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NECTAR OF LIFE

Unwanted guests turn sweet hosts

Invasive species, shunned by conservationists, sustain a large number of butterfly species in Assam's Raimona National Park

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What are the gains from the India-U.K. trade deal?

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Argentina and Spain battle for football's greatest prize

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INSIDE

Apex court halts demolition drive in Rajasthan

NEW DELHI
Granting interim relief to residents affected by an ongoing demolition drive in Rajasthan's border districts, the Supreme Court on Friday ordered that no demolition of properties shall take place for two weeks. The court was hearing a plea filed by Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind on behalf of 40 affected people. » PAGE 5

2,914 State school dropouts in 2024-25 in Kerala

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM
As many as 2,914 students dropped out of schools that follow the State government syllabus in the 2024-25 academic year in Kerala. Of them, 36.72% were children of migrant workers. These students formed the biggest group of dropouts from State schools.» PAGE 2

Speaker approves merger of 6 MPs with Shiv Sena

NEW DELHI
Ahead of the Monsoon Session of Parliament, Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla has approved the merger of six Shiv Sena (UBT) MPs into the Shiv Sena led by Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Eknath Shinde. The Shiv Sena (UBT) will now have only three MPs in the Lok Sabha. » PAGE 3

Police move Wangchuk to hospital on Day 21 of fast

Activist demanding resignation of Union Minister refuses medical interventions at hospital; police cite HC order for the move; personal physician, lawyer denied access to Wangchuk, says his wife

Aroon Deep
NEW DELHI

Activist Sonam Wangchuk was whisked away by police from the Jantar Mantar protest site on Saturday morning, in a setback for the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP)-led protest demanding resignation of Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan.

Mr. Wangchuk, who is on the 21st day of an indefinite hunger strike, was grabbed behind raised curtains by plainclothes officers in a matter of minutes, shortly after mobile Internet was briefly shut down in the area, according to two people at the site. He has been admitted to the Safdarjung government hospital.

The forced hospitalisation came two days before the CJP's planned march to Parliament, which the activist had insisted he would attend.

Gitanjali J. Angmo, Mr. Wangchuk's wife, said that she was not able to visit him with a smartphone in hand, and that his personal physician and lawyer were not being allowed access. Central security personnel were added at Safdarjung Hospital's entry gates.

The New Delhi Deputy Commissioner of Police said in a statement that Mr. Wangchuk was taken to the hospital following the Delhi High Court's order to closely monitor his health. The court had not specifically ordered his hospitalisation.

Mr. Wangchuk refused to permit intravenous or oral medical interventions while hospitalised, the Safdarjung Hospital said in a bulletin in the afternoon. Ms. Angmo urged the hospital to shift him to a facility of her preference.

Strong resolve: Activist Sonam Wangchuk gestures to the crowd as he is moved from Jantar Mantar in New Delhi on Saturday. PTI

Abhijeet Dipke, the CJP's founder, was held at a flat during the police action at Jantar Mantar, and was only released upon Mr. Wangchuk's hospitalisation. Mr. Dipke vowed to proceed with Monday's strike and declared that he would start his own hunger strike.

Opposition pushback

Opposition parties roundly condemned Mr. Wangchuk's forced hospitalisation. "The removal of Sonam Wangchuk ji from Jantar Mantar while he was on a non-violent hunger strike is wrong ... No amount of force can deter India's students, and those of us who love and believe in them, from raising these issues," said Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, Rahul Gandhi, who held his own programme on exam irregularities in Dehradun on Friday evening.

Mr. Dipke meanwhile urged people to gather at Jantar Mantar, fearing police action overnight to clear out the site. Later in the day, Mr. Dipke was subjected to an ink attack. The Delhi police have apprehended the attacker.

Three students from the CPI (ML) Liberation's All India Students' Association continued their concurrent hunger strike at the site.

Former Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal called for more crowds to gather at the protest site. Mr. Dipke and Mr. Wangchuk "are fighting for the future of your children," Mr. Kejriwal said in a video message. "Sitting at home won't work anymore. Now everyone must unite and take to the streets. Only then will something change in this country."

"The news that Mr. Wangchuk was forcibly removed from his hunger strike site by the use of force is extremely condemnable," Samajwadi Party president Akhilesh Yadav said. "The BJP's mindset is divisive; that is why wherever there is unity, harmony, and solidarity, the BJP, out of fear, responds like reactionaries and disperses the movements."

"A government that treats dissent as a threat instead of a democratic obligation cannot demand trust while evading accountability," former West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee said in a post on X.

"If the government is genuinely concerned about Mr. Wangchuk's health, it should engage with the protesters and address their legitimate demands," CPI general secretary D. Raja said on X.

FAST AND COMPOSED
» PAGE 9

21 protesters continue hunger strike

NEW DELHI
Despite deteriorating health conditions, at least 21 protesters from across the country continued their hunger strike at Jantar Mantar on Saturday, saying that activist Sonam Wangchuk's hospitalisation had only reinforced their determination to continue until Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan resigns. While protesters have been advised to rest as much as possible and conserve energy, they have continued to address press briefings in the sweltering heat, saying that they would not stop their protest until the "government shivers". » PAGE 4

India's first privately made orbital rocket Vikram-1 places payloads into orbit

Hemanth C.S.
SRIHARIKOTA

India achieved a major milestone in its space journey on Saturday as the country's first privately developed orbital rocket, Vikram-1, successfully placed multiple technology demonstration payloads and postcards – including from Prime Minister Narendra Modi – into a low earth orbit.

Dubbed 'Mission Aagaman' (meaning arrival), the launch marked India's entry into an elite group of nations, becoming only the third country in the world to achieve the feat through a privately developed launch vehicle.

The mission was a "grand success", said private space launch company Skyroot Aerospace, which developed the rocket.

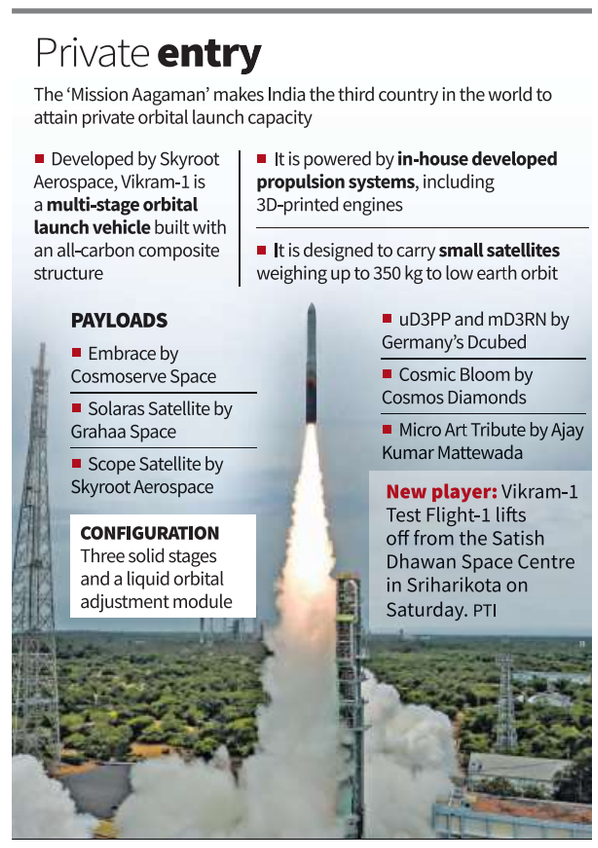
Vikram-1 lifted off from the Satish Dhawan Space Centre in Sriharikota at 12.05 p.m.

Defining moment: PM

Pawan Kumar Chandana, co-founder and CEO, Skyroot Aerospace, said that during the flight, Vikram-1 completed every principal mission milestone, validating the performance of its propulsion, avionics, and guidance, navigation and control systems under true operational conditions.

Following the successful launch, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had a phone conversation with the team of Skyroot Aerospace. Speaking to Mr. Chandana, the Prime Minister said that the launch is a defining moment in India's space journey.

"The growing participation of our private sector is opening new frontiers and accelerating innovation. This achievement will encourage youngsters to dream bigger and innovate fearlessly," Mr. Modi said.



The launch comes 46 years after India launched its first experimental satellite launch vehicle, SLV-3. On July 18, 1980, India became the sixth member of an exclusive club of space-faring nations when the SLV-3 was successfully launched from the same venue as Vikram-1.

"The vehicle deployed its customer payloads and generated a wealth of in-flight data that will directly inform future Vikram missions and the continued evolution of Skyroot's launch programme," Mr. Chandana said.

"We have a team of freshers, experienced persons and a diversified workforce," he said.

Vikram-1 is a seven-storey-tall, multi-stage orbital launch vehicle built with an all-carbon composite structure and powered by in-house developed propulsion systems, including 3D-printed engines and high-thrust solid-fuel rocket boosters. It is designed to carry small satellites weighing up to 350 kg to low earth orbit.

During the flight, Vikram-1 deployed six technology demonstration payloads from Grahaa Space, Cosmoserve, DCubed and Skyroot, along with Cosmos Diamonds' artwork 'Cosmic Bloom', and a micro-art piece.

Pawan Goenka, chairman, IN-SPACe, said: "Only a handful of nations can reach space on their own, and today a private Indian company joined that exclusive club. What lifted off today is the culmination of years of work, a team of over a thousand people, and efforts of close to 400 suppliers with it. Congratulations to team Skyroot. You have given us an India moment."

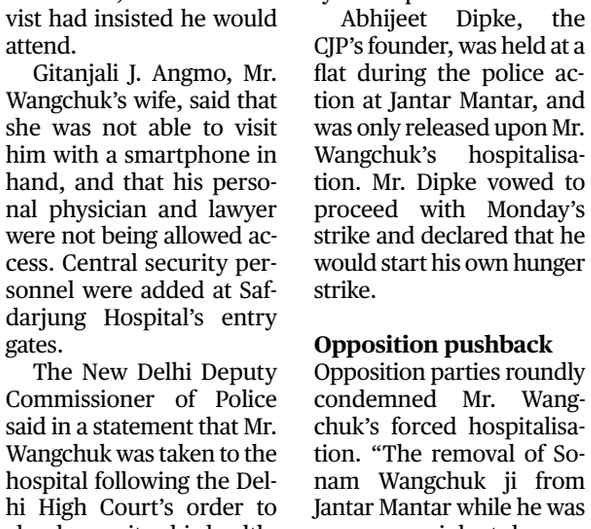
STEEP CLIMB
» PAGE 11

Article 370 bags top honour; Mammootty wins 4th time

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Bollywood film *Article 370*, based on the events surrounding the abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution in 2019, was named the best feature film of 2024 at the 72nd National Film Awards on Saturday.

Malayalam superstar Mammootty won his fourth National Film Award for best male actor with his performance in *Bramayugam*, sharing the honour with Kartik Aaryan, who was recognised for *Chandu Champion*. Mammootty had previously won the best actor award for *Oru Vadakkan Veeragatha* and *Mathilukal* (1989), *Ponthan Mada* and *Vidheyan* (1994), and *Dr. Ambedkar* (1999).



Yami Gautam was named the best female actor for her performance in *Article 370*.

Rajkumar Periasamy won the best director award for *Amaran*, a Tamil biography that chronicles the life of Major Mukund Varadarajan, an officer of the Indian Army, who was posthumously awarded the Ashoka Chakra.

Music composer G.V. Prakash Kumar won the best music director award for his background score in *Amaran*.

Randeep Hooda won the best debutant director award for *Swatantrya Veer Savarkar*.

The acclaimed Tamil slice-of-life drama *Meiyazhagan* received a special mention for its sound mixing. *Pushpa 2* won two awards, as Deepali Noor and Sheetal Sharma received the best costume design award, while director Sukumar was honoured with the best screenplay award.

Tamil actor Dhanush received a special mention for his performance in *Captain Miller*, which was named the best feature film promoting national, social, and environmental values.

Satirical drama *Feminichi Fathima* was named the best Malayalam film. *Mithya* won the award for best Kannada film, while *Raayan*, directed by Dhanush, was named the best Tamil film.

Telugu movie *Kalki 2898 AD* bagged the trophy for the best popular film.

"Around 400 feature films in 34 languages, including Scheduled and non-Scheduled languages, were considered. It was a huge task because many young filmmakers came up with different experiments and fresh visions," Jayaraj, noted filmmaker and chairperson of the feature film jury, said.

Delimitation a national issue, says Venugopal

Sandeep Phukan
NEW DELHI

The INDIA bloc and several other Opposition parties will oppose any attempt to alter constitutional balance and undermine federalism, Congress general secretary K.C. Venugopal has said. Speaking to *The Hindu* ahead of the Monsoon Session of Parliament where the Bill on delimitation is expected to be introduced again, he said a change in the seating arrangement amid the BJP's push for a two-thirds majority is not going to change the character of Parliament or the Opposition's resolve.

He said delimitation was a national issue concerning the democratic and constitutional framework. The Opposition, he said, would demand an all-party meeting before deciding its parliamentary strategy.

INTERVIEW
» PAGE 3

Bidadi row: JD(S) plans protest march from July 30

The Hindu Bureau
BENGALURU

A day after the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) announced that it would launch a *padayatra* from Bidadi to Bengaluru against the Greater Bengaluru Integrated Township (GBIT), its NDA partner, the Janata Dal (Secular), held a separate press conference on Saturday and announced its own *padayatra*. While the BJP said it was yet to decide the dates, the JD(S) announced that its march would begin on July 30 and reach Bengaluru on August 1.

As per the plans, Union Minister H.D. Kumaraswamy will flag off the rally at Bairamangala Circle, where farmers have been protesting against the project for the past 495 days. JD(S) youth wing president Nikhil Kumaraswamy will lead the rally. On the first day, the march will cover 15 km, followed by 16 km on July 31 and 8 km on August 1 before reaching Freedom Park, where a public meeting will be held. The JD(S) said farmers from the region would also take part in the march.

BJP MLC N. Ravi Kumar said that the party had to decide on the next course of action after the protest, but could not establish contact with senior JD(S) leaders.

As a result, it announced the march without finalising the dates. "We will hold a meeting with the JD(S) and undertake the march together," he said.

Kerala records 2,914 State school dropouts in 2024-25

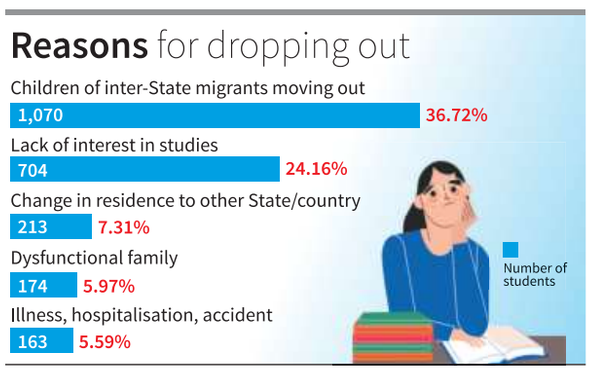
Migrant workers' children account for 36.72% of the dropouts; they discontinued studies to return to their native States or as their parents moved elsewhere for work, says Education Minister

R.K. Roshni
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

As many as 2,914 students dropped out of schools that follow the State government syllabus in the 2024-25 academic year in Kerala. Of them, 36.72% (1,070 students) were children of migrant workers.

These students formed the biggest group of dropouts from State schools. A majority of them were from States such as Assam, West Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Odisha.

They discontinued studies either because they, along with their parents, had returned to their native States or their parents had shifted to another location for work, Minister for General Education N. Samsudheen said in a written reply in the Assembly recently.



Key reasons

Of the total inter-State migrant children who dropped out, 36.5% (390 children) were from Ernakulam. Malappuram followed with 169 children dropping out, while Idukki recorded 127 dropouts.

Additionally, 29 students were children of workers from other countries. They returned to their home countries and discontinued their education in Kerala. Of them, 27 were from Nepal and two from Bangladesh.

Another major reason for dropping out from schools was a "lack of interest in studies", according to the Minister's reply. A total of 704 students in the State dropped out owing to this reason.

Of them, 42.19% (297 students) were from Wayanad district. Palakkad recorded 92 such students, followed by Thrissur with 60 and Kannur with 55, who also discontinued their education midway owing to lack of interest.

As many as 213 students left studies because they moved to other States or countries, while 174 had dysfunctional family backgrounds. Persistent illness, hospitalisations, and accidents were responsible for 163 students discontinuing studies. As many as 103 students left to prioritise religious education.

Some of the other factors for students dropping out include "negative attitude" of parents to education (78 students), and poor financial condition of family (43 students).

T.N. rolls out 'e-Zero FIR' for faster action against cyber fraud

R. Sivaraman
CHENNAI

DGP Magesh Kumar Agarwal says the system ensures that legal action begins without delay

The Tamil Nadu government has implemented the e-Zero FIR system to facilitate prompt registration and investigation of cyber financial fraud cases reported through the National Cybercrime Helpline 1930. The initiative has been introduced in line with the Union Ministry of Home Affairs' nationwide efforts to strengthen the response to cyber financial crimes and improve the recovery of defrauded funds.

Director-General of Police/Head of Police Force (DGP/HoPF) Magesh Kumar Agarwal said that under the e-Zero FIR mechanism, cyber financial fraud complaints involving a loss of more than ₹1 lakh, reported through the 1930 helpline, are automatically integrated to the Crime and Criminal Tracking Network and Systems (CCTNS) – a nationwide digital police portal – for the registration of an e-Zero FIR.

SMS for verification

The e-Zero FIR is electronically transferred to the jurisdictional cybercrime police station for investigation and is subsequently converted to a regular FIR by the police station having territorial jurisdiction. Once an e-Zero FIR is registered, the complainant receives an SMS directing them to visit the jurisdictional cybercrime police station within three days to complete the necessary formalities, he said.

As provided under the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS), 2023, the complainant must visit the police station concerned within three days to authenticate the electronically submitted complaint and complete the formal registration process.

The e-Zero FIR system has been implemented under Section 173 of the BNSS, which permits information relating to a cognizable offence to be furnished through electronic communication and enables the registration of a Zero FIR irrespective of territorial jurisdiction.

Mr. Agarwal said the system ensures that legal action can begin without delay, even before territorial jurisdiction is determined. "Integration of the 1930 helpline with CCTNS eliminates duplicate data entry, enables faster case registration and seamless jurisdictional transfer, and supports timely investigation, freezing of fraudulent transactions, preservation of digital evidence, and improved recovery of defrauded funds during the critical Golden Hour," he said.

The police also advised the public to report all cybercrimes immediately by calling the 1930 helpline.

Raise issues in party forums, Venugopal tells KSU

The Hindu Bureau
KOTTAYAM

All India Congress Committee (AICC) general secretary K.C. Venugopal on Saturday said the party understood that Kerala Students' Union (KSU) workers might have genuine grievances, but stressed that such issues should first be raised through the party's internal forums rather than in public.

Mr. Venugopal said the party "recognised" that KSU workers might have legitimate concerns but maintained that such issues should first be raised in the appropriate organisational forums. "There may be matters that have disappointed KSU workers. Such issues should first be taken up within the party, and effort must be made to resolve them internally," he said.

Describing the United Democratic Front (UDF) government as one that had generated high public expectations, Mr. Venugopal said neither the party nor its workers should contribute to unnecessary controversies. "They may have some issues. The party will make every effort to address them and the government too will do its part," he said, adding that no one should engage in actions that demoralise party workers.

Responding to the Opposition's criticism over the Waqf Board issue, Mr. Venugopal dismissed the allegations raised by Leader of the Opposition Pinarayi Vijayan as baseless.

Five Koya tribals drown in Godavari

The Hindu Bureau
YETAPAKA

They were among a group of 12 people who had gone downstream to catch fish

Five Koya tribals, three of them women, drowned while fishing in the Godavari in Polavaram district of Andhra Pradesh on Saturday.

The deceased were identified as Vooke Susheela (37), Vooke Lakshmi (37), Turram Bharathi (40), B. Balaraju (38), and Vooke Ramesh (38). The incident took place near Gommu Kotta Gudem hamlet of Yetapaka mandal, when 12 people went downstream to catch 'cheera menu' fish.

Local residents usually catch the fish in floodwaters using saris as nets.

Probe under way

"The 12 persons formed two groups for fishing. Three persons from one group and two from the other drowned at the same location in the river.

The bodies of all the five victims have been retrieved and sent to the Nellipaka Primary Health Centre for autopsy, the police said, adding that an investigation was under way.

Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu expressed grief over the incident.

He enquired about the incident and instructed the officials to provide necessary assistance and support to the families of the deceased.

INBRIEF

KTR asks Cong. govt. to prove that it filled 70,000 vacancies

Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) working president K.T. Rama Rao on Saturday asked the Congress government to prove that it had issued a notification to fill 70,000 government job vacancies in Telangana as it claimed. Addressing a youth meet, 'Yuva Sangrama Sadassu', convened by the BRS in Hyderabad to expose the government's alleged failure to give jobs, he said: "I will quit politics if the government proves that it has filled 70,000 jobs." He said the Revanth government had filled only 16,978 vacancies.

Locals welcome HYDRAA action on Ammuguda hillocks

Residents of Gandhi Nagar Basti burst crackers and came out to celebrate as the Hyderabad Disaster Response and Asset Protection Agency (HYDRAA) secured the hillocks near Ammuguda and started fencing off the area on Saturday, which was under occupation by a renowned builder. This action follows a news story by *The Hindu* towards the end of May, on encroachment of the land and destruction of rock formations which were billions of years old. Local residents too reportedly approached HYDRAA through Prajavani programme against the rock blasting.

Ex-PM Deve Gowda's wife passes away in Bengaluru

Former Prime Minister H.D. Deve Gowda's wife Chennamma died of cardiac arrest at a private hospital in Bengaluru on Saturday. She was admitted to Manipal Hospital in Bengaluru on Wednesday night. She is survived by her husband, four sons, two daughters, and several grandchildren. The last rites are expected to be conducted in Hassan on Sunday. She was regarded as the pillar of support in Mr. Gowda's long political career with various ups and downs.

Smog blanket

Grey horizon: Smog engulfs R.K. Beach in Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh, on Saturday. Industrial pollution and high humidity severely reduced visibility, pushing the city's AQI to a "poor" 126 and triggering health concerns among coastal residents. K.R. DEEPAK

TDP leader, 8 others held after woman alleges assault

Sambasiva Rao M.
GUNTUR

The alleged assault and stripping of a woman on a public road in Guntur, Andhra Pradesh, has sparked widespread public outrage and condemnation from both the ruling and Opposition parties.

All the nine accused, including a TDP ward secretary and his wife, have been arrested.

The incident reportedly took place on the night of July 15. According to the police and local sources, a dispute broke out when TDP ward secretary Mallela Venkata Ramana Murthy allegedly demanded money from a family that sought permission to drill a borewell as the existing one had been closed during drainage work undertaken by the Guntur Municipal Corporation.

The dispute later turned violent. The police said that a woman from the family that had sought permission for the borewell said the accused assaulted her and pulled off her clothes.

A CCTV footage of the incident went viral on Saturday, setting off a furore. The TDP has suspended Mr. Murthy. Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu termed the incident "deeply disturbing".

Voters flummoxed by 'logical discrepancies' during Karnataka SIR

Rishita Khanna
BENGALURU

Even before the publication of the draft electoral roll, voters filling their enumeration forms online under the ongoing special intensive revision (SIR) in Karnataka are being shown notifications flagging "anomalies" after submitting their forms. This indicates that "logical discrepancies" have already become part of the process.

So far, the Karnataka Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) V. Anbu Kumar had not clarified whether logical discrepancies would be applied at the enumeration stage, but indicated that it would become clear only after the draft electoral rolls are published.

However, voters report that after submitting the enumeration form online, they see a pop-up stating that an anomaly has been detected, along with an option to view what logical discrepancy is flagged.

One voter received an anomaly stating: "You have been linked as son/daughter with someone who is also claimed by six others as father, giving suspicion of a likely incorrect match."

When contacted, the CEO said he would look into it.

Idukki village unites to save its post office

After officials decided to shift the post office from Pushpakandam, citing declining business and poor facilities, nearly 2,000 families launched a fund collection drive to reconstruct the building

Sandeep Vellaram
IDUKKI

Residents of a small panchayat ward have joined hands to reconstruct a post office building at Pushpakandam in the Idukki district of Kerala, to preserve a service that has served their community for nearly 50 years. According to residents, officials had moved the post office from Pushpakandam to Anakkallu – about six kilometres away – due to declining business and the dilapidated condition of the building.

P.J. Jomon, the Pushpakandam ward member, said that moving the post office felt like losing the village's identity. "The post office was suddenly shifted by the officials on December 13, 2025," he said. "Nearly 2,000 families across four wards benefit from this facility, and they wanted it retained in the village. We formed a committee and submitted a complaint to the district postal office.

The reconstructed post office building in Pushpakandam, under the Nedumkandam panchayat in Idukki district. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Following our complaint, officials visited the area and stipulated that a proper building be constructed."

"The committee organised a fund collection drive and rebuilt the structure. A total of ₹2 lakh was spent on construction, out of which ₹50,000 is still to be repaid," he added.

He said the post office was established in 1982. "When the post office was shifted, residents realised how central it was to the village's identity and unanimously demanded its return." The reconstruction was over in about three months.

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Punjab Police arrest officer charged in U.S. for alleged extortion

Press Trust of India
HOSHIARPUR

Punjab Police has arrested an inspector following allegations linking him to a U.S. federal indictment in an alleged extortion conspiracy involving an India-based organised crime syndicate, officials said.

Deputy Inspector General (DIG), Jalandhar Range, Naveen Singla, on Saturday, confirmed the arrest of Inspector Gurinderjit Singh Nagra.

Mr. Nagra, who was posted as Station House Officer of Tanda Police Station in Hoshiarpur district, was shifted to Police Lines on July 8 after the State took cognisance of media reports linking him to the allegations. The police had also ordered a fact-finding inquiry into the matter.

Operation Hard Ball

The action followed the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Central District of California announcing a coordinated international crackdown, code-named 'Operation Hard Ball', against India-based transnational organised crime groups, leading to arrests in the U.S., Canada and Europe.

The federal indictment, unsealed in Los Angeles on July 7, alleged that gangster Jaggu Bhagwanpuria operated the criminal syndicate from an Indian jail and that Mr. Nagra, described as a Punjab Police officer, attempted to implicate a U.S.-based family in a false murder case in India.

False cases

The victims were allegedly coerced into paying $4,00,000 as part of an extortion scheme that involved using false criminal cases in India.

The police had earlier said the inquiry officer was directed to examine the allegations and submit a detailed report.

The U.S. indictment also named gangster Lawrence Bishnoi, who is lodged in an Indian jail, and his aide Satinderjeet Singh alias Goldy Brar for allegedly ordering the assassination of Khalistan separatist Hardeep Singh Nijjar in Canada.

Birla approves six Sena (UBT) MPs' merger with Shiv Sena

Shinde's side now has 13 MPs in Lok Sabha as Sena (UBT) is down to three; Speaker also approves 20 rebel Trinamool MPs' request for separate seating during the Monsoon Session of Parliament

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Going strong: Eknath Shinde with MPs Sanjay Uttamrao Deshmukh, Nagesh Patil, Sanjay Jadhav, and Bhausaheb Wakchaure who are now part of the Shiv Sena after leaving the Sena (UBT). PTI

Ahead of the Monsoon Session of Parliament, Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla has approved the merger of six Shiv Sena (Uddhav Balasaheb Thackeray or UBT) MPs into the Shiv Sena led by Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Eknath Shinde. The Shiv Sena (UBT) will now have only three MPs in the Lok Sabha.

The Lok Sabha Secretariat on Saturday published a circular with the Shiv Sena's revised position in the Lok Sabha. The Shiv Sena, with floor leader Eknath Shinde, has 13 MPs, the circular said, suggesting the Lok Sabha Speaker had approved the merger of six Shiv Sena (UBT) MPs with the Shinde camp of Shiv Sena.

The Shiv Sena (UBT) MPs – Nagesh Patil Ashtikar, Sanjay Deshmukh, Sanjay Dina Patil, Bhausaheb Wakchoure, Omraje Nimbalkar, and Sanjay Bandu Jadhav – had requested a merger with the Shiv Sena. The request for the merger was pending with Mr. Birla, and by issuing a circular on party's position, the Speaker has apparently cleared the merger.

The Speaker has also approved the request of 20 Trinamool MPs to sit separately during the session.

The Union government, meanwhile, has invited rebel Trinamool leaders – Sudip Bandopadhyay and Kakoli Ghosh Dastidar – for a meeting of floor leaders on Sunday.

After a split in the Trinamool, 20 MPs had announced that they had joined the little known National Citizens Party of India.

In a letter to Mr. Bandopadhyay inviting him for the meeting, Union Parliamentary Affairs Minister Kiren Rijiju said he had requested the Speaker to recognise the NCPI, which is under his consideration.

"It is my pleasure to invite you for a meeting of Floor Leaders of Political Parties in Lok Sabha/Rajya Sabha to discuss important issues and Legislative Business likely to come up before the Houses in the ensuing Monsoon Session of Parliament," Mr. Rijiju said in his letter.

"I shall be looking forward to your participation and request you, along with Kakoli Ghosh Dastidar, nominated Chief Whip of your party, to kindly make it convenient to attend the meeting," the letter added.

The Monsoon Session will begin on July 20.

Nine killed in blast at illegal firecracker unit in Ahmedabad

Press Trust of India
AHMEDABAD

Six people injured; toll likely to rise as some of the injured are in a critical condition, say police

At least nine people were killed and six others injured in a blast and fire at an illegal firecracker factory in Ramol area of Ahmedabad, Gujarat, on Saturday, a police official said, adding the toll is likely to rise as some of those hospitalised are in a critical condition.

The explosion and the resultant fire took place at 3:30 p.m. at the factory situated on Ramol-Gatrad road, the official said.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi expressed grief over the loss of lives in the incident and announced an *ex gratia* of ₹2 lakh from the Prime Minister's National Relief Fund to the next of kin of each deceased and ₹50,000 to those injured. Gujarat Chief Minister Bhupendra Patel announced a financial assistance of ₹4 lakh to the families of the deceased and ₹50,000 to the injured.

The injured persons were transferred to two separate hospitals - Civil Hospital in Asarwa area, and L.G. Hospital in Maninagar.

No valid licence

The unit, set up on an open farm, was operating without a valid licence, Joint Commissioner of Police Jaipal Singh Rathore said.

Personnel from Rapid Action Force (RAF) and Ahmedabad Fire and Emergency Services rushed to the spot and launched rescue and relief operations.

The official said a case of culpable homicide not amounting to murder and other offences will be registered under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) and provisions of the Explosives Act.

The City Crime Branch is carrying out further investigation.

Weather woes: Amarnath, Vaishno Devi yatras temporarily suspended

Press Trust of India
SRINAGAR/JAMMU

Authorities in Jammu and Kashmir on Saturday said that Amarnath and Vaishno Devi yatras will be temporarily suspended from July 19 due to the inclement weather forecast.

"In view of inclement weather forecast issued by India Meteorological Department (IMD), Amarnath yatra shall remain temporarily suspended from both the Pahalgam and Baltal routes with effect from 19.07.2026 as a precautionary measure to ensure the safety and well-being of the pilgrims," Kashmir Divisional Commissioner Anshul Garg said in a statement.

So far, over 3.76 lakh pilgrims have paid obeisance at the holy cave shrine during the Amarnath Yatra.

Pilgrims proceed towards the holy cave shrine of Amarnath in Jammu on Saturday. PTI

Confirming the suspension of Vaishno Devi yatra, an official spokesperson in Jammu said: "In view of the inclement weather advisory issued by the IMD, the Vaishno Devi yatra shall remain temporarily suspended as a precautionary measure to ensure the safety of pilgrims."

Pilgrims are requested to remain updated through official communication channels for the latest information on resumption of the yatras.

Moderate to widespread rainfall has been predicted across Jammu and Kashmir from July 19 to 23 .

Panels examining Bill for removal of Ministers and VBSA Bill defer meeting

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Opposition leaders call the development, just ahead of the Monsoon Session, a 'big victory'

The Joint Parliamentary Committee examining the Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan (VBSA) Bill on Saturday cancelled its July 20 meeting where the Bill's draft report was to be adopted. This came a day after the Committee examining the Constitution (130th Amendment) Bill to remove Prime Minister, Chief Ministers, and Ministers if they are detained in prison for 30 days in serious criminal offences deferred its meeting.

Opposition leaders – Congress general secretary Jairam Ramesh and Trinamool leader Sagarika Ghose – called the development, which comes just ahead of the Monsoon Session of Parliament, a "big victory" for the Opposition. In a social media statement, Mr. Ramesh said, "The shadow of the embarrassment that the [Narendra] Modi government had to endure in the Lok Sabha on April 17, 2026, still lingers."

On April 17, the government's effort to pass Bills related to delimitation of Lok Sabha constituencies was defeated in the Lower House. On Saturday, Mr. Ramesh referred to the defeat of the delimitation-related Bills as a "humiliation suffered by the Modi government" that had cast a "long shadow that persists in spite of the Union Home Minister's bluff, brag, and bluster".

While the Committee examining the Constitution Amendment Bill on Friday said it had deferred its meeting so as to make room for more consultations, the panel on the VBSA Bill, which intends to overhaul the country's higher education regulatory framework, on Saturday said it had deferred its meeting until further notice.

The panel on the Constitution Amendment Bill, headed by BJP MP Aparajita Sarangi, in its draft report, recommended replacing "removal" of Ministers with "suspension". The Committee on the VBSA Bill, headed by BJP MP D. Purandeswari, in its report, revealed that the Centre had agreed to changes proposed by its NDA-allied governments in Andhra Pradesh and Meghalaya over concerns of over-centralisation, as reported by *The Hindu*.

The Trinamool is learnt to have submitted a formal dissent note to the committee on the VBSA Bill, in which it has called the legislation a "constitutional Trojan Horse" being presented as a standards-setting framework for higher education. The party's note further expounds that the proposed VBSA architecture exceeds Parliament's constitutional role, weakens cooperative federalism, affects academic freedom and institutional autonomy, and proposes reform without a financing framework – issues that were reportedly raised by Congress leader Digvijay Singh, who is also on the panel.

'Delimitation Bill a matter of national concern'

The Constitution (131st Amendment) Bill is not a Congress or an INDIA bloc issue alone; it concerns India's constitutional framework, says the party's general secretary; citing exam paper leaks, ethanol blending issues, and the Ram Temple donation theft, the leader says people are losing faith in BJP

INTERVIEW

K.C. Venugopal

Sandeep Phukan

Ahead of the Monsoon Session of Parliament, Congress general secretary (organisation) K.C. Venugopal speaks to *The Hindu* on the BJP's push for the Constitution (131st Amendment) Bill on delimitation, the changing Opposition numbers, repeated examination paper leaks, and concerns among vehicle owners over ethanol blended petrol among others. Edited excerpts:

The Opposition benches will look different this Monsoon Session, with 20 Trinamool MPs and six Shiv Sena (UBT) MPs now sitting with the NDA, and the DMK forming a separate bloc. Does this alter the Opposition's numbers and morale?

Not at all. The seating arrangement may have changed, but that is not going to change the character of Parliament or the Opposition's resolve.

This is not merely about numbers. The BJP is trying very hard to secure a two-thirds majority to push through constitutional amendments, particularly on delimitation. Delimitation is not a Congress issue or an INDIA bloc issue alone; it is a national issue because it concerns India's democratic and constitutional framework. The Government appears to be trying to divide Opposition parties to facilitate its agenda. In West Bengal, even the Opposition has been handpicked by the BJP. The same MPs who opposed the delimitation Bill have now crossed over.

The Constitution (131st Amendment) Bill is expected to be one of the most contentious pieces of legislation. Has the INDIA bloc evolved a common strategy on the Bill?

SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

The INDIA bloc, along with several Opposition parties outside the alliance, believes this is a matter of national concern. We fundamentally oppose any attempt to alter the constitutional balance in a manner that undermines federalism and democratic representation.

The people are losing faith in the BJP and its leadership. That is why they [the BJP] want to win elections through other means like delimitation, SIR and by splitting parties.

If the Government includes the clause of a 50% increase in seats for all States, will the Opposition agree?

Our first demand is that the Government convene an all-party meeting and explain its intentions. We made the same demand when the Bill was introduced earlier. The Congress president has also conveyed this in writing. Individual consultations cannot substitute for a formal discussion with all Opposition parties.

We want to see the Bill before deciding our parliamentary strategy. In principle, however, we oppose any attempt to give the executive sweeping powers over delimitation through a constitutional amendment. Even if the Government were to include such an assurance, that alone would not address our concerns.

Parties like the DMK could be important. Are you in touch with them?

We believe this issue transcends party politics and will unite those committed to protecting democracy. Whatever political differences may exist, the DMK has consistently placed Tamil Nadu's interests above all else. The State's interests are paramount for the party. Therefore, I do not think the DMK will support this Bill.

What are the other issues on which the Opposition intends to corner the Government?

The repeated paper leaks in various examinations will be a major issue. Students and parents across the country have lost faith in the examination system. There is no accountability, and the Education Minister has failed to provide credible answers. We will continue to demand his resignation.

We will also raise the theft of donations at the Ram Temple in Ayodhya. The BJP came to power invoking the Ram Janmabhoomi movement. This is not merely a financial issue; it concerns the faith of millions. The Prime Minister, under whose watch the trust functions, has not uttered a word.

Then there is the issue of ethanol-blended fuel. Many middle-class vehicle owners are worried about the impact of higher ethanol blending on their vehicles, and the government has not adequately addressed these concerns. Then there is also inflation, unemployment, and large-scale layoffs following changes in labour codes.

Read full interview at newsth.live/KCVenugopal

Two more arrested in Manipur over killing of six Nagas

The Hindu Bureau
GUWAHATI

Second set of arrests in the case the NIA has been handling; police say more arrests could follow

A joint team of the National Investigation Agency (NIA), the Manipur Police, and the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) on Saturday arrested two people accused in the abduction and killing of six Liangmai Naga civilians more than a month ago.

While Lungoulal Vaiphei was arrested from Leilon Vaiphei, the village where the six slain individuals resided, Lunminthang Sitlhou was arrested from Molhoi village. Both villages are in the Leimakhong area of the Kuki-dominated Kangpokpi district.

This was the second set of arrests in the case the NIA has been handling after the mutilated bodies of the six Naga civilians were recovered from Kangpokpi district on June 10. The first was the arrest of Pradip and his wife Ayingbi, alias Mangaih, from Leilon Vaiphei on July 10.

"Further efforts are on to arrest other individuals connected with the case," the State police said. The efforts are based on the testaments of witnesses to the abduction of the six Nagas.

The six were among 48 people – 28 Kukis and 20 Nagas – abducted hours after unidentified gunmen ambushed and killed three church leaders from the Thadou community in Kangpokpi district on May 13.

The Thadous are divided over their ethnic affiliation to the Kuki group.

Kuki abductors released 14 Nagas, and Naga abductors released 14 Kukis in a hostage exchange deal brokered by the security forces on May 15. The Nagas released the remaining 14 Kuki hostages on June 9.

The bodies of the six abducted Nagas were recovered the following day.

‘Wangchuk not alone’: at least 21 refuse to end fast

Three AISA activists enter 21st day of hunger strike; protesters have been advised by doctors to rest, conserve energy and speak less, but they remain resolute after Wangchuk’s hospitalisation

Ashna Butani
Suruchi Kumari
NEW DELHI

Hue and cry: Abhijeet Dipke, CJP’s founder, before beginning an indefinite hunger strike demanding the resignation of Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan in New Delhi on Saturday. SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

Even as social activist Sonam Wangchuk was taken to the hospital on Saturday morning following his 21-day hunger strike at a protest in Jantar Mantar, called by the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP), at least 21 protesters, from across the country continued their hunger strike despite deteriorating health conditions.

They asserted that Mr. Wangchuk’s removal from the site has only strengthened their resolve to continue until Dharmendra Pradhan resigns as the Union Education Minister.

Crowds continued to swell on the 28th day of the protest, and volunteers at a medical counter handed out Strepsils and Oral Rehydration Salts to protesters. As scores of people walked in and out of the site, those on hunger strike stayed in their makeshift tents lined up metres away from the stage at one side.

The tents were brimming with posters, whiteboards full of slogans, bags, clothes, towels and other necessities. The names of those on hunger strike were stuck on boards, along with the number of days that they have been protesting.

All India Students’ Association (AISA) activists Neha, Ameen Amitoj, and Manish Kumar, Ph.D. scholars at Jawaharlal Nehru University, Ambedkar University Delhi and Allahabad University, respectively have been on hunger strike for 21 days.

Protesters have been advised by doctors to rest as much as possible, conserve energy and speak less. Despite this, they have continued to address press briefings in the sweltering afternoon heat.

Ms. Neha said that they would not stop their protest until the “government shivers”. “We saw how Sonam Wangchuk was picked up by the police, and they tried to pounce upon us, but they could not reach us because people surrounded us,” Mr. Manish said.

Nitish, 30, who has been on hunger strike for 16 days, originally from Bihar, now working in Delhi, has not returned to work since the indefinite protest began last month.

‘Wangchuk is not alone’

Along with them, Aaditya, a social activist from Uttar Pradesh, has rejoined the hunger strike after being forced to stop upon falling ill on July 6. After Mr. Wangchuk was removed from the site, they have tied a white strip of cloth around their head with ‘*kafan*’ written on it.

Mr. Nitish said, “We tied it today, and if they have to do anything to Wangchuk sir, they will have to go through us first. And today we are not even drinking water, as a mark of our protest to what happened in the morning,” he said, with chapped lips.

Doctors said that those on hunger strike have been walking through the crowds to the mobile washrooms on the two ends of the site. A few doctors have been voluntarily conducting health check-ups on the protesters.

Dr. Tilopa, a volunteer, said that the three protesters from AISA are in critical condition and have lost 10% of their body weight each. “Manish and Ameen have bleeding gums, which could be a sign of vitamin C deficiency, liver damage or protein deficiency. Neha’s blood sugar has dropped to dangerously low levels and has been fluctuating. If prolonged, the strike can lead to conditions like seizures, shock, organ failure and various other complications,” she said.

Parliament session, CJP rally plan key reasons for Wangchuk’s removal

Vijaita Singh
NEW DELHI

Security personnel stand outside Safdarjung Hospital where Sonam Wangchuk is admitted in New Delhi. SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

The Delhi Police was instructed by the Union government to shift activist Sonam Wangchuk from the protest site at Jantar Mantar due to the upcoming Monsoon session of the Parliament, which commences on Monday, government sources said.

The police and other security agencies also apprehended a law and order situation in the national capital, metres away from the Parliament House as the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) has announced a rally to demand the resignation of Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan in the wake of NEET examination paper leak.

In a post on X, Delhi Police however, said that Mr. Wangchuk was shifted to a hospital as per orders of the Delhi High Court and on expert medical advise due to his deteriorating health condition. He was taken to Safdarjung Hospital in south Delhi.

His wife, Gitanjali J. Angmo has contested the police statement saying the High Court order was never about hospitalisation and the court only asked to monitor his health at regular intervals.

Early on Saturday morning, the dais at Jantar Mantar, where Mr. Wangchuk had been on a hunger strike for 21 days, was surrounded by police personnel in civilian clothes posing as members of a government medical team.

They covered the platform with white bedsheets and escorted Mr. Wangchuk away. He could not put up resistance due to his frail health.

Sources said the government did not want images or videos of any confrontation or force being used against the activist going viral on social media.

Victory sign

He was seen showing a victory sign as he was being brought down the dais. Besides the Delhi Police, personnel from the Rapid Action Force (RAF) and anti-riot specialised force were also deployed.

Earlier in June, Delhi Police had allowed the protest called by CJP, an online youth group, to pacify the youth’s anxiety against the NEET paper leak. Upon his arrival from the United States on June 6, Abhijeet Dipke, founder of CJP was granted permission by the police to protest at Jantar Mantar.

After the first round of protest at Jantar Mantar in June, when the government analysed that the CJP was more of an online sensation, with few people coming out in support on the streets, they were allowed to extend the protest at Jantar Mantar, beyond the day-long agitation that started June 20.

A week later, Mr. Wangchuk sat on a hunger strike to demand Mr. Pradhan’s resignation. The removal of Mr. Wangchuk was among the first tasks of Police Commissioner Anurag Kumar, who took charge less than 24 hours ago.

AIIMS expert backed urgent treatment, says hospital

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

A bulletin issued by the Safdarjung Hospital at 9 p.m. on Saturday stated that an independent expert from AIIMS had backed urgent medical treatment for activist Sonam Wangchuk due to clinical signs of dehydration.

“In view of his prolonged fasting, his condition warrants immediate medical intervention to prevent further deterioration and potentially serious complications,” the hospital said in a statement, adding that Mr. Wangchuk was conscious and haemodynamically stable. His pulse, blood pressure and oxygen saturation were within normal limits, it said.

The bulletin said that the AIIMS expert had concurred that immediate oral/intravenous fluid and electrolyte therapy was medically indicated and an AIIMS doctor had joined the treating team for continous monitoring. However, despite repeated counselling, the patient had declined intravenous fluids, oral rehydration solution and all medications.

In two letters to the Medical Superintendent, Mr. Wangchuk’s wife, Gitanjali J. Angmo directed that no oral or intravenous medicine or fluid be administered to Mr. Wangchuk without her consent. She also requested that he be discharged so he could be shifted to a medical facility of the family’s choice, citing “lack of transparency”.

NC expels Akhoon as he refuses to quit as Kargil CEC

The Hindu Bureau
SRINAGAR

The National Conference (NC) on Saturday removed party leader in Ladakh Dr. Mohammad Jaffer Akhoon days after he refused to step down from the top post of Chief Executive Councillor (CEC) of the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council, Kargil (LAHDC-K) as part of a deal with ally Congress.

An NC spokesman said party general secretary Haji Ali Mohammad Sagar removed Mr. Akhoon from the basic membership of the party for a period of six years.

“The action has been taken in view of his anti-party activities and for causing indiscipline within the party,” the spokesman said.

The NC and the Congress contested the hill council elections as a coalition in 2023. While the NC won 12 seats, the Congress managed to win 10 out of 26 seats.

Two seats were won by the BJP and two by Independent candidates. Besides these 26 seats, four seats are nominated in the 30-member hill council.

Rotational basis

As part of the pre-poll agreement, the NC and the Congress were to occupy the CEC post with a five-year term on a rotational basis for two-and-a-half years each.

However, Mr. Akhoon refused to step down in spite of bids by the Congress to bring a no confidence motion against him. Ladakh Member of Parliament Hanifa Jan has met Lieutenant Governor V.K. Saxena “to ensure the floor test as per the rules”.

Abhishek asks rebel leaders to come back to *Didi*, says he is ready to quit

Shrabana Chatterjee
KOLKATA

People gather during the demolition of Trinamool MP Abhishek Banerjee’s office in Amtala, West Bengal, on Saturday. PTI

Trinamool Congress general secretary Abhishek Banerjee on Saturday challenged rebel Trinamool leaders who have blamed him for the party’s downfall to return to the party and stand with “*Didi*”, saying he would resign within an hour if they did.

“Those who left the party and are now abusing or blaming me today... I challenge them to return to *Didi* [former Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee]. If they do, I will resign from the party within an hour. But they won’t. They have made a deal with the BJP: leave the party, join the rebel camp or the BJP, take protection from the ED, the CBI and other agencies and then blame and abuse Abhishek Banerjee,” Mr. Banerjee said, while addressing presspersons.

He said that those who believed they could burn down Trinamool must remember that the party would rebuild from the same fire with *Didi* leading the way.

Earlier in the day, one of Mr. Banerjee’s Trinamool offices in Amtala, within his Diamond Harbour Lok Sabha constituency, was bulldozed over allegations of illegal construction. Three bulldozers were deployed to raze down the structure as a large crowd gathered at the site.

Rejecting the allegations, Mr. Banerjee stated the party had purchased the land and constructed the office, and it would submit necessary documents in the court. “They have razed the whole place. Not just local administration, but BJP leaders and goons also created a ruckus inside the party office. We have videos of all of this. We will go to the Supreme Court,” Mr. Banerjee said.

He added that the party had sent an email about the demolition to the Calcutta High Court Chief Justice’s Officer on Special Duty, adding they would take action against those identified in the videos.

Mr. Banerjee went on to say that the demolition of the party office revealed the “real face” of the BJP and that the action would not be able to weaken Trinamool, but only make it stronger.

PDP unlikely to join NC in Delhi protest for Statehood

Peerzada Ashiq
SRINAGAR

Mehbooba Mufti

Just days ahead of ruling National Conference’s protest in New Delhi, Opposition Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) on Saturday dropped broad hints at not joining the protest, with party chief Mehbooba Mufti saying that her party would join only if the NC included other issues such as restoration of Article 370, release of political prisoners, and removal of ban on Jamaat-e-Islami in the agenda.

“Any movement confined solely to the demand for Statehood would amount to legitimising the abrogation of Article 370. Limiting the political struggle to Statehood echoes the BJP’s narrative by pushing Article 370 to the background and risks whitewashing the illegal and unconstitutional actions of August 5, 2019,” said Ms. Mufti, in a letter to NC president Dr. Farooq Abdullah. “The people of Jammu and Kashmir continue to carry the collective humiliation and dehumanisation inflicted after the abrogation of Article 370.”

She said the constitutional guarantees that formed the basis of Jammu and Kashmir’s accession to India were removed in a single stroke. “Both the PDP and the NC had promised the restoration of Article 370 in their 2024 Assembly election manifestos and the overwhelming mandate received by the NC reflected the people’s faith in that promise,” Ms. Mufti said.

She said the NC has “gradually reduced the broader political struggle of Jammu and Kashmir to the demand for Statehood alone, thereby normalising the BJP’s political agenda”.

“The NC has remained a mute spectator to several decisions, including the dismissal of government employees, action against Jamaat-e-Islami and its affiliated institutions, arbitrary detentions, restrictions on literature, and environmental degradation,” Ms. Mufti said.

Uddhav Thackeray calls for ‘BJP-free’ Ram movement

Ashokamithran T.
MUMBAI

Uddhav Thackeray, Aaditya Thackeray, MP Sanjay Raut and others offer prayers at Ram Mandir in Nagpur on Saturday. PTI

Shiv Sena (UBT) chief Uddhav Thackeray called for a “BJP-Free” Ram movement at his “*Ram Raksha Andolan*” (Save Ram Movement), which he conducted with his party workers on Saturday, while criticising the Centre over alleged financial misappropriation at the Ayodhya temple.

Speaking at the Ram temple in Nagpur, he said that his father and founder of Shiv Sena, Bal Thackeray, was instrumental in the movement to mobilise people in support of building a temple at Ayodhya.

The next phase of the Ram movement, independent of the BJP, has now begun, he said.

He further criticised the police action that citizens, CJP members and social activist Sonam Wangchuk were subjected to at the protest at Jantar Mantar on Saturday.

BJP govt. in Chhattisgarh survives a no-trust motion after 14-hour debate

Press Trust of India
RAIPUR

The BJP government led by Chief Minister Vishnu Deo Sai defeated the Congress’s no-confidence motion in the Chhattisgarh Assembly in the early hours of Saturday, following a marathon 14-hour debate that witnessed intense clashes over governance, corruption, and law and order issues.

The five-day monsoon session concluded with a voice vote defeating the motion, as the treasury benches fended off the Opposition party’s 136-point chargesheet alleging the government’s failures towards farmers, tribals, youth and women.

As many as 17 legislators, including the Chief Minister participated in the debate, which began post noon on Friday and concluded shortly after 2.30 a.m. on Saturday.

The Congress opened the attack by tabling a 136-point chargesheet, alleging that the BJP government had failed farmers, tribals, youth and women during its two-and-a-half years in office.

Replying to the debate, Mr. Sai dismissed the motion as “hollow, baseless and a political drama”.

Mr. Sai questioned whether the motion was directed against the three crore people of Chhattisgarh who elected the BJP to power in 2023 and subsequently backed the party in Lok Sabha and local body elections.

“Perhaps they cannot digest the fact that the son of a tribal farmer from a village is the Chief Minister today,” he said.

He further accused the Congress of using tribals as a vote bank during its decades in power at the Centre and in various States, claiming that it was the BJP that had given the community respect and representation.

Referring to the previous government’s leadership tussle, he mocked the “raja” (Bhupesh Baghel) and “maharaja” (T. S. Singh Deo) dynamic, asserting that the State’s governance suffered due to their internal infighting.

Supporting the motion, former Chief Minister Bhupesh Baghel alleged that the State was being run by an “invisible force”, citing tree felling in the Hasdeo forest region a few days before the BJP assumed office in December 2023.

INBRIEF

CBSE declares Class 10 second Board exam results

The Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) has announced the results for the Class 10 Second Board Exams on Saturday, which were held from May 15 to 21. The results can be accessed through the students' DigiLocker Results Portal. The pass percentage rose to 96.78%, officials said. "Over 6.63 lakh candidates appeared for the second edition of the board exams, out of which more than 5.13 lakh appeared for improvement. Over 59% of candidates improved their performance as compared to the main exam," CBSE Examination Controller Sanyam Bhardwaj said.

Mumbai Police probing threat issued against Aamir Khan

Bollywood actor Aamir Khan has allegedly received a threat from individuals claiming links to jailed gangster Lawrence Bishnoi, accusing him of promoting 'love jihad', with Mumbai Police examining the authenticity of a social media post and a voice note, officials said on Saturday. The purported threat was issued through a social media post and an accompanying voice clip allegedly shared by two men. They described themselves as associates of Lawrence Bishnoi, a police official said, citing the viral clip. No formal complaint has been lodged by Mr. Khan or his representatives regarding the alleged threat so far. PTI

At least five injured in blast at sponge iron factory in Bengal

A furnace of a sponge iron factory exploded in West Bengal's Paschim Bardhaman district, triggering a fire inside the unit and injuring at least five workers, police said on Saturday. The incident occurred late on Friday in Jamuria and the explosion could be heard from nearly a kilometre away. A senior police officer said: "Five workers have been rescued so far and shifted to different hospitals in critical condition. It is not yet clear whether anyone else was near the furnace at the time of the explosion." Another police officer said the temperature around the furnace shot up after the blast, making rescue operations extremely difficult. PTI

Couple, three children found dead in house in Raipur

A couple, their two minor daughters, and their son were found dead in a house in Raipur, Chhattisgarh, police said on Saturday. The deaths that occurred at the victims' rented house in the Sanjay Nagar locality came to light late on Friday night, an official said. Preliminary investigations suggest the man poisoned his family members before ending his life by hanging, though the exact cause of death will be confirmed following a detailed post-mortem and forensic analysis, as per the official. The deceased were identified as Sajid Ali alias Sajju, 50, his wife Rabia Bano, 45, son Irshad Ali, 20, and daughters Shahida Begum, 15 and Irshaba Parveen, 12. PTI

SUDOKU

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DIFFICULTY RATING: ★☆☆☆☆

Solution to yesterday's Sudoku

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

Unwanted guests turn sweet hosts for Assam butterflies

Rahul Karmakar
GUWAHATI

Butterflies have revealed that some invasive plant species, disliked by conservationists and farmers, and avoided by herbivores, serve an ecological purpose.

Bishal Basumatary, a research scholar at Bodoland University, set out to document the butterflies and their nectar sources in Raimona National Park. The university is on the outskirts of Kokrajhar, the administrative headquarters of the Bodoland Territorial Region, about 220 km west of Guwahati.

The research was conducted under the supervision of Kushal Choudhury, an associate professor at the university's Department of Zoology, between 2022 and 2025.

Their study documented 220 species of butterflies, 56 species of larval host plants, and 41 species of nectar plants in the 422 sq. km national park that forms a large transboundary conservation landscape with Bhutan's Phibsoo Wildlife Sanctuary.

"One of the most significant findings is that *Lantana camara*, *Chromolaena odorata*, and *Ziziphus mauritiana*, which are generally regarded as invasive exotic species and are often excluded from forest management practices, serve as major nectar sources for a large number of butterfly species in the park," Mr. Choudhury said. *Lantana camara* and *Chromolaena odorata* are recognised among the world's most aggressive invasive plant species and regarded as ecologically undesirable because of their negative impacts on native vegetation and ecosystem functioning.

Plot twist: *Lantana camara* and a few other plant species are often excluded from forest management practices but they also function as host plants. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Abundant nectar

Larval host plants serve as the food source for butterfly larvae during their developmental stages, whereas nectar plants provide nectar, the principal nutritional resource for adult butterflies. The study revealed that some invasive plant species provide abundant nectar supply for adult butterflies, particularly during periods when native wildflowers are scarce in the park. Their prolonged flowering period and high nectar availability were also found to have helped sustain butterfly populations during seasons of limited floral resources.

The researchers observed that *Lantana camara* attracted exceptionally large numbers of butterflies. "The species produces flower clusters that change colour as the flowers age, resulting in multicoloured inflorescences that serve as highly conspicuous visual cues for foraging butterflies. Coupled with its continuous nectar production, this characteristic likely contributes to its high attractiveness and frequent visitation by diverse butterfly species," they noted.

The study showed *Lantana camara* alone attracted more than 30 butterfly species between April and October, while *Chromolaena odorata* supported 24 butterfly species from December to February.

In addition to serving as nectar sources, several invasive plant species were also found to function as larval host plants, highlighting their multifaceted ecological importance. These include *Ricinus communis*, *Senna alata*, *Portulaca oleracea*, *Sida rhombifolia*, *Cleome rutidosperma*, *Gomphocarpus physocarpus*, *Ageratum conyzoides*, *Chromolaena odorata*, *Tridax procumbens*, *Mikania micrantha*, *Mesosphaerum suaveolens*, *Spermacoce latifolia*, *Cyanthillium cinereum*, *Heliotropium indicum*, *Persicaria hydropiper*, *Persicaria sagittata*, *Sida acuta*, *Leucas aspera*, and *Urena lobata*.

The researchers recommended maintaining small, carefully managed patches of *Lantana camara*, *Chromolaena odorata*, and *Ziziphus mauritiana* in suitable areas of protected landscapes to provide a continuous nectar supply for butterflies.

SC halts demolition drive in Rajasthan border districts

The top court was hearing a petition filed by Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind; it stays demolition for a period of two weeks in respect of the petitioners' properties; rules out discrimination on basis of religion

Ziya Us Salam
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court has granted interim relief to residents affected by the ongoing demolition drive targeting mosques, madrasas, dargahs, homes and other structures in Rajasthan's border districts. Hearing a petition filed on behalf of the affected residents by the Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind, the top court on Friday ordered that no demolition of the properties shall take place for two weeks and directed the petitioners to approach the Division Bench of the Rajasthan High Court at Jodhpur.

People gather as authorities carry out an anti-encroachment drive at a mosque in Jaipur on June 8. PTI

Fact-finding visit

The petition was filed on behalf of 40 affected people by the Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind. Appearing for the petitioners, senior advocate Kapil Sibal advanced detailed submissions before the Bench comprising Justices P.S. Narasimha and Alok Aradhe.

The litigation followed a fact-finding visit undertaken by a high-level delegation of Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind to the affected border districts of Rajasthan. The delegation documented the ground situation, met affected families and collected material relating to the demolition proceedings. The visit followed the demolition of at least four mosques in the border districts of Barmer and Jaisalmer last month.

Based on its findings, nearly 40 petitions were filed before the Rajasthan High Court at Jodhpur.

The court, however, dismissed the concerns raised by the Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind citing national security in the sensitive border areas, and ruled out discrimination on the basis of religion.

Unabated demolitions

The petitioners then approached the Supreme Court. During the hearing, Mr. Sibal submitted that demolition proceedings against residential properties, mosques, madrasas and other places were continuing unabated and that notices had been issued to hundreds of other residential and religious structures.

After hearing the submissions, the Supreme Court directed that no demolition shall be carried out for a period of two weeks in respect of the petitioners' properties. The court observed that disputes involving contested questions of fact are more appropriately adjudicated by the jurisdictional High Court and accordingly permitted the petitioners to seek appropriate relief before the Division Bench of the Rajasthan High Court at Jodhpur.

Reacting to the order, Mahmood Asad Madani, president of Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind, said the organisation would immediately approach the Division Bench of the Rajasthan High Court. He reiterated that the Muslim body will pursue every available legal remedy. "We remain confident that the rule of law and constitutional values will ultimately prevail," he said.

BCI lays down social media norms for law students, advocates

The Hindu Bureau
DELHI

The Council stressed that the dignity of courts and the Bar must be maintained.

In a sweeping move to regulate the digital conduct of the legal fraternity, the Bar Council of India (BCI) has issued a comprehensive circular prescribing strict standards for the use of social media by advocates, law students and legal interns.

The circular, issued on July 17, prohibits advocates interns and law students from creating or circulating social media content that sensationalises court proceedings, judicial hearings, chambers or professional work.

Advocates have been directed to refrain from "making reels, videos, photographs or promotional content inside Court premises, courtrooms, corridors, Bar rooms, chambers or judicial buildings in a manner inconsistent with dignity and decorum."

The circular also bars lawyers from "clipping, editing or circulating live-streamed proceedings with captions, music, commentary, thumbnails or voiceovers that ridicule, mock, distort, sensationalise or scandalise the conduct of Judges, counsel, litigants or witnesses."

The BCI has further prohibited lawyers from creating or circulating AI-generated images, deepfake videos, voice-cloned recordings or other synthetic content. It also warns against publishing fabricated judgments, misleading legal advice, undisclosed AI-generated legal content, clickbait legal claims and the misuse of professional identity.

The BCI said its concern was with "content which crosses the line from education into breach of confidentiality, manufactured authority, with the dignity of Courts and the Bar."

SC seeks Assam reply to pleas on citizenship

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court has granted two weeks to the Assam government to file its responses on pleas challenging orders declaring five women as foreigners who allegedly entered the State illegally. The Bench passed the order after the counsel appearing for the Assam government sought time to file counter-affidavits in the five petitions.

On June 5, the top court had ordered *status quo* on the deportation of the petitioners while agreeing to hear their pleas challenging separate orders of the Gauhati High Court.

On Thursday, an advocate appearing for one of the petitioners referred to a July 13 verdict of the apex court, which held that the determination of citizenship status must be made through a fair, lawful and reasoned process. Another advocate said the top court had stayed their deportation by ordering *status quo* in the matter.

Shah reviews indigenous border security technology in West Bengal

Vijaita Singh
Shrabana Chatterjee
NEW DELHI/KOLKATA

Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Saturday said the Siliguri corridor in West Bengal, that was "once a corridor of infiltration under previous governments", is now becoming synonymous with a secure border.

As part of his three-day visit to the State, which ends on July 19, Mr. Shah visited Jhumagachh Border Outpost of the 18th Battalion of the BSF's North Bengal Frontier in Siliguri, where he inspected indigenous and state-of-the-art technologies for strengthening border security.

"I reviewed the operational preparedness by observing the exhibition of the Intruder Warning System, Radio-based Fence Intrusion Detection System, Gate Management Software, and the Indigenous Border Security System installed on the new-design fence. Our borders, equipped with state-of-the-art equipment and modern alert systems, are becoming an ideal example of modern border security," Mr. Shah wrote on social media.

Amit Shah inspects the surveillance system at Jhumagachh Border Outpost of the 18th Battalion of the BSF's North Bengal Frontier in Siliguri on Saturday. ANI

He also chaired a high-level meeting with senior BSF officers in Siliguri, which was also attended by Chief Minister Suvendu Adhikari, Members of Parliament, Union Home Secretary Govind Mohan, Border Management Secretary Rajendra Kumar, Intelligence Bureau Director Mahesh Dixit, BSF Director General Praveen Kumar, senior State police officers, State government officials, and district administration officials.

Earlier, State Minister Agnimitra Paul said Mr. Shah's visit would focus on border fencing and security in the Siliguri Corridor, commonly referred to as 'Chicken's Neck'.

Projects worth ₹77 cr.

Mr. Shah virtually laid the foundation stone for and inaugurated development projects worth ₹77.06 crore. The projects included laying the foundation for the construction of a 4-km border fence to be built at ₹30 crore on newly acquired land for two border outposts in West Bengal.

Speaking during the event, the Minister stated that the government is establishing a quadrangular security grid to fortify the borders. He emphasised that the welfare of security personnel guarding the nation's borders and their families is a top priority for the government. The government is working towards making the borders completely secure and preventing infiltration in border areas through the concept of 'Smart Borders'.

The BSF has already said that it will expedite border fencing in coordination with other government departments. However, the Sundarbans with its thick mangrove forests and several river channels remains a challenge.

Soon after the BJP assumed power in West Bengal, Mr. Shah had said that the party's victory in the State would plug "one of the biggest holes" in the country's border security.

India shares a 4,096-km border with Bangladesh, of which 2,216 km lies in West Bengal.

NMC set to limit faculty eligibility reviews

Bindu Shajan Perappadan
NEW DELHI

The National Medical Commission (NMC) will no longer process "routine" requests from faculty members and medical colleges seeking to determine the eligibility of candidates for appointment, promotion, or designation to teaching positions, according to a public notice issued by the Post Graduate Medical Education Board (PGMEB).

More complicated cases must be referred through an institution, accompanied by a fee of ₹25,000. Shifting the responsibility primarily to the appointing authority, the medical institution, university, or any other competent authority, the PGMEB maintained that the NMC will no longer issue eligibility certificates or clarifications in routine cases where the eligibility can be determined directly using the provisions of the Medical Institutions (Qualifications of Faculty) Regulations, 2025.

Daily grind: A goods shed worker carries a sack of rice inside a railway wagon during loading operations in Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu.

Hands at work: Workers carry heavy sacks of rice across the railway yard, a daily routine that relies on coordination and physical strength.

Spilled stories: Rice grains spill from a sack as a worker moves it towards a railway wagon, a reminder of the precious cargo handled through every stage of the supply chain.

Scorching hours: Amid rising temperatures, workers continue their daily routine at the Thanjavur railway goods shed, where much of the work remains dependent on manual labour.

The weight of a nation's food

From dawn until dusk, they lift, carry, stack and unload sacks of grain and agricultural commodities, keeping the flow of food moving from farms to markets

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Every grain of rice tells a story.

Before it reaches dining tables, restaurant kitchens and family meals across India, it passes through many hands. Among the most important – and least visible – are the loadmen of the railway goods shed in Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu.

Known as the rice bowl of Tamil Nadu, Thanjavur produces vast quantities of paddy that travel across the country through an intricate supply chain. At the heart of that movement are labourers whose daily work depends almost entirely on physical strength. From dawn until dusk, they lift, carry, stack and unload sacks of grain and agricultural commodities, keeping the flow of food moving from farms to markets.

Armed with little more than a cloth wrapped around the head and a metal hook in hand, the workers navigate narrow spaces between lorries, platforms and railway wagons. Their movements are repetitive and relentless. A sack is hoisted onto a shoulder, carried across the yard, stacked inside a wagon and replaced by another. A worker makes about ₹1,000 after a hard day's labour.

During breaks, workers seek shade wherever they can find it: beneath railway wagons, beside parked trucks or along the edges of the platform. Water becomes both refreshment and necessity as they endure heat, dust and fatigue. In the middle of their shift, they eat the meals brought from home as there are no canteen facilities.

The movement of grain from one of India's most productive agricultural regions depends on these labourers. Every loaded wagon represents countless individual lifts, steps and moments of effort that rarely enter public view. While mechanisation has transformed many sectors, much of this work continues to rely on human endurance.

In an era increasingly defined by automation and technology, the goods shed at Thanjavur remains a reminder that human strength continues to power some of the most fundamental processes of modern life. The loadmen may remain anonymous to those who consume the food they help transport, but their work is woven into the daily lives of countless people across the nation.

Tools of trade: Iron hooks used to lift and move heavy sacks lie beside a railway wagon. Tools like these remain essential to the daily work at the goods shed.

Paths of labour: Workers walk between trucks and railway wagons as they move grain through the loading yard.

Hands that feed: Dust-covered and calloused, a worker's hands show years of physical labour.

Unseen effort: A worker arranges sacks inside a railway wagon, one step in the long journey of rice from Tamil Nadu's fields to consumers across India.

The human cost: Co-workers carry a worker after he sustained a foot injury while loading rice sacks. Behind the movement of every wagon are workers exposed to physical risks.

Brief respite: Workers rest in the shade of a railway wagon and drink water during a break, before returning to their work. The cycle of work is relentless, as the cargo must be loaded on a strict schedule every day.

How does India's newly launched train powered by hydrogen work?

How new is this technology? What is its future in India? Is hydrogen a safe fuel?

Maitri Porecha

The story so far:
On July 17, Prime Minister Narendra Modi flagged off India's first train powered by hydrogen. It operates on an 89-km stretch between Jind and Sonipat in Haryana.

What is a hydrogen-powered train?
India's hydrogen fuel cell-powered train is a 10-coach train with a capacity of carrying around 2,600 passengers. Unlike conventional electric trains that draw power from overhead lines, it generates its own electricity onboard using hydrogen, known as the cleanest fuel.

Unlike conventional diesel locomotives that burn fuel to generate mechanical power, a hydrogen train carries a small power plant onboard in the form of a proton exchange membrane fuel cell. Hydrogen stored in the train's cylinders combines with oxygen from the surrounding air inside the fuel cell, producing electricity that powers the traction motors and turns the wheels. The only direct by-products of this electrochemical reaction are water vapour and heat. There is no combustion, no smoke, and no tailpipe carbon emissions.

The train consists of two Hydrogen Driving Power Cars (DPCs) and eight Trailer Coaches. Each DPC houses fuel cells, lithium iron phosphate batteries, and hydrogen storage cylinders that work together to provide traction power, while ensuring reliable operation under varying operating conditions. The two power cars, one at each end, each produce 1,200 kW (1,600 hp) of power. Their combined 2,400 kW output enables the train to reach its design speed of 110 km/h.

> Hydrogen is inflammable and needs to be handled with care. Since it cannot be seen or smelled, the project's safety design focuses on detecting even the smallest leak instantly

Where does the hydrogen come from?
The dedicated hydrogen storage, compression and dispensing facility established at Jind will support refuelling operations, the Indian Railways has stated. Just like a petrol pump or a CNG station, the train needs a place to refuel.

First, hydrogen is produced on site through electrolysis, in which water is split into hydrogen and oxygen using electricity at the green hydrogen plant, and is then stored safely in dedicated storage tanks. In the second step, the hydrogen is compressed to 500 bar, enabling a larger quantity to be stored in a smaller volume. Finally, it is dispensed through two independent hydrogen dispensers at a regulated pressure of 350 bar, allowing both DPCs to be refuelled simultaneously and reducing turnaround time. The facility stores nearly 3,000 kg of hydrogen at a time, sufficient to support regular operations of the train set, and its storage and supply system has been approved by the Petroleum and Explosives Safety Organisation.

Is it safe to travel on a hydrogen-powered train when hydrogen is an inflammable fuel?
Hydrogen is colourless, odourless, tasteless and non-toxic. However, it is inflammable and needs to be handled with care. Since it cannot be seen or smelled, the project's safety design focuses on detecting even the smallest leak instantly.

The train and the plant are fitted with devices that continuously watch for hydrogen leaks, unusual heat, flames, or smoke. Continuous ventilation keeps air moving through the train at all times, so that even if a tiny amount of hydrogen were to leak, it is safely carried away and diluted in the open air.

There is also an automatic shut-off system. If any unusual activity is detected, the system can automatically cut off the hydrogen supply on its own, without waiting for a person to react.

The Jind hydrogen plant has protections, including leak detectors, flame detectors, automatic shutdown systems, water sprays to control any fire, and fire alarms.

Before being commissioned, the entire system underwent an independent third-party safety assessment by TÜV SÜD, Germany, one of the world's leading technical inspection and certification agencies, an Indian Railways spokesperson said.

What is the status of hydrogen-powered trains globally?
They are still at a nascent stage. Germany was the first country to introduce commercial hydrogen passenger trains, while France, Italy, China, Japan and others are pursuing pilot projects or limited deployments. However, these trains typically have two to four coaches and serve mainly regional routes.

What is the future of such trains in India?
Indian Railways is exploring the deployment of hydrogen technology on heritage railways, including the Kalka-Shimla route. They intend to transition to a structured national programme for hydrogen-powered rolling stock, which will contribute to the National Green Hydrogen Mission and the country's long-term Net Zero goal, an Indian Railways spokesperson said.

What are the gains from the India-U.K. trade deal?

How do the two countries benefit from the deal? What changes will the deal bring for Indian workers in the U.K.? What were the intractable issues left out of the deal? Why does this deal stand out in particular?

T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan

The story so far:
The India-U.K. Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) came into effect on July 15, a year after it was signed. At the same time, the India-U.K. Double Contribution Convention (DCC) also comes into effect. The trade deal has been hailed by both sides, with Commerce Secretary Rajesh Agrawal even calling it the "gold standard" of India's free trade agreements.

What trade benefits does India get?
While speaking to the media a day before the deal came into force, Mr. Agrawal said the CETA stood out not just for its breadth, but also depth. That is, not only does it cover a wide range of tariff and non-tariff issues, but it also yields deep concessions within many of these issues.

As per the deal, the U.K. will immediately remove tariffs on 96.8% of its tariff lines, accounting for 97.7% of trade by value. An additional 2% of tariff lines, amounting to 1.8% of trade value, will see reduced tariffs based on quotas. In total, this covers 98.8% of tariff lines and 99.5% of trade value.

Apart from tariffs, the 30 chapters of the CETA also cover digital trade, government procurement, small and medium enterprises, innovation, labour, environment, and gender. They also address non-tariff barriers such as Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures and Technical Barriers to Trade so that they do not become insurmountable trade restrictions in the future.

The CETA also incorporates a significant section on services, which is of considerable interest to India since services exports are a vital engine of growth. The U.K. has agreed to grant commercial presence rights to Indian companies in sectors such as computer services, consultancy, and environmental services. This means Indian companies operating in these sectors can set up branches, subsidiaries, or representative offices in the U.K.

> Apart from its breadth and depth, the CETA stands out for two other reasons: automobile tariffs and government procurement

Union Minister of Commerce and Industry Piyush Goyal addresses a press conference on the India-U.K. CETA, in New Delhi. ANI

What is the DCC and how does it help Indian workers in the U.K.?
One big win for India is the DCC. Under this deal, Indian workers in the U.K. and their employers will no longer need to pay social security in the U.K. if that payment is being made in India. The duration of this relief was initially three years, but was revised to five.

The problem was that Indian workers in the U.K. were paying social security in both India and in the U.K. Most Indian workers in the U.K. are there for short periods of up to five years. However, under U.K. law, workers can claim social security benefits only after making contributions for 10 years. As a result, Indian workers would pay into the system but return to India before becoming eligible to receive the benefits. Now, the five-year relief under the DCC means that about 90% of Indian workers in the U.K. will no longer have to part with about 23% of their salaries towards U.K. social security, as long as they are paying social security in India. Mr. Agrawal said this will benefit over 75,000 Indian workers and more than 900 employers.

What does the U.K. gain?
The U.K. stands to gain significantly in terms of market access in both goods and services, even as India has sought to protect its sensitive sectors from foreign competition.

India will immediately remove tariffs on goods accounting for 30.3% of trade value, with tariffs on an additional 47% of trade value being eliminated in a phased manner. It will also offer reduced tariff rates under quota arrangements for goods accounting for 12.1% of trade value. In total, this will cover 89.5% of tariff lines and 89.4% of trade value.

In terms of popular U.K. products, alcohol from the U.K., especially whiskey, is set to become cheaper in India, and so are British cars, and engineering products.

India has also agreed to open up some of its key service sectors to U.K. firms, such as accounting, auditing, financial services, telecom, and environmental services. This means that U.K. companies in these sectors can offer their services to Indian customers without first having to establish a local presence here. India has also agreed to recognise U.K. professional qualifications in law and accounting.

Are there any unusual aspects of the deal?
Apart from its breadth and depth, the CETA stands out for two other reasons: automobile tariffs and government procurement.

This deal is the first under which India has agreed to reduce tariffs on automobile imports. On July 10, the Directorate General of Foreign Trade notified the tariff rates that will apply to auto imports from the U.K. Under the arrangement, 20,000 completely built petrol and diesel passenger vehicles will be allowed to enter India in the first year at concessional tariff rates of 30-50%, depending on engine size and vehicle type, down from the standard import duty of 66-110%.

The quota will gradually increase to 37,000 such vehicles by the fifth year of the deal, before gradually falling to 15,000 by the 15th year and beyond. The tariffs on these in-quota vehicles will fall to 10% in the fifth year and remain there. There are separate quotas and tariffs for alternative fuel passenger vehicles and commercial vehicles.

Regarding government procurement, U.K. firms will now be allowed to participate in Indian Central government procurement bids. However, they can participate only as Class-II local suppliers in eligible tenders.

Indian suppliers, on the other hand, will continue to receive Class-I local supplier preference in the U.K. However, U.K. market access will be limited to non-sensitive Central government entities and utilities, excluding central PSUs and State/local government procurement. According to the Ministry of Commerce, this provides Indian suppliers legal access to the U.K. government procurement market worth around £90 billion ($122 billion). India is providing reciprocal opportunities of around $114 billion.

What has been left out of the deal?
Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal has repeatedly said that India and the U.K. have not let the best become the enemy of the good in negotiating this deal. That is, issues that were intractable were left out of the deal and are being worked out separately.

One key element is an investment agreement. The Trade and Economic Partnership Agreement (TEPA) India has signed and implemented with the four European Free Trade Association (EFTA) countries includes a provision where the EFTA bloc has committed to facilitating investment of $100 billion in India over 15 years. The India-New Zealand free trade agreement too includes a provision where New Zealand will facilitate investments of $20 billion in India over 15 years. The U.K. deal does not include any such provision.

Another is investor-state dispute resolution. Ever since India unilaterally cancelled all its Bilateral Investment Treaties (BITs) in 2017, dispute resolution has been a key sticking point for foreign investors. Under the earlier BITs, investment disputes could be referred to international arbitration in a neutral third country. With their cancellation, the disputes are being arbitrated in India. The perception is that this is not a fair process.

India has also not managed to wring any concessions from the U.K. regarding the latter's upcoming Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism tariffs. However, no country has made headway in this regard.

What goals does Semicon 2.0 aim to achieve?

What are the key focus areas of Semicon 2.0? How is it different from the first phase? Why is India focusing on semiconductor manufacturing? What incentives does the Mobile Phone Manufacturing Scheme offer?

Aroon Deep

The story so far:
On July 15, the Union Cabinet cleared the second phase of the India Semiconductor Mission (ISM), and the Mobile Phone Manufacturing Scheme (MPMS), with a ₹1.27 lakh crore and ₹62,500 crore outlay, respectively. The programmes are aimed at encouraging the next cohort of semiconductor fabrication, assembly, and packaging facilities in India, as well as following through on encouraging more phone assembly and component manufacturing in the country. The government expects the scheme to draw ₹4 lakh crore in investment, ₹2 lakh crore in production, and ₹1 lakh crore in exports over its tenure of five years.

How is this different from the first phase?
ISM's first phase was approved in December 2021 with an outlay of ₹76,000 crore. Following an amendment in 2022, the programme was empowered to provide for up to 50% capital subsidy for big-ticket projects, such as Micron's memory chip packaging facility in Sanand, Gujarat. The funds were also directed to the Electronics Component Manufacturing Scheme, which was designed to incentivise additional manufacturing of smaller electronics components.

> The government has insisted that building domestic capacities is essential even if it takes decades to reach the level of countries, such as the Netherlands and Taiwan, whose companies are critical in chipmaking

Union IT Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw showcases 'Made in India' semiconductor chips while speaking during a Cabinet briefing in New Delhi. PTI

The Gazette notification laying out the precise details of the second phase is set to be published by next month. In the meantime, Information Technology Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw and Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) Additional Secretary Amitesh Kumar Sinha have offered a few details of the expanded scope of the programme.

The main change is that the ISM programme will now cover a larger part of the electronics manufacturing ecosystem, including areas that were partially addressed in the previous phase. These include encouraging chip design talent, capital machinery (the large equipment used in chip-making facilities), chemicals and gases that are of semiconductor-grade purity, and research and development efforts.

The newer scheme will also trim capital subsidies to 30-40%, Mr. Sinha said, as the semiconductor industry is likely to get more attractive in India even with less incentives. The government is also less likely to offer land support, as State governments have shown increasing enthusiasm for hosting such projects by providing land at token prices and offering their own incentives on top of those provided by the Union government.

What have been the outcomes of phase 1?
Of the 12 manufacturing and packaging units approved in phase 1, with a total committed investment of ₹1.64 lakh crore, most are semiconductor packaging units. Nine such units are spread across Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Assam, Odisha, and Andhra Pradesh. In addition, there is a silicon fabrication unit, and one gallium-nitride Micro LED display fabrication unit. The Tata Electronics fab is set to start commercial production in 2028.

The scheme included a design-linked incentive programme, under which 24 projects have been approved. The government has also obtained licences for expensive semiconductor design software and provided them free of cost to universities and startups. The Semiconductor Lab, Mohali, which is being revamped, is being positioned as a facility to help "tape out" chips designed by students and researchers.

Why is India focusing on semiconductor manufacturing?
From the COVID-19 era supply chain disruptions to export controls initiated by the U.S. during the trade war with China, there has been a growing sense that India needs to integrate more tightly with global electronics value chains. The government has insisted that building domestic capacities is essential even if it takes decades to reach the level of countries, such as the Netherlands and Taiwan, whose companies are critical in chipmaking.

How sophisticated are the chips targeted in the current facilities?
While the most powerful phones use "frontier" grade chips, with a process node of 7 nanometres or even less, the Union government has targeted 28nm chips (which are made in what are called "legacy" process nodes). There is a massive market for these chips, Mr. Vaishnaw reasoned, as everyday electronics, where size and computing power are not constraints, require such components too.

As ISM 2.0 progresses, the government hopes that the ecosystem will progress to frontier nodes, especially by improving the level of domestically owned intellectual property and research for such chips. While semiconductor designers are aplenty in India, most work for either foreign firms or on their behalf, leaving royalties and expertise outside the domestic industry.

Why is MPMS being notified?
While a growing share of iPhone sales around the world come from handsets assembled in India, most components remain imported, and there are barely any Indian-designed handsets in the market. The MPMS aims to incentivise both the expansion of domestic phone assembly as a way to grow the ancillary market, and to incentivise domestic design and research and development. To that end, the scheme provides for incentives ranging from 2.25% to 5%, depending on the level of local design involved in the handsets.

PROFILES

The commander of asymmetric warfare

Ahmad Vahidi

The former IRGC spymaster and Defence Minister, who laid the foundations of Iran's 'Axis of Resistance' and expanded the country's conventional military capabilities, is facing his greatest test as the Islamic Republic comes under relentless U.S. bombardment

Stanly Johny

When Ahmad Vahidi was appointed deputy commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in December 2025, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, then Iran's Supreme Leader, wrote in his decree that the Brigadier General's elevation was aimed at "enhancing operational readiness and addressing the spiritual and material needs" of the IRGC. Gen. Vahidi's appointment came months after the 12-day Iran-Israel war in June 2025. On the opening day of that conflict, the IRGC's Commander-in-Chief Hossein Salami was killed in a targeted Israeli strike. He was succeeded by Mohammad Pakpour. There was a fragile lull in tensions after that conflict. But Iran believed that a bigger war was coming. An experienced commander and one of the architects of Iran's resistance infrastructure, Gen. Vahidi was brought in to help prepare the IRGC for the next round of fighting. Few, however, expected that he would soon be leading that war himself.

Gen. Pakpour was killed, along with Ali Khamenei and several other senior officials, on February 28 when the U.S. and Israel launched a new war against Iran. Within days, Gen. Vahidi was appointed Commander-in-Chief of the IRGC. He then disappeared almost entirely from public view, enforcing and directing Iran's military response from the shadows. With Ali Khamenei dead and his successor, Mojtaba Khamenei, not seen in public since the war broke out, the IRGC, which has spearheaded Iran's response, has emerged as the country's most powerful state institution. At its helm, Gen. Vahidi has found himself in one of the most consequential – and unenviable – positions in the Islamic Republic.

Born on June 27, 1958 in Shiraz, Vahid Shahcheraghi grew up in the Shah's tumultuous Iran. He adopted the nom de guerre 'Ahmad Vahidi' when he joined the IRGC, or Sepah-e-Pasdaran, in 1979, immediately after Ayatollah Khomeini established his rule following the collapse of the monarchical regime.

One of the main objectives of the Pasdaran was to preserve the revolution and the theocratic, constitutional system Khomeini and his followers built. The revolutionaries were wary of the loyalty of Iran's regular Army that was commanded by royalists until the revolution. They wanted a fighting force that was completely loyal to the clergy. So they went on to build one. Khomeini described the Guards as "the soldiers of Islam". "Wherever you be, guard yourselves against the self in you and from all the Satans around you," he told Pasdaran after the group was founded. Ahmad Vahidi was one of those founding guards of Pasdaran.

The spy who became general

The Iran-Iraq war of 1980-88 transformed the IRGC from a militia network into a powerful fighting force. As a young soldier, Vahidi was appointed the deputy internal security chief in the IRGC intelligence unit. In 1983, at age 25, he became the intelligence chief, a post he would hold until the war was over in 1988, according to Tasnim news agency. Iran had laid the foundations for its regional resistance activities during this period. In 1982, the IRGC established the Islamic Resistance in Lebanon, which later became Hezbollah. The 'Department 900' and the 'Special External Operations Department' of the IRGC oversaw the organisation's overseas operations.

After the war, these two arms merged into one and the Quds Force was established as the Guards' de facto external arm. Gen. Vahidi was appointed as its commander and he laid the foundations of what is now called Iran's 'Axis of Resistance'. Gen. Qassem Soleimani, who succeeded Gen. Vahidi, expanded the operations of the Quds Force and transformed the unit into a special operations and intelligence network spread across Iran's neighbourhood. Gen. Soleimani was killed in January 2020 after an American air strike in the outskirts of Baghdad.

Rooted in Khomeini's Shia revolutionism, Gen. Vahidi has been close to the conservative political establishment of the Islamic Republic.

ILLUSTRATION: R. RAJESH

And he has held key positions throughout his long career. When reformist President Mohammad Khatami was in office, Gen. Vahidi was a deputy for planning at the Ministry of Defence. In 2005, when Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected President, Gen. Vahidi became the chief deputy defence minister. Mr. Ahmadinejad appointed him as Defence Minister after his contested re-election in 2009. During his term as Defence Minister, Gen. Vahidi focused on expanding Iran's conventional military capabilities. Fars News Agency, describing his Defence Ministry tenure, called it "the golden age of Iran's defensive deterrence".

According to the U.S. Treasury, which placed sanctions on him in 2010, he played a key role in procurement for Iran's missile, drone and nuclear programmes.

In August 2021, he was appointed the Interior Minister by President Ebrahim Raisi. His appointment solidified the IRGC's role as a key external and internal security player during the Raisi administration. When protests broke out across the country in September 2022, following the death of Mahsa Amini, who was detained for allegedly violating Iran's hijab rules, Gen. Vahidi oversaw the crackdown. An Interpol Red Notice remains active for his alleged role in the 1994 AMIA bombing in Buenos Aires, Argentina, which killed 85 people. Argentine courts issued international arrest warrants for nine Iranian and Hezbollah officials, including Vahidi. He has also been sanctioned by Canada, the U.S. and the European Union for alleged involvement in terrorism and nuclear proliferation activities.

Theory of victory

After the recent war broke out, the IRGC responded by staging retaliatory attacks against Israel and targeting American bases across the Persian Gulf. It also closed the Strait of Hormuz, a critical waterway connecting the Persian Gulf with the Gulf of Oman. The IRGC's military theory is rooted in asymmetric warfare, not in proportional conventional response. By regionalising the war, closing the strait and threatening energy facilities across the Gulf, the IRGC has enhanced the economic cost of the war, putting the U.S. and regional monarchies under pressure. There was a lull in fighting following the April 8 ceasefire and the July 17 memorandum of understanding between the U.S. and Iran. But now, both countries have returned to another phase of all-out war – this time over the status of the Strait of Hormuz. The U.S. Navy claims that the Strait is open. But the IRGC, which has turned the entire Persian Gulf into a battlefield, has retained its tight grip on the waterway.

As the U.S. bombing and Iran's counterattacks continue, Gen. Vahidi finds himself in a position that is both powerful and precarious. A lifelong believer in perpetual resistance and asymmetric warfare, he now faces his greatest test. Many of his senior commanders have been killed, much of Iran's military infrastructure has come under sustained attack, and the country remains under relentless bombardment. The U.S. and Israel seek to compel Tehran to reopen the Strait of Hormuz and dismantle its nuclear programme. Gen. Vahidi's theory of victory is, however, different – to ensure that Iran survives and the state endures, while defeating the enemy by denying a victory.

THE GIST

- Rooted in Khomeini's Shia revolutionism, Gen. Ahmad Vahidi has been close to the conservative political establishment of the Islamic Republic
- As a young soldier, Vahidi was appointed the deputy internal security chief in the IRGC intelligence unit during the Iran-Iraq war
- He became the Defence Minister in 2009 and Interior Minister in 2021. As Interior Minister, he oversaw a crackdown on protests over the death of Mahsa Amini in police custody

A common platform

'Medai'

Political parties and groups representing Sri Lanka's Tamil-speaking ethnic minority communities seek to voice their shared concerns

Meera Srinivasan

Last week, when prominent political parties and groups representing Sri Lanka's Tamil-speaking ethnic minorities launched a common platform, the move piqued the interest of many. Especially since the platform, or "medai", as the leaders called it, is neither a conventional political coalition nor an electoral alliance.

Seated next to each other at a Colombo hotel, leaders of the All Ceylon Makkal Congress, Ceylon Workers' Congress, Democratic Tamil National Alliance, Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi, Sri Lanka Muslim Congress, and the Tamil Progressive Alliance took turns to say the common platform would allow them to voice the shared concerns their respective constituencies face – war-affected Tamils in the north and east, the historically marginalised and chronically neglected Malaiyaha Tamils living mostly in the central and southern hill country, and Muslims living in the north, east, and the rest of the country.

All the parties and groups sit in Opposition in the current Parliament, where President Anura Kumara Dissanayake's National People's Power (NPP) enjoys a supermajority, following a historic mandate that included support from ethnic minorities across the country. While some parties are directly aligned with the main Opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), others maintain a distance.

MEERA SRINIVASAN

Many of them also clash at the polls, competing for the same vote bank. Each party, or breakaway formation, has its own story situated in Sri Lanka's tumultuous history. Their track records show varied political alignments and departures, shaping their own course and that of national politics on the island. Some were in alliance with former President Mahinda Rajapaksa when he was in power, while others vehemently opposed the Rajapaksas.

The actors represent Sri Lanka's ethnic minorities who are Tamil-speaking, but they also grapple with sharp differences and fierce conflicts among themselves, seen, for example, in the competing claims for land in the north and east, or the contestations over natural resources, especially among Tamils and Muslims of the north and east. Regardless of the known tensions and evident contradictions, the leaders behind the platform have clearly articulated a limited and specific programme for now, focusing on three areas – the introduction of a new Constitution, the early conduct of the long-pending Provincial Council polls, and the resolution of conflicts surrounding people's land, adding that the platform would gradually open up space for conversations around other contentious issues.

President's pledges

President Dissanayake has made clear pledges on all three areas. The NPP's August 2024 poll manifesto – subsequently adopted as the government's National Policy Framework – explicitly promised to introduce a new Constitution, building on the constitutional reform process that began in 2015, and hold Provincial Council elections within a year.

Weeks after being elected to the country's top office, Mr. Dissanayake told a packed rally in the northern Jaffna district that people's lands, held by various state agencies, would be returned to them. While his government had initiated the return of land in some areas to the people, huge swathes remain under the control of the military, archaeology, and forest departments. Nearly two years since those pledges were made, provincial polls have not been held, and there is no movement on the new Constitution.

In the hill country, where Malaiyaha Tamils have sustained a resolute struggle for land rights, communities are still fighting to rightfully own a piece of land where their ancestors toiled. In October 2023, the NPP said it would ensure a "fair solution" to realising the "land rights of Malaiyaha Tamils". In identifying the three issues, members of the common platform have sought to hold the Dissanayake administration to account, based on its own pledges to the people. The initiative, they underlined, stems from neither an anti-government nor a pro-opposition stance.

Fast and composed

Sonam Wangchuk

The educationist-cum-innovator, who has been on a 21-day fast, has emerged as the face of the CJP's protest in Delhi demanding the Union Education Minister's resignation

Aroon Deep

Right as Sonam Wangchuk entered the 21st day of his fast, authorities whisked him away, covering his path from the stage at the Jantar Mantar protest site to the waiting ambulance with a wall of white curtain. Mr. Wangchuk tried to raise his hand beyond the curtains, and it appeared for a split second, before he was ushered in and sped off.

Mr. Wangchuk, 59, has emerged as an unlikely symbol of the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP)'s weeks-long youth-led protests across the country, now centred in the heart of the capital. The mythology surrounding Mr. Wangchuk is ever evolving: from stories of how he concealed his family pedigree – his father Sonam Wangyal, a mountaineer and former MLA – to gain admission to an engineering college as an ordinary student, to becoming the face of climate demonstrations in ecologically sensitive Ladakh in 2023, and, last year, to championing the region's demand for greater autonomy.

On both occasions, Mr. Wangchuk undertook a lengthy fast, setting him on a path that would lead him to Delhi. In 2025, as Mr. Wangchuk participated in a walk from Leh to Delhi, authorities arrested him after violence broke out, leaving four persons dead. While Mr. Wangchuk was held under the stringent National Security Act, he was released midway through his detention period, as the government sought to earn Ladakhis' trust. His record as an educator precedes his recent streak of resistance. His Ramon Magsaysay award citation in 2018 recognised his "uniquely systematic, collaborative and community-driven reform of learning systems in remote northern India, thus improving the life opportunities of Ladakhi youth, and his constructive engagement of all sectors in local society to harness science and culture creatively for economic progress."

ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

Social issues

In recent years, Mr. Wangchuk has brought national attention to the causes he championed, such as worries around Ladakh's autonomy following the abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution. In that sense, it was not far-fetched for Mr. Wangchuk to fuse the real-world impact he was recognised for with his growing social media savvy.

After the CJP's Abhijeet Dipke landed in Delhi from the U.S. on June 7, announcing that he would protest at Jantar Mantar, Mr. Wangchuk showed up, too. On June 28, when the CJP returned there, Mr. Wangchuk started his fast, anchoring the movement – threatened with displacement by police, which was urging protesters to clear out – in place.

For the most part, Mr. Wangchuk has been most commonly associated with *3 Idiots*, the 2009 Hindi film whose effortlessly smart Phunsukh Wangdu character, essayed by Aamir Khan, was widely read as a nod to him and his solar-powered SECMOL campus. Neither Aamir Khan nor Mr. Wangchuk seemed to relish in the comparison. Mr. Wangchuk distanced himself from the film, while Mr. Khan denied the link when asked about it in London, and side-stepped a question on the fast.

On more than one occasion, Mr. Wangchuk has stated that this protest is not political, an assessment that flies in the face of the goal of the protest: Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan's resignation, and accountability for blunders in two separate crucial examinations [NEET and CBSE]. As the face of the CJP's protest, Mr. Wangchuk has attracted growing concern over his health, and a fair amount of scepticism from would-be sympathisers, who see him as a misfit in the current movement at best, and a diversion from the issues at worst.

That has not stopped crowds from thronging at Jantar Mantar, from where Mr. Wangchuk was whisked away on Saturday morning. As of Saturday evening, Mr. Wangchuk had refused, even out of sight from anyone but his wife Gitanjali J. Angmo, being hooked up to an intravenous fluid or oral medication that would compromise his fast. On Monday [July 20], Mr. Wangchuk was due to lead a march to Parliament to push the issue of Mr. Pradhan's resignation.

Power grids face unexpected slow-burn threat from solar storms

Vasudevan Mukunth

As countries electrify more of their economies and increasingly interconnect their power grids, understanding space weather has become crucial. One particularly adverse form of space weather is a geomagnetic storm: temporary disturbances in earth's magnetic field caused by charged particles from the sun. These storms produce beautiful aurorae but also induce strong yet short-lived currents in the grid.

However, a new study in *Space Weather* has reported that these storms can also stress power grids in a hitherto unexpected way and that existing tools may not fully capture the effects. The findings are centred on a geomagnetic storm in June 2015 that the U.S. Space Weather Prediction Centre had rated G4, or 'severe', and which produced a strange effect in New Zealand.

Instead of intensely spiking the strength of currents in the South Island power grid, the storm ramped up geomagnetically induced currents over 90 minutes. The currents amounted to only 20 amperes but the duration was interesting, per the study. When such a current flows through a transformer for long periods, it can saturate the magnetic cores, leaving them to overheat and suffer more wear.

The study data came from multiple datasets plus measurements provided by Transpower New Zealand.

The researchers – from the University of Gothenburg, Sweden – traced the cause to a possible "mid-latitude ionospheric current wedge". That is, the storm had appeared to divert a part of the electric current that encircles earth in space, called the ring current, into the ionosphere.

Aside from the unusually prolonged current, the authors also wrote that the extant ways to track the effects of geomagnetic storms didn't properly capture the diversion. Scientists conventionally use the rate of change of earth's horizontal magnetic field, denoted H', to understand the extent of the geomagnetically induced current. But during the June 2015 event, H' did not sufficiently correlate with the grid currents. The wedge also distorted some of the parameters commonly used to assess geomagnetic storms.

The authors also found that the risk of these unusual events depends on how well the local ground conducts electricity and the layout of power lines.

They concluded that experts need to update their understanding of the ways in which adverse space weather could be dangerous and suggested that protective measures could not afford to focus on spiking currents alone.

Non-animal testing is key to next phase of pharma growth

Animal studies continue to play an important role and cannot be entirely replaced at present; however, advances in non-animal testing models are enabling a more scientific approach that can reduce dependence on lab animals

N.K. Ganguly

For every medicine that reaches a pharmacy shelf, many others do not – not necessarily because the science was flawed but because testing models do not always predict how those medicines will behave in the human body. This long-standing challenge is at the heart of global drug development. But for India, which supplies affordable medicines to more than 200 countries, it also presents an opportunity.

As the sector matures, future growth must be anchored in creating value through original drug discovery, complex biologics, and stronger domestic innovation. Central to this transition will be India's ability to adopt and scale non-animal testing models (NAMs).

Only 10-14% of drug candidates worldwide entering phase I clinical trials ultimately receive regulatory approval. One significant reason is animal testing, which often struggles to accurately predict how a compound will behave in humans.

The consequence is not only high attrition and rising costs but also delays in bringing effective treatments to patients.

NAM is emerging as a complement to this system. NAMs include organoids, organ-on-chip platforms, advanced computational models, and artificial intelligence-enabled approaches designed to generate insights grounded in human biology. Increasingly, these tools are demonstrating the ability to improve predictive accuracy, shorten drug development timelines, and support more informed decision-making.

India's engagement with NAMs has evolved steadily over the years. Greater emphasis on laboratory animal ethics and institutional oversight encouraged researchers to explore alternative approaches. This led to the adoption of a range of platforms, including *Caenorhabditis elegans*, *Drosophila melanogaster*, zebrafish, yeast-based models, and *ex-vivo* tissue studies. More recently, 3D organoids and human-relevant cellular models have expanded the scientific toolkit available for research.

The U.S., the European Union, the U.K., and Japan have already established national centres, dedicated funding streams, and validation programmes for NAMs. For India, engaging early with this shift will be critical to remain competitive and to play a role in shaping emerging global standards.

India's existing strengths include a robust generics industry, growing biosimilars capability, and a well-established contract research ecosystem. However, moving from scale to innovation will require a decisive shift in how we approach drug development. Integrating NAMs into research and development pipelines can enable more reliable science and faster development cycles. In this sense, NAMs can enable India's ambition to become a hub for drug discovery and innovation.

Incorporating NAMs into quality testing of generics and biosimilar development could enhance efficiency without disrupting existing systems. In areas such as pyrogen and endotoxin testing, validated non-animal alternatives are already available and can be adopted at scale. For more complex therapies, NAMs can complement conventional approaches.

NAMs' relevance extends beyond pharmaceuticals. In the cosmetics and personal care sectors, virtual skin models and computational testing platforms have demonstrated an ability to generate robust safety data without relying exclusively on animal studies. .

While India possesses significant scientific capabilities and research infrastructure relevant to NAMs, much of this capacity remains underutilised and is not formally integrated into regulatory pathways. Progress remains constrained by limited regulatory clarity and the absence of a unified national strategy. Addressing these gaps will require aligning existing strengths with a clear and shared direction that recognises NAMs as a strategic priority.

A national framework to adopt NAMs would provide that direction. A central coordinating mechanism can help align stakeholders, prioritise investments, and ensure India moves in step with global developments. The regulatory system already permits the use of NAMs in areas such as proof-of-concept studies, target identification, drug screening, and aspects of toxicology. As a next step, clear guidance on the use and acceptance of NAMs-generated data will give industry confidence and accelerate adoption.

The broader implication is not limited to improving efficiency in drug development. It is about positioning India as an active participant in defining the future of medical science. While animal studies continue to play an important role and cannot be entirely replaced at present, advances in NAMs are enabling a more balanced and scientifically informed approach that can progressively reduce dependence on laboratory animals.

(N.K. Ganguly is former director-general, Indian Council of Medical Research)

Animals of medicine

Only 10-14% of drug candidates entering phase I trials ultimately receive regulatory approval

- High failure rates in global drug development often stem from the poor predictive accuracy of animal models
- Transitioning to non-animal models is essential for India to move from generic manufacturing towards discovering original drugs
- Technologies like organoids and artificial intelligence can improve predictive accuracy while significantly shortening drug development timelines
- India must establish a national framework and clear regulations to effectively integrate these innovative testing methods
- Implementing these models in generic and biosimilar testing offers an immediate way to enhance domestic pharmaceutical efficiency
- Adopting advanced testing technologies will position India as a competitive leader in the evolving global medical landscape

Hit or miss: Animal testing often struggles to accurately predict how a compound will behave in humans. PUBLIC DOMAIN

Knowledge work in the age of agentic AI

DECODED

John Xavier

In the middle of a technological shift, people tend to get stuck in tunnel vision – heads down, focused on whatever's directly in front of them. It helps, every so often, to step back and get a broader read on the lay of the land.

In 1969, the management thinker Peter Drucker, in *The Age of Discontinuity*, argued that the coming wave of technology would break apart the work structures everyone assumed were permanent. Two years later, Intel released the 4004 – the first commercially available microprocessor, a full central processing unit shrunk onto a single programmable chip. Before it, computing power lived in the back rooms of large corporations and research labs. After it, computing got small enough to put on a desk, and eventually in a pocket.

Semiconductors did their part. So did software and together they built the scaffolding for what we came to call the knowledge economy. Manual, repetitive industrial labour gave way to work that ran on judgment and information. A new class of worker emerged, one who owned the means of production in their own head.

The numbers back up how big that shift was. Global GDP grew from roughly $1.3 trillion in 1960 to about $33.5 trillion by 2000, then nearly doubled again to around $66.8 trillion within another decade, as trade barriers fell and emerging markets came online. Knowledge work didn't just survive that expansion – it drove it.

Now we're in the middle of another discontinuity, and once again it's easy to miss while everyone's arguing about the latest model release.

Agentic AI systems can pursue goals, sequence decisions, operate over stretches of time without a human checking. FILE PHOTO

Agentic AI systems can pursue goals, sequence decisions, and operate over stretches of time without a human checking in at every step – work that, until recently, only people could do. These systems can move through enormous volumes of information fast enough that the old premise of the knowledge economy no longer holds the way it used to.

So the real question is what happens to the knowledge worker once knowledge itself stops being scarce.

Drucker warned about something that reads as almost prophetic now: the knowledge worker's biggest risk wasn't ignorance, it was becoming a prisoner of their own speciality – brilliant in a narrow lane, lost outside it. The knowledge economy rewarded that narrowness because depth was what execution required.

The agentic economy may reward the opposite. When an agent can already execute a well-scoped task inside a domain, the human's value shifts toward defining the task well and checking the output – catching what's wrong before it ships. And people are still hesitant to take AI output at face value; a lack of trust in reliability remains one of the biggest reasons people won't treat an AI-generated answer as final.

That means the next class of essential workers won't be defined just by the depth of their specialty, but by how well they can set context across domains, get a grasp of the technology, the people involved, the institutional politics, and the ethics at stake to know which question is even worth handing to an agent in the first place.

That's an uncomfortable finding for anyone who has spent a career building a narrow technical edge. But it fits Drucker's deeper point about discontinuities: they don't shrink the need for human judgment. They move it somewhere else.

The agentic economy won't mean fewer decisions. It'll mean more of them than any person or organisation has had to navigate before.

The knowledge workers who come out ahead won't be the ones who know the most. They'll be the ones with the judgment to ask the right question, the skepticism to distrust a suspiciously confident answer, and the nerve to stop an agent mid-task when something looks off.

We may need a new name for that kind of worker. But we're going to need them more than ever.

SNAPSHOTS

Surprise found in why some ancient brains don't decay

Scientists have long wondered why human brains are sometimes preserved in archaeological sites while other soft tissues have rotted. A new study using mice found that in wet, low-oxygen environments, certain brain proteins bind into stable structures that resist decay. Surprisingly, the study revealed the proteins most likely to survive postmortem are also the ones involved in brain ageing and Alzheimer's, indicating the pathways leading to preservation after death mirror those of protein stabilisation in life.

Central African monkey with striking patch is new species

Researchers have found a new species of African monkey in Central Africa. Colobus congoensis, or 'Likweli', lives in Lomami National Park. It was first photographed in 2008 but has only now been confirmed to be a unique species, using genetic tests and field observations in 2018-2022. The Likweli is small, black, and distinguished by a striking orange-cream patch around its mouth and a white patch under its tail. The authors proposed classifying the Likweli as 'endangered'.

A small imbalance breaks open a soggy physics puzzle

The reverse sprinkler problem is an old physics puzzle: if a lawn sprinkler sucks fluid in instead of spraying it, which way will it spin? After many tests, scientists found a reverse sprinkler will rotate in the opposite direction of a regular sprinkler. As water flows through the curved arms, centrifugal forces make the flow slightly asymmetric. When these skewed jets enter the hub, they create an angular momentum that spins the arms the other way.

Question Corner

Changing chemistry

Why does our body scent change distinctly as we age?
– *Mahua Ray*

The distinct scent often associated with ageing is primarily caused by a compound called 2-nonenal. Around 40 years old, our bodies' natural antioxidant defenses start to weaken, allowing certain fats on the skin to break down. For instance, when omega-7 unsaturated fatty acids like palmitoleic acid are exposed to oxygen, they oxidise and produce 2-nonenal.

The body odour caused by sweat and bacteria can be easily washed away but 2-nonenal is an unsaturated aldehyde and repels water. So standard soaps and water often can't remove it, allowing the scent to persist even in individuals with excellent hygiene. In Japan, products containing persimmon extract (which in turn contain tannins) are known to be chemically effective at neutralising the 2-nonenal odour. Second, since the scent is a result of oxidation, a diet rich in antioxidants can help mitigate oxidative stress on the skin. Staying well-hydrated also helps flush toxins out.

Readers may send their questions / answers to science@thehindu.co.in

INBRIEF

PNB Q1 profit surges over threefold to ₹5,253 crore

Punjab National Bank (PNB) reported an over threefold jump in standalone net profit at ₹5,253 crore for the quarter ended June 30, primarily helped by a reduction in tax payment. The State-owned bank had posted a net profit of ₹1,675 crore in the year-ago period. As the bank migrated to the new tax regime, the tax liability decreased by ₹3,358 crore, which directly added to the bottomline, PNB MD and CEO Ashok Chandra said during a media interaction. PTI

Kotak Mahindra Bank Q1 net climbs 26% to ₹4,123 crore

Kotak Mahindra Bank (KMB) standalone net profit increased 25.6% to ₹4,123 crore in the quarter ended June 30 2026 against ₹3,281.7 crore in the year ago period. KMB's net interest income (NII) increased 9% to ₹7,927.4 crore in the recently concluded quarter in fiscal 2027 as against ₹7,259.3 crore in the corresponding period of last fiscal. The bank's net interest margin increased to 4.53% in the first quarter of fiscal 2027, a bit lower than 4.65% a year ago.

Yes bank Q1 net up 33.4% on higher interest income

Yes Bank net profit climbed 33.4% to ₹1,071 crore on an increase in net interest income in quarter ended June 30 against ₹802 crore a year ago. Net interest income increased 17.5% to ₹2,786.4 crore in the first quarter of fiscal 2026 against ₹2,371.5 crore. Net interest margin increased mildly to 2.7% against 2.5% in the year ago period. Gross non-profitable assets (NPA) as a share of gross advances reduced to 1.3%. Net NPA share in net advances improved to 0.2% from about 0.3%.

HDFC Bank Q1 net profit grows 5% to ₹19,060 crore

The Hindu Bureau
MUMBAI

HDFC Bank Ltd, India's largest private sector bank, for the first quarter ended June 30 reported a 5% year-on-year (YoY) growth in net profit to ₹19,060 crore while Net Interest Income (NII) rose by 6.7% to ₹33,536 crore.

The growth was supported by a steady rise in loans and deposits.

Net Interest Margin (NIM) was under pressure and stood at 3.26%. Asset quality improved. Gross Non-Performing Assets (GNPA) fell 3.22% YoY to ₹35,846 crore. Net NPA (NPA), however, marginally grew 0.65% to ₹12,357 crore from ₹12,276 crore a year earlier.

GNPAs stood at 1.17% as on June 30, 2026 (0.91% excluding NPAs in the agricultural segment) as against 1.15% as on March 31, 2026 (0.91% excluding NPAs in the agricultural segment) and 1.40% as on June 30, 2025 (1.14% excluding NPAs in the agricultural segment), the bank said in a filing. NNPAs stood at 0.41% of net advances as on June 30.

Total Capital Adequacy Ratio (CAR) as per Basel III guidelines was at 19.6% as on June 30 (19.9% as on June 30, 2025) against a regulatory norm of 11.9%.

Tier 1 CAR was at 17.8% and Common Equity Tier 1 Capital ratio at 17.4% as of June 30. During the quarter gross advances grew 15.4% while total deposits rose 13.3% compared with the previous year.

Promoters made less money on listing firms so far in CY26

While this may appear like serious capital deployment from the money earned from the markets, the overall share of OFS in IPOs, still remain more than half of the proceeds, analysis shows

Ashokamithran T.
MUMBAI

Shrinking stakes: The BSE building in Mumbai. ANI VIDEO GRAB

Promoters and venture capitalists of companies that listed in the stock market up to the first week of July 2026 earned lower share of the total offer for sale (OFS) component than in the same period last year.

The share of owners or founders of the firms along with private equity or venture capitalists, the early investors, reduced to 84% of the total offer for sale (OFS) proceeds to ₹10,696 crore, as per an analysis of IPO data up to July 8 from primedatabase.com.

This share was 95.5% in the same six-month period of calendar year 2025. This share was 94% in 2023 and 68% in 2024, the lowest in the last four years. Initial public offering (IPO) is the process by which privately held companies list in the market, effectively becoming "public limited." The shares of the companies are then bought and sold by investors in the stock market. In the process, firms can raise money from new investors via fresh issues or existing investors via owners selling part of shares to the public. While the former may be used for developing the firm, the OFS, goes into the pockets of the sellers.

Less intense exit

Many large investors and market observers have often criticised OFS as a system of wealth transfer from retail investors to large company owners and private equity funds were basically using the primary market to exit the firms rather than helping it raise productive capital.

Luxury realty demand

For context, Knight Frank, a property consultant, said in its report the IPO boom and the new wealth created out of it drove luxury real estate demand last year. The criticism came from as high as Chief Economic Advisor to the Government V. Anantha Nageswaran, where he called out P/E and VCs, for making listing an "exit route."

Selling shareholders who sold their stake took home just half of the ₹12,783 crore garnered from the market up to July 2026. This share was much higher in 2023 when 73% of the IPO proceeds were OFS. This slipped to 54% in 2024, rose to 61% in 2025 and again fell to 52% in the current calendar year.

While this may look like serious capital deployment from money earned in the market, the overall share still remains more than half of the proceeds.

Give and take

The headline number while suggesting that they are earning a smaller share, however, hides the larger trend. In the past four years, share in OFS proceeds has been swinging between promoters and VCs. For instance, last year, in the six-month period, VCs earned just 7.4% of the ₹29,486 crore of OFS proceeds. Promoters were the largest sellers, pocketing over 88% of the money. To be sure, VC shares in total OFS have reduced from over 60% in 2023, to just about 36% of the total OFS sales in 2026.

Promoters, however, consistently made a minimum of 30% of total OFS in the last four years.

To be sure, several large IPOs, which can potentially have huge OFS shares are yet to happen in 2026.

This includes the largest stock exchange NSE, Reliance Jio, Oyo, Phone Pe, Zepto among others.

Including large IPOs can, however distort underlying trends. The overarching trend of IPOs as an exit route still remains. It is just the composition of the sellers and the intensity that has kept changing.

ICICI Bank Q1 net profit climbs 16% to ₹14,805 crore

The Hindu Bureau
MUMBAI

Beating analysts' estimates, ICICI Bank Ltd. –India's second largest private sector bank– for the first quarter ended June 30, reported 15.9% YoY growth in profit after tax (PAT) to ₹14,805 crore.

Net interest income (NII) rose 12.7% to ₹24,384 crore. Net interest margin was 4.36% compared with 4.32% a year earlier.

Provisions (excluding provision for tax) was ₹1,260 crore in Q12027 against ₹1,815 crore.

On June 30, the bank continued to hold contingency provision of ₹ 13,100 crore and additional standard asset provision of ₹1,283 crore made in Q3-2026 as directed by the RBI in respect of agricultural priority sector portfolio.

NPA ratios

Gross NPA ratio was 1.38% as at June 30 versus 1.40% as at March 31, 2026 and 1.67% at June 30, 2025.

Net NPA ratio was 0.35% at June 30 compared with 0.33% as at March 31, 2026 and 0.41% as at June 30, 2025. Gross NPA additions were ₹5,552 crore in Q1-2027 compared with ₹6,245 crore in the year earlier period.

Recoveries and upgrades of NPAs, excluding write-offs and sale, were ₹2,845 crore versus ₹3,211 crore a year earlier.

Net additions to gross NPAs, excluding write-offs and sale, were ₹2,707 crore in Q1-2027 compared with ₹3,034 crore a year earlier.

Gujarat tops NITI first Investment Friendliness Index 2026

Abhinay Deshpande
AHMEDABAD

Gujarat has emerged as the country's leading investment destination after securing the top position among major States in NITI Aayog's first-ever Investment Friendliness Index 2026, according to the report released by the Chief Minister's Office.

The State scored 56.6 points, ahead of Maharashtra (53.7) and Tamil Nadu (53.3), in an assessment of 17 major States. The index evaluates States across 84 indicators under eight pillars covering the entire investment lifecycle, including policy and governance, infrastructure, business facilitation and fiscal management.

According to the report, Gujarat's policy stability, investor-centric governance and streamlined business facilitation mechanisms have contributed to its top ranking. The Industrial Extension Bureau (iNDEXTb) was cited for providing end-to-end investor support through its single-window clearance system, while the State's time-bound framework for statutory approvals and No Objection Certificates helped reduce project implementation delays.

Labour issues

The report also noted curbs on strikes in essential services helped maintain industrial peace, resulting in negligible labour disruptions and provided businesses with a stable operating environment.

Gujarat's industrial infrastructure was identified as one of its key strengths.

India Inc. CSR spend up 17% to ₹40,794 cr. in FY25, shows report

The Hindu Bureau
MUMBAI

The top 10 firms accounted for 17% of the total CSR expenses, collectively spending ₹7,123 crore

Corporate India's commitment to social development continued to strengthen in FY25, with Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) spends rising 17% year-on-year to ₹40,794 crore, as per a report released by Fulcrum based on data from the Ministry of Corporate Affairs.

The report showed corporate sector's cumulative investment over the past decade had now touched ₹2.61 lakh crore.

The report also points to a broader participation by firms in such initiatives.

According to the report a total of 72,233 CSR projects were implemented nationwide, a 21% increase from the previous year, with an average project cost of ₹56.47 lakh per project. The rise in project numbers indicates expanding outreach across sectors such as education, skill development, health, sanitation and environmental conservation with firms focusing on both scale and impact, the report said.

The top 10 companies accounted for 17% of the total CSR expenditure, collectively spending ₹7,123 crore, the report said.

Among individual firms Reliance Industries Ltd. emerged as the highest CSR spender in FY25 with an outlay of ₹1,309 crore, followed by HDFC Bank Ltd. at ₹1,039 crore.

Axis Bank Q1 net profit grows 23% to ₹7,114 crore

Lalatendu Mishra
MUMBAI

Beating analysts' estimates, Axis Bank Ltd., India's third-largest private sector bank, reported a 23% year-on-year rise in profit to ₹7,114 crore for the quarter ended June 30.

Net Interest Income (NII) stood at ₹14,646 crore up 8% while Net Interest Margin (NIM) was 3.46%.

Provision and contingencies for the quarter stood at ₹2,223 crore. Specific loan loss provisions were ₹2,079 crore. Cumulative provisions (standard and additional other than non-performing asset (NPA) stood at ₹15,608 crore as on June 30.

This is over and above the NPA provisioning included in the provision coverage ratio (PCR) calculations.

As on June 30, Gross NPA and Net NPA levels were 1.28% and 0.39%, respectively against 1.57% and 0.45% as on June 30, 2025.

As Vikram-1 reaches orbit, Skyroot faces steep climb to prove commercial viability

NEWS ANALYSIS

Vasudevan Mukunth

New era: Vikram-1 at SHAR at the Satish Dhawan Space Centre, in Sriharikota on Saturday. SKYROOT AEROSPACE

India had its first private orbital rocket launch at 12.05 pm on July 18. So far, all orbital rockets India has launched have been state-funded and led by the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO). Hyderabad-based Skyroot Aerospace changed that by launching its small-satellite launch vehicle Vikram-1 to a low-earth orbit under mission 'Aagaman', Hindi for 'arrival'.

Since 2020, the Centre has opened the domestic space sector to private firms by creating institutions such as IN-SPACe, allowing them to build launch vehicles and use ISRO infrastructure. Thus far, worldwide, only a small number of private firms have successfully developed orbital launch vehicles, including SpaceX, Rocket Lab, Firefly Aerospace and a clutch of Chinese firms.

Significant feat

A successful first flight is a significant feat. Many rockets, including Falcon 9, have failed their maiden flights. But the feat also shows the full context in which Skyroot is operating. As a commercial entity, a single launch – while crucial– will not catapult it to success. The global small-satellite launch market is evolving and there are still considerable challenges, including local demand and market uncertainties.

Former ISRO engineers Pawan Kumar Chandana and Naga Bharath Daka founded Skyroot Aerospace in 2018. The first milestone was in 2022, when Skyroot successfully launched Vikram-S, the first privately developed Indian rocket on a suborbital flight. Vikram-1 is a four-stage rocket. The first three stages use solid fuel and the fourth, liquid fuel. Skyroot said once manufacturing is streamlined, it will be able to make one rocket a month. Mission Aagaman was a developmental flight of Vikram-1, meaning the firm tested the rocket by putting it through its paces, especially to check parameters that can't be fully understood unless the rocket is flying.

According to Skyroot, Mission Aagaman was to validate stage separation, propulsion, guidance and navigation, structural performance, avionics, fairing deployment, upper-stage separation and orbital insertion. Orbital insertion would have been the mission's hardest part, as the launch vehicle would have had to accelerate to high speed while maintaining its guidance and propulsion.

It also carried some payloads, although the primary mission focused on the rocket itself. Vikram-1 has a payload capacity of 290 kg to a 500-km sun-synchronous orbit and 480 kg to a low-inclination orbit at similar altitude. Skyroot said it will have two more developmental flights before the rocket is deemed market-ready.

"The firm's roadmap includes Vikram-2, capable of carrying up to 1,000 kg to low-earth orbit with its maiden flight targeted for 2027, and a fully reusable launch vehicle with both booster and upper stage engineered for recovery and reuse," Skyroot said.

Building a business

Building rockets is one thing. Building a business is another – and arguably significantly more valuable. Broadly, the small-satellite launch market in which Skyroot is hoping to excel has become challenging. A successful business today requires growth as well as industrial maturity and access to demand.

In the half-decade until 2021, many forecasts saw a boom in the demand for launching satellites weighing 100-500 kg. While the demand has grown since, not every entrant has been equally profitable. Launch vehicle revenues have been growing more slowly than that of satellite manufacturing, creating consolidation pressure. The forecast assumed demand would be diffused across firms, but following a series of geopolitical realignments, demand is today increasingly concentrated in satellite constellations.

On costs, many small-satellite makers are flying payloads as rideshares on larger rockets, especially SpaceX Falcon 9. The launch fee has thus dropped dramatically. For added measure, while a launch vehicle dedicated to small satellites will offer flexibility and the option to pick specific orbits to deploy into, satellite-makers still have to pay a premium over the lower costs offered by rideshares.

The PSLV itself is such a launcher, although public confidence in its abilities has come under a cloud due to two successive failures, the reasons for which the Centre has refused to disclose.

That said, Vikram-1 may enjoy an advantage in India's lower manufacturing and labour costs, access to ISRO's infrastructure and India's increasing focus on manufacturing, including of satellites. Next, startups across Europe, the U.S., China, Japan, and Australia are also developing small-satellite launchers – and many have folded or pivoted away after struggling to secure launch contracts from what is already a small pool of customers. Vikram-1 will also compete with ISRO's own Small Satellite Launch Vehicle, once it's ready.

Third, launch services are low-margin and capital intensive, especially compared to satellite manufacturing, downstream applications, data services and communications. Then come the costs of compliance for debris mitigation and other regulatory obligations. Of course, Skyroot itself may diversify in future. And India's own commercial space ecosystem is only just starting to expand and includes potential future collaborators such as Pixxel, Bellatrix Aerospace, and Dhruva Space. Even so, domestic market is relatively limited.

Big picture

The big picture is that the Skyroot factory capable of producing 12 Vikram-1 rockets every year will be an asset if there is demand for 12 Vikram-1 launches every year. But even ISRO does not launch 12 small satellites a year today. In other words, Skyroot will have to find and secure international customers.

And when it does, it will still have to contend with a simple fact: even when small satellites account for a third of all satellites launched, as some projections show will be the case in the decade until 2035, they will only account for less than a tenth of the total launch mass.

None of this diminishes what Skyroot achieved on Saturday. Designing, building, testing and flying an orbital launch vehicle on the first attempt is a rare accomplishment anywhere. It is certainly a milestone for India's private space sector. But it remains that the firms that endure have repeatedly reached orbit through repeatability and reliability, and at prices customers are willing to pay. With the success of Mission Aagaman, Skyroot now has an opportunity to build that kind of business.

TEHRAN

IRGC says two oil tankers explode after hitting mines in Hormuz

REUTERS

Iran's Revolutionary Guards said on Saturday that two oil tankers transiting through the Strait of Hormuz hit mines and exploded, a claim disputed by the U.S. military. "To protect their capital and, more importantly, their lives, the sailors should not be deceived and enter the minefield," they said. AFP

DUBAI

Two troops dead, one missing after Iran hits Jordan base: U.S. military

REUTERS

The United States military on Saturday announced its first troop deaths due to direct Iranian fire since the opening days of the war, saying two were killed and another was missing in an attack on a base in Jordan on Friday. Since the war began, 16 U.S. service members have been killed and over 430 wounded. AP

BEIRUT

Lebanon's President Aoun departs for Washington to meet Trump

REUTERS

Lebanese President Joseph Aoun on Saturday left Beirut for Washington, where he is expected to meet Donald Trump, the Lebanese presidency said, after talks between Lebanon and Israel wrapped up in Italy. It will be the first trip to Washington by a Lebanese head of state since 2009. AFP

MAJDAL SELM

Hezbollah holds mass funeral and buries fighters in south Lebanon

AFP

Hezbollah held a mass funeral for dozens of people, most of them fighters killed in the most recent fighting with Israel, in southern Lebanon's Majdal Selm on Saturday. Hezbollah buried 44 people, 39 of them fighters and four civilians said to have been killed in Israeli operations, and one man who died of natural causes. AFP

Iran 'suspends commitments' to interim agreement with the U.S.

U.S. Centcom says its strikes hit surveillance sites, military logistics infrastructure, underground weapons storage, maritime capabilities; Kuwait reports most damage from Iranian strikes, including hits on a water desalination plant and an oil facility

Associated Press
DUBAI

The U.S. and Iran exchanged strikes aimed at infrastructure and military targets on Saturday as an Iranian negotiator said Tehran had suspended its commitments under the interim deal with the U.S. – snapping another fragile thread as the war shows no end in sight.

The U.S. Central Command said that its seventh straight night of strikes hit "surveillance sites, military logistics infrastructure, underground weapons storage, and maritime capabilities".

The U.S. has violated its commitments under the deal that was signed about a month ago and now Iran is "no longer implementing them," Kazem Gharibabadi, Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister, told state TV.

There was no new word on mediation efforts.

The most significant damage from Iranian strikes on Saturday occurred in Kuwait, where a water desalination plant and an oil facility were hit, according to the Kuwait authorities.

The strikes injured several people at the oil facility and caused a fire at the desalination plant, forcing several power generation units offline. It was the second attack against a desalination plant in two days in the tiny desert nation that depends on desalination for 90% of drinking water.

Black smoke billows over the town of Mangaf, south of Kuwait City amid reports of an attack on an oil facility on Saturday. AFP

U.S. air strikes hit an electricity and desalination plant in Iran's southern Hormozgan province, Iranian state TV reported. *IRNA* said the Bonji desalination plant was destroyed, cutting off water supplies to about 10,000 people, and that a desalination plant on strategic Qeshm Island inside the strait was damaged.

Iran acknowledged "attacks on power infrastructure" during the U.S. airstrikes for the first time Friday when its Energy Ministry issued a call for people to use less power in southern provinces "experiencing extreme heat".

Iranian authorities said at least 50 people have been killed and more than 500 wounded in U.S. strikes in the past three weeks, including eight killed on Friday.

9 killed in Ukrainian drone attack on Russian regions

Associated Press
MOSCOW

A firefighting helicopter attempts to extinguish a fire at the Wildberries' logistics complexes in Elektrostal on Saturday. AFP

Nine persons were killed and more than 80 were wounded in Russia by Ukrainian drone attacks overnight and on Saturday, Russian officials said.

Kyiv's forces are continuing their relentless aerial campaign against energy infrastructure and military targets inside Russia, aiming to undermine Moscow's war effort and make Russians feel the consequences of the Kremlin's all-out invasion of Ukraine that is well into its fifth year.

Two sprawling warehouses of Russia's major online retailer, Wildberries, were hit by Ukrainian drones overnight, according to Russian officials: one in the town of Kotovsk in the Tambov region, and another one in the city of Elektrostal.

Both caught fire, but Wildberries founder Tatyana Kim said later on Saturday morning that the fire in Kotovsk has been put out. Images and footage released by Russian online outlets showed a fire raging at the Elektrostal facility, with massive plumes of smoke towering over it.

A Ukrainian drone also hit an oil depot in the city of Noginsk, just north of Elektrostal, sparking a fire and prompting evacuations of a nearby maternity hospital and a residential building, according to the governor of the Moscow region, Andrei Vorobyov.

Mulling Netanyahu's arrest during UN meet, says Mamdani

Agence France-Presse
NEW YORK

New York Mayor Zohran Mamdani is in talks over whether to try to arrest Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu during an upcoming UN summit, he said in an interview published on Saturday – prompting a sharp rebuke from Mr. Netanyahu's camp.

"I believe that Prime Minister Netanyahu belongs in The Hague," Mr. Mamdani told *The New York Times*.

"He's a war criminal who has been charged by the International Criminal Court," he added.

Mr. Mamdani admitted he was not sure if he has the power to order the New York Police Department to detain a foreign leader but is discussing the matter with the city's legal team.

"Whatever the law allows me to do in New York City, that's what we will do," he said.

Danny Danon, Israel's Ambassador to the United Nations, quickly called out Mr. Mamdani.

"Instead of focusing on his responsibilities as mayor and confronting the rising wave of antisemitism in his city, he has chosen to incite hostility and generate headlines by attacking the State of Israel," Mr. Danon wrote on X.

Renewed purpose

Former Senegalese President Macky Sall gestures to supporters after returning to Senegal to meet with his successor, President Bassirou Diomaye Faye, as part of Mr. Sall's campaign for the post of United Nations secretary-general, in Dakar, Senegal, on Friday. REUTERS

Venezuela quake toll crosses 5,000 as IMF supports relief efforts

Agence France-Presse
CARACAS

Jorge Rodriguez

The twin earthquakes that struck Venezuela last month killed over 5,000 people, officials said, while announcing they drew hundreds of millions of dollars from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for reconstruction.

The 7.2 and 7.5 magnitude quakes struck within a minute of each other on June 24, decimating the coastal state of La Guaira, located north of Caracas.

The disasters killed 5,069 people, National Assembly chief Jorge Rodriguez posted on Telegram, with most casualties occurring in the coastal region.

The number of people injured remains unchanged at 16,740, with most of them already discharged from the hospital.

Later on Friday, Interim President Delcy Rodriguez said the country tapped $346 million from the IMF for earthquake reconstruction.

Cuban Ambassador calls for lifting of energy blockade imposed by the U.S.

Kallol Bhattacherjee
NEW DELHI

People gather at a park to escape the heat inside their homes as Cuba's power grid collapses for the third time in 10 days. REUTERS

The oil blockade that the United States imposed against Cuba has affected all sectors of the its economy and has delivered a "collective punishment" against its population, Cuban Ambassador to India Juan Carlos Marsan Aguilera said on Saturday.

In a written response to questions from *The Hindu*, Mr. Aguilera said the blockade has created a humanitarian crisis for Cuba, where frequent power cuts have led to cascading effects on all sectors of the economy, like agriculture and the medical sector, where more than a lakh critical surgeries have been postponed because of the collapsing health system.

"The oil blockade has become a collective punishment to the Cuban population because the shortage of oil is affecting the Cuban economy, especially in electricity supply – why Cuba is suffering frequent blackouts – in the healthcare system, in water supply, food production, transportation, education and many other sectors," he said.

Mr. Aguilera's remarks come against the backdrop of Iran once again blocking the Strait of Hormuz after renewed hostilities with the U.S. since the funeral of former Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

The Cuban Ambassador said the curbs have imposed "unprecedented suffering" on Cuban society.

"In health, we are facing more than 1,00,000 pending medical surgeries, with 11,000 children among them; infant mortality has increased from 4.0 to 9.9 per 1,000 live births in the last year; the survival rate for children with cancer has declined from 85% to 65%," Ambassador Aguilera said, arguing that no country had the right to impose unilateral energy blockades.

UN to list more sites as 'in danger' from armed conflict or climate change

Agence France-Presse
PARIS

A drone view of archaeological remains in the ancient village of Sebastia, near Nablus in the Israeli-occupied West Bank. REUTERS

The United Nations looks set to list a Biblical site, Lebanese castles, an antelope migration path and the world's deepest lake as world treasures under threat, including from war or climate change.

The 196 members states of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) are to cast votes from Friday next week on new additions to its World Heritage and World Heritage in Danger lists when they meet in Busan, South Korea.

"We may not have the means to deploy peacekeepers... but we can send a message to the entire world," the director of UNESCO's World Heritage Centre, Lazare Eloundou Assomo said.

Safeguarding "heritage allows communities that have been traumatised, victims of conflicts, to begin to come back and rebuild," he added.

A site being qualified as heritage in danger, Mr. Assomo said, was not a reprimand but a measure meant to help states "find funding, partners and attention" to better preserve it. Some 1,200 sites around the globe are listed as part of UNESCO World Heritage.

The sites expected to be voted on include Sebastia, identified as being Biblical Samaria, in the Israeli-occupied Palestinian territory of the West Bank; five castles in south Lebanon, one of which – the Crusader fortress of Qalaat al-Chakif or Beaufort Castle – Israeli troops captured in May; Boma-Badingilo grassland and woodland savannahs in South Sudan; and Lake Baikal in Russia.

Israel left UNESCO in 2017, but remains a member of the World Heritage Committee, which has the final say on which sites are inscribed on each list.

MIND GAMES?

Spain is a great team, everything about it worries me: Scaloni

GETTY IMAGES

Argentina head coach Lionel Scaloni is wary of the threat that Spain carries and is expecting a tough fight in the World Cup final. "Spain is a great team, everything about it worries me. We might win and I hope we do, but in any case the journey to get this far has been incredible," said Scaloni on Saturday.

READY TO FIRE

We will use all our 'weapons' to beat Argentina: de la Fuente

AFP

Spain head coach Luis de la Fuente said that his team will do everything in its power to overcome Argentina in the World Cup final. "Having the chance to fight to win it (title) is a privilege. We will try to use all our weapons to win against a country which has been at its best over the past few years," said de la Fuente.

WELL PREPARED

This will be the most physical match: Rodri on title decider

AP

Spain captain Rodri expects the World Cup final against Argentina to be a high-octane battle. "There is no defined style for our team. Matches have different stages, and we have not played the same way every game. This will be the most physical match. We know when to attack, defend or counter. That's why we are here".

BANTER

I hope Yamal and Spain don't have a good game, says a cheeky Messi

AP

Lamine is truly amazing. I've followed him a lot because he plays for a club I love so much. He has a chance to achieve something historic. We'll try to put on a good match, but I hope he and his team don't put on a good one — Argentina skipper Lionel Messi on facing Spain's Lamine Yamal in the World Cup summit clash.

Spain, Argentina lock horns in a fascinating finale

The European champion has mastered every situation on the way to the summit clash while the holder, led by Messi, has been pushed to the brink, only to fight its way past the opponents

FIFA WORLD CUP

Ayon Sengupta
NEW YORK

There is more than one way to become a World champion.

Spain has spent the past month trying to ensure football unfolds exactly as it imagines, while Argentina has proved that even when football refuses to cooperate, victory can still be found.

Sunday's World Cup final brings those two journeys together.

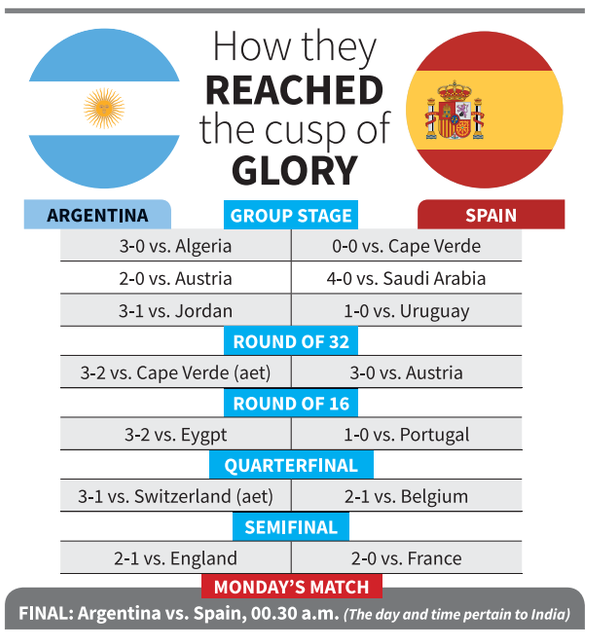
If Spain, which cancelled its training session due to a thunderstorm on Saturday, has glided into the summit clash at East Rutherford, Argentina has clawed its way here.

Luis de la Fuente's European champions have produced the tournament's most complete campaign. Seven matches, six clean sheets, only one goal conceded and, perhaps most remarkably, not a single minute spent trailing. They dismantled France in the semifinal with the same composure that has become its signature, reducing one of the world's most feared attacks to little more than spectators.

Argentina's journey has unfolded at the opposite extreme. Lionel Scaloni's defending champion has needed extra-time, survived penalty shootouts, overturned a two-goal deficit against Egypt and rescued another match against England with two late goals after appearing destined for elimination. Time and again, Argentina has been pushed to the brink, only to discover another gear.

Spain has reached this stage by mastering every situation. Argentina has reached it by surviving every situation.

Sparks bound to fly: Spain, consisting of stars like Rodri, Baena, Yamal and Simon, meets Argentina which has Emiliano, Messi, Alvarez and Fernandez. GETTY IMAGES



Stat attack

- **0.14** Spain has conceded just one goal in seven games during this campaign
- **1** The reigning champions of Europe and South America will meet in a World Cup final for the first time
- **Argentina has a 6-2-6 (W-D-L) record against Spain in all competitions**
- **1** Spain will look to become the first nation to hold the men's and women's World Cup crowns simultaneously
- **2** Argentina will aim to join Italy (1934, 1938) and Brazil (1958, 1962) as the only nations to win back-to-back World Cup titles
- **3** Messi will join Cafu as the second player to appear in three World Cup finals
- **3** Only three teenagers have figured in the final of the football showpiece: Pele (17, 1958), Bergomi (18, 1982) and Mbappe (19, 2018). All of them ended up on the winning side. Spain's Yamal (19) and Cubarsi (19) could do the same
- **8** Of the 11 finals between South American and European nations in the global extravaganza, the former has won eight times
- **10** Messi, who had announced his retirement after losing in the Copa America final at the MetLife Stadium 10 years ago, will play in the World Cup final at the same venue
- **13** Spain's best goal tally in an edition, surpassing its previous record of 11 (1986)
- **23** All World Cups have been won by a nation whose manager is native to the country. That streak will continue with either Scaloni or de la Fuente
- **49** Ruiz is unbeaten in his 49 senior games for Spain (W34, D15)
- **71** 37 of the 52 players (71%) across the Spain and Argentina squads played their club football in 2025-26 in LaLiga (24) or Premier League (13)

Compiled by **ANIRUDH VELAMURI**

Generational subplot

The football alone would have been enough to make this one of the most enthralling World Cup finals. But it also carries a generational subplot that few sporting occasions could hope to match.

Lionel Messi, 39, walks into what is expected to be the final World Cup match of a career that has redefined the game. Across him will be Lamine Yamal, the 19-year-old many regard as the game's brightest future.

Their ways have crossed only once before, in a photograph from Barcelona in 2007, when Messi cradled the five-month-old Yamal during a charity calendar photoshoot. On Sunday, for the first time, they will share the same pitch with the World Cup to fight for.

Yet reducing the final to just Messi against Yamal would be a disservice to both teams.

Rodri has been the metronome of Spain's campaign, dictating the tempo, extinguishing counterattacks, and allowing *La Roja* to suffocate opponents with possession. His duel with Enzo Fernandez, whose late runs and willingness to attack space have repeatedly transformed Argentina's fortunes, could dictate the rhythm of the final.

If Rodri imposes his familiar authority, Spain will play the match on its own terms. But if Fernandez can break beyond him and bring Messi into dangerous pockets, Argentina's belief will once again find fertile ground. Further forward, Mikel Oyarzabal's movement presents another fascinating contest. The Spain striker has scored five goals, but few centre-back pairings relish physical confrontation more than Cristian Romero and Lisandro Martinez. Spain's intricate attacking play depends on Oyarzabal creating space for Yamal, Dani Olmo and Alex Baena and Argentina's defenders will aim to ensure those spaces never materialise.

de la Fuente is expected to retain the core that has carried Spain within one victory of a second World title, with Rodri anchoring a midfield alongside Fabian Ruiz and Yamal providing the spark from the right.

Scaloni also has a full squad available, with his only genuine dilemma coming in attack, where Julian Alvarez's relentless pressing may again earn him the nod ahead of Lautaro Martinez despite the latter's semifinal winner.

For more than a month, Spain has made the extraordinary look routine, while Argentina has reached the final by making the impossible appear ordinary.

Now, one match will decide which of these two teams will become the defining story of this World Cup.

A battle between master and pupil

Ayon Sengupta
NEW YORK

The embrace lasted longer than the cameras expected.

After a quick interaction in front of the fans at the FIFA Fanatics events, a first ahead of a World Cup final, Lionel Scaloni, the Argentina coach, walked across the stage and wrapped his former teacher, Luis de La Fonte, in a tight hug.

On Sunday, they will stand in opposite technical areas with football's biggest prize in contention.

Their relationship stretches back to 2017, when Scaloni, just retired from playing, had enrolled for his UEFA Pro coaching licence at the Spanish Football Federation's academy in Las Rozas. One of the instructors guiding the course was de la Fuente, then one of Spain's most respected coaching educators.

Nearly a decade later, both have arrived at the summit of international football.

"He knows me personally, but he doesn't know what I'm thinking about football," Scaloni said with a smile. "Both of us know how the other plays. hope Sunday's game will be a good show and people will be entertained."

de la Fuente believes their footballing ideas are closer than many realise. "We are great competitors and we are happy to face each other," he said. "We have huge admiration for each other. Scaloni and I share many concepts, values and principles that drive our teams."

Scaloni echoed that respect, insisting Argentina's previous World Cup final experience counts for little against a Spanish side that has already conquered Europe.

"Spain is a tough team," he said. "They have played a Euro final and a Nations League final under Luis.."

During the course of the final, the friendship forged in a classroom in Las Rozas will be suspended. The master and his pupil will compete for the same trophy.

But the camaraderie and the embrace will, hopefully, return once the game is over.

Once in his arms, now in his way: Yamal, Messi and a date with destiny

Who will bathe in glory? A 20-year-old Messi and a five-month-old Yamal at a photoshoot in Barcelona in 2007. The two will now vie for football's greatest honour. FILE PHOTO

Anirudh Velamuri

Some old photographs gather dust, some others gather meaning.

When Lionel Messi held a five-month-old Lamine Yamal during a charity calendar shoot around Christmas 2007, it was just another click. Nearly two decades on, it has become part of football folklore.

During Euro 2024, Yamal's father Mounir Nasraoui shared the image with the caption: "The beginning of two legends." What was probably a throwaway line then reads like prophecy now as the two gear up to face each other in the FIFA World Cup final.

Fans, pundits, players and coaches have all weighed in on the duo, and they all have the same opinion.

Similarities galore

The parallels are hard to ignore. Messi scored his first World Cup goal when he was 18, wearing the No. 19 shirt.

Twenty years later, Yamal did the same, at the same age and with the same jersey number! He is Barcelona's youngest debutant and also the youngest goalscorer, breaking records that once belonged to Messi. The list goes on and on.

"For me, Messi is the greatest football player in history. He is a legend and I do not find myself worthy of being compared to him. I do not want to be Messi, and he knows it. I want to follow my own path," Yamal once said.

Even so, it's hard to miss how closely the teenager is tracing the trail Messi laid down, and doing it better than others who were hastily crowned the Argentine magician's successor.

Messi, now 39, is chasing one more piece of history, trying to make Argentina the first team since Brazil in 1962 to defend the World Cup.

Up against him will be the 19-year-old Yamal, the face of a Spanish side hoping to lift the trophy for only the second time.

Between red and blue

Spain once tried hard to convince Messi to play for *La Roja*, back when *La Albiceleste* was slow to notice him. That push peaked before the 2003 Under-17 World Cup where the Spaniards, featuring Messi's *La Masia* teammate Cesc Fabregas, defeated the Argentines 3-2 in the semifinal. Fabregas netted a brace, including the match-winner.

Jose Pekerman, the Argentine coach, revealed that the Spanish players during the post-match handshake told him: "If you had this kid (Messi), you would have been the champions."

Messi, however, stayed loyal to Argentina, leaving behind the old question of what Spain might have looked like with him in the line-up.

That fantasy will never play out. But in Yamal, Spain may have found something close to it.

The stage is now set for a generational showdown.

One gladiator walks onto football's grandest spectacle for the first time. The other, probably, for his last dance.

Between them sits two decades, a stack of broken records and a photograph that has come to signify how destiny always plays a role in football.

The beautiful game brings these two together in the same frame once again, not as legend and heir but as opponents battling for the ultimate prize.

Sobers stood out among the greats, says Holding

CRICKET

Agence France-Presse

The late Garry Sobers "stood out" even among cricket's greats but remained humble despite his standing in the game, former West Indies fast bowler Michael Holding said.

The Barbados-born Sobers, who died at the age of 89 on Friday, featured in 93 Tests between 1954 and 1974, amassing 8,032 runs and taking 235 wickets.

Holding, 72, never played with Sobers but said he was struck by the way he was revered in the game.

"Among the great cricketers he stood out," the Holding said over the phone from his Cayman Islands home. "Look at his numbers, and they are impressive but he too was impressive. I know other cricketers whose numbers are good but who I would not be impressed by."

Holding, who was part of a fearsome West Indies pace attack in the 1970s and 1980s, said: "People who played against him said he was number one.

"Ian Chappell, whom I saw on a regular basis when we worked for *Channel 9* in Australia, said 'Mikey do not worry about the question, Is Sobers the best all-rounder? He was more than that – he was the best cricketer that ever lived'.

"Those are big words coming from someone who was a former Australian captain and lived in Australia, the country that Don Bradman came from."

Holding, who took 249 wickets in 60 Tests, said he had enjoyed Sobers' company. "It was always good to be around Sir Garry," he said. "One thing I noticed is he never spoke about himself. There are so many cricketers who do and start with 'In my time'.

"He did not like to talk about the game a lot unless he was asked a question. He was a very humble man."

Sobers averaged a hugely impressive 57.78 with the bat and a very respectable 34.03 with the ball in Test cricket.

He also captained West Indies in 39 Tests between 1965 and 1972, winning nine and losing 10.

"Nobody could do what he did. If you did try, you would fall flat on your face," Holding said.

"You could look up at him on the pedestal and be proud he is from the Caribbean".

Style and substance: Sobers was a flamboyant batter. THE HINDU ARCHIVES

> This is probably the saddest day for the game of cricket. The greatest cricketer to walk the earth has left us. No words can ever do justice to Sir Garfield Sobers, the cricketer
>
> SUNIL GAVASKAR

> It's incredibly tough to process that Sir Garry is gone. I've been looking back at the memories we shared... He truly was the 'One and Only'. Going to miss him immensely
>
> SACHIN TENDULKAR

> Cricket has lost one of its greatest. Rest in peace, Sir Garfield Sobers. Your legacy will inspire generations
>
> VIRAT KOHLI

A once-in-a-lifetime cricketer

> The greatest all-rounder, an icon and a once-in-a-lifetime cricketer. I just loved the way Garry walked out to bat. He was like a panther with a purposeful, loping and confident walk
>
> GEOFFREY BOYCOTT

> Cricket has lost one of its greatest icons... we have all lost someone we admired immensely
>
> K. SRIKKANTH

> To the greatest cricketer of my lifetime. My hero. My inspiration. God bless your soul, Sir Gary!
>
> RAVI SHASTRI

> Like many others, my heart is heavy at the passing of the great Sir Garfield Sobers. He elevated Barbados and the West Indian Islands to a place of great and unprecedented standing in the world
>
> IAN BISHOP

> Our greatest player has left us
>
> BRIAN LARA

> His unmatched brilliance as an all-rounder, remarkable sportsmanship, and enduring legacy will continue to inspire generations
>
> MOHAMMAD AZHARUDDIN

> His skills in that generation was a yardstick for many to judge their own talent. One of the rarest...
>
> SOURAV GANGULY

> Sir Garry showed that while our individual islands shape who we are, the West Indies provides a platform for us to unite, compete and inspire on the world stage
>
> HAYLEY MATTHEWS, SHAI HOPE AND ROSTON CHASE

> Generations have learnt from his mastery, and always will
>
> BABAR AZAM

> Sir Garfield Sobers was not only the finest all-rounder the game has ever known, but one of the greatest cricketers in history. He helped shape the identity of West Indies cricket during one of its most celebrated eras
>
> JAY SHAH

Mercedes' Antonelli takes pole ahead of Red Bull's Verstappen

FORMULA ONE

Associated Press
SPA-FRANCORCHAMPS

Kimi Antonelli beat a display of Red Bull formation flying to take pole position for the Belgian Grand Prix in qualifying on Saturday and boost his Formula 1 title charge. Max Verstappen had set the fastest time after smart coordination with Red Bull teammate Isack Hadjar to give him the strongest possible slipstream on his lap.

Mercedes driver Antonelli found a new level of pace on his lap to beat Verstappen by 0.317 of a second and dedicated the pole position as a birthday present to his father Marco, who turned 61 on Saturday.

Antonelli. AP

"Let's go, man, let's go," he said over the radio.

With Verstappen starting second and teammate and title rival George Russell third on the grid, Antonelli is hoping he can cling on to the lead in the long run-up into the forested hills on the first lap Sunday and that if there's overtaking, "hopefully it's just off in the distance." Beyond that, he said, he'll just focus on managing his tire wear.

Lando Norris qualified third-fastest for McLaren, but a grid penalty means he drops 10 places. Antonelli's teammate George Russell is set to move up to third on the grid, but once again he struggled to match the 19-year-old Italian.

Qualifying results: 1. Antonelli (Mercedes); 2. Verstappen (Red Bull); 3. Norris (McLaren); 4. Russell (Mercedes); 5. Leclerc (Ferrari); 6. Hamilton (Ferrari); 7. Piastri (McLaren); 8. Lindblad (Racing Bulls); 9. Bortoleto (Audi); 10. Hadjar (Red Bull); 11. Lawson (Racing Bulls); 12. Gasly (Alpine); 13. Colapinto (Alpine) 14. Hulkenberg (Audi); 15. Sainz (Williams); 16. Bearman (Haas); 17. Albon (Williams); 18. Ocon (Haas); 19. Bottas (Cadillac); 20. Pérez (Cadillac); 21. Alonso (Aston Martin); 22. Stroll (Aston Martin).

Rohit's future and the series on the line in Lord's showdown

The kerfuffle surrounding the 39-year-old's time as an international cricketer has dominated news; Rahul, after missing out on the second ODI, is expected to play the decider; both teams will be hoping to avoid middle-order collapses

INDIA IN ENGLAND

N. Sudarshan
LONDON

At a time when every bilateral white-ball fixture acquires meaning only in the context of the next big global tournament, the third and final ODI between England and India at Lord's works as a standalone product too.

If the kerfuffle surrounding Rohit Sharma's future as an ODI cricketer has dominated news, with rumours and clarifications flying thick and fast, Sunday is likely to be the last occasion for the English audience to savour Virat Kohli and Rohit in international colours.

But the best sportspersons operate beyond the headlines, and Rohit, in particular, would like to do exactly that. The 39-year-old practised on Saturday, under the watchful eyes of head coach Gautam Gambhir and batting coach Sitanshu Kotak.

The crisp, almost therapeutic, sound of Rohit's bat hitting the ball was pleasing to the ear. If it translates to some confident runs, it will be a godsend.

That the contest is the series-decider may help Rohit hyper-focus and elevate his batting. Both in Birmingham and Cardiff, his time at the crease was scratchy at best, as he made a 21-ball 11 and a 47-ball 26, respectively.

All to play for: Gill and Root will be looking for a polished performance. ANI & AFP

The two surfaces, admittedly, were not as batter-friendly as one would expect limited-overs pitches to be, but Rohit's ball-striking was in sharp contrast to the way Shubman Gill and Kohli wielded the willow.

Gill followed up his 80 in Edgbaston with a sweet 31 in Sophia Gardens while Kohli, after a blip in the first game (5), scored an assured 66-ball 65. Shreyas Iyer was fluent during his 66-run knock but what hurt India in the four-wicket loss in Wales was the absence of an anchor.

Joe Root performed this role for England with an unbeaten 99 and saw his side through; the talisman would want to complete the job and earn his team only its third title success in the last nine bilateral series.

One area where both outfits need improvement is in developing middle-order resilience. In the opening ODI, England collapsed from 61 for no loss to 107 for six while in the second, India was reduced to 193 for seven from 178 for three. The tourists, in particular, have found short-pitched bowling a tad tough to counter.

Harsh in squad

India will be without Washington Sundar, who sustained a hamstring injury while batting in Cardiff. Vidarbha's Harsh Dubey, who made his debut recently versus Afghanistan, has flown in as cover, but it remains to be seen if the think-tank picks wrist-spinner Kuldeep Yadav or chooses to replace Washington's all-round skills with Harsh's.

Wicketkeeper-batter K.L. Rahul is likely to be available after missing the previous tie because of an illness, for he batted in the optional nets on match-eve. So did Ishan Kishan, Rahul's replacement in the last game.

For England, a triumph will be a good starting point ahead of the long road leading to the 2027 World Cup.

It has not been a successful 50-over side for nearly three years, but with coach Brendon McCullum's focus exclusively on the white-ball teams now, a series victory against the World's No. 1-ranked ODI outfit will mark a golden reset.

Match starts at 3.30 p.m. IST.

'No concerns with the way Rohit is batting'

N. Sudarshan
LONDON

Amidst concerns about Rohit Sharma's below-par form, India bowling coach Morne Morkel backed the premier batter to break out of the rut soon.

"It's hard work [against] the new ball up front and we've seen that in the entire series," said Morkel on match-eve. "Rohit, no doubt, will work it out. He's done it in the past, and he is experienced. He brings calmness to the batting line-up. So without a doubt, no worries and concerns at all with the way he's going about things."

In the four-wicket loss in Cardiff, India couldn't break the English middle-order's resistance as Joe Root carried the home side with a patient 133-ball unbeaten 99. But India did not have the services of spinner Washington Sundar, who had sustained a hamstring injury while batting.

"To be honest, the way we bowled in the last game was exceptional," Morkel opined.

"Just looking at the numbers, the high speeds that the boys generated and the areas that we bowled in were great to see.

"We went in wanting to use Prasidh [Krishna] and Gurnoor [Brar] with their extra bounce in the middle phase. We'll keep on working on ways to get those breakthroughs. But Joe played exceptionally well... classy innings there. We've got a couple of plans in place and hopefully, they will work [on Sunday]."

The former South Africa pacer backed the Indian batters to shine even in the likelihood of the Lord's pitch not being conducive to free-flowing run-making.

"Our top and middle-orders are very experienced. They are very well aware of how to form partnerships, and that's going to be the key. In the last game, we looked pretty set to get to that 280-300 mark, but unfortunately lost a couple of wickets.

"The 50-over game is about partnerships, and if we can form that with bat and ball, it will be an exciting game for us," the 41-year-old added.

Invaluable: Morkel says Rohit brings calmness to the batting line-up. ANI

Root an ideal role model for the England team: Brook

N. Sudarshan
LONDON

England captain Harry Brook said that he expected the Lord's pitch to be similar to the ones encountered in Birmingham and Cardiff.

"I reckon the new ball will be quite important," Brook said, ahead of Sunday's third and final ODI versus India here.

"I think there'll be a little bit of assistance for the seam bowlers to start with, and then it generally gets quite slow here.

Rotating the strike

"So, rotating the strike is going to be an important part of the game, and likewise with the ball, trying to stop them [India] from rotating the strike."

Joe Root has been in stellar form for the home team, scoring 76 not out and 99 not out in the first two matches of the series. Brook stated that the 35-year-old talisman, also a fellow Yorkshireman, was the ideal role model for his team.

"We probably have depended on him quite a little bit in recent times in ODI cricket and Test cricket," said Brook.

"Hopefully, the boys can learn from what he's doing, myself included, and realise how easy he's making batting look.

"He's arguably the best rotator of the strike that's ever played the game and he just makes it look so easy.

Strong position

"If we can add a little bit of Joe Root into our batting, then we'll definitely be in some strong positions," added the 27-year-old.

On song: Manush starred in U Mumba's victory. BUTTERFLYUTT

U Mumba posts record win, revives hopes

UTT

Amol Karhadkar
PANAJI

It was billed as the marquee contest of the evening. Manush Shah and Manav Thakkar – the bespectacled doubles partners who have carried India's flag with distinction on the international table tennis circuit – found themselves on opposite sides when defending champion U Mumba TT took on UP Prometheans in Ultimate Table Tennis on Saturday. But much like the tie itself, the much-anticipated duel turned into a one-sided affair as Manush outclassed Manav to script U Mumba's biggest-ever victory in UTT history.

Having swept the first three matches, U Mumba established complete control. Anusha Kutumbale set the tone with a commanding 3-0 win over Australia's Yangzi Liu before her teammates stretched the lead to 9-0, leaving Manav with the unenviable task of reviving UP's fortunes.

Instead, it was Manush who dictated proceedings. His heavy forehand and backhand topspins repeatedly breached Manav's defence as the left-hander surged to a two-game lead. Manav earned a consolation by converting the Golden Point in the third game.

With no team having previously won more than 12 games in a UTT tie, U Mumba had history within touching distance. Young Welsh paddler Anna Hursey ensured it became a reality, targeting Sayali Wani's forehand corner with remarkable consistency to clinch two games and help U Mumba finish with an emphatic win, which also revived the defending champion's hopes of reaching the knockouts.

Earlier in the evening, Manika Batra produced her most convincing performance of the season, blanking French southpaw Prithika Pavade as Ahmedabad APL Pipers registered a comfortable victory over PBG Pune Jaguars.

The results: Ahmedabad APL Pipers bt PBG Pune Jaguars 10-5 (Adrien Rassenfosse bt SFR Snehit 11-8, 11-6, 8-11, Sofia Polcanova bt Diya Chitale 4-11, 11-10, 11-10, Payas Jain & Polcanova bt Anirban Ghosh & Prithika Pavade 9-11, 11-6, 11-7, Payas lost to Omar Assar 6-11, 11-7, 9-11, Manika Batra bt Prithika Pavade 11-8, 11-7, 11-8).

U Mumba TT bt UP Prometheans 13-2 (Lilian Bardet bt Ricardo Walther 11-6, 11-8, 11-6, Anusha Kutumbale bt Yangzi Liu 11-7, 11-9, 11-3, Manush Shah & Anna Hursey bt Walther & Swastika Ghosh 11-8, 11-4, 11-2, Manush bt Manav Thakkar 11-7, 11-4, 10-11, Hursey bt Sayali Wani 11-6, 7-11, 11-6).

Most of the surrendered Maoists belong to the Muria tribal community from Pungutta village, located around 20 kms from Chintoor in Polavaram district, are back in the social mainstream and are trying to take things in their stride one day at a time. T. APPALANAIDU

Trading years of conflict for livelihood and a stable future

For many former Maoists, surrender only marks the beginning of a long journey. While they attempt to rebuild their lives through farming and family, rehabilitation remains a work in progress. Many continue to grapple with unemployment, inadequate skills, and challenges of reintegration, writes **T. Appalanaidu**

Former Maoist Madakam Idumamma alias Idimi. (Right) Former Maoist Dirdha Lakshmaiah and his wife Adamamma.

For those who spent years underground, the greatest adjustment has not been surrendering their weapons but learning to build an ordinary life. Today, many former Maoists are rebuilding their lives one day at a time, trading years of conflict for livelihoods, families, and the hope of a stable future.

One such story is that of Madakam Idumamma alias Idimi. In March 2022, after traversing the Karregutta hills along the Andhra Pradesh-Telangana-Chhattisgarh borders for five years, she called it quits and joined the mainstream. A native of Pungutta village of Pega panchayat in Polavaram district, she was recruited by the banned Communist Party of India (Maoist) at the age of 16. She later served as a dalam member of the Charla-Sabari Area Committee and as a member of the Local Operation Squad, carrying a .303 rifle.

Looking back on those years, Idimi says when I visit the nearby Edugurallapalli shandy, where other surrendered Maoists from our area sometimes meet, nobody there suspects or questions our movements. Maybe it is because we choose to lead a peaceful life in harmony. "...Five months ago, I was blessed with a baby girl, Saranya," says a happy Idimi.

While surrender marks the end of armed conflict, rebuilding a life is often a longer and more uncertain journey. Government rehabilitation packages provide financial assistance and livelihood support, but several surrendered Maoists say reintegration remains a challenge, with many facing social and economic difficulties.

Financial assistance

The rehabilitation programme has gained traction in recent years. According to the Andhra Pradesh Police, as many as 118 Maoists surrendered between January 2024 and March 2026. "Among those who surrendered were CPI (Maoist) central committee member Chelluri Narayana Rao, alias Suresh, two State committee members, and six district committee members," according to a top official who requested anonymity.

According to the office of the Andhra Pradesh Director General of Police, ₹1.2 crore has been disbursed as compensation, while more than ₹1 crore has been proposed for disbursement to surrendered Maoists by June 2027.

The financial assistance is provided under the revised Surrender-cum-Rehabilitation Scheme for Left-Wing Extremists, introduced in 2013, under the scheme, high-ranking Maoist cadres are entitled an immediate grant of ₹2.5 lakh and middle- and lower-rank cadres ₹1.5 lakh, upon surrender before the State government concerned. The scheme also provides a monthly stipend of ₹4,000 for three years for vocational training, apart from special incentives for surrendering weapons.

> I am prepared to undergo any skill training programme to earn a livelihood. I am even determined to resume my studies, which were interrupted after I joined the Maoists. Otherwise, I will be happy to work as a tourist guide if our government introduces a scheme similar to the one in Telangana State
>
> **DIRDHA LAKSHMAIAH,** Former Maoist

In many cases, surrendered Maoists, particularly those from the lower ranks, are arguably unaware of these entitlements. Against this backdrop, Dirdha Lakshmaiah, who dropped out of school in Class IX, says he was recruited by the Maoists in 2016 and surrendered in 2019. Now 25 years old, he makes a living by farming. "I am prepared to undergo any skill training programme to earn a livelihood. I am even determined to resume my studies, which were interrupted after I joined the Maoists. Otherwise, I would be happy to work as a tourist guide if our government introduces a scheme similar to the one in Telangana State," he says.

Three years after his surrender, he fell in love with Adamamma, a girl from his own tribe, the Muria, and village on the Andhra Pradesh-Chhattisgarh border. "In the deep forest, our three-acre land is entirely rain-fed. We grow paddy for our family and cereals during the rabi season. Other than this, we are not equipped with any other skills to earn a livelihood," says Lakshmaiah.

Former Maoist Ungaiah playing a Permakore, a traditional musical instrument, at Pungutta village in Chintoor agency in Polavaram district.

Career opportunities

To address such concerns, the police say they are working with both government and private companies to create employment opportunities for surrendered Maoists. Chintoor Assistant Superintendent of Police and Officer on Special Duty (Naxal Operations) Pankaj Kumar Meena says, "We have been in touch with various companies to explore employment opportunities for surrendered Maoists. Special job melas are being conducted in Paderu, Rampachodavaram, and Chintoor. For women Maoists who have surrendered, we are chalking out an action plan with a list of skill-training programmes and self-employment opportunities."

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>
> **PANKAJ KUMAR MEENA,** Chintoor ASP and Officer on Special Duty (Naxal Operations)

Police personnel continue to stay in touch with those who surrendered to assist with their medical needs until they are fully settled in their native villages, he adds.

But true settlement is difficult in regions severely lacking basic infrastructure. Pungutta, the village that fell prey to Maoist recruitments in the past, is one of the 54 settlements officially classified as Reserve Forest. More than half of these settlements still do not have a primary school. A decade ago, temporary schools were opened in the Muria settlements following directions from the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) in response to appeals from human rights activists in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana.

Located over 20kms from Chintoor and accessible only after crossing three streams through dense forests, Pungutta became known not only for its remoteness and lack of schools but also for the number of young people it lost to the Maoist Movement.

Lack of proper education

Among them was Ungaiah, who joined the Maoists at the age of 16 in late 2016. Before being recruited by the Maoists, he had no formal education, he says, adding, "Being a party member of the CPI (Maoist), I was deputed as a guard carrying a .303 rifle for the team led by CPI (Maoist) Telangana State committee secretary Haribhushan alias Yapa Narayana, who died of COVID-19 in June 2021 in Chhattisgarh."

Recalling that he walked the entire stretch of the Red Corridor, beginning from Maharashtra through Telangana, Andhra Pradesh and Odisha to Chhattisgarh as the guard of Mr. Haribhushan, Ungaiah says that he convinced Haribhushan to let him quit the movement and returned home in 2018.

If surrender marks the end of one chapter, rehabilitation is where the next begins. Polavaram District Collector K. Dinesh Kumar says that there will be convergence of schemes offered by various departments exclusively to improve the livelihoods of surrendered Maoists.

He says in early June, the Polavaram district administration, in collaboration with the Police Department, kick-started a socio-economic survey of the families of surrendered Maoists and those who lost their loved ones to Left-Wing Extremist violence.

The ongoing survey is documenting the number of surrendered Maoists, their livelihood options, educational qualifications and requirements such as housing, he adds.

Civic rights

Officials say rehabilitation is not limited to financial assistance and employment. It also involves restoring former Maoists' access to civic rights.

Surrendered Maoists who reside in an area for six months qualify as ordinary residents and are therefore entitled to enrol as voters in the constituency, Integrated Tribal Development Agency (ITDA) Project Officer Kavuri Chaitanya had told *The Hindu* during the 2024 general elections.

For Ungaiah also rehabilitation is about more than financial assistance or schemes. "I had enrolled for Aadhaar before joining the Maoists. However, I have not yet enrolled as a voter. I am keen to exercise my franchise in the next Panchayat elections," he says.

Retrenched employees of the U.S.-based CorroHealth Infotech Private Limited waiting at the entrance of the company office in Kochi. H. VIBHU

Ctrl+Alt+Delete for IT sector?

The recent sacking of more than 1,000 employees of two information technology firms in the State has triggered a disquiet in the sector. **G. Ragesh** talks to some of the affected employees and other stakeholders to find out what is ailing the sector

A heavy, brooding charcoal-grey cloud hovers over a multi-storey commercial building standing tall near the service road of the busy Vyttila-Edappally bypass in Kochi on a Tuesday morning.

Down in the basement of the building sits Fatima*, a 35-year-old woman, on the granite steps at the entrance of what once used to be her workplace. The glass door remains shut behind her, and Fatima stares at an uncertain future, her forced smile failing to hide the unease within.

A senior medical coder at CorroHealth Infotech Private Ltd., a U.S.-based health-care analytics company, Fatima has worked from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. for the past four years. Her routine changed on July 3 as the company shut its operations in Kerala, a decision that shocked around 800 employees.

"Nowadays, some of us come here in the morning, sign an attendance register arranged by the district labour office, sit here for some time and leave. We are just following the instructions of government officials. We really don't think the company is going to reverse its decision," a disappointed Fatima says.

"It all feels like a nightmare now," she says, recalling the "lay-off" horror on July 3.

"None of us could believe what the HR (human resources) representatives said. Some of us even felt choked and rushed out of the office for some fresh air. By the time we tried to re-enter, our access was blocked," she remembers.

The company retrenched the employees in its Kochi and Kozhikode offices, citing operational losses, in a move that triggered several uneasy questions on the job market, labour laws and perceived threats from artificial intelligence (AI).

In its 'Separation and Full and Final Settlement Letter' sent to the employees affected, CorroHealth states that it was "conducting a workforce restructuring exercise due to a sustained downturn in the company's Hierarchical Condition Category (HCC) vertical." In medical coding parlance, HCC refers to the grouping of similar diagnoses into one related category to be used in a risk-adjustment payment model.

The company paid a compensation amounting to salaries for two and a half months to the employees while terminating their services.

The retrenchment has snowballed into a major controversy with both the Kerala government and the Opposition political parties terming it illegal.

Similar crisis

Just a week after the CorroHealth incident, a similar crisis played out in another Kochi-based venture, Talrop Private Ltd., with its employees coming out against the abrupt shutdown of its "₹250-crore ecosystem company." The closure of 21 start-ups operating under Talrop's ecosystem has left over 300 employees jobless.

The company announced the closure by claiming it was "not built for the AI era," triggering further questions about the impact of the cutting-edge technology across sectors, especially in the information technology (IT) industry. The closure led to protests by employees who have raised allegations of inordinate delay in payments. A few investors have also alleged cheating by the company. The employees have lodged complaints with labour offices in Ernakulam, Thiruvananthapuram, and Kannur against various Talrop companies for non-payment of salaries.

> I lost my job as soon as a home loan was sanctioned. After the company announced its closure, we cancelled the home loan application. At present, my priority is to find another job in the city and it doesn't look easy.
>
> **SREELAKSHMI K.**
> A retrenched employee of CorroHealth

The back-to-back lay-offs come amid a similar global trend in the IT sector with Microsoft cutting roughly 4,800 jobs in the latest such instance. It is estimated that global business leaders across sectors have announced at least one-lakh job cuts linked to AI advancements since October 2025. The reasons cited by the companies for the cuts include AI overhaul, AI-driven operational streamlining and AI expansion move, all essentially meaning the same.

Though the circumstances that led to the sacking of employees of CorroHealth and Talrop look different, the plight of their employees appears eerily similar and distressing.

"I lost my job as soon as a home loan was sanctioned. We had decided to settle in Kochi and were about to start building a house as my husband too works in the city. After the company announced its closure, we cancelled the home loan application. At present, my priority is to find another job in the city and it doesn't look easy," says Sreelakshmi K., another employee of CorroHealth.

Fatima, meanwhile, is disappointed that she won't be able to meet the family expenses, especially for her children, for now. She also has loans to pay back.

'Not many opportunities'

"People like us are not able to relocate now. Though the juniors among us are ready to shift to other cities, there aren't many opportunities in the field. Even when there are openings, companies are offering salaries much lower than what we have been getting," Sreelakshmi laments.

They both refuse to believe that AI has taken away their jobs. So do the employees of Talrop.

"The management started peddling the AI narrative just about a week ago, though we had been facing salary payment issues for several months," says an employee of Talrop, alleging that he has not been paid for the past 11 months.

Jones Joseph, CEO, Talrop, rubbishes the charges against the venture. "With the advancements in AI, it doesn't require three engineers to develop an educational platform. Instead, it can be done in just three hours," Joseph reasons, before blaming the West Asia war for escalating their crisis with disruptions in funds flow. He says the pending dues will be settled by October.

A section of the employees, meanwhile, believes that the CorroHealth crisis was the culmination of long-standing unrest between the management and the employees.

"The employees in Kochi and Kozhikode had several times flagged issues like long work hours and lack of cab services for those who have to stay back after usual hours. The employees' fair demands may have provoked the management, especially since such issues were raised only from Kerala," says a senior employee of the company, who was instrumental in mobilising political and trade union support for the retrenched workers. The company has not issued any official response to the development and allegations yet.

Impact of Labour Codes

Along with concerns over AI eating into jobs, the Kerala cases have also triggered debates over the impact of the new Labour Codes passed by the Centre though they are yet to be implemented in Kerala.

Bindhu Krishna, Kerala Labour Minister, says the management of CorroHealth violated the Industrial Relations Code, 2020, as it did not give prior notice to the government before deciding to wind up operations and hence could face legal action. The Code mandates companies with 300 or more employees to obtain government permission at least 90 days before closing an establishment.

She has sought the intervention of the Union Labour Minister to iron out the crisis.

Need for unionisation?

Trade Unions believe the current crisis calls for the mobilisation of the workforce in Kerala's IT sector.

Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) national president Sudip Dutta terms the termination of employees illegal. He is also apprehensive about the actual impact of AI on the job market.

"There's no substantial evidence that AI is replacing jobs. Big companies are willing to invest more in the AI speculative market than in the production of services and goods, eyeing higher returns. However, it has not shown any substantial result yet," he argues.

"With the latest lay-off incidents, Kerala's IT workers will now feel the need for unionisation in the sector," he observes.

Sooraj Nidiyanga, State secretary, Karnataka State IT/ITeS Employees Union, echoes Dutta's views. "The IT industry is seeing trends like juniorisation–laying off mid-level and senior employees and hiring juniors with lower salaries–as well as AI washing–termination in the name of the technology. Mobilisation of the workforce across IT ecosystems is the need of the hour to fight such acts legally," he explains.

Anish Panthalani, president of Progressive Techies, a socio-cultural organisation of IT employees in Kerala, believes the sector is facing both advantages and disadvantages of the absence of the traditional type of unionism. "It may not always be practical to deal with multinational companies on matters such as working hours in strict union terms. At the same time, unions may be able to address several employee-related issues more effectively," he says.

Panthalani admits that the recent lay-offs have triggered panic among sections of IT workers. He says the community is aware that routine IT jobs are being replaced by AI and certain companies have already initiated upskilling measures, and urged other firms also to follow the suit. Terming several instances of lay-offs, including the latest ones, unethical, he stresses that the Progressive Techies protest against such moves.

Ranjith Balan, State president, All India Professionals Congress, also questions the "insensitive" manner in which lay-offs were effected in the two companies. "Job loss due to mismatch with AI skill sets appears to be inevitable. However, such scenarios should be handled sensitively. Governments, institutions and professionals have to address the skill gaps in the workforce together, besides ensuring better compensations, including extension of health insurance in case of a severance," he suggests.

GTECH offer

The Group of Technology Companies of Kerala (GTECH), with around 300 member companies, meanwhile, extended an unusual goodwill gesture to the affected employees. In a meeting with Kerala Minister for Industries and IT P.K. Kunhalikutty, GTECH leaders said they will facilitate the redeployment of CorroHealth employees by collecting their resumes and creating a platform through which member companies can identify suitable candidates based on their current openings.

Ecosystem facilitators are, meanwhile, treading a cautious path when it comes to the AI question. The emerging automation trends and the resultant impact on the sector and job economy have prompted IT Parks to rethink their outlook.

"There is a threat perception, and it will take a couple of years to be clear where the sector is heading. We expect the size of companies to be smaller in the future while their numbers are likely to go up," Susanth Kurunthil, CEO, Infoparks notes.

The Kerala government, on its part, has initiated conciliatory talks with the managements of both CorroHealth and Talrop. The State Labour department is in the process of vetting the documents and obtaining the relevant details in the case of the two companies. "Our priority is to explore all options to retain the company in the State and protect the employees," says an official of the department.

The government has scheduled yet another meeting with the company's representatives and other stakeholders on July 20 while another round of talks with Talrop leadership is planned before July 25.

Fathima, Sreelakshmi and their former colleagues, as well as the IT sector of the State, are eagerly waiting for the outcome of the meeting to reboot their careers and lives.

*(*Name changed to protect her privacy.)*

A protest in front of CorroHealth Infotech Private Limited in Kochi following the unannounced lay-off of employees. H. VIBHU