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Swear words may be uncivil, but not obscene: SC

NEW DELHI
The Supreme Court has reasoned in a judgment that the use of four-letter expletive and its variations may be "abusive, unpalatable or uncivil", but does not qualify as "obscene" in law. » PAGE 6

11 killed in J&K as rain triggers flash floods

- Nine dead in Poonch, two in Rajouri; 100 homes, two dozen school structures reported damaged
- Pir Panjal Valley worst affected; floods washed away many vehicles and landslides hit traffic
- CM Abdullah asks officials to monitor vulnerable localities, particularly those prone to landslides

Peerzada Ashiq
SRINAGAR

Eleven people were killed, and 10 went missing in flash floods triggered by torrential rain in Poonch and Rajouri districts of Jammu and Kashmir on Sunday, officials said.

Nine deaths were reported from Poonch and two from Rajouri. Initial assessment suggested that more than 100 houses and around two dozen school structures were damaged in the floods.

Chief Minister Omar Abdullah chaired a high-level review meeting at the Civil Secretariat in Jammu in the evening. He instructed all Deputy Commissioners and field agencies to closely monitor vulnerable areas, particularly those prone to landslides, flash floods and inundation, and ensure that rescue teams, machinery and essential services remain fully prepared to respond at short notice.

"The foremost priority of the administration is to safeguard precious lives. Every possible effort should be made to trace and retrieve missing persons so that affected families receive timely support... and are able to come to terms with the reality of the unfortunate death of their loved ones. Besides, there should be expeditious restoration of roads, power supply, drinking water supply and communication links disrupted by heavy rains," said Mr. Abdullah.

According to officials, Poonch district in the Pir Panjal valley was the worst affected. Heavy rain since Sunday morning also triggered flash floods in Rajouri and Kishtwar districts, damaging public property and washing away scores of vehicles. Landslides disrupted traffic in several areas.

Authorities in several districts of the Kashmir Valley issued fresh advisories for those living near streams, rivers and hilly areas prone to landslides and flash floods. "People in these areas are advised not to venture out till the weather improves. Tourists, travellers and transporters have been asked to check road conditions before travelling to hilly areas," said an advisory.

J&K Lieutenant-Governor Manoj Sinha said personnel from the civil administration, the police, the Army, and the State Disaster Response Force and local volunteers were actively working on the ground. "Affected families have already been moved to safer locations. All departments are on high alert and are prioritising immediate relief and restoration work," he said.

The Chief Minister also cut short his stay in Delhi and left for Jammu to personally monitor the situation on the ground. The National Conference's proposed July 20 protest in Delhi, seeking restoration of Statehood and constitutional guarantees, will now be led by party president Dr. Farooq Abdullah.

Meanwhile, Union Home Minister Amit Shah was briefed about the situation. Mr. Shah assured the L-G and the CM of all possible assistance from the Centre for the safety and security of the affected people, officials said.

The administration suspended the Amarnath Yatra from both the Baltal and Pahalgam routes from Sunday following an adverse weather forecast issued by the India Meteorological Department (IMD).

The weather department has forecast more spells of rain across Jammu and Kashmir till July 23.

Traces of ruin: Residents inspect vehicles damaged by flash floods and a landslide in Rajouri district of Jammu and Kashmir on Sunday. AFP

Landslides in Nagaland town kill 8 people

GUWAHATI
Landslides in at least 11 locations, triggered by heavy, incessant rainfall, killed eight people and injured 15 in Mon town in Nagaland on Sunday morning. The town, which is the headquarters of Mon district bordering Myanmar, is about 300 km northeast of the capital, Kohima. Mon Deputy Commissioner Wennyei Konyak said the landslides occurred around 6 a.m. » PAGE 4

Final chapter

Moment of glory: Fireworks go off before the FIFA World Cup final match between Spain and Argentina in East Rutherford, near New York, on Sunday. REUTERS

Court rejects plea to transfer Sonam Wangchuk from Safdarjung hospital

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

A day after climate activist Sonam Wangchuk was moved from the site of his hunger strike to Safdarjung Hospital in New Delhi by the police, the Delhi High Court on Sunday refused any interim order in a petition seeking to transfer Mr. Wangchuk to a hospital of his choice. The petition filed by Gitanjali J. Angmo, wife of Mr. Wangchuk, who is on a hunger strike demanding the resignation of Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan, alleged that the activist was confined to Safdarjung Hospital without his or his family's consent.

Appearing for the petitioner in a special hearing, senior advocate Kapil Sibal submitted that Mr. Wangchuk was neither under detention nor accused of any offence and was therefore entitled to be treated at a hospital of his choice. He submitted that the family of Mr. Wangchuk wished to shift him to Medanta Hospital in Gurugram, alleging that his own doctors presently had no access to him.

Justice Mini Pushkarna, hearing the petition, held that the decision to shift Mr. Wangchuk from Jantar Mantar – where he was fasting for 20 days before the police intervention – could not be termed "arbitrary". Observing that Mr. Wangchuk had chosen not to admit himself to a medical facility despite his deteriorating health, the court held that the authorities were justified in moving him. Justice Pushkarna also issued notices to the Centre, Safdarjung Hospital, and the police on the plea and asked them to file responses within three days. The petition would be heard next on July 24.

In the spotlight: Gitanjali J. Angmo and CJP founder Abhijit Dipke at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi on Sunday. SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

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The Hindu Lit for Life Unplugged strolls down lanes of history in Kolkata

Shreya Banerjee
KOLKATA

"That side," said Padma Bhushan and Padma Shri awardee Usha Uthup, pointing towards the right corner of Trincas, a restaurant in Kolkata's Park Street, "is where Sharmila Tagore and the Nawab of Pataudi would sit."

Then she swept her hand across the room. "Farokh Engineer... the West Indies cricket team... Jyoti Basu... Uttam Kumar... Suchitra Sen..."

"I never had to go anywhere, the world came to me," said the legendary singer as she remembered a particularly fond encounter with filmmaker Satyajit Ray at Park Street. The maestro visited Trincas often and had expressed his interest in making a film about the restaurant. She paused before smiling. "It sounds like I'm dropping names. Which I am, actually."

The audience erupted into peals of laughter. Around them was the same dining room that had once hosted many of those famous names.

On Sunday, Trincas became both venue and subject as *The Hindu's* Lit for Life Unplugged brought together Ms. Uthup and historian Anand Puri, third-generation custodian of the iconic Park Street restaurant, for *When Park Street Sings: A Conversation on Music, Memory & Kolkata*.

Moderated by *The Hindu's* Associate Editor Shonali Muthalaly, the discussion moved between Ms. Uthup's five-decade musical journey and the history of Park Street, tracing how one restaurant became central to Kolkata's nightlife.

Soulful stories: Singer Usha Uthup in conversation with Shonali Muthalaly at Trincas in Kolkata on Sunday. CHITROGRAPHER MEDIA

Turning pages

The evening introduced Mr. Anand's forthcoming book on revisiting the history of Kolkata in the last 100 years through the eyes of Trincas.

The event also turned the pages of Ms. Uthup's memoir, *The Queen of Indian Pop: The Authorised Biography of Usha Uthup*, written by Vikas Kumar Jha, and published by Penguin Random House.

Looking back at the beginning of her career, Ms. Uthup returned to Madras in 1969. The conversation began with Ms. Muthalaly asking the singer about an inland letter she received from Mr. Anand's grandfather in 1969 inviting her to Park Street in what was then Calcutta. Prior to receiving the letter, she recalled accompanying her aunt, then director of tourism, to the Nine Gems nightclub in Madras where Ms. Uthup was spotted by Mr. Anand's grandfather, Omi Prakash Puri.

Her musical career truly began when her aunt suggested she sing a line or two on stage. "My music teacher had thrown me out of class," she said, laughing. "So being asked to sing with a professional band was unbelievable." Usha chose the song *Fever* by Peggy Lee. "What stayed with me was the sound of the applause. I think that's what clinched it," Ms. Uthup remembered.

She never imagined that she would eventually become known for singing Western pop in a sari. "I was just myself. Nobody thought someone looking like me, wearing a sari and a bindi, would stand on stage singing pop music," she said. Music in Madras, she added, "has no barriers, no caste, colour, language or gender. It simply connects."

Mr. Anand situated Ms. Uthup's story within the history of Park Street itself. Before becoming Park Street, he explained, the road had been known as Badam Tala because of its almond trees, and later as Burial Ground Road because it led to the South Park Street Cemetery. It eventually took its present name from the deer park owned by Sir Elijah Impey.

The conversation eventually gave way to questions from the audience and a musical performance. Seated in her chair, Ms. Uthup enthralled a full house at Trincas, singing hits such as *Ramba Ho*, *Dum Maro Dum*, *Skyfall*, *Shaan Se* and *Jaane Ja Dhoondta Phir Raha*.

Within minutes, members of the audience had risen from their seats and were dancing between the tables.

As the final chorus echoed through Trincas, memory gave way to music, just as it always had on Park Street.

U.S. retaliates against Iran after killing of its soldiers

Associated Press
DUBAI

The United States launched more air strikes at Iran on Sunday in response to the killing of U.S. troops, and Iran fired missiles toward Jordan that risked widening the conflict into neighbouring Israel.

Step by step, the U.S, and Iran have returned closer to all-out war as last month's interim deal meant to permanently end the fighting has crumbled and shipping traffic in the Strait of Hormuz has largely stalled.

FULL REPORT ON » PAGE 14

INBRIEF

4,000 killed in human-animal conflict in U.P., says Adityanath

Asserting that Uttar Pradesh is the first State to declare human-animal conflict a disaster, Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on Sunday called for raising public awareness and also pressed the need for leveraging technology to minimise the loss of lives. The Chief Minister also said over 4,000 people lost their lives in human-animal conflict while more than 5,000 others died in natural disasters. Mr. Adityanath was speaking at the inauguration of the new headquarters of the Uttar Pradesh State Disaster Management Authority in Lucknow. PTI

Substantiate bribery charges, DMK leader tells T.N. Minister

Former Minister for Registration P. Moorthy of the DMK on Sunday challenged Tamil Nadu Law Minister R. Nirmalkumar to furnish evidence to substantiate his allegations that bribes were collected in the Registration Department during the previous DMK regime. He was responding to allegations by Mr. Nirmalkumar that, while serving as Registration Minister, Mr. Moorthy had stationed his aides at every registration office to collect a 20% commission on every property registration. Mr. Moorthy said Mr. Nirmalkumar, who also holds the Power portfolio, should focus on ensuring uninterrupted power supply.

BJP govt. in West Bengal implementing promise of *Sonar Bangla*: Shah

People brought about political change in the State unlike any witnessed in the country since Independence, says Home Minister; lays foundation stone for ₹700-crore Amul dairy project

Shiv Sahay Singh
KOLKATA

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government in West Bengal is implementing the promise of *Sonar Bangla* (Golden Bengal) on the ground, said Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Sunday while virtually laying the foundation stone for the ₹700-crore Amul Bengal Dairy Project at Sankrail in Howrah.

"I have come to tell the people of West Bengal that whatever we had promised during the election, the government is implementing it on the ground," the Union Home Minister said.

During the recent Assembly poll campaign, the BJP leadership, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Mr. Shah, had spoken about turning the State into *Sonar Bangla*.

The Home Minister alleged that the idea of *Sonar Bangla* envisioned by Rabindranath Tagore was destroyed by the previous Left and Trinamool Congress governments.

Union Home Minister Amit Shah in Kolkata on Sunday virtually laying the foundation stone for Amul's dairy plant in Howrah. ANI

He said the change the people of West Bengal have brought about is unlike any political change witnessed in any State of the country since Independence.

Mr. Shah, who is on a three-day visit to the State, held detailed discussions on governance and security. "We have discussed and taken several steps to stop infiltration, strengthen law and order, and improve women's safety," he said.

Largest plant

The project will house the country's largest curd production plant and it will be produced by processing 10 lakh litres of milk. "Small dairy farmers will benefit. I told the Chief Minister to give two 15-acre plots. Then the entire milk production system of east India will be from here," the Home Minister said.

Chief Minister Suvendu Adhikari and senior ministers attended the event. Alluding to former Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, Mr. Adhikari said: "Those who used to say that they will not let Bengal become Gujarat are watching [this event] on TV from home today. Amul is investing ₹700 crore for the development of West Bengal."

He also urged the Gujarat Cooperative Milk Marketing Federation to set up two ice cream plants, one each in south Bengal and north Bengal, and said the government will provide 15 acres to set up the plants.

This is the third major investment announced by the BJP government. Lux Cozi recently laid the foundation stone for a mega manufacturing hub in Dankuni, with planned investment of ₹600 crore. The Shyam Steel Group has also announced a project at its Mejia plant in Bankura district with total investment of ₹15,000 crore.

J&K Congress leaders detained; police stop march to L-G's house

Press Trust of India
JAMMU/SRINAGAR

Dozens of Congress leaders and activists were detained on Sunday as the police stopped their march to Lok Bhavan, the Lieutenant-Governor's residence, in Jammu to submit a memorandum addressed to President Droupadi Murmu in support of the demand for immediate restoration of full Statehood to Jammu and Kashmir.

The march led by Pradesh Congress Committee president Tariq Hameed Karra came a day ahead of the National Conference's (NC) proposed demonstration for restoration of Statehood in Delhi.

Before the march, hundreds of Congress workers staged a peaceful sit-in at Maharaja Hari Singh Park in the heart of the city and raised slogans in support of the demand.

The police barricaded the road at Jewel Chowk, stopping Congress workers from proceeding in a procession to Lok Bhavan to submit their memorandum. A brief scuffle ensued as the protesters attempted to push past the barricades, officials said.

Congress leaders and workers marching towards Lok Bhavan in Jammu on Sunday. PTI

They added that dozens of Congress workers and leaders, including Mr. Karra, Congress general secretary G.A. Mir, working president Raman Bhalla and several former Ministers and legislators, were detained by the police.

BJP puts off stir

Meanwhile, the Opposition BJP said on Sunday that it has postponed its proposed July 20 protest outside the Civil Secretariat in Srinagar against the NC government's 'outsourcing of jobs' in J&K, citing the flash floods that caused heavy loss of life and property.

Leader of the Opposition Sunil Sharma said the party will announce a fresh date for the protest after the situation normalises.

Preparing to contest all seats in Punjab: Chirag

Press Trust of India
CHANDIGARH

Union Minister Chirag Paswan on Sunday said the ruling Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), Congress and Shiromani Akali Dal are losing the trust of people in Punjab. Mr. Paswan, president of the Lok Janshakti Party (Ram Vilas) and Union Minister for Food Processing Industries, said his party is working to strengthen its presence in the State, which is due for Assembly election next year.

The Union Minister reached Amritsar earlier in the day and offered prayers at the Golden Temple and visited Jallianwala Bagh with his mother.

AAP, Akalis and Cong. are losing people's trust, said LJP(RV) president Chirag Paswan. PTI

Speaking to mediapersons, Mr. Paswan hit out at the Bhagwant Singh Mann government over the issue of drug abuse and criticised AAP for "looting" Delhi for 10 years. "As far as I know, Punjabis are completely fed up with AAP. They want change," he said.

On the Assembly poll, he said, "I don't know whether there will be an alliance or how many seats we will contest. Nevertheless, we are preparing to fight from all constituencies." The LJP(RV) is a constituent of the ruling National Democratic Alliance in Bihar.

Taking on the Akali Dal, Mr. Paswan said the party led by the Badals had been in power in the State for a long time, and the "lack of development" during its rule was for all to see.

'Cong. infighting'

The LJP(RV) chief also took a dig at the alleged infighting within the Congress. "The same situation that existed between (Navjot Singh) Sidhu*ji* and Captain *saab* (Amarinder Singh) is now prevailing between (Charanjit Singh) Channi and the State unit president (Amrinder Singh Raja Warring)," he said.

Panel to study benefits for STs after conversion

The Hindu Bureau
MUMBAI

The Maharashtra government has constituted a 27-member committee to examine whether Scheduled Tribe (ST) members are entitled to benefits such as reservation after religious conversion.

The panel is headed by Tribal Development Minister Ashok Uike and includes Minister of State for Tribal Development Indranil Naik, Food and Drug Administration Minister Narbhari Zirwal and MLAs from the ST constituencies. The Commissioner of the Tribal Research and Training Institute, Pune, has been appointed as the member secretary.

Policy for Maharashtra

The committee has been tasked with studying the Central and State laws governing welfare measures for ST members after conversion, and with recommending a comprehensive policy for Maharashtra.

A Government Resolution to form the panel was issued on July 16. No deadline has been specified to submit the draft policy.

The committee was constituted following allegations in the Assembly last year regarding the activities of Christian missionaries in Nandurbar district's Navapur taluka.

During the 2025 Monsoon Session, Bharatiya Janata Party MLA Anupbhaiyya Agrawal and other Assembly members alleged that missionaries were offering inducements to tribals and non-tribals in Navapur to convert, and demands were made to withdraw benefits to those who convert.

Revenue Minister Chandrashekhar Bawankule and Mr. Uike later assured the House that a panel would be constituted to formulate a policy.

As per data from the 2011 Census, Maharashtra's ST population increased from 85.77 lakh in 2001 to over 1.05 crore in a decade. Among the ST population, 97.2% identified themselves as Hindu. Over the same period, the population of Buddhist STs grew by 114.8%, Muslim STs by 49.1%, and Jain STs by nearly six times.

Drop in Christian STs

The Christian ST population in the State declined by 34.8% during the 10-year period.

SPOTLIGHT

The E20 transition: fuel for debate

As car and bike owners report clogged injectors, damaged fuel pumps, and contaminated petrol across the country, a look at competing claims on what is driving the complaints and whether ethanol is really to blame

Jagriti Chandra

"Business is brisk," says 53-year-old Abdul Aziz, a mechanic and co-owner of a repair shop in Karol Bagh's Nala market, New Delhi, a bustling car repair bazaar. He says this flashing a wry smile, his mouth stained red by *paan*. The surge in business, he says, is being driven by a growing number of owners arriving with strikingly similar complaints.

Over the past few months, motorists have been reporting a sharp drop in fuel efficiency and vehicles that jerk while driving. Mechanics call it *"gaadi* missing *de rahi hai"* – a symptom that often points to poor fuel delivery. According to Aziz and his business partner, Tanveer Ahmed Khan, the most common causes are clogged fuel injectors and blocked fuel filters.

Khan says mechanics are also noticing unusually heavy carbon deposits in fuel injectors, and carburettors of older vehicles, along with a rise in oxygen (O2) sensor failures. "Almost every car that comes in now has to be opened up for inspection," he says.

According to the mechanics, these complaints are a relatively recent phenomenon that coincides with the nationwide rollout of petrol blended with 20% ethanol (E20) as the default fuel at retail outlets since April 2025, 5 years ahead of the original timeline under the Ethanol Blended Programme. The programme seeks to improve India's energy security by reducing dependence on imported fossil fuels, support farmers by creating a market for ethanol feedstock, and lower vehicular emissions.

According to the government and the automobile industry, all petrol vehicles sold since April 1, 2023 are E20 material compliant. They acknowledge that E20 may lead to a 3-5% reduction in fuel economy because ethanol has a lower energy content than petrol. However, many motorists claim that their real-world experience has been different, with some reporting mileage losses of up to 20% after switching to E20. These anecdotal claims have not been independently verified and can vary depending on the vehicle, driving conditions and maintenance.

However, while the government commissioned the Automotive Research Association of India (ARAI), an autonomous body under the Ministry of Heavy Industries, to study the impact of E20 on vehicles, it has not made the empirical findings public.

The absence of official data has fuelled speculation and competing claims over the blend's real-world impact. A media report on the study had suggested that some E10-compatible vehicles showed deterioration of rubber components such as hoses, gaskets, seals, and O-rings, while issues were also observed in certain BS-VI turbocharged engines.

Vehicles parked at a mechanic's shop in Karol Bagh, New Delhi. SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

On the ground, mechanics in Karol Bagh say they are increasingly seeing fuel-system failures. Another component that is failing more frequently, they claim, is the fuel pump. Its fine valves often become clogged, while the electric motor can short-circuit if excessive moisture is present in the fuel, as a result of which repair bills have risen sharply.

For mechanics in Karol Bagh, the spike in repair work has translated into better business. For car owners, it has meant more frequent workshop visits and significantly higher maintenance bills.

Experts say ethanol itself is not the culprit. Instead, the problems may stem from older vehicles that were not designed or calibrated to run on E20 fuel, particularly models manufactured before 2023, or from issues related to fuel quality. "Ethanol behaves differently from petrol. It is a stronger solvent, so in older vehicles it can loosen deposits that have accumulated over time, occasionally leading to clogged filters or injectors. It also absorbs moisture more readily, making fuel quality, storage conditions, and the condition of ageing fuel-system components more important. These factors can contribute to symptoms such as rough idling or jerky driving," says Vinay Piparsania, founder of Gurugram-based automobile consultancy MillenStrat Advisory & Research, and Former Executive Director at Ford India. He says the situation is different for vehicles specifically engineered for E20 fuel, that is those manufactured after 2023.

Another key factor

Those who work in the automotive space say contaminated fuel can independently cause injector fouling, poor drivability, fuel pump failures and, in severe cases, engine damage – the very problems mechanics say they are increasingly seeing in their workshops.

Fuel quality is also the issue that petrol dealers have been raising. They argue that ethanol's hygroscopic nature, or its tendency to absorb moisture, has made fuel more vulnerable to water contamination if storage and dispensing systems are not properly maintained or upgraded. According to dealers, this has forced some retail outlets to discard hundreds of litres of E20 after it became contaminated with water and was deemed unfit for sale.

A petrol pump owner who wanted to remain anonymous as oil marketing companies have advised dealers against speaking publicly on the matter, says, "The underground tanks that store fuel often have some amount of water due to ingress during rains or moisture. There is also condensation from the fuel tanker that brings petrol to the petrol pump." He adds that when the water content in the entire E20 stock in underground tanks exceeds 0.5%, ethanol binds with water. This results in phase separation, where the water-ethanol mixture settles at the bottom of the tank, while the petrol forms a separate layer above.

As fuel is drawn by the dispensing unit from the bottom of the underground tank, some vehicles may end up being dispensed this water-rich mixture instead of E20, pump owners further explained.

The concerns raised by petrol pump owners underscore the complexity of India's transition to E20. Experts say the shift is not merely about introducing a higher ethanol blend at the fuel pump, but also about ensuring that every link in the supply chain is equipped to handle it.

"An E20 transition is not simply about changing the fuel in the vehicle. It is also an end-to-end engineering exercise involving refineries, logistics, storage terminals, fuel stations, vehicle manufacturers, and service networks. The transition succeeds only when every link in that chain is engineered and managed to the same standard," says Piparsania.

So, if vehicles were already using E10 without much concern, why are more issues being reported with E20? "The move from E10 to E20 is more significant than simply doubling the ethanol percentage. The chemical characteristics of ethanol become more pronounced, making compatibility requirements more demanding," explains Piparsania.

But couldn't the transition from E10 to E20 could have been managed differently, automobile users ask? Piparsania feels this is an opportunity to strengthen the transition, but the move could have been done through more coordinated communication from the government, oil marketing companies, vehicle manufacturers, and dealer networks.

"Equally important is a visible commitment from all stakeholders that any genuine issues arising during the transition will be investigated promptly, transparently, and resolved fairly. That assurance is essential for building consumer confidence," asserts Piparsania.

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IUML tells its Ministers to be cautious about policies

The Hindu Bureau
MALAPPURAM

The Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) leadership has asked its Ministers in the United Democratic Front (UDF) government in Kerala to tread carefully while supporting coalition policies, amid criticism over the party's positions on issues such as Waqf, PM SHRI and the government's move to reduce taxes on low-alcohol beverages.

Facing pressure from various quarters over decisions perceived as a shift from its earlier positions, the IUML wants its Ministers to back UDF policies while ensuring that their statements and actions do not create confusion over the party's stand.

Waqf Board issue

The Waqf Board issue has emerged as the biggest challenge for the party. The government's submission before the Kerala High Court that it would reconstitute the State Waqf Board in accordance with the Waqf (Amendment) Act, 2025, has invited criticism from Muslim organisations.

Waqf Minister N. Samsudheen's statement that the government would abide by the law has also come under scrutiny.

The High Court had frozen the functioning of the existing board, citing the absence of a Shia member and two non-Muslim members as required under the amended law. The board has challenged the order in the Supreme Court.

Minister claims diversion of Central funds in Telangana

Bandi Sanjay Kumar alleges developmental funds are being utilised for staff salaries, electricity bills, and other administrative expenditures; urges Centre to put in strict monitoring mechanism

The Hindu Bureau
HYDERABAD

Union Minister of State for Home Affairs Bandi Sanjay Kumar on Sunday urged Union Minister for Panchayati Raj Rajiv Ranjan Singh to conduct a special inquiry into the utilisation of 15th Finance Commission grants in Telangana, alleging that funds were being diverted for purposes other than those permitted under the guidelines.

In a communication released to the media, Mr. Sanjay Kumar has sought immediate directions to the State government to ensure that funds earmarked for village development are not used for unauthorised purposes.

The Congress government must explain the alleged diversion of funds, the Minister said in the letter. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

The Minister claimed that the funds were being utilised for staff salaries, electricity bills, routine maintenance and other administrative expenditures instead of developmental work.

He further alleged that gram panchayat sarpanches had expressed serious concern over being pressured to use the funds for such non-permissible purposes.

The Union government should put in place a strict monitoring mechanism to ensure that funds released to gram panchayats are utilised exclusively for intended developmental works, he said.

Mr. Sanjay Kumar said a total of ₹2,293.74 crore had been released in phases and credited to the State Treasury so far, while another ₹729.41 crore remained due for release.

The Congress government should be asked to explain the alleged diversion of funds, Mr. Sanjay Kumar said in the letter.

He also urged the Union government to direct the State government to initiate disciplinary and legal action against officials responsible for diverting the funds.

YSRCP decries 'neglect' of Handri-Neeva canal project; TDP terms charge baseless

The Hindu Bureau
ANANTAPUR

The Yuvajana Sramika Rythu Congress Party (YSRCP) leaders in Andhra Pradesh on Sunday inspected the Handri-Neeva canal system from Cholasamudram to Narayanapuram, and demanded expansion of its capacity to 11,500 cusecs.

The party alleged that the NDA government weakened one of Rayalaseema's critical irrigation projects through poor execution and policy reversals.

As part of their "*Chalo Cholasamudram*" protest to highlight the alleged neglect, the leaders visited the canal, and said its lining and expansion works were of substandard quality. They alleged large-scale irregularities in works costing ₹3,000 crore, and asserted that had the works been executed properly, Anantapur district would have received up to 80 tmc ft of water. The NDA government had cancelled the orders issued during the YSRCP term and reduced the canal's capacity to 3,850 cusecs, undermining the irrigation needs of Rayalaseema, they said.

The YSRCP leaders alleged that hundreds of crores of rupees have been siphoned off. They also criticised Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu for halting the Rayalaseema Lift Irrigation project.

Meanwhile, Finance Minister and Telugu Desam Party leader Payyavula Keshav alleged the YSRCP, which lost public support, was struggling for relevance and levelling baseless allegations on the Handri-Neeva works. He said the YSRCP, which had neglected the project during its term, was now staging a drama to mislead the public.

Tamil Nadu govt. plans to reduce VAT rate on aviation fuel

T. Ramakrishnan
CHENNAI

The Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK)-led government is planning to lower the State-level Value Added Tax on the Aviation Turbine Fuel (ATF). The tax rate is 29% now. "We want to put it on a par with that of neighbouring States," says an official. The actual rate will likely be made public shortly.

According to information disclosed by the Union Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas in the Lok Sabha four months ago, Andhra Pradesh charges 1%, Puducherry 14.5%, Telangana 16%, and Karnataka 18%. In Kerala, the sales tax rate is 5%, along with a cess of 1% on tax. Furthermore, the four airports in the State – Thiruvananthapuram, Nedumbassery, Kannur, and Kozhikode – charge 1% tax and 1% cess.

The Tamil Nadu government's plan is in response to the persistent request from the Union government for bringing down the rate, which is one of the factors that determine the operating cost of airlines. About two months ago, Maharashtra and Delhi lowered the VAT rate on the ATF from 18% and 25% respectively to 7%. In Delhi, the reduction would be in force initially for six months. Maharashtra has set no such timeline.

The reduction is seen as a relief to the aviation sector grappling with airspace closures, uncertain operations, and a sharp increase in ATF prices after the tension mounted in West Asia. But the Union government has been urging Tamil Nadu and other States to cut the rate for tax rationalisation. The ATF accounts for a major chunk of airlines' operating cost. It is, in turn, determined by several factors like the VAT. Aircraft fuel and oil expenses account for 40%-45% of the total operating expenses of the scheduled Indian operators.

The plan is in line with request from the Union government to lower tax rate. FILE PHOTO

In March 2025, Minister for Civil Aviation Kinjarapu Rammohan Naidu told Parliament, "Taking cognisance of the high VAT on ATF levied by the States and the Union Territories, the issue was taken up with them. As a result, the VAT has been reduced by 19 States and the Union Territories..."

In February 2023, his predecessor, Jyotiraditya M. Scindiamade an open appeal to the State government to decrease the VAT as Tamil Nadu was one of the seven States with 20%-30% VAT on the ATF.

Karnataka CM puts State officials on drought alert

The Hindu Bureau
BENGALURU

Issuing a stern warning to officials against slacking or negligence in handling the drought situation, Karnataka Chief Minister D.K. Shivakumar on Sunday said that drinking water, fodder for animals, insurance for crop losses, and sinking of borewells to mitigate water problems in rural areas should be the top priorities.

Speaking to Deputy Commissioners and Chief Executive Officers of zilla panchayats during a video conference on Sunday, he said farmers should not suffer because of official apathy, and that any slacking or negligence would not be tolerated.

"In the coming days, we should be prepared to handle any crisis arising out of drought. All the data and statistics will be cross-checked with the ground reality. So don't just give numbers without verification," the Chief Minister said.

Deficit rainfall

He added, "Our government is proactively engaging with all stakeholders to help the farming sector during this period. Karnataka is facing a massive rainfall deficit. Sowing is at 32%, and except for about six districts (of the total 31 districts in the State), all other districts are facing deficient rainfall. Water levels in reservoirs are staring at dead storage. The priority remains drinking water."

INBRIEF

Omicron RF.5 detected in A.P. as COVID-19 cases rise to 19

Nearly three weeks after the first COVID-19 case was reported in Andhra Pradesh, the State government has said that genome sequencing has identified the Omicron RF.5 sublineage in samples tested at the National Institute of Virology (NIV), Pune. Based on the scientific evidence available so far, the variant does not appear to be more dangerous than other Omicron sublineages, Director of Medical Education A. Vishnu Vardhan said. The State has reported 19 COVID-19 cases between June 26 and July 19, including three on Sunday.

Karnataka now has highest number of medical seats

The National Medical Commission has sanctioned two private medical colleges for Karnataka for 2026-2027 and approved an enhancement of a total of 1,300 seats. It has approved Alva's Institute of Medical Sciences and Research Centre in Dakshina Kannada and Chettinad Institute of Medical Education and Research in Kolar. A total of 15,395 medical seats are available in 75 medical colleges in the State. Karnataka has now emerged as the State with the highest number of medical seats in the country.

Srisailam Temple improves darshan facilities for devotees

To facilitate quick darshan to common devotees and to reduce waiting time on Saturdays, Sundays and Mondays, the management of Sri Bhramaramba Mallikarjuna Swamy temple at Srisailam has made changes in darshan to VIPs. Temple officials said that 'Sparsha Darshan' during mornings on the said days would be exclusive to devotees who have booked tickets via the 'Manamitra' WhatsApp service or online platforms. Similarly, Sparsha Darshan for VIPs during morning hours would be made based on priority only when the VIPs visit in person.

Bonalu beckons

People dressed as the Hindu deity 'Pothuraju' dance as devotees proceed towards the Sri Jagadamba Mahakali Temple during the 'Ashada Masam Bonalu' festival celebration at the Golconda Fort in Hyderabad on Sunday. PTI

Amid outrage, Kerala Minister clears the air on DYFI food packets

The Hindu Bureau
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

Facing intense outrage, Health Minister K. Muraleedharan on Sunday flip-flopped on his opposition to the Democratic Youth Federation of India (DYFI)'s free "*pothichoru*" (food parcel) distribution in over 60 government hospitals in Kerala.

On Saturday, Mr. Muraleedharan had said that the government would stop the distribution of food packets in hospitals under the banner of political parties. He said the government would start community kitchens.

By Sunday, the Minister's office issued a clarification on the issue. "The Minister's statement was regarding the Government Medical College in Alappuzha, where some organisations have encroached upon the land in the name of food distribution."

DYFI national president A.A. Rahim told *The Hindu* that governments across the world usually attempt to get community organisations involved in the health sector, but the UDF government has unfortunately taken an opposite view. Leader of the Opposition Pinarayi Vijayan said that the UDF is prioritising denying food to the needy without finding solutions to mismanagement in the health sector.

'Natural accidental causes' led to eight elephant deaths: SIT

K.S. Sudhi
KOCHI

Eight elephants, which were found dead in a river flowing through the Malayattoor and Vazhachal forests in Kerala last year, died of "natural accidental causes," a special investigation team report has concluded. The animals might have slipped into the river following heavy rain and died due to the impacts of the fall, the report said.

The SIT, headed by D.K. Vinod Kumar, Chief Conservator of Forest, High Range Circle, Kottayam, ruled out poaching as the cause of death as it could not find any evidence of forcible extraction of ivory. The team also ruled out alternative causes of death such as poisoning, infectious disease, or human-wildlife conflict "in the absence of any forensic, pathological, or toxicological indicators."

The SIT concluded that the deaths were caused by "natural accidental causes linked to hydrological events and hazardous topography", citing evidence from post-mortem tests and field observations that showed the incident coincided with episodes of extreme rainfall leading to flash-flood conditions in a steep, waterfall-dominated river system.

Hearts melt as Karnataka rivals put relationships, compassion over politics

B.S. Satish Kumar
BENGALURU

The death of Chennamma Deve Gowda, wife of former Prime Minister H.D. Deve Gowda, which has plunged her family into grief, also witnessed compassion and human relations gaining importance over politics among Karnataka's politicians as arch political rivals paid a visit to Mr. Gowda's residence.

Former Chief Minister Siddaramaiah, who had worked with Mr. Gowda during his stint with the Janata Parivar, is one of the strongest political opponents of Mr. Gowda and the Janata Dal (S) led by him. But Mr. Siddaramaiah did not lose any time in rushing to Mr. Gowda's residence.

Words of solace: Former Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah consoling former Prime Minister H.D. Deve Gowda. PTI

Mr. Siddaramaiah wiped Mr. Gowda's tears and held his hands while gently consoling him. Earlier, he took to social media, where he showered praises on Ms. Chennamma.

Mr. Siddaramaiah was accompanied by former Minister N. Cheluvarayaswamy. He too is often seen attacking Mr. Gowda's son and Union Minister H.D. Kumaraswamy.

Chief Minister D.K. Shivakumar, who is involved in a political tussle over the contentious Bidadi Township project, called on Mr. Gowda along with his wife. The Shivakumar family went to Mr. Gowda's residence in a private vehicle without any protocol.

Hailing Ms. Chennamma as one whom he would see as his own mother, he announced that her last rites would be performed with state honours.

Former Union Minister C.M. Ibrahim and former State Minister Zameer Ahmed, both of whom have politically moved away from Mr. Gowda, too rushed to his residence.

The last rites are set to be performed in Mavinakere in Hassan district on Monday.

Neha, a prominent face of CJP protests, presses on with fast

Nikhil M. Babu
NEW DELHI

As the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) started its current protest at Jantar Mantar here on June 20, at the peak of Delhi's punishing summer, the focus was mostly on the founder of the party, Abhijeet Dipke.

As the sun went down, the Delhi Police started removing people from Jantar Mantar and the protest was reduced to a small band of people gathered on and around the main stage. But one lesser-known face, standing right next to Mr. Dipke on his left with an "AISA" badge pinned to her kurta, continued chanting slogans louder than most of the others. She was Neha Bora.

Neha Bora

Hunger strike

As the protest progressed, the 29-year-old national president of the All India Students' Association (AISA), the students wing of the CPI(ML), began an indefinite hunger strike with five other AISA members on June 28, the same day as activist Sonam Wangchuk.

Over the next three weeks, three of her colleagues gave up the hunger strike and Mr. Wangchuk was forcibly removed on Saturday morning, leaving Ms. Neha and two of her colleagues continuing the hunger strike for the 22nd day on Sunday.

Not new to protests

Ms. Neha is not new to protests. She became politically active while pursuing her undergraduate degree from the University of Delhi. Ms. Neha has continued student politics during her Masters' programme from Dr. B.R. Ambedkar University Delhi (AUD) and now during her Ph.D. at the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU).

Ms. Neha told *The Hindu* that they had been building this movement for a long time. "The student organisations, specifically of the Left, along with AISA, have built this movement from the ground up," she said. "When something like the CJP comes up, it's great for us. It's great for the students."

'Wangchuk to end fast if focus of Parliament is on education'

Activist's wife says political leaders must provide assurance that 'education accountability' will be focus of Monsoon Session beginning today; thousands gather at Jantar Mantar, night vigil held; police issue prohibitory order ahead of CJP march

Aroon Deep
NEW DELHI

Activist Sonam Wangchuk will end his indefinite hunger strike if "political leaders meet him and provide an assurance that education accountability" will be the focus of the Monsoon Session of Parliament beginning on Monday, his wife Gitanjali J. Angmo said on Sunday.

Mr. Wangchuk, who had started the strike with the demand of Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan's resignation over exam irregularities on June 28, is currently at Safdarjung Hospital in Delhi.

"If political leaders meet Sonam at the hospital and assure him that they will raise the issue of education accountability during the Monsoon Session, he will end his hunger strike tomorrow. If there is no assurance or accountability, he will continue his fast," Ms. Angmo said, adding, "He has not broken his fast even after being in the hospital for two days."

Earlier, thousands gathered at the Jantar Mantar on Sunday ahead of the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP)'s planned march to the Parliament, demanding resignation of Mr. Pradhan, even as the Delhi Police issued a prohibitory order against marches, demonstrations, and assemblies of five or more people except at the designated protest site with prior permission. Senior AAP leader Manish Sisodia along with many others joined the CJP's protest on Sunday, incidentally the 22nd day since Mr. Wangchuk began his protest.

People throng the Jantar Mantar in New Delhi on Sunday ahead of the CJP's planned march to Parliament. SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

No permission

The unprecedented turnout spilled over to the streets surrounding Jantar Mantar. However, no permission has been granted for the march planned by the CJP to the Parliament on Monday, when both Houses will convene for the Monsoon Session, potentially setting up a showdown between the massive crowd and the heavy security arrangements expected to meet them in the morning. Security personnel with riot guns have been deployed in the national capital, prompting the CJP to issue a call for more people to arrive at the site.

"In view of reports of a proposed march to Parliament by CJP on 20.07.2026 (Monday), Delhi Police hereby categorically clarifies that no permission has been sought or granted for any such protest march or procession," said Sachin Sharma, Deputy Commissioner of Police (New Delhi).

"Accordingly, protest marches, processions, demonstrations and assemblies of five or more persons are strictly prohibited, except at the designated protest site at Jantar Mantar with prior permission."

The CJP's 1.5-kilometre march is planned to start from the Jantar Mantar protest site at 9 a.m., before moving through the Patel Chowk roundabout and terminating at the new Parliament building.

Security has been strengthened around Jantar Mantar, Parliament Street, Central Vista, Connaught Place, Shankar Chowk and other key installations, while rapid response teams have been positioned to respond to any contingency. Several police vans, buses and ambulances could be seen at the protest site.

Vigil continues

Meanwhile, CJP founder Abhijeet Dipke's call for a night vigil drew a huge response. Addressing activists in a video message, Mr. Dipke said they must remain at Jantar Mantar throughout the night and that their presence was important to ensure the march to Parliament proceeded peacefully.

Support marches

Large rallies with hundreds of people also took place in several parts of the country including Mumbai, Nagpur, Bengaluru, Nashik, Guwahati, and Jammu. The march in Mumbai was led by Shiv Sena (UBT) chief Uddhav Thackeray and Maharashtra Navnirman Sena chief Raj Thackeray.

Over a dozen students and others continued their own hunger strikes on Sunday. Earlier in the morning, protesters formed a human chain to prevent fasting members of the AISA from being transferred to a hospital. Several high-profile Opposition figures and celebrities too arrived at Jantar Mantar. Mr. Sisodia, Trinamool Congress MP Kirti Azad, and Trinamool leader Mahua Moitra were among those who showed up.

(With inputs from Shrimansi Kaushik)

Naveen urges Union govt. to hold dialogue with students

Satyasundar Barik
BHUBANESWAR

Former Odisha Chief Minister and Biju Janata Dal president Naveen Patnaik on Sunday urged the Centre to initiate dialogue with students who have been protesting for bringing reforms in examination process and restoring faith of students in the system and take up the issue for debate in Parliament.

"India too has made remarkable progress because of the strength of its education system. Today, however, trust in this system stands broken. The damage goes far beyond a failed exam," Mr. Patnaik said, in a post on X.

"A nation that compromises the integrity of its examination system, compromises its own future. This grave issue, affecting millions of students across the country, must be taken up in Parliament as the highest priority"

"Politics aside, I urge the government to initiate a meaningful dialogue with the students who have been peacefully protesting for days. They must be given a platform to express their views. A vibrant democracy advances through dialogue, not silence and this dialogue is most vital when it involves the youth," he pointed out.

HC orders halt to demolition of Abhishek's party office

Press Trust of India
KOLKATA

The Calcutta High Court on Sunday ordered *status quo* on the demolition of the Diamond Harbour constituency office of Trinamool Congress MP Abhishek Banerjee in West Bengal's South 24 Parganas district.

Justice Raja Basu Chowdhury directed the authorities not to carry out further demolition of the building at Amtala till the matter is taken up for hearing again or till the end of July, whichever is earlier.

Directing that *status quo* be maintained with regard to the demolition of the five-storey building on Diamond Harbour Road, the court said that the matter would be heard by the regular bench.

Eight persons killed and 15 injured as heavy rainfall triggers landslides in Nagaland town

The Hindu Bureau
GUWAHATI

Landslides in at least 11 locations, triggered by heavy, incessant rainfall, killed eight people and injured 15 in Mon town in Nagaland on Sunday morning.

The town, which is the headquarters of Mon district bordering Myanmar, is about 300 km northeast of the State's capital, Kohima. Mon Deputy Commissioner Wennyei Konyak said the landslides occurred around 6 a.m.

Officials of the Nagaland State Disaster Management Authority (NSDMA) said many areas of the rain-battered Mon district were cut off and communication networks were disrupted.

Many areas of the adjoining Longleng and Mokokchung districts were also affected, but there were no reports of any human casualties there.

State officials said many areas of Mon district were cut off and communication networks were disrupted. X/@DIPR_NAGALAND

Four bodies recovered

"We have so far retrieved four bodies – three females and a male – from the disaster site. Twelve houses were damaged at the site," Mr. Konyak said, adding that houses were also damaged in 10 other locations in the town, prompting the district administration to relocate the residents to safer places.

Chief Minister Neiphiu Rio mourned the deaths and said the State government was closely monitoring the situation. The government announced *ex-gratia* assistance of ₹4 lakh to the next of kin of each deceased person and ₹74,000 to each of the injured.

He added that the NSDMA, District Disaster Management Authority, State Disaster Response Force, district administration, police, Assam Rifles, and locals were engaged in the search-and-rescue operations.

'Ensure comms access'

BJP Rajya Sabha MP S. Phangnon Konyak, who hails from Mon, said incessant rains and a cloudburst had caused widespread destruction at various localities. She requested network service providers and the authorities responsible to ensure continued access to mobile and Internet connectivity in Mon, so that rescue operations, distress calls, warnings, and information flow are not hampered.

Apart from Mon district, the Tuli sub-division in Mokokchung district and other affected areas were severely affected, witnessing landslides, flash floods, road blockages, and damage to public infrastructure and private property.

Guwahati incident

Heavy rainfall also triggered a landslide in Guwahati's Kharghuli area around 10 a.m. on Sunday. Officials said the retaining wall of a homestay collapsed and damaged at least six parked two-wheelers downhill. No one was injured in the incident.

Standing firm: Amit Bhatnagar and other protesters during their demonstration against irrigation projects. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Police clear protest against Ken-Betwa, other projects in M.P.

Mehul Malpani
BHOPAL

The Madhya Pradesh Police on Sunday cleared a two-week-long protest led by several tribals against the Ken-Betwa river link and other irrigation and development projects in Madhya Pradesh's Chhatarpur district, dispersing protesters and hospitalising protest leader Amit Bhatnagar, who had been on a hunger strike for 14 days.

The action comes a day after the Delhi Police, in a similar move on Saturday, forcibly removed activist Sonam Wangchuk from his Jantar Mantar protest site.

Residents of several tribal villages from Panna and Chhatarpur districts had been protesting on the banks of the Barana river near Kupi village against the ₹44,000-crore project of the Union government, and various State irrigation projects, with several demonstrators tying nooses around their necks and lying on makeshift funeral pyres in the river in a symbolic protest.

Safety concerns

The Madhya Pradesh Police, which entered the protest site on the banks of the Barana river early morning, dismantled the protest site and removed symbolic pyres erected by the villagers. Officials said the protesters were moved out of the riverbed due to rising water levels following heavy rainfall in the area.

Several protesters, however, refused to move, accusing the police of forcibly evicting them and assaulting women.

Chhatarpur Collector Parth Jaiswal told *The Hindu* that the area had received heavy rain for the past two days, causing the river to overflow and the action was taken to prevent any untoward incident. He also said that Mr. Bhatnagar has been admitted to the Bijawar Civil Hospital and his vitals signs are stable.

"We had also received information from the weather department about more rains in the coming days. This is why the police arrived at the site around 5 a.m. and held dialogues with the protesters," Mr. Jaiswal said, adding that the protesters were dropped to their villages in Panna district in buses.

Mr. Bhatnagar while in the hospital, told *The Hindu* that the police forcibly took him to the hospital. He said the police action came on a day when he was planning on "revealing the details of ₹44,000-crore corruption" related to the compensation process.

"My health was not that bad. My indefinite hunger strike continues. I will not break it. If I am forced, I will not drink water or even breathe," he said.

Bihar CM opens ₹130.88-cr. link to divert floodwaters, enhance farm productivity

Amit Bhelari
PATNA

Bihar Chief Minister Samrat Choudhary on Sunday inaugurated a 68-km Belwa-Minapur link channel in Sheohar. The channel – part of the Bagmati-Budhi Gandak River Interlinking Project – is expected to bring respite to north Bihar districts affected by floods by diverting surplus water from the Bagmati river to the Budhi Gandak river. The project, constructed at a cost of ₹130.88 crore, will enable the management of excess water during floods and reduce their intensity, said the Chief Minister.

The channel is expected to benefit lakhs of farmers and boost agricultural productivity in the region, Mr. Choudhary said.

Green revolution: Chief Minister Samrat Choudhary inaugurates the 68-km Belwa-Minapur link channel in Sheohar on Sunday. PTI

Boost to farmers' income

"The project will enhance irrigation capacity, boost agricultural production, increase farmers' income and encourage fisheries as well as other agriculture-based activities. Additionally, it will strengthen groundwater recharge, expand green cover, environmental conservation and provide a boost to the regional economy," he said.

Mr. Choudhary said the river inter-linking projects are aimed at realising the vision of the late Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

"Today, under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, these ambitious projects are being implemented on the ground in Bihar, giving a new direction to integrated water resource management in the State," he added.

"River inter-linking projects represent a historic initiative towards realising the vision of a developed Bihar and will serve as a strong foundation for the State's sustainable development," said the Chief Minister, accompanied by his deputy Vijay Kumar Choudhary.

At another event, in Begusarai, the Chief Minister inaugurated 551 Saraswati Vidya Niketan schools in all 38 districts of Bihar.

The Chief Minister said the government had taken several measures to improve facilities for teachers.

From August 15, live and interactive classes will be delivered via 'FILO' app, allowing children to access sessions at any time, he said.

Farmers urge DMK to drop demand for Mekedatu tribunal

The Hindu Bureau
TIRUCHI

Farmers' body chief says that such a tribunal would jeopardise the livelihood of farmers

P.R. Pandian, president of the Coordination Committee of All Farmers Associations of Tamil Nadu, on Sunday urged the DMK to drop its demand for the formation of a tribunal on Mekedatu, stating that it would jeopardise the livelihood of farmers.

Speaking to pressperson here, he said the recent resolution adopted in the Assembly, which incorporated a key amendment moved by Leader of the Opposition in the State Assembly Udayanidhi Stalin seeking the formation of a new tribunal over the proposal to build a balancing reservoir at Mekedatu, was against the law and farmers' interests.

The coordination committee, Mr. Pandian said, had welcomed the DMK's move to bring an adjournment motion on the Mekedatu issue in the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha.

However, farmers were against the move demanding the formation of a tribunal on Mekedatu. If the DMK went ahead with this, it would go against the Supreme Court direction that no reservoir or new dams should be built without the permission of lower riparian States. It was contrary to the final verdict of the Cauvery Tribunal as well, he said.

Ahead of Monsoon Session, MPs seek debate on NEET, delimitation

Opposition parties stage a brief walkout from all-party meet in protest against invitation to breakaway Trinamool faction; seek talks on police action at Jantar Mantar, E20; Rijiju tells parties to participate constructively in parliamentary debates

Sobhana K. Nair
NEW DELHI

An invitation extended by Parliamentary Affairs Minister Kiren Rijiju to a breakaway Trinamool Congress group prompted Opposition parties to stage a walkout from the all-party meeting held on Saturday, ahead of the Monsoon Session of Parliament.

The protest brought together parties that have often been at odds, including the DMK; the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), which skipped the INDIA bloc meeting on June 8; and the Left parties, which are ideologically opposed to the Trinamool. They objected to the government's decision to invite the rebel Trinamool MPs, stating that Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla had not yet recognised the group's claim that it had merged with the Tripura-based Nationalist Citizens Party of India (NCPI).

The Opposition's walkout lasted for a brief while before leaders returned to the meeting and pressed for discussions on a range of issues, including the alleged theft of Ram temple donations, the NEET paper leak controversy, ethanol-blended petrol (E20), the Delhi Police's action at Jantar Mantar to shift activist Sonam Wangchuk, the continuing hunger strike by students, and the situation in Manipur.

Setting the stage: Union Parliamentary Affairs Minister Kiren Rijiju chairs a meeting with floor leaders of political parties at Parliament House on Sunday. ANI

Mr. Rijiju later said that the walkout "should not be viewed as a boycott of the entire day's proceedings; it was symbolic".

In his opening remarks, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, who chaired the meeting, lauded the BJP government for its handling of the ongoing crisis triggered by the U.S.-Iran stand-off.

Delimitation Bill

Several Opposition leaders sought clarity on reports that the government could revive the Delimitation Bill in view of changes in the Lok Sabha's composition following split in the Trinamool and Shiv Sena (UBT).

DMK leader Tiruchi Siva said that his party favoured implementing the 33% reservation for women within the existing strength of the Lok Sabha, and maintained that any delimitation exercise should not adversely affect southern States.

Mr. Rijiju did not clearly say if the government would bring back the Delimitation Bill during the session, but said the matter would be discussed at the Business Advisory Committee meeting. He urged all parties to participate constructively in parliamentary discussions and support legislative business. Smooth functioning of Parliament, he said, was in the national interest, while disruptions and sloganeering ultimately harmed both Parliament and the Opposition.

Trinamool MP Mahua Moitra questioned the basis for inviting the 20 rebel MPs. Stating that the disqualification petitions were pending, she said there was no constitutional basis for a separate bloc. Defending the invite, Mr. Rijiju said the breakaway group had sought recognition from the Speaker and could not be ignored by the government.

Among other demands, Samajwadi Party MP Dharmendra Yadav sought discussion on the alleged theft of Ram temple donations. CPI(M) leader John Brittas criticised the "BJP-engineered split" in Opposition parties, arguing that they weakened democratic representation. CPI leader P. Sandosh Kumar sought a discussion on "large-scale deletions" of voters' names during the SIR.

A total of 58 leaders from 40 political parties attended the meeting. The Monsoon Session begins on Monday and will conclude on August 13.

Centre has to align what it says on delimitation with what is written in the Bill

NEWS ANALYSIS

Varghese K. George
NEW DELHI

Though there is no official word on it yet, the Centre appears eager to initiate the delimitation exercise by amending the Constitution and passing a Delimitation Bill. In April, the Centre moved the 131st Constitutional Amendment Bill and the Delimitation Bill, which in combination proposed the following:

Increase the strength of the Lok Sabha to a maximum of 850 seats.

Allot those seats among States based on the population figures of the "latest Census" (which happens to be that of 2011) and delimit individual constituencies within each State immediately. As per the existing provisions of the Constitution, a fresh allocation among States and delimitation can happen only after the Census of 2027.

Reserve one-third of the Lok Sabha seats for women, which would otherwise happen along with the fresh delimitation after the 2027 Census.

The Bills moved by the government did not align with the oral promises made by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah on the floor of Parliament and in interactions with representatives of political parties. The government has publicly maintained that its delimitation plans would not affect the existing proportion of individual States in the Lok Sabha, and that the proposed 50% increase in the size of the Lok Sabha would translate into a 50% increase in the number of seats in each State. Since that promise was in conflict with the text of the proposed amendments in April, no consensus could be reached for the passage of the Constitution amendment, which requires a two-thirds majority in the Lok Sabha. The amendment Bill was defeated in the Lok Sabha, and the Delimitation Bill was not put to vote.

The 131st Constitutional Amendment Bill and the Delimitation Bill proposes to increase the Lok Sabha strength to 850. PTI

The question, therefore, as Parliament convenes for a new session, is how the text of the Constitution can incorporate the promise of maintaining the current proportional distribution of Lok Sabha seats.

The existing proportion of seats for each State is a constitutional guarantee written into Articles 81 and 82 of the Constitution. That guarantee has a sunset clause – the existing arrangement comes to an automatic end once the data of the first Census after 2026 is published.

In Articles 81 and 82, there are references to three Censuses: the first Census after 2026; the Census of 1971; and the Census of 2001. The next delimitation is tied to the first Census after 2026; the existing proportion of Lok Sabha seats among States is tied to the 1971 Census; and the population of individual constituencies within the States is tied to the 2001 Census. The April amendments and the Delimitation Bill, in combination, proposed to remove all these separate references and tie the allotment of seats to the States and the delimitation of constituencies to the "latest Census".

If the Centre wants to make good on its verbal assurance of maintaining the existing proportional share of each State in the Lok Sabha, it must extend the freeze that ends in 2026 into the future. The last two times, the freeze was imposed for 25 years each – in 1976 until 2001, and in 2001 until 2026. If the Centre plans to freeze the current arrangement for another 25 years, the references to the first Census after 2026 in Articles 81 and 82 can be amended to read "after 2051". Or it can be any other date into the future, as the case may be.

To ensure that each State gets a 50% increase in seats, the reference to the 1971 Census in Articles 81 and 82 would also need to be retained, unless the government has another formulation to achieve that objective. If the Centre wants to propose a fresh delimitation while retaining the existing proportion of seats and only redrawing constituency boundaries within each State, it can retain the references to the 1971 Census where they exist now in Articles 81 and 82 and amend the references to the 2001 Census to the 2011 Census. This way, the constitutional guarantee of the proportional strength of States can be extended while paving the way for a fresh delimitation of constituencies within State boundaries, and kicking off women's reservation.

Silence on Ram Temple theft unacceptable: Cong.

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Saying that lakhs of devotees are feeling betrayed by the alleged embezzlement of donations from the Ram Temple in Ayodhya, the Congress has urged Prime Minister Narendra Modi to conduct "an independent and comprehensive investigation of financial affairs" of the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust, including the handling of all offerings.

"You are aware of the theft of thousands of crores in the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust. Lakhs of devotees who donated their hard-earned money with faith, devotion and trust are feeling betrayed by the theft," said a joint letter by Congress president and the Leader of the Opposition in the Rajya Sabha, Mallikarjun Kharge, and his party colleague and the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, Rahul Gandhi, to the Prime Minister.

The letter, dated July 18 and released on Sunday, a day before the Monsoon Session of Parliament gets under way, appears to have set the stage for a stormy political discourse.

Call for accountability

The Trust was set up by the Prime Minister on the instructions of the Supreme Court, but its members were entirely selected by the government, the Congress leaders said.

"It is public knowledge that the members of the Trust are affiliated with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and its affiliates. Its disgraced former General Secretary was also your close associate. Your silence now in the face of such a crime is unacceptable. It is your duty to ensure accountability and restitution," they said.

"The findings and the Trust's accounts should be made public so that every devotee knows how their offerings have been utilised. All those found responsible must be held accountable, irrespective of position or influence. The credibility of your government and the Trust rests on how transparently and swiftly you act. The people of India are watching," they said.

Bill in Rajya Sabha to criminalise insulting the National Song

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Centre will begin the Monsoon Session of Parliament on Monday with a move to grant statutory protection to the National Song *Vande Mataram*, listing the Prevention of Insults to National Honour (Amendment) Bill, 2026.

This legislation seeks to amend the Prevention of Insults to National Honour Act, 1971. The statement of objects and reasons of the Bill by Union Home Minister Amit Shah said that the 1971 Act provides that any act of intentionally preventing the singing of the National Anthem or causing disturbance to any assembly engaged in such singing constitutes a punishable offence.

The proposed amendment seeks to extend similar protection to *Vande Mataram*.

According to the Bill, any act causing obstruction in the singing of the National Song or insulting it in any form would become punishable.

"Presently, there is no specific legal provision to prevent insults to the singing of *Vande Mataram*, which is honoured as the National Song. Therefore... it is proposed to amend Section 3 of the said Act to include the National Song also within its ambit, so as to make such acts punishable," the Bill circulated among Rajya Sabha members said.

The Ministry had written to the States directing that it be played at functions where the National Anthem is rendered.

Earlier, the Union Home Ministry had written to the States directing that the song be played or sung at official functions where the National Anthem, *Jana Gana Mana*, is rendered.

CPI(M) member in the Rajya Sabha John Brittas has shot off a letter to Mr. Shah seeking withdrawal of the Bill.

"After nearly three years of exhaustive deliberations, the Constituent Assembly consciously refrained from incorporating any provision placing the National Song and the National Anthem on the same legal footing," it said.

DMK, TDP should uphold their legacy of ensuring fair delimitation: Congress

Sobhana K. Nair
NEW DELHI

Invoking the role played by the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) in the previous rounds of delimitation, Congress general secretary (communications) Jairam Ramesh has said the two parties should not fritter away their legacy of ensuring fairness in the delimitation process.

Speaking to *The Hindu* ahead of the Monsoon Session of Parliament, Mr. Ramesh said continuing with the 1971 Census as the basis for the distribution of Lok Sabha seats is crucial to maintaining the federal balance. He said the Congress favoured extending the freeze for another 25 years, until 2051.

"The DMK played a pivotal role in the Constitutional freeze of 1976. The DMK and the TDP played a crucial role in the Constitutional freeze of 2001. Hopefully both will now continue to play the key role in ensuring there is no unfreezing," he said.

Defeat of Bill

On April 17, the Constitution (131st Amendment) Bill, which sought to redistribute Lok Sabha seats on the basis of the 2011 Census and expedite the implementation of women's reservation, was defeated by a united Opposition. In a House where 528 members were present and voting, 298 voted in favour of the Bill, falling short of the required two-thirds majority.

> The DMK played a pivotal role in the Constitutional freeze of 1976. The DMK and the TDP played a crucial role in the Constitutional freeze of 2001
>
> **JAIRAM RAMESH**
> General Secretary, Congress

There is speculation that the government may amend the legislative package comprising the Constitution (131st Amendment) Bill and the Delimitation Bill to ensure a proportionate 50% increase in the strength of every State in the Lok Sabha, in an effort to address concerns raised by its allies. The speculation has gained traction after the government's strength in the Lok Sabha increased after the split in the Trinamool Congress and the Shiv Sena (UBT).

Since the Congress decided to align with the TVK following the defeat of the DMK-led alliance in the Tamil Nadu Assembly election, the DMK has maintained its distance from the Congress, and it remains unclear how it would vote if the Bill returns to Parliament. The TDP, a key BJP ally, too has advocated for retention of the 1971 reference in the legislation.

'Optical illusion'

The Congress leader said the oral assurance given by Home Minister Amit Shah in the last session regarding a proportionate 50% increase in the Lok Sabha representation of every State was only an "optical illusion" created by the government. The assurance was not reflected in the Bills circulated during the last session. He argued that the issue would not be resolved merely by adding a clause to that effect.

"The talk of a proportionate 50% increase... in the strength of each State is an optical illusion. It is meaningless in the light of Article 81(2)(a) of the Constitution," Mr. Ramesh said, arguing that the government, through the Bills defeated in the last session, had removed the constitutional protection for maintaining the State-wise proportion of seats in the Lok Sabha.

The legislation sought to amend Article 81(1) to increase the number of Lok Sabha members from 543 to 850 and Article 81(3) to lift the 1971 freeze, while leaving Article 81(2)(a) untouched. This provision maintains that the ratio between a State's population and its number of Lok Sabha seats should be roughly equal across States.

"The Bills circulated by the government in the last session removed the constitutional freeze on the distribution of Lok Sabha seats, which means that it is now a constitutional imperative to reallocate seats in favour of more populous states," Mr. Ramesh said.

This, he argued, leaves a wide ambit for the Delimitation Commission, which is appointed by the government and whose decisions are protected from judicial challenge under Article 329 of the Constitution.

"The Modi government may commit to a proportionate 50% increase for all States in the Lok Sabha for the 2029 elections, however after the elections, the commission can very well change the State-wise distribution of the Lok Sabha seats, favouring the more populous States in allocation of seats," he said.

Martyrs' Day set to be show of strength for Trinamool factions

Shiv Sahay Singh
KOLKATA

Both factions are giving finishing touches to their rallies set to be held tomorrow

The annual Martyrs' Day observance on Tuesday is set to become a show of strength for rival factions of the Trinamool Congress. With less than 48 hours to go, the Mamata Banerjee-led faction and the Ritabrata Banerjee-led faction are giving finishing touches to their respective rallies.

Several leaders of the Ritabrata Banerjee faction, including Arup Roy, whom the group has nominated as the party chairperson, visited Mayo Road and took stock of preparations. Former Ministers Chandrima Bhattacharya, Aroop Biswas and Firhad Hakim were also present at the venue. The leaders said that they would offer sombre respect to the martyrs and there would be no "song and dance" as was prevalent when Trinamool Congress was in power.

Former Chief Minister and Trinamool Congress chairperson Mamata Banerjee will visit the venue of her rally in front of the Birla Planetarium in Kolkata's Maidan area on Monday. While Ms. Banerjee used to address supporters outside Victoria House till last year, this time the administration has denied permission to any political group to hold a rally at the site. The Calcutta High Court has permitted the Mamata Banerjee group to hold its gathering outside the Birla Planetarium.

Meanwhile, Trinamool MP Kakoli Ghosh Dastidar, who, along with 19 other party Lok Sabha MPs, has merged with the little-known Nationalist Citizens Party of India (NCPI), said on Sunday it would observe Martyrs' Day at Rajghat in New Delhi.

Annual event

Martyrs' Day or Shaheed Divas is observed every year in Bengal to commemorate the 13 Youth Congress workers killed in police firing on July 21, 1993, during the Left Front regime. Ms. Banerjee, then a Congress leader, had organised a march to the Writers' Building (the State Secretariat during the Left regime), demanding that voter identity cards be made the sole mandatory document for voting. The protest turned violent, and the police opened fire leaving 13 dead.

INBRIEF

Murmu embarks on 3-nation Europe tour to deepen ties

President Droupadi Murmu on Sunday embarked on state visits to Moldova, North Macedonia, and Romania to deepen India's ties with the three European countries across a range of sectors, including trade and technology, and to boost people-to-people ties. The first leg of her tour begins with a visit to Moldova on Monday, marking the first-ever visit by an Indian President to the eastern European nation. The Rashtrapati Bhavan posted a message on X, saying, "This is the first-ever visit by an Indian President to Moldova and North Macedonia. The visit to Romania by the President is taking place after a gap of over three decades." PTI

CBI arrests man for posing as govt. official, taking bribes

The CBI on Sunday arrested a man for allegedly impersonating an official of the Department of Animal Husbandry and Dairying. The accused demanded and collected bribes from applicants seeking loans under the Animal Husbandry Infrastructure Development Fund. The accused, identified as Prabhu Dayal, claimed that he had been posted in the Department's Krishi Bhawan office. The accused allegedly sought a bribe of ₹45,000 from the complainant, equivalent to 2% of the ₹22,50,000 loan the latter had applied for. The complainant runs a poultry farm in Lalpur village in Uttarakhand's Udham Singh Nagar. He had applied for the loan through the Udyami Mitra portal.

M.P. Cabinet approves draft UCC Bill; tribes get exemption

The draft Bill proposes ban on polygamy, *nikah halala*, makes registration of live-in relationships mandatory; CM claims that the proposed law has received support from all religious communities

Mehul Malpani
BHOPAL

The Madhya Pradesh Cabinet on Sunday approved the draft Uniform Civil Code (UCC) Bill, proposing a prohibition on practices like polygamy and *nikah halala*, while introducing strict provisions for live-in relationships. The Bill, however, exempts the State's large tribal population.

The Bill, drafted by a six-member committee and scheduled to be tabled in the Legislative Assembly during the Monsoon Session starting Monday, was approved at a special Cabinet meeting near Bhopal.

Chief Minister Mohan Yadav, who has stepped up his push for the UCC over the past week, claimed that the proposed law had received support from all religious communities and that over 80% of Muslim women and 40% of Muslim men backed the proposal.

Mr. Yadav also slammed the Congress, saying while Opposition parties like the Left and the Aam Aadmi Party attended the consultations on the government's invitations, the principal Opposition party did not.

Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Mohan Yadav addresses a Cabinet meeting in Bhopal on Sunday along with Deputy Chief Ministers. ANI

"I don't know what the Congress sees in the Hindu-Muslim votes. They always have a dilemma over one nation, one symbol and one law," he said, addressing the media after the Cabinet meeting.

The draft Bill excludes the ST communities to protect their "unique cultural heritage and traditional lifestyle".

"Respecting constitutional safeguards, this law will not apply to Scheduled Tribes (such as Bhil, Gond, Korku, Baiga, Sahariya, and Bharia) covered under Articles 342 and 366 (Clause 25) of the Constitution. Furthermore, communities whose traditional rights are protected under Part XXI of the Constitution have also been specifically exempted," a government official said.

The Bill seeks to prohibit polygamy across all communities and declares practices like triple talaq and *nikah halala* as illegal and punishable. "Verbal divorce or decisions made by informal panchayats have been declared completely illegal. Now, a marriage can be dissolved only on clear and statutory grounds prescribed by law," the official said.

Mandatory registration

As per the draft Bill, it will be mandatory to register marriages and divorces across all communities through government portals, to ensure marital rights, alimony and other legal protections.

"The Code has removed the term "illegitimate" from the legal framework. Children of married or unmarried parents – whether biological, adopted, or born through surrogacy or Assisted Reproductive Technology – will enjoy equal legal status," he said.

The Bill also seeks to make it mandatory for live-in couples to submit an affidavit to the local registrar within a month of entering such a relationship, failing which could attract legal action.

While the minimum age for entering a live-in relationship remains 18, the proposed legislation provides that if either partner is below 21 years of age, information regarding the commencement and termination of the live-in relationship will be sent to their parents or guardians, and that the registrar will also share the record with the local police.

"Children born out of live-in relationships will be considered legitimate and entitled to full inheritance rights. If the male partner abandons the woman, she can claim maintenance–just like a legal wife–through a competent court," the official said.

Shah unveils India's first immersive language museum

The Hindu Bureau
KOLKATA

Home Minister Amit Shah at an event in Kolkata on Sunday. PTI

Highlighting that a country's language carries its heritage and offers a window into its culture, Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Sunday inaugurated the Museum of Word at the National Library campus here and called it a step to preserve the *virasat* of India.

Developed by the National Library under the aegis of the Union Culture Ministry, the first immersive language museum in the country, also known as *Shabdalok*, celebrates India's rich linguistic heritage and showcases the evolution of its oral and written traditions through interactive and technology-driven exhibits.

"Our Prime Minister [Narendra Modi] has prioritised both *Vikas* (development) and *virasat* (heritage). This museum is a step to preserve India's rich linguistic and cultural heritage. Our language carries our heritage, and through languages you can understand a country's culture," Mr. Shah said addressing the inauguration event.

The museum features nine galleries exploring different facets of the history of languages and their influence on India's civilisation and culture. It seeks to present language as a living entity that has continuously shaped society while also being shaped by it.

Linguistic diversity

The first phase of the museum chronicles the diversity of Indian languages, scripts, and literature.

Rather than a conventional repository, it has been designed as an immersive cultural experience using digital displays, holograms, and motion-sensor technology to engage visitors.

Shabdalok celebrates India's 22 official languages and traces their journey from oral traditions and ancient manuscripts to printed works and modern electronic texts, highlighting the country's enduring linguistic diversity.

Doctor assault case: Sena corporator sent to judicial custody

Chinmay Gaikwad
MUMBAI

Police also arrest patient's mother in connection with the attack on hospital staff in Maharashtra

Shiv Sena corporator Ramesh Mhatre surrendered before the police in Kalyan on Sunday, complying with the Bombay High Court order that cancelled his bail in an assault case at the Shastri Nagar Hospital.

Mr. Mhatre and his supporters had allegedly assaulted doctors and nurses at the civic hospital, citing delay in treating a pregnant woman.

The High Court had directed him to surrender by 5 p.m. on July 19.

The police produced Mr. Mhatre before a Kalyan court, which remanded him in judicial custody till August 3, an official said.

The Vishnu Nagar police also arrested Sadhana Karande, the mother of the pregnant woman, for joining Mr. Mhatre and his group in assaulting the hospital staff after an argument over treatment.

Five arrested so far

With her arrest, the number of accused in the case has risen to five. She was produced before the Kalyan court.

The Bombay High Court on Saturday cancelled the bail granted to Mr. Mhatre by the Kalyan Judicial Magistrate First Class Court and directed him to surrender.

The matter has been posted for further hearing on Wednesday.

Swear words are uncivil, but not obscene by law, says SC

Krishnadas Rajagopal
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court has reasoned in a judgment that the use of four-letter expletive and its variations may be "abusive, unpalatable or uncivil", but does not qualify as "obscene" in law.

"Use of mere swear words, profanities and vulgar expletives, however distasteful or uncivil they may be, cannot be equated with obscenity... Words which are merely vulgar or abusive may evoke a feeling of disgust, revulsion, or shock, but that by itself does not make them obscene in law," the court said.

The judgment by a Bench headed by Justice Sanjay Karol came in a land dispute case between neighbours in Tamil Nadu. During an altercation in 2017, one of them repeatedly flung the four-letter abuse, along with its various appendages, at another. The question before the Supreme Court was whether the user could be booked under Section 294(b) of the Indian Penal Code (obscene acts and songs).

Dictionary definitions

Justice Karol turned to dictionaries – Collins and Cambridge – to explore the definitions of words such as "abusive" and "vulgar" in his judgment.

The judge observed that the lexicon described "abusive" as language which was "extremely rude and insulting", while "vulgar" was meant to be words which were "rude and likely to upset or anger people, especially by referring to sex and the body in an unpleasant way".

The court said that to qualify as "obscenity" would require passing the "community standards test". That is, the terms used must be lascivious, should appeal to prurient interests of people, and provoke a tendency to deprave and corrupt the persons who are likely to see, hear, or read them. The court found nothing on record to show that the appellants' verbal outrage passed the test.

In the current case, Justice Karol said the choice of words and slang used by the now 70-year-old alleged abuser over 10 years ago were "at best, abusive or vulgar in nature" and did not reach the "obscenity threshold".

The court distinguished between vulgarity and obscenity. Vulgarity aroused a feeling of disgust, revulsion, and boredom but did not deprave, debase, and corrupt the morals as obscenity did.

Manipur, Meghalaya, Kerala declare holiday for World Cup final

The Hindu Bureau
GUWAHATI

The governments of Kerala, Meghalaya, and Manipur have declared a holiday for all schools and higher educational institutions on Monday in view of the FIFA World Cup 2026 final between Argentina and Spain.

Football is the most popular sport in Manipur, which produces an assembly line of players representing top clubs across India.

"...The Governor of Manipur is pleased to declare the closure of all schools as may be affiliated to the Board of Secondary Education, the Council of Higher Secondary Education, the Central Board of Secondary Education or otherwise; college and higher education institutes, including universities; falling under government, aided, or unaided sectors, on Monday, the 20th of July," read an order, signed by Education Commissioner-Secretary Ningthoujam Geoffrey on Sunday.

The decision was made to let students enjoy the final without worrying about attending classes "half asleep", a government spokesperson said.

Meghalaya Chief Minister Conrad K. Sangma also announced a holiday for all educational institutions in the State on Monday for the World Cup final."Enjoy the finals," he said in a social media message.

The Kerala government also declared Monday a holiday for all schools and higher educational institutions considering requests from students who are football enthusiasts.

CBI conducts searches in 4 States in bank fraud case

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The CBI has conducted searches at six locations across West Bengal, Odisha, Tamil Nadu, and Uttarakhand in connection with a ₹1,109-crore bank fraud case.

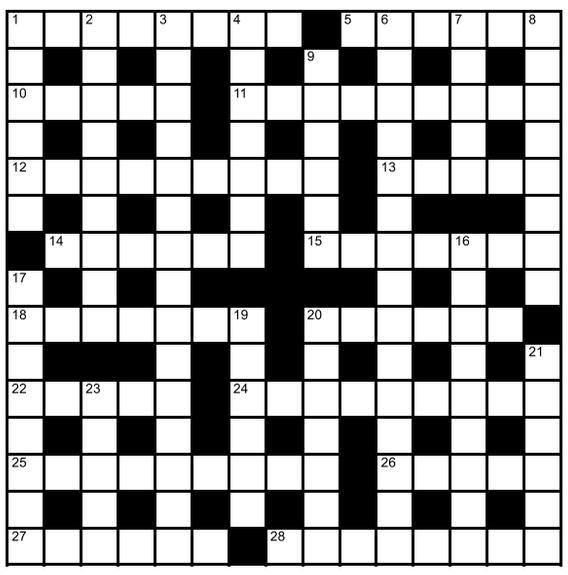
The case pertains to alleged cheating by a company named Gupta Power Infrastructure Ltd., wherein it had taken various fund and non-fund based financial facilities from Canara Bank. "It is alleged that the accused manipulated the value of stocks and inflated trade receivables, falsified the company's financial statements to obtain enhanced credit facilities, siphoned and diverted loan funds, and resorted to evergreening of accounts, thereby causing a wrongful loss to bank," the CBI said.

TH CROSSWORD + 14850

(set by Dr. X)

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

SCAN TO PLAY



Across

1 One who observes husband tottering, overwhelmed by drink (8)
5 Prodigy beginning to work on developing drone (6)
10 View small insect going around lake (5)
11 Fixed mindset is leading to diffidence (9)
12/17 Without any limitations, like loafers? (2,7,8)
13 Wants fine food and more rum (5)
14 Fold extremely large transversely ribbed fabric (6)
15 Satisfy upper-class female with fine diamonds after a little spat (7)
18 Little people desire to cut cake in retreat (7)
20 Envies model surrounded by men (6)
22 American guy touring Malta's capital (5)
24 Possibly bit nervous going topless? That's obvious (9)
25 Clumsy and daft, he is beginning to make blunders (3-6)
26 Glide over snow around an Asian city (5)
27 Model is turning on girl in retreat (6)
28 Homeless feline lately wandering around area behind college (5,3)

Down

1 Mounting gossip about immorality in building (6)
2 Democrat leading in preliminary contest getting early advantage (4,5)
3 Creative way of solving problems after a fine leader wins polls at centre (7,8)
4 President entering to accept treaty (7)
6 Weird nuts in USA vote for likely winner (4-2,9)
7 Fear's gone after taking therapy essentially (5)
8 Cool being engaged (8)
9 One overwhelmed by onset of enteric disorder is vomiting (6)
16 Perhaps, ricin isn't genuine (9)
17 See 12 Across
19 Small bananas becoming mottled (6)
20 Scoundrel having sex with English lady in castle (7)
21 Plant in compound outside a posh bar (6)
23 Mother's taking a little pill for viral infection (5)

SUDOKU

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

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DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★☆☆☆

Solution to previous puzzle

B	E	S	I	D	E		O	W	N	G	O	A	L	S
U		O		E		M		A		E		B		I
I	M	P	R	I	S	O	N	S		R	E	A	L	M
L		P		F		U		H		M		T		O
D	R	I	L	Y		S	A	T	I	A	T	I	O	N
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Y	E	A	R	N		I	M	M	I	N	E	N	C	E
E		L		C		E		S		D		E		R
D	E	L	A	Y	E	R	S		M	I	O	S	I	S

Solution to yesterday's Sudoku

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

FAITH

Efficacy of chanting

The great Acharyas have taught that in this Kali Yuga, listening to spiritual discourses, studying sacred scriptures, reading the Itihasas, performing daily parayanam, and visiting temples all have one common purpose – to keep our minds constantly absorbed in the remembrance of Bhagavan, said Sri Kidambi Narayanan in a discourse. Whatever we repeatedly practise throughout our lives naturally comes to our mind at the final moment. Therefore, Nama Sankirtanam, the chanting of the Lord's divine names, is regarded as one of the most powerful spiritual practices. This truth is beautifully illustrated in the Bhagavata Purana through the story of Ajamila.

Ajamila was originally a virtuous personality who spoke the truth, controlled his senses, respected elders, remained pure in thought, word, and deed, and lived a disciplined life. However, due to bad association, he became attached to a courtesan, abandoned his righteous path, lost his wealth, and committed numerous sinful acts. His youngest son was named Narayana. At the time of his death, when the messengers of God of death arrived to take him to Yamaloka, Ajamila cried out, "Narayana!" intending to call his son. Yet, because he uttered the Lord's divine name, the messengers of Lord Vishnu immediately appeared and stopped the Yamadutas, declaring that one who chants the holy name of Narayana at life's final moment becomes eligible for the Lord's grace. This episode reveals the immeasurable glory of the divine name.

In Srimad Bhagavatham, the grandsire Bhishma tells Dharmaputra that chanting the Lord's names is the highest form of dharma, especially in the Kali Yuga.

The materials and methods that made the Vikram-1 launch unique

If its engine is printed, the airframe is woven; carbon-fibre composite — filaments of near-pure carbon set in resin — offers strength per unit weight many times that of aerospace aluminium or maraging steel; Skyroot has thus claimed a five-fold saving over the best rocket steel

Jacob Koshy

The Vikram-1 rocket, built by the Hyderabad firm Skyroot, shot through the sky a little past noon on July 18. The seven-storey-tall vehicle lifted off ISRO's First Launch Pad at Sriharikota and, a little over 15 minutes later, placed its payloads in an orbit roughly 450 km above the earth. The mission, named 'Aagaman', Sanskrit for 'arrival', made India only the third country, after the U.S. and China, whose private industry can reach orbit on its own launch vehicle.

Rocket engines have traditionally been forged, machined, welded from dozens of parts. 3D printing inverts this. A laser fuses metal powder layer upon layer, building the part up from nothing. There are some real advantages to this approach. An engine printed as one piece sheds the bolts, seals, and joints where conventional engines leak and fail. When Skyroot test-fired its 'Raman' engine in 2020, it said the fully printed injector halved the mass and cut components and lead time by 80% against conventional manufacturing.

Complex internal plumbing – the fine cooling channels that let Vikram-1's regeneratively cooled engine chill itself with its own propellant – can be printed in shapes no drill can reach. Prototypes emerge in days, not months, so a startup can test, fail, and redesign at a pace that would have been anathema to ISRO's supply chains. The downsides are more subtle: peer-reviewed surveys of the field flag porosity, rough internal surfaces, and batch-to-batch variability, and NASA has documented a printed copper combustion chamber failing on the test stand from degraded material quality.

A printed engine, in short, is faster and lighter but demands obsessive quality control. The flaws hide inside the layers.

This photograph taken on July 7, 2026 shows a Vikram-S rocket model at Skyroot Aerospace facility on the outskirts of Hyderabad. AFP

Carbon-composite body

If the engine is printed, the airframe is woven. Carbon-fibre composite – filaments of near-pure carbon set in resin – offers strength per unit weight many times that of aerospace aluminium or maraging steel. Skyroot claims a five-fold saving over the best rocket steel. Every kilogram of structure trimmed is a kilogram of satellite gained.

The American company Rocket Lab's Electron rocket pioneered the approach. The material also resists fatigue and corrosion and can be laid up by automated machines into seamless tubes. Vikram-1's own stage-1 is India's longest single-piece composite rocket stage. However, the material and its curing infrastructure are expensive; its strength runs along the fibres, so a poorly designed laminate is strong one way and brittle another; and damage can lurk beneath a perfect surface, demanding ultrasonic inspection where a dent in aluminium announces itself.

Both Vikram-1 and PSLV are four-stage expendable rockets that end in a restartable liquid stage for precise orbital insertion: Vikram-1's Orbital Adjustment Module is a miniature cousin of the PSLV's PS4. Both lean on India's long mastery of solid propulsion. However, the PSLV is a 44-metre, 320-tonne workhorse alternating solid and liquid stages to lift 1,750 kg to polar orbit. Vikram-1 is a 22-metre featherweight stacking three solid stages under its liquid module to carry 350 kg.

The nearer analogue is the SSLV. Both Vikram-1 and the SSLV have three solid-fuel stages capped by a small restartable liquid module, both conceived for small satellites on short notice.

On raw capacity, ISRO wins: SSLV lifts 500 kg to low-earth orbit against Vikram-1's 350 kg. However Vikram's all-carbon airframe is leaner than SSLV's conventional casings. Most of all, SSLV was designed by the state and its production licensed to Hindustan Aeronautics Limited for ₹511 crore; Vikram-1 is owned outright by its maker, financed by venture capital, and priced by the market.

First flight

According to reports, the Vikram-1 developmental flight met almost every one of its checkpoints, including the process called 'long coast', a tricky phase for a debutant, where the rocket must hold its attitude with nothing pushing it while the printed engine burns one last time. For a maiden flight whose stated ambition was merely to clear the tower and gather data, reaching orbit is an important achievement: Electron, Firefly's Alpha, and ISRO's own SSLV all stumbled the first time.

For a maiden flight whose stated ambition was merely to clear the tower and gather data, reaching orbit is an important achievement: Electron, Firefly's Alpha, and ISRO's own SSLV all stumbled the first time

The rocket carried five working payloads and two talismans: EMBRACE, a robotic-arm demonstration by Cosmoserve Space aimed at grabbing space debris; the SOLARAS satellite from Grahaa Space; Skyroot's own SCOPE experimental satellite; and two deployable-technology demonstrators, uD3PP and mD3RN, from the German firm Dcubed.

Alongside flew a lab-grown diamond lotus and an 18-karat gold micro-rocket bearing rice-grain sculptures of 'Sarabhai', 'Raman', and 'Kalam' – the three names Skyroot gives its rockets and engines. The company has said that all the payloads have been deployed.

Building rockets

Skyroot holds both of Indian private spaceflight's firsts – the suborbital Vikram-S launch in November 2022 and now an orbital launch with customer payloads.

But Chennai's AgniKul Cosmos, incubated at IIT-Madras, is running a parallel course. Its Agnibaan SOrTeD vehicle flew a suborbital flight in May 2024 from India's first private launchpad, on the world's first single-piece 3D-printed engine – a semi-cryogenic design burning liquid oxygen and kerosene, a propellant technology ISRO itself is still maturing.

Having test-fired four Agnilet engines in cluster this May, and with former ISRO chairman S. Somanath joining its board, AgniKul is working on its Mission 02: a two-stage Agnibaan attempting India's first sea recovery of an orbital-class booster while the rocket's upper stage reaches orbit as a working platform. Mission 02, in other words, aims at reusability – the technology that rewrote launch economics and the next barrier Indian rockets must clear.

Since the 2020 reforms and IN-SPACe's creation in 2022, India's space startups have multiplied from a handful to more than 400, but until Saturday (July 18) they all needed ISRO's rockets to fly. A private launcher now could turn ISRO from gatekeeper into landlord – and turn access to orbit from a national programme into a market. The small-satellite launch business is supply-starved worldwide; Skyroot pitches itself as a "cab service" to space.

jacob.koshy@thehindu.co.in

THE GIST

The 'Aagaman' mission made India only the third country, after the U.S. and China, whose private industry can reach orbit on its own launch vehicle

Rocket engines have traditionally been forged, machined, welded from dozens of parts. 3D printing inverts this

When Skyroot test-fired its 'Raman' engine in 2020, it said the fully printed injector halved the mass and cut components and lead time by 80% against conventional manufacturing

According to reports, the Vikram-1 developmental flight met almost every one of its checkpoints, including the process called 'long coast', a tricky phase for a debutant

BIG SHOT

Egyptian workers load bails of plastic for recycling on a truck at the garbage city in the Manshiyet Nasser neighbourhood, Cairo, on July 6. Hundreds of recyclers and manufacturers across Egypt are benefiting from a war-driven surge in demand ever since the U.S. and Iran choked off the Strait of Hormuz , a major shipping lane for the raw materials from which plastic is made. AFP

WHAT IS IT?

Finning: cruel, wasteful practice

Agence France Presse

Finning, the practice of removing a shark's fins and casting the rest of the shark overboard, often alive. The animal will subsequently drown. Finning is largely prohibited across a variety of regulatory zones, countries and international conventions, even if fishing certain shark species is generally allowed.

Yet in recent years, illegal shark fins have been repeatedly landed in Senegal's capital Dakar, one of Africa's busiest fishing ports, by dozens of Chinese and Taiwanese longline tuna vessels, according to a report released last week by the London-based Environmental Justice Foundation NGO.

The fins are then shipped to Asia for use in shark fin soup, a delicacy in certain countries, or in traditional medicine.

The practice is inherently cruel and wasteful, conservationists say, likening it to killing a rhinoceros for its horn. But brutality is not the only problem.

Global shark populations have been in rapid decline due to industrial fishing, with a study published in the journal Nature showing their population has plummeted, alongside that of their close relatives rays, 71% since 1970.

Finning also often occurs in tandem with other types of illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing and human rights abuses.

A picture taken on November 17, 2022, shows shark fins laid out on a tarp outside a shop in Hong Kong. AFP

Senegal is a party to the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas, which regulates fishing operations related to tuna and tuna-like species in the Atlantic Ocean. It also bans the retention of certain species of sharks and specifies that fins cannot total more than 5% of the overall weight of sharks onboard. The rule is meant to prevent finning, but makes things difficult to quantify.

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Maturing approach

India needs to use market access in the U.K. to raise its market share

The India-U.K. Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) reflects New Delhi's more mature approach to free trade negotiations. Unlike its 2009 free trade agreement (FTA) with ASEAN, which tilted the trade balance against India, New Delhi has approached the U.K. pact by attempting to balance liberalisation with domestic sensitivities amid an increasingly fragmented global trading system. A similar shift was evident in the New Zealand FTA, where India succeeded in protecting its sensitive dairy sector despite dairy products being one of New Zealand's biggest exports. While the India-U.K. CETA is expected to strengthen India's export competitiveness, its benefits are likely to be uneven across sectors and could place competitive pressure on already cost-disadvantaged MSMEs. The pact, an attempt to secure long-term market access and integrate India further into global value chains, offers zero-duty access on 99% of India's exports, covering almost the entire value of bilateral trade. However, smaller firms often lack the documentation and compliance capacity needed to claim these benefits. Despite the deal including some agreements on non-tariff aspects, MSMEs may find it difficult to comply with the U.K.'s stringent sanitary, phytosanitary, technical and sustainability standards, which could prove a bigger hurdle than tariffs. Globally, such agreements have accelerated export diversification, attracted investment and facilitated technology transfer, but only when supported by robust industrial ecosystems and competitive firms.

India has historically underutilised several trade agreements because of low awareness, cumbersome administration and high compliance costs. The trade deficit with ASEAN widened from about $10 billion in 2017 to nearly $44 billion in 2023. Similarly, the U.K. agreement's benefits may remain below expectations unless India strengthens regulatory administration, intellectual property protection and dispute resolution. Although the U.K. accounts for only about 3% of India's merchandise exports and around 1% of its imports, the U.K. pact expands India's access to a high-income market where it enjoys a merchandise trade surplus. However, this advantage could narrow if imports of the U.K.'s relatively price-inelastic exports, such as luxury vehicles, grow faster than India's largely labour-intensive, price-sensitive exports. The Double Contribution Convention benefits Indian IT and professional services firms, but its economy-wide benefits may remain modest. The pact also faced a hurdle over the U.K.'s steel safeguard quotas before implementation, underlining how non-tariff measures can dilute market access. India's carbon-intensive exports could face challenges as climate-related trade regulations become more stringent. Ultimately, CETA's success lies in turning market access into market share.

Spreading wings

Vikram-1 is an engineering triumph seeking commercial viability

The launch of the Vikram-1 rocket built by Skyroot Aerospace from Sriharikota marked the Indian private sector's first orbital flight. Vikram-1 is a four-stage launcher designed to provide what Skyroot has called a "cab service" for satellites, letting customers pick their orbit and launch schedule rather than accept the orbital slot and drop-off point presented by rideshares, at a commensurate premium. Skyroot is targeting a price per launch below that of the PSLV and above that of the SSLV (projected), to be achieved in part by basing the rocket on carbon-composite structures. It also has plans for a more powerful Vikram-2 rocket. The company was founded in 2018 by two former ISRO engineers and its path to orbit followed engine tests in 2020 and a suborbital flight in 2022. For roughly six decades, ISRO held a state monopoly over launch activities in India while private firms were limited to being suppliers. Reforms since 2020 and the 2023 Space Policy opened the door for commercial players and freed ISRO to focus on R&D and scientific missions. In 2024, up to 49% FDI in launch vehicles was allowed by the automatic route. The push is also part of the government's ambition of growing the national space economy to $44 billion by 2033 from around $8 billion alongside satellite manufacturing, communications, navigation, and earth observation.

Orbital launch capability remains hard-won: India is now only the third country to host private enterprise that has demonstrated it. But now that Skyroot has proved competence in engineering, its next milestone is commercial viability, which may be harder. Specifically, the company has to demonstrate repeatability and stable launch costs in an increasingly crowded suppliers' market that includes established 'brands' such as SpaceX and Rocket Lab and a bevy of rapidly scaling Chinese firms. Rideshares on larger rockets are still often cheaper per kilogram to orbit. The model Skyroot is betting on, letting customers specify orbit and schedule in return for a premium over a rideshare launch, depends on a market of uncertain size. The greater production scale will challenge the engineering, too, as batch-to-batch variability becomes harder to control. India also lacks a Space Activities Act, leaving liability to be governed by policy, contracts, existing law, and international commitments rather than statute, maintaining long-term regulatory uncertainty, particularly in the event of a launch or orbital mishap. The Vikram-1 launch is an engineering triumph. Whether it translates to commercial success, which is the real national ambition, is now the question.

The stark reality of the missing jobs for India's Gen Z

Santosh Kumar Dash

Assistant Professor at IRMA, Tribhuvan Sahkari University, Anand, Gujarat

Balakrushna Padhi

Assistant Professor at BITS Pilani (Pilani Campus), Rajasthan

India has one of the world's largest youth populations (371 million, according to United Nations data of 2025), often described as a demographic dividend. But this demographic dividend is only a promise and does not guarantee an automatic outcome. It pays off only when the transition occurs, enabling young people to move from classrooms into decent, productive work with higher skills. Right now, that transition is faltering, and the evidence is visible in Gen Z's employment patterns.

The term 'Gen Z' refers to individuals born between 1997 and 2012. They succeeded the Millennials (also known as Generation Y), who were born between 1981 and 1996. The working-age population for Gen Z broadly falls within the 15-26 age group, while Millennials are aged between the years 27 to 42. According to the 2023-24 Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), India has an estimated 29.94 crore working-age Gen Z individuals (aged 15-26 years), compared with 35 crore Millennials (aged 27-42 years). Using the same datasets, we analyse their occupational patterns, labour force participation rates, unemployment levels, and access to social security systems.

Gen Z work status

PLFS 2023-24 estimates show that a large share of Gen Z remains engaged in education. The data show that 41.7% of young males and 38.4% of young females are studying. While this partly explains their delayed entry into the labour market, the situation of the remaining youth is a cause for concern.

When young people do enter the labour market, many are absorbed into non-salaried and casual forms of employment. Among young males, 15.8% are engaged as unpaid family workers, 12.3% are in casual work – possibly with segments of the informal economy – and only 14.8% are regular wage earners. Among female Gen Z individuals, about 35% are engaged in domestic duties (out of the labour force), 10.7% work as unpaid family workers, and only 4.7% are regular wage earners.

These patterns underline the fact that women bear this burden disproportionately. Among Gen Z females, 27.1% are engaged in domestic duties only, compared with just 0.32% of males. Even where women want paid work, they face higher unemployment and weaker labour market attachment. This is not only a matter of jobs. It also reflects childcare burdens, safety concerns, mobility constraints and social norms, and the design of work itself. India cannot talk seriously about harnessing its demographic advantage while leaving such a large share of young women outside the paid economy.

What happens when young people try to enter the labour market? The answer is concerning: too many of them are unable to find adequate employment opportunities.

The first indicator to consider is the labour force participation rate (LFPR). Among Gen Z, 41.7% are in the labour force, against 75% of Millennials. Within Gen Z, rural participation (44.1%) exceeds urban participation (37.2%), suggesting that rural youth tend to enter the labour market earlier, whereas urban youth spend more time in education and training. A sharp gender divide is also evident. Among young males, labour force participation is 59.3% in rural India and 51.3% in urban India, compared to just 28% and 21.1% respectively for young females.

The unemployment situation is even more alarming. The overall unemployment rate for Gen Z is 11.9%, compared to only 2% among Millennials. In urban India, the situation deteriorates further, with Gen Z unemployment rising to 17.1%.

For urban young women, it reaches a staggering 22.6%. This is not merely a temporary labour-market friction; it is a serious warning sign that the economy is struggling to absorb young jobseekers, particularly in areas where aspirations and educational qualifications are often higher.

The graduate trap, social security mirage

For most of the youth, education offers a gateway of opportunity: more education leading to better jobs and lower unemployment. Instead, our estimate shows the opposite at the top end. Among Gen Z males with graduate-level education or above, unemployment stands at 29%. Among Gen Z females, it is even higher at 36.9%. This is the heart of India's silent jobs crisis. The country is producing educated young people faster than it is producing suitable jobs for them.

A similar disparity persists among Millennials. Only 5.2% of male graduates and above are unemployed, but the corresponding figure for women is significantly higher at 13.8%.

This disconnect perhaps points to a deeper mismatch between the education system and labour market requirements. While part of the problem relates to skill mismatches, it is also increasingly shaped by automation and the growing adoption of artificial intelligence, both of which are altering the nature of available jobs.

That mismatch carries a deeper risk. When higher education no longer improves employment prospects quickly or reliably, frustration rises, family investment in education comes under strain, and confidence in the growth story weakens. A labour market that cannot absorb its educated youth is not just inefficient. It can become socially corrosive and destabilising. Even for those who do find work, the quality of employment remains deeply concerning. Only 20.1% of Gen Z individuals are covered by social security, and just 14.1% have a formal job contract. Among the remaining 79.9% who lack social security coverage, only 3.2% have a job contract. Overall, only 17.3% of Gen Z workers have any form of contractual employment.

This implies that most are entering the workforce without either. The challenge, therefore, is not merely unemployment but the widespread prevalence of informal, insecure, and weakly protected work. Further, in recent years, there has been growing evidence of the informalisation of formal employment among the Gen Z population.

The situation among Millennials is only marginally better. Merely 26% have a job contract, while only 28.6% are covered by social security.

The recent large-scale violent labour protests in Noida, Uttar Pradesh, led by industrial and factory workers demanding higher wages and better working conditions, reflect the frustration that insecure and poorly protected employment can produce.

A promise deferred

India's jobs debate is too often discussed in silos: unemployment, skilling, women's work and labour force participation, and informality. However, these are not separate problems. They are one connected failure of labour market transition. Young people (Gen Z) are staying in education longer, but the bridge from education to work is weak. Women face structural barriers that keep them out or push them into unpaid roles. And even when work is found, it is too often outside the protections of formal employment.

It is time India moves beyond merely celebrating its large demographic dividend and begins treating the issue with greater urgency. Skill programmes have value, but they cannot substitute for actual job creation. The answer lies in expanding labour-intensive sectors, building stronger school-to-work pathways, linking training more closely to employers, and making it easier for women to enter and remain in paid work. Apprenticeships, formal hiring incentives, urban employment expansion, safe transport and childcare support all need to be part of the response.

The numbers tell a blunt story. India's youth challenge is no longer about whether young people are ready for work. It is about whether the economy is ready for them. Until that changes, the demographic dividend will remain what it has so far been: a promise deferred.

> Celebrating India's demographic dividend means little when Gen Z faces unemployment, insecurity and shrinking pathways to decent work

Much more than 'Melbourne meets Modi'

Philip Green

Australia's High Commissioner to India

In terms of rock star performances by foreign leaders, it would be hard to beat Prime Minister Narendra Modi's magnetic engagement with a Melbourne crowd in Australia in the second week of July. As one of those in the crowd, I can attest that the audience revelled in Mr. Modi's energy, and the messages of aspiration for the diaspora and for the Australia-India partnership.

Mr. Modi's visit to Australia took place from July 8 to 10. But this visit was a lot more than a rock star performance. It opened new chapters in the India-Australia story – in investment, strategic trust, culture, sports and people.

Beyond symbolic diplomacy

A short call of the board is warranted. The leaders, Mr. Modi and Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese agreed on: a new Joint Declaration on Defence and Security Cooperation that deepens our work together as a force for peace, stability and prosperity in the Indo-Pacific; a new Partnership on Cyber, Critical Technologies and Supply Chains that strengthens our respective cyber capabilities, improves regional and global cyber resilience, and boosts our industrial and business linkages; a sports playbook that leverages Australia's expertise in major sporting events, as India seeks to demonstrate its global leadership by hosting the Commonwealth Games and bidding for the Olympic and Paralympic Games; a statement on energy security that commits Australia and India to more resilient energy supply chains, while making possible Australian uranium exports to India for peaceful purposes, and a Maritime Security Collaboration Roadmap that charts the way forward for Australia and India to expand cooperation on maritime security in the vast Indian Ocean that lies between our shores.

Business, education, cricket

That is a lot for a single visit. And business leaders chipped in – Australia's largest pension fund, Australian Super, decided to invest half a billion dollars (that is ₹3,360 crore) in India's National Investment and Infrastructure Fund Limited. That is on top of Australia's leading hyperscalers committing to build tens of billions of dollars in data centres across India.

Our education sectors reminded us that eight Australian universities have now undertaken to open foreign branch campuses in India, including the University of New South Wales (UNSW), which is a global top 20 university. When its campus opens later this year, UNSW will be the highest-ranking university in India.

And a big next step in our relationship was also foreshadowed, with the plans for an annual showcase of the best of Australian culture and business under the banner "G'Day - Namaste". G'Day - Namaste will coincide with the Australian Big Bash League playing its first game (cricket) on foreign soil in December this year.

To me, this rich set of outcomes represents more than a fair bit of work in preparation for the visit. It shows that there is a lot more headroom to deepen and expand our collaboration. That is because of three underlying drivers that are impelling our partnership forward: The fact that we are reliable partners at a time when our region, and the world more broadly, is in flux, and when each of us needs to find deeper international connections to safeguard our interests; the fact that we have highly complementary economies – Australia's strengths in energy, mining, and education and skills fit neatly with India's rapidly growing manufacturing industry, and the fact that the Indian diaspora in Australia – Australia's fastest-growing – is a source of pride and dynamism for our two governments.

Leadership drives partnership

Relationships grow when the objective conditions are fertile. They flourish when each nation sees in the other, solutions to some of its problems, and pathways to maximise their opportunities. That is where Australia and India are.

They also flourish when they have leadership with a shared vision and ambition for the relationship.

That shared ambition was much on display between Prime Ministers Narendra Modi and Anthony Albanese. Stability and continuity are on the side of our leaders too, with each focused on fixing long-term problems and seizing opportunities.

The two leaders have a deep respect and admiration for each other.

The genuine warmth between our Prime Ministers was on unmistakable display over two days in Melbourne – from their banter about cricket in quiet moments, to their attentive consideration of each other's viewpoints, to the bear-hugs that caught the attention of the cameras.

The visit is a vivid demonstration of what a positive place we find ourselves in, in the India-Australia partnership. Not all bilateral relationships have that just now, so we should celebrate it. Celebrate it, and recommit ourselves to maximising the opportunities of a special moment of alignment of interests.

> The 'Melbourne momentum' is opening new chapters in security, business, education and culture

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Silencing peaceful dissent

The Delhi police's act of forcibly bundling off the fasting Sonam Wangchuk appeared deeply dehumanising towards a man engaged in a Gandhian-style satyagraha. However, the government's cold response has made its position clear: it will pay no heed to the students' demand for the resignation of the Union Education Minister. The prolonged silence has only reinforced perceptions of an authoritarian approach.

Kamal Laddha,
Bengaluru

I still remember line in my Class 9 NCERT political science textbook: "A democratic government is better because it is a more accountable form of government." Accountability means that the government should answer the people and listen to their concerns. The gathering at Jantar Mantar was a peaceful protest with one demand. Whether people agree with this demand or not, students have the right to peacefully express their concerns. Paper leaks have made students take a second look at the education system as behind every test are months, and sometimes years, of hard work. Who will be accountable for the stress, disappointment and uncertainty that students face? Wanting a fair education system does not mean we are against India.

Sourabh Singh Shekhawat,
New Delhi

Private players lift off

Skyroot Aerospace's successful launch of Vikram-1 (Front page, July 19) marks a watershed moment in the evolution of India's space sector beyond the Indian Space Research Organisation. However, space remains an unforgiving frontier, as reflected in the high failure rate of launch startups worldwide. To sustain this momentum, India must move beyond a single milestone to achieve reliable, high-frequency commercial launches. This will require the Government to ensure continued access to critical infrastructure, a predictable regulatory environment, and robust venture funding.

Vijaykumar H.K.,
Raichur, Karnataka

It was exhilarating to watch a merry bunch of jeans-clad youngsters achieve spectacular success. The mission was textbook-perfect, with every parameter meticulously met. One can only hope that we show the same seriousness in addressing the glitches in our education system. The gaffes surrounding the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test and other public examinations must be acknowledged with equal urgency, and accountability fixed, if we are to keep our youth motivated and engaged in achieving sustained excellence across every field of technology and innovation.

That said, United States President Donald Trump may yet come to regret his whimsical views on H-1B visas when shown images of Indians in their twenties, thriving under private entrepreneurship and demonstrating high technological excellence.

R. Narayanan,
Navi Mumbai

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Text&Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Number of people killed by Israel in Gaza since Oct. 2025 truce

1,144 Gaza's civil defence and hospitals said Israeli attacks on Saturday killed 11 people across the territory. A ceasefire remains in place between Israel and the Hamas, but it has not halted the violence in Gaza. At least 1,144 Palestinians had been killed since the truce took effect last October, according to Gaza's Health Ministry. AFP

Amount of old age pension released by Punjab government

1423 in ₹ crores. The Punjab government has released ₹1,423.33 crore under the old-age pension scheme so far in the current financial year, Social Security, Women and Child Development Minister Baljit Kaur said on Sunday. She said around 23.77 lakh senior citizens across the State are receiving financial assistance under the scheme. PTI

Decrease in transit trade between Afghanistan-Pakistan

367 in $ million. Afghanistan-Pakistan transit trade plunged to $367 million in the outgoing fiscal year from $5 billion in 2021, according to a media report. The transit trade between the two countries has suffered one of its steepest declines, plummeting to just 11,592 containers in FY-26, the Dawn reported on Sunday. PTI

Patients who availed free cardiac treatment in Punjab

135 According to Punjab's State Health Agency, the beneficiaries underwent treatment for congenital heart defects, valve disorders and other complex cardiac conditions under the scheme. The government said young adults in the 17-35 age group accounted for the highest number of beneficiaries receiving cashless cardiac procedures. PTI

Number of deaths in U.P. due to human-animal conflict

4000 Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on Sunday called for raising awareness on human-animal conflict and also pressed the need for leveraging technology to minimise the loss of lives. He also said that over 4,000 people have lost their lives in human-animal conflict. PTI

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On the second phase of U.S.-Iran war

The second phase of the Iran-U.S. war is primarily centred on the future of the Strait of Hormuz. The MoU stipulated that Iran would allow 60 days of free passage for ships through the strait and define its future administration with Oman. Subsequent talks in Doha broke down over U.S. resistance to a formal management plan

EXPLAINER

M. Kalyanaraman

The second phase of the Iran-U.S. war is being fought almost exclusively over the future of the Strait of Hormuz. The sequence of events leading to the restart of hostilities suggests there was no genuine meeting of minds when the MoU was signed. As before, by holding out and retaliating, Iran has forced the issue – shipowners now seem resigned to paying a "logical" toll, even as they worry about the precedent it sets for other straits.

Events that led to the war

The two countries agreed to a ceasefire on June 14 and the terms of the MoU were finalised, which stipulated that Iran would allow ships to pass "with no charge for 60 days only," and that Iran would work with Oman to "define the future administration and maritime services" in the strait. Two days later, the Persian Gulf Strait Authority – set up by Iran in May to handle transits – circulated terms reasserting itself as the nodal transit authority, requiring every vessel to hold a passage permit and PGSA-approved insurance, free for now but with fees reserved for later. Iran was formalising its stake as a legal outcome of the MoU.

U.S. and Iranian delegations met in Switzerland on June 21, and sanctions were lifted the next day. But the PGSA, already sanctioned, was never explicitly relieved – leaving shipping firms wary of dealing with it.

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio then toured the UAE, Kuwait and Bahrain from June 23-25, culminating in a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) meeting in Bahrain. Amid that visit, on June 24, the International Maritime Organization (IMO) – working with Oman – formally announced a temporary corridor: a southern one via Oman, alongside the northern route Iran championed. This effectively formalised the Omani route.

The second phase of the war is fought almost exclusively over the future of the Strait of Hormuz. REUTERS

Iran complained it had not been consulted and said any other route barring the route it had specified was "unauthorised and dangerous."

The next day in Bahrain, Mr. Rubio said accepting a toll near a country's territorial waters "will spread throughout the world like a contagion," adding that no Gulf state supported one. The U.S. and GCC signed a statement opposing Iran's control of the strait. Iran did not take this quietly. The IRGC threatened vessels on non-Iranian routes, and the IMO's governing council "strongly condemned" Iran's bid to "establish an entity purporting to control traffic through the strait."

On June 30, U.S. and Iranian officials met in Doha. Reports said Iran and Oman had floated a plan to monetise transits – a voluntary toll modelled on the Malacca-Singapore Straits – which Washington rejected in favour of the pre-war status quo.

A Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore spokesperson, responding exclusively to *The Hindu*, said the Straits of Malacca and Singapore are, like Hormuz, Straits Used for International Navigation, and that Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore accordingly levy no fees or tolls on ships exercising transit passage. A voluntary Aids to Navigation Fund exists, backed by contributors including The Nippon Foundation, but the spokesperson stressed its "contributions are not for the exercise of transit passage and should not be misconstrued as fees, tolls or payment imposed on transiting ships." Talks in Doha broke down over U.S. resistance to any formal management arrangement – effectively a bid to walk back the MoU's own Hormuz clauses.

Hostilities resume

The first week of July brought the mourning period for Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. As the NATO summit opened in Turkey on July 7 – where U.S. officials restated their Hormuz position, and Donald Trump complained European allies weren't helping keep the strait free for navigation – Iran struck three ships on the Omani route, among them the India-bound Al Rekayyat, one of the largest LNG carriers built. An exploding LNG tanker at a chokepoint ranks among shipping's worst-case scenarios. Mr. Trump declared the ceasefire over. War had resumed.

On July 11, 2026, Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi met with Omani Foreign Minister Badr Albusaidi in Muscat to discuss the strait but the meeting apparently produced no agreement. A few hours later, Iran attacked the DFS Galaxy, in which one Indian seafarer died, bringing the recent Iranian attacks on ships to six. The U.S. began attacking merchant ships too, as part of its blockade against Iranian oil trade. It has reinstated the sanctions it had briefly lifted.

Washington keeps claiming it has degraded Iran's capacity to strike shipping – a claim repeated after nearly every strike, rebutted each time by a fresh attack. For instance, on July 13, CENTCOM said strikes on six Iranian sites would "further degrade" that capability; the IRGC responded the same day by claiming it had disabled two tankers.

Strikes on Greater Tunb Island on July 15 drew the same claim. Yet on July 16, the Joint Maritime Information Center raised its Hormuz risk rating to "severe," and nine Greek-operated LNG tankers stayed put rather than risk transit – insurers, the most reliable independent judges, are pricing in continued Iranian capability. Lloyd's List data shows weekly transits that nearly doubled to 282 for June 22-28 have since fallen to 164 for July 6-12, concentrated on the Omani route.

Iran has now turned to alternatives to the strait – targeting ship-to-ship transfers off UAE's Fujairah pipeline and pushing the Houthis to shut off Saudi Arabia's East-West pipeline route by attacking ships taking the Red Sea route.

"Shipping companies are super tired [of] all this back and forth," said Dimitris Maniatis, CEO of Greek maritime risk firm Marisks, at a Lloyd's List webinar. "Most would accept a toll amount that is logical, not 20% though which is ludicrous. If a legitimate arrangement is formulated, shippers would welcome the development."

THE GIST

- On June 30, U.S. and Iranian officials met in Doha. Reports said Iran and Oman had floated a plan to monetise transits — a voluntary toll modelled on the Malacca-Singapore Straits — which Washington rejected in favour of the pre-war status quo.
- On July 11, Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi met his Omani counterpart Badr Albusaidi, to discuss the strait. A few hours later, Iran attacked the DFS Galaxy. The U.S. reinstated the sanctions it had briefly lifted.

What is the legal tussle surrounding the Taj Mahal?

What controversial claims have been made about the monument over the years?

Ziya Us Salam

The story so far

Taj Mahal, the seventeenth-century tomb, is once again in the news. Earlier this month, the Allahabad High Court issued notices to the Centre and the Archaeological Survey of India, asking for their response to a plea challenging an Agra trial court order refusing a survey of the Taj Mahal. A Bench of Justice Rohit Ranjan Agarwal passed the order on a petition filed by advocate Harishankar Jain contending that the Taj, a UNESCO World Heritage monument, is actually 'Tejo Mahalaya'.

Mr. Jain pleaded for a declaration that the Taj Mahal is a Hindu temple and sought permission for Hindus to offer prayers there. The petitioners also sought the appointment of an Advocate Commissioner to inspect the monument.

Built by Mughal emperor Shah Jahan as a tomb for his favourite wife Arjumand Bano, the Taj Mahal took 22 years to be completed. Constructed under chief architect Ustad Ahmed Lahori, the first time it faced a controversy was when it was claimed by many in the West that the architect of the Taj was Venetian Geronimo Veroneo, a jeweller by profession. That was in the 17th Century. Then came the claim by Mughal Beg in Tarikh-e-Taj Mahal that the Taj was designed by Muhammad Effendi, an architect supposedly sent by the Sultan of Turkey. Effendi, however, was not an architect as subsequent revelations proved.

What was P.N. Oak's claim?

Then in the mid-19th Century, it was claimed that the monument was the result of the genius of Frenchman Austin de Bordeaux, a jeweller by profession. However, Austin died in 1632, the year the work on the Taj began.

No historian of medieval India has contested the fact of the Taj being a tomb of the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan's wife. This includes the illustrious historians Irfan Habib and Athar Ali, besides noted names like Satish Chopra and Syed Ali Nadeem Rezavi. The first person to cast aspersions on the tomb's authenticity was a non-historian, P.N. Oak, a teacher-turned-lawyer-turned-journalist, who, through his book *Taj Mahal is a Temple Palace*, claimed in 1965 that the Taj was originally a Rajput palace built in the 4th century. In 1989, Oak revised his opinion and claimed it was originally a Hindu temple built in the early 12th century. Again, he penned a book, *Taj Mahal: The True Story*, to buttress his contention. It was the first time anybody associated the monument with a Hindu deity. The historians rejected his claims as lacking credibility in the absence of any evidence. Oak's claim, however, was heard in the Supreme Court, which rejected it outright in 2000.

What legal challenges followed?

In 2005, Amarnath Mishra, now a member of Ayodhya Sadbhavna Samiti, went to Allahabad High Court claiming the Taj was a temple built by the Chandela rulers in 1189. The court dismissed his contention too.

The opponents did not give up. In 2015, a civil suit filed at an Agra trial court sought to declare the Taj Mahal a Hindu temple. The court, however, didn't agree with the claim. After it refused to order a survey of the Taj premises, like the one ordered in Gyanvapi and Bhojshala, the petitioners went to Allahabad High Court. The court then sought response from the Union Government and the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI).

What was the ASI's stand?

In 2017, the ASI stated unambiguously that the Taj was a 17th-century tomb. The technology used in its construction and design, including pietra dura, did not exist in pre-medieval days. It should have ended any vestiges of controversy. However, a PIL was filed by a BJP leader in the Supreme Court in 2022. It was dismissed too. Two years later, some activists tried to offer Gangajal at the Taj. That attempt, too, was foiled. Now, following the Allahabad HC ruling, the ball is in the Centre's court, besides the ASI yet again.

THE GIST

- The Allahabad High Court had issued notices to the Centre and the Archaeological Survey of India, asking for their response to a plea challenging an Agra trial court order refusing a survey of the Taj Mahal.
- In 2017, the Archaeological Survey of India stated unambiguously that the Taj was a 17th-century tomb. The technology used in its construction and design, including pietra dura, did not exist in pre-medieval days.

KEYWORD

Making sense of embodied AI: the next frontier in robotics

Unlike the AI chatbots that learn from texts, images, and videos, embodied AI must master gravity and balance, which are more difficult due to the countless physical scenarios a robot must face and the 'simulation-to-real gap', where success in simulation rarely translates perfectly to the real world

John Xavier

On April 14, Boston Dynamics and Google DeepMind announced that Spot, the yellow-colour robot dog that spent most of its life running narrowly scripted routines, is getting an AI brain. Gemini Robotics-ER 1.6 is being folded into Spot and into Boston Dynamics' Orbit inspection platform, giving both stronger spatial reasoning, autonomous decision-making, and the ability to keep learning inside complex industrial sites.

Spot's hardware has been good for years, but the intelligence needed to make it useful in a messy factory, without a human driving it frame by frame, is only arriving now. That gap – between a machine that can move and a machine that understands what it is moving through – is exactly what a decades-old field called embodied AI has been trying to close.

What 'embodied' actually means

The easy mistake is to think embodied AI just means "AI in a robot body." The deeper claim by experts working on this field is that a body is not a delivery mechanism for intelligence, but a part of the computation itself.

In their book *How the Body Shapes the Way We Think*, Rolf Pfeifer, longtime director of the Artificial Intelligence Laboratory at the University of Zurich, and Josh Bongard, computer science professor at the University of Vermont, argue that thought is not independent of the body but is tightly constrained, and at the same time enabled, by it.

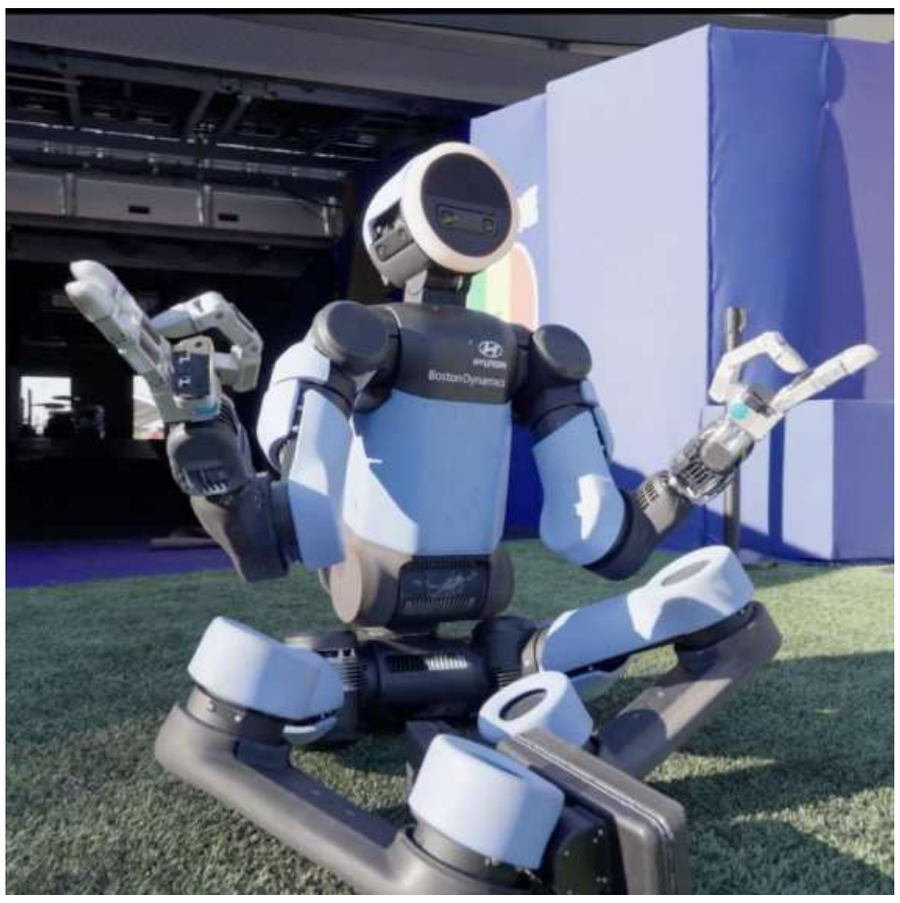
Pfeifer has worked extensively on building physical robots to test behaviours that emerge from the body's design and look for results that tell something about intelligence in general.

Australian roboticist Rodney Brooks, who wrote the foreword for the book and whose own work at MIT in the late 1980s and 1990s made the case even more provocatively, asserting against the dominant symbolic-AI paradigm of the time, that robots didn't need internal world-models and elaborate planning to act intelligently. A layered "subsumption architecture" of simple reflexes, tightly coupled to sensors and motors, could produce robust, real-time behaviour without anyone programming a representation of the world at all.

You don't need to build an abstract map of a room if your sensors and body can just react to the room as it actually is, moment to moment. Practically, this plays out as "morphological computation" – offloading work that would otherwise require a brain, onto the physical structure of the body.

A passive-dynamic walker can stroll down a slight incline with no motors or control system at all, purely because the leg geometry and joints are shaped to do the computing. A soft, compliant robot hand can grasp an oddly shaped object without a controller that has explicitly modelled that shape, because the material itself deforms and adapts.

A common thread connecting Pfeifer's Zurich lab, Brooks's robots, and today's humanoids is that intelligence is distributed between brain, body, and environment, not confined to just one part.



Boston Dynamics' Atlas robot makes a yoga pose on the football field. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Why this matters now, and why it's hard

The current wave of interest is precisely about discovering how hard that distribution problem is at scale. Unlike the AI chatbots that learn from texts, images, and videos, embodied AI must master gravity and balance, which are profoundly difficult because of the countless physical scenarios a robot must face and the "simulation-to-real gap," where success in simulation rarely translates perfectly to the real world.

Industry data bears this out starkly. Though the embodied AI market is projected to reach $23 billion by 2030, most humanoid robots still last only about 90 minutes on a charge, and policies that succeed 95% of the time in the lab drop to roughly 60% in the real world. The gap between demo and deployment is the field's central, unglamorous problem.

Embodied AI vs. neuromorphic AI

In common discussions, people tend to conflate embodied AI with neuromorphic AI as both take biology seriously. But they answer different questions.

Embodied AI is about where intelligence lives. The field views cognition distributed across brain, and body, meaning computational work is not fixed to the brain. It is largely agnostic about what kind of processor sits inside the robot; you could run an embodied robot's "brain" on an ordinary GPU cluster.

Neuromorphic AI is about how the processor itself is built – it is a hardware and algorithm paradigm that tries to mimic the physical mechanics of biological neurons, most commonly through spiking neural networks (SNNs).

SNNs operate through discrete spikes: each neuron integrates incoming signals and fires only when a threshold is exceeded, which makes them well suited to time-sensitive tasks like motion sensing. Neuromorphic chips are also notably power-efficient, since only the neurons actively spiking consume energy at any given moment.

The two areas in robotics increasingly overlap in practice as a growing body of research on "embodied neuromorphic intelligence" puts spiking, event-driven chips inside physical robots specifically because their low power draw and timely response suit real-world, always-on embodied tasks.

Where evolution comes in

If bodies do computational work, an obvious question follows: how do you design the right body for the task, instead of bolting an AI model onto whatever frame engineers have built?

This is the terrain of evolutionary computation.

Yaochu Jin, an Alexander von Humboldt Professor at Bielefeld University, makes the case that neural control and physical form should not be designed separately and then combined. Instead, the two have to be developed together, the way biological organisms grow nervous systems and bodies in tandem.

Mr. Jin's research sits at the intersection of evolutionary algorithms, developmental biology, and computational neuroscience, focused on the interaction between evolution, learning, and artificial systems.

His research focuses on co-evolving nervous systems and morphology, and modelling how feedback from the environment shapes an organism's sensory distribution.

This matters directly for embodied AI's central bottleneck: robot bodies are frequently mismatched to the tasks and environments they end up in, and manually re-engineering hardware every time a task changes is slow and expensive.

Evolutionary methods offer a way to search body-and-brain design space automatically, letting simulated populations of robotic forms compete and replicate based on task performance before anything is built.

The unresolved problems

Even as capital and models pour into the field of embodied AI, a fairly consistent list of hard problems keeps surfacing. For instance, the gap between simulation and real-world experience in using robotic systems is still not narrow. Policies trained in simulation that can be run millions of times cheaply, degrade sharply when deployed onto real hardware.

Sophisticated reasoning models are often too slow to keep pace with a robot arm or leg that needs to react in milliseconds, forcing a split between heavy "thinking" done off-device and lighter reflexive control on it. Short runtimes due to extensive battery use and vulnerable components keep undercutting otherwise successful pilots.

These systems also lack data. Text and image models were scaled on troves of internet data; embodied systems have no equivalent. Efforts like the Open X-Embodiment dataset and Generalist AI's GEN-0, pretrained on hundreds of thousands of hours of manipulation data, are attempts to build that missing corpus. But to put these systems in real world situations they need to be trained on at least tens of millions of hours of data.

Embodied AI should be viewed as a systems challenge rather than only a software challenge as safe deployment depends on sensors, hardware robustness, operational design limits, human interaction, cybersecurity, and organisational processes, not algorithms alone. Regulators must start asking for evidence of what counts as proof for allowing learning-enabled robotics systems to be deployed in real world.

All of these problems cannot be solved by a single breakthrough. They're being chipped away in parallel with better simulators to narrow the simulation-to-real gap, larger shared datasets to address data scarcity, split "brain in the cloud, reflex on the robot" architectures to handle the speed mismatch, and slowly maturing safety frameworks to handle governance.

Evolutionary methods of the kind Mr. Jin champions add another angle to that effort.

Instead of only improving how a fixed body learns, they ask whether a different form factor would make the problem easier to solve in the first place.

Embodied AI systems have come a long way. Boston Dynamics' humanoid robot Atlas on the football field during FIFA World Cup 2026 shows how robots are able to adapt to uneven surfaces. In a separate event, on America's Got Talent Season 21, China's Unitree G1 robots performed alongside Wu Yufei, a 26-year-old Chinese dancer. Spot is now powered by an AI brain and can assist e-commerce delivery agents.

It is starting to become clear that intelligence was never just a matter of better software sitting inside better computers. It was also, at least partly, a matter of testing out new form factors. And these designs are starting to get better with advances in quadruped and avian design-inspired robots.

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

The leader trusted only his sycophants

He had a tin ear for criticism and dissenting voices

S. Upendran

What is the meaning and origin of 'tin ear'? (Rajesh Das, Cuttack)

The expression is mostly used in informal contexts to suggest disapproval. When you say that an individual has a 'tin ear', you mean that the person does not have a good or sensitive ear as far as music is concerned - being tone deaf, this individual fails to appreciate the finer things in life - music, poetry, etc. The person may also have problems picking up on the tone someone uses when speaking. He may, for example, fail to understand that someone is being sarcastic and not literal - very much like Sheldon in 'The Big Bang Theory'.

Ram's father was a great musician. But poor Ram has a tin ear.

His descriptions are fantastic. When it comes to writing dialogue, however, he has a tin ear.

People who are hard of hearing can today buy a hearing aid and slip it into their ear - others won't be able to see it. This was not the case in 18th century Europe. In the 17th and 18th centuries, people who were hard of hearing, made use of the collapsible 'ear trumpet' which was nearly 20 inches long. The instrument, shaped like a trumpet, was made out of tin - hence, those who made use of it were called 'tin ear'.

How is the word 'sycophant' pronounced? (K.S. Seetha, Hyderabad)

Many of us in India pronounce the first syllable like the 'psy' in 'psychology' and 'psychic'. Native speakers of English, however, pronounce the 'syc' like the word 'sick'. The following vowel is like the 'a' in 'china', while the final syllable rhymes with 'pant', 'chant' and 'rant'. The word is pronounced 'SICK-e-fant', with the stress on the first syllable. It comes from the Greek 'sukophantes', meaning 'informer'. The original 'sycophant' was someone who informed the authorities about the illegal activities being carried out by others - today, there are several terms to refer to such a person - snitch, stooge, rat, etc. Over time, the meaning of the word gradually underwent a change in meaning. From someone who pleased authorities by informing on others, today, it means someone who chooses to please the rich and the powerful through flattery.

Unlike most politicians, she chose not to surround herself with sycophants.

Which is correct? I'm an English teacher or I'm a teacher of English? (K. Damodharan, Srirangam)

In terms of grammar, both sentences are acceptable. When someone says he is a teacher of English, what he means is that teaching is his profession, and the subject he teaches is English - there is no ambiguity here. The second sentence - I'm an English teacher - is frequently heard in our country, and it can be interpreted in two different ways. Like the first sentence, it could mean that the person is someone who teaches English. But 'English teacher' could also be interpreted to mean that the teacher's nationality is English - in other words, he is from England.

Word of the day

Indigence:
a state of extreme poverty or destitution

Synonyms: need, penury, pauperism

Usage: *The economic crisis left thousands on the brink of indigence.*

Pronunciation: newsth.live/indigence

International Phonetic Alphabet: /ˈɪndɪdʒəns/

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

THE DAILY QUIZ

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

Test your knowledge on the life and career of Sir Garfield Sobers who passed away recently

V.V. Ramanan

QUESTION 1
With which physical oddity was Sobers born with before 'normalcy' was restored by the age of 14?

QUESTION 2
To make his inclusion legitimate in the Police Cricket Club, how was Sobers, still in his teens, recruited?

QUESTION 3
According to his autobiography, Sobers never ducked into a bouncer in his career after being hit on the forehead by a legendary fast bowler in a match against the touring English side in 1953-54. Name the bowler.

QUESTION 4
Name the sci-fi book he supposedly authored in 1967 in which a supercomputer helps a university cricket team become unbeatable.

QUESTION 5
The first of his 26 Test centuries was an unbeaten 365 in 1958. Where and against whom did notch up the record-breaking knock?

QUESTION 6
Name bowler at the receiving end when Sobers hit six sixes in an over.

QUESTION 7
The winner of which ICC award is given the 'Sir Garfield Sobers Trophy'?

QUESTION 8
Which innings by Sobers did the great Don Bradman describe as 'probably the greatest exhibition of batting ever seen in Australia'?

Visual question: Name this Indian actress and model to whom Sobers was briefly engaged in the 1960s. AFP

Questions and answers to the previous daily quiz: 1. In the 2026 World Cup, France entered the quarter-finals after defeating this country. A senator of said country lashed out at one of the French players using extremely racist and dehumanising imagery. Name the country and the French player. **Ans: Paraguay; Kylian Mbappé**
2. In 1998, when France hosted the FIFA World Cup, a terror plot targeting the tournament was uncovered. Name the group which plotted the attack. **Ans: Armed Islamic Group (GIA) of Algeria**
3. This South Korean player was suspended by FIFA from two qualifying matches during the 2014 World Cup for holding up a banner which said "Dokdo is our territory". Name the player. **Ans: Park Jong-woo**
4. England and Argentina faced each other, in the quarter-finals, in 1986. A significant geopolitical event underpinned the match. Two goals scored by this Argentinian player in the match are now among the most well-known goals in football history. Name the event and the player. **Ans: Falklands War; Diego Maradona**
5. This plastic whistle-cum-horn is popular in South Africa's football stadiums. Name the instrument. **Ans: Vuvuzelas**
Visual: This image showcases a flare being thrown next to a player during a match between Brazil and Chile in the 1990 FIFA World Cup. Name the player. **Ans: Roberto Rojas**
Early birds: Sukdev Shet| Erfanally Oosmany| Barnali Biswas| Sudhir Thapa| Santu Rakshit

Insurers' investments: should you care?

COVERNOTE

K. Nitya Kalyani

Last week some insurers asked the regulator to ease proposed investment norms in unlisted firms.

They wanted a higher quantum of investible funds to be allowed in unlisted firms by tweaking a certain basis of calculation proposed. Regulator IRDAI lays down investment norms and different view points and requirements lead to the dialogues.

All large firms, apart from core business, also maintain an investment portfolio spanning the securities markets, government debt, money market, international currency and so on. The income from that is called 'other income.'

Large investment portfolios

Insurers have significantly large investment portfolios and are big institutional investors.

The premium is invested and it is with that income the insurers run operations, sell more policies and pay claims. This is because it is a long and difficult road to profit in core insurance business, called underwriting profit. And in general insurance, underwriting profit can be elusive even after decades since they deal with catastrophic and long-tail risks which can be difficult to quantify and manage.

This is why insurance norms take a strict view of investments by insurers. The percentage of total investment in each category of investment is laid out. The overarching goal of this norm is fund safety not high returns.

Investment in securities

However, since profit is also important, the regulations allow a certain, measured, portion of the portfolio to be invested in the securities market and some other instruments where the risk is higher and so is the chance of reward.

Investment in unlisted companies is considered riskier than in listed companies, other things being equal. Yet, they can give impressive returns as we have seen in the case of tech startups and the unicorns.

So, what does all this have to do with you, an individual? And this page, which is about personal finance? You should be aware of how your money is safeguarded. Because, investment is not a one-size-fits-all activity.

A case in point, years ago, a young relative came home to give my mother the good news that he had got a job in the marketing team of a mutual fund.

When he learnt of my insurance background, he complained bitterly that insurance companies were not allowed (then) to invest in mutual funds and that the insurers were losing out a golden investment opportunity (and he, a golden sale!).

I explained to him that the insurance company was investing his personal life insurance premium and asked how safe he wanted that money to be, right up to the day when a claim is made. The penny dropped and he accepted that all investments are not for everyone.

Difficult business

There are many reasons why insurance is a difficult business. It requires large investments, significant staying power until breakeven which can be over a decade later, sustained marketing and repeated shoring up of solvency as per regulations.

With all this pressure for continuing investment, your funds need to be safeguarded and that is what the regulations do.

They ensure that your money is in a safe investment until you call for it by way of a claim.

You definitely don't want to see it frittered away on some dubious investment or shiny ponzi scheme as my neighbour did with his retirement settlement and found himself figuratively on the streets.

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

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

ILLUSTRATION- SAAI

Electronic Gold Receipts: a new way to own gold

The yellow metal has long gone digital, but this time it is offering the convenience of electronic investing along with ownership of physical gold

NEW AGE GOLD

Vaishali R. Venkat

In May 2026, the National Stock Exchange of India (NSE) introduced Electronic Gold Receipts (EGRs), a new exchange-traded segment for buying and selling gold in electronic form. The initiative aims at improving transparency in gold pricing, standardise quality, and provide investors with a regulated and secure way to own the yellow metal, while making India's gold market more efficient. It enables investors to own physical gold without the need to store it at home or in a bank locker.

Gold exchange journey

On September 28, 2021, the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) approved the framework for Gold Exchange and SEBI (Vault Managers) Regulations, 2021. The Centre notified EGRs as securities under the Securities Contracts (Regulation) Act, 1956, in December 2021. Further, on April 11, 2022, SEBI issued a 'Comprehensive Risk Management Framework' for EGRs. Together, they laid the regulatory foundation for EGR trading in India.

In September 2022, the Bombay Stock Exchange (BSE) received SEBI's final nod to unveil the EGR segment. It became the first bourse in India to launch EGR on October 24, 2022 on Muhurat trading session. Initially, BSE introduced two EGR products backed by 995 and 999 purity gold with trading in multiples of 1 gram and physical delivery in multiples of 10/100 grams.

> Retail investors, jewellers, bullion traders, refiners, institutional investors and other eligible market participants can buy EGRs via registered stockbrokers

> One of the biggest advantages is, EGRs enable transparent price discovery via exchange trading, ensuring uniform price across India at any point in time

What are EGRs?

Electronic Gold Receipts (EGRs) are exchange-traded securities representing ownership of physical gold (specified purity) stored in SEBI-regulated vaults. They can be held electronically in a demat account, bought and sold in different denominations on the bourse and converted into physical gold via prescribed process.

Buying/selling EGRs

EGRs can be traded from Monday to Friday during market hours. Trading is available from 9 a.m. to 11:30 p.m., or up to 11:55 p.m., during the U.S. daylight saving period. Like shares, EGRs follow a T+1 settlement cycle with the receipts credited to the buyer's demat account the next trading day. Retail investors, jewellers, bullion traders, refiners, institutional investors and other eligible market participants can buy EGRs via registered stockbrokers. Investors need both trading and demat accounts to buy and sell EGRs.

Benefits of EGRs

EGRs combine the advantages of physical gold with the convenience of electronic investing. As a SEBI-recognised security, each EGR is backed by a specified quantity of gold of a defined purity, securely stored in SEBI-regulated vaults. This offers a transparent and standardised way to own gold while removing concerns over purity and personal storage.

One of the biggest advantages is EGRs enable transparent price discovery via exchange trading, ensuring uniform price across India at any given point in time. Investors can buy and sell EGRs during market hours, hold them in a demat account and choose from denominations based on budget. The gold backing an EGR is stored safely in regulated vaults, so investors need not worry about its purity.

Those who prefer physical gold can convert EGRs into gold whenever needed. EGRs offer liquidity, settlement guarantee, fungibility and can help diversify investment portfolios.

The EGRs are available in two purity standards: 999 (99.9% pure gold) and 995 (99.5% pure gold). In each purity category, investors have six different denominations such as 10 mg, 100 mg, 1 g, 10 g, 100 g and 1 kg. Whether you want to test the waters with a tiny investment or accumulate over time, EGRs offer denominations to suit first-time buyers and seasoned investors.

Costs to bear

Apart from the cost of purchasing EGRs, investors may also incur brokerage, demat (depository) and vault-storage charges and other applicable transaction charges. Those opting for physical delivery of gold may also have to bear purity testing and transportation charges. There is no GST for EGR trading. However, investors opting for physical delivery must pay 3% GST on gold value.

Buying and selling EGRs is only one part of the story. The real questions lie behind the scenes: Why did India create a Gold Exchange? How does physical gold become an Electronic Gold Receipt? And should EGRs find a place in your portfolio? Behind every EGR lies a vault. The story behind its doors will unfold in the next part.

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

Investment process has to be simple

THINKINVESTOR

A simple core portfolio may not help earn more returns than a benchmark index but it could help you achieve your goals. The objective is to keep investment process simple and moderate regret

Venkatesh Bangaruswamy

If you decide to self-manage your investments, you should keep the investment process simple. Here, we discuss how to create a simple behaviourally optimal portfolio within the core-satellite framework.

Moderating biases

Your investment process should moderate biases relating to your investment decisions. The important behaviour traits you should address are regret and present biases. You can moderate future regret by keeping the choice of investments simple. Present bias – the desire to spend now instead of saving for the future –– can be moderated by setting up systematic investment plans (SIPs).

Consider your investment choices. For the core goal-based portfolio, you can choose active mutual or passive funds (index funds/ETFs). An active fund chosen may do well but not as good as some other funds you did not choose. That can open the door for regret.

ETFs/index funds do not expose you to such regret as such funds on the same benchmark give similar returns. So, choosing one passive fund instead of another may not cause regret in the future.

Your satellite portfolio is meant to help capture short-term market fluctuations. You could buy individual stocks and ETFs. Equity ETFs appear optimal as they contain a basket of stocks. For instance, if an index constitutes 40 stocks and 15 of them dip, there is a strong likelihood the balance 25 stocks may push the index up. An ETF on an index is, therefore, likely to cause less regret in the future than a bet on an individual stock. Then, with global geopolitical tensions, there is investor preference for gold and silver. Buying ETFs on these metals is simpler than buying physical assets. Core portfolio can have just one ETF for each goal. Your satellite portfolio can contain, if you consider appropriate, an index ETF, a gold ETF and, perhaps, a silver ETF.

Conclusion

A simple core portfolio may not help earn more returns than a benchmark index but it could help you achieve your goals. The objective is to keep investment process simple and moderate future regret. Based on the core portfolio framework, you should have one portfolio (one ETF and bank deposit) for each goal, as risk appetite is different for each goal. For instance, you may want a conservative allocation (more bonds) for a child's education portfolio and an aggressive allocation for a retirement portfolio.

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

Personal Loans

Rates and Charges		Loan amount 5 lakh Tenure 5 years	Loan amount 1 lakh Tenure 5 years	(% of loan amount)
Name of Lender	**Interest Rate (%)**	**EMI (Rs)**	**EMI (Rs)**	**Processing fee**
HDFC Bank	9.99 onwards	10,621 onwards	2,124 onwards	Up to Rs 6,500
Tata Capital	10.99 onwards	10,869 onwards	2,174 onwards	Flat Rs. 99
State Bank of India	10.00-15.00	10,624-11,895	2,125-2,379	Up to 1.50% (Rs. 1,000 - Rs. 15,000)
ICICI Bank	9.99 onwards	10,621 onwards	2,124 onwards	Up to 2%
Bank of Baroda*	10.15-18.00	10,660-12,697	2,132-2,539	Up to 2% (Max. Rs 10,000)
Axis Bank	8.90 onwards	10,355 onwards	2,071 onwards	Up to 2%
Kotak Mahindra Bank	10.99 onwards	10,869 onwards	2,174 onwards	Up to 5%
Bank of India	10.85-16.15	10,834-12,199	2,167-2,440	Up to 1% (Min. Rs 250; Max. Rs 15,000)
Canara Bank	9.70-15.15	10,550-11.934	2,110-2,387	0.25% (Rs. 500 - Rs. 2,500)
Punjab National Bank	10.25-16.80	10,685-12,373	2,137-2,475	Up to 1%
HSBC Bank	9.75 onwards	10,562 onwards	2,112 onwards	Up to 2%
Federal Bank	11.75 - 18.99	11,059 - 12,968	2,212 - 2,594	Up to 3%
Union Bank of India	8.90 - 12.65	10,355-11,287	2,071-2,257	Up to 1% (Max. Rs 7,500)
Bajaj Finserv	10.00-30.00	10,624-16,177	2,125-3,235	Up to 3.93%
Punjab & Sind Bank	9.60-13.85	10,525-11,595	2,105-2,319	0.50%-1%
Indian Overseas Bank	10.25 onwards	10,685 onwards	2,137 onwards	Up to 0.75%
UCO Bank	9.95 - 13.20	10,611-11,428	2,122-2,286	Up to 1% (Min. Rs 750)
IDFC FIRST Bank	9.99 onwards	10,621 onwards	2,124 onwards	Up to 3.5%
Bank of Maharashtra	9.75-15.00	10,562-11,895	2,112-2,379	Up to 1% (Max. Rs 10,000)
Central Bank of India	11.25 onwards	10,934 onwards	2,187 onwards	Up to 1%
IndusInd Bank	10.49 onwards	10,744 onwards	2,149 onwards	Up to 3.5% (2% for instant personal loans for limited period)

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

Car Loans

Rates and Charges		Loan amount 5 lakh Tenure 5 years	(% of loan amount)
Name of Lender	**Interest Rate (%)**	**EMI (Rs)**	**Processing fee**
Union Bank of India	7.50-10.00	10,019 - 10,684	Up to Rs 1,000
Punjab National Bank	7.60-10.70	10,043 - 10,797	Up to 0.25% (Rs. 1,000 - Rs. 1,500)
Bank of Baroda	7.60 - 11.35	10,043 - 10,959	Up to Rs. 2,000
Canara Bank	7.45-11.45	10,007 - 10,984	0.25% (Rs 1,000 - Rs 5,000)*
Bank of India	7.60-12.55	10,043 - 11,262	Up to 0.25% (Rs. 2,500 - Rs. 10,000)
UCO Bank	7.35-10.00	9,983 - 10,624	0.5% (Max. Rs 5,000)
State Bank of India	8.70 - 9.85	10,307 - 10,587	Rs. 1,000 - Rs. 4,000
IDBI Bank	7.75-9.30	10,078 - 10,452	Rs 2,500
Bank of Maharashtra**	7.45-11.75	10,007 - 11,059	0.25% (Rs. 1,000 - Rs. 15,000)
Indian Overseas Bank	7.55-12.00	10,031 - 11,122	NIL
ICICI Bank	8.40 onwards	10,234 onwards	Up to Rs. 8,500
HDFC Bank	8.15 onwards	10,174 onwards	Up to 0.5% (Rs. 3,500 - Rs. 8,000)
Karnataka Bank	8.14-11.64	10,172 - 11,031	Up to 0.60% (Rs. 2,500 - Rs. 11,000)
Federal Bank	7.65-9.00	10,055 onwards	1% (Rs. 1,000 - Rs. 50,000)
Punjab and Sind Bank***	7.50-14.00	10,019 - 11,634	0.25% (Rs. 1,000 - Rs. 15,000)
Indian Bank	7.50-9.65	10,019 - 10,513	Rs. 1,200
Central Bank of India	7.60-9.30	10,043 - 10,452	0.50%(Rs. 2,000 - Rs. 20,000)

*50% waiver on processing fee till Sept.30
**0.25% interest rate concession for home loan borrowers, customers with at least 6 months banking relationship
***Concession of up to 50% on processing fee for PSB Apna Vahan Sugam.

Rates and charges as on July 15 **Source: Paisabazaar.com**

'DeepSeek to raise capital at $74 billion valuation'

Cash flow: A DeepSeek AI sign is seen at a building where the start-up's office is located in Beijing, China. REUTERS

Reuters
HONG KONG/BEIJING

Chinese AI startup DeepSeek is planning to launch a fresh fundraising round at a valuation of about 500 billion yuan ($74 billion) ahead of a potential mainland initial public offering, two people with knowledge of the matter said.The plan comes just weeks after the Hangzhou-based company,which drew global attention with its low-cost AI models in 2025,raised about $7.4 billion in June at a post-money valuation of about 450 billion yuan, the people said. Filings by two Chinese investors later suggested DeepSeek was valued at 350.88 billion yuan, or around $52 billion.

Strong investor appetite

The back-to-back fundraising plans underscore strong investor appetite for one of China's most closely watched AI companies, but also point to the rising costs of competing in AI, which requires large amounts of computing power, data-centre capacity and engineering talent.

DeepSeek is looking to raise as much as 50 billion yuan in the new funding round, according to a third person briefed onthe matter.

It has also started early deliberations on a potential IPO on Shanghai's Nasdaq-style STAR Market, the three sources and two other people with knowledge of the plan said.

The company has set an internal target to complete an IPO filing this year, one of them said.

All the people declined to be identified because the information is not public. The fundraising and IPO plans are at early stages, and terms and timetable may change, they said.

DeepSeek did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Bloomberg News first reported on Tuesday that DeepSeek was preparing for a possible IPO filing, while the Financial Times reported that the company was weighing a fresh fundraising round at a valuation of at least 480 billion yuan.

Rising costs

DeepSeek shook global technology markets last year after releasing models that appeared to rival leading U.S. systems at lower training and operating costs. Soon after its maiden fundraising round in June, DeepSeek said it planned to double staff across departments, including in areas such as data centres and AI agents, systems capable of performing tasks with limited prompting. Some of those initiatives will require significant capital expenditure. *Reuters* reported earlier this month that DeepSeek was looking to develop its own AI inference chip and had discreetly increased hiring of chip-design engineers for the project. DeepSeek had long stood out in China's AI sector for rejecting outside funding. Founder Liang Wenfeng had largely bankrolled the company using his quantitative hedge fund High-Flyer before its recent external financing, sources previously told *Reuters*.

But the cost of staying at the frontier of AI has risen sharply, forcing a change in strategy.

Inside L&T Vyoma's Artificial Intelligence factory in Chennai

The digital infrastructure arm of L&T is competing hard in the AI data centre race leveraging its parent's engineering capabilities; L&T Vyoma's "AI factory" now deploys GPU clusters through a landmark Nvidia partnership; L&T Vyoma plans to invest about ₹9,000 crore across its campuses

NEWS ANALYSIS

Sindhu Hariharan
Rohan Das

Giant stakes: The L&T group has allocated ₹10,000 crore to the DC business. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Even as the AI boom is impacting businesses the world over, it is creating a serendipitous opportunity for India. As the soaring demand for GPU infra, coupled with power shortage in the West, forces companies to look towards India for data centre (DC) capacity, developers are racing to build AI-ready DCs.

L&T Vyoma, the digital infrastructure arm of Larsen & Toubro, is betting big on this window of opportunity and accelerating the expansion of its Chennai campus, which has transformed from a conventional DC into an "AI factory" serving varied customer needs. After expanding from basic co-location services to private, public, and sovereign cloud options, L&T Vyoma's "AI factory" now deploys GPU clusters through a landmark Nvidia partnership.

A digital fortress

A walk-through of the DC, located near Sriperumbudur on the outskirts of Chennai, offers a glimpse into a future that is already fast hurtling into the present. Entering the campus – after stringent security checks of the airport kind, complete with scanners, frisking and minute inspection of bags and purses – one feels one is stepping into a rarefied zone.

The eerie quietness intensifies this feeling. Unlike other mega factories that throb with the hum and hustle of people and machinery, the surreally quiet DCs are populated with racks of servers processing huge amounts of data. There are rows of servers in the hallways, alongside power electronics, cooling systems and back-ups for seamless operations. Several areas were off-limits to us, owing to client confidentiality requirements.

Once filled with CPU racks, the Chennai DC now hosts the coveted Nvidia H100s, H200s, and Blackwell GPUs, in step with technological shifts.

> Clients include neo-cloud players, banking and financial institutions, commodity exchanges, and other companies; there is significant interest from hyperscalers also

The nerve centre of a DC is its control room, where we encounter a small team monitoring everything from the temperature of individual racks to grid connectivity, and the parameters of the UPS and standby diesel generators.

There is also a dedicated security control room, where the CCTVs are equipped with AI-powered software to provide real-time alerts. It's a well-guarded fortress.

Huge demand

"Chennai is our flagship data centre campus, where we currently have a 30 megawatt IT load DC. We have power ready, network ready, permit ready for the second building, which we are kicking off, as we see significant demand for AI data centres," says Prashant C Jain, MD, L&T Vyoma, and Head of Electronic Products and Systems.

Expansion pipeline

L&T Vyoma has a second DC campus in Panvel in Maharashtra's Raigad district. Alongside Phase 2 of the Chennai and Panvel campuses, the company's expansion pipeline includes the upcoming campuses at Mahape (in Navi Mumbai) and Bengaluru. The live capacity is around 30 MW (Chennai), 2 MW (Panvel); an additional 200 MW is set to go live in the short- to medium-term.

With the L&T group allocating ₹10,000 crore to the DC business, L&T Vyoma plans to invest about ₹9,000 crore across its campuses in FY27 itself, given the high demand for AI-ready infrastructure.

Jain does not rule out external funding in the future, adding that the nature of the funding would depend on the model of the DCs. Clients include neo-cloud players, banking and financial institutions, commodity exchanges, and other companies. There is significant interest from hyperscalers, he says.

The business is also constantly innovating and entering into partnerships to support new-age requirements.

For instance, L&T Vyoma recently partnered with Fortanix Inc to offer sovereign, secure AI solutions using Nvidia confidential computing technology. This model specifically targets regulated sectors in India, ensuring data sovereignty and compliance while enabling secure AI adoption. The two companies will jointly develop solutions, co-sell to industries, and engage with AI model builders to strengthen the ecosystem.

Jain says that while it typically takes 15-18 months to get a DC up and running, L&T with its engineering, procurement and construction (EPC) strengths is constantly innovating to make this more efficient.

"L&T Vyoma has a significant advantage. We as a group have a strong EPC experience and competence, which we rely on. We also have good experience in realty and project management," Jain notes.

What also sets Vyoma's Chennai DC apart is the fact that facilities designed for conventional cloud computing were re-engineered to handle dense GPU clusters, advanced cooling systems and massive power loads – a feat perhaps only an infra giant like L&T can accomplish.

L&T Vyoma is also exploring improvements in DC design to avoid dependence on power utilities when scaling up AI-ready DCs. "We are evaluating technologies like battery energy storage system and grid forming inverters to support the grid.

Such solutions will be a good hedge to support the grid, rather than expecting the grid to take more load," says Jain. This will also help the company increase its share of renewable energy usage, which is about 40 per cent today.

(The writers are with The Hindu businessline)

Underutilised loans against insurance policy

Rajesh Krishnan

Short-term liquidity: A loan against insurance policy (LAIP) is available for select categories of life insurance products.

Life insurance products are designed to meet the long-term financial needs of individuals.

However, some financial needs arise unexpectedly – medical emergencies, education expenses, or temporary cash-flow gaps, among others – making timely access to liquidity essential. Many individuals end up surrendering their life insurance policies to meet such unforeseen expenses, but premature surrender can erode the policy's accumulated value and weaken long-term financial protection.

A loan against insurance policy (LAIP), available for select categories of life insurance products, bridges this gap by providing access to short-term liquidity while allowing the policy to continue and enabling the policyholder to benefit from its long-term advantages.

New-age expectations

Today's customers expect seamless, digital-first experiences marked by speed, transparency, and simplicity.

The evolution of LAIP offerings increasingly reflects these preferences through paperless loan applications, digital submission of documents, faster eligibility checks, faster disbursals, and a transparent online tracking system.

By integrating technology with financial flexibility, many leading life insurers position LAIP as an intuitive and accessible liquidity solution. Access to this corpus can be significantly quicker, as the policy details are already available with the insurer, reducing the need for extensive documentation.

LAIP allows policyholders to access funds against the policy's surrender value, while keeping the life cover intact.

LAIP vs. personal loan

Policyholders often compare an LAIP with conventional personal loans when evaluating their liquidity options. While both provide access to funds, structure and customer experience differ significantly. Some of the key differences are:

- LAIP does not need credit appraisal of the individual and typically does not involve checking one's credit bureau score, as the policy itself secures the loan.
- The interest rate is generally competitive when compared to personal loans. Moreover, personal loans may involve processing fees and other charges, which typically do not apply for an LAIP.
- Since the loan is accessed against an existing insurance policy, there is no need for a separate collateral. The policy itself serves as collateral .
- Most of the leading life insurers have digitised the LAIP process, enabling policyholders to access the loan efficiently through a largely digital journey with minimal documentation.
- Repayment options are generally flexible. Loan eligibility is reinstated as repayments are made and may rise further as renewal premia continue to build the policy's cash value.

However, an LAIP should not be viewed as a conventional bank loan. Rather, it functions more as a feature or benefit attached to an insurance policy. They may provide greater repayment flexibility without the usual EMI burden or concerns around hidden repayment hassles and charges. Since the loan is against policy value, there is generally no financial assessment involved.

(The writer is Chief Operations and Customer Experience Officer, Bajaj Life Insurance)

Inox's clean-energy platform an expressway to green empire

Avinash Nair

Skyward bound: Inox Clean's valuation soaring to nearly ₹70,000 crore. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

For most renewable energy companies, growth follows a familiar script – projects are bid for, capacities are added and capital raised. But Inox Clean is trying to rewrite the playbook.

Over the past year, the INOXGFL Group-backed clean energy platform has spent more than ₹25,200 crore on a string of acquisitions stretching from India to West Asia and Southeast Asia. The deals span renewable power generation, solar manufacturing, project development, operations and maintenance, and international assets.

At first glance, the buying spree appears unusually intense – even by the standards of India's rapidly consolidating renewable energy sector. But the company insists that the objective is not simply to become bigger.

Says Devansh Jain, Executive Director, INOXGFL Group, "From the beginning we have been focused on building an integrated clean energy platform that spans manufacturing, project development, power generation and lifecycle services. The strategy is attracting investor attention. Adar Poonawalla Family Office's recent investment of ₹700 crore sent Inox Clean's valuation soaring to nearly ₹70,000 crore – the highest among India's privately held clean energy companies.

According to Jain, the company wants to grow its integrated clean energy platform into a "world leader" – a company measured not only by megawatts installed but also its ability to manufacture, develop, own and operate renewable energy assets across global markets.

The ambition marks a significant evolution for the diversified INOXGFL Group. Best known for building businesses across the chemicals, fluoropolymers, wind energy and industrial gases segments, the group is now attempting to replicate its integrated model in clean energy.

Rather than assembling a portfolio of unrelated firms, "every acquisition fits into a larger strategic architecture."

String of acquisitions

It started off with the acquisition of SkyPower 1 in August 2025, followed by SkyPower 2 a month later, giving Inox Clean an immediate portfolio of operating renewable energy assets. January 2026 saw the acquisition of SunSource Energy, strengthening the company's commercial and industrial (C&I) renewable energy business.

A month later came SkyPower MENA, opening the door to overseas markets. April proved to be the busiest month – Inox Clean acquired Wind World IPP, while listed group company Inox Green purchased Wind World O&M, adding both operating renewable assets and long-term asset management capabilities. Around the same time, the acquisition of Vibrant Energy expanded its generation portfolio. The strategy then moved further upstream. May saw the acquisition of Vietnam-headquartered Boviet Energy, providing an entry into integrated solar module manufacturing and strengthening backward integration. June brought in Singapore-based Vena Energy and geographically diversified renewable portfolio across Asia. The proposed buy of Regen Energy awaits National Company Law Tribunal nod.

Funding the expansion

The acquisitions and funding inevitably raise questions over leverage and capital allocation.

The funding entailed a combination of internal accruals, equity capital and debt "while maintaining a disciplined approach to leverage".

The recent Adar Poonawalla Family Office investment and the preceding institutional backing have strengthened the balance sheet. Despite the dilution of stake, the promoter group continues to hold more than 90%. Jain sees benefits beyond just capital infusion. "Having credible long-term investors strengthens governance, brings valuable perspectives and reinforces our commitment to disciplined execution," he says.

(The writer is with The Hindu Businessline)

MIAMI

Prominent Cuban dissident artist Otero Alcantara lands in U.S. exile

AFP

Prominent Cuban dissident artist Luis Manuel Otero Alcantara flew on Saturday to exile in the United States after serving a five-year sentence on the island. Mr. Otero Alcantara was sentenced to five years in prison in 2022 for insulting national symbols, contempt and disturbing the public order. AFP

JOHANNESBURG

Radioactive contamination at nuclear plant minor, says S. Africa

REUTERS

Recent radioactive contamination incidents at Africa's only nuclear power plant were minor and posed no public danger, officials said on Sunday. Low levels of "airborne radioactive contamination" was detected during scheduled maintenance work at the Koeberg nuclear plant, between June 30 and July 16, they said. AFP

BAMAKO

At least 50 Malian soldiers killed in rebel-jihadist attack, say officials

AP

At least 50 Malian soldiers were killed in an attack by Tuareg separatists and jihadists as they left the strategic northern town of Anefis, officials said on Sunday. The attack, claimed by JNIM and the FLA, on the army convoy occurred on Saturday, following weeks of fighting with both sides attempting to take control. AFP

LONDON

'U.K.'s Burnham drops digital ID scheme to prioritise cost of living'

REUTERS

Britain's next leader, Andy Burnham, will scrap government plans for a digital ID scheme when he takes office, signalling his intention to focus resources on kitchen table issues such as the cost of living, his allies said. Dubbed the 'King of the North', Mr. Burnham will replace Keir Starmer as Prime Minister on Monday. REUTERS

U.S. strikes Iran over troop deaths; Israel warns of 'full force' response

Washington says strikes meant to degrade Iran's ability to control the strait; Iran responds with attacks on Kuwait, Jordan, and Bahrain; Jordan's military says it shot down several incoming Iranian missiles with no reported casualties or damage

Associated Press
DUBAI

The United States launched more air strikes at Iran on Sunday in response to the killing of U.S. troops, and Iran fired missiles toward Jordan that risked widening the conflict into neighbouring Israel.

Step by step, the U.S, and Iran have returned closer to all-out war as last month's interim deal meant to permanently end the fighting has crumbled and shipping traffic in the Strait of Hormuz has largely stalled. Both sides have targeted civilian infrastructure relied on by millions of people.

A heavily-damaged bridge which was hit by a U.S. strike along the road connecting Roudan and Bandar Abbas in Iran on Saturday. AFP

The U.S. military said the latest strikes targeted Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard to retaliate for Friday's killing of troops in Jordan. The campaign, now in its second week, has seen the U.S. target bridges, water desalination plants and electrical facilities in Iran. Tehran has hit U.S.-allied countries throughout the West Asia.

Kuwait, Jordan and Bahrain again activated air defences for incoming Iranian drones and missiles. Kuwait said one of its power and water desalination plants was attacked for the second time in two days, causing fires.

Jordan's military said it shot down several Iranian missiles. The country hosts major U.S. bases and relies on U.S. air-defence systems. The missiles did not cause casualties or damage, according to Jordan's military.

Israel warned that missiles launched toward neighbouring Jordan could cause fire to spill over into Israeli territory for the first time in weeks.

Israel's Defence Minister Israel Katz said that his country would respond powerfully to any attack by Iran, after Israeli and Jordanian forces intercepted an Iranian missile launched towards the Jordanian city of Aqaba. "If Iran fires missiles at Israel, we will attack them with full force."

The United States military's Central Command said it hit "Iranian military coastal surveillance and air defence facilities, maritime capabilities and missile and drone storage sites".

It said the attack was designed to degrade Iran's ability to control the strait and "swiftly punish Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps forces".

Russian attacks on several Ukrainian cities kill six

Associated Press
KYIV

Russia attacked Kyiv and other Ukrainian cities with ballistic missiles, drones and guided bombs on Sunday, killing at least six persons and wounding dozens, authorities said, again highlighting Ukraine's shortage of U.S.-made Patriot air defence systems.

Moscow has in recent weeks stepped up its use of ballistic missiles as it seeks to choke off Ukrainian strikes on oil facilities deep inside Russia that have caused critical fuel shortages affecting both the military and the civilian population.

U.S. President Donald Trump has said he is prepared to grant Ukraine licenses to produce Patriots, the most effective means of intercepting Russian ballistic missiles, potentially bolstering Kyiv's defences. However, the details and timeline remain unclear, and full production could take years.

Critical hit: An explosion in the city during a Russian missile and drone strike, in Kyiv, Ukraine on Sunday. REUTERS

Russia launched 41 missiles and 125 drones across Ukraine overnight, according to the Ukrainian air force. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said most of the missiles had targeted the capital.

Later on Sunday, a Russian attack on a postal facility near Ukraine's second-largest city of Kharkiv killed three persons and wounded at least 20, according to the regional administration.

Russian guided bombs also hit the cities of Kherson and Sumy.

Russian Opposition figure withdraws from election

Agence France-Presse
MOSCOW

Russian anti-war politician Boris Nadezhdin on Sunday said he will not be running in September's legislative elections, saying he has been "silenced" and "pushed out of politics".

Mr. Nadezhdin – one of the few politicians in Russia openly criticising President Vladimir Putin and Moscow's Ukraine offensive – had recently been convicted for displaying "extremist symbols".

"My ability to legally engage in opposition politics in Russia has been exhausted," he wrote on Telegram.

"I'm not prepared to put at risk those who support me and took part in the election campaign".

The 63-year-old's campaign had been severely compromised since he was declared a "foreign agent" last week, followed by his sentencing on Friday for "displaying extremist symbols", in this case posting a video in 2023 that briefly showed deceased dissident Alexei Navalny.

> My ability to legally engage in opposition politics in Russia has been exhausted... I'm not prepared to put at risk those who support me and took part in the election campaign
> **BORIS NADEZHDIN**

State's clampdown

Navalny and his organisations had been designated as "extremist" prior to his death in prison in 2024. Since then, the authorities have regularly accused individuals of promoting "extremism" for sharing his comments or even his photographs.

Since the full-scale offensive against Ukraine in February 2022, the Russian authorities have significantly intensified their crackdown, imprisoning hundreds of their critics.

Almost all opponents are now either in prison, dead or in exile. Mr. Nadezhdin was one of the few people in Russia to publicly denounce Mr. Putin and the offensive in Ukraine without being imprisoned.

Fallen fighters

People gather on the day of a funeral procession for members of the Iranian Kurdish opposition group Komala who were killed in a missile strike on the group's headquarters, in Sulaymaniyah, Iraq, on Sunday. REUTERS

Ferry capsizes off Guyana; 67 rescued, 66 missing

Agence France-Presse
GEORGETOWN

An ageing ferry carrying more than 100 people capsized off the coast of Guyana, with 67 saved and rescue teams searching for the rest, officials said on Sunday.

The ferry *MV Barima* left the small English-speaking country at the northeast corner of South America Saturday afternoon with 133 people aboard for a trip from the capital, Georgetown, to the town of Port Kaituma.

Port Kaituma is inland in the oil-rich Essequibo region, and the ferry travels along the coast in the Atlantic before heading upriver to reach its jungle destination.

It was carrying 116 passengers and a crew of 17.

Two men executed for anti-govt. protests, says Iran's judiciary

Agence France-Presse
TEHRAN

Iran's judiciary announced that two men were hanged on Sunday over charges relating to anti-government protests that peaked in January, having begun a month earlier over economic grievances.

The two men, Erfan Esfandiari and Gol-Mohammad Mohammadi, were found guilty of "tying police officers to a road sign with ropes, injuring them with stones, dousing them with gasoline, and setting them on fire" in the central city of Isfahan, said the judiciary.

The indictment stated that the two individuals had "filmed the scene of the killing and transmitted the footage to television channels" abroad.

The statement did not specify the dates of their arrest or trial.

According to Amnesty International, Iran is responsible for the second most executions of any country, after China.

Palestinians say Israeli settlers torched mosque, factory in occupied West Bank

Agence France-Presse
AT TUWANI

Israeli settlers set fire overnight to a mosque in a village in the occupied West Bank, a Palestinian official said on Sunday, as journalists saw the structure's entrance scorched and Hebrew graffiti sprayed on its walls.

The incident came during a period of increased attacks against Palestinian communities by settlers in the Israeli-occupied West Bank since the start of the Gaza war in 2023.

More than two dozen settlers, some masked, attacked the Al-Taqwa mosque in the village of Al-Tuwani during the night and set it on fire, Mohammed Rabie, head of the village council, said.

A Palestinian man and a child carry a burnt carpet out of Al-Taqwa mosque after an attack, in Al-Tuwani, in occupied West Bank. AFP

The settlers also set fire to two houses and a dairy factory, he said, adding the attackers spray-painted Hebrew graffiti on the walls of the mosque.

Mr. Rabie said the settlers fled after villagers emerged from their homes, adding that local volunteers managed to extinguish the flames before they spread further.

The Israeli police said it deployed officers to the village last night "after a report of suspects who caused damage at the site, including a vehicle that was set on fire, damage to the door of a prayer structure, and graffiti sprayed on walls".

Pak. issues summons to Imran Khan's sister for 'offensive' remarks

Agence France-Presse
LAHORE

Pakistan's anti-cybercrime body has issued summons to Noreen Niazi, sister of former Prime Minister Imran Khan, accusing her of disseminating "false, offensive and inflammatory" content on social media to defame state institutions and spread "fake narratives".

The summons came after Ms. Niazi, in an interview, claimed that the India-Pakistan military confrontation in May 2025 was the result of collusion between Pakistan's military leadership and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and was orchestrated to enhance the image of the armed forces.

The National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency asked Ms. Niazi to appear at its Islamabad office on Monday to record her statement. It warned that non-compliance would mean that she "has nothing to present or state in her defence".

A geisha and a maiko (apprentice) watch a parade during the Gion Matsuri festival in Kyoto, Japan. AP

Kyoto celebrates centuries-old Gion Matsuri festival

Associated Press
KYOTO

There's a special moment when Katsushi Horikawa feels closer to the gods. It comes as he rides atop one of the towering floats pulled through the streets in a centuries-old procession in Japan.

This is the Gion Matsuri festival, born more than 1,000 years ago as a ritual to ward off epidemics and celebrated in the former imperial city of Kyoto throughout July. The parades – accompanied by dances, music and song – draw large crowds and tourists every year. The biggest floats can weigh up to 12 tonnes. Yet, behind the festive atmosphere lies a tradition rooted in the worship of deities and rituals of protection.

"Those performances are not meant primarily for the entertainment of people," said Fabio Rambelli, a religious studies professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara. "They are offerings to the gods." The Gion Matsuri originated in the late 9th century as a ritual to appease spirits believed to cause epidemics and to pray for protection. It takes its name from Kyoto's Gion district and "matsuri," the Japanese word for festival.

At the heart of the celebration is Kyoto's Yasaka Shrine, a Shinto site whose principal deity has long been revered as a protector against calamities. But, the shrine's history also reflects centuries of interaction between Shinto and Buddhism in Japan. Some key participants spend months getting ready for the celebrations. Different neighbourhoods prepare their floats with great care and dedication, with many people trusting the floats will drive away evil spirits.

Challenges ahead for Andy Burnham as he takes over as U.K. Prime Minister

He faces the same challenges as his predecessor in trying to temper a cost-of-living crisis and improve overstretched public services; scrutiny owing to wars in Ukraine and West Asia also awaits; he vowed to provide details about how he will fund a domestic agenda to kick-start a sluggish economy

NEWS ANALYSIS

Associated Press
LONDON

Andy Burnham will enter 10 Downing Street on Monday with a wave of enthusiasm behind him and a mountain of challenges ahead.

His coronation as British Prime Minister may be short-lived as he faces the same struggles as his predecessor in trying to temper a cost-of-living crisis, improve overstretched public services, and step into the international spotlight during major wars in Ukraine and West Asia.

He arrives after spending most of the past decade running Greater Manchester, in northwest England, before winning his ticket back to Parliament in a special election last month.

Leading a government delivering services for 70 million people will be a monumentally larger task with problems on a larger scale and facing issues foreign to a leader of a region with 3 million residents.

Here are the main issues confronting Mr. Burnham and some hints to how he may approach them:

Mr. Burnham has been vague, but promised to provide details this week about how he would fund a domestic agenda to kick-start a sluggish economy, enhance services and raise living standards.

"This change today is the most significant change moment in our politics for 40 years," he said Friday as he became Labour Party leader. "It will take us to a country where life is more affordable, and all people and places are lifted from where they are now."

Mr. Burnham inherits an economy that was improving until the Iran war upended forecasts and growth is now widely predicted to slow sharply over this year while inflation rises.

'Equalise opportunities'

He has said he wants to equalise opportunities around the U.K., particularly by decentralising government, funnelling money to local governments and taking back some services that were privatised four decades ago.

His brand of business-friendly socialism – known as "Manchesterism" and aiming to harness private and public money to invest in areas like transportation, housing and infrastructure – could take years to put in place.

Joshi Herrmann, founder of Manchester news site The Mill, who has covered Mr. Burnham for years, said he may be able to soften the blow for some people who are struggling. "But if the essay question is who can get economic growth and who can remodel the economy in the post-Brexit, post-financial crash era, I'd be very surprised if the answer to that question is Andy Burnham," Mr. Herrmann said.

People demonstrate outside Downing Street in London, calling on Andy Burnham to stand up for the Palestinian cause. REUTERS

With the uncertain state of public finances, Mr. Burnham won't have much room to raise spending. He is replacing Prime Minister Keir Starmer, who was elected on a manifesto that ruled out increases in the government's major tax rates, so he's locked in unless he breaks those pledges.

Mr. Burnham said he would not rule out a wealth tax, telling Gary Lineker on the Goalhanger podcast last week that the government "might be having to ask for a little more."

Mr. Burnham has little foreign policy experience, but has promised to continue the government's NATO commitment and support for the U.K.'s nuclear deterrent. He said Britain will remain a strong booster of Ukraine and a firm United States ally.

Relations with the U.S. could depend on how he interacts with a capricious President Donald Trump, who initially gave Mr. Starmer glowing reviews only to sour on him for not supporting his war with Iran. Mr. Burnham has publicly criticised Mr. Trump in the past but has said he would deal with him respectfully, as he does with others, but would also be willing to disagree.

"I like to think I've got some personality myself and I'll just, you know, I'll deal with him very upfront in the same way," he told Mr. Lineker.

Mr. Trump has pushed NATO members to significantly boost military spending, and Mr. Burnham will be under pressure to exceed the defense spending goals set out by Mr. Starmer.

The defence plan calling for a 15 billion pound ($20 billion) spending boost is much smaller than military leaders had sought and has been criticised for not being fully funded under the current budget. Mr. Burnham has criticised Mr. Starmer's approach to Israel's war with Hamas and the devastation of Gaza.

Sensitive stands

Mr. Burnham condemned the October 7, 2023, attacks on southern Israel by Hamas militants, who killed around 1,200 people and took 251 others hostage, but said the British government waited too long to call for a ceasefire.

More than 73,000 Palestinians have been killed, according to the Gaza Health Ministry, which is part of the Hamas-led government. The Ministry, which does not differentiate between civilians and combatants, is staffed by medical professionals who maintain detailed records viewed as generally reliable by United Nations agencies and independent experts. Mr. Burnham said the U.K. would consider further sanctions against Israelis involved in Gaza violence and illegal West Bank settlements.

The issue is a sensitive one for Labour, which was found to be tainted with anti-semitism before Mr. Starmer took over, and also relies on the support of a large Muslim population.

His comments drew a backlash from Jewish groups, but he's also been criticised by pro-Palestinian groups for not declaring Israel's bombardment of Gaza a genocide.

During his acceptance speech as Labour's leader on Friday, Mr. Burnham did not mention immigration, which is a top issue for many voters. Like much of Europe and other wealthier nations, the U.K. has seen an influx of migrants fleeing war-torn areas, famine, climate-driven crises, political persecution and poverty. He wants to continue reducing net migration and voted in support of a Bill that aims to further cut English Channel crossings and direct people to legal routes.

Voters in Sao Tome and Principe cast ballots to choose their next President

Agence France Presse
SÃO TOMÉ

Voters in the Atlantic archipelago of Sao Tome and Principe, regarded as a model of democracy in Africa, headed to the polls on Sunday for a presidential election.

Outgoing President Carlos Vila Nova faces party rival Nito Viegas D'Abreu, a current member of Parliament backed by former Prime Minister Patrice Trovoada, along with two independent candidates.

Polling official Wernick Capita told *AFP* the first few hours had been "calm" after polling stations opened at 7:00 a.m. (0700 GMT) "because people prefer to vote in the afternoon".

A former Portuguese colony in the Gulf of Guinea, the island nation Sao Tome and Principe has about 2,00,000 inhabitants. FILE PHOTO

A former Portuguese colony in the Gulf of Guinea, the island nation of 2,00,000 inhabitants has a history marked by attempted coups including one in 2022 that was promptly thwarted by the military.

The scattering of islands off the coast of western equatorial Africa is now viewed as a model of African democracy.

The President has a largely ceremonial role, responsible for representation and the promulgation of laws, while most executive powers lie with the Prime Minister.

Mr. Vila Nova, 66, elected President in 2021 with his Independent Democratic Action (ADI) party's support, is casting himself as the guarantor of the "political stability of the country". He has faced criticism for dismissing former Prime Minister Mr. Trovoada in January 2025, a move ruled one year later to be contrary to the constitution. Mr. Trovoada, now head of the ADI and vying to regain the Prime Minister post in legislative polls this coming September, has thrown his support behind Vila Nova's rival Mr. Viegas D'Abreu.

Mr. Viegas D'Abreu, the 43-year-old leader of the ADI group in Parliament, is promoting himself as a representative of those born after the country's independence in 1975. If no candidate gains more than 50% of the vote on Sunday, there will be a second-round run-off on August 9.

Search operation

Call of duty: Volunteers and rescuers search for bodies amid debris of buildings damaged during the twin earthquakes on June 24, in Tanaguarena, La Guaira, Venezuela. AFP

Faith vs therapy: inside a dedicated school to teach exorcism in the Philippines

Agence France Presse
MANILA

Asia's only dedicated exorcism centre – designed to train not only Philippine priests but clergy from across the region – sits just off a busy thoroughfare in Metro Manila.

Inside, neatly made-up rooms for visiting priests line warmly lit halls that lead to a chapel where the 400-year-old ritual takes place.

Holy relics employed in the proceedings line one wall, another features a one-way mirror that allows family members and novice exorcists to observe.

The Michael Center for Spiritual Liberation and Exorcism – five months old this week – was built because "cases were piling up", Father Jose Francisco Syquia told *AFP*.

Trauma driven by bullying, sexual abuse and the pain of separation as family members leave for work abroad has increasingly opened the door to spiritual attacks, he said.

"We had to find a more permanent and secure and private place to pray over people," Mr. Syquia said.

The centre's function as an effective school for exorcists, however, is what makes it unique.

"I don't know of any other centre in the world that trains exorcists," Mr. Syquia said of the two-storey facility built largely with donations from local families of the previously afflicted.

Priests from countries including Singapore, Malaysia, Cambodia and India were already lining up for training, Mr. Syquia added.

A key element of that training is discerning the difference between psychological and spiritual problems, he said.

'Beyond science'

While the centre operates without strict Vatican oversight, it follows long-standing Church rules governing exorcism, including mandatory vetting by mental health professionals.

"We have clinical psychologists. We have a psychiatrist... There are also neurologists, so they work hand in hand with us," Syquia told *AFP* on a visit to the centre.

Still, he insists he knows a demonic possession when he sees one.

"You will see a change in behaviour... a different consciousness. Something else takes over a person," Mr. Syquia said, noting he had personally exorcised a demon only a week earlier.

Though Michael Center for Spiritual Liberation and Exorcism works without Vatican oversight, it follows Church rules over exorcism. AFP

"When it comes to the spiritual world, we need something beyond science."

But attempts to draw that distinction have long worried the mental health community.

"If a condition isn't recognised as medical, it delays appropriate treatment," Christopher French, a psychologist and emeritus professor at the University of London, told *AFP*. "It's more dangerous to accept the supernatural explanations," he warned, noting that conditions ranging from schizophrenia to Tourette's syndrome were once interpreted as spirit possession.

The Philippines has roughly one psychiatrist for every 2,00,000 people in the archipelago, according to the World Health Organization. Some provinces have none at all.

'A lot of stigma'

Given the choice between an exorcist and a mental health professional, many in the heavily Catholic country will choose the former, Dr. Kathryn Tan, a Manila-based psychiatrist, told *AFP*.

"It's a lot of stigma when somebody is brought to a psychiatrist," she said.

"If it's an exorcism... you're a victim, but if you're brought to a psychiatrist, there's a lot of shame," she said.

Many of her own patients came only after first visiting indigenous healers, Ms. Tan said, viewing psychiatry as a "last resort".

Ms. Tan, who said alleged possessions are often accompanied by symptoms of psychosis, insisted Philippine psychiatrists were not seeking to "compete with the Catholic Church", but rather to bridge the gap between culture and science.

"It's about... compassion and empathy and trying our best to understand without judgement what our patients are experiencing," she said.

Both Ms. Tan and Mr. French agreed that cultural sensitivities need to be respected in treatment.

"You can shape a treatment to fit the belief system without explicitly endorsing it," Mr. French said, conceding an exorcism might even have a beneficial placebo effect in some cases.

Ms. Tan, who said she keeps an "open mind" about the supernatural, said it was not surprising when people seek spiritual explanations for something they cannot readily define. "Perhaps this is our way of trying to control the unknown," she said.

Inside his office, Father Syquia told *AFP* he was confident science and faith could coexist. "We're... focusing on the spiritual dimension. But of course, the body is always part of that," he said.

A greater investment in mental health care might even lighten his own load, he conceded. "If psychology and psychiatry, if proper mental and emotional health [are] fostered, there will be [fewer exorcism] cases," he said. "Science is a gift from God."

PROLIFIC

Mbappe becomes World Cup all-time top scorer with 22 goals

REUTERS

Kylian Mbappe became the top scorer in World Cup history on Saturday as he netted his second goal in the third-place playoff against England to take his tally to 22. The Frenchman, who has scored his goals over three World Cups, has one more than Argentina's Lionel Messi ahead of the title decider.

RAISING THE BAR

Bellingham becomes England's highest goal-scorer in a World Cup

AP

Jude Bellingham on Saturday became England's highest goal-scorer in an edition of the World Cup. The midfielder took his tally to seven with a stoppage-time strike in England's 6-4 victory over France in the third-place playoff in Miami. He broke the record of Gary Lineker (1986) and Harry Kane (2018 and 2026).

MARK OF RESPECT

India, England players wear black armbands as tribute to Sobers

BCCI

India and England players on Sunday wore black armbands in the memory of legendary West Indies cricketer Garry Sobers, who passed away aged 89. A minute's silence was observed at Lord's before the series-deciding third ODI. Former India all-rounder Yuvraj Singh rang the bell to mark the start of play.

MAIDEN MAJOR

New Zealander Fox clinches British Open in dramatic finale

AFP

New Zealand's Ryan Fox won the 154th British Open at Southport with a birdie on the final hole to claim his first Major at 10-under 270 on Sunday. He produced a 68 to pip Cameron Young to the Claret Jug. **Top scores: 270:** Ryan Fox (72, 68, 62, 68); **271:** Cameron Young (67, 67, 73, 64); **272:** Sam Burns (73, 62, 65, 72).

England trades blows with France, seals third place

The Three Lions pull clear with four goals in the first half before *Les Bleus* rouse themselves and make a fist of it in the second period; Saka performs a hat-trick while Mbappe scores a brace and moves to the top of the all-time list

FIFA WORLD CUP

Agencies
MIAMI

England defeated France 6-4 in a chaotic World Cup third-place playoff contest here on Saturday as Kylian Mbappe became the all-time leading scorer in World Cup history.

Both coaches made multiple changes, with a host of stars on the bench at the start.

England boss Thomas Tuchel left out Harry Kane and Jude Bellingham from his starting line-up while France's Didier Deschamps omitted Bradley Barcola and Ousmane Dembele.

Declan Rice put England ahead with a goal from distance in just the third minute and defender Ezri Konsa headed the ball home to make it 2-0.

Mbappe and Michael Olise were a threat as France searched for a way back into the game but they could not beat England's second-choice goalkeeper Dean Henderson in the opening period.

The game threatened to become embarrassing for France when Bukayo Saka made it 3-0 after a swift break that also involved Marcus Rashford.

All class: Saka makes his start count with an excellent effort against France. REUTERS

Golden Boot: Mbappe is the standalone leader in the top-scorer race after a brace against England. He now has 10. REUTERS

It became 4-0 in first-half stoppage time after Saka scored his second goal of the game, celebrated with a fist pump by Tuchel.

Deschamps made four changes for the second half, bringing on Dembele, Dayot Upamecano, Lucas Digne and Barcola.

Second-half blitz

France was rewarded almost instantly when Mbappe scored his ninth goal of the tournament – via a left-footed strike – to move clear of Lionel Messi at the top of the Golden Boot standings.

Barcola drilled a right-footed shot past Henderson while Mbappe was back at it as he sent a left-footed effort into the corner of the net.

That goal made him the first player to score 10 goals in a single World Cup since Germany's Gerd Muller in 1970.

France squandered a number of chances to equalise and England was handed an opportunity to extend its lead when Malo Gusto brought down Djed Spence in the penalty area. Saka stepped up to the spot and converted to complete his hat-trick.

Frantic finish

There was still time for Dembele to grab a fourth for France but Bellingham strode forward to score the 10th goal of the match with an individual effort.

England thus secured its best finish at a World Cup since winning the tournament in 1966, but it will carry bitter memories of its defeat by defending champion Argentina. France was among the favourites to win the showpiece after a sensational start, but it was well beaten 0-2 by Spain in the semifinals.

THE RESULT

Bronze-medal match: France 4 (Mbappe 48, 66, Barcola 54, Dembele 90+6) lost to England 6 (Rice 3, Konsa 18, Saka 37, 45+1, 87, Bellingham 90+8).

Deschamps. REUTERS

'Decided to leave as there was a stifling atmosphere'

Agencies
MIAMI

Departing France head coach Didier Deschamps revealed that he decided to end his 14-year spell in the role because of a "stifling atmosphere" around him.

"I decided that it had to stop. And if I made that decision, it was not for my own sake; it was for the good of the French team. I am telling you this in all honesty," the 57-year-old told *M6*. "The atmosphere around me had become so stifling. The French national team does not deserve that," he added.

Deschamps, who took charge in 2012, will be remembered as the coach who led France to its second World title in 2018, two decades after captaining it to its first. He said that he experienced a "truly wonderful adventure" with his players as he bid farewell on Saturday.

The jury is still out on hydration breaks, says Wenger

Ayon Sengupta
NEW YORK

The mandatory hydration breaks introduced at the 2026 World Cup will be reviewed once the tournament ends. Arsene Wenger admitted that the move had not been universally popular despite being introduced as a measure for player welfare in the hot and humid conditions of North America.

FIFA's Chief of Global Football Development said that the governing body would analyse the impact of the compulsory three-minute stoppages before deciding whether they should remain part of future tournaments.

"Sometimes people didn't like it," Wenger said at the FIFA Technical Study Group's final press conference. "In many games, especially when the stadium was covered, people were not happy with it.

"But at the start of the competition, it was decided that it would be done for everybody."

The breaks have drawn criticism for interrupting the flow of games while also creating additional commercial windows for broadcasters. Many coaches have used the intervals to bring in tactical changes, but Wenger felt that the stoppages had no impact on the results of the games.

Wenger. REUTERS

"It didn't look to me that it changed the results, but we are here to serve people who watch football. We will analyse after the World Cup what the impact was and come to conclusions afterwards," Wenger said.

The Frenchman also defended FIFA's decision to expand the World Cup to 48 teams, arguing that fears over a decline in quality had been emphatically disproved. "That was questioned before it (World Cup) started. We found that it was ethically needed to give a chance to everybody or to more teams to represent football. Overall, I am convinced that it was the right decision and it was a great success."

Wenger highlighted Cape Verde's run as an example of how the gap between football's traditional powers and emerging nations has narrowed.

Rohit's classy century not enough as England takes series in a run-fest

INDIA IN ENGLAND

N. Sudarshan
LONDON

For an hour or two on Sunday, India threatened to pull off a heist similar to the one in the 2002 NatWest Series final when it chased down England's 325.

But that fleeting promise withered away like autumnal leaves as Shubman Gill & Co. fell 28 runs short of the humongous 388-run target to lose the series 1-2.

India's pursuit was built on a towering century from Rohit Sharma (138, 110b, 17x4, 5x6), which not just signalled the premier batter's return to form but also marked the first ODI ton by an Indian at Lord's.

The tourists were in the contest until the 42nd over, when they needed 93 more with eight wickets remaining and a well-set Virat Kohli still batting.

Making merry: Rohit fought hard for India after openers Duckett and Bethell set up the platform for England with a 192-run stand. ANI, AP & GETTY IMAGES

Turning it around

But part-time left-arm spinner Jacob Bethell (7-0-49-1) – who had earlier dismissed Rohit by rattling his stumps – and left-arm seamer Sam Curran (10-0-75-4) strangled India by taking the pace off and making run scoring incredibly hard. And in substitute Rehan Ahmed, England had a stellar support actor, who pulled off two splendid catches in the outfield against the backdrop of a blinding sun to send back Ishan Kishan (14) and Shreyas Iyer (nought). Curran also accounted for Kohli (74, 60b, 4x4, 3x6).

Earlier, after England opted to bat, India's bowlers resembled shipwrecked sailors stranded in the middle of an ocean.

Bumrah injured

Jasprit Bumrah sat out owing to "reactive swelling in his left knee" following an injury in the second ODI in Cardiff. Shivam Dube was also absent, and in came Prince Yadav and Arshdeep Singh.

Washington Sundar was replaced by K.L. Rahul, which meant India had just five specialist bowlers and very little variety without the wrist spin of Kuldeep Yadav.

The quicks were also largely unimaginative, dropping it short and mostly maintaining a leg-stump line. It was no surprise that openers Ben Duckett and Bethell scored more than 70% of their runs on the on-side.

Duckett's 141 (135b, 18x4, 1x6) was highest individual score in ODIs at this ground, bettering Viv Richards' unbeaten 138 way back in the 1979 World Cup final.

The 192-run partnership between Duckett and Bethell (91, 93b, 11x4, 2x6) was also the highest for the opening wicket at Lord's.

Bethell's stay was highlighted by the two sixes off Prince and Axar Patel, over square-leg and long-off, respectively, as he got to his half-century off 51 balls.

Duckett was a tad slower, reaching the milestone in 64, but was more creative, scoring multiple boundaries behind square by employing the shuffle and the reverse sweep. His fourth ODI century came courtesy a four to the deep mid-wicket fence.

When the southpaw departed in the 44th over, he had laid the perfect foundation. In an ideal world, captain Harry Brook would have been the death-overs enforcer, but it was Joe Root who glinted like gold under the glorious afternoon sunshine as he pulled, reverse-swept and reverse-scooped his way to an unbeaten 74 (48b, 9x4).

Gill often stationed four men on the leg-side boundary and baited the English batters.

But Root, the master craftsman, dissected the field with a surgeon's precision while Jos Buttler was at his maverick best (41 n.o., 13b, 4x4, 3x6), cross-batting and heaving maximums.

The 63 runs Root and Buttler put on off just 19 balls carried England to the highest List-A total ever made at cricket's most-prestigious piece of real estate. It, however, came scarily close to losing the plot.

SCOREBOARD

ENGLAND

Ben Duckett c & b Prince 141 *(135b, 18x4, 1x6)*, Jacob Bethell c Rohit b Prasidh 91 *(93b, 11x4, 2x6)*, Joe Root (not out) 74 *(48b, 9x4)*, Harry Brook c Kohli b Prasidh 14 *(12b)*, Jos Buttler (not out) 41 *(13b, 4x4, 3x6)*; Extras (lb-9, nb-1, w-16): 26; Total (for three wkts. in 50 overs): 387.

FALL OF WICKETS

1-192 (Bethell, 30.1 overs), 2-293 (Duckett, 43.3), 3-324 (Brook, 46.5).

INDIA BOWLING

Arshdeep 10-0-72-0, Prasidh 10-2-69-2, Prince 10-0-79-1, Gurnoor 10-0-97-0, Axar 10-0-61-0.

INDIA

Rohit Sharma b Bethell 138 *(110b, 17x4, 5x6)*, Shubman Gill lbw b Rashid 77 *(84b, 10x4, 1x6)*, Virat Kohli c Brook b Curran 74 *(60b, 4x4, 3x6)*, Ishan Kishan c sub (Rehan) b Curran 14 *(12b, 1x4)*, Shreyas Iyer c sub (Rehan) b Curran 0 *(3b)*, K.L. Rahul b Archer 12 *(8b, 2x4)*, Axar Patel c Jacks b Curran 2 *(3b)*, Gurnoor Brar (not out) 18 *(14b, 1x4, 1x6)*, Arshdeep Singh (not out) 15 *(6b, 3x4)*; Extras (b-1, lb-3, w-6): 10; Total (for seven wkts. in 50 overs): 360.

FALL OF WICKETS

1-147 (Gill, 24.2), 2-260 (Rohit, 38.4), 3-304 (Kishan, 43.3), 4-304 (Shreyas, 43.6), 5-315 (Kohli, 45.2), 6-327 (Rahul, 46.3), 7-329 (Axar, 47.2).

ENGLAND BOWLING

Archer 10-0-63-1, Atkinson 6-0-24-0, Tongue 5-1-43-0, Curran 10-0-75-4, Rashid 8-0-64-1, Jacks 4-0-38-0, Bethell 7-0-49-1.

Toss: England.

PoM: Bethell; **PoS:** Root.

England won by 27 runs to clinch the series 2-1.

Selfie time: Sindhu and Yamaguchi on the podium after the women's singles final. AFP

Sindhu wins maiden Japan Open title

The 31-year-old combines relentless attack with tactical discipline and composure to tame Yamaguchi and end a 19-month title drought

BADMINTON

Press Trust of India
TOKYO

P.V. Sindhu produced a vintage display of attacking badminton to outclass local favourite Akane Yamaguchi in straight games, clinching her maiden Super 750 title at the Japan Open here on Sunday.

The 31-year-old became the first Indian to win the Japan Open, combining relentless attack with tactical discipline and composure in the decisive moments to register a 21-17, 21-17 victory over the three-time World champion and end a title drought.

"I'm very happy. I'm out of words as it has been 19 months since I won a title," said Sindhu after the match. "I think this one was very important to me because playing in the finals, coming to the finals is one thing but I think to win, stand on the podium and get that gold is a different thing.

"I'm happy that I'm on the positive side of the result and I think this will give me a lot of confidence. I'm very thankful to my coach, my parents, my support staff and of course my husband."

Sindhu's previous title came at the Syed Modi International in 2024.

The triumph is her biggest title since winning the World Championships in 2019.

She had won the Singapore Super 500 in 2022.

Yamaguchi was appearing in her sixth Japan Open final, while Sindhu had not beaten the Japanese in a completed match in four years. Their meeting at the Malaysia Open earlier this year ended with Yamaguchi retiring after the opening game.

Sindhu's last full-match victory over her came at the Thailand Open in 2022.

On Sunday, however, the Indian dictated terms from the outset.

She controlled the forecourt superbly, attacked with purpose rather than sheer power and repeatedly found answers whenever Yamaguchi threatened a comeback.

Along with her powerful smashes, Sindhu's precise net play proved decisive. She repeatedly worked the shuttle tight to the net, forcing Yamaguchi to lift and creating opportunities to unleash her trademark cross-court and body smashes.

Sindhu targets a sixth Worlds medal next

Uthra Ganesan
NEW DELHI

A title after 20 months is perhaps the best preparation P.V. Sindhu could hope for in the run-up to the prestigious World Badminton Championships at home.

Becoming the first ever Indian winner of the Japan Open on Sunday, a Super750 event, against home favourite Akane Yamaguchi was made more special by the fact that this was Sindhu's first win in a completed match against Yamaguchi in four years. More importantly, it was Sindhu's first World Tour title outside India in four years, since the 2022 Singapore Open.

"It has been a long time, almost two years... and it feels really special. There was a lot of hard work, on and off the court. I suffered injuries and struggled with a lot of niggles, fought to get fit and competitive. We play hard on the court but there is a lot more that happens off it, and I believe there cannot be a better run-up to the World Championships," Sindhu said in a virtual interaction on Sunday.

The intensity of the achievement can be gauged from the fact that Sindhu, not the most expressive player, was teary-eyed after the match. "I had tears in my eyes because it was very, very important for me to win. I kept believing I could do it. Even though a lot of people were asking if I was 'done', I still believed in myself, my family, my coaches, and my support staff," she admitted, crediting coach Irwansyah, strength and conditioning trainer Wayne Lombard and her family.

Sindhu is now aiming to be the first shuttler ever to win an unprecedented six World Championships medals and her second title at home. "I would really want to do that and doing so at home would make it special. But I have the China Open before that, and at the moment I am focusing on it".

Means a lot: Sindhu said the win over Yamaguchi was special. AFP

Kerr made his 'Project 222' a reality on Saturday. AP

Kerr breaks world mile record

Reuters
LONDON

Josh Kerr shattered the 27-year-old world mile record at London Stadium on Saturday as he made his "Project 222" a reality, shaving almost three seconds off his own personal best in the process.

The 28-year-old Briton, roared on by a capacity 60,000 crowd at the London Diamond League meeting, ran a time of three minutes 42.66 seconds to break Hicham El Guerrouj's long-standing mark by 0.47 seconds.

As part of 'Project 222', Kerr had targeted a sub-223-second race, and with Saturday's run he became the seventh Briton to hold the mile record and first since Steve Cram in 1985.

Saint Lucia's Julien Alfred won the women's 200m in 21.66.

The results (winners only):
Men: 100m: Kanyinsola Ajayi, 9.84s; **400m**: Rai Benjamin, 44.05; **800m**: Brandon Miller, 1:42.19; **Mile:** Josh Kerr, 3:42.66 (WR); **110m hurdles:** Ja'Kobe Tharp, 12.89; **400mH:** Karsten Warholm, 46.61; **Pole vault:** Sam Kendricks 5.95m.
Women: 200m: Julien Alfred, 21.66s; **400m:** Marileidy Paulino 48.97; **800m:** Keely Hodgkison 1:56.21; **3000m:** Jessica Hull 8:24.69; **High jump:** Nicola Olyslagers 2.01m; **Long jump:** Malaika Mihambo 7.05.

Gukesh, Abdusattorov split the point on a day of draws

CHESS

C. Shyam Sundar
CHENNAI

The clash between World champion D. Gukesh and Nodirbek Abdusattorov in the fourth round had drawn the attention of chess aficionados when the pairings for the Chennai Grand Masters at The Westin Velachery were out.

Intriguing battles

The two, who have been involved in some intriguing battles over the years, played out a 41-move stalemate on Sunday when draws were the order of the day. While the focus was on Gukesh's joust with the former World rapid champion, Alireza Firouzja was held to a draw by American Hans Niemann.

On top

The result saw the Frenchman maintain the top spot with three points, just ahead of Indian GM Arjun Erigaisi, who survived a wobble against young compatriot M. Pranesh.

Nihal Sarin's sequence of draws continued as he shared the point again with Russian GM Dmitry Andreikin.

The two have drawn all their four games thus far.

The Abdusattorov-Gukesh match saw the former playing white and opting for the Ragozin Defence. The Indian chose a solid defensive play to prevent his opponent from gaining an early advantage.

The middle-game saw the exchange of several pieces and reduced the attacking options though the queens remained on the board till the end, resulting in honours being shared.

Gukesh takes on countryman Arjun in the fifth round as he searches for his first victory.

All-Indian fixture

The all-Indian fixture between Arjun and Pranesh saw the latter gain the initiative briefly before his more experienced rival fought back to restore parity and walked away with half a point.

The results:
Fourth round: Hans Niemann (USA) 1.5 drew with Alireza Firouzja (Fra) 3; Dmitry Andreikin (Rus) 2 drew with Nihal Sarin 2; Nodirbek Abdusattorov (Uzb) 2 drew with D. Gukesh 1.5; Arjun Erigaisi 2.5 drew with M. Pranesh 1.5.

No breakthrough: The clash between Abdusattorov and Gukesh ended in a stalemate. B. VELANKANNI RAJ

Badminton not being there in CWG quite shocking: Gopi Chand

Anirudh Velamuri
HYDERABAD

The Commonwealth Games (CWG) have traditionally been one of India's most productive multi-sport events, with the country consistently returning with a healthy medal haul. But at Glasgow 2026, India's prospects have taken a hit after several sports, including badminton, were dropped from the programme, with organisers holding cost management responsible for the trim.

The decision has not gone down well within India's badminton community, with chief national coach P. Gopi Chand among those disappointed.

"Commonwealth was an important event and badminton not being there in Glasgow was quite shocking. It's done and dusted for this edition, but we are hoping that in our edition in Ahmedabad (2030), we would have badminton featuring back again. Indian players are stronger than ever, so we do expect some medals from the event as well," he said in an interaction organised by the Sports Authority of India.

"Asian Games are tough for some events, but also there are some where the participation of countries like Australia, England and Jamaica makes the standard of the CWG higher than the Asian Games."

The CWG is not the only area where badminton has seen change. The sport has also introduced proposals that have split opinion, including a new scoring system and trials involving synthetic shuttlecocks.

Gopi Chand. FILE PHOTO

"What's the point of complaining when it's done? That's one of the reasons why I haven't spoken against it," he quipped.

"For me, the sport has been very, very exciting in the last few years. The calendar is packed with tournaments, and there was no need for us to mess with the system," Gopi Chand said, talking about the new 3x15 scoring system replacing the traditional 21-point format. The 52-year-old was, however, more receptive to the prospect of synthetic shuttlecocks, citing the need to make the sport more sustainable.

Gopi Chand also weighed in on Satwiksairaj Rankireddy's remarks about the lack of recognition for badminton players after India's Thomas Cup bronze medal-winning team returned home to a subdued reception.

"I endorse what Satwik said. It's unfortunate that one of the best players the country has ever produced feels that way. We've never had anybody reach anywhere close to where they have reached. What he said is genuine," he explained.

(Watch the Glasgow 2026 Commonwealth Games live and exclusive on Sony Sports Network and Sony LIV).

Antonelli pulls away at the top

BELGIAN GP

Agence France-Presse
SPA-FRANCORCHAMPS

Italian teenager Kimi Antonelli extended his lead at the top of the world championship with victory in the Belgian Grand Prix on Sunday. The 19-year-old Mercedes driver posted his sixth race win of the season, coming home ahead of Ferrari's Charles Leclerc and Red Bull's Max Verstappen.

Antonelli's teammate George Russell, who began the race in second place in the championship, just 25 points behind the Italian, crashed out of the race on the opening lap.

Russell started in third but was overtaken by the two Ferraris before sliding into the gravel after being tagged by Lewis Hamilton through turns five and six.

Hamilton was given a five-second penalty but recovered to finish fourth and move up to second in the standings, 45 behind the young Italian.

However, he was referred for a second investigation, this time post-race, after hitting one of his mechanics as he pulled away from a pitstop.

McLaren's Oscar Piastri finished fifth and stands to benefit if Hamilton is penalised for a second time.

Isack Hadjar did superbly to work his Red Bull up to sixth, just holding off reigning world champion Lando Norris.

That's mine: Antonelli looks lovingly at his winner's trophy. REUTERS

The results (44/44 laps): 1. Antonelli (Mercedes) 1h:24m:42.479s; 2. Leclerc (Ferrari) +1.952s; 3. Verstappen (Red Bull) 11.586; 4. Hamilton (Ferrari) 17.245; 5. Piastri (McLaren) 18.988; 6. Hadjar (Red Bull) 23.307; 7. Norris (McLaren) 24.014; 8. Bortoleto (Audi) 49.140; 9. Lindblad (Racing Bulls) 50.406; 10. Colapinto (Alpine) 76.037; 11. Gasly (Alpine) 76.991; 12. Lawson (Racing Bulls) 77.523; 13. Hulkenberg (Audi) 78.348; 14. Bearman (Haas) 94.465; 15. Albon (Williams) 104.684; 16. Sainz (Williams) 105.856; 17. Ocon (Haas) 110.925; **+1 lap:** 18. Bottas (Cadillac); **+2 laps:** 19. Alonso (Aston Martin);
DNF: Stroll (Aston Martin), Perez (Cadillac), Russell (Mercedes).
Standings: Drivers: 1. Antonelli 204; 2. Hamilton 159; 3. Russell 154; 4. Leclerc 126; 5. Norris 103.
Constructors: 1. Mercedes 358; 2. Ferrari 285; 3. McLaren 195; 4. Red Bull 151; 5. Alpine 61.

Becoming a GM a big moment for me, says Rathanvel

C. Shyam Sundar
CHENNAI

He was named after Ratan Tata, a titan among Indian industrialists. V.S. Rathanvel, India's newly-minted Grandmaster, didn't take after his businessman-father and instead showed a fascination for chess and as it has turned has been rather good at it.

"I started to play with my mother and, from there, they enrolled me in an academy. That's how it started," he said about his initiation into the game at the age of six.

The Coimbatore player, who became the country's 99th GM, had to endure a long wait to achieve the title despite having earned the third norm in 2022 as he couldn't breach the 2500 Elo mark in live ratings.

Rathanvel said it was due to pressure but was happy to join the elite list now.

"The closer I got, the pressure got to me. I was probably four or five times very close to 2500 and didn't cross it," he said, reflecting on the gap in gaining the coveted GM title.

"Becoming a Grandmaster is a big moment for me... it will also help in getting invitations for open tournaments."

The big moment came when he reached the threshold rating of 2500 at the Smart City Open in Guwahati.

He was trained by Dhanasekhar and Krishnamoorthy initially and has been working with GMs Vishnu Prasanna, M. Shyam Sunder and N. Srinath, and credits them for crossing the line.

Rathanvel, a Mechanical Engineering graduate, said he had identified a few areas where he can get better as he looks to engineer his way to bigger things.

V.S. Rathanvel.
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

> The closer I got, the pressure got to me. I was probably four or five times very close to 2500 and didn't cross it

The Coimbatore player became the country's 99th GM when he reached the threshold rating of 2500 at the Smart City Open in Guwahati

SNAPSHOTS

Kajal bags 76kg gold; silver for Antim, Neha

BUDAPEST: Reigning U-20 world champion wrestler Kajal clinched the women's 76kg category gold in the Budapest Ranking Series. The high-stakes encounter against USA's Dymond Precious Guilford ended in a 3-3 deadlock, but Kajal clinched it on criteria, securing India's third gold medal of the tournament. India added two silver medals in the 53kg and 57kg weight divisions. In the 53kg final, Antim Panghal conceded against Sweden's Emma Jonna Denise Malmgren due to an injury while in the 57kg category, Neha Sharma lost to China's Kexin Hong 4-0. In the 53kg division Nishu claimed a hard-fought bronze medal after besting Romania's Andrea Beatrice Ana on criteria (VPO1) after the bout ended in a 2-2 tie. India has accumulated 12 medals at the tournament – three gold, four silver, and five bronze. The focus now shifts to the Greco-Roman contests.

Kajal celebrates after being declared winner on criteria. FACEBOOK/UWW

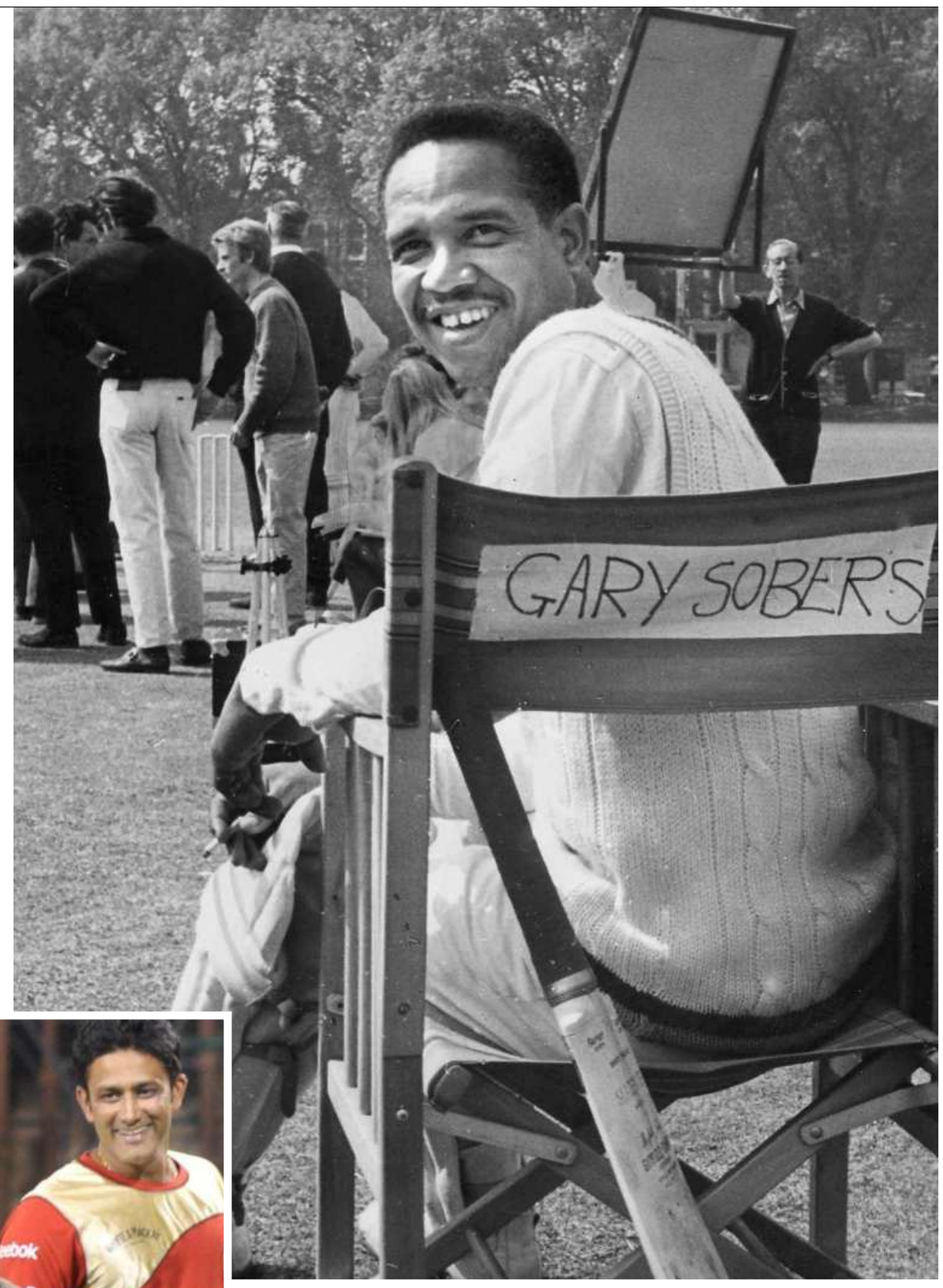
Evenepoel wins; Vingegaard crashes out

PLATEAU DE SOLAISON: Olympic champion Remco Evenepoel beat race leader Tadej Pogacar in a sprint finish to win Sunday's 15th stage of the Tour de France, as former winner Jonas Vingegaard crashed out. Evenepoel edged out the reigning champion on the tough 11km-long climb to the finish, with Mexican Isaac Del Toro finishing third, six seconds back.

Tsitsipas ends long wait in Gstaad

GSTAAD: Greece's Stefanos Tsitsipas won his first ATP title in nearly a year-and-a-half with a 6-4, 6-7 3), 6-3 win over Belgian Raphael Collignon at the Swiss Open on Sunday. It is former World No. 3's 13th trophy of his career and first since Dubai in February 2025.

Evenepoel. AFP



Cricket's Greatest — a legacy beyond numbers

The unchecked outpouring of grief at his passing, followed almost immediately by tales of his kindness and generosity, are testament to the standing Sir Garfield Sobers enjoys in the cricketing ecosystem in which he is the unquestioned emperor

R. Kaushik

The legacy a celebrated, high-profile achiever leaves behind isn't defined merely by awards and accomplishments, no matter how staggeringly impressive they might be, but equally – if not more – by how many people they have touched, how many lives they have impacted, how much joy they have provided.

The unchecked outpouring of grief at his passing, followed almost immediately by tales of his kindness and generosity, are testament to the standing Sir Garfield Sobers enjoys in the cricketing ecosystem, of which he was the unquestioned emperor for the longest of times, and beyond. Sobers was 'the greatest' long before hyperbole took root and even the commonplace was labelled 'great'. He was cricket's Muhammad Ali. Scratch that. Ali was boxing's Sobers, if that makes sense, given that the Sobers aura had pervaded the sporting world long before Cassius Clay became Muhammad Ali, and floated like a butterfly and stung like a bee.

In the three days since Sobers shuffled off the Shakespearan mortal coil, the tributes have come thick and fast, from those who played with and against him, from those who were fortunate enough to be the recipients of his wisdom and goodness, and from those who have heard of his exploits from others and have had to reconcile to watching his genius on *YouTube*. That he was universally adored was obvious long before he left us for what is certain to be a better world merely because he is inhabiting it. His demise has rekindled old memories and enveloped his peers and juniors in a sea of nostalgia, which remains the overwhelming theme that has accompanied any mention of Sir Garry since Friday night (IST).

Farokh Engineer, the maverick wicketkeeper-batter, and Bishan Bedi, the late former skipper, were among the earliest to be blessed by the charm of Sobers, given that both were regulars in the English county circuit

Sobers' international career spanned 20 years, his first-class stint 22; he didn't play competitively after July 1974. But even 52 years on, the stirring deeds are spoken about with awe and reverence. In his final representative outing, for his beloved Nottinghamshire against Worcestershire, he unleashed 84 in an 18-run loss at Worcester in the quarterfinals of the Gillette Cup 60-over domestic tournament in England.

It was his 95th List-A match, of which only one, against England in September 1973, was an international fixture. The legend was dismissed without scoring, caught behind off by Chris Old, as West Indies went down by one wicket in a low-scoring thriller.

Imagine that - Garry Sobers, Test average 57.78, 8,032 runs, 26 centuries and a highest of 365 not out, averages 0 in ODIs. Oh, the wicked humour of the one above us. On the face of it, given his exceptional versatility and the multiple skillsets that allowed him to dominate the longer version as a bowler alone or as a batter alone - not to mention his terrific fielding or his sensational catching which netted him 109 grabs in 93 Tests, mostly close in - Sobers ought to have been a natural fit in limited-overs cricket.

He didn't reproduce his lofty First Class deeds in the shorter format (there was obviously no 20-over games in his playing days) but no one is really complaining because his one-day career ended nearly a year before the first of three Prudential World Cup (60 overs a side) was staged in England in the summer of 1975.

THE HINDU ARCHIVES, GETTY IMAGES & K. BHAGYA PRAKASH

Sobers and India had a strong bond shaped by mutual respect and love and respect. Farokh Engineer, that maverick wicketkeeper-batter, and Bishan Bedi, the late former skipper, were among the earliest to be blessed by the charm of Sobers, given that both were regulars in the English county circuit and often encountered Sobers' genius from close quarters with admiration but also, one senses, a tinge of trepidation. But among his greatest 'fans', if one might use that word, are the two little masters who were the combined backbone of the Indian batting for nearly a dozen years, each bringing his own unique style and together producing the kind of magic that mesmerised the best, Sobers included.

Sunil Gavaskar first played internationally 55 years back, as a 21-year-old, making his debut in the Caribbean in March 1971. By then, G.R. Vishwanath had already announced himself on the international stage, with a hundred in his first Test, against Australia in Kanpur a year and a half previously. Like his future brother-in-law, 'Vishy' was also on his first overseas tour when Ajit Wadekar led his troops out to the Caribbean islands in 1971, little aware that the Indians were walking into history.

Almost from their first meeting, Sobers and the other great West Indian batter of that time, Rohan Kanhai, took a shine to the technician from Bombay and the magician from Bangalore. With the charismatic M.L. Jaisimha helping break the ice in his inimitable fashion - the debonair Hyderabadi and the proud Barbadian shared a wonderful bond - the two young men benefitted from the voluntary advice even during Test matches of Sobers and Kanhai. At least one of them has spoken of a gentle 'warning' from the slip cordon after a false stroke. 'Don't throw it away, you have done all the hard work. Focus. Concentrate.' Can you imagine that? A superstar of the game, the opposition captain, no less, looking out for you in an unequal battle of two versus 11. How could they not become Sobers converts? How could they not indeed?

In his 2022 autobiography *Wrist Assured*, Vishwanath writes, "Sir Garry is easily the greatest cricketer I have played with and against, no two ways about it. At various stages during that tour, I had to pinch myself as a reminder that I wasn't actually dreaming of being on the same ground as him."

That tour in 1971 was a seminal one in Indian cricket history. India didn't have the greatest overseas record at the time. But fuelled by the brilliance of Gavaskar, whose debut series fetched him a massive 774 runs in four Tests, the dependability of Dilip Sardesai as well as the three-pronged spin attack of Bedi, E.A.S. Prasanna and S. Venkataraghavan, superbly complemented by that affable maverick Salim Durrani, India registered a 1-0 triumph, their first series victory in the Caribbean. That was the catalyst for a similar scoreline in England a few months later when the mystery-propelled leg-spin of B.S. Chandrasekhar sparked a grand victory at The Oval.

In the West Indies, India had the temerity to enforce the follow-on for the first time against their hosts in the first Test in Kingston, where Sobers had conjured an unbeaten 365, the highest individual score in Test cricket for 36 years, in 1958. The first day's play was washed out, and after India bowled West Indies out for 217 in response to their 387 around tea on day four, Wadekar darted over to the West Indian dressing room to inform Sobers that they would have to bat again.

"I hope you are only joking," Sobers laughed, only to be met by a neutral, "No, not joking," from the Indian skipper, who explained that since it was now a four-day Test, a lead of 150 was enough to stick the opposition back in. "All right maan, so we will bat again." "Ajit had fired an unexpected salvo," Vishwanath recalls in the book. "We feared retaliation of some sort and sure enough, Rohan and Sir Garry, did not disappoint. Almost as if they were slighted at being asked to bat again, the two virtuosos put on an exhibition on the last day.

Vantage position

"Later in that series, at the Kensington Oval in Barbados where the square boundaries aren't too long, I was stationed at deep square-leg for the sweep with Pras bowling to him. From my vantage position, I had a fantastic, uninterrupted view of Sir Garry. He shaped to come forward. saw the trajectory was short, and quickly rocked on to the back foot. He didn't play the pull, more a whip with the blade more vertical than horizontal. Oh, the horror... The ball crashed into the wall and ricocheted halfway back into the ground. It was a ferocious stroke played all along the ground, the control immaculate. I quickly did my mathematics; he was 34, had played international cricket for 16 years. I couldn't start to imagine what he would have been like at his peak."

Sobers had a kind word and a smile not just for his fellow cricketers. On the rest day (yes, it was a thing once upon a time) of the Pongal Test in Madras in 1967, he was gracious enough to interact with several kids

Sobers had a kind word and a smile not just for his fellow cricketers, he also loved interacting with kids. On the rest day (yes, it was a thing once upon a time) of the Pongal Test in Madras in January 1967, despite being unbeaten on 95 at the end of the third day, Sobers was gracious enough to interact with several kids, some of whom had made the trip from Bangalore with their parents to watch the match, and fine-tune their games to the extent that it can be done in one short stint. He wasn't expected to do anything of that sort, it was not an obligation or a social media gimmick or a sponsor commitment. It's just something that came naturally to him, and while he might not have thought a great deal about it, it left the teenaged lads with memories for a lifetime. In the long list of people that he has touched, these kids too figure, prominently. Sobers never went out of his way to win friends and influence people; he didn't have to, you see.

Endearing video

There is an endearing video of Anura Tennekoon, the former Sri Lankan captain who is now a young 79, interacting with the 15-year-old Vaibhav Sooryavanshi during the triangular 'A' series in Sri Lanka last month. Tennekoon made the 161-kilometre drive from Colombo to Dambulla merely to offer the young man words of advice and encouragement.

Sobers was like that too, turning up mainly at Bridgetown to catch up with young batters who fired his imagination, batters like Sachin Tendulkar and Rahul Dravid and Virat Kohli. He was a giver in the truest sense. He gave the bowlers great grief though he did so with such class and elegance that they almost didn't seem to mind. He gave his teammates, the connoisseurs and the fans the ultimate joy. He gave West Indian cricket, at the time divided by regional considerations, a sense of pride and identity. The Big Man upstairs broke the mould after he made Sir Garfield Sobers, the original Champion of Champions.

THE GIST

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- His exceptional versatility and multiple skillsets allowed him to dominate the longer version as a bowler alone or as a batter alone. Sobers ought to have been a natural fit in limited-overs cricket
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Faith and its fallout

In Ayodhya, weeks after allegations of money being siphoned off from donations at the Ram temple surfaced, pilgrims and residents say it has triggered a crisis of trust. Devotees say their faith in Lord Ram and the temple remains intact, but many have grown cautious about donating. Locals report a dip in visitors, though they attribute part of that to seasonal factors as well. As an SIT probe seeks accountability, **Ishita Mishra** reports from the temple town, where faith, transparency, and the city's religious tourism hopes hang in the balance

On a sultry July afternoon, with the sun playing hide-and-seek behind the 161-foot-tall spire of the Ram temple in Ayodhya, people pass through the steel crowd-control barricades that regulate entry. People from across generations and genders gather outside the Jagadguru Shri Ramanandacharya Dwar, the main entry point of the shrine, which took seven years and ₹1,900 crore to build.

They walk through the familiar ritual of passing through metal detectors, being frisked, depositing their belongings at counters in an expansive courtyard, before entering the main temple. Bare feet on warm pink stone, foreheads smeared with sandalwood and vermilion paste, folded hands and the low murmur of "Jai Shri Ram" carrying from one group of devotees to the next.

After roughly 40 minutes in this process, 67-year-old Saraswati Devi, from Mathura, reaches the sanctum. She folds her hands before the black stone idol of Ram Lalla and prays silently. As a security guard gestures for her to move on so others can take their turn, she pauses at the donation box in the hall. In her palm are a few sweat-dampened currency notes. She turns them over once, looks at them for a second or two, then slips in the smallest denomination, a 10-rupee note, withholding the rest.

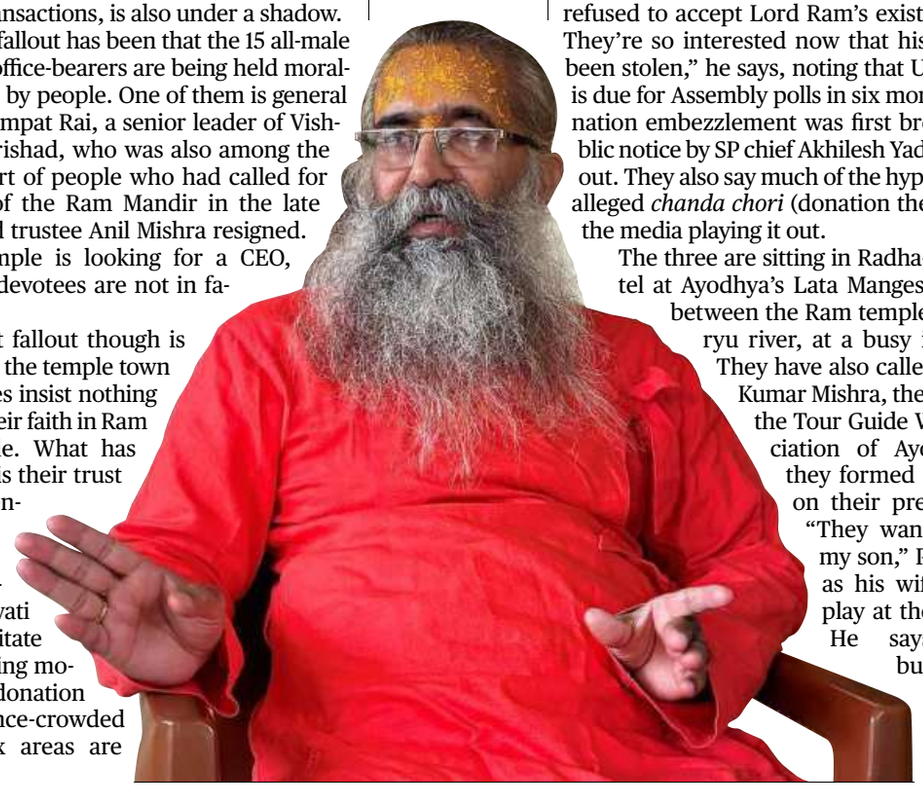
Outside, she says, "The last time I came here, in October 2024 (the year the temple was consecrated), I offered (₹)1,000. I even donated (₹)2,100 for the temple construction in 2021, when they were collecting door to door," she says, admitting that this time, "*Vaja sabko pata hai* (Everyone knows the reason)."

The reason she refers to is the alleged theft of cash from the counting tables of donation money that came to the temple managed by the trust Shri Ram Janmbhoomi Teerth Kshetra (SRJBTK). In May, a security guard discovered bundles of cash in a temple washroom, triggering an internal inquiry. In June, some employees were found smuggling cash out of the temple. Soon, Opposition parties took it up, with Samajwadi Party head and former Chief Minister Akhilesh Yadav calling it a multi-crore scam. The temple trust was forced to file a First Information Report.

In mid-June the Uttar Pradesh government under Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath constituted a Special Investigation Team (SIT) to fix accountability. The investigators have spent weeks analysing CCTV footage, matching surveillance records with duty rosters, entry registers, and cash-counting logs to identify possible breaches. So far, eight persons have been accused in the alleged theft, ₹80 lakh in cash has been seized, and 30 bank accounts linked to the accused have been frozen. The State Bank of India, which was overseeing transactions, is also under a shadow.

The larger fallout has been that the 15 all-male temple trust office-bearers are being held morally responsible by people. One of them is general secretary Champat Rai, a senior leader of Vishwa Hindu Parishad, who was also among the original cohort of people who had called for the making of the Ram Mandir in the late 1980s. He and trustee Anil Mishra resigned. Now, the temple is looking for a CEO, which many devotees are not in favour of.

The largest fallout though is playing out in the temple town itself. Devotees insist nothing has shaken their faith in Ram or the temple. What has been shaken is their trust in those entrusted with managing the offerings. Many like Saraswati Devi now hesitate before dropping money into the donation box. The once-crowded donation box areas are empty.



> I offered what I felt like giving. But yes, this time it took me a second to slip the money into the donation box. I asked myself if my money was going into the right hands.
>
> **SUSHIL VYAS,** DEVOTEE

(Above) Ram temple in Ayodhya; (left) Temple entry rows, of which 4 of 5 were almost empty; (below) Mahant Dinendra Das, member of Shri Ram Janmbhoomi Teerth Kshetra. SUNALINI MATHEW

In a city that has tied its future to faith-driven tourism, the allegations have also stirred uncertainty. If the custodians have failed, several devotees say, then protecting the sanctity of Ram's legacy and the trust it rests on, has become a responsibility they must now share.

Broken trust and shared responsibility

Sushil Vyas, 69, from Mohali, and his wife Meena Vyas, had no plans to visit Ayodhya in weather so humid an hour outdoors leaves a shirt sweat-soaked. They have visited the temple four times since construction began after the Supreme Court's 2019 order.

The donation theft changed that.

"The donation theft has disturbed all of us. But what disturbed me more was the news on social media saying footfall at the temple had declined after the incident. I decided right away to come here with my friends, to help increase footfall in whatever way I could," Sushil says, his wife nodding.

For Meena, a house does not stop being sacred because someone dishonest walked through its door. "I have full faith that Ram Lalla himself will make sure the truth comes out and the guilty are punished. That is not my job. My job is only to keep believing in Ram," she adds.

Asked if the couple had made any offerings at the temple, Vyas nods: "I offered what I felt like giving. But yes, this time it took me a second to slip the money into the donation box. I asked myself if my money was going into the right hands."

Sanjeev Bhargava, who accompanied the Vyas couple, says he feels a responsibility to make sure no non-believer gets to mock his god amid the current situation. "These Opposition parties refused to accept Lord Ram's existence earlier. They're so interested now that his money has been stolen," he says, noting that Uttar Pradesh is due for Assembly polls in six months. The donation embezzlement was first brought to public notice by SP chief Akhilesh Yadav, he points out. They also say much of the hype around the alleged *chanda chori* (donation theft) has been the media playing it out.

The three are sitting in Radha-Ratna, a hotel at Ayodhya's Lata Mangeshkar Chowk between the Ram temple and the Saryu river, at a busy intersection. They have also called in Pramod Kumar Mishra, the president of the Tour Guide Welfare Association of Ayodhya, who they formed a bond with on their previous visits. "They wanted to meet my son," Pramod says, as his wife and child play at the next table.

He says Ayodhya builds relationships among believers. One member of his team of about 50 core and 300 peripheral members is there, explaining that a big part of the feeling of being deceived is because the temple's inauguration was accompanied by so much "PR".

In the temple and around the city

Inside the temple premises, there are still crowds, but it stays confined to the sanctum sanctorum, the parks, the food distribution counters, and the shady spaces the premises offer.

Outside, at the Pilgrim Facility Centre, a hall people use to relax before or after *darshan* (obeisance), Rakesh Rungta, 70, a businessman from Mumbai, says he has found a better way to send his offerings: paying online, which he feels will have better accountability. The money is for "the Hindu cause", he says, walking away after swiping his debit card. "*Chori kahan nahi hoti hai? Kya masjid mein nahi hoti hai? Church mein nahi hoti hai?*" (Where does theft not happen? Doesn't it happen in mosques? In churches?), he says.

After sunset, the crowd moves towards the Saryu river for the evening's *aarti*, the sound-and-light show projected against the white structures of the ancient city, street food, and revolving selfie points against heart-shaped backgrounds.

Standing at Naya Ghat, constructed as part of city's beautification, Niranjan Das, 78, from Odisha, looks once at the river, then at the people around him. He has come to Ayodhya with 13 family members and relatives to immerse the ashes of his sister-in-law at the Sangam in Prayagraj, another holy city for the Hindus, 200 kilometres from Ram's birthplace. Ayodhya, Prayagraj, and Varanasi are the saffron triangle that pilgrims often plan to visit together.

"Something doesn't feel right. This temple theft case must have a clear and quick resolution. It's very important to keep our trust intact," Das says. Another problem with the city, he feels, is the lack of cleanliness. At Saryu Ghat, rainwater has flooded some areas; monkeys swim here to beat the heat. There is the stink of rotting flowers. The bylanes of the city are no different, with the fear of monkeys at every corner, including within the temple.

"This is how you keep your showcase city? So much dirt and filth," he asks, comparing the civic condition of Ayodhya with Odisha.

For Mahant Dinendra Das, member of Shri Ram Janmbhoomi Teerth Kshetra and leader of Nirmohi Akhara, a Hindu monastic order belonging to the Ramanandi sect whose members are devoted to Lord Ram, the problem is in intention.

"They built the temple, owned it, and cut off the *sadhu-sant*. Look at the condition of our *akharas*. The old buildings of the town. There is so much to take care of," he says, unhappy with the idea of appointing a CEO. If it all that happens, he must be from a religious community, as only seers can ensure that the trust of devotees is not shattered, he feels. He also wonders why, in a Ram temple, only two people on the trust are from a Vaishnavite sect. Lord Ram is considered an avatar of Vishnu, the preserver, among the Hindus.

City still betting on tomorrow

For Ayodhya's residents, this chapter goes beyond political debates, institutional failures, or trust betrayal. It is about the lives they rearranged, the careers they left behind, and the faith they placed in the promise that the temple's rise would become their own. They are careful, almost defensive, about how much of the slowdown to blame on the scandal itself.

Atul Pandey, 32, left his job as a hotel manager in 2023, months before the temple's consecration, and bought a car on loan to run as a taxi.

For him, the alleged donation theft has put a speed breaker in his hopes for a better life. "Business had been booming until last month. Customers have dropped off now," he says, before quickly adding that one reason is also that schools have reopened.

"*Is shaher ko* Sita *ka* shraap *hai.Yahaan kabhi kuch hamesha sahi nahi* hoga (This city is cursed *by* Sita. *Nothing here will ever stay right forever),*" he says, referring to the Ramayana, where Sita, Lord Ram's wife curses the city when she was exiled.

As he drives down Ram Path, the road broadened during the temple construction with land acquired from the shops around, he passes one entry point to Hanuman Garhi, the second-most-visited temple in Ayodhya that claims to date back to the 10th century.

Here, the lanes continue to be narrow, and the temple cramped.

Sunil Kumar Singh, in his 40s, who converted his home on Ram Path into a guesthouse anticipating growing crowds, says the uncertainty around the temple theft keeps him up some nights. Sooraj Yadav, 28, who left a job in Patiala to become a photographer at Naya Ghat, echoes the same hope for a quick resolution and a return of the crowds.

Mishra, the guide who left a bank job to become a guide when he sensed an opportunity in the town, remains unshaken by the episode. "Ayodhya has survived so many attacks in 500 years. It survived Aurangzeb, the British, and more. You think this city will fall over such a small episode?" he says, adding that he expects the town to emerge even stronger from this.

Nitin Chandra from Patna, who says he graduated with an MBA degree from IIM Kolkata and worked in corporate jobs before Ayodhya called him, shares Mishra's thoughts. "Don't judge Ayodhya from outside. Come, spend some days here," he invites. He runs Radha-Ratna, the hotel where Mishra and the Mohali couple meet.

For him, since 2019, Ayodhya has seen a "disruption" for the better: wider roads, symmetrical markets, everything that is needed for a city to become a pilgrim town. This disruption is the reason the Bharatiya Janata Party was voted out of Faizabad, the constituency Ayodhya is a part of, in the Parliamentary elections in 2024, he feels. He thinks this will change soon.

Durgavati, in her late 60s, sits on a cracked wooden platform on the banks of the Saryu, selling flowers and *diyas* for the evening *aarti*. The offerings, in a leaf dona, range from ₹7 to ₹20 depending on the customer's bargaining power. People will float these down the river, asking for blessings.

Tucking some money into a purse she puts into her blouse, she offers, almost without meaning to, a summary of where Ayodhya currently stands: unsettled, but not without hope.

"*Chori se man kharaab to hua hai* (The theft has troubled the mind)," she says. But underneath the disappointment is something steady. "I believe Ram is watching everything, even what happens behind closed doors. His devotees are waiting, and praying, and in the meantime, they'll keep coming," she says.

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A buffer: Decades of urbanisation and indiscriminate dumping have reduced the Pallikaranai marsh to a fraction of its original extent. Even in its diminished form, the marsh remains one of Chennai's most critical ecological assets. B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM

Quicksand in the marshland

The first expansion of the city of Chennai in modern times happened along its southern stretch. As the government in its wisdom decided to locate the IT corridor in south Chennai, breathless development happened over a couple of decades, right around a rich natural reserve, the Pallikaranai marshland. Today, two decades later, there's a conflict that pits development against preservation. **Geetha Srimathi** and **R. Aishwaryaa** do a deep dive in an attempt to pull together the several threads that have brought this particular tapestry to the fore today

For years, the Pallikaranai marsh has embodied Chennai's environmental paradox. One of Tamil Nadu's most important wetlands, it is also surrounded by apartment complexes, IT parks, arterial roads, and neighbourhoods that have grown steadily over the past five decades. Today, the marsh is at the centre of a debate – whether protecting it requires freezing development across the entire surrounding landscape, or whether science can identify a more nuanced regulatory framework that safeguards the wetland while recognising the rights of people who have legally owned and occupied these lands for decades.

Ecological asset

Long before the IT Corridor, apartment complexes, and arterial roads spread across the southern suburbs, Pallikaranai was an expansive wetland ecosystem. Once stretching across nearly 50 square kilometres, the freshwater marsh connected dozens of smaller wetlands, grasslands, and scrub forests, regulating the region's natural drainage. According to the Tamil Nadu State Wetland Authority (TNSWA), sediment studies suggest the marsh is at least 1,000 years old, while marine crustacean and mollusc sub-fossils indicate it once had greater marine influence. Decades of urbanisation, land reclamation, and indiscriminate dumping have reduced it to a fraction of its original extent. The remaining core area of around 698 hectares was notified as a Reserve Forest in 2007. Even in its diminished form, Pallikaranai remains one of Chennai's most critical ecological assets.

The marsh receives water from nearly 65 wetlands before draining into the Bay of Bengal through Okkiyam Madavu and Kovalam Creek. Acting as the city's natural sponge, it stores monsoon floodwaters, recharges the groundwater table, filters pollutants, and moderates flooding – services that have assumed greater significance after the devastating Chennai floods of 2015.

Pallikaranai is also one of India's richest urban biodiversity hotspots. Official records show it supports more than 175 species of birds, 50 species of fish, and over 100 species of plants, besides reptiles, amphibians, mammals, butterflies, and molluscs. Every winter, migratory birds such as Glossy Ibis, Eurasian Spoonbill and Pheasant-tailed Jacana descend on the marsh, underscoring its ecological importance despite being enveloped by one of Tamil Nadu's fastest-growing urban landscapes. Yet the marsh's ecological value has always existed alongside competing pressures. Encroachment, pollution, infrastructure expansion, and rapid urbanisation have steadily transformed the landscape around it.

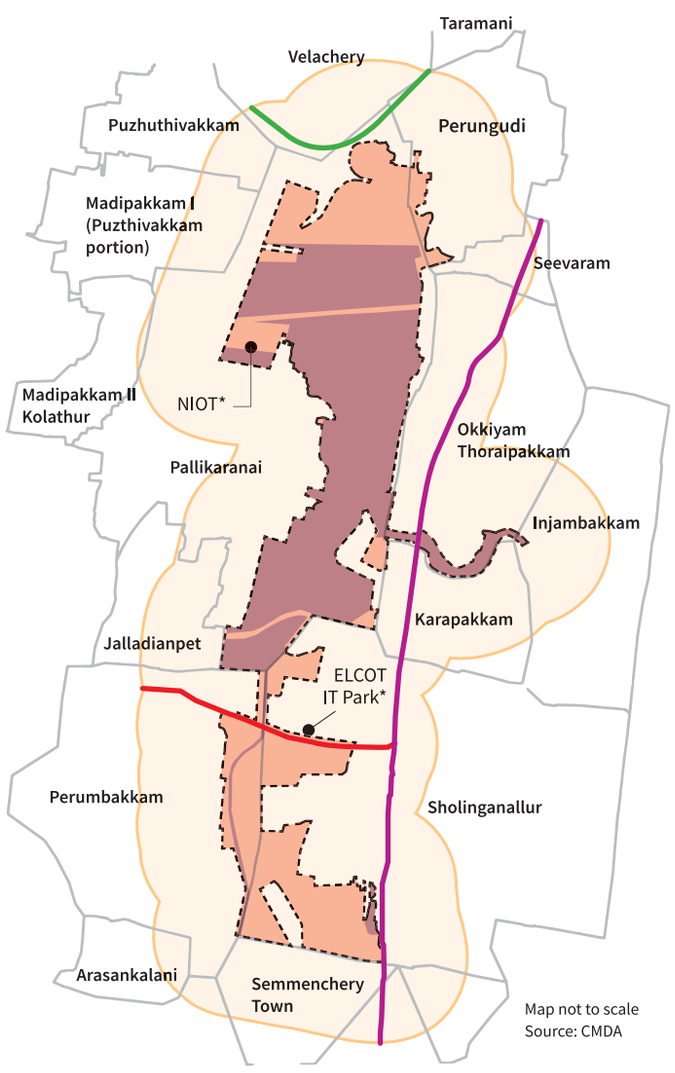
In 2022, Pallikaranai received international recognition when an additional 550 hectares surrounding the 698-hectare Reserve Forest was included under the Ramsar Convention. This took the total protected area to 1,247.54 hectares. Contrary to popular perception, a Ramsar designation does not automatically prohibit construction or development. Rather, it recognises a wetland's international ecological importance and requires governments to ensure its "wise use" through scientific management.

Under India's Wetlands (Conservation and Management) Rules, 2017, the next step after such recognition is for the State Wetland Authority to scientifically delineate the wetland's boundaries, prepare an Integrated Management Plan (IMP), and identify a 'zone of influence' – the surrounding landscape whose hydrology, drainage, groundwater movement, and land use directly affect the wetland's ecological health.

The IMP is expected to be based on hydrological and ecological studies, field verification, and public consultation before regulatory measures are finalised. Unlike many Ramsar wetlands located away from dense human settlements, Pallikaranai sits in the middle of a metropolitan landscape. A thriving economy of residential colonies, IT parks, hospitals, educational institutions, Metro Rail corridors, and government offices has emerged around it over several decades, and statutory approval has been issued by public authorities.

The areas in **trouble**

In September 2025, the National Green Tribunal (NGT) directed the authorities not to grant planning approval or construction permission within one kilometre of the Pallikaranai Ramsar site until a comprehensive study to identify the wetland's zone of influence was completed. The CMDA subsequently instructed the planning authorities not to process applications within the Ramsar site and its proposed one-kilometre influence zone.



Ramsar Site Boundary Pallikaranai Marshland

Pallikaranai Swamp Area

Zone of Influence: 1 km, around roughly 1,247 hectares

MRTS

Metro Lines Purple Line, Red Line

*National Institute of Ocean Technology

*Electronics Corporation of Tamil Nadu

Key Statistics

Core Area 1,247.54 ha

Influence Zone 4,742 ha

> Conservation should not come at the cost of lakhs of people already living in approved neighbourhoods
>
> **A. FRANCIS,** Residents' association leader

Caught in the zone

In September 2025, the Southern Bench of the National Green Tribunal (NGT) directed the authorities not to grant planning approval or construction permission within one kilometre of the Pallikaranai Ramsar site until a comprehensive scientific study identifying the wetland's zone of influence was completed.

Acting on the order, the Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority (CMDA), through a circular issued on October 3, 2025, instructed the planning authorities not to process applications within the Ramsar site and its proposed one-kilometre zone of influence.

The notified area extends across parts of Perumbakkam, Sholinganallur, Medavakkam, Madipakkam, Thoraipakkam, and Velachery. It also encompasses major public institutions such as the National Institute of Wind Energy, the National Institute of Ocean Technology, ELCOT, Metro Rail infrastructure, hospitals, schools, and government offices. The CMDA order has affected thousands of residents living in Chennai's fastest-growing neighbourhoods.

Ganesh, a resident of Ram Nagar North since the 1980s, said his family vacated their 40-year-old independent house on a 2,400 sq. ft. plot to rebuild it, but the CMDA's order stalled their plans. "The house had become old, so we wanted to rebuild it. But the bar on new approval dampened our plans. Having lived here for over four decades, moving out due to the uncertainty was emotionally difficult," he said.

His father bought the residential plot in the 1980s when the area had few houses and the nearest bus service was at Velachery, he added.

Others point out that much of the development around the marsh had taken place with government approval over several decades. Chandran, who bought a plot at Madipakkam in 1994 based on a layout approved in 1964, said he obtained building permission from the then Chitlapakkam Panchayat Union before constructing his house. "People invested their life savings after obtaining all the necessary permissions. Now they are unable to build, modernise, renovate, or even raise loans against their properties," he said.

Property market affected

Residents also say the uncertainty has begun affecting the local property market. Pavan, a resident of Thoraipakkam, said buyers have become wary of investing in the area despite its proximity to Old Mahabalipuram Road, major IT parks, and the upcoming Metro Rail line. Rengasamy, representing residents of Ram Nagar North, Srinivasa Nagar, Bagireddy Nagar, Ramalinga Nagar, Annai Theresa Nagar, and adjoining localities, estimated that more than 3,000 residents had been affected by the planning approval suspension. He said homeowners were unable to reconstruct ageing buildings, add floors, or access housing loans despite living in neighbourhoods with established civic infrastructure such as roads, drinking water supply, and underground sewerage.

The concern is echoed by residents' welfare associations. A. Francis, president of the Federation of Thoraipakkam Residents' Welfare Associations, said residents were not opposed to restoring the marshland. "We have campaigned for years to restore Pallikaranai and remove the Perungudi dump yard. But conservation should not come at the cost of lakhs of people already living in approved neighbourhoods," he said.

S. Kumararaja, of the Federation of Velachery Residents' Welfare Association, said he had recently failed to secure approval for a joint-venture redevelopment proposal at Velachery, despite repeated attempts. "The government stands to lose crores of rupees in revenue. Registration alone used to fetch nearly ₹10,000 crore annually from the sub-registrar offices across Velachery and Adyar, while the Greater Chennai Corporation (GCC) and the CMDA are also losing income from property tax and planning permissions," he said. Wetland ecologists, however, caution that the debate cannot be reduced to property rights alone. The ecological health of Pallikaranai depends not only on the marsh but also on the surrounding landscape. The very term, 'zone of influence', means activities outside the wetland can have a bearing on what happens inside it, said Jayashree Vencatesan, managing trustee of Care Earth Trust. "Imagine having a clean house surrounded by garbage. Eventually, the dust and waste will enter the house. Likewise, if the hydrology around the marsh is altered, the marsh itself cannot remain healthy," she said.

> **The marsh receives water from nearly 65 wetlands before draining into the Bay of Bengal. Acting as the natural sponge, it stores monsoon floodwaters, recharges the groundwater table, filters pollutants, and moderates flooding**

She added that maintaining feeder channels, drainage pathways, freshwater inflows, tidal exchange, and seasonal water retention was important to the wetland's survival. "Pallikaranai functions as a landscape, not merely as an isolated protected patch. The zone of influence, therefore, has to be delineated very carefully; otherwise, decades of conservation work could be undone."

'Demarcation in progress'

According to the CMDA, the one-kilometre zone of influence is unjustified and has brought real estate development across the major IT corridors of Old Mahabalipuram Road and East Coast Road to a standstill. The TNSWA maintains that the one-kilometre zone of influence should not be viewed as a permanent regulatory boundary. Srinivas R. Reddy, Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (Head of Forest Force) and Member-Secretary of the TNSWA, said the current one-kilometre zone was adopted as an interim precautionary measure based on the best information available at the time and should not be construed as a scientifically determined buffer. "The one-kilometre zone was proposed based on the information available then. It is a temporary precautionary demarcation and not the final scientifically established boundary," he said.

Mr. Reddy explained that the Ramsar designation is only one step in the conservation process. While the international recognition was accorded in 2022, the wetland must now be formally notified under the Wetlands (Conservation and Management) Rules, 2017, a process that requires detailed scientific studies before regulatory boundaries are finalised. "As part of this exercise, we will undertake scientific ground-truthing to identify the precise extent of the wetland and its ecological characteristics. Only then will the zone of influence be delineated," he said.

The district administration is verifying survey numbers, land ownership, and land-use records before forwarding the information to the National Centre for Sustainable Coastal Management (NCSCM), which will carry out scientific validation of the wetland boundary and recommend the final zone of influence. The TNSWA maintains that this process is intended to ensure that the final notification is based on scientific evidence rather than broad assumptions. For residents, however, the uncertainty has persisted for nearly a year. Many say they remain unsure whether they will eventually be permitted to construct, redevelop, mortgage, or even sell properties that were purchased legally and, in many cases, developed with the approval granted by public authorities decades ago.