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INSIDE



4,000 EVMs
gutted in Bengal
govt. building fire

KOLKATA

Around 4,000 electronic voting machines (EVMs) were gutted after a building in Kolkata that houses the South 24 Parganas Zila Parishad office and units of several other departments caught fire on Wednesday, said officials. » PAGE 4

Maharashtra to
table women
farmers' Bill

MUMBAI

The State government will introduce the Maharashtra Women Farmers Empowerment Bill, 2026, during the upcoming Monsoon Session beginning on June 22, CM Devendra Fadnavis said on Friday. » PAGE 2

Attacks on ships ‘unacceptable’, says India

Three ships struck by U.S. had strong Indian links; were catering to the nation’s oil needs

Centre summons U.S. Embassy Charge d’Affaires; lodges ‘strong protest’ over use of ‘lethal force’

Meanwhile, Trump accuses Tehran of ‘totally unacceptable’ drone attacks on Indian ships

M. Kalyanaraman
Kallol Bhattacharjee
CHENNAI/NEW DELHI

While condemning the U.S. attacks on three ships with Indian crew that killed three Indian seafarers, Esmail Baqaei, a spokesperson for Iran’s Foreign Affairs Ministry, on Friday, described them as “attacks on Indian commercial vessels.”

Publicly available information shows that the three ships, though foreign flagged, have deeper Indian links than just the crew on board, including potentially in ownership and management. Two ships were serving Indian ports, facilitating Iranian oil trade with India.

On Thursday, the External Affairs Ministry had said the ships were foreign-flagged and indicated that the deaths were incidental



Sushila Devi, wife of Shivanand Chaurasia, an Indian seafarer killed in U.S. attacks, mourns in Deoria, U.P., on Friday. REUTERS

collateral damage in the conflict, tamping down any notion of targeting of Indians by the U.S.

On Friday, however, for the second time in three days, the Ministry summoned the Charge d’Affaires of the U.S. Embassy Jason Meeks and lodged a “strong protest”. “The Ministry once again conveyed its deep concern over the

A deal ‘has never been closer’, says Araghchi

Stanly Johny

A day after U.S. President Donald Trump backed away from a threatened attack on Iran, claiming progress in talks, Iran’s Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi said on Friday that Washington and Tehran have “never been

closer” to reaching a preliminary agreement.

“The Islamabad Memorandum of Understanding has never been closer. All details will be shared in due course,” Mr. Araghchi said.

FULL STORY ON
» PAGE 12

base. *Opencorporates.com* lists six Indian names associated with the company - director, president and so on.

Marivex was one of the first ships to transit the Strait of Hormuz carrying Iranian oil and was bound for Mangalore. Since then, it has served Karwar, too.

The *Settebello*, struck on Wednesday, was the ship on which three Indian seafarers died. Owned by a company in UAE, its manager, IOS Marine FZE, had disputed U.S. Centcom’s version that the ship’s crew “repeatedly failed to comply with directions from American sources”, saying no warning or call was received by the ship and no contact whatsoever was made by the U.S. Navy with the ship.

Settebello had been flagged by the United Against Nuclear Iran, a U.S.-based non-profit, which had included it in its

‘Ghost Armada’ list for trading in Iranian oil. The IOS Marine statement says the company had no affiliation with Iran or Iranian oil and sought evidence of U.S. Navy contacting the ship.

Settebello has changed its flag ten times - nearly all of them flags of convenience - names five times, and ownership three times. It has been managed by ship management companies located in India in the past. Its current owner owns another ship which had been managed by Global Tankers based in India.

Global Tankers was sanctioned by the U.S. for Iran links. Meanwhile, *Jalveer*, the Guinea Bissau-registered ship struck on Thursday, has publicly listed as a One Person Company in Mumbai as responsible for safety compliance.

Its last port of call, as per *marinetraffic.com*, was Dighi in Maharashtra.

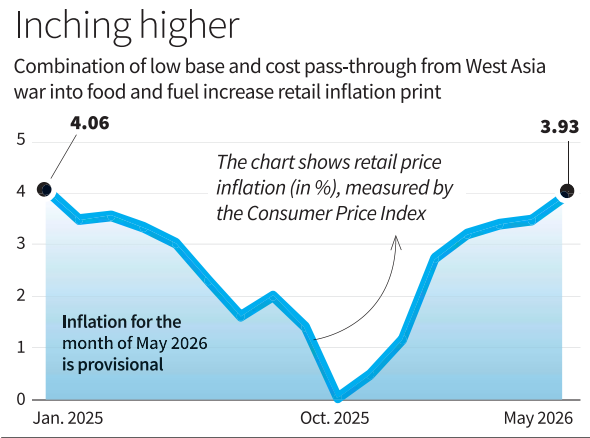
Food prices take retail inflation to 3.9% in May

Ashokamithran T.
MUMBAI

Retail inflation, as measured by the Consumer Price Index, increased to 3.9% in May as food prices rose, according to data from the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation released on Friday. The inflation rate was 3.5% in April.

Retail prices moved at the fastest pace since January 2025, when the index increased 4.06%, making the May figure the highest in 16 months.

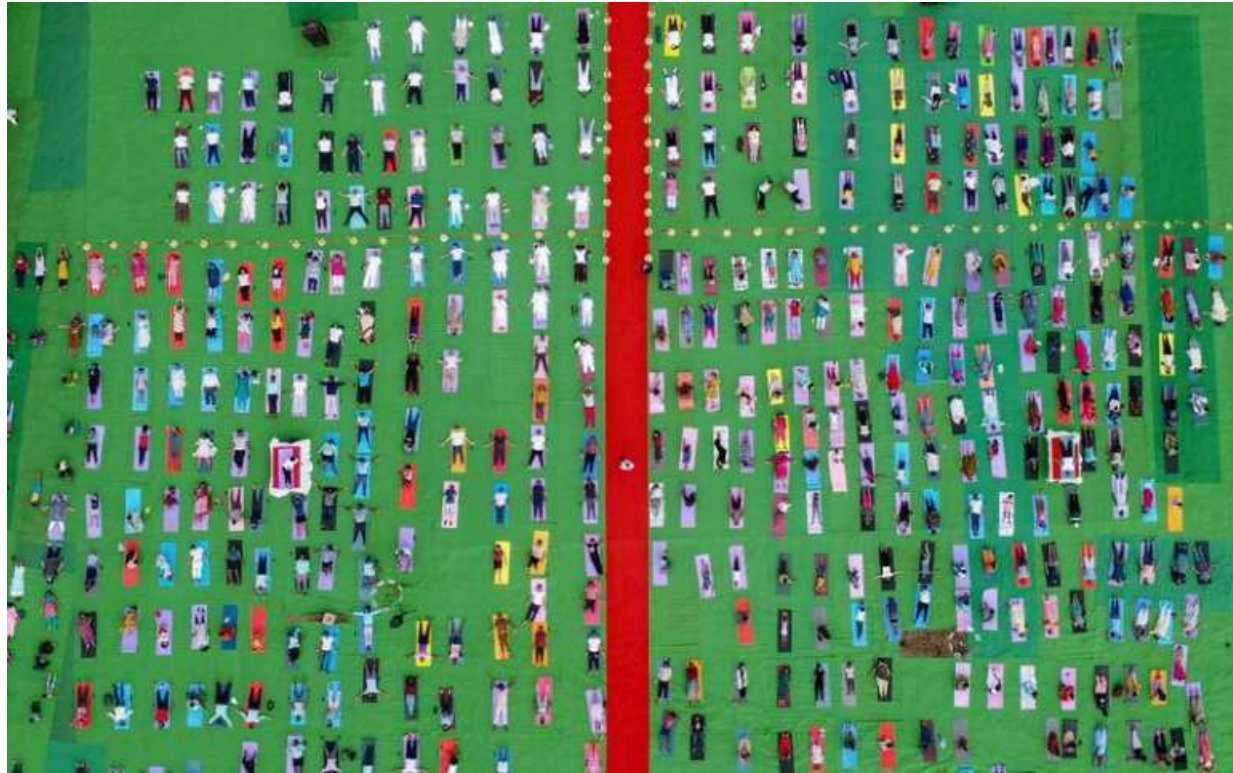
Several food staples saw a faster rate of inflation or slowing rate of deflation. Cereal prices increased 0.28%, entering the posi-



tive territory for the first time since January 2026. Most of the increase came from rice, prices of which increased 0.23%. Tomato prices increased 48.4% in May, from 35.3% in April.

Housing, water, electricity, gas and other fuels inflation - the second largest group of items constituting 17.6% of the retail basket - quickened to 1.73% in May, from 1.71% a month before.

Asanas on the beach



Stretching it: An aerial view of people taking part in the Yogandhra programme on the Rushikonda beach in Visakhapatnam on Friday in the run-up to the International Day of Yoga celebrations on June 21. K.R. DEEPAK

Minimum one Sanskrit batch required for Classes 6 & 9 in KV schools

Maitri Porecha
NEW DELHI

Every Kendriya Vidyalaya (KV) must maintain a minimum of one dedicated section of students learning Sanskrit as a third language in Classes 6 and 9, according to a circular issued by Kendriya Vidyalaya Sangathan (KVS), an autonomous body under the Union Education Ministry.

There are currently 1,288 functional KVs across the country, along with three operating internationally in Moscow, Kathmandu, and Tehran. The circular, dated May 29 and accessed by *The Hindu*, is meant for all KVs in India and abroad.

“KVS has ensured that the policy remains sensitive to its transferable student population by maintaining Sanskrit as a common option across all KVs, while offering regional languages as an alternative for those who are not subject to frequent transfers,” a senior KVS official said, on the condition of anonymity.

The circular clarifies that the R3 choice (Sanskrit or a regional or State language from the scheduled languages) must be distinct from R1 (Hindi) and R2 (English).

Staffing and resources

The official acknowledged that a few KVs face challenges such as limited teacher availability and resource constraints, but insisted that the use of contractual teachers for regional languages, phased roll-out, and adoption of SCERT materials will help mitigate these constraints.

SC dismisses Congress leader’s plea on rejection of Rajya Sabha nomination

Aaratrika Bhaumik
NEW DELHI

Observing that courts should refrain from intervening in electoral processes, the Supreme Court on Friday dismissed Congress leader Meenakshi Nataraajan’s plea challenging the rejection of her Rajya Sabha nomination papers from Madhya Pradesh.

A Bench of Justices Prashant Kumar Mishra and A.S. Chandurkar observed that in view of Article 329(b) of the Constitution, it had no jurisdiction to interfere with the order of the Returning Officer (RO) and that an election petition was the only remedy available in such cases.

The provision stipulates that no election to either



Whenever an attempt is made to invoke this court’s or the High Court’s writ jurisdiction to interject during the conduct of elections, on every occasion the court has rejected such an attempt, keeping in view the principles contained in Article 329 of the Constitution

SUPREME COURT



House of Parliament or a State legislature can be called in question except through an election petition.

“...Whenever an attempt is made to invoke this court’s or the High Court’s writ jurisdiction to interject during the conduct of elections, on every

occasion, the court has rejected such an attempt, keeping in view the principles contained in Article 329 of the Constitution,” the Bench said.

The top court was hearing a plea filed by Ms. Nataraajan, the Congress’s sole candidate for one of the three Rajya Sabha seats

from Madhya Pradesh, challenging a June 9 order of the RO and Madhya Pradesh Assembly Principal Secretary Arvind Sharma rejecting her nomination on the ground that she had failed to disclose a pending criminal case in Hyderabad in her affidavit. BJP candidates Tarun Chugh, Rajneesh Agrawal and Mahesh Kewat were declared elected unopposed to Rajya Sabha on Thursday.

Appearing for Ms. Nataraajan, senior advocate A.M. Singhvi argued that the RO’s decision suffered from a “patent error” and warranted interference by the court. He also questioned the EC’s decision to proceed with the results despite the top court being cognisant of the matter.

AI-171 crash: AAIB releases interim statement on probe

Jagriti Chandra
NEW DELHI

The evidence gathered in the probe into the crash of a London-bound Air India flight, AI-171, in Ahmedabad on June 12, 2025 is undergoing comprehensive analysis, the Aircraft Accident Investigation Bureau (AAIB) said in an interim statement on Friday.

The final report will be released after all investigative work, mandatory international review, and consultation processes are concluded, it said.

A total of 260 people, 241 on board and 19 on ground, were killed when the Boeing 787-8 Dreamliner crashed while taking off.

“The evidence gathered and the results of various



Family members of the victims of the crash at an event organised on the first anniversary of the tragedy in Ahmedabad on Friday. ANI

examinations are being analysed in a comprehensive and integrated manner,” the AAIB said.

Separately, the Civil Aviation Minister said the Centre was committed “to a thorough and objective determination of the causes of the accident”.

“Significant progress has been made in the ex-

amination and analysis of aircraft systems, flight recorder data, engine-related components, maintenance and operational records,” the statement said.

The UN aviation safety watchdog’s Annex 13 on Aircraft Accident and Incident Investigation says states must bring out final report as soon as possible.

INBRIEF



Smriti's name missing from Amethi panchayat voter list

Former Union Minister Smriti Irani has been left out of the panchayat voter list of Medan Mawai village in Amethi district despite her name being present in the Lok Sabha and Assembly electoral rolls for the area, officials said on Friday. District Magistrate Sanjay Chauhan said an inquiry had been ordered into the matter. The BJP leader had represented Amethi in the Lok Sabha from 2019 to 2024. She built a residence in Medan Mawai village after winning the 2019 parliamentary election. She is registered as a voter from the village and had cast her vote there during the Lok Sabha poll. PTI

CITU: Haryana should publish Labour Code rules in Hindi

The Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) has demanded that the Haryana government extend the deadline for suggestions on draft Labour Code rules and publish them in Hindi, calling the current process a violation of workers' rights. CITU objected that the rules were issued only in English, unlike the Central Government's versions which are in both Hindi and English. "Publishing rules only in English disregards regulations and makes it impossible for workers, union activists and stakeholders to read or suggest changes. This amounts to a disregard for the fundamental rights of workers," it said.

Regional parties formed after splitting away from Congress should reunite, says Gehlot

Mohammed Iqbal
JAIPUR

Veteran Congress leader Ashok Gehlot on Friday made a strong pitch for the Opposition unity by calling upon the regional parties, which separated from Congress, to rejoin its fold and "wholeheartedly accept" Rahul Gandhi as their leader. Mr. Gehlot affirmed that this would change the voting pattern across the country.

The former Rajasthan Chief Minister made the remarks while endorsing Shiv Sena (UBT) leader Sanjay Raut's suggestion that the parties that had split from Congress should reunite with the grand old party. Mr. Raut had urged Nationalist Congress Party (SP) chief Sharad Pawar to take the lead for the merger. "I believe there is merit in what Mr. Raut has said.



Ashok Gehlot

The time has come to fight for saving democracy. When all of us are on the battlefield to protect democratic values, the parties that emerged after separating from Congress should consider rejoining and wholeheartedly accept Rahul Gandhi as their leader," Mr. Gehlot said.

Talking to journalists at his residence, Mr. Gehlot said the INDIA bloc should present a clear leadership structure before voters. "People see a direct political fight between Narendra

Modi and Rahul Gandhi. If all Opposition parties unequivocally accept Rahul Gandhi's leadership, the voting pattern in the country will change significantly," he said.

Laying emphasis on Mr. Gandhi's role as principal challenger to Prime Minister Mr. Modi, the Congress veteran said his appeal was directed at the parties that originated from Congress and not at organisations with distinct ideological and historical roots.

"Shiv Sena, CPI(M), CPI and the Samajwadi Party are political formations that have evolved independently. They cannot be expected to merge with Congress, but the parties formed after breaking away [from Congress] should seriously reflect in the larger national interest at this critical juncture," Mr. Gehlot said.

Odisha to introduce free education from KG to PG in govt. schools, colleges: CM

Satyasundar Barik
BHUBANESWAR

Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi on Friday announced that education from kindergarten (KG) to postgraduate (PG) level in all government institutions in Odisha would be made completely free.

Addressing a press conference on the occasion of the Bharatiya Janata Party government completing two years in the State, Mr. Majhi said, "Our government is committed to making education truly free and universal. Therefore, I announce that education from KG to PG level will be completely free of cost."

The Chief Minister said the initiative would benefit all students in the State, particularly those from



CM Mohan Charan Majhi at an event marking two years of the BJP government in Odisha, in Bhubaneswar on Friday. ANI

economically weaker sections and girls.

Food scheme soon

In another announcement, Mr. Majhi said the government would launch the Chief Minister Annapurna Yojana to strengthen food security. Under the scheme, all beneficiaries of

the National Food Security Act and the State Food Security Scheme would receive an additional 5 kg of rice per month free of cost.

"As a result, every beneficiary will receive 10 kg of rice free of cost every month. The scheme will benefit 3.28 crore beneficiaries, covering about 80

per cent of the State's population. The State government will spend ₹8,813 crore annually on this programme," he said.

In the education sector, Mr. Majhi said the government had taken two historic steps: implementation of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which he said had been pending due to political reasons, and establishment of Gopabari Mishra Model Primary Schools in every panchayat. He said that out of 2,200 schools planned in the first phase, foundation stones had been laid for 322. Over the last two years, 26,615 teaching and non-teaching staff have been recruited, he said, adding that 45,000 more teachers would be recruited over three years.

Shiv Sahay Singh
KOLKATA

West Bengal Chief Minister Suven- du Adhikari on Friday said Tatas will come to the State but added that the land at Singur on which Tata Motors had set up a small car factory has been returned to the farmers and no longer with the State government.

Speaking to mediapers- ons at a press conference to mark 12 years of the Na- rendra Modi government at the Centre, Mr. Adhikari said that his government is serious about attracting investments to the State and will not engage in just "photo sessions" in the name of industrialisation.

He said that land acquisition will not be an issue and forcibly acquiring land like the Left Front government or forcing industries out of the State like the Trinamool Congress government is no way out.

Mr. Adhikari cited the allocation of land to the Bor-



West Bengal Chief Minister Suven- du Adhikari at a press meet on the completion of 12 years of the Modi government. PTI

der Security Force for fencing about 100 kms of West Bengal-Bangladesh border as a success of his first month as Chief Minister and added that people are willing to give land for industrialisation. He said that a road map for industrialisation of West Bengal will be reflected in the budget, which the BJP government will table in the Assembly later this month.

Mr. Adhikari, who spoke on a number of policy issues at the press conference, said that the government has a "zero tolerance"

policy towards unrest, hoo- liganism and anti-social activities.

Demolition drives

The Chief Minister also defended ongoing anti-en- croachment drives against hawkers on Kolkata streets and railway stations.

"People have the right to walk on footpaths. Nobody has the right to occupy them. No one has given me the right to hand over Kol- kata's wide roads and foot- paths to anyone. I am ac- countable to the people," he said.

FIR against Mamata over 'communal remark'

Senjuti Sengupta
KOLKATA

A first information report (FIR) was registered against former Chief Minister and Trinamool Congress supre- mo Mamata Banerjee for al- legedly making provocative remarks during the As- sembly election campaign, a senior officer said on Friday.

The officer said, "It's a Zero FIR that was lodged on June 7. It was initially filed at the Netaji Nagar po- lice station based on a com- plaint by one Tushar Kanti Das (45). However, the case was later transferred to the Hare Street police station." According to the com- plaint, Ms. Banerjee's speech was intended to provoke breach of peace.

Maharashtra to table women farmers' Bill in Monsoon Session

The Hindu Bureau
MUMBAI

The State government will introduce the Maharashtra Women Farmers Empow- erment Bill, 2026, during the upcoming Monsoon Session of the Legislative Assembly beginning on June 22, seeking to grant women farmers indepen- dent legal recognition and improve their access to welfare schemes and institu- tional support, Chief Min- ister Devendra Fadnavis announced on Friday.

Mr. Fadnavis reviewed a preliminary presentation on the draft Bill at a meet- ing attended by Deputy Chief Minister Sunetra Ajit Pawar, Agriculture Minis- ter Dattatray Bharane and Minister of State for Agri- culture Ashish Jaiswal at his official residence on Friday.

"Women account for more than 81 per cent of participation in Maharash- tra's agricultural sector. However, most agricultural policies and government schemes remain male-cen- tric. Since land ownership is often a prerequisite for availing benefits under agricultural schemes, a large number of women farmers are excluded from these benefits. Women cul-



Maharashtra CM Devendra Fadnavis chaired a meeting on the draft Bill on Friday. ANI

tivating family- or com- munity-owned land, as well as those engaged in al- lied activities such as fish- eries, livestock rearing, poultry farming and collec- tion of forest produce, are often not recognised as farmers. It is against this backdrop that the pro- posed legislation has been drafted," he said.

Digital system

The Chief Minister direct- ed officials to undertake a detailed study for develop- ing an effective digital sys- tem through which women farmers can access State government loan schemes, agricultural subsidies, seeds, fertilisers, crop in- surance, extension servic- es, market facilities, trans- portation, storage infrastructure and social security schemes.

No formal proposal yet, say senior NCP (SP) leaders amid buzz over merger with Cong.

Vinaya Deshpande Pandit
MUMBAI

There is no formal propo- sal yet for the merger of the Nationalist Congress Party (Sharadchandra Pawar) with the Congress, senior NCP (SP) leaders told *The Hindu* on Friday.

"Nobody has spoken about it yet with Sharad Pa- war *saheb* or with [Bara- mati MP] Supriya Sule," said a senior party leader.

While the Congress's Maharashtra unit has re- fused comment on specu- lations about the merger, sources said a proposal to this effect has been in the pipeline for some time.

'Party brass to take call'

When asked, Maharashtra Congress president Har- shawardhan Sapkal said, "This is something our central leadership will look into. If asked, I will convey my opinion to the central leadership, as I have done in the past."



Maharashtra Congress chief Harshwardhan Sapkal (left) with NCP (SP)'s Supriya Sule (right) and other Opposition leaders. FILE PHOTO

NCP (SP) State president Shashikant Shinde dismis- sed the speculation as a "mere rumour". He said the party had recently ce- lebrated its foundation day and had decided to intensi- fy its struggle against the Bharatiya Janata Party.

'Sinking ship'

Meanwhile, Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis re- sponded to the merger buzz by terming the Congress a "sinking ship". "The Con-

gress is a sinking ship. No- body will step onto it. In politics, one doesn't answer hypothetical questions. But let me tell you, if it hap- pens, it will only streng- then us," he said.

When reached for com- ment over Shiv Sena (UBT) leader Sanjay Raut's sug- gestion over the merger of the NCP (SP) and the Trina- mool Congress with the grand old party, the Bara- mati MP termed it Mr. Raut's personal opinion.

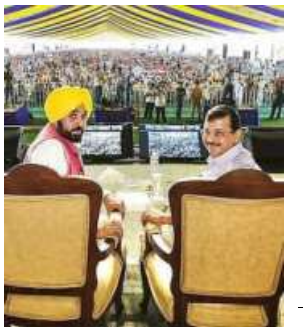
Later, while speaking to reporters, she said that the Shiv Sena (UBT) was like an "elder brother", and her party would take note of his suggestion.

'Congress not keen'

The State Congress lead- ership is said not to be in fa- vour of the merger owing to the differences between the two parties.

"It will end up becom- ing a liability. We have an anti-Adani stance. For them, Adani is like a family member. There are inter- nal issues within their party, and everyone is worried about the future of the NCP (SP)," said a senior Con- gress leader.

The leader added, "There are concerns about who the leader will be after Sharad Pawar. Different things are being speculated about as there is unrest within their party. There is fear that leaders and cadres might move to Su- netra Pawar or to the BJP."



CM Bhagwant Mann and AAP chief Arvind Kejriwal at a public event in Punjab. FILE PHOTO

Punjab may go to polls in Nov., Mann to return as CM: Kejriwal

The Hindu Bureau
CHANDIGARH

Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) chief Arvind Kejriwal said on Friday that the Punjab Assembly election may be held in November this year rather than in February 2027, when the AAP government would complete its five-year tenure. He also expressed confidence that Bhagwant Singh Mann would return as CM.

Mr. Kejriwal made the comment while addressing a roadshow in Bathinda, along with the CM, AAP's State in-charge Manish Si- sodia and other leaders.

"I have been told that the elections will be held in November [2026], not February [2027]. Only four months are left. Now we all have only one task – to make Bhagwant Singh Mann Chief Minister again," said the ruling party's national convener.

'No graft allegation'

"In the last four years, not a single allegation of cor- ruption involving even one paisa has been made against Bhagwant Mann. Do you think PM Modi would have spared him if there had been such an al- legation? The ED and CBI would have conducted raids here as well," Mr. Ke- jriwal claimed.

The CM said traditional political parties have been unable to accept that a per- son from an ordinary fami- ly could lead Punjab and work tirelessly for the wel- fare of its people.

Notices sent to 4 former MLAs for defying AIADMK whip during trust vote in House: T.N. Speaker

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI

Tamil Nadu Assembly Speaker J.C.D. Prabhaka- ron Friday said notices were issued on June 9 to four former AIADMK MLAs who voted in favour of the Chief Minister C. Joseph Vi- jay-led government during the confidence vote on May 13, defying the di- rections of the party whip.

The notices were issued by the Assembly Secreta- riat to S. Jayakumar, P. Sathyabama, Maragatham Kumaravel, and Esaki Sub- aya, who were among the 25 rebel AIADMK MLAs who had voted in favour of the TVK-led government and later resigned as legis- lators and joined the TVK.



J.C.D. Prabhakaran

Barring these four, the re- maining 21 rebel MLAs were condoned by AIADMK general secretary Edappadi K. Palaniswami after they reconciled them- selves with the party.

Speaking to journalists at the Secretariat in Chen- nai, Mr. Prabhakar said the four former MLAs would

have to respond within seven days of the date of is- suance of the notices.

Training for MLAs

The Speaker said a training programme would be or- ganised on June 16 and 17 by the Assembly Secreta- riat at Kalaivanar Arangam in Chennai for all the MLAs to familiarise themselves with Assembly proceed- ings.

Mr. Vijay will inaugurate the programme, and all legis- lators, irrespective of their experience, will be in- vited.

Officials of the Assembly Secretariat and former As- sembly Secretaries will conduct sessions on the procedures to be followed at Assembly sessions.

BSF, BGB discuss 'illegal, forced' border crossings

Compromised PM cannot protect sons of India: Rahul

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi on Friday criticised Prime Minister Narendra Modi over the deaths of three Indian seafarers in U.S. military strikes on commercial vessels off the coast of Oman, alleging that the Prime Minister had remained silent despite the loss of Indian lives.

In a post on X in Hindi, the Congress leader questioned the Prime Minister’s response to the incidents.

“Three Indians have been killed in U.S. attacks on three ships in international waters within three days. And our compromised PM... Not a single word. When any foreign power murders an Indian, the Prime Minister has to speak up. But he can never utter even one word,” Mr. Gandhi said.

“Next week at the G-7, just days after the murder of our sailors, Modiji will smile, embrace, and sign agreements – but for those three Indians, he won’t have a word to spare,” he said, adding, “A compromised PM cannot protect the sons of Mother India, because he lacks either the courage or the strength to confront those who took the lives of those sons.”

The remarks came a day after the Congress condemned “reckless military actions” by the U.S. and demanded that the Union government take all necessary diplomatic measures to establish accountability.

Country is drifting towards electoral autocracy: Cong.

Congress accuses BJP of subverting democratic institutions for political gain in connivance with the poll body, and says the fight is between the ‘constitutional model’ and the ‘Modi model’

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Congress on Friday intensified its attack on the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Election Commission of India (EC) over the rejection of its Rajya Sabha candidate Meenakshi Natarajan’s nomination from Madhya Pradesh, alleging that the ruling party had graduated from “vote chori” to “seat chori” (seat theft). It said the country was “drifting towards electoral autocracy.”

The principal Opposition party said the BJP and the poll body were partners in crime, and the ruling party was subverting democratic institutions for political gain. The party’s charge came at a press conference attended by 61 Congress MLAs from Madhya Pradesh, who travelled to Delhi to express support for Ms. Natarajan and seek an appointment with the President.

The MLAs, who had planned to march from the party’s 24 Akbar Road office to the Rashtrapati Bhavan, were detained by the Delhi Police.

Leaders pointed out that Ms. Natarajan required the backing of only 58 legislators to secure election to the Upper House, lower than the party’s strength in Madhya Pradesh.

Madhya Pradesh Congress president Jitu Patwari



Hitting out: Congress leader Meenakshi Natarajan with MLAs and leaders from Madhya Pradesh addressing the media in New Delhi on Friday. SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

alleged that the BJP resorted to extraordinary measures after failing to engineer defections within the Congress Legislature Party.

Leader of the Opposition in the State Assembly Umang Singh said the episode reflected a broader democratic decline. “The country is drifting towards electoral autocracy,” he said, citing what he alleged was the centralisation of executive power, weakening of legislative oversight and curbs on freedom of expression.

AICC Madhya Pradesh in-charge Harish Chaudhary said the contest in the country was now between the “constitutional model” and the “Modi model”. He alleged that institutions meant to function impartially were increasingly act-

ing in a partisan manner.

Explaining her case, Ms. Natarajan said her nomination had been rejected on the ground that she failed to disclose a criminal case in Form 26.

She maintained that no criminal case was pending against her and that the matter referred to by the Returning Officer was a private complaint on which no court had taken cognisance.

“The root of this entire matter is Form 26,” she said. “If there was a column for it, I would have given the details.” She argued that election rules required disclosure only of cases in which charges had been framed or a court had formally taken cognisance.

The Congress also alleged “double standards”

in the scrutiny of nominations, contrasting Ms. Natarajan’s case with that of BJP-backed candidate Parimal Nathwani in Jharkhand.

It said that while Ms. Natarajan faced “farcically stringent” scrutiny, Mr. Nathwani was given opportunities to rectify deficiencies in his papers.

In a separate attack on the BJP, Congress general secretary (communications) Jairam Ramesh accused Union Home Minister Amit Shah of attempting to “engineer” a two-thirds majority for the ruling party in Parliament by encouraging defections from Opposition parties.

“The fight is on. His evil designs must not and will not succeed,” Mr. Ramesh said in a post on X.

Congress doesn’t require ‘neutrality of the Indian state’ to function: Rahul

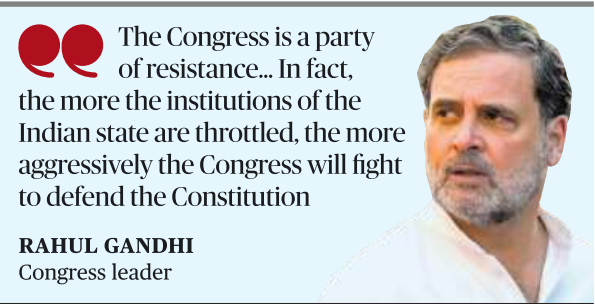
Sobhana K. Nair
NEW DELHI

The Congress does not require the “neutrality of the Indian state” to operate, Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi said during the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) meeting held on June 8.

The Congress on Friday released the audio and the transcript of Mr. Gandhi’s speech made in the closed-door meeting of the INDIA bloc. The address, which sets out the road ahead for the Opposition in the 2029 Lok Sabha election, positions the Congress as the leader of the bloc while also spelling out the limitations within which the bloc will have to operate.

“The Congress is a party of resistance. It does not require the neutrality of the Indian state to operate. In fact, the more the institutions of the Indian state are throttled, the more aggressively the Congress will fight to defend the Constitution,” Mr. Gandhi said. The party seemed to have timed the release of the speech on a day when the Supreme Court rejected its plea against the disqualification of Meenakshi Natarajan, the Congress candidate for the Rajya Sabha elections from Madhya Pradesh.

He framed the Congress as a “resistance movement”, in the context of the Bharatiya Janata Party



and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh “tightening their grip on the Indian state,” and rendering conventional political tools increasingly ineffective.

‘Resistance works’

“If political parties can’t function, what functions? Resistance works. Wherever we resist, it works. I have seen it with my own eyes. I have walked 4,000 kilometres across this country – resistance works,” he said. Mr. Gandhi also addressed the criticism levelled against his party by allies. “It is not my place to answer any of the things that were said today about the Congress. It is my place to, like in the Shaiva tradition, swallow everything. The idea of the blue-necked One (Shiva) who drinks all the poison. Whatever more you want to say... we will accept it happily, with a smile on our face,” he said.

He argued that the Congress occupies a fundamentally different role within the alliance. “I do not say this with arrogance. Our role, as many of

you have stated, is to unite all of you together with love and affection,” he said, assuming the leadership of the INDIA bloc.

He expressed confidence in key allies, saying: “...I can vouch right now for the DMK. When it comes to defending the idea of India, every single person will be in this room.”

At the same time, he did not gloss over internal contradictions. “We have our fights, but if you are asking me to go and hug the ex-Chief Minister of Kerala – I cannot and I will not, because I have an ongoing political fight with him,” he said.

On electoral prospects

Striking a confident note on electoral prospects, he told allies: “The next election has already been won. Please understand: there is so much anger among the people of India that the next election is already over. The problem is the capture of the instruments of the Indian state by the RSS. The problem is that you will not have a free and fair election to win,” he said.

4,000 EVMs gutted in Bengal govt. building fire; Minister flags ‘foul play’

Senjuti Sengupta
KOLKATA

Around 4,000 electronic voting machines (EVMs) were gutted after a government building in Kolkata’s Alipore area that houses the South 24 Parganas Zila Parishad office and district units of several other departments caught fire on Wednesday, said officials, flagging a possibility of sabotage.

Minister of State for Fire and Emergency Services Koushik Chowdhury said, “The incident took place on Wednesday afternoon. It’s a nine-storey building in Alipore that houses the South 24 Parganas Zila Parishad, local District Forest Officer’s (DFO) office, and



A fire breaks out at a government building in Kolkata’s Alipore area that houses the South 24 Parganas Zila Parishad office. ANI

also the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan. The EVMs were stored in a room on the ninth floor. All of those EVMs have been gutted.”

According to the Minister, those EVMs have been used in at least 10 consti-

tuencies across Kolkata, North 24 Parganas, and South 24 Parganas during the recent Assembly election.

Mr. Chowdhury, who went to visit the site, also flagged a possibility of sa-

botage. “Prima facie, the fire first broke out at the third and fourth floors. It is not yet clear how it reached the eighth and ninth floors while the fifth, sixth, and seventh floors were safe. It is not normal. The fire services personnel were also called pretty late. Police are investigating the matter. The District Magistrate was also asked to launch a probe. They are trying to trace what exactly caused the fire.”

An officer from the Alipore police station also said that the Additional District Magistrate has lodged an FIR based on which a four-member special investigation team (SIT) was formed to investigate the matter.

Jairam urges Defence Minister to reconsider expansion of INS Baaz

Jacob Koshy
NEW DELHI

Congress Rajya Sabha member Jairam Ramesh, on Friday, wrote to Defence Minister Rajnath Singh urging him to reconsider the rejection of a full runway expansion at INS Baaz on Campbell Bay. He argued that the alternative now being pursued – a greenfield airport at Galathea Bay in Great Nicobar – carries far heavier ecological and social costs than the government has acknowledged.

The letter follows the Defence Ministry’s June 8 assertion that India would invest around ₹13,000 crore in a dual-use airport and runway for civilian and



Jairam Ramesh

naval operations.

Mr. Ramesh’s letter responds to media reports, attributed to Defence Ministry sources, that runway expansion at INS Baaz would be limited because lengthening it beyond 4,500 feet would damage the surrounding environment. He questioned the

timing of that concern. “I appreciate the sudden worry for ecological protection,” he wrote, before listing what he said were the greater costs of the Galathea Bay site.

The proposed airport, he wrote, would require cutting two forest-covered hills of 115 metres and clearing around 225 acres of protected forest and 130 acres of deemed forest that form part of the territory of the Shompen tribal community. About 142 acres sit on Island Coastal Regulation Zone-1A land – the most protected category under the 2019 coastal notification – and take in turtle-nesting beaches, corals and breeding grounds of the endangered Nicobar

megapode. The project would also involve reclaiming a creek, relocating salt-water crocodiles, and moving 234 ex-servicemen settler families who, he said, would be displaced for a third time in recent years.

Mr. Ramesh argued that the site had not undergone a serious environmental assessment, despite Great Nicobar being designated as an Important Bird Area and lying on two international migratory routes, the Central Asian and East Asian-Australasian flyways.

He asked the Minister to reconsider rejecting the full INS Baaz expansion, which he said some senior naval officers had themselves recommended.

Amit Shah reviews security plans for Amarnath Yatra

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Union Home Minister Amit Shah reviewed the security arrangements for the upcoming Amarnath Yatra in Jammu and Kashmir on Friday. He directed the officials to ensure robust security arrangements at other major tourist destinations besides the Yatra route. The Yatra is scheduled to be held from July 3 to August 28.

After the April 2025 terror strike at Baisaran Valley in Pahalgam, where 26 people, mostly tourists, were killed, several tourist spots in J&K were shut down for security audit.

The meeting was attended by J&K Lieutenant-Governor



Amit Shah (Centre), J&K Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha (Right) and National Security Advisor of India Ajit Doval (Left). PTI

Manoj Sinha, National Security Adviser Ajit Doval, Union Home Secretary Govind Mohan, Army chief General Upendra Dwivedi, Director of the Intelligence Bureau (IB) Tapan Kumar Deka, J&K Director-General of Police Nalin Prabhat, and other senior officials.

Mr. Shah instructed the officials that an integrated and impregnable security cover be put in place for the Yatra through the coordinated efforts of all security agencies. He said that the traditional security framework should be strengthened through the use of modern technologies.

Project Kusha, our indigenous air defence shield, will be a game changer, says Rajnath

Saurabh Trivedi
NEW DELHI

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on Friday described the indigenous Project Kusha air defence programme as a “game changer” for India’s security architecture, asserting that its importance had already been demonstrated during Operation Sindoor.

Addressing scientists and officials in Hyderabad, after inaugurating the Advanced Weapon System Complex at the Defence Research and Development Organisation’s (DRDO) Defence Research & Development Laboratory (DRDL) in the Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam Missile Complex, Mr. Singh said India’s

indigenous air defence capabilities had successfully thwarted enemy intentions during the operation.

“Today I predict that Project Kusha will be a game changer for India’s security scenario. It is a world-class indigenous air defence system. Just as the Govardhan hill protected the entire region of Braj in the Dvapara Yuga, our air defence system provided a protective umbrella during that period (Operation Sindoor),” he said.

Project Kusha is a long-range air defence missile system being developed by the DRDO to provide a comprehensive shield against a wide range of aerial threats.

The Defence Minister



Rajnath Singh

praised the DRDO’s Missile Systems and Strategic Systems cluster for strengthening India’s technological excellence, strategic autonomy and national security. He said indigenous systems such as Akash and BrahMos had proved India’s capability to compete

in the global defence technology ecosystem.

Changing warfare

Highlighting the changing nature of warfare, Mr. Singh said emerging technologies such as precision-strike systems, integrated air defence networks, hypersonic weapons, autonomous platforms, artificial intelligence and electronic warfare were reshaping modern battlefields. In this environment, he stressed the need for both resilience and deterrence.

Referring to the government’s ambitious “Mission Sudarshan Chakra”, announced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his Independence Day address in 2025, Mr. Singh said the

initiative would establish a multi-layered missile defence shield capable of protecting military assets, critical infrastructure and civilian establishments across the country.

“The system will provide robust protection while ensuring citizens face minimal inconvenience. It will also possess the capability to deliver a decisive response whenever required,” he said.

The Defence Minister lauded the DRDO’s progress in indigenous missile technologies, stating that the recent successes in strategic and tactical weapon programmes reflected India’s growing self-reliance and confidence in defence manufacturing.

IN BRIEF



Two held for throwing stones at train with RSS chief aboard

Two persons have been arrested for allegedly throwing stones at the Swarn Shatabdi Express, plying between Lucknow and New Delhi, in which Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) chief Mohan Bhagwat was travelling. The incident occurred around 7.20 p.m. on Thursday when the train was approaching Firozabad station of Prayagraj division. The miscreants were identified from CCTV footage and arrested, Railway CPRO Shashikant Tripathi said. Mr. Bhagwat was travelling in the Ei coach. The stone hit the exterior window near seat 51. “The interior side of the window was not affected,” Mr. Tripathi said.

BRICS backs people-centric, inclusive urban development

The BRICS nations on Friday adopted a declaration on inclusive, resilient and people-centred urban development. The Ministerial declaration adopted on the concluding day of the 13th BRICS Urbanisation Forum in the national capital, highlights key priorities shared by member nations and reaffirms commitment to advancing people-centred urban development. It emphasises the importance of creating inclusive, sustainable, resilient and liveable cities that ensure equitable access to urban services, particularly for marginalised groups, according to an official statement of the Union Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs.

‘Deep-seated’ bias for male child persists in society: SC

Aaratrika Bhaumik
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court has observed that though the country’s child sex ratio has shown “clear signs of improvement”, the continued prevalence of sex selection practices reflects “deep-seated patriarchal preferences” for a male child.

A Bench of Justices Sanjay Karol and P.K. Mishra made the observation while dismissing a Maharashtra doctor’s appeal challenging criminal proceedings against him under the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Prohibition of Sex Selection) Act, 1994 (PCPNDT Act).

Referring to various schemes introduced by State governments to curb female foeticide, the court said these reflected sustained efforts to address

The court noted that the country continues to face significant gaps in gender parity

the systemic discrimination faced by “the girl child in an inherently patriarchal” society.

However, it pointed out that several States continue to record sex ratios at birth below the national average. “...the country’s sex ratio has shown clear signs of improvement in recent years... Nonetheless, several States still report sex ratios at birth below the national average. This shows the continuing presence of deep-seated patriarchal preferences towards a male child and the ‘behind the curtains’ prevalence of sex selection practices,” the Bench said.

Accordingly, the top

court stressed that strict enforcement of the PCPNDT Act would remain essential until entrenched social attitudes towards the girl child undergo change.

The judges also noted the country continues to face significant challenges in achieving gender parity when assessed against global indicators. “On a global level though, unfortunately, the data does not present a positive outlook. The World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Report 2025 records a drop in our ranking in terms of overall gender parity score from the previous year to 131 out of 148, from 129 the previous year”, the Bench said.

Accordingly, the Bench refused to quash the criminal proceedings against the doctor, underlining that “letting infractions slide” would defeat the purpose of the PCPNDT Act.



Mourning the loss: The relatives of an Air India crash victim at an event in Ahmedabad on Friday. ABHINAV DESHPANDE

tional Airport on June 12, 2025. “My daughter came to India for 15 days and was engaged to a man from Gujarat who was living in the U.K.,” Mr. Patel said, wiping away tears.

The aircraft went down barely seconds after take-off, killing 260 people, including 241 passengers and the crew, and 19 people on the ground. Former Gujarat Chief Minister Vijay Rupani was one among those killed.

While tributes were paid to the victims, whose photographs were adorned with garlands, rose petals, and lamps, the family members and the

Federation of Indian Pilots bemoaned that there was no statement from the Prime Minister or the Gujarat Chief Minister, nor any public representative was present on the first anniversary of the crash.

“If a similar incident had occurred elsewhere in the world, particularly in Western countries, people would have gathered and taken out rallies across the country in memory of the victims. But nothing has happened in India,” the federation’s president, C.S. Randhawa, said.

He asked the family members to demand land from the government and

build a memorial at the crash site.

Marked absence

British High Commissioner to India Lindy Cameron reached the crash site in the city’s Meghaninagar area and offered floral tributes to the victims, saying her thoughts were with all the families affected by the tragedy.

She was among the rare dignitaries to pay her respects at the crash site, and her visit made the absence of State or Union government representatives more conspicuous.

Fifty-two British nationals were among the 260 persons killed in the incident. “One year ago today, the tragic Air India crash claimed 260 lives, including 52 British nationals,” Ms. Cameron said in a post on X. “I will never forget arriving in Ahmedabad and visiting the site on that day. My thoughts are with all the families affected, and I thank my team who stood up immediately to support them and have continued to do so in the toughest circumstances. I am back with some of them in Ahmedabad today,” she added.

Cabinet Secretary reviews NEET-UG re-test preparations

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI



T. V. Somanathan

Cabinet Secretary T.V. Somanathan on Friday reviewed the preparedness for the NEET re-test, in a meeting with the Director-General of the National Testing Agency (NTA).

“The Central government, State governments and district administration are working together in close coordination, to ensure smooth conduct of the NEET re-examination. The full might and weight of the law will fall on any person trying in any manner to distort, disrupt or tamper with the integrity or smooth conduct of the re-examination,” Mr. Somanathan said in a statement.

The NEET re-examination is scheduled to be held on June 21.

During the review, the Cabinet Secretary also emphasised the need for ensuring a smooth, transparent, and secure conduct of the re-examination through close coordination among all stakeholders concerned.

Mr. Somanathan had reviewed the arrangements with the Secretaries of the Union government and relevant agencies on June 1. Subsequently, on June 4,

The NEET-UG re-examination is scheduled to be held on June 21

he also held a review meeting with the Chief Secretaries of the States to assess the preparedness and progress of the arrangements.

These meetings are aimed at ensuring effective coordination, strengthening preparedness, and maintaining the integrity and credibility of the NEET re-examination process.

The NEET-UG was held on May 3, but was cancelled by the NTA on May 12 amid allegations of a paper leak.

The CBI is investigating the case and has made several arrests.

Govt. opens draft telecom rules on TV, radio for feedback

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Centre has published the draft Telecommunications (Television, Radio and Associated Services) Rules, 2026, for public consultation. They have been framed to consolidate the various guidelines issued for television and radio services under the erstwhile Telegraph Act, within the framework of the newly enacted Telecommunications Act, 2023. The Information and Broadcasting Ministry administers the provisions relating to television, radio, and associated services.

Unified rule-book

In the draft rules, existing terms and conditions of authorisation have been harmonised and rationalised to facilitate continuity,

while enabling reforms and provision for a single regulatory framework in place of multiple guidelines. “With this set of rules, the industry will now have a unified and significantly simplified rule book. These rules are designed to simplify the existing regime while promoting ease of doing business in the television and radio broadcasting sector,” said the Ministry.

Once notified, the rules will replace various existing guidelines governing broadcasting services.

Digital implementation of the authorisation process, simplified authorisation procedures, removal of the requirement for signing Grant of Permission Agreement, and provision of transparent adjudication mechanism are the other key features.

HC denies plea to reopen Class 12 re-evaluation portal

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Delhi High Court on Friday declined to direct the reopening of the CBSE’s portal for the re-evaluation of Class 12 answer sheets on a petition by the Congress’s student wing.

A vacation Bench of Justice Neena Bansal Krishna and Justice Madhu Jain observed that an individual student was free to take appropriate action if aggrieved and that reopening the portal, which was operational from June 2-7, would delay the entire process of result declaration.

“For you, it is one week, but the whole process gets delayed by a month...It is not one step,” the Bench remarked. “I am not giving further directions. Whoever is aggrieved, let the individual approach.”

As the National Stu-



The court said that any aggrieved student may seek legal remedy individually.

Govt. says it is mulling policy for students in West Asia

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Union government on Friday informed the Supreme Court that it was considering a policy to accommodate private students in West Asia whose examination results could not be declared by the CBSE owing to the prevailing conflict in the region.

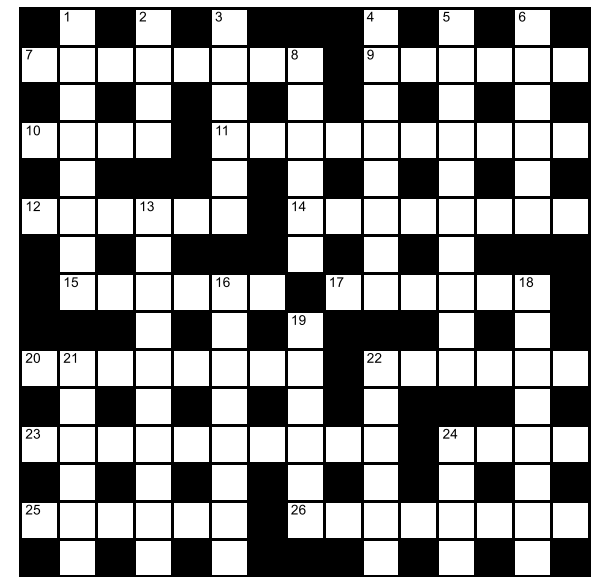
A Bench of Justices Augustine George Masih and Vijay Bishnoi was informed by Solicitor-General Tushar Mehta that a decision was likely to be taken shortly. He accordingly requested the Bench to defer the hearing to June 22.



THE CROSSWORD + 14819
(set by Afterdark)

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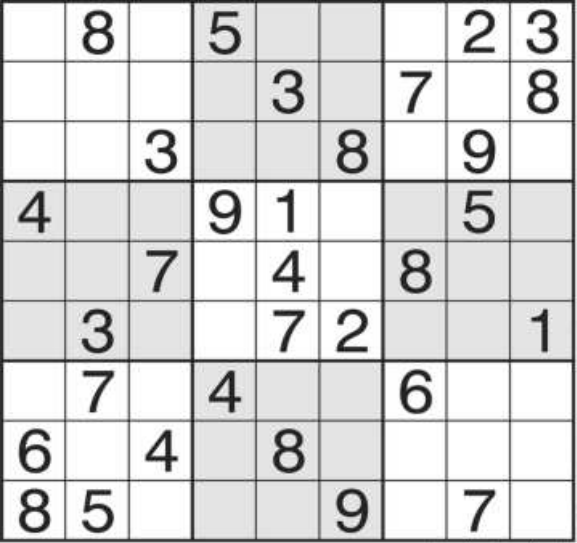
SCAN TO PLAY



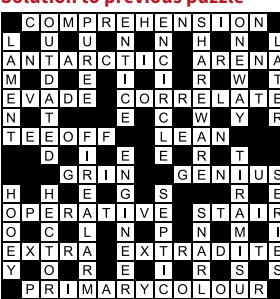
- Across**
- 7 Pass surplus income (8)
 - 9 Marvel character gets one leading cameraman's callback (6)
 - 10 Directed to hail girl in front (4)
 - 11 Straying from purpose by accepting daughter's mistake endlessly (10)
 - 12 Ship officers' captain arrests one (6)

- 14 Director to acknowledge fine in front of everyone (8)
 - 15 Departs as crowd enters ship (6)
 - 17 Cat could be Welsh (6)
 - 20 Fail to meet expectations in dislocating wolf and lion primarily (4,4)
 - 22 Suit is special, a leading designer brought to East and South (6)
 - 23 Page dear Bob, pa ordered material for making boxes (10)
 - 24 Star featuring in love games (4)
 - 25 Tips from co-star included new editing methods applied in movies (6)
 - 26 Assume control of profits at head office absolutely for the most part (4,4)
- Down**
- 1 Pilots are new navigators? No, not good (8)
 - 2 Not starting rush for egg (4)
 - 3 Grandmother in Chennai's at leading sanatorium unit (6)
 - 4 Diana and Edward; in the absence of love, some sex always faded (4,4)
 - 5 Silly errata sinking company that is in solid ground (5,5)
 - 6 Erotic Four chucked out of festival (6)
 - 8 Antelopes found on ground in El Salvador (6)
 - 13 Not a fake explosive planted around half of Kiev is unmitigated (10)
 - 16 Township in Ontario has natural light (8)
 - 18 Churchmen with no answer? Sacrilege in disguise (8)
 - 19 Determined to get an apartment near nurse's residence in the front (6)
 - 21 An auditors spies a plant (6)
 - 22 American back's fine, being behind Germany for all to see is a puzzle (6)
 - 24 Instrument is available for 5 + 10 + 50 (4)

SUDOKU



Solution to previous puzzle



Solution to yesterday's Sudoku



FAITH

Conquer the 'I' and 'mine'

Tiruvalluvar says, “He enters the abode of the gods who lays the axe at I and mine.” One may say that this advice is hardest to follow in the material world that we live in where self-promotion appears to be the norm. Unless one conquers the ‘I’, one cannot lead a truly enriching life, said Damal S. Ramakrishnan.

Narayana Bhattadri says Krishna abhors two types of people: those who go about swollen-headed due to their academic achievements (*vidyarti garvam*) and those who boast about riches (*Aishwarya garvam*). Mahalakshmi ensures that this does not happen with the true devotee.

Kusela came calling upon Krishna at the behest of his wife. To Kusela, living in abject poverty, Krishna was a dear friend but his wife pleaded with him to seek material help from the wealthy Krishna. When he agreed to visit Krishna, she sent Kusela with a gift of *poha*. After offering it to Krishna, Kusela spoke of general affairs and did not seek any help. Taking a fistful of *poha* and relishing it, the all-knowing Krishna immediately showered wealth upon Kusela, transforming his humble abode into a palatial one. When Krishna reached for the second fistful of *poha*, Mahalakshmi (having manifested as Rukmini) stopped Him. Why did She ? The first fistful of *poha* was an offering of Krishna bhakti: pure, unadulterated friendship and worship. With the second helping of *poha*, Krishna might shower more gifts upon Kusela, which could make Kusela proud of his affluence. At the onset of such ego, Krishna would distance Himself from his dear Kusela. Rukmini (Mahalakshmi) did not want this pitfall for Krishna's devotee and hence She stopped Him from having more *poha*.



Strategic stalemate

The U.S. should lift the blockade before asking Iran to open the Hormuz Strait

President Donald Trump’s decision to back off from striking Iran, just hours after threatening to seize the country’s Kharg Island, underscores the dilemma he faces in dealing with Tehran. Mr. Trump, who launched the conflict with his ally Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel on February 28, now wants to end it through talks. But Iran, which survived 40 days of U.S.-Israeli bombing and now controls the Strait of Hormuz, appears unwilling to hand him a diplomatic victory. Caught between an uncontrollable Israel, whose bombing of Lebanon threatens the fragile U.S.-Iran ceasefire, and an emboldened Iran that has become increasingly defiant and intransigent, Mr. Trump reverted to his familiar playbook of using military pressure to alter Tehran’s negotiating position. On Wednesday he ordered strikes on Iran after confirming that a U.S. Apache helicopter had been shot down over the Strait of Hormuz. Iran retaliated by striking U.S. bases in Kuwait, Bahrain and Jordan. After two nights of tit-for-tat strikes, Mr. Trump backed off on Thursday, claiming progress in talks. Over the past two months, he has claimed dozens of times that a deal with Iran was within reach. In the war’s escalation cycle, Mr. Trump takes one step forward, two steps back.

When Mr. Trump despatched his “armada” to Iran’s shores in February, he wanted to force Tehran into submission through military pressure. The U.S. and Israel had an ambitious list of demands, including dismantling Iran’s nuclear programme, degrading its missile capabilities and ending its support for non-state militias. When the U.S. and Israel launched the war, they wanted regime change in Tehran. More than three months later, the war, which failed to achieve any of its declared objectives, has hardened Iran’s positions. If Iran was willing to make concessions on its nuclear programme on February 27, it now insists that any discussion on the nuclear file can take place only after the U.S.-Israeli hostilities cease and the blockade is lifted. The war has fundamentally altered the strategic reality of the region. Yes, Iran has absorbed significant military and economic costs, but it has emerged strategically stronger by taking control of the Hormuz Strait and effectively trapping the U.S. in a costly stalemate. Rather than chasing a delusional Iranian surrender, Washington should adopt a phased, realistic diplomatic approach. The priority should be to enforce and extend the ceasefire in good faith and lift the blockade in exchange for Iran reopening the Strait of Hormuz. Once stability is restored, both sides can return to substantive talks on Iran’s nuclear programme and work towards a durable end to the conflict.

Long overdue

Coal exchanges can balance out energy scarcities across India

Unveiled at a time of record domestic coal production, the Coal Exchange Rules, 2026, are a case of better-late-than-never. They will create a broad market-based mechanism through regulated trading platforms for the lynchpin of India’s energy system – coal. They are aimed at enhancing price discovery, transparency, access for small consumers, as well as, one would hope, reduce bilateral agreements that are often opaque and come with a whiff of graft, too often. Today, most coal transactions between producers and buyers take place through long-term contracts, primarily for the power sector, followed by auctions, imports and captive mining. While India’s commodity exchanges are well established, they function largely as financial markets rather than physical delivery platforms. Coal exchanges, however, appear closer in design to power exchanges, which, despite modest volumes, play a role in price discovery, market signalling and the development of secondary markets. As if to prove this point, coal exchanges are expected to serve the non-regulated sector, which relies on Coal India auctions where coal is often sold at a premium to the highest bidder. Power exchanges are not merely niche trading platforms; they serve as points of reference for the broader power market. They have enhanced price discovery and served as a balancing market without replacing long-term power purchase agreements. Initially the power exchanges were only balancing shortages, but eventually the spot prices became a barometer of the broader power market indicating scarcity, surplus and system stresses for all electricity stakeholders. Perhaps the first role of coal exchanges could be to open up inventories, allowing surpluses to balance out shortages across India.

The templates for the two exchanges are not very different though the specific rules framed by the Coal Controller Organisation of India will determine the success of coal exchanges. Just as with the successes, the failures of power exchanges can also serve as lessons learned for coal. Coal is not as fungible as electricity, which once generated is the same everywhere requiring only minimum standards. Coal quality varies widely. Therefore, robust standards and quality assurance are as important as contract design, liquidity creation and enforcement. The latter set of requirements will ensure that major producers and consumers are drawn to the coal exchanges. The emphasis should be on facilitating participation of retail consumers unlike power exchanges, which are dominated by discoms. Coal India’s stance will be crucial. Besides safeguards against volatility, dispute resolution mechanisms and improved transportation logistics will be important too, since the coal exchanges will be physical delivery platforms.

Addressing the digital divide through the Digital India Mission, India has marched on towards becoming a global “best practice” model of a digital welfare state. Yet, Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) remain largely excluded from this promise of universal outreach. Disability pensions, contrary to the very principles underlying disability rights, are determined not by the nature or extent of disability but by domicile, the discretionary decisions of State governments, and cumbersome bureaucratic processes. As a result, a vulnerable section of citizens continues to remain outside the ambit of a welfare architecture that otherwise prides itself on inclusivity and last-mile delivery.

An inadequate safety net

The 2011 Census recorded 2.68 crore PwDs. Today, accounting for population growth and changing disease profiles, their number is conservatively estimated at 4.5 crore-6 crore. Although the Supreme Court of India has recognised the right to live with dignity as a fundamental right and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 provides legal protection, disability benefits – especially pensions – remain fragmented, discretionary, and inadequate. As a result, the Indira Gandhi National Disability Pension Scheme covers only a small fraction of PwDs, while pension amounts in most States range from just ₹300 to ₹500 a month, with a few offering ₹1,000-₹3,000.

India spends barely 0.02% of GDP on disability welfare including pensions. South Africa spends 0.12%-0.15% of GDP (six times more); Brazil 0.45%-0.50% (20 times more); OECD countries 2.2% (110 times more) and Australia 0.35%-0.40% (20 times more).

Beyond politics, sound economics demands the inclusion of PwDs. The World Bank and UNDP estimate that low- and middle-income countries lose 3%-7% of GDP when PwDs are excluded from education, employment, and social security. Disability income improves household stability, rural consumption, and labour participation. Studies show fiscal multipliers of 1.4-1.6, while the 2025 Pro Bono Economics report found that the socio-economic returns from disability pensions exceed their costs by nearly 48%. Far from being a welfare expense, disability pensions are an investment and an effective economic stimulus.

India must establish a Minimum Universal Disability Pension Floor Rate (MUDPFR) to give effect to the state’s constitutional obligation, under Article 41, to provide public assistance to persons with disabilities, and to operationalise Section 24 of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, which guarantees adequate



Sushil Kumar

Former Secretary, Government of India, and an Advocate in the Supreme Court and High Court

India must adopt a minimum universal disability pension floor rate

social security, including pension benefits. Such a measure would translate the promise of inclusive growth and “Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas” into reality by shifting disability pensions from a matter of charity and discretion to a matter of citizenship rights. While ensuring that no disabled person receives less than a minimum pension regardless of where they live, a MUDPFR would still allow States to provide additional top-ups.

This is not an unrealistic proposal. South Africa provides a national disability grant with uniform eligibility norms; Brazil’s BPC guarantees a national minimum income; and Australia and New Zealand operate nationwide disability pension systems. Several developing countries, including Kenya, Rwanda, Thailand and Indonesia, also provide disability income support at the national level. International experience shows that centrally set standards promote uniformity, universality and portability.

A MUDPFR of ₹8,000 per month for 40 lakh beneficiaries would cost about ₹38,400 crore annually (0.08% of GDP), while ₹10,000 for 65 lakh beneficiaries would cost ₹78,000 crore. Even a pension of ₹15,000 per month would keep expenditure below 0.2% of GDP. Such spending is fiscally manageable when compared with allocations for food subsidies (₹2.05 lakh crore), rural development (₹1.80 lakh crore), tax concessions and revenue foregone (₹1.72 lakh crore), and infrastructure (₹11.11 lakh crore). Yet, disability pensions and inclusion continue to receive only a tiny fraction of public expenditure.

From fragmentation to integration

The current disability pension system, shared between the Ministry of Rural Development and the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities, leads to duplication, delays and diffused accountability. Countries that have faced similar challenges have addressed them through a single national authority – South Africa’s SASSA, Australia’s NDIA, Brazil’s INSS and Ireland’s Department of Social Protection. India too needs a National Disability Pension Authority to oversee eligibility norms, a national registry, portability, digital integration, grievance redress and State-wise performance monitoring – one standard, one system, one nation.

Implementing a robust disability pension system would strengthen India’s bid for a UN Security Council seat by translating its commitments into action under Article 28 of the UN Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities, ILO Recommendation No. 202, SDG 1.3, and the G-20 New Delhi Leaders’ Declaration, all of which endorse social protection as a cornerstone of inclusive development.

Combining pensions with employment

and earlier retirement. Civilian services generally offer broader avenues for advancement and longer careers. Aligning compensation across such different systems requires careful consideration of these structural differences.

Another significant trend is the reduction in experience required for senior administrative positions. While faster career progression may reflect changing governance needs, complex policy challenges still demand institutional memory and seasoned judgment. Efficiency is important, but it cannot fully substitute for experience. Questions also arise over allowances. While they are intended to compensate for hardship, remoteness or operational risk, there is no uniform and transparent framework for assessing such conditions across services. This can create disparities that are difficult to justify and may foster perceptions of inconsistency.

Non-Functional Upgradation (NFU) raises a related concern. By allowing financial advancement without a corresponding increase in responsibility, it weakens the link between role, accountability and compensation. Though introduced to address slower promotion avenues, the NFU continues to generate debate over equity and institutional rationale.

The pension challenge

Pensions add another layer of complexity. India currently operates multiple pension systems, including legacy defined-benefit schemes, contributory plans for newer entrants, and separate arrangements for elected representatives. According to the Reserve Bank of India’s State Finances Report (2023), salaries, pensions and interest payments consume a large share of State expenditure, limiting fiscal space for development. As a result, concerns about sustainability and inter-generational equity are becoming increasingly important.

Taken together, these issues highlight the need for a more coherent approach to public compensation. At present, pay frameworks for the executive, legislature and judiciary evolve

support can move persons with disabilities from mere survival to productive participation. A MUDPFR could also yield economic benefits. Countries such as Singapore, South Korea, South Africa and Brazil integrate disability pensions with employment and social security systems. India should similarly strengthen its fragmented Disability Employment Incentive Scheme. Models abroad include employer tax incentives in Nigeria, the U.K.’s Access to Work programme, and Australia’s wage subsidies. Existing schemes such as PM-DAKSH, NAPS and State-level employer incentives provide a foundation for expansion.

Constitutional imperative

A MUDPFR would give effect to the Constitution’s guarantees of equality, equal protection, dignity and the right to life. India has already standardised major welfare programmes – from food security and health care to PM-KISAN and pensions – and delivers benefits at scale through DBT and UPI. The capacity and technology exist. What is needed is the political will to prioritise dignity. Disability pensions remain one of the few entitlements determined by where a person lives. If dignity is a constitutional right, geography cannot decide the minimum support for survival.

More than an economic or administrative reform, a MUDPFR is a moral one. It affirms that persons with disabilities are rights-bearing citizens, not recipients of charity. By transforming the state from a benevolent provider into a constitutional guarantor, it strengthens dignity, inclusion and citizenship.

Should India continue with a system in which disability pensions vary according to State budgets, political priorities and bureaucratic complexities, leaving persons with disabilities vulnerable to hardship? Or should the Republic guarantee a minimum level of support for all? A Viksit Bharat cannot leave its most vulnerable citizens at the mercy of a postcode lottery. Federalism cannot be a justification for inequality.

A MUDPFR is the next logical step in India’s welfare architecture, building on rights-based entitlements enabled by digital inclusion and DBT. It would humanise the state, uphold the dignity of persons with disabilities and strengthen the Republic.

Over the past 75 years, India has steadily expanded its welfare state in pursuit of social justice. With the necessary platforms and delivery systems now in place, the time has come to secure the foundation. The real question is whether India recognises dignity for persons with disabilities as a constitutional right and a collective obligation. That promise is long overdue, and a MUDPFR offers a way to fulfil it.

The 8th CPC — a chance to reform pay commissions



Prem Kumar Nair

Retired Indian Army officer (colonel) with an interest in governing architecture and systems

The 8th Central Pay Commission should reform compensation frameworks, not merely salaries

As India moves toward the 8th Central Pay Commission (CPC), public discussion has largely centred on familiar themes – fitment factors, salary revisions and arrears. Yet, the larger question may not be how much compensation should increase, but whether the framework for determining public compensation remains coherent, equitable, and fiscally sustainable. This is not merely an administrative matter. The manner in which the state structures salaries, allowances and pensions reflects broader institutional priorities and influences public confidence in governance.

The framework deficit

Over the decades, Pay Commissions have become far more than wage-revision exercises. Their recommendations shape inter-service parity, long-term fiscal commitments and the institutional balance within the state. Yet, the process remains narrow, with a small, time-bound body tasked with evaluating a diverse ecosystem of civil, military and technical services, largely on the basis of representations from the services themselves. A key challenge is the absence of a common evaluative framework. Services operate under different structures, career trajectories and working conditions, but there is no universally accepted method for comparing risk, responsibility, technical complexity or career progression. As a result, the system often seeks parity without clearly defining its basis.

This challenge is most visible in questions of parity. Officers across services with very different career paths and responsibilities may, at certain stages, receive comparable compensation. The issue is not one of competition between services but institutional coherence. If parity is to be maintained, the principles governing it must be transparent, consistent and objectively justified.

The comparison between civilian services and the armed forces illustrates this complexity. Military careers follow a sharply pyramidal structure, with limited promotional opportunities

confirmed by Tehran. The two countries remain far apart in their approaches to resolving the crisis, with few signs of de-escalation. Repeated attacks on Indian ships could strain U.S.-India relations. Even diplomatic experts struggle to decipher America’s motives, given its central role in triggering the crisis. It is frustrating that

there appears to be no end in sight.
V. Lakshmanan,
Tirupur, Tamil Nadu

Delhi fire, standards

It is a matter of shock and shame that so many people lost their lives in a fire in Delhi, including foreign nationals. Reports suggest that there was a lack of compliance with safety

regulations. In such circumstances, it is difficult to expect tourism to flourish, as foreign visitors may lose confidence in the safety standards of accommodation in India. The Ministry of Tourism should play a more direct role in ensuring that hotels adhere to safety standards.
N.G.R. Prasad,
Chennai

Hydration matters

It is unfortunate that the ‘water bells scheme’ appears to have been ignored in most government schools in Chennai (Chennai, June 12). The Tamil Nadu government has repeatedly emphasised its commitment to the education and the welfare of schoolchildren. Given

rising summer temperatures, the scheme should be enforced in all schools across urban, semi-urban and rural areas of the State to ensure that children remain adequately hydrated.

Murali Mohan P.V.,
Chennai

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

GROUND ZERO



A farmer sprays pesticides in a paddy field on the outskirts of Hyderabad. NAGARA GOPAL

The human cost of a deadly weed killer

In March, Telangana banned paraquat, one of the world's most widely used and highly toxic weedicides, becoming only the third State in India to do so. The herbicide is responsible for hundreds of deaths each year, most of them suicides and some accidental. **Serish Naniseti** reports on the campaign that led to the ban and why much more remains to be done

At 50, Banoth Goud (name changed) has lived to tell a tale. “I may look normal, but I become breathless when I climb stairs or even walk more than five minutes. The doctor says my lungs got affected,” he says.

About three years ago, on a sweltering afternoon, Goud opened his refrigerator, took out a small plastic bottle labelled with a popular juice brand, and took a sip. The drink did not have the sweet, tart apple flavour that he was used to; instead, it tasted flat. He began vomiting.

Goud did not know that he had drunk paraquat, a highly toxic herbicide and one of the most effective weed killers in the world. Paraquat, a colourless and tasteless liquid, is most often fatal for both humans and animals.

It was a mistake that resulted in Goud fighting for his life. “I had asked my nephew to get the *gaddi mandu* (the local term for the weedicide) to clear weeds in front of our house,” he recalls. “He kept the bottle on a table inside the house. My wife thought it was a cool drink and placed it inside the fridge.” While wholesale traders store paraquat in drums, farmers and others often fill up stray bottles with the weedicide.

Goud was rushed from his house in Paloncha to a hospital in Kothegudem, about 11 kilometres away. The doctors were sure he would die.

Being an employee of TSGENCO (Telangana State Power Generation Corporation Limited), Goud had an ESIC (Employee State Insurance Corporation) card, necessary for workers below a certain salary level to access free medical care and financial benefits at ESIC dispensaries and hospitals across the State. He was quickly ferried in an ambulance to a tertiary-care facility in Hyderabad, roughly 285 km away.

Dr. Verrana Addanki, a General Medicine practitioner, noticed that Goud had a ‘paraquat mouth’ – the severe, corrosive damage that occurs when a person swallows or is exposed to paraquat – and put him on continuous renal replacement therapy (CRRT). Over the next 40 days, Goud’s condition slowly improved.

“His family had given up on him,” remembers Dr. Addanki. “But we persisted and he had the will to survive too. Now, he has photographs of his family as his WhatsApp display picture.”

On March 31, 2026, Telangana banned the sale, distribution, manufacture, and use of paraquat, to protect the safety and health of people, especially farmers. It became only the third State to do so, after Kerala and Odisha. The Government Order was issued days after intense lobbying by doctors, clinicians, and public representatives calling for the ban of the weedicide, which has been often used for self-harm. Neighbouring Andhra Pradesh followed suit in May.

Bans and bust-ups

Paraquat wreaks havoc due to its immense potential for harm, easy availability, low price



A ban by one State without the involvement of e-commerce sites is just a ban on paper. It is ineffectual.

DILEEP KUMAR
Pesticide Action Network

(₹280 per litre), and widespread use in India. The only law to regulate hazardous chemicals such as paraquat is the Insecticides Act, 1968.

Goud’s story is an exception: the weedicide has killed thousands of people, as is evident from autopsy reports from hospitals across the world. Paraquat is banned in 74 countries. In India, Kerala became the first State to ban it in 2011. However, in February 2022, the Kerala High Court overturned the ban following a plea by a cardamom growers’ collective. While the Kerala Agriculture Department’s notification specifically named the chemical along with 13 others, the High Court struck down the ban on the technical ground that the State did not have the authority to enforce it beyond 60+30 days (as per Section 27 of the Insecticides Act).

In October 2022, Kerala was rocked by the murder of Sharon Raj, who was allegedly poisoned with a paraquat-laced drink by his fiancée, Greeshma. He died at the Medical College Hospital in Thiruvananthapuram, triggering a public uproar as details of the case quickly emerged in the public domain.

“We can still order it online,” says Dileep Kumar of Pesticide Action Network, a global coalition of over 600 NGOs, institutions, and individuals across 90 countries dedicated to eliminating hazardous chemical pesticides. “A ban by one State without the involvement of e-commerce sites is just a ban on paper. It is ineffectual,” he points out.

Kumar adds that the country needs stronger laws and regulations to manage the crisis. “Even the Bhopal gas tragedy [in 1984] did not lead to new laws to regulate pesticides,” he says.

The problem is not just limited regulation of pesticides, weedicides, and insecticides; it is also low awareness about safe use. According to a



Ambulance vans stand outside the Gandhi Hospital mortuary in Hyderabad, where 217 paraquat victims were brought in for postmortem examination between 2024 and 2025. NAGARA GOPAL

statement by the Minister of State for Agriculture in the Lok Sabha, 79,185 farmers were made aware of the safe and judicious use of pesticides between 2020 and 2026. This is a low share in a country where 46.1% of the population is dependent on agriculture, as per the Economic Survey of 2025-26.

As per the Act, the ban in Telangana was for 60 days and can be extended by 30 more days. On the day that the Telangana issued a Government Order imposing a ban on paraquat, the Legislative Assembly passed a bipartisan resolution asking the Central government to ban the chemical across the country.

Lobbying for a ban

On the afternoon of February 12, Dr. Marri Mahesh Reddy, the founder of a grassroots movement called Doctors Against Paraquat, called for a gathering of farmers in Potharam village in Karimnagar. The emerald green village, with endless paddy fields, is on the eastern side of the Sriramsagar flood flow canal that carries water from the Godavari river. This whistle-stop tour and meeting with farmers was part of a campaign by Dr. Reddy.

“If we don’t use this, can’t we do agriculture?” Dr. Reddy said, addressing the gathering. “Didn’t we do agriculture before this? Brush-cutter *leva*, *vere mandulu leva*. *Dina valla yavaruki upogam?* (We have brush-cutters, sickles, and other chemicals. Why use this toxic substance?)”

He explained what made paraquat particularly dangerous. “I used to get emergency cases of snake bites and poisoning,” he said. “There were antidotes for snakebites and the venom was not always so toxic. But paraquat is in a different league. It destroys the cell structure and there is no antidote.”

Doctors Against Paraquat comprises 202 doctors drawn from different parts of Telangana, who lobbied with politicians, farmers, and bureaucrats relentlessly for a ban on paraquat. Using social media and personal connections, Dr. Reddy reached out to the Telangana Chief Minister’s Office, the Maharashtra Chief Minister’s Office, the Prime Minister’s Office, and politicians.

Yet, Potharam and other farming villages have found paraquat useful. As labour shortage is rising and the cost of hiring farm workers is increasing, farmers use paraquat, which is labelled and sold as non-selective contact herbicide (meaning, it does not differentiate between one plant and another), to clean up residual plants and weeds. Paraquat imports to India rose from 8,598 tonnes in 2019-20 to 20,786 tonnes in 2022-23, according to the Lok Sabha Unstarred Question No. 2542 under the Minister of Agriculture and Farmers’ Welfare in 2025.

“Without any oversight or intervention by officials from the agriculture department, there is a runaway use of paraquat in most parts of the country. There are many accidental deaths due to careless use as well,” says Kodanda Reddy, Chairperson of the Telangana Agriculture Farmers Welfare Commission, who has also worked to get the ban imposed in the State.

“Currently we are working with e-commerce companies as well as cyber crime officials to ensure that the product is not available in online stores,” he adds. This lobbying appears to have paid off, as two big e-commerce sites – Flipkart and Amazon – no longer list the chemical in Telangana. However, it is easily available from smaller agriculture commerce sites.

A rush to save patients

Bodies are constantly wheeled in and out of the Department of Forensic Medicine, Toxicology and Autopsy Complex at Gandhi Hospital in



Without any oversight or intervention by officials from the agriculture department, there is a runaway use of paraquat in most parts of the country.

KODANDA REDDY
Chairperson of the Telangana Agriculture Farmers Welfare Commission

Hyderabad. Families wait in grief and the police mill around. There is an overpowering odour of bleach, urine, and putrefying flesh.

The toll of paraquat poisoning is evident here. According to Dr. Atmudi Vivek Sai Ram’s Doctor of Medicine dissertation, ‘An autopsy based study on deaths due to Paraquat poisoning in Gandhi Hospital’, the facility recorded 217 cases of paraquat poisoning in 2024 and 2025. Of these, 54% of the patients were farmers and 16% students. Of the 100 cases studied for the dissertation, 94% were suicide cases and 5% were accidental.

“There is no treatment for paraquat poisoning, no antidote. We only receive clues from the family when bottles with labels are found near the victim or there is an oral statement,” says Dr. Krupal Singh, the head of department of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology. He is also part of Doctors Against Paraquat.

“All we can do is symptomatic treatment,” Dr. Singh adds. “As a result, treatment remains largely supportive, focusing on early gastrointestinal decontamination, organ support, and prevention of further oxidative damage. If the patient is put on a ventilator, the progress of the chemical is accelerated, with multiple organ failure and fibrosis of lungs being irreversible.”

Inside the nephrology ward of the century-old Osmania General Hospital in Hyderabad, patients sit in rows. “Every month, we get 4-5 paraquat-related cases. Most of the patients die within days,” says Dr. Manisha Shenoy, Head of the Nephrology Department, who is the first doctor to be called in once a patient suspected of imbibing paraquat is wheeled into the hospital.

“The prognosis is bleak even with advanced treatment like CRRT,” she explains. “The chemical causes rapid damage, first to the kidneys, then the liver, and eventually the lungs. Intubation of a patient on a ventilator accelerates damage to the lungs.” She does not remember any survivors.

Poor regulatory efforts

While the dangers of paraquat and its misuse have drawn global attention, regulatory efforts in India have largely escaped public scrutiny.

Paraquat’s origins date back to the 1880s, when it was first developed as a chemical dye. Its herbicidal properties were discovered in the 1950s, and Imperial Chemical Industries began marketing it as Gramoxone in the 1960s. Concerns about its toxicity surfaced early in India. In 1989, G. Vijaya Rama Rao, a doctor from Siddipet, raised the issue in the Lok Sabha, but the Agriculture Minister said the government had received no reports of harmful effects.

However, Imperial Chemical Industries documents suggest the company was aware of the risks. An agenda paper by the company dated November 19, 1987, and accessed by *The Hindu*, noted: “Suicidal abuse of the product will not be eliminated.” According to the paper, the company also chose not to dilute the chemical to make it safer, calculating that this would increase packaging size fivefold. It noted that “usage by farmers would reduce significantly because of bulk inconvenience/higher prices.”

During these years, Imperial Chemical Industries was earning significant revenues from paraquat. In 1987, sales of the product reached 15,000 tonnes, generating £192 million, according to a document from October 4, 1988, and accessed by *The Hindu*.

In August 2025, the Lok Sabha was informed that there are 1,503 licensed manufacturers of paraquat in the country. While Telangana banned the herbicide on March 31, on April 16, the Central Insecticides Board and Registration Committee, at its 471st meeting, cleared seven applications for formulation under indigenous manufacture as “satisfactory.”

India has not been a passive player in the regulation of paraquat; it has also, at times, been an enabler in its continued use. In May 2013, India joined Guatemala in opposing the listing of paraquat as a “severely hazardous pesticide formulation” under Annex III of the Rotterdam Convention, a multi-lateral environmental agreement. Such a listing would not have led to a banning of the chemical, but it would have required exporting countries to notify and obtain prior consent from importing countries before shipment. The proposal was supported by 118 countries but did not go through because the treaty’s voting rules require complete consensus.

CropLife India, representing 17 agro-chemical companies, said to *The Hindu*, “Sudden restrictions on paraquat dichloride and carbosulfan, just as kharif sowing begins, could raise input costs, disrupt crop protection, and deepen farmer vulnerability.” Paraquat is used on nearly 80 lakh acres in India and remains a low-cost weed-control option for small farmers, it added.

In Karimnagar, however, the ban has already had a visible impact. “Deaths due to paraquat have dropped from around 30-50 per month before the ban to 3-5 now, according to data from pulmonologists and nephrologists,” says Dr. Reddy. “We can reach zero deaths if the ban is imposed across the country and the chemical is removed from shelves and online stores. All doctors will breathe easier if that happens.”

Those in distress or having suicidal tendencies could seek help and counselling by calling any of the following numbers: iLife - 78930-78930

UTTAR PRADESH



Charbagh railway station in Lucknow, as thousands of candidates come in and leave after appearing for the Uttar Pradesh Police Constable Examination between June 8 and 10. SANDEEP SAXENA

When hope and desperation collide

With over 28 lakh youths applying for a little over 32,000 constable-rank positions in Uttar Pradesh, the focus is back on employment opportunities and the increasing number of young degree holders in the State, reports **Mayank Kumar**

Vishal Maurya boarded the Ganga Sutlej Express at Akbarpur Junction in Uttar Pradesh (U.P.) on June 8. The 22-year-old was headed to Lucknow, 194 kilometres away by rail. Across the seven-hour journey, what played in Maurya's head on loop was a plea. All he wanted was to pass the constable-rank examination to be held on June 10 in Uttar Pradesh's capital.

Maurya is from Ghughurpatti in Amedkar Nagar district, and passed out of school four years ago. If he gets through the test, he hopes to change the lives of his parents and lift generations of disadvantages off their shoulders.

His parents work as agricultural labourers in their village, and don't own land. "When they find work, they earn ₹300. I aspire to change their fortunes. I studied diligently for the exam, inspired by my online teacher who shares motivational stories of youths from similar backgrounds who have succeeded in becoming constables," Maurya said. He added that for generations they had "lived a life of inferiority". This was an opportunity "for people like us to change our lives". Maurya is a first-generation learner. He works part-time as a construction labourer.

On June 9, he was in Lucknow's Charbagh railway station, with thousands of others who had arrived to take the exam. Charbagh is Lucknow's main railway station, situated in the heart of the U.P. capital, just 3 km from Hazratganj, the downtown area and main shopping centre of Lucknow. Hazratganj remained overcrowded with candidates for the U.P. constable posts written examination. Held across June 8-10, all trains departing from or arriving at the station were fully booked. Thousands of U.P. constable aspirants stand on the floors, with many sitting in the lavatories of the trains. On the platforms, there is barely any space to walk. Thousands queue up to charge their phones via a few dozen charging points.

In the last week of December, 2025, U.P. notified 32,679 posts of police constables and equivalent positions, the lowest category of the workforce under the State police force. The registration process, which began on December 31, 2025, and ended on January 30, 2026, led to 28.86 lakh aspirants filling the form to appear in the written test at 1,183 centres across 75 districts. More than 1.35 lakh candidates were allocated test centres in Lucknow.

The platform of possibility

At the train station, Maurya's story found resonance with a stranger, Vaibhav Chaudhary, 24, from Gorakhpur, a B.Tech graduate in Computer Science. Screen-locking his OPPO A3x5G smartphone, he said, "Everyone in this sea of people has a story filled with urgency, desperation, hope, and aspiration for this job. While taking the exam, I thought of my 15-year-old sister and the need to provide her with better educational opportunities, so she won't have to struggle as I did."

Chaudhary battled the 40 degrees Celsius heat in a yellow vest. He was returning from Barabanki, about 20 km from Lucknow, after taking the recruitment examination. To be eligible to qualify, people must be between 18 and 27 years, depending on the job, gender, and reservation, and have passed class 12, the highest school examination.

Chaudhary works as a gig worker in Gorakh-



A constable's job is much better than poorly paid engineering jobs. It provides job security and stability and includes attractive perks and social security benefits, like medical insurance and gratuity.

VAIBHAV CHAUDHARY
Gig worker in Gorakhpur

pur. He says there are barely any private-sector office jobs that match his education. "I was offered a ₹20,000 job in an IT firm in Noida. It was impossible to survive there on such a low salary," he said. Noida is in U.P. and is a part of the National Capital Region. "A constable's job is much better than poorly paid engineering jobs. It provides job security and stability and includes attractive perks and social security benefits, like medical insurance and gratuity." His parents are marginal farmers with four acres of land.

The platforms were full of stories of people coming in for exams, or leaving after, or coming back after writing them. "I intentionally missed five trains before boarding the Suhaildev Superfast express, but I still had to travel in the bathroom," said Pushpesh Kumar, 21, a second-year BA English Literature student who took online coaching for the test. He took the exam because "There are hardly any job opportunities for English graduates. I am working as a private tutor, making ends meet, preparing for government jobs." His plan B is a government teaching job, "but that is a long road as I need to do a B. Ed (Bachelor's in Education)."

Sensing the massive influx of candidates, U.P. Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath instructed the Uttar Pradesh State Road Transport Corporation (UPSRTC) to provide 50% concession on fares to candidates appearing for the examination. They simply had to present their admit cards to bus conductors. Despite this, the public transport system was overcrowded for at least three days in the State, with many passengers having pre-booked train tickets complaining of not being able to board the train because of the huge rush of young aspirants at multiple railway junctions.

Testing, testing

Over 21.92 lakh aspirants appeared in the examination. The written test consisted of 150 objective-type multiple-choice questions of two marks each. The written examination syllabus was divided into four sections: General Studies, General Hindi, Numerical and Mental Ability tests, and Reasoning.

The Uttar Pradesh Police Recruitment and Promotion Board (UPPRPB), the recruiting agency, will prepare a list of shortlisted candidates who passed the written test on a date yet to be

announced. Since 2008, the UPPRPB has been entrusted to conduct selections for various non-gazetted posts, including that of the U.P. constable. A senior Indian Police Service (IPS) officer as Chairman of the agency heads and oversees all the activities that occur in the board.

The second stage is the Physical Standard Test (PST), where height will be checked. For general and Other Backward Class (OBC) male candidates, the minimum height requirement is 168 cm, while the minimum chest measurement requirement is 79 cm (without expansion) and 84 cm (with expansion). For general and OBC females, the minimum height requirement is 152 cm and the minimum weight is 40 kilograms.

In the final stage, the candidates need to make it through a physical efficiency test, in which men must run a distance of 4.8 km in 25 minutes and female candidates 2.4 km in 14 minutes. A new entrant will earn roughly ₹21,700 a month, with a slew of benefits enjoyed by government servants.

Struggle and hope

A section of the candidates appearing in the recruitment drive hails from farming families fighting to make ends meet in the Hindi headland. A large number is also from the educated, salaried section of society.

Aman Singh, 22, is a BSc Biotechnology degree holder from Basti district in eastern U.P. His father is a retired teacher who taught classes 11 and 12. "I worked in a Dehradun-based firm for a few months. I filed the constable form as it is free from private sector volatility and provides protection against lay offs," he said. Singh added that he left his job as the wages were only ₹18,000 per month. "The company believes there is a massive oversupply of labour, hence at the entry-level, they keep salaries low and stagnant. Now, I live with my family in Basti, and I am preparing for government jobs."

Up to 9.24 lakh women candidates filed the form, with the majority of them being accompanied by at least one male family member in the journey.

Rachna Yadav, 24, from Lucknow, who has a BA in Economics, and teaches in a private school, has a similar story to tell. "In the private sector, we get informal and poorly-paid jobs." Her father, who is an electrician, was carrying the luggage, protecting her from the crowd. He said, "For people like us, a government job is the only way towards upward social and economic mobility. Every person who is appearing is a struggler here; their family is struggling in this materialistic world."

Vibhuti Narain Rai, a 1975-batch IPS officer from the Uttar Pradesh cadre, served as the Director General of Police until he retired. He says, in rural parts of the State, only a *sarkari naukari* (government job), even if it's at the lowest rung, is considered a job, as it commands respect and authority in society.

"In a volatile economic scenario, *sarkari naukari* is a life-long safety net, whereas in private jobs opportunities are shrinking and instability is common," he said. "Two people at the same level will get one-third the pay in a private job. I was vice-chancellor of a central university, and out of eight drivers, four were permanently appointed through a recruitment exercise. They were getting over ₹45,000 as salary, apart from social security benefits. The four drivers who were hired on a temporary basis were getting hardly ₹18,000 without benefits. People want to be fully em-

ployed by the government."

Someone selected for a constable position may rise to the post of Inspector in the State police force after serving about 25 years in the police service. He said the first two years are a probation period. It generally takes 5-8 years in service to be promoted to the position of head constable, then 5-8 years in service for promotion to sub-inspector. A team of a constable, a head constable, and an Assistant Sub-Inspector form the backbone of the police. "They are the first to reach the spot in a law-and-order situation," Rai said. It's the constable's job to maintain ties with local informers.

A symbol of desperation

Critics alleged that the staggering number of job seekers signifies multiple challenges facing Uttar Pradesh. "Over 80 candidates competing for one constable post is a marker of many crises in the State. It points to the fact that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government failed in generating employment opportunities for millions of young people in the State," said Udai Veer Singh, the Samajwadi Party (SP) spokesperson. He added that the government makes claims of investment from big companies, but nothing is changing on the ground. "With constant paper leaks, the youth are wasting away their years. Well-qualified people are applying for low-pay jobs under frustration," he said.

Pushing for a transparent and stringent examination system, in view of past instances of irregularities, the recruitment board made comprehensive security arrangements and took legal action against those attempting to compromise the integrity of the examination. The Recruitment Board, on June 8, registered cases at Husainganj police station against the Telegram channel 'UPP Exam Paper' and the Instagram account 'UP Police Leak' for their alleged involvement in selling a fake question paper claiming it had been leaked. In Azamgarh, a case was registered against Instagram user Ashutosh Kumar Maurya for allegedly doing the same. He was taken into custody.

Sharat Pradhan, a veteran political commentator based in Lucknow, calls the huge rush for the constable job a symbol of desperation among the youth. "It points towards a kind of distress and humongous failure of the system in employment generation. If a BA pass-out in English, or a B. Tech degree holder is competing for constable jobs in the police force, it shows the overall system is not generating opportunities to utilise their skills and education," added Pradhan.

Ajit Kumar Jha, an Oxford University-trained political and social analyst who has followed U.P. closely for four decades, says the State needs to put in place emergency steps to generate employment opportunities. "This shows a structural problem with U.P.'s economy, as a large population is unemployed or underemployed. Many among them are skilled youths," he said.

He said the crisis is all the more serious because U.P. is a State with a low median age due to fertility rates (2.4 between 2019-21 and 2.2 between 2023-24; India's was 2 for both periods). U.P.'s median age is 24.7 years, among the lowest in India, as per the Government of India data.

"Uttar Pradesh needs an industrial and manufacturing revolution to fix the crisis. It cannot be done only by generating service-sector jobs," Jha said.

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Candidates outside an examination centre in Lucknow, where they sat for the test to qualify as a constable. SANDEEP SAXENA

KARNATAKA



People carrying out works under the MGNREGA at Honna Kiranagi near Jewargi taluk in Kalaburagi district. The scheme was introduced in 2006 to legally guarantee the ‘right to work’, combat chronic poverty, and serve as a social security net. ARUN KULKARNI

No guarantee of right to work?

Hailed as one of the most important social welfare laws for making the State accountable for providing dignified livelihoods, MGNREGA 2005 is set to be replaced by VB-G RAM G 2025. Sections of workers argue that the new Act strips the scheme of its core promise, the right to work backed by a guarantee, writes **Rishita Khanna**

Until 2007, Srilakshmi worked in jowar fields in Belagavi’s Athani taluk for ₹40 a day and a ration of two kg of grain. Men alongside her earned ₹65 and the same ration. During lean months when work dried up, she joined nearly 50 others from the taluk migrating over 100 km to Kolhapur in Maharashtra, where they worked for over 60 days, cutting leather into straps and soles and finishing Kolhapuri chappals, earning ₹120 a day with accommodation.

For Srilakshmi and thousands who migrated for work, equal wages, guaranteed employment within 15 days, and compensation for denial was unthinkable. These promises formed the basis of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005 (MGNREGA).

Right to work

Hailed with the social message of “*Har hath ko kaam mile, kaam ka pura daam mile*” (every hand should get work, and every worker should get the full value of their labour), MGNREGA was introduced in 2006 to legally guarantee the “right to work”, combat chronic poverty and serve as a social security net, with workers saying it gave them something they were long deprived of – bargaining power.

“It was MGNREGA that first recognised women as workers in their own right. That was when many of us first saw our names on job cards and opened bank and post office accounts in our own names,” Srilakshmi said.

Proudly narrating the women’s first collective demand for work, Bharathi Santosh, a worker from Raichur, said 120 women had gone to the block office in Sindhanur seeking employment. “The officer

had never seen so many women turn up asking for work,” she said. Two days later, many were allotted work. “Four hours of work and equal income. That felt powerful. We felt equal,” she said.

Women have accounted for over 58% of MGNREGA workers for the last five years, as per official data.

End of MGNREGA

After completing 20 years in February this year, MGNREGA is set to be replaced. Starting July 1, the Viksit Bharat-Guarantee for Rozgar and Aajeevika Mission (Gramin), 2025 (VB-G RAM G Act) will be rolled out nationwide.

VB-G RAM G has triggered sharp resistance from sections of workers, who argue that it guarantees “unemployment” under the pretext of a guarantee scheme. Workers argue that the new Act kills the “soul” of the scheme – by shifting from a “demand-based” entitlement to a “supply-driven” model, where funds are no longer opened but capped.

Even before the Act is rolled out, the transition has left workers without work. The Act was ear-



Women have accounted for over 58% of MGNREGA workers for the last five years. ARUN KULKARNI



It was MGNREGA that first recognised women as workers in their own right

SRILAKSHMI, worker from Athani

lier announced to come into effect in April 2026 and was then postponed to July.

“From March till June, Form 6 was not available across gram panchayats. We were only told that new forms will come under the new Act, nothing beyond that,” said Krishnappa from Raichur. “This is the peak season. The income cycle revolves around wages – from buying seeds or repaying small debts taken to surviving the lean period until the next round of work begins. If that cycle breaks, there is no way to manage even basic expenses,” he said, adding that new worksites were not being opened despite assurances that MGNREGA would continue until the new Act comes into effect.

125 vs 100

The scheme proposes 125 days of work, compared to the 100 days guaranteed under the MGNREGA. The government has invited objections to the draft rules ahead of rollout. However, workers say their only demand is that VB-G RAM G be immediately and unconditionally halted.

Workers and unions such as the NREGA Sangharsh Morcha said the law was passed through both Houses of Parliament in less than a week, and the same continues in the draft rules process. The rules, released on May 23, 2026, gave stakeholders until June 21 for feedback, even as rollout is set for July 1. Unions wonder if these inputs will be considered at all if the decision has already been made.

Power dynamics

Arguing that the changes could reshape wage dynamics across labour markets, Rajendran Narayanan from NREGA Sangharsh Morcha said the MGNREGA created a wage floor below which private employers found it harder to push workers. “If employment under the scheme is restricted or suspended, large numbers of labourers are pushed into the private labour market at once, weakening bargaining power and benefiting large landowners and employers, while landless labourers and women workers lose out,” he said.

He added that

the issue goes beyond workdays, as MGNREGA provided an alternative source of income and the ability to refuse exploitative wages, and reducing it inevitably shifts power back towards employers.

Capped employment

Notably, while the new Act increases the workdays, it also caps the total amount of work that can be generated. Unlike MGNREGA, where work expanded with demand, the new framework ties jobs to a fixed annual “normative” allocation for each State. Once this central cap is exhausted, additional demand is not met unless States fund it, turning an open-ended entitlement into a budget-restricted system.

Split the bill

The scheme is also structured on a 60:40 funding model, with States expected to contribute 40% of the cost, unlike MGNREGA where wage payments were fully funded by the Centre.

Workers argue that similar Centre-State cost-sharing patterns, as seen among ASHA and Anganwadi workers, often lead to delays in wage payments when either side of funding is disrupted. Even under MGNREGA, they argue, wage revisions over time did not keep pace with inflation.

The funding model has also drawn criticism from the Karnataka government, which has argued that States are already under fiscal stress and cannot shoulder the burden of contributing 40% of the funds.

The Union government on June 9 released the interim budget for VB-G RAM G. Karnataka has been allocated ₹5,709.9 crore under the Act. Announcing the release, Union Rural Development Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan said that Karnataka, along with Jharkhand, Telangana and Mizoram, is yet to complete all procedural formalities. The total allocation for States under the interim budget stands at ₹92,550.17 crore.

Not perfect

Workers’ unions acknowledged that MGNREGA was not perfect, citing delayed fund releases, wage payment backlogs and excessive digitisation as recurring post-COVID concerns, and acknowledging that even the legal guarantee of 100 days was rarely met. While households were entitled to 100 days of work, data shows average employment per household as close to 45 days.

In 2025-26, the average wage rate per person per day was ₹342, up from ₹282.2 in 2021-22, an increase of only ₹59 – which workers say does not reflect rising living costs.

However, workers like Chetana from Dharwad argued that if a demand-driven programme backed by a legal guarantee, open-ended funding commitments and full central support struggled to provide 100 days of employment, how can a scheme built on capped allocations, shared state funding and periodic work stoppages realistically deliver 125?

Right under question

“We are told work will be given only if a requirement is identified, approved and funded. If there is no approved project or the budget is exhausted, there is no work. That means it is no longer a guarantee, and the uncertainty decides whether we migrate,” said Mahantesh, a worker from Kalabura-

gi. He added that work under the Act will be identified by the Union government and if priorities lie elsewhere, workers will have to migrate for work. “How does someone sitting in Delhi know what is the need in Raichur or Belagavi or anywhere? How is that a right to work?” he contended.

Workers argue that the new Act is not a replacement for MGNREGA in any real sense. “Replacement means something better, beyond changing name. Something that reflects current realities and is framed after consulting the people it affects,” said another worker Mahesh from Gramena Kooli Karmikara Sangha (Grakoos), emphasising that for labourers, power lay in the gram panchayats – the first point of access for any household seeking work.

“Every December, a gram panchayat meeting would be held where we put forward our demands. Work was planned and implemented accordingly,” said Gayathri Anjappa from Hubballi. She added that the gram sabha decided village works, with “the village’s priorities” guiding planning. Under VB-G RAM G, however, access to work depends on central priorities, notified areas and approved schemes through Viksit Gram Panchayat Plans (VGPP).

Pause window

Another provision drawing criticism is the 60-day “Seasonal Alignment Window,” under which State governments can suspend all VB-G RAM G works for up to 60 days a year during peak sowing and harvesting seasons. Workers are expected to return to the private labour market during this period, and since it is treated as an administrative pause, no unemployment allowance is payable.

Workers say this marks another shift from MGNREGA, where work could be demanded throughout the year. “Karnataka’s uneven geography makes such a blanket pause problematic, as drought-prone north Karnataka depends far more heavily on the scheme than the south, and a uniform shutdown could hit the poorest regions hardest, leaving migration as the only option,” argued Krishnappa, a worker from Koppal.

The provision around pause-window rests on the assumption that demand for work falls during monsoon months – a claim contested by workers. In Karnataka, 34.5 lakh people demanded work between June and August alone in 2025-26.

‘Excessive digitisation’

Excessive digitisation has long been flagged as a problem under MGNREGA, with workers complaining that the National Mobile Monitoring System (NMMS) used for attendance is often affected by poor connectivity, server failures and facial recognition errors, leaving workers marked absent despite completing work and losing wages.

They say a system meant to improve transparency has instead become a barrier to wages. Even the Parliamentary Standing Committee report in April 2025 had even recommended pausing NMMS until glitches were fixed and strengthening offline systems, noting that technology should enable access to work, not block it.

Workers argue the new Act pushes further in the same direction. “Despite repeated complaints, VB-G RAM G relies even more on digital and biometric systems for attendance, payments and monitoring,” said Raja K., another worker, adding there is still no clarity from the Centre or State on implementation. “If workers can lose wages because a photo fails to upload or a server crashes, what happens when the system becomes even more dependent on technology?” he asked.





Congestion cascade: Traffic crawls on the perpetually congested Gachibowli stretch in Cyberabad. The IT corridor was among the worst affected after June 9 evening's downpour triggered widespread waterlogging and a massive traffic gridlock. FILE PHOTO

When monsoon clogs Hyderabad's tech heart

A billion-year-old terrain, a 25-year-old master plan and decades of urbanisation later, the city's IT corridor still dreads the rain. On Tuesday, a brief but intense downpour exposed the fault lines beneath Cyberabad's gleaming skyline, trapping more than three lakh vehicles in a massive gridlock and raising fresh questions about drainage, planning and infrastructure. **Serish Naniseti, Siddharth Kumar Singh and Lavpreet Kaur** decode why Cyberabad remains so vulnerable to flooding

When M. Aditya stepped out of his office in Gachibowli, Hyderabad, around 8 p.m. on Tuesday, the rain had already stopped. But so had the city.

Outside, the roads were slick with rainwater, traffic stood frozen and a sea of red tail lights stretched into the distance. His commute back home to ECIL, Nagaram, which ordinarily takes about 50 minutes, turned into a three-and-a-half-hour ordeal of failed cab bookings, long walks to the nearest Metro station, packed trains and gridlocked roads. By the time he reached home, it was well past 11.30 p.m.

"It was a nightmare. Just a few minutes of rain brought the entire traffic system to its knees," he recalls.

Aditya's experience was not exceptional. Across Cyberabad, photos and videos captured a city at a standstill beneath the gleaming glass towers of multinational corporations and luxury residential complexes. According to police estimates, more than three lakh vehicles were caught in the traffic gridlock that paralysed large parts of Hyderabad's western corridor. Stretched bumper to bumper, they would have covered roughly 824 acres, or 3.34 square kilometres – an area equivalent to about 55 cricket grounds the size of Rajiv Gandhi International Cricket Stadium in Hyderabad.

For many commuters, the scale of disruption seemed out of proportion to the rain spell that had triggered it.

“Such thunderstorms are a common summer phenomenon following prolonged periods of intense heat,” explains G.N.R.S. Srinivas, senior meteorologist at the India Meteorological Department (IMD), Hyderabad centre. “Telangana had experienced temperatures between 41C and 46C over several days, causing severe heating of the land surface. The resulting temperature difference between the landmass and the surrounding seas drew in moisture-bearing winds from the Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal, leading to the formation of cumulonimbus clouds and short-duration but intense rainfall events,” he adds.

Office and residential buildings have come up along natural pathways, blocking water flow and causing flooding in low-lying areas. Gentle slopes and plains have been built over, and permissions for construction have been granted without respecting geological contours.

**HARI
SARVOTHAMAN,**
Geologist

and persistent, the pre-monsoon showers are highly localised, he says. “The June 9 downpour was concentrated over pockets of the city while several localities received very little rain. Such events are typically driven by afternoon and evening heat build-up and last for brief durations.”

But rainfall intensity alone does not explain the city's flooding problem, Srinivas argues. Even rainfall totals of around 11 cm recorded in some pockets of Hyderabad on Tuesday are not extraordinary from a meteorological perspective, he says.

The flooding, in many ways, is a billion-year-old geological legacy with a 25-year-old urban twist. The rocks and hills that once defined the landscape may have given way to modern concrete towers, but the slopes and natural drainage patterns remain. Unlike the relatively flatter parts such as Charminar, Secunderabad, Nampally, Balanagar, Khairatabad, Musheerabad and Marredpally, western Hyderabad is shaped by a dense network of hills, valleys and natural channels. On Tuesday evening, rainwater raced through these gradients and pooled under flyovers, along roads and around commercial hubs.

“The flooding is due to the difference between high-elevation and low-lying areas. Water naturally flows from higher ground to the plains. Earlier, much of this water drained into Durgam Cheruvu,” says Hari Sarvothaman, guest faculty at the Centre for Earth, Ocean and Atmospheric Sciences, University of Hyderabad.

“But now office and residential buildings have come up along the natural pathways, blocking water flow and causing flooding in low-lying areas. Gentle slopes and plains have been built over, and permissions (for construction) have been granted by urban planning authorities without respecting geological contours,” adds Sarvothaman, who has studied floods in Hyderabad, including the deluge of August 2000.

The root of the problem, he says, goes back to the birth of Cyberabad itself.

As Hyderabad hopped onto the IT bandwagon in the late 1990s, Cyberabad emerged as the city's flagship technology hub. The Cyberabad De-

velopment Authority, created on January 20, 2001, was tasked with developing a “model enclave commensurate with the concentration of such institutions”.

Cost of building against contours

Renowned architectural consultancy Vastu Silpi Consultants helmed by B.V. Doshi prepared the master plan, zoning framework and building regulations. Conceived around the area's natural topography, the plan included two high-density corridors with a matching grid. Cyber Towers had already come up in 1998 while the master plan came into effect from October 29, 2001.

Nearly 25 years later, the city is paying the price for design flaws, omissions and hubris, say critics. While a master plan existed, geologists were not part of the planning process. And then there were modifications in the plan itself. A 2013 government order, for instance, redesignated a proposed 24-metre CDA Master Plan road passing through parts of Gopanpally and Manikonda as a residential-use zone. This change occurred close to the areas that witnessed flooding on Tuesday evening.

The consequences become evident during intense rainfall events. A community note prepared by IMD's Srinivas states, "A 5-cm rainfall event over one square kilometre generates around 50,000 cubic metres of water, or nearly

By the time we realised what was happening, all the vehicles were

already on the road. There was no chance to put in diversions.

S. SHESHADRINI REDDY,
DCP (Traffic), Cyberabad

ground, natural absorption is severely restricted, causing runoff to rapidly accumulate, and leading to flooding depths of 60 cm to 100 cm and widespread traffic disruption, it reads.

Srinivas believes that urban flooding is not an unavoidable consequence of climate change but a manageable infrastructure challenge. His blueprint proposes a four-month strategy involving public awareness campaigns, compliance windows for larger properties, digital verification mechanisms, targeted audits and penalties for continued non-compliance.

On June 3, however, the city had little time to respond. The downpour began around 5 p.m., just as lakhs of employees across the IT corridor were leaving their offices and entering the road network. Within minutes, water began accumulating at vulnerable locations even as traffic volumes surged across western Hyderabad.

Queues built up at key places including Biodiversity Junction, Cyber Gateway, Hitec City Main Road and the IKEA flyover before spilling onto connecting roads and flyovers across Cyberabad. By 6 p.m., the IT corridor had slipped into near-complete gridlock. With more employees conti-

ning to pour onto the roads, the congestion deepened by the minute.

"It took me four hours to cover just three kilometres from Hitec City to Gachibowli. Mindspace Road was a literal swimming pool," recalls a commuter. Another spent nearly two hours and 15 minutes on a 1.8-km journey from Raidurg Metro station to IKEA.

Struggle to untangle a gridlock

According to Cyberabad Traffic DCP S. Sheshadri-ni Reddy, authorities had little opportunity to intervene once the scale of the crisis became clear. "By the time we realised what was happening, all the vehicles were already on the road. There was no chance to put in diversions," she says.

An advisory urging staggered office timings was issued around 4.30 p.m., but it was too late. “We did not have an accurate forecast and the authorities were caught off guard,” Reddy adds.

The congestion proved so severe that even emergency response teams and personnel tasked with clearing waterlogged and restoring traffic struggled to reach affected locations. Reddy herself took more than 90 minutes to travel from Miyapur to Gachibowli despite using internal roads.

"What happened that night was essentially firefighting after the situation had already developed," she says.

An hours-long traffic gridlock in an Indian city is no longer a story confined to local newspapers. As Hyderabad and Telangana aggressively pursue Global Capability Centres and global investment, such episodes travel far beyond city limits, shaping perceptions of the city's infrastructure and resilience.

Cyberabad Municipal Corporation Commissioner G. Srijana acknowledges that the event had exposed vulnerabilities despite monsoon preparedness meetings held earlier this month. She, however, rejects suggestions that the rainfall was moderate, and describes it as a cloudburst-like event that dumped nearly 57 mm of rain within an hour. “We had a reality check on Tuesday; I should admit that,” she says, adding that while vulnerable locations had been identified on paper, the June 9 rain offered important lessons in real-world conditions.

While accepting public criticism, Srijana maintains that several locations drained faster than they did during previous rain events. However, the presence of a water stagnation point for a few minutes can translate into traffic congestion lasting several hours, she notes.

New vulnerabilities

The rain also revealed new flood-prone locations. In some instances, engineering interventions appeared to have shifted the problem rather than eliminated it. Drainage works near Nectar Garden, for example, addressed flooding in one stretch but resulted in waterlogging behind it. “We have learned our lesson, and we are taking corrective actions,” she says.

Can anything be done about Hyderabad's recurring flooding? Sarvothaman laughs at the question. "Perhaps they can create trenches near the foothills and drain the water to lower lying catchment areas. But where will they find land to create trenches," he asks.

Business

INBRIEF



Rupee surges 67 paise against 'weaker' U.S. dollar

The rupee surged 67 paise to close at 95.18 against the greenback on Friday as global oil prices fell sharply after U.S. President Donald Trump indicated an imminent deal with Iran. A firm trend in domestic equity markets and a weaker American currency also supported the rupee, forex traders said. At the interbank foreign exchange, the rupee opened at 95.40 and traded in the range of 94.95-95.53 before settling at 95.18, up 67 paise from its previous close. PTI

Govt. waives duty on nuclear power equipment imports

In what could serve as a major boost to India's nuclear energy ambitions, the Finance Ministry in an order on Thursday, waived customs duty on specific imports required for spurring generation of nuclear energy. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman had announced extending the basic customs duty exemption on imports necessary for nuclear power projects up to 2035. The latest order takes retrospective effect, extending relief to imports made between April 1, 2019 and January 31 this year.

NLC wins Telangana critical minerals' block bid

NLC India has emerged as the preferred bidder for a Vanadium, Titanium and Aluminous Laterite block in Telangana. "NLC India Limited is declared as preferred bidder for Parvathapur Vanadium, Titanium and Aluminous Laterite block of Sanga Reddy, Telangana, subsequent to the Critical and Strategic mineral blocks e-auction held on June 11 by the Union Ministry of Mines," the company said in a filing on Friday.

Mandate on solar cell manufacturing may hit projects on books

Approved list of cell manufacturers given effect without ensuring adequate domestic cell manufacturing capacity, says solar association

M. Soundariya Preetha
COIMBATORE

Solar energy projects that are on the books and waiting for implementation, may be impacted by the approved list of cell manufacturers (ALCM) for solar cells that came into effect on June 1. According to the approved list of module manufacturers (ALMM) order issued in 2019, solar photo-voltaic module manufacturers should use solar PV cells only from those listed under the ALCM.

The introduction of ALCM may create several challenges for the Indian solar industry as it has come into effect without ensuring adequate domestic cell manufacturing capacity, said C. Narasimhan, president of the Indian Solar Association.

India's module manufacturing capacity has reached approximately 190 GW, whereas domestic solar cell manufacturing capacity is only around 25 GW. India's annual solar installation requirement is estimated at about 50 GW. With domestic cell manufacturing capacity substantially lower than demand, a supply deficit is likely to emerge, he told *The Hindu*.

Data of projects that are awaiting installation in different States are not available publicly. And, the



Low voltage: Phased implementation of the ALCM has been sought till the cell production capacity comes to at least 100 GW. AFP

ALCM order for solar PV cells has come into effect just 12 days ago. "However, it has an impact on both prices and availability," said Mr. Narasimhan.

Prior to the implementation of mandatory domestic cell sourcing requirements, solar module manufacturers were able to procure solar cells from international markets though the Basic Customs Duty on it is 20%.

It is learnt that imported solar cells are reportedly available at approximately ₹5 per watt. The price of domestically manufactured solar cells is said to be in the range of ₹13 per watt, he said.

The resulting high costs would ultimately have to be absorbed by project developers, investors, electricity consumers, distribution companies, commercial and industrial consumers, or the government through various sup-

port schemes, he said.

With the mandatory Domestic Content Requirement (DCR), many EPC and manufacturing companies may face closure as module availability will become an issue, he added.

Residential rooftop solar installations are going on with DCR cells because consumers get subsidy under PM Surya Ghar.

Commercial installations or solar park development projects contribute 70% of the total installation and will be affected, Mr. Narasimhan said.

Further, insufficient cell availability may lead to underutilisation of module manufacturing facilities.

"While there are cases in courts regarding this issue, the government should look at a phased implementation of the ALCM till the cell production capacity comes to at least 100 GW," he added.

Govt. bars bulk buyers from retail purchase of petrol, diesel

Saptaparno Ghosh
NEW DELHI

Seeking to curb the recent "extraordinary" increase in sales of petrol and diesel, the government, in an order late on Thursday, barred industrial and commercial consumers from purchasing petrol and diesel from retail outlets and directed them to source the fuels only from dedicated supply channels.

Additionally, the government also directed retail outlets not to dispense more than 200 litres of diesel in a day to either a consumer or a vehicle. The same cannot be resold, according to the order.

The directive would be in force for 90 days unless revoked before the stipulated date.

In a statement on Friday, the government underlined that the latest directive sought to arrest an "uneven extraordinary demand growth" in some re-



Procurement of large quantities of diesel in jerry cans had come to the government's notice.

tail outlets that is stemming from consumers of bulk diesel increasingly turning to State-owned oil-marketing companies' retail outlets.

"This is driven by industrial and direct or institutional and commercial consumers, who have been shifting their procurement from their dedicated consumer pumps to retail outlets due to the difference between bulk and retail diesel prices," the statement read.

Bulk diesel is about ₹40

per litre more expensive than the one sold at retail outlets.

Further, according to the government, there has been about 58% decline in sale of diesel among private oil marketing companies in May this year – from the same period last year – owing to comparatively higher prices at their pumps.

Privately-owned oil marketing companies immediately pass on the elevated pressure onto the final consumer of retail fuels sold at their pumps unlike State-owned companies.

State-owned companies' retail pumps in 80 districts have witnessed more than 30% growth in sale of diesel during the same period, the government added.

"Blatant instances of procurement of large quantities of diesel in jerry cans, and its resale have come to the notice of the government," it said.

Investors upbeat as oil becomes cheaper on hopes of peace deal

Ashokamithran T.
MUMBAI

Investors were elated after oil prices plummeted 2.5% to \$88.1 levels on hopes of a peace deal between Iran and the U.S. Benchmark Nifty and Sensex rose over 2% to 23,622.90 and 75,527.95 points on Friday.

Nifty opened at 23,412.55 points, 1.22%

above the previous day's close, and traded at about 23,350 before the day's close. Sensex, too, saw a similar pattern.

All sectoral indices improved, with some gaining up to 3% or more. Most stocks that traded in the session advanced, suggesting a broad-based rally.

"The sharp market recovery suggests that inves-

tors are beginning to price in a more favourable geopolitical outcome. While a formal agreement remains pending, the moderation in crude oil prices and rupee gain have improved the near-term outlook for domestic equities," said Siddhartha Khemka, Head of Research, Wealth Management, Motilal Oswal Financial Services Ltd.

NCLT rejects insolvency plea against Noida Metro

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI

The NCLT has dismissed an insolvency petition filed by Empire Transport Services Ltd. (ETSL) against Noida Metro Rail Corporation observing that there were 'genuine' pre-existing disputes between the parties over service quality, contractual obligations and payment deductions.

The Allahabad Bench of NCLT rejected ETSL's plea seeking initiation of Corporate Insolvency Resolution Process (CIRP) against Noida Metro Rail Corporation (NMRC) under Section 9 of the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC).

ETSL approached NCLT claiming operational dues of about ₹7.09 crore arising from a bus operators pact signed with NMRC.

Estonia, industry eye trade, defence ties with India

Aroon Deep
TALLINN

Estonian government officials and business executives are expressing greater interest in cooperating with India in defence and trade, even as the Baltic country, with a population of 14 lakh, works to strengthen its position amid the Russia-Ukraine war.

"India is one of the most interesting markets, because the population is still growing for a long time," Ahti Kuningas, Secretary-General of Estonia's Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications said in a briefing last month to visiting journalists.

"You definitely have to be more present there," Mr. Kuningas listed areas such as 'wood chemistry, machinery, drones... and then a little piece of chips'



A bee sits on a dandelion flower in a park on a sunny day in Tallinn, Estonia. AP

where cooperation could be possible.

Sigrid Rajalo, director of the Ministry's Economy and Technology Department, pointed out to engineering and ICT as fields in which Indian students "found their way to our universities." Foreign Minister Margus Tsahkna added Estonia could serve as a "gateway to the European

Union" for Indian firms.

E-residency

Mr. Tsahkna endorsed Estonia's e-residency programme as a way for more entrepreneurs to access global markets.

Medical cooperation

Priit Salumaa, founder of Better Medicine which builds AI solutions for radiologists, said he travelled to the AI Impact Summit in Delhi in February with the Estonian President's delegation.

Stating he had held discussions with incorporating his firm's technology in Indian hospitals, he said a key policy adjustment applied to U.S. and U.K. would help firms like his.

(The author was in Tallinn at the invitation of the Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.)

Global liquor firms chase Telangana for \$400 mn dues

Reuters
NEW DELHI

Indian groups representing alcohol giants Diageo, Pernod Ricard, Heineken and Carlsberg, accused Telangana of breaching accounting rules over dues it owes them totalling almost \$400 million. India's biggest beer-consuming state by volume, like many other local governments in India, requires liquor firms to supply only to State-run depots, which then sell to retailers, forcing the firms to rely on State governments for payment.

The system has long soured relations with big drinks companies and last year, Telangana officials acknowledged they owed money to liquor firms without giving reasons for the delayed payments.

SpaceX opens 11% higher on Nasdaq

Reuters

SpaceX rose 11% in its Nasdaq debut on Friday, lifting its valuation to about \$1.96 trillion as investors piled into the world's largest IPO and bought into Elon Musk's sprawling empire spanning rockets, satellite communications and AI to Wall Street.

The stock opened for trading at \$150 compared with the IPO price of \$135 per share. The deal was being closely scrutinised because of the stakes for the IPO market, which some bankers said could face difficulties if SpaceX shares close below Thursday's pricing level.

With SpaceX widely viewed as a dress rehearsal for a new generation of mega-listings, market participants will also be watching for signals on investor appetite ahead of forth-



A billboard of SpaceX visuals at the Times Square, U.S.

coming IPOs for AI heavyweights Anthropic and OpenAI.

The landmark listing cemented Mr. Musk's status as the first trillionaire ever and propelled SpaceX into the ranks of the world's most valuable companies - even though the firm posted a loss of nearly \$5 billion last year and generated only a fraction of the revenue brought in by similarly valued tech giants.

Nestle India says no infestation in its noodles

Reuters

Nestle India on Friday rejected allegations that insects were found in its MAGGI noodles product, after a news agency reported India's food regulator had taken cognisance of social media complaints and issued notice to the consumer goods company.

Nestle India said in a statement that the concern was raised from an unverified social media account and that the account holder did not respond to repeated requests for the sample.

Testing of a reference sample from the same batch at an independent laboratory notified by the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) found no infestation, Nestle India said.

SAP to deploy 200 Artificial Intelligence agents in '26

Mini Tejaswi
BENGALURU

SAP would deploy 200 AI agents as part of its workforce by end of this year, said Manos Raptopoulos, global president, customer success - Europe, APAC, Middle East & Africa.

The company deployed more than 50 domain-specific Joule Assistants across finance, supply chain, procurement, human capital management and customer experience.

End-to-end process

"These assistants will automate end-to-end processes by orchestrating a subset of over 200 specialised



Leading player: The country ranked second worldwide in strategic approaches to AI investment, according to SAP. REUTERS

agents to execute precise tasks," he said.

AI was the backbone of the Autonomous Enterprise and in SAP, AI was

grounded in deep industry context and rich business semantics, said Mr. Raptopoulos, also member of the extended board, SAP SE.

"This means, AI truly understands the processes, and data of your specific industry. As this embedded intelligence becomes core to operations, organisations become more adaptive, resilient and future-ready," he said while delivering a keynote address at SAP Now AI Tour.

Agentic AI returns

SAP forecast agentic AI returns in India were projected to grow fivefold to \$14.4 billion. Overall, AI ROI in India would rise from 22% to 39% in two years and the country ranked second worldwide in strategic approaches to AI investment, the German enterprise

software firm said.

SAP also disclosed Indian enterprises were rapidly moving beyond AI experimentation to value-driven implementation - positioning themselves as global leaders in enterprise-wide adoption. Reflecting this momentum, Indian organisations plan to invest \$25.9 million in AI with spending expected to grow by 45% over next two years, as per a study conducted by SAP in collaboration with Oxford Economics.

The data also showed that from experimentation to execution, AI took centre stage in India Inc. For instance, 71% of Indian

businesses have defined AI strategy aligned with business goals. AI supports 33% of business tasks globally and likely to rise to 51% over next two years.

Embed AI into core

In his address, Manish Prasad, president and MD, SAP Indian Subcontinent, said, "India stands at the forefront of one of the most significant technology shifts of our time - and our survey shows organisations are not waiting on the sidelines. Customers are moving decisively beyond experimentation, embedding AI into the core of their business and making it a strategic priority."

This momentum, he said, combined with India's strong digital foundation, deep talent pool, and vibrant innovation ecosystem, uniquely positioned the country not just to adopt AI at scale but lead the next wave of enterprise transformation and define how AI delivers real business value globally.

According to the company's senior leadership, SAP's vision of the Autonomous Enterprise focuses on helping organisations bring together Artificial Intelligence, data, and business processes to drive more connected, trusted and responsible business outcomes at scale.

Tata Motors to hike prices of cars, SUVs by up to 1.5%

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI

Tata Motors Passenger Vehicles Ltd said it will increase prices of its passenger vehicle portfolio, including both internal combustion engine (ICE) and electric vehicles (EVs) by up to 1.5% from July 1, marking its second hike in three months after the company raised prices of its ICE vehicle range from April 1 amid escalating cost pressures due to the ongoing West Asia conflict-led disruptions.



H3 rocket No. 6 being launched from Tanegashima Space Center in Kagoshima Prefecture, Japan, on Friday. AFP

Following earlier setbacks, Japan's H3 rocket lifts off

Agence France Presse
TOKYO

Japan's flagship H3 rocket successfully blasted off on Friday, live footage showed, months after its previous mission to put a geolocation satellite into orbit ended in failure.

The H3 was developed to boost the international competitiveness of Japan's rocket industry, and the country's space agency has come under pressure to increase the success rate of launches.

The rocket has been mooted as a rival to SpaceX's Falcon 9, and could one day deliver cargo to bases on the moon. On Friday, the rocket – which was carrying six small satellites – lifted off at 9:53 a.m. (0053 GMT) from Tanegashima Space Center in southern Japan.

"The second-stage combustion, action control and trajectory are all normal," the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) said in a live YouTube broadcast, about six minutes after blast-off.

The satellites loaded onto the rocket included Tokyo University of Science's "Umitsubame", which observes earth and other targets with a high-performance camera, and Shizuoka University's "Shiraito", which is testing space debris capture technology, according to JAXA.

Designed for "high flexibility, high reliability, and high cost performance", JAXA had toasted five successful launches of the H3 before Friday, but there have been two failures, including the last one in December.

H3 project manager Makoto Arita said prior to lift-off that the latest attempt was "crucial for our comeback" following December's failed mission, in which a second-stage engine terminated prematurely. The space agency is targeting up to eight H3 rocket launches a year, according to a JAXA official.

With key U.S. surveillance programme expiring, fate of Section 702 uncertain

Section 702 grants U.S. spy agencies powers to gather communications of foreigners without warrant; however, over the years, activists have raised concerns that the security tool has been misused for info on citizens, including in relation with 2021 Capitol hill riot and 2020 racial justice protests

Associated Press
WASHINGTON

A key surveillance tool seen as vital in preventing terror attacks in the United States and catching foreign spies is set to expire Friday after congressional efforts to temporarily extend it failed in bipartisan fashion. It's a significant lapse for the programme known as Section 702, and even as President Donald Trump nominates a new National Intelligence Director more palatable to both Republicans and Democrats than his initial pick, it's unclear how soon lawmakers – set for recess – would be able to revive the spy programme.

Still, there may not be an immediate drop-off given that a court order from March authorised these government surveillance powers to remain in effect for another year.

The provision is a part of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, known as FISA, and grants American spy agencies sweeping powers to collect and examine the communications of foreigners located outside the United States without first getting a warrant.

U.S. officials see the law as an invaluable national security tool that has helped disrupt potential acts of terrorism, yielded valuable insight into ransomware attacks on critical infrastructure and contri-



Act under review: Speaker Mike Johnson briefs reporters at U.S. Capitol in Washington on Thursday after the House did not extend FISA Section 702 surveillance powers ahead of Friday's deadline. AFP

buted to the killing of al-Qaida leader Ayman al-Zawahri in a 2022 drone strike. The law was passed in 2008 as an effort to codify key aspects of a predecessor spy programme created by President George W. Bush's Republican administration.

Since then, officials across administrations of both major political parties have warned that without the law the government won't be able to collect crucial intelligence overseas. The periodic need to reauthorise the law has prompted protracted debate in Congress well before this year, including discussion over whether additional guardrails are needed to protect the privacy of Americans and their personal data.

That's because when the government eavesdrops on foreigners

abroad, it also sweeps up the communications of American citizens and others in the U.S. who are in contact with those surveillance targets.

Civil liberties advocates have raised concerns over revelations that FBI analysts over the years have improperly queried the vast repository of intelligence collected through the programme for information about Americans, including related to the January 6, 2021, riot at the Capitol by a mob of Trump supporters and the racial justice protests of 2020, as well as about state and federal political figures.

Some of those advocates have said the government should be required to have a warrant before examining communications collected from Americans. U.S. officials have said that a warrant would be legally

unnecessary and overly cumbersome and that corrective measures have been implemented to reduce the number of improper queries. Complicating the debate is the unlikely political alliances it has produced, uniting a coalition of lawmakers sceptical of government surveillance that includes both privacy-minded liberal Democrats and Republicans who still regard the intelligence community with suspicion over the investigation of ties between Russia and Mr. Trump's 2016 Republican presidential campaign.

Democrats balked when Mr. Trump picked Bill Pulte to serve as acting national intelligence director and refused to support a FISA extension until the selection was withdrawn. Pulte, a Trump loyalist with no known national se-

curity experience, has set off alarms by using his perch as director of the Federal Housing Finance Agency to facilitate dubious mortgage fraud investigations of perceived Trump adversaries.

A House vote this week that would have temporarily extended the programme collapsed, with 19 Republicans and nearly all Democrats rejecting the temporary measure, 198-218. A Senate effort to approve its own versions also failed. After those votes, Mr. Trump announced he was tapping Jay Clayton, a U.S. attorney in Manhattan who previously served as chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission, as his permanent pick for Director of National Intelligence, or DNI. The pick was warmly received on Capitol Hill, but it was not enough to break the impasse before Friday's scheduled expiration.

Programme renewed
Connecticut Rep. Jim Himes, the top Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, said that he has "known and respected" Mr. Clayton for decades and that had he been tapped a week ago, "lots of pain might have been avoided."

"His intelligence, temperament and deep commitment to public service will make him a terrific DNI," Mr. Himes said. Republican Arkansas

Sen. Tom Cotton, chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, and Iowa Sen. Chuck Grassley, chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, have warned the Trump administration to prepare "for a potential significant gap in foreign intelligence collection."

The expiration is likely to be the first meaningful lapse of Section 702 since it was created more than 15 years ago. In 2024, the Senate barely missed its midnight deadline before voting to approve a Bill that was then signed by President Joe Biden, a Democrat, creating a brief lapse.

Despite the lapse, there's no expectation of any immediate drop-off in intelligence collection as the U.S. hosts a series of events this summer with potential national security concerns, including the World Cup and festivities surrounding the 250th birthday of the nation.

A March opinion from the secretive Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court certified the programme's renewal for another year, meaning that Section 702's authority is expected to remain intact for months.

Even so, it's conceivable that without congressional reauthorisation, a telecommunications company or Internet service provider could challenge the government's ability to compel it to cooperate with its demands for surveillance.

Massive cuts to international aid put fight against HIV 'in peril', warns UN

Agence France Presse
PARIS

Massive cuts to international aid have put the world's response to HIV "in peril", the UN's top AIDS official warned Friday, as a new report revealed the scale of disruption to HIV prevention efforts.

Last year, the new administration of U.S. President Donald Trump – with help from then-adviser Elon Musk – dismantled the world's largest aid agency, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and slashed global funding.

Countries including the U.K., France and Germany followed his lead in slashing aid funding, leaving humanitarian organisations



Proactive step: People at the launch of a rollout programme for Lenacapavir, a drug used to treat HIV, in Secunda, South Africa. AP

reeling and severely impacting efforts against diseases such as HIV that particularly affect the world's poorest and most vulnerable people.

"This is the most serious disruption in the HIV response since the world came together to fight this disease," UNAIDS executive director Winnie Byanyima told AFP. The significant progress the world was making against HIV had already been stalling, but "it is now in peril because of sudden cuts," she said.

It will take time for the full impact of these funding cuts to become clear – but there are already signs that hard-fought gains are

being reversed, Ms. Byanyima added.

In the countries most affected by HIV – most of which are in sub-Saharan Africa – HIV testing rates under a major programme decreased by 22%, the report said.

"By the nature of this disease, new infections will show up in the following years, not immediately," Ms. Byanyima said.

She called for the world to show "global solidarity" to bring an end to a "virus that knows no borders".

The report was released ahead of a UN General Assembly meeting on HIV and AIDS starting on June 22, where member states are expected to adopt a political declaration to guide the world's response over the next five years.

Holding ground



Furious youth: Student protesters tear down a police barricade during a rally against fuel price hike, inefficient government spending, and military involvement in civilian affairs in Jakarta, Indonesia, on Friday. AP

Ukraine hits fuel supplies to Crimea, sparking crisis on Russian-held peninsula

Associated Press

In a new blow to the Kremlin's narrative that Moscow is winning the 4-year-old war in Ukraine, Kyiv's forces have targeted supplies to Crimea, triggering the worst fuel crisis on the Black Sea peninsula since it was illegally annexed by Russia in 2014.

The persistent attacks reflect the growing intensity and efficiency of Ukraine's drone strikes and have caught Russia off-guard and struggling for a response.

As the country marks the Russia Day national holiday on Friday, signalling the start of summer vacations, the gas shortages are threatening to cause further disruptions to the tourism-dependent region

with its beaches and resorts.

In a rare public acknowledgment, the Kremlin has recognised the scope of the problem and promised to address the issue quickly.

Ukraine's successes have highlighted its ability to inflict painful damage to Russia and change the course of the conflict while Moscow's advances recently have ground to a near halt. On Thursday, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine reached its 1,569th day, surpassing the duration of World War I.

Control of Crimea
Crimea has been a jewel in Russia's imperial crown since it was seized from Turkic-speaking Tatars in the 18th century after Mos-

cow defeated the Ottoman Empire. Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev transferred Crimea from Russia to Ukraine in 1954 when both republics were part of the USSR. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the diamond-shaped peninsula became part of newly independent Ukraine.

Russia kept a naval base in Sevastopol, and when a Moscow-friendly Ukrainian President was ousted by a popular uprising in February 2014, Russian President Vladimir Putin sent in troops to overtake Crimea. Weeks later, Moscow annexed the peninsula following a referendum that most of the world refuses to recognise.

Soon afterward, a Moscow-backed separatist insurgency erupted in east-



Caught in a war: Ukraine's drone strikes on fuel supplies to Crimea threaten further disruption to the tourism-dependent region. AP

ern Ukraine, and fighting there raged with varying intensity until the February 2022 invasion. Russian troops concentrated in Crimea quickly seized large parts of southern Ukraine early in the war and secured the land route to the peninsula.

Since early in the war, Ukraine has fired missiles

and drones to try to dislodge Moscow's hold on the territory. The Ukrainian military sank several Russian warships in the Black Sea and at their Crimean bases, crippling Moscow's naval capability and forcing it to redeploy its fleet to Novorossiysk.

Ukraine also methodically targeted munitions

depots, airfields and Mr. Putin's prized asset, the Kerch Bridge linking Crimea to Russia.

Since the Kerch Bridge attacks, Russia has channelled most fuel and other supplies along the highway and railroad via the occupied territories along the Sea of Azov coast. Those shipments were interrupted last month, when Ukrainian drones hit fuel trucks on the highway, leaving behind dozens of burning vehicles. Other relentless strikes hit refineries, oil depots and pipelines deep inside Russia, hurting its oil exports and causing domestic fuel shortages.

Calculated attacks
The Washington-based Institute for the Study of War noted the synergy between

the longer-range attacks and those disrupting supplies to Crimea and other occupied regions.

"The long-range strike campaign is therefore reducing Russia's production capacity, while the mid-range strike campaign is hurting Russia's ability to transport the gasoline Russia is still able to produce," it said in an analysis.

Making matters worse, Ukrainian drones this week repeatedly hit the Chonhar Bridge, which links mainland Ukraine and Crimea over a shallow strait. It's not immediately clear how the fuel disruptions will affect Russian military operations, but residents of Crimea and other occupied territories are keenly feeling the blow.

The peninsula has had

periodic fuel shortages from Ukrainian strikes before, but this crisis is the worst since its 2014 annexation.

Social networks have been abuzz with requests and advice on where to find fuel, and authorities launched a hotline for tourists who have found themselves trapped.

While fuel shipments over the Kerch Bridge long has been suspended for security reasons since the Ukrainian attacks, fuel also has been carried by ferries. Those shipments are expected to increase.

Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov acknowledged the Crimean fuel shortages earlier this week and promised that "measures were being taken" to deal with them.

Partey out of Panama game after Canada visa application refused



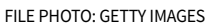
Defender Senesi takes Balerdi's place in the Argentina squad



Japan captain Endo ends his int'l. career after injury setback



Brazil's 1970 World Cup winner Brito passes away aged 86



Neymar carries the burden of Brazil’s resurrection into the last chance saloon

The 34-year-old is no longer central to his country’s football identity, but still is its biggest star. After three failed attempts at claiming the sport’s most prized trophy, he will again be confronted by the existential question asked of every great in a Seleccion shirt: can you win the World Cup?



N. Sudarshan

It is difficult to be a Brazilian footballer. It is more difficult to be a talented Brazilian footballer. After the legendary Pele fired the South American nation to three World Cup triumphs in four editions (from 1958 to 1970), playing a leading role in at least two of those, every potentially great player who wears the *Seleccion* shirt has been asked just one existential question – can you win the World Cup? Romario in 1994 and Ronaldo in 2002 answered this emphatically, leading Brazil to its fourth and fifth titles respectively. Ronaldinho (in 2006) and Kaka (in 2006 and 2010) were put through the wringer, but could not add to the collection of World Cup trophies.

King in Waiting

From then on, the burden of resurrecting Brazil has been Neymar’s. Ever since he broke out as a prodigious 17-year-old at Santos and captured the imagination of his country, he has been Brazil’s ‘King in Waiting’. There were four trophy-filled seasons at Barcelona, and then the record €222 million move

to Paris Saint-Germain that liberated him from Lionel Messi’s colossal shadow at the Catalan giant. But circumstances back in Brazil have been such that Neymar is yet to be coronated. In the time since that magical night in Japan in 2002, when Ronaldo buried the ghosts of the 1998 final loss to France by leading his side to a 2-0 win over Germany, Brazil has reached just one semifinal – at home in 2014. That was the first of Neymar’s three appearances at the quadrennial extravaganza. He played admirably until the quarterfinals but a lower-back injury ended his tournament, and he watched helplessly on television the 7-1 humiliation that eventual champion Germany dishied out. In 2018, Belgium’s golden generation proved too good for Brazil as it crashed out in the quarters. In the 2022 last-eight clash versus Croatia, Neymar started and finished a brilliant move from midfield to put Brazil ahead in extra-time, only for his teammates to exhibit a severe lack of game awareness and ultimately lose on penalties. For the maverick footballer, who is now 34, the North American sojourn will in all probability be the last chance saloon – a fourth attempt at claiming the elusive title. Neymar, however, has to come to terms with the altered reality of him no longer being the leading man. Zinedine Zidane was also 34 when he led France to the final in 2006. Messi is 38 and Cristiano Ronaldo 41, and both are still synonymous with their outfits.

Neymar, though, is no longer central to his country’s identity. He is still Brazil’s biggest star, scorer of a record 79 goals (two more than Pele), but is neither the fulcrum nor the conductor who was once at the centre of every signature move on the field. In fact, there was a real danger of Carlo Ancelotti – the first foreign coach in Brazil’s history, brought in to instil a culture of collectivism and tactical discipline – side-stepping him altogether, for Neymar had featured in just four fixtures after the 2022 World Cup. His last outing for the national team was in October 2023, a World Cup qualification tie against Uruguay during which he ruptured the anterior cruciate ligament and meniscus in his left knee and was out of action for a year. He made a comeback in October 2024, only to injure his hamstring and spend more time out. Al Hilal, the Saudi Arabian club he joined in August 2023, terminated his contract in January 2025, and Neymar returned to Santos.

Flashes of his old self

The spell at his boyhood club has been mixed, with only flashes of his old self visible. There have been multiple spells on the sidelines; in 2026, he has only competed in eight matches. Leading into the World Cup he has again been waylaid by a calf injury. The question now is how much of the old Neymar remains and what facets Ancelotti can tap into. At his pomp, Neymar was a flamboyant footballer and a glorious combination of pace, precision and trickery.

His close control and dribbling skills were such that the ball appeared glued to his feet, and such was the velocity he could gather in his first three-four steps that most opponents struggled to keep up. Now that he is well into the third decade of his life, speed is no longer his ally. He is not as sharp as before. But set-piece delivery is still part of his muscle memory. Considering that he would have had more rest than his Europe-based teammates, he can be a real threat if called upon to play short cameos, especially at the business end. Neymar’s popularity among his peers was also a factor in his selection. For long, Ancelotti maintained that he would only pick those who were fully fit. But here, there appears to be an ever-so-slight departure as Ancelotti himself pointed to the “affection the group has for him [Neymar]” and how he can help “create a better atmosphere”. The Italian, who has coached high-profile clubs such as Real Madrid, Bayern Munich, Paris Saint-Germain and Chelsea, is among the best man-managers around and known to prioritise harmonious dressing rooms. Pragmatic in his approach, Ancelotti has mostly shaped tactics according to the personnel at hand. At the same time, he has not allowed individual egos to disturb the shared ethos of his teams. “He has the same role, the same obligation as the other 25,” he said about Neymar. “He might play; he might not; he might be on the bench and come on.” In South America, footballers cater to heightened demands. With the best players from the continent almost always leaving for greener pastures in Europe, there is an expectation



He has the same role, the same obligation as the other 25. He might play; he might not; he might not be on the bench and come on
CARLO ANCELOTTI
Brazil head coach

from the fans for them to do well in national colours. Messi might have had one of the greatest careers at Barcelona, but the whole of the Argentine population fully warmed up to him only in the aftermath of the 2022 success in Qatar. It has been no different for Neymar. He helped Brazil win the 2013 Confederations Cup and clinch its first Olympic gold in football at Rio 2016. Both were at home but they still did not endear him to the public completely.

Failure and scrutiny

With every failure at the World Cup and Copa America, the scrutiny grew. Minor acts of petulance were overblown; every breath was analysed; every step was scrutinised; something as simple as a haircut was also not spared. In the battle of perception, he mostly lost. “Those who have been with me through it all know that it was difficult, it was hard,” Neymar said about his latest selection. “But after hearing my name on the list, [it felt like] all the sacrifices and all the effort was worth it. We’re in this together as Brazil heads for a sixth World Cup title.” The big question is: can a Brazilian ensemble deliver what a solo Neymar couldn’t?



GETTY IMAGES

STACKING UP



ATP Men's Top 15

#	Player	Age	Points	Events
1	Jannik Sinner	24	13,500	19
2	Carlos Alcaraz	23	9,960	18
3	Alexander Zverev	29	7,305	21
4	Felix Auger-Aliassime	25	4,440	24
5	Ben Shelton	23	3,920	23
6	Alex de Minaur	27	3,905	23
7	Novak Djokovic	39	3,760	16
8	Daniil Medvedev	30	3,760	24
9	Taylor Fritz	28	3,720	23
10	Flavio Cobolli	24	3,540	27
11	Alexander Bublik	28	2,930	25
12	Jiri Lehecka	24	2,575	21
13	Andrey Rublev	28	2,460	23
14	Casper Ruud	27	2,425	22
15	Karen Khachanov	30	2,320	24



Sumit Nagal
Rank 278 ▲ 4 spots



Manas Dhamne
Rank 373 ▲ 21 spots

WTA Women's Top 15

#	Player	Age	Points	Events
1	Aryna Sabalenka	28	9,090	19
2	Elena Rybakina	26	8,143	22
3	Iga Swiatek	25	6,733	19
4	Jessica Pegula	32	6,056	20
5	Amanda Anisimova	24	5,848	17
6	Mirra Andreeva	19	5,751	21
7	Coco Gauff	22	4,879	19
8	Elina Svitolina	31	4,315	15
9	Victoria Mboko	19	3,670	21
10	Karolina Muchova	29	3,438	19
11	Belinda Bencic	29	3,385	19
12	Marta Kostyuk	23	3,157	19
13	Linda Noskova	21	3,054	22
14	Jasmine Paolini	30	2,617	20
15	Naomi Osaka	28	2,571	20



Sahaja Yamalapalli
Rank 331 ▲ 29 spots



Vaishnavi Adkar
Rank 374 ▲ 4 spots

F1 Drivers' standings

#	Driver	Team	Points	Wins
1	A.K. Antonelli	Mercedes	156	5
2	L. Hamilton	Ferrari	90	0
3	G. Russell	Mercedes	88	1
4	C. Leclerc	Ferrari	75	0
5	O. Piastri	McLaren	60	0
6	L. Norris	McLaren	58	0
7	M. Verstappen	Red Bull	43	0
8	I. Hadjar	Red Bull	29	0
9	P. Gasly	Alpine	26	0
10	L. Lawson	RB	26	0
11	O. Bearman	Haas	18	0
12	F. Colapinto	Alpine	15	0
13	A. Lindblad	RB	13	0
14	C. Sainz	Williams	6	0
15	A. Albon	Williams	5	0
16	E. Ocon	Haas	3	0
17	G. Bortoleto	Audi	2	0
18	F. Alonso	Aston Martin	1	0
19	N. Hulkenberg	Audi	0	0
20	V. Bottas	Cadillac	0	0
21	S. Perez	Cadillac	0	0
22	L. Stroll	Aston Martin	0	0



A.K. Antonelli



L. Hamilton

F1 Constructors' standings

Pos	Team	Points	Wins
1	Mercedes	244	6
2	Ferrari	165	0
3	McLaren	118	0
4	Red Bull	72	0
5	Alpine	41	0
6	RB	39	0
7	Haas	21	0
8	Williams	11	0
9	Audi	2	0
10	Aston Martin	1	0
11	Cadillac	0	0



Badminton Men's ranking

#	Player	Points	Events
1	Shi Yu Qi	1,05,305	12
2	Kunlavut Vitidsarn	92,565	16
3	Anders Antonsen	91,155	17
4	Jonatan Christie	88,431	18
5	Christo Popov	84,682	20
6	Chou Tien Chen	80,280	27
7	Alex Lanier	74,525	17
8	Li Shi Feng	73,083	16
9	Victor Lai	72,915	21
10	Lin Chun-Yi	69,414	18
11	Lakshya Sen	69,373	23
12	Kodai Naraoka	68,020	22
13	Alwi Farhan	66,209	20
14	Loh Kean Yew	65,700	18
15	Weng Hong Yang	59,341	17



Lakshya Sen
Rank 11



Ayush Shetty
Rank 21

Badminton Women's ranking

#	Player	Points	Events
1	An Se Young	1,17,787	17
2	Wang Zhi Yi	1,06,839	16
3	Akane Yamaguchi	99,626	17
4	Chen Yu Fei	87,651	16
5	Han Yue	82,288	14
6	Putri Kusuma Wardani	75,223	19
7	Ratchanon Intanon	73,626	21
8	Pornpawee Chochuwong	64,977	15
9	Tomoka Miyazaki	63,646	22
10	P.V. Sindhu	59,781	13
11	Chiu Pin-Chian	57,498	25
12	Nozomi Okuhara	57,440	19
13	Michelle Li	57,327	21
14	Mia Blichfeldt	53,503	15
15	Sim Yu Jin	53,354	10



P.V. Sindhu
Rank 10



Unnati Hooda
Rank 24



Test Batting

#	Player	Rating	Career best
1	Harry Brook	869	898
2	Travis Head	853	884
3	Joe Root	851	932
4	Steve Smith	831	947
5	Kamindu Mendis	781	784
6	Kane Williamson	780	919
7	Temba Bavuma	775	806
8	Shubman Gill	743	807
9	Yashasvi Jaiswal	733	858
10	Dinesh Chandimal	717	755

ODI Batting

#	Player	Rating	Career best
1	Daryl Mitchell	815	840
2	Virat Kohli	791	908
3	Ibrahim Zadran	756	756
4	Rohit Sharma	748	879
5	Shubman Gill	716	841
6	Babar Azam	689	894
7	Shai Hope	683	782
8	Harry Tector	679	730
9	K.L. Rahul	664	676
10	Charith Asalanka	659	705

T20I Batting

#	Player	Rating	Career best
1	Abhishek Sharma	875	931
2	Ishan Kishan	871	871
3	Sahibzada Farhan	848	848
4	Phil Salt	792	881
5	Pathum Nissanka	766	796
6	Tilak Varma	742	845
7	Suryakumar Yadav	722	912
8	Jos Buttler	716	794
9	Dewald Brevis	702	738
10	Brian Bennett	701	708

Test Bowling

#	Player	Rating	Career best
1	Jasprit Bumrah	870	908
2	Mitchell Starc	838	852
3	Pat Cummins	832	914
4	Marco Jansen	825	825
5	Scott Boland	820	820
6	Noman Ali	817	853
7	Matt Henry	812	853
8	Kagiso Rabada	807	902
9	Josh Hazlewood	775	864
10	Gus Atkinson	754	766

ODI Bowling

#	Player	Rating	Career best
1	Rashid Khan	705	775
2	Abrar Ahmed	675	675
3	Jofra Archer	649	682
4	Keshav Maharaj	645	737
5	Maheesh Theekshana	641	680
6	Adil Rashid	629	671
7	Kuldeep Yadav	624	757
8	Mehidy Hasan	621	722
9	Shaheen Afridi	604	691
10	Josh Hazlewood	601	725

T20I Bowling

#	Player	Rating	Career best
1	Rashid Khan	753	828
2	Varun Chakaravarthy	740	818
3	Abrar Ahmed	736	757
4	Adil Rashid	721	747
5	Jasprit Bumrah	702	783
6	Adam Zampa	682	746
7	Corbin Bosch	669	745
8	Matthew Forde	667	679
9	Mujeeb Ur Rahman	663	757
10	Nathan Ellis	661	678

