



CONTAINMENT EFFORTS ON
Kerala on alert after positive Nipah test
STATES » PAGE 3



AI-171 CRASH
Pilot body questions delay in final probe report
NEWS » PAGE 4



‘MAKE IN INDIA’
France signals new model for Rafale deal
NEWS » PAGE 4



PARLEY
Shifting approach to controlling population
Should India incentivise bigger families?
OPINION » PAGE 9



CABINET DISSENT
U.K. Defence Secretary resigns over funding
WORLD » PAGE 14

INSIDE



Two shot dead as violence breaks out in Manipur

Unidentified gunmen killed a Kuki man and a woman at a village in Kamjong district in Manipur early in the morning on Thursday after violence broke out in Senapati district over the alleged killing of six Nagas taken hostage on May 13. At least two others were reported injured. » [Page 4](#)



Police use water cannons against Belfast protesters

Police blasted water cannons on Wednesday at protesters in Northern Ireland who set small fires and hurled bricks, rocks and bottles at them during a second night of violence over a brutal stabbing on a Belfast street. Demonstrators smashed pavements with sledgehammers to toss at riot police. » [PAGE 14](#)

Excise relief for petrol at higher ethanol-blend

Aiming to popularise the uptake of biofuels in the country, the Centre on Wednesday removed central excise duty on petrol blended with higher quantum of ethanol. Following this, petrol blended with ethanol at 22%, 25%, 27% and 30% would be exempted from central excise duties. » [PAGE 12](#)

Homemakers are ‘nation builders’, their work is worth at least ₹30,000 a month, says SC

Rizmi Lia M.
CHENNAI

Observing that homemakers deserve to be recognised as “nation builders”, the Supreme Court on Thursday ruled that the unpaid domestic work performed by them must be monetised at a minimum of ₹30,000 per month while calculating compensation for deaths in road accidents.

The ruling came in an appeal arising from a motor accident claim in Punjab where a woman named Reshma died in a road accident in November 2001. Her husband and three children approached the Motor Accident Claims Tribunal seeking compensation. While the tribunal



The court said motor accident compensation claims should be decided within a year.

awarded compensation in 2003, they approached the High Court to enhance the amount. On appeal, the High Court enhanced the compensation to ₹8.43 lakh with 7.5% interest, providing for a higher rate

of interest in case of delay in payment. A Division Bench of Justice Sanjay Karol and Justice N.K. Singh said the contribution of a homemaker extended beyond the household and played a vital role in nation-building. “We are of the view that the housewife contributes to the growth of the human being and the nation,” said the Bench.

Shift to ‘homemaker’ Justice Karol stated that “loss of domestic care” would be an additional ground to the heads of damages previously recognised by the court. The top court also noted the need to shift from the stereotypical terminology of daily usage from “house-

wife” to “homemaker”. The court said motor accident compensation claims should ordinarily be decided within a year. “Such cases should be decided within a year usually,” the Bench said. Recognising all aspects of being a homemaker and the unpaid labour that a homemaker undertakes, the court directed the Motor Accidents Claim Tribunal (MACT) to award a separate compensation of ₹30,000 per month under the head of “domestic care” in cases involving death of a homemaker. It clarified that this amount would be treated as the minimum value of a homemaker’s unpaid work and would increase by 10% every three years. If the

homemaker also had a paid job, this amount would be awarded in addition to her income. However, the court resorted to the application of homemaker to the traditional image of woman. The court said, “As a result on one circumstance or another, sometimes unfortunate sometimes not, a man may too need to don the role of a homemaker. It is not to take away from the efforts of these men who also deserve recognition and acknowledgment, but for the purposes of the present case and more particularly the quantification of domestic efforts, we limit its application to the quintessential and traditional image, that of a woman.”

Opening salvo



Celebration begins: Mexico’s Julian Quinones, second from left, scores the first goal of the FIFA World Cup 2026 in the inaugural match against South Africa at the Azteca Stadium in Mexico City on Thursday. REUTERS (RELATED REPORTS: PAGE 16, 17)

BJP’s RS candidates in M.P. elected unopposed; EC yet to decide on Congress plea

Mehul Malpani
BHOPAL

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) candidates Tarun Chug, Rajneesh Agrawal, and Mahesh Kewat were on Thursday declared elected unopposed to the three Rajya Sabha seats from Madhya Pradesh, even as the Congress challenged in the Supreme Court the rejection of nomination of its candidate, Meenakshi Natarajan.

Madhya Pradesh Legislative Assembly Principal Secretary Arvind Sharma, who is the Returning Officer (RO) for the election, issued election certificates to the three BJP candidates, prompting celebration in the party camp.

The Election Commission (EC), however, is yet to take a decision on the Congress’s petition challenging the rejection of Ms. Natarajan’s nomination for allegedly not disclosing a case in Hyderabad in which she had received a notice as a respondent.

‘Seat theft’

The Congress accused the RO and the BJP of “seat theft”, while maintaining that Ms. Natarajan did not face any charges in the Telangana case and that she was thus not required to disclose it in the election affidavit.

Congress State president Jitu Patwari said the party MLAs from Madhya Pradesh had sought time from President Droupadi Murmu on Friday to seek her intervention.

Outgoing Rajya Sabha member and senior Congress leader Digvijaya Singh demanded Mr. Shar-



Newly elected BJP Rajya Sabha members with election certificates at the Madhya Pradesh Assembly on Thursday. A. M. FARUQUI

SC agrees to hear plea against rejection today

Aaratrika Bhaumik
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court will hear on Friday a plea filed by Congress leader Meenakshi Natarajan challenging the rejection of her nomination papers for the Rajya Sabha election in Madhya

Pradesh. A Bench of Justices Prashant Kumar Mishra and A.S. Chandurkar has agreed to take up the matter, but declined to grant interim relief preventing the declaration of the result.

FULL REPORT ON
» PAGE 4

ma’s dismissal, while terming the rejection “unconstitutional”. He is vacating a Rajya Sabha seat on June 21 which the Congress had hoped to fill by sending Ms. Natarajan to the Upper House. “Our worst fears have materialised. The EC has failed to reach a decision. We urged the Supreme Court to deliver a verdict today, but that did not happen. By 4 p.m., the election results were declared. We vehemently oppose this act of theft... We will fight this battle to the very end and ensure that

Meenakshi Natarajan makes it to the Rajya Sabha,” Mr. Singh said. The Leader of the Opposition in the Assembly, Umang Singh, also slammed the EC and accused it of bias in favour of the ruling party. “Given that the EC has special powers to intervene and take decisions, why was no timely decision taken on the Congress’s objection? Why is there such proactivity in matters concerning the BJP, yet silence regarding the Congress,” Mr. Singh asked.

INBRIEF

**'Forced tips': Maharashtra govt. orders action against taxi firms**

Taking cognisance of the cab aggregators' 'arm-twisting' tactics for forcibly extracting tips from customers, Maharashtra Transport Minister Pratap Sarnaik on Thursday directed the transport commissioner to take action against erring taxi companies. He also announced that a new aggregator policy for the sector will be introduced soon. "The Minister has taken immediate cognisance of the demand raised by Kalyan Lok Sabha MP Shrikant Eknath Shinde regarding incidents involving app-based taxis. These incidents include drivers compelling passengers to pay additional amounts," an official said.

Pawan Singh among 9 elected to Bihar Legislative Council

Bhojpuri superstar Pawan Singh, Bihar Health Minister Nishant Kumar, and BJP national media co-in-charge Sanjay Mayukh were among nine candidates who on Thursday were declared elected unopposed to the Bihar Legislative Council. Altogether eight candidates of the ruling NDA and one of the Opposition RJD had filed their nomination papers for nine seats of the Upper House, to which biennial elections were recently announced. They all were handed over respective certificates of election after the time was up for withdrawal of nomination papers, said an official of the Vidhan Sabha Secretariat. PTI

Abhishek appears before CID in Trinamool MLAs' signature forgery case

HC grants three-week interim protection to Diamond Harbour MP; directs agency not to take any coercive action as long as he cooperates with the probe; seeks report from CID on its investigation

Shiv Sahay Singh
KOLKATA

Trinamool Congress (TMC) national general secretary Abhishek Banerjee on Thursday appeared before the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) at Bhabani Bhawan, headquarters of the West Bengal police, in connection with a signature forgery case.

Mr. Abhishek's appearance was in compliance with an order issued by the Calcutta High Court earlier in the day during a hearing in the case. "The petitioner shall present himself before the investigating agency today by 6 p.m. The agency shall be at liberty to interrogate the petitioner in accordance with law. The petitioner shall fully cooperate with the investigation," Justice Kausik Chanda stated in the order.

During the hearing, the High Court granted Mr. Abhishek interim protection for three weeks and directed the CID not to take



TMC MP Abhishek Banerjee arriving at the headquarters of the West Bengal police to appear before the CID, in Kolkata on Thursday. PTI

any coercive action as long as he cooperates with the probe. The court directed the agency to provide 48-hour notice to the petitioner if he has to appear before it again. It also sought a report from the CID on its investigation and posted the matter for further hearing after two weeks.

The Diamond Harbour MP had moved the court seeking protection from coercive action by the CID over its probe into the alleged forgery of party

MLAs' signatures. The case was registered based on a complaint filed with the Assembly Secretariat by two now expelled TMC legislators - Ritabrata Banerjee and Sandipan Saha. They alleged that their signatures were forged in the party's resolution nominating Ballygunge MLA Sobhandeb Chattopadhyay as the Leader of the Opposition in the Assembly.

According to the CID, Mr. Abhishek had sent a written communication to

Speaker Rathindra Bose on May 20 and enclosed a copy of the party's resolution and attendance sheet.

Raid at party office

The agency had issued several summonses to Mr. Abhishek but he did not appear in person, citing health issues. It then conducted searches on Tuesday at the TMC's office at party chairperson Mamata Banerjee's Kalighat residence in a bid to recover the original copy of the party's resolution and attendance sheet containing the signatures of 70 MLAs at its meeting on May 6.

Mr. Ritabrata and Mr. Saha had claimed in their complaint that the May 6 party resolution was "manufactured and fabricated" and stated that as many as 14 of the 70 signatures were in "block letters".

The signature row had sparked a rebellion in the TMC, with 58 of its MLAs forming a bloc and electing Mr. Ritabrata as the Leader of the Opposition.

CPI is not part of DMK-led alliance, says Veerapandian

The Hindu Bureau
COIMBATORE

The CPI is not in an alliance with the DMK in Tamil Nadu, CPI State secretary M. Veerapandian has said.

Addressing the media in Coimbatore on Thursday, he said the current environment was not conducive for the CPI to be a part of the DMK-led alliance. "We will continue to travel with the Left parties. The CPI sees the DMK, the AIADMK, and the TVK as democratic forces. We cannot be a part of the DMK-led alliance under the current circumstances," he said.

The Congress had withdrawn from the DMK-led alliance, and the DMK had said it was not part of the INDIA bloc, he said. "The VCK and the IUML are not there either. The current situation is not conducive for an alliance. In the coming days, when there are local body elections and other polls, the CPI will decide its stand," he added.

He said the TVK had emerged as a new democratic force, winning 108 constituencies in the 2026 Assembly election. The CPI decided to extend external support to the TVK government to back the verdict of



CPI Tamil Nadu secretary M. Veerapandian

the people as a political duty, he said.

As for the upcoming by-elections, he said that when the situation arose, the party would decide its stand. "We want to protect secularism. There is no private enmity with the BJP. The BJP and the RSS are the only forces we oppose politically. We will work with any party that joins us to protect the welfare of the workers and the State," he said.

Stand welcomed

Mr. Veerapandian said the CPI welcomed the TVK government's stand on the Thirupparankundram issue and the two-language policy. "The TVK government needs time, but should implement its electoral promises. However, it cannot take time to ensure law and order," he said.

Two from BJP, lone Congress candidate elected unopposed to Rajya Sabha from Rajasthan

Mohammed Iqbal
JAIPUR

Three candidates were elected unopposed to the Rajya Sabha from Rajasthan on Thursday following the expiry of deadline for withdrawal of nominations. Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) Satish Poonia and Alka Gurjar won two seats, while Congress candidate Neeraj Dangi secured the third seat.

Returning Officer Bharat Bhushan Sharma declared the three candidates elected to the Upper House, as no other nominee for any of the seats was in the fray. The number of validly nominated candidates was found equal to the number of seats to be filled.

All nine nomination papers filed by the three candidates were found valid during a scrutiny conducted at the State As-



BJP candidate Satish Poonia filing his nomination papers for Rajya Sabha election in the presence of CM Bhajanlal Sharma. FILE PHOTO

sembly earlier this week. The biennial election was held for three Rajya Sabha seats, as the terms of Mr. Dangi, the Congress MP, and BJP MPs Rajendra Gehlot and Ravneet Singh Bittu are set to end on June 21. The Opposition Congress renominated Mr. Dangi for a second consecutive term.

Mr. Sharma issued certificates of election to all three candidates. Though the voting for the Rajya Sabha election was sche-

duled for June 18, the polling became unnecessary as only three candidates contested an equal number of vacant seats.

Equal representation

With the unopposed election of three candidates, Rajasthan has now an equal representation of five Rajya Sabha MPs each from the ruling BJP and the Opposition Congress. The State has a total of 10 Rajya Sabha seats.

Three NDA candidates from three N-E States make it to Rajya Sabha

The Hindu Bureau
GUWAHATI

Three candidates of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) were elected unopposed to the Rajya Sabha from as many States in the Northeast on Thursday.

They are the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) Tai Tagak and Adhikarimayum Sharda Devi from Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur, and the National People's Party's (NPP) James Pangsang Kongkal Sangma from Meghalaya. Each of these States has one Rajya Sabha seat.

One of the oldest members of the BJP in Arunachal Pradesh, the 54-year-old Mr. Tagak will succeed incumbent Nabam Rebia, whose tenure will end on June 23.

Ms. Devi, 59, is among the oldest members of the BJP in Manipur and has

been shepherding the party's State unit since June 2021. A former teacher, she will succeed incumbent Maharaja Sanajaoba Leishemba, whose term in the Rajya Sabha ends on June 21.

CM's brother elected

A former Minister, Mr. James Sangma is the elder brother of NPP national president and Meghalaya Chief Minister Conrad K. Sangma. The BJP is a minor partner of the NPP in the Meghalaya Democratic Alliance government.

The Chief Minister congratulated his brother, a consensus candidate of the ruling alliance.

In Mizoram, K. Laltluangkima of the ruling Zoram People's Movement is pitted against lawyer-writer Zothansangi Hmar of the Mizo National Front. The election will be held on June 18.

Kharge, Pawan Khera among four unanimously elected to Rajya Sabha from Karnataka

The Hindu Bureau
BENGALURU

All the four candidates, who had filed their nominations for the Rajya Sabha elections from Karnataka, including AICC president Mallikarjun Kharge, have been declared unanimously elected.

Legislative Assembly Secretary M.K. Vishalakshi, the Returning Officer for the Rajya Sabha polls, issued a statement on Thursday declaring them as elected unanimously.

The other three candidates are - Pawan Khera, Mansoor Ali Khan, who had contested on Congress ticket, and M. Nagaraja, a BJP nominee.

The polling for these seats was scheduled to be held on June 18, in which the members of the Legislative Assembly were to exercise their franchise. Ho-



The four candidates are Mallikarjun Kharge, Pawan Khera, and Mansoor Ali Khan of the Congress, and M. Nagaraja of the BJP.

wever, the need for polling did not arise as there were only four candidates in the fray as against equal number of vacancies. June 11 was the deadline for withdrawal of nominations.

The biennial elections had been necessitated owing to the retirement of former Prime Minister H.D. Deve Gowda, Mr. Kharge, and BJP members Irrana Kadadi and Naraya-

na Koragappa on June 25.

However, the Council elections are set to witness a keen poll battle as eight candidates are fighting for seven seats. None of them withdrew from the contest on Thursday when the deadline ended.

While the Congress has fielded five candidates, the BJP has fielded two and the JD(S) too has fielded a candidate.

Telangana Cong. alleges 'dirty politics' in RS election

The Hindu Bureau
HYDERABAD

Telangana Pradesh Congress Committee working president T. Jagga Reddy on Thursday questioned the 'dirty' politics of the Bharatiya Janata Party to prevent senior Congress leader Meenakshi Natarajan from entering the Rajya Sabha.

Addressing a press conference here, Mr. Reddy said that Ms. Natarajan was deliberately targeted by the BJP during the Rajya Sabha election process in Madhya Pradesh. Rejection of her nomination is based on an unregistered case, he said, questioning the legitimacy of such a decision.

Congress's Praveen Chakravarty elected to Upper House for the lone vacant seat from Tamil Nadu

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI

Congress nominee Praveen Chakravarty was declared elected unopposed to the lone vacant Rajya Sabha seat from Tamil Nadu on Thursday.

The vacancy arose following the resignation of AIADMK leader C.Ve. Shanmugam from the Upper House on May 7 after he was elected to the Tamil Nadu Assembly.

The nominations of 12 other candidates were rejected during scrutiny on June 9. As the number of nominations accepted was equal to the number of vacancies, the Returning Officer for the byelection to the seat, P. Thenmozhi, de-



Congress leader Praveen Chakravarty with Congress and TVK leaders after being declared elected unopposed to the Rajya Sabha.

clared Mr. Chakravarty elected unopposed.

He will be the third Congress MP in the Rajya Sabha from Tamil Nadu. Former Union Finance Minister P. Chidambaram and Christopher Manickam are

the two others.

Though the Congress has only five MLAs in the Assembly, his election was facilitated by the TVK, which allotted the seat to the Congress, a post-poll ally.

Gurugram to rename 'garbage pickup fee' as 'sanitation charge'; residents call it 'extra tax'

The Hindu Bureau
GURUGRAM

After facing the ire of residents over 'garbage collection' charges in the 2026-27 property tax bills, the Municipal Corporation of Gurugram (MCG) is planning to continue collecting the levy after renaming it as 'sanitation charge'.

Gurugram Mayor Raj Rani told *The Hindu* that charges listed under 'garbage collection' will be called 'sanitation charge'. She said the revised head will cover all sanitation and cleaning work by the corporation, including road sweeping and sewage pipeline cleaning. The nomenclature will be updated on the MCG website, she said.

However, Sushant Lok I and II Residents' Welfare Association (RWA) presi-

Bills issued over the past few months have included garbage collection charges ranging from ₹200 to ₹600

dent Pawan Yadav termed the proposed sanitation charge an "extra tax" on residents. "Sanitation in the city is in a pathetic state, with garbage and debris scattered everywhere. Before imposing an additional burden on residents, the corporation should first ensure that the city is clean," he said.

Bills issued by the MCG over the past few months have included automated garbage collection charges ranging from ₹200 to ₹600. RWAs argue that the MCG does not provide re-

liable door-to-door collection or waste segregation in many sectors, which forces residents to hire private vendors for ₹100 to ₹200 per month.

'Inadequate service'

The RWAs have termed the civic body's garbage collection fee "double payment" for a service that they claim is either non-functional or inadequate across large parts of the city.

Gaurav Singla, a resident of Sector 43, said his property tax bill included the garbage collection fee despite the corporation not providing the service in his area. "We pay ₹100-150 a month to private vendors. Now, the MCG is also charging us without providing the service," he said.

Mr. Singla added that homeowners had little

choice but to pay as a 'No Dues Certificate' from the corporation is mandatory for property transactions.

DLF City RWA general secretary Manish Dhawan said the issue was brought to the attention of area councillor Jyotsana Yadav, who raised it in a House meeting, but no resolution had come out of it. "We get many messages on WhatsApp groups with residents raising this issue," he said.

Residents and RWAs have demanded that the MCG either roll back the charge in areas without the service or first ensure that door-to-door collection and segregation is carried out before imposing the levy. They have called the current billing "double taxation" on households that are already paying private vendors for waste pickup.

Efforts on to contain Nipah outbreak: Kerala Minister

Contact list of persons who might have interacted with the patient drawn up; no containment zone needed as none other than the patient had shown symptoms, says K. Muraleedharan

The Hindu Bureau
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

The Health Department in Kerala is maintaining maximum vigilance and taking all possible preventive measures to ensure that the current Nipah outbreak in Kozhikode is contained and that no nosocomial or human-to-human transmission of the virus occurs.

The patient, a 43-year-old man from Ramanattukara, who was transferred from a private hospital to the Government Medical College Hospital (MCH), Kozhikode on Wednesday with encephalitis symptoms, is stable and on ventilator support.

Health Minister K. Mura-



Health workers at the Nipah isolation ward at the Government Medical College Hospital in Kozhikode on Thursday. K. RAGESH

leedharan, who spoke to mediapersons in Thiruvananthapuram on Thursday, after holding a high-level meeting with Health and medical college officials, said that a contact list of 77 persons who might have closely interacted

13 at “high risk”, and 62 at low risk. He said that as of now, there was no need for earmarking a containment zone as none other than the patient had shown any symptoms.

The Health Department was preparing the patient’s route map, and he appeared to have visited several healthcare establishments from May 10 before reaching the Kozhikode medical college, Mr. Mura-leedharan said.

The Rapid Response Team in Kozhikode had met and adequate stocks of personal protection equipment and medicines were being made available. A control room has been opened at Kozhikode district medical administration’s office.

Bacillary dysentery cases rise in Kerala

The Hindu Bureau
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

More cases of shigellosis (bacillary dysentery), a highly contagious bacterial diarrhoeal disease caused by shigella, are being reported across Kerala, with a total of 34 cases reported in June alone.

Thiruvananthapuram has reported six cases, Kollam and Idukki one each, Alapuzha three, Malappuram and Kannur two each, Kozhikode 11 and Wayanad eight.

Three more children tested positive for shigellosis at Wayanad Mar Baselios HSS on Thursday, where around 514 children have shown symptoms of the infection. The results of seven more samples are awaited, Health Minister K. Muraleedharan said here on Thursday.

He said that 47 people are currently undergoing treatment in hospitals, both public and private, in Wayanad, while three people were hospitalised in Kozhikode and Thiruvananthapuram, and two others in Kollam.

Mr. Muraleedharan said that water samples from both the borewell as well as the well in Mar Baselios school had been sent for testing and that the well water was found to be highly contaminated.

Shigellosis is sporadically reported from all districts every year, with occasional outbreaks. Last year, a total of 133 cases had been reported, with zero deaths.

Shigellosis is a severe

form of diarrhoeal outbreak involving intestinal tissue invasion by the bacteria, causing highly infectious, bloody, and mucoid stools (bacillary dysentery) accompanied by high fever and severe abdominal cramps.

The infection spreads through contaminated water, food and contact from infected surfaces and is extremely infectious. Ingesting as few as 10 to 100 bacteria can cause an infection. It spreads rapidly via the fecal-oral route.

Precarious perch



Over the edge: A lorry hangs precariously over the edge after crashing into the railing of the Alexander Parambithara Bridge in Kochi, Kerala on Thursday. THULASI KAKKAT

Director Bharathiraja laid to rest with state honours

The Hindu Bureau
THENI

Film director Bharathiraja, who died in Chennai on Wednesday at the age of 84, was laid to rest at his farmhouse in Theni district of Tamil Nadu with full state honours on Thursday.

Scores of people from his native village began gathering in front of his farmhouse from as early as 6 a.m., when the mortal remains were brought by road from Chennai.

Many mourners wept inconsolably on seeing the body. The police had a tough time controlling the crowd.

At least 1,000 police personnel were deployed



Bidding farewell: Bharathiraja was laid to rest at his farmhouse in Theni district with a gun salute by the police. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

in and around the Ghat Road, and traffic was diverted in the vicinity.

Leaders of various political parties and members of cine-associations paid their last respects.

The villagers, who recalled their association with Bharathiraja, said he

Challenges loom for Karnataka govt. ahead of second Cabinet expansion

Nagesh Prabhu
BENGALURU

As the Congress government headed by D.K. Shivakumar prepares for the second phase of the Cabinet expansion, the biggest challenge before the Chief Minister is balancing competing political interests within the party.

The first round of the Cabinet formation triggered open dissent, suggesting that the next expansion could prove to be even more complicated.

Over a dozen Congress MLAs are already camping in New Delhi, meeting the party’s top leadership and lobbying for ministerial berths. Many of them view the upcoming expansion as a do-or-die opportunity.

CBI steps up investigation into Karur stampede

The Hindu Bureau
KARUR

After a lull of about three months, the CBI, which is probing the stampede in Karur that claimed 41 lives during a rally addressed by TVK president C. Joseph Vijay on September 27, 2025, has stepped up the investigation.

The CBI had questioned several persons, including Mr. Vijay, former DMK Minister V. Senthilbalaji, then Collector M. Thangavel and then Superintendent of Police Jose Thangaiiah. Mr. Vijay and Mr. Senthilbalaji appeared before CBI officials in New Delhi.

The investigation, which was progressing in a full-fledged manner till March, slowed down after the announcement of the Assembly election. The Circuit House in Karur, which is being used as the temporary office of the CBI since it took over the case on the orders of the Supreme Court, is once again witnessing hectic activity.

J&K Chief Minister raises Statehood demand with PM

The Hindu Bureau
SRINAGAR

Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Omar Abdullah raised the issue of Statehood with Prime Minister Narendra Modi at a meeting in Delhi on Thursday.

The National Conference (NC), which is currently in power in J&K, plans to hold a protest in Delhi on the first day of the upcoming monsoon session of Parliament to press for the restoration of Statehood for J&K.

Mr. Abdullah, in a post on X, said he called on Mr. Modi in Delhi “to discuss issues of importance to J&K, including the early return of Statehood, the state of the economy, pace of development, and promotion of tourism.”

NC president Farooq Abdullah, while speaking in Srinagar, said the party's constitutional struggle for the restoration of State-



Omar Abdullah

hood and rights will continue. He said all J&K's political parties were united on this demand. On the upcoming protest in Delhi, Mr. Abdullah said, “The NC does not intend to invite any party. We are going (to Delhi). Those who want to join can come. Unity on the issue of Statehood is the need of the hour.”

He said the J&K Lieutenant Governor, who is a nominee from Delhi, has most of the powers, which the elected government should have.

Two killed as violence flares up in Manipur; NPF office stormed

Unidentified gunmen kill a Kuki man and woman in Kamjong district's Kuluth village close to the Myanmar border; mob storms Naga People's Front office in Senapati over deaths of six Nagas, sets furniture and other properties on fire

The Hindu Bureau
GUWAHATI

Unidentified gunmen killed a Kuki man and a woman at a village in Kamjong district in Manipur early in the morning on Thursday after violence broke out in Senapati district over the alleged killing of six Nagas taken hostage on May 13.

Both districts are Naga-dominated.

Officials in the State's capital, Imphal, confirmed the death of two persons at Kamjong district's Kuluth village near the India-Myanmar border. At least two others were reported injured.

The Eastern Kuki Chiefs' Association said the attackers belonged to an armed Naga group.

“The attackers mercilessly set fire to seven houses,



Bodies, suspected to be of six Naga persons abducted on May 13, being brought to a mortuary in Imphal on Thursday. PTI

including the village church, causing extensive destruction to both private property and a sacred place of worship,” it said in a statement.

On the other hand, the Eastern Command Naga Village Guard blamed the attack on an armed Kuki group in conflict with

another Kuki extremist group over area domination along the International Border. The Naga organisation claimed that one of the Kuki groups was Myanmar-based.

On Wednesday night, a mob stormed the office of the Naga People's Front (NPF) in Senapati town,

and set its furniture and other properties on fire.

The NPF, a Nagaland-headquartered party, is an ally of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in Manipur. The regional party has five MLAs in the 60-member Manipur Assembly.

The mob vented its ire on the NPF office after the security forces recovered the bodies of six Liangmai Nagas, allegedly abducted by Kuki extremists after three Thadou tribal church leaders were gunned down in Kangpokpi district on May 13.

One of the reasons behind the storming of the NPF office was the perception that the party's key leader and Nagaland Chief Minister Neiphiu Rio played a key role in the release of 14 Kuki hostages by Nagas on Tuesday, without securing the release of the

six Nagas held captive by the Kukis.

The mortal remains of the six Nagas were recovered on Wednesday after nearly 24 hours of sustained search operations involving about 450 personnel of the Manipur Police, Central Reserve Police Force, and Assam Rifles.

24-hour shutdown

The United Naga Council called a 24-hour shutdown to protest the alleged killing of the six Naga men. The shutdown affected normal life in the Naga-inhabited areas on Thursday.

In Meitei-dominated Imphal, hundreds of protesters gathered outside the Jawaharlal Nehru Institute of Medical Sciences after the mortal remains of the six Nagas were taken there for post-mortem on Wednesday night.

‘No AFSPA in most of Northeast from 2027’

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI

Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Thursday said the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, or AFSPA, will be withdrawn from the entire Northeast next year, barring one or two States.

Speaking after signing a tripartite Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the Centre, Assam, and Nagaland on mineral and oil operations in the disputed Assam-Nagaland boundary areas, Mr. Shah said fewer areas being covered under AFSPA indicate peace in the region.

“I am confident that barring one or two States, we will withdraw AFSPA from the entire Northeast next year,” he said.

The Home Minister termed the MoU a “historic moment” and said it removed the last hurdle in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision of a developed Northeast.

France backs ‘Make in India’ in defence, signals new model for Rafale deal

Saurabh Trivedi
NEW DELHI

Ahead of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to France for the G7 Summit, French diplomatic sources on Thursday said the nation's future defence cooperation with India, including the proposed Rafale fighter jet deal, will be aligned with the ‘Make in India’ initiative and based on an equal partnership.

France has reiterated its commitment to India's ‘Make in India’ programme in the defence sector, signalling that the proposed procurement of 114 Rafale fighter jets for the Indian Air Force (IAF) would be structured differently from previous defence deals.

During the visit on June 13-14, Mr. Modi is scheduled to hold bilateral talks with French President Emmanuel Macron on the sidelines of the summit.

India is currently ad-



India is currently advancing a defence acquisition programme, at around ₹3.25 lakh crore, for 114 Rafale fighter aircraft. REUTERS

vancing a mega defence acquisition programme, estimated at around ₹3.25 lakh crore, for 114 Rafale fighter aircraft for the IAF.

According to French diplomatic sources, the proposed collaboration is being envisioned as a partnership based on co-development and industrial cooperation rather than a traditional client-vendor arrangement.

“The defence programmes developed jointly by France will be fully

aligned with India's ‘Make in India’ requirements,” a source said. The sources stressed that the partnership was based on an “equal-to-equal” approach.

Civil nuclear energy is expected to feature prominently in discussions between Mr. Macron and Mr. Modi. French officials expressed optimism about the prospects of enhanced cooperation in the nuclear sector, citing recent legislative reforms in India.

SC agrees to hear plea by Meenakshi Natarajan today

Aaratrika Bhaumik
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court will hear on Friday a plea filed by Congress leader Meenakshi Natarajan challenging the rejection of her nomination papers for the Rajya Sabha election in Madhya Pradesh.

A Bench of Justices Prashant Kumar Mishra and A.S. Chandurkar agreed to take up the matter following an oral request by senior advocate Abhishek Singhvi. The Bench, however, declined to grant any interim relief preventing the declaration of the election result, observing that courts should ordinarily not intervene once the electoral process has commenced.

“Sorry, we cannot. We are posting it tomorrow, subject to clearance of all defects,” the Bench told Mr. Singhvi, who urged the court to pass an interim order preventing the authori-

ties from declaring the result pending adjudication of the plea.

The move came amid concerns raised by the Congress that Thursday was the final day for withdrawal of nominations. The party said with Ms. Natarajan out of the fray, the BJP candidates could be elected unopposed after the withdrawal deadline expired. “Today is the last day of withdrawal. They are technically entitled to declare the result after the deadline to withdraw nomination ends later today because it would be unopposed,” Mr. Singhvi said.

Contending that the rejection of Ms. Natarajan's nomination was legally untenable, senior counsel argued that the criminal proceedings relied upon by the Returning Officer (RO) had not advanced to the stage where a competent court had taken cognisance of the complaint.

One year since AI-171 crash, pilot body questions delay in release of final report

Jagriti Chandra
NEW DELHI

On the first anniversary of Air India flight AI-171 crash in Ahmedabad, the Federation of Indian Pilots has questioned the delay in releasing the final investigation report. It urged authorities not to publish an incomplete interim report, warning that it could add to confusion and speculation on the cause of the accident.

“We are at one year since the crash. Why is the AAIB [Aircraft Accident Investigation Bureau] unable to investigate a flight of 32 seconds,” the federation's president C.S. Randhawa asked at a press conference in Ahmedabad.

The June 2025 incident claimed 261 lives – 242 on board and 19 on the ground.

A preliminary investigation report found that the aircraft's fuel control



Captain C.S. Randhawa

switches had moved to the cut-off position, interrupting fuel supply to the engines moments before the crash. While the report stopped short of determining whether the switch movement was the result of a deliberate action or inadvertently done or a technical malfunction, it included a brief cockpit exchange between the plane's two pilots that has triggered widespread speculation on the cause of the accident.

Pilot associations have condemned the inclusion

of the excerpt, arguing that it has contributed to the building of a narrative around pilot involvement before the investigation reached a definitive conclusion.

On Thursday, Mr. Randhawa warned that an incomplete, interim report could cause more confusion. “If there are no conclusive findings, we have asked the government to wait until the probe is concluded and publish the final report,” he added.

Analysis under way

Government officials said an interim report on the Air India AI-171 crash would be released soon. They added that analysis of data from the aircraft's engines, manufactured by U.S.-based General Electric, was still under way at the manufacturer's facilities in the U.S., contributing to the delay in releasing the final report.

Modi tells States to harness power of AI, prepare for El Nino's impact

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday asked the States to balance the opportunities of artificial intelligence with safeguards against emerging social challenges, such as cyberfraud and drug abuse, while warning of risks posed by El Nino conditions and calling for stronger water conservation measures.

Chairing the 11th Governing Council Meeting of NITI Aayog, Mr. Modi noted that at a time when many major economies were facing uncertainty and economic challenges, India's growth story continued to inspire the world.

He emphasised the need to strengthen the nation's resolve towards self-reliance and highlighted the importance of adopting and implementing global best practices, particularly in the renewable energy sector. Referring to India's recently concluded



Prime Minister Narendra Modi speaks during the 11th meeting of the Governing Council of NITI Aayog, in New Delhi on Thursday. ANI

trade agreements with several countries, Mr. Modi asked the States to create opportunities for youth and MSMEs and equip stakeholders to effectively leverage benefits from these agreements.

Cooperative federalism

Underscoring the importance of cooperative federalism, Mr. Modi stated that the Centre and States must work together to achieve the goal of a Viksit Bharat, according to an official statement. He stressed that

the vision of Viksit Bharat should become the collective resolve of every State, district, block and village. In his remarks, he highlighted the need for coordinated efforts to address emerging social challenges, such as drug abuse and cyberfraud, through preventive measures, awareness campaigns and effective governance.

Highlighting the importance of good governance, transparency, and infrastructure for attracting investment, Modi asked

states to focus on branding, ease of doing business, and emerging opportunities in sectors such as data centres and artificial intelligence.

Mr. Modi said the focus should also be on next-generation manufacturing. He further said that AI should be viewed as an opportunity and called for greater efforts to equip people with the skills required for the future economy.

All CMs attend meet

The day-long meeting was attended by all 28 States and 5 Union Territories. It is the first time that the Chief Ministers of all 28 states participated in the annual meeting.

Mr. Modi termed India's 70 crore youth its asset, and urged States to transform this “demographic dividend into development dividend”. According to the statement, the Chief Ministers/Lt.-Governors/Administrators congratulated Mr. Modi on completing 12 years in his office.

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI

Balancing a call for greater State autonomy with an assurance of cooperation, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister C. Joseph Vijay said on Thursday that his government would work constructively with the Centre even while safeguarding the State's interests and aspirations.

In his debut address at the 11th Governing Council meeting of NITI Aayog chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New Delhi, Mr. Vijay said Tamil Nadu wholeheartedly supported the nation's aspirations and believed a developed India could be built only through empowered States, cooperative federalism, and inclusive development. “The people of Tamil Nadu have entrusted our government with a historic mandate founded on transparent governance, social justice, inclusive growth, youth empowerment, and equitable



C. Joseph Vijay

able development. We remain committed to working constructively with the Union government while firmly safeguarding the interests and aspirations of Tamil Nadu,” he said.

The Chief Minister demanded the early release of pending funds under Samagra Shiksha Scheme, amounting to ₹3,284 crore, without any condition and without linking them to the implementation of the National Education Policy or insisting on the three-language policy.

He urged the Centre to

provide the committed Central government assistance of ₹2,283.40 crore for the Hogenakkal Phase-III Combined Water Supply Scheme and permit employment generation activities under VB-G RAM-G for the State government's rural housing schemes.

He made it clear that Tamil Nadu opposed the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test (NEET) for admission to undergraduate medical and dental courses, as its introduction had adversely affected students from rural and socio-economically disadvantaged families. He urged the Centre to permit Tamil Nadu to fill all the seats under the State quota in the MBBS, BDS, and AYUSH courses solely on the basis of Class XII marks.

He also sought the declaration of the ISRO's Space Manufacturing Hub at Kulasekarapattinam, established with IN-SPACE, as a National Space Manufacturing Hub, facilitating end-to-end manufacture of

propellants and launch vehicles, among other products, and helping the nation tap into the global space economy. Mr. Vijay also requested the establishment of a second AI-IMS in Tamil Nadu at Coimbatore, for which, he said, the State government would give the land.

He envisaged a Youth Skill and Employment Mission under which five lakh youth would annually receive stipend-supported internships and industry-linked training in emerging technologies at the district level. He urged the Centre to protect the traditional fishing rights of Indian fishermen in the Palk Bay and guarantee their safety and security and secure the release of their fishing boats from Sri Lanka's custody. Mr. Vijay also sought enhanced support for permanent flood mitigation infrastructure in coastal cities and a Comprehensive Disaster Management Mission aimed at zero casualties.

Lalu Prasad celebrates 79th birthday with family, party

Amarnath Tewary
PATNA

Days after Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) chief Lalu Prasad returned from Singapore, the former Bihar Chief Minister celebrated his 79th birthday at his wife Rabri Devi's official residence on Thursday amongst family members and some party leaders. Extending his greetings, Chief Minister Samrat Choudhary wished Mr. Prasad a "healthy, long and illustrious life".

"Heartfelt birthday wishes to the former CM of Bihar, Lalu Prasad Yadav ji. I pray to the lord for your healthy, long and illustrious life," Mr. Choudhary posted on X. DMK president and former Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin too greeted Mr. Prasad in a social media post saying: "Warm birthday wishes to RJD president Thiru@LaluPrasadRJD. Your consistent defence of secularism and social justice remains an inspiration to democratic and progressive forces across the country..". Several other leaders also wished Mr. Prasad.

Loyalist Kalyan hits out at Abhishek, calls him 'arrogant'

Shrabana Chatterjee
KOLKATA

Trinamool Congress MP and senior leader Kalyan Banerjee lashed out at party general secretary Abhishek Banerjee on Thursday, calling him "arrogant". He also gave an ultimatum to Trinamool supremo Mamata Banerjee, asking her to choose between him and Mr. Abhishek. His remarks came amid the escalating crisis in the party.

A senior advocate, Mr. Kalyan said he would remove himself from all legal matters involving Mr. Abhishek. Mr. Kalyan was representing the Diamond Harbour MP at the Calcutta High Court in the signature forgery case.

"Henceforth, I will not be appearing in any matter for Abhishek Banerjee. I do not like this arrogant attitude. One must respect their seniors, I have 45 years of experience in this profession... How can he insult me," Mr. Kalyan asked after giving up Mr. Abhishek's case.

He also said that another legal counsel of Mr. Abhishek had filed a separate writ petition on the same issue and that he was taken aback by the development. He said had he known

Cong. to mount legal, political battle over rejection of Rajya Sabha papers

Party calls the issue a case of 'seat *chori*' by 'the BJP-EC *jugalbandi*'; the party plans a nation-wide agitation on inflation, unemployment, NEET paper leak, CBSE OSM row, and other issues; protest campaign likely to begin by the end of June

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Congress on Thursday said it would challenge the rejection of its Madhya Pradesh candidate Mee-nakshi Natarajan's nomination for the Rajya Sabha election legally and politically. It also announced a nationwide campaign on issues such as inflation, unemployment, the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test-Undergraduate (NE ET-UG) and other paper leaks, and the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) On-Screen Marking (OSM) controversy.

The decision was taken at a meeting of the party's top leadership, presided over by Congress chief Mallikarjun Kharge and attended by Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi, party general secretaries K.C. Venugopal, Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, and Jairam Ramesh and other leaders. In a post



Protest rite: Congress workers perform 'Sadbuddhi Yagya' in Bikaner over the Rajya Sabha nomination controversy. ANI

on X, Mr. Gandhi called the candidacy issue a case of seat *chori* [theft] and said that it is easier to fix elections with the help of the Election Commission rather than win them. "After vote *Chori* and *Sarkar Chori* – the BJP-EC *jugalbandi* [tie-up] has finished the contest before it has even begun with Seat *Chori*."

'Differential treatment'
"Congress candidate Mee-nakshi Natarajanji submitted every document. No pending cases. The EC can-

celled her nomination on a frivolous BJP objection. Parnal Nathwanji, the BJP-backed Independent, got his own name wrong on the form and skipped multiple mandatory disclosures. The EC gave him an extension to fix everything," he said. The Opposition leader added that the same EC treated two candidates very differently.

"One was disqualified without even a hearing. The other was rewarded despite not following the rules," Mr. Gandhi said.

Soon, the 60-odd Congress MLAs from Madhya Pradesh are likely to launch a protest against the decision of the Returning Officer in New Delhi.

In a post on X, Mr. Kharge said the country was facing serious challenges, including inflation, unemployment, examination scandals and social inequality. "Paper leaks in NEET and various recruitment exams, along with controversies related to the education system, have shaken the trust of millions of youth and their families..." he said.

New campaign in talks
"Today, unfortunately, we see that those institutions and systems which took decades to build are being deliberately weakened. Therefore, our responsibility is not only toward political struggle, but also toward safeguarding India's Constitution, democracy, and social justice," Mr. Kharge said.

The party has drawn up

a list of issues which would be highlighted in a three-four-month-long campaign. Though the exact modalities are being worked out, the campaign is expected to start by the end of June.

Mr. Gandhi is said to have urged his colleagues to stand with the people, telling them that price rise, fuel shortage, paper leaks are because of "wrong policies" of the Prime Minister. Ms. Vadra reportedly said the party should focus on a targeted campaign.

Addressing a press conference with Mr. Ramesh after the nearly three-hour meeting, Mr. Venugopal described recent developments in Madhya Pradesh and Jharkhand as a matter of "great worry".

Calling the Madhya Pradesh episode "seat *chori*", he said the developments reflected the "pathetic condition of Indian democracy". "Today's meeting discussed

INBRIEF



CBI brings back two fugitives from Georgia and Thailand

The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) has facilitated the return of two fugitives from Georgia and Thailand through Interpol channels and in coordination with the ministries of external and home affairs. In the first case, accused Vainket Garg (in picture) was wanted by the Haryana Police in multiple cases of murder, attempted murder, extortion, organised crime and possession of legal arms. He was brought from Georgia to India on Thursday. The second case is related to Ganesh Balaso Kale, who was deported from Thailand. He was wanted in connection with cybercrime fraud.

Navy recovers unexploded missile warhead from tanker

The Navy has successfully carried out a complex and high-risk operation to recover and safely dispose of an unexploded missile warhead from a crude oil tanker that was en route to Kochi after suffering damage off the coast of Oman. It said that the Marshall Islands-flagged tanker *MT Olympic Life*, sailing from Fujairah in the UAE to Kochi, reported an explosion in its hull on May 26. The vessel informed authorities about the presence of an unexploded ordnance onboard. Upon receiving information, the Navy launched a coordinated response. The recovered ordnance has since been transported to a secure facility.

U.S. attacks third ship with Indian seafarers, crew safe

External Affairs Ministry says ‘deeply worried’ by attacks but blames conflict in the region; U.S. Centcom says missiles were fired into *Galveer*’s engine room as directions were not complied with

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI/NEW DELHI

U.S. forces attacked a merchant ship carrying Indian seafarers for the third time in four days. Thursday’s attack was on Guinea-Bissau flagged bitumen carrier *Galveer* off the port of Shinas, Oman.

The vessel had 20 Indian seafarers, and they were safe, said Mukesh Mangal, Additional Secretary of the Ports, Shipping and Waterways Ministry. “As per the latest information, evacuation [of crew] to Shinas port has commenced,” Mr. Mangal said at an inter-ministerial briefing on Thursday.

On Wednesday, the External Affairs Ministry had summoned the U.S. Chargé d’affaires Jason Meeks and lodged a “strong protest” regarding the attacks.

On Thursday, the Ministry, while emphasising that the “attacks came from the U.S. Navy stationed there”, described the strikes as “deeply worrisome” but blamed them on the ongoing conflict between U.S.-Israel and Iran in the re-



The commercial vessel *Galveer* attacked off the coast of Oman on Thursday. FORWARD SEAMEN’S UNION OF INDIA/ANI

gion. U.S. Centcom has said in a statement that two Hellfire missiles were fired into *Galveer*’s engine room after the “crew repeatedly failed to comply with directions from U.S. forces”. The ship was attacked for “attempting to transport Iranian oil.”

Galveer’s safety manager is an Indian company located in Chembur, Mumbai, as per the Equasis database.

U.S. aircraft attacked Palau-flagged tankers *Mari-veer* and *Settebello* on Monday and Wednesday, respectively. Three Indian seafarers on *Settebello* died

in the attack, which the Indian government confirmed on Thursday.

The three attacks have targeted the engine rooms of the ships and sometimes the steering compartment but above the waterline. This would render the ship without the means to move or manoeuvre but not sink it. The Directorate General of Shipping had issued an advisory mid-February asking seafarer recruiters and shipowners not to deploy seafarers on ships calling on Iranian ports. An official source said the crew onboard the three vessels had joined before

the advisory was issued.

Family members of seafarer Aditya Sharma (23), a deck cadet on *Settebello* who was among the dead, urged the government of Himachal Pradesh, where they live, and the Centre to get his body back to the native Galore village in Hamirpur so that his last rites could be performed. Sharma was planning to visit home in May but decided to extend his stay at the vessel for a month, they said.

The official spokesperson of the External Affairs Ministry Randhir Jaiswal said efforts are under way to bring back the mortal remains of the dead.

Condemning the attacks, the Congress said in a statement that PM Narendra Modi had “repeatedly showcased his personal rapport with President Donald Trump as a diplomatic achievement” and that Mr. Modi should “not evade responsibility when that relationship fails to protect Indian lives and interests.”

(Inputs from Kallol Bhattacharjee, M. Kalyanaraman and PTI)

IIT-K hires hacker who flagged CBSE ‘vulnerabilities’

Maitri Porecha
NEW DELHI

The Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur, (IIT-K) has hired the 19-year-old ethical hacker, Nisarga Adhikary, who exposed ‘critical vulnerabilities’ in Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE)’s IT ecosystem.

Mr. Adhikary will work as an ‘OSINT and threat intelligence engineer’ in C3iHub, a not-for-profit Section 8 company housed in IIT-K. Founded six years ago, C3iHub employs 200 persons of whom 170-180 are engineers.

On his visit to Delhi earlier in June as part of the IIT expert team to strengthen the CBSE portals for re-evaluation and on-screen marking, IIT-K Director Manindra Agarwal met with Mr. Adhikary and his parents.

A team of cybersecurity experts, including Mr. Agarwal, sought to understand the teenager’s take on critical vulnerabilities in the CBSE portals which led to leaking of sensitive student data such as answer scripts.

“I helped the IIT expert member team with securi-

ty audits. They asked me to find vulnerabilities in the new post-result portal and I helped them,” Mr. Adhikary said.

New course

Mr. Agarwal told *The Hindu* that Mr. Adhikary “will be able to expand his knowledge base and work on various projects alongside experts of all kinds looking after

HEALTH

Contraceptive use and the weight women carry: insights from NFHS-6

India must invest in policies that move contraceptive use from compliance to choice: this will involve ensuring no girl is married before the age of 18, investing in rural secondary education, and increasing access to reversible scientific contraception methods

Trishna Sarkar
C. Saratchand

Reproductive agency, the power to decide whether, when, and how to bear children is a vital and necessary component of women's empowerment, and yet, is often not taken into account when metrics of income, education, mobility and political representation are analysed. India's demographic transition, as reflected in the latest round of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-6, 2023-24), besides revealing incremental changes in health indicators, also signals a structural shift in the domain of reproductive agency. Contraception, once framed primarily as an instrument of population control, is increasingly emerging as a marker of women's reproduction agency.

History of contraceptive use
India's engagement with contraception dates back to 1952, when it became the first country to launch an official family planning programme but with women bearing a disproportionate share of the required responsibility. The following data, drawn from the NFHS-6 (2023-24) survey of currently married women aged 15- 49 years, maps the reproductive and contraceptive landscape across urban and rural India, and against the NFHS-5 baseline: A striking finding in the NFHS-6 data is the persistence of early marriage. Nationally, 20.1% of women aged 20-24 was married before the age of 18, with the rural figure reaching 23.3% – unchanged from NFHS-5. Among men, 15.9% aged 25-29 were married before 21. These trends are not only legal failures, they are also healthcare setbacks. A girl married before she has had the opportunity to complete secondary education or enter the paid workforce, confronts a significantly extended reproductive window. When contraceptive access is limited, awareness of healthcare attenuated, or agency within the family is negligible, unhealthy pregnancies, unsustainably more births, and heightened maternal and child health risk are the consequences. The data bears this out: 6.7% of women aged 15-19 were already mothers or pregnant at the time of the survey rising to 7.9% in rural areas. From a public health standpoint, early marriage is not merely a social problem, it is a reproductive health emergency with lifelong consequences. Girls married young are less likely to know their contraceptive options, less likely to be able to negotiate their use, and more likely to undergo less spaced-out pregnancies. The cumulative physiological burden of anaemia, obstetric complications and maternal mortality is concentrated precisely in this



Reproductive rights: India's engagement with contraception dates back to 1952, when it became the first country to launch an official family planning programme but with women bearing a disproportionate share of the required responsibility. FILE PHOTO

demographic. Yet policy conversations about fertility routinely overlook the role of early marital unions, seeking to unsuccessfully treat the symptom (high fertility) while ignoring the structural cause (constrained reproductive agency). The rural-urban divide in these figures is striking. Urban women tend to marry later, complete more schooling, and are exposed to a broader suite of contraceptive options. Rural women face the inverse: earlier marital unions, relatively less agency, and a healthcare infrastructure that, as we shall see, defaults to unattainable permanent solutions rather than investing in what is relevant: public healthcare.

On sterilisation
Female sterilisation remains the dominant contraceptive method in India, accounting for 36.5% of all contraceptive use nationally and is as high as 38.1% in rural areas. Male sterilisation, by contrast, stands at a negligible 0.5%. This gargantuan skew is the consequence of policy design and gender disempowerment. The NFHS-6 data also shows a modest decline in female sterilisation from 37.9% (NFHS-5) to 36.5%, alongside a sharp rise in traditional method use (from 10.3% to 16.4%) and a slight decline in modern reversible methods (from 56.4% to 52.7%). Read together, these trends suggest that some women are able to step back from sterilisation – but into informal, less

Female sterilisation remains the dominant contraceptive method, accounting for 36.5% of all contraceptive use nationally and is as high as 38.1% in rural areas

medically supported methods rather than towards reversible scientific methods that would authentically enhance reproductive autonomy. Female sterilisation in India's public health system has a troubled history. The mass sterilisation camps epitomised by the Bilaspur tragedy of 2014, in which 13 women died following a single-day mass sterilisation drive are not aberrations but logical consequences of a system that treats women's reproductive capacity as a population management problem to be solved at scale, cheaply and rapidly. Tubectomies and sterilisation surgeries done in rural government hospitals can sometimes be risky – these facilities are overcrowded, staff are not always well-trained, and the focus is on performing as many procedures as possible rather than on scientific patient care. Women who go through these surgeries can get infections, complications from maladministered anaesthesia or failed procedures resulting in increased morbidity. Most women are compelled to access what they can afford, namely underfunded public healthcare. Most women undergoing such procedures

are not empowered to make an informed choice due to their being at the short end of the stick of the social reproduction and social production processes.

Towards reproductive agency
An analysis of the NFHS-6 data demonstrates that contraception in India is no longer merely about limiting births, but about enabling reproductive agency by overcoming the underlying unequal social architecture. Three policy imperatives follow from such an analysis. First, early marriage must be addressed as a reproductive health crisis by retaining girls in school, fully implementing the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act and investing in rural secondary education for girls. Second, policy must pivot from unsustainable permanent methods of contraception toward increasing access for reversible scientific contraception through augmenting community based public healthcare. Third, the diminishing of the gender skew in contraception must become a programmatic priority of policy. Sustainable demographic transition presupposes reproductive agency of women. (Dr. Trishna Sarkar is faculty at the department of economics, Dr. BhimRao Ambedkar College, University of Delhi. trishna.sarkar@gmail.com; Prof C. Saratchand is faculty at the the department of economics, Satyawati College, University of Delhi chandsarat@gmail.com.)

THE GIST

Contraception, once framed primarily as an instrument of population control, is increasingly emerging as a marker of women's reproduction agency

When contraceptive access is limited, awareness of healthcare attenuated, or agency within the family is negligible, unhealthy pregnancies, unsustainably more births, and heightened maternal and child health risk are the consequences

An analysis of the NFHS-6 data demonstrates that contraception in India is no longer merely about limiting births, but about enabling reproductive agency by overcoming the underlying unequal social architecture

SNIPPETS

Latest updates from the world of health

Ingredient for sunscreen



Reuters

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration on Tuesday said it added bemotrizinol to its list of permitted active ingredients, marking the first new UV (Ultraviolet) filter to be cleared for over-the-counter sunscreens since the late 1990s. Bemotrizinol helps protect against both ultraviolet A and B rays and has low levels of absorption through the skin into the body, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration said.

Support fund to fight Ebola



Reuters

The U.S. State Department said on Wednesday it would provide an additional \$20 million to help fight the Ebola outbreak in Africa, bringing its total direct support to more than \$220 million. The money will support preparedness efforts in Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, and South Sudan, including for national emergency operations centres, as well as surveillance, testing, border screening and infection prevention and control.

AI dolls for loneliness



Agence France-Presse

Many older South Koreans are battling loneliness. The country has low birth rates and almost half the population is 50 or older. In 2024, it recorded more than 3,920 "lonely deaths", people dying alone and remaining undiscovered for extended periods. To combat this, authorities are providing AI care devices – some designed to detect signs of lonely deaths – to seniors living alone for companionship and safety-monitoring.

Misconceptions continue to deter men from getting vasectomies, say experts

Athira Elssa Johnson

According to the findings of the sixth National Family Health Survey (NFHS-6), India's Total Fertility Rate (TFR) has remained at 2.0 children per woman, below the replacement level of 2.1. The survey also points to improved access to family planning services, with the contraceptive prevalence rate increasing from 66.7% in NFHS-5 to 69.1%. The burden of contraception, however, continues to remain shouldered largely by women. Sterilisation, accounts for a significant chunk of contraception methods used in India. As per NFHS-6, male sterilisation (vasectomy) remains at a dismal 0.5%, barely a change from 0.3% in NFHS-5. Experts say misconceptions surrounding vasectomy continue to discourage men from taking a more active role in family planning, placing a disproportionate share of the burden on women. A study published in the journal *BMJ Sexual & Reproductive Health* found that fears about loss of libido and physical weakness, social stigma, poor awareness and health system barriers continue to impede acceptance of vasectomy among married men in India, with uptake declining from 3.31% in the early 1990s. Experts note that vasectomy is a simple, safe and highly effective long term contraceptive method that does not affect sexual performance or libido, contrary to these widespread myths. One of the most persistent

A study published in the journal BMJ Sexual & Reproductive Health found that fears about loss of libido and physical weakness, social stigma, poor awareness and health system barriers continue to impede acceptance of vasectomy among married men in India

misconceptions surrounding vasectomy is that it diminishes sexual function. However, there is no evidence to support these claims. N. Ragavan, senior consultant-urologist, Apollo Hospitals, Chennai, said the belief is cultural and has no clinical basis. "Fertility should not be tied to misconceptions that equate a man's reproductive capacity with his masculinity as though fewer sperm somehow mean less manhood," he said, adding that vasectomy does not affect testosterone levels or sexual drive. The procedure merely involves blocking the sperm-carrying tube and does not interfere with blood supply to the testes or their normal function. It has nothing to do with libido or erectile function, he said. Muthu Veeramani, director and senior consultant, urology, SIMS Hospital, Chennai, added that studies have consistently shown that vasectomy does not affect testosterone production, sexual desire or sexual performance. Experts also sought to dispel the notion that vasectomy is a major surgery associated with serious health risks.

Vasantharaja Ramasamy, senior consultant, urology, MGM Malar Hospital, Chennai, said the procedure is usually carried out under local anaesthesia. After identifying the vas deferens (sperm duct) through palpation, a small incision is made and the tube is divided and sealed to prevent reconnection. Patients are discharged within a few hours and can resume routine activities after a couple of days, although heavy physical activity should be avoided for about a week.

Myths from social media
Doctors also rejected several myths circulating on social media, including claims that vasectomy causes obesity, cancer, infections or long-term health complications. Dr. Ragavan said there was no indication that the procedure increased the risk of obesity or cancer, and no scientific evidence to support such claims. Despite being simpler and less invasive than female sterilisation, vasectomy continues to have low acceptance, especially in India. One major concern among men is that vasectomy is irreversible and could lead to regrets later in life. Experts emphasise that recanalisation procedures performed within three years of vasectomy have success rates exceeding 90%. Additionally, advances in microscopic surgery have improved outcomes when reversals are undertaken after proper counselling. Greater male participation in reproductive health, doctors noted, would make reproductive healthcare more equitable. (athira.elssa@thehindu.co.in)



Low

The rejection of the papers of Congress Rajya Sabha candidate is fraudulent

The rejection of Congress leader Mee-nakshi Natarajan's nomination for the Ra-
jya Sabha election from Madhya Pradesh
raises questions of institutional integrity and pro-
cedural fairness, going beyond the fate of a single
candidate. The Supreme Court has agreed to
hear the matter on Friday. Meanwhile, all three
BJP candidates have been declared elected unop-
posed, raising further questions on the neutrality
and fairness of the process. Ms. Natarajan's nom-
ination was rejected by the Returning Officer
(RO) following objections that she had failed to
disclose a pending criminal case in Hyderabad in
her election affidavit. As the All-India Congress
Committee (AICC) in-charge of Telangana, she
was named as one of the respondents in a private
complaint filed by a former Telugu Desam Party
corporator before the court of the Additional Me-
tropolitan Magistrate, Hyderabad, in 2025. The
complaint was not even against Ms. Natarajan; it
was against another Congress leader for alleged
inappropriate behaviour and criminal intimidat-
ion, and she was mentioned in the petition for
allegedly not taking appropriate action against
the leader. There is no criminal FIR by the Telan-
gana police against Ms. Natarajan. Unlike a con-
ventional police case, a private complaint origi-
nates directly before a court. The court had
issued notices to the persons named in the com-
plaint, including Ms. Natarajan.

The RO's decision to use this as grounds for the
rejection of the nomination reeks of extreme ar-
bitrariness, and even a conspiracy. The law re-
garding the disclosure of cases is unambiguous.
Section 33A of the Representation of the People
Act requires disclosure only of those cases that
carry a punishment of two years or more and,
above all, only of those cases in which charges
have been framed. Framing of charges is a judi-
cial step, which follows the filing of a charge
sheet. The RO's position that material facts had
been concealed and the nomination papers were
incomplete is not merely a misinterpretation of
the law, but an insult to common sense. Going
by that logic, a candidate could be disqualified for
failing to list notices of traffic violations too. The
disclosure regime has been designed to ensure
transparency regarding candidates' criminal an-
tecedents and pending cases. What makes Ms.
Natarajan's case starkly arbitrary is that in the
same election cycle, another candidate was
asked by the RO to amend the affidavits to meet
mandatory requirements. The Election Commis-
sion of India has the sacred constitutional duty of
ensuring free and fair elections. It is failing in that
duty, damaging democracy in the process. The
capture of a Rajya Sabha seat by the ruling BJP in
complete disregard for the law is a severe setback
for election integrity.

Fair and square

T.N. Assembly Speaker is going by the letter and spirit of Tenth Schedule

Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly Speaker
J.C.D. Prabhakar has followed democratic
principles by deciding not to pursue dis-
qualification proceedings against 21 AIADMK
MLAs after the party's general secretary, Edappadi
K. Palaniswami, condoned the actions of the
rebel legislators. Contrary to their party's whip,
the MLAs had supported the Tamilaga Vettri Kaz-
hagam (TVK)-led government during the trust
vote on May 13. Mr. Prabhakar also stood by his
assurance, made on May 24, that his eventual de-
cision would demonstrate his impartiality. Ac-
tually, 25 MLAs of the Dravidian major had violat-
ed the party's directive and favoured the new
regime but four of them including two women le-
gislators subsequently resigned their seats. This
is why the Speaker's action pertained only to 21
MLAs, after receiving letters from Mr. Palaniswa-
mi stating that he had condoned the dissidents'
violation of the party whip. As the official group
and the rebels reached a truce on May 27, the
AIADMK chief decided to condone the dissidents'
actions within 15 days from the date of such vot-
ing, as prescribed under the Tenth Schedule and
the Tamil Nadu Assembly's disqualification rules.
Notwithstanding Mr. Prabhakar's track record
as a non-controversial politician, many won-
dered whether he would act fairly, given that Mr.
Palaniswami and his colleagues are political ad-
versaries of TVK. Besides, Tamil Nadu has not
been free from the unfortunate tendency of As-
sembly Speakers acting in a partisan manner.
P.H. Pandian, who served as Speaker from 1985
to 1989, had even said that the presiding officer of
the Assembly possessed "sky-high powers". The
discretionary powers enshrined in the Tenth
Schedule of the Constitution, which deals with
defection, have been used by Speakers in various
States for the wrong reasons. By dropping the
proceedings against the 21 dissidents, Mr. Prabha-
kar has upheld constitutional morality. However,
he should have initiated disqualification proceed-
ings against the four others before accepting their
resignation. The Assembly Secretariat also duly
notified that vacancies had arisen in the four con-
stituencies, following which the election authori-
ties advised the District Election Officers to ap-
point Returning Officers. Mr. Prabhakar rightly
went by Mr. Palaniswami's submission wherein
only the names of 21 MLAs were mentioned, and
decided to pursue the matter against the other
four. But, this will be of a purely technical nature
as the bar is only on disqualified members be-
coming Ministers before getting elected again.
Even as Mr. Prabhakar's next course of action is
awaited, it is a healthy sign that he has so far de-
monstrated fairness in dealing with the petitions
seeking disqualification.

The Foreign Contribution (Regulation)
Amendment (FCRA) Bill, 2026,
introduced in the Lok Sabha on March
25, 2026, is far more than a routine
regulatory measure. While presented as a step
towards greater transparency and national
security, it significantly increases executive
power, transforming the FCRA from a law
regulating foreign funding into one that enables
extensive state control over non-governmental
organisations (NGOs), charitable trusts, and
educational and religious institutions.

From oversight to overreach

The current FCRA regime was already among the
most stringent regulations governing civil society
in any democracy. The 2020 amendments
imposed strict restrictions: requiring all foreign
contributions to pass through a single bank
branch (State Bank of India) in New Delhi,
reducing administrative expenditure limits from
50% to 20%, banning sub-granting to smaller
organisations, and expanding suspension powers.
These measures alone devastated thousands of
NGOs, particularly smaller faith-based and
charitable bodies serving marginalised groups.

The 2026 Bill goes much further. By
introducing a new Chapter IIIA (and removing
the previous Section 15) and replacing existing
asset-management provisions, it creates a
framework for the government to seamlessly vest
organisational assets and properties without
compensation or management. Its most troubling
provision is the proposed Section 14B, which
introduces automatic "cessation" of FCRA
registration. An organisation could lose its
registration not only if renewal is denied but also
if it fails to apply on time or if renewal remains
pending. This effectively allows institutions to be
paralysed through procedural delays rather than
proven misconduct

Should India incentivise bigger families?



Aparajita Chattopadhyay

Professor at the International Institute for Population Sciences



Neelanjan Sircar

Political scientist teaching at Ahmedabad University

PARLEY

For decades, Indian policymakers have encouraged population control, with the familiar slogan of ‘Hum Do, Humare Do’ (We two, our two). However, the recent drop in India’s Total Fertility Rate (TFR) – the average number of children a woman would have in her lifetime – has now dropped to 1.9, below the replacement rate of 2.1, with some southern States seeing their TFR drop to 1.3. Last month, Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu announced cash incentives of ₹30,000 and ₹40,000 to women having their third and fourth child respectively, in a bid to reverse that trend. Several other southern States have indicated that they also see the benefits of boosting population growth, though not through a cash payout. Should India incentivise bigger families? Aparajita Chattopadhyay and Neelanjan Sircar discuss the question in a conversation moderated by Priscilla Jebaraj.

Why are policymakers considering a change in the approach to population control?

Aparajita Chattopadhyay: After a long struggle with family planning since independence, our fertility has started declining. There are State-level variations, but overall fertility now is 1.9. It is fine, and India can grow in this way for maybe 40 to 50 years. But reversal of fertility trends cannot be a policy driven thing. It is deeply rooted socio-culturally and is an individualistic choice. You cannot tell a group of women to increase fertility because I am giving you money. It has never happened in that way, even in European or other Asian countries.

The political implications are the immediate trigger for this policy. Is the threat of future parliamentary delimitation a reason to reverse fertility decline?

Neelanjan Sircar: There has been a lot of discussion about the growth rate of southern States as delimitation is on the horizon. But we need to look beyond pure politics because any growth spurred by these incentives is unlikely to help in the short-term. The reality is, if there’s a delimitation exercise happening in the next couple of years, you’re not going to dramatically change the fertility rate by then. Another reason this is being considered is because of the political economy of States with a working population that may be shrinking. But this is a ham-handed approach. Social and demographic transformations are complex phenomena, and go hand in hand with a certain level of economic development. Historically,



Children playing on the swings near the outskirts of the Amaravati capital region, amid the summer heat, in Andhra Pradesh on May 8. G.N. RAO

with a certain level of social and economic development, the fertility rate drops. Now, there’s a cash incentive at play to encourage people to have more children. For a wealthy family, this incentive is simply not enough to invest in another child. But for a poor family, perhaps it is. Here, you are not just increasing the fertility rate in a State, you are also changing other social attributes in the population, in terms of who is going to be able to respond to such an incentive and who will not. It’s not as simple as saying we’ve created a working age population because you’ve fundamentally changed the composition of the working age population once you’ve introduced an economic incentive.

What has been the international experience of attempting to boost population growth?

AC: Incentivisation can help relatively lower income groups, and this has happened in many European countries. For example, in Poland, there was a short-term boost in birth rate only among the lower income demographics. In Sweden and France, tax incentives changed things for a short span, but it was very difficult to sustain that reversal, and the same thing happened with Singapore, Japan, South Korea. Nowadays, the entire world is going through a polycrisis shock. There is a lot of instability in geopolitics, the economy, and the climate. Moreover, there are both altruistic and individualistic attitudes to fertility. The younger generation is quite aspirational. They need their prosperity – a good job and savings. So, you cannot ask them to go and have more children. Until women confirm that there is security in every possible sense, they will not reverse the fertility rate because there are plenty of tangible and intangible costs for a woman or for the



Social and demographic transformations are complex phenomena, and go hand in hand with economic development. Historically, with a certain level of social and economic development, the fertility rate drops

NEELANJAN SIRCAR

society to have an additional child. So at this juncture, I believe that incentivisation may not work. In India, especially, it is not required because we have a huge population base, so there may not actually be a scarcity of working age labourers if you improve their skills, give them better job opportunities, improve the savings and investment scenario, and promote the silver ageing economy.

Falling fertility rates are an uneven phenomenon. What does this portend for Indian federalism?

NS: Obviously there are some immediate questions about converting populations into political representation through delimitation. But another variable would be that as we see differences in fertility rates, we’re also going to see very different demographic profiles of States. And we know that the youth, the middle-aged, and the elderly all vote differently. They’re in different stages of life, so they have different economic preferences in terms of what a government should be investing in, for instance, pensions versus manufacturing jobs versus childcare. So we’re going to see very different political economy choices.

AC: With regard to Andhra Pradesh, if you look at the recent NFHS statistics, there are a number of areas, instead of cash incentives, where they can spend money in order to get lower middle class people to reproduce more. Almost one in four women aged 20 to 24 got married before turning 18. Only 30% of households have women who own any assets, and only 48% of women work. If Andhra Pradesh thinks that they’re demographically advanced and can behave like Europe to reverse fertility trends, then the women in the workforce should be at 80%. In European countries, the motherhood penalty is almost negligible. There is enough parental leave, and workforce participation is very high. So only when your economy and social security is perfect can you think of having a reversal of fertility trends.

What are some key findings of the

Longitudinal Ageing Study in India?

AC: By 2050, 20% or more of the Indian population will be aged 60 and above, so we have to prepare ourselves, especially with regard to healthcare costs. We need tremendous investment in geriatric care, basic primary healthcare, better pension schemes, and better savings schemes. We also need to have communities for elderly living. But we still have a huge population base. Don’t mix up the percentage with the number base. We can reduce the working age population so long as we have a very highly skilled population who earn well and will pay for these costs.

If population growth incentives don’t work, then lower-fertility rate States may increase their working age population through migration from other States. What is the political fallout of that?

NS: Demographic anxieties have been showing up in one State after another. Even in a poorer State like West Bengal, there are demographic anxieties vis-a-vis Bangladesh. As for why this phenomenon happens, these are labour market vacancies. These are populations which have achieved a certain level of development, and yet the economy requires some people willing to do manual work, at a lower wage, in the sun. This is not a problem that can be solved by simply having more children. It is unlikely that demographic anxieties can be reduced as a function of the economic structure. Migration is an economic phenomenon that is almost independent of the fertility rate, given what the economic condition of these States might be. The people who are being birthed there are very unlikely to be willing to do those jobs that people coming from north India are doing today in south India. It boggles the mind that somebody is trying to reverse what is a very standard social phenomenon and demographic trend at this stage of development. I understand that there are challenges in Europe where countries are well below replacement rates. But this entire debate is bizarre for the very simple reason that there are so many things the government could be spending this kind of money on which would actually address the needs of an ageing population and an underemployed population. This is a very peculiar policy decision.



To listen to the full interview
Scan the code or go to the link
www.thehindu.com

NOTEBOOK

To err is human; one can only accept, learn and get on with it

We never forget our first mistake at work and while it may certainly not be the last, we become better versions of ourselves over time

Kannal Achuthan

It was the year 2002 when two reporters at the beginning of their careers stood before a furious ‘TNG’. One was me, the other was a fellow reporter who covered the crime beat. TNG or T.N. Gopalan, then Tamil Nadu Bureau Chief of *The New Indian Express*, was in a fit of rage as he had to deal with idiot cub reporters when he would rather be re-reading *Das Kapital* in the original German. I exited TNG’s cabin with a cataract of tears and a ruptured ear-drum. There was nothing for my colleague and me to do except drown our sorrows in the lemon tea at the Rajendran roadside stall outside the Express office. Rajendran kindly added an extra scoop of sugar, and the parakeet couple that lived in a tree on the pavement offered commiserating squawks. On November 18 of that fateful year, I was the reporter on night duty. I was two months into my first job as a daily news reporter. While on the shift, I would make a round of calls on the landline to the police, fire services, government hospitals and the weather department to check on developments. There was also an informal arrangement where we would call night-duty counterparts in other newspapers to check if they’d learnt of any late news alerts. A reporter in *Dinamalar* tipped me off on what he knew. A gangster in the city had been shot dead by the police, he said. I dutifully called the police, who gave out some details. I typed about 150 words and submitted the copy. The city desk was staffed by another young colleague, only a couple of years older than me. She used it to fill up a single column in the newspaper. I did not think of telling the News Editor. Nor did I alert the Chief of Bureau or Chief Reporter. The crime reporter, who could have called in with more details, was probably asleep. A job well done, I thought to myself. I did not realise then that an “encounter death” required far more serious treatment. That politics and human rights issues would be involved. That such cases

can occupy courts for years. I’d treated a top story as a routine brief. *The Hindu*, the only other morning newspaper in English in Chennai then, carried the story prominently, running it across four columns: ‘Gangster Sura, alias Suresh, of Vyasarpadi had been shot dead in a pre-dawn operation’. The next day, my boss, TNG, pinned a warning memo on the reporting section’s notice-board for all to read. It was printed out on a dot-matrix printer and was over a page long. My mind has blocked out parts of the trauma so I don’t remember the details but the essence of the memo was that the crime reporter and I had dug ourselves deep in a four-letter word ending with ‘it’. We had missed out on giving an important development the coverage it demanded. And I would be watched carefully to find out if I could continue with my job and, indeed, my career. Over two decades have passed and I’ve managed to stick to the newsroom. Not that there haven’t been missteps. In journalism, there is little room for slacking if you want to do a good job. Becoming complacent can mean missing a crucial story. On the desk, it can be vital to remember pitfalls that seasoned editors tell us to look out for and to keep deadlines sacrosanct. Otherwise, one had better be prepared for a dressing-down on the office WhatsApp group. Course correction after making mistakes requires resilience and reflective thinking. As the lines in *Batman Begins* go, “Why do we fall, Bruce? So we can learn to pick ourselves up.” Along my journey, I’ve met several interesting colleagues – those who served me the bitter but healthy lesson on humility, those who laughed with me over goof-ups, those who showed the way by example, and those who offered second chances. I may have become a little wiser. And what of the former colleague, my Express partner in crime and punishment on the encounter story? Perhaps I did something right. Reader, I married him.

kannal.achuthan@thehindu.co.in

PICTURE OF THE WEEK

The hunger for stability



For a seat: Candidates appearing for the Uttar Pradesh Police Constable Examination sit outside an exam centre in Lucknow on June 8. There are 32,679 vacancies for which 28,86,797 candidates have registered. The exam took place across 1,183 centres from June 8 to 10, under tight security amid paper leak concerns. SANDEEP SAXENA

FROM THE ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO JUNE 12, 1976

Rly. Ministry’s steps to check murder & dacoity

Madras, June 11: Concerned at the growing murder and dacoity menace on the railways, the Union Railway Minister has held discussions with the Chief Ministers of West Bengal, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh recently. Following these discussions, the three Chief Ministers have assured the Railway Minister that they would take steps to ensure close co-operation in fighting the menace. The Ministry has also taken several measures to reorganise the Railway Protection

The Hindu

Force and to invest them with powers of reporting and investigating crimes, thus relieving the Government Railway Police of their duties. This is imperative because about 40 RPF personnel have laid down their lives in the past while protecting railway property. The Inspector General of RPF, Mr. R.D. Singh, to-day called on Mr. E.L. Stracey, Inspector General of Police, Tamil Nadu, and discussed with him, measures to help the RPF in crime detection work. Mr. Stracey has agreed to train 150 RPF personnel in crime reporting, detection, investigation and prosecution. The IG of Police, Tamil Nadu, has also promised to provide accommodation for the RPF personnel and give them detailed instructions through well qualified instructors and experts in crime detection.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JUNE 12, 1926

The Darwin of Botany

London, June 11: Sir Jagdish Chandra Bose was entertained at a luncheon to-day by the British Indian Union. Lord Lee of Fareham, who presided, paid a tribute to Sir J.C. Bose’s work in the cause of science and humanity. He stated that he understood that this “Darwin of Botany” hoped to make it possible to substitute plants for animals for vivisection. Sir Jagdish emphasising the importance of science, said for the economic welfare of a vast continent like India, there must be two complementary activities, industry and agriculture, both depending on science.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Percentage increase in bank credit in May 2026

17 in per cent. Bank credit grew 17.44% year-on-year in May, marking the ninth consecutive month of double-digit expansion, reflecting sustained demand for loans from both retail and corporate borrowers, according to the latest Reserve Bank data. Since January 31 this year, credit growth has stayed above 13% and ranged between 14 and 17% thereafter. PTI

Opportunities presented by India's data centre ecosystem

280 in \$ billion. Driven by the AI boom and rapid digital transformation, India's data centre value chain is projected to generate a potential order book of \$280 billion by 2035, according to consulting firm PwC. While direct investments to build core data centre facilities are estimated at \$71.6 billion by 2035, the broader ecosystem offers a larger opportunity. PTI

Estimated increase in India's horticulture production in 2025-26

2 in per cent. India's horticulture production is estimated to rise 2% to 377.77 million tonnes during the 2025-26 crop year, mainly on better output of fruits and vegetables, according to government data. According to an official statement, the area under horticulture crops stood at 301.51 lakh hectare in 2025-26, a marginal increase from 301.36 lakh hectare in the preceding year. PTI

People killed in drone strikes on the key Sudan city of El-Obeid

23 Drone strikes on the strategic Sudanese city of El-Obeid killed 23 people, a rights group and witnesses said on Thursday. The Emergency Lawyers group said the attack on the key hub in the southern Kordofan region began on Wednesday evening and continued into Thursday, striking residential areas, a funeral gathering and a truck carrying food supplies. AP

Migrants from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh to Gulf since 2010

19 million. A study has estimated that about 19 million people, averaging 1.35 million per year, have migrated from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, and the UAE since 2010. Globally, West Asia experienced the highest total inflow of migrants, chiefly from South Asia and the Philippines. PTI
COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

Follow us facebook.com/thehindu X.com/the_hindu instagram.com/the_hindu

Why is Nicobar debating elections?

Why are Nicobarese tribal councils wary of the administration's proposed election rules? How are Nicobarese leaders chosen today, and what changes do the draft rules propose? Why does the administration want formal elections for tribal councils? How could the proposed rules change Nicobarese self-governance?

EXPLAINER

Abhinay Lakshman

The story so far:

The centrally administered Union Territory of Andaman and Nicobar Islands is planning to introduce elections, as they are conducted in the rest of India, to the Nicobarese tribal community's system of self-governance in the archipelago. This includes measures such as the delimitation of constituencies, the preparation of electoral rolls, and the reservation of seats and leadership positions for women in the community's tribal councils. This move has led to urgent discussions amongst existing tribal councils of the Nicobarese about how this might bureaucratised the governance they have been practising. Some have also suspected that it could be intended to have tribal councils that might be more favourable to the Union government's interests there, especially in Great Nicobar, where the current Nicobarese leadership has been opposing the Centre's ₹91,000 crore container port, airport, and tourist-townfield project.

What do the draft rules propose?

The draft Andaman and Nicobar Islands Tribal Councils (Preparation of Electoral Rolls and Conduct of Elections) Rules, 2026, was notified by the district administration on May 15 this year and prescribes the exact procedure and rules for conducting 5-yearly elections to the Village Councils and Tribal Councils. The draft rules provide for conducting elections, the structure of the new representative system, the manner in which seats and constituencies are to be delimited, the rules for candidature, nomination, and withdrawal, their duties and responsibilities, and the broader administrative set-up for conducting these elections.

The proposed structure involves Nicobarese villagers electing five to nine Captains for each village and directly voting for the position of the Chief Captain of each Island Tribal Council. The First Captains of each village of a particular Island are to vote for the position of the Vice-Chief Captain of the Island Tribal Council, and this Island Tribal Council would include the Chief Captain, the Vice-Chief Captain, and all First Captains of the Island.

These draft rules have been notified under the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (Tribal Councils) Regulation, a Presidential regulation promulgated in 2009 with the specific intent to bring autonomous self-governance to the Nicobarese community. Even though this Regulation provided the statutory language to set up the Village Council and Tribal Council structure, a key feature of this Regulation gave the district administration (through the Deputy Commissioner and Assistant Commissioner) an absolute and unilateral veto over any decision of the councils, if they posed a threat of injury or "annoyance" to the public or might "lead to a breach of peace".

Since the 2009 Regulation was passed, there have been several attempts at notifying Draft Rules under it, the latest one in 2020. The past iterations of the draft have often been circulated among tribal council leaders, but the leadership has not been able to successfully communicate the essence of these rules and procedures to the community at large.



The Tribal Welfare Department of the A&NI administration has said that it will wait till June 15 for suggestions and objections. FILE PHOTO

Even though the Nicobarese community has been participating in Lok Sabha elections, according to officials from the Office of the CEO, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, this would be the first time a system of constituency-wise representative leadership structure will be implemented for Nicobarese self-governance if the Draft Rules are finalised.

How do the Nicobarese tribal councils function today?

The Nicobarese community, a designated Scheduled Tribe with a total population of about 30,000 across the Nicobar group of Islands, is traditionally represented by Tribal Councils that have been established over the last five to six decades. Each group of inhabited islands in the Nicobar has its own Tribal Council. Under this Tribal Council structure lies the village leadership, which comprises three Captains per village, headed by the First Captain and assisted by the Second and Third Captains. Including the Tribal Council of Little and Great Nicobar, seven Tribal Councils represent the Nicobarese community in islands like Car Nicobar, Nancowry, Kamorta, Teressa, and others.

Since at least the mid-1970s, experts and scholars have observed that the Nicobarese have been picking village captains through adult franchise. The concept of captaincy as village leadership first emerged in the 16th Century, when the Nicobarese who would go on board passing ships of colonial empires to negotiate began calling themselves captains. The British colonists were, however, the first to start legitimising the Captaincy structure as representative leadership of the community for their own administrative advantage towards the end of the 19th Century.

This structure eventually developed into a supplement to the social structure of large joint families, often referred to as *Tuhets*, that could become a formal channel of communication with the government.

The idea of the tribal council, however, emerged only in the 1990s to facilitate and ease the community's entry into Government developmental activities, specifically in relation to a Central government scheme of the time for poverty alleviation. Today, the Nicobar district says that the Village leadership and the tribal councils have become "the

link between the Local Administration and the tribal people of the island... most of the developmental schemes are being implemented through them only".

How are leaders currently chosen in Nicobarese communities?

Even though authorities in the Nicobar district administration have maintained that under the current system, village captains are usually elected every four years, Anthropologist and community leader Anstice Justin has told The Hindu that "there is actually not much documentation on how exactly the leadership of the existing tribal councils operate".

A senior leader of the Tribal Council in Great Nicobar Island explained that elections for Captains and Tribal Council chairperson are held whenever the community feels the need for it. This leader, who is also the First Captain of his village on Great Nicobar Island, elaborated, "For example, the last time I was elected Captain was maybe around 2-3 years ago. There is a tradition in our community to get together for a village meeting. All residents of the village are present at this meeting."

The villagers then nominate names for the Captains of the village through popular consensus. These names are then put on a ballot paper. "We make the ballot papers and print them out ourselves, we appoint a polling officer from among us to conduct the ballot, and the person with the most votes becomes First Captain." He added that similarly, the Tribal Council on GNI has been choosing the Chairperson by popular consensus, but that it had been decades since there was an election to this position.

Villagers mostly think about candidates' level of education, fluency in Hindi (the language of government officials), "foreign" trips (an indicator of exposure to the world outside the islands), and "smartness" (the ability to deal appropriately with officials and outsiders, according to R. Venkat Ramanujam, Simron Jit Singh & Arild Vatn (2012). What Ramanujam et. al. noted, however, was that even though the Captains and Council were elected, "decisions were taken after popular consultation, usually through community meetings, and the tribal council did not have unilateral decision-making powers. Consequently, the captains were neither

seen as lawmakers nor as "leaders" balancing social and political concerns."

Why are the proposed changes causing concern?

Tribal Council leaders who have spoken to *The Hindu* about the implications of the new Draft Rules said that the proposed structure is largely being seen as something that would disrupt their traditional ways of perceiving governance. The tribal council leader from Great Nicobar said, "We have been using this way of governing our villages for generations. We hold elections through consensus when needed, and our traditional ways of living are so well integrated into how we oversee the islands and villages. This looks like it will turn all of this into an office job that we will have to do in addition to the lives we live on the islands."

Meanwhile, Mr. Justin has noted that there is a real chance that an attempt to notify the Rules has come now in light of the opposition the government is facing from the Tribal Council on GNI, even though he acknowledged that systemic problems of opacity have riddled the existing system of Tribal Councils and Village Captaincy. "For instance, in several Island Tribal Councils, it remains unclear when the Chairperson was last elected and what kind of authority they wield," he said.

But experts like Mr. Justin, who have worked with the government on engaging with the indigenous communities of the A&NI, have doubted whether the entire Nicobarese community in the islands will have the time and resources to understand the Draft Rules as they have been notified, the context of the Regulation under which they will be implemented, and the implications of introducing such a system for their village-level governance.

The Tribal Welfare Department of the A&NI administration has said that it will wait till June 15 for suggestions and objections, after which a final version may be notified. While the Tribal Councils of Nicobar are yet to hand in a formal objection or suggestions, the Congress party in A&NI has already objected to them and called for their withdrawal, primarily citing the lack of recognition for the Tuhet system and the lack of consultation with the community before bringing this draft.

THE GIST

▼ Draft rules propose formal elections for Nicobarese Village and Tribal Councils, including constituencies, voter rolls, and reservations for women.

▼ Traditional governance is consensus-based, with village captains chosen through community meetings and locally conducted ballots rather than a fixed bureaucratic electoral system.

▼ Tribal leaders fear the proposed electoral system could bureaucratised their traditional governance structure and alter existing decision-making processes.

IN THE LIMELIGHT



A still from ‘Close Encounters of the Third Kind’ COLUMBIA PICTURES

Before ‘Disclosure Day’: how first-contact cinema taught us to imagine the Third Kind

For over a century, science fiction has used aliens to talk about empire, paranoia, language, and power – here is how first-contact cinema became a mirror for humanity’s shifting fears and ambitions

Ayaan Paul Chowdhury

When Steven Spielberg releases *Disclosure Day* today, his first alien film in over two decades, he will be returning to the obsession that helped define his career. The veteran American filmmaker who transformed Devils Tower, Wyoming, into a beacon for cosmic pilgrims in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and turned a homesick alien into a beloved cultural icon in *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*, now finds himself at a curious moment in history. Unidentified aerial phenomena (UAP), the bureaucratically sanitised successor to the UFO, have migrated from grainy VHS footage to very serious U.S. congressional hearings and Pentagon investigations. The border between conspiracy theories and institutional scrutiny has grown increasingly porous of late, placing Spielberg’s prodigal return alongside a broader public reckoning with the oldest question in the cosmos: are we alone?

Though ostensibly focused on extraterrestrial life, first-contact stories have consistently explored humanity’s attempts to understand forces beyond familiar systems of knowledge. Across more than a century, extraterrestrials have played the roles of invaders, gods, refugees, mirrors, parasites, colonial powers, ecological warnings, and philosophical riddles. The shape of the alien has changed with each generation because the fears and aspirations projected onto it have evolved with time.

The earliest modern template came in 1898 when H.G. Wells published *The War of the Worlds*. Wells instinctively understood something many later imitators would spend decades rediscovering – the terror of contact emerged from powerlessness. His Martian invaders treated humanity with the same

brutal apathy European empires had shown colonised peoples across Africa, Asia, and the Americas. The novel appeared during the height of British imperial expansion, yet its staying power came from forcing readers to imagine themselves on the receiving end of that violent conquest.

Alien invasion cinema throughout the 20th century inherited those anxieties, and the Cold War accelerated that trend. American sci-fi films of the 1950s turned extraterrestrials into vessels for political paranoia because the possibility of nuclear annihilation and ideological infiltration already influenced public consciousness. Don Siegel’s *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* imagined entire communities replaced by emotionless duplicates, reflecting fears surrounding communist infiltration during the McCarthy era. Even hopeful films carried atomic-age dread. Robert Wise’s original *The Day the Earth Stood Still* presented Klaatu as a benevolent visitor, yet his message centred on nuclear brinkmanship because the probability of self-destruction had become impossible to ignore.

By the late 1960s, first-contact cinema began asking different questions. Space exploration had expanded public imagination while Vietnam and Watergate weakened faith in institutions. Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* abandoned invasion entirely in favour of cosmic mystery. The alien presence remained largely unseen, manifesting through monoliths that accelerated evolution and nudged humanity toward an unknowable future.

But few filmmakers embraced a sense of unbridled wonder with the unknown more completely than Spielberg. When *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* was released in 1977, it effectively rewrote the very grammar of alien cinema. Richard

Dreyfuss’ Roy Neary abandons his job, his family, and eventually his place in ordinary society because a brief glimpse of something impossible has broken his ability to care about anything else. When contact finally occurs at Devil’s Tower, Spielberg and composer John Williams turn the climax into a strangely moving duet between a synthesiser and a spacecraft with a simple five-note melody.

That idea reached its fullest expression through Carl Sagan’s *Contact* and Denis Villeneuve’s *Arrival*. Both recognised that contact begins with communication. Jodie Foster’s Ellie Arroway discovers a coded transmission from beyond and spends the film navigating politicians, engineers, and sceptics. Nearly two decades later, *Arrival* reduced first contact to language lessons inside a mist-filled spacecraft, where Amy Adams’ Louise Banks tests the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis against heptapod visitors whose language reshapes her perception. *Project Hail Mary* reached much the same conclusion this year, treating communication as the foundation of an unlikely interstellar friendship and punctuating that first exchange with a wink to John Williams’ iconic five-note *Close Encounters* motif.

First contact has also proven fertile ground for traditional UFO folklore and urban legends. M. Night Shyamalan’s *Signs* draws heavily from crop-circle paranoia, filtering a global invasion through the anxieties of a grieving Pennsylvania family. Andrew Patterson’s *The Vast of Night* recreates the world of 1950s switchboard operators and amateur radio enthusiasts in a small town. And Egor Abramenko’s *Sputnik* channels a different strain of extraterrestrial mythology, embedding its creature within the secrecy of the Soviet military apparatus and the long tradition of state cover-ups that has accompanied UFO culture on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

Contrary to the *Independence Day* school of thought, alien invasions do not always occur within comfortable driving distance of Washington, D.C. – the genre’s most fascinating variations often emerged beyond Hollywood.

Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Solaris* depicted first contact as a confrontation with memory and grief, while Kiyoshi Kurosawa’s *Before We Vanish* imagined invasion through the theft of human concepts themselves. Neill Blomkamp’s *District 9* even relocated extraterrestrials into Johannesburg and framed them through the legacy of apartheid. And though it falls outside cinema, any discussion of modern first-contact fiction would feel incomplete without Cixin Liu’s *The Three-Body Problem*, whose influential Dark Forest hypothesis argues that silence may be the universe’s dominant survival strategy.

This holistic evolution helps explain why first-contact stories keep finding new life – every era tends to imagine the alien through its own dominant preoccupations. For over a century, science fiction has repeatedly asked what happens when humanity encounters something radically unfamiliar. Though the answers have varied according to circumstance, technology, politics, and culture, the question still persists.

Which brings us back to Spielberg. Details surrounding *Disclosure Day* still remain guarded, but its premise appears to revolve around the public confirmation of extraterrestrial life and the social aftershocks that follow. If the film succeeds, it will serve as a record of an era increasingly convinced that the unknown may already be here, even if the search for intelligent life elsewhere has repeatedly yielded uncomfortable findings much closer to home. Perhaps the truth was never really out there after all.

THE DAILY QUIZ

Here is a quiz to test your FIFA World Cup knowledge

N. Soorya Prakash

- QUESTION 1**
Which Goalkeeper holds the record for most consecutive clean sheets and as well as most consecutive minutes without conceding a goal in World Cup history?
- QUESTION 2**
Which Manager holds the record of having won the most tournaments in World Cup history?
- QUESTION 3**
Who is the only player to have won 4 medals in the World Cup history?
- QUESTION 4**
Which player has the distinction of having scored at least one goal in all five tournaments that he played?
- QUESTION 5**
Which was the first World Cup to be held outside Europe and the Americas, and who hosted it?



Visual Question:
Identify the player and what is the unique record that he possesses in World Cup history? THE HINDU ARCHIVES

- Questions and Answers to the previous day’s daily quiz:**
1. Name his debut film made in 1977 that had Kamal Hasan, Rajinikanth and Sridevi and is considered an all-time classic in Indian cinema. **Ans: 16 Vayathinile**
2. What was the moniker given to him as a tribute to his directorial prowess and with what words (on screen) did he welcome the viewers of his films? **Ans: Iyakkunar Imayam (Pinnacle among Directors) and Yen Iniya Tamil Makkale**
3. The first of his six National awards was for the Telugu film ‘Seethakoka Chiluka’. Of which Tamil work that introduced Karthik and Radha was it a remake? **Ans: Alaigal Oivathillai**
4. Bharathiraja also dabbled in acting and in ‘Rettaisuzhi,’ he shared screen space with another

- legendary filmmaker. Name him. **Ans: K. Balachander**
5. Known for introducing many a talent, which film of his saw the debut of the award-winning lyricist Vairamuthu? **Ans: Nizhalgal**
6. ‘Aakhree Raasta’, the hit Amitabh Bachchan-starrer, was the Hindi remake of which Bharathiraja film? **Ans: Oru Kaidhiyin Diary**
7. Who were the music directors for his National Award-winning films ‘Vedham Pudhithu’ and ‘Karuthamma’? **Ans: Devendran and A.R. Rahman**
- Visual: Name this Bharathiraja film, the only one he made with the thespian Sivaji Ganesan, said to have been inspired by writer Fyodor Dostoevsky’s love life. **Ans: Muthal Mariyathai**
- Early Birds:** Abhay Krishan | Amit Kumar | Pankaj Gharde | Bhavya Pandey | Santhiya Lakshmi



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

S. Upendran

“Good grief! This article is full of mistakes. The author has spelt the word ‘opposite’ with an ‘a’! How could...”

“....it isn’t a mistake. The word ‘apposite’ does exist.”

“It does?”

“Yes, it does. The ‘a’ in the first syllable is like the ‘a’ in ‘act’, ‘fact’ and ‘tact’. The ‘o’ in the second syllable is like the ‘a’ in ‘China’ and ‘amount’. The final syllable is like...”

“...is like the final syllable in ‘opposite’, I suppose?”

“You suppose right. Apposite means appropriate or suitable. It is a word usually used in formal contexts. For example, I can say, some of the objections made by the members of the Board were apposite.”

“The Minister’s remarks were not apposite to the discussion.”

“Politicians seldom make apposite remarks.”

“That’s true. What happened in yesterday’s final? Did your team win?”

“No, we didn’t. Sujatha and Ramesh blamed themselves for the loss.”

“I don’t believe it. Sujatha usually blames the others. Do you mean to say she has changed?”

“Of course, not. She blamed Ramesh for our team’s defeat.”

“Well, in that case, Sujatha and Ramesh did not blame themselves.”

“Yes, they did. Sujatha blamed Ramesh and Ramesh blamed Sujatha.”

“If that is the case, they didn’t blame themselves; they blamed each other.”

“They blamed each other?”

“...when you say ‘Sujatha and Ramesh blamed themselves’, it means that Sujatha blamed herself and Ramesh blamed himself.”

“I see. In other words, Sujatha felt that she was responsible for her team’s defeat. She didn’t think it was Ramesh’s fault that the team lost.”

“Exactly! And Ramesh feels the same way too. He, like Sujatha, believes that it was he who let the team down. Each one takes the blame.”

“But when you say that they blamed each other, then...”

“....when you say, Sujatha and Ramesh blamed each other, it means that Sujatha blamed Ramesh for the defeat and”

“....Ramesh blamed Sujatha!”

“Exactly! Sounds more like the Ramesh and Sujatha we know, doesn’t it?”

“It certainly does. In our country, political parties, instead of blaming themselves for the mess the country is in, blame one another.”

“Politicians are always looking for a scapegoat.”

“Right now, the scapegoat seems to be the country.”

“Sad, but true. By the way, I need your help. Do you think...”

“....oh, I don’t know. I am not...”

“....I will make you an offer that you can’t refuse.”

“Make me an offer that I can’t refuse, eh? You watched Godfather during the weekend, did you?”

“That’s right. It was great. I saw...”

“...yes, it was. Could you explain me why the third son...?”

“Could you explain to me why. The word ‘explain’ is usually followed by ‘to’.”

“I explained to him why it was not possible.”

“I explained to my boss why his plans could not be carried out.”

“I am sure he was really happy to know that! It must have made his day.”

“Very funny”

Published in *The Hindu* on December 12, 2000

Word of the day

Perforce:
by necessity; by force of circumstance

Synonyms: inevitably, necessarily, needs, unavoidably

Usage: *The road was blocked, so we perforce took another route.*

Pronunciation: newsth.live/perforce

International Phonetic Alphabet: /pəˈfɔːs/

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

INBRIEF



Rupee slumps 60 paise to close at 95.85 against dollar

The rupee plunged 60 paise to settle at 95.85 against the U.S. dollar on Thursday amid heightened tensions in West Asia and a stronger greenback. Heavy foreign capital outflows and weak sentiments at the domestic equity markets put further pressure on the local unit, according to forex traders. At the interbank forex market, the rupee opened at 95.55 and touched the intraday low of 95.85. It settled at the session's lowest level of 95.85 against the dollar. PTI

SatSure bags \$2.6 mn grant to build AI-powered models

Space start-up SatSure Analytics secured a ₹246 million (\$2.57 million) grant from the country's space regulator on Thursday, to develop AI models for Earth observation as part of a wider push towards building sovereign AI capabilities. SatSure said the grant will help support development of large Earth observation models using satellites and drone data tailored to India to improve accuracy over global models, which could often struggle with local conditions. REUTERS

8 PSBs add 13,223 employees in FY26; SBI largest recruiter

Eight of the 12 public sector banks added 13,223 employees in FY26, taking their combined workforce to over 6.28 lakh, with State Bank of India (SBI) accounting for the bulk of the hiring. Analysis of data compiled by PTI from banks' annual reports shows that the total employee strength of the eight public sector banks stood at 6,28,203 at the end of March 31, 2026, compared with 6,14,980 in FY25, marking an increase of 13,223 employees. PTI

Opendoor shuts India office, lays off 250 staff, embraces AI

Press Trust of India
WASHINGTON

San Francisco-based real estate technology firm Opendoor started to shut down India operations, laying off all 250 staff as it relocates operational roles closer to the U.S.

Opendoor started its operations in India in 2022 with offices in Chennai, Hyderabad and Bengaluru. "Today we began to say goodbye to our colleagues in India as we wind down our India operations. Our customers are in America, and that's where our operational work belongs," Opendoor CEO Kaz Nejatian said in a post on X.

The internal note said since the launch of Opendoor 2.0 a few months ago, the company had unified systems and built small AI-native customer-facing teams across the U.S.

"This affects all of our colleagues in India who have done meaningful work for Opendoor. I am grateful for their dedication and this decision is not a reflection of the quality of their work," the note by Mr. Nejatian said.

Affected employees will receive severance pay, outplacement services and transition support while a small group will remain temporarily to complete the migration of key workstreams.

Founded in 2014, Opendoor had an "iBuying" model, using technology and data analytics to make instant cash offers to homeowners, buy homes directly and then resell them. The firm also offers mortgage and home-selling services via a digital platform.

Indian textile sector witnessing revival of investments

M. Soundariya Preetha
COIMBATORE

For the textile and clothing industry, the last quarter of FY26 and the first quarter of the current financial year have seen growth in demand, triggering investments, according to industry officials.

"After 2022, the industry saw demand picking up across the textile value chain from January to mid-May. There is a slowdown in demand now after withdrawal of the import duty on cotton. We hope the situation will stabilise in a month or so," said K. Selvaraju, secretary general, the Southern India Mills Association.

"All the good performers are investing now, expanding capacities. Investments are not decided based on the performance of two or three months. For larger industries, the investments were planned at least seven or eight months before. They are looking at long-term growth," added Chandrima Chatterjee, Secretary General, Confederation of Indian Textile Industry.

Higher yarn exports

Yarn exports from October 2025 to March 2026 were higher compared with the same period the previous year in quantity. Export of fabrics picked up and then saw a slow down. Similarly, yarn price spike did have an impact on garments and made-ups for a few weeks. Now, fall in cotton prices again led to demand drop, Mr. Selvaraju said.

"When the market revives, it takes about three months for the entire supply chain to benefit. Cotton

Centre lifts excise duty on higher ethanol-blend petrol

Union government exempts E22, E25, E27, and E30 variants from central excise duty; clarifies that the latest reduction does not indicate anything on rolling out higher blends

Saptaparno Ghosh
NEW DELHI

Aiming to popularise the uptake of bio-fuels in the country, the Union government late on Wednesday removed central excise duty on petrol blended with higher quantum of ethanol. Following the move, petrol blended with ethanol at 22%, 25%, 27% and 30% would be exempted from central excise duties.

In a statement, the government clarified that the latest reduction did not indicate anything on rolling out higher blends.

"This is a preliminary prerequisite for eventually introducing higher blends, but doesn't convey anything about roll out of higher blends as of now as that will only be done after extensive testing and consultation," the government stated.

The government clarified



In the pipeline: The move is a preliminary prerequisite for eventually introducing higher blends, the government stated. ANI

fied that the exemption specifically concerned the blending activity of ethanol with petrol, which is essentially a manufacturing activity. The objective is to avert the possibility of a dual levy.

"Petrol bears excise duty and ethanol bears GST at their respective stages. When the two are blended, the resulting product may attract excise duty once again on the full quantity,"

the Centre clarified.

"For ethanol blends of petrol up to 20%, excise duty on the blended petrol was exempted by the Ministry of Finance. The exemption ensures that the duties already paid are not charged a second time on the blend," it added.

The gazette notification comes days after India formally launched the E85 variant of petrol, that is 85% ethanol blended with

15% gasoline, on June 5.

Industry associations across the ethanol blending value chain have welcomed the move to remove excise levy.

C.K. Jain, President of the Grain Ethanol Manufacturers Association (GEMA) said that the move indicated a "strong signal of policy stability and long-term commitment".

"It is essential for attracting fresh investments across the ethanol value chain, including production capacity, logistics, storage, fuel retailing and flex-fuel mobility solutions," he said.

Welcoming the move, Bharati Balaji, Deputy Director General at the All-India Distillers Association (AIDA) added, "We urge the state governments to complement this measure with aligned tax structures so that the full benefit reaches both industry and consumers at the pump."

TCS to train 50,000 staff with Claude powered by Anthropic

The Hindu Bureau
MUMBAI

Tata Consultancy Services Ltd (TCS) has announced a global strategic partnership with Anthropic, the frontier AI company behind Claude, to help customers scale enterprise AI adoption.

TCS said it will setup a

dedicated Business Unit focused on delivering strong customer value propositions, joint industry solutions and deep AI expertise on the Claude family of models through early access to Claude models.

TCS will equip 50,000 associates across engineering, finance, legal, marketing, and sales with Claude

through enterprise-wide licensing.

By deploying Claude internally, TCS will gain first-hand experience to transform its own operations. In regulated industries, most AI initiatives stall at the pilot stage, where the requirements for accuracy, auditability and oversight are far more stringent, and

the consequences of error significantly higher. This partnership is designed to overcome those barriers, TCS said in a statement.

K. Krithivasan, CEO and MD, TCS, said, "This partnership reflects TCS' broader strategy to help clients become perpetually adaptive enterprises by turning frontier AI into

transformation at enterprise scale."

Dario Amodei, co-founder and CEO, Anthropic, said, "This partnership deepens our commitment to India, our second-largest market, with TCS bringing Claude to enterprises and professionals across the region and globally, including 50,000 of

its employees." "By combining Anthropic's capabilities with Tata Group's scale, trusted relationships, and nation-building commitment, we will accelerate enterprise reinvention and equip India's youth with the skills to lead in the AI era," said Tata Sons Chairman N. Chandrasekaran.

Expedition excavation



Tool tour: A member of staff gestures as she shows a tunnel-digging machine during a media tour of BESSAC, a company specialising in the construction of tunnels and micro-tunnels, at their plant in Saint-Jory, near Toulouse, southwestern France. AFP

Pre-empting proposed FTA, British luxury carmakers slash prices in India

Amit Vijay Mohile
MUMBAI

Luxury automakers are pre-empting the proposed India-U.K. Free Trade Agreement by slashing prices of British-built imported cars.

Car buyers can look forward to savings ranging from about ₹8 lakh on the Mini Cooper S to ₹75 lakh on the Range Rover SV, and as much as ₹3.32 crore on the McLaren 750S Spider.

For brands such as Bentley, Aston Martin and Rolls-Royce, the FTA could potentially trigger price reductions ranging from ₹1 crore to over ₹3 crore, depending on engine size and model specifications.

But the proposed pact is also creating an unusual in-



For brands such as Aston Martin price reductions could be from ₹1 crore to over ₹3 crore.

version in India's premium automobile market. While some of the country's most expensive petrol-powered supercars and luxury SUVs are suddenly becoming dramatically cheaper, premium electric vehicles and hybrids remain excluded from the benefits and will continue to attract steep import duties for years.

McLaren Automotive

and Jaguar Land Rover have already started revising prices downward in anticipation of lower import duties under the India-U.K. Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA), which proposes reducing Customs duties on qualifying British-built completely built units (CBUs) from 110% to 30% initially, before tapering them further gradually under a quota-based system.

The biggest rebate so far is on the McLaren 750S Spider, whose ex-showroom price is expected to fall by ₹3.32 crore to ₹5.46 crore from ₹8.78 crore earlier. The McLaren 750S Coupe could become cheaper by ₹3 crore to ₹4.94 crore, while the McLaren GTS may see a

₹2.32 crore reduction to ₹3.83 crore. JLR has reduced the price of the Range Rover SV by ₹75 lakh and the Range Rover Sport SV by ₹40 lakh.

The duty relief applies specifically to imported British petrol cars with engines above 3,000cc, putting the McLaren 750S Coupe, 750S Spider and GTS directly within the qualifying bracket.

The biggest surprise in the agreement may be what it excludes.

Alternative-fuel vehicles, including EVs, hybrids and hydrogen-powered models are locked out of duty reductions for the first five years after implementation.

(The writer is with The Hindu businessline)

IT majors' shares dip as Claude's new model 'poses risk' to revenue

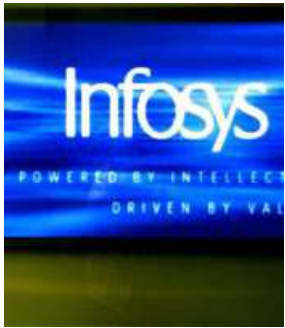
Ashokamithran T.
MUMBAI

Nifty IT, the 10-stock index representing Indian IT companies, dipped 1.6% on Wednesday, a day after Anthropic opened Fable 5, a restricted version of Claude Mythos 5, to the public. Fable 5 is expected to put the revenue of IT majors at risk, according to industry experts.

While Infosys dipped over 2.5%, Persistent Systems dipped 0.87%, closing at ₹1,114.6 and ₹4,874.00 per share respectively.

HCL Tech shaved 1.6% off its previous day's price and Oracle Financial Services Software Ltd. became cheaper by 1.9%. Revenues of Indian IT services companies are expected to see a deflation of 3-5%, said Sumit Pokharna, Senior VP, Fundamental Research, Kotak Securities.

Anthropic, the American AI company that makes Claude, has been releasing new models with



Shares of Infosys dipped over 2.5% on the Nifty IT index.

increasing efficiency, according to information on its website.

"It is state-of-the-art on nearly all tested benchmarks of AI capability, showing exceptional performance in software engineering, knowledge work, vision, scientific research, and many other areas. The longer and more complex the task, the larger Fable 5's lead over our other models," Anthropic said in a post on its website.

Further, Anthropic plans to move its finance model from subscription-based to usage based.

RIL, Vedanta, Adani said to join hands to cut China rare earth reliance

Reuters
NEW DELHI

Indian industrial groups-Reliance, Vedanta and Adani have shown interest in developing facilities to process Andhra Pradesh state's significant reserves of increasingly important rare-earth minerals, according to two sources with knowledge of the matter.

With New Delhi seeking to cut India's dependence on China for rare earths, the three companies are among about 10 who have expressed interest in setting up rare earth facilities in the southern state, one of the sources said.

The sources declined to be identified as they were not authorised to speak to the media. Andhra Pradesh holds 211 million metric tonne of beach sand mineral resources, including rare earths, across 16 identified coastal deposits, as per a draft document.

India has 482.6 million tonne of rare earth ore resources, according to the Geological Survey of India.

The interest comes as New Delhi steps up efforts to build domestic rare earth mining, processing and magnet manufacturing capacity, while Andhra Pradesh aims to attract ₹50,000 crore (\$5.2 billion) in rare earth and titanium investments over the next decade. The plans were set out in a draft government document.

The Andhra Pradesh government, Reliance Industries Ltd. (RIL), Vedanta Ltd. and Adani Enterprises Ltd. did not respond to Reuters emails seeking comments.

South African banks chase mid-sized businesses



Growing business: A general view of densely packed residential housing in Alexandra township. REUTERS

Reuters
JOHANNESBURG

In the glass-walled boardrooms of South Africa's biggest banks, executives are ramping up efforts to win clients from a once overlooked corporate segment: medium-sized companies that are now too lucrative to ignore.

Faced with growing competition for large corporates and squeezed retail banking margins in a sluggish economy, lenders including Nedbank, Investec, FirstRand's First National Bank and Standard Bank are targeting the sector with dedicated teams and tailored services.

This market, companies with annual revenue of 100 million rand to around 1.5 billion rand (\$6 million to \$91 million), spans sectors from manufacturing and mining services to agriculture, retail and logistics. Bank executives say these businesses are often cash-rich, fast-growing and steadier and provide more attractive returns than more volatile retail and small business portfolios.

"This is a strategic growth vector for Nedbank. We're scaling the operation," Marlon Davids, the head of mid-corporate coverage at Nedbank's Business and Commercial Banking unit, told *Reuters*.

Raise the stakes

Nedbank has created a mid-corporate unit with its own credit committees and commercial bankers targeting up to 30% of South Africa's estimated 3,000 to 3,500 medium-sized companies generating annual revenue of at least 750 million rand, Davids said. The country's fourth-largest bank by assets plans to triple the unit's banker headcount to about 30 from 10, while its client base has already grown 50% since its launch last year.

Double returns

Investec, a specialist private bank, says banks serving medium-sized companies are generating returns on equity of around 30%, roughly double those of most major lenders.

The sector is dominated by privately or family-owned businesses, often with substantial cash balances looking for a home and transactional banking services.

To tap into that, Investec plans to more than double its mid-corporate client base to 7,000 by 2030, and raise annual revenue from the segment to 3.8 billion rand from 1.7 billion in 2025, said Nick Riley, head of business and commercial banking at Investec.

The bank has invested more than 300 million rand to set up full banking services which it plans to roll out before March 2027, Riley said.

Investec lacked the full day-to-day transactional banking capabilities needed to compete with larger rivals for medium-sized corporate clients. "In South Africa, we continue to see good client acquisition momentum. We're starting to see the flywheel really gather momentum," Investec Group Chief Executive Pani Titi told reporters in May.

Once an Arab oil embargo victim, U.S. now becomes world's top oil exporter

U.S. exports of crude and fuel climbed to about 10.5 million barrels per day in May as Saudi, Russian exports disrupted by conflict and sanctions; EU officials warn of risks in growing dependence on U.S. energy supplies; U.S. oil boom driven by private firms, contrasting with state-led output in rivals

NEWS ANALYSIS

Reuters
HOUSTON

The United States has become the world's largest oil exporter, upending a decades-old order long dominated by Saudi Arabia and Russia, a shift that tightens American companies' grip on energy markets as Washington's war with Iran reshapes global energy trade. America's ascendancy to the top spot marks a stunning reversal for a country that was dependent on Middle Eastern oil for decades and suffered from an oil embargo imposed by some OPEC members in 1973 to retaliate against U.S. support for Israel.

Change in fortune

U.S. fortunes began to change after 2010, when oil and gas output from its shale formations soared, first making it the world's top gas and then the world's top oil producer.

With the U.S.-Iran war disrupting Saudi oil exports since February 2026 and Russian oil exports suffering from Ukrainian drone attacks and U.S. sanctions on Moscow for the invasion of Ukraine, the U.S. has become the world's leading oil exporter.

U.S. exports of crude and fuel climbed to about



Oil power: A pump jack operates near a crude oil reserve in the Permian Basin oil field, U.S. REUTERS

10.5 million barrels per day in May on the back of high output and the release of strategic reserves, data from ship tracking services Vortexa showed, making the U.S. the top global exporter for the third month in a row.

Russian exports stood at 7 million bpd in May, according to *Reuters'* calculations, while Saudi Arabia's exports stood at 5.9 million bpd, according to Vortexa.

In comparison, Saudi Arabia exported about 8.1 million bpd in 2025, while the United States shipped out 6.6 million bpd, and Russian exports stood at about 5.8 million bpd, according to Vortexa data.

"Washington has a new tool they didn't realise they had before the Iran war – energy exports," said Mi-

chelle Brouhard, head of policy at ship tracking firm Kpler.

OPEC price weakening

The new U.S. dominance could weaken the pricing power that the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries and its allies have historically held over oil markets. U.S. President Donald Trump has long criticised OPEC for manip-

ulating the markets. The group also suffered a blow in May when one of its biggest members, the United Arab Emirates, left the organization after nearly 60 years. The biggest oil exporter spot will give Washington a powerful new lever in talks with allies and rivals in addition to its global military supremacy and its dominance of financial markets thanks to the U.S. dollar's role as the world's reserve currency.

U.S. leverage

"You can see now the leverage the United States has over some of these countries because they are dependent on the U.S. for their oil or gas," Brouhard said, adding that the U.S. was the largest provider of crude to Europe and the

AI robot cleaners head to China's living rooms

Agence France-Presse
BEIJING

Beijing cleaner Lin Mei-qiong found her work a little easier the day she was paired with an unlikely new colleague – a tall, wheeled robot with AI-powered tidying skills.

The 56-year-old and her white-and-silver partner, fitted with cameras and two mechanical claws, are part of a new human-robot cleaning service offered by Chinese household help platform 58.com.

Baby step

It's a baby step towards a future espoused by tech evangelists in which robots increasingly take over manual labour from humans – though at the moment, such services are largely a data-gathering exercise for



Human like: A housekeeper cleaning the floor as an X Square Robot folds clothes at a customer's home in Beijing. AFP

companies and a novelty for curious customers.

"It's definitely different," Lin told AFP in between cleaning the kitchen and wiping down windows. "I used to have to do everything myself," she said. "It's reduced the workload a bit."

The cleaning service, a

collaboration between 58.com and Chinese robotics company X Square, costs 149 yuan (\$22) for three hours and is available in Beijing and tech hub Shenzhen.

Helped into the apartment by an X Square engineer, the AI-operated Quanta X1 Pro robot uses

its cameras to identify areas it could spruce up.

As Lin scrubbed the floor on her knees, it picked up rubbish and folded clothes strewn across a sofa. Grasping a pair of dark grey trousers, it raised its upper body to stretch the fabric taut, before laying it flat and arranging it into neat halves.

The process took several minutes and resembled a child learning to fold clothes for the first time.

Voice commands

Future iterations of the robot will respond to voice commands and even be able to chat, said the engineer, Hu Bowen.

Around 200 households have booked the service since it was rolled out in March. Tan Pei, who works in advertising and booked

the robot to clean her Beijing flat, said she had chosen the service because she was interested to "see what it could do".

"Even though it's not that perfect, there are still parts of it that surprised me," such as folding a pair of trousers "quite well", she said. China's robots have wowed audiences with fluid dancing and set-piece martial arts displays onstage, but application and performance in real-life settings is limited.

Data collection

For companies like X Square, the logic of launching an imperfect service lies in data collection for so-called embodied artificial intelligence.

Unlike large language models trained on vast quantities of internet con-

tent, robots lack comparable real-world datasets.

"We don't have a robot internet yet," Christoforos Mavrogiannis from the University of Michigan told AFP. "It is much more informative to put the robot out there and study what happens than staying forever in the lab." X Square engineer Hu said he sends his robots to work in a "completely unfamiliar environment". "That is very challenging, but this unfamiliar data is also helpful for the robot's growth."

As investment into embodied AI booms, similar trials in China include robots directing traffic or working on factory floors. On domestic help, firm GigaAI plans to deploy 100 humanoid robots in households in central Wuhan for free home-service trials.

Wall Street buckles up for SpaceX lift-off, glitch-free ride

Reuters
NEW YORK/SAN FRANCISCO

As SpaceX prepares for its record-breaking \$75 billion market debut with great fanfare, Wall Street traders, brokers and exchanges are working nonstop to make sure their trading systems can handle the blockbuster IPO and avoid the chaos that marred other highly anticipated launches. Weighing heavily is Facebook's infamous debut in 2012, which was upended by technical glitches that turned into hours of uncertainty over whether trades had been properly executed, ultimately costing market-makers hundreds of millions of dollars. Financial firms have undergone weeks of preparation to en-

sure SpaceX's Friday trading debut is a success, particularly ahead of other blockbusters expected later this year from Anthropic and OpenAI.

'Historic event'

"It's a historic event," Peter Tuz, president of Chase Investment Counsel in Charlottesville, Virginia, said. "I hope it trades successfully afterwards, for the market's sake. If something like this comes and trades down, not only will it cast a pall over the market in general, but over the other IPOs that are lining up for the rest of the summer." While Wall Street executives host splashy client events and deck out their foyers to promote the rocket maker, those in key roles at exchanges, market mak-



Full focus: SpaceX prepares for its record-breaking \$75 billion market debut with great fanfare. REUTERS

ers, investment firms and brokerages are more concerned with ensuring a smooth trading kick-off. In a sign of brokerages' long memories, one executive at a Wall Street firm work-

ing on the IPO who requested anonymity even mentioned lingering scar tissue from the Facebook debut.

Executives at Nasdaq as well as leading market

makers like Citadel Securities and Jane Street have been running numerous simulations and stress-testing systems, according to three people directly familiar with the matter. Nas-

daq invited clients to weekend mock IPOs over the past month, two of the sources said. Bookrunner Morgan Stanley has a key role as the IPO's stabilisation agent, the brokerage responsible for the opening of the stock and ensuring it trades in an orderly manner. Morgan Stanley did not respond to requests for comment. Executives at S&P Global, which is providing the technology that helps facilitate allocations to institutional investors and is working with SpaceX's underwriters on those orders, have been constantly testing their systems due to the deal's size.

Darren Thomas, head of enterprise solutions at S&P Global Market Intelligence, said the firm also used AI to make sure its code was

operating efficiently.

"We really had to scale the infrastructure so that it could handle much larger volumes," said Thomas. "We've never seen anything of this size before."

Trading technology

Exchanges have upgraded their infrastructure to handle heavier volumes since a technology failure disrupted Facebook's \$16 billion IPO. Nasdaq, where it was listed, paid nearly \$42 million in claims to participants who estimated a collective \$500 million in losses. The exchange was also fined \$10 million by the Securities and Exchange Commission. That same year, BATS Global Markets attempted to launch its stock on its own trading platform, until massive

technological glitches forced BATS to withdraw the deal entirely.

Back-up platform

Nasdaq has overhauled its trading systems, upgraded its flagship IPO technology Book viewer in the lead-up to the SpaceX IPO, and has a back-up trading platform if its primary technology fails. To be sure, the exchange has conducted IPO test runs before, including runs prior to chip designer Arm Holdings' 2023 debut. Nasdaq declined comment.

Citadel, Jane Street, and other high-frequency trading firms have carried out multiple internal test runs of their systems to prepare for the outsized volume of client orders, the sources said.

"How are private importers supposed to store diesel and get it into vehicles without using CUPET facilities?," he wrote on X.



The Anstalten Rosersberg prison facility is among several facilities preparing special units for young offenders. AFP

Sweden retracts plan to reduce penal age to 13

Agence France-Presse
STOCKHOLM

Sweden's right-wing government withdrew Thursday a heavily contested proposal to lower the age at which children can be sentenced to prison from 15 to 13, citing a lack of support in parliament.

But Justice Minister Gunnar Strommer said the government would present a revised proposal within weeks, lowering the age to 14. He said he expected parliament to approve the measure by August. The minority government, backed by the far-right Sweden Democrats, has made the fight against crime a priority since coming to power.

"Things are a bit uncertain in parliament, and that is why we have decided to act responsibly in this situation by making the decision this morning to withdraw this Bill," Mr. Strommer said.

The proposal, which parliament had been due to vote on June 15, had been met with fierce criticism in a country known for championing children's rights. Most of the 126 authorities and organisations the government consulted before presenting the Bill opposed the measure, including the police and the prison service.

A government-appointed commissioner had recommended lowering the age to 14 for serious offences, but the government had chosen to go a step further to 13. Sweden's main Opposition Social Democrats are in favour of lowering the age to 14. "I think most feel more comfortable with 14," Mr. Strommer said.

Sweden has been rocked by violent organised crime for more than a decade, linked primarily to battles between gangs as well as gang wars over the drug market. The loosely formed networks have increasingly recruited under-15s, often online, to carry out bombings and shootings, knowing they would not face prison time if caught.

The 'King of the North' seeks a path to becoming Britain's PM in a special vote

Immigration clearly dominates the high-stakes Makerfield byelection as voters voice growing concerns over strained services; Andy Burnham eyes a return to Westminster and potential leadership challenge; with Reform UK surging and Labour support wavering, many predict a tight contest

Associated Press
ASHTON-IN-MAKERFIELD

About 75,000 voters in a pocket of northwest England are about to make a momentous decision. They will cast ballots in a contest that may well pick the U.K.'s next Prime Minister, or plunge Britain's febrile politics into even more turmoil. Possibly both.

"I think they're all a waste of time," said Shirley Prior on the choice of candidates in Makerfield, where a special election on June 18 has drawn interest from journalists around the world. That level of attention is all but unheard-of for a midterm byelection to fill one of the 650 seats in the House of Commons.

If Andy Burnham from the centre-left Labour Party wins, there's a strong chance he will replace embattled Prime Minister Keir Starmer as leader of both party and country. He's up against Reform UK, a hard-right party hoping to prove that this longtime Labour stronghold is fertile ground for its anti-immigration message, with potentially seismic consequences for British democracy.

This district has elected Labour lawmakers for 120 years, but Mr. Burnham is not a shoo-in. Reform, led by the veteran anti-immigration politician Nigel Farage, won 24 of the 25 council seats up for grabs in



Greater Manchester Mayor Andy Burnham speaks at the launch of his byelection campaign in Ashton-in-Makerfield, Greater Manchester in north-west England on May 22. AFP

local elections in this area last month.

"I always voted Labour because my dad, my granddad, everybody voted Labour then," Ms. Prior said.

The election is taking place amid heightened tensions over immigration. A stabbing in Belfast this week, for which a Sudanese man has been charged with attempted murder, triggered violent protests in Northern Ireland in which cars and houses torched.

In the constituency's main town of Ashton-in-Makerfield, 320 kilometers northwest of London, some voters echo Reform claims that recent arrivals are straining housing and public services.

"Immigration's too high, all the services are being put under pressure

and Labour just keep inviting more and more people into the country and it's the taxpayer who has to pay for them," said retiree Phil Arrowsmith.

Annual net migration to the U.K. reached more than 9,00,000 in 2023, under the previous Conservative government, before falling to 1,71,000 last year.

That decline has done little to boost a Labour government that has floundered since winning election in July 2024.

Mr. Starmer has struggled to deliver promised economic growth, repair tattered public services and ease the cost of living, and been hamstrung by repeated missteps, including his decision to appoint Peter Mandelson, a scandal-tarnished friend of Jeffrey Epstein, as Britain's Am-

bassador to Washington.

A dismal performance in local elections last month sparked a clamor from Labour lawmakers for Mr. Starmer's resignation. He has refused, but Cabinet Minister Wes Streeting quit so he can run in a leadership contest that could come soon.

Mr. Burnham, the popular mayor of Greater Manchester, also harbors leadership ambitions, but needs a seat in Parliament if he wants to challenge Mr. Starmer. An opening emerged when Josh Simons, the Labour lawmaker for Makerfield, stepped down to trigger a special election.

Mr. Burnham said he understands that voters are "fed up" and calls the large Reform UK vote "a cry for real change" that

Labour must heed.

The Makerfield constituency is a capsule of British history, a collection of former coal-mining communities turned commuter suburbs. Though far from the city center, it is part of Greater Manchester, and Mr. Burnham gets honks and thumbs' ups from passing drivers as he walks down the street in his smart-casual uniform of dark jeans with a navy blue shirt and jacket.

The 56-year-old has been mayor of the region of 3 million people since 2017, a period that has seen central Manchester boom, with skyscrapers blooming on postindustrial sites. Many residents praise him for championing the city, and for taking a piecemeal public transport system under municipal control as the Bee Network.

For a decade and a half before that he was a lawmaker in Parliament, and a Minister in Labour governments. He doesn't emphasize that part of his CV, preferring the outsider status that has seen him nicknamed the King of the North.

"What we've built in Greater Manchester needs to go national," Mr. Burnham told reporters during a campaign event this week. "I know what it is to turn places around."

The campaign is an odd mix of the local and the international. Some voters cite immigration as a top

concern. Others mention struggling main street shops, potholes and petty crime.

Mr. Burnham's main rival is Reform UK candidate Rob Kenyon, a 41-year-old plumber and local councillor who came second to Labour here in the 2024 national election. He says he's an unpolished regular bloke, though opponents have criticized him over crude, sexist and anti-vaccine comments on social media.

Reform voters are also being targeted by Restore, an even more hardline anti-immigration party.

Michael Poultney, a retired teacher and Labour supporter, thinks the unpopularity of Starmer's government means Mr. Burnham faces a stiff challenge.

"Without his personal vote, I think we would struggle," he said. "Keir Starmer has done reasonably well on the international stage, but the government is yet to be in control of the economy."

Mr. Burnham insists he is running for the people of Makerfield, not his own ambition, and is not taking victory for granted.

"I am making no assumptions beyond the 18th of June," he said. But he stressed that "this is a change byelection." "I will take the fight for the changes I want to see in politics as far as I can take it," he said.

Sumo stroll



Sumo wrestlers walk along a Paris street on Thursday, ahead of the Paris Sumo Tournament scheduled for June 13-14. AFP

Europe has no option but to talk to Taliban govt. about migration: EU

Agence France-Presse
BRUSSELS

Europe has no other option than to talk to the Taliban government about returning failed asylum-seekers to Afghanistan, the EU's migration chief said Thursday, defending a planned Brussels meeting that critics say would renege on the bloc's values.

The European Commission has invited Taliban officials for discussions under a push to crack down on irregular migration and boost deportations – despite it not formally recognising the Taliban administration.

"It's no option not to talk to these people in order to improve the situation," Magnus Brunner, the EU's Commissioner for Mi-



In a fix: The EU has invited Taliban officials for talks despite it not formally recognising the Afghan Taliban administration. AFP

gration, told journalists. Taliban officials were yet to be granted visas to visit Belgium and a date has not been set for the meeting but it has already caused an uproar in Brussels.

European governments shut their embassies in Kabul when the Taliban returned to power in 2021 and imposed their strict in-

terpretation of Islamic law. Women must be almost entirely covered when they leave home and are banned from a host of public places, including parks and gyms, while girls' education stops at age 12. Rights groups have questioned the legality and ethics of returning migrants to a country that is in the

midst of a severe humanitarian crisis, with millions facing hunger and economic hardship, according to the United Nations.

But Mr. Brunner said that talks were not tantamount to recognising the "Taliban regime" and that it was in Europe's best interest to press ahead with them, citing interest from many member states.

"It is important to talk to them at least to improve the situation for Europeans, but also for asylum applicants, for asylum-seekers," Mr. Brunner said.

The Belgian government told AFP the commission had given it the names of the Taliban officials expected to be part of the delegation – allowing for security services to start checks – but it was yet to get any visa applications.

G7 allies seek to narrow differences with Donald Trump at France summit

Agence France-Presse
PARIS

Europe's leading nations and their G7 allies will seek to narrow differences with Donald Trump at a summit from Monday in France chaired by French President Emmanuel Macron but expected to be dominated by the U.S. leader's presence.

Participants on the shores of Lake Geneva will be looking to put the sparkle and fizz back into relations with the United States, in the French spa resort of Evian-les-Bains famed as the home of Evian mineral water.

The summit will be one of the first major international gatherings since the

U.S. and its ally Israel began a war against Iran in late February, upending the West Asia and widening transatlantic tensions.

Aside from promoting efforts to end the conflict and re-open the key Strait of Hormuz shipping bottleneck, the leaders will have a packed agenda of potentially explosive issues over three days of talks.

With Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in attendance, they will look to find a united front on bringing Russia to the negotiating table to end over four years of war sparked by Moscow's full-scale invasion of its neighbour.

Mr. Zelenskyy's participation "is very important

for us because we need to rebuild consensus within the G7", including the need for "negotiations", Mr. Macron said Wednesday, in a nod to differences with Mr. Trump over Ukraine over the past year.

But the other members of the G7 will also be looking to press Mr. Trump to accept concessions on global trade imbalances – in the face of his protectionist trade policies. There is also pressure for greater regulation of big tech firms to protect minors, despite U.S. reluctance.

France has been keen to expand the appeal of the Group of Seven leading economies – Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom



French military boats patrol Lake Geneva in Evian-les-Bains on Thursday ahead of the G7 summit scheduled for next week. AP

and United States – beyond its core membership. Mr. Macron has invited the leaders of Brazil, Egypt, India, Kenya and South Korea to the meeting.

In a bid to find regional

consensus on Iran, Mr. Macron has invited the leaders of Arab states Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates to a special session on Tuesday.

But China will be con-

spicuous by its absence. There is growing concern in the West over Beijing's dominance in the market for rare earth minerals.

Seeking to reach out to Beijing, Mr. Macron will on Thursday hold the "World Convergence Summit for Growth" videoconference with the G7 members, China and several other emerging markets attending.

Mr. Trump, always a mercurial presence, will be arriving at the G7 summit fresh from celebrating his 80th birthday on June 14.

French officials want to ensure that there is no repeat of the last G7 in Canada, in which Mr. Trump left early. They hope the U.S. leader could be tempted to

extend his stay in France with a bilateral summit with Mr. Macron in Paris or elsewhere.

'Aggressive behaviour'

An immense security operation involving thousands of police and troops is under way, spreading to neighbouring Switzerland on the other side of the lake, where the airport in Geneva will receive arrivals and shops have already boarded up their windows.

For Mr. Macron, whose country holds the rotating presidency of the G7, the summit will be one of the final chances to make an impact on the international stage. With less than a year of his final mandate remaining, he wants to

press home his cherished idea of increasing European sovereignty.

The talks will lead up to a summit of the wider G20 group that includes China – to be hosted in December by Mr. Trump at a golf resort he owns in Miami.

Ahead of the summit, the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) published a poll of citizens from over a dozen European countries showing that confidence in the U.S. was falling. In the face of U.S. "criticism and aggressive behaviour", European leaders have a window "to go further and faster" in building common systems of security, said ECFR senior policy fellow Pawel Zerka.

TOKEN OF APPRECIATION

New York temporarily renames streets after Pele and Henry



FILE PHOTO

New York has honoured two footballing greats by temporarily renaming streets after Pele and Thierry Henry. Crowd gathered at West 50th Street and 6th Avenue in Manhattan to mark the unveiling of “Thierry Henry Way” by city officials. The intersection of Shea Road and Meridian Road was renamed after Pele.

SETBACK

Morocco forced to make two changes to its WC contingent



GETTY IMAGES

Morocco has been hit by the loss of two starters to injury, with Nayef Aguerd and Abde Ezzalzouli, *in pic.*, replaced in its World Cup squad. Defender Marwane Saadane and striker Amine Sbai have been brought in. Morocco opens its Group C campaign against five-time champion Brazil at the New York New Jersey Stadium on Saturday.

ANXIOUS WAIT

Goalkeeper Verbruggen a doubt for the Dutch team’s first fixture



GETTY IMAGES

Netherlands goalkeeper Bart Verbruggen missed training on Wednesday, two days after hurting his hip in a collision during a warm-up match with Uzbekistan. It left his status in question for the team’s World Cup opener against Japan. Verbruggen is the first-choice custodian for head coach Ronald Koeman.

SECOND SPELL

Real Madrid names Mourinho as coach on a three-year deal



FILE PHOTO

Real Madrid named Jose Mourinho as its new head coach on a three-year deal until June 30, 2029, the 15-time European champion announced on Thursday. Mourinho will return to the club on July 13 to begin his second spell with Real for the start of pre-season training. His first stint in Madrid was from 2010-13.

Of old warhorses, their longevity and last dance

While Messi, Ronaldo and Ochoa are appearing in their record-equalling sixth tournament, Modric and Neuer are going strong in their 40s; they are, however, set to bow out soon

FIFA WORLD CUP

S. Shrivathsan

Look at age-verification documents would make one wonder how these war-horses’ batteries still have enough charge for the FIFA World Cup.

It appears as though they have been competing at football’s glitziest spectacle since time immemorial. The ageless fighters, however, are likely to bid adieu to the pinnacle of the global game in the ongoing edition. Here are five such players who are set for their last dance:

Lionel Messi (38 years): The Argentine talisman, who will turn 39 during the World Cup, is no longer shouldering the burden of attaining ultimate success, having achieved crowning glory in Qatar 2022.

There was a shadow of doubt whether he would make it to the record-equalling sixth tournament, but the richly gifted forward has opted to take the toughest football examination once again. Messi is steadily building up to full fitness after being sidelined with a hamstring injury, which he suffered when he was on duty for Inter Miami. His objective? Adding a feather to an already heavily decorated



Golden oldies: Messi, Ronaldo, Modric, Neuer, and Ochoa are among those who will probably be playing their last World Cup. GETTY IMAGES, AP, REUTERS & AFP

cap with a successful title defence.

Cristiano Ronaldo (41): The Portuguese legend would just not bow out of the international arena without straining every sinew to accomplish the mission. After multiple unsuccessful pursuits that left him heartbroken, Ronaldo, the only man to score in five iterations, will have another bite at the cherry.

The once-in-a-genera-

tion attacker has a genuine chance of hoisting the shimmering trophy, for his team has several game-changers who can alter the script in a jiffy.

On an individual note, Ronaldo, cognisant of his well-below-par returns in knockout fixtures, will be determined to exert more influence in such clashes. If he carries Portugal to the promised land, he will almost certainly be ‘sainted’

back home.

Luka Modric (40): The Croatian may be running the last mile in his illustrious career, but the mid-field master is still a feared opponent in his ‘area’ of strength.

That he plied his trade in one of Europe’s top-five leagues – for AC Milan in Serie A – last season despite being in the 40s shows his longevity with no compromise in quality.

After stumbling in the final hurdle in 2018 and coming third four years later, Modric will hope to turn those near-misses into a perfect finish. Croatia will have to come out in full force if it is to join the World Cup-winning community.

Manuel Neuer (40): The German custodian’s international return was something that not many anticipated, but head coach

Julian Nagelsmann has pinned his hopes on the shotstopper.

Neuer, donning the national colours for the first time since the European Championship in 2024, will be the No. 1 choice between the sticks provided he is in the best shape.

The goalkeeper’s volume of years in the sport and experience of tasting success at this level (in 2014) were too good to ig-

nore for Nagelsmann, who is two years younger to Neuer. “He does not need to settle in at this stage. He can handle pressure situations,” the chief coach said of the veteran.

Guillermo Ochoa (40): A Mexican World Cup squad without Ochoa in the mix will look incomplete, considering that he was a constant presence under the crossbar in the previous three editions.

The goalkeeper, chosen to represent the North American outfit in the tournament proper for the record-levelling sixth time, has revelled in performing at the quadrennial event.

But Ochoa has hardly garnered game time in recent years and may find himself on the bench again. He, however, is prepared to give head coach Javier Aguirre a ‘happy’ selection problem.

Star-studded line-up on the touchline Brotherhood and shared memories

Ashwin Achal

There will be a star-studded line-up in the technical area of the 2026 FIFA World Cup as a host of popular managers will wield their magic.

While Didier Deschamps and Lionel Scaloni are seasoned national team coaches, others like Carlo Ancelotti and Mauricio Pochettino will hope to translate club success to the international arena.

Didier Deschamps (France): Only one of three men, alongside Franz Beckenbauer and Mario Zagallo, to have won the FIFA World Cup as both player and manager, Didier Deschamps brings stability and pedigree to France.

Since taking charge of a fractured squad from Laurent Blanc in 2012, Deschamps has built one of international football’s most consistent teams.

Under him, France won the 2018 World Cup, lifted the 2021 Nations League and finished runner-up at the 2022 World Cup.

Heading into the final tournament of his long reign, Deschamps will be eager to add another major trophy and sign off on a high.

Carlo Ancelotti (Brazil): Having last won the



Master tacticians: Deschamps, Ancelotti, Bielsa, Scaloni and Pochettino. AFP & REUTERS

World Cup back in 2002, Brazil has gone over two decades without the big prize.

The powerhouse needed a big personality to reclaim lost glory, and who better for the job than Carlo Ancelotti.

A five-time UEFA Champions League winner, and the only manager to capture league titles in Europe’s top five leagues, Ancelotti arrived with unmatched credentials.

In his first World Cup as a full-time international coach, the Italian – an expert man-manager – carries Brazil’s hopes of ending a prolonged wait for global supremacy.

Marcelo Bielsa (Uruguay): Known to extract the very best out of players through rigorous fitness conditioning and meticulous planning, Bielsa has his task cut out.

Bielsa’s high press, direct football will be tested as Uruguay is without two

star strikers – Luis Suarez (dropped) and Edinson Cavani (retired). Bielsa depends heavily on Real Madrid midfielder Federico Valverde and Al Hilal striker Darwin Nunez to buy in to his system.

Bielsa enters the mega event after a roller coaster three-year tenure, wherein Uruguay defeated giants Brazil and Argentina en route to a third-place finish at the 2024 Copa America, before going on a poor run, which included a 1-5 defeat to the USA last year.

Lionel Scaloni (Argentina): When Lionel Scaloni was appointed Argentina manager in 2018, many questioned his credentials.

Having served as an assistant during Argentina’s disappointing 2018 World Cup campaign, he was viewed as an unlikely choice to lead one of football’s giants.

Eight years later, Scaloni has silenced every critic. Calm and understated on

the touchline, he guided Argentina to the 2021 Copa America, the 2022 World Cup and the 2024 Copa America titles.

His biggest challenge at the 2026 tournament will be balancing sentiment with pragmatism as the team enters a new era.

While Lionel Messi remains Argentina’s iconic figure, Scaloni must ensure the supporting cast is ready to carry the load.

Mauricio Pochettino (United States): Mauricio Pochettino arrives at the World Cup carrying the expectations of a nation eager for a breakthrough on home soil.

The Argentine took charge of a United States side that has shown promise but has yet to establish itself among football’s elite.

After earning acclaim during his spell at Tottenham Hotspur, Pochettino embarked on his first international assignment with a reputation for developing young talent and building cohesive teams.

Results have been mixed against top opposition, and scrutiny has intensified. With the United States serving as a co-host, reaching the knockout stage will be considered the minimum requirement for success.

Sankar Narayanan E.H.

FIFA World Cups are as much about shared memory as they are about football.

They are, at the same time, grand and intimate – a collective realisation that we are about to turn the page to a brand-new chapter in our global family album.

While billions build memories watching the action unfold, a select few will craft theirs directly on the pitch. The ultimate intersection of football and family belongs to seven sets of brothers playing in the 2026 showpiece. While some households have the happy headache of splitting their allegiances as the siblings represent different badges, others have a straightforward and aligned legacy waiting to be forged under one flag.

Here are the brothers taking the field in the ongoing iteration of the World Cup:

Nico Williams (Spain) and Inaki Williams (Ghana): Though both ply their trade for Athletic Bilbao in LaLiga, the 23-year-old Nico decided to represent Spain, whereas the 31-year-old Inaki went with the country of his parents’ birth: Ghana. The Williams family must have got a



Sibling rivalry: Desire and Guela will play for different nations. AFP

hang of divided loyalties, for this is Nico and Inaki’s second rodeo at the quadrennial event.

Desire Doue (France) and Guela Doue (Ivory Coast): The latest battle between the Doue siblings saw Guela claim the bragging rights by scoring the equaliser against France. Although his younger brother, the 21-year-old Paris Saint-Germain playmaker, was an unused substitute, Desire set aside France’s 1-2 loss to share a warm embrace with Guela – a picture of brotherly love after the friendly encounter.

Lucas Hernandez and Theo Hernandez (France): The presence of these Marseille-born brothers makes the French defence whole. While 28-year-old Theo is with Al-Hilal in Saudi Arabia, the elder sibling plays his club

football closer to home with PSG. Their family agenda will be banishing the ghosts of finishing runner-up in Qatar by going the distance in the Americas.

Harry Souttar (Australia) and John Souttar (Scotland): Leicester City’s Harry and Rangers FC’s John, both defenders by profession, punched their tickets through different nations. While 27-year-old Harry opted to represent the country of his mother’s birth, his 29-year-old brother stayed true to his Scottish roots.

Juninho Bacuna and Leandro Bacuna (Curaçao): The Bacuna brothers, both born in the Dutch town of Groningen, will be navigating football’s biggest tournament representing the smallest nation to ever qualify for the World Cup. The 34-year-

old Leandro has racked up 70 caps in over 10 years for Curaçao, with 28-year-old Juninho, a midfielder, amassing 49 senior international appearances.

Deroy Duarte and Laros Duarte (Cape Verde): Born in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, Deroy and Laros will be the toast of Cape Verde when the nation makes its debut. Tasked with anchoring the midfield, Deroy, the younger of the two, and Laros likely perfected their partnership during the impromptu strategy sessions at the family dining table.

Brian Brobbey (Netherlands) and Derrick Luckassen (Ghana): There will be no half-measures when these half-brothers walk out to represent the Oranje and the Black Stars, respectively. While Sunderland’s Brobbey earns his stripes as a striker, 30-year-old Luckassen provides defensive steel for Ghana.

Only one of Quinten Timber and Jurrien Timber will be turning out for the Netherlands as the identical twins got separated when Jurrien was ruled out due to an injury. The onus now falls on Quinten to create everlasting memories playing mesmerising football for his country and family.

INBRIEF



Bangladesh wins maiden ODI series against Australia

Towhid Hridoy hit an unbeaten 40 as Bangladesh won the second One-Day International by five wickets on Thursday to seal its first-ever series win against Australia in the 50-over format. Chasing a DLS revised victory target of 192 in 41 overs in a rain-hit match, Bangladesh eased home with 36 balls to spare to take an unassailable 2-0 lead in the three-match series. Australia posted 187 for eight in 42 overs with its innings cut short and ended by rain after Marnus Labuschagne, who made an unbeaten 55, and Xavier Bartlett, who hit 52, rescued the visitor from 0-3. Opening bowlers Mustafizur Rahman and Taskin Ahmed took three wickets each. The victory extended Bangladesh's winning streak to five consecutive home ODI series, following triumphs over Sri Lanka, West Indies, Pakistan and New Zealand.

The scores: Australia 187/8 in 42 overs (Marnus Labuschagne 55 n.o., Xavier Bartlett 52, Taskin Ahmed 3/33, Mustafizur Rahman 3/27) lost to Bangladesh 195/5 in 35 overs (Soumya Sarkar 42, Najmul Hossain Shanto 42, Towhid Hridoy 40 n.o.). **Target:** 192 in 41 overs; Bangladesh won by DLS method.

2027 ODI World Cup from Oct. 4 to Nov. 21: report

The 2027 ICC ODI World Cup is provisionally scheduled to be held from October 4 to November 21, across South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Namibia, according to *ESPNCricinfo*. The dates were agreed upon during the ICC board meeting in Ahmedabad in May, with final confirmation expected at the ICC Annual General Meeting in Edinburgh in July. As per the report, South Africa is likely to host the majority of matches, with at least 41 out of 54 games taking place across eight venues. Zimbabwe is expected to stage between eight and 10 games across three venues, including Victoria Falls, Harare Sports Club, and Queens in Bulawayo. Namibia will host three fixtures.

Yashbardhan to lead India under-19 in Sri Lanka

Yashbardhan Singh Chauhan was named skipper of the India men's u-19 squads for the tour of Sri Lanka in July.

The squads: One-dayers: Yashbardhan Singh Chauhan (Capt.), Lakshya Raichandani (Vice-capt.), Sagar Virk, V.K. Vineeth, Arjun Rajput, Kushagra Ojha, Rajat Baghel (wk), Anvay Dravid (wk), Anmoljeet Singh, Vutkuri Yashveer Goud, Rohit Anil Yadav, V. Shavin, Kavya Paresh Patel, Mohit Ulva, and Ishan Sood. **The dates:** July 4, 6 and 9, all at Hambantota. **Multi-day:** Yashbardhan Singh Chauhan (Capt.), Lakshya Raichandani (Vice-capt.), Sagar Virk, Kush Patel, Manal Chauhan, Kushagra Ojha, Manav Krishna (wk), Aryan Sandesh Sakpal (wk), J. Hemchudeshan, B.K. Kishore, Rohit Anil Yadav, Kavya Paresh Patel, Priyanshu Singh, Pranav Raghavendra, and Venkata Chigurupati. **The schedule:** July 13 to 16, Galle; July 20 to 23, Colombo.

Bhavika to helm India u-19 women against Sri Lanka

Bhavika Ahire will lead the India women's under-19 squads in the home series against Sri Lanka. It will figure in three T20s and three one-dayers.

The squads: T20s: Bhavika Ahire (Capt. & wk), Mahak Narwase (Vice-capt.), Ira Jadhav, Tanishka Sharma, Ishwari Awasare, Avni Chawda, Mahto Nidhi, Purva Siwach, Kumari Palak, Kashvi Kandikuppa, Maniar Maitri, Gouri Goyal, Janvi Vikar, Anaadi Tagde, and K. Deeksha (wk). **The schedule:** June 22, 24 and 27, all in Chennai. **One-dayers:** Bhavika Ahire (Capt. & wk), Mahak Narwase (Vice-capt.), Ira Jadhav, Deeya Yadav, Ishwari Awasare, V. Pratiksha, Mahto Nidhi, Purva Siwach, Kumari Palak, Kashvi Kandikuppa, Vidhi Parmar, Gouri Goyal, Janvi Vikar, Anaadi Tagde, and K. Deeksha (wk). **The dates:** June 30, July 3 and 6, all at Puducherry.



Knicks stage epic comeback, move one win from NBA title

New York Knicks staged the biggest comeback in NBA Finals history as it erased a 29-point deficit to edge San Antonio Spurs 107-106 and move within one win of the title. OG Anunoby's tip-in basket with 1.2 seconds left sealed the thrilling win to give the Knicks a 3-1 stranglehold on the best-of-seven championship series, which shifts back to San Antonio for game five on Saturday.

Under-pressure USA faces Paraguay

The Americans will look to unleash McKennie, Pulisic and Balogun; co-host Canada, hampered by a long injury list, runs into Bosnia

FIFA WORLD CUP

Reuters
LOS ANGELES

The United States will be under pressure to launch its World Cup campaign with a victory when it hosts underdog Paraguay on Friday.

The US, at 17th, is the highest-ranked team in Group D, while Paraguay is 41st among the tournament's 48 teams and the lowest-ranked side in a group which also includes Australia and Turkey.

The US is on a three-match winning streak against the South Americans. The home side will look to shake off the nerves by scoring early with a formidable attack featuring Weston McKennie, Christian Pulisic and Folarin Balogun.

Defence is its weakness and inexperienced goalkeeper Matt Freese may have to work hard.

Paraguay had to come through the demanding CONMEBOL qualifying section, finishing last of the six automatic qualifiers in South America.



Key men: Home team's star Pulisic and Paraguay midfielder Almiron will have a big role to play in their opening encounter

Stokes — the problem child

Each time he was in the dock, the star all-rounder dug deep to come back stronger, endearing himself to England's historically unforgiving cricketing populace; the fact that Brook has been overlooked and the captaincy returned to Root, if only on a temporary basis, reiterates how shaken the mandarins at the ECB are at the latest turn of events



R. Kaushik

Ben Stokes is an extraordinary cricketer who has done extraordinary things on the cricket field. Superhuman. Out of the world. Impossibly compelling. These are some of the adjectives that have accompanied his stirring deeds, driven as much by his supreme skills and his never-say-die attitude as the bull-headed unwillingness to surrender even when the odds are stacked heavily against him.

Born in Christchurch in the Antipodes but having made the historic city of Durham in the North-East of England his home several moons back, the 35-year-old has scaled dizzying heights through sheer weight of character. With the bat, he can switch from watchful defence to a blitz of epic proportions in the blink of an eye. He is a most accomplished operator with the ball, but it's for his ability, indeed willingness, to do the dirty job that he truly stands out.

When England seek control, Stokes takes it upon himself to dry up the runs. When they try to bounce batters out, Stokes thinks little of going round the stumps and bashing the ball into the most docile of pitches ball after ball, over after over, going even eight or nine overs in a spell without losing pace, intensity, energy or direction. He is a fabulous fielder, sure of hands and athletic beyond compare. And he is a grand leader of men, always in the thick of battle. He is the quintessential all-round package, the premier all-rounder of his generation bar none, one of those players that, as they say, 'put bums on the seats'.

There has to be a streak of madness, however, in the round-the-wicket mode of operation that has become a Stokes calling card, and sometimes (maybe more than sometimes), that streak manifests itself off the field, often with a little nudge from Bacchus. Stokes' latest dalliance, in cahoots with Gus Atkinson, has heaped further misery on a system that is seen as being subservient to players, who appear to have perfected the art of bossing over their bosses.

Stunning twist

In a stunning turn of events, Stokes (and Atkinson) have been stood down from the second Test against New Zealand, starting at the Oval on Wednesday, following their run-in with a Saracens rugby player last Sunday, hours after England pulled off a comfortable win over the Kiwis at the home of English cricket. Lord's threw up a diabolical 22-yard strip that made batting a lottery, and made heroes out of workmen-like bowlers. So heavily skewed in favour of the bowlers was the pitch that match referee Andy Pycroft was compelled to rate it 'unsatisfactory' (perhaps he was a touch generous), a massive blow to the reputation of a venue that prides itself on being the very definition of prim and proper. If Lord's can be perceived as having failed to live

up to the lofty standards that have come to be associated with it, surely, we shouldn't be surprised at Stokes playing true to character, right?

Stokes has a long and disturbing history with nightclubs and other watering holes. The most visible of misadventures came in 2017 in Bristol when, after an ODI against West Indies, he was involved in a late-night altercation outside a nightclub. After a flurry of punches that might not have been out of place in a boxing ring, Stokes was arrested and charged with affray, lost his vice-captaincy, was suspended by the England and Wales Cricket Board and missed the 2017-18 Ashes tour of Australia.

After an understandably high-profile trial, he was clear of affray charges in August 2018. Stokes celebrated in style, playing a lead role in England's maiden tryst with the 50-over World Cup the following July and playing one of the most unforgettable fourth-innings knocks in Leeds to single-handedly pilot his side to a one-wicket victory against the old foe.

Long before this, he had been cautioned officially by the cops during a night out in Newcastle (2012) early in his career, which meant that he wasn't considered for international selection for a year thereafter even though he had debuted in both white-ball formats by the time. A year on, he was sent home from an England Lions tour of Australia (alongside Matt Coles) for breaching drinking and curfew rules while in 2014, he completed a hat-trick of ignominy when he fractured his hand after smashing a dressing room locker in frustration on being run out in the Caribbean, an injury severe enough to rule him out of the T20 World Cup in Bangladesh.

Each time he was in the dock, Stokes dug deep to come back stronger, endearing himself to England's historically unforgiving cricketing populace through sheer bloody-mindedness and the propensity to leave nothing behind in the dressing-room. One couldn't help but admire his resolve (so much so, that his remarkable skills were almost taken for granted) and he became larger than life in the country which he had made his home very early, eventually ascending the captaincy in 2022 after a terrible run under Joe Root that produced just a solitary Test win in the Yorkshireman's last 17 outings as captain.

In a sequence of developments that can so easily find a special mention in *Ripley's Believe It or Not*, Root, also 35 and arguably the greatest English batter of all time, is now back as Test skipper, albeit in an interim capacity, for the Oval skirmish against Tom Latham's beleaguered troops. By and in itself, that's an interesting development because Harry Brook, the white-ball captain, was Stokes' designated deputy. The fact that Brook has been overlooked and the captaincy returned to Root, if only on a temporary

basis, reiterates how shaken the mandarins at the ECB are at the latest turn of events where, we are repeatedly being told, the *only* transgression Stokes and Atkinson were guilty of was breaking team curfew rules.

The curfew was imposed this January after a litany of bad behaviour with the high-profile Brook and opener Ben Duckett in the crosshairs, the former in New Zealand on the eve of an ODI in his first series as captain and the latter during the ill-fated Ashes tour down under in the last Australian summer. England had sought to sweep the Brook episode under the carpet after he was 'clocked' by a bounce outside a nightclub in Wellington the night before the final ODI. He was fined more than ₹36 lakh and almost lost his captaincy. A few months later, a video surfaced of Duckett purportedly drunk and unable to find his way to the team hotel in Noosa when England embarked on a pre-arranged mid-series break between the second and the third Ashes Tests despite being 0-2 down in the most furiously followed cricketing faceoff.

Ironically, alongside head coach Brendon McCullum with whom he once enjoyed a fabulous relationship rumoured to have gone pear-shaped during the disastrous Ashes campaign, Stokes was among the prime movers of the curfew imposed ahead of a white-ball tour of Sri Lanka that was to culminate in the T20 World Cup in India and Sri Lanka in February-March. For the skipper therefore to breach the rules he himself had helped put in place is poor optics, never mind if he and Atkinson, like we are being told, were not the *agent provocateurs* in the London incident of Sunday at Chelsea's Rex Rooms nightclub which left an ECB security personnel needing stitches after reportedly being struck by the Saracens' Samoan rugby player, Tootoa Auvaa.

Mixed messages

There have been mixed messages from England in the days since the incident came to light. It is been rumoured that Stokes might not just step down from the captaincy but retire entirely from the sport, which might seem like an overreaction until one is informed that there is no guarantee that he will be selected in the Test squad if he quits the leadership role because he has scored only 31 runs in his last six Test innings. Anyone who has followed the Stokes graph with only cursory interest knows well the perils of ruling him out prematurely. But clearly, England's bosses with McCullum -- himself under scrutiny for his backfiring Bazball tactics -- at the helm might feel Stokes' best days are behind him and that the responsibility of taking the team forward across formats must be entrusted to the exciting, unconventional and aggressive Brook.

The problem is that all these Brook traits, so arresting on the cricket field, have spilled over beyond the boundary.

Root's temporary elevation as skipper is the ultimate acknowledgement from the decision-making group at this troubled time, England are looking for stability and maturity and poise and measured leadership in the short term, all of which Root provides in abundance and which aren't necessarily Brook's visible USPs. It can also be construed as a message, however belated, that there will be no more tolerance of unacceptable behaviour from young men tasked with not just acquitting themselves with credit on the cricket field but who are also installed as global ambassadors of their country. Nasser Hussain and Mike Atherton, respected former captains with respected voices, are unequivocal in stating that the Rex Rooms standoff isn't a 'sackable offence'. *Per se*, they are absolutely right. After all, one can argue, they were out celebrating a Test victory -- unlike Brook in Wellington -- and that shouldn't be a crime in itself. But when the captain breaks the same rules that he had helped implement, surely, it must come with repercussions far greater than if only a 'mere' member of the side was guilty of curfew-breaking. Which is exactly why there is a more lenient view of paceman Atkinson's misdemeanour.

Stokes, it would seem, has chosen not to make decisions from a place of emotion, which is just as well because any immediate emotional call will inevitably come with regrets for a lifetime. He has a few days to consider where he stands, where is at mentally, how much gas he has left in the mental tank, confabulate with his bosses, read the room and then decide how he wants to play it. If he is seen to be sincerely remorseful, he could be back, at least as a player. If he has played his last international game, it will be a shame but then again, actions do have consequences, don't they?

THE GIST

Stokes has a long and disturbing history with nightclubs and other watering holes. The most visible of misadventures came in 2017 in Bristol when, after an ODI against West Indies, he was involved in a late-night altercation outside a nightclub

The problem is that all the Brook traits, so arresting on the cricket field, have spilled over beyond the boundary. Root's temporary elevation as skipper is the ultimate acknowledgement from the decision-making group at this troubled time, England are looking for stability and maturity

When the captain breaks the same rules that he had helped implement, surely, it must come with repercussions far greater than if only a 'mere' member of the side was guilty

