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INSIDE



Ladakh leaders meet Amit Shah over Statehood

NEW DELHI Civil society leaders in Ladakh, who are protesting for constitutional safeguards for the region, met Union Home Minister Amit Shah, on Monday, but the "meeting did not result in any positive outcome". This is the first meeting of the leaders with Mr. Shah since 2020. » PAGE 4

Khurshid's wife accused of money laundering by ED

NEW DELHI The Enforcement Directorate on Monday alleged that Louise Khurshid, wife of Congress leader Salman Khurshid and the then project director of Dr. Zakir Husain Memorial Trust, and two others allegedly laundered ₹71.50 lakh. » PAGE 5

Cong. manifesto committee holds crucial meeting

NEW DELHI The Congress manifesto committee, headed by former Finance Minister and senior party leader P. Chidambaram, on Monday discussed the draft election manifesto as the party started gathering momentum in preparation for the coming Lok Sabha polls. » PAGE 5

Govt. employees protest against promotion delay

NEW DELHI Employees of the Union government have threatened a "non-cooperation movement" if an expedited decision is not taken regarding their promotions. Over 100 Central Secretariat Service officials on Monday took out a peace march at Raisina Hill. » PAGE 6

SC ends immunity for legislators taking bribes

Seven-judge Bench overrules the judgment by a five-judge Bench in 25-year-old JMM bribery case | The Bench observes that corruption by elected members puts representative democracy at stake | The court dismisses fears of enhanced possibility for abuse of the law by political parties in power

Krishnadas Rajagopal
NEW DELHI

A seven-judge Bench of the Supreme Court on Monday declared that parliamentary privilege or immunity will not protect legislators who take bribes to vote or speak in Parliament or State Legislative Assemblies from criminal prosecution. "Privileges and immunities are not gateways to claim exemptions from the general law of the land... Corruption and bribery of members of the legislature erode the foundation of Indian parliamentary democracy," the Supreme Court observed.

The unanimous verdict authored by Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud overruled a 25-year-old majority view of the Su-

preme Court, laid down in the JMM bribery case judgment of 1998, that lawmakers who took bribes were immune from prosecution for corruption if they go ahead and vote or speak in the House as agreed.

'Majority erred'

The seven-judge Bench said the majority on the five-judge Bench in the JMM bribery case had erred. The court did not want to perpetuate the grave error. Representative democracy was at stake. Chief Justice Chandrachud clarified that the offence of bribery was complete the moment the corruption money was accepted.

"The legislator will face criminal prosecution whether or not he makes a speech or votes in favour of the bribe-giver. The offence of bribery is com-

plete on the acceptance of the money or on the agreement to accept money being concluded," Chief Justice Chandrachud observed.

The Constitution Bench dismissed notions that whittling down parliamentary immunity would expose a vote or a speech made by Opposition lawmakers in the House to criminal investigation and thus enhance the possibility of abuse of the law by political parties in power.

Bribed lawmakers, the court said, were destructive to the "aspirational and deliberative ideals of the Constitution and create a polity which deprives citizens of a responsible, responsive and representative democracy".

Chief Justice Chandrachud reasoned that the freedom of speech and ex-

Taking away privilege

A look at the observations made by the seven-judge Bench of the Supreme Court in its unanimous verdict:

- The JMM bribery case judgment of 1998, granting lawmakers immunity from prosecution for bribery, had wide ramifications on public interest, probity in public life and parliamentary democracy
- A claim of immunity should fulfil the twofold test that it is tethered to the collective functioning of the House and that it is necessary for the discharge of the essential duties of a legislator
- The offence of bribery is complete at the point when the legislator accepts the bribe

pression, which include voting in the House, and attendant immunities granted to legislators under Articles 105 and 194 did not extend to giving or taking bribes.

The judgment said parliamentary immunity would kick in only if a legislator acts in furtherance of

"fertilising a deliberate, critical and responsive democracy".

Twofold test

The shield of immunity or parliamentary privilege could be claimed in two circumstances. One, if the actions of a legislator were meant to enhance the dig-

ity and authority of the House and its members as a collective body and, secondly, if they were in the exercise of his rights to free speech, protest and freedom from arrest, among others. A claim for immunity would not survive if it failed this two-fold test, the court said.

"An interpretation which enables an MP to claim immunity from prosecution for an offence of bribery would place them above the law. This would be repugnant to the healthy functioning of parliamentary democracy and subversive of the rule of law," Chief Justice Chandrachud observed.

Criminal courts and Houses of the legislature have parallel jurisdiction over allegations of bribery. One cannot negate the jurisdiction of the other.

"The jurisdiction exercised by a competent court to prosecute a criminal offence and the authority of the House to take action for a breach of discipline in relation to the acceptance of a bribe by a member of the legislature exist in distinct spheres," Chief Justice Chandrachud laid down.

The reference came in an appeal filed by JMM leader Sita Soren, who was accused of taking a bribe to vote for a particular candidate in the Rajya Sabha elections of 2012.

Though she later denied culpability on the ground that she voted for the official nominee of her own party, the CBI had filed a chargesheet in the case. The Jharkhand High Court had refused to quash the chargesheet, following which she had moved the apex court.

Back with a bang



Students during morning assembly as schools in Kashmir re-opened after winter break on Monday. NISSAR AHMAD

Nepal PM Prachanda forges a new ruling alliance

Sanjeev Satgainya
KATHMANDU

Nepal's ruling alliance broke down after Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal Prachanda's Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre) switched sides from the Nepali Congress and joined with former Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli's Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninist) on Monday.

The latest development puts the Nepali Congress, the largest party in parliament with 88 seats, in the Opposition seat. The Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) and the Janata Samajbadi Party will also be part of the new Maoist-UML coalition.

FULL REPORT
» PAGE 12

PM slams political 'dynasts', says the country's people are his 'family'



Prime Minister Narendra Modi waving to the crowd during a public meeting in Chennai on Monday. S.R. RAGHUNATHAN

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI

Hitting out at the Opposition alliance after Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) leader Lalu Prasad mocked him as a person who did not have a family, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday said the country's "140 crore people" were his family and he was working day and night for their development.

"Mera Bharat, Mera Parivar" (My India, My family), he declared and said the entire country was speaking in one voice - "I am Modi's family". The Prime Minister, addressing a public meeting of the BJP in Chennai, said parties such as the DMK and Congress believed in the motto of "family first" and the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) leaders have made it a habit to abuse his family repeatedly.

"The farmers and the poor are my family. I have dedicated myself to empowering them," Mr. Modi emphasised, adding for those who did not have a family, he was their relative and vice versa. On his call, the party cadre chanted "Naan Dhaan Modiyin Kudumbam" (I am Modi's fa-

mily). "But I keep saying 'Nation First'. Hence, the INDIA bloc has come up with a new formula to abuse me. They say Modi has no family. Do those who have a family get the licence for corruption?" he wondered.

Mr. Modi alleged that the Congress, its ally DMK, and the INDIA parties were "soaked in corruption and dynastic politics".

Referring to Monday's Supreme Court judgment holding there was no immunity from prosecution for lawmakers indulging in corruption, the Prime Minister said he welcomed it. According to him, this verdict has left the INDIA bloc and its leaders worried.

'Afraid and trembling'

"Their tears are not drying up, they are afraid and trembling," he said. "Those in the INDIA bloc have, for decades, been in the politics of loot. Because of them, the youth of the country are keeping away from politics," he charged and further contended that the apex court verdict would give a push for "swachh rajneethi" (clean politics).

'MODI KA PARIVAR'
» PAGE 5

Supreme Court to hear Udhayanidhi's petition to club FIRs

Krishnadas Rajagopal
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Monday agreed to examine a plea by Tamil Nadu Minister Udhayanidhi Stalin to club First Information Reports (FIRs) registered against him in multiple States over his remarks on 'Sanatana Dharma'.

Initially, the Bench of Justices Sanjiv Khanna and Dipankar Datta said that Mr. Stalin was no layman and should have realised the consequences that would follow his comments.

The Minister responded that he was not before the Supreme Court on the merits of the case but on a question of procedure.

He said the registration of multiple FIRs was a vio-

lation of his right to a fair trial and amounted to "persecution before prosecution".

"You abuse Article 19(1) (a) [free speech], you abuse Article 25 [freedom of conscience]. Now you are coming here under Article 32 [writ protection of fundamental rights]... You are not a layman. You are a Minister. You should have realised the consequences," Justice Datta addressed senior advocates A.M. Singhvi, Mukul Rohatgi and P. Wilson, appearing for the Tamil Nadu Minister.

Justice Khanna said Mr. Stalin could approach the High Courts in each of these States. The judge reasoned that it was not even certain at present whether chargesheets would even



The plea said only the criminal courts within whose jurisdiction the alleged offence took place would proceed with the case. FILE PHOTO

be filed in all these FIRs spread across Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Bihar, Karnataka and Jammu and Kashmir for various offences, including promoting communal enmity and outraging religious feelings.

Mr. Singhvi said there

were instances in the past when the top court had intervened and clubbed the FIRs in one place.

"I may lose or win the case on merits. But this is persecution, making me run around. The FIRs are based on the same statement," Mr. Singhvi submit-

ted. Justice Datta asked if the Minister expected a witness to come all the way from Jammu to Tamil Nadu to appear in the case.

Neutral place

"Then do not have it in Tamil Nadu. Have it in a neutral place. Have it in one place and not all places at the same time. Otherwise this is persecution before prosecution... I will suffer my fate whatever the place you club the FIRs at. I am not on the merits of the case," Mr. Singhvi responded.

The petition filed by Mr. Stalin, through advocate Purvish Jitendra Malkan, said it was well-settled in criminal law that only the criminal courts within whose territorial jurisdiction the alleged offence

took place would proceed with the case. Mr. Stalin made the speech at Kamarajar auditorium in Chennai.

The jurisdiction would be vested in a court in Chennai. Mr. Stalin voiced apprehension that enquiries in Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra would "certainly have political overtones" and affect his right to a fair trial.

"Filing different complaints in different courts was a means to harass the petitioner and drown him in litigation. The petitioner will have to spend all his time travelling to courts across the country. He has already received grave threats, including death threats," the petition said.

The court listed the case on March 15.

IN BRIEF



Defreeze varsities accounts, Bihar Raj Bhavan tells banks

Bihar Raj Bhavan has written to banks to overrule an Education Department order that had frozen the accounts of all State-run universities, barring one. The Raj Bhavan's direction comes after the Bihar government had ordered the freezing of the bank accounts of State-run universities, and withheld salaries of their Vice-Chancellors for allegedly being absent at a recent review meeting convened by the Education Department. The Department's letter to all V-Cs, except that of Kameshwar Singh Darbhanga Sanskrit University, sought clarification for their absence from the meeting. PTI

Stranded tourists in H.P.'s Spiti Valley shifted to safer places

As many as 81 tourists stranded in Himachal Pradesh's Spiti Valley due to closure of roads after heavy snowfall have been shifted to safer places, police said on Monday. The tourists were on Sunday night shifted to and accommodated in different hotels and homestays there, the police said in a statement. Meanwhile, an excavator operator engaged in clearing a blocked stretch on the Shimla-Kinnaur road on National Highway 5 at Negulsari in Kinnaur died after shooting stones fell on him. Over 650 roads, including four national highways, in the State remained closed for vehicular movement on Monday following several avalanches and landslides. PTI

Kerala struggles to pay employee salaries, limits withdrawals to ₹50,000

Finance Minister Balagopal blames Union govt. for financial crunch; Leader of the Opposition Satheesan says empty treasury stands testimony to financial mismanagement by LDF government

The Hindu Bureau
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

The Kerala government began crediting the salaries of government employees on Monday, but temporarily limited the daily withdrawal at ₹50,000 citing technical issues.

Finance Minister K.N. Balagopal, talking to reporters here, said the government hoped to complete the disbursement of salaries and pensions for February in the next two to three days.

Overdraft issue

The ₹50,000 cap has been set reportedly to prevent the treasury from drifting into overdraft once again. The official account is that the limit has been set to prevent the online system from collapsing. The payment of salaries via the employee-Treasury Savings Bank (e-TSB) accounts was hit on March 1, triggering protests from employees' organisations.



Kerala NGO Association members stage a protest in front of the District Treasury in Thiruvananthapuram on Monday demanding immediate payment of their salary. S. MAHINSHA

Mr. Balagopal roundly blamed the Union government for the financial crunch.

The Centre has whittled down the State's eligible funds by ₹57,400 crore. It has offered to permit the State borrow ₹13,608 crore in return for withdrawing the suit filed in the Supreme Court. Kerala expects a favourable decision from the Supreme Court

when the case is heard on March 6 and 7, he added.

Hunger strike

Meanwhile, the Opposition-backed Secretariat Action Council staged a hunger strike demanding urgent steps to disburse the salaries.

Inaugurating the protest, Leader of the Opposition V.D. Satheesan said the United Democratic

Front (UDF) is not surprised by the delay. It had foreseen and warned of this scenario through two white papers on State finances.

Mr. Satheesan accused the Finance Minister — who had attributed the problem to “technical issues” — of misleading the employees regarding the reasons for the delay. The empty treasury stands testimony to the financial mismanagement by the Left government, he said.

Congress-backed State Employees and Teachers Organisation staged a protest outside the Government Guest House here where the Finance Minister hosted a lunch for the Finance department officials who had helped prepare the State Budget for the 2024-25 fiscal.

Secretariat Action Council convener Irshad M.S. said the council's hunger strike will continue as more than half the employees were yet to receive their salaries.

₹1,500 monthly aid for Himachal women, says CM

Vikas Vasudeva
CHANDIGARH

Even as the political turmoil in Himachal Pradesh appears to be settling, Chief Minister Sukhvinder Sukhu on Monday announced that a monthly financial assistance of ₹1,500 will be given to women above 18 years during the ongoing financial year.

Pointing out that the contribution of women towards progress of the State is incomparable, Mr. Sukhu said that under 'Indira Gandhi Pyari Behna Sukh Samman Nidhi Yojana', all the women above 18 years of age of the State will be given ₹1,500 per month. "Our government is fully committed to your respect and your rights," he said at a press conference in Shimla.

Pre-poll guarantees

He said the decision has been taken as a part of the Congress's commitment to fulfil its pre-poll guarantees. The financial assistance will be given during the ongoing financial year, which will put an additional financial burden of about ₹800 crore annually on the State exchequer. He said around five lakh wo-



CM Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu addressing a press conference in Shimla on Monday. ANI

men were expected to benefit from the scheme.

Rebels' concerns

Meanwhile, PWD Minister Vikramaditya Singh, who recently held a meeting with the disqualified Congress MLAs in Panchkula, met senior All India Congress Committee leaders in Delhi and has reportedly conveyed their (rebel MLAs) message and concerns to the 'high command'. Some of the rebel MLAs have reportedly called up Mr. Singh and expressed their willingness to return to the party fold.

Speaking on the political situation in the State, Mr. Sukhu said he followed the guidelines of the party's central leadership and no one was upset in the party.

Teary Kalpana Soren makes political debut, blasts Centre

Amit Bhelari
PATNA

Former Jharkhand Chief Minister Hemant Soren's wife Kalpana Murmu Soren on Monday made her political debut in an emotionally charged rally in the State's Giridih district, where she broke down while delivering her first speech.



Kalpana Murmu Soren wipes off her tears at a rally in Giridih district, Jharkhand. PTI

"Today, I am standing in front of you all with a heavy heart. My in-laws are not well, they are disturbed. I had decided to control my tears but after seeing so much love and affection I could not control it. This love is giving me a lot of strength, which I had never imagined," she said in the presence of Chief Minister Champai Soren.

The former CM was arrested in a money laundering case by the Enforcement Directorate last month. At that time, speculations were rife that Ms. Kalpana might take over as the Chief Minister from her

husband. However, the ruling Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) picked Champai Soren for the post.

'Won't bow down'

As soon as Ms. Kalpana broke down, party workers raised slogans in favour of her husband.

Wiping off her tears during the event held to mark the 51st foundation day of the JMM, she accused the Centre and the BJP of hatching a conspiracy against her husband to arrest him.

"It shows their cheap mentality. They consider tribals as insects. They believe that they can do anything with the down-trodden. The act of the Central government also proves how much hatred they have towards us and they forced him to step down from the post of Chief Minister," she asserted.

Ms. Kalpana said Jharkhand and its people will never bow down in front of the Central government.

Having done her engineering and MBA from her native State Odisha, Ms. Kalpana had married Mr. Soren on February 7, 2006. The couple have two children.

On Sunday, she had posted a message on X announcing her entry into public life. "Until Hemantji comes back among us, I will continue to be his voice and share his thoughts with you all and will continue to serve you," she said.

RLD releases names of LS candidates from Bijnor, Baghat

Anuj Kumar
GHAZIABAD

A day after formalising its entry into the National Democratic Alliance, the Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) on Monday announced its candidates from Baghat and Bijnor Lok Sabha seats and a Legislative Council slot. Party sources said it had been done after consultation with the BJP. National spokesperson Mohd Islam said loyalty had been rewarded and no outsider was thrust on the workers. "The party is also expected to get one or two members in the next expansion of the Yogi Adityanath Cabinet," he said. The nine MLAs of the party had voted for the BJP candidate in the fiercely-contested Rajya Sabha poll recently.

Striking a balance between its Jat and Gurjar vote base and giving a firm answer to erstwhile partner Samajwadi Party, the

RLD announced its trusted veteran and national secretary Rajkumar Sangwan, an acolyte of Chaudhary Charan Singh, from its traditional Baghat seat while Meerapur (Muzaffarnagar) MLA Chandan Chauhan will contest from the Bijnor seat which is currently held by Bahujan Samaj Party's Malook Nagar.

Speculation was rife that Mr. Nagar, a prominent Gurjar leader in the region, would join the RLD but the party chose Mr. Chauhan, grandson of former Deputy Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh Chaudhary Narayan Singh, who also hails from the Gurjar community.

The choice of candidates is being seen as party president Chaudhary Jayant Singh's statement of why he moved away from the SP. In the 2022 Assembly poll, Mr. Chauhan was one of the three SP candidates who contested on the RLD symbol.

Row in Punjab Assembly after CM asks Speaker to 'lock' House

The Hindu Bureau
CHANDIGARH

Tempers ran high in the Punjab Assembly on Monday following a sharp exchange of words between the treasury benches and the Opposition after Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann gave a lock and key to the Speaker, urging him to lock the Vidhan Sabha from inside so that they don't 'run away' from the discussion.

Mr. Mann alleged that the Opposition was 'running away' from a discussion on the Governor's address as they were not able to digest the path-breaking initiatives taken by his government.

'Running away'

Hitting out at the Congress, Mr. Mann said that running away from the core issues is in the DNA of the Congress and its State unit is doing the same. "At a time when the budget session of Parliament was going on, the top leader of the Con-



Heated exchange: Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann in the Punjab Assembly on Monday. ANI

gress, Rahul Gandhi, was wandering in Chhattisgarh. They are the most irresponsible party in the country which is least bothered about the common man," he said.

The Chief Minister said that the Congress is now on its knees and is daily requesting AAP to forge an alliance with it. He said these leaders are political deadwoods who don't have any base among the people and have been rejected by them.

He also attacked the Shiromani Akali Dal, accusing

the Badal family of looting crores from the State for personal benefits during their regimes.

In response to Mr. Mann's remarks, Congress MLAs raised slogans against the AAP government in the well of the House even as the Leader of the Opposition, Partap Singh Bajwa, said that the Congress never runs away.

Outside the House, Mr. Bajwa said Mr. Mann was indulging in theatrics and adopting unethical and unconstitutional behaviour on the floor of the House.

Bharuch braces for 'Vasava versus Vasava' contest as first-time MLA is pitted against six-time MP

Mahesh Langa
AHMEDABAD

Among Gujarat's 26 Lok Sabha seats, Bharuch is likely to witness one of the most absorbing contests this time. The South Gujarat constituency, unique in being represented by a tribal leader since 1989 despite the seat being a non-reserved one, will have the State's most senior parliamentarian from the Vajpayee-Advani era crossing swords with a first-time MLA: sitting BJP MP Mansukhbhai D. Vasava and the Aam Aadmi Party's Chaitar Vasava.

Once a pocket borough of the late Congress leader Ahmed Patel, who had won the seat thrice in a row from 1977 to 1984, the BJP has had a vice-like grip over Bharuch since it won

for the first time in 1989, with Mr. Mansukh Vasava representing it since 1998.

As part of the alliance between Congress and AAP, two Lok Sabha seats in Gujarat - Bharuch and Bhavnagar - have been given to the latter while the principal Opposition party will contest on the remaining 24 seats. AAP picked Mr. Chaitar Vasava, its 37-year-old tribal face who enjoys strong popularity in the region after winning the Dediapada Assembly seat in December 2022, for Bharuch. His candidature was announced as early as January by Delhi Chief Minister and AAP national convener Arvind Kejriwal when the MLA was in jail in a case related to an alleged assault on a government employee.

The South Gujarat con-



AAP candidate Chaitar Vasava and (right) BJP's Mansukhbhai Vasava with Prime Minister Narendra Modi. FILE PHOTO

stituency has a large concentration of tribal and Muslim voters, with both communities making up around 7.5 lakh voters in this seat that houses some of the largest industrial estates such as Ankleshwar and Dahej, Gujarat's life-line Narmada dam, and tribal pockets such as Dediapada, Jhagadia and

Nandod.

Mr. Chaitar Vasava, once a protege of another tribal veteran from the region, Chhotubhai Vasava, helped AAP gain a large chunk of tribal votes from the Congress in the 2022 Assembly polls as he went on to defeat Mahesh Vasava, his mentor's son and then incumbent MLA from

their own political outfit Bharatiya Tribal Party (BTP). In fact, Congress was the first choice of Mr. Chaitar Vasava but comments by party leaders about an alliance with BTP prompted him to join AAP ahead of the Assembly poll.

AAP has stood firmly behind Mr. Chaitar Vasava since his induction into the party. After meeting him and his wife Shakuntala in jail, Mr. Kejriwal had told a gathering in Bharuch that "Chaitar Vasava and his wife have been arrested by the BJP government of Gujarat in a fake case". The AAP national convener went on to laud his MLA for fighting for his people's water, forests, land, schools, and hospitals. "There is anger against the BJP government in the en-

tire tribal community regarding his arrest," he had said.

By announcing him as the AAP candidate from Bharuch, Mr. Kejriwal had sought to strengthen his party's grip over the tribal votes in this seat.

Now out on bail, Mr. Chaitar Vasava has been criss-crossing the area addressing small public gatherings, playing the martyr and painting both BJP and Congress as "anti-tribal" parties. He softened his stance against the Congress after AAP's alliance with the party was announced and has been trying to make inroads in Muslim-dominated pockets as well.

Heartburn in Cong.

The Congress ceding the seat to AAP caused much

heartburn among local leaders, particularly Mumtaz Patel and Faizal Patel, daughter and son of Ahmed Patel. Leaders in the Bharuch unit led by former district Congress chief Parimalsinh Rana and party candidate from the seat in the 2019 election Sher Khan Pathan demanded that the decision be reconsidered. Both of Ahmed Patel's children also expressed their disappointment but later accepted the party central leadership's decision.

Mr. Chaitar Vasava's candidature is understood to have prompted the BJP, which was reportedly in a mood to replace Mr. Mansukh Vasava, to stick with him despite his mercurial attitude and outspoken nature.

The Bharuch MP has of-

ten been critical of the State government and administration for their "lack of interest in resolving the issues of tribals in the region".

In 2020, he had even resigned as an MP and posted his resignation letter on social media after being reportedly upset over the inclusion of around 121 villages in Narmada district in the "eco-sensitive zone". After a meeting with then CM Vijay Rupani, he withdrew his resignation and claimed not to have any dispute with either the State or central leadership.

However, Mr. Mansukh Vasava continues to be critical of the local administration on occasion - in April last year, for instance, he threatened to sit on a fast over "illegal sand mining" in the Narmada.

Protest erupts after wild jumbo kills woman

Congress holds protest at Kothamangalam town in Kerala after the 70-year-old was attacked near Adimaly in Idukki district; she dies on way to the hospital; State govt. says ₹10 lakh was given to family members of victim; this is the fifth such death in Munnar forest division in the last two months

The Hindu Bureau
IDUKKI

A 70-year-old woman was trampled to death by a wild elephant at Kanjiraveli near Adimaly in Idukki on Monday morning. The deceased was identified as Kanjiraveli resident Indira Ramakrishnan.

According to officials, the incident occurred around 9.30 a.m. on Monday. Local residents rushed her to hospital. But she died en route to the Kothamangalam taluk hospital. The elephant also charged at Kanisseri Shaji,

another resident, while he was tapping rubber.

Meanwhile, the Congress launched a protest with the victim's body in Kothamangalam town around noon before an inquest and post-mortem examination could be conducted. Idukki MP Dean Kuriakose, MLAs Mathew Kuzhalnadan and Eldhose Kunnapillil, and Ernakulam District Congress Committee president Muhammad Shiyas led the protest.

The police resorted to cane charging around 2.30 p.m., pulled down the makeshift tents erected by the protesters, and shifted the



Tragic death: Body of elephant attack victim Indira being taken to hospital for autopsy. SPECIAL ARRANGMENT

body back to the taluk hospital on an ambulance around 3 p.m. Mr. Kuzhalnadan and Mr. Kunnapillil

began a hunger strike at Post Office Junction at 6 p.m. demanding compensation to the victim's family

and a permanent solution to man-wildlife conflict.

Minister for Law P. Rajeev said the alleged forceful seizure of the mortal remains of the victim from the mortuary without the permission of the mourning family members and before the inquest and post-mortem was unheard of in the history of the State. He said the government has handed over a compensation of ₹10 lakh to the family of the victim.

After a post-mortem examination, the body was handed over to the relatives. Indira is survived by husband, Ramakrishnan,

and children Shibu, Sindu, and Sheeja.

A senior Forest department official said that on Monday morning, a herd of wild elephants entered the Neendapara area. "Forest officials and Rapid Response Team (RRT) members chased the animals to the Nagarampara range around 7 a.m. But one elephant crossed the Periyar and moved to Kanjiraveli. The woman was on the farm and came under attack," said the official.

Within two months, five people lost their lives in wild elephant attacks in the Munnar forest division.

Modi is neglecting genuine demands of T.N. govt.: Stalin

N. Sai Charan
MAYILADUTHURAI

Chief Minister M.K. Stalin on Monday accused the Union government of ignoring the genuine demands of the Tamil Nadu government and said Prime Minister Narendra Modi was only frequenting the State as the Lok Sabha poll were around the corner.

"The Prime Minister can visit the State, but at the same time, he should consider the genuine demands put forth by the State government. They [the BJP government at the Centre] neglected our request to release ₹37,000 crore towards flood relief following the two disasters in December last year. Not even a single rupee was released, but they want the taxes and votes from Tamil Nadu in order to retain power," he said.

"But they cannot deceive the people of Tamil Nadu, who always stand by the 'Dravidian Model' government that works for the rights and development of the State," he added, while inaugurating the Integrated Collectorate complex in Mayiladuthurai, built at a cost of ₹114.48 crore at Mannampandal.

He also virtually inaugurated 70 other completed projects at a total cost ₹308.88 crore and laid the foundation stone for 40 new projects at a cost of ₹80.62 crore in Mayiladuthurai, Nagapattinam, and Tiruvarur districts. He distributed welfare assis-



M.K. Stalin

tance to 12,653 beneficiaries at a cost of ₹143.46 crore under various schemes.

'Neengal Nalama'
The DMK government, Mr. Stalin said, had been implementing various schemes to benefit every family in the State.

"To ensure their proper implementation, a new initiative, 'Neengal Nalama', will be launched on March 6. Under the scheme, the Chief Minister, Ministers, Secretaries, and Collectors will interact with beneficiaries through phone calls to get their feedback on various schemes and services offered by the government for further improvement," he said. The State government had followed up on all its announcements by issuing Government Orders and ensuring their proper implementation, he said.

To ease the challenges faced by people living in rural areas in getting pattas for their Grama Natham lands, the State government, for the first time, has launched the Natham Online Patta Transfer Scheme. This will benefit 75.33 lakh people in the first phase, he said.

PM visits Kalpakkam nuclear power plant

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday witnessed the commencement of "core loading" at India's first indigenous Fast Breeder Reactor (500 MWe) at Kalpakkam near here. He took a tour of the reactor vault and the control room of the reactor.

India has developed comprehensive capabilities spanning the entire spectrum of the nuclear fuel cycle. The government had approved in 2003 the creation of Bhartiya Nabhiya Vidyut Nigam Ltd. (BHAVINI) to operate India's most advanced nu-



Narendra Modi at the nuclear plant on Monday. PTI

clear reactor-Prototype Fast Breeder Reactor (PFBR), said a statement. The PFBR has been fully designed and constructed indigenously by BHAVINI with contributions from 200 Indian industries. Once commissioned, India will be the second country after Russia to have commercial operating Fast Breeder Reactor, it added.

Karnataka Police hand over Bengaluru cafe explosion case to Central agency

The Hindu Bureau
BENGALURU

The National Investigation Agency (NIA) has taken over the Rameshwaram Cafe blast case. Director-General and Inspector-General of Police Alok Mohan confirmed the news and said a team of NIA officials met him on Monday to discuss the formalities.

Meanwhile, the city police teams probing the case have some vital clues and are working on tracking down the suspect.

They will continue the investigations along with NIA officials, a senior police officer said.

The Bengaluru police



Under scanner: The Bengaluru city police say the suspect may have boarded multiple buses to reach the cafe. PTI

said one of the CCTV camera footages from the restaurant revealed that the suspect stayed for 10 minutes at the cafe, after which he left. The IED fit-

ted with a timer exploded minutes after he left, resulting in nine people getting injured. "The IED shrapnel hit the ceiling instead of going in all direc-

tions. This minimised the damage and injuries. Had it spread around, the casualties could have been more," an officer added.

CCTV footages

The Bengaluru city police, who analysed CCTV footage from hundreds of cameras, have said that the suspect may have boarded multiple buses and taken a circuitous route to reach the restaurant to plant the bomb.

The police are probing the networks of at least four terror suspects from Karnataka, who have given security agencies the slip and are still at large in connection with the blast.

Three held in 'pro-Pak. slogan' case in Bengaluru

The Hindu Bureau
BENGALURU

The Vidhana Soudha police in Karnataka on Monday arrested three people for allegedly raising "Pakistan Zindabad" slogans in the corridors of State Assembly during the victory celebrations of Rajya Sabha member Syed Naseer Hussain.

Shekhar H.T., Deputy Commissioner of Police, Central division, confirmed that the arrest is based on FSL report, circumstantial evidence and statements of the witnesses gathered at the event. The accused have been identified as Iltaj from Delhi, Munawar from R.T. Nagar in Bengaluru and Mohammed Shafi Nashipudi from Byadagi in Haveri district. The accused have been produced before the court for further probe.

A video had gone viral soon after the election results were announced, claiming that a few Congress supporters had shouted "Pakistan Zindabad" slogans in the corridors of Assembly to celebrate the win of Mr. Hussain. Some Congress leaders had, however, denied the allegations saying supporters were cheering for Syed Naseer Hussain, and shouting "Naseer saab zindabad." BJP MLAs had staged a protest inside and outside the Vidhana Soudha demanding the arrest of the accused.

The accused had been detained for questioning where they denied raising any pro-Pakistan slogans. However, the police continued to probe and waited for the FSL report on the video clip submitted to ascertain the facts.

Net-working



Golden waters: Fishermen venture out to the Bay of Bengal off the Visakhapatnam coast as the first rays of the sun spread golden hues on the water. V. RAJU

Three girls suffer burn injuries in acid attack

The Hindu Bureau
MANGALURU

Three second year Pre-University girl students of science stream suffered burns following an acid attack at the Government PU College in Dakshina Kannada district on Monday.

The Kadaba police arrested Abin, 23, an MBA student from Malappuram district of Kerala, for throwing the acid. The police said that the youth was enraged as one of the girls had refused to love him.

Abin entered the college premises in uniform at about 9 a.m. and threw acid on the 17-year-old girl who was with her classmates. She suffered burns on her face and hands. Acid fell on two other girls

who also suffered burns, the police said.

All three students are undergoing treatment in a hospital in Mangaluru.

Soon after the attack, five of their classmates chased and caught Abin and handed him over to the college principal. Following a complaint by the victim, the Kadaba police arrested Abin.

Preliminary investigation revealed that Abin was angry with the girl for refusing his proposal.

Deputy Director of PU Department C.D. Jayanna spoke to students who wrote the exam. Mr. Jayanna said the three students will be allowed to appear for the paper in the second attempt, the examination of which will be held soon.

GI recognition for Narasapur crochet lace craft revives hopes of struggling artisans

T. Appala Naidu
WEST GODAVARI

The famed Narasapur crochet lace craft has received the Geographical Indications (GI) tag, giving a new lease of life to the dying craft in the Godavari region of Andhra Pradesh.

The Department of Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT) under the Ministry of Commerce and Industry registered the craft in the Geographical Indications Registry (GIR) on March 1 certifying that the craft is geographically limited to 19 mandals in West Godavari and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Konaseema districts in the Godavari region.

Narasapur and Palacole are the major trade points



An artisan knitting a lace product near Narasapur.

for lace products in West Godavari district. In Konaseema region, Razole and Amalapuram are known for the craft.

Nearly 15,000 women are directly involved in the craft, producing three ca-

tegories of products made of lace – garments, home furnishings and accessories.

West Godavari District Alankriti Lace Manufacturing Mahila Mutual Aided Co-operative Societies' Federation Limited (popularly known as Alankriti Federation), Narasapur All India Crochet Lace Exporters Association and Andhra Pradesh Handicrafts Development Corporation Limited (APHDC) jointly applied for the GI Tag for the crochet lace craft.

Bleak scenario

"Finally, our craft has received the GI tag. More than 15,000 women are associated with our federation comprising 51 societies. However, barely 200

New rules for plastic use in Odisha's parks

Press Trust of India
BHUBANESWAR

The Odisha government on Monday imposed a ban on the use of single-use plastic in national parks, tiger reserves, wildlife sanctuaries and eco-tourism sites in the state from April 1.

An order to this effect was issued by Chief Wildlife Warden Susanta Nanda. As the use of plastic water bottles will also be banned inside the protected forest areas, alternate drinking water facilities will be arranged for the tourists, said Mr. Nanda, who is also the Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (Wildlife).

Visitors carrying food items in wraps will be ad-

vised to dispose of the wraps at designated garbage bins and not litter the protected areas, the order stated.

All the garbage generated by visitors, nature camps and other places inside the protected areas will be disposed of in accordance with existing guidelines.

Mr. Nanda, in a letter to all regional chief conservators of forests, divisional forest officers and deputy directors of Similipal Tiger Reserve (STR) and Nandanakanan Zoo, said, "While this was necessitated for protecting habitats of the last mile of our State, it is reiterated that the public at large should not be put to inconvenience."

KSU activists, Kerala police clash over student death

The Hindu Bureau
KALPETTA

Chaos descended on the Kerala Veterinary and Animal Sciences University (KVASU) headquarters at Pookode in Wayanad district on Monday with Kerala Students Union (KSU) activists clashing with the police at the entrance of the university.

The violence unfolded when the KSU activists marched to the university headquarters raising a slew of demands, including handing over the case in connection with the death of Sidharthan J.S., a second-year Bachelor of Veterinary Science and Animal Husbandry student, to Central agencies for an impartial investigation.

The protesters also raised demands such as providing a solatium of ₹1 crore to the family of Sidharthan, adopting legal action against the university officials involved in the crime, dismissing the teachers who protected the accused, registering murder case against the accused, and the resignation of Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan.

Students from Kannur, Kasaragod, Kozhikode, Wayanad, and Malappuram districts attempted to enter the university campus by pulling down the barricades set up at the entrance to block the march. The police responded by discharging truck-mounted water cannon several times. The pressurised jets of water felled several students, but the police could not disperse the protesters. The protesters then threw stones and sticks at the police.

IN BRIEF



Yadav Mahakumbh BJP's old tactic for division: Akhilesh

Samajwadi Party (SP) President Akhilesh Yadav on Monday reacted sharply over Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Mohan Yadav's visit to Uttar Pradesh to attend the Yadav Mahakumbh. Mr. Yadav added that attacking his family is an 'old tactic' of the BJP. He added that the saffron party intends to create division but reiterated that the backward classes, Dalits, and minorities are solidly behind the SP. "The BJP is a very smart party, this trick [Yadav Mahakumbh] is an old trick for division," Mr. Akhilesh said. Mr. Mohan participated in a Mahakumbh on Sunday in Lucknow, and said that the Yadav community freed itself from the contractual system of vote bank politics practiced by one family.

'Ensure 60 lakh children of age 3 to 6 attend playschool'

The Ministry of Education (MoE) wants to ensure that 60 lakh children between the ages of three to six years attend play school or Balvatika, and can be accommodated in 14 lakh Anganwadis across the country, Sanjay Kumar, Secretary (School Education), said. Mr. Kumar was speaking at the Early Childhood Care and Education conference, Udaan 2024, in Delhi on Monday. He urged all government and non-government stakeholders to work with the MoE to create mapping towards this. "We need to take this matter with the States and nudge them to do it as quickly as possible," he added.



2 involved in INLD leader Rathee's killing held in Goa

Two people have been arrested from Goa in connection with the killing of INLD's Haryana unit president Nafe Singh Rathee, police said on Monday. Rathee and Indian National Lok Dal (INLD) worker Jai Kishan were killed after multiple rounds were fired on their vehicle in Bahadurgarh in Jhajjar district on February 25. Ashish and Saurabh were arrested from Goa in a joint operation by the Haryana Police's Special Task Force, the district police and the Delhi Police's Special Cell, officials said. They were flown to Delhi from Goa and then taken to Jhajjar on Monday afternoon, said police officials adding that the duo was arrested from a hotel in North Goa. PTI

AIADMK invites VCK to join its alliance for LS election

The AIADMK on Monday invited the VCK to contest the Lok Sabha election together. Interacting with the media, the party's organisation secretary D. Jayakumar said "If they [VCK] come to us, they will benefit. If they remain with the DMK, they won't get any seats." During the 2006 Assembly poll, the VCK was part of the AIADMK-led coalition and won two seats (Kattumannarkoil and Mangalore) out of the nine it contested. It polled 4.26 lakh votes with about 1.3% in vote share.



Feeding stray dogs is making them territorial, says Delhi HC

The Delhi High Court on March 4 expressed concerns regarding people feeding stray dogs which is making them territorial, which leads them to attack people who enter "their territory". The remarks came as the court issued notice to the Delhi government, New Delhi Municipal Council (NDMC), and Delhi Police on a plea filed by the father of 18-months-old baby who was mauled to death by a pack of dogs last month, seeking ₹50 lakh compensation for the incident.

ADR says it will oppose SBI plea on poll bonds

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

As the State Bank of India (SBI) moved the Supreme Court seeking time to comply with a direction to make public details of electoral bonds, the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR), chief petitioner in the case, said it was considering all legal options, including opposing the SBI plea in court.

"...The data is obviously in digital format and collecting data from different States and locations and taking four months for that is impossible in this day and age," Jagdeep Chhokar, founder-member and trustee of the ADR, told *The Hindu*.

RTI activist Anjali Bhardwaj, who is a member of the board of Common Cause, which is one of the petitioners, said: "Donor names and redemption details of electoral bonds are both available in SBI's Mumbai Branch in sealed cover as per their affidavit. Why is SBI not disclosing these immediately?"

SBI seeks time till June 30 to disclose details of poll bonds

The SC had told the bank to furnish the information to the Election Commission by March 6; SBI said there were practical difficulties with the decoding exercise and the timeline fixed for it

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The State Bank of India (SBI) on Monday moved the Supreme Court seeking time till June 30 to comply with a direction from the Supreme Court to make public details of electoral bonds purchased since April 2019, including the date of purchase, the name of the buyer, and the denomination of the bond.

A Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court, headed by Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud, had struck down the electoral bonds scheme, which provided blanket anonymity for financial contributions to political parties, as "unconstitutional and manifestly arbitrary" on February 15.

Full disclosure

The bank was directed to make a full disclosure to the Election Commission (EC) of political parties which had received contri-



The extension of time sought by the SBI would ensure that the details are made public after the Lok Sabha election. REUTERS

butions and encashed the electoral bonds since April 12, 2019. The bank was ordered to furnish the information to the EC by March 6. The poll body, in turn, had to publish the entire information given by the SBI on its website by March 13.

The extension of time sought by the SBI would ensure that details are made public after the Lok Sabha election.

In its nine-page application, the bank said there were "certain practical difficulties with the decoding

exercise and the timeline fixed for it".

"Due to the stringent measures undertaken to ensure that the identity of the donors was kept anonymous, decoding of the electoral bonds and the matching of the donor to the donations made would be a complex process," the SBI submitted.

The bank has laid down a detailed standard operating procedure (SoP) for 29 authorised branches across India and no central database was maintained. Donor details were kept in

a sealed cover at the designated branches.

"In order to make available donor information, the date of issue of each bond will have to be checked and matched against the date of purchase by a particular donor. This exercise would only deal with the first silo of information. These bonds were redeemed by political parties in their designated bank accounts. Accordingly, this information would then have to be matched against the bond redemption information that makes up the second silo," the bank explained.

It said the details ordered by the court to be made public were stored separately.

"Some of the details such as number of bonds, etc. are stored digitally while the other set of details are stored physically. The purpose of not storing all details digitally was to ensure that it cannot be gathered easily," the application said.

'Travesty of justice,' says Opposition on SBI demand

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Opposition parties on Monday questioned the SBI's plea for extending the date for submitting details of electoral bonds and called it a "travesty of justice". They said every effort was being made to ensure that the data were not released in time for the elections to shield the "corrupt practices" of the Modi government.

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi in a post on X asked, "When the Supreme Court has said that it is the right of the countrymen to know the truth about electoral bonds, then why does SBI want this information not to be made public before the elections?"

CPI(M) general secretary Sitaram Yechury asked whether the SBI's extension was only to shield the government. Trinamool Congress leader Saket Gokhale said, "This is 'Modi Ka Parivaar' working overtime to hide the large-scale corruption done by him and BJP."

Bribery involving legislators: PM, Congress hail SC ruling

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Congress, and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) on Monday welcomed the Supreme Court's judgment that members of Parliament and Legislative Assemblies do not enjoy immunity from prosecution for taking bribes to make speeches or to cast votes in the legislature.

A seven-judge Constitution Bench, headed by Chief Justice D.Y. Chandrachud, unanimously overruled the 1998 verdict delivered by a five-judge Bench in the *Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) bribery* case by which MPs and MLAs were granted immunity from prosecution for taking bribe to make a speech or vote in the legislature.

Minutes after the judgment was delivered, Mr. Modi posted on X (formerly Twitter): "SWAGATAM! [welcome] A great judgment by the Hon'ble Supreme Court which will ensure clean politics and



Narendra Modi

deepen people's faith in the system."

'Historic decision'

Congress spokesperson Abhishek Manu Singhvi also welcomed the judgment, stating that this had been "a long-pending issue for many years to correct a purely legal issue", which cannot be the law on the text of the Constitution.

"It is a salutary, desirable, welcome judgement. It is something which sets right the law and it should have been done earlier. It is a legal issue decided on the assumption that some people did not so vote and some people did vote on the allegation of bribery

and whether they can at all be prosecuted, not whether they are convictable or not, on the merits," said Mr. Singhvi.

"These provisions of protection to Members of Parliament or an MLA are made for the discharge of their duties and only for those things without which they cannot discharge their duties, and not to give them additional benefits like, for example, receiving bribe," he added in a video message.

CPI(M) general secretary Sitaram Yechury termed the judgment "historic" and also connected it to horse trading and toppling of governments through pecuniary appeals to legislators.

He posted on X: "A historic 7 Judge Constitution bench judgement. Mega horse trading allegedly through bribery indulged by the BJP has toppled many democratically elected governments replaced by BJP govts! Likewise, some BJP RS (Rajya Sabha) MPs have been elected in this manner."

Vijaya Singh
NEW DELHI

Civil society leaders in Ladakh, who are protesting to demand Constitutional safeguards for the region, met Union Home Minister Amit Shah, on Monday, but the "meeting did not result in any positive outcome".

This is the first meeting of the Ladakh groups with Mr. Shah since 2020.

The members of the Leh Apex Body (LAB) and the Kargil Democratic Alliance (KDA) said they had two rounds of meetings with officials from the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) on Monday.

"Today the sub-committee of LAB and KDA held a meeting with the officials of MHA and adviser Union Territory, Ladakh. The meeting ended without any concrete outcome. Subsequently, the sub-committee members had a meeting with Home Minister Amit Shah at his residence. This meeting too didn't result in any positive outcome. Both the bodies will devise future course of



Unresolved talks: The sub-committee members had a meeting with Amit Shah at his residence on Monday. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

action after consultation with the people of the two districts," a statement issued by the leaders said.

The MHA and the civil society groups have had three rounds of talks so far.

The Union Territory, with a population of 2.74 lakh (2011 Census) has erupted in protests several times in the past four years amid concerns over protection of land, resources, and employment for the locals, and bureaucratic overreach. Earlier, MHA officials had agreed to examine how the provisions of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution could be implemented in Ladakh's context.

The LAB and KDA are jointly protesting for Statehood and inclusion of Ladakh in the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution, thus giving it a tribal status; job reservation for locals; and a parliamentary seat each for Leh and Kargil.

Former Member of Parliament Thupstan Chhewang, who is also the chief of the Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA), has been leading the talks.

After the special status of J&K under Article 370 of the Constitution was abrogated by the Parliament on August 5, 2019, Ladakh was turned into a Union Territory without any Legislative Assembly.

Allow MPs, MLAs to speak without fear of harassment in House, says SC

Krishnadas Rajagopal
NEW DELHI

A Constitution Bench on Monday said the Parliament and State legislatures would lose their representative character in a democratic polity if MPs and MLAs are not able to attend the House and speak their minds in the exercise of their duties as members without fear of being harassed by the executive or any agencies.

"The freedom of elected legislators to discuss and debate matters of the moment on the floor of the House is a key component of a deliberative democracy in a parliamentary form of government. The ability of legislators to conduct their functions in an environment which protects their freedom to do so



Fearless debates: The top court said freedom of speech was a 'necessary privilege' essential to the functioning of the House.

without being overawed by coercion or fear is constitutionally secured. As citizens, legislators have a fundamental right to the freedom of speech and expression," Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud observed.

The judgment overruled a majority judgment of 1998 in the *JMM bribery* case.

"... Even in the face of

colonial reluctance, the demand for parliamentary privileges in India was always tied to the relationship which it bore to the functions which the Indian legislators sought to discharge," the judgment said.

However, the Bench said the parliamentary privilege and immunity would swing into action if legislators were threatened

with prosecution for their official actions or speeches given in the House to enhance the dignity and authority of the legislature.

The Chief Justice said freedom of speech in the Houses of Parliament and their committees was one such "necessary privilege" essential to the functioning of the House.

"This privilege is not only essential to the ability of Parliament and its members to carry out their duties, but it is also at the core of the function of a democratic legislative institution," the judgment noted.

Similarly, the vote given by an MP was an extension of speech. "Therefore, the freedom of a Member of Parliament to cast a vote is also protected by the freedom of speech in Parliament," the court set down.

Rajya Sabha elections must be given utmost protection, says court

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Monday said the elections to the Rajya Sabha and Council of States required "utmost protection" and the right to vote should be carried out freely without fear or persecution.

"The Rajya Sabha or the Council of States performs an integral function in the working of our democracy and the role played by the Rajya Sabha constitutes a part of the basic structure of the Constitution. Therefore, the role played by elected members of the State Legislative Assemblies in electing members of the Rajya Sabha under Article 80 is significant and requires utmost protection to ensure that the vote is

exercised freely and without fear of legal persecution," a Constitution Bench of seven judges, headed by Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud, said.

He also said the free and fearless exercise of franchise by elected members of the Legislative Assembly while electing members of the Rajya Sabha was undoubtedly necessary for the dignity and efficient functioning of the State Legislative Assembly.

The court said parliamentary privilege was not to be restricted to only law-making on the floor of the House but extended to other powers and responsibilities of elected members, which took place in the Legislature or Parliament even when the House was not sitting.

Congress manifesto, screening committees hold crucial meetings

Party's election panel to meet on Thursday to finalise names for first list; manifesto for LS polls to focus on MSP legal guarantee, caste census

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Congress held a series of important meetings on Monday as the party geared up for the Lok Sabha elections.

The manifesto committee, headed by former Finance Minister and senior party leader P. Chidambaram, discussed the draft manifesto. Meetings of screening committees were also held to shortlist candidates for the elections.

The party's Central Election Committee (CEC) will meet on Thursday to finalise the names for the first list of Lok Sabha candidates, said sources.

The manifesto committee will also be meeting on Tuesday for further discussions. Sources said the panel cleared about 10 pages of the 50-page document on Monday.

Once the document is finalised, it will be sent to the Congress Working Committee for the final stamp of approval. On Saturday, *The Hindu* had reported that giving legal guarantee to minimum



Congress leaders Supriya Shrinete, P. Chidambaram, and T.S. Singh Deo during the website launch for the manifesto. FILE PHOTO

support price, conducting a caste-based census, and filling up existing government vacancies as a priority would prominently figure in the party's manifesto for the elections.

A source told *The Hindu* that apart from caste census, the party would focus on better access to education for marginalised sections, higher scholarships, economic packages for different target groups like women, youth, backward classes, micro and small entrepreneurs, gig workers, and so on.

Thematically, the document would focus on *paanch nyay*, or five pillars

of justice, that the Rahul Gandhi-led Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra has been highlighting for the past two months.

In a post on X on Monday, Mr. Gandhi said the data presented by the Centre in Parliament showed that 9.64 lakh posts were vacant across 78 departments. "If we look at important departments only, 2.93 lakh posts are vacant in the Railways, 1.43 lakh in the Home Ministry and 2.64 lakh in the Defence Ministry," he said.

"The INDIA bloc's resolve is that we will open closed doors of jobs for the youth," he asserted.

After Lalu's jibe, BJP launches 'Modi Ka Parivar' campaign

Nistula Hebbar
NEW DELHI

Reacting to Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) chief Lalu Prasad's jibe at Prime Minister Narendra Modi for having "no family", BJP leaders on Monday added "Modi Ka Parivar" (Modi's family) to their social media profiles.

Mr. Prasad had made the remarks at a rally in Patna on Sunday while referring to Mr. Modi's attacks on dynastic politics, asking why the Prime Minister did not have a family.

Union Ministers Amit Shah, Rajnath Singh, Nitin Gadkari, and Nirmala Sitharaman, and BJP chief J.P. Nadda were joined by party members from across the country in declaring themselves as "Modi Ka Parivar" on their social media accounts, as the ruling party launched a counter-attack.

Many supporters of Mr. Modi also made the change on their pages.

BJP MP and spokesperson Sudhanshu Trivedi said this was in response to the Opposition parties which "have been launching personal attacks against Modi by making such 'petty' remarks against him for the past 16-17 years".

"In that series, yesterday [Sunday], at a rally in Patna, once again such pet-

BJP MP said the Opposition had been launching personal attacks against Modi for past 17 years

ty remarks were made against Prime Minister Modi by Mr. Prasad in the presence of INDIA alliance leaders. This is sad and painful," Mr. Trivedi said at a press conference at the BJP headquarters here.

"He [Prasad] has talked about Modi's family. I want to remind [him] that for Prime Minister Modi, the entire country is his family," he added.

The BJP's move in support of Mr. Modi in the run-up to the Lok Sabha election is reminiscent of a similar campaign the party had mounted prior to the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. It then had launched the "Main bhi chowkidar" campaign to take on Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's "chowkidar chor hai" dig at Mr. Modi.

Responding to the remark, Mr. Modi at a rally in Telangana said that "140 crore people of India are my family". He also kept up his attack on "dynastic parties" in the country, saying that they may have different faces, but "jhoot aur loot" (lies and loot) was their "common character".

Modi's 'real family' loots country, says Rahul

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Taking a dig at the 'Modi Ka Parivar' (Modi's family) campaign launched by the BJP on social media, the Congress on Monday said it was an attempt at "misleading" people from real issues.

"Farmers are in debt, youth are unemployed, labourers are helpless, and the country is being looted by Modi's 'real family'," Congress leader Rahul Gandhi said in a post on X.

Mr. Gandhi also shared his earlier photo from the Lok Sabha, in which he had held a poster-size photograph of Mr. Modi in a private jet with business tycoon Gautam Adani.

The Congress's social media handles ran a hashtag 'Modi Ka Asli Parivar' (Modi's real family) and pointed to his ties with Mr. Adani. "Do women of Manipur find a place in Modi Ka parivar? Will the PM call the farmers protesting on the borders of Delhi his parivar? What about the unemployed youth?" Congress general secretary (organisation) K.C. Venugopal asked on X.

The party also targeted the Prime Minister over Minister of State for Home Ajay Mishra Tani, whose son allegedly mowed down a group of protesting farmers with his SUV.

INBRIEF



Delhi HC dismisses Mahua's plea in cash for query case

The Delhi High Court on Monday dismissed a plea filed by Trinamool Congress leader Mahua Moitra that requested the court to restrain BJP MP Nishikant Dubey and advocate Jai Anant Dehadrai from making bribery allegations against her for asking questions in Parliament. Justice Sachin Datta, who had reserved the verdict on the application for the interim relief by Ms. Moitra on December 20, rejected it on Monday. She was expelled from the Lok Sabha in December after Mr. Dubey and Mr. Dehadrai alleged that she has taken bribe from businessman Darshan Hiranandani to ask questions in Parliament. Ms. Moitra has refuted the allegations against her as "political vendetta".

BJP's Barabanki MP opts out of LS race after viral video

BJP Lok Sabha MP from Barabanki, Upendra Singh Rawat, whose alleged obscene video went viral on Monday, declared that he would not contest any election until proven innocent, and urged party president J.P. Nadda to probe the video. Mr. Rawat, whose name was declared in the first list of Lok Sabha candidates, alleged that the video had been generated by deep fake artificial intelligence technology for which he has lodged an FIR. The Barabanki MP alleged that the video had been made public after he had been renominated in an attempt to tarnish his image. Mr. Rawat won the Barabanki seat in the 2019 Lok Sabha election defeating the Samajwadi Party candidate Ram Sagar Rawat.

Media ignoring joblessness, farmers' protest, says Rahul in Madhya Pradesh

Mehul Malpani
BHOPAL

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Monday hit out at the mainstream media for telecasting billionaire Mukesh Ambani's son Anant Ambani and Radhika Merchant's pre-wedding festivities, and accused it of not highlighting issues like farmers' protest, unemployment, and inflation.

The remarks came on the third day of his Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra in Madhya Pradesh.

He said the biggest issues in the country were unemployment, inflation, and corruption. "Why is Ambani ji's wedding being discussed in the media all day long? Someone explain this to me," he asked. "When you watch the TV [news] you will see Bollywood stars, they will talk



Hitting out: Congress leader Rahul Gandhi greeting the crowd at the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra in Madhya Pradesh's Binagarj on Monday. ANI

about cricket sometimes. But they will not talk about your issues because you have no control over the media," he said. He reiterated his stance that OBCs, Dalits, and tribal people do not have proper representation across sectors.

Mr. Gandhi resumed his march from Shivpuri on

Monday. From Shivpuri, the yatra travelled through Guna, the bastion of Union Minister Jyotiraditya Scindia, who was announced as the BJP's candidate for the Lok Sabha elections. He had unsuccessfully contested from the seat on Congress ticket in 2019, before switching to the BJP.

With the election around the corner, the Congress has been working to negate the Scindia-factor in the region and make a comeback. The party currently does not hold any of the four Lok Sabha seats - Morena, Bhand, Gwalior, and Guna - in the belt.

A decade of degradation for Railways, says Cong.; cites price hike, poor safety

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Criticising the Union government over the issues of rising ticket prices, reduction in number of non-AC coaches, falling train speeds, rail safety, and deteriorating finances, Congress general secretary Jairam Ramesh said that it had been a "decade of degradation" for the Railways.

Mr. Ramesh in a post on X on Sunday said the average price per passenger per kilometre had registered a 107% increase "from 0.32/passenger-km in 2013-14 to 0.66/passenger-km". For the United Progressive Alliance decade, he said the increase was only 33%. "We must credit the Modi government for coming up with so many different ways to



JAIRAM RAMESH
Congress leader

extort people," he said.

He listed out "fake superfast surcharges", "senior citizen concessions withdrawal", "dynamic pricing fraud" and "long extensions of so-called 'special' trains" as factors contributing to this hike.

'Ticket concessions'

Mr. Ramesh said, "In a move that requires a special kind of cruelty, the Modi government withdrew rail ticket concessions for senior citizens during the pandemic. In the three

years since this policy, over ₹3,700 crore has been looted from senior citizens!"

The dynamic pricing, he said, was exclusionary and shunted out migrant workers who want to visit their families for Chhath Puja or a student wishing to see her family for the holidays.

Mr. Ramesh also accused the government of "anti-poor mindset" when it comes to constructing rail infrastructure. "While the UPA spent crores on high-quality services for the common man, such as

the Garib Rath trains, the Modi government has shifted spending to expensive AC coaches - even though 95.3% of train passengers ride sleeper and general classes," he said, underlining that more than 33% of seats added in the last 10 years went to AC 3-tier coaches. The schedule for the Railways Coach Factory for 2023-25 has just 1,142 general and sleeper coaches against 3,044 air-conditioned coaches on order.

He criticised the Centre's lackadaisical attitude towards safety. "The CAG has flagged a huge backlog in renewal and replacement of 'over aged assets' critical for safe running of trains. It found that the decline in fund availability and non-utilisation of available funds for track renewals was causing derailments," he said.

ED accuses Congress leader Salman Khurshid's wife, two others of money laundering

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Enforcement Directorate on Monday alleged that Louise Khurshid, wife of Congress leader Salman Khurshid and the then project director of Dr. Zakir Husain Memorial Trust, and two others allegedly laundered ₹71.50 lakh.

The agency Lucknow Zonal office of ED has provisionally attached 15 immovable properties worth ₹29.51 lakh, in the form of agricultural land, in Farukhabad, Uttar Pradesh and ₹16.41 lakh lying in four bank accounts linked to the trust.

The agency's money-laundering probe is based on 17 FIRs registered by the Uttar Pradesh Police's Eco-



Louise Khurshid

director, Ms. Khurshid, it said.

According to the ED, the grant-in-aid of ₹71.50 lakh received by the trust was not used for holding camps as sanctioned by the Centre. The funds were instead allegedly laundered by Mr. Shukla, Mr. Athar and Ms. Khurshid, "for the interest of the trust and their personal gain".

Last month, an MP-MLA court in Uttar Pradesh's Bareilly district issued an arrest warrant against the Mr. Athar and Ms. Khurshid.

The trust had received the funds purportedly for the distribution of hearing aids and wheelchairs among persons with disabilities in Uttar Pradesh. (With PTI inputs)

Senior leader Tapas Roy quits Trinamool, resigns from Assembly

The Hindu Bureau
KOLKATA

Ahead of the Lok Sabha elections, senior Trinamool Congress MLA Tapas Roy on Monday resigned from all posts in the Trinamool Congress and as a member of West Bengal Legislative Assembly.

He had been voicing his discontent in the media over the past few days. Mr. Roy was also vocal against veteran Trinamool leader Sudip Banerjee. Speculation is rife that Mr. Roy may join the BJP and contest against Mr. Sudip from Kolkata Uttar Lok Sabha seat.

The former Trinamool leader remained tight-lipped about his plans. Mr. Roy said that Trinamool chief Mamata Banerjee did not stand by him when his

house was raided by the Enforcement Directorate about 50 days ago.

Leader of the Opposition Suvendu Adhikari welcomed Tapas Roy's decision to resign. His resignation comes as a setback to the Trinamool Congress ahead of the Lok Sabha polls.

Tumult in party

Meanwhile, Trinamool Congress leader Kunal Ghosh who has been airing his dissatisfaction over Sudip Banerjee, received a show cause notice for speaking against the party.

Mr. Ghosh announced his decision to quit as general secretary and spokesperson of the party. Mr. Ghosh, however, added that he will remain a loyal soldier of the party.

Congress asks why BJP LS candidate was not named in FIR in Chhattisgarh coal scam

Shubhomoy Sikdar
RAIPUR

The Opposition Congress party has accused the State police of providing preferential treatment to a BJP Lok Sabha election candidate from Chhattisgarh whose name cropped up during the Enforcement Directorate (ED) probe in the coal levy scam case.

Party spokesperson Sushil Anand Shukla on Monday asked why Chintamani Maharaj - whose name featured among the 195 candidates announced by the BJP last week - had not been named in the FIR filed by the Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB) in the coal levy case based on a letter by the ED.

The purported letter

The BJP leader was named in ED's letter in the case but was left out of ACB's FIR, says Congress

named Mr. Maharaj - a former Congress MLA who joined the BJP ahead of last year's Assembly election - as one of the legislators who "extorted" money from Suryakant Tiwari, alleged kingpin of the coal levy scam. While the FIR mentions that Mr. Maharaj received ₹5 lakh from Mr. Tiwari, his name has not been mentioned in the list of accused.

Mr. Shukla asked if Mr. Maharaj was put in the "Modi [a reference to Prime Minister Narendra

Modi] washing machine" and all his sins were washed away, while likening his case to other leaders from across the country who have switched over to the BJP in the past decade.

"When a case is registered against 35 people on the basis of a letter, then why was Chintamani Maharaj's name left out of the FIR? It's because he has joined the BJP. This is the character of BJP, cases are filed against leaders of Opposition parties by forwarding them to ED, I-T, CBI and pressure is created. But as soon as that leader joins BJP, all proceedings against him are stopped. There are many examples of this..." said Mr. Shukla.

IN BRIEF



Swedish defence major SAAB begins work on unit in India

Swedish defence major Saab on Monday started construction of its new manufacturing facility in India for its iconic Carl-Gustaf M4 weapons with a formal ground-breaking ceremony. The facility is being built at MET City in Haryana. The State has a strong industrial base of good potential partners and skilled employees, the company said. "Today is an important milestone for Sweden and India. Saab's factory will be the first foreign fully-owned defence production facility in India. It is a testament to the strong bilateral relationship between our countries," says Håkan Jevrell, State Secretary for Foreign Trade, Sweden.

Court seeks response from WFI, govt. on wrestlers' plea

The Delhi High Court on Monday sought response from the Union government and the Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) on a plea filed by wrestlers Bajrang Punia, Vinesh Phogat, Sakshi Malik, and Satyawart Kadian challenging a WFI circular for conducting the selection trials for the Asian Olympic Qualifiers and the World Olympic Qualifiers, 2024. The petitioners were at the forefront of the protest against former WFI president Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh for allegedly molesting women grapplers. Justice Sachin Datta has put the matter for hearing on March 7 before which the ad-hoc committee has to reply to the plea.

Vacate party offices at Rouse Avenue by June 15: SC to AAP

The Supreme Court on Monday allowed the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) time till June 15 to vacate its offices from a property at Rouse Avenue allotted to the Delhi High Court for expanding judicial infrastructure. "In view of the impending general elections, we grant time till June 15, 2024 to vacate the premises so that land allotted to expand the district judiciary's footprint can be utilised on an expeditious basis," a Bench headed by Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud observed. The court asked the AAP to approach the Land and Development Office for allotment of land for its offices.

Arvind Kejriwal skips eighth summons by ED in excise case

Delhi Chief Minister and Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) supremo Arvind Kejriwal on Monday skipped the eighth summons by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) to appear before the agency. Mr. Kejriwal, however, agreed to appear before the agency virtually on any date after March 12. The ED had summoned Mr. Kejriwal on Monday in relation to a money laundering probe in the Delhi excise policy case. ED sources, however, said they had no provisions for doing a virtual hearing. Mr. Kejriwal has repeatedly skipped the summons by the agency stating that they were illegal, unfair, and politically motivated. AAP leaders have alleged that the Centre was using the ED as a political tool to intimidate the Opposition.

Govt. employees protest against promotion delay

They threaten to stage a 'non-cooperation movement' if an expedited decision is not taken regarding their promotions and the Union government does not 'wake up from its deep slumber'

Vijaita Singh
NEW DELHI

Employees of the Union government have threatened a "non-cooperation movement" if an expedited decision is not taken regarding their promotions and the "government does not wake up from its deep slumber".

The officials said that many employees suffer stagnation in their careers and financial losses in pension as they retire without getting promoted. Over 100 Central Secretariat Service (CSS) officials on Monday took out a peace march at Raisina Hill, where the Prime Minister's Office and several Ministries such as Home and Defence are located, to mark their protest.

A cadre review committee (CRC) constituted in 2022 is yet to submit its findings. The committee is headed by officials of the Department of Personnel



Mass protest: There is a stagnation in almost each grade of CSS due to which officers are distressed and dismayed. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

and Training (DoPT).

"The CSS forum has pursued the matter at every level, however, we are yet to receive any positive outcome from the government. Such kind of treatment with CSS officers who are considered as backbone of Central government is very disappointing and frustrating," the forum said in a letter sent to the Secretary, DoPT.

It said the government had constituted a cadre review committee on Octo-

ber 27, 2022 to assess the rising demand for manpower across various Ministries and departments in view of a growing number of schemes and projects of the Government of India and to suggest the steps for better cadre management and smooth career progression of CSS officials.

"As per information available with us, the deliberations of the committee have been completed long ago. However, the matter is still pending with the go-

vernment. As per information available with us, at least 20 government departments have sent requisitions for more than 2,500 additional posts. The number will be huge if the data of all the departments are to be considered. Due to the delay in the submission of the report of CRC, these departments are crippled due to shortage of manpower, which is also hampering official work. There is also stagnation in almost each grade of CSS due to which officers are distressed and dismayed," the forum said.

The forum has decided to take out a series of protest marches in the next few days.

"We will start a non-cooperation movement if the government does not act. We will only work during the official hours, 9 a.m. to 5.30 p.m., and will not put in any extra hours as we do on a usual basis," one of the members of the forum said.

Uttarakhand Cabinet nod for Ordinance to recover damage cost

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Uttarakhand Cabinet on Monday approved an Ordinance for the recovery of the cost of damage to public property during riots and protests from those involved.

The government has also formed a tribunal which will assess the cost of the damage.

Those found guilty will also have to pay a fine of up to ₹8 lakh apart from the recovery amount.

Heavy price

The Cabinet nod to the Uttarakhand Public (Government) and Recovery of Damage to Private Property (Ordinance) Act 2024, comes less than a month after violence broke out in Haldwani's Banbhoolpura after the civic body demolished an illegal madrasa and mazar built on Nazool (owned by government) land. Five people were killed and 100 injured in

the violence. "With the aim of strictly curbing the cases of riots and unrest, the Cabinet has approved the constitution of a Special Tribunal. The damage caused to public property during the riots will be compensated by the rioters themselves. Those who disturb the peace of the State will have to pay a heavy price," Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami wrote on X.

A government communique said that in addition to the compensation, the rioters will also have to pay for the treatment of those injured in the violence. Apart from this, the entire expense incurred during the riots on the police, administration or other agencies for riot control will also be recovered from the people involved.

Hundreds of govt. officials to be mobilised for Modi's rally

Peerzada Ashiq
SRINAGAR

The J&K Lieutenant-Governor's administration has made elaborate arrangements to mobilise hundreds of government employees to attend the public rally of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Srinagar's Bakshi Stadium on March 7.

Top official sources said 13 departments have been directed to send their employees to the venue.

These departments are Education, National Rural Livelihood Mission, Agriculture, Rural Development Department, Handicrafts, Srinagar Municipal Corporation, Integrated Child Development Services, Directorate of Youth Services & Sports, Nehru Yuva Kendra, J&K Khadi and Village Industries Board, Social Welfare, and Jal Shakti.

The Food Safety Department has been directed to ensure the presence of representatives from 62 bakery shops across the city.

"All Departmental/Sec- toral Nodal Officers shall



On alert: Sashtra Seema Bal (SSB) personnel monitoring vehicle movement in Srinagar on Monday. ANI

strictly ensure that vehicles allotted to their respective sectors shall only be utilised at respective identified pickup locations, keeping in view of the security measures. No alteration shall be entertained in the list of participants, Vehicle Nodal Persons, allotted vehicles," an official circular read.

One list, accessed by *The Hindu*, suggested that around 7,000 employees from 13 departments will attend the Prime Minister's rally.

A massive security clearance initiative has been launched to carry out a background check of these government employees at-

Tired of spam or fraud calls? File a complaint on Chakshu

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Department of Telecommunications (DoT) on Monday launched *Chakshu*, a platform for telecom users to report fraud or spam callers. The facility, available at sanchar-saathi.gov.in/sfc, will allow citizens to "proactively report suspected fraud communication", the DoT said in its announcement.

The platform will allow users to report frauds related to bank account, payment wallet, SIM, gas connection, electricity connection, KYC update, expiry, deactivation, impersonation as government official or relative, and sextortion.

The Digital Intelligence Platform was also launched, which would be a non-public data-sharing resource for "Telecom Service Providers, law enforcement agencies, banks and financial institutions, social media platforms, identity document issuing authorities, and so on", the DoT said.

Minister for Communi-



Ashwini Vaishnaw

cations and Electronics & Information Technology Ashwini Vaishnaw also supported Caller Name Presentation (CNAP), a feature that would allow telecom users who opt for the service to view the registered name of everyone calling them. Telecom firms and some civil society groups had warned that it would adversely impact people's privacy rights.

Mr. Vaishnaw likened the feature to the right to know who was knocking at the door but added that recommendations favouring CNAP's introduction by the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India would be reviewed in detail before further steps are taken.

Submit report on gang rape of Spanish woman: HC

The Hindu Bureau
PATNA

The Jharkhand High Court on Monday took *suo motu* cognisance of the gang rape of a Spanish woman in the State on Friday night. A Division Bench led by Acting Chief Justice S. Chandrashekar sought a report from Jharkhand's Chief Secretary and Director-General of Police (DGP), as well as the Superintendent of Police (SP) of Dumka district, where the incident took place.

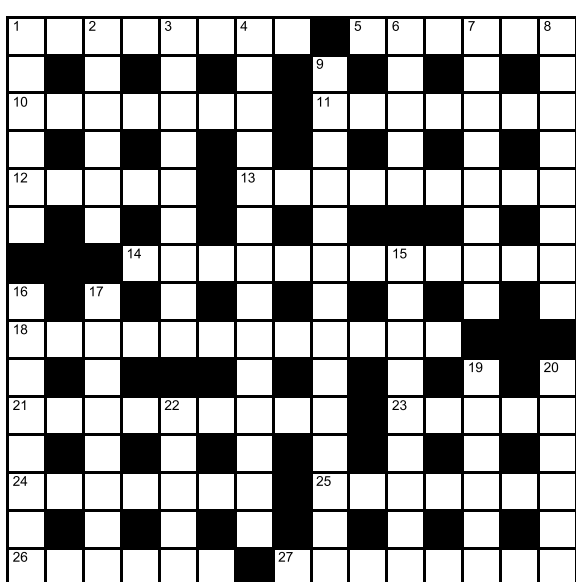
The next hearing is scheduled on Thursday.

The court said, "The incident of crime of any kind against a foreign national may have serious national and international repercussions including impacting the tourism economy of the country. A sex-related crime against a foreign woman is likely to bring adverse publicity against the country and thereby tarnishing the image of India across the globe."

The police said three people had been arrested.

THE CROSSWORD+ 14114

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



Across

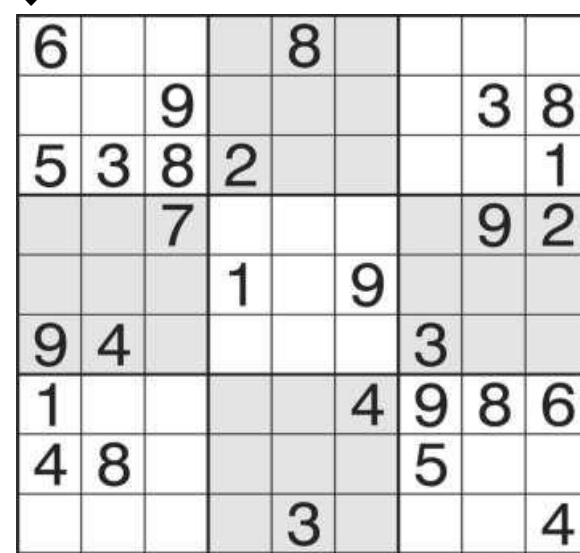
- Live coverage of break during IPL, is it New York? (3,5)
- American central bank admitted the statute is defective (6)
- Jesus! I enjoy being outside (7)
- Time consuming, it's about a country in Africa (7)

- Kannada or Tamil, some of it comes straight from the heart (5)
- Gather under cover, one goes for duck (9)
- Go on line by coincidence (12)
- Served rivals who became tyrants (5,7)
- Reform over masters' admission in old college (4,5)
- Fight to catch river fish (5)
- Miss Turner fills up gas and gets something to eat (7)
- Beer bottles - dispatch a messenger (7)
- Secure around a governor (6)
- She goes into a depression, he follows (8)

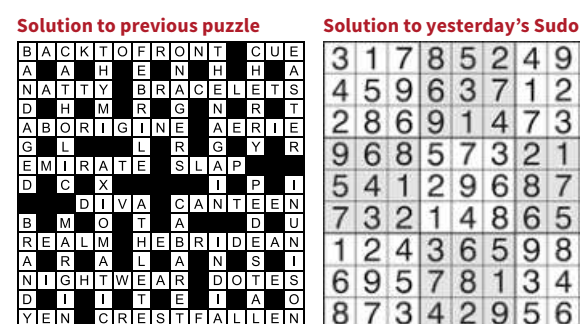
Down

- Stop supporting bus conductor (6)
- 26 no alternative to rule (6)
- Increase pressure and work on stone (9)
- Testing ground for holy bishops (5,9)
- Placed right inside for a land owner (5)
- Defect is not with the make up (3,5)
- Departs, having taken a chance with disease (8)
- Repeated refusal to come down from paradise (14)
- Bird modulates voice (9)
- Countrymen face terrorists hiding real bomb (8)
- Cat creates some problem in the shop (8)
- Man follows law, I suffer pain (6)
- Select range, erect on all sides of the road (6)
- Hot stuff comes up during a team game (5)

SUDOKU



DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★☆☆☆



FAITH

Unique actions of God

Human beings are born in this world, which is not permanent, but the magnum opus of Acharyas is considered as 'Aprakrutham' or 'Divyam' or permanent. How can it be? Velukkudi Sri Krishnan Swamy said in a discourse that the divine works of Acharyas show us the way to eternal bliss, which is permanent; hence, they are called 'Aprakrutham'.

Sri Koorathazhwan, an ardent disciple of Sri Ramanuja, in his work 'Athi Manusha Sthavam', praises the superhuman deeds of God.

God is the custodian of the entire universe. How could He beg King Mahabali for just three feet of space?

Sri Rama says 'Aatmaanam Maanusham Manye Ramam Dasarathathmajam' - 'I am the son of Dasaratha'. But His deeds were not so.

While everyone in the forest knew Ravana abducting Sri Sita, how did Lord Rama not know and was in search of Her? The bird Jatayu didn't know karma, jnana or bhakti yoga. How did the Lord grant moksha to Jatayu? When Rama's arrow can pierce through seven trees and hit Vali, would it take seven days for Rama to fight with Ravana? Will anyone let his arch-rival go off granting a chance? Why did Rama ask Ravana to come the next day? As a young child, Sri Krishna feigned to be tied up by the rope tethered with a mortar by Yasodha.

How could a seven-year-old boy lift the Govardhana hills?

Sri Koorathazhwan says whatever God undertakes will be unique, and the Acharya prays and pays his obeisance.

Big Swedish study hints at link between bowel disease, infant diet

The authors of the new study found that children who had a high intake of fish and vegetables at one year of age were at lower risk of developing Inflammatory Bowel Disease while those who had a higher intake of sugar-sweetened beverages at the same age were at higher risk

Savantana Datta

Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD) describes disorders where the lining of the digestive tract is inflamed. There are two types of IBD disorders: ulcerative colitis, where the large intestine and the rectum are prone to inflammation and sores, and Crohn's disease, which usually affects the small intestine.

Researchers have reported diet, age, family history, cigarette smoking, and certain medications, among other factors, as being responsible for causing or worsening IBD.

They have also said changing diet patterns can help explain changing patterns of the prevalence of IBD. For example, a 2023 study in *The Lancet* attributed a higher incidence of IBD in rural Telangana to the greater availability and consumption of processed foods.

A diet that predicts IBD

More recently, a study published in the journal *Gut* in January reported that the diet of infants as young as a year old could affect their chances of developing IBD in future. Researchers behind the study followed the dietary habits of more than 80,000 children through adolescence in Norway and Sweden as they consumed plenty of vegetables and fish in the first year of life, and were associated with a lower future risk of developing IBD.

Consuming sugar-sweetened beverages in this time was associated with a higher risk of IBD, they reported. According to their analysis, at three years of age, no dietary factor other than fish intake was associated with IBD risk. The researchers suspect the developing gut microbiome may be at the heart of the apparent age-dependent relationship of dietary intake and IBD.

The gut microbiome comprises a vast number and types of micro-organisms that live in the human gut. According to the authors of the *Gut* paper, it changes significantly through the first year and stabilises by the time the infant is two to three years old.

ABIS and MoBa databases

Ashwin Ananthakrishnan, a gastroenterologist at the Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, suggested in an article accompanying the paper that infants may benefit from a "preventive" diet that includes "adequate dietary fibre, particularly from fruit and vegetables", "intake of fish", a minimal amount of sugar-sweetened beverages, and a preference of "fresh over processed and ultra-processed foods and snacks".

The authors of the *Gut* paper, led by doctoral student Annie Guo from the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, tracked participants from two large-scale databases: All Babies in Southeast Sweden (ABIS) and Norwegian Mother, Father and Child Cohort (MoBa).

Both databases use questionnaires to document a child's upbringing and lifestyle, including diets. ABIS records data from children born in southeast Sweden from October 1997 to October 1999. MoBa recruited pregnant women throughout Norway from 1999 to 2008.

Together, the researchers had a cohort of 81,280 children, of which roughly half were female. They found an IBD incidence rate of 32 per 100,000 person-years in the ABIS database and 22 per 100,000 person-years in the MoBa database. (If 1,000 people participated in a study for one year, the study is said to have 1,000 person-years of data.)

Statistical prediction of IBD risk

To test whether an early-life diet correlated with later incidence of IBD, the authors collated data of the children's dietary habits at 1-1.5 years and 2.5-3 years of age from the two databases. They assigned a score to the diet quality, and recorded the frequency of intake of nine food categories: dairy, fish, fruits, grains, meat, sugar-dense and fat-dense food, sugar-sweetened beverages, and vegetables.

A diet rich in fruits, vegetables, fish, and eggs was seen to comprise "healthy food groups". A diet had "unhealthy foods" if it was rich in "salty snacks and sweet snacks".

In their analyses, the researchers used a statistical test to check whether a child's early-life dietary intake could also predict later IBD risk.

The analysis was adjusted to account for several factors implicated in the past as causes of IBD, including parental history of IBD, early-life antibiotic exposure, and intake of formula food in the first year.

The effect of fish



Researchers followed the dietary habits of more than 80,000 children through adolescence in Norway and Sweden. RANDY FATH/UNSPASH

The researchers also excluded from their final analysis data from children who were diagnosed with IBD at less than six years of age because such a case "often constitutes a highly genetically determined subtype of IBD", they wrote in their paper.

The authors found that children who had a high intake of fish and vegetables at one year of age were at lower risk of developing IBD while those who had a higher intake of sugar-sweetened beverages at the same age were at higher risk.

At three years, fish intake was the only dietary predictor of IBD: a high intake correlated with a lower risk. The authors speculate, "The content of poly-unsaturated fatty acids or vitamin D in fish may be of special importance for IBD."

This is because, they add, previous studies on adults have observed that higher intake of PUFAs and Vitamin D are associated with lower risk of ulcerative colitis and Crohn's disease respectively.

According to the authors, the study's strength lies in being the first to "prospectively investigate the association between early-life diet quality and intake frequency of specific food groups and later IBD risk".

Not readily generalisable



A high intake of fish reduced the chances of developing IBD. GETTY IMAGES



The probability of a child developing IBD may be the result of their dietary intake and their socioeconomic status, which could affect their diet and exposure to toxins

That said, Ms. Guo, the lead author, told this reporter that "since diet and other lifestyle habits may be strongly influenced by factors such as country of living and cultural differences, our findings should be replicated in other settings before we can generalise the results to other parts of the world."

In their paper, the team added that since the study's sample came from two high-income countries, the results may not be readily generalisable to low- and middle-income countries.

Researchers know the composition of the gut microbiome composition – an imbalance of which is implicated in IBD – varies between different geographical locations and between different ethnic groups in the same area.

However, Sylvia Karpagam, a public health doctor and researcher, told this writer that instead of exactly replicating

Guo et al.'s study as is, such studies in India must also account for nutritional deficiencies and dormant infections that participants aren't regularly screened for.

For example, activist groups have raised concerns about the Indian government's distribution of iron-fortified rice that has allegedly exacerbated complications from undiagnosed sickle-cell anaemia, thalassaemia, and dormant tuberculosis in tribal populations in Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand.

Dr. Karpagam also suggested studies on IBD focus not on diet alone but on "multiple factors that interplay with and aggravate each other".

For example, she mentioned that the probability of a child developing IBD later in their life may be the result of their dietary intake and of their socioeconomic status, which could affect their diet and exposure to toxins, duration of breastfeeding, and their likelihood of consuming junk foods.

"These confounding variables are not taken into account and one variable gets highlighted," she said.

A 'preventive' diet for infants

Dr. Ananthakrishnan also wrote in his editorial that the study didn't account for additives and emulsifiers common in baby foods.

These compounds have been implicated in accelerating IBD by changing the composition of the gut microbiome.

Dr. Karpagam said "individual foods cannot be blanket-classified as 'detrimental' or 'beneficial' in the context of IBD." For example, she said, "some people with IBD show improvement with whole milk" while others deteriorate.

Fruits and vegetables are high in dietary fibre and a high-fibre diet is implicated in IBD development and aggravation, she added.

A 2021 review found that while several studies demonstrate the benefit of high-fibre diets for people with IBD, other studies show "fibre intake prior to developing IBD [to be] linked to risk of disease".

Dr. Karpagam also advised against a "preventive" diet like what Dr. Ananthakrishnan proposed. One reason is the *Gut* study's use of secondary data – i.e. data collected by a different researcher and not specifically for the purpose of studying the relationship between early-life diet and later development of IBD. Such data may be less qualitatively suited for a specific analysis than that collected for the purpose.

Instead, she suggested a clinical trial that could systematically follow a group of pregnant women and their infants over a period of time to study "what variables are associated with the development of IBD".

"Especially with conditions like IBD, which have been shown to be aggravated by multiple triggers and their interactions with each other, interventions that provide one or the other foods or eliminate one or the other would not be advisable," she added.

(Savantana Datta is a science journalist and a faculty member at Krea University. The writer tweets at @queersprings)



The study finds 80% of the human exposure to heat stress in India can be avoided by adhering to the Paris Agreement. GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

'3 degrees to year-long droughts in Himalayas'

Press Trust of India

About 90% of the Himalayan region will experience drought lasting over a year if the world warms by 3 degrees C, according to anew research.

The findings, published in the journal *Climatic Change*, show 80% of the increased human exposure to heat stress in India can be avoided by adhering to the Paris Agreement goal of limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees C.

Researchers at the University of East Anglia (UEA) in the U.K. quantified how risks to human and natural systems increase at a national scale as the level of global warming increases.

A collection of eight studies – focusing on India, Brazil, China, Egypt, Ethiopia, and Ghana – found the risks of drought, flooding, declines in crop yields, and loss of biodiversity and natural capital greatly increase for each additional degree of warming.

It added that in India, pollination was reduced by half at 3-4 degrees versus reduction by a quarter at 1.5 degrees.

The team also reported large increases in the exposure of agricultural land to drought with 3 degrees of warming: more than 50% of the agricultural land in each of the countries was projected to be exposed to severe droughts longer than a

More efforts are required to reduce global warming since the policies already in place worldwide are likely to result in warming by 3 degrees C

year over a 30-year period.

Economic damages associated with sea-level rise were also projected to increase in coastal nations, but more slowly if warming was limited to 1.5 degrees C.

The researchers said more efforts are required to reduce global warming since the policies already in place worldwide are likely to result in warming by 3 degrees C.

One paper explored the risks to plants and vertebrates due to increases in global warming while another developed a new natural 'capital risk register' for each of the six countries, including projected changes in risks stemming from future human population changes.

Their results in combination showed that many areas in the six countries are already at high natural capital risk at 1.5 degrees C once the effects of higher human population are accounted for.

"The results presented in this collection confirm the need for the implementation of climate policies aligned to the Paris Agreement limits if widespread and escalating climate change risk is to be avoided," said Prof. Rachel Warren of the UEA and lead author of the study.

"They provide additional confirmation of the rapid escalation of climate change risks with global warming found in the Intergovernmental Panel of Climate Change 2022 report, which identifies how the risk of severe consequences increases with every additional increment of global warming," Prof. Warren said.

Although these studies focus on the risks to six countries only, other nations are projected to experience similar issues, the researchers added.

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



Tepid trade-offs

World Trade Organization continues to struggle to foster free and fair trade

The latest meeting of the World Trade Organization's (WTO) apex decision-making body concluded late on Friday with precious little progress on key issues that affect global trade, despite extending deliberations by a day. To be clear, hopes for any significant outcomes from the 13th Ministerial Conference (MC13) in Abu Dhabi were not high to begin with. Yet, this was an important moment for the WTO to deliver on its mandate amid an increasingly fractious environment for the very rules of trade it seeks to enforce. The intervening period has delivered significant shocks to the global trading architecture such as the ripple effects of conflicts in some parts of the world, the disruptions on critical shipment routes that are expected to linger for long, and recalibrations in supply chains to reduce dependence on single suppliers such as China. An increasing inward-looking tendency among nations has also catalysed isolationist, tariff-heavy trade policies that run adrift of the WTO's primary purpose of open trade for the benefit of all. The Abu Dhabi declaration does refer to some of the challenges, such as the need to ensure open, inclusive and resilient supply chains, but there is little of substance beyond lip service.

Divergences between the WTO's 164 member-countries persisted on most issues carried forward from Geneva (MC12), including areas of particular interest to India, such as a permanent solution in agriculture for public stock holding to ensure domestic food security or subsidies to the fisheries sector. The WTO Director-General, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, has noted that the agriculture deliberations, in the works for over two decades now, have made some progress as there is finally a text to work with that the body will strive to clinch in future parleys. The exemption from customs duties for e-commerce, that India had sought an end to, citing the adverse impact on countries' revenues, will now carry on for at least two more years. Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal has nuanced this outcome stating that India is "not necessarily" fully opposed to them. Prospects for the resuscitation of WTO's dispute resolution body, rendered defunct for four years, remain bleak, though the Geneva commitment to revive the vital body by 2024 was reiterated. A key win for India at the MC13 was its successful efforts with South Africa to thwart an attempt that was led by China and backed by over 120 countries, to introduce an investment facilitation pact into the WTO framework. Going forward, India will have to redouble efforts to retain policy space for sensitive sectors, especially farms. The WTO itself must do much more to stay relevant in an increasingly polarised world. That members find it convenient to tout its failed biennial meetings as successes is a sad commentary on its waning efficacy.

What's in a surname?

Women should not be tied to the name of their husbands

In the quest for equal rights for women in all spheres of life, every act that justifies hierarchy, othering, and a patriarchal mindset must be shunned totally. Seeking the right to choose her own identity, Ms. Divya Modi Tongya, had petitioned the Delhi High Court that she be allowed to revert to her maiden name after her divorce comes through. She landed in court after running into a barrier in the form of a government notification which said a married woman who wants to use her maiden name after divorce must either furnish divorce papers or a no-objection certificate from her husband. The Delhi High Court has sought the Union government's response by May 28, the next date of hearing. In her plea, Ms. Modi Tongya states that the notification is "gender biased" and creates unnecessary restrictions for women who seek to exercise their constitutional right to choose their name – in her case a change of surname – by violating Articles 14, 19 and 21. The very idea of a NOC is objectionable, divorce proceedings or not, and is reflective of a deep-seated misogyny that wants to control an individual's preference. Ms. Modi Tongya should be able to choose whichever surname she is comfortable with and not have to fight for it.

Women have often complained of harassment when they have taken the path less trodden. For instance, women who have decided not to opt for their husband's surname after marriage face a barrage of unnecessary questions and a mountain of paperwork while, say, opening a joint bank account, or during a child's admission in school, or applying for a passport. A society that is already battling caste-based hierarchies should not add to the discrimination by giving an upper hand to anyone in a relationship, but work towards safer spaces without gender bias, difference and humiliation. In India, the most populous country in the world, stark gender disparities persist, both politically and socially. Women do most of the unpaid work at home, and are often edged out of the labour force for various reasons. What a girl or a woman can – and cannot – do, is often laid down by the men in the family; sometimes women too acquiesce to such indignities in the name of tradition. The United Nations has said that the greatest human rights challenge in the world right now is achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls. Paying lip service to rhetoric that women are equal without effecting change on the ground with legislative backing and strong social frameworks defeats the purpose.

There are two routes to Sandeshkhali in West Bengal. One takes you through a Hindu-Muslim divide. The other through the acquisition-deprivation divide. Both stories are compelling and powerful.

In the first story, the name of the villain is Trinamool leader Sheikh Shahjahan, and the victims are the Hindu women. The story fits into the long tale of Muslim attacks on the hapless Hindu whenever and wherever the Hindu is weak or in a minority, be it in Bangladesh, Pakistan or places such as Sandeshkhali. The strength of this story reinforces a sweeping narrative that has gained traction in West Bengal in recent years, restoring the festering wounds of Partition. The problem is that in Sandeshkhali the story is not only partial but also false. The immediate perpetrators of alleged crimes against women here are Uttam Sardar and Shibaprasad Hazra, both non-Muslims. The third is Ajit Maity, whom the villagers of Sandeshkhali attacked last week.

Under public pressure, Mamata Banerjee's police arrested all three men, though Sheikh was absconding. That he had been spared for so long helped to feed the allegation of Ms. Banerjee's Muslim 'appeasement' with an eye to the forthcoming elections. Hindus are all but in 'minority' in both Sandeshkhali blocks: 70% in one and 77% in the other, mostly belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

A crisis of governance

Rather than a Hindu-Muslim strife, Sandeshkhali quintessentially reflects the crisis of Mamata Banerjee's model of governance. Unlike in many other States where people form collectives around caste, tribal, linguistic or religious identities, in West Bengal's post-Partition strife for life and livelihood, people clung to different political parties for both protection and provisions.

During the long rule of the Left Front, due to the well-coordinated structure of the hegemonic CPI(M), partisan affiliations of individuals and groups got further reinforced in offering the master key to enter public life. Party affiliation gave people an identity which, in turn, created a fusion called party-society. In the twilight years of the Left Front, the educated middle class party leaders were slowly but steadily getting replaced at the grassroots by enterprising individuals representing either relatively well-off farmers or those running small trade and businesses. With the Left Front's defeat, the most ambitious of these local political managers changed sides and



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Sandeshkhali is an apt example of franchisee politics, told through two compelling and powerful narratives

joined the Trinamool Congress (TMC).

Ms. Banerjee realised early on that although she had to work with party society, she could not run a government the CPI(M) way. In her party, she alone drew universal authority without any stable hierarchy of command. She compensated for this in a three-pronged manner. She brought some key bureaucrats and police officers, irrespective of their rankings, under her direct command and placed her faith in them over party workers. She befriended ethnic, caste and religious community leaders, and inducted them in the party. Moreover, she extended protection to the local party chieftains to expand their dubious businesses in lieu of complete personal loyalty. These enterprising political managers were quick to leverage their political power – in cahoots with the local administration and police – for usurping as much profit as possible from legal and illegal businesses involving land, forest, sand, coal, fisheries, foodgrains and siphoning off cash from various government schemes and contracts. Most of these people are from relatively rich peasant households who earlier lost land due to the Left Front's land reforms but eventually were positioned in places of power – first in the CPI(M) and thereafter in the TMC.

With West Bengal's steady industrial decline, these enterprising individuals are now the main employers in the informal economy. Such a combination of power and profit has created cronyism of small capital in West Bengal's vast swaths of rural and semi-urban settlements. These micro-appropriators and also political leaders cash in on Ms. Banerjee's popularity for running personal fiefdoms. They eliminate all possible challenges to their local power and prosperity, routinely forcing Opposition parties to withdraw their candidates in the panchayat elections.

The TMC embodies such a two-way flow of might and money spread over 'leased out' zones of control and command to its key players. Note, the structure primarily stands on absolute material gains and uses people's vague faith in Didi's 'good intentions' as its moral hinge. In a long essay, I have called it 'franchisee politics' ("Of Collaboration and Conflict: Mamata Banerjee and the Making of 'Franchisee Politics' in West Bengal", *Economic & Political Weekly (EPW)*, September 9, 2023).

The essence of Sandeshkhali

Sandeshkhali is an apt example of franchisee politics. The crisis sparked off when the

Enforcement Directorate (ED) officers went to Sheikh Shahjahan's house. They were attacked by the locals. Even journalists were not spared. For the locals, Sheikh is a patron-provider of their livelihood. Sheikh's name surfaced during an investigation of a Public Distribution System (PDS) scam in which a large amount of foodgrains was allegedly siphoned off to the open market. In October, the ED arrested Jyotipriya Mallick, former Minister of Food and Supplies in Ms. Banerjee's government. Sheikh reported to him. While Mallick ran his fiefdom over North 24 Parganas district, he 'sub let' the two blocks of Sandeshkhali to his deputy Sheikh, who, in turn, 'sub let' Sandeshkhali Block-II to Shibu Hazra. Hazra 'sub let' Sandeshkhali Gram Panchayat to Uttam Sardar. A clear chain of profit and power was drawn, which constitutes the lifeblood of the TMC.

When the chain snapped

Why did the chain snap? It snapped because the equation flipped with Mallick's arrest and Sheikh's absence from the scene. As the media focused on Sandeshkhali, the locals found enough courage to open their mouths. They made two specific allegations: that the TMC leaders like Hazra and Sardar illegally seized their farmland and turned them into private fisheries without any compensation. And the TMC workers routinely called women from the village to the party office late in the night and sexually abused them. The first is a classic case of the reversal of land reforms in which the Left Front in the late 1970s and early 1980s had distributed privately held agricultural land above a fixed amount among the landless and the land-poor peasants. The second is a typical demonstration of monstrous masculine power by activists of a political party bereft of any binding ideological-moral discipline.

Predictably, the TMC now attempts to distance itself from the Sheikh, Hazra and Sardar. And the Bharatiya Janata Party is on an overdrive to paint it as exploitation of Hindu women by Muslim goons. With the party's massive occupation of the Opposition space in Bengal today, it may find fertile ground to further polarise the turf in the days ahead of the Lok Sabha elections. Yet, the untold story of Sandeshkhali is one of the usurpation of absolute power to misappropriate property from the poor in a reversal of land reforms and rejection of local democracy by an emergent class of rural rich, pampered and promoted by the Trinamool Congress.

The quick transformation of Russia-North Korea ties

In the middle of a series of actions that are fuelling tensions in the Korean peninsula, including the abandoning of the decades-long unification goal with Seoul, Pyongyang is quickly deepening its ties with Russia. The pace and the depth appear to have gained momentum since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 which led to a strain in most of Moscow's international ties. It gathered further fuel during the visit, in July 2023, of a delegation from Russia led by Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu to Pyongyang, which was followed soon after by North Korean leader Kim Jong-un's subsequent visit to Moscow in September 2023.

The Russian President, Vladimir Putin, is expected to visit Pyongyang once again in 2024, with both countries preparing for a summit between the two leaders where "very good" deals are expected to be signed. With 2023 having been a year in which bilateral ties were fast-tracked, Russia's Ambassador to North Korea, Alexander Matsegora, anticipates 2024 to be a breakthrough year for the two countries. Just last month, Mr. Putin gifted the North Korean leader a luxury Russian-made car, a type that is used by Mr. Putin himself.

Warming ties, greater collaboration

While historically, the two nations maintained diplomatic ties during the Cold War era, largely driven by shared ideological affinities as communist states, relations between Moscow and Pyongyang experienced fluctuations as the geopolitical landscape shifted. In recent years, there has been a noticeable warming of ties between Russia and North Korea, manifesting itself in diplomatic engagements and strategic collaborations, with Pyongyang emerging as a key arms, munitions, artillery shells and another conventional weaponry supplier to Moscow during the ongoing Ukraine crisis.



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This is a partnership that has been forged amid common challenges and shared strategic objectives

Reports also suggest that the two countries are discussing cooperation in sensitive areas that cannot be disclosed, with Mr. Putin also offering technical support for the development of spy satellites (a feat that North Korea has been aiming for some time now). There are also talks of trilateral naval exercises with Beijing although these are unconfirmed. In February 2024, Pyongyang also welcomed the first group of tourists from Russia since the COVID-19 pandemic.

For Russia, as a country that is an outcaste in world politics and yet a nuclear power, North Korea is a useful neighbour to cultivate. For North Korea, grappling with economic challenges and international sanctions, Russia has emerged as a potential saviour for development in sectors such as energy and transportation, and even in addressing Pyongyang's chronic food shortages. Earlier, infrastructure projects such as the Rajin-Khasan railway linking Russia to North Korea's Rajin port, underscored the tangible efforts to bolster economic cooperation.

The energy link

Energy collaboration has also formed another crucial aspect of the partnership. Russia has been a key supplier of fuel to North Korea, and discussions have been under way to explore further cooperation in the energy sector. The mainstay of bilateral cooperation is, however, a food-for-arms agreement, evidence of which surfaced during August 2023, although both countries have not confirmed the existence of such an agreement. The utility of a deal such as this is undeniable though, as Moscow needs arms to sustain its invasion of Ukraine while Pyongyang is in dire need of commodities and food. Satellite images in October 2023 tracked a significant increase in freight railcar traffic at the Tumangang rail facility located near the North

Korea-Russia border, pointing to North Korea's transfers of ammunition to Russia.

The American factor

Among other factors contributing to this rapprochement is the shared challenge posed by the United States and its allies in the region. North Korea and Russia have faced varying degrees of strain in their relations with the West, prompting a pragmatic recalibration of their foreign policy priorities. Moscow perceives engagement with North Korea as a means to influence the broader security landscape in northeast Asia.

The diplomatic initiatives undertaken by Russia, often in collaboration with China, underscore a desire to shape regional security architecture independently of western influence. The North Korean Foreign Minister, Choe Son-hui, observed in October 2023 that powerful ties between Moscow and Pyongyang could potentially offset the U.S.-led efforts of a strong alliance between Washington, Tokyo and Seoul.

Developments in 2023, and indications thus far in 2024, point to the 'solidification' of bilateral ties between Russia and North Korea, with both countries having found instinctive collaborators in each other. This partnership, forged amid common challenges and shared strategic objectives, has far-reaching implications for regional stability and global geopolitics. As both nations deepen their engagement and cooperation across various sectors, their relationship is likely to exert a significant influence on the dynamics of the Korean Peninsula and the broader northeast Asian region. As such, Russia-North Korea ties represent a notable development in the geopolitical landscape, with ramifications that extend beyond the immediate bilateral relationship.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Campaign and conduct

The Election Commission of India (ECI) advisory to political parties, asking leaders not to reach out to voters on the basis of 'appealing to castes, raising communal passions and religious symbols, raking up personal issues, vilifying women and peddling half-truths' is a case of closing one's eyes to the true position. How caste, community and religion play out in all areas in public life, including politics, is well known. People want their representatives to be of good character and integrity, both in public and

private. These can be ascertained only through more information on the candidates and their mode of activities being put out in the public domain. The ECI's directives often appear to infringe on this absolutely personal right of voters to select a candidate on any count of her/his (voter's) choice.

P.R.V. Raja,
Pandalam, Kerala

The ECI appears to be losing its impartiality and freedom under the current administration. The recent surge in the 'integration' of religion into the political landscape, notably

amplified by the inauguration of the Ram Temple, is a matter of great concern. The exponential increase in temple visits by certain leaders and the extensive coverage provided by electronic media in this regard only accentuate this issue.

The intertwining of religion with politics poses a potential threat to the fairness and the integrity of the Lok Sabha election. As the custodian of electoral integrity, the ECI must enforce measures to maintain a level playing field for all political parties.

N. Nagarajan,
Secunderabad

Political long jump

It is the right of any political party or alliance to wish to return to power but the Bharatiya Janata Party has gone overboard by discussing 'a 100-day agenda for govt. after poll' (Page 1, March 4). It is amusing and ridiculous and it appears to be subjecting the Opposition INDIA bloc to some sort of psychological political pressure. On what basis is the BJP so confident? Is it going to adopt malpractices using EVMs or are we going to see Chandigarh mayoral election-like situations? The electorate will exercise its mind and choice at the

polling booth. The party must wait.

A. Jainulabdeen,
Chennai

'India's parched IT capital'

Bengaluru, once labelled as a pensioner's paradise and known for its salubrious climate, is no longer so. The city receives rain that is in no way insignificant, and every drop needs to be conserved. Bengaluru is a classic example of how humans have extinguished access to a life-sustaining commodity. The government and the Army, with vast land holdings in and around the city, should adopt rainwater harvesting

in a big way. Depending on the Cauvery alone is unlikely to meet the needs of an ever-burgeoning city ('Ground Zero' page, March 2).

H.N. Ramakrishna,
Bengaluru

Bengaluru is no longer a garden city. The metropolis is another instance of poor urbanisation – like Chennai – where water bodies have been lost.

V.M. Mahendran,
Chennai

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

A vaccine that prevents six cancers

January was observed as Cervical Cancer Awareness Month. Additionally, every year, March 4 is observed as International HPV Awareness Day. Protecting women's health includes protecting the cervix, the lower-most part of the uterus. With HPV vaccination, we can prevent cervical cancers that can seriously affect a woman's health. As the fourth most common cancer among women worldwide, cervical cancer claims the lives of more than 3,00,000 women every year, or one life every two minutes. Nine out of 10 women dying of cervical cancer live in lower- and middle-income countries. In India, cervical cancer is the second most common cancer after breast cancer. Given the country's population size, about 500 million women above the age of 15 are at risk of cervical cancer. If there is no action taken, the number of cases and deaths from cervical cancer are projected to rise significantly in the future. With the current population growth rate, the absolute number of new cases of cervical cancer for all ages in India in 2040 is estimated to be 1,91,347 – an increase of 54% over the number of new cases reported in 2020.

Strategies for prevention
It was in 1983 that German scientist Harald zur Hausen demonstrated that cervical cancer in humans is caused by certain types of papilloma viruses (wart viruses). Knowledge of HPV epidemiology and its role in causation of cancer has resulted in the development of two major strategies for prevention and early detection: HPV vaccination and screening for precancerous lesions. Although elimination of cervical cancer is a real possibility, the tragedy is that even today, many lower-resourced communities lack effective intervention programmes for elimination of cervical cancer as a public health problem. The World Health Organization's strategy



Hrishikesh Pai
is President, FOGSI 2023



Upendra S. Kinjavadekar
is President, IAP 2023

outlines a 90-70-90 triple pillar intervention to be implemented by 2030 with an additional focus on high-quality health care and equitable health care services. The intervention targets are: 90% of girls must be fully vaccinated with the HPV vaccine by the age of 15; 70% of women must be screened using a high-performance screening test by the age of 35 and again by 45; and 90% of women detected with cervical pre-cancer and cancer lesions must receive treatment and care.

A recent report titled 'Accelerating global health pathways: to health equity for the G20' highlighted the commitment of India's G20 presidency to promoting equitable access to vaccines, particularly for lower- and middle-income countries. The HPV vaccine was introduced in India in 2008. After sufficient country-level studies and successful State-level roll-outs, it was recommended for inclusion in the Universal Immunization Programme in 2023. An initial announcement was made in this regard by the Health Ministry in early 2023 and, recently, by the Finance Minister in her Interim Budget speech. The vaccine now awaits a national launch.

Research indicates that the HPV vaccine is not widely accessible to all girls across India. Currently, it is available in the private market at a significant out-of-pocket cost. Many physicians underestimate the incidence and risk of cervical cancer and the HPV infection. Physicians also underestimate the safety and effectiveness of HPV vaccines. The lack of trust in vaccine safety and effectiveness leads to hesitation in recommending the HPV vaccine to parents of age-eligible adolescents. Physicians may also hesitate to recommend this cancer prevention vaccination because HPV infections are primarily transmitted through intimate skin-to-skin contact. They may also feel it might be time-consuming to answer parents' questions regarding

myths and misinformation about the HPV vaccine.

Facts and best practices

In support of the widely anticipated national roll-out of the HPV vaccine, the Federation of Obstetric and Gynaecological Societies of India (FOGSI) and the Indian Academy of Pediatrics (IAP), with a combined membership of over 80,000 physicians, have joined hands to remind member obstetricians-gynecologists and pediatricians about the facts of HPV vaccination and share best practices for effectively communicating with parents about this cancer-preventing vaccine. This safe and effective vaccine can help prevent six HPV cancers. Five of these occur in women: vulvar, anal, vaginal, throat, and cervical. Recommending the HPV vaccine to all adolescents starting at age 9 years is part of completing the IAP immunization schedule. Recently, the FOGSI Good Clinical Practice Recommendations, upon review of the body of evidence, reinforced its recommendation for HPV vaccination to the primary age group of 9-14 years as well as regular screening for every woman above the age of 30 years. As apex national medical societies with a track record of promoting health and well being of the population, the FOGSI and IAP seek to ensure that every girl grows up protected from cervical cancer through HPV vaccination and every woman is protected through regular cervical screening. In doing so, they are creating at least 20,000 HPV physician champions in their cadres by mid-2024. These member physicians will share the importance of HPV vaccination among their peers and the community at large.

Physicians are the most respected leaders in society and the trusted source for health-related information. Their leadership is needed to eliminate cervical cancer in India.

HPV vaccination and screening for precancerous lesions are two major strategies for prevention and early detection of cervical and other cancers

In Karnataka, Congress on the defensive

But it hopes to shift focus to 'guarantee schemes' and the issue of devolution of funds

STATE OF PLAY

S. Bageshree

In the heels of the Budget session of the Karnataka Legislature ending on a raucous note, an IED blast at the Rameshwaram Cafe in Bengaluru's IT hub has set off a predictable narrative ahead of Lok Sabha elections.

During the Budget session, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) alleged that supporters of the Congress's Rajya Sabha winner Syed Naseer Hussain raised "Pakistan Zindabad" slogans in the corridors of the State Secretariat. On Monday three people were arrested in connection with the case. BJP State party president B.Y. Vijayendra described the blast in the cafe as an "extension" of the incident involving the alleged slogans and blamed the "my brother" policy of the Congress government for both. Rajeev Chandrasekhar, Union Minister and BJP contestant from Thiruvananthapuram, also said that both were a result of the "appeasement politics" of the Congress. Even as the investigating agencies are yet to make a significant breakthrough in either of the cases – with the forensic science laboratory report on the audio clip awaited in the first and no arrests made yet in the second – there has been political cacophony.

The Opposition has also been talking about the "failure" of the Congress government's guarantee schemes and mounting allegations of corruption. But the two recent episodes and the manner in which the BJP has seized these opportunities to target the ruling party is an indication of the tenor of its Lok Sabha campaign. Its leaders' statements are in the party's com-



fort zone of Hindutva politics, which is in tune with what is perceived to be the national mood after the inauguration of the Ram Mandir at Ayodhya. The two incidents have succeeded in putting the Congress on the defensive, yet again compelling it to bend backwards to "prove" that it is not "anti-Hindu." Effectively countering this narrative and bringing the discussion back to what it was hoping for in the run up to the elections is a challenge for the Congress.

Besides riding on the "success" of its five guarantee schemes, the party gave a fair indication of what it is keen to focus on during its campaign, during the Budget session. Chief Minister Siddaramaiah launched no-holds-barred attacks against the Centre over "stepmotherly treatment" in the devolution of taxes and drought relief. The Congress government went on to even pass a resolution in the Assembly against the Union government. This led to acerbic exchanges, dharnas, and walkouts in the Budget session. Mr. Siddaramaiah's Budget speech and his reply to the Budget discussion were replete with accusations against the BJP government at the Centre for decreasing the State's share of devolved taxes, and gradually decreasing the grant-in-aid allocation for centrally sponsored schemes and forcing the State to increase its share. Every time

the Opposition brought up the question of drought or funding for works, the Chief Minister laid the blame squarely at the door of the Centre.

In early February, the State government's leadership, led by Mr. Siddaramaiah, staged a protest in New Delhi, calling it a "movement to protect the interests of Karnataka and Kannadigas" and against the "gross injustice" of the Centre. Mr. Siddaramaiah wrote a letter to all the MPs of the BJP and the Janata Dal (Secular), the BJP party's ally for the Lok Sabha polls, asking them to participate in this agitation "in the interest of Kannadigas."

Devolution of funds has remained a hot issue, with Deputy Chief Minister D.K. Shivakumar's brother and Lok Sabha member D.K. Suresh going as far as to argue that "South Indian States may be forced to demand a separate country if the Centre does not provide them with adequate funds." While this was dubbed "anti-national" by the BJP, the Congress government has continued to make overtures related to federalism and regional identity, also evident in the passage in the Budget session of the Kannada Language Comprehensive Development (Amendment) Bill, 2024, which mandates 60% of text on the name boards of all business and industrial establishments to be in Kannada in the top half. The Congress has made similar attempts in the past, including demanding that the Centre to grant official status to the "Kannada flag".

The Lok Sabha polls are going to be held in summer. Karnataka is reeling under a drinking water crisis and farmers have already lost a large part of their crops. What narrative will cut ice with the voters in a such a situation remains to be seen.

Over 1,000 Indians crossed into U.K. illegally in 2023

The number of Indians applying for asylum in the U.K. crossed the 5,000-mark for the first time in 2023

DATA POINT

Vignesh Radhakrishnan & Jasmin Nihalani

In 2023, more than 1,000 Indians risked their lives to reach the U.K. by crossing the English Channel from Europe in inflatable small boats, searching for jobs and seeking asylum. The number of Indians who took this dangerous journey has surged in recent years. In 2023, the number more than doubled from the previous year. The share of illegal migrants from India aged 18-29 has shot up in recent years; they formed close to 60% of the total number of illegal Indian migrants in 2023. In parallel, the number of Indians applying for asylum in the U.K. has also surged in recent years, crossing the 5,000-mark for the first time in 2023. Notably, the number of Indians crossing into the U.S. illegally has also surged recently, with close to 1 lakh people doing so in 2023.

The U.K. has been grappling with the problem of a sudden surge in the inflow of illegal migrants in recent years. There has been a notable rise in the number of asylum-seekers arriving in the U.K. by small boats from the European mainland. Through most of 2021 and 2022, daily crossings of the perilous English Channel by thousands of migrants were recorded. Although the number of these crossings decreased in 2023 compared with the previous two years, the incidence of such events remained substantially higher than what was observed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. This trend continues in 2024, with over 2,000 people crossing into the U.K. until February 27 this year.

Chart 1 shows the number of Indians who arrived in small boats between 2018 and 2023. In 2023, most of those who crossed into the U.K. were from Afghanistan (5,545 people), Iran (3,562), and Turkey (3,060). Indians featured ninth on

the list with 1,192 crossings, similar to the number of people from Albania and Egypt. In 2022, Albania recorded 12,600 crossings, the highest that year, as its economy had turned anaemic, impacting jobs and wages.

Chart 2 shows the number of U.K. asylum applications raised by Indians over the years. The number skyrocketed post-pandemic, with 5,253 Indians applying for asylum in the U.K. in 2023. In total, close to 84,500 people from around the world applied for asylum last year. Close to 9,300 were from Afghanistan, the highest, followed by Iran (7,397), Pakistan (5,273), and India (5,253).

Chart 3 shows the age-wise share of Indian asylum applicants in the U.K. After the pandemic, the share of people aged 18-29 formed more than 50% in all the years. In 2023, 57% of the asylum-seekers were from this age group.

Chart 4 shows the number of asylum applications by Indians that were granted at the initial stage. In 2023, over 140 Indian asylum applicants were granted either protection or leave to remain (those who do not qualify for refugee status but are given permission to stay for various other reasons). It is important to note that most Indian asylum applications were rejected or the applicants themselves withdrew after some time.

This rising tide of asylum-seekers is now a political issue in the U.K. as the country may go to the polls later this year or in early January next year. The British Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, has long been pledging to "stop the boats" – a reference to the recent surge in illegal migrants crossing the English Channel. Given that the Conservative Party has been trailing the opposition Labour Party by a considerable margin in the opinion polls until now, Mr. Sunak has been pushing a Bill to send asylum-seekers in the U.K. to Rwanda, the outcome of which may have an impact on his and his party's success in the polls.

A dangerous journey far from home

The data for the charts were sourced from the U.K. Home Office's immigration system statistics and irregular migration statistics



Perilous path: Migrants on a beach near Calais, France, after a failed attempt to cross the Channel. REUTERS

Chart 1: The chart shows the number of Indians who arrived in small boats between 2018 and 2023

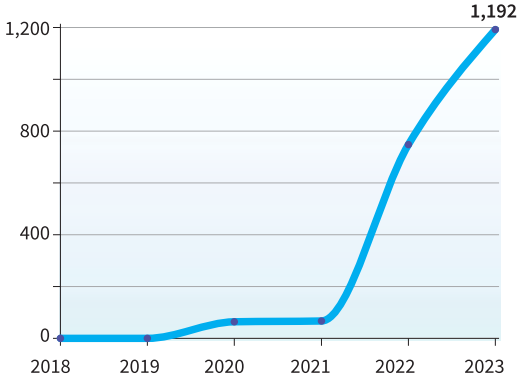


Chart 2: The chart shows the number of U.K. asylum applications raised by Indians over the years

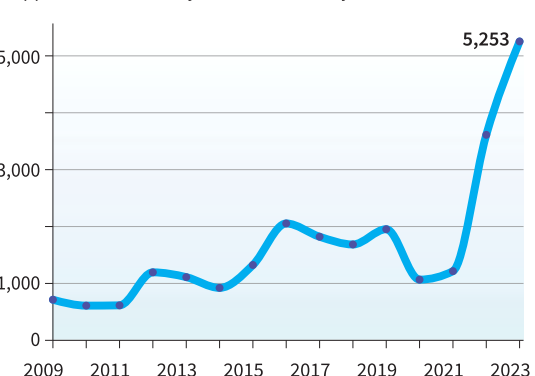


Chart 3: The chart shows the age-wise share of Indian asylum applicants in the U.K.

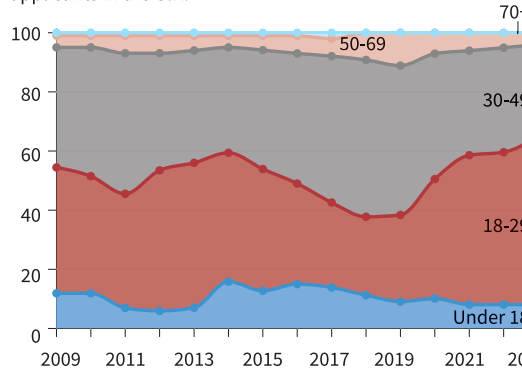
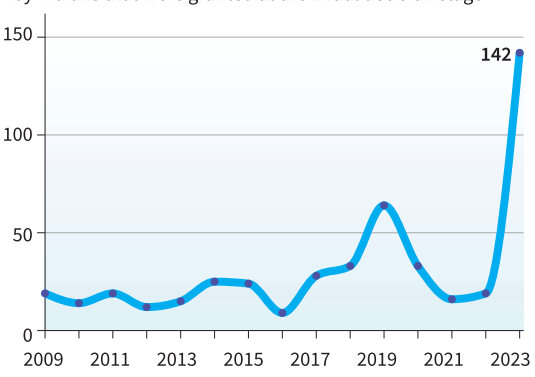


Chart 4: The chart shows the number of asylum applications by Indians that were granted at the initial decision stage



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO MARCH 5, 1974

Speaker threatens to "walk out"

New Delhi, March 4: The Lok Sabha to-day witnessed an unusual protest. The Speaker, Mr. G.S. Dhillon, threatened to withdraw from the House, taking exception to the disrespectful remarks against the Chair made by a senior Opposition member, Mr. S.N. Mishra (Cong.-O).

It happened when the House was discussing the Government action in announcing outside the House the price hike of petrol, kerosene and other petroleum products, decided by the Cabinet last Friday. The Speaker, upholding the points raised by the Opposition, chastised the Government for not taking the House into confidence on the price rise as the House had been in session till 6 p.m. that day. Mr. Mishra was not present when the Speaker, replying to points raised by some Opposition members, observed that the Government action was "improper." A few Congress members joined the Opposition in cheering the Speaker's observations. As the discussion was on, Mr. Mishra entered the House. So also, a smiling senior Minister, Mr. D.K. Barooah, apparently unaware of the anger of the Opposition. Mr. Barooah, who was coming after answering similar protests in the Rajya Sabha, explained that the price hike was to compensate for the increased food prices. The Cabinet had taken the decision at 7 p.m. and it had to be announced before midnight for administrative reasons. Opposition members again rose up to protest and the Speaker tried to end the discussion by pointing out that under the rules they could not have an immediate discussion on the Minister's statement. An angry Mr. Mishra, who had asked to when the increase in price of crude was effected, insisted on getting a reply to his point. Mr. Mishra went on to charge the Speaker with trying to protect the Government.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MARCH 5, 1924

Davis tennis cup

Washington, March 3: The draw for the Davis cup will be held at the White House on March 17th. Mr. Coolidge will draw the first number. 15 nations besides the United States will participate. Ambassadors and Ministers will draw for their respective countries. Mr. Collidge will draw for the United States and the challenger round will be played in Philadelphia early in September.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

A marginal decline in sugar output so far this year

1.19 in percentage. India's sugar production fell to 25.53 million tonnes (MT) in the ongoing 2023-24 marketing year, the Indian Sugar Mills Association said. Sugar production stood at 25.84 MT till February in the year-ago period. PTI

The budget allocated for education by the Delhi government

16,396 in ₹ crore. There is a slight decline in Delhi government allocation for education in its budget for fiscal year 2024-25 from the previous fiscal budgetary outlay of ₹16,575 crore. PTI

The fine the EU imposed on Apple over competition laws

1.8 in billion euro. The European Union levilled its first anti-trust penalty against Apple, fining the U.S. tech giant for breaking the bloc's competition laws by unfairly favouring its own music streaming service over rivals. AP

The number of visas issued by Pakistan to Indian pilgrims

112 The Pakistan High Commission issued visas to pilgrims from India to facilitate their travel to Shree Katas Raj temples in the Chakwal district. Under bilateral protocol, Sikh and Hindu pilgrims from India visit Pakistan every year. PTI

The wastewater flowing into Ganga in Varanasi: NGT

128 million litres per day. The National Green Tribunal was hearing a matter regarding the discharging of untreated water into the Ganga, hurting religious sentiments. PTI

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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The status of India's nuclear programme

Why is the core-loading event of the Prototype Fast Breeder Reactor being hailed as a milestone? What does the reactor do? Why has the event taken so long to materialise? What led to the delays? What are small modular reactors?

EXPLAINER

Vasudevan Mukunth

The story so far:

On March 4, Prime Minister Narendra Modi witnessed the start of the process of core-loading the indigenous Prototype Fast Breeder Reactor (PFBR) at the Madras Atomic Power Station in Kalpakkam, Tamil Nadu. A statement from his office called the occasion "a historic milestone in India's nuclear power programme".

What is the PFBR?

The PFBR is a machine that produces more nuclear fuel than it consumes. Its core-loading event is being hailed as a "milestone" because operationalisation of the PFBR will mark the start of stage II of India's three-stage nuclear power programme.

In the first, India used Pressurised Heavy Water Reactors (PHWRs) and natural uranium-238 (U-238), which contains minuscule amounts of U-235, as the fissile material. In nuclear fission, the nucleus of an atom absorbs a neutron, destabilises, and breaks into two while releasing some energy. If the destabilised nucleus releases more neutrons, the reactor's facilities will attempt to use them to instigate more fission reactions. The heavy water in PHWR – water molecules containing the deuterium isotope of hydrogen – slows neutrons released by one fission reaction enough to be captured by other U-238 and U-235 nuclei and cause new fission. The heavy water is pressurised to keep it from boiling. The reactions produce plutonium-239 (Pu-239) and energy.

Only U-235, not U-238, can sustain a chain reaction but it is consumed fully in stage I. In stage II, India will use Pu-239 together with U-238 in the PFBR to produce energy, U-233, and more Pu-239. The Department of Atomic Energy (DAE) set up a special-purpose vehicle in 2003 called Bharatiya Nabhikiya Vidyut Nigam, Ltd. (BHAVINI) to implement stage II.

In stage III, Pu-239 will be combined with thorium-232 (Th-232) in reactors to produce energy and U-233. Homi J. Bhabha designed the three-stage programme because India hosts roughly a quarter of the world's thorium. The three stages are expected to make the country completely self-sufficient in nuclear energy.

Why was the PFBR delayed?

The PFBR saga in India has been associated with numerous delays, cost overruns, and broken promises, and has accrued many critics.

The fast breeder test reactor (FBTR) at Kalpakkam is a testing ground for PFBR technologies. It was built by 1977 but sanctions against India's 'Smiling Buddha' nuclear test forced the use of a mixed carbide fuel over enriched uranium (which France was to deliver). The former lowered the power output and changed operating conditions. By the time the Indian government green-lit the PFBR in 2003, most people who worked on the FBTR were also nearing or had completed retirement.

The Indira Gandhi Centre for Atomic Research (IGCAR), Kalpakkam, designed the PFBR. Its original cost was ₹3,492 crore and the original deadline, 2010. Six years later, the DAE sought more funds and an extended deadline, which the government granted in 2012 – ₹5,677 crore and commercial operations by March 2015. The nuclear power establishment further pushed the



The next stage: Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the initiation of core loading of the PFBR, at Kalpakkam in Tamil Nadu on March 4. PTI

deadline to the next year, then the year after that, and so on until by March 2020, the new deadline to commercialise was October 2022. Even by 2019, its cost had ballooned to ₹6,800 crore. In a 2014 audit, the Comptroller and Auditor General found BHAVINI had fumbled the procurement of some PFBR components by becoming inordinately dependent on the Nuclear Power Corporation of India, Ltd. The result: the placement of a hundred purchase orders had a "median delay" of 158 days per order. Other causes of delay included technical difficulties with the reactor coolant.

How does the PFBR work?

PHWRs use natural or low-enriched U-238 as the fissile material and produce Pu-239 as a byproduct. This Pu-239 is combined with more U-238 into a mixed oxide and loaded into the core of a new reactor together with a breeder blanket. This is a material the fission products in the core react with to produce more Pu-239. A breeder reactor is a nuclear reactor that produces more fissile material than it consumes. In a 'fast' breeder reactor, the neutrons aren't slowed, allowing them to trigger specific fission reactions.

The PFBR is designed to produce more Pu-239 than it consumes. It uses liquid sodium, a highly reactive substance, as coolant in two circuits. Coolant in the first circuit enters the reactor and leaves with

(heat) energy and radioactivity. Via heat-exchangers, it transfers only the heat to the coolant in a secondary circuit. The latter transfers the heat to generators to produce electricity. In a 2020 paper, former IGCAR scientist R.D. Kale wrote about several issues with getting this system to work as expected. For example, according to him, personnel working with the PFBR had expected the reactor vessel could be preheated to 150 degrees Celsius in about a month based on theoretical calculations and tests with a mock-up. But the process took more than a year in reality.

What role can SMRs play?

The delays brooked another potential complication in the form of Small Modular Reactors (SMRs). These reactor designs have a maximum capacity of 300 MW, require less land, and accommodate more safety features.

"Several countries are developing SMRs to complement conventional [facilities] since SMRs can be installed at reduced cost and time by repurposing ... infrastructure in brownfield sites," R. Srikanth, a professor at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru, told *The Hindu*. He added SMRs can work with low-enriched uranium, which India can import from the U.S. via its 123 Agreement. According to him, increasing SMRs' contribution would require, among

other things, amendments to the Atomic Energy Act (1962) "and other related statutes" to allow private sector participation "under the oversight of the Atomic Energy Regulatory Body (AERB), with both nuclear fuel and waste controlled by the DAE" according to international safeguards.

What is the value of stage II?

The PFBR has a capacity of 500 MWe. In 2019, the DAE proposed building four more fast breeder reactors (FBRs) of 600 MWe capacity each – two in Kalpakkam from 2021 and two from 2025, with sites to be selected. Experts have said the best way to moot work on stage II technologies is to press the reactors into commercial service.

The delays haven't helped, however. In 2003, renewable sources of energy were a blip on the horizon. Today, the tariff for solar electricity is under ₹2.5/kWh whereas nuclear electricity costs around ₹4/kWh. The 2011 Fukushima Daiichi disaster also shifted public opinion worldwide against nuclear power, slowing work on new facilities. Today nuclear power has a new lease of life thanks to the pressure on India to decarbonise, reduce its import of fossil fuels, and give its renewable sector some breathing space. NPCIL chairman B.C. Pathak told *The Hindu* the corporation plans to "commission a nuclear power reactor every year" from 2024.

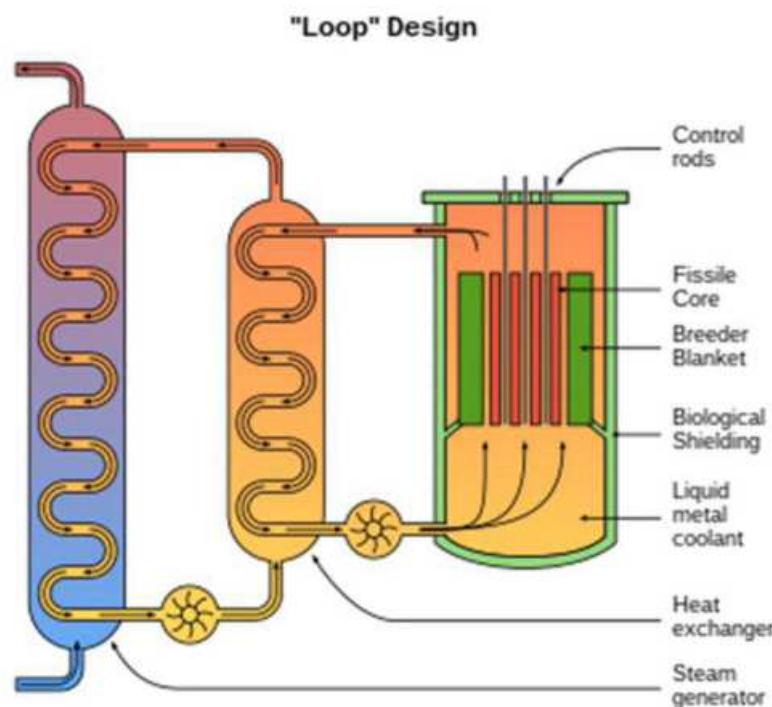
What are the challenges of stage II?

On the flip side, bigger challenges await. FBRs are harder to handle than other reactor designs, whereas the DAE has acquired an unfavourable public reputation over its often heavy-handed response to safety concerns.

Further, the civilian nuclear programme's nodal regulatory body, the AERB, was set up by executive order and reports ultimately to the DAE secretary. In 2015, the International Atomic Energy Agency urged India to set up an independent statutory atomic regulator instead.

The DAE had responded to similar concerns with the Nuclear Safety Regulatory Authority (NSRA) Bill in 2011. It sought to replace the AERB with the NSRA. But it was criticised for allowing the Union government too much control over the NSRA's composition.

Finally, among other products, the thorium fuel cycle produces caesium-137, actinium-227, radium-224, radium-228, and thorium-230 – all isotopes radioactive in ways that complicate their handling and storage.



The FBTR is a loop-type sodium-cooled fast breeder reactor. GRAEEMOORE (CC BY-SA 3.0)

THE GIST

On March 4, Prime Minister Narendra Modi witnessed the start of the process of core-loading the indigenous Prototype Fast Breeder Reactor (PFBR) at the Madras Atomic Power Station in Kalpakkam, Tamil Nadu.

The PFBR is a machine that produces more nuclear fuel than it consumes. Its core-loading event is being hailed as a "milestone" because operationalisation of the PFBR will mark the start of stage II of India's three-stage nuclear power programme.

The PFBR saga in India has been associated with numerous delays, cost overruns, and broken promises, and has accrued many critics.

FROM THE ARCHIVES



GETTY IMAGES

A case to reform bail law and guidelines, but make the right diagnosis first

A large number of undertrials continue to remain in prison despite being granted bail due to challenges in complying with bail conditions. Lack of means to arrange for money/property and local sureties are the most significant reasons accounting for the inability to comply with bail conditions

Medha Deo
Mayank Labh

Recently, the Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud said that there is a growing reluctance on the part of trial judges to grant bail and that jail, and not bail, was becoming the rule. In this article, dated July 26, 2022, Medha Deo and Mayank Labh further complicate the question of granting bail to undertrials, most of whom are unable to furnish the necessary bond/money to avail of bail.

Over 75% of India's prison population are undertrials while overcrowding in Indian prisons stands at 118%. These stark realities are often cited to represent the scale of the crisis in India's criminal justice system. The Supreme Court of India recently acknowledged, in *Satender Kumar Antil vs CBI*, the ineffectiveness of India's bail system and its contribution to this crisis. The Court noted that despite repeated guidelines on bail law, things have not changed much on the ground. The Court provided comprehensive guidelines on laws related to bail, such as mandating timelines for the disposal of bail applications and laying emphasis on the need to enact a separate legislation. The judgment noted that crowding jails with undertrial prisoners ignored the principle of 'presumption of innocence' and that 'bail not jail' should be the norm. However, there is still a need to reflect on why these established principles are honoured more in their breach than observance.

Any reimagining of the law on bail needs to first understand the exact nature of the problem that results in large-scale undertrial incarceration. This assessment needs to be based on multiple parameters and we have no real empirical evidence on how each of these impacts the issue. What proportion of undertrials are

applying for bail? What proportion of bail applications are accepted or rejected, and on what grounds? Is bail compliance a far bigger problem than denial of bail? These are some fundamental empirical questions which need answers. An effective bail law must be based on the correlation of these answers with variables such as the demographics of undertrials, category of offences and timelines for bail, and also address socio-economic and structural barriers. The foundations of the current bail law ensure that it is anti-poor and disproportionately burdens those from marginalised backgrounds. The solutions we intend to craft must be based on a realistic understanding of the problem.

Lack of safeguards
The Court averred that effective enforcement of safeguards against arbitrary arrest would eliminate the need to seek bail from courts. However, these safeguards exclude a significant proportion of arrested persons, especially those from disadvantaged sections of society, who form the large majority of undertrial prisoners. For example, the arrest of a person is justified as 'necessary' if the police have 'reasons to believe' that it is required to ensure their presence in court. Such vague justifications put migrants, persons without assets or those with no contact with family at higher risk of arrest because of their socio-economic conditions. Data from the Fair Trial Programme (FTP) in Yerwada and Nagpur central prisons can be instructive here. Of the undertrials (2,313) represented by the FTP, 18.50% were migrants, 93.48% did not own any assets, 62.22% did not have any contact with family, and 10% had a history of previous incarceration. Evidently, a significant proportion from the sample would be unjustifiably excluded from protections against arrest

and contribute to the large proportion of undertrials in our prisons.

Approach to bail adjudication
The power to grant bail is largely based on the court's discretion and depends on the facts of each case. The Supreme Court has time and again laid down principles for guiding the exercise of such discretion by courts in deciding bail applications. While these guidelines lay stress upon the need to release applicants on bail, they also validate the denial of bail or imposition of onerous bail conditions based on the gravity of the offence, character of the accused and likelihood of the accused absconding or tampering with evidence. In all such cases, courts rarely exercise their discretion for granting bail and are likely to take a more stringent approach against release on bail. Despite existing guidelines, courts do not usually record reasons for rejecting bail; the rationale behind how courts factor in offence-based and person-based considerations in deciding bail applications remains unclear.

This is important because marginalised persons bear the brunt of these broad exceptions. They are either denied bail or granted bail with onerous conditions, in absolute disregard of their realities. Bail conditions in the nature of cash bonds, surety bond, proof of property ownership and solvency, as is commonplace, are at odds with the reality of undertrial prisoners languishing in jails.

Challenges in bail compliance
A large number of undertrials continue to remain in prison despite being granted bail due to challenges in complying with bail conditions. Lack of means to arrange for money/property and local sureties are the most significant reasons accounting for an undertrial's inability to comply with bail conditions, realities borne out by our experience in the FTP. However,

factors such as lack of residence and identity proof, abandonment by family and limitations in navigating the court system also undermine an undertrial's ability to comply with bail conditions. Compliance with bail conditions and ensuring presence in courts for the overwhelmingly structurally disadvantaged undertrials requires constant handholding, as is evident by the FTP's interventions in the past three years. This is a crucial aspect of ensuring last mile delivery of justice that the extant bail law does not consider.

Our experience shows that in 14% of cases, undertrials were unable to comply with bail conditions and remained in prison despite being granted bail. In almost 35% of these cases, it took over a month after obtaining the bail for undertrials to comply with bail conditions and secure their release.

Flawed assumptions
The bail system, as it currently operates, has flawed assumptions that every arrested person will be propertied or have access to propertied social connections. It presumes that the risk of financial loss is necessary to ensure the presence of the accused in court. Such assumptions have the effect of rendering the rule of 'bail not jail' meaningless for a significant proportion of undertrial persons. For any bail law to effectively provide relief, a careful re-evaluation of the said presumptions is imperative. There is an urgent need for bail reform but it would be counterproductive to undertake a reform exercise without first developing the basis to understand and diagnose the problem at hand.

Medha Deo and Mayank Labh are with the Fair Trial Programme, an undertrial legal aid initiative at Project 39A, National Law University Delhi. The programme provides legal aid to undertrials in Pune and Nagpur central prisons

THE DAILY QUIZ

A quiz on Antonio Vivaldi, one of the greatest baroque composers, who was born on March 4, 1678

V.V. Ramanan

QUESTION 1
Why was Antonio Vivaldi nicknamed 'Red Priest'?

QUESTION 2
Vivaldi was ordained as a priest in 1703 but did not function as one because he suffered from 'strettezza di petto'. What has this ailment been interpreted as?

QUESTION 3
The composer spent 37 years of his life as a music teacher/director at the Pio Ospedale della Pietà asylum and most of his compositions were during

that tenure. What sort of inmates were housed in that asylum?

QUESTION 4
The most recognised of his compositions were composed around 1718-1720 when Vivaldi was the court chapel master in Mantua. Name this group of four concerti and for which instrument were they written?

QUESTION 5
If Mozart's works are prefixed with 'K' (for Köchel Catalogue), by what two letters are compositions by Vivaldi identified today?



Visual question:
Name this famous composer, who between 1713 and 1714 transcribed at least nine concertos of Vivaldi for keyboard, strings, organ, and harpsichord.

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz:
1: This is the rarest disease in the world. **Ans: RPI Deficiency.**
2: The plot of the movie *Paa* was built around this rare disease. **Ans: Hutchinson Gilford Progeria Syndrome. Or, merely Progeria, which causes premature ageing.**
3: A speech disorder that causes a native speaker to speak with a 'foreign' accent. **Ans: Foreign Accent Syndrome. It is often caused by damage to the brain.**
4: People suffering from this rare disease have blue colour blood. **Ans: Methemoglobinemia, a blood disorder in which an abnormal amount of methemoglobin, a form of haemoglobin, is produced.**
5: The definition of Stone Man's Disease. **Ans: It transforms a person's muscle tissues into bones, and is also known as Fibrodysplasia Ossificans Progressiva (FOP).**
Visual: This rare disease among tribes in New Guinea met an end by itself when this particular habit among them was abolished. **Ans: Kuru disease. It is an acquired infectious disease linked with the ritualistic practice of feeding upon the corpses of relatives as part of mourning. Putting an end to the practice meant an end to the disease as well.**
Early Birds: K.N. Viswanathan| Rajmohan. V| M. Suresh Kumar| Sanjana Veerabhadra



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

K. Subrahmanian

"Mr. P. Radhakrishnamurthy, Babu Camp, Kothagudam, wants to know which of the following is correct: (a) He came on foot (b) He came by foot."

" 'He came on foot' is correct. 'By walk' is also used commonly in India. I came by walk. This is not acceptable. I came on foot or I came walking. 'Foot it' means 'walk, not travel by bus, etc.'"

It is about ten kilometres from here. But I will foot it.

'Foot it' is used when the distance is long. 'Foot' as a verb is also used to mean 'to pay a bill, especially one considered large.'

He footed the bill for the party.

"Mr. Y. Murali Nath, Old Town, Anantapur, wants to know whether 'return back' is acceptable."

" 'Return' means 'come or go back to a place.' He returned home or he came back home. 'Return back' is not acceptable."

"Mr. L. C. Venkatarangan, Korattur, Madras, wants to know which of the following is correct: (a) administer (b) administrate."

"Both are correct. Some may jump to the conclusion that 'administrate' is an Americanism. 'Administrate' was used in Britain as early as the 17th century. Most administrators administer, some administrate. 'Administrate' is not used as frequently as 'administer.' 'Administrate' is increasingly used in business correspondence."

"Mr. Y. Raghavendran, K.K. Pudur, Coimbatore, wants to know the meaning of 'watershed.'"

" 'Watershed' is 'a line of separation between waters flowing to different rivers, basins or seas.' When used figuratively, it means 'a turning point in affairs.' Politicians and journalists are fond of this word."

This is likely to be a watershed between war and peace.

Darwin's Origin of the Species was a watershed in the history of ideas.

"Watershed" is a translation of the German word 'wasserscheide' and the earliest entry for this word in the Oxford English Dictionary was in 1803."

"Mr. Y. Sreekrishna, Sripuram Colony, Tirupati, wants to know the difference between 'dissatisfied' and 'unsatisfied.'"

"When you do not get the satisfaction that you expected, you are unsatisfied. *I attended the dinner. I came away unsatisfied.*

When you are dissatisfied, you are thoroughly displeased, discontented. 'Dissatisfied' is a stronger word than 'unsatisfied.'

She was dissatisfied with the arrangements he had made for the meeting.

"Mrs. Satyamurthy, Bagh Lingampalli, Hyderabad, wants to know the meaning of the idiom 'A rolling stone gathers no moss.'"

"It means that a person who moves from place to place and does not settle down will never become prosperous. He is a rolling stone. A stone which is at one place will gather moss and the moss will protect it from erosion. 'Moss' is 'a very small green or yellow flowerless plant growing in thick masses on damp surfaces or trees or stones.'"

Published in The Hindu on April 23, 1991.

Word of the day

Connive:
encourage or assent to illegally or criminally; form intrigues (for) in an underhand manner

Synonyms: intrigue, scheme

Usage: He accused her of conniving with foreign companies.

Pronunciation: bit.ly/connivepro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /kə'naɪv/

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

PARIS

French parliament votes to make abortion constitutional right



REUTERS

The French parliament on Monday voted to anchor the right to abortion in the country's constitution, making France the first country in the world to offer protection for terminating a pregnancy. A congress of both the lower and upper houses easily obtained the three-fifths supermajority needed for the change. AFP

PORT-AU-PRINCE

Haiti government declares state of emergency after huge prison break



AFP

Haiti's government on Sunday declared a state of emergency and night-time curfew after a deadly gang assault on the capital's main prison that allowed thousands of inmates to escape. The curfew will be enforced in the Ouest region, which includes the capital, through Wednesday, the government said in a statement. AFP

SEOUL

South Korea to start legal action against doctors over walkout



AP

South Korea's Health Minister said on Monday that authorities will start inspecting hospitals to take legal action against doctors who have ignored an ultimatum to end a walkout over plans to increase medical school admissions. Around 9,000 resident and intern doctors have walked off the job since February 20. REUTERS

BANGKOK

Thailand's top court clears former PM Yingluck in corruption case



AFP

In the latest legal success for Thailand's powerful Shinawatra family, the country's Supreme Court on Monday cleared former Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra — who ruled from 2011 until she was ousted in a 2014 military coup — of corruption in awarding a government contract during her time in office. AFP

Joe Biden, Donald Trump set to win primary races on Super Tuesday

Sriram Lakshman
WASHINGTON DC

Presidential candidates criss-crossed the country in the run up to Super Tuesday this year, when 17 U.S. States and territories hold their primaries and caucuses to pick their contenders for November's general election. The support of more than a third of each party's delegates (i.e., representatives who vote in the parties' conventions to select the candidate) is up for grabs on Tuesday.

Former U.S. President Donald Trump is expected to sweep the Republican contests on Tuesday, with Nikki Haley, the former American Ambassador to the UN, having won just one race thus far (Washington DC). Although, at this stage, a Biden-Trump showdown is all but certain, further campaigning has been planned for the following weeks, with groups of States voting in March and April.

The incumbent, U.S. President Joe Biden, is running untested for the



Donald Trump is expected to sweep the Republican contests on Tuesday, with Nikki Haley having won just one race thus far. AFP

Democratic (re)nomination in many of the States, while some States will have other contestants on them, such as self-help author Marianne Williamson and Minnesota Congressman Dean Phillips.

Challenging days

Mr. Biden is therefore expected to win the day on Tuesday but the process has revealed that the ultimate path to the White House — when the primaries are completed and Mr. Biden presumably faces Mr. Trump — will be far

more challenging for Mr. Biden, than is often the case for a sitting President seeking a second term. Questions about Mr. Biden's age, perceptions about the economy and inflation and Mr. Biden's handling of the Israel-Hamas conflict have been working against him.

Mr. Biden was faced with bleak polling results over the weekend. A *New York Times*/Sienna College poll indicated that the President had the support of 43% of registered voters versus Mr. Trump's 48%.

Supreme Court restores Donald Trump to ballot

Associated Press
WASHINGTON

The U.S. Supreme Court on Monday unanimously restored Donald Trump to 2024 presidential primary ballots, rejecting State attempts to ban the Republican former

president over the Capitol riot. The justices ruled States cannot invoke a post-Civil War constitutional provision to keep presidential candidates from appearing on ballots. That power resides with Congress, the court wrote.

Some 10% of those who voted for Mr. Biden in 2020 were planning to vote for Mr. Trump in 2024.

Democratic primary voters were more or less equally split on whether Mr. Biden should be their party's candidate, as per the poll, with the strongest opposition to the idea from those under 45 years of age. The data also indicated that Mr. Biden's edge over Mr. Trump among non-white non-college graduates had also significantly narrowed since 2020.

After Democratic politi-

cians urged primary voters in the crucial swing State of Michigan to show their frustration with Mr. Biden's policy towards Israel's retaliatory attacks on Gaza, which have claimed more than 30,000 lives, more than 1,00,000 Michiganders cast an 'uncommitted' ballot in last week's Democratic primary.

This was more than the target of 10,000 uncommitted votes and was some five times the number of such votes in the last two presidential elections and is being seen as a warning

to Mr. Biden to change his accommodative stance towards Israel.

A growing number of voters, not just Muslim Americans but also younger voters across the board, could sit at home on election day if the administration continues with the status quo. A few thousand voters could make a huge difference: Mr. Trump beat former Democratic presidential candidate Hilary Clinton in Michigan by less than 11,000 votes in 2016 and Mr. Biden won the State from Mr. Trump in 2020 by a margin of 2.8% (just over 1,54,000 votes).

Call for ceasefire

On Sunday, Vice President Kamala Harris called for an immediate ceasefire in the region and a return of hostages taken by Hamas. On Monday, she was scheduled to meet with Israeli War Cabinet Member Benny Gantz.

Mr. Trump has so far won 247 delegates — more than 10 times Ms. Haley's tally. So far his legal troubles have not prevented

Mr. Trump from moving forward and he has used them in his campaign rallies to portray himself as the victim of a political witch-hunt.

Ms. Haley, who served on the Trump Cabinet, has said she will remain in the race as long as she is "competitive" but declined to define this term. She has shown some traction among college graduates and independent voters as well those who consider themselves moderate.

While she has claimed she is not anti-Trump, Ms. Haley's attacks on her former boss have become sharper in the run up to Super Tuesday. She has suggested that both lead candidates are too old for the job, has pointed to the fiscal deficit and spending — particularly during Mr. Trump's time in the White House and criticised his isolationist 'foreign policy and admiration for Russian President Vladimir Putin'.

Significantly, Ms. Haley did not commit to supporting Mr. Trump if he is the chosen GOP candidate,

when questioned about a pledge all GOP candidates had to take before an intra-party debate that they would support the eventual nominee. She cited changes in the party organisation, specifically Mr. Trump's daughter-in-law Lara Trump's bid for the position of Co-Chair of the Republican National Committee (RNC). "The RNC is now not the same RNC, now it's Trump's daughter in law," she told NBC's *Meet the Press* on Sunday. She also said she did not know if Mr. Trump would abide by the country's constitution if elected.

Other contests

There are also a number of 'down ballot' primaries on Super Tuesday — such as a primary contest for the post of Governor (North Carolina), several for the U.S. House of Representatives, where the Republicans have a four-seat majority, and the U.S. Senate, including a primary contest in California for the late Senator Diane Feinstein's Senate seat.

Prachanda quits Congress alliance, joins hands with Oli

Communist coalition back at the helm in Nepal after little more than a year; CPN (Maoist-Centre)'s demand for the post of the National Assembly chair had caused a rift with Nepali Congress

Sanjeev Satgainya
KATHMANDU

Nepal's ruling alliance broke down after Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal Prachanda's Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre) switched sides from the Nepali Congress and joined with the K.P. Sharma Oli's Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) on Monday.

The latest development puts the Nepali Congress, the largest party in parliament with 88 seats, in the Opposition seat.

Leaders from both the CPN (Maoist-Centre) and the CPN-UML said that they have reached a new deal to form the government, once again bringing a communist coalition to the helm in Kathmandu after little more than a year. The Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) and the Janata Samajbadi Party will also be part of the new Maoist-UML coalition.

Mr. Prachanda on Monday evening dismissed all his Ministers and inducted three new Ministers without portfolios into his Cabinet — one each from his party, the CPN-UML and the RSP — and kept all 25 portfolios with him.

Mr. Prachanda's CPN (Maoist-Centre) party had fought the 2022 general elections with the Nepali Congress. However, Mr. Prachanda was elected Prime Minister with the backing of the CPN-UML,



Musical chair: Pushpa Kamal Dahal shakes hand with K.P. Sharma Oli in Kathmandu on Monday. ANI

the second largest party with 78 seats, on December 25, 2022, after the Nepali Congress refused to oblige his demand to lead the government.

Later in February 2023, the CPN-UML pulled out of the government after the CPN (Maoist-Centre) decided to back Ram Chandra Poudel, a Congress leader, for the post of President. The Nepali Congress subsequently joined the government.

Cracks in coalition

Hari Sharma, a writer and political analyst, says the Maoist-Congress coalition had become untenable, especially after some Nepali Congress leaders began questioning Mr. Prachanda's style of governance and the relevance of the alliance. "There is nothing to be surprised about this change. This Maoist-UML coalition was not a matter of if but when," Mr. Sharma said.

government on its own. Of the 275 members, 165 are elected under the direct election system, or first-past-the-post system, and the remaining 110 are elected under the proportional representation system.

It was because of that Mr. Prachanda found room to manoeuvre and managed to wrest the post of the Prime Minister from the first and second largest parties despite his party coming third with just 32 seats in parliament.

The CPN-UML and the Maoists merged in 2018 to form the Nepal Communist Party (NCP) in a bid to form a large Left force in Nepal. However, a power struggle between Mr. Prachanda and CPN-UML Chairman K.P. Sharma Oli led to the implosion of the NCP in 2021.

A Maoist-UML unity in Nepal is something Beijing has always wanted. It is unclear how India, which has traditionally enjoyed its clout in Nepal, will react to a suddenly evolved left-dominated dispensation in Kathmandu.

Mr. Prachanda, a vocal critic of India in the past, in recent years has made peace with the south, and he does appear to be in New Delhi's good books, if recent high-level bilateral exchanges and some forward-looking deals under his prime ministership are anything to go by.

(Sanjeev Satgainya is an independent journalist based in Kathmandu)

Lessons from a conflict



Ismael Wahba, director of the UNRWA Taif School in Rafah, teaches at a school housing displaced Palestinians, in Rafah on Monday. AFP

Shehbaz Sharif takes oath as Pakistan's PM

Press Trust of India
ISLAMABAD

Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N)'s Shehbaz Sharif on Monday took the oath as Prime Minister of Pakistan, assuming the cash-strapped country's reins for a second time, nearly a month after an inconclusive election marred by allegations of vote rigging. President Arif Alvi administered the oath to Mr. Shehbaz, the 24th elected Prime Minister, in a ceremony held at the Aiwan-i-Sadr, the presidential palace.

China eliminates Premier's annual news conference

Associated Press
BEIJING

China's government said on Monday that it is eliminating an annual news conference by the Prime Minister that was one of the rare times a top Chinese leader took questions from journalists.

Lou Qinjian, the spokesperson for the National People's Congress, said on the eve of the opening of the legislature's annual session that Premier Li Qiang would not hold a news conference at its conclusion, as Premiers have

done every year since 1993.

The move appears to be in line with a diminishing of the premier's power, and that of the government bureaucracy generally, as the Communist Party and leader Xi Jinping centralise control of the nation's affairs, said Alfred Wu, an associate professor at the National University of Singapore.

The meeting of the largely ceremonial congress is being closely watched for any indications of what steps the government will take to boost the economy.

Moscow summons German Ambassador

Associated Press

Moscow summoned Germany's Ambassador Alexander Graf Lambsdorff to Russia's Foreign Ministry on Monday, local media reported, days after the release of an audio recording on social media purporting to show German officers discussing support for Ukraine.

The 38-minute recording features military officers discussing in German how Taurus long-range cruise missiles could be used by Kyiv against invading Russian forces.



The names of the people onboard the missing Malaysian flight MH370 displayed in Subang Jaya. REUTERS

‘Will reopen MH370 search if compelling evidence emerges’

Agence France-Presse
MELBOURNE

Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim said on Monday that he would be “happy to reopen” the search for flight MH370 if “compelling” evidence emerged, opening the door to a renewed hunt a decade after the plane disappeared.

“If there is compelling evidence that it needs to be reopened, we will certainly be happy to reopen it,” he said when asked about the matter during a visit to Melbourne. His comments came as the families marked 10 years since the plane vanished in the Indian Ocean with 239 people aboard.

“I don’t think it’s a technical issue. It’s an issue affecting the lives of people and whatever needs to be done must be done,” he said.

Malaysia Airlines flight 370, a Boeing 777 aircraft, disappeared from radar screens on March 8, 2014, while en route from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing. Despite the largest search in aviation history, the plane has never been found and the operation was suspended in January 2017.

About 500 relatives and their supporters gathered on Sunday at a shopping centre near the Malaysian capital Kuala Lumpur for a “remembrance day”, with many visibly overcome with grief.

Some of the relatives came from China, where almost two-thirds of the passengers of the doomed plane were from.

Speaking to the crowd, Grace Nathan, a Malaysian lawyer whose mother was on the flight, called on the government to conduct a new search.

Transport Minister Anthony Loke told presspersons that “as far Malaysia is concerned, it is committed to finding the plane... cost is not the issue”.

After Amnesty’s criticism, Cambodia defends relocations from Angkor Wat

Responding to UNESCO following a scathing report from Amnesty International which said thousands of families were forcibly evicted from around the World Heritage Site, Cambodia rejects the allegations saying it was only relocating ‘squatters’ and not the residents living there for ‘generations’

Associated Press
BANGKOK

Cambodia is rejecting allegations that it violated international law by evicting people living around its famous Angkor Wat temple complex, saying in a report to UNESCO released on Monday that it was only relocating squatters and not residents of more than 100 traditional villages.

The UN cultural agency had demanded a response from Cambodian authorities in November after a scathing report from Amnesty International claimed that thousands of families, some that had lived in the area for “several generations,” were being forcibly evicted from around the World Heritage Site as Cambodia seeks to develop the area for tourism.

Amnesty questioned Cambodia’s assertion that the families were being voluntarily relocated, citing interviews with people who said they had been forced out, while maintaining that resettlement sites lacked adequate water, sanitation and other facilities, and criticising UNESCO for failing to challenge Cambodian authorities.

Paris-based UNESCO responded that it was “deeply concerned about the allegations” and ordered Cambodia to report on the state of conservation at the Angkor Wat site



Rich culture: The Angkor Wat site sprawls across some 400 square kilometre, containing the ruins of Khmer Empire capitals from the 9th to the 15th centuries, including the temple of Angkor Wat. FILE PHOTO

about a year earlier than previously planned, while urging them to “ensure that any relocation is voluntary.”

The Angkor Wat site sprawls across some 400 square kilometre, containing the ruins of Khmer Empire capitals from the 9th to the 15th centuries, including the temple of Angkor Wat. UNESCO calls it one of the most important archaeological sites in Southeast Asia, and it is critical to Cambodia’s tourism industry.

‘Illegal occupation’

In its report to UNESCO, Cambodia argued it was only moving people involved in the “illegal occupation of heritage land,” and not those identified by UNESCO as inhabitants of traditional villages shortly after the Angkor Wat com-

plex’s inscription in 1992 as a World Heritage Site.

“At the Angkor heritage site there are 112 villages where people have been living for generations, but there are squatters who have been coming in, and these squatters are the people who are being relocated, not the people living in the traditional villages,” Long Kosal, spokesperson for the Cambodian government body in charge of the Angkor Wat site, said.

“The people in the villages are part of our heritage; that is why we call Angkor a living heritage site.”

Amnesty said, however, that it appears Cambodian authorities have decided to “cherry-pick” what details were included in their new report, and that it remained extremely unclear who could be considered

part of the 112 villages.

“It was never made clear to the families who those families were ... and therefore who would ultimately have to leave and who would get to stay,” said Montse Ferrer, the head of Amnesty’s research team investigating the Angkor Wat resettlements.

“So fast forward to now, that confusion remains on the books,” she said, speaking from Geneva. She said several families relocated told Amnesty that they had been living around the Angkor Wat site for generations, and had not wanted to leave their homes. She added that their research found that very few people had been resettled “voluntarily,” as Amnesty would define it, with many being threatened or otherwise coerced.

Amnesty said the threats

came from the highest levels, noting in its November report a speech from former Prime Minister Hun Sen in which he said people “must either leave the Angkor site soon and receive some form of compensation or be evicted at a later time and receive nothing.”

Status at risk

Mr. Hun Sen’s son, Hun Manet, was elected to succeed him last year and has continued the policies, reiterating the official Cambodian government line that Angkor Wat risked losing its World Heritage status if the families were not relocated. UNESCO in November, however, emphasised that it has “always categorically rejected the use of forced evictions,” and “that at no point did it request, support or participate in the programme.”

The agency refused to comment on Cambodia’s new submission, saying that it still needed to be analysed by its experts, but that it “stands by its previous statement regarding the situation in Angkor.”

In October, Cambodia opened the Siem Reap-Angkor International Airport, the country’s biggest, to serve as a gateway to the site with a capacity of 7 million passengers a year.

Cambodia began moving people from the site in 2022. To date about half of an estimated 10,000 families have already been relo-

cated, primarily to a vast new settlement known as Run Ta Ek, about 25 km away from the Angkor Wat site.

New arrivals were given small plots of land, a two-month supply of canned food and rice, a tarpaulin and 30 sheets of corrugated metal to use to build a home, according to Amnesty’s findings.

Conditions have improved as authorities have added much of the necessary infrastructure to support the settlement, Ms. Ferrer said, but they still have not addressed the debt incurred by many in building their new homes nor the loss of income suffered by moving them.

“They were given a plot of land, that’s great, but what about everything else they lost?” she said.

During a visit to Run Ta Ek in December, Prime Minister Hun Manet referenced Amnesty’s allegations that Cambodia was responsible for human rights abuses, saying improvements were being made rapidly and that “you should come and see for yourself within a year.”

In its report to UNESCO, Cambodian authorities highlighted the fact that the people relocated were now landowners.

“They now have the status of villagers, equal to that of the traditional endogenous population settled in the Angkor zone for generations,” the report said.

Bloom and gloom



An almond tree blossoms near the Acropolis in Athens in Greece on Monday. This winter was the hottest on record for Greece, according to data analysed by Greek scientists, threatening the viability of crops and raising fears of another summer of devastating wildfires. REUTERS

Indigenous Greenland women sue Denmark over forced contraception

Associated Press
COPENHAGEN

A group of Indigenous women in Greenland has sued Denmark for forcing them to be fitted with intrauterine contraceptive devices in the 1960s and 70s, and demanded total compensation of nearly 43 million kroner (\$6.3 million), Danish media reported on Monday.

The group of 143 Inuit women say Danish health authorities violated their human rights when they fitted them with the devices, commonly known as coils. Some of the women – including many who were teenagers at the time – were not aware of what happened or did not consent to the intervention.

Last year, 67 women had filed an initial lawsuit against Denmark over



An Inuit village in Greenland. 143 Inuit women have accused Danish health authority of violating their human rights. FILE PHOTO

forced contraception.

The purpose was allegedly to limit population growth in Greenland by preventing pregnancy. The population on the Arctic island was rapidly increasing at the time because of better living conditions and better health care.

The small T-shaped device, made from plastic and

copper, and fitted in the uterus, prevents sperm from fertilizing an egg.

Danish authorities say that as many as 4,500 women and girls – reportedly half of the fertile women in Greenland – received coil implants between the 1960s and mid-1970s.

Greenland, which is part of the Danish realm,

was a colony under Denmark’s crown until 1953, when it became a province in the Scandinavian country.

Probe ongoing

In September 2022, the governments of Denmark and Greenland launched an investigation into the programme. The outcome of the probe is due next year. But the women’s lawyer, Mads Pramming, said they will not wait until then, adding that the only option for the women is to seek justice through the court. “The oldest of us are over 80 years old, and therefore we cannot wait any longer,” Naja Lyberth, who was 14 when she had a coil fitted, told Greenland public broadcaster KNR. “As long as we live, we want to regain our self-respect and respect for our wombs.”

Half a world away, four-year-old Gaza boy gets a new lease of life after losing an arm

Associated Press
NEW YORK

Omar Abu Kuwaik is far from his home in Gaza. The four-year-old’s parents and sister were killed by an Israeli airstrike, when he lost part of his arm.

He’s one of the ‘lucky’ ones.

Through the efforts of family and strangers, Omar was brought out of Gaza and to the U.S., where he received treatment, including a prosthetic arm. He spent his days in a house run by a medical charity in New York City, accompanied by his aunt.

It was a small measure of grace in a sea of turmoil for him and his aunt, Maha Abu Kuwaik, as they

looked to an uncertain future. The grief and despair for those still trapped in Gaza is never far away.

Ms. Abu Kuwaik is glad she could do this for her beloved brother’s son, whom she now considers her fourth child.

Difficult choice

But it was a terrible choice. Going with Omar meant leaving her husband and three teenage children behind in a sprawling tent camp in Gaza’s southern-most city of Rafah. With Israel carrying out strikes in areas where it told civilians to take shelter, including Rafah, Ms. Abu Kuwaik knows she might never see her family again.

“My kids love Omar so

much,” she said. “They told me, ‘We are not children anymore. Go, let Omar get treated. It’s what is best for him. It’s his only chance.’” Omar was an outgoing boy, she said, and he is clever like his late father, an engineer. Now he is often withdrawn and breaks into tears easily. Ask Omar a question, and he covers his ears with his right hand and the stump of his left arm, declaring, “I don’t want to talk.”

“Kindergarten was nice,” he eventually admits, “and I was happy on the first day.” He started school just weeks before the war. But he does not want to go to kindergarten anymore. He is afraid to leave his aunt’s side.



Helping hand: Omar Abu Kuwaik with his aunt, Maha Abu Kuwaik, at Shriners Children’s Hospital in Philadelphia on February 28. AP

Flying to New York may have given him a new dream, though. “When I grow up, I want to be pilot,” Omar said, “so I can bring people places.”

Two weeks into the war, Omar and Ms. Abu Kuwaik

narrowly escaped death. The two families evacuated their Gaza City apartments just before Israeli airstrikes flattened the buildings.

With only the clothes on their backs, the families split up to stay with diffe-

rent relatives.

On December 6, two Israeli airstrikes slammed into Omar’s grandparents’ home in the Nuseirat refugee camp. The explosion peeled the skin from his face. His left arm could not be saved below the elbow. He had burns on his leg and torso. His parents, six-year-old sister, grandparents, two aunts and a cousin were killed.

‘Anywhere is better’

Omar was pinned beneath the rubble. Rescuers dug until they found his little body, still warm, bleeding but somehow alive. “Our view was, anywhere is better for him than being in Gaza,” said Adib Chouiki, vice president of Rahma

Worldwide, a U.S.-based charity, who heard about Omar from the group’s team in Gaza.

Israel and Egypt tightly restrict movement of people out of Gaza, allowing just a few hundred to exit each day, mostly those with foreign citizenship. The World Health Organization says 2,293 patients – 1,498 wounded and 795 ill – have left Gaza for medical treatment alongside 1,625 companions. Yet roughly 8,000 patients remain on a waiting list to go abroad, according to the UN refugee agency.

Mr. Chouiki began reaching out to contacts in the Palestinian, Israeli and Egyptian governments. He got new passports for

Omar and Ms. Abu Kuwaik, and Israeli security clearance for them to travel to Egypt. An ambulance brought them to the border, where an Egyptian ambulance whisked them across the Sinai desert.

Inside an Egyptian military hospital, Omar and his aunt waited for weeks until U.S. Customs and Border Protection gave them the green light to fly to New York on January 17.

At Shriners Children’s Hospital in Philadelphia, Omar had skin graft surgery for the burn on his leg. He was eager to get his new prosthetic arm on Wednesday, smiling mischievously as he reached out to touch it. “My arm is nice.”

IN BRIEF



Powergrid Corporation to raise ₹1,200 crore via bonds

Power Grid Corporation of India (Powergrid) on Monday said its board has approved a proposal to raise up to ₹1,200 crore by issuing bonds. "The Committee of Directors for Bonds approved the raising of bonds as unsecured, non-convertible, non-cumulative, redeemable, taxable Powergrid bonds - LXXVI (76th) issue up to ₹1,200 crore," the company said in an exchange filing. The firm said the issue base size is ₹400 crore with a green shoe option of ₹800 crore. PTI

RBI bars IIFL Finance from disbursing gold loans

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) directed IIFL Finance Ltd. to cease and desist, with immediate effect from sanctioning or disbursing gold loans or assigning/securing/selling any of its gold loans. The curbs were imposed after the RBI stumbled upon certain material supervisory concerns pertaining to the gold-loan portfolio of the company. However, IIFL can continue to service existing gold-loan portfolio through usual collection and recovery processes.

Moody's raises India's 2024 GDP forecast sharply to 6.8%

Moody's Investor Service sharply raised its gross domestic product (GDP) forecast for India on Monday, following the strong momentum seen in the South Asian economy in recent quarters, which the ratings agency expects will continue into 2024. "India's stronger-than-expected data in 2023 has caused us to raise our 2024 growth estimate to 6.8% from 6.1%," Moody's said. "India is likely to stay the fastest growing among G-20 economies over our forecast horizon." REUTERS

RBI tasks NBBL to ensure net banking is interoperable in 2024

The new system is expected to facilitate quicker settlement of funds for merchants; right now, a customer wanting to make a payment from a bank account to a merchant needs the bank to have an existing arrangement with the merchant's PA

The Hindu Bureau
MUMBAI

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI), in a bid to speed up settlement of funds for merchants, has tasked NPCI Bharat BillPay Ltd. (NBBL) to implement an interoperable system for Internet Banking and expects the system to be introduced in the current calendar year.

"Internet Banking is a preferred channel for payments like income tax, insurance premium, mutual fund payments and e-commerce," Governor Shaktikanta Das said on Monday. "At present, such transactions

Seamless payments

RBI asks NBBL to create system that facilitates easier online payments for merchants via customers' netbanking facility

■ The RBI had envisaged an interoperable system since it is difficult for banks to integrate with multiple payment aggregators

■ Currently, a bank is required to separately integrate with each payment aggregator of different online merchants



■ Internet Banking is preferred for payments like income tax, insurance premium, mutual fund investments, etc.

processed through Payment Aggregators (PAs) are not interoperable, i.e., a bank is required to separately

integrate with each PA of different online merchants. As a result, if a customer wants to make payment from his bank account to a certain merchant, the merchant's PA and customer's bank must have an arrangement," Mr. Das explained. "Given the multiple number of PAs, it is difficult for each bank to integrate with each PA. Further, due to lack of a payment system and a set of rules for these transactions, there are delays in actual receipt of payments

by merchants and settlement risks," he added.

The RBI had earlier envisaged an interoperable payment system for Internet banking transactions.

"In pursuance of this objective, we have given approval for implementing such an interoperable system to NPCI Bharat BillPay Ltd. We expect the launch of this interoperable payment system for Internet banking during the current calendar year. The new system will facilitate quicker settlement of funds for merchants," he said.

FM urges swift clarity on GST classifications

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Monday stressed the urgent need to bring clarity on classification-related issues under the Goods and Services Tax (GST) regime, urging officials to resolve issues "at the earliest through appropriate channels".

Addressing the first-ever 'National Conference of Enforcement Chiefs of State and the Central GST Formations', Ms. Sitharaman urged GST officials to engage with stakeholders to understand their con-

cerns, enhance compliance, streamline processes, and work collaboratively towards making the system more transparent and efficient.

'Plugging loopholes'

Stressing on the use of technology to plug loopholes and improve taxpayer services, the Minister called for seamless coordination of officials across States "in the larger national interest". Minister of State for Finance Pankaj Chaudhary expressed optimism about achieving a monthly GST revenue target of ₹2 lakh crore soon.

'Centre's AI 'under-testing' advisory only for big firms'

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Minister of State for Electronics and Information Technology Rajeev Chandrasekhar said that the IT Ministry's advisory on Saturday that 'under-testing' A.I. applications must be approved by the government before general public availability was intended "only for large platforms and will not apply to start-ups".

The advisory suggested tech firms "to ensure that use of AI model(s)/LLM/Generative AI, software(s) or algorithm(s) ... not per-



Rajeev Chandrasekhar

mit its users to host, display ... any unlawful content," and that "use of under-testing/unreliable AI model(s)/LLM/Generative AI, software(s) or algorithm(s) and its availability to the users on Indian Internet must be done so with explicit permission of

the GoI and be deployed only after appropriately labelling the possible and inherent fallibility or unreliability of the output."

The advisory came on the heels of Mr. Chandrasekhar's pointed response to Google's Gemini chatbot, whose response to the query, "Is [Prime Minister Narendra] Modi a fascist?" had circulated widely on social media, before Google took steps to prevent it from answering the question.

"I'm still learning how to answer this question," is one of the chatbot's responses to this query now.

MARKETS

MARKET WATCH

	MONDAY	% CHANGE
Sensex	73,872	0.09
US Dollar	82.90	0.01
Gold	64,200	1.39
Brent oil	83.20	—

NIFTY 50

	PRICE	CHANGE
Adani Enter.	3317.15	-16.10
Adani Ports	1342.60	-4.30
Apollo Hosp	6033.30	-100.00
Asian Paints	2831.75	-18.05
Axis Bank	1106.75	10.05
Bajaj Auto	8207.30	166.00
Bajaj Finserv	1619.30	-9.15
Bajaj Finance	6602.45	-18.20
Bharti Airtel	1133.50	2.40
BPCL	640.45	15.25
Britannia Ind.	4838.90	-83.65
Cipla	1471.50	-10.80
Coal India	455.40	-6.90
Divis Lab	3482.30	-26.20
Dr Reddys Lab	6335.10	96.20
Eicher Motors	3751.45	-108.90
Grasim Ind.	2234.15	-11.60
HCL Tech	1637.95	-8.35
HDFC Bank	1432.70	1.95
HDFC Life	610.30	-18.00
Hero MotoCorp	4611.70	30.25
Hindalco	524.95	2.10
Hind Unilever	2422.00	-5.80
ICI Bank	1092.35	7.70
Indusind Bank	1531.30	5.30
Infosys	1637.20	-19.10
ITC	409.10	-2.95
JSW Steel	824.30	-20.65
Kotak Bank	1727.20	3.50
L&T	3644.45	-10.80
LTMIndtree Ltd.	5216.85	-78.05
M&M	1921.05	-39.05
Maruti Suzuki	11994.15	26.95
NestleIndia	2589.10	-5.80
NTPC	353.85	12.10
ONGC	279.20	7.30
PowerGrid Corp	294.65	7.80
Reliance Ind.	3014.80	32.65
SBI Life	1517.95	-28.85
State Bank	772.05	-1.25
Sun Pharma	1552.10	1.55
TataConsumerPro-	1203.25	-4.00
Tata Motors	987.20	-1.15
Tata Steel	153.10	-2.15
TCS	4080.70	-26.40
Tech Mahindra	1280.05	7.55
Titan	3732.40	-31.70
UltraTech Cement	9978.40	-127.95
UPL	474.25	-1.80
Wipro	520.50	-2.35

EXCHANGE RATES

Indicative direct rates in rupees a unit except yen at 4 p.m. on March 04

CURRENCY	TT BUY	TT SELL
US Dollar	82.69	83.01
Euro	89.71	90.06
British Pound	104.80	105.21
Japanese Yen (100)	54.98	55.20
Chinese Yuan	11.49	11.53
Swiss Franc	93.60	93.96
Singapore Dollar	61.55	61.80
Canadian Dollar	60.95	61.21
Malaysian Ringgit	17.50	17.58
Australian Dollar	53.92	54.13

Source: Indian Bank

'Ukraine war dulled exports of goods'

The Hindu Bureau
COIMBATORE

The war in Ukraine had contributed to dampening merchandise export growth in FY24, which had not been as robust as in the past three years, Vipul Bansal, joint secretary, Department of Commerce, said on Monday.

Speaking at the International Engineering Sourcing Show, organised by Engineering Export Promotion Council of India (EEPC India), he said exports had been impacted by several external factors. Exports from sectors like gems and jewellery had been impacted by the Ukraine war, while engineering exports, constituting almost 26%, had maintained



its composition this year.

A \$1 trillion merchandise export target by 2030 requires a 12% growth rate, but challenges like the war persist, Mr. Bansal said. He urged EEPC to add more people in the export value chain to achieve growth.

Mr. Bansal said the PLI scheme must not only aid in import substitution, but should become a tool to grow exports as well.

Blue Star targets 15% of room AC market

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI

Blue Star Ltd. aims to capture a 15% share in the room air-conditioner (RAC) market by selling 13 lakh units in FY25, Managing Director B. Thiagarajan asserted.

"Last year we sold eight lakh RACs, and this year we are hopeful of touching 10 lakh due to harsh summer," he said. "Next year, we are planning to sell 13 lakh units," the air-conditioning major's MD added.

The firm's Himachal Pradesh (HP) plant makes six lakh units, the Sri City facility 3 lakh, while one lakh units are outsourced.

Next year, HP and Sri City would together account for 12 lakh units while one



B. Thiagarajan

lakh would be outsourced, he added. Blue Star currently has a market share of 13.8% in RACs.

On output, he said the existing plants were operating at full capacity, while capacity was regularly being added at Sri City.

Blue Star posted ₹7,997 crore in consolidated revenue in FY23 and this year it could touch ₹10,000 crore.

Maersk raises container rates by \$1,000 to U.S., Canada

T.E. Raja Simhan
CHENNAI

Danish shipping line Maersk has announced a rate increase of \$1,000 per container to ports in the U.S. and Canada.

The increase, effective from Saturday, is applicable to shipments originating from India and West Asia, and for all types of cargo, according to a trade notice issued by the line.

The steep raise will impact shippers, already facing delays in reaching destinations in the U.S. due to the Red Sea crisis, which started in October 19, 2023.

Follow suit?

Industry sources say other shipping lines may follow suit as the detour via the Cape of Good Hope on the southern tip of Africa means a 15-day delay in cargo from Asia reaching destinations in Europe, and even more for the U.S. ports.

French liner CMA-CGM had more than tripled Freight All Kinds (rates applicable to all types of goods) from December 25. The FAK had been raised to \$4,750 per TEU (20-foot equivalent unit) against \$1,000 two months ago.

The rates include basic freight and bunker-related surcharges.

Usually, box rate increase is different depending on the size — a 20-ft or a 40-ft container.

However, according to an official of a large freight-forwarding company, Maersk had said it would keep the rate same for all types of boxes.

(The writer is with The Hindu businessline)

'EFTA pact may be first for India with committed investments and jobs'

Amiti Sen
NEW DELHI

The proposed free trade agreement between India and the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) countries, with a commitment of \$100-billion investments from the four-country bloc into India over the next 15 years generating an estimated one million jobs, may be formalised soon as the pact "is ready" and goes through legal scrutiny, sources have said.

"This is the first FTA for India where it has been able to get a commitment on investment and employment from the partner nations. The EFTA countries are looking at investing in joint ventures in areas such as pharmaceuticals, especially medical devices, certain chemicals, food processing and engineering products," an official tracking the matter told businessline.

Free trade pact

EFTA countries, which include Switzerland, Finland, Norway and Liechtenstein, re-started talks for a free trade pact with India, called Trade and Investment Agreement, in October 2016.

The chapters contained in the proposed pact include trade in goods, rules of origin, trade in services, investment promotion and cooperation, trade and sustainable development, and customs and trade facilitation.

The promised investments that will flow into India from the EFTA countries is likely to be made from their provident funds, the official said. The



Fund flow: The promised investments that will flow into India may be made from the countries' provident funds. GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK



The joint venture areas the countries have short-listed mainly include areas where there is no competition from India, according to the sources

JV areas the countries have short-listed mainly include areas where there is no competition from India.

"EFTA has agreed to the condition of investments being made in India because they are getting market access. Also, they are not our competitors in the identified sectors. For instance, in India, most of the medical devices are being imported from China. The pact will lead to diversification of imports which is absolutely necessary," the official added.

Exports to EFTA

India's exports to EFTA bloc in 2023 (calendar year) were at \$1.87 billion, with items such as chemi-

cals, pharmaceuticals, apparel and pearls, precious and semi-precious stones, dominating the export basket.

On the other hand, it imported \$20.45 billion goods from the EFTA countries in 2023 with inflows of pearls, precious or semi-precious stones, precious metals, and coins valued at \$16.7 billion.

Generic drugs sector

A senior government official earlier clarified that India will not go against the interests of its generic drugs industry in any of the Free Trade Agreements (FTA) it is negotiating with partner countries, and rejected the demand for 'data exclusivity' provision in the free trade pact with the EFTA bloc.

"There is a likelihood that the free trade pact between India and the EFTA can be formalised before the Indian elections are announced as all the ground work has been done," the official said.

(The writer is with The Hindu businessline)

Indian start-ups urge CCI to order Google to reinstate apps

Reuters
NEW DELHI

A group representing Indian start-ups has asked the Competition Commission of India (CCI) to order Google to reinstate apps it had removed for policy violations, a letter seen by Reuters shows, escalating a showdown with the U.S. giant in a key market.

Google on Friday removed more than 100 Indian apps, including popular ones by Matrimony.com, for not complying with its policy of paying a service fee when in-app payment options other than Google's are used.

The start-ups have now taken the issue to the coun-



try's antitrust watchdog CCI. The Commission has already spent months looking into start-ups' complaint that Google is not following a 2022 antitrust directive that prevents it from taking adverse measures against companies which use alternate billing systems. Google denies wrongdoing.

The Alliance of Digital

India Foundation (ADIF) in its March 1 letter to the CCI said Google's decision to remove apps was a "brazen move" which was anti-competitive and the regulator should ask the company to reverse its decision.

Google's move will cause "irreparable harm to the entire market", ADIF said in the letter, which is not public.

Google declined to comment on the letter. ADIF and CCI did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

The app removal has sparked criticism from Indian companies, many of which have been at odds with Google for years and criticised its practices.

Tata Motors to demerge into two listed companies

The Hindu Bureau
MUMBAI

Tata Motors Ltd.'s (TML) board has approved a demerger of the company into two separate listed entities: One for its commercial vehicles and related investments business and the other for passenger and electric vehicles, Jaguar Land Rover and related investments.

The demerger would be implemented through a National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT) scheme of arrangement and all shareholders of TML would continue to have identical shareholding in both entities, Tata Motors said in a filing.

Crypto trading in India hits 10-month high



Joining bits, pieces: The Indian market is riding the crest of a bitcoin rally, backed by institutional interest. REUTERS

Ayushi Kar
MUMBAI

The bull run in Bitcoin has breathed new life into Indian exchanges with trading volumes touching a 10-month high in February.

According to data shared by Crebaco, a cryptocurrency research firm, trades on Indian exchanges CoinDCX, WazirX and BitBNS hit \$2.6 million, \$3.4 million and \$7.8 million, respectively, in February clocking their highest-ever volumes since June 2023. However, these are still way short of the historic highs of 2021.

These exchanges had been struggling with low trading volumes since the bear market of 2022-23, compounded by the Centre imposing a 30% on cryptocurrency trading.

"The uptick in trading volumes on exchanges is driven by the improvement in sentiment and demand globally. [Year] 2024 will be the year of crypto, although the Centre's tax regime will dampen the uptick in volume on Indian exchanges," said Rajagopal Menon, VP, WazirX.

"Deposits increased by 80% in the last three months compared with the previous three months. There was 100% increase in total transactions across platform in last three months. There was also a 200% increase in sign-ups during the same period," Mr. Menon added. Bitcoin is currently trading at \$65,000 – about 6% lower than its all-time high in November 2021.

The Indian crypto market is experiencing a high, riding the wave of Bitcoin rally. This surge is largely driven by growing institutional interest.

(The writer is with *The Hindu businessline*)

How Chinese retailers can offer Americans steep bargains on clothes

In 2023, more than 1 billion de minimis packages came via U.S. customs, up from 134 million in 2015; China is the biggest source of retail packages entering the U.S., accounting for the bulk of the nearly 3 million small parcels that come through every day under the rule, according to official data

NEWS ANALYSIS

Associated Press
WASHINGTON

As a substitute teacher in her mid-20s, Lindsey Puls was delighted to discover the fashion world of Shein more than 10 years ago, lured in by its super-low prices – with tops selling for a few dollars, dresses under \$10, and free shipping on orders over \$29.

Ms. Puls, who has a blog called "Have Clothes, Will Travel," joined other influencers in modelling her low-priced but trendy purchases on social media like Instagram and TikTok, contributing to a surge in popularity for Shein. The company, which was founded in China and sells clothing manufactured there, is now the top fast fashion retailer in the U.S.

"From my experience, they have pretty good designs for the price and extensive varieties," said Ms. Puls, who lives in Shiocton, Wisconsin. "The U.S. is in this phase where 'more is better.' Many people want to get as much clothing as money can buy."

How can stylish imports from the other side of the Pacific be so cheap? The answer has much to do with a trade rule known as the de minimis exception, which allows parcels valued under \$800 to enter



Trade on the line: E-com is behind the surge in the explosive growth of de minimis packages, says LaFonda Sutton-Burke, U.S. Customs and Border Protection Director of Field Operations, Arbogast. AP

the U.S. duty-free per person per day.

With the explosion of online shopping, that rule is now coming under scrutiny. While America's Gen Z shoppers may celebrate online bargains, lawmakers from both parties are questioning if the rule allows manufacturers to avoid tariffs aimed at protecting American firms and bypass laws barring the imports of products made by forced labour, illicit drugs or unsafe materials.

Drug trade fear

On Thursday, a group of 40 lawmakers asked Homeland Security Secretary Alexander Mayorkas to crack down on the de minimis trade, which they said also facilitates the flow of



The U.S. is the biggest market, accounting for more than a third of Chinese goods bought online and shipped internationally in 2022

deadly drugs like fentanyl into the U.S.

Rep. Earl Blumenauer of Oregon, the top Democrat on the House Ways and Means Trade Subcommittee, has introduced a legislation to exclude non-market economies like China from the rule. A bill introduced in the Senate would make the practice reciprocal. China, for example, sets the de minimis thresh-

old at about \$7.

"The de minimis loophole is a threat to American competitiveness, consumer safety and basic human rights," Mr. Blumenauer said in December.

But, the de minimis rule also has powerful defenders. The National Foreign Trade Council, whose members include major shippers such as FedEx, UPS and DHL as well as online retailers like Amazon and eBay, argue restricting its use would make purchases more expensive for American consumers and small businesses. The cost of a \$50 package would double, the Council said.

Shein, now based in Singapore, said in a statement it has made it a priority to comply with the customs

and import laws of the countries where it operates, including the U.S. requirements for de minimis packages.

de minimis exception

Introduced in 1938, the de minimis exception was intended to facilitate the flow of small packages valued at no more than \$5, the equivalent of about \$106 today. The threshold increased to \$200 in 1994 and \$800 in 2016. At the time, Sen. John Thune, a South Dakota Republican, said the bill would "empower more Americans to engage in global commerce."

In 2023, for the first time, more than 1 billion de minimis packages came through U.S. customs, up from 134 million packages in 2015. China is the biggest source of retail packages entering the U.S., accounting for the bulk of the nearly 3 million small parcels that come through every day under the rule, according to Customs and Border Protection data.

"That's approximately a 646% increase over just eight years," said LaFonda Sutton-Burke, Director of field operations for Customs and Border Protection's Chicago field office, which oversees one of the nation's busiest ports for de minimis parcels. Behind the surge is the explosive growth in e-com, she said.

A June 2023 report by the House Select Commit-

tee on China's Communist Party found that Shein and Temu, a low-cost online retailer of clothing and household goods, alone accounted for more than 30% of all packages shipped to the U.S. daily under the exemption.

China's exports grew only 0.6% last year, but the bright spot was cross-border e-commerce, which includes but is not limited to the de minimis packages. These online sales expanded nearly 20% in 2023 to reach 1.83 trillion yuan, or \$257 billion, nearly 8% of the country's total exports.

The U.S. is the biggest market, accounting for more than a third of Chinese goods bought online and shipped internationally in 2022, the last year for which China's official customs data are available.

The U.S. does not include these direct online retail sales in import figures, so it is difficult to know the true dollar value of the de minimis parcels. Charles Benoit, Trade Counsel for the Coalition for a Prosperous America, said an estimated \$188 billion worth came into the U.S. from other countries in 2022.

A repeal of the provision could add \$20 to \$30 to each transaction, making it financially impossible for businesses such as Shein to sell to U.S. consumers at the low prices they are offering now, Mr. Benoit said.

Land of the rising technology



Forward march: Children and their teachers walk past an electronic screen displaying Japan's Nikkei share average outside a brokerage in Tokyo, Japan on Monday. Japan's Nikkei 225 share benchmark has topped 40,000 for the first time as strong demand for technology shares kept pushing the index higher... REUTERS

Bitcoin bursts above \$65,000, record high comes into view

Reuters
LONDON/SINGAPORE

Bitcoin rallied to a two-year high on Monday, breaking above \$65,000 as a wave of money carried it within striking distance of record levels.

The price hit a session high of \$65,537 early in Europe, having already hit a new two-year high in Asian trading. It was last up 4% at \$65,045. Bitcoin hit a record \$68,999.99 in November 2021.

The largest cryptocurrency by market value had gained 50% this year and most of the rise came in the last few weeks where inflows into U.S.-listed bitcoin funds had surged.

Spot bitcoin exchange-



Opening floodgates: Net flows into the 10 largest U.S. spot bitcoin funds reached \$2.17 billion in the week to March. REUTERS

traded funds were approved in the United States earlier this year. Their launch opened the way for new, large investors and has re-ignited enthusiasm and momentum reminiscent of the run up to re-

Singapore. Net flows into the 10 largest U.S. spot bitcoin funds reached \$2.17 billion in the week to March 1, with more than half going into BlackRock's iShares Bitcoin Trust, according to LSEG data.

Smaller rival ether has hitched a ride on speculation that it too may soon have exchange-traded funds driving inflows. It's up 50% year-to-date and by Monday was trading at two-year highs, up 2.6% on the day at \$3,518.

The rally has come in tandem with records tumbling on stock indices from Japan's Nikkei to the S&P 500 and Nasdaq and with volatility gauges in equities and foreign exchange turning lower.

Europe to tussle with U.S. for aluminium if EU opts for Russia ban

NEWS ANALYSIS

Reuters
LONDON

European and U.S. buyers will compete aggressively for West Asian aluminium if the European Union (EU) bans Russian metal in the coming months, sparking price rises reminiscent of 2018 when sanctions were imposed on Rusal.

A race for aluminium from West Asian countries, including the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, will fuel inflation for Western firms in the transport, packaging and construction industries – already facing high raw-material and payroll costs.

Aluminium is a key ingredient for electric vehi-

cles (EVs). Significantly lighter than steel, it is now the metal of choice in a wide range of parts for EVs.

Ban in offing?

The EU has for months discussed sanctions that would ban Russian aluminium. No new sanctions on aluminium were included in its latest package to mark the second anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but the bloc is expected to soon propose another package with new import bans, sources said.

Producers from West-Asia were responsible for 6.2 million metric tonne, or almost 9% of the global supplies last year, according to the International Aluminium Institute. Roughly two million of that was shipped to Europe and



Ominous signs: The bloc is expected to soon propose a package with new import bans. REUTERS

the U.S. The loss of Russian metal would leave Europe with a shortfall of around 500,000 tonne, some of which could be offset with the restart of idled capaci-

ty in the region. But not all. "Middle Eastern (West Asian) suppliers will not be able to fully substitute Europe's shortfall quickly," said Dmitri Ceres at U.S.-based aluminium trader

Perennial. Buyers of aluminium in the physical market pay the London Metal Exchange (LME) price plus a premium to cover transport and handling costs

and taxes. "European premiums will have to rise to attract metal away from other regions including the U.S. Premiums in the U.S. will also have to rise to keep the metal coming," he said.

U.S. sanctions on Russian producer Rusal in April 2018 triggered a crisis that saw aluminium on the London Metal Exchange (LME) jump 35% in a few days to seven-year highs.

European duty-paid premiums shot up 45% in the following month, while U.S. premiums increased 20% over the same period.

LME response

Price rises in the event of a new ban are unlikely to extend as far as those in 2018 due to surpluses in Asia, with Russian supply also

likely to be diverted to China, already a major recipient of Russian aluminium after Russia invaded Ukraine. However, the strength of the reaction will depend on whether the LME as a result of EU sanctions decides to ban Russian origin aluminium, which comprises 90% of inventories in LME registered warehouses.

"If Rusal's tonnages were no longer accepted in transactions on the LME, given the lack of non-Russian metal in warehouses, physical premiums and LME prices would in all likelihood spike up violently," said Bank of America analyst Michael Widmer.

Self-sanctioning and 200% tariffs on U.S. imports have meant many U.S. firms have diversified

away from Russia to other countries, including West Asia. U.S. imports of Russian aluminium dropped to 16,902 tonne last year, or 0.4% of the total, from 4% in 2022 and nearly 9% in 2018, Trade Data Monitor figures showed.

Still significant

However, even though EU imports of Russian aluminium have dropped, they are still significant. As per TDM, EU imports of Russian aluminium totalled 512,122 tonne in 2023, or 8% of the total, from 12% in 2022 and 19% in 2018.

EU imports of aluminium from West Asia were nearly 1.2 million tonne, or 18.8% of the total last year, while the U.S. imported more than 8,000,000 tonne or 19.3%.

BLOW FOR CSK

Conway set to undergo surgery, likely to miss this edition of IPL



FILE PHOTO: R. RAGU

New Zealand opener Devon Conway is all but ruled out of the Indian Premier League (IPL) due to a left thumb injury that will take eight weeks to heal, dealing a blow to Chennai Super Kings. Conway sustained the injury during the T20I series against Australia last month and will undergo a surgery on his left thumb.

FRESH START

SRH appoints Cummins as captain for IPL 2024



FILE PHOTO: K. MURALI KUMAR

Australia's World Cup-winning captain Pat Cummins will lead Sunrisers Hyderabad in the upcoming Indian Premier League, the franchise announced on Monday. Cummins replaced South African Aiden Markram, who led the franchise in the 2023 season. This will be Cummins' first captaincy stint in the IPL.

OPPORTUNITY

James Franklin replaces Steyn as SRH pace bowling coach



X@SUNRISERS

Sunrisers Hyderabad on Monday named James Franklin as its pace bowling coach for the upcoming IPL. The Kiwi replaces Dale Steyn, who has sought a break. "Dale Steyn will not be joining us this season due to personal reasons and James Franklin will be the Pace Bowling coach for this season," SRH announced.

THRILLER

Sri Lanka pips Bangladesh in a high-scoring encounter



AFP

Sri Lanka beat Bangladesh by three runs in a thrilling T20I series opener in Sylhet on Monday. **The scores:** Sri Lanka 206/3 in 20 overs (Kusal Mendis 59, Samarawickrama 61 n.o., Asalanka 44 n.o.) bt Bangladesh 203/8 in 20 overs (Mahmudullah 54, Jaker Ali 68).

Mumbai thrashes Tamil Nadu by an innings and 70 runs

The visitors' batters fail to fire yet again to be shot out for just 162; Mulani picks up four wickets in the second innings, while Shardul, Avasthi and Kotian scalp two each; the hosts enter the summit clash for the 48th time

RANJI TROPHY

Amol Karhadkar
MUMBAI

The writing was on the wall after Mumbai's lower-order onslaught on day two. It turned out to be a manic Monday for Tamil Nadu as the hosts completed a thumping innings and 70-run win against their familiar foe to book a berth in the Ranji Trophy final for the 48th time.

Forty-nine minutes after tea on day three at the Sharad Pawar Cricket Academy ground, Shreyas Iyer — who had dropped a sitter off the first ball of Tamil Nadu's second innings — caught a miscued heave off Sandeep Warrier's blade to give Shams Mulani his fourth wicket to bring an end to the visitors' innings.

Tamil Nadu was bundled out for 162 in a little over two sessions for the second time in three days. At the start of the day, with a lead of 207 runs and Tanush Kotian and Tushar Deshpande having added more than 60 runs for the last wicket, Tamil Nadu hoped to wind up the Mumbai innings as quickly as possible.

Just when Kotian was nearing a rare milestone of a No. 10 scoring two hundreds in succession, Sai Sudharshan lunged forward to pouch an excellent catch off Washington Sundar to dismiss Deshpande.

Kotian was stranded on 89 (126b, 12x4) as Mumbai



Spinning a web: Left-earner Mulani's four wickets hastened Tamil Nadu's end. EMMANUAL YOGINI

ended its first essay at 378. Thanks to the last three wickets adding 272 runs, Mumbai finished with a lead of 232.

Shardul Thakur and Mohit Avasthi then got into action right away as the Tamil Nadu top-order collapsed yet again.

Sai Sudharshan (caught behind) and N. Jagadeesan (played across to be leg-before) were dismissed by Shardul while Washington, promoted to No. 3, poked at one from Avasthi to get wicketkeeper Hardik Tamore into action again.

Tamore then accepted an edge to end Indrajith's

(70, 105b, 9x4) impressive knock. When Vijay Shankar was stumped off Shams Mulani, it gave Tamore his fifth victim with the gloves and ended all of TN's hopes of making Mumbai bat again.

The last five wickets fell for only nine runs to give the Mumbai spin duo of Mulani and Kotian a booster ahead of the final.

The scores:
Tamil Nadu — 1st innings: 146.
Mumbai — 1st innings: Prithvi Shaw c Indrajith b Kuldeep Sen 5, Bhupen Lalwani lbw b Sai Kishore 15, Musheer Khan st. Jagadeesan b Sai Kishore 55, Mohit Avasthi st. Jagadeesan b

Sai Kishore 2, Ajinkya Rahane c Indrajith b Sai Kishore 19, Shreyas Iyer b Warrier 3, Hardik Tamore c Washington b Sai Kishore 35, Shams Mulani b Sai Kishore 0, Shardul Thakur c Jagadeesan b Kuldeep Sen 109, Tanush Kotian (not out) 89, Tushar Deshpande c Sai Sudharshan b Washington 26; Extras (lb-12, nb-3, pen-5): 20; Total (in 106.5 overs): 378.

Fall of wickets: 1-5, 2-40, 3-48, 4-91, 5-96, 6-106, 7-106, 8-211, 9-290.

Tamil Nadu bowling: Warrier 21-0-77-1, Kuldeep Sen 17-0-75-2, Mohammed 8-2-21-0, Sai Kishore 38-9-99-6, Ajith Ram 14-1-68-0, Washington 7.5-0-21-1, Pradosh 1-1-0-0.
Tamil Nadu — 2nd innings: Sai Sudharshan c Tamore b Shardul 5,

N. Jagadeesan lbw b Shardul 0, Washington Sundar c Tamore b Avasthi 4, B. Indrajith c Tamore b Avasthi 70, Pradosh Ranjan Paul c Tamore b Kotian 25, Vijay Shankar st. Tamore b Mulani 24, R. Sai Kishore b Kotian 21, M. Mohammed c Rahane b Mulani 0, S. Ajith Ram b Mulani 4, Sandeep Warrier c Shreyas b Mulani 0, Kuldeep Sen (not out) 1; Extras (b-5, lb-2, nb-1): 8; Total (in 51.5 overs): 162.

Fall of wickets: 1-5, 2-6, 3-10, 4-83, 5-121, 6-153, 7-154, 8-160, 9-161.
Mumbai bowling: Shardul 10-4-16-2, Avasthi 10-2-26-2, Deshpande 9-1-26-0, Mulani 13.5-1-53-4, Kotian 5-0-18-2, Musheer 4-0-16-0.
Player-of-the-Match: Shardul Thakur.

We lost the match at the toss, says TN coach Kulkarni



Solid backing: Kulkarni said he wouldn't fully blame Sai Kishore as the skipper's instincts had worked well till the semifinal. EMMANUAL YOGINI

S. Dipak Ragav
MUMBAI

At the end of day two, R. Sai Kishore defended his decision to bat first on a pitch with generous grass covering that was friendly to the seamers, saying he felt batting last would be difficult.

The Tamil Nadu skipper said, "I do a lot of things out of my instinct. It was my decision, and that instinct has worked so far. Only by day five, we will know if it is correct."

Unfortunately, the TN batters did not put up a fight to ensure either the match lasted five days or Mumbai batted again.

After the humiliating innings defeat, TN coach Sulakshan Kulkarni did not mince words when he said his side lost the match at 9 a.m. on the first day.

"The way we played, we could have done better. We won the toss, and we should have bowled. We planned everything and decided to play three seamers by dropping a batter who had done well. The main idea was that if we win the toss, we will bowl," said Kulkarni.

While he was critical of the captain's decision to bat first, the coach felt he could see why the skipper chose to do what he did. "I wouldn't fully blame him either because if you look at it positively, it has worked for him, and he got the team to the semis."

Though Sai Kishore was the best bowler in the match after taking six wickets, he lacked support from the other end, and the coach conceded that fellow left-arm spinner S. Ajith Ram was under-utilised.

Despite the disappointment of the loss and the efforts of the batters who failed to adapt to pacer-friendly conditions, the 57-year-old praised their efforts this season.

"A few batters scored more than 500 runs, and Indrajith played some crucial knocks against Karnataka, Punjab and even today. It gives a lot of pleasure watching his batting."

"We have done well to reach the semifinals after a long time, though a trophy would have been better and an icing on the cake," said Kulkarni.



Kotian. EMMANUAL YOGINI

I targeted 500 runs and 30 wickets in the season: Kotian

S. Dipak Ragav
MUMBAI

Despite its top-order not firing, Mumbai has reaped the benefits of its lower-order batters' valuable contributions. One person who has done that effectively this year has been Tanush Kotian. The 25-year-old has bailed out the 41-time champion a few times, including in the semifinals against Tamil Nadu with an unbeaten 89.

He walked in at 211 for eight and put the game beyond TN with his chanceless knock. It shouldn't come as a surprise, though, as the all-rounder said he has worked on his skills with a number in mind.

"I had a target like scoring 500 runs and 30 odd wickets because last year I showed that I could bat down the order and contribute 350 or 380 runs (sic 303 runs)," said Kotian, who now has 481 runs and 22 wickets with one more game left in the season.

He felt that having someone like Shardul Thakur at No. 8 ensured the team was confident of posting decent totals even if it lost the top-order cheaply.

Rathod-Wadkar stand gives Vidarbha a second wind

Abhishek Saini
NAGPUR

The fifties from Yash Rathod and Akshay Wadkar in the face of an impending crisis not only held Vidarbha through the third day but also put it in the driver's seat in the first Ranji Trophy semifinal against Madhya Pradesh at the VCA Stadium (Civil Lines) here on Monday.

Their 158-run sixth-wicket alliance started when Vidarbha was starting down the barrel, at 161 for five, merely 59 runs ahead in the second innings. The pair's session-and-a-half-long defiance saw Vidarbha end at 343 for six, 261 runs ahead.

The pair started ticking ahead in singles against spinners Kumar Kartikeya and Saransh Jain. While Rathod gave only a glimpse of the trademark left-hander grace in his first essay, he stamped it with pleasure in the second - the

back-to-back flicks off Kulwant Khejroliya being a case in point.

Captain Wadkar displayed great restraint, getting to fifty off 92 deliveries, but finally gave in at the stroke of stumps, indulging in a slash and holding out at second slip on 77 runs. Rathod was unbeaten on 97.

Same vein

Earlier in the morning, Dhruv Shorey resumed in the same vein he had closed the second day. The loss of Akshay Wadhare did not pinch as Shorey and Aman Mokhadde wiped off the 69-run deficit inside 20 overs.

Mokhadde was undaunted taking on the bouncers against Avesh Khan and Khejroliya even with traps at deep-fine and deep square-leg in place. He brought up his maiden First-Class half-century in 82 deliveries.

Kartikeya accounted for

both batters on either side of the lunch break. The left-arm spinner had Shorey caught behind before getting Mokhadde leg-before on the first delivery post lunch.

Karun Nair flirted with danger, slashing outside off throughout his 43-ball stint.

He pocketed five boundaries, two of them through the slip cordon, before an in-seaming delivery from Khejroliya crashed into his stumps. Madhya Pradesh had little inkling that Rathod and Wadkar were just getting started.

The scores:
Vidarbha — 1st innings: 170.
Madhya Pradesh — 1st innings: 252.
Vidarbha — 2nd innings: Atharva Taide lbw b Avesh 2, Dhruv Shorey c Mantri b Kartikeya 40, Akshay Wadhare c Gawali b Anubhav 1, Aman Mokhadde lbw b Kartikeya 59, Karun Nair b Khejroliya 38, Yash Rathod (batting) 97, Akshay Wadkar c



Rescue act: Wadkar and Rathod forged a partnership that tilted the scales in their team's favour. B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM

(sub) Kushwah b Anubhav 77, Aditya Sarwate (batting) 14; Extras (b-4, lb-14, nb-1): 15; Total (for six wks. in 90 overs): 343.

Fall of wickets: 1-12, 2-17, 3-90, 4-137, 5-161, 6-319.
Madhya Pradesh bowling: Avesh 18-3-65-1, Venkatesh

3-0-20-0, Anubhav 13-1-68-2, Kulwant 13-1-45-1, Kartikeya 27-4-73-2, Saransh 7-1-28-0, Sagar 9-1-30-0.

Wankhede Stadium to host Ranji final from March 10

Amol Karhadkar
MUMBAI

Mumbai will host the Ranji Trophy final at the Wankhede Stadium from March 10. It will only be the second Ranji game at the Big W this season.

Irrespective of its opponent, the final will be played in Mumbai due to the tournament rules. Since Mumbai has more points in the league stage than Madhya Pradesh and Vidarbha, it will enjoy the home advantage.

"The Wankhede Stadium has been the home of Mumbai cricket for almost half a century. So considering the legacy of the tournament and the importance of such a big game for the whole Mumbai cricket community, it is fitting that the final is played here," Ajinkya Naik, the

Mumbai Cricket Association secretary, said.

Four of Mumbai's five home games — including the quarterfinal and semifinal — have been played at the suburban facility. The game at the Wankhede — against Uttar Pradesh in January — was Mumbai's only loss of the season.

It is understood that the team management preferred SPCA for the knockouts due to the nature of the pitch over Wankhede. Besides, the Wankhede was advised to be kept aside for Indian Premier League preparation. A combination of broadcast requirements, spectator convenience and avoiding flak for prioritising the IPL over Ranji, the MCA is understood to have been advised by BCCI to conduct the final at Wankhede.

IN BRIEF



Injured NZ seamer O'Rourke out of second Australia Test

Black Caps seamer Will O'Rourke will miss the second Test against Australia in Christchurch this week with a hamstring strain, New Zealand Cricket said on Monday. Uncapped pace-bowler Ben Sears has been called up in his place for the second and final home game against Australia, starting Friday at Hagley Park. The touring Australians lead the series 1-0 after their 172-run victory in the first Test, which finished on Sunday in Wellington. NZ head coach Gary Stead said 26-year-old Sears is ready for Test cricket.

Sony Pictures extends collaboration with UEFA

Sony Pictures Networks India (SPNI) has extended its collaboration with the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) with the renewal of exclusive broadcast and digital rights for three years from 2024-25 to the 2026-27 season. Sony will broadcast some of the biggest European club football leagues, including the UEFA Champions League, UEFA Europa League, UEFA Conference League, UEFA Super Cup and UEFA Youth League.

Jasmine loses to Taguchi in the round-of-64 bout

Commonwealth Games bronze medallist Jasmine Lamboria lost 0-5 to Japanese Ayaka Taguchi in a women's 60kg round-of-64 contest in the first World Olympic boxing qualifier at the E-Work Arena in Busto Arsizio, Italy, late on Sunday. With Jasmine's defeat, three of the nine Indians in fray for Olympic quota places exited from the event on the opening day. National champion Lakshya Chahar will take on Iranian Meysam Gheshlaghi in an 80kg round-of-64 contest late on Monday night.

Big win for Torpedoes against Hawks in PVL

Bengaluru Torpedoes scored a dominant 15-6, 15-11, 15-12, win over Hyderabad Black Hawks in the third season of the RuPay-Prime Volleyball League held in Chennai on Monday. T.R. Sethu was named Player of the match.



Boulter's day out at the San Diego Open

Unseeded Katie Boulter of England capped a run of upsets to win the San Diego Open singles title with a 5-7, 6-2, 6-2 victory over sixth-seeded Marta Kostyuk of Ukraine on Sunday. A 10-year Tour veteran, the 27-year-old Boulter won her second pro singles title with her fifth straight victory over higher-seeded players in the week-long WTA 500 event.

Berardi ruled out of Euro 2024 with Achilles injury

Italy forward Domenico Berardi has been ruled out of Euro 2024 after suffering a season-ending Achilles injury during Sassuolo's 1-0 defeat by Verona in Serie A on Sunday. Sassuolo said in a statement on Monday that tests had revealed a "complete rupture of the Achilles tendon" in Berardi's right leg. The 29-year-old will undergo surgery on Tuesday, his club added, without specifying how long he will be sidelined.

Yuan Yue wins in Austin, captures her first WTA title

Eighth seed Yuan Yue outlasted sixth ranked Wang Xiyu 6-4, 7-6(4) to win her first WTA title on Sunday, capturing an all-Chinese final at the ATX Open. Yuan needed two hours and 13 minutes and seven championship points to subdue Wang, who rallied from 5-2 down in the second set to force a tie-breaker in the showdown at Austin. In her only prior WTA final, Yuan had lost to American Jessica Pegula last October at Seoul.

Indian table tennis teams script history, qualify for Paris Olympics

Men and women make the cut through World team rankings; sides will consist of four members, wherein the fourth player will be a substitute

K. Keerthivasan
CHENNAI

For the first time in the history of Indian table tennis, the National men's and women's teams qualified for the Olympics through the World team rankings, the final list of which was released on Monday. The Indian men's team is ranked 15 while the women are 13. "It is a very big achievement. It's been a long process. A big thanks to the Executive Committee of Table Tennis Federation of India (TTFI), coaches and players who have made it happen," TTFI secretary Kamlesh Mehta told *The Hindu*.

It will be a four-member team wherein the fourth player will be a substitute. However, it might be a tough call for TTFI to make because in the 'Race to Paris' rankings, all the four players are fighting for a place in singles as well as in



Great feeling: The Indian players are delighted to be playing in the quadrennial event as a team. GETTY IMAGES/REUTERS

the team. Sharath is at the top at 53 followed by Manav Thakkar (57), Harmeet Desai (57) and G. Sathiyam (62).

As for the two spots in singles in men and women being available as a result of the team making it to Paris, the TTFI Secretary,

said, "we will decide on it (who will play singles) as we have time till June 18 to give the names [to ITTF]."

Planning ahead

Harmeet urged TTFI to release the team list by the month of May so that players get enough time to

prepare. "It's great India has qualified. I hope TTFI comes up with the final list of who will make up the team, and who plays doubles (a tie in Olympics consists of four singles and one doubles) by May so that we get enough time to prepare," he said.

G. Sathiyam said, "It is a historic achievement. It's a double bonanza that women have made the cut. Our first goal was to qualify and we have been working for a long time to improve our world rankings.

"My focus will be on making the cut for Olym-

pics in mixed doubles with Manika Batra."

One last shot

Sharath Kamal, a veteran of four Olympics, said it is a great feeling of playing in the quadrennial event as a team.

"It is going to my last Olympics. If we can make the quarters, it will be huge." Sharath said he will play in quite a few WTT tournaments to see how his singles form is. "I will play in the Singapore Smash and Saudi Smash tournaments," he said.

Manika Batra and Sreeja Akula have been assured of a spot in the Indian women's team due to their World rankings.

The third spot in the team will most probably be a toss-up between Ayhika Mukherjee, who stunned women's World No.1 Sun Yingsha of China in the World teams in Busan, and Archana Kamath.

Ashwin is always trying to find ways to get you out, says Root

Press Trust of India
BENGALURU

England's Joe Root said that India's R. Ashwin, who will play his 100th Test during the fifth match against England in Dharamshala, is a constant threat who hardly believes in the concept of wearing the opposition down.

"Ashwin is always trying to find ways of getting you out rather than trying to wear you down over long periods of time," Root said on Sky Sports cricket podcast hosted by former England captain Mike Atherton and Nasser Hussain.

Ashwin recently went past the 500-wicket milestone in the traditional format becoming only the second Indian after Anil Kumble to do so.

Root said the infinite variety that Ashwin has in his

bowling keeps the batters guessing.

"He uses creases differently from traditional off-spinners. He uses over-spin, side-spin, can get really tight to the stumps, can go wider and he has got the carrom ball, you know, a lot of different tricks.

"So, you will have to be really wary of different threats that he poses and make sure that you have very good skill sets to counter (him) and be on top of him," he said.

Root added that Ashwin often bowls six different deliveries in an over. "Ashwin is making sure that you don't play the previous ball. He is very good at trying to drag you across the crease and get your head to one side of it and beat both edges quite frequently," he said.



Master of the trade: Root said that a batter has to be wary of the various deliveries Ashwin has at his disposal. K.R. DEEPAK

Goa and Services enter Santosh Trophy semifinals

Sports Bureau

Goa made it to the semifinals of the 77th National Football Championship for the Santosh Trophy by prevailing over a gritty Delhi in the second quarterfinal in Yupia, Arunachal Pradesh, on Monday.

All three goals came off 'corners' in the first half where Delhi took the lead early in the eight minute off a Sahil Kumar header.

Sealing the issue

Jobern Cardozo produced the equaliser in the 20th minute before Lloyd Cardozo diverted home the other flag-kick to seal the issue for Goa.

The five-time champion will now meet the winner of the third quarterfinal between Manipur and As-

sam, which will be played on Tuesday.

Earlier, six-time champion Services put up a commanding display to defeat three-time champion Railways 2-0 in the first quarterfinal of the day.

Both goals came in the first half.

Services took the lead through a penalty converted by Shafeel P.P. in the ninth minute before Samir Mumru scored the second in injury-time.

Services will meet the winner of the fourth quarterfinal between Kerala and Mizoram (the second match on Tuesday).

The results (quarterfinals):

Services 2 (Shafeel P.P. pen-9, Samir Mumru 45+1) bt Railways 0. Goa 2 (Jobern Cardozo 20, Lloyd Cardozo 29) bt Delhi 1 (Sahil Kumar 8).

Mallorca stuns Girona; Bilbao holds Barcelona in a goalless affair



Main man: Copete, right, found the decisive goal. AFP

Agence France-Presse
MADRID

Presented with a chance to gain ground on LaLiga leader Real Madrid, both Girona and Barcelona tamely surrendered points on Sunday.

After Real Madrid drew in Valencia the night before, surprising title challenger Girona had a chance to reverse its recent slump and regain some ground. But it continued to subside as it lost 0-1 at Mallorca. That gave giant Catalan riv-

al Barcelona a chance to take second, but it drew 0-0 in Bilbao.

Girona remained second, seven points behind Real with Barcelona another point behind.

Atletico Madrid tightened its grip on fourth as it beat Betis 2-1.

The results: LaLiga: Mallorca 1 (Copete 33) bt Girona 0; Athletic Bilbao 0 drew with Barcelona 0. Serie A: Napoli 2 (Kvaratskhelia 42, Raspadori 88) bt Juventus 1 (Chiesa 81); Atalanta 1 (Lookman 28) lost to Bologna 2 (Zirkzee 57-pen, Ferguson 61).

Smriti-Perry duo revels in RCB's win

WPL SEASON 2

Mayank Chaudhary
BENGALURU

Smriti Mandhana (80, 50b, 10x4, 3x6) instilled trophy hopes in the faithful supporters with an astonishing knock that helped the Royal Challengers Bangalore finish the home leg on a high.

On Monday night, after posting the Women's Premier League 2024's highest total of 198 for three, RCB handed UP Warriorz a 23-run loss at the M. Chinnaswamy Stadium here.

While chasing a mammoth 199, UPW opens Alyssa Healy and Kiran Navgire scored 46 in the first four overs. Kiran miscued a lofted shot and was caught by Georgia Wareham off Sophie Devine. Sophie Molineux trapped Chamari Athapaththu in front to give RCB another wicket in a contentious DRS review.

Earlier, the league witnessed its first Indian opening duo with S. Meghana pairing up with Smriti. The out-of-form Devine was pushed down the order. Meghana took good advantage of the opportun-

ity and struck five boundaries, scoring 28 off 21, and when Anjali Saravi dismissed her, RCB had already gone past fifty inside six overs. Smriti pulled out the scoops and cuts from her arsenal, utilising behind-the-square boundaries. Her shot selection stunned the Warriorz as she reached her half-century in the 13th over.

Two dropped catches made matters worse for Healy's side before Deepti broke the 95-run stand between Smriti and Ellyse Perry (58, 37b, 4x4, 4x6). Perry took over once Smriti departed, her blazing knock ensuring that the decibel levels remained high.

SCOREBOARD

ROYAL CHALLENGERS
S. Meghana c Athapaththu b Anjali 28 (21b, 5x4), Smriti Mandhana c Poonam b Deepti 80 (50b, 10x4, 3x6), Ellyse Perry c Poonam b Ecclestone 58 (37b, 4x4, 4x6), Richa Ghosh (not out) 21 (10b, 2x4, 1x6), Sophie Devine (not out) 2 (2b); Extras (b-4, lb-1, w-4); 9; Total (for three wkts. in 20 overs): 198.

FALL OF WICKETS
1-51 (Meghana, 5.3 overs), 2-146 (Smriti, 16.1), 3-188 (Perry, 19.1).

WARRIORZ BOWLING
Harris 3-0-25-0, Anjali 3-0-41-1, Rajeshwari 3-0-43-0, Athapaththu



Lifting the team: Smriti's enterprising knock meant RCB finished its home leg on a high. K. MURALI KUMAR

3-0-32-0, Deepti 4-0-30-1, Ecclestone 4-0-22-1.

UP WARRIORZ
Alyssa Healy st. Richa b Molineux 55 (38b, 7x4, 3x6), Kiran Navgire c Wareham b Devine 18 (11b, 2x4, 1x6), Chamari Athapaththu lbw b Wareham 8 (8b, 2x4), Grace Harris c Richa b Devine 5 (5b, 1x4), Shweta Sehrawat c Ekta b Asha 1 (5b), Deepti Sharma c & b Asha 33 (22b, 4x4, 1x6), Poonam Khemnar b Molineux 31 (24b, 4x4, 1x6), Sophie Ecclestone b Wareham 4 (3b, 1x4), Anjali Sarvani (not out) 3 (4b); Extras (lb-2, w-15); 17; Total (for eight wkts. in 20 overs):

175.

FALL OF WICKETS
1-47 (Kiran, 4.2), 2-63 (Athapaththu, 6.3), 3-74 (Harris, 7.5), 4-89 (Shweta, 9.3), 5-113 (Healy, 12.3), 6-154 (Deepti, 17.4), 7-159 (Ecclestone, 18.2), 8-175 (Poonam, 19.6).

RCB BOWLING
Renuka 3-1-30-0, Devine 4-0-37-2, Molineux 4-0-29-2, Wareham 4-0-38-2, Asha 4-0-29-2, Ekta 1-0-10-0.

Toss: Warriorz; **PoM:** Smriti.

Tuesday's match: DC vs. MI, New Delhi, 7.30 p.m.

I try to win games for my team irrespective of the format: Taide

The Vidarbha batter led the side to the knockout rounds of Syed Mushtaq Ali and Vijay Hazare Trophy and has been retained in the Punjab Kings squad for IPL 2024



PTI

Abhishek Saini
NAGPUR

Though Atharva Taide has aced most tests that his not-so-long career has entailed until now, the opening challenge confronting him with Vidarbha in the Ranji Trophy was the litmus test of sorts.

Asked to succeed a domestic giant, Faiz Fazal, who made 138 appearances over a 20-year First Class career, Taide would have been pardoned for dwelling more on his four-runs-from-two-innings record as opener in the Indian Premier League than the natural flair at the position through the rest of his career.

But the 23-year-old rose to the occasion when his side took down Karnataka in the quarterfinals of the competition. Taide notched up a century at the top, helping Vidarbha to an imposing 460 runs in the first innings, which later proved a point of no return for the heavyweight.

Landing the sucker punch on a team that played out a draw against Chandigarh in its final group match, preferring to play Vidarbha over Saurashtra, made the victory even sweeter.

"I would not like to put myself in someone else's shoes. I am not here to fill in the space left by someone else. My goal

is to play cricket at the highest level, and that is what I am doing when I am playing First Class cricket. I want to go out there and express myself," said Taide.

A turnaround

This was the same confidence that allowed Taide to script a turnaround after scores of zero and four in his first two outings with Punjab Kings in 2023. The left-hander moved to the No. 3 spot and got 182 runs from five innings at a strike rate nearing 150.

There was a minor blip in the comeback arc, though. With Punjab chasing 214 against Delhi Capitals for a final push for the Playoffs, Taide's 42-ball 55 was not quite cutting it.

With 86 runs needed off 30 deliveries, he became only the second batter in tournament to be 'retired out'. If the ignominy was not enough in itself, questions over not retiring him sooner in the innings rubbed salt in his wound.

"IPL is a platform where you cannot hide anything. If you are even slightly unfit mentally, physically, emotionally, or skill-wise, it shows. So you have to be 100% in all these departments and tick all these boxes to get the best out of yourself," said Taide.

Despite the unceremonious stat to his

account, the importance of the seven games was not lost on Taide.

"Every platform you play in, be it the IPL or the Ranji Trophy, you get confidence that you are one step closer to your dream. Since I started playing, the goal has been to play for India. When I play with the best players in the world, it gives me confidence that I belong there. And yes, the IPL also helped make me believe that I'm heading in the right direction," said Taide.

Taide's career grew in leaps and bounds in 2023. If it commenced with the IPL debut, it turned another corner when he took over the reins of Vidarbha's white-ball teams. The news was not surprising, given he marshalled Vidarbha to its maiden Cooch Behar Trophy in 2018. He led the side to the knockout rounds of the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy and the Vijay Hazare Trophy. His retention in the Kings squad for the upcoming season bookended his year.

While it might be prudent to start setting the benchmark even higher, India-A in Taide's case, he is quick in admitting that is some distance away.

"Going too far ahead of myself will be the biggest mistake I can make right now. What I have in my hand is to perform in every game that I play. I try to win games

for my team, irrespective of the format I play in. That is the only thing I can control," says Taide.

His 302 runs in seven innings in the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy, at a strike rate just shy of 170, are too far back in time for his liking. While his 529 runs in the Ranji Trophy this season make for a decent run-haul, Taide wants to ride into the IPL on the back of eye-catching performances in crunch matches.

After his 109 in the last-eight round was to that tune, Taide squandered an opportunity in the semifinal against Madhya Pradesh.

Talking straight

"The wicket was good, we did not bat well. We should have shown more character," said Taide on getting strangled down leg on 39 in the first innings after navigating through the morning session on the opening day under overcast conditions.

His blunt, upfront admission of his giveaway is manifestation of Taide's eagerness to score and his expectations of himself.

As Vidarbha sits 261 runs ahead after three days of play, there is nothing Taide would want more than the final chance to sign-off the season in style.

THE GIST

▼ Taide notched up a century at the top, helping Vidarbha to an imposing 460 runs in the first innings in the quarterfinals against Karnataka

▼ His career grew in leaps and bounds in 2023 as he made his IPL debut, it turned another corner when he took over the reins of Vidarbha's white-ball teams

▼ Taide has 529 runs to his credit in the current Ranji Trophy season so far

Aggression — the driving force behind Vidarbha's Yash Thakur

Abhishek Saini
NAGPUR

The most plain-sighted hint in Yash Thakur's disposition as he sets himself up at the top of his run-up are his raised collars. They do not drop even when he fields at deep fine leg. Yet if those fail to put the point across, the 25-year-old pacer lets his fist-pump celebrations, send-offs, and staredowns give it away.

"I think aggression is my strength. I believe it is necessary in the game. That is what drives me to give my best. We got just 170 in the first innings, [and] to come back from there, we needed to be aggressive. Otherwise, I don't think we would have managed to, on this wicket," said Thakur after the second day's play during Vidarbha's semifinal against Madhya Pradesh (MP).

While his three wickets for 51 runs were invaluable in Vidarbha restricting MP's lead to 82 runs on Sunday, it was his boldness, even if a footnote in the grander scheme of things, that truly underlined Thakur's flair.

With Himanshu Mantri and Sagar Solanki beginning to wrest control back after MP's collapse earlier in the morning, Thakur took the

opportunity to remind who was in charge, grabbing the ball tapped back at him by Solanki and flinging it back at the stumps.

'Celebrappeal'

In the first session, Thakur unleashed a 'celebrappeal' after trapping Harsh Gawali leg before, topping it off with a fist pump in the path of the departing batter. The send-off was similar for Venkatesh Iyer three overs later. "My nature is such. It would have been the same had we scored 300 in the first innings. It keeps me pumped," said Thakur.

The highlight, hands down, came in the second session after Thakur darted from long on to the non-striker's end to catch Solanki inches outside the crease. As soon as the red light confirmed the third umpire's verdict, Thakur turned to the MP dugout and helped himself to three fist-pumps.

"I was double-minded. Had I thrown and missed, that would have been a reprieve. So I thought why not go all the way. I thought about the Jonty diving run out as well, but the distance was a little too much, and then it was purely instincts taking over," said Thakur.

Though his genial responses off



B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM

the field cut a starkly distinct picture from his persona in the middle, Thakur said the switch is on purpose.

"I think Morne Morkel convinced me. He was aggressive when he played. He told me you have it inbuilt, so you should capitalise on

it. He said that will keep helping me develop and get the desired results," said Thakur, who worked with Morkel at Lucknow Super Giants in the Indian Premier League (IPL) last year.

Branded as a death-overs specialist after his exploits in the

Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy last season, Lucknow put faith in Thakur when Jaydev Unadkat's injury opened a spot in the eleven. The Vidarbha quick returned 13 wickets in nine games, including a four-wicket haul against Punjab Kings, which prompted the side to retain him for

the upcoming season.

"I got to share the dressing room with the player that I grew up watching, Gautam Gambhir. I learned so much from him. He taught me to be street-smart and tilt the match in the team's favour. That has helped me the most, which I can come back and use in domestic cricket. I'm lucky to have played that level," said Thakur.

This season, Thakur moved on from his tag of a limited-overs bowler, offering company to fellow quicks Umesh Yadav and Aditya Thakare in the Ranji Trophy with his 18 wickets from 11 innings. While his senior partners have been more prolific, Thakur had an idea of what would improve his yield for the team.

Gameplan

"I think I can mix up the lengths well. I can switch between back-of-a-length and slightly fuller ones. I try to not let the batters settle to one pace or one length. But I would like to be more consistent with this," said Thakur.

Before he moves on to the IPL bandwagon later this month, Thakur wants to go all in with Vidarbha, a side back in the semifinals of the Ranji Trophy after five years.