot
NEW DELHI

Output growth in India's eight core sectors dropped to a 15-month low of 3.6% this January, driven by a contraction in fertilizer and refinery production along with base effects from 2023 when the core sectors had grown 9.7% in the same month.

However, in absolute terms, overall output levels were at a 10-month high, with production rising sequentially for the second straight month and 2.2% above the December 2023 levels. Fertilizer produc-



tion shrank 0.6% in January, the first decline since February 2022.

The Commerce and Industry Ministry, which re-

leased the data on Thursday, also upgraded the growth rate for December 2023 to 4.9% from the 14-

month low of 3.8% estimated earlier. The Index of Core Industries (ICI) constitutes a little more than 40% of the Index of Industrial Production (IIP).

While refinery products, with a 28% weightage in the ICI, dropped 4.3% in January, marking their first contraction in nine months, electricity generation, with a 20% weightage, recovered from a mere 1.2% uptick in December to rise 5.2% in January.

Coal output growth slowed slightly to 10.2%, but still clocked the seventh straight month of

double-digit growth. Crude oil production broke a two-month streak of contraction to register a minor 0.7% growth in January.

"With a healthier trend in other high frequency indicators, we project IIP growth of 2%-4% in January," reckoned ICRA chief economist Aditi Nayyar.

While overall the core sectors' performance was a mixed bag in view of the low 3.6% uptick, cement and steel output growth, which are reflective of capex, were 7% and 5.6%, respectively, despite high base effects, said Bank of Baroda's Madan Sabnavis.

Services lifted U.S. prices in Jan.; inflation trending down

Reuters
WASHINGTON

U.S. prices picked up in January amid strong gains in the costs of services, but the annual increase in inflation was the smallest in three years, keeping a mid-year rate cut from the Federal Reserve on the table.

The Commerce Department's report also showed consumer spending slowing, including on motor vehicles and furniture. PCE inflation rose 2.4%, the smallest year-on-year gain since February 2021.

NBFC-MFIs seek to revise household income norms for microfinance loans

K. Ramkumar
MUMBAI

NBFC-MFIs (non-banking finance company-microfinance institutions) want the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) to revise the criteria relating to annual household income limit for giving micro loans in view of the growing needs of individual borrowers.

They want this limit raised from the existing ₹3 lakh to about ₹5 lakh.

The last time criteria relating to the annual household income limit for giving micro loans to individual borrowers was revised was in 2022, when the same was increased from ₹2.25 lakh in rural areas and ₹2 lakh in urban and semi-urban areas to a uniform ₹3 lakh.

Discussions with RBI Manoj Kumar Nambiar, Managing Director, Arohan Financial Services Ltd. and Vice-Chairperson of Microfinance Industry Network (MFIN), underscored the request to revise the annual household income limit as part of the ongoing discussions with the RBI.

"Typically, they don't do it on an annual basis, but in about two to three years' time. But they do re-look at the limit... I'm sure after the end of this financial year, when we look at the numbers and when we also index it with the government schemes/inflation, we will be able to make a case to the RBI to re-look at the limit," said Nambiar.

Defining 'household' The RBI defines a microfinance loan as a collateral-



Rising demand: Portfolio delinquency at pre-COVID level shows improving health of microfinance portfolio. GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

Average microfinance loan size has risen to ₹47,374 in Q3 FY24 from ₹41,123 in the year-earlier period and ₹39,512 in Q3 FY22, according to MFIN data

"The industry saw a robust growth of 24.6% from the last financial year taking the total industry portfolio to ₹3,99,442 crore. Portfolio delinquency has reached the pre-COVID levels which indicates improving health of the microfinance portfolio."

Industry portfolio According to MFIN data, 91 NBFC-MFIs are the largest providers of micro-credit with a loan outstanding of ₹1,56,245 crore, accounting for 39.1% of the total industry portfolio.

Banks (13) hold the second-largest share of portfolio in micro-credit with total loan outstanding of ₹1,33,753 crore, which is 33.5% of the total micro-credit universe.

Small Finance Banks have total loan outstanding of ₹70,449 crore with a total share of 17.6%. NBFCs account for another 8.9% and other MFIs account for 0.8% of the universe. (The writer is with The Hindu businessline)

MARKETS

MARKET WATCH

	THURSDAY	% CHANGE
Sensex	72,500	0.27
US Dollar	82.88	0.02
Gold	62,970	6.11
Brent oil	83.64	0.25

NIFTY 50

Stock	PRICE	CHANGE
Adani Enter.	3385.60	56.40
Adani Ports	1320.50	21.00
Apollo Hosp.	6301.60	-269.75
Axis Finance	3393.80	9.30
Axis Bank	1075.10	0.90
Bagaj Auto	1769.85	-279.30
Bagaj Finance	3393.80	9.30
Bagaj Finance	6495.35	-3.35
Barclays Bank	1222.85	-6.40
BFLCL	603.85	-0.45
Britannia Ind.	4965.20	77.40
Cipla	3480.35	-3.35
Coal India	436.70	2.50
Divis Lab.	3488.80	-29.55
Dr Reddy's Lab.	4642.40	-2.80
Equinox Motors	3792.40	-71.35
Grubler Ind.	2393.40	-3.35
HCL Tech	1628.60	11.95
HDFC Bank	1483.40	6.40
HDFC Life	582.80	1.40
Hind MobCorp	6426.50	51.45
Hindalco	563.85	-0.55
Hind. Inver.	2422.20	-0.25
ICICI Bank	1052.20	6.00
Indus Bank	1474.00	25.70
ITC	397.00	2.65
ITC	406.30	-2.00
J&F Steel	800.15	1.50
Kotak Bank	1489.45	5.85
LAT	3477.55	7.35
Uthmaniyah Ltd.	2612.50	309.10
MAM	1892.40	30.75
Manu. Sankal	12288.55	135.55
Nestle India	25962.00	25.30
NTPC	335.60	2.30
ONGC	264.60	-1.15
Powertech Corp.	282.45	3.30
Reliance Ind.	2931.60	10.35
SBI Life	1352.55	12.25
State Bank	786.10	5.60
Sun Pharma	1577.95	4.10
Tata Consumer/ProP.	1190.05	22.10
Tata Motors	950.20	-7.85
Tata Steel	1402.85	0.10
TCS	4095.10	-23.85
Tech Mahindra	1273.85	-12.00
Titan	3624.60	29.70
UltraTech Cement	9892.40	87.45
WIPAC	489.70	-4.20
Wipro	518.60	0.90

EXCHANGE RATES

Indicative direct rates in rupees a unit except yen at 4 p.m. on February 29

CURRENCY	TSBUY	TSSELL
US Dollar	82.71	83.03
Euro	75.13	76.68
British Pound	104.77	105.19
Japanese Yen (100)	55.16	55.38
Chinese Yuan	16.00	11.54
Swiss Franc	94.07	94.44
Singapore Dollar	61.50	61.76
Canadian Dollar	62.89	61.91
Malaysian Ringgit	17.39	17.51
Guarani/Colombian Dollar	53.14	53.95

Source: Reserve Bank

Re-examine moratorium on e-com, says India at WTO

Amiti Sen
NEW DELHI

India stressed on the need for "re-examination" of the implications of the moratorium on customs duties on electronic transmissions, particularly for developing countries and the LDCs at the 13th WTO Ministerial Conference (MC13) being held in Abu Dhabi, on Thursday.

New Delhi had earlier indicated its interest in favour of extending the moratorium at WTO MC13 as it believed that had resulted in considerable revenue loss for developing nations and there was no consensus on the scope of its coverage.

"India reiterated with the digital revolution still unfolding and with increasing dependence on technologies such as additive manufacturing and 3D printing, data analytics, artificial intelligence, internet-of-things etc., there was a need for re-examination of the implications of the moratorium on customs duties on electronic transmissions. The moratorium had since been periodically extended at successive ministerial conferences.

Developing countries lose an estimated \$10 billion a year in revenue due to the moratorium, as per a 2017 UNCTAD study.

For India, it could be more than \$500 million a year (2017 estimate). (The writer is with The Hindu businessline)

'Banks' deposit growth rate to cool in FY25'



Bigger slice: The moderation will intensify competition for deposit accretion, says India Ratings. GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

Anshika Kavastha
MUMBAI

Deposit growth rate of the banking system is expected to moderate to 12-13% in FY25, from 13.8% in FY24, further intensifying competition for deposit accretion, especially low-cost current account savings account (CASA) deposits.

While the deposit growth rate improved to 12.5% in Q3 FY24 from 9.6% in FY23, it continued to lag system credit growth, which is about 16.1%. System loan to deposit ratio (LDR) is at 81%, the highest in the last five years.

This is also seen raising lenders' reliance on bulk deposits if growth in granular deposits remained constrained, India Ratings said.

The rating agency has maintained a 'neutral' outlook on the banking sector for FY25. It increased the credit growth forecast for FY24 to 20.5% (inclusive of the impact of HDFC merger), driven by continued growth in retail, NBFC, other services and government/public sector units.

Credit growth for FY25 is seen at 15%, albeit with a change in portfolio mix due to slowdown in lending to NBFCs and retail sector, which is likely to be offset by a revival in private capex benefiting corporate credit growth.

"With the increase in policy rates and banks increasing the rates on term deposits, the mix of deposits has changed."

"This has led to a decline in the CASA ratio for the system (excluding the HDFC amalgamation) by around 300 bps between Q4 FY22 and Q1 FY24, owing to the movement of funds from CASA to better-yielding products."

(The writer is with The Hindu Businessline)

A case for buyer-led responsible renewable-energy procurement

The RE value chain is being exposed to environmental and social challenges just like any other sector; responsible RE procurement policies can set future standards; voluntary actions by a group of firms can aggregate huge demand for responsible RE procurement and catalyse it globally

COMMENT

Atul Mudaliar
Bhakti G.

More than 60% of the world's electricity demand is now met by fossil fuels. The International Energy Agency forecasts by 2026, low-carbon electricity sources, including renewable energy (RE), will account for almost 50% of the total global electricity production.

RE has been a game changer in our options to mitigate climate change. However, transitioning to cleaner forms of energy such as RE presents another overlooked golden opportunity. By being consciously responsible towards environment and communities in procurement, the RE sector can lead by example in the global clean-energy shift.

Responsible RE would mean not only procuring RE but also account for social and environmental externalities and costs as well. To give an example of positive and negative externality, the fossil fuel energy industry has provided the world with jobs and incomes for years, but it has also put adverse pressures on land, air, and water.

Similarly, the use of RE promises to mitigate the release of carbon into the atmosphere, secure energy



Green canopy: India plans to add 320 GW to its grid to reach 500 GW by end of this decade. AP

needs of countries, provide livelihood opportunities, cleaner air and other benefits. However, the RE value chain is also exposed to environmental and social challenges just like any other sector. Responsible RE procurement policies can set future standards.

Social conflict

The recently concluded global climate negotiation at COP28 in Dubai set an ambition to triple RE capacity by 2030. India is planning to add another 320 GW to its electricity grid to reach 500 GW by the end of this decade. Greater RE capacity will demand greater access to natural resources and human capital, which can induce social conflict. These are emerging challenges



that we must consider. The challenges could manifest in hyperlocal ways such as conflicts with communities on issues of land use and co-benefit sharing. RE projects can also exert burden on precious resources, including new minerals, land, water and in managing them sustainably at their end-of-life (such as disposing of solar panels and batteries used for storage of RE).

The RE value chain is a multi-stakeholder mesh of manufacturers, project developers, financiers, buyers, electricity regulators, government, communities, civil society and others. Each one of them has a role to play in growing RE exponentially, optimising positive externalities, and minimising undesirable outcomes.

In our experience, a growing number of businesses that are environmentally and socially responsible are proving that they have the power to influence RE markets. More than 400 companies globally have pledged to buy 100% RE by 2050 to meet their electricity needs. This network includes 10 Indian companies and more than 120 global coun-

terparts with India-based operations. Collectively, these firms with a demand of 430 TWh/year are driving RE demand and shaping policies in favour of RE adoption across regions and markets.

RE buyers, either small or big, together can also play a key role in demanding responsible procurement of RE. Currently though, the global RE regime is not incentivised enough for the RE buyer companies to explicitly do so. The focus is on a competitive, clean energy auction market for low-cost renewable energy.

Responsible RE

RE has an intrinsic advantage of being cleaner compared with its rivals, but it is being evaluated for its externalities by its consumers and shareholders. The RE sector can be responsible, value-driven and flourish at the same time.

Responsible RE could constitute several things. For example, it may well be the inclusion of local communities through participation in decision-making and being a beneficiary themselves throughout the life cycle of the RE project. It could mean preserving ecology through avoidance and mitigating measures in project siting, design and implementation.

Responsible RE may possibly also mean that RE buyers collaborate with de-

velopers to safeguard a people- and planet-centric transition, and that rights are protected and compliant with Indian laws.

RE buyers could also transition their own supply chains. Take for instance Apple, a RE100 company, through their Supplier Clean Energy Program, they review their suppliers' clean-energy projects by verifying and upholding accountability standards.

The shift to responsibility-oriented and sustainability-centric reporting for businesses is now in focus.

Business Responsibility and Sustainability Report by the Securities and Exchange Board of India aims at promoting transparency in disclosing non-financial parameters and sustainability goals. Indirectly, this will pave the way for responsible RE through accountability and transparency. However, RE buyer companies can lead by demanding responsible practices that percolate down their supply chains.

In the absence of a universal rule book, voluntary actions by a group of companies can aggregate huge demand for responsible RE procurement and catalyse it globally. By doing so, corporate RE buyers could become champions of sustainability.

(Bhakti G is Programme Officer and Atul Mudaliar Director of Systems Change at Climate Group India)

Show of bottle



Choked by costs: A French winegrower takes part in the blockade of the warehouses of global wine trading giant 'Castel Freres' to demand purchase prices "that take production costs into account" in Blanquefort in southwestern France. Farmers across Europe have been protesting for weeks over what they say are excessively restrictive environmental rules, competition from cheap imports from outside of the European Union and low incomes. The placard reads "French agriculture is suffering, producers are choking". AFP

Japanese investors allocate more to overseas equities than at home

Reuters

Japanese investors are hesitant to own home stocks despite the Nikkei's recent surge above bubble-era peaks because of uncertainty about sustained corporate returns and lingering memories of the 1990s market crash.

Instead, they are allocating more money to foreign equities, drawn by the promising outlook for U.S. stocks and its technology sector, and emerging economies such as India.

According to Morningstar, Japanese equity funds focusing solely on domestic markets received only \$1.2 billion in January, compared with an inflow of \$7.8 billion into funds



Frayed nerves: Foreign investors want reassurance that Japanese individual investors are actively buying own market, says LI. REUTERS

with a foreign investment focus. Of this, U.S.-focused equity funds received \$3.8 billion while those targeting global equities secured \$3.1 billion.

After a stellar rally, mainly fuelled by foreign

investors, the local market needs a domestic bid to sustain its uptrend.

Japanese households hold about \$7.7 trillion in cash and deposits, according to Bank of Japan data, which means they can

have sizeable impact on the Nikkei. They hold just 13% of assets in equities, significantly lower than 40% in the U.S.

Nikkei retreats
Nikkei index is retreating from this week's record high after a year-long rally driven by cheap valuations, corporate reforms and investment flows from Chinese stock market.

"While foreign investors have shown significant interest in Japanese equities, institutional clients are seeking reassurance that Japanese individual investors are also actively buying their own market," said Wei Li, portfolio manager at BNP Paribas Asset Management.

Under fire over disclosures, companies walk ESG tightrope

Reuters

LONDON

Since joining Asahi Group in 2020 as sustainability chief, Preeti Srivastava has helped the Japanese brewer make several environmental and social pledges but has not got it to disclose all its progress.

Asahi said on February 9 it had brought forward its target to 2040 from 2050 for lowering net greenhouse emissions to zero. It has not fully explained how it plans to get there.

Asahi is keeping private a sustainability and diversity, equity and inclusion (DE&I) "dashboard" launched in December 2020 to monitor progress in environmental, social and corporate governance (ESG), Ms. Srivastava said in

an interview.

The dashboard serves as an internal system for collecting the data which is then used for external reporting, Asahi said.

"There's so many landmines in some of these areas," Ms. Srivastava said. She noted that peer Anheuser-Busch InBev saw Bud Light sales slide as some U.S. beer drinkers bristled at a promotion featuring transgender influencer Dylan Mulvaney.

Ms. Srivastava also cited fears that employees and consumers could criticise slow progress on ESG targets or that regulators or investors could file "greenwashing" lawsuits accusing Asahi and other firms of exaggerating ESG accomplishments. "A lot of companies are



Under fire: Some politicians have even pressured firms to drop ESG policies. GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

hesitant, including us, to talk about any of our sustainability work until we can show even marginal improvement or impact," Ms. Srivastava said. Reuters interviews with

more than 20 company executives, data firms, consultants and investors shed light on how corporate ESG disclosures have become an ever more challenging balancing act for

companies. Environmentally and socially minded shoppers, employees and business partners seek ambitious ESG goals and want companies to document pro-

gress, while regulators and investors scrutinise ESG statements for accuracy. Meanwhile, some politicians, especially U.S. Republicans, have pressured companies to drop ESG policies altogether.

Discretion about ESG

The result often is discretion about ESG policies and accomplishments, or "greenhushing" as business leaders call it.

Analysis of more than 10,000 news sources for environmental statements shared with Reuters by data firm Permutab said greenhushing has been most prominent in the U.S., particularly for companies relying on Republican-led states for revenue or regulatory support. Financial sector compa-

nies worth \$10 billion or more collectively showed the biggest drop in ESG-related statements, year-over-year in the third quarter of 2023, down 20%.

U.S. Republican politicians have targeted banks and asset managers that support the transition away from fossil fuels to cleaner forms of energy.

A survey by The Conference Board, a U.S. think tank, showed 37% of financial and insurance industry respondents had experienced ESG backlash.

That far outpaced the next-most impacted sector, business and professional services, at 8%.

ESG mentions by autos and healthcare companies also fell according to the Permutab data. Food and beverage company state-

ments were flat. Politicians in Republican-controlled U.S. States have already launched 150 anti-ESG bills in 2024, which has had a chilling effect, according to Andrew Behar, chief executive of activist group As You Sow, which pressures companies, including the big U.S. banks, over ESG issues.

"We have to walk a very fine line... we're in a particularly tough situation in the United States right now. The way we talk is impacted," an executive at a U.S.-based bank said. A European banking source said U.S. clients were also affected. "Look, the environment in the U.S., you go to a client who does an 'E' project, he doesn't even want to name it 'E'... Everyone is hesitant now."

CALLING FOR CHANGE

Smith pushes for rule reform, urges intervention on leg-side bouncers



Steve Smith has said that authorities should urgently address the issue of pacers persistently bowling bouncers to a leg side field, as it restricts a batter's ability to hit the ball "anywhere in front of the wicket". He added a bowler should be allowed just one or two such deliveries, after which he should be warned or be called a wide.

PRIORITY

Even Rohit, Kohli should play domestic cricket when free: Azad



Member of the 1983 World Cup-winning team Kirti Azad on Thursday backed the BCCI's directive for cricketers to play Ranji Trophy. "Whenever you are free, even if you're a Rohit Sharma or a Virat Kohli, you should play domestic cricket for the State. That [State] gave you the opportunity to play for the country," he said.

UNDER THE SCANNER

Pogba banned for four years for doping violation



Juventus midfielder Paul Pogba was banned for the maximum four years by Italy's anti-doping court on Thursday after the World Cup winner tested positive for testosterone. Pogba's positive test was announced in September, stemming from an exam that was carried out after Juventus' game at Udinese on Aug. 20.

QUICKEST

Ricciardo on top in breezy Bahrain GP opening practice



Daniel Ricciardo topped the times for the re-branded RB team, formerly Alpha Tauri, in Thursday's first practice at the Bahrain Grand Prix. Max Verstappen went up sixth for Red Bull, but the action provided few clues to likely pace and form for Saturday's race that kicks off an unprecedented 24-race campaign.

Shafali-Capsey's rollicking stand sets up Capitals' win over RCB

Kapp and Jonassen's all-round shows with cameos and telling strikes prove decisive; Smriti's brilliant innings of 74 goes in vain for Royal Challengers as they lose the plot after a promising start

WPL SEASON 2

Mayanek Chaudhary
BENGALURU

Delhi Capitals rode on Shafali Verma's half-century (50, 31b, 3x4, 4x6) and Jess Jonassen's impressive all-round show (three for 21 and 36 n.o., 16b, 4x4, 2x6) to beat Royal Challengers Bangalore by 25 runs here at the M. Chinnaswamy Stadium on Thursday.

Chasing 195, RCB skipper Smriti Mandhana put on a show in front of a packed crowd. She took Royal Challengers past 50 inside Power-Play single-handedly and brought up her maiden WPL fifty off 32 deliveries in the eighth over.

Opener Sophie Devine fell to Arundhati Reddy before Marizanne Kapp removed the dangerous Smriti, cleaning her up in the 12th over, putting a massive dent in RCB's hope.

Although S. Meghana and Richa Ghosh scored valuable runs down the order, Royal Challengers fell like a pack of cards towards the end.

Arundhati sent Nadine de Klerk packing and



Packing a punch: Shafali's quickfire fifty was a perfect launching pad for Delhi Capitals' formidable total. K. MURALI KUMAR

Meghana was run out in the 19th over before Jonassen picked three scalps in the last over to restrict RCB to 169 for nine.

Earlier, a collective bat-

SCOREBOARD

DELHI CAPITALS

Meg Lanning c Wareham b Devine 11 (7b, 2x4), Shafali Verma c Wareham b Shreyanka 50 (32b, 2x4, 4x6), Alice Capsey b de Klerk 46 (33b, 4x4, 2x6), Jemimah Rodrigues c Simran b de Klerk 0 (4b), Marizanne Kapp c Simran b Devine 32 (16b, 2x4, 2x6), Jess Jonassen (not out) 36 (16b, 4x4, 2x6), Arundhati Reddy (not out) 10 (4b, 2x4); Extras (lb-2, w-6, nb-1); 9; Total (for five wks. in 20 overs): 194.

FALL OF WICKETS

1-28 (Lanning, 4 overs), 2-110 (Shafali, 11.6), 3-111 (Jemimah, 12.5), 4-124 (Capsey, 14.6), 5-172 (Kapp, 18.3).

RCB BOWLING

Renuka 4-0-28-0, Devine 3-0-23-2, Molnueux 2-0-23-0, Asha 2-0-30-0, Wareham 1-0-13-0, de Klerk 4-0-35-2, Shreyanka 3-0-40-1.

ROYAL CHALLENGERS

Smriti Mandhana 1 Kapp 74 (43b, 10x4, 2x6), Sophie Devine c Jonassen b Arundhati 23 (17b, 2x4, 2x6), S. Meghana run out 36 (32b, 2x4, 2x6), Richa Ghosh c

ENGLAND IN INDIA

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI

Senior India batter K.L. Rahul will not feature in the fifth and final Test against England in Dharamshala owing to an injury while pace spearhead Jasprit Bumrah will return to the team, the BCCI said on Thursday.

Rahul, who continues to feel sore in his right quadriceps, has travelled to London to get an expert opinion on his injury.

The wicketkeeper-batter became unavailable after the series-opener in Hyderabad in January and was 90% fit before the third Test in Rajkot earlier this month.

"Mr. K.L. Rahul, whose participation in the final IDFC First Bank Test was subject to fitness, has been ruled out of the fifth and final Test in Dharamshala. The BCCI Medical Team is closely monitoring him and coordinating with specialists in London for further management of his issue," the Board said in a release.

Meanwhile Bumrah, who was released from the squad for the fourth Test in Ranchi in line with the team's workload manage-



K.L. Rahul, K.R. DEEPAK



Green, AFP

Green rescues Australia with defiant ton

Agence France-Presse
WELLINGTON

Cameron Green slammed only his second Test century on Thursday to steer Australia to 279 for nine at stumps on the opening day of the first Test here.

The visitors were tottering on 89 for four after being put into bat at the Basin Reserve before Green dug in for a rescue mission with the help of Mitchell Marsh, who made 40.

The 24-year-old Green brought up three figures with his 16th four in the final over to end unbeaten on 103 with Josh Hazlewood yet to score.

Henry dismissed Smith for 31 before lunch, bowled Khawaja after the break, and then snaggled Marsh and Nathan Lyon.

The scores: Australia 279/9 in 85 overs (Green 103 batting, Mitchell Marsh 40, Khawaja 33, Smith 31, Henry 4/42) vs New Zealand. Toss: New Zealand.

Blancaneaux eases past second seed Walton

DELHI OPEN

Kamesh Srinivasan
NEW DELHI

Geoffrey Blancaneaux of France outplayed the second seed Adam Walton of Australia 6-3, 6-0 in the pre-quarterfinals of the Dafa News \$82,000 Delhi Open Challenger tennis tournament at the DLTA Complex on Thursday.

Walton struggled to find his rhythm right through the match. In contrast, Blancaneaux, who had lost in the first round of the Bengaluru and Pune Challenger events over the last fortnight, thrived in the conditions, with strong serves and fluent strokes.

In the quarterfinals, Blancaneaux will play qualifier Philip Sekulic of Australia.

In doubles, second seeds Arjun Kadhe and Jeevan Nedunchezhiyan fought back against Constantin Kouzmine and Maxime Janvier, but the Frenchmen handled the climax nicely for a 7-6(4), 6-7(4), [10-6] victory in the quarterfinals.

The Indian pair led 4-2



Percentage game: Blancaneaux thrived in the conditions, with strong serves and fluent strokes against Walton. KAMESH SRINIVASAN

in the super tie-break, but after being on par at 5-5, the French pulled away with a better game.

The other Indian pair of Nitin Kumar Sinha and Manish Sureshkumar lost 6-4, 6-4 to Germans Jakob Schnaitter and Mark Wallner (Ger) who had knocked out the top seeds Saketh Myneni and Ramkumar Ramesh in the quarterfinals.

The results: Pre-quarterfinals: Tristan Boyer (USA) bt Dane Sweney (Aus) 7-5, 6-3; Dalibor Srvcina (Cze) bt

Samuel Ruggiero (Ita) 7-5, 6-2; Philip Sekulic (Aus) bt Evgeny Donskoy 6-3, 6-2; Geoffrey Blancaneaux (Fra) bt Adam Walton (Aus) 6-3, 6-0. Doubles: Quarterfinals: Jakob Schnaitter & Mark Wallner (Ger) bt Nitin Kumar Sinha & Manish Sureshkumar 6-4, 6-4; Ray Ho (Tpe) & Calum Puttergill (Aus) bt Toshihide Matsui & Kaito Uesugi (Jpn) 6-4, 6-3; Piotr Matuszewski (Pol) & Matthew Romios (Aus) bt M Rifki Fitriadi (Ina) & Ryuki Matsuda (Jpn) 6-4, 7-5; Constantin Kouzmine & Maxime Janvier (Fra) bt Arjun Kadhe & Jeevan Nedunchezhiyan 7-6(4), 6-7(4), [10-6].

Paltan and Steelers clash for the ultimate honour



The big prize: Captains of Paltan and Steelers, Inamdar and Dahiya, ahead of the final. PKL

PKL

Saikat Chakraborty
HYDERABAD

Puneri Paltan and Haryana Steelers, boasting the best defences in Pro Kabaddi League seasons 10, will clash for the title here at the Gachibowli Indoor Stadium on Friday.

Led by coach B.C. Ramesh and all-rounder Aslam Inamdar, Paltan emerged as favourites due to their dominant season and aggressive style. Featuring raiders like Inamdar, Mohit Goyal, Pankaj Mohite and Akash Shinde, the Puneri team will aim to lift its first-

ever title. However, their true weapon is their innovative, team-oriented defence, marshalled by Iranian left-cornor Mohammadreza Chiyaneh.

On the contrary, the Steelers reached their first-ever final through sheer determination. Coach Manpreet Singh's team also boasts a strong defensive unit, led by Jaideep Dahiya, Mohit Nandal, and Rahul Sethpal. Vinay and Shivam Patare have emerged as key raiders.

This final promises a thriller where both teams will use strategic brilliance and defensive prowess to rewrite history and claim their first PKL title.

F1's longest season set to kick off after an eventful off-season

Associate Press
SAKHIR

After the most dramatic off-season in recent Formula 1 history comes its longest-ever season.

This off-season, seven-time champion Lewis Hamilton stunned the sport by announcing he is moving to Ferrari next year. The switch surprised his current team, Mercedes, and even his parents. Netflix star Guenther Steiner was removed from his role leading the Haas team.

Verstappen, Red Bull teammate Sergio Perez voiced concern for staff on



Concerned: Verstappen, who completely dominated last season, is not a fan of the impending marathon campaign. GETTY IMAGES

F1 teams who, he said, seemed exhausted at the final races of last year.

"I remember seeing a lot of zombies in Abu Dhabi, after Vegas," he said Wednesday. "We are trying to basically put some points across that it's not only for the drivers, to be honest. There's a lot of mechanics, engineers and basically they travel the world weekend after weekend, a lot of hours on the planes."

The record season means an extended goodbye for Hamilton, who is leaving Mercedes at the end of the season to join Ferrari, and raised concerns over how the expanded calendar might worsen F1's impact on the environment. Pre-season testing last year at the same track in

Bahrain was twice disrupted by rain covers flying off and leaving debris across the track — prompting Verstappen to voice concerns over safety — but that problem has now been solved for now.

Rain isn't a major concern in Bahrain so problem drains at two corners have simply been filled in with concrete.

Modern F1 cars' powerful ground-effect aerodynamics generate grip between the floor and the track surface but that force can also pull loose items away from the ground. Carlos Sainz Jr.'s Ferrari was badly damaged by a water valve cover in practice for the Las Vegas Grand Prix in November, underlining the risks to drivers.

IN BRIEF



Kush Maini secures pole for Bahrain F2 feature race

Invicta Racing's Kush Maini secured his maiden pole in the F2 championship with a time of 1:41.696 at the first FIA Formula 2 race of the year in Bahrain on Thursday. He was two tenths of a second faster than teammate Gabriel Bortoletto. It is the second season for Maini in the championship. The 23-year-old will start 10th in the reverse grid sprint race and from pole for the feature race. Meanwhile, Formula One announced on Thursday that FanCode will be its broadcast partner for the next two seasons in India, with the streaming site showing all practice and qualifying sessions, sprint events, and Grands Prix.

Sreenidi Deccan held by Mohammedan Sporting

Sreenidi Deccan FC conceded a late goal as it was held to a 1-1 draw by Mohammedan Sporting Club in the I-League at the Deccan Arena here on Thursday. David Castaneda scored early on for the Deccan Warriors but it was eventually cancelled out by Mohammedan substitute Mohammad Jassim as both teams took a point each in the top of the table clash.

The result:
Sreenidi Deccan 1 (Castaneda 3) drew with Mohammedan Sporting 1 (Jassim 82).

Thunderbolts hit Black Hawks to post second win in the PVL

Kolkata Thunderbolts picked up its second win, going past Hyderabad Black Hawks with a dominant 15-8, 15-8, 11-15, 20-18 win in the third season of the Prime Volleyball League in Chennai on Thursday.

World champion Spain wins Women's Nations League

Aitana Bonatti scored as Spain added the Women's Nations League trophy to its World Cup title with a comfortable 2-0 victory over France in Wednesday's final in Seville.

The results, final: Spain 2 (Bonatti 32, Caldentey 53) bt France 0; Third place: Germany 2 (Buhl 66, Schuller 78) bt Netherlands 0.



Super strikes: Martinez scores Inter's second against Atalanta. AP

Inter surges 12 points clear with win over Atalanta

Hat-trick hero Osimhen and Kvaratskhelia help Napoli hit Sassuolo for a six and be in mix for European spots

SERIE A

Agence France-Presse
MILAN

Inter Milan continued its march towards the Serie A title with Wednesday's 4-0 thumping of Atalanta which extended its league lead to 12 points, while Victor Osimhen and Khvicha Kvaratskhelia netted five of Napoli's six at Sassuolo.

Convincing victory in its game in hand at the San Siro took Inter's all-competitions winning streak to 11 matches and left closest rival Juventus trailing in the distance.

Simone Inzaghi's side was missing key players Francesco Acerbi, Hakan Calhanoglu and Marcus Thuram but it made little difference against one of the division's form teams.

Matteo Darmian got the ball rolling in the 26th minute with his first club goal of the season before Lautaro Martinez scored his 26th on the stroke of half-time

with a sensational spin and left-footed hit.

Martinez was denied a brace when Marco Carnesecchi saved his penalty nine minutes after the break, but Federico Dimarco was on hand to ram home the rebound.

However things might not have gone all their way had Charles De Ketelaere's early opener for Atalanta not been chalked off for a Aleksai Miranchuk handball following a long VAR check. Atalanta boss Gian Piero Gasperini was visibly irritated by that decision and the awarding — for another handball by Hans Hateboer — of the spot-kick which led to Dimarco ending the match as a contest.

Heavy defeat ensured that Gasperini's team stays fifth, two points behind Bologna which has the advantage in the race for the Champions League.

But Inter dominated from the moment De Ketelaere's goal was disallowed and substitute Davide Fratres completed the rout in the 71st minute with a

header from Alexis Sanchez's free-kick, as Inter put four past its opponents for the fourth straight league match.

Clinical Osimhen scored a hat-trick before Kvaratskhelia bagged a brace of his own as Napoli come from behind to win its game in hand 6-1 and reignite hopes of European football.

After Amir Rahmani levelled just before the half-hour mark, Osimhen rattled in his treble across 16 minutes either side of half-time to take his goal tally since returning from the Africa Cup of Nations to five in three matches in all competitions.

And Kvaratskhelia, who rolled Osimhen in for his simple third, belted in two fabulous strikes in the 51st and 75th minutes against a dreadful Sassuolo.

The results:
Inter Milan 4 (Darmian 26, Martinez 45+1, Dimarco 54, Fratres 71) bt Atalanta 0; Sassuolo 1 (Raci 17) lost to Napoli 6 (Rahmani 29, Osimhen 31, 41, 47, Kvaratskhelia 51, 75).

Yuki & Haase make it to last four in Dubai ATP event

TENNIS

Sports Bureau

Yuki Bhambhani and Robin Haase defeated third seeds Jamie Murray and Michael Venus 6-4, 7-6(1) in the doubles quarterfinals of the \$3,113,270 ATP tournament in Dubai on Thursday. Top seeds Rohan Bopanna and Matthew Ebden lost 8-10 in the super tie-break to Ariel Behar and Adam Pavlasek in quarterfinals.

The results: \$3,113,270 ATP, Dubai: Doubles, quarterfinals: Ariel Behar (Uru) & Adam Pavlasek (Cze) bt Rohan Bopanna & Matthew Ebden (Aus) 3-6, 6-3, [10-8]; Yuki Bhambhani & Robin Haase (Ind) bt Jamie Murray (GBR) & Michael Venus (Nzl) 6-4, 7-6(1).

\$15,000 ITF men, Kish Island, Iran: First round: Savelly Ivanov bt Ishaque Eqbal 6-4, 6-0; Samuil Konov (Bul) bt Adili Kalyanpur 6-4, 2-6, 7-5; **Doubles, quarterfinals:** Ishaque Eqbal & Adili Kalyanpur bt Amir Badi & Sina Moghimi (Iri) 6-1, 6-2; Rishi Reddy & Gheorghe Schintee (Rou) bt Ivan Kazakov & Maxim Zhukov 6-7(2), 6-4, [10-7].

\$15,000 ITF, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Thailand: Men, First round: Credit Chaiyanin (Tha) bt Yovan Mandel 6-4, 6-1; **Women, pre-quarters:** Watsachol Sawatdee (Tha) bt Jennifer Luikham 6-2, 1-6, 7-6(4); **First round:** Kim Yujin (Kor) bt Bela Tamhankar 6-3, 6-1; Jenniffer Lu Zhiu Chengting (Chi) 6-2, 2-6, 6-2; Carolann Delaunay (Ncl) bt Pooja Ingale 2-6, 6-3, 6-4; **Doubles, pre-quarters:** Liu Yanni & Zhang Jiale (Chi) bt Jennifer Luikham & Zheng Yizhen (Chi) 7-5, 6-1.

\$15,000 ITF men, Monastir: First round: Lorenzo Carboni (Ita) bt Chirag Duhani 6-4, 7-5; **Doubles, pre-quarters:** Simon Beauplain & Romain Faucon (Bel) bt Chirag Duhani & Jesse Flores (Crc) 6-3, 4-6, [10-5].

\$15,000 ITF men, Villena, Spain: Doubles, pre-quarters: Marco Berti & Federico Iannaccone (Ita) bt Raghav Harsh & Yashwanth Karthik 6-1, 6-0; **\$15,000 ITF women, Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt: First round:** Irina Balus (Svk) bt Maaya Rajeshwaran 6-0, 6-3; Evgeniya Boudina bt R. Prithivisha 6-3, 6-3. **Doubles, pre-quarters:** Merna Refaat & Sandra Samir (Egy) bt Flavie Brugnone (Fra) & Tanisha Kashyap 6-3, 3-6, [10-1].

Indians do well at C'wealth chess meet

Sports Bureau

India did exceptionally well in the Commonwealth chess championships in Melaka, Malaysia, recently, winning 10 gold medals in different categories.

The results (winners only): Open: Mithabha Guna; **Open U-18:** S. Ashwath; **U-14:** Avul Saurin Patel; **U-10:** Rahul Ramakrishnan; **U-8:** Mani Sarbartho; **Blitz:** Open: N.R. Vignesh.

Girls: U-16: Sneha Halder; **U-14:** Prishtha Gupta; **U-12:** Pratihee Bortolito; **U-10:** A.S. Sharuvaanica.



Sharuvaanica, u-10 girls' winner.

Manipur storms into the last eight; Railways and Delhi also make the grade

SANTOSH TROPHY

Sports Bureau

Former champion Manipur booked a quarterfinal berth with a remarkable 4-1 win over neighbour Mizoram in a final stage Group B league match of the 77th National football championship in Yupia, Arunachal Pradesh, on Thursday.

Philam Sanathoi Meetei netted a brace while Leimajam Sangkar Singh and substitute Pebam Renedy Singh scored once each to ensure a big win for Manipur.

Manipur, with three wins and draw, remained on top with 10 points, while Mizoram, who could only reply once through Malsawm Zuala Tlangte, stayed in fourth spot with four points.

Railways also qualified to the last eight from the group, after downing defending champion Karnataka 1-0.

Subrata Murrmu scored the lone goal in

the 53rd minute. Karnataka, which has managed two draws, dropped to the last spot with two points while Railways remained third with seven points.

Best goal scorer: Sridarsh Nongmekapam scored in the final minute of the second half injury-time to help Delhi edge past Maharashtra 3-2 and secure a quarterfinal berth.

The result helped Delhi pick up its second win and tally seven points to reach the second spot (as it had a better goal difference than Railways) in the standings.

With only a round to go, the final standings and the quarterfinal spot from the group will be decided on March 2.

The results:
Group B: Railways 1 (Subrata Murrmu 53) bt Karnataka 0; Manipur 4 (Leimajam Singh 8, P. Sanathoi Meetei 35 & 90, Pebam Renedy Singh 56) bt Mizoram 1 (Malsawmzuala Tlangte 84) Delhi 3 (Bhaaryan Bansa 7, Milind Negi 42, Sridarsh Nongmekapam 50) bt Maharashtra 2 (Mohammed Arfat Ansari 2, 65).

Palak Gulia beats Shital Desai to top air pistol event

SHOOTING

Sports Bureau

Asian Games gold medalist Palak Gulia beat qualification topper Shital Desai by 1.4 to top the women's air pistol in the third National shooting selection trials at the Madhya Pradesh Academy on Thursday.

The 18-year-old Gulia shot 242.0 after qualifying with a modest score of 578. Desai had shot 581. Suruchi placed third ahead of Anjali Shekhawat, Jasmin Kaur, Surbhi Rao, T.S. Divya and Pranjali Dhimal.

In men's air pistol Amit Sharma shot 242.6 in the fi-



Podium finish: Shital, Palak and Suruchi, the toppers in air pistol. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

nal to beat qualification topper Sharvan Kumar (586) by 0.4 point. Olympian Gurpreet Singh placed third.

Aditya Malha, who had also shot 586, Omprakash Mitharwal, Ajay Ambawat, Udhyaveer Sidhu and Ra-

hul were the others to make the final.

The results: 10m air pistol: Men: 1. Amit sharma 242.6 (584); 2. Sharvan Kumar 242.2 (586); 3. Gurpreet Singh 221.7 (582).

Women: 1. Palak Gulia 242.0 (578); 2. Shital Desai 240.6 (581); 3. Suruchi 220.0 (577).

Praggs commits a blunder

Press Trust of India
PRAGUE

Indian Grandmaster R. Praggnanandhaa committed a time-pressure blunder in his loss to Parham Maghsoodloo of Iran in the second round of Prague Masters Chess tournament here.

The defeat ended Praggnanandhaa's impressive 47-game unbeaten streak in classical chess.

The results (round 2): Parham Maghsoodloo (2) bt R. Praggnanandhaa (1); David Navara (1) drew with Vincent Keymer (0.5); Nguyen Thai Dai Van (0) lost to D. Gulegh (1.5); Vidit Gujrathi (1) drew with Nodirbek Abdusattorov (1.5); Richard Rapport (1) drew with Bartel Mateusz (0.5).

Shrivalli begins well but bows out to Cabaj in the pre-quarterfinals

ITF WOMEN

Sports Bureau
GURUGRAM

Shrivalli Bhamidipaty got off to a flying start but lost her serve rhythm and got beaten 1-6, 6-3, 7-6(5) by Jacqueline Cabaj Awad of Sweden in the pre-quarterfinals of the Federal Bank \$25,000 ITF women's tennis at the Tennis Project on Thursday.

Shrivalli had two aces and 15 double faults in the match that spanned two hours and 30 minutes.

Seventh seed Jacqueline played well right through and made less mistakes to reach the quarterfinals. She had to do less in terms

of winning points or breaking serve, and Shrivalli slithered to defeat, making three double faults in the third set tie-break.

The Swede will challenge second seed Anikita Raina who came through a tough encounter against Zeel Desai in straight sets.

Best match

The best match, in terms of high quality play, was the one between Sahaja Yamalappali and Riya Bhatia. Sahaja was gritty as she recovered from being 3-5 down in the first set, when she eventually saved a set point in the tie-break, for a 7-6 (8), 7-5 victory in two hours and 45 minutes.

While serving for the



Cabaj Awad in action against Shrivalli. KAMESH SRINIVASAN

match at 5-4, Sahaja missed three match points, as Riya stroked brilliantly to fight till the end.

Sahaja will challenge top seed Dalila Jakupovic of Slovenia who negotiated her way past the young Vaishnavi Adkar 7-6(0), 6-3.

The results:
Pre-quarterfinals: Dalila

Jakupovic (Slo) bt Vaishnavi Adkar 7-6(1), 6-3; Sahaja Yamalappali bt Riya Bhatia 7-6(8), 7-5; Justina Mikulskyte (Ltu) bt Yasmine Mansouri (Fra) 6-1, 7-6(4).

Ekaterrina Kazionova bt Anastasia Gasanova 3-6, 7-5, 6-4; Yoonwoo Ku (Kor) bt Fanny Ostlund (Swe) 4-6, 6-2, 7-5; Zhibek Kulumbayeva (Kaz) bt Rinon Okuwaki (Jpn) 6-4, 6-3; Jacqueline Cabaj Awad (Swe) bt Shrivalli Bhamidipaty 1-6, 6-3, 7-6(5); Anikita Raina bt Zeel Desai 7-6(4), 6-3.

Doubles: Quarterfinals: Kulumbayeva & Anikita bt Akiko Omae & Ikumi Yamazaki (Jpn) 7-5, 7-6(9); Riya & Michika Ozeki (Jpn) bt Gasanova & Ekaterrina Yashina 6-4, 6-4; Ku & Diana Marcincovic (Lat) bt Kazionova & Mansouri 6-4, 6-3; Cabaj Awad & Mikulskyte bt Shrivalli & Valdehi Chaudhari 3-6, 6-4, [10-8].

Mohun Bagan SG and Jamshedpur FC will aim to carry on their upward swing

ISL-10

Amitabha Das Sharma
KOLKATA

Defending champion Mohun Bagan SG will look to continue its resurgence under its new coach when it meets Jamshedpur FC, another team undergoing resurrection under a new manager, in an interesting clash of the ISL-10 at the

Salt Lake Stadium here on Friday.

In terms of efficiency so far in the tournament, Bagan is a bit ahead having won nine and drawn three for 30 points from 15 matches.

Jamshedpur is on 20 gained from 17 wins and five draws in 15 outings. Bagan, currently third, will hope to strengthen its claim for the League Shield

while Jamshedpur, a former League Shield winner, will aim to cement its place in the top-six and progress to the knock-outs.

Both sides have remained unbeaten in their last five encounters with three wins and two draws each.

Bagan's recovery happened in the second phase under Antonio Lopez Ha-

bas, who returned in January to end the sequence of losses under Juan Ferrando.

The story has been somewhat similar for Jamshedpur, which has undergone a great transformation under Khalid Jamil, who joined the side in the new year after the previous coach Scott Cooper parted ways.

National camp for senior wrestlers after trials, says WFI president Sanjay Singh

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI

The Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) is gearing up for the senior National camp after almost 15 months with Delhi likely to replace Patiala as the venue because of the ongoing farmers' protest.

The ad-hoc panel had started the training camp for men (Rohtak) and women (Patiala) after conducting its

own Nationals in Jaipur. The WFI, after United World Wrestling (UWW) lifted its suspension, announced the trials to select the national teams for the Asian championships in Bishkek (April 11-16) and the Continental Olympic Qualifier in the Kyrgyzstan capital (April 19-20).

"After we conduct these trials, the top-four in each category will be invited to be part of the National camp,"

WFI president Sanjay Singh said.

The four-best wrestlers at the recently conducted Nationals in Jaipur (conducted by the ad-hoc panel) and Pune (conducted by WFI), have been invited to compete in the trials.

Those who did not compete in either Nationals but are good performers will also be allowed to compete. Rejecting the WFI's invita-

tion to compete in the upcoming national trials, Bajrang Punia has moved an urgent joint petition in the Delhi High Court, seeking a stay on the selection competition being organised by the WFI here on March 10-11.

While Bajrang did not confirm filing a petition, he questioned the government's silence on issues concerning Indian wrestling.

The importance of Manpreet in Haryana Steelers' remarkable run

The outspoken and passionate Punjab-born player-turned-coach is thrilled that league will see a new team lifting the trophy in PKL 10

Saikat Chakraborty

Manpreet Singh, the outspoken and passionate coach of Haryana Steelers, has taken the Pro Kabaddi League by storm this season.

After its unexpected win against Jaipur Pink Panthers in the semifinals, Manpreet took to the social media to urge fans for sportsmanship, regardless of the outcome of the match.

A former India International, Manpreet boasts an impressive coaching career in PKL. He previously led Gujarat Fortune Giants (now Gujarat Giants) to two consecutive finals (in seasons five and six), showcasing his strategic prowess. However, guiding the underdog Haryana Steelers to the PKL 10 final could be his crowning achievement, unless he crosses the final hurdle.

An Unlikely Journey

At the start of the season, the Steelers were considered the least likely to make the playoffs, let alone the final. They lacked experienced players, with the exception of Mohit Nandal and Siddharth Desai.

A heavy defeat in their first match against UP Yoddhas (by 30 points) further solidified this perception. Desai's injury added to the woes, leaving them with a seemingly insurmountable task.

Undeterred, Manpreet transformed the team into a defensive powerhouse. He trusted his young defenders and Nandal's experience, and the Steelers emerged as one of the league's meanest defensive units. Captain Jaideep Dahiya, Nandal, Rahul Sethpal, Ashish, and Mohit formed a formidable wall, consistently stifling opposition raiders.

Grinding Out Success

Unlike their flashy final opponent, Puneri Paltan, the Steelers relied on grit and determination. They defied expectations, grinding out wins and securing a playoff spot.

Despite their limited playoff experience, the Steelers continued their impressive run, cruising past the Giants in the eliminator, to secure their first win in PKL knockouts in their five-year history, before dethroning the Pink Panthers to reach the final.

The Steelers' coach acknowledged the unique nature of this season and termed the emergence of young teams as a sign of a shift in kabaddi.

"Both the finalists consist of young players, which I think is a statement that the game has evolved. Players after their 30s are not able to cope with the speed of the game," he said after the win against the Pink Panthers.

The Punjab-born player-turned-coach also expressed happiness that league will



SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

see a new team lifting the trophy. "I'm very happy that this year there will be a new winner, a team will lift the trophy," opined Manpreet.

Manpreet was proud about his team, acknowledging their underdog status after the semifinal win.

"My team had nothing to lose... I'm very happy for my boys, they have played with their hearts and they deserve to play in the final," said the former India international.

While recognising Paltan's strengths, the tactician was confident in his team's

abilities and called for the best team to lift the trophy. "Puneri are a brilliant team... In the final, anything can happen, the best team in those 40 minutes will win. We are confident that we'll give our best on the mat."

Defensive prowess

The Steelers' defensive prowess is evident with three of their defenders – Sethpal, Dahiya, and Nandal – ranking among the top 10 in the league for tackle points.

However, as Dahiya, the team's 'Virender Sehwa' for his aggressive

playing style, emphasised, "individual numbers don't matter, all that matters is the team is winning."

The defender also credited his coach for the success of the team. "Manpreet paaji is more of a brother to us than a coach. He helps us a lot in terms of understanding the game and motivates us to play fearlessly," Dahiya said ahead of the final.

With a passionate coach, a determined team, and a strong defensive foundation, Haryana Steelers are ready to create history in the PKL 10 final.

THE GIST

▼ Manpreet had led Gujarat Fortune Giants (now Gujarat Giants) to two consecutive PKL finals (in seasons five and six)

▼ The former India international has transformed the Steelers into a defensive powerhouse that has consistently stifled the opposition raiders.

▼ The Steelers' coach has acknowledged the unique nature of this season and termed the emergence of young teams as a sign of a shift in kabaddi.

Puneri Paltan's adoption of a daring, unique style redefines the sport

Saikat Chakraborty

More than just contenders in the Pro Kabaddi League Season 10, finalist Puneri Paltan is transforming the sport itself. The team ditched traditional tactics, adopting a fresh and innovative style that sets it apart. This bold approach comes after a gut-wrenching loss in last year's PKL final, prompting it to re-strategise and rise as a force to reckon with.

In its quest for the maiden PKL title, coach B.C. Ramesh made a daring move at the season 10 auction. Paltan bid farewell to seasoned Iranian duo of Fazel Atrachali and Mohammad Nabibakhsh and welcomed the versatile Mohammadreza Chiyaneh. The captaincy reins were entrusted to Aslam Mustafa Inamdar, a young talent in his third PKL season, symbolising a commitment to youth.

Paltan topped the league on their way to the semifinal, winning 17 out of 22 matches with an impressive score difference of 253 (the top two teams in league stage automatically make the semifinals while the remaining four battle it out in playoffs). And in the semifinal, Paltan brushed aside Patna Pirates 37-21 to reach the second consecutive final.

"We've played our brand of kabaddi throughout the tournament, and it's brought us success. We won't change our approach for the final. My boys are ready for the challenge," declared Paltan's coach in the post-match press conference

following their semifinal victory over Pirates.

Puneri Paltan is showcasing a unique style of kabaddi, where every player seamlessly transitions between offence and defence. Led by the dynamic Aslam Inamdar, raiders like Mohit Goyat and Pankaj Mohite actively contribute to the team's defensive capabilities, often catching opponents off guard with their anticipation and cover skills.

The team's offensive duty is well distributed, moving away from relying on a single raider, keeping the opposition uncertain.

"When a raider goes for a raid, he's alone, but in defence, the entire team can work as a unit. If all seven players are together, it makes it difficult for the opposition raiders to score. Relying on one or two main raiders makes things very predictable. Their off day can ruin the chances of the team," Ramesh earlier in the season explained his team's approach to *The Hindu*.

Leading the charge for Puneri Paltan with his all-around talent is captain Aslam Inamdar. A key player in India's successful Asian Kabaddi Championship and Asian Games campaigns in 2023, Inamdar boasts an impressive record of 139 raid points and 25 tackle points this season.

Defensive dominance
Paltan boasts the league's most coordinated defensive unit, emphasizing teamwork. The Pune-based team has the best

defensive record in PKL 10, with a tackle success rate of 55.04% and a total of 340 tackle points from 322 successful tackles, averaging 14.78 tackle points per match.

Paltan has also inflicted the most all-outs (45) and conceded the least (14) compared to all other 11 teams in the league. This kind of dominance is unheard of in the annals of PKL.

One of the key players in Puneri Paltan's defence is vice-captain and left-corner, Chiyaneh. The flamboyant Iranian is leading the individual defensive leaderboard with a staggering 97 tackle points, putting him just four points shy of the PKL record for most tackle points by a defender in a single season. "Shadloui (Chiyaneh) is a brilliant defender and all-rounder. He's always hungry on the mat, and I'm constantly learning from him. He's a young guy and very hungry to make a mark in the sport. He's been very consistent scoring over 80 points in the last two seasons," said Inamdar ahead of the final.

Despite being a well-rounded player for his national team, Chiyaneh hasn't had many opportunities to raid in the PKL 10. However, he showcases his explosive raiding skills whenever he gets a chance. This Iranian powerhouse has already accumulated 27 raid points.

Stepping onto the mat at the Gachibowli Indoor Stadium for the finale on Friday, Paltan will put their new, game-changing approach to the ultimate test.



SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT