

2024 POLLS

How far will Artificial Intelligence go?

As synthetic and realistic deepfakes have found their way into election campaigning, experts warn against the prevalent menace of misinformation

MAGAZINE » PAGE 1

The dissent vocalist in the Carnatic music scene

PROFILES » PAGE 9

Tropical cyclones of higher intensity demand new category

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Mayank Yadav swings it Super Giants' way

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INSIDE

'This poll is about preserving secular state'

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan has underscored that the upcoming Lok Sabha election is a referendum on "preserving India's secular democracy" and little else. In an e-mail interview with *The Hindu* on Friday, Mr. Vijayan articulated the pivotal nature of the poll. » PAGE 3

CAA Rules silent on fate of rejected applicants

Applicants can be rejected by an empowered committee if their documents fail scrutiny | Adverse security clearance report also leads to rejection; review procedures absent in CAA Rules | Citizenship Act, 1955, had a provision to file review application before the Union govt.

Vijaita Singh
NEW DELHI

As applications start coming in through the online citizenship portal of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA), some potential applicants are worried about their fate if rejected. The law's Rules, notified earlier this month, are silent regarding any review process for applications rejected by the empowered committees which have the final authority to accord citizenship under the Act.

Some potential applicants, including lakhs of people from the Matua community of West Bengal,

entered the country decades ago and have been living as Indian citizens for many years. However, if their submitted documents now fail the scrutiny of the empowered committee, or if there is an adverse security clearance report about them, their applications for Indian citizenship under the CAA could be rejected.

'Detention centres'
"If an application is rejected, people may end up in detention centres," warned Mamata Bala Thakur, a Trinamool Congress parliamentarian who hails from a Hindu community that migrated from Bangla-

Hurdles in front
What happens after a citizenship application is uploaded online?

- 1 A district-level committee headed by the Superintendent of Post will verify the documents
- 2 The officer will forward the application to an empowered committee
- 3 The empowered committee on being satisfied with the suitability of the applicant, may grant him

the citizenship of India by registration or naturalisation, as the case may be, and issue a certificate

A protest rally held against CAA in Kolkata. AFP

des. The parent law, the Citizenship Act, 1955, says that the applicant may file a review application before the Central government

dud, an Assam-based lawyer who has worked extensively on citizenship cases in the State, "the review of the rejection is to be done by the same authority, the empowered committee (as per Section 15 A of the Act). In case the review is rejected, a writ petition can be filed before the High Court."

'Raises concern'
The ambiguity around the rejection of applications poses concerns, particularly in West Bengal, who stand to benefit from the CAA's provision of fast-tracked citizenship. Lakhs of people belong-

ing to the Scheduled Caste community migrated from Bangladesh (earlier East Pakistan) before and after the 1971 war with Pakistan. Many came without any papers but subsequently acquired all documents proving their Indian citizenship, such as passports and voter identity cards.

Ms. Thakur, a Matua leader nominated to the Rajya Sabha by the Trinamool Congress in February, said that the Rules were akin to making people slaves. "No one has applied for CAA here. Even Union Minister Santanu Thakur has not applied yet, his ancestors are from Bangladesh. If an applica-

tion is rejected, people may end up in detention centres," she said.

According to the Rules, the applicant must declare the country they belong to along with their "date of entry into India", and upload on the citizenship portal any of the nine documents issued by government authorities in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh to support their claim.

This means that though the CAA was envisaged for undocumented migrants belonging to the six communities from the three neighbouring countries, the Rules indicate that documents are essential.

Left seeks to iron out differences in West Bengal

KOLKATA With the Left Front's All India Forward Bloc and the Congress in collision course over the Coochbehar and Purulia seats in West Bengal ahead of the Lok Sabha election, Left Front chairperson Biman Basu said the allies have enough time to sort out differences. » PAGE 4

Chaos during aid delivery kills five in Gaza

GAZA STRIP The Palestine Red Crescent said five persons were killed and dozens wounded by gunfire and a stampede during an aid delivery on Saturday in northern Gaza, where famine looms. Video footage showed a convoy of trucks moving past burning debris near the distribution point. » PAGE 12

Epitome of elegance

Traditional affair: Girls perform Bihu after completing a dance workshop ahead of Bohag Bihu festival in Guwahati on Saturday. Bohag Bihu will be celebrated in Assam from April 13 to mark the beginning of the Assamese New Year. RITU RAJ KONWAR

Chargesheet filed against NewsClick in UAPA case

Ishita Mishra
NEW DELHI

The Delhi Police on Saturday filed its first chargesheet against news portal *NewsClick* and its founder Prabir Purkayastha, in a case lodged under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967, following allegations that they received funds through Chinese firms to spread pro-China propaganda.

The chargesheet, which runs into thousands of pages, was brought in a trunk and filed before the Additional Sessions Judge Hardeep Kaur of the Patiala House Court. It had named Mr. Purkayastha and PPK NewsClick Studio Private Limited as accused, special public prosecutor Akhand Pratap Singh submitted in the court. The court posted the case for April 16.

The chargesheet came nearly six months after the police arrested Mr. Purkayastha and the human resources head of the news portal Amit Chakraborty, on October 3, 2023. Mr. Chakraborty later turned approver in the case.

Under Section 43 D of the UAPA, the time to file a chargesheet in a case extends from 90 days to up to 180 days. In the case in hand, the court granted three extensions to the special cell of the Delhi Police to file the chargesheet.

The FIR was registered after *The New York Times* published a report saying that the portal got money from U.S. businessman Neville Roy Singham, an "active member of the propaganda department of the Communist Party of China" to distort the map of India by projecting Kashmir and Arunachal Pradesh as disputed territory.

President presents Bharat Ratna to four posthumously

Dr. Nitya Rao receives Bharat Ratna from President Droupadi Murmu on behalf of Dr. M.S. Swaminathan on Saturday. ANI

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

ceremony in the Rashtrapati Bhavan.

'Exemplary actions'
"As the ninth Prime Minister of India, Shri P. V. Narasimha Rao led far-reaching economic reforms. Earlier, in his youth, he had taken an active part in the freedom struggle, especially against the misrule and oppression in the Nizam-ruled Hyderabad," the official handle of the Rashtrapati Bhavan said in a post on X.

Recalling the late Charan Singh's role during the freedom struggle in another post on X, President Murmu said, "His contribution to zamindari abolition and land reforms, and his deep understanding of the economy, are respectfully remembered." President Murmu said Dr. Swaminathan played a major role in making India self-sufficient in food production.

Recalling the selfless actions of Karpooi Thakur, the official handle of Rashtrapati Bhavan said: "Working tirelessly to improve the lives of the disadvantaged people, he commanded high regard and had earned the honorific, 'Jan-Nayak'."

Zakaat funds help free prison inmates during Ramzan

Over the past few years, some organisations have used a part of their savings set aside for charity during the holy month to free prisoners who cannot afford bail or those who have no support system to pay fines associated with their convictions

Syed Mohammed
HYDERABAD

It is in the month of Ramzan that most Muslims busy themselves with calculating *zakaat*, a prominent manifestation of charity in Islam. Usually given to those in abject poverty, over the past few years, *zakaat* funds, calculated at 2.5% of an individual's annual savings and eligible assets, are being used to free inmates of jails who have served their prison sentences but have no support systems to pay fines associated with their convictions.

Moin Pasha, an octogenarian, says, "It was two years ago that I got to know of an organisation

that uses *zakaat* money to pay those who cannot afford bail. Some of these prisoners are sole breadwinners and everything depends on them," she says.

The Movement for Peace and Justice (MPJ), a non-profit, is one such organisation that has been gathering *zakaat* from donors and channelling these funds to secure prisoner release. "Since last year we have paid 130 fines that are associated with prison sentences. Additionally, we have paid bail money for 35 prisoners and have got them all released," Ahmed Hameeduddin Shakeel, finance secretary, MPJ, says.

The MPJ, an affiliate of

A noble cause: MPJ secretary Shaik Kasim Sahah with Khammam district jail authorities. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

the Jamaat-e-Islami Hind, a socio-religious organisation, after due diligence, identifies prisoners who are first-time offenders involved in small crimes, and who have no family or friends to pay bail or fines. "We have been active

since 2007-08 and have seen cases in which family members have no idea of the whereabouts of the prison inmate. It is only much later that they get to know that they are in jail. The situation is so bad that families cannot even afford to pay ₹500. The

aim and object of our organisation is to help everyone," he says.

'Religious injunction'
Ghazala Ahmed (name changed upon request), an entrepreneur, too has been earmarking a part of her *zakaat* funds for this cause. "The goodness here is two-fold: a religious injunction is being fulfilled, and we help a family in dire need," she says.

The All India Milli Council, another socio-religious group, has secured the release of 68 inmates lodged in prisons in and around Hyderabad, since last year, according to its office-bearer Mufti Omar Abdeen Qasmi Madani.

IN BRIEF



BJP hatching plan to remove slums, says Aaditya Thackeray

Shiv Sena (UBT) leader Aaditya Thackeray on Saturday accused the BJP of hatching a plan to "forcibly remove slums" from Mumbai and relocate those living in them to salt pan lands. Addressing a news conference, Mr. Thackeray referred to the remarks of Union Minister Piyush Goyal, the BJP candidate from the Mumbai North Lok Sabha seat, where he had said that if elected, he intends to clear his constituency of slums. "The BJP's policy is not to eradicate poverty, but poor people," alleged Mr. Thackeray. PTI

BJP using Central agencies to harass Oppn. leaders: Cong.

Senior Congress leader and former CM Harish Rawat on Saturday accused the BJP of using Central agencies such as the CBI, ED, I-T department and the NIA to harass the Opposition leaders and eliminate any challenge from them in the upcoming Lok Sabha election. Democracy and constitutional institutions are in danger under the BJP rule, he said. "The BJP first filled its own coffers in the name of electoral bonds and then seized the accounts of the Congress and donations it had received to paralyse the party. Now income tax notices are being issued." PTI

CPI (ML) Liberation names candidates for three LS seats

The CPI(ML) Liberation, an ally of the Mahagathbandhan in Bihar, on Saturday nominated two sitting MLAs and a former one for the Lok Sabha poll. Sudama Prasad, MLA from the Tarari Assembly seat, will contest the Arrah LS constituency, while its Paliganj legislator Sandeep Saurav has been fielded from the Nalanda constituency. Party's former MLA Rajaram Singh will be the Mahagathbandhan nominee from the Karakat LS seat. The party also announced the candidature of Vinod Singh from the Koderma Lok Sabha seat in Jharkhand. PTI

Will support NDA, says Paras; stops short of calling truce with Chirag

Press Trust of India
PATNA

Former Union Minister Pashupati Kumar Paras on Saturday made it clear that he will "continue to support the NDA" in the Lok Sabha polls, but fell short of calling a truce with nephew Chirag Paswan.



Pashupati Kumar Paras made a statement on the social media site X. FILE PHOTO

Mr. Paras, who has been avoiding the press since he returned to Bihar after giving up his ministerial berth, made a statement on the social media site X. Tagging Union Home Minister Amit Shah, BJP president J.P. Nadda and party's Bihar in-charge Vinod Tawde, Mr. Paras wrote in Hindi, "Our Rashtriya Lok Janshakti Party is a part of NDA and Prime Minister Narendra Modi is our leader".

'Modi's decision'

He said Mr. Modi's "decision is supreme for us. Our full support will be there to ensure that the NDA crosses the 400-mark and wins all 40 seats in Bihar".

Mr. Paras had quit the Union Cabinet after the NDA gave five seats to Mr. Chirag's Lok Janshakti Party (Ram Vilas), including the Hajipur seat, while leaving him high and dry.

His party had come into being in 2021 after he split the Lok Janshakti Party founded by his late brother and Mr. Chirag's father, Ram Vilas Paswan. Although Mr. Paras had then

succeeded in getting the support of all LJP MPs, except Mr. Chirag, they have now deserted him.

Speculation had been rife that Mr. Paras, who had been hopeful that the BJP would back him for a second consecutive term in Hajipur, might enter the fray as a rebel candidate and get support from the INDIA bloc. However, on Friday the RJD, the largest Opposition party in Bihar, made it clear that it would field its own candidate from the reserved seat, which late Paswan had represented several times and now his son is contesting, to drive home the point that Mr. Chirag, and not Mr. Paras, was the true heir to his father's legacy.

The BJP has been of the view that the nephew and the uncle should "come together", though Mr. Chirag has maintained that the ball was in the court of Mr. Paras, who was "the one to cause a split in the family and the party".

It's Pawar vs Pawar as NCP factions face off in Baramati

Ajit Pawar's group announces his wife Sunetra Pawar as ruling Mahayuti candidate, pitting her against Sharad Pawar's daughter Supriya Sule, the incumbent MP; MVA-allied NCP faction releases first list of 5 candidates for Lok Sabha poll

Shoumojit Banerjee
PUNE

The ruling Ajit Pawar-led Nationalist Congress Party on Saturday officially announced the name of his wife, Sunetra Pawar, as the ruling Mahayuti candidate for the high-stakes Baramati Lok Sabha seat in Pune district. While Ms. Sunetra Pawar's name was long expected, it was formally announced by NCP State chief Sunil Tatkare.

She will be pitted against Sharad Pawar's daughter Supriya Sule, the incumbent Baramati MP, whose candidature was also announced on Saturday in the first list of five Lok Sabha candidates put out by the opposition NCP (Sharadchandra Pawar) faction.

Poll on May 13

Elections in Baramati will be held in the fourth phase on May 13.

Besides Ms. Sule, the other seats and candidates announced by NCP (SP) State chief Jayant Patil are: Amol Kale (Wardha), Bhaskar Bhagare (Dindori), Dr. Amol Kolhe (Shirur) and Nilesh Lanke (Ahmednagar).

A three-term MP from Baramati, Ms. Sule's 'candidature' for the Pawar clan's stronghold was already declared by her father some time ago.

Both Ms. Sule and Ms. Sunetra Pawar have thrown themselves into the Baramati poll campaign, given that this Lok Sabha seat is arguably the most keenly contested of



All in the family: The contest between three-time MP Supriya Sule (left) and debutant Sunetra Pawar in Baramati will be keenly watched. FILE PHOTO

all 48 seats in Maharashtra.

A number of developments preceded the announcement of Ms. Sunetra Pawar's candidacy with the ruling Mahayuti (Eknath Shinde-led Shiv Sena, the BJP and Ajit Pawar's NCP) gaining success on resolving disagreements on not just Baramati but other key Lok Sabha seats as well.

Earlier on Saturday, Vijay Shivtare, the senior Eknath Shinde-camp leader and former two-term MLA from Purandar (part of Baramati), who had vowed to make things tough for his ally Ajit Pawar by proposing to enter the Baramati fray as a third challenger, publicly announced he would not be contesting the seat.

Having publicly called for the overthrow of the Pa-

Vijay Shivtare, senior Eknath Shinde-camp leader and former two-term MLA from Purandar (part of Baramati), publicly announced he would not be contesting the seat

war clan in Baramati some days ago, Mr. Shivtare was finally pacified after a night meeting with CM Shinde, Mr. Ajit Pawar and Deputy CM Devendra Fadnis who prevailed on him to obey 'coalition dharma'.

Speaking to reporters on Saturday, Mr. Shivtare pledged to campaign in full strength for Mr. Ajit Pawar's candidate while assuring that over 1.5 lakh votes will now be given to the 'clock' symbol (of the

NCP) from the Purandar Assembly segment.

In another key move, the ruling NCP faction announced the candidature of Rashtriya Samaj Paksha (RSP) chief Mahadev Jankar for the Parbhani Lok Sabha seat.

Mr. Jankar, a Dhargar (shepherd) community leader who wields considerable influence in Baramati, had given Ms. Sule a stiff fight during the 2014 Lok Sabha contest.

However, despite being a BJP ally, Mr. Jankar was disgruntled with the ruling Mahayuti dispensation of late.

There was much speculation on whether he would switch sides to the Sharad Pawar faction after he had offered to field him from the Madha Lok Sabha seat in Solapur.

Chirag Paswan names candidates for five Lok Sabha seats in Bihar

Press Trust of India
PATNA

The Lok Janshakti Party (Ram Vilas), headed by Chirag Paswan, on Saturday announced candidates for all the five Lok Sabha seats in Bihar it will be contesting as an NDA ally.

While his brother-in-law Arun Bharti has already filed nomination papers from Jamui, Mr. Chirag, who has represented the seat twice in a row, will try

his luck from Hajipur, his late father Ram Vilas Paswan's pocket borough.

For the remaining three seats of Samastipur, Khagaria and Vaishali, the party has named Shambhavi Choudhary, Rajesh Verma and sitting MP Veena Devi, respectively, according to a statement issued by the LJP (Ram Vilas).

Ms. Choudhary, who will be making her debut, is the daughter of Ashok Choudhary, a senior JD(U)

leader and an influential Minister in the Nitish Kumar government. The seat, reserved for Dalits, was held by Prince Raj, Mr. Chirag's cousin.

Mr. Verma has been preferred over sitting MP Chaudhary Mehboob Ali Kaiser.

Ms. Devi, the first among LJP rebels to have reverted to the Chirag camp, is an upper caste Rajput, married to Dinesh Kumar Singh, a JD(U) MLC.

BJP replaces Sunny Deol with three-time MLA from Gurdaspur

The Hindu Bureau
CHANDIGARH

Days after the BJP said it would contest the Lok Sabha election in Punjab alone, the party on Saturday announced names for six of the 13 seats in the State.

The BJP has dropped Sunny Deol, its sitting MP from Gurdaspur, and has fielded Dinesh Singh Babu, a three-time MLA and former Deputy Speaker of the Assembly, instead. Pre-

neet Kaur, former Congress leader and MP, will contest from Patiala.

Taranjit Singh Sandhu, who was the Ambassador of India to the United States, will contest from Amritsar. Former Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) leader and Lok Sabha MP Sushil Kumar Rinku, who recently joined the BJP, has been fielded from Jalandhar. In 2023, Mr. Rinku joined AAP after leaving the Congress ahead of the Jalandhar par-

liamentary byelection that he won.

Ravneet Singh Bittu, former Congress leader and Lok Sabha MP from Ludhiana who on March 27 joined the BJP, is the party's Ludhiana candidate.

Hans Raj Hans, BJP MP from North West Delhi, has been shifted to Punjab where he will contest from the Faridkot (SC) constituency. Elections for Punjab's 13 Lok Sabha seats will be held on June 1.

Much ado about cash: how T.N. flying squads go about their job

R. Sivaraman

'Cash for votes' has of late come to define, or rather defame, Tamil Nadu politics. Money seems to be one of the key reasons driving up voting. The Election Commission of India (ECI) has had a tough time preventing cash distribution for votes.

It also has to depend on State government officials to handle this problem. Anyone carrying more than ₹50,000 in cash or gold or other valuables in bulk, with or without substantiating documents, will have to face scrutiny by flying squads and static surveillance teams (SSTs).

Flying squads are meant to swiftly reach the spot on receipt of a complaint, while the static surveillance team will be positioned in a particular place marked sensitive. With nearly 20 days to go for

polling, these teams have already seized nearly ₹100 crore in cash and valuables.

Every Assembly constituency will have at least two or three flying squads and static surveillance teams, each comprising a senior revenue officer in the rank of tahsildar or deputy tahsildar or assistant engineer or junior engineer of a municipal corporation, one sub-inspector or special sub-inspector, two constables, a videographer, and a car driver. They are on duty round the clock. These teams attend to complaints of threat and intimidation and prevent the movement of anti-social elements, liquor, arms and ammunition, and large sums of cash meant for bribing voters.

A control room has been opened in every district. Once a complaint is



A flying squad inspecting a vehicle in Chepauk in Chennai.

B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM

filed, the control room relays the information to a flying squad, which reaches the spot and reports to the assistant returning officer within 50 minutes. Flying squads and static surveillance teams are required to enter the details of seizures in a mobile application, called Election Seizure Management System, which provides real-time information.

However, the functioning of these teams often comes under scrutiny. The Opposition parties allege that only their representatives and members of the public are affected and those of the ruling party are let off.

Of late, traders and farmers are feeling the heat as any amount above ₹50,000, being carried without proof, is seized. S.

Vijayan, 33, a farmer from Omalur, Salem, was stopped at the toll gate at Pallikonda near Vellore. A flying squad seized ₹5.89 lakh that he had in his possession for buying cows. "Where do I go now as the flying squad insists on receipt? How can they expect a person like me to carry documents for the money?"

Tourists are also at the receiving end. Five members of a family from Kolkata travelling to Udhagamandalam in a taxi were stranded after ₹60,000 was seized from their possession. The flying squad officers refused to accept the bank statement. In another incident, ₹69,000 was seized from a couple from Punjab during a vehicle check at Coonoor. But top officials intervened and returned the money.

A.M. Vikramaraja, president of Tamil Nadu Vanigar

Sangankalin Peramaippu, says, "Traders, farmers, vegetable vendors, and fish vendors, who carry cash for their daily trade, are under scrutiny. It seems they are not focusing on the money that goes to the candidates or from them to voters."

"The functionaries of political parties or candidates are rarely intercepted. Some officers are unwilling to take risks. Mostly, they check the dashboard or boot of a car. Will any politician keep cash or valuables in the dashboard or boot," asks an officer.

Seizure of ₹10 lakh and above should be intimated to the nodal officer of the Income Tax Department. Instead, the flying squads or the static surveillance teams themselves send the cash to the treasury without understanding the rules, the officer says.

TMC dares BJP to launch scheme like 'Lakshmir Bhandar'

Shiv Sahay Singh
KOLKATA

Trinamool Congress general secretary Abhishek Banerjee on Saturday said the entitlements in the State's 'Lakshmir Bhandar' scheme will be doubled from April 2024 and dared the Bharatiya Janata Party to implement the social welfare scheme in States ruled by the party.

In this year's budget, the assistance was increased to ₹1,000 from ₹500 for the general category, and to ₹1,200 from ₹1,000 for the SC/ST category. The State government had spent ₹25,000 crore for the scheme to empower women, Mr. Banerjee said.

He dared the BJP to offer cooking gas cylinders free of cost. "[If the] government ... promises cooking gas cylinders free of cost for the next five years, I will take back candidates from the 42 constituencies..." he said while addressing a gathering at Mathurapur in South 24 Parganas district.

He also raised the issue of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in a conversation with a BJP Lok Sabha candidate, saying that ₹3,000 crore cash confiscated during ED raids would be distributed among the people. "If ₹3,000 crore were to be divided among 140 crore Indians, every person would get ₹21. The BJP is asking for people's votes in exchange for only ₹21."

Mr. Banerjee also took a swipe at the investigation agencies. "... ED-CBI should enter the poll fray. BJP has not been able to find a candidate for Diamond Harbour."

ED takes statement of Delhi Minister Kailash Gahlot in excise policy case

Gahlot was among those who drafted policy: AAP leader Atishi says the questioning is part of attempt by BJP to break AAP as it could not defeat the party the democratic way; BJP expresses shock at the alleged involvement of a 'silent Minister'

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) on Saturday recorded the statement of Delhi Minister Kailash Gahlot in connection with the excise policy case, in which the agency arrested Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal.

Mr. Gahlot was one of the Ministers who had drafted the excise policy. He reached the ED headquarters around 11.45 a.m. and was questioned for about five hours.

After recording his statement, Mr. Gahlot told presspersons that he answered whatever questions he was asked and that there was no cross-questioning. "I have never been part of the Goa election campaign and I am unaware of what happened," he said.

He confirmed that AAP leader and accused in the case, Vijay Nair, lived in the bungalow allotted to him at Civil Lines. "The government bungalow was allotted to me but I have always stayed in my private resi-



Detailed inquiry: Delhi Minister Kailash Gahlot speaks to the media after appearing before the ED for questioning in connection with the excise policy case, in New Delhi on Saturday. ANI

dence in Vasant Kunj because my wife and kids didn't want to move from there," he said, refuting allegations of corruption in the matter.

The ED's chargesheet mentioned that some meetings related to the excise policy happened at Mr. Gahlot's residence.

Reacting to the questioning of Mr. Gahlot, senior AAP leader Atishi said

it was part of a continued attempt by the BJP to break the party as it could not defeat the AAP the democratic way. "Today it was Mr. Gahlot, tomorrow it will be me or Saurabh Bharadwaj or other elected AAP representatives. It is all an effort to break the party by using the probe agencies to make false cases," she said.

The BJP said that Mr. Gahlot was a comparative-

ly silent Minister in the AAP government and that it was beyond shocking that his role was being probed. "The people of Delhi now believe that all of AAP's MLAs are inundated in corruption," said Delhi BJP president Virendra Sachedva.

The ED had earlier summoned the AAP's Goa unit chief Amit Palekar and some of his party col-

leagues from the State for questioning at its Panjim office, after it arrested Mr. Kejriwal on March 21.

On the agency's request, a special court on Thursday extended Mr. Kejriwal's remand till April 1. He was the fourth AAP leader arrested in the excise policy case, the others being former Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia, Rajya Sabha Member Sanjay Singh and the party's former communications in-charge, Mr. Nair.

The ED had also arrested Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) legislator K. Kavitha on March 15. Subsequently, it alleged that she and a few others had conspired with the top AAP leaders, including Mr. Kejriwal and Mr. Sisodia, to get favours in the formulation and implementation of the liquor policy. The agency accused her of being involved in paying ₹100 crore in advance to the AAP leaders as illegal gratification.

The agency has so far arrested 16 accused persons and attached properties worth ₹128.79 crore in the excise policy case.

ED must probe 'direct nexus' between BJP and 'South lobby', says AAP

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) on Saturday said it has found "another link" between the witnesses in the alleged Delhi excise scam and the BJP, and has demanded that the Enforcement Directorate (ED), which is investigating the case, also probe the links between the "South lobby" and the ruling party if it claims to be an "independent body".

According to Delhi Minister Saurabh Bharadwaj, Magunta Srinivasulu Reddy — the father of Raghava Magunta Reddy, who was arrested by the ED in connection with the case — was fielded by the BJP's ally, the Telugu Desam Party (TDP), in the upcoming Lok Sabha election, thus proving a "direct nexus" between the BJP and the "South lobby".

"Magunta Reddy said in two statements that there was no discussion between him and Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal regarding the excise policy, but after his son's arrest, he succumbed and gave a third statement against the Chief Minister.



Delhi Ministers and AAP leaders Atishi and Saurabh Bharadwaj during a press conference, in New Delhi on Saturday. PTI

His son Raghava Magunta also did not mention the Chief Minister's name in six statements, but issued a seventh statement against him, and after being turned into a government witness, managed to secure bail," Mr. Bharadwaj said.

"The ED should also investigate Magunta Reddy and Raghava Magunta's direct association with the BJP. They will find details of their mutual phone calls dating back years. Even a small probe will separate fact from fiction," the Minister said.

Approver and donor
Delhi Minister Atishi said that after the "exposition"

of how Sarath Reddy, the director of Aurobindo Pharma, became an approver in the case and then donated money in the form of electoral bonds to the BJP, this was another "big revelation".

"I challenge the ED, if it is an independent agency, to bring into record this connection and probe it," Ms. Atishi said, alleging that the BJP had ties with the liquor traders of the "South lobby".

"The ED must present the relationship of the BJP's relationship with the South's liquor businessmen in front of the court by making BJP an accused in the chargesheet," she added.

INDIA rally is to save democracy, says Congress

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The "maha rally" being organised by the INDIA bloc at the capital's Ramlila Maidan on Sunday is not aimed at protecting one person, the Congress said on Saturday, emphasising that the event was focussed on saving the Constitution and democracy.

Posters sporting the slogan "Main bhi Kejriwal (I am also Kejriwal)" can be seen at Ramlila Maidan, as part of a campaign being run by the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) since the arrest of its national convener and Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal.

However, Congress general secretary Jairam Ramesh said that the "strong message" being sent out from the rally to PM Narendra Modi's Lok Kalyan Marg residence was that the BJP-led government's "time is up".

Congress targets Centre, BJP over CBI closure report in aviation corruption case

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Targeting the Narendra Modi-led government and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) over the Central Bureau of Investigation's closure report in a 2017 corruption case involving Air India during former Civil Aviation Minister Praful Patel's tenure, the Congress on Saturday held a press conference with a washing machine and detergent powder to underscore how "stains" against politicians are "washed away" the moment they join the BJP or become a part of its alliance.

Eight months ago, Mr. Patel joined the Ait Pawar-led Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) that is part of the BJP-led coalition in Maharashtra.

Addressing a press conference, Congress spokes-



Pawan Khera holds a T-shirt next to a washing machine during a press conference in New Delhi on Saturday. SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

person Pawan Khera said the ruling party's "fully automatic washing machine" works on the principle — "join BJP, case closed".

Giving a "live demo", the Congress leader put a heavily stained T-shirt into the machine and after switching it on, a sparkling white T-shirt was brought out.

Mr. Khera claimed that the "BJP washing machine costs over ₹8,500 crore" —

the money that the ruling party got through electoral bonds — and it is effective in cleaning all types of "stains of corruption" when used with "Modi washing powder".

The Congress claimed that there are, at least, 21 important leaders who have been whitewashed "clean" after the saffron party made allegations of corruption and illegality against them.

This poll is about preserving India's secular democracy, says Kerala CM

G. Anand
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan has underscored that the upcoming Lok Sabha election is a referendum on "preserving India's secular democracy" and little else.

In an e-mail interview with *The Hindu* on Friday, Mr. Vijayan articulated the pivotal nature of the 2024 Lok Sabha election ahead of the launch of his 24-day tour through Kerala's 20 Lok Sabha constituencies on Saturday.

Mr. Vijayan said it was reductive to depict the Left Democratic Front's (LDF) staunch resistance to the implementation of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act as a "question about minority or majority". Instead, the "question is about secularism", he added.

The CPI(M) veteran pointed out that a broad and diverse coalition of be-



Pinarayi Vijayan

lievers and non-believers won India's freedom and founded a secular state. He said the Constitution did not envisage religion as a criterion for citizenship.

'Defections a worry'

Mr. Vijayan said the Congress's disintegration was not in the interest of the CPI(M)-led LDF. However, pursuing a soft Hindutva line would not keep the more extreme BJP from the door. Only an uncompromising position against communal politics could defeat the BJP, he said.

Mr. Vijayan said defec-

tions from secular and democratic parties empowering the right wing, which was disconcerting.

Mr. Vijayan said Congress MP Rahul Gandhi's candidature for Wayanad would have no effect on Kerala in 2024. The people of Wayanad would evaluate him for his work as an MP, which was hardly any. He said Mr. Gandhi's constituents were sceptical about the latter's "presence and performance" in the Lok Sabha on issues such as human-wildlife conflict, CAA, and Ayodhya.

"If the Congress is keen on fighting the BJP, it would contest directly against BJP candidates. What message are you giving to the Indian public if even your topmost leaders are reluctant to fight the BJP?" Mr. Vijayan asked.

He said the Congress, as the biggest party in the Opposition, seemed unable to bring secular and regional

forces on the same platform.

BJP's actions instil fear
Mr. Vijayan rejected the BJP's accusation that the LDF had sown seeds of fear in the minority community to reap electoral dividends. "It is the BJP-RSS combine's politics of violence and hatred, and policies of discrimination and profiling, such as the CAA, which are instilling fear in various sections of the Indian society," he said.

Mr. Vijayan said the Congress-BJP recriminatory campaign, often bordering on the personal, would have no traction among voters. "They are barking up the wrong tree," he said. 'Nava Kerala Sadas', the government's outreach programme, had stirred people to question the Congress-led United Democratic Front's jarring silence about the Union government's discrimination against Kerala, he said.

Court acquits three accused in madrasa teacher murder case

The Hindu Bureau
KASARAGOD

The District Principal Sessions Court here acquitted three accused in a case involving the murder of Mohammed Riyas Maulavi, 27, a teacher at Pazhaya Choori Madrasa, due to lack of evidence.

Ajesh alias Appu, 29, Nithin Kumar, 28, and Akhilesh alias Akhil, 34, all hailing from Kasaragod in Kerala, were absolved of all charges by the court.

The verdict was delivered after three adjournments. The trial, which began in 2019, faced delay due to the pandemic and transfer of judges.

The court identified eight reasons for the acquittal, emphasising the lack of evidence linking the

accused to the crime.

Among the reasons cited, the court noted the prosecution's inability to prove allegations of the accused having Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh affiliations. Additionally, the court found insufficient evidence to support claims that hatred against the Muslim community motivated the murder.

Riyas was murdered at his residence in the mosque on March 20, 2017.

"In this case, the courts did not grant bail to the accused for the past seven years. The accused were not connected with Riyas. Even the police chargesheet clearly mentions that the crime was an attempt to create communal unrest in the region," Riyas' relatives told reporters.

Many countries yet to fully implement steps to prevent misuse of virtual assets, says FATF

Devesh K. Pandey
NEW DELHI

The Financial Action Task Force (FATF), the global money laundering and terrorist financing watchdog, has found that many countries are yet to fully implement its requirements aimed at preventing misuse of virtual assets and virtual asset service providers (VASPs).

Virtual assets (crypto assets) refer to "any digital representation of value that can be digitally traded, transferred or used for payment". The FATF plenary had in February 2023 agreed on a road map to strengthen the implementation of its standards on virtual assets and VASPs. Recently, it carried out a survey on the current levels of implementation

and has now published a paper on the "Recommendation 15 by FATF Members and Jurisdictions with Materially Important VASP Activity".

"Following a 12-month process to collect and evaluate information, the FATF is publishing a table which sets out the status of implementation of Recommendation 15 by FATF members and other jurisdictions with the most materially important VASP activity. This table is based on the work of the FATF's Virtual Assets Contact Group members as well as the extensive input by the FATF Global Network of FATF members and FATF-Style regional bodies," it has said.

The FATF also had consultations with representatives of the private sector,

Virtual assets refer to 'any digital representation of value that can be used for payment'

besides the virtual assets and VASP community.

The study, which involves 58 FATF and non-FATF jurisdictions, found that India has already conducted a risk assessment covering virtual assets and VASPs.

Although it has explicitly prohibited the use of virtual assets and VASPs, it is compliant on issues such as enactment of legislation/regulation requiring VASPs to be registered or licensed and application of Anti-money Laundering/Counter-Terrorism Financing measures.

India, a member country, has conducted a supervisory inspection or included VASPs in its current inspection plan; has taken enforcement action or other supervisory action against VASPs; and has passed or enacted the travel rule for VASPs. The FATF is yet to evaluate and rate India's performance with respect to the revised standards on virtual assets and VASPs.

The countries which have explicitly prohibited the use of virtual assets and VASPs are China, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, while it is in progress in Seychelles and Indonesia.

"The table includes all FATF members plus 20 jurisdictions with materially important VASP activity. These jurisdictions were identified based on two cri-

teria: trading volume and user base, based on open-source datasets from January to December 2022 and cross-checked against data from blockchain analytics companies," said the FATF.

It added: "It is important to note that large-scale trend data related to virtual assets is difficult to obtain, incomplete, and may change rapidly. This table provides a snapshot in time of jurisdictions that are identified as having materially important VASP activities as well as jurisdictions that are FATF members."

Listing the reasons for issuing the table, the FATF said as virtual assets were inherently international and borderless, any failure to regulate VASPs in one jurisdiction could have serious global implications.

Delhi Bar Council leaders flay criminal laws

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Expressing serious concerns over the implementation of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, and Bharatiya Sakshya Adhinyam, the vice-chairman, secretary, and two members of the Bar Council of Delhi (BCD), in a letter to Home Minister Amit Shah, have urged him not to implement them.

In the letter, they objected to the extension of the police remand period from 15 days to 60-90 days in the new laws, among others.

They also maintained that the police cannot be given such free hand, since it may lead to a Police Raj rather than a rule of law as per the Constitution.

Rajnath Singh to head BJP's manifesto committee

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) president J.P. Nadda on Saturday notified the setting up of the party's manifesto committee for the Lok Sabha election. The committee will be headed by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh.

Union Ministers Nirmala Sitharaman and Piyush Goyal will be the conveners of the committee. The Chief Ministers of four States – Bhupendra Patel of Gujarat, Himanta Biswa Sarma of Assam, Mohan Yadav of Madhya Pradesh, and Vishnu Deo Sai of Chhattisgarh – are members of the 27-member committee.

So are senior leaders including Shivraj Singh Chouhan and Vasundhara Raje.

Suggestions from public
The BJP had in January set off vehicles across the country to collect suggestions from the public on what the party should include in its election manifesto.

In 2019, the BJP had promised the setting up of a mission for tap water connections in all households, which resulted in the 'shar ghar jal' (water to every house), once voted back to power.

In Bengal, Left seeks to iron out differences between allies

Differences have emerged over the Coochbehar and Purulia seats, with both the Congress and All India Forward Bloc looking to contest them; it also has the challenge of accommodating ISF

Shiv Sahay Singh
KOLKATA

Left Front chairperson Biman Basu on Saturday joined senior Congress leader and Kolkata Uttar Lok Sabha candidate Pradip Bhattacharya as the Congress nominee began his election campaign from Gandhi Bhavan in the Belegata area of West Bengal.

Mr. Basu said the Left Front and the Congress are united as a third alternative against the Trinamool Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

"We want similar campaigns for all the constituencies. Those against the BJP and the Trinamool should come together," the Communist Party of India (Marxist) leader said.

The CPI(M)-led Left Front has announced candidates for 23 Lok Sabha constituencies in West Bengal and the Congress has fielded candidates for seven. For 12 of the 42 Lok Sabha seats in West Bengal, neither of the two has announced any candidate.

Differences have emerged over the Coochbehar and Purulia seats. The Congress and the All India Forward Bloc (AIFB) – a constituent of the Left



Standing together: Left Front chairperson Biman Basu campaigning for Congress candidate Pradip Bhattacharya in North Kolkata on Saturday. DEBASISH BHADURI

Front – have both fielded candidates for the Coochbehar seat. In Purulia, the Congress has announced its candidate and the AIFB too wants to join the poll fray.

"We will iron out our differences. The seven-phase election gives us some time to do so. We want to break the politics of binary of the Trinamool Congress and BJP," Mr. Basu said.

The challenge is not only to accommodate the Congress and the Left Front constituents but also

the Indian Secular Front (ISF). The ISF has announced candidates for eight seats. The West Bengal Congress leadership says it has nothing to do with the ISF, a party led by Furfura Sharif religious leader Abbas Siddique and his brother and Bhangar MLA Naushad Siddique.

Names of candidates

The Congress has announced candidates for seats such as Baharampur, where State Congress president Adhir Ranjan

Chowdhury is contesting, Purulia (Nepal Mahato) and Kolkata Uttar.

For the Left Front, CPI (M) State secretary Mohammed Salim is contesting from Murshidabad, Sujjan Chakraborty from Dum Dum, Srijan Bhattacharya from Jadavpur, Dipsita Dhar from Serampore and Sayan Banerjee from Tamaluk. ISF MLA Nausad Siddique is keen to contest from Diamond Harbour against Trinamool Congress leader Abhishek Banerjee.

BJP names candidates for 11 more Lok Sabha seats

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI

The BJP on Saturday named its candidates for 11 more Lok Sabha seats, fielding a number of leaders who joined it from different parties recently such as Bhartruhari Mahab, Ravneet Singh Bittu, Sushil Kumar Rinku and Premeet Kaur.

All these leaders have been fielded from the seats they represent in the outgoing Lok Sabha, while former Indian Ambassador to the U.S., Taranjit Singh Sandhu, will be making his poll debut from Amritsar.

Hans Raj Hans, who had won from North West Delhi in 2019 on BJP ticket, will contest the Faridkot seat, which is reserved for members of the Scheduled Castes.

Mr. Mahab, who quit the BJD recently, will contest from Cuttack, Mr. Bittu from Ludhiana, Ms. Kaur from Patiala, and Mr. Rinku from Jalandhar, a seat reserved for SCs.

Both Mr. Bittu, the grandson of former Punjab Chief Minister Beant Singh, and Ms. Kaur, the wife of former Punjab CM Amarinder Singh, were in the Congress before joining the BJP, while Mr. Rinku was in the Aam Aadmi Party.

The BJP has announced candidates for 411 seats.

IN BRIEF



3 MLAs stage stir in Himachal, seek acceptance of resignation

Three Independent leaders from Himachal Pradesh, who recently resigned as MLAs and later joined the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), staged a sit-in protest in Shimla on Saturday. The three MLAs – Ashish Sharma, Hoshiyar Singh, and K.L. Thakur – picketed the State Assembly, protesting the non-acceptance of their resignations by Speaker Kuldeep Singh Pathania. Demanding that the Speaker accept their resignations immediately, they said that they had quit voluntarily, and were not under any pressure. They had voted in favour of the BJP candidate in the Rajya Sabha election, tendered their resignations on March 22 and joined the BJP a day later.

Sharad's NCP files complaint with EC against Sena, BJP

The Sharad Pawar camp on Saturday said it has filed a complaint with the Election Commission against the BJP and the Shiv Sena for violating the Representation of the People Act and poll code by publishing the names of individuals from other parties as their star campaigners. The NCP (Sharadchandra Pawar) is part of the opposition Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) in Maharashtra. It claimed Shinde's Sena, published the names of various people holding high public office such as the Prime Minister, Union Ministers, Chief Minister. "This is not only a violation of the Representation of People Act, but of the MCC as the representatives of the party in power in Centre or State are categorically barred from using their official positions for the purpose of election campaign," it said. PTI

BJP shapes electoral narrative around Article 370 in J&K

Peerzada Ashiq
JAMMU/SRINAGAR

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is shaping its poll narrative around the positive impacts of abrogation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir, as its senior leader Jugal Kishore Sharma filed the nomination papers for the Jammu constituency on Saturday.

Union Minister Anurag Thakur accompanied Mr. Sharma, who is seeking a third term in Parliament, to the Deputy Commissioner's office. Later, Mr. Thakur led a roadshow in the city and set the party's tone for the upcoming election.

"J&K has a special place in the heart of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. By abrogating articles 370 and 35A, he has ended stone pelting and terrorism in the State. Terrorism-related incidents have come down by 75%, killings of locals have gone down by 81% and killing of security forces has also decreased by 50%. This is all possible because of a strong govern-

Senior leader Jugal Kishore Sharma filed nomination papers for the Jammu Lok Sabha constituency on Saturday

ment at the Centre," the Union Minister said.

Highlighting the post-August 5, 2019 development projects in Jammu and Kashmir like "IIT, IIM, 11 medical colleges, Vande Bharat train, four lane highways and six lane expressway", Mr. Thakur said the Union Territory has treaded a developmental path helmed by the Modi government.

Tarun Chugh, another senior BJP leader, underlined that the movie, Article 370, shows how J&K was turned into a terror industry via Article 370. "However, under PM Modi's leadership, Article 370 and Article 35(A) were revoked and J&K has been brought to the path of development, and it has now been turned into a tourism capital," Mr. Chugh said.

BJP wins unopposed 10 of 60 seats in Arunachal Pradesh Assembly election

The Hindu Bureau
GUWAHATI

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has won 10 seats without a contest in the 60-member Arunachal Pradesh Assembly.

The party, however, fell short of the Congress record of 11 seats won unopposed in 2014.

While no Opposition parties fielded candidates in five constituencies, rivals of the BJP withdrew their nominations in five more by Saturday, the last day of withdrawal of candidature.

Among those who won uncontested were State Chief Minister Pema Khandu from Mukto and Deputy Chief Minister Chowna Mein from Chowkham.

The other winners are Ratu Techi from Sagalee, Jikke Tako, Tali; Nyato Dukam, Taliha; Mutchu Mithi, Roing; Hage Appa, Ziro-Hapoli; Techi Kaso, Itanagar; Dongru Siongju, Bomdila; and Dasanglu Pul, Hayuliang.



Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister Pema Khandu being congratulated by BJP leader Ashok Singhal after he was elected unopposed. PTI

"...It's all because of the people's love and trust in #ModiKiGuarantee and our dedication in ensuring all-round development of the State," Mr. Khandu wrote on social media platform X (formerly Twitter).

'Confident of a win'

Later, he told presspersons that the party was confident of bagging the remaining 50 Assembly seats and the two Lok Sabha seats in the State.

"We are confident that we will win the Arunachal East and Arunachal West

Lok Sabha seats with a thumping majority because of the amount of love that we are getting from the people," the Chief Minister said, attributing the support for the BJP to the "unprecedented" development in Arunachal Pradesh under 10 years of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

He also said the State has been used to uncontested electoral victories. Four candidates had won unopposed in 1999, one in 2004, three in 2009, 11 in 2014, and three in 2019.

Assam CM cites 'reign of peace', bats for Muslim votes

Rahul Karmakar
UDALGURI (ASSAM)

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said that the BJP is banking on the "equal treatment" of all communities and the "unprecedented" reign of peace to get Muslim votes in the Lok Sabha election.

Elections to the 14 Lok Sabha constituencies in Assam are scheduled in three phases. "We have not discriminated against Muslims. Developmental projects and beneficiary schemes have been distributed equally to all communities, including Muslims, who I do not think want more than what they have received," Mr. Sarma told presspersons after a meeting of the NDA constituents in Udalguri.

"For the first time, the minorities are getting a taste of good governance and equal treatment in the true spirit of 'sabka saath, sabka vikas, sabka vishwas and sabka prayas'. And unlike the communal violence in the past, they are living in peace," he said.

Cong. leader's daughter-in-law Archana Patil joins the BJP

Archana Patil, the daughter-in-law of former Union Home Minister and senior Congress leader Shivraj Patil, joined the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) on Saturday. The induction took place in the presence of Maharashtra's Deputy Chief Minister Devendra Fadnis, BJP's State unit president Chandrashekar Bawankule, and other party leaders, in Mumbai. Ms. Patil's addition will strengthen the BJP's presence in Maharashtra ahead of the Lok Sabha election, Mr. Fadnis said. "It is a matter of pleasure for us that someone from the family of Shivraj Patil, who was a senior leader of Congress is joining our party," he told presspersons on Friday. "I have been working at the grass roots level in Latur for many years now. After joining politics, I will devote myself with the same amount of dedication to the party (the BJP)," she said.

National Conference, Lone's JKPC engage in war of words

The National Conference (NC) and the J&K Peoples Conference (JKPC), are engaged in a war of words ahead of the Lok Sabha elections in the Kashmir Valley. "One of the most heavily guarded VIPs in India happens to be the ex-Chief Minister of J&K, Mr. Omar Abdullah. And Mr. Abdullah, feeling fully secure behind the impenetrable security grid, has absolutely no qualms in scripting a discourse which has the greatest probability to end in violence and consume the lives of unguarded innocents," JKPC chairman Sajad Lone said. His reaction comes in the wake of recent speeches made by Mr. Abdullah, where he made oblique references to the JKPC being "a crony of the BJP".

Cong. seeks to downplay Pappu Yadav's Purnea claim

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

A screening panel to shortlist potential Congress candidates for Bihar for the Lok Sabha election met on Saturday but it did not discuss the contentious Purnea seat.

"We are not bothered who is saying what as we are focused on doing our best in the nine seats that has been allotted to us," said a senior Congress leader, trying to downplay the threat of five-term MP Rajesh Ranjan, alias Pappu Yadav, standing as rebel candidate from the Purnea seat.

"Look at Nikhil babu

[former IPS officer Nikhil Kumar]. He can't contest from Aurangabad but he hasn't made any public statement. We won't be encouraging any friendly fight at Purnea," the leader added.

The Purnea seat has not only gone to the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) that is leading the mahagatbandhan or grand alliance in Bihar but the party has already declared Bima Bharati as the official candidate.

But Mr. Yadav, who merged his Jan Adhikar Party with the Congress on March 20, has staked claim to the seat. He had represented it thrice earlier and was hoping to contest on



Pappu Yadav

Congress ticket.

But a few leaders questioned his induction, given his image of being a "baahubali".

"In the early 2000s when Lalu Prasad was the Chief Minister, people feared Pappu Yadav's gang.

Of course, now he has tried hard to acquire a Robinhood-like image in Kosi-Seemanchal," senior leader of Bihar Congress Kishore Kumar Jha said.

The party, the source said, was banking on the calculation that Mr. Pappu Yadav's induction would have strengthened it in Seemanchal region in north-eastern Bihar that has important Lok Sabha seats like Madhepura, Supaul, Katihar and Kisanganj.

Mr. Pappu Yadav, whose wife Ranjeet Ranjan, who is a senior Congress leader and a Rajya Sabha MP, had credited Priyanka Gandhi Vadra with his induction.

"When Priyanka Gandhi called me to come and join the Congress, I did not think twice," Mr. Pappu Yadav said while speaking to presspersons in Purnea on Friday.

However, the Congress did not factor the frosty relationship between Lalu Prasad's family and Mr. Pappu, who had been expelled from the RJD earlier.

Mr. Pappu Yadav, who detests being called a baahubali now, still battles the tag of being an outsider by many Congress veterans.

Thirumavalavan, Ravikumar get 'pot' symbol; 'matchbox' for MDMK

C. Jaisankar
TIRUCHI

While VCK's Thol. Thirumavalavan and D. Ravikumar, contesting in the Chidambaram and Villupuram Lok Sabha constituencies respectively, were allotted the party's 'pot' symbol, the MDMK got the 'matchbox' symbol for the Tiruchi Lok Sabha constituency, where the party's principal secretary Durai Vaiko is contesting.

The symbols were allotted by the respective district election officers on Saturday after the deadline

for withdrawal of nominations ended at 3 p.m.

In Chidambaram, 14 candidates were left in the fray after scrutiny of nominations on Thursday. Ariyalur Collector J. Annie Mary Swarna, who was also the Returning Officer of the Chidambaram constituency, took up the process of allotting symbols to candidates.

Since no other candidate had sought the 'pot' symbol, she allotted it to Mr. Thirumavalavan.

The VCK chief later told presspersons that the EC had failed to accept the ge-

nuine and rightful demand of the VCK for the symbol, and was acting as an agent of the Sangh Parivar.

Durai Vaiko's options

Mr. Durai Vaiko was denied the traditional 'top' symbol of the MDMK. He has been given the 'matchbox' symbol, which was one of the options sought by the party.

Collector-cum-Returning Officer M. Pradeep Kumar announced the decision. Mr. Durai Vaiko said he was happy over being allotted the 'matchbox' symbol.

IN BRIEF



Nine pirates being brought to India to face legal action: Navy

A day after rescuing a hijacked Iranian fishing vessel and its 23-member Pakistani crew under an anti-piracy operation at sea, the Indian Navy on Saturday said the nine surrendered pirates are being brought to India for further legal action. Legal action will be initiated under the Maritime Anti-Piracy Act, 2022. The Indian Navy's specialist teams have completed sanitisation and seaworthiness checks of fishing vessel *Al-Kambar* (in picture), according to the Navy's spokesperson. "The crew, comprising 23 Pakistani nationals, were given a thorough medical check-up prior to clearing the boat to continue with her fishing activities," it said. PTI

PAN fraud: M.P. student gets I-T notice of over ₹40 crore

A university student in Gwalior in Madhya Pradesh approached the police after he got an Income Tax notice over transactions of more than ₹40 crore done by a company created fraudulently using his PAN details, an official said on Saturday. The company formed by unidentified person/s using the details of Jiwaji University student Pramod Dandotiya has also not paid GST, the official said. "As per Mr. Dandotiya's complaint, a company was being operated by misusing his PAN details and it had carried out transactions of more than ₹40 crore. The complainant found this out after he got an IT notice," Additional SP Shiyaz K.M. said. PTI

Alchemist group case: ED attaches assets worth ₹29 cr.

The ED has provisionally attached properties estimated to be ₹29.45 crore of the Alchemist group companies in a money laundering case. The group was headed by Kanwar Deep Singh, a former Rajya Sabha member of the Trinamool Congress, it said on Saturday. Earlier, it had attached ₹10.29 crore belonging to the Trinamool in the same case. "The probe also revealed that an amount of ₹10.29 crore was paid by Alchemist Airways Private Limited to various aviation/helicopter companies for the aviation services availed by All India Trinamool Congress (AITC)...during the campaigning for 2014 Lok Sabha elections," it had said.

Land grabbing case: ED questions Shahjahan in jail

The Enforcement Directorate on Saturday questioned suspended Trinamool Congress leader Sheikh Shahjahan in the Basirhat Correctional Home in connection with cases involving land grabbing in Sandeshkhali. The ED officers interrogated him inside the jail for over four hours after getting permission from Basirhat court in West Bengal. Mr. Shahjahan was arrested on February 29 after 55 days on the run following violent protests led by women, alleging sexual atrocities and land grab. He went missing after a mob attacked an Enforcement Directorate (ED) team that went to search his house in the alleged ration scam on January 5. PTI

SUDOKU

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DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★★★★

Solution to yesterday's Sudoku

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

Police dismiss info on police protection to V.K. Pandian

The Hindu Bureau
BHUBANESWAR

A day after the Odisha Soochana Adhikar Abhijan (OSAA), a forum for the State's Right to Information (RTI) activists, alleged that 74 police personnel were deployed for the protection of V.K. Pandian, Chairperson, 5T (Transformational Initiatives), the State police administration on Saturday said there was no veracity to the claim.

"We have not supplied any information under the RTI Act that talks about security cover provided to Chairperson of 5T (Transformational Initiative) to the applicant," Prateek Singh, Deputy Commissioner of Police, Bhubaneswar, said on Saturday.

Mr. Singh is also the designated public information officer under the RTI Act for the Commissionerate Police here. "We are assessing the veracity of the purported letter which is claimed to be in existence," he said.

Prakash Chandra Dash, an RTI activist, asserted that the Reserve Inspector of Police, Bhubaneswar had said that two armed sub inspectors, 11 havildars, 53 constables, and four women constables, in addition to a protection vehicle, were deployed for Mr. Pandian's security in response to his RTI application.

250 rescued from cyber fraud centres abroad: MEA

Govt. working with Cambodian authorities to crack down on those responsible for the scam; recruits forced into cybercrime; online recruitment scam is linked mainly to Chinese firms

Suhasini Haidar
NEW DELHI

The Union government is "collaborating closely" with Cambodian authorities and has rescued about 250 Indians from Cambodia, who had been lured there by cyber fraud and fake online recruitment scams, the Ministry of External Affairs said on Saturday. About 75 of them have returned to India over the past three months.

The return of the Indians comes as investigating agencies launched a nationwide operation against agents - many of them believed to be linked to companies in China - that operate in Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar to recruit job seekers across South Asia and South East Asia on the promise of working in the information technology industry there. Once they go abroad, the recruits are instead forced to work in cyber fraud centres, and coerced into defrauding others over the telephone and online.

Prompt response
"Our Embassy in Cambodia has been promptly responding to complaints from Indian nationals who were lured with employ-

Vicious network

A nationwide hunt against agents involved in such scams has revealed some insights into their operations



- Job seekers from across South Asia and South East Asia are recruited by agents operating in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and India
- They are promised IT jobs but once there, are forced to work in cyber fraud centres
- They then work over the phone and through social media and get people to invest in fraudulent cryptocurrency trading and other schemes
- MHA says they get over 2,000 calls a day about such scams involving firms in Cambodia and Myanmar
- MEA cautions people against accepting job offers from South East Asia region, asking them to go through authorised agents

GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

ment opportunities to that country but were forced to undertake illegal cyber work," the MEA said in a statement on Saturday. "We are also working with Cambodian authorities and with agencies in India to crack down on those responsible for these fraudulent schemes," it added.

The statement followed reports that the MEA has been coordinating with the Home Ministry and law enforcement agencies to help bring back about 300 of those who have reached out to the Indian Embassy in Phnom Penh.

In January this year, the Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre (I4C) and the Home Ministry had said that about half of the 5,000 calls received on the

Over the past year, arrests have been made in many States, including Odisha, Punjab and Kerala

cybercrime helplines on an average day relate to such scams involving companies based in Cambodia and Myanmar, linked mainly to Chinese apps.

Caution advised
The MEA and the Indian Embassy have issued several advisories warning job-seekers against accepting such job offers. "All Indian nationals who are travelling to jobs in Cambodia and the South East Asia region are advised that there are many fake agents oper-

ating in the region, who along with the agents in India, are luring people to scam companies, involved especially in cyber crimes," said one such advisory, counselling the job-seekers to only go through authorised agents approved by the MEA.

Over the past year, police in several Indian States, including Odisha, Punjab, and Kerala, have made arrests in such cases. Officials conceded that there were likely to be many more victims across South East Asia, but said that they were working mainly with those who have reached out to Indian embassies abroad, and those whom the local police officials in those countries have managed to rescue.

Green groups seek ban on infra projects in Himalayas

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI

More than 60 environmental and social organisations in the country have demanded a complete ban on all mega infrastructure projects, such as those related to the railways, dams, hydro projects and four-lane highways, in the Himalayas, and have urged for referendums and public consultations to be made compulsory for all development projects.

The organisations, jointly leading the "People for Himalaya" campaign, issued a five-point charter of demand for all political parties for the Lok Sabha polls. They called for a complete moratorium on all mega infrastructure projects along with a comprehensive multidisciplinary review of the impacts of the existing projects.

The organisations demanded that democratic decision-making through referendums and public consultations be made compulsory for large infrastructure projects.

They also called for the strengthening of the Environment Impact Assessment Notification-1994, the scrapping of the EIA-2020 amendments and FCA-2023 amendments, and free prior informed consent of gram sabhas for all development projects.

Ex-MLA Mukhtar Ansari laid to rest in Ghazipur amid heavy security

Mayank Kumar
LUCKNOW

Gangster-turned-politician Mukhtar Ansari was laid to rest at the Kali Bagh burial ground in Ghazipur, Uttar Pradesh, on Saturday amid heavy security.

The former MLA, who had been in jail since 2005, suffered a cardiac arrest on Thursday. While his family alleged that he had been poisoned in jail, Opposition leaders have sought a high-level investigation into his death.

The body was brought to the family's ancestral burial ground at Yusufpur in Mohammadabad, roughly a kilometre from the Ansaris' residence, on Saturday morning. A sea of supporters accompanied the body in procession to the burial ground.

The district police faced difficulty in managing the crowd that tried to force its way into the burial ground where entry was restricted. Security personnel, in-



Supporters of Mukhtar Ansari take part in the funeral procession of the politician at Mohammadabad in Ghazipur on Saturday. ANI

cluding from the paramilitary, were deployed in thousands around the Ansaris' residence and the burial ground.

Plea to supporters
Earlier, the family requested supporters to pray for the deceased. In a post on X on Friday, Suhaib Ansari, MLA and nephew of the deceased, said: "My younger uncle Mr. Mukhtar Ansari Sahib passed away last night. Tomorrow at 10 a.m. he will be buried in the Ka-

libagh graveyard of our Yusufpur Mohammadabad (Ghazipur). You all are requested to pray for the forgiveness of the deceased." Mukhtar Ansari, a five-time former MLA, died on Thursday night within hours of his admission to the Rani Durgawati Medical College in Banda district.

"Around 8.25 p.m., convicted/undertrial prisoner Mukhtar Ansari, son of Subhanullah, aged 63, was brought by jail staff to the

emergency department at the Rani Durgawati Medical College in an unconscious state. The patient was treated by a team of nine doctors and given all possible medical facilities, but despite all the attempts for recovery, the patient died due to cardiac arrest," reads the medical bulletin from the hospital. On March 26, he was admitted to the same hospital after he complained of abdominal pain and later discharged. His family had alleged that he was being "poisoned". Mr. Ansari faced more than five dozen cases and had been languishing in jail since 2005. Opposition leaders in the State have demanded a high-level investigation into the death, with Samajwadi Party (SP) president Akhilesh Yadav calling for an investigation under the supervision of a Supreme Court judge, and Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) chief Mayawati pushing for a high-level probe.

Anticipatory bail must not be norm in many cases, rules SC

Krishnadas Rajagopal
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court has in a judgment said that bail may be the rule in many cases, but anticipatory bail is certainly not the norm.

A Bench of Justices C.T. Ravikumar and Sanjay Kumar said the power of the courts to grant anticipatory or pre-arrest bail is an extraordinary one, and not to be given for the asking.

"Though in many cases it was held that bail is said to be a rule, it cannot, by any stretch of imagination, be said that anticipatory bail is the rule. It cannot be the rule and the question of its grant should be left to the cautious and judicious discretion of the court, depending on the facts and circumstances of each case," the top court said.

The judgment was based on an appeal for anticipatory bail filed by persons booked under provisions of the Indian Penal

The Bench said the power of the courts to grant anticipatory or pre-arrest bail is an extraordinary one

Code for offences, including assault on a woman, wrongful restraint, causing grievous hurt, and the provisions of the Prevention of Witch (Daain) Practices Act, 1999 in Bihar.

The court observed that anticipatory bail should not lead to miscarriage of justice, especially in cases of crimes against women.

"The court concerned has to be very cautious as the grant of interim protection or protection to the accused in serious cases may lead to miscarriage of justice and may hamper the investigation to a great extent as it may sometimes lead to tampering or distraction of the evidence," Justice Ravikumar cautioned.

Facing pressure from Google, NCPDR, Ullu drops adult content

Aroon Deep
NEW DELHI

Pressure has been mounting on the adult streaming platform Ullu on its content, with the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPDR) asking the government to act against the firm. Separately, the Digital Publisher Content Grievance Council (DPCGC) has issued a rebuke of the streaming service's catalogue. The DPCGC is a streaming self-regulatory body, and Ullu is a member.

Under notice from Google, the Android version of the app has been cleansed of much of the content it has built its business on. Google's action was re-

vealed to the NCPDR in a reply obtained by *The Hindu*.

As streaming platforms find their content increasingly restricted against political and religious themes - often due to self-imposed restraint - the government has set its sights on smaller players who put out mature content intended for adults. Eighteen such sites and apps were blocked earlier this month for "obscene and vulgar content".

These sites include "Hot Shots VIP," Mojflix, MoodX, and Uncut Adda". While there is no explicit ban on pornography in India, many international websites offering such content have been ordered ofline by the Uttarakhand



The Ullu app has been cleansed of much of the content it has built its business on.

High Court, in a *suo motu* 2018 judgment that the government and Internet providers continue to comply with.

The DPCGC was established under the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and

Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021.

From all the appeals that DPCGC's grievance redressal board has heard and issued orders on, only one outcome has been published on its website - a June 2023 order against Ullu finding the firm had a "solitary aim" to "depict sexual contents," and to take down some content that fit this description. The board is headed by former Supreme Court judge Justice A.K. Sikri (retd).

Ullu CEO Vibhu Agarwal did not respond to a message seeking comment. Last year, though, the firm defended itself to the DPCGC saying that it "offers a wide variety of genres

from drama, horror, suspense, thriller to comedy and beyond which targets audience[s] above eighteen years of age," and that it has safeguards to prevent minors from viewing its content, according to Justice Sikri's summary of arguments by Priyanka Chaurasiya, a lawyer for the firm.

Google told the NCPDR that it found no inappropriate content featuring children on Ullu, indicating that the commission's concern was around such content being accessible to minors, and not featuring them. The IT Rules have mandatory provisions for streaming services to provide age-restricting features for mature content,

and most streaming providers are in compliance with this requirement.

An advisory by Justice Sikri in December 2023 to streaming services, previously unreported, "strongly advises the platforms to undertake suitable measures to ensure that all the content on their respective platforms must comply with the test of obscenity and pornography as enumerated under the various laws of the land." The advisory does not name Ullu.

Ullu had set itself apart from rival adult streaming outfits by abstaining from depicting graphic nudity or other acts that could trigger immediate backlash from authorities.



Sacred flame: A boy with a ceremonial lamp at the Kottankulangara Bhagavathy Temple in Kollam, Kerala, on March 24.



Getting ready: Family members help a boy get dressed before going to offer prayers at the temple.



Gracious look: Men attired in sarees and decked in jewellery participate in the rituals and procession.

Embracing the feminine

Chamayavilakku, a festival in Kollam district of Kerala, is a flamboyant display of sartorial creativity where men deck up in women's clothes, complete with jewellery and accessories



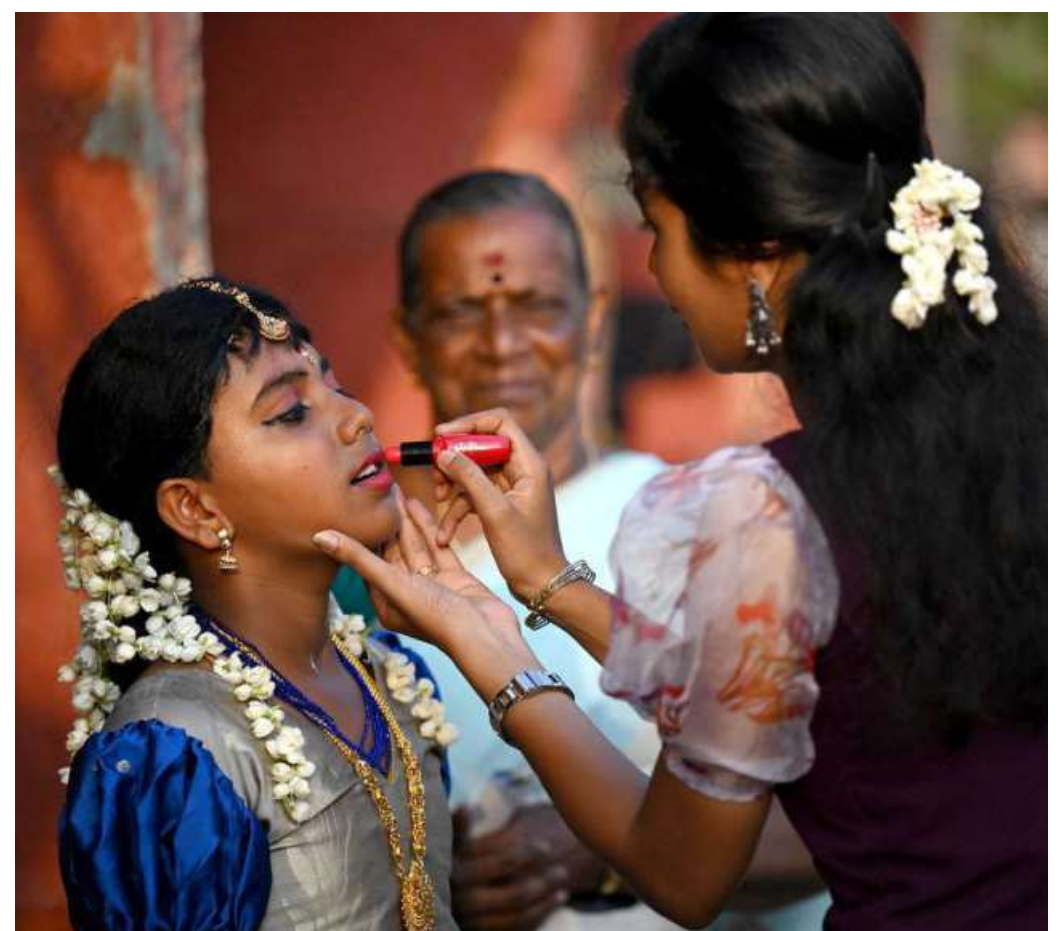
Thulasi Kakkat
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On the 10th and 11th of the Malayalam month of Meenam (mid-March to mid-April), thousands of men dressed as women through the Kottankulangara Sri Bhagavathy Temple in Kollam for its annual festival, Chamayavilakku. As per tradition, during the two-day celebration, men line up from the temple gate for the ceremonial *Ezhumallathu* (procession) around 2 a.m., holding lamps with five wicks to seek the blessings of the presiding deity, goddess Durga.

This gender-bending festival is a flamboyant display of sartorial creativity. Men deck up in women's clothes, complete with jewellery and accessories. Every year, several studios and green rooms mushroom near the temple to help male devotees transform into women.

On both days of the festival, the same rituals are followed. This tradition goes back to the temple's legend, according to which when some cowherds attempted to smash a coconut with a stone and it began to bleed. Astrologers discovered that the stone held Vanadurga's divine force, and they instructed the local people to erect a shrine around it. At the time, girls performed pujas in the temple. The cowherds therefore dressed as girls to perform the temple's initial pujas. Boys below the age of 10 also dress up as girls for Kakkavilakku, a part of the Chamayavilakku festival, but held during the day.

Over the years, Chamayavilakku has acquired a special significance for the transgender community in Kerala, which attends the festival in large numbers.



Final touches: Boys get to wear lipstick and rouge for the ceremony.



Devotional fervour: The traditional five-wick lamp is an important part of the festival.



Floral adornment: Apart from jewellery, strands of flowers are also part of the finery worn by the male devotees.



Peace and poise: It is believed that the feminine touch propitiates the Goddess Bhagavathy and brings her blessings to all.



Lighter moments: The festival procession is older than any pride march.



Patient prayer: Many families come together to mark the sacred occasion.

What happened to the bridge in Baltimore?

Could the Baltimore bridge disaster have been prevented? What happens when a ship's generators fail?

Vasudevan Mukunth

The story so far:

On March 26, a container vessel ran into the pillar of a bridge on the Patapsco River in Baltimore, bringing a part of the structure crashing down together with some people and cars on the bridge. By late March 27, the U.S. Coast Guard had concluded its search in the river for the bodies of the six people who fell. The vessel had an all-Indian crew.

What is the timeline of events?

After departing from the port of Baltimore at 12.28 a.m. local time, the 300-metre-long vessel *Dali* was headed for Colombo, Sri Lanka, with several containers of oil and some hazardous material. Less than an hour after its departure, people nearby reported the *Dali's* lights flickering. Two minutes later, the ship's course also started to angle towards two of the bridge's pillars in the river. At 1.27 a.m. local time, the *Dali* mowed into the pillar and brought down a segment of the bridge.

A U.S. Coast Guard report said, the *Dali's* crew had broadcast a mayday signal seeking help to control the vessel. This signal alerted the Coast Guard as well as prompted local authorities to close the bridge for further traffic. A part of the bridge's superstructure also fell on the vessel, smashing some containers and leaving them balanced precariously on the vessel.

The Coast Guard suggested the vessel's engine failed. In this scenario, it would have lost its lights and other facilities and, sans mechanical power, deprived its pilots of the ability to steer the vessel.

Maryland governor Wes Moore later declared a state of emergency. With inputs from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, federal officials had by March 28 also virtually ruled out deliberate intent to cause the collision.

The *Dali* belongs to the Danish shipping giant Maersk and flies a Singapore flag. It is managed by the Synergy Marine Group, headed by Rajesh Unni.

What were the casualties?

The Synergy Marine Group said in statements that all crew members were safe.

The bridge's collapse dropped eight people through 50 feet into the Patapsco River. While two people were fished out soon after, the Coast Guard postponed the search for the other six because of the river's depth, temperature, lack of light, the presence of sharp objects in the water, and the risk of more parts of the bridge and/or the containers falling in.

Rear Admiral Shannon Gilreath told reporters on March 28 that the team no longer expected to find the six people alive.

What happened to the ship?

The *Dali* is propelled by a nine-cylinder two-stroke diesel engine. In the two-stroke cycle, fuel is pumped into the combustion chamber, where a spark plug causes the fuel-air mixture to explode. The energy release pushes a piston up, rotating the crankshaft. The explosion's residue (exhaust) is then pumped out of the engine to bring the piston down in the second stroke. Once the engine transfers mechanical power to the crankshaft, it can be further transferred to the propeller directly, via a gearbox or electric motors. It is also coupled with an alternator that converts the mechanical power to electric to supply appliances on the vessel, including lighting. The Coast Guard recorded a statement that at least one of *Dali's* engines "coughed" and that "the smell of burned fuel was everywhere in the engine room", suggesting the vessel's engine failed. In this scenario, the vessel would have lost its lights and other facilities and, sans mechanical power, deprived its pilots of the ability to steer the vessel. Onlookers reported the vessel's lights flickering on later which experts have attributed to a backup generator.

The U.S. National Transportation Safety Board said it would be checking whether the fuel used in the *Dali's* engine was contaminated.

In 2023, Chilean authorities reported issues with *Dali's* propulsion, although Singaporean ones said it had cleared two inspections at foreign ports the same year.

Could the collision have been prevented?

The Francis Scott Key Bridge – the structure in question – was built in the mid-1970s. Colin Caprani, a civil engineer at Monash University, Melbourne, wrote that the protective shielding around the pillars into which the ship moved wasn't designed to withstand the impact of such a large vessel. Together with the vessel's speed at the time of the collision, around 15 km/hr, he estimated the impact force to be equivalent to 20,000 tonnes. In 2016, Panama Canal authorities upgraded its locks to allow larger ships to pass through. The *Dali's* design was subsequently modified to increase its container capacity by 10%. Before this, *Financial Times* reported, vessels of this size seldom made port along the U.S. east coast – nor did bridges over waterways here have to contend with them.

Why is unemployment high among the youth?

What has the India Employment Report 2024, prepared by the Institute for Human Development and the International Labour Organization, found? Why are educated youth also not getting jobs? Why is women participation in the labour force low? What are some of the correctives suggested?

A. M. Jigeesh

The story so far:

The India Employment Report 2024, prepared jointly by the Institute of Human Development (IHD) and the International Labour Organization (ILO), and released on March 26, revolves around "youth employment, education and skills." It has analysed trends and patterns of the Indian labour market for two decades, including the COVID-19 years, and listed the "emerging characteristics of the employment challenges now confronting the economy as well as the impact of growth on employment."

What are the key findings?

The report's authors note that the proportion of India's working-age population (aged 15-59) increased from 61% in 2011 to 64% in 2021 and is projected to reach 65% in 2036. About 7-8 million young people are added each year to the labour force. Though the proportion of youth getting an education increased from 18% in 2000 to 35% in 2022, the percentage of youth involved in economic activities decreased from 52% to 37% during the same period.

The authors warn that unemployment in the country is "predominantly a problem among youth", especially those with a secondary level of education or higher, and that it has intensified over time.

"In 2022, the share of unemployed youth in the total unemployed population was 82.9%," they noted, adding that the share of educated youth among all unemployed people also increased, from 54.2% in 2000 to 65.7% in 2022. Also, among the educated (secondary level or higher) unemployed youth, women accounted

The report pointed out that most jobs in 2023 were in the informal sector; and that about half the jobs in the formal sector were also of an informal nature

for a larger share (76.7%) than men (62.2%).

Is the crisis the result of a lack of jobs?

Santosh Mehrotra whose studies have been cited in several chapters in the report, told *The Hindu* that it's a question of both lack of opportunities and unemployability of educated youth due to poor quality of education. He urged the government to ensure that the development of skills was separated from formal education. The ILO and IHD said the share of technically qualified youth was low in India: 15.62% youth had vocational training in 2022, but out of them only 4.09% had formal vocational training. According to Mr. Mehrotra, the fact that employment in the agriculture sector has increased after 2019 is because of the lack of quality education among the youth, making it difficult for them to get jobs in other sectors. The report's authors pointed out that most jobs in 2023 (90.4%) were in the informal sector; and that around half the jobs in the formal sector (45.2%) were also of an informal nature. Mr. Mehrotra stressed the importance of creating more jobs in the formal sector, pointing out that the unemployment rate among youth had tripled between 2012 and 2018.

What is the quality of employment?

The ILO and IHD stated that the jobs remained low-productive and low-earning. Real wages and earnings showed a decline or had stagnated. A large proportion of regular workers (40.8%) and casual workers (51.9%) did not receive the average daily minimum wage prescribed for unskilled workers. The government-prescribed rate is ₹480 per day.

Central trade unions and the Samyukt Kisan Morcha are concerned about the report's findings. According to senior trade union leader Amarjeet Kaur, the ILO report flags the "wage depression" prevalent in the country, especially when food inflation is not under control. She adds that formal employment is merely 9% of total employment and that most of the workforce is kept out of any social security net. "This itself adds to unemployment and underemployment as workers without formal employment may not be able to build a base of education and skill enhancement for the next generation," she observes.

The report's authors said as individuals attain higher levels of education, they are more likely to have access to more secure and formal employment options, leading to higher average returns. Youth residing in the southern, western and north-eastern regions had greater probabilities of being in formal employment, they noted, also flagging the larger presence of

socially marginalised youth in informal jobs.

Why are jobs scarce in the formal sector?

Trade unions contend that thousands of posts have not been filled for years and the policy of letting one-third of the vacancies lapse after retirements have resulted in the decrease of formal employment. The trend of contractual appointments and clamour for consultancies are also blamed for the dip in formal jobs.

What about the gender gap?

There is a significant gender gap in the labour market, with low rates of female labour force participation. The gender gap in the LFPR has remained almost consistent over the past two decades, the report's authors observed.

In 2022, the LFPR of young men (at 61.2%) was almost three times higher than that of young women (at 21.7%), and the gender gap was similar in both rural and urban areas. The report's authors have noted that there is a large proportion of young persons, particularly women, who are not in education, employment or training. Between 2012 and 2019, there was an alarming increase in unemployment because of the decrease in women participation in the workforce, a trend which has been slightly reversed post 2019. "Young women are more likely to engage in agriculture than young men," they said.

What has the report recommended?

India was expected to have a sustained economic growth of 5-6% in the next 15 years or so, the report's authors noted. "Rapid technological changes and high growth have increased the gap between skill supply and demand," they said, urging policymakers to take adequate steps to ensure rapid integration of youth into the labour market through well-targeted supply and demand measures.

The report's authors have recommended "five missions" to address the challenges: Make production and growth more employment-intensive; improve the quality of jobs; overcome labour market inequalities; make systems for skills training and active labour market policies more effective; bridge the deficits in knowledge on labour market patterns and youth employment. They have recommended measures such as integrating employment creation with macro and other economic policies to boost productive non-farm employment. They also said micro, small and medium-sized enterprises must be supported and decentralised.

The report's authors have urged the government to take steps to increase agriculture productivity, create more non-farm jobs and promote entrepreneurship. Calling for a focus on policies that boost women's participation in the labour force, they also sought a minimum quality of employment and basic rights of workers across all sectors.



Crisis time: The trend of contractual appointments and clamour for consultancies are also blamed for the dip in formal jobs. AFP

Will global forest expansion hit tribals?

What are the concerns about the Global Biodiversity Framework which aims to increase areas under forest cover, inland water, coastal and marine areas to at least 30% of the world's terrestrial area? What is the situation in India?

Rahul Karmakar

The story so far:

A symposium on the rights of indigenous people organised by the University of Arizona on March 21-22 put the spotlight on the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) and how, in conjunction with the Forest (Conservation) Amendment Act of 2023, it will hit India's tribes the hardest. Many at the symposium foresaw doom for the country's indigenous communities already affected by the establishment of national parks.

What is the Kunming-Montreal GBF?

This framework was adopted during the 15th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity in December 2022 following a four-year consultation and negotiation process. It claims to support the achievement of sustainable development goals and build on previous strategic plans, paving "an ambitious pathway to reach the global vision of a world living in harmony with nature by 2050." Accordingly, four goals were set for 2050 and 23 targets for 2030 toward planning, monitoring, reporting and reviewing implementation, organising finance, and drawing up strategies for capacity development, technical and scientific cooperation, and an agreement on digital

Activists say meeting the GBF targets will threaten the existence of indigenous populations

sequence information on genetic resources. In adopting the GBF, all parties have committees to set national targets to implement it. Participating at the event, New Delhi-based rights activist Suhass Chakma drew the attention of environmentalists and leaders of indigenous communities to Target 3 of the Kunming-Montreal GBF, which aims to "increase terrestrial, inland water, and of coastal and marine areas, especially areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem functions and services" to at least 30% of the world's terrestrial area. At present, protected areas (PAs) cover about 16%.

What are its implications?

Participants at the 'Symposium on Conservation, Racism, and Indigenous Peoples Human Rights' felt that the seemingly benign goals of the GBF tilt the scale in favour of corporate houses eyeing forest resources at the expense of the indigenous communities living with nature. Indigenous peoples have been denied the right to housing, health, education, electricity, and security in Indonesia's Ujungkulon National Park while Heng Saphen, an indigenous leader living inside the Beng Per Wildlife Sanctuary of Cambodia was convicted by a kangaroo court for cultivating on her own land. About 18% of Cambodia's Botum Sakor National Park stands protected after much of its land was sold off to private firms, the participants said. Involving the private sector in forest conservation is a bad idea and India has taken a step in that direction with the Forest (Conservation) Amendment Act to 2023 to include zoos, safaris, ecotourism facilities, etc., as forest activities, Mr. Chakma pointed out. The UN Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Peoples, José Francisco Calí Tzay, said the PAs were initially created "as recreational opportunities, hunting grounds for western colonial elites". The concept, the participants pointed out, has not changed much with ecotourism or sustainable ecotourism projects reducing the indigenous peoples to animals in a zoo, made to sit in "model replicas" of traditional houses wearing traditional dresses and ornaments, and playing traditional musical instruments.

What would GBF mean for India?

About 84% of India's national parks (89 out of a total of 106) were established in areas inhabited by the indigenous peoples and meeting the GBF targets will threaten their existence, the activists said. For instance, the initiative to upgrade the Kumbhalgarh Wildlife Sanctuary in Rajasthan to a tiger reserve will affect 162 tribal villages located inside and outside the sanctuary while the expansion of the Nauradehi Sanctuary in Madhya Pradesh is set to affect 62 villages of mostly tribal people. In Assam, the June 19, 2022, notification for the Barak Bhuban Wildlife Sanctuary will affect the indigenous groups. The gazette notification states that the sanctuary "is free from encroachment as per record, there are no rights and concessions of any person in the area" but the Khasis possess documents showing they have been living in the area since 1914.

What can be done to protect the tribal lands?

Mr. Chakma said a multilateral agreement like the Kunming-Montreal GBF cannot be amended but the government of India needs to change its policy.

First, it has to recognise the right to free, prior, and informed consent as guaranteed under the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act and make further amendments to the laws to make the tribals custodians of the PAs as nature has largely been protected because of their special relations with the forests and their denizens. Secondly, the government of India should not only target the tribal areas simply because they do not matter electorally.

"That Uttar Pradesh and Bihar only have one national park each – Dudhwa inhabited by the indigenous Tharu people and Valmiki inhabited by the Tharus, Oraons, Mundas, etc. – speaks for itself. If tiger reserves can be created in areas where there are no tigers such as Sahyadri (Maharashtra), Satkosia (Odisha), Kamlang (Arunachal Pradesh), Kawal (Telangana), and Dampa (Mizoram), there is no reason why PAs cannot be created in non-tribal areas," he said. Finally, India ought to address human rights violations in the PAs seriously.

Human rights issues of these people such as access to education, healthcare, and housing cannot be left to the Wildlife or Forest Department. Thousands of indigenous people living within the PAs must be respected and recognised for preserving the biodiversity and the ecosystem and not punished, he said.



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PROFILES

The dissident vocalist

T.M. Krishna

The Carnatic singer, whose musical genius and reformist activism won him both plaudits and condemnation, has kicked up a storm in the music world after he got this year's Sangita Kalanidhi award

Ramya Kannan

If two hypothetical roads diverged in the mature Carnatic woods, T.M. Krishna took the one less travelled by, and that has made all the difference. India is no stranger to controversies about awards that are given for meritorious achievement, and yet, seldom have we seen as much flap as was witnessed after the Music Academy in Chennai announced that, this year, it would confer its top honour – the Sangita Kalanidhi award – on the Carnatic vocalist.

The award has always been widely considered to be the 'highest accolade in Carnatic music'. Conferred by an institution that has been in existence for nearly a century, at the annual conference in Chennai's most salubrious season in Margazhi, artistes have accepted it with a Bhakti akin to what they might employ on a Thyagaraja *kriti*.

To understand the opposition to Krishna, comprehending the cultural and historical context is essential.

The idea of a Music Academy originally emerged as an offshoot of the All India Congress Session held in Madras in December 1927 as an institution that would set the standards for Carnatic music. It was inaugurated the next year. In 1929, it started hosting annual conferences on music, which in turn spawned the December music festival of Madras, known popularly as the *Kutchery* season. The format is a series of concerts across the city conducted in an intensive month-long festival that attracts both the cognoscenti and the common people, drinking in the performances, ticketed or free based on economic capacity, equally possessive of their own fest in their own backyard.

Was this feeling of possession truly universal? Or was this an esoteric stratosphere that, through deliberate plan and design, kept some out? It was here that Krishna, a prodigy who gave his first Carnatic concert at the age of 12 at a noon slot in the Music Academy, branched out on the path that has brought him both awards/plaudits and condemnation, in possibly equal measure.

Krishna himself was born in this crucible of culture, in Madras, 48 years ago, and was educated at The School, run by the Krishnamurti Foundation, with a liberal pedagogical outlook, that urges students to "learn and grow in mindful relatedness".

Initially, he got a hand up from his grand uncle T.T. Krishnamachari, industrialist and former Finance Minister, who was then a member at the Academy. A privilege that he acknowledged as his now famous awakening dawned, and one he sought to question, even counter, shaking at the roots of the system he was a symbiotic part of.

In retrospect, his grooming and education set him on this inevitable path of introspection. But some critics believe it was prep work on his books that set him askew. His first book *Voices Within* (2007), with singer Bombay Jayashri, was a coffee table book on Carnatic music maestros. It was his second book *A Southern Music: The Carnatic Story* (2013) that first hinted at the schisms in Carnatic music that Krishna was beginning to see.

It shows him standing dissatisfied at the edge of that yellow wood, peering at the divergent path. In this clearly polemical book, he strikes the first discordant note: "The environment that pervades Karnatik music makes it very difficult for an atheist to function within its world. There may be a few, but they will find it very difficult to come out in the open and articulate an atheistic narrative for Karnatik music." Later in an interview to *The Hindu*, he clarified: "The music – its form, history, integrity – is what I treasure. What we are stuck with is the *kutchery*. As far as the *kutchery* is concerned, I am willing to give it up. Because, after a point, I think the *kutchery* has not looked at the music but got stuck in its own success story."

Thorny paths

With *Sebastian and Sons*, Krishna was stridently in the other path, as he questioned what he called caste discrimination ingrained in, this time, percussion music.

Critics and colleagues, particularly the purists among them, were outraged. His questions went deeper,



ILLUSTRATION: R. RAJESH

beyond form and content, further rocking the foundation that all had found comfort in. No one was truly surprised by what he said, that Carnatic music was in the preserve of one community – the Brahmins. However, to express discomfort with that so openly and with judgement as Krishna did, was inexplicable. Was the innate performer in him at play even as he struck out, craving a different kind of attention? It could be said that reformers tread thorny paths; to shock and shake is the play of someone who wants to usher in change. His unvarnished opinion, nevertheless,

ruffled many feathers.

It is also what he did later that seems to have built up this bulwark of opposition. Refusing to participate in the Margazhi season in 2015, could well have been harakiri in that world. Krishna said: "I feel that the music season today has reached a point where music has almost disappeared from it. Perhaps I should say music has fled from it, because of the noise that pervades it." He also alleged corruption and hijacking of the sabhas by certain people. What a dissonance this might have seemed to them.

The Carnatic community perceived

his activism as arising from an intrinsic anti-Brahmanism, and was further scandalised by his growing, well-articulated fondness for the Dravidian ideologue Periyar, who was stridently against the Brahmin hegemony of his times. Krishna also performed non-ticketed concerts, besides going out to beaches and streets to take music to the people. In association with the progressive writer Perumal Murugan, he set Periyar's writing, and ancient Tamil texts to Carnatic music.

The Periyar connection

In the letter that was to muddy the waters, vocalist duo Ranjani and Gayathri (RaGa) invoked Krishna's Periyar connection, calling the latter a promoter of Brahmin "genocide", notably not questioning his ability as a musician. Others who pilloried Krishna subsequently too invoked 'dharma' and Hinduism. Even as they disagreed with the politics of Krishna, they allowed that to colour their perception of his musical genius, though Music Academy president N. Murali attested in a note that the choice was "based on his excellence in music over a long career".

In response, some sophistry followed: RaGa claimed they had not questioned the institution's prerogative to award someone, they had chosen not to perform at an event that the awardee would preside over. Inadvertently, his detractors advanced Krishna's own narrative. In their second letter, RaGa said, "It will be the happiest day for us and for millions of people to see star performers emerge from underprivileged communities and dominate the stage..." reserving their attack, for the Academy this time, calling for reform to start at the top.

In the 1981 Oscar winning movie *Mephisto*, the protagonist, an actor famed for playing the demon Mephistopheles, is shown signing a Faustian pact with the Nazi Party of Germany to advance his own career. He ignores the moral compromises his decision forces on him, but seeks to justify it: "I'm just an actor." Krishna is an artiste who has reached the opposite end of that spectrum, he long stopped being "just a singer".

THE GIST

▼ Krishna was born in Madras, 48 years ago, and was educated at The School, run by the Krishnamurti Foundation, with a liberal pedagogical outlook

▼ Initially, he got a hand up from his grand uncle T.T. Krishnamachari, industrialist and former Finance Minister, who was then a member at the Music Academy

▼ Krishna, who gave his first Carnatic concert at the age of 12 at a noon slot in the Music Academy, branched out on a different path that has brought him both awards/plaudits and condemnation, in possibly equal measure

Israel's Minister of offence

Yoav Gallant

The Likud leader and member of Netanyahu's war Cabinet threatens to continue and expand the military operations despite a UNSC demand for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza

ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

Priyali Prakash

When the U.S. finally abstained from vetoing a UN Security Council resolution demanding for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza on March 25, it prompted a slew of angry remarks from Israel. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu cancelled a delegation [which was eventually reinstated] to Washington to express his disappointment, which meant that his Defence Minister Yoav Gallant was left alone in the U.S. to deal with the immediate aftermath of the significant update.

Mr. Gallant, a member of Israel's three-member war Cabinet who famously likened Palestinians to "human animals" while ordering a complete siege of Gaza after the October 7 Hamas attack, has been instrumental in leading the war on the enclave. A former soldier himself, Mr. Gallant has not always had it easy with Israel's top brass. He was believed to be not particularly close to Mr. Netanyahu previously, who had cancelled his appointment as the Chief of General Staff of the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) in 2011 due to allegations related to seizure of public lands for personal use.

In 2023, Mr. Netanyahu fired him from the post of Defence Minister after he



warned the administration of a security threat due to a proposed judicial overhaul. Mr. Gallant was, however, reinstated following public outrage. A member of the Prime Minister's right-wing Likud Party, Mr. Gallant was among the first senior leaders who spoke against the judicial overhaul which proposed limiting the Supreme Court's powers.

Born to a Holocaust-survivor mother who arrived in Israel onboard the *SS Exodus* and a father with military roots, Mr. Gallant began his military career as a naval commando with the 13th Flotilla, also called Shayetet 13, which specialises in operating in the sea, on land, and in the air. He spent six years with the unit, before taking a break from the armed forces. Like many Israeli soldiers who travel overseas after their military service periods, Mr. Gallant went to Alaska and worked as a lumberjack for two years before returning to Israel.

He first rejoined the Navy before transferring to the IDF.

Mr. Gallant was appointed the military secretary of late Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and was promoted to Major General – setting him up for his future roles within the IDF as well as Israeli politics.

During his tenure with the IDF, he moved up to serve with the Gaza Division. He commanded the 2009 Operation Cast Lead in Gaza in which around 1,400 Palestinians were killed in 22 days. The operation put him in the 2011 race for the IDF Chief of Staff, even as a UN report accused Israel of committing war crimes during the offensive.

Political entry

In 2015, Mr. Gallant moved to politics after over 35 years with the armed forces. He joined the newly formed Kulanu Party, and was elected to the Knesset (Parliament) after the party won 10 seats. He was ap-

pointed the Minister of Construction.

By 2019, Mr. Gallant had crossed over to the Likud Party and was appointed the Minister of Education. As the Education Minister, he attempted to cancel the award of Israel Prize to Oded Goldreich, a scientist at the Weizmann Institute, who reportedly supported the "anti-Zionist" Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement.

Mr. Gallant became the Defence Minister in 2022.

In January 2024, he outlined his vision for the future of Gaza, which, according to him, would be an enclave run by a Palestinian body under overall Israeli control. Since the October 7 Hamas attack in which at least 1,200 Israelis were killed and around 240 taken as hostages, Israel has killed more than 32,000 Palestinians in its offensive in Gaza and forced most of the strip's population out of their homes amid continuous bombings. After the U.S. abstained from vetoing the UNSC resolution on March 25, Mr. Gallant has proactively met with leaders in Washington, sometimes referring to supporters as "true friends of Israel" in an apparent dig at U.S. President Joe Biden. And now, he is back in Israel, and is threatening to expand operations against Hezbollah in Southern Lebanon.

The TikTok Taoiseach

Simon Harris

The Fine Gael leader is set to become the youngest Irish Premier at a time when the country is faced with an acute housing crisis and the ruling party is battling dwindling popularity

ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

Joan Sony Cherian

"This is a moment for Fine Gael to reset," said Simon Harris after he was appointed the new leader of the Fine Gael, the centre-right party leading Ireland's ruling coalition, after the shock resignation of Prime Minister Leo Varadkar on March 20. At 37, Mr. Harris is set to become the youngest ever Taoiseach when the Dail (Irish parliament) reconvenes in April. He is determined to let the government run its full term until elections next year.

Mr. Harris was introduced to politics at the very young age of 16 when he, frustrated by the lack of information and guidance for people with autism like his brother, called for a public meeting in his neighbourhood on the issue which led to a lobby/support group for people and children with autism. Even though he calls himself an 'accidental politician', Mr. Harris seems to have paved his way in politics well in advance when one looks at how he rose through the ranks.

Dropping out of college to make his mark in politics, Mr. Harris, at the age of 22, was elected councillor of Wicklow in 2009. He then became a member of parliament at 24, a junior Minister at 27 and held his



first ever Cabinet position at 29 as Minister for Health in 2016. From 2020 onwards, he held the post of Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. His strong online presence has earned him the moniker, the 'TikTok Taoiseach'.

Mr. Harris oversaw the beginning of safety and quarantine precautions when COVID-19 first hit the country. He was applauded for his foresight in mandating necessary safeguards and ordering a total closure of schools and colleges almost a fortnight before the U.K. Another feather in his cap as Health Minister was bringing in the 36th amendment of the Constitution, which came out of the 2018 referendum that called for an upturn of Ireland's near-total ban on abortion.

However, it has not all been smooth-sailing for Mr. Harris. In February, 2019, he faced a no-confidence motion moved by

the Sinn Fein, the opposition political party, over the cost-oversruns at the new national children's hospital. The hospital, one of the government's biggest construction projects, which was to be built at an estimated cost of €800 million in 2014, rose to almost €1.43 billion by 2019. The opposition called the project a financial mismanagement. Mr. Harris survived the motion and went on to state that the government would build the hospital and "get to the bottom of what has gone wrong".

It was also under his tenure that the cervical cancer smear test scandal broke out. In April 2018, Vicky Phelan, a 43-year old woman, accused the Irish government's health authority of misdiagnosing a routine pap smear she underwent in 2011, which later turned out to be positive for cervical cancer. Many more women (over 200) then came forward sharing stories of how their state-run pap smear tests

were given as negative when it should have been flagged as positive, thus depriving these women of an early diagnosis and another chance at life.

Challenges ahead

Mr. Harris was quick to take a dig at the Opposition when he stated in his appointment speech that the "Sinn Féin cannot bear to look back over what Fine Gael has achieved since pulling our economy back from the brink...they cannot handle the truth." Mr. Harris said his party supports small businesses and education, and is committed to making "work pay".

However, the youngest ever Irish Premier has his work cut out for him. Ireland faces an extreme housing crisis, topped only by concerns over mass immigration and the record number of asylum seekers and refugees. Additionally, inheriting a three-party coalition leaves very little room for the incumbent Prime Minister to make any major policy changes.

After almost a decade of Fine Gael rule, Sinn Fein has the support of 28% voters, almost eight percentage points ahead of the ruling party.

Whether it be 'resetting' the party or forming a new Cabinet, it remains to be seen what impact Mr. Harris can have in his short tenure as Prime Minister.

Naturally occurring bile acid can blunt statin-induced diabetes

Vasudevan Mukunth

Administering ursodeoxycholic acid (UDCA) can stave off the tendency of statins to induce glucose intolerance and diabetes, a study by a group of researchers in China has found.

Statins are prescribed to people with a high risk of cardiovascular disease. They work by blocking the activity of an enzyme involved in the metabolic pathway that produces LDL, or "bad", cholesterol.

Statins are on the World Health Organization's list of essential medicines and among the most sold drugs worldwide.

However, many studies have found statins could increase the risk of developing diabetes.

'Frank diabetes'

"It has been known for a few years now that statins can induce glucose intolerance and even frank diabetes in some people," Dr. V. Mohan, chairman of the Madras Diabetes Research

Foundation, Chennai, told *The Hindu*.

He added that doctors have continued to prescribe them because statins' benefits "far outweigh the risk". Nonetheless, the mechanism by which statins have this effect has been unclear.

In the study, published in February in the journal *Cell Metabolism*, the researchers reported one mechanism through which statins could increase glucose intolerance, involving UDCA, a bile acid.

The team recruited 30 people with atorvastatin and 10 without and tracked their metabolism for four months.

They reported that the faeces of those taking atorvastatin had a reduced abundance of bacteria of the genus *Clostridium* and that these individuals had "altered serum and faecal bile acid profiles" as well.

Gut microbiome

The gut microbiome is a community of bacteria in the gut in a symbiotic rela-

tionship with the body. The researchers found that the *Clostridium*-deficient microbiome inhibited enzymes called hydroxysteroid dehydrogenases and lowered UDCA.

They also verified an idea that "the decreased *Clostridium*-rich microbiota might influence bile acid synthesis and excretion and impair glucose metabolism" in a 12-week study of mice.

To check the role of UDCA, they recruited five participants on statins and ad-

ministered 10-13 mg/kg (of body weight) of UDCA per day. After two months, they found the individuals' HbA1C levels, among others, were "substantially decreased".

They concluded that "UDCA restored impaired glucose homeostasis without limiting the lipid-lowering effect of statin".

Dr. Mohan called the finding "good news" and "a new angle" but also said the underlying hypothesis will have to be tested in randomised clinical trials.

SNAPSHOTS



Imaging detects hypoxic pockets in the mouse brain

Using a bioluminescent oxygen indicator, scientists discovered a spontaneous, spatially defined occurrence of "hypoxic pockets" in the mouse brain. Their technique offers a way to learn more about brain oxygen tension (pO₂), a measure of oxygen delivery and demand in brain tissue that changes dynamically but is not well understood. The findings could have implications for how rest and exercise affect pO₂ in the human brain, including the role of these activities in conditions such as dementia.

Tropical cyclones of higher intensity demand a new category

Tropical cyclones with peak wind speeds far exceeding category 5 scale of 252 km/hour are increasingly seen due to global warming, making a case for introducing category 6 for wind speed above 309 km/hour

Madhavan Nair Rajeevan

Tropical cyclones are powerful and destructive weather systems that form over warm tropical ocean basins, where sea surface temperatures are above 26.5 degree C. These storms are characterised by strong winds, heavy precipitation and storm surges and can cause significant damage to coastal communities and infrastructure.

Climatologically, tropical cyclones form mainly in the North Atlantic, East Pacific, West Pacific, South Pacific and the Indian Ocean. Out of 85 tropical storms that develop annually over the warm tropical oceans, more than half (45) of them intensify into tropical cyclones. The Western Pacific basin is the most active region for tropical cyclones and accounts for about a third of the world's tropical cyclones. The North Indian basin accounts for only about 4% of the global total, although it is one of the most vulnerable regions in the world to the effects of such cyclones.

The Saffir-Simpson (SS) hurricane wind scale, introduced in the early 1970s, is the most widely used metric for warning the public about the dangers of tropical cyclones. The SS hurricane wind scales are categorised by the maximum sustained wind speed at a height of 10 metres. Although most tropical cyclone-related deaths are caused by storm surge and heavy rainfall, wind hazard remains an important metric for communicating risk to the public and a critical metric

Global warming intensifies tropical cyclones

Tropical cyclones form mainly in the North Atlantic, East Pacific, West Pacific, South Pacific and the Indian Ocean

- Saffir-Simpson (SS) hurricane wind scale introduced in the early 1970s has five categories. Wind speed exceeding 252 km/hour fall under category 5

- Long-term data indicate that the frequency of intense tropical cyclones is

Increasing occurrence: Five tropical storms with wind speeds over 309 km/hour occurred in the last nine years.

- increasing in the large ocean basins

- For every degree of warming, an increase in wind speed of 12% is observed in the strongest cyclones

- Tropical cyclones with wind speed far exceeding category 5 are becoming common. A new category 6 scale for wind speed over 309 km/hour may be required

- The Western Pacific

basin is the most active region for tropical cyclones, and accounts for about a third of all tropical cyclones. The north Indian basin accounts for about 4%

- At present, the north Indian Ocean is not very vulnerable to category 6 storms. As global warming continues, category 6 storms may occur here in near future

- There is a need to revisit India's disaster management strategy for tropical cyclones and the early warning systems

WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



for measuring the impact of these cyclones. There are five categories on the SS hurricane wind scale – category 1 to category 5 – with category 5 wind speed exceeding 252 km/hour. The combined effects of wind, storm surge, and rainfall in a category 5 impact would completely raze any structure.

The sharp rise in man-made greenhouse gas emissions has led to global warming of the order of 1.10 degree C since pre-industrial times. The warming can be observed not only at the sea surface, but also in the depths of the ocean, which increases the heat content of the ocean and thus favours the intensification of tropical cy-

clones. Long-term data indicate that the frequency of intense tropical cyclones is increasing in the large ocean basins. For every degree of warming, an increase in wind speed of 12% is observed in the strongest cyclones, which corresponds to a 40% increase in destructive potential. As warm waters extend further poleward, cyclones are shifting poleward, with more storms forming at higher latitudes than in the past. A warmer atmosphere can hold more moisture, leading to heavier rainfall when tropical cyclones make landfall. As the oceans warm, cyclones also strengthen faster and spend more lifetime over the oceans. In 2023, tropi-

cal cyclone Freddy spent 37 days over the oceans, making it the longest-lived cyclones ever recorded.

Category 5

In a recent research paper published in the *Proceedings of National Academy of Sciences*, the authors document that storms are occurring at intensities well above Category 5 and that record wind speeds are likely to continue as the planet continues to warm. At the time of its introduction, the SS wind scale did not foresee the need for a tropical cyclone-beyond category 5. However, due to global warming, there is now a need to define a category 6 cyclone. The authors therefore proposed to

introduce a hypothetical modification of the SS wind scale to tie category 5 to peak wind speeds between 252-309 km/hour and to include an additional category 6 above 309 km/hour.

Observations indicate that of the 197 tropical cyclones categorised as category 5 in the 42-year period from 1980 to 2021, half occurred in the last 17 years of the period. Five of these storms which exceeded the hypothetical category 6 (with wind speeds of over 309 km/hour). Simulations of future climate change suggest that the annual exceedance of the category 6 threshold will increase even more in the regions where intense tropical cyclones currently occur. It is expected that the proposed 6th category of the SS wind scale could raise awareness of the dangers of large cyclones due to global warming.

At present, the North Indian Ocean is not as vulnerable to category 6 storms. However, as global warming continues unabated, there is a good chance that a category 6 storm with maximum wind speeds of over 309 km/hour may occur over the North Indian Ocean in the near future. Therefore, there is a need to revisit India's disaster management strategy for tropical cyclones and the early warning systems. (Madhavan Nair Rajeevan was former secretary to the Government of India and presently the Vice Chancellor, Atria University, Bengaluru)



Microbes may seed an autoimmune kidney disease

A member of the gut microbiome may help spark an autoimmune disease in the kidneys by leaking antigens that trigger the immune system, experiments on mice and samples from 118 people showed. Gut microbiomes of 33 patients with the disorder were skewed toward bacterial species that degrade mucin. The bacterium modified IgA1 and converted it into the deglycosylated form associated with IgA nephropathy. This created antigens that crossed from the intestines to the glomeruli region.



4 mpox vaccines in animals reveal correlates of protection

Scientists have made new discoveries about the effectiveness of four vaccines for the mpox virus – and have uncovered potential signs of immune activity that correlate with protection. Their head-to-head comparison could inform further research into safer and improved vaccines for mpox. All four vaccines protected the macaques from infections when exposed to the current outbreak strain of mpox. However, one vaccine provided almost complete protection.

Sprouting a sandalwood sapling



SPEAKING OF SCIENCE

D. Balasubramanian

Sandalwood hardly needs an introduction to the readers of *The Hindu*. It has been valued for many centuries, for its fragrant oil, its prized wood, and the many medicinal uses it has been put to. The tree that all this comes from, however, is not all that familiar. Growing in deciduous forests, it is a partial, or hemiparasite that needs four or five other trees growing around it. Under the ground, sandalwood roots form a haustorium that forms an octopus-like hold on the host tree's roots, from where water

and nutrients are taken.

The sandalwood fruit is probably even more unfamiliar. About 1.5 cm in diameter, the fleshy fruit is a shiny purplish black when ripe. The one seed inside is a hard, dry kernel, not the usual tough seed coat protecting a fleshy interior. This makes it difficult for the seed to survive beyond one season.

Both the above properties – the need for other trees in the early growth phase, and the seeds, which are short-lived and cannot be stored, have added to the overexploited tree's difficulties. This has led to a drastic fall in the number of sandalwood trees in the forests of South India. The IUCN has classified sandalwood as a vulnerable species. It is not surprising that Australia is



Ideal way: Passage through the digestive system of birds is good for the seeds as they have better chances of maturing into trees.

now the world's largest supplier of sandalwood and its oil.

Dispersal by birds

The fruit is bitter, and not to human tastes. But it is loved by birds. About 10 species, such as the Asian Koel, and the Gray Hornbill

swallow the fruit whole, and over time drop the seeds at great distances from the tree they feasted on. These birds are among India's larger frugivores, or eaters of fruit. The sandalwood tree's fruit is just right for the koels and hornbills. It has been esta-

blished that sandalwood trees that produce larger seeds usually end up with the seeds close by. Although the large seeds are better equipped for germination, birds cannot swallow those large seeds, and drop them off after pecking away at the flesh.

The passage through the digestive system is good for the seeds. The seeds now germinate very quickly and have better chances of maturing into trees. This is the reason why forests, and not plantations, are where we get to see a few mature sandalwood trees. Sadly, the thinning of forests has reduced bird populations, and therefore the chances of proper seed dispersal.

Can humans try to emulate birds? Researchers at the Kerala Agricultural University in Thrissur, work-

ing with European colleagues have tried various ways of priming sandalwood seeds for germination (*Forests*, 14:1076, 2023). Best results were obtained when they soaked freshly collected sandalwood tree seeds in a 5% solution of polyethylene glycol-6000 for two days. This interesting synthetic substance induces osmotic pressure on the cells of the seed and pushes the germination process forward. This is called osmopriming, and when done correctly is more effective than soaking in just water. The sprouting rate was 79% compared to 45% when just planting the seed.

(The article was written in collaboration with Sushil Chandani, who works in molecular modelling)



Question Corner

Tooth decay

When did an uptick in dental cavities in humans begin?

Researchers have recovered remarkably preserved microbiomes from two teeth dating back 4,000 years, found in an Irish limestone cave. Genetic analyses of these microbiomes reveal major changes in the oral microenvironment from the Bronze Age to today. The authors identified several bacteria linked to gum disease and provided the first high-quality ancient genome of *Streptococcus mutans*, the major culprit behind tooth decay. While *S. mutans* is very common in modern

mouths, it is exceptionally rare in the ancient genomic record. One reason for this may be the acid-producing nature of the species. This acid decays the tooth, but also destroys DNA and stops plaque from fossilising. While most ancient oral microbiomes are retrieved from fossilised plaque, this study targeted the tooth directly. Another reason for the scarcity of *S. mutans* in ancient mouths may be the lack of favourable habitats for this sugar-loving species.

Readers may send their questions / answers to questioncorner@thehindu.co.in

IN BRIEF



'CUB exceeds ₹1-lakh cr. total business milestone in FY24'

City Union Bank (CUB) has crossed a milestone in FY24 as the private sector bank's total business exceeded the ₹1 lakh-crore mark for the first time. The lender achieved this in its 120th year of operations. Total business of the bank crossed the ₹50,000-crore mark in FY17 with the second ₹50,000 crore coming just seven years later. In the December 2023 quarter, the bank's total business stood at ₹96,744 crore, and the lender reported a profit after tax of ₹253 crore.

'Unsold homes in 9 cities slid 7% in last 3 months on sales'

Unsold housing inventories fell 7% in the last three months across nine major cities to about 4.81 lakh units on higher sales than new supply, PropEquity said. Real estate data-analytic firm PropEquity data showed unsold housing stock slid to 4,81,566 units at the end of March this year from 5,18,868 units at the end of December 2023 across 9 major cities. The cities are Mumbai, Navi Mumbai, Thane, Delhi-NCR, Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Pune, Chennai and Kolkata.

Bengaluru, Mumbai lead in office space absorption: C&W

The Indian office market reported a net absorption of 11.5 million square feet (MSF) across the top 8 cities in Q1 24 (January-March quarter of 2024), as per the office-segment data released by Cushman & Wakefield (C&W). "This is the third-highest level recorded in the last five years, demonstrating a robust appetite for office space among businesses. Net absorption is a barometer of real demand or expansion of occupied space in the market," C&W said.

IT Act change yet to aid MSMEs

Section 43 b (h) of the IT Act allows payments due to MSMEs to be deducted if they were made within a stipulated time; experts note that while this will benefit MSMEs in the long-run, some buyers may choose to source from other suppliers

M. Soundariya Preetha
COIMBATORE

An intervention introduced in the Union Budget last year to ensure timely payments to micro- and small-scale manufacturing and service units is yet to help them and even hurting some.

Section 43 b (h) of the Income Tax Act says payments due to UDYAN-registered micro- and small-scale industries would be allowed as deduction only if the actual payment was made within the time stipulated in the MSME Act.



Payment rules: If MSMEs have a written agreement with a buyer, payments need to have been made within 45 days. REUTERS

Otherwise, the payment would be taxed as income. If a micro or small-scale unit had a written agreement with a medium- or large-scale industry for supply of components, spares, or any other product or service, the payment should be made by

the buyer within 45 days. If there was no agreement, the payment should be made within 15 days.

However, the risk for micro units was that the buyers would prefer to source from suppliers who were not UDYAN-registered, said B. Kandavel, organising secretary of the Federation of Tamil Nadu Powerloom Associations. For instance, weavers in Tamil Nadu supplying textile products to large buyers got paid once in three months or so. Buyers are now either reducing payment as the credit pe-

riod has dropped or are preferring unregistered suppliers, he said.

Still, MSMEs would benefit in the long run as they would get payments on time, asserted Anil Bhardwaj, secretary general of the Federation of Indian Micro, and Small & Medium Enterprises.

The intervention will aid MSMEs though it will take time for the system to settle down and may also temporarily affect the working capital of buyers, said V. Thirugnanam, president, Coimbatore District Small Industries Association.



Nirmala Sitharaman

GDP set to grow 8% or more in Q4: Sitharaman

Reuters
NEW DELHI

India's gross domestic product (GDP) is on track to grow by 8% or more in the quarter ending March 31, Union Minister of Finance Nirmala Sitharaman said on Saturday.

The economy is expected to show the same rate of year-on-year expansion for the 2023/24 financial year, Ms. Sitharaman added, citing the impact of improved inflation management and macroeconomic stability.

"Hopefully the fourth quarter... will also have (growth) of 8% or above 8% resulting in 2023/24 having an average growth in GDP of 8% or over 8%," she said at an event in Mumbai.

GDP data for the January-March quarter is due to be released on May 31.

Asia's third-largest economy grew 8.4% in the October-December quarter, outpacing the 7.6% logged in the previous quarter.

India's economy is projected to grow at 7.6% in the current fiscal year, according to the latest government estimates.

Gem and jewellery exports to cross \$100 bn. soon: Ambani

Lalendu Mishra
MUMBAI

India's gem and jewellery industry would achieve exports of \$100 billion in a few years and Indian-designed jewellery would make its mark globally, Mukesh Ambani, Chairman and Managing Director, Reliance Industries Ltd., said on Friday.

"Evolving remarkably over the years, the industry has emerged as a leading player in the global luxury market, and as a pivotal contributor to India's export economy. It has also become a major generator of large-scale employment opportuni-



Mukesh Ambani

ties," Mr. Ambani said.

"As a result, the industry is poised to achieve exports of \$100 billion in the coming years from \$40 billion currently."

Vipul Shah, Chairman, Gem & Jewellery Export Promotion Council, said, "Today, India's exports continue to rise, our dom-

estic market flourishes, and our artisans inspire the world with their intricate creations. This progress is a direct reflection of the hard work, dedication, and collective vision of the industry stakeholders".

"We must empower our artisans, invest in research and development, and leverage technology to unlock new horizons of growth. As we mark the 50th India Gem & Jewellery Awards (IGJA), we not only applaud the remarkable achievements of individual exporters but also acknowledge the collective endeavours of the industry at large," he added.

Russian central bank lends more yuan under currency swap

Reuters
MOSCOW

Russia's central bank said it had provided banks with 2.5 billion Chinese yuan (\$346.25 million) for the equivalent 31.8 billion roubles on Friday under currency swap transactions.

The banks' maximum demand for yuan swaps was recorded on February 29, when the entire 10 billion yuan limit was used.

The central bank launched swap transactions for yuan and roubles in January 2023. The total amount of currency swap

operations last year was 59.7 billion Chinese yuan, the central bank said.

'Reserves sufficient'

The bank also said its liquid reserve assets were sufficient to maintain financial stability and perform necessary operations.

Opportunities for further diversification of reserve assets into currencies and financial instruments of "unfriendly" countries were limited by the risks inherent in these currencies and economies.

'Fashion industry should shun discounting, adopt hyper-personalisation'

Mini Tejaswi
BENGALURU

The fashion retail industry is contemplating moving away from "discounting" and embracing hyper-personalisation (close to bespoke model) to shore up its balance sheets and stop margin erosion, hinted industry captains.

Domain experts, who spoke at the India Fashion Forum (IFF), an industry intelligence summit, held in Bengaluru, further said several pressing challenges constantly confronted the industry and therefore urged the fashion retail community to move away from conventional discounting practices and embrace data-driven personalisation which may lead to better business impacts and enhanced customer satisfaction.

Suparna Mitra, CEO, Titan Watches & Wearables, highlighted the detrimental impact of unsold inventory resulting from heavy investments in large-scale production.

"The perpetual cycle of excess stock leading to discounted rates threatens the financial health of fashion businesses. However, a deeper understanding of consumer behavior presents a potential solution," she recommended.

Echoing similar sentiments, Shailesh Chaturvedi, Managing Director and CEO of Arvind Fashions cautioned the industry against discounting and commoditisation.

"Today's consumers are discerning and savvy. They recognise the facade of discounts and demand authenticity. Our industry must



New fads: Gen-AI, client-data algorithms will allow fashion brands to know consumer desires more precisely, says Chaturvedi. REUTERS

Experts noted the detrimental impact of unsold inventory resulting from heavy investments

transcend pricing and differentiate through innovation to remain competitive," he asserted.

By harnessing disruptive technologies such as generative AI and customer data algorithms, fashion brands would know consumer desires more precisely, Mr. Chaturvedi, who is also the Chairman of the India Fashion Forum, added.

Shivaneer Dutt, Director, Brand Marketing & Merchandising, Snapdeal, emphasised the critical role of personalised experiences in engaging discerning consumers.

"Tailored communication strategies driven by consumer data insights are essential for resonating deeply with today's audience," she said. According to participants, the integration of generative AI, from chat-

bots to personalised content creation and data visualisation is revolutionising marketing strategies and reshaping the entire fashion retail landscape in India and globally.

Value creator

Amid the evolving nature of consumer behaviour and the importance of leveraging technology to meet changing demands, technology would be the largest value creator, observed Saloni Nangia, President & MD of Technopak Advisors while adding, "AI will be an enabler and a disruptor, and sustainability will continue to hold importance."

Murali Balan, Co-founder of Tenovia, an e-com analytics firm, emphasised the transformative power of data analytics in guiding strategic decision-making. "Data-driven insights unlock opportunities for personalisation, enabling brands to offer bespoke experiences that transcend generic marketing approaches," he pointed out.



Chai Kings CEO Sadique (left) and COO S. Balaji are eyeing 1 lakh cups in sales daily.

Chai Kings eyes \$2-mn fundraise for expansion

N. Anand
CHENNAI

Chai Kings is planning to raise \$2 million to open 80 outlets in 18-20 months, said CEO Jahabar Sadique.

"We have initiated talks with venture capitalists to raise the much-needed funds [the lack of which] that derailed our expansion plans," he told *The Hindu*. "We need it during FY25 and FY26 to foray aggressively into neighbouring States," he added.

Currently, Chai Kings has 56 outlets of which 50 are in Chennai. As per the original plan, the B2C firm was to open more outlets in Chennai, Hyderabad and Bengaluru. But the plan couldn't take off on account of the pandemic.

"Before the pandemic, we were selling 25,000 cups per day. We have crossed the pre-COVID level and are selling around 30,000 cups. Our aim is to sell one lakh cups per day in 20 months," he said.

"The series A funding of ₹16 crore will help us to move into Bengaluru, Hyderabad and Tier-II cities of Tamil Nadu," said Chief Operating Officer S. Balaji. Chai Kings is likely to end FY24 with a revenue of ₹45 crore.

SMEs make big IPO splash; 28 firms raise ₹954 cr. in March

Suresh P. Ivengar
MUMBAI

Initial Public Offerings (IPOs) in the SME exchanges have been raining, with 28 companies raising ₹954 crore in March alone. In fact, the funds mopped up by SMEs have more than doubled to the highest-ever in this fiscal year to ₹6,300 crore against ₹2,235 crore logged in FY23.

According to exchange data, the number of companies tapping the capital market has also jumped sharply to 205, up from 125 in FY23.

Retail participation has steadily risen in the SME IPO segment despite SEBI fixing a minimum investment of ₹1 lakh against ₹15,000 in the main board IPO.

The S&P BSE SME IPO index has more than doubled in this fiscal to 52,725 points against 24,405 logged on April 3, 2023, outperforming the 25% surge in benchmark Sensex.

Investors rejoice

Some IPOs in the SME exchanges were oversubscribed multiple times and listed at a huge premium.

In January, Kay Cee Energy and Infra, which was seeking to raise ₹15 crore, received bids worth ₹1,052 crore. The company's shares, which were priced at ₹54 a piece, were listed at ₹252 on NSE Emerge. Kay Cee Energy is currently trading at ₹177 a share.

Similarly, Maxposure, a digital media and entertainment company, was out in the market to raise ₹20.26 crore after pricing



its shares at ₹33 a piece and received bids worth ₹13,256 crore, with the retail portion getting bids worth ₹6,990 crore.

Caution ahead

Market regulator SEBI has raised concerns about price manipulation in the SME segment and intends to enhance the disclosure mechanism to rein in the market's run-away euphoria.

Deepak Sharma, Founder and MD of Sarthi Capital Advisors, said SME Exchanges have become a good option for smaller businesses to raise capital and an opportunity for investors to invest in businesses that have huge potential to grow but also carry more risk than the larger business.

The trend for SME IPO is going to be progressive as there are many good businesses yet to hit the market and growing investors' appetite, he said.

Alok Haralalka, MD & CFO of Grete Corporate Services, said the growth in SME IPOs will increase in the coming months as the awareness and participation of funds houses has given confidence to investors.

(The writer is with *The Hindu businessline*)

Foreign brokerages, banks expect MPC to hold repo rate at 6.5%

K.R. Srivats
NEW DELHI

Foreign brokerages and banks expect the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) to keep the repo rate unchanged at 6.5% in the upcoming April 5 meeting. They also see the MPC retain its monetary policy stance of 'withdrawal of accommodation'.

They see the MPC keep the repo rate on hold even as the central bank continued to enjoy expanding space to cut interest rates, if needed.

Goldman Sachs Research and Morgan Stanley Research see the the RBI going in for two rounds of 25 basis-point cut in the second half of CY24. As inflation has remained largely within the comfort range of the central bank, the RBI has kept policy repo rates steady since March 2023.

Santanu Sengupta, Chief India Economist, Goldman Sachs India said, "With IHCY24 headline inflation still above the RBI's target, we maintain our view the RBI will keep the policy repo rate unchanged at 6.5% at the April 5 meeting, sounding optimistic on growth, acknowledging January-February average core inflation at 3.5%, but continue to reiterate the commitment to the 4% headline inflation target."

Two cuts

Goldman Sachs Research has forecast one 25 bps cut each in July-September and October-December quarters this year.

Rahul Bajoria, MD & Head of EM Asia (ex-China) Economics, Barclays, said, "Not much has changed



since the last MPC meeting in February, with the RBI overseeing an economy enjoying high growth and falling core inflation, amid stable macro stability parameters.

Repo on hold

"Against this backdrop, we expect the MPC to keep the repo rate on hold at 6.5% and maintain MPC at withdrawal of accommodation."

The RBI has dialled back its hawkishness on liquidity management since the February meeting, allowing weighted average call rates to drift lower, according to Mr. Bajoria.

Upasana Chachra, Chief India Economist, Morgan Stanley said in a recent research note it sees the RBI go in for two rate cuts of 25 bps each, but pushed the first rate cut forward from its earlier expectation of June to August/September.

"We further expect the RBI to retain its monetary policy stance (as signalled by the comment they will 'remain focused on withdrawal of accommodation to ensure that inflation remains within the target going forward, while supporting growth', Ms. Chachra said.

(The writer is with *The Hindu businessline*)

BEIJING

As Sri Lanka PM concludes visit, China vows to help island nation



China has said it would continue to support Sri Lanka, as the crisis-hit island nation's Prime Minister Dinesh Gunawardane on Saturday wrapped up a visit to Beijing to try to finalise a debt restructuring deal. Among other projects, the two sides agreed to "to promote the Port City Colombo and Hambantota Project". AFP

AUSTRIA

17 injured as river cruise ship hits concrete passageway



17 passengers were hurt when a Bulgarian river cruise ship lost steering and hit the sides of a lock on the Danube in Austria. The ship with 142 aboard, most of them from Germany, temporarily lost power to its electronics system and became unsteerable as it passed through narrow locks at 9:45 p.m. on Friday. AP

KATHMANDU

On Tibet visit, Nepal official calls for opening China border points



Nepal has urged China to reopen the 14 traditional border points with the Tibetan Autonomous Region not just for bilateral trade and commerce but for the movement of people too. Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs Narayan Kaji Shrestha is on his first visit to China after taking over office earlier in the month. PTI

BEIRUT

Death toll in Israeli air strikes on Syria climbs to 52: war monitor



The death toll in Israeli air strikes on Syria has risen to 52, including 38 soldiers and seven members of Lebanon's Hezbollah movement, a war monitor said on Saturday. Israeli strikes on targets in Syria have increased since Israel's war against the Hezbollah-allied Hamas group in the Gaza Strip broke out on October 7. AFP

Asia should prevent world from becoming an arena for geopolitical fighting, says China

Countries in Asia should jointly oppose unilateralism and self-serving practices, oppose picking sides and bloc confrontation and prevent the region and the world from becoming an arena for geopolitical fighting, says Zhao Leji, Chairman of the National People's Congress Standing Committee

Nikhil M. Babu
HAINAN

China's top legislator Zhao Leji has said that Asia has endured both "hot and cold" wars and they should prevent the world from becoming an arena for "geopolitical fighting", and welcomed all countries to board China's "express train" of development.

Mr. Zhao, Chairman of the National People's Congress (NPC) Standing Committee, was speaking at the opening session of the Boao Forum for Asia (BFA) Annual Conference 2024, an international organisation of 29 member states, including many leaders from Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) countries such as Sri Lanka.

Speaking at the same session, on March 28, Sri Lankan Prime Minister Dinesh Gunewardane, said



New vision: Zhao Leji speaks at the opening ceremony of Boao Forum of Asia in southern China's Hainan province on Thursday. AP

that Sri Lanka's port development has taken a new turn of "advanced" development with the assistance of China and it will "change the present scenario".

A day earlier, the Sri Lankan Prime Minister had said had pledged to develop the island nation's strategic deep sea port and the capital's airport after talks

with his counterpart in Beijing, according to AFP.

"Colombo port will become a hub of a newly developed port with financial instruments that could cater to the new demands that are growing among ourselves, among our countries, for development and investment, which is essential. This will change the present scenario

from East Asia to East Africa, and the blue seas that we all could work together for the future that we face in a successful and a great joint programme are what we look forward to," Mr. Gunawardane said.

Sri Lanka's southern sea port of Hambantota was handed to a Chinese state-owned company in 2017 on a 99-year lease for \$1.12 billion. India and the U.S. are both concerned that a Chinese foothold at the port could boost China's naval advantage in the Indian Ocean.

In December 2023, amid repeated messages from New Delhi, Colombo announced a year-long moratorium on foreign research vessels visiting Sri Lankan waters.

Mr. Zhao said that Asian countries have the fine tradition of helping each other in trying times and they have overcome one difficulty after another on their paths to development.

"Now in a phase of clamours for division and confrontation, it is essential that we stay independent, seek strength through unity, and continue to walk side by side with each other. (We should) jointly oppose unilateralism and self-serving practices, oppose picking sides and bloc confrontation and prevent this region and the world from becoming an arena for geopolitical fighting," he said.

Mr. Zhao called on all countries to transcend the "old mentality" of bloc confrontation and zero-sum games and practice genuine multilateralism to jointly build an open world economy. "We must oppose trade protectionism and all forms of erecting

barriers, decoupling, or severing of supply chains," he said.

Hot and cold wars

Mr. Zhao said people in Asia have endured both hot and cold wars, as well as hardships and tribulations, leading them to deeply cherish the value of peace. He added that China will make it more convenient for foreigners to work, study, and travel in China.

The BFA, which concluded on Friday, was held in Hainan – the southern most and the only tropical island province of China – in the South China Sea, not very far from the Philippines, amidst an ongoing tension between the two countries.

(This correspondent attended the Boao Forum for Asia at the invitation of the China Public Diplomacy Association)

President of Peru's home raided in luxury watch probe

Agence France-Presse
LIMA

Peruvian authorities raided President Dina Boluarte's home and the government palace early on Saturday as part of an ongoing corruption investigation related to undisclosed luxury watches.

The search was carried out "according to the court order," Colonel Harvey Colchado of the police told reporters. He would not say whether anything suspect had been found.

Authorities launched an investigation into Ms. Boluarte this month after a news outlet drew attention to pictures of her sporting luxury watches at events.

A news outlet had drawn attention to pictures of her sporting luxury watches at events

for Rolex watches that Ms. Boluarte had not publicly declared.

The raid "is for the purpose of search and seizure," the police said.

The embattled President was at the palace at the time, officials said.

Authorities launched an investigation into Ms. Boluarte this month after a news outlet drew attention to pictures of her sporting luxury watches at events.

Dutch drama



Dutch police officers detain a person near Cafe Petticoat, where several people were held hostage in Ede on Saturday. The suspect, who was previously known to police, had threatened the hostages with knives. Officials said there was no indication of a terrorist motive. REUTERS

Zardaris supersede Sharifs with most legislators from a family

Press Trust of India
LAHORE

With six members, the Zardaris have overtaken the Sharifs to hold the record for having the most number of lawmakers from a family in Pakistani politics after President Asif Ali Zardari and slain former Premier Benazir Bhutto's youngest daughter Aseefa was elected unopposed as a member of parliament.

First Lady

Ms. Aseefa Bhutto Zardari, 31, who is set to become



Aseefa Bhutto Zardari

the First Lady, had filed a nomination for the National Assembly seat NA-207 from the Shaheed Benazirabad (formerly Nawabshah) area of Sindh province for the bye-election scheduled for next month.

According to a notification issued by the Returning Office of the area, Ms. Bhutto Zardari was elected unopposed after three candidates who had filed papers against her withdrew their names from the contest.

It left her with no challenger and she was declared winner in her maiden electoral contest on Friday. The seat was vacated by her father Asif Ali Zardari after he was elected President.

Malaysia store attacked for offering 'Allah' socks

Agence France-Presse
KUALA LUMPUR

A Molotov cocktail was thrown at a store belonging to a Malaysian chain that had offered socks bearing the word "Allah" for sale, the police said on Saturday.

The incident came days after the mini-market chain's executives were charged with hurting religious feelings over the sale of the socks at another of its stores.

The police chief in Kuantan city in Malaysia's east, said the KK Super-

mart branch had been hit just before dawn, causing a small fire at the entrance of the store.

He said that the attack was "still under investigation, but we are not denying that it may be related to the incident involving stockings with the word Allah".

Employees put out the fire with an extinguisher and no injuries were reported, he said.

Islam is the official religion in Malaysia and Malay-Muslims make up more than two-thirds of the population of 34 million.

Russia unleashes new attacks as Ukraine sees another reshuffle

Associated Press
KYIV

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy dismissed a long-time aide and several advisers on Saturday in a continuing reshuffle while Russia unleashed fresh attacks overnight.

Mr. Zelenskyy dismissed top aide Serhiy Shefir from his post of first assistant, where he had served since 2019. The Ukrainian President also let go of three advisers, and two presidential representatives overseeing volunteer activities and soldiers' rights.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy has dismissed top aide Serhiy Shefir from his post of his first assistant

No explanation was given immediately for the latest changes in a wide-reaching personnel shake-up over recent months. It included the dismissal on Tuesday of Oleksii Danilov, who served as secretary of the National Security and Defence Council, and Valeriy

Zaluzhnyi as head of the armed forces on February 8. He was appointed Ukraine's Ambassador to the United Kingdom earlier this month.

Ukraine said on Saturday that Russia launched 12 Shahed drones overnight, nine of which were shot down, and fired four missiles into eastern Ukraine.

Russia unleashed a barrage of 38 missiles, 75 airstrikes and 98 attacks from multiple rocket launchers over the last 24 hours, Ukraine's armed forces said in social media posts.

LIGHTNING
LSG's Mayank cranks up pace, catches the eye on IPL debut



Mayank Yadav, the architect of LSG's win over PBKS on Saturday, represents Delhi in domestic cricket. In the 2023 Deodhar Trophy, he was the joint second-highest wicket-taker with 12 wickets in five innings while representing North Zone. The pacer registered 155.8 kph on the speed gun and clocked consistently in the high 140s.

CROSSING THE LINE
Fan wars should never take ugly route: Ashwin on Hardik incident



R. Ashwin came out in vehement support of the besieged Hardik Pandya after the MI captain was subjected to boos from the fans. Ashwin blamed this to the prevailing atmosphere of "fan wars" and "cinema culture". "Fan wars should never go this ugly. One should remember which country these players represent."

FOND MEMORIES
Cummins and Travis head back to their place of conquest



Australia's World Cup-winning captain Cummins, left, in pic, and Player-of-the-Final Head will return to the Narendra Modi Stadium, where they won the global title last November. "They had a smile. If you can associate a place with something that was good, it gives you a positive mindset," said SRH assistant coach Simon Helmot.

MOVING ON...
Kohli, Gambhir hug each other during RCB's clash against KKR



The IPL clash between RCB and KKR witnessed a heartfelt moment with Virat Kohli and Gautam Gambhir embracing each other. During RCB's encounter versus Lucknow in IPL 2023, Kohli and Gambhir got into a heated argument. In 2013, the two got into a heated fight, even pushing each other before being separated by teammates.

Mayank Yadav breathes fire as LSG subdues PBKS

De Kock, Pooran and Krunal propel the Lucknow side to 199 with the West Indian leading the team in place of 'Impact Player' Rahul who opens the innings but fails to get going

IPL-17
P.K. Ajith Kumar
LUCKNOW

He is quick. He is lightning quick, actually. Say hello to Mayank Yadav. He is that rare Indian cricketer: the genuine fast bowler. And he announced his arrival in stunning fashion.

Not merely the 21-year-old bowled the fastest ball of the season, he also took the first three wickets of Punjab Kings to help Lucknow Super Giants register a 21-run win – its first in the 17th edition of the IPL – at the Atal Bihari Vajpayee Stadium on Saturday night.

Spectacular start
Chasing 200 – that would have beaten the record for the highest IPL total at this venue, bettering the one made in the first innings of this match – the visitors were off to a spectacular start.

Captain Shikhar Dhawan (70, 50b, 7x4, 3x6) and Jonny Bairstow (42, 29b, 3x4, 3x6) put on 102



Top shows: De Kock gave Super Giants an energetic start with a half-century while Mayank Yadav's fiery spell derailed Kings' chase. SANDEEP SAXENA

inside 12 overs. The debutant Mayank had come on in the 10th over and his first ball clocked 147.1 kmph. The third ball was 150 kmph. And he became faster. The first ball of his second over recorded 155.8

kmph – the fastest of the season. Off the fourth, he had Bairstow caught at deep mid-wicket. In his next two overs, he had the Impact Player Prabhsimran Singh and then Jitesh Sharma also caught. He finished with

three for 27. No fast bowler since Umran Malik has excited Indian cricket as much. **Losing its way**
When Mohsin Khan removed Dhawan and Sam Curran off successive balls,

the Kings slumped to 141 for five in 16.3 overs. It was going to be a tough ask from then on. Earlier, the opening scene of the match proved a bit of a surprise. Out came Nicholas Pooran for the toss and announced

that the regular captain K.L. Rahul would play as an Impact Player. Rahul, whose straight six off Arshdeep Singh was one of the shots of this IPL so far, put on 35 for the first wicket with Quinton de Kock 54 (38b, 5x4, 2x6) in-

SCOREBOARD

LUCKNOW SUPER GIANTS
Quinton de Kock c Jitesh b Arshdeep 54 (38b, 5x4, 2x6), K.L. Rahul c Bairstow b Arshdeep 15 (9b, 1x4, 1x6), Devdutt Padikkal c Dhawan b Curran 9 (6b, 2x4), Marcus Stoinis b Rahul Chahar 19 (12b, 2x6), Nicholas Pooran b Rabada 42 (21b, 3x4, 3x6), Ayush Badoni c Bairstow b Curran 8 (10b), Krunal Pandya (not out) 43 (22b, 4x4, 2x6), Ravi Bishnoi c sub (Tanay) b Curran 0 (1b), Mohsin Khan run out 2 (1b), Naveen-ul-Haq (Impact Player in place of K.L. Rahul) (not out) 0 (0b); Extras (b-1, lb-1, w-5): 7; Total (for eight wks. in 20 overs): 199.

FALL OF WICKETS
1-35 (Rahul, 3.5 overs), 2-45 (Padikkal, 5.1), 3-78 (Stoinis, 8.4), 4-125 (de Kock, 13.1), 5-146 (Pooran, 15.1), 6-189 (Badoni, 18.4), 7-189 (Bishnoi, 18.5), 8-197 (Mohsin, 19.4).

PUNJAB KINGS BOWLING
Curran 4-0-28-3, Arshdeep 3-0-30-2, Rabada 4-0-38-1, Rahul Chahar 3-0-42-1, Brar 2-0-14-0, Harshal 4-0-45-0.

PUNJAB KINGS
Shikhar Dhawan c de Kock b Mohsin 70 (50b, 7x4, 3x6), Jonny

Bairstow c Stoinis b Mayank Yadav 42 (29b, 3x4, 3x6), Prabhsimran Singh (Impact Player in place of Arshdeep) c Naveen b Mayank Yadav 19 (7b, 1x4, 2x6), Jitesh Sharma c Naveen b Mayank Yadav 6 (9b, 1x4), Liam Livingstone (not out) 28 (17b, 2x4, 2x6), Sam Curran c Pooran b Mohsin 0 (1b), Shashank Singh (not out) 9 (7b, 1x4); Extras (lb-2, w-2): 4; Total (for five wks. in 20 overs): 178.

FALL OF WICKETS
1-102 (Bairstow, 11.4), 2-128 (Prabhsimran, 13.3), 3-139 (Jitesh, 15.4), 4-141 (Dhawan, 16.2), 5-141 (Curran, 16.3).

SUPER GIANTS BOWLING
M. Siddharth 2-0-21-0, Naveen 4-0-43-0, Mohsin 4-0-34-2, Krunal 3-0-26-0, Bishnoi 3-0-25-0, Mayank Yadav 4-0-27-3. **Toss:** LSG; **PoM:** Mayank Yadav. LSG won by 21 runs.

Next assignment

LSG: April 2 vs RCB Bengaluru, 7.30 p.m.
PBKs: April 4 vs GT Ahmedabad, 7.30 p.m.

May consider Shaw if he impresses: Ponting

S. Dipak Ragav
VISAKHAPATNAM

As Delhi Capitals searches for its first win of the tournament following defeats in the opening two games, the decision to bench Prithvi Shaw has come under scrutiny. But with its batting line-up appearing thin, head coach Ricky Ponting said Shaw could be considered for selection for the match against Chennai Super Kings.

"Our team make-up in the first game without (Anrich) Nortje allowed us to play four overseas batsmen. By doing that we pushed Mitchell Marsh to the top of the order, which pushed Prithvi out. We will look at Prithvi at training today and see how well he plays. If he impresses everybody, we will consider him for tomorrow (Sunday)," said Ponting.

"We feel that a really good game is just around the corner for us. In fact, I am sure we will have a more positive intent going into this game," added the former Australian skipper.

Meanwhile, CSK's bowling consultant, Eric Simmons, praised Rituraj Gaikwad's captaincy in the first two matches. "He is a very calm individual and a great student of the game. "As a captain, you need to understand the game and why you need to make those changes," he said.

In-form Super Kings has the edge over Capitals

S. Dipak Ragav
VISAKHAPATNAM

After two defeats on the road, Delhi Capitals will look for comfort at its temporary home ground for two games at the ACA-VDCA Stadium as it gears up for a stern test against table-topper Chennai Super Kings on Sunday.

The hosts will be acutely aware of the perils of not getting early wins on the board.

In 2023, their campaign was derailed by five losses out of the gate, from which they could never recover, and finished a lowly ninth in the table.

Over-reliant
Even as skipper Rishabh Pant is slowly finding his feet, the Capitals' batting seems over-reliant on openers David Warner and Mitchell Marsh.

It will be interesting to see if the team plays destructive opener Prithvi Shaw to strengthen its batting line-up.

Capitals have a few headaches even on the bowling front, with the pacers leaking runs in the death overs in the first two matches.

Well-rounded squad
Meanwhile, Super Kings will look to continue their winning run and hold the edge, thanks to a well-rounded squad. The depth in the batting



Zooming in: The way Dube has been hitting the ball, it seems he sees it as big as this one. K.R. DEEPAK

line-up has allowed its batters to be aggressive throughout the innings, putting the opposition bowlers under the pump.

Three left-handers in the top six, including the in-form Shivam Dube, also give the Chennai outfit a tactical advantage to neutralise Capitals' left-arm

spin duo of Kuldeep Yadav and Axar Patel.

The Super Kings' new overseas picks have all performed admirably in the first two games and the only challenge is whether they would be able to adapt quickly to the conditions away from home.

TODAY'S MATCHES

<p>Ahmedabad, 3.30 p.m.</p> <p>HEAD-TO-HEAD</p> <p>Played: 3</p> <p>GT 2 SRH 1</p> <p>PREVIOUS MEETING</p> <p>GT won by 34 runs, 2023</p>	<p>Visakhapatnam, 7.30 p.m.</p> <p>HEAD-TO-HEAD</p> <p>Played: 29</p> <p>DC 10 CSK 19</p> <p>PREVIOUS MEETING</p> <p>CSK won by 77 runs, 2023</p>
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LIVE ON STAR SPORTS 1 (SD & HD) & JIO CINEMA

Titans, Sunrisers will look to surmount bowling woes

N. Sudarshan
AHMEDABAD

With a win and a loss each, there is little separate Gujarat Titans and Sunrisers Hyderabad. Yet, it is the latter that will take the field with more confidence when they meet at the Narendra Modi Stadium on Sunday.

GT, after opening with a nervous six-run win over Mumbai Indians, suffered a 63-run drubbing at Chennai Super Kings' hands that sent its net run-rate south. SRH, following the narrow four-run defeat to Kolkata Knight Riders, raked up IPL's highest-ever total (277) before going on to beat MI by 31 runs.

Stark contrast
The contrast is especially stark in the way the teams have batted.

GT has found middle-overs acceleration tough, with the likes of Sai Sudharsan, Vijay Shankar, Azmatullah Omarzai and David Miller unable to bat with freedom.

Australian wicketkeeper-batter Matthew Wade will be welcomed back into the squad, but to fit him in, the think-tank will have much tinkering to do.

For SRH, on the other hand, Abhishek Sharma, Heinrich Klaasen, Travis Head and Aiden Markram have been at their marauding best, helping their side breach the 200-run mark twice in succession.



Aiming high: Gill will look to pull his weight while Abhishek will be keen to rock again. VIJAY SONEJI

Points Table

	M	W	L	PTS	NRR
Chennai Super Kings	2	2	0	4	1.979
Kolkata Knight Riders	2	2	0	4	1.047
Rajasthan Royals	2	2	0	4	0.800
Sunrisers Hyderabad	2	1	1	2	0.675
Lucknow Super Giants	2	1	1	2	0.025
Punjab Kings	3	1	2	2	-0.337
Royal Challengers	3	1	2	2	-0.711
Gujarat Titans	2	1	1	2	-1.425
Delhi Capitals	2	0	2	0	-0.528
Mumbai Indians	2	0	2	0	-0.925

Bowling is an area where both GT and SRH have to improve. A better performance will be expected from the seasoned Umesh Yadav, whom GT is banking on in the absence of Mohammed Shami but has gone for more than 10-an-over. SRH, meanwhile,

will look to not concede in excess of 200 again.

This being an afternoon tie, dew will have negligible effect. But the sweltering summer heat will test endurance levels, with temperatures expected to hover around 40°C around start-time.

You have to back the players, says Kirsten

N. Sudarshan
AHMEDABAD

Gujarat Titans batting coach and mentor Gary Kirsten was firm in his belief that his team's top-order will be back to its fiery best, ahead of the Sunday afternoon clash against Sunrisers Hyderabad here.

In two outings so far, GT has come up with middling totals – 168 against Mumbai Indians and 143 against Chennai Super Kings – and has been unable to switch gears after decent starts.

"Our top-order has done well for us [in the past]," insisted Kirsten. "Sai Sudharsan got 96 (47b) in the final last year. If you blow hot and cold and get into crisis-management because you haven't won a game, you can get into trouble very quickly."

"It is a high-risk game, and while players make an error or don't score, you have to back [them] believing what they can do."

SRH, meanwhile, has scored runs by the truckload, but has also conceded aplenty. "We would look at improving our defensive bowling," said assistant coach Simon Helmot. "When we won in 2016, good defensive economy was one of our best aspects. But with the Impact Player rule, it is difficult. A new batter comes to the crease and teams are still attacking."

INBRIEF



Sri Lanka's top-order makes merry on opening day

A top-order batting blitz brought Sri Lanka to 314 for four and left the tourists firmly in command on the first day of the second and final Test against Bangladesh in Chittagong on Saturday.

The scores: Sri Lanka 314/4 in 90 overs (Kusal Mendis 93, Dimuth Karunaratne 86, Nishan Madushka 57, Dinesh Chandimal batting 34) vs Bangladesh. **Toss:** Sri Lanka.

Clinical East Zone marches into the semifinals

East Zone romped to an innings and 120-run win over North East Zone and booked a spot in the semifinals of the Senior Women's Inter Zonal Multi-Day Trophy in Pune on Saturday. It bowled out North East for 108 and 157 in the two innings after putting up 385 for eight declared.

Rithvik Bollipalli & Niki Poonacha in Challenger final

Rithvik Bollipalli and Niki Poonacha defeated Ryan Seggerman and Patrik Trhac of USA 6-3, 6-4 in the doubles semifinals of the \$82,000 Challenger tennis at San Luis Potosi, Mexico. In the \$40,000 ITF women's in Kofu (Japan), Rutuja Bhosale and Ankita Raina lost 6-3, 7-5 in the doubles final to Erina Hayashi and Saki Imamura.

The results: €148,625 Challenger, Naples: Doubles, quarterfinals: Theo Arribage (Fra) & Victor Cornea (Rou) bt Arjun Kadhe & Jeevan Nedunchezhiyan 6-3, 6-2.

\$82,000 Challenger, San Luis Potosi (Mexico): Doubles, semifinals: Rithvik Bollipalli & Niki Poonacha bt Ryan Seggerman & Patrik Trhac (USA) 6-3, 6-4.

\$40,000 ITF women, Kofu (Japan): Doubles, final: Erina Hayashi & Saki Imamura (Jpn) bt Rutuja Bhosale & Ankita Raina 6-3, 7-5.

\$25,000 ITF women, Terrassa (Spain): Doubles, final: Nika Radisic (Slo) & Anita Wagner (Bih) bt Vvonne Cavalle-Reimers (Esp) & Vasanti Shinde 7-5, 7-6(7).



Sinner to meet Dimitrov in Miami Open final

Italy's Jannik Sinner destroyed defending champion Daniil Medvedev 6-1, 6-2 in just 69 minutes on Friday to reach the final of the ATP Miami Open, where he will take on Grigor Dimitrov. Bulgarian Dimitrov made his third Masters 1000 series final beating fourth-seeded Alexander Zverev 6-4, 6-7(7), 6-4. The win means Dimitrov will return to the top ten in the ATP rankings for the first time since 2018, his 260 week wait is the third longest in the history of the rankings. "I'm happy about this season - who wouldn't be happy?" Sinner said. "I know the players will get to know me more and study me so I have to be ready." Sinner, 22, began his revenge against Medvedev for last year's Miami final by beating him in the Australian Open final in January - rallying from two sets down - and setting the stage for a wonderful 2024 campaign. "This year, I have another chance," Sinner said in the on-court interview. "I don't think he played his best tennis and I tried to stay focused and in my rhythm."



National champion Sitwala enters pre-quarterfinals

National champion Dhruv Sitwala defeated Arun Agrawal 979-399 and Dhvaj Haria beat Englishman Rob Hall 1055-425 in the pre-quarterfinals of the all-India CCI Billiards Classic in Mumbai on Saturday.

The results (pre-quarterfinals): David Causier (Eng) bt Kamal Chawla 1422-306; S. Shrikrishna bt Sourav Kothari 492-473; Raayan Razmi bt Siddharth Parikh 606-519; Dhvaj Haria bt Rob Hall (Eng) 1055-425; Dhruv Sitwala bt Arun Agrawal 979-399; Peter Gilchrist (Sin) bt Rohan Jambusaria 900-493; Peter Sheehan (Eng) bt Rupesh Shah 738-583; Pankaj Advani bt Aditya Agrawal 1236-428.

To play international cricket at a slightly later age a blessing: Mitchell

The all-rounder feels the time allowed him to understand the type of player he wanted to be; he is happy to play a similar role at CSK

IPL-17

S. Dipak Ragav
VISAKHAPATNAM

By contemporary standards, Daryl Mitchell is a late bloomer, making his international debut only at 28. But since his first game in 2019, the big-hitting all-rounder quickly established himself as a regular for New Zealand across formats. Last year, he hit the jackpot when Chennai Super Kings shelled out ₹14 crore to secure his service in the player auction. Though he had to bide his time to make it to the big league, Mitchell saw the bright side of it.

"To play international cricket at a slightly later age is a blessing. It allowed me to learn my game at the

domestic level over some time and work out not only the cricketer that I want to be and how I want to play but also the person I want to be off the field," said Mitchell during a conversation with select media recently.

Spin-hitter

A striking aspect of his game is his ability to play spinners well despite growing up in conditions where spin doesn't play a significant role. It was evident last year during the ODI World Cup when he scored 552 runs, often hitting the spinners down the ground.

"It's again a blessing that it allowed me to take a while to get to these stages where I could work out how I wanted to go about things. I'm 6'3" and 100 kg, so it's about making

sure I use my size and base

and finding ways to put pressure back on the spinners in my way," explained Mitchell on how he developed his game against spin.

The 32-year-old will have a crucial role for Super Kings in the middle-order and has already made an impact with both bat and ball in the first two games.

"The cool thing about batting in the middle order is it's never the same. I can adapt to different situations, work out ways to keep extending partnerships, and put pressure back on the bowlers.

"It is something I pride myself on. Here at CSK, it's doing that sort of 4-5 role, managing the middle and getting us positioned to allow the big boys at the end to try and launch it," he added.



Comfort zone: Mitchell feels playing in the middle-order brings out the best in him. K.R. DEEPAK

AIFF executive committee member arrested for alleged physical assault on women players

FOOTBALL

Neeladri Bhattacharjee
CHENNAI

Indian football was rocked by further controversy when Deepak Sharma, a member of the All India Football Federation (AIFF) Executive Committee was arrested on Saturday evening for allegedly assaulting two women players of Khad FC physically in a drunken state.

The incident took place on Thursday night (March 28) in Mapusa, Goa. The players had filed a complaint on Friday with the AIFF and later an FIR with the police.

Himachal Pradesh's Khad FC is currently playing in the inaugural edition of Indian Women's League 2.

After the Goa Football Federation (GFA) filed a complaint on Friday, the local police started investigating the case against Deepak, who is also the general secretary of the Himachal Pradesh Football Association.

"Acting on this complaint, an FIR was registered at the Mapusa Police Station under sections 354A, 323 and 341 of the Indian Penal Code. Also, in this case, the main accused, who has been identified as Deepak Sharma, has been arrested," Akshat Kaushal, the Superintendent of Police of North Goa, said.

The AIFF, after an urgent meeting under president Kalyan Chaubey on Saturday, formed a three-member committee to submit a report on the issue in seven days.

Taking cognizance of the matter, Union Sports Minister Anurag Thakur tweeted. "The Ministry of Sports has taken a serious note of an alleged physical assault upon women footballers by an official during the ongoing Indian Women's League in Goa."

The incident became public on the morning of March 29 and the match commissioner, Sujesh Rajan, reached out to the GFA for quick action.

"In the morning, I got a call from the Match Commissioner saying that there was a complaint," Jonathan D'Souza, the vice president of GFA, told *The Hindu*.

"So, the General Secretary and the Match Commissioner went to the place where the girls were staying and they did a preliminary investigation. They forwarded their re-

port to the AIFF."

Deepak was the only male in the contingent, as confirmed by GFA's secretary Adlear D'Cruz, who was one of the people to conduct the preliminary investigation.

"He (had) started drinking right from the time they (started travelling) in the tempo traveller in Himachal Pradesh.

"He was drinking openly and was the only male in the vehicle and was fully drunk right from that day," he told *The Hindu*.

"He assaulted both of them and three girls were witnesses.

"He just barged into the room and started assaulting them."

The girls had also accused the team manager, Nandita Sharma - who is the accused's wife - of 'defending' Deepak.

Sikki-Sumeeth pair bows out in semifinals

SPAIN MASTERS

Press Trust of India
MADRID

India's challenge in the Madrid Spain Masters Super 300 tournament ended here on Saturday after the mixed doubles pair of N. Sikki Reddy and B. Sumeeth Reddy crashed out in the semifinals.

The Indonesian pair of Rinov Rivaldy and Pitha Haningtyas Mentari did not have to work too hard as they prevailed 21-17, 21-12 over the Indian duo in a contest lasting only 29 minutes.

This was the first meeting between the two mixed doubles pairs.

N. Sikki Reddy and B. Sumeeth Reddy had earlier beaten Indonesia's Rehan Naufal Khusarjanto and Li-

sa Ayu Kusumawati in the quarterfinal on Friday, beating the fourth seeded pair 14-21, 21-11, 21-17.

On Friday, Supanida Katethong defeated P.V. Sindhu 24-26, 21-17, 22-20.

The results: (Indians unless specified):

Mixed doubles: (semifinals): Rinov Rivaldy & Pitha Mentari (Ina) beat N. Sikki Reddy & B. Sumeeth Reddy 21-17, 21-12.

On Friday:

Mixed doubles: (Quarterfinals): N. Sikki Reddy & B. Sumeeth Reddy beat Rehan Khusarjanto & Lisa Kusumawati (Ina) 14-21, 21-11, 21-17.

Women's singles: (Quarterfinals): Supanida Katethong (Tha) beat P.V. Sindhu 24-26, 21-17, 22-20.

Men's doubles: Junaidi Arif & Roy Yap (Hkg) beat M.R. Arjun & Dhruv Kapila 21-19, 21-23, 21-17.

Women's doubles: Chia Hsin & Teng Hsun (Tai) beat Ashwini Ponnappa & Tanisha Crasto 21-23, 21-17.



Masterclass in defence: OFC's Ahmed Jahouh, right, and BFC's Siva Sakthi are up against each other in a game which saw neither side give an inch. K. MURALI KUMAR

Goalkeepers hog limelight in BFC-OFC stalemate

ISL

Ashwin Achal
BENGALURU

Goal-line clearances and sharp goalkeeper saves were the order of the day, as Bengaluru FC (BFC) and Odisha FC kept clean sheets in their ISL match at the Sree Kanteerava Stadium here on Saturday.

BFC (22 points) is sixth on the points table, while OFC is third. The result handed a jolt to Odisha's hopes of clinching the

League Winners Shield, as the side is now five points behind leader Mumbai City FC (41 points). The back-line scrambles began early, when Odisha defender Mourtada Fall cleared Oliver Drost's shot off the line.

BFC goalkeeper Gurpreet Sandhu was then called into action, sticking his leg out to parry Jerry Lalrinzuala's firm strike.

Odisha's Roy Krishna had the best chance of the game, when he found himself in a one-on-one battle with Sandhu. Krishna, a former BFC player, got past

Sandhu, but Shankar Sampingiraj sprinted back to make a desperate block.

More defensive excellence was in store in the second-half, when Odisha's Amey Ranawade booted a dangerous chip from Javier Hernandez in front of goal. Odisha custodian Amrinder Singh also made a couple of strong saves, denying an invigorated BFC in the final few minutes.

The result: BFC 0 drew with Odisha FC 0. **At Jamshedpur:** Jamshedpur 1 (Javier 45) drew with Blasters 1 (Diamantakos 23).

Japan puts it across India in title clash

TENNIS

Sports Bureau

Japan defeated India 2-0 in the final of the WJT Asia-Oceania under-14 boys tennis tournament at Kuching (Malaysia) on Saturday.

Slow start

Hruthik Katakam looked set to force the deciding doubles after Tavish Pahwa lost the first singles, but Takahiro Kawaguchi overcame a slow start to win

1-6, 6-4, 6-4, in sealing a 2-0 victory for Japan.

Incidentally, Japan had scored a 2-0 victory over India in the league stage earlier.

India had assured itself of a berth in the World Group competition to be staged at a later date in Europe.

The results (final):

Japan bt India 2-0 (Shintaro Ogaki bt Tavish Pahwa 6-2, 6-3; Takahiro Kawaguchi bt Hruthik Katakam 1-6, 6-4, 6-4).

VFI to conduct trials for Asian volleyball championships

Sports Bureau
KOCHI

The ad-hoc committee for the Volleyball Federation of India will conduct open selection trials to pick players for the Asian volleyball championships at the SAI Southern Centre, Bengaluru, on the following dates - under-18 men: April 8 (reporting time 9 a.m.), under-20 men: April 9 (9 a.m.), senior men: April 10, 11 & 12 (reporting

on April 10, 9 a.m.).

The trials are open to all and interested players must email the scanned copy of the registration form to adhoc.committee.vfi@gmail.com by 1 p.m. on April 6.

Players must bring their passport (original and a self-attested copy and five passport-size photos). For further details, call Chetan (98101 95489).

Real Kashmir's victory confirms NEROCA's relegation

I-LEAGUE

Press Trust of India
SRINAGAR

Real Kashmir FC dished out a fine performance to outclass NEROCA FC 3-0 in the I-League here on Saturday, the result relegating the Manipur outfit to the second division following a poor season.

Goals from Real Kashmir's Gnohere Krizo (35th minute), Hyder Yousuf (45th) and Shaher Shaheen (67th) sealed NEROCA's fate.

The loss left the Orange Brigade in the 12th spot, with 13 points from 21 matches.

Challenges

Its record of four wins, one draw, and 16 losses reflects the challenges it faced throughout the season.

The other team to have been relegated is TRAU FC.

The results:

At Srinagar: Real Kashmir 3 (Gnohere Krizo 35, Hyder Yousuf 45, Shaher Shaheen 67) bt NEROCA. **NEROCA relegated to second division.**

At Naihati: Mohammadan SC 1 (Samndip Mandi 8-og) drew with Inter Kashi (Mario Barco 82).

TELANGANA

Pill predicament

With counterfeit drugs inundating Telangana's pharmaceutical market, authorities are waging a multifaceted battle, because of regulatory gaps and inadequate monitoring systems.

Siddharth Kumar Singh highlights the dire consequences on public health and the need for stricter enforcement measures



Counterfeit medications, also known as spurious drugs, are illicitly manufactured medicines designed to mimic legitimate products, often those belonging to well-established brands. These fraudulent drugs may even display fabricated information about non-existent manufacturers.

The *mehendi* was too dark to be real. Manufactured by Shakil Industries in Hyderabad, the 'Special Karachi Mehndi' cones were a popular choice among customers for their rich colour and allure. Yet unknown to many, they concealed a dangerous secret – the material in the cones contained picramic acid, a synthetic dye which can cause skin irritation and allergic reactions, ranging from redness and itching to severe symptoms like swelling and blistering.

"We source our *mehendi* (henna) powder from various States such as Rajasthan, Haryana, and Maharashtra. At times, we obtain it from the Old City area of Hyderabad," says Adesh, a *mehendi* artist from Secunderabad. He points out that trust is fundamental in their business since artists cannot always determine if the powder contains harmful chemicals. "But many customers have shared their experiences of skin irritation and allergy after applying *mehendi*," he adds.

Earlier this year, officials of the Drugs Control Administration (DCA) raided the cottage industry in Hyderabad's Mehdiapatnam area following information about the unnaturally dark henna. The discovery of the hazardous chemical in *mehendi* cones is just one of the challenges faced by the DCA, amid a surge in counterfeit drugs and cosmetic products in Telangana.

In another raid conducted in February, DCA officials found eight varieties of ayurvedic medicines being distributed in the market with misleading claims on their labels. These claims purported their effectiveness in treating a range of conditions such as diabetes, kidney stones, impotence, obesity, asthma, menstrual disorders, and optical ailments.

Among the confiscated products was the 'Diab Amrit capsule', packaged in boxes containing 30 tablets. Its label proclaims it as an ayurvedic remedy for diabetes. According to the instructions, consuming one capsule twice daily with water, 15 minutes before lunch and dinner, alongside a diet rich in fruits and vegetables while avoiding fried and processed foods, purportedly aids in insulin production and naturally regulates blood sugar levels.

Other seized items included 'Stone Crush Capsules' and 'Stone Crush Syrup' for kidney stone treatment, 'Sleemocare kit powder and capsule' for obesity, 'Sperm grow kit care and capsule' for impotency, 'Migrocare capsules' for vision irregularities and ocular pressure, 'Cysto care syrup' for menstrual irregularities, and 'Asthma care capsules' for asthma management.

Addressing subsequent steps following the raid, Drugs Inspector K. Someshwar of Nalgonda region stated that they have issued a notice to the manufacturer, since the label printing is done directly by them. Once the manufacturer's identity is verified, appropriate legal action would be pursued against them, he had said.

However, even after Telangana DCA seized medicines manufactured by Lifecare Ayurvedic in Rajasthan, these falsified drugs continue to be sold across multiple online platforms.

Drug regulation

Regulating drugs in India involves navigating a complex legal framework primarily governed by the Drugs and Cosmetics Act, 1940, overseen by various ministries, including the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. This legislation establishes a network of regulatory authorities at

In many instances, the seized counterfeit drug had no active ingredients whatsoever. This presents grave danger as patients unwittingly administer what they believe to be medication, but receive no therapeutic benefit.

V.B. KAMALASAN REDDY,
Director General of Telangana DCA

both the Central and State levels. Despite drug regulation falling under the jurisdiction of the Central government, 'public health' is constitutionally a State subject in India, granting State governments significant control over drug regulation. Statutory bodies known as State Drug Regulatory Authorities (SDRAs) are established under the 1940 Act, to oversee drug regulation within their respective States.

According to a member of the Indian Medical Association (IMA) in Telangana, while the preparation of a new drug necessitates approval from the Central government, vulnerabilities arise at the State level. State drug control bodies frequently struggle with understaffing and inadequate monitoring systems, creating opportunities for companies to introduce spurious drugs into the market sans thorough scrutiny.

Counterfeit medications, also known as spurious drugs, are illicitly manufactured medicines designed to mimic legitimate products, often those belonging to well-established brands. The primary objective is to deceive people and capitalise on the popularity of genuine medications. These fraudulent drugs may even display fabricated information about non-existent manufacturers, creating a false appearance of legitimacy for fictitious companies.

Apart from their failure to effectively treat targeted medical conditions, spurious drugs can lead to severe consequences for patients over time. Director-General of Telangana DCA V.B. Kamalasan Reddy says that in numerous instances of seized counterfeit medications, they found that those contain no active ingredients whatsoever. "This presents grave danger as patients unwittingly administer what they believe to be medication, and yet receive no therapeutic benefit. Instead, the absence of active ingredients in these deceptive drugs poses serious risks to their health, potentially leading to deterioration," he adds.

Faking it

Dr. Kiran Madala, Professor and head of Anaesthesia department at the Government Medical College in Nizamabad, Telangana, states that according to the World Health Organization, substandard medicine loses its quality attributes, while falsified medicine intentionally misrepresents its composition, identity, or source. "Both types may contain incorrect ingredients and could have been manufactured in unhygienic conditions, rendering them ineffective for their intended purposes and potentially harmful.



Identifying falsified medical products is exceedingly difficult since they often closely resemble authentic ones," says Dr. Madala.

He attributes the prevalence of such products in the market to three key factors – constrained access pertaining to issues related to availability, acceptability, and affordability of the product; technical capacity concerning the ability to detect those products; and poor governance, characterised by corruption, unethical practices, and weak administrative structures.

Quacks often resort to prescribing excessive doses of antibiotics and steroids, which can lead a patient to be immuno-compromised.

DR. RAJEEV NAIK,
Member, Telangana State Medical Council

While substandard medicines may not immediately exhibit negative effects, the unpredictable nature of spurious drugs, where consumers are unaware of the actual contents, poses a significant health hazard.

Staying alert and aware

Consumers must remain vigilant against counterfeit drugs, says P. Santosh, a drug inspector. To identify potentially spurious medications, one should compare with previously used products from the same manufacturer, and look for differences

in packaging and labelling. Any variations in size, weight, colour, or embossing could signal counterfeit production, as authentic medicines are manufactured with precision.

"Spelling and labelling errors should also raise concerns, along with discrepancies in manufacturing and expiry dates across packaging components. Visual inspection for discoloration, degradation, or unusual odours is crucial, along with ensuring uniformity in blister packs or bottles," the inspector adds.

A DCA official says most of the seized drugs in Telangana originate from manufacturing facilities located in Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, and specific areas within the National Capital Region (NCR), such as Haryana and Rajasthan. Manufacturing activities are not widespread in Telangana per se. These drugs are then distributed across the country, including Telangana. The official highlights a regulatory loophole, citing lack of oversight by regulatory bodies in those States. "Our jurisdiction is limited to Telangana and not beyond that," the officer explains.

In recent months, the DCA has also intensified its efforts to check quacks. Dr. Rajeev Naik, a member of Telangana State Medical Council, highlights the repercussions of having unqualified individuals within the medical community. "Such people frequently contribute to misdiagnosis. Quacks often resort to prescribing excessive doses of antibiotics and steroids, which can lead a patient to be immuno-compromised," he says. While there may be no immediate side-effects of a quack's diagnosis, the long-term consequences on one's health could be severe, he warns. For instance, if someone with joint pain receives a prescription for steroids without proper examination, the pain might temporarily subside. However, the long-term effects could manifest after a year, resulting in enduring damage to health.

Dr. Naik also asserts that the proliferation of quacks is partly attributed to the irregular recruitment of doctors by the State health department. "If qualified doctors are regularly recruited, they could be deployed to even the most remote areas, thereby reducing the likelihood of quacks operating in those regions," he adds.

Discussing future actions, Reddy says that the DCA is cognisant of the widespread marketing of spurious medicines in Telangana and is actively addressing it by deploying specialised teams throughout the State. "Raids will continue, and we will maintain the momentum in combating the issue," he avers.



DCA team raiding a quack-run clinic from where they seized 59 varieties of medicines; (above) officials taking stock of the seized bottles of 'Saheth Care Powder', which claims to treat diabetes and hypertension, following a raid in Hyderabad.



ARUNACHAL PRADESH

The Indian Army connects Arunachal Pradesh

There is a buzz of activity in the State beyond the Kameng area as India speeds up efforts to improve infrastructure and connectivity along the Line of Actual Control with China. **Dinakar Peri** finds that the building of bridges and military facilities has military and civilian advantages, boosting tourism and quickening the Army's movements

Denwa Meyor, 40, and Kunchok Dolma Meyor, 29, are residents of Kibithoo, one of the easternmost villages in Anjaw district of Arunachal Pradesh. Inhabited by people of the Meyor tribe, it is located about 7-8 km from the Line of Actual Control (LAC), the contested line that separates India and China. Their husbands work as porters with the Indian Army, like many men here. Denwa has two children, a 13-year-old daughter and a four-year-old son. Her daughter is in a hostel in Hayuliang, about 135 km away, as Kibithoo's school runs only until Class 8 and English-medium education is limited in the area. Kunchok has a two-and-half-year-old son. He plays in the sun, oblivious of his mother's worry about his education.

"We want better education [closer home], and in English," says Denwa. The State-run hostel costs ₹60,000-₹70,000 a year and making the monthly trip to see her daughter is expensive.

Over the past year, the village of about 130 residents has witnessed its Primary Health Centre and residences of the schoolteachers being upgraded, and concrete tracks being laid under the Central government's Vibrant Villages Programme (VVP).

Nijum Manyu, 32, a contractual government teacher from Tezu, 245 km away, who got his first posting in Kibithoo three years ago, says there are four teachers, and the school is being renovated, with a new badminton court as well.

The Army's demarcation
For administrative purposes, the Army classifies Arunachal as Kameng, derived from the name of the river that flows through the State. Tawang district is part of the Kameng area, while the remaining part of the State is considered separate and was earlier referred to as the Rest of Arunachal Pradesh (RALP).

Of the 3,488-km-long LAC, 1,346 km falls in the eastern sector, comprising Sikkim and Arunachal. While the Tawang and Kameng areas are under the Army's IV Corps, headquartered at Tezpur, RALP is under the III Corps, which is based at Dimapur. Kameng and Tawang have seen development in the last 10-15 years, with the remaining areas only now catching up with the kind of infrastructure that China possesses.

The VVP was approved as a Centrally-sponsored scheme on February 15, 2023, with an outlay of ₹4,800 crore for the financial years 2022-23 to 2025-26 for the development of 2,967 villages in 46 blocks across 19 districts in the border States of Arunachal Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Uttarakhand, and the Union Territory of Ladakh. The objective of the VVP is comprehensive development of these villages to improve the quality of life of people, thereby reversing outmigration, according to the Ministry of Home Affairs. The VVP is an effort to counter China's model villages – called Xiaokang (moderately prosperous) and located very close to the LAC opposite Uttarakhand, Sikkim, and Arunachal Pradesh – which have raised apprehensions in the security establishment.

In the first phase of the VVP, 662 villages have been identified on priority, of which 455 are in

Captured the beautiful landscapes during my visit to Kibithoo, India's first village. Arunachal Pradesh is blessed with immense natural beauty. I urge all to visit Arunachal Pradesh, especially Kibithoo, to be inspired by its history and stunned by nature's marvels

AMIT SHAH
UNION HOME MINISTER



Arunachal, with 245 earmarked in the III Corps area. Out of these, 23 villages have been identified by the Army in Tezu for priority development, officials on the ground say.

Union Home Minister Amit Shah formally launched the VVP in Kibithoo on April 10, 2023. He also inaugurated nine micro hydel projects of the State government and 14 infrastructure projects for the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP). "Captured the beautiful landscapes during my visit to Kibithoo, India's first village. Arunachal Pradesh is blessed with immense natural beauty. I urge all to visit Arunachal Pradesh, especially Kibithoo, to be inspired by its history and stunned by nature's marvels," the Union Minister said in a post on social media platform X (formerly Twitter), after his visit, along with a video of the mountainous landscape.

Along with Kibithoo, the adjacent villages of Kaho and Meshai, all in the Anjaw district, have together been allotted ₹9.72 crore for infrastructure development, revenue generation, and human resource development. Work is approximately 85% complete, an official says.

Civil-military coordination

Just a few metres from where Denwa and Kunchok live, is Kibithoo Bakery, staffed with four young women, in the 20 to 27 age group, who draw a monthly salary of ₹7,500.

It was established in 2022 by the Army with the help of the Pune-based Aseem Foundation through funds under Operation Sadbhavna, a social welfare scheme spanning the areas of environment, education, and skilling.

The bakery sells *nankhatai* (a type of shortbread), coconut and butter cookies, and cake. With tourists trickling in, the Army has lined up a renovation plan that will see new decor, lighting, and seating, estimated to cost between ₹30 lakh and ₹35 lakh. Once there is decent mobile connectivity, expected in the next few months, UPI

payments will also be made available, improving ease of payments, officials say.

Civil-military coordination is a prerequisite for the programme in border areas, says Lt. Col. R.S. Manhas, from a unit of the Punjab Regiment deployed in the area. "Our works through Operation Sadbhavna function as a feeder to the VVP," he says. The Army has allocated ₹15 crore under Operation Sadbhavna for developmental projects and outreach activities in the forward areas in III Corps area for 2022-23.

The topography of Arunachal is like a wheel, the flat plateau as the hub with mountains and valleys jutting outwards like spokes. It means for travel between valleys, a visitor must come back to the plains.

Work on the 2,400-km trans-Arunachal highway, which goes along the length of the border, is about 92% complete and the rest is expected to be completed this year, another official says.

The new, almost 1,800-km-long frontier highway, on which work has commenced, will fill a critical void facilitating inter-valley movement. It will start from Bomdila in Arunachal's west, pass through Nafra, Huri and Monigong villages, and end in Vijaynagar, near the Indo-Myanmar border. The roads cut through eastern Arunachal's thick forests.

Another 3,000 km of road infrastructure is also under planning and construction in the State. A number of operational tracks are being built by the Army to ensure last-mile connectivity in the forward areas, and in addition, a large number of projects have been sanctioned under the Prime Minister Gati Shakti project for infrastructure development.

A total of 34 new bridges have been constructed between 2020 and 2023, and three are under construction, all of which are Class 70 or higher, which means they have a capacity to carry 70 tonnes of load or higher. "All seven valleys have been connected with Chinook-specific helipads

In full swing: Kibithoo, one of the easternmost villages in Arunachal Pradesh, close to the Line of Actual Control with China, is being developed under the Centre's Vibrant Village Programme; and (left) M777 Ultra Light Howitzers, which can be airlifted by Chinook helicopters, deployed close to the LAC. **DINAKAR PERI**

to ensure aerial connectivity," a source says, meaning they can be used by CH-47F(I) Chinook heavy-lift helicopters of the Air Force, which have emerged as a game changer on the LAC.

Since the 2020 stand-off with China in eastern Ladakh, the Army has carried out a major reorientation of troops from the western borders to the northern and eastern borders, and a change in the Order of Battle (ORBAT), the structural changes involved in maintaining troops and machines. As a part of this, several battalions that were committed to counter-insurgency roles in the Northeast were moved to the LAC.

The Army's artillery guns – M777 Ultra Light Howitzers and 105mm Indian Field Guns – are deployed close to the LAC. The M777s, with a range of over 30 km, weigh just four tonnes and can be airlifted underslung on Chinooks, giving significant manoeuvrability in terms of long-range firepower between the valleys.

Over the last few years, a range of new-generation equipment ranging from SIG-716 rifles, Negev light machine guns, Sako TRG-42 sniper rifles, tactical drones, sensors, and other weapons and equipment have been inducted here.

A new memorial dedicated to the Battle of Walong of 1962 stands tall. In November 1962, the Indian Army halted the advancing People's Liberation Army soldiers for 27 days, forcing them to commit their reserve division from Tawang sector to Walong. Vastly outnumbered, with little ammunition and no resources, Indian soldiers fought until the last man and the last round. Capturing this, *Time* wrote in January 1963: "At Walong, Indian troops lacked everything. The only thing they did not lack was guts."

Another infrastructure development is the connectivity across the Lohit river, which, for India, starts from Kibithoo and flows to Tezu, and then joins the Brahmaputra in Assam, a distance of almost 350 km, dividing the stretch into east and west banks.

Three key bridges across the river, to be ready by next year, can handle 80 tonnes of load. "Only 17 suspension bridges between the east and west banks currently exist, the last one at Kibithoo," an Army official on the ground explains.

From 2G to 4G

Another aspect witnessing tremendous change is mobile connectivity. The Universal Service Obligation Fund (USOF) was established with the fundamental objective of providing access to "basic telegraph services" to people in remote and rural areas at affordable and reasonable prices.

Under the USOF, an agreement was signed with the Bharti Group in 2021 for the commissioning of towers and provision of 4G-based mobile services at 980 sites, covering 1,683 uncovered villages in Arunachal Pradesh, with a roll-out time of 21 months.

An official says 345 sites are being upgraded by Airtel in Lohit, Anjaw, and Dinjan valleys, of which 23 sites have been completed. Similarly, 451 BSNL sites have been selected under the project and 13 2G sites for upgradation to 4G.

In the past, mobile phones at Kibithoo would only connect to Chinese networks. Locals would tell the few tourists here to put their phones on flight mode to avoid international roaming charges. However, now phones pick up both Indian and Chinese networks. Officials explain that while towers have been set up, laying optical fibre networks is in progress.

As connectivity improves, efforts are on to promote tourism. Under the Seema Darshan project, the State government, with support from the Army, has approved 12 tourist circuits, including two foreign tourist ones, beyond the Kameng area. Religious tourism to Kepang La, Pasang Sonam Tso Lake, and Taksang Gompa is also being showcased and promoted, an official says, adding that passes for trekking are also being facilitated.



Building bridges: A Class 70 bridge near Parasuram Kund, which provides an alternate axis for movement to Kibithoo; and (right) Kibithoo Bakery, which was established by the Army in 2022. **DINAKAR PERI**