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**Adani project in Sri Lanka: locals raise concern**

COLOMBO

A wind power project being executed by Adani Green Energy in northern Sri Lanka has run into controversy, with locals and experts raising concern over its impact on its coastal region. » PAGE 11

**Army raises unit to man its Apache helicopters**

NEW DELHI

Preparing to induct the first batch of AH-64E Apache attack helicopters into its fold, the Indian Army Aviation Corps raised its first unit at Jodhpur on Friday that will operate the helicopters. It will be the second attack helicopters in the Army. » PAGE 5

**Indian Railways plans to develop mega terminals**

CHENNAI

The Indian Railways will create mega railway terminals with multi-modal connectivity in aspirational cities with a population of more than 10 lakh across the country. This is part of the infrastructure being developed for Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 'Viksit Bharat' initiative. » PAGE 5

**Israel PM clears plan for Army action in Rafah**

GAZA STRIP

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office said on Friday he had approved the military's plan for an operation in Rafah. Mr. Netanyahu "approved the plans for action in Rafah," his office said in a statement. » PAGE 11

# Why has SBI not disclosed codes of bonds: SC

Top court sends SBI a notice over the missing unique codes and lists the case for March 19

SC to return original documents that the Election Commission submitted after making digital copies

According to the SBI, 22,217 electoral bonds were purchased and 22,030 were redeemed

The Hindu Bureau  
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Friday asked the State Bank of India (SBI) why it had not disclosed the unique alphanumeric numbers of individual electoral bonds to the Election Commission (EC) for publication on its official website. "In our judgment of February 15, we had directed disclosure specifically of all the details of the electoral bonds, including date of their purchase, the amount, names of purchasers, the political parties which redeemed the bonds, etc. But the bank has not disclosed the numbers of the bonds purchased and encashed.

Why?" Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud, heading a five-judge Bench, asked. The court issued a notice to the bank and listed the case for March 19. The Bench further agreed to return to the EC the documents regarding electoral bonds which the poll body had given the court, in compliance with judicial orders passed on April 12, 2019 and November 2, 2023.

'No copies retained' In its judgment on February 15, the five-judge Bench had directed the EC to publish the confidential information submitted in the court, along with details of electoral bonds. However,

## Untangling the bond

A timeline of the electoral bonds issue in the Supreme Court

- March 15, 2019: An affidavit filed by the Ministry of Finance in the Supreme Court specifies that electoral bonds have "unique hidden alphanumeric serial numbers as an in-built security feature"
- February 15, 2024: A Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court directs that "SBI must disclose details of each electoral bond encashed by political parties"
- March 12: SBI hands over details of electoral bonds purchased by anonymous donors and redeemed by political parties to the EC
- March 15: A Constitution Bench asks why the SBI did not give the unique serial numbers to the EC. Issues notice to the bank.

the EC filed an application on March 14, saying that it had given the court the originals of the documents and not retained any copies. The Commission said that it had handed over to

the Supreme Court a sealed cover containing 106 sealed envelopes, and then sealed boxes containing 523 sealed envelopes, in two tranches in pursuance of the judicial orders of April 2019 and No-

**Many top donors were under ED, I-T Dept. scanner**

CHENNAI

An analysis of the companies which feature among the top purchasers of electoral bonds shows that a significant number of them were under the Enforcement Directorate's or the Income Tax (I-T) department's scanner at some point of time in the past five years. » PAGE 4

ember 2023.

"We presumed you would have retained copies," Chief Justice Chandrachud told advocate Amit Sharma, appearing for the EC. The court ordered its

**Rahul accuses Modi of running 'extortion racket'**

THANE

In a blistering attack on Prime Minister Narendra Modi over the electoral bonds, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Friday accused Mr. Modi of "running the world's largest extortion racket". He alleged that the funds amassed through electoral bonds scheme were used to split parties. » PAGE 4

Registry to scan and digitise copies of the documents in the course of the day and finish the work by tomorrow. The originals will be returned to the EC along with a digitised copy. The ready availability of a

digitised copy, provided by the Supreme Court itself, will help avert any delay in the publication of these documents on electoral bonds.

The court, in its February 15 judgment, had required the SBI to provide the EC with the complete details, including dates of purchase; the names of the purchasers; and the denominations of the bonds purchased; along with the details of bonds redeemed by political parties, including their dates of encashment and denominations. The SBI had said that 22,217 electoral bonds were purchased and 22,030 were redeemed by political parties between April 1, 2019 and February 15, 2024.

## Fields of gold



Agricultural workers harvesting marigold flowers in a field near Undavalli village, close to Vijayawada. K.V.S. GIRI

# New ECs take charge; Supreme Court refuses to stay their appointments

**Krishnadas Rajagopal Sreeparna Chakrabarty**  
NEW DELHI

Former bureaucrats Gyanesh Kumar and Sukhbir Singh Sandhu assumed charge as Election Commissioners on Friday, a day after their selection by a high-powered panel chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The Supreme Court refused to intervene immediately on a petition urging a stay on their appointments, on the grounds that the hurry and lack of transparency shown by the government has sent a wrong message that the two retired IAS officers are "favourable" to the regime in power.

This is the first time that Election Commissioners have been appointed in accordance with the new Chief Election Commissioner and Other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Service and Term of Office) Act, 2023, which was brought in by the government last December, and which replaces the Chief Justice of India with a Cabinet Minister in the selection panel chaired by the Prime Minister. Appearing before a three-judge Bench headed

by Justice Sanjiv Khanna, the petitioners – including Association for Democratic Reforms and Congress leader Jaya Thakur and others, represented by senior advocates Kapil Sibal, Vikas Singh, and advocate Prashant Bhusan – said the enactment of the new law, which gives the Union government a dominant role in the selection and appointment of Election Commissioners, had worked to its advantage. However, the Bench relied on a technical point that legislative enactments are not "normally" stayed. The court adjourned the case to March 22.

Listing out the series of circumstances which raised suspicions about the process, advocate Prashant Bhusan said that the government had deliberately advanced the meeting of the high-profile selection committee by a day to time the appointments ahead of the court hearing on Friday. The petitioners argued that this law had been enacted to get the better of a March 2023 Supreme Court judgment in the Anoop Baranwal case, which had called for a fair and transparent appointments' mechanism, with

the participation of the Chief Justice of India as a member of the selection committee.

'In favour of Centre' The petitioners argued that even this law, which rolled the dice heavily in favour of the Union government, was violated when the "minority" member of the selection committee and leader of the largest Opposition party, Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury, found himself reduced to the status of a figurehead by a majority vote on Wednesday. Mr. Chowdhury was given 212 names of candidates only a day prior to the selection committee meeting. He had told the media that he was provided the names of shortlisted candidates only 10 minutes prior to the appointment. This was a violation of Section 6 of the 2023 Act, which required the selection panel members to be given ample opportunity to make a considered decision regarding the candidates.

Mr. Kumar and Mr. Sandhu were appointed following vacancies created by the sudden resignation of EC Arun Goel, and the retirement of EC Anup Chandra Pandey.

# Supreme Court will hear petitions seeking stay on the CAA and its rules on March 19

**Krishnadas Rajagopal**  
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court agreed to hear on March 19 a slew of petitions to stay the operation of the controversial Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) and its rules notified earlier this week, which fast-track the grant of Indian citizenship to non-Muslim migrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan.

"The Act was enacted in 2019. They wait for four-and-a-half years and notify the rules just days ahead of the elections... Once the process of grant of citizenship starts under this Act, it



On the boil: All Assam Students' Union (AASU) members during a protest march against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act. PTI

cannot be reversed. Please hear our applications for stay," senior advocate Kapil Sibal urged a three-judge Bench headed by Chief Jus-

ice of India D.Y. Chandrachud in an oral mentioning of the case on Friday. Mr. Sibal represents the Indian Union Muslim

League (IUML), a political party also represented by advocate Haris Beeran. The IUML is the primary petitioner in the lead case that has 237 separate petitions challenging the legality of CAA on the ground that it discriminates in granting citizenship on the basis of religion.

**Interim stay sought**

The Democratic Youth Federation of India (DYFI), represented by advocate Subhash Chandran K.R., has also filed an application seeking an interim stay on the implementation of the law. Solicitor-General Tushar

Mehta, appearing for the Union government, said listing the case early, on March 19, was "absolutely the prerogative of the court".

"However, none of these petitioners have the *locus standi* to say whether or not the Centre can grant citizenship... That may be kept in mind... Whether it is now the first day or the last day before the elections, the petitioner [represented by Mr. Sibal] need not go into that. This is a constitutional court," Mr. Mehta objected strongly.

The court said all 237 petitions would be listed on March 19.



Task at hand: Gyanesh Kumar and Sukhbir Singh Sandhu assumed charge as ECs on Friday. PTI



## INBRIEF



## Chameli Devi award presented to Greeshma Kuthar, Ritika Chopra

Chameli Devi Jain Award 2024 for Outstanding Woman Media Person of the Year was awarded jointly on Friday to independent journalist Greeshma Kuthar, and Ritika Chopra of the *Indian Express*. An independent jury comprising senior journalist and columnist Radhika Ramaseshan (chair), award-winning journalist and author Mariyam Alavi, and Down to Earth managing editor Richard Mahapatra selected the winners from more than 65 entries of women journalists, a statement from the Media Foundation said.

## Announce dates for both LS, Assembly polls in J&amp;K: Omar

Former J&K Chief Minister and National Conference leader Omar Abdullah on Friday said the Election Commission of India (ECI) should restore democracy fully in J&K and announce the dates of both Parliament as well as Assembly elections. "It has been 10 years that J&K has not seen an Assembly election. There have to be elections in J&K and it is a golden opportunity. The ECI should restore democracy fully in J&K. Let it announce the dates of both Parliament as well as Assembly elections," Mr. Abdullah said. His statement comes as the ECI is set to announce the poll schedule for the Lok Sabha and some State Assemblies on Saturday.

## Congress MLA joins AAP in Punjab ahead of election

Ahead of the Lok Sabha election, Congress party MLA and the Deputy Leader of the Opposition in Punjab Raj Kumar Chabbewal on Friday quit the party and joined the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP). Mr. Chabbewal, a prominent Dalit leader was inducted into the party fold by AAP State chief and Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann. Mr. Chabbewal also said he has quit as a legislator from the Chabbewal Assembly constituency in Hoshiarpur district. Mr. Chabbewal is likely to be fielded from the Hoshiarpur Lok Sabha seat by the AAP, said sources. He is the second prominent Congress leader, after former MLA from Bassi Pathana Gurpreet Singh GP, to join the AAP recently.

## Forging of documents: court denies bail to four T.N. men

A sessions court in Mumbai has denied bail to four men from Tamil Nadu arrested for allegedly using forged documents to obtain visas and attempting to travel to a European country. The accused had travelled to Dubai on these visas in February and were caught by the authorities before they could travel to Hungary. Additional sessions judge (Dindoshi court) M.H. Pathan rejected the bail plea of Venugopal Sugumar (32), Mahesh Muthu Subramanian (33), Ananthan Vadivel (36) and Jayshankhar Ragunathan (30). The accused, in their plea, claimed that they were cheated by an agent who gave them the visas and they had paid ₹5 lakh for the same. PTI

## AIUDF names candidates for Lok Sabha poll in Assam

The Hindu Bureau  
GUWAHATI

The minority-based All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF), Assam's third largest party, on Friday announced its list of candidates for the upcoming Lok Sabha election.

The party is contesting three of the 14 parliamentary seats in the State. These are western Assam's Dhubri, southern Assam's Karimganj, and central Assam's Nagaon where Muslims are a major voting force.

A statement issued by the AIUDF said the party chief Badruddin Ajmal will seek re-election from the Dhubri seat.

## TMC MP Arjun Singh returns to BJP, Dibyendu follows suit

Shiv Sahay Singh  
KOLKATA

Almost 20 months after Arjun Singh severed ties with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to join Trinamool Congress, the Barrackpore MP on Friday returned to BJP. Dibyendu Adhikari, Trinamool Congress MP from Tamruk and brother of Leader of Opposition Suwendu Adhikari also joined the BJP with Arjun Singh in New Delhi in presence of BJP leaders Amit Malviya and Dushyant Gautam.

While Arjun Singh's return to BJP was triggered by the Trinamool Congress denying him ticket from Barrackpore and fielding the State's Minister Partha Bhowmick from the seat, he chose to take up the law

## Court rejects Kejriwal's plea challenging ED summons in Delhi excise policy case

The CM has skipped eight summonses between December 2023 and March 2024 in two cases saying they were 'illegal' and 'politically motivated'; Magistrate Court to take up both today

Ishita Mishra  
NEW DELHI

A Sessions Court here on Friday refused to stay the summons issued by a Magistrate Court to Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal on the basis of the complaints filed by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) for not appearing before the agency for questioning in the Delhi excise policy case.

Special Judge of the Rouse Avenue court, Rakesh Syal, rejected the plea filed by Mr. Kejriwal, which had challenged the summons and sought a stay on the proceedings against him in the Magistrate Court. He said that the Chief Minister may file an application before the Magistrate Court to seek exemption from appearing before the probe agency.

Last week, Additional Chief Metropolitan Magistrate Divya Malhotra had summoned Mr. Kejriwal on March 16 in two separate complaint cases filed by the ED. In its complaints,



Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal. ANI

The Central agency had said that the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) national convener had skipped eight summonses issued to him between December 2023 and March 2024 in a money-laundering case linked to the now-scrapped Delhi excise policy.

The Magistrate Court is expected to take up both complaints on March 16.

'Bound to comply' The AAP chief has, on multiple occasions, termed the

multiple ED summonses "illegal" and "politically motivated", and has alleged that the probe agency, in cahoots with the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, is planning to "arrest" him ahead of the Lok Sabha election.

The Magistrate Court, had, however, noted that Mr. Kejriwal is "legally bound" to comply with the ED's summons, but has "purportedly failed to do so".

During the hearing, se-

nior advocate Ramesh Gupta and advocate Rajiv Mohan, who appeared for the Delhi CM, said that their client had not skipped any summons for "personal reasons", but on account of being a public servant.

The counsel for the ED said that Mr. Kejriwal had joined the proceedings in the Magistrate Court on February 17 via videoconferencing and had assured the court that he would appear before it in person on March 16. But only two days before the court date, he filed a plea in the Sessions Court challenging the summons.

Incidentally, Mr. Kejriwal had also told the court that he could not appear before it any time before March 10, on account of the ongoing session of the Delhi Assembly, which was then slated to have finished by the first week of the month.

Hours before the Sessions Court's order, however, the Delhi government extended the Assembly session until March 22.

## 'DMK, Cong. will never succeed in developing T.N.'

C. Palanivel Rajan  
KANNIYAKUMARI

BJP leader and Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday said that the INDIA bloc, comprising parties such as the DMK and the Congress, would never succeed in developing Tamil Nadu. "Their history is that of scams, and their policies are focused on coming to power to loot the public," he said, at a public meeting in Kanniyakumari district.

Mr. Modi said that he was expecting to see a huge transformation in the State. "I am confident that the performance of the BJP in Tamil Nadu will break the arrogance of the INDIA bloc," he said.

Akin to the BJP's 'Ekta (unity) Yatra' from Kanniyakumari to Kashmir in 1991, this time, the route for the 'Viksit Bharat Sankalp Yatra' is from Kashmir to Kanniyakumari, he said. "Just as the people of Jammu and Kashmir rejected the party who dreamt of breaking the nation apart, the people of Tamil Nadu will also do the same," he said.

Listing various infrastructure projects undertaken by the Centre such as



PM Modi at a public meeting in Kanniyakumari on Friday.

the Kanniyakumari-Thiruvananthapuram four-lane road; the Marthandam-Parvathipuram flyover; and the Narikulam bridge, he said that past governments had kept these projects on hold for years, citing various reasons. On the one hand, there were the BJP's welfare schemes, and on the other, there were the "DMK government's scams and more scams", he alleged.

## Ram temple

Taking pride in the consecration of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya, Mr. Modi said that he had visited several important temples in Tamil Nadu before the event. However, the DMK government had attempted to stop the people from viewing the ceremony, for which it was criticised by the Supreme Court.

## Walkar case: HC orders Aaftab to be unlocked for 8 hours a day

The Hindu Bureau  
NEW DELHI

The Delhi High Court on Friday ordered the Tihar Central Jail authorities to permit Aaftab Amin Poonawala, the primary suspect in the Shradha Walker murder case, to spend eight hours daily outside his cell before being confined to solitary confinement at night.

The court passed the order on a petition by Mr. Poonawala, contending that under the garb of security, he cannot be kept in solitary confinement. According to his counsel, Mr. Poonawala is reportedly granted only an hour each in the morning and evening. "... we direct the jail authorities to unlock him for eight hours, and during the night, he be lodged in a solitary cell."

## SP names 6 LS poll candidates for U.P., gives one seat to TMC

Mayank Kumar  
LUCKNOW

The Akhilesh Yadav-led Samajwadi Party (SP) on Friday declared candidates for six seats in Uttar Pradesh for the upcoming Lok Sabha election and allocated the Bhadohi seat to its INDIA bloc ally, the Trinamool Congress (TMC).

The main Opposition party in the State has fielded Yashveer Singh from the Bijnor seat, Bijendra Singh from Aligarh, Manoj Kumar from Nagina, Daroga Saroj from Lalganj, Bhanu Pratap Singh from Meerut, and Jasveer Valmiki from Hathras. Nagina, Lalganj, and Hathras constituencies are reserved for the Scheduled Castes.

Later in the day, the TMC declared Laliteshpati Tripathi, former Congress MLA and great-grandson of former CM Kamalapati Tripathi, as its candidate for

the Bhadohi seat. Mr. Laliteshpati had joined the TMC in October 2021.

With the latest list, the SP has signalled that it will not be forging an alliance with the Dalit-centric Azad Samaj Party (ASP), led by Chandrashekhar Azad, which had declared its candidature for the Nagina seat. Earlier, it was believed that the SP would support Mr. Azad by not putting up a candidate for the seat.

## Consultations done

The SP said the candidates were chosen after proper consultation and the INDIA bloc will register a landslide victory in Uttar Pradesh. SP spokesperson Sunil Singh Yadav 'Sajan' said the alliance will "sweep the State". "As far as the Nagina [seat] is concerned, the decision of the leadership is in front of you with the announcement of the candidate," he said.

## In a first for trans-Yamuna region, L-G approves plans to redevelop three JJ clusters

The Hindu Bureau  
NEW DELHI

Lieutenant Governor V.K. Saxena on Friday approved plans to redevelop three *jhuggi-jhopri* (JJ) clusters in east Delhi housing 4,000-odd households under the Centre's in situ rehabilitation scheme, 'Jahan Jhuggi Wahin Makaan'.

This will be the first in situ rehabilitation project in the entire trans-Yamuna area (east and north-east Delhi) and the fourth such project overall in the national capital after Kalkaji Extension, Jailorwala Bagh and Kathputli Colony.

The three JJ clusters at Kalandar Colony, Deepak Colony and Dilshad Vihar Colony will be developed over about seven hectares and on completion, existing households in the area will be provided flats in multi-storeyed buildings



Delhi L-G V.K. Saxena

with modern amenities.

The decision comes in the wake of a visit the L-G paid to the residents of Kalandar Colony in Shahdara on March 5 at their request. Mr. Saxena said he witnessed first-hand that the area was "bereft of even basic civic amenities".

The L-G has directed the Delhi Development Authority to present a detailed project report (DPR) along with the finances involved at the earliest and proceed further. He issued specific directions to execute the

project in a time-bound manner and avoid the kind of delays that have plagued similar projects in the past.

Responding to the L-G's announcement, the ruling Aam Aadmi Party in a statement said his tenure has witnessed many clusters being demolished by agencies under his supervision and by those under the Central government.

"More than 3 lakh poor residents have been rendered homeless in the last one and a half years. These people are forced to live under the flyovers and on the footpaths of Delhi. Now, under the pressure of the coming Lok Sabha elections, the L-G is trying an image makeover. However, lakhs of people who have been rendered homeless will never forgive the L-G and the Central government," the party said in a statement.

## Spurious cancer drug racket: police arrest four more in Delhi and Gurugram

Samridhi Tewari  
NEW DELHI

The police have arrested four more persons in connection with the manufacturing and supplying spurious 'life-saving' cancer and chemotherapy drugs. The total number of arrests in the case has now climbed to 12.

On Tuesday, seven members of the fake drug racket were arrested, including the kingpin, Neeraj Chauhan, 38. A day later, the police arrested Aditya Krishna, 23, an alumnus of the Indian Institute of Technology (Banaras Hindu University), in connection with the case.

The four accused, who were arrested from Delhi and Gurugram on Wednes-

**The gang is believed to have sold fake chemotherapy drugs worth over ₹25 crore over the past 2 years**

day and Thursday, are accused of stealing chemotherapy drugs from the hospitals where they worked and selling them for a commission to Mr. Chauhan.

"We believe that the gang mixed some genuine medicines with fake ones to deceive their clients. An investigation is being carried out to find how members of the gang stole drugs from the departments where they worked," said a senior officer.

The police have frozen

14 bank accounts in connection with the case and seized a total of ₹92.81 lakh. An officer said that the gang is estimated to have sold spurious chemotherapy drugs worth more than ₹25 crore over two years.

## New arrests

Rohit Singh Bisht, 36, was arrested from Dwarka on Wednesday. He sold stolen vials of chemotherapy drugs Keytruda and Opdyta to Mr. Chauhan for ₹65,000 and ₹35,000, respectively. Mr. Bisht has a diploma in general nursing and 10 years of experience in the field.

Jitendra, 33, worked in a bone marrow transplant unit at an oncology department. He was caught red-

handed by the police when he came to supply three vials of chemotherapy drugs to Mr. Chauhan. "These were drugs meant for patients at the hospital where he worked," said a senior officer.

Majid Khan, 34, worked as a senior staff member at a chemotherapy daycare unit in Gurugram. Mr. Khan was paid a commission of ₹4,000-₹5,000 for each vial he stole from his workplace. He was arrested from his house in Jaipur on Thursday.

The fourth accused, Sajid, 33, worked at an oncology department of a Gurugram-based hospital.

He has a diploma in general nursing and was arrested for supplying drugs to Mr. Majid.

## Lok Sabha election schedule set to be announced today: EC

**The Hindu Bureau**  
NEW DELHI

The Election Commission will announce on Saturday the schedule for elections to the Lok Sabha and some State Assemblies.

The current Lok Sabha's term ends on June 16 and a new House has to be constituted before that.

The term of the Assemblies in Andhra Pradesh, Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh and Odisha is coming to an end on different dates in June.

### Polls in J&K?

It remains to be seen whether the poll panel announces dates for Assembly election in Jammu and Kashmir as well.

The poll panel announced in a post on X that a press conference to an-

nounce the schedule for elections to the Lok Sabha and some State Assemblies will be held at 3 p.m.

The announcement will be made by Chief Election Commissioner Rajiv Kumar. New Commissioners Gyanendra Kumar and Sukbir Singh Sandhu, who assumed office on Friday, will also be present.

### 97 crore voters

Nearly 97 crore people are eligible to cast vote in the upcoming poll at over 12 lakh polling stations.

In 2019, the Lok Sabha poll were announced on March 10 and held in seven phases beginning April 11 and the votes were counted on May 23.

In the last parliamentary polls, the BJP secured 303 seats while the Congress got 52 seats.

## ED arrests BRS MLC Kavitha in Delhi excise policy case

Agency probing her involvement in 'South Group', which allegedly played a key role in liquor policy scam; ED and Income Tax officials had searched her house before arresting her

**The Hindu Bureau**  
HYDERABAD

In a dramatic development that stretched through the day, the Enforcement Directorate officials arrested Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) Member of the Legislative Council (MLC) Kalvakuntla Kavitha in the alleged Delhi Liquor Policy scam case. She has been arrested under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act.

"In exercise of the power conferred upon me under sub-section (1) of Section 19 of the PMLA, 2002 (915 of 2003), I hereby arrest Kalvakuntla Kavitha at 5.20 p.m. and she has been informed of the grounds for arrest. A copy of the



**High profile:** BRS leader K. Kavitha being taken into custody by the Enforcement Directorate in Hyderabad on Friday. NAGARA GOPAL

grounds for her arrest has been served upon her," read a release by the ED official.

Earlier, around noon on Friday, three vehicles of ED and Income Tax officials reached the residence of Ms. Kavitha in Banjara

Hills. The officials cordoned off her house, barred her staff from interacting with her, they seized their phones during the time the searches were carried out, according to sources.

The ED is probing the al-

legation of Ms. Kavitha's involvement in the 'South Group', which played a key role in the Delhi Liquor Policy scam that provided an exceptionally high profit margin both for wholesalers and retailers.

The ED alleged that Hyderabad-based liquor businessman and co-accused Arun Ramchandra Pillai had represented the interests of Ms. Kavitha. He along with another accused, Abhishek Boimpally, and chartered accountant Butchibabu Gorantla fronted for the 'South Group' that was favoured under the excise policy.

The ED alleges that Mr. Pillai had a 32.5% stake in Indo Spirits, which had got a wholesale liquor licence.

## India strongly rebuffs U.S. criticism of CAA, calls it 'misinformed'

**Kallol Bhattacharjee**  
NEW DELHI

In a sharp rebuke, India on Friday said the U.S. State Department's criticism of the controversial Citizenship (Amendment) Act is "misinformed and unwarranted".

In a weekly press briefing, Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal argued in support of the inclusive provisions of the Constitution and dismissed any concern regarding the Act, describing it as "laudable".

"The CAA is about giving citizenship, not about taking away citizenship. It addresses the issue of statelessness, provides human dignity, and supports human rights. As regards the U.S. State Department's statement on the implementation of CAA, we are of the view that it is misplaced, misinformed and unwarranted," Mr. Jaiswal said.

### Concerns of U.S. gov't.

"We are concerned about the notification of the Citizenship Amendment Act on March 11," U.S. State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller told reporters during his daily briefing on Thursday. "We are closely monitoring how this Act will be implemented. Respect for religious freedom and equal treat-

### No grounds for any concern on treatment of minorities, says MEA spokesperson

ment under the law for all communities are fundamental democratic principles," Mr. Miller added.

In response, Mr. Jaiswal said: "India's Constitution guarantees freedom of religion to all its citizens. There are no grounds for any concern on treatment of minorities. Vote bank politics should not determine views about a laudable initiative to help those in distress. Lectures by those who have a limited understanding of India's pluralistic traditions and the region's post-Partition history are best not attempted."

The CAA was passed in Parliament on December 11, 2019 and received assent from the President the next day. The law, aimed at granting citizenship to persecuted religious minorities from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan except Muslims, was greeted with widespread protests in many parts of India, including in Assam and Delhi.

The law did not come into force during the subsequent four years and two months.

## Yediyurappa booked under POCSO; CID to investigate case



B.S. Yediyurappa

**The Hindu Bureau**  
BENGALURU

The Karnataka Police late on Thursday night booked BJP leader and former Chief Minister B.S. Yediyurappa under a section of the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012 (POCSO) acting on a sexual assault complaint

filed by the mother of a 17-year-old girl.

The State government has handed over the case to the Criminal Investigation Department (CID). The order was issued by Director-General & Inspector-General of Police Alok Mohan on Friday afternoon, but the case is yet to be handed over to the CID.

This decision came hours after Home Minister G. Parameashwara confirmed that the city police had registered a case against the former Chief Minister.

"Investigation is on and the law will take its own course," he said.

He added: "It is a very sensitive case, connected

to a former Chief Minister and a minor girl. We will not be able to reveal any more details at this stage."

### Woman's mental health

However, Mr. Parameashwara said that some people were saying that the woman was "mentally unstable".

Deputy Chief Minister

D.K. Shivakumar, who rushed to Mr. Parameashwara's house on Friday morning to discuss the case, refused to comment on the issue.

Meanwhile, the city police got the victim in the case to undergo the procedural medical examination at a private hospital in the city on Friday.

## Modi kicks off LS poll campaign in Kerala, says lotus will bloom in State

**The Hindu Bureau**  
PATHANAMTHITTA

Kicking off the National Democratic Alliance's (NDA) Lok Sabha election campaign in the State, Prime Minister Narendra Modi here on Friday expressed confidence that "the lotus is going to bloom in Kerala in this election."

He urged the voters to break the cycle of the Left Democratic Front (LDF) and the United Democratic Front (UDF) forming governments to "save Kerala from its current slide".

Addressing a public event in Pathanamthitta, Mr. Modi said: "The BJP, which won a two-digit vote percentage here last time, will open its account in the State," he said.

"When the BJP government comes to power, it is



Prime Minister Narendra Modi being presented the traditional Onavillu (musical instrument) in Pathanamthitta on Friday. PTI

going to need MPs in Kerala who will take your needs to the government, and this, in turn, will be helpful in bringing development to the State."

"Modi will never turn a blind eye towards your needs. That's Modi's guarantee," he said.

He accused the LDF and

the UDF of unleashing a reign of terror in the State. "Things have come to such a pass that even the priest of a church was subjected to violence. Several college campuses have become hotspots of communist violence. Women and children are living in constant fear, but the government

appears to be sleeping," he said. Mr. Modi accused successive governments in the State of turning a blind eye to the plight of rubber growers.

While the people of Kerala have been progressive and far-sighted, the Congress and the Left parties follow outdated principles. "This is why they even raised objections to progressive initiatives such as the ban on triple talaq, appointment of an OBC commission, and reservation for economically weaker sections," Mr. Modi said.

The UDF and the LDF, according to him, were "two sides of a coin" engaged in corruption and loot. "If the LDF is conducting this loot through gold, the UDF has done it in the form of solar energy," he said.

## Bihar Cabinet expands as 12 BJP, 9 JD(U) leaders take oath

**Amarnath Tewary**  
PATNA

Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar on Friday expanded his Cabinet, inducting nine Ministers from the Janata Dal (United) and 12 from the BJP. With this, the strength of the Cabinet has risen to 30, six short of the maximum capacity.

The Cabinet expansion comes 46 days after the new National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government was formed in the State on January 28 as Mr. Kumar severed ties with the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) and returned to the NDA led by the BJP.

After the oath-taking ceremony, all new Ministers said the NDA would win all 40 Lok Sabha seats in the State.

In 2019, the NDA had won 39, while the Congress



**New faces:** BJP leader Renu Devi takes oath as Minister in the Bihar Cabinet at a ceremony in Patna on Friday. ANI

won the lone Kishanganj seat. In the Cabinet expansion, almost all JD(U) leaders who were earlier Ministers in the Mahagatbandhan government have been repeated, while the BJP has brought in some new faces like Kedar Gupta, Surendra Mehra, and Santosh Kumar Singh.

Both parties have given preference to MLAs belonging to the Extremely Backward Classes. The recent caste survey had revealed that the EBC population is over 36% in Bihar.

Women MLAs like Renu Devi of the BJP, Lesi Singh of the JD(U), and Sheela Kumari Mandal too have found place in the Cabinet.

## Motorcade causes traffic snarls, Adhir writes to PM

**The Hindu Bureau**  
NEW DELHI

Congress leader in the Lok Sabha Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury on Friday wrote to Prime Minister Narendra Modi to highlight "huge traffic snarls" that Mr. Modi's motorcade causes in central Delhi.

He said traffic management experts and authorities should formulate a plan without any compromise on the Prime Minister's security.

"Your security and well-being are of utmost concern to the Indian people as a whole..." Mr. Chowdhury said, adding that varied sections of society face hardship owing to the blocking of traffic that continues for long duration due to VVIP movement.

## The Hindu wins 6 WAN-IFRA digital media awards for 2023

**The Hindu Bureau**  
CHENNAI

The Hindu's projects bagged six awards at the WAN-IFRA Digital Media Awards South Asia 2023 held in New Delhi recently.

The Hindu Made of Chennai, a campaign to celebrate the city, won gold in both 'Best in audience engagement' and 'Best in native advertising campaign' categories.

Chennai-A-Maze, an online cryptic crossword challenge, bagged silver in the 'Best in audience engagement' category.

The crossword was rolled out on The Hindu Crossword and website as part of the Made of Chennai campaign for Madras Day (August 22, 2023) for 10 days.

The activity was organised along with the Tamil

### The Hindu's Madras Day campaign won gold in 'Best in audience engagement' and 'Best in native advertising campaign' categories

Nadu Tourism Development Corporation and was powered by Storytrails, a company that organises story-based walking tours in India.

### Tribute to city

A 'Made of Chennai song' - an audio-visual tribute to the city that was part of the campaign - won a special jury mention in the 'Best use of video' category.

The Hindu website won silver in the 'Best news website' category.

The Hindu's meta de-

scription for news articles using generative artificial intelligence bagged silver in the 'Best use of AI in the newsroom' category.

L.V. Navaneeth, Chief Executive Officer of The Hindu Group, said: "With Made of Chennai, we embraced the city's passion points and crafted engaging activities around them. The resounding success of our campaign underscores our deep understanding of Chennai and its vibrant community. With digital technology, we intend to elevate the user experience on our platforms and foster deep engagement with readers. The Hindu website is reshaping how we deliver top-notch news content, particularly to young audiences. This acknowledgement from WAN-IFRA fuels our drive to elevate the efforts."

## U.S. probing Adani Group over potential bribery, says report

**Reuters**  
BENGALURU

The United States has widened its investigation of Adani Group to focus on the conduct of its founder, Gautam Adani, and whether the company may have engaged in bribery, Bloomberg News reported on Friday.

Prosecutors are digging into whether an Adani entity or people linked to the company, including Mr. Adani, were involved in paying officials in India for favourable treatment on an energy project, the report said, citing people with direct knowledge of the matter.

The U.S. Attorney's office for the Eastern District of New York and the Justice Department's fraud unit in

Washington are handling the investigation and are also looking at Indian renewable energy company Azure Power Global, the report added.

"We are not aware of any investigation against our chairman," Adani Group told Bloomberg News.

Adani Group, Azure Power, and the DOJ did not immediately respond to Reuters' requests for comments. The Attorney's office could not be immediately reached.

Adani Group's stocks and bonds saw a massive selloff early last year after U.S. short-seller Hindenburg Research issued a report that alleged improper governance practices by the group. The Indian firm has denied the allegations.

## Mirwaiz calls for release of Kashmiri 'political prisoners'

**Peerzada Ashiq**  
SRINAGAR

Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, the Valley's chief cleric who joined Ramzan prayers at Srinagar's historic Jamia Masjid for the first time since 2019 on Friday, urged the Jammu and Kashmir authorities to "release thousands of Kashmiri political prisoners as a gesture of goodwill".

"I appeal to the authorities to listen to the voice of people's collective conscience and unconditionally release thousands of Kashmiri political prisoners, who are in jails in J&K and all over India, as a gesture of goodwill in the holy month of Ramzan," Mr. Farooq, who delivered the sermon to hundreds of worshippers, said.

During the address, he highlighted that the condi-



Mirwaiz Umar Farooq

and one-upmanship will make us perish," Mr. Farooq said.

### Appeal to the youth

Mr. Farooq, also the Hurriyat chairman, addressed the youth and asked them to pursue education and awareness, "which will bring out their inner capabilities and consciousness to shape a just and prosperous community".

The 50-year-old Mirwaiz has been allowed to resume his religious activities this month.

It comes after Mr. Farooq approached the J&K High Court over "unjustified and illegal house detention" by the authorities since August, 2019. The Lieutenant Governor, however, informed the court that Mr. Farooq "is a free man and can go wherever he wants".

# Many top electoral bond donors were under scanner of ED, I-T Department

Of bonds worth ₹1,368 crore purchased by Future Gaming and Hotel Services PR, 50% were purchased before ED searches and 50% after searches; other firms which followed a similar pattern are Keventer Food Park Infra Ltd., MKJ Enterprises Ltd., and Madanlal Ltd., all registered in Kolkata

Vignesh Radhakrishnan  
Srinivasan Ramani  
CHENNAI

An analysis of firms which feature among the top purchasers of electoral bonds throws up many curious patterns. One of the common links is that a significant number of companies in the top donor list were under the scanner of the Enforcement Directorate or the Income Tax (I-T) Department at some point of time in the past five years. In some cases, these companies bought a chunk of the bonds in the days following such searches.

Future Gaming and Hotel Services PR was the largest donor to political parties through the electoral bond route, with a cumulative sum of ₹1,368 crore. In May 2023, the ED carried out searches at the residence of Santiago Martin, a well-known lottery magnate and managing director of the company, in Chennai.

The ED also conducted searches at the business premises of the company in Coimbatore under the provisions of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA). A year earlier, on April 2, 2022, the ED attached movable assets worth ₹410 crore under the PMLA in a case of lottery scam against the company and its subsidiaries. Interestingly, five days later, on April 7, 2022, the company made a significant purchase of electoral bonds worth ₹100 crore, marking

Company	ED/I-T searches	Amount and details
Future Gaming and Hotel Services PR	On April 2, 2022, ED attached assets worth ₹410 crore. Five days later, the company purchased bonds worth ₹100 crore	Bonds worth ₹1,368 crore bought in total. Close to 50% of this was purchased after the ED attached the assets
Keventer Food Park Infra Ltd., MKJ Enterprises Ltd., and Madanlal Ltd.	Keventer Agro, a company which shares its email domain with Madanlal and MKJ Enterprises, was searched by the ED in Feb. 2021	Total purchase worth ₹573 crore cumulatively
Yashoda Super Speciality Hospital	Searched by the Income Tax Department in December 2020	Bonds worth ₹162 crore purchased between October 2021 and October 2023
Aurobindo Pharma	Director Sarath Reddy was arrested by the ED on November 10, 2022	Total purchases worth ₹52 crore. Five days after the arrest, the company purchased bonds worth ₹5 crore. A year later, it purchased bonds worth ₹25 crore
Shirdi Sai Electricals Ltd.	On December 18, 2023, I-T searches were conducted	Bonds worth ₹40 crore bought on January 11, 2024
Kalpataru Projects International	I-T searches were conducted in August 2023	Electoral bonds worth ₹25.5 crore bought between April 2023 and October 2023

one of their largest transactions on a single date. Of the bonds worth ₹1,368 crore purchased by the company, 50% were purchased before the ED searches and 50% after the searches.

#### Same address

The other set of companies which followed a similar pattern are Keventer Food Park Infra Ltd., MKJ Enterprises Ltd., and Madanlal Ltd.

All the three firms are registered with the same address in Kolkata, West

Bengal, and have at least one common director.

The common director is Siddharth Gupta, but the three companies were incorporated in different years. MKJ Enterprises was incorporated in 1982, Madanlal in 1983, and Keventer Food Park in 2010. The three companies together donated about ₹573 crore – the third highest – if purchases are considered cumulatively. Of the ₹573 crore, bonds worth ₹195 crore were purchased by Keventer Food Park Infra Ltd. in three batches bet-

ween April and May 2019. Bonds worth about ₹185 crore were purchased by Madanlal Ltd. between May 8 and 10, 2019.

#### Stake sale

Keventer Agro, a company which shares its email domain with Madanlal and MKJ Enterprises, ran into controversy following a public interest litigation (PIL) petition filed by West Bengal Congress unit chief Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury after the State government's sale of its stake in Metro Dairy to Keventer Agro in

2017. The West Bengal government divested its 47% shares in Metro Dairy to Keventer Agro Ltd. for ₹85 crore in 2017.

In the same year, a Singapore-based private equity fund picked up 15% shares of Keventer Agro for ₹170 crore. Currently, Mayank Jalan is the managing director of Keventer Agro and also a director of Metro Dairy.

The ED started an investigation into the divestment of the West Bengal government's stake in Metro Dairy in 2019. Summons were issued to several officials of the State government, including H.K. Dwivedi, who was the State's Finance Secretary in 2017, when the shares of Metro Dairy were divested. Summons were issued to State officials, including Mr. Dwivedi, in June 2020 and March 2021. In February 2021, searches were conducted by the ED officials at the office of Keventer Agro Ltd. in Kolkata in connection with the probe.

The investigation lost steam after the Calcutta High Court in June 2022 dismissed the PIL plea filed by Mr. Chowdhury alleging lack of transparency in the divestment. The Supreme Court in September 2022 upheld the Calcutta High Court order.

The Yashoda Super Speciality Hospital Group in Hyderabad, whose premises were searched by the Income Tax Department in December 2020, donated ₹162 crore in multiple tranches beginning Octo-

ber 2021 and ending in October 2023.

Aurobindo Pharma's director Sarath Reddy was arrested by the ED on November 10, 2022 for his alleged involvement in irregularities in the scrapped liquor policy of the Delhi government. Five days after the arrest on November 15, the company purchased bonds worth ₹5 crore. A year later, in November 2023, it purchased bonds worth ₹25 crore. In total, the company purchased electoral bonds worth ₹52 crore in multiple tranches between April 2021 and November 2023, of which ₹30 crore were done after Mr. Reddy's arrest.

On December 18, 2023, I-T searches were conducted on the factory premises of Shirdi Sai Electricals Ltd. at the Industrial Development Area on the outskirts of Kadapa.

Searches were also conducted simultaneously at the Hyderabad office and at residences of its top officials. The company purchased electoral bonds worth ₹40 crore on January 11, 2024. I-T searches were conducted on the premises of real estate development firm Kalpataru Projects International and the residences of some of its directors and executives in August 2023. The company bought electoral bonds worth ₹25.5 crore between April 2023 and October 2023.

(With inputs from Kunal Shankar and Shiv Sahay Singh)

## INBRIEF



### Assam CM threatens legal action against Congress MP

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma threatened legal action against Congress MP Pradyut Bordoloi on Friday for alleging that the State government has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with a company that gave donation to the BJP through electoral bonds. "The allegations levelled by Pradyut Bordoloi is devoid of any facts and are entirely baseless," Mr. Sarma posted on X. Earlier, Mr. Bordoloi, the Nagaon MP, reposted a tweet of a person who alleged that the Assam government had signed an MoU with a firm and shared a donors' list, in which the firm's name figured, along with amounts donated to the BJP. Responding to the CM's tweets, Mr. Bordoloi said that he welcomed any such move to prosecute him. He also added that the CM should not forget that the electoral bonds "scam" had been unearthed on the direction of the SC to invite public probity which is integral to democracy. PTI

### Pak. agency bought bonds after Pulwama attack: RJD

Senior RJD leader Manoj Jha on Friday alleged that the data on electoral bonds had proved that the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) at the Centre was "the most corrupt political party in the history" of the country. Mr. Jha, the RJD national spokesperson, also claimed that the data flew in the face of the "nationalistic pretensions" of the BJP, while lending credence to the charge that the Central investigating agencies were being misused for political ends. "The data show that shortly after the Pulwama terror attack, a Pakistani agency purchased electoral bonds. So much for the nationalistic pretensions of the BJP, which stands exposed as the most corrupt party in the history of Independent India," Mr. Jha said. The Rajya Sabha MP also pointed out that "a private company was raided by the ED and, a few days later, it ended up purchasing electoral bonds. Anybody can join the dots and make out what the party has been up to". PTI

## Modi ran world's biggest extortion racket: Rahul

Abhinav Deshpande  
THANE

In a blistering attack on Prime Minister Narendra Modi over the electoral bonds scheme, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Friday accused Mr. Modi of "running the world's largest extortion racket".

He alleged that the funds amassed through the now-scrapped scheme were used to split political parties like the Shiv Sena and the Nationalist Congress Party in Maharashtra, and to topple Opposition governments.

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge demanded a Supreme Court-monitored inquiry, while the party's communications chief Jairam Ramesh alleged that companies which donated to the BJP were granted government contracts in a *quid pro quo* arrangement.

Interacting with media in Thane at the end of day 62 of his Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra, Mr. Gandhi said that the opaque electoral bonds system was designed to benefit the ruling party.

"Now it turns out that this is a way of extorting



Congress leader Rahul Gandhi speaking during the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra in Maharashtra's Palghar district on Friday. PTI

money from India's largest corporates. A way of stealing money from the biggest contracts in the country, and intimidating corporates and forcing them to give money to the BJP. Electoral bonds is the world's biggest corruption scam and extortion racket run by the Prime Minister of India," he said.

Terming it criminal extortion from corporate India, the Wayanad MP said that he was not making allegations, but stating facts. "Months after a contract is given or days after the CBI or ED raids take place, the companies suddenly start giving electoral bonds to the BJP. Certain companies which never donated mo-

ney to the BJP, have got cases filed by the ED, CBI, and then the corporates donate money to the party. It's upfront," Mr. Gandhi said.

The Congress leader alleged that the Enforcement Directorate (ED) and the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) had morphed into BJP and RSS entities.

Asked by *The Hindu* about certain companies which bought electoral bonds and have projects in Congress-ruled Karnataka and Telangana, Mr. Gandhi said, "There is no correlation between the electoral bonds and the contracts given by the Congress or other Opposition parties' governments in States."

In Bengaluru, Mr. Kharge demanded a Supreme Court-monitored special investigation into the electoral bonds scheme through which the ruling BJP has encashed ₹6,065 crore over five years. The BJP's bank accounts must be frozen till the completion of the probe, he added.

While the BJP has received the highest amount in electoral bonds, it was the bank account of the Congress, containing donations received from party workers, which had been frozen, he said, adding that there was "no level playing field".

Mr. Kharge sought an investigation into alleged links between donations made by companies that were either searched by I-T Department and ED officials, or received notices from Central agencies, and the funds received by the BJP.

Mr. Ramesh focused on companies that donated to the BJP after searches by Central investigation agencies, shell companies which made donations, and key missing data about the bonds scheme.

"There are many cases of companies that have donated electoral bonds, and immediately afterwards gotten huge benefits from the government: Megha Engineering & Infra has given over ₹800 crores in EBs. In April 2023, they donated ₹140 crore, and just one month later, they were awarded the ₹14,400 crore Thane-Borivali Twin Tunnel Project," he alleged.

"The BJP's Hafta Vasooli strategy is simple – raid a target through the ED/CBI/I-T, and then seek 'hafta' (donations) for the company's protection. At least 14 of the top 30 donors have been raided," Mr. Ramesh said.

CPI(M) general secretary Sitaram Yechury said the correlation between the searches by the CBI and the ED has been clearly established with the available data on electoral bonds. "It is very clear that once they buy the electoral bonds, the investigations against them are suspended. This is nothing but a clear-cut case of political extortion," he said.

(With inputs from Nagesh Prabhu in Bengaluru and Sobhana K. Nair in Delhi)

## 'Huge assumption to link ED searches with bond purchases'

Vikas Dhoot  
NEW DELHI

Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Friday dismissed suggestions that electoral bonds were purchased by many corporates to "save themselves" from probe by investigative agencies, arguing that there was a probability that the bonds were either transferred to regional parties or were donated to the ruling party before the said probes began.

Speaking at The India Today Conclave-2024, Ms. Sitharaman said it was a "huge assumption" that the money was given by firms after an Enforcement Directorate (ED) search. She was responding to a query whether bond purchases by 14 of the top 30 corporate electoral bond purchasers revealed so far, could be construed as a form of "protection" from probes they faced by some investigative agency.

"For all you know, that money was given earlier and yet, we went knocking



Nirmala Sitharaman

at their door. Am I making sense? No?... What if the companies gave the money and after that, we still went and knocked at their doors through the ED... Is that a probability or not?" the Minister said.

"Second assumption in that is, are you sure they have given it to the BJP? They probably gave it to the regional parties. What makes you assume so many things and build a narrative? The government has given and the State Bank has done its job as per the orders of the Supreme Court. Now you do it without assumptions of this nature," she emphasised, adding that "smart hard-working research will

do good rather than lazy journalism".

Stressing that she was not criticising the Supreme Court's verdict on electoral bonds, Ms. Sitharaman admitted that the system was not perfect, but said her predecessor, the late Arun Jaitley, had brought this scheme as an improvement over the previous system of electoral funding. "A system which is not perfect from a system which was completely imperfect, was consciously brought in so at least one aspect of it would be cleaner. Now, in the wisdom of the Supreme Court, they thought this is not the way to go about it. Alright. Till a better system comes, what is there? We have returned to the old era that 'do as you feel like – pay in cash, cheque, or give something else'," she said.

Any future law on electoral funding must incorporate the lessons from this episode, she said, underlining that "transparency will have to be progressively better" than each earlier system.

## Will work to ensure 100% voting in Lok Sabha election, says RSS

The Hindu Bureau  
NEW DELHI

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) will work towards ensuring 100% voting in the Lok Sabha election, joint general secretary Manmohan Vaidya said on Friday.

"To create awareness

about voting, RSS volunteers will go from door to door to request people to exercise their franchise," Mr. Vaidya said.

He said 19.39 crore families came in contact with the RSS during the 'Akshat' (sacred rice) distribution campaign before the inauguration of the Ram temple

in Ayodhya on January 22.

He said every year, 15,000 to 17,000 young people participated in the RSS's training programmes, adding that more than one lakh requests to join the RSS were received on the website of the organisation for the past seven years.

## Mamata stable after fall; doctor issues clarification

Shiv Sahay Singh  
KOLKATA

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, who suffered injury to her forehead and nose after a fall on Thursday, remained stable on Friday. A team of doctors from the State-run SSKM Hospital treated Ms. Banerjee at her residence.

Meanwhile, SSKM Hospital director Manimoy

Bandyopadhyay, who had on Thursday generated much political speculation by saying that the injury was caused due to a push from behind, clarified that he meant a "sensation of pushing from behind which led to the fall".

"This is a sensation of pushing from behind which led to the fall. Our job is to treat and we have done that. There was a

misinterpretation of what I said last evening," Dr. Bandyopadhyay told presspersons on Friday.

Senior officials of the Kolkata Police visited the residence of the Chief Minister, but there was no clarity on whether any complaint had been lodged in connection with the incident.

Leaders from the Opposition and the Trinamool

Congress targeted each other on the injuries sustained by the Chief Minister.

The Leader of the Opposition, Suwendu Adhikari, allegedly mocked Ms. Banerjee's fall. "Her head is spinning and she is falling regularly," he said.

A number of Ministers and leaders of the Trinamool Congress raised the issue of Mr. Adhikari's re-

marks and demanded an apology from him. "While entire Bengal prays for Mamata Banerjee's swift recovery, Suwendu Adhikari spews derogatory remarks about her health," Minister Snehasish Chakraborty said, adding, "We vehemently condemn his malicious utterances. Is this the behaviour expected of a LoP? We demand an immediate apology!".

**IN BRIEF**



**Former Navy chief Admiral L. Ramdas passes away**

Former Chief of Naval Staff, Admiral Laxminarayan Ramdas passed away at the Military Hospital in Secunderabad on Friday. He was 90. He is survived by his wife Lalitha Ramdas, daughters Kavitha, Sagari, and Mallika. The last rites would be performed with full Naval honours at Swarg Vatika on Saturday. Admiral Ramdas was the Chief of Naval Staff between 1990-1993. He joined the Joint Services Wing of the Armed Forces Academy in 1949. He was commissioned in the Indian Navy in September 1953, and trained as a communications specialist. The Admiral had a glorious career in the Indian Navy rising to the helm as its 13th chief.

**Govt. notifies rules to improve film certification process**

The Central government has notified the Cinematograph (Certification) Rules, 2024, in order to improve the process of certification of films for public exhibition. "These new rules aim to streamline and modernise the film certification process for the digital age, keeping pace with the emerging technologies and advancement in the film sector," the Information & Broadcasting Ministry said on Friday. The rules introduce age-based categories of certification by further subdividing the existing UA category into three age-based categories: seven years (UA 7+), 13 years (UA 13+), and 16 years (UA 16+), instead of 12 years.

**U.P. Police arrest three in question paper leak case**

The Uttar Pradesh police on Friday arrested three persons accused of leaking the question paper of the cancelled constable recruitment examination. Director-General of Police Prashant Kumar said the accused were former employees of a company that transported question papers. The accused were registered under Sections 419 (punishment for cheating by personation), 420 (cheating by inducement), 467 (forgery of valuable documents), 468 (forgery for the purpose of cheating) and 471 (using as genuine a forged document) of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) in the paper leak case.

**Bandh affects normal life in Manipur's Imphal Valley**

A 48-hour 'general strike' imposed by 12 civil society organisations from Friday morning affected normal life in Manipur's Imphal Valley. The organisations called the bandh to exert pressure on the government to unconditionally release three leaders of the Pambei-led extremist group United National Liberation Front (UNLF), which signed a peace agreement with the Centre in November 2023. The National Investigation Agency allegedly arrested the trio on March 13 in connection with a case registered in West Bengal. The organisations, however, shortened the duration of the shutdown to 24 hours later in the day to address the concerns of students appearing for the ongoing Class 10 final exams.

**Railways plans to develop multi-modal transport hubs**

The terminals will come up in 'aspirational cities' with population of over 10 lakh as part of 'Viksit Bharat' initiative; officials told to enhance travel experience of passengers by improving cleanliness

**S. Vijay Kumar**  
CHENNAI

The Indian Railways will create mega railway terminals with multi-modal connectivity in aspirational cities with a population of more than 10 lakh across the country.

The programme is part of the infrastructure being developed for Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 'Viksit Bharat' initiative.

According to official sources, the Railway Board has communicated to General Managers of all Zonal Railways that the project could also be extended to cities where a sizeable population was expected. Giving a list of cities with more than 10 lakh population, Shrihar Kumar Sinha, Additional Member (Planning), called for suggestions to include new locations or stations.

**'Enhancing experience'**  
The Railway Ministry has also taken up enhance-



**Swachh focus:** The principal chief mechanical engineers have been instructed to closely monitor housekeeping activities. AFP

ment of passenger experience on a mission mode and warned that any laxity on the part of its senior officers will not be tolerated.

With the proliferation of Vande Bharat Express trains across the country, which are being projected as game changers, the Railway Board has taken up the task of enhancing the travel experience of passengers through improved cleanliness of coaches and properly maintained amenities on railway

premises.

The principal chief mechanical engineers (PCMEs) of Zonal Railways have been instructed to closely monitor and ensure sustained housekeeping and maintenance activities and take necessary action on real-time basis.

**Investigation needed**  
Videos and pictures of staff cleaning exteriors, toilets, fans, inaccessible areas, and so on developed confidence in the system. These

efforts were required to be increased and sustained to achieve a quantum jump in cleanliness level and enhancement in the passenger experience.

"While many divisions have been actively involved in this mission, a few are still to get into this important area of Rolling Stock Maintenance. I have been regularly emphasising this aspect during my interaction with PCMEs and no laxity is to be tolerated," Satish Kumar, member (Traction & Rolling Stock), Railway Board, said in an order recently.

Pointing out there had been a spate of cases relating to brake binding, brake block jamming, uncoupling of air hoses, and train parting, affecting the operation of passenger and freight trains, he urged the PCMEs to conduct a proper investigation into the incidents and implement remedial measures in consultation with the Research Designs and Standards Organisation.

**₹2,890-cr. deal for Dornier upgrade inked with HAL**

**The Hindu Bureau**  
NEW DELHI

The Defence Ministry on Friday signed a contract worth ₹2,890 crore with the Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd. (HAL) for the midlife upgrade of 25 Dornier patrol aircraft of the Indian Navy.

"The midlife upgrade for Dornier aircraft includes an upgrade to incorporate state-of-the-art avionics systems and primary role sensors. The upgrade would significantly enhance the operational capability of the Dornier aircraft of the Indian Navy to perform primary roles of maritime surveillance, coastal surveillance, electronic intelligence, and development of maritime domain awareness," the Ministry said in a statement.

The upgrade will also enable the aircraft to carry out secondary roles of search and rescue, casualty evacuation, and communication linking.

**No porting allowed within seven days of SIM card swap: TRAI**

**The Hindu Bureau**  
NEW DELHI

The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) on Friday updated regulations to disallow telecom subscribers to port out of their current network provider if they have "swapped" their SIM card, after the loss or damage of a previous card, within the past seven days. The regulations prohibit telecom operators from issuing a "unique porting code" (UPC) which is the first step of changing providers using mobile number portability. This amendment would "result in preventing [the] porting of mobile connections soon after SIM swapping/ replacement, by fraudsters in the name of new subscribers," the TRAI said in an explanatory memorandum.

The move is part of the anti-spam measures the TRAI has taken. Previous steps include creating a do-not-disturb registry for subscribers to opt out of

spam, releasing a now-defunct app to enforce that registry by allowing users to file complaints against errant telemarketers, and requiring all transactional SMS messages by businesses to be as per a format registered with telecom operators, barring which they get filtered out.

The TRAI has also recommended to the Department of Telecommunications (DoT) a feature that would display the legally registered name of every caller on recipients' handsets, a feature that drew some criticism on privacy grounds. The DoT has launched Chakshu, its own portal for reporting "suspected fraud communication".

The DoT had asked the TRAI to examine a suggestion that telecom firms be required to match the identity of subscribers when they port out from one operator to another. The TRAI said that this suggestion will be "examined separately".

**Army raises first unit to operate Apache attack helicopters in Jodhpur**

**Dinakar Peri**  
NEW DELHI

Preparing to induct the first batch of AH-64E Apache attack helicopters into its fold, the Indian Army Aviation Corps raised its first unit at Jodhpur on Friday that will operate the helicopters. The Apaches will be the second attack helicopters in the Army after the indigenous light combat helicopter (LCH).

The 451 Aviation Squadron was formally raised at Jodhpur on Friday in the presence of Lt. Gen. A. K. Suri, Director-General of the Army Aviation Corps, a defence official said. "Army will receive the first batch of three Apaches in May and another three in July," the official added.



The Indian Army will receive the first batch of three Apache attack helicopters in May. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

by Boeing in the U.S. The Army Aviation inducted its first dedicated attack helicopter with the LCH and the first squadron, 351 Army Aviation, was moved to Missamari, Assam in the Eastern Sector near the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in November 2022.

The Cabinet Committee had in the past given sanction for the procurement of 39 AH-64 Apache attack helicopters from the U.S., as part of which the IAF inducted 22 Apaches under a deal signed in September 2015. Subsequently, the government decided that future Apache procurements

would go to the Army. While the Army has been pushing the case for 11 more Apaches, the Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) last year ordered a study on the number of armoured helicopters required by the three Services.

Last November, the Defence Acquisition Council approved the procurement of 156 LCH at an estimated cost of ₹45,000 crore - 90 for the Army and 66 for the Air Force. There are 10 for the Air Force and five for the Army, currently being inducted, in addition to the 15 limited-series production LCH at a total cost of ₹4,264 crore.

**THE CROSSWORD+ 14124** (set by Pixie Dust)

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

**Across**

- Alexander Randall's hidden mission (6)
- Strip financial assistance to obtain dangerous rifle (8)
- Unelevated in audition? Ignore (8)
- Send able Docs (without borders) all at once (2,4)
- Incorrigible rebel! He dared go around naked, basically (8)
- Horse for a child picked up in Lucknow? Yes! Yes! (3-3)

**Down**

- Leading industrialist escaped with man from Scotland and a native of Tehran (7)
- The French retailer has no love for oriental plant (8)
- No side rejected one who had a light-bulb moment? (6)
- Broken chord affected opera gig (8)
- Eat nachos, Italian bruschetta, buttery lamb enchiladas for starters (6)
- Miserable old man! Sent away daughter to meet Queen's official distributor (7)
- Say, Hulk's hips? (9,4)
- Judges's new table (check edges), deep dark in colour (3-5)
- Corrupt act kills a place where animals go for supplements, perhaps (4,4)
- Average man Spooner refers to as Professor Joseph? (4,3)
- Make yourself small and spirit away man around noon (7)
- City without a square (6)
- Force husband into custody (6)

**SUDOKU**

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

DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★★★★

**Solution to previous puzzle**

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

**Solution to yesterday's Sudoku**

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

**FAITH**

**The doctrine of karma**

What is Karma? Will it yield results directly? When will it give?

Valayapettai Sri Ramachariar said in a discourse that Karma refers to the deeds undertaken by human beings. It may be a good one (punya karma) or a bad one (papa karma). Not all will ever do only either the good or the sinful deeds. People will do both with or without their knowledge.

Punya karma refers to those activities through which we derive benefits, solace, and comfort. The effect of papa karma will be that which we don't like to come to us (e.g., disease).

Karma is a non-sentient (Achetana) and cannot give results by itself directly. God, the Supreme One, grants based on our Karma.

Adversities often compel a person to blame God, little realising that the divine Agency shows neither partiality nor favouritism.

The wealth one enjoys, or the poverty in which he is steeped are but the consequences of his past deeds - noble or wicked as the case may be.

We cannot say when the karmas will start giving results. It may be in this birth itself or in the births to come. God only knows. Good and bad Karma cannot be nullified. For every good or bad, one must face its effects separately.

One may wonder how a person indulging in wrongful deeds still enjoys various comforts.

The retort is that the effect of his evil deeds has not started to disturb him but is in wait.



## Food factor

**Inflation is impacting personal consumption and hurting growth**

The latest retail inflation data, yet again, underscores how volatile food prices continue to hold hostage not only broader inflation but also the lynchpin of economic growth, namely, personal consumption. While February's headline Consumer Price Index (CPI)-based reading remained virtually unchanged from the preceding month, at 5.09%, the pace of food price gains computed from the Consumer Food Price Index accelerated by 36 basis points to 8.66%. Vegetable prices continued to remain the biggest concern, with the third-heaviest food category in the food and beverages sub group of the CPI registering 30.3% inflation year-on-year, a disconcerting 315 basis points acceleration from January's reading. And inflation in cereals, the largest weight among foods in the CPI, also remained high at 7.6%, just marginally slower than the preceding month's 7.83% pace. Among vegetables, the potato-onion-tomato triumvirate, which is the most-widely consumed group nationwide and constitutes more than a third of the weight in the category, led the charge. Potato prices moved from an almost 2% year-on-year deflation in January to a 12.4% inflation, onion logged 22.1% inflation and tomato's price gains quickened by close to 400 basis points to a six-month high of 42%. A look at the Department of Consumer Affairs' daily price monitoring dashboard shows little respite on this front, with average retail prices of potato, onion and tomato reigning 21.3%, 41.4% and 35.2% higher, respectively, as on March 14 from a year earlier.

Clearly, the government's supply side measures, including a three-month-old ban on export of onions, has had little impact on cooling prices of these politically sensitive food inputs. And the outlook too is far from reassuring. Onion output in the 2023-24 horticulture crop year is seen more than 15.6% lower than last year and production of potato is projected to log an almost 2% deficit as in the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare's First Advance Estimates released on March 7. The water storage data from the Central Water Commission, showing live storage at 150 reservoirs across the country as on March 14 at 40% of capacity, and trailing both the 10-year average and the year-earlier levels, also does not portend well for summer-sown crops. This is particularly so in the southern region, where the storage deficit compared with the 10-year average is a most acute 29%. Reserve Bank of India Deputy Governor Michael Patra aptly summed up the risks to the economy from persistently high food inflation in his statement to the Monetary Policy Committee last month when he observed: "private consumption, which accounts for 57% of GDP, is languishing under the strain of still elevated food inflation. This is particularly telling in rural areas. Inflation has to be restrained to its target for growth to be inclusive and sustained." Policymakers have their task cut out if the economy is to avoid a summer of discontent as the country heads to the polls.

## Homecoming

**A.P. is set for a three-cornered contest after the TDP's return to the NDA**

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) pulled off a major tactical victory in Andhra Pradesh as it welcomed back an estranged ally, the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) and a former Convenor of the ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in New Delhi and former Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu. With a vote share of only 0.84% in the Assembly election in 2019, the BJP was all but written off in the State. It was perceived as the party that reneged on its promise to extend the Special Category Status (SCS) by another five years. While many viewed the TDP's exit from the NDA just months ahead of the 2019 elections as too little too late, given the widespread discontent against the alliance for 'betraying' the State, the TDP managed to poll almost 40% of the votes, despite contesting on its own, but won only 23 of the 175 seats in the Assembly. While actor-turned politician Pawan Kalyan's Jana Sena Party (JSP) garnered around 6%, winning one seat, the BJP, that contested on its own in 173 of the 175 seats, drew a blank. The five-cornered contest gave the Yuvajana Sramika Rythu Congress Party, and its leader Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy an impressive 50% vote share and a brute majority of 151 seats in the Assembly.

While the exit of Y.S. Sharmila from the YSRCP — she is Mr. Jagan Mohan Reddy's younger sister — has given the Congress a lifeline in the State, and has become the Chief Minister's Achilles heel, the TDP remains the main opposition. The pre-dawn arrest of Mr. Naidu by Andhra's Crime Investigation Department on September 9, 2023, over corruption allegations in the Andhra Pradesh State Skill Development Corporation case has won the 73-year-old, three-time former Chief Minister considerable sympathy among the State's people. It remains to be seen if the anti-Jagan votes will be split between the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance and the NDA, possibly delivering a win for YSRCP, or if there could be considerable shift in the incumbent's vote base (minorities, Dalits and Backward Castes, who might view Ms. Sharmila as a bearer of the YSR legacy) and give the TDP the advantage in a three-cornered contest.

The Russian presidential election (March 15-17, 2024) is the country's eighth presidential election since the dissolution of the USSR. Vladimir Putin is contesting for a fifth term, also the first time after the 2020 constitutional amendment nullifying his previous terms. He was first elected in 2000 and then re-elected in 2004, 2012 and 2018, with a brief interlude from 2008-2012 when he was the Prime Minister, making his trusted man Dmitry Medvedev the President. Mr. Putin remained the de facto ruler, and it was to avoid the constitutional requirement that forbade the sitting President to seek a third consecutive term.

### No serious opponent, the future

In this election, the outcome of which is a foregone conclusion, given that there is no serious contender in the foray, he will be in power for the next six years. He can be re-elected in 2030 and technically remain in power until 2036. Mr. Putin will contest as an independent candidate in 2024. The other three contenders, Nikolai Kharitonov (in his 70s) of the Russian Communist Party, Leonid Slutsky (in his 50s) of the nationalist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, and Vladislav Davankov (40) of the New People Party, are also in the race. Mr. Kharitonov was a distant second in the 2004 election. All three candidates are considered to be very close to Mr. Putin and have been supportive of the Kremlin's policies, which includes the invasion of Ukraine. In a way, they are puppets in the well-orchestrated drama of the Russian presidential election.

The only serious opposition presidential candidate, Boris Nadezhdin, a critic of the Russian war with Ukraine, was debarred by the Central Election Commission of the Russian Federation. Speaking to CBC News, Mr. Nadezhdin said, "Elections in Russia now are not fair and not free, but I don't know another way to challenge the politics and power in Russia." Another most prominent Putin opponent, Alexei Navalny, died in a high-security Arctic penal colony in February 2024, with his supporters alleging that he had been murdered and that Mr. Putin was behind it. Predictably, the Kremlin refuted this allegation and, interestingly, did not explain what led to Navalny's death.

Then what is the rationale behind such an exercise? What does it say about the Russian political system and political culture? And how will it impact Russian foreign policy, Europe in particular and world politics in general? Abbas Gallyamov, a political scientist and former speech writer for Mr. Putin, has described the election as



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What makes Vladimir Putin tick, in his bid for a fifth term, is his role as arbiter in the political culture of Russia

where "multiple choice is replaced with a simple, dichotomic one: 'Are you for or against Putin?'" And has said that it will be a referendum on the issue of the war and a vote for Putin will become a vote for the war. "The current election will not offer even a semblance of competition to Mr. Putin, much less give a limited stage to any critical opponent as past elections sometimes did. It will not be an election, but a plebiscite on the loyalty to Putin," says Ms. Masha Lipman, a Russian journalist.

In a poll by the Levada Centre (it is known for its reliability) in January 2024, it concluded that mass opinions over the Russia-Ukraine war (Russia calls it special military operations) in favour of Russia remain high. For instance, 85% of Russians approved Mr. Putin's actions; there was 77% approval of the military's actions. Despite the approval ratings, war fatigue is setting in, but it is less than what it is in Ukraine. With the progress of the conflict, the goalposts of the war are also shifting. It started as a war against "Nazism" in Ukraine, but has gradually shifted to a war on the West. But the initial goal is touted as the ultimate objective of the war.

### Why Putin is still popular

The resilience shown by the Russian economy in the face of sustained western sanctions is credited to Mr. Putin's leadership. Scholars have attributed this success to the "Military Keynesianism" of Mr. Putin. The shot-up demand for military hardware in the face of a war of attrition has spurred the growth of the military-industrial complex. This has led to increased military contracts and import substitution in response to sanctions. This has also created a demand for skilled labourers and a support base that has benefited from the war.

The Ukraine war is projected as a western plan to weaken Russia and impose western cultural hegemony over it. Historically, Russia has projected itself as a fortress of liberal-conservative values that trace their origin to the Russian orthodox church. The idea of "Moscow-Third Rome" is one of the Kremlin theological theories and it projected itself as a true representative of conservative Christian values. Liberalism and its value of individualism present a threat to the communitarian and social values of Russia and the preservation of traditional Russian values, being projected as if the West is attacking it.

The common perception that Mr. Putin completely controls the affairs of the Russian state is a half-truth. Mr. Putin is the lynchpin around which Russian politics revolves, but there

is the entrenched control of the Russian elites, and Mr. Putin is the arbiter of different interest groups. These interest groups are made of the bureaucracy, the business elite and local political elites, and their complete loyalty towards Mr. Putin is needed to ensure their survival. They are certainly competing for favour, and it is dependent on loyalty towards Mr. Putin. In a way, there are two social contracts — i.e., one between state and citizen and the other between the state and elites.

### Russian political culture

One probable reason for Mr. Putin's iron fist-like control over the Kremlin is the political culture of Russia. Russians are invariably described as the enablers of their own autocracy. Western accounts portray supporters of democracy as a small minority in Russia, amidst a majority that is supposed to be inclined to authoritarianism. This attitude relates to the Russian history of autocratic regimes, political culture and the absence of a democratic government. In a counter to this cultural determinism, Russian authoritarianism is described by some scholars as circumstantial, a result of the unfortunate coincidence of Russia's Soviet past, democratic opening with institutional disintegration, economic disruption and political uncertainty. A section of scholars believes that Russians are both authoritarian and democratic at the same time, which Levada dubs as "Russian doublethink". Russian scholar Richard Sakwa has rebutted the historicism of these scholars — the past, like facts, is created in the eyes of the beholder. There are many Russian pasts that reflect its European and Asian identities.

Any monocausal explanation for the current state of the Russian political system flies in the face of a nuanced understanding of Russia. As Churchill famously said about Russia, in 1939, it is a "riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma". This is a statement that still holds true, signifying Russia as the intimate 'other' of the West. It amalgamates many elements, some rooted in Russia's culture, history, and precarious geopolitical position. Political leadership does have an important place in all this. Doomsday prophecies of western scholars should be taken with a pinch of salt. The resilience shown by the Russian state in the face of heavy-handed economic sanctions and the efforts on the part of the West to isolate Moscow give Russia a prominent place on the world stage. Russia's efforts to galvanise the support of anti-western countries and expose the double standards of the West seem to be successful.

## Looking to the future on St. Patrick's Day

St. Patrick's Day 2024 in India is especially important. This year we celebrate 75 years of diplomatic relations between Ireland and India. We remember the proud history of Ireland's partnership with India in the struggle we both went through for freedom from colonial oppression. We remember the conversations, exchanges and meetings that took place between our founding fathers and mothers as both countries charted a path towards independence and the creation of proud and modern republics. And, we celebrate the links that have only grown since then, in trade, education and in people-to-people connections.

We realise that, in Ireland, we are fortunate to have a National Day that almost everyone knows. St. Patrick's Day is an opportunity to celebrate Ireland with the more than 70 million people globally who claim Irish ancestry and the many more who show their fondness for Ireland in any number of ways.

### Stand on conflicts

And yet, even the notion of "celebrating" in our world today provokes doubt and hesitation for many people, and for good reason. We have witnessed more than two years of unprovoked Russian brutality in Ukraine. The appalling attack by Hamas on Israel on October 7 last year was stark in its depravity. The killing of tens of thousands of innocent civilians in Gaza in the period since has also been viewed with horror around the world.

Ireland has a clear and principled position on these conflicts. We have demanded accountability, internationally, for Russia's illegal invasion and we are one of the strongest supporters of Ukraine's path to European Union membership. We condemned outright Hamas's terrorist attack in October and we have called at every juncture for all hostages in Gaza to be released unconditionally.

We have also strongly argued, since the early weeks of the conflict, for an upholding of international humanitarian law, a humanitarian



**Kevin Kelly**  
is the Ambassador of Ireland to India

A foundation of 75 years of diplomatic relations apart, Ireland and India can build an even more enduring partnership by tapping young talent

ceasefire and for sustained humanitarian assistance to be provided for the over two million desperate civilians in Gaza. Protecting civilians in conflict — all civilians, everywhere — is our highest priority.

Ireland's own history includes experiences of famine, poverty and forced migration. Even the relative growth and prosperity we have enjoyed since joining the European Union in 1973 co-existed, at least until the 1990s, with conflict very close to home in Northern Ireland. These experiences have, to an obvious degree, shaped how we view the world around us today. And yet, whatever resilience or empathy these experiences can engender within us — even that sense of eventually making our way through the most difficult of times — can be tested for all of us when we read or scroll through news of our world in 2024.

### A young talent pool

And so, it should be no surprise that we look to young people. Young people have been to the fore in opening our eyes to the climate emergency and to the innovative solutions that can reduce our dependence on fossil fuels and deliver a clean energy future. Young people globally have demanded respect for international law and for multilateral institutions, and for key actors such as the United Nations Security Council to speak and act coherently in support of a rules-based order, sustainable development and human rights.

Indeed, it was these priorities that Ireland sought to emphasise in our own most recent term on the Council over 2021-22. During our tenure we sat alongside India and we sought to take a strong and principled stance on the burning issues of the day.

Young people are at the heart of what makes Ireland a great place to invest, trade, visit and study too. Ireland is home for all five of the world's top software companies and 14 of the top 15 medical technology companies globally. Those companies, and very many others, have put

down roots in Ireland because of our economic track record, stability, ease of doing business and access to a European Union market of 450 million people. But they are also in Ireland because of our talent pool, with brilliant globally-connected young people from across the European Union, who are a key part of our dynamic workforce. Ireland is a country where enterprise is valued and young entrepreneurs are supported to bring their products and ideas to international markets. And many of those ideas have blossomed in a world-class Irish university system that attracts thousands of students from around the world because of the safe, welcoming and culturally rich environment on offer in Ireland for young people.

Ireland, like every country, faces plenty of domestic and international challenges on an ongoing basis. But we also recognise how fortunate we are to feature in the top 10 countries in the UN's Human Development Index in recent years and the obligation this places on us as global citizens to be a voice for progress, for peace, for human dignity and for equality for all.

### The Indian link

We hope that this is the experience of the almost 10,000 young Indian boys and girls who go to study in Irish universities every year. And we also trust that the over 80,000 Indians who now live in Ireland feel at home in the Emerald Isle. We certainly appreciate the great contribution they are making to Irish society as leaders in IT, health care and a number of key sectors. They breathe lifeblood into the bilateral relationship of today, as much as our Irish and Indian freedom fighters provided the soul of our partnership in the past.

There is an old Irish saying, "Ar scáth a chéile a mhaireann na Daoine (We live in each other's shadow)". This will remain true for our young people in the world of the years to come. Protecting and supporting each other, and building enduring partnerships, has never been more vital. It is our focus too this St. Patrick's Day (March 17).

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Poll bonds

The corruption among the Opposition parties has almost lost its shock value, thanks to the persistent efforts by investigative agencies and the media in the past decade. In contrast, the ruling party has maintained a clean and corruption-free image almost throughout its tenure. This situation is likely to change with the arrival of the much-awaited "electoral bonds data". As

the top recipient of funds (Page 1, "Poll bonds: 22 firms donated over ₹100 cr., BJP got highest share", March 15) and the inventor of this innovative 'scheme', the BJP cannot get away from its responsibility of offering a rational explanation for how and why it got so much. The media must be unbiased so that voters can make an informed choice.

**A. Venkatasubramanian,**  
Tiruchi, Tamil Nadu

The good aspect is that the bonds are through a proper banking channel and accounted for. The BJP has been the ruling party not only in the Centre but also in several States for the past 10 years. So, there is nothing unusual in the party getting the lion's share of the bonds redeemed. It is very intriguing to note that regional political parties in power in only one State have also received

substantial donations. It is quite interesting to note that none of the prominent corporates in the country is involved.

**S. Parthasarathy,**  
Chennai

The data released by the Election Commission of India, though incomplete, make for some startling revelations, as discovered by data miners. Some of the top 30 donors had been under investigation in the

past. Is there any nexus between these probes and the donations made?

**S.K. Choudhury,**  
Bengaluru

### Simultaneous polls report

The official report on 'one nation one poll' has not surprised many. It ties in with the line of the ruling party, the BJP, in declaring that simultaneous polls are 'good for the health of democracy'. The cause of uninterrupted governance

and less expensive polls are said to be the central themes in support of this idea. But these are not convincing. States and local governance would lose more with such a system. The election process needs to be freed from money power. Maladies in electoral practices cannot be wished away by piece-meal reforms. They need to be addressed comprehensively.

**Dr. D.V.G. Sankara Rao,**  
Vizianagaram, Andhra Pradesh

# GROUND ZERO



Two days after the child went missing, and the police had made no headway in their investigation, the girl's parents and relatives launched a protest. On March 5, the agitation began to snowball and cadres of the Opposition parties joined the protesters. Some protesters at the promenade in Puducherry. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

## The crime that enraged Puducherry

On March 2, a nine-year-old child, who had gone out to play, went missing from her neighbourhood in the Union Territory. Three days later, her body was found in a drain. **Rajesh B. Nair** reports on the crime that brought the residents of the city to the streets, and the agony of the family who knew the accused

*Trigger warning: the following article has references to rape. Please avoid reading if you feel distressed by the subject*

**B**y all accounts, Nithya (name changed to protect identity), 9, was a cheerful child. She studied at a primary school in Puducherry, a coastal city in the Union Territory of the same name, bordering Tamil Nadu in the south. Her father says she enjoyed playing sports and the freedom of walking or cycling along the narrow lanes of her neighbourhood, located at one end of Beach Road, where houses are densely packed together. She would buy biscuits or sweets from small shops. Like many children her age, she was curious.

On March 2, Nithya went out to play. She should have been gone only a short while, but she did not return. Her sister, 11, was the last to see her. Her parents filed a missing complaint.

Two days later, when the police found no leads, her parents hit the streets, along with relatives and residents of the neighbourhood, in protest. They staged a blockade on the arterial Mahatma Gandhi Road, demanding that the police make more of an effort in tracing the child. The protesters dispersed only when the police assured them that they would intensify their search and find the girl soon.

When yet another day passed without any signs of progress in the investigation, the agitation began to snowball. Campaigns seeking justice for the girl began trending on Facebook and X (formerly Twitter). Cadres of Opposition parties, including the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, the Congress, the Left parties, the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi, and the All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, joined the protesters on the morning of March 5. Lieutenant Governor Tamilisai Soundararajan and Home Minister A. Namassivayam, who belongs to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), held meetings with senior police officers to review progress in the case.

The same afternoon, the child's body, with her hands and feet tied, was found in a drain a few metres from her house. The discovery came as a shock to the city. S. Sundhari, a resident of Nithya's neighbourhood, says, "We have heard that such atrocities happen to girls in different parts of India. But we never thought it would happen to a child in our locality."

However, according to data furnished by the Puducherry police, the Union Territory with a population of nearly 14 lakh people recorded 164 cases pertaining to crimes against women last year. Of these, 92 cases were registered under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012; 30 on charges of molestation; and nine on charges of rape.

The day the body was found, the police held two men from Nithya's neighbourhood on charges of kidnapping and murder. The victim's family says they knew the accused. Namassivayam announced that a Special Investigation Team had been constituted under Senior Superintendent of Police Kalaivanan to probe whether more people were involved in the case. Earlier, this week, the post-mortem report revealed that the child had



Karnas even used to buy sweets and ice-cream whenever he saw my child. I had no idea that he had such a beast in him.  
Father of the victim

also been raped.

"Everyone here knows one another," says Sundhari. "Usually, we tell our children to be cautious while mingling with strangers. Now, it is scary that we have to teach them to be wary of people known to them too."

### The day she disappeared

On March 2, at 8 a.m., Nithya's parents left her at home with her sister and went to work. Nithya's mother works at a health centre as a help and her father owns a mini truck which he drives mainly to transport fish from the harbour to various markets. It was Saturday, a non-working day for primary schools. The parents routinely left their daughters at home except on Sundays, when the mother would take the day off.

The police say Nithya stepped out to play soon after. She returned home to eat lunch before leaving the house again. At around 5 p.m., Nithya's mother came home and only found her older daughter. When there was no sign of Nithya for some time, she went around the locality in search of her, gripped by dread. She went with a few relatives to the police station and lodged a complaint. She then called her husband to inform him that their daughter was missing.

"I came home immediately," Nithya's father recalls. "We searched all the areas near our house. Soon, it was night. We thought she may have been kidnapped as there have been reports of child kidnapping cases in recent times."

After registering a case of kidnapping, the police and the girl's relatives combed through the entire area. They navigated their way first through the narrow lanes and then the wider adjacent ones, marked by posh houses, large guest houses, and hanging bougainvillea. They went to the beach, searching for her near stalls and amid the slippery rocks withstanding the force of the waves. The CCTV footage from the area also did not show any signs of Nithya.

"We initially restricted the search to the child's residential area, but there was opposition from the relatives. They strongly believed that the girl had been abducted and taken elsewhere. So, we extended our search beyond Puducherry,"



Protests erupted after the child went missing and there was no immediate headway in the case. Three days after her disappearance, the police found her body. S.S. KUMAR

ry," says a police officer, who was part of the initial investigation.

Three days after the search, the police finally found the partly decomposed body of the child in a drain. The injuries on her body indicated that she had met a brutal end.

### Men known to her

During the days between the time Nithya went missing and her body was found, the police came under some flak. Residents in the neighbourhood felt that the response to the missing complaint had been lukewarm. They wanted the police to cast the net wider, but the investigators seemed keen on searching the neighbourhood first.

Under pressure, the police intensified their investigation and picked up some suspects for questioning. One of them was Karka alias Karnas, 19, a school dropout. Karnas lives with his mother and siblings some 50 metres from Nithya's house.

When he was interrogated, the police say Karnas admitted that he had taken the child to the house of Harikrishnan alias Viveganandan, 56, a dairy farmer, when she was playing. Viveganandan, too, lives a stone's throw away from her house. "He used to give Karnas money to buy alcohol and cannabis," says a neighbour. "Karnas would often go to his house to party."

The accused confessed that they raped and murdered the child and dumped her body in the drain behind Viveganandan's house, according to the police. The confession was corroborated by medical evidence. The post-mortem was conducted at the Jawaharlal Institute of Postgraduate Medical Education and Research in Puducherry.

Based on these statements, the police arrested Karnas and Viveganandan under Section 6(1) of the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012; the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989; and under several sections of the Indian Penal Code including 363 (punishment for kidnapping), 342 (punishment for wrongful confinement), and 302 (punishment for murder). The two men have been remanded to judicial custody and lodged in separate cells at the Central Prison in Kalapet, around 15 kilometres from Puducherry town.

While Karnas stayed put in the locality after allegedly committing the crime, Viveganandan left for Kottakuppam in Villipuram district, about 2 km away. They police say he, too, knew the child. Neither of these men had a criminal past, but both of them were known to get into trouble. Neighbours say Viveganandan was once beaten up by the residents for his "inappropriate behaviour with women." They allege that his wife left him because she was disgusted with his attitude towards women. Karnas, they say, used to fight with his mother for money after getting drunk. He would also smoke cannabis and get into brawls with the residents of the locality.

Nithya's father recalls seeing the two accused spend their evenings at the same place where his daughter's body was recovered. "I have seen Karnas and his friends smoking ganja near the drain. Sometimes, Viveganandan would join them. We warned them several times not to smoke and drink in public places," he says.

While political parties and residents link the crime to substance abuse, the police say there is no evidence. "We can't say the murder is directly linked to drug addiction and alcoholism. But when Karnas was arrested, he was high. It took him hours to get sober," says a police officer.

The Director General of Police, B. Srinivas, says the police are making efforts to prevent the sale of drugs. So far, they have focussed on cracking down on the supply chain and on sources from other States. There is no organised drug cartel operating from Puducherry, he adds.

"Drug addiction is a social menace which has to be prevented through awareness. While strong enforcement is the responsibility of the police, it is also necessary that various sections of society and government departments come together to create awareness," he adds, in officialese.

Srinivas says the police will file the charge sheet in 5-6 weeks. The government has also decided to approach the district court to fast-track the trial once the charge sheet is submitted.

Former Lieutenant Governor of Puducherry Kiran Bedi believes that the Puducherry government should not allow more liquor outlets and should reduce its dependence on revenue from liquor. "There is also need for better rehabilitation centres, including in prisons," she says.

### Educating the child

Following the incident, the people of Puducherry have questioned the effectiveness of policing, especially the weakness of the 'beat system'. Under this system, every constable is assigned an area and is mandated to frequently visit it to learn about the issues that the people face.

"In recent times, we have seen a weakening of the beat system. We don't see anyone patrolling these areas. Senior officers do not conduct field visits. If senior officers did that, inspectors and the constabulary would be on their toes," says Raghu Chandran, a resident.

But Assistant Professor of Criminology at Rashtriya Raksha University, Puducherry Campus, Shivalaxmi Arumugham, says this is not a viable solution. "Although the police do instil fear among the people, we cannot have them around at all times. Community or public vigilance is also important. And any suspicious activity should be reported immediately," she says.

Her colleague, Nethaji Subash, adds that only a collaborative exercise will enhance public safety.



Offenders are often from the family or the neighbourhood. Educating children is important. They should know that they can report anything that makes them uncomfortable.

**SHIVALAXMI ARUMUGHAM**  
Assistant Professor of Criminology at Rashtriya Raksha University, Puducherry Campus

"It will also lead to a better relationship between the police and community," he says. "Regular meetings between the police and the residents would help create awareness about crimes and also help people identify potential offenders."

Arumugham adds that it is important for people to know that those who abuse children are often known to them. "These offenders are often from the family or the neighbourhood. Educating children is important. They should know that they can report anything that makes them uncomfortable. Education is also important for parents. If they see behavioural changes in their child, they should speak to the child. This way, we can prevent atrocities," she says.

In any society, children should be able to play outside or roam around without fear, says child rights activist Vidya Ramkumar. "It is the child's right to play or roam around alone or with friends in the neighbourhood. This is important for the child's development. But adult supervision is definitely required," she says.

Before Nithya was cremated, Chief Minister N. Ranganatham announced a compensation of ₹20 lakh to the family. Representatives of the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes visited them with a cheque of ₹7.12 lakh. A delegation of the BJP, led by party in-charge for the Union Territory, Nirmal Kumar Surana, went to the victim's house on March 14 and gave the family compensation of ₹5 lakh.

Money cannot take away from the family's grief, though. Nithya's father recalls how he saw Karnas even when he was searching for his daughter on March 2. "He was near my house," he says, shaking with anger. "He even used to buy sweets and ice-cream whenever he saw my child. I had no idea that he had such a beast in him."

# ANDHRA PRADESH



A group of residents of ST Colony on Simhachalam Hills in Visakhapatnam engaged in conversation; and the dilapidated colony standing in stark contrast to the grand Sri Varaha Lakshmi Narasimha Swamy Temple, located barely 100 metres away. K.R. DEEPAK

## When temple PRASAD leaves a bitter aftertaste

The Simhachalam Temple's grand expansion has cast a shadow over the local hamlet that houses 70 families of the Konda Dora tribe. Temple officials embarked on a relocation mission in 2003 under the Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual Augmentation Drive, shifting 60% residents out of the hamlet. Those who put their foot down and stayed back continue to fight for basic amenities, finds **V. Kamalakara Rao**

**I**n a chilly January afternoon, thick plumes of smoke billowing from a secluded spot on the Simhachalam hills in Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh, caught the attention of onlookers. Initially thought to be routine burning of firewood by the local tribal population during winter, the source of the smoke later turned out to be the cremation ceremony of a 55-year-old tribal woman, Chodipilli Varalamma.

Varalamma, who had fallen ill in the first week of January this year, succumbed while undergoing treatment at a nearby hospital a few days later. Overcome with sorrow, her family, including her son Bhairava, faced a daunting task in ensuring a dignified farewell. Unable to enter the usual burial ground, the grieving family ultimately laid Varalamma to rest in the middle of a narrow road leading to the common graveyard.

The management of Sri Varaha Lakshmi Narasimha Swamy Temple, popularly known as the Simhachalam Temple, has allegedly acquired a portion of the burial ground as part of its expansion project. Temple authorities have sealed off the area, denying tribals access to the cremation ground.

### The stark contrast

Dedicated to Lord Narasimha, the fourth incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu, depicted as half-man, half-lion, this temple holds great religious importance and is among the oldest in the country.

According to the tribals, the temple management has not only tried to grab the burial ground but also their hamlet, known locally as ST Colony, or Scheduled Tribe Colony, named after their legal status given by India's Constitution. This settlement, home to about 250 people from 70 families of the Konda Dora tribe, has existed for centuries, they say.

Situated approximately 100 metres from the main entrance of the temple, the hamlet falls within the jurisdiction of Simhachalam village in Advavaram gram panchayat of Visakhapatnam Rural mandal. It is topographically part of Visakhapatnam city, which Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy plans to make the State's executive capital. However, despite the hamlet's vast history and importance, the tribal residents find themselves cramped out, their tranquillity disturbed.

Temple officials state that attempts to relocate the tribals began in 2003 under the Centre-sponsored scheme, PRASAD (Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual Augmentation Drive), aimed at temple development. As part of the initiative, 193 families in the hamlet were identified for relocation to the Gosala area at the bottom of the hill. Although 60% of them were moved, the remaining continue to hold onto their roots but at a price — they are struggling with civic and other issues. They express a profound sense of isolation,

**Q** We get seasonal fevers, but we don't worry about it. Our body has adapted to the climate here. The only problem is the lack of amenities.

**KUNDI PRASAD**,  
Sweeping supervisor of Simhachalam temple

lacking essential amenities like electricity, drainage systems, and government services. During temple events, their area is completely sealed with sidewalls in a bid to conceal them and their challenging living conditions from visitors, especially VVIPs, they say.

"The temple is literally next door. We can hear and see every activity in the temple like Suprabhatam, the first ritual to wake up the Lord. The temple is decorated with flowers for every occasion and vibrantly illuminated. But our hamlet which is next to the temple is always in the dark. We did not want to leave during the relocation drive due to our love for the Lord and attachment to our place, but we didn't expect such bitter circumstances," says J. Devudamma, a tribal resident of Simhachalam.

The hamlet is perennially littered with garbage and silt, resulting in malodorous streets. In a nutshell, the settlement stands in sharp contrast to the delightful fragrance permeating the temple area.

### The original settlers

Delving into the history, K.V. Narasimham, a resident of the ST Colony who works as a home-guard in the Police department, says his ancestors originally resided on the same hill in the Chintapaka area near the Madhava Swamy temple, a small structure on the same hill, about 500 metres from the ST Colony. His ancestors were brought to the temple to serve as security personnel, he says.

"That's how they decided to settle here. The elders used to collect forest produce from the hills and sell it on the temple ghat roads in those days, but now our people are doing menial jobs as sweepers and sanitation workers at the temple, or selling flowers to visitors," he adds.

However, some others, including former sarpanch Pasaarla Prasad, contend that the hamlet belonged to the hill tribes, who were the initial inhabitants. Subsequently, as the temple developed and roads were laid, people started going up the hill to worship the Simhachalam temple



deity. According to them, the tribe called Boyina Durgadu stumbled upon the temple and started worship.

The Simhachalam hills, where the hamlet is situated, serves as a natural barrier, safeguarding the city from calamities like cyclones. Located on the west side of the core city, this geographic feature attracts environmentalists and ornithologists for activities such as bird watching and trekking. Despite the temple's widespread fame, the tribal village adjacent to it remains unknown to the world.

"People here prefer to be isolated from the modern world. Only one girl from here has completed her post-graduation and a few others are graduates. Some still live in mud houses, depend on mud-stoves and firewood for cooking," says Narasimham.

The hamlet has 50 houses. Typically, two or three families share a single house since only a few have metered electricity connections. Every Thursday, the residents visit the weekly market at the foot of the hill to buy groceries.

Men here maintain familial ties in Narsipatnam, Kotavuratla, Chodavaram, Devarapalli, Koonam, Madugula, and Paderu tribal regions of the erstwhile Visakhapatnam district. While young women often seek grooms in those areas and settle there, the men usually find local girls to marry. Outsiders are hesitant to marry brides to the men here, citing the hamlet's poor infrastructure such as damaged houses and roads.

### Slip between the cup and lip

Under the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) scheme, attempts were made to get 77 houses sanctioned for the residents. Beneficiaries were identified in 2008 during Mukesh Kumar Meena's tenure as commissioner of Greater Visakhapatnam Municipal Corporation (GVMC), says P. Vasantha Kalyani, who was corporator of 72nd ward then.

"The process was abruptly halted after officials found out that the temple authorities had already arranged for houses for the tribals as part of the relocation drive under the PRASAD scheme," she explains.

During the monsoon, the houses and stairways become narrower due to mud accumula-

tion from the hill. The slope allows rainwater to enter their settlement, leaving them miserable. Those without access to water and other basic facilities resort to collecting water from streams and gathering firewood for cooking. The hamlet is also prone to snake encounters due to the densely forested hills.

"We get seasonal fevers, but we don't worry about it. It is because our body has adapted to the climatic conditions here. The only problem is the lack of infrastructure," says Kundi Prasad, 50, who works as the sweeping supervisor of the temple on a contractual basis.

Communist Party of India (Marxist) leader T.V. Krishnamraju, who is advocating for tribal rights, says the temple authorities have built some houses on the hill and spent crores of rupees in the name of cottages, which remain unused. He suggests repurposing the structures for tribal housing with minor repairs or renovation.

### Property rights

He points out that the GVMC appears to have stopped collecting house tax from tribals here, raising concerns about their property rights. "Payment of taxes is the proof of ownership of properties. But, as tax is not collected, people are worried about their rights on the hamlet here," Krishnamraju asserts.

The issue of tax collection has been brought to the notice of the current GVMC corporator (98th ward) Pisini Varaha Narasimha, who promises to address it with the officials concerned. "If this is true, it will be brought to the notice of GVMC officials and justice will be given to the people. However, shifting the tribals from there is completely the lookout of the temple management," he explains.

Executive Officer of the Simhachalam Devasathanam, S. Srinivasa Murthy clarifies that there is currently no directive to evict the ST Colony residents: "There has been no progress on the previous proposals of evacuation of the tribals in the hamlet. It is true that his predecessors had requested to shift them from the present place to another area for the temple development under the PRASAD scheme, but now, there is no movement in that proposal. However, we are willing to listen to them."

Sources say the reluctance to disturb the residents stems from their adaptation to living conditions and the climate, making them well-suited for temple security. Expressing frustration, a tribal resident, requesting anonymity, says, "Let them relocate us to a place with proper facilities or ensure essential services where we are right now. But first, they should stop treating us as lesser mortals."



# HARYANA



Drone operator Kavita Dhull in Rohtak, Haryana. R.V. MOORTHY

## The long, bumpy road from 'drone didis' to 'lakhpati didis'

Fertiliser companies have taken the lead in facilitating and funding the first leg of a Central government programme that will train 1,000 women to own and operate drones for spraying pesticides. **Maitri Porecha** reports from Haryana, on the initial challenges of the scheme for women's entrepreneurship

**A** month before farmers began their protest along the Punjab-Haryana border, with the police dropping tear gas shells from drone-based launchers, Ram Raji, 36, had been issued a drone and an electric autorickshaw by a fertilizer company. Raji and several women like her were to spray liquid pesticide over the ripening wheat crop. But when the protests broke out, the drone operator from Qila Zafargarh village in Haryana's Jind district was disappointed.

"There was a 12-day Internet shutdown in the districts bordering Punjab and Haryana, including Jind. While working in the fields, I need an Internet connection for the GPS signal connecting to the drone," she explains, standing in front of a field of wheat, and locking an acre to be sprayed on her remote control. February is a crucial month for spraying nano urea over the wheat crop, right before it flowers, and now, farmers feel it's too late, Raji says. Each workday lost also means a loss of income.

Raji is one of the initial 1,000 drone *didis* selected by fertilizer companies from across India to be trained under the Central government's Namu Drone Didi scheme to fly agricultural drones that will spray fertilizers over crops. Armed with a pilot's licence from the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA), they are meant to be seen as changemakers.

In November last year, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the decision to engage 15,000 women from rural self-help groups (SHGs), at an outlay of ₹1,261 crore, to cover the cost of drones and battery sets. This amount has not yet been spent, says a Central government official working closely with the scheme.

Over two months after the announcement, PM Modi interacted with the first 1,000 drone *didis* on March 11. However, officials say exact modalities and the future road map are still unclear. "The government has planned for another 6,000 drone *didis* to be trained in 2024-25, and another 8,000 in 2025-26," the official says.

### Costs to companies

The official adds that the cost of training the first batch of drone *didis*, equipping them with the drone and its components (four battery sets, a generator), and an electric autorickshaw is being borne by fertilizer companies like Indian Farmers Fertiliser Cooperative Limited (IFFCO) and Coromandel International Limited (CIL).

"IFFCO is supporting training and supply of equipment worth ₹42 crore at the rate of ₹14 lakh per woman, including the electric autorickshaw for 300 drone *didis*, while CIL is supporting another 200," the official adds. IFFCO has cited this expense as "benefits to farmers" in its books.

Among other companies that have assured a joint supply of 500 additional drones are Krishak Bharati Cooperative (KRIBHCO), Indian Potash Limited (IPL), Matix, Indorama India Private Limited, Brahmaputra Valley Fertilizer Corporation Limited, and the public-sector National Fertilizers Limited.

"The cost for each set of equipment (including a drone, four battery sets, a generator; excluding the electric autorickshaw) is ₹10 lakh, of which the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare has agreed to fund up to ₹8 lakh, while ₹2 lakh will have to be arranged by the SHG," says the of-

There was a 12-day Internet shutdown [during the farmers' protest] in the districts bordering Punjab and Haryana including Jind. While working in the fields, I need an Internet connection for the GPS signal connecting to the drone

RAM RAJI  
Drone didi

ficial, referring to the drone *didis* who will be trained after the first batch.

### Influencer marketing

The Haryana government will foot the bill for the service provided by the drone *didis*, promising them ₹400 for every acre sprayed. No other State has offered this. "In Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana, farmers must spend their own money for spraying," the Central government official says.

Raji was given a target of 257 acres in Julana block over two months. Her counterpart, Kavita Dhull, 35, in Rohtak district, had a target of 800 acres, of the 4,000 acres to be covered exclusively by drone *didis* out of the total two lakh acres.

However, in 40 days of work, between January 14 and February 25, Raji has been able to cover only 180 acres, averaging 4.5 acres per day, where she was supposed to cover six to eight acres every day. She is helped by her brother-in-law, who drives the electric autorickshaw and assists her in operating the drone. "We are incurring EV charging costs and labour costs and are spending from our own pockets. We hope the promised reimbursement comes through in March," Raji says.

The Drone Didi project is a subset of the Centre's Lakhpati Didi programme, for women from SHGs to earn an annual household income of ₹1 lakh. The aim is for the women to be influencers at home and in their communities, shifting the focus from social and financial inclusion to entrepreneurial success. The Prime Minister, through his Sunday radio broadcast, *Mann Ki Baat*, often refers to 'lakhpati didis'. The term also found mention in Finance Minister Nir-mala Sitharaman's Budget speech this year, and appears in government advertisements.

### Farmer trials

To encourage farmers to apply to get their crops sprayed via drones, Haryana's Agriculture Department, along with fertilizer companies, announced enrolment through the online portal, Meri Fasal Mera Byora. Farmers would also get a

1-litre nano urea bottle at ₹100, instead of the ₹225 marked on the bottle, and a drone *didi* would visit the fields for spraying. One bottle, mixed in 10 litres of water, serves an acre.

Kuldip Singh Hooda, 40, is among a minority of 1,000-odd farmers in Dhamar village, Rohtak district, who has a substantial landholding of 15 acres. Most others own land between two and four acres. "I had registered to get 15 acres sprayed. However, the drone *didi* who came sprayed six acres and said she didn't have the time to do the rest. No one came again to spray the other nine acres," he says.

Farmers in Haryana had a difficult 2023. Their rice crops were destroyed due to heavier than usual rain during the monsoon, between July and August. "Half our annual income has been washed away," says Manjit Hooda, another farmer from Dhamar village. Manjit says he had tried registering on the portal, but his application did not go through; no one contacted him either.

For farmers to avail themselves of the subsidy, their farm will have to fall under the earmarked acreage allotted to drone *didis*, or else they will have to shell out ₹400 per acre. Many who are debt-ridden or those with small landholdings prefer to do the job manually, themselves or through less-expensive hired labour.

Traditionally, farmers procure granular urea in sacks, each sack of 50 kg at a subsidised rate of ₹268. Labour costs for manual application is between ₹80 and ₹100 per acre, making the cost of fertilizer purchase and application no more than ₹368 per acre. If they choose to use the water-based medicine through spray cans, the application is still ₹200 per acre, half of what the drone *didi* charge. "Drones then will only be useful on large plantations like that of coffee, tea, or sugarcane, to make it cost-effective," the government official says.

"A big landowner can afford drones, but there are only five to 10 such rich farmers in the village," says Harinder Singh, in his mid-40s, who owns two acres and farms on another 17 acres leased out from

another landowner. "I don't have enough money to build my own house, buy a tractor, or send my children to a good school. What use are drones for me?" he says.

### The women's challenges

Dhull makes her way down a bumpy *kuccha* road of Dhamar village along with her assistant, who drives the electric autorickshaw, and then helps her unload the heavy metal box that contains the 25-kg drone.

"I cannot venture into the fields alone, because of safety concerns. I need a helper who can drive the EV. The vehicle does not easily reverse, and has even toppled over. The drone weighs nearly 30 kg after being loaded with fertilizer and water. It takes two people to lug it around," Dhull says. She pays her assistant ₹15,000 a month. "There is no provision for helpers in the scheme," she says.

As soon as she covers three acres, she exhausts one charged battery set needed to fire up the drone. She simultaneously charges another set in her EV to cover more ground. Dhull ends up charging four battery sets each day to finish her day's work on the field. "I spend nearly ₹500 to ₹600 each day on fuel to run the generator that charges the battery sets." She isn't sure how the job will work out economically in the long run.

On paper though, the earnings are large: if each drone *didi* covers 20 acres a day for 200 days, her earnings, at ₹300 to ₹400 per acre, will be ₹12-₹16 lakh per year.

### Push for pesticide

India uses 3.5 lakh metric tonnes (MT), or 65 crore bags, of granular urea annually, of which 2.95 lakh MT is met with domestic production, while the remainder is imported. The Central government then extends ₹2.45 lakh crore in subsidy to make granular urea bags affordable for farmers. Only 7.42 crore bottles of liquid nano urea have been manufactured in the last two years. Manufacturing liquid nano urea costs ₹225 per bottle, while granular urea costs ₹2,000.

"Our vision is to augment the capacity of nano urea production to 48.5 crore bottles annually by 2026-27, so that we can reduce our dependence on the import of expensive granular urea," the government official explains. However, liquid nano urea (which is sprayed by drones or by the knapsack method) cannot completely replace traditional granular urea, as farms need fertilizers thrice in every crop cycle. Liquid can be sprayed only once, as only granular urea is effective at the sowing stage, and a fertilizer can only be used at the roots once the flowering begins, they add.

Many questions remain to be answered. "For instance, who will have the ownership of the drone? Will it be with the individual, the SHG she belongs to, the village organisation (VO) under which the SHG comes, or the cluster level federation (CLF) that consists of many village organisations?" says a source working in the Namu Drone Didi implementation committee. Again, there isn't clarity around future earnings. Will the money be the woman's or will some of it flow to the SHG, VO, or CLF?

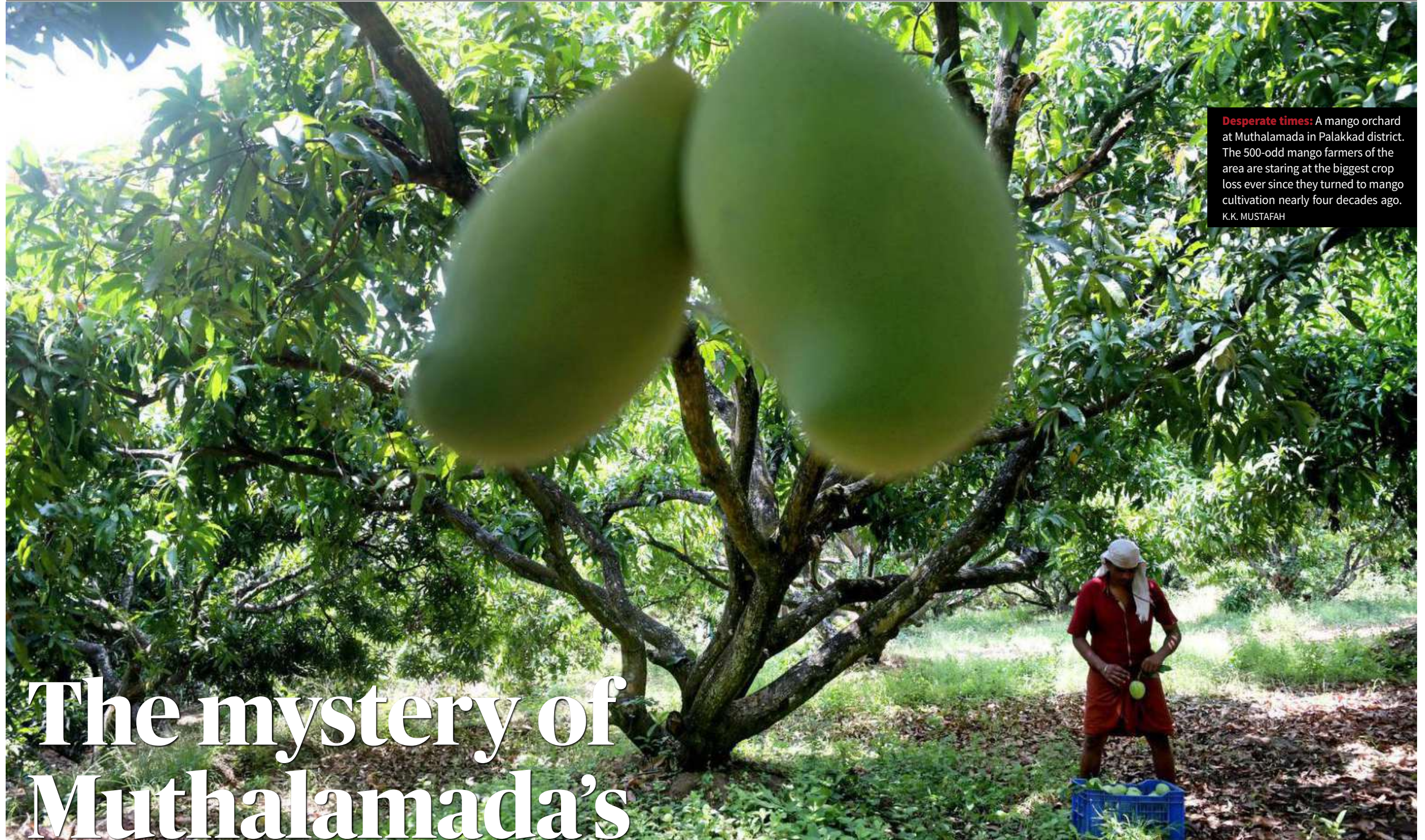
Last year, the Agriculture Ministry had floated a proposal for procuring 300 drones under Krishi Vigyan Kendras (KVKs), centres attached to agricultural universities that conduct research. "While some KVKs are using drones, others are not. Before announcing another drone-related scheme, it would have been important to understand the learnings of KVKs while using drones," an official from the Agriculture Ministry added. "Also, farmers are free to buy their own drones, so imagine if a few farmers band together to buy their drone, it will eat into the business of drone *didis*," the official adds.

Meanwhile, Dhull has sprayed nearly 600 acres in Rohtak, and is now waiting for her money to be reimbursed by the Haryana government for her services. Now that the wheat is flowering, there is a lull in work for two months. "Let's see when we will get paid," she says.



Drone operator Ram Raji at Qila Zafargarh village, Jind district, Haryana. R.V. MOORTHY

## KERALA



**Desperate times:** A mango orchard at Muthalamada in Palakkad district. The 500-odd mango farmers of the area are staring at the biggest crop loss ever since they turned to mango cultivation nearly four decades ago.  
K.K. MUSTAFAH

# The mystery of Muthalamada's shrinking mangoes

Erratic weather, insects, and harsh pesticides have all led to crop failure over the past five years in the hilly area of Palakkad district. **Abdul Lateef Naha** meets the farmers to understand what is at stake and their expectations of the government

**"I**t is like our lives, deprived and desolate," mumbles K. Ashiq, a mango farmer in his mid-20s at Muthalamada in Palakkad district, Kerala, as he runs his fingers through a bunch of fallen mango buds in his orchard. His voice carries the angst and despair of the 500-odd mango farmers of the area known as Kerala's 'mango city', as they are staring at the biggest crop loss ever since they turned to mango cultivation nearly four decades ago.

In this hilly, dry land bordering Tamil Nadu, Ashiq has taken 2,000 mango trees across 40 acres on lease for the past decade. Crop loss has become a regular feature since 2018 – the adverse impact of unpredictable weather changes. Last year, the showers Muthalamada got in November and December dashed the expectations of farmers, who own or lease anything between two and 500 acres of land. The loss is so heavy that the farmers say they will be happy to get 15% yield in the current season.

The weather in Kerala has been erratic since the floods of 2018, which saw large-scale devastation and deaths across the State. Rains became untimely and summers, hotter in the past six years. This time around, unseasonal rain in the flowering time of the fruit played spoilsport.

More than two-thirds of the 40,000-tonne yearly produce of mangoes from Muthalamada that ripen by January and February, the earliest variety of the season, reach the wholesale markets of Delhi, Mumbai, and Ahmedabad, the largest mango markets in the country.

## Early harvesting has mangoes in demand

In Muthalamada, where the hot weather is ideal for mango, with temperatures going up to 40°C when it is winter in most of north India, flowering begins in November and mangoes are exported well ahead of harvesting in the other regions in the country. "It is this early harvesting that makes Muthalamada mangoes much in demand in the North," says J.M. Hafees, a mango exporter.

Muthalamada and its neighbouring villages – Elavanchery, Kollangode, Perumatti, Pattancheri, Vadakarapathy, Eruthempathy, Kozhinjampara, and Nallepilli – are all in the rain shadow, and mango-producing. Ten wards of Muthalamada panchayat alone have more than 4,000 hectares of orchards, and 90% of them lie to the south of the Pollachi-Vadakkanchery road. This is about 80% more than the other mango-producing villages.

A. Shaik Musthafa, a farmer-cum-trader, who has been in the business for 14 years, says it is the worst-ever season. "We used to get up to 15 tonnes of mangoes from an acre. Now I am afraid

**“**We used to get up to 15 tonnes of mangoes from an acre. Now I am afraid I won't get even 300 kg from an acre this season.  
**A. SHAIK MUSTHAF**  
Farmer-cum-trader

I won't get even 300 kg from an acre," he says. Musthafa's annual returns from the plantation used to be about ₹5 crore, but he looks at a ball-park figure of ₹1 crore this season. According to the Mango Farmers and Merchants Welfare Association, mangoes in Muthalamada meant business worth ₹5,000 crore annually. This year, the farmers feel collective business will only come to about ₹500 crore.

Muthalamada produces a wide variety of mangoes such as Alphonso, Banganapalli, Sindhooram, Totapuri or Kilimooku or Kilichundan, Kalapadi, Mallika, Naduselai, Neelam, Rumani, Malgoa, and Gudadath. However, Alphonso continues to be the leader, bringing two to three times the price of other varieties. Banganapalli, Sindhooram and Totapuri are the key varieties covering two-thirds of the total crop.

However, over the years there has been a dip in the quality and size of the mangoes. If three or four Sindhooram mangoes made up a kilo earlier, it takes up to six mangoes now, says Ashiq. Sindhooram, a variety grown in south India that has a sweet-tangy taste, was not in demand earlier, but has seen an increase in uptake up north over the past six years, says Ashiq.

## Combatting insect attacks

Besides variable weather, massive attacks by pests and insects have scythed the fortunes of Muthalamada. As the attacks increased, there has been a concurrent increase in the use of pesticides, sometimes harsher ones, often beyond the permitted limits, as some of the farmers ad-

mit. Trees are flowering unevenly, forcing them to apply the chemicals in parts.

"We are turning to the chemicals knowing well that they are deadly. But we have little choice. Pesticides are a must for our survival," Ashiq says.

Farmer-activist V.P. Nijamudheen says the banned pesticides include the dreaded endosulfan, linked to birth abnormalities in the village population close to the cashew plantations in Kasaragod district. These pesticides are illegally produced and smuggled in unlabelled containers from other States and are sprayed in secret. The use of endosulfan was prevalent at Muthalamada until it was banned by the Supreme Court in 2011. Although Kerala had banned endosulfan in 2005, it was available in other States until the Supreme Court imposed a pan-India ban. Some veteran farmers say that there's still no pesticide as effective as endosulfan.

The farmers agree that pesticide companies have made handsome profits from Muthalamada. A pesticide dealer, on condition of anonymity, says that the number of chemicals he sells in Muthalamada has increased manifold over the past four to five years.

Many have been luring farmers by offering attractive credits. Farmers turn to those companies as they find no help from the Agriculture department.

"The department has failed the farmers. There hasn't been any effective intervention from the department. Nothing will happen even if the Krishi Bhavans [agricultural offices] are shut down for a year. They have become irrelevant," says V. Mohan Kumar, general secretary of the Mango Farmers and Merchants Welfare Association (MFMWA) at Muthalamada.

"We have been able to control the spread of the COVID-19 virus. But I fail to understand how we have not learnt to control some visible pests, including thrips. That's the failure of our Agriculture department," he says vehemently.

But Deputy Director of Horticulture Nizam S.A. says the department has been doing its best to help the farmers. "Scientists have identified mainly two types of pests in Muthalamada – planthoppers and thrips. They have found a solution to the issue, and trials are currently on in Muthalamada," says Nizam. He says a project to help the farmers export their produce to foreign countries by doing away with middlemen is on the anvil. "It can fetch a minimum 30% extra income for the farmers."

Although scientists and researchers from Kerala Agricultural University, Mannuthy, conducted

several studies, they have failed to win the confidence of farmers. The dozen-odd orchards chosen by the scientists for their study in Muthalamada about two years ago still sport their boards.

"The farmers don't trust anyone. That's perhaps why only 15 of them turned up when the Agriculture department convened a seminar here the other day," says Nijamudheen. He is peeved that the department has always ignored the farmers' demands. "Mango is still not considered an agricultural crop, and the farmers get no subsidy or compensation for crop loss," Nijamudheen says.

The farmers' demand to appoint a special officer for Muthalamada has fallen on deaf ears, and the government's promises of setting up a mango hub at Muthalamada has not been fulfilled. "It is the change in weather pattern that has upset Muthalamada. We are helpless about the untimely rains. Erratic weather has upset the flowering of trees," says Nizam.

According to Berin Pathrose, entomologist from the College of Agriculture, Vellanikkara, who studied the thrips attack at Muthalamada a few years ago, a holistic approach is needed to address the crisis. "Excessive application of pesticides can kill the natural enemy population of pests. An integrated pest management approach is needed for Muthalamada," he says. He attributes the abnormal flowering of mango trees in the past five years to an increase in the presence of thrips.

Abraham Thomas, a scientist who studied the pest attacks of Muthalamada about 10 years ago, suggests that the farmers install pheromone pest traps. Although 10,000 such traps were arranged for distribution, the idea did not find traction and farmers continued to increasingly fall back on the assurances of pesticide manufacturers. "We still don't know how thrips came here. We never had that menace until five years ago. We even suspect that it came through some chemical," says Shaik Musthafa.

Farmers agree that mindless application of plant growth enhancers such as cultar, too, has contributed to the crop fall. If applied excessively and carelessly, cultar can destroy mango trees. A plantation near Chulliyar Dam recently withered away due to careless hormonal application, says Nijamudheen. Some farmers who take the plantations on lease resort to cultar application secretly as plantation owners oppose it.

## Muthalamada in limelight

Locals say that Muthalamada shot to fame as a mango country thanks to a fruit trader from Palakkad named Abdul Azeez. "We remember him whenever we talk of mangoes," says Nijamudheen. Equipped with the knowledge he acquired from other States as a trader, Azeez bought a dozen-odd acres at Muthalamada and planted budded mango saplings in the eighties. In five years, he started getting a good yield. Although many others followed Azeez's path, some failed.

Some farmers have mortgaged their orchards to the traders who control the wholesale markets in north India. This is a trap some of them have walked into, says Nijamudheen. "Muthalamada is silent now, like a funeral home," says Mohan Kumar.

Every February and March, the 100-odd sheds in the Kamprath Challa area in Muthalamada would bustle with farmers, agents, and traders. When crates of mangoes would flow into the sheds from the orchards during the day, workers would be busy packing them at night. It would be a festive season for Muthalamada. But today, the mango sheds are almost deserted. And the farmers are despondent.



Workers cleaning mango at a stockyard at Muthalamada. K.K. MUSTAFAH

**RAMALLAH**

**Palestinian leader names adviser Mohammed Mustafa as PM**



Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas has appointed Mohammed Mustafa, a long-trusted adviser on economic affairs, as Prime Minister on Thursday. Mr. Mustafa's appointment comes less than three weeks after his predecessor, Mohammed Shtayeh, resigned, citing the need for change after the Gaza war began. AFP

**BRUSSELS**

**EU set to impose sanctions on 'violent' Israeli settlers, Hamas**



EU countries reached a preliminary agreement to impose sanctions on "violent" Israeli settlers in the West Bank, and on Hamas for sexual violence during the October 7 attack. A top EU official said he expected Foreign Ministers from the bloc's 27 member states to support the moves at a meeting in Brussels on Monday. AFP

**TOKYO**

**Japan's ruling coalition agrees to allow export of fighter jets**



Japan's ruling coalition agreed on Friday to allow the export of next-generation fighter jets being developed with Britain and Italy, relaxing Tokyo's strict transfer rules for military equipment. Japan and the two countries signed a treaty in December to co-develop the fighter jet they hope will take to the skies by 2035. AFP

**WASHINGTON**

**U.S. sanctions India-based firm along with Panama-flagged tanker**



The United States imposed "counter terrorism" sanctions on Friday, with the designations targeting one India-based company called Vishnu Inc and a Panama-flagged oil tanker named Lady Sofia, the U.S. Treasury Department website showed. It said the vessel belonged to Vishnu Inc registered in the Marshall Islands. REUTERS

**Netanyahu approves plan for Army operation in Gaza's packed Rafah**

Rafah is the last major population centre yet to come under Israel attack; U.S. President Biden has said an Israeli invasion without civilian protection plans would be a 'red line'; Blinken has also asked for a clear strategy to ensure civilian safety

**Agence France-Presse**  
JERUSALEM

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office said on Friday he had approved the military's plan for an operation in Rafah, where most of war-battered Gaza's population has sought refuge.

Mr. Netanyahu "approved the plans for action in Rafah," his office said in a statement, without giving details or a timeline.

The statement said the military was "prepared for the operational side and for the evacuation of the population".



**Seeking shelter:** Palestinians, who fled north Gaza for the south, pass through the central Gaza Strip on Friday. REUTERS

Rafah is the last major population centre yet to be subjected to a ground assault during Israel's war against Hamas in Gaza,

which was triggered by the militants' unprecedented attack on southern Israel on October 7. The attack resulted in

the deaths of about 1,160 people, mostly civilians.

Israel's retaliatory military campaign to eliminate Hamas has killed at least 31,490 people, mostly women and children.

U.S. President Joe Biden, who has supported Israel during the war, has said an Israeli invasion of Rafah would be a "red line" without civilian protection plans in place.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said during a visit to Vienna on Friday that Washington had not seen any plans for a Rafah operation, but reiterated that it wants a "clear and implementable plan"

to ensure civilians are "out of harm's way".

The office of Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas "expressed deep concern over an imminent Israeli military offensive in Rafah, which could result in a new massacre and further displacement of the Palestinian people in Gaza," the official Wafa news agency reported.

Meanwhile, Gaza's Hamas-run Health Ministry said on Friday that Israeli fire killed 20 persons and wounded 155 waiting to receive desperately needed aid in the besieged territory, but Israel said the reports were "erroneous".

**Russian missiles kill at least 16 in latest strike on Odesa**

**Associated Press**  
KYIV

A Russian missile attack blasted homes in the southern Ukrainian city of Odesa on Friday, followed by a second missile that targeted first responders who arrived at the scene, officials said. At least 16 persons were killed.

The dead included a paramedic and an emergency service worker. At least 53 other people were wounded, officials said.

At least 10 houses in Odesa and some emergency service equipment were damaged in the strike, which started a blaze.

The tactic of firing a second missile at the same location, aiming to hit res-

**Putin says Ukraine organised attacks on poll booths in Russia as presidential elections are on**

**Reuters**  
GENEVA

A United Nations commission of inquiry on Ukraine said on Friday that it had gathered more evidence that Russia has systematically tortured Ukrainian prisoners of war, documenting rape threats and the use of electric shocks on genitals.

The three-member Commission of Inquiry headed by Erik Møse said the scale of such torture cases may amount to the most serious abuses known as crimes against humanity. The report has been submitted to the 47-member UN Human Rights Council in Geneva.

**Moscow used torture in Ukraine war, says UN panel**

**Locals, experts raise concern over Adani wind project in Sri Lanka**

**Meera Srinivasan**  
COLOMBO

A wind power project being executed by Adani Green Energy in northern Sri Lanka has run into controversy, with locals and environmentalists raising concern over its possible impact on the coastal region and livelihoods.

In February last year, Sri Lanka's Board of Investment cleared the company's \$442-million project at two wind energy-rich sites in the island's Northern Province.

"The project expects to add 250 MW in Mannar and 234 MW in Pooneryn to the national grid," Sri Lanka's Minister for Power and Energy Kanchana Wijesekera said on social media platform 'X' on Thursday, following a discussion with Adani Green's executive director Sagar Adani on a power purchasing agreement that is yet to be finalised.

The Sri Lankan government aims to meet the country's growing energy demands with 70% renewable energy by 2030. The ambitious target will require investments totalling over \$11.5 billion, according to official estimates.

Meanwhile, environmentalists and residents of Mannar fear that the Adani wind energy project could spell danger to the biodiversity of the area and impact people's livelihoods that are tied to the coastal environment.

**'Death trap'**

According to ornithologists, Mannar is part of the Central Asian Flyway, an important migration route for many waterbird species around the world. Every winter, thousands of flamingos arrive at wetlands in the district, drawing scores



Gautam Adani met President Ranil Wickremesinghe in July 2023 regarding the Adani Group's projects in Sri Lanka. TWITTER

of birdwatchers and tourists. In a recent commentary on the wind project, Prof. Sampath S. Seneviratne from the Department of Zoology and Environmental Sciences, University of Colombo, called it "death trap" for migratory birds. "The proposed wind farm is located in the best forest areas in central Mannar island, which serve as vital stopover and refuelling sites for birds approaching Sri Lanka," he wrote.

Around 50 wind turbines, each with a capacity of 5.2 MW, are to be installed as part of the project. Such an installation would usually entail a rapid clearing of the canopy, according to Marynathan Edison, an environmentalist from Mannar. "No matter how much they talk about restoration and reforestation, it will not be the same," he told *The Hindu*.

While activists like him welcome Sri Lanka's push for renewable energy, the move's likely environmental impact could outweigh its benefits in the absence of careful planning and wider consultation, they contend.

"Preserving the bird corridor and the biodiversity is very important, but we should not forget the

social environment and the impact such projects may have on that," Mr. Edison further noted.

The project's impact on local livelihoods is a serious concern for residents, said Dilani Croos, a former member of Mannar's local council that is now defunct as Sri Lanka postponed local government elections last year. "We are a coastal district and most of our people's livelihoods are linked to the sea. Fishermen worry that changes in the coastal landscape may affect marine biodiversity and therefore their catch," she said.

**Assessment report**

Sri Lanka's northern fishermen are already enduring a major setback to their post-war economic recovery, owing to relentless bottom-trawling fishing by Indian fishermen along their coastline. "You cannot blame the fishermen for raising concern. Policymakers and authorities have not held any consultation at the local level for them to know or better understand what this wind power project is about," Ms. Croos said.

Sri Lanka's Central Environmental Authority, which is tasked with integrating environmental considerations into the go-

vernment's development agenda, published an Environmental Impact Assessment report on the Adani wind power project, and invited public comments earlier this year. "We have received several representations and a lot of feedback," a senior official told *The Hindu*. "All stakeholders are being consulted," he said.

**Past controversy**

This is not the first time the Adani wind project has drawn flak in Sri Lanka. The country's political opposition and a senior bureaucrat have in the past questioned the company's entry into the island's energy space, alleging there was pressure from India and Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The Sri Lankan government has denied the allegations.

When *The Hindu* contacted Adani Green for comment on recent concerns, a spokesperson of the Group said there appears to be a "vicious campaign being run by vested interests" against the proposed wind power project in Mannar.

"The project location was chosen after careful consideration and no turbines will be set up along the critical migratory pathways or sensitive habitats," the spokesperson said in a written response.

The Environmental Impact Assessment, including birds and bats studies, was carried out by the Sri Lanka Sustainable Energy Authority (SLSEA), with leading subject experts guiding the process, the company said.

**Exodus in Congo**



People displaced by war in the Democratic Republic of Congo set off for Goma on a wooden boat from a port near Minova in South Kivu province. Over 1.5 million people in the country have been displaced by the advance of the M23 rebels, backed by the Rwandan Army. AFP

**Polish panel questions right-wing leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski over use of Pegasus**

**Agence France-Presse**  
WARSAW

The chairman of Poland's main populist party Jaroslaw Kaczynski appeared before a parliamentary commission on Friday over the alleged use of the Israeli spyware Pegasus while it led the country's previous government.

The Law and Justice (PiS) party, which ruled from 2015 to 2023, is suspected of having spied on opposition politicians and magistrates critical of its administration.

Mr. Kaczynski, who also served as Poland's Prime Minister, acknowledged in 2022 that his country had bought the spyware but denied that it had been used against critics.



**In the spotlight:** Jaroslaw Kaczynski testifying in front of a parliamentary committee in Warsaw on Friday. AFP

Ahead of Friday's inquiry, the head of the commission, Magdalena Sroka, said Mr. Kaczynski was picked first to testify because of his "responsibility for the actions of the Law and Justice Party, which was in power until 2023".

Ms. Sroka added that the purchase and operation of Pegasus had "no basis" in law.

The parliamentary committee will examine the objectives and legality of the use of Pegasus and try to establish how it and other

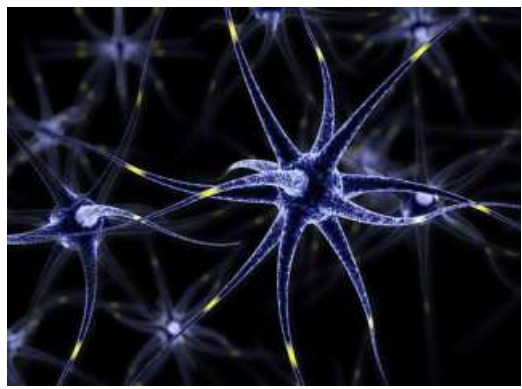
similar systems were acquired by Poland.

**'Long list'**

According to several sources within the new governing coalition, led by pro-EU Prime Minister Donald Tusk, the undisclosed list of individuals to be questioned could be "very long" and "shocking".

Citizen Lab, a Canada-based cybersecurity monitoring group, claimed that Pegasus was used against several people in Poland.

One notable target, they say, was Krzysztof Brejza, currently a member of the European parliament but previously a coordinator of the electoral campaign of an opposition party, Civic Platform, during 2019 legislative elections.



**Alert mode:** More than 43% of the global population experienced a neurological condition in 2021. ISTOCKPHOTO

## 'Nervous system disorders now top cause of illness'

Agence France-Presse  
PARIS

Conditions affecting the nervous system – such as strokes, migraines and dementia – have surged past heart disease to become the leading cause of ill health worldwide, a major new analysis said on Friday.

More than 43% of the global population experienced a neurological condition in 2021, the analysis found.

The study was carried out by hundreds of researchers led by the U.S.-based Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME), which has become a global reference for health statistics.

Lead study author Jaimie Steinmetz of the IHME said the results showed that nervous system conditions are now “the world’s leading cause of overall disease burden”. Cases of these conditions have soared by 59% in the last three decades, she said, with the increase mainly driven by the fact that the world’s population was ageing fast.

The researchers looked at how 37 different neurological conditions affected ill health, disability and premature death across 204 countries and territories from 1990 to 2021. This data was used to estimate how many years of healthy life were lost to each condition, called disability-adjusted life years (DALYs). More than 443 million years of healthy life were lost to nervous system disorders globally in 2021, an 18% increase from 1990, the study found. However, if the population’s age and growing size was adjusted for, DALYs and deaths from these conditions actually fell by around a third, the researchers said.

# Will fight Israel alone, Hezbollah tells Iran as all out war looks imminent

Quds chief Qaani met Hezbollah leader Nasrallah at least three times since Hamas’s October 7 attacks, say sources; Israel expresses strong determination to no longer allow the presence of Hezbollah’s main fighters along the border, fearing an attack similar to Hamas’s incursion

Reuters  
DUBAI

**W**ith ally Hamas under attack in Gaza, the head of Iran’s Quds Force visited Beirut in February to discuss the risk posed if Israel next aims at Lebanon’s Hezbollah, an offensive that could severely hurt Tehran’s main regional partner, seven sources said.

In Beirut, Quds chief Esmail Qaani met Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, the sources said, for at least the third time since Hamas’s deadly October 7 attacks on southern Israel and Israel’s devastating retaliatory assault on Gaza.

The conversation turned to the possibility of a full Israeli offensive to its north, in Lebanon, the sources said. As well as damaging the Shia Islamist group, such an escalation could pressure Iran to react more forcefully than it has so far since October 7, three of the sources, Iranians within the inner circle of power, said.

Over the past five months, Hezbollah, a sworn enemy of Israel, has shown support for Hamas in the form of limited volleys of rockets fired across Israel’s northern border.

At the previously unreported meeting, Mr. Nasrallah reassured Mr. Qaani he did not want Iran to get



**Intense attack:** Lebanese Army soldiers secure a site that was hit by a strike, after Israeli jets hit Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley for a second day on Tuesday, in Saraain in Lebanon. REUTERS

sucked into a war with Israel or the United States and that Hezbollah would fight on its own, all the sources said.

“This is our fight,” Mr. Nasrallah told Mr. Qaani, said one Iranian source with knowledge of the discussions.

Calibrated to avoid a major escalation, the skirmishes in Lebanon have nonetheless pushed tens of thousands of people from their homes on either side of the border.

Israeli strikes have killed more than 200 Hezbollah fighters and some 50 civilians in Lebanon, while attacks from Lebanon into Israel have killed a dozen Israeli soldiers and six civilians.

In recent days, Israel’s counter-strikes have increased in intensity and reach.

Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant indicated in February that Israel planned to increase attacks to decisively remove Hezbollah fighters from the border in the event of a Gaza ceasefire, although he left the door open for diplomacy.

Israeli security sources have said previously that Israel did not seek any spread of hostilities but added that the country was prepared to fight on new fronts if needed.

Iran and Hezbollah are mindful of the grave perils of a wider war in Lebanon, two of the sources aligned

with the views of the government in Tehran said, including the danger it could spread and lead to strikes on Iran’s nuclear installations.

The U.S. lists Iran as a state sponsor of terrorism and has sought for years to rein in Tehran’s nuclear program. Israel has long considered Iran an existential threat.

Two U.S. sources and an Israeli source on request of anonymity, said Iran wanted to avoid blowback from an Israel-Hezbollah war.

The Beirut meeting highlights strain on Iran’s strategy of avoiding major escalation in the region while projecting strength and support for Gaza across the West Asia

through allied armed groups in Iraq, Syria and Yemen, analysts said.

### In Israel’s sights

Between them, Mr. Qaani and Mr. Nasrallah hold sway over tens of thousands of fighters and a vast arsenal of rockets and missiles. They are the main protagonists in Tehran’s network of allies and proxy militias, with Mr. Qaani’s elite Quds Force acting as the foreign legion of Iran’s Revolutionary Guards.

While Hezbollah has publicly indicated it would halt attacks on Israel when the Israeli offensive in Gaza stops, U.S. Special Envoy Amos Hochstein said last week a Gaza truce would not automatically trigger calm in southern Lebanon.

Arab and Western diplomats report that Israel has expressed strong determination to no longer allow the presence of Hezbollah’s main fighters along the border, fearing an attack similar to Hamas’s incursion that killed 1,200 people and took 253 hostages.

Israel’s retaliatory assault in Gaza has killed more than 31,000 Palestinians and laid waste to the coastal enclave.

A senior Israeli official agreed that Iran was not seeking a full-blown war, noting Tehran’s restrained response to Israel’s offensive on Hamas.

“It seems that they feel they face a credible military threat. But that threat may need to become more credible,” the official said.

A war in Lebanon that seriously degrades Hezbollah would be a major blow for Iran, which relies on the group founded with its support in 1982 as a bulwark against Israel and to buttress its interests in the broader region, two regional sources said.

“Hezbollah is the first line of defence for Iran,” said Abdulghani Al-Iryani, a senior researcher at the Sana’a Center for Strategic Studies, a think tank in Yemen.

If Israel were to launch major military action on Hezbollah, the Iranian sources within the inner circle of power said, Tehran may find itself compelled to intensify its proxy war.

According to the Iranian insider, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is not inclined to see a war unfold on Iran, where domestic discontent with the ruling system last year spilled over into mass protests.

“The Iranians are pragmatists and they are afraid of the expansion of the war,” said Iryani.

“If Israel were alone, they would fight, but they know that if the war expands, the United States will be drawn in.”

## The Gen-Z students at the heart of Vietnam’s chip plans

Associated Press  
HANO

Nguyen Phuong Linh is among a crop of young electronics students crucial to Vietnam’s ambitions to become a chips hub.

She’s driven, smart and already has her sights set on a professorship – wanting to train a new generation that could help attract foreign investors eager to diversify semiconductor production away from China and Taiwan.

Long viewed as a low-cost destination to make clothes, shoes and furniture, Vietnam is now eyeing a rapid climb up the global supply chain and has put computer chips at the heart of its development plans.

It is a goal that suits nations such as the United States – increasingly worried about economic tensions with Beijing – but there are huge hurdles to overcome, chiefly a short-

**The govt. has said the current pool of 5,000 semiconductor engineers must jump to 20,000 in the next five years in Vietnam**

tage of highly skilled engineers.

“Chips are attracting so much attention... among both the government and the public,” Ms. Linh said from the lab at Hanoi’s University of Science and Technology.

“I used to dream of working as a chip designer but now I want to be a professor. I think our country needs more teachers to create a better workforce,” the 21-year-old said.

**Growth expected** Vietnam’s market for semiconductors, which are used in everything from smartphones to satellites and to power AI technology, is expected to grow at

6.5% a year, reaching \$7 billion by 2028, according to Technavio, a market research firm.

During a visit to the capital last year, U.S. President Joe Biden announced deals to support Vietnam’s chips industry, and shortly after, Nvidia – an American giant in the sector – said it wanted to set up a base in the country.

South Korea’s Amkor and Hana Micron both opened packaging factories last year in Vietnam, which is already home to the U.S. firm Intel’s largest factory for assembling, packaging, and testing chips.

As the hype around Vietnam’s emerging chips industry ramps up, its communist government has said the country’s current pool of around 5,000 semiconductor engineers must jump to 20,000 in the next five years – and to 50,000 over the next decade.

## Protest line up



Spanish farmers gather with their tractors in Valladolid during a protest in demand of fair conditions for the agricultural sector. AFP

## Senegal’s Sonko to address supporters

Associated Press  
DAKAR

Senegal’s top Opposition leader was expected to address supporters on Friday in his first public speech hours after being released from prison and ahead of the country’s March 24 election in which he has been barred from running.

Ousmane Sonko’s release late on Thursday night, after months behind bars, triggered a mix of jubilation and political uncertainty on the streets of the capital, Dakar. His supporters are waiting to see whether authorities will reverse their decision and allow him to run in the presidential election.

A charismatic former tax collector and mayor of the southern city of Ziguinchor, Mr. Sonko is seen as the main challenger to President Macky Sall’s ruling party. His key ally, Bassirou Diomaye Faye, who was also freed from prison late on Thursday, has been named the Opposition’s presidential candidate. Their release follows Mr. Sall’s decree to exonerate political prisoners, including hundreds who were arrested in the violent protests last year.

The protests have rocked Senegal’s image as a pillar of stability in West Africa, where dozens of coups and attempted coups have taken place in recent decades.

Dakar was thronged overnight with thousands of people singing and dancing as convoys of supporters drove around tooting horns and young people piled onto motorbikes and trucks.

Fresh graffiti on Dakar streets on Friday morning rallied in support of Mr. Sonko.

## Russians vote in presidential election that holds little suspense

Associated Press

Russia began three days of voting on Friday in a presidential election that is all but certain to extend President Vladimir Putin’s rule by six more years after he stifled dissent.

At least half a dozen cases of vandalism at polling stations were reported, including a firebombing.

The election takes place against the backdrop of a ruthless crackdown that has crippled independent media and prominent rights groups and given Mr. Putin full control of the political system.

It also comes as Moscow’s war in Ukraine enters

its third year. Russia has the advantage on the battlefield, where it is making small, if slow, gains.

Ukraine, meanwhile, has made Moscow look vulnerable behind the front line.

Russian regions bordering Ukraine have reported several attempts by Ukrainian fighters to take towns this week. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Friday that “it is beyond any doubt that they are related one way or another to attempts to cast a shadow on the elections.”

Voters are casting their ballots on Friday through Sunday at polling stations across the vast country’s 11



**Poll scenes:** A woman pours a liquid into a ballot box, during the Russian presidential election in Moscow. REUTERS

time zones, in illegally annexed regions of Ukraine and online.

Officials said that voting was proceeding in an orderly fashion. But in St. Petersburg, a woman threw a

Molotov cocktail onto the roof of a school that houses a polling station, local news media reported. The deputy head of the Russian Central Election Commission said people poured

green liquid into ballot boxes in five places, including in Moscow.

The election holds little suspense since Mr. Putin, 71, is running for his fifth term virtually unchallenged. His political opponents are either in jail or in exile; the fiercest of them, Alexei Navalny, died in an Arctic penal colony last month. The three other candidates on the ballot are low-profile politicians from token opposition parties that toe the Kremlin’s line.

**No Opposition, choice** Observers have little to no expectation that the election will be free and fair.

European Council President Charles Michel mordantly commented ON Friday on the vote’s preordained nature. “Would like to congratulate Vladimir Putin on his landslide victory in the elections starting today. No opposition. No freedom. No choice,” he wrote on X.

Beyond the fact that voters have been presented with few options, the possibilities for independent monitoring are very limited. No significant international observer missions were present.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation Europe’s monitors were not invited, and only regis-

tered candidates or state-backed advisory bodies can assign observers to polling stations, decreasing the likelihood of independent watchdogs. With balloting over three days in nearly 1,00,000 polling stations in the country, any true oversight is difficult anyway.

“The current elections will not be able to reflect the real mood of the people,” Golos, Russia’s renowned independent election observer group, said in the report.

“The distance between citizens and decision-making about the fate of the country has become greater than ever.”

IN BRIEF



**Clients can use FASTag using existing balance: Paytm bank**

Paytm Payments Bank said clients can continue using FASTag for making payments at toll and parking merchants up to the available balance in the wallets despite the RBI's time limit for not accepting deposits taking effect on March 15. "However, no further funding or top-ups will be allowed in FASTags issued by Paytm Payments Bank after March 15," the bank said. Credit balance cannot be transferred from the bank's FASTag to a FASTag obtained from another bank.

**DRL's Mexico arm slapped with ₹29-cr. penalty in tax case**

A wholly owned subsidiary of Dr. Reddy's Laboratories in Mexico has been directed to pay Mexican peso 58 million (₹28.8 crore) penalty in a tax-litigation case. The Superior Chamber of the Federal Court in Administrative Justice, Mexico, in its order on the ongoing tax litigation, has levied the penalty on Industrias Quimicas Falcon de Mexico, S.A. de C.V. (Dr. Reddy's Mexico), the subsidiary, the drugmaker said in a stock exchange filing on Thursday.

**Union government approves wage revision for LIC staff**

The Centre has approved wage revision of Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC) staff and a one-time ex-gratia payment to pensioners. The revision, effective August 1, 2022, will benefit more than 1.10 lakh staff and result in a 17% rise in wage bill. NPS contribution enhancement from 10% to 14% forms part of the revision and will benefit almost 24,000 staff who joined service after April 1, 2010. The ex-gratia will benefit more than 30,000 pensioners and family pensioners.

**India woos Tesla by slashing import duty on EVs to 15% from 70-100%**

Policy links duty reduction to EV makers investing minimum \$500 million, setting up India plant within three years and reaching at least 25% domestic value addition in that time; lower duty will apply to CBUs of CIF value of \$35,000 and above

**The Hindu Bureau**  
NEW DELHI

In a bid to woo firms like Tesla to set up a manufacturing plant in India, the Centre on Friday announced reduced import duty of 15% for electric vehicles (EVs) imported as a completely built unit (CBU), from the present 70% to 100% applicable for CBU vehicle imports, provided the EV maker sets up a local manufacturing unit within three years.



**Target Tesla:** The govt. is offering a 'limited concession' with the aim of bringing in players with latest technology, says Singh. AP

The reduced import duty would be offered if the EV maker met certain pre-conditions, including a minimum investment of ₹4,150 crore (or \$500 million), starts a local plant

within three years and reaches 25% domestic value addition in that time, the Ministry of Commerce and Industry said.

The customs duty of 15% on CBUs would be applicable on EVs priced at \$35,000 including cost, insurance and freight charges and above. The duty relief would be applicable for five years an a maximum of 8,000 vehicles per year would be permitted to be imported under the policy.

Asked about concerns voiced by domestic manu-

facturers, the DPIIT Secretary, Rajesh Kumar Singh said the government was offering "limited concession for a limited number of imports." He added that since the benefit was only for EVs priced above \$35,000, the impact on Indian manufacturers would be minimal.

"Our intention is not to cannibalise their market, but to expand the electric vehicle market by bringing in new players with the latest technology," Mr. Singh asserted.

**Exports hit 11-month high in Feb. but gold pushed imports to \$60 bn.**

**The Hindu Bureau**  
NEW DELHI

India's merchandise exports grew 11.87% in February to hit an 11-month high of \$41.4 billion, while imports surged at a faster pace of 12.2% to hit \$60.11 billion, thanks to a sharp spike in gold imports which hit a four-month peak of \$6.15 billion.

February marks only the fifth occasion that India's goods exports have registered positive growth in 2023-24, recording the highest uptick so far.

However, rising imports lifted the trade deficit to



Sunil Barthwal

\$18.7 billion from January's 9-month low of 17.5 billion.

"The export numbers in February have surpassed all our expectations, especially as it has been achieved despite tight monetary conditions in most

markets, ongoing conflicts and lower commodity prices," Commerce Secretary Sunil Barthwal said.

Exuding hope this year's overall exports, including Services trade, may surpass last year's record \$776 billion, he said the World Trade Organization (WTO) has recently projected a higher 3.3% growth in world trade for 2024.

"We feel that this will now be a rising tide for exports that will show in 2024-25 too," he reckoned.

In the first 11 months of the year, goods exports have contracted 3.5% to \$395 billion, while imports

have dropped 5.3% to \$620 billion, narrowing the trade deficit to \$225 billion from \$246 billion in the year-earlier period.

"From trade deficit and current account deficit perspectives, there has been an improvement but rising imports of gold and electronics and the dip in exports of garments must raise a red flag," Bank of Baroda Chief Economist Madan Sabnavis said. Low global demand has hurt exports of readymade garments (which is down 11%) and engineering goods, which are down 9.3% so far this year, he said.

**Goyal urges hallmarking of precious stone jewellery**

**Lalendu Mishra**  
MUMBAI

Union Minister Piyush Goyal on Friday said the gem and jewellery industry must consider hallmarking of precious stones jewellery studded with emerald, rubies and sapphires.

He said the government was able to successfully implement hallmarking of gold jewellery though it was notified more than two decades ago. Mr. Goyal was speaking at the Bharat Ratnam Mega Common Facility Centre for the gem and jewellery industry.

MARKETS

MARKET WATCH

	FRIDAY	% CHANGE
Sensex	72,643	-0.62
US Dollar	82.86	-0.02
Gold	66,150	-0.07
Brent oil	85.35	-0.22

NIFTY 50

	PRICE	CHANGE
Adani Enter.	3132.20	44.75
Adani Ports	1283.00	15.15
Apollo Hosp.	5983.20	-39.95
Asian Paints	2867.55	-24.70
Axis Bank	1046.40	-11.85
Bajaj Auto	8350.70	-32.85
Bajaj Finserv	1571.45	7.75
Bajaj Finance	6514.35	116.90
Bharti Airtel	1220.00	25.40
BPCL	586.45	-22.30
Britannia Ind.	4974.20	35.30
Cipla	1488.05	-8.60
Coal India	415.25	-12.45
Divis Lab	3485.40	-32.50
Dr Reddys Lab	6284.90	-9.70
Eicher Motors	3745.65	-27.00
Grasim Ind.	2197.10	0.60
HCL Tech	1647.30	-31.95
HDFC Bank	1452.65	-2.80
HDFC Life	632.35	10.10
Hero MotoCorp	4585.30	-90.00
Hindalco	532.55	7.30
Hind Unilever	2327.70	-6.90
ICI Bank	1080.35	-3.25
IndusInd Bank	1484.35	-7.60
Infosys	1634.00	-19.30
ITC	419.10	-0.55
JSW Steel	780.65	-4.80
Kotak Bank	1738.30	-4.10
L&T	3537.15	-71.05
LTI Mindtree Ltd.	5194.35	-69.85
M&M	1799.50	-91.05
Maruti Suzuki	11476.65	72.05
NestleIndia	2603.65	-9.10
NTPC	316.30	-5.55
ONGC	258.75	-4.50
PowerGrid Corp.	265.95	-0.40
Reliance Ind.	2836.45	-26.50
SBI Life	1500.00	-5.85
State Bank	731.90	-9.15
Sun Pharma	1548.20	-22.00
Tata Consumer Product.	1212.15	13.80
Tata Motors	945.85	-21.90
Tata Steel	141.70	-0.75
TCS	4219.25	11.65
Tech Mahindra	1282.20	-11.15
Titan	3633.20	-6.95
UltraTech Cement	9632.95	-64.00
UPL	475.15	13.05
Wipro	517.00	-0.95

EXCHANGE RATES

Indicative direct rates in rupees a unit except yen at 4 p.m. on March 15

CURRENCY	TT BUY	TT SELL
US Dollar	82.68	83.00
Euro	90.03	90.39
British Pound	105.44	105.85
Japanese Yen (100)	55.57	55.78
Chinese Yuan	11.49	11.53
Swiss Franc	93.56	93.92
Singapore Dollar	61.82	62.07
Canadian Dollar	61.09	61.33
Malaysian Ringgit	17.56	17.65
Australian Dollar	54.27	54.49

Source: Indian Bank

**Vistara tells pilots: 'accept new pay or risk job in merged firm'**

**Jagriti Chandra**  
NEW DELHI



Vistara issued an ultimatum to its pilots on Friday, hours before a deadline to accept a new pay structure ahead of its merger with Air India that could result in a pay cut of more than 50% for some, warning that failure to sign on could lead to their exclusion from the integrated airline.

On Friday morning, Vistara's Human Resources department sent a mail to pilots reminding them that it was the last day for them to accept the new pay structure, failing which they risked losing a one time pay-out, their place in the sequence for upgrade, and their elimination from the merged entity.

Pilots, particularly First Officers, had demanded an

extension of deadline after a heated exchange during an online meeting with the HR on Thursday.

The First Officers argue the new salary structure, which offers 40 hours of minimum guaranteed flying to all pilots instead of the current 70 hours, results in an almost 57% pay cut. They also assert that under the new terms they have to fly for up to 76 hours to earn what they

were drawing at 70 hours earlier, and this at a time when Vistara's flights are expected to reduce as aircraft are shifted to Air India and Air India Express.

On the other hand, Captains and Senior Captains would only have to fly 52-55 hours and 55-60 hours, respectively, to earn the salary they were getting for 70 hours of flying.

"After an employee is hired, the conditions of employment can't be changed to his or her disadvantage," said aviation lawyer Yeshwanth Shenoy. "This means that any bonds signed by pilots, along with undated cheques, in lieu of training, will be invalid," he observed. Vistara had not responded to questions e-mailed to it, till the time of going to press.

**Large MFs face higher risks, stress test shows**

**Suresh P. Ivengar**  
MUMBAI

The SEBI-mandated stress test on mid- and small-cap mutual fund schemes shows some of the larger players may be at higher risk compared with smaller peers.

Large fund houses, including HDFC MF and SBI MF, with assets of ₹28,597 crore and ₹25,534 crore, respectively, will take 42 and 60 days to sell 50% of their assets in the event of any heavy redemption.

On the other hand, smaller players such as Edelweiss MF said it will take only three days to off-load half of the small-cap portfolio.

(The writer is with The Hindu businessline)

**States and UTs step on the gas to raise funds**

**K. Ram Kumar**  
MUMBAI

States & Union Territories (UTs) seem to be in a tearing hurry to raise monies before the close of FY24. This also comes in the backdrop of expected announcement of General Election dates on Saturday.

As many as 17 States and UTs are expected to mop up ₹50,206 crore cumulatively at an auction of State Government Securities (SGS) to be conducted by the RBI on March 19.

The amount is substantially higher than the ₹27,810 crore they had planned to mop up, going by the Indicative Calendar of Market borrowings.

The amount will also be the highest that they have raised at a weekly auction in FY24 so far. As many as 20 States and UTs had raised ₹45,160 crore (the second-highest amount raised in FY24) collectively on February 27.

Venkatakrishnan Srinivasan, Founder & Managing Partner, Rockfort Fin-cap LLP, said such a large weekly SGS auction size had not been witnessed before. States & UTs raise about ₹35,000-37,000 crore usually at the weekly RBI auctions.

**VRR auctions** Meanwhile, the RBI conducted a variable rate repo (VRR) auction on Friday. The RBI received bids from banks for drawing seven-day funds aggregating to ₹76,560 crore against the notified amount of ₹75,000 crore. It allotted funds amounting to ₹75,001 crore at a weighted average rate of 6.65%. (The writer is with The Hindu businessline)

**At 40.4 mt, 92% of Indian iron ore exports went to China in April-Feb. FY24**

**Abhishek Law**  
NEW DELHI

A year since withdrawal of COVID-19 restrictions in China, the country has increased iron ore buying from India. Nearly 92% of Indian iron ore exports, or 40.40 million tonne (mt), for the 11-month period (April-February) of FY24, had gone to China.

In percentage terms, this is the highest ever shipment over a seven year-period (between FY18 and FY24) and second highest in volume, after 11M FY21 when exports to China stood at 47.73 mt.

In the 11M period of FY24, India's exports of iron ore stood at 44.23 mt, up 162% y-o-y. Shipments to China increased nearly 200%.

**Key feedstock**

Iron ore is a key feedstock raw material for steel-making.

Over the last seven years, about 83% of Indian exports went to China, data collected from research firm BigMint show.

For instance, in 11M FY18, 82% shipments were to China (17.6 mt out of 21.31 mt), which fell to 78% next fiscal (10.51 mt out of 13.79 mt). It rose to 80% (27 mt out of 34 mt) and 90% respectively, in FY20 and FY21. It dropped to 88% in 11M FY22 (20.84 mt out of 23.65 mt) and fell further to 81% (14 mt out of 17 mt) last fiscal.

**Other countries**

Apart from China, some of the other countries to which iron ore was exported, albeit in much smaller quantity, were Malaysia



**Growing in strength:** Trade sources said Chinese iron-ore imports in the first two months of 2024 rose by more than 8% y-o-y. REUTERS

**Exports of iron ore and pellets had not actually gone up since shipments were badly hit by the duty**

Industries (FIMI) pointed out that export of iron ore and pellets had "not actually gone up" since shipments were badly affected by the export duty that was in force between May and November of 2023.

According to R.K. Sharma, Secretary General, FIMI, export of iron ores is mainly for fines which are of lower grade, about 58% iron content. And, these have no use in the domestic market.

"In mining of ore, lumps are generated to the tune of 25-30% and the rest are fines. Fines are kept in the mining lease area. Non-removal of these fines generally lead to environmental hazards; while accumulation of fines also impact lump production that actually impact availability for the steel sector," he explained.

The Centre, though, has not announced any such curbs, but a senior Ministry official said, they continued to track the situation. (The writer is with The Hindu businessline)

**Technology combined with behavioural analysis can prevent financial frauds: Das**

**The Hindu Bureau**  
MUMBAI



Shaktikanta Das

Technology, combined with behavioural analysis, can go a long way in spotting anomalies in consumer behaviour and help in understanding and preventing frauds, Reserve Bank of India Governor Shaktikanta Das said while speaking at the annual conference of RBI Ombudsman in Mumbai.

Suspicious consumer behaviour that could be monitored include transactions during odd hours, transactions against usual patterns and unauthorised beneficiary additions. He said, however, that

on the flip side the utilisation of such technologies without appropriate safeguards may lead to compromise in customer data.

"The possible issues that may arise include invasion of privacy or subtle manipulations based on consumer profiling to

nudge [the customer] into certain services that may not be the right fit," he said.

"Appropriate safeguards need to be put in place in this regard," he further said.

Mr. Das also said that Artificial Intelligence (AI) capabilities are currently being utilised to complement customer service through personalised interaction, chatbots and virtual assistants tailored to specific products.

Its deployment in prevention of frauds, identity verification, vulnerability mitigation and data protection were, however, at nascent stages, he added.

Mr. Das said that under the Integrated Ombudsman Scheme, the Ombudsman has been entrusted with the responsibility of upholding the trust of ordinary citizens.

"The RBI Ombudsman is expected to provide an independent and impartial avenue to citizens for their unresolved grievances. They have the power to facilitate delivery of fair redress of customers' grievances," he said.

"There have been significant improvements in the implementation of the integrated Ombudsman framework of the Reserve Bank after the launch of RB-IOS, 2021," he added.



GETTY IMAGES

# From crossovers to cash-grabs, where is the fight business headed?

There was no doubting the authenticity of the Anthony Joshua-Francis Ngannou boxing bout — it even enhanced Joshua's standing in the heavyweight ranks — but the same can't be said of the upcoming 'clash' between Mike Tyson and influencer-turned-boxer Jake Paul



## Ashwin Achal

Francis Ngannou was expected to put up a fight. In his professional boxing debut just five months earlier, Ngannou sent Tyson Fury — an established fighter — to the canvas in the third round. Ngannou, a former UFC mixed martial arts (MMA) heavyweight champion, more than held his own over 10 rounds. It was only a controversial split decision in Fury's favour that ruined a memorable night for Ngannou. The impressive performance earned Ngannou a bout against Anthony Joshua, another fighter of high pedigree. Joshua, a two-time world champion, is on a comeback trail, having suffered back-to-back losses to Oleksandr Usyk.

## A few questions and a statement

At 34, questions were asked of Joshua's drive and passion. Ngannou, on the other hand, was hungry to make a big statement in his new chosen field. When the duo squared off a week ago at Riyadh, it was Joshua who sent a message loud and clear. The Briton dismantled Ngannou, delivering a destructive second-round knockout. Joshua floored Ngannou in the first round with a straight right, establishing his dominance early. The next round signalled an early end to the night, when Ngannou walked into a monstrous blow. The frightening big right hand of Joshua put Ngannou to sleep. It took a few moments and

[Anthony Joshua] was quite special because he stopped me. He did what Tyson Fury couldn't

FRANCIS NGANNOU

medical attention for Ngannou to get to his feet. The unexpected one-sided victory exposed Ngannou's weaknesses in full. The French-Cameronian looked utterly out of place in the ring, providing no resistance to Joshua's advances. Joshua took all the time in the world to take aim and load up punches, and despite the tells, Ngannou failed to take evasive action. This has led some experts to believe that this type of crossover fight can be dangerous, even fatal. Ngannou must stick to his primary occupation — mixed martial arts — they argue. He does not belong

in the boxing arena, as all it takes is one clean blow for things to go horribly wrong.

Ngannou will turn his attention back to MMA, where he will make his PFL SmartCage debut. As it stands now, this is his best route.

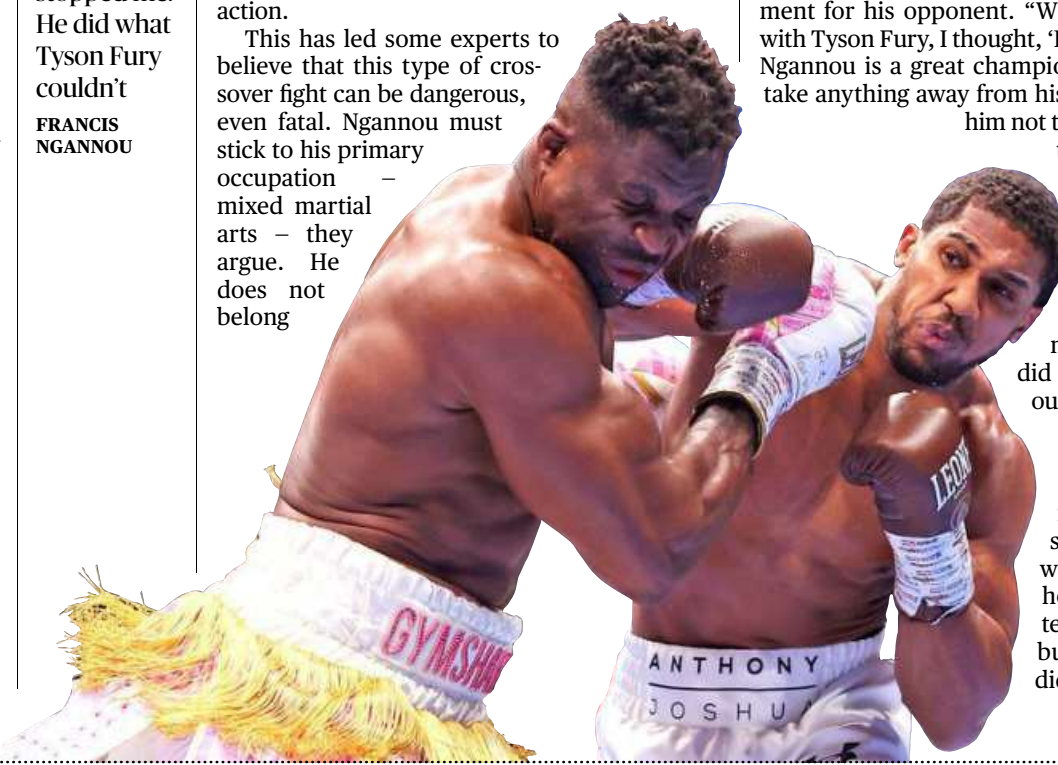
A dignified Joshua refrained from celebrating after the knockout.

Joshua even had a few words of encouragement for his opponent. "When I saw the fight with Tyson Fury, I thought, 'I want some of that'. Ngannou is a great champion and this doesn't take anything away from his capabilities. I told him not to leave boxing. He's

two fights in and he's fought the best," Joshua said.

Ngannou admitted that Joshua was the better man, adding that he did not feel the knockout punch.

"[Joshua] was quite special because he stopped me. He did what Tyson Fury couldn't. It wasn't my day, and he was just way better than me. It sucks, but it's the game. I didn't feel the punch.



## STACKING UP



### ATP Men's Top 15

#	Player	Age	Points	Events
1	Novak Djokovic	36	9,675	18
2	Carlos Alcaraz	20	8,805	18
3	Jannik Sinner	22	8,270	20
4	Daniil Medvedev	28	7,715	19
5	Andrey Rublev	26	5,010	24
6	Alexander Zverev	26	4,950	26
7	Holger Rune	20	3,720	23
8	Hubert Hurkacz	27	3,405	24
9	Casper Ruud	25	3,405	24
10	Alex de Minaur	25	3,210	25
11	Stefanos Tsitsipas	26	3,170	25
12	Taylor Fritz	26	3,015	25
13	Grigor Dimitrov	32	2,880	24
14	Ugo Humbert	25	2,415	29
15	Karen Khachanov	27	2,300	23



### English Premier League Standings

#	Team	GP	W	D	L	GF	GA	GD	PTS
1	Arsenal	28	20	4	4	70	24	46	64
2	Liverpool	28	19	7	2	65	26	39	64
3	Man. City	28	19	6	3	63	28	35	63
4	Aston Villa	28	17	4	7	59	41	18	55
5	Tottenham	27	16	5	6	59	39	20	53
6	Man. United	28	15	2	11	39	39	0	47
7	West Ham	28	12	7	9	45	49	-4	43
8	Brighton	28	11	9	8	50	44	6	42
9	Wolves	28	12	5	11	42	44	-2	41
10	Newcastle	28	12	4	12	59	48	11	40
11	Chelsea	27	11	6	10	47	45	2	39
12	Fulham	28	10	5	13	40	44	-4	35
13	Bournemouth	28	9	8	11	41	52	-11	35
14	Crystal Palace	28	7	8	13	33	48	-15	29
15	Brentford	28	7	5	16	40	52	-12	26
16	Everton*	28	8	7	13	29	39	-10	25
17	N. Forest	28	6	6	16	34	50	-16	24
18	Luton	28	5	6	17	41	59	-18	21
19	Burnley	28	3	5	20	27	62	-35	14
20	Sheffield	28	3	5	20	24	74	-50	14

\* Everton deducted six points following a breach of the Premier League's Profitability and Sustainability Rules

### Italian Serie A Standings

#	Team	GP	W	D	L	GF	GA	GD	PTS
1	Inter Milan	28	24	3	1	70	13	57	75
2	AC Milan	28	18	5	5	52	32	20	59
3	Juventus	28	17	7	4	44	23	21	58
4	Bologna	28	14	9	5	41	25	16	51
5	Roma	28	14	6	8	54	35	19	48
6	Atalanta	28	14	5	9	51	32	19	47
7	Napoli	28	12	8	8	43	32	11	44
8	Florentina	28	12	7	9	41	32	9	43
9	Lazio	28	12	4	12	33	31	2	40
10	Monza	28	10	9	9	31	36	-5	39
11	Torino	28	9	11	8	26	26	0	38
12	Genoa	28	8	9	11	31	36	-5	33
13	Udinese	28	4	15	9	28	42	-14	27
14	Verona	28	6	8	14	25	36	-11	26
15	Cagliari	28	6	8	14	29	49	-20	26
16	Lecce	28	5	10	13	25	45	-20	25
17	Empoli	28	6	7	15	22	42	-20	25
18	Frosinone	28	6	6	16	35	57	-22	24
19	Sassuolo	28	6	5	17	33	55	-22	23
20	Salernitana	28	2	8	18	23	58	-35	14

### Spanish LaLiga Standings

#	Team	GP	W	D	L	GF	GA	GD	PTS
1	Real Madrid	28	21	6	1	60	18	42	69
2	Girona	28	19	5	4	59	33	26	62
3	Barcelona	28	18	7	3	57	34	23	61
4	Atletico Madrid	28	17	4	7	54	31	23	55
5	Athletic Bilbao	28	15	8	5	48	26	22	53
6	Real Sociedad	28	11	10	7	40	31	9	43
7	Real Betis	28	10	12	6	34	31	3	42
8	Valencia	27	11	7	9	32	31	1	40
9	Las Palmas	28	10	7	11	29	31	-2	37
10	Osasuna	28	10	6	12	31	39	-8	36
11	Villarreal	28	9	8	11	46	51	-5	35
12	Getafe	28	8	11	9	36	42	-6	35
13	Alaves	28	8	8	12	26	33	-7	32
14	Sevilla	28	6	10	12	35	42	-7	28
15	Real Mallorca	28	5	12	11	24	35	-11	27
16	Rayo Vallecano	28	5	11	12	23	38	-15	26
17	Celta Vigo	28	5	9	14	30	43	-13	24
18	Cadiz	28	3	13	12	20	38	-18	22
19	Granada	27	2	8	17	30	57	-27	14
20	Almeria	28	0	10	18	27	57	-30	10



### Test Batting

#	Player	Rating	Career best
1	Kane Williamson	859	919
2	Joe Root	824	923
3	Babar Azam	768	882
4	Daryl Mitchell	768	804
5	Steve Smith	757	947
6	Rohit Sharma	751	813
7	Dimuth Karunaratne	750	783
8	Yashasvi Jaiswal	740	740
9	Virat Kohli	737	937
10	Harry Brook	735	773

### Test Bowling

#	Player	Rating	Career best
1	R. Ashwin	870	904
2	Josh Hazlewood	847	864
3	Jasprit Bumrah	847	881
4	Kagiso Rabada	834	902
5	Pat Cummins	820	914
6	Nathan Lyon	801	801
7	Ravindra Jadeja	788	899
8	Prabath Jayasuriya	783	783
9	James Anderson	739	903
10	Shaheen Afridi	733	836

### ODI Batting

#	Player	Rating	Career best
1	Babar Azam	824	898
2	Shubman Gill	801	847
3	Virat Kohli	768	909
4	Harry Tector	767	767
5	Rohit Sharma	746	882
6	Daryl Mitchell	728	750
7	David Warner	723	869
8	Dawid Malan	707	730
9	Rassie van der Dussen	701	796
10	Heinrich Klaasen	697	757

### ODI Bowling

#	Player	Rating	Career best
1	Keshav Maharaj	716	741
2	Josh Hazlewood	688	727
3	Adam Zampa	686	695
4	Mohammed Siraj	678	736
5	Jasprit Bumrah	665	838
6	Shaheen Afridi	650	688
7	Mohammed Nabi	648	657
8	Kuldeep Yadav	645	760
9	Trent Boult	643	775
10	Bernard Scholtz	642	642

### T20I Batting

#	Player	Rating	Career best
1	Suryakumar Yadav	861	910
2	Philipp Salt	802	802
3	Mohammad Rizwan	800	875
4	Babar Azam	764	896
5	Aiden Markram	755	796
6	Yashasvi Jaiswal	714	739
7	Rilee Rossouw	689	724
8	Finn Allen	686	723
9	Jos Buttler	680	687
10	Reeza Hendricks	660	674

### T20I Bowling

#	Player	Rating	Career best
1	Adil Rashid	726	746
2	Wanindu Hasaranga	687	797
3	Akeal Hosein	664	683
4	Axar Patel	660	667
5	Maheesh Theekshana	659	684
6	Ravi Bishnoi	659	699
7	Josh Hazlewood	654	806
8	Talraiz Shamsi	654	821
9	Fazalhaq Farooqi	646	692
10	Mitchell Santner	645	724

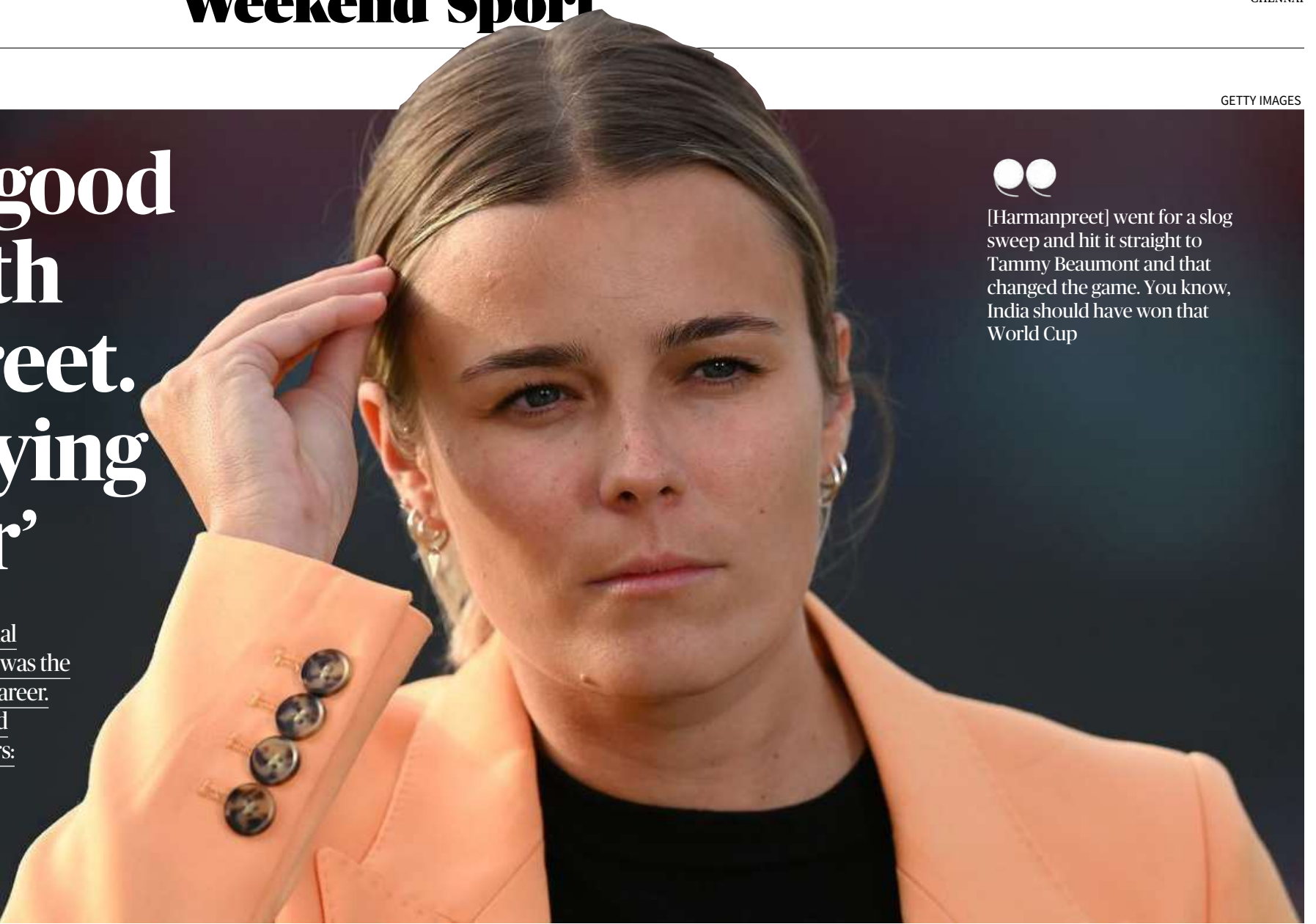
Top Indians →  
Sumit Nagal Rank 101 ▲ 4 spots  
Ramesh Raju Rank 409 ▼ 2 spots

Top Indians →  
Ankita Raina Rank 225 ▲ 1 spot  
Sahaja Yamalappalli Rank 326 ▲ 3 spots

GETTY IMAGES

# 'I'm really good friends with Harmanpreet. I loved playing against her'

Alex Hartley turned the 2017 World Cup final around by dismissing her 'good friend' — it was the highlight of the English left-arm spinner's career. After retiring at the age of 29, she has stayed involved in the game in her different avatars: coach, commentator, podcast host



[Harmanpreet] went for a slog sweep and hit it straight to Tammy Beaumont and that changed the game. You know, India should have won that World Cup

INTERVIEW

Alex Hartley

P.K. Ajith Kumar

**I**n radio during an England women's cricket match some time back, Alex Hartley's co-commentator told her that one of her records was going to be broken. "Normally I am in the record books for things like the most expensive bowling figures," she said. The commentators' box broke into hearty laughter.

Hartley has indeed made her presence felt on the BBC's iconic Test Match Special. The former World Cup-winning left-arm spinner also entertains listeners with her popular podcast 'No Balls', which she presents alongside her former teammate Kate Cross.

Hartley is, of course, in the headlines these days more for her coaching. She is the spin coach of Multan Sultans in the Pakistan Super League. The franchise's fast bowling coach is also a woman — Cath Dalton from Ireland; as is the general manager — Hijab Zahid.

The strong female presence in the support staff seems to be working for the Sultans. They qualified for the knockout stage with three games to spare.

Not surprisingly, that was one of the topics Hartley talked about in the latest edition of 'No Balls', which went on air just a few days before the International Women's Day. "It is such a relief actually," she said. "There was a little bit of criticism around us going into the competition; we got rid of six of our key players and had a revamp in the staff, no Andy Flower. We have the first two female coaches in Pakistan as well as the first female general manager."

Though she retired as a cricketer last year, at the age of 29, Hartley remains very much part of the game in her different avatars. Excerpts from an interview with *The Hindu*:



I like watching Smriti Mandhana. She is unreal, isn't she? She has got great technique. Shafali Verma is another Indian cricketer I enjoy watching

**You retired rather young. You played a key role in England's World Cup win in 2017, but do you think you could have done more?**

No, I don't have any regrets. You know, I tried my hardest for as long as I could. And I feel nice when I look at who has taken my place in the England team.

**Sophie Ecclestone, the world's No. 1 bowler.**

She became the world's best bowler at the age of 20. I did everything I could for that England team, and to get there into that team. And I am very proud of it.

**How do you look back at your international career? You made your debut against Pakistan...**

My debut was rubbish. I didn't bowl very well. I have blocked it out of my memory. I didn't think I would ever play for England again.

**But a year later, you were England's second-highest wicket-taker at the 2017 World Cup. Winning that World Cup must be the high point of your career.**

Without a doubt. There isn't a day that would even come close to that.

**And you took India's most important wicket. It was Harmanpreet Kaur's first game after her sensational innings in the semifinal against Australia. She was batting on 51 and India was looking pretty good at that time.**

But we knew it might rain, so we were trying to stay ahead of the Duckworth-Lewis-Stern System. And we were ahead. And I guess, I was very naive in that situation. I just came on to bowl and she hit me for two sixes. The ball I got her out to was probably the worst of the lot. She

went for a slog sweep and hit it straight to Tammy Beaumont and that changed the game. India was still ahead of the game, though. You know, India should have won that World Cup.

**How did you enjoy commentating on the men's World Cup in India for the listeners back home and in Australia?**

Very much. It was great travelling all over India.

**Was radio commentary something you were planning to do?**

No. I fell into it, to be honest. It was never something that I thought I would do. I just tried it one day for the Lancashire versus Worcestershire game and then became part of the BBC commentary team. I love it, though I am still not sure whether I will get to do it for the next match.

**Your podcast is doing well.**

Yes it is doing great. We have been doing it since 2019, I think.

**How did the idea take shape?**

Somebody literally tweeted me and Kate Cross saying, you should do a podcast. And we thought: Let's do that, yeah. I had just lost my England contract, so it was, you know, a bit of fun for me to be able to do that. And, yeah, we are still doing it to this day.

**How is women's cricket doing back home in England? The Hundred has done some good to it, hasn't it?**

The women's game is thriving. You know, it is getting better and better. It is getting bigger and bigger. Yes, The Hundred has really helped. It has been amazing. We have sold-out grounds, having 18,000 or 20,000 people coming to watch the games; among them are so many wo-

men and girls. And selling out the Women's Ashes was unbelievable.

**Talking of the Ashes, why do you think the Australian women's team is so good? They now have one of the all-time great teams in sport.**

They are so good because they have been professional for longer than everybody else. You know, their domestic set-up has been pro for a lot longer than ours has. They are the best team in the world and others have to catch up.

**Looking back at your own career, who are the cricketers that you enjoyed playing against?**

You know, for me, it was always about playing with my friends and against my friends. I am really good friends with Harmanpreet. So, I loved playing against her. I loved being on the same team as her as well. I have also enjoyed playing against Suzie Bates and Sophie Devine.

**Devine, like you, has a terrific sense of humour.**

Yes, she has. I also like watching Smriti Mandhana. She is unreal, isn't she? She has got great technique. And Shafali Verma is another Indian cricketer I enjoy watching. A male Indian cricketer I like to watch is Yuzvendra Chahal. He is a lovely bowler. I am a massive RCB fan. He was there for a while before going to Rajasthan.

**How do you look at the future of women's cricket across the globe?**

It looks great, with competitions like the WPL, though I believe India should have started it long ago. There were talks about the WPL during the 2017 World Cup. And I would like women's cricket getting better in countries outside Australia, England and India, the top three. That can be achieved with more money.

## GAME THEORY

The shifting pattern of the classical format

The pattern of Test cricket has changed over the decades: there has been a clear shift towards decisive results and shorter Tests. The data show that between the 1920s and the 1990s, a third to almost a half of the games finished in draws. The Tests during these decades were typically longer. In the 1960s, for instance, there were on average 2409 balls or about 401 six-ball overs per Test. This has reduced significantly since the 2000s. The average Test over the last three decades has ranged between 1832 balls or 305 six-ball overs (2020s) and 1975 balls or 329 six-ball overs (2000s); at an over-rate of 90 per day, the average Test in these decades has not entered the fifth day.

Decade	Tests	Draws	% of drawn Tests	Balls per Test
1870s	3	0	0.00	1586
1880s	29	4	13.79	1667
1890s	32	6	18.75	1939
1900s	41	10	24.39	1803
1910s	29	4	13.79	1791
1920s	51	16	31.37	2247
1930s	89	36	40.45	2127
1940s	45	22	48.89	2378
1950s	164	51	31.10	2283
1960s	186	88	47.31	2409
1970s	198	84	42.42	2255
1980s	266	122	45.86	1987
1990s	347	124	35.73	2018
2000s	464	114	24.57	1975
2010s	433	84	19.40	1953
2020s	158	23	14.56	1832



A rare 2020s draw: The India-Australia epic at Sydney in 2021. GETTY IMAGES

SOURCE: ESPNCRICINFO

## PICTURE THIS



GETTY IMAGES

### Ice-capades

The recent IBSF Bobsleigh World Championship in Winterberg, Germany, had exactly what you would expect of athletes trying to slide swiftly on ice: bone-rattling action.

Sleds, as a mode of transport, have been around for

centuries, but it wasn't until the 1860s that the modern sport of bobsleigh was invented.

A few thrill-seekers in Switzerland attached two sleds together and fashioned a basic steering mechanism. Wealthy tourists wanted to try it, but their appetite for danger was considerably smaller, and so a

protective chassis was added to the sleigh.

Today's bobsleigh competitions feature contestants making timed runs down narrow, twisting, banked tracks. The sport has advanced technologically: the vehicles have become lighter and more aerodynamic over the years.

Modern tracks — made of concrete and coated with ice — are required to have at least one straight section and one 'labyrinth' (three turns in quick succession without a straight).

At speeds of up to 150 kmph, the risk of injury is high, and major accidents (some fatal) have been reported.