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INSIDE

Two more killed in Russia as Kyiv keeps up assault

KYIV
Ukraine kept up its heavy drone assault on Russia, setting fire to a major oil refinery in the south and killing at least two people, Russia said on Sunday. Ukraine has markedly stepped up its attacks on Russian industries and energy facilities, aiming to cut Moscow's revenue for its invasion. » PAGE 14

CJP stir: Sonam Wangchuk goes on fast in Delhi

NEW DELHI
Environmentalist and educator Sonam Wangchuk began a hunger strike on Sunday afternoon at the Jantar Mantar here, where the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) has been protesting since June 20, demanding the resignation of Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan for multiple irregularities in the examination system. » PAGE 4

After 15-year wait, CRPF officers get first promotion

NEW DELHI
More than 250 officers of the country's largest paramilitary Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) finally received their first career promotion after a 14-15-year wait, officials said on Sunday. Their elevation came about after prolonged litigation and conditional resolution of pending service issues related to seniority and vacancies. » PAGE 4

Indian Ocean a shared responsibility: Modi

- PM meets Seychelles President, stresses 'security, sustainability and prosperity' of the region
- Two sides unveil 19 outcomes in areas, including defence, maritime, space, and digital payments
- Modi attends the golden jubilee celebrations of National Day of Seychelles as Guest of Honour

Press Trust of India
VICTORIA

India envisioned an Indian Ocean where maritime security was ensured alongside economic prosperity and where partnership was defined not by size, but by mutual respect and trust, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on Sunday during his visit to the Seychelles.

Mr. Modi, who held wide-ranging talks with President Patrick Herminie of the archipelago, said they agreed that the Indian Ocean was "our shared home" and therefore "its security, sustainability and prosperity are our shared responsibility".

"Our vision is to make the Indian Ocean an ocean of opportunity," Mr. Modi said after delegation-level talks with Mr. Herminie, during which they took stock of the economic partnership between the two countries and discussed new opportunities in industries, connectivity, technology, digital infrastructure, and other areas.

After the talks, the two sides unveiled 19 outcomes, expanding cooperation in areas ranging from defence and maritime security to digital payments, space, healthcare, agriculture, and education.

The two sides also announced the gifting of a fast patrol vessel to the Seychelles, the handover of 10 utility vehicles and five Laser Radial class boats to the Seychelles Defence Force, the completion of the refit of *PS Zoroaster* for the Seychelles Coast Guard and the upgrading of a Dornier aircraft with a glass cockpit.

Climate impact

Mr. Modi also addressed the National Assembly of the country, where he emphasised that the Global South, especially island nations, was the most impacted by climate change.

Sea of opportunities: Prime Minister Narendra Modi addresses the National Assembly of the Seychelles in Victoria on Sunday. ANI

He reiterated that those who had contributed the least to climate change should not bear the greatest burden of its consequences and said climate action must be guided by "fairness, responsibility, and equity".

"The Global South, and especially the island nations, are the most impacted by climate change. Its effects are already visible on our coastlines, in the marine ecosystems, in weather patterns, and in our communities," he said.

"We will continue to explore new opportunities for the industries of both our countries. We will also work towards enhancing connectivity between India and the Seychelles. This will not only boost our bilateral trade but also strengthen our ties with East Africa and the Indian Ocean region," he said.

The Prime Minister, who is on a three-day visit to the archipelago, attended the golden jubilee celebrations of the National Day of Seychelles as the Guest of Honour.

Earlier in the day, at a special ceremony, Mr. Modi was also conferred with 'Guardian of the Blue Horizon' by Mr. Herminie for his "green leadership and efforts towards advancing the interests of developing countries and his long-standing commitment towards promoting the blue economy".

The outcomes after the talks on Sunday included an extradition treaty, an agreement on cooperation in the peaceful uses of outer space, an agreement to advance UPI-based digital payments in the Seychelles, an umbrella line of credit agreement with the Export-Import Bank of India and an agreement for preliminary preparations for a new the Seychelles National Hospital, according to the Ministry of External Affairs.

Win-win partnership

"Our cooperation in the fields of energy and climate action continues to advance steadily. We will further strengthen our win-win partnership in emerging areas of clean energy, including green hydrogen. The Blue Economy is a natural and strategic pillar of our relationship," he said.

"The true strength of India-Seychelles relations lies in our people-to-people ties," Modi said.

He said the popularity of Yoga and the Indian film industry in the Seychelles reflected the deep cultural connection between the peoples of the two countries. "In the same spirit, we will continue our efforts to enhance people-to-people exchanges, particularly among the youth of our two countries."

Addressing the National Assembly later, the Prime Minister said the Seychelles "occupies a special place in India's vision for the Indian Ocean."

"Our vision recognises that our futures are interconnected and inter-dependent. And, we will continue to work together for a safer and more secure Indian Ocean region," he said.

The Prime Minister last visited the Seychelles in 2015, while President Herminie visited India earlier this year.

ARMY EVENT
» PAGE 4

Flaunting colours

Owning identity: LGBTQIA+ community members and allies hold a pride march in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, on Sunday. B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM

Govt. rejects Pak. charges of Indian role in Karachi attack

Kallol Bhattacherjee
NEW DELHI

The Centre on Sunday "categorically" rejected "baseless allegations" Pakistan has made about India being involved in an attack on a security installation in Karachi.

"We have seen Pakistani reports making baseless allegations against India regarding the recent incident in Karachi. We categorically reject them. Instead of pointing fingers at others, Pakistan would do better to look inwards, take credible actions [against] the terror infrastructure on its territory and rid itself of its proclivity to rely on terrorism as an instrument of state policy," said Randhir Jaiswal, spokesperson of External Affairs Ministry.

Pakistan security personnel inspect the rooftop of a compound in Karachi on Sunday following an alleged militant attack. AFP

Saturday's attack in Karachi's Gulistan-e-Jauhar neighbourhood killed at least three and injured four personnel of Pakistan Rangers (Sindh), the country's DGISPR had said. "The assailants, after a blast at the main gate of the camp, attempted to breach the perimeter security," it said.

Following Saturday's attack, Pakistan's Information Minister Mohsin Naqvi had said, "These terrorists are normal terrorists. India is supporting them."

Multiple attacks rocked Pakistan this weekend that spread from Karachi to Balochistan where groups such as Jamaatul Ahrar and Baloch Liberation Army were allegedly involved.

Ayodhya embezzlement row: houses of 8 accused searched

Mayank Kumar
LUCKNOW

The Uttar Pradesh Police on Sunday searched the residences of all eight accused in the alleged embezzlement of Ram Temple donations.

The residences of Ramashankar Yadav, one of the accused and a close aide of Champat Rai, the general secretary of Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust who submitted his resignation on Saturday, were among those searched. The police questioned his family members present on the premises.

The police teams were accompanied by local magistrates. The development came two days after all the accused, who were associated with keeping track of the donations at the temple, were remanded in judicial custody till Monday by a court in Ayodhya.

CM, SP chief lock horns

The war of words between Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath and Samajwadi Party (SP) president Akhilesh Yadav intensified, with Mr. Yadav questioning how the CM who frequently visited Ayodhya was not aware of the wrongdoings and corruption and Mr. Adityanath accusing the previous SP government of "firing upon Ram *bhakts*".

"...How many times has he gone there, and yet he has no news of this. What are the State intelligence agencies and police force doing? This shows complete lack of competence," said Mr. Yadav.

In response, Mr. Adityanath said, "Those who speak of making Ayodhya a religious city should first look at their own history. The SP government that had Ram devotees fired upon, opposed the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, stopped Shri Krishna Janmashtami celebrations, and even banned the Kanwar Yatra is today talking about making Ayodhya a religious city."

'JURISTIC PERSON'
» PAGE 4

DGS stands by lifting of curbs on Indian shippers

S. Vijay Kumar
M. Kalyanaraman
CHENNAI

India's maritime regulator will stand by its June 26 directive removing curbs on Indian seafarers and ship owners operating in the Persian Gulf, despite a fresh surge in regional hostilities.

The Directorate General of Shipping (DGS) clarified its stance as the International Maritime Organization (IMO) halted its evacuation of stranded ships following recent attacks.

Indian officials say that negotiations are under way on restarting the IMO's plan and expect a resolution soon. The Friday notification superseded a June 13 notification that imposed restrictions after the U.S. attacks on *Marivex*, *Settebello*, and *Jalveer* carrying Indian crew and was based on the Indian government's threat assessments and advice from the Ministry of External Affairs.

Some Indian-flagged vessels are waiting for transit permission from Omani authorities and Iran's Persian Gulf Strait Authority. AFP

Some Indian-flagged vessels have asked for transit permission from Omani authorities and Iran's Persian Gulf Strait Authority, and approval is awaited, said an official.

These vessels are LPG carrier *BW Loyalty*, container ships *CMA CGM Manaus* and *CMA CGM Diamond*, and *Volvox* dredger.

While removing restrictions, the DGS has asked Masters of vessels operating in or transiting through the Gulf region, including the Strait of Hormuz and adjoining waters, to maintain heightened security vigilance, closely monitoring navigational warnings and other warnings or instructions received from security agencies. Indian-flagged vessels have been advised to coordinate with the United Kingdom Marine Trade Operations and Maritime Information Cooperation Centre and keep the Indian Navy, missions in respective countries, as well as the DGS updated on transit.

Calling the DGS notification a mature one, Anil Devli, CEO of Indian National Shipowners Association, said every shipowner would be vigilant and proceed only after doing a total risk assessment.

IMO Secretary-General Arsenio Dominguez , said shipowners had to make their own risk assessment before transiting either of the two routes available.

Iran launches new attacks, threatens to halt discussion

DUBAI
Iran on Sunday launched drone and missile attacks targeting Bahrain and Kuwait in response to U.S. air strikes against the Islamic Republic, and threatened a "complete halt" in negotiations to end the war if Washington continues its attacks. » PAGE 14

INBRIEF

No foul play in hiring through outsourcing: J&K CM's adviser

The National Conference (NC)-led Jammu and Kashmir government on Sunday dismissed allegations of malpractices in recruitment, saying the process of outsourcing for jobs was started before it came to power. "We did not start this outsourcing process. We got it in legacy, just like they [the PDP] left us to face the fallout of Article 370 abrogation and division of the erstwhile State," adviser to the Chief Minister, Nasir Aslam Wani, said in Srinagar. Mr. Wani, accompanied by Ministers Sakina Ittoo and Javed Dar, addressed a press conference to counter the allegations of "back-door appointments" levelled by PDP chief Mehbooba Mufti against the NC dispensation. PTI

Youth Cong. stages stir over Maharashtra TET paper leak

Members of the Mumbai Youth Congress on Sunday staged a protest outside Maharashtra School Education Minister Dada Bhuse's official residence, demanding his resignation over the alleged leak of the Teacher Eligibility Test (TET) question paper. Led by Mumbai Youth Congress president Zeenat Shabreen, the protesters raised slogans demanding the Minister's resignation on moral grounds. They alleged that repeated examination paper leaks, including the TET and NEET, has jeopardised the future of lakhs of students and reflected the State government's failure to ensure a fair examination process. PTI

Kerala 'killing zone' back in focus as elephant dies from suspected explosives

Forest Department probing the death of the tuskless male elephant in Malayattoor forests; study attributes 77 wild elephant deaths in the State between 2019 and 2025 to human-induced causes

K.S. Sudhi
KOCHI

Human-induced elephant deaths are back in focus in Kerala after the death of a makhna (tuskless male) elephant, reportedly after chewing on fruit stuffed with explosives, in the Malayattoor forests in Ernakulam district on Saturday.

While forest officials are probing the incident, the death has put the spotlight on continuing elephant killings in the Munnar- Parambikulam- Malayattoor forest sector, one of the major elephant mortality hotspots in Kerala.

This is the second such incident in the region in two months. In May, a tusker died a few days after biting a jackfruit stuffed with explosives – aimed at deterring crop raiding by wildlife – in the Kuttampuzha forest. A tribesperson was arrested in connection with the incident.

In the same month, another elephant was electrocuted in the Neriamangalam Range in Kaverippady.

Officials treating the elephant found injured in the Malayattoor forests in Ernakulam, days before its death. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Crop raiding and habitat intrusions by elephants and retaliation by humans have contributed to elephant deaths in the region, according to a study on elephant mortality in Kerala between 2019-20 and 2024-25 by an expert team led by Pramod G. Krishnan, the former Chief Wildlife Warden, Kerala.

The study had identified electrocution as the leading unnatural cause of death, with incident rates tripling over the six years. "Explosives and poaching persist as threats, with juveniles increasingly falling victim to explosive traps often set for wild boar," noted the report.

The study estimated that 744 wild elephants died between April 2019 and March 2025, with 77 deaths attributed to human-induced causes

The primary elephant mortality zones in the State also included the Wayanad landscape, Nilambur region and Periyar-Ranni-Konni landscape.

The death of a pregnant wild elephant in the Silent Valley forest in 2020, also a suspected case of the animal getting injured after feeding on fruit stuffed with firecrackers, had stirred widespread outrage.

Probe into death

The Forest Department has been asked to probe the latest incident, said Shibu Baby John, State Forest Minister. The government is working on long- and short-term proposals to address the issue, he said.

Ironically, the incident occurred just a day after senior forest officials met to discuss the "Management Effectiveness Evaluation (MEE) for elephant reserves for the 2026-27 cycle." The post-mortem report indicated septicaemia as the cause of death due to injuries.

'TVK-led govt. not addressing power cuts, farmers' woes'

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI

DMK chief M.K. Stalin

DMK president M.K. Stalin on Sunday accused the TVK-led government of not addressing pressing issues such as power outages and protests by farmers, and instead, indulging in diverting people's attention.

Speaking at an event in Chennai, where hundreds of supporters of former AIADMK Minister P. Benjamin joined the DMK, Mr. Stalin said in the last five years, Tamil Nadu had reached new heights in several sectors. "It was the DMK that made Tamil Nadu the second-largest economy in India. We formulated welfare schemes that benefited all sections of society and ensured that they reached the people... But now there has been a change in government. Within one month, Tamil Nadu has reached a situation where it is heading downhill," he said.

According to the DMK chief, industrial establishments are hesitant to invest in the State due to the "deterioration of law and order, increasing sexual abuse cases, narcotic drug menace, and robberies". In many of these crimes, members of the ruling party were the accused, the former CM alleged.

"There are power cuts and protests by farmers. But instead of addressing these issues, the government is in a 'take-diversion mode'. People have now understood the tactics of the new government," he said, adding that the responsibility of protecting Tamil Nadu rests with the DMK. "We cannot allow the Tamil Nadu we nurtured with great care to deteriorate," Mr. Stalin said.

New entrants

Meanwhile, former senior office-bearers and district-level functionaries of the MDMK on Sunday joined the DMK in the presence of Mr. Stalin at Anna Arivalayam, the party headquarters, in Chennai.

Bihar on verge of bankruptcy, says Tejashwi

Amit Bhelari
PATNA

Leader of the Opposition (LoP) in Bihar Legislative Assembly Tejashwi Yadav on Sunday criticised the Samrat Choudhary-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government, claiming it to be "on the verge of bankruptcy". The Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) leader also hit out at the CM over the alleged tender scam.

On May 30, the Bihar General Administration Department had suspended two IAS officers – Yogesh Sagar and Abhilasha Kumari Sharma – and initiated a departmental inquiry against them for allegedly accepting bribes in exchange for awarding tenders to a contractor named Rishu Ranjan Sinha, alias Rishu Shree. All three have since been arrested, and further probe is on.

RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav. ANI

The former Deputy CM said the Treasury lacks the funds to pay employee salaries, student scholarships, pensions, and dues to farmers. "The Bihar government recently withdrew ₹3,660 crore from the Contingency Fund. They keep begging and pleading before the Centre, even as the Centre has expressed its inability to help," Mr. Yadav said.

'Tender scam'

On the issue of the "tender scam", the RJD leader said, "Chats revealed during the investigation show that Rishu Shree enjoyed the protection of those in power." The LoP alleged that the "big fish" were left out of the chargesheet that the police filed in the matter last week.

Tejashwi to blame: BJP

In response, Bihar BJP spokesperson Niraj Kumar alleged that the accused contractor enjoyed patronage during Mr. Yadav's term in office. "All these scams involving Rishu Shree date back to the time when Tejashwi was the Minister of the department concerned," he said.

Meanwhile, Mr. Choudhary on Sunday asserted his government's "zero-tolerance approach" towards crime and said that most criminals have fled the State and taken refuge in neighbouring Nepal.

Eight undocumented Bangladeshis held in Tripura, sent to police custody

Syed Sajjad Ali
AGARATALA

The Tripura police on Sunday said they arrested eight undocumented Bangladeshi men in Agartala. The arrests were carried out by personnel from the Airport police station during two raids in Narsinghgarh, the police said.

Over the past month, there have been multiple incidents of undocumented persons, suspected to be from Bangladesh, being sent across the border on foot, only to be stopped by the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB).

The youth told the police that they did not intend to stay in Tripura but travel to other States

Those who have been nabbed in the latest raids are all aged around 30, said an officer.

A court has remanded the eight persons in police custody, and an investigation will be conducted to ascertain the motive behind their decision to cross over, the officer added.

During questioning, the youth told the police that they did not intend to stay in Tripura but travel to other States, another officer said.

Talks between BSF, BGB

Earlier this month, the Border Security Force (BSF) and the BGB held a four-day conference, where discussions were held on measures to effectively prevent trans-border crimes, including smuggling of narcotics, arms, counterfeit currency, gold and other contraband, as well as illegal border crossings and human trafficking, according to a statement issued by the BSF.

Himachal CM urges natural farming in Bara Bhangal

The Hindu Bureau
CHANDIGARH

On a two-day visit to Bara Bhangal, Himachal Pradesh Chief Minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu on Sunday called for a distinct brand identity for the area's renowned *rajmah* (kidney bean) and urged farmers to adopt natural farming to avail themselves of the MSP.

On Saturday, the Chief Minister had announced a monthly pension of ₹1,500 for all eligible women in the region.

SPOTLIGHT

What lay hidden in Purana Kharve

Situated on the banks of the Mahanadi river in Chhattisgarh's Balodabazar-Bhatapara district, the village houses about 800 residents and sees few outsiders. In the past 20 years, no murder has been reported here, police records show. Then, in the span of five months, a man allegedly killed 8 persons

Shubhomoy Sikdar

In June, Purana Kharve woke up to discover that eight murders had been committed over the past five months, after two decades of no heinous crime in the village. It shocked the 130-140 families that live here by the banks of the Mahanadi river in Chhattisgarh's Balodabazar-Bhatapara district.

The Kasdol police found that Ram Sahay Jaiswal, a 46-year-old shopkeeper, allegedly poisoned eight men. He served all his victims alcohol laced with poison, according to the police. Ram Sahay, now arrested and remanded in judicial custody, planned to kill a few more, the police say.

"For most in the village, he was a frail, meek figure. This helped him avoid suspicion for long. He was a friendly drinking partner for his victims and a socially active family man to boot," says Kasdol Sub-Divisional Police Officer Kaushal Kishore Wasnik of the 5-foot-2-inch tall Ram Sahay. Wasnik says masked behind that disposition were "deep insecurities, an inferiority complex, and a cynical and suspicious nature", compounded by life's circumstances: mounting debt, a failing business, caste dynamics, and the daily insults he endured. "All this fuelled his revenge against the victims," the officer adds.

A shocked village

At Budhru Chowk, Ram Sahay's house is locked and so is the tiny shop in the same compound. The family has moved to Kasdol, a town nearly 7 km from the house, after his arrest on June 22.

Next to it under a peepal tree, a small group of people stand, that includes family members of a few victims, are discussing the infamy Purana Kharve has acquired of late.

Among them is Bagh Ram Sahu, who recalls the events of February 20 when his father Buthalu Ram Sahu – chronologically the second of Ram Sahay's eight victims – had collapsed in front of the shop. By the time Buthalu Ram was taken to a hospital in Kasdol, he was pronounced dead.

He dismissed the motive the police gave that Buthalu Ram had abused Ram Sahay and his caste during a 2023 Assembly election campaigning event. The police said one episode had left Ram Sahay nursing a grudge against many members of the Sahu community, a dominant caste group in the village. But that 2023 argument had a deep psychological impact on Ram Sahay, the police say. The fatal poisoning of Mahetaru Ram Sahu on May 14, the last of the killings, was also purportedly linked to the same episode. Mahetaru's son Divyanshu is surprised that a man who was regular at Ram Sahay's shop could be killed in a cold-blooded manner.

The site along the Mahanadi river where the bodies of the victims were found buried. SHUBHOMOY SIKDAR

The 2023 episode was also linked to the one death that Ram Sahay – otherwise "unapologetic, even boastful" about the eight killings as per the police – regretted. It was the death of Vinod Sahu, who died on March 31, said Wasnik.

"During interrogation, Ram Sahay broke into tears and said he was fond of Vinod, who called him Kaka. His anger was directed towards other members of Vinod's community," Wasnik says. Vinod was a part of the group from the Sahu community that was campaigning during the 2023 election.

As population numbers stand in the village, the Sahus are in the majority, followed by tribals, Satnamis (a Scheduled Caste group), and then Kalars, the community to which Ram Sahay belongs. He believed that due to their small numbers, his community was at a disadvantage and that he could not retort as he would have liked. However, the fourth murder was of Budhram Jaiswal – a man from Ram Sahay's own community – over an alleged property dispute.

Personal motives

The first murder, of Badri Prasad Patel, on February 6, was allegedly over a long-standing grudge over regular bullying and abuse. "It is alleged that Badri Prasad used to hurl abuses at Ram Sahay. He had conveyed to Badri quite a few times that his behaviour hurt him. But each time Badri would dismiss his concerns and mock him more," Wasnik says, adding that this had a deep impact on Ram Sahay but he couldn't take a physically stronger Badri on. "So he decided to kill him. On February 6, he served him half a quarter bottle of whiskey, with poison mixed in it," says Wasnik.

The next two killings, Chhattu Ram Sahu on March 31 and Gajanand Manjhi on April 28, were both allegedly over Ram Sahay's suspicion. He suspected Chhattu Ram had ill-intentions towards his wife, says Assistant Sub-Inspector Sanjeev Rajput.

The police suspect that after the initial killings over revenge, Ram Sahay saw eliminating his lenders as a way to rid himself of the debt. Chaitu was killed on April 29, the seventh of the eight deaths.

'Didn't see it coming'

Omeshwar Jaiswal, one of his nephews, the son of his elder brother Ramcharan Jaiswal, asserts that his uncle had no enmity with anyone. "He used to indulge in religious activities, was regular with prayers, used to play bhajans in the morning," he says, wary of the backlash coming because of the association with his uncle.

Others also say that he was deeply religious. Ram Sahay had constructed a Hanuman temple in the village a few years ago, and had been associated with the Gayatri Pariwar in the past. According to Wasnik, he did all that assuming that he would get some recognition from his fellow villagers but that never came. "This had left him upset and fuelled his revenge further," he says.

Smelling a problem

By the time the last death was reported, people had started linking the deaths to him. This was mainly due to the testimony of 23-year-old Kartik Kumar, the only survivor.

He recalls that a friend, Pramod, had given him a quarter bottle of whiskey on April 14. "As soon as I consumed it, I felt uneasy and fell unconscious. I was taken to a hospital where I vomited and gradually started feeling better," he says, initially not suspecting anything. "Later, as more deaths happened, I asked Pramod where he'd got the bottles from." Ram Sahay's name came up.

Balodabazar-Bhatapara Superintendent of Police recalls how after the arrest Ram Sahay was remorseless, even gleefully proclaiming, "*Main nipta diye hon sab la* (I have finished them all, in Chhattisgarhi)."

Due to its complex nature, the murders have become a case study in circumstantial evidence gathering and criminal psychology for a newly inducted batch of sub-inspectors who visited Kasdol for training on June 24.

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INBRIEF

Revanth, other leaders offer tributes to P.V. Narasimha Rao

Political leaders across party lines paid rich tributes to former Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao on his 105th birth anniversary on Sunday, recalling his contributions to nation-building and economic reforms. Telangana Chief Minister A. Revanth Reddy paid floral tributes to Narasimha Rao's portrait at his residence in Jubilee Hills. Ministers Komatireddy Venkat Reddy and Adluri Laxman Kumar accompanied him.

A.P. issues policy guidelines for airport bars, liquor shops

The Andhra Pradesh government has issued guidelines for the grant of bar and liquor shop licences at airports in the State, excluding Tirupati Airport, based on a Group of Ministers' study of policies of other States. The policy allows airport bars and shops with 24/7 operations and flexible serving points, treating terminals as licensed premises. A graded Retail Excise Tax has been introduced – ₹25 lakh annually for bars at airports handling over 20 lakh passengers, ₹15 lakh for smaller airports, and ₹1 crore for liquor shops.

TTD cancels VIP, Srivani darshan amid huge rush

The Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams (TTD) has cancelled Monday's VIP Break Darshan and withdrawn the same-day online Srivani Darshan quota as part of a crowd-management exercise to cope with the unprecedented influx of pilgrims to Tirumala. The decision comes as the hill shrine witnesses one of the biggest pilgrim rushes in recent years. Over 1.5 lakh devotees were waiting for the darshan on Saturday.

Kerala Minister's support for PMAY logo kicks up a storm

K.M. Shaji's stand is in contrast to that of the previous LDF govt., which had opposed placing the emblem in front of houses built under the scheme, citing concern for the dignity of beneficiaries

S.R. Praveen
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

The stand by the Minister for Local Self-Governments, K.M. Shaji, that the Kerala government was not opposed to the Centre's insistence on placing an emblem in front of houses built under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY) has drawn sharp criticism from the Opposition.

The Minister's stand is in sharp contrast to that of the the previous LDF government, which had opposed the same, citing concern for the dignity of the beneficiaries of the housing scheme.

Mr. Shaji, who met presspersons on Sunday, claimed that reports which said the PMAY emblem had Prime Minister Narendra Modi's photograph were wrong.

> I said there was nothing wrong with displaying the PMAY emblem. Can anyone show me a PMAY emblem carrying the PM's photograph? Houses meant for the poor should not be blocked by creating unnecessary controversies in the name of an emblem
>
> **K.M. SHAJI**
> Kerala Minister for Local Self-governments

"I said there was nothing wrong with displaying the PMAY emblem. Can anyone show me a PMAY emblem carrying the Prime Minister's photograph? Over 1.2 lakh poor families will get new houses under the scheme. Houses meant for the poor should not be blocked by creating unnecessary controversies in the name of an emblem," Mr. Shaji said.

He said that the previous government had withdrawn from the PMAY agreement not because of ideological reasons but due to its inability to provide the State's financial share.

The Leader of the Opposition, Pinarayi Vijayan, on Saturday posted on his Facebook page a video of a speech he had made on the issue during his tenure as the Chief Minister. "When you put up an emblem or logo in front of a house, it conveys a message to those who are living there that the house does not belong to them. The houses belong to the beneficiaries. Our stand is that no display board which questions the self-respect of the beneficiaries should be put up in front of houses. If the Union government's stand is that it will not provide its share of housing schemes if the logo is not put up, we are ready to give up that aid," Mr. Vijayan had said.

The woman's husband assisted in the delivery, allegedly watching YouTube videos of natural childbirth. GETTY IMAGES

T.N. woman dies after botched home birth; her husband booked

The Hindu Bureau
COIMBATORE

A 32-year-old woman from a village in Tiruppur district died of post-partum haemorrhage and related complications on Sunday, after she gave birth to a baby at her home, allegedly assisted by her husband watching YouTube videos on birthing, on June 24.

The police said that following complications, K. Sasikala, of Punjaithalavaipalayam in Uthukuli taluk, was taken to a private hospital in Coimbatore, where she died on Sunday morning.

The woman went into labour in the early hours of June 24. Her husband Kolanthasamy, 35, and mother-in-law assisted in the delivery, allegedly watching videos of natural childbirth on YouTube. She gave birth to a female child, the police said.

The woman developed post-partum haemorrhage as the placenta was not expelled after the childbirth. She was taken to the Government Erode Medical College and Hospital at Perundurai. Thereafter, she was admitted to a private hospital in Coimbatore on June 25 and died without responding to treatment on Sunday, the police said.

On a complaint filed by the Block Medical Officer, Kunnathur, the Uthukuli police registered a case against Kolanthasamy, under Section 105 (punishment for culpable homicide not amounting to murder) of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita.

"The deceased woman's family members did not want to file any complaint. They said the couple had planned for a natural delivery at home," Uthukuli Inspector S. Saravanan said.

Health Department sources said the infant was healthy and stable after the delivery. The couple has a six-year-old daughter, born in an institutional delivery in 2020. The department launched an inquiry and found that the woman was not registered under its maternal and infant care tracking system.

The police and Health Department officials are investigating further.

See children as wealth, says CM Naidu

The Hindu Bureau
VIJAYAWADA

Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu has stressed the need for the joint family system to return, and said the government has been giving incentives to families to have two or more children, treating them as wealth at a time when the fertility rate is dropping.

Launching the national pulse polio immunisation drive by administering oral polio drops to a few children at his residence on Sunday, Mr. Naidu said raising and looking after children should not be limited to women alone, and that, in the past, when there were joint families, everyone became partners in raising the young ones.

Share responsibility

He recalled that grandmothers, grandfathers and other family members played an important role in raising children with values, and said husbands and men must also take the responsibility of raising children, especially where women were working.

Mr. Naidu said the mindset of viewing children as a burden must go, and that the situation was changing around the world, with children seen as wealth, keeping the future in view.

He advised parents to have all the vaccines provided by the government administered to their children as per schedule, to protect them from crippling diseases.

Officials of the Department of Family Welfare told the Chief Minister that the drive was aimed at administering polio drops to about 49.2 lakh children under the age of five during the three-day programme.

Commissioner of Family Welfare and other senior officials of the State Health Department and the National Health Mission were present.

BJP wants politics of development: Nitin Nabin

The Hindu Bureau
HYDERABAD

BJP president Nitin Nabin on Sunday called upon cadres to step up preparations for the upcoming municipal elections in Telangana, and urged them to intensify outreach efforts and position the party as an alternative to the ruling Congress and Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS).

On his visit to Hyderabad on Sunday, Mr. Nabin addressed a booth *pramukh sammelan* in Nampally and also virtually inaugurated nine district offices from Rangareddy rural party office. Addressing the *sammelan*, Mr. Nabin wanted cadres to prepare for a 'new struggle' based on service, sacrifice and commitment rather than power and privilege.

Stressing the importance of organisational strength, he said the BJP's success depended on its booth-level workers and reiterated the party slogan, '*booth jita toh chunav jitaa* (win the booth, win the election)'. Greater Hyderabad and municipal elections are approaching, he said, adding that only the BJP can bring real development. "We want politics of development, not politics of dynasty and corruption," he said.

Launching an attack on Congress and the BRS, Mr. Nabin accused them of corruption, dynasty politics and governance failures. He said the Congress government had failed to fulfil promises made to the youth, particularly on employment, and charged both the Congress and BRS with pursuing vote-bank politics through their relationship with the AIMIM.

Trackside care

A child receives polio drops at the Vijayawada railway station in Andhra Pradesh during the pulse polio campaign on Sunday. G.N. RAO

Shivakumar-Kumaraswamy clash deepens over Bidadi

Sharath S. Srivatsa
BENGALURU

The political battle for dominance in the Vokkaliga community – a major landowning caste in Karnataka's Old Mysore region – has intensified, with the Bidadi Township Project emerging as a flashpoint.

While the initial opposition centred on farmers' concerns, it has now turned into a contest for one-upmanship among Vokkaliga leaders.

Though it was widely expected to become a thorny issue soon after Chief Minister D.K. Shivakumar occupied the top post in the State Congress, his political rival and Union Minister H.D. Kumaraswamy has upped the ante, attracting wider attention within the farming community in south Karnataka. Both leaders are from Bengaluru South district, of which Bidadi is a part.

The political narrative has turned messy, with allegations over Mr. Shivakumar's wealth countered by a poster campaign targeting Mr. Kumaraswamy and his family.

Mr. Kumaraswamy's actions are also being portrayed by the Congress as "smacking of jealousy", with a fellow Vokkaliga unable to stomach the rise of another leader from the community. Mr. Kumaraswamy on Sunday countered this by asking whether a leader should be allowed to "loot" simply because he is a Vokkaliga.

Incidentally, the project was conceived and notified by Mr. Kumaraswamy during his first term in 2006-07, a fact that is now being highlighted by the Congress. Mr. Shivakumar has repeatedly said that he is not ready to "denotify it now and go to jail".

Mr. Kumaraswamy has vehemently denied that it is a clash of Vokkaliga personalities, maintaining that the opposition is only to the project. Party sources argued that the "soul and identity" of the Vokkaliga community was its land, and that the community had lost vast tracts of it as Bengaluru's landscape expanded rapidly over the last three decades.

"Our focus is to protect farmers from real estate interests. It is only incidental that about 80% of farmers in the region are Vokkaligas," a leader claimed.

He also pointed out that the project had been opposed by the Congress during Mr. Kumaraswamy's tenure.

Bengaluru police probe woman's murder; hunt on for her partner

The Hindu Bureau
BENGALURU

The death of a 30-year-old Karnataka woman, initially treated as an unnatural death, has now been confirmed as murder after the post-mortem examination report.

The Jigani police have launched a manhunt for the prime suspect, who has been absconding since the incident.

The body of the victim, identified as Akshata Indaragi, 30, from Ilkal in Bagalkote district, was found in a decomposed state at a rented house near Patalamma Temple in Jigani, on June 17. She had been staying in a house owned by municipal councillor Ramesh.

Neighbours alerted the house owner after noticing a foul smell and finding that the house had remained locked for nearly three days. The police initially registered a case of unnatural death.

CCTV footage later revealed that Akshata's live-in partner, identified as Nanne Saab, had left the house and gone missing after the incident.

The house owner subsequently lodged a complaint expressing suspicion over her death.

The post-mortem report confirmed that Akshata had been strangled and assaulted before being murdered, prompting the police to register a murder case.

During the investigation, the police found that Saab was already married. They also discovered that Akshata had earlier been married to Krishna Indargi and had two children from that marriage. According to investigators, Akshata left her husband and children around six months ago after developing a relationship with Saab while working in the sari-weaving industry in Ilkal.

User development fees at Bhogapuram airport may be among highest in country

K. Srinivasa Rao
VIZIANAGARAM

Flying from the upcoming Bhogapuram International Airport of Andhra Pradesh, to be operated by GMR Airports Infrastructure Ltd., is likely to become more expensive, with passengers required to pay one of the highest User Development Fees (UDF) among major airports in the country. The airport will also levy UDF on arriving passengers, unlike several other airports where no such charge is collected.

According to representatives of air travellers' associations, Visakhapatnam airport – which will cease operations once the Bhogapuram airport becomes functional – currently does not levy any UDF. Passengers will therefore have to bear not only higher travel costs to reach Bhogapuram in Vizianagaram district but also the additional UDF on both departure and arrival. The Airports Economic Regulatory Authority of India (AERA) has approved a UDF of ₹835 for departing domestic passengers and ₹355 for arriving domestic passengers at the airport.

A view of the under-construction airport at Bhogapuram. FILE PHOTO

For international travellers, the fee has been fixed at ₹1,255 for departures and ₹545 for arrivals. GMR-operated Rajiv Gandhi International Airport in Hyderabad charges ₹750 as UDF for departing domestic passengers and ₹1,500 for departing international passengers, but does not levy any UDF on arriving passengers. Asked about the wide variation in UDF, a GMR spokesperson said that the charges were fixed in accordance with AERA's recommendations.

Centre seeks to ease licensing process for medical devices

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI

The draft notification has been placed in the public domain.

The Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare has proposed amendments to the Medical Devices Rules, 2017, to shorten the timelines for the grant of manufacturing licences for medical devices across different risk categories.

The initiative is aimed at enhancing the ease of doing business, improving regulatory efficiency, and facilitating the timely availability of quality medical devices in the country, the Health Ministry said on Sunday. The draft notification published in the Gazette, seeks to simplify and expedite the licensing process while ensuring continued compliance with quality, safety, and performance requirements, the Ministry said.

Under the Medical Devices Rules, 2017, medical devices are classified into four risk-based categories – Class A, Class B, Class C and Class D – with Class D comprising the highest-risk devices. The Rules prescribe statutory timelines for processing applications for manufacturing licences for each category.

The draft amendments also introduce clearly defined timelines for each stage of the licensing process, including scrutiny of applications, audit by notified bodies, verification of compliance, and issuance of licences.

This is expected to bring greater transparency, predictability and efficiency to the regulatory framework, benefiting both the medical device industry and patients through faster access to quality-assured medical devices, the Ministry said.

The draft notification has been placed in the public domain for comments and suggestions from all stakeholders. The notification is available in the official gazette and on the website of the Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation.

Stakeholders are invited to submit their comments within the prescribed period.

CJP stir: Wangchuk goes on fast at Jantar Mantar

The activist starts strike calling for Dharmendra Pradhan's resignation; says he cannot not remain silent when young people raised concerns over the education system; AISA joins hunger strike

Ashna Butani
NEW DELHI

Activist Sonam Wangchuk having a word with CJP founder Abhijit Dipke at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi on Sunday, demanding the resignation of Dharmendra Pradhan. SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

Environmentalist and educator Sonam Wangchuk began a hunger strike on Sunday afternoon at the Jantar Mantar here, where the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) has been protesting since June 20, demanding the resignation of Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan for multiple irregularities in the examination system.

Prior to the hunger strike, CJP founder Abhijeet Dipke had said on social media platform X that he had visited Rajghat with Mr. Wangchuk to pay tribute to Mahatma Gandhi. Soon after that, Mr. Wangchuk began his hunger strike, seeking justice for students and calling for the Minister's resignation.

'Water cut off'

The Delhi Police had cut off the water and sanitation facilities at Jantar Mantar after Mr. Wangchuk announced his strike, Mr. Dipke alleged.

The police termed the allegation "falsehoods and misinformation". The Deputy Commissioner of Police, New Delhi said online that the Delhi Police, being a law enforcement agency, had no role to play in providing these facilities.

Explaining his decision to join the protest, Mr. Wangchuk said education had been close to his heart for the last 40 years and that he could not remain silent when young people raised concerns over the education system.

"I have been forced to sit here, I am not doing this happily. I am sitting on a fast in support of both issues. Many people ask me, you were doing a movement in Ladakh, why are you with CJP now. Education, which is the issue here, has been close to my heart for the last 40 years, since I was a student," he said. Many others, including farm leaders, joined the protest on Sunday. At least six student activists have joined Mr. Wangchuk in the hunger strike, demanding Mr. Pradhan's resignation.

"I am not alone. I have been told that some youth are also going on hunger strike. Wherever you are, I salute you," he said. The All India Students' Association (AISA), which previously expressed solidarity with the CJP's protest, on Sunday said six students associated with the AISA have decided to go on the hunger strike, too.

"Students have called for the strike in complete solidarity with the call by Sonam Wangchuk, and will fight shoulder to shoulder in the struggle for Dharmendra Pradhan's resignation, repeal of NEP (National Education Policy) 2020, and scrapping of the National Testing Agency," the AISA said in a statement.

(With PTI inputs)

Indian diplomats hold talks with officials of Chinese news agency

Press Trust of India
BEIJING

Shweta Singh with Wang Jianxin at *Xinhua* News Agency, in Beijing, China. PTI

Officials of the Indian Embassy in Beijing have met representatives of China's state-run Xinhua news agency amid ongoing efforts between the two countries to normalise relations.

The meeting took place between Shweta Singh, Minister of the Embassy, and Wang Jianxin, Deputy Director-General of the Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Department of Xinhua.

"On 24 June 2026, Embassy officials met representatives of Xinhua News Agency at its headquarters in Beijing and exchanged views on issues of mutual interest," the Indian Embassy said in a post on X, along with a photo on Sunday, without providing details.

Enhancing engagement

Indian officials described the meeting as part of efforts to enhance engagement with Chinese media.

Both countries are currently in the process of normalising relations post the Eastern Ladakh conflict in 2020, which had frozen their ties.

Currently, both countries have resumed Kailash-Manasarovar Yatra, visas and flights. China, for its part, has been calling for restoration of visas for its journalists.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, in his meeting with National Security Adviser Ajit Doval last week in New Delhi, called for both countries to promote exchanges in various fields, including media.

Mr. Wang was in New Delhi to attend the BRICS NSA meeting.

In April 2023, China froze the visas of two Beijing-based Indian journalists while they were on leave in India, alleging that Chinese scribes were not receiving visas.

Later, Beijing also declined to renew the visa for one more Indian journalist while permitting the PTI bureau to continue.

Recently, China has given a journalist visa to *The Hindu* Correspondent to work from Beijing.

Curbs relaxed on diesel sale to hospitals in Bengal: CM

Press Trust of India
KOLKATA

The West Bengal government has relaxed restrictions on sale of diesel in containers and barrels for several essential sectors, including agriculture, healthcare and tea industry, after concerns that curbs were affecting daily operations and emergency services, Chief Minister Suvendu Adhikari said on Sunday.

In a post on X, Mr. Adhikari said his government is committed to ensuring that daily lives of people and the State's economy are not disrupted, and the government intervened to protect public interest.

Ram Temple graft case concerns assets of a 'juristic person'

NEWS ANALYSIS

Krishnadas Rajagopal
NEW DELHI

The embezzlement case is based on the alleged misappropriation of devotees' donations at the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya. ANI

The Ram Temple embezzlement case raises serious allegations of misappropriation of cash and valuables donated by devotees as an "expression of piety" to a Hindu deity, uniquely considered a 'juristic person' who is a minor in law.

Series of judicial decisions, right from the days of the Privy Council to Supreme Court's judgments in the Sree Padmanabhaswamy Temple and the Ramjanmabhoomi Temple cases, hold the deity as a legal entity capable of holding property.

The Padmanabhaswamy Temple case saw the Supreme Court hold that donations given by worshippers belong strictly to the deity. By detailing Maharaja Marthanda Varma's act of dedication of his kingdom to the deity, the 2020 judgment provided an insight into the acceptance of the deity as a separate entity as far back as in the 18th century.

The importance of the act of donating to a deity as an expression of Hindu piety was discussed by the Privy Council in *Vidya Varuthi Thirtha Swamigal v. Balusami Ayyar and Others*, a case law which dates back to 1921. "Hindu piety finds expression in gifts to idols and images consecrated and installed in temples," the judgment said.

It noted that these gifts or donations by devotees were made to the deities *eo nomine* (in the name of the deity itself), providing proof that a deity was a juristic entity vested with the capacity of receiving gifts and holding property.

The courts have, however, recognised that a dedicated property vests in the idol only in an "ideal sense". The physical possession and management of that property must be taken over by a "human agency". But this person or group of individuals have the status of a mere 'manager'. The ownership of a dedicated property vests entirely with the deity.

This legal principle was reinforced by Justice B. K. Mukherjea in his lead judgment in *Angurbala Mullick versus Debabrata Mullick* in 1951. "In a Hindu religious endowment, the entire ownership of the dedicated property is transferred to the deity or the institution itself as a juristic person, and the shebait or mahant is a mere manager."

Position of a minor

The Supreme Court in *Bishwanath and Others v. Sri Thakur Radhaballabhji* had declared a deity to be in the legal position of and requiring the protection afforded to a 'minor'. "An idol is in the position of a minor. When a person representing it leaves it in the lurch, a person interested in the worship of the idol can certainly be clothed with an ad hoc power of representation to protect its interest," the court held in the 1967 judgment.

The Constitution Bench in the Ram Janmabhumi Temple case described a Hindu idol as the "material embodiment of a testator's pious purpose".

Even the Income Tax law recognises a deity as a legal person and considers it a material manifestation of the devotee's belief and prayers. The 1969 case law of *Yogendra Nath Naskar versus Commissioner Of Income-Tax, Calcutta*, has termed a Hindu deity as an 'individual' to be treated as a unit of assessment under the Income Tax Act.

"Neither God nor any supernatural being could be a person in law. But so far as the deity stands as the representative and symbol of the particular purpose which is indicated by the donor, it can figure as a legal person and in that capacity alone the dedicated property vests in it," the top court had held.

Meghalaya U-23 women's team coach banned for life

The Hindu Bureau
GUWAHATI

The Meghalaya Cricket Association (MCA) has issued a lifetime ban on the coach and manager of the State's Under-23 women's cricket team after the confirmation of a sexual harassment case against them. MCA president and Rajya Sabha member James P.K. Sangma said the association also suspended its honorary secretary Rayonald Kharkamni for allegedly suppressing the complaints. The Meghalaya State Commission for Women Chairperson slammed the MCA for failing to initiate an inquiry on time or protect the cricketers.

Justice Narasimha to be part of SC Collegium as Justice Maheshwari retires

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI

The senior judge will officially be a part of the SC Collegium until he retires on May 2, 2028

Justice P.S. Narasimha is set to become a member of the Supreme Court Collegium following Justice J.K. Maheshwari's retirement on Sunday.

Being the fifth seniormost judge, Justice Narasimha will officially be a part of the Collegium until he retires on May 2, 2028.

Justice Maheshwari who retired on Sunday, demitted office after nearly five years.

The Collegium will now comprise Chief Justice Surya Kant, Justice Vikram Nath, Justice B. V. Nagarathna, Justice M. M. Sundresh, and Justice P. S. Narasimha.

Under the Collegium system, which came into existence in 1993 following a Supreme Court judgment, the five top judges of the apex court recommend the appointment, transfer, and elevation of judges to the Supreme Court and the 25 High Courts.

The government can return the recommendation to the Collegium under this system. While it usually accepts the recommendation if it is reiterated by the Collegium, there have been cases when the government returned the file or did not respond to the recommendation.

Born on May 3, 1963, in Hyderabad, Justice Narasimha graduated with triple majors in economics, political science and public administration from the Nizam College, Hyderabad, and pursued law at the Campus Law Centre, Delhi University, in 1988.

Enrolling as an advocate in the same year, he practised in the high court, civil courts and tribunals in Hyderabad, before shifting his counsel practice to the Supreme Court.

Public law cases

He appeared in a large number of cases before the Supreme Court, including the Constitution Benches.

During this period of time, he was appointed as commission counsel for the Justice Chinnappa Reddy Commission. He was also a member of the Supreme Court Legal Aid Committee.

He was designated as a senior advocate by the full court of the Supreme Court in 2008.

After 15 years, over 250 CRPF officers get maiden promotion

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI

More than 250 officers of the country's largest paramilitary Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) finally received their first career promotion after a wait of 15 years, officials said on Sunday.

Their much-delayed elevation came about after prolonged litigation and conditional resolution of pending service issues related to seniority and vacancies.

On June 26, the CRPF headquarters issued orders promoting 263 Assistant Commandant-rank (AC) officers to Deputy Commandant (DC). The AC rank is the entry-level officer post in the Central forces.

"The development is significant because it will act as a morale booster for the officers who waited 14 to 15 years for their first promotion, which should ideally have come in five years," a senior CRPF officer said.

SC order

A Supreme Court order issued on April 16 clarified the position in this context.

The CRPF headquarters followed up with the Union Home Ministry, leading to the issuance of the much-delayed order, the officer said.

He said the newly promoted officers would, however, continue to serve in their current positions because their posting orders could not be issued immediately due to "operational and administrative constraints".

A second officer said these orders would further impact lower-rank personnel, as promotions to the AC rank would now occur from the Inspector rank, creating a ripple effect for other subordinate ranks.

Indian Army contingent to participate in Seychelles' 50th National Day event

Saurabh Trivedi
NEW DELHI

The contingent of 32 personnel from the Assam Regiment is led by Captain Aryan H. Deolekar. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

An Indian Army marching contingent will participate in the 50th National Day celebrations of the Seychelles on Monday, marking the golden jubilee of the island nation's Independence.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will attend the event as the guest of honour, underscoring the close bilateral ties between the two countries.

The Army said the contingent of 32 personnel from the Assam Regiment will be led by Captain Aryan H. Deolekar.

An Indian Navy marching contingent, accompanied by a military band, will take part in the ceremonial parade, reflecting the strong and enduring defence partnership between India and the Seychelles.

The two nations share long-standing historical ties that have grown into a robust strategic partnership spanning defence cooperation, development assistance, maritime security, culture, and trade, it added.

The participation of Indian armed forces personnel in the celebrations is seen as a symbol of mutual trust, military camaraderie, and the shared commitment of both countries to deepen bilateral relations. Such ceremonial engagements also reinforce defence cooperation and highlight India's role as a reliable partner in promoting peace and security in the Indian Ocean region.

Officials said India's participation in the Seychelles' golden jubilee celebrations reaffirmed the special partnership between the two countries and reflected the expanding scope of bilateral engagement.

Mamata loyalists file complaint over the 'misuse' of party name

Mamata faction leader tells police that the rebels' meeting was an exercise aimed at creating confusion and damaging the reputation and credibility of the party; the group seeks permission to observe a Martyrs' Day event in Kolkata on July 21

Shiv Sahay Singh
KOLKATA

Trinamool Congress leaders loyal to Mamata Banerjee have filed a police complaint against party rebels led by Ritabrata Banerjee, the Leader of Opposition in the West Bengal Assembly, alleging misuse of the party name and symbol.

The faction has written to the Commissioner of Police, Kolkata, seeking permission to observe Shahid Divas (Martyrs' Day) on July 21 in front of Victoria House in the city's Esplanade area. While the police have not given permission, the group led by Mr. Ritabrata has plans to organise a similar programme.

On behalf of the leaders backing Ms. Banerjee, Trinamool MP Dola Sen filed a complaint with the Kalighat and Newtown police stations in Kolkata. This grouping of leaders is also called the Kalighat camp of the Trinamool.

Kunal Ghosh and Dola Sen of the Mamata faction at the proposed venue for the party's Martyrs' Day rally in Kolkata, on Sunday. ANI

In the complaint letter sent to the officer in-charge of the Kalighat police station, Ms. Sen, one of the national joint secretaries of the Trinamool, alleged that the rebel MLAs Javed Khan and Sandipan Saha had called all the Trinamool councillors from Kolkata for a meeting on Saturday afternoon, claiming to be the general secretaries of the party.

Ms. Sen alleged that such an exercise was aimed at creating confusion among party workers, damaging the reputation and credibility of the party, misleading members into attending an unauthorised meeting and facilitating unlawful activities by misusing the party name.

On June 22, the Trinamool rebels, led by Mr. Ritabrata, had organised a special session of the party at a hotel in Kolkata and set up a national working committee in the presence of several MLAs and former legislators. The rebels removed Mamata Banerjee and Abhishek Banerjee as chairperson and national general secretary of the party.

Both the factions – the Kalighat camp and the rebels – have written to the Election Commission informing it about the newly formed working committee and other organisational changes in the party.

Ritabrata's reaction

Commenting on the police complaint, Mr. Ritabrata said, "Anyone can file a complaint. There are laws and the Election Commission in the country. Let's trust in those laws and the Election Commission."

After the Trinamool's defeat in the West Bengal election, several of its MPs and MLAs have rebelled against the leadership. Nearly 65 of the 80 MLAs are supporting a camp led by Mr. Ritabrata.

Regarding the Martyrs' Day event, Ms. Sen told presspersons that Ms. Banerjee would address Trinamool workers on July 21, as she had been doing in the past.

The former Chief Minister has told her close confidants that even if five party workers are present, she will address the gathering. On Sunday, Ms. Sen and party MLA Kunal Ghosh reached the proposed site and took measurements for the construction of a stage.

Martyrs' Day has been the biggest organisational events of the Trinamool Congress.

Defections part of larger conspiracy; rebel MPs must be disqualified: Uddhav

Press Trust of India
PARBHANI

Shiv Sena (UBT) chief Uddhav Thackeray on Sunday demanded the immediate disqualification of the six party MPs who recently defected to the Eknath Shinde-led camp, alleging that their switch was part of a larger political conspiracy.

The Lok Sabha Speaker must uphold the rule of law regarding the defections, the former Maharashtra Chief Minister said at a rally in Parbhani, alleging that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s central leadership was systematically "clipping the wings" of its own State leaders.

The MPs loyal to the Shiv Sena (UBT) had submitted a formal representation to Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla, seeking an opportunity to present their side, Mr. Thackeray said, noting that party MP Arvind Sawant had cut short an official visit to Kargil after the Speaker had advanced the date of the hearing. "If there is a rule of law in this country, these six MPs should be disqualified. I still believe in the Lok Sabha Speaker because if he does not follow the law, he cannot ask others to follow it. We respect his authority, not his wishes," the Shiv Sena (UBT) leader said.

Uddhav Thackeray

Earlier this week, six rebel Lok Sabha members of the Shiv Sena (UBT) joined the ruling Shiv Sena led by Deputy Chief Minister Eknath Shinde. They had won against candidates of the BJP and Shiv Sena in the 2024 Lok Sabha Election. The Shiv Sena (UBT) won nine Lok Sabha seats in Maharashtra in 2024.

Mr. Thackeray has undertaken a tour of the constituencies represented by the rebel MPs. Sanjay Jadhav, one of the rebel lawmakers, is from Parbhani.

The Sena (UBT) chief alleged that the defections were part of a "bigger political game" he termed "Operation Devendra", aimed at sidelining Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis, just as the party had done to other leaders in the past.

Attacking the BJP over the Ram Temple donation issue, Mr. Thackeray accused the saffron party of exploiting the temple for political gain, labelling it the "Babur Janata Party". "Babur demolished the Ram Mandir. A 'Babur Janata Party' has now come to loot the newly constructed temple. What is the difference between them?" he said.

Congress kicks off units' revamp with new appointments

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The appointment of Virudhunagar Lok Sabha member B. Manickam Tagore as the new Tamil Nadu Pradesh Congress Committee (PCC) president on Saturday was part of a series of organisational changes that the Congress high command was expected to undertake in the immediate future.

B. Manickam Tagore

Besides Tamil Nadu, Kerala will get a new PCC chief as the incumbent, Sunny Joseph, has become a Minister in the State government.

A prominent Scheduled Caste leader and eight-term Lok Sabha member, Kodikunnil Suresh, who has served as a working president of the Kerala PCC twice, is seen as the front-runner for the post.

In the southern States, the Congress no longer has a prominent Scheduled Caste face as a PCC chief following the change of leadership in Tamil Nadu.

Changes in Punjab

In Punjab, where the Assembly election is scheduled early next year, the party has appointed three observers to examine the leadership issue, as factionalism has often spilled into the open.

There is also a buzz about a change in leadership in States, including Bihar and Rajasthan, though there is no official word on the matters. All India Congress Committee (AICC) leaders in charge of several States are likely to be changed.

Avinash Pande, the AICC in-charge for Uttar Pradesh, where the Assembly election is scheduled early next year, took to social media to announce that his tenure in the State ended on Saturday.

The Maharashtra AICC in-charge, Ramesh Chennithala, is now Kerala's Home Minister and, therefore, a new in-charge has to be appointed.

Jitender Singh has already resigned as the AICC in-charge of Assam after the party faced its worst defeat in the recent Assembly election. Among the frontal organisations, the Congress Seva Dal has got a new chief, with former Youth Congress president Srinivas B.V. being appointed its chief organiser.

VB-G RAM G will push workers to starvation: Congress

Sobhana K. Nair
NEW DELHI

The Congress said on Sunday that even some BJP-governed States had raised concerns over the financing scheme of the new Viksit Bharat – Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) Act (VB-G RAM G), which the "vengeful and petty" Modi government bulldozed through Parliament without consultations.

The new scheme requires a majority of the States to bear 40% of the total expenditure.

After a report in *The Hindu* revealed that several State governments, including some governed by the BJP, had raised objections with respect to the new Act, Congress general secretary (communications) Jairam Ramesh, in a post on X, said Union Rural Development Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan's home State of Madhya Pradesh was among those that had raised concerns.

Mr. Ramesh said that the Centre had not carried out any consultations before replacing the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) with the VB-G RAM G Act.

"The Modi government, vengeful and petty as ever, bulldozed the repeal of MGNREGA through Parliament without any thorough consultation with the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Rural Development, State governments, or other relevant stakeholders," he said.

> MGNREGA guaranteed right to work derived from the Constitution. VB-G RAM G will guarantee only centralisation and further financial stress on the States
>
> **JAIRAM RAMESH**
> Congress leader

Mr. Ramesh said concerns were being raised by several States over the design of the new scheme, which is scheduled to be launched on July 1. *The Hindu* reported on Sunday that at least three States, two of them with BJP-led governments – Bihar and Madhya Pradesh – raised concerns over the proposed shift of financial burden on State governments under the new rural employment programme. The new scheme requires a majority of the States to bear 40% of the total expenditure, in contrast to the MGNREGA, under which the Centre bore 100% of the wage bill and the States had to pay only a part of the material bill, which accounted for only 10% of the total budget.

'Voicing concerns'

"The Rural Development Minister's own home State is voicing concerns around the Modi government's new pet project," Mr. Ramesh pointed out.

Mr. Chouhan had been Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister for over 16 years.

Contrasting the new employment programme with the MGNREGA, the Congress leader said, "MGNREGA guaranteed right to work derived from the Constitution. VB G RAM G will guarantee only centralisation and further financial stress on States."

'A conspiracy'

Congress general secretary Randeep Surjewala, sharing a copy of *The Hindu*'s report on the social media platform X, said replacing the MGNREGA with the VB-G RAM G was a "calculated conspiracy to push rural India and workers toward starvation". "The question is straightforward: If even the 'double-engine' governments can't shoulder this 40% cost burden, how will poor workers get employment on the ground?" he said,

Govt. launches portal for auditing of rural schemes

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Ahead of the implementation of the Viksit Bharat – Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) from July 1, Union Rural Development Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan launched a "Rural Internal Audit Portal" during the Rashtriya Gramin Vikas Sammelan here on Sunday.

The Ministry said the AI-enabled portal marked a significant step towards enhancing transparency, accountability, and technology-driven governance. The portal is a unified digital platform for end-to-end management of internal audits covering both risk-based and compliance audits.

The Ministry said the portal had transformed internal audit from a fragmented, paper-intensive, and largely manual exercise into a transparent, technology-enabled, and data-driven management system.

Speaking at the event, Mr. Chouhan said when he was the Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh, he had noticed irregularities in implementing the erstwhile MGNREGA in many places. He said there were shortcomings such as use of machines for work instead of labourers, errors in muster rolls, and incorrect attendance that led to significant misappropriation of funds.

"We are making certain changes such as increasing the working days of labourers from 100 to 125. No needy labourer will be left without work," he said.

The Union Minister said the revamped scheme would have improved implementation.

All Sikh MLAs, Ministers to appear before Akal Takht on anti-sacrilege law: Mann

Press Trust of India
CHANDIGARH

All Sikh MLAs and Cabinet Ministers from Punjab will appear before the Akal Takht on Monday regarding the anti-sacrilege law, Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann said on Sunday.

His statement came after a closed-door meeting with Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) MLAs in Amritsar to decide the course of action in view of the summonses issued by the Akal Takht, the highest temporal seat of Sikhs.

The State is due for election next year.

Following the meeting, Mr. Mann held a press conference in Amritsar, where he was flanked by AAP national convener Arvind Kejriwal, who was on a three-day visit to the State.

Mr. Mann shared details regarding the party's Sikh MLAs and Ministers who will appear before the Akal Takht while Mr. Kejriwal restricted himself to speaking about building a "grand Luv-Kush temple" near Bhagwan Valmiki Temple in Amritsar.

Akal Takht Jathedar Giani Kuldip Singh Gargajj, on June 15, had summoned all Sikh MLAs, regardless of party affiliations, on June 29 regarding the anti-sacrilege law. Non-Sikh Ministers have been asked to submit their views in writing on the matter.

Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann (centre) addressing a public gathering at Qadian in Gurdaspur district on Sunday. X/@AAPPUNJAB

Objection to law

The Akal Takht and the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) had raised objections to the Jaagat Jot Sri Guru Granth Sahib Satkar (Amendment) Act, 2026, saying it was enacted without consulting the Sikh *panth* (community).

The Akal Takht had earlier asked the State government to remove provisions from the anti-sacrilege Act that are "against the Guru Granth Sahib, the *Khalsa panth* and the sentiments of the *Sangat* (Sikh community)". Sikh MLAs from other parties have already confirmed that they would appear before the Akal Takht.

Replying to a question whether he will appear before the Akal Takht, the Chief Minister said he has not been summoned.

"Our MLAs and Ministers will present the government side. Punjab Assembly Speaker (Kultar Singh Sandhwan) will also go. Whatever suggestions come from the Akal Takht or SGPC, we will discuss the same," the Chief Minister said.

Replying to a question that the Opposition parties are accusing him of challenging the authority of the Akal Takht, Mr. Mann said, "I could not even think of doing it."

Humayun Kabir booked for making 'threatening remarks'

Senjuti Sengupta
KOLKATA

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) unit in Murshidabad has lodged a first information report against the chairperson of the Aam Janata Unnayan Party (AJUP), Humayun Kabir, for allegedly issuing murder threats to a religious community during a rally on Friday.

According to the officials, the Naoda MLA sparked a controversy with his remarks at a rally in the Rejinagar constituency.

"The FIR was lodged by the BJP's youth wing and Ram Sita Sewa Mandir. The FIR was based on a viral video from the rally in which Mr. Kabir was allegedly heard saying [he would] mobilise a religious community against another if they cross the line," said an official from the Behrampur police station.

Mr. Kabir reportedly issued a warning targeting West Bengal Chief Minister Suvendu Adhikari, demanding an immediate end to the BJP's political dominance in Murshidabad district.

Another FIR

The development comes only a day after another BJP leader in English Bazaar of Malda lodged another first information report against the Aam Janata Unnayan Party leader for allegedly inciting religious communities against each other.

Electric cooking to be promoted in T.N.

S. Vijay Kumar
CHENNAI

The Tamil Nadu Power Distribution Corporation Limited (TNPDCL) will accelerate the adoption of electric cooking (e-cooking) in commercial and institutional establishments such as restaurants, hotels, club kitchens and industrial canteens.

Acting on a request by the Government of India, the TNPDCL issued an order to all distribution companies under its control to prioritise applications seeking new service connection or loan enhancement for e-cooking, official sources said on Sunday.

TNPDCL's Director (Distribution) instructed Chief Engineers (Distribution Region) across the State to fast-track new electricity connection/load enhancement requests from commercial and institutional establishments, and carry out capacity upgrades on priority.

INBRIEF

Arunachal Pradesh landslide dams river; Assam on alert

A massive landslide caused by heavy rainfall blocked the flow of the Siji River in Arunachal Pradesh's Lower Siang district on Sunday, endangering lives and infrastructure downstream. District officials said rainfall-induced water accumulation had increased the possibility of the dam giving way and causing a flash flood. The district authorities have alerted residents of Likabali town and villages along the Siji river, which becomes the Gai river in Assam. People have been advised to stay away from riverbanks, avoid unnecessary movement near the river, evacuate low-lying and flood-prone areas if instructed by the authorities.

DGCA begins probe after propeller hits trainee pilot

Aviation watchdog Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) is probing the incident of a trainee pilot sustaining injuries after being hit by a running propeller of a trainer aircraft at the Kanpur airport on Friday. The incident occurred after the trainee pilot deboarded the twin-engine Tecnam P2006T aircraft VT-NBV, and the instructor concerned has been derostered from flying training duties pending investigation, the DGCA said in a statement on Sunday. The DGCA also said it has issued directions that the aircraft concerned should not be utilised pending investigation. The trainee pilot is admitted to a hospital in Kanpur. PTI

From seas to skies, India is becoming self-reliant: Modi

PM highlights indigenously built missile systems, says June was a 'landmark month' for India's defence sector; he thanks people for responding to his call for austerity amid the West Asia crisis

Saurabh Trivedi
NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday hailed India's growing self-reliance in defence manufacturing, pointing to the maiden flight of the first made-in-India C-295 transport aircraft and the successful test of the indigenous Long-Range Land-Attack Cruise Missile (LRLACM). He also thanked citizens for supporting his appeal for austerity amid the West Asia crisis.

Addressing the nation in his monthly radio programme *Mann Ki Baat*, Mr. Modi said June had been a "landmark month" for India's aviation and defence sectors.

> As many as 40 such aircraft [C-295] are being built right here in India and this is giving new strength to MSMEs and the aerospace sector ... From the seas to the skies, our India is becoming increasingly secure and self-reliant
>
> **NARENDRA MODI**
> Prime Minister

'Indigenous' industry

Referring to the C-295 programme, he said 40 aircraft are being manufactured in India, giving a major boost to the country's MSMEs and aerospace industry while creating employment opportunities.

The first C-295 transport aircraft manufactured in India completed its maiden flight on June 10. The Indian Air Force is procuring 56 aircraft under a ₹21,935-crore deal, with 40 being manufactured by Tata Advanced Systems Limited in partnership with Airbus at a facility in Gujarat's Vadodara.

The Prime Minister cited the successful flight-test of the indigenous LRLACM conducted by the Defence Research and Development Organisation earlier this month.

"From the seas to the skies, our India is becoming increasingly secure and self-reliant," he said, adding that all major subsystems of the missile had been indigenously developed.

Mr. Modi referred to the recent induction of *INS Dunagiri*, *INS Shanshak*, and *INS Agrya* into the Indian Navy, saying the warships were designed and built entirely in India.

West Asia conflict

The Prime Minister thanked citizens for responding positively to his appeal for conserving resources amid the conflict in West Asia. He said many people had begun carpooling, using public transport, postponing foreign travel and increasing the use of natural fertilizers. He noted that several families had decided to recycle old gold instead of buying new jewellery for weddings.

"I am grateful to every citizen of the country; not only have they supported my appeal, they are also actively cooperating in every way," he said.

The PM praised Nagaland's 'Baby League' football initiative for children aged 5 to 12

Highlighting environmental conservation, Mr. Modi praised the efforts of biologist Purnima Devi Barman in changing public perceptions about Assam's *hargila* bird (greater adjutant) and lauded community initiatives in Meghalaya to preserve the State's living root bridges, for which India has sought UNESCO World Heritage status.

The Prime Minister commended women in Madhya Pradesh's Rajgarh district for converting plastic waste into eco-bricks used for beautifying public spaces and praised Nagaland's 'Baby League' football initiative for children aged five to 12.

For Ganesh Chaturthi, Mr. Modi urged people to purchase idols crafted by Indian artisans, calling on buyers to check the both the material used and the country of manufacture before making their purchase.

Sanskrit University introduces B.Tech. in AI and data science

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

In the first instance of a Sanskrit university in India entering engineering education, the Central Sanskrit University has introduced a B.Tech. programme in artificial Intelligence and data science from 2026-27.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in his *Mann ki Baat* address on Sunday, said this was a significant effort to prepare the youth for new technology while keeping them rooted in their heritage.

The B.Tech. programme, on lines of the National Education Policy, 2020, is designed to transform Sanskrit institutions into multi-disciplinary centres of learning. The programme is AICTE-approved and has a total sanctioned intake of 66 seats: 60 regular seats and six supernumerary ones.

AI tools in Sanskrit

The programme is expected to support development of AI-enabled tools for Sanskrit and Indian languages, strengthen language technologies, enable digitisation and preservation of classical texts and promote inter-disciplinary research linking AI with Indian Knowledge Systems.

"This marks a crucial step towards integrating modern technology with India's traditional knowledge. It will facilitate the development of new AI tools for Indian languages and accelerate the digitisation and preservation of our ancient texts and manuscripts," the Prime Minister said.

Traditional domains

The programme will also provide opportunities to apply modern computational techniques to traditional domains such as Ayurveda, Yoga, Jyotisha, Nyaya, and other classical disciplines.

The technical components of the programme include artificial intelligence, machine learning, data science, python programming, statistics, cloud computing, data analytics and deep learning, an official spokesperson of the Education Ministry said.

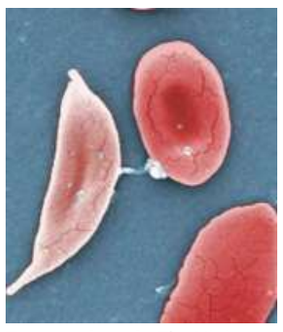
The language and knowledge system components include natural language processing, computational linguistics, machine translation, speech recognition, conversational AI, language technologies, knowledge representation and optical character recognition (OCR) for ancient manuscripts.

New Anaemia Mukt Bharat norms seek early action

Bindu Shajan Perappadan
NEW DELHI

The Union Health Ministry is set to launch revised operational guidelines for the Anaemia Mukt Bharat Abhiyaan (AMB) on Monday, expanding the national programme's strategy to include a new beneficiary group, greater emphasis on dietary interventions, and digital tracking of beneficiaries.

The guidelines, to be released by Union Health Minister J.P. Nadda during the 16th meeting of the Central Council of Health and Family Welfare at Vigyan Bhawan in Delhi, mark the transition of the programme from Anaemia Mukt Bharat to Anaemia Mukt Bharat Abhiyaan.



Treat and track: The Ministry proposed a digital ecosystem to monitor anaemia services.

New framework

The revised framework seeks to strengthen anaemia control through improved testing, treatment, monitoring and community participation.

The revised programme adds low birth weight babies (0-6 months) as a seventh beneficiary group, recognising the need for early intervention.

A new "eating right" component has been introduced as the seventh intervention to promote the regular consumption of iron-rich and diversified diets. The seventh institutional mechanism focuses on strengthening monitoring and evaluation through digital tracking. The guidelines also replace the existing T3 with a T4 strategy of Test, Treat, Talk, and Track, which emphasises routine haemoglobin testing, treatment according to national anaemia management protocols, systematic tracking of beneficiaries for referral and follow-up, and counselling on healthy dietary practices.

The Ministry has also proposed an integrated digital ecosystem for monitoring anaemia services.

The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) shows that 67.1% of children aged six to 59 months, 57% of women aged 15 to 49 years, 52.2% of pregnant women, and 59.1% of adolescent girls aged 15 to 19 years are anaemic.

Advisory issued for pilgrims undertaking Mansarovar Yatra

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI

The External Affairs Ministry has advised Indian citizens undertaking the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra through private tour operators to exercise caution, asking them to verify if their operator is duly registered.

"This Ministry is in receipt of several requests for help and assistance from Indian citizens stuck in Nepal while undertaking Kailash Mansarovar Yatra without the required entry permit and visas for China, through tours organised by private tour operators," the Ministry said in an advisory issued on Saturday.

"Citizens are advised not to commence their journey from India until all required travel documents have been obtained for undertaking the complete journey," it said.

Commencing travel without confirmed documentation or in anticipation of obtaining the necessary documentation "increases the likelihood of being stranded".

"Pilgrims are also strongly advised to verify that their tour operator is duly registered and authorised," the Ministry said.

In April, the Ministry had announced that the annual Kailash Mansarovar Yatra was set to take place from June to August this year via two routes – Lipulekh Pass in Uttarakhand and Nathu La in Sikkim.

The tour resumed last year after a gap of nearly five years as part of efforts to normalise the relations between India and China.

It was suspended because of the military standoff between the two sides in eastern Ladakh.

Police recreate crime scene with accused at Pune fort

Press Trust of India
PUNE

The police on Sunday took Siya Goyal, an accused in the alleged murder of her fiancé and Pune realtor Ketan Agarwal, to Lohagad Fort to reconstruct the crime scene, using a dummy to recreate the moment he was pushed to his death, an official said.

The police is investigating various aspects of the case including the digital footprint of the two accused. PTI

The exercise was aimed at establishing the exact chain of events of the June 18 incident, when the 25-year-old victim was allegedly killed by Ms. Goyal, 20, and her alleged lover, Chetan Chaudhary, 22, he said.

"A crime scene recreation was conducted this morning. The accused was taken to the actual spot where the incident took place," a senior official from the Pune rural police said. He said that a dummy body was created, and police officials asked Ms. Goyal to demonstrate how she pushed Mr. Agarwal from the location. She also showed the route taken to reach the crime spot.

Mr. Chaudhary would be taken to the fort separately for a similar reconstruction, he added.

Ms. Goyal and Mr. Chaudhary have been arrested for allegedly conspiring to kill Mr. Agarwal and pushing him off Lohagad Fort in Pune district.

Ms. Goyal has allegedly told the police that she did not want to marry Mr. Agarwal, and hence plotted with Mr. Chaudhary to kill him as she thought calling off the wedding would bring disrepute to the family.

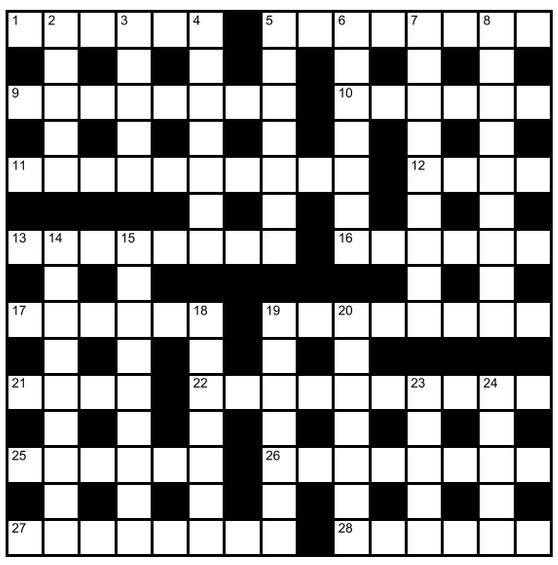
Investigators are probing various aspects of the case, including the planning, the movements of the accused before and after the incident, their digital footprint, and the motive behind the murder, a senior police official said.

TH CROSSWORD + 14832

(set by Pixie Dust)

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

SCAN TO PLAY



Across

1 Perhaps the curt city folk (6)
5 Drug seller is quick covering damage (8)
9 Clueless Inspector General's tirade overwhelming new officer at first (8)
10 Is this creator redesigning pantries? (6)
11 Surprisingly, strange associate quits subsequently in support (10)
12 Member cycling around a storm (4)
13 Like a stag, colony resident ogled - abandoning last trace of shame (8)
16 Hence the French people, heartless and glum (6)
17 Florida completes uniformly chosen constructions (6)
19 Most insensitive subset to bust (8)
21 Magnificent huskies smuggled in this manner (4)
22 Quarrelsome Finny ruled out (10)
25 Character without bit of loyalty and grace (6)
26 In comparison, some vital errands partly withdrawn (8)
27 Anxious playing drest repeatedly? (8)
28 Come, rise, dance exhibiting revolutionary passion (6)

Down

2 Close tense contest! Missed the beginning (5)
3 Discovered snoop uses net (5)
4 German supporting family blunder (7)
5 Spotted Penny at church with journalist (7)
6 A lecturer flags plants (7)
7 Bloomers from post-graduate doctor and grey-haired saint (9)
8 Wild dance around large infinite pole in Christian festival (9)
14 Point of Mathematician or the astronomer (9)
15 Rock's tipping point, Mark switching places with Lira (9)
18 Son leaves carrying revolver finally and shoots (7)
19 Advanced deer? (7)
20 Delighted Henry quit and laughed in a high-pitched voice (7)
23 Records Spooner's accents (5)
24 Celebrate climbing bar (5)

SUDOKU

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

DIFFICULTY RATING: ★☆☆☆☆

No.SS6926 Distribution: www.knightfeatures.com

Solution to previous puzzle

Solution to yesterday's Sudoku

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

FAITH

Temples, replica of Vaikunta

One may wonder, in today's state of incredulousness, what the purpose of a temple is. God resides in Vaikunta, which is the supreme abode, and we cannot experience it in our mortal lives. Temples, a replica of Vaikunta, are accessible to us and their purpose is to give the devotees an opportunity to experience the Lord while on this earth, said Tirukkudanthai Dr. Venkatesh.

As mortals, we are unable to ascend to Vaikunta; therefore, Perumal has descended to us in temples, to give us a chance to experience the bliss of Vaikunta. The rajagopuram which we behold first is symbolic of the rajagopuram of Vaikunta. In his Tiruvaimozhi, Nammazhwar says, *Kodi adi nedu magizh gopuram*, referring to the gopuram in Vaikunta. Similarly, Chandogya Upanishad details the *Airammadia kulam* (pond) in the celestial abode of Perumal. Echoing this, the temple ponds or pushkaranis are a representation of the heavenly water body. The same text also specifies presence of a sacred ashwatha tree (Somasavana) there, which is represented by the sthalavriksham in temples. The Visakha upastambham in Vaikunta is depicted in temples by the dwajastambham, the flag pole. The sanctum sanctorum of the God in temples is the equivalent of the Golden Hall where Maha Vishnu resides in Vaikunta. The many sannidhis surrounding the main deity in temples are the eternal servants, the Nithya Suris, who serve the Lord in the celestial strata, who enjoy their own chambers in a temple. When Perumal descends, the Nithya Suris accompany Him, to serve Him. They also guide devotees to Him, progressively. In short, temple visits are a virtual experience of Vaikunta for devotees.

Smart AI caching can keep the data flowing when disaster strikes

In cooperative caching, different parts of a disaster-response network, including satellites, drones, base stations, and emergency vehicles, work together to store and share useful data; when one node receives or generates important content, such as satellite images or video, nearby nodes may also cache copies based on demand

Shamim Haque Mondal

Two years ago, Mundakkai and Churalmala in Kerala experienced powerful landslides that killed hundreds of people. Last year, a large village in Dharali, Uttarakhand, was washed away following heavy rain. In the monsoon season of 2025, the States in Northeast India were devastated by frequent floods. More than a hundred people lost their lives after heavy rain in Uttar Pradesh on May 13-14 this year.

During such disasters, it is common for telecom towers to topple over, power lines to be cut, and roads to be closed. In these situations, real-time information as to what is happening on the ground, where people are stuck, which routes are still open, etc. becomes crucial for rescue workers and medical workers. In the absence of such communication, rescue operations are delayed, more property is damaged, and more lives are lost.

During disasters, real-time information about where people need help and which routes are still open is crucial for rescue and medical workers. REUTERS

Cooperative caching

'Solving' communications in disaster-affected areas is a long-standing problem. Recently, in a paper published in the IEEE *Transactions on Services Computing*, researchers from Ireland, led by Sangita Dhara of Trinity College Dublin, presented a novel approach – a way to transmit important real-time information using a technology called collaborative caching even if the local network is in a subpar condition.

At a time of disaster, the local administration typically has three main communication channels: satellite or satellite-based communications, drones or unmanned aerial vehicles, and some *ad hoc* network based on the ground. A satellite can beam data down over a wide area, so accessing that signal is relatively easy, but the big problem here is data latency, i.e. the delay in getting information. Time is of the essence. It is also possible to take pictures from the sky or transmit live video using drones. However, they are limited by their short range, limited battery capacity, and, above all, obstacles in the form of inclement weather. Finally, ground-based wireless networks can help with local communication – but they are often damaged or non-functional during disasters.

In this context, the researchers have presented cooperative caching. Here, different parts of a disaster-response network, including satellites, drones, base stations, and emergency vehicles, work together to store and share useful data. When one node receives or generates important content, such as satellite images or video, nearby nodes may also cache copies based on the demand. This cooperation allows rescue teams to retrieve information from the nearest available source rather than a distant origin, reducing delay, improving reliability when infrastructure is damaged, and increasing the chance that critical information is available in real time.

Automatic decision-making

Creating this caching system is technologically not simple, however. The drones are airborne, rescue vehicles are on the road, and the position of satellites is constantly changing. It is also difficult to know when and where information will be required, plus the storage of each device will be limited.

To address this problem, the researchers developed a statistical model called contextual multi-armed bandit (CMAB), an AI model that optimises caching decisions quickly.

The model learns from each of the previous decisions, then reviews three factors: what data are recently available, what data demand is currently high, and how much memory is needed in the cache.

For example, it would be helpful to understand that a photo taken 10 minutes before a flood is more effective than a photo taken one hour before the flood. Similarly, video footage or a map of a place that most rescuers are asking for is more important than those that fewer ones are looking for. Sometimes, instead of caching high-resolution video – such as 4K video – short text alerts or warning messages could help rescuers remain productive without taking up large amounts of storage. The model is taught to make such decisions automatically.

The researchers developed a statistical model called contextual multi-armed bandit, an AI model that optimised caching decisions quickly

Federated learning

While in CMAB each node learns from what information it alone has, a more advanced version called FMAB – short for federated multi-armed bandit – learns from its information as well as what the nodes nearby have learnt.

"Caching decisions are executed periodically rather than per request, amortising the computational cost," the researchers wrote in their paper. "Even the highest observed decision latency of Contextual MAB [around 87 microseconds] remains negligible compared to network delays, ensuring system complexity does not hinder the practical applicability for dynamic and real-time, post-disaster deployments."

The work also highlights the importance of a three-tier network, where space, air, and ground are working together, called Space Air Ground Integrated Network (SAGIN). Here, each layer plays a unique role, but the limitations that exist between them are greatly reduced due to caching, and the system becomes more efficient. In the post-disaster scenario, it is important not to look at all the information that is available but only at which information is more useful. An updated road map can tell us which bridges are still usable while a live video can let us know that boats are urgently needed in a specific part of the floodplain.

All together

As a result, content should be seen not only as data but as time-dependent actionable data. And the goal of advanced caching should be to learn how to store the most valuable information in the most appropriate place with limited resources.

To meet this goal, SAGIN works to build external infrastructure, CMAB helps to make acceptable decisions, and FMAB can make the network stronger in the post-disaster period by spreading those decisions across multiple nodes.

However, the results of this simulation-based study depend on many parameters, such as the weather at the time, the flight of the drone, energy management, hardware malfunctions, cyber security, and the behaviour of rescuers in reality.

Moreover, it is not always technically possible to determine which content is valuable or preferable. In many cases, the needs of the local administration or humanitarian considerations can also speed up the rescue.

(Shamim Haque Mondal is with the Physics Division, State Forensic Science Laboratory, Kolkata. shamimmondal709@gmail.com)

THE GIST

- It is common for communication to get disrupted when a disaster occurs. The absence of real-time information delays rescue operations
- Researchers from Ireland found a way to transmit important real-time information using a technology called collaborative caching even if the local network is in a subpar condition
- The work also highlights the importance of a three-tier network, where space, air, and ground are working together, called Space Air Ground Integrated Network (SAGIN)

BIG SHOT

Zoraide de Deus Mota, 104, Zulina de Deus Nunes, 103, and Levita de Deus Nunes, 109, pose for a photo after samples were collected for longevity research in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil on June 23. Recently named the world's oldest living siblings, the sisters are part of a study exploring genetic factors linked to longevity. REUTERS

WHAT IS IT?

Life on Mars: enduring mystery

Vasudevan Mukunth

In a new study in *Science Advances*, an international team of researchers has reported finding organic matter on Mars. Using the NASA Perseverance rover, the team recorded a distribution of complex organic carbon within an ancient river valley on the red planet's Jezero Crater.

Using the rover's SHERLOC instrument, the researchers detected a complex and hardy form of organic matter called macromolecular carbon within fine-grained mudstones. According to the study paper, published in *Science Advances*, this is significant as it represents the most robust detection of organic material in Jezero Crater to date and is the first time such a material has been found directly on a natural rock surface on Mars.

Over the last decade, the NASA Curiosity rover has found organic molecules in Gale Crater, proving the building blocks of life could be preserved in Mars's lakebed rocks. However, Perseverance's previous scans of the floor of Jezero Crater only showed localised and faint hints of organic materials.

The new evidence, from the Neretva Vallis channel, suggests organic matter could be more widespread on Mars than thought. The fact that these organic materials have also been found alongside minerals like carbonates and sulphates suggests they may have been trapped and preserved by water-driven processes billions of years ago.

A selfie taken by NASA's Perseverance Mars rover in 2025 shows the Cheyava Falls rock to the rover's left. NASA

While the new study noted that these organics could have been formed by geological (i.e. abiotic) processes rather than biological ones, the findings are, in the paper's words, "astrobiologically compelling", showing that complex carbon can survive the planet's harsh radiation for aeons.

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

Buyer beware

Tracking down defective batches of drugs is essential

The Health Ministry's notification to expand Schedule H2 drugs to entire therapeutic classes now from a curated list of brands earlier is a commendable change from regulating based on revenue to regulating based on risk. The government had introduced Schedule H2 in 2022-23, which required a barcode or QR code on each pack of specific drugs to verify the pack's authenticity. It is part of a framework that also touches on regulating active pharmaceutical ingredients and export-oriented pharmaceutical compliance. Now, with the additional symbols encoding a product identifier, the manufacturing licence number, batch number, and other details, authorities hope to better track down defective batches. Counterfeit networks have long targeted vaccines, cancer medicines and antimicrobials, with WHO flagging high volumes of fake antimicrobials in low- and middle-income countries. India has one of the world's highest antimicrobial resistance rates, and substandard antimicrobials can lead to sub-therapeutic dosing, exerting selection pressure on resistant strains. The Narcotics Control Bureau has also expressed concerns about medicinal opioids and psychotropic substances 'leaking' into illicit markets. The government will hope that the new system addresses the U.S. FDA's and the European Medicines Agency's recurring concerns about quality control, an issue on which India has found itself on the back foot over contaminated cough syrups. The U.S. Trade Representative has also repeatedly identified India as a leading source of counterfeit medicines, with many fake pharmaceuticals seized at the U.S. border originating from or transiting through India.

Together with policy changes effected by the Jan Vishwas Act 2026, the new framework finally distinguishes between procedural non-compliance and substantial non-compliance, considering only the latter constitutes meaningful enforcement. In the long term, the government should rationalise the compliance burden and eliminate the risk of corruption associated with discretionary enforcement. The government must also recognise that the QR code system will only be effective if backed by a state-managed database that pharmacists and regulators can access in real time, supported by interoperable software and scanning infrastructure across States. Second, pharmacists and consumers must develop a habit of verifying medicines before a sale. Third, the compliance needs imposed by new packaging requirements and the IT integration will strain MSME manufacturers in particular. Finally, prescription data on controlled substances is sensitive information and will need to be handled with a digital governance layer that does not yet exist. Thus, whether the new framework will improve India's reputation as a pharmacy comes down to its implementation.

Sharing waters

The Tungabhadra dam is a good example of inter-State cooperation

The coming together of the Chief Ministers of Karnataka (D.K. Shivakumar), Telangana (A. Revanth Reddy) and Andhra Pradesh (N. Chandrababu Naidu), along with Union Jal Shakti Minister C.R. Patil, at the inauguration of the 33 spillway gates of the Tungabhadra dam on June 25 was significant beyond the optics. The three leaders pledged greater inter-State cooperation, which is welcome given that the dam has largely remained free of major disputes due to an established water-sharing formula and the Tungabhadra Board's regulation of releases. Located in Karnataka's Koppal district, the dam is considered to be the lifeline of the three southern States, providing irrigation to about 16.4 lakh acres – 9.26 lakh in Karnataka, 6.25 lakh in Andhra Pradesh, and 87,000 in Telangana. It hit the headlines in August 2024 when a crest gate was washed away during heavy inflows – which also happened when the dam was full with 105 thousand million cubic feet (tmc ft) of water. The damaged gate was replaced with a temporary one, but with much water wasted, the authorities, who did not want to take chances with the other 32 gates, chose to install high-grade steel gates, at ₹51 crore and which are expected to last 60 years.

Notwithstanding the bonhomie, the differences among the leaders on some issues concerning the larger Tungabhadra project cannot be brushed aside. The Upper Bhadra project, a major lift irrigation scheme under implementation in the central region of Karnataka and upstream of the Tungabhadra dam, has emerged as an irritant for Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. At one stage, the BJP-led Union government had made a provision of ₹5,300 crore in its budget for 2023-24, a few months before the Karnataka Assembly elections. However, the Centre later chose not to include it under any of its schemes, but this is being implemented by a Karnataka government undertaking. It remains to be seen whether the spirit of camaraderie will help the three neighbours to overcome their differences on the Upper Bhadra issue. The Tungabhadra dam is also facing excessive siltation, which has reduced its storage capacity from the original 133 tmc ft to about 106 tmc ft. Mr. Patil has assured the Chief Ministers about the Centre's plan to remove silt from water reservoirs across the country including the Tungabhadra. More importantly, the Union government should closely monitor and expedite, wherever required, the execution of dam rehabilitation and improvement projects being taken up in 19 States. Any laxity with regard to dam safety may have disastrous consequences. The focus must be on prevention, not reparation.

The new digital slavery needs constitutional guardrails

Shashi Tharoor

Fourth-term Member of Parliament (Lok Sabha) for Thiruvananthapuram (Congress party), the Chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs and the Sahitya Akademi Award-winning author of 29 books, including, most recently, 'The Sage Who Reimagined Hinduism: The Life, Lessons and Legacy of Sree Narayana Guru'

In his profound encyclical, *Magnifica Humanitas*, Pope Leo XIV grounds the contemporary crisis of technology in elemental theology, reminding humanity that the individual stands at the absolute centre of divine creation. Yet, this sacred human dignity faces an unprecedented challenge. The Holy Father warns that artificial intelligence (AI), left unchecked, threatens to turn the ownership of our personal data into a new form of digital slavery – a subjugation as cruel as human bondage. Because the stakes are so inherently tied to human dignity, the Pontiff insists that the governance of AI cannot rely on vague good intentions, nor can it be left to the private consciences of the engineers who build these systems. Instead, he issues an urgent call for robust, binding law over abstract ethics, independent public oversight over the empty promises of Silicon Valley's modern pharaohs – and a clear requirement that a human being remains accountable whenever an automated system decides who gets a loan, a job, a medical bed, or an education. Pope Leo XIV's core demand is that this new electronic Curia be strictly regulated rather than quietly surrendered to a handful of private tech monopolies whose reach and resources already outstrip most sovereign governments. He even goes so far as to commend the courage to deliberately slow down the development of AI.

When regulation lags

However, a fundamental problem remains: AI and morality do not observe the same time. AI is developed at the breakneck speed of the start-up culture, driven by an ethos to move fast and run perpetual beta tests on society in the guise of progress. This velocity is fuelled not just by commercial rivalries, but by relentless mathematical innovation spanning from Silicon Valley to Shenzhen. It presents a deeper hurdle for lawmakers worldwide: parliament can govern what a person does, but it can never forbid a mathematical theorem, a discovery, or an equation from being made. How do lawmakers fulfil the Pope's wishes?

Law in most democracies moves slowly. By the time landmark legislation such as the European Union's Artificial Intelligence Act or the United Kingdom's Online Safety Act were painstakingly debated and passed, the specific technical harms they were built to combat had already mutated, leaving an entire generation to grow up inside unaddressed digital vulnerabilities. Policymakers have historically been behind the innovation curve, and under current paradigms, we will be again.

If legislation is fated to lag behind innovation, the consequences for democratic societies are not merely regulatory; they are existential. Democracy cannot function if citizens cannot distinguish reality from fabrication. At its core, democratic governance relies on a shared epistemic foundation: a collective agreement on basic facts from which public debate, policy, and electoral choices can flow. When that foundation is systematically undermined, the entire democratic project is threatened. Today, AI-generated disinformation and advanced synthetic media ("deepfakes") have advanced to a level of fidelity where the human eye and ear can no longer reliably detect forgery. This is already our reality. Highly convincing audio and video duplications of political leaders are deployed strategically during sensitive electoral cycles to depress voter turnout, fabricate scandals out of thin air, and instantly shatter public trust in legitimate state institutions.

This vulnerability is hyper-charged by algorithmic manipulation. Big Tech platforms operate on business models engineered exclusively to maximise user engagement. Because outrage, fear, and sensationalism generate the highest click-through rates, platform algorithms systematically prioritise and amplify hyper-partisan content, driving radicalisation. By trapping citizens within hyper-customised echo chambers, these systems normalise online hate and accelerate social fragmentation. In doing so, private platforms exert an unprecedented form of unaccountable power, effectively rewriting the rules of the public square to optimise quarterly corporate profits at the expense of social cohesion.

Democracy's digital vulnerability

When a society is deeply polarised and stripped of a shared reality, it becomes a soft target for foreign interference. Adversarial nation-states and non-state actors have weaponised these platform vulnerabilities, transforming them into a theatre for sophisticated information warfare. Foreign information manipulation operations are no longer clumsy, bot-driven spam campaigns; they are highly targeted, AI-driven psychological operations designed to covertly exploit pre-existing religious, ethnic, or socioeconomic fault lines within a target nation. By covertly funding, generating, and amplifying divisive narratives, hostile foreign actors can destabilise a democracy from within, turning its own citizens against one another. These coordinated campaigns represent nothing less than a direct, strategic threat to democratic sovereignty itself. As the world's largest democracy and a global technology hub, India stands at the absolute epicentre of this crisis. In an environment where digital adoption outpaces structural digital literacy, the weaponisation of synthetic media and algorithmic polarisation poses a unique threat to India's pluralistic society.

If traditional, reactive legislation is doomed to always trail behind mathematical innovation, India cannot rely on standard, backward-looking regulatory frameworks. Instead, an enduring law and policy framework for India must be anchored in five foundational pillars that operate concurrently.

First, AI governance must adopt a strictly rights-based framework that prioritises individual human dignity and digital autonomy, ensuring citizens possess unalienable rights over their personal data, strict consent protocols, and clear protections against algorithmic discrimination in critical sectors such as employment, credit, and health care. Second, platforms must be subjected to genuine democratic accountability; large technology firms can no longer hide behind absolute safe-harbour immunities while their algorithms profit from the viral spread of destabilising disinformation. They must be legally compelled to introduce structural transparency, allowing independent audits of their recommendation engines and forcing them to accept systemic liability for algorithmic amplification that results in real-world violence.

Third, even as these frameworks are constructed, free speech protections must remain fully intact. The power to define and combat disinformation must never devolve into a tool for state-sponsored censorship or the silencing of political dissent. The focus of regulation must remain strictly on structural platform mechanics, such as automated bot networks and deepfake originators, rather than the heavy-handed policing of individual ideological speech.

Fourth, because technical fixes are entirely insufficient without building cognitive resilience within the populace, India must launch a massive, state-backed educational initiative focused on media literacy and digital citizenship. This curriculum must be integrated across schools, universities, and rural community centres to train citizens to critically evaluate digital sources and identify emotional manipulation tactics. Finally, to defend national sovereignty, India must establish sophisticated, cross-sector early-warning systems capable of detecting coordinated misinformation operations in real-time. By leveraging advanced detection tools and fostering deep collaboration between state security apparatuses, independent fact-checking networks, and ethical hackers, the nation can identify and neutralise foreign information warfare campaigns before they achieve viral velocity.

A constitutional imperative

Ultimately, the lesson of our era is clear: AI governance cannot remain merely regulatory or technical. It is a profound mistake to treat the manipulation of the information ecosystem as a series of isolated technical glitches to be patched with minor corporate updates or narrow statutory tweaks. Because these technologies possess the unique capability to distort truth, polarise societies, and erode the sovereign choice of voters, AI governance must rise to the level of a constitutional imperative. The right to an unmanipulated information ecosystem, where reality can be clearly distinguished from corporate or state fabrication, must be viewed as an indispensable extension of the fundamental right to life, liberty, and free expression.

> Unchecked AI threatens democracy, demanding constitutional safeguards beyond conventional regulation

July opens the biggest chapter in India-U.K. trade ties

Harjinder Kang

His Majesty's Trade Commissioner for South Asia and the British Deputy High Commissioner for western India

Trade deals are important for accelerating prosperity but not every deal is a game changer. One that drives shared growth across key sectors, unlocks opportunity for businesses of all sizes, and pushes the envelope for bilateral trade qualifies to achieve that tag. And so, it is no surprise to see businesses and trade associations using the term in relation to the United Kingdom-India Free Trade Agreement (FTA) which is formally known as Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA). India remains the fastest-growing economy in the G-20 and it is on track to become the world's third-largest economy within the next five years. Complementing this the U.K. remains one of the top global destinations for investment and was the third fastest-growing economy in the G-7 in 2025. Securing preferential access to each other's market is not an abstract diplomatic win; it is an economic advantage that will deliver significant returns in both countries over time. This FTA is forecast to boost Indian GDP by £5.1 billion, the U.K.'s GDP by £4.8 billion and increase bilateral trade by £25.5 billion every year in the long run.

Bilateral trade was already worth £48 billion a year in 2025. From July 15, it will be cheaper, quicker, and easier for businesses to trade across both countries. Even before this deal came into force, we have seen the creation of thousands of new jobs on both sides and that is showing no signs of slowing down, as the countdown to entry into force closes and a new era of growth between the two nations begins. We should all be excited to see what the two countries and businesses on both sides can achieve in the years ahead. These are the hallmarks of a historic deal; but it is not just about the numbers.

A story of scale and depth

From day one, both sides agreed that this deal must be broad, deep, and a driving force that brings long-term growth for both countries. Nearly three years of intensive negotiations preceded this deal and there is no doubt that the agreement reached is the most economically significant trade deal that the U.K. has done since leaving the European Union; it is also one of the most comprehensive trade deals that India has ever done. In short it is a win-win for businesses and consumers and for both economies. To give readers just a flavour of the far-reaching benefits – 99% of U.K. tariff lines will be duty-free for Indian products and India will remove or reduce tariffs on 90% of its tariff lines for U.K. products.

For India, this could support jobs in labour-intensive sectors such as textiles, leather, jewellery and, equally, it will boost exports in services such as IT and finance by a large margin.

Similarly, tariff duties on U.K. exports to India are estimated to fall by around £400 million when the deal comes into effect, and further to £900 million in later phases. Critical industries such as aerospace, automotives, medical devices, and whiskies will all benefit significantly, adding billions to the U.K. economy. This is transformational and it is also just the beginning.

Benefits beyond Mumbai and London

One of the most persistent criticisms of trade policy is that the gains created are only concentrated in a few places. We have ensured that this deal benefits all aspects of the local economy beyond the major cities in both countries. Several unprecedented and dedicated provisions across high-growth and high-value sectors from each side are agreed in a deal spanning 30 chapters. In practical terms, that means manufacturers, innovators, supply chain businesses, and service exporters – often based far away from the major cities – can compete more effectively with cheaper imports and fewer barriers. For instance, a textile manufacturer from Indore, Madhya Pradesh, will now be able to trade more efficiently into the U.K. just like an auto-parts manufacturer from Birmingham will be able to trade more cost effectively into India.

Modern trade goes beyond just tariffs and that is why this agreement's provisions on customs, digital trade, and services are central to its exceptional standard. Improved customs provisions will help goods reach markets faster – particularly valuable for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that cannot afford excessive red tape. On services, where the U.K. is globally renowned, the agreement locks in market access across key sectors, providing the predictability that U.K. businesses need to expand in India and vice versa. The deal also includes India's first-ever standalone chapters on anti-corruption, gender, and development – and one of the most comprehensive labour and environmental commitments that India has ever made in a trade deal. But it is not just about access; it is also about securing appropriate protections for domestic producers, which is what this deal does so well.

For instance, India maintains protections for dairy products and edible oils, while the U.K. shields sugar, milled rice, pork, chicken, and eggs. In an era where trade agreements are judged not only on growth but also on sustainability and fairness, this deal shows how it is done.

Making the deal count

It is clear that this landmark deal combines measurable economic gains, deep market access in the sectors of the future, practical trade facilitation, strong domestic protections, and the first-of-their-kind values chapters. It sets a template for what modern trade agreements should look like: pro-growth, pro-worker, pro-innovation – a gold standard for trade deals.

As we close in on entry into force, the task is clear: let us maximise it. Businesses from both countries should champion exports, explore procurement opportunities, map supply chains against new rules of origin, and move quickly because in trade, first-mover advantage is real, and it rarely comes twice.

> The U.K.-India Free Trade Agreement, the 'gold standard of modern trade deals', comes into force on July 15

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Ayodhya fund case

Reports of alleged irregularities in the handling of funds raised for the Ram temple in Ayodhya demand urgent public scrutiny (Front page, June 27). Thousands of donors across the country contributed in good faith to a cause presented as both religious and civic. Transparency and accountability are non-negotiable when public contributions are involved. A shrine built on collective faith deserves an administrative framework beyond reproach. The authorities must thoroughly investigate these allegations and take swift corrective action to restore public confidence.

Kshirasagara Balaji Rao,
Hyderabad

Temple fund scandals are seldom the work of a few dishonest individuals alone. They are usually a combination of omission and commission: systemic loopholes are either deliberately created or conveniently left unattended. Cash-intensive institutions demand the highest standards of transparency, independent audits, digital accounting, CCTV-backed custody chains, and clear segregation of responsibilities. When these safeguards fail, faith itself becomes collateral damage. The lesson is that sacred institutions must be governed by systems so robust that temptation finds no opportunity and dishonesty no refuge.

R. Narayanan,
Navi Mumbai

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

How schools can tackle adolescent malnutrition

SubbaRao M. Gavaravarapu

Scientist G at the ICMR-National Institute of Nutrition and leads the Let'sFixOurFood Initiative

Bharati Kulkarni

Director, ICMR-National Institute of Nutrition

As schools across the country reopened after summer vacation, classrooms were filled once again with the energy, aspirations and anxieties of millions of adolescents. Yet hidden behind their growing ambitions lies a silent public health emergency – adolescent malnutrition. The recently released NFHS-6 (2023-24) findings are stark. Obesity among women aged 15-49 years has risen from 24% to 30.7%, and among men from 22.9% to 27.3%. High blood sugar among men aged 15 and above jumped from 15.6% to 20.9%, and among women from 13.5% to 17.8%. What is most alarming is that lifestyle changes once associated with cities and affluent communities such as sedentary behaviour, processed diets, stress and rising obesity, are now affecting rural populations too. India faces a double burden: undernutrition among children and surging obesity among adults, with obesity driving diabetes, heart disease and stroke. These crises do not begin in adulthood. Their roots lie in adolescence, making schools the most critical setting for prevention.

Addressing diets differently

Schools must recognise that malnutrition is no longer only about thinness. India is witnessing the 'thin-fat' phenotype –children who appear lean yet carry dangerous metabolic risk. According to the Comprehensive National Nutrition Survey (CNNS, 2019), 27.4% of Indian adolescents are stunted. At the same time, obesity is rising, particularly among the urban youth. More strikingly, 35% of children under five are stunted yet carry adult-level triglycerides, which is like a metabolic time bomb associated with adult-onset diabetes and cardiovascular disease. Preventing these diseases must begin in school, not in hospitals decades later.

Studies on Delhi school adolescents confirmed that the consumption of milk and dairy products, green leafy vegetables and fruits is lower than what is recommended. Far too many children consume cereal-heavy diets while proteins and protective foods remain woefully inadequate. Schools can address this through improved midday meals, healthier canteens and food demonstrations that teach students how to build balanced plates. The Dietary Guidelines for Indians 2024 recommend that half the plate by volume should consist of fruits and vegetables. Yet research confirms that sedentary and screen-heavy behaviours are inversely associated with daily fruit and vegetable intake – a dangerous compounding effect. School gardens, fruit breaks, and local seasonal produce can normalise healthier eating habits.

Addressing sugar and UPFs

Moreover, the bitter truth about sugar has to be revealed. Sugary drinks, High fat sugar and salt (HFSS) foods, and Ultra-Processed Foods (UPFs) are rapidly replacing traditional foods. Studies highlight alarming trends in free sugar and UPF consumption among Indian adolescents. A recent World Health Organization study has revealed that UPF consumption in India has been surging at more than 13.7% year-after-year. The bitter truth is that the excess sugar consumed today becomes a metabolic risk tomorrow. Schools must actively discourage sugary beverages and display sugar boards showing hidden sugar content. Reinforcement, not one-time campaigns, converts knowledge into practice.

Physical inactivity must be treated as seriously as poor diet. Schools should guarantee structured physical activity and sports as core educational components, not optional extras. This is especially urgent as urban lifestyle habits such as reduced movement, changing diets, and rising obesity are now affecting rural communities too, making inactivity a nationwide epidemic, not only city schools' problem.

> Schools are not merely educational institutions; they have the potential to be powerful public health promoting institutions

Thus, among the most common risk factors for non-communicable diseases in children and adolescents are unhealthy diets and insufficient physical activity. The rapid rise of adolescent obesity increases the risk of early-onset Type 2 diabetes, hypertension and heart disease, and will lead to substantially greater healthcare spending. UPF-free school zones must become a national movement backed by consistent policy.

Schools advancing public health

It is here that the Let's Fix Our Food (LFOF) initiative offers a compelling direction. Led by the Indian Council of Medical Research-National Institute of Nutrition (ICMR-NIN), the LFOF consortium is a multi-stakeholder initiative working to create healthier food environments for adolescents by advancing evidence-based policy, empowering youth through nutrition literacy, and campaigning for regulatory frameworks. Its outputs include recommendations for regulating HFSS food advertising, taxation on unhealthy beverages, a model school nutrition curriculum and a food label reading kit.

A 2025 *Lancet* study projected that 21.8 crore men and 23.1 crore women in India will be overweight by 2050, with the steepest rise expected among adolescents and young adults aged 15-24 years.

Schools must move beyond textbook nutrition education and adopt skill-based approaches such as reading food labels, recognising portion sizes, understanding marketing tactics, and basic cooking. Schools are not merely educational institutions; they have the potential to be powerful public health promoting institutions. School-based interventions in India have demonstrated measurable improvements in dietary behaviour and reductions in sugary beverage consumption. A child protected from unhealthy diets today is far less likely to become a patient tomorrow.

The politics around custodial deaths

The Opposition in Andhra Pradesh is attacking the government on its excesses

STATE OF PLAY

Sumit Bhattacharjee

The recent alleged custodial death of a person at the Krishnalanka police station in Vijayawada in the NTR district of Andhra Pradesh is turning out to be a major political issue.

Gade Sai Krishna, who, according to the police, has a criminal history, was picked up by the Circle Inspector of Krishnalanka police station, S.S.V.V. Nagaraju, on May 9 from his residence in Markapuram for questioning in connection with some old cases. He has been missing since then. G. Vijaya Lakshmi, mother of Sai Krishna, after making repeated rounds to the police station to inquire about the whereabouts of her son, filed a *habeas corpus* petition in the Andhra Pradesh High Court on June 2. Based on the petition, the court ordered the NTR Police Commissionerate to produce Sai Krishna by June 15. Upon failing to meet the deadline, the High Court further directed the police to produce him on June 29.

In the meantime, voices of protest grew louder and the Opposition parties, including the YSR Congress Party (YSRCP) and the Congress, left no stone unturned in blaming the administration and the government. They shaped the narrative as one of custodial torture and death, which, they claimed, was being hushed up by the police.

Ever since the incident started gaining prominence, former Chief Minister and YSRCP president Jagan Mohan Reddy has sought to highlight, what he describes as, police excesses under the ruling party and has even gone to the extent of accusing the government of "Red Book" governance. It may be recalled that during the run-up to the 2024 elections, the present IT Minister Nara Lokesh had spoken of a "Red Book," indicating that he had noted down incidents and the names of people who had reportedly committed excesses during the YSRCP rule and that, once in power, he would deal with them suitably.

Same playbook?

Not long ago, during the 2024 election campaign, a similar murder case had become the Achilles' heel of then Chief Minister Jagan Reddy. His own Member of Legislative Council (MLC), Ananta Satya Udaya Bhaskar, popularly known as Ananta Babu, was involved in the murder of his driver, Subrahmanyam.

Chandrababu Naidu, then in the Opposition, and Jana Sena Party (JSP) leader Pawan Kalyan had turned the issue into a major political talking point during their election campaign. As the deceased man was Dalit, they targeted Mr. Reddy and his party leaders by accusing them of being biased against the Dalit community. The issue became a major political plank for the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in the run-up to the 2024 election campaign.

While this incident may not have been the tipping point for Mr. Reddy's rout in the elections, it did play a role and may have contributed to the polarisation of Dalit voters, particularly in the Godavari districts, where the community has a significant vote share.

While Ananta Babu's case was turned into a caste-based political narrative, Sai Krishna's case may not evolve into one. Both the accused and the victim belong to the same community, and there is no apparent political angle to it, though the Opposition is trying its best to give it a political twist. What exactly happened to Sai Krishna is still not known, as neither his whereabouts nor his body (if he is dead) has been found.

In the meantime, a seasoned Mr. Naidu has taken stock of the situation and appears to be dealing with it firmly. The Chief Minister inquired into the incident in detail and directed DGP Harish Kumar Gupta to suspend Mr. Nagaraju. Subsequently, the police registered a murder case against the CI, and he was taken into custody on June 23.

Further, the Government constituted a Special Investigation Team (SIT) to investigate the alleged illegal detention, custodial death, and destruction of evidence in Sai Krishna's case. Mr. Naidu also met the mother of the missing youth and assured her of a transparent investigation.

The challenge before the ruling alliance is to prevent the controversy from turning into a larger political debate. While the authorities concerned have so far taken the necessary action and set the course of the narrative, much depends on fast-tracking the investigation and bringing it to a logical conclusion before the Opposition can transform it into a political rallying point in the days ahead.

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Will a survey error threaten the credibility of govt. schools?

The finding that government schools are charging fees in rural areas is at odds with all existing government policy and needs to be properly investigated

DATA POINT

Anish Gupta
Gaurav
Deepti Kushwaha

In a written question in the Rajya Sabha earlier this year, an MP highlighted that 27% of students in government schools are paying fees – including admission, tuition, examination and development charges – and sought a response from the Ministry of Education. The MP's claim was based on the findings of the Comprehensive Modular Survey: Education (CMS-E), conducted by the National Statistics Office as part of the 80th round of the National Sample Survey (NSS) from April-June 2025 **(Charts 1 and 2)**.

The finding that a sizeable share of students, even in government schools, paid fees surprised many, since it could suggest that those schools were illegally charging fees, raising concerns over the implementation of the Right to Education (RTE) Act, which mandates free education for all children up to age 14. The survey covered 52,085 households, including 28,401 in rural areas.

This article examines whether government schools are indeed charging such fees, or whether the findings reflect issues related to data collection, compilation or both.

To identify the source of the problem, the average course fees paid by students in rural and urban areas were compared using education expenditure data for students in Classes 1 to 8, who are covered under the RTE Act. For the analysis, the course fees reported in the survey – which include admission fees, tuition fees, examination fees, development fees and other compulsory payments – were classified into four categories: no fees, ₹1-₹5,000, ₹5,001-₹10,000 and above ₹10,000.

The analysis showed that, among those reporting course fees above ₹10,000, the average course fee paid by students in government schools in rural areas was higher than that paid by their counterparts in private schools.

Second, the data across all four course-fee categories showed that the percentage difference in average total educational expenditure between students in government and private schools ranged from –50.4% to +4.0% in rural areas and from –57.2% to +34.3% in urban areas **(Table 1)**. Both points challenge the widely held perception that students in government schools incur substantially lower educational expenses than those in private schools.

Third, several States reported unusually low proportions of students with no course fees in government schools. In rural areas, the share of such students is particularly low – in Ladakh (0%), Tripura (2.6%), West Bengal (43%) and Kerala (53%).

Fourth, the percentage of students with no course fees in government schools is substantially lower in rural areas than in urban areas. For instance, in Himachal Pradesh this was 55.6% and 78.3% respectively, with similar patterns observed in six other States, which is difficult to reconcile with any existing government policy.

Possible problems

A commonly cited explanation for such discrepancies is data-collection error.

First, even when survey investigators understand the intended meaning of the questions, they may struggle to communicate it to respondents in the same context in which they were designed. For example, a key question on educational expenditure in this survey is Question 9(i) in Block 5. It asks about "course fees", which include admission fees, tuition fees, examination fees, development fees and other compulsory payments. Interestingly, in common usage, the term "tuition fees" is often understood to mean fees paid for private coaching or supplementary education.

However, in school education, "tuition fees" refers to payments made to schools for teachers' salaries and basic academic resources. While the survey intends to capture this, respondents may have reported spending on private coaching as tuition fees.

Second, information was collected using Computer-Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI), under which responses are recorded directly on tablets. While this approach may facilitate faster processing, it also introduces certain limitations. For example, in earlier paper-based NSS surveys, enumerators could leave questions blank when respondents gave no answer. With CAPI, non-response is generally not permitted, and enumerators must enter a value before proceeding. Previous surveys suggest that non-response, resulting in missing observations, was not uncommon and in the NSS 75th Round (2017), it was 39.4%. However, there were no missing observations in 80th Round of survey, which used CAPI.

This raises the possibility that some course-fee values may have been entered merely to proceed to the next question. Moreover, even minor modifications may disrupt the process, and features such as autocorrect can sometimes distort recorded responses. Even the World Bank has noted that CAPI systems can be highly rigid.

If a large number of students do not have access to free education, the issue warrants serious scrutiny. Yet it is surprising that, despite the matter being raised in Parliament, neither the Central government nor any State government has come forward to investigate.

Conversely, if the findings result from flaws in data collection and validation, as the evidence above suggests, those responsible must be held accountable. Such errors not only distort policy research but also tarnish the reputation of government schools and teachers.

Misleading data?

The data for the charts were sourced from the NSS 80th round, the Comprehensive Modular Survey: Education (CMS:E), 2025

Students arrive at a government high school in Vijayawada in Andhra Pradesh after the summer vacation on June 12. G.N. RAO.

Chart 1: The share of students who reported expenditure on course fees by type of school

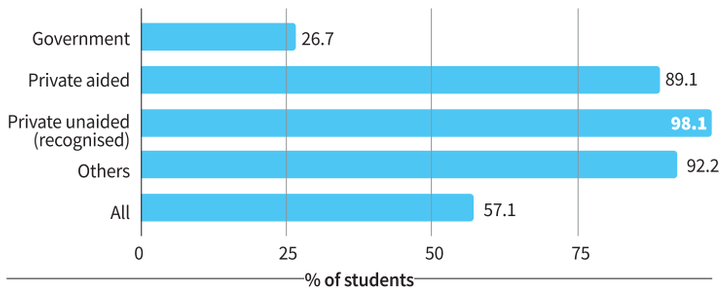

Chart 2: The share of students who reported expenditure on course fees in government schools in rural and urban areas. Figures in %

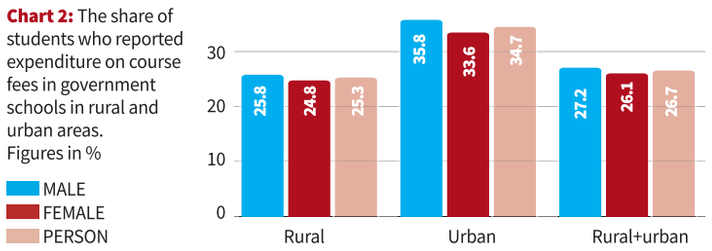

Table 1: Average total expenditure by course fee categories (in ₹)

Course Fee category	School type	Average exp on course fee		Average total expenditure	
		Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban
0	Government	0	0	1,824	2,470
	Private (aided & unaided)	0	0	3,677	5,767
1-5000	Government	736	1,009	3,920	5,255
	Private (aided & unaided)	2,621	2,800	7,866	8,200
5001-10000	Government	6,917	6,827	15,839	19,956
	Private (aided & unaided)	7,595	7,837	15,236	14,857
Above 10000	Government	24,000	19,443	31,850	30,856
	Private (aided & unaided)	22,608	28,458	35,742	41,452

Based on authors' calculations

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FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO JUNE 29, 1976

Seychelles attains Independence today

Victoria (Seychelles), June 28: "The String of Pearls", a group of 92 islands of Seychelles in the western Indian Ocean will take its rightful place in the comity of nations when it attains independence to-morrow after centuries of French and British Colonial domination.

A new chapter will unfold in the lives of 68,000 Seychellois people when the President, Mr. James R. Mancham, will raise the flag of the world's youngest nation at a colourful ceremony in Victoria, marking yet another great victory for a member of the third world.

Delegations from all parts of the world have gathered in picturesque Victoria, capital of Seychelles, to represent their respective nations on this historic occasion.

India is represented by the Minister of State for Tourism and Civil Aviation, Mr. Surendra Pal Singh, and the Indian High Commissioner to Kenya, Air Chief Marshal Arjan Singh.

The Seychelles archipelago has a land area of only 279 sq.km but stretches across 3,88,000 sq. km. The climate in the islands, despite their proximity to the equator, is equable.

Although the islands were probably known to seafarers as early as 916, they remained uninhabited for several centuries. The establishment of the first French colony in 1770 brought Seychelles in the path of Anglo-French rivalry in the Indian Ocean. After no fewer than seven capitulations to the British, the period of French rule finally ended in 1814 when Seychelles became a dependency of the British colony of Mauritius.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JUNE 29, 1926

Raw cotton in the Madras presidency

The receipts of loose cotton at presses and spinning mills in the Madras Presidency from 30th January to 18th June 1926 amounted to 250,446 bales of 400 lb lint against an estimate of 551,400 bales of the total crop of 1925-26. The receipts in the corresponding period of the previous year were 311,321 bales. 30,642 bales mainly of pressed cotton were received at spinning mills and 123,701 bales were exported by sea, while 11,730 bales were imported by sea from Karachi and Bombay.

Text&Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Number of children covered in T.N. polio vaccine programme

53 in lakh. Tamil Nadu CM C. Joseph Vijay launched a Statewide health drive, aiming to administer the oral pulse polio vaccine to children under the age of five. The National Pulse Polio Immunisation campaign was rolled out across more than 43,000 authorised vaccination centres. PTI

Govt. schools covered in Rajasthan's mental health programme

1,500 Officials claimed that Rajasthan is the first State in the country to launch such a programme. RSCERT Director Shweta Fagediya said that a pilot project conducted in Sirohi and Banswara districts in 2024 yielded encouraging results. PTI

Approximate surplus stock held by private firms for kharif season

30 in per cent. FSII Chairman Ajai Rana said while the sector was well-prepared following a bumper seed production season for corn, rice, and millets, a survey of 1,000 farmers showed 75% had already purchased seed while the remaining 25% were waiting for the monsoon. PTI

Number of targets in Iran struck by the U.S. army during ceasefire

10 The U.S. military said on Saturday it had struck 10 targets in Iran at President Donald Trump's direction, continuing a string of attacks that have shaken the war's uneasy ceasefire. The U.S. says strikes were a response to an Iranian attack on an oil tanker. PTI

Magnitude of the earthquake in northeastern Japan

6.1 A magnitude-6.1 earthquake rattled northeastern Japan early on Sunday, according to the Japan Meteorological Agency. No tsunami warning was issued, and there were no immediate reports of damage or casualties. PTI

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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Can neutral ships be lawfully attacked?

What protections does international law afford neutral merchant vessels? When can neutral ships lawfully lose that protection? Can oil tankers and blockade runners be treated as military targets? What legal remedies are available to India after the deaths of its seafarers? How does international law regulate attacks?

LETTER & SPIRIT

Kartikey Singh

The story so far:

Recently, the U.S. Navy carried out Hellfire missile strikes against three merchant tankers – *Marivex, Settebello and Jalveer* – all carrying Indian seafarers. While *Marivex* and *Jalveer* escaped without casualties, three Indians aboard *Settebello* – the chief engineer, an engine fitter, and a deck cadet – were killed. Although U.S. President Donald Trump and Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian signed an MoU on June 17, intended to end the conflict and reopen the Strait of Hormuz, this fragile peace has already been breached by fresh confrontations between U.S. and Iranian forces. Beyond these shifting geopolitical tides, the fundamental legal questions surrounding the attacks on neutral shipping and the accountability for civilian lives lost in these combat zones remain unresolved.

What laws govern naval operations during armed conflict?

The two primary bodies of law governing naval operations during an international armed conflict are the (1) "law of naval warfare" – a branch of law of armed conflict or International Humanitarian Law (IHL) – and the (2) "law of the sea". The former regulates the conduct of hostilities at sea, including which vessels may be attacked and when merchant ships may be visited and searched, captured, destroyed after capture, or attacked, as well as the declaration and enforcement of 'naval blockades'. The latter provides the maritime legal framework within which the rights and obligations of belligerent (warring states) and neutral parties operate, thereby shaping the geography of naval operations.

The "law of the sea", set out primarily in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), often called the "Constitution of the Oceans", defines maritime zones such as the territorial sea (up to 12 nautical miles), exclusive economic zones (EEZs) (up to 200 nautical miles), the high seas, and international straits. Although the U.S., Israel, Iran, and some neutral states are not parties to UNCLOS, its relevant provisions are widely regarded as customary international law binding on all states.

Are neutral merchant vessels and civilians protected?

The "law of naval warfare" does not confer unrestricted authority upon belligerents. Its operation is constrained by IHL, neutrality law, and the "law of the sea". While ethical restraints on warfare have roots in ancient Greek, Roman, Indian, and Chinese civilisations, their modern legal expression lies in IHL, codified in the 1949 Geneva Conventions and supplemented by other treaties and customary international law. Designed to limit human suffering by regulating the 'means' and 'methods' of warfare, IHL protects the wounded, sick, prisoners of war, civilians and civilian objects, while restricting certain weapons and methods of combat. Unlike the UN Charter, which governs the legality of starting a war (*jus ad bellum*), IHL regulates the conduct of war (*jus in bello*) through the principles of 'distinction', 'proportionality', 'military necessity' and 'precaution'.

In naval warfare, as on land, civilians and civilian objects are generally protected from attack. Accordingly, submarine cables, pipelines, container ships, and tankers carrying food, fertilizer, or oil may not be targeted. Likewise, the right of "transit passage" through international straits, codified in Part III, Section 2 (Articles 37-44) of UNCLOS and recognised under customary international law, also continues during armed conflict. Equally important is the law of maritime neutrality – a key component of the "law of naval warfare" – which regulates relations between belligerent and neutral states by protecting neutral territory, shipping and commerce from unnecessary interference while requiring neutrals not to provide military assistance to either side. In the Strait of Hormuz, which straddles the territorial seas of Iran and Oman and carries roughly one-fifth of global oil supplies, neutral merchant vessels therefore remain entitled to exercise "transit passage" despite the hostilities.

Commercial vessel *MT Jalveer* after it was attacked off the coast of Oman near Shinas Port. ANI

When do the neutrals lose their protected status?

Under IHL, during an armed conflict, attacks may be directed only against 'military objectives'. At sea, some vessels (like enemy warships and naval auxiliaries) qualify as 'military objectives' by their nature, while others acquire that status because of their use or activities at the time of attack. Yet, the "law of naval warfare" permits attacks on merchant vessels in certain limited circumstances, although not in neutral waters. The San Remo Manual on International Law Applicable to Armed Conflicts at Sea (1994) – the most influential restatement of the "law of naval warfare" – provides that objects may be targeted when they make an effective contribution to military action and their total or partial destruction, capture, or neutralisation offers a definite military advantage (Paragraph 40 of the Manual).

Applying this principle to neutral shipping, Paragraph 67 of the Manual, which specifically addresses merchant vessels flying a neutral state's flag, permits attacks on neutral merchant ships reasonably believed to be carrying "contraband" or breaching a "blockade", and after prior warning they intentionally and clearly refuse to stop, or intentionally and clearly resist visit, search or capture, or where ships 'otherwise make an effective contribution to enemy's military action'. The International Law Association's Helsinki Principles on the Law of Maritime Neutrality (1998) adopt a similar approach. By contrast with 'neutral' merchant vessels, which typically cannot be captured merely for trading with the enemy, 'enemy' merchant vessels are generally liable to "capture" outside neutral waters. However, even the 'enemy' merchant vessels may be attacked only when, and for as long as, they qualify as 'military objectives', for instance, by laying naval mines, performing functions normally undertaken by naval auxiliaries, or gathering and transmitting tactical intelligence.

Can oil tankers be attacked?

Significantly, the U.S. military has alleged that the Palau-flagged *Settebello* was illegally transporting Iranian oil. While disputed, the claim raises the question of whether oil carried aboard a 'neutral' merchant vessel can be treated as "contraband". Given its military utility, oil may, in certain circumstances, qualify as "contraband", but only if destined for enemy-controlled territory or otherwise supporting the enemy's military effort – a concept particularly relevant to neutral merchant vessels, since enemy merchant ships are already generally liable to capture outside neutral waters.

More fundamentally, the legality of attacking oil tankers turns on whether they qualify as 'military objectives'. Under the traditional view, commercial exports do not become military objectives merely because they generate revenue for a belligerent; the tanker and its cargo must make an effective contribution to military action, and their destruction must offer a definite military advantage. Ordinary export trade, including oil sold on the open market, is generally considered too remote from military operations to meet this test. In contrast, the U.S.-backed "war-sustaining" theory treats objects that finance or sustain an enemy's war effort as military objectives, potentially rendering oil exports that generate revenue closely linked to military operations lawful targets.

What about naval blockades?

The U.S. justifies the strikes on the grounds that the vessels were violating an American blockade. Both the San Remo Manual and the Helsinki Principles recognise "blockade" enforcement as a legitimate belligerent right and permit force against neutral vessels reasonably believed to be breaching a lawful "blockade". A blockade seeks to prevent vessels and aircraft of all nations from entering or leaving enemy-controlled ports, airports or coastal areas, thereby restricting both the import of supplies and the export of goods. Notably, it must be publicly declared, applied impartially to all vessels of all states, including neutrals, and be effective rather than a mere "paper blockade".

However, compliance with the aforesaid "law of naval" warfare governing blockades is not, by itself, sufficient to justify attacks on neutral vessels. As many international law scholars argue, such actions must also comply with the UN Charter, adopted in 1945, following the devastation of World War II, to maintain international peace and security. Article 2(4) of the Charter prohibits states from using force against another State's 'territorial integrity' or 'political independence', except pursuant to UN Security Council authorisation or in self-defence under Article 51, including, under the contested but widely invoked doctrine of 'anticipatory' self-defence, against an imminent threat.

Since the U.S. war against Iran arguably has neither Security Council authorisation nor a valid self-defence claim, many scholars view it as violating the UN Charter itself. Consequently, the "blockade" forms part of an unlawful use of force and is therefore unlawful as a matter of *jus ad bellum*, regardless of its compliance with the law of naval warfare (*jus in bello*). In other words, the "blockade" and measures taken to enforce it may satisfy the latter but not the former, since the exercise of belligerent rights to enforce a "blockade", unlike self-defence or UN Security Council authorisation, is not recognised as an exception to Article 2(4)'s prohibition on the use of force.

Importantly, the UN Security Council may authorise forcible measures by member states, and Article 42 expressly identifies "blockade" as one such measure. However, outside a "blockade" authorised by the Security Council, there does not seem to be any *jus ad bellum* basis for using force against neutral merchant vessels to enforce a "blockade". The exercise of belligerent rights through attacks on vessels flagged to "neutral" states, including the forcible enforcement of a "blockade" against neutral shipping, sits in direct tension with the UN Charter, irrespective of whether force may lawfully be used against the blockaded state itself. Even where a state possesses a valid *jus ad bellum* basis for using force to repel an armed attack, it may employ only such force as is necessary and proportionate; that right does not ordinarily extend to attacks on third states or their vessels absent an independent basis for self-defence.

What is next for India?

Beyond the serious doubts surrounding the legality of the U.S. strikes, key questions remain: what intelligence supported the attack; were less intrusive measures such as boarding, diversion or capture available; and were adequate warnings issued to allow civilians to protect themselves? For India, the incident is not merely a diplomatic issue but a legally cognisable injury to its nationals. Under the doctrine of "diplomatic protection", India has standing to espouse claims arising from injuries to its citizens caused by an internationally wrongful act, demand explanations, seek accountability and compensation, and call for an independent investigation into the deaths of the three seafarers.

(Kartikey Singh, lawyer, and currently working as a Law Clerk-cum-Research Associate at the Supreme Court of India. The views expressed are personal)

THE GIST

- International law generally protects neutral merchant vessels and civilians during armed conflict, but that protection may be lost in limited circumstances, such as when ships effectively contribute to military action or breach a lawful blockade.
- The legality of the U.S. strikes on neutral tankers depends not only on the law of naval warfare but also on the UN Charter, raising questions over the lawfulness of the blockade, the targeting of neutral shipping, and compliance with international humanitarian law.
- The deaths of three Indian seafarers raise issues of state responsibility, diplomatic protection, accountability, and India's right to seek explanations, an independent investigation, and compensation.

CACHE

Do unprecedented security measures address NEET's real vulnerabilities?

While extraordinary security measures may safeguard printed question papers, deeper risks arising from institutional blind spots, insider networks, and powerful commercial interests remain largely unaddressed

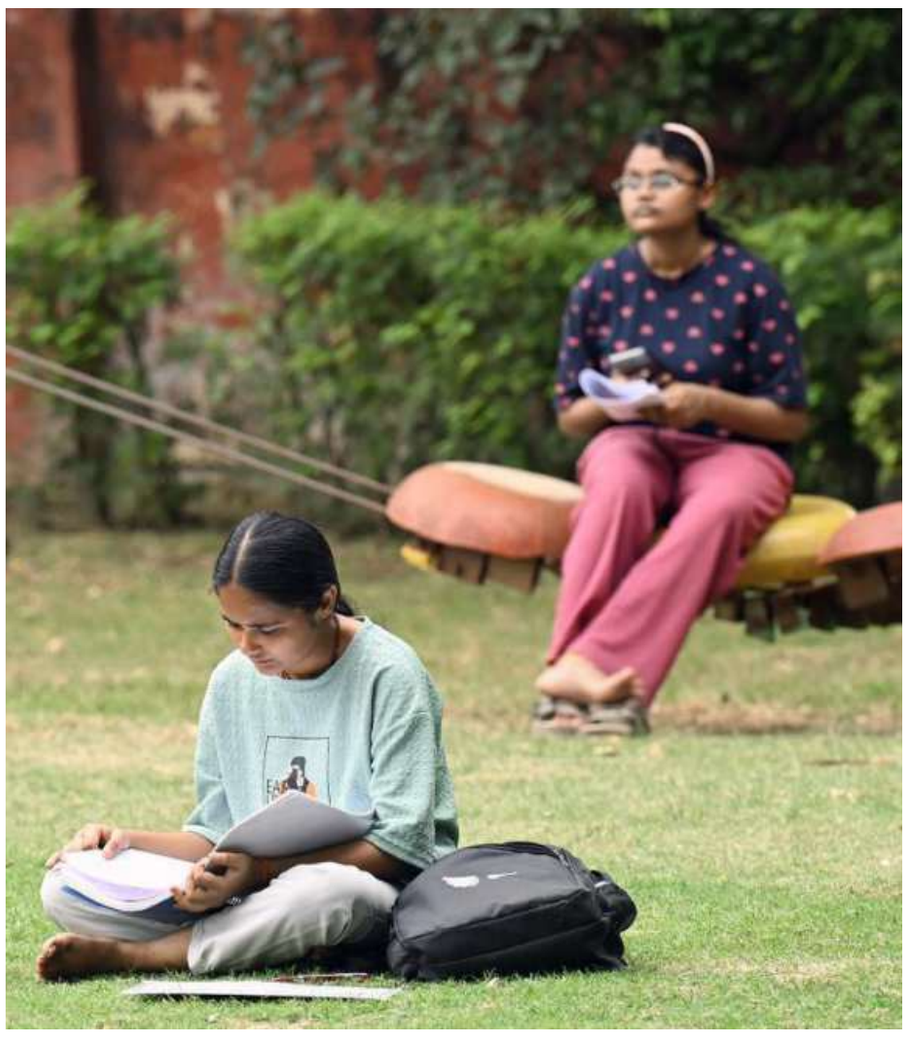
Rajeev Kumar

The National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test (NEET) has evolved into one of India's most high-stakes examinations, where a student's medical career often depends on performance in a single three-hour test conducted once a year. Intense competition for medical seats, immense social prestige, and the high economic value of a medical degree create enormous academic, financial, and psychological pressure.

The stakes are further amplified by management quota admissions, for which several crores of rupees may be offered, particularly in family-owned hospitals. In such an environment, paper leaks, impersonation, unfair means, coaching-centre collusion, insider access, and other forms of malpractice are not merely security failures but manifestations of the powerful incentives surrounding medical admissions.

Following the NEET-2026 controversy, the Union government made unprecedented security arrangements for Indian public examinations. Coordinated by the Cabinet Secretary and involving the Air Force, paramilitary and police forces, AI-enabled surveillance, biometric authentication, GPS-tracked logistics, and nearly seven lakh personnel, the exercise was comparable in scale to China's Gaokao. It demonstrated that the logistics of a high-stakes examination can be secured through an extraordinary national security and administrative effort.

Yet the central question remains: do these unprecedented measures address the real vulnerabilities of NEET, or merely its most visible component – the physical movement of question papers and personnel?



Intense competition for medical seats, immense social prestige, and the high economic value of a medical degree create enormous academic, financial, and psychological pressure. R. V. MOORTHY

Recurring anomalies

Since its inception in 2013, NEET has repeatedly faced controversies involving allegations of paper leaks, score inflation, and unusually high-performing candidates emerging from particular centres, rooms, families, and coaching hubs. Concerns have also been raised about the weak correlation between NEET performance, Class XII marks, and subsequent performance in medical education. The repeated occurrence of these concerns warrants closer scrutiny.

The credibility crisis was serious enough to trigger a complete re-examination in 2015 (then AIPMT) and extraordinary interventions following the NEET-2024 controversy. The 2024 episode exposed systemic weaknesses, including an incorrect question paper, grace marks, inflated scores, and an unprecedented clustering of candidates' near-perfect scores.

More significantly, weeks before NEET-2026, highly targeted question compilations reportedly circulated across several parts of the country. Following the examination, many candidates claimed that an unusually large number of questions closely matched the circulated material. Yet no intelligence, cybersecurity, law enforcement, or the National Testing Agency (NTA) appears to have acted on these signals before the controversy surfaced through a whistleblower's FIR, ultimately leading to the cancellation of the examination.

Official submissions before the Supreme Court emphasised compliance with the Radhakrishnan Committee recommendations and the establishment of SOPs, while treating the leak allegations as arising from specific inputs. If the NTA detected no credible abnormality, what justified cancelling NEET-2026 and imposing enormous social, psychological, and economic costs on over two million students?

Where do leaks really originate?

Most past investigations failed to establish any printed paper leak, yet the NEET-2026 re-test security architecture was overwhelmingly focused on protecting printed question papers. This raises an obvious question: does the primary vulnerability lie elsewhere?

Before printing, question papers pass through question setting, moderation, translation, and digitisation, during which a small group of individuals has privileged access. The recurring appearance of highly targeted, accurate question compilations and coaching material closely resembling examination content points towards possible information flows at these source stages.

The risk increases when the same experts reportedly participate repeatedly across years and examinations while maintaining direct or indirect links to the coaching ecosystem. Such leakages need not involve complete papers; fragments, themes and high-probability questions may be sufficient to create a substantial advantage. If information is selectively transmitted through insider networks, recurring leakages can occur without a single printed question paper ever being leaked or recovered.

Will isolation of experts prevent leaks?

Keeping question setters, moderators, and translators in isolation assumes that leaks occur only after they are confined. But if their identities and information are already circulating through informal networks, isolation does not address the real source of risk.

The larger concern is the repeated engagement of some experts across years and examinations, often amid allegations of links with coaching ecosystems and other commercial interests.

In such circumstances, information advantages need not take the form of a leaked paper; they may appear as targeted question banks, recurring themes, or unusually accurate predictions.

The real issue, therefore, is not confinement for a few days, but the integrity, independence, and conflict-free selection of experts. Without safeguards against conflicts of interest, repeated engagements, and entrenched networks, isolation may leave the underlying vulnerability untouched.

Unaddressed vulnerabilities

Despite unprecedented security arrangements, several critical vulnerabilities remain outside the current security framework.

One of the most significant vulnerabilities is the absence of rigorous conflict-of-interest avoidance and antecedent verification for question setters, moderators, and translators. Alleged links between some experts and coaching or commercial ecosystems raise concerns about the integrity of the question-setting process itself. No amount of surveillance or expert isolation can compensate for a compromised source. Stringent background checks, conflict-of-interest scrutiny, and intelligence-based monitoring are therefore essential safeguards.

The National Medical Commission Act, 2019, mandates a single uniform entrance examination, not unlimited participation over decades. Yet NEET imposes neither an upper age limit nor any restriction on attempts, with nearly half of the candidate population reportedly being repeaters. This creates a large pool of long-term aspirants increasingly dependent on coaching ecosystems and susceptible to information asymmetries. While repeated attempts may improve familiarity with the examination, academic ability and professional suitability cannot be expected to improve indefinitely through repeated attempts alone.

The problem is compounded by the fact that the qualifying threshold is fixed at the 50th percentile; the larger the pool of long-term repeat candidates, the lower the effective qualifying score tends to become. Unlimited attempts and a low eligibility threshold encourage repeat participation and create conditions in which unfair practices can thrive.

NEET-2026 also exposed vulnerabilities beyond question papers. A teenager reportedly accessed candidate accounts and attempted to divert refund payments. At the same time, an ethical hacker reported access to super-administrative functions, including observer management, appointment letters, and backend data exports. Meanwhile, AI-enabled surveillance and monitoring systems reportedly failed to detect warning signals associated with the widely circulated "guided papers" controversy, even as portal glitches persisted.

These incidents point to weaknesses in cybersecurity and examination preparedness.

These are only some of the visible vulnerabilities. The bigger challenge is to understand where information advantages come from, who benefits from them, and how they spread through networks of coaching centres, intermediaries, insiders, and commercial ecosystems.

The way forward

NEET-2026 demonstrated that a high-stakes examination can be conducted under an unprecedented security apparatus. However, securing the physical movement of question papers is only one part of the challenge.

Future reforms must focus on the examination ecosystem itself: rigorous conflict-of-interest and antecedent verification of experts, stronger cybersecurity safeguards, intelligence-based monitoring of organised examination networks, and a review of structural vulnerabilities such as unlimited attempts, the absence of age limits, and the low qualifying threshold for private admissions.

Unless these vulnerabilities are addressed, additional layers of security may relocate the risk rather than eliminate it.

Ultimately, the credibility of NEET will depend not on how securely question papers are transported, but on whether the entire admission ecosystem is transparent, conflict-free, and genuinely merit-driven.

(Rajeev Kumar is a former Computer Science Professor at IIT Kharagpur, IIT Kanpur, BITS Pilani, and JNU, and a former scientist at DRDO and DST)

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

Her knees were knocking before the interview

The thief prised open the window with a crowbar

S. Upendran

"Come on in! Today is Sunitha's big presentation. Do you think she's ready? Does she..."

"Relax, will you? I'm just coming from her place. You seem to be more nervous than she is."

"That's probably true. I guess I worry too much. Sunitha is always relaxed. She gives the..."

"I'm not so sure about that! This is her first presentation, after all. I wouldn't be too surprised if her knees weren't already knocking."

"Knees already knocking?"

"This informal expression means to shake with anxiety. It is ..."

"In other words, it means you were so nervous that your legs were shaking or trembling."

"Very good!"

"Veena's knees started knocking when she heard strange noises coming from her window."

"That's a good example! Saurabh claimed he was an experienced speaker. There was no evidence of that yesterday. Of all the speakers, I would say, his knees knocked the most."

"Really?"

"He didn't sound confident at all yesterday. During lunch, he was telling me how busy he's been renovating the old house he bought a few months ago."

"He's been having a tough time getting the windows and doors open."

"It's a very old house, and the doors and windows haven't been opened in a while. They have to be prised open. It's prised. P...r...i...s...e...d. It's pronounced like the word p...r...i...z...e."

"I see. I'm sure the two words don't have the same meaning. What does p...r...i...s...e mean?"

"It means using force to get something open. For example, when we are unable to remove the lid from a paint can, what do we do?"

"In my case, I usually place a screwdriver under the lid."

"Apply pressure and prise the lid open. That's how a lot of people I know prise the lid off a can of paint."

"How about this example? The thugs prised the hero's fingers apart and took the key."

"Sounds good. As we got closer to the house, we realised that the front door had been prised open by a crowbar."

"Your friend Ganesh came yesterday."

"I hope it wasn't to borrow money again."

"It was!"

"The next time he comes around, tell him to go jump in the lake."

"Does it mean you're not giving him money?"

"When someone asks you for something, and you respond by saying 'Go, jump in the lake', what you're suggesting is that you want the person to get lost."

"In other words, you're being rude."

"Yes. And you're not going to do what the person wants you to. When Saurabh asked if he could borrow my new car, I told him to go jump in the lake."

"I got so irritated by her silly questions that I told her to go jump in the lake."

"Did she get upset?"

"No, she merely smiled and continued asking questions!"

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Word of the day

Iota: an extremely small amount

Synonyms: bit, particle, hint

Usage: *There is not an iota of truth in the rumour.*

Pronunciation: newsth.live/iotapro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /aɪəʊt/

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

THE DAILY QUIZ

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

Test yourself on the group phase of FIFA World Cup that concluded on Sunday

V.V. Ramanan

QUESTION 1
A total of 215 goals were scored across 72 matches. Apart from France, which other teams netted 10 goals each?

QUESTION 2
Three teams progressed with perfect records, of which one had no goals conceded against it. Name the teams.

QUESTION 3
Which modern-day great became the first to score in six editions, and who achieved the feat of scoring in seven consecutive World Cup matches?

QUESTION 4
Two teams registered three draws and had a goal difference of zero. But thanks to the qualification rules, one made it to the next phase while the other was eliminated. Name them.

QUESTION 5
Only one match in the round-of-32 will see two teams who have made the summit clashes before, with one of them having tasted glory. Name the two European sides.

QUESTION 6
Which team scored eight goals in the group stage, had a positive goal difference, but still failed to qualify?

QUESTION 7
Record attendances were seen despite high ticket prices. Which stadium had the distinction of hosting 80,824 spectators on two separate occasions, as per FIFA?

Visual Question:
Identify, and he was one of three to achieve what feat in the group stages? AFP

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1. Who is the only British Prime Minister who was assassinated? **Ans: Spencer Perceval**
2. This statesman's tenure as Prime Minister was overshadowed by his military prowess. He famously defeated a French Emperor in this war in 1815. Name the Prime Minister, the Emperor and the famous war. **Ans: Arthur Wellesley; Napoleon Bonaparte; Battle of Waterloo**
3. This Prime Minister started out as a journalist, specifically a war correspondent for the Morning Post. Name him. **Ans: Winston Churchill**
4. This Prime Minister had the shortest run in Westminster, serving just 44 days. Name the Prime Minister. **Ans: Liz Truss**
5. The Second World War broke out with Nazi Germany invading Poland. Roughly a year back, this British Prime Minister, after talks with Hitler, had declared that "I believe it is peace for our time". Needless to say, he did not last long in office. Name him. **Ans: Neville Chamberlain**
6. Which Prime Minister introduced the Indian Independence Act 1947 in the House of Commons? **Ans: Clement Atlee**
Visual: This is one of the most famous addresses in the world. Name it. **Ans: 10, Downing Street, London**
Early Birds: Tamal Biswas | K.N. Viswanathan | Sudhir Thapa | Arun Kumar Singh | K. M. Vikashini

Med cover inadequate and not affordable

COVERNOTE

You should be sure that you can maintain an even higher medical fund and that should be over and above your retirement planning

K. Nitya Kalyani

How much hospitalisation insurance is enough? For the average city living middle class family ₹5 lakh looks woefully inadequate because which city hospital even has ₹5,000 rooms?

Because, with the sub limit of 1% of sum insured (SI) on room rent, you will be dipping into your pocket for the extra room rent. You can buy an additional cover for extra premium to protect against that. Be sure to read up about it and opt for it on your next renewal. But what is left uncovered is the share of expenses you will bear on all other services like surgeons' or physicians' fees going by the sub-limit rules. Mercifully medications and diagnostic procedures don't come under the sub-limit. A higher SI comes at a higher premium and that escalation is going to be endless, we have seen. The real problem we are left to focus on is the inadequacy of SI. With rising healthcare costs, the question has changed to how much of your expenses are left uncovered by your SI. Remember, that gap is going to widen each coming year. This diminution of protection is cause for serious concern.

Let's get back to the 'Why not self-insure for the first ₹10 lakh and take only a top-up?" idea.

We saw that if you can maintain a ₹10 lakh medical fund and keep enhancing it, if you can resist spending it on that family holiday, and if you can pay your hospital expenses and replenish your fund without feeling the financial pain, this is a workable idea. This comes with some age-related pros and cons. For the below-30s family, it may work well because hospitalisations may be few and far between and the fund can keep earning returns and growing. However, nobody can predict serious illnesses and accidents and the fund would be one more demand on the family's expenses.

In the next decade and a half of your life, till age 45, the medical fund is much easier to create and maintain with better earnings and cashflows, and you can have no basic policy, saving on premium and maintain the top up. However, this is when lifestyle illnesses start making their appearance, parents are getting older and children can contribute with ills and spills. At this stage you can move to start a small basic policy of ₹5 lakh.

From age 45 to 60 avoiding a basic policy means substantial premium savings as the rates rise sharply. If you have significant accumulated wealth you can rely on self-insurance with maybe that small basic policy we saw earlier plus a sizeable top up.

This is the age group when chronic illnesses increase and hospitalisations can be expected. You should be sure that you can maintain an even higher medical fund and that should be over and above your retirement planning. Insurance becomes a much more efficient part of the game plan at this stage. Your medical fund also should be periodically reviewed and enhanced, preferably during your earning years when the funds are still flowing. By the 60s your basic policy should be for a higher SI and that means you should enhance it a few years prior in order to work off the waiting period for pre-existing diseases. Definitely do this before retirement so that you are not left without insurance. Getting a fresh policy or enhancement of SI after this age is quite a challenge. If your employer provides a retirement policy, it is wise to opt for that and build other policies around it.

Much as we may plan about and spend on insurance, we are truly happy When we don't need to use it. So, after reading all this if you plan on jogging every morning, cutting back on smoking and junk food and getting a full night's sleep, even better!

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

People pleasing: Money leaves the wallet not out of necessity, but out of social expectation and peer pressure. SAINATH B.

Treatflation: The invisible 'ghost' in office culture

This ghost does not ask for a feast; neither does it care if it's month-end or your budget is already stretched; it simply asks for a bite, again and again, which may gobble up your savings over time

TREAT TRAVAILS

Vaishali R. Venkat

There is a hungry 'ghost' 'haunting' your office. It neither rattles chains, bangs on doors, roams dark corridors, nor lives in deserted, dilapidated buildings. It silently lurks in WhatsApp groups, emails or phone calls. Its ambush is never a one-time affair. It strikes again and again, often when least expected.

This invisible ghost rarely asks for a feast and never compels; a small bite usually suffices. It does not care whether you are carrying a mountain of debt, whether it's month-end, budget is already stretched, or if your wallet can withstand another hit.

Most employees feed this ghost: a pocket-friendly contribution for a birthday cake, a party for promotion, a wedding or a team lunch. The strangest thing is that this ghost never feeds on fear but on goodwill. Nobody is forced to offer a bite, yet, this ghost is somehow fed. I call this ghost Treatflation, a portmanteau of 'treat' and 'inflation' that captures the rising cost of recurring workplace celebrations.

It is the accumulation of countless small contributions in the name of treats. Each request seems modest in isolation. Yet, over time, these small acts of participation can quietly become a drain on personal finances. It's an invisible financial burden wherein workplace camaraderie slowly begins to resemble a subscription fee for a 'utility' you never subscribed to.

> It is our tendency to change our behaviour in order to fit in with a group and maintain good relationships with the people around us

> Most employees contribute because they want to fit in, maintain good relationships and avoid being the only person who declines

Treatflation is not created by greedy bosses or demanding colleagues. It is sustained by decent people doing decent things. Every contribution is usually voluntary; every occasion is genuine; every amount is modest. Yet, over the course of a career, when thousands of such gestures accumulate, they raise an uncomfortable question: can even goodwill become so expensive?

Treatflation is powered by a force that social psychologists call 'Normative social influence.' It is our tendency to change our behaviour in order to fit in with a group and maintain good relationships with the people around us.

Put simply, it is the urge to conform to group expectations. Most employees do not contribute because they are forced by their bosses or colleagues, but because they want to fit in, maintain good relationships and avoid being the only person who declines. As a result, money leaves the wallet not out of necessity, but out of social expectation and peer pressure. In the 1950s, psychologist Solomon Asch demonstrated this tendency in a series of conformity experiments. He found that people often aligned their behaviour with a group even when their own judgement suggested otherwise. The lesson was simple: the desire to fit in and avoid standing out proved stronger. The behaviour underlying Treatflation is a simple human need: the desire to belong. Most people would rather contribute a few hundred bucks than risk appearing indifferent to the group.

The consequences of this desire are not merely social; they are financial as well. Left unchecked, this desire expresses itself through a steady stream of small contributions.

What makes Treatflation different from most expenses is not its size, but its frequency. A ₹500 contribution rarely attracts attention, but if it occurs just twice a month, it adds up to ₹12,000 a year. Over a 30-year career, the cumulative cost can exceed ₹3.6 lakh. The result is a financial leak that many employees may feel the pinch of, but rarely plug. Viewed differently, the same ₹1,000 invested every month at a 10% annual return could potentially grow to nearly ₹20 lakh over 30 years. When millions of employees across the country repeatedly make thousands of small contributions year after year just to maintain relationships with friends, colleagues and relatives, then culture itself becomes an economic force. Treatflation is simply one of its many manifestations. Economists devote considerable attention to studying how people spend money on consumption, investment and savings. Treatflation reminds us that people also spend money on something less visible: social acceptance and belonging.

In a relationship-oriented society such as India, the cumulative value of such spending may be far greater than we realise. So, the next time a contribution request pops up, perhaps the question should be if the price of belonging is worth the wealth you give up in return. Also, if declining the contribution leaves you feeling left out, the wealth you give up may well be worth the sense of belonging you receive in return. After all, relationships have value too, even if they cannot be measured in monetary terms. The key is to maintain balance and make that trade-off consciously rather than contributing unknowingly.

(The writer is an NISM & CRISIL-certified Wealth Manager and certified in NISM's Research Analyst module)

What are asset allocation funds

THINKINVESTOR

Asset allocation, the proportion of how much you should invest in various asset classes to create a portfolio, is the first step in your investment process

Venkatesh Bangaruswamy

Asset management companies in India can now offer lifecycle funds, a category of funds introduced by SEBI this year. Such funds can hold equity, bonds and commodities. Hybrid funds typically carry equity and bonds.

For our discussion, we refer to all multi-asset-class funds as asset allocation funds. In this article, we discuss the characteristics of such funds and what you should be mindful of before investing in such funds. Asset allocation funds typically have an asset allocation range. Suppose a fund invests in equity and bonds and has an asset allocation range of 65-75% in equity and 25-35% in bonds. This allows fund managers to tactically move between 65% minimum allocation to equity to a maximum allocation of 75%.

Now, asset allocation, the proportion of how much you should invest in various asset classes to create a portfolio, is the first step in your investment process. Importantly, your asset allocation is a function of how important your life goal is. Your children's education portfolio, for instance, may require a conservative allocation (more bonds, less equity) than, say, your retirement portfolio.

By investing in asset allocation funds, you are giving-up the first step in your investment process. This is because fund managers will manage the asset allocation based on the fund's mandate and their view of the asset markets, not based on your life goals. This is not to say that asset allocation funds do not serve a purpose. It is useful if you believe that determining asset allocation for each of your goal is a tedious process. Technically, outsourcing your asset allocation would mean hiring an investment advisor to custom-tailor portfolios to meet your life goals. Asset allocation funds cannot fulfill such objectives.

Asset allocation funds carry some benefits. For one, such funds are tax efficient compared to you separately managing an equity and a bond portfolio for each goal. This is because fund managers moving money between stocks and bonds within the fund will not be taxable for you, unless you sell your units in the fund. For another, you get the benefit of professional expertise. Fund managers are better equipped than us to understand how to tactically move between equity and bonds. But if you prefer bank deposits for your bond allocation, asset allocation funds may not be an optimal fit for your goal-based investment.

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

Bank Fixed Deposit Rates

Bank Name	Interest Rates (%) Highest Slab	1-year Tenure	3-year Tenure	5-year Tenure
Small Finance Banks				
AU Small Finance Bank	7.40	6.35	7.40	6.75
Equitas Small Finance Bank	8.00	7.10	7.10	7.00
ESAF Small Finance Bank	7.75	6.00	6.00	5.75
Jana Small Finance Bank	8.00	7.00	8.00	7.77
Shivalik Small Finance Bank	8.00	6.00	7.50	6.25
slice Small Finance Bank	7.75	6.25	7.50	7.00
Suryoday Small Finance Bank	8.10	7.25	7.25	7.90
Ujjivan Small Finance Bank	7.80	7.25	7.25	7.20
Utkarsh Small Finance Bank	8.10	6.00	7.50	7.00
Private Sector Banks				
Axis Bank	6.45	6.25	6.45	6.45
Bandhan Bank	7.45	7.00	7.25	5.85
City Union Bank	7.25	6.65	6.50	6.55
CSB Bank	7.35	5.00	5.75	5.75
DBS Bank	6.85	6.30	6.40	6.25
DCB Bank	7.50	6.90	7.00	7.50
Federal Bank	6.80	6.25	6.75	6.40
HDFC Bank	6.50	6.25	6.45	6.40
ICICI Bank	6.50	6.25	6.45	6.50
IDFC FIRST Bank	7.35	6.50	7.35	6.75
IndusInd Bank	7.00	6.75	7.00	6.65
Jammu & Kashmir Bank	7.30	6.80	6.70	6.75
IDBI Bank	6.50	6.20	6.35	6.25
Karnataka Bank	7.00	6.50	6.15	6.15
Kotak Mahindra Bank	6.80	6.35	6.40	6.25
RBL Bank	7.20	7.00	7.20	6.70
SBM Bank India	7.85	7.10	7.10	7.00
South Indian Bank	6.80	6.25	6.20	5.70
Tamilnad Mercantile Bank	7.25	6.80	6.70	6.70
YES Bank	7.25	6.65	7.00	6.75
Public Sector Banks				
Bank of Baroda	6.75	6.25	6.25	6.30
Bank of India	6.85	6.50	6.70	6.00
Bank of Maharashtra	6.65	6.40	5.25	5.00
Canara Bank	6.60	6.25	6.25	6.25
Central Bank of India	6.70	6.10	6.00	6.00
Indian Bank	6.80	6.10	6.05	6.00
Indian Overseas Bank	6.60	6.50	6.10	6.10
Punjab National Bank	6.60	6.25	6.30	6.35
Punjab & Sind Bank	6.85	5.85	5.85	5.95
State Bank of India	6.45	6.25	6.30	6.05
Union Bank of India	6.65	6.20	6.10	6.00

Home Loan Interest Rates

(In %)

Name of Lender	Loan Amount (Rs.) Upto 30 lakh	Above 30 lakh & upto 75 lakh	Above 75 lakh
Public Sector Banks			
State Bank of India	7.25-9.05	7.25-9.05	7.25-9.05
Bank of Baroda	7.20-9.00	7.20-9.00	7.20-9.25
Union Bank of India*	7.15-9.60	7.15-9.60	7.15-9.60
Punjab National Bank	7.25-9.25	7.20-9.15	7.20-9.15
Bank of India	7.10-10.00	7.10-10.00	7.10-10.25
Bank of Maharashtra	7.10-9.90	7.10-9.90	7.10-9.90
Punjab and Sind Bank	7.30-10.70	7.30-10.70	7.30-10.70
Indian Overseas Bank	7.20 #	7.20 #	7.20 #
Indian Bank	7.15-9.55	7.15-9.55	7.15-9.55
Central Bank of India	7.10-9.15	7.10-9.15	7.10-9.15
Private Sector Banks			
Kotak Mahindra Bank	7.60 #	7.60 #	7.60 #
ICICI Bank	7.50 #	7.50 #	7.50 #
Axis Bank	8.00-11.90	8.00-11.90	8.00 - 9.10
HSBC Bank	7.45 #	7.45 #	7.45 #
South Indian Bank	7.20 #	7.20 #	7.20 #
Karur Vysya Bank	8.50-10.65	8.50-10.65	8.50-10.65
Karnataka Bank	7.47-11.70	7.47-11.70	7.47-11.70
Federal Bank	8.35 - 10.25	7.35 - 10.25	7.35 - 9.25
Tamilnad Mercantile Bank	7.90 - 9.30	7.90 - 9.30	7.90 - 9.30
Bandhan Bank	8.41-13.38	8.41-13.38	8.41-13.38
RBL Bank	8.20 #	8.20 #	8.20 #
CSB Bank	8.30 #	8.30 #	8.30 #
HDFC Bank	7.75 #	7.75 #	7.75 #
City Union Bank	8.25-9.50	8.50-10.00	8.75-10.50
Housing Finance Companies (HFCs)			
LIC Housing Finance	7.15 #	7.15 #	7.15 #
Bajaj Housing Finance	7.25 #	7.25 #	7.25 #
Tata Capital	8.00 #	8.00 #	8.00 #
PNB Housing Finance	7.50 #	7.50 #	7.50 #
GIC Housing Finance	8.20 #	8.20 #	8.20 #
SMFG India Home Finance	9.25 #	9.25 #	9.25 #
Sammaan Capital	8.75 #	8.75 #	8.75 #
Aditya Birla Capital	7.75 #	7.75 #	7.75 #
ICICI Home Finance	7.50 #	7.50 #	7.50 #
Godrej Housing Finance	7.65 #	7.65 #	7.65 #

*Extra 0.05% rate concession to borrowers taking insurance
Rates as on July 24 #Onwards Source:Paisabazaar.com

How NDR built a warehouse empire

MD Amrutesh Reddy cites the introduction of GST as the turning point for the warehousing industry. BIJOY GHOSH

T E Raja Simhan

India's warehousing sector has transformed dramatically over the past decade, driven by the roll-out of GST, rapid growth in e-commerce, rising consumption and the formalisation of supply chains. Among the companies that have capitalised on this shift is the Chennai-based NDR Group, which launched nearly six decades ago with a rice mill and has evolved into one of the country's largest warehousing platforms.

The group's development arm, NDR Smart Spaces, is currently constructing around 7 million sq. ft of space across the warehousing and industrial park segments. This is part of a 13 million sq. ft land and development pipeline scheduled for eventual transfer to the group's infrastructure investment trust (NDR InvIT), valued at ₹6,650 crore, says N. Amrutesh Reddy, MD, NDR Warehousing Pvt Ltd.

The rice mills set up in the 1960s by the company's founder, Naidu Dasaradharami Reddy, ran only during the crop seasons and the storage space remained idle for a significant part of the year. Fertiliser companies began using the space during the off-season, creating an opportunity that eventually developed into a dedicated warehousing business.

Mr. Reddy credits his father and group Chairman, Adikesavulu (son of Dasaradharami), for the growth of Continental Warehousing, the group's integrated multimodal logistics company. Today, their focus is on the free trade warehousing zone (FTWZ) business under NDR Infrastructure Pvt. Ltd., he says.

He cites the introduction of GST as the turning point for the country's warehousing industry. In the absence of GST, companies maintained warehouses across multiple states largely for tax optimisation. GST enabled businesses to redesign supply chains around fewer, larger regional distribution centres, he says. This helped reduce inventory and transportation costs while improving operational efficiency.

Anticipating this shift, NDR had focused on developing large, compliant warehousing facilities in major consumption hubs. As demand for regional distribution centres increased, the company's warehousing portfolio expanded sharply from around 3 million sq. ft in 2016 to more than 21 million sq. ft within seven years.

The group's growth received a further boost in 2021 when global asset manager Investcorp invested about ₹300 crore to accelerate the expansion of the platform's logistics infrastructure. It hit a major milestone in February 2024 with the launch of India's first listed warehousing InvIT, with 17 million sq ft of completed warehousing space and around 2 million sq ft under development – cumulatively valued at ₹3,800 crore. Since then, acquisitions and business expansion have significantly increased the platform's scale.

The InvIT now manages around 22 million sq ft of warehousing and industrial assets, serving over 100 customers, with no single client contributing more than 5% of revenue. The company recently raised around ₹800 crore from institutional investors for more acquisitions.

(The writer is with The Hindu businessline)

How smart tech is replacing oily tawas

The shift is led by consumers who want convenience, wellness and personalisation even as household chores transition to becoming gender-neutral; the advent of robotics and Artificial Intelligence in home appliances is, in turn, reshaping the strategies of consumer appliance makers

NEWS ANALYSIS

Meenakshi Verma Ambwani

The rhythmic beeps of air fryers are slowly overtaking the ubiquitous whistles of pressure cookers in Indian households. Smart tech is replacing the greasy *tawa*.

From induction cooktops to electric pressure cookers and all-in-one robotic and smart cooking appliances, the assortment on kitchen countertops is changing. The shift is led by consumers who want convenience, wellness and personalisation even as household chores transition to becoming gender-neutral. The advent of robotics and AI in home appliances is, in turn, reshaping the strategies of consumer appliance makers.

Anil Dua, COO, Usha International, says there is a clear evolution in how younger consumers approach kitchen appliances today. "While earlier purchase decisions were driven primarily by functionality and durability, today's consumers are looking for solutions that align with their preferences around health and everyday efficiency." He adds that Usha is witnessing a strong growth in demand for induction cooktops, iChef range of air fryers, blender heater, steam ovens, electric pressure cooker, programmable electric kettle and Trienergy+ mixer grinders.

The flip side: Automation alone cannot woo Indian consumers. Perhaps this is why the microwave segment's penetration remains low. GETTYIMAGES/ISTOCK

Appliance makers say Indian consumers are increasingly seeking products that are multi-functional, sleeker, more compact and quieter.

Pooja Baid, Chief Marketing Officer, Versuni India, points out that young consumers are no longer buying appliances but buying outcomes and experiences. Inspired by digital content and global cuisines, Gen Z and millennial consumers are seeking convenience, wellness, versatility and an ability to experiment with food.

But this does not mean they are giving up their quest for authentic flavours and traditional textures. For instance, the air fryer has become so popular in Indian homes because not only does it reduce oil consumption but also preserves the taste and texture of samosas and kebabs, argues Ms. Baid.

> Consumers no longer want clunky machines hidden away in cabinets but beautiful and compact appliances that look great
>
> **RAVI SAXENA,** Founder and CEO, Wonderchef

"One of our biggest learnings came when we introduced Philips air fryers in India. While the technology offered a healthier alternative to deep frying, consumers kept asking us a simple question: "Can it make a good samosa?" People were not looking to replace their favourite foods – they wanted a healthier way to enjoy them," she adds.

Moreover, automation alone cannot woo Indian consumers. Perhaps this is why the microwave segment's penetration remains low.

Flavours and trends

On the rationale behind the launch of the all-in-one OneChef that can air-fry, stir-fry, roast, bake and steam, Baid says, "India is perhaps the world's most passionate biryani market. Biryani preparation involves multiple appliances and several stages, and the recipe changes every few hundred kilometres. Consumers want a simpler way to prepare these dishes at home without compromising authenticity. OneChef was born from that insight."

Ravi Saxena, founder and CEO, Wonderchef, says the transformation is "structural and generation-led", as consumers no longer want clunky machines hidden away in cabinets but beautiful and compact appliances that look great on open-kitchen countertops. Cookware earlier accounted for 70% of Wonderchef's revenues, but today appliances are the primary growth driver.

"We have localised smart technology with Chef Magic, our all-in-one kitchen robot, and Chai Magic, the world's first automatic tea maker. We will continue to pioneer the smart appliance layer," he adds.

Asna Khursheed, General Manager-E-commerce and Marketing, INALSA Home Appliances says, "Indian consumers are demonstrating a growing willingness to trade up. Appliances in the mid- to premium-price range are growing in demand significantly faster than those at entry-level tier, and we see substantial headroom in variants with superior build, design, and smart features."

Zero-labour homes

AI is a major change factor. LG Electronics is championing a Zero Labour Homes concept, where intelligent machines will handle everyday chores. At CES 2026, it showcased LG CLOiD, an AI-powered home robot for handling household tasks like cooking and laundry, powered by the LG ThinQ ecosystem.

"LG already has extensive experience and expertise in this space. This gives us strong capabilities not only in hardware, but also the software and user experience required to seamlessly integrate robots into daily life," Youngjae Kim, Leader of Robotics Platform Advanced Research Task, LG Electronics, told *businessline*.

He next foresees the entry of humanoid robots in the kitchen. Quick commerce platforms are reflecting this changing demand landscape in kitchen appliances.

"Platforms like Blinkit, Instamart, and Zepto, are contributing over a third of our online sales. Buying a kitchen appliance used to be a highly deliberated, multi-weekend family errand. Today, the decision window has shrunk considerably. A consumer decides they want a healthy smoothie or an air-fried dinner, opens an app, and a Wonderchef appliance arrives in 10 to 15 minutes. Urban consumers value instant gratification so highly that they are comfortable making high-ticket durable purchases in a split-second, mobile-first environment," sums up Mr. Saxena of Wonderchef.

(The writer is with The Hindu businessline and was in Korea at the invitation of LG)

How football has inspired marketers over the years

Harish Bhat

The ongoing FIFA football World Cup brought up a charming old memory – me as a young boy in the 1970s, eating ice cream from a football-shaped plastic container. This was popularly called "ball ice-cream" and marketed by Joy Ice Creams. After eating this delicious treat, I would carefully preserve the plastic football, and dream about the legendary Brazilian footballer Pele.

Limited edition: This year, Coca-Cola has launched bottles shaped like soccer balls, adorned with geometric patterns. BY ARRANGEMENT

My childhood ball ice-cream indulgence is just one example of hundreds of brands that have been inspired by football, the beautiful game that is watched by around 5 billion people across the world. First and foremost are the products such as shoes, which are integral to playing the game. Global brands such as Adidas, Puma and Nike are wedded to football, each in their own way. Take Adidas, for instance. Ever since its founder, Adi Dassler, equipped the German football team with revolutionary lightweight boots featuring screwed-in studs, Adidas has been part of the legend of this game.

The Adidas Samba shoe, designed to help footballers train on hard surfaces, has sold over 35 million pairs worldwide. The Puma King and Nike Phantom offer similar stories of football inspiration.

Then there are the brands that may not have a direct functional connect with football, but ride the bandwagon smartly.

Many use advertising as the key connection – for instance, Apple's celebrated advertisement featuring Lionel Messi, or Samsung's advertisements for its Galaxy 11 phones. Closer home, Tata Motors and Tata Power have both used football beautifully in their advertising.

I am most intrigued by brands that have used packaging innovatively to signal their football connect. This year, Coca-Cola has launched bottles shaped like soccer balls, and adorned with bold geometric patterns. These limited edition bottles have become highly desired keepsakes. Tesco, the global groceries and general merchandise retailer, has wrapped lettuces in a clear packaging with hexagonal prints, making the whole resemble a football. What lovely ideas!

Labels promoted by famous footballers constitute yet another stream of brands that ride the fame of this game. Christiano Ronaldo has his famous CR7 brand spanning apparel and shoes, and since expanded to hotels and gymnasiums. David Beckham has his grooming line House 99, launched in partnership with global beauty brand L'Oreal. Apart from hair and skincare, the line interestingly also features beard care and tattoo care products, which smartly reflect Beckham's personality. Lionel Messi has entered the world of fashion with The Messi Store, which offers premium garments with a sporty feel.

Then there are the football teams and clubs, which are globally famous brands themselves. Real Madrid, FC Barcelona and Manchester United are perhaps the most popular and have huge followings – Real Madrid, for instance, has over 600 million followers on its social media channels. Their branded merchandise, including football jerseys, are hugely sought after and command premium pricing. They also earn significant amounts of money from sponsorship tie-ups with other brands, broadcast and media rights for their games, and ticket sales.

(Harish Bhat is an avid marketer and bestselling author)

Gujarati blockbuster *Laalo*'s word-of-mouth triumph

Naveen Chandra

The power of talk in building excitement for a regional film, making it an improbable hit

Films lead an incredibly chaotic, short life. No other product sees as much intense competition for survival as films do. Every week there's a new film that threatens to draw audiences away from the films released the previous week.

Most films, therefore, front-load their marketing effort with advance bookings, meet-and-greets with the stars, premieres, and special screenings to build a big opening weekend at the box office. Generally they achieve predictable results. A good Friday leading into more tickets sold on Saturday, and peaking on Sunday before tapering off during the week for a repeat in the coming week, but with subdued numbers, as theatres give away more screens to newer films.

Consider the daily box-office collection of *Dhurandar 1* and *2*. A similar chart, except that the large number of people who saw the first part created much buzz and drew even more numbers for the sequel, giving it a much higher opening. But the blistering start tapered off within two weeks, as expected.

Reversing the script

The sleeper hit Gujarati film *Laalo: Krishna Sada Sahaayate*, however, followed a different curve. The story of an autorickshaw driver who encounters Lord Krishna as he tries to manage his miserable life, made on a tight budget of ₹50 lakh, grossed an incredible ₹120 crore at the box office.

Highest grossing: On day 30, it clocked ₹13 crore at the box office, a record single-day collection for a Gujarati film. BY ARRANGEMENT

The day-wise collection chart shows an inexplicable porcupine-shaped behaviour. For nearly 19 days after its release across 280 screens there wasn't any collection, and it had been removed from most screens, crashing to a low of seven screens on day 5, with occupancy less than 10%. For the next week the film's director, Ankit Sakhiya, booked 15-16 shows every day and started showing the film to select audiences. Since these were closed audience sets, the occupancy clocked 65-70% during the week.

The people who watched it spread great word-of-mouth praise about the film. PVR and other theatres waived the virtual print fee (VPF) that the producer pays theatres to exhibit the film, substantially reducing the cost of distribution.

On day 18, incredibly, the shows picked up to 40 and, by day 20, *Laalo* was playing in 100s of theatres. On day 30, it crossed 2,500 shows with a 70% occupancy and clocked ₹13 crore at the box office – a record single-day collection for a Gujarati film.

There's been no comparable example of such a performance by a film, given that it wasn't dubbed or sub-titled in any other language. Months later, when the producers dubbed and released the film in Hindi, the tacky production values got them a tepid response.

It catalysed *Deolband 2*, a Marathi adaptation of *Laalo* with a similar storyline, which collected ₹80 crore across over 500 shows in its fourth week.

Other than possibly Lord Krishna's hand in the film's tremendous success, there are two interesting aspects to it. One is the role of strong word-of-mouth buzz about the film, which gave it more screens as the weeks went by. Second, the poor performance of the films released in the subsequent weeks made survival easier.

Similarly, Imtiaz Ali's new film, *Main Vaapas Aaunga*, opened with a whimper, collecting just ₹1.5crore on the first day and ending the first week with ₹6 crore, an abysmal low for a Hindi film. In an incredible turnaround, collections surged to ₹15 crore in the second week, reaching ₹30 crore by day 10, following solid word-of-mouth recommendation.

When a film becomes widely discussed online, people feel pressure to watch it simply to participate in conversations. Remember how the videos of audiences crying while watching the film *Saiyaara* became so much of a pull that if you hadn't seen the movie then you were out of the social chatter.

Laalo is a low-budget film with low production values. But the universal problem of poverty, debt, relationship issues, the Junagadh landscape, the fight between greed and honesty, and the advice of Lord Krishna touched an emotional chord.

The film had travelled beyond its core audience. When a film becomes popular, its popularity itself becomes a marketing tool.

(Naveen Chandra is the founder and CEO of 91 Film Studios, a Mumbai-based company that produces and distributes regional language feature films)

RIYADH

14 nationals killed in helicopter crash in Saudi Arabia: state media

REUTERS

A helicopter crash in Saudi Arabia killed 14 Saudi citizens on Sunday, the kingdom's official press agency reported, adding that the aircraft belonged to state oil giant Aramco. The helicopter crashed in Ras Tanura in the country's east. The Saudi Press Agency said that an investigation was under way. AFP

NEW DELHI

Ousted leader Sheikh Hasina vows to return to Bangladesh 'this year'

AP

Bangladesh's fugitive former leader Sheikh Hasina who fled to India in 2024 after a student-led uprising has vowed to return to her country "this year", according to an interview published on Sunday. "I want to say clearly: overcoming every conspiracy [against me], I will return to my country this year," she told broadcaster NDTV. AFP

JERUSALEM

Israel approves landmark proposal to recognise Armenian genocide

AP

Israel on Sunday recognised the massacres of Armenians during the First World War as genocide, a move seen as a rebuke to Turkey. "The Cabinet has approved the proposal to recognise the Armenian genocide," Israel's Foreign Ministry said. Armenians seek recognition of the mass killings under the Ottoman Empire as genocide. AP

TOMBLAINE

Skydiving plane crash in eastern France kills all 11 people aboard

REUTERS

A skydiving plane crashed on Sunday in eastern France, killing all 11 people aboard, local authorities said. The crash in the town of Tomblaine killed five instructors, five nursing students and the pilot. The incident is "the most serious general aviation accident in terms of loss of life", according to France's BEA aviation safety agency. AFP

Iran attacks Bahrain and Kuwait after U.S. air strikes, threatens to halt talks

IRGC strikes target Gulf nations hosting U.S. military; U.S. Central Command says it struck key Iranian military infrastructure after Saturday's ship attack; Araghchi says any attempt to bypass arrangements in Hormuz will lead to 'increase in tensions'

Associated Press
DUBAI

Iran again launched drone and missile attacks on Sunday targeting Bahrain and Kuwait in response to new U.S. airstrikes against the Islamic Republic, and threatened a "complete halt" in negotiations to end the war if Washington continues its attacks.

Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard (IRGC) claimed responsibility for the attacks in Bahrain and Kuwait.

Kuwait's military said air defences intercepted Iranian drones and missiles just after the U.S. strikes in Iran. Kuwait, which hosts a major U.S. military base, said it intercepted two ballistic missiles.

In ruins: Rescue personnel work in a residential building hit by an alleged Iranian drone in Muharraq, Bahrain on Sunday. REUTERS

Bahrain's Interior Ministry said the Iranian strikes damaged a residential building near the international airport. Bahrain is home to the U.S. Navy's 5th Fleet, whose base came under repeated attack during the war.

The U.S. military's Central Command said it struck Iranian military "surveillance infrastructure, communication systems, air defence sites, drone storage facilities and minelayer capabilities" following an attack on a ship at sea on Saturday.

Trump threats

Meanwhile, U.S. President Donald Trump on social media accused Iran of violating the ceasefire and warned of a point where the U.S. may no longer be reasonable "and will be forced to militarily complete the job."

"If that happens, the Islamic Republic of Iran will no longer exist!" Mr. Trump wrote.

Efforts to reopen the Strait of Hormuz without Iran's direct oversight sparked the days of crossfire and have imperilled the talks for a lasting ceasefire.

Iran insists that it alone must govern the strait, the narrow mouth of the Persian Gulf that once carried a fifth of the world's oil and natural gas.

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi reiterated the claim on Sunday.

"Any attempt to establish new or separate arrangements from those currently being carried out by the Islamic Republic of Iran will only lead to further complications, delay the reopening of the Strait of Hormuz and increase the level of tension," Mr. Araghchi said.

Israel strikes south Lebanon despite framework accord

Agence France-Presse
BEIRUT

Israel renewed its strikes on Lebanon on Sunday, Lebanese state media reported, two days after an agreement was signed by the two countries, which a Hezbollah lawmaker warned would lead to "internal conflict".

The strikes come a day after one person was killed in an Israeli strike on the south, according to Lebanon's Health Ministry, with the Israeli military saying it targeted Hezbollah members near its self-proclaimed "security zone", which reaches 10 kilometres into Lebanon.

Lebanon's state-run National News Agency (NNA) reported several strikes on Sunday.

The Israeli Army said a soldier "fell in combat" in southern Lebanon. In a later statement, Israeli military chief Eyal Zamir approved plans for "continued operations in the security zone, in accordance with the ceasefire agreement".

Status quo: An Israeli flag hoisted atop a destroyed building in southern Lebanon on Sunday. AP

Lebanese President Joseph Aoun said on Saturday that his country "would assume its responsibilities" in implementing the framework agreement.

Hezbollah lawmaker Hassan Fadlallah said on Sunday that "the agreement of humiliation and disgrace signed by the authorities will never see the light of day".

He added that what "the authorities have done amounts to sedition aimed at pushing the country into chaos and shifting the conflict from one with the enemy to an internal conflict".

Stolen mornings

A boy sleeps outside earthquake-damaged homes in Catia La Mar, Venezuela on Sunday. Interim Venezuelan President Delcy Rodriguez said on Sunday the number of deaths has reached 1,450. The United Nations has estimated that some 50,000 people are missing. Twenty-four countries have sent crucial supplies, dog units and search-and-rescue personnel to locate people trapped beneath the rubble. AP

Over 1,300 excess deaths reported as record heatwave roasts Europe

Agence France-Presse
GENEVA

The World Health Organization said on Sunday that over 1,300 excess deaths had been recorded in Europe since June 21 in connection with the record-breaking heatwave roasting much of the continent.

The heat remained intense across central and eastern Europe, with the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland hit hard as temperatures soared and records fell.

At least 191 million Europeans were expected to face temperatures above 35 degree Celsius during the day, according to AFP estimates.

France worst affected

On Sunday morning, French health officials said there had been around 1,000 more deaths than expected in their country just since Wednesday. Many of those fatalities are among those aged 65 and over, they said.

Cold respite: Authorities use water cannon to spray people with water in Berlin, Germany, on Sunday amid a deadly heatwave. AFP

And across Europe, "more than 1,300 excess deaths have been recorded since June 21", WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said on X.

"Heat stress is often called the 'silent killer' - and European homes, workplaces and schools were not built for these temperatures," he said.

A total of 381 million people in Europe, excluding Turkey, will see temperatures surpass 30 degree Celsius, according to analysis based on forecasts from the German Meteorological Service and 2025 population projections from the Joint Research Centre collated by Austrian NGO Klimadashboard.

Millions of people across the continent are currently "living under extreme heat, hundreds have died, schools are shut, grids are buckling", Mr. Tedros warned.

"Driven by climate change and global warming, the phenomenon of the 'once-in-a-generation' heatwave is now occurring nearly annual," he said, pointing out that "Europe is the fastest-warming continent on Earth, heating at twice the global average".

He called on European countries to "implement heat health action plans", as part of a push to safeguard health in the face of climate change.

Non-independence parties make gains in New Caledonia polls

Reuters
SYDNEY

New Caledonia's non-independence coalition won the most seats of any single grouping, 24 out of 54 available, preliminary results released by officials showed, in long-delayed provincial elections which were held amid tight security on Sunday.

The outcome of the elections, delayed since 2024 after New Caledonia was hit by violent unrest between indigenous Kanaksand French loyalists, is key in shaping future talks with France on the territory's status.

The group of islands in the southwest Pacific has around 270,000 inhabitants, including 41% Melanesian Kanak and 24% of European origin, mostly French. Three independence referendums, including the most recent in 2021, returned majorities in favour of remaining part of France.

Sunday's voter turnout stood at 63.71%. Final results are expected on Monday.

Two killed, major oil refinery damaged in Russia as Ukraine keeps up assault

Associated Press
KYIV

Ukraine kept up its heavy drone assault on Russia, setting fire to a major oil refinery in the south and killing at least two people, Russian authorities said on Sunday.

Ukraine has markedly stepped up its long-range attacks on Russian military industries and energy facilities in recent months, aiming to cut Moscow's revenue for its invasion – now in its fifth year.

Debris from downed Ukrainian drones sparked a blaze at the refinery in Slavyansk-na-Kubani, a town in Russia's Krasnodar region. The falling debris killed one person in Slavyansk, according to regional authorities.

Vladimir Putin says Russia will overcome security challenges during his speech at a congress of the United Russia party. REUTERS

The Slavyansk site is one of southern Russia's major refineries, processing close to 4 million tons of crude per year.

Ukrainian drone strikes killed one person in Russia's Belgorod region.

Russian President Vladimir Putin on Sunday vowed to ensure security and overcome challenges.

"Yes, we see the problems, we are aware and are responding to them, but we will certainly ensure the security of both the country and our citizens, as well as the inviolability of Russia's borders," Mr. Putin said at the United Russia party congress.

Russia attacked Ukraine with 142 long-range strike drones and eight missiles overnight, according to the Ukrainian air force.

Iraqi officials held in anti-corruption drive; raids in Green Zone

Agence France-Presse
BAGHDAD

Iraqi security forces launched raids in Baghdad's fortified Green Zone on Sunday to arrest officials including MPs suspected of corruption, amid heavy deployment in the area.

The Green Zone houses the U.S. Embassy and other diplomatic missions, as well as international institutions and government offices.

The large-scale raids, which included other neighbourhoods in Baghdad as well, were aimed at arresting senior Iraqi officials and politicians.

Iraq's news agency (INA) quoted a senior official as saying that "several suspects accused of corruption have been arrested". The official added that the arrests "involved members of Parliament whose immunity was removed," as well as other officials.

Iraq's new Prime Minister Ali al-Zaidi has vowed to fight corruption and mismanagement that have plagued Iraq for decades.

Cages to care: Dogs rescued from slaughter facilities at an animal shelter in Paju, South Korea. AFP

Canines disappear before a dog meat ban in South Korea

Agence France Presse
PYEONGTAEK

Electric prods rest against the wall near rusty cages containing dog skulls in an abandoned canine slaughterhouse in a South Korean town.

The deserted site in Pyeongtaek, south of Seoul, offers a glimpse into an industry rapidly disappearing as South Korea's landmark dog meat ban enters into force next year. It also begs a question: what happened to the hundreds of thousands of dogs once bred for human consumption?

Historically regarded as a summer stamina booster – particularly among older and rural people – dog meat has steadily fallen out of favour as younger Koreans embrace dogs as pets and public attitudes shift.

In January 2024, the country passed a law banning the breeding, slaughter and sale of dogs for food. Once it takes effect next February, violators will risk prison sentences of up to three years.

As the ban looms, the industry is disappearing much faster than many expected.

Government figures show between 4,00,000 and 4,50,000 dogs were being raised for meat in 2024. Today, the Agriculture Ministry estimates just 20,000 are on farms. To help farmers transition, the government offered up to 6,00,000 won (about $390) for every dog they got rid of. But where the animals went was not tracked.

Data obtained by a lawmaker showed that by February just 623 dogs had been adopted, and just under 500 were sent to shelters.

Most of the rest were likely killed, animal welfare groups and former farmers believe.

"If large numbers of rescued dogs had entered adoption programmes, animal groups like us would know about them," said Kim Young-hwan, a representative of animal rights group CARE.

China's role in Bangladesh's Teesta plans, and India's strategic worries

Following discussions last week over a Teesta project in Bangladesh, China is expected to expedite a feasibility study for a plan aimed at turning the river into an artery of economic development; the increased Chinese presence so close to a sensitive Indian region has raised eyebrows in New Delhi

NEWS ANALYSIS

Kallol Bhattacherjee

Bangladesh Prime Minister Tarique Rahman has received assurance from China on building the Teesta River Comprehensive Management and Restoration Project. The discussion in this regard took place when Mr. Rahman visited Beijing during June 24-26 and met top Chinese officials, including Premier Li Qiang, President Xi Jinping and Chinese Water Resources Minister Li Guoying.

China has harvested its major rivers for power generation and irrigation, and is considered a major dam builder among the world powers. It is expected to expedite a feasibility study of the Teesta project that aims to change the physical nature of the Teesta inside Bangladesh and turn it into an artery of economic development.

Bangladesh has been in talks with China about managing and developing the Teesta river region for nearly a decade, and the discussion has spanned the government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, which has been taken forward by the current government of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party.

In January this year, under the interim government led by Prof. Mohammed Yunus, Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) and the Chinese state-owned power generation company POWERCHINA signed an extension to an MoU that revived the Bangladesh-China cooperation on the river.

The original MoU in this project was signed in 2016 under the Sheikh Hasina government, which had suggested river bank erosion control, flood management, disaster reduction, land reclamation, transportation and environment preservation as some of the features of China's plans for Teesta.

Massive plans

The MoU included dredging of 140 million cubic metres of riverine sediment, reclamation of 171 square km of land, repairing of 110 km of embankment, constructing 124 km of new embankments and developing 224 km of road network. The project would lead to building of 82 jetty facilities along the Teesta. As a lower riparian project, the Chinese plans cannot disrupt the Teesta upstream in India and it aims to create conditions for Bangladesh to better utilise the water that it gets from India at present.

Teesta's water is essential for the farmers of northern Bangladesh, covering districts like Nilphamari, Rangpur, Dinajpur, Bogura, Joypurhat and Gaibandha. Bangladesh's main complaint is that Teesta's water reduces to a trickle in the winter months between December and February, when water is required for sowing of paddy and vegetables.

Diplomatic outreach: Tarique Rahman arrives for a meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing on Friday. REUTERS

To deal with its water requirements, Bangladesh built the Teesta Barrage, the largest irrigation project of the country, in the 1990s. The Teesta Barrage Irrigation Project (TBIP) was built to help the northern region of Bangladesh, as it had a history of being hit by Teesta's floods, followed by a long spell of dry season, both of which used to disturb the local agricultural cycle.

India has built barrages and electricity projects upstream in the Teesta that allow it to harvest Teesta's waters for requirements in West Bengal, Sikkim and Assam. Most prominent among these is the barrage in Gajoldoba in West Bengal, which is a major irrigation project that is controlled by West Bengal.

Whenever India holds water for its needs in Gajoldoba or in power generation units in Sikkim, Bangladesh claims that the part of the Teesta on its side goes low on water. For example, last year in November, TBIP had to shut all its gates as the water flow on the Teesta had reduced. The TBIP is used to store water for nearly 55,000 hectares of land, but the reduction of water on the river causes concern for it as lack of water affects both irrigation as well as commercial activities on the river.

Teesta originates from the spectacular high altitude Cholamu or Tso Lhamu Lake (5100 metres) in the Himalayan range in Sikkim. As the river flows down, it gathers volume from multiple glaciers and streams, and India has built multiple power generation projects on the river.

Deal with India

Bangladesh's main demand from India has been getting what it considers to be a fair share of the Teesta's water so that the irrigation project in North Bangladesh can run smoothly.

The two sides had negotiated the issue of sharing of Teesta's water for decades, and it was taken up again in 2010 when India prepared a set of principles for sharing of Teesta's water, and the two sides agreed to an interim deal.

However, the agreement was not sealed when Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited Dhaka in 2011, mainly because of objections from Mamata Banerjee, who had spoken about the matter during her election rallies that year.

Ms. Banerjee became Chief Minister that year after defeating the Left.

A joint statement issued on September 7, 2011, in Dhaka said, "The two Prime Ministers welcomed that there has been progress on the principles and modalities of interim agreements on sharing of waters of Teesta and Feni Rivers on a fair and equitable basis. They directed the concerned officials to work towards concluding the agreements at the earliest." At the end, it was clear that Kolkata's objection prevailed over Delhi's plans. Subsequently, Sheikh Hasina repeatedly raised the issue during her visits to Delhi and discussed this matter in June 2024 when a technical committee was planned to take the matter forward.

Before that visit, Foreign Secretary Vinay Kwatra had visited Dhaka and conveyed the Indian offer of financing the $1 billion project to dredge and manage the Teesta in Bangladesh. That was the last attempt by India to deal with the issue, as the two sides did not discuss the matter during the 15-month-long interim rule in Dhaka, which was followed by the BNP government led by Prime Minister Rahman.

The area of Nilphamari and Rangpur is near Jalpaiguri of India, which is where the "chicken's neck" is located. POWERCHINA, which has revived the MoU with Bangladesh, is a large organisation experienced in river projects, but it is also related to the strategic sectors of China.

Stationing a large number of Chinese professionals so close to a sensitive area of India will raise eyebrows in India. However, Bangladesh has several internationally supported projects, including the Ruppur nuclear power plant that has engineers and technicians from multiple countries, including Russia and Ukraine.

An electric touch

Bolt from the blue: After a week of record-breaking temperatures, lightning strikes the iconic Eiffel Tower during a thunderstorm in Paris. French weather authorities have issued thunderstorm alerts in the capital city. AFP

Trump's proposal to pit Syria against Hezbollah unsettles Lebanon, Israel

Associated Press
BEIRUT

As the White House has soured on Israel's war with Hezbollah in Lebanon, U.S. President Donald Trump has shocked many in the region by pushing an alternative: let Syria fight the Iran-backed militant group instead.

He has suggested that the battle-hardened and Islamist-led insurgents who overthrew Syria's autocratic President Bashar Assad a year and a half ago and formed a new government would do a better job of rooting out Hezbollah than the Israeli Army.

Syrian President Ahmad al-Sharaa has said he has no interest in doing so, and has asserted that Mr. Trump's comments were misconstrued. But Mr. Trump has doubled down on the idea.

Balancing act: Syrian President Ahmad al-Sharaa has rejected suggestions that Syria plans to intervene in Lebanon. AP

The prospect of a Syrian invasion has raised alarms in Lebanon – and also in Israel, which regards Mr. al-Sharaa's Islamist-led government with suspicion and has seized control of a strip of southern Syria since he took power.

Syria has also become the site of rising tensions between Israel and Turkey – a main backer of Mr. al-Sharaa's government – with each seeking to limit the other's influence in the neighbouring country.

Top Israeli security officials convened a meeting on the subject on Wednesday, according to an official.

Syrian officials scrambled to do damage control. In a speech in Damascus on June 13, al-Sharaa said, "There are people spreading rumors that Syria will intervene in Lebanon. This is not true. We are calling for a permanent end to the war."

Mr. Trump "spoke about Syria's role in finding a safe and peaceful solution, but the statement was misinterpreted as if Syria were going to invade Lebanon tomorrow morning," Mr. al-Sharaa said.

The official who spoke anonymously said while Israel is closely watching developments between Syria and Lebanon, its main concern is Hezbollah.

Inside Albania's 'Flamingo Revolution' against a Kushner-linked development

Associated Press
TIRANA

Albania's rallies against a coastal development project have garnered global attention, both for their connection to Donald Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner and because of their curious mascot.

The luxury project has two components: a small resort on the uninhabited island of Sazan and a coastal development in the nearby Narta Lagoon area, which is a wildlife reserve frequented by wetland species including flamingos.

Every evening for weeks, protesters have marched by the thousands in the capital Tirana, holding up cut-outs of flamingos. The result has been a nickname for their fledgling movement: "The Flamingo Revolution."

Here are some of its members.

Fatma Paja, 28, lives in Tirana and runs a creative studio with her two sisters. She's part of a group of artists who created the cut-out flamingos that have become a fixture at the nightly rallies.

"I have long used art as a means to express the injustices and dissatisfaction associated with everyday civilian life in Albania," Paja told *AP* on Friday.

Ms. Paja's group also organises drawing and colouring activities for children during the protest, so that willing parents are able to join.

At the demonstrations, she leads chants through a loudspeaker. "Albania is not for sale!" she shouts, and "Don't touch Narta!"

The project has sparked outrage because of the location's pristine nature and unique habitat that would be irreversibly devastated, according to environmentalists.

Citizens are demanding the project's halt, citing a lack of transparency and concerns that in many similar projects environmental standards were not met.

"I am against a pro-elitist project that is blocking a fully protected area and destroying it," Ms. Paja said. "It is a project that has no legal basis and has not been supported by any study on the damage it would cause to the environment and nature." She said she is optimistic, believing the protest has already produced results.

"This protest has motivated people to speak up and react," she said, adding that, because it was not affiliated with political parties, it fostered trust and solidarity.

Colourful dissent: Protesters hold flamingo-shaped placards as they demonstrate against the government in Albania. REUTERS

Although unaffiliated with a specific party, protesters are almost universally calling for the resignation of Prime Minister Edi Rama.

Arben Kola, one of the first protesters in the "Flamingo Revolution," has worked as a tour guide for more than a decade. He takes visitors to historic and nature sites around Albania – including the area around the prospective development.

Tourism in Albania has seen a sharp increase in recent years, with people relishing the nation's vast, undeveloped coastline. Among those who have been impressed were Mr. Kushner and Mr.Trump's daughter, Ivanka Trump. She explained on a podcast last month that they discovered the site of the planned development while on a friend's boat and stopping for a swim.

It was yet another example, for Kola, of the government abusing its power, and he couldn't stomach it any longer. He joined the nascent protest movement when it was just getting started.

"Albania is facing a high level of corruption, with the privatisation and giveaway of land, beaches, valleys and rivers," the 46-year-old said in an interview while leading a tour group through Tirana.

Albania's anti-corruption agency has opened an investigation related to the project. The government says the land is privately owned, but rival claims over its privatisation have emerged.

In an interview with the *AP* this month, Mr. Rama dismissed environmental objections as the result of misinformation and said the development was turning Albania from a country once ignored by investors into one "where the big capital wants to come and the big investors want to come."

It is unclear exactly what Mr. Kushner's investment role is in the project's development, but Mr. Rama confirmed his involvement. The Prime Minister said a formal environmental impact assessment has not started because the plan for the development has not been finalised. He said international architects and environmental specialists are still shaping the proposal.

Mr. Kola says it looks to him like the project is already moving full steam ahead. He is furious that work has already begun to clear land inside a nature reserve with excavators and other heavy machinery. Today, Mr. Kola is one of the people who organises the crowds by speaking to them on a loudspeaker. He's still floored by just how much the demonstrations have grown.

"We didn't believe the protest would reach this size," he said, adding that people repeatedly ask him whether the movement will continue. "It depends on the people," he says.

WIN-WIN SITUATION

Austria and Algeria advance after playing out a thrilling draw

REUTERS

Austria and Algeria played out a thrilling 3-3 draw in Kansas City on Saturday in what amounted to a win-win result in their World Cup Group J finale. It allowed both to progress to the round of 32 while eliminating Iran from the tournament. Iran would have advanced as one of the eight best third-placed teams had Austria or Algeria won.

AGEING LIKE FINE WINE

Modric becomes oldest assist provider at the marquee event

REUTERS

Veteran midfielder Luka Modric continues to defy age. At 40 years and 291 days, Croatia captain Modric became the oldest player on record — since 1966 — to register an assist at a World Cup. He delivered the decisive corner that Nikola Vlasic headed home in the 83rd minute to seal the Group L victory over Ghana.

BONUS POINT

India exacts revenge on England in penalty shootout in Pro League

WORLDSPORTPICS

India beat England 3-2 in a penalty shootout after a goalless draw in the return leg of the Hockey Pro League in London on Sunday. Abhishek, Shilanand Lakra and Hardik Singh converted in the shootout as India secured the bonus point with a composed display. Zachary Wallace and David Goodfield scored for England.

ON THE CHARGE

Rachin and Mitchell shine as New Zealand eyes series victory

AFP

England captain Ben Stokes' prospects of a victorious farewell were slim as New Zealand closed in on a series win in Nottingham. England was 103 for four at stumps on day four. **The scores:** New Zealand 438 & 234/8 decl. in 83 overs (Rachin 94, Mitchell 100 n.o, Archer 4/53) vs England 354 & 103/4 in 15 overs (Foulkes 3/42).

Messi magic again as Argentina stays perfect with easy victory

Coming off the bench, the 39-year-old scores from a free-kick in the reigning World champion's 3-1 win over Jordan; Lo Celso and Lautaro also get on the scoresheet; Scaloni's men finish the first round with nine points

FIFA WORLD CUP

Ayon Sengupta
DALLAS

The hallmark of champions is not simply their brilliance but the quality waiting beyond the spotlight. Argentina started without several of its biggest names, including captain Lionel Messi, against Jordan yet scarcely looked diminished as it completed a flawless Group J campaign with a 3-1 triumph on Sunday.

Lionel Scaloni made nine changes to the side that beat Austria, with only goalkeeper Emiliano Martinez and striker Lautaro Martinez retaining their spots. For much of the opening half, the loudest cheers inside the Dallas colosseum were reserved not for the players on the pitch but the man sitting in the dugout.

Every time the giant screen showed Messi, seated alongside clubmate Rodrigo De Paul with an amused expression, the stadium erupted before returning to its familiar chorus. On the field, Argentina's understudies gave their fans more to cheer for. The breakthrough arrived in the 19th minute after Mohannad Abutaha brought Giovani Lo Celso down just outside the penalty box. The midfielder punished the untidy Jordanians by curling his free-kick around a poorly organised wall.

Argentina's pressure soon brought another reward. Lautaro's angled effort struck the post before Marcos Senesi, following up on the rebound, was caught in the face by Nizar Al-Rashdan's raised boot. After a VAR review, the referee pointed to the spot, and Lautaro calmly sent his penalty into the bottom-left corner.

In Messi's absence, Argentina found different routes to goal, and around the half-hour mark, the contest was already drifting away from Jordan. But the Asian side refused to become a supporting act. Mousa Al-Tamari's sliding finish in the 55th minute cut short the deficit, just as Messi started warming up.

The moment the No. 10 stepped towards the halfway line, the crowd found another gear. The roar that greeted his arrival dwarfed every celebration that had come earlier. His now-customary World Cup goal – for a seventh successive match – arrived in the 80th minute as he outfoxed Jordanian goalkeeper Yazid Abulaila with a low free-kick that flew past the wall. At last, the full house of 70,649 got what it had been waiting for.

Air of invincibility: Messi capped off another good Argentine performance with a second-half strike. AFP

The standings

GROUP J	M	W	D	L	GF	GA	GD	Points
Argentina (Q)	3	3	0	0	8	1	7	**9**
Austria (Q)	3	1	1	1	6	6	0	**4**
Algeria (Q)	3	1	1	1	5	7	-2	**4**
Jordan (E)	3	0	0	3	3	8	-5	**0**

Q: Qualified | **E:** Eliminated

Source: FIFA

Round of 32 schedule

DATE	TEAMS	TIME
June 29	South Africa vs. Canada	00.30 a.m.
June 29	Brazil vs. Japan	10.30 p.m.
June 30	Germany vs. Paraguay	2 a.m.
June 30	Netherlands vs. Morocco	6.30 a.m.
June 30	Ivory Coast vs. Norway	10.30 p.m.
July 1	France vs. Sweden	2.30 a.m.
July 1	Mexico vs. Ecuador	6.30 a.m.
July 1	England vs. DR Congo	9.30 p.m.
July 2	Belgium vs. Senegal	1.30 a.m.
July 2	USA vs. Bosnia & Herzegovina	5.30 a.m.
July 3	Spain vs. Austria	00.30 a.m.
July 3	Portugal vs. Croatia	4.30 a.m.
July 3	Switzerland vs. Algeria	8.30 a.m.
July 3	Australia vs. Egypt	11.30 p.m.
July 4	Argentina vs. Cape Verde	3.30 a.m.
July 4	Colombia vs. Ghana	7 a.m.

* The dates and times pertain to India

THE RESULTS

Group L: Croatia 2 (Sucic 31, Vlasic 83) bt Ghana 1 (Luckassen 73); Panama 0 lost to England 2 (Bellingham 62, Kane 67). **Group K:** DR Congo 3 (Wissa 68-pen, 90+1, Mayele 78) bt Uzbekistan 1 (Shomurodov 10); Colombia 0 drew with Portugal 0. **Group J:** Jordan 1 (Tamari 55) lost to Argentina 3 (Lo Celso 19, Martinez 31-pen, Messi 80); Algeria 3 (Belghali 45, Mahrez 60, 90+3) drew with Austria 3 (Arnautovic 28, Sabitzer 55, Kalajdzic 90+6).

Tuesday's matches

ROUND OF 32

Germany vs. **Paraguay,** 2 a.m.

Netherlands vs. **Morocco,** 6.30 a.m.

Ivory Coast vs. **Norway,** 10.30 p.m.

The day and time(s) pertain to India

The Perry-Gardner show ends Women in Blue's run

T20 WORLD CUP

P.K. Ajith Kumar
LONDON

Ellyse Perry and Ashleigh Gardner are two of the shining reasons why the current Australian women's team is frighteningly formidable. The two gifted women joined hands to end India's T20 World Cup dream at Lord's on Sunday afternoon.

Australia chased down India's 170 for four with six wickets and six deliveries to spare. The South Africans, who predictably defeated Bangladesh by four wickets, joined Australia in the last four. England and West Indies made the grade from the other group. When the Aussies began the chase, Renuka Singh brought joy to her team and a highly partisan crowd. She had Georgia Voll lbw off the second ball, which jagged back in at good pace.

Phoebe Litchfield, returning from injury, and Beth Mooney put the chase on track with a 50-run partnership for the second wicket, but when they both departed, India's hopes soared. At 68 for three, Australia had plenty to do. But, Perry (56, 38b, 8x4) and Gardner (53 n.o., 29b, 3x4, 3x6) stayed calm and pushed their side confidently towards the target.

It was a pity that Harmanpreet's stunning knock, when India needed it desperately, ended in a losing cause. But for the skipper's 27-ball 56 (6x4, 3x6), India would have struggled to post a meaningful total against a line-up that bats deep.

The Women in Blue, choosing to bat, were struggling to force the pace. Smriti Mandhana (38, 37b, 6x4) and Shafali Verma (34, 26b, 3x4, 2x6) gave another fine start, but their 66-run stand off 55 balls wasn't brisk enough.

Shafali looked more threatening of the two until she tried to make room against the Australian captain Sophie Molineux, lost balance and was castled.

Smriti was tragically run out after Jemimah Rodrigues (34, 28b, 1x4, 1x6) possibly didn't hear the call for a quick run. Jemimah and Harmanpreet put on 64 for the third wicket before the former was retired out to bring in India's designated finisher Richa Ghosh. But, on this day, the captain took over that role.

Harmanpreet swung her bat to maximum effect. She hit her counterpart for three sixes in the final over, which went for 23 runs.

But, Perry and Gardner put the smile back on their captain's face.

Swing time: Perry and Gardner's counterattack shocked India. AFP

SCOREBOARD

INDIA
Smriti Mandhana run out 38 *(37b, 6x4)*, Shafali Verma b Molineux 34 *(26b, 3x4, 2x6)*, Jemimah Rodrigues retired out 34 *(28b, 1x4, 1x6)*, Harmanpreet Kaur c Perry b Molineux 56 *(27b, 6x4, 3x6)*, Richa Ghosh (not out) 1 *(1b)*, Deepti Sharma (not out) 4 *(1b, 1x4)*; Extras (w-3): 3; Total (for four wkts. in 20 overs): 170.

FALL OF WICKETS
1-66 (Shafali, 9.1 overs), 2-83 (Smriti, 11.3), 3-147 (Jemimah, 18.6), 4-166 (Harmanpreet, 19.5).

AUSTRALIA BOWLING
Hamilton 3-0-17-0, Garth 3-0-24-0, Gardner 2-0-25-0, Perry 1-0-7-0, Wareham 3-0-16-0, Sutherland 4-0-35-0, Molineux 4-0-46-2.

AUSTRALIA
Georgia Voll lbw b Renuka 4 *(2b, 1x4)*, Beth Mooney c Radha b Deepti 22 *(20b, 2x4)*, Phoebe Litchfield c Smriti b Shree Charani 24 *(25b, 2x4, 1x6)*, Ellyse Perry c Shafali b Shree Charani 56 *(38b, 8x4)*, Ashleigh Gardner (not out) 53 *(29b, 3x4, 3x6)*, Georgia Wareham (not out) 4 *(2b, 1x4)*; Extras (lb-3, nb-2, w-4): 9; Total (for four wkts. in 19 overs): 172.

FALL OF WICKETS
1-4 (Voll, 0.2), 2-54 (Litchfield, 6.6), 3-68 (Mooney, 9.1), 4-168 (Perry, 18.4).

INDIA BOWLING
Renuka 4-0-41-1, Kranti 1-0-12-0, Shafali 4-0-29-0, Shree Charani 4-0-32-2, Deepti 4-0-31-1, Radha 2-0-24-0.

Toss: India.
PoM: Perry.
Australia won by six wickets with one over to spare.

Japan out to douse Brazil's firepower

Ayon Sengupta
HOUSTON

The World Cup has always belonged to the dreamers. The knockout rounds, however, have little time for romance.

For Japan, that moment arrives in Houston on Monday. The Samurai Blue have become one of world football's most consistent overachievers. Since 2002, on four occasions, it has emerged from difficult groups, but Japan is yet to win a men's World Cup knockout match.

Standing in its way, this time, is Brazil – a nation that has lifted the trophy more times than any other.

Carlo Ancelotti's side appears to be finding its rhythm since falling behind early on Matchday 1, before drawing with Morocco. Brazil responded with six unanswered goals in wins over Haiti and Scotland to finish top of its group and Neymar's return after 981 days has added another boost to its attack.

Recent history, though, offers a note of caution, as Brazil lost 3-2 to Japan in a friendly in October 2025. Japan coach Hajime Moriyasu is trying to draw inspiration from that result.

"Last time we proved to Brazil that we aren't a pushover," Moriyasu said. "That is great progress for us. The Brazilian team is a top team in the world and we greatly respect them. In the match, we don't know what will happen. We will have a chance to win as well."

Japan, meanwhile, is on an unbeaten 10-match run. It reached the round of 32 after defeating Tunisia 4-0 and drawing with the Netherlands and Sweden, with Daichi Kamada (3) and Ayase Ueda (2) leading the goal-scoring charts.

Brazil, however, possesses a different level of firepower. Vinicius Junior has four goals, Matheus Cunha has scored three and teenager Rayan has emerged as another exciting option in Ancelotti's evolving attack.

Japan has spent decades proving it belongs among football's elite. On Monday, it must prove it can finally beat one of them when it matters.

Suzuki will have a tough job on his hands. AFP

The standings

GROUP L	M	W	D	L	GF	GA	GD	Points
England (Q)	3	2	1	0	6	2	4	**7**
Croatia (Q)	3	2	0	1	5	5	0	**6**
Ghana (Q)	3	1	1	1	2	2	0	**4**
Panama (E)	3	0	0	3	0	4	-4	**0**

Q: Qualified | **E:** Eliminated

Source: FIFA

The standings

GROUP K	M	W	D	L	GF	GA	GD	Points
Colombia (Q)	3	2	1	0	4	1	3	**7**
Portugal (Q)	3	1	2	0	6	1	5	**5**
DR Congo (Q)	3	1	1	1	4	3	1	**4**
Uzbekistan (E)	3	0	0	3	2	11	-9	**0**

Q: Qualified | **E:** Eliminated

Source: FIFA

Ireland stuns India, clinches T20I series

Top show: Ireland's superlative effort ended India's 16 T20I-series winning streak. GETTY IMAGES

Press Trust of India
BELFAST

Jai Moondra, a software engineer from Rajasthan's Tonk, rocked a star-studded batting line-up filled with IPL stars as Ireland did the unthinkable, shocking reigning T20 World champions India by one run to complete a historic 2-0 series win here on Sunday.

In slightly nippy, blustery conditions, Moondra (3/32), who still holds an Indian passport, removed Sanju Samson and Abhishek Sharma for first-ball ducks with icing on the cake being skipper Shreyas Iyer's wicket.

India managed only 153 for nine after the hosts made 154 for eight.

Towards the end, Harshit Rana (21, 10b, 2x4, 1x6) tried his best before being dismissed off the penultimate delivery of the contest.

The series defeat also ended India's 16 T20I series winning streak that started mid-2023.

Earlier, debutant Prince Yadav gave a good account of himself with three scalps. Harry Tector (53) and Ben Calitz (37) added 65 runs for the fourth wicket before Dube (2/25) got wickets off successive deliveries to help restrict the hosts.

SCOREBOARD

IRELAND
Tim Tector c Abhishek b Harshit 5 *(6b, 1x4)*, Ross Adair c Tilak b Arshdeep 16 *(7b, 1x4, 2x6)*, Harry Tector c Kishan b Prince 53 *(47b, 5x4, 1x6)*, Lorcan Tucker c Kishan b Prince 15 *(18b, 2x4)*, Ben Calitz c Tilak b Dube 37 *(23b, 3x4, 2x6)*, Gareth Delany b Dube 0 *(1b)*, George Dockrell c Axar b Arshdeep 19 *(14b, 1x4, 1x6)*, Liam McCarthy c Kishan b Prince 2 *(4b)*, Jai Moondra (not out) 1 *(1b)*; Extras (lb-2, nb-1, w-3): 6; Total (for eight wkts. in 20 overs): 154.

FALL OF WICKETS
1-17 (Tim, 1.5 overs), 2-21 (Adair, 2.2), 3-48 (Tucker, 7.3), 4-113 (Calitz, 14.4), 5-113 (Delany, 14.5), 6-144 (Dockrell, 18.3), 7-153 (Harry, 19.4), 8-154 (McCarthy, 19.6).

INDIA BOWLING
Arshdeep 4-0-35-2, Harshit 3-0-17-1, Prince 4-0-22-3, Dube 3-0-25-2, Shedge 2-0-25-0, Axar 4-0-28-0.

INDIA
Sanju Samson lbw b Moondra 0 *(1b)*, Abhishek Sharma c Hollard b Moondra 0 *(1b)*, Ishan Kishan run out 12 *(11b, 1x4)*, Shreyas Iyer b Moondra 10 *(7b, 2x4)*, Tilak Varma c McCarthy b Hollard 55 *(46b, 3x4, 1x6)*, Axar Patel c Tucker b Hollard 14 *(18b)*, Shivam Dube c Dockrell b Humphreys 20 *(16b, 2x4)*, Suryansh Shedge c Tim b Hollard 1 *(5b)*, Harshit Rana c Tim b Harry 21 *(10b, 2x4, 1x6)*, Arshdeep Singh (not out) 4 *(5b)*, Prince Yadav (not out) 6 *(1b, 1x6)*; Extras (b-1, lb-4, nb-1, w-4): 10; Total (for nine wkts. in 20 overs): 153.

FALL OF WICKETS
1-0 (Samson, 0.1), 2-1 (Abhishek, 0.4), 3-19 (Shreyas, 2.4), 4-35 (Kishan, 4.5), 5-74 (Axar, 11.3), 6-109 (Dube, 16.1), 7-117 (Tilak, 17.2), 8-121 (Shedge, 17.5), 9-147 (Harshit, 19.5).

IRELAND BOWLING
Moondra 4-0-32-3, Humphreys 4-0-28-1, Hollard 4-0-26-3, McCarthy 4-0-22-0, Harry 4-0-40-1.

Toss: India.
PoM & PoS: Moondra.
Ireland won by one run to win series 2-0.

INBRIEF

Jangoo and Chase put WI in command against Sri Lanka

A double-century by relative newcomer Amir Jangoo, *in pic*, and 194 from captain Roston Chase put the West Indies in a commanding position with the sixth-wicket pair's partnership of 401 lifting the home side to a mammoth first innings total of 626 for nine declared on the third day of the first Test against Sri Lanka in Antigua on Saturday.

The scores: Sri Lanka 308 in 71.5 overs & 15/1 in 4 overs vs West Indies 626/9 decl. in 160.5 overs (Jangoo 233, Chase 194, Milan Rathnayaka 5/124).

Padikkal scores half-century as match ends in a draw

Devdutt Padikkal hit a patient 67 (101b, 5x4) in India-A's second innings as the opening 'Test' against Sri Lanka-A ended in a draw with weather disrupting the proceedings on the fourth and final day at Galle on Sunday. The second 'Test' will be played from July 2 to 5.

The scores: India-A 452/6 decl. & 189/8 decl. in 57 overs (Devdutt Padikka 67, Dilum Sudeera 5/49) drew with Sri Lanka-A 330 & 70/2 in 15 overs.

Stokes to retire from int'l cricket after NZ Test series

England captain Ben Stokes will retire from international cricket after the third Test against New Zealand, the team said on Sunday. The announcement came midway through day four of the Test at Trent Bridge. It ends Stokes' 15-year international career that peaked when he starred for England in its win over New Zealand in the 50-over World Cup final in 2019.

India finishes third in AVC Men's Volleyball Cup

India finished third in the AVC Men's Volleyball Cup after defeating Bahrain 25-23, 23-25, 25-21, 25-17 in the playoff match in Ahmedabad on Sunday. Skipper Jerome Vinith scored 24 points while Joel Benjamin and Chirag Yadav logged 17 points apiece. In the title decider, Indonesia got the better of South Korea 34-32, 25-16, 25-23.

Bhagat claims gold; Krishna wins mixed silver

Para badminton star Pramod Bhagat won the men's singles SL3 gold at the British & Irish International, in Dublin on Sunday. In an all-Indian final, Bhagat defeated compatriot Nitesh Kumar 23-21, 21-14. Bhagat also added a bronze in the mixed doubles SL3-SU5 category alongside Manisha Ramdass. Tokyo Paralympic champion Krishna Nagar won silver in the mixed doubles SH6 category alongside Nithya Sre while adding a bronze in the men's doubles SH6 event with Sivarajan Solaimalai and also singles.

Haryana men and Punjab women emerge champions

Haryana and Punjab emerged the men's and women's champions of the fifth Fast5 senior National netball championship at the Vaasavi International School in Puducherry on Sunday.

The top-three: Men: 1. Haryana, 2. Puducherry, 3. Punjab & Telangana; **Women:** 1. Punjab, 2. Haryana, 3. Puducherry & Telangana. **Special awards: Best players: Men:** Shahrukh Khan (Puducherry), Tarun (Haryana); **Women:** Versha, Sonakshi (both Haryana), Angel, Jaswinder (both Punjab), Jaya Priya (Puducherry).

Srikanth beats Okimoto, makes it to US Open final

K. Srikanth edged out Japan's Yudai Okimoto in a thriller to progress to the men's singles final of the US Open Super 300 badminton championships here. Srikanth recorded a 22-20, 15-21, 21-19 win over World No. 33 Okimoto in 72 minutes. In women's singles, sixth seed Devika Sihag fell to Denmark's second seed Line Christophersen 21-15, 11-21, 15-21.

Sinner starts clear favourite to defend his crown

The top-seeded Italian will have to contend with the hot weather; Sabalenka will look to end a Slam drought as she targets a maiden crown at SW19; Djokovic against begins quest for 25th Major

WIMBLEDON

Reuters
LONDON

Boon, not a bane: Sinner is unperturbed by his lack of preparation ahead of the tournament and says it could work to his benefit. REUTERS

Wimbledon begins on Monday, with defending champion Jannik Sinner chasing a fifth Grand Slam title and women's top seed Aryna Sabalenka chasing her first Major of the year.

In the absence of rival and two-time winner Carlos Alcaraz, Sinner is the clear favourite this year, but the Italian may have to contend with the hot weather and his own lack of preparation. After his second-round defeat at the French Open from a near-winning position when he cramped up in sizzling conditions, the 24-year-old skipped the warm-up tournaments ahead of the grasscourt Slam.

He said this could work to his benefit, however, ahead of his opening clash with Serbian Miomir Kecmanovic on Monday.

"If you play a tournament before here, maybe it's not going the way you would like to, you come here with some doubts," he told reporters. "If you don't play any tournament, you don't have these doubts, you just go and play."

Sabalenka has been at the top of the WTA rankings since late 2024, but the Belarusian has only won one Grand Slam title in the past 18 months, despite reaching four finals. She also suffered a collapse against Diana Shnaider in the French Open quarterfinals last month, losing the last 10 games in a row.

She said she wanted to "quit tennis" after her collapse in the the French Open but has since worked with a psychologist and said she was not affected as much by losing to Jessica Pegula in this month's Berlin Open semifinals.

"I felt really good throughout the tournament there. I struggled a little bit here and there, (but) overall I feel like things are clicking back together," she told reporters ahead of her opening match against Teodora Kostovic.

The four-time Major champion has never won Wimbledon, but she has reached the semifinals in her last three appearances.

Novak Djokovic has spent the last 2-1/2 years trying to capture a 25th Major that would see him overtake Margaret Court. Wimbledon could be his best bet for achieving that.

Since he won his seventh Wimbledon title in 2022, the Serb has reached two finals and a semifinal at the All England Club.

"Playing on grass, comparing to clay, you don't need to exert as much physical effort. So that's better for me," he added.

"I always loved playing on grass. I have a very good score here, history, in Wimbledon. That gives me a higher dose of confidence coming into the tournament."

Serena Williams, another seven-time champion, had doubts about accepting a wildcard into this year's singles draw but is now looking forward to enjoying her return.

"I think in general my expectations are definitely different for the first time in my career," Serena told reporters on Sunday in London. "I feel like my feelings are just – not that I never enjoyed it before, or else I wouldn't be here today – but I feel like I'm really going to enjoy being out there."

Monday's order of play:
Centre Court: 1-Sinner vs. Kecmanovic (Srb); 1-Sabalenka vs. Kostovic; Wu vs. 7-Djokovic (Srb).
Court No. 1: Ruzic vs. 30-Raducanu; Cilic vs. 8-Medvedev; Linette vs. 5-Andreeva.
Court No. 2: 4-Pegula vs. Vidmanova; Zheng vs. 26-Norrie; 3-Auger-Aliassime vs. Shevchenko; Korpatsch vs. 7-Gauff.

If I were India coach, I will build the batting line-up around Sooryavanshi: Swann

CRICKET

S. Shrivathsan

Sooryavanshi. SLC

If there is a competition to find Vaibhav Sooryavanshi's biggest fan, former England off-spinner Graeme Swann will certainly be in the mix.

During a 40-minute media interaction on Sunday, Swann could not stop waxing eloquent about the 15-year-old, even when questions pertaining to other topics were posed at him. Describing Sooryavanshi as a "once in a generation talent", the 47-year-old felt that a "box-office batter" like him should not be kept away from the India T20I XI for long.

"If I were the Indian captain or coach, I would have Sooryavanshi in immediately. The sooner India plays him, the sooner he gets exposed to international cricket.

"There is no reason why he cannot be the best player in the world for the next 15 years. He is that good," Swann said.

The southpaw has been made to wait for his international debut after being benched in the two-match series in Ireland.

"If you look at the XI, there is none who deserves to be dropped based on performances.

"But you could argue that Sooryavanshi outperformed them all in the IPL. Let us face it; his stats do not lie. So personally, I would build a batting line-up around him.

"The hype around him is real. He can hit the best bowlers all over the park and destroy them. He is not old enough to drive in this country (England) but is old enough to smash the best bowlers.

"He can be an absolute match-winner. When you look at the Indian T20I and ODI teams, they are full of world-class players. The fact that a kid who is more exciting has come along is astonishing," Swann went on to add.

The Englishman also opined that new skipper Shreyas Iyer will match the high standards set by his predecessors Rohit Sharma and Suryakumar Yadav.

(Watch India vs. England first T20I live on July 1 from 10 p.m. IST on Sony Sports Ten 1 SD & HD, Sony Sports Ten 5 SD & HD & Sony MAX).

U-15 grapplers bag three gold in Asian wrestling championships

ANI
PATTAYA

Indian women wrestlers clinched three gold medals – Samruddhi Satish Patil (33kg), Vinakshi (46kg), and Disha Shokeen (66kg) – as the country bagged an impressive eight medals on the second day of the under-15 Asian wrestling championships here on Sunday.

India also won two silver and three bronze medals. Meanwhile, the Greco-Roman team finished third overall in the team standings with 150 points.

Vinakshi (46kg gold). UWW

Dnyaneshwari (42kg silver).

The results: Final: 33kg: Samruddhi Satish Patil bt Madina Nosirova (Uzb) 8-2; **36kg:** Sara Kori bt Divya Rani 6-2; **42kg:** Ramu Sugibayashi (Jpn) bt Dnyaneshwari Vrusheshwar Shinde 9-7; **46kg:** Vinakshi bt Muslima Hojimamatova (Uzb) 7-4; **66kg:** Disha Shokeen bt Nowa Doike (Jpn) 11-0.
Third place: 54kg: Nisha Mor bt Lo I Huang (Tpe) 8-0 (fall); **58kg:** Dipanshi bt Anudari Bayanmunkh (Mgl) 6-1; **62kg:** Anjali Santosh Vetal bt Khongorzul Lkhagva Ochir (Mgl) 15-2.

Ethan, Harshavardhan become India's 96th and 97th GMs

Sports Bureau
CHENNAI

Ethan and Harshavardhan. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

India got its 96th and 97th Grandmasters in a day as Ethan Vaz and G.B. Harshavardhan completed the achieved their respective titles at different tournaments on Saturday.

The 14-year-old Ethan from Goa, obtained his third and final GM norm at the "Chess Summer in Sarajevo - GM Mix" tournament in Sarajevo, Bosnia & Herzegovina.

He also won the international GM tournament with a score of seven points from nine rounds while remaining unbeaten.

Harshavardhan became the country's 97th GM by remaining unbeaten in the second Chola Chess GM-norm round-robin tournament in Chennai on Saturday.

The 22-year-old from Chennai finished with four wins and five draws for 6.5 points from nine rounds.

Speaking to *The Hindu*, Harshavardhan said: "It's a huge relief and I am so happy.

"I got both my IM title in 2020 and my GM crown in Chennai. That is a great coincidence."

He added that the win over Michal Krasenkow in the seventh round was crucial as the Polish GM was leading till then.

"Krasenkow was unbeaten and the win was very important for me.

"My Elo rating is 2507 and I want to take it to 2600 by the end of the year," he said.

Harshavardhan earned his first GM norm by winning the Asian Juniors in 2022, and his second came at the Asian Continental in 2025, through which he qualified for the FIDE World Cup in Goa.

Russell back to winning ways

Reuters
SPIELBERG

George Russell won the Austrian Grand Prix from pole position on Sunday to trim Mercedes teammate Kimi Antonelli's Formula One lead to 40 points.

Max Verstappen finished 1.6 seconds adrift, after crashing in qualifying and starting fifth, at his Red Bull team's home circuit with Antonelli third and 0.3 behind after a thrilling chase to the line.

Russell... the victor. AFP

The results: 1. George Russell (Mercedes) 1h:26m:37.979s; 2. Max Verstappen (Red Bull) +1.611s; 3. Kimi Antonelli (Mercedes) +1.986; 4. Oscar Piastri (McLaren) +21.809; 5. Lewis Hamilton (Ferrari) +26.393; 6. Isack Hadjar (Red Bull) +29.399; 7. Lando Norris (McLaren) +31.505; 8. Charles Leclerc (Ferrari) +45.659.
+1 lap: 9. Liam Lawson (Racing Bulls); 10. Arvid Lindblad (Racing Bulls); 11. Gabriel Bortoleto (Audi); 12. Nico Hulkenberg (Audi); 13. Pierre Gasly (Alpine); 14. Oliver Bearman (Haas); 15. Franco Colapinto (Alpine); +2 laps: 16. Esteban Ocon (Haas); 17. Alexander Albon (Williams); +3 laps: 18. Fernando Alonso (Aston Martin);
DNF: Lance Stroll (Aston Martin); Carlos Sainz Jr. (Williams); Sergio Perez (Cadillac);Valtteri Bottas (Cadillac).
The standings: Drivers: 1. Antonelli 171; 2. Russell 131; 3. Hamilton 125; 4. Piastri 80; 5. Norris 79.
Constructors: 1. Mercedes 302; 2. Ferrari 204; 3. McLaren 159; 4. Red Bull Racing 115; 5. Alpine 57.

Rohit unleashes massive throw, qualifies for Asiad

Y.B. Sarangi
BHUBANESWAR

Javelin thrower Rohit Yadav unleashed a massive throw in his last attempt to qualify for the Asian Games with a new meet record while long jumper M. Sreeshankar displayed amazing consistency to make the cut with his season's best on the concluding day of the National inter-state athletics meet here on Sunday.

Giving it his all: Rohit came up with a special effort in his final attempt. BISWARANJAN ROUT

The results (finals):
Men: 400m (Asiad Q Mark 45.97): 1. Vishal T.K. (TN) 45.43, 2. Manu T.S. (Ker) 45.60, 3. Jay Kumar 45.73; **10,000m (Asiad QM 29:00.00):** 1. Abhishek Pal (UP) 30:03.88, 2. Sawan Barwal (HP) 30:08.08, 3. Sailesh Kushwaha (Kar) 30:23.13; **3,000m steeplechase (Asiad QM 8:36.57):** 1. Balkishan (Har) 8:50.98, 2. Sharuk Khan (UP) 8:53.18, 3. Shubham Bhandare (Mah) 8:54.90; **4x400m relay (Asiad QM 3:04.23):** 1. Tamil Nadu 3:09.32, 2. Karnataka 3:09.51, 3. Kerala 3:09.89; **Long jump (Asiad QM 7.91m):** 1. M. Shreeshankar (Ker) 8.38m, 2. Shahnavaz Khan (UP) 8.30m, 3. David P. (TN) 8.06m; **Javelin (Asiad QM 77.87m):** 1. Rohit Yadav (UP) 87.05m (NMR, Old 84.35m, Manu D.P., 2022), 2. Yashvir Singh (Raj) 83.72m, 3. Sachin Yadav (UP) 82.32m.

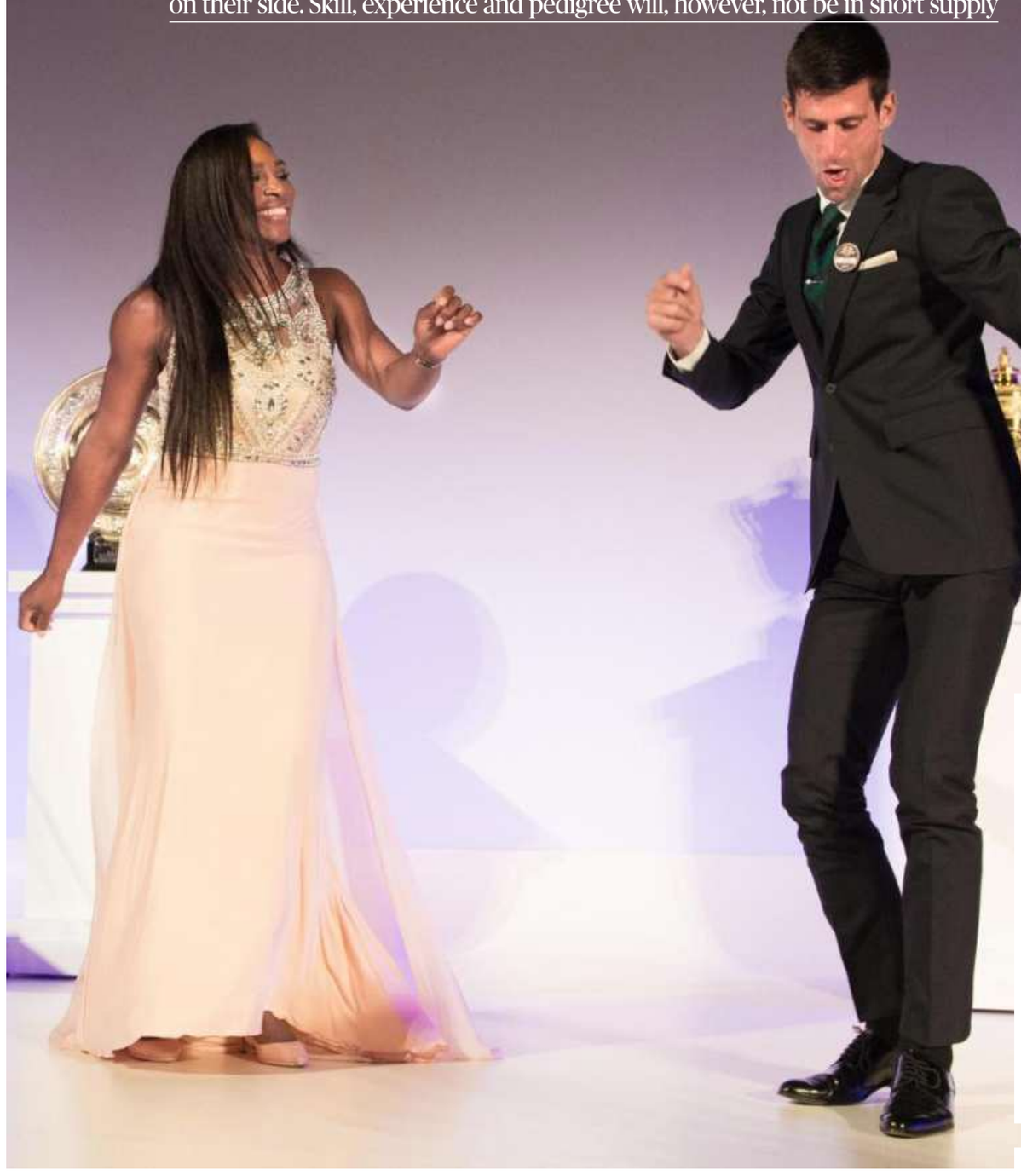
Women: 400m (Asiad QM 53.72): 1. Prachi (UP) 53.24, 2. Kiran Pahal (Har) 53.45, 3. Devyaniba Zala (Guj) 53.46; **10,000m (Asiad QM 33:50.00):** 1. Seema (HP) 34:28.75, 2. Soniya (Utk) 34:35.22, 3. Ravina Gayakwad (Mah) 35:44.45; **3,000m steeplechase (Asiad QM 9:47.53):** 1. Ankita Dhyani (Utk) 9:44.05, 2. Khushbu Gupta (UP) 10:36.47, 3. Kumari Parru (Raj) 10:52.28;

High jump (Asiad QM 1.80m): 1. Pooja (Har) 1.83m, 2. Supriya B. (Kar) 1.80m, 3. Khyati Mathur (UP) 1.80m; **4x400m relay (Asiad QM 3:31.23):** 1. Tamil Nadu 3:35.87, Karnataka 3:36.18, 3. Kerala 3:39.70; **Heptathlon (after day two) (Asiad QM 5605 points):** 1. Pooja (Har) 5619, 2. Anamika K. (Ker) 5466, 3. Khushi (Har) 5438.

Resurrection Game: Can Serena and Djokovic turn back the clock?

At Wimbledon 2026, the American great will return to competitive singles after a near four-year absence while the Serb will look to win his first Major since the 2023 US Open. At 44 and 39, age is not on their side. Skill, experience and pedigree will, however, not be in short supply

N. Sudarshan



AP

If you are looking for the most complete CVs in world tennis, you shouldn't be going beyond Serena Williams and Novak Djokovic.

Serena has 23 singles Majors – an Open Era record – and 14 in doubles. She has won every Slam at least thrice in singles and twice in doubles.

The American has clinched the Olympics singles gold once (London 2012), the doubles gold thrice (Sydney 2000, Beijing 2008 and London 2012), and the erstwhile Fed Cup (now Billie Jean King Cup) in 1999. Since 1990, no player has won more singles titles on the WTA Tour than Serena's 73.

Djokovic has an all-time men's record 24 singles Majors, secured every Slam at least thrice, and bagged all nine Masters 1000s and ATP Finals at least twice. He won the Davis Cup for Serbia in 2010, and when he pocketed the Olympics singles gold at Paris 2024, following a sensational victory over Carlos Alcaraz, it filled the last existing gap.

It is natural for everyone to expect that the two legends will now be resting on their incredible laurels, vacationing year-round, soaking in the sunshine, swimming the sea, and taking long and calming strolls with their partners and children in tow.

Back to the grind

But from Monday at Wimbledon, Serena and Djokovic will be seen hitting tennis balls again, not for fun but in all seriousness as full-blooded professionals. The former is closing in on 45, and is a mother of two, with the second child yet to turn three. The latter has just stepped into the 40th year of his life and is also a father of two.

Yet, here they are, sparring with players a decade or two younger, and looking to shoe-horn another high-impact bullet point into their already exceptional resumes.

Serena, a seven-time winner and four-time runner-up at Wimbledon, is making a comeback to competitive singles for the first time since US Open 2022 while Djokovic, a seven-time winner and three-time finalist at SW19, will be on his 21st successive visit to the All England Club.

What is their motivation? Serena, in her own words, has said that it is an opportunity to show her two daughters what it takes to perform on the biggest stage. She has also been inspired by her sister Venus, 46, who made the doubles quarterfinal at the 2025 US Open. In fact, Serena and Venus will also be playing doubles at Wimbledon, having been granted a wild card.

"I had nothing better to do," Serena said at the Queen's Club in London recently, eliciting great laughter from the crowd which watched her pair up with Canada's Victoria Mboko and win a round. "I got tired of sitting at home. My kids are out of school for the summer, so why not?

"I don't need to win. I've won more than most people have in their whole lives. I don't have anything to lose. Everything is a gain," she observed.

For Djokovic, it is the "thrill of competition". At the Australian Open earlier this year, he beat the then World No. 2 Jannik Sinner over five sets in the semifinal, and pushed No. 1 Alcaraz hard in the final before succumbing in four sets. A month later at Indian Wells, he stated that he would keep going as long as he has the "flair and quality, and the motivation".

"I still enjoy getting out there in front of the fans and being competitive," Djokovic said. "I have proven to myself primarily, and to others, that I can still compete at the highest level. I still have that edge, and I'll keep on going as long as I feel like it."

Serena certainly looks leaner and fitter than when she last played on the Tour, thanks to the effectiveness of new-age weight-loss drugs. After her second pregnancy, she couldn't "beat the weight" and turned towards GLP-1 medication.

Glucagon-Like Peptide 1 (GLP-1) is a naturally occurring hormone that nudges the pancreas to release insulin, slow down digestion and reduce hunger. Semaglutides and Tirzepatides perform this function when ingested in the form of medicines, reducing food intake and leading to significant weight loss.

These two drugs have been on the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) monitoring programme since 2024 and there is a raging debate whether they can be bracketed as performance-enhancers. How Serena benefits will further this discussion.

But this is only one part of the story. Playing tennis is part of Serena's muscle memory and that aspect is not going away. At her peak, she had the most devastating serve on Tour, and even a watered-down version will give her the first-mover advantage on a slick and fast surface like grass.

There is also her on-court aura, the overarching nature of which can make opponents shrink. Only a handful have risen to the challenge, like Naomi Osaka and Bianca Andreescu did when they beat Serena in their maiden Major finals at the 2018 and 2019 US Opens respectively.

"I see her in the gym more than I have seen her when she was at her prime," Djokovic said last week at Wimbledon. "It's admirable, honestly, the effort she's putting in. For her to come back after years of being absent, two children later, and to give so much effort not just for her own satisfaction but to also give all of us the pleasure of seeing her is remarkable."

However, there are challenges galore. A similar comeback in singles was once attempted by Martina Navratilova in 2002 when she was nearly 46. That lasted only 10 matches over three years, and featured just three wins. Navratilova did go on to have a wonderful second wind in doubles, but Serena has said that anything other than singles is "not my journey right now".

Lacking the edge

Having not experienced a competitive environment for nearly four years, Serena is bound to be rusty. Even before that, she was in a state of semi-retirement, playing just eight singles matches from Wimbledon 2021 and tasting defeat in five.

Present-day singles is also more powerful and explosive than at any other time. A reality check may well await Serena, who once dominated the Tour with her athleticism and superior heft of stroke.

Unseeded and unranked as she is, the early rounds will not be easy. Against World No. 87 Maya Joint, Serena may have a softer-than-expected opening, but she is drawn to meet the fast-rising 21-year-old from Philippines Alexandra Eala, the big-serving Czech and 2021 finalist Karolina Pliskova, and defending champion Iga Swiatek in the subsequent rounds.

In contrast, Djokovic, by virtue of still being in the top-10, has the ranking protection to ease in. Unfortunately, the seventh seed has also been dealt with a banana skin of a draw.

After China's Wu Yibing (No. 102), the Serb can potentially meet Stefanos Tsitsipas, a two-time Slam finalist and former World No. 3 but now down to 87, Joao Fonseca, who beat him in the third round at French Open and is now No. 27, and 12th seed Andrey Rublev in the second, third and fourth rounds respectively. Since the run to the final in Melbourne, Djokovic has done precious little, playing just seven matches and losing three. After winning the ATP Finals in November 2023, which came two months after he secured the last of his 24 Majors, he has just two Tour titles – ATP 250s in Geneva and Athens, both last year.

In fairness, Djokovic's struggle has not been in beating mid-level players but the elite ones in Sinner and Alcaraz. As they are almost always ranked in the top-two, every player who dreams of a Slam invariably has to beat both.

Prior to the success over Sinner at the Australian Open, Djokovic had lost five straight times to the Italian, with three of those at Majors. Against Alcaraz, he has lost four of his last five Slam contests, with three of them coming in finals.

While there is little doubt that the duo has elevated the quality of tennis, the physicality in the game has gone through the roof. So much so that Djokovic, who once raised fitness standards to such levels that it triggered massive shifts in the way Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal prepared, is now struggling to keep up. It doesn't help that Sinner and Alcaraz are nearly 15 years younger.

Playing catch-up

"It's just age, the wear and tear of the body," Djokovic said after losing to Sinner in the semifinal at Wimbledon 2025. "As much as I'm taking care of it, reality hits me. It's tough for me to accept that because I feel that when I'm fresh and fit, I can still play really good tennis. I have proved that.

"But playing best-of-five [sets] has been a real struggle physically. The longer the tournament goes, the worse the condition gets. These guys are fit, young and sharp. I feel like I'm going into the match with a tank half-empty. It's just not possible to win a match like that.

"But it's one of these things I accept and embrace, deal with the reality the way it is, and try to make the most out of it."

Wimbledon 2026 will give Djokovic the best opportunity to do this. In Alcaraz's absence, he has just one big worry in Sinner. Alexander Zverev is the second seed, but the reigning French Open champion has a history of stumbling on grass and never gone past the fourth round at The Championships.

Though Djokovic's best surface was hard for long, the lush green lawns of south-west London have been immensely hospitable. Over the years, he has mastered the art of moving on the slippery turf, improved his volleying to a significant degree, and spot-serves like the best in the business.

Remarkable record

In his last seven visits to Wimbledon, he has earned four titles, made two appearances in the final and one in the semifinal. The dash to the 2024 summit clash, in particular, was astounding, because it hadn't even been six weeks since Djokovic had gone under a surgeon's scalpel to mend a torn meniscus in his right knee.

"I think I'm better prepared than I was for Roland-Garros," Djokovic said looking ahead. "Obviously, playing on grass, compared to clay, you don't need to exert as much physical effort. And I always loved playing on grass. I have a very good history at Wimbledon.

"Roland-Garros was physically very draining, demanding, but the effort was there. Anyway, I was planning to peak at Wimbledon after the shoulder injury kept me away from the Tour. I knew that going straight into Roland-Garros was going to be quite difficult... maybe too big a challenge for me, and that's what happened.

"But I knew that's going to give me a bit more time to prepare for Wimbledon. So, hopefully, I'll have a good tournament here."

With a combined 47 Grand Slam singles trophies, Serena and Djokovic are tennis royalty. Can they be at their regal best at the crown jewel of the sport?

THE GIST

- Serena is returning to the Tour so that her daughters can watch her play as a professional. Her sister Venus' comeback last year has also proved inspirational
- Djokovic continues to play for the "thrill of competition", and also because he still believes he can beat the top players. The most recent example came at the 2026 Australian Open when he defeated Sinner in the semifinal
- Serena's record at Wimbledon and her playing style which flows from the serve can be her allies. But a severe lack of match practice and opponents' power game can be her foes
- Djokovic has a proud record at SW19 and has developed a fine grass-court game. But having played just seven matches since the final in Melbourne, he may be undercooked

Djokovic has an all-time men's record 24 singles Majors, secured every Slam at least thrice, and bagged all nine Masters 1000s and ATP Finals at least twice

Serena has 23 singles Majors – an Open Era record – and 14 in doubles. She has won every Slam at least thrice in singles and twice in doubles

Ketan Agarwal was engaged to Siya Goyal in February and a lavish wedding was planned for November. On June 18, Ketan was found dead at the bottom of a 400-foot gorge at Lohagad Fort in Maharashtra's Pune district. What followed was a police investigation that peeled back, layer by layer, a plot allegedly months in the making, reports **Chinmay R. Gaikwad**

The scorpion's sting

The Maharashtra police at Lohagad Fort, investigating the death of 26-year-old Ketan Agarwal, who was allegedly pushed into a gorge. EMMANUAL YOGINI

Lohagad Fort sits above the Indrayani valley in Maval taluka, roughly 50 kilometres from Pune, Maharashtra. A popular weekend trekking destination, the fort draws visitors through most of the year, and in the weeks before and after the monsoon, the approach path fills with groups from across the Mumbai-Pune corridor.

On the morning of June 18, Ketan Agarwal, 26, the director of a Pimpri-Chinchwad real estate firm and the son of Vishal Agarwal, a businessman in construction, was among those who climbed its stone steps. He had come to celebrate the birthday of his fiancée Siya Goyal, 20. He did not return.

At 10.30 that morning, Siya informed authorities that Ketan had slipped while taking photographs near the Vinchu Kata ridge, an extension of the fort that looks like a scorpion's tail, and fallen into the valley below. His body was recovered after a three-hour rescue operation. The incident was registered as an accidental death. But Ketan's father told police that his son was a frequent trekker who knew the terrain well, and that things did not add up.

"Ketan always played it safe. He never took risks, so it is unlikely that he stepped so close to the edge as to fall over," said Vishal.

That account set in motion an investigation that would over the following days lead Pune Rural Police to allege that Ketan's death was not an accident but a premeditated murder. Police say it was planned across multiple visits to the fort, and murder had been attempted once before. Siya and her boyfriend Chetan Babulal Chaudhary, 22, have been arrested since.

Ketan's father told the police that the engagement with Siya had taken place in February this year. The families had made arrangements at a considerable scale and cost for the November wedding planned in Jaipur, which was to cost about ₹17 crore, with two private aircraft arranged to ferry guests.

What the Agarwal family did not know, according to police, was that Siya had been in a relationship with Chetan Chaudhary, a businessman, for close to a year before the engagement. The two had worked together, said Pune Rural Superintendent of Police Sandeep Singh Gill at a press conference on June 23.

Between January 1 and June 18 alone, investigators found evidence of approximately 2,000 phone calls between them, amounting to more than 238 hours of conversation. Siya had, police allege, no intention of going through with the wedding, but did not communicate this to the Agarwal family.

> Ketan always played it safe. He never took risks, so it is unlikely that he stepped so close to the edge as to fall over
>
> **VISHAL AGARWAL**
> Ketan Agarwal's father

A defence lawyer speaks

Chaudhary's advocate Ram Shahane has contested the basis of his client's arrest and has raised challenges to the FIR on several grounds. Shahane argued that the FIR, as registered, does not disclose a specific overt act on the part of Chaudhary that would constitute direct participation in the alleged offence.

Under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), 2023, a charge of murder under Section 101 requires the prosecution to establish that the accused caused the death, intended to cause death, or caused bodily injury sufficient in the ordinary course of nature to cause death. Shahane's position is that the FIR does not set out the factual foundation for any of those ingredients against his client specifically, as distinct from the co-accused.

He also argued that the presence of a romantic relationship between Chaudhary and Siya, the principal basis on which his client has been named, does not satisfy the requirements of Section 61 of the the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, which governs the grounds on which a person may be arrested. Arrest requires either a reasonable complaint, credible information, or reasonable suspicion founded on definite facts, Shahane noted, and mere association with a co-accused does not automatically fulfil that threshold.

On the question of criminal conspiracy under Section 61 of the BNS, which the prosecution is expected to invoke given the alleged prior planning and coordination, Shahane maintained that no concrete act in furtherance of a conspiracy had been attributed to his client beyond his alleged presence at the fort.

"If we look at the FIR, the allegations against him are not concrete. His role is not described. It is only said that he is her boyfriend. He has been implicated in this case," Shahane said. The advocate indicated that the defence would challenge the remand and the charges at the appropriate stage.

Police have maintained that the call records, tower location data and CCTV footage together constitute sufficient material to sustain the arrest and the charges. The investigation remains ongoing, and a chargesheet is yet to be filed.

The questions the case leaves behind

The case has drawn attention across Maharashtra, partly because of the scale of the alleged planning, and partly because of what it has exposed about the circumstances that preceded it.

Swati Dyahadroy, Assistant Professor in the Department of Women and Gender Studies at Savitribai Phule Pune University, noted that cases in which women are the primary accused tend to attract disproportionate public and media attention, in part because they disturb prevailing assumptions about gender and moral conduct. "In Indian society, we connect women with ethics and submissiveness. When a woman is at the centre of a crime, it disrupts that image," she said.

She also pointed to a detail that has received little scrutiny in media coverage: Siya was 20 years old at the time of the engagement and had not yet graduated from college. "Why was she being married at 20? What was the family pressure? These are questions society should be asking itself," Dyahadroy said.

Dyahadroy situated the case within what she described as a pattern of a compulsory endogamous marriage system in which young people, particularly young women, have limited room to exit arranged matches set in motion by families. "Siya may get proven guilty for what she is accused of doing. But the question of why she felt she could not simply say no, and say it and be heard – that question deserves an answer too," she said.

chinmay.r@thehindu.co.in

Pune Rural Police SP Sandeep Singh Gill along with the forensic team at Lohagad Fort, at the spot where the body of Ketan Agarwal was found. EMMANUAL YOGINI

The Maharashtra police's version of developments

May 31
The reconnaissance begins

■ Siya and Ketan went to Lohagad fort. According to Gill, she allegedly identified a spot near the Vinchu Kata part of the fort. Vinchu Kata translates to 'the scorpion's sting'. A fall from here would have been fatal. CCTV footage recovered from a cafe in Pune after the death, showed Siya and Chetan meeting between May 31 and June 4. Police are examining the purpose of those meetings as part of the alleged conspiracy.

June 4
A trip that did not happen

■ A visit to the fort was again planned for June 4, which did not take place. Ketan's mother had raised objections to the trip, and it was called off.

June 6
The passport disappears

■ Ketan was to travel from Mumbai to Bali, in Indonesia, for a pre-wedding photoshoot with Siya, her brother, and his sister. When they left home in a car, all documents were in order, and in a single pouch. After arriving at the airport, everyone had their passports except Ketan. Because of that, the four of them returned home without taking the trip.
Investigators believe the passport was stolen and destroyed by Siya on June 6, deliberately preventing Ketan from travelling abroad. The episode, which at the time was treated as a misfortune, is now being examined as part of what police describe as a deliberate sequence of preparatory acts.

June 14
A first attempt

■ Four days before he died, Ketan survived what police allege was the first direct attempt on his life at Lohagad fort. During a visit on June 14, Siya allegedly created a distraction near the ridge by warning Ketan that she'd seen a snake. In the resulting panic, she allegedly said she'd accidentally pushed him over the edge. Ketan caught hold of a bush and survived. Family members who spoke to investigators said that Ketan did not fully understand what had happened. Siya convinced him the incident was accidental, and he continued to trust her. Four days later, he returned to the fort with her.

June 18
The fall from the fort

■ Ketan had agreed to trek to the fort again to mark Siya's birthday. What Ketan did not know, police allege, was that Chetan had arrived at the fort separately. He had left his own mobile phone at his father's masala store and carried a borrowed phone belonging to one of his employees, using it to communicate with Siya via WhatsApp. The measure, investigators say, was intended to ensure that no tower location data would place him at the fort that day.
He entered the premises without paying the entry fee at the ticket counter. CCTV cameras at the ticket counter recorded what followed. The footage shows Ketan and Siya walking through together. Some distance behind them is a man in shorts, a hoodie pulled over his face, wearing a headset. In one clip, Siya glances back. The hooded figure quickly sits down. Police found it difficult to explain why anyone would wear a hoodie in 33-degree Celsius heat. They compared the figure in the footage against photographs and social media profiles of Chetan Chaudhary. The resemblance led to his detention.
At 10:30 that morning, Siya reported that Ketan had slipped while taking photographs. His body was recovered from a gorge between 350 and 400 feet deep.

June 23
The arrests

■ Pune Rural Police announced that the case had been reclassified as murder and that both Siya Goyal and Chetan Chaudhary had been arrested. Gill addressed the press, setting out the alleged sequence. During custodial interrogation, each accused attributed primary responsibility to the other. Siya told investigators that she had communicated to Ketan that she did not wish to marry him, but that he had refused to call off the engagement. She alleged that Chetan had devised and proposed the plan to eliminate him. Chetan, in turn, alleged that Siya had pressured him into carrying out the act. "Investigations so far indicate that the entire conspiracy was hatched by Goyal," the investigating officer Dinesh Tayade said.
A court granted the police 7 days of custody till June 29. Tayade said they had recorded the statement of an employee at Chetan's store, who confirmed that Chetan had left his personal mobile phone behind on June 18 and departed with the employee's device.

June 24
Forensics and reconstruction

■ The day after the arrests, Gill visited the base of Lohagad fort with a forensic team to collect physical evidence and establish the sequence of events. A separate team took Siya to the fort for a panchanama, an official site reconstruction under Section 100 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023, in which a person accused of a crime is taken to the scene of the alleged crime in the presence of independent witnesses to demonstrate how the offence was carried out. Investigators said they had not yet determined whether it was Siya, walking alongside Ketan at the moment of the fall, or Chetan, positioned at the location beforehand, who delivered the fatal push, or whether both acted in concert at that precise moment.
The CCTV footage, investigators added, contained a detail that pointed to prior coordination: at a point near the ridge, the footage showed Siya and Chetan briefly acknowledging each other with a wave before proceeding separately.

Women grading prawns at a processing and export unit at Tundurru village in West Godavari district; (below) aqua farmers at a shrimp farm in West Godavari district. G.N. RAO

Rise in shrimp feed prices leaves aqua farmers in deep waters

For thousands of aqua farmers in Andhra Pradesh, the question is no longer whether the shrimp are growing or not, but will farming fetch profits after the increase in the prices of Vannamei shrimp feed by ₹10 per kilogram and Black Tiger shrimp feed by ₹12 per kilogram. **G.V.R. Subba Rao** reports the uncertainty and stress faced by farmers as they fear shrinking margins

It is 4.30 a.m. and long before dawn, John Raju, an aqua farmer from a village near Palacole in West Godavari district, wakes up to the buzzing alarm and peeps out of his bedroom window into his backyard. He then heads out towards his shrimp pond and walks along its embankment, even as the aerator machines, which have been running through the night, make a constant whirring sound.

He then pauses at a stilt and glances across the pond, spread across sprawling 10 acres. In the pond, he sees tens of thousands of shrimps, reminding him of the months of hard work and investment running into lakhs of rupees. John Raju, like thousands of other farmers, is hopeful of making profits but the constant fear of things going wrong amid rising feed prices, is a stiff challenge he faces like others across the State's aquaculture belt in districts of Godavari, Krishna, Bapatla, Prakasam and Nellore.

According to farmers, feed manufacturers have recently increased the price of Vannamei shrimp feed by ₹10 per kg and Black Tiger shrimp feed by ₹12 per kg. As a result, the price of a 25-kg bag of tiger shrimp feed has gone up by ₹300 and vannamei feed by ₹250.

"There was a time when I worried only about the produce falling prey to diseases. But today I worry about the aqua feed," he says anxiously.

What was once considered one of rural India's greatest success stories has been turning tables for farmers by heaping stress, uncertainty and shrinking margins.

> There was a time when I worried only about the produce falling prey to diseases. But today I worry about the aqua feed
>
> **JOHN RAJU**
> Farmer

Stakes are high

The stakes extend far beyond individual farmers. Aquaculture has been one of the most significant drivers of the State's rural economy, supporting lakhs of livelihoods directly and indirectly. The sheer scale of operations underscores why rising feed prices have emerged as a matter of statewide concern.

According to the government, aquaculture is currently being practised across nearly 2.35 lakh hectares in Andhra Pradesh. Fish farming occupies about 1.22 lakh hectares, while another 1.13 lakh hectares are under brackish water aquaculture.

Commercially valuable species such as shrimp and sea bass are cultivated over nearly 1.2 lakh hectares, with fortunes of a vast network of farmers, labourers, hatcheries, feed dealers, processors and exporters tied to the sector. For many farmers, the concern is no longer about the profitability of a single crop but about the sustainability of an industry that has become a cornerstone of Andhra Pradesh's coastal economy.

Farmers invest substantial sums in pond preparation, seed stocking, aeration systems, labour, electricity, water management and disease prevention. Among all these expenditures, however, feed prices take a lion's share. It represents the single largest component of production costs, accounting for 60-70% of total expenditure in many shrimp farming operations.

Consequently, even a relatively small increase in feed prices can have a disproportionate impact on farm economics, says Bhagawan Raju, an aqua farmer and president of A.P. State Aqua Farmers Association.

According to officials, the sharp rise in feed prices is primarily driven by escalating costs of key raw materials such as fishmeal, fish oil and soybean meal, which together form the backbone of shrimp feed production.

Fishmeal and fish oil supplies have been affected by lower anchovy catches, climate-related disruptions and fishing restrictions in major producing countries, while soybean meal prices have surged due to supply shortages and strong global demand.

Officials noted that feed manufacturers are also facing higher transportation, energy, packaging and import costs, further increasing production expenses. Since raw materials account for a major share of feed manufacturing costs, these increases have inevitably translated into higher feed prices for farmers. Raw materials account for the overwhelming majority of feed manufacturing costs. Fishmeal, fish oil and soybean meal alone can determine whether a feed company earns a profit or suffers losses.

For farmers, however, these explanations provide little comfort. The increase, farmers allege, was implemented without prior consultation with them and at a time when the industry is already struggling with rising production costs and fluctuating international market conditions.

"We are told fishmeal prices have increased. We are told fish oil is expensive. We are told soybean costs have gone up," says Venugopal, a farmer. "Maybe all of that is true. But the shrimp buyer doesn't pay us more because fishmeal has become costly. At the end of the day, it is the farmer who carries the burden."

Meanwhile, Bhagwan Raju argues that feed prices in the year 2021-22 were increased, citing a rise in prices of raw materials such as soya and fish meal. Later, the prices of raw materials have come down, but the companies did not reduce the feed price, he recalls.

Farmers question feed pricing formula

Duggineni Gopinath, president of the Ongole District Prawn Farmers Association, alleges that shrimp feed companies often cite higher raw material costs during the annual fishing ban to justify feed price increases, arguing that prices of fishmeal and fish oil typically rise immediately after the ban is imposed because of temporary supply constraints, but decline once fishing resumes and supplies return to normal.

According to Gopinath, feed manufacturers usually procure and stockpile fishmeal, fish oil and soybean meal when market prices are relatively low. Despite this, he claims, companies continue to base feed price revisions on the higher prices prevailing during the fishing ban period. The government should adopt a more transparent mechanism for determining the costs of raw materials, he says.

> When feed prices rise unexpectedly, those calculations can quickly unravel. A crop that initially appeared profitable may suddenly become marginal. A modest profit may turn into a loss
>
> **KOTESWARA RAO**
> Farmer

Farmers' associations have been demanding greater scrutiny of feed pricing, maintaining that rising input costs are eroding profitability in Andhra Pradesh's aquaculture sector.

Fisheries Commissioner Rama Shankar Naik says the State government has formed a technical committee to examine the issues.

The committee is expected to assess the concerns raised by both farmers and feed manufacturers before submitting its recommendations. Based on the findings, the government will facilitate discussions between industry representatives and farmers' associations to arrive at a consensus on feed pricing and address concerns affecting the aquaculture sector.

Small, medium-scale farmers feel the pinch

The anxiety is particularly acute among small and medium-scale farmers. Many farmers like Chidapotu Koteswara Rao from Tangutur depend heavily on borrowed capital. Before a crop even begins, they often take loans from banks, private financiers or relatives. Some mortgage land, while others pledge gold ornaments. Their calculations are based on carefully projected expenses and expected returns.

"When feed prices rise unexpectedly, those calculations can quickly unravel. A crop that initially appeared profitable may suddenly become marginal. A modest profit may turn into a loss," Koteswara Rao says.

He feels that under current market conditions, Vannamei farmers can recover their investment only when shrimp reaches around 60 counts. Farmers harvesting shrimp between 100 and 70 count are reportedly losing ₹30-₹40 per kg. In shrimp farming, "count" refers to the number of shrimps needed to make one kilogram. Lower counts mean larger shrimp and generally better prices.

For Black Tiger shrimp farmers, the situation is similar. Production costs can typically be recovered only when shrimp reaches around 40 counts. Any harvest at smaller sizes significantly reduces profitability.

The recent feed price hike, however, has shifted the break-even point even further. Farmers estimate that Vannamei shrimp would now need to be grown to nearly 40 counts merely to cover costs. Yet only a small proportion of farms consistently achieve such large harvests. Industry leaders claim that nearly 90% of Vannamei production is harvested between 100 and 50 count, meaning a vast majority of farmers may struggle to remain profitable under the revised feed pricing structure.

For Black Tiger shrimp, the challenge is equally severe. Farmers estimate they would now need to achieve around 30 count shrimp to break even, a size reached by only a fraction of total production.

The industry also faces volatile export demand, global competition and unpredictable weather. Many farmers rely on loans, adding financial pressure. As farmers gather across Andhra Pradesh, discussions now revolve less around production and more around costs.

"This is why shrimp farmers closely track both count and market price before deciding when to harvest. In Andhra Pradesh's aquaculture industry, daily conversations among farmers often revolve around questions such as: 'What's the 30-count price today?' or 'Has the crop reached 40 count yet?' because count directly determines profitability," says Gopinath.

Demand grows for govt.'s intervention

The farmers argue that the companies have increased the prices of feed without the approval of the Andhra Pradesh State Aquaculture Development Authority. Later, with the intervention of the Chief Minister, the companies agreed to bring down the prices, but they went back on their assurance by slashing merely ₹2 per kg. With these prices, the farmers would not get break-even if they go for a 60-count harvest.

Farmers state that the Andhra Pradesh government has to intervene and examine the circumstances surrounding the feed price increase. They argue that feed prices should not be viewed solely as a commercial matter between companies and farmers, but as an issue with broader implications for rural employment, exports and economic growth.

According to officials and farmer associations, any sustained decline in shrimp cultivation could trigger a chain reaction across the sector. Reduced production would affect hatcheries, seed suppliers, feed dealers, cold storages, ice plants, transport operators, processing units, exporters and numerous ancillary businesses dependent on aquaculture.

Cold storage facilities, which handle large volumes of harvested shrimp before processing and export, could witness a sharp fall in utilisation. Ice plants, truck operators, harvesting labourers and workers in peeling sheds and processing factories may also face reduced income and employment opportunities.

The impact could extend to export earnings as well. Andhra Pradesh is one of India's leading seafood-producing States, and shrimp remains among the country's most valuable marine exports. A prolonged slowdown in cultivation could affect export commitments, reduce foreign exchange earnings and weaken the State's contribution to national seafood exports.