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BJP using NIA to target leaders, says Trinamool

KOLKATA

The Trinamool Congress on Friday alleged that the Bharatiya Janata Party candidates contesting the Lok Sabha poll were conspiring with the National Investigation Agency to have certain leaders of the party arrested ahead of the election. » PAGE 3

INDIA bloc leaders prepare for big showdown

NEW DELHI

The Opposition is preparing for a big showdown on Sunday at the Ramlila Maidan in Delhi, where the INDIA bloc is scheduled to hold a rally to protest against Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal's arrest by the Enforcement Directorate. » PAGE 4

Centre extends validity of FCRA registrations

NEW DELHI

The Union Home Ministry on Thursday extended the validity of the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA) registration of non-government organisations (NGOs) and associations till June 30. » PAGE 5

Big powers need to stop strangling N. Korea: Russia

MOSCOW

Russia said on Friday that major powers needed a new approach to North Korea, accusing the United States and its allies of ratcheting up military tensions in Asia and seeking to "strangle" the reclusive state. » PAGE 12

Grand alliance announces Bihar seat-sharing deal

According to the agreement, RJD will contest 26 seats, and the Congress nine in the State

Five of the total 40 Lok Sabha seats have been allocated among the CPI(ML), CPI and CPI(M)

In 2019, BJP-led NDA won 39 seats, while Cong. won just one of the nine seats it contested

Amarnath Tewary
PATNA

A day after the last date for filing nomination papers for the first phase of Lok Sabha election scheduled on April 19, the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) and Congress-led mahagathbandhan (grand alliance) in Bihar announced their seat-sharing agreement on Friday. According to the agreement, the RJD will contest 26 seats and the Congress nine, while five seats have been allocated among the three Left parties – the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist).

The announcement was jointly made by the parties at the State headquarters of the RJD here.

While the RJD will contest Purnia, Aurangabad, Gaya, Jamui, Nawada, Saran, Patliputra, Buxar, Ujjiyarpur, Jehanabad, Darbhanga, Banka, Araria, Munger, Sitamarhi, Jhanjharpur, Madhubani, Siwan, Seohar, Vaishali, Hajipur, Supaul, Valmikinagar, East Champaran, Madhepura, and Gopalganj, the Congress will fight in Kishanganj, Katihar, Samastipur, Patna Sahib, Sasaram, West Champaran, Muzaffarpur, Bhagalpur, and Maharajganj.

In the 2019 Lok Sabha election too, the Congress had contested nine seats winning the lone Kishanganj seat. The BJP-led NDA had won the remaining 39 seats in the State.

Among the Left parties, the CPI (ML) is to contest three seats – Bhojpur (Ara), Nalanda and Kara-



Battle-ready: Leaders of the grand alliance after releasing the candidates' list in Patna on Friday. ANI

kat. While the CPI will contest the Begusarai seat, for which it has already announced Awadhesh Rai as the candidate, the CPI(M) will contest the Khagaria seat.

RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav, who is also the Leader

of the Opposition in the State Assembly, was conspicuous by his absence during the announcement. State Congress chief Akhilesh Prasad Singh, though, was present

Meanwhile, heavy-weight Rajesh Ranjan alias

Pappu Yadav who wants to contest the Purnia seat "at any cost" and had recently merged his party Jan Adhikar Party (JAP) into the Congress party, appears sulking. The Congress has been denied the seat with the RJD already announc-

ing the name of Bima Bharti as its candidate from Purnia. However, Pappu Yadav whose wife Ranjit Ranjan is a Congress Rajya Sabha MP from Chhattisgarh, is likely to be fielded from Supaul seat which she had represented in Lok Sabha once.

"I'm the son of Purnia and will contest from Purnia seat. Will prefer to leave the world but not the Purnia seat", Mr. Yadav said on Thursday while campaigning in Purnia.

The Begusarai seat has gone to the CPI amid speculations that Congress leader and former Jawaharlal Nehru University Students' Union (JNUSU) president Kanhaiya Kumar would be fielded there. In the 2019 Lok Sabha poll, Mr. Kumar, a CPI candidate then, was defeated in Begusarai by BJP candidate Giriraj Singh by over two

lakh votes. Mr. Kumar later joined the Congress party.

Meanwhile, All India Majlis-E-ettehadul Muslimeen has announced that they will contest 16 seats in Bihar and give support to Hina Sahab from Siwan. She is the wife of the late strongman of Siwan Mohd. Shahabuddin, who had represented Siwan in the Lok Sabha four times.

RJD in Jharkhand

RJD sources told *The Hindu* that under mahagathbandhan alliance, the party would get one more seat in the neighbouring State of Jharkhand. The RJD, which had already been allocated the Chatra constituency in the State, is now likely to get the Palamu seat as well, he added.

CONGRESS UNHAPPY

» PAGE 4

A ride in the rain



Sticking together: People huddle under umbrellas amid a downpour while crossing the Dal Lake in Srinagar on Friday. AP

42 killed in Syria as Israeli airstrikes hit missile depots

Associated Press
BEIRUT

Israeli airstrikes early on Friday near the northern city of Aleppo killed or wounded "a number of" people and caused damage, the Syrian Army said. An opposition war monitor said the strikes killed 42, most of them Syrian troops.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said the strikes hit missile depots for Lebanon's militant Hezbollah group in Jibreen, near the Aleppo International Airport, home to a sprawling military facility.

FULL REPORT

» PAGE 12

Congress accuses BJP of unleashing 'tax terrorism'



Congress leaders Jairam Ramesh, Ajay Maken and Pawan Khera at a press conference in New Delhi on Friday. SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Accusing the Union government of resorting to "tax terrorism" against the principal Opposition party to deny a level playing field in the Lok Sabha election, the Congress on Friday said the Income Tax (I-T) department has made a fresh demand of ₹1,823.08 crore from the party.

Addressing a press conference along with general secretary (communications) Jairam Ramesh, party treasurer Ajay Maken said an analysis of the donations received by the BJP – posted on the Election Commission (EC) website – reveals "serious violations" that should attract a penalty of ₹4,600 crore.

The party said it arrived at this figure of ₹4,600 crore by using the same rate of penalty and interest that the I-T department used to penalise it for a cash deposit of ₹14 lakh by its MPs and MLAs in 2019.

Mr. Maken said political parties have to fill up a proforma of Form 24A, in which two basic and important pieces of information have to be furnished – the names and addresses of their donors.

However, there were over 1,400 entries of donors that didn't have an address, and these totalled a

donation of over ₹42 crore.

"I will soon file a public interest litigation petition to recover ₹4,600 crore from the BJP for its violations in the past seven years," he said, adding, "We have analysed all the submissions of the BJP to the Election Commission. The party has faltered every year."

Mr. Maken said that they had moved the Supreme Court and the case relating to the ongoing tax dispute has been listed for hearing on April 1. Asked about the United States government taking note of Congress's financial troubles, Mr. Maken said "this is an internal matter and the Constitution empowers us to take on the BJP".

Rahul's warning

Taking to social media platform X, senior party leader Rahul Gandhi warned that when the government changes, there would be strict action against all those who assaulted democracy. Party general secretary (organisation) K.C. Venugopal asked the State and District units of the Congress to organise massive protests across the country on Saturday against "the blatant murder of democracy".

FULFIL OBLIGATIONS: BJP
» PAGE 3

Discussed 'peace formula' with India: Ukraine Foreign Minister

Kallol Bhattacharjee
NEW DELHI

India and Ukraine on Friday discussed a 'peace formula' for the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, visiting Foreign Minister of Ukraine Dmytro Kuleba said at the conclusion of official exchanges.

Mr. Kuleba, who was on a two-day visit to India, met with External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar and described the Russian campaign against Ukraine as a "full-scale war", while arguing for energising India-Ukraine relations with new projects.

"In New Delhi, I had sincere and comprehensive talks with Mr. Jaishankar about Ukraine-India bilateral relations, the situation in our regions, and global security. We paid specific attention to the peace formula and next steps on the

path of its implementation," Mr. Kuleba said, after the official interaction that was also attended by Secretary (West) Pavan Kapoor and J.P. Singh, Joint Secretary of the External Affairs Minister's Office, and others.

In comments to *The Hindu* on Thursday, Mr. Kuleba had urged India to play a "more proactive role" in the upcoming peace process in Switzerland.

'Momentum in ties'

"We have been looking forward to this visit. In recent months, we have had interactions at various levels. This has created a certain momentum in our bilateral relations. Your visit gives us an opportunity to understand the situation in your region," said Mr. Jaishankar in his opening remarks at the delegation-



External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar meets with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba, in New Delhi on Friday. ANI

level meeting. Since the beginning of the crisis, India has maintained contact with both Ukraine and Russia as well as other stakeholders.

On March 16, National Security Adviser Ajit Doval spoke with Andriy Yermak, head of the office of the Ukrainian President, which was followed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's te-

lephonic conversation with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Kyiv and Russian President Vladimir Putin.

'Global Peace Summit'

The mention of the peace formula by Mr. Kuleba has attracted attention as a 'Global Peace Summit' aiming at ending the stalemated conflict is expected

to meet soon in Switzerland.

Mr. Kuleba had earlier called upon India to participate in the summit along with other major countries in the world. R

Prospects of the summit, however, received a jolt with Russian Foreign Ministry's spokesperson Maria Zakharova dismissing the possibility of Moscow's participation in the Switzerland-led peace talks. "Zelenskyy's formula is nothing but alchemy," said Ms. Zakharova.

The Ukraine's President had presented a 10-point peace plan in 2022 during the G-20 summit in Bali. That plan which called for "complete withdrawal of Russian forces from the 1991 borders", was rejected immediately by Moscow. Russia feels that Mr. Zelenskyy's peace formula does not take the Russian

concerns into consideration.

It is expected that the Swiss-backed peace process may help finding a solution between the two positions. Diplomatic sources however could not confirm when precisely the Swiss would host the event, indicating that hectic talks are on at various levels to make that a reality.

'Comprehensive talks'

The Indian side did not elaborate on what the Ukrainian peace formula was, but mentioned that Friday's exchange included "a comprehensive discussion on the ongoing conflict and efforts to achieve a peaceful settlement."

"We also agreed to restore the level of cooperation between our countries that existed prior to the full-scale war," said Mr. Kuleba.

IN BRIEF



Kangana Ranaut launches campaign with roadshow

Actor Kangana Ranaut began her Lok Sabha election campaign in Mandi constituency on Friday with a roadshow, hailing Prime Minister Narendra Modi with "Jai Shri Ram" slogan and asserting that the BJP's main agenda is development. A large number of people turned up to see the Bollywood actor. "... we will spare no effort to win the elections under the guidance of Prime Minister Modi," she said.

Another plea filed in HC to remove Kejriwal as Delhi CM

Another petition has been filed in the Delhi High Court on Friday seeking the removal of Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal from the post following his arrest in the money laundering linked to the excise policy case. On Thursday, the court had, while rejecting the earlier plea, said that "is of the view that there is no scope for judicial interference. It is for the other wing of the government to examine the issue". In the fresh plea, the petitioner Vishnu Gupta, referring to a Supreme Court ruling, asked, "If the CM commits a breach of constitutional trust himself, then whether the Governor can dismiss the CM."

Nagaland group rejects appeal to not boycott LS election

The Eastern Nagaland People's Organisation (ENPO), demanding a separate administration for six districts of Nagaland, has rejected an appeal by a legislators' union to not boycott the Lok Sabha elections on April 19. At a coordination meeting in Tuensang on Thursday, the ENPO upheld its February 23 decision to boycott the polls in protest against the Centre's failure to create the Frontier Nagaland Territory.

Ambedkar targets Sanjay Raut for breakdown in seat-sharing talks between MVA, VBA

Shoumojit Banerjee
PUNE



Raut has stabbed us in the back

PRAKASH AMBEDKAR
Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi chief

After announcing that his Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi (VBA) would have no truck with the Opposition Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) in the Lok Sabha election, VBA chief Prakash Ambedkar on Friday singled out Sanjay Raut, spokesperson of the Uddhav Thackeray-led Shiv Sena (UBT) faction, as being responsible for the break down in parleys between the MVA and the VBA.

Speaking in Mumbai, Mr. Ambedkar targeted Mr. Raut for spreading "misinformation" about seat-sharing during the talks, and accusing the Sena (UBT) leader of "stabbing the VBA in the back".

"Sanjay Raut, how many lies will you tell," Mr. Ambedkar said and alleged that it was Mr. Raut who had not invited the VBA for seat-sharing meetings with the MVA.

"Is it not true that you [Mr. Raut] had raised the issue of fielding a candidate against the VBA in Akola? On the one hand, he was creating this perception of forming an alliance with us, but on the other, he was plotting to undermine the VBA," said

Mr. Ambedkar.

Meanwhile, Mr. Raut gave a guarded response to Mr. Ambedkar's "allegations".

He said, "Our fight is against those [meaning BJP] who are stabbing democracy in the back. I have nothing to do with Mr. Ambedkar's remarks. We [the MVA] had given him an offer of five Lok Sabha seats. It is now up to him to decide."

He added that Mr. Ambedkar had been levelling accusations against various parties and leaders, including Maharashtra Congress chief Nana Patole.

He clarified that the MVA had invited Mr. Ambedkar and his party to every meeting on seat-sharing discussions.

Bank accounts cannot be frozen under UAPA without satisfaction that funds are being used for banned outfits: Madras High Court

Mohamed Imranullah S.
CHENNAI

Bank accounts cannot be frozen under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967 unless the Centre conducts an inquiry and arrives at a subjective satisfaction of the funds in those accounts having been used or intended to be used for a banned organisation, the Madras High Court has ruled.

A Division Bench of Justices M.S. Ramesh and Sunder Mohan held so while quashing an executive order freezing the savings bank account of the Chen-

nai-based Tamil Nadu Development Foundation Trust that was suspected to be aiding Popular Front of India (PFI), a banned organisation under UAPA.

The judges pointed out that Section 7 of UAPA empowers the Centre to prohibit the use of funds of an unlawful association and Section 7(1) prescribes the procedures to be followed before passing such prohibitory orders. As per these provisions it is mandatory to have a prior inquiry and a subjective satisfaction.

"Admittedly, in the present case, the Central Go-



Prior inquiry and a subjective satisfaction are mandatory under Section 7, court says.

vernment has not expressed the manner in which they had arrived at a subjective satisfaction but for relying upon certain documents from the digital devices which evidence

BJP fields Subhash Tamboliya for Bagidora Assembly byelection

The Hindu Bureau
JAIPUR

The Bharatiya Janata Party on Friday announced Subhash Tamboliya, who recently switched from the Congress, as its candidate for the Assembly byelection at Bagidora in Rajasthan's Banswara district.

The seat fell vacant following the resignation of former Minister Mahendra-jeet Singh Malviya, who left Congress and joined the BJP last month.

Polling will be held on April 26, along with the second phase of the Lok Sabha election in the State.

The BJP has fielded Mr. Malviya as its candidate from the Banswara-Dungarpur Lok Sabha seat.

Mr. Tamboliya, 54, considered a close associate of

Polling will be held on April 26, along with the second phase of Lok Sabha election in the State

Mr. Malviya, had resigned from the Congress recently.

The political scenario in Bagidora has completely changed after the 2023 Assembly election, as the BJP is trying to make inroads into the tribal area.

BJP candidate Krishna Katara had occupied third position in the 2023 election, while the Bharat Adivasi Party's Jaikrishna Patel stood second.

The BAP has once again fielded Mr. Patel as its candidate in Bagidora, while the Congress is yet to announce its nominee.

Sunita Kejriwal urges people to send messages to AAP chief, who is in ED custody; BJP leader and Union Minister Puri says she is 'preparing to hold the CM's post like Rabri Devi did in Bihar'

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal's wife, Sunita Kejriwal, on Friday launched 'Kejriwal ko Aashirwad', a campaign under which citizens can send WhatsApp messages through a dedicated phone number to her husband, who is in Enforcement Directorate (ED) custody.

Ms. Kejriwal sought people's support for the AAP national convener, who, she said, is fighting "the most corrupt and dictatorial forces" in the country.

In response, Union Minister Hardeep Singh Puri compared Ms. Kejriwal with former Bihar Chief Minister Rabri Devi, saying, "The madam you are naming is perhaps preparing to hold the Chief Minister's post like Rabri Devi did in Bihar."

He added that Mr. Kejriwal's "time is going to be up soon" as his government "has not done any work for the people of Delhi". The senior BJP leader made the remarks at the inauguration of an office of the party's Delhi unit.

On Thursday, a Delhi court had extended the Delhi Chief Minister's ED custody till April 1. The Central probe agency had



AAP workers conducting a door-to-door campaign in Delhi asking people to attend a protest rally on Sunday. SHIV KUMAR PUSHKAR

arrested Mr. Kejriwal on March 21 in a money laundering case linked to the now-scrapped Delhi excise policy for 2021-22.

'True patriot'

In a digital message, her third since her husband's arrest, Ms. Kejriwal sought to rally support for him. "Arvind will be very happy to read your messages. I will pass on each of your messages to him. I have been with him for the last 30 years; patriotism is in his every pore."

Ms. Kejriwal urged people to listen closely to the Delhi Chief Minister's arguments in court a day earlier. "Arvind presented his

side in the court yesterday, and the entire country heard it. It requires a lot of courage," she said.

"I have full confidence that we will all fight this battle together," she said, thanking the "mothers and sisters" who had prayed for her husband.

Speaking at the BJP event in Delhi, Mr. Puri said his party will focus on the work and development done for the Capital's residents.

Delhi BJP president Virendra Sachdeva said that the festival of good over evil has begun in the national capital and that a BJP worker will soon become the Delhi Chief Minister.

AAP pulls out all stops for mega Oppn. rally in Delhi

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) is pulling out all the stops to ensure a large turnout at the Opposition's 'maha rally' at Delhi's Ramliya Maidan on Sunday. Several senior leaders of the Indian National Developmental, Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) bloc are likely to attend the event to express solidarity with Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal, who is in ED custody on corruption charges.

AAP workers have been conducting a door-to-door drive in the national capital, distributing pamphlets and urging people to attend the event on Sunday. On Friday, Delhi Minister and AAP Delhi in-charge Gopal Rai joined party workers in the outreach drive. When asked whether Mr. Kejriwal's wife would attend the event, the senior AAP leader said the decision would be made later. The police have allowed up to 20,000 people to attend the event.

BSP MLA Raju Pal murder case: CBI court convicts seven persons

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI

A special CBI court in Lucknow on Friday convicted seven people in the killing of former Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) MLA Raju Pal in 2005, a case in which murdered gangster-turned-politician Atiq Ahmad was also an accused, officials said.

The proceedings against Atiq Ahmad, his brother and prime accused Khalid Azim alias Ashraf, and Gulbul alias Rafiq were stopped after their death, they said.

Raju Pal, a BSP leader from Prayagraj in Uttar Pradesh, was gunned down on January 25, 2005, as a result of political rivalry with Ashraf, whom he had defeated in the 2004 bypoll to the Prayagraj West seat.

The BSP leader had lost the seat to Atiq Ahmad in 2002 but when the latter vacated it after being elected to the Lok Sabha, Pal defeated Ashraf in the bypoll.

The Central Bureau of Investigation had taken over the probe into the case in 2016.

The Special Judge CBI, Lucknow, held Ranjeet Pal, Abid, Farhan Ahmad, Israr Ahmad, Javed, Gulhasan, and Abdul Kavi guilty in the case for criminal conspiracy and murder among other serious charges. Accused Farhan Ahmad was additionally held guilty un-

der the Indian Arms Act. Raju Pal's wife Pooja Pal welcomed the judgment but said they should have been sentenced to death. "I am satisfied with the court's decision. But the accused should have been given death sentence because an MLA was murdered in broad daylight," she said over phone from Lucknow.

She said along with her husband, two others were also murdered. "This crime is so heinous that the culprits should have been given the death sentence," she said.

On April 15 last year, Atiq Ahmad and his brother Ashraf were killed in a sensational on-camera shooting when the assailants opened fire on them near a medical college in Prayagraj while in police custody. The shooting was caught on camera as mediapersons were following the duo being escorted to the hospital by the police for a medical check-up.

At least two people were seen firing from close range at the brothers who fell to the ground, while police personnel overpowered the attackers.

MHA approves CBI probe against Satyendar Jain in inmate extortion case

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI

The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) has given approval for a Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) probe against Delhi's former Prisons Minister Satyendar Jain in a matter under the Prevention of Corruption Act, official sources said on Friday.

Mr. Jain, who is behind bars in connection with a money laundering case, was accused of extorting ₹10 crore from an inmate, Suresh Chandrashekhar, for providing him protection in the jail, they said.

High-profile inmates

Apart from Mr. Jain, former Director General of Tihar prisons Sandeep Goel and some other staff members



Satyendar Jain

Chandrashekhar after which the CBI had begun inquiring into the matter and sought sanction from the competent authority to prosecute the former minister under the Prevention of Corruption Act, he said.

Chandrashekhar, lodged in Tihar jail in a money laundering case, alleged in his complaint that "Jain had extorted ₹10 crore from him in tranches during 2018-21, either personally or through his accomplices, as protection money so as to help him 'live peacefully and comfortably' in different jails of Delhi."

He had also alleged that some jail officials had allegedly extorted ₹12.50 crore from him in instalments during 2019-22.

CBI files chargesheets in H.P. scholarship 'scam'

Press Trust of India
SHIMLA

The CBI has concluded its investigation in the Himachal Pradesh multicore scholarship 'scam' with the filing of chargesheets against 20 institutions and 105 persons, officials said on Friday.

The chargesheets have been filed against the owners of educational institutes, the staff of the Directorate of Higher Education, Shimla; bank officials and other private persons allegedly involved in the misuse of funds under the scholarship and reimbursement scheme of fees launched

by the Union government and implemented through the State government to help the students of SC, ST and OBC categories, a CBI statement said.

The 'scam' started in 2012-13, when the scholarships for SC, ST and OBC students of the State in pre-matric and post-matric classes under 36 schemes were not paid to the eligible students. Almost 80% of the scholarship money was allegedly paid to private institutes. The 'scam' was unearthed following reports that the students in the tribal Spiti Valley had not been paid a scholarship for the past five years.

Fulfil tax obligations, BJP tells Congress

Congress's charge of 'tax terrorism' shows its frustration... all tax authorities as well as Delhi HC have rejected party's arguments, says BJP, adding that the I-T dept. had found unaccounted for cash transactions and unfiled returns by the Congress, during a probe based on seized documents

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) on Friday said the Congress's accusations that the Modi government was indulging in "tax terrorism" — after that party received multiple notices from the Income Tax Department — "reveals its frustration".

Addressing a press conference at the BJP's national headquarters, party spokesperson Syed Zafar Islam said the Congress had "failed to follow the correct procedures for filing taxes or making appeals".

Mr. Islam said authorities, ranging from the Commissioner of Income Tax to

the Income Tax Appellate Tribunal and even the Delhi High Court, "have upheld the actions of the Income Tax Department while dismissing the Congress's arguments".

"Instead of engaging in media rhetoric, the Congress should adhere to legal processes and fulfil its tax obligations," Mr. Islam said.

The Congress often invoked "threats to democracy" when faced with allegations of fraud, the BJP said.

Fresh demands

Senior Congress leaders Jairam Ramesh and Ajay Maken had held a press conference earlier accus-



The High Court in its decision admitted that the department had sufficient and solid evidence for further probe under the I-T Act

SYED ZAFAR ISLAM
BJP spokesperson

ing the BJP-led government of "unleashing tax terrorism" after the I-T department made fresh demands amounting to ₹1,823 crore from the party.

Mr. Islam added that it was mandatory for any registered political party to file returns every year under the Income Tax Act section 13(A).

"However, the Congress has violated that condition and also misrepresented the income," he said.

He also pointed out that the I-T department had found unaccounted for cash transactions and unfiled tax returns by the Congress as well as unreported income, during its investigation based on

seized documents. Consequently, the department issued recovery notices to the Congress, he said.

'Party ignored notices'

The Congress had at first "ignored" notices from the I-T department, Mr. Islam said, and later appealed to the Commissioner of Income Tax, but its arguments had been rejected. Subsequently, the party had approached the Income Tax Appellate Tribunal (ITAT), where the Congress did not get relief. It then took the matter to the Delhi High Court on March 13, 2024, where too the Congress's petition against recovery proceedings was dismissed.

Mr. Islam mentioned that during the investigation, the department found that the Congress had violated the law in many financial years.

"The Congress again approached the Delhi High Court to quash the reassessment proceedings under Section 153C for all seven years from 2014 to 2021, which was rejected by the High Court. The High Court in its decision admitted that the department had sufficient and solid evidence for further investigation under the Income Tax Act. The High Court found that income worth hundreds of crores of rupees has been hidden," he said.

BJP using NIA to target our leaders, says Trinamool

Shiv Sahay Singh
KOLKATA



Kunal Ghosh

The Trinamool Congress on Friday alleged that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) candidates contesting the Lok Sabha polls were conspiring with the National Investigation Agency (NIA) to have certain leaders of the State's ruling party arrested ahead of the Lok Sabha election. Trinamool Congress spokesperson Kunal Ghosh said that two BJP candidates had held a meeting with the NIA officer in Kolkata regarding summonses and arrest of Trinamool Congress leaders in Purba Medinipur district.

Referring to an NIA official, Mr. Ghosh asked on X whether two BJP leaders met the official and "handed over a list of @AITCofficial leaders and workers for immediate summon and arrest, or not".

The Trinamool Congress also asked "whether the NIA is planning for a raid and arrest some @AITCofficial workers tomorrow according to a list given by BJP or not". The allegations come at a time when the NIA has issued notice to eight persons to appear before the agency in connection with an explosion in Purba Medinipur district. Earlier on March 28, summonses were issued by the NIA to four persons to appear before the investigation agency.

The blast at the house of Trinamool Congress panchayat pradhan at Bhupatinagar in December 2022

had claimed three lives. Purba Medinipur, where two seats — Kanthi and Tamluk — are up for grabs during the Lok Sabha polls, has emerged as a prestige contest between the BJP and the Trinamool.

A home turf of BJP leader Suwendu Adhikari, former Judge Abhijit Gangopadhyay is contesting from Tamluk while Mr. Adhikari's brother Soumenduh Adhikari is contesting from Kanthi. Trinamool has fielded Debangshu Bhattacharya from Tamluk and Uttam Barik from Kanthi.

While political parties in the Opposition have raised allegations of targeting their leaders as an attempt of political vendetta against Central agencies, particularly the Enforcement Directorate and Central Bureau of Investigation, the Trinamool Congress has raised allegations against the NIA.

During the day, a Trinamool delegation approached the EC and sought the poll body's intervention against the BJP's "continued misuse" of Central agencies.

Left parties too receive notices from I-T dept. for 'tax violations'

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Communist Party of India (CPI) reportedly has been served a notice by the Income Tax Department for violation of its procedures after two of its State units were found using old Permanent Account Number (PAN) cards for filing income-tax returns.

A PTI report quoting sources said that the department has asked the party to pay "dues" of ₹11 crore, though a top CPI leader stated the notice

does not mention any sum. He further said that the party is consulting lawyers to challenge the notice.

The department in July 2022 had also served a notice to Communist Party of India (Marxist) withdrawing the tax exemption of the party for the year 2016-17 and taxed the Left party ₹15.59 crore for not declaring a bank account in its tax returns for the year. Sources said the CPI(M) had received the notice under Section 148A of the I-T Act.

The department passed

an order under Section 148A(d) of the Act, rejecting the party's submissions, and reopened the case by issuing a notice under Section 148. The sources said the department has passed a final order and levied a tax of ₹15.59 crore.

They added that the CPI (M) had filed a writ petition against the order in the Delhi High Court. The court had issued a notice to the I-T department and directed it not to take any precipitate action, the sources said.

(With inputs from PTI)

On the draw



MIKA AZIZI

Opposition parties in U.P. demand high-level inquiry into Ansari's death

Mayank Kumar
LUCKNOW

Top Uttar Pradesh Opposition leaders on Friday demanded a high-level investigation into the death of jailed gangster-turned-politician Mukhtar Ansari.

Samajwadi Party (SP) president Akhilesh Yadav called for an investigation under the supervision of a Supreme Court judge, and alleged that Uttar Pradesh was going through the worst phase of "government anarchy".

Ansari died of cardiac arrest on Thursday, within hours after he was rushed to the Rani Durgawati Medical College in Banda district, according to the hospital's medical bulletin.

Son's allegation

Ansari's son, Umar Ansari, alleged that the 63-year-old five-time former MLA had died of "slow-poisoning" as a substance was mixed in food and given to him in



Tight security: An ambulance carrying the mortal remains of Mukhtar Ansari leaves for his native place in Ghazipur, from a hospital in Banda on Friday. PTI

the Banda jail. "My father wrote to courts and told that he was being subjected to 'slow poisoning', the entire country now knows about it," he said.

"It is the primary responsibility and duty of the government to protect someone's life in every situation and at every place. The death of a prisoner will erode public confidence in the judicial process," wrote SP president Akhilesh Yadav on X.

Four-time former Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister and Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) president Mayawati demanded a high-level investigation in view of the serious allegation levelled by the family of the deceased.

"The persistent apprehensions and serious allegations made by Mukhtar Ansari's family regarding his death in jail require a high-level investigation so that the true facts of his death can be revealed. May

nature give the family the strength to bear this sorrow," said Ms. Mayawati.

Prohibitory orders

Amid the news of Ansari's death and likely funeral on Friday in Ghazipur, his native place, shops remained closed in many towns in the State.

The police imposed prohibitory orders under Section 144 of the CrPC across the State following the death of the former MLA.

CJM of Banda district orders judicial probe

The Hindu Bureau
LUCKNOW

The Chief Judicial Magistrate (CJM) of Banda district in Uttar Pradesh on Friday ordered a judicial inquiry into the death of gangster-turned-politician Mukhtar Ansari. The court directed the Banda MP/MLA court judge, Garima Singh, to submit the report within a month.

Ms. Singh, who is the Additional Chief Judicial Magistrate, will lead a three-member team entrusted to conduct the magisterial investigation.

Meanwhile, the post-mortem examination was conducted by a panel of five doctors at the Banda Medical College and the body was handed over to the family. The last rites will be held at Kalibag graveyard in Ghazipur district.

A medical bulletin from Rani Durgawati Medical College said Ansari had died of cardiac arrest.

National parties ignore regional aspirations, says AIADMK chief

T. Ramakrishnan
D. Suresh Kumar
CHENNAI

Criticising national parties for "ignoring" regional aspirations "many times", AIADMK general secretary and Tamil Nadu Leader of Opposition Edappadi K. Palaniswami on Friday said that regional parties, such as his own, were better equipped to represent the people and expedite development initiatives in the States.

In an interview to *The Hindu* at his official residence, Sevanti, on Greenways Road in Chennai, Mr. Palaniswami, who took time off his busy Lok Sabha election campaign schedule, said, "In a country such as ours with much diversity", regional parties fulfilled the regional aspirations. Sometimes, this made national parties less relevant in some States. "There is no necessity that a national party has to rule every State to bring about development in the country," the former Chief Minister said.

PM candidate

In a parliamentary democracy, there was no need to identify the Prime Minister before the election. Today, many parties were contesting in the election with no prime ministerial candidate.

After the election, the prime ministerial candidate may emerge, depending on the relative strength of the parties in Parliament, he said.

"We will play an appropriate role in determining the Prime Minister who is concerned about Tamil Nadu and who listens to the genuine demands of our State," he said, answering a question whether people of the State would accept a



AIADMK general secretary Edappadi K. Palaniswami during an interaction with *The Hindu* in Chennai on Friday. AKHILA EASWARAN

front that did not project anyone as the prime ministerial candidate and did not have any national party.

The former Chief Minister added that principal political players in West Bengal, Odisha and Andhra Pradesh, too, were not promoting anyone for the post of Prime Minister.

Asked whether his party would not require the support of a national party as it promised several measures to boost the revenue of the States, Mr. Palaniswami replied, "We feel a revisit to the Central fiscal policy is the need of the hour, especially after the introduction of the GST [Goods and Services Tax] as the States' own resources are dwindling. If the idea is acceptable [to many], we will press in Parliament for such a course of action. Further, it is not necessary that one should be part of the government to get such policies implemented. We can be a rallying point among like-minded parties to mobilise support and press for the implementation of many of our proposals."

On the circumstances that led to the AIADMK's separation from the BJP and exit from the National Democratic Alliance, Mr. Palaniswami acknowledged that on matters concerning the State, "we

were not able to function independently while in the alliance".

Primary job

It was the people of the State who "elect us" and "it is our primary job to resolve their problems", he said.

Apart from the BJP State leadership "denigrating" AIADMK founder M.G. Ramachandran and former Chief Ministers C.N. Annadurai and Jayalalithaa, the State was "being neglected at the national level", he pointed out.

When asked about the DMK alliance being stronger, he said, "It is an illusion to say that the DMK alliance looks stronger. The ground realities are different. The fight is tough as the ruling party will use money and muscle power, but we will emerge victorious with the support of the people. There is a considerable amount of mood against the incumbents at the Centre and in the State, and I feel that people will largely vote for our alliance."

On the opinion polls suggesting a big win for the BJP-led NDA, Mr. Palaniswami said, "Opinion polls are manipulated and fabricated. We ignore such polls but work with confidence at the field level to ensure the victory of our candidates."

'People being jailed for criticising govt.'

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI

Expressing concern over the "prolonged incarceration" of a large number of writers, journalists, and social activists for criticising the Indian government, a group of eminent personalities have sought to draw the world's attention to how India's "democratic tradition is being fundamentally undermined".

In a joint statement, they pointed out how individuals are jailed "often

without so much as a chargesheet against them".

Novelist Amitav Ghosh, literary theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Professor Akeel Bilgrami, and Professor Sheldon Pollock are among those who signed the statement on the undermining of elementary freedoms in India.

In a separate statement, Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen expressed his "sense of indignation at this basic violation of human freedom in my own country".

Moment law takes its course, they take to the streets, says Dhankhar

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

In an apparent swipe at the Opposition for rallying behind beleaguered Delhi Chief Minister and Aam Aadmi Party leader Arvind Kejriwal, Vice-President Jagdeep Dhankhar on Friday pointed out how one breaking the law was playing the victim card.

Mr. Kejriwal was arrested by the Enforcement Directorate on March 21 in a money laundering case linked to Delhi's scrapped

excise policy. Addressing an event at the Indian Institute of Public Administration, the Vice-President said the law was holding them accountable.

"Some people think they are above law, immune from the law. That has been demolished... those who think are beyond law, the law is after them," Mr. Dhankhar said, though he refrained from naming any person.

But leaving no doubt that his remarks were aimed at the Opposition,

who have organised a public meeting at the Ramlila Maidan on Sunday to protest against Mr. Kejriwal's arrest, he said, "But what do we see — the moment law takes its course, they take to the streets, high decibel debates, camouflaging culpability of the worst nature by human rights. This is happening under our nose."

He asked as to what was the justification for persons or organisations to take to the streets when law was set in motion.

INDIA bloc leaders prepare for a big showdown tomorrow

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Opposition is preparing for a big showdown on Sunday at the Ramliya Maidan in Delhi, where the INDIA bloc is scheduled to hold a rally to protest against Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal's arrest by the Enforcement Directorate. Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge, former president Rahul Gandhi, and top leaders of 11 Opposition parties have confirmed their presence at the event.

This will be the first public meeting of the INDIA bloc leaders since the coalition was formed on June 23 last year in Patna. The alliance in September last year had announced a public rally in Bhopal coinciding with the Madhya Pradesh Assembly election, but that never materialised. The more recent efforts — one in Patna after the Rashtriya Janata Dal's Jan Vishwas Rally last month and the March 17 rally in Mumbai at the close of Mr. Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Yatra, saw only scant presence from the

This will be the first public meeting of the INDIA bloc leaders since the coalition was formed on June 23 last year in Patna

Opposition ranks.

Trinamool Congress, which refused to cede any seat to the Congress, will also be seen at the event. Trinamool Rajya Sabha leader Derek O'Brien will be representing his party. Jharkhand Chief Minister Champai Soren, Nationalist Congress Party patriarch Sharad Pawar, former Maharashtra Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray, and former Bihar Deputy Chief Minister Tejashwi Yadav have confirmed their presence. The Left will also be present in full force.

The general secretaries of four left parties — the CPI(M), the CPI, the CPI (ML), and the Forward Bloc will take part in the event. The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam will be represented by the party's Rajya Sabha leader Tiruchi Siva.

Congress unhappy with RJD over seat division in Bihar

The party, many feel, should have negotiated for more and better seats; Pappu Yadav, who joined the Congress recently and was eyeing the Purnia seat, hints at the possibility of a 'friendly fight'

Sobhana K. Nair
Sandeep Phukan
NEW DELHI

With the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) keeping the Purnia Lok Sabha seat for itself following the seat-sharing arrangement in Bihar, the Congress has been left with a tricky situation in the form of former MP Rajesh Ranjan, alias Pappu Yadav.

The party also has to contend with furious State leaders who feel that it is settling for too little.

The Congress has got nine out of the 40 Lok Sabha seats in the State. In a majority of these seats, State leaders claim, it has a nominal presence, with the caste arithmetic leaning in favour of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance.

With regard to Purnia, the RJD's decision to stick with its candidate, Bima Bharti, who switched over from the Janata Dal (U), is being seen as a direct snub to the Gandhis who



Congress leader Rajesh Ranjan, alias Pappu Yadav, has not announced yet whether he will contest as an Independent. PTI

brought Mr. Pappu Yadav on board recently.

Mr. Pappu Yadav has not announced yet whether he will contest as an Independent, but citing the example of Wayanad — where senior CPI leader Annie Raja is contesting against former Congress president Rahul Gandhi — hinted at the possibility of "friendly fights". Mr. Pappu Yadav, whose last electoral success came in 2014, when he won from Madhepura on RJD ticket, had represented Purnia thrice in the 1990s, two times as an Independent.

"I am committed to making Rahul Gandhi the country's Prime Minister and helping a Congress revival in Bihar where, five years from now, it will be a force to reckon with in all 40 Lok Sabha constituencies," Mr. Pappu Yadav said. His remark struck a chord with several Congress leaders, who feel short-changed.

'Weak State leadership' The Congress, many feel, should have negotiated for more and better seats, since in a national election, it has better resonance

than the RJD. "In Bihar, our party has surrendered to Lalu Prasad's whims and fancies. Our State leadership couldn't keep the party's interest as supreme while negotiating seats with the RJD and now our central leadership looks helpless," senior Bihar Congress leader Kishore Kumar Jha told *The Hindu*.

He said the seats where the Congress could have been stronger were given to the RJD by a "weak State leadership". Other than Kishanganj and Katihar, the Congress has not won the remaining seven in several decades. For example, in Muzaffarpur, the Congress last won in 1984 and the RJD in 1998. In Maharajganj, the Congress last won in 1984. The Patna Sahib seat has been with the BJP since 2009 and the Congress does not fancy its chances here. "I think Mallikarjun Khargeji and Rahul Gandhiji should call off these relations and go it alone instead of being in this insulting alliance," Mr. Jha said.

Cong. seeks funds from shortlisted candidates

Satyasundar Barik
BHUBANESWAR

Facing fund shortage to meet election expenses, the Odisha unit of the Congress has asked candidates shortlisted for the Lok Sabha election to contribute ₹50,000 each to the party.

Odisha Pradesh Congress Committee president Sarat Pattanayak sent a letter to the probable candidates, inviting them to discuss strategies for their constituencies with the war-room members of Odisha Congress.

The Odisha Congress had invited applications from people who wanted to fight the Lok Sabha election. More than 3,000 aspirants had applied on a portal called 'Pragman'.

Senior Congress leader Panchanan Kanungo acknowledged that the party was seeking funds from shortlisted candidates. "There is nothing wrong in seeking funds from candidates especially when the Narendra Modi-led government has resorted to financial terrorism to cripple the Opposition..." said Mr. Kanungo.

"The party will decide on refunding the amount to candidates who do not make it to the final list," he added.

Wives help bahubalis of Bihar maintain poll grip

Amarnath Tewary
PATNA

Having weathered allegations, criminal cases and even long prison stints, Bihar's *bahubalis* (strongmen) are back in action in Bihar's politics. Like previous elections, their wives are in the fray, but voters clearly understand who's calling the shots.

Lovely Anand, wife of strongman Anand Mohan Singh; Bima Bharti, wife of Awadhesh Mandal; and Anita Mahto, wife of Ashok Mahto, are better known as *Mrs. Bahubalis*. Their husbands hold sway in their respective constituencies and beyond but cannot contest the poll directly owing to their criminal background and rules that prohibit convicts jailed for over two years from contesting elections "until six years after release". This is not too different from *mukhiapatis* (village head's husband) in Bihar reigning supreme at village panchayats with their elected wives (*mukhias*) watching from the sidelines.

Recently, convict and dreaded strongman of Nawada, Lakhisarai and Sheikhpura areas during 1990s and early 2000s, Ashok Mahto, 55, married Ms. Anita Mahto, 46, in the inauspicious period of



Election allies: Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar with ex-MP Anand Mohan and former RJD leader Lovely Anand. PTI

Kharwas, just a day before she was given the ticket to contest the Lok Sabha election by Lalu Prasad-led Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD). Ms. Anita Mahto will contest from the Munger seat against Janata Dal (United) national president and close associate of Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, Rajiv Ranjan alias Lalan Singh.

Ashok Mahto was released from jail in November last year after 17 years of imprisonment, and his hurried marriage just before the election reminded voters of a similar marriage in 2011, again in an inauspicious month. *Bahubali* Ajay Singh tied the knot with Kavita Singh ahead of the by-election to the Daranda Assembly constituency necessitated by the demise of Ajay Singh's mother Jagmato Devi.

Similarly, RJD has fielded Ms. Bharti from the Purnia seat. Wife of Awadhesh Mandal, a feared don in Purnia and Kosi areas of north Bihar, Ms. Bharti will battle JD(U) candidate and sitting MP Santosh Kushwaha. Ms. Bharti has been a five-time MLA from Rupa under Purnia Lok Sabha seat and also Minister in the State Cabinet.

On the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) front, JD(U) is fielding Ms. Lovely Anand, wife of strongman Anand Mohan Singh, from Sheohar Lok Sabha seat. Ms. Lovely Anand had been an MP (1994) and MLA twice. Her husband, convicted for the murder of former Gopalganj District Magistrate G. Krishnaiah in December 1994, had been MP twice from Sheohar in 1996 and 1998.

Assam district goes pink to encourage women voters

The Hindu Bureau
GUWAHATI

A district in western Assam has gone pink to make its women vote as much as or more than men.

Nalbari is among very few districts where almost all officers are women. Apart from District Commissioner and District Election Officer Varnali Deka and Superintendent of Police Supriya Das, they include the Deputy DEO, Finance and Accounts Officer, Treasury Officer, District Information and Public Relations Officer, and District Social Welfare Officer. The majority of the Additional Deputy Commissioners, Circle Officers, and Block Development Officers are women too. So are some 300 polling personnel covering three Assembly segments of the Barpeta Lok Sabha constituency.

Women in the district, however, have lagged in exercising their franchise.

"In the 2019 Lok Sabha election, our district recorded a turnout of 83.5%, higher than the State average of 81.5% and the national average of 67.18%. But the gap between men and women voters in Nalbari was wider than that at the national and State le-



Women in Nalbari are being encouraged to vote in large numbers.

vels," Ms. Deka said.

In Nalbari, 84.4% of men voted compared with 82.4% of women, a gap of 2%.

The district officers and polling personnel have been taking up various Systematic Voters' Education and Electoral Participation (SVEEP) activities to encourage all sections to come and cast their votes.

The campaign entailed more than 300 women polling personnel and women officers turning up in *mekhela chador*, the traditional Assamese attire, in various hues of pink.

They held pink placards with various SVEEP messages urging unregistered people to apply for a voter card and others to assert their rights by casting their votes. This campaign will culminate with the "manning" of 50% of the district's urban polling stations by women.

BJP's Rajkot candidate faces wrath of Kshatriyas over remarks

Mahesh Langa
AHMEDABAD

The Kshatriya community continued its protests against the BJP candidate from Rajkot, Parshottam Rupala, for his controversial remarks against its members.

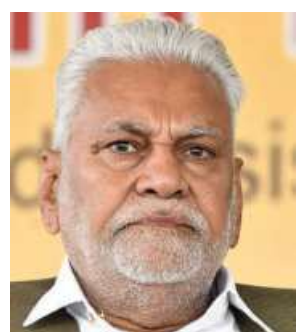
On Friday, protests were held at around a dozen places in Saurashtra and north Gujarat, with members of different Kshatriya castes demanding that his candidature be withdrawn.

The Union Minister, during an election campaign speech on March 22, said that erstwhile '*maharajas*' (Kshatriya kings) had

succumbed to foreign rulers like the British and forged family bonds with them. Princely families broke bread with the British rulers and also married their daughters to them, he said. Mr. Rupala then praised a Dalit community saying it had not bowed down before the British regime.

In Gujarat, there were hundreds of small princely families before Independence.

His speech, which went viral on social media, offended the Kshatriya or Rajputs in Saurashtra and parts of north Gujarat with significant hold of different castes of the erstwhile rul-



Parshottam Rupala

ing class. In Saurashtra alone, the BJP has half a dozen MLAs and MPs from the Kshatriya community.

Minister apologises

After the initial protests, the Union Minister apologised, but various caste

groups and outfits like the Karni Sena have intensified their protests by holding group meetings and burning his effigy and posters.

"We will not call off the protests till he is removed from the candidate list," the Karni Sena said.

P.T. Jadeja, the international president of the Rajput Yuva Sangh, told presspersons in Rajkot on Thursday that the BJP should withdraw Mr. Rupala as its candidate as a precondition for any talks for a compromise.

After the remarks triggered widespread outrage, the State BJP roped in former Gondal MLA Jayraj-sinh Jadeja to talk to the

community leaders and resolve the situation even as Mr. Rupala has remained silent over the issue after his apology.

Cheap statements: AAP Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) leader Yuvrajsinh Jadeja urged the community not to compromise with Mr. Rupala who had lowered the image of the community by making "cheap remarks".

State Congress president Shaktisinh Gohil also lambasted the Union Minister and said he "lacked any understanding or knowledge to speak about" the community.

At a rally on Thursday, a

member of the Kshatriya community said: "Our forefathers had fought Mughals and other invaders and made sacrifices. Can he [Rupala] name one person from his family who died fighting invaders? Rupala should read history before displaying his utter ignorance."

A senior BJP leader from Saurashtra said Mr. Rupala's remarks had unnecessarily created a political issue in the run-up to the election.

The Chief Electoral Officer of Gujarat, P. Bharathi, sought a report from the Rajkot District Collector to the Minister's speech.

INBRIEF



Congress to unveil manifesto for Lok Sabha polls on April 5

The Congress is likely to release its manifesto for the Lok Sabha election on April 5. The party plans to follow it up with rallies and public meetings across the country, sources said on Friday. The first such public rally, in which former party chief Sonia Gandhi may participate, will be held in Rajasthan on April 6. Before the formal release of the manifesto, the Congress will launch the Ghar Ghar guarantee campaign on April 3. Through this campaign, the party plans to reach eight crore households with their 25 guarantees before the election.

Pathan removes photographs of World Cup-winning squad

Former cricketer and Trinamool Congress candidate from Baharampur, Yusuf Pathan, on Friday, began removing photographs of the Cricket World Cup-winning moment used by his supporters as campaign material in the Lok Sabha seat. The development comes after the West Bengal Congress lodged a complaint with the Election Commission (EC) accusing the former cricketer of violating the model code of conduct (MCC). In a letter to the Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) of the State, the West Bengal Congress unit demanded stern action against Mr. Pathan. Mr. Pathan is pitted against five-time Congress MP and State Congress president Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury.

Congress releases ninth list of five candidates for LS election

The Congress on Friday released a list of five candidates for the Lok Sabha election. The party's ninth list included a change of nominees in two seats in Rajasthan. Former Union Minister C.P. Joshi, who was the Speaker of the previous Rajasthan Assembly before losing last year's Assembly election, has been fielded from Bhillwara in place of Damodar Gurjar. Mr. Gurjar has now been fielded from the Rajsamand Lok Sabha seat while the earlier announced candidate, Sudarshan Rawat, has been dropped. In Karnataka, Sunil Bose has been fielded from Chamarajanagar, while E. Thukaram will be the candidate from Bellary. Both seats are reserved seats, with the former reserved for the Scheduled Castes and the latter for the Scheduled Tribes.

Madhya Pradesh Congress MLA switches over to BJP

Congress MLA from Amarwara constituency in Madhya Pradesh Kamlesh Pratap Shah joined the BJP on Friday. Amarwara falls under Chhindwara Lok Sabha constituency, which is former Chief Minister Kamal Nath's bastion. Mr. Shah's resignation was accepted by Speaker Narendra Singh Tomar. The three-term MLA from Chhindwara Lok Sabha's Amarwara (Scheduled Tribe reserved) joined the BJP at the Chief Minister's Residence in Bhopal. Hailing from the Gondwana tribal community, Mr. Shah won his seat in the 2013, 2018, and 2023 Assembly polls. He was also considered close to Mr. Nath.

ED issues second summons to Shiv Sena (UBT) LS candidate

The ED on Friday issued a fresh summons to Shiv Sena (UBT) leader Amol G. Kirtikar to investigate his alleged involvement in the 'klichdi scam'. The agency has asked him to appear before it on April 8. This is the second summons issued to the party's candidate who is contesting the Lok Sabha elections from the Mumbai North-West seat. Hours after his candidature was announced on Wednesday, the ED had summoned Mr. Kirtikar, but his lawyer sought more time. His father Gajanan Kirtikar is the sitting MP from Mumbai North-West and had joined the Eknath Shinde-led Shiv Sena after the party split in 2022.

Pawar's aide Shrinivas Patil will not contest LS polls

Veteran Nationalist Congress Party (Sharadchandra Pawar) leader and incumbent Satara MP Shrinivas Patil will not contest the Lok Sabha elections, said NCP (SP) chief Sharad Pawar on Friday. The Satara seat in the 'sugar belt' region of western Maharashtra was one of the four seats won by the undivided NCP in the 2019 general election. Mr. Patil, an ex-IAS officer-turned-politician, is a former Governor of Sikkim and a close friend of Mr. Pawar. He is reportedly withdrawing from the poll fray owing to health reasons.

IN BRIEF



10 killed in road accident in J&K; PM announces ex gratia

Ten passengers were killed when a vehicle plunged into a deep gorge on the Jammu-Srinagar national highway on Friday. Officials said the passenger taxi rolled down a deep gorge near the Battery Chashma area in the Ramban district in a pre-dawn accident. The area was witnessing a major rainfall when the taxi rolled down around 300 meters, officials said. Officials could not immediately confirm the exact cause of the accident. Prime Minister Narendra Modi expressed grief over the accident. He announced ex-gratia of two lakh rupees from the Prime Minister's National Relief Fund to the next of kin of each deceased.

Tripura Bar Council to launch drive to identify fake lawyers

The Bar Council of Tripura has announced plans to conduct a survey in order to identify and remove fake lawyers from the State. A senior council member on Friday said that they have reached out to all bar associations in the State requesting a list of advocates, who claimed to have obtained their law degree after 1990. The decision was announced amid concerns that some individuals may have obtained their degree through corrupt means and falsely enrolled in the Bar Associations. The deadline for submitting the list is April 15.

IMA releases charter of demands from doctors

Bindu Shajan Perappadan
NEW DELHI

The Indian Medical Association (IMA) will engage with political leaders to put across its communities' demands for the upcoming election, with the doctors demanding that the Centre help them maintain the "purity of modern medicine, to bring in strict measures to protect medical staff while on duty, reduce GST burden on healthcare products, and insurance, and exempt small and medium hospitals up to 50 beds and clinics from the Clinical Establishments (Registration and Regulation) Act, 2010." The association has released its charter of demands and has asked local branches to engage with political leaders to "educate them about the needs of the community," said its national president R.V. Asokan.

Delaying new duty norms hampers air safety: pilots' body

Jagriti Chandra
NEW DELHI

The aviation safety regulator's decision to defer the implementation of new pilot rest and duty norms indefinitely "endangers pilot safety and safety of passengers", a nationwide body of pilots has said in its letter to the government. The new rules were framed following concerns over mounting fatigue among pilots. They provided enhanced rest by raising the weekly rest from 36 hours to 48 hours and curtailing night-time flying, which is known to impact alertness levels and crew performance, among other measures. **Safety of passengers** "The action of the DGCA not only endangers pilot safety but also undermines the safety of passengers which the implementation

Notify norms to make movies accessible to disabled persons: HC

Court directs I&B Ministry to notify the guidelines by July 15; the order came on a petition by four persons with visual and hearing disabilities

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Delhi High Court has given the Centre time till July 15 to notify the guidelines for making films accessible to persons with hearing and visual disabilities. The court said accessibility was enforceable as a legal right and that even private parties have to take reasonable measures to enable greater accessibility for persons with hearing and visual disabilities. The court observed that the Information and Broadcasting Ministry has framed draft guidelines for accessibility standards in cinema halls for persons with hearing and visual disabilities and is in the process of finalising the same. "The guidelines shall now be finalised by the Ministry and shall be notified on or before July 15, 2024. It is made clear that the said guidelines shall make



Mandatory provision: The Delhi High Court said accessibility was enforceable as a legal right. FILE PHOTO

the provision of accessibility features mandatory and provide a reasonable period for compliance by all stakeholders, in an expeditious manner," the court ordered. The court's order came on a petition by four persons with visual and hearing disabilities who sought directions on making films accessible to them. They argued that though various rights have been recognised for "persons with disabilities" under

the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act, most films which are released in India do not cater to disabled persons despite the statute having been enacted more than five years ago. The Ministry had issued various directions to the film producers' association and to the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) in October 2019, to use audio description and subtitles and closed captions in all films.

Celebratory firing at weddings is a recipe for disaster, says SC

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court, in a judgment, has highlighted the often disastrous consequences of "uncontrolled and unwarranted" celebratory firing at weddings, including the maiming or loss of innocent lives. This is the second time in as many years the court has raised its voice against the culture of gun-toting bravado. In February 2023, the court had condemned the easy availability and possession of guns, mostly country-made or unlicensed, in States like Uttar Pradesh as a feudal practice that cocks a snook at a very basic fundamental right – the right to life – guaranteed under Article 21 of the Constitution. Recently, the court again came across the case concerning the death of man who was fatally shot in the neck by a fellow guest at a wedding in 2016. "The act of celebratory firing during marriage ceremonies is an unfortunate yet prevalent practice in our nation. The present case is a direct example of the disastrous consequences of such uncontrolled

A man was fatally shot in the neck by a fellow guest at a wedding in U.P.

and unwarranted celebratory firing," a Bench of Justices Vikram Nath and Satish Chandra Sharma observed. The shooter, Shahid Ali, was sentenced to life imprisonment for murder. The Allahabad High Court had dismissed his appeal, and he had approached the Supreme Court for reprieve. Justice Sharma, who authored the judgment, found him guilty of culpable homicide, but not murder. The top court concluded there had been no previous enmity between Ali and the man who died. Only a single bullet had been fired. The man had died instantly. The court ordered Ali to be released forthwith. He had already served eight years of his sentence. Last year, the court had similarly expressed its distress at the large number of cases concerning the possession and use of illegal guns in Uttar Pradesh.

Manipur govt. assures HC of aid to UPSC aspirants

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Delhi High Court has accepted the Manipur government's assurance to extend financial assistance to candidates from the hill districts who have opted for centres outside the strife-torn State for the Civil Services (Preliminary) Examination, 2024. The government's assurance came in response to a plea by the Zomi Student Federation seeking to set up examination centres in the hill districts of Manipur. The Union Public Service Commission (UPSC), which organises the exam, handed over an affidavit filed by the Manipur government, expressing its inability to open examination centres in Chura-chandpur and Kangpokpi districts. The UPSC said candidates from the hill districts who have at present opted for Imphal as their examination centre can choose any of the following centres – Aizawl (Mizoram), Kohima (Nagaland), Shillong (Meghalaya), Dispur (Assam), Jorhat (Assam), Kolkata (West Bengal), and Delhi.

Indian Navy seizes hijacked Iranian vessel, rescues crew

Dinakar Peri
NEW DELHI

Indian Navy ships *Sumedha* and *Trishul* intercepted and freed a hijacked Iranian fishing vessel (FV), *Al-Kambar*, after forcing the pirates to surrender, the Navy said late on Friday. "After more than 12 hours of intense coercive tactical measures as per the Standard Operating Procedures, the pirates on board [the] hijacked FV were forced to surrender. The crew, comprising 23 Pakistani nationals, have been safely rescued," a Navy spokesperson said. "Indian Naval specialist teams are presently undertaking thorough sanitisation and seaworthiness checks of the FV in order to escort her to a safe area for resuming normal fishing activities." *Al-Kambar* was approximately 90 nautical miles southwest of Socotra when it was reportedly boarded by nine armed pirates. The



Rescue mission: Iranian fishing vessel *Al-Kambar*, which was reportedly boarded by nine armed pirates. @indiannavy/x

Navy spokesperson said that based on inputs of a potential piracy incident on Thursday, two Indian Navy ships, deployed in Arabian Sea for maritime security operations were diverted. *INS Sumedha* intercepted *Al-Kambar* during early hours of Friday and was joined subsequently by guided missile frigate *INS Trishul*. This is the latest in a series of incidents of piracy in the Arabian Sea and off Somalia in the past few

months. As reported by *The Hindu* earlier this week, the pirate mother vessel that was used to hijack Malta-flagged merchant vessel *MV Ruen* on December 14 was itself an Iranian fishing vessel. *Al Ashkaan* with 24 Pakistani crew members was hijacked earlier by seven Somali pirates on November 29 near Socotra Island off the coast of Yemen. It was taken to Somalia and later used to hijack *Ruen*.

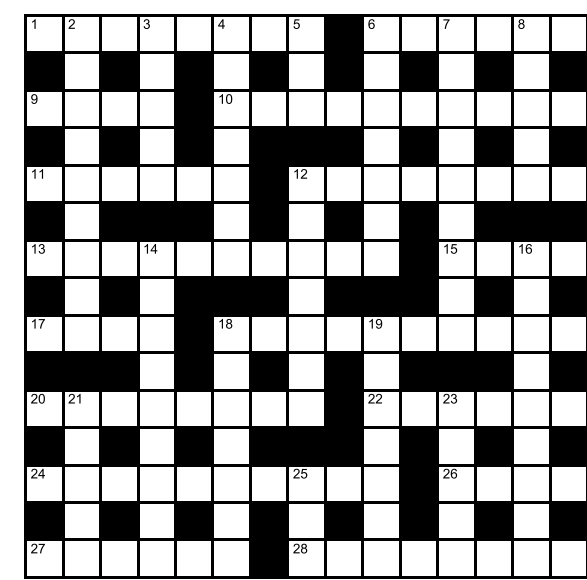
Govt. extends validity of FCRA registration of NGOs till June 30

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Union Home Ministry on Thursday extended the validity of the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA) registration of non-government organisations (NGOs) and associations till June 30. Registrations of many NGOs are up for renewal since September 29, 2020. The registration, mandatory to receive foreign funds, is renewed every five years. The Ministry has extended the validity of NGOs at least nine times since 2020 as the applications could not be processed within the stipulated time frame. On Thursday, the Ministry, in an order, said the registration certificates of entities whose validity was extended till March 31 and "whose renewal application is pending will stand

extended till June 30, 2024, or till the date of disposal of renewal application, whichever is earlier". The Ministry said all FCRA-registered associations should note that in case of refusal of the application for renewal of registration, the validity of the certificate shall be deemed to have expired on the date of refusal of the application and the association or the NGO shall not be eligible either to receive the foreign contribution or utilise the foreign contribution received. The order said that the registration of FCRA entities whose five-year validity period is expiring between April 1 and June 30 this year and the NGOs that have applied for renewal before the expiry of the registration will also stand extended till June 30 "or till the date of disposal of renewal application, whichever is earlier."

THE CROSSWORD+ 14136 (set by Gussalufz)
To solve this puzzle online, get across to our crossword site. @ <https://qrqo.page.link/jjpTn>



- Across**
1 Video conference or phone displaying a cat or dog's rendering? (8)
6 Angel, he's back penning hip-hop! (6)
9 To an extent, get along with others (2,2)
10 Beverage in bar with name and class (10)
11 Baby, it's irrational with ultimately increasing rent (6)
- Down**
2 Show me everything post-intro, you idiot box (3,4,2)
3 Zero Lactobacillus acidophilus initially found in milk oddly containing 58.44 grams salt per kilogram, say (5)
4 Stiff resistance to biosynthesised cocaine (7)
5 Alluring party-thrower kills guests at the end (3)
6 Small-time criminal finally caught by exhausted security using charm (7)
7 Gauge again malfunctioning? A mere surge?? No good! (9)
8 TV show episode storyline captivates one (5)
12 Bear eating a bit of lunch with honey, essentially to become bigger (7)
14 Isn't Kali bubbling with energy and angelic! (9)
16 Indian spies probing vendor unfortunately in trouble with the bank (9)
18 "Also, hand joint," said tripping person (7)
19 Winslet so humbly rejected guards, accommodations (7)
21 Low interest EMI's terms ensnare poor nun (5)
23 After taking top off, cleaned and pressed (5)
25 State-owned radio broadcast (3)

SUDOKU

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

DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★☆☆☆

Solution to previous puzzle

T	Y	R	A	N	N	S	M	A	S	H	E	D		
A	J	O	A	E	H	V								
F	O	O	F	F	E	N	T	I	M	E	S			
U	I	D	T	A	B	R								
U	N	C	O	L	E	X	C	L	O	D	E	S		
D	E	N	E	I	S									
V	E	R	B	O	S	I	T	I	T	S	C	O	T	S
E	I	H												
A	T	A	L	I	T	O	D	O	L	I	S	T	S	
E	S	M	N	P	L	I	T	S						
S	M	A	R	I	L	I	S	C	L	E	V	E	R	
T	A	M	P	O	N	E	I							
A	B	O	V	E	B	O	A	R	D	S	C	O	W	
E	I	A	N	E	U	P								
I	D	I	A	M	I	N	A	S	P	E	R	S	E	

Solution to yesterday's Sudoku

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

FAITH
God, the ultimate refuge

One of the 12 Azhwars, Sri Kulasekara, is suffixed with the title Perumal and called Kulasekara Perumal. His work Thirumozhi is called Perumal Thirumozhi. Kulasekara Azhwar's poems are devotional in nature, being dedicated to the most prominent avatars of Lord Vishnu like Rama and Krishna. Sri Bharathan Swamy said in discourse that the Azhwar emphasised that God alone is the ultimate refuge. In all verses in the Vth decad, he expressed his helplessness and said he had no other recourse for succour than Lord Narayana. The Azhwar says: "I have no other go if you fail to wipe out my sorrows. Even if a mother pushes her child for disobedience, he will hold her feet crying. So do I." "I cling to you like a wife who holds on to her husband irrespective of his attitude. Like citizens expect their king to save them as their only protector, I look upon you." "I am like a patient who still loves his surgeon for curing illness despite his piercing with sharp instruments and causing pain." "A bird that slept on a ship's mast when it started, woke up in the mid-sea and tried to search for the shore. Seeing nowhere near, it returned to the mast. I am like that bird." "Like all rivers confluence in the ocean, you are my final destination. Even if it does not rain, the standing crops will look upon the sky to pour and give relief. I yearn for your divine grace." Those who recite this Vth decad will not go to hell, will not have rebirth and will derive His blessings.



A balancing act

The year's fiscal deficit target seems achievable despite a spike in February

The Centre's fiscal deficit, or the gap between the Union Government's receipts and expenditure, has widened sharply from about ₹11 lakh crore by January to ₹15 lakh crore at the end of February. This represents the deficit moving up from 63.6% of the revised target of ₹17.3 lakh crore to 86.5% within 29 days. This is a significantly bumpier trajectory compared with last year – the deficit target was ₹17.55 lakh crore in 2022-23, it stood at 67.6% of target by January and reached 82.6% in February when the deficit rose ₹2.3 lakh crore. Eventually, last year's fiscal gap was ₹17.33 lakh crore, virtually the same as this year's goal. A couple of factors partially explain the February deficit spurt. One, the Centre transferred around ₹2.15 lakh crore to States through two instalments of their tax devolution share, as opposed to just ₹1.4 lakh crore last year. Second, capital expenditure which had slumped to ₹47,600 crore this January, was scaled up to ₹84,400 crore, over four times February 2023's capex outlay. Capex will have to further rise to ₹1.4 lakh crore in March to meet the government's ₹10 lakh crore target, but the implementation of the Model Code of Conduct for the Lok Sabha polls mid-way through the month could temper the number a bit.

As a proportion of GDP, the deficit last year stood at 6.4% and this year's original target was 5.9% that Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman revised to 5.8% in the interim Budget last month. The government has committed to narrow it to 4.5% of GDP by 2025-26, with a 5.1% target for 2024-25. This glide path may need some recalibration in the full Budget for the year after the general election, depending on the next government's priorities and the state of the economy over the current and next quarter. Having sought to prop up growth through public capex since the COVID-19 pandemic, the Centre is hoping private investment shifts to the driving seat, but high inflation, a bad monsoon and uneven consumption demand cloud those hopes. On the revenue spending front, the government still had ₹6 lakh crore of spending room available for March. Just three critical people-centric ministries – Agriculture, Rural Development and Consumer Affairs – still had over ₹1.03 lakh crore of firepower left for the last month of this fiscal despite their planned spends being revised in February. It is quite plausible that some Ministries will miss their targets and yield a positive surprise on the full-year deficit number. Tightening the belt is good for macroeconomic health, but persistently missing spending goals compromises intended outcomes and signals that there is scope to plan outlays better and borrow less in coming years.

Flight from fatigue

The DGCA must ensure regulatory norms are enforced for safety

The move by the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) in January this year to introduce changes to flight duty time limitations (FDTL) would have been a much-needed regulatory step to address the industry issue of fatigue in a professional and scientific manner, or manage what crew call the burden of the red-eye flight. By dictating more rest time for pilots, redefining night duty and even directing airlines to file regular fatigue reports, the rules were to have been implemented no later than June 1. Instead, a large section of the managements of India's airlines, most in private hands, only saw red. In a discordant development this week, the DGCA quietly inked a copy of the revised Civil Aviation Requirements (CAR) which said that scheduled air transport operators 'may continue to operate in compliance with CAR Section 7 Series J Part III dated 24th April 2019 till approval of their respective scheme in compliance with this CAR'. Read in perspective, it meant this: airline economics had blanketed out safety. As highlighted in the media, a federation of Indian airlines had sought a postponement of the rules by pushing the line that the new norms would necessitate the hiring of between 15% to 25% more pilots over a 10-month period and could even result in a nearly 20% cancellation of flights during the peak summer season. But, as a number of aviation experts point out, with the DGCA now willingly lowering a safety net, pilots will continue to face fatigue-related issues.

In the early 1950s, recognising the need to limit flight and duty hours for the purpose of safety, the International Civil Aviation Organization established guidelines, under its Standards and Recommended Practices, which required the operator to ensure that fatigue did not endanger operations. Since then, the management of fatigue in the industry, especially in international operations, has evolved to include the adoption of Fatigue Risk Management Systems – which the DGCA is also planning – by tapping into scientific principles of fatigue management and aviation scheduling principles. The Indian aviation market, in the backdrop of a pilot shortage, is in high growth mode, and with increased flying flowing from an expanding route map, domestically and internationally, there are cases of the well-being of flight crew facing much stress. Ultra-long haul flying, with its own ecosystem of issues, is on the rise too with more widebody aircraft being inducted in India. Instead of taxiing back to holding point, the DGCA needs to demonstrate an independence where it will still ensure that regulatory norms are enforced and also aligned with the highest standards of safety, for flight crew and passengers deserve safer flying.

Bonds, big money and an imperfect democracy

The electoral bonds scheme that has been declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court of India, was supposed to end the financing of elections with black money. If this had happened, Indian politics would have been transformed with great benefit to the nation. After all, illegal finance results in the control of politics passing into its hands – and that subverts democracy. The electoral bonds made not an iota of difference to the way politics is conducted in India. Elections continue to be fought with an increasingly larger amount of illegal funds being spent by political parties and candidates.

Gap between the professed and the actual

The lesson is clear. If politics is undemocratic in content, no patchwork such as electoral bonds can make it democratic. Indian politics requires large sums of money since it has been largely hollowed out of its content and become formalistic. Elected leaders, mainly serving the interests of those who finance their elections, hardly represent the interests of their constituency. Vested interests, increasingly, have got themselves elected. What they profess and what they practice are different.

This gap between the professed and the actual undermines democracy since government is no longer an entity 'of the people, by the people and for the people'. The vast majority of people see that they hardly gain benefit from government policies while vested interests corner most of the gains from development. It is in the design of the policies – the packaging is cleverly done to make policies appear to be in the national interest. In fact, vested interests are defined as national interest. They take precedence over the interests of the marginalised sections.

For instance, if poverty, unemployment, ill health and poor educational standards persist, these are said to be natural and are left to market forces. Concessions are granted to businesses to provide these services through the market which results in the inability of the poor to afford them while simultaneously leading to growing disparities. Concessions also reduce the availability of resources with the public sector so that it is unable to provide these services at the requisite level. Inadequate public services hurt the interests of the marginalised sections. For instance, the recent Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) shows that 40% of children in the age group of 14 to 18 years are unable to read, write or do the level of math of standard two. They cannot acquire higher skills which could enable them to end their poverty. So, why does education not receive high priority? That is because in the top down model of development, resources are preempted by the elite.

Businesses, not satisfied with the gains that they make legally, resort to making them illegally



Arun Kumar

is a retired professor of Economics at Jawaharlal Nehru University, and the author of 'Understanding the Black Economy and Black Money in India' (2017)

using undeclared incomes which constitute the black economy. Illegality is systematic and systemic. But, that is only possible if policymaker and executive become party to the subversion of the systems. This is the triad that underlies black income generation.

It requires weak accountability by government personnel, which is at the root of the weakness of democracy in India and its hollowing out. This is reinforced by the broadly feudal mindset that is prevalent in society which leads to the individual's willingness to bow before authority rather than standing up to it. This is visible in the institutions that are supposed to uphold democracy.

Money and the election

Voting is often not based on a candidate's performance but on attributes such as caste, community and region. To win votes, political parties slice and dice the electorate along these lines. Vote banks are cultivated and the constituents bribed just prior to an election. Campaigning is conducted by paid workers and crowds are mobilised to attend rallies and meetings using money, transportation and food. Big rallies are held to overwhelm voters, for which posters and cutouts are required, musclemen hired and the media kept happy.

All this requires a lot of money – far more than the permitted election expenditure limit of ₹95 lakh for a big parliamentary constituency. People in the know say that it is more like ₹50 crore as the amount required. Thus, ₹49 crore a candidate has to be mobilised through illegal funds. Over and above this sum, a party spends large sums to organise its politics, run offices, and in mobilisation – again, most of it from illegal funds.

It is in this milieu that the electoral bonds scheme was introduced. The argument was that this scheme would enable political parties to get legitimate funds and that their dependence on illegal funds would decline. But, right from day one, the scheme drew criticism for being opaque since the electorate would not get to know who was financing a political party and why – for legitimate or illegal reasons. It enabled a bribe to be given in white for favours done. Since big sums could only be given by businesses and the rich, their influence and manipulations were expected to increase. The bonds could only be given to a political party and not to individuals. So, the individual continued to be in need of illegal funds. The party obtaining funds could use them for all kinds of purposes and not necessarily for elections, such as setting up offices or destabilising Opposition-led governments. Thus, the name electoral bonds was inappropriate.

Further, any amount of bribe could be given since the limit of 7.5% of profits was removed. Even loss-making firms could make a donation. Shell companies could be used, opening the door

for foreign firms to make donations. Even though the bonds had to be encashed within 15 days, they could be traded for 14 days and then given to the intended party. So, the entity buying the bond may not be the entity making the donation. In this case, the trail of funds and the identity of the donor were obscured.

Many of the donors did not realise that their identity would be revealed were the judiciary to declare the electoral bonds scheme to be unconstitutional. Only the experienced ones covered their tracks by making donations through shell companies or in cash. Their names may never be known. Finally, the contributions through the black money route continue, remaining the major source of funding for political parties. In effect, the electoral bonds scheme was only an additional avenue for funds that political parties received.

Cronyism uncovered

Even though the electoral bonds formed a fraction of the total funding requirement of political parties, data now made available unravels the character of Indian politics and elections. The data show that funds were given to political parties: for favours from policymakers; to escape prosecution for wrong doing, and as investment for the future. Under the last category, even political parties not in power receive funds. The first category enables a business to receive favours such as manipulation of policy or preferred treatment in policy implementation as in for example needing environmental clearance or getting a contract.

The second category is one where there is arm-twisting. Given how complex rules are, some violation of rules can be detected and prosecution initiated by agencies such as the Enforcement Directorate. The case can then drag on so that the process becomes the punishment. There are businesses that cut corners and it is easy to have them under pressure. There may be businesses that pay money just to escape harassment. The data provided by the State Bank of India shows the *quid pro quo* in the case of some of the donations made. More analysis could expose the money trail and the link with policy manipulation. This will also expose the criminality.

In a well-functioning democracy, where the political leadership is accountable, fighting an election would need neither big funding nor electoral bonds to be bought in secrecy. There would be no need of having to spend more than the expenditure limits set.

The electoral bonds scheme only highlights the growing weakness of Indian democracy. It could have worked in an ideal situation but then it would not have been required. It seems to have been designed to weaken the Opposition and democracy.

In a well-functioning democracy, fighting an election would need neither extravagant funding nor electoral bonds to be bought in secrecy

The human-dog relationship, conflict and coexistence

It seems that each news cycle brings with it a steady stream of gruesome, heart-wrenching stories that relate to human-street dog conflict. These are usually stories of people, often children, being attacked by street dogs, or of the mistreatment of dogs by humans. Familiar tropes such as "the dog menace" or "man's best friend" animate these discussions and capture public and media attention.

In turn, more complicated and nuanced accounts that pay fidelity to the socio-ecological complexity of human-dog relations remain ignored. How, then, can we resist these reactionary impulses and fruitfully build on the wealth of work in the fields of ecology, public health, canine ethology, and urban dynamics to come to a more sophisticated and integrated understanding of these issues?

Human-dog interactions

A starting point could be to appreciate that "newsworthy" incidents of dog biting, chasing, or mauling represent only a fraction of all human-dog interactions. Citizen-based research across various parts of India by ROH-Indies (University of Edinburgh), shows that a majority of people-dog interactions are mundane and unremarkable such as casual feeding, occasional petting and ignoring. While this is certainly not intended to downplay the gravity of conflict, it would pay to remind ourselves that extreme instances such as mauling cannot be taken to be representative of the overall human-dog relationship.

On the other side of the spectrum of opinions on human-dog co-existence is the equally problematic notion that dogs are inherently virtuous creatures who can do no wrong. Dogs, like all other animals, including human beings, are beings whose motivations cannot always be known to us. This means treating dogs as individuals with specific backgrounds and environments, rather than an undifferentiated



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population mass that is either good or bad.

The tragic passing of the high-profile businessman in Ahmedabad in October last year, and subsequent explosion of anti-dog sentiment in media and public discourse is an exemplary case in how this conflict can move to a different level.

It began with the supposed involvement of dogs that attacked him causing him to fall, to his affection for dogs, to the statement by the hospital that treated him, and, finally, statements by animal rights groups asking the media not to villainise dogs. Ultimately, it remains unclear how the incidents leading up to his fall panned out. Did the dogs chase him? Or were they barking at the sight of him fallen on the ground? The incident is an example of one where the same issues could come up again unless we pay due attention to the complexity of human-dog interactions in India.

Findings from a research study

Being mindful of these considerations which introduce different shades of grey can help us educate ourselves about the folly in holding black and white positions. Take for instance the arguments in favour of mass culling or the eradication of street dogs through other means such as confinement in 'shelters'. Culling is rarely an effective or workable solution to reduce conflict, and can be counterproductive, especially in the complex social and ecological conditions found in a place such as India.

A research study, 'Reorienting rabies research and practice: Lessons from India' published in the journal, *Nature* (2019), says, eradication can exacerbate the situation by triggering unpredictable ecological changes that may be unwelcome. In the United Kingdom, for instance, where street dogs were successfully eliminated through killing and removal, foxes have come to live in the ecological niches vacated by dogs in cities and towns. These foxes, and other animals

such as gulls which occupy similar niches, are now considered by some as pests and a nuisance, even attracting controversy around suspected attacks on children – in effect, simply reproducing many of the same old problems. What this study shows is that the different issues – rabies, bites, public feeding, nuisance – associated with dogs may need different responses.

Local context, relevant actions

In the face of such complexity, our energies must be geared toward improving our understanding of the drivers of different types of conflict to develop suitable interventions, rather than relying on silver bullet solutions that are rarely successful in building healthy societies.

In other words, what we need is a range of actions that are tailored to local contexts. Our ongoing research shows that this will have to include measures such as ensuring ready access to post-exposure treatment and anti-rabies vaccination for people; prevention of relocation or removal of local dogs, which then triggers the influx of new dogs and associated conflict; maintenance of neutered, vaccinated and socialised street dog populations in their localities so as to reduce incidents of conflict (such as those seen in South Mumbai and parts of Chennai, Bengaluru and New Delhi); better solid waste management as a way to control the 'carrying capacity' of known flash points such as garbage dumps; and, very crucially, public education programmes to teach people, both adults and children, how to safely interact with dogs.

Our cities and villages have always been sites where different species live together, without either harmony or conquest. In this context, we would do well to approach problems of human-dog conflict as one among other civic issues relating to how we live and share spaces safely with others.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Comments from overseas

Should India adopt an unflappable attitude? I do not think so (Editorial, "Easily provoked, March 29). Any sovereign nation would indeed find it intolerable for another country to comment on its internal affairs. Irrespective of whether the government's actions are right or wrong, the United States holds no

position to upbraid them.

Pratibha Sharma,
Chandigarh

The only quest

The first phase of the general election is drawing closer and it is an open secret that most politicians have only one burning desire – to be in power at any cost. How else does one explain politicians defecting

from one party to another?

Such politicians are neither truthful to the trust imposed in them by the innocent voter or to the parties under whose umbrella/banner they get elected. How will the nation grow if politicians are blinded only by power?

Balasubramaniam Pavani,
Secunderabad

Wasted meals

As the world's population grows, our challenge should not be on how to grow more food but to reduce food loss in a sustainable way ("Households across the world waste 1 billion meals a day, says UN report", March 29). It is an immediate need if we are to maximise the food we produce and to feed more.

There used to be a time when everything people could grow, such as banana or coconut, would be reused in some way. India needs a national mission to cut food wastage.

H.N. Ramakrishna,
Bengaluru

This is another global tragedy especially when a third of humanity faces food

insecurity. As it is not a rich country problem alone, countries like India should avoid wastage by improving public-private partnerships and encouraging NGO participation.

Dr. Thomas Palocaren,
Vellore, Tamil Nadu

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address.

GROUND ZERO



The Matuas go on a rally at Bongaon in North 24 Parganas district celebrating the Citizenship (Amendment) Rules. DEBASISH BHADURI



Wherever our MP (Shantanu Thakur) used to go, he would face the same question (When will the Rules be framed?) Now, we will win.

DEBABAS MONDAL
BJP president of the Bongaon organisation district,

worker who has worked with the Matuas for decades, says the sect, which was mostly a reform movement, has now been appropriated by the larger Hindutva fold. "Upper caste Bengalis came from Bangladesh before 1947-48. The Matuas, who were dependent on land and agriculture, came to India at a much later date," he points out.

For more than five years, the Matuas have been at the centre of the BJP's politics around the CAA. Prime Minister Narendra Modi began his campaign for the 2019 Lok Sabha polls in West Bengal by addressing a gathering at Thakurnagar. On March 27, 2021, the first day of polling for the State Assembly polls, he was at Orakandi in Bangladesh, the birthplace of Harichand Thakur.

The Trinamool Congress has not lagged behind. It recently nominated Mamatabala Thakur, the aunt of BJP MP Shantanu Thakur, to the Rajya Sabha. The party has also fielded Biswajit Das, a BJP legislator who defected to the Trinamool and has significant influence over Matua votes, to contest against Shantanu Thakur from the Bongaon Lok Sabha seat.

Debabas Mondal, the BJP president of the Bongaon organisation district, admits that the delay in framing the Rules had put the party in a difficult position. "Wherever our MP (Shantanu Thakur) used to go, he would face the same question (When will the Rules be framed?) Now, we will definitely win," he says.

As far as the issue of applying for citizenship on the portal is concerned, the BJP leader says the people are not "getting a proper way to apply". He explains that people will not require all the documents. "Any one of the documents will be enough," he says. On being asked why people who are already citizens and are availing themselves of all the privileges as citizens need to apply for citizenship, Debdas says, "It will wipe out the stigma that they are refugees."

Recently, *The Hindu* reported that a local priest may issue an "eligibility certificate" under the CAA to validate the religion of an applicant. Many in the Matua community feel that the membership cards issued by the All-India Matua Mahasangha may be used as a document to apply through the MHA portal. However, there are no reports of people applying for citizenship under the CAA through the portal. While there is a rush for membership cards, Krishna Thakur says leaders of the sect have discouraged their supporters from filling any form through the portal.

Fear and apprehension

Krishna Thakur believes that more than the issue of citizenship, the attempt to divide people on religious grounds is becoming more pronounced through the CAA and the Rules. He also questions the claims that everyone who crossed the border was persecuted along religious lines. "When the country (Pakistan) was partitioned, it was a matter of right (of rehabilitation) for those who had come (to India) from East Pakistan. Now, the CAA narrative has shifted from the rights-approach to giving something to a guest or outsider," he says.

While fear and apprehension have prevailed among different sections of people who have come from Bangladesh to India, there were no incidents of violence. However, when the CAA was passed in Parliament in 2019, the State witnessed arson and violence across several districts.

Mir Abdul Hashem, a trader from Bongaon, who exports and imports goods between Bangladesh and India, believes that the exercise is to target Muslims. "No one is a fool. The exercise is to create fear and panic among Muslims. We need to understand why the Rules were announced before the elections," he says. Muslims form 27.01% of the population of West Bengal.

The confusion surrounding the CAA is not limited to Bongaon. On March 21, a 31-year-old man in Kolkata died by suicide in south Kolkata's Netaji Nagar. His family members alleged that he was panic-stricken about the CAA and the new Rules. Netaji Nagar is among the many colonies in Kolkata where people from Bangladesh have settled over the last few decades. In a complaint letter to the Netaji Nagar police station, Tapan Sengupta, the man's father, wrote, "Since the announcement of the CAA, my son has been suffering from tremendous mental trauma and agony." The Trinamool leadership sent a five-member delegation to the house of the deceased and said that the Rules were creating panic.

Bibhas Chandra Saha, 77, a retired government employee, has been restless since the Rules were notified. He fears that he does not have the relevant documents to apply for citizenship. "Unlike many who stayed in refugee colonies, I stayed at the house of a relative in Jalpaiguri when I entered the country in 1964. I have a letter from the District Magistrate, but I don't think that will work," he says. Saha is not sure whether he should apply for citizenship or just wait and watch. "After so many years of staying in the country, applying for citizenship afresh is nothing but harassment," he contends.

Even if the lakhs of people like Saha who came from Bangladesh and settled in West Bengal decide whether they want to apply for citizenship or not, they have little clarity on the process, and whether the State government can stop it or slow it down. The Trinamool government has ruled out any need to apply for new citizenship under the CAA. As a result, there is no infrastructure in the State to help the people. As the political temperatures rise with the Lok Sabha polls drawing near, the CAA and the Rules pose more questions than answers for the people.

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*Those who require assistance for overcoming suicidal thoughts may contact ElioMind +91-1800-599-0019

The conundrum of citizenship

The Matuas, who have migrated from Bangladesh to India over the years, possess Aadhaar cards and voter identity cards, yet believe that the Citizenship (Amendment) Rules are necessary. For years, the BJP and the Trinamool have been competing to win the support of the sect. **Shiv Sahay Singh and Varghese K. George** report on the confusion regarding identity and statehood in West Bengal

Sadananda Biswas, 68, from West Bengal's North 24 Parganas district, breaks down while recalling his childhood at Faridpur district in Bangladesh. "Our house was set on fire before my own eyes. We had to run away from Bangladesh with nothing but what we were wearing," he says. Now, 10 days after the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) notified the Citizenship (Amendment) Rules, 2024, Sadananda, who belongs to the Matua sect, is relieved that his long wait for "authentic nationality" has finally come to an end.

The Matua sect comprising Namashudras or Dalits was set up by Harichand Thakur at Orakandi in Bangladesh in the mid-19th century, in order to question the practices of Brahminical Hinduism. Millions of Matuas have migrated to India both before and after the war in 1971 that liberated what was then East Pakistan from West Pakistan, laying the foundation of Bangladesh.

Wearing garlands of wooden beads, considered holy, around his neck, Sadananda stands outside the office of the All-India Matua Mahasangha, the headquarters of the Matua order, in Thakurnagar town in Bongaon. He has travelled about 35 kilometres from his village, Baghjhola, in Baduria, in preparation for the annual Matua mela, which was attended by about 20 lakh people last year. During the mela in April, the Matuas will offer prayers at the temple of Harichand Thakur and his wife Shantidevi, bathe in the nearby pond, and participate in *kirtan* (religious chanting and singing) for days.

Like the majority of the people from the Matua sect, Sadananda, a local trader of Ayurvedic medicines, has all the documents of Indian citizenship, including a voter identity card and Aadhaar. His older son is working in West Asia on an Indian passport. Yet, he believes that the Citizenship (Amendment) Rules are necessary. "It is not about what we get under the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA). It is about not allowing Muslims to keep coming to India," he says. "We fled Bangladesh because of persecution. Now, you want us to allow them to follow us here?"

Hindu or Matua?

Sustained politics over many decades by the Sangh Parivar and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and now the CAA, 2019, and the Citizenship (Amendment) Rules, are nudging more people like Sadananda to think of their identity.

"India should be a Hindu Rashtra," contends Nipa Biswas, a woman in her 40s, who also hails from Baghjhola and has come with him to the headquarters of the Matua Mahasangha.

The same sentiment is echoed by Manoj Gosai, an office-bearer of the Mahasangha, who is busy issuing pink slips to people gathered for member-



We fled Bangladesh because of persecution. Now, you want us to allow them (Muslims) to follow us here?

SADANANDA BISWAS
Member,
Matua sect

ship inside the office. "You know everything but you want me to say it. Muslims have not faced any religious persecution in the countries mentioned in the CAA. That is why the law does not allow them citizenship," says Manoj, who sports a white beard, a saffron towel, and a garland of wooden beads.

The CAA, which was passed by Parliament on December 11, 2019, facilitates citizenship to undocumented migrants belonging to six non-Muslim communities – Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi or Christian – from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, who entered India on or before December 31, 2014. The Rules were notified on March 11, 2024, coinciding with the birth anniversary of the founder of the Matua sect.

For Sadananda and Manoj, the CAA and the subsequent Rules are about establishing their identity and keeping Muslims at bay. However, they have no clear answers as to whether they consider themselves Hindu or Matua.

"I am a Matua first. But my religion is Sanatana Dharma. It is not a question of religion but identity. There are more than 3 crore Matuas across India," says Manoj. Others around him are not sure where they stand.

Sadananda says he lives his life according to the teachings of Harichand Thakur. "I am a Matua first and a Hindu later. We may be Hindus by religion, but Matua is our sect. For us, Harichand Thakur and Guruchand Thakur (son of Harichand Thakur) are our gods. Our prayers are answered here. Why should we not believe in

them," he says.

Applying for citizenship

The Matuas are euphoric over the CAA Rules being notified, but they are also confused about how to apply for citizenship. Drigen Biswas, a BJP booth president from Gopalganj in Bongaon, has been going around the office of the All-India Matua Mahasangha asking whether camps will be set up to help people fill in the CAA forms.

"Since the government wants us to apply, we will do so. But we will need a little help. We do not have the documents that the portal is asking for," he says. However, Drigen emphasises that the CAA will help the BJP in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections.

The Citizenship (Amendment) Rules specify several documents that are to be uploaded on an online portal (indiancitizenshiponline.nic.in/) in order to process the application. A sworn affidavit declaring the country of origin and date of entry into India along with an eligibility certificate to be issued by a locally reputed community institution certifying that a person follows one of the six faiths are mandatory.

Manoj says the process of filling in the forms should be simplified. "The Rules are welcome, but it is not possible for people who have been persecuted on religious lines to provide documents relating to their residence in another country," he says.

Sadananda says there are about 25-30 families from Bangladesh residing for decades at Baghjhola. All of them, too, are not sure how to apply for fresh citizenship through the MHA portal. "If the government wants us to apply through the portal, we will. But at this moment, how to apply is not our concern," he says.

Reaching out to the Matuas

The Rules have been the subject of debate, discussion, and also confusion in the political circles of West Bengal. Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, who reacted soon after the Rules were notified, said that Matuas will become refugees the moment they apply on the portal. "Those who are being asked to apply... the moment they apply, from becoming citizens they will become illegal refugees. What will happen to your properties, your jobs, and the studies of your children? Everything will be declared illegal," she said, while addressing a gathering on March 12 at Habra, located 15 km from Thakurnagar.

Bongaon BJP MP and Union Minister of State for Shipping and Waterways Shantanu Thakur, who hails from the family of the founders of the Matua sect, emphasised that the CAA is necessary. Hindu refugees from Bangladesh will have to suffer a fate like the Rohingyas if they do not apply through the MHA portal, he said. "In future, if there is a government that says as per the law, those who have entered the country after 1971 are not citizens and they and their children will be identified and driven out, can Mamata Banerjee save them? The Rohingyas have been driven out. Has she been able to do anything," he asked.

The Minister added he would apply for citizenship under the CAA to counter the "false propaganda" of the Trinamool. While BJP leaders have maintained that the CAA and the Rules are not meant to take away anyone's citizenship, Banerjee said that the CAA will lead to a National Register of Citizens (NRC), like in Assam, and the establishment of "concentration camps".

The Matua community has a considerable influence not only in the Bongaon Lok Sabha constituency, but also in nearly half a dozen Lok Sabha seats in areas bordering West Bengal and Bangladesh. Both the BJP and the Trinamool are trying to win the support of the community.

Kapil Krishna Thakur, an author and social

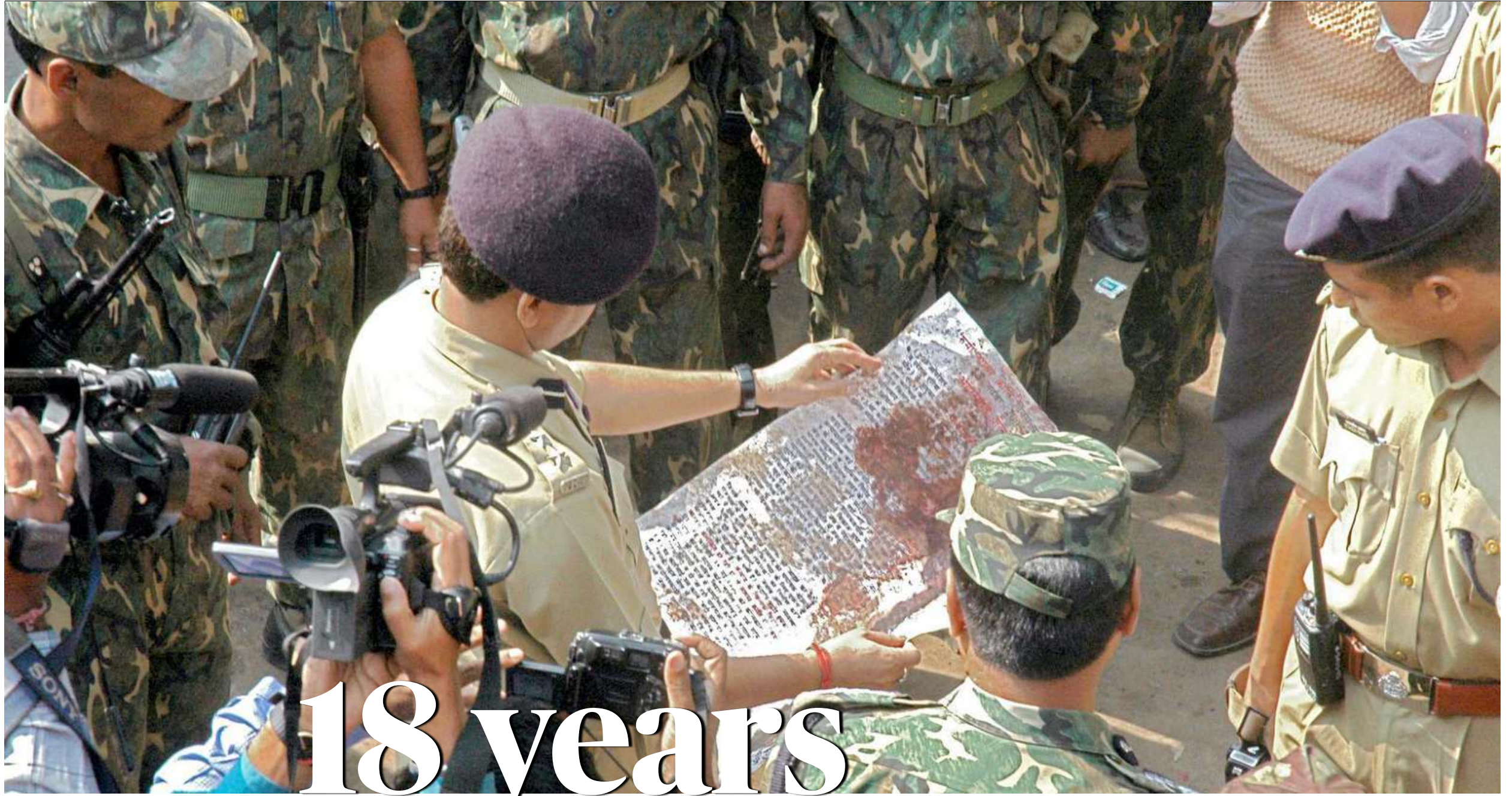


Sadananda Biswas, a resident of Baduria in North 24 Parganas, believes that the Citizenship (Amendment) Rules are necessary. DEBASISH BHADURI



North 24 Parganas

BIHAR



18 years after India's biggest jailbreak

Ajay Kanu, once a Naxal leader who allegedly instigated the prison escape in Bihar, today claims he focuses on children's education. **Amarnath Tewary** meets the once dangerous man, who has a lingering regret about the bloodshed in the 1990s and early 2000s, and revolutionary politics itself

Ajay Kanu, 56, looks like any other middle-class man walking down a road in Bihar's capital, Patna. He's in blue jeans, black sports shoes, and a checked polycot shirt. He sports a bit of a middle-aged belly, and his spectacled, mildly pudgy face does not conform to the stereotype of a dangerous Naxal laughing in death's face.

"It was in prison that I learnt who I was," says Kanu, who has been a free man for a couple of years now, having served 18 years in several jails in the State. The erstwhile Naxal commander, accused in 50 cases of murder, today looks upon the world with forgiveness and some faith.

In 2005, Kanu, alias Sao, or the more sedate Raviji, was the reason behind the Jehanabad jailbreak that led to 389 prisoners, including several Maoists and hardcore criminals, escaping. Nearly a dozen people were killed and about half a dozen injured; police rifles and bullets were looted. The strength of the overcrowded Jehanabad jail at the time was 659; the official capacity was 140.

An officer, who later became Bihar's Inspector General (IG) of Police in the early 2000s, says hundreds, both upper caste people and peasants, were killed in caste massacres in the 1990s and early 2000s. "Infamously known as the 'killing fields' or 'flaming fields', law and order in central Bihar — Jehanabad, Gaya, Aurangabad, Bhojpur, Arwal — was severely compromised."

The main challenge for the police were the guerrilla warfare tactics that Naxals used, blowing up police vehicles and extorting money from private companies involved in construction. Their armed squads, sometimes supported by politicians, moved through the thick jungles of Jamui, Sasaram, Gaya, and Nawada, pitching their camps and planning attacks.

Towards the latter half of the 2000s, the Naxals shifted their base to the neighbouring Jharkhand districts.

The year of the Jehanabad jailbreak, Bihar recorded 13.4% of all crimes against Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, the third highest in the country. Patna recorded the highest cases of murder, robbery, and dacoity among cities.

Breaking out

On November 13, 2005, at 9.05 p.m., the first bomb exploded, not far from the jail. "A signal to fellow incarcerated Maoists that their comrades had come to release them," says Kanu. This was the same month that the Bolshevik party had seized power in Russia in 1917.

In Jehanabad, about 1,000 armed Maoists besieged the jail, just 70 km from Patna, for over two hours. Then the piercing sounds of more bombs and bullets cut through the quiet of the town whose electricity had been cut off. The land around the jail and the roads leading to the na-



The oppressor who beat my father to death was killed by Maoist cadre. I left my village to be with them, their ideologies. You can kill a man, but you cannot kill an ideology

AJAY KANU
Former Naxal leader



Ajay Kanu. AMARNATH TEWARY

tional highway were carpeted with landmines. Every police picket was garrisoned. Soon, Kanu remembers, the jail was opened. "We just walked out; we didn't even run."

The senior police officer, who was involved in the probe, says Kanu was thrown an AK-47 that he used to kill two commanders of the Ranvir Sena, the upper caste militia group at loggerheads with the Maoists in central Bihar at the time.

The foot soldiers, wearing bathroom slippers and oversized police uniforms, appealed over microphones to the town's residents to "remain indoors" as "we have no quarrel with the public, only with the *prashasan* (administration)". People heard the sounds of crude 'cane' bombs (in milk cans) and gunfire, interspersed with dreadful silence. "If the deaf were to hear, the sound had to be very loud," says Kanu.

Bihar was under President's Rule and the State Assembly election was on. Much of the police force was away on election duty, so stealing arms and ammunition was easy. The operation was executed by the People's Liberation Guerrilla Army (India), a militant underground unit of the Communist Party of India (Maoist), of which Kanu was the commander. The jail remained open until dawn the next day, for all to go and come freely. By the following month though, 269 prisoners returned of their own accord, but the Maoist cadre and Ranvir Sena members didn't.

"It is the duty of revolutionaries to help the oppressed and free their cadre even by storming a jail," says Kanu, sipping *kum-cheeni-waali* chai (low-sugar tea) at a roadside stall on a muggy day. Crowds bustle around. "I'm diabetic now," he says, wryly, adding that he also has high blood pressure. His mind is alert though, and movements quick, always watchful of his surroundings. Over the years, he has been acquitted in most cases. "Very soon, I'll be acquitted in the remaining six, and I'll be a free man," he says.

The formative years

Kanu hails from Chauhar village, Arwal district, 34 km from Jehanabad. He comes from the Extremely Backward Classes (EBC), a clutch of communities that in Bihar's 2022-23 caste survey forms 36.01% of the State's population. "I want to work for the development and upliftment of 110 castes under this category," he says.

Recently, he sold a part of his agricultural land in his village so his children could go to good colleges. His son is in a polytechnic, studying a technology-related course, and his daughter is working towards becoming a nurse.

After the jailbreak, the police demolished his house in the village. He now lives in an unpretentious but spacious house on Patna's periphery, next to the bypass road. His wife, Sharda Devi, looks after the household.

His late father, Phagu Prasad, was a marginal farmer. "My father was more leftist than farmer. He has been the biggest influence in my life," says Kanu, wiping his golden-framed glasses, and putting them back neatly on his face. "When I was in school and used to massage his tired legs at night, he would tell me stories about Bhagat Singh, Mao Tse-tung, Che Guevara, and the Rus-



(Top) A police officer looks at a bloodstained pamphlet left by the Naxals who attacked the Jehanabad jail in 2005; and the town's residents through the prison. FILE PHOTOS

sian Revolution," he remembers. Kanu's father was part of the Communist Party of India (CPI) in the 1980s and later started participating in ultra-left underground activity. "In fact, he indoctrinated me into ultra-left ideologies," reminisces Kanu, a graduate in History from Jehanabad's Swami Sahjanand College.

In college, Kanu says he was keen on sports, and won college championships in long jump, high jump, and running events. He got involved in student politics and was elected as college president from the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), the student wing of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). He was soon disillusioned with right-wing ideologies because of the "divisionary politics of the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) and the RSS".

For financial independence after he graduated in 1989, he started a coaching institute called Navin Bal Vidya Niketan in Jehanabad's Professor's Colony, but had to shut it down after what he calls "treachery" from the upper caste owner of the space he was running it from.

The journey into Maoism

A series of events upset Kanu. First, he says, the village strongman got his brother and cousin killed in a petty dispute. "I was falsely implicated in the case. Then my father was beaten to death in a land dispute by another village strongman and his men in February 1994; again I was implicated. But by that time, I had started taking part in underground meetings of Maoists in the area."

"The oppressor who beat my father to death was killed by Maoist cadre. I left my village to be with them, their ideologies. You can kill a man, but you cannot kill an ideology," philosophises Kanu, truce gleaming through his puckish smile. His understanding of the ideology, an athletic body, and the capacity to quickly learn about weapons, helped him quickly rise through the ranks in a couple of years. He was made a member of the central committee of the Maoists, whose operations spanned States such as Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, Jharkhand, and Chhattisgarh. Soon, he was made an area commander of the banned organisation, which is still in existence.

"Our fight was against oppressors, who at that time were landlords and zamindars. The Ranvir Sena would not spare women and children, but we [the Maoists] would only target able-bodied men," says Kanu, whose name by that time began to be used as a way of keeping people indoors.

The State police announced a reward of ₹3 lakh to bring in Kanu. On August 28, 2002, he was arrested from Patna's Bailey road when his wife was expecting their first child.

He says he was "tortured for 24 hours" by the police. A senior police officer who interrogated him says, "He was a very tough nut to crack."

He was later shifted to the Jehanabad jail, where he read books and organised fellow inmates, demanding better living conditions and food, and speaking out against corruption by jail officials. He soon earned the respect of his fellow inmates and was feared by jail officials.

He also sat on hunger strikes inside the jail to "press for his demands", which eventually got the prison inmates access to better food, living conditions, and facilities such as telephone, television, and medical care, he says.

Before and after the jailbreak

"Once I had a severe toothache and asked the jail authorities to shift me to Patna for better medical attention. The then District Magistrate (DM) visited the jail ward and humiliated me," he says. He told the DM that he would get out of jail.

"We should have killed him [in an encounter] three years before 2005, when we arrested him in 2002," says the senior police officer, who was involved in the initial arrest.

After the jailbreak, Kanu says, "I went to an abandoned *kothi* (large stand-alone house) in a village in Jehanabad, from where I escaped on a vehicle inside the jungle." The police had announced a ₹5-lakh reward on him, and in 2007, he was re-arrested from the Burdwan railway station in West Bengal, while on his way to Gaya from Bokaro in Jharkhand, and shifted to Patna's Beur central jail. He came out of jail in 2019, but was arrested again in what he says is a false case, and shifted to the high-security Bhagalpur jail. The Naxal leader was finally a free man in 2022.

That year, Kuldiep Singh, the then Director-General of the Central Reserve Police Force, said at a press conference that Bihar was free of left-wing extremism (LWE), and that the struggle against the Naxals was in its final stages.

Last year, the Union Minister of State for Home Affairs, Nityanand Rai, told Parliament that the number of LWE-related deaths had reduced from 1,005 in 2010 to 98 in 2022.

Through the conversation, Kanu gets many calls. After one, he is angry: "My blood boils, and I think of returning to the jungle with a gun in hand again." A labourer was killed by someone with more money and power.

The Jehanabad jailbreak story was the subject of a web series, *Jehanabad — Of Love & War*, which began streaming online from February 2023. Kanu was consulted, but he says the final product was bizarre.

He's sure he never wants to join politics, though he claims almost all the major parties have approached him. To run his home, he operates as a small-time *thekedar* (contractor), but wants to reopen the coaching institute.

"Those days were regrettable. Now, I want to concentrate on education."

KERALA



Water woes in Kuttanad wetland

The region in Kerala, famous for cultivating paddy below the sea level, is reeling under a severe drinking water crisis caused by water pollution, high salinity, and changing weather patterns.

Hiran Unnikrishnan and **Sam Paul A.** travel to the region that spans 62 grama panchayats in Kottayam, Alappuzha, and Pathanamthitta districts to understand the issue up close

Anarrow, broken road runs alongside Nattuthodu, a canal clogged with water hyacinth and mucky water. It leads to the 1,100-acre Ayyanad paddy polder, where golden yellow rice plants are almost ripe for harvest, in Pulinkunnu grama panchayat in Kuttanad region, Alappuzha. After working under the relentless sun, a small group of visibly exhausted labourers, some with muddy legs, have gathered on the veranda of their co-worker P. Shantha's small single-storey house to catch their breath.

The middle-aged woman goes inside, returning with a jug of water and a couple of steel mugs. In a hushed tone, she says, "If the supply does not arrive, we will run out of drinking water by the evening."

Shantha's four-member family has been relying on private water supply for several years for drinking and cooking, whether in the rainy season or summer. There is no well or piped water system in the region.

"Despite having plenty of water around, in the form of canals and lake, it's not fit for consumption. Every fortnight, we spend ₹500 to buy 500 litres of drinking water that is delivered on a goods carrier from Changanassery, 18 km away. For all other purposes including washing clothes, utensils, and bathing, we use the contaminated water from local water sources. There is no other choice," explains Shantha.

Almost everyone in Pulinkunnu and nearby Kavalam has similar stories. With public taps running dry and water supply by local governments irregular, people are forced to spend anywhere between ₹1,000 and ₹3,000 a month on drinking water. Plastic water tanks, ranging from 3,000 to 5,000 litres, placed along the roadside, serve as a stark reminder of the severity of the situation.

The Kuttanad wetland system, part of the Vembanad wetland system, is famous for cultivating paddy below sea level on land created by draining delta swamps in brackish waters. The farming system was declared a Globally Important Agricultural Heritage System (GIAHS) by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) over a decade ago.

As Kuttanad, known for idyllic backwaters, rivers, canals, and vast paddy fields, faces the dire consequences of changing weather patterns, for the people of the region who live across 62 grama panchayats in Alappuzha, Kottayam, and Pathanamthitta districts, fluctuating weather patterns, alternating between torrential downpours and drought, and intrusion of saline water from the sea are at the forefront. Adding to their woes is the worsening drinking water problem caused by water pollution, high salinity, and drought.

Waiting for water

Country boats carrying water-filled tanks sailing across Vembanad Lake and goods carriers transporting potable water are a common sight. Packaged drinking water is in high demand in Kuttanad.

At Hotel Deepus, near Mini Civil Station in Mankombu village, Alappuzha district, a dozen



Kuttanad has some sort of water distribution infrastructure but lacks quality water sources. The lack of waste management in Kuttanad and surrounding areas is intensifying water pollution in the region. Natural waterbodies need to be revived.

JIBIN THOMAS
Coordinator,
MSSRF, Kuttanad
centre

20-litre cans filled with water are on display by the main door. "It will all be sold in no time," says Narayanan K., the 80-year-old owner of the restaurant.

After the devastating 2018 floods, many water sources in Kuttanad taluk in Alappuzha district, such as ponds, wells, and rainwater harvesting pits, were destroyed or left unusable. Recurring floods exacerbate the situation. While residents blame the government for failing to ensure drinking water supply in the region, experts point out the lack of proper waste management in various sectors including water transport, houseboat tourism, and agriculture, which contribute to pollution in Kuttanad. Absence of efficient water management is also an issue.

"Kuttanad receives an average of 250-300 cm of rainfall annually. Still, the region is water-starved," says Jibin Thomas, coordinator at the M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) Kuttanad centre. Thomas blames the crisis on a lack of coordination in water conservation and management.

"Kuttanad has some sort of water distribution infrastructure but lacks quality water sources. The lack of waste management in Kuttanad and surrounding areas is intensifying water pollution in the region. Natural waterbodies need to be revived. A dual water supply system should be introduced with one source designated for drinking and the other for other purposes," he says.

People parched

While the people of Kuttanad taluk are concerned about the lack of quality drinking water, the scenes from upper Kuttanad in Kottayam and Pathanamthitta are rare in mid-summer; in early March, they are unprecedented.

A long line of country boats is stranded on the desiccated brown banks of a canal running through Chungathu Muppathu, a village on the

banks of the Kottayam-Alappuzha boat channel. The landscape surrounding the waterbody is arid: The absence of rain has caused water to evaporate and the land to crack. When the water level in the canal drops far enough, people have few options. They can pay indefinitely for water delivery services on country boats or wait for the tap water.

In her 77 years of living here, Mary Joseph of Akampadathu House, Chungathu Muppathu, Kottayam district, has never witnessed anything like it. Amidst this punishing heat, she finds herself unable to draw water even from the muddy canal in front of her house.

"Everything is dry, brown, and very sad," she remarks. On alternate mornings, she despatches her grandson, Albin, on a country boat with a few vessels to draw water from a public tank located on the opposite side of the Kottayam-Alappuzha boat channel. When the young man in his early 20s arrives at the spot, he's not alone. All 35 families residing on the other side of the boat channel will rely on this single tap this summer.

"Drawing water has been quite a struggle this year. Unlike previous years, we do not have access to the water in the canals, which are generally used for bathing and washing clothes," Mary adds, alluding to the dry waterbodies.

According to Prasad, who operates a petty shop near a footbridge that grants access to the other bank of the boat channel, the recent heat-wave has exacerbated the situation.

The load on agriculture

For most of the monsoon in 2023, C.G. Muraliedharan, a 58-year-old paddy farmer from Malarikkal village, an emerging destination known for its water lily flowering season, remained optimistic. However, compared to the average rainfall of the area, there was a decrease by 35% in 2023. Aside from only a handful of days, the flow in the Meenachil river and its connected canals was at a historic low.

But the farmer believed things will soon return to normal. "I thought the lack of water would be temporary," he says. But without rain, the water evaporated, and the land cracked.

Historically, access to water in Malarikkal had never been an obstacle in this low-lying patch of land, which lies between the Meenachil and Kodoor rivers. Cultivating paddy twice a year is a way of life for those living here, and their primary concern, for a long time, has been to control the excess water gushing from upstream.

Muraliedharan realised the full extent of what he was about to lose only by the second half of February 2024 when his 50-acre rice fields did not turn their usual luxuriant green. "The unrelenting sun has scorched and stunted my paddy in several acres," he laments.

There is still a month left for the crop to be harvested, but Muraliedharan is uncertain how much of his crop will survive this prolonged heat.

People's plight: Prasad, a resident of Chungathu Muppathu in upper Kuttanad, enters the Kottayam-Alappuzha channel on a country boat with vessels full of drinking water collected from a public tap. VISHNU PRATHAP

As the drought intensifies over upper Kuttanad, the entire local economy has been affected. Fishing, agriculture, livestock, and even toddy tapping are all suffering in the region. "Even the coconut trees are running dry. The yield per tree has decreased to less than a litre per day against the average volume of 1.5 litres. The tappers are struggling to meet their daily quota of 5 litres," says Saneesh Mohan, who runs a toddy shop near Paral, Changanassery.

"It's always a tricky balance," explains K.G. Padmakumar, Director of the International Research and Training Centre for Below Sea Level Farming in Kuttanad. According to him, the first sign of a failing well tends to be linked with the falling water level in Vembanad Lake.

Possible solutions

"While closing the Thanermukkom bund (Thaneremukkom barrage was constructed across Vembanad Lake between Thaneremukkom in Alappuzha and Vechur in Kottayam to prevent the intrusion of brackish water into Kuttanad), we should follow the water cycle instead of the calendar. This year, the bund was closed in December, but during low tide. This has significantly affected the water level not just in Vembanad Lake but the entire landscape," he points out.

As of March 4, the water level above sea level in the lake system stood at 25 cm compared to 38 cm recorded during the same period last year. "The early summer rains, which should have begun in the first half of March, too are missing this time," he adds.

Although the region faces an acute shortage of safe drinking water, the Kuttanad drinking water scheme, launched in 1973 to provide water to people in 13 grama panchayats in Kuttanad taluk, remains an unfinished project. Last year, the government accorded administrative sanction for the revised estimate of the project. The ₹387.91-crore Kerala Infrastructure Investment Fund Board-aided project being implemented in six phases, however, is making slow progress. The proposed water distribution network includes a 46.2-km main supply line and 895 km of sub-main and branch lines.

With traditional water sources declining and people struggling to access clean water, experts at the MSSRF and the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE), a Bengaluru-based non-profit organisation, suggest setting up rainwater harvesting systems extensively to deal with the water crisis. An expert team from IIT Bombay, which surveyed the Kuttanad region a few years ago, also called for a decentralised water supply alternative like rainwater harvesting system to address the acute water shortage experienced by the region.

"Rainwater harvesting systems are ideal for the unique landscape of Kuttanad. They are easy to maintain and can also help during floods. The government should prioritise the installation of rainwater harvesting systems," says Jojo T.D., project manager at ATREE, Alappuzha unit.

ATREE has installed 580 rainwater harvesting units with the support of LIC Housing Finance Ltd, benefiting around 1,700 households. MSSRF has installed around 150 units ranging in size from 10,000 to 50,000 litres.

It last rained in parts of upper Kuttanad a few days ago, although the nearly half-hour showers that fell evaporated almost immediately on contact with the parched earth. Before that, the region hadn't seen any rain since January. As the land dangerously dries up, people desperately wait for the summer rains to arrive. But the skies remain a vivid, cloudless blue, at least for now. Shantha and others living on the banks of Nattuthodu, meanwhile, pin their hopes on the Kuttanad drinking water scheme to get access to clean water.



A lifeline: Drinking water being filled into tanks from a pumping station at Nedumudi in Kuttanad taluk, Alappuzha, for distribution in other parts of the taluk. SURESH ALLEPPEY



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A 'krishi honda' (pond) at Bhuvanahalli near Hoskote, which farmers have set up to collect water from borewells and ponds, and pump to agricultural fields. But it's dry because of water scarcity. BHAGYA PRAKASH K.



Farmers Krishnamurthy and his wife Varalakshmi speak about the water crisis in Chickballapur district. BHAGYA PRAKASH K.



Owing to the scarcity of water, tomato crop has perished in some areas in Kolar district. BHAGYA PRAKASH K.

Heat and drought wilt vegetable cultivation

Villages of Hoskote, Kolar, and Chickballapur in Karnataka have traditionally ensured a good supply of vegetables to Bengaluru, but the drought has shrunk the area under cultivation, and standing crops are withering. **Jahnvi T.R.** visited the vegetable-growing areas to understand the ground realities

Patches of green followed by patches of brown dominate the scene through the villages of Hoskote taluk, a major horticultural crop supplier to Bengaluru, situated roughly 35 kilometres from the city centre. Cabbage, tomato, sunflower, marigold, and maize are among the crops grown in the fields adjacent to the highway, but on a scorching March morning, half the fields are dry and barren.

While drought has hit the drinking water supply to Bengaluru, the dry season affecting the horticulture belt around the city has burnt a hole in the pockets of consumers in the last year as prices of vegetables soar, with withering crops and the resultant supply crunch.

The Hindu visited this belt – Hoskote in Bengaluru Rural district, a couple of taluks in Kolar and Chikkaballapur districts – to find out how badly agriculture is affected and whether what Bangaloreans are shelling out for their vegetables is reaching the farmers who are struggling to keep their crops alive.

Failed borewells

The locals say Nandagudi and Sulibele hoblis in Hoskote are the most water-deprived regions in the taluk. The nearby lake, which, when filled up, provides irrigation, has now completely dried up. Their only other source of water is the borewells. But with the monsoons failing in 2023 and most borewells going dry, many

farmers sank more borewells in their fields, only to find no water.

B.N. Anand is one such farmer. "I got two borewells – going down 1,150 feet and another 1,200 feet – drilled in my field this time. Both of them failed, and after having spent ₹7 lakh on borewells and motors, I could not get even one extra drop of water," Anand lamented. Apart from some patches of maize and banana, his vast field of over 10 acres barely had any signs of greenery. He said cultivation had dropped by about 50% in Hoskote.

"Across Hoskote, lakes have dried up, and borewells are failing. We are major producers of vegetables, flowers, and, most prominently, ginger. In a good season, the farmers around here cultivate ginger on at least 40-50 acres. This time, the crop is spread over hardly 25 acres. This is the same case with all other crops," Anand explained.

While water tankers have become part of everyday conversation in Bengaluru, some farmers are also spending a small fortune on them to save their standing crops. Venu B.C. has cultivated green grapes on two acres in Sulibele hobli. After his borewells failed, he is getting four tanker loads every day.

"Usually, in summer, I get around 15 tonnes in



I got two borewells – going down 1,150 feet and another 1,200 feet – drilled in my field this time. Both of them failed, and after having spent ₹7 lakh on borewells and motors, I could not get even one extra drop of water.

B.N. ANAND
Hoskote farmer

yield and during the rainy season, I get around 25 tonnes. This time, I will be lucky if I get around 10 tonnes. If I do not get water tankers, then I will lose even that. I pay ₹550 for one water tanker, and I need four of them in a day. The fruits will not ripen or get their colour without water. The bunches will also be loose (fewer grapes in the bunch) without enough water," Venu said.

Most farmers across the belt have farm ponds (open sumps) in their fields where they collect whatever water they can get from their borewells or the rains. Water comes into some borewells only once in two or three days, and the farmers store water at such times. This is the only water source for Ramakrishna, a farmer in Sidlaghatta taluk in Chikkaballapur district. In his 20 acres of land, he has cultivated tomatoes in just ten guntas (40 guntas make an acre).

"I have so many wells in my field that are all dried up. We used to get water at just 50-60 feet in those wells. My cultivation has gone down year after year as the water availability kept getting worse. For now, with the water I have stored in the sump, I am growing some vegetables and feeding my animals, but if this situation continues, then next year, I will have nothing," he said. Farmers in Chikkaballapur grow tomatoes,

beans, carrots, green leafy vegetables, and mulberry for sericulture.

The valley dilemma

In contrast to the situation at Hoskote, the lakes in Kolar district, which has a history of being prone to drought, are filled with water, thanks to the Koramangala-Challaghatta Valley (K.C. Valley) project. Under this first-of-its-kind project, the sewage water from Bengaluru is treated in two stages and pumped to tanks in Kolar.

Several farmers here, who supply water to Bengaluru and Chennai, are vehemently opposed to using this treated water to fill their lakes. They believe that it drastically reduces the quality of the groundwater directly while also indirectly affecting their crops and inflicting diseases.

"We do not want this sewage water from Bengaluru unless the government undertakes tertiary treatment of the water," says Ramu Kalvamanjali, a member of the Karnataka Rajya Raitha Sangha's (KRRS) Kolar wing. He also says that despite the government's claims that the project helps recharge groundwater, even the borewells situated next to the project's path have failed in the district.

A similar project called the Hebbala-Nagavara Valley (H.N. Valley) project is being used to fill tanks in Chickballapur. Even there, farmers claim the sewage water is one reason for a drop in their yield. They also alleged that treated water in such quantities has become a breeding ground for pests that are highly resistant to insecticides and pesticides.

"My flowers and vegetables are infested with highly resistant fungus, thrips and mites. Previously, we could control it with pesticides and insecticides. After this project started, they are proving to be of no use," claims Srinivas N., a farmer from Ajjavara in Chickballapur.

The Horticulture Department officials say that these claims are not verified. "We have told them strictly that the treated water should not be used for agriculture. The Minor Irrigation Department regularly tests all the groundwater samples for contamination, and if anything is found, they will

take steps accordingly," a senior official from the Horticulture Department said.

Other factors for supply crunch

A little away from Sidlaghatta, in a field of marigolds and some green leafy vegetables, Krishnamurthy and Varalakshmi, a farmer couple in their 50s, were waiting for the clock to strike 3 p.m. to turn on the drip irrigation system for their crops. "We are managing with whatever water we have. All around us, there is a water problem. One in 20 borewells works here. But our life must go on," they say in a slightly optimistic tone.

They point out that moisture stress is the main reason why the output in many fields has dropped this year. "There is absolutely no moisture left in the soil. With this heat (maximum temperature has hovered between 33 - 35 degrees Celsius in the last week), it is difficult for flowers to bloom or to turn into vegetables. Most flowers wither in this heat. Hence, vegetable production has gone down this year, including in my own field," Krishnamurthy explains.

Among all the water troubles is also the problem of power. "Due to weather conditions, the ground needs double the amount of water than usual this year. While borewells are failing, on the other hand there is no constant supply of electricity to pump even the available water," Srinivas adds.

Money matters

In Bengaluru, in the last couple of weeks, the price of one kilo of beans has touched ₹100-120 per kg in retail markets. Carrots are selling at ₹60-80 per kg, capsicum ₹70-100 per kg, and brinjals are selling at ₹30-40 per kg. There has been an almost two-fold jump in the prices of these vegetables since the beginning of this year.

But none of this is reaching their pockets, say farmers. They say that only the middlemen are making money, and their fortunes have not changed with the prices going up. "To grow beans on an acre, a farmer needs at least ₹25,000. For tomatoes, he needs ₹4 lakh per acre, ₹2.5 lakh per acre for potatoes, ₹20,000 for cabbage and ₹50,000 to ₹60,000 for an acre of capsicum. Even when the vegetables are selling at their best prices, there is a good chance that the farmers here would not even have broken even here with these costs," said Narayanaswamy G., general secretary, Kolar, KRRS.

As for Bengaluru, if there is no good rain this year, the availability and affordability of vegetables, fruits, and flowers will be a nightmare, farmers warn. Many of them have predicted that cultivation of horticultural crops might entirely stop in the belt, except for their household purposes, without rain. Even the traders in the markets maintain that if there are no signs of rain in the next two weeks, then prices of vegetables will shoot up further.

Focus on drought resistant crops

The Horticulture Department is urging farmers to choose drought-resistant crops actively. "When there is no rain, there is not much we can do. We are always telling farmers to choose resistant varieties and practice microirrigation. The amount of water that is used in one month for flood irrigation can be used for one year through drip irrigation," says Ramesh D.S., director of the Horticulture Department.

Consumers at the other end of the chain feel helpless. "Whom do we blame in a situation like this? If the supply is affected at the source level, then it is difficult for the prices of vegetables to remain stable in the market. Like we reduced the use of tomatoes when it reached its all-time high prices, we should probably think of reducing the consumption of all vegetables in the coming days and buy other sources of nutrition like meat," said Sharada S.K., a homemaker from South Bengaluru.



The drying up of borewells has resulted in the loss of crops in Yannur near Sidlaghatta in Chickballapur district. BHAGYA PRAKASH K.

IN BRIEF



AstraZeneca drug gets CDSCO nod to treat two more cancers

AstraZeneca Pharma India has received nod from the Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation (CDSCO) to import for sale and distribution Trastuzumab deruxtecan lyophilized powder for concentrate for solution for infusion 100 mg (Enhertu) for treating two more cancers. The additional indications for which CDSCO has given approval are HER2-low metastatic breast cancer and HER2 positive gastric/gastro-oesophageal cancer, the company said.

RoC lets L&T Finance Holdings to be called L&T Finance Ltd.

L&T Finance Holdings Ltd. (LTFH) said it had received approval from the Registrar of Companies to change its name to L&T Finance Ltd. (LTF). The change is effective March 28. "Subsequent to the merger effective December 4, 2023, this rebranding initiative reflects our commitment towards the creation of a simplified 'single lending entity,' housing all lending businesses under one operating NBFC," Sudipta Roy, MD & CEO, LTF, said in a statement.

Afcons Infrastructure files papers for ₹7,000-cr. IPO

Afcons Infrastructure Ltd. of the Shapoorji Pallonji Group has filed a draft red herring prospectus with the market regulator, Securities and Exchange Board of India, to raise funds through an initial public offering (IPO). The offering, with a face value of ₹10 an equity share, is a mixture of fresh issue of ₹1,250 crore shares and an offer for sale of up to ₹5,750 crore by Goswami Infotech Private Ltd. according to a filing by the company.

ZF Rane India acquires 100% stake in TRW Sun Steering

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI

ZF Rane Automotive India Pvt. Ltd., a joint venture between the ZF Group in India and the Rane Group, has acquired a 100% stake in TRW Sun Steering Wheels Pvt. Ltd. (TSSW) for an undisclosed sum.

With the acquisition of the Gurugam-based domestic steering wheels and occupant safety equipment manufacturer, this joint venture is now more strongly committed to growth in the western and northern region, said the hydraulic steering gear system, seat belts and airbags manufacturer for the automobile sector in a statement.

Traders, retailers must report weekly wheat stocks: Centre

Reuters
MUMBAI

Traders, retailers and food processors must declare wheat stocks every Friday from April to prevent hoarding and price spikes, the govt said on Friday.

The second biggest global wheat consumer after China has been trying to contain wheat prices after heat waves hit production for two straight years, forcing the government to sell record volumes to boost domestic supplies.

India imposed a limit on wheat stock traders could hold to moderate prices. However, the limit is set to expire on March 31.

The measure is aimed to

BBL to manufacture battery pack systems

N. Anand
CHENNAI

Bimetal Bearings Ltd. (BBL), in association with a Scotland based firm, has decided to manufacture and sell battery pack systems and associated technologies for the e-mobility and energy sector.

Battery maker MEP Technologies Ltd., which entered into a pact with BBL in 2021, has agreed to provide the required technology for energy storage and management solutions, manufacturing and assembling of the battery packs and other allied technologies, said the company in a regulatory filing. The new business is ex-



pected to commence production in the last quarter of FY25 or the first quarter of FY26.

BBL is into the manufacturing of engine bearings, bushings, thrust washers, alloy powder and bimetallic strip. It reported a net revenue of ₹229 crore for FY23 against ₹197 crore in the earlier period.

'GeM may offer works contracts'

The procurement portal wants works contracts for construction projects to also be bid out through the platform with a transparent monitoring mechanism; procurements through the GeM platform this year rises past the ₹4 lakh crore mark

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Government e-Marketplace (GeM), an online platform for public procurement of goods and services, plans to seek the Centre's approval to enable work contracts for construction and building projects to also be bid out through the platform with a transparent monitoring mechanism to assess the progress in such contracts.

This is part of a broader reboot of the GeM platform, which is now used for everything from critical

Better practices

GeM says it wants to expedite the tendering process for public works contracts and attract contractors across India



consuming and attracts only local contractors

- Total GMV of procurement via the GeM platform doubled from ₹2.01 lakh crore in 2022-23
- Platform now used even for defence procurement'

defence procurements to services like aircraft chartering and printing of election-related material, its chief executive officer P. K. Singh said on Friday.

The planned upgrade includes a revamp of its online interface to switch to an open Application Programming Interface (API) architecture, that will al-

ZEE to cut Tech & Innovation Centre headcount by 50%

Hindu Bureau
MUMBAI

ZEE Entertainment Enterprises Ltd. (ZEE) has decided to prune headcount at its Bengaluru-based Technology & Innovation Centre (TIC) by about 50% and streamline its work as part of a strategic board-driven push to cut costs.

"Going forward, the TIC will maintain a sharper focus on enhancing the overall content creation, distribution and monetisation process for the company by utilising technology led tools to gain deeper insights into consumer preferences," the company said in a statement on Friday.



Zee did not specify the exact number of employees who would be affected by the move at the TIC, which was inaugurated in May 2022.

Zee, which has been struggling to improve its financial performance, is locked in a legal battle with Sony after the Japanese

media company's Indian unit pulled out of a proposed merger.

'Streamline costs'

Separately, competition has also intensified in the Indian television and digital media space following Reliance Industries' acquisition of Disney's Indian media assets, forcing Zee to streamline its operations and costs.

"The core and streamlined team at TIC will now only focus on enabling and empowering us in this process of content creation, distribution and monetisation," Zee's MD & CEO Punnit Goenka was quoted as saying in the statement.

India must pay DT \$132 mn in Devas case award: U.S. court

Ayushi Kar
MUMBAI

The U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia has confirmed a \$132-million award to Deutsche Telekom against India. The German firm had petitioned the court to confirm this award even as India had countered the petition to get the award dismissed.

The award by the UN Commission on International Trade Law Arbitration had found India in violation of the bilateral investment treaty (BIT) between Germany and India. The reason cited was

that it had held that the government of India had terminated a spectrum deal between state-owned Antrix and Devas in 2011. Deutsche Telekom was a shareholder in Devas.

DT had sought enforcement of the award in the U.S. India had tried to get this petition dismissed on two counts. First, that the U.S. was not the appropriate jurisdiction, that is forum non conveniens. Second, that DT did not have sufficient evidence to claim the award. The court said DT met its burden of proof.

(The writer is with The Hindu businessline)

Banks' GNPA's set to improve to 2.1% by FY25, says Care Ratings

Press Trust of India
MUMBAI

The gross non-performing assets (GNPA) of the Indian banking system are set to improve further to up to 2.1% by the end of FY25, according to a report.

GNPAs are likely to come at 2.5-2.7% in FY24 and will improve further to 2.1-2.4% by the end of FY25, Care Ratings said in the report.

For true picture

It can be noted the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) began the comprehensive exercise in the middle of the last decade by instructing banks to classify certain stressed assets as NPAs as that the balance sheets represent a true picture.

The rating agency also flagged a list of downside risks, which may result in its estimate not coming true, including a material weakening of asset quality due to elevated interest rates, the impact of regulatory changes, tighter liquidity environment and global issues.

Care said GNPA's surged to 11.2% in FY18 from 3.8% in FY14 due to the AQR process of 2015-16, which pushed banks to recognise NPAs and cut unnecessary restructuring and added the stress was emanating from exposure to big-ticket wholesale advances.

The asset quality has improved due to recoveries, higher write-offs by banks and much lower slippages, Care said in the report.

Force Motors to shut down agri-tractors business

Reuters
BENGALURU

Force Motors said on Friday it will close its agricultural tractors business and related activities from March 31.

The closure of business is part of the company's product rationalisation programme under which it will focus on its core segments such as shared mobility transportation, last mile mobility and the creation of special vehicles for civil and defence applications, the company added.

During financial year 2023, the sale of agricultural tractors accounted for 3.66% of the company's total revenue, Force Motors said in a regulatory filing.

India Inc.'s mop-up via IPOs rises 19% to ₹61,000 cr. in FY24

Suresh Iyengar
MUMBAI

The funds mobilised by India Inc. through the Initial Public Offering (IPO) route in this financial year was up 19% to ₹61,000 crore compared with ₹52,116 crore raised in FY23.

However, excluding the mega LIC IPO of ₹21,000 crore in May 2022, the mop-up increased 58% year-on-year, according to Prime Database.

Given the buoyancy in the economy, 75 companies hit the primary market in FY24 compared with 37 in FY23. The average deal size reduced significantly to ₹815 crore in this fiscal from ₹1,409 crore in FY23 due to a higher number of companies tapping the market.

Among the mainboard IPOs, Mankind Pharma was the largest with ₹4,326 crore, followed by JSW Infrastructure at ₹2,800 crore. The smallest IPO was that of Plaza Wires, which raised ₹71 crore.

Average listing gains

With the key benchmark indices hitting a new high, the average listing gains rose to 29% in FY24 against 9% in the previous financial year.

Of the 75 IPOs, 48 delivered a return of over 10%. Vibhor Steel delivered the biggest return of 193% on debut, followed by BLS E-Services (175%) and Tata Technologies (163%). Over 50 of the 75 IPOs are currently trading above the issue price with an average return of 65%.

Pranav Haldea, Managing Director, Prime Database Group, said that of the 75 IPOs that hit the market,



54 issuances were subscribed over 10 times, out of which 22 IPOs were subscribed more than 50 times while 11 IPOs were subscribed more than three times. The other 10 IPOs were oversubscribed between 1 and 3 times.

The response of retail investors was also higher compared to the previous financial year.

The average number of retail applications rose to 1.3 million from about 0.6 million in the previous financial year. Tata Technologies, the first Tata Group IPO in two decades, saw the highest number of retail applications with over 50 lakh applications, followed by DOMS Industries (41 lakh) and INOX India (37 lakh).

In FY24, 96 companies filed their offer documents with the market regulator SEBI (Securities and Exchange Board of India) compared to 75 in the previous financial year. However, 37 companies planning to raise ₹59,000 crore let their approval lapse, while two looking to raise ₹1,000 crore withdrew their documents. SEBI returned the offer documents of five looking to raise ₹2,500 crore.

(The writer is with The Hindu businessline)

'Target of 25-cr. smart meters by 2025 to be missed by long mile'

Rishi Ranjan Kala
NEW DELHI

The government's aim to install 25 crore smart meters by 2025 is unlikely to be met on account of slow progress in implementation, with expectations of only up to half the numbers will be installed.

The pace of smart meter installations (only about 97 lakh were installed till February 29) has been slow.

"While it is likely to gain rapid pace during calendar years (CY) 2024 and 2025, CareEdge Ratings expects the installations to be in the range of 40%-50% of the targeted 25 crore smart meters by December 2025," CareEdge said in a report.

The ratings agency emphasised policy push and adequate supply chain will be crucial for a quick ramp-up of installations.

Production capacity

The smart meter manufacturing capacity in India stands at about seven crore units per annum and is dominated by a few large players, which are operating at 65%-70% capacity against the cumulative requirement of 25 crore smart meters, it added.

Semiconductor chips are a critical component of smart meters, and their seamless imports are a precursor for removing any supply bottlenecks to the sector.

Capacity ramp up

However, the pace of installation is likely to pick up in the next two years with an expected ramp-up in sanction and awarding, as well as higher utilisation of smart-meter manufac-



turing capacity, it said.

CareEdge Ratings Senior Director Sabyasachi Majumdar said it was clear smart meters had significant revenue potential for discoms which had been otherwise bleeding in the past on account of inadequate billing.

There is a governmental impetus to drive the rollout quickly through financial support so that the power distribution sector makes a turnaround operationally.

Tardy pace

However, the implementation pace of the smart metering sector has remained sluggish in the last 1-2 years, he added.

"The surprises during construction which may have significant impact on the project economics, have not fully emerged. Moreover, once the projects are operational, it will be interesting to observe to what extent is the counterparty credit risk mitigated for the advanced metering infrastructure services provider (AMISP)," he said.

"While smart metering may not be the panacea for discoms, it has the potential to cure the operational inefficiencies to a large extent," he stressed.

(The writer is with The Hindu businessline)

GAZA STRIP

Israel's Netanyahu approves talks on Gaza ceasefire, hostage release



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu approved on Friday new talks on a Gaza ceasefire, a day after the world's top court ordered Israel to ensure urgent humanitarian aid reaches people in the Palestinian territory. The new talks on Gaza ceasefire and hostage release will take place in Doha and Cairo. AFP

PARIS

France looking at plant to process spent uranium to bypass Russia



The French government said it is "seriously" studying the option of building a plant to convert and enrich reprocessed uranium to cut its reliance on Russia following the invasion of Ukraine. The only plant in the world that currently converts reprocessed uranium for use in nuclear power plants is located in Russia. AFP

SAN FRANCISCO

Musk's Grok-1.5 AI chatbot to be available on X starting next week



Elon Musk said his artificial intelligence startup xAI's latest Grok-1.5 chatbot will be available on his platform X next week. Earlier this month, Mr. Musk said xAI would open-source Grok, days after the billionaire sued Microsoft-backed OpenAI for allegedly abandoning its original mission in favour of a for-profit model. REUTERS

BEIJING

Chinese tech giant Huawei says profits more than doubled in 2023



Chinese tech giant Huawei said on Friday its profits more than doubled in 2023, as it ramps up efforts to bounce back in a year that saw the company apparently defy U.S. sanctions with the release of a high-end smartphone. Huawei said it generated a profit of 87 billion yuan (\$12 billion) last year. AFP

Israeli airstrikes near Syria's Aleppo kill 42: war monitor

Casualties include 36 Syrian troops and six Hezbollah fighters; dozens injured in what is the deadliest such attack in years, says Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights

Associated Press
BEIRUT

The Syrian Army says Israeli airstrikes early on Friday near the northern city of Aleppo killed or wounded "a number of" people and caused damage. An opposition war monitor said the strikes killed 42, most of them Syrian troops.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, an opposition war monitor, said Israeli strikes hit missile depots for Lebanon's militant Hezbollah group in Aleppo's southern suburb of Jibreen, near the Aleppo International Airport, and the nearby town of Safira,



Same story: Israel has carried out hundreds of strikes on targets in government-controlled parts of Syria in recent years. REUTERS

home to a sprawling military facility.

The Observatory said 36 Syrian troops and six Hezbollah fighters died, and dozens of people were wounded, calling it the

deadliest such attack in years.

There was no immediate statement from Israeli officials on the strikes.

Israel, which has vowed to stop Iranian entrench-

ment in its northern neighbor, has carried out hundreds of strikes on targets in government-controlled parts of Syria in recent years, but it rarely acknowledges them.

On Thursday, Syrian state media reported airstrikes near the capital, Damascus, saying they wounded two civilians.

Hezbollah has had an armed presence in Syria since it joined the country's conflict fighting alongside government forces.

The strikes have escalated over the past five months against the backdrop of the war in Gaza and ongoing clashes between Hezbollah and Israeli forces on the Lebanon-Israel border.

Russia strikes Kyiv's energy infra with drones, missiles

Associated Press
KYIV

Moscow launched a large-scale attack on Ukraine's energy infrastructure on Friday, with a mass barrage of 99 drones and missiles hitting regions across the country, Ukraine's armed forces said.

Air raid warnings rang out across the country, with 10 Ukrainian regions coming under fire, the country's Interior Minister, Ihor Klymenko, said.

Ukraine's state-owned grid operator, Ukrenergo, said that Friday's attack deliberately targeted thermal and hydroelectric power plants across central and western regions. DTEK, Ukraine's largest private electricity operator, also said that three of its thermal power plants had been damaged in the attack. It



Counter strike: Ukrainian troops from anti-drone mobile air defence unit at their position in Chernihiv on Thursday. REUTERS

announced emergency power shutdowns in the city of Odesa.

Escalating strikes

Russia has escalated its attacks on Ukraine in recent days, launching several missile barrages on the capital, Kyiv, and hitting energy infrastructure across the country. Large-scale blackouts have already

affected Ukraine's Kharkiv, where 7,00,000 people lost power in an attack on March 22.

Five people, including a 5-year-old girl, were wounded during the attack in Ukraine's Dnipropetrovsk region. He later said that another man had been killed and one more injured in a separate drone attack on Friday.

Moscow to begin spring draft of conscripts

Agence France-Presse
MOSCOW

Russia will begin calling up tens of thousands of soldiers next week in a conscription drive to replenish its armed forces and build up its military reserves.

Moscow says conscripts are not sent to fight in Ukraine but the draft – which happens twice a year – comes amid persistent rumours of a new wave of mobilisation for the Ukraine offensive.

"The spring draft will be held from April 1," a senior Russian official said.

Some 1,47,000 conscripts were drafted during last year's spring call-ups. Russian men aged between 18 and 30 are eligible to be called up after lawmakers increased the upper age limit from 27 last year.

Beating the heat



A vendor prepares crushed ice at a fresh market in Bangkok on Friday. Thailand braces for more hot weather with temperatures expected to rise above 40° Celsius during a severe heatwave period, according to the Thai Meteorological Department. AFP

Nine held in Tajikistan for Russia concert hall attack

Associated Press
MOSCOW

Nine persons have been detained by Tajikistan over suspected contact with the perpetrators of last week's attack by gunmen on a suburban Moscow concert hall that killed 144 people, Russian state news agency RIA Novosti said on Friday.

Those detained are also suspected of having connections with the Islamic State group.

Russia's Investigative Committee said on Thursday it had detained another suspect in relation to the raid on Crocus City Hall, on suspicion of being involved in financing the attack. It did not give further details of the suspect.

Following UN veto, Russia says big powers need to stop 'strangling' North Korea

Reuters
MOSCOW

Russia said on Friday that major powers needed a new approach to North Korea, accusing the U.S. and its allies of ratcheting up military tensions in Asia and seeking to "strangle" the reclusive state.

Russia vetoed the annual renewal of a panel of experts monitoring enforcement of longstanding United Nations sanctions against North Korea over its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programmes.

Moscow's move, which strikes a blow at the enforcement of a myriad of UN sanctions imposed after

Russia had vetoed the annual renewal of sanctions against North Korea over its nuclear programmes

Pyongyang carried out its first nuclear test in 2006, underscores the dividend that Kim Jong-un has earned by moving closer to President Vladimir Putin amid the war in Ukraine.

'Old templates'

"It is obvious to us that the UN Security Council can no longer use old templates in relation to the problems of the Korean Peninsula," Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman

Maria Zakharova said. Ms. Zakharova said the U.S. was stoking military tensions, that international restrictions had not improved the security situation and that there were severe humanitarian consequences for the population of North Korea, formally known as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK).

The U.S. State Department said on Thursday that Russia's veto had "cynically undermined international peace and security" and accused Moscow of seeking to bury reporting by the panel of experts on its own "collusion" with North Korea to get weapons.

U.S. President assures Pakistan PM Shehbaz of continuous support

Press Trust of India
ISLAMABAD

Marking the first official communication with a Pakistani Premier during his tenure, U.S. President Joe Biden has dashed off a letter to Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif expressing continuous support and highlighted that the ties between the two nations are critical for bilateral and regional peace and security.

After assuming office in January 2021, Mr. Biden neither telephoned former Prime Minister Imran Khan after his election victory nor spoke to Mr. Sharif when he succeeded Mr.



Joe Biden

Khan in April 2022, *The Express Tribune* said on Friday.

Mr. Sharif took oath as the country's Prime Minister for a second time earlier this month after a controversial election that his rival and former Prime Mi-

nister Imran Khan dubbed as "rigged." Mr. Khan, who is the founder of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party, had also openly accused the U.S. of orchestrating his downfall after he was removed through a vote of no-confidence in April 2022.

Vital factor

According to the contents of Mr. Biden's letter, shared by the U.S. Embassy here, "The enduring partnership between our nations remains critical to ensuring the security of our people and the United States will continue to stand with Pakistan to tackle the most pressing global and region-

al challenges of our time."

Mr. Biden added that through the U.S.-Pakistan Green Alliance framework, the two nations would continue strengthening their climate resilience, supporting sustainable agriculture and water management and advancing Pakistan's recovery from the devastating floods of 2022.

He wrote that the United States remains "committed to working with Pakistan to protect human rights and promote progress." "Together, we will continue to forge a strong partnership between our nations and a close bond between our people," the letter concluded.

5 dead, over 100 hospitalised after taking health supplement in Japan

Associated Press
TOKYO

Five persons who took a Japanese health supplement have died and more than 100 have been hospitalised as of Friday, a week after a pharmaceutical company issued a recall of the products, officials said.

Osaka-based Kobayashi Pharmaceutical Co. came under fire for not going public quickly with problems known internally as early as January. The first public announcement came only on March 22.

People are undergoing treatment in hospitals after taking products – includ-



Tough spot: Akihiro Kobayashi of Kobayashi Pharmaceutical Co. arrives at a news conference in Osaka in Japan on Friday. AP

ing Benikoji Choleste Help meant to lower cholesterol – that contain an ingredient called benikoji, a red species of mold.

Some people developed kidney problems after taking the supplements, but the exact cause was still under investigation.

"We apologise deeply," President Akihiro Kobayashi told reporters on Friday, bowing for a long time to emphasise the apology alongside three other top company officials.

The company's products have been recalled – as have dozens of other products that contain benikoji, including miso paste, crackers and a vinegar dressing. Japan's Health Ministry put up a list on its official site of all the recalled products, including some that use benikoji for food coloring. The ministry warned the deaths could keep growing.



Now showing: A worker cleans a screen showing an advertisement of *Oppenheimer* in Tokyo on Friday. AFP

Atomic bomb saga *Oppenheimer* hits screens in Japan

Agence France-Presse
TOKYO

Oppenheimer, Academy award winner for best picture among others, was finally released in Japan on Friday, where its subject – the man who masterminded the creation of the atomic bomb – is a highly sensitive and emotional topic.

The U.S. blockbuster hit screens in the United States and many other countries in July at the same time as *Barbie*, inspiring a viral phenomenon dubbed ‘Barbenheimer’ by moviegoers.

But while *Barbie* was released in Japan in August, *Oppenheimer* was conspicuously absent from cinemas for months.

No official explanation was offered at the time, fuelling speculation the film was too controversial to be shown in Japan – the only country to have ever suffered a wartime nuclear attack.

Around 1.40,000 people died in Hiroshima and 74,000 in Nagasaki when the U.S. dropped atomic bombs on the cities in August 1945, days before the end of the Second World War.

At a large cinema in central Tokyo where *Oppenheimer* was showing on Friday, there was none of the prominent promotional material that might be expected for a global megahit. Instead only one small poster advertised the film, which was shot on a \$100 million budget and collected nearly \$1 billion at box offices worldwide.

In Hiroshima, the city devastated by the first nuclear bomb, the biopic’s Academy Awards success earlier this month had met a mixed reaction.

Kyoko Heya, president of the city’s international film festival, said after the awards ceremony that she had found the movie “very America-centric”.

Meloni, Le Pen rift disrupts far-Right’s prospects of wielding power in the EU

Italian Prime Minister’s efforts to keep the French far-Right leader at a distance illustrates the depth of divisions within Europe’s nationalist Right parties that may stymie its efforts to wield power at European Union despite record support ahead of the coming European parliament election

Reuters
PARIS/ROME

When a French Minister compared Italy’s nationalist Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni to Marine Le Pen, the leader of the French far-Right last year, the Italian Premier rang French President Emmanuel Macron to complain.

Ms. Meloni was so incensed that the French leader felt compelled to send an emissary to Rome to appease her, said two sources with knowledge of the conversations.

The Italian Premier’s message to Mr. Macron was clear, according to one of the sources: she was no Italian version of Ms. Le Pen.

Both Mr. Macron’s and Ms. Meloni’s office declined to comment on the incident, which has not been previously reported.

Ms. Meloni’s anger illustrates the depth of divisions within Europe’s nationalist Right that may stymie its efforts to wield power at a European Union (EU) level despite record support ahead of a European parliament election in June, according to half a dozen sources with knowledge of their parties’ strategy.

Polls predict that Europe’s nationalist and eurosceptic parties will win a record number of votes in June. Voters are expected to punish mainstream parties for failing to shield



Italy’s PM Giorgia Meloni and French President Emmanuel Macron at EU headquarters in Brussels. AFP

households from high inflation, curb immigration and deliver decent housing and healthcare.

A model constructed by the European Council on Foreign Relations, a policy think tank, using polls from EU countries forecast in January that a populist Right coalition of the Christian democrats, conservatives and radical Right could, in theory, emerge with a ruling majority in the European parliament for the first time.

Stark differences

But the prospect of a single, muscular bloc encompassing the far-Right emerging is slim amid stark differences between its leading figures, Ms. Meloni and Ms. Le Pen, the sources said.

Ms. Meloni *de facto* leads the hard-Right European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) grouping within parliament, while Ms. Le Pen is a driving force in the more overtly anti-EU Identity and Democracy (ID).

A merger between their two groups at the European parliament is highly unlikely because Ms. Meloni’s strategy, now that she is in power, is to maximise Italian influence within Europe by collaborating with EU institutions, not fighting them, the sources said.

Ms. Le Pen, by contrast, is intent on demonstrating that “Macron’s Europe”, as she calls it, is failing common folks – even if she says she no longer advocates a French exit from the EU.

“What Meloni really wants is to form a coalition of the Right at the European parliament to be in a pivotal position,” Nicolas Bay, a French member of the European parliament, said. His party, Reconquête, a French far-Right rival of Ms. Le Pen’s, struck an alliance with Ms. Meloni last month.

The lack of a single, coherent policy platform will weaken the far-Right’s influence on matters ranging from trade relations with China to Europe’s response to the war in Ukraine, climate policy and immigration, analysts say.

Influence within the European parliament is vital for the composition of the European Commission – the bloc’s executive body which also has the respon-

sibility of initiating EU legislation. The legislature has become more fragmented and uncertain as mainstream parties have lost ground in EU elections over the last decade.

Jean-Paul Garraud, the leader of Ms. Le Pen’s troops at the European parliament, accused the ECR of favouring Ukraine joining the EU, the sharing of migrants across European countries, and of trade deals that harm Europe’s agricultural sector.

“We have always stood against all these points,” he said.

On their website, ECR say they want a Europe that’s “safe and secure”, “an immigration system that works”, “all member states treated equally” and that they “stand with Ukraine”. A spokesperson declined further comment.

Across Europe, the far-Right is gaining momentum.

Rising Right

In France, Ms. Le Pen is polling 12 points ahead of Mr. Macron, while Germany’s Alternative for Germany (AfD) lies in second place nationwide. The Dutch Freedom Party won November’s election by a surprise margin, and Portugal’s Chega this month quadrupled its number of parliamentary seats.

Chega, the Freedom Party and AfD belong to ID, which is dominated by Ms. Le Pen’s Rassemblement

National party. Surveys show the bloc is third in voting intentions behind the centre-Right European People’s Party (EPP) and centre-Left Alliance of Socialists and Democrats.

Narrowly trailing ID is the Ms. Meloni-led ECR, which houses Poland’s former ruling party.

Polls suggest an alliance between the two would leave Europe’s hard-Right in contention to become the leading political force in the next European parliament, ahead of the conservative EPP, which has dominated it in recent decades.

That would unleash a political earthquake. Leadership of the EU’s powerful executive, the European Commission, should be handed to the parliament’s largest group.

But political insiders on both sides of the Alps say Ms. Meloni’s decision to keep Ms. Le Pen at bay will prevent that.

A French diplomat, who asked not to be named because of the sensitivity of the issue, said Ms. Meloni’s strategy was to be at the heart of the game in Europe and seek a strong economic portfolio in the next Commission.

Her actions set her apart from Ms. Le Pen’s more protectionist rhetoric on the economy as well as the French politician’s past ties to Russia and her more ambiguous support for Ukraine.

Using AI robs creative joy off artists: DC comics chief

Agence France-Presse
PARIS

A new three-part documentary, *Superpowered*, charts the 90-year history of DC Comics, which brought the world Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman and countless other superheroes. Korean-born U.S. comic-book artist Jim Lee has been one of the genre’s great stars since his early days at Marvel in the 1980s, working on *X-Men*. When he switched to DC, he helped revive its iconic characters, eventually rising to be president and chief creative officer.

With the advent of AI, comics are seeing a paradigm shift in the way they are produced – much like any other creative field.

“We have to figure out a way to live in a world where it exists, and the source material from which it derives its content is properly credited and compensated”, Mr. Lee said in an interview to promote the coming documentary which is set to be released on April 4. “But even if it were accepted and someone were going to pay me to use an AI engine to create work, I just would not do it”, he added. “Typing something into a prompt and getting something two minutes later? I’m robbing myself of the whole point of why I got into this business.”

When asked about the relevance of the ‘simplistic morality of a superhero’, Mr. Lee said: “The value of comics... is to remind people that we are all going to go through hardship and trauma, and it’s the choices you make that will define your future, as glib as that might sound”.

Absolving again



People watch the re-enactment of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ on Good Friday in San Fernando, Pampanga province in the Philippines. AFP

A year after arrest in Russia, U.S. reporter still awaits trial

Agence France-Presse
MOSCOW

Evan Gershkovich, a *Wall Street Journal* reporter who has spent a year behind bars in Russia, is awaiting a trial on espionage charges the White House says are fabricated but could still see him jailed for decades.

His arrest in March 2023 on charges of spying – the first such charge against a Western journalist since the Soviet era – showed that the Kremlin was prepared to go further than ever before in what President Vladimir Putin has called a “hybrid war” with the West.

Russia has kept information about his case classified, sharing no details since his arrest in the Urals city of Yekaterinburg on March 29, 2023.

The U.S.-born son of So-



Evan Gershkovich

viet emigres covered Russia for six years as the Kremlin made independent, on-the-ground reporting increasingly dangerous and illegal.

The *Wall Street Journal* and the White House vehemently deny Russia’s accusation, which they see as a false pretext to secure the release of Russians in custody in the U.S.

Mr. Putin said last month that he would like to see Mr. Gershkovich released as part of a prisoner exchange, but cautioned

certain “terms” were being discussed.

The 32-year-old, who has been remanded in custody until at least the end of June, faces up to 20 years in prison if found guilty.

Mr. Gershkovich had carried on reporting from across Russia, even after dozens of other foreign correspondents left over Moscow’s military offensive in Ukraine.

Mr. Gershkovich reported extensively on how ordinary Russians experienced the Ukraine conflict, speaking to the families of dead soldiers and Putin critics.

Breaking stories and getting people to talk was becoming increasingly hard, Mr. Gershkovich told friends before his arrest.

But as long as it was not impossible, he saw a reason to be there.

Nun spurs debate in Lebanon after urging students to ‘pray’ for Hezbollah

Associated Press
BEIRUT

The nun stood in front of a group of young students at a Lebanese Christian school and asked them to pray for the “men of the resistance” in southern Lebanon who she said were defending the country.

The men to whom nun Maya Ziadeh was referring were members of the Lebanese Shia militant group Hezbollah, which has been clashing with Israel across a volatile border for nearly six months, becoming a critical regional player as the Israel-Hamas war persists in Gaza.

A video capturing Ms. Ziadeh’s comments was

widely circulated online earlier this month, outraging some who accused her of “brainwashing” the children and imposing her political views. Others rallied to her support, commending her stance as courageous and honourable.

The war of words that unfolded highlighted larger, longstanding schisms in Lebanon over Hezbollah, now amplified by the Lebanon-Israel border clashes and by fears that an already crisis-hit Lebanon could be dragged into an all-out war.

“There are sharp divisions over Hezbollah’s weapons,” said Sami Nader, director of the Institute of Political Science at Saint



The war of words that unfolded following the ‘prayer’ highlights larger, long-standing schisms in Lebanon over Hezbollah. AP

Joseph University of Beirut. And while there’s wide support for the Palestinian cause, he said, there are “differences over the degree of such support.”

Lebanon is home to multiple religious groups. Politically, the presidency

is given to a Maronite Christian, the parliament Speaker post to a Shia Muslim and the Prime Minister’s post to a Sunni Muslim.

Although Hezbollah has alliances with figures from other religious groups, the

base of its support lies in the Shia community, while many Christians and Sunnis accuse the group of hijacking the country. The nun’s speech generated added attention – and for some, furor – in particular because it came from a Christian religious figure.

‘Men of resistance’

In the recent video, Ms. Ziadeh called for praying for the “children, people and mothers of the south and ... for the men of the resistance,” describing those who fail to do so as “traitors,” a characterisation that many found troubling, especially given the young age of her audience. “In the south, there are

students your age who say that ‘our only dreams are to protect our land,’” the nun told the children.

Lebanese Christian anti-Hezbollah activist Antonios Tawk criticised Ms. Ziadeh on X, calling on the Maronite Catholic church to act “because our children are being brainwashed.”

Meanwhile, Gebran Bassil, head of the Free Patriotic Movement party, Hezbollah’s main Christian ally, argued online that when Ms. Ziadeh called for prayers, “she was implementing the teachings of Jesus.”

Ms. Ziadeh couldn’t be reached for comment. Officials with Hezbollah,

a Shia military and political powerhouse in Lebanon, say the group’s cross-border strikes are in support of Gaza and argue they divert some Israeli forces that would otherwise be focused on Hamas in Gaza, where the territory’s health officials say the Israel-Hamas war has killed more than 32,000 Palestinians.

To Hezbollah’s critics in Lebanon, the fighting is a reminder that the group’s weapons constitute “a threat ...because they give Hezbollah a monopoly over decisions outside state structures,” said Randa Slim, senior fellow at the Washington-based Middle East Institute.

SOARING HIGHER

Kohli climbs to fourth spot in the six-hitters' list in IPL



K. BHAGYA PRAKASH

Virat Kohli's four sixes in the game against Kolkata Knight Riders in Bengaluru on Friday took him past M.S. Dhoni's tally of 239. With 241 maximums to his credit, the Royal Challengers batter is fourth in the all-time list behind Chris Gayle (357), Rohit Sharma (261) and A.B. de Villiers (251).

AFTER EFFECT

Nortje will take time to get better after injury layoff, says Hopes



ANI

Delhi Capitals bowling coach James Hopes feels that pace spearhead Anrich Nortje will get better with time, having recently made a comeback to competitive cricket after six months. Nortje was taken to the cleaners by Rajasthan Royals' Riyan Parag at the death as he went for 48 in his four overs on Thursday night.

PINPOINT ACCURACY

All the balls landed in the same area, wide yorkers: Avesh



SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

After giving just four in the final over and helping Rajasthan Royals pip Delhi Capitals and post its second straight win, Avesh Khan said it was his best in such a situation, execution-wise. "All the balls landed in the same area, wide yorkers," said the seamer, who had started the last over with Capitals needing 17.

FOCUS

Block it out, it's all irrelevant: Smith on Hardik facing boos



K.R. DEEPAK

Steve Smith advised Hardik Pandya to simply "block out" the jeers and boos the new Mumbai Indians skipper is receiving from spectators at the IPL so far, as they are "all irrelevant". "I'd try and just say, to block it out," Smith, who has faced abuse from fans across the world. "No one outside knows what you are going through."

Blazing Narine leads the chase as KKR makes short work of RCB

Venkatesh follows suit with top score of 50 and with Salt and Shreyas chipping in. Knight Riders records a seven-wicket win with 19 balls to spare; Kohli carries his bat for a 59-ball 83 to take Royal Challengers to 182 for six which proves inadequate



On the rampage: Narine wielded the willow with abandon while Venkatesh sustained the momentum. K. BHAGYA PRAKASH



SCOREBOARD

ROYAL CHALLENGERS
Virat Kohli (not out) 83 (59b, 4x4, 4x6), Faf du Plessis c Starc b Rana 8 (6b, 1x6), Cameron Green b Russell 33 (21b, 4x4, 2x6), Glenn Maxwell c Rinku b Narine 28 (19b, 3x4, 1x6), Rajat Patidar c Rinku b Russell 3 (4b), Anuj Rawat c Salt b Rana 3 (3b), Dinesh Karthik run out 20 (8b, 3x6); Extras (b-1, w-3): 4; Total (for six wkts. in 20 overs): 182.

FALL OF WICKETS
1-17 (du Plessis, 1.6 overs), 2-82 (Green, 8.6), 3-124 (Maxwell, 14.1), 4-144 (Patidar, 16.3), 5-151 (Rawat, 17.3), 6-182 (Karthik, 19.6).

KNIGHT RIDERS BOWLING
Starc 4-0-47-0, Rana 4-0-39-2, Anukul 2-0-6-0, Narine 4-0-40-1, Russell 4-0-29-2, Varun 2-0-20-0.

KOLKATA KNIGHT RIDERS
Phil Salt c Green b Vyshak 30 (20b, 2x4, 2x6), Sunil Narine b Dagar 47 (22b, 2x4, 5x6), Venkatesh Iyer c Kohli b Dayal 50 (30b, 3x4, 4x6), Shreyas Iyer (not out) 39 (24b, 2x4, 2x6), Rinku Singh (not out) 5 (5b); Extras (b-7, w-8): 15; Total (for three wkts. in 16.5 overs): 186.

FALL OF WICKETS
1-86 (Narine, 6.3), 2-92 (Salt, 7.5), 3-167 (Venkatesh, 15.1).

RCB BOWLING
Siraj 3-0-46-0, Dayal 4-0-46-1, Joseph 2-0-34-0, Dagar 2.5-0-23-1, Vyshak (Impact Player in place of Karthik) 4-0-23-1, Green 1-0-7-0.

Toss: KKR; **PoM:** Narine. KKR won by seven wickets with 19 balls to spare.

Next assignment

RCB: April 2 vs LSG Bengaluru, 7.30 p.m.
KKR: April 3 vs DC Visakhapatnam, 7.30 p.m.

a sitter a short while later to give Maxwell another reprieve.

In the 17th over, the virus spread to Varun Chakravarty, who failed to hold on to a low catch offered by Anuj Rawat.

The KKR opening blitz, however, made up for these failings.

LSG looks for home charm against PBKS to chalk up its first victory of season



Ready for challenge: LSG skipper Rahul will be keen to improve his strike rate after a middling fifty in the first game while PBKS' Arshdeep will be raring to make an impression. SANDEEP SAXENA

P.K. Ajith Kumar
LUCKNOW

Lucknow Super Giants is back on familiar turf. It should be hoping to get back into form as it takes on Punjab Kings in its first home match of the 17th edition of the IPL.

After the defeat to Rajasthan Royals last Sunday, LSG would want the season's overwhelming trend to continue: every team had won its first match at home till Thursday.

For Punjab Kings, this is the third game: it won the first and then lost the second.

Though it is very much the early days yet, no team would want to register two losses on the trot. So, much is at stake at the Atal

Today's match



Lucknow, 7.30 P.M.

HEAD-TO-HEAD

Played: 3

LSG 2 | PBKS 1

PREVIOUS MEETING

LSG won by 56 runs, 2023

LIVE ON STAR SPORTS 1 (SD & HD) & JO CINEMA

contribute.

Captain K.L. Rahul and Nicholas Pooran showed form against Royals, but the likes of Quinton de Kock and Devdutt Padikkal have to remain at the wicket longer. Bowlers like Ravi Bishnoi and Mohsin Khan have to be sharper, as well.

As for Kings, they need to put behind them the terrible finish to their match against Royal Challengers Bengaluru.

They would be hoping for Jonny Bairstow to regain his touch at the top of the order, where skipper Shikhar Dhawan and Prabhsimran Singh also have to deliver.

Kagiso Rabada and Harpreet Brar may not mind more support in the bowling department.

Hope to make Lucknow a dominant place for LSG this summer: Langer

P.K. Ajith Kumar
LUCKNOW

Justin Langer is enjoying his maiden stint at the IPL.

"There is nothing I haven't liked about the IPL so far," the Lucknow Super Giants coach said at a press conference here on Saturday. "India has been very hospitable. And Holi, the festival of colours the other day... I haven't had so much fun since I was about three years old."

Looking back at his team's disappointing start to the campaign (the 20-run defeat to Rajasthan Royals), the former Australian opener and coach said he was glad the first game was out of the way. "Now

we are looking forward to our first home game and hoping to make it a dominant place for LSG this summer," he said. "And I found that every game is won by the home side this IPL (till Thursday)."

Langer isn't bothered about the talk about the LSG captain K.L. Rahul's strike-rate. "I am not going to lose one second's sleep over Rahul," he said. "He is a beautiful player."

Punjab Kings' spin-bowling coach Sunil Joshi said he would advise his players about the pitch, which he is familiar with as Uttar Pradesh coach. "I will tell the bowlers where there are good pockets to bowl on," he said.



Meet and greet: LSG bowling coach Morne Morkel and PBKS skipper Dhawan on the eve of the match. SANDEEP SAXENA

It was a match-changing innings from Riyan, says Avesh

P.K. Ajith Kumar
LUCKNOW

Avesh Khan may have bowled an exceptional final over for Rajasthan Royals, but he acknowledged his teammate Riyan Parag's remarkable innings that helped him defend a competitive total against Delhi Capitals.

Royals' top-order had failed, as Jos Buttler, Yashasvi Jaiswal and skipper Sanju Samson were all back in the dugout within the eighth over. At 37 for three, the scoreboard didn't make happy reading for the local fans at the Saiwaj Mansingh Stadium in Jaipur on Thursday. But,



Stepping up: Avesh delivered a remarkable final over to deny Capitals. SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

Parag, who has been promoted to the crucial No. 4 slot this season, played a brilliant knock — 84 not out off 45 balls — to power RR

to 185 for five. The host won by 12 runs, with Avesh giving away only four runs in the final over. "It was a match-changing innings

from Riyan, as we had lost wickets early and the run-rate was less than six," the seamer said. "He batted fabulously and helped us post a fighting total. He is in good touch and he did well in the last game, too."

Avesh said Parag batted sensibly. "It was because of the 25 runs he took off the last over that I got the opportunity to defend the total," said Avesh.

"I have done something similar in the past too. It is not the first time I have bowled the last over and defended runs. Last year, I defended 15 against Rajasthan. When I played for Delhi too, I bowled the last over."



GETTY IMAGES

Carlos Sainz – the smooth operator with a hard edge

The 29-year-old returned from emergency appendix surgery to win the Australian GP, remaining the only driver outside Red Bull to triumph since 2022. Out of contract at the end of the season, the Spaniard's analytical approach and aggressive driving style are set to attract top suitors

Reuters
Associated Press

When Carlos Sainz was in hospital after having his appendix removed, the most natural thing for him – if he were the average human being – would have been to wallow in self-pity.

The emergency surgery meant he would miss the Saudi Arabian Grand Prix – in the cut-throat world of Formula One, you never give another driver an even break, and Sainz was being forced to do just that.

Significant displacement

This turn of events, moreover, had followed a more significant displacement: the Spaniard had learnt before the season that seven-time world champion Lewis Hamilton would replace him at Ferrari in 2025.

Out of work at the end of the year and out of commission for at least one Grand Prix, Sainz watched British teenager Oliver Bearman step into his car in Jeddah and drive it to seventh place on an extraordinary F1 debut. Most people, confronted by an equivalent set of circumstances, would have sunk back into their beds in a gloom-

my, woe-is-me mood.

The reason why athletes recover faster is because you can dedicate 24 hours per day for seven days to recovery. And that's exactly what I did

Sainz, however, got to work. "As soon as I got my appendix removed, I went on the internet and started talking with professionals and said, 'OK, what helps to speed up recovery?'" he told reporters.

"I started doing all the sort of things that you can do to speed up recovery, the wounds, the scar tissue, what you can help to be faster on that, talking to other athletes, talking to other doctors in Spain, internationally. And then I put together a plan with my team.

"The reason why athletes recover faster is because you can dedicate 24 hours per day for seven days to recovery. And that's exactly what I did."

Sainz had twice daily hour-long sessions in a hyperbaric chamber, breathing pure oxygen at higher pressure, and used an electromagnetic INDIBA machine for tissue repair. He programmed his time spent in bed, walking and eating "the kind of food that you have to recover."

Stunning recovery

Two weeks after surgery, Sainz was back in his Ferrari, ready for the Australian Grand Prix.

"Nine days ago, when I was about to catch the flight to come to Australia, I was still in bed. I

could barely use my abdominal [muscles] to move. And I was like, this is not going to happen," he said. "But I took the flight, and suddenly when I landed in Australia, the feeling was a lot better.

"And every 24 hours, I was making a lot more progress than the first seven days, which is actually what all the doctors and professional people told me. Don't worry, because the second week, every day is going to improve a lot more than the first week."

Although he was improving, Sainz knew that driving a Formula 1 car – a physically punishing experience at the best of times – would be even more challenging after an appendectomy. So he consulted Williams driver Alex Albon, who had had his appendix removed in 2022.

"I feel like it's exactly what Alex told me," Sainz said. "With the g-force and everything, on the inside, it just feels like everything is moving more than normal and you need some confidence to brace the core and the body as you're used to doing, but you get used to it.

"There is no pain, nothing to worry about. It's just a weird feeling that you have to get used to. Especially on this circuit, we're pulling five to six Gs in some of the braking zones and corners."

If he felt stiff and tired by the end of the race at Albert Park, the result exceeded all expectations. Sainz handled the "weird feeling" to capitalise on a mechanical failure for three-time world champion Max Verstappen – the back of his Red Bull began spewing smoke, with fire following, forcing Verstappen's retirement – and win the Australian Grand Prix.

Resilience that runs deep

The Spaniard was the first driver since Austrian Gerhard

Berger in 1997 to win his first race back from a medical absence – perhaps not surprising when you consider that resilience runs in the Sainz family. After all, his father, Carlos Sainz Sr., won the gruelling Dakar Rally for a fourth time earlier this year, becoming the oldest winner of the race at 61.

The younger Sainz, with his victory in Melbourne, remains the only driver outside Red Bull to triumph since 2022 – some feat for a man still without a seat for 2025. His last win came in Singapore last year, when he showcased his racecraft and lateral thinking. Leading the race on a track with few overtaking opportunities, he deliberately lapped slower than he might have done, keeping the pack within range and too close to make a strategic pit-stop work.

After a safety car came out, Sainz saw another way of getting the win without going faster. He slowed down and cleverly kept second-placed Lando Norris within DRS range, helping the Englishman prevent the hard-chasing George Russell and Hamilton from challenging for No. 1.

These two wins – Singapore 2023 and Melbourne 2024, in the midst of Red Bull dominance – prove that Sainz can make the most of the smallest opportunity. His ability to stay calm in the heat of battle, analytically plot a route to victory when a sliver of a chance opens up, and then execute the race without making an error has earned him the nickname 'Smooth Operator'.



I am still without a job for next year. I don't race to prove to team principals my value. I race for myself. That's the mentality and approach I have and will continue to [have]

The calm, clinical approach is married to a scrappy, aggressive driving style. Unlike Verstappen and Charles Leclerc, he enjoys a less skittish car. "I prefer a car that understeers than a car that oversteers," he once said. "Why? because my driving is really aggressive. When I am out on track, I know everyone calls me 'Smooth Operator' but I can make a car rotate... I turn the car myself with the steering wheel and the pedals."

Underrated and respected

With just three career race wins, Sainz may not have the numbers some others on the grid have – but that is also a function of him rarely having cars that could contend for victory. Sainz does, however, have the respect of his peers and predecessors. Regarded as the most underrated driver in the sport, he is a man team principals will be keeping a close eye on. With vacancies, or potential vacancies, in top teams such as Mercedes and Red Bull for next season, Sainz should have attractive options to choose from. He is giving himself "enough time and enough information" to make a decision on "probably the most important three or four years of my career", but his focus for the moment is more immediate.

"I am still without a job for next year," Sainz said after his victory in Melbourne. "Everyone more or less knows what I'm capable of doing. I don't race to prove to team principals my value. I race for myself. That's the mentality and approach I have and will continue to."

If Ferrari's early promise holds, Sainz, who has already ended two Red Bull streaks, will back himself to pull off something truly breathtaking in his final season in red.



STACKING UP

ATP Men's Top 15

#	Player	Age	Points	Events
1	Novak Djokovic	36	9,725	18
2	Carlos Alcaraz	20	8,805	18
3	Jannik Sinner	22	8,310	20
4	Daniil Medvedev	28	7,765	19
5	Alexander Zverev	26	5,060	26
6	Andrey Rublev	26	4,970	24
7	Holger Rune	20	3,875	23
8	Casper Ruud	25	3,560	24
9	Hubert Hurkacz	27	3,370	24
10	Alex de Minaur	25	3,300	25
11	Stefanos Tsitsipas	25	3,255	25
12	Grigor Dimitrov	32	2,935	24
13	Taylor Fritz	26	2,935	25
14	Tommy Paul	26	2,430	27
15	Ugo Humbert	25	2,420	29

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	29	17	5	7	60	42	18	56
5	Tottenham	28	16	5	7	59	42	17	53
6	Man. United	28	15	2	11	39	39	0	47
7	West Ham	29	12	8	9	46	50	-4	44
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	29	11	5	13	43	44	-1	38
13	Bournemouth	28	9	8	11	41	52	-11	35
14	Crystal Palace	28	7	8	13	33	48	-15	29
15	Brentford	29	7	5	17	41	54	-13	26
16	Everton*	28	8	7	13	29	39	-10	25
17	Luton Town	29	5	7	17	42	60	-18	22
18	N. Forest*	29	6	7	16	35	51	-16	21
19	Burnley	29	4	5	20	29	63	-34	17
20	Sheffield	28	3	5	20	24	74	-50	14

* Everton deducted six points and Forest deducted four points following breaches of the PL's Profitability and Sustainability Rules

Top Indians

Sumit Nagal Rank 97 ▲ 4 spots	Ramkumar Ramanathan Rank 410 ▼ 1 spot

WTA Women's Top 15

#	Player	Age	Points	Events
1	Iga Swiatek	22	10,715	19
2	Aryna Sabalenka	25	8,195	17
3	Coco Gauff	20	7,150	19
4	Elena Rybakina	24	5,848	19
5	Jessica Pegula	30	5,035	22
6	Ons Jabeur	29	4,118	23
7	Qinwen Zheng	21	4,050	21
8	Marketa Vondrousova	24	4,015	16
9	Maria Sakkari	28	3,825	24
10	Jelena Ostapenko	26	3,493	23
11	Daria Kasatkina	26	3,118	25
12	Karolina Muchova	27	3,060	12
13	Beatriz Haddad Maia	27	2,870	24
14	Jasmine Paolini	28	2,810	29
15	Liudmila Samsonova	25	2,605	24

Top Indians

Ankita Raina Rank 242 ▼ 17 spots	Sahaja Yamalappali Rank 309 ▲ 17 spots

Spanish LaLiga Standings

#	Team	GP	W	D	L	GF	GA	GD	PTS
1	Real Madrid	29	22	6	1	64	20	44	72
2	Barcelona	29	19	7	3	60	34	26	64
3	Girona	29	19	5	5	59	34	25	62
4	Athletic Bilbao	29	16	8	5	50	26	24	56
5	Athletic Madrid	29	17	4	8	54	34	20	55
6	Real Sociedad	29	12	10	7	42	31	11	46
7	Real Betis	29	10	12	7	34	33	1	42
8	Valencia	28	11	7	10	32	32	0	40
9	Villarreal	29	10	8	11	47	51	-4	38
10	Getafe	29	9	11	9	37	42	-5	38
11	Las Palmas	29	10	7	12	29	32	-3	37
12	Osasuna	29	10	6	13	33	43	-10	36
13	Alaves	29	8	8	13	26	35	-9	32
14	Real Mallorca	29	6	12	11	25	35	-10	30
15	Rayo Vallecano	29	6	11	12	25	38	-13	29
16	Sevilla	29	6	10	13	36	44	-8	28
17	Celta Vigo	29	6	9	14	32	44	-12	27
18	Cadiz	29	3	13	13	20	40	-20	22
19	Granada	28	2	8	18	30	58	-28	14
20	Almeria	29	1	10	18	28	57	-29	13

German Bundesliga Standings

#	Team	GP	W	D	L	GF	GA	GD	PTS
1	Leverkusen	26	22	4	0	66	18	48	70
2	Bayern	26	19	3	4	78	31	47	60
3	Stuttgart	26	18	2	6	60	31	29	56
4	Dortmund	26	14	8	4	53	32	21	50
5	RB Leipzig	26	15	4	7	60	32	28	49
6	E. Frankfurt	26	10	10	6	42	35	7	40
7	FC Augsburg	26	9	8	9	43	42	1	35
8	Hoffenheim	26	9	6	11	44	50	-6	33
9	SC Freiburg	26	9	6	11	36	48	-12	33
10	Werder Bremen	26	8	6	12	35	41	-6	30
11	Heidenheim	26	7	8	11	35	44	-9	29
12	M'gladbach	26	6	10	10	46	50	-4	28
13	Union Berlin	26	8	4	14	25	42	-17	28
14	Wolfsburg	26	6	7	13	31	44	-13	25
15	Bochum	26	5	10	11	30	54	-24	25
16	Mainz	26	3	10	13	22	46	-24	19
17	Cologne	26	3	9	14	20	47	-27	18
18	Darmstadt	26	2	7	17	26	65	-39	13

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	740	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	747	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	746	767
5	Rohit Sharma	746	882
6	Daryl Mitchell	728	750
7	David Warner	723	869
8	Pathum Nissanka	711	728
9	Dawid Malan	707	730
10	Rassie van der Dussen	701	796

ODI Bowling

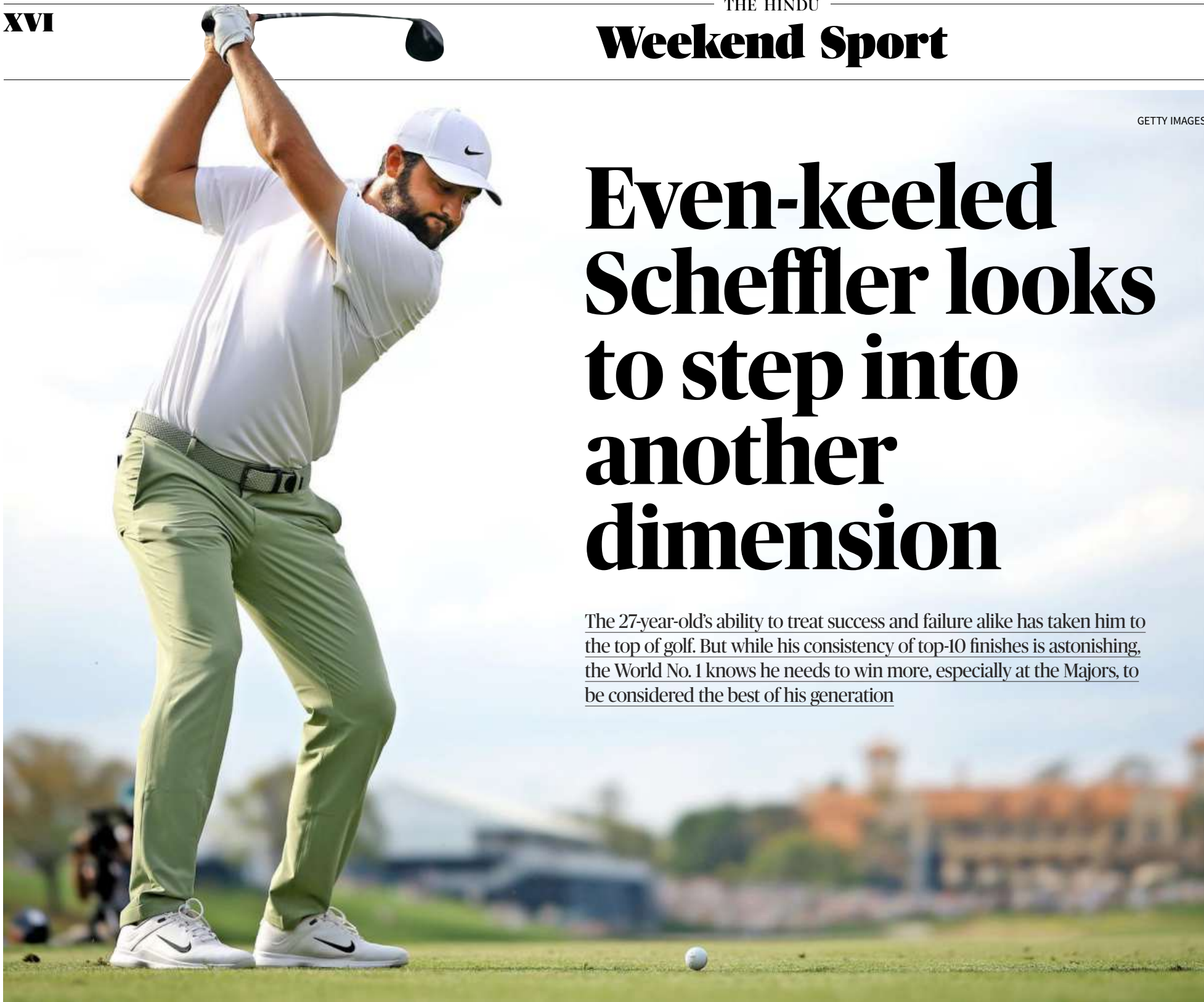
#	Player	Rating	Career best
1	Keshav Maharaj	716	741
2	Josh Hazlewood	688	727
3	Adam Zampa	686	695
4	Mohammed Siraj	678	736
5	Jasprit Bumrah	665	838
6	Mohammad Nabi	656	657
7	Shaheen Afridi	650	688
8	Kuldeep Yadav	645	760
9	Trent Boult	643	775
10	Bernard Scholtz	642	642

T20I Batting

#	Player	Rating	Career best
1	Suryakumar Yadav	861	910
2	Phillip 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



GETTY IMAGES

Even-keeled Scheffler looks to step into another dimension

The 27-year-old's ability to treat success and failure alike has taken him to the top of golf. But while his consistency of top-10 finishes is astonishing, the World No. 1 knows he needs to win more, especially at the Majors, to be considered the best of his generation



It's not like I've been a bad putter my whole career. Golf is a hard game. ... The more free and loose I can play, especially on the greens, the better off I am

since Woods, leading the tour in all the important categories from the tee to the green, along with scoring. He had the seventh-lowest adjusted scoring average (68.63) in PGA Tour history – the top six belong to Woods – and finished outside the top 10 only six times in 23 tournaments.

To stay emotionally stable, Scheffler doesn't spend much time on social media. He also takes precautions not to listen or read about himself.

"Let's say I remember all the good things. Then I walk around with a big head thinking, 'This is how great I am.' That's not good, either," Scheffler said before his most recent run. "If I read the bad stuff, that's all I'm going to remember. 'Scottie can't putt. He hadn't won in a year. Is he the best player in the world?' It's a losing game."

Mostly what keeps him grounded are the people around him. His mother has been a chief operating officer for law firms in New York and Dallas, and his father stayed at home with Scheffler and his three sisters.

His wife, Meredith, is pregnant with their first child, due around the end of April. She's the one who told Scheffler on Sunday morning of the 2022 Masters, when he woke up with tears and self-doubt, "Who are you to say that you are not ready?" He wound up winning his first Major.

The Woods comparisons

Golf is always looking for the heir to the throne, and so it's no surprise that Scheffler has drawn comparisons with Woods. But the 27-year-old has not let it get to his head, aware that Woods spent more than 13 years as No. 1, including a record 281 consecutive weeks.

"Anytime you can be compared to Tiger is really special," Scheffler said. "But I mean, the guy stands alone. I've got 14 more Majors and 70-some PGA Tour events to catch up. So I'm going to continue to plod along, try and stay as even-keeled as I can."

Scheffler also knows that while his consistency continues to draw admiration, he needs to win more, especially at the Majors. With the sport divided after the advent of LIV Golf, financed by the sovereign wealth fund of Saudi Arabia, only the four Majors see the full roster of great players, and it's at these iconic tournaments that Scheffler must prove his superiority. To do that, he must ensure that his putting stays solid. Long known to struggle on the greens, Scheffler switched from a blade to a mallet putter recently. "I like not having to line the ball up," he said. "I line this putter up well in the middle of the face. It's very good visually."

But as important to Scheffler as the switch to a mallet style was a redressing of his mental game. "It's not like I've been a bad putter my whole career," he said. "I've just gone through a tough stretch. I'm still working on the same fundamentals. Golf is a hard game. ... The more free and loose I can play, especially on the greens, usually the better off I am."

Scheffler's newfound strength with the mallet putter may have his competitors nervous, but he will know that Augusta's unforgiving, undulating greens will be a fierce test. What he will also know, however, is that he has battled doubts and mastered them previously.

A second green jacket, which will double his Majors tally to two, will confirm his status as the current undisputed top dog in golf. But he will not be getting ahead of himself.

When he stands on the tee on April 11, the only thing he will be thinking about will be his first shot.

Associated Press Agence France-Presse

The historic Masters Tournament, held every year in the first full week of April, effectively sets the schedule for the PGA Tour. The dates fall to April 11-14 this year – the first time since 2019 – meaning an extra tournament on the road to Augusta National.

As a result, the top players are having to make some adjustments – World No. 1 and 2022 Masters champion Scottie Scheffler is at the Houston Open, trying his hardest to win but also fine-tuning his game with an eye on slipping into the coveted green jacket again.

Steady Scottie

His title defence came apart last year, with the American conceding that he "just didn't have it". But it's a measure of Scheffler's consistency – an increasingly recurrent theme in his career – that he still finished in a tie for 10th, eight strokes behind winner Jon Rahm.

Indeed, it's Scheffler's quality of invariably being in contention that makes him so remarkable. Elite sport is played between the ears – and golf, because of the extreme levels of precision it demands in a changeable environment, is a severe mental test. Scheffler's ability to treat success and failure alike has allowed him to consistently deal with these emotional challenges.

Just weeks ago – right before he earned \$8.5 million for winning two big trophies in a span



I had this idea that I had to play perfect on Sundays, and that's not necessarily how golf is played. The most valuable thing is knowing what you feel like and being able to prepare for it

of 10 days and erased any questions on whether he deserved to be ranked No. 1 – he spoke about how quickly he can forget the past, win or lose.

"I don't celebrate accomplishments that well. I don't feel like I dwell on failures that much either," Scheffler said. "If you ask my wife, she would say I need to celebrate more."

The celebration after he won the Arnold Palmer Invitational involved cheeseburgers in the clubhouse with his family, followed by a two-hour drive to the TPC Sawgrass. The day after Scheffler became the only player in 50 editions of The Players Championship to win back to back, he was texting his swing coach about their practice schedule.

The 6'3" American has a big game, but it's guided by a process-oriented approach.

"I try not to place too much emphasis on results, good or bad," he said. "I show up to try and perform my best and hopefully win. But when I stand on the tee on Thursday, I'm not thinking about the trophy ceremony

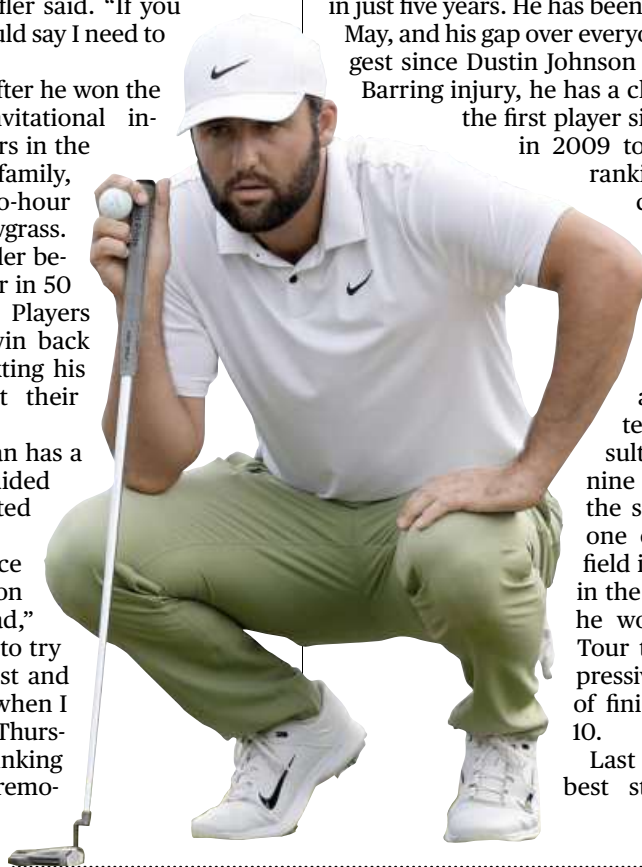
at the end of the week. I'm just trying to be committed to the shot."

Leading the world

Scheffler's latest victory at the Players pushed him over \$50 million for his PGA Tour earnings in just five years. He has been at No. 1 since last May, and his gap over everyone else is the largest since Dustin Johnson seven years ago.

Barring injury, he has a chance to become the first player since Tiger Woods in 2009 to hold the No. 1 ranking for an entire calendar year.

Scheffler is playing great golf, measured as much by his elite ball-striking and alarming consistency as the results. He now has nine victories against the strongest fields – one of them a small field in the Bahamas – in the 25 months since he won his first PGA Tour title. Equally impressive is his 65% rate of finishing in the top 10. Last year, he had the best statistical season



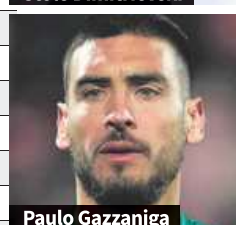
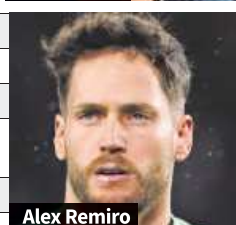
GAME THEORY

Top shot-stoppers in LaLiga

We take a look at how often goalkeepers in Spain's top flight have made saves and kept clean sheets so far this season.

Goalkeeper	Club	Games	Saves	Saves per game	Clean sheets	Clean sheet %
Unai Simon	Athletic Club	29	75	2.59	15	51.72
Alex Remiro	Real Sociedad	28	73	2.61	11	39.29
Stole Dimitrievski	Rayo Vallecano	29	90	3.10	10	34.48
Paulo Gazzaniga	Girona	29	90	3.10	10	34.48
Marc-Andre ter Stegen	Barcelona	19	49	2.58	10	52.63
Giorgi Mamardashvili	Valencia	28	81	2.89	9	32.14
Jan Oblak	Atletico Madrid	29	82	2.83	9	31.03
David Soria	Getafe	29	95	3.28	9	31.03
Sergio Herrera	Osasuna	25	65	2.60	8	32.00
Andriy Lunin	Real Madrid	17	36	2.12	8	47.06
Predrag Rajkovic	Mallorca	29	76	2.62	8	27.59
Rui Silva	Betis	20	61	3.05	8	40.00
Antonio Sivera	Alaves	29	79	2.72	7	24.14
Alvaro Valles	Las Palmas	29	86	2.97	7	24.14
Kepa Arrizabalaga	Real Madrid	12	26	2.17	6	50.00
Vicente Guaita	Celta Vigo	20	62	3.10	5	25.00
Jeremias Ledesma	Cadiz	26	86	3.31	5	19.23
Luis Maximiano	Almeria	26	86	3.31	5	19.23
Filip Jorgensen	Villarreal	28	112	4.00	4	14.29
Orjan Nyland	Sevilla	15	43	2.87	3	20.00
Marko Dmitrovic	Sevilla	13	44	3.38	2	15.38
Inaki Pena	Barcelona	10	22	2.20	2	20.00
Augusto Batalla	Granada	10	39	3.90	1	10.00
Andre Ferreira	Granada	15	49	3.27	0	0.00
Ivan Villar	Celta Vigo	10	25	2.50	0	0.00

SOURCE: FBref.com | Minimum 10 games



PICTURE THIS



Yee-haw!

Tilden Hooper, riding Choke Cherry, competes in the bareback riding event during The American Rodeo in Arlington, Texas, recently.

The sport of rodeo has its roots in the working practices of cattle-herding in Spain and Mex-

ico. It is now a competition with several events that test the speed and skill of cowboys and cowgirls.

The American Rodeo, accessible to both amateurs and professionals, has a prize pool exceeding \$1 million and draws sizeable crowds.

Bareback riding is one of the

events featured in rodeos; the others include breakaway roping, bull riding, steer wrestling and barrel racing.

In bareback riding, which has a sporting history dating back a century, competitors attempt to stay on a bucking horse for eight seconds without touching the horse with their free hand.

To hold on, bareback riders use a rigging, like a suitcase handle, attached to a strap that fastens around the horse's girth.

Modern rodeos, responding to accusations of cruelty from animal welfare advocates, have instituted rules governing how rodeo livestock are to be managed.