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INSIDE



Bangladesh pair gets death over murder of child

DHAKA
A court in Bangladesh on Sunday sentenced a couple to death for the rape and murder of an eight-year-old girl, delivering its verdict after just five days of hearings in what prosecutors said was the fastest murder trial in the country's history. The case had drawn widespread attention amid reports of rising incidents of child sexual violence in the country. » PAGE 14



Odisha girls 'miss school during menstruation'

BHUBANESWAR
Absenteeism from school during menstruation continues to be a major concern for female students across Odisha, with nearly 74% of them missing anywhere between one to eight days of classes per cycle, according to a study on menstrual health released here recently. » PAGE 6

Farmers protest against 'Third Mumbai' project

RAIGAD
Social reformer and former judge B.G. Kolse Patil on Sunday issued a strong warning against the "Third Mumbai" project under way in Raigad district of Maharashtra, declaring that it would be built "only over our dead bodies". At a farmers' meeting, he asked attendees to take an oath to oppose the project. » PAGE 6

Not seeking mediation on border: Nepal FM

Claim to the Kalapani-Lipulekh-Limpiyadhura trijunction is Kathmandu's focus, says Khanal

New 'political reality' in Nepal seeks to avoid 'old baggage' in ties with India, says Foreign Minister

To solve disputes through diplomacy; in contact with U.K. over documents not mediation: Khanal

Kalol Bhattacharjee
NEW DELHI

Kathmandu is focused on establishing Nepal's claim on the Kalapani-Lipulekh-Limpiyadhura trijunction and is not "asking for mediation" by third parties, Nepal's Foreign Minister Shisir Khanal said here on Sunday.

At a press conference at the Embassy of Nepal, Mr. Khanal said he represented a "completely new political reality in Nepal" that was determined to deliver "uncompromising good governance". The new government of Prime Minister Balendra Shah was not in favour of tying Nepal-India relations down to "old baggage", he added.

"We want to solve our disputes through diplomatic processes. We just want to see if we can access some of the docu-

ments that might be in libraries or museums in the U.K. Our position was not that we were asking for mediation," Mr. Khanal said, elaborating on Mr. Shah's remarks that Nepal was in contact with China and the U.K. on the Kalapani-Lipulekh-Limpiyadhura dispute with India.

Shah's statement
"The problems that existed when British India left the region still persist, so we believe Britain also has a role to play in this matter," Mr. Shah had said in Nepal's Parliament, stirring debates.

India's Ministry of External Affairs had issued a rebuttal, reiterating that India and Nepal had established a bilateral mechanism for discussing the dispute, and there was no scope for third-party intervention.

As the new generation



Field trip: Nepal's Foreign Minister Shisir Khanal visits the Embassy of Nepal in New Delhi on Sunday. ANI

of rulers, the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) refuses to "look at India through the distorted, hypersensitive lens of 20th century geopolitics", Mr. Khanal said. "Instead, the RSP wants to shift the entire vocabulary of Nepal-India relations away from geopolitical friction and square it firmly on development diplomacy," he added.

After a gap of a few

years, the border issue between the two sides began simmering again when India on April 30 announced the Kailash-Manasarovar Yatra for 2026, scheduled to be conducted in 20 batches of 50 pilgrims each.

The Ministry of External Affairs announced that the pilgrimage would be conducted "in coordination with the Government of

the People's Republic of China" through the Lipulekh pass that is claimed by Nepal, and the Nathu La pass in Sikkim.

This announcement attracted a protest from Nepal, which communicated its objection to both India and China.

"We have expressed our position through an official diplomatic note to both India and China. We have clearly said to both countries that the land [Kalapani-Lipulekh-Limpiyadhura] belongs to us. That's been our historical claim," Mr. Khanal said in response to questions.

'More visits soon'

He said his visit to India had restarted the track of high-level interaction from the two sides, and more such visits would take place from Nepal's side soon with Finance Minister Swarnim Wagle expected

to visit Delhi "very soon".

Mr. Khanal had held a formal meeting with External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar on Saturday, when the two sides officially announced the operationalisation of peer-to-peer (P2P) cross-border payment transactions under a memorandum of understanding between Nepal Clearing House Ltd. and the National Payments Corporation of India, he said, which would enable digital and financial connectivity between the two sides.

The Nepal Prime Minister was focused on the "domestic front" as he was keen to show "early results" because of the "strong mandate" that the RSP had received in the May election, Mr. Khanal said, refusing to provide a "timeline" for Mr. Shah's visit to India.

The RSP led by Mr. Shah came to power after de-

feating the well-established, formerly dominant political players, including the Nepali Congress and the Maoist parties (Communist Party of Nepal-United Marxist-Leninist, or CPN-UML, and CPN-Maoist Centre).

Mr. Shah's rise to prime ministership took place against the backdrop of the "Gen Z uprising" in Nepal that overthrew the government of K.P. Sharma Oli after Mr. Oli launched a crackdown on Nepal's digital ecosystem in the first week of September 2025.

To a question on the fate of the report of the Eminent Persons Group set up over a decade ago to provide guidelines to India-Nepal bilateral ties, Mr. Khanal said, "The EPG was commissioned by an agreement of the two Prime Ministers, and the report can only be submitted to two Prime Ministers."

A lush retreat



Greener pastures: Spotted deer graze on a clearing inside the Mudumalai Tiger Reserve, near Udhamandalam, in Tamil Nadu on Sunday. Recent showers have helped improve the vegetation in the reserve, drawing deer to open grasslands. M. SATHYAMOORTHY

Protest will continue until Pradhan quits: CJP founder

Snehal Mutha
MUMBAI

A day after organising a demonstration in New Delhi demanding resignation of Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan, founder of online movement Cockroach Janta Party (CJP), Abhijeet Dipke, on Sunday said the protest would continue.

Hundreds of people, including students, had gathered at Jantar Mantar on Saturday demanding the resignation of the Minister over alleged irregularities in CBSE examinations, entrance tests for higher education, and recruitment examinations.

Climate activist Sonam Wangchuk and CPI(ML) Liberation general secretary Dipankar Bhattacharya also came in sup-



The youngsters of the country are not scared of the government. We will continue to fight for him [Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan] to resign. Someone must be held accountable

ABHIJEET DIPKE
CJP founder

port of the CJP's demands.

Addressing presspersons at his hometown in Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar in Maharashtra on Sunday, Mr. Dipke said, "What to do with this government? No employment, no proper exams. The youngsters of the country are not scared of the government. We will continue to fight until he [Mr. Pradhan] resigns. Someone must be held accountable."

He said the Delhi protest was a success, claiming that around 7,000 people took part in it. He dismissed claims that people were paid to take part in the protest.

On the future course of action of the movement, Mr. Dipke said, "We will discuss with the members of the community, take their suggestions, and accordingly decide on our next move."

23 parties will attend INDIA bloc meet; absent members on same page: Cong.

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Ahead of a meeting of the Indian National Developmental, Inclusive Alliance (INDIA), coming amid disarray within the Opposition bloc, the Congress on Sunday sought to project unity, asserting that 23 parties would participate in the gathering in Delhi and that even those skipping it had conveyed their "strong opposition" to the Narendra Modi government's policies.

The bloc has been grappling with one crisis after another. The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) has already announced that it will not attend the meet-



There are some parties that have expressed their inability to attend this particular meeting for their own reasons, even though they have conveyed their strong opposition to the Modi government's policies

JAIRAM RAMESH
Congress general secretary (communications)

ing, calling the Congress's decision to tie up with the Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK) in Tamil Nadu a "betrayal". Separately, Communist Party of India (Marxist) general secretary M.A. Baby has written to all INDIA bloc partners, underlining the Congress's campaign against the Left

in Kerala, while Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) is learnt to be unhappy with the Congress unilaterally announcing its candidate for one of the two Rajya Sabha seats that are up for election in Jharkhand.

Congress general secretary (communications) Jairam Ramesh, in a post on X

on Sunday, said 23 political parties had confirmed participation in the "INDIA janbandhan" meeting. "There are some parties that have expressed their inability to attend this particular meeting for their own reasons, even though they have conveyed their strong opposition to the Modi government's policies," Mr. Ramesh said.

According to sources, the meeting was convened at the insistence of the Trinamool Congress, which is facing internal strains in West Bengal. Former West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee and party national general secretary Abhishek Banerjee are expected to attend.

Neutralise armed miscreants on the loose in Manipur, says CRPF chief

Vijaita Singh
NEW DELHI

Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) Director-General G.P. Singh has asked personnel deployed in Manipur to "neutralise" miscreants found roaming around in civilian areas with weapons.

Mr. Singh made the remarks during an interaction with CRPF personnel in Manipur on Saturday, according to a 6.05-minute video clip seen by *The Hindu*. He said that discussions were held at the highest levels in the government, and added, "It is expected that there will be a turnaround in the situation in the northeast-



Security agencies have flagged the availability of weapons with civilians as a major challenge in the violence-hit State. FILE PHOTO

ern State in the next 1-1.5 years."

Over 6,000 police weapons and thousands of rounds of ammunition were looted from armouries after ethnic violence erupted in the State on May 3, 2023. Security agen-

cies have consistently flagged the availability of a large number of weapons with civilians as a major security challenge.

In the video, the CRPF officer said that personnel need not worry about firing at miscreants and he,

as a D-G, would protect any

"bona fide action".

"If you do not fire at miscreants, why has the government given us so much arms and ammunition. I have your back. Till the time I am here, no need to worry about any [legal] action," Mr. Singh said, referring to an April 7 incident in which CRPF personnel opened fire as a mob stormed the force's camp at Gelmol, a buffer zone between Meitei and Kuki-Zo areas in Bishnupur district since 2023. The firing led to the death of three protesters.

When contacted, Mr. Singh said the video was meant for "internal purposes".

INBRIEF



Over 31 lakh pilgrims visit Char Dham; 161 fatalities since April

Over 31 lakh pilgrims have visited Uttarakhand since the Char Dham Yatra began in April, while 161 fatalities have been reported among devotees during the pilgrimage season, officials said on Sunday. According to the latest report from the State Emergency Operation Centre, Kedarnath recorded the highest footfall with 11,05,676 pilgrims since its opening on April 22. Yamunotri reported the highest toll with 78 deaths, followed by Kedarnath (47), Badrinath (20), and Gangotri (16). Officials said 2,89,918 vehicles have used the yatra routes since the start of the season. PTI

Tribal woman gang-raped in Ranchi; 8 held, minor detained

Eight persons were arrested and a teenager was detained for allegedly gang-raping a 20-year-old tribal woman in Jharkhand's Ranchi district, police said on Sunday. The incident occurred late Friday night in a village under the Mandar police station limits. "We arrested eight persons and detained a minor in this connection on Sunday. The accused were nabbed during raids at multiple locations in the Burmu and Chanho police station limits. The accused are aged between 19 and 24 years while the detained teen is 15 years old," Ranchi (Rural) Superintendent of Police Gaurav Goswami said. PTI

Baghel: INDIA bloc will win both RS seats in Jharkhand

Press Trust of India
RANCHI

Senior Congress leader Bhupesh Baghel on Sunday said the INDIA bloc will win both seats in the June 18 biennial Rajya Sabha polls in Jharkhand.

The Jharkhand Mukti Morcha has declared former Minister Baidyanath Ram as its candidate for one of the two seats. The Congress has announced Pranav Jha as its candidate.

TVK govt. drawing criticism even before 6 months: Stalin

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI

DMK president M.K. Stalin said on Sunday that though he had earlier maintained that the Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK) government should be given six months before any criticism, the prevailing circumstances would not permit any such leniency.

"I fear the situation warrants criticism even within three months. The government is being run in such a manner," he said at a meet-



M.K. Stalin

ing organised to welcome former Viduthala Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK) legislator Panaiyur Babu into the DMK in Chennai.

According to the former Tamil Nadu CM, the government's functioning had already drawn criticism from various quarters. The DMK president said there was no need to criticise the party to which Mr. Babu belonged before joining the DMK.

Recalling DMK founder C.N. Annadurai's observation that even the jasmine blooming in a neighbour's garden carries the same fragrance, Mr. Stalin said there was no need to underestimate anyone.

33 years later, a conviction

It took the courts over three decades to sentence a man, now aged 85, to three years in jail in an attempt to murder case in Bihar's Vaishali district. A report on the story behind the judgment and the area, which the police say is overrun by country-made guns and illicit liquor trade



Deep Rai, 85, with family members at his house in Jurawanpur village of Bihar's Vaishali district. AMIT BHELARI

incomplete and unpainted; just two rooms have an electricity connection. They still cook food using cow dung cakes.

The village, with a population of about 8,000, is situated in the taal (wetland) and diara (riverine) areas, and is prone to flooding. The roads are crumbling and there is heavy loadshedding. The village falls under the Raghapur Assembly constituency, represented by Rashtriya Janata Dal leader Tejashwi Yadav, who is also the Leader of the Opposition

in the Bihar Assembly.

On December 10, 1992, a dispute had erupted over broken shards of glass being scattered across a pathway in Jurawanpur village. While details of why this was done are scarce now, it is common practice in Bihar's villages for people to upset the lives of others they are in dispute with.

According to the verdict, Adalat Rai was at his doorstep when nine persons, including Deep, began laying shards of glass on the road. One of the nine had purchased land

2 women from Assam declared foreigners

Press Trust of India
NAGAON (ASSAM)

Two women from Assam's Nagaon district have been declared foreigners and sent to a detention centre, now called a transit camp, in Goalpara district, officials said on Sunday.

The two women - Jahanara Begum of Bagarigori village and Mamta Begum of Dagaon - claimed Indian citizenship, but were unable to produce documents such as educational and birth certificates as legacy documents despite having valid documents of their parents, officials said.

Both sent to transit camp as they were unable to produce legacy documents despite having valid documents of their parents, officials said

Advocate Zahidul Hoque, appearing for Ms. Jahanara, said the two were first declared foreigners by the Juria Foreigners Tribunal (FT) in 2019. "After that, separate petitions were filed in the Gauhati High Court challenging the FT verdict. The High Court, in its order on April

24, sent the cases back to the FT for review," he said.

Later, the FT declared them foreigners despite having valid documents of their families as they could not provide linkage documents, Mr. Hoque said.

"They were then sent to the transit camp by the authorities last week. We are now evaluating all legal options," he added.

The case against Ms. Jahanara was registered in 2016 by the FT while that of Ms. Mamta in 2015.

The High Court, in its order, had stated that the FT judgment of 2019 was given without proper discus-

sion of the evidence in the documents, Mr. Hoque said. "Therefore, the judgment was quashed and the matter was sent back to Juria FT for reconsideration. The petitioners were also directed to appear before the designated Juria FT with a certified copy of the High Court order and submit necessary documents," the lawyer added.

Mr. Hoque alleged that the FT did not conduct a detailed hearing before passing the fresh order declaring the two women as foreigners and directing them to be sent to the transit camp in Goalpara.

SPOTLIGHT

Amit Bhelari

Deep Rai, 85, hardly remembers anything about the incident that took place 33 years ago. Sleeping on a charpoy wearing a dhoti, he stares at the ceiling at his house in Jurawanpur village of Bihar's Vaishali district. Deep is one of the five accused convicted in an attempt to murder case. He was sentenced to three years of rigorous imprisonment by a Vaishali court on June 2.

His daughter, Uma Devi, 50, tries to keep him cool and stirs the hot air gently with a hand fan. There is not much relief from the 40 degrees Celsius heat outside. The house holds just the father and daughter, with villagers dropping in to visit.

His wife, Munnar Devi, died 15 years ago aged 70, and his son and daughter-in-law, in their 50s, now look after Deep. He cannot walk anymore, crippled by arthritis and Alzheimer's disease, and spends the day mostly asleep on the cot. Still, in the manner of those who rise with the sun, he wakes up at 5 a.m.

Uma says he has only a few teeth left, so he is mostly on a liquid diet of satu (roasted gram powder), milk, and rice mashed in its starch water.

On the day of the verdict, his son and a few villagers managed to get him

into an autorickshaw and took him to the court in Hajipur, nearly 35 km from their village in Raghapur block. The court granted Deep bail the same day. The family plans to file an appeal against the conviction in the High Court.

In December 2025, then Deputy Chief Minister, now Chief Minister Samrat Choudhary, had said there are over 1.8 million pending cases in various courts across the State.

The family and village

Asked about committing the crime, Deep shakes his head. "Maine kuch nahi kiya (I have not done anything)," he says, his voice feeble, almost choking.

Uma is quick to intervene: "He has not done anything wrong in his entire life. His name was unnecessarily dragged into this case. It was really painful for him when he was being taken to court. Do you think that at this age, he can even move an inch? Despite that, he had to do so due to a court order."

His neighbour, who joins the conversation, says Deep has not been out of his village for several years. He says on the day of the judgment, Deep needed help to climb nearly 40 stairs to reach the courtroom on the first floor.

The family is dependent on farming and earns a living by selling milk from their two cows and two buffaloes. The house, constructed 10 years ago, lies

from a man whose house was on the same road as Adalat's. Adalat and Udesh Rai, a fellow villager, objected. Deep abused them and left.

He and the others later returned armed with guns. Four persons were hit by bullets, with Adalat getting shot in his hand, leg, and face. His aunt was also injured when she tried to intervene.

Medical reports confirmed Adalat's bullet injury. The then Medical Officer at the Primary Health Centre in Jurawanpur, Dr.

some of his loyal MLAs who had stayed in a hotel in Haryana's Manesar.

Amid questions over the timing of Mr. Gehlot's comments about a simmering leadership row, the former CM said he had adopted a "forget and forgive approach". The timing, however, is significant as party leader Rahul Gandhi recently hailed the unity among Rajasthan leaders.

While receiving Mr. Gandhi in Pushkar, State Congress chief Govind Singh Datasara and CLP Tika Ram Jolly jointly offered him a bouquet, prompting him to make the remark. "A very good example for all other States," he said.

Mr. Gehlot was reacting to comments made by the Rajasthan BJP about factionalism in the Congress. "These [the BJP] people keep taking jibes at us again and again over Manesar. This is a matter within our own house, and we will sort it out," he said.

Mr. Gehlot claimed a "wrong perception" was spread and there was a conspiracy to defame him.

"It is repeatedly asked what happened on September 25, 2022. There can never be a revolt against the high command," he said, adding that 100 MLAs had reacted to speculation about a leadership change and Sachin Pilot taking oath as CM.

In September 2022, the Congress high command planned for a leadership change in Rajasthan, with Mr. Pilot being considered for the CM's post and Mr. Gehlot as a candidate for

the Congress' presidential polls later that year. A meeting of the Congress Legislature Party (CLP) was scheduled for September 25 but it could not take place as MLAs defied the high command directive.

"Unacceptable choice" Mr. Gehlot said the party MLAs took the view that they had demonstrated loyalty to the party high command and remained confined in hotels to save the Congress government.

Clearing the air: Congress leaders Ashok Gehlot and Sachin Pilot at an event in Jaipur. FILE PHOTO

Reviewing the pending arrears and Dearness Allo-

Withdraw salary deferment order, says Himachal CM

Press Trust of India
SHIMLA

Himachal Pradesh Chief Minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu on Sunday directed the Finance Department to withdraw the notification on deferment of salaries and said arrears will be cleared next month.

The order, which exempted the Chief Minister, came in a meeting of the department that Mr. Sukhu presided over. The Chief Minister said the financial condition of the State has improved significantly due to the government's pragmatic policies. "The State's economy has shown encouraging results and Himachal Pradesh is steadily moving towards self-reliance," Mr. Sukhu said, according to a statement.

'Plugged loopholes'

He said the government has plugged several loopholes that had led to financial leakages and corruption in the past. He directed the Finance Department to release the arrears of all pensioners in the next month.

Reviewing the pending arrears and Dearness Allo-



Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu

wance, the Chief Minister said the government employees are the backbone of the State and the government is committed to safeguarding their welfare and interests.

Mr. Sukhu said his government restored the Old Pension Scheme (OPS) to ensure social and financial security of employees.

"Following the restoration of OPS, the Union government withheld financial assistance amounting to ₹1,200 crore due to the State. Had this amount not been withheld, the State government would have been in a position to clear the pending arrears of employees. Nevertheless, the State government is sympathetically considering the demands of employees," he said.

IN BRIEF



Cong. gov't. compromising on Telangana's water rights: MLA

Former Telangana Minister and BRS MLA T. Harish Rao accused the Congress government of compromising on water rights by linking the proposed Godavari-Nallamalasagar project with the Palamuru-Rangareddy Lift Irrigation Scheme. He said the State was entitled to 45 tmc ft water allocation in Krishna waters if Godavari was diverted to the Krishna basin by Andhra Pradesh. "Any attempt to link the two projects amounts to surrendering Telangana's legal rights," he said.

Hyderabad man shot dead during pizza delivery in U.S.

A 28-year-old Hyderabad man was allegedly shot dead in Philadelphia, United States, while carrying out a pizza delivery on Friday. The victim, Anshul Kuncha, had moved to the U.S. almost four years ago for higher education. The family said he was employed at a multinational company and took up pizza deliveries during weekends to supplement his income. The family has sought the Centre's intervention to expedite the repatriation of Anshul's mortal remains.

Karnataka schools introduce module for value education

With an aim to instil morality, good behaviour, and social responsibility in schoolchildren, the Karnataka government has introduced a value-education module from Classes 1 to 10 in all schools this academic year. "Instead of teaching value education as a separate subject, steps have been taken to integrate it with all subjects," an official from the State Educational Research and Training Department said. Over a lakh teachers have already been trained for the module.

TDP names three candidates for elections to Rajya Sabha

The ruling party says the candidate selections have been made with a focus on social engineering and to encourage young leadership; Jana Sena, NDA ally in Andhra Pradesh, fields one candidate

The Hindu Bureau
VIJAYAWADA

The Telugu Desam Party (TDP) has announced Chintakayala Vijay, Bhashyam Ramakrishna, and sitting Rajya Sabha member Sana Satish as the candidates for the forthcoming elections to the Upper House.

TDP national president and Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu presented the B-Forms to them at his camp office on Saturday.

Mr. Vijay is the son of Assembly Speaker Chintakayala Ayyanna Patrudu and the party's State general secretary.

For Mr. Satish, this is his re-nomination to the Rajya Sabha. He was elected to



TDP candidates for Rajya Sabha polls (from left) Chintakayala Vijay and Sana Satish, and Bhashyam Ramakrishna (right) with party president N. Chandrababu Naidu. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

the Upper House in 2024 and his term is set to expire on June 21.

Mr. Ramakrishna is the founder-chairman of Bhashyam educational institutions.

The TDP stated that the

selections were made with a focus on social engineering, dedication and loyalty to the party, and to encourage young leadership.

The leaders who could not be accommodated in the current round of politi-

cal appointments would be considered for other positions in the future, the party added.

Ally choice

The TDP's ally in the ruling NDA alliance in the State, Jana Sena Party, has named industrialist Lingamaneni Ramesh.

Mr. Vijay hails from north Andhra and the other three are from the central coastal region.

Some leaders from the Greater Rayalaseema region, which spans from Prakasam to Chittoor districts, have expressed displeasure over the selection of candidates. The leaders questioned the lack of representation from the 11 districts, which comprise nearly half of the State.

Meat, fish shops in Varanasi city to be shifted to outskirts

Mayank Kumar
LUCKNOW

The Varanasi Municipal Corporation has decided to shift all meat and fish shops operating within the city limits to designated locations on the outskirts as part of efforts to improve urban management and cleanliness, officials said on Sunday.

The proposal was approved at a meeting of the municipal corporation's governing body on Saturday, Public Relations Officer Sandeep Srivastava said.

Mr. Srivastava said comprehensive discussions were conducted regarding various facts of the city's development, during which members supported the initiative to systematically relocate meat and fish markets to the peripheral areas of the city. These sites were located near the city's outer limits to reduce inconvenience for residents, said municipal corporation officials.

According to the plan, meat and fish shops currently situated within the city would be moved to Ramnagar, Sujabad, Ganeshpur, Avleshpur, and Shivpur in the near future, officials indicated. This initiative aimed to enhance sanitation and optimise the operation of such markets, they added. Mr. Srivastava said approximately 350 to 400 meat and fish shops were presently functioning within city limits.

During the meeting, corporator Gulshan Ali mentioned that the proposal to

relocate the shops had been presented nearly a year ago, but effective implementation had yet to occur. Addressing concerns raised by traders, Mr. Ali noted that the annual closure of meat shops during the holy month of Shra- van significantly impacted the livelihoods of individuals involved in the meat trade. In response to this issue, Municipal Commissioner Himanshu Nagpal assured the assembly that land had already been identified on the outskirts of the city and that the process of implementing the proposal would commence shortly.

Congress slams move

The Congress, while terming the move unconstitutional, said the decision was part of a larger design by the ruling dispensation to impose uniformity on society.

"Firstly, such a decision goes against the right to livelihood, which is the fundamental right to earn a living with dignity, and it amounts to depriving a large population of their means of survival. Secondly, the decision is part of a larger design to impose uniformity on the Hindu society. *Bali chadhana* [animal sacrifice] is a traditional ritual practised primarily within Shakta tantric traditions in many regions of India, at temples. So, imposing a particular decision on a whole city is wrong," said Congress national secretary Shahnaz Alam.

Salim Kumar cremated with state honours



Kerala Chief Minister V.D. Sathesnan pays his last respects to actor Salim Kumar in Ernakulam on Sunday. R.K. NITHIN

The Hindu Bureau
KOCHI

Malayalam actor-filmmaker Salim Kumar, who started as a mimicry artiste and went on to win the National Award for Best Actor in an inspiring career, was cremated at North Paravur, his hometown in Ernakulam district in Kerala, on Sunday with state honours.

Thousands of people, including his colleagues from the film industry, political leaders and fans from across the State, gathered

to pay their last respects to the popular actor at North Paravur Municipal Town Hall.

The funeral of the 57-year-old actor, who died of a cardiac arrest, was conducted on the premises of his residence at Chittattukara.

Chief Minister V.D. Sathesnan paid last respects to the actor at the town hall and also attended the funeral. He remembered Salim Kumar as someone with whom he shared a "brotherly bond."

Ticket to ride



Karnataka Chief Minister D.K. Shivakumar interacts with commuters on the Metro on Sunday as he visits Kanakapura, his home turf, for the first time after becoming the Chief Minister to extend his gratitude to the people of his constituency. The leader took the train from Vidhana Soudha to Silk Institute to avoid causing inconvenience to road users. K. MURALIKUMAR

Kerala government issues orders reinstating suspended IAS officers

The Hindu Bureau
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

The United Democratic Front (UDF) government in Kerala has issued orders revoking the suspensions of IAS officers B. Ashok and N. Prasanth.

Both officers had been placed under suspension during the Left Democratic Front (LDF) government's term on charges of criticising the government.

In separate orders dated June 6 issued by Chief Secretary A. Jayathilak, the suspensions stand revoked with "immediate effect".

The ongoing disciplinary proceedings against the officers would continue in accordance with the relevant service rules, the



B. Ashok and N. Prasanth were suspended by the LDF government.

orders said.

Mr. Prasanth, a 2007-batch officer, was placed under suspension on November 11, 2024, for levelling serious allegations against Mr. Jayathilak, then Additional Chief Secretary and current Chief Secre-

tary of Kerala, and former Chief Secretary Sarada Muraliedharan. The suspension has since been extended multiple times, the latest extension coming in May 2026.

Mr. Ashok, a senior officer of the 1998 batch of

the Kerala cadre, was Vice-Chancellor, Kerala Agricultural University, and Principal Secretary, Sainik Welfare, when he was suspended in April for criticising government policies on social media.

Mr. Ashok's earlier disputes with the LDF government over his postings had grabbed headlines on several occasions.

The officers are expected to be given fresh postings shortly, official sources said.

While in the Opposition, the Congress had accused the then Pinarayi Vijayan government of targeting officers for dissent and stifling criticism within the administration. (With inputs from PTI)

Forest Dept. restricts tiger movement in A.P. district

The Hindu Bureau
VIJAYAWADA

The movement of the tiger which is on the prowl around Nelakota and Pudipalli villages in Alluri Sitharama Raju district, Andhra Pradesh, has been restricted to the nearby hill terrain, away from the human habitations, according to a social media post by officers from the Forest Department.

It was stated that special teams have been vigilant for several days and deflected the wild cat away with the help of drone surveillance, ground teams, wildlife experts and veterinary specialists.

Jailhouse Rock: Shivamogga prison inmates sing in new radio programme

The Hindu Bureau
SHIVAMOGGA

For listeners of Bhadravathi Akashvani, Sunday afternoon brought something extraordinary – a music programme called "*Jailu Hakkigala Gaanasudhe*", presented by inmates of the Central Prison in Shivamogga, Karnataka as part of an initiative to foster rehabilitation among the convicts.

Thimmappa, an inmate who was a teacher earlier, presented N.S. Lakshminarayana Bhat's song *Manavaredeyalu*. A line in the song conveys a profound truth: The hands that rise to kill also know how to show love. Through this choice, he subtly reflected



Creative outlet: An inmate of the Central Prison in Shivamogga presents songs on Bhadravathi Akashvani. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

the programme's own purpose. Dadapeer, a native of Davangere, presented B.R. Lakshman Rao's *Amma Ninna Yedeyaladalli*. He remembered his mother, who struggled throughout her life to support the family alone, and died shortly

after he was jailed. Chandira Hemmadi, a former journalist, rendered T.P. Kailasam's *Koliyale Ranga*. Thippeswamy sang K.S. Nisar Ahmed's *Jogada Siri Belakinalli*, while Ravi Kumar presented a work by Da.Ra. Bendre.

Chief Jail Superintendent P. Ranganath explained the prison's broader rehabilitation efforts, saying, "We conduct various cultural programmes involving inmates, including poetry collections, theatre, and literary activities". The prison houses over 850 inmates.

"During a visit to the prison with our staff, we were impressed by the talent we encountered. We identified at least 20 skilled singers and decided to provide them with a platform," said S.R. Bhat, programme head of Akashvani Bhadravathi.

The programme will go on air every Sunday throughout June between 4 p.m. and 5 p.m.

Court frames charges against first accused in the infamous hand-chopping case in Kerala

The Hindu Bureau
KOCHI

The long arm of the law has caught up with Savad, the first accused in the hand-chopping case, who went into hiding for 14 years after the crime.

Charges were framed against him at the special court for trying the offences booked by the National Investigation Agency (NIA) in Kochi, Kerala last week.

The prosecution case is that Mr. Savad, in continuation of the conspiracy hatched with the other accused in the case, attacked T.J. Joseph, a teacher at Newman College, Thodu-

The accused, who severed the palm of a teacher, went into hiding for 14 years until his 2024 arrest

puzha, and chopped off his right palm on July 4, 2010, after reportedly being perturbed by the inclusion of some alleged blasphemous references in a Malayalam question paper set by Mr. Joseph.

Mr. Savad, who was reportedly an active member of the Popular Front of India (PFI), attacked Mr. Joseph with an axe.

The charges framed

against him include the commission of a terrorist act, being a member of a terrorist gang and conspiring to commit a terrorist act under the Unauthorised Activities (Prevention) Act [UAPA].

Mr. Savad, who went into hiding for 14 years, was arrested in 2024 from Beram in Kannur district.

19 convicted

The NIA, which took over the investigation in 2011, had arraigned 55 persons as accused. The court had convicted 19 persons and let off 24 others in the case. A few of the accused are still at large.

'Encounters in U.P. undermine criminal justice system'

Mayank Kumar
LUCKNOW

Amid the debate over police encounters in Uttar Pradesh following the State government's release of data related to such operations, retired Director-General of Police-rank officials on Saturday said that through this policy the whole society is "made barbaric". It is adversely affecting the growth of the democratic system, fundamentally undermining the criminal justice system and fostering a culture of lawlessness.

"Our society has unfortunately given social recognition to acts of encounters. During the V.P. Singh regime, a 'Maro, Maro' campaign was launched in the early 1980s. But, for the first time in the last nine years, the State under the BJP rule has made encounters an instrument of controlling crime," said Vibhuti Narain Rai, a retired DGP-rank officer from the Uttar Pradesh cadre and a 1975 batch IPS officer.

Recalling an incident in a Ghaziabad village, he said, "The mother of the victim demanded that the accused's body be shown to the family after his encounter killing. People are accepting encounter actions as legal, moral acts,

which in reality are barbaric medieval practices. Instant justice through encounters is an extrajudicial killing — a black chapter for society."

Criticising encounter actions, former U.P. DGP Sulkhan Singh said that through such operations, the State is normalising violence. "Encounters and bulldozer actions fundamentally undermine the criminal justice system by bypassing due process, fostering a culture of lawlessness, and eroding trust in law enforcement. These acts turn police into judges and executioners, violating fundamental human rights and turning democracy into autocracy," he said.

"This is against the constitutional guarantee of the right to a fair trial by an independent court and the presumption of innocence. The State is normalising violence, ultimately creating a climate of vigilantism where society demands extrajudicial killing and house demolition as a satisfaction for base desires of vengeance," Mr. Singh told *The Hindu*.

The debate intensified after Asad, the main accused in the stabbing of 17-year-old Surya Pratap Chauhan in Ghaziabad, was shot dead in a police encounter on May 30.

Bangladesh to raise issue of 'push-ins' in BGB-BSF talks

Press Trust of India
DHAKA

Bangladesh said on Sunday that the issues of alleged "push-ins" by India and border killings will be discussed at an upcoming meeting between the heads of the two countries' border guarding forces.

The 57th edition of the bi-annual Director General-level border coordination conference between the Border Security Force (BSF) and Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) will be held in New Delhi between June 8 and 11.

"The situation on the frontier, bilateral cooperation and particularly the issue of illegal push-ins will be placed with importance (by BGB)," Bangladesh Home Minister Salahuddin Ahmed told reporters at his office.

India maintains that "only illegal intruders" are pushed into Bangladesh following due procedures.

New Delhi says its policy is that "all illegal foreign nationals staying in India must be repatriated as per our laws, procedure and established bilateral arrangements."

The four-day conference comes as BGB intensified vigil along its frontiers with India to halt what it calls "illegal push-in" attempts in recent weeks.

4,800 'infiltrators' sent back to Bangladesh in one month: Bengal CM

Suwendu says 836 people in holding centres will be deported soon: BJP govt. in State giving priority to 'chicken neck' area in north Bengal, he says

Shiv Sahay Singh
KOLKATA

West Bengal Chief Minister Suwendu Adhikari on Sunday said that 4,800 "illegal infiltrators" from Bangladesh, who do not fall within the ambit of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, have been deported to Bangladesh over the past one month.

"There is a law of the Government of India, under which they [illegal infiltrators] could be handed over to the Border Security Force [BSF] instead of being sent to prisons. This law was used by other States, but here [in West Bengal], they were treated as guests and lodged in prisons, fed our food, given our clothes and treated with our medicines," said Mr. Adhikari, while speaking at an event organised by the West Bengal BJP, titled "Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya Prashikshan Maha Abhiyan 2026".

Mr. Adhikari said holding centres had been set up in border districts of the State and 836 "illegal infiltrators" there would soon



Bangladeshi migrants, alleged to have crossed into India illegally, resting near a Border Security Force camp on the outskirts of Kolkata for verification on May 28. AFP

be deported to Bangladesh. He also referred to the voluntary crossing of undocumented migrants from the border outpost at Hakimpur in North 24 Parganas district to the neighbouring country.

The Chief Minister said the demography of West Bengal was changed long ago and that deportation of "illegal infiltrators" was being done as a priority by the West Bengal government.

On May 20, Mr. Adhikari had said that the policy of his government

regarding "illegal infiltrators" was to "detect, delete and deport".

The Chief Minister said since the BJP government came to power, about 100 km of land had been handed over to the BSF and priority had been accorded to the strategically important "chicken neck" area of north Bengal.

West Bengal shares a 2,216-km border with Bangladesh and about 556 km of this border remains unfenced, according to the Chief Minister.

J&K tribal leader arrested for protest faces grave charges

The Hindu Bureau
SRINAGAR

A tribal leader who was arrested after he organised a protest at a demolition site in Jammu faces charges of "attempt to murder", "rioting", and "possessing deadly weapon".

Seeking his immediate release, former Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister and Peoples Democratic Party president Mehbooba Mufti said he "has been jailed for fighting for the rights of the poor marginalised tribal community".

According to the first information report (FIR), the tribal leader, Talib Hussain Choudhary, faces charges under Sections 109, 126(2), 121, 132, 191(2), 191(3), 190, 125, and 125(2) of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita. They deal with the charges of attempted murder, voluntarily causing grievous hurt and assault of a public servant, rioting with deadly weapons and compromising public safety.

Mr. Choudhary, also a member of the PDP, was arrested on June 1 from Bandhi-Ragura village, where 32 structures belonging to tribals were demolished in an anti-encroachment drive.

The police said that at about 4 p.m., approximately 100-150 persons



Treating him like a criminal sends a chilling message to Gujjar Bakerwals who have stood by India

MEHBOOBA MUFTI
PDP chief

under the leadership of Mr. Choudhary and Molvi Makhan Din and some other local leaders assembled at Bandhi-Ragura.

They said the members attacked the police party with stones and other deadly missiles. "As a result, Sub-divisional police officer City East Jammu; Deputy Superintendent of Police; Station House Officer, Police Station Bagh-e-Bahu; and several other police officials sustained injuries," said the police.

Ms. Mufti said, "Treating him like a criminal simply for taking out a peaceful march against an arbitrary demolition drive in Sidhra sends a chilling negative message to Gujjar Bakerwals who have always stood by India."

Solemn occasion



Fruitful celebration: The premises of a church decorated with vegetables and fruits on the occasion of the 'Feast of the Holy Eucharist' in Kochi in Kerala on Sunday. PTI

India, Indonesia review bilateral ties as Jaishankar meets his counterpart

Kallol Bhattacharjee
NEW DELHI

Ahead of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's expected visit to Indonesia, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar and his Indonesian counterpart Sugiono held the 8th India-Indonesia Joint Commission meeting here on Sunday.

In a press statement, the External Affairs Ministry said the two Ministers covered the "full spectrum" review of bilateral relations covering cooperation in defence, security, maritime, trade and investment, pharma and healthcare, digital, energy, connectivity, space, education, consular and culture domains, as well as political ties.

"The two sides exchanged views on regional



External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar with Indonesian Foreign Minister Sugiono in New Delhi on Sunday. ANI

and global developments of mutual interest and reaffirmed their commitment to closer cooperation and

coordination in regional and multilateral fora," said the Ministry. Following the meeting, Mr. Jaishankar

said the talks were "substantive".

The Joint Commission meeting was held after a gap of four years, Mr. Jaishankar said in his opening remarks, informing that during the past four years the two sides made "good progress" in bilateral ties.

Mr. Sugiono said Indonesia was looking forward to Mr. Modi's visit that is expected in the coming weeks. He said the visit would provide an "important opportunity to further deepen our cooperation and deliver tangible benefits for our peoples".

The visit will be a reciprocal one by the Indian side as Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto had come to New Delhi in January 2025, when he was the chief guest at the Republic Day celebrations here.

CBI conducts searches in IDFC First, AU Finance case

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) has conducted searches at six premises in connection with a large-scale misappropriation and fraud case allegedly involving IDFC First Bank and AU Finance Bank.

It is alleged that about ₹661 crore in eight departments of the Haryana government, the Municipal Corporation Chandigarh, and CREST (Chandigarh Renewal Energy and Science and Technology Promotion Society) were siphoned off.

The search operations were carried out on Saturday in Chandigarh, Panchkula, and in and around Delhi. They included the residential premises of senior public servants of the



The CBI searched locations in Chandigarh, Panchkula, and in and around Delhi.

Haryana cadre, and Vipam Consultancy Private Limited and its director.

The agency alleged that, during the investigation, evidence surfaced suggesting public servants had colluded with bank officials and facilitated the opening of accounts, transfer of funds, and subsequent diversion thereof.

"It is alleged that they have received undue advantages for their facilitation and inaction. Vipam Consultancy Pvt. Ltd., Noida, received the crime proceeds...which was subsequently transferred into the director's personal account," the agency said.

"Incriminating documents, digital devices, property documents and other relevant material were seized during the search operations," it said.

The CBI initiated the probe after taking over one case from the State Vigilance and the Anti-Corruption Bureau, Haryana, and two cases originally registered at the Economic Offences police station, Chandigarh.

The cases pertain to alleged criminal conspiracy, misappropriation of government funds, and related offences involving bank officials and public servants.

Bengal couple held for the murder of DU assistant professor

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Delhi Police have arrested a couple from West Bengal in connection with the murder of an assistant professor of the University of Delhi earlier this week, officials said on Sunday. A minor has also been held.

The police said the couple allegedly murdered Debosmita Paul over a property dispute. They had been residing in the property belonging to Paul in Burdwan in West Bengal since 2023.

"The victim had been repeatedly asking the accused to vacate the premises, leading to an ongoing property dispute. Following a final warning issued by the victim to vacate the property, the accused allegedly conspired to elimi-

nate her and travelled to Delhi on June 3," a police officer said. Paul was found dead in her flat in New Ashok Nagar on June 4.

Following this, the East District police team carried out CCTV analysis around the scene of crime. The suspects were found moving through the building, changing their clothes, and hiding their faces.

"After committing the offence, the accused fled from the scene and travelled via Anand Vihar to New Delhi Railway Station, boarded the Poorva Express at 5.40 p.m. on June 3, and reached Burdwan on June 4," the officer said. The couple will be brought to Delhi for further investigation. A razor allegedly used to slit the victim's wrists has also been recovered, the police said.

Prepare for 2029 polls, Nitin tells Jharkhand BJP workers

Amit Bhelari
PATNA

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) national president Nitin Nabin instructed his party workers in Jharkhand on Sunday to gear up for the 2029 Assembly election in the state.

He was speaking during a meeting held at the party office in Ranchi as part of a two-day visit to the State that concluded on Sunday. State office bearers, presidents of State wings (*morchas*), district presidents, and districts in-charge were present for his first visit there after becoming BJP's national president.

Addressing the party workers and leaders, Mr. Nabin said that every worker must gear up for 2029 and learn from past polls.

"Jharkhand was, is, and will remain a BJP strong-



BJP national president Nitin Nabin addresses a joint meeting with Jharkhand BJP president Aditya Sahu in Ranchi on Sunday. ANI

hold. Although the party did not achieve the expected success in the last election because opposition parties misled the public with false promises, people still hold more affection for the BJP in their hearts than for the 'INDI Alliance'," Mr. Nabin said.

He pointed out that the party failed to win the public's trust, but now is the time to transform the at-

mosphere of disappointment into hope. He added that the organisation must be revived by motivating booth-level workers.

Monthly meetings
Mr. Nabin said regular monthly meetings should be held at all levels from the State down to the block level to maintain continuous communication with grassroots workers.

BJP govt. will pay a political price: Pawar slams hike

The Hindu Bureau
MUMBAI

Nationalist Congress Party (SP) supremo Sharad Pawar on Sunday criticised Prime Minister Narendra Modi's handling of gas and fuel price hike and said that it was being done in a phased manner to avoid public backlash while steadily disturbing household budgets.

Hitting out at the Prime Minister, Mr. Pawar said, "He [Mr. Modi] assured people of keeping inflation in check but that is not happening. The ruling party will have to pay a political price for this at the right time." Speaking to presspersons in Baramati, he said, "The hike started with two rupees but slowly it has only piled up, affecting people."

Mr. Pawar's statement comes in the wake of increase in price of domestic cooking gas by ₹29 per cylinder, which is the second rise in price in the past three months.

Maharashtra Congress leader Vijay Wadettiwar alleged that the BJP was not concerned about issues affecting ordinary people like it had been when it was in the Opposition. "During the Congress government, they used to raise voice on the price rise of fuels and gas but now they are maintaining silence," he said.

Govt. cites oil firm losses for latest LPG price hike

Price of a domestic LPG cylinder has gone up by ₹29 after the second hike in three months; Centre says oil marketing companies are now absorbing under-recoveries at ₹700 per cylinder

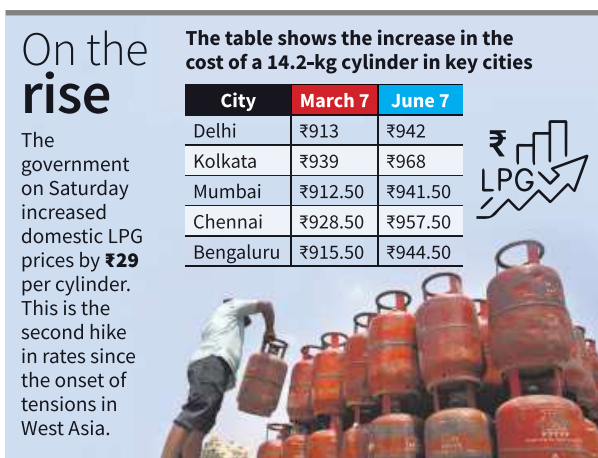
Saptaparno Ghosh
NEW DELHI

The price of a domestic LPG cylinder has gone up by ₹89 overall since the beginning of the war in West Asia, following the latest hike by ₹29 on Sunday. This was the second increase since the crisis began three months ago.

With the latest increase, the 14.2-kg domestic LPG cylinder costs ₹942 in Delhi, ₹941.5 in Mumbai, ₹968 in Kolkata and ₹957.5 in Chennai. On March 7, the government last increased domestic LPG prices by ₹60 per cylinder.

There was no increase in the price of the 19-kg commercial LPG cylinder and the 5-kg free trade LPG (FTL) cylinder on Sunday. However, since the war began, prices of both variants have seen multiple hikes, with cumulative increase of ₹1,345 (per commercial LPG cylinder) and ₹323 (per FTL cylinder).

In a statement, the government said that state-owned oil marketing companies are now absorbing under-recoveries, that is, the difference between effective cost and selling price, on domestic LPG at about ₹700 per cylinder. At current rates, domestic



LPG is discounted by about 45% as against current international pricing, it added.

Rising costs

Elaborating, the Centre stated that the cost of supplying a 14.2-kg cylinder would be over ₹1,600 had the present retail prices of domestic cylinders been in line with the Saudi Contract Price in June.

"The effective Ujjwala price of the first four cylinders at ₹642 (per cylinder) is at a discount of about 60% to the actual international prices of an LPG cylinder and the non-PMUY price of ₹942 (per cylinder) is at a discount of about 45% to the international price," it said.

According to Prashant

Vashisht, senior vice-president at ICRA Limited, the latest hike may not suffice for oil firms struggling with under-recoveries.

"The bulk of the LPG in the country is consumed by households which have been insulated from hikes. Also, a major part of the under-recoveries absorbed by OMCs with respect to retail fuels [petrol, diesel and LPG] also comes from LPG," he stated. "The ₹29 per cylinder hike in domestic LPG would not help a lot, considering the ₹700 per cylinder under-recovery."

The conflict in West Asia has directly impacted about 54% of India's LPG demand.

(With inputs from Devesh Kumar Pandey)

Kharge takes a dig at Modi govt. over price hike

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Congress chief Mallikarjun Kharge on Sunday demanded to know why the government, despite its "grand claims" of diversifying fuel sources across 41 countries in response to the West Asia conflict, carried out one more hike in the price of LPG cylinders.

He said, "Modi ji had made grand claims in Parliament about diversifying fuel sources across 41 countries in response to the West Asia conflict. What became of that?"

The soaring domestic LPG prices, he said, threaten to disrupt the kitchens of common people.

"Modiji and BJP leaders used to raise a hue and cry about inflation during the UPA era. Is it not true that the Modi government has increased domestic LPG prices by ₹530 over the last 12 years? Why aren't BJP leaders taking to the streets with LPG cylinders in protest now?" he said.

There is no DMK-led Secular Progressive Alliance in T.N. now: CPI(M) State secretary

The Hindu Bureau
PUDUKOTTAI

CPI(M) Tamil Nadu secretary P. Shanmugam said on Sunday that the DMK-led Secular Progressive Alliance did not exist now and the Left party was not part of the DMK's alliance.

"There is no such thing as a DMK alliance now. The Secular Progressive Alliance, of which we were a part, is no longer there. However, we will work with the DMK on issues concerning the welfare and rights of Tamil Nadu, based on a shared understanding on select issues," he said.

Interacting with journalists in Pudukottai, he criticised DMK president M.K. Stalin and AIADMK general secretary Edappadi K. Palaniswami for publicly stating the C. Joseph Vijay-led government would not last even one or two months. He called such remarks "irresponsible".

Calling for patience towards the new TVK-led administration, he said it would need time to familiarise itself with various departments.

He rejected claims of widespread power cuts across Tamil Nadu, noting that even the electricity board chairman had acknowledged outages only in certain areas. "Power must



However, we will work with the DMK on issues concerning the welfare and rights of Tamil Nadu, based on a shared understanding on select issues

P. SHANMUGAM
CPI(M) State secretary

be distributed without disruption," he said.

Mr. Shanmugam also called for continuing the complete ban on lottery ticket sales in Tamil Nadu, citing the destruction it had caused to many families across the state.

He argued that the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) no longer existed in its original form.

"Some parties that were part of that alliance voted against the TVK-led government in the confidence motion, some voted for it, and some remained neutral. This must be seen as a major shift in the political landscape," he said.

Mr. Shanmugam clarified that his party had no intention of propping up the TVK-led government.

"Our aim is not about which alliance we were part of when we won, but that a government chosen by the people should be in place. If the TVK-led government, which we are

supporting, takes decisions we disagree with, we will oppose them," he said.

RSS outfit

On the BJP, he alleged that since the party had failed to gain traction in Tamil Nadu, Prime Minister Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah had blessed former State BJP president K. Anamalai to launch a new organisation – effectively another RSS outfit – under a different name. "He has created an image of lakhs of people joining his organisation," he said, questioning why the leader, who claimed he was resigning from the BJP, needed to travel to Delhi to meet party leaders.

"He could have simply sent his resignation letter from here," he said. He also took a swipe at defectors, saying that while switching parties was wrong, others changing parties was being treated as normal.

'Youth power': Rahul lauds student for flagging OSM issues

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Taking a dig at Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, Rahul Gandhi, on Sunday posted a video of his interaction with Sarthak Siddhant, the 18-year-old student who flagged the irregularities in the tendering process to select a vendor for the Central Board of Secondary Education's On-Screen Marking System (OSM).

He said that the Prime Minister wanted the youth to keep "making reels and frying pakoras".

"Mr. Sarthak is 18 years old, yet in terms of mindset, courage, and principles, he is second to none," Mr. Gandhi said in a post in Hindi, accompanying the video, on X.

Naming ethical hacker Nisarga Adhikary, who also exposed the vulnerabilities in the CBSE's OSM portal, Mr. Gandhi said that the duo had accomplished what the country's major media houses and investigative journalists could not. "They exposed the collusion between CBSE and COEMPT [edtech company] to the nation," he said. He lauded Mr. Sidhant for being "faster and sharper" than the Central Bureau of Investigation, and said this victory for the



Rahul Gandhi

youth was, in the true sense, a defeat for the government.

"Mr. Modi ji wants our youth to keep making reels and frying pakoras, without asking questions or opening their eyes. But these young men did ask questions, and they found the answers, too. This is India's true youth power, inquisitive, aware, and informed. And remember, the country's future will not be led astray," he said.

Meet from last week

The eight-minute-long video is from Mr. Gandhi's meeting with Mr. Sidhant and his family last week. The video opens with Mr. Gandhi asking him whether he believes he had done "a good thing" or "a bad thing". Mr. Sidhant responded that he did what a "concerned citizen" should do, explaining how Mr. Adhikary and he had investigated the issue.

Panel looking into NEET, OSM issues seeks answers from NTA and CBSE

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI

A parliamentary panel has asked the National Testing Agency (NTA) to define what constitutes a "paper leak" in its definition and whether any paper leaks have occurred in exams it conducted since 2018, sources said.

The panel's questionnaire follows NTA officials' appearance before it last week, where they contended that there was no paper leak from their system, claiming that some questions from a guess paper were in circulation, the sources said.

The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Education, Women, Children, Youth and Sports, headed by Congress Rajya Sabha member Digvijaya Singh, is investigating the NEET paper leak and the CBSE's On-Screen Marking (OSM) fiasco, and has summoned top government officials, including those from the NTA and Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE).

The committee has sought written answers from the CBSE and the NTA on the issues of OSM system and the NEET exam respectively.

The panel has asked the NTA whether it conducted any inquiry into the allegations of irregularities in the



The Parliamentary panel looking into the issues is headed by Congress leader Digvijaya Singh.

NEET-UG 2024 (outside of the CBI investigations). The panel has also asked the NTA about its staff strength for the last three years and fresh recruitments made since 2022. It has also demanded the annual report the NTA submitted to the Higher Education Department for the last three years.

Action taken report

It has sought a detailed report on each of the Radhakrishnan Committee Report's 101 recommendations and the action taken by the NTA on each of them, the sources said.

While the CBSE must answer the questions by June 8, the NTA has been asked to submit written answers by June 10. Both agencies are yet to respond, the sources add.

The panel has also asked the CBSE about reported "changes" between the various Requests for Proposals (RFPs) issued for the OSM contract and whether any background checks on the company COEMPT were conducted before awarding it the contract, the sources added.

The panel has also sought to know from the CBSE whether it was aware that COEMPT EduTeck and/or its directors were previously associated with Globarena Technologies, whose evaluation software was faulted in the inquiry into the 2019 Telangana intermediate results and how this was factored in the award decision, the sources claimed.

Detailed answers

Seeking detailed answers from the CBSE, the committee has asked why the proviso disqualifying bidders with a past record of poor performance was removed in the third RFP for the OSM contract, the sources claimed.

It has also asked why the proviso prohibiting bidders who were previously blacklisted was "weakened" to exclude only currently blacklisted bidders in the third RFP and why the minimum company turnover for the bidder was specifically set at ₹50 crore, they said.

The committee has sought to know why the RFP provisions "changed" from favouring contractors with their own data centres to those using MeitY-empowered data centres, the sources said.

It has asked why the provision for a robotic scanner was "dropped and replaced with a generic provision ('sufficient scanners')", and why the stipulation for contractors to scan answer papers without cutting the spine of the paper was removed.

It has also sought to know why the minimum scanning resolution desired by the CBSE in its RFP was reduced from 300 DPI (dots per inch, which describes the resolution of an image) to 200 DPI, according to sources.

The panel has also asked why the criteria requiring experience in handling large projects (involving at least five lakh students per project) was "dropped" in favour of a criterion allowing cumulative answer-book volume across multiple projects, the sources said.

The panel had also asked the CBSE to share the action taken on the report of the observers of the OSM dry run and whether the Board shared and/or discussed the observers' report with the Ministry of Education.

Defer three-language policy for Class 9, Digvijaya urges govt.

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Urging the government not to implement the three-language policy for Class 9 CBSE students in the ongoing session, senior Congress leader Digvijaya Singh, in a letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, said enforcing the policy without adequate teachers, textbooks or transition time was likely to create "serious disruption".

Mr. Singh compared implementation of this policy midway through the session with the "hasty implementation of CBSE's On-Screen Marking System".

He said he had received several letters from parents who had flagged genuine challenges in implementing the policy. "The sudden enforcement of this policy mid-session – without adequate teachers, textbooks, or transition time – is likely to create serious disruption, not unlike the chaos witnessed during the hasty implementation of CBSE's OSM system, which adversely impacted lakhs of students across the country," he said.

He said that the CBSE's governing body, in its meeting in December 2025, had ratified the Curriculum Committee's recommendation that

Enforcing policy without transition time might create 'serious disruption', Congress leader says

"schools continue with the existing Scheme of Studies, especially with regard to language, until the release of graded textbooks of languages by NCERT".

Overriding the decision, the CBSE issued a circular on May 15, asking for the implementation of third-language instruction in Class 9 from July 1.

The NCERT, he said, had not yet released graded textbooks of language, and the CBSE had, therefore, recommended the use of the NCERT's Grade 6 textbooks.

"It is not clear how and why the CBSE has so evidently overturned its Governing Body's decision and in a way that threatens the academic planning of thousands of schools across the country," Mr. Singh wrote.

He further argued in the letter that the situation was particularly untenable for students in the Southern and North-Eastern States, where Hindi was not spoken and local tribal languages might not feature in the CBSE's recognised language list.

Eggs thrown at Trinamool leaders

The Hindu Bureau
KOLKATA

More than a month after the defeat of the Trinamool Congress in the West Bengal Assembly election, public anger against local party workers has not subsided. People across the State have found a new way to express their anger

– throwing eggs at Trinamool leaders accused of corruption and wrongdoing.

On Saturday night, eggs were allegedly hurled at senior Trinamool leader MLA Madan Mitra's convoy in Kamarhati constituency. The vehicle in which the MLA was travelling was peppered with eggs and a

video showing it went viral.

On Sunday, people threw eggs at Trinamool councillor Bappaditya Dasgupta, arrested on serious charges including extortion, even as the police escorted him to the Alipore court amid tight security.

Reports indicate that the Trinamool had to cancel

a meeting of its councillors scheduled for Sunday afternoon at Trinamool Bhavan in Kolkata fearing 'egg attacks' on party councillors.

In another incident, a local Trinamool worker from Amta in Howrah district was found hiding under a pile of sarees during a police raid.

Kin of 2021 violence victims to get jobs

Shiv Sahay Singh
KOLKATA

Chief Minister Suwendu Adhikari on Sunday said the West Bengal government would provide jobs to kin of 315 deceased BJP workers in June. The Chief Minister also announced one-time financial assistance of ₹5 lakh for all the affected families from the Chief Minister's Relief Fund.

The BJP had lost the 2021 West Bengal Assem-

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INBRIEF



Modi congratulates Major Abhilasha Barak on UN Award

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday congratulated Major Abhilasha Barak on being conferred the UN Military Gender Advocate of the Year Award and said the honour is a recognition of her exemplary service and also of India's longstanding contribution to the United Nations peacekeeping efforts. Major Barak, currently serving with the United Nations mission in Lebanon, has been honoured with the award for her outreach efforts with women and girls during her deployment in the West Asian nation. She is also the first woman combat helicopter pilot of the Indian Army. **PTI**

4 workers die while cleaning tank at Surat jewellery unit

Four workers died allegedly after inhaling toxic fumes while cleaning a tank at a jewellery manufacturing unit in Surat, Gujarat, on Sunday morning, the police said. While asphyxiation is likely the primary cause of their death, the exact cause will be confirmed by the post-mortem report, Deputy Commissioner of Police, Zone-1, Alok Kumar said. The incident occurred at the septic tank, which collects waste from the jewellery cleaning process, in Ashwini Kumar area, he said. "We are examining whose negligence led to the incident, as preliminary investigations show that safety protocols were not followed," he said. **PTI**

Toll in Delhi fire rises to 22 as a foreign national dies

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI

A Nigerian national injured in the fire at a hotel in south Delhi's Malviya Nagar died during treatment at a hospital, taking the death toll in the tragedy to 22, the police said on Sunday.

The blaze ripped through Flourish Stays B&B in the Hauz Rani area on Wednesday morning, killing 21 people, including a 16-year-old girl and several foreign nationals from Kyrgyzstan, Nigeria, Bangladesh, Iraq, Congo, Mozambique, and Liberia.

A foreigner, who was undergoing treatment at a hospital in Delhi, died on Saturday night, Deputy Commissioner of Police (South) Anant Mittal said.

The deceased has been identified as Okale, a Nigerian national. He had sustained severe burns.

Law student dies at concert in Mumbai, woman falls ill

The Hindu Bureau
MUMBAI

A 28-year-old man died and a woman fell ill during the 'Klangkuentler All Night Long' concert at the NSCI Dome in Mumbai on Saturday night.

The deceased has been identified as Rishabh Gangurde, a law student from Mahim. He was reportedly heavily intoxicated. The 31-year-old woman, a friend of the deceased, was taken to a hospital. She is in a stable condition, the police said.

The Mumbai Police have filed an accidental death report and the body has been sent for post-mortem examination. According to a preliminary inquiry, the deceased experienced a medical emergency during the event. "The cause of death remains unclear, forensic reports are awaited," a police official said.

"Based on enquiries with the woman, [it was found that] she had consumed alcohol and energy drinks. No drug use was revealed." The police are re-examining if it was a "rave party". A similar incident had taken place in April at the NESCO centre in Goregaon, where two students died from a drug overdose.

Efforts on to establish AI ecosystem for the judiciary, says CJI

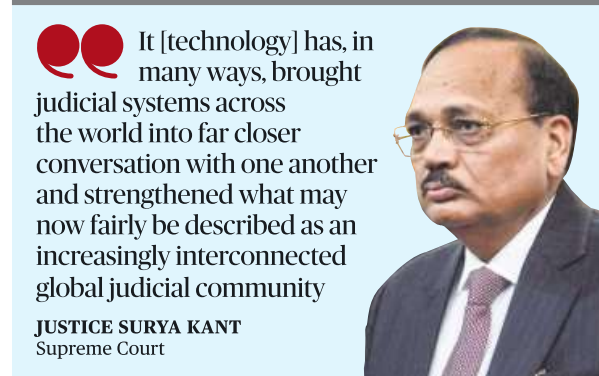
SC has consciously approached technology as an aid to human reasoning rather than substitute for independent judicial thought, Justice Kant says

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI

Observing that the Supreme Court has consciously approached technology as an aid to human reasoning rather than as a substitute for independent judicial thought, Chief Justice of India Surya Kant said that considerable emphasis has been placed on developing "Swadeshi jurisprudence".

Delivering a lecture at the Oxford Union and the Oxford Law Society on the theme "Constitutional promise to digital reality: safeguarding justice in the age of AI and technological advancement", the CJI said that in addition to ongoing technological initiatives, serious efforts are under way to explore establishing an indigenous AI ecosystem for the judiciary.

"The Supreme Court of India has consciously approached technology as an aid to human reasoning rather than as a substitute for independent judicial thought. Considerable em-



phasis, however, has been placed upon the development of what may be described as a distinctly Indian or 'Swadeshi jurisprudence': One that remains attentive to our own constitutional values, institutional realities, linguistic diversity, and social conditions rather than relying solely upon imported technological models or assumptions," the CJI said.

He said technology has contributed to something beyond the constitutional promise of access to justice.

"It has, in many ways, brought judicial systems across the world into far closer conversation with one another and strengthened what may now fairly be described as an increasingly interconnected global judicial community," he said.

Young lawyers, judicial officers, and legal professionals are an encouraging source for the judiciary's technological transformation, the CJI said.

He also emphasised that technology can never replace human judgment.

He added that an AI system can process immense volumes of legal text with astonishing speed.

'Detailed NFHS report will provide a broader picture'

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI

Union Health Ministry sources addressed criticism directed at "missing" indicators, such as anaemia, sanitation, and coverage of clean cooking fuel, in the National Family Health Survey (NFHS)-6 factsheets saying those are being monitored through dedicated national surveys and administrative databases, and were not "duplicated" in the preliminary release.

Responding to "commentary in sections of the media regarding the absence of certain indicators", official sources said the factsheets represent the first stage of dissemination and cover 101 major indicators intended to provide a concise snapshot of India's most critical health and demographic trends.

"The factsheets are the first stage of dissemination. The detailed national report will provide a much broader picture," sources said. The report will be released subsequently with a much wider range of indicators, detailed analyses and methodological documentation.

"The aim is to ensure

that each indicator is reported through the most appropriate and authoritative source, reducing duplication and improving overall data coherence," sources said. They said several indicators cited as "missing" from the factsheets are being monitored through dedicated national systems. Sanitation and clean cooking fuel coverage, for instance, are tracked through specialised surveys and administrative platforms such as Swachh Survekshan Grameen and the Statistics and Programme Implementation Ministry's surveys, making duplication within the factsheets unnecessary, they said.

Key statistics relating to mortality, birth registration and population characteristics continue to be generated through systems such as the Sample Registration System, Civil Registration System and Census framework.

On the absence of anaemia estimates in the factsheets, they said that haemoglobin testing was not undertaken in NFHS-6 due to concerns surrounding the capillary blood sampling methodology used in previous rounds.

Farmers protest against 'Third Mumbai' project in Raigad

Snehal Mutha
RAIGAD

Social reformer and former judge B.G. Kolve Patil on Sunday issued a strong warning against the "Third Mumbai" project under way in Raigad district of Maharashtra, declaring that it would be built "only over our dead bodies".

Addressing a farmers' meeting, he asked the attendees to take an oath to oppose the project. The meeting was organised by the Raigad-based MMRDA KSC Navnagar (Third Mumbai) Virodhi Samiti.

"Today our fight is on another level. Earlier judges did their job, lawyers did their job, and the police did theirs. The political leaders in power are shameless," Mr. Patil said.

The Third Mumbai project, or Karnala-Sai-Chirner (KSC) New Town, includes 124 villages and spans a land area of 323 sq. km. The land is spread



A meeting organised by the Raigad-based organisation MMRDA KSC Navnagar (Third Mumbai) Virodhi Samiti on Sunday. **SNEHAL MUTHA**

across Uran, Panvel, and Pen talukas in Raigad district, and strategically links to Mumbai via the Atal Setu Road. Farmers are agitated over the compensation provisions made by the Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority, the authority managing the project.

According to the Government Resolution issued in March, the landowners are to receive 22.5% developed land in return for the land sold or opt for compensation in

the form of floor space index and transferable development rights.

Activist Ulka Mahajan criticised the government, saying the project ignores laws, democracy and constitutional norms. Samiti representative and farmer Rupesh Patil advised his peers not to fall prey to inducements that could ruin their homes. "If we sell today, we won't be able to buy even half a *gunta* of land. Our land is no more farmland but has become a real estate hub."

Poor facilities, stigma force Odisha girls to skip school during menstruation: study

Bindu Shajan Perappadan
BHUBANESWAR

Absenteeism from school during menstruation continues to be a major concern for female students across Odisha, with nearly 74% of them missing anywhere between one to eight days of classes per cycle, according to a study on menstrual health released here recently.

Pain and discomfort were identified as the primary reasons for absenteeism, with lack of privacy, inadequate facilities, and social stigma also major factors. The assessment, conducted from April 28 to May 25 across several districts, revealed persistent gaps in menstrual hygiene management, sanitation infrastructure, awareness, and institutional support systems. The survey covered 177 respondents - 121 schools and 56 public institutions - from rural and

urban areas, and was conducted by organisations, including UNICEF, Aaina, WaterAid, AIIMS-Bhubaneswar, and IIT-Bhubaneswar.

While 94% of the schools surveyed had separate toilets for girls, the lack of basic menstrual hygiene support systems, and non-availability of water and soap were cited as major hurdles. The study found that around 56% of schools either lacked menstrual waste disposal facilities



Pain and discomfort were identified as the primary reasons for absenteeism from school. **BISWARANJAN ROUIT**

or relied on unsafe disposal methods.

The lack of healthcare staff within schools is another concern, with only 27% of schools having a nurse or health worker and 44% reported having first aid kits.

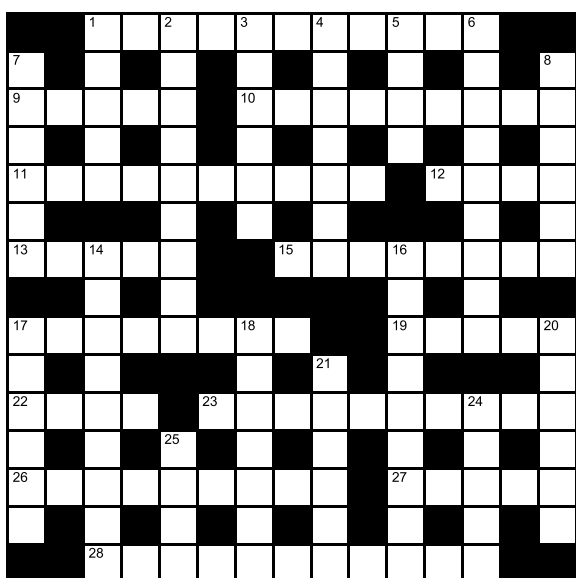
Over the past three years, public spaces in Bhubaneswar, have been audited by adolescents using the Public Spaces Assessment Framework developed by the World Resources Institute India, a

global non-profit, with inputs from over 800 young people.

"Here, too, one of the key issues that persists is the lack of inclusive and period-friendly toilets in public spaces. Building on three years of field insights, the Safe, Vibrant, and Healthy Public Spaces project offers a model for inclusive toilets that we aim to demonstrate at three strategic locations across Bhubaneswar. The initiatives will be led by adolescent champions of Aaina, seeking to support city agencies to build awareness around accessible and inclusive sanitation infrastructure, especially for women, girls, and persons with disabilities, while ensuring dignity, hygiene and comfort in public spaces for everyone," Mukti Swaroop Pradhan, programme associate, Urban Development, Sustainable Cities and Transport, WRI India, said.

THE CROSSWORD+ 14814

Solve this puzzle online and access more puzzles at <https://thehindu.com/crosswords>



- Money held by masseur obtained (4)
- Cut off from Chris Evert (5)
- Warped space on 1st for wool gatherer (8)
- Following friend, on this day, turning into a follower of an Oriental faith (8)
- Pertaining to quality of sound arising from ventilator after losing rivet (5)
- Gas used in Cochrane, Ontario (4)
- A kind of presentation for electrical socket (5,5)
- So, large things are thrown with this (9)
- Son has fun returning female's ground tobacco (5)
- Point carton out to get device (11)

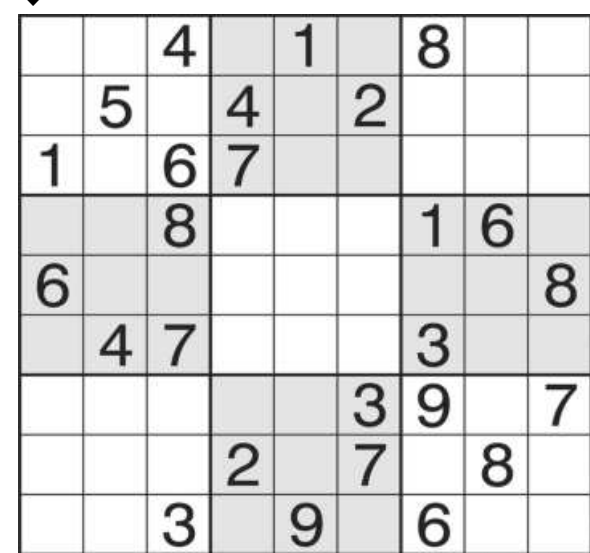
Down

- Rodent is shy at first, perhaps unsettled, for starters (5)
- Are rather confused about metal not available in pure form in nature (4,5)
- Start to produce units manufactured to make feedstocks (6)
- Adds, "Badly snapped" (7)
- Indian and Yankee in a motor sport (4)
- Entice ox running around university for performance (9)
- Throws fine fish on top of salver (6)
- Meaning: One drink, after commencement of May (6)
- Cod dives strangely consuming current media storage device (5,4)
- A new advice: With Italian wine, for starters (9)
- In absence of war, brainwash distraught and exile (6)
- After school, parent gets choke (7)
- The French aristocrat is pardoned (3,3)
- Rose, you and I punt badly (4,2)
- Put in vase and badly ruin before noon (5)
- Against rebellious Anglican leaving clan (4)

Across

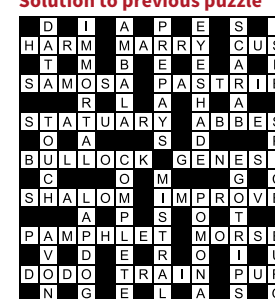
- Local going after vehicle on highway from London to Leeds? It can lead to reduction in gas (11)
- Wife leaves lawyer's coat (5)
- Grand proposal to install gas lines to every house is fanciful thinking (4,5)
- American consuming sodium first? Disgusting! (10)

SUDOKU



DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★★★★

Solution to previous puzzle



Solution to yesterday's Sudoku



FAITH

Azhwar's thirst for Krishna

Born under the Visagam star in the Tamil month of Vaikasi, Nammazhwar, also referred to as the original Periyar, Periyavar, numero uno, the first preceptor among gurus, etc., expounded the system of Visishtadvaita in clear terms and is accorded the greatest importance. Parasara Bhattar uses the term *Krushna trushna tattva* to portray Nammazhwar's thirst for Krishna. He is a true personification of Krishna bhakti, said Tirukkudanthai Dr. Venkatesh.

Immersed in Perumal and His qualities, the works of the Azhwar are an outpouring of divine bliss. Poigai Azhwar, Peyazhwar and Boothattazhwar composed on Vairamun and Ulagalanda Perumal. Tirumazhisai Azhwar focused on Antaryami, Kulasekhara Azhwar sang on Rama, Tondaradipodiazhwar and Tiruppanazhwar had eyes only for Lord Ranganatha, Madhura Kavi sang paean on his guru, Tirumangai Azhwar sang about the Divya Desams. Nammazhwar, Periazhwar and Andal sang about Krishna but while the latter were Krishna devotees (bhaktas), Nammazhwar epitomised Krishna bhakti. In Periya Tiruvandhadhi, when he engages Perumal in a debate on who is greater, Nammazhwar says, 'I am greater than You. You hold the entire universe, but since I hold You (with my devotion) I am greater.' Krishna Himself is fond of the devotee who places complete faith in Him. In Chapter VII of the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna says, "The man of realisation I regard as my very Self, for with his mind (fixed) on Me, he has taken refuge in Me alone as the highest goal. At the end of innumerable births, the man of realisation takes refuge in Me, considering that Vasudeva as everything for him. Such a saint is exceedingly rare."

Homo erectus fossil yields secrets long thought to be beyond genetics

That modern humans carry DNA fragments from two other members of the genus *Homo* raised the possibility that they may also harbour genetic material from other extinct human species; but in the 14 years since the Denisovan genome was published, no new genome from any other extinct human relative has been uncovered — until now

Arun Panchapakesan

For much of modern history, human evolution was thought to progress in linear fashion, with one species replacing another, one by one. The famous 'ape turning to human' cartoon illustrating a stooped primate gradually straightening into a modern man essentially captures this idea.

That picture began to change in the second half of the 19th century when scientists started to unearth human-like fossils. At the time, scientists used geological clues such as the depth at which a fossil was found and the rock layers surrounding it to determine the age of fossils. This method could establish which fossils were older or younger than others but did not reveal precise dates.

The timeline suggested an intriguing possibility, however. It appeared that these different kinds of humans had not followed one another in succession but had lived alongside each other. Radiometric dating techniques later confirmed this idea: multiple human species had coexisted on the earth at various points.

Series of surprises

In 2003, the Human Genome Project announced the first high-quality sequence of the human genome. Human beings finally possessed the secret to their own identity — the reason(s) they were unique. That sense of identity, however, proved to be short-lived.

In 2010, scientists published the genome of the Neanderthals, our closest extinct relatives. When they compared Neanderthal DNA with the genomes of living people, they uncovered a remarkable result. Most humans alive today carry around 1-2% Neanderthal DNA in their own genomes. In Africans, this percentage is slightly lower, but even their DNA is 0.3-0.5% Neanderthal.

The surprises did not end there. In 2012, scientists sequenced the genome of Denisovans, another human lineage, finding that some present-day populations, particularly in Oceania and parts of Southeast Asia, had 3-6% Denisovan DNA.

That we carry DNA fragments from two other members of the genus *Homo* raised the possibility that we may also harbour genetic material from other extinct human species. But in the 14 years since the Denisovan genome was published, no new genome from any other extinct human relative has been uncovered.

DNA after death

The difficulty lies in the nature of DNA itself. The moment an organism dies, its DNA begins to break down. Enzymes



Representative image of the bones of the *Homo erectus* fossil 'Turkana Boy', the most complete fossil of the species found to date. EINSAMER SCHÜTZE (CC BY-SA)

released from dying cells cut DNA into small pieces. Microbes and fungi invade the remains and further degrade the genetic material. Water and oxygen promote chemical reactions that further damage DNA. Then there are temperature fluctuations, solar radiation, and UV damage. Over a few tens of millennia, the DNA is reduced to a few small pieces.

To recover DNA from these ancient humans, scientists need to be very lucky. The specimen must have been exposed to cold, dry, and stable environments such as permafrost, frozen sediments, or the inside of a deep cave. This is very rare — and why only a small fraction of fossils contain usable DNA.

One such species whose DNA sequence has evaded us for a long time is *Homo erectus*, the species estimated to have originated over 2 million years ago and thought to be one of the first human relatives to spread widely across Africa, Europe, and Asia.

Acid etching

A recent study published in *Nature* has provided the first molecular sequences from *Homo erectus* fossils from China. Rather than attempting to recover DNA directly, the researchers extracted proteins preserved within the enamel of six *Homo erectus* teeth dated to around

4,00,000 years ago. Because proteins are the products of the DNA, their sequences can reveal portions of the underlying genetic information, providing a rare, albeit narrow, view into the genome of an extinct human species.

The method used to recover the genetic information is notable. Usually, recovering ancient DNA or proteins requires scientists to grind up part of a fossil, so museum curators are reluctant to permit such analyses, especially when there is no guarantee that usable genetic material will be recovered.

To overcome this problem, the researchers used acid etching, a technique where a small area of the tooth enamel is briefly exposed to a dilute acid solution, which dissolves microscopic amounts of tooth enamel and releases the proteins trapped within it. The fossil is left largely intact. Since tooth enamel is a highly mineralised tissue, it can trap and protect proteins for a long time.

The researchers proceeded to successfully recover enamel proteins from five male and one female *Homo erectus* individuals. When they compared the protein sequences with those of modern humans, Neanderthals, and Denisovans, they made two interesting discoveries.

First, all six *Homo erectus* individuals had a protein variant that has never been

found in any other known species in the genus *Homo*. Second, they carried another variant present in Denisovans. This suggests populations related to these Chinese *Homo erectus* may have interbred with Denisovans in East Asia.

Shared story

However, because the results come from only the enamel proteins and not the entire genome, they are not conclusive. It was long known that the Denisovan genome contains DNA from a much older species of the human lineage. While this study points to *Homo erectus* as a possible candidate, it does not prove it.

Nevertheless, the study represents an advance far beyond the information it has generated, which by itself is tiny. This is the first effort to recover meaningful molecular data from *Homo erectus* fossils, long thought to be beyond the reach of genetics.

Though Neanderthals, Denisovans, and others have vanished from the earth, traces of their existence endure within our DNA. The more we look, the more we find that the story of humans is not only ours: it is theirs as well.

(Arun Panchapakesan is an assistant professor at the Y.R. Gaitonde Centre for AIDS Research and Education, Chennai. arun.panchapakesan@gmail.com)

THE GIST

Radiometric dating techniques have confirmed that multiple human species had coexisted on the earth at various points

While the Human Genome Project in 2003 provided humans with a sense of unique identity, later studies showed the presence of Neanderthal and Denisovan DNA in the modern human genome

A recent study on enamel from *Homo erectus* teeth has revealed a protein variant never found before in the genus as well as another variant present in Denisovans

It was known that the Denisovan genome contains DNA from a much older species of human lineage and the study, while not conclusive, points to *Homo erectus* as a possible candidate

BIG SHOT



As part of the Wilderness Project, wildlife experts who visited Angola's Lisima plateau in February have reported eight new species of dragonfly, three unknown grasshoppers, and some 60 new butterflies and moths in vivid hues. They have also found a spider species that fluoresces under ultraviolet light (shown). REUTERS

WHAT IS IT?

Pyroprocessing: heat shows the way

Vasudevan Mukunth

Pyroprocessing is a way to change a solid material physically or chemically using high temperature. It is a dry process and very energy-intensive. The three sectors that use it most are cement-making, metallurgy, and nuclear power.

Of these, cement-making uses pyroprocessing the most. First, finely ground limestone, clay and iron — the raw materials — are fed into a rotary kiln. As the temperature increases to 900° C, the limestone loses its carbon dioxide, and at around 1,450° C, the mix partly melts to form marble-sized nodules called clinker. The clinker is then ground to produce cement.

In metallurgy, pyroprocessing is used to extract metals from their ores in multiple stages. For example, sulphide ores are heated in air — or roasted — to convert them into metal oxides, like zinc sulphide. Smelting melts an ore to separate the metal from waste impurities called slag. Heating limestone to yield lime is likewise called calcining.

In the nuclear industry, pyroprocessing has a slightly different meaning. It is used to reprocess spent nuclear fuel, in techniques developed in the 1980s and 1990s. First, used nuclear fuel is broken up into pieces and placed in a salt bath — usually a mixture of lithium and potassium chlorides at 500° C or more. Then, an electric current is passed through the salt bath, causing



A rotary kiln is visible as the rust-coloured horizontal tube at the centre in this image of a cement plant in the U.S. GREG GOEBEL (CC BY-SA)

different elements to become separated depending on their electrochemical properties. Operators then recover the elements of interest in separate streams.

This form of pyroprocessing has been the subject of study in Japan, South Korea, and the U.S. and is used as part of programmes involving advanced fast reactors.

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



Testing times

GDP data reveal some strengths, but they will come under strain

The GDP growth data released on Friday simultaneously portray recent economic strength and reveal some reasons for worry. The provisional estimates of GDP growth for 2025-26 have been pegged at 7.7%, which is marginally higher than the 7.6% predicted by the government in February. This suggests that March, the first full month since the West Asia crisis erupted, did not see enough of an impact to affect the full year's growth. That resilience will be dented in the months ahead. The data also showed that several key sectors of the economy, such as manufacturing and several services sectors, grew by double digits over and above a relatively high base. These are all good signs for an economy heading into severe supply-related headwinds due to the war in Iran. Notably, both Private Final Consumption Expenditure and Gross Fixed Capital Formation – metrics of household consumption and government and private sector investment activity, respectively – grew faster in 2025-26 than they did in the previous year. The consumption growth is especially welcome given that it had been at a tepid 5.8% for the previous two years. It remains to be seen how much of the investment growth was driven by the private sector. Even if this growth was driven by government spending, it has positive knock-on effects on the rest of the economy.

The weakness in the agriculture sector, however, is something to worry about. The sector's growth slowed to 3% in 2025-26 from 4.2% in 2024-25, despite the 2025 monsoon having concluded at 108% of its long period average (LPA). This is dire news, given that the India Meteorological Department has predicted that this year's monsoon will only be 90% of the LPA. That is not counting the fertilizer supply constraints that will really be felt in the months ahead. The data also show the rising dominance of services in the economy, with their share rising to 54.3% of total gross value added (GVA) in 2025-26, up from 51.9% in 2022-23. The agriculture sector, which continues to employ the largest share of the population by far, saw its share in GVA fall to below 20% from 22.1% in 2022-23. The manufacturing sector's share has remained largely unchanged, another cause for concern. This suggests that India is not growing its value-added manufacturing sector fast enough. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI), government, and independent economists are in agreement that 2026-27 will see growth slowing significantly. The RBI predicted growth will dip to 6.6%, and the Chief Economic Adviser said that he saw no need to second-guess this estimate. Last year's tariff-related disruptions were a test of India's export resilience. This year's energy supply disruptions will test the entire economy as well as the government's policy agility.

Missed call

India must brace itself for a deficient southwest monsoon

The southwest monsoon reached Kerala on June 4, three days past its normal date and four days behind the India Meteorological Department's own forecast. This is the first time since 2015 that the agency has misjudged the onset beyond its margin of error. A late arrival, in itself, is no calamity. The date on which the rains touch the Kerala coast has little statistical bearing on how much falls over the four months that follow. Many times in the past, the monsoon has begun early and failed, and also begun late and recovered. It is what the monsoon has in store over the next four months that is unsettling. The India Meteorological Department has pegged seasonal rainfall at 90% of the long-period average, with a 60% probability of an outright deficient year – its most pessimistic pre-season call in a decade. Only the northeast is expected to see normal rain; the northwest, central India, the peninsula and the monsoon core zone that waters most of the country's rain-fed farmland are all forecast to fall short. As monsoon watchers have often cautioned, it is the distribution – the sudden long dry spells, sown crops that then face the danger of being unwatered – that matters. Every monsoon is consequential for India. This one is exceptionally so, because it arrives atop an input crisis. The West Asia conflict and the disruption at the Strait of Hormuz earlier this year throttled energy supply and fertilizer production.

History offers little comfort. Around 60% of El Niño years since 1951 have brought deficient or below-normal rains; 2002, 2009 were the severest droughts of the century with significant shortfalls in 2014 and 2015. With El Niño now near-certain through the heart of the season, the government must not count on a late, redeeming swing of the Indian Ocean Dipole. That means activating the Agriculture Ministry, Jal Shakti and Consumer Affairs Ministries on a war footing along with the disaster management authorities, with advisories steering farmers toward short-duration pulses, oilseeds and millets over thirsty paddy. Disciplined groundwater and reservoir management are necessary and crop insurance and relief provisioning must be readied. India will also have to brave more days of severe heat, which a parched landscape will only sharpen. The government as recently as last week claimed to deliver a record *kharif* production. While hoping for the best, it must prepare for the worst. A weak monsoon would fall on a farm economy whose nutrients and fuel are both already scarce and dear.

India is on the cusp of a demographic upheaval. Fertility rates across the country have been falling for decades and are now on or below replacement levels. We will soon have to shift from the challenges of finding jobs for the youth bulge to preparing to care for an ageing population.

You would not think so looking at the Terms of Reference (ToRs) of the High-Level Committee on Demographic Change that the government constituted at the end of May. The ToRs are peppered with the need to address “illegal immigration” and border management. Home Minister Amit Shah said on the social media site X while announcing the formation of the committee that “Illegal infiltration and other reasons leading to Unnatural Demographic Change is a very big challenge for the present and future of any nation.” It is no wonder that the committee does not have a single demographer to guide its work. Its chairperson is a retired Supreme Court of India judge; it has a retired IAS officer and a retired IPS officer, the Census Commissioner and an economist.

The infiltration narrative expands

Using strong words about “infiltrators”, the Prime Minister had announced the need for such a committee from the ramparts of Red Fort on August 15, 2025. Indeed, this was the culmination of years of building a mythology that undocumented (Muslim) migrants from Bangladesh are swamping the districts on the border, spreading across the country and influencing electoral outcomes. It was way back in 2018 that Amit Shah, then Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) President, said that Bangladeshi migrants were termites. The mythology about hordes of immigrants has seeped into the citizen's consciousness and has served well the electoral purposes of the BJP.

It has worked very well in Assam during a couple of election cycles, and it was stunningly effective in West Bengal during the recent elections where the need to deal with “infiltration” was a central feature of the BJP campaign. It is perhaps time now to make it a nation-wide campaign aided by the recommendations of the Demographic Change Committee.

Given how the issue has been highlighted and framed, we can have a fair idea of what the recommendations of this committee will be. It is still important to understand why this has little to do with demographic challenges and is all about moving to the next stage of the “Othering” of India's minorities, especially Muslims.

To begin with, what is the evidence of large-scale undocumented immigration from Bangladesh? It is revealing that the only kind of official evidence we have so far of “demographic change” (i.e., immigration from Bangladesh



C. Rammanohar Reddy

Writer based in Hyderabad

affecting population size and composition) are observations by the Home Minister of large increases in the population of a few of the border districts. Highlighting such increases without reference to domestic migration or differential fertility behaviour among communities is not proof of undocumented immigration. It is instructive that studies that had been done by official agencies showing evidence of demographic change in the border districts were removed without explanation, according to a report in this daily (“Government proposal in 2024 for a panel on ‘demographic challenges’ never took off”, August 16, 2025). We can only presume that they were deleted because they did not stand scrutiny.

This is not about undocumented migration

For decades there has indeed been cross-border migration between India and Bangladesh across what is an integrated riverine ecology. But given the economic transformation that has taken place in Bangladesh in recent decades, it would be hard to argue for economic distress driving large-scale migration from Bangladesh to India. India's neighbour is no “basket case” as it was derisively described decades ago.

According to World Bank data, Bangladesh's per capita income (in nominal dollar terms) grew faster than India during 2005-23 (10.4% versus 7.70% compound annual growth rate); it now has roughly the same income as India's. In purchasing power parity terms, India's growth is slightly higher. Both countries presently have roughly the same per capita income however measured, and both now have the same levels of human development, according to the UNDP's Human Development Index. But the change in Bangladesh has been much faster. Why then would there be migration to India of a scale that there should be talk of being swamped? There would certainly remain pockets of distress forcing the poor to consider migrating to India and the more skilled to West Asia. But we cannot find economic evidence to suggest waves of Bangladeshis being pushed by distress to migrate to India, ending up affecting jobs and electoral outcomes here.

Of course, all this is not about undocumented migration. All this is really a code for the place of Muslims in India and an acceleration of the social, economic and political discrimination of this community of Indian citizens that has taken place over the past 12 years. And here the government has given a more dangerous diktat to the committee. Item (iv) reads “to analyse structural population changes at the level of religious or social communities, particularly where they deviate from broader trends”. This in particular is about the fertility behaviour of Muslims and “where they deviate from broader trends”.

For a century now, the Hindutva campaign has

The Demographic Change Committee may become a platform to institutionalise the targeting of minorities

From borderland to India's strategic resource frontier

Within days of one another, official platforms of the Ministry of Mines cast several northeastern States in a similar frame – as repositories of strategic minerals and untapped potential. Manipur was described as a “quiet mineral frontier”, Arunachal Pradesh as a “resource-rich frontier”, while Meghalaya and Mizoram were portrayed through comparable narratives that emphasised the hidden wealth beneath their hills. Governments routinely publicise natural resources and development opportunities, and such descriptions would ordinarily attract little attention.

Taken together, however, they point to a broader shift in the language through which the northeast is increasingly being framed in the national conversation and strategic picture.

The critical mineral push

The timing is significant because critical minerals have moved from geological discussions into strategic ones. Lithium, cobalt, graphite, nickel and rare earth elements increasingly shape industrial competition, technological manufacturing and energy transitions. Batteries, semiconductors, renewable technologies and defence systems depend upon them, and countries have begun repositioning themselves around access to these resources. India itself continues to depend on imports for several critical minerals and has consequently expanded exploration efforts. According to a Ministry of Mines reply in Parliament, the Geological Survey of India undertook 43 critical mineral exploration projects across northeastern States during the 2022-23, 2023-24 and 2024-25 field seasons, covering minerals such as graphite, vanadium, lithium, rare earth elements, nickel and cobalt. Exploration activity has expanded across Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Assam, Nagaland and Manipur. In Manipur, projects involving nickel, cobalt and chromium exploration have recently been initiated.

Geological surveys have pointed toward mineral potential across the region for years.



Sangmuan Hangsing

Researcher and alumnus of the Kautilya School of Public Policy

What appears to be changing is the language through which that significance is increasingly being understood. The northeast has long held strategic significance that extends beyond geology, but the framework through which that significance is understood now appears to be widening.

Shift in language

For decades, the northeast has figured in national strategy largely through the language of borders and security. Discussions have centred on insurgencies, territorial management, connectivity initiatives and geopolitics considerations involving neighbouring countries, while infrastructure and development were often justified as instruments of strategic access and territorial security.

The language of resources is increasingly entering a strategic space once dominated by concerns over borders and security. Critical minerals are now discussed alongside trade corridors and geopolitical access, with territorial and resource security converging. Places once viewed mainly as sensitive border regions are increasingly seen as strategic assets.

The repeated use of the word frontier is revealing, because frontiers rarely function as neutral descriptions. They do not merely describe geography; they often reflect how States imagine it. Historically, frontiers have been viewed as spaces awaiting integration, development or extraction because they appear as landscapes of future possibility.

The difficulty is that frontiers are rarely empty spaces waiting to be discovered. The hills and valleys of the northeast already contain dense social and political worlds structured around customary land systems, local institutions and long-standing relationships with territory. Questions of land often extend beyond economics, as they are also tied to authority, identity and memory. Resource extraction thus enters landscapes that already possess institutions and histories of their own.

Critical mineral ambitions must account for the people, land and history of northeast India

whipped up fears of Muslims overtaking Hindus in population.

This is now firmly impregnated in the minds of Hindus of all ages, classes, castes and regions. It is to be found in everyday social conversations, on social media of course, and it is expressed in less than thinly veiled terms during electoral campaigns.

When facts are ignored

It is tiresome to repeat the facts, but one has to, even when confronted by a wall of disinformation and prejudice. Yes, the share of Muslims in India's population has risen from 10% in 1951 to 14% in 2011, at the time of the last Census. Yes, in the past, the Muslim community on a whole has shown a higher fertility than the Hindus and other religious denominations. This has been on account of its poorer economic status, lower education of women and perhaps even religious beliefs. However, fertility among Muslim women has begun falling rapidly, with the result that the gap between Muslims and Hindus has narrowed and will soon disappear. On the desired number of children that women want to have, there is now almost no difference between Hindus and Muslims. So much for Muslims now having more children than Hindus. And to repeat what is well-known, the best example of why religion is not the determinant of fertility behaviour: Muslim women in Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Jammu and Kashmir exhibit lower fertility than the Hindu women of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Poverty and education matter more. This is the deviation that needs to be addressed, not fertility behaviour according to religion.

To speak then about Muslim fertility “deviating from broad trends”, as one of the ToRs of the committee indicates, is to ignore the facts on the ground and fall back on familiar tropes about the behaviour of this minority, giving official validation of age-old misinformation.

We cannot escape from the realisation that this committee is being asked to recommend steps to target minorities under the cover of checking undocumented migration. After all, we have already become an inhumane society where, according to reliable reports, government agencies have flown Rohingya refugees from Delhi to the Andamans and then pushed them into the sea with life jackets. So when the Demographic Change Committee is asked “to recommend a streamlined and permanent operational mechanism for the legal, fair, and time-bound identification, detention, and deportation of illegal immigrants already residing in the country”, there is a chilling similarity between the language of this “permanent operational mechanism” and the “Final Solution” practised in 1940s Europe.

We should not say we have not been forewarned.

These questions become particularly significant in regions where political uncertainties continue to shape everyday life. In Manipur, years of violence and displacement have intensified debates over land and territorial arrangements. Similar concerns about ownership, ecological vulnerability and local participation have surfaced across the northeast at different times. Projects involving land often acquire meanings that extend beyond development, as communities interpret them through the lens of trust, representation and political inclusion.

Resources and inclusion

India's search for critical resources is understandable within a global environment increasingly shaped by supply-chain uncertainty and strategic competition. The northeast itself also requires infrastructure, employment and economic opportunities that have remained uneven for decades. Questions surrounding resource development rarely fit neatly into positions of support or opposition.

How quickly these transitions unfold and who shapes them may matter as much as the resources themselves. For a very long time, national priorities and local realities in the northeast often moved at different speeds. Connectivity projects sometimes arrived without corresponding economic ecosystems, while strategic considerations frequently overshadowed questions surrounding participation and representation. Resource development risks reproducing similar tensions if extraction begins moving faster than institutions capable of managing its social consequences.

What is being debated extends beyond the minerals beneath the hills. The northeast has spent years being viewed first as a border to be secured and then as a corridor to be connected. If it now begins entering national imagination as a landscape of strategic resources, the question is whether this new frontier will finally include the people who already inhabit it, or merely assign another purpose to the land beneath their feet.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The Hindu Huddle 2026

The 2026 edition of The Hindu Huddle, in Bengaluru, was an intellectually enriching experience that provided a remarkable platform for delegates to engage with an eclectic range of subjects – spanning the complexities of domestic and geopolitics

to the nuanced worlds of cinema, art, and music. The event was well-organised, ensuring a seamless and hassle-free experience for all in attendance. It is rare to find such a thoughtful curation of topics under one roof, and the depth of insight provided by the speakers was

commendable. One hopes that such vibrant dialogue continues to flourish in our city.

Ram Kumar Viswanathan, Bengaluru

The sessions were well curated and offered an engaging blend of perspectives and

discussions. The sessions featuring the actors and the mentalist were particularly refreshing. I especially enjoyed the discussion with the diplomats from the EU and Australia.

L. Gopinath, Bengaluru

It is distressing that Jammu

and Kashmir Chief Minister Omar Abdullah unabashedly bemoans the abrogation of Article 370 while, in the same breath, urging the Centre to accord statehood to the newly carved-out Union Territory. He must reconcile himself to the changed realities and accept that the welfare of

Jammu and Kashmir can be better served now than under the erstwhile dispensation with Art.370.

Ravi Mathur, Noida, Uttar Pradesh

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

How ICMR is rewiring the health ecosystem

As the nation advances toward the vision of Viksit Bharat 2047, the question is not only about how to treat disease, but how one builds a health system that is anticipatory, equitable, and innovation-driven. At the heart of this transformation lies a reimagined approach to health, one that connects data to decisions and decisions to impact. Building on the hard-earned lessons of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), India's apex body for biomedical research, has undertaken a series of forward-looking reforms. These reforms range from reimagining its institutional architecture to strengthening the way research is funded and translated into impact. This shift reflects a deliberate move towards integrated, institute-led research aligned with national priorities, where science is designed not just to generate knowledge, but to solve pressing public health challenges.



Rajiv Bahl

Secretary to Govt. of India, Department of Health Research, Ministry of Health & Family Welfare and Director-General, Indian Council of Medical Research

where AI, genomics, and real-time data systems are integral to public health decision-making.

Equally important is the shift from compartmentalised functioning to a connected national research ecosystem. Institutes are now envisioned as resource centres that contribute to a shared national mission, ensuring that evidence generated in one setting informs action across the country. This systems-level thinking is critical in an era where health challenges, be it antimicrobial resistance, pandemics, or non-communicable diseases, are complex and interconnected. Similarly, the research funding ecosystem is also going through a redesign.

This integrated continuum marks a decisive shift from funding projects to enabling solutions. It is further reinforced by the National Health Research Programme (NHRP), which has identified 13 priority areas ranging from antimicrobial resistance and tuberculosis to mental health, nutrition, and emergency care.

Technology, too, is playing a transformative role. The integration of AI into diagnostics, surveillance, and program implementation is helping bridge longstanding gaps between urban and rural healthcare. AI-enabled tools for tuberculosis and diabetic retinopathy screening are already supporting frontline health workers, while innovations such as AI-driven nutritional monitoring are improving program delivery at scale. The i-Drone initiative, which began with vaccine delivery and has expanded to transport critical medical supplies, exemplifies how cutting-edge technology can overcome geographic barriers and bring care closer to communities. At the frontier of science, advances across the medtech gamut, from medical devices and diagnostics to next-generation vaccines and therapeutics, are enabling more targeted, patient-centric interventions. In parallel, the integration of

traditional knowledge systems through innovative, evidence-based models is gaining global recognition. Schemes such as First in the World Challenge complemented with platforms such as MedTechMitra and the Medical Innovations-Patent Mitra initiative are accelerating the journey from research to commercialisation, ensuring that publicly funded science translates into affordable, accessible technologies for the people.

Towards universal access

The true measure of these reforms, however, lies in their impact on public health. Initiatives such as the India Hypertension Control Initiative have demonstrated how evidence-based strategies can transform chronic disease management at scale. Mission-mode programmes in emergency care, including mobile stroke units and rapid cardiac response systems, are redefining outcomes in life-threatening conditions. Expanded diagnostic networks and indigenous technologies are strengthening early detection and treatment across diseases ranging from cancer to infectious outbreaks. These efforts are closely aligned with the National Health Policy 2017, which emphasises preventive and promotive healthcare, universal access, and quality of care.

As we look to the future, the vision is clear. The ICMR will continue to serve as a catalyst, bringing together researchers, clinicians, policymakers, and the industry to transport critical medical supplies, exemplifies how cutting-edge technology can overcome geographic barriers and bring care closer to communities. At the frontier of science, advances across the medtech gamut, from medical devices and diagnostics to next-generation vaccines and therapeutics, are enabling more targeted, patient-centric interventions. In parallel, the integration of

A strategic reorientation

A cornerstone of this transformation is the restructuring of the ICMR's institutional architecture. Recent reforms have expanded the mandates of several institutes, repositioning them as interdisciplinary hubs rather than narrowly defined entities. The evolution of institutes toward domains such as digital health and data science, child health, and women's health reflect the changing contours of India's disease burden and technological capabilities. Another important step is the creation of a network of regional National Institutes of Health Research across the country, from Dibrugarh in the Northeast to Jodhpur in the west. These institutes will conduct operational research with State and district health systems to ensure that relevant research is conducted and the output is used on the ground. These changes signal a strategic reorientation toward future-ready science,

The roadmap to 2047 will be shaped by advances in digital health, bio-manufacturing, and sustainable development, with a strong emphasis on capacity building and global collaboration

A united front for local body elections

All three parties of the ruling coalition are likely to eye the lion's share of seats

STATE OF PLAY

Hareesh P

The elections to Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) in Andhra, likely to be held towards the end of 2026 or in the first half of next year, are set to pose an acid test for the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) partners, as they will have to navigate differences that may arise during the process of seat-sharing.

While petitions are pending before the courts questioning the ongoing ward delimitation process, the bigger challenge before the NDA, and more particularly Chief Minister and Telugu Desam Party (TDP) national president N. Chandrababu Naidu, is the need to quell dissidence and ensure that the NDA emerges with flying colours in the elections.

There are over 120 urban local bodies spread across the 175 Assembly constituencies in the State, and winning them gives political parties an edge ahead of the Assembly elections. This, however, is not always the case. The YSR Congress Party (YSRCP), which swept the ULB elections last time, could not capitalise on its success in the 2024 general elections due to a massive anti-incumbency wave that reduced the party's strength from 151 Assembly seats in 2019 to just 11 in 2024.

Proportional sharing

As the number of wards are set to increase in corporations and municipalities, the number of leaders aspiring to contest in the ULB elections will also rise across all parties; there is bound to be competition among the ruling coalition leaders of the TDP, the Jana Sena Party (JSP) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).



of leaders working against the spirit of coalition politics, thereby hurting the alliance's prospects and inadvertently benefiting the YSRCP. This is where Mr. Naidu's political acumen will be put to the test, as the arduous task of containing dissidence and rallying the three parties behind a common strategy will rest largely on his shoulders.

Focus on local issues

Moreover, Mr. Naidu could be wary of the possibility of the YSRCP winning a significant number of corporations, municipalities, or even seats in key local bodies such as the Greater Visakhapatnam Municipal Corporation and the Vijayawada Municipal Corporation. Such victories could energise the party's cadre and leadership, turning the results into a launch pad for the Assembly elections that are just three years away.

The NDA will have to rely on local issues rather than solely banking on the government's much-publicised success of the 'Super Six' welfare schemes and its claims of development through investments. With local issues such as sanitation, sewerage systems, basic infrastructure and grassroots development expected to play a crucial role, the NDA will have to demonstrate what it has done to improve cities and towns over the past two years vis-à-vis the previous YSRCP regime.

The early completion of elections and the formation of new executive and administrative bodies with elected public representatives at the helm, replacing the current Special Officer governance, would pave the way for a faster and more effective development of the ULBs.

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India's pension scheme lags in terms of coverage, contribution

The Centre's contribution to India's flagship pension scheme has remained the same while the add-on contributions by State governments have increased

DATA POINT

Nitika Francis

The Indira Gandhi National Old Age Pension Scheme (IGNOAPS) – the Government of India's flagship cash assistance scheme for the elderly under its National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP) – is in dire need of a revamp as it remains frozen in time, since 2007, both in terms of the sum of ₹200 it offers per person per month and the roughly 2.2 crore beneficiaries it covers. The States and Union Territories (UTs) add their own contributions, ranging from ₹150 to ₹2,000, on top of the ₹200 offered by the Union government for the 60-plus age group or the ₹500 it offers for the 80-plus category.

Chart 1 shows how the Union government's contribution for this centrally-sponsored scheme has remained the same while the add-on contributions by State governments have increased between 2012 and 2023. States such as Telangana and Andhra Pradesh contribute the largest sums – of around ₹2,000. Many others do not bring as much to the table. Chhattisgarh offers ₹150, taking the total pension to ₹350, while West Bengal offers a total of ₹250. Goa and Manipur do not provide any additional amount.

The call for increasing the quantum of assistance, number of beneficiaries and linking the assistance with inflation, as it is done for the payment of Dearness Allowance to government employees, has been made at least since 2013, when the task force constituted by the Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) first made such recommendations. The latest official recommendations came from the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) of the Lok Sabha in 2025 and the report released in May 2026 based on an independent evaluation of the NSAP commissioned by MoRD. The evaluation report said that the

real value of the assistance fixed at ₹200 has "significantly eroded due to inflation, and that the amount should be increased to ₹353 to retain its original purchasing power".

An analysis by *The Hindu* based on the changes in the Consumer Food Price Index (CFPI) (base year 2012) at the all-India level showed that since 2013, the value of ₹200 has eroded to just around ₹99. This means that beneficiaries can buy only half the quantity of food items they could earlier buy with ₹200. Conversely, they should be receiving a minimum of around ₹400 to be able to afford even the small quantity of items they could buy with ₹200 in 2013 (Chart 2).

Notably, the survey findings in the latest report highlighted that over 95% of the beneficiaries cited increase in prices as the main reason for their demand to increase the pension amount. More than 80% of them stated that the current pension amount does not cover their daily needs (Chart 5).

The task force's report in 2013, the PAC's 2025 report and the recent MoRD report have all recommended an increase in coverage, stating that the Union government was relying on outdated BPL data to fix ceilings on the number of beneficiaries. The MoRD report estimated that the IGNOAPS beneficiaries should be nearly 17 crore at present and about 20 crore by 2030, which is 10-fold higher than the present coverage of 2.2 crore people. Chart 3 shows how the number of beneficiaries have remained stagnant when compared with the projected growth of the elderly population.

The report also surveyed 6,000 beneficiaries across 600 Gram Panchayats across 10 sample States. In nine out of these 10 States, less than 10% of respondents thought that the scheme was "fully adequate", with a majority stating that it was only "somewhat adequate" or not adequate at all (Chart 4).

With inputs from Pon Vasanth B. A.

Old and unsupported

The data for the charts were sourced from the Lok Sabha replies, the Ministry of Rural Development's report titled "Impact Assessment and Evaluation of NSAP", and the Ministry of Statistics and Program Implementation

CHART 1: The monthly pension offered by all States, barring few Union Territories, under the centrally-sponsored Indira Gandhi National Old Age Pension Scheme (IGNOAPS) as of 2023

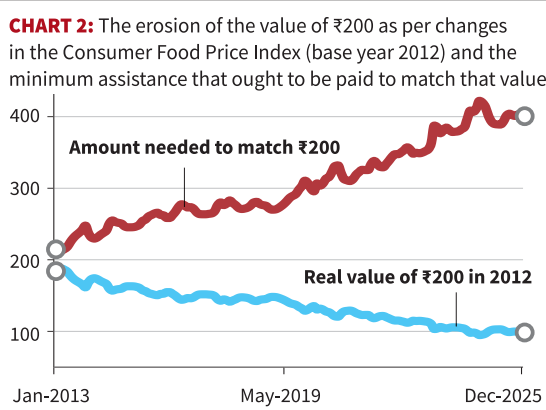
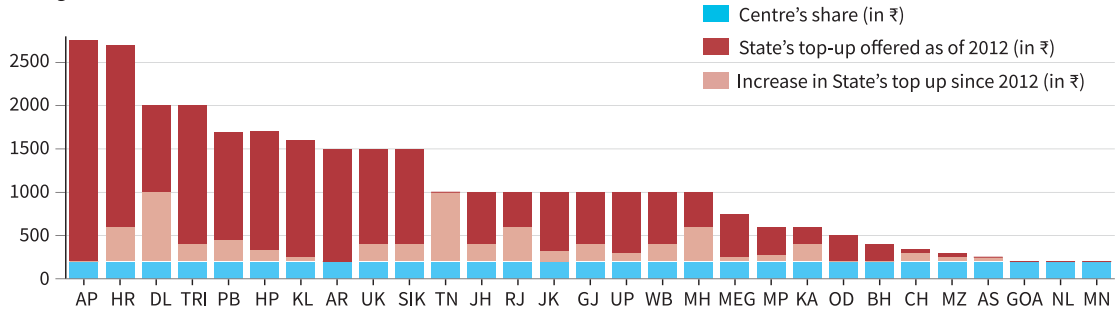


CHART 2: The erosion of the value of ₹200 as per changes in the Consumer Food Price Index (base year 2012) and the minimum assistance that ought to be paid to match that value

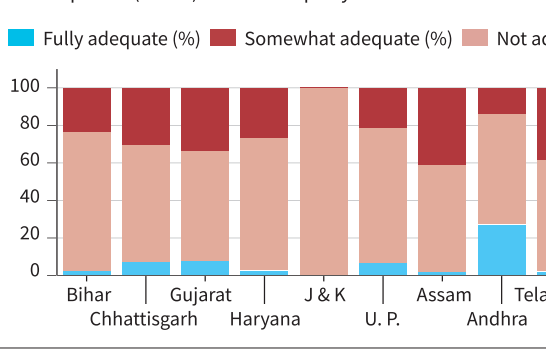


CHART 4: The response of surveyed beneficiaries in nine States and Jammu and Kashmir for a study commissioned by Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD) on the adequacy of assistance under IGNOAPS

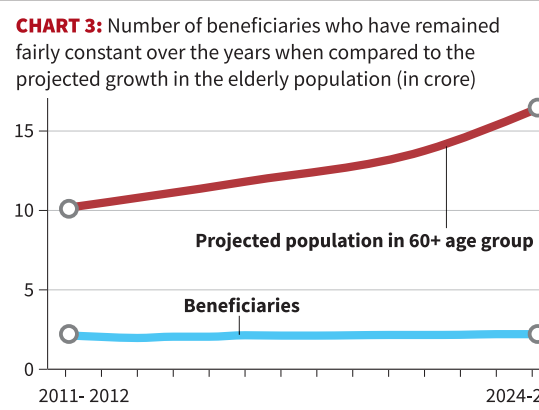
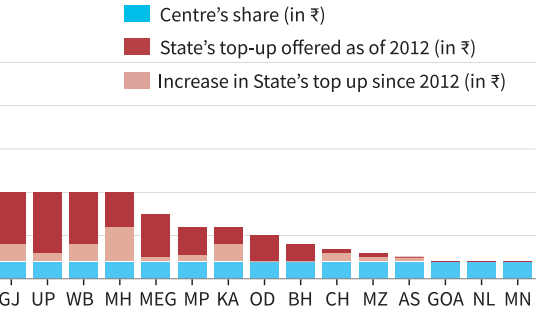


CHART 3: Number of beneficiaries who have remained fairly constant over the years when compared to the projected growth in the elderly population (in crore)

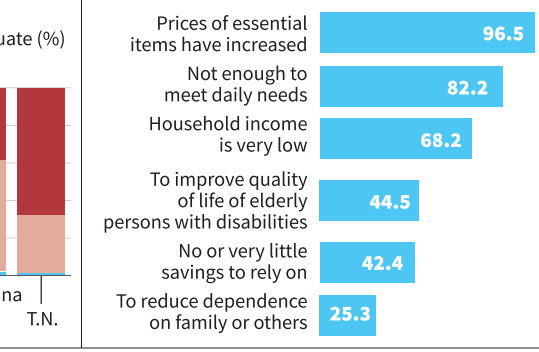


CHART 5: The reasons cited by respondents (%) of the MoRD study for the need to increase IGNOAPS assistance

FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO JUNE 8, 1976

Mango big money spinner for country

New Delhi, June 7: Mango, the king of fruits, is becoming a big money spinner for India. According to preliminary official estimates, exports of mango, mango slices, juice, jams, chutneys, and pickles will fetch the country nearly Rs. 10 crores this year. The exchange earnings through exports to Britain, Canada, West Asia, the Persian Gulf Sheikdom and other countries in 1975-76 were nearly Rs. nine crores.

India produces annually about nine million tonnes of mango nearly 80 per cent of world's output. Of this Uttar Pradesh, the home of the succulent "dusehri" and "langra" contributes about 30 per cent (nearly 2.5 million tonnes).

Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh, has been made famous by its sweet cream like "Dusehri" which attracted the Mughal kings to the abode of nawabs.

This variety is at its best and sweetest in the latter half of June. This year the mango crop in U.P. has been damaged by powdery mildew which has also attacked some areas in Punjab, Haryana and Delhi. The mango harvest in U.P. this year will be two million tonnes but the loss in northern India will be made up by the bumper mango crop in South India.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JUNE 8, 1926

A new anaesthetic

A demonstration of ethylene, an anaesthetic of American discovery, was given recently by one of the chief anaesthetists at the Manchester Royal Infirmary with such success as to assure its adoption in future in cases of a certain kind.

The drug represents a further step in the search for the ideal anaesthetic, but is as yet only supplementary to other methods of anaesthesia.

Its value lies particularly in its applicability to cases not met by the ordinary forms of anaesthesia, principally those in which the patient is at one or the other extreme of life, or in diabetic, consumptive, or other cases in which the administration of the anaesthetics in common use is attended by a certain amount of poisoning of the system. The drug has the advantage of giving immunity from certain distressing after effects – "The Manchester Guardian".

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Persons injured in violence that erupted in Somalia's capital

55 One person was killed and 55 were injured in political violence that erupted in Somalia's capital this week, according to a government statement on Sunday. President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud has sparked a fresh political crisis by announcing a one-year extension of his term, which had been due to expire on May 15. AFP

Share of grassland lost by Assam's Manas National park

60 in per cent. Assam's Manas National Park & Tiger Reserve rolled out the State's first grass nursery as it has lost more than 60% of the park's grasslands over the past 35 years. The nursery has been developed over an area of 7.5 bigha with financial support from the State Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority. PTI

Deaths linked to unsafe use of pesticides in Rajasthan

535 As many as 535 farmers have died while using pesticides in Rajasthan between January 2024 and January 2026, according to information provided in response to a legislative assembly question. The agriculture department said that ₹5.10 crore in assistance was provided to the families of deceased farmers under the CM's farmer welfare scheme. PTI

Amount invested by Swiss firms in the U.S. after tariff deal

27 in \$ billion. Swiss companies invested \$27 billion in the U.S. between January and April, as Switzerland moves to fulfil a pledge to sharply increase investment following a tariff agreement with Washington, *NZZ am Sonntag* reported. The figure was contained in an internal email from the Swiss-American Chamber of Commerce to its members, it said. REUTERS

Number of fatalities reported during Char Dham Yatra

161 More than 31 lakh pilgrims have visited Uttarakhand since the Char Dham Yatra began in April, while 161 fatalities have been reported among the devotees during the ongoing pilgrimage season, officials said on Sunday. According to the latest report, Kedarnath Dham recorded the highest footfall with 11,05,676 pilgrims. PTI
COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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The Ordinance question before the SC

The Collegium's acceptance of an Ordinance that creates four additional judges' posts raises questions about judicial independence, security of tenure and the appearance of detachment from the executive; court has taken a calculated risk by staking its independence on the goodwill of the government and Parliament

LETTER & SPIRIT

V. Venkatesan

In February 1937, the President of the United States of America, Franklin D. Roosevelt, asked Congress to enlarge the nine-judge Supreme Court. He sought a new justice for each one past 70 who refused to retire, up to 15 in all. The Senate Judiciary Committee saw through it. It preferred "an independent Court, a fearless Court," to one that bent "out of fear or sense of obligation to the appointing power." The Senate refused, with 70 members voting against and 20 in favour, and the plan was dead.

In Delhi last week, five judges took the oath; three occupy chairs, that no statute has created. They sit because the President, by Ordinance, lifted the sanctioned strength from 34 to 38.

Ordinance-made seats

The five are fit for office: four sat as Chief Justices of High Courts, the fifth came from the bar. Their elevation is not the grievance; the manner of it is. The Ordinance was promulgated on May 16, when the Court sat at 32 against a sanctioned 34. Two lawful vacancies existed; two of Tuesday's appointments filled them. The other three rest on the Ordinance alone.

Article 124(i) leaves the number of judges to what Parliament may prescribe. An Article 123 Ordinance carries, for its life, the force of an Act. Independence of the judiciary is a basic feature of the Constitution. It is also about whether the court holds its seats free of obligation to the political branch. A court that owes three chairs to a six-week renewable Ordinance holds them at the executive's sufferance.

A test of principle

In 2015, a Constitution Bench decided *Supreme Court Advocates-on-Record Association vs Union of India*. It struck down the 99th Amendment and the National Judicial Appointments Commission. Parliament had passed it 367 to nil in the Lok Sabha, with the States ratifying. The commission was to have six members: the Chief Justice, the two senior-most judges after him, the Union Law Minister, and two eminent persons. The eminent persons were to be chosen by a panel of the Prime Minister, the Chief Justice, and the Leader of the Opposition. That composition was meant to keep the choice neutral. Yet the Act provided that any two members could veto a name. The court feared that the Law Minister and even one eminent person could thus block a candidate the judges favoured. It held that this destroyed the judiciary's primacy in its own appointments.

Yet the Supreme Court Collegium has accepted an Ordinance that seats three of its own, despite the uncertainty over its fate. Under Article 123, the President may withdraw an Ordinance at any time. Both Houses may disapprove it by resolution. Otherwise, it ceases to operate six weeks after Parliament reassembles.

The court itself taught the country to distrust the Ordinance. In *D.C. Wadhwa vs State of Bihar* (1986), it called governance by repromulgated ordinance a fraud on the Constitution. In *Krishna Kumar Singh vs State of Bihar* (2017), a seven-judge Bench ruled against using ordinance-making power as a parallel source of legislation.

If the Bill replaces the Ordinance, the



GETTY IMAGES



CJI Surya Kant administers the oath of office to Justice V. Mohana as a judge of the Supreme Court, in New Delhi on June 2. She is only the second woman to be elevated directly from the Bar to the court. PTI

anomaly closes. If not, the apex court's strength reverts to 34, and the executive cannot bridge the gap by repromulgation, the fraud *Wadhwa* condemned. Whether a judge appointed to an Ordinance-created post can be removed once that post lapses is untested. Their judgments hold under the de facto doctrine, affirmed in *Gokaraju Rangaraju vs State of Andhra Pradesh* (1981). The subtler harm is to appearance: in any matter touching the Union, the government whose majority must regularise their seats may appear before them. A judge whose tenure lies, even loosely, in one party's gift cannot wear the detachment the office demands.

The calculated risk

The court sits at 37; the 38th and last sanctioned post is empty, the calendar suggests why. Justice Pankaj Mithal retires on June 16 and Justice J.K. Maheshwari on June 28. Their retirements reopen two lawful seats, into which two of the three Ordinance judges move. A judge in the 38th post would be the junior-most. Its occupant would reach a lawful seat only at Justice Satish Chandra Sharma's retirement on November 29, months after the Ordinance expires. Leaving it empty spares the court a judge stranded that long.

That leaves Justice V. Mohana, alone of the five from the bar and so junior-most,

The five are fit for office: four sat as Chief Justices of High Courts, the fifth came from the bar

on an Ordinance post. She can reach a lawful seat only when Justice Sanjay Karol retires on August 22. Here, the Collegium seems to have taken a calculated risk. Justice Karol's retirement all but coincides with the Ordinance's likely lapse, six weeks into the monsoon session. The replacing law should thus arrive first, and even a short delay is caught by his vacancy, which absorbs her. Her position turns precarious only if the Ordinance is rejected or lapses before August 22. Then the strength reverts to 34, the court still sits at 35, and she holds a post that the law no longer recognises. That a judge of the highest court should depend on which reading prevails, and on when Parliament meets, is the disquiet.

Larger question

The wager will likely be won; the government has the numbers, and the Opposition will not unsettle freshly sworn judges. But that is not the point. The court has staked its independence and its judges' security of tenure on the goodwill of the executive and Parliament.

The U.S. Senate's warning of 1937 was against a court bound by obligation to the appointing power. The graver danger is a court that no longer notices the obligation. Independence of the judiciary is not only the right to say no to the executive. It is the instinct to want to. (V. Venkatesan is Contributing Editor at *Supreme Court Observer*. Views expressed are personal)

THE GIST

Five judges were sworn in to the Supreme Court after the sanctioned strength was raised from 34 to 38 through a Presidential Ordinance; while two appointments filled existing vacancies, three were made to newly created posts.

The Supreme Court has previously held in cases such as *D.C. Wadhwa vs State of Bihar* and *Krishna Kumar Singh vs State of Bihar* that ordinance-making power cannot become a parallel source of legislation and that repeated promulgation of ordinances is unconstitutional.

If Parliament does not replace the Ordinance with a law, the court's sanctioned strength would revert to 34, raising unresolved questions about the status of judges appointed to Ordinance-created posts and the legal implications of such appointments.

CACHE



Meta rolled out its AI support assistant chatbot on Facebook and Instagram in March. REUTERS

Did Meta's own AI support bot help hack Instagram accounts?

Hackers allegedly used Meta's AI support assistant to change account details and hijack Instagram profiles; the incident has raised concerns about AI-enabled cyber-attacks and the security of customer support chatbots

Sahana Venugopal

The story so far:

In May, a number of Instagram users were locked out of their accounts by hackers. Many of the affected users took to other social media platforms like Reddit and X (formerly Twitter) to post their complaints. Screen recordings later circulated online suggested that their Instagram accounts were hacked with the help of Meta's own AI support chatbot. Adding to the users' worries was the lack of transparency from Meta's side about the security lapse, fuelling fears of an AI-enabled hack.

How were users' Instagram accounts hacked?

Meta rolled out its AI support assistant chatbot on Facebook and Instagram in March. The feature is different from the company's better known Meta AI. The AI support assistant can take action for users when it comes to requests such as reporting content, understanding content takedowns, managing privacy settings, resetting passwords, and updating profile settings.

Several widely-circulated recordings and images of the hack revealed hackers purportedly instructing the Meta AI support assistant to use an email ID that was different from the one associated with users' Instagram accounts. After the switch was made, hackers were able to

access the verification code sent to the new email ID. They used this to reset the account password and hijack the user's Instagram account.

Many affected users claimed they were logged out of their accounts and that trying to contact Meta for help led them to another AI chatbot. Some noted they had been unfairly penalised after being hacked.

Multiple high-profile accounts were also hacked around this time period, such as the White House Instagram account of former U.S. President Barack Obama (@obamawhitehouse), which last posted in 2017. At the time of writing this story, Meta did not confirm whether this specific security breach is linked to hackers who used the Meta AI support chatbot.

According to *TechCrunch*, the attacks on users' accounts continued even after Meta addressed the issue.

What was Meta's response?

While the company did not issue a formal statement about the hack, Meta spokesperson Andy Stone replied to users on the X platform about the cyber-attack. "This issue has been resolved and we are securing impacted accounts," Mr. Stone told one user, without offering further confirmation or denial.

Mr. Stone told another X user that Instagram was trying to restore access to affected individuals, which meant that

some users could see password reset notifications or security question verification while logging in. This, in turn, triggered alarm and suspicion amongst some users who worried they were being targeted by additional phishing attacks.

The Hindu reached out to Meta multiple times in order to clarify the details of the exploit and learn how many users were affected, but did not receive an official response.

Are such AI-enabled attacks common?

While malicious actors have adopted Generative AI and agentic AI technologies to launch phishing attacks or social engineering attacks at scale, Meta's case is unique. Here, the shared evidence points to the company's own AI customer support chatbot helping hackers commit cyber crimes. Unlike other cyber-attacks that use third-party AI tools, this incident breaks the trust that a customer places in a company's supposedly vetted AI chatbot.

Satnam Narang, Senior Staff Research Engineer at the cybersecurity company Tenable, said that the Meta incident was "one of the most consequential abuses of AI chatbots" seen thus far. He warned that as companies begin using AI to power their chatbots, more such incidents can be expected.

"The incident with Meta was believed to have been addressed, but persistent

attackers still found ways to continue to leverage the chatbots for nefarious purposes. It is believed that this incident is now resolved, but once Pandora's box is opened, we can expect attackers to start hunting for and probing other chatbots for potential exploitation," said Mr. Narang.

He added that most everyday internet users did not have to worry about their accounts, observing that many hacked targets were those with high-demand Instagram usernames, or accounts belonging to high-profile users.

"The downstream effects are more likely to affect users if an account is hijacked, and it is used to conduct follow-on attacks, whether it's phishing or financial-fraud related, that is where most everyday internet users may be impacted," explained Mr. Narang.

As experts have stressed in the past, multiple layers of security – two-factor authentication (2FA) and multi-factor authentication (MFA) – help to safeguard accounts.

This is especially crucial for celebrities, business users, official bodies, influencers, or those working in sensitive fields who might end up losing their reputation and livelihood due to hacks.

But after an unprecedented AI-enabled hack impacting one of the world's most valuable tech companies, Instagram users want to see Meta taking responsibility with more than just a few tweets.



KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

The teenager is being called a wunderkind

The die was cast the moment he accepted the bribe

S. Upendran

What is the meaning of 'wunderkind'? How is the word pronounced? (Sandeep Reddy, Ongole)

'Wunderkind' has been borrowed from German, and it consists of two words - 'wunder' and 'kind'. The first word, 'wunder', consists of two syllables; the vowel in the first, sounds like the 'u' in 'full', 'pull' and 'bull', while the following 'e' is pronounced like the 'a' in 'china'. The 'i' in 'kind' sounds like the 'i' in 'kid', 'bid' and 'hid'. The word is usually pronounced 'WUN-de-kind', with the stress on the first syllable. It is also possible to pronounce the 'w' like the 'v' in 'vet', 'vase' and 'village'.

In German, 'wunder' means 'wonder' and 'kind' means 'child'; the term literally means 'wonder child'. In English, the word is frequently used to refer to a very young individual who has achieved tremendous success in his chosen field. Another term for such a person is 'child prodigy'. During the recently concluded IPL tournament, commentators were waxing lyrical over the batting exploits of the teenager, Vaibhav Sooryavanshi. In the past two years, he has demonstrated that he is highly skilled with the bat. Many experts of the game believe that he is a 'wunderkind'. The term can be used with anyone young who excels in any field - not just sports.

Neither of his parents are interested in music. So, they are surprised that he is frequently referred to as a musical wunderkind.

The wunderkind had published five successful novels by the time he turned 20.

What is the meaning and origin of 'the die is cast'? (J Arun, Kanchipuram)

The 'die' in the idiom has nothing to do with death. When we play board games like Snakes and Ladders and Monopoly, we roll the dice to determine how many squares we can move. When you are referring to two or more of the cubes, then you refer to it as 'dice'. In other words, 'die' is the singular form of 'dice'. When you say that the 'die is cast', what you are suggesting is that you have made certain decisions that cannot be reversed or changed; the chain of events are no longer under your control. There is no turning back. When the die leaves your hand, your fate has already been determined; you have no control over the number that the die will land on.

The moment he accepted the bribe, the die was cast. He could never go back to leading the life of an honest man.

The die was cast when Joseph started making fun of her father. She called off the engagement the very same day.

According to scholars, when Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon in 49 BC to invade Rome, he is supposed to have said, 'Alea iacta est', meaning 'the die is cast/thrown'. In other words, by crossing the river, Caesar was declaring war against Pompey and the Roman Republic – the decision he was taking was irreversible. The civil war that resulted, lasted over four years; and the rest, as they say, is history. The translation of this Latin idiom became part of the English language only in the 16th century. upendrankye@gmail.com

THE DAILY QUIZ

A quiz to test your knowledge of oceans on World Oceans Day

V.V. Ramanan

QUESTION 1

Why was June 8 specifically chosen for World Oceans Day and when was it first observed officially?

QUESTION 2

Oceans cover about 70% percent of the Earth. According to the International Hydrographic Organization, how many oceans are officially recognised and which is the smallest?

QUESTION 3

Which distinct characteristic of oceans is because of mineral runoff from land and hydrothermal activity on the seafloor?

QUESTION 4

If the average global temperature rises

by 1.5°C, the estimated loss of which remarkable biodiverse natural feature is 70 to 90%?

QUESTION 5

In one of the biggest environmental disasters, the Aral Sea dramatically shrank because of massive water diversion projects in the 1960s on two major rivers. Name the rivers.

QUESTION 6

What is a 'seamount'?

QUESTION 7

What body of water separates Madagascar from the African continent?

QUESTION 8

Which 'colourful' sea's name is a direct translation of its ancient Greek name Erythra Thalassa?



Visual Question:

Name this member of the deepest-living fish family that have been recorded in trenches of over 8000m.

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz:

1. What was the name of the World Cup before it was changed to the FIFA World Cup Trophy since 1974? **Ans: Jules Rimet trophy**
2. Who scored the first-ever goal in World Cup Football history? **Ans: Lucien Laurent of France**
3. Which country has taken part in all 22 editions of the Football World Cup held so far? **Ans: Brazil**
4. Which country has the dubious distinction of having played the World Cup final the most times yet still to win it on a single occasion? **Ans: Netherlands (3) - 1974, 1978 & 2010**
5. Which country has reached the semi-finals the most times in World Cup history? **Ans: Germany (12 times - played as West Germany before unification)**

Visual: Identify this player who holds a unique record in World Cup history of having played in three consecutive finals? **Ans: Cafu, Brazil (1994-2002)**

Early Birds: Prem Raj P. | Sadhan Panda | Prem Nath Tiwari | Keshav Raturi | Pulkit Sathe

Please send in your answers to dailyquiz@thehindu.co.in

Word of the day

Tarry:

be about a place without any apparent purpose

Synonyms: stay, drag, linger, loiter

Usage: *He tarried outside the station, waiting for a friend.*

Pronunciation: newsth.live/tarry

International Phonetic Alphabet: /tæri/

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

Health is wealth and both wear away

COVERNOTE

K. Nitya Kalyani

Health is wealth and conversely, ill-health is erosion of wealth. Conventional wisdom says this is where health insurance comes in. Until health insurance itself becomes a large drain on the pocket, ironically.

Things have been taking this direction in the last few years and now we have entered a stage where many are questioning the high premiums for reasonable levels of cover. And, by extension, wondering about health insurance economics and what it will become in the future. We will come back to this question in a bit but first let's take specific examples of premium increases.

Steep increase

A ₹10 lakh hospitalisation policy for a 45-year-old costs ₹20,000 to 25,000 today compared with about ₹18,000 to ₹20,000 a year ago. As much as 15% increase in a year is quite a shocker but still tame compared with the 25-30% increases for older people.



Catch 22: As much as 15% premium rise in a year is quite a shocker. GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

Premium rates vary quite a bit by coverage, age, location and definitely insurance company, but the direction is clear, namely upwards, steeply. Before you think the premium jump is due to age 45 when you enter a new slab with higher rates, that was the case until last year. Annual increases have started across insurers and there are differentiations by zone as well.

Rising medical inflation

The reason offered is rising costs, centrally, medical inflation which is reportedly about 15% in recent years. The customer is still left wondering where this is all going. Going by this trend, in six or seven years our 45-year-olds would be paying double the premium for the same coverage. Or, her premium today will get her only half the sum insured. (Today's 45-year-old, at 52 will be looking at a more intimidating premium situation!).

All this if today's morbidity trends remain the same. Cancer diagnoses are growing, as are lifestyle diseases and God forbid another pandemic.

Sure, top-up policies help increase coverage for relatively much lower premiums and has been the portfolio tweak many have taken. It has taken the heat off those who want higher coverage but cringe at the premium rates of basic hospitalisation policies. Coming back to the basic policy, questioning the worth of insurance is an inadequate response. What about the cost of medical care WITHOUT insurance? Here is a creative idea – suggested in CoverNote a couple of years ago – which is now becoming the topic of family conversations and even decisions. Why not have only a top-up cover with a ₹10 lakh threshold and desired sum insured and be ready with funds to meet the first ₹10 lakh?

I know families that opted for this. Perhaps because paying an average of ₹1,00,000 a year for a ₹10 lakh policy for 10 years with no claim means you have paid the entire sum insured as premium and are set to keep paying.

Also, perhaps as they were denied hospitalisation cover due to age or medical reasons and they did not have much of a choice. In this situation, the top-up policy takes care of peak risk and the emergency medical fund pays bills of up to ₹10 lakh. Can this work? Yes and No. Let us see some scenarios in the next installment of CoverNote.

(The writer is a business journalist specialising in insurance & corporate history.)



ILLUSTRATION—SAAI

The retirement trap India is walking into unprepared

India is entering a phase where ageing, healthcare, personal finance will become deeply interconnected public issues; retirement can no longer be limited to tax-saving instruments

TWILIGHT ZONE

Vishwajeet Goel

India is growing older, at a pace most households are financially unprepared for. As per the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), almost one of five Indians will be over the age of 60 by 2050. The elderly population in India is likely to rise from about 15 crore today to more than 34 crore over the next three decades. At the same time, healthcare costs continue to rise sharply, while inflation steadily chips away at household savings.

Yet, retirement planning in India still largely operates on assumptions built for another era.

We are living longer

Better healthcare access, improved sanitation, rising incomes and medical advancements have helped Indians live longer than previous generations.

But the longer people live, the more years they must fund without a regular income. For most people retirement calculations are based on current spends than future costs.

A family spending ₹75,000/month today may believe a few crores will comfortably sustain retirement. But inflation changes the picture dramatically. Even with moderate inflation, everyday expenses can multiply several times over two or three decades. The impact becomes even sharper in healthcare.

In recent years, medical inflation in India has stayed at 12-14%, much higher than the overall inflation. Treatment can now cost a chunk of retirement savings.

This is why retirement planning can no longer rely on traditional savings instruments. India needs stronger pension participation and long-term retirement-focused investing habits. Instruments such as the National Pension System (NPS) encourage sustained retirement planning via regulated and relatively low-cost structure. Its flexibility across equity, government securities and debt allocation allows investors to gradually align risk with age and retirement goals. More importantly, NPS addresses the absence of a structured pension culture outside of government employment.

In recent years, medical inflation in India has stayed between 12-14%, significantly higher than overall inflation. Treatment can now use a huge chunk of retirement savings.

India is witnessing a rapid rise in chronic conditions such as diabetes, hypertension and cardiac disorders which are long-duration illnesses requiring continuous medication, diagnostics, follow-up care and, in many cases, repeated hospitalisation.

While earlier genera-

Even with moderate inflation, everyday expenses can multiply several times over two or three decades. The impact becomes even sharper in healthcare.

tions often associated retirement with reduced spending, modern retirees may experience the opposite. Healthcare, assisted living, home care support, diagnostics and medicines can become recurring monthly expenses changing the role of health insurance in household financial planning. Health cover today is increasingly becoming central to retirement protection. Without adequate coverage, even disciplined long-term savings can erode quickly after a major medical event.

Starting early

The advantage of starting early in instruments such as NPS is the ability to build a retirement corpus gradually over decades while benefiting from compounding and professional fund management. For younger earners especially, time is the biggest asset. Small but consistent contributions made early can potentially create significantly larger retirement outcomes compared with delayed investing later.

Traditional retirement strategies are not able to keep pace with realities.

Fixed deposits, long

considered the safest retirement instrument, often fail to generate inflation-beating post-tax returns over long periods. Realty is illiquid and does not always provide reliable rental income. Pension cover in India is also limited.

At the same time, Indian society is changing. Urbanisation, migration, nuclear families and changing career patterns mean many retirees may no longer have the same family-support structures similar to earlier generations. Financial independence during retirement is an economic and a social necessity.

Starting early allows compounding to work over decades rather than years.

But retirement planning cannot be reduced to chasing market returns or accumulating the largest corpus. The larger objective is sustainability. People need savings that can survive inflation, market cycles and rising healthcare costs over long retirement periods.

India is entering a phase where ageing, healthcare, and personal finance will become deeply interconnected public issues. It's retirement conversation can no longer remain limited to tax-saving investments or fixed deposits.

The challenge is, how does a country prepare millions of people to financially sustain lives becoming longer, more expensive and medically more demanding? This would define the future of retirement planning in India.

(The writer is Head, Pensionbazaar)

Investing in gold and silver

THINKINVESTOR

Geopolitical tensions around the world have made gold and silver important assets to have in one's investment portfolio. But you must be mindful of differences between the two assets.

Venkatesh Bangaruswamy

You would have observed how gold and silver prices have moved in recent times. It is also highly likely you gained from the price movements over the last year. With gold prices near record highs and silver prices very volatile, many appear undecided on the next course of action on the two metals. Should you buy now or wait for a dip? If so, should you buy physical or financial asset? Here, we discuss why market timing on gold and silver exchange traded funds (ETFs) is optimal.

Market timing?

The important decision you should make is whether to buy the physical asset or its financial equivalent viz. ETFs. It is optimal to invest in ETFs for two reasons. One, it is operationally efficient to buy and sell ETFs. And two, gold and silver ETFs closely track the spot price of the underlying metal. True, these ETFs trade at a premium to spot price but you may be able to capture a similar premium when you sell the ETF. Selling price of 24-carat physical gold is typically lower than its spot price.

The question of whether you should buy ETF units now or wait for a dip depends on how you invest in gold and silver and manage the positions. Typically, gold and silver form part of satellite portfolio within the core-satellite framework. In this framework, the core portfolio is goal-based and the satellite is trading portfolio, geared to capturing short-term price fluctuations in the market. That means you must be comfortable with market timing. To do this, you must be good at reading price charts – applying technical analysis. Otherwise, you could buy such research from investment professionals. Another choice would be to set up short-term systematic investment plans (SIPs) and take profit whenever the investment generates predefined absolute gains. This choice, however, removes market timing out of the decision process.

Conclusion

The geopolitical tensions around the world have made both gold and silver important assets to have in one's investment portfolio. But you must be mindful of the difference between the two assets. Gold is typically considered as safe haven during global crisis (referred to as flight to quality). Also, central banks across the world invest in gold to build reserves. Silver is primarily an input in manufacturing processes. So, their returns and price volatility may not always be similar.

(The author offers training programmes for individuals to manage their personal investments)

Personal Loans

Rates and Charges		Loan amount 5 lakh Tenure 5 years	Loan amount 1 lakh Tenure 5 years	(% of loan amount)
Name of Lender	Interest Rate (%)	EMI (Rs)	EMI (Rs)	Processing fee
HDFC Bank	9.99 onwards	10,621 onwards	2,124 onwards	Up to Rs 6,500
Tata Capital	10.99 onwards	10,869 onwards	2,174 onwards	Flat Rs. 99
State Bank of India	10.00-15.00	10,624-11,895	2,125-2,379	Up to 1.50% (Rs. 1,000 - Rs. 15,000)
ICICI Bank	9.99 onwards	10,621 onwards	2,124 onwards	Up to 2%
Bank of Baroda*	10.15-18.00	10,660-12,697	2,132-2,539	Up to 2% (Max. Rs 10,000)
Axis Bank	8.95 onwards	10,367 onwards	2,073 onwards	Up to 2%
Kotak Mahindra Bank	10.99 onwards	10,869 onwards	2,174 onwards	Up to 5%
Bank of India	10.85-16.15	10,834-12,199	2,167-2,440	Up to 1% (Min. Rs 250; Max. Rs 15,000)
Canara Bank	9.70-15.15	10,550-11,934	2,110-2,387	0.25% (Rs 500 - Rs 2,500)
Punjab National Bank	10.25-16.80	10,685-12,373	2,137-2,475	Up to 1%
HSBC Bank	9.75 onwards	10,562 onwards	2,112 onwards	Up to 2%
Federal Bank	11.75 - 18.99	11,059 - 12,968	2,212 - 2,594	Up to 3%
Union Bank of India	8.90 - 12.65	10,355-11,287	2,071-2,257	Up to 1% (Max. Rs 7,500)
Bajaj Finserv	10.00-30.00	10,624-16,177	2,125-3,235	Up to 3.93%
Punjab & Sind Bank	9.60-13.85	10,525-11,595	2,105-2,319	0.50%-1%
Indian Overseas Bank	10.25 onwards	10,685 onwards	2,137 onwards	Up to 0.75%
UCO Bank	9.95 - 13.20	10,611-11,428	2,122-2,286	Up to 1% (Min. Rs 750)
IDFC FIRST Bank	9.99 onwards	10,621 onwards	2,124 onwards	Up to 3.5%
Bank of Maharashtra	8.75-13.55	10,319-11,518	2,064-2,304	Up to 1% (Max. Rs 10,000)
Central Bank of India	11.25 onwards	10,934 onwards	2,187 onwards	Up to 1%
IndusInd Bank	10.49 onwards	10,744 onwards	2,149 onwards	Up to 3.5% (2% for instant personal loans for limited period)

*Interest concession of 0.10% to customers opting for group credit life insurance.

Car Loans

Rates and Charges		Loan amount 5 lakh Tenure 5 years	(% of loan amount)
Name of Lender	Interest Rate (%)	EMI (Rs)	Processing fee
Union Bank of India	7.50-10.00	10,019 - 10,684	Up to Rs 1,000
Punjab National Bank	7.60-10.70	10,043 - 10,797	Up to 0.25% (Rs. 1,000 - Rs. 1,500)
Bank of Baroda	7.60 - 11.35	10,043 - 10,959	Up to Rs. 2,000
Canara Bank	7.45-11.45	10,007 - 10,984	50% waiver on [0.25% (Rs 1,000 - Rs 5,000)]
Bank of India	7.60-12.55	10,043 - 11,262	Up to 0.25% (Rs. 2,500 - Rs. 10,000)
UCO Bank	7.35-10.00	9,983 - 10,624	0.5% (Max. Rs 5,000)
State Bank of India	8.80 - 9.85	10,331 - 10,587	Rs 750 - Rs 1,500
IDBI Bank	7.75-9.30	10,078 - 10,452	Rs 2,500
Bank of Maharashtra*	7.45-11.75	10,007 - 11,059	0.25% (Rs. 1,000 - Rs. 15,000)
Indian Overseas Bank	7.55-12.00	10,031 - 11,122	NIL
ICICI Bank	8.35 onwards	10,222 onwards	Up to 2%
HDFC Bank	8.15 onwards	10,174 onwards	Up to 0.5% (Rs. 3,500 - Rs. 8,000)
Karnataka Bank	8.02-11.52	10,143 - 11,001	Up to 0.60% (Rs. 2,500 - Rs. 11,000)
Federal Bank	7.60-9.00	10,198 onwards	1% (Rs. 1,000 - Rs. 50,000)
Punjab and Sind Bank**	7.50-14.00	10,019 - 11,634	0.25% (Rs. 1,000 - Rs. 15,000)
Indian Bank	7.50-9.65	10,019 - 10,513	Rs. 1,200
Central Bank of India	7.60-9.30	10,043 - 10,452	0.50%(Rs. 2,000 - Rs. 20,000)

*0.25% interest rate concession for home loan borrowers, other customers with at least 6 months of banking relationship

**Concession of up to 50% on processing fee for PSB Apra Vahan Sugam.

Rates and charges as on June 3

Source: Paisabazaar.com

Send queries on personal finance and investing to the moneywise@thehindu.co.in ID. Our experts in personal finance will respond to select queries, but will not give specific recommendations for investment in a particular mutual fund, share or fixed deposit.

How practical are curbs on discretionary spending?



Sacrificial lamb: The first thing that goes out in a freeze mode is hiring.

Kamal Karanth

“What happened to your regular car?” asked my colleague when he saw me driving an EV to office. “You heard what PM Modi asked us to do, haven’t you?” I replied. I told him how, as a family, we have been responding to the austerity call in recent weeks by juggling the only EV we have for our city travel. “But Modiji also asked us to do more ‘work from home’. Allow us also to contribute to the nation’s cause,” he said, tongue-in-cheek.

His retort prompted me to survey how our employees travel to work. About 70% use either public transport or energy-efficient modes. After the Herculean efforts to get a young company back to the office, returning to WFH felt unpatriotic, rather than contributing through a sustained, productive organisation.

It also made me think about the ways in which enterprises cut discretionary spending during a crisis, or whenever the headquarters thinks it’s the season for savings.

Rob Peter to pay Paul

The first thing that goes out in a freeze mode is hiring. But enterprises have ways of subverting this too. You will know by now that the stock prices of

companies that lay off full-time employees (FTEs) immediately go up. The top 10 companies in terms of laid-off FTEs collectively retrenched about 84,000. Six saw Wall Street rewarding them with higher share prices. That’s the immediate return for the board and management. However, internally, the work still has to be done by someone. The quick solution to that are contractors, who get expensed differently on the P&L.

For example, the leading Indian IT services companies’ employee count has remained flat over the last 12 months in response to weak customer demand and perceived AI threat. At the same time, top six that publish sub-contractor spend have shown a 22% increase in contractor expenses. The organisation still spent, albeit on a different expense line.

Early during Covid, one of our customers said it was a difficult time and wanted partners to share the pain and asked for discounts. Three months later they published their results and, guess what, it was their best quarter in the last 12 months. An enterprise with ₹2,000 crore revenue took a discount of ₹50,000 per month from a ₹50-crore-turnover supplier to book 40% more profits in the next quarter.

For few dollars less

“It’s a difficult time for the organisation, as you can see from our results; we will all take a voluntary pay cut of 10%,” announced the VP at a hurriedly called ‘all-hands’. When such announcements are made, you wonder whether the word “voluntary” is being abused. Pushing variable pay to another quarter to satisfy shareholders in the interim has become a norm in the IT industry.

We were in the middle of annual appraisals and wondering if it made sense to dole out increments during difficult times. Our HR head disagreed, saying that as a Fortune 500 company we shouldn’t take such reactive decisions at the end of a year. She strongly opined that the enterprise should notify employees in advance that if it doesn’t achieve 80% of its target, there wouldn’t be any raise the next year. In her view, such arbitrary decisions of leaders influence employees to act like mercenaries, and discretionary efforts take a back seat. As logical as her argument was, she didn’t last to see the next year. Large corporations like leaders who always toe the line, especially in austerity mode.

Road less travelled

We are on a travel freeze; “no offsites” is something you hear during any downturn, or senior executives are advised to skip business class, which by itself is a reminder that things are not fine. If corporations think travel is such a non-essential thing, why have it in the first place? One of my employers even had headings like essential and non-essential expenses. I heard it for the first time when the EVP there got senior executives from multiple countries to China for an important strategic meeting and called it the right spend. He said we wouldn’t go out for the collective dinner, given the cost control. Instead, we ordered room service at the five-star hotel we were staying at.

(Kamal Karanth is the Co-Founder of Xpheno, a specialist staffing company)

Narasu’s Coffee, a long journey across generations and traditions

Narasu’s launched in 1926, the company is named after the founder, V. Lakshmi Narasimhan (called Narasu by all); the company’s headquarters in Salem, which was inaugurated by the then President V.V. Giri, still stands tall, housing its corporate office and the coffee roasting and grinding plants.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Sindhu Hariharan

In a tea-drinking nation like India, coffee may be finally be having its moment. Whether it is filter coffee for the purists or instant coffee for the hustlers or a ₹250 cold brew in a chic café, Indians are consuming more coffee than ever before, and coffee companies are racing to keep pace.

Betting on this shift, Tamil Nadu’s very own ‘besh! besh!’ Narasu’s Coffee, a familiar fixture in south Indian kitchens for years, is brewing a change in its 100th year.

Narasu’s launched in 1926, named after the founder, V. Lakshmi Narasimhan (called Narasu by all). The company’s headquarters in Salem, which was inaugurated by President V.V. Giri, still stands tall, housing its corporate office and the coffee roasting and grinding plants.

In 1966, the company was auctioned and acquired by a partnership firm headed by R.P. Sarathy and comprising his family members. After a round of family settlements, the management was entrusted to Sarathy’s son Sivanantham P. (the current chairman) and grandson Srudheep S., who is managing director.



Coffee time: Chairman Sivanantham P and Managing Director Srudheep S

In keeping with the times, the legacy brand has had a makeover. Although known for its pure blend (without chicory), the company is no longer confined to the aromatic ‘dava-tumbler’ filter coffee, but caters to every taste bud – roasted-and-ground coffee powder, chicory blends, instant coffee mix, liquid decoction, premix packs, tea, and even a range of food products.

Pure coffee producer

“We started from filter coffee, became one of the largest producers and retailers of pure coffee. Then, when the market evolved, we have provided whatever the consumer asks,” says Sivanantham.

Narasu’s is particularly popular for its iconic small



Coffee seed prices, linked to the commodity markets, pose a key challenge for Narasu’s, which buys from coffee estates in India and global hubs such as Vietnam and Indonesia.

stores, where one stands outside as the shopkeeper scoops up the correct measure of coffee powder and proceeds to seal the warm packet. For today’s generation of consumers, Narasu’s is adding convenience to this nostalgia. Its stores now resemble mini-supermarkets stocking all its offerings under one roof.

“The appearance of our stores may change but we

are grounded to our core offering – the quality of the coffee,” Sivanantham stresses.

Currently, in the roasted-and-ground (R&G) segment the brand has a market share of 40-45% in Tamil Nadu. In the highly competitive instant coffee space, it holds 10-15% share.

Smell the coffee

A walk through the R&G plant in Salem is not just an olfactory delight but also a revelation of the company’s fierce focus on quality. “We have a policy of ‘farm-to-shelf in 24 hours,’” says Srudheep.

The inflection point was the entry into the instant coffee space in 2002. Global coffee makers were already in the play in this ca-

tegory, but it was a bold bet for the company, the Chairman says, which has since paid off. “It opened up exports for us,” he says, recalling a time when monthly exports to Russia touched almost 17 tonne in the early days of the plant.

Cut to today, almost 50% of revenue comes from exports across 45 countries, including the US, Europe, the UAE, and Singapore.

“Indian coffee has a distinct taste profile and is being preferred in export markets. Besides the countries with a large Indian diaspora, we are seeing some new markets opening up, such as Nigeria and Iceland,” Srudheep says.

As Sunalini Menon, president of Coffee Lab consultancy, says, filter coffee is no longer confined to the South and is a pan-India phenomenon. “Even the younger generation wants to drink filter coffee but maybe not by making it with a conventional filter,” she points out.

Narasu’s is staying relevant with its packaging innovation, and has done well in Tamil Nadu, she adds. “Flamboyancy is not their style and they have done well to balance the traditional vs modern customer,” she notes.

But the journey is not without challenges.

The coffee industry is seeing a drastic transformation in both consump-

tion patterns and branding. Chains like Third Wave and Blue Tokai are giving a tough fight to legacy players, which are forced to reinvent to capture new-generation consumers. “We have plans for products like drip and drip coffee, where you just open the sachet, put it in the cup and pour hot water,” says Srudheep.

Additionally, coffee seed prices, linked to the commodity markets, pose a key challenge for Narasu’s, which buys from coffee estates in India and global hubs such as Vietnam and Indonesia.

High caffeine

With a piping hot coffee market, one may think it’s time for accelerated growth, but the quintessential TN enterprise that it is, Narasu’s is comfortable with its current ambitions.

“We are not looking for any financing at the moment,” the patriarch says. “We have limits from bank but are not utilising even that; We had a lot of opportunity [for external investments] but did not want that,” he says, choosing instead to preserve the culture he has built with his 1,000-plus employees.

And given that the brand has stood the test of time on the foundations of this familial culture, he may have a point.

(The writer was in Salem at the invitation of Narasu’s)

Re-engineered RITES chases disruptive growth with an all-time high order book of ₹9,416 crore

Chitra Narayanan

“We are pitching 2026-2027 as the year of disruptive growth,” declares Rahul Mithal, CMD of RITES. With an all-time high order book of ₹9,416 crore as of 31 March 2026, Mithal can afford to be confident that the revenue growth will be on track with the PSU’s mounting ambitions.

Ever since 2022-23, when the 52-year old Navaratna in which the Ministry of Railways has majority shareholding (72%), went in for complete internal re-engineering, it has been showing aggression in chasing orders, especially in its key focus area of exports.

13 verticals

The infrastructure consultancy company which has 13 different verticals (including railways, ports, airports, metro system, highways, ropeways, bridges, sustainability) and is in three broad areas of work - techno-feasibility studies, project management consultancy and third party audits - is currently executing 700 orders spread across these verticals. “We have been tapping on growth in infra - both domestic and international - across all these verticals,” says a gungh-ho Mithal.

There is a sea of opportunity opening up in the maritime sector, he points out, with India investing aggressively in new shipbuilding clusters and port expansions. “We are creating the master plan, and doing studies for Vishakapatnam port which is developing shipbuilding facilities at Duvairajpatnam and for Kandla Port which is developing a cluster at Veera,” says Mithal.



Firing on all cylinders: RITES is currently executing 700 orders spread across 13 verticals. PTI

Similarly, the opening up of the skies has meant more projects. “For example, we recently got an order for doing the feasibility report for two airports in Bihar,” says Mithal. On ground, the thrust on expressways has also resulted in more projects. “We are doing the third party audit for many expressways. For instance, for the Purvanchal Expressway we were the third party auditors. On Ganga Expressway we are doing the safety audit,” he says.

Export revival

But it’s the key area of design and exports of railways rolling stock where the transformation exercise is really showing dividends. Ideally, as Mithal points out, exports which is a good margin business, should yield 25% of RITES topline.

But for two years, post COVID, the order book remained blank as many of the African and Southeast

Asian countries that RITES had traditionally been exporting to faced struggles in getting funding.

Typically, many of the orders that RITES got from these nations were on line of credit extended by the government of India but the LoCs dried up.

For Mithal, who took charge at RITES in October 2021, this was a challenging time. “We had to rediscover the global market and start pitching for the first time in open global tenders,” he says. And it was up against highly competitive Koreans and Chinese. “Bidding for global tenders required costs as you had to do a lot of market analysis, study competition, price points, timelines and most of all have the aggressive mindset to win,” he says.

The breakthrough happened in 2023-24 with two orders - one from Mozambique for 10 locomotives for about ₹300 crore and another from Bangladesh

for 200 coaches for about ₹900 crore. “This was the turning point in our export business as these wins were through open global competition and not through LoC,” says Mithal.

“After a gap of nearly two years, FY25-26 saw a revenue realisation of ₹300 crore and was a hugely satisfying inflection point in our export business,” says Mithal.

Even as the structural changes RITES initiated internally helped, the opening up of the coaches and locomotives manufacturing ecosystem in India was a boon too. For instance, BEML has expanded its production capabilities and has JVs for high-speed and rolling stock projects. Titagarh Rail Systems has expanded into locomotives and passenger coaches. Private players entered the fray. “So now we have more options - whether it is locomotive or coaches, the dynamics have changed,” he says, point-

ing out how for any rolling stock export, RITES is free to get the best deal, whether from a railway production unit or from a private player.

Currently, RITES’ rolling stock order for exports is about ₹1,750 crore which includes a recent order of five locomotives from Mozambique won on a competitive bidding basis.

Green transition

Mithal is excited about an interesting new initiative in the export domain that RITES has taken - which is to modify and refit old diesel locomotives.

“As Indian Railways has become nearly 100% electrified, a large number of diesel locomotives have become spare with substantial codal life left in them. So we took up this initiative last year of trying to repurpose them with a changed gauge,” he says. Many of the southern African nations run on cape gauge while the Indian track is mainly broad gauge. “We’ve got an order of 30 retrofitted locomotives totalling to roughly about \$50 million,” says Mithal, who points out how it is a win-win situation for everybody - for railways it is asset use, for the clients it is lesser cost.

The first two retrofitted locomotives are ready and will be shipped soon, says Mithal. It’s a pilot case and once these are tested, it has the potential to open up a whole new business opportunity since the Indian Railways has over 4,000 diesel locomotives in rolling stock.

Expanding geographies Now, clubbed under a department called RITES Videsh, the international bu-

siness strategy in the last few years has changed significantly. Besides exports in rolling stock, it has also aggressively begun pitching for project consultancies internationally. And it has moved afield from the traditional five decade geographies of only Africa and Southeast Asia that it was operating in. “We’re exploring opportunities in Latin America in Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay, and in Central American nations like Panama, and Costa Rica. We have started getting some highway projects in Guyana and that has encouraged us to open an office there,” says Mithal. He says like exports, now RITES has begun seeing green shoots in international project consultancies too.

“We opened an office about a year back in Abu Dhabi and we already got a small order in Jordan.

“We are already working in the UAE closely with Etihad Rail, DP World and Abu Dhabi Ports,” he says.

“In our Rites Videsh initiative, we have ended the year with an order book of ₹2,100 crore - about ₹1,750 crore on export of rolling stock and the balance of about ₹350 crore on project consultancy,” says Mithal.

What pleases the CMD most is that RITES has now become a one order a day company from just 0.6 two years back. In Q4 of 2025-26, it got 120 orders. And this has come about through competitive bidding - no longer through nominations (in the olden days as a Railways firm, it would win bids through nominations, but now has to fight for every order). (The writer is with The Hindu businessline)



Parents and teachers wave at students as they line up for college entrance exams in Beijing, China, on Sunday. AP

Millions of Chinese students take the gruelling 'gaokao'

Agence France Presse
BEIJING

Hundreds of young Chinese students clutching pens and their IDs shuffled into a testing centre in Beijing on Sunday, swarmed by parents, joining millions sitting for the national high-stakes university entrance exam. Around 12.9 million students nationwide registered for this year's "gaokao", according to the Ministry of Education, which for most is the sole determining factor in admission to a Chinese university.

The multi-day exam, which began Sunday, drills test-takers on subjects including Chinese, mathematics, English, science and the humanities – with the tallied scores to be released later this month.

Some mothers and fathers clustered outside the exam halls dressed in red, a symbol of good fortune in Chinese culture.

Dozens of police and security guards milled about as parents stood beside the line of students waiting to enter the exam hall, hoping to film their children walking inside.

High-level education has expanded rapidly in China in recent decades as an economic boom pushed up living standards – as well as parental expectations for their children's careers.

Yet the job market that fresh graduates enter is no longer as rosy as it once was, with high youth unemployment a significant concern.

Roughly one in six Chinese between the ages of 16 and 24, excluding students, are jobless, according to official data. Attitudes toward the test are changing, with students and parents more and more unwilling to trade physical and mental health for high test scores.

For many Beijing students, the gaokao is still a step toward achieving their dream.

Weighing ties with Russia and West, conflicted, cornered Armenia votes

With mounting pressure from Russia against Armenia joining European Union and a vocally pro-Russian Opposition, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and his ruling Civil Contract party, which advocates balanced ties with U.S., Europe and Moscow, are seeking a strong mandate in parliamentary polls

Associated Press
YEREVAN

Armenians will vote Sunday in parliamentary elections as the incumbent government, under mounting Russian pressure, seeks to loosen ties with Moscow and deepen cooperation with the West.

Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and his ruling Civil Contract party are looking for a strong mandate for a new geopolitical course. The Opposition they face includes some parties that are vocally pro-Russian.

Russian officials have hit Armenian exports with a barrage of restrictions in recent weeks, while high-ranking officials, including President Vladimir Putin, have made thinly veiled threats comparing Armenia's path to that already taken by Ukraine.

Armenian investigators said they issued six arrest warrants for members of the Opposition Strong Armenia party the day before the vote, accusing them of buying votes. The nation's Central Election Committee confirmed Saturday that the party could run after a member of another Opposition party, Republic, appealed for Strong Armenia to be barred over corruption allegations.

Armenia's Parliament, the National Assembly, must consist of at least 101 members who are elected



Making a choice: A woman casts her ballot at a polling station in Yerevan during Armenia's parliamentary election on Sunday. AP

for five-year terms. Parties must win at least 4% of the vote to take a seat, while blocs made up of three or more parties must hit 8%.

Two political blocs and 17 parties are taking part in Sunday's election. Most pollsters and experts have predicted Mr. Pashinyan, who came to power in 2018 following sweeping street protests, will come out ahead.

Balanced foreign policy "I think Armenians expect, first of all, a peaceful, independent and prosperous Armenia from this election, as we have today," said Hripsime Grigoryan, a Civil Contract member of the outgoing Parliament.

Mr. Pashinyan has spoken on several occasions about the need for a ba-

lanced foreign policy ensuring Armenia maintains good relations with the United States, Europe and Russia, as well as regional powers such as Turkey and Iran. Despite this, he has attracted far more enthusiasm in the West than in Moscow. He has been endorsed by several European leaders, as well as U.S. President Donald Trump.

"Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, of Armenia, a great friend and Leader, is making his Country strong, wealthy, and very secure," Mr. Trump wrote on social media, urging Armenians to "Make (Armenia) Great Again."

This has displeased the Kremlin. Speaking to journalists after Russia's Victory Day parade on May 9,

Mr. Putin said if the Armenian people saw benefits in joining the European Union then "we will certainly have nothing to say against it." Yet he also reminded reporters, "We are currently living through everything that is happening in respect of Ukraine. And how did it start? It started with Ukraine's joining or attempting to join the EU."

Unlike the Civil Contract party, most of Armenia's Opposition supports building stronger relations with Moscow.

The Strong Armenia party seeks to develop business ties with Russia and has accused Mr. Pashinyan of attempting to start a war with Moscow. Party leader Samvel Karapetyan is on trial for allegedly advocating for the government's

overthrow, which the Armenian-Russian billionaire has rejected as a politically motivated case. He has coordinated the party's campaign while under house arrest, aided by his nephew Narek Karapetyan.

Other potential contenders include former President Robert Kocharyan, who leads the Hayastan bloc and has accused Mr. Pashinyan of "seriously undermining" relations with Russia, and the Prosperous Armenia Party led by pro-Russian business owner Gagik Tsarukyan. These parties also have strongly criticised Mr. Pashinyan for attempting to normalise relations with neighbouring Azerbaijan. The Armenian leader and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev initialed a document on moving toward a peace deal at the White House alongside U.S. President Donald Trump in August.

The two countries were locked in a decades-long conflict over the fate of Karabakh, a breakaway region that had been controlled for decades by ethnic Armenian forces backed by Armenia. Azerbaijan took control of the entire Karabakh region during a rapid offensive in 2023.

"I want this government to change because the condition of our country is getting worse," Sahakyan Elna, a supporter of the Prosperous Armenia Party,

told AP at a rally Thursday. "I don't want to live with my enemies in unity."

'Economic coercion' Russian officials have slapped new restrictions on Armenian produce in the run-up to the parliamentary vote, banning the import of Armenian flowers, certain types of cognac and wine, eggplants, potatoes, dried fruits, fish and more. Russia says the bans are related to violations of agricultural import rules.

The European Commission on Thursday described the move as "nothing short of economic coercion." "By extending export restrictions on Armenian products, Moscow is weaponising economic relations for political pressure. We know this playbook all too well," the Commission said.

Moscow also controls a significant portion of Armenia's energy and infrastructure and supplies it with cheap gas, which is a point that Mr. Putin has been quick to drive home in his meetings with Mr. Pashinyan.

Mr. Putin also has stressed that Armenia cannot join the EU and remain within the Eurasian Economic Union, a Russian-led customs bloc. "Being in a customs union with the European Union and the Eurasian Economic Union is impossible," Mr. Putin said. "It's simply impossible by definition."

Health workers at centre of Congo's Ebola crisis toil with little pay or rest

Associated Press
MONGBWALU

Dr. Richard Lokudu, the medical director of Mongbwalu General Referral Hospital, has received barely any compensation for his work on the front line of one of Congo's deadliest Ebola virus outbreaks.

Mr. Lokudu and several of his colleagues work all day at the hospital treating an influx of patients. Notifications of suspected cases come even late at night.

"I have not received my allowance [and] what happened to others could happen to me as well," Mr. Lokudu told AP. "Despite all the infection prevention and control measures we are implementing, we do not know what may hap-



Holding the fort: Health workers prepare for duty at a treatment centre in Mongbwalu, Congo, on Friday. AP

pen." Authorities believe the outbreak, which took the eastern region of Congo by surprise after spreading silently for weeks, started in the bustling mining area of Mongbwalu in Ituri province.

Mongbwalu has emerged as the epicentre of the rare Bundibugyo

type. The town attracts large numbers of labourers who work in large gold mines with muddy pools of gold deposits, narrow pits and caves. They live in low-income areas including crowded camps and have little access to proper health protocols.

The conditions increase

the possibility of transmitting the disease, which spreads through close contact with bodily fluids.

"It is one thing to be far away and hear statistics being reported, but what is happening on the ground is enormous," Mr. Lokudu said. Congolese authorities have confirmed 452 cases including 82 deaths. On Thursday, the Central African nation recorded 71 new cases, which authorities said is a sign of "active community transmission."

The rare Bundibugyo type has no vaccines or treatment, so workers have been targeting symptoms. The government said at least five people have recovered from Ebola since the outbreak was officially confirmed on May 15.

Remembering a rebel



As relevant as ever: Fans dressed as 'The Tramp', the iconic character created by Charlie Chaplin, gather for a photograph outside the English filmmaker's final residence, during an event marking the 10th anniversary of Chaplin's World museum in Switzerland on Sunday. AFP

Israel's permanent state of war comes with heavy economic and social costs

Agence France Presse
JERUSALEM

The enormous costs of Israel's multi-front war and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's determination to turn his country into a "super-Sparta" of West Asia are driving up the defence budget and raising fears of cutbacks in education and healthcare.

The total cost of the series of interconnected regional conflicts that began with Hamas's attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, stood at 405 billion shekels (\$138 billion) as of late April, according to the Governor of the Bank of Israel, Amir Yaron.

"That's a huge figure, more than 17% of GDP," he said during a recent economic conference in Her-

zliya, north of Tel Aviv. Just the military campaign against Iran, which began with a wave of U.S.-Israeli strikes on February 28, incurred an additional cost of 35 billion shekels (\$12 billion) for the state up until a ceasefire took effect on April 8, according to an initial estimate by the Finance Ministry.

Following the adoption of the 2026 budget in late March, the government noted the Defence Ministry's budget had more than doubled since October 2023.

To support the war effort, the government borrowed heavily on international markets in 2024 and 2025.

It has reached the point where public debt now accounts for more than 69%

of GDP, compared to 60% before the war, according to the Treasury.

Taxes and social security contributions have also increased.

'Trauma economy' Israelis are "paying twice" for the war, said Esteban Klor, an economics professor at Jerusalem's Hebrew University.

The first cost, he told AFP, is via the decline in government social spending and reduced investment in public services resulting from several successive "across-the-board" budget cuts, even as "we are... increasing the debt".

"Education will suffer, the quality of infrastructure will decline, as will the performance of the health-



Israel PM Benjamin Netanyahu has vowed to invest 350 billion shekels over the next decade in the defence industry. REUTERS

care system," he said.

The second cost is to economic growth, though this has been less visible as the Israeli economy quickly overcame the initial shock of the war.

GDP had returned to its 2022 level by 2024 and is continuing to grow at an

enviable rate.

But the ongoing mobilisation of tens of thousands of reservists since October 2023 is also taking a toll.

"Since... many of our workers are in the Army rather than at their jobs, this affects production," Mr. Klor explained.

According to a survey published on June 1 by the Israel Democracy Institute (IDI) think tank, 31% of respondents said they had experienced a decline in their wages or income since October 7, 2023.

The phenomenon is hitting the self-employed and lowest-income workers the hardest.

At the Herzliya conference, the deputy head of budgets at the Finance Ministry, Tamar Levy-Boneh, warned against a "trauma economy" – in which the sense of shock and failure from October 7 lead the military to constantly demand more funding to ensure the country's security.

"The security establishment must learn to meet its needs in a way that does not undermine the stan-

dard of living and must assume its share of responsibility," Mr. Levy-Boneh added.

'Super-Sparta' But Mr. Netanyahu advocates the opposite view.

In September 2025, he said Israel had no choice but to become a "super-Sparta", a reference to the ancient Greek city-state devoted entirely to war.

As divergences emerge between Netanyahu and U.S. President Donald Trump regarding Israel's offensive against Hezbollah in Lebanon and how to end the war with Iran, the Israeli premier is pushing for greater self-sufficiency.

Under his vision, Israel would gradually wean itself off its reliance on the massive military aid it re-

ceives from the United States. He confirmed as such on May 3, vowing to invest 350 billion shekels over the next decade in the national defence industry to ensure "overwhelming aerial superiority".

Economics professor Mr. Klor warned that the defence budget could exceed 10% of GDP and called for a swift return to a "more reasonable" level.

Israel is one of the developed countries where inequality is most glaring, and the dragging war is not helping.

According to the latest available study by the Israeli National Insurance Institute, the proportion of children living below the poverty line rose from 27.6% to 28% between 2023 and 2024.

LACKING CONVICTION

Have to work on our process of taking reviews: Afghanistan coach



R.V. MOORTHY

For the second day in succession, Afghanistan was left to lament its failure in using DRS effectively. While K.L. Rahul was let off on Saturday, Shubman Gill and Rishabh Pant enjoyed reprieves on day two. "Without throwing anybody under the bus, there was a lack of conviction in the decision-making," said head coach Richard Pybus.

PICTURE PERFECT

Women's T20 World Cup takes shape with captains' carnival



AFP

Bangladesh's Nigar Sultana takes a selfie with Hayley Matthews (West Indies), Nat Sciver-Brunt (England), Amelia Kerr (New Zealand), Fatima Sana (Pakistan), Harmanpreet Kaur (India), Sophie Molineux (Australia) and Chamari Athapaththu (Sri Lanka) at the Women's T20 World Cup captains' carnival in London on Sunday.

ETCHED IN MEMORY

Former umpire Vikram Raju, who officiated tied Test, passes away



FILE PHOTO: SUSHANTA PATRONOBISH

Former umpire Vikram Raju, who officiated in the historic tied Test between India and Australia in Chennai in 1986, passed away on Sunday. He was 92. Raju had adjudged No. 11 batter Maninder Singh leg-before as Test cricket witnessed its second tie. He officiated in two Tests, five ODIs and 42 First Class matches.

TICKET BOOKED

Animesh breaches 200m CWG mark, wins silver in Taipei City



X@AFINDIA

National record-holder Animesh Kujur finished second in men's 200m at the New Taipei City Athletics Open as he breached the Commonwealth Games qualification mark on Sunday. The 23-year-old Indian clocked 20.47s, well inside the mark of 20.61s set by the Athletics Federation of India.

Manav impresses as India has Afghanistan on the mat

The left-arm spinner's three-wicket haul leaves the visitor reeling at 113 for five, 451 runs in the red, after the host declares its first innings at 564 for eight; speedster Saleem scalps six

AFGHANISTAN IN INDIA

Vivek Krishnan
NEW CHANDIGARH

The first Test wicket resides in a bowler's memory for eternity. For some, it could be the beginning of a long and fulfilling journey. For others, it could be the peak of a brief career.

Manav Suthar and Mohammad Saleem will hope to belong to the former category. The India left-arm spinner and Afghanistan pacer opened their accounts in this format on day two of the one-off Test at the Maharaja Yadavindra Singh Stadium on Sunday.

Saleem claimed six for 140 in his second Test appearance even as India, which resumed on 368 for three, amassed 564 for eight before declaring its first innings.

While Shubman Gill (126, 177b, 15x4, 1x6) and Rishabh Pant (81, 121b, 6x4, 3x6) were dismissed without adding significantly to their overnight tally, Washington Sundar scored an unbeaten 52 (68b, 5x4, 1x6). In response, Hashmatullah Shahidi's side reached 113 for five at stumps.

Manav enjoyed a dream start on debut, picking up the wicket of Abdul Malik in his very first over. Having been beaten three balls



Our time to shine: Manav showcased his discipline and guile, while Saleem worked hard for his spoils. R.V. MOORTHY

in a row, Malik looked to counter the 23-year-old's vicious turn with a sweep. All he managed was a top

edge that lobbed to Mohammed Siraj at short fine-leg. The youngster from Ra-

jasthan, who runs in diagonally whilst operating around the wicket, continued to beat the bat fre-

quently. He also accounted for Rahmanullah Gurbaz, whose torturous time against the left-armed end-

ed when he nicked one to Sai Sudharsan at second slip. Manav ended the day



SCOREBOARD

INDIA — 1ST INNINGS

Yashvi Jaiswal c Afsar b Saleem 24 (32b, 5x4), K.L. Rahul c Gurbaz b Ziaur 100 (165b, 11x4), Sai Sudharsan c Afsar b Saleem 81 (104b, 13x4), Shubman Gill c Afsar b Saleem 126 (177b, 15x4, 1x6), Rishabh Pant c Omarzai b Shahidi 81 (121b, 6x4, 3x6), Dhruv Jurel b Saleem 19 (20b, 4x4), Washington Sundar (not out) 52 (68b, 5x4, 1x6), Manav Suthar c Afsar b Saleem 28 (41b, 2x4, 2x6), Mohammed Siraj b Saleem 22 (12b, 4x4, 1x6), Kuldeep Yadav (not out) 9 (26b, 1x4); Extras (b-4, lb-13, nb-4, w-1): 22; Total (for eight wickets, decl. in 127 overs): 564.

FALL OF WICKETS

1-41 (Jaiswal, 11.6 overs), 2-180 (Sai Sudharsan, 42.4), 3-247 (Rahul, 60.2), 4-416 (Gill, 95.5), 5-452 (Jurel, 101.5), 6-456 (Pant, 102.4), 7-510 (Manav, 116.5), 8-540 (Siraj, 120.4).

AFGHANISTAN BOWLING

Ziaur 24-2-91-1, Omarzai 22-5-67-0, Saleem 27-3-140-6, Kharote 23-0-115-0, Malik 7-0-43-0, Shahidi 24-1-91-1.

AFGHANISTAN — 1ST INNINGS

Abdul Malik c Siraj b Manav 16 (18b, 3x4), Sediqullah Atal b Prasidh 17 (27b, 3x4), Rahmanullah Gurbaz c Sai Sudharsan b Manav 12 (40b, 1x4, 1x6), Rahmat Shah (batting) 43 (81b, 6x4, 1x6), Hashmatullah Shahidi lbw b Prasidh 20 (48b, 4x4), Afsar Zazai c & b Manav 3 (26b); Extras (nb-1, w-1): 2; Total (for five wickets, in 39.5 overs): 113.

FALL OF WICKETS

1-28 (Malik, 5.4), 2-40 (Sediqullah, 8.4), 3-62 (Gurbaz, 19.2), 4-98 (Shahidi, 32.2), 5-113 (Afsar, 39.5).

INDIA BOWLING

Siraj 6-1-24-0, Prasidh 7-0-27-2, Manav 15.5-7-21-3, Kuldeep 7-0-29-0, Washington 4-0-12-0.

with figures of 15.5-7-21-3, with Afsar Zazai caught and bowled off what turned out to be the final ball. Prasidh Krishna chipped in with two scalps. The pacer cleaned up Sediqullah Atal and trapped Shahidi leg-before.

In the morning session, Afghanistan's bowlers showed admirable heart in oppressive heat. Soon after the second new ball was taken, Azmatullah Omarzai struck Gill on the pads for a leg-before shout, and induced a nick from Pant off the very next delivery. Neither appeal was entertained by umpire Sharfud-

doula, but television replays confirmed Afghanistan's blunder in not using its remaining review.

Stepping up

Saleem stepped up soon after being brought on. With Gill's feet static as he drove a back-of-a-length delivery, the outside edge was snaffled by Afsar.

Dhruv Jurel shouldered arms to a nip-backer from Saleem before the speedster sent back Manav and Siraj for his fifth and sixth wickets. On Monday, Manav could end up with a five-wicket haul too.

It was a treat to watch Manav bowl: Washington

Vivek Krishnan
NEW CHANDIGARH

Washington Sundar is no stranger to promising debuts.

In his first Test, against Australia at the Gabba in Brisbane in 2021, the Tamil Nadu all-rounder contributed a nerveless 62 in the first innings as India pulled off a storied series triumph.

On Sunday, Manav Suthar, although not against an opponent of the same calibre, made a striking impression in his maiden outing.

The left-arm spinner took just four balls to take his first wicket, and ended the day with three wickets to leave Afghanistan reeling at 113 for five.

Blessed with a high-arm action and a languid approach to the crease, Manav imparts a lot of revolutions on the ball to extract appreciable turn.

Left in awe

Washington, who is also Manav's teammate at Gujarat Titans in the IPL, is thoroughly impressed with the 23-year-old.

"He has been brilliant. Those who have played



Quick off the blocks: Manav needed only four deliveries to get his first Test wicket. R.V. MOORTHY



He is a genuine spinner in terms of how much he can actually spin the ball and how many revs he can put on the ball. That has always been his strength

with him in the last few years know what he could bring to the table, especially in this format. It was a genuine treat to watch. For him to bring out his best skills, especially at this le-

vel for India, is amazing. You can expect a lot more from him in terms of him winning a lot of games for India," Washington said in praise of the debutant.

When Washington was pressed on the virtues of the left-armed that impress him, he elaborated: "He is a genuine spinner in terms of how much he can actually spin the ball and how many revs he can put on the ball. That has always been his strength. He uses a lot of his body and gives all his energy on the ball every single delivery".

Saleem's consistency was superb: Pybus

Vivek Krishnan
NEW CHANDIGARH

In Afghanistan head coach Richard Pybus' view, consistency of length was the driving factor behind Mohammad Saleem's six-wicket haul in the first innings of the one-off Test against India at the Maharaja Yadavindra Singh Stadium here.

Having not returned a wicket in his first four appearances at the international level, comprising a Test, two ODIs and a lone T20I, the 23-year-old quick was grandly rewarded for his labour in the sweltering heat against Shubman Gill & Co.

"What I enjoyed about him was his consistency to-

day (Sunday). He was super consistent. The SG ball has got a proud seam. So, it grips the surface. He was just fantastic...he just held a length. And I think if you hold a length, you're in the game the whole time," Pybus said after the day's play.

According to the 61-year-old, the entire bowling unit learnt from where it went wrong on the opening day. "We showed a lot of naivety with the ball yesterday (Saturday). It wasn't Test-quality bowling in any conditions. We weren't building pressure. So, we had a conversation around that, and we were much better," Pybus said.



Lone-ranger: Saleem stood out in an otherwise disappointing show from Afghanistan. R.V. MOORTHY

Important to be the same person as before: Shreyas

Amol Karhadkar
MUMBAI

Barely 24 hours after being handed the responsibility of leading India's T20I side into a fresh World Cup cycle, Shreyas Iyer made one thing clear: captaincy will not alter who he is.

Shreyas, speaking at an event here on Sunday, insisted that the challenge of leading the side excites him but stressed that authenticity rather than reinvention would define his approach.

"Even when I have got this job right now, or responsibility as a captain, it's a great challenge at the same time," Shreyas said. "I don't have to change my personality. I have to be the same person how I was before, and not try to be someone else or be under someone's shadow."

Shreyas' elevation as captain perhaps completes one of Indian cricket's more dramatic recent turnarounds. Eighteen months ago, he had fallen out of India's T20I plans altogether. On Saturday, he returned not merely to the side but directly into captaincy role after replacing



Big responsibility: Shreyas has been entrusted with the task of leading India in the new T20I World Cup cycle. FILE PHOTO: K.R. DEEPAK

Suryakumar Yadav at the helm. For Shreyas, however, the foundations of leadership were built much earlier — in Mumbai cricket's famously unforgiving ecosystem.

"I obviously loved challenges growing up, especially being from Mumbai, where the cricket is pretty big, competition is high," he said. "Every other kid on the street wants to represent Mumbai. My mindset was always about winning, against everyone that

I challenged." Shreyas suggested that the competitive culture shaped not only his cricketing journey but also his appetite for responsibility. "Learning or winning is secondary, but (its about having) more fun growing up. The more competitive nature you have, especially while you play cricket or any other sport in general, the better it is," he said. "I think that takes you to another level and you want to take that sort of responsibility".

Brazil targets title No. 6; Mexico hopes for a fine show

Switzerland the favourite to make it to knockouts for the fourth straight edition; burden of expectation on Morocco after its semifinal run in Qatar 2022; Scotland desperate to end group-stage jinx

FIFA WC COUNTDOWN

P.K. Ajith Kumar

With the FIFA World Cup – hosted by the United States, Canada and Mexico – starting on June 11, *The Hindu* begins its Countdown, analysing the 48 teams in the fray.

Group A (Mexico, South Korea, Czechia, South Africa)

The majestic Azteca Stadium in Mexico City, where more than 114,000 people watched Diego Maradona's Argentina beat West Germany in a five-goal thriller to lift the World Cup in 1986, will host the opening match on June 11. The pressure will be on the co-host when it takes on South Africa, which itself memorably conducted the 2010 edition. Sport's biggest show is returning to Mexico after 40 years. The Mexicans had reached the quarterfinals in 1986, as they had 16 years earlier, when they first hosted the World Cup. They should be hoping they would do it again on home soil. Mexico has played every World Cup since 1994 and is the highest-ranked team in the group, at No. 15 (as of April 1, 2026).

Mexico starts very much the favourite to top the pool. It boasts stars such as Santiago Gimenez, Raul Jimenez, Edson Alvarez and Guillermo Ochoa, who will be appearing in his sixth World Cup. Also watch out



In focus: Brazil has the highly rated striker Endrick in its ranks. Mexican goalkeeper Ochoa is all set to feature in his sixth World Cup while the Swiss will look up to its inspirational captain Khaka. AP & AFP



has forecast greatness.

Morocco made history in Doha, becoming the first African team to reach the semifinals. The expectations are also high from the current squad, featuring the likes of Achraf Hakimi, who helped Paris Saint-Germain win successive UEFA champion league titles over the last two seasons, Abde Ezzalzouli, Neil El Aynaoui, Brahim Diaz and the 18-year-old Ayyoub Bouaddi, who had captained France's under-21 team not so long ago.

This is Scotland's first World Cup in nearly three decades. And the Scots achieved qualification in spectacular style, beating Denmark 4-2, thanks in no small measure to a Scott McTominay's overhead-kick goal that has now been immortalised on a bank note. John McGinn, Ben Gannon-Doak, Lawrence Shankland and Ryan Christie would also be trying hard to take their team past the group stage for the first time in history.

Haiti making it to its World Cup was a huge achievement, given the troubles the country has been facing. It is ranked 83rd, only New Zealand at 85 is ranked lower among all the teams in the finals. But it has fine players like Duckens Nazon and Wilson Isidor.

Best finish: Brazil: Champion (1958, 1962, 1970, 1994, 2002); Morocco: Semifinal (2022); Scotland: Group stage (1954, 1958, 1974-1990, 1998); Haiti: Group stage (1974).

for the 17-year-old Gilberto Mora, the youngest in the tournament.

South Korea is the team most likely, after Mexico, to advance from the group. A regular since 1986, the Asian giant is ranked 25th in the world. The Koreans have come with an unbeaten record in the qualifiers, spanning over 16 games. For inspiration, they could look to captain Son Heung-min, who is poised to become their all-time leading scorer at the World Cup.

Unlike South Korea or Mexico, Czechia is no regular at the World Cup. This is only its second World Cup. With talented performers like Patrik Schick, Pavel Sulc and Tomas Holes, the Czechs are capa-

ble of surprises.

South Africa is ranked 60th, the lowest in the group. It will require something extraordinary, from the likes of Teboho Mokoena and Lyle Foster, to upset the fancied opponents.

Best finish: Mexico: Quarterfinals (1970, 1986); South Korea: Semifinal (2002); Czechia: Group stage (2006); South Africa: Group stage (1998, 2002, 2010).

Group B (Switzerland, Canada, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Qatar)

Switzerland reached the knockout stage at the last three World Cups. It will be a huge shock if the Swiss don't make it four in a row. They are placed 19th in global rankings and start the

clear favourite to top the group that features no big teams. There are big stars, though. Switzerland's captain Granit Khaka, for instance. The Sunderland skipper is the most capped player for his country and he is still the man his team looks up to. And there is class up front in the form of Breel Embolo, Dan Ndoye and Noah Okafor.

Canada has lost all its games at the World Cup. You may not quite be able to say that by the end of the group stage this time around. It is possibly the best-ever Canadian side, and being the co-host is a bonus. The team has players with enough experience in Europe, such as Jonathan David, Alphonso

Davies, Ali Ahmed and Cyle Larin. Davies, though, is likely to be available only for the second game against Qatar.

Bosnia booked the ticket to its second World Cup in dramatic fashion, knocking out former champion Italy in a penalty shootout. Coached by its former captain Sergej Barbarez – his target was actually Euro 2028 – the team is returning to the tournament after missing the last two editions. And it could feel at home as thousands of Bosnians moved to North America because of the war in the 1990s.

It has some fine players, including the 40-year-old superstar Edin Dzeko, 18-year-old Kerim Alajbegovic

and Esmir Bajraktarevic, who took that winning penalty against Italy.

The last World Cup's host Qatar is looking to score its first-ever point in the showpiece. It is pinning hopes on men like Akram Afif, Almoz Ali and Mohammed al-Mannai. India, especially Kerala, will be wondering Tahsin Jamshid, whose parents are from Kannur, could get on to the field at some stage.

Best finish: Switzerland: Quarterfinals (1934, 1938, 1954); Canada: Group stage (1986, 2022); Bosnia & Herzegovina: Group stage (2014); Qatar: Group stage (2022).

Group C (Brazil, Morocco, Scotland, Haiti)

Brazil has played at every World Cup. Nobody

else has. Brazil has won five World Cups. Nobody else has. But the last of those triumphs came in 2002. The Latin American giant, which has traditionally enjoyed popularity around the globe for its flair, is not quite the force it used to be. It has appointed, for the first time, a foreign coach. Italian Carlo Ancelotti is one of the best in history, having won the title in all the five major European leagues.

Ancelotti has brought Neymar back, though Brazil's all-time top-scorer has injury concerns. Brazil also hopes a lot from the gifted Vinicius Junior and the experienced Casemiro. And there is the 19-year-old Endrick, for whom Bebeto

The big boys versus the teams with a point to prove

S. Shrivathsan

A pool devoid of big teams is set to be highly competitive, while Germany and The Netherlands are overwhelming favourites to top their groups.

Group D (USA, Turkiye, Australia, Paraguay)

The USA team is chasing the American dream. Competing on home soil in the global competition for the first time since 1994, the national side, now led by Mauricio Pochettino, is locked in to Make America Great Again in 'soccer'.

The World No. 16's first task will be to get out of a tricky pool that consists of two other top-30 teams but none of the perennial powerhouses – Turkiye at 22 and Australia at 27.

The close win over Senegal and narrow defeat to Germany in World Cup warm-up games should have given Pochettino a fair idea of where the finishing touches to the preparation have to be applied.

Playing in front of jam-packed galleries could be both a boon and a bane. While stars like Christian Pulisic, who is no stranger to elite football, can live up to the heightened expectations, some may wilt under the enormity of the situation. How they tackle battles not only on the field but also off it will be crucial to USA's chances.

For Turkiye and Australia, the focus will be much beyond spoiling the co-host's carnival.

Having earned the right to perform on the global stage after 24 years, the European outfit cannot afford to pass up the golden opportunity.

The wait has been so long that Arda Guler and Kenan Yildiz, two of the most exciting prospects in the current squad, were not even born when Turkiye last caught the World Cup fever. Something close to the fairytale run of 2002



The show-stoppers: Pulisic will bank on home support while Havertz and Depay, centre, will look to efficiently lead their forward lines. GETTY IMAGES & REUTERS

– which ended in a third-place finish – will be required if Vincenzo Montella's contingent is to make inroads.

Australia, a regular at the finals since 2006, is no pushover but is yet to win a knockout fixture. Meanwhile, Paraguay, the lowest-placed team in the group at World No. 40, will be itching to prove that rankings do not directly translate to results.

Best finish: USA: Semifinals (1930); Turkiye: Third place (2002); Australia: Round of 16 (2006, 2022); Paraguay: Quarterfinals (2010).

Group E (Germany, Curacao, Ivory Coast, Ecuador)

Germany was forced to board the first available flight back home after being knocked out in the opening round of the last

two editions. Ghosts from the past may resurface, especially for those who had endured the pain firsthand in Russia and/or Qatar, but the 2014 title-winner must avoid the ignominy of three early exits in a row without fuss.

The top-level experience in Julian Nagelsmann's squad, recent form of four victories in as many matches since March and superior ranking (10) – the other teams in the pool are placed well below the European side – provide the Germans the head start in the race to top the group.

The four-time World champion should, however, be eyeing bigger things. That Germany has flown under the radar in discussions pertaining to title contenders may free up the additional baggage it has usually carried. But it

has catching up to do in the overall scheme of things.

First up for Germany is Curacao, the smallest nation (both in terms of population and land area) ever to qualify for football's biggest spectacle. Adding intrigue, only one player in the 26-member squad – Tahith Chong – was born in the Caribbean island, yet the place of birth hardly matters within the group because "you are accepted into the family once you come here."

Curacao is home to Dick Advocaat, the 78-year-old who is poised to become the oldest coach at the quadrennial event. The 82nd-ranked outfit will have to punch well above its weight in the Americas to inscribe its name in the history books once again.

As for Ivory Coast,

which is back in the World Cup fold after 12 years, it has not got to this point "to make up the numbers or go sightseeing." The African country is likely to be involved in a tussle with Ecuador for the second automatic qualification spot.

Best finish: Germany: Champion (1954, 1974, 1990, 2014); Curacao: Debut; Ivory Coast: Group stage (2006-2014); Ecuador: Round of 16 (2006).

Group F (Netherlands, Japan, Sweden, Tunisia)

Come hell or high water, The Netherlands has guaranteed itself knockout football in every edition it has competed in since 1974. And it looks well placed to extend that streak under Ronald Koeman, who had donned the Oranje as a player in 1990 and 1994.

The Netherlands, the

highest-ranked team in the pool at World No. 7, was sounded a warning in the recent 0-1 defeat to Algeria in a pre-tournament friendly. But the Dutch side is too good to not pass the preliminary test, with Japan being the closest challenger for the top spot.

It has the resources to even be fourth time lucky – it had finished runner-up in 1974, 1978 and 2010 – but consistently rising to the occasion against the 'favourites' will be vital.

Although not among the 'big boys', Japan cannot be ignored.

The Asian nation came agonisingly close to qualifying for the quarterfinals in 2018 and took centre stage four years later when it topped the group that included Spain and Germany.

So, not many eyebrows were raised after England great David Beckham termed Japan as a potential "surprise" package to upset the apple cart. "It has a really strong team... it could be kind of a secret," Beckham told *ABC News* recently.

While Japan will miss the injured Kaoru Mitoma's box of tricks in the final third, it has the experience and variety to crack complex codes. Hajime Moriyasu's men may first have to overcome the Swedish challenge to secure a direct ticket to the eliminators.

Despite having a bumpy ride in the lead-up to the World Cup, Sweden possesses the dash of enviable quality that is required to get through to the next phase. With regards to Tunisia, it should play out of its skin to even stand a chance of making the cut for the first time.

Best finish: Netherlands: Runner-up (1974, 1978, 2010); Japan: Round of 16 (2002, 2010, 2018, 2022); Sweden: Runner-up (1958); Tunisia: Group stage (1978, 1998-2006, 2018, 2022).

Eriksen collapses but is conscious

Reuters
ODENSE

Denmark football player Christian Eriksen collapsed on the pitch in a friendly match against Ukraine here on Sunday. But the Danish football federation said in a social-media post that he was conscious. "Christian Eriksen is conscious and is doing well under the circumstances,"

the federation said in a statement, adding that the friendly had been called off.

In 2021, Eriksen had collapsed during a European championship match in Copenhagen and was given life-saving CPR treatment. He was later fitted with a special heart-starting device known as an Implantable Cardioverter-Defibrillator (ICD).

England labours to win; Germany, Portugal notch up victories

Reuters
TAMPA

Harry Kane's 79th international goal helped England bag a 1-0 win over New Zealand as the Three Lions' World Cup preparation got off to an underwhelming start in the Florida heat on Saturday.

In Chicago, Germany earned a 2-1 victory over World Cup co-host United States of America in its final warm-up match.

Portugal defeated Chile in an ill-tempered clash in Oeiras, where both teams finished with 10 men as Rafael Leao and Ivan Roman received their marching orders late in the first half following a brawl. Romelu Lukaku continued his

comeback from injury for Belgium with 25 minutes off the bench as his side enjoyed a 5-0 victory over 10-man Tunisia in Brussels.

Argentina eased to a 2-0 victory over a lacklustre Honduras in the reigning champion's penultimate World Cup warm-up game in Texas.

Lionel Messi, who suffered a hamstring injury on May 24, was on the bench but not used by head coach Lionel Scaloni.

In Cleveland, Endrick and Bruno Guimaraes netted the goals as Brazil defeated Egypt 2-1. The victory completed a smooth build-up for Brazil coach Carlo Ancelotti, whose team had routed Panama 6-2 in Rio de Janeiro.



Goal machine: Kane, left, extended his excellent run. GETTY IMAGES



It's not just about Magnus, you have to do well against everyone

FLICKR/NORWAYCHESS

Grandmaster Praggnanandhaa says every tournament is unique in its own way; the 20-year-old admits that he will have to prioritise taking breaks to ensure he isn't burnt out; the Indian, who had a tough time at the Candidates, feels he is someone who quickly recovers from disappointments

INTERVIEW

R. Praggnanandhaa

C. Shyam Sundar

He's been around for so long that one forgets that he is just 20. Indian Grandmaster R. Praggnanandhaa's rise has been steadily spectacular.

Having been drawn to chess quite early, his growth was impressive. Winning became a habit for him and the International Master title at the age of 10 turned the spotlight on him firmly. He has come a long way since, pursuing excellence in the sport with unwavering focus and dedication.

The Chennai GM was a hugely popular player at the Norway Chess 2026 along with compatriot and World champion D. Gukesh with fans swarming the duo to get pictures taken and for autographs.

Praggnanandhaa or simply Pragg as the chess fraternity and fans like to call him, took time off to share his thoughts with the Indian media about life on the road, the pressures of top-flight sport, hobbies and friends in a freewheeling chat. Excerpts:

The strangest place you have played chess in? You are playing a library right now...

I can't think of one, probably the library. Usually a library is calm... but here there is always something happening in the background

In this tournament, you defeated World No. 1 Magnus Carlsen twice... What do you think about that?

I think everyone is strong here, it's not just about Magnus, there are also other strong players, so you have to do well against everyone, I didn't have good moments early in the tournament.

Given your busy schedule, what facet of the game motivates you to give your best?

I enjoy playing the game, so whenever I sit at the board, I just enjoy it, so I try to give my best. Nothing specific, I think every tournament is different, you are facing different opponents, different formats, so every tournament is exciting in its own way.

At this stage of your career, what is it that most interests you about chess?

I think it just depends on the tournament.... like here the format is so exciting that I am just happy to play, also the players are super strong, I mean there are tournaments where the goal is simple, just to try to win the tournament.

Which are these tournaments that you are just there to enjoy?

It just depends on the tournament, it just depends on my mood, how I feel before it, how I feel during the tournament and all these things.

You played around 16 tournaments in 2025. Is there a conscious idea to maybe play less tournaments?

Yeah, that is something that I decided I will try to do (play less), try to have breaks in between. Last year... even though the results went my way, it was a bit too much to play... so much of chess. I'm still probably going to play almost all the (big) tournaments, but I'll probably skip the EWC (Esports World Cup) and all these other tournaments. I mean at some point you just have to prioritise.

Did you feel that playing so many tournaments kind of affected your tournament play at some point because you didn't have time to reset, you didn't have time to retool in terms of tactics and strategies and things like that?

For sure, I think at some point you are just burnt out, you don't have energy like even if you have physical energy, you just don't have the mental energy to do the same thing pretty much every tournament, same routine and everything gets tiring at some point. It just becomes automatic that you just don't enjoy it anymore, it just happens. So, that's why I think these breaks are important.

When did you feel burnt out or feel why am I playing so much?

I can't really say the exact moment but at some point like I was, I counted this like in three months I travelled to seven countries, which I think is too much for anyone... Look, one is not going there to just have a look at the place, you are going there to fight in every tournament and all these tournaments are super strong. It is mentally tiring, but you know it's me that signed up for all these tournaments so I have to take it whatever that comes.

You became an International Master at a young age and 10 years down the line you are one of the



strongest chess players in the world, so how do you look at being a role model...

I don't really think too much about it. I just do what I do, I just try to play a game, but it's nice to see that people look up to a chess player and want to take up chess... you know whenever there is some kid coming to take a picture or for an autograph I try to do my best, I try to give them a little bit of time, so yeah, I think it's great. When one starts, they look up to someone and get started. So, it's nice that people are looking at not just me but also the other Indian players too.

Has there ever been a time in the recent past, when you thought maybe I could have had a normal childhood, school, and finished college?

You have to give (up) certain things for certain things. I don't really regret it,

but I would have loved to have some school friends or college friends. But when I'm going for something much bigger, I'm happy with how things are.

When you are in Chennai, who are the people that you call to maybe go to the beach or cinema. Is it someone like Gukesh or Arjun (Erigaisi) or others?

No, I think we look at each other too much in tournaments... (laughs). If I am going out when I am in Chennai, it's usually like my sister (R. Vaishali) is there, my family is there, they are the ones.

Don't you get to look at Vaishali as you play a lot of tournaments together..

As brother and sister, we have to look at each other in tournaments and at home too.. There is no escape. I have a few chess friends and we sometimes go out

to play some sports.

Do you think that Indian youngsters focus maybe too much on chess and is there too much pressure?

I can only answer from my part. At times, I do feel like I focus too much on chess. Certainly, I think having a different hobby could help chess as well. There are some things that I want to try in the future. There is nothing specific, it's just that sometimes you just read something and you are excited.

On the disappointment after missing out in the Candidates

Certainly that (disappointment of not doing well in Candidates) is something that I have to deal with because in the last two years I was thinking only about this cycle... I sort of gave everything for this. There was nothing else I was thinking about. You can also see from the tournaments I played last year that I was just going for this one spot in the FIDE circuit (to qualify for the Candidates). I have to try and get back to playing tournaments. I just want to play chess and chill (now). I don't want to think about the next two-year cycle.

How long does it take for you to recover from such disappointments, like the one in the Candidates

I am usually quick to recover from disappointments. And, I think, in this Candidates specifically like my sister (Vaishali) winning certainly helped me cope with my own disappointment.

You have a growing fan base in Taiwan though you have not played there... Any message for them?

I'm pleasantly surprised to hear that. It's nice to know that as you don't really hear Taiwan as a chess culture nation, so I think any country starting to grow a chess culture is great. I hope more tournaments will be held there and more kids will be coming up from there.

Do you use Artificial Intelligence (AI) in your training?

I wouldn't say I use proper AI, but of course I use engines and computers and they do play a vital role in opening preparation. But also you learn a lot from just looking at the engine, the way it thinks, the way it analyses and so on. I think everyone uses that.

(The writer is in Oslo at the invitation of Norway Chess).

TAMIL NADU

Shut BUT open

On May 12, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister C. Joseph Vijay ordered closure of around 717 liquor shops located near schools and places of worship across the State. Within a month, these shops have disappeared from Tamil Nadu's streets. But, in the towns and villages across the State, customers have merely migrated to the next nearest Tasmac outlet. Residents meanwhile complain that they have not yet seen an end to drunken nuisance at public spaces.

This is not the first time Tamil Nadu has acted to cut down on the number of Tasmac outlets. In 2016, Chief Minister Jayalalitha promised prohibition in phases and closed around 500 shops. The following year, her successor Edappadi K. Palaniswami announced the closure of another 500 shops.

Long-running effort

In 2023, Minister for Electricity, Prohibition and Excise V. Senthil Balaji informed the Assembly that 500 more Tasmac retail outlets would be closed. The latest closure of 717 shops is therefore the latest chapter in a long-running effort to balance public sentiment with the State's dependence on revenue from liquor sales.

"From past experience, every time a new party comes to power in Tamil Nadu, closing liquor shops becomes one of its standard promises. But shops are eventually opened in other locations. Moreover, shutting down outlets does not necessarily result in a loss of business, as tipplers simply migrate to nearby shops. What the Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK) government has done too is merely a cosmetic fix to a much deeper problem," says a source tracking the liquor industry.

In the days following the closure order, *The Hindu* visited several Tasmac outlets across Tamil Nadu to examine whether the shutters had truly come down and whether the decision had made any tangible difference on the ground. They had, in many areas. However, during this visit, members of the public have said there are more such shops which the government has to close.

For instance, at Velachery in Chennai, residents of Balakrishna Nagar have been demanding the removal of Tasmac Shop No. 928 for several years. They are aggrieved by the presence of the outlet on Station Service Road, which serves as the gateway to residential neighbourhoods such as Annai Indira Nagar, VGP Avenue, and Balakrishna Nagar. Residents point out that Station Service Road also connects Velachery to the Mass Rapid Transit System (MRTS) station at Taramani. They argue that the presence of the liquor shop here increases the risk of accidents on the busy arterial road.

Social activist S. Kumararaja says that while the Greater Chennai Traffic Police regularly advise motorists not to drink and drive and conduct awareness campaigns, many customers visiting Tasmac outlets are motorists who consume alcohol there itself and drive. He alleges that the traffic police do not conduct enough vehicle checks at night to curb the practice.

In Tiruvallur district, residents of Karanodai were initially excited to find that their long-standing demand for the closure of Tasmac Shop No. 9075 had been included in the list of 717 outlets shut down by the government. However, within two days of its closure, the shop was reopened after the authorities stated that the shop number had been wrongly mentioned in the list.

In Kancheepuram and Chengalpattu, activists say closing liquor shops near schools, colleges, bus stops, and places of worship alone is not enough. "If those shops are closed, people go to elite shops. In Kancheepuram town alone, there are three outlets on the main road. Why do we need so many liquor shops in such a small town," asks an activist. Farmers say that at many places, culverts, bridges, and pump rooms have become informal drinking spots. Waste generated by those who gather there is often discarded indiscriminately, with plastic litter ending up in farmland and water channels. In many areas, tipplers dump plastic cups and papers on the road or throw them into waterbodies.

Among the outlets closed in Coimbatore was a bar-attached Tasmac shop at Airport Junction on Avinashi Road, which has busy bus stops, a Passport Seva Kendra, two hospitals, and a church within a 500-metre radius. A Tasmac official says the department continues to receive petitions seeking closure of additional outlets located near schools or places of worship. "These demands will be scrutinised," he says. Residents have also sought the closure of Tasmac Shop No. 1663 at Mani's Theatre bus stop on Kamarajar Road, a busy stretch linking Avinashi Road and Tiruchi Road. Near the Pudukottai bus stand, two Tasmac outlets were closed, but two FL2 liquor outlets in the same area continue to operate, resulting in no change in the availability of alcohol.

Fresh list sought

A supervisor from Thanjavur says several Tasmac outlets near schools and public places were not included in the list of 717 shops. According to officials in Tiruchi and Pudukottai, the department has now sought a fresh list of such outlets for possible closure. In Salem district, N. Prasanth, a resident of Kolathur, says residents of the locality are happy about the closure of the Tasmac outlet. Members of the public, especially women, had faced considerable hardship as inebriated customers often harassed women and picked quarrels, he adds.

Protests have been held across Erode district, seeking closure of more Tasmac outlets, with residents citing inconvenience and worries over safety. Residents of Solar, Kadambur, Ammapettai, and Anthiyur have submitted petitions to the district administration demanding closure of shops in their localities. V. P. Manikandan, a Madurai-based activist, says a Tasmac outlet at Ellis Nagar, on his route to work, was closed. However, people have shifted to nearby recreation clubs. "Many also buy liquor, drink in vehicles parked along roadsides, and throw the empty bottles in resi-

Every time a new party comes to power, closing liquor shops becomes one of its standard promises. But shops are eventually opened in other locations. Is the Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam government's decision to shut 717 liquor shops near educational institutions and places of worship going to be any different, people wonder. **Sangeetha Kandavel** listens in



A Tasmac outlet at Ellis Nagar was closed. However, people have shifted to nearby recreation clubs. Many also buy liquor, drink in vehicles parked along roadsides, and throw the empty bottles in residential areas

V. P. MANIKANDAN, an activist in Madurai

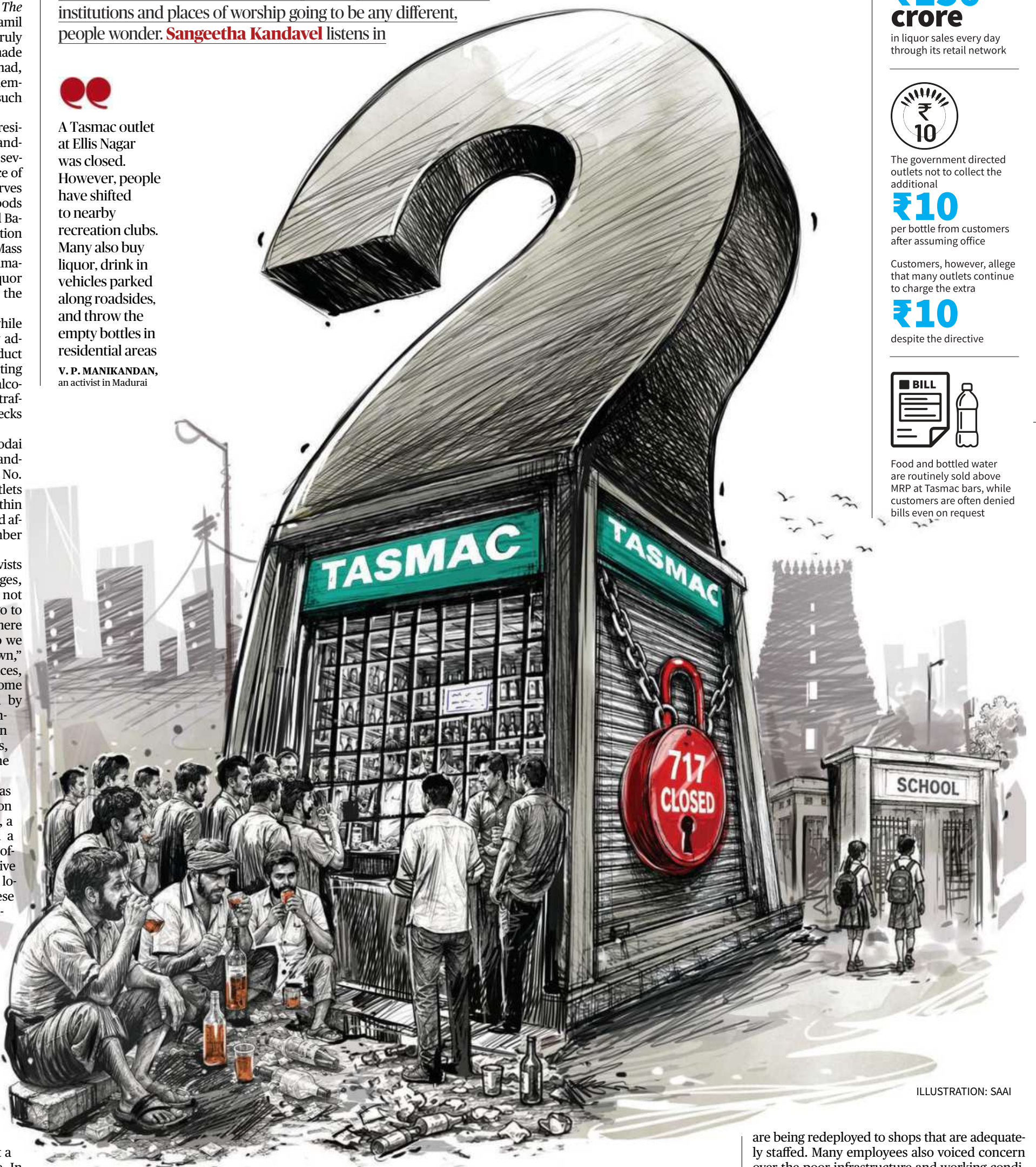
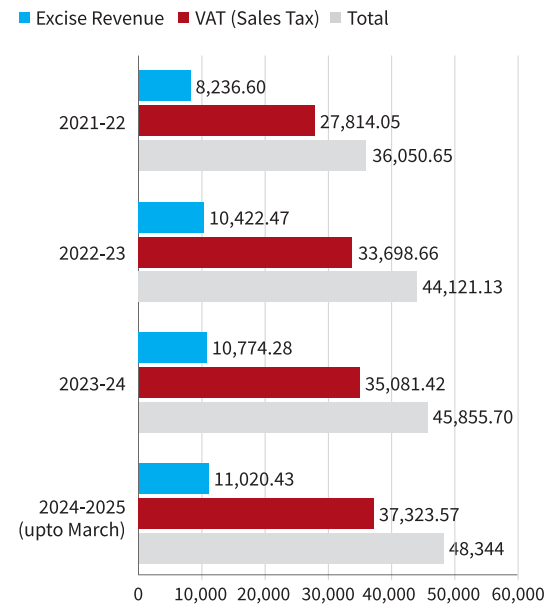


ILLUSTRATION: SAAI

Region	No. of shops closed	Shop personnel				Shop personnel redeployed	Shop personnel pending to be redeployed
		Supervisor	Salesman	Assistant salesman	Total		
Chennai	82	88	261	42	391	189	202
Salem	82	112	238	24	374	300	74
Coimbatore	179	228	520	177	925	925	0
Madurai	290	395	821	152	1,368	501	867
Tiruchi	84	123	278	15	416	416	0
TOTAL	717	946	2,118	410	3,474	2,331	1,143

REVENUE EARNED THROUGH TASMAC (₹ in crore)



TASMAC BY THE NUMBERS



A total of **4,765**

Tasmac outlets were operational when the TVK government assumed office



Tasmac generates around **₹150 crore**

in liquor sales every day through its retail network



The government directed outlets not to collect the additional **₹10** per bottle from customers after assuming office

Customers, however, allege that many outlets continue to charge the extra

₹10 despite the directive



Food and bottled water are routinely sold above MRP at Tasmac bars, while customers are often denied bills even on request

purpose as private bars continue operating nearby. "Earlier, the revenue went to the State exchequer. Now, private individuals are the ones benefiting," he says.

The closure has displaced 3,474 shop workers. Of them, 2,331 workers have been redeployed to nearby shops, while the remaining 1,143 will be sent to other shops in the coming days. Minister for Prohibition and Excise K. Vignesh said all workers would be redeployed at places where there was demand. A Tasmac supervisor in Madurai says he was posted at the Bibikulam outlet, which was closed for being within 500 metres of a place of worship and an educational institution. He has now been asked to join a shop at Tiruppalai, which already has three supervisors.

Questioning the rationale behind the decision, he alleges that employees from the closed outlets

dential areas," he says.

In Tenkasi district, the authorities have closed the "low-sales" shops, while allowing "high-sales" outlets to continue their operation despite being located in violation of the norms, a supervisor claims.

Re-survey planned

In Virudhunagar, a senior official says efforts are being made to re-survey the distance between Tasmac retail outlets and schools, temples, and bus stands, as officials had erroneously prepared the list without properly verifying the 500-metre radius. This exercise was done in many parts of the State before complete closure. E. Srinivasagan, an AIADMK functionary, says the closure of two Tasmac outlets at Aruppukottai will serve no

are being redeployed to shops that are adequately staffed. Many employees also voiced concern over the poor infrastructure and working conditions at Tasmac outlets and bars. They said the corporation offered low salaries, despite their work being demanding.

Residents across Tamil Nadu say they want more shops violating the norms to be shut and not merely relocated. They have also called for stricter enforcement of rules against drunk driving, tighter police surveillance, and stronger action to prevent the sale of spurious liquor. For many, the government must go beyond symbolic closure of shops and address the broader public safety concerns linked to alcohol.

(With inputs from R. Srikanth and Deepa H. Ramakrishnan in Chennai; B. Tilak Chandar and S. Sundar in Madurai; P. Sudhakar in Tirunelveli; Wilson Thomas in Coimbatore; Nachinarkkiniyan M. in Tiruchi; M. Sabari in Salem; and S.P. Saravanan in Erode.)

HARYANA



In Nhari village in Haryana, women ride past a slogan against female foeticide, a part of the Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao campaign.
SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

A movement losing momentum and daughters

Launched by PM Modi in Panipat in 2015, the Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao campaign initially delivered strong results. Haryana's Sex Ratio at Birth rose from 838 in 2010 to 923 by 2019, driven by strict raids on pre-natal testing centres, inter-State crackdowns, monthly video conference reviews, and fixed accountability. However, data for the first four months of 2026 show that the number of girl babies born has dipped below 900, sparking fears that the programme is losing focus and momentum, reports **Ashok Kumar**

At 31, Bijli Devi weighs just 44 kg. Weak and pregnant, she has come to Katlupur sub-centre in Sonipat district for a routine vaccination. The doctor has flagged her pregnancy as high risk. This is her seventh in 12 years. She has six daughters, 2 to 12. "I have little choice," she says. Her husband, an agricultural labourer, and in-laws want a son. She doesn't know what will happen if the seventh is a girl too. Her two oldest daughters have dropped out of school. They now work as farm labourers alongside their father. "We never went for sex-determination," Bijli Devi adds. "We don't have the means." A sex-determination test, illegal in India, costs ₹50,000-60,000 on the black market.

In May this year, a secret sex-determination racket, running in the middle of Gurugram, was busted. At Aayu Hospital in Hari Nagar, a mere 2 kilometres north of Sector 37 police station, along the frenetic arterial stretch of Khandsa Road off the Delhi-Jaipur Highway, sleuths dismantled a syndicate peddling prenatal gender testing. Arrested consultant radiologist Manjit Kumar would allegedly conduct the sex-determination test for ₹40,000.

Here, in the pulsating heart of the Millennium City, directly opposite the cacophonous Sector 10A market, thrived the illicit sex-determination centre. This, more than a decade after the clarion call of "Beti Bachao Beti Padhao" (BBBP) echoed from Panipat, more than a thousand surgical raids executed, and upwards of 4,000 miscreants incarcerated.

The bust wasn't just about catching criminals. It exposed a deeper failure: the slow collapse of monitoring and the fading fear of law among offenders. For the enforcement teams, the brazenness of it all was a jolt.

The rupture surfaced against an ominous backdrop: Haryana's Sex Ratio at Birth (SRB) has plummeted to 898 girls per 1,000 boys in the first four months of 2026. Only four of the 23 districts — Nuh, Rewari, Sonipat, and Panchkula — breached the 900 mark. At the bottom of the table, Charkhi Dadri recorded 768 girls per 1,000 boys. Since BBBP's inception, annual SRB figures had ascended, cresting at 923 in both 2019 and 2025.

The May raid revealed an uncomfortable truth. Between the gap of slogans and supervision lies the old persistent practice of eliminating female foetuses.

Lost focus and direction

In May, another sex-determination racket at Leelawati Hospital in NIT Faridabad was also busted. The accused, Om Prakash, was not a doctor. A senior secondary pass-out, he ran the centre and used a foetal doppler, a handheld ultrasound tool used to listen to a baby's heartbeat, for sex-determination, fooling desperate parents seeking sons. The hospital sits a stone's throw from the district's Chief Medical Officer's office.

Sex-determination centres running openly in metro cities, along with the SRB slide, signal that a programme which once raised hope of fixing the skewed ratio is losing steam, say those associated with the programme for the past several years, adding that it demands a renewed, sustained crackdown and constant monitoring to restore accountability.

A Food and Drug Administration official who has participated in over 30 raids, including inter-State operations, says the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao campaign has lost "focus" and "direction."



Women often get sex-determination done outside Haryana, then use easily available MTP kits for abortion — even over the counter. When we report cases, no action is taken against the women because proving an illegal abortion is difficult

SUNITA
President,
Haryana ASHA
Workers' Union

"The two key components of the programme — constant monitoring and the crackdown — are now missing," says the officer, requesting anonymity. He partially links the decline to the change of guard in Haryana and the transfer of then Additional Principal Secretary out of the State. He is now the Additional Secretary in the Union Health Ministry. The programme was personally monitored by then Chief Minister Manohar Lal, who was replaced by the incumbent Nayab Singh Saini before the 2024 Lok Sabha poll.

"The number of raids and FIRs has gone down, and the focus has shifted from action against illegal sex-determination centres to the medical termination of the pregnancies, putting the cart before the horse," he remarks. The previous machinery used raids, FIRs, daily accountability.

From a peak of 271 FIRs in 2016, the crackdown collapsed to just 85 cases in 2023 and 47 in 2024. Though 154 cases surfaced last year, the priority had inverted. For the first time, cases filed under the Pre-conception and Pre-natal Diagnostic Techniques Act, 1994, stood at 37. However, FIRs under the Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTP) Act, 1971, were by up 117. In 2026, only 28 FIRs have been registered until May.

"The monthly video conferences held with district officers, including Deputy Commissioners, before 2021, have now become a thing of the past, making the officers complacent," he says.

The racket adapts, moves, hides

From its launch in Panipat on January 22, 2015, by Prime Minister Narendra Modi until September 2021, the Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao programme in Haryana had one constant — nodal officer Rakesh Gupta.

Every month, he ran video conferences with Deputy Commissioners, Chief Medical Officers, and Food and Drug Administration officials from all districts. Files moved, and so did teams on the ground. As raids intensified, the racket didn't vanish; it migrated. Sex-determination centres cropped up across the border in Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Rajasthan, Delhi, and Uttarakhand. Ha-

ryana officials then began holding meetings with bureaucrats and political leadership in neighbouring States, pushing for joint action.

COVID-19 disrupted the rhythm. Despite health officials being diverted to pandemic duty, for three years after the pandemic, the SRB ranged between 914-917, before a dip in 2024.

Formal tip-offs and informal networks fed the raids. Because illegal sex-determination centres must market themselves to find clients, word leaks. Teams used decoys to catch doctors, word leaks. Teams used decoys to catch doctors and touts red-handed. But conviction rates stayed low, admit officials, though they do not disclose how low.

The "market" told its own story. A sex-determination test that cost ₹5,000 to ₹15,000 before the crackdown shot up to ₹1.5 lakh. Demand didn't fall, but supply crashed under monitoring and raids.

Rejecting allegations of policy failure, health officials assert that Haryana's Sex Ratio at Birth has rebounded to 923 in 2025, driven by a renewed "crackdown effect". They concede that post-pandemic complacency from 2019-2024 weakened enforcement, with fewer raids, causing SRB to slip to 910. The 2025 recovery, they argue, reflects revived surveillance.

However, the monthly SRB hovered between 889 and 910 through the first half of 2025. The final three months posted abnormally high ratios, ranging from 930 to 997. The pattern has raised eyebrows among officials and activists alike, casting doubt on whether the "2025 Recovery" reflects genuine improvement or statistical manoeuvring. Critics within the Health Department allege that male births were deliberately under-registered towards December to artificially inflate the annual average.

Responding to *The Hindu's* query on the late-2025 spike and early-2026 dip in Sex Ratio at Birth, the Haryana Health Department argued that SRB was calculated for the calendar year and monthly fluctuations were routine. "Historically, SRB declines in the summer months and shows an upward trend from September to December," the department stated. It added that total birth registrations increased in 2025 compared to 2024. As per CRS data, 5,16,402 births were registered in 2024, while 2025 recorded 5,19,691 registrations. The department maintained that seasonal variation, not data manipulation, explains the monthly swings in SRB.

It also said that top-level monitoring is ongoing, with weekly video conferences, and review meetings. A State Task Force chaired by Additional Chief Secretary (Health) meets regularly, while District Task Forces led by Deputy Commissioners convene monthly. Their approach was one of "reverse tracking", targeting those resorting to illegal abortions.

The department flagged some key challenges in tackling female foeticide: the misuse of handheld, mobile-sized ultrasound machines; repeat offenders undeterred by legal action; and legal sex detection in countries like Thailand and Singapore, where people go to get sex-determination tests.

The son preference

"The Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao mission in Haryana took a back seat towards the end of 2021 and the Swachh Bharat Mission came to the fore," says Manasi Mishra, who heads the Research and Knowledge Management Division at Delhi-based non-profit Centre for Social Research (CSR) that

works in the gender space.

CSR had been implementing the Meri Shakti Meri Beti programme since 2007, targeting prenatal sex selection and girl empowerment. After the Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao programme was launched, CSR became the nodal agency for five skewed-SRB districts in Haryana: Gurugram, Ambala, Kurukshetra, Jhajjar, and Mahendragarh. The NGO ran BBBP there until 2021.

Mishra adds that once the sex ratio at birth showed improvement, the government began to relax. "There was no official announcement, but the call of the day was, since this target has been achieved, we should be more focused on the Swachh Bharat Mission and to make the State Open Defecation Free," Mishra says.

Government officials working on BBBP were largely moved to sanitation work, she says. "All of a sudden, this change happened in every district. In the five districts I had been working with, BBBP took a backseat."

Her 25 community watch groups reported rampant sex-selection amid zero monitoring during the pandemic. "They keep sending me messages that during the pandemic, sex selection went on rapidly and there was no check." She warns that northern states like Haryana and Punjab have deep-rooted son preference and without economic upliftment of girls and visible role models, gains will soon be reversed.

"There is no concentrated effort to sustain the achievements of Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao. It remains a slogan only." Earlier success came from multi-stakeholder work: Panchayat engagement, medical audits with PC-PNDT authorities, and mobilising ASHA and anganwadi workers.

Sunita, president of the CITU-affiliated Haryana ASHA Workers' Union, attributes the post-Covid slowdown in enforcement to "fatigue," frequent top-level transfers, and a disconnect from ground realities. Officers at the helm, she says, lack field insight, and there's little action against violators. ASHAs are tasked with tracking pregnant women whose first child is a daughter.

"These women often get sex-determination done outside Haryana, then use easily available MTP kits for abortion — even over the counter," Sunita explains. "When we report cases, no action is taken against the women because proving an illegal abortion is difficult."

The demoralisation runs deeper. "Many private clinics sealed for illegal sex selection reopen after some time. It demotivates teams that worked hard to bust them," she says.

At the Katlupur vaccination centre, Meenakshi, 37, has two daughters, both of who were delivered by caesarean sections. Doctors warned her against a third pregnancy. She says there was no pressure from her husband or in-laws. She wanted a son. "My husband is unwell. His elder brother died. I thought a male child should carry forward the family name." Her aunt, she claims, knows people who run illegal sex selection centres. She says she has never tried it.

The son preference remains entrenched. "A family in Nahari village celebrated for 17 days when a boy was born," says Sunita. In September last, the ASHA Workers' Union ran a month-long inquiry across Haryana to understand why female foeticide persists. "We didn't find a single family that opted for family planning after their first child was a girl. But many stopped after a boy. The mindset has not changed," Sunita says. "Everyone still wants a son."

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Bijli Devi, 31, is pregnant with her seventh child, and has come for a vaccination at Katlupur health sub-centre in Haryana's Sonipat. Her family hopes she will have a son. SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA