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Will find a way for the undocumented: Shah

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It is imperative to raise the poverty line

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Mumbai clinches Ranji Trophy in style

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INSIDE



Prime Minister to visit Bhutan next week

NEW DELHI
Prime Minister Narendra Modi will visit Bhutan next week, announced the visiting Bhutanese Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay in New Delhi on Thursday night. » PAGE 6

West Bengal CM injured after fall at residence

KOLKATA
West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee was injured on her forehead after a fall at her residence in Kalighat here on Thursday. She remains stable and was discharged from the hospital later in the evening. » PAGE 4

Probe into Nijjar's killing continues, says Canada

NEW DELHI
Canada said on Thursday that it continues to investigate the killing of Khalistani separatist leader Hardeep Singh Nijjar. The comment came in response to statements by New Zealand Deputy Prime Minister Winston Peters during his visit to Delhi. » PAGE 4

China gives bomb disposal devices to Sri Lanka

COLOMBO
Sri Lanka has received a stock of bomb squad equipment through a grant from the Chinese military, the Sri Lankan Army has said. The equipment will be used primarily for screening, bomb detection, and disposal, according to Army sources in Colombo. » PAGE 12

Poll bonds: 22 firms donated over ₹100 crore

Election Commission publishes the data on poll bonds received from SBI on March 12

The Hindu Data Team
CHENNAI

Future Gaming and Hotel Services PR, whose managing director is lottery magnate Santiago Martin, was the single largest donor to political parties between April 12, 2019 and January 24, 2024, according to the electoral bonds data released by the State Bank of India and published by the Election Commission on Thursday, on the orders of the Supreme Court.

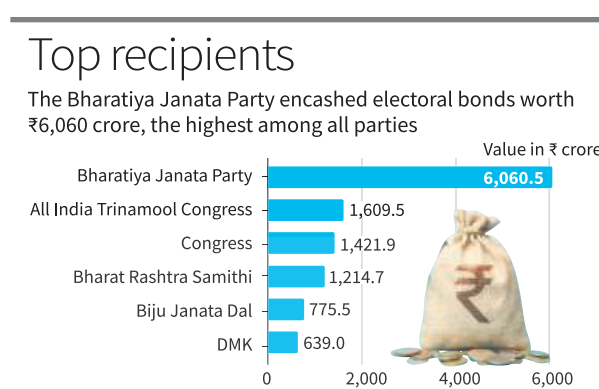
The firm donated a cumulative sum of ₹1,368 crore through electoral bonds during this period. Incidentally, the Enforcement Directorate had attached ₹411 crore in the bank accounts of this firm and other companies in March 2022 and had later filed a prosecution complaint against it under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act, 2002 before the

PMLA Court, Kolkata on September 9, 2023. Among parties, the Bharatiya Janata Party encashed electoral bonds worth ₹6,060.5 crore – the highest among all parties – within this period. In fact, the BJP's share of the total bonds encashed by parties was over 47.5%.

Other political parties
The All India Trinamool Congress received ₹1,609.50 crore (12.6%), followed by the Congress, which received ₹1,421.9 crore (11.1%), the second and third biggest parties in terms of encashment during the period. The Bharat Rashtra Samithi (9.5%), Biju Janata Dal (6.1%), and Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (5%) were the other parties which encashed more than ₹500 crore worth of electoral bonds during this period.

Overall, 22 donated more than ₹100 crore dur-

ing this period. Megha Engineering and Infrastructures Limited (MEIL), headquartered in Hyderabad, was second on the list, having donated ₹966 crore. Western UP Power Transmission Company, which is also part of MEIL group of companies, donated ₹220 crore.



The other firms in the top 10 donor list for this period were: Qwik Supply Chain (₹410 crore), Haldia Energy (₹377 crore), Vedanta (₹375.65 crore), Essel

Mining and Industries (₹224.45 crore), Bharti Airtel (₹198 crore), and Kevenor Foodpark Infra (₹195 crore).

Other major buyers include: Grasim Industries, Megha Engineering, Piramal Enterprises, Torrent Power, DLF Commercial Developers, Apollo Tyres, Lakshmi Mittal, Edelweiss, PVR, Sula Wine, Welspun, and Sun Pharma.

In total, electoral bonds worth over ₹12,155 crore were purchased by donors

in this period and more than ₹12,769 crore were encashed by all parties during the same time.

The information was put in the public domain by the ECI on Thursday, after SBI disclosed the data on March 12. The Supreme Court had directed the EC to host this information on its website by March 15, which it did on "as is where is" basis.

"In compliance of the Hon'ble Supreme Court's directions, contained in its order dated Feb 15 & March 11, 2024 (in the matter of WPC NO.880 of 2017), the State Bank of India (SBI) had provided the data pertaining to the electoral bonds to the Election Commission of India (EC) on March 12, 2024. The Election Commission of India has today uploaded the data on electoral bonds on its website as received from SBI on 'as is where is basis'," the Election Commis-

sion said in a statement. The information uploaded on the EC website showed that the SBI shared two sets of data: one with the name of the purchaser of each electoral bond, the date of purchase, and the denomination of the bond; and another with the name of the political party, date and denomination of bonds encashed.

The data supplied by SBI does not include the serial numbers of the bonds. On February 15, Supreme Court had scrapped the electoral bonds scheme, terming it "unconstitutional". It had asked the SBI to submit to the EC all details of the bonds which had been purchased since the interim order of the court was issued on April 12, 2019, till date. On March 4, the SBI sought additional time till June 30, saying it needed

more time to match the buyers of the bonds with the political parties which encashed them. On March 11, SC dismissed a plea filed by the SBI seeking an extension till June 30 for disclosure of the data on electoral bonds. It asked that the data be submitted to the EC by Tuesday.

In an affidavit filed in the SC on Wednesday, the public sector bank said that 22,217 electoral bonds were issued between April 2019 and February 15, 2024. It said that political parties had redeemed 22,030 bonds, while the remaining 187 were redeemed and the money was deposited in the Prime Minister's National Relief Fund, in accordance with the scheme's rules. (With inputs from Sreepartha Chakrabarty in New Delhi)

RETURN DOCUMENTS: EC
» PAGE 5

Snowscape valley



A thick blanket of snow covers an area near the Atal Tunnel in Manali following fresh snowfall on Thursday. PTI

Panel recommends simultaneous polls

Sandeep Phukan
NEW DELHI

The high-level committee headed by former President Ram Nath Kovind has recommended simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies as the first step, and holding municipal and panchayat polls within 100 days of the general election in the next phase.

The committee on Thursday submitted its report, running into more than 18,000 pages, to President Droupadi Murmu. The report that is put in the public domain, however, is a 321-page one.

The 22nd Law Commission, which is examining the simultaneous polls issue, is also expected to submit its report to the Law Ministry anytime now and recommend the same from the 2029 general election cycle.

The Kovind panel report will not have any bearing on the upcoming Lok Sabha election.

To synchronise the elections, the Ram Nath Kovind Committee has suggested that the President, through a notification issued on the first sitting of the Lok Sabha post general elections set an 'Appointed Date'. This date would mark the beginning of the new electoral cycle. State Assemblies, which are formed after the 'Appointed Date' and before the completion of the Lok Sabha's term, would conclude before the subsequent general elections. After this, election to the Lok Sabha and all State Assemblies would be held simultaneously.

The panel recommended that fresh elections could be held to constitute



Backing the proposal: Former President Ram Nath Kovind presents the report to President Droupadi Murmu on Thursday. ANI

a new Lok Sabha in the event of a hung House or a no-confidence motion, or any such event but the tenure of the House will be "only for the unexpired [remaining] term of the immediately preceding full term of the House".

When fresh elections are held for Legislative Assemblies, then such new Assemblies – unless sooner dissolved – shall continue up to the end of the full term of the Lok Sabha.

To effect these changes, the panel has recommended amendments to Article 83 (duration of Houses of Parliament) and Article 172 (duration of State legislatures) of the Constitution.

Ratification by States
The panel recommended suitable amendments to Article 324A of the Constitution to allow simultaneous elections in panchayats and municipalities;

and Article 325 to allow the Election Commission of India (EC), in consultation with State election authorities, to prepare a common electoral roll and voter ID cards. Both these constitutional amendments would require ratification by the States, the report said. Presently, the EC is res-

ponsible for Lok Sabha and Assembly polls, while local body polls for municipalities and panchayats are managed by State election commissions.

In all, 18 amendments to the Constitution and other statutes have been suggested. An implementation group has also been recommended to oversee the execution of the recommendations by the committee.

"Now, several elections are being held every year. This casts a huge burden on the government, businesses, courts, political parties, candidates contesting elections, and civil society at large," the panel said, adding, "the government must develop a legally tenable mechanism to restore the cycle of simultaneous elections".

The panel has crafted its recommendations in such a way that they are in accordance with the spirit of the Constitution and would require bare minimum amendments to the Constitution, an official statement said after the report was handed over to President Murmu.

CONG. SLAMS REPORT
» PAGE 5

Gyanesh Kumar, Sukhbir Sandhu appointed Election Commissioners

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

President Droupadi Murmu on Thursday appointed retired bureaucrats Gyanesh Kumar and Sukhbir Singh Sandhu as Election Commissioners. A selection panel, headed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, had earlier recommended their names.

"The President is pleased to appoint Shri Gyanesh Kumar, IAS (retd) and Dr. Sukhbir Singh Sandhu, IAS (retd) as Election Commissioners in Election Commission of India with effect from the date of assumption of charge of their office," a



New roles: Former bureaucrats Gyanesh Kumar and Sukhbir Singh Sandhu who were appointed as ECs on Thursday. ANI

Rashtrapati Bhavan communicate said.

This is the first time that Election Commissioners have been appointed in accordance with the new Chief Election Commissioner and Other Election Commissioners (Appoint-

ment, Conditions of Service and Term of Office) Act, 2023 brought in by the government in December.

According to the Act, a selection committee headed by the Prime Minister and comprising a Union Minister nominated by the

Prime Minister and the Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha will select members of the Election Commission.

Union Home Minister Amit Shah and Congress leader Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury are members of the current committee.

After the meeting, Mr. Chowdhury told the media that a total of six shortlisted names had been shared with him barely 10 minutes before the meeting.

Mr. Chowdhury said that late on Wednesday night, a list of 212 names had been shared with him. The Congress leader also said that he had submitted a dissent note.

Stop 'using' Sharad Pawar on party flyers, SC tells Ajit

Krishnadas Rajagopal
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Thursday asked Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar to not "ride piggyback" on uncle and Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) founder Sharad Pawar to get votes.

A Bench of Justices Surya Kant and K.V. Viswanathan said Mr. Ajit Pawar should desist from using the elder Pawar's photographs and name on his party pamphlets and notices.

FULL REPORT
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IN BRIEF



Found evidence of illegal sand mining by Cong. MLA, says ED

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) found evidence of illegal sand mining during recent searches at 20 locations linked to Jharkhand Congress MLA Amba Prasad (in picture), the Central agency said on Thursday. The probe agency conducted searches at multiple locations in Ranchi and Hazaribagh linked to the MLA, her father and their other family members and associates on March 12. In an official statement on the search operation, the ED said it had seized unexplained cash of ₹35 lakh, fake seals of circle offices and banks, as well as various hand-written receipts/diaries.

Case against Swami Prasad Maurya over CAA remark

A First Information Report (FIR) has been registered against Rashtriya Shoshit Samaaj Party (RSSP) president Swami Prasad Maurya at the Manchi police station in Sonbhadra on Thursday for hate speech, insulting religious belief over his statement on the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). In his petition, the complainant Bindu Kharwar, a local, alleged that Mr. Maurya in his post on social media handle X (formerly Twitter) tried to promote enmity between different groups and committed acts prejudicial to maintenance of harmony. The Manchi police could not be reached despite multiple attempts for a response.

Sambar deer antlers seized, two arrested in Maharashtra

The Palghar police in the Mumbai Metropolitan Region on Thursday seized sambar deer antlers valued at ₹60 lakh, and arrested two persons. Based on a tip off that a group of smugglers were coming to Nalasopara in Vasai, police set up a trap and arrested the two when they arrived in an auto-rickshaw with a bag. When the bag was opened, a deer antler worth ₹50 lakh was found inside, the police said. After interrogating the accused another antler worth ₹10 lakh was seized, the police added. A case under provisions of the Wildlife Protection Act was filed against the two accused. A probe is on to find out the source of smuggling, the police said.

ED issues fresh summons to ex-CM Hemant's press adviser

The Enforcement Directorate has summoned former Jharkhand Chief Minister Hemant Soren's press adviser Abhishek Prasad, Preeti Kumar, wife of a senior IAS officer, and DSP Pramod Mishra for questioning in money laundering investigation linked to alleged illegal mining and land deals in the State, official sources said on Thursday. Mr. Prasad has been asked to depose at the federal agency's Ranchi office on March 18, Mr. Mishra on March 19 and Ms. Kumar on March 20, they said. Sources said their statements will be recorded under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA). Mr. Prasad had appeared before the ED on February 9 and 10 for questioning in the same case, officials said. PTI

Shah, Kejriwal engage in verbal duel after AAP chief raises doubts on CAA

Union Home Minister asks why AAP national convener remained mum on Rohingya infiltration; Kejriwal says Act's implementation will create law and order problems, jeopardise women's safety

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Thursday said Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal's opposition to the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) shows that he has "lost his calm" due to the uncovering of his corruption and the "tough" Lok Sabha election his party faces in the Capital.

Mr. Shah also said while the AAP chief has opposed citizenship to persecuted minorities from neighbouring countries, he has so far remained silent over the Bangladeshi and Rohingya "infiltration" into the country.

Mr. Shah's statement drew a sharp reaction from Mr. Kejriwal, who said he doesn't care if the BJP leader calls him corrupt as the country comes first for him. He claimed that the implementation of the Act will trigger larger migration than the Partition, creating law and order pro-



Refugees from Pakistan staging a protest against CM Arvind Kejriwal outside his residence in New Delhi on Thursday. ANI

blems and jeopardising women safety.

The Union Home Ministry on Monday notified the rules for the implementation of the CAA that was passed by Parliament in December 2019. The law facilitates citizenship to "persecuted" people belonging to Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Parsi, Christian and Jain communities from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan.

Mr. Kejriwal on Wednesday alleged that the Centre's move allowing

poor minorities from neighbouring nations to settle in India will snatch away job opportunities from the countrymen, and it is aimed at "only creating a vote bank" for the BJP in the areas where it is weak.

Reacting to the allegations, Mr. Shah in a podcast with a news agency said the minorities in neighbouring countries faced persecution ever since India was partitioned on the basis of religion in 1947.

"They were being con-

verted, women were being tortured. Don't they have the right to get our citizenship?" Mr. Shah said.

'Questions unanswered' Hours after, Mr. Kejriwal in a video message said Mr. Shah did not answer the questions raised by him and only "abused" him.

He asked why the BJP did nothing to stop those belonging to the Rohingya community (predominantly Muslims from Myanmar) from entering India after 2014 when it came to power at the Centre.

He also expressed concern over the security situation after the refugees settle in the country. "If the slums of these intruders from Pakistan are constructed right in front of your homes, would you accept it? Will your daughters be safe? Would you feel safe among the people whom you don't know? What if Pakistan sends people intentionally? There will be constant law and order problems," he said.

Nitish, Rabri among 11 elected to Bihar Council

Amarnath Tewary
PATNA

Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar and Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) leader Rabri Devi were among 11 candidates elected unopposed on Thursday to the State Legislative Council. Earlier, the Election Commission had announced biennial polls for 11 seats of the Upper House in the State.

Mr. Kumar, who is also JD(U) president, was elected to the Council for the fourth consecutive term while party leader Khalid Anwar was elected for the second consecutive term.

Manjhi's son elected

The other alliance partner of NDA, Hindustani Awam Morcha (Secular) leader Santosh Kumar Suman, who is the son of former CM Jitan Ram Manjhi, too was elected to the Council. The three BJP candidates Mangal Pandey, Anamika Singh and Dr. Lal Mohan Gupta were elected to the Council as well.

From the Opposition Mahagathbandhan (grand alliance), all four candidates of the principal coalition partner RJD - Rabri Devi, Abdul Bari Siddiqui,



Nitish Kumar being greeted after his election to Legislative Council on Thursday. PTI

Urmila Thakur and Faisal Ali - were elected along with one candidate Shashi Yadav from ally Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) to the Council unopposed as March 14 was the last date for the candidates to withdraw their papers.

Except these 11 candidates, no other candidate filed the nomination for the Council seats.

No Congress candidate

Earlier, it was speculated that grand alliance ally Congress too would field one candidate for the Council seat as party leader Prem Chandra Mishra's term had come to an end while the party has a total of 19 MLAs in the Assembly. But the Congress kept itself away from the polls.

Nine of 20 BJP candidates in Maharashtra Lok Sabha list come from political families

Abhinav Deshpande
NASHIK

The BJP is facing charges of nepotism as nine out of the 20 candidates in its second list for Lok Sabha seats in Maharashtra come from political families.

BJP candidates on the list from political families include Union Minister Piyush Goyal, Union Minister of State Bharati Pravin Pawar, and former State Minister Pankaja Munde.

Mr. Goyal is the son of Ved Prakash Goyal, a long-standing RSS activist, and Chandrakanta Goyal, who served as a corporator post-Emergency and represented the Matunga seat in the Maharashtra Assembly for three terms. Mr. Goyal has now been fielded from Mumbai North.

Ms. Munde is being fielded from Beed, taking over the mantle from her sister, Pritam Munde, and

Piyush Goyal, Pankaja Munde among those who will continue their family's legacy

continuing the political legacy of their father, Gopinath Munde, a BJP leader and former Union Minister.

Ms. Pawar, Dindori's sitting MP, represents the second generation of leadership, succeeding her father Harishchandra Chavan in the 2019 Lok Sabha poll.

The BJP has retained its sitting MPs Sujay Vikhe-Patil, son of BJP leader and State Minister Radhakrishna Vikhe-Patil, from Ahmednagar; and Raksha Khadse - whose father-in-law, Eknath Khadse, is an MLC from the NCP's Sharad Pawar faction - from Raver. Heena Gavit, two-time MP from Nandurbar, is the daughter of Minister

Vijaykumar Gavit. Ranjeet-sinha Naik-Nimbalkar, son of former Shiv Sena MP Hindurao Naik-Nimbalkar, has been fielded again from the Madha seat.

Anup Dhore, the son of Akola MP Sanjay Dhore, will contest the seat in the Vidarbha region. Sangli MP Sanjaykanta Patil's uncle Dinkarrao Patil is a three-time MLA from Tasgaon-Kavathe Mahankal seat.

'Double standards' Slamming Mr. Modi's "double standards", Congress leader Jairam Ramesh said, "The Prime Minister constantly criticises dynastic politics, but if you look at both the lists of candidates, you will find they are replete with candidates who represent parivarvad," he told *The Hindu*.

However, a senior BJP leader claimed that candidate selection for the seats was "merit-based".

'CAA rules, police deployment attempt to provoke Muslims'

Sobhana K. Nair
NEW DELHI

The move to notify the rules of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the subsequent deployment of police forces in Muslim majority areas look like an attempt to contrive a reaction from the community, Samajwadi Party MP Javed Ali Khan said, pointing out that the rules were notified on Tuesday coinciding with the first day of Ramadan.

Mr. Khan asserted that the CAA rules are not part of the Samajwadi Party's electoral discourse, which, he said, is mainly centred around farmers' demand for MSP, rising unemployment and crimes against women, and exploitation of Dalits and minorities under the BJP in Uttar Pradesh and at the Centre. "Rules are being framed for so many laws in the country, but we have never seen police

deployment at Muslim majority residential areas for that. The day the CAA rules were notified, coinciding with the beginning of Ramadan, they strategically placed the police force hoping to provoke a reaction," Mr. Khan, who was also part of the joint parliamentary committee on the CAA, said.

The SP and the other Opposition parties, he said, opposed the CAA on the principle that "it uses religion as a qualifier to grant citizenship, which is unconstitutional". The timing of notifying the rules, he said, is definitely circumspect.

The CAA prescribes a cut-off date of December 31, 2014. Persons who entered India after that aren't eligible to seek citizenship under the law. "Does the BJP believe that there is no religious persecution happening in Pakistan or the neighbouring countries after 2014?" he added.

Will wait for pact with MVA till last day: Ambedkar

Press Trust of India
SAMBHAJINAGAR

B.R. Ambedkar's grandson Prakash Ambedkar, who heads the Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi, said on Thursday that they will wait for an alliance with the Opposition MVA in Maharashtra till the last date of nomination for the Lok Sabha poll.

'Differences in MVA'

There are differences within the Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA), which comprises Congress, Uddhav Thackeray-led Shiv Sena (UBT) and Nationalist Congress Party (Sharadchandra Pawar), he claimed.

According to Mr. Ambedkar, there is a tussle between Congress and NCP over five seats. Similarly, Sena (UBT) and Congress have yet to agree over ten seats, he said.

Maharashtra has 48 Lok Sabha seats, second after Uttar Pradesh's 80.

Barrackpore may see a 2019 rematch as Trinamool's Arjun Singh set to join BJP

Shiv Sahay Singh
KOLKATA

Upset at being denied a ticket to contest the Lok Sabha polls from Barrackpore, Trinamool Congress leader Arjun Singh on Thursday said he would be joining the BJP on Friday.

The development at Barrackpore, ahead of 2024 Lok Sabha poll, is similar to what happened ahead of the 2019 Lok Sabha poll, when after being denied ticket by the Trinamool Congress, Mr. Singh joined the BJP and contested the polls.

He returned to the Trinamool Congress in May 2022. The Barrackpore MP, who had defeated Trinamool candidate Dinesh Trivedi in 2019 by a margin of



Arjun Singh has been denied ticket by the Trinamool from Barrackpore.

about 13,000 votes, expressed his desire to contest the Lok Sabha polls from the same seat this time on a BJP ticket. "If the party [BJP] gives me an opportunity to contest in Barrackpore, I will give a befitting reply to those who indulged in post-poll violence in 2021," Mr. Singh

said. His son Pawan Singh is a BJP legislator from Bhatpara that falls under the Barrackpore Lok Sabha constituency.

Barrackpore, with a number of jute mills in West Bengal's North 24 Parganas had witnessed communal unrest and electoral violence between 2019 and 2021, resulting in several deaths.

On Thursday, Mr. Singh said that "at least one top Trinamool Congress leader" would be joining the BJP along with him. Sources in the BJP said Trinamool Congress MP from Tamruk, Dibyendu Adhikari, who is brother of BJP leader Suwendu Adhikari, might join the BJP. The BJP has fielded Soumendu Adhikari, another brother of

Mr. Suwendu Adhikari from the Kanthi Lok Sabha seat.

'Links with Shahjahan' Meanwhile, targeting the Trinamool candidate from Barrackpore and State Irrigation Minister Partha Bhowmick, Mr. Arjun Singh raised questions about his alleged links with Sheikh Shahjahan.

"Why did the TMC top brass send Partha Bhowmick, instead of the local MLA to Sandeshkhali to defend Shahjahan and his cohorts? That's because he had close contacts with Sheikh," he alleged. He said that not only Sheikh Shahjahan, but his associates Shiba Prasad Hazra and Uttam Sardar had also bought land and properties in Naihati.

BSP eyes Muslim-Dalit combination as return ticket to relevance in western U.P.

Mayank Kumar
LUCKNOW

Going by the names of some of its Lok Sabha probables, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) seems to be falling back on the party's old Muslim-Dalit formula to stay in the reckoning in western Uttar Pradesh.

Over the past few days, the party has announced names of probable candidates on seven Lok Sabha seats, several of them in western U.P. - Irfan Saifi from Moradabad, Mushahid Hussain from Amroha, Anis Ahmed Khan from Pilibhit, Majid Ali from Saharanpur, Akil Ahmed Patta from Kannauj, Chaudhary Vijendra Singh from Bijnor and Dara Singh Prajapati



Mayawati

from Muzaffarnagar.

While the official declaration of these candidates for the seven seats will be made by party president Mayawati in the coming days, BSP coordinators of the region have announced the names at district-level meetings of the party. The party sees a revival of the Dalit-Muslim social alliance as a formidable combination given a scenario where it has been

increasingly edged out by the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance and the Samajwadi Party-led INDIA bloc in the State.

The candidates named by the BSP have considerable grassroots connect. Mr. Saifi, for instance, is the Nagar Palika president of Thakurdwara in Moradabad district while Mr. Ali has been an influential leader in Deoband constituency and has fought Assembly polls in the past. Mr. Khan is a three-time former MLA from Bisalpur seat in Pilibhit and has contested parliamentary polls twice in 2009 and 2014 on the BSP symbol. Mr. Singh, a Jat and former Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) leader, holds influence in the Bijnor region while Mr. Prajapati is

the national president of Rashtriya Prajapati Mahasabha, a caste-centric social organisation.

"In many of these seats, Muslims constitute more than 30% of the electorate and all the constituencies have a sizeable Dalit population, hence the party thinks it may repeat its past results," said Shashikant Pandey, a political scientist teaching at Lucknow University.

Declining base

The party, however, has an uphill task due to its declining support base. While in 2007 it formed a government on its own after winning 206 out of the 403 Assembly seats, it only has a lone MLA in the current Assembly.

IN BRIEF



Amit Shah opens new NIA office complex in Kochi

The new office complex of the National Investigation Agency (NIA) was inaugurated in Kochi by Union Home Minister Amit Shah virtually on Thursday. The new facility includes an administrative block with state-of-the-art investigation and intelligence facilities, modern interrogation room, among other amenities. The NIA's Kochi office with jurisdiction over Kerala and Lakshadweep was established in 2012. Criminal Case Management System, a digital investigation platform, was also launched.

Earthquake of magnitude 3.6 reported in Tirupati district

Tirupati district in Andhra Pradesh witnessed a mild earthquake for five seconds in Sullurpeta constituency on Thursday evening. The quake was recorded at a magnitude of 3.9 on Richter scale in Pichireddythopu and Mangapathi Nagar areas of the Naidupeta area at 8.43 p.m. However, no loss of life or property was reported. The district administration advised the people not to panic over the incident. Those in trouble can call the number 08772236007.

TDP releases second list for A.P. Assembly election

The Telugu Desam Party announced the second list of candidates for 34 Assembly seats on Thursday. With this, it has named 128 candidates. The first list had 94 names. The TDP is contesting the Lok Sabha and the Assembly polls in an alliance with BJP and the Pawan Kalyan-led Jana Sena. It will be contesting 144 of the 175 Assembly seats and will field candidates for 17 of the 25 Lok Sabha seats in Andhra Pradesh.

State Cabinet approves Phase 3 of Metro rail in Bengaluru

The Hindu Bureau
BENGALURU

Providing a boost to urban mobility in Bengaluru, which is plagued by traffic issues, the Karnataka government on Thursday approved Phase 3 of Namma Metro Rail. Under this plan, 44.65 km of the new line will be added to the network by 2028 at a cost of ₹15,611 crore.

The proposed new line connects Hebbal with J.P. Nagar via Goruguntepalya, Magadi Road, Mysuru Road and Kanakapura Road along the Outer Ring Road for a distance of 32.15 km. Another line connecting Hosahalli and Kadabugere via Magadi Road for a distance of 12.5 km has been approved.

Work to start soon
“The Cabinet approved adding two more corridors to the Namma Metro network to reduce traffic problems. While metro Phase 2A and Phase 2B are expected to be completed in two years, work on Phase 3 will start soon. Once Phase 3 is completed, the line along the Outer Ring Road will be completed. Already, the J.P. Nagar to Silk Board junction is under progress under Phase 2,” Minister Krishna Byre Gowda said. He said that the overall ridership was expected to increase once Phase 3 becomes operational.

“About 80% to 85% of the cost of Phase 3 will be funded by the State, and we hope that the Centre meets the remaining cost. The feasibility survey has been completed, and the Centre has given its approval,” Mr. Gowda added.

Season's special



Favourite spread: Children walk past vermicelli (seviyan) kept for drying in Hyderabad on Thursday. It is used to make a traditional sweet dish popular during the fasting month of Ramzan. G. RAMAKRISHNA

Kerala to build beehive fences, ponds to check rising conflicts

The Hindu Bureau
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

Faced with an increasing prevalence of human-wildlife conflicts, the Kerala government has decided to adopt a wide range of mitigation efforts, ranging from eco-restoration activities to erecting ‘beehive fences’, to keep the marauding animals at bay.

Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, who on Thursday chaired the first meeting of the high-level panel constituted to address the issue, said a control room has been set up at the Forest department headquarters to coordinate the efforts. Around 900 watchers will be deployed on a temporary basis to the rapid

Case filed against T.N. Minister in Delhi for remarks on Modi

FIR was registered based on a complaint by a Supreme Court lawyer, who said Anbarasan had made a ‘threatening statement’ that poses significant risk to Prime Minister’s safety and security

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

A case has been registered against Tamil Nadu Minister T.M. Anbarasan for his alleged threatening remarks against Prime Minister Narendra Modi at a public rally in the State, the Delhi Police said on Thursday.

According to the police, the first information report (FIR) was filed at the Parliament Street station on Wednesday following a complaint from Supreme Court lawyer Satya Ranjan Swain.

According to the FIR,



T.M. Anbarasan

Mr. Anbarasan, the Minister of Rural Industries, Cottage Industries, and Small and Medium Industries in Tamil Nadu, had openly threatened to “chop Mr.

Modi into pieces”. The FIR adds, “The threatening statement made by Anbarasan is not only alarming and poses a significant risk to the safety and security of our Prime Minister, but is also shameful and made deliberately to stir the peace and stability of our nation and evoke violence.”

“Such kind of deliberate provocations during election times when the PM has been visiting places all across the country has been done in a calculated manner to cause disaffection amongst the citizens of this country on reli-

gious, ethnic and regional grounds,” the FIR said.

Minister’s video

The FIR registered under Sections 153 (wantonly giving provocation, with intent to cause riot), 268 (negligent conduct with respect to explosive substance), 503 (criminal intimidation), 505 (statements conducting public mischief) and 506 (punishment for criminal intimidation) of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) also said that a video of the Minister making the remarks is doing the rounds on social media.

Fest judge accused of bribery found dead

The Hindu Bureau
KANNUR

A competition judge embroiled in a bribery case linked to the Kerala University Arts Festival held in Thiruvananthapuram recently was found dead at his house in Kannur on Wednesday night.

The deceased, P.N. Shaji, had reportedly consumed poison. The police have recovered a suicide note. In the note, Shaji, the primary accused in the case, professed his innocence and denied any involvement in bribery to in-

fluence the judgment.

Allegations that details of contestant were sent via intermediaries to Shaji’s phone had surfaced, prompting an inquiry.

The case, implicating four persons, including two dance instructors and an assistant, had cast a shadow over the integrity of the Margamkali competition, leading to the withholding of results pending investigation. Shaji was supposed to appear for questioning.

(Those in distress may contact suicide prevention helpline: 0471-2525056)

Kerala Chief Minister questions Congress for being ‘mute’ on CAA

The Hindu Bureau
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan slammed the Congress for being mute in its opposition to the “patently anti-Muslim” Citizenship (Amendment) Act.

Mr. Vijayan on Thursday said Rahul Gandhi, who is seeking re-election from the Wayanad Lok Sabha constituency in Kerala, has not uttered a word about the Centre’s election eve push to impose the “communally divisive law”.

Mr. Vijayan said Con-



Bone of contention: A DYFI protest march against the CAA, in Thiruvananthapuram on Monday. ANI

gress president Mallikarjun Kharge restricted himself to a cursory remark against the Centre’s framing of

rules to implement the law. He said K.C. Venugopal, the Congress candidate for the Alappuzha constituen-

cy, questioned the Centre’s delay in implementing the contentious law. “He found the Centre’s timing inappropriate and saw no fundamental flaw in the anti-Constitutional legislation,” he added.

Mr. Vijayan said that in 2019 the Congress initially supported the Kerala Assembly’s resolution urging the Centre to annul the divisive law.

Later the party changed tack. None of the Congress MP’s from Kerala challenged the CAA in the Lok Sabha, he said.

Desertions continue to hit BRS ahead of Lok Sabha poll

The Hindu Bureau
HYDERABAD

The Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) continues to face a setback ahead of the Lok Sabha election with many leaders either quitting the party or crystallising plans to leave the party in the coming days.

Former Minister and Medchal MLA C. Malla Reddy along with his son C. Bhadra Reddy met Karnataka Deputy Chief Minister D.K. Shivakumar in Bengaluru on Thursday, leading to speculation that the leaders are planning to exit the BRS. Mr. Bhadra was an aspirant for Malkajigiri constituency.

Mr. Malla’s meeting with Mr. Shivakumar, who is considered close to Telan-



C. Malla Reddy

gana Chief Minister A. Revanth Reddy, assumes significance as it comes close on the heels of the State government action against the educational institutions run by Mr. Malla and his son-in-law, Rajasekhar Reddy, on the charges of encroachment.

Mr. Bhadra has backed out from contesting the

election following the developments.

Speaking to *The Hindu*, Mr. Malla said he had met Mr. Shivkumar regarding the take over a private university in Bengaluru. “I met him at a reception and a friend of mine facilitated the meeting for the university,” he said.

Meanwhile, two-time BRS MLA Aroori Ramesh quit the party after a meeting with party president K. Chandrasekhar Rao on Wednesday. He travelled to New Delhi on Thursday to join the BJP. He lost the recent Telangana Assembly election.

Former Minister E. Peddi Reddy also said he that he was quitting the BRS. He is likely to join the Congress.

A.P. sanctuaries hosted more than one lakh migratory birds this winter

Rajulapudi Srinivas
ATAPAKA

Nature lovers, bird watchers, students and tourists have been having a delightful time at the Atapaka Bird Sanctuary in Andhra Pradesh with thousands of migratory birds visiting the Kolleru Lake here.

Mounds, trees and iron stands erected by the Forest Department in the lake were swarming with the winged visitors.

“The number of winged visitors to the State was good this year. Around 1.5 lakh birds arrived in the sanctuaries, water bodies and wetlands in Andhra Pradesh this migratory season,” said Additional Principal Chief Conservator of



Safe perch: Pelicans with their young ones sitting on iron stands erected by the Forest Department in the Kolleru Lake. K.V.S. GIRI

Forests (Wildlife) Shanti Priya Pandey. Nearly 50,000 birds were counted at the Kolleru Lake, 43,130 birds at the Coringa Sanctuary, 37,150 at the Pulicat Lake, around 16,000 birds at Nelapattu, and 8,000

birds at Uppalapadu, Ms. Pandey told *The Hindu* on Thursday.

Pat for villagers

“I thank the villagers for protecting the birds at the sanctuaries and wetlands.

As there is no risk posed by humans, the migratory birds have been arriving at the lakes and sanctuaries for the winter since decades,” Ms. Pandey said.

“Indian skimmers, great knots, greater flamingos, pelicans, painted storks, little egrets, northern pintail, Indian pond herons, Eurasian coots, glossy ibis, lesser whistling ducks, black-tailed godwits, grey pelicans, Asian open bill storks, purple swamphen and other birds were sighted,” the Additional (Wildlife) PCCF said.

“Thousands of birds visit Atapaka every year. The birds will brood, fly off with young ones and come back the next winter,” a villager in Atapaka said.

West Bengal CM suffers injury after fall at residence

Shiv Sahay Singh
KOLKATA

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee was injured on her forehead after a fall at her residence in Kalighat here on Thursday.

The 69-year-old leader was rushed to the State-run SSKM Hospital here.

SSKM Hospital director Manimoy Bandopadhyay said Ms. Banerjee was brought to the hospital with injuries sustained in a fall after "a push from behind". She suffered cerebral concussion and had a sharp cut on the forehead and nose, he added.

Ms. Banerjee's family members said she was given four sutures. She remains stable and was discharged from the hospital later in the evening.

Earlier, the Trinamool Congress posted photographs of the injured Chief Minister on X, and said: "Our chairperson @MamataOfficial sustained a major injury. Please keep her in your prayers."

Earlier, hundreds of people gathered at the hospital to enquire about Ms. Ba-



Mamata Banerjee has been discharged from hospital.

nerjee's health condition.

Leaders' concern

Leaders across political lines wished the Chief Minister a speedy recovery. Trinamool leader Sukhendu Sekhar Ray said Vice-President and former West Bengal Governor Jagdeep Dhankhar enquired about Ms. Banerjee's condition.

State BJP president Sukanta Majumdar as well as Congress leader Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury wished her a speedy recovery.

State Congress president Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury also wished her a quick recovery. (With PTI inputs)

Don't ride piggyback on Sharad Pawar to get votes, SC tells Ajit

Bench says Ajit Pawar should desist from using his uncle and NCP founder Sharad Pawar's name, photograph on notices and pamphlets of his breakaway faction; asks both groups to issue public statements clarifying their respective positions

Krishnadas Rajagopal
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Thursday asked Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar to not "ride piggyback" on uncle and Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) founder Sharad Pawar to get votes.

A Bench of Justices Surya Kant and K.V. Viswanathan said Mr. Ajit Pawar should desist from using the elder Pawar's photographs and name on his party pamphlets and notices.

"Why are you using his [Sharad Pawar] photo? If you are so confident of your popularity and being a public leader, you get votes on your photos. Why are you riding on his back," Justice Kant asked senior advocate Maninder Singh, appearing for the Ajit Pawar group.

Senior advocate A.M. Singhvi, appearing for the Sharad Pawar faction, said "if you [Ajit Pawar camp]



Better times: NCP founder Sharad Pawar with his nephew, Ajit Pawar, at an event in Mumbai, in this file photo.

have the guts, get your votes yourself, why get votes on my piggyback?"

'Own identity'

Mr. Singh said the workers, especially those in rural areas where not everyone had a smartphone to know that the uncle and nephew has separated ways, may be behind this turn of events.

"You [Ajit Pawar] chose to go separately. You say you are a separate political party now... You say you are two separate entities now, that you have separate identities... But to get to voters you need his [Sharad Pawar] face... Go with your own identity... or is that to win elections, you need him. Once you win, you don't need him," Jus-

tice Kant said.

Mr. Sharad Pawar had approached the court saying that his breakaway nephew, who is part of the coalition government with the BJP and the Shiv Sena faction led by Chief Minister Eknath Shinde, was paying him "left-handed compliments" by using his name and photographs on his pamphlets to mislead voters.

'Each vote counts'

"This is a compliment I don't want... Each vote counts. There should be fair, free elections, which is part of the basic structure," Mr. Singhvi submitted.

The court said it wanted a "categorical and unconditional assurance" from the Ajit Pawar faction that they would not use Mr. Sharad Pawar's name, photograph and identity directly or indirectly anymore. "There will be no overlap between the two parties," Justice Kant said.

Both factions have been

asked to issue public notices clarifying their respective positions and to establish their new identities.

Mr. Singhvi said even the original NCP symbol of 'clock' should be frozen.

"Clock' is intertwined with the Sharad Pawar name and identity," Mr. Singhvi said.

The court said it would hear the issue on March 19.

The elder Pawar has already challenged the Election Commission (EC) decision on February 6 declaring Mr. Ajit Pawar's camp as the "real" NCP.

The Supreme Court, however, on February 19, allowed Mr. Sharad Pawar and his faction to operate under the name 'Nationalist Congress Party-Sharad Chandra Pawar' apparently beyond the Rajya Sabha polls scheduled on February 27.

On the Supreme Court's order, the EC had also allocated the 'trumpet' as the party symbol for the Sharad Pawar-led faction.

Switched to portraits of Y.B. Chavan, says Ajit

Shoumojit Banerjee
PUNE

After the Supreme Court rapped the Ajit Pawar-led Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) faction on Thursday for continuing to use photos of NCP founder Sharad Pawar, Mr. Ajit clarified that his faction was now using pictures of the late Y.B. Chavan, the first Chief Minister of Maharashtra.

Talking to presspersons at Baramati, Mr. Ajit Pawar said that after he aligned with the Shiv Sena-Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) combine in July last year, his NCP faction had initially used the name and photos of his uncle, Sharad Pawar.

"But after Sharad Pawar objected, we started using photos of Maharashtra's first CM Yashwantrao Chavan," said Mr. Ajit, who is the Deputy Chief Minister.

He also cautioned voters that the NCP patriarch would use sentiment to seek votes for his daughter, Supriya Sule, and exhorted his constituents to vote for the person whom he nominated as the ruling Mahayuti's candidate.

CPI(M) names candidates for 16 LS seats in West Bengal

The Hindu Bureau
KOLKATA

Amid talks of seat sharing with the Congress, the CPI (M)-led Left Front on Thursday announced candidates for 16 of the 42 Lok Sabha constituencies in West Bengal.

"We are not ruling out an alliance with the Congress. If the Congress wants seat adjustments, we are not going to say no," Left Front chairperson Biman Basu said. As the Left Front had announced candidates for 16 seats, there was scope for an alliance with the Congress on the remaining seats, he said.

A few days ago, CPI(M) State secretary Mohammad Salim and Congress State president Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury had held discussions on an electoral alliance. Mr. Chowdhury had said that the possibility of an alliance with the Left Front was open.

Mr. Basu said that 14 in the list are new candidates. The list included Saira Shah Halim from Kolkata South, Dipsita Dhar from Serampore and Sayan Banerjee from Tamuk.

The Left Front and the Congress have had electoral alliances in the State since 2016 but they did not yield much electoral success.

Focus is on welfare of public, says Modi at street vendors' meet

Satvika Mahajan
NEW DELHI

Addressing beneficiaries of the PM SVANidhi scheme at an event in the capital on Thursday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said the Union government has been making a concerted effort to uplift street vendors of the country.

At the event, he also laid foundation stone of two additional corridors of Delhi Metro's Phase 4 and highlighted efforts to improve housing for the urban poor. Praising the work being done in Delhi by the BJP-led Union government, he said, "We are relentlessly working to improve the lives of the poor and the middle class. My focus is on 'Welfare of the nation through welfare of the public', and making India the world's third-largest economy," Mr. Modi emphasised.

The PM Street Vendor's AtmaNirbhar Nidhi (SVANidhi) scheme provides collateral-free working capital loans to beneficiaries. Mr. Modi said lakhs of street vendors work very hard with dignity to uplift their families. "Their shops might be small, but their dreams are big," the PM said, adding that money has been transferred directly to the accounts of

street vendors all over the country under the scheme. He emphasised how the vendors who had earlier contributed to the informal economy are now part of the formal economy.

He said the previous government did not care for the street vendors and did not care for their concerns which left the vendors facing disrespect and hardship. "This servant of yours has come out of poverty. I have lived in poverty. That is why those who have not been cared for by anyone, have not only been cared for but also worshiped by Modi," said the PM.

Until now, 62 lakh beneficiaries have received assistance worth ₹11,000 crore, Mr. Modi said. He expressed delight that more than half of the beneficiaries were women.

The scheme was launched during the pandemic in 2020 to help street vendors tide over the crisis. In Delhi alone, nearly 2 lakh loans worth ₹232 crore have been distributed, the PM said. He noted that many of them had migrated from villages to cities to make a living. "PM SVANidhi not only connects the beneficiaries to banks but also opens the doors to other government benefits."

Tasty treat



Mixed flavours: A shopkeeper sells traditional Kashmiri snacks and savouries in a market during the month of Ramzan, in Anantnag on Thursday. ANI

Assam will have lowest number of applicants under CAA, says CM

The Hindu Bureau
GUWAHATI

The Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) will be "a fiasco" in Assam, Chief Minister and BJP leader Himanta Biswa Sarma said on Thursday. He underlined the conditions a refugee has to fulfil to predict that Assam would have the lowest number of people applying for citizenship under the CAA.

"It has been four days since the rules for implementing the CAA were not-

ified. There is not a single application on the portal in Assam," he said, while downplaying the anti-CAA protests in the State.

"The CAA will be a fiasco in Assam. We may have to set up camps for people whose biometrics were locked during the exercise to update the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and ask them to apply," he said.

Some 19.06 lakh out of 3.3 crore applicants were left out of the NRC. They were rejected due to the alleged lack of documents.

The Chief Minister said people who did not apply for inclusion of names in the NRC were unlikely to seek citizenship via the CAA because of the questions that would arise.

"Not having applied for NRC means one did not come to India before December 31, 2014. The CAA is very clear that one has to provide evidence of having come to the country before the prescribed date. This law will, therefore, be completely insignificant for Assam," he said.

'Will find a way for those without papers to apply under CAA'

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Union government will soon find a way for people who do not have the required documents to apply for benefits under the Citizenship Amendment Act, (CAA), 2019, Union Home Minister Amit Shah said on Thursday.

The CAA facilitates the citizenship process for undocumented migrants belonging to six non-Muslim communities from Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh. However, according to the CAA rules notified earlier this week, applicants will have to produce a clutch of documents which includes at least one document issued by a government authority in one of these countries.

In an interview to news agency ANI, Mr. Shah said that according to government estimates, 85% of the people seeking to apply under CAA had the required documents, adding that the government would soon find an alternative for those who did not.

Retrospective effect

Mr. Shah said that there was no official count as of now about the number of people getting citizenship under the CAA, adding that a "lot of them" had ap-

Amit Shah said that 85% of the people seeking to apply under CAA had the required documents

plied for citizenship.

"Many people may hesitate to file an application due to the mis-campaign going on against CAA. I want to assure everyone to apply and the citizenship will be given with retrospective effect. If you have entered India illegally, there will be no criminal case against you. There is no need for anyone to get scared. Everyone will be given equal rights as they will become citizens of India," he said.

The CAA rules reduce the qualification period of application for citizenship from 11 to five years for migrants who entered India before December 31, 2014.

Asked about the stand taken by the governments of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and West Bengal that the CAA will not be implemented in those States, Mr. Shah said: "Article II of the Constitution gives all the powers to make rules regarding citizenship to Parliament. This is the Centre's subject, not the State's. I think everyone will cooperate after the election," he said.

RLJP decides to stay with NDA despite Chirag Paswan's deal

The Hindu Bureau
PATNA

A day after Chirag Paswan, leader of the Lok Janshakti Party (Ram Vilas), finalised a seat-sharing arrangement with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) - which reportedly includes the coveted Hajipur seat once held by his father, the late Ram Vilas Paswan - the Rashtriya Lok Janshakti Party (RLJP), led by his estranged uncle Pashupati Kumar Paras, the current Hajipur MP, indicated that

it will stay within the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) as well.

RLJP State president Prince Raj posted on X on Thursday, that the RLJP was an integral part of the NDA and that the party considered Prime Minister Narendra Modi's decisions above everything else.

Sources said that Mr. Raj had been offered a berth in the Cabinet of Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, while Mr. Paras may be accommodated as a Governor or Rajya Sabha MP.

'Investigation continues into death of Khalistani separatist'

Suhasini Haidar
NEW DELHI

Canada said on Thursday that it continues to "actively" investigate the killing of Khalistani separatist Canadian Hardeep Singh Nijjar. The comment came in response to statements by New Zealand Deputy Prime Minister Winston Peters during his visit to Delhi, where he spoke about the case in Canada, and evidence shared thus far by Canadian authorities.

Canada and New Zealand are part of the "five eyes" intelligence sharing network along with the United States, the United

Kingdom, and Australia, that regularly coordinate on security issues.

'Credible allegations'

"Canadian security agencies have been actively pursuing credible allegations of a link between agents of the government of India and the killing of a Canadian citizen, Hardeep Singh Nijjar. Canada is a rule of law country and the protection of our citizens and the defence of our sovereignty are fundamental," the spokesperson for Global Affairs Canada, the Canadian Foreign Ministry, told *The Hindu* in a written response, doubling down on allegations made by



A Canadian Foreign Ministry spokesperson said that authorities remain engaged with New Delhi on this 'serious matter'. FILE PHOTO

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in Canadian parliament last year.

The spokesperson added that the Canadian authorities remain engaged with New Delhi on

this "serious matter" and that it was "pivotal to respect the justice process."

On Wednesday, Mr. Peters had said that the evidence of Indian government's involvement, as

alleged by Mr. Trudeau, would only be known in its entirety when Canada takes the case to trial in court.

In an interview to the *Indian Express* earlier this week, Mr. Peters seemed to question the quality of evidence, indicating a shift in New Zealand's position.

'No evidence'

"As a trained lawyer, I look okay, so where's the case? Where's the evidence? Where's the finding right here, right now? Well, there isn't one," Mr. Peters was quoted as saying, in comments that set off a diplomatic flurry.

On Wednesday evening,

the Deputy Prime Minister Peters appeared to clarify the comments by saying that he meant that until the trial in the Nijjar case begins, the full extent of evidence would not be known.

"When you go to court that's when you find out all the evidence. If there is something suspicious, you wait for all the facts to come out," he told *The Hindu*, while speaking to presspersons at a reception in his honour.

The Ministry of External Affairs has not thus far responded to the comments, that favoured India's stand denying its involvement in the killing.

Students in Gujarat school forced to remove hijab

Press Trust of India
BHARUCH

The Gujarat Education Department took action against a private school official on Thursday after he allegedly forced some students to remove hijab.

Parents of the students appearing for Class 10 examination in Lions School in Ankleshwar, Bharuch district, complained that exam centre administrator, Ilaben Suratiya forced their wards to remove hijab before appearing for a paper on Wednesday.

Following the allegation, the State Education Department on Thursday ordered the removal of Ms. Suratiya. The Gujarat Secondary and Higher Secondary Education Board made it clear that there are no specific rules about the clothes worn by the examinees, and they can appear for the exam in any "decent" attire.

T.N. CM urges Union govt. to disburse MGNREGS dues

Stalin seeks personal intervention of Union Rural Development and Panchayat Raj Minister Giriraj Singh to ensure disbursal of pending wages worth ₹1,678.83 crore to the State

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin on Thursday wrote to the Union government requesting it to disburse the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) dues towards wages, amounting to ₹1,678.83 crore, up to January 5, 2024.

In his letter to Union Minister for Rural Development and Panchayat Raj Giriraj Singh, the Chief Minister sought his personal intervention in this regard.

Till March 6, Tamil Nadu generated 40.51 crore persondays as against the labour budget of 37 crore persondays by providing employment to 79.28 lakh workers from 68.68 lakh households, he said.



Tamil Nadu has always been a top-performing State since the inception of the MGNREGS scheme.

M.K. STALIN
Chief Minister

During 2023-24, a total of ₹8,734.32 crore was sanctioned to Tamil Nadu towards wages up to November 6 this year. However, only ₹7,712.03 crore had been disbursed to the workers, as a result of which a wage liability of ₹1,022.29 crore for November 2023 and December 2023 was pending as on January 5 this year, the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister said.

As the wages for unskilled workers had not

been disbursed since the last week of November 2023, the liability had risen to ₹1,678.83 crore (to be disbursed to 24.21 lakh households), whose members worked under MGNREGS from December 2023 to February 2024, he said.

The MGNREGS is one of the key schemes for providing employment to all registered households in rural areas, and as far as Tamil Nadu is concerned,

it has been implemented inclusively as 86% of the workers comprise women while 29% belong to the SC/ST communities, he said.

'Top-performing State'

"It is to be noted that Tamil Nadu has been at the forefront at the national level in providing employment to differently-abled people. Further, Tamil Nadu has always been a top-performing State since the inception of the scheme," he said.

So far, the Union government has approved 37 crore persondays in three spells.

Recalling his communications to the Ministry on this issue and the subsequent release of ₹1,388.91 crore, the Chief Minister extended his gratitude.

EC asks Supreme Court to return sealed documents of data on electoral bonds

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

A five-judge Bench of the Supreme Court headed by Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud is scheduled on Friday to hear an application filed by the Election Commission seeking the return of electoral bonds' documents handed over to the top court in a sealed cover and sealed boxes on two occasions.

The EC, represented by advocate Amit Sharma, said the documents were given to the court confidentially in compliance with two orders on April 12, 2019 and November 2, 2023.

The application referred to a direction issued on March 11 by the Bench in its order that the "copies of the statements which were filed by the EC before this court would be maintained



in the office of the EC".

The poll body said it had handed over to the top court a sealed cover, which contained 106 sealed envelopes, and then sealed boxes containing a total of 523 sealed envelopes in two tranches in pursuance of the judicial orders of April 2019 and November 2023.

The EC said it had not retained copies of these documents. "The Election Commission of India forwarded the documents received by it to this court in sealed covers/boxes without retaining any copies.

Documents/data/information submitted by the Election Commission of India to this court in sealed covers/boxes may be returned to it in order to enable the Election Commission of India to comply with the directions passed by the court on March 11, 2024," the application said.

On March 11, the five-judge Bench refused an extension of time till June 30 for the State Bank of India (SBI) to disclose the electoral bonds' purchase and encashment details to the EC. It was directed to publish the information handed over by SBI on its website by March 15.

The EC, in a statement on Thursday, said it had "uploaded the data on electoral bonds on its website as received from the SBI on "as is where is basis" in furtherance of disclosure and transparency.

Modi wants 'one nation, no election', says Congress on Kovind panel report

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Reacting to the report on simultaneous elections submitted by a committee headed by former President Ram Nath Kovind, the Congress on Thursday said the panel's aim was to "dismantle" the Constitution, with the objective of "one nation, no election".

In its report of over 18,000 pages submitted to President Droupadi Murmu, the panel recommended simultaneous

elections for Lok Sabha and State Assemblies as the first step, followed by synchronised local body polls within 100 days.

"The Prime Minister's objective is very clear. He is going around asking for a clear majority, two-thirds majority, 400 seats, and the cat is out of the bag. They want to completely dismantle Babasaheb Ambedkar's Constitution and with what objective - 'one nation, no election', that is what they want," Congress communications chief Jai-

ram Ramesh said. Other Opposition parties also reacted sharply to the report. All India Majlis-E-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) president Asaduddin Owaisi said that frequent elections kept governments on their toes.

Federalism in danger

"There are many constitutional issues with one nation, one election, but the worst is that governments will no more have to worry about people's fury for five years. It will be the death

knell for Indian federalism. It will convert India into a one party state," Mr. Owaisi posted on X.

Communist Party of India general secretary D. Raja said that his party did not agree with the proposal as it was not practical in India which has a multi-party democracy. "What we should be discussing instead is comprehensive electoral reforms. This is just a sinister design to introduce a presidential form of government," Mr. Raja said.

Will exclude farmers from GST, waive loans if INDIA bloc wins, says Rahul

Abhinav Deshpande
NASHIK

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Thursday took potshots at Prime Minister Narendra Modi for working only for "media attention" through actions like performing undersea puja, flying an aircraft, and visiting the border areas along Pakistan and China while neglecting the urgent issues faced by farmers, including loan waivers.

He said the Indian National Developmental, In-

clusive Alliance (INDIA) would champion farmers' rights if elected, vowing to exempt them from the Goods and Services Tax (GST) and work on only one tax, revamp crop insurance, and ensure a fair Minimum Support Price (MSP).

'Voice of farmers'

Addressing a 'Shetkari Sammelan' (farmers' conference) at Nashik's Chandwad as part of the ongoing Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra, he said: "We will exclude

farmers from GST and restructure crop loan insurance schemes for your [farmers'] benefit. We will be the 'voice of farmers' and frame policies to protect you."

Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) supremo Sharad Pawar and Shiv Sena (UBT) leader Sanjay Raut joined the former Congress president in his yatra.

He greeted the farmers with 'Rama Rama Mandali' and reaffirmed the Congress's pledge to enact a legal guarantee for MSP,

citing recommendations from the Swaminathan committee report, and that a government led by the INDIA bloc would always keep its doors open for farmers.

"The issues of farmers, inflation, unemployment, and Agniveers are the most prominent in the country today. You will never see TV channels discuss these issues. Instead, you see Mr. Modi going under the sea to do a puja, taking a seaplane, or at times visiting borders," he stated.

Five Ministers in AAP's first list of Punjab candidates

The Hindu Bureau
CHANDIGARH

The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) on Thursday declared its first list of eight candidates for Punjab for the upcoming Lok Sabha election. Five of them are State Cabinet Ministers.

There are 13 Lok Sabha seats in the State.

The Cabinet Ministers on the list are Dr. Balbir Singh from Patiala, Gurmeet Singh Meht Hayer from Sangrur, Kuldeep Dhaliwal from Amritsar, Gurmeet Singh Khundian from Bathinda, and Laljit Singh Bhullar from Khadoor Sahib.

AAP MP Sushil Rinku will contest again from Jalandhar. The party has fielded Karamjeet Anmol from Faridkot and former MLA Gurpreet Singh, who recently joined AAP from the Congress, as its candidate from Fatehgarh Sahib.

Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann, in a statement, said the party will win all Lok Sabha seats in the State.

The upcoming Lok Sabha election is being seen as a critical test to ascertain the two-and-a-half-year old AAP government's popularity in the State.

On the draw



MIKA AZIZ

T.N. files defamation complaint against Opposition leaders

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI

The Tamil Nadu government has filed complaints against Leader of the Opposition and AIADMK general secretary Edappadi K. Palaniswami and BJP State president K. Annamalai, accusing them of making statements defaming the government and linking Chief Minister M.K. Stalin to the recent seizure of pseudoephedrine in New Delhi.

The complaints, which were filed at the Principal Sessions Court by City Public Prosecutor G. Devarajan on behalf of the government, sought to punish Mr. Palaniswami and Mr. Annamalai under Sections



Edappadi K. Palaniswami

499 (defamation) and 500 (punishment for defamation) of the Indian Penal Code.

One of the complaints said that at a press conference on March 8, Mr. Palaniswami had made defamatory statements intending to harm Mr. Stalin's reputation in respect

of his conduct in the discharge of his public functions. The AIADMK leader had alleged that the Chief Minister was involved in the distribution of the contraband.

The other complaint said that Mr. Annamalai had circulated a video of his speech on the social media platform X on February 29, and made defamatory statements intending to harm the reputation of the Chief Minister in the eyes of his peers and the public, with the malicious intent of obtaining unjust political advantage. Mr. Devarajan submitted that these speeches were not only devoid of truth but were also meant to undermine public interest.

Probe 'nature' of pets in area where toddler was mauled: HC

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Delhi High Court on Thursday ordered Delhi Police to investigate the "nature" of pets kept by residents on Tuqhlq Lane, where a one-and-a-half-year-old girl was allegedly mauled to death by a pack of dogs last month.

"It is also stated that there was a pitbull in the area. Investigate this. Status report to be filed by Tuesday," Justice Subramonium Prasad said while hearing a petition by the infant's father seeking a

compensation of ₹50 lakh for the child's death.

The court also asked the police to ascertain whether there were any pet dogs in the nearby houses where the incident took place to rule out the apprehension of a ferocious pet dog attacking the child.

Earlier, the court had issued a notice to the New Delhi Municipal Council (NDMC) and the Delhi government, asking them to take steps to ensure that such incidents are not repeated. On February 24, the toddler, who was sitting outside her home, was

allegedly attacked by a pack of four to five dogs and dragged for several metres, before leaving her badly mauled. She later succumbed to her injuries. Her father Rahul Kanauiya, in his plea, said that the attack had occurred due to administrative lapses and the New Delhi Municipal Council's negligence. His counsel argued that dogs were being fed in parks, putting the children playing there at risk.

The petitioner also urged the court to issue directions to the authorities to shift the dogs elsewhere.

Two children, couple killed as massive fire rips through building in Delhi; 11 others hurt

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Two children and a couple were killed after a massive fire broke out at a residential building in Shastri Nagar area of Shahdara on Thursday morning, the police said.

The deceased persons have been identified as Manoj, 30, Suman, 25, and their two nieces, aged 10 and 7. Eleven others suffered burn injuries in the fire, suspected to be caused by sparks flying from electrical wires, the police added. A car and a

motorcycle were also damaged in the incident. The police said they received information about the incident at 5.20 a.m. and nine fire tenders were pressed into service to douse the flames.

DCP (Shahdara) Surendra Choudhary said, "As per the preliminary obser-

vation by the forensic team, sparks in wires may be the reason behind the fire." The police said the building where the fire broke out has four floors and a car parking area.

They said the fire started from the parking lot and the smoke soon engulfed the entire building.

Eyewitnesses said since the building entrance was blocked by the leaping flames, some residents ran to the terrace and then jumped on to the roofs of adjacent buildings to save their lives.

An eyewitness said the

firefighters doused the flames in no time but due to the smoke and fire in the main exit area, people could not leave the building immediately.

The DCP said those injured were sent to Dr. Hedgewar Aarogya Sansthan Hospital in Karkardooma. The police said they received information from the hospital that four of them have died. Later, four of the severely injured persons - Rakesh Kumar, 34, Baby 32, Nandu, 25, and two-year-old Iafra - were referred to Guru Teg Bahadur Hospital.

IN BRIEF



Tamil Nadu tops illegal trade in shark body parts

Tamil Nadu accounted for almost 65% of the illegal trade in shark body parts, a new analysis of seizures by TRAFFIC and WWF-India between January 2010 and December 2022 has revealed. TRAFFIC is the Trade Records Analysis of Flora and Fauna in Commerce. The analysis, released on Thursday, found that about 16,000 kg of shark fins were also seized from 2010 to 2022, constituting almost 80% of the shark-derived products. Significant volumes of shark cartilage and teeth were also seized. The factsheet titled "Netted in illegal wildlife trade: Sharks of India" said Karnataka, Gujarat, Kerala, and Maharashtra follow Tamil Nadu in illegal shark trade.

Panel formed to reform prices of drugs and medical devices

The Department of Pharmaceuticals (Pricing Division) has formed a committee to reform the pricing framework for drugs and medical devices. The panel is likely to submit its report in the next three months. It is mandated to give inputs regarding institutional reforms within the NPPA and balancing price and availability of essential medicines, while providing incentives to sustain growth and exports. On March 12, the department had specified that the committee would have three members – Secretary, Department of Pharmaceuticals; Chairman, NPPA; and Senior Economic Adviser, Department of Pharmaceuticals.

'India likely to start free trade deal talks with EAEU'

Kallol Bhattacharjee
NEW DELHI

India is "seriously considering" starting talks for a free trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), the Foreign Minister of Belarus Sergei Aleinik declared during his two-day visit to India. The remarks from the Belarusian Minister acquire significance as Belarus has been closely aligned with Russia even as President Vladimir Putin continues to push ahead with the military operation against Ukraine since February 2022.

"My counterpart confirmed that India is seriously considering starting negotiations on a free trade agreement. Of course, we agreed to maintain contacts on this issue," Mr. Aleinik was quoted as saying by Belta, the state-owned news organisation.

"We reaffirmed our mutual support for our efforts at the UN. We hold similar views with India on international relations, on the need to build a truly fair system of international relations, a just, multipolar world order, which would be based on the principles of equality of states and the balance of interests of all UN members," Mr. Aleinik said.

Modi will travel to Bhutan next week

PM says he had productive discussions with Tobgay on various aspects; Bhutan PM is expected to travel to Mumbai and meet business leaders

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will visit Bhutan next week, announced the visiting Bhutanese Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay after the two leaders met in New Delhi on Thursday night. Mr. Tobgay is on a five-day visit to India and is expected to return to Thimphu on Monday, after which Mr. Modi will travel there, officials said.

No press statement was made after the meeting, but Mr. Modi posted on X that he had "productive discussions encompassing various aspects of [India-Bhutan's] unique and special partnership" and thanked the King of Bhutan Mr. Tobgay for the invitation to Bhutan next week.

Mr. Tobgay said that he had thanked Mr. Modi for his "steadfast support to Bhutan" during their meeting and confirmed the Prime Minister's acceptance. "Modi ji also agreed to visit Bhutan soon... next week, in fact!" he added.

The announcement is significant as it not only indicates the strong ties between



Cordial relations: Prime Minister Narendra Modi with his Bhutan counterpart, Tshering Tobgay, in New Delhi on Thursday. PTI

road. The packages for trauma and polytrauma offered under the Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana will also be co-opted under the scheme. Claims raised by hospitals for providing treatment will be reimbursed from the Motor Vehicle Accident Fund.

The golden hour is the period following an injury during which there is highest likelihood of preventing death by providing prompt medical care, according to the Motor Vehicles Amendment Act, 2019.

The amendment also provided for "a scheme for cashless treatment of road accident victims" as well as a Motor Vehicle Accident Fund. The National Health Authority will be the implementing agency for the programme, and will coordinate with the police, hospitals and the State Health Agency.

his first international visit after winning elections in January this year. During his visit, he met with External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, and is due to meet Ministers of Finance, Trade and Energy on Friday, and subsequently to Mumbai where he will meet business leaders. He is expected to discuss strengthening bilateral trade, raising investment levels in infrastructure projects, and Bhutan's plans for a mega "Gelephu Mindfulness City [GMC] on Bhutan's southern border with Assam. India is watching Bhutan-China talks on boundary demarcation closely as well, and talks on the new Bhutanese government's strategy on the issue are understood to have been part of the agenda.

Study flags mixed implementation of Forest Rights Act

The Hindu Bureau
GUWAHATI

A fact-finding committee formed by Call for Justice, a Delhi-based organisation, has found "mixed" implementation of the Forest Rights Act (FRA) of 2006 in five States across the country.

The States studied by an eight-member committee, led by Justice S.N. Dhingra (retired), over eight months are Assam, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, Odisha, and Karnataka.

The team assessed two districts in Assam – Dima Hasao and Hailakandi – and found that the FRA in its current form does not address the unique situation existing in the north-eastern States concerning shifting or *jhum* cultivation. This form of cultivation involving slashing and burning plants on hill slopes needs to be recognised as a practice adapted to the ecological and cultural needs of the forest-dwelling communities, the team's status report made public on Thursday said.

In Chhattisgarh, the decision-making process was significantly delayed in Kanaker and Korba, the two districts where the team conducted the study.

The FRA implementa-

Delhi-based group Call for Justice says that *jhum* cultivation should be recognised in the northeast

tion in Maharashtra's Gadchiroli was found to be satisfactory while the process was not completed in Nashik.

The team found "substantial advancement" in the implementation of FRA in Kandhamal and Sundergarh districts of Odisha.

However, it was observed that a significant gap existed in the districts between individual forest rights (IFR) and community forest rights (CFR) claims submitted and recognised.

In Karnataka, the team visited Ramnagara and Mysuru districts.

According to Ministry of Tribal Affairs data, only 5.17% of the claims filed for IFR were recognised, which showed Karnataka had the highest rate of IFR claims rejection among the States surveyed.

"Overall, there was inadequate focus on community rights. Various agencies were unclear about the distinction between the two," the report said.

Govt. blocks 18 OTT platforms for streaming obscene content

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Information & Broadcasting Ministry has blocked 18 OTT platforms for streaming obscene and vulgar content. Nineteen websites, 10 apps, and 57 social media handles associated with these platforms have also been blocked.

The action has been taken in coordination with various intermediaries for violations of the Information Technology Act, the Indian Penal Code, and the Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act. While seven of the blocked apps were hosted on Google Play Store, three were on Apple App Store, the Ministry said.

"Union Minister for Information & Broadcasting Anurag Singh Thakur has repeatedly emphasised the responsibility of the platforms to not propagate obscenity, vulgarity, and

19 websites, 10 apps, and 57 social media handles linked to these platforms have also been blocked

abuse under the guise of 'creative expression'. On March 12, 2024, Mr. Thakur announced that 18 OTT platforms publishing obscene and vulgar content have been taken down," it said.

The blocked platforms are Dreams Films, Voovi, Yessma, Uncut Adda, Tri Flicks, X Prime, Neon X VIP, Besharams, Hunters, Rabbit, Xtramood, Nueflicks, MoodX, Mojflix, Hot Shots VIP, Fugi, Chikooflix, and Prime Play. The Ministry said a significant portion of the content was found to be obscene and portrayed women in a demeaning manner.

"It depicted nudity and sexual acts in various inap-

propriate contexts, such as relationships between teachers and students, incestuous family relationships, and so on. The content included sexual innuendos and, in some instances, prolonged segments of pornographic and sexually explicit scenes devoid of any thematic or societal relevance," it said.

One of the OTT apps had amassed over one crore downloads, while two had over 50 lakh downloads on the Google Play Store. "Additionally, these platforms extensively utilised social media to disseminate trailers, specific scenes, and external links aimed at attracting audiences to their websites and apps. The social media accounts... had a cumulative followership of over 32 lakh users," it said. The accounts were on Facebook (12), Instagram (17), X (16), and YouTube (12).

Centre unveils project for cashless treatment of road crash victims

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Road Transport and Highways Ministry on Wednesday announced a pilot project to provide cashless treatment of up to ₹1.5 lakh to all victims of road accidents.

The pilot project will be undertaken in Chandigarh to establish an "ecosystem for providing timely medical care to the victims of road accidents, including during the golden hour," the Ministry said in a statement.

Victims will be entitled to cashless treatment of up to ₹1.5 lakh per person for a maximum period of seven days from the date of the accident.

The scheme will be applicable to all victims of road accidents involving a motor vehicle which occurred on any category of

Will oust BJP this election, says Kisan Mahapanchayat

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Thousands of farmers, who gathered here on Thursday for a *Kisan Mahapanchayat* under the Samyukt Kisan Morcha (SKM) banner, resolved to defeat the BJP in the Lok Sabha election.

Alleging that the policies of the Centre were pro-corporate and anti-farmer, the SKM gave a call for mass protests against the BJP, and to observe "save democracy day" on March 23 against the BJP's decision to field Minister of State of Home Ajay Mishra Teni from the Kheri Lok Sabha seat again. The SKM alleges that Mr. Teni is the "mastermind" behind the killing of four farmers and a journalist at Lakhimpur Kheri during the 2020-21 farmers' protests.

A resolution adopted at the *mahapanchayat* also decided to "expose and



Dissent mode: Farmers attending the Kisan Mahapanchayat at the Ramnala Maidan in New Delhi on Thursday. SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

punish" the BJP for not implementing the Swaminathan Commission formula on minimum support price. "The real homage to M.S. Swaminathan is not conferring the Bharat Ratna on him, but implementing the farmer-friendly recommendations in his report," senior SKM leader Ashok Dhawale said.

He said more than one lakh farmers committed

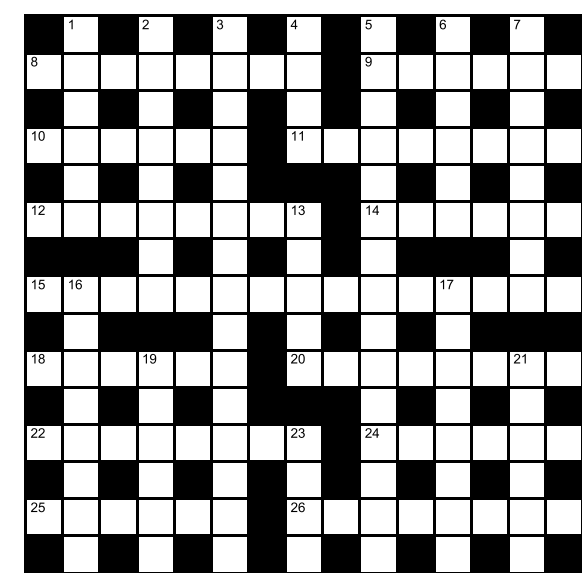
suicide in the first eight years of the Modi regime.

Trade unions' backing Promising their support, 10 Central trade unions, in a message to the *mahapanchayat*, said the workers were with the farmers after understanding that the "corporate-communal nexus" was posing great danger to the core values outlined in the Constitution.

THE CROSSWORD+ 14123
(set by Crescent)

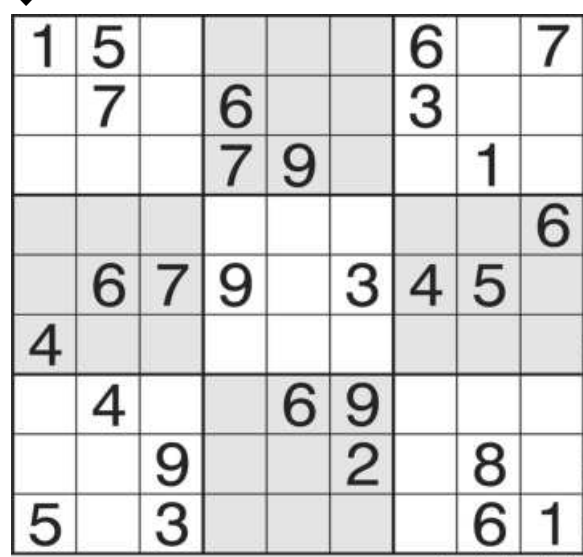
To solve this puzzle online, get access to our crossword site. @ <https://argo.page.link/jjpTn>

SCAN TO PLAY



- Across**
- Smart and keen guards at the rear (6)
 - Crazy scene and theme in comic (6,3,6)
 - Rip off belly from tropical seafood (6)
 - One bound by rule constantly trains in this? (8)
 - Article received in legacy, fantastic medieval weapon (8)
 - Lay, short one ending in fourteen lines? (6)
 - More shocking depressing tales about corrupt legislature (6)
 - Take advances (8)
- Down**
- Company beginning to grow and stir up spirit (6)
 - Kitty withdrawn, one chance withdrawn (8)
 - Coral reef adding new mass at sea (4,4,7)
 - In motion spilling a drop of red wine (4)
 - Not working, as how a broker without earnings may be? (3,2,10)
 - Hats off to mum's condition complicating aspiration (6)
 - Crazy football club covers entire ground (8)
 - Cycling at that place in compound (5)
 - Trade dialogue (8)
 - Present, not past, primarily to consider - it's not surprising (2,6)
 - Help out family considerably less hard up (4,2)
 - Returns slide, bad year ahead (6)
 - Jabbers, for example, about power cuts (4)

SUDOKU



DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★☆☆☆

Solution to previous puzzle

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

Solution to yesterday's Sudoku

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

FAITH

Example of sibling bonding

Whenever one is feeling down or sorrowful, wise men say reading of the Ramayana will uplift such a person. Every character in the epic will show all of us the way forward in spiritual and material life and provide relief from sorrow, said Damal S. Ramakrishnan in a discourse.

The Ramayana is a practical guide on various premises, including on how a son should conduct himself, upbringing of children by parents, the equation between a guru and shishya, the connection between a ruler and his subjects and the understanding between a husband and wife. Above all, it showcases sibling bonding.

Rama is a stellar example of the ideal brother, right from birth, to Lakshmana, Bharata and Shatrughna. Lakshmana, who would not stop crying in his cradle until he was placed in the same crib as his older brother, was inseparable from Rama. When sage Viswamitra summoned the bala Rama to his yagna, Rama took Lakshmana along, who stood by his brother. Bharata, likewise looked up to his two older brothers. When he was summoned to Ayodhya after Rama's banishment Bharata went to the palace of Rama in order to ascertain what had unfolded in his absence. Upon learning of his banishment, and his own impending elevation as ruler, Bharata refused the realm forthwith. He immediately donned the attire of an ascetic and set out to bring Rama, the lawful heir, back to Ayodhya. Kausalya also joined the growing ranks of people determined to go to the forest. Guha, the boatman who Rama embraced as his own sibling, was initially suspicious of Bharata's motive; however, upon coming face to face with him, he too became aware of Bharata's nobility.

SCIENCE

Sparing no one: cardiac risk factors present even among the very poor

CVD risk factors such as hypertension, diabetes, smoking, obesity, and dyslipidaemia were also present among adults in extreme poverty. Most were not treated for CVD-related conditions, particularly hypertension and have no access to medication to stabilise their condition

Ramya Kannan

It has conventionally been assumed that prevalence of cardiovascular disease (CVD) risk factors among those living in extreme poverty in low and middle-income countries (LMICs) is low.

There are, of course, reasons for this: Historically, this group has been thought to take in fewer calories and have correspondingly lower body mass index, consume a largely plant-based diet and be in occupations associated with higher physical activity. All of these lifestyle patterns we know, decrease the risk of developing CVD and its risk factors. But there is very little data available on the prevalence of CVD risk factors among those living in poverty. A recent paper in *Nature Human Behaviour* by Pascal Geldsetzer et al, lists all of the above, but goes on to deliver results from a study that busts that assumption.

Assumptions not necessarily true

The findings of a global study, have established that the assumptions are not necessarily true any more. Researchers pooled individual-level data from 105 nationally representative household surveys across 78 countries, representing 85% of people living in extreme poverty globally, and sorted individuals by country-specific measures of household income or wealth to identify those in extreme poverty. CVD risk factors (hypertension, diabetes, smoking, obesity and dyslipidaemia) were present among adults in extreme poverty. Most were not treated for CVD-related conditions, particularly hypertension.

The authors say: "Understanding the extent to which this assumption of a low prevalence of CVD risk factors among those in extreme poverty holds true is important for setting priorities within health policy and care delivery, both for equity and effectiveness. From an equity perspective, if CVD risk factors mostly affect wealthier population groups in LMICs, then investing in programmes aimed at preventing and treating CVD instead of focusing on those conditions that disproportionately affect those in extreme poverty could further worsen health inequities by wealth.

Poverty level was as stratified by World Bank country income category. Extreme poverty is generally defined by the international poverty line of \$1.90 per day, and to enable comparison with other income groups in LMICs, researchers also examined the prevalence of CVD risk factors for the population with an income <\$3.20 and <\$5.50 per day, as well as those with an income >\$5.50 per day.

In the analysis, they discovered that the prevalence of hypertension was similar between these poverty level groups and those with higher income levels. They found that among



Among those living in extreme poverty who should be taking a statin for secondary prevention of CVD, only 1.1% were on the drugs. GETTY IMAGES

participants living in extreme poverty, only diabetes was associated with differential prevalence by whether they lived in an urban centre or in rural areas, with urban dwellers at higher risk; men had a slightly higher prevalence of hypertension and a far higher prevalence of smoking than women. For diabetes, the prevalence was not statistically different between income categories in low-income countries or upper middle-income countries; only in lower middle-income countries did there exist a clear gradient wherein those with higher incomes had a higher prevalence of diabetes.

The prevalence of obesity displayed a positive income gradient across all World Bank country categories. The prevalence of smoking and dyslipidaemia (abnormal lipid levels) was low across poverty levels in low-income countries and high across population income groups in upper middle-income countries, with an income gradient in the prevalence in lower middle-income countries. These are all known factors predisposing individuals to a high risk of cardiovascular disease.

Poor lack access to medicine

What was equally or more significant is that among those living in extreme poverty and who had hypertension, only 15.2% reported taking blood pressure (BP)-lowering medication and 5.7% had achieved hypertension control (BP < 140 mmHg/ < 90 mmHg). Of those poor living with diabetes, 19.7% reported taking blood glucose-lowering medication. Among those living in extreme poverty who should be taking a statin for secondary prevention of CVD according to WHO guidelines, only 1.1%



Only in lower middle-income countries did there exist a clear gradient wherein those with higher incomes had a higher prevalence of diabetes

were on the drugs. In low-income countries, hypertension treatment and control, diabetes treatment and statin use were low across poverty levels.

"This is an important study," says J. Amalorpavanathan, vascular surgeon, and member, Tamil Nadu State Planning Commission. "The conventional belief that CVD is low among the poor is no longer valid. The major risk factors of CVD like Diabetes, Hypertension, Smoking etc have a significant prevalence across all sections, regardless of income. We also know that the health systems' engagement of poorer sections with these diseases is abysmal. As a *Lancet* study revealed, this group adds substantially to the suffering and mortality of the poorest billion in the world."

The authors state that the study estimating CVD risk factor prevalence among adults living in extreme poverty would provide a crucial empirical foundation for future work and addresses the call of the The Lancet NCDI Poverty Commission for "investigation regarding a broad range of priority NCDs ... with an additional focus on the rural poor". One of the authors of the study and professor of global health, at the Institute for Applied Research, Birmingham University, Justine Davies says: "We recommend that governments put in

place programmes to detect people with these risk factors that are targeted at poorer people. These may involve doing education, awareness, and screening programmes in areas where the government knows that socio-economically deprived people live. It is then important that once detected, people are referred to care and that care is accessible to them in terms of geography, costs, and overcomes other cultural or educational barriers that people who are less well-off often need to overcome."

Mitigation initiatives

Some nations have some sort of scheme to address the issue in a limited sense. For instance, India has a National Programme for prevention & Control of Cancer, Diabetes, Cardiovascular Diseases and Stroke and State governments have further added on with their own regional surveillance and intervention programmes. For instance, Tamil Nadu has a scheme wherein intervention for non communicable diseases is delivered at the door step of the patients. It is crucial to evaluate these schemes from time to time to ensure that they are addressing the target audience effectively.

"Tamil Nadu's 'Makkalai Theedi Maruthuvam' scheme is specifically designed to address this important gap in the health care system," Dr. Amalorpavanathan further explains. Under the scheme, since 2001, more than one crore people have been visited at their homes. About 1.50 crore people regularly receive drugs for hypertension, and 1.08 crore people get drugs for diabetes. "It is too early to comment about the long term control but data is being collected regularly for analysis. We shall certainly embark upon research to identify the relation between poverty and CVD and its contributive factors and effective ways to address them," he says.

Dr. Davies adds: "It is really important to do so, to see if they are effective at detecting people with risk factors and treating these in people who have them, but also for prevention in those who don't yet have the risk factors. As part of these effectiveness studies, it is also important to understand why the programme might or might not have worked, so it can be adjusted in order to improve effectiveness if needed."

Dr. Amalorpavanathan also says a key shortcoming in communicating the hazards of smoking is the lack of a vigorous public education. The poor seem to outnumber the rich in smoking, which is a major risk factor for diabetes. "We must include education, to see if it has a modifying role in the community. The government of Tamil Nadu and the State Planning Commission will certainly undertake this research," he adds.

(ramya.kannan@thehindu.co.in)



Rhodamine-B is a fluorescent dye used in cosmetics, textile and leather industries. It is used as a food colouring agent not only in cotton candy but also in sweets, various manchurian items and pakodas. GETTY IMAGES

Why govts. are seeing red on Rhodamine B in street food

The Hindu Bureau

On February 17, Tamil Nadu banned the sale of cotton candy or candy floss after analysis confirmed the presence of Rhodamine-B, an industrial dye, in samples lifted from stalls in Chennai. Since then, the Karnataka government has banned the use of harmful colouring agents in cotton candy and "Gobi Manchurian", while Andhra Pradesh has begun lifting samples for analysis.

Rhodamine-B is a textile dye, and its use in food has a huge impact on health. Meenakshi Bajaj, dietician, Tamil Nadu Government Multi Super Speciality Hospital, explains: "Rhodamine-B is a fluorescent dye used in cosmetics, textile and leather industries. It gives you brilliant pinks, greens and blues. Unfortunately, it is used as a food colouring agent not only in cotton candy but also in the preparation of sweets, various manchurian items and pakodas and in the preparation of sauces for Chinese food."

Rhodamine-B can cause cell death. In long-term use, it can damage the cerebellum tissue and brainstem. There is recent evidence that it damages the kidney, liver and increases the risk of stomach tumour. It is not a food colour but is toxic to the human body and is a carcinogen

"The problem has existed for many years," Prasad Eswaran, senior consultant, Medical Oncology, Apollo Proton Cancer Centre, Chennai, said. "Rhodamine-B has been routinely used in many coloured foods such as cotton candy to make it look appealing and attractive to young persons and children. Fortunately, the government has woken up to a longstanding request from the medical fraternity. When taken in small quantities for many years, it can cause a lot of health problems including cancers," he added.

Long-term consumption can cause allergies that can manifest in the form of irritation of the lip, tongue as well as eyes and also cause upper respiratory allergies, Ms. Meenakshi said. "Studies have shown that Rhodamine-B can cause cell death. In long-term use, it can damage the cerebellum tissue and brainstem. There is recent evidence that it damages the kidney, liver and increases the risk of stomach tumour. It is not a food colour but is toxic to the human body and is a carcinogen."

Dr. Eswaran said, "While health issues such as gastric burning sensation, irritation and acidity can be managed with medicines and lifestyle modification, Rhodamine B can cause cancer too."

FSSAI has approved certain food colours and flavors as safe for consumption. These include: Caramel, Riboflavin (Lactoflavin), Saffron, Annatto, Curcumin (Turmeric), Carotene and carotenoids, including Beta-carotene, red colour from Ponceau 4R, Carmoisine, and Erythrosine, yellow colour (Tartrazine and Sunset Yellow FCF), blue colour (Indigo Carmine and Brilliant Blue FCF) and green colour (Fast Green FCF).

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North Indian diet high on salt, low on potassium, proteins: study

R. Sujatha

A recent study of the north Indian diet has raised a host of red flags. The study found that their diet does not conform to recommended guidelines for salt, and nutrients such as potassium and proteins. The population's salt intake is very high and potassium intake is low, increasing the risk of developing hypertension, cardiovascular disease and chronic kidney disease (CKD).

Consumption of protein is also below the recommended figure, according to researchers. Unsurprisingly, women were not getting sufficient nutrients compared to men. The study was conducted at the Postgraduate Institute of Medical Education and Research (PGIMER), Chandigarh, and the George Institute for Global Health, India.

Dietary variations

The Indian diet is varied and differs from region to region. In the south if the population predominantly eats rice, then in the northern parts people consume wheat. It is thus challenging for policymakers to come up with an all-encompassing guideline for the entire country.

To find ways to prevent CKD the researchers decided to assess the intake of nutrients such as sodium, potassium, protein and phosphorus. They included two groups of adults - one that was healthy and another of persons with stage 2 to 4 chronic CKD. The healthy population was drawn from among the family members of those with CKD.

Of the 404 adults who participated, 182 were healthy and 222 had CKD. The mean

age of the group was 47 years. An equal number of men and women were enrolled for the study. While 71 (32%) of the subjects were in stage 4 of CKD, 127 (57%) persons were in stage 3 and another 24 (11%) persons were in stage 2 of the disease.

"We analysed sodium, protein, potassium and phosphorus intakes using one-time 24-hour urinary excretion. Dietary intake was also analysed in sub-groups based on sex, body mass index, blood pressure and abdominal obesity," the researchers, Prabjot Kaur et al wrote in their research article published in the peer-reviewed journal *Frontiers in Nutrition*.

The Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Medicine recommends a dietary allowance of 700mg/day of phosphorus and 0.80gm/kg/day of protein. The actual phosphorus and protein intake in the western population is around 1,056-1,617 mg/day and 1.30-1.40g/kg/day respectively, the researchers said. The intake of sodium was calculated at around 2 gm a day. They explained that dietary manipulation is an important strategy to manage patients with non-communicable diseases, including CKD. The participants' 24-hour urinary excretion was analysed to assess their nutrient intake.

High salt intake

In the first of its kind study the researchers said they found that more than two-thirds of the subjects studied took salt higher than recommended levels. The amount of salt intake was lower in the study as compared to earlier studies done across the country, it acknowledged, attributing the reason for fall in salt consumption to bet-



RAVIKANTH

ter awareness after being educated on the benefits of a low-salt diet.

Healthy individuals consumed substantially less than 3.50g/day of potassium that is recommended for healthy population, and 2-4gm for those with early-stage CKD as per the Kidney Disease Outcome Quality Initiative 2020 guidelines. The diet contained just around 39.5g/kg/day of protein among the healthy population. The authors pointed out the diet reflected the low dietary diversity in the population whereas a balanced diet requires nuts, green vegetables and fruits, considered the main

source of potassium. The collective intake combination of higher than recommended sodium and lower than recommended potassium raises cardiovascular disease risk, the authors pointed out.

"A poor-nutrition diet is a major risk element for non-communicable diseases (NCD), which are of considerable public health concern. In India, people eat different foods, so it is important to know exactly what nutrients they are getting to help prevent and manage these diseases. The high salt intake and low potassium intake point to the need to develop interventions targeted to individuals and societies," said Vivekanand Jha, lead author of the study. He is also the executive director, The George Institute for Global Health, India and a kidney health specialist.

Reducing risk of NCD

The authors said the study highlighted the need for personalised changes in diet to reduce the risks of common non-communicable diseases. It also emphasised the importance of accurate dietary assessments to provide personalised advice and develop effective policies.

Dr. Jha said, "The study shows that it is important to have dietary guidelines that are specific to the local area. We need to take action to fix imbalances in nutrients and encourage people to eat more healthily by increasing diversity." The project was supported with funding from the Department of Biotechnology, the India Science and Engineering Research Board and the Department of Biotechnology-Welcome Trust, India Alliance.

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



Inevitable collapse

By calling off their alliance, BJP and JJP have sought to appease their base

The coalition of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Jannayak Janta Party (JJP) in Haryana was set for inevitable collapse as both political parties intensified efforts to consolidate their mutually antagonistic support bases. By cutting off its ties with the JJP, which draws its support largely from the agrarian class Jat community, the BJP is, yet again, focusing on the electoral dialectics of 'Jats' and 'non-Jats' in Haryana. Going into elections along with the JJP could have made it difficult for the BJP to remain as the preferred vehicle of 'non-Jat' interests in the State. BJP leaders had on several occasions made it clear that the BJP-JJP alliance was not forged on any ideological ground, but only to form the government in 2019, and not to contest elections. The BJP also installed Nayab Singh Saini as the new Chief Minister of the State, a member of the Other Backward Class (OBC) community, by replacing Manohar Lal Khattar. OBCs account for around 40% of the State's population. By removing Mr. Lal, who has been Chief Minister for around nine and a half years, the BJP also hopes to combat the 'anti-incumbency factor' ahead of the elections in 2024, for the Lok Sabha first, and for the Assembly later. With the appointment of Mr. Saini, a Member of Parliament from Kurukshetra and the BJP's Haryana State president, the party is also aiming to strengthen its political base in districts of north Haryana, where non-Jats have relatively more influence.

Haryana saw a violent stir for quotas for Jats in the year 2016, which pitted the community against the rest, and its impact is still felt in the politics of the State. Around 36 castes make up the State's social mosaic, and Sainis, Baniyas, Brahmins, Yadavs, and Punjabis, among others, tend to band together in opposition to the party that is aligned with the Jat interests at any given point. Jats form about 25% of the population and the JJP, which is the breakaway outfit of Indian National Lok Dal (INLD), has emerged as the primary platform of the community which also has sway in the Congress in the State. The JJP fought the 2019 Assembly election on an anti-BJP plank, but after the BJP failed to get the majority in the 90-member Haryana Assembly, the BJP and JJP forged an alliance of convenience to form a government. The BJP had won 40 seats in the Assembly polls while the JJP had 10 MLAs in its kitty. The JJP has the numbers now even after the collapse of the alliance. Despite the party's claim of confidence, abrupt moves in Haryana show that the BJP has reasons to worry ahead of the Lok Sabha election. Pre-poll alliances need ideological affinities and aligned values unlike post-poll relationships that can run, in the short term, solely on the desire to share the spoils of political office.

Square one

Both Republicans and Democrats need alternative voices to articulate vision

With the exit of Nikki Haley, former Governor of South Carolina, from the U.S. Republican nomination race for the 2024 presidential election, the country is now set to witness a rematch of the 2020 contest between the incumbent, President Joe Biden, and his challenger, former President Donald Trump. It is hardly a surprise that the contest has reverted to this match-up yet again, given that they are the only two leaders who have made the cut as viable candidates for their respective parties over the many months on the campaign trail. On the Republican side, Ms. Haley likely reflected the hopes of some among those who stood for the conservative values of the Republican Party mainstream, which is facing an unprecedented challenge from Mr. Trump and his nativist-populist style of politics. Nevertheless, voters at the primaries and caucuses clearly leaned towards Mr. Trump, perhaps under the assumption that he had left behind, at the end of his term in the Oval Office, an unfinished political agenda to Make America Great Again. On the Democratic side, at 81 years of age, it is Mr. Biden's ability to yet again live up to the rigours of being in office that remains a question mark, even among the party faithful. Yet more worrying from the perspective of the long-term prospects of the Democratic Party is the fact that there has been no other leader from among their ranks with the national stature and sufficient charisma to navigate the party through an election in which they are challenged by the likes of Mr. Trump.

While polls have given Mr. Trump a robust lead over Mr. Biden, at this stage in the election cycle, the outcome of the political clash between the two men will depend on factors such as voter turnout, the preferences of independent voters in swing States, and the impact that the many legal cases against Mr. Trump could have on his ability to campaign and persuade voters that he is a victim of a conspiracy by the Democrats. The absence of alternative leadership in both parties beyond the two current contestants suggests that politics in America has not moved past pre-existing conditions of partisan deadlock, even though it is abundantly clear that business-as-usual politics does not serve the U.S.'s national interest. The best that the country could hope for in the next election cycle, perhaps, is for alternative voices within both parties to articulate a new vision undergirding the American Dream, a brand of leadership that embraces the new paradigm of national and global politics today.

In issuing AI advisory, MEITY becomes a deity

Until a few years ago, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MEITY/MeitY) was called the Department of Electronics and IT, or DEITY. The abbreviation often led to its overzealous and early attempts to censor the Internet, or regulate technology, open to ridicule. Underlying it is the comic act of government departments that demand divine obedience but do their work with clumsy incompetence. This very avatar was adopted on March 1, 2024, when MEITY issued an advisory to several large platforms for the regulation of generative Artificial Intelligence (AI). It was immediately criticised by both a cross-section of experts in regulation and AI and even the more reticent start-up founders.

An ambiguous stance on legal status

The crux of the issue lies in understanding the legal basis of the government's text. The term "advisory" lacks definition under the principal legislation empowering MEITY, and the Information Technology Act, 2000 (IT Act). Unlike regulatory bodies such as the Securities and Exchange Board of India, MEITY has no residual powers. But still, it has regularly issued advisories at least since March 2020, with four published on its website until June 2022 and none thereafter. These advisories, aimed at "all social media platforms", demand vague censorship without citing any legal authority. Contrary to optimistic interpretations, these advisories are more than mere suggestions. One is even titled "notice", indicating MEITY's ambiguous stance on the legal status of these advisories. They imply compliance without stating clear penalties. In a weak rule of a country like ours it is common sense for citizens and corporations to perform a compliance charade after an unreasonable demand rather than asking for the official's rulebook. Hence, these vague advisories are an offer you cannot refuse.

The recent advisory on AI, dated March 1, 2024, marks an escalation following earlier advisories on generative AI (November 7, 2023, and December 23, 2023). Each one of them, triggered by mercurial policymaking, is made at a frantic pace to serve a media cycle rather than be an exercise in sober assessment. In November, the Rashmika Mandanna deepfake video went viral. In December the Prime Minister issued a public warning to "...be very careful before



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There has been a policy flip-flop on an 'illegal' MEITY advisory on Artificial Intelligence, but it refuses to admit its mistake

believing the authenticity of a video or an image". And in February, a Twitter/X user posted a screenshot of Google's AI response to the question, "Is Modi a fascist?". MEITY shortly afterwards issued an advisory on each of these occasions. The other common link between all three advisories is the opportunistic transparency adopted by MEITY. Here, their full text has been withheld, with only a press release for the two issued last year. In addition to the press release, there are extensive social media posts and press interviews by the Minister for State, Rajeev Chandrasekhar. These reports show that the November advisory cited social media platforms' censorship obligations under the IT Rules, 2021. The December advisory reminded platforms to educate users about Indian law under the IT Rules, 2021. In many ways, these were meaningless other than being official coercion for social media companies to perform more proactive censorship.

The March 1, 2024 advisory is a divergence, as Meghna Bal from Esya Center notes, by introducing an illegal AI governance model that requires licensing of AI models. On this, only Minister Chandrasekhar's press interviews and Twitter/X feed have been the official sources of information. Further, only some Twitter users have published the advisory, indicating selective distribution to media and private firms.

'Undefined' terms

This advisory vaguely directs compliance for AI models, including bias prevention and a licensing regime for "under testing" or "unreliable" AI. These terms escape definition under the IT Act, the IT Rules or even the advisory itself. Glaring errors and phrases such as "Indian internet" increase uncertainty.

When many of these issues were highlighted, the Minister's response was to provide direct interpretation on Twitter/X. On March 4 at 11:43 a.m. he claimed that the advisory "needs to be understood" and abruptly exempted "startups". Uncertainty was only compounded as none of the terms in his tweet was defined.

Facing growing online criticism and ridicule, the Minister issued his second clarification on Twitter/X at 2:32 p.m., addressing "noise and confusion being created, many by people who shd know better". This sentence ended with an emoji of a man shrugging his shoulders. But there were signs of a climbdown: "Advisory was simply

that - advise". The Minister avoided any comment on the licensing requirement that goes far beyond the dictionary meaning of "advice".

Deliberation is old-fashioned now

Dismissing this as just another example of bureaucratic red tape only understates the problem with MEITY's "advisory regulation". Technology regulation in India is advancing under questionable legality. The IT Rules, 2021 that were initially intended to regulate user-generated content, have expanded into the "everything law", as highlighted in the article, "India's juggernaut of censorship" (*The Hindu*, January 26, 2023). Its overreach encompasses digital news, video streaming, and online gaming, prompting many High Courts to question its constitutionality.

The practice of issuing advisories without amendments to the IT Rules, but merely making reference to them, represents a further decline in administrative standards. Worse, advisories are subsequently modified on social media posts without any official documentation. This demonstrates how technology policy is increasingly driven by an influencer culture that masquerades short-term ministerial visibility as public interest. Policy decisions are swayed by press coverage and social media metrics rather than the 'dull and deliberative' processes of working groups and stakeholder consultations. All of this is rarely put to question and has increased administrative arrogance as a response to government buffoonery.

This was not always the case. As Amber Sinha wrote in Tech Policy Press in 2014, the government quickly retracted a Draft Encryption Policy after online backlash. The times have changed as the recent AI advisory maintains its validity with a muscular if not bungling ministerial defence. Even expert and technical commentary is self-censored. Gone are the vibrant and combative challenges that used humour and directed sharp criticism at the highest officers of the Union Government. Developments now signal an environmental change in which there is a greater risk of consequences in questioning policies of digital authoritarianism. The options for us are to pray, be polite and hope for good sense to prevail for there is little else to do. For today, despite an illegal and embarrassing AI advisory, MEITY seems more like a deity.

Bhutan's opening move, its Gelephu gambit

In an age where connectivity projects, mega-highways and smart cities are in currency worldwide, Bhutan's plans for a regional economic hub at Gelephu, a town bordering Assam in India, are high on Bhutan Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay's agenda in Delhi this week in talks with the government in Delhi and India Inc. in Mumbai. The plan, launched by Bhutan's King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck in December 2023, is to build a "Gelephu Mindfulness City" (GMC) with a unique Bhutanese architectural blueprint across 1,000 square kilometres, as a special administrative zone with separate, investor-friendly laws.

As a carbon-neutral city, Gelephu would include only non-polluting industries (mainly IT, education, hotel and hospital sectors), and would be promoted as an investment destination and health and wellness hub in the middle of the region. In that sense the city is more like newer global peers - planned cities such as Saudi Arabia's Neom and Indonesia's Nusantara than financial hubs with glass-cased skyscrapers such as Dubai, Hong Kong and Singapore. It would also lie at the crossroads of India's "Act East" plans for connectivity to Myanmar, and on to Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the Indo-Pacific region as well as the new India-Japan connectivity plans between India's north-eastern States through Bangladesh to the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean. At the 7th Indian Ocean Conference 2024 in Perth in February, External Affairs Minister highlighted the "need for lateral land-based connectivity across the Indian Ocean region,.... essential to supplement and complement the maritime flows" through "initiatives like the IMEC [India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor] to India's West and the Trilateral Highway to India's East".

Despite the lofty ambitions, the Gelephu gambit will require a major leap of faith from India. To begin with, the geography of Gelephu, a rare broad plain in an otherwise mountainous country, poses challenges. With warmer temperatures than in the mountains, Gelephu gets high amounts of rainfall during a monsoon season that lasts several months, leading to considerable flooding each year. The surrounding forests and wildlife populations place Gelephu right in the middle of elephant corridors. Insurgencies in Assam and the northeastern States and just across the Indian border in Myanmar have been an area of great concern in the past, leading to a major military operation (Operation All Clear) by Bhutan's former (Fourth)



Suhasini Haidar

The mega project is a huge gamble for Bhutan but can be a gamechanger for the region, with help from India

king in 2003, working with the Indian Army to drive out militant groups sheltering in the area. As Gelephu is landlocked, it is dependent on other countries, primarily India, to provide the infrastructure for trade and transport out of the special administrative region.

A necessity for Bhutan

For Bhutan, the Gelephu project is necessitated by its economic challenges. Apart from hydropower, tourism is Bhutan's mainstay, but the kingdom has always discouraged mass tourism, preferring instead a "high value, low volume" motto to ensure sustainability. However, if Bhutan wants to increase these revenues, it must scale up its capacity to take in more tourists and visitors and land bigger planes, which need a much larger airport than the present one in the narrow Paro valley.

The first part of the Gelephu project involves scaling up the Gelephu airport and tarmac to international standards, which will need financing and expertise from India. The growing "outmigration" of Bhutanese youth in search of jobs abroad is another challenge, and the government hopes a mega project such as Gelephu will stem that. Finally, there is Bhutan's most pressing geopolitical concern: pressure from its northern neighbour China to conclude a boundary resolution deal and to establish diplomatic ties. Far away to the south, Gelephu offers Bhutan a way to open itself up in a controlled manner to the rest of the world, while also continuing negotiations with Beijing for a stable border.

For India too, the worry of Bhutan - its only direct neighbour not currently in Beijing's orbit - broadening its ties with China should keep it focussed on the Gelephu project. India and Bhutan have thus far built an idyllic relationship, based on a strong understanding between every Bhutan's king and Indian Prime Minister over the past 75 years. Bhutan's requests have seldom ever been rejected, and India is the leading source of investments in Bhutan, comprising 50% of its total foreign direct investment. New Delhi would also be wary of "missing an opportunity" of the kind seen in Sri Lanka's Hambantota a decade ago, which sent the close neighbour to China, caused unsustainable debt and is a project that risks becoming a "white elephant". When it comes to investment in infrastructure, Gelephu's needs will dovetail with New Delhi's own plans for the region: railway lines right up to the border with Bhutan; better roads to feed into the

trilateral highway to Myanmar and South East Asia; cooperation with Japan to coordinate roads and bridges construction in Bangladesh in order to access Chattogram and Mongla ports; and upgrading border posts with all three land neighbours to allow efficient trade. In addition to climate-friendly solar and wind power generation projects, India's plans for a South Asian power grid that would draw electricity from Nepal and Bhutan, with supply to Bangladesh and Sri Lanka would lend itself to more consistent power supplies needed for Gelephu.

Gelephu faces immense challenges, but New Delhi's other grand plans for connectivity confront challenges too. The International North-South Transport Corridor (through Iran-Russia via Chabahar to Central Asia) faces western sanctions, and the IMEC (through the United Arab Emirates-Saudia Arabia-Greece), and I2U2 initiative (Israel-India-UAE-U.S.) are challenged by Israel's bombardment of Gaza and Houthi attacks in the Red Sea. Meanwhile, nearly a decade of deteriorating ties with Pakistan have seen the Narendra Modi government virtually cut off any plans for land connectivity over India's western border.

It can recast ties

Obviously, the conditions for a mega-smart city with no immediate returns from the investment envisioned for the GMC, are not optimal at present. However, as the global setting grows more polarised and countries increasingly opt for "tribal" foreign policies that draw more from traditional allies in their respective neighbourhoods, India too must find its tribe in South Asia: a region that shares language, faith, culture, geography and climate. The goodwill generated by India's generous support to Sri Lanka during its economic crisis and steadfast relationship with Bangladesh can be multiplied by similar forays in other directions, such as helping Nepal defray the costs of its new airports by allowing overflight rights, continuing the projects committed to the Maldives despite recent setbacks in ties, and even considering a new chapter with Pakistan, amidst all its other political and economic turmoil. To that end, the Gelephu project offers a chance for the region to conjure an imagination beyond the problematic present - one that is a huge gamble for Bhutan, but also a potential gamechanger for the region, with help from India.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Democracy's course

Political adventurism and its relentless onslaught on democratic principles, continue to ensure a precarious perch for democracy in India, on the three-legged stool of the legislature, the executive and the judiciary. The

onerous task of propping up democracy in the world's most populous democracy is hardly the sole responsibility of the judiciary. Deeming political funding through electoral bonds as 'unconstitutional' by the judiciary led to the subsequent avowal by the

Chief Election Commissioner to publish details of poll bonds 'in time'. Whether an informed perspective on transparency and accountability influences the electorate is a hazardous guess. **Anthony Joseph,** New Delhi

Parched Bengaluru

The front-page photograph (March 14), of people in

Bengaluru waiting with pots for water, paints a grim picture of the crisis.

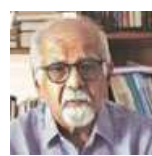
Corrections & Clarifications

The reference to "four EU nations" in the strapline of "A fresh stance" (Editorial, March 14, 2024) was erroneous. The countries are part of the European single market accord and are EFTA nations.

In the report "Centre signs ₹200-cr pact for anti-drone systems" (March 12, 2024), Vivek Virmani is the Chief Operating Officer and not the CEO of iDex.

The problem is not a resource-based concern, but an issue emerging out of poor policy implementation. Water governance in the State and Bengaluru must be examined as a whole. **R. Sivakumar,** Chennai

Has poverty really dropped to 5% in India?



Surjit Bhalla
is a former member of the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council



Jayati Ghosh
is a development economist and author of 'The Making of a Catastrophe: The Disastrous Economic Fallout of the COVID-19 Pandemic in India'

PARLEY

NITI Aayog B.V.R. Subrahmanyam recently claimed that less than 5% of Indians now live below the poverty line. He made the claim based on the findings of the Household Consumption Expenditure Survey (HCES), 2022-23. Mr. Subrahmanyam argued that the average consumption expenditure in the bottom 5% of India's population, as estimated by the survey, is about the same as the poverty line in India, suggesting that the poverty rate in India is somewhere in the range of 0 to 5%. Has poverty really dropped to 5% in India? Surjit Bhalla and Jayati Ghosh discuss the question in a conversation moderated by Prashanth Perumal J. Edited excerpts:

The claim is that less than 5% of Indians live below the poverty line. Can you explain how the poverty line is defined in India? Does the poverty line need to be raised?

Surjit Bhalla: We are talking about the change in the level of poverty. In 2011-12, the poverty level in India, based on the same poverty line (as of today), was 12.5%. Now it's down to 5%. If you apply the poverty line, which is today close to ₹1,500 in rural areas and ₹1,800 in urban areas according to the Tendulkar poverty line, you get something close to a poverty level of 2%. Therefore, we have moved from something like 12.5% in 2011-12 to 2% in 2022-23 and that definitely suggests that the poverty line needs to be raised around the world. Extreme poverty is what has been eliminated. We have made good progress, but we have to raise the poverty line. If we apply the World Bank's lower-middle-income line to calculate poverty, we get a poverty level of something like 25% in rural areas and 11% in urban areas, which gives you a poverty rate of 21%. So, there is no question that the poverty line needs to be raised.

Jayati Ghosh: Whatever is being used as the poverty line today is inadequate. But I want to highlight a couple of things. First, officially, there is no declared income poverty line right now. What Surjit is using is the Tendulkar line adjusted for consumer price inflation and the World Bank's purchasing power poverty line of \$2.15 a day, both of which would give you less than 5% extreme poverty or extreme destitution. However, there is a problem. The Tendulkar line itself was not really conceptually based on anything. It broke away from the idea that you need a certain minimum calorie requirement to be fulfilled and therefore households that spend at least that much on calories would be above the line. So, we don't actually have a poverty



Farmers near Raipur, Chhattisgarh. SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

line in India. The government has not announced any clear poverty line. Also, we have to be careful when comparing this survey over time because the official report makes it explicit that this is not comparable with earlier surveys.

The survey says consumption expenditure has gone up about 2.5 times since 2011-12, but critics say income has not risen in tandem to corroborate this claim. What explains the gap?

SB: Well, that's in nominal terms. Consumption has gone up per capita by about 40% over the last 11 years in real terms. So, I don't see what the problem with that is. There are other figures that corroborate the claim. Look at wages. The Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) provides you with data on the wages of different workers. For agricultural workers, wages have gone up 3.2% per year since 2011, so real wages have really gone up. Further, tax data show a reasonably strong, robust growth since 2011 in the wages of salaried workers. So, you have data showing that incomes have gone up and therefore consumption has gone up.

JG: It's unfortunate that we have to keep disagreeing even on data, but there are so many different studies that looked into real wage data and show that real wages have grown by less than 1% per annum since 2017. And they have fallen for construction workers. What's more important is that the increase in employment that has been celebrated in the latest PLFS in 2022-23 doesn't actually exist because it's generally due to the dramatic increase in unpaid family helpers. That is, people who work in family enterprises in unpaid forms. At the moment, the PLFS shows us that 37.5% of women workers are unpaid, which is an increase from 32% in 2011-12 and 2017-18. If you look at only the paid employment rate (that is, of



We really do not have any indications that real wage incomes are growing for most working families

JAYATI GHOSH

people who are working and getting paid for their work), it's only 48% for men and 13% for women. So, we really do not have any indications that real wage incomes are growing for most working families.

The National Sample Survey Organisation is showing us that real consumption grew at around 3% per annum. Yes, but what's really happening here is a dramatically increased consumption of the top 10 to 15%, and this is widely documented. The fact is that whatever consumption we have is driven by the upper deciles. We also have many other indicators, like the demand for mass consumption goods and fast-moving consumer goods; they are hardly increasing. There is stagnation in demand for two-wheelers; sales are less than they were pre-demonetisation (pre-November 2016).

GDP growth is now driven by capital expenditure, largely public capital expenditure, because we really haven't seen the same revival in private investment, largely because mass consumption demand is stagnant.

What do you have to say in response to the arguments made by critics about the unreliability of the government's data?

SB: We need a larger discussion about the quality of private sector data. I'm particularly concerned about data from the CMIE (Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy) which show that female labour force participation rate in India is lower than that in Yemen and Iraq. This implies that only 9% of women are working in India. Second, regarding government data, we know that the 2017-18 consumer expenditure survey data were not released because of bad quality. The government should have released that data, but it doesn't negate the fact that that data was of awful quality. The point is that the data offered by the private sector is perhaps much worse than government data.

JG: I don't agree because numbers in India now are politicised like never before. The consumer expenditure survey of 2017-18 was scrapped apparently because it was of poor quality, but we need to have the survey results and see what exactly was wrong. But look at the way the PLFS was not even released until after the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. Look at the attack [last year] on the head of the agency [the International

Institute for Population Sciences] that provides guidance for the National Family Health Survey because the survey came out with results on open defecation, etc. that were not to the liking of the government. Look at the suppression of many audit reports like the Clean Ganga mission. Look at the fact that we haven't even had a Census yet, four years after we are supposed to have started this process. Look at selective publication of partial reports that do not provide all the usual details, whether it was the Economic Survey before the Vote on Account this year, which came out more like a propaganda sheet than an actual Economic Survey, or even this particular consumption report which does not give us sufficient details. This is something of deep importance because we had one of the best statistical systems in the world for a low- to middle-income country, and for this to be destroyed in a very blatantly politicised way is a serious problem.

NITI Aayog's CEO argues that more people are spending on items beyond just basic food stuff like cereals. Isn't this a sign of economic progress?

JG: Absolutely. But this has to happen with an increase in income, right? This is not a surprise and it certainly is valid. It's also true that as there is much more mechanisation, much less walking etc., you need to eat less cereals and you should have a much more balanced and nutritious diet. But you know there's a new United Nations report that just came out and it says 74% of the Indian population cannot afford the minimum nutritious diet prescribed by the FAO (Food and Agricultural Organization) for South Asia. So, we are still very far behind.

SB: In the 1980s, we all thought calories were an important indicator of poverty. A survey in the U.S. at that time said that 80% of American women were malnourished according to caloric consumption standards. Thankfully the World Bank has changed and got to an absolute income level by which to define poverty.

JG: Nutrition is a critical part of well-being. The indicator that is produced by 12 UN agencies put together does not rely on only calorie consumption. It is a much more sophisticated indicator and it's on that basis that they have realised that 3/4th of the Indian population cannot afford the minimum nutritious diet.



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NOTEBOOK

The journalist's fight against the rumour mill

It is not that easy to prove that something does not exist

Ramya Kannan

Winston Churchill could not have imagined how prescient his words would be; how decades after he uttered them, they would be truer than they ever were. "A lie gets half way around the world before truth gets a chance to put its pants on," he once said. This is equally true of rumours too.

Kate-gate, as the infamous doctored photo incident might well be called, has a voyeuristic world in its hold. An image of the Princess of Wales, Kate Middleton, posing with her three children, her arms wrapped around two of them, released by Buckingham Palace on the occasion of Mother's Day, was in the news for all the wrong reasons. The media discovered that the image had been manipulated and spent time and energy speculating about it. Rumours swirled at greater speed after Kate herself admitted that she had edited the photo. The memes and updates fed the relentless interest of the world, as the 'non story' travelled everywhere.

Across the world, journalists battle with the ability of rumours to capture the imagination and attention of the public. Sometimes, this support from the public offers a bulwark of resistance against truth itself, making the job of countering rumours with facts burdensome.

In the Indian subcontinent, it has become common for rumours to gather momentum until rigorous fact-checks lead people to sometimes delete their posts. But rumours are most resilient; they keep cropping up. It is true that some may not be very harmful – for instance, old videos of heavy rainfall often circulate repeatedly, much like boot cuts become fashionable every few years. But others are more significant and impact the life of the person/persons involved. All of them, though, are gloriously at odds, in varying degrees, with the facts of the case.

It is not that easy to prove that something does not exist. This makes a journalist run around in circles to look for evidence that something has not happened. Among journalists who have done this,

the worst job is to confirm that some one is not yet dead. A well-known example is the recent declaration by a fake account on social media that Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen was no more. Telugu film star Sarath Babu, too, suffered a hasty end at the hands of social media, while he was ailing. Journalists who constantly and compulsively trawl social media probably caught this rumour earlier than the families, and the scramble began to "break the news". But how do you decently ask someone if they are alive? Or for that matter, ask them if their mother, spouse or children are alive? We journalists hem and haw. Sometimes we may also come across as slow-witted to the people to whom we say, "I hope all is well. Just calling to check."

The lack of access to the truth is frustrating. Some of the toughest things to confirm are facts about the hospitalisation of celebrities or political leaders. Unlike parts of the West, where a culture of voluntary disclosure of information by the managers of celebrities is common, in India, you hear only what the celebrity's family or coterie want you to hear. Even those in the know are probably barred from speaking. Fair enough, but it only creates an atmosphere where rumours not only germinate but also thrive.

The case of former Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalitha, who spent months at a private hospital before she passed away, was one such instance. A Tamil news channel announced one night that she had died, but there was nothing official to confirm this – neither a bulletin nor an official release from the government that she was technically still heading. The short period that followed that "news break" might best be slotted in the 'berserk phase' of every journalist's life. It turned out, of course, that the channel had jumped the gun. In this age where there is a burning desire to break news, even if tragic, without confirmation, there is no peace, neither for journalists nor the people involved.

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PICTURE OF THE WEEK

Embarking on a new journey



Newly commissioned Officer Cadets at the Officers Training Academy in Chennai. Cadets who graduated included those from three African countries. The foreign cadets will go on to join the armies of their respective countries now. Velankanni Raj B.

FROM THE ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO MARCH 15, 1974

"Coca Cola not detrimental to health"

New Delhi, March 14: Mr. A.K. Kisku, Union Deputy Minister for Health, said to-day that Coca Cola was neither detrimental to human health nor did it impair appetite.

Intervening in the debate on the expansion of the Coca Cola Export Corporation's activities in India and facilities extended to it

The Hindu

by the Government, Mr. Kisku said he was quoting from the latest report of the National Institute of Nutrition. The discussion was raised by Mr. Jyotirmoy Basu (CPM).

Mr. Kisku who intervened at the fag end of the discussion was interrupted by Mr Basu, who alleged that the report of the Nutrition Institute about Coca Cola had been changed. "Now they have managed to change the report," Mr. Basu shouted.

Earlier, initiating the debate, Mr. Basu had quoted from a report of the same Institute to support his assertion that Coca Cola was injurious to health.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MARCH 15, 1924

Rejected by Commons

London, March 14: The Commons to-day by 211 votes to 129 rejected the second reading of the Trade Union Act 1913 Amendment Bill, providing that when a trade union passed a resolution in favour of political objects shall indicate their desire in writing and shall not as heretofore be automatically included as supporters unless they contracted out.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Land in J&K allotted to build Maharashtra Bhawan

2.5 In acres. The Maharashtra Cabinet has approved a proposal to construct a Maharashtra Bhawan in the Ichgam area, clearing the decks for the first State-run guest house to come up in the Valley. PTI

Prize money for the Mumbai team for winning Ranji trophy

10 in ₹ crore. Mumbai won a record-extending 42nd Ranji title after beating Vidarbha. The triumphant Mumbai team will receive an additional ₹5 crore on top of the ₹5 crore prize money already decided. PTI

Blue Star AC firm's planned investment in Andhra Pradesh

250 in ₹ crore. Leading home appliances company Blue Star will invest ₹250 crore in the next financial year to raise the manufacturing capacity of air conditioners at its Sri City facility. PTI

People arrested in Mizoram for not having ILP

1,187 According to the provisions of the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation, 1873, people from other States need to possess Inner Line Permit to enter and stay in Mizoram. PTI

India's ranking in HDI among 193 nations in 2022

134 After a drop in its Human Development Index value in 2021 and following a flat trend, India's HDI value has increased marginally to 0.644 in 2022. PTI

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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CAA and status of judicial proceedings

How have the newly notified rules eased the process of granting Indian citizenship to specific communities under the CAA? What arguments have been presented for challenging its constitutionality? What is the significance of the government's assertion that the CAA does not affect legal, democratic, or secular rights?

EXPLAINER

Aaratrika Bhaumik

The story so far:

Four years after Parliament passed the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), 2019, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) notified the rules to implement the law on March 11. It fast-tracks citizenship for undocumented immigrants from six non-Muslim communities – Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Parsi, Christian and Jain – from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh. The CAA is also under challenge before the Supreme Court, with several petitioners moving fresh pleas seeking a stay on the implementation of the rules.

What are the implications of CAA?

In December 2019, Parliament passed an amendment to The Citizenship Act, 1955 (1955 Act) introducing a new proviso to Section 2(d)(b) which defines "illegal migrants." Accordingly, undocumented immigrants who entered India on or before December 31, 2014, and whom the Central government has exempted under the Passport (Entry into India) Act, 1920, or the Foreigners Act, 1946, would be eligible for citizenship under the 1955 Act. However, certain tribal areas in Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Tripura were exempted from the legislation's ambit. To access these protected areas, an Inner Line Permit (ILP) is needed from the concerned State governments.

A key concern is that when viewed in combination with the proposed all-India National Register of Indian Citizens (NRIC), the CAA has the potential to disproportionately impact Muslims residing in India. In the event of people being excluded from NRIC, non-Muslims may have an opportunity to get included through the CAA, while it may be denied to Muslims. A Supreme Court-monitored National Register of Citizens that took place in Assam in 2021 left out over 19 lakh people from the citizenship register.

On May 28, 2021, the Union government issued an order under Section 16 of the 1955 Act, granting District Collectors in five States with high migrant populations the power to grant citizenship to groups identified in the



Protest march: Petitioners challenge the Citizenship Amendment Act's constitutionality. AFP

2019 amendment. In its 2021-22 Annual Report, the MHA stated that in 2021, 1,414 citizenship certificates were granted under CAA provisions. However, after petitions were filed alleging that this order was a "ruse" to implement CAA, the MHA contended before the court that its order had "no relation whatsoever" with the CAA and that it merely delegated "the power (of granting citizenship by registration and naturalisation) to the local authorities in particular cases."

With the newly notified rules, the Centre has eased the process of granting Indian citizenship to members of the specified communities by excluding the requirement of a "valid passport" of their origin countries or a valid visa from India. Instead, "any document" that shows one of the parents, grandparents or even great-grandparents of the applicant was from one of these countries is sufficient to prove their nationality. Additionally, a certificate issued by an elected member of a local body can be a replacement for a visa.

After the legislation's enactment in 2019, the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) filed a petition challenging its constitutionality, which was joined by close to 200 petitioners. These petitioners challenge the law for violating Article 14 of the Constitution by making religion a qualifier for citizenship.

The CAA has also been dubbed as a move to subvert the Assam Accord of 1985 that deems any person who cannot prove his ancestry beyond March 24, 1971, as an alien and does not differentiate on grounds of religion. The petitions contend

that the law will further multiply the "uncontrolled influx of illegal migrants from Bangladesh to Assam."

How has the Supreme Court responded?

Calling the CAA a "benign piece of legislation," the Centre in its affidavit before the Supreme Court said that it seeks to provide amnesty to specific communities from specified countries with a clear cut-off date. It highlighted that the law does not in any manner affect the legal, democratic or secular rights of any Indian citizen.

The affidavit further stated that the "narrowly tailored legislation" was passed to "tackle a specific problem, i.e., the persecution on the ground of religion in the light of the undisputable theocratic constitutional position in these specified countries, the systematic functioning of these States and the perception of fear that may be prevalent amongst minorities as per the *de facto* situation in these countries."

On December 18, 2019, a Bench comprising former Chief Justice of India (CJI) S.A. Bobde refused to stay the operation of the law and instead suggested that the government publicise the actual intent of the Act. The court rejected a similar plea for stay on January 22, 2020, by underscoring that it needs to hear the government first.

On October 6, 2022, a Bench comprising former CJI U.U. Lalit passed an order stating that final hearings in the case would begin on December 6, 2022. However, the case has not been listed

since then. As per the Supreme Court's website, the petitions are currently listed before a Bench headed by Justice Pankaj Mithal.

Why are petitioners seeking a stay on the rules?

The IUML and others have moved the top court seeking a stay on the rules notified on March 11.

They have pointed out how the Centre had earlier averted a push for a stay of the CAA in the Supreme Court nearly five years ago by arguing that the rules had not been framed. It has also been highlighted that the rules have done away with the tiered scrutiny of applications for citizenship by District Collectors on the ground, and recommendations of State governments as to the wisdom of granting citizenship.

They said that the government ought to have waited for a final decision from the Supreme Court before implementing the rules.

What is the significance of the challenge to Section 6A?

The proceedings against the CAA are also dependent on the outcome of the challenge to Section 6A of the 1955 Act which was introduced in furtherance of a Memorandum of Settlement called the "Assam Accord" signed on August 15, 1985.

In December last year, a five-judge Constitution Bench led by CJI D.Y. Chandrachud reserved its verdict on the validity of Section 6A after orally observing that the provision was enacted as a humanitarian measure in the wake of the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War and was deeply interwoven in the country's history.

Section 6A determines who is a foreigner in Assam by establishing March 24, 1971, as the cut-off date for entry – those who came to the State on or after January 1, 1966, but before March 25, 1971, were to be declared as "foreigners" and would have all the rights and obligations of Indian citizens except that they would not be able to vote for 10 years.

If March 24, 1971, is upheld as a valid cut-off date for entry into the State, then CAA can be held to be violative of the Assam Accord since it establishes a different timeline.

THE GIST

The Ministry of Home Affairs notified the rules to implement the CAA, which fast-tracks citizenship for non-Muslim immigrants from neighbouring countries. Despite delays, the Act faces challenges in the Supreme Court.

Petitions challenge the CAA's constitutionality, arguing it violates Article 14 by making religion a qualifier for citizenship.

Petitions seek a stay on the recently notified rules, criticising the bypassing of tiered scrutiny for citizenship applications and the government's decision to implement rules before a final court decision.

What are the causes of the flare-up in eastern Congo?

What are the underlying reasons behind the renewed clashes between the Congolese army and the M23 rebels? How has the humanitarian crisis worsened as a result of the recent escalation in violence?

Sumeda

The story so far:

Renewed clashes in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) have sparked global concern, worsening the humanitarian crisis. Fighting between the Congolese army and Rwandan-backed M23 group intensified around Sake and Nyanzale, resulting in deaths, displacements, and food security risks. The U.S. urged both countries to avoid war, calling for Rwanda to withdraw its personnel and missile systems. The United Nations and several Western countries have also denounced the attacks and called on the M23 rebels to cease their offensive.

What is the conflict?

An unending cycle of violence has

engulfed the eastern region of the central African country for decades, with the conflict originating in two civil wars. In 1994, an estimated eight lakh minority ethnic Tutsis and Hutu moderates were killed by extremist Hutus in 100 days, in what is now known as the Rwandan genocide.

In the subsequent days, around two million people crossed the Congolese border (then known as Zaire) to settle in refugee camps in the eastern provinces of North Kivu and South Kivu as a Tutsi government gained control of Rwanda.

Tutsi militias also banded together to fight extremist Hutus as tensions heightened between local Congolese and Rwandan emigrants. The ethnic tensions further set the stage for the First Congo War between the Zairean soldiers on one hand and the Tutsi militia and the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the

Liberation of Congo (AFDL) on the other, with the backing of Rwanda and Uganda which wanted to root out the remaining perpetrators of the genocide. In 1997, the AFDL captured the capital Kinshasa and Zaire was renamed as the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Another deadly war followed in 1998 after the new regime ordered Rwandan refugees and troops to leave the country. It feared that Rwanda would join forces with Uganda. The war that followed was dubbed 'Africa's world war.' A new Rwanda-backed rebel group, the Rally for Congolese Democracy (RCD), began invading parts of Congo. In response, Congolese President Laurent-Désiré Kabila allowed armed Hutu refugees to organise in the east to fight against Rwanda.

Since then, several agreements have been signed to put an end to what has

been called one of the world's deadliest conflicts since the Second World War, but fighting has continued.

Who are the M23 rebels?

The March 23 Movement or M23, formed in 2012, claims to defend Tutsi interests against Hutu militias. Originating from a 2009 ceasefire agreement, it broke away from the Congolese army, accusing the government of failing to integrate Tutsis. The group resurged in 2022, citing attacks by Hutu militias. Recent attacks near Goma have escalated the humanitarian crisis, prompting protests urging Rwanda's withdrawal of support.

The worsening violence has led to an escalation in tensions between the DRC and Rwanda, with Congo accusing the latter of backing M23 rebels. Rwanda has repeatedly denied these allegations. Rwanda has claimed the escalation is due to Congo's decision to send back regional peacekeepers.

The new fighting could lead to an escalation of regional tensions and involve more countries. The International NGO Forum in Congo said the escalation has involved artillery attacks on civilian settlements, causing a heavy toll and forcing many health and aid workers to withdraw. There are concerns a new disaster could go unnoticed because of the attention on the war in Gaza and Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

THE GIST

Renewed clashes in eastern DRC between the Congolese army and Rwandan-backed M23 rebels have raised global concerns.

The conflict exacerbates the humanitarian crisis in the region, with increased fatalities, displacements, and food security risks.

The United Nations and several Western countries denounce the attacks and urge the M23 rebels to halt their offensive.

IN THE LIMELIGHT



A still from *Fighter*.

Now playing politics: Bollywood movies goes into poll mode

Shunning the inclusive approach, Bollywood film narratives are busy promoting elements of aggressive nationalism and Islamophobia and are demonising left-leaning liberals before India votes this summer

Anuj Kumar

A female police officer vowing to eliminate left-leaning liberals that support the rights of tribals on natural wealth, a fighter pilot eager to occupy Pakistan, and a news anchor desperate to put out the truth of the fire in Sabarmati Express at Godhra station in 2002. The images of aggressive nationalism, Islamophobia, and the ‘Red Scare’ are wafting into theatres to build public opinion against the political opponents of the ruling dispensation.

As it seeks a third term, cinema halls are turning into rallying points for the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to help create the *mahaul* (political atmosphere) in its favour. The notification of election is yet to be made and parties and alliances are still being broken and forged but a section of the film industry has already declared its manifesto and is indulging in dog-whistle politics.

A far cry from the stated credo of inclusivity defined by *sabka saath, sabka vikas* and *sabka vishwas*, historical events, it seems, are being skewed to fit a particular communal narrative by dividing communities into monolithic groups of heroes and villains based on religious and ideological identity. The spaces and issues that are contested or have existed for years in a grey zone are being insidiously turned into a black-and-white contrast that suits a political narrative.

The chronology of the release dates tells a story. Since January, every other week we have a film that reflects the ruling dispensation’s thrust on a contentious issue, stated or otherwise. Hrithik Roshan’s *Fighter* took a shot at the promised Akhand Bharat while reimagining the Pulwama attack and the subsequent Balakot strike. Yami Gautam’s *Article 370* explained the government’s vision of Naya Kashmir where peace is earned through the bullet and not negotiated through the back channel diplomacy. This week, Adah Sharma’s

Bastar: The Naxal Story is holding left liberals, which the party leaders often describe as urban Naxals, to account for the Maoist insurgency.

This idea of finding the enemy within is taking another shape in the form of the upcoming film *JNU* whose provocative poster made it to social media this week where a reputed Central university’s name is mischievously expanded as Jahangir National University – a centre of education that promotes anti-national ideas, teases the poster. The university is being repeatedly used to get even with political opponents with hardly any creative filters.

Then, *The Sabarmati Report* will unravel in the first week of May when the political temperature is expected to be peaking. In a statement, the makers said that the film narrates a story of events that took place in The Sabarmati Express on the morning of February 27, 2002, near the Godhra railway station in Gujarat. Before that *Razakar: The Silent Genocide of Hyderabad* backed by a BJP politician and set against the blood-soaked backdrop of Hyderabad’s merger with India, is striking a disconcerting tone against a religion with its trailer.

Changing ecosystem

Apart from seeing controversial issues and events in a ‘new’ light, an attempt is being made to put one source of light against the other to provide ideological muscle to the claims. It started with Rajkumar Santoshi’s *Gandhi Godse: Ek Yudh*, where Gandhi was charged with appeasement and Godse had the last word.

It continued this year with Pankaj Tripathi’s *Main Atal Hoon*, a sanitised biopic of Atal Bihari Vajpayee, and is now ready to take the next level with Randeep Hood’s *Swatantra Veer Savarkar* that seems keen on whitewashing the conflicted personality and legacy of a freedom fighter who wrote multiple mercy petitions to the colonial power and accepted a pension from those he once

fought against. Unlike Gandhi, Savarkar believed in the power of cinema, and, ironically, decades after his death, the medium is being used to help him scale Gandhian stature.

There is a concerted effort to correct the ecosystem which the right-leaning influencers in the film industry say hasn’t changed as much as they wanted it to in the last ten years. They see it as an ideological shift and put it under the umbrella of freedom of speech, a counter view that was allegedly suppressed when film folks saw the world from the prism of *bhaichara* (brotherhood) or *Ganga-Jamuni tehzeeb* (syncretic culture), euphemisms for appeasement politics.

However, in the real world, the Prime Minister still takes G-20 leaders to pay floral tributes at the Gandhi Samadhi. The new ecosystem speaks with a forked tongue. Replying to an RTI query, the Home Ministry said it didn’t have any information about urban naxals or their activities.

We saw a similar but limited attempt without much box-office success before the 2019 polls as well but the new variants are a lot more technically polished and emotionally manipulative in putting the point across. Also, they are being headlined by competent actors such as Hrithik Roshan, Randeep Hooda, and Yami Gautam and are backed by producers for whom it is proving to be a safe proposition.

Investing in political narratives

As the industry means business, producers are investing in political narratives after seeing the box-office success of *The Kashmir Files* and *The Kerala Story*. They feel there is a mass that wants to see the dramatic representation of what is dog-whistled at political rallies and newsroom debates and give the crude WhatsApp chats a creative shape. For the foot soldier, the advantage is that ‘suitable’ portions make it to reels to roll over the facts over and over again.

For instance, the Indian government had described the surgical strikes after

Pulwama as a ‘non-military pre-emptive strike’ but *Fighter* frames it clearly as revenge. The Central Board Of Film Certification, until recently was very careful about how the Prime Minister is portrayed on the screen, let a declamatory statement like “Show them who is daddy” go in his name in *Fighter*.

At another level, it shows the makers like politicians don’t want the Pulwama episode and the Balakot strike to go off public memory. In 2019, we had *Uri: The Surgical Strike* on the same operation by the same producer. The difference is while the movie threatened home invasion, *Fighter* talked of the possibility of ‘India Occupied Pakistan’. Telugu film *Operation Valentine* also milked the same events with lesser intensity and craft. Curiously, the creative fraternity, like the ruling party, is silent on the martyrs of Galwan so far.

It is not that this polarising cinematic discourse is going uncontested. Dissent is taking allegorical shapes to avoid censorship. Last year, it was very much present in the measured subversion of *Pathaan* and *Jawan* while *Afwaah* and *Bheed* measured the impact of disinformation. The surge in films around the 1971 war and Indian intelligence officers’ exploits in Pakistan ended up endorsing the view that India had a well-endowed chest before 2014 as well.

Ae Watan Mere Watan, a Karan Johar production, releasing on an OTT platform next week documents the sacrifices the youth made to win us free speech. Based on the life of Usha Mehta, the freedom fighter who ran the secret Congress Radio during the Quit India Movement to take the message of the incarcerated Congress leadership to the people, the film will see socialist leader Ram Manohar Lohia who has hardly been discussed in popular culture. Not to forget, Devashish Makhija’s *Joram* evocatively talks of the deliberate invisibilisation of tribals in the name of development and Kiran Rao’s *Laapataa Ladies* cleverly delivers a political punch on social hypocrisy by stimulating those who seek a ban on hijab to look within.



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

K. Subrahmanian

MR. M. Jhabar Ali, Hindustan Teleprinters, Madras, wants to know which is correct: (a) The board has decided (b) The board have decided.

Both are correct. When we use the singular verb, we think of the members of the board as a group. When we use the plural verb, we think of the board as individuals that make up the group. Other words like ‘board’ are: government, committee, family, gang, jury, mob, team, public, class, crowd, flock, herd, orchestra, panel, offspring, staff.

How is the team? It is fine.

How are the team? They are enthusiastic.

The committee has submitted its report. The committee are yet to arrive at a decision.

These collective nouns can be used either with the singular verb or the plural. But you should not mix the singular and plural. The team is noted for their liveliness’ is wrong. Either it is ‘The team is noted for its liveliness,’ or ‘The team are noted for their liveliness.’ The use of the singular verb or the plural depends on whether you look at the collective noun as a unit or as individuals comprising the unit.

Mr. P. S. Mathur, Indira Nagar, Madras, wants to know whether – it is correct to use ‘Britisher’ for a British person. It is used by Americans and not by the British. ‘British’ is what is generally used in British English. He is British. He is a British citizen. The British introduced cricket wherever they went ‘Briton’ is also used in Britain to refer to a British person, mainly in newspaper reports concerning British people.

Ten Britons died in the air crash in Paris.

‘Briton’ also refers to the early inhabitants of Britain. Those who live in England are English people. The people of Britain are all British. Britain comprises England, Scotland and Wales. The term was first used in 1604 when James I was proclaimed ‘King of Great Britain’. ‘Great’ was used to distinguish Britain from Britania Minor, Brittany in France. Those who belong to Scotland are Scots and those who belong to Wales are Welsh. In India, there is a tendency to use ‘English’ to refer to Scots and the Welsh also. Both resent this. Scotland is a country by itself and so is Wales. England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland comprise the United Kingdom, or U.K. for short. There are certain terms where ‘Scots’ is used as an adjective: Scots law, Scotsman, Scotswoman. But ‘Scottish’ is more frequently used as an adjective: Scottish universities, Scottish newspapers, Scottish English. ‘Scotch’ is used for products originating in Scotland: Scotch whisky, Scotch wool. Scots call their national drink whisky rather than Scotch whisky or Scotch. The people of Scotland are Scots or the Scottish people and not Scotch. Scots are offended when you call them Scotch. They used to call themselves ‘Scotch’ during the 18th and 19th centuries, but now they do not like it. The blacks of America are offended when you call them Negroes. The Japanese dislike being called Japs. Even some highly educated people in India call the blacks ‘Negroes’ and the Japanese ‘Japs’ out of ignorance.

Published in *The Hindu* on June 11, 1991

THE DAILY QUIZ

Here is a quiz on the historical significance of the Ides of March, the day Roman statesman Julius Caesar was assassinated

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

Vasudevan Mukunth

QUESTION 1
On months with 31 days, the ides fall on the 15th day. When do they fall in months with 30 days?

QUESTION 2
In the first, a delegate from the senate marched to the Temple of Venus Genetrix to bestow upon Caesar various honours for his leadership in the Gallic Wars and the civil war that followed. But once the senators reached the temple, Caesar did X, which they construed to be an insult. What is X?

QUESTION 3
In the second, two elected officials or tribunes stoked trouble in the senate after suspecting Caesar of Y. Following his clash with them Caesar had the

duo removed from the senate. The Romans held this to be an affront to democracy. What is Y?

QUESTION 4
In the third, in a public event in February of 44 BC, _____ twice placed a crown on Caesar’s head only for Caesar to take it off on both occasions. The second time, Caesar said only Jupiter (the deity) could be king of the Romans – but many perceived his actions to be a charade orchestrated by Caesar to check if he had the people’s support to be king. Fill in the blanks.

QUESTION 5
In Dante’s *Inferno*, Satan is frozen waist deep in ice in the Ninth Circle of Hell. He has three faces. The one in the centre is munching on Judas Iscariot while the other two are consuming two ‘traitors’ involved in Caesar’s assassination. One is Gaius Cassius Longinus. Who’s the other?



Visual Question:
This photograph shows three actors essaying a scene from Shakespeare’s *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*. Name the left-most actor. He became famous for assassinating the leader of his country.

Questions and Answers to the previous day’s daily quiz: 1. Why is March 14 observed as Pi Day? **Ans: Pi Day is observed on March 14 (the third month) since 3, 1, and 4 are the first three significant figures of pi**

2. Who founded this day and in which year? **Ans: It was founded in 1988 by Larry Shaw, an American physicist**
3. In 2019, UNESCO designated Pi Day to be celebrated as which day? **Ans: International Day of Mathematics**
4. People also celebrate Pi on other dates in the year. Which are they? Why? **Ans: July 22 (22/7 in the day/month format, an approximation of pi) and June 28 (6.28, an approximation of 2pi)**
5. In the year 2015, March 14 was celebrated as Super Pi Day. **Ans: The date is written as 3/14/15 in month/day/year format. At 9:26:53, the date and time together represented the first ten digits of pi, and later that second Pi Instant represented all pi’s digits**
6. Name two common ways of celebrating Pi Day. **Ans: Pie eating competitions, recalling Pi to the highest number of decimal places**
7. Which famous scientist’s birthday also falls on Pi Day? **Ans: Albert Einstein**
Visual: What is the symbol? How is it related to Pi? What is the specific time associated with the symbol? **Ans: Tau. Tau is double the value of Pi. Tau Time is at 6:28**
Early Birds: Saravanan C | Rajmohan V | Prashant Nain | Gautam Singh VishwanadhaRao Batchu | Tamal Biswas

Word of the day

Equivocal:
open to two or more interpretations, intentionally misleading

Synonyms: ambiguous, obscure, vague

Usage: The officer’s equivocal behaviour increased the victim’s uneasiness.

Pronunciation: bit.ly/equivocalpro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /tkwivəkəl/

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

MOSCOW

Two dead, nine wounded as Russia fights off a string of border attacks



Russia's national guard said on Thursday it was fighting off attacks from pro-Ukrainian groups in the region of Kursk, the latest in a recent string of clashes at the border. In the neighbouring Belgorod region of Russia, officials announced that two people had been killed and nine wounded in fresh aerial attacks on Thursday. AFP

SUVA

Fiji High Court finds ex-PM guilty of perverting course of justice



Former Fiji Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama was found guilty on Thursday of illegally shutting down a sensitive police investigation. Mr. Bainimarama, a former military commander who became an elected leader, was convicted by the High Court of perverting the course of justice while leading the South Pacific island nation. AFP

SEOUL

Kim test drives a new tank and orders troops to prepare for war



North Korean leader Kim Jong-un joined troops training on a new model of tank and drove one himself, state media reported on Thursday. Mr. Kim praised the country's latest tank as "the world's most powerful" and told his troops to bolster their "fighting spirits" and complete "preparations for war," according to the media. AP

SANHE

Chinese city officials issue rare apology after media harassed



Officials of Sanhe city, near Beijing in eastern China, apologised to local presspersons after authorities were shown pushing them and trying to obstruct reporting from the site of a deadly explosion that killed seven and injured 27, in a rare acknowledgment of state aggression against journalists. AP

Sri Lanka gets bomb disposal device through Chinese grant

The equipment will be used primarily for screening, bomb detection, and disposal, according to Army sources in Colombo; the official statement did not mention the cost of the equipment

Meera Srinivasan
COLOMBO

Sri Lanka has received a stock of bomb squad equipment through a grant from the Chinese military, the Sri Lankan Army has said.

The Chinese Ambassador in Colombo handed over the Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) equipment to the Secretary to Sri Lanka's Ministry of Defence Gen. Kamal Gunaratne (Rtd) in a ceremony held on Wednesday, according to a media statement. The equipment will be used primarily for screening, bomb detection, and disposal, according to Army sources in Colombo. The statement did not mention the cost of the equipment.

The development came a day after the U.S. Department of Defence commenced a training programme for Sri Lanka's Air



Designated tools: Explosive Ordnance Disposal equipment delivered to the Sri Lankan Army under Chinese military grant.

Force for enhanced protection of the island's maritime resources, to counter illicit trafficking and monitor its exclusive economic zone. It also coincided with the Chinese People's Liberation Army's recent engagement in the region, including in Sri Lanka.

On March 7, a senior Chinese military official was in Colombo for talks with the military establishment. Deputy Chief of the Office for International Mil-

itary Cooperation (OMIC) of the Central Military Commission (CMC), China, Major General Zhang Baoqun met Gen. Gunaratne to "exchange perspectives on prevalent regional security challenges and explore avenues for joint initiatives on enhancing maritime security collaborations on mutual ground," a press release from the Sri Lankan Army said.

Beijing on Wednesday confirmed that a military

delegation visited the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Nepal from March 4 to 13 to discuss further defence cooperation. During the delegation's visit to the Maldives, the island nation's Minister of Defence signed a pact with Major General Zhang Baoqun for military assistance from China.

Beijing's enhanced military engagement in the region remains a cause for concern in New Delhi, even as India and Sri Lanka maintain long-standing defence ties, and currently have an annual defence dialogue at the level of Secretary to the Defence Ministry. The seventh round of the dialogue was held in New Delhi on February 23, 2023. Sri Lanka has a Liaison Officer posted at the Indian Navy's Information Fusion Centre for the Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) located in Gurugram. (With inputs from Dinakar Peri in New Delhi)

U.K. govt. releases new guidelines on extremism

Sriram Lakshman
LONDON

The U.K. government on Thursday unveiled a new and expanded definition of extremism and announced a policy banning government association and funding for designated organisations. The guidelines were criticised before they were formally unveiled, and the process has been mired in controversy after the names of some organisations on the new extremism list were leaked.

The U.K. saw a surge in anti-Semitic and Islamophobic activity and a rise in far-right violence since Hamas's October 7 attack in Israel and Israel's retaliatory attacks in Gaza.

'Work together'

With Britain heading towards a general election before January 2025, several politicians, including three former Conservative Home Secretaries, had issued a statement, warning Conservative and Labour lawmakers to work together on the issue and not use it for "short-term tactical advantage".

"The proposed definition will hold that extremism is the promotion or advancement of an ideology based on violence, hatred or intolerance that aims to negate or destroy the fundamental rights and freedoms of others, or undermine, overturn, or replace the U.K. system of liberal parliamentary democracy and democratic rights, or intentionally create a permissive environment for others to achieve these results," the U.K.'s Minister for communities, Michael Gove

said in the House of Commons. The new guidelines do not involve changes to criminal law, but seek to list organisations that continue not to be banned from having any association with or funding from the government. The government has set up a 'Counter-Extremism Centre of Excellence' to identify new entities of concern.

Mr. Gove listed a few of the Neo-Nazi and Islamist organisations under scrutiny, including the British National Socialist Movement, Patriotic Alternative, Cage, MEND and the Muslim Association of Britain, which he described as a U.K. affiliate of the Muslim Brotherhood. A legal inquiry has been constituted to look into how names got leaked to the press, as per Mr. Gove.

Among the critics of the government's new guidelines were the Archbishops of Canterbury and York who warned in a joint statement that the new rules could disproportionately impact Muslim communities and "drive us [Britons] apart".

"Islamism should never be confused with Islam," Mr. Gove said in the Commons on Thursday.



The U.K. saw a surge in anti-Semitic and Islamophobic activity since Hamas's October 7 attack in Israel. AP

Extreme right-wing group activity in the U.K. is a "growing worry" as is the targeting of Muslims and Jewish communities, he said.

Concerns about rules

Addressing concerns that the new rules could curb free speech, Mr. Gove said they would not apply to gender-critical campaigners, individuals with conservative religious beliefs, environmental protest groups or "those exercising their proper right to free speech".

Opposition parties also continued to call on the Conservatives to part with £10 million in donations from their largest donor, Frank Hester, who had reportedly said in 2019 that MP Diane Abbott made him want to "hate all black women" and that "she should be shot". Mr. Hester had apologised for the comments.

On Thursday, Mr. Gove called his remarks "clearly racist and regrettable", but made no commitments about the funding, when asked if the remarks met his definition of extremism and if the Conservative Party would return the money or donate it to charity.

China says U.S. TikTok vote follows 'logic of a bandit'

China says U.S. TikTok vote follows 'logic of a bandit'

Agence France-Presse
BEIJING

China blasted Washington's "bandit" mentality on Thursday after the U.S. House passed a Bill that would ban TikTok unless it splits from its Chinese owner, and vowed to "take all necessary measures" to protect the interests of its companies overseas.

The short-video app has soared in popularity worldwide but its ownership by Chinese technology giant ByteDance – and alleged subservience to Beijing's ruling Communist Party – has fuelled concern in Western capitals.

On Wednesday, the U.S. House of Representatives overwhelmingly approved a Bill that would force TikTok to divest from its parent company or face a nationwide ban.

Yet to become law

The Bill is yet to pass the Senate, where it is expected to face a tougher test in order to become law.

"The U.S. should truly respect the principles of a market economy and fair competition [and] stop unjustly suppressing foreign companies," Beijing's Commerce Ministry spokesperson He Yadong said at a press conference.

China has blocked Western online platforms such as Facebook and X for years on its heavily-censored internet.

TikTok has consistently denied that it is under the control of China's Communist Party.

The app is at the centre of long-running tensions between China and the United States.

Israeli general in Gaza criticises political leaders, asks them to 'be worthy' of soldiers

Agence France-Presse
JERUSALEM

An Israeli general leading troops in Gaza has delivered rare public criticism of the country's political leadership, demanding it "be worthy" of the soldiers fighting against Hamas in the Palestinian territory.

Brigadier General Dan

Goldfus, head of the 98th division deployed in Gaza's main southern city of Khan Yunis, also appeared to enter into a row over exempting ultra-Orthodox Jews from military service. He was subsequently summoned by the military leadership for his comments, which breached a long-standing taboo on un-

informed officers publicly wading into politics.

On live TV

"You must be worthy of us," Mr. Goldfus said of his country's leaders, in comments broadcast on Israeli television on Wednesday.

He called for Israeli politicians "to push aside the extreme, and adopt togeth-

erness" in the Gaza war sparked by Hamas's October 7 attack on southern Israel. The general vowed that military commanders and soldiers would take responsibility for their actions.

Neither Mr. Netanyahu nor Defence Minister Yoav Gallant publicly responded to Mr. Goldfus's remarks.

Working on establishing aid airlift for Haiti, says UN

Agence France-Presse
UNITED NATIONS

The United Nations said on Thursday it was working on establishing an aid airlift to Haiti that will bring much needed aid into the country amid political upheaval and street violence.

The helicopter air connection will involve "flying in and out between Dominican Republic and Haiti," the secretary-general's spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said, correcting his earlier statement that it was already operational.

Haiti's gangs began an offensive to topple the government on February 29, storming and ransacking police stations, prisons and hospitals, and laying siege to strategic locations, including the port and airport.

Israel not a banana republic, Likud hits back as Schumer calls for polls

Reuters
WASHINGTON

U.S. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer called on Thursday for new elections in Israel, harshly criticising Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as an obstacle to peace.

Democrat Schumer, long a supporter of Israel and the highest-ranking U.S. Jewish elected official, told the Senate that Mr. Netanyahu's government "no longer fits the needs of Israel" five months into a war that began with attacks on Israel by Hamas militants on October 7.

"As a democracy, Israel has the right to choose its own leaders, and we should let the chips fall where they may. But the important thing is that Israelis are given a choice. There needs to be a fresh debate about the future of



U.S. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer speaking during a press conference on Capitol Hill in Washington. REUTERS

Israel after October 7," Mr. Schumer said.

"In my opinion, that is best accomplished by holding an election," he said.

Mr. Schumer said it would be a "grave mistake" for Israel to reject a two-state solution and urged negotiators in the Israel-Gaza conflict to do everything possible to secure a ceasefire, free hostages

and get aid into Gaza.

White House national security spokesperson John Kirby said that Mr. Schumer had given the White House advance notice about the speech, but that it had not given disapproval or approval or edited in anyway.

Asked if Washington thinks Israel should hold elections after the war, Mr. Kirby said: "That's up to

the Israelis."

A spokesperson from the Israeli Prime Minister's office said there was "no comment for now". However, Mr. Netanyahu's Likud party said that Israel was not a banana republic and that Mr. Netanyahu's policy had wide public support.

"Contrary to Schumer's words, the Israeli public supports a total victory over Hamas, rejects any international dictates to establish a Palestinian terrorist state, and opposes the return of the Palestinian Authority to Gaza," the Likud statement said.

Mr. Schumer's speech reflected growing frustration in Washington with Mr. Netanyahu, his management of the war, failure to do more to protect Palestinian civilians and perceived obstruction of aid deliveries in Gaza.

Aircraft's signal jammed near Russia, says U.K. govt.

Associated Press
LONDON

A plane carrying British Defence Secretary Grant Shapps had its satellite signal jammed as it flew near Russian territory, the government said on Thursday. The government said the Royal Air Force jet carrying Mr. Shapps, officials and presspersons "temporarily experienced GPS jamming when they flew close to Kaliningrad" on a flight from Poland to the U.K.

The Times of London, whose reporter was on board, said that for about 30 minutes mobile phones could not connect to the internet and the aircraft was forced to use alternative methods to determine its location.

Mr. Shapps visited Poland on Wednesday to see U.K. troops participating in



Grant Shapps, right, greeting the British and Polish troops during the Steadfast Defender-2024 military exercise in Poland. AFP

a large NATO exercise – Steadfast Defender.

Kaliningrad is a Russian enclave bordered by Poland and Lithuania, home to the Russian Navy's Baltic Fleet.

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's spokesperson, Dave Pares, said "the jamming did not threaten the safety of the aircraft at any point". He said it was not unusual for aircraft to ex-

perience electronic jamming near Kaliningrad.

Western officials say Russia has significant electronic warfare capabilities based in Kaliningrad.

Since Moscow's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russia has engaged in GPS jamming in areas from Finland to the Black Sea. A regional Finnish carrier had to cancel flights on one route for a week as a result.



Niki Smit, co-director of Soul Paint, a VR experience that lets users draw their emotions on their body, in Texas. AFP

At Texas arts and tech festival, VR is perfectly human

Agence France-Presse
AUSTIN

At South by Southwest — the gargantuan Texas festival for cinema, music, and tech — artists this year embraced virtual reality (VR) as a way to better connect with humanity, not escape it.

VR and augmented reality (AR) are often associated with video gaming, or the groundbreaking hardware races underway between tech titans like Apple and Meta — though with little in the way of mass adaptation.

But for inventor Niki Smit, VR is an avenue for humans to express their emotions, and explore their mental health.

After donning the usual headgear, the user of Smit's "Soul Paint" program is invited to "paint" their virtual body, using colors and lines to explore and express their inner reality. "When I'm stressed, I clench my teeth — so I draw this pulsating red thing near my jaws," Mr. Smit said, demonstrating the software.

"What we've been making here is an invitation to dive into yourself, to explore yourself," he said.

In a massive hall dedicated to VR, demonstrations invited conference goers to watch films and test video games, faces pressed against the VR headset. But at Mr. Smit's stand, users emerged looking visibly moved, having smeared their virtual stomachs in sickly green or their heads in gray, and dancing to free themselves from downbeat emotions.

"VR is not an extension of film. VR is not an extension of video games. We're starting to find out it is a medium about your own human body," said Mr. Smit.

Reports claim Yemen's Houthis have hypersonic missile in their arsenal

The hypersonic missile could potentially raise stakes in their ongoing attacks on ships in the Red Sea; Houthis have for weeks hinted about 'surprises' they have planned for battles at sea to counter the U.S. and its allies; Houthi secretive supreme leader has also warned about rebels' weapons efforts

Associated Press
DUBAI

Yemen's Houthi rebels claim to have a new, hypersonic missile in their arsenal, Russia's state media reported on Thursday, potentially raising the stakes in their ongoing attacks on shipping in the Red Sea and surrounding waterways against the backdrop of Israel's war on Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

The report by the state-run RIA Novosti news agency cited an unnamed official but provided no evidence for the claim. It comes as Moscow maintains an aggressively counter-Western foreign policy amid its grinding war on Ukraine.

However, the Houthis have for weeks hinted about "surprises" they plan for the battles at sea to counter the United States and its allies, which have so far been able to down any missile or bomb-carrying drone that comes near their warships in Mideast waters.

Meanwhile, Iran and the U.S. reportedly held indirect talks in Oman, the first in months amid their long-simmering tensions over Tehran's rapidly advancing nuclear program and attacks by its proxies.

Iran, the Houthis' main benefactor, claims to have a hypersonic missile and



Under surveillance: A view of the operations room as Sea Ceptor missiles are fired from HMS Richmond shooting down two Houthi drones on March 9, in the Red Sea. AP

has widely armed the rebels with the missiles they now use. Adding a hypersonic missile to their arsenal could pose a more formidable challenge to the air defence systems employed by America and its allies, including Israel.

"The group's missile forces have successfully tested a missile that is capable of reaching speeds of up to Mach 8 [eight times the speed of sound] and runs on solid fuel," a military official close to the Houthis said, according to the RIA report. The Houthis "intend to begin manufacturing it for use during attacks in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, as well as against targets in Israel."

Russia has maintained

close ties with Iran, relying on Iranian bomb-carrying drones to target Ukraine. Russian state media, particularly its Arabic-language services, have closely reported on Yemen's years-long civil war that pits the Iran-backed Houthis against forces of the internationally backed Yemeni government, supported by a Saudi-led coalition.

Hypersonic weapons, which fly at speeds higher than Mach 5, could pose crucial challenges to missile defence systems because of their speed and manoeuvrability. The danger from a hypersonic missile depends on how manoeuvrable it is. Ballistic missiles fly on a trajectory

in which anti-missile systems like the U.S.-made Patriot can anticipate their path and intercept them. The more irregular the missile's flight path, the more difficult it becomes to intercept.

Russia claims it has already used them on the battlefield in Ukraine. However, speed and manoeuvrability isn't a guarantee the missile will successfully strike a target. Ukraine's air force in May said it shot down a Russian hypersonic Kinzhal missile with a Patriot battery.

In Yemen, Abdul Malik al-Houthi, the Houthi rebels' secretive supreme leader, boasted about the rebels' weapons efforts at the end of February. "We

have surprises that the enemies do not expect at all," he warned at the time.

A week ago, he similarly warned: "What is coming is greater."

"The enemy ... will see the level of achievements of strategic importance that place our country in its capabilities among the limited and numbered countries in this world," al-Houthi said, without elaborating.

After seizing Yemen's capital, Sanaa, in 2014, the Houthis ransacked government arsenals, which held Soviet-era Scud missiles and other arms.

As the Saudi-led coalition entered Yemen's conflict in 2015, the Houthis' arsenal was increasingly targeted. Soon — and despite Yemen having no indigenous missile manufacturing infrastructure — newer missiles made their way into rebel hands.

Iran long has denied arming the Houthis, likely because of a years-long United Nations arms embargo on the rebels. However, the U.S. and its allies have seized multiple arms shipments bound for the rebels in Mideast waters. Weapons experts as well have tied Houthi arms seized on the battlefield back to Iran.

Iran also now claims to have a hypersonic weapon. In June, Iran unveiled its Fattah, or "Conqueror" in Farsi, missile, which it de-

scribed as being hypersonic. It described another as being in development.

On Thursday, *The Financial Times* reported that the U.S. and Iran held indirect talks in Oman in January "to end attacks on ships in the Red Sea." Iran's state-run IRNA news agency indirectly acknowledged the talks but insisted they were "merely limited to negotiations on lifting anti-Iran sanctions."

The Houthis have attacked ships since November, saying they want to force Israel to end the war in Gaza. The ships attacked, however, have increasingly had little or no connection to Israel, the U.S. or other nations involved in the war. But the assaults have raised the profile of the Houthis.

Adding a new weapon increases that cachet and puts more pressure on Israel after a cease-fire deal failed to take hold in Gaza before the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

Fabian Hinz, a missile expert and research fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, said he wouldn't be surprised if Iran transferred a new, hypersonic weapon to the Houthis. However, the question is how manoeuvrable such a weapon would be at hypersonic speeds and whether it could hit moving targets, like ships in the Red Sea.

Fields of survival



Finding a way: Displaced residents working in the illegal poppy fields for their livelihood during the fighting between Myanmar military and Karenni Nationalities Defence Force (KNDF) at Moe Bye in Pekon Township, on the border of Karen State and southern Shan State. AFP

'EU far right scoring high in polls but still faces hurdles in quest for power'

Agence France-Presse
PARIS

Far-right parties are scoring ever higher in elections across the European Union, but experts say hurdles remain to the movements making a concerted push for power.

How high the wave goes will largely depend on the response from traditional conservative and centre-right parties, outfits often balancing efforts to cling on to their electoral turf while trying to form workable governing coalitions.

In the past, far-right parties could be kept beyond the pale on two conditions: voters saw them as dangerous to democracy, and their election results remained relatively marginal at up to 15%, said Gilles Ivaldi of France's Sciences Po university.

But with much of the far right moderating anti-EU and anti-migrant rhetoric,



In focus: Dutch PVV far-right leader Geert Wilders speaks to media as he arrives at the House of Representatives in The Hague. AFP

"it's more difficult to maintain a quarantine when you have a party that people think is pretty much like the others," he added.

What's more, such parties are scoring much higher at the ballot box than in past decades. Their electoral performance has made Brothers of Italy chief Giorgia Meloni Prime Minister of Italy and propelled Geert Wilders's PVV party to the threshold of power in the Netherlands.

Some regions of Spain and Germany appear ungovernable without inviting in the Vox or Alternative for Germany (AfD) parties, while Portugal's Chega is poised to play kingmaker following Sunday's national elections.

Such successes are founded on "the build-up of successive crises" generating "successive layers of resentment" at those in power since the last European Parliament election

in 2019, Mr. Ivaldi said. He pointed to a "paradox" that even as populations become more tolerant overall, voters are placing a higher political priority on issues like immigration "in the context of the crisis in the economy and purchasing power".

In France, the National Rally crowd of an "ideological victory" as it backed a hardline immigration bill that centrist President Emmanuel Macron thrashed out with opposition conservatives and passed in January. Riding high in the polls, the party hopes to install its figurehead Marine Le Pen in the Elysee palace following the 2027 presidential vote.

In Stockholm, the Sweden Democrats support the centre-right government in a confidence and supply arrangement as other parties excluded ruling with them during the 2022 election campaign.

China should speed up coal transition: U.S. climate envoy

Agence France-Presse
TOKYO

China should speed up its transition away from coal, the new chief U.S. climate negotiator John Podesta said on Thursday, calling for Beijing to "take their responsibility seriously".

"China is the largest emitter (of greenhouse gases) in the world... They still have more coal than they need, and more coal is good for the health of the world," Mr. Podesta said in Tokyo.

He praised Beijing's role



The United States was moving to 'decarbonise' its power sector

JOHN PODESTA
U.S. climate envoy

in the UN's COP28 conference in Dubai in December when nations agreed to triple global renewables capacity this decade and to "transition away" from fossil fuels. But Mr. Podesta added: "We just hope that (China's) transition away from coal would be a little

faster than their current schedule."

The United States was moving to "decarbonise" its power sector, he told at an event. "We are historically the world's largest emitter but we take that responsibility seriously," Mr. Podesta said.

"Now China is by far the world's largest emitter. They need to take their responsibility seriously."

He said it was key to keep communicating, and noted that China was "the fastest deployer of renewable power in the world".

Associated Press
BRUSSELS

A unit of about 30 soldiers belonging to Belgium's armed forces will be dismantled after serious cases of violence and harassment surfaced, the Minister of Defence said on Thursday.

Minsiter Ludvine Dedonder said several people were already placed under protection, while suspects were dismissed or transferred to other units.

Speaking at a press conference alongside Defence



Ludvine Dedonder

Chief Adm. Michel Hofman, Ms. Dedonder said she was informed of the violence taking place within the Fourth Engineer Battalion when she received

an email in November. She was alerted by a relative of one of the soldiers who had been a victim of the alleged violence. The investigations were immediately launched, focusing on "serious acts" of violence during hazing sessions featuring "sexism, racism, extremism," she added.

"Among other things, we are talking about degrading treatment, assault and battery, blackmail, threats between soldiers, pressure exerted by soldiers on their peers, and an obligation of silence

about these facts," the Minister said.

Zero-tolerance policy

Ms. Dedonder said the violence lasted for several months and involved officers, non-commissioned officers and less experienced soldiers. "These behaviors are unacceptable," Ms. Dedonder said, which is why Belgium was taking strong measures, including the disbanding of a platoon within the 4th Battalion in Amay. She said the army will adopt a zero-tolerance policy.

The battalion in the eastern city of Amay was formed in 1913 and took part in the First World War the following year. It has a great reputation within the Belgian army.

"It's not the whole workforce that's affected," Ms. Dedonder said. "We are talking about a few dozen people at the moment," she added.

Mr. Hofman and Ms. Dedonder said they could not give more details about the identity of people involved because investigations were ongoing.

IN BRIEF



Petrol, diesel prices slashed by ₹2/litre, effective Friday

Oil companies have cut petrol and diesel prices by ₹2 a litre, effective from 6 a.m. on Friday, said Petroleum Minister Hardeep Singh Puri. "Reduction in petrol and diesel prices will boost consumer spending and reduce operating costs for over 58 lakh heavy goods vehicles running on diesel, six crore cars and 27 crore two-wheelers," Mr. Puri said in a post on X. Petrol prices were at ₹96.72 in Delhi, ₹106.31 in Mumbai, ₹106.03 in Kolkata and ₹102.63 in Chennai prior to the cut.

Centre transfers Air India building to Maharashtra govt.

The Centre on Thursday said it has approved the transfer of the Air India building at Nariman Point to the Maharashtra government from the Air India Assets Holding Company created to hold the national carrier's assets before its sale to the Tata Group. A consideration of ₹1,601 crore will be received from the State which has also agreed to waive dues of ₹298.42 crore that would have arisen from the transaction, DIPAM Secretary Tuhin Kanta Pandey said.

RIL to buy 13% in Viacom 18 from Paramount Global

The Reliance Industries Ltd. (RIL) on Thursday informed stock exchanges that it had agreed to acquire 13.01% equity stake (on a fully diluted basis) of Viacom 18 Media Private Ltd. from two subsidiaries of Paramount Global for an aggregate consideration of ₹4,286 crore. Post the completion of this transaction, RIL's stake in Viacom18 will increase to 70.49% (on a fully diluted basis), Reliance Industries Ltd. said in a filing with the exchanges.

'Citroen India plans to expand its dealer network fourfold'

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI

Citroen India plans to expand its sales and service touch points by almost four times to more than 200 from the current 58 by the end of 2024.

New dealerships across urban, semi-urban, and rural markets would significantly increase Citroen's footprint to more than 200 across India, the French automaker said in a statement.

'Widening reach'

"We are looking to aggressively make Citroen available to consumers and extend the potential of our products beyond Tier I/II



Shishir Mishra

cities," said Brand Director Shishir Mishra. "Our focus extends to Tier III and even Tier IV markets, strategically chosen for their proximity to Tier I and Tier II cities and their potential for substantial growth."

Earlier this year, Stellantis invested an additional ₹2,000 crore under its Citroen brand in India.

AstraZeneca plans to expand GITC in Chennai

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI

The Global Capability Centre of AstraZeneca has announced that it plans to expand the scope of its Global Innovation and Technology Centre (GITC) in Chennai, including growing headcount by about 30% across information technology, software and business services over the next two years.

"With this expansion, GITC Chennai is set to make a significant contribution to AstraZeneca's global presence, highlighting our confidence towards the pool of talent available," said AstraZeneca India Pvt. Ltd.'s MD Siva Padmanabhan.

Realty site Neoliv raises ₹300 crore in maiden fund closing

The Hindu Bureau
MUMBAI

Residential real estate platform Neoliv on Thursday announced that the first scheme of its Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) registered category II Alternative Investment Fund, 'Inliv Real Estate Fund' had completed initial closing with above ₹300 crore of its maiden fund raise.

Neoliv said it would achieve its corpus of ₹1,000 crore - ₹1,500 crore ahead of its two year limit. "The first of its kind residential equity fund has garnered participation from family offices and UHNW's (ultra high net worth individuals) across the country," Neoliv said, adding "funds will be utilised to develop high quality, middle-income residential properties in Mumbai MMR, Delhi NCR, and plotted opportunities in Tier 2 cities."

The integrated platform with fund management and in-house development capabilities began in January 2023.

BenQ unveils home cinema projector for ₹6.5 lakh, says targeting HNIs in India



Rajeev Singh

dards in the industry," he added.

Mr. Singh said the company plans to sell about 1,000 units of the projector annually in India and as-

sented that demand had been growing among HNIs.

India focus

With growth of about 30% year-on-year, Mr. Singh said India had become the third-largest market for BenQ worldwide after the U.S. and China.

BenQ imports its projectors, but Mr. Singh said it had plans to manufacture them in India in the near future. The BenQ Group with more than ₹25 billion in revenue comprises 20 firms operating in more than 30 countries across numerous industries.

TVS Motor Singapore invests \$5.5 mn in ION Mobility

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI

TVS Motor Co. (TVSM), through its wholly owned Singapore subsidiary, proposes to make an additional cash investment of \$5.5 million in ION Mobility in two tranches.

Post the deal, the aggregate shareholding of TVSM Singapore Pte. Ltd., will be 25.64%, the leading two and three wheeler manufacturer said in a filing.

On Thursday, TVS Motor (Singapore) subscribed to an additional 18,20,326 Series AA Shares of ION Mobility by paying \$2.5 million.

Wholesale food inflation sped up in Feb. on onion, tomato

WPI-based inflation eased marginally to 0.2% last month even as eight of 10 primary food items recorded accelerations in price gains; manufactured products, fuel, power register YoY deflation

Vikas Dhoot
NEW DELHI

Wholesale price inflation eased to a four-month low of 0.2% in February, from January's 0.27%, despite an acceleration in food and primary articles' inflation rates, owing to a sharper year-on-year drop in manufactured products' and fuel and power prices.

The Food Index quickened to 4.1%, from 3.8% in January, while primary articles' prices rose 4.5%. On a sequential basis, the Wholesale Price Index (WPI) was 0.07% higher, with primary articles rising

Wholesale concerns

The wholesale Food Index quickened to 4.1%, from 3.8% in January, while primary articles' prices rose 4.5%



Five food items saw double-digit inflation including vegetables (19.8%), onion (29.2%), pulses (18.5%) and paddy (10.3%)

Tomato prices surged 60.5%; potato rose 15.3%, breaking a 12-month deflation streak

Overall fuel and gas prices were 1.6% lower than in February 2023

0.22% and food up 0.17%.

Eight of 10 primary food articles recorded faster price rise than in January, with five items recording double-digit inflation, including vegetables (19.8%),

onion (29.2%), pulses (18.5%) and paddy (10.3%). Tomato prices surged 60.5% while potato prices spurted 15.3%, breaking a 12-month deflation streak. India Ratings and Re-

search economists noted that inflation in onions and tomatoes had now been in the high double digits since August and November, respectively. Cereals and wheat inflation hit a three-month high of 6.6% and 2.3%, respectively.

Among non-food primary articles, crude petroleum inflation surged to a 14-month high of 16.7%. LPG prices, which were cut by ₹100 this month, rose 3.8%, compared with 0.4% in January.

However, overall fuel and gas prices were 1.6% lower than February 2023, marking the sharpest deflation in three months.

NPCI allows Paytm to offer UPI as a TPAP

The Hindu Bureau
MUMBAI

National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI) on Thursday allowed One 97 Communications Ltd. (OCL), which operates as Paytm, to offer UPI transactions as a Third-Party Application Provider (TPAP) with Axis Bank, HDFC Bank, State Bank of India and Yes Bank serving as Payment System Provider (PSP) banks to OCL, NPCI said in a statement.

Yes Bank would also act as merchant acquiring bank for existing and new UPI merchants for OCL.

"This will enable existing users and merchants to continue to do UPI transactions and AutoPay mandates in a seamless... uninterrupted manner," it said.

Fitch lifts India growth view to 7.8% for 2023-24

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Fitch Ratings on Thursday raised its GDP growth projections for India to 7.8% for this year, and 7% for 2024-25, attributing the "sizeable upward revisions" to brighter prospects for emerging markets excluding China "particularly in India".

While raising world growth prospects for 2024 from 2.1% to 2.4%, Fitch said there are "upside risks" to its 2023-24 growth projection for India which is marginally higher than

the government's 7.6% estimate. Terming domestic demand and investment the main drivers of growth, Fitch said short-term growth would outpace the economy's estimated potential before moderating towards the trend next year.

The rating agency expects retail inflation to average 4% in 2024-25, from 5.7% this year, but pared its expectations of an interest rate cut from the central bank. "We now think that the RBI will cut rates only in the second half of 2024," Fitch said.

DGFT looks to revamp trade rules for e-commerce exports

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Commerce Ministry is in talks with the Reserve Bank of India and the Departments of Revenue and Posts to revisit trade-related regulations and facilitate more exports via the e-commerce route, Director General of Foreign Trade Santosh Kumar Sarangi said on Thursday.

While globally, cross-border trade through e-commerce is expected to exceed \$2 trillion by 2030, such exports from India



currently stand at \$8 billion to \$10 billion. China, however, has leveraged e-commerce to export more than \$300 billion of goods, Mr. Sarangi observed.

Noting that 62 of India's 800 districts account for

80% of goods exports, Mr. Sarangi said boosting e-commerce shipments from craftsmen and smaller businesses in districts could bolster overall exports.

"Most of our trade laws and regulations were designed for B2B shipment of goods... it requires a tremendous mindset change for regulators to understand the changing landscape where a supplier based in India can connect directly with the consumer outside," he said at an Asia-Pacific e-commerce Policy Summit hosted by ICRIER.

DB Realty raises ₹920 crore by selling shares via QIP

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI

DB Realty on Thursday said it has raised ₹920 crore by selling shares to institutional investors, in-

cluding Morgan Stanley Asia, to fund its real estate projects. The company unveiled its Qualified Institutional Placement (QIP) issue on March 7 and the issue closed on March 13.

5 PSBs to reduce govt. shareholding

Five public sector lenders are planning to reduce government stake to less than 75% to comply with SEBI's minimum public shareholding (MPS) norms, Financial Services Secretary Vivek Joshi has said. PTI

RBI likely to 'upgrade' some NBFCs to top layer this year

Hamsini Karthik
MUMBAI

Nearly two years after introducing a revised regulatory framework for non-banking finance companies (NBFCs), the Reserve Bank of India is set to review the categorisation of NBFCs in 2024.

Sources aware of the matter say the review has become imminent given how NBFCs have exploded in terms of growth, their business models and operations have changed significantly from the time of initiating scale-based regulations.

"Some NBFCs backed by large corporate houses and conglomerates could be in focus for the purpose of this review," said a source with knowledge of the development. Another person linked to the development hinted that this could also be a precursor to awarding bank licences to certain NBFCs.

'Top layer NBFCs'

"Based on specific parameters, some NBFCs could be moved to the top layer from the upper layers, and depending on how they perform in the top layer, they could be contenders for bank licenses when opportunities open up," said the source quoted above. The exercise of moving up



select NBFCs from upper layer could hence be a precursor and a testing process for handing out bank licenses.

Currently, 16 non-banks are placed in the upper layer of which nine NBFCs, including Tata Sons Private Ltd., are led by large business houses.

Tata Capital, M&M Finance, L&T Finance and Bajaj Finance are some names doing the rounds for the upgradation to the top layer.

Basis of upgradation

It is learnt that merely scale and size of an NBFC may not be a determining factor for upgradation in scale.

The regulator is expected to take a nuanced approach and rate non-banks on parameters such as ability to handle customer grievances, technology capabilities, asset granularity and composition of loan book, nature and

quantum of business handled in-house, quality of board and top management, asset liability mismatch management, diversification of liabilities and so on.

"The regulator may not adopt a 'one-size fit all' approach to gauge the candidates. Who should move to the top layer may be reviewed on a case-to-case basis," said another senior official aware of the matter. Also, the upgradation process is seen as critical to remove the thought process which many NBFCs in the upper layer have, which is that they are already functioning like banks. In fact, on February 9, Deputy Governor M. Rajeshwar Rao in a speech mentioned significant differences continue to exist between the regulations applicable to banks and NBFCs.

Scale based regulations came into effect on October 2021 and was implemented a year later. There are four layers namely base layer, middle layer, upper layer and top layer. As on September 30, 2023, NBFCs in the base, middle and upper layers constituted 6%, 71% and 23% of the total assets of NBFCs respectively. Presently, no NBFC is listed in the top layer.

(The writer is with The Hindu businessline)

MARKETS

MARKET WATCH

	THURSDAY	% CHANGE
Sensex	73,097	0.46
US Dollar	82.84	-0.03
Gold	66,200	0.37
Brent oil	85.16	2.12

NIFTY 50

	PRICE	CHANGE
Adani Enter.	3087.45	181.25
Adani Ports	1267.85	58.30
Apollo Hosp.	6023.15	14.75
Asian Paints	2892.25	32.10
Axis Bank	1058.25	-22.15
Bajaj Auto	8383.55	-1.35
Bajaj Finserv	1563.70	-9.45
Bajaj Finance	6397.45	-58.70
Bharti Airtel	1194.60	25.85
BPCL	608.75	11.00
Britannia Ind.	4938.90	82.25
Cipla	1496.65	25.40
Coal India	427.70	10.65
Divis Lab	3517.90	38.10
Dr Reddys Lab	6294.60	-9.20
Eicher Motors	3772.65	37.10
Grasim Ind.	2196.50	47.40
HCL Tech	1679.25	47.75
HDFC Bank	1455.45	-4.95
HDFC Life	622.25	12.20
Hero MotoCorp	4675.30	163.20
Hindalco	525.25	18.25
Hind Unilever	2334.60	22.00
ICI Bank	1083.60	-0.35
IndusInd Bank	1476.75	-25.90
Infosys	1653.30	41.90
ITC	419.65	-2.80
JSW Steel	785.45	-7.50
Kotak Bank	1742.40	12.25
L&T	3608.20	69.65
LTIMindtree Ltd.	5264.20	69.20
M&M	1899.55	36.85
Maruti Suzuki	11404.60	14.45
NestleIndia	2612.75	29.80
NTPC	321.85	-0.65
ONGC	263.25	7.90
PowerGrid Corp.	266.35	2.05
Reliance Ind.	2862.95	-1.40
SBI Life	1505.85	18.50
State Bank	741.05	-6.20
Sun Pharma	1570.20	11.60
TataConsumerPro-	1198.35	19.40
Tata Motors	967.75	-5.45
Tata Steel	142.45	-1.20
TCS	4207.60	58.60
Tech Mahindra	1293.35	16.15
Titan	3640.15	14.45
UltraTech Cement	9696.95	103.40
UPL	462.10	10.20
Wipro	517.95	13.55

EXCHANGE RATES

Indicative direct rates in rupees a unit except yen at 4 p.m. on March 14

CURRENCY	TT BUY	TT SELL
US Dollar	82.62	82.94
Euro	90.41	90.76
British Pound	105.90	106.32
Japanese Yen (100)	55.90	56.11
Chinese Yuan	11.49	11.54
Swiss Franc	93.95	94.32
Singapore Dollar	62.02	62.27
Canadian Dollar	61.36	61.61
Malaysian Ringgit	17.62	17.70
Australian Dollar	54.73	54.94

Source: Indian Bank

Eris to acquire Biocon formulations for ₹1,242 cr.

The Hindu Bureau
MUMBAI

Eris Lifesciences announced it had entered into a definitive agreement for the acquisition of Biocon Biologics' India branded formulations business for ₹1,242 crore.

"The acquisition brings two major insulin brands Basalog and Insugen - into the Eris fold. These are the largest Indian brands in their respective segments with market shares of over 10%," Eris said. "With this acquisition, Eris's Diabetes care franchise will soon reach ₹1,000 crore in revenue," the company added.

The Hindu Bureau
MUMBAI

Taiwan-based BenQ Corporation, specialising in display technologies unveiled W5800 home cinema projectors targeting high networth individuals (HNIs) in India. W5800 is priced ₹6.5 lakh apiece.

"With the W5800 home cinema projector, we aim to revolutionise home viewing, bringing the magic of cinema into our customers' living spaces," said Rajeev Singh, MD, BenQ India. "We believe this new addition will set new stan-

Most IT hardware players set to meet PLI 2.0 targets



Odd one out: Apple did not apply under the scheme, choosing to localise only smartphone production. REUTERS

Ayushi Kar
MUMBAI

A majority of IT hardware players are set to meet their targets under the second edition of the production linked incentive scheme (PLI 2.0) by March. This is a significant improvement to the earlier version of the scheme, where only two of the 14 applicants met the first-year targets, and many big players such as Samsung did not apply. In May 2023, the Cabinet approved the new version of the subsidy scheme, doubling the outlay to ₹17,000 crore. The new scheme not only came with double the budgetary outlay, but also a longer tenure of six years (as opposed to four years earlier) and a more attractive incentive package.

As a result, about 38 companies applied for this version of the production-linked incentive scheme, with the scheme being more flexible in its current iteration, allowing applicants to choose from 2023, 2024 or 2025 as the base year.

Many global players such as HP, Dell, Lenovo and Foxconn as well as local makers Dixon Technologies applied under the scheme. Apple, however, did not, choosing to only localise smartphone production.

For the most part, it appears that the majority of the applicants started production under the 2.0 scheme from 2023 itself, something that the government alluded to while announcing the number of applicants. However, government sources told *businessline* that some laptop producers like HP will only start producing IT hardware under the scheme by 2025. Dixon, which is making IT hardware for Lenovo and Acer, will also start production next year.

(The writer is with *The Hindu businessline*)

Property titans seek clues in Cannes for a turnaround in real estate market

MIPIM property conference unfolds against backdrop of falling commercial real estate prices and developers wondering what to do with offices emptied out by the pandemic; some investors believe turnaround is near if central banks begin cutting rates, easing companies' debt burdens

NEWS ANALYSIS

Reuters
CANNES, FRANCE

The global real estate industry is scrabbling around for reasons to be optimistic in the grip of its biggest crash in more than a decade, with developers and investors talking up the prospect of a recovery – just not quite yet.

Held this week in Cannes on the French Riviera, the MIPIM property conference unfolds against a backdrop of falling commercial real estate (CRE) prices and developers wondering what to do with offices emptied out by the pandemic.

As an expected 20,000 investors, developers and agents began arriving, delegates gathered around miniature models of planned developments and met clients on company-commandeered yachts. Many were busy discussing the market fallout, others trying to strike deals.

Several of the largest real estate investors, including U.S. giants LaSalle, Greystar, Hines and Federated Hermes, France's AEW and Germany's Patrizia, told Reuters they saw tentative signs of deal activity rebounding.

But some also struck a note of caution.

"There's a lot of hot air



Drip down: Rob Wilkinson, CEO of France-based investor AEW, expects German office prices to decline 10% more in the first half of this year. REUTERS

being pushed through the Croisette," Philip La Pierre, head of Europe at LaSalle Investment Management, said at the conference, referring to Cannes' beachside thoroughfare thronged with estate agents. "So you've got to navigate that quite carefully."

A punishing rise in borrowing costs and empty offices have combined to sour many property investments, although sectors such as data centres and logistics have held up much better.

European commercial capital values fell 13.9% year-on-year in the fourth quarter of 2023, the biggest drop since the global financial crisis in 2009, according to MSCI Real Es-



European commercial capital values fell 13.9% year-on-year in the fourth quarter of 2023, the biggest drop since the global financial crisis in 2009

sets data.

LaSalle's La Pierre reckons 30% of European office space is "probably obsolete." Prices in American cities are down sharply too as vacancy rates in the likes of San Francisco and Los Angeles near 30%.

Rather than realise losses, investors are sitting on the sidelines.

Commercial property deal volumes in Europe

collapsed by half in 2023 to €166 billion (\$181 billion), and it was the worst year for office sales on record, said MSCI, which has been collating the data since 2007.

Despite this, some investors believe a turnaround is near if central banks begin cutting interest rates, easing companies' debt burdens.

"In general, there's a renewed sense of confidence and enthusiasm for the year ahead," James Seppala, head of real estate in Europe for the world's largest commercial property owner, Blackstone, said ahead of the event.

"We have been active over the last few months, and we will continue to look to be active," he ad-

ded. A big test of improving sentiment will be MIPIM itself. Investors and property agents have been toasting deals at the annual jamboree since 1990, but there were few to speak of last year. "The worst of the market is now unsellable," said Jose Pellicer, head of investment strategy at investor M&G Real Estate.

Europe has been less afflicted by visible signs of property distress than the U.S. and China, but sharp sell-offs have occurred for exposed lenders in Germany and Sweden.

Austrian property tycoon Rene Benko's Signa Group, the co-owner of New York's Chrysler Building, collapsed in November, rocking confidence further.

"There is a big real estate crisis ongoing which is global," said Antoine Flamarion, co-founder of investors Tikehau Capital. "It might take some time to play out."

Banks unscathed

Major banks have been relatively unscathed so far. Large European banks have been cutting CRE lending, according to Morgan Stanley.

This could put alternative lenders that tend to be more leveraged such as asset managers and insurers on the hook for more losses. They already make up about 20-30% of Europe's CRE loans, according to

Bayes Business School.

Whether the slump in office prices widens out into a broader crisis will depend partly on whether banks and developers can avoid crystallising losses until borrowing costs fall, or demand returns.

'Extend and pretend'

Some lenders are re-adopting an "extend and pretend" approach to bad loans, a popular tactic after the 2007-09 financial crisis to avoid foreclosing on properties. "You extend and pretend simply because even if you enforce you probably couldn't sell the asset in the current market," Mathew Crowther, a managing director at investor PGIM Real Estate, said in the run-up to MIPIM.

Property prices could be closer to bottoming out in markets such as Britain, where prices have corrected faster, but are seen falling further in the likes of Germany. Rob Wilkinson, CEO of France-based investor AEW, expects German office prices to decline 10% more in the first half of this year. "Last year was one of the hardest capital-raising years ever," Selena Ohlsson, director of real estate client solutions at Federated Hermes, said in Cannes.

But she said investor interest was returning, particularly from the West Asia and Asia Pacific: "I've got a bit more hope than I did last year."

Made for the track



Games wide open: A Mondo employee works on the production of the Paris 2024 Olympics and Paralympic Games' athletics track at the Mondo Group production and R&D laboratories in Alba, northwestern Italy. The Stade de France will be equipped for Paris 2024 with Mondo's latest athletics track design, the Mondotrack EB, which the company says will reduce athletes' energy loss and will be purple. AFP

U.S. Feb. retail sales rise 0.6%, strong job market fuels household spending

Associated Press
NEW YORK

Shoppers picked up their spending in February after a pullback the previous month, reflecting the mixed feelings Americans have in an economy where prices are up, but jobs are plentiful.

Retail sales rose 0.6% last month after falling a revised 1.1% in January, dragged down in part by inclement weather, according to the Commerce Department's report on Thursday. February's number was lifted in part by higher gas price and higher auto sales.

Excluding sales from gas stations and auto dealers, sales were up 0.3%.

Business at general mer-



chandise stores rose 0.4%, while electronics and appliance stores had a solid 1.5% increase. Restaurants posted a 0.4% increase. Furniture and home furnishings stores saw a 1.1% decline. Online sales were down 0.1%.

Household spending is being fuelled by a strong jobs market and rising wages. But spending has become choppy in the face of

rising credit costs and higher prices.

America's employers continued to hire in February, adding a surprising 2,75,000 jobs, underscoring the U.S. economy's resilience despite efforts of the U.S. Federal Reserve to knock down inflation by slowing spending.

While costs for many goods appear to have plateaued, consumer prices in the United States picked up last month, showing how a vibrant economic activity and strong consumer spending has made fighting inflation a complicated task for the Fed, and a potential headache for President Joe Biden's bid for reelection. The most recent quarterly financial reports from big retailers like Wal-

mart, Target and Macy's show that their customers are looking for deals and in many cases sticking to the necessities when they shop. "They continue to shop but they are more constrained," Target's CEO Brian Cornell told *The Associated Press* in an interview last week. "People are using credit cards to get through the month. Rent costs across the country are up, and gas has been volatile."

Chris Riccobono, founder of New York clothing chain Untuckit, said that customers are waiting for sales. That is a break from the pandemic and he said this year he wants to cut back on the company's reliance on discounts to drive sales.

China lithium boom slows as sagging prices batter high-cost miners

Reuters
BEIJING

A slump in the price of lithium, a key raw material in electric car batteries, is dragging on China's mining of the ultralight metal which together with a costly extraction process is prompting a reassessment of output growth and new project plans.

Softening EV demand has knocked down global lithium prices, with a basket tracked by Benchmark Mineral Intelligence plunging more than 80% in the past 12 months. That has already forced many producers worldwide to shutter production and cut jobs. In China, which accounted for about a quarter of the world's mined lithium output in 2023, analysts expect the mining

of lepidolite - a hard rock ore that is relatively expensive for producing lithium - to take a hit as a prolonged price slump makes costly production unsustainable.

"Lepidolite mining and new projects in China and worldwide are taking a big hit from prices, while other types of lithium mines that provide some relative cost advantages, especially brines in South America, will keep on a fast-growing pace," said Susan Zou, a vice president at Rystad Energy.

The consultancy has slashed its forecast for China's mined lithium output growth in 2024 to about 12% from 54% previously, mainly due to the lepidolite slowdown. Globally, it now expects 27% growth in mined lithium output, down from 42% previously.



Cause and effect: In China, softer EV demand and a supply glut have pushed down spot lithium carbonate prices to about 1,00,000 yuan from peaks near 6,00,000 yuan in November 2022. AFP

Almost half of China's lithium output in 2023 came from lepidolite, pricing agency Fastmarkets said, adding volumes of the ore more than doubled over the past two years to 1,14,500 metric tons of lith-

ium carbonate equivalent (LCE). It costs about 80,000 yuan (\$11,120) to 1,20,000 yuan to process a ton of LCE from lepidolite in China, while it costs around 40,000 yuan and 60,000 yuan to get the

same volume from brine deposits and spodumene, respectively, analysts say.

That undermines the economics of lepidolite mining in China, where softer EV demand and a supply glut have pushed

down spot lithium carbonate prices to around 1,00,000 yuan from peaks near 6,00,000 yuan in November 2022.

Five China-based analysts forecast spot prices will stay in the 1,00,000 yuan to 1,20,000 yuan range in 2024 or rise slightly higher, despite a futures rally boosted by restocking demand after the Lunar New Year holiday.

'Market is really bad'

China ranks fourth in lithium reserves. Beijing has been pushing for more investment to ramp up mining to meet demand from the battery sector and to cut its reliance on imports.

Much of that investment has been in the southern province of Jiangxi, home to some of the newest lepidolite projects that are rich

in kaolinite, a clay mineral with lower lithium content that costs around 1,20,000 yuan per ton of LCE to produce, according to research firm CRU.

Such projects include EV battery giant CATL's vast new Jianxiwo mine and Yongxing Special Materials Technology's Huashan mine.

CATL won exploration rights for Jianxiwo in April 2022 with a bid of 865 million yuan, according to the government of Yichun, the provincial mining hub.

"Projects including the Jianxiwo mine are facing negative margins and very high risk of production curtailment," said Yin Yiwei, a senior CRU analyst.

CATL and Yongxing did not immediately respond to emails seeking comment. Market speculation

that CATL had suspended production at Jianxiwo sparked a rally in shares of Australian miners last month, but CATL said at the time that operations were normal.

"The market is really bad. Producers in Yichun are trying to survive with higher costs and poor prices," said a mining expert working for a major company in Yichun.

A survey of 11 Jiangxi lithium carbonate producers published by Mysteel on Feb. 28 found widespread production suspensions in February.

Yan Yun, secretary of the Yichun committee of China's ruling Communist Party, acknowledged the city's lithium battery sector had been hit by falling prices and a supply-demand mismatch.

VITAL COGS

Williams hails Richa, Renuka and Shreyanka's contributions



R.V. MOORTHY

RCB head coach Luke Williams hailed the side's Indian contingent for its role in the side making the playoffs. "Richa (Ghosh) has had a great tournament. Renuka (Singh) bowls tough overs in the PowerPlay against the best in the world. Shreyanka (Patil) is primed for some good performances. The Indian contribution has been important."

LOFTY IDEAL

MI batting coach provides insight into Harmanpreet's 48-ball 95



SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

Mumbai Indians batting coach Devieka Palshikar offered an insight into what went behind Harmanpreet Kaur's monstrous 48-ball 95 against Gujarat Giants. "Before each game, Harman asks for certain kinds of batting drills. The day she scored that 95, she came in and, for the first time, asked for more lofted shots. There was some instinct."

PICKING THE THREAD

It didn't feel like he was batting after a long time: Amre on Pant



PTI

Rishabh Pant's bat swing remains "vintage" and his batting in Delhi Capitals' pre-season camp doesn't indicate that he has been away from the game for 14 months, said the team's assistant coach Pravin Amre. Earlier this week, the BCCI declared Pant fully fit for the IPL, which will mark his comeback from a horrific car accident in 2022.

ON A ROLL

Sharath continues his giant-killing run in Singapore Smash



FILE PHOTO

A. Sharath Kamal continued his giant-killing run in the Singapore Smash table tennis tournament with a 11-4, 11-8, 12-10 victory over Omar Assar of Egypt in the round-of-16 on Thursday. Sharath had defeated World No. 13 Darko Jorgic of Slovenia a day earlier. This is his best performance in the tournament.

Mumbai breaks Vidarbha's resolve, ascends Cloud 42

Skipper Wadkar's century and his 130-run stand with Dubey for the sixth wicket delays the inevitable; Kotian bags four as the visitors crash to defeat losing the last five wickets for 15 runs

RANJI TROPHY

Amol Karhadkar
MUMBAI

Akshay Wadkar and Harsh Dubey put on a great fight. But with the gargantuan target Vidarbha was chasing, the writing was on the wall even before the day started. As a result, 51 minutes into the fifth and final day's play Mumbai started riding high on Cloud 42 at the Wankhede Stadium here on Thursday.

It took its well-oiled bowling unit 42.3 overs to earn the remaining five scalps and engraved its name on the Ranji Trophy yet again. It was fitting that when the ninth wicket fell, Tushar Deshpande asked captain Ajinkya Rahane to throw the ball to Dhawal Kulkarni.

And the veteran pacer – playing his final game – moved the ball slightly and lured Umesh Yadav into a wild heave resulting in the red cherry disturbing the woodwork.

Dramatic collapse

That wicket completed a dramatic collapse, with Mumbai picking up the last five wickets for a paltry 15 runs in just 32 balls.

Tanush Kotian finally sneaked through captain Wadkar's (102, 199b, 9x4, 1x6) defence after a remarkable knock. It ended the 130-run partnership between him and Dubey (65, 128b, 5x4, 2x6).

In the next over, Dubey succumbed to Deshpande's short-ball ploy,



Journey of rediscovery: Mumbai ended its second-longest title drought in the Ranji Trophy with a thumping win over Vidarbha on Thursday. EMMANUAL YOGINI

with Shams Mulani taking a lunging catch at short backward square-leg.

The same strategy saw Aditya Sarvate – suffering a back spasm – offering Ajinkya Rahane catching practice at mid-on. Kotian then bowled Yash Thakur before Kulkarni wrapped the game up.

Seamless batting

The morning session, though, belonged to Wadkar and Dubey. The overnight unbeaten duo continued to bat seamlessly on a slow surface to frustrate Mumbai and its loyal supporters

Only after Deshpande was introduced into the attack the batters started looking uncomfortable. And the wheels came off soon after Wadkar converted his eighth 50-plus score of the season into a hundred.

Mumbai took home the winner's cheque for ₹5 crore while Vidarbha was richer by ₹3 crore. The

Mumbai Cricket Association also announced a bonus of ₹5 crore to the squad for ending the eight-year title drought.

The scores:

Mumbai – 1st innings: 224.

Vidarbha – 1st innings: 105.

Mumbai – 2nd innings: 418.

Vidarbha – 2nd innings:

Atharva Taide lbw b Mulani 32, Dhruv Shorey b Kotian 28, Aman Mokhadde lbw b Musheer 32, Karun Nair c Tamore b Musheer 74, Yash Rathod lbw b Kotian 7, Akshay Wadkar lbw b Kotian 102, Harsh Dubey c Mulani b Deshpande 65, Aditya Sarvate c Rahane b Deshpande 3, Yash Thakur b Kotian 6, Umesh Yadav b Kulkarni 6, Aditya Thakare (not out) 0; Extras (b-1, lb-12): 13; Total (in 134.3 overs): 368.

Fall of wickets: 1-64, 2-64, 3-118, 4-133, 5-223, 6-353, 7-355, 8-356, 9-364.

Mumbai bowling: Mulani 35-9-75-1, Shardul 12-0-46-0, Kulkarni 8.3-0-38-1, Deshpande 16-1-53-2, Kotian 39-5-95-4, Musheer 24-3-48-2.

Mumbai won by 169 runs.

PoM: Musheer. PoS: Kotian.

Fabulous 42

Mumbai extended its Ranji Trophy record by clinching its 42nd title in the 89th edition of the tournament

1934-1935: bt Northern India by 208 runs (in Mumbai)

1935-1936: bt Madras by 190 runs (Delhi)

1941-1942: bt Mysore by an innings & 281 runs (Mumbai)

1944-1945: bt Holkar by 374 runs (Mumbai)

1948-1949: bt Baroda by 468 runs (Mumbai)

1951-1952: bt Holkar by 531 runs (Mumbai)

1953-1954: bt Holkar by 8 wickets (Indore)

1955-1956: bt Bengal by 8 wickets (Kolkata)

1956-1957: bt Services by an innings & 38 runs (Delhi)

1958-1959: bt Bengal by 420 runs (Mumbai)

1959-1960: bt Mysore by an innings & 22 runs (Mumbai)

1960-1961: bt Rajasthan by 7 wickets (Udaipur)

1961-1962: bt Rajasthan by an innings & 287 runs (Mumbai)

1962-1963: bt Rajasthan by an innings & 19 runs (Jaipur)

1963-1964: bt Rajasthan by 9 wickets (Mumbai)

1964-1965: bt Hyderabad by an innings & 126 runs (Hyderabad)

1965-1966: bt Rajasthan by 8 wickets (Jaipur)

1966-1967: bt Rajasthan on first innings lead (Mumbai)

1967-1968: bt Madras on first innings lead (Mumbai)

1968-1969: bt Bengal on first innings lead (Mumbai)

1969-1970: bt Rajasthan by an innings & 59 runs (Mumbai)

1970-1971: bt Maharashtra by 48 runs (Mumbai)

1971-1972: bt Bengal by 246 runs (Mumbai)

1972-1973: bt Tamil Nadu by 123 runs (Chennai)

1974-1975: bt Karnataka by 7 wickets (Mumbai)

1975-1976: bt Bihar by 10 wickets (Jamshedpur)

1976-1977: bt Delhi by 129 runs (Delhi)

1980-1981: bt Delhi by an innings & 46 runs (Mumbai)

1983-1984: bt Delhi on first innings lead (Mumbai)

1984-1985: bt Delhi by 90 runs (Mumbai)

1993-1994: bt Bengal by 8 wickets (Mumbai)

1994-1995: bt Punjab on first innings lead (Mumbai)

1996-1997: bt Delhi on first innings lead (Gwalior)

1999-2000: bt Hyderabad by 397 runs (Mumbai)

2002-2003: bt Tamil Nadu by 141 runs (Mumbai)

2003-2004: bt Tamil Nadu on first innings lead (Chennai)

2006-2007: bt Bengal by 132 runs (Mumbai)

2008-2009: bt Uttar Pradesh by 243 runs (Hyderabad)

2009-2010: bt Karnataka by 6 runs (Mysore)

2012-2013: bt Saurashtra by an innings & 125 runs (Mumbai)

2015-2016: bt Saurashtra by an innings & 21 runs (Pune)

2023-2024: bt Vidarbha by 169 runs (Mumbai)

Proud of the way we dominated the season: Rahane



Over the moon: Ecstatic members of the Mumbai team thank the crowd after the triumph. EMMANUAL YOGINI

Amol Karhadkar
MUMBAI

Minutes after laying his hands on the Ranji Trophy and ending Mumbai's second-longest title drought, captain Ajinkya Rahane and the rest of his teammates took the team on a victory parade to celebrate along with the loyal fans.

As captain Ajinkya Rahane and head coach Omkar Salvi sat down to reflect on the team's title-run, the duo had a sense of pride. Rahane lauded the BCCI for forcing established cricketers to play the Ranji Trophy. "I want to mention about BCCI for giving importance to domestic cricket, which is a very good thing. Allowing players to go and play domestic cricket is very important," Rahane said.

In an endeavour to in-

centivise achievements in First Class cricket, the Mumbai Cricket Association announced an additional prize of ₹5 crore – over and above the prize money.

"For all the players, nowadays, there are very less institutions which provide jobs. For youngsters, there is also a lot of lure towards franchise cricket (where) there is also a lot of money," Salvi said.

Rahane said, "This victory means a lot to us. It is very special since almost 10 players were representing India or India-A across formats, which is a very good sign. We all are happy (for) guys who are representing India right now from (the) Mumbai team and extremely proud of ourselves for the way we have dominated the season."

MI will hope for history to repeat itself as it meets RCB

WPL SEASON 2

Lavanya L

Sports and superstition go together like wine and French cheese. Patterns are easy to spot and comfortable to believe in. So why shouldn't Mumbai Indians draw parallels from its Women's Premier League campaigns in the last two seasons?

"Don't you think history is repeating?" MI batting coach Devieka Palshikar asked ahead of the Eliminator against Royal Challengers Bangalore on Friday. "We lost against UP Warriorz last season in the league. We then bounced back in the Eliminator against them with a largely one-sided win. The same pattern this season... we're looking at it as a good luck sign," she quipped.

MI's strength lies in its bowling attack's ferocity and versatility. Shabnim Ismail has given the side the



Eliminator beckons: Come Friday, Harmanpreet or Smriti will earn the right to face Lanning's Capitals in the final. SPORTSPICS/WPL

comfort of feisty overs at the start which others like Amelia Kerr, Pooja Vastrakar and Saika Ishaque have been able to build on.

For RCB, the Ellyse Perry show against MI was a jail break as it helped the star-studded side scrape through to the playoffs.

The team has been unacceptably generous with extras and needs to be

tighter to contain a trigger-happy batting arsenal like MI's.

From Perry, Smriti Mandhana, S. Meghana and Richa Ghosh to Georgia Wareham, RCB's batting depth has been on display this season. A coordinated effort will be the ideal recipe on what could well prove a big day for Smriti's Bengaluru side.

Lakshya advances, Sindhu bows out



Stunning: Lakshya scored a thrilling win over Antonsen. GETTY IMAGES

ALL ENGLAND

Press Trust of India
BIRMINGHAM

Lakshya Sen recorded a stunning win over World No. 3 Anders Antonsen to progress to the quarterfinals but an error-prone P.V. Sindhu lost in the second round of the All England Championships here on Thursday.

Lakshya fought his way back from a 2-8 deficit in the decider after losing the second game to prevail 2-

22, 11-21, 21-14 over Antonsen in the second round.

Sindhu seemed to be in good touch as she fought hard against World No. 1 An Se Young of Korea, but failed to curb her mistakes and slipped to a 19-21, 11-21 loss.

Other results: Men's doubles (first round): Satwiksairaj Rankireddy & Chirag Shetty bt Mohammad Ahsan & Hendra Setiawan (Ina) 21-18, 21-14.

Women's doubles (pre-quarterfinal): Zhang Shu Xian & Zheng Yu (Chn) bt Tanisha Crasto & Ashwini Ponappa 11-21, 21-11, 21-11.

Meteors overcome hiccups and a defiant Defenders

PVL

Saikat Chakraborty
CHENNAI

Mumbai Meteors recorded a 15-8, 13-15, 7-15, 16-14, 15-13 victory over Ahmedabad Defenders in a five-set thriller and opened its account in the Super 5 stage of the Prime Volleyball League here on Thursday.

Led by the all-round brilliance of universal-attacker Shubham Chaudhary, Meteors got off to a flying start by winning the first set 15-8. The defending champion bounced back in the second as Angamuthu and Max Senica led the charge. Even a "Super Serve" from Shubham couldn't stop Defenders from pulling level.

The momentum shifted dramatically in the third set. Defenders' Angamuthu, Shon T. John and Shikhar Singh unleashed a flurry of powerful smashes as the team cruised to a



On the attack: Meteors, pushed to the brink, made a smashing comeback. R. RAGU

15-7 win. To make matters worse for Meteors, Shubham suffered an injury.

Meteors, pushed to the brink, refused to give up. Attacker Amit Gulia and middle-blocker Shameemudheen stepped up in the fourth set to keep their side in the hunt. In the decider, Aditya Rana's powerful smashes and Shameemudheen's crucial blocks

sealed a win for Meteors. Senica's Super Serve couldn't save the day for Defenders.

In another nail-biting encounter, Calicut Heroes overcame Bengaluru Torpedoes 18-16, 16-14, 8-16, 11-15, 15-10 to reclaim the top spot. Skipper Jerome Vinith and substitute opposite-hitter Ashok Bisnoi were Calicut's heroes.

IN BRIEF



BISWARANJAN ROUT

Odisha FC fails to make it to AFC Cup inter-zonal final

Indian Super League side Odisha FC failed to progress to the inter-zonal final of the AFC Cup after being held to a goalless draw in the home leg by Australia's Central Coast Mariners in Bhubaneswar on Thursday. Having lost the first leg to the A-League side, Odisha could not capitalise on the home advantage to concede the tie 0-4 on aggregate.



Messi, Suarez fire Inter Miami into CONCACAF quarterfinals

Luis Suarez and Lionel Messi were on target as Inter Miami marched into the last eight of the CONCACAF Champions Cup with a 3-1 (5-3 aggregate) win over Nashville on Wednesday. Messi set up Suarez for the eighth-minute opener and then the Argentine found the target himself in the 23rd minute. But the eight-times Ballon d'Or winner was substituted in the 50th minute before his replacement Robert Taylor made sure of the victory with a 63rd-minute header.

Onaindia and Boris help FC Goa rally past Bengaluru FC

FC Goa registered a come-from-behind 2-1 victory over 10-man Bengaluru FC in Margao on Thursday. Young Shivaldo Singh had given BFC a dream start, putting the side ahead in the second minute with a first-time finish. But Odei Onaindia equalised with a fortuitous goal before Suresh Wangjam's red card two minutes into the second half tilted the scales in favour of the host. Boris Thangjam, with a tap-in in the 81st minute, gave Goa full points and prolonged BFC's wait for a first away win of the season.

The result: FC Goa 2 (Onaindia 22, Boris 81) bt Bengaluru FC 1 (Shivaldo 2).

Siddhartha Babu places 12th in mixed rifle prone

Siddhartha Babu shot 616.4 and placed 12th in the mixed 50m rifle prone event in the Para shooting WSPS World Cup that concluded in New Delhi on Thursday. Mona Agarwal in R2 women's air rifle was the only Indian to win a Paralympic quota place for Paris. She was the ninth Indian to win the quota place for Paris after Manish Narwal, Singhraj Adhana, Rudransh Khandelwal, Avani Lekhara, Amir Ahmad Bhat, Nihal Singh, Sidhartha Babu and Sriharsha Ramakrishna.

The results: R6 mixed 50m rifle prone: 1. Juan Reinaldo (Esp) 250.4 (627.0); 2. Dong Chao (Chn) 249.6 (621.7); 3. Anna Benson (Swe) 229.1 (621.2); 12. Siddhartha Babu 616.4.

Vasanti and Kathleen in doubles quarterfinals

Vasanti Shinde and Kathleen Kanev of Germany beat Italians Chiara Torrieri and Marta Valentini 6-0, 7-5 in the doubles pre-quarterfinals of the \$25,000 ITF women's tennis in Solarino, Italy.

Prithviraj Tondaiman and Manisha Keer top trap trials

Prithviraj Tondaiman beat Olympic quota winner and qualification topper Bhowneesh Mendiratta (124) 46-45 to top the men's trap in the fourth National shotgun selection trials in Bhopal.

The results: Trap: Men: 1. Prithviraj Tondaiman 46 (121); 2. Bhowneesh Mendiratta 45 (124); 3. Lakshay Sheoran 35 (121). **Women:** 1. Manisha Keer 43 (113); 2. Nivetha Nenthirasingamani 41 (112); 3. Neeru 31 (116).

PSV supporter seriously hurt at Dortmund game

A PSV Eindhoven supporter was left seriously injured following clashes between rival fans ahead of Wednesday's Champions League last-16 match against Borussia Dortmund. German police said a 35-year-old was badly hurt and that authorities were investigating.

Fairytale finish as Kulkarni bids adieu to his First Class career on a high

The domestic stalwart, who has featured in five Ranji Trophy summit clashes that Mumbai has prevailed in, takes a wicket off his final ball



Fitting finale: Kulkarni had moments to cherish after Mumbai's triumph as his teammates carried him on their shoulders and his wife and daughter bask in the glory. EMMANUAL YOGINI



CRICKET

Amol Karhadkar
MUMBAI

Getting into the XI for the Ranji Trophy final in place of injured Mohit Avasthi – Mumbai's highest wicket-taker coming into the final – was the fairytale ending for Dhawal Kulkarni's First Class career. The script ended on an even better

note as Kulkarni – the king of Ranji finals – took the final wicket to end his career on a high.

It was the fifth final Mumbai had won where Kulkarni – the pacer who played his 96th First Class game – featured in. In the first four, he had three five-wicket hauls and a match-turning 87 with the willow – his personal best – against Karnataka in 2009-10, a match he describes as his "most memorable". No

wonder then that Rahane stressed that the team requested him to prolong his retirement by a season while Rohit Sharma referred to him as "Mumbai's warrior" in a social media post.

Road ahead unclear

For Kulkarni, though, the road ahead is unclear but being the workhorse he has been, he promised to be involved with cricket. "I have not thought about it

much, but cricket has given me so much that I want to give back to it, whether it be coaching or whatever I get," Kulkarni said.

"Winning a final in a tough way is what you want and that's what we did as a team. We hung on to our nerves, put pressure, bowled really well, all the bowlers chipped in, it was what you could say bowling in partnership and that's what we did," Kulkar-

ni said. More than his 12 ODIs and two T20s for India, Kulkarni is hailed as a domestic stalwart. Ever since he marked his Ranji debut with a five-wicket haul in November 2008, Kulkarni has been the leader of the Mumbai's pace pack. In fact, on Thursday, the quickest Mumbai pacer Tushar Deshpande asked captain Ajinkya Rahane to get Kulkarni to bowl and pick the last wicket.

"I should have played more (for India) than I did but that wasn't in my hands. I wanted to help Mumbai win by getting my A game, especially in the knockouts. Whenever I played for Mumbai, I wanted the lion to roar," Kulkarni said. As much as Kulkarni will miss wearing the lion's crest – the signature emblem of Mumbai Cricket Association – the lion's crest will also miss him.

We have a good chance to defend our trophy, but it will not be easy: Chennai Super Kings bowling coach Bravo



Time to get cracking: Bravo will look to guide the Super Kings bowlers the way he did the previous season. M. SRINATH

IPL

S. Dipak Ragav
CHENNAI

Chennai Super Kings bowling coach Dwayne Bravo feels his side's bowling attack is even better going into the 2024 season, and is confident of defending the IPL title.

In the player auction held in December, the five-time reigning champion bolstered its pace attack by snapping up Shardul Thakur and Mustafizur Rahman.

"We have (Matheesha) Pathirana, Deepak (Chahar) and Shardul (Thakur)

is back; Fizz (Mustafizur) is there, and Mukesh (Choudhary) is back. We have a lot of depth with young fast bowlers," said Bravo at the store opening of Avira Diamonds on Thursday.

"These guys add to what we had last year, and we have a better attack. It is always good to have depth in the squad."

Bravo is regarded as one of the greatest T20 bowlers, especially in the death overs and helped the Super Kings be effective in the back end of an innings last year.

When asked if the team focussed on shoring up its death-bowling attack, the 40-year-old said, "I don't

have input in the auctions. But my job starts now. Death bowling is my speciality. I believe in T20s that (death overs) is a very important segment of the game. It requires a lot of skill, bravery, and planning."

"You have to implement it in practice and get these guys to believe in the philosophy and work towards it. Last year, we had the best death bowling team, and we look forward to repeating it."

Super Kings will kick off its title-defence campaign at home against Royal Challengers Bangalore on March 22, and the former Windies skipper felt his

side has a good chance of retaining the crown. "Our chances are very good, just like the other teams. CSK starts as favourites in most seasons, but we can't go into the tournament thinking we are favourites and will win."

Preparation "We must prepare well as a team, which we always do. The (mix of) experience and youth is a combination that has been working well for us. "With a good management staff and captain cool (MS Dhoni), we have a good chance to defend our trophy, but it will not be easy," said Bravo.

Cricket's inclusion in Olympics makes both commercial and sporting sense: says Anson

N. Sudarshan
BENGALURU

Cricket is far from a global sport, with the best versions of it confined to the Commonwealth nations. But Andy Anson, chair of the British Olympic Association (BOA) and also president of the Lancashire Cricket Club, said that cricket's inclusion for the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics was the right call.

Anson was speaking at a panel discussion titled "What it takes to win on and off the field", organised by Lancashire Cricket and supported by the British Deputy High Commission, here on Wednesday, alongside Deepthi Bopaiah, CEO GoSports Foundation, Rajesh Menon, vice-president Royal Challengers Bangalore and Gaurav Manchanda, founder FC Bengaluru United. "Cricket was a big omission from the Olympics," Anson said. "It made absolute sense to include it now

considering its reach. For the IOC, it made commercial sense and for cricket it made sporting sense to join the Olympic movement."

With India being world cricket's nerve centre and the country expressing a concrete desire to host the 2036 edition of the Olympics, a potential coming together of the two has excited many.

"Everyone would like the Olympics in India," quipped Anson.

"It is an untapped market. It is also such a diverse country with so many different people. In a sense it is similar to the diversity in Team Great Britain, something we celebrate. And that reflected in Tokyo 2020 where we won more medals across more sports than any other country. So India too should get the Olympics and 2036 would be right."

If India eventually wins the bid, sound planning will be the need of the

hour. "Twelve years may seem long, but it is a short time to build talent and infrastructure," said Bopaiah. "We have to put the money on the younger lot as well and not just the elite. I feel the three things that we have to focus on are – setting up of professional teams, creating pathways for success and funding."

The amount of money to be spent on sport is often a contentious topic, but Anson pointed out how Britain successfully navigated this by securing not a single penny from the government but from the National Lottery set up by Prime Minister John Major in 1994.

"The lottery was the game changer for us. We had a disastrous Olympics at Atlanta 1996, winning just one gold medal. The lottery funding changed things and at Beijing we had over 50 medals, including 20 (19) golds. "Not all sports are commercial and they need support."

Bournemouth engineers remarkable comeback



Sensational: Semenyo completes Bournemouth's riposte with this strike. REUTERS

PREMIER LEAGUE

Agence France-Presse
BOURNEMOUTH

Bournemouth staged an astonishing fightback from three goals down to beat Luton 4-3 and spoil Tom Lockyer's emotional return to the scene of his near-death ordeal on Wednesday.

Lockyer collapsed on the pitch after suffering a cardiac arrest during the

second half of Luton's Premier League match on December 16.

After the original game was abandoned with the score at 1-1, the 29-year-old was back at Bournemouth for the rearranged fixture 88 days on from the harrowing incident.

Lockyer's presence initially galvanised Luton, who scored three times in the first half through Tahith Chong, Chiedozie Ogbene and Ross Barkley. But Bournemouth hit

back in stunning style after the interval thanks to strikes from Dominic Solanke, Illia Zabarnyi and two-goal Antoine Semenyo. Third-bottom Luton sit three points adrift of fourth-bottom Nottingham Forest after blowing a golden opportunity to climb out of the relegation zone.

The result: Bournemouth 4 (Solanke 50, Zabarnyi 62, Semenyo 64, 83) bt Luton 3 (Chong 9, Ogbene 31, Barkley 45+1).



K. MURALI KUMAR

'I like having a point to prove'

Exclusion from the Australian setup left seasoned all-rounder Jess Jonassen with a lot of self-doubt and thoughts of even retiring from the game; the four-time World Cup winner is making a case to feature in the T20 World Cup in Bangladesh later this year with imperious performances in the Women's Premier League

INTERVIEW

Jess Jonassen

Lavanya Lakshminarayanan

In a 2019 column she penned for *Athletes' Voice*, Jess Jonassen likened herself to a boxer, a metaphor she attributed to her psychologist. She wrote, "Throughout much of my career – and definitely over the past six months or so – I've been on the ropes taking blow after blow. But I'm still standing. Still in the fight." Four years later, Jonassen's fight is yet to end.

It's been a particularly trying past couple of months. The 31-year-old found herself out of favour in the national setup, relegated to running drinks, a marked difference from carrying the team to world titles (four Women's T20 World Cup crowns, one ODI World Cup triumph, one Commonwealth Games gold medal).

This was courtesy a hammering at the hands of West Indies' Hayley Matthews last year. Since then, she featured in the one-off Test between India and Australia but was not in the mix for Australia's efforts against India in the white-ball leg, the whole multi-format series against South Africa at home or the upcoming tour of Bangladesh in the run-up to the T20 World Cup in the same nation later this year.

The Queensland-born all-rounder is currently in India for the second edition of the Women's Premier League, playing for Delhi Capitals. After missing the first two games, Jonassen has more than made up for it in the games that followed.

Cementing her place in DC side, she has been in constant contention for the purple cap and one of captain Meg Lanning's trusted commanders in crunch situations. Jonassen spoke to *The Hindu* about her axing, contemplating retirement, the World Cup in Bangladesh later this year and more.

How does it feel to be back on the cricket field and succeeding?

It has obviously been a challenging last couple of months, particularly with not playing as much cricket as I would have liked to. I was pretty nervous because I had not played for a while. The crowd at the M. Chinnaswamy Stadium was incredible and I wanted to do well. Those initial nerves dissipated once the game started. I guess it was down to just all this time spent sitting around and waiting. I just loved the fact that I was out there running around again, trying to play a part and contributing because that was something I hadn't experienced in a while.

I was that person on the sidelines, being the No. 1 cheerleader. I wanted to be able to take a night off from mixing drinks (smiles). For me, there were questions over the past few months whether I was still good enough, whether I was capable. The push of wanting to do well for the team came from there.

How did you cope with life on the bench?

This environment and this group at Delhi Capitals has made sitting out actually not feel so bad, which is a really weird thing for me to say because I always want to be out on the field, contributing and doing my best. That said, the level of love and support and the fact that the girls just genuinely want each other to do well makes this a really nice place to be in and it's probably no surprise then that we have had the team success that we have so far.

Over the years, there's been a realisation that there always has to be somebody that misses out of the team in elite sports and it is the direction the women's game is heading in because of the professionalisation of it. You have to be on top of your game almost all the time. Sometimes when you're not or there's a run of games when you're not, that opens the door and opportunity for somebody else. To know that it's never just that one person that's missing out, that there



There were thoughts of whether it was time to retire from international cricket or not, whether I was still wanted, whether I was still good enough. But yeah, I'm not really thinking too far ahead now. It's just about taking up whatever opportunities pop up to try and give myself the best possible chance and do my very best

are other people in a similar situation as well has given me a greater perspective and empathy for others who went through that as well.

Be it the likes of Shikha Pandey, Jemimah Rodrigues, Poonam Yadav or even Arundhati Reddy, DC is full of characters who at some point have had to prove they're still good enough. How much does that baggage get shared in the group?

A lot of the time, it's always nice to be able to have conversations with people that truly understand what you've gone through. For example, the day the news of the Bangladesh squad came out, I had a knock on my door. It was Shikha. She just gave me a hug and said, "I saw the news this morning. I thought I'll come by and give you a hug to hopefully make it feel better." It's no surprise that our team is as close as we are. Yes, we're all cricketers. We all do the same sport and want to excel and succeed. But

yeah, there's those human and personable connections as well, which makes it extra special. There was a period of a couple of days when I just had so many of the girls just reaching out and checking in on me, the coaching staff as well and it's something I haven't experienced a lot before. This is also the first international squad that I've missed out for non-injury related reasons. I am learning how to be kind to myself as well as I give myself time to be able to process something that I've never actually experienced before.

Have you been given an explanation about why you don't find a place in the scheme of things?

Because I've been sitting on the sidelines for the last couple of series, they didn't see where or how I would get a game at this point. There was nothing really beyond that, just that I needed to keep staying ready and keep working hard and things could change quickly. I looked a little bit internally and knew that over the upcoming pre-season, there were a few things that I want to specifically work on, even back in my domestic setup as well being the captain of the two teams over there (Brisbane Heat in the WBBL and Queensland Fire in the WNCL). I've been taking the selfless approach especially with the bat, slotting myself down the order a bit more, thinking it's the best for the team.

That's probably come at a cost for me. So it's about having relevant conversations I need to with people back home and working our way through to see what's the best for those teams while also making sure I am doing what's best

for me too.

You have been Meg Lanning's go-to person in crisis so many times over the years. Is it a source of comfort to have her close during this time?

I love Meg. I loved playing under her when she was captain. As a leader, she just had that ability to make you, as a player, feel like you were in control as well. She always believed I could do it and whenever she threw me the ball, my feeling was also that I don't want to let her down.

She's reached out to me at different times to say if I need anything or if I need to talk about anything, we'll catch up. But she knows the kind of personality I am as well. She knows that whatever it is, I'll just keep coming back. I'll keep fronting up and doing my best. It's really comforting knowing that somebody I've played a lot of cricket with is also in a franchise team on the other side of the world.

Is that Bangladesh World Cup still on your mind?

Honestly, it did cross my mind when I wasn't in this upcoming squad for the Bangladesh tour that, "Oh, well, there goes my World Cup as well."

I had my two-day pity party where I was feeling sorry for myself, but then I don't want news like that or decisions that are ultimately out of my control to dictate or influence my experience of where I currently am. I wanted to make sure I make the most of this season of the WPL.

A thing that sort of came as a result of missing out on the Bangladesh series is that I was nominated for The Hundred draft. So there's an opportunity to potentially play some more cricket. I feel like that's the only way that I'm going to push my way back into that eleven – by simply playing cricket wherever that may be.

I still have that drive and determination to want to keep playing. There were thoughts of whether it was time to retire from international cricket or not, whether I was still wanted, whether I was still good enough. But yeah, I'm not really thinking too far ahead now. It's just about taking up whatever opportunities pop up to try and give myself the best possible chance and do my very best for the team that I'm a part of at that time.

Can Delhi Capitals go the distance this year?

We're not being complacent. We know we still need to play good cricket. The last part of this tournament is in front of our home fans is a powerful feeling. I know a lot of the girls, myself included, are really relishing that.

We know the hurt that we felt last year and how close we came to being the inaugural winners. It's a deeper driving force, particularly for someone like me who relishes a little bit of needing a point to prove.

