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## INSIDE



### Lebanon urges Tehran to 'stop interference'

**DIBBINE**  
Lebanese President Joseph Aoun urged Iran not to interfere in his country in an interview broadcast on Friday, also telling the Tehran-backed Hezbollah that diplomacy was the only solution to the conflict with Israel. » PAGE 14

### Nicobar project meant to benefit Adani, says Rahul

**NEW DELHI**  
Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Friday alleged that the BJP's claim that the Great Nicobar Island project is a strategic one is a "lie", aimed at helping industrialist Gautam Adani. » PAGE 4

### Bihar police book educator 'Khan Sir' in firing case

**PATNA**  
Patna-based educator and YouTuber Faisal Khan, popularly known as "Khan Sir", was booked by the police on Friday and questioned over a firing episode in Patna earlier this week. » PAGE 5

# GDP growth estimated at 7.7% in 2025-26: govt.

Provisional estimates are slightly higher than the 7.6% growth projected in February; growth in Q4 stands at 7.8%; PM Modi says the figures show the success of reforms and the hard work of Indians

**T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan**  
NEW DELHI

The growth in India's gross domestic product (GDP) has been estimated at 7.7% in 2025-26, according to data released by the government on Friday, compared with 7.1% in the previous financial year of 2024-25. GDP growth in the fourth quarter of 2025-26 stood at 7.8%.

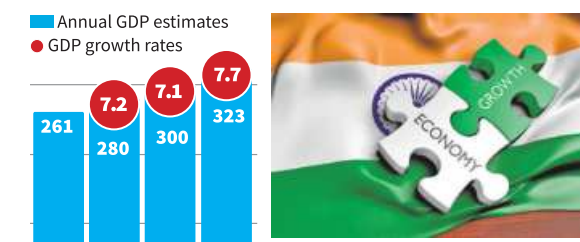
According to the data released by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, the provisional estimates of GDP growth in 2025-26 are slightly higher than the 7.6% growth estimated in February 2026.

The data comes at a time when Reserve Bank of India (RBI) Governor Sanjay Malhotra, while announcing the Monetary Policy Committee's decisions, said that GDP growth for 2026-27 was expected to slow to 6.6%.

**'Fair estimates'**  
In the press conference on the GDP data, Chief Economic Advisor V. Anantha Nageswaran said that the RBI's assessment on growth and inflation "seems fair estimates" and that he didn't see the need to second-guess them. "GDP growth rate of

### Stronger estimate

India's GDP is estimated to grow by 7.7% in 2025-26, slightly faster than the 7.6% estimated in February 2026. In the chart below, the bars show annual GDP estimates (in ₹ lakh crore) and the circles indicate growth rates (in %).



Figures for FY25 and FY26 are First Revised Estimate (FRE) and Provisional Estimate (PE) respectively.

7.7% in FY 2025-26 and 7.8% in Q4 of FY 2025-26 reflect the inherent strength of our economy, the success of reforms and the hard work of 140 crore Indians," Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on X following the data release. "We shall leave no stone unturned to further 'Ease of Living,' 'Ease of Doing Business' and increase opportunities for our youth."

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, on X, emphasised that manufacturing, trade, repair, hotels, transport, communication & services related to broadcasting, storage and financial, real estate and professional services sectors hit double-digit growth at both constant and current prices in 2025-26.

### Growth in 2026-27 is expected to slow due to the pressure on demand and the price levels exerted by the crisis in West Asia, economists say

Earlier this year, the government also updated the base year of the GDP data to 2022-23 and improved its methodology.

The data shows that the manufacturing sector is estimated to have grown at 10.7% in 2025-26 as compared to 9.3% in the first revised estimates for 2024-25. However, in Q4 of 2025-26, the sector grew at 7.3%, as opposed to 11.8% in the same quarter of the previous year.

The "trade, repair, hotels, transport, communication & services related to broadcasting and storage" sector similarly saw its growth estimate quicken to 11% in 2025-26 from 6.6% in 2024-25. In Q4, the sector accelerated to 12.4% from 6.3% in Q4 of 2024-25.

The agriculture sector, however, is expected to see growth slowing to 3% in 2025-26 from 4.2% in the previous year, with growth in Q4 slowing to 3.6% from 3.8% in the fourth quarter of 2024-25.

Notably, the data also shows that the growth of private final consumption expenditure (PFCE) is estimated to have quickened to 7.7% in 2025-26 from 5.8% in the previous year.

Asset creation and investment, in the form of gross fixed capital formation (GFCF), is also estimated to have grown 8.2% in 2025-26 from 6.4% in 2024-25.

Looking ahead, economists across the board, however, have warned that growth in 2026-27 could slow due to the pressure on demand and price levels being exerted by the crisis in West Asia, as well as the possibility of a lower-than-normal monsoon.

**NO LTCG TAX ON FIIS**  
» PAGE 13

# Karnataka CM Shivakumar inaugurates sixth edition of The Hindu Huddle

**The Hindu Bureau**  
BENGALURU

Karnataka Chief Minister D. K. Shivakumar on Friday described Bengaluru as "the biggest talent pool in Asia", highlighting the city's vast reserve of IT professionals, engineers, nurses, and other skilled workers who contribute to economies across the world.

He said Bengaluru remains one of the safest cities to live and work in.

Speaking at the inauguration of the sixth edition of The Hindu Huddle at the Taj West End in Bengaluru, he said the event marked his first inauguration since assuming office.

The Hindu Huddle – themed "A World in Transition" – curated by The Hindu's Opinion Editor, Narayan Lakshman, brought together heads of government, diplomats, policy-makers, thought leaders, experts from diverse fields and members of the arts and entertainment industry to discuss major geopolitical, economic, technological, and social changes shaping the world today.

The distinguished lineup of speakers included Jammu & Kashmir Chief Minister Omar Abdullah, former Union Minister and Rajya Sabha member Jairam Ramesh, Chinese Am-



Karnataka Chief Minister D.K. Shivakumar with The Hindu's Opinion Editor, Narayan Lakshman, at the inauguration of The Hindu Huddle in Bengaluru on Friday. K. MURALI KUMAR

bassador Xu Feihong, European Union Ambassador Hervé Delphin, former Foreign Secretary and former Indian Ambassador to U.S. and China Nirupama Rao, and Australian High Commissioner Philip Green.

**'Steadfast commitment'**  
Praising The Hindu for its commitment to independent journalism, Mr. Shivakumar said, "You write history, we believe in making history."

Commenting the newspaper's editorial integrity, he added that The Hindu had remained steadfast despite political and governmental pressures, saying, "You have not moved a budge with any political or government pressures. Your pen is very straight."

On Bengaluru's global image, the Chief Minister said, "While California has 13 lakh IT professionals,

Bengaluru has 26 lakh IT professionals. Karnataka produces 13,940 doctors, over a lakh engineers and 1.2 nurses every year. We export the best of the talent to the rest of the world. A few months ago when I was in Davos, everyone said they find the best talent pool in India only in Bengaluru."

Indicating this did not happen overnight, Mr. Shivakumar said even during the times of Jawaharlal Nehru, key Public Sector Units like Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL), Hindustan Machine Tools (HMT) and Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL) apart from Indian Institute of Management (IIM) were started in Bengaluru.

**REPORTS ON**  
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# Three Kukis shot dead in Manipur, houses torched; CM condemns the attack

**The Hindu Bureau**  
GUWAHATI

Unidentified gunmen killed three Kuki villagers, including a woman, and torched seven houses in Kangpokpi district of Manipur around 4 a.m. on Friday.

The incident occurred in Loibol Khullen, a village in the Kuki-dominated district's Saitu-Gamphazol subdivision.

The Kuki Inpi Manipur (KIM), the apex body of the Kuki community in Manipur, accused members of the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (NSCN) and its "proxy", the Kamson faction of the Zelian-grong United Front.

The NSCN is also referred to as the Isak-Muih faction of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland. The Naga groups have not yet reacted to the allegation.

"This reprehensible act of violence has resulted in the tragic killing of three innocent civilians – Letkhongam Haokip, his wife Tinmary Haokip, and Jangminlal Haokip – while seven houses were reduced to ashes and substantial



Security personnel stand guard in Imphal. FILE PHOTO/AFP

damage was inflicted upon civilian properties," the KIM said in a statement condemning the attack.

"The deliberate killing of innocent persons and the destruction of homes and livelihoods constitute a serious violation of human dignity and fundamental human rights. The deliberate targeting of civilians and the destruction of homes can never be justified under any circumstances," it said.

The KIM urged the Centre and the security agencies to probe the incident, apprehend the perpetrators, and ensure that justice is delivered without delay.

Condemning the attack, the Kuki-Zo Council said

that the continued atrocities against the Kuki-Zo people have reaffirmed the legitimacy of the demand for a separate administration.

**'Expedite solution'**  
"We, therefore, call upon the Government of India to expedite a political solution to our long-standing demands so that the Kuki-Zo people may live in peace, security, and dignity, like every other citizen of India," it said in a statement.

Manipur Chief Minister Yumnam Khemchand Singh condemned the "brutal" and "cowardly" attack that resulted in the killing of three civilians.

He instructed the authorities to apprehend the perpetrators at the earliest and to enhance security in vulnerable areas.

Friday's attack came less than 24 hours after the All Naga Students' Association, Manipur, launched a march from Ukhrul to a village in Kangpokpi district to meet the families of six Naga men who have been missing since soon after three church leaders were killed on May 13.

## Restoring habitat



Pelicans at Amber Cheruvu in Hyderabad on Friday. The Hyderabad Disaster Response and Asset Protection Agency's efforts to restore the lake appear to be working. HYDRAA has removed sludge and installed fences to curb pollution and protect biodiversity. NAGARA GOPAL

# CBSE seeks hacker's aid to fix security gaps

**Maitri Porecha**  
NEW DELHI

The Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) invited ethical hacker Nisarga Adhikary, 19, this week for meetings with an Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) expert team to flag security gaps in its IT ecosystem.

Mr. Adhikary last month

reported "critical vulnerabilities" in the portal that stores sensitive student data. The CBSE had earlier denied any breach in its data security.

"It is very important to admit that there is a breach, but earlier CBSE was not properly advised on how to deal with the situation. On the contrary, when the JEE (Advanced)

portal had a minor breach, we admitted the flaw and fixed it," a member of the IIT expert team said.

Top cybersecurity experts from the IIT, Madras and Kanpur, including their respective Directors, camped at the CBSE headquarters in New Delhi for nearly two weeks starting May 24 to fix the IT ecosystem.

Sources said the expert team worked 16 to 18 hours every day to patch vulnerabilities.

The team found that the OSM portal developed by COEMPT Eduteck had "a lot of vulnerabilities", including "seven to eight" critical ones.

**FULL STORY ON**  
» PAGE 4

# Pressure on Modi to limit India-Russia ties: Putin

**Press Trust of India**  
ST. PETERSBURG

Western pressure on Prime Minister Narendra Modi to scale back India's engagement with Russia will harm global stability, Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Thursday.

"Everyone has understood that putting pressure on Prime Minister Narendra Modi (and India) that has the largest population in the world, is detrimental for international relations and for bilateral relations. It doesn't matter where this pressure comes from," he said.

Calling India a "reliable" strategic partner, Mr. Putin said India's growth has not "come out of the blue" but was an outcome of the hard work done under Mr. Modi's leadership. The remarks came against the backdrop of Western capitals expressing unease over India-Russia relations and the oil trade amid the Ukraine war.

**FULL STORY ON**  
» PAGE 3



## IN BRIEF



## Maharashtra govt. approves ₹2,267 crore for Kumbh land

The Maharashtra government on Friday approved ₹2,267 crore for the acquisition of 191.21 acres of land for temporary township (Sadhu Gram) project for the 2027 Nashik-Trimbakeshwar Kumbh Mela. The government warned that diversion of the Kumbh project-linked funds for any other purpose would be treated as a serious financial irregularity inviting action against those responsible. The Urban Development Department issued a government resolution (GR) sanctioning ₹2,267 crore for acquisition of the land reserved within the civic corporation limits that will house seers and religious akharas. PTI

## BJD criticises Centre for delay in approval of highway project

The Biju Janata Dal (BJD) on Friday criticised the Centre for delaying and altering the Odisha Coastal Highway Project, which was announced in 2015. Reacting to the approval by the Union Cabinet for coastal highway between Rameshwar and Paradip connecting Konark, the BJD said the ₹8,301 crore project was approved after a long wait of 11 years. The regional party observed the Centre completely disregarded the hopes and aspirations of the people of Odisha, stating that the project is not merely a road project but a historic initiative linked to the State's future.

## Suvendu heads to Delhi as suspense over allocation of portfolios continues

Thirty-five Ministers await portfolios as allocation gets deferred again; Adhikari continues to hold charge of 42 departments; govt. keen on ensuring smooth execution of Central projects: official

Shiv Sahay Singh  
KOLKATA

The allocation of portfolios to 35 newly inducted Ministers in West Bengal was deferred for the second time on Friday, fuelling speculation of last-minute consultations within the BJP leadership as Chief Minister Suvendu Adhikari left for Delhi.

West Bengal BJP president Samik Bhattacharya is already in the national capital. A total of 35 BJP MLAs took oath as Ministers at Lok Bhavan in Kolkata on June 1. Among them, 13 were sworn in as Cabinet Ministers, three as Ministers of State with independent charge, and 19 as Ministers of State. The allocation of portfolios to these Ministers was initially scheduled for Wednesday and was later postponed to Friday.

After the BJP stormed to power in West Bengal on May 4, the first set of Minis-



West Bengal Chief Minister Suvendu Adhikari (centre) planting a sapling on World Environment Day in Kolkata on Friday. ANI

ters was administered the oath of office on May 9.

## Ministerial portfolios

Mr. Adhikari and five Cabinet Ministers - Dilip Ghosh, Agnimitra Paul, Nisith Pramanik, Ksudiram Tudu and Ashok Kirtania - were sworn in at Kolkata's Brigade Parade Ground. These five Ministers were allocated portfolios and the Chief Minister continues to hold charge of 42 departments.

Prominence was given to geographical, ethnic and gender considerations while selecting the 35 Ministers. Efforts were made to ensure representation for every region and district in the State Council of Ministers. Seven members of the Council of Ministers are women and 10 are MLAs from north Bengal.

Key faces sworn in as Cabinet Ministers on June 1 included Tapas Roy, Swapan Dasgupta, Sharadwat

Mukherjee, Arjun Singh and Jagannath Chatterjee, all first-time MLAs elected on a BJP ticket. Sankar Ghosh, Deepak Burman, Manoj Oraon and Gouri Shankar Ghosh, who were elected to the Assembly for a second term, were also sworn in as Cabinet Ministers.

## Focus on infra

The Chief Minister's visit to Delhi comes at a time when the State government is focusing on infrastructure development and industrial expansion. Mr. Bhattacharya is in New Delhi to apprise the party's Central leadership about the government's policy to attract fresh investments. "The government is keen on ensuring smooth execution of Central projects while creating a favourable environment for industries and investments. These are expected to figure prominently with the Central leadership," an official told a news agency.

## 12 hospitalised after ammonia leak at ice plant in Kerala

The Hindu Bureau  
KOCHI

As many as 12 people were hospitalised after complaining of uneasiness and breathing difficulties following an ammonia leak at a private ice plant at Munambam in Ernakulam district of Kerala on Friday.

The leak, which occurred at the plant near the mini fishing harbour by noon, was brought under control by fire and rescue services personnel from North Paravur in an operation that lasted two hours.

The accident occurred as a slab from the sunshade of the building fell over the ammonia receiver tank at the plant and damaged a valve, an officer with the fire station said. Liquid ammonia is a commonly used refrigerant in ice plants.

Three workers at the plant and a few residents reported breathing difficulties as the gas spread around. Some suffered a burning sensation in their eyes. All of them were rushed to a primary health centre nearby, and a young woman with a history of asthma had to be shifted to the Taluk Hospital in Paravur. All of them were discharged by 6 p.m.

Pallippuram panchayat president E.K. Jayan said residents of houses behind the plant were affected the most. "Luckily, children were at school. Residents near the plant have been advised to stay elsewhere for a day as a precautionary step. The police and the Fire and Rescue Services department have suggested an emergency meeting to discuss better safety measures as the congested area houses several ice plants. An emergency exit towards the main road has to be ensured from the locality," he said.

"Ammonia leaks are reported from ice plants occasionally. The frequency of such incidents had come down in recent years due to stricter compliance with safety norms," a fire and rescue official said.

"As soon as the leakage occurred, teams of police and fire force as well as elected representatives and doctors from the primary health centre rushed to the spot. Ambulance facility was also arranged promptly," an officer with the Munambam police said.

He added that no case had been registered over the incident yet.

## SC orders status quo on deportation of five women

Press Trust of India  
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Friday ordered status quo on the deportation of five women while agreeing to hear their petitions challenging the orders declaring them foreigners who allegedly entered into Assam.

A Bench of Justices Vikram Nath and V Mohan was hearing five separate pleas challenging orders of the Gauhati High Court.

In its order passed on two pleas, the Bench said the petitioners, if they were in detention, be not deported till the next date of hearing on July 16. The High Court had rejected the pleas filed by the petitioners seeking quashing of the orders passed by the Foreigners Tribunal declaring them foreigners who had illegally entered India.

The apex court sought responses from the Centre and Assam government.

## Cong. nominee files papers for RS bypoll; Left parties object to his claim on alliance

The Hindu Bureau  
CHENNAI

The Congress nominee for the Rajya Sabha byelection from Tamil Nadu, Praveen Chakravarty, filed his nomination before Returning Officer P. Thenmozhi at the Secretariat in Chennai on Friday.

Mr. Chakravarty was accompanied by Chief Minister C. Joseph Vijay, a few Ministers and former Union Finance Minister P. Chidambaram. His candidature was proposed by Mr. Vijay, Ministers N. Anand, Aadhav Arjuna, S. Keerthana, Vanni Arasu, A.M. Shahjahan, S. Rajesh Kumar and P. Viswanathan, and MLAs Tharajai Cuthbert and Y.N. Jamal Mohammed Younoos.

Mr. Chakravarty thanked Mr. Vijay, Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi, and Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge for giving him the opportunity to contest the byelection.



Praveen Chakravarty

He said he would reflect the sentiments of the people of Tamil Nadu in the Rajya Sabha and take up issues concerning the State. Apart from Mr. Chakravarty, four Independents - K. Padmarajan, Agni Aalwar, P. Jayakumar, and Tamilvelan Selvamani - have filed their nominations, as of Friday.

In a blow to the Congress, CPI(M) State secretary P. Shanmugam and CPI State secretary M. Veerapandian on Friday objected to the claim made

by Mr. Chakravarty that he had been nominated as the candidate of the Tamil Nadu Social Justice Progressive Alliance, comprising the TVK, the Congress, the VCK, the IUML, the CPI, and the CPI(M).

Following his nomination, Mr. Chakravarty claimed in a social media post that he enjoyed the support of all parties associated with the TVK.

## 'No one approached us'

Reacting to the post, Mr. Shanmugam said no one had approached the CPI (M) regarding the formation of the Tamil Nadu Social Justice Progressive Alliance. "No one has discussed an alliance with us or sought our support for forming one. We have already explained the reasons for extending outside support to the TVK government," Mr. Shanmugam said, describing Mr. Chakravarty's statement as "audacious". Mr. Veerapandian, meanwhile, said Mr.

Chakravarty's claim was unacceptable to the CPI.

## 'Politically wrong'

"It is politically wrong to include the names of the two Left parties without any consultation on the formation of an alliance. It is condemnable," Mr. Veerapandian said.

Mr. Veerapandian noted that the Left parties had contested and won the election as part of the DMK-led Secular Progressive Alliance.

"We decided to extend outside support to the TVK government to respect the people's verdict and prevent the Governor from exploiting the situation. We remain firm in that decision. We are not part of the alliance mentioned by Mr. Chakravarty," he said.

When asked whether the CPI continued to be a part of the DMK-led alliance, Mr. Veerapandian said his party remained a constituent of the Secular Progressive Alliance.

## Dalit worker hung in well, thrashed over motor theft suspicion

The Hindu Bureau  
GURUGRAM

A 32-year-old man from a Scheduled Caste community was allegedly beaten up and hung upside down in a well by a group of upper caste men in Haryana's Hansi district on suspicion of stealing a motor pump from an agricultural field, police said on Friday.

The victim, Baru, a resident of Sorkhi village, works as a steel gate and door fabricator. In his statement to police, he said the assault took place on June 1 around 12.30 p.m. while he was travelling from Sorkhi to Bhatol village.

According to the FIR, Mr. Baru had stopped near the fields of a man named Surendra after suffering stomach pain and loose motion. There, he was confronted by Deepak, Pawan, Joga, Pawan Mandasa and Surendra along with a few other unidentified men

who are all residents of Sorkhi.

## 'Forced to confess'

The group allegedly accused him of stealing a motor pump, then beat him with sticks, and also resorted to kicks and punches. Mr. Baru alleged that Surendra recorded a video on his mobile phone as the men tied him with a rope, hung him upside down in a well, and tried to force a confession. He said they threatened to kill him if he reported the incident. Fearing for his life, Mr. Baru did not disclose the assault.

On June 4, he approached the Civil Hospital in Hansi due to severe pain and was admitted by the doctors. He gave his statement to police on June 5. Based on his complaint, a case has been registered at Bas police station on charges of attempt to murder, wrongful restraint and criminal intimidation.

## Nitish Kumar's son among candidates for Bihar election

The Hindu Bureau  
PATNA

The ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in Bihar on Friday announced names of eight candidates, four each from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Janata Dal (United), for the biennial State Legislative Council poll scheduled to be held on June 18.

First, it was JD(U) which announced names of Nishant Kumar, son of former Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, Bharti Mehta, Shivani Devi Prajapati and Lalan Prasad as the party's candidates for the upcoming poll. Hours later, ally BJP too announced names of party candidates Sanjay Mayukh, Pawan Singh, Anil Kumar Thakur and Sheela Pandit.

Of the total 10 seats going to the poll, five seats are held by the JD(U), two each by the BJP and the Rashtriya Janata Dal and one by the Congress.

## Desert villagers in Rajasthan turn to traditional ingenuity to beat intense heat, water scarcity

Mohammed Iqbal  
PUGAL (BIKANER)

Families residing in Rajasthan's Thar Desert are facing the ongoing heatwave with adaptations to cope with high temperature, water scarcity and the difficult geographical conditions. The villagers of the region are used to facing the blistering heat every year, and the mercury has crossed 46 degrees Celsius in Bikaner district this time.

The source of water for the rural households and agricultural fields in the region is mainly the Indira Gandhi Canal, considered the lifeline of the Thar Desert as it brings the Himalayan waters.

Pugal marks the geographical bridge where the main canal's primary feeder line ends and its downstream path continues into

Jaisalmer district, with a 256-km section heading towards Mohangarh.

The present heatwave, partly attributed to climate change, has put immense pressure on the local agrarian economy and livelihood of farmers, peasants and agricultural labourers. Though the canal feeds an extensive local network of distributaries, the shortage of water persists during summer.

## Livestock needs

"The severe heatwave conditions have disturbed the regular schedule of our family. Half of our daytime is spent in arranging water for our livestock. We were planning to sow the seeds of kharif crops, but it will not be possible until we get sufficient water in our farm pond," Maroof Khan, 18, a resident of Ramai village, 22 km away from Pugal,

told *The Hindu*.

Water from the canal supports water-intensive crops like wheat, mustard and cotton, boosting the local economy and agriculture-based livelihoods. Local pumping stations and a vast network of minor distributaries help mitigate drought in the desert tehsil of Pugal, but the 45-day closure of the canal for scheduled maintenance has created difficulties for the villagers in the isolated rural settlements.

Deepanker Sharma, Executive Engineer, Indira Gandhi Canal Project, Bikaner, said the canal's closure was necessitated because of its dilapidated condition, which had led to seepage of water. The closure is a regular operative procedure for maintenance.

"The works were carried out efficiently this



Former sarpanch Siddharth Singh Bhati at the Indira Gandhi Canal near Pugal. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

year and the water flow has been restored from Harikere Barrage in Punjab. The average flow at present is 10,000 cusecs against the canal's maximum capacity of 18,000 cusecs," Mr. Sharma said. The water has been released first to resolve the drinking water shortages in Pugal, Dan-

taur and Aduri distributaries, with irrigation schedules for the kharif crops of groundnuts, moong, moth and cotton to follow. The canal's closure has affected cattle, industrial usage and Army cantonments along the India-Pakistan border. Though the moderate rains

and dust storms caused by western disturbance brought a temporary reprieve to the people in the region last week, the intense summer heat continues to affect normal life and batter the desert region.

## Damage control steps

The desert inhabitants have devised several methods to cope with high temperature and minimise its impact on their food, cattle and the daily routine. "The thatched roof of our house traps air to provide natural insulation. When we sprinkle water on it, the temperature of the interior decreases during hot days," Mr. Khan said.

Some of the houses in the village have walls built with a combination of cow dung and clay, which cuts the heat intake. Besides, drip irrigation in the field

saves water and ensures soil moisture for longer durations.

Agricultural labourer Kailash Meghwal, 24, in Ramai village, working on 50-bigha land, said he had grown the drought-resistant jowar (sorghum) crop on a small piece of land as fodder for a cow and half-a-dozen goats reared by his family. The limited quantity of water available after the restoration of canal has helped in irrigating the crop and meeting the household needs.

Former Pugal sarpanch Siddharth Singh Bhati, functioning as the village panchayat's administrator since his term ended in 2025, said the canal water had percolated into the ground and led to a rise in the groundwater table in the areas around the panchayat headquarters, providing an additional source

of irrigation. "Several farmers have dug wells in their fields and found good quality water at a reasonable depth," Mr. Bhati said.

## Uptick in work

The heatwave has also led to an increase in the demand for work under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS). Pugal Block Development Officer Gopa Ram said the work allotted to the villagers had helped strengthen the local economy and reduced the impact of agrarian distress. "The Pugal Panchayat Samiti comprises as many as 97 villages. Besides the regular work, we have taken up the task for covering of open irrigation ditches and water channels connected to Indira Gandhi Canal with concrete structures," Mr. Ram said.

## Denied 'promised' portfolio, Karnataka Minister resigns

**Press Trust of India**  
BENGALURU



Ramalinga Reddy

The two-day-old Congress government in Karnataka, led by Chief Minister D.K. Shivakumar, suffered a setback on Friday when Minister Ramalinga Reddy resigned, expressing displeasure over portfolio allocation.

Mr. Reddy said he was promised the Bengaluru Development portfolio but was instead made Minister for Major and Medium Irrigation Projects.

The resignation came after Mr. Shivakumar allotted portfolios on Thursday night. "I am resigning from my post because I cannot work against conscience," Mr. Reddy said at a press conference. "How long can I tolerate this humiliation? Twice they called me and promised to give me that (Bengaluru Development) portfolio, but in the end it went to someone else. That is why I feel hurt," Mr. Reddy told reporters, while asserting that he would continue in the Congress and remain an MLA.

The development marks the first major challenge for the Shivakumar government, which assumed office on Wednesday.

Mr. Reddy, an eight-time MLA from Bengaluru, said he had never lobbied for a

ministerial office or sought any specific department during his five-decade-long political career.

Asked whether he would reconsider his decision if persuaded by the party leadership or offered the portfolio he wanted, Mr. Reddy replied with a firm "no".

Sources close to Mr. Shivakumar said that his resignation had not yet been accepted. The Chief Minister said he would meet Mr. Reddy personally to pacify him. The Chief Minister acknowledged that he had earlier assured Mr. Reddy of the Bengaluru Development portfolio, but said the final decision rested with the party leadership.

The development coincides with the upcoming municipal elections in Bengaluru, a constituency where Mr. Reddy holds considerable sway.

## Pressure to limit India-Russia ties will hurt global stability, says Putin

Russian President calls India a reliable partner, says a 'large economy' like India will prioritise national interests; New Delhi's relations with U.S. will not cause friction, he says; points out that it is 'not a good idea' to interfere in 'delicate' India-China ties

**Press Trust of India**  
ST. PETERSBURG

Western pressure on Prime Minister Narendra Modi to scale back India's engagement with Russia will harm global stability, Russian President Vladimir Putin said late on Thursday at a press conference.

"Everyone has understood that putting pressure on Prime Minister Narendra Modi (and India) that has the largest population in the world, is detrimental for international relations and for bilateral relations. It doesn't matter where this pressure comes from," he said.

Calling India a "reliable" strategic partner, Mr. Putin said India's growth has not "come out of the blue" but was an outcome of the hard work done under Mr. Modi's leadership.

The remarks came against the backdrop of Western capitals expressing unease over India-Russia relations and the oil trade amid the Ukraine war.

The U.S., for instance, has been asking India to stop importing Russian crude oil and had slapped punitive tariffs.



Vladimir Putin had met Narendra Modi during a visit to New Delhi for a bilateral summit in December 2025. R.V. MOORTHY

But Mr. Putin said New Delhi will prioritise its national interests and added that India's engagement with the U.S. does not affect its strategic ties with Russia.

"I don't think this is a case. We are glad that India is developing its relations with all the countries, it's a great country, a large economy, the largest democracy, it is only natural that it develops its economy in accordance with its inter-

est with those countries that it deems necessary," Mr. Putin said when asked whether India's alignment with Washington creates structural friction for Russia.

### No interference

Last September, in the wake of U.S. President Donald Trump's tariff war, a photo of Mr. Modi, Mr. Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping from the SCO Summit in Tianjin grabbed

### Russian President says he does not believe Pak. is under the control of China

the global spotlight. Mr. Putin, who is set to visit India in September for the BRICS summit, said Moscow will not interfere in the "delicate" bilateral relations between India and China.

The Russian President, who called Mr. Xi his "old friend", said, "This is a delicate, multi-faceted relationship between India and China, and interfering into them is not a good idea. Of course, we interact with both our friends... President Xi and Prime Minister Modi are both trying to resolve all the issues of mutual interest, including the border issue."

Highlighting Moscow's strategic equilibrium in Asia, President Putin characterised Russia's ties with India and China as having evolved organically. He stressed that Moscow's growing synergy with New Delhi does not come at Beijing's expense, just as Russia's deep alliance with China does not compromise its bond with India.

"Russia has established these relations (with India and China). It was happening naturally. Relations between Russia and India do not disturb China, our relations with China do not disturb India," he said.

Mr. Putin also touched upon the ties between India and Pakistan. "We are well aware of the intricacies of the issues concerning the border between India and Pakistan," he said, adding that he does not believe Pakistan was under the control of China.

### Su-57 on offer

The President also offered Russia's fifth-generation stealth aircraft Su-57 to India and suggested that the combat jet could be jointly built in India.

"As for the Su-57, we offered our friends from India to jointly develop this machine, a fifth-generation aircraft. I think it's the best to date. But our Indian friends said, 'well, let's see'," he said.

"In principle, this could have been our (Russia-India) product. We made it independently. And we are ready to work with India. To work and develop. There will be no restrictions whatsoever," he said.

## Court denies bail to blogger accused of spying for Pak.

**The Hindu Bureau**  
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Friday dismissed the bail application of Haryana-based travel blogger Jyoti Malhotra, accused of sharing sensitive information with Pakistan, observing that the allegations levelled against her were "very serious".

A Bench of Justices Dipankar Datta and S.C. Sharma dismissed her petition challenging a March 7 order of the Punjab and Haryana High Court denying her bail, observing that considerations of national security had to be given due weight. Taking note of the allegations that she had travelled to Pakistan and met government officials there, the Bench held that no case for grant of bail was made out.

Ms. Malhotra, a resident of Hisar who ran a YouTube channel called "Travel-with-Jo", is accused of sharing sensitive information with Pakistani intelligence operatives. The Haryana Police registered a case against her under the Official Secrets Act and Section 152 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), which deals with acts endangering the sovereignty and integrity of the country. She has been in custody since her arrest on May 16 last year.

## Nepal Foreign Minister Shisir Khanal arrives in Delhi, meets National Security Adviser

**Kallol Bhattacharjee**  
NEW DELHI



Shisir Khanal

In a sign of Kathmandu's deepening security dialogue with India, Nepal Foreign Minister Shisir Khanal met National Security Adviser Ajit Doval on Friday.

Mr. Khanal is the first Minister from Prime Minister Balen Shah's Cabinet to visit India at an official level, since Nepal's new government was elected in March to replace the interim administration that had taken charge after the September 2025 Gen-Z uprising against former Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli's government.

"With Nepal, we have an expansive agenda, from development cooperation to people-to-people ties to

trade and investment. All these ties will be discussed when the two Foreign Ministers meet. But on our side, we are keen to further strengthen this multifaceted partnership that we have with Nepal," said Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal, announcing Mr. Khanal's arrival at an official briefing.

Earlier, Nepal's Foreign

Affairs Ministry had said that Mr. Khanal's visit to India between June 5 and 7 would enhance cooperation "across key areas including trade, investment, connectivity, energy, and people-to-people ties". Mr. Khanal had met External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar in Mauritius between April 10 and 12 on the sidelines of the Indian Ocean Conference.

The last Nepali Foreign Minister to visit India was Arzu Rana Deuba, who visited Delhi in August 2024 and then again in December that year to participate in a think tank event. The downfall of the Oli government had paused high-level diplomatic engagements while Nepal was governed by the interim arrangement.

## MEA assisting kin of foreigners who were killed in Delhi blaze

**The Hindu Bureau**  
NEW DELHI

The Ministry of External Affairs on Friday said 13 foreign nationals are among those who died in a hotel fire in south Delhi's Malviya Nagar, and the Ministry is in touch with the embassies of their countries, extending help with paperwork and medical assistance.

Of the 13, four were from Nigeria, three from Kyrgyzstan, and one each from Mozambique, Uzbekistan, Bangladesh, Congo, Liberia, and Iraq, according to MEA's official spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal.

Twenty-one people were killed and several others injured in a massive fire in a hotel in Delhi's Hauz Rani area on Wednesday. "We are intervening

with local authorities for all the paperwork that is required, as also with the hospital authorities, for any medical assistance required," Mr. Jaiswal added.

About 20-22 foreign nationals have sustained injuries in the fire, he said.

The fire at the Flourish Stay B&B in Hauz Rani in Malviya Nagar started around 8.30 a.m. on Wednesday and quickly spread through the five-floor narrow building that had only one entry-exit point.

At least 58 people were rescued and rushed to various hospitals where 21 were declared brought dead, officials said on Wednesday. Family members of many of the persons who died in the blaze were being treated at hospitals nearby.

(With PTI inputs)

## Correcting 'discrepancies' is normal practice in statistical exercise, says Census official

**The Hindu Bureau**  
NEW DELHI

An official from the office of Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India (RG&CCI) said on Friday that the House Listing Operation is still under way in Rajasthan and that the process of Census is multi-pronged.

Swadha Dev Singh, Director, RG & CCI, said in an e-mail that, primarily, the enumerators collect data through house-to-house visits. "Supervisors and other senior Census functionaries conduct field inspections to see that enumerators have properly understood the concepts and correctly recorded data from the respondents. In case of any discrepancy, it is pointed out to enumera-

tor for suitable modification. This is a normal practice in any administrative statistical exercise, which is followed in Census operations as well," she said in response to a report in *The Hindu* on June 4 titled "Re-check ordered over 'discrepancies' in Census 2027 data".

Ms. Singh added that "there have been some attempts to misrepresent this normal exercise as data tampering, which is regrettable and factually inaccurate".

*The Hindu* spoke with enumerators in Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan who said that they were being asked to revisit households and correct the data "discrepancies", particularly on issues such as open defecation and household ac-

cess to electricity or cooking gas connections.

This is the first digital Census and enumerators, mostly government school teachers, are keying in the data through mobile apps on their personal phones. The process can be monitored in real time by their superior officers.

On May 25, CG Box, a Raipur-based digital media platform, published a report, which said that school teachers in Chhattisgarh were being asked to edit the entries on open defecation and LPG connection after they had completed the survey of a household. Devesh Tiwari, who runs CG Box, said that several teachers had approached him stating they were being asked to edit the entries.

## Shah unveils plans for 'smart border' in Tripura to curb illegal activities

**Syed Sajjad Ali**  
AGARTALA

Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Friday visited the Lankamura border on the outskirts of Agartala to interact with Border Security Force (BSF) personnel. This was the site where BSF Assistant Commandant Jeevan Kumar Sinha was killed in April 2005, leading to a prolonged exchange of gunfire between the BSF and the BGB (Border Guard Bangladesh).

During his interaction with officers and jawans of the 42nd battalion, Mr. Shah focused on the impact of climate change and the importance of planting trees in the light of World Environment Day. He also announced plans for a 'Smart Border' along the borders manned by the

BSF and the Sashastra Seema Bal, which were being finalised. The Home Minister underlined the need to prevent human trafficking, cross-border smuggling of illegal arms, fake currency and narcotics.

He also cautioned against infiltration and demographic changes in Tripura, West Bengal and Bihar. He stated that the smart border, which would use cutting-edge technology, would have a four-layer security mechanism to effectively manage the border. He advised officials from the Home Ministry and the BSF to conduct inspections at border locations and consult with local civil and police officials as well as the general public to gather suggestions for useful border management.



Union Home Minister Amit Shah plants a sapling of 'Agarwood' during his visit to Lankamura Border Outpost in Tripura. PTI

## Air Marshal Ashutosh Dixit to be next Vice-Chief of Air Staff

**The Hindu Bureau**  
NEW DELHI

Air Marshal Ashutosh Dixit, a distinguished fighter pilot and test pilot, has been appointed the next Vice-Chief of the Air Staff (VCAS) and will assume office on July 1. He succeeds Air Marshal Nagesh Kapoor.

Currently serving as the Chief of Integrated Defence Staff (CISD), Air Marshal Dixit has played a pivotal role in enhancing jointness among the armed forces and advancing efforts towards the creation of integrated theatre commands.

His tenure has focused on improving coordination and operational synergy between the Army, Navy and Air Force.

An accomplished officer with extensive operational



Air Marshal Ashutosh Dixit

Commissioned into the fighter stream of the Indian Air Force on December 6, 1986, Air Marshal Dixit is an alumnus of the National Defence Academy, Khadakwasla, the Defence Services Staff College, Bangladesh, and the National Defence College, New Delhi.

### Flying instructor

A qualified flying instructor and an experimental test pilot, he has accumulated more than 3,300 flying hours on over 20 types of aircraft, including the Mirage-2000, MiG-21 and Jaguar fighter jets.

During his distinguished career, he commanded a premier fighter training base under the Southern Air Command, which earned recognition as the best base in the command during his tenure.

## Cong. flags failure of ED, CBI in Rajesh Exports case

**The Hindu Bureau**  
NEW DELHI

The Congress on Friday questioned why economic offences investigating agencies such as the ED, the Serious Fraud Investigation Office, the CBI, and the Financial Intelligence Unit failed to act over alleged financial irregularities at Rajesh Exports, a jewellery company, after interim findings by the SEBI pointed to one of the biggest cases of financial misrepresentation in India's corporate history.

Congress said the findings exposed not only irregularities in reported revenues of about ₹15.15 lakh crore but exposed serious weaknesses in the government's regulatory oversight.

## Assam Cabinet expanded; 12 new Ministers take oath

The Hindu Bureau  
GUWAHATI

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma expanded his Cabinet on Friday, taking the strength of the Council of Ministers to 17. The State can have a maximum of 19 Ministers, including the Chief Minister, based on the total of 126 seats in the Assembly.

Governor Lakshman Prasad Acharya administered the oath of office and secrecy to 12 MLAs — 11 from the BJP and one from Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) — at a function at the Jyoti-Bishnu Antarjatik Kala Mandir in Guwahati.

"It is a balanced team, which represents the aspirations of all sections of people, and their experience and wisdom will further strengthen our resolve to build a Viksit [developed] Assam," Mr. Sarma said after the ceremony.

He took the oath as the Chief Minister on May 12, along with Rameswar Teli and Ajanta Neog (BJP), Atul Bora (AGP), and Charan Bodo of the Bodoland People's Front.

Eight of the 12 Ministers are experienced. They are Ashok Singhal, Bimal Borah, Jayanta Mallabaruah, Kaushik Rai, Krishnendu Paul, Pijush Hazarika and Ranaj Pegu, and Keshab Mahanta.

The rest include Nilima Devi, a first-time MLA, Biswajit Daimary, a former Rajya Sabha member, Sushanta Borgohain and Ashwini Ray Sarkar.

# CBSE invited ethical hacker to plug security gaps in IT system

The Board had earlier denied any security breach; for two weeks, an IIT expert team worked 16 to 18 hours daily to patch vulnerabilities that were emerging in CBSE IT ecosystem; team to submit report to Education Ministry in coming weeks

Maitri Porecha  
NEW DELHI

The Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) invited ethical hacker Nisarga Adhikary, 19, this week for meetings with an Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) expert team to flag security gaps in its IT ecosystem. Mr. Adhikary last month reported "critical vulnerabilities" in the portal that stores sensitive student data. The CBSE had earlier denied any breach in its data security.

"Nisarga is a bright kid. He found important vulnerabilities. We were curious to understand his thought process. Because he happened to be in Delhi, we exchanged messages and found him very focused on cybersecurity, so we called him in to help us fix the system," a member of the IIT expert team said.

"It is very important to admit that there is a breach, but earlier CBSE was not properly advised on how to deal with the situation. On the contrary, when the JEE (Advanced) portal had a minor breach, we admitted the flaw and fixed it," the member said.

### IIT team

Top cybersecurity experts from the Indian Institutes of Technology, Madras and Kanpur, including their respective Directors,



Pressing problems: Youth Congress members protest in Guwahati against the issues in the conduct of national-level tests. ANI

camped at the CBSE headquarters in New Delhi for nearly two weeks starting May 24 to fix the IT ecosystem.

"Top faculty members suddenly had to drop everything and stay put at CBSE for two weeks to patch vulnerabilities in two portals — the on-screen marking (OSM) portal On-Mark, developed by private firm COEMPT Edudeck, and the CBSE portal for procuring answer sheets and applying for re-evaluation," sources in the Education Ministry said.

The IIT-Madras team consisted of two cybersecurity experts in addition to Director V. Kamakoti, while the IIT-Kanpur team consisted of Director Manindra Agarwal and a senior cybersecurity engineer.

Sources said that for two weeks, the expert team worked 16 to 18 hours every day to patch vulnerabilities that were emerging in the CBSE IT ecosystem. The team found that the OSM portal developed by COEMPT Edudeck had "a lot of vulnerabilities", including "seven to eight" critical ones.

"The external vendor [COEMPT Edudeck] had severely misconfigured the cloud storage 'buckets' holding the data and kept unsecured backup copies of students' answer scripts on their own servers. The team had to migrate the data to securely configured buckets," the expert team member added. "We also asked COEMPT to delete answer script data backups from their servers and they have complied."

Among the "critical vulnerabilities" that were fixed was an "Authentication Bypass", which is a flaw that allowed anyone to log into the system without being a genuine student. The second vulnerability provided unauthorised administrative access to the central server. In addition, a 'Data Exposure' glitch allowed any logged-in user to extract the answer scripts of students.

"Once code is developed which is insecure, patching it is a herculean task," the IIT expert explained, noting that changing a single flawed function often has a cascading effect across multiple different places in a massive codebase.

### War room set up

To fix the system, the IIT expert team set up a classic "Red Team versus Blue Team" dynamic. The Blue Team — comprising IIT-Madras experts, CBSE developers, and the Digital India Corporation (DIC) officials — modified the code to defend the portals meant for re-evaluation and on-screen marking. The Red Team, consisting of IIT-Kanpur experts, acted as aggressive hackers, constantly trying to breach the system.

"Following four intense rounds of back-and-forth testing, the Red Team final-

ly withdrew after being unable to find any more weaknesses," Prof. Agarwal, Director, IIT-Kanpur, told *The Hindu*.

He said artificial intelligence tools, including Claude, were deployed to find vulnerabilities in an easier and faster manner.

The re-evaluation portal was launched after extensive load management restructuring on June 2, and the work on securing OSM portal was successfully completed on Thursday evening, with it officially going live on Friday, officials confirmed.

On June 2 and 3, the re-evaluation portal faced massive, coordinated standard Denial of Service attacks aimed at bringing the systems down, an IIT expert confirmed. Within a mere two-minute window on June 2, the system was hit with 13 lakh login attempts. The next day, that number jumped to over 30 lakh attempts.

"While only a few thousand genuine students were trying to access copies at that moment, the attack multiplied the traffic 100 times over to freeze the system. Because of the newly implemented load management, the system held itself together," the member added.

The IIT expert team will submit a formal report to the Education Ministry in the coming weeks.

## CBSE files complaint over cyberattacks on re-evaluation portal

The Hindu Bureau  
NEW DELHI

The Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) has filed a formal complaint with the Intelligence Fusion and Strategic Operations (IFSO) Unit of the Delhi Police over a series of coordinated and sophisticated cyberattacks directed at its Post-Result Services Portal.

The police have registered a case under Section 66 along with Sector 43 (F) of the IT Act and investigation has been taken up.

"As the portal caters to lakhs of students across the country for availing post-result services, any disruption to its functioning has the potential to adversely impact a large number of stakeholders, cause significant public inconvenience, and affect public order and create dissatisfaction amongst students against the Board," the CBSE said in a public statement.

The portal, launched on June 2 to facilitate services such as verification and re-evaluation of answer scripts for candidates who had appeared in the Class 12 Board examination, was subjected to repeated and coordinated cyberattacks over the past three days, the CBSE said.

The portal had accepted more than 56,000 applications for verification and re-evaluation as of 9.30 p.m. on June 3.

"The attacks involved

**Post-Result Services Portal was subjected to coordinated cyberattacks over the past three days, says CBSE**

large volumes of malicious traffic originating from multiple IP addresses within and outside the country. The apparent objective of the attackers appeared to be destabilising the platform, denying access to legitimate users, and attempting unauthorised extraction of information by the elements inimical to national interest," the CBSE stated.

"Systems remain secure" In view of the nature, scale, and coordinated character of these attacks, the CBSE has approached the IFSO Unit for a detailed probe and appropriate legal action against those responsible. "It is emphasized that despite these malicious attempts, CBSE's systems and databases remain secure and uncompromised. No data breach or unauthorised access has been detected," it stated.

The attacks were successfully mitigated through continuous 24x7 monitoring and response mechanisms, with support from cybersecurity teams from IIT-Kanpur, IIT-Madras, Digital India Corporation, Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre (I4C), CERT-In, and other government agencies, it said.

## Tribal councils sceptical of election plan for Nicobarese

Abhinav Lakshman  
NEW DELHI

The Centrally administered Union Territory of Andaman and Nicobar Islands is planning to introduce elections, as in the rest of India, to the Nicobarese tribal community in the archipelago.

This includes measures such as delimitation of constituencies, preparation of electoral rolls, and reserving seats and positions of leadership for women. It is doing this by introducing draft rules for the conduct of such elections, which provide for ballot paper polls to Village Councils and the constitution of the Island Tribal Councils, that will be representing the Nicobarese communities through electoral constituencies for terms of five years each.

The rules spell out how the Election Commission and the administration should prepare electoral rolls, draw constituency boundaries and the terms of reference for the appointment of poll officials. The draft rules have already ignited urgent discussions amongst the Island Tribal Councils across the Nicobar Islands, with some village captains arguing this threatened the bureaucratisation of the governance they have been intuitively practising through generations.

Some others have raised suspicions that these draft rules were an attempt to give rise to a Nicobarese leadership that might be more favourable to the Centre's interests, especially on Great Nicobar Island, where the existing Tribal Council has been opposing the ₹92,000-crore airport, container port, and tou-



The administration's draft rules for polls have already ignited urgent talks in the archipelago.

rist-township project for close to four years now.

These rules have been put out for public consultation by the Directorate of Tribal Welfare, under the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (Tribal Councils) Regulations of 2009.

On Great Nicobar Island, where the existing Tribal Council has been opposing the Centre's mega-infrastructure project there, members are anxious over the proposed draft rules for elections. A member of the Council on GNI told *The Hindu*, "Right now, the way we govern ourselves has been carried on through generations, which allows us to keep our livelihoods and cultural practices."

Anthropologist Anstice Justin, who was India's first anthropologist from the Nicobarese community, added, "Previously also attempts to introduce such elections were made," referring to the time when the 2009 regulations were first being discussed. "Even then, I remember officials in the Nicobar Islands discussing the difficulties in implementing something like this, given that so many people in the community are not educated enough," Mr. Justin said.

## Great Nicobar project to benefit Adani, not defence: Rahul

The Hindu Bureau  
NEW DELHI

Leader of the Opposition in Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi on Friday alleged that the BJP's claim that the Great Nicobar Island project is a strategic one is a "lie", aimed at helping industrialist Gautam Adani.

On World Environment Day, Mr. Gandhi launched an online petition, inviting citizens to join the campaign which read: "We choose green over greed."

Releasing a 16-minute video based on his visit to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in April, Mr. Gandhi alleged that the Centre's proposed mega-development project in Great Nico-

bar would lead to large-scale ecological destruction and displacement of local communities while primarily serving private commercial interests. The project involves building a transshipment hub, an airport and a tourist township. "The Modi government tells you the Great Nicobar project is about defence. It is not," Mr. Gandhi said in the video, titled "This is what Modi doesn't want you to see".

He argued that if strategic considerations were paramount, the government should expand INS Baaz, the naval air station located on the Nicobar Islands, a move that the Congress would fully support.



In deep waters: Congress leader Rahul Gandhi scuba dives during a visit to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands on Friday. @INCINDIA

"The Navy has been asking for expansion for five years. If you want to make a military argument, expand INS Baaz. There is no need to destroy rainforests for that," he said.

"INS Baaz is also on the coast. The point is that they want to help Mr. Adani and these criminals are hiding behind the Navy, the forces, to steal Indian land. They are saying they

want to build a transshipment port, but it is a non-starter as they are already building a port in Kerala, which is on the mainland so that is the first lie."

"Ecology under threat" Alleging the project was intended to facilitate large-scale commercial development, including hotels and casinos, he said more than 1.5 crore trees, ancient rainforests and coral reefs were under threat. And the size of the area being talked about is four times that of New Delhi.

In a post on X, Mr. Gandhi said he had visited Indira Point, interacted with settlers and tribal communities, and witnessed

the island's ecological richness first hand. He alleged that tribal communities were being deprived of their land in violation of the Forest Rights Act and that settlers were not receiving fair compensation.

"What kind of India do you want to inherit? One where rainforests have been bulldozed for casinos, coral reefs erased from maps, tribal communities pushed off land, and the air we breathe turned into poison? Or one where India's heritage is protected, tribal communities are safe, and progress works with nature not against it," he asked, urging youngsters to sign his online petition.

## Kerala HC dismisses CMRL's plea to quash ED proceedings

The Hindu Bureau  
KOCHI

The Kerala High Court on Friday dismissed an appeal that was filed by Cochin Minerals and Rutile Limited (CMRL) and its officials, seeking to quash the proceedings that the Directorate of Enforcement (ED) had initiated against them in the alleged pay-off case involving Exalogic Solutions, an IT firm owned by Veena T., daughter of Leader of the Opposition Pinarayi Vijayan.

A Division Bench of Justice Raja Vijayaraghavan V. and Justice K.V. Jayakumar held that the ED can initiate civil action even without the registration of an FIR or a complaint in the predicate offence. Registration of an FIR is needed only for criminal cases, it held and went on to dismiss the appeal.

The CMRL and its officials had filed the appeal

before the High Court over a week ago, seeking a stay on the ED's probe into its financial transactions with Exalogic Solutions. The probe pertained to alleged misappropriation of public funds.

The appellants had sought to quash the Enforcement Case Information Report (ECIR) and related summons, arguing that the ED lacked jurisdiction in the absence of a prior crime or complaint regarding a scheduled offence.

The court held that the ECIR is an internal, non-statutory document of the ED, and is not equivalent to an FIR.

It thus upheld the Single Judge's decision, finding no merit in the challenge to the ECIR or the summons to the officials concerned.

Soon after the court dismissed the CMRL's plea, its counsel sought two weeks of protection from coercive action for the company to approach the Supreme Court. The court declined to grant the request.

### Under PMLA

The High Court had earlier directed the firm's officials to appear before the ED under provisions of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA), 2002, and to cooperate with the probe.

The CMRL had questioned the ED invoking the PMLA against the firm, "even without the registration of an FIR or a complaint in the predicate offence."

The ED had submitted that the agency had the right to issue summons to the firm's officials. It submitted before the High Court that its probe was independent of a probe by the Serious Fraud Investigation Office (SFIO) into the matter.

## Annamalai floats new 'political movement'; eyes next T.N. polls

The Hindu Bureau  
CHENNAI

Former Tamil Nadu BJP chief K. Annamalai, who quit the party earlier this week, on Friday announced the launch of a "political movement", inspired by the ideals promoted by former President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam.

A few hours before his announcement, the BJP said its national president Nitin Nabin had accepted Mr. Annamalai's resignation from the primary membership of the BJP.

Sharing his idea of the new political movement on social media platforms, Mr. Annamalai said it would eventually become a political party. All its functionaries would be trained at Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam Centre for Ethics and Politics in Coimbatore before they face any election, he said.

After Mr. Annamalai's



K. Annamalai

announcement, several BJP functionaries, including State unit vice-president Karu. Nagarajan, resigned from the party, and said they would join him.

Mr. Annamalai said there were several "issues" in the BJP, which were flagged to the national leadership "patiently" over several months before his resignation. Though he conveyed his decision to part ways with the BJP on December 4 last year, he said he accepted the party's request and stayed on

until the completion of the Tamil Nadu Assembly election in May 2026.

The former IPS officer said he continued to respect Prime Minister Narendra Modi but chose to disagree with him on certain issues with courage. He chose to meet BJP leader and Union Minister Amit Shah to convey his decision "eye to eye".

Even as he sought time from his supporters for his movement to evolve into a political party, he said there is "no doubt that it will face the next general election" in Tamil Nadu. He said the new initiative would accommodate the views of Gen Z, Gen Alpha as well as the elderly.

He said there was indeed space for a new party in Tamil Nadu. "We will have to come out of cult politics. This will be common man's politics, there will be no compromise on principles," he said.

**IN BRIEF**



**Bihar removes Z+ security for Lalu, retains Y+ for Tejashwi**

The NDA government in Bihar has withdrawn the Z+ security cover accorded to Rashtriya Janata Dal chief Lalu Prasad and his wife, Rabri Devi, along with the Y-category security provided to their elder son, Tej Pratap Yadav. However, the government has decided to retain the Y+ security cover for the Leader of the Opposition Tejashwi Yadav, his elder sister Misa Bharti, and his wife, Rajshree Yadav. Mr. Prasad and Ms. Devi, both former Chief Ministers, will now be provided security cover by the Bihar Special Armed Police. This was done following a review of the protection provided to VIPs in the State.

**Ex-Trinamool MLA Saokat Molla arrested in blast case**

The National Investigation Agency (NIA) on Friday night arrested former Trinamool Congress MLA Saokat Molla, the prime suspect in the Bhangar blast case, from West Bengal's South 24 Parganas district, hours after declaring him as 'absconding'. One person was killed, and three others were critically injured in a crude bomb explosion at the Dakshin Bamunia village in South 24 Parganas district on March 19, while it was allegedly being made. "We have arrested Saokat Molla as part of the ongoing investigation into the Bhangar bomb blast case. He will be produced before a court," an NIA official said. With Mr. Molla's arrest, the total number of people held in the case has gone up to four.

**Coal mine collapse in M.P. leaves 2 dead, 4 injured**

**Press Trust of India**  
SHAHDOL

Two workers were killed and four injured on Friday after a portion of the roof collapsed inside an underground coal mine operated by the South Eastern Coalfields Limited (SECL) in Madhya Pradesh's Shahdol district.

The accident occurred at the Bangwar coal mine in SECL's Sohagpur area where workers were engaged in constructing a stopping wall, Dhanpuri Police Station House Officer (SHO) Khem Singh Pendro said. "Workers Ballu Baiga (43) and Golu Baiga (30) died in the incident. The injured have been admitted to hospital. Rescue teams, mine management personnel and safety officials rushed to the spot," the SHO said.

**PFI members charged under UAPA for conspiracy to overthrow govt.**

**Ishita Mishra**  
NEW DELHI

A Delhi court on Friday ordered the framing of charges against 25 people associated with the banned Popular Front of India (PFI), including its chairman, holding that the investigation so far has disclosed a "grave suspicion" of a conspiracy to overthrow India's secular democratic government and establish an Islamic caliphate governed by Sharia law by 2047.

Additional Sessions Judge Prashant Sharma of the Patiala House Courts directed that charges be framed under various provisions of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) and the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) against the accused including PFI chairman O.M.A. Salam, vice-chairman E.M. Abdul Rabi-



E. Abubacker

man, general secretary Anis Ahmed, founding chairman E. Abubacker, founding PFI National Executive Council (NEC) member P. Koya, NEC member Mohammed Ali Jinnah and several other national and State-level functionaries.

**Multi-level conspiracy**  
According to the order, some members were involved in strategic decision-making at the NEC le-

vel, while others handled State-level execution, recruitment, arms training, terror financing and support activities linked to the Islamic State (ISIS).

The court referred to several meetings held during the 2018 Leadership Eligibility Course in Pune; a 2017 NEC meeting in Aurangabad; and a review visit to Hyderabad in 2021. The order also mentions meetings held during the Shaheen Bagh protests in Delhi in 2021, interactions relating to the organisation's Mohalla Committee initiative in Madurai, and gatherings at Freedom Hall and Mithur in Karnataka.

A key piece of evidence cited by the court was the

confidential "Vision 2047" document, which the prosecution alleged outlined the organisation's long-term objective of establishing Islamic rule in India.

During the hearings, Special Public Prosecutor Rahul Tyagi alleged that the organisation had sought to radicalise Muslim youth and promote hostility towards Hindus. He argued that the PFI had concealed its objectives behind welfare activities.

The defence challenged the prosecution's claims by comparing the PFI with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and contended that if the latter could advocate for a 'Hindu Rashtra', the PFI could not be faulted for expressing support for an Islamic nation.

The Centre had banned the PFI and its affiliates in 2022 under the UAPA.

**Abhinav Deshpande**  
AHMEDABAD

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday said the Congress had spent the past 12 years trying to create "chaos and uncertainty" in an attempt to regain political space, but asserted that people across the country had given the party a "strong response".

Addressing a public function in Surat, where he inaugurated and laid the foundation stone for development projects worth ₹18,777 crore, Mr. Modi said Gujarat had already sidelined the Congress and claimed that people in States governed by the party were dissatisfied with its performance.

"In Gujarat, you have pushed the Congress aside, but wherever the party is in power in the country, people are fed up with its misgovernance," he said. Referring to the recent local body elections in Himachal Pradesh, where the Congress is in power, Mr. Modi claimed that the party had suffered setbacks.

"The people of Himachal Pradesh are fed up with its misgovernance.



**Furthering development:** Prime Minister Narendra Modi reviews ongoing industrial operations and infrastructure projects during his visit to Hazira, in Surat, on Friday. PTI

Earlier, the people of Haryana and Punjab also gave a clear message to the Congress that its parasitic politics will no longer work," he said.

Taking a swipe at the recent leadership change in Karnataka, where D.K. Shivakumar was sworn in as Chief Minister earlier this week after replacing Siddaramaiah, Mr. Modi said that public dissatisfaction had forced the party to make the change.

Additionally, referring to the Assembly election in

West Bengal, Mr. Modi said the results reflected public rejection of "chaos, uncertainty and despair". "The message is clear that the country does not accept chaos, uncertainty and despair," he said.

**Vision for Gujarat**

The Prime Minister also criticised those who questioned the concept of Atmanirbhar Bharat and India's development vision. "Some people continue to ridicule the idea of Atmanirbhar Bharat and ques-

tion the country's development vision. They are the ones who, in the past, kept India dependent on other nations and failed to understand that true development cannot be achieved by countries that rely on others," he said.

Referring to the ongoing global energy crisis arising from tensions involving Iran and the U.S., Mr. Modi said the situation highlighted the importance of self-reliance in the energy sector. Mr. Modi said that Gujarat had made a significant

contribution to India's energy security through investments in refining, solar energy, and wind power. Highlighting India's renewable energy growth, the Prime Minister said the country's installed renewable energy capacity had reached 250 GW, of which Gujarat accounted for 50 GW. He said Gujarat was to play a major role in India's ambitions in green hydrogen and green ammonia.

**Review of operations**

Earlier, the Prime Minister visited Larsen & Toubro's Hazira facility in Surat, where he reviewed ongoing industrial and infrastructure operations at the company's manufacturing complex. During the visit, he toured the A.M. Naik Heavy Engineering Complex and was briefed by company officials on various projects.

Mr. Modi was also shown the 'Zorawar' light tank and other defence equipment manufactured at the plant. The 25-tonne air-transportable tank has been jointly developed by the DRDO and L&T Defence for rapid deployment, particularly along India's border with China.

**HC refuses urgent hearing on plea against CJP protest**

**The Hindu Bureau**  
NEW DELHI

The Delhi High Court on Friday refused to hear a petition raising law and order concerns arising from digital outfit Cockroach Janta Party (CJP)'s call for a protest at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi on Saturday. Counsel for 'Save India Foundation' mentioned the plea for an urgent hearing before a vacation Bench of Justices Saurabh Banerjee and Amit Sharma. The Bench, however, refused to list the case.

Earlier this month, CJP founder Abhijeet Dipke called on supporters to join the protest in Delhi to demand the resignation of Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan over alleged examination-related lapses. The party, which is a youth-driven social media movement, has gained much traction since its formation.

The petitioner sought directions to the authorities to "restrict, regulate, or relocate the scheduled gathering" to maintain public order. The plea alleged that the CJP had turned the youth into an "unregulated contingent" by "utilising overseas-tethered servers to execute a transnational institutional destabilisation agenda".

**Police book 'Khan Sir' in firing case; Bihar govt. to take steps to curb coaching centre rivalry**

**Amarnath Tewary**  
PATNA

Patna-based educator and YouTuber Faisal Khan, popularly known as "Khan Sir", was booked by the police on Friday and questioned over a firing episode in the Bihar capital earlier this week.

On the night of June 2, around 20 people vandalised his coaching institute, Khan Global Studies, and brutally attacked a security guard. Following the incident, Mr. Khan's two bodyguards fired in the air allegedly on the instructions of Mr. Khan. The bodyguards were arrested and Mr. Khan was named in an FIR.

Earlier, three persons, including the owner and teacher of a rival coaching institute, were arrested over the attack on Mr. Khan's



Students protest against the arrest of the director of the Gyan Bindu coaching institute in Patna on Thursday. ANI

centre. Members of the rival institute, Gyan Bindu coaching centre, blamed Mr. Khan for orchestrating the attack.

Mr. Khan had praised the police for acting promptly on the issue. "Some anti-social elements from a nearby coaching institute carried out widespread damage, beat our guard badly and even fired

gunshots," Mr. Khan told mediapersons.

Political leaders blamed the incident on rivalry between coaching institute owners. "The State government will formulate a policy within the next three months to prevent such rivalry and the resultant law and order problems," said State Education Minister Mithilesh Tiwari.

**THE CROSSWORD+ 14813** Solve this puzzle online and access more puzzles at <https://thehindu.com/crosswords>

(set by Incognito)

**Across**

- Damage hot weapon (4)
- Ms Lamb has right to get hitched (5)
- Swear in Damascus, Syria (4)
- Silly ass takes a moment to get a snack (6)
- Tense, perhaps, before sire manufactured baked goods (8)
- Sculpture tray at US building (8)
- Convent head hugs boys in entrance after Catholics leave (6)

**Down**

- Information from armada taped (4)
- Eternally living tailor stitched around a small measure of length (8)
- Alcoholics Anonymous accepted minced lamb in city (6)
- Drunken sapper going around end of July settles dues in advance (7)
- Wrongly see heady cosmetic (8)
- Beetle disturbs a crab after commencement of sunset (6)
- Insular land in Memphis leased (4)
- Feel model accompanied by cry (5)
- Point at small picture by European showing flavouring substance (5)
- Utter, "Finish" (8)
- Silly herpetologists dropping hotels in displays of narcissism (3,5)
- Michigan salt spread around top of rim gives wind! (7)
- Friend returns, rejecting god, to become subservient person (6)
- Maiden in erstwhile Pune is a Greek goddess (6)
- River covered by Miroslav Ondricek (4)
- Cad going away from Ecuador counterfeiting money (4)

**SUDOKU**

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

DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★☆☆☆

**Solution to previous puzzle**

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

**Solution to yesterday's Sudoku**

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

**FAITH**

**Venerate enlightened men**

Caught in the cycle of rebirth, it is very common to come across devotees who express contrition and seek ways to negate their sins. Bathing in holy rivers such as the Ganga, undertaking penance or working hard to make others prosperous in a dharmic way are the usual avenues pursued to find inner peace. The same can also be attained by cultivating the company of venerable men, said S. Sarma.

Scriptures say when a person invites a spiritually evolved personage home and welcomes him with due honour, the environment takes on a different vibe, which will have a positive impact on not only the host but all the others who keep him company. Divine grace is exuded by the saintly person resulting in an overpowering of devotion in the host and his associates. The Bhagavatam is replete with examples of such benefits derived by welcoming the spiritually evolved.

The other recommendation is the study of sacred literature at various points of time. Ideally, one should read the epic on gambling (the Mahabharata) in the forenoon, about the outcome of passion (the Ramayana) in the afternoon and about the activities of a 'thief' (Lord Krishna who steals the heart of a devotee) via the Bhagavatam which details the incarnation of Krishna, in the evenings.

Parikshit was a powerful king and yet, due to an unwitting mistake was cursed to die within seven days. Rather than lament his fate, he chose to seek the company of a wise sage and listen to the exposition of Bhagavatam. The sacred text says bhakti is a value attainable by an ordinary man. In fact, bhakti is held to be superior to mukti (merging in the Divine).



## Loyal Opposition

West Bengal is in the grip of a toxic political culture

The rout in the West Bengal Assembly election has thrown the Trinamool Congress (TMC) into a tailspin. TMC rebel Ritabrata Banerjee has been formally recognised as Leader of the Opposition (LoP) in the Legislative Assembly after claiming the support of 58 of the 80 MLAs of the party. Abhishek Banerjee, the party's national general secretary and nephew of Mamata Banerjee, had written to the Speaker naming veteran Sobhandeb Chattopadhyay as LoP. Ritabrata Banerjee challenged that decision, with some encouragement and support from the ruling BJP. The TMC had earlier expelled Ritabrata Banerjee and Sandipan Saha, both TMC MLAs, accusing them of anti-party activities after they complained to the Speaker that their signatures on Abhishek Banerjee's letter had been forged. Assembly officials found discrepancies between signatures on the submitted documents and those recorded during the oath-taking of newly elected MLAs, and the government has ordered a CID investigation. Ritabrata Banerjee framed his elevation as LoP as a "collective fight against individualism", pointedly declaring that the resistance was directed at Abhishek Banerjee and pledging loyalty to Mamata Banerjee – at least for public consumption. TMC functionaries are quitting the party in large numbers, even as its workers and leaders, including Abhishek Banerjee, continue to face physical violence.

Having been in power for three consecutive terms, the TMC's collapse has long been in the making, thanks to corruption, authoritarian governance, suppression of dissent, and violence against women. While all this had steadily eroded public confidence in both the administration and the party, the expanding role of Abhishek Banerjee alienated a generation of senior leaders who had built the party from the ground up. Chief Minister Suwendu Adhikari – the BJP's first in the State – was once among Mamata Banerjee's most trusted lieutenants. He resented the rise of the nephew, and was also vulnerable to pressure from central agencies that were investigating serious corruption cases against him. The TMC had no qualms about using state resources, local administrations, and police machinery for its power, but it could not withstand the BJP which is willing to stretch the rules of the game even further. In the TMC versus TMC fight, there will be protracted legal tussles over the status of the two groups that claim to be the legitimate TMC. This episode also highlights West Bengal's decades-long toxic political culture, marked by violence and opportunism. The new LoP was earlier a Marxist leader who defected to the TMC. The BJP has openly stated that several newly elected TMC MLAs wanted to join the party. They seem, instead, to have captured the TMC in the Assembly – a rather curious case of political consensus.

## Incomplete truce

Israel has to pull back troops from Lebanon for peace to take hold

The new ceasefire agreement between Israel and Lebanon could help remove a major obstacle to U.S. President Donald Trump's efforts to secure a preliminary agreement with Iran to end the war. Last week, Iran suspended talks with the U.S. in protest against Israel's escalating war in Lebanon. In April, when Mr. Trump announced an Israel-Lebanon ceasefire, he had said that Israel was "prevented" from attacking the country any longer. But Tel Aviv continued air strikes and expanded ground operations in southern Lebanon. Iran has maintained that in its April 8 ceasefire with the U.S., Washington had promised that the ceasefire would come into force on all fronts, including Lebanon. Now, after Iran paused talks with the U.S., Mr. Trump swung into action. He claimed that he had talked Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu out of his plans to bomb Beirut and had a conversation with Hezbollah's representatives, who agreed "not to shoot". The Israel-Lebanon ceasefire statement followed Mr. Trump's announcement. Mr. Trump's firm diplomatic intervention, which reportedly included an expletive-laden call with Mr. Netanyahu, points to the importance he gives to the diplomatic process. Before the Lebanon crisis flared up, the U.S. and Iran were negotiating a memorandum of understanding to reopen the Strait of Hormuz and remove the U.S. blockade of Iranian ports, which would set the stage for negotiations on Iran's nuclear programme.

While the ceasefire agreement is welcome, it remains fragile and incomplete, leaving the conflict's key problems unaddressed. The actual fighting in Lebanon is between Israel and Hezbollah. The Lebanese government is not a party to the conflict and Hezbollah does not report to the Lebanese army. But Hezbollah was not part of the negotiations. The ceasefire agreement requires Hezbollah to unilaterally cease attacks, but it does not ask Israel to make concessions. Hezbollah says it would stop fighting only if Israel withdraws from southern Lebanon. Israel, which has made its deepest incursions into southern Lebanon since its 2000 withdrawal, is not talking about any withdrawal plan. Israel has also broken all its ceasefire agreements in recent years. Despite a truce deal, it continues to bomb Gaza. Mr. Trump's announcement of a new ceasefire despite an existing one highlights the fragility of the truce. What he is trying to do is to bring in a stop-gap arrangement in Lebanon to push his planned deal with Iran. But for this to work, he should get firm commitments from Israel that it would not break the terms. For a lasting truce in Lebanon, Israel has to end its illegal occupation of the south and pull back its troops.

# India needs innovative strategies to eliminate TB

More than a century after the first tuberculosis vaccine was introduced, the world is struggling to control one of its oldest diseases. Tuberculosis (TB) continues to kill more people annually than any other infectious disease, surpassing even the COVID-19 pandemic at its peak. Yet, there is still no effective vaccine for adolescents and adults.

Once exposed to *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*, individuals may get infected and remain asymptomatic for years. Others develop subclinical disease, showing minimal or no symptoms while harbouring infection. A subset progresses to active TB, which may manifest as pulmonary TB (PTB) – the infectious form that drives transmission – or as extrapulmonary TB (EPTB), which affects organs beyond the lungs and is harder to diagnose, more debilitating, and sometimes fatal.

### No one-size-fits-all vaccine

With such diversity in disease pathways, expecting a single "one-shot" vaccine to prevent all forms of TB may be unrealistic. This expectation has shaped global disappointment in TB vaccine development especially since most previous trials have focused primarily on preventing pulmonary TB.

Meanwhile, the burden remains immense. In many low- and middle-income countries, TB incidence ranges between 200 and 300 per 100,000 population. Reducing this to 10-20 per 100,000 – the threshold for elimination – will require sustained effort and enormous public health investment. For India, which carries one of the world's highest TB burdens, the challenge is systemic.

India's goal of eliminating TB is ambitious and necessary. But achieving it will require a holistic approach towards all forms of disease and all age groups moving beyond the search for a perfect solution and embracing a layered, pragmatic approach. As tools are discovered and tested, decisions will need to be made on their deployment.

The first layer is better detection. Advances in diagnostics, including tools for identifying subclinical TB, can help identify individuals at risk earlier. The second is preventive therapy, ensuring that those with latent infection receive treatment before progressing to active disease. The third – arguably the most complex – is vaccination. However, access to diagnostics and preventive therapy remains uneven, making vaccination an especially critical pillar.

Recent findings from the BMJ-published PreVenTB trial conducted by the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) provide such an opportunity. Conducted across 18 sites in India and involving more than 12,700 household contacts of TB patients, the trial evaluated VPM1002 developed by SIIPL and Immuvac developed by Cadila, in a real-world, high-risk population aged six years and above, including



**Balram Bhargava**

Former Director-General, Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR)



**Soumya Swaminathan**

Former Chief Scientist of the World Health Organization (WHO)

individuals with comorbidities and varying infection status closely reflecting real life conditions.

The trial reported efficacy of VPM1002 and Immuvac as: 50.4% efficacy of VPM1002 against extrapulmonary TB (statistically significant); 64.6% efficacy of VPM1002 in children aged 6-14 years against all TB (PTB and EPTB); More than 60% efficacy of Immuvac against EPTB in children aged 6-10 years; more than 60% efficacy against progression to disease among those developing latent infection during follow-up and overall 21.4% efficacy of VPM1002 against all TB (Reference: Subho Sarkar, Consultant Intervention Pulmonologist; from LinkedIn). These are not trivial findings.

Extrapulmonary TB is the hidden burden of the epidemic, harder to diagnose, frequently missed, and associated with significant morbidity and mortality. A reduction of over 50% in such cases represents a meaningful clinical and public health impact, including reduced health-care costs and patient suffering.

The data also highlight a strong signal in school-age children and adolescents, where efficacy exceeded 60% which is an add-on benefit of vaccination in this age group. This is particularly relevant because India currently has no structured TB vaccination strategy beyond infancy. If confirmed, this could open the door to a booster-dose TB prevention strategy.

### Need for nutritional support

Another important piece of evidence generated from study is the role of nutrition. Reduced efficacy was observed in individuals with low body mass index (BMI), underscoring the need for nutritional support for vaccines to work optimally in undernourished in context of broader health determinants.

From a programmatic standpoint, VPM1002 offers additional advantages. It is a single-dose vaccine based on a modified BCG platform, making it operationally simpler than multi-dose, adjuvanted vaccines in development. In a country of India's scale, logistical simplicity is a decisive advantage. The vaccine can be manufactured at large scale and cost effectively.

TB is largely a disease of low and middle income countries (LMIC) and their governments must act proactively. Waiting for expansive solutions developed elsewhere is neither practical nor sustainable. LMICs cannot afford to wait for a silver bullet, because there is no one-stop solution for TB, especially when there are results from a Phase III trial conducted in an Indian population across all age groups (six years and above) and against all forms of TB, including PTB and EPTB. It is to be noted that no other TB vaccine trial till date has studied efficacy against EPTB and none of the currently ongoing trials worldwide has included EPTB as the efficacy end-point.

India has navigated similar public health

decisions before. TrueNat was the first 'make in India' Molecular test approved and adopted by the National TB Elimination Programme before its World Health Organization pre-qualification study.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Bharat Biotech's Covaxin was initially approved in "clinical trial mode" to enable early access while additional data continued to accumulate. That decision was driven not by perfection, but by urgency and it helped accelerate protection at a critical time.

India has also demonstrated this approach with indigenous rotavirus vaccines, which were introduced despite modest efficacy and wide confidence intervals. Since then, they have helped reduce severe disease and child mortality and have been incorporated into the national immunisation programme (Bhandari *et al.*, *The Lancet*, 2014).

### A smarter TB strategy

TB is, in many ways, a slow-moving pandemic. Yet, it has not always been met with the same urgency in policy action. The policy question, therefore, is how innovations, including moderately effective vaccines such as VPM1002 and Immuvac, can be intelligently integrated into the TB elimination programme. Targeted use among household contacts, deployment in school-age children, and alignment with nutrition and preventive therapy programmes could together lead to a more effective TB control framework. A combination of vaccines effective across different indications and age groups may be needed to have an impact.

India's TB challenge is unlikely to be solved by a single breakthrough. It will require a combination of early detection, preventive treatment, targeted vaccination against both pulmonary and extrapulmonary TB, case-based clinical management, nutritional supplementation, and sustained public health investment.

Waiting for a perfect vaccine may delay progress indefinitely, especially when no trial other than the PreVenTB trial has evaluated vaccine efficacy against both pulmonary and extrapulmonary TB in individuals aged six years and above. In contrast, deploying tools that reduce severe disease, particularly EPTB, can deliver immediate and tangible benefits.

The PreVenTB trial is comprehensive, well-designed and well conducted, offering a meaningful signal – perhaps a light at the end of the tunnel in TB vaccine development. Given the urgency of the challenge and the limited time to act, we must focus on solutions that are available today and supported by robust evidence of efficacy against both PTB and EPTB in individuals aged six years and above under real-world conditions, rather than wait indefinitely in the hope that better options may emerge in the future – an outcome that is far from certain.

New Indian vaccine trial data show meaningful protection against extrapulmonary TB, underscoring the need for targeted vaccination alongside stronger public health strategies

# Rubio fails to win India back for Washington

For nearly a year, strategic experts in India and the United States have warned that worsening bilateral ties could damage a partnership that former U.S. President Joe Biden called the most consequential of the 21st century. They argue that India remains central to America's Indo-Pacific strategy and indispensable to its competition with China in geopolitics, technology, and securing critical supply chains.

**Warnings from think tanks, sense of betrayal** Think tanks have also been sounding the alarm. A March 2026 report by the Center for a New American Security, titled *Repairing the Breach: Getting U.S.-India Ties Back on Track*, said bilateral ties had "stumbled badly" in the second half of 2025. It cited U.S. President Donald Trump's claims about the May 2025 India-Pakistan ceasefire and his 50% tariffs on Indian exports as the key causes of the breach in trust, and recommended urgent steps to rebuild trust and deepen cooperation.

Similarly, the Hudson Institute's "New India Conference" underscored India's importance to U.S. interests and the Indo-Pacific balance of power. By featuring RSS General Secretary Dattatreya Hosabale, it also signalled a willingness to engage Hindutva nationalists despite concerns over their treatment of religious minorities.

This anxiety is not confined to Washington's think tanks, but also in India too. During a visit to India in January 2026, discussions at academic and policy institutions, as well as engagements with experts, diplomats and Indian foreign policy scholars, pointed to a common concern: New Delhi had lost trust in Washington. The damage was seen as not merely diplomatic or transactional, but also strategic. Many Indian experts believed that even if both sides recognised the importance of the relationship, it would take a long time to repair the trust deficit.

Three indicators came to define the deterioration in relations. The first was the growing U.S.-Pakistan strategic partnership in the



**Muqtadar Khan**

Professor of International Relations at the University of Delaware, a Senior Non-Resident Fellow at the Middle East Policy Council and also host of a YouTube channel on global affairs called Khanversations

post-Operation Sindoor period. As India sought to isolate Pakistan internationally, Mr. Trump's repeated praise for Pakistani leaders and the country's role in mediating with Iran was widely seen in India as a betrayal.

The second indicator was trade. The 50% tariffs levied on India – among the highest imposed on any country – came as a shock to New Delhi. The 25% tariff penalty on India, imposed specifically for buying Russian oil, further reinforced the perception that India was being singled out and punished for no apparent reason. The third indicator was the neglect of the Quad (Australia, India, Japan and the U.S.). The absence of head-of-state summits, combined with the lack of visible enthusiasm around the Quad meetings, suggested that one of the central pillars of America's Indo-Pacific strategy had been downgraded. The Quad, and therefore India, were clearly less important to Mr. Trump's plans which now appear to be more focused on carving a more productive partnership with China.

### The Rubio visit and after

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio's visit to India (May 23-26, 2026) gave him a clear opportunity to address all three parameters. Unfortunately, there was hardly any progress on the pending trade deal. On top of that, Mr. Rubio essentially gaslit India by asserting in a tweet that India had committed to buying \$500 billion worth of American products over the next five years – a claim that Indian officials had disputed. The Quad Foreign Ministers' summit produced no major breakthrough and no clear announcement about when the heads of state would meet. Finally, when given an opportunity by the Indian press to criticise Pakistan for cross-border terrorism, Mr. Rubio instead chose to praise Pakistan's role in the Iran crisis.

He failed to take positions that would have reassured India that he had come to repair the relationship. Instead, the message he sent was that "America First" would be the only criterion determining U.S. choices, not any desire to repair

the U.S.-India strategic partnership.

The symbolism after Mr. Rubio's return to Washington only reinforced this conclusion. Just hours later, he participated in a public Cabinet meeting. When Mr. Trump asked him about Iran, Mr. Rubio spoke about Iran, Ebola, Cuba, Venezuela, and even his stopover in Armenia, which he described as highly successful. But he did not mention India, his meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, or the Quad meeting. Mr. Trump did not ask about India either. This amnesia is astonishing – coming just hours after a visit to one of America's most important strategic partners. Nor did Mr. Trump use his social media platforms to highlight the Quad or stress the importance of repairing U.S.-India relations.

It is precisely such indicators that make policymakers in New Delhi nervous. They signal that India's strategic significance has diminished in Washington's eyes.

### A partnership that still matters

There remain many strategic reasons for the U.S. and India to work together: keeping the Indo-Pacific open, sustaining a partnership between major democracies in an era of rising authoritarianism, and collaborating on technological innovation, artificial intelligence, semiconductors, defence, and energy security. These shared interests have not disappeared and may well bring the two countries back toward closer cooperation. But for now, India and the U.S. are not as closely aligned as they were a year and a half ago.

If Mr. Rubio's goal was to repair the perceived damage done to India-U.S. relations since Mr. Trump's election in 2024, he clearly failed. But if his mission was to reinforce that American foreign policy will be driven by whatever Mr. Trump defines as "America First" on any given day, then perhaps he succeeded – making clear that American national interests are now shaped less by careful strategic thinking and more by the unpredictable thought process of President Trump.

The U.S. Secretary of State's visit failed to bridge the widening U.S.-India divide

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### EV battery safety

I write this letter as a Scientific Officer at the National Test House, Bengaluru, under the Government of India. The report, "On a Slow Charging Mode" (Bengaluru, 'Spotlight', June 5),

highlighted that while infrastructure and cost remain hurdles to EV adoption, long-term consumer trust ultimately depends on battery safety. The government is expanding a robust testing ecosystem. State-of-the-art

testing facilities for lithium-ion cells, battery packs, and EV chargers are already operational and continue to expand at National Test House centres in Bengaluru, Mumbai, and Kolkata. Industry players must make greater use of

these accessible government laboratories.

**R.N. Lokesh,**  
Bengaluru

### Nicobar project

It is surprising that the government has chosen to mask the observation of the

Public Investment Board (PIB) that the Nicobar's Galathea Bay project lacks "strategic objectives" and is now making all out efforts to project it as a strategic project ('Exclusive', Front page, June 5). It would be a great national loss if a

natural ecosystem with pristine tropical forest is destroyed and ancient tribes displaced.

**Kosaraju Chandramouli,**  
Hyderabad

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

# GROUND ZERO



The lane down which Flourish Stay in South Delhi caught fire, where the owner ran a hotel instead of a bed-and-breakfast that the property was licenced for. SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

## Punished for a guilty system

A fire in a bed-and-breakfast took the lives of over 20 guests in Delhi's Hauz Rani. Of these, most were foreign nationals, mainly in India for their families' medical needs. The owner was allegedly misusing government permits and had no clearance from the fire department. **Suruchi Kumari** and **Shrimansi Kaushik** report on how, despite repeated announcements of government audits, on ground, compliance is a challenge

It is 12 noon on June 3, a day surprisingly not as hot as Delhi can get at this time, but the water from the fire extinguishers has dried up. About 200 people are gathered in a narrow lane in South Delhi's Hauz Rani, breathlessly recalling what happened that morning. The smoke has now cleared up over Flourish Stay, a bed-and-breakfast spread across six-storeys, but the building is charred. The structures flanking it are also blackened. This is the scene of a disaster.

The fire brigade says that 49 people were pulled out of the building. "There was no emergency exit, the doors on the terrace were locked, and the glass façade made rescue difficult. It left the trapped choking," says an officer. In addition, the main doors were powered by electricity, so could not be opened once the fire broke out. Hauz Rani is a pre-independence urban village that has seen unregulated growth over the years. Homestays illegally converted into multi-storey hotels run cheek by jowl with homes and real-estate brokers' offices. The lanes are so narrow only a single car can fit. High-tension electricity wires hang dangerously close to the traffic below. Tall and small buildings are packed into the *lal dora* area, a historic land classification demarcating a village habitation zone. Here, construction on an existing structure does not require building layout plans to be approved by the authorities.

The uniformed forces are swarming around, as the traffic police barricades the area, up to 1 kilometre around Flourish Stay that had caught fire at 8:30 that morning. The residents of Hauz Rani are on the street. Some guests from the homestays around are also out, now worried about their safety.

The police does not allow those from Micasa, the lodge next door, to enter the building. One couple from Congo is panicked because they need their medicines from the room. Another asks what will happen to their passports and money. Across the next few hours, foreign nationals from other homestays begin leaving with their luggage.

By the evening, the boards of all the surrounding bed-and-breakfast places have been taken down, fearing a government crackdown.

Outside this mess, within a kilometre, are two of Delhi's newer areas: Malviya Nagar, from where the police and fire brigade arrived; and Saket, with a steel-and-glass strip of malls and Max hospital's buildings. The lodges serviced those coming into Delhi for treatment to this hospital. Thirteen of the people who died were foreign nationals from Bangladesh, Congo, Iraq, Kyrgyzstan, Liberia, Mozambique, Nigeria, Uzbekistan, as per the Ministry of External Affairs. Nine were from India.

This is not Delhi's first disaster. Last month, an

It did not take the fire more than a few minutes to blow out of the ground floor. There were sparks in the dangling web of wires which people would later step on to jump

**RIYAZUDDIN MANSURI**  
Mattress-shop owner

under-construction five-storey building collapsed in Saidulajab, killing six. Earlier in the month, a fire in a Vivek Vihar residential building killed nine. In March, another fire in Palam also killed nine, all from the same family. Over two-and-a-half months ago, the Delhi government promised a fire audit across the city.

### The first hour

Ambulances began to arrive at 8:40 a.m. when locals had begun the rescue operation. "It did not take the fire more than a few minutes to blow out of the ground floor. There were sparks in the dangling web of wires which people would later step on to jump," says Riyazuddin Mansuri. He and his son Armaan, who had a mattress shop under a tin shed right opposite the B&B, used up their stock of over 20 mattresses to lay them down for those who began jumping. At the time, Mansuri says, he did this by instinct. "It felt like the thick smoke would swallow the whole neighbourhood."

He recalls feeling breathless, hours after. "People gathered and the narrow streets were already jammed by the time ambulances and fire services came. We were looking at people hanging from the windows, glass shreds falling on the road," he remembers.

The fire brigade arrived 45 minutes after the fire broke out, though officials say the call came to them 20 minutes into the fire. The police reached within 20 minutes, says the station house officer (SHO) of Malviya Nagar Police Station, Vinay Yadav. "They were late," the officer says of the fire engines. "There were ladders and mattresses, but no water," SHO Yadav says, of the alleged delay in the fire department reaching.

Seven fire tenders and 39 Delhi Fire Service personnel reached the spot and doused the fire within 20 minutes, they say. Deputy Chief Fire Officer A.K. Malik says that the nearest fire station at Geetanjali Enclave did not have water tenders. Firefighting units had to be called from over 7 km away. "We received the fire units that were called from Nehru Place and Bikaji Cama Palace. With Delhi traffic, it took them 19 minutes to reach the spot," he says.

Mohammed Israr Khan, a resident of Hauz Rani village, saw smoke rising towards the north of his house. He rushed to the spot with his brother. Three hours later, his yellow vest and shorts were black. He remembers: "A victim's phone rang while I was helping with the rescue. It was the person's mother. I could not say anything and handed the phone to the police. I didn't want to be the bearer of bad news."

Along with Wasim, Amir, Shahrukh, Afzal, Hazi, Shoaib, and Anish, he helped pull victims out and carry them to ambulances. "We were also clearing the way where cars and auto were parked," he says. Locals and officials later removed cars and autos to make way for ambulances.

Once the fire services arrived and broke open the main door, rescue teams entered with residents, who lent a hand. "When we entered the building with the police and rescue teams, we could not see anything. There was only smoke, screams, and wailing from every floor," Khan says. "Many had tried to escape and were trapped in the basement." Over the next couple of hours, he says he saw some gruesome sights.

Head Constable Dinesh Yadav says he helped rescue five people trapped on the west side of the building. "When I climbed the ladder to break open the window of the bathroom on the second floor, two Nigerian women were unconscious. For others who were trapped on different floors, there was no way to go out. I guided three people to climb down the rainwater pipe along the building and jump from there," he says. Yadav suffered injuries from glass shreds and had blisters on his arms from the melting cables that fell on him. Ten constables and head constables were taken to AIIMS for treatment.

### Police action

The same day, the police apprehended the owner of the building, Lavkesh Bajaj, for negligence. An initial enquiry revealed he had been misusing a 'Bed & Breakfast' (B&B) license issued by the Tourism Department of the Delhi government. His permit allowed for only six rooms, but he had been running 26 rooms, including a basement. He had no clearance from the fire department.

He also did not have permission to run a kitchen and a restaurant on the ground floor from where the fire allegedly started. The kitchen was being run under a different licence, called the tea-and-snacks licence, issued by the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD), the capital's civic body.

While no hotel staff was present on the spot, Bajaj was allegedly seen driving past the raging building in the CCTV visuals that went viral later. While the fire was raging, the MCD received an application between 9.30 a.m. and 10 a.m., for the yearly renewal of the tea-and-snacks license "without seating" at the same address. It had expired two months before.

The police registered an FIR against Bajaj under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita's Sections 105 (culpable homicide not amounting to murder), 326 (g) (mischief by fire), 324 (5) (wrongful damage of property), 125 (a) (endangering human life and safety), 125 (b) (causing hurt by negligence), and 287 (negligent conduct with respect to fire). He was produced in court the next day.

The police are still looking for Jay Mishra, Bajaj's accountant, who handled day-to-day operations of the hotel. The B&B license had been issued in his name.

### Lives lost and saved

Vivek Aggarwal, 47, the head of finance at an insurance company, lost his life in the fire along with seven members of his family. They had been stranded in the basement. His wife Tarjani, daughters, and mother lived with him in Gurugram, while his aunt and uncle had come from Ajmer to meet his father, who was in Max hospital. His cousin Ashok Goyal had come from Kishangarh in Uttar Pradesh.

Prem Bansal, Tarjani's father, says, "I had called my daughter just 15 minutes before the incident to ask when they had planned to go and meet her father-in-law. She said it was too early to think about that and cut the call. Half an hour later, Vivek's brother, Mahendra, informed me about the fire," he says. Mahendra was outside the hotel, trying to rescue the members, after he received a call from Vivek that there had been a fire. He alleges that the fire services did not have the cutters to cut through the basement shutters in time.

Isaac, a 62-year-old Nigerian national, is mostly quiet, says the attendant in the Intensive Care Unit of Max hospital. He is injured, but his wife didn't survive the jump from the third floor. The couple had travelled to Delhi for Isaac's medical treatment.

Habib, 20, from Bangladesh, had come to donate a part of his liver to his father. When he jumped from the second floor, his liver was impacted. Doctors have told him that he may not be able to donate it now. His father is in the same hospital, awaiting a liver transplant. Three others, including his mother, sister, and uncle, all jumped with him, and are injured. His mother says she will never stay in a hotel again.

### The action plans that followed

By the evening of the fire, a series of condolences and measures to fix accountability were announced by the Delhi Government. Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced an ex-gratia of ₹2 lakh from the Prime Minister's National Relief Fund for the next of kin of each deceased member, and ₹50,000 to each of the injured.

Lieutenant-Governor Taranjit Singh Sandhu chaired a meeting along with Delhi Home Minister Ashish Sood. He ordered a magisterial inquiry into the incident along with a month-long drive from June 4 to review safety compliance of all hotels, lodges, inns, nursing homes, coaching institutes, restaurants, and other vulnerable commercial establishments in the city.

Chief Minister Rekha Gupta sought a detailed report on the incident and warned of strict action if any lapses were found. On June 4, Gupta announced a compensation of ₹10 lakh to the next of kin of the people who died in the fire. The injured will receive ₹5 lakh each, she said, after she visited Max hospital, where most of the injured were.

The following day, teams were formed across Delhi's 13 districts by the government. In addition, the MCD began surveying all buildings with five floors and over. The civic body had also identified 12 B&Bs in the Hauz Rani area to seal, as they were violating permits given by the Tourism Department.

Simultaneously, Tourism Minister Kapil Mishra told *The Hindu*, "The department only gives permission for B&Bs. Regulatory enforcement is not carried out by our department, nor is any other follow-up inspection." Flourish Stay was granted the licence in 2024, valid through 2027. Mishra also says his department will review the draft policy, which was put in the public domain on May 26, 2026, for suggestions. The draft policy has proposed a self-certification and self-renewal framework, with "deemed approval" within seven working days, down from 30 days in the 2007 policy.

Meanwhile, MCD officials, including South Zone Deputy Commissioner Rakesh Kumar, say that it is not their job to check for violations under the B&B policy. Kumar says that those who grant the licence are supposed to enforce its rules. "We cannot take any action on buildings constructed before 2014 as they are exempt from MCD building by-laws," he says, of the structure that was built in the 1980s.

In January this year, after the Goa fire tragedy claimed 25 lives the month before, the MCD asked all 12 zones to conduct scrutiny of licences, including the instant ones. The tea-and-snacks licence comes under this category. For this B&B, the scrutiny, which involves a physical inspection, was marked "closed" a day before the fire. This meant there were no violations detected.

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Local people rescue a foreign national from the fire in New Delhi. AP

# THE HINDU HUDDLE 2026



**Rapt attention:** Delegates listening to a session at The Hindu Huddle in Bengaluru on Friday. K. MURALI KUMAR



**The mind's eye:** Mentalist Naman Anand in action during the 'Mind Games' session on Friday. K. MURALI KUMAR



**Seeking insight:** A student asking a question to Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Omar Abdullah at the event. K. MURALI KUMAR



**Creative showcase:** Spectators viewing artworks on display at The Hindu Huddle on Friday. K. MURALI KUMAR

## Student huddle focuses on linking skills with degrees



**Young minds:** Students with Vinaya Deshpande Pandit, Chief of Bureau, Maharashtra, *The Hindu*. K. MURALI KUMAR

### The Hindu Bureau BENGALURU

A panel discussion on 'Degree or skills, what will matter in the future?' in the student huddle organised as part of The Hindu Huddle in Bengaluru on Friday turned into an incisive and critical analysis of the education system and the job market in the country.

The panellists felt that there was an urgent need to integrate degrees with skills, as skills were important, but degrees could not be discarded.

Vinaya Deshpande Pandit, Chief of Bureau, Maharashtra, *The Hindu*, who moderated the session, raised the issue of what would matter to young people in the coming days – formal education or skills learnt by candidates on or off the course.

Aditi Singh, a management student from Amity University, said emphatically that she believed that 'skills before degree' was the way ahead. Anishka Chandra, studying biotechnology, said she believed skills were important, but she would not discard the importance of degrees.

Abd Ur Rehman Mujahid, a graduate student of medicine, Khaja Bandanawaz University, Kalaburagi said the relative importance of degrees or skills was highly sector-specific, as some fields required degrees while others required skills.

Premika Vallabhaneni, a post-graduate student of pathology, KBN University, felt that both degrees and skills were important, but there was a need to integrate them seamlessly.

## Abrogation of Article 370 was Centre's biggest policy mistake: Omar Abdullah

Jammu & Kashmir Chief Minister demands restoration of statehood and seeks clarity on timeline, parameters on which decision will be made; he says 'One Nation, One Election' will be difficult to implement in diverse country like India, and calls for more South Indian movies to be shot in Valley

### Vinaya Deshpande Pandit BENGALURU

Seeking the restoration of statehood for Jammu & Kashmir, Chief Minister Omar Abdullah on Friday said the abrogation of Article 370 was the biggest policy mistake made by the Union government. "You have already made it, in 2019," he said, when asked about errors the government could make in the Valley in the next decade.

Mr. Abdullah was in conversation with Dr. Narayan Lakshman, Opinion Editor, *The Hindu*, and Curator, The Hindu Huddle, in a session titled "Beyond the Valley: the role of Kashmir in great power politics".

In a candid conversation on myriad issues, Mr. Abdullah reflected on the geo-strategic significance of Jammu and Kashmir, perception about Muslim youth of the valley, impact of the West Asia conflict, and the complex issues affecting the Union Territory. He spoke about the connection the Union government had drawn between development and abrogation of Article 370, and said that the two were not related.

"The clauses in Article 370 were never a cause of lack of development in Jammu and Kashmir. It has suffered due to 30-35 years



**Illuminating discourse:** Omar Abdullah, Chief Minister of Jammu and Kashmir, in conversation with Narayan Lakshman, Opinion Editor, *The Hindu*, and Curator, The Hindu Huddle, in Bengaluru on Friday. K. MURALI KUMAR

of violence. The fact that Jammu and Kashmir was perceived as an unsafe place, is what we paid the price of," he said, adding that there are several other States where different rules were applicable at the regional level.

### 'Different systems'

"The BJP had said that we can't have two different systems in the same country. That was the stick used to beat us. But there are other places where you

can't buy land, or face other restrictions. It is a part of politics of the BJP. And we are suffering because of it," the Chief Minister said.

Questioning the Bharatiya Janata Party over the alleged commitment of the Prime Minister, which he referred to as 'Modi ka wada', Mr. Abdullah sought statehood for J&K. He wanted the Union government to clarify the parameters on which it would take the decision and a stipulated time frame. "It was a

commitment that delimitation will be followed by election, and that Statehood will follow. But it is nowhere to be seen. We don't know when the appropriate time will be. How are we supposed to gauge the appropriate time," he asked.

### On one election pitch

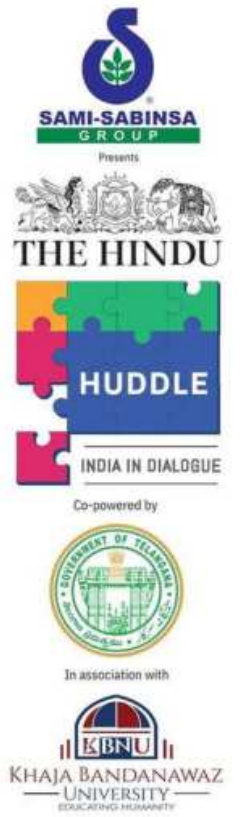
When the audience asked him about 'One Nation, One Election', he said that it was realistically difficult to make it work in a diverse

country like India. He highlighted the distrust among regional parties about its motive and questioned the implementation in States where the government may fall before completing its term.

"Realistically, how do you implement it for a country as diverse as ours with State governments that are so different in conditions where there is no fixed term," he said.

Mr. Abdullah said that there were not enough vis-

itors from the South of the Vindhyas to Jammu and Kashmir. "Tourism often follows movies. Look at what happened to Switzerland, thanks in part to Yash Chopra's films. We would love to see more South Indian films shot in Kashmir. These days, your films seem to be doing better than Bollywood's, and you have bigger budgets. So, I hope more films from the south are shot in Kashmir in the future," the Chief Minister said.



## In India, protection of nature also means safeguarding culture: Jairam

### Shilpa Elizabeth BENGALURU

To think you can deforest in Nicobar and manage its ecological impact by doing some compensatory afforestation in Haryana is a bogus argument, Jairam Ramesh, Congress leader and Rajya Sabha member, said at the session titled 'From the Aravallis to the Nicobar: at the edge of ecology' at The Hindu Huddle in Bengaluru on Friday.

Pointing out that Nicobar is a unique biodiversity spot, the former Union Environment Minister criticised the government for allowing the clearing of forest areas that should never be deforested.

### Cultural significance

"Large parts of Central India, which is the rich forest bowl of India, are under threat... We are seeing loss of forests and biodiversity that is known and unknown in Odisha, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and Nicobar," he said.

Taking the example of the protests that happened against Bauxite mining in Niyamgiri, he said that in many parts of India, people feel attached to their lands not just because of livelihoods, but because of



**Biodiversity concerns:** Jairam Ramesh, Rajya Sabha MP; Gargi Rawat, Consulting Editor, NDTV; and Dr. Krithi Karanth, CEO, Centre for Wildlife Studies, in Bengaluru on Friday. K. MURALI KUMAR

their cultural traditions.

"Democracy ultimately is about protecting the smallest of the small. If a particular community says that this is integral to my culture, then it is incumbent upon us to protect that culture. Because in India, unlike in many other parts of the world, when we protect nature, we also protect culture," he said.

However, he also acknowledged that governments have compulsions to create jobs and attract investments and said that the trade-off between environment and development has to be a democratic, give and take process.

"In environment and development, you cannot satisfy all sides. The only

policy that works is balanced dissatisfaction," he said.

"But going hand in hand means making difficult choices. There are certain situations where you will have to choose development because jobs are involved, investments are involved, and organisations are involved. However, there are instances where you have to say, 'no, we will protect the environment at all costs,'" he said.

Dr. Krithi Karanth, CEO, Centre for Wildlife Studies, who took part in the conversation, raised concerns that Indians, although they celebrate their language, culture, and history, do not celebrate the country's wildlife despite India being

one of the 17 mega biodiversity countries in the world.

"We're forgetting that we are not the only Indians in the room. There are tigers, elephants, hornbills, the Narcondam hornbill, and a multitude of amphibians, butterflies and insects yet to be discovered," she said.

While noting that in many parts of India, including Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, and Maharashtra, the wildlife numbers have gone up, she said that there are large parts of India that are in deep trouble. "The Great Indian Bustard is going to go in our lifetime..." she warned.

### Human-animal conflicts

With regards to human-animal conflicts, Dr. Karanth stressed that solutions have to be based on science and data, and required deep local community commitment.

"We now have high densities of animals, but we have huge cultural, social problems for wildlife in rural India...Urban Indians don't make decisions that matter for tiger, elephants, rural Indians do; and I think we have to empower rural Indians to solve the conflict," she added.

## Envoys stress need for rules-based global order and economic integration

### Appaji Reddem BENGALURU

Envoys of the European Union (EU), Australia, and a former Indian Foreign Secretary, who were panelists at a session of The Hindu Huddle, emphasised the need for a rules-based international order and economic integration. In this context, the growing India-EU and India-Australia partnerships were highlighted as major drivers of future cooperation.

Hervé Delphin, EU Ambassador to India, in an interaction with Suhasini Haidar, Diplomatic Affairs Editor, *The Hindu*, over domination of middle powers and major powers, said the EU wants to work together with those considered agents of change for cooperation, and rejected the terminology "middle powers" as it "boxes" people or countries in different categories. Instead of categorisation, he said the focus should be on countries with intent, capability and willingness to cooperate.

"We are in an era of paradox and polarisation which would assumingly



**Global ties:** Philip Green, Australian High Commissioner; Nirupama Rao, former Indian Foreign Secretary and diplomat; Hervé Delphin, EU Ambassador; and Suhasini Haidar, Diplomatic Affairs Editor, *The Hindu*, in Bengaluru on Friday. K. MURALI KUMAR

necessitate more cooperation than ever," he said. He said that India could play a constructive role in conflict resolution due to its unique relationships with multiple actors.

Philip Green, Australian High Commissioner to India, said the rules-based order remained largely intact and is governing trade, shipping, telecommunications and international business, and stressed on the need to strengthen the order. "Rather than worry about the world where rules don't exist, we need to protect the rules that exist and try to build them on," Mr. Green said. Speaking about diplo-

macy and India's role in international politics, former Indian Foreign Secretary and diplomat Nirupama Rao said the choice has been to maintain influence and dialogue. With growing global instability, India, Japan, and Australia have greater responsibility within the Indo-Pacific.

"India should continue acting as a pivotal power rather than joining a rigid bloc," Ms. Rao said.

India's current approach should be viewed against its long-standing West Asia policy. India's historical sympathy and support for the Palestinian cause remain important, she added.

## Naman Anand captivates the crowd with 'Mind Games'

### Anagha Maareesha BENGALURU

Day 1 of The Hindu Huddle was packed with thought-provoking sessions, and it concluded with a performance by mentalist Naman Anand, whose session titled 'Mind Games' took the audience through a mind-bending experience of illusions and tricks.

Popularly known as Bollywood's favourite mind reader, Mr. Anand has performed for personalities ranging from Shah Rukh Khan and the Ambani family to IPL cricket teams.

After serious and critical dialogues the whole day, this playful session came as a welcome change. He opened his interactive session by inviting an audience member on stage and asking her to choose a number between 1 and 100. He then pulled out a list of the "Top 100 Hollywood personalities" on his phone. The woman chose two, and the number corresponded to Brad Pitt on the list. Mr. Anand then impressed the audience by pulling out a photo of the American actor.

Mr. Anand's charismatic show brought energy and laughter to the evening.

# THE HINDU HUDDLE 2026

## India-China relations have improved to a new level of development: Xu Feihong

Chinese Ambassador calls for accelerated efforts towards 'full normalisation' of relations and stresses the need to address a 'serious deficit of trust'; currently, border situation is generally stable and peaceful, he says, adding that it requires dialogue to ensure a fair, mutually acceptable resolution

**Ananth Krishnan**  
BENGALURU

India-China relations over the past year have improved from a "reset and fresh start" to a "new level of development", Chinese Ambassador to India Xu Feihong said on Friday, calling for accelerated efforts towards a "full normalisation" of relations and to address a "serious deficit of trust".

In a conversation with Suhasini Haidar, Diplomatic Affairs Editor, *The Hindu*, Mr. Xu said the two leaders – Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping – had played "a leading role in providing strategic guidance for relations between our two countries".

"Both President Xi and Prime Minister Modi attach great importance to bilateral ties and view relations from the strategic and long-term perspective," he said.

"The diplomatic teams of two sides have been working very hard to step up communication and cooperation at various levels to advance implementation of the important common understandings between the two leaders. I would say the leaders have led relations from a reset and fresh start to a new level of development."

Mr. Xu said he was "very glad to see the gradual and tangible progress" both sides had made recently, including through easing of restrictions on investments from China, resumption of the Kailash-Mansarovar yatra for Indian pilgrims, resumption of direct flights between



**Vital ties:** Xu Feihong, Chinese Ambassador to India, speaking with Suhasini Haidar, *The Hindu's* Diplomatic Affairs Editor, at The Hindu Huddle in Bengaluru on Friday. K. MURALI KUMAR

several cities, and other measures. At the same time, he said ties were not yet fully normalised.

"It is true we have made progress and (made) improvement in relations, but the full normalisation of our ties still calls for joint and continuous efforts from our two countries," Mr. Xu said. "China-India relations are one of the most important bilateral relationships in the world. The importance of relations extends beyond the bilateral scope and carries global strategic significance."

**'Eased restrictions'**

He said the Chinese side was "happy to see the Indian side has gradually eased restrictions on Chinese investment", referring to the restrictions im-

posed in early 2020, at the start of the pandemic, following the issuing of Press Note 3. He did, however, add that this was not yet a "complete" easing of measures.

Calling for more people-to-people ties, he said "the deficit of trust remains serious" between the two countries. "Exchanges between the policy-making bodies are not enough. China and India have nearly 50 government-to-government dialogue mechanisms, unfortunately most of them remain stalled," he said, adding that China was "ready to resume exchanges with India in various fields and at various levels."

On the border question and the rupture in ties following the Galwan Valley clash in June 2020, Mr. Xu

said both sides had held several rounds of recent talks, including most recently, last week in Beijing when both sides held the 35th meeting of the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on border affairs. Both countries in Beijing discussed issues related to border delimitation, border management, mechanism building and cross-border cooperation.

"Currently the border situation is generally stable and peaceful," Mr. Xu said. "I think the boundary question is an important one and we should handle it properly. The boundary question is very complex and sensitive and left over from history. It concerns the sentiments of the two peoples and requires dialogue and consultation to

seek a fair, reasonable and mutually acceptable resolution. China and India as two ancient civilisations have the wisdom and capability to find effective ways to accommodate each other's core interests and major concerns, and properly settle differences through dialogue."

**On ties with Pakistan**

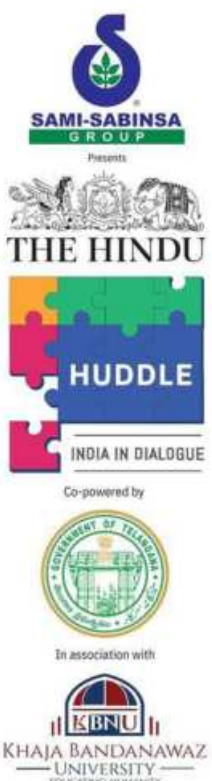
Questioned on China's relations with Pakistan, including its provision of assistance to the Pakistani military during Operation Sindoor which raised concerns in India, Mr. Xu said China "hopes India and Pakistan seek resolutions on their differences through negotiation and dialogue."

"Geographically you can never be separated from each side," he said. "Good relations will bene-

fit the two countries, two peoples and will be conducive to maintain peace, development and prosperity of this region."

China, he said, was also "actively participating" in BRICS and supporting India's hosting of the BRICS Summit later this year. Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping are among leaders expected to attend.

On whether Mr. Xi will visit New Delhi for the summit on what would be his first visit to India since the 2019 summit, he said, "China, together with all member countries, is fully getting prepared for this very important occasion. There are three months for us to get prepared, so I cannot give you a very exact answer, but I hope you will stay tuned."



Amit Malik, psychiatrist, and Prabha S. Chandra, Director, NIMHANS, in conversation with Amrita Tripathi, author, in Bengaluru on Friday. K. MURALI KUMAR

## Character AI poses unique risks for young users, mental health experts warn

**Afshan Yasmeen**  
BENGALURU

Mental health professionals have raised concerns over the growing popularity of Character AI platforms among young people, warning that immersive chatbot interactions could blur the line between entertainment, companionship and psychological dependence.

Speaking at a session titled 'The matrix can hear you: chatbots and mental health' organised as part of The Hindu Huddle, NIMHANS Director Prabha S. Chandra said Character AI differs significantly from conventional generative AI tools because users can interact with simulated personalities ranging from historical figures and celebrities to fictional characters and customised companions.

"Unlike a standard chatbot, Character AI allows users to create highly personalised relationships and narratives. It can become deeply immersive because users are not just consuming content; they are actively participating in and shaping the story," she said.

Dr. Chandra noted that many young users find such platforms engaging and entertaining, but cautioned that the absence of adequate safeguards could make them particularly vulnerable.

Referring to studies suggesting that individuals experiencing loneliness, social isolation or social anxiety are among the most frequent users of such platforms, Dr. Chandra said: "People who are lonely often use these tools for comfort, and that can sometimes be helpful. However, those who are already socially avoidant may end up withdrawing further from real-world interactions."

Amit Malik, psychiatrist and founder of mental health organisation Amaha, said AI systems could play a constructive role in improving access to information and mental health resources, particularly in a country where treatment gaps remain significant.

"The challenge is ensuring that AI remains a tool rather than becoming a substitute for human relationships, professional care or independent thinking," he said.

**Need for stronger oversight**

Pointing to international cases in which prolonged engagement with AI companions has been linked to emotional distress and harmful outcomes, Dr. Malik said this calls for stronger oversight and age-appropriate protections.

Both experts emphasised that while AI technologies are likely to become increasingly integrated into everyday life, human oversight, stronger regulations and greater digital literacy will be essential to minimise risks. Parents should take an active interest in how children and adolescents use AI platforms and discuss online experiences openly, they said.

Excessive dependence on such tools can have unintended consequences, the experts agreed. It can contribute to "cognitive laziness" – a reduced willingness to engage in independent thinking and problem-solving and also "emotional laziness", where individuals increasingly seek reassurance and emotional regulation from AI systems instead of developing coping skills through relationships and lived experience.

The discussion moderated by Amrita Tripathi, author and mental health advocate, also highlighted concerns around data privacy, misinformation and the potential impact of excessive reliance on generative AI on critical thinking, creativity and decision-making abilities.

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R. Ganesan, Senior Vice-President, L&T; Neeti Sharma, CEO, TeamLease Digital; Praveen Someshwar, MD & CEO, USL and Member, Global Diageo Executive Committee; and Shailendra Katyal, MD, Lenovo India, with L.V. Navaneeth, CEO of The Hindu Group in Bengaluru, on Friday. K. MURALI KUMAR

## Industry leaders reflect on leadership in times of chaos

**Ravi Reddy**  
BENGALURU

Industry leaders shared candid reflections on leadership and the need to adapt to chaos, disruption, and volatility at The Hindu Huddle on Friday.

At a session moderated by L.V. Navaneeth, CEO of The Hindu Group, the panelists R. Ganesan, Senior Vice President, L&T; Neeti Sharma, CEO, TeamLease Digital; Praveen Someshwar, MD & CEO, USL and Member, Global Diageo Executive Committee; and Shailendra Katyal, MD, Lenovo India, shared their experiences on leadership.

Mr. Ganesan stressed the value of a structured approach: "I activate what I call 'pause, reflect, and then act. It's a regression of wisdom acquired over time, and it works," he said.

Ms. Sharma added that listening to stakeholders is critical. "Dashboards and analytics are abundant, but leaders must hear the

noise of the industry. What keeps CXOs awake at night is understanding that noise," she said.

Mr. Katyal stressed on the need for clarity and focus. "Chaos is always the short term raising its hand. You must drown out the noise but keep an eye on the North Star. Fewer, bigger, better decisions matter most," he said and also warned against middle management bottlenecks. "Radical simplification and clear communication are essential," he said.

**On geo-political shocks**

Referring to the geopolitical shocks, Mr. Ganesan said: "Conflicts in the Red Sea, Ukraine, and the Strait of Hormuz disrupted supply chains. We started putting up algorithms knitting multiple variables – logistics, suppliers, raw material sources, and geopolitical events – to see how much uncertainty we can convert into structured decisions." Reflecting on consumer

behaviour and adaptability, Mr. Someshwar said: "Change is the reality. The ability to say no is the single biggest challenge – choosing what we will not get into is as important as what we will."

Ms. Sharma highlighted the permanence of disruption, pointing out that most retailers thought e-commerce was temporary. "But they missed the early signals and lost huge market share. Likewise, AI is a permanent disruptor. Leaders must redraw structures, talent maps, and skill sets," she said.

Mr. Navaneeth reflected on the media industry's upheaval: "We thought search traffic would remain stable, but when Google integrated Gemini, everything changed. Plans must adapt to reality. Don't get married to plans, get married to context," he said. He said that while AI reveals patterns, technology scales intelligence, but leadership scales judgment.

## Film personalities discuss the influence of OTT platforms on Bollywood

**Vivek M.V.**  
BENGALURU

Film production in Bollywood has gone down by 50%, and current filmmakers are confused about their prospective audience, according to actor Huma Qureshi.

"It's not an alarming sign, but I feel for upcoming actors who struggle for opportunities," said Ms. Qureshi, who was speaking at The Hindu Huddle on Friday.

**Current trends**

Ms. Qureshi shared her observations on current trends in Bollywood, along with fellow actor Kritika Kamra, during a session titled 'New avatar for the silver screen: the global reach of OTT', which was moderated by journalist and talk show host Rohit Khilnani.

"Earlier, great stories were backed by OTT. It was a wonderful period of storytelling. Today, we are confused about whom we are catering our films to," said Ms. Qureshi, who is set to star in the highly anticipated film *Toxic*.

Ms. Kamra echoed her thoughts. "Some incredible work was being done at the beginning of the OTT era. We took some big leaps in the OTT space. Now, we are making movies for numbers. Visibility is being prioritised because it makes money. It is



Actors Huma Qureshi and Kritika Kamra in conversation with journalist and host Rohit Khilnani on Friday. K. MURALI KUMAR

a scary situation to be in," the actor said.

Ms. Kamra was praised for her performance in *The Great Shamsuddin Family*, a JioHotstar film revolving around a modern Muslim family grappling with generational gaps and social tensions. "It took eight years for the film to see the light of day. It's a small film, but I am glad to see the love it has gotten from women all over the world. The reception to the movie has given me the confidence to do an indie movie. We must have more small, mid-budget movies. They have disappeared," she said.

**'Breaking barriers'**

Ms. Qureshi said her hit series *Maharani* changed how people in the industry look at her as a performer. She is keen on featuring in stories that "break cultural barriers", she said. "I would love to be part of something on the lines of *Adolescence* and *Squid*

*Game*," she added.

Is becoming an influencer the new way to break into acting? Ms. Kamra does not think so. She opined that youngsters must be a part of the film-making process to grow as performers.

"They must attend auditions and try to assist directors. It's a better approach than building a social media profile and going viral," she said.

**On pay parity**

The actors also offered their perspectives on the hot topic of pay parity. "Apart from equal pay, we must also talk about female actors getting more screen-time and unique characters. As for pay, I wish we reach a situation where we are in a position to demand a share of the film's profit," Ms. Kamra said.

Ms. Qureshi added: "Films are made for the male gaze. Women are just accessories. This mindset is deep-rooted."

## KARNATAKA

## On a slow charging mode

While Bengaluru leads the transition towards electric mobility, vehicle owners say inadequate infrastructure, long charging times, and high purchase cost pose challenges for wider adoption. **Darshan Devaiah B.P.** and **Mini Tejaswi** take an overview of the EV scenario on World Environment Day



**Current scenario:** Electric vehicles being charged at a station in Bengaluru on Thursday. India's overall EV market penetration is expected to reach approximately 10% in FY 2026-27. ALLEN EGENUSE J.

**B**uying an electric car has been a great decision for my daily commute in Bengaluru. It is comfortable to drive, and has reduced my fuel expenses. But whenever I travel to my hometown Mangaluru, I have to stop after around 220 km, and spend nearly an hour charging before continuing the journey, says Ramya Kumari, an IT professional from Bellandur. "While EVs are excellent for city driving, long-distance travel requires careful planning around charging stations, which can be frustrating."

Her experience mirrors that of thousands of electric vehicle (EV) owners across Karnataka, where the shift towards cleaner mobility is accelerating, but infrastructure continues to lag behind demand.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi recently urged citizens to reduce dependence on petrol and diesel, citing the need to conserve foreign exchange and strengthen India's energy security amid global uncertainties in fuel markets. Electric vehicles have emerged as a key pillar in India's strategy to reduce oil imports and lower emissions.

India's overall EV market penetration is expected to reach approximately 10% in FY 2026-27, led by robust two-wheeler sales from major manufacturers and growing four-wheeler adoption. While national public charging infrastructure has grown to over 29,000 units, deployment remains urban-centric with a high EV-to-charger ratio (235:1). Karnataka spearheads this deployment, housing 23% of the nation's chargers, though 75% of these are deployed in Bengaluru, say industry observers.

Indeed, for Bengaluru residents, EVs have become increasingly attractive due to soaring fuel prices, rising environmental awareness and government incentives. Yet, once drivers venture beyond the city limits, concerns over charging infrastructure often overshadow the benefits, like in the case of Ramya.

Says Ramya, "Whenever I drive to Mangaluru, I usually stop around Sakleshpur, where a limited number of charging points are available. During weekends or holiday periods, there can be queues. Even though the number of charging stations is increasing, it is still nowhere near sufficient for the growing number of EV users. The biggest challenge is range anxiety, constantly worrying about whether the next charging station will be available and operational before the battery runs low."

The Bengaluru-Mangaluru route, one of Karnataka's busiest inter-city corridors, illustrates the challenge. Drivers often have to plan journeys around available charging points rather than choosing the most convenient route or schedule.

#### Charging duration

Apart from the availability of charging stations, charging duration remains a major concern. Unlike conventional fuel vehicles that can be refuelled within minutes, EVs require significantly more time. Depending on battery size and charging capacity, a standard home charger can take anywhere between six and 12 hours to fully charge a vehicle. Fast chargers can reduce charging times to between 30 minutes and one hour for a substantial battery refill, but such facilities remain limited, especially outside cities.

For apartment dwellers in Bengaluru, even home charging is not always straightforward. Praveen S., a resident of J.P. Nagar who owns an electric vehicle, said that access to charging infrastructure within residential complexes remains a challenge.

"Many people assume that EV owners can

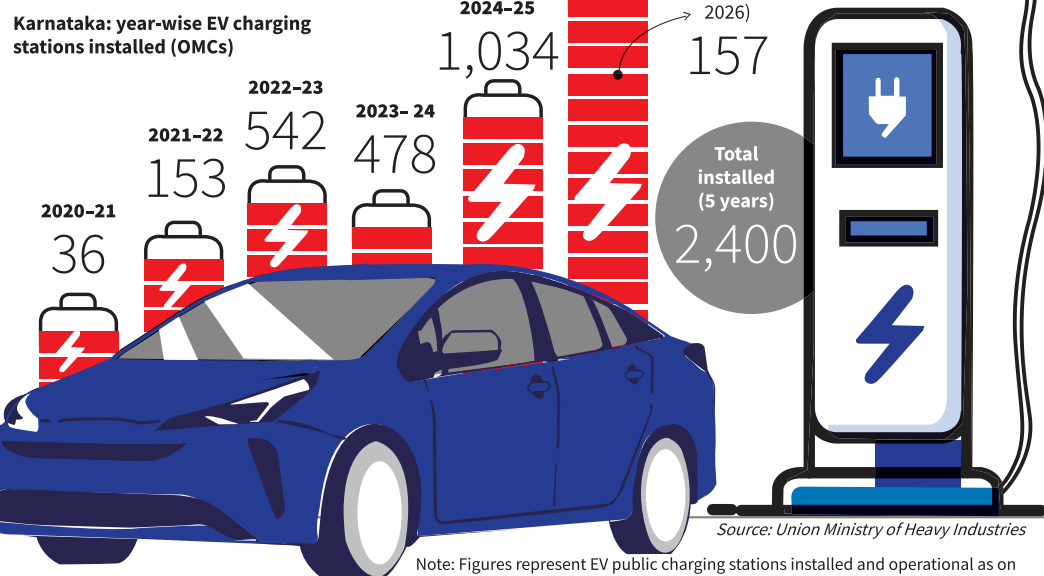
**The biggest challenge is range anxiety, constantly worrying about whether the next charging station will be available and operational before the battery runs low**

**RAMYA KUMARI**  
IT professional

#### Key concerns among EV users

- Limited charging stations outside major cities
- Range anxiety during long-distance travel
- Charging takes 30 minutes to 1 hour at fast chargers; 6-12 hours at home
- Lack of charging facilities in many apartment complexes
- Long journeys require careful route planning around charging points
- Concerns over battery degradation and replacement costs
- Higher upfront purchase cost compared to petrol/diesel vehicles

#### Karnataka's charging network



GRAPHICS: SEBASTIAN FRANCIS

simply charge their vehicles at home. In reality, several apartment complexes were designed long before electric vehicles became common. Residents do not have dedicated parking slots or access to electrical connections required for installing personal chargers. Getting approvals from apartment associations can be time-consuming. Unless residential infrastructure evolves alongside EV adoption, many urban residents will continue facing practical difficulties," he said.

#### On-road price

Another hurdle for many contemplating to buy EVs is the higher upfront cost of purchasing an electric vehicle. While operating costs are generally lower than those of petrol and diesel vehicles due to cheaper energy and reduced maintenance requirements, the initial investment remains substantial.

Sukesh Hegde, a resident of Yelahanka, spent months researching electric vehicles before ultimately deciding to purchase a diesel car. "Everyone talks about the benefits of EVs, and I agree they make sense in many situations, especially two-wheelers are good. But when I compared prices, I realised that a good electric SUV costs significantly more than a comparable fuel-powered vehicle. For many middle-class families, that difference matters," he said.

Hegde also pointed to uncertainty about battery life. "Lithium-ion batteries degrade over time, and replacing them can be expensive. I was concerned about what the vehicle would be worth after several years and whether battery replacement costs would offset the savings from lower running expenses."

#### Infrastructure growth

According to data available on the VAHAN dashboard, Karnataka registered more than 54,000 electric vehicles between January and March 2026. At the same time, the State has emerged as the second-largest hub for public EV charging stations installed by oil marketing companies (OMCs) in the country.

Data accessed by *The Hindu* shows that 2,039 EV public charging stations installed by OMCs are currently operational across the State. Karnataka had only 36 charging stations in 2020-21. The number increased to 153 in 2021-22 before rising sharply to 542 in 2022-23 amid growing EV adoption.

Although installations dipped slightly to 478 stations in 2023-24, the overall growth trajectory remained positive. The biggest expansion occurred in 2024-25, when 1,034 charging stations were added in a single year.

In the previous financial year up to March 1, 2026, another 157 charging stations have been installed. This has taken the total installations over five years to approximately 2,400 stations, of which 2,039 are operational.

OMCs comprising Indian Oil (IOCL), Bharat Petroleum (BPCL), and Hindustan Petroleum (HPCL) have already installed close to 30,000 charging sites across their fuel retail networks and fast-charging infrastructure on highways in India. BPCL has set up EV fast-charging corridors along busy routes like Bengaluru-Tirupati. Indian Oil in partnership with Sun Mobility deployed battery swapping stations to offer quick charging to commercial fleets and three-wheelers.

IOCL is planning 608 EV charging stations across all 31 districts in Karnataka, of which 304 stations have already been onboarded. Siddharth Agarwal, executive director and State head, Karnataka State Office, Indian Oil, said all of these are fast DC chargers, enabling efficient and convenient charging. "We are planning 240 kW charging stations, which will cater to the heavy vehicles segment. Feasibility studies are being conducted and rollout is expected in the current financial year." Currently, 124 chargers are already integrated with Indian Oil's e-Charge platform. The remaining chargers are under various stages of onboarding.

HPCL's flagship brand HPeCharge, leveraging its extensive fuel retail network, has built one of the most expansive public EV charging infrastructures in the country, including Karnataka, according to the oil PSU.

#### Private players

EV vehicle manufacturers and infrastructure developers say Karnataka has made important strides in this segment.

Karnataka is one of the strongest examples of EV adoption, according to Ravneet S. Phokela, chief business officer at Ather Energy of Hero MotoCorp. The State was already seeing some of the highest electric two-wheeler penetration levels in the country, with EVs accounting for 13.1% of new two-wheeler registrations in FY26, supported by a strong ecosystem of startups, suppliers, manufacturers and charge point operators. More importantly, consumer behaviour has evolved, he observed, adding that concerns around range, battery life, and charging accessibility are reducing as products become more reliable and the supporting ecosystem matures.

Phokela said his company has invested extensively in battery technology, safety systems, and validation for Indian conditions. On charging accessibility, Ather claims to have over 6,000 LECCS-powered fast-charging points across India, including more than 500 in Karnataka. Bengaluru alone has over 200 fast-charging points, with charging stations typically located within 2 kilometres of one another.

Chetan Maini, co-founder and chairperson of SUN Mobility, said Karnataka, in particular, is among the States most prepared for EV transition, having been an early mover in EV policy and ecosystem development.

#### Investment flow

Karnataka has attracted over ₹25,000 crore in EV-related investment across manufacturing, batteries, charging infrastructure, and R&D, while also building one of the country's largest charging networks with more than 5,000 charging stations. Over the years, SUN Mobility has established a network of more than 1,700 battery swapping stations across 23 cities, supporting over 95,000 vehicles and enabling more than 60 million battery swaps, claimed the company. The company also collaborates with Indian Oil Corporation, Bescom and the Indian Railways.

A spokesperson of Tata Power, an integrated power company, said Bengaluru's technology-driven ecosystem and sustainability focused businesses have played an important role in accelerating this shift. Tata Power's EZ Charge energised over 5,500 public charging points in over 700 cities across the country, including 320 in Karnataka.

Karnataka government officials, meanwhile, say substantial investments are already under way. A senior official from the Transport Department in Bengaluru said that both the Centre and State governments are actively working to strengthen charging infrastructure.

Another official pointed to major Central government initiatives aimed at accelerating deployment. "Under the FAME-II scheme, ₹912.5 crore has been sanctioned for EV charging infrastructure across the country. Of this, ₹895.48 crore has already been released, while ₹655.43 crore has been utilised. In addition, ₹2,000 crore has been earmarked under the PM E-DRIVE scheme specifically for expanding charging infrastructure nationwide."

He added that the focus is shifting from merely increasing number of charging stations to improving reliability and accessibility. "We are encouraging deployment of fast-charging networks, supporting private sector participation and working with oil marketing companies and urban local bodies," the official said.

#### Ecosystem at a critical stage

Despite this progress, experts argue that infrastructure growth has not kept pace with the rapid increase in vehicle registration. Traffic and mobility expert M.N. Sreehari says, "Karnataka may have emerged as one of India's very fast growing areas of electric mobility, but the next phase of growth will depend on user confidence. The challenge is no longer convincing consumers to buy EVs. It is ensuring they can use them conveniently across the State. A driver should never have to worry about finding a charging station within a reasonable distance."

Sreehari feels that charging technology and grid integration also require attention. "The government should encourage ultra-fast charging corridors along major highways connecting Bengaluru, Mysuru, Mangaluru, Hubballi-Dharwad, Kalaburagi and Belagavi. Apartment charging regulations need to be simplified, and incentives should be provided to housing societies that install common charging facilities," he added. According to him, consumers need reliable information about battery life, operating costs and charging options.

#### Legal, regulatory issues

Drawing attention to another oft-ignored but key factor, Sonam Chandwani, managing partner, KS Legal & Associates, emphasised the importance of the legal and regulatory ecosystem in accelerating EV transition. While policies such as FAME, the Production Linked Incentive (PLI) Scheme, State-level EV policies, and renewable energy initiatives have created momentum, implementation remains fragmented.

Land acquisition for charging stations, power connectivity approvals, environmental clearances, battery waste management obligations under the Battery Waste Management Rules, 2022, and compliance with electricity and urban development regulations continue to present practical challenges.

The next phase of India's EV journey would require greater regulatory harmonisation between the Central and State governments, municipal authorities, electricity distribution companies, and private sector participants.

"The EV transition is often viewed as a technological revolution, but it is equally a legal and regulatory transformation. Technology can create the vehicle, but laws, contracts, compliance frameworks, financing structures, and investor protections create the ecosystem within which that vehicle can operate at scale," Chandwani said.

# DELHI

# 'College feels like a distant dream'

In the past month, multiple controversies surrounding competitive and board examinations have raised questions about the integrity of the examination system. In conversation with students across the country, **Ashna Butani** and **Shubhangi Kshitiza Saurav** find that hope has been replaced with despair for most and the future is uncertain for many students, some of whom are set to be the first in their families to go to college

In the first week of May, Shreya Rajput from Uttar Pradesh's Deoria dreamt of studying BSc in Criminology. Ankit Singh from Bihar's Bihta was sure he would clear the competitive medical entrance test in his seventh attempt. Dhruv Tiwari in Delhi's Preet Vihar was studying every waking minute hoping to become the first doctor in his family and Prem Kumar from Jharkhand thought he would be the first in his immediate family to go to college.

Within weeks, examination controversies – from concerns over the Central Board of Secondary Education's (CBSE) new digital evaluation system to cancellation of the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test (NEET) and glitches in the Common University Entrance Test (CUET) – left each of these students questioning their futures.

Now, as colleges open their admission windows, these students still await their re-evaluated results. As they prepare for retests, some worry that they might not be able to afford the cost of travelling to the examination centre again.

### Cost of emotional labour

As he stands at a precipice in his academic journey, Dhruv, 17, son of a homemaker and a grocery store owner, says, "I wanted to study at AIIMS, Rishikesh but now I am not thinking about my dream college. College itself feels like a distant dream." When Dhruv returned after appearing for NEET on May 3, he was confident that his examination had gone well. But a few days later, while scrolling on his mobile phone, he learnt that the examination had been cancelled and he would have to appear again. "I immediately started studying again. It has been a childhood dream of mine to become a doctor and I was very close." He adds, "Magar ab pata nahi kya hoga (But now I do not know what will happen)."

While NEET is the main qualifying examination for medical colleges, CUET has opened doors to Central universities since 2022, even as some rely on the CBSE Class 12 board exam results in cases of tie-breakers. Some private colleges still consider CBSE marks. In certain competitive examinations such as the Joint Entrance Examination (JEE), students require a minimum pass percentage of 75% in the CBSE exam.

The controversies unfolded on May 12, with the National Testing Agency (NTA) announcing the cancellation of NEET over allegations of a paper leak after it conducted the examination for 22.05 lakh candidates. The retest is scheduled to take place on June 21.

The CBSE results came the next day, which showed that the pass percentage dipped to 85.29% from 88.39% last year. Soon, the board came under fire for discrepancies in evaluation of answer scripts, malfunctioning of the re-evaluation process, and questions over the newly introduced On-Screen Marking (OSM) system. In addition to this, it costs students ₹100 per subject to secure scanned copies, ₹100 for re-totalling, and ₹25 for giving an answer for re-evaluation.

While a student, Sarthak Sidhant, 17, began flagging irregularities in the board's tendering process for the OSM system, yet another examination conducted by the NTA - CUET - faced disruptions and technical glitches. CUET is conducted over a couple of weeks, with some students having to appear for multiple papers.

### The burden of travel

At 2 a.m. on May 30, Prem, 18, left Hazaribagh in Jharkhand to reach an exam centre in Dhanbad, 200 km away, to appear for his CUET Physics paper. His dream is to be the first in his immediate family to go to college. Originally from Giridih, he moved to Hazaribagh for his schooling.

On the same day, Akash Kumar, 19, originally from Bishnupura, a village in Bihar, travelled from a relative's house in Delhi's Burari to Noida's

During the two hours that we were waiting at the centre, all I could think of was whether I would be able to appear for a retest if it was cancelled. I have to think of what my family can afford

**PREM KUMAR**  
Resident of Hazaribagh, Jharkhand

Sector 64 for his English and General Aptitude papers, with hopes of leaving his home town and gaining admission in a foreign language course at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in Delhi.

After completing the long journeys, what followed was hours of chaos and uncertainty. The centres in Dhanbad and Noida, students kept waiting for the exam to start. In Dhanbad, the exam began two hours late. After writing the paper, students were told that their examination was cancelled. In Noida, students say they were told that the examination would not take place after they waited for hours.

Prem spent around ₹1,400 that day on food, a train journey, and toots. Akash spent around ₹1,000 on Rapido.

"During the two hours that we were waiting at the centre, all I could think of was whether I would be able to appear for a retest if it was cancelled. I have to think of what my family can afford," Prem says, his voice heavy with exhaustion. He is from a family of farmers and wishes to experiment with AI tools in the future.

On the day of the disruptions, the NTA said there had been technical glitches and that its technical service provider had been asked to conduct a root-cause analysis and submit a report. It stated that most students (95%) had completed the examination after the disruptions while 3,765 candidates "chose to leave before the exam could restart". The NTA has announced that the revised examinations will take place on June 6 and 7 for these candidates.

### Two days of despair

For Mridul Mayank, 18, from Luddega, a village in Chhattisgarh, around 400 km from his CUET centre in Raipur, appearing for the examination was fraught with uncertainty from the beginning. Mridul has Type 1 diabetes, for which he follows a strict regimen of insulin injections four times a day. Despite this, he maintained good scores throughout his schooling.

With CUET scheduled for May 14, he eventually made it to Raipur on May 13, shelling out ₹10,000 on travel, accommodation, and meals. The same day, his CBSE results were declared. Like thousands of students, he believed he had done well in the examination, but the new OSM system delivered a blow only hours before he was scheduled to appear for CUET.

"I was already scared about leaving home for higher studies because of my medical condition. The only thing that kept me motivated was my dedication to studies. But when I saw my board result, I could not believe my eyes. I thought the world around me had stopped," he says.

His family had to convince him to appear for CUET as he had lost motivation. He appeared for the tests on May 14 and 19, only to face technical difficulties at the centre.



**SAANVI**  
From Jaipur, Rajasthan  
A NEET aspirant, who says the retest has added mental pressure

**MRIDUL MAYANK**  
From Luddega village in Chhattisgarh  
Travelled around 400 kilometres for CUET but his CBSE results, released the day before, broke his spirit

**ANKIT SINGH**  
From Bihta, a town in Bihar  
Thought his NEET examination went well on the seventh try, but the examination got cancelled

**KHUSHI SINGH**  
From Sariya in Jharkhand  
Her college dreams are hinged on the rechecked CBSE papers, which she is still awaiting

**PREM KUMAR**  
From Giridih in Jharkhand  
His CUET examination got cancelled, and he is unsure of appearing for the retest given the travel costs

**SHREYA RAJPUT**  
From Deoria, Uttar Pradesh  
Dreams of studying B.Sc in Criminology. But her unexpected CBSE marks are now setting her back

**DHRUV TIWARI**  
From Preet Vihar, Delhi  
Dreams of becoming a doctor, but the NEET cancellation has temporarily halted his dreams

**AKASH KUMAR**  
From Bishnupura village in Patna, Bihar  
Dreams of studying foreign languages from JNU. Appeared for CUET but his examination was cancelled. His dreams are on hold until the retest

**ANJALI GIRI**  
From Pathalgaon, Chhattisgarh  
She aspires to join the defence services someday, and is awaiting her reevaluated CBSE papers before she can make her future plans

There were multiple issues while marking. The papers were not scanned properly and blurry. Marks were getting assigned wrongly and it was difficult to zoom into the questions to read the answers. The OSM system could have been beneficial for us only if we were given proper training before

CBSE EXAM EVALUATOR

His mother, Vibha Singh, says, "It was very difficult for him that day. Due to his health, he is already sensitive to stress."

She adds that the timing of the CBSE results on the day before CUET did not help the situation.

The board has been posting regular updates and even admitted to "vulnerabilities". It added that teams have been deployed to strengthen the systems. Amid the row, the Central government replaced the board's Chairman and Secretary. It also set up a one-member committee to initiate an inquiry into the CBSE's procurement of services for the OSM system. Meanwhile, students across the country have been protesting against these irregularities.

### Faulty marking system, glitches in portal

Shreya, who studied in a CBSE school in U.P.'s Deoria district, says her results gave her a shock. "Almost all my results were bad, but the subject that surprised me the most was Physics, in which I got six out of 70 in the theory component." In her internal school examinations, her marks were never this low, she says.

She hopes to study Criminology and Forensics and does not want to appear for centralised examinations given the "constant paper leaks and cancellations".

Her mother is a homemaker and her father works in a pharmaceutical company. While there are no restrictions in her family on girls' education, she was set to be the first woman to go to college. But now, she is sending her papers for re-evaluation and is unsure of what will happen. "First, the portal was not opening for two days. Finally, when it opened, I managed to give my Physics paper for re-evaluation. It costs ₹25 per question, so I spent around ₹375 in total."

A teacher who evaluated CBSE papers in Delhi

says on condition of anonymity: "There were multiple issues while marking. The papers were not scanned properly and blurry. Marks were getting assigned wrongly and it was difficult to zoom into the questions to read the answers."

She says it was particularly difficult for evaluators with weak eyesight and who are not technology-savvy as they were being asked to check at least 25 answer sheets every day. "The OSM system could have been beneficial for us only if we were given proper training before," she says.

### Hopes and expectations

Ankit Singh, 26, says he was full of "josh (energy)" when he first started preparing for NEET in 2018. Now, seven attempts later, he has decided to leave Kota, a coaching hub in Rajasthan, to return to Bihta, a town in Bihar. After the exam was cancelled, he felt it didn't make sense to keep paying room rent in Kota and investing in coaching classes in the city. Last year, Ankit secured 480 out of 720 when medical colleges in Bihar had a cut-off starting at 510. "This year, I thought it was my turn to make it. I calculated my marks and I was getting around 596, which would have secured me admission in a good medical college. I thought I had cleared it," he says, only to find out later that the examination had been cancelled and he would have to reappear.

The years of preparation came with their share of issues too. Ankit says he did not have the infrastructure in his home town to prepare during the three years affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. He says he has symptoms of anxiety and takes medicines for it.

"With NEET comes a respectable job and financial security. I do not want to regret not giving it a real shot." He still wants to, but says he is tired as paper leaks and cancellations continue to plague the examination.

### College dreams in limbo

In January this year, Sheela (name changed to protect identity), from Bihar, lost her father, who was the only family member who had encouraged her to become a doctor. She had calculated her NEET marks based on the provisional answer key and thought she would score around 620. But then the news of the examination being cancelled came.

Now, her brothers are trying to convince her to get married, citing financial constraints and limited pension that is sustaining the household.

"The last paper I gave was mentally my last attempt. I do not know where my life will take me by the end of the year. I am unsure if I will reappear for NEET," she says.

Another young woman from Uttar Pradesh, who hoped to do well in the CBSE exam, says she tried to send her papers for re-evaluation, but the portal kept glitching and her requests did not go through. "I do not know what will happen now. My marks are weak, so I will have to stay at home," she says, with hopes of a college education temporarily dashed.

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# TELANGANA



**Stone under strain:** A worker oversees a granite block being cut at a processing unit in Khammam, where many factories are operating below capacity amid an industry downturn. NAGARA GOPAL

## Growing cracks in the granite trade

Telangana's once-thriving granite industry is showing signs of stress as export markets shrink and input costs soar. In Karimnagar and Khammam districts, quarry owners, factory operators and migrant workers are all feeling the impact of a prolonged downturn, report **P. Sridhar and P. Laxma Reddy**

For years, Rajendra Mohanty believed granite would guarantee him a steady livelihood. Today, cooking over a firewood stove outside his room on a factory campus in Kamanpur near Karimnagar, the 42-year-old migrant worker from Odisha is unsure what lies ahead. A slowdown triggered by geopolitical tensions in West Asia, rising fuel costs and weakening export demand has begun to ripple through Telangana's granite industry, affecting everyone from quarry owners and factory operators to truck drivers and migrant labourers.

Karimnagar, often referred to as the 'city of granites', has long been a key driver of industrial activity in north Telangana. Home to around 250 quarries and over 290 granite cutting and polishing units, the district built its reputation on strong international demand for its signature Tan Brown variety. Today, however, the industry is struggling with supply-chain disruptions, escalating transportation costs and a slump in demand from key markets such as China and the Middle East.

According to official sources, only around 25% of the licensed quarries are currently fully functional. "We faced hard times during the COVID-induced lockdown in 2020 and are now experiencing a crisis-like situation," says Mohanty, who has worked in Kamanpur for the past 12 years after migrating from Balasore in Odisha.

"Rising fuel prices have pushed up transportation costs while demand in international markets has slowed," he adds, pointing to stacks of unsold granite slabs.

The crisis has seeped into everyday life. Mohanty says workers have switched to the *chulha* (firewood stove) due to LPG shortages and rising prices. Of the 30 migrant workers employed at the factory where he is employed, 13 have already returned to their native States since the latest downturn gripped the industry, he explains.

Factory owners are grappling with rising production costs due to the increase in prices of imported raw materials, even as demand for granite blocks and polished slabs weakens. Across Telangana's granite belt spanning Karimnagar, Warangal and Khammam districts, many units have scaled down production and even reduced manpower, leaving thousands of workers facing an uncertain future.

Telangana is one of India's leading granite-producing States, with Karimnagar renowned for globally recognised varieties such as Tan Brown, Coffee Brown, Maple Red, Red Rose and Blue Brown while Khammam and Warangal are known for premium black granite deposits, including the sought-after Jet Black variety. The wide range of commercially valuable granite found across the State has supported a vast network of quarries, processing units and export-oriented industries, with processed granite shipped to markets including China, Japan, Taiwan, the UAE, USA and Europe.

Karimnagar's granite industry is heavily dependent on overseas markets. The district's signature Tan Brown granite, once buoyed by strong international demand, is now facing demand volatility amid the fallout of the West Asia conflict.

According to industry figures, Karimnagar ex-



While 170 units have completely shut down and 200 are running in a single shift, only around 100 are functioning at full capacity. Lack of availability of the raw material is the main cause behind the decline of business.

**PATIBANDLA YUGANDHAR**, President, Khammam Granite Factory Owners Association

ported 56,730 cubic metres of granite blocks between April 1 and May 31, 2026, compared to a little over 3.35 lakh cubic metres during the whole of 2025-26. Demand for Tan Brown granite peaked in the late 2000s, especially around the Beijing Olympics, and it remains popular among buyers in China because of its affordability, availability and durability. Industry stakeholders, however, say current market conditions have impacted exports.

### An industry in retreat

For decades, the deep black granite quarried from Khammam's rocky landscape symbolised prosperity. Renowned for its uniform colour, durability and premium finish, Khammam Black Granite found its way into luxury homes, commercial complexes, hotels and monuments across India and overseas markets. The industry once generated an annual business volume of nearly ₹1,000 crore and provided direct and indirect employment to around one lakh people. Today, however, it is struggling for survival.

Across the industrial belts of Khanapuram Haveli, Mudigonda, Arempula, Pallegudem, Gopalapuram and Nelakondapalli, where granite processing units once buzzed with activity, silence has replaced the hum of cutting and polishing machines. Industry representatives say the downturn began around 2018-19 and deepened during the pandemic, driven by a combination of policy changes, rising costs, shrinking quarry activity and weakening international demand.

According to Khammam Granite Factory Owners Association president Patibandla Yugandhar, only a fraction of the industry remains fully operational. "While 170 units have completely shut down and 200 are running in a single shift, only around 100 are functioning at full capacity," he says, referring to the nearly 470 slab units located within a 20-km radius of Khammam city. The shortage of raw granite blocks remains the biggest challenge. "Non-availability of the raw material is the main cause be-

hind the decline of business," Yugandhar adds.

Industry estimates suggest that around 3,000 workers have already lost their jobs due to unit closures and downsizing.

Entrepreneurs also point to changes in quarry lease allotment policies. The earlier system, Yugandhar says, encouraged exploration by allowing prospectors to identify deposits and obtain leases through a phased process: "But now open auction is in implementation for the sanction of leases. This is hurting prospective miners."

Industry leaders contend that auction-based allotments and stricter eligibility norms have discouraged exploration and reduced the number of operational quarries. The district, which once had more than 200 quarries, now has fewer than 100 active operations. Government officials, however, maintain that lease allotments are governed by prescribed regulations and environmental safeguards.

For many entrepreneurs, the granite business has become financially unsustainable. Nallamothu Venkat Babu, who shut down his polishing unit two years ago, says the shortage of raw material forced him to exit the industry. "Since I am an agriculturist, I am now focussing on commercial crops," he adds.

The impact extends beyond unit owners. A polishing unit equipped with four cutters can employ around 10 semi-skilled and unskilled workers, and closures have sharply reduced employment opportunities.

K. Venkat Reddy, who operates a unit exporting granite tiles to the US and Europe, says prolonged uncertainty has discouraged the younger generation from entering the business.

**K. VENKAT REDDY**, Owner of a granite quarry

"Our next generation is not showing interest to take up the reins from us due to losses mainly caused by the non-availability of raw material in sufficient quantities," he rues.

Industry participants say financial distress is becoming widespread. Paramesh Reddy, treasurer of the association, points to rising diesel prices triggered by West Asia tensions as a major challenge. "Since quarrying, transportation and processing depend heavily on fuel, higher diesel costs have increased operational expenses for both quarry owners and polishing units, further eroding already thin margins," he explains.

The crisis has also affected thousands of workers, particularly migrants who form the backbone of the polishing industry. According to Yugandhar, most workers in polishing units come from West Bengal, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Bi-

har, Odisha and Jharkhand while quarry labour is largely local.

### The cost of decline

Workers in quarries and polishing units generally earn between ₹15,000 and ₹25,000 a month, but shrinking operations have reduced employment opportunities. "A fellow villager returned home due to non-availability of work," says Sandip Mandal, a 21-year-old polishing machine operator from a village near Bishnupur in West Bengal.

Industry veterans say the sector is caught between rising input costs and weakening demand. While the price of raw granite has increased over the past 15 years, demand in some export markets has softened. At the same time, unit owners continue to bear fixed expenses regardless of production levels. "Whether you run the factory or not, the owner must pay the minimum power bill and prescribed fees," says senior industry leader Narender. Some entrepreneurs argue that intermediaries and brokers often earn more than manufacturers, further squeezing profit margins.

Industry representatives believe one avenue for revival lies in better utilisation of granite waste. Quarrying generates large quantities of rejected blocks, slurry and earth, much of which is discarded despite its potential to be converted into value-added products.

Venkat Reddy advocates greater investment in research and development. "We can use the waste blocks of granite, slurry and earth for different by-products. But the government is collecting taxes on the waste," he says.

Experts say granite waste can be processed into manufactured sand and other construction materials. One enterprise in Khanapuram Haveli has already demonstrated its commercial potential by producing artefacts, premium tiles, sanitaryware and bath fittings from discarded granite blocks. Despite the industry's troubles, Khammam Black Granite continues to enjoy demand in domestic markets, particularly north India. However, that demand has also spawned regulatory challenges. Recently, authorities uncovered an alleged tax-evasion network involving the transportation of black granite through fake firms and fabricated e-Way bills. Investigations are continuing.

### China demand dries up

Telangana Small Scale Granite Industries Association president Rayala Nageswara Rao says the sector has suffered huge losses following the disruption of exports to China since the COVID-19 pandemic. He notes that nearly 70% of quarries in the erstwhile Karimnagar district have shut down due to lack of demand from China.

Rao says applicants are now required to pay around ₹25 lakh per hectare to secure quarry leases. Black granite has a recovery rate of only about 10%, compared with more than 50% for coloured varieties such as Tan Brown, he adds.

According to him, Khammam district has around 700 slab and tile units, of which nearly 200 have closed. Welcoming the release of ₹20 crore towards pending subsidies and the revival of the old measurement method, he urges the government to liberalise lease rules and provide further support to the sector.

Government officials acknowledge the industry's difficulties. Assistant Director of Mines and Geology, Khammam, R. Sainath says polishing units are under severe stress due to sluggish market conditions, rising production costs and inadequate availability of granite blocks. He estimates that around 130 polishing units in the district have shut down, but notes that the government has refrained from increasing royalty and seigniorage charges in an effort to support the industry. For Amit, a polishing worker from Betul in Madhya Pradesh employed at a granite factory near Bavpet in Karimnagar, rising fuel prices and reduced production have taken a direct toll on household finances. "Earlier, I used to send ₹15,000 to my family. Now, I hardly send ₹10,000 back home," he says, adding that even firewood has become costlier amid LPG shortages that have forced many workers to return to the traditional *chulha*.

"We pray that the geopolitical tensions ease so that supply chains are restored and our factory runs at full capacity," he says.

The crisis reflects the export-dependent nature of Karimnagar's granite industry. Raw granite blocks are largely shipped to China while polished slabs are exported to markets in the Middle East through Kakinada port in Andhra Pradesh. Industry stakeholders say bottlenecks in shipping routes and cargo delays linked to the West Asia conflict have led to increased freight costs and disrupted exports.

J. Praneeth Rao, president of the Karimnagar District Granite Industries Association, says rising shipping charges, a stronger US dollar and higher prices of imported cutting and polishing tools have forced many units to scale down operations. "The increase in transport charges due to fuel price hikes is taking a toll on our business, compelling us to operate only a single shift," he says. Road transport costs have risen from around ₹2,800-₹2,900 per tonne to ₹3,300-₹3,600 per tonne while unit owners continue to struggle with bank loan repayments and electricity charges. Praneeth Rao says the industry directly and indirectly supports 30,000 to 40,000 families and argues that the 18% GST on granite places it at a disadvantage compared to tiles, which attract 5% GST.

Assistant Director of Mines and Geology, Karimnagar, S. Venkat Reddy says inflated ocean freight costs arising from the West Asia conflict have adversely affected granite exports from the district. A quarry owner from Bavpet, requesting anonymity, says the price of taper bits and other imported inputs used in drilling operations had increased three-fold, pushing up production costs by 10-15%. He also calls for improved rail-based logistics between Karimnagar and Kakinada port to reduce transportation costs.

Industry representatives have urged the government to encourage the use of locally produced Tan Brown granite in public infrastructure projects to support the sector's revival.



A worker pointing to a black granite quarry at Pindiprolu village in Khammam district. NAGARA GOPAL

**IN BRIEF**



**Vietnam's VinGroup launches taxi service in Delhi-NCR**

Vietnamese conglomerate VinGroup with interests spanning automobiles, real estate, technology, healthcare and education, has launched an all-electric taxi service using its auto company VinFast's cars, marking its entry into India's ride-hailing market. Called Green SM Limo, the service was launched on Friday and will initially operate across parts of Delhi-NCR with a fleet of 1,000 company-owned vehicles.

**Coal India to offer 35 MTs to non-regulated sector**

State-owned Coal India informed on Friday that it would be putting on offer 35 million tonnes (MTs) of high gross-calorific value (GCV) under the linkage auction window to be held June 12. The miner underlined the objective was to reduce the import of the high-GCV coal which is primarily consumed by the sponge iron sector. In the current tranche of auction, Coal India has offered 13.75 MT of coal to the steel sub-sector.

**Rajesh Exports denies financial misreporting charge**

Rajesh Exports Ltd., which was charged with misreporting financial information and misleading investors by SEBI, denied the charges in an exchange filing on Thursday. "The company emphatically states that it has done no wrong and all the reporting of the company with regard to its financials has been correct," it said, adding that the interim order of SEBI, was not based on "conclusive adverse findings."

**Truhome Finance gets SEBI nod for ₹3,000-cr. IPO**

Truhome Finance Ltd., a retail-focused housing finance company, formerly known as Shriram Housing Finance Ltd., has received SEBI's approval for its proposed ₹3,000 crore initial public offering (IPO), the company said in a regulatory filing on Friday. Truhome Finance was acquired in December 2024 by New York-based global private equity firm, Warburg Pincus.

**MPC retains repo rate, lowers growth forecast**

Repo rate unchanged at 5.25%; real GDP growth projected at 6.6%, down by 0.3% from the earlier projection of 6.9% for FY27; CPI inflation projected to be at 5.1% 50 bps more than the earlier one

**Lalatendu Mishra**  
MUMBAI

The Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on Friday voted unanimously to keep the policy repo rate under the liquidity adjustment facility (LAF) unchanged at 5.25%. Consequently, the standing deposit facility (SDF) rate remains at 5% and the marginal standing facility (MSF) rate and the bank rate at 5.50%.

The MPC also decided to continue with its neutral stance.

"The committee noted that the global environment has deteriorated since the last policy meeting with the conflict lingering amidst a fragile truce. The adverse implications of the extended disruption in supply chains and elevated energy prices are reflected in the moderation of growth and increase in inflation projections from the April policy," RBI Governor Sanjay Malhotra said in a statement.

Stating that CPI inflation remained below the target despite global shock as the pass through to domestic prices had been limited, he said baseline projections pointed towards headline inflation firming up towards the upper tolerance level in Q3 2026-27 and the impact of the supply shock would wane Q4 onwards.

"The underlying inflation pressures continue to remain benign at this juncture. However, generalisation of inflation through second-round effects on expectations and wages is a distinct possibility, warranting a close vigil. The outlook also remains clouded due to the sub-normal south-west monsoon forecast and El Niño risks," Mr. Malhotra said.

**Gloomy outlook**

Elevated energy prices coupled with global supply constraints are having adverse spillovers on economic activity, says MPC

- Domestic demand remains resilient, manufacturing and services sectors activity continue to expand
- Incipient signs of moderation in some sectors as suggested by high frequency indicators
- Considerable risks to baseline assessment of inflation and growth due to the uncertainty about the duration and intensity of West Asia conflict
- Food outlook uncertain on account of sub-normal south-west monsoon forecast and El Niño



**Central bank announces host of measures to attract foreign capital**

**Lalatendu Mishra**  
MUMBAI

To attract foreign capital the RBI on Friday announced several measures. For government securities under the Fully Accessible Route (FAR), the RBI said it was expanding the universe of

'specified securities' by including all new issuances of 15, 30 and 40-year tenor G-secs.

Additionally, limits on short-term investments, concentration and individual securities on FPI investment under the General Route are being removed. "These

measures should help attract foreign capital for government borrowing," the RBI Governor said.

The RBI has also decided to increase the limits for investment by NRIs and OCIs in equity instruments traded on the stock market without SEBI registration.

As for growth, the MPC noted that elevated energy prices coupled with global supply constraints are having adverse spillovers on economic activity.

"While domestic demand remains resilient and manufacturing and services sectors activity continue to expand, there are incipient signs of moderation in some sectors as suggested by high frequency indicators," he stated.

He said the MPC was of the opinion that there were considerable risks to the baseline assessment of inflation and growth due to the uncertainty about the duration and intensity of the conflict, magnitude of its spillover effects, and the

pace of restoration of supply chains. "Additionally, the food outlook remains uncertain on account of the sub-normal south-west monsoon forecast and El Niño. Although risks of higher inflation have amplified, the MPC felt it would be prudent to wait for greater clarity to emerge," he said.

Stating that overall, the economic situation had broadly exhibited resilience and withstood the conflict spillovers, he said the impact of cost pressure was becoming visible.

"The rise in prices of energy and other inputs, coupled with supply disruptions, is likely to weigh on economic activity.

While import diversification in affected commodities is likely to improve supply, it would come at a higher cost," he said.

"The full impact, however, will depend on the duration of the conflict, time taken for normalisation of supply chains and the burden-sharing approach among the stakeholders," he added.

Real GDP growth for 2026-27 is projected at 6.6% down from earlier projection of 6.9% with Q1 at 6.6%; Q2 at 6.3%; Q3 at 6.5%; and Q4 at 6.8%.

CPI inflation for 2026-27 is projected to be at 5.1% which is 50 basis points more than the earlier projection.

**'Our economy is on a strong footing, we are in a far better condition'**

**Lalatendu Mishra**  
MUMBAI

India's economic condition is very 'strong, capable and healthy' despite the adverse impact of the West Asia conflict and the global uncertainties, Reserve Bank of India (RBI) Governor Sanjay Malhotra said during the post Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) meeting press conference on Friday.

"There is a global shock and in that India is not alone. All countries are affected. However, as far as India's economic condition is concerned, we are comparatively, compared with other countries and similar shocks, today better placed. Our economic strength has increased. We are having a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth of about 6.5% and no major country has this type of growth," he said.

He, however, said inflation would increase in line with rise in fuel prices.

"But we expect it will not last long. Our financial strength is robust, our economy is growing, our banks are strong and capable and India's corporate sector's balance sheet is very healthy. Our foreign exchange reserves are enough and it can take care of 11 months of imports. Overall, we are in a far better condition," he emphasised.

He said the RBI was confident that it would deal with the current situation effectively and in turning the crisis into an opportunity, the country would emerge stronger so that such crisis and shocks would be faced effectively.

Asked if the situation had changed from last month when Prime Minister Narendra Modi had urged citizens not to em-



Sanjay Malhotra

bark on overseas travel, postpone buying gold, work from home, do car pooling and reduce fuel consumption, he said, "It is important for all of us to be prudent, to be judicious, not be wasteful. That message I think he gave and it should be taken in that spirit."

Answering another question on what concerned RBI the most, he said, "It's the duration of the conflict and the time it would take for the restoration of supply chains. The major risk is what impact it will have on prices and for how long."

"Other than this, the worries are concerning monsoon and El Niño," he added. In the current year's inflation forecast, the RBI has assumed the price of crude at \$95 per barrel so the projected inflation is higher.

Earlier in the day, despite all major central banks gearing up to tighten monetary policy, the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) voted unanimously to hold the policy repo rate at 5.25% and to maintain a neutral stance.

Since the pass through of higher fuel prices is visible now across sectors, the MPC reduced its growth forecast for FY27 to 6.6% from 6.9% and raised inflation expectation to 5.1%, which is 50 bps higher than its earlier projection.

**No LTCG tax on FIIs' govt. bond investments**

**Ashokamithran T.**  
MUMBAI

Government of India (GoI) promulgated an ordinance waiving the 12.5% long term capital gains (LTCG) tax on foreign institutional investments (FII) in government bonds.

The exemption will take effect from April 1, 2026. "Recognising the importance of a competitive tax regime in attracting global capital, the Government decided to rationalise tax treatment on investments by FIIs in Government Securities," it said.

This comes at a time when FIIs sold ₹2.5 lakh crore worth of Indian securities, as per NSDL data.

"This would make Indian government securities more tax-efficient for overseas investors," said CA Chandni Anandan of ClearTax.

"The two pools of capital are different investors with different return expectations. Making gilts cheaper to own does not address why long-only equity investors have been cautious on India. Capital gains structure, currency risk, valuation premium... that is where the silence is. The real ask from foreign investors has been on equities. That is unanswered," said Sachin Sawrikar, founder, Artha Bharat Investment Managers.

**'To boost banking, regulators have to be accessible'**

**T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan**  
MADRID

Indian regulators need to be more accessible and approachable to encourage deeper banking penetration and private sector activity in the banking sector, said Joe Wilson of Bunq, a Netherlands-headquartered unicorn non-banking financial company.

Speaking on the sidelines of the South Summit 2026, co-organised by IE University here, Mr. Wilson, previously COO and now 'chief evangelist' of Bunq, told *The Hindu* there were some regulations and practices in the European Union (EU) that India could fruitfully emulate.

"I think the relationship with regulatory agencies in the EU is very important," Mr. Wilson said. "My experience with India was not in a regulated area, but I do understand there's quite a lot of long distance relationship, meaning you submit things and then someone looks at it and sends it back to you, like a teacher grading your paper.

"That relationship is very slow for innovation," he added. "In certain countries in the EU, like the Netherlands or others, you can engage with these regulatory groups directly. You can email, you can have phone calls, you can



Joe Wilson

set up meetings quite quickly. That relationship speeds innovation faster than almost anything else. People get to understand both sides of any issue."

**Policy on cryptos**

The other aspect the EU has implemented that India could benefit from is the policy on cryptocurrencies and stable coins, Mr. Wilson explained. The EU in 2023 implemented its Markets in Crypto-Assets (MiCA) regulation.

The regulation provides a comprehensive legal framework for standardising cryptocurrency rules across EU, including licensing requirements for crypto-asset service providers, issuers, reserve rules for stablecoins and consumer protection standards.

(The reporter is in Madrid at the invitation of IE University)

**OIL reports natural gas in Andaman offshore block**

**The Hindu Bureau**  
NEW DELHI

State-owned explorer-producer Oil India Ltd. (OIL) confirmed the presence of natural gas in the third exploratory well it drilled, that is, Vijayapuram-3, in the Andaman shallow offshore block.

With this, OIL has established hydrocarbon presence in two of the three exploratory wells it has drilled in the block so far. It had earlier reported the occurrence of natural gas in the second exploratory well September last year.

In a statement, the explorer-producer said, "Initial production testing of the well at the depth of 1,900 plus meter in the Eocene formation has established the presence of natural gas through continuous flaring," adding, "Post perforation, immediate pressure build up was observed and well started to produce."

Union Petroleum Minister Hardeep Singh Puri said, "presence of natural gas will help us take forward exploration ambitions in coordination with global deepwater exploration experts like Petrobras, TotalEnergies, BP India, Shell and ExxonMobil."

OIL said it already started the appraisal programme for the second exploratory well.

**Blackstone-backed AirTrunk to invest ₹3 lakh cr. in digi infra**

**Vallari Sanzgiri**  
MUMBAI

AirTrunk, a leading hyperscale digital infrastructure platform in the APAC region, is set to invest more than ₹3 lakh crore (\$30 billion) in India's digital infrastructure capacity by 2030. This will be among the largest such investments currently in the works for the country.

A private company, AirTrunk was acquired by Blackstone (majority stake) and Canada Pension Plan Investment Board (CPP Investments) in 2024 and is well capitalised to fund the development of hyperscale data centres (DC) across the region. The two entities invested alongside AirTrunk's Founder and CEO Robin Khuda (minority stake) valuing the company at over \$24 billion. The implied enterprise valuation of AirTrunk is approximately ₹1.53 lakh crore.

**Next wave of AI**

The investment will enable the next wave of cloud and artificial intelligence growth and position India as a cornerstone of AirTrunk's global growth strategy and one of the company's most significant long-term investment markets, per a press release. "Capital is mobile, and



**Sky high:** India has set out one of the world's most ambitious digital growth agendas. REUTERS (REPRESENTATIONAL PURPOSE ONLY)

India is creating the conditions for it to thrive. India is taking a top-down approach to AI with clear government-led initiatives, a world-class talent pool and massive availability of renewable energy. We were bullish on India before entering the market through Lumina. Following discussions with government leaders, we're looking to double down on that commitment" said Khuda.

Prior to the investment announcement, Khuda had his first senior government engagement programme in India following the firm's entry into the market via acquisition of Lumina CloudInfra in April this year.

Through this acquisition, AirTrunk's existing development pipeline in India includes 600 MW across Mumbai, Chennai and Hyderabad.

**Govt. extends tenure of RBI Deputy Governor Swaminathan**

**Press Trust of India**  
MUMBAI

The government has extended the tenure of Reserve Bank Deputy Governor Swaminathan Janakiraman by another two years.

He was appointed as RBI Deputy Governor for three years in June 2023.

"The Central Government re-appointed Swaminathan Janakiraman as Deputy Governor, RBI, for a period of two years with effect from June 26, 2026, the central bank said.

**E85 to be about ₹20 per litre cheaper than E20: Puri**

**Saptaparno Ghosh**  
NEW DELHI

E85 fuel, that is, fuel containing 80-85% ethanol and 15-20% motor gasoline, will be approximately ₹20 per litre cheaper than the E20 variant, Union Petroleum Minister Hardeep Singh Puri said at the launch. He also clarified the E85 fuel was exclusively meant for specially designed flex fuel vehicles with compatible engines.

(The writer is with *The Hindu businessline*)

## UNITED NATIONS

## Palestinian ambassador to UN calls on U.S. to stop Israeli annexation



The Palestinian ambassador to the UN, surrounded by his counterparts from Arab and Muslim countries, called on the United States on Thursday to stop Israel's annexation of its territories. "I know that President (Donald) Trump is capable, and he has the tools to stop Netanyahu in his tracks," Riyad Mansour said. AFP

## WASHINGTON

## U.S. Senate backs \$70 bn in new funds for immigration crackdown



A majority of the U.S. Senate voted early on Friday to approve President Donald Trump's request for \$70 billion in additional funds for immigration enforcement, as Republicans bypassed Democrats' opposition. The funding would help pay for Mr. Trump's migrant deportation crackdown over the next three years. REUTERS

## BEIJING

## Xi Jinping to travel to North Korea next week in first visit since 2019



Chinese leader Xi Jinping will travel to North Korea next week, both countries announced on Friday, in what will be his first visit in nearly seven years. The trip is coming just a few weeks after Mr. Xi hosted U.S. President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin in quick succession in Beijing. AP

## MOSCOW

## 'Two leaks found on International Space Station, no threat to crew'



Russian state space agency Roscosmos said on Friday that its experts had detected two leaks aboard the International Space Station (ISS) but that there was no immediate threat to the crew. The first leak was fixed with a hermetic compound while preparations are under way to seal the second leak, it said. REUTERS

# 'It's not your job to interfere in our country', Lebanon leader tells Iran

Tehran insists the fighting in Lebanon and the war in the Gulf are linked; Aoun urges Hezbollah to pursue diplomacy with Israel, stating that negotiation and dialogue are the only ways to resolve the conflict; six killed as Israel hits south Lebanon

Agence France-Presse  
BEIRUT

Lebanese President Joseph Aoun urged Iran not to interfere in his country in an interview broadcast on Friday, also telling the Tehran-backed Hezbollah that diplomacy was the only solution to the conflict with Israel.

"It's not your country, it's our country... It's not your job to interfere into our country," Mr. Aoun said in the interview with CNN, addressing Iran's Revolutionary Guards.

"They are using Lebanon as a bargaining chip in their negotiation with the



Reclaiming space: UN peacekeepers and Lebanese soldiers at a road in Dibbine village in southeast Lebanon on Friday. AP

United States. It's unacceptable," he said.

Hezbollah drew Lebanon into the West Asia war with rocket fire at Israel on March 2 to avenge the kill-

ing days earlier of Iran's Supreme Leader in U.S.-Israeli strikes. Israel responded with massive strikes and a ground invasion.

On Wednesday, Leba-

nese and Israeli envoys in Washington agreed to a truce which according to a statement is conditional on a "complete cessation" of Hezbollah fire, without mentioning a halt to Israeli attacks.

Tehran insists the fighting in Lebanon and the war in the Gulf are linked, and on Thursday the head of the Guards' foreign arm said Israel must pull back from its front lines in Lebanon.

"Hezbollah must understand that [there is] no other way but to sit and talk, no other way to solve this problem and to save what's left except through negotiation and diplomacy," Mr.

Aoun added.

"It's the Lebanese people, they are not Naim Qassem's people," he said, referring to the Hezbollah chief, who on Thursday rejected the truce deal.

"The majority of the Lebanese people are fed up with war," the President added.

Meanwhile, Israel's air force struck different parts of southern Lebanon and killed six persons as the military issued evacuation warnings for nine villages, including one that has been spared much of the destruction and was sheltering thousands of people displaced by the three-month war.

# Russian strikes in Ukraine kill 7, destroy food plant

Agence France-Presse  
KYIV

Russia fired hundreds of drones at Ukraine between late Thursday and early Friday, killing seven persons and destroying a factory that produces milk products for children, authorities said.

Images published by Ukraine's state emergency service showed the ruins of a building bearing the logo of Ukrainian dairy producer "Yagotynske for Kids", its facade partly destroyed and flames visible on one floor.

"The enemy attacked a peaceful civilian food industry enterprise," Kyiv region governor Mykola Kalashnyk said in a post on Telegram.

Elsewhere, a Ukrainian maritime drone that was



Ukrainian rescuers work at the site of an air attack at an undisclosed location in the Kyiv region on Friday. AFP

being used in the country's war against Russia exploded at a Black Sea port in Romania, while three other sea drones exploded outside the port, Romanian authorities said. No one was hurt.

Meanwhile, Russian President Vladimir Putin ruled out meeting his Ukrainian counterpart any

time soon, a day after Volodymyr Zelenskyy called for a sit-down between the leaders to end the four-year war. Mr. Putin said he saw "no point" in meeting Mr. Zelenskyy until the terms of a possible peace deal had been agreed - triggering Kyiv to say the Russian leader was "weak" and "choosing war again".

# U.K. slams Vance's remarks on student murder handling

Agence France-Presse  
LONDON

British Prime Minister Keir Starmer's office on Friday denounced "people trying to interfere in our democracy" after U.S. Vice President J.D. Vance condemned Britain's handling of the murder of a white student, Henry Nowak, by a Sikh man.

The Downing Street statement followed comments by Mr. Vance on X linking the young student's murder to what he said was civilisational decline caused by mass migration.

Mr. Vance, a long-time critic of European migration policies, called for "righteous anger" in response to the case.

"In recent days we have seen people trying to interfere in our democracy and seeking to stir up division on our streets," a spokes-



J.D. Vance

person for Mr. Starmer's Downing Street office said in a statement.

"The Nowak family are grieving after Henry's horrific murder. They have said they do not want his death to be used to create further division, hatred or tension. We should be respecting their wishes."

"Our politics should bring people together even in the most terrible of circumstances. That is who we are as a country," it added.

Mr. Starmer on Thursday accused South African tech tycoon Elon Musk of "trying to whip up division" over the case, which has sparked public outrage.

Eighteen-year-old Nowak, a first year finance and accounting university student, was put in handcuffs by police as he lay mortally wounded after being stabbed by Vickrum Digwa, 23, in the southern city of Southampton in December.

Digwa lied and told police he was the victim as Nowak had racially insulted him.

Far-right figures have claimed the murder is evidence that police forces in Britain treat white people and ethnic minorities differently - an allegation Mr. Starmer's Labour government and police chiefs vehemently deny.

## Territorial claims



Regional dispute: Israeli security forces stand guard along a road while smoke billows from an area reportedly set ablaze by Israeli settlers in the Palestinian village of Idna, west of Hebron in the occupied West Bank, on Friday. AFP

# U.S. judge blocks Trump restrictions on immigration

Agence France-Presse  
WASHINGTON

A U.S. federal judge on Friday blocked a series of restrictions placed by President Donald Trump's administration on legal immigration following last year's shooting of two members of the National Guard by an Afghan immigrant.

District Judge John McConnell said the restrictions on asylum, work permit, green card and citizen applications from nationals of 39 African, Asian, Latin American and West Asian countries were unlawful.

The restrictive immigration policies "threw the lives of countless immigrants living in the U.S. into indeterminate legal limbo," the judge wrote.

# UN doubles appeal for Lebanon aid to \$640 mn amid war

Agence France-Presse  
GENEVA

The UN on Friday more than doubled its aid appeal for Lebanon as the country reels from Israel's war against Iran-backed Hezbollah, saying nearly \$640 million was needed over six months.

Three months into the war, the United Nations warned that a "humanitarian catastrophe" was looming in Lebanon, with a quarter of its population needing aid.

"Communities across

Lebanon have faced an appalling situation due to the escalation of hostilities," Imran Riza, the UN's resident humanitarian coordinator for Lebanon, told presspersons in Geneva, speaking from Beirut.

He said Israeli attacks have killed more than 3,500 people and injured over 10,000 others since Hezbollah drew Lebanon into the wider West Asia war on March 2, firing rockets at Israel in retaliation for U.S.-Israeli strikes that killed Iran's Supreme Leader.

# U.S. sanctions Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canel and Castro family members

Associated Press  
WASHINGTON

The United States on Thursday imposed sanctions on Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canel, his wife and three other individuals, in the latest move by the Trump administration to pressure the island's leadership that drew immediate condemnation from Havana.

Included in the sanctions are Alejandro Castro Espin, the sole son of former Cuban President Raul Castro and Vilma Espin. He served as an adviser to Cuba's Defence and National



Miguel Diaz-Canel

Security Commission and was present when Raul Castro greeted then-U.S. President Barack Obama in Havana during a 2016 meeting. Castro Espin's son, Raul Alejandro Castro Calis, also was listed.

The new penalties come as U.S. President Donald Trump has been threatening military action in Cuba since ousting Venezuelan leader Nicolas Maduro in January and then ordering an energy blockade that choked off fuel shipments to Cuba. That has led to severe blackouts, food shortages and an economic collapse across the island.

The threats took on additional weight after the U.S. announced criminal charges against Raul Castro last month. Thursday's penalties, which follow Mr. Trump signing an execu-

tive order expanding sanctions against the island, freeze individuals' property and bank accounts in the U.S. But it's unclear how intertwined their finances are with the U.S. financial system.

Mr. Diaz-Canel accused Mr. Trump of making "new threatening statements against Cuba" and said "these measures are aimed at reinforcing the blockade and escalating the conflict between Cuba and the United States".

The new sanctions also apply to non-American entities that might do business with those listed.

# Five Azerbaijanis killed in Azov Sea drone attack: Baku

Agence France-Presse  
BAKU

Five Azerbaijanis were killed and three wounded in a drone attack on Friday on two foreign cargo ships in the Sea of Azov, Azerbaijan's Foreign Ministry said.

Russia said Ukraine carried out the attack.

The commander of Ukraine's unmanned systems forces said Kyiv had struck "loitering vessels" transporting illegal cargo in the area, without commenting on the statements by Baku and Moscow or the reports

of crew killed.

Citing an official Russian communication to Baku, Azerbaijan's Foreign Ministry said 25 of its citizens were among the crews of the two vessels, which it said were not owned by Azerbaijani companies.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Maria Zakharova, said the vessels, the *Natra* and *Tsirkon*, were attacked by Ukrainian drones early Friday while sailing from Turkey to the port of Rostov-on-Don under the flags of Belize and Palau respectively.



**Daily support:** Mette-Marit seen in April wearing a nasal breathing tube. AFP

## Crown princess of Norway put on lung transplant waitlist

**Agence France-Presse**  
OSLO

Norway's Crown Princess Mette-Marit, who suffers from an incurable lung disease and whose health has recently deteriorated, has been placed on a waiting list for a lung transplant, the Royal Palace announced on Friday.

Ms. Mette-Marit, 52, was diagnosed in 2018 with a rare form of pulmonary fibrosis that causes breathing difficulties, which has repeatedly forced her to take sick leave or scale back her official duties. "The progression of the Crown Princess's lung disease is serious. After a comprehensive medical assessment, she has now been placed on the list of patients who will undergo a lung transplant as soon as it is possible," Are Holm, a lung specialist at the Oslo University Hospital Rikshospitalet, said in a statement from the Palace.

While awaiting the operation, the crown princess will not be able to carry out her official duties, the Palace said, adding that her ailing health would also affect the duties and activities of the crown prince and the rest of her family.

The princess has recently appeared in public with a breathing tube connected to an oxygen device carried by a palace employee.

### 'Difficult few months'

Ms. Mette-Marit, who married Haakon in 2001, has had a difficult few months in the spotlight.

Documents were released in January revealing her friendship and frequent contact with convicted U.S. sex offender Jeffrey Epstein.

In addition, her son from a previous relationship, Marius Borg Hoiby, went on trial earlier this year for rape, which he denies. The verdict in his trial is due on June 15.

# Leaders gather for summit on the EU's enlargement into the Western Balkans

The European Union signals its commitment to expand into the Western Balkans to counter security and economic threats posed by Russia, China; Montenegro considered a front-runner among region's other candidate nations; top EU diplomats seek ways to accelerate the membership process

**Associated Press**  
MONTENEGRO

Leaders from across the European Union and the Balkans gathered in Montenegro on Friday to discuss expanding the bloc to include countries in the region, seen as a key area in countering security and economic threats posed by Russia and China.

The EU-Western Balkans summit, being held in the Adriatic Sea coastal town of Tivat, brings together EU leaders including President Emmanuel Macron of France and German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen as well as the heads of candidate countries in the Balkans.

High on the agenda will be Montenegro's EU accession. The bloc has already formed a working group to draft an accession treaty for the country, a signal that membership is within reach.

Security was heavy across Montenegro after the National Security Agency said it had foiled a plot to disrupt the summit and had turned away 87 Serbian nationals because they posed "a risk for internal and national security."

Adding members to the bloc for more single market economic benefits and stronger security capabilities has gained increased urgency in recent years as



**Balkan bonhomie:** Heads of state pose for the family photo at the EU-Western Balkans Summit in Tivat, Montenegro, with a focus on the integration of the six Western Balkans nations into the EU. AFP

the continent has faced a series of challenges, such as lopsided trade with China, migration pressures, the war in Ukraine and increasing hybrid threats from Russia.

### Reforms and rapport

The EU has signalled its commitment to expanding into the Western Balkans, where it has urged candidate countries such as Montenegro to carry out reforms like cutting corruption and shoring up democratic institutions — steps viewed as benefiting both the candidate nations and the EU as a whole.

"Enlargement means that we can win economically, become stronger politically, and provide more security to our citizens,"

said European Parliament President Roberta Metsola.

In a post on X, Mr. Merz said the bloc wants the Western Balkan countries to join the EU "as quickly as possible."

"The fact that we haven't admitted any new members in 13 years also shows shortcomings of the EU," he wrote. "We want to overcome those today."

As wars rage in Ukraine, Iran and West Asia, and Europe's security has come under question with the United States viewed as less committed to its NATO allies, EU countries have pushed to boost their military capabilities to ward off future threats.

During a tour of countries in the Western Balkans this week, European

Council President Antonio Costa, who is hosting the summit, has emphasised how serious the bloc is about enlarging.

Speaking in Serbia on Thursday after meeting with Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, Mr. Costa said the EU would look for new ways to speed up the membership process for the Western Balkan candidate countries.

In times of "global geopolitical uncertainty and economic instability," Mr. Costa said, enlarging the EU is "not just an opportunity. It is a geostrategic necessity for Europe."

### '28 by 28'

Montenegro, a small, mountainous country that was once a part of Yugosla-

via and which this week marked the 20th anniversary of its independence from a union with neighbouring Serbia, is considered a front-runner ahead of the region's other candidate countries of Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo and North Macedonia.

After joining NATO in 2017, the country of 623,000 people is now set on fulfilling an ambitious agenda of becoming the 28th member of the EU in 2028. The motto "28 by 28" has even been inscribed on one of the planes of Montenegro's national airline.

All 27 EU members must agree before each chapter can be opened, and then again for it to be closed. Ukraine and Moldova are also among about 10 countries aspiring to join the bloc, while Iceland will hold a referendum in August on whether to apply.

Serbian leader Vucic said he had high hopes for the summit and accession paths for Balkan countries. "We will see a lot of progress of Western Balkan countries in the future. Of course, we need to do a lot of reforms," he said. "We are on our EU path."

Ms. Von der Leyen too called for quickening the accession process. "Enlargement is merits-based, but merits-based does not mean slow. We have to make the process faster and more credible."

Faruk Bašić, a researcher at the Brussels Institute for Geopolitics, said the summit will likely result in a rapid movement for Montenegro to join the bloc in 2028. It will also likely see new safeguards to ensure member nations don't break EU norms.

The summit will be the first to bring together EU leaders since the stunning defeat in April of Viktor Orbán, Hungary's former Russia-friendly Prime Minister who, during his 16-year rule, flouted the EU's standards on democracy and the rule of law and forged close ties with other autocrats.

Mr. Orbán's successor, Hungarian Prime Minister Péter Magyar, did not attend the summit.

With the painful experience of Mr. Orbán's democratic backsliding and historic use of the veto in the European Council, the EU is devising new ways to use financial penalties or restricted access to the single market to pressure incoming nations to carry out reforms and adapt to the bloc's standards, Mr. Bašić said.

"The EU is trying to find a way to admit a country that isn't fully ready to be admitted without losing the ability to hold it accountable after the fact," he said, pointing to Ukraine's accession bid as well as nations in the Western Balkans like Serbia and Kosovo.

## Feared global hunger crisis 'coming to pass' as war in West Asia persists: UN

**Agence France-Presse**  
GENEVA

"Pessimistic" predictions that war in West Asia could push tens of millions more people into acute hunger if drawn out are being proven right, the United Nations said on Friday.

A few weeks after the U.S.-Israeli strikes against Iran on February 28 sparked the conflict and plunged world energy markets into turmoil, the UN's World Food Programme (WFP) warned that soaring oil prices were devastating global food security.

If oil prices were to remain around \$100 per barrel until the end of June, an estimated 45 million more people worldwide would face acute hunger, the WFP warned in March. They would come in addition to the nearly 320 million peo-



**Cost of conflict:** The UN will serve 1.5 million fewer people this year than planned, heavily impacting children under five. REUTERS

ple considered acutely food insecure at the start of the year, it said.

And now, nearly three months into the conflict, "the negative scenario is unfortunately materialising", said Jean-Martin Bauer, director of WFP's food and nutrition analysis service. "The closure of [Strait of] Hormuz is tran-

slating into increased hunger," he said, pointing to soaring costs for staples like rice and wheat.

### Spillover effect

According to the WFP's analysis, "the crisis is generating significant spillovers", which were being felt far beyond West Asia, "particularly through fuel, food

price and income shocks and trade disruptions".

"What's shaping up is the return of a global cost of living crisis of the likes that we experienced in 2022," after the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Mr. Bauer warned.

But this time, the humanitarian system that jumped into action back then has been hard-hit by dramatic cuts to global aid funding, especially since U.S. President Donald Trump's return to the White House.

The agency estimated that it would now serve 1.5 million fewer people this year than originally planned.

"The ones who will experience the impact of this are going to be very vulnerable children under the age of five," he cautioned.

## Harvesting planet's excess



A waste picker searches for reusable or recyclable materials at a dump yard on World Environment Day in Lahore on Friday. AFP

## Burkina Faso's military rulers quash growing dissent in latest crackdown

**Agence France-Presse**  
ABIDJAN

As part of their clampdown on dissent, Burkina Faso's military rulers' latest targets have included an influential imam, several worshippers and students who criticised the junta.

Captain Ibrahim Traore seized power in a coup nearly four years ago and now openly asserts that he is not presiding over a democracy.

In what has now become a well-trodden pattern, masked men, sometimes in civilian clothing, arrive and detain anyone questioning the effectiveness of those in power, especially over the jihadist

violence that has plagued the west African country for a decade.

The lucky ones are convicted and end up in prison. Others are conscripted and shipped off to fight the jihadists at the front, some not to be seen again.

### New purge

In the latest round-up, influential Sunni imam Mohamad Ishaq Kindo was detained last week and taken to an unknown destination.

Long seen as a junta supporter, he criticised a draft law regulating the exercise of religious freedoms in a country where around 60% of the population is Muslim.

"The terror has reached

its peak," an ally of the preacher said.

"Brutally abducting a religious leader and preventing worshippers from gathering for prayer by firing tear gas even inside the mosque is taking things way too far," they said.

After his arrest, the imam's supporters demonstrated to call for his release and several were themselves detained. Images on social media later showed them dressed in military uniforms and undergoing physical training at a camp in the capital.

"If an individual breaks the law, the justice system should deal with it. Why resort to such barbaric practices?" Mr. Kindo's ally said.



Thousands of people threatened by jihadist violence are taking refuge at camps, such as this one in Dori, Burkina Faso. AFP

"What this regime is putting the people of Burkina Faso through is unbearable, all under the pretext of fighting terrorism, when we can't even see any results," they added. In September 2022,

Captain Traore had justified toppling the previous rulers for their inability to put an end to the jihadist attacks. He promised to do so within months. Nearly four years on, groups affiliated to Al-Qae-

da and the Islamic State control large swathes of the country and have imposed a blockade on several cities.

A researcher in Ouagadougou said imam Kindo's arrest reflected a desire to strictly define the framework of religious discourse.

Public authorities, including those before Captain Traore, believed that "in the face of terrorism, the only legitimate words that can be recognised from religious leaders are those that contribute to tolerance, social cohesion and peace", the researcher said.

The imam's arrest was not an isolated case. The biggest student un-

ion, the General Union of Students of Burkina (Ugeb), has also been suspended and its leader arrested. The union had denounced arbitrary arrests and criticised the junta for its "obvious inability to restore security".

### 'Single way of thinking'

A union official said that "what this regime wants is the elimination of all student movements and the establishment of a single, uniform way of thinking."

"University is not a camp for subjugation and indoctrination, much less a prison," another activist complained.

Since the religious leader's arrest, the activist said people were noticeably

speaking out a bit more freely. "It's impossible to count how many videos there are of young people who, for the first time, are criticising the regime in scathing terms," he said.

In March, activist Mahamadi Baguian, whose posts on social media sung the junta's praises, died after being arrested.

But the researcher said the clampdown against the imam and the faithful was not likely to turn people away from the junta, which was welcomed into power.

"I don't think these demonstrations can be powerful enough to cause the regime to lose significant support within the Muslim community," the researcher said.

## ONUS ON ICC

## Teams like Afghanistan need to gain more exposure: Pybus



R.V. MOORTHY

Afghanistan head coach Richard Pybus highlighted the lack of regular high-quality cricket that the less-fancied teams get. "The onus is on the ICC. It is one thing to get full membership, but then you need to get a full fixture list. It can't be that the development of teams is just based on the exposure they get at World Cups".

## VIEWPOINT

## Sooryavanshi should play Tests for larger good of the game: Ashwin



FILE PHOTO

You cannot force a particular facet of the game [to someone], but I think he should play Test cricket. If you are thinking about the larger good of the game, I believe he should. But that said, can you teach your children what they are not willing to learn? You cannot — R. Ashwin on Vaibhav Sooryavanshi during the ESPNcricinfo awards.

## SHOWING SYMPATHY

## I almost cried and was completely sad: Cobolli on Arnaldi's pullout



REUTERS

Flavio Cobolli expressed his sympathy after his "friend" Matteo Arnaldi pulled out of the French Open semifinal clash owing to illness. "It is tough for me to speak. When Arnaldi came to me an hour ago, I almost cried and I was completely sad for him. But at the same time, I am really happy for what I have achieved this week".

## TACTICAL SHIFT

## I have had to develop different kinds of weapons: Chwalinska



AFP

I know that I'm playing different tennis compared to most of the girls on the tour. I don't have the [physical] conditions to play strong, so I need to develop different kinds of weapons. I have played differently and I think it helps me a lot against these players — French Open women's finalist Maja Chwalinska.

## India's quest for Test reset begins against Afghanistan

Head coach Gambhir confirms that Sai Sudharsan will be given a long rope at No. 3; for the visitor, some of its white-ball stars, including ace leggie Rashid, are missing from the squad

## AFGHANISTAN IN INDIA

Vivek Krishnan  
NEW CHANDIGARH

The dawn of a fresh Test season carries an abiding allure. The maroonish-red hue of the brand new ball, the expanse of lush green gleaming under azure skies, the players stretching every sinew in creamy white flannels, all enrich the unique rhythms of the game's oldest format.

After a heavy diet of T20 cricket in this part of the world, the one-off Test between India and Afghanistan from Saturday will hope to showcase some of these fine aspects. The venue will be the Maharaja Yadavindra Singh Stadium, which is poised to become the country's 31st Test centre.

On the face of it, of course, an assignment against Afghanistan for Shubman Gill & Co. should be a cosy precursor to more gruelling challenges. It isn't even part of the World Test Championship (WTC) cycle. But for India's current Test outfit, reeling from a series defeat to South Africa last November, the need to set things right in this version is pressing.

Particularly at home, which was an impregnable bastion for 12 long years, India has conspicuously



Opening duty: Rahul gets into the groove ahead of the Test.  
R.V. MOORTHY

floundered in recent times. The whitewash by New Zealand in a three-Test series in 2024 precipitated the downturn. In the current WTC cycle, India is sixth in the standings.

But head coach Gautam Gambhir doesn't quite believe all is lost in the quest to make the WTC final next year. Two Tests each against Sri Lanka and New Zealand, and a blockbuster five-match series at home

noor Brar bring spark and novelty.

Not all of these will fit into the XI, but Sai Sudharsan seems set to continue at No. 3. "Honestly, Sai Sudharsan hasn't got a fair chance. He started his Test career in England, which we all know is not the easiest place," reasoned Gambhir.

The other vacant spot meriting debate involves the uncapped left-arm spin duo of Manav Suthar and Harsh Dubey.

In Afghanistan's case, some of its leading white-ball stars, including ace leggie Rashid Khan, are missing.

But for Hashmatullah Shahidi's men, who have played just 12 Tests in eight years, the chance to engage in India's Test season should be enough to spur the competitive juices.

**The teams (from): India:** Shubman Gill (Capt.), K.L. Rahul, Yashasvi Jaiswal, Sai Sudharsan, Rishabh Pant (wk), Devdutt Padikkal, Nitish Kumar, Washington Sundar, Kuldeep Yadav, Mohammed Siraj, Prasidh Krishna, Manav Suthar, Gurnoor Brar, Harsh Dubey, and Dhruv Jurel (wk).

**Afghanistan:** Hashmatullah Shahidi (Capt.), Abdul Malik, Afsar Zazai (wk), Ikram Alikhil (wk), Rahmanullah, Rahmanullah Gurbaz (wk), Sediqullah Atal, Azmatullah Omarzai, Nangeyalia Kharote, Rahmat Shah, Sharafuddin Ashraf, Bilal Sami, Mohammad Saleem, Qais Ahmad, and Ziaur Rahman. Match starts at 9.30 a.m.

## Gambhir all for use of pink ball in bad light

Vivek Krishnan  
NEW CHANDIGARH

India head coach Gautam Gambhir has backed the ICC's trial to switch from a red ball to a pink ball during a Test in the case of bad light affecting play. The agreement of both teams prior to a Test is required for the change to be effected.

## Getting the nod

The decision was one of the recommendations of the Chief Executives Committee that was approved by the ICC Board at a meeting in Ahmedabad last Sunday.

India has so far played five Tests with the pink ball, which is used exclusively for day-night matches. With making the World Test Championship final being a big incentive in the five-day game, Gambhir said he wouldn't want his team to be deprived of that opportunity owing to bad light.

"I love that. I've always believed that if there's an opportunity to get a result, you should always have that opportunity," Gambhir said.

"Imagine if you're playing the last Test before the WTC final and you have the chance to win that Test and qualify, but because of bad light it's not happening. I know it could be a little difficult for the players. But it's a proactive move. And hopefully the teams will start taking it in a positive way".

## 'We need to prepare better for Tests'

Vivek Krishnan  
NEW CHANDIGARH

Less than a week after the conclusion of the Indian Premier League's 19th season, the Indian team will be switching to the classical format when it takes on Afghanistan in a one-off Test at the Maharaja Yadavindra Singh Stadium from Saturday.

Such little turnaround time between formats is a persistent demand of modern-day cricket for Indian players in particular, but head coach Gautam Gambhir said that the focus from now will be on ensuring more extensive preparation leading up to a Test assignment.

India's fortunes in the longest format have plummeted over the last two years. Having been whitewashed by New Zealand at home in 2024, the subcontinent giant suffered a similar fate at the hands of South Africa last November. In the current World Test Championship cycle, Shubman Gill & Co. are languishing at sixth in the standings.



All in readiness: Jurel and head coach Gambhir during a practice session on Friday. R.V. MOORTHY

## Pybus keen to start with a clean slate as Afghanistan head coach

Vivek Krishnan  
NEW CHANDIGARH

In Jonathan Trott's four-year tenure as head coach, Afghanistan scaled new heights, notably reaching the semifinals of the 2024 T20 World Cup.

## Task ahead

It is now upon Richard Pybus, 61, to build on the foundation laid by the former England batter.

Whilst acknowledging Trott's efforts, Pybus wants to go into his maiden assignment — a Test against India at the Maharaja Yadavindra Singh Stadium from Saturday — with a clean slate.

"I did have a chat with Jonathan to hear from him about the role, and also to congratulate him because he's done so well to develop the side.

"When I start with a team, I start with a blank slate though," the England-born coach told reporters on Friday.

Pybus' first Afghanistan challenge is compounded by Rashid Khan's unavailability.

## Rashid conundrum

"Rashid has got this long-standing back complaint. He's got such a huge volume of cricket, and he has to manage himself. I look forward to having that conversation to see how we can support him to continue to play red-ball cricket".

## Shreyas set to be handed Men in Blue's T20I reins

Amol Karhadkar  
MUMBAI

Shreyas Iyer is set to return to India's T20I set-up and is also likely to be handed the captaincy in the shortest format when the senior national selection committee meets here on Saturday to pick the squads for three crucial assignments.

The senior selection panel, chaired by Ajit Agarwal, is scheduled to finalise the contingents for the T20I series in Ireland, subsequent limited-overs tour of England and the Asian Games. Shreyas, who last played a T20I in December 2023, is expected to replace Suryakumar Yadav both in the squad and as captain. After enduring a prolonged lean patch with the bat, Suryakumar is set to lose his place despite having led India during its successful T20 World Cup title defence earlier this year.

The Hindu understands that both the selectors and



Shreyas. FILE PHOTO: VIJAY SONEJI

team management have increasingly gravitated towards Shreyas as the leadership choice.

Having captained Kolkata Knight Riders to the IPL title in 2024 before guiding Punjab Kings to the final in 2025, the 31-year-old's leadership credentials have significantly strengthened his case. Other names discussed for the role included Sanju Samson, Ishan Kishan and Tilak Varma.

Interestingly, Hardik Pandya — who had been replaced by Suryakumar as captain at the beginning of the previous T20 World

Cup cycle — and vice-captain of the recent World Cup campaign, Axar Patel, have not featured prominently in discussions so far.

Beyond the captaincy debate, teenage sensation Vaibhav Sooryavanshi is the major talking point. The key question is whether the selectors accelerate the 15-year-old's entry into the T20I squad or introduce him gradually through a relatively easier assignment in Zimbabwe in July.

India will play two T20Is in Ireland on June 26 and 28 before travelling to England for five T20Is and three ODIs between July 1 and 19. The Asian Games cricket competition, scheduled from September 17 to October 3, overlaps with India's home ODI series against the West Indies.

The selectors are also expected to name a replacement for Virat Kohli, whose hamstring injury has ruled him out of the ODI series against Afghanistan.

## Zverev gets past Mensik; Cobolli handed a walkover

## FRENCH OPEN

Agencies  
PARIS

Alexander Zverev moved to the verge of a long-awaited maiden Grand Slam men's title as the second seed saw off Jakob Mensik in four sets here on Friday to set up a French Open final against Flavio Cobolli.

The German, who secured a 7-5, 6-2, 3-6, 6-3 victory, will face 10th seed Cobolli on Sunday.

Cobolli did not even have to play his first Grand Slam semifinal as his last-four opponent and fellow Italian, Matteo Arnaldi, withdrew shortly before the match due to illness.

Arnaldi's dream of a Slam title was ended by a virus. "It is tough... how the tournament was, how many hours I spent on court, I felt pretty good," said Arnaldi. "Every time I get up, I feel dizziness and not the best, so it was the right decision."

While there was agony



Marching on: Zverev stepped up when required. REUTERS

## SEMIFINAL RESULTS

**Men:** 2-Zverev (Ger) bt 26-Mensik (Cze) 7-5, 6-2, 3-6, 6-3; 10-Cobolli (Ita) w/o Arnaldi (Ita).

for Arnaldi, there was joy for Zverev. The 29-year-old took a closely-fought first set, courtesy of a break in the 11th game, having earlier saved three break points to deny Mensik a 5-3 lead. The 26th seed could not keep pace in the second set as Zverev broke twice and only dropped four points on his serve.

Mensik called for a medical time-out three games into the third set, appearing to struggle with a neck injury. But he dragged himself back into the contest, breaking to take a 4-2 lead, as his drop shots had a greater impact. That shot wrapped up a hold to love and the set — only the second Zverev had lost in the tournament.

But Mensik could not keep up his momentum and later allowed Zverev to earn victory on his first match point.



Glory beckons: Eighth seed Andreeva and qualifier Chwalinska are eyeing their maiden Slam. REUTERS & AP

## It's Andreeva's power vs. Chwalinska's guile

Reuters  
PARIS

If the French Open women's final appears on paper to be a mismatch between a teenage prodigy and an unheralded qualifier, Poland's Maja Chwalinska has spent the past fortnight proving appearances can be deceiving.

Russian eighth seed Mira Andreeva arrives at Saturday's showpiece as the overwhelming favourite after bulldozing her way through the draw, dropping only 12 games in her last three matches and looking every inch a future Grand Slam champion. Yet across the net will stand a player whose improbable run has become one of the stories of the tournament.

Chwalinska travelled to Paris ranked 114th in the world and had to win three qualifying matches to reach the main draw. Nine victories later, the 24-year-old finds herself one win away from one of the most unlikely Grand Slam titles of the Open Era.

The Russian's relentless baseline power and ability to dictate rallies have overwhelmed opponents.

In an era dominated by power hitters, Chwalinska has captivated spectators with a game built on variety, touch and tactical intelligence. Only one qualifier had previously reached a Grand Slam final in the Open Era — Emma Raducanu at the 2021 U.S. Open, a tournament the Briton went on to win.

GETTY IMAGES

# Luis Enrique joins the GOATs, but PSG success isn't above reproach

The 56-year-old is now a part of an elite group of managers with three or more European Cup titles. And he did it with silky, selfless, attacking football. But while there is no doubt about Enrique's quality or his influence on the modern game, the question of his legacy — specifically the Paris chapter, amid criticism of 'sportswashing' — is less straightforward



fluence of PSG president Nasser al-Khelaifi, the chairman of both European Football Clubs (EFC) and broadcasting company beIN, on the administration of European club football. This, they say, is the "deeper effect of state money".

The questions and criticism have reduced with PSG's success on the biggest stage — critics contend that this is precisely the point of 'sportswashing'.

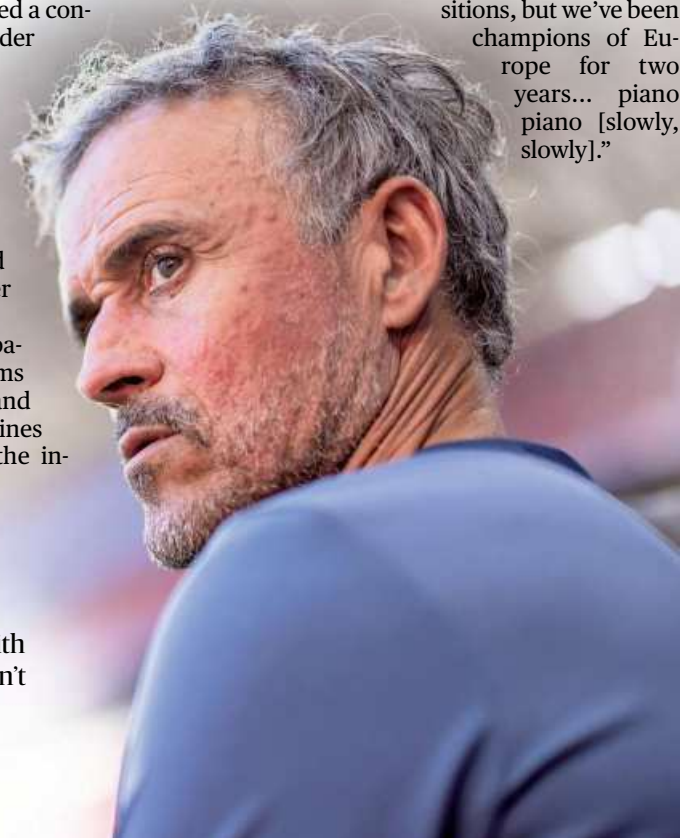
Enrique's tenure at PSG — much like Guardiola's at City, which was marked by incredible trophy success but marred by 115 alleged breaches of the Premier League's financial regulations — will be accompanied by a knotty question: Can legacy be separated from the context of the circumstances in which it is built?

Fans of Enrique will hope that the answer doesn't define him entirely. The 56-year-old has enriched the game with his progressive ideas of play, extending the limits of modern tactical thinking. While mastering his craft, he has endured a great personal tragedy and borne the loss of his young daughter with resilience and grace. Some will also highlight the fact that other managers have enjoyed Enrique's resources at PSG but failed to produce the results he has.

### Target three-peat

For his part, Enrique isn't overly concerned about his legacy, at least publicly. After the final, he said he was "not interested" in whether he was becoming a legend or not. His next target is the Champions League three-peat. "The first one was incredible, but more than anything we had that desire to get the second," he told broadcaster M6. "I love this club so much, and it's not over! We've got the second, we'll keep working and go get the third."

Record 15-time winner Real Madrid won the Champions League three times (2016-2018). Before that, the last teams to complete a hat-trick were Bayern Munich and Ajax in the 1970s. Real also won it five years running, back at the competition's inception. "We can talk about the back-to-back-to-back," said Enrique. "We can talk about these types of objectives, our club is worthy of it, as are our supporters. We do need new players to refresh certain positions, but we've been champions of Europe for two years... piano piano [slowly, slowly]."



Associated Press  
Agence France-Presse  
Sports Bureau

After presiding over PSG's successful Champions League title defence, Luis Enrique put his name up in lights in the hall of fame for football's greatest-ever managers.

Having previously guided Barcelona to Champions League glory in 2014-15, the Spaniard secured his third European Cup triumph as a coach. He joined an elite group of managers with three or more European Cup titles, alongside Carlo Ancelotti, who won a record five, and Bob Paisley, Zinedine Zidane and Pep Guardiola, who have each lifted the trophy three times.

### Getting one over Guardiola

By going back to back, Enrique achieved what even his good friend Guardiola — who has a case for being considered the greatest ever — could not. And he did it in some style, with his PSG team being feted for its silky interplay and bewildering movement.

Enrique's insistence on high-intensity, high-pressure football with electrifying forwards who dribble through defences has created a rare blend — arguably even improving on Guardiola's iconic Barcelona side which won the Champions League twice. He has expanded on the possession-based ideas of Spain's best teams, adding risk-taking and transitional threat.

Enrique's PSG plays structured positional football, typically a 3-1-6 in possession. But there is fluidity within this formation — it's not the same players in the same positions at all times. The side can pull apart most defences with its clever positional interchanges.

While PSG couldn't break Arsenal down in the final, which went to penalties, it still created sev-



I arrived at the club thinking, 'My objective is to make history,' and we have indeed made history

LUIS ENRIQUE

eral headaches for the English champion, which Enrique said was the best team in the world out of possession. Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta said after the game that his plan wasn't to have just 25% of the ball, but PSG's dominance had precipitated the situation.

"It's not a plan to play in certain scenarios when you don't have the ball but they force you to do that," Arteta, who admitted to being inspired by Enrique and PSG, said. "What they are able to do with the ball, individual actions, I haven't seen it [before]. And so even more praise to them."

In many ways Enrique is the defining figure of this PSG project, after the megastars, Lionel Messi, Neymar, and Kylian Mbappe, departed. As Arteta said, "His fingerprints are all over this team." Enrique arrived in Paris in 2023 promising a cultural shift rather than instant glamour. The Spaniard wanted a team in which collective sacrifice outweighed individual status, where the biggest names defended, pressed and suffered together. It's fair to say he has succeeded.

After Mbappe left in 2024, Lucho, as he is nicknamed, said his team would become even stronger. "Having a player who moved wherever he wanted meant there were parts of the game I couldn't control... next year, I'll control everything. Everything," he said. And he did.

The club still invested heavily in players, but players tailored to their manager's plans, willing to run endlessly for the collective, and keep egos in check. "I arrived at the club thinking, 'My objective is to make history,' and we have indeed made history," Enrique said. "We want to keep writing the story because we believe there's still more there for us to achieve."

creating a modern football dynasty. But while there is no doubt about Enrique's quality, the question of his legacy, specifically the PSG chapter, is less straightforward.

The French team, built with Qatari riches, continues to face questions about 'sportswashing', which global campaigning network Greenpeace defines as "the act of sponsoring a sports team or event in order to distract from bad practices elsewhere. This tactic is often used by companies and governments with poor environmental or human rights records, exploiting people's love of sports to 'wash' their image clean".

Qatar Sports Investments acquired a controlling stake in PSG in 2011, just under a year after Qatar was named host for the 2022 World Cup. Critics saw both moves as a means to "mute criticism of an autocratic regime", to take attention away from its "appalling treatment of migrant workers", "suppression of human rights", and "imprisonment of whistleblower Abdullah Ibhais".

Critics also cite the financial imbalance enjoyed by state-owned teams such as PSG, Manchester City and Newcastle, arguing that it undermines fair competition. They point to the in-



His fingerprints are all over this team. What they are able to do with the ball, individual actions, I haven't seen it [before]

MIKEL ARTETA  
Arsenal manager

## STACKING UP

ATP Men's Top 15				
#	Player	Age	Points	Events
1	Jannik Sinner	24	14,750	19
2	Carlos Alcaraz	23	11,960	18
3	Alexander Zverev	29	5,705	21
4	Novak Djokovic	39	4,460	16
5	Ben Shelton	23	4,070	23
6	Felix Auger-Aliassime	25	4,050	24
7	Alex de Minaur	27	3,855	23
8	Daniil Medvedev	30	3,760	24
9	Taylor Fritz	28	3,720	23
10	Alexander Bublik	28	3,320	25
11	Lorenzo Musetti	24	3,115	23
12	Jiri Lehecka	24	2,665	21
13	Andrey Rublev	28	2,460	23
14	Flavio Cobolli	24	2,340	27
15	Karen Khachanov	30	2,320	24

F1 Drivers' standings				
#	Driver	Team	Points	Wins
1	A.K. Antonelli	Mercedes	131	4
2	G. Russell	Mercedes	88	1
3	C. Leclerc	Ferrari	75	0
4	L. Hamilton	Ferrari	72	0
5	L. Norris	McLaren	58	0
6	O. Piastri	McLaren	48	0
7	M. Verstappen	Red Bull	43	0
8	P. Gasly	Alpine	20	0
9	O. Bearman	Haas	18	0
10	L. Lawson	RB	16	0
11	F. Colapinto	Alpine	15	0
12	I. Hadjar	Red Bull	14	0
13	C. Sainz	Williams	6	0
14	A. Lindblad	RB	5	0
15	G. Bortoletto	Audi	2	0
16	E. Ocon	Haas	1	0
17	A. Albon	Williams	1	0
18	N. Hulkenberg	Audi	0	0
19	V. Bottas	Cadillac	0	0
20	S. Perez	Cadillac	0	0
21	L. Stroll	Aston Martin	0	0
22	F. Alonso	Aston Martin	0	0

Badminton Men's ranking				
#	Player	Points	Events	
1	Shi Yu Qi	1,08,905	12	
2	Anders Antonsen	95,455	17	
3	Kunlavut Vitidsarn	93,565	16	
4	Christo Popov	84,682	20	
5	Jonatan Christie	83,631	18	
6	Chou Tien Chen	82,080	27	
7	Li Shi Feng	74,783	16	
8	Alex Lanier	74,525	17	
9	Lin Chun-Yi	69,414	18	
10	Lakshya Sen	69,373	23	
11	Kodai Naraoka	68,020	22	
12	Alwi Farhan	66,209	20	
13	Loh Kean Yew	65,700	18	
14	Victor Lai	64,915	20	
15	Weng Hong Yang	59,341	17	

Test Batting			
#	Player	Rating	Career best
1	Joe Root	880	932
2	Harry Brook	857	898
3	Travis Head	853	884
4	Steve Smith	831	947
5	Kane Williamson	807	919
6	Kamindu Mendis	781	784
7	Temba Bavuma	775	806
8	Yashasvi Jaiswal	750	858
9	Rachin Ravindra	737	737
10	Shubman Gill	730	807

Test Bowling			
#	Player	Rating	Career best
1	Jasprit Bumrah	879	908
2	Mitchell Starc	838	852
3	Pat Cummins	832	914
4	Matt Henry	828	853
5	Marco Jansen	825	825
6	Scott Boland	820	820
7	Noman Ali	817	853
8	Kagiso Rabada	807	902
9	Josh Hazlewood	775	864
10	Nathan Lyon	753	812

Top Indians	
Sumit Nagal Rank 282 ▼ 7 spots	Manas Dhamne Rank 394 ▼ 3 spots

Top Indians	
Lakshya Sen Rank 10	Ayush Shetty Rank 20

WTA Women's Top 15				
#	Player	Age	Points	Events
1	Aryna Sabalenka	28	9,960	19
2	Elena Rybakina	26	8,313	22
3	Iga Swiatek	24	7,273	19
4	Coco Gauff	22	6,749	19
5	Jessica Pegula	32	6,286	20
6	Amanda Anisimova	24	5,958	17
7	Elina Svitolina	31	4,315	15
8	Mirra Andreeva	19	4,181	21
9	Victoria Mboko	19	3,710	21
10	Karolina Muchova	29	3,318	19
11	Belinda Bencic	29	3,145	19
12	Linda Noskova	21	3,054	22
13	Jasmine Paolini	30	2,787	20
14	Ekaterina Alexandrova	31	2,679	27
15	Marta Kostyuk	23	2,387	19

F1 Constructors' standings				
Pos	Team	Points	Wins	
1	Mercedes	219	5	
2	Ferrari	147	0	
3	McLaren	106	0	
4	Red Bull	57	0	
5	Alpine	35	0	
6	RB	21	0	
7	Haas	19	0	
8	Williams	7	0	
9	Audi	2	0	
10	Cadillac	0	0	
11	Aston Martin	0	0	

Badminton Women's ranking				
#	Player	Points	Events	
1	An Se Young	1,17,787	17	
2	Wang Zhi Yi	1,07,689	16	
3	Akane Yamaguchi	97,826	17	
4	Chen Yu Fei	86,951	16	
5	Han Yue	84,638	15	
6	Putri Kusuma Wardani	75,223	19	
7	Ratchanon Intanon	73,626	20	
8	Pornpawee Chochuwong	64,977	15	
9	Tomoka Miyazaki	62,086	22	
10	P.V. Sindhu	59,781	13	
11	Michelle Li	56,847	21	
12	Nozomi Okuhara	56,490	19	
13	Chiu Pin-Chian	54,748	25	
14	Mia Blichfeldt	53,503	15	
15	Lin Hsiang Ti	52,029	24	

ODI Batting			
#	Player	Rating	Career best
1	Daryl Mitchell	815	840
2	Virat Kohli	791	908
3	Ibrahim Zadran	756	756
4	Rohit Sharma	748	879
5	Shubman Gill	716	841
6	Babar Azam	687	894
7	Shai Hope	679	782
8	Harry Tector	679	730
9	K.L. Rahul	664	676
10	Charith Asalanka	656	705

ODI Bowling			
#	Player	Rating	Career best
1	Rashid Khan	705	775
2	Jofra Archer	649	682
3	Keshav Maharaj	645	737
4	Abrar Ahmed	633	633
5	Adil Rashid	629	671
6	Maheesh Theekshana	624	680
7	Kuldeep Yadav	624	757
8	Mehidy Hasan	621	722
9	Josh Hazlewood	614	725
10	Adam Zampa	604	696

Top Indians	
Sahaja Yamalappalli Rank 360 ▼ 2 spots	Vaishnavi Adkar Rank 378 ▼ 3 spots

Badminton Women's ranking				
#	Player	Points	Events	
1	An Se Young	1,17,787	17	
2	Wang Zhi Yi	1,07,689	16	
3	Akane Yamaguchi	97,826	17	
4	Chen Yu Fei	86,951	16	
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13	Chiu Pin-Chian	54,748	25	
14	Mia Blichfeldt	53,503	15	
15	Lin Hsiang Ti	52,029	24	

Top Indians	
P.V. Sindhu Rank 10	Unnati Hooda Rank 23

T20I Batting			
#	Player	Rating	Career best
1	Abhishek Sharma	875	931
2	Ishan Kishan	871	871
3	Sahibzada Farhan	848	848
4	Phil Salt	792	881
5	Pathum Nissanka	766	796
6	Tilak Varma	742	845
7	Suryakumar Yadav	722	912
8	Jos Buttler	716	794
9	Devald Brevis	702	738
10	Brian Bennett	701	708

T20I Bowling			
#	Player	Rating	Career best
1	Rashid Khan	753	828
2	Varun Chakaravarthi	740	818
3	Abrar Ahmed	736	757
4	Adil Rashid	721	747
5	Jasprit Bumrah	702	783
6	Adam Zampa	682	746
7	Corbin Bosch	669	745
8	Matthew Forde	667	679
9	Mujeeb Ur Rahman	663	757
10	Nathan Ellis	661	678

GETTY IMAGES

# Batters just keep getting better and better; but I think we are also bowling quicker

In this conversation, England fast-bowler Issy Wong previews the upcoming T20 World Cup, reminisces about her time with the Mumbai Indians, and reveals who the toughest opponents she has faced are. The 24-year-old also holds forth on the impact of The Hundred and describes what it was like to watch the 2017 World Cup final from the stands at Lord's



**[In The Hundred] you have got both young girls and young boys really engaging with both the men's and the women's game and being entertained by both. It is no longer just women's cricket for women to watch**

**Any team is only one brilliant individual performance away from beating anyone else. That is why people love the game. That is why people watch cricket**

INTERVIEW

Issy Wong

P.K. Ajith Kumar

Issy Wong is one of the quickest bowlers in the women's game. After being out of the England team for almost a year, she returned to international cricket recently, and is now looking forward to the upcoming T20 World Cup at home. She took the Women's Premier League's first-ever hat-trick, in the inaugural edition in 2023, in which she played a key role in Mumbai Indians' triumph.

Excerpts from Wong's interview over the phone with *The Hindu*:

**Who do you think could be the strongest contenders at the T20 World Cup that starts next week in England?**

We just had a really competitive series against New Zealand and they are the reigning world champions. We obviously know that the talent of Australia, India and South Africa is enormous.

But the brilliant thing about cricket is that it is an individual team sport, isn't it? So, you know, any team is only one brilliant individual performance away from beating anyone else. That is why people love the game. That is why people watch cricket. It is genuinely a sport where anything can happen.

**You did very well in the inaugural edition of the WPL, in which you helped Mumbai Indians win the title.**

I love playing out there in India. As a place to tour and as a place to play sort of franchise cricket, it is right up there. I love the passion for the game that you always feel there is in India.

It is super exciting to know what you are doing has that entertainment factor. That is why we do it, isn't it? In India, that first year of the WPL real-



The Indian team is stacked full of brilliant batters and they just keep coming as well, don't they? You get one of them out and then out walks Harmanpreet

ly gave me that platform to go out and enjoy my cricket and try and hope that people enjoy that too. The one thing that stands out for me personally is the hat-trick [against UP Warriorz]. That was also the sort of moment where we thought, 'We are almost in the final here'. That will go down as one of the best moments in my career. I had a good group of people that I just enjoyed being with and sharing the field with.

**How was it being part of the champion side?**



It was cool. It was my first experience of being part of a championship-winning side. And there was so much to learn off all the people involved. I got to spend a lot of time with Nat [Sciver-Brunt]. You know her skillset. Her experience and being from an English background as well, it was cool to watch her up close.

There were of course other overseas players, Hayley Matthews, Amelia Kerr, and the Indian superstars as well, like Harmanpreet Kaur, Yastika Bhatia. Building relationships with those players, learning a bit from them. How they see the game is sometimes quite different to us. I found that fascinating. We had a good run as well, which always helps. I guess you always have more fun when you are winning.

**And your coach at MI was Charlotte Edwards, whom you have now reunited with in the England team.**

She is all right, isn't she? It was

cool to build that relationship with Lottie. She was the perfect sort of coach, especially in that first year, given the last-minute nature of it. She just kind of helped us ride that wave as a playing group. There can be a lot of noise around that competition and a lot of distractions away from what we do on the pitch.

**The toughest batters you have bowled to?**

Good question. I think there are so many good batters and it feels like the batters just keep getting better and better. As bowlers, it's hard for us to keep up with them; maybe balls are going farther. But I think we are also bowling quicker or turning it more.

We have just played against Sophie Devine, and she has played, I think, one of the great T20 innings at Canterbury. Last year, Matthews got a hundred at Canterbury as well. Those two recently have really tested our bowling attacks and they are pretty tricky.

And also, the Indian team is stacked full of brilliant batters and they just keep coming as well, don't they? You get one of them out and then out walks Harmanpreet. Every batter has her own strengths and weaknesses. And it's exciting to be able to test yourself against them.

**Who are the cricketers that you admired growing up?**

Being English, there were obviously Anya Shrubsole, Katherine Sciver-Brunt. You can't really get two better pace-bowling role models than them. To see them running in, representing England, their passion and extraordinarily high skill level...It was really inspiring to watch as a kid. From other countries, you look at people like Shabnim Ismail, Jhulan Goswami, and seeing those bowlers just makes you passionate about bowling fast.

**How is The Hundred helping women's cricket in England?**

We have got players like Tilly Corteen-Coleman

that have had success in The Hundred. I think about my time at MI and players like Saika Ishaque and (S.) Sajana that ended up representing their country and that happened quite quickly.

It has been really cool to see the young players coming through and embracing that platform that The Hundred gives them. Also, you look in the stands, you find lots of young girls, but also young boys coming to watch women's cricket.

You have got both young girls and young boys really engaging with both the men's and the women's game and being entertained by both. We have seen it as well with women's football in this country, everybody getting behind it. It is no longer just women's cricket for women to watch. I think The Hundred talks a lot about equal exposure. And for us as players, it is really nice to promote that because we are playing for the same clubs, playing on the same days. It is such a fun tournament to be part of.

**What are your memories of watching the 2017 World Cup final at Lord's and how did it impact you as a young aspiring cricketer?**

It has had a massive impact. There was a good core of us, probably younger players in the side now, that were in the stands at Lord's and it just felt like a brilliant day watching women's cricket. The final couldn't have been much more dramatic than it was. And I think as a spectator, that was brilliant. And it really captured the hearts of loads of young, especially girls in England, you know. Nine years have gone by now. When you sit there at Lord's watching our players win a World Cup for England on home soil, there is nothing more inspiring than that, nothing that makes you want to follow in their footsteps more.

**Have you had a look at this boy called Vaibhav Sooryavanshi?**

Yeah, a little bit. He whacks it, doesn't he?

*(This interview was facilitated by Sony Sports Network, which is broadcasting the England-India women's bilateral series)*

GAME THEORY

Maximum overdrive: the most frequent six-hitters in IPL history

Vaibhav Sooryavanshi broke Chris Gayle's record for the most sixes in an IPL edition, finishing with 72 this season and bettering the West Indian's mark of 59 set in 2012. The 15-year-old has hit a six every 4.68 balls in his young IPL career. How does that stack up against the most frequent six-hitters of all time in the tournament's history? Let's take a look:

Player	Balls faced	Sixes hit	Balls per six
Vaibhav Sooryavanshi	449	96	4.68
Andre Russell	1,522	223	6.83
Tim David	650	83	7.83
Nicholas Pooran	1,540	186	8.28
Rajat Patidar	980	110	8.91
Liam Livingstone	687	76	9.04
Sunil Narine	1,101	120	9.18
Chris Gayle	3,333	357	9.34
Abhishek Sharma	1,389	144	9.65
Kieron Pollard	2,316	223	10.39
Heinrich Klaasen	1,262	120	10.52
Shivam Dube	1,464	137	10.69
Shimron Hetmyer	1,045	96	10.89
Mitchell Marsh	1,249	111	11.25
Glenn Maxwell	1,817	161	11.29
Travis Head	915	78	11.73
Riyan Parag	1,300	108	12.04
Prabhsimran Singh	1,161	94	12.35
Marcus Stoinis	1,520	117	12.99
Hardik Pandya	2,020	155	13.03



VAIBHAV SOORYAVANSHI



ANDRE RUSSELL



TIM DAVID



NICHOLAS POORAN



RAJAT PATIDAR

SOURCE: ESPNCRICO.COM | MINIMUM 75 SIXES

PICTURE THIS



GETTY IMAGES

Nimble giants

Sumo is the oldest Japanese martial art, dating back more than 1500 years.

The first sumo matches, combining crude boxing and wrestling techniques, were part of a prayer ritual dedicated to the gods for a good harvest

season. Today's matches continue to involve several rituals. They are fought on a dohyo — a raised and sanctified circle, with a roof similar to a Shinto shrine.

The bout itself may last only a few seconds, and the rules are simple enough: the first to step out of the ring, or touch the

floor with anything except the soles of the feet, loses.

Unlike other forms of wrestling, sumo has no weight categories, and competitors often have to bring down much larger opponents.

Wrestlers lead extremely disciplined lives. Everything they do — from what they eat to how

they dress — is governed by tradition.

Every year, Japan has six Honbashi or Grand Sumo tournaments, as rikishi (wrestlers) grapple to become eligible for the grand prize: the Emperor's Cup. The most recent concluded last month; there are three more to go.