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GOES BEYOND

THE KERALA STORY 2 ROW

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It has potential long-term implications for both countries

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Brook's century puts England in semifinals

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Pakistan accuses Afghanistan of 'firing' at border

ISLAMABAD
Pakistan on Tuesday accused the Afghan Taliban of "unprovoked firing" along the border, while warning of a severe response to any further such attacks. » PAGE 14

Cong. slams PM's Israel visit amid regional tensions

NEW DELHI
The Congress on Tuesday criticised Prime Minister Narendra Modi's upcoming visit to Israel, questioning its timing amid escalating tensions in West Asia. » PAGE 5

MP flags failure to utilise funds for the Northeast

NEW DELHI
Trinamool Congress MP Derek O'Brien has raised concerns and sought a probe into budget underutilisation and limited reach of Centre schemes in the Northeast and West Bengal. » PAGE 6

Bangladesh's new govt. announces major changes

NEW DELHI
The Tarique Rahman-led government of Bangladesh carried out changes in the country's armed forces as well as the International Crimes Tribunal. » PAGE 14

SC expands judicial team to aid West Bengal SIR

Bench says judges can be borrowed from neighbouring Odisha and Jharkhand, if needed; it permits use of civil judges for the exercise; move follows Calcutta HC Chief Justice flagging lakhs of claims and objections pending; EC allowed to publish voter list on February 28, which would be followed up by supplementary lists till the Assembly election

Krishnadas Rajagopal
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Tuesday moved quickly to swell the ranks of judicial officers deployed to aid the Election Commission (EC) in the completion of the special intensive revision (SIR) in West Bengal, even alerting neighbouring Odisha and Jharkhand to spare their judges.

A Special Bench headed by Chief Justice of India Surya Kant met urgently after receiving a letter from the Chief Justice of the Calcutta High Court detailing the perils of the "enormous exercise". The High Court Chief Justice said a whopping 50 lakh claims and objections, raised by voters excluded on grounds of logical discrepancies and

mapping, were pending before the Electoral Registration Officers/Assistant Electoral Registration Officers.

'Drop in the ocean'

The letter said the 294 district and additional district judges selected to deal with the verification process was merely a drop in the ocean. Even if each one heard 250 cases a day, the entire process would take 80 days to be completed. Time was already stretched and deadlines for the Assembly election were drawing close.

On February 20, the Supreme Court took the "extraordinary" decision to involve the judiciary in the ongoing SIR exercise in the State, citing the persistent "trust deficit" between the Mamata Banerjee govern-



Long wait: People summoned for hearings during the special intensive revision exercise in Balurghat, West Bengal. PTI

ment and the EC. The top court had requested the Chief Justice of the Calcutta High Court to deploy serving and retired judicial officers in West Bengal for SIR hearings.

They would hear lakhs of voters who found themselves purged from the

draft roll, and had received hearing notices after the EC found them "unmapped" or detected "logical discrepancies" in their personal details.

On Tuesday, the Special Bench, including Justices Joymalya Bagchi and Vipul M. Pancholi, entitled the

Trinamool, BJP hail Supreme Court order

KOLKATA
The Trinamool Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party both hailed the Supreme Court's order allowing the Calcutta High Court Chief Justice to deploy judicial officers from neighbouring Jharkhand and Odisha to deal with claims and objections in West Bengal SIR. » PAGE 4

Chief Justice of the Calcutta High Court to additionally deploy civil judges, both senior and junior divisions, with experience of not less than three years, for the SIR process.

If further human resources were required, the top court authorised the

Calcutta Chief Justice to request his counterparts in neighbouring Odisha and Jharkhand to spare serving or retired judicial officers for the verification work in West Bengal.

The Supreme Court asked the Chief Justices of Jharkhand and Orissa High Courts to consider the Calcutta Chief Justice's request, if made, sympathetically.

The court instructed that the verification of objections and claims regarding logical discrepancies/unmapping would be based on documents listed in the EC's October 27, 2025 SIR notification. The court underscored that Aadhaar, Classes 10 admit card and pass certificate would be considered as proof during SIR verification.

Most significantly, the court allowed EC to publish a voter list in West Bengal on February 28, 2026. However, supplementary lists would be published on a continuous basis till nominations are filed for the Assembly election. The Supreme Court invoked its plenary powers under Article 142 of the Constitution to declare that voters included in the supplementary lists would be deemed to be part of the final electoral roll published on February 28.

"The purity of elections has to be maintained. Concerns from both sides... have to be addressed," Justice Bagchi observed.

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PLEA ON AADHAR DECLINED
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History on wheels



Commemorative edition: A special heritage ride of tram no. 498 'Gitanjali', a wooden tram built during the Second World War, was flagged off to mark the 153rd anniversary of the Kolkata tram service on Tuesday. PTI

Health Ministry set to roll out free HPV vaccination plan targeting girls aged 14

Bindu Shajan Perappadan
NEW DELHI

The Union Health Ministry is set to launch a nationwide Human Papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination programme targeting girls aged 14.

The vaccination will be voluntary and free of cost, ensuring equitable access across socio-economic groups.

India will use Gardasil, a quadrivalent HPV vaccine, for protection from HPV types 16 and 18, which cause cervical cancer, and types 6 and 11.

"Global and Indian scientific evidence confirms that a single dose provides robust and durable protection when administered to girls in the recommended age group," a senior Health Ministry official said.

"The nation-wide programme will target girls aged 14 years, an age at which the HPV vaccine offers maximum preventive benefit, well before potential exposure to the virus," they said.

To ensure uninterrupted availability and quality, India has secured HPV vaccine supplies through a transparent, globally supported procurement mechanism.

"Under India's partnership with Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, Gardasil vaccines, which are approved by India's drug regulator and widely used internationally, have been made available for the national programme. The procurement follows stringent quality and cold chain standards, enabling the government to provide the vaccine free of cost to eligible girls across all States and Union Territories," the official said.

Safety shot

The Centre's nation-wide HPV vaccination programme targeting girls aged 14 will begin soon

- A single-shot of Gardasil, a vaccine that provides protection against HPV types 16 and 18, which cause cervical cancer, and types 6 and 11 will be used
- The vaccination will be voluntary and free of cost. It will be administered exclusively at designated government health facilities
- Cervical cancer remains the second most common cancer among women in India

HPV vaccination under the national programme will be conducted exclusively at designated government health facilities, including the Ayushman Arogya Mandirs (Primary Health Centres), Community Health Centres, Sub-District and District Hospitals, and Government Medical Colleges. Each vaccination session will be carried out in the presence of trained medical officers, supported by skilled healthcare teams, and equipped for post-vaccination observation and management of any rare adverse events.

Common ailment

Cervical cancer remains the second most common cancer among women in India, with nearly 80,000 new cases and over 42,000 deaths reported annually. Scientific evidence establishes that almost all cases of cervical cancer are caused by persistent infection with high-risk types of HPV, particularly HPV types 16 and 18, which together account for more than 80% of cervical cancer cases in India. Despite being largely preventable through vaccination and early screening, cervical cancer continues to impose a heavy burden on women and families.

"The forthcoming HPV vaccination programme directly addresses this challenge by preventing HPV infection before it can progress to cancer," the Health Ministry said.

HPV vaccines are among the most extensively studied vaccines worldwide, with evidence demonstrating 93-100% effectiveness in preventing cervical cancer caused by vaccine-covered HPV types. The vaccine is non-live, does not cause HPV infection, and has a good safety record, supported by more than 500 million doses administered globally since its introduction in 2006.

Meanwhile, globally, over 90 countries are implementing single-dose HPV vaccination schedules, improving coverage and affordability. Several countries have already demonstrated substantial reductions in HPV infection, precancerous lesions, and cervical cancer incidence following widespread vaccination. India's approach is grounded in global best practices, national disease burden evidence, and expert recommendations of the National Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation, a Health Ministry official said.

Panel to probe repeated failures of PSLV, says ISRO

Jacob Koshy
NEW DELHI

A committee that includes K. Vijay Raghavan, former Principal Scientific Adviser, and S. Somanath, former Chairman, India Space Research Organisation (ISRO), will probe "systemic issues" underlying the successive failures of the ISRO's Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle (PSLV).

While technical committees probe and submit 'failure analysis reports' when mishaps occur, this committee, *The Hindu* has reliably learnt, will investigate questions on whether "organisational" problems may have played a role in the debacles involving the PSLV.

On January 12, the PSLV-C62 failed in its mission to deliver 16 satellites into orbit as the rocket failed to ignite. This was similar to the May 18, 2025 failure of the PSLV-C61, in which, too, the third stage failed to



On January 12, the PSLV-C62 failed in its mission to deliver 16 satellites into orbit as the rocket failed to ignite in the third stage. PTI

fire, destroying as a result the EOS-09 satellite intended for the government's strategic needs.

The committee members consist of experts who are external to the ISRO, and are expected to table their findings to ISRO Chairman V. Narayanan before April.

On February 3, *The Hindu* reported that National Security Adviser Ajit Doval, who is also a member

of India's Space Commission, visited the Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre, reportedly in connection with the failure of the PSLV-C62 mission.

"A national-level expert committee has been constituted and is reviewing the reason for the anomaly in the PSLV vehicle," the ISRO said in a statement to *The Hindu*.

The PSLV's failures would be the core focus of

the report, and the committee would be looking into the processes in the manufacture, procurement, and assembling of various components of the rocket. This has implications for other rockets, too, *The Hindu* was told, because they have commonalities.

Report in a week

India's space ecosystem now involves several private companies and, therefore, the probe will not only be about which part or component failed, and who was responsible, but also whether there is a process in place to fix accountability, and how it may be improved.

A technical committee of the ISRO will first table a report on the PSLV-C62 incident this week, *The Hindu* has learnt through reliable sources.

The ISRO's historical response to rocket failures has been to have a Failure Analysis Committee probe the reasons, and publicise its findings. This, however,

has not taken place in the case of both the PSLV-C61 and PSLV-C62.

The Failure Analysis Committee report of the May 18 mishap was sent to the Prime Minister's Office before the PSLV-C62 launch, but its details have not been made public.

The Failure Analysis Committee, constituted by the ISRO Chairman, is a body of experts within ISRO to lead in the event of a major incident. It is expected to reconstruct the chain of events leading up to a failure, and recommend corrective action before the rocket is cleared to fly again. The committee members include experts within ISRO as well as relevant experts from academia.

At a press conference on February 2, the Union Minister of State for Science and Technology, and Earth Sciences, Jitendra Singh, said that a "third party appraisal" was ongoing. (With inputs from Hemant C.S. in Bengaluru)

IN BRIEF



Meerut house blaze kills 6 persons including 5 children

Tragedy struck a cloth trader's family in Uttar Pradesh's Meerut when six members, including four-month-old twin sisters and three other children, perished in a fire triggered by a suspected electrical malfunction at a three-storey house, officials said on Tuesday. The incident occurred around 8 p.m. on Monday at Kidwai Nagar. Seven people were admitted to hospital with burn injuries, of whom six died, Meerut SSP Avinash Pandey said. Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath expressed condolences to the bereaved family and directed officials to expedite relief measures to the injured person. PTI

'Central govt. salary accounts will improve savings accounts'

With an aim to strengthen banking outreach among central government employees, M. Nagaraju, secretary of the Department of Financial Services, Ministry of Finance, on Tuesday unveiled a composite salary package accounts opening camp at Kartavya Bhavan in New Delhi. It was jointly organised by SBI and Canara Bank, with 12 public sector banks participating. Addressing a gathering, Mr. Nagaraju said that salary accounts offer scope for improvement in savings accounts. SBI New Delhi Circle Chief General Manager, Debasish Mishra, said that the salary package would help both government employees and banks.

Hospitalised Goa MLA rejoins protest against 'misuse' of law

Revolutionary Goans Party (RGP) legislator Viresh Borkar on Tuesday rejoined the protest against the "misuse" of a section in the Town and Country Planning Act to convert a tribal area into a "settlement zone" in Goa. The agitation, which began on February 20, has entered its fourth day. On Saturday, Mr. Borkar, who has launched a hunger strike, was allegedly dragged and manhandled by the police. He was shifted to a private hospital on Monday night after his health started deteriorating during his indefinite fast. Speaking to reporters, RGP president Manoj Parab said the MLA refused to stay in the hospital and rejoined the protest at Azad Maidan. PTI

Jharkhand tables ₹1.58-lakh-cr. budget for 2026-27 fiscal

Pledging inclusive growth and development of all sections of society, the Jharkhand government on Tuesday tabled a ₹1.58-lakh-crore budget in the Assembly for the 2026-27 fiscal, allocating ₹67,460 crore for the social sector aimed at the welfare of the poor, women and other vulnerable groups. The Jharkhand Mukti Morcha government had in 2025-26 presented a ₹1.45 lakh crore budget. "I lay on the table of the House a budget of ₹1,58,560 crore for the 2026-27 financial year, up 9% as compared to the current fiscal. 'Abua Dishom' [our own] budget will bring smile to the faces of Jharkhand people," Finance Minister Radhakrishna Kishore said. PTI

AIADMK unleashes third round of populist promises to counter DMK's poll sops

Ahead of T.N. election, party promises ₹10,000 each as solatium to families hit by 'impact of inflation', 'tax hikes' effected during DMK rule; ₹1,000 each to ration cardholders as annual Pongal gift hamper

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI

AIADMK general secretary Edappadi K. Palaniswami on Tuesday unveiled the party's third phase of poll promises for the upcoming Assembly election in Tamil Nadu. Making a slew of promises, Mr. Palaniswami said, if voted to power, the party would give ₹1,000 each to ration cardholders as part of the annual Pongal gift hamper.

It would also give ₹10,000 as solatium to every family affected by the "impact of inflation" and "tax increases" effected by the DMK government.

Fisher families would receive ₹12,000 instead of ₹8,000 during the fishing ban, stated the release.

An unemployment dole of ₹2,000 a month would be given to graduates and ₹1,000 to those who finished higher secondary education, subject to both categories having registered themselves with employment exchanges.

Handloom weavers



AIADMK general secretary Edappadi K. Palaniswami says all these schemes will be implemented by increasing the State's revenue once the AIADMK comes to power. FILE PHOTO

would be entitled to 450 units of free electricity instead of the existing 300 units and power looms 1,400 units as against 1,000 units. Loans taken by city pavement dwellers from cooperative institutions would be waived, it added.

In the first round of promises on January 17, the party assured people that the monthly assistance to women heads of families would go up to ₹2,000, a promise made subsequently by Chief Minister and DMK president M.K. Stalin, too.

The principal Opposition party also proposed to extend free bus rides to men. In the second round on February 4, the AIADMK assured the voters of three free cooking gas refills, waiver of educational loans, an increase in old-age pension to ₹2,000 a month from ₹1,200, and interest-free loans to women self-help groups belonging to religious minorities.

The party has so far made 16 promises.

Addressing reporters at the AIADMK headquarters, Mr. Palaniswami said, "All these schemes will be im-

plemented by increasing the State's revenue once the AIADMK comes to power."

The latest round of promises were announced coinciding with the birth anniversary of the late AIADMK leader and former Chief Minister, J. Jayalalithaa.

'Divided AIADMK' Meanwhile, interacting with journalists in Theni after paying homage to the former Chief Minister, ousted AIADMK coordinator O. Panneerselvam said he would not join any political party or launch one.

He said senior BJP leader and Union Home Minister Amit Shah's attempts to reunite the AIADMK factions before the 2021 Assembly election had failed, as did his efforts in January 2026 to accommodate the factions in the NDA.

"Mr. Shah told me that the DMK-led alliance was intact, and not a single party had left the alliance. He said it would certainly win the election, and wondered how a divided AIADMK could win," Mr. Panneerselvam said.

Seat sharing in NDA will be finalised by mid-March: Himanta

The Hindu Bureau
GUWAHATI

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Tuesday said that the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) would finalise its seat-sharing arrangement for the upcoming Assembly election by mid-March.

The Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) and the United People's Party Liberal (UPPL) were allies of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the 2021 Assembly poll. While the former continues to be an ally, there is no clarity about the status of the latter after the BJP befriended its regional rival, Bodoland People's Front, following the Bodoland Territorial Council elections in September 2025.

Mr. Sarma said discussions with alliance partners were at an advanced stage. "Everything is moving in the right direction, and I think the seat-sharing and the names of candidates will be finalised by March 15-16," he told mediapersons in central Assam's Bokajan.

Assam has 126 Assembly constituencies. In 2021, the BJP, the AGP, and the UPPL contested 93, 22, and 11 seats, winning 60, nine,



Assam CM Himanta Biswa Sarma said discussions with alliance partners were at an advanced stage. ANI

and six of them respectively. Speculation is rife that the BJP may allot fewer than 22 seats to the AGP for the upcoming poll, likely by April. The AGP is also expected to contest a significant number of seats in Muslim-dominated areas, where the BJP has limited electoral prospect.

'Web of uncertainty'

The UPPL is caught in a web of uncertainty about the alliance. "What is certain is that our alliance [with the BJP] continues to date," party president Pramod Boro said.

Both the UPPL and the BPF are eyeing 15 Assembly constituencies across five districts under the Bodoland Territorial Council.

Rajasthan prohibits felling of khejri trees after 11-day protest

The Hindu Bureau
JAIPUR

The Bharatiya Janata Party government in Rajasthan has enforced a ban on the felling of khejri trees following an 11-day-long agitation by saints and Bishnoi community members in Bikaner.

A Bill for tree protection will also be introduced during the ongoing Budget Session of the State Assembly.

Khejri is the official State tree of Rajasthan, designated in view of its immense value to the desert ecosystem and rural economy.

The agitation had started after the alleged widespread felling of khejri for solar power projects coming up in the western parts of the State.

The indefinite sit-in protest outside the Bishnoi

Dharamshala in Bikaner was called off after the State government issued a circular to halt the felling of the trees.

Protesters backed

The agitation received support from several State leaders, including ex-Rajasthan Chief Ministers Ashok Gehlot and Vasundhara Raje.

Minister of State K.K. Bishnoi had earlier attempted to get the agitation withdrawn by assuring a ban limited to Bikaner and Jodhpur divisions. As the protesters rejected the partial measure, a delegation led by Mr. Bishnoi handed over an order to all District Collectors. The order stated that felling of khejri trees would remain prohibited throughout the State until a new law comes into force to protect them.

Punjab varsity V-C removed for 'misbehaving' with J&K students over meal request

Press Trust of India
LUDHIANA

CT University Chancellor Charanjit Singh Channi on Tuesday said that Vice-Chancellor (V-C) Nitin Tandon was removed from his post, after a group of Kashmiri students accused him of "misbehaving" with them.

The private university in Punjab's Ludhiana has also initiated an internal probe into the matter while the situation is being monitored by local authorities.

The students claimed that on Monday they requested for 'sehri' (pre-dawn meal) and 'iftar' (evening meal) arrangements to be made in the university mess amid the ongoing month of Ramzan. However, Mr. Tandon used "abusive language" against them and "threatened to

cancel their admissions", they alleged.

The students also held a protest in the university and raised slogans against Mr. Tandon.

Mr. Channi said the services of the V-C have been terminated and a committee led by the Jagraon Sub-Divisional Magistrate has been formed to probe the matter. The issue was also highlighted by Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) leader Iltija Mufti.

Ms. Iltija shared on X a video of the Kashmiri students who alleged misbehaviour by the V-C and de-

mandated that Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann take action in the matter.

CM intervention sought The Jammu and Kashmir Students Association also sought the intervention of Mr. Mann in the matter.

National convener of the student association, Nasir Khuehami, said the association received complaints from students alleging that they had been threatened that they would be evicted from their hostels and their admissions cancelled for seeking meals at non-regular hours in the mess during Ramzan. Mr. Khuehami said the students are regular fee-paying boarders who merely requested necessary meal arrangements.

He said no student should face threats or coercion for following their faith.

Press Trust of India
AHMEDABAD

The Gujarat High Court on Tuesday set aside the conviction and sentence of five-year rigorous imprisonment of former Director General of Police S.S. Khandawala in a 1976 custodial torture case, holding the order of the Sessions Court as "erroneous and failed in merits".

Justice Gita Gopi set aside Khandawala's September 2003 conviction and sentence of five-year rigorous imprisonment by a Sessions Court at Junagadh under section 365 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) in a 1976 custodial torture case.

The court also dismissed the plea filed by the State government for enhancement of the sentence passed by the Sessions Court in 2003.

Centre's anti-Naxal push: Odisha Police officers recall their ordeal in Malkangiri forests

Satyasundar Barik
BHUBANESWAR

Ahead of Centre's March 31 deadline to eliminate Left Wing Extremism, once described as the country's gravest internal security threat, Assistant Sub-Inspector of Police Siva Shankar Nayak reflects on the past decade of his life - marked by encounters with Naxals.

Deployed in several anti-Naxal operations in Odisha, Mr. Nayak, now posted at a police station in Malkangiri district, has earned six police medals for gallantry, including the President's Police Medal.

But the accolades did not come without a cost, he said. "My wife and daughter have spent countless sleepless nights. Every time I returned home at odd hours after an encoun-

ter or a narrow escape during anti-Naxal operations, I could see how relieved they were," Mr. Nayak recalled.

Subrat Majhi (name changed) still plans anti-Naxal operations long after his years in active combat. In over two decades with Odisha Police, he too has earned six gallantry medals. Anonymity, he said, sharpened his focus in the fight against the Red Rebels.

Inside Maoists' fortress After joining as constables, they were among the first batches to have trained with the Greyhounds, India's first dedicated anti-Naxal force carved out of the police force in undivided Andhra Pradesh. They later became part of Odisha's own Special Operations Group.



Siva Shankar Nayak, winner of six police medals for gallantry, during an anti-Naxal operation some years ago. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Malkangiri, bordering Chhattisgarh and Andhra Pradesh and not far from Telangana, remained a stronghold of the outlawed Communist Party of India (Maoist) for years. Swabhim Anchal, formerly a "cut-off area" surrounded by water on three sides and mountains and forests

on the fourth, was their fortress.

Senior officers scarcely entered the district in uniform. They often came in plain clothes and switched two or three hired vehicles to evade the Maoists' formidable ground intelligence network.

"Between 2005 and

2015, no one in the force felt safe," Mr. Majhi said. "We would walk 70 km in teams of three groups of about 24 personnel, including trekking hills over four days. Death could have struck at any moment in those ambushes. The extremists were highly trained," said the officer.

The standing instruction, he added, was simple: trust no one, not even villagers or bystanders. "Teams skirted villages, maintained distance, and avoided even dogs. A single bark could trigger a chain reaction, alerting Maoist 'sympathisers' and jeopardising the mission. The rebels then enjoyed deep village support while militia were everywhere. Communication with families was almost impossible without mobile phone networks. Occasionally, a sa-

tellite phone message, brief and coded, would reassure loved ones they were alive," Mr. Majhi said.

Close shave

Mr. Nayak has escaped death more than once. In 2008, a landmine blast ripped apart a police vehicle, killing 17 personnel ahead of them. "We were on motorcycles. Immediately after the explosion, Maoist cadres opened fire from vantage points they had already secured. It was like a battlefield. We retaliated and pushed them back," he recollected. Rumours spread swiftly that he was among the dead. His family rushed to the site, fearing the worst.

Every anti-Naxal operation begins with precise role briefings, the officers tell *The Hindu*. On return, teams undergo debriefings

to assess performance and "acts of individual courage under fire". Names are then accordingly recommended for gallantry medals.

Once, nearly 800 Naxal cadres were believed to be active across almost half of Odisha's 30 districts. Today, their numbers have dwindled to fewer than 40, with most of their leaders eliminated, according to officials. Odisha also served as a crucial transit corridor for cadres of the CPI (Maoist), who, under sustained pressure in Andhra Pradesh, used the route to move towards Chhattisgarh. To counter the insurgency, alongside Odisha Police, Central forces such as the Central Reserve Police Force and the Border Security Force were deployed in affected regions.

While there were instances of alleged excesses by security personnel during patrolling and area domination exercises in Maoist-affected areas, extremist groups, officials claim, often amplified those instances or made allegations against security forces to "deepen mistrust between villagers and the police".

Built trust with locals

Both Mr. Nayak and Mr. Majhi noted that, alongside security operations against the insurgents, efforts were increasingly focused on building trust with local communities. This strategic shift in the latter part of the decade played a key role in weakening Maoist influence and restoring confidence in the administration, they added.

Death toll due to 'adulterated milk' goes up to five in A.P.

The Hindu Bureau
RAJAMAHENDRAVARAM

The death toll due to acute renal failure allegedly caused by consuming adulterated milk in Rajamahendravaram, Andhra Pradesh has gone up to five, after a six-year-old boy died during treatment in Visakhapatnam on Tuesday.

The condition of seven of the 15 patients undergoing medical treatment for acute renal failure in hospitals in Rajamahendravaram and Visakhapatnam remains 'critical'.

All five deceased and 15 persons undergoing treatment had consumed milk that was supplied by one vendor, who was arrested on Tuesday.

Meanwhile, food safety officials conducted inspections at milk distribution centres at various places across the State.

Kerala Story 2 depicts State in a wrong light: High Court

People of Kerala live in harmony, but the film portrays them wrongly, observes Kerala High Court; HC seeks Centre's stance on screening the film before it today ahead of its release on February 27

The Hindu Bureau
KOCHI

Stating that the teaser and trailer of the Hindi film *The Kerala Story 2: Goes Beyond* wrongly portrays the people of Kerala, the Kerala High Court on Tuesday sought the Centre's stance on screening the film before it on Wednesday.

The movie is slated for release on February 27.

"The people of Kerala live in harmony. But the film portrays them wrongly," a Bench of Justice B. Ch. Kurian Thomas observed, while hearing pleas that challenged the granting of censor certificate for the film. The petitioner said there was prejudice against people from Kerala after the release of



Dissent note: SFI activists hold a protest against the upcoming movie in Thiruvananthapuram. NIRMAL HARINDRAN

the first film *The Kerala Story*.

The court recently issued notice to the producers of the film and the Central Board of Film Certification on a plea challenging censor certificate for the film.

The petitioner had said the film's teaser and trailer portrayed narratives in-

volving women from multiple States, although the title was *The Kerala Story*, thus associating alleged incidents of terrorism and forced conversion exclusively to the State.

The court said the apprehension of the people of Kerala cannot be ignored, since the filmmakers, who say that it features

a pan-India story, had used 'Kerala' in the title.

"The filmmakers add that the theme has been inspired by true events. This could lead to communal tension," the court said, adding that the averment that the film was based on "fictional characters, has been mentioned in microscopic letters (in the teaser)."

Asserting that it was against restricting artistic freedom, the court hastened to add that there were "restrictions the law had laid down (on screening films)." The court went on to direct the Centre to "come up with instructions" on whether the movie could be screened on Wednesday.

The case was posted for hearing on Wednesday.

'Racial abuse' of three Arunachal women in Delhi condemned

The Hindu Bureau
GUWAHATI

Chief Ministers of at least three north-eastern States have called for exemplary action against those who racially abuse people from the region in the country beyond.

Reacting to the alleged racial discrimination and abuse of three women from his State in New Delhi recently, Arunachal Pradesh CM Pema Khandu said such behaviour was unacceptable and had no place in society. "I had spoken with the Commissioner of Police, Delhi, and sought swift and strict action. The accused are currently absconding, and I have been assured that they will be apprehended at the earliest and dealt with as per law," he said.

His Sikkim counterpart Prem Singh Tamang said the incident was "concerning and unfortunate". "Such instances remind us of the importance of upholding dignity and mutual respect at all times. The Northeast is an integral part of our nation, and every citizen deserves dignity, equality, and respect," he said.

Meghalaya CM Conrad K. Sangma said discrimination against people from the Northeast must stop. He also cited the "racial and sexual abuse" of a resident doctor of AIIMS Gorakhpur from Nagaland. "Outraging a woman's modesty is not what a civilised nation should tolerate. They are your sisters and daughters, too," he said.



Pema Khandu.

Among other leaders who condemned the abuse were Assam Congress president and MP Gaurav Gogoi, Manipur MP Angomcha Bimal Akojiam, and Tipra Motha Party leader Pradyot Bikram Manikya Debbarma. "The incident is a stark reminder that prejudice against people from the Northeast continues to persist," Mr. Gogoi said.

Mr. Debbarma reminded the nation that people of Arunachal Pradesh had been guarding their State's border with China. "It is because of the patriotism of Arunachalis that not one Chinese soldier can enter our country, yet they have to be subjected to racism and ridicule," he posted on X.

According to the Delhi police, the three women from Arunachal Pradesh had engaged an electrician on their fourth-floor flat to instal an air conditioner, but the abusive neighbours objected to it. They claimed that dust and debris from the drilling work fell on their floor below. A viral video showed a couple hurling abuses at the Arunachal Pradesh women.

Four senior Maoist leaders surrender in Telangana

The Hindu Bureau
HYDERABAD

Four of the most senior underground leaders of the banned Communist Party of India (Maoist) surrendered before the Telangana Police in the presence of Director General of Police B. Shivadhar Reddy on Tuesday, expressing their intent to join the mainstream.

Those who renounced armed struggle include politburo member and central committee member (CCM) Tippiri Thirupati alias Devji alias Kumma Dada; CCM Malla Raji Reddy alias Sangram; Telangana State Committee (TSC) secretary Bade Chokka Rao alias Damodar alias Jagan; and state committee member (SCM) Nune Narsimha Reddy alias Ganganna alias Sannu Dada.

'Decisive setback'

Addressing the media in Hyderabad, Mr. Shivadhar Reddy said that Devji had been underground for 44 years, Raji Reddy for 46 years, Damodar for 28 years and Narsimha Reddy for 36 years. The DGP described the development as a "decisive setback" to the Maoist organisation.

With the reintegration of a politburo member and a CCM, the party's last surviving apex organisational structure has effectively collapsed, he said. The Telangana State Committee has also been rendered defunct. The police chief said that the central committee has now been reduced to just one active member.

Union Cabinet nod for 'Kerala' to become 'Keralam'

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Union Cabinet on Tuesday approved the Kerala government's proposal to change the State's name from 'Kerala' to 'Keralam', the name used in the Malayalam language.

The President will now refer the Kerala (Alteration of Name) Bill, 2026, to the Kerala Legislative Assembly to express its views, under the proviso to Article 3 of the Constitution of In-

dia, a government statement said.

Once these views are received, the Union government will take further action to obtain the President's recommendation to introduce the name change legislation in Parliament.

The decision was taken at a Cabinet meeting chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi at its first gathering at Seva Teerth, the new complex housing the Prime Minister's Office.

The Kerala Assembly passed a resolution seeking name change on June 2024

The move comes almost two years after the Kerala Assembly passed a resolution seeking the name change.

The resolution, dated June 24, 2024, said: "The name of our State is 'Keralam' in Malayalam Language. States were formed

on the basis of language on the 1st day of November, 1956. The Kerala Piravi Day is also on the 1st day of November. Since the time of national independence struggle, there has been a strong demand for the formation of United Kerala for the people speaking Malayalam language. But in the First Schedule to the Constitution the name of our State is recorded as 'Kerala'. This Assembly unanimously appeal to the Central Government to

take urgent steps as per Article 3 of the Constitution for modifying the name as 'Keralam'."

The matter was considered in the Ministry of Home Affairs and, with the approval of Minister Amit Shah, the draft note was circulated to the Department of Legal Affairs and the Legislative Department of the Ministry of Law and Justice, for their comments. These departments concurred with the proposal to change the name.

IN BRIEF



High Court quashes case over edited photo of National Flag

The High Court of Karnataka has quashed criminal proceedings against a government high school principal accused of disrespecting the National Flag after a photo of him standing on the flag was uploaded as his social media status. The court quashed the case after finding that the image was not of him standing on the flag but a portrait edited onto its background, and accepted his claim that students had his phone that day, when one of them edited the photo and posted it as his status without permission.

T.N. student injured in attack inside IIT-Palakkad campus

A student of the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Palakkad was attacked by an unidentified person on the campus on Monday. Aswini Kannan, a fourth-year B.Tech Data Science student from Tamil Nadu, sustained an injury on her forehead when she was struck with a wooden plank while walking from her hostel to the dining hall. She was admitted to a hospital in Coimbatore. IIT officials said she was stable. The student was unable to identify her attacker. IIT students protested demanding the immediate arrest of the assailant and enhanced security.

Sreedharan unveils revised Kerala high-speed rail plan

Veteran technocrat E. Sreedharan on Tuesday unveiled a revised high-speed rail plan that would cut travel time between Kannur and Thiruvananthapuram to three hours and 20 minutes (from the current 8 to 10 hours). Positioning it as an alternative to Kerala government's K-Rail project, he presented the Kerala High Speed Rail as a fast, affordable and environmentally friendly corridor. Estimated to cost ₹56,500 crore, lower than K-Rail's ₹63,941 crore, the project seeks to ease congestion, curb pollution and fuel use, and boost connectivity.

SC stays Kerala court order pausing State govt.'s citizen feedback initiative

Krishnadas Rajagopal
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Tuesday stayed the Kerala High Court decision keeping in abeyance the 'Nava Kerala Citizen Response Programme', described as a public outreach and development feedback initiative to obtain suggestions from the public on development and welfare measures.

A Bench of Chief Justice of India Surya Kant and Justice Joymalya Bagchi said "there was nothing wrong in the government enquiring if its welfare programme has worked on the ground". The court, however, asked the State to provide a status report containing details of the expenditure of ₹20 crore allocated for the project.



The top court has sought status report containing details of the expenditure from the State.

The special leave petition filed by the State government submitted that the High Court had intruded into matters of public policy.

"The High Court interfered with the government's power to implement governance and development outreach

programmes and seriously prejudiced the ability of the State to take policy decisions involving public expenditure and thus disturbed the constitutional balance between the executive and judiciary," the petition has submitted.

The State said the programme was envisaged as a time-bound statewide exercise to be conducted from January 2026 to February 2026 for collection of public opinion and suggestions regarding development and welfare schemes.

The State submitted that approximately ₹20 crore under the budget head 'Special PR Campaign' was set aside for the conduct of the programme. The financial sanction for the programme was issued by the State's Information and Pu-

blic Relations Department in October last year.

High Court intervention

The High Court's intervention was based on a writ petition alleging that the programme violated the Rules of Business framed under Article 166(3) of the Constitution, inasmuch as the subject matter of the programme relating to collection of development inputs and evaluation of welfare schemes fell within the domain of departments and not the Information and Public Relations Department.

The writ petitioner had contended that the allocation of ₹20 crore amount to diversion or misuse of public funds and required legislative sanction under Articles 202 to 205 of the Constitution.

'20 cr. Tirupati laddus were prepared using adulterated ghee'

G.V.R. Subba Rao
VIJAYAWADA

Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu stated in the State Legislative Assembly that nearly 20 crore Tirumala laddus were prepared using adulterated ghee during the previous regime, describing the episode as a "Mahapaapam" (great sin).

He said 20.01 crore laddus were allegedly made with compromised ingredients, deeply affecting the faith of devotees of Lord Sri Venkateswara. Citing the findings of a CBI-supervised Special Investigation Team (SIT), he noted that between 2019 and 2024, about 59.71 lakh litres of adulterated ghee was used, involving alleged irregular-

ities worth Rs. 231.51 crore. The Chief Minister further said that tender norms had been relaxed to favour certain firms. Requirements such as annual turnover, milk procurement capacity, production experience, and technical scrutiny were reduced or removed, enabling inexperienced suppliers to enter the system. Bribes were paid, lab reports were forged, and oversight mechanisms bypassed, he alleged.

Stating that devotees had repeatedly complained about declining quality of *prasadam*, Mr. Naidu questioned whether such large-scale irregularities could have occurred without the knowledge of the Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams (TTD) Board.

ABVP members held for vandalism at APU campus in Bengaluru

The Hindu Bureau
BENGALURU

A group of students affiliated with Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) was taken into preventive custody after they staged a protest, allegedly barged onto the campus and vandalised the property of Azim Premji University near Sarjapur, Bengaluru.

Varsity denies charge

They alleged that the institution facilitated an event of a students' group with "anti-national" content, portraying the Indian Army in a poor light. These

charges, however, have been denied by the university authorities and students who were part of a study circle event.

The police rushed to the spot to prevent escalation and detained a few students. "All necessary steps have been taken to ensure that there is no disturbance to law and order," said Chandrakanth M.V., Superintendent of Police (SP), Bengaluru District.

In a counter-protest, students held a demonstration against the ABVP's actions and urged the government to act against them.

Engagement with local people is key to mitigate human-wildlife conflict: SC

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Tuesday said a deeper understanding of reasons behind human-wildlife conflict in southern States cannot be gained by mere court orders passed from thousands of miles away, but by being on the ground, reaching out to the local people in their own language.

"This is an issue which has to be addressed not by court orders, but through a humanitarian approach, by reaching out to them... you have to speak their language, understand their issues, their economic con-



Growing concern: The top court says the situations leading to human-wildlife conflicts in southern States were 'alarming'. H. VIBHU

ditions and how certain people or interests are even alluring them," Chief Justice of India Surya Kant, heading a Bench, remarked.

The court said the situa-

terests involved and there is also conflict of interest. Also, there are some exploiting the situation. There are systematic evasions of the law," Chief Justice Kant observed orally.

Playing with fire

The court was hearing a series of petitions which referred to the orders passed by the apex court on August 1, 2018 and December 4, 2018 while hearing a plea which highlighted the cruel methods used in some States to manage human-wildlife conflict.

The petitions referred to how spikes or fireballs were being used for driving away elephants.

TRAI backs auction of all available spectrum

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI

The Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) on Tuesday recommended auctioning the entire available radiowave spectrum while proposing lower entry barriers for new players and a uniform 35% spectrum cap to safeguard competition in the telecom sector.

While TRAI has not officially disclosed the combined base price of the entire spectrum on offer, as per industry calculations, if all the spectrum on offer across bands (excluding 600 MHz) is sold, the radiowaves could fetch nearly ₹81,000 crore at the reserve price.

While urging the Department of Telecommunications (DoT) to reclaim spectrum held by telecom companies undergoing insolvency, TRAI proposed halving the net worth criteria for new entrants from ₹100 crore to ₹50 crore per licensed service area (and from ₹50 crore to ₹25 crore for Jammu and Kashmir and the northeast) to encourage more participation.

All available spectrum, across nine frequency bands, should be put to auction in the forthcoming bidding, it recommended.

DGCA grounds four aircraft, a month after Pawar's death

Jagriti Chandra
NEW DELHI

Nearly a month after the death of then Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar in a plane crash, the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) has grounded four aircraft operated by VSR Ventures Pvt. Ltd., the charter company that was flying him.

After a high-level meeting on Tuesday following "a recent surge" in accidents, the regulator also announced a slew of measures for charter companies to ensure tighter oversight.

"The multi-disciplinary audit team observed several non-compliances of approved procedures in the organisation in the area of airworthiness, air safety and flight operations," said a press statement issued by the DGCA about VSR Ventures Pvt Limited. As a result, four aircraft were being "immediately grounded" till the company meets the prescribed airworthiness standards. All aircraft grounded are either Learjet 40 or Learjet 45.

VSR Ventures has 17 aircraft registered under its name, according to the DGCA's website. Ajit Pawar and four others

Most of the accidents from the past decade were because of non-adherence to SOPs, says DGCA

ers onboard a Learjet 45, died when it crashed in Baramati on January 28. Subsequently, the DGCA undertook a special audit of VSR, as well as broader industry-wide audits. A preliminary probe report is expected within 30 days of the accident.

In a press statement, the DGCA said accident data from the past decade indicated that most incidents stemmed from non-adherence to standard operating procedures (SOPs), inadequate flight planning, and deficiencies in training.

In response, the regulator announced a series of corrective measures. These include the introduction of a safety ranking system for all charter operators, enhanced random audits, and closer surveillance of ageing aircraft. The DGCA has also directed charter companies to disclose details such as the age of their aircraft, maintenance records, and pilots' experience on their websites.

Probe team visits site of plane crash that killed 7 in Jharkhand

Air ambulance, carrying a patient and family members, two pilots, and medical personnel, went down in Chatra district; CM terms it 'tragic'

The Hindu Bureau
RANCHI/ NEW DELHI

A day after an air ambulance crashed in Chatra district of Jharkhand, officials on Tuesday said all seven persons aboard the aircraft had died.

"The entire administration swung into action as soon as we received information about the crash. Seven people on board died in the accident. It is a tragic and unfortunate incident. The weather condition was bad yesterday [Monday]," Jharkhand Chief Minister Hemant Soren said.

The Beechcraft C90 aircraft, owned by Redbird Airways Pvt. Ltd., was operating a medical evacuation flight from Ranchi to Delhi when it crashed in Kasaria panchayat of Chatra district.

According to officials, the aircraft took off at 7.11 p.m. and had sought a deviation due to inclement weather, but lost communication shortly thereafter.

A team from the Aircraft Accidents Investigation Bureau (AAIB), which is prob-



Wreckage of the Redbird Airways air ambulance which crashed on Monday. All seven persons aboard were killed. ANI

ing the crash, reached the accident site on Tuesday morning. Jharkhand Governor Santosh Gangwar expressed grief over the accident.

Among those killed were Sanjay Rao and his wife, Archana Devi. Family members said they had arranged ₹8 lakh through loans to book the air ambulance after Mr. Sao sustained severe burns and needed advanced treatment in Delhi. Their nephew, Dhruv Sao, two pilots, and two medical personnel were also aboard the plane.

The crash was the second in less than a month involving a plane operated by a non-scheduled operator. On January 28, Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar and four others died in a plane crash near Baramati.

In a separate incident on Tuesday morning, a Pawan Hans helicopter made an emergency landing in the Arabian Sea while flying to Mayabunder from Rangat at around 9.10 a.m. All seven persons on board were rescued safely, the company said in a statement.

Amid DoT push, WhatsApp appears to test SIM-binding

Aroon Deep
NEW DELHI

The online messaging platform WhatsApp appears to be preparing to comply with the SIM-binding directive of the Department of Telecommunications issued late last year.

The directive requires messaging platforms to ensure that a user's registered SIM card is provisioned on the handset used to access the service, and to disable access if it is not. It also includes a potentially disruptive requirement that web-based instances, such as WhatsApp Web, be logged out every six hours.

The directions were issued on November 28, 2025, by the DoT's AI & Digital Intelligence Unit, under its expanded authority to regulate Telecommunication Identifier User Entity (TIUE) – defined as any online service that uses a phone number as an identifier.

Meta, WhatsApp's parent company, had pushed back through industry bodies it is a part of, including the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI), arguing that the measures could cause "hurdles to the modern communication habits such as use of inter-



In the latest beta versions, code references to the SIM-binding directions have been detected.

national numbers during travel [or] secondary devices".

Beta version

In the latest beta versions of WhatsApp, code references to the SIM-binding directions have been detected. A Meta spokesperson declined to comment on the development, while a DoT spokesperson did not immediately respond to queries on whether the direction would come into force this month as originally ordered.

The new code, discovered by WABetaInfo – an independent blog which tracks changes in WhatsApp's code often much before public rollout – includes a prompt on the sign-in screen saying, "Due to regulatory requirements in India, WhatsApp needs to check that your SIM card is in your device."

Religious leader seeks anticipatory bail in POCSO case

Ishita Mishra
NEW DELHI

Swami Avimuktেশ्वरानंद Saraswati on Tuesday moved the Allahabad High Court for anticipatory bail after being booked by the Uttar Pradesh Police for alleged sexual harassment of two minors.

The FIR against the religious leader and one of his aides, Mukundanand Giri, was registered on the directions of a special court in Prayagraj.

On February 21, the court had ordered the police to act on a complaint filed by Ashutosh Brahmachari and two minors, aged 14 and 17, who alleged sexual abuse by the accused during the recent Magh Mela in Prayagraj.

The swami had earlier been involved in a confrontation with the Prayagraj district administration over alleged assaults on his

followers on the day of Mauni Amavasya, which fell on January 18. The confrontation between the two parties stretched for weeks in which two notices were served on the religious leader by the administration. The first notice questioned him for using the "sankaracharya" title, while in the second, he was blamed for causing a "stampede-like situation" in the fair which was attended by millions.

Addressing the media, the religious leader said he was ready to cooperate with the investigation and claimed that he was being falsely implicated. He also claimed seeing photographs of a senior Prayagraj police officer cutting a cake with Ashutosh Brahmachari and alleged that the police and the administration were working together to frame him in a "fake case".

UN launches road safety project in four Indian States

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The United Nations on Tuesday launched a project in partnership with four Indian States for a road safety financing framework.

To be implemented across Rajasthan, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Assam under the coordination of the UN Resident Coordinator's Office, the project will focus on building capacities for the effective implementation of road safety action plans and on reducing road fatalities and serious injuries. Jean Todt, United Nations Secretary-General's Special Envoy for Road Safety, told *The Hindu* that the world was not on track to achieve the pledge to reduce road traffic deaths and injuries by at least 50% by 2030 under the "Decade of Action for Road Safety 2021-2030."

Show of power



Aerial display: An Indian Air Force Chinook performing at a full dress rehearsal of Exercise Vayu Shakti - 2026, at the Pokhran Field Firing Range in Rajasthan on Tuesday, ahead of the February 27 firepower display. This biennial show underscores the IAF's combat readiness, precision strike capabilities, and integrated multi-domain operations. VIJAY SONEJI

SC suggests PMAY benefits for Haldwani occupants

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Tuesday directed Uttarakhand officials and the State Legal Services Authority to conduct camps to encourage nearly 50,000 people occupying over 30 hectares of public land near the railway tracks of Haldwani to apply for benefits and rehabilitation measures under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY) scheme.

The land is being reclaimed by the Railways for infrastructure development, compelling nearly 5,000 families to leave a place they had occupied for half a century.

"This is public land. You argue as if you are the owner of the land. You can have the concession of being considered, but it is illegal to encroach on public land," Justice Joydalya Bagchi of the Bench headed by Chief Justice of India Surya Kant addressed advocates Prashant Bhushan and Neh Rath, appearing for the occupants.

Justice Bagchi said it was the prerogative of the State to "do what it wanted on public land. For you, it is more of a help and less a right".

Additional Solicitor-General Aishwarya Bhati, for the Railways, said a flooding Ghaula River habitually disrupts railway operations in a region known as the doorway to the hills of Uttarakhand. The Railways required more land urgently to lay new tracks.

Striking a balance between development requirements and the human element behind, Chief Justice Kant suggested the State acquire alternative land under the PMAY for the rehabilitation of the evictees.

Instead of monetary compensation, the amount could be used for construction of homes which were equivalent to those the evictees had to leave behind.

SC closes suo motu case on polluted rivers after 5 years of near inaction

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Tuesday closed a suo motu case from 2021 on remediation of polluted rivers after five years of near inaction. It directed the National Green Tribunal (NGT) to reopen the case and ensure continued monitoring.

A Bench headed by Chief Justice of India Surya Kant questioned the feasibility of examining the extent of pollution in rivers across the country.

"Is it possible for this court to look at all the polluted rivers? We can look at it one by one. We also keep entertaining so many matters and issue directions... we also have to see that we



Floating disaster: Toxic foam floats on the surface of the Yamuna river near Mathura. FILE PHOTO

entertain matters together. Why should we have a multiplicity of issues like this?" Chief Justice Kant asked.

On January 13, 2021, the apex court had taken suo motu cognisance of the contamination of rivers by

sewage because of lapses committed by municipalities, saying "open surface water resources, including rivers, are the lifeline of human civilisation".

"Deterioration of the quality of fresh water has a

The court questioned the feasibility of assessing river pollution across the country

direct co-relation with the quality of public health... The right to a clean environment, and further, pollution-free water, has been protected under the broad rubric of the right to life," a three-judge Bench led by then Chief Justice of India Sharad A. Bobde had said in January 2021.

The Supreme Court Bench had been hearing an urgent plea by the Delhi Jal Board to "immediately stop" Haryana from discharging pollutants into the Yamuna.

Trinamool, BJP hail SC order on deployment of judicial officers from other States for Bengal SIR

The Hindu Bureau
KOLKATA

The ruling Trinamool Congress and the Opposition Bharatiya Janata Party on Tuesday hailed the Supreme Court decision to allow deployment of judicial officers from Jharkhand and Odisha to deal with claims and objections in the ongoing special intensive revision (SIR) of electoral rolls in West Bengal.

The Supreme Court, after receiving a letter from the Chief Justice of Calcutta High Court detailing the perils of the "enormous exercise", authorised him to request his counterparts in Odisha and Jharkhand to spare serving or retired

judicial officers for the verification work in West Bengal.

The Trinamool called the decision "another resounding victory for Bengal's Maa-Mati-Manush in the Supreme Court". "@ECISVEEP's arrogant stranglehold on Bengal's SIR process has been decisively snapped. As Smt. @MamataOfficial demanded and fought tooth and nail, the SC has now taken the reigns, stripping the ECI of its unchecked discretion," it said in a post on social media.

The party termed the court order "a decisive affirmation of the constitutional right to vote and a clear reminder that electo-

ral processes cannot be manipulated through administrative overreach or arbitrary standards".

West Bengal BJP president Samik Bhattacharya said the development was a result of "complete politicisation of the administration" in the State.

"It is a matter of shame that the apex court can also realise there is a total politicisation in Bengal administration under the reign of Mamata Banerjee. The inclusion of judicial officers from other States in the SIR process in Bengal does not bring dignity and glory to our State, and the TMC is solely responsible for that," the BJP leader said.

Modi's Israel visit faces headwinds

Netanyahu's plans to announce a 'hexagonal alliance' with India, Greece, Cyprus, and some unnamed countries against 'both radical Sunni and Shia axes' will be watched closely by those likely to feel targeted, including Iran, Türkiye, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, all of which have complex ties with India

NEWS ANALYSIS

Suhasini Haidar
NEW DELHI

As Prime Minister Narendra Modi prepares for a standalone visit to Israel on Wednesday to upgrade bilateral relations, its timing faces geopolitical headwinds.

While defence and security, labour and trade, AI and technology, and IMEC project connectivity will be at the top of the agenda for his meetings with Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the outcomes will go beyond bilateral agreements to their symbolism and the message they send to the wider West Asian region.

Over the course of the 24-hour visit from Wednesday, most of the engagements planned will see the leaders together. Mr. Netanyahu will receive Mr. Modi at the airport in Tel Aviv, and they are expected to travel together to Jerusalem. Apart from bilateral talks and press statements

on Thursday, they will attend a private dinner, an innovation event, a visit to the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial museum, and possibly a meeting with the diaspora in Israel, billed as an interaction with the "Indian-Jewish" community settled there. Mr. Modi will address the Knesset.

'Hexagonal alliance'

In particular, Mr. Netanyahu's plans to announce a "hexagonal alliance" with India, Greece and Cyprus, and some unnamed Arab, African and Asian countries against "both radical Sunni and Shia axes", will be watched closely by those countries seen to be targeted, including Iran, Türkiye, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, each of which has historical and complex ties with India. Any announcements on trilateral cooperation between India, the UAE and Israel during the visit will also have an impact in the region, where UAE-Saudi tensions are rising.

"The intention here is to create an axis of nations that see eye-to-eye on the reality, challenges, and



Prime Minister Narendra Modi with his Israeli counterpart, Benjamin Netanyahu, in 2018. FILE PHOTO

goals against the radical axes, both the radical Shia axis, which we have struck very hard, and the emerging radical Sunni axis," Mr. Netanyahu told his cabinet on Sunday while announcing Mr. Modi's visit. The comments came just as U.S. Ambassador to Israel Mike Huckabee said in an interview that it "would be fine" if Israel were to take control of most of the biblical Middle-East or West Asia, leading commentators to draw a link between the remarks.

To travel to Tel Aviv, Mr. Modi will also have to navi-

gate U.S. President Donald Trump's threats to attack Iran, both literally and figuratively, amid a U.S. military build-up and withdrawal of personnel from key bases across West Asia. While attacks do not appear likely this week, given Iran-U.S. talks on Thursday, it must be remembered that U.S. strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities in June 2025 took place even as negotiations were ongoing. Facing questions over India's travel advisory asking citizens in Iran to leave the country, Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri said on

Monday that the Prime Minister's security would be ensured in the event of bombardment of Iran. However, New Delhi would also have to consider the optics of being caught in the crossfire between Iran and Israel, just as Mr. Modi will be standing shoulder to shoulder with Mr. Netanyahu.

The visit could affect India's ties with Iran directly, a country that borders South Asia and has long offered India energy and connectivity options. In deference to Mr. Trump's sanctions, the Modi government stopped importing Iranian oil in 2017. Trade and investment declined subsequently, and more recently development of the Chabahar port terminal has been curtailed. In January, New Delhi put off the scheduled visit of Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi. Later this year, New Delhi is expected to host the BRICS summit, where Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian will be invited.

Mr. Modi's visit, the first since the two-year Israeli war on Gaza in which more

than 70,000 were killed, also coincides with Israel's plans to extend control over more territories under the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, which has sparked international condemnation. India was hesitant to join a statement at the United Nations, eventually signed by 100 countries criticising Israel's violations of international law over the plans, and the Indian mission signed it a day after it was announced at a joint press conference by dozens of diplomats. When asked last week, the Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson blamed the Palestinian mission and others for proceeding too early with a statement that was not "jointly negotiated".

However, the government did not explain why it delayed, while many countries signed immediately. Mr. Modi's talks with Mr. Netanyahu will also be crucial, given the U.S. "Board of Peace" plans for reconstruction, administration and peacekeeping of the Gaza Strip, and India's decision to participate as an observer.

Cong. slams PM's Israel visit amid West Asia tensions

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Congress on Tuesday criticised Prime Minister Narendra Modi's upcoming visit to Israel, questioning the timing of the visit amid escalating tensions in West Asia.

Israel's "dispossession and displacement of thousands of Palestinians in the occupied West Bank has intensified and drawn worldwide condemnation", Congress general secretary (communications) Jairam Ramesh said in a post on X.

Israel's attacks on civilians in Gaza continue mercilessly, Mr. Ramesh added.

Israel and the United States were "planning air assaults on Iran", he further said.

"Yet the Prime Minister is going to Israel tomorrow to embrace his good friend Mr. Netanyahu," Mr. Ramesh wrote, referring to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The Congress leader also alleged that Mr. Netanyahu "faces very serious corruption charges", and

Jairam Ramesh accuses the Union government of inconsistency in its foreign policy

pointed to reported tensions within Israel.

According to Mr. Ramesh, sections of the Israeli Opposition have threatened to boycott Mr. Modi's address to the Israeli Parliament in protest against what they describe as attempts to undermine judicial independence.

Mr. Ramesh accused the Union government of inconsistency in its foreign policy. "The Modi government makes cynical and hypocritical statements on its commitment to the cause of the Palestinians. The reality is the Modi government has abandoned them," he said.

India was among the earliest countries to recognise the state of Palestine on November 18, 1988, Mr. Ramesh said, adding that New Delhi's present stance marked a departure from its long-standing position.

4 more held over Youth Cong. protest at AI summit

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Delhi police on Tuesday arrested four more Youth Congress (YC) members and added charges of rioting in the FIR related to the "shirtless" protest on February 20 at the AI Impact Summit in New Delhi.

In response, Congress national president Mallikarjun Kharge said, "We will continue to fight and continue our struggle against those who have mortgaged our country."

YC president Uday Bhanu Chib, arrested on Monday and labelled the "mastermind" of the Bharat Mandapam protest, was on Tuesday remanded to four days' police custody. Judicial Magistrate First Class Ravi also directed the police to supply a copy of the FIR to Mr. Chib and the other accused, rejecting the police's claim that the case was "sensitive", stating that the protest lacked the hallmarks of terrorism or insurgency.

A total of eight IYC members have been arrested for their protest over the India-U.S. trade deal. Addressing a press conference, Special Commissioner of Police (Crime Branch) Devesh Chandra Srivastava called the protesters "aggressive elements" and said the protest was part of a "deep-rooted conspiracy".

"A premeditated attempt was made to breach the security cordon in the presence of dignitaries, delegates and visitors attending the international event. The aggressive elements were immediately overpowered. During the process of restraining them, some police personnel deployed on duty sustained injuries," said the officer.

Earlier in the day, the Congress staged a demonstration in Delhi against the arrests of its members and met Lieutenant-Governor V.K. Saxena, to whom they submitted a letter stating that the police action lacked "proportionality" and calling for the "protection of democratic political expression".

(With inputs from PTI)

Union Cabinet, led by Modi, holds the first meeting at Seva Teerth

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Union Cabinet, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, on Tuesday held its first meeting at the newly inaugurated Seva Teerth complex and adopted a resolution to fulfil the government's goal of placing India among the world's top three economies in the near future.

In the resolution, the Cabinet said that with the "new energy" of Seva Teerth — the new Prime Minister's Office complex — and the rapid pace of reform, it would work towards realising the vision of a "Developed India 2047".

Long-term journey

Describing the initiative as a long-term journey, the resolution said the decisions taken today would shape the future for generations to come.

"This first meeting at Se-



Prime Minister Narendra Modi during the inauguration of Seva Teerth, the new building of the PM's office earlier this month. ANI

va Teerth reminds us that the greater the goal of development, the deeper must be our responsibility towards it. This complex is not just a modern workplace. It also symbolises a new work culture of governance. Through its modern technology and efficient working methods, government efficiency will reach new heights," it said, adding that every "Kar-

mayogi who works here will be inspired by the sense that their work is linked to simplifying the lives of the last person in the country".

Vision realised

The Union Cabinet resolved that the work culture would encourage judicious use of resources and accelerate the continuous journey of reforms that the

country had experienced over the years, and added that it would become the foundation for advancing India as a capable, strong, and self-reliant nation.

"For decades since Independence, governments have preserved this legacy and dreamed of the future in the Prime Minister's Office, South Block. We dreamed of an India whose thinking is indigenous, its form is modern, and its potential is infinite. Today, Seva Teerth is the embodiment of that vision, which will enhance India's pride as the mother of democracy," the resolution said.

Listing the achievements under the leadership of Mr. Modi over the past decade, the Union Cabinet said, "Every decision taken here (at the new complex) will be inspired by the spirit of service towards 140 crore countrymen and linked to the broader goal of nation-building".

Meat restrictions in Bihar are about 'cultural control': MP

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Lok Sabha member and Congress whip Manickam Tagore on Tuesday alleged that attempts were being made to impose "cultural control" in the name of governance, citing recent restrictions on meat and fish sales near schools and religious places in Bihar.

In a post on X, Mr. Tagore questioned the rationale behind the move, arguing that such measures went beyond administrative regulation. "Why do RSS and BJP need to be defeated. Because increasingly, the attempt is not just to govern — but to control what people eat, how they live, and whose culture is considered 'acceptable'," he said.

He argued that restrictions made in the name of "social harmony" disproportionately affected other Backward Class communi-



Manickam Tagore

ties, Dalits, Adivasis, and minorities, whose food practices are shaped by their history, geography, and livelihood patterns.

"When the state begins to indirectly stigmatise or restrict those food practices, it is not about hygiene — it becomes about cultural control," he said.

Noting that the Constitution guarantees freedom of choice, Mr. Tagore asserted that governance must protect diversity rather than impose uniformity.

Hydroelectric projects must return to J&K: NC in House

The Hindu Bureau
SRINAGAR

The ruling National Conference (NC) has introduced a resolution in the Jammu and Kashmir Assembly for the return of power projects run by the National Hydroelectric Power Corporation to Jammu and Kashmir.

In the resolution, NC leader Sajad Shaheen sought the House's nod to "recommend that the Government of India consider a phased and mutually agreed transfer of operational control and/or ownership rights of the running hydroelectric power projects presently operated by NHPC".

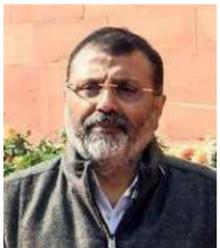
"We have clearly stated in our manifesto that some power projects should be given back to J&K. It is a genuine demand. We will follow it up," NC leader and legislator Tanvir Sadiq said.

Parliamentary panel passes resolution praising AI summit; mention of protest stirs row

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Communications and Information Technology, chaired by BJP MP Nishikant Dubey, on Tuesday adopted a resolution praising the successful organisation of the India AI Impact Summit but only after a sharp exchange between members over the wording of the motion and its scope.

According to sources, the meeting began with BJP MP Amarpal Maurya moving a resolution that included a reference to the February 20 protest of Youth Congress members at the summit venue, Bharat Mandapam. Opposition members immediately objected to it. Congress MP Saket Gokhale, it is learnt, argued that if the protest



Nishikant Dubey

were to be cited, then other recent episodes, including Galgotias University passing off a China-made robot as its own, must also be acknowledged.

Opposition members pushed back strongly against including "one selective incident for condemnation" in an otherwise congratulatory resolution.

"If we start inserting negative sentences, then

there are incidents every day that may require mention," one member said, according to people aware of the discussion. The Opposition MPs maintained that they would support the resolution only if the text remained "positive and limited to the AI Summit".

With the BJP short of numbers at that point, the motion was not put to vote. It was taken up later once more BJP MPs arrived, and eventually passed 10-6. Two members from the Congress and one each from the Shiv Sena (UBT), the Samajwadi Party and the Trinamool Congress, voted against the resolution.

Opposition MPs reiterated their support for the summit but said the move to foreground the protest was unnecessary.

Manipur CM, deputies invite PM to visit State

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Manipur Chief Minister Yumnam Khemchand Singh called upon Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Tuesday and briefed him on the steps taken by his government to promote peace and harmony in the State. He urged the Prime Minister to pay special attention to women's empowerment in both the hill and valley districts. He was accompanied by Deputy Chief Ministers Losii Dikho and Nemcha Kipgen.

The Manipur leaders have invited Mr. Modi to visit the State. "We extend our sincere gratitude, Honourable Prime Minister @narendramodi ji, for your concern regarding Manipur and for graciously sparing your valuable time for us," the Chief Minister posted on X.

Centre approves construction of 5,000 houses for people displaced by Manipur violence

The Hindu Bureau
GUWAHATI

The Union government has approved the construction of 5,000 houses for the rehabilitation of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Manipur.

These houses will be built according to the framework of implementation of the Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana-Gramin, the office of Chief Minister Yumnam Khemchand Singh said on Tuesday.

The Manipur government had earlier submitted a proposal seeking a special project under PMAY-G for IDPs affected by the recent law and order crisis. The ethnic conflict in Manipur began on May 3, 2023. According to government estimates, nearly 62,000 persons have been displaced from



Nearly 62,000 persons have been displaced by the ethnic violence in Manipur.

their homes with many of them living in relief camps.

The proposal was approved for the financial year 2025-26 after the Chief Minister met with Union Agriculture and Rural Development Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan at his residence in New Delhi on February 23. Deputy Chief Ministers Nemcha Kipgen and Losii Dikho ac-

companied the Chief Minister.

The Union Rural Development Ministry also approved a special window of the Awaas+ 2024 household survey to capture the details of eligible affected households. The Awaas+ survey is a digital initiative to identify and include eligible rural households for housing assistance that were missed in the previous Socio-Economic Caste Census (SECC) 2011. The State has been permitted to continue registering eligible beneficiaries under the special project of PMAY-G.

In January, the Manipur government said it planned to resettle 10,000 IDP families by March 31. The government has, so far, resettled 16,500 IDPs. (With inputs from Sobhana K. Nair in New Delhi)

IN BRIEF



Helicopter crashes into sea near Andaman's Mayabunder

A Pawan Hans helicopter carrying seven people, including two crew members, crash-landed in the sea shortly after take-off from Mayabunder in the North and Middle Andaman district on Tuesday morning. All occupants were rescued, officials said. The incident occurred around 9.30 a.m., and all five passengers and the two crew members were admitted to hospital. "The helicopter had taken off from Sri Vijaya Puram around 8.45 a.m. A preliminary inquiry suggests a technical snag, following which the pilot made a crash-landing in the sea," a senior Civil Aviation official said. PTI

Centre increases MSP for jute by ₹275 per quintal

The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA), after a meeting on Tuesday, increased the minimum support price (MSP) of raw jute for 2026-27 by ₹275 per quintal over the previous season. The new rate is ₹5,925 per quintal. Information and Broadcasting Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw said the increased MSP would benefit jute growers in States such as West Bengal and Assam. Prime Minister Narendra Modi said the Centre was leaving no stone unturned to make the lives of jute farmers easier. A statement issued by the government said the revised MSP, for TD-3 grade raw jute, would ensure a return of 61.8% to the farmers over the all-India weighted average cost of production.

Airport in Srinagar to be upgraded at ₹1,677 cr: govt.

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Union Cabinet on Tuesday approved the expansion of passenger facilities at Srinagar airport for ₹1,677 crore.

The expansion project is spread over 73.18 acres and includes a terminal building spanning 71,500 square metres, of which 20,659 square metres comprises the existing structure. It will have the capacity to accommodate 2,900 passengers at a time and an annual capacity of 10 million passengers. The expanded apron will accommodate 15 aircraft parking bays, including one wide-body aircraft. The project will also include the construction of a multi-level car parking facility for 1,000 cars and barracks for security personnel.

MP flags underutilisation of funds meant for Northeast, seeks probe

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Raising "serious concerns" over budget underutilisation, implementation delays and the limited reach of Central schemes in the Northeast and West Bengal, Trinamool Congress Rajya Sabha member Derek O'Brien, in a letter to the panel's chairperson, has urged the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Home Affairs to investigate the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (DoNER).

In his submission to the committee chaired by BJP MP Radha Mohan Das Agarwal, Mr. O'Brien, who is also a member of the panel, flagged what he called persistent underutilisation of funds by DoNER. He said 41% of the Budget Estimates for 2024-25 and 36% of the allocation for 2025-

SC to examine installation of EV chargers in group housing

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Tuesday agreed to examine a plea seeking a direction to the State governments permitting the installation and operation of electric vehicle charging infrastructure, especially within group housing societies, as an effective anti-pollution measure.

A Bench headed by Chief Justice of India Surya Kant issued notice on a petition filed by Rachit Kalyal, a resident of Noida, for direction to the States to implement the Guidelines for Installation and Operation of Electric Vehicle Charging Infrastructure 2024.

The petition said the installation of electric vehicle chargers would enable residents to have "safe and sufficient infrastructure for charging their e-vehicles in the society at their own cost".

"Despite more than a year, there has been no legislative intervention to address the issue of effective implementation Guidelines for Installation and Operation of Electric Vehicle Charging Infrastructure, 2024, which is a facet of Articles 14, 15, 16 and 21 of the Constitution of India," the petition said.

Top court declines plea to remove Aadhaar as proof of identity in SIR process

SC says petitioner-advocate Ashwini Kumar Upadhyay should take his apprehensions that fake Aadhaar cards are manufactured on an "industrial scale" in the border areas to the Union govt.

Krishnadas Rajagopal
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Tuesday refused to alter a September 2025 order to use Aadhaar in the special intensive revision (SIR) process, saying the Representation of the People Act continues to endorse the 12-digit unique identity number as an identity proof for citizens.

A Bench of Chief Justice of India Surya Kant and Justice Joymalya Bagchi said petitioner-advocate Ashwini Kumar Upadhyay should take his apprehensions that fake Aadhaar cards were manufactured on an "industrial scale" in the border areas to the Union government.

The top court made it clear that as long as the Representation of the People Act included Aadhaar as a proof of identity, the court had no choice but to follow the law.

Section 23 of the Representation of the People Act of 1950 notes that a person could furnish his Aadhaar



Legal backing: The court clarifies it has to follow the law since the Representation of the People Act includes Aadhaar as proof. PTI

number to the Electoral Registration Officer for the purpose of establishing identity.

"You make a representation to the Union government to amend the Representation of the People Act... This cannot be a discussion before our forum always. If, as you say, Aadhaar has been fraudulently procured on an industrial scale, then it requires to be statutorily regulated..." Justice Bagchi addressed Mr. Upadhyay.

Mr. Upadhyay said that

"whenever there are Bangladeshis or Rohingyas captured by the police, the Aadhaar cards found on them are from Bengal".

Chief Justice Kant said the issue was serious, though it was pressed before the wrong forum, the court, instead of the government.

Earlier, too, the court had objected to an argument that Aadhaar must be dropped from the list of documents that electors were allowed to use for the purpose of identity verification during the SIR.

Mr. Upadhyay, on that occasion, had argued that Aadhaar was easily forged and could be sourced through private agencies.

"Do you know that a passport is also outsourced to a private agency under the auspices of the Government of India? These private service centres [through which Aadhaar enrolments and updates may be done] operate under the statutory authorities or the government itself. Aadhaar is a public document. Any document can be forged. Even a passport can be forged..." Justice Bagchi had remarked.

On September 8, last year, the apex court had ordered the Election Commission to include Aadhaar as the 12th "indicative" document for verification and a proof of identity. The order was passed during the Bihar SIR exercise.

Mr. Upadhyay had also sought "periodic SIR", arguing that infiltration into India has crossed the limit to become a form of "external aggression".

₹9,072 cr. for three railway projects for various States

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs, chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, on Tuesday approved three multi-tracking railway projects at a cost of ₹9,072 crore.

The projects include the construction of a second line on the Gondia (Maharashtra)-Jabalpur (Madhya Pradesh) section and the addition of third and fourth lines between Purnakh and Kiul in Bihar, and between Garmharia and Chandil in Jharkhand.

Spanning a total length of 307 km, the three projects are aimed at decongesting these busy sections. The proposed works are expected to enhance connectivity to nearly 5,407 villages, and improve rail connectivity to several prominent tourist destinations, including Kachnar Shiv Temple, Kanha National Park (Balaghat), and Pench National Park, among others.

According to the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways, the projects are being undertaken under the PM-Gati Shakti National Master Plan and aims to enhance multi-modal connectivity and logistics efficiency through integrated planning.

The Hindu, VIT School of Law to host Justice Unplugged 2026

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI

The Hindu, in partnership with the VIT School of Law, VIT Chennai, will host Justice Unplugged 2026 in New Delhi on Saturday. The event is designed for aspiring lawyers to get a meaningful opportunity to interact directly with judges, senior advocates, policymakers, scholars, and industry experts.

"As the legal profession feels the effect of societal change, technological transformation, and constitutional amendments, we need platforms for informed dialogue," said Suresh Nambath, Editor, The Hindu. "For us, Justice Unplugged is an extension of our editorial mission to provoke thoughtful, civil, and forward-looking public discourse," he added.

The 2026 edition will address the impact of generative AI on legal practice, the evolution of fundamental rights in the digital age, and pathways to improving access to justice.



Justice Unplugged 2026 exemplifies our collective commitment at VIT Chennai to extending learning beyond the classroom. Specific to School of Law (VITSOL), VIT Chennai, the initiative reflects our emphasis on experiential learning by meaningfully linking academic study with real-world legal practice," said G.V. Selvam, Vice-President, Vellore Institute of Technology (VIT).

"Keeping in mind VITSOL's vision and mission of preparing students to be professionals in an exceptionally skilled manner with strong ethics, and as socially responsible outstanding legal professionals; the Justice Unplugged 2026 has much to give the young student audience," he added.

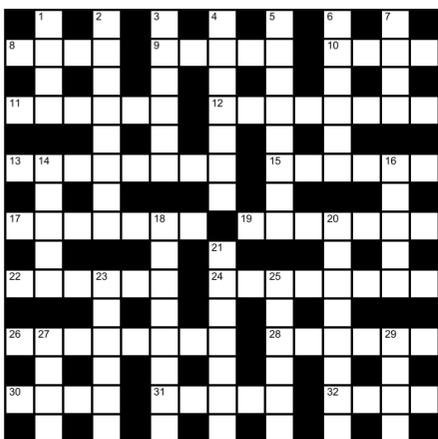
Suresh Balakrishna, Chief Revenue Officer, The Hindu Group, said, "Justice Unplugged shows how strong media and academia collaborations can create lasting value for students. Through our partnership with the VIT School of Law, we are connecting young learners with leading legal voices while strengthening industry-academia ties."

For registrations, visit newsth.live/THVITJU or scan the QR code.



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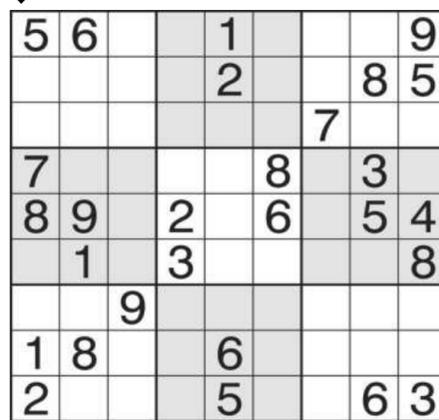


Across

- 8 Flier gets right drink (4)
9 State: "After saint, African leader gets domed memorial" (5)
10 Expression of regret in Australasia (4)
11 Retired Red Army chief's earlier sex, perhaps (6)
12 Taped bus damaged in capital (8)
13 Astronaut brandishes mace in interval (8)

- 15 Javan returns with love for Indian (6)
17 Small farm hired out by my detective's brother (7)
19 Tempter from Eden may be present (7)
22 Holds Greek snakes (6)
24 In bygone times, you entered river and shed (8)
26 Building fort around this place instead (8)
28 Horrible rust covering gold bull (6)
30 Privy to cutting onion letting out some blood (2,2)
31 Unstable mountains in the US (5)
32 Eastern lair, where reportedly 19 lived (4)
- Down
- 1 This place is in another estate (4)
2 Maker making 207 (8)
3 Burnt remains carried on animal in retreat (4)
4 Bus hand becomes spouse! (7)
5 RAW's mock combat? (3,5)
6 Chess champion served pork around midday by Victor (6)
7 Girl from Thalassery (4)
14 Nosy parker's plea without a note (5)
16 Jughead, Jupiter or Indiana, for example... one in Junior Statesman, for starters (5)
18 Around end of March, wrongly affirms, "Banjo or drum may be raised here" (4,4)
20 Got professional treated (8)
21 Fish eggs with lots of fat for famous painter who used to live in Bangalore (7)
23 Reduce psychiatrist's contract (6)
25 Moon from the sty? (6)
27 Asafoetida from Washington (4)
29 Guy leaving manure along with a fertiliser (4)

SUDOKU



DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★☆☆☆



FAITH

Power of final thoughts

The Bhagavad Gita, a sacred Hindu scripture, emphasises the significance of one's final thoughts in determining one's future, said Swami Mitranandaji. In Chapter VIII, verse 6, Lord Krishna says, "Yam yam vapi smaran bhavam tyajaty ante kalevaram, Tam tam evaiti kaunteya sada tad-bhava-bhavitah". This verse highlights the importance of one's final thoughts at the time of death, stating that one will attain the state of being one focuses on during one's final moments.

The analogy of a bullet and a gun barrel is apt in this context. Just as the bullet travels in the direction the barrel is pointed, so too is our life's journey influenced by our predominant thoughts. Our final thoughts are a reflection of our preoccupations and our life's desires. If our mind is fixed on the divine, we are likely to attain spiritual liberation.

This concept underlines the need to cultivate a consistent and strong connection with the divine throughout our lives. By remembering the Lord daily, we can ensure that our final thoughts are pure and focused on Him. This, in turn, will guide us towards spiritual growth and self-realisation.

In essence, the Bhagavad Gita teaches us to be mindful of our thoughts, words and actions, as they shape our destiny. By focusing on the divine and living a life of purpose, we can attain inner peace and ultimately, liberation. We should all constantly strive to make the most of our time on this earth, prioritise our spiritual journey, so that we may depart this life with a sense of fulfilment and a heart full of devotion.

Scientists confirm HIV capsid is a good drug target despite resistance

A new study has found that to escape a drug called lenacapavir, HIV has to damage one of its own components, the capsid; the finding reaffirms the belief that the viral capsid is a good drug target and that the virus cannot afford to change it too much, opening the door to a new generation of drugs

Arun Panchapakesan

In 1987, four years after the discovery of HIV as the causative agent of AIDS, scientists reported the first drug effective against the virus, called zidovudine. Zidovudine targeted a viral enzyme called reverse transcriptase, and prevented the virus from completing its life-cycle. However, zidovudine was no magic bullet. It could hold the virus at bay for a while, but HIV quickly learned to outsmart it, and the resulting drug resistance meant many patients soon lost the drug's protective effect.

It quickly became clear why zidovudine alone would not keep HIV in check. The virus is prone to copying 'mistakes' when it turns its RNA into DNA, generating endless new variants. Some of these variants possess the property of drug resistance. Importantly however, these changes can't happen just anywhere. Some parts of the virus are so essential to its survival that they must remain largely unchanged. Altering them would break the virus itself.

So researchers decided to aim more drugs at these 'must keep' regions, where the virus has little room to evolve. The insight led to the development of multiple antiretroviral drugs targeting different viral proteins, including reverse transcriptase, protease, and integrase, laying the foundation for combination therapies that could suppress the virus far more effectively and durably.

Provocative question

In 1999, a paper in the journal *Science* detailed how another protein of HIV, called the capsid, folds into its unique protective shape. The study was important because the capsid is a structure that protects the virus's RNA from the environment. The work provided the breakthrough to understanding how the capsid folds into its unique 3D structure. Soon, the same team reported that most mutations in the capsid protein could render HIV incapable of infecting cells, showing that it was much more vulnerable than previously believed.

The discovery raised a provocative question: if the capsid was so essential, and so fragile, could it itself be a drug target? For years, the answer seemed to be 'no'. Scientists at major pharmaceutical companies started working on potential molecules that could latch onto the capsid and disrupt its carefully balanced structure, effectively stopping the virus in its tracks.

While one candidate seemed promising, it had a persistent problem: it didn't easily dissolve in water. Since solubility was a basic requirement for most medicines to circulate reliably in the body, the researchers had to keep tweaking it to see if they could improve its solubility while maintaining its potency.



A vial of lenacapavir at the Desmond Tutu Health Foundation's Masiphumelele Research Site, in Cape Town, South Africa. FILE PHOTO

Then, after more than two decades of persistence, the problem was turned on its head.

On June 18, 2025, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved lenacapavir, the world's first capsid-based HIV inhibitor. Its poor solubility, once a liability, became its greatest strength. Instead of being taken daily, lenacapavir is injected under the skin of the abdomen just once every six months, forming a slow-release reservoir that steadily delivers the drug into the bloodstream.

The results were astonishing: in clinical trials, it prevented HIV infection in high-risk individuals with 100% effectiveness. Lenacapavir was not a cure but, as a *Science* article put it, it may be the next best thing to an HIV vaccine.

Acting solo

However, one hard-learned lesson from four decades of HIV research is that no single drug has ever escaped resistance. Given enough time, the virus finds a way, which is why HIV is always treated with combinations of drugs and never one alone.

In a study published recently in *Science Translational Medicine*, researchers from across the U.S., including the pharmaceutical company Gilead Sciences, examined viruses from patients who received lenacapavir as part of treatment, rather than prevention, and identified a small set of changes in the

The certainty that viral capsid is a very good drug target opens the door to a generation of drugs that target the capsid, with the reassurance that resistance will come at a high cost to the virus

capsid protein, most commonly involving positions known that reduced the drug's effectiveness.

Importantly, these resistance mutations emerged primarily when lenacapavir was acting alone, without other fully active drugs in the regimen. When lenacapavir was used in proper combination therapy, viral suppression was largely maintained, reinforcing the long-standing rule of HIV treatment: that the virus can escape one blockade but not many at once.

To test whether the resistance came at a price, the researchers engineered the drug-resistant viruses in the laboratory. They took capsid sequences from patients who had developed resistance, inserted those exact mutations into a standard laboratory HIV strain, then watched how these altered viruses behaved.

The results were striking. Viruses carrying the strongest resistance mutations often replicated at less than 20-30% of normal levels, even in the absence of the drug. In effect, escaping lenacapavir meant HIV had to damage

one of its own components, the capsid, and that was the cost of its survival.

Shells of other viruses

The study reaffirmed the longstanding belief that the viral capsid is actually a very good drug target and that the virus can't afford to change it too much. This certainty opens the door to a new generation of drugs that target the capsid, with the reassurance that resistance will come at a high cost to the virus. With this proof in hand, researchers can now explore capsid-focused strategies more aggressively, combining them with existing therapies. Beyond HIV, the work also adds to proof that it's a good idea for researchers to examine the protective shells of other viruses, which may be similarly vulnerable.

The four-plus decades of HIV research are a reminder that scientific progress is often slow, uneven, and unglamorous. For years, capsid inhibitors were under scrutiny and may have even been abandoned permanently if not for those researchers who kept at it, unwilling to abandon an idea they believed the science supported. If the story of lenacapavir teaches us anything, it is that sometimes, breakthroughs are the result of persistence and not inspiration. (Arun Panchapakesan is an assistant professor at the Y.R. Gaitonde Centre for AIDS Research and Education, Chennai. arun.panchapakesan@gmail.com)

THE GIST

The capsid is a structure that protects the virus's RNA from the environment

Most mutations in the capsid protein could render HIV incapable of infecting cells

Lenacapavir, the world's first capsid-based HIV inhibitor, is injected under the skin of the abdomen once every six months, forming a slow-release reservoir that steadily delivers the drug into the bloodstream

BIG SHOT



Cretaceous discovery: In the Sahara desert in Niger, scientists have unearthed fossils of a new species of Spinosaurus, among the biggest of the meat-eating dinosaurs, notable for its large blade-shaped head crest and jaws bearing interlocking teeth (illustrated above). It was 12 m long and weighed 5-7 tonnes. REUTERS

QUESTION CORNER

Left and right



Q: Why don't left-handed persons make up half the population?

A: There is a neural basis for handedness

but it is not due to any single part of the brain.

Hand preference reflects how the brain organises movement control. In most right-handed people, the left hemisphere has stronger control over fine hand movements and also more often dominates language. In left-handed people, these patterns are more mixed. Studies have found average differences in how motor areas are wired and how strongly the two hemispheres communicate, but these are trends and can't be the basis of diagnosis. In other words, the brain shows differences that go with handedness yet there's no scan or test that can predict handedness with certainty.

Second, handedness is partly genetic but it is polygenic, meaning it is due to many genes, each with small effects. Development also matters. Small prenatal differences in growth or early brain organisation can tip a person towards one hand, even with similar genes. In many places social pressures have also reduced the prevalence of left-handedness because children are



Hand preference reflects how the brain organises movement control KELLY SIKKEMA/UNSPASH

often trained to write with the right hand. Finally, while being left-handed may bring some advantages — like in direct combat or sports because it is rare — the world is built for right-handers, from scissors to desks with right-handed writing arms, due to which left-handedness has 'organically' stabilised at around 10% in the population.

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



Band aid

The constitutionality of the flawed SIR process must be decided quickly

With the corrections and claims process coming to an end, the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) process has seen the release of final electoral rolls except in West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh which are due soon. The net number of voters removed (with fresh additions) from the pre-SIR electoral rolls in States such as Tamil Nadu (nearly 11.5%), Gujarat (13.4%) and Chhattisgarh (11.8%) remain high. Tamil Nadu and Gujarat are, after all, net in-migrant States unlike Bihar where deletions were around 6%. The high number of deletions, and the fact that excisions are higher for female than male electors, suggests that the SIR process, as envisaged and implemented by the Election Commission of India (ECI), suffered from clear structural defects. A clear-cut assessment could have only been possible with comparison with Census figures, but due to the prolonged delay by the Bharatiya Janata Party-led Union Government, only outdated numbers from 2011 are available. The final figures of the electorate in major States where the SIR was conducted indicate that the registered adult population in the final rolls is much below the projected estimates. This again raises the question of whether the ECI should have waited for the Census before rushing the SIR – but that is now only of academic interest.

The exercise's lacunae and anomalies could have been mitigated if the Supreme Court of India had ruled on SIR's constitutionality and compelled the ECI to adopt a more robust – though slower – household-by-household count, instead of depending on an enumeration that shifts the burden onto electors to prove their eligibility. This exercise has clearly, and unduly, affected migrant voters – especially those leaving their residence for the short term and married women who have shifted residences. By letting the process to continue despite its frailties, the Court relied on the ECI's claim that concerns with omissions are overblown, given the relatively few complaints filed by political parties. But the fact that political parties participate in a zero-sum game of competition should alert to the possibility of their relative lack of agency in assisting all electors to be part of the list. Also, unlike other identity documents such as ration card, passport or Aadhaar, the voter identity card is of use only during quinquennial elections, disincentivising citizens from trying to ensure that they are on the list. This is even more so in West Bengal, where the ECI's shoddy implementation has created such a humongous mess that the Court has sought the services of not just the State's judicial officers but those of its neighbours to aid in the "legal verification" process. The Court is seeking to ease the hurt rather than aid the process of universal adult franchise.

Inglorious retreat

Top court's failure to uphold directives on cow vigilantism is shocking

The Supreme Court of India has washed its hands of the responsibility to enforce its own guidelines of 2018 to prevent and punish mob violence in the name of cow protection. The trajectory of this case over the years had foretold this outcome, and fits within a disturbing pattern of judicial diffidence in the face of majoritarian politics. On February 23, the Chief Justice of India (CJI), Justice Surya Kant, observed that the "general directions" issued by the Court in a 2018 judgment to the Centre and States to prevent and prosecute cow vigilantism and mobocracy were "unmanageable". The CJI favoured an approach of taking up each crime on its singular facts and merits, and went on to add that if someone's rights are infringed, they could seek legal recourse. Petitioners had sought contempt proceedings against States that have refused to implement preventive, punitive and remedial measures against cow vigilantism. In 2018, a Bench headed by then CJI Dipak Mishra had expressed shock and dismay over the spate of violence perpetrated by cow protection gangs. The Court had observed that lynching "must be curbed and crippled", stressing that the state has a "sacrosanct duty" to protect citizens. The 2018 guidelines assumed the Court would remain a watchdog, but what followed was a gradual, but unmistakable, judicial retreat that now appears final with the pronouncement of the CJI.

In a situation of perfect rule of law, there is no reason for the highest court of the land to be directly involved in monitoring policing. Any police force acting in fidelity to the law would curb and bring to justice acts of violence. That citizens had to seek the intervention of the Supreme Court for what should be a routine police function was itself revealing, and the 2018 judgment reflected that awareness. Since 2018, cow vigilantism has grown more monstrous, while the police and State governments, in many places, overlook or even encourage mob violence in the name of cow protection. In several States, cow vigilantes have been accorded legal sanctity and quasi-policing powers in blatant violation of the Court's guidelines. The Court earlier refused to entertain a special challenge to such empowerment of mobs, asking petitioners instead to file individual petitions in High Courts. Several Bharatiya Janata Party-ruled States have not only refused to implement the Court's directives but have also moved in the opposite direction by enabling vigilantism. Vigilante violence continues unabated, with the police looking away – or worse, turning against the victim. It will be a severe blow to the rule of law if the Court sticks to the view that it has no reason or intent to uphold its own directives.

An Israel visit — its strategic, economic, regional impact

The West Asian region is staring at the possibility of its worst ever military conflict with one of the largest American military buildups in the Persian Gulf. Iran is defiant and has refused to bow down to 'unreasonable demands' from the United States. Concurrently, in Gaza, although the ceasefire has held since October 2025, the prospects of lasting peace still look remote. In addition, emerging fault lines in the region are drawing allies such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia into opposing military blocs.

In the midst of such an uncertain security situation, Prime Minister Narendra Modi is set to undertake a two-day visit to Israel (February 25-26, 2026). This will be Mr. Modi's second visit to Israel, following his historic first visit in July 2017 – the first by any Indian Prime Minister. Notably, this is a standalone visit with no engagement with Palestinian Authority leadership, highlighting India's success in "de-hyphenating" its Israel engagement.

The question, however, that arises is why this visit? What role can India play in this fragile security situation in the region? With India and Israel facing similar security threats, how can they take this very important partnership forward?

Convergence in a security partnership
Surrounded by hostile neighbours and as victims of frequent terror attacks, both countries have often sought convergence on security and defence issues. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), India has been Israel's largest defence customer for several years, accounting for about 34% of Israel's total arms exports between 2020 and 2024. The cooperation has gradually progressed from imports to joint development and technology collaboration.

Over the past few decades, Israel has provided India with a number of cutting-edge technologies, weapon and surveillance platforms such as unmanned aerial vehicles, missiles, special forces equipment and radar systems. The Barak-8 air and missile defence system, co-developed by India and Israel, is one such success story. During Israel Defence Minister Benjamin Gantz's visit to New Delhi in June 2022, there was the 'India-Israel Vision on Defence Cooperation' for enhancing cooperation in the field of futuristic defence technologies. In November 2025, India and Israel signed an agreement to deepen cooperation in defence, industry and technology, including the sharing of advanced systems to support joint development and production.

For India, there were lessons from its experience in Operation Sindoor (May 2025) – the need for a strong and impregnable air (including anti-drone) and missile defence shield under Mission 'Sudarshan Chakra'. There are inputs that there could be special focus on it during Mr. Modi's visit including the procurement and co-production of the 'Iron Beam' – a



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100kW-class high-energy laser system capable of intercepting drones, rockets, and mortars efficiently and cost-effectively. There are also reports that Autonomous Guard, an Israeli company has signed a deal with an Indian private defence firm valued at approximately \$51.9 million, which would cover the supply of advanced surveillance and threat-detection systems, specialising in sensor-based observation technologies.

The science, technology and innovation link

India has benefited immensely from Israel's success in modern technology and innovations, especially in agriculture, water and electronics. There are more than 35 Centres of Excellence (CoE) in India which are focused in high quality and high-density production of flowers, vegetables, fruits (mango, citrus, litchi, date palm, pomegranate), and beekeeping. Water management technologies too are critical, especially with many water-scarce areas in India. MASHAV, Israel's Agency for International Development Cooperation under Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, signed agreements with Haryana in June 2022 and Rajasthan in December 2024 to collaborate on integrated water resource management and capacity building. With Artificial Intelligence (AI) rapidly emerging as a key driver of modern technology, it is expected to become a focus area in future bilateral cooperation and innovation initiatives.

Israel-India bilateral trade is often overshadowed by security cooperation. It, however, remains a significant pillar of engagement. India is Israel's second-largest trading partner in Asia, with bilateral trade reaching \$3.75 billion in FY2024-2025. While merchandise trade continues to be dominated by diamonds, petroleum and chemicals, the partnership is expanding into electronics, high-tech products, communications and medical equipment.

In September 2025, during the visit of Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, India and Israel signed a Bilateral Investment Agreement. This was followed by the signing of the Terms of Reference for a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) during Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal's visit to Israel in November 2025. With India having recently concluded several significant trade deals, the FTA with Israel could gain the necessary momentum during Mr. Modi's visit. Israel is also keen to establish arrangements and exemptions for Indian infrastructure companies to participate in building critical roads and ports. Additionally, similar to India's agreement with Russia, Israel may pursue a deal to facilitate "human mobility" to attract skilled Indian talent.

Another key aspect to watch during the Modi visit is the progress of the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). Announced at the G-20 Summit in Delhi in September 2023, this intercontinental connectivity project holds strategic significance

for both countries. Although the Gaza conflict had temporarily stalled the initiative, there is now a renewed sense of urgency to advance it. Recent trade agreements with the European Union, Oman, and the UAE are expected to boost trade in both value and volume, creating the need for a shorter and safer transport route. With the Suez Canal route vulnerable to disruptions from regional conflicts, IMEC could provide an alternative, secure corridor to Europe. But achieving lasting peace in Gaza remains crucial for the project's success.

Gaza peace process and regional dynamics

Discussion on the Gaza peace process is a definite likelihood. During the recent 'Summit' of the Board of Peace, presided over by U.S. President Donald Trump on February 19, 2026, more than 50 countries participated, with some pledging \$7 billion in funding and others committing troops to the International Stabilisation Force. India attended as an observer and has not yet defined its role in the process. Given India's strong ties with both the Gulf region and Israel, discussions may include potential avenues for India's involvement in Gaza.

Both leaders are also expected to discuss regional dynamics in depth, including developments in Iran, given the potential implications of conflict for India and the wider region, particularly with regard to India's energy security. India's hosting of the 2nd India-Arab Foreign Ministers' Meeting (IAFMM), in January 2026, along with Mr. Modi's visits to Jordan and Oman (December 2025), and the visit of the UAE President in January 2026, demonstrate the careful balance that India has forged in the region. This sets the stage for a constructive and realistic discussion on various regional issues during the visit.

Ahead of the Modi visit, Prime Minister of Israel Benjamin Netanyahu tweeted this: "we will create a 'hexagon' of alliances around or within the Middle East. This includes India, Arab nations, African nations, Mediterranean nations (Greece and Cyprus), and nations in Asia... The intention here is to create an axis of nations that see eye-to-eye on the reality, challenges and goals against the radical axes, both the radical Shiite axis, which we have struck very hard, and the emerging radical Sunni axis."

India, however, does not necessarily see things in the region from this lens. How India reacts to such a proposal, given how close India's ties are with countries in the region, will also be a thing to be watched.

Mr. Modi's visit is being closely watched, as India and Israel are at pivotal points in their journeys. Despite domestic differences, the two have built a strong strategic partnership over the past decade. Mr. Modi's address to the Knesset – a privilege usually reserved for U.S. Presidents – and his visit to a Jerusalem innovation centre highlight the visit's significance. It is far more than routine diplomacy, with potential long-term implications for both countries and the region.

The Prime Minister's visit will help deepen engagement with Tel Aviv, going far beyond routine diplomacy

India's trade strategy in a multipolar world

India's recent global trade strategy aims to boost exports and strengthen its position as a leading global trade partner. This has resulted in ambitious free trade agreements and a stronger presence in key international economic forums. In 2023, India updated its Foreign Trade Policy (FTP) with the goal of increasing exports to \$2 trillion by 2030, reinforcing a framework of strategic autonomy that supports sovereign decision-making while engaging major global powers. According to the Department of Commerce's 2025 Year-End Review, India recorded a 6.05% annual increase in total exports – merchandise and services combined – reaching \$825.25 billion.

A shift in approach

For many years, India adopted a cautious approach to free trade agreements (FTA), engaging primarily with economies that were similar in structure and stages of development. In recent years, however, New Delhi has shifted to a more proactive trade strategy, pursuing intensive negotiations and concluding comprehensive FTAs with major developed economies that were previously beyond reach. According to recent estimates, India's network of FTAs is projected to cover nearly 71% of its total export basket by 2026 – an extraordinary increase from approximately 22% in 2019. This rapid expansion reflects a decisive shift away from primarily regional trade arrangements toward deeper integration with advanced economies such as Australia, the European Union (EU), the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the United Kingdom (U.K.) and the United States, signalling India's broader strategic ambition to integrate into global value chains and high-value markets.

A major development in India's trade diplomacy is the India-EU Free Trade Agreement, signed on January 27, 2026 after nearly two decades of negotiations. Described as "historic" by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, it creates a vast free trade zone covering nearly two billion people.

The agreement reduces or eliminates tariffs on



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over 90% of traded goods, boosting market access for Indian exporters, especially in textiles, leather, pharmaceuticals, chemicals, and marine products. It enhances India's competitiveness against exporters such as Bangladesh and Vietnam. The FTA also removes tariffs on many pharmaceutical exports, strengthens regulatory cooperation, and lowers production costs by easing access to advanced European machinery and inputs. It is also expected to foster digital trade, boost investor confidence, and strengthen long-term economic resilience. Widely regarded as the "mother of all deals", the agreement represents a transformative boost to India's export ecosystem and marks a decisive shift in India's broader global trade strategy.

The deal with the U.S.

Early in February 2026, India and the U.S. signed a framework for an interim agreement on reciprocal trade, restating their commitment to advancing negotiations on a broader U.S.-India Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA). The interim framework is designed to progressively reduce tariffs across a range of products, thereby facilitating greater Indian exports to the U.S. market and enhancing overall market access.

The agreement also prioritises strategic collaboration in critical sectors such as rare earths and semiconductors. This cooperation is expected to support India's ambitions in high-technology manufacturing, reinforce its electronics export capacity, and strengthen its emergence as a reliable global hub for electronics and semiconductor-related production. By diversifying export destinations and reducing overdependence on specific markets, the pact enhances India's strategic and economic flexibility. Strategically, India's recent global trade agreements collectively signal a major shift toward enhancing its role as a leading player in the global trading system. This shift is visible across four key dimensions. First, deeper engagement with advanced economies such as the EU and the U.S. provides India with preferential access to some of the world's most

lucrative and high-demand markets. Such access is expected to significantly strengthen India's export potential and global market presence with benefits flowing to labour intensive sectors integrating the Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises into the Global Value Chains. The agreements are across continents that reinforces India's strategic attempt to diversify and not become overly dependent on any single geography.

Second, FTAs reduce barriers on both exports and imports of intermediate goods, enabling Indian firms to integrate more effectively into global supply chains and improve their global competitiveness. This integration is especially beneficial for high-growth sectors such as technology, electronics, pharmaceuticals and services, all of which depend heavily on seamless cross-border movement of inputs and components.

Third, trade agreements serve as strategic instruments for enhancing India's diplomatic influence. By establishing deeper economic interdependence with major powers, India strengthens its role in global economic governance and positions itself as a more influential voice in shaping trade norms and standards.

At the core

India's evolving global trade strategy is central to its ambition of becoming an economic superpower and achieving Viksit Bharat. After opting out of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, India adopted a calibrated approach – boosting domestic manufacturing through production-linked incentives and infrastructure expansion while deepening global integration. Trade agreements with Australia, the EU, the UAE, and the U.K. aim to expand market access, attract investment, and diversify exports. By strengthening supply chains, promoting digital and services trade, and integrating into global value chains, India seeks to scale high-value exports and position itself as a leading force in global commerce.

Free trade agreements and trade reforms are key to propelling India's exports and global presence

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Court curbs outreach

The decision by America's Supreme Court to strike down U.S. President Donald Trump's imposition of tariffs on numerous countries, is

indeed a blow to the American President who has been running the administration ever since he was elected for a second term, as a dictator and not

as a President who is bound to respect laws. All those who are genuinely concerned with the hasty and imprudent acts of the American President are

indescribably glad that he has been snubbed as his actions are a clear case of 'It out-Herods Herod'. Though Mr. Trump may try his level best to wriggle out

of the situation, the entire world will see him in a good light if he at least now realises that he has committed a Brobdignagian folly in

imposing tariffs.
Mani Natarajan,
Chennai

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

Attracting talent positioned abroad

When Washington imposed a one-time \$1,00,000 fee on the issuance of new H-1B visa petitions in 2025, the move did more than unsettle young Indian engineers based in the U.S. It also forced skilled professionals to reassess the cost of their American aspirations and compelled companies to reconsider where they source and retain talent.

A geopolitical earthquake triggered by the Trump administration has also coincided with a moment when India is looking for its best talent positioned abroad to think and act Swadeshi and consider reinvesting in India. Macrotrends in this regard have all been adversely positioned over the last 10 years, given how poorly India's domestic private investment scenario has been despite the best government efforts. Recent government signals indicate a structured push to re-engage India's global talent through initiatives including Global Access to Talent from India (GATI), eMigrate V2.0, Visiting Advanced Joint Research (VAJRA) Faculty Scheme, and the Know India Programme. Senior officials have urged overseas professionals to "return and reinvest" amid global visa uncertainties.



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Geetaali Malhotra and Aditi Lazarus contributed to this piece.

labs, policy networks, and ministries than its entrepreneurial volume. This benefit is enhanced by a proposed startup to increase venture activity. However, Delhi serves as both a gateway and a gatekeeper, favouring those with established institutional capital due to housing costs and extensive recruitment networks at universities and institutes. Karnataka serves as an example of structural ambition devoid of absorptive realism. Its Beyond Bengaluru and Skill Development Policy (2025-32) seek to decentralise growth through Global Capability Centres in Mysuru and Mangaluru. However, "family-readiness" is constrained by inadequate global research infrastructure, healthcare, and education.

These cases are connected by two empirical insights. First, States give institutional support such as incubators, seed money, and infrastructure priority over family relocation policies. Second, mobility studies demonstrate that while wages draw migrants, retention is influenced by networks, spouse employment, and educational attainment. This unevenness shows that while States compete to attract firms, they rarely plan for people. The absence of housing, education, and spousal employment provisions explains why returnees often view India as a temporary assignment rather than a permanent reintegration.

H-1B policy shift

With nearly 71% H-1B approvals in FY2024, India's dominance in the H-1B visa programme is unparalleled. This dominance makes India highly sensitive to U.S. policy shifts. According to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, in FY 2024, 71% of the 3,99,395 total H-1B approvals were Indian nationals and 46% of total beneficiaries held a master's degree.

The educational profile of H-1B holders has also shifted markedly over time: the proportion of

workers with a master's degree as their highest qualification rose from 31% in 2000 to 57% in 2021, while those with only a bachelor's degree declined from 57% to 34%. Following policy revisions in September 2025, the U.S. introduced limited exemptions to the proposed \$1,00,000 filing fee, particularly for applicants already in the country who transition from F-1 student to H-1B status. This provides short-term relief for U.S.-educated Indian graduates but affects new overseas applicants. Shivani Desai, the CEO of BDO Executive search firm, estimates that the number of Indian students from Ivy League universities seeking positions in India has risen by about 30% this year, while senior Indian executives in the U.S. are increasingly reassessing long-term career prospects amid visa uncertainty. This reversal comes at an opportune moment. With 1,600+ Global Capability Centres employing 1.66 million people and rising U.S. visa costs, conditions are ripe for a shift from brain drain to brain circulation.

Retaining talent remains equally challenging. India's R&D investment is merely 0.64% of GDP, far below the U.S. (3.47%), China (2.41%), and Israel (5.71%), due to limited private sector incentives. This gap reflects both limited public funding and the structural composition of India's corporate sector.

Addressing this imbalance by incentivising private R&D investment and diversifying into higher-intensity sectors such as software products, semiconductors, and advanced manufacturing will be crucial if India is to convert the H-1B disruption into a genuine innovation dividend. The H-1B disruption could catalyse a wave of innovation if cities, universities, and firms strengthen social and research infrastructure to retain returnees. Otherwise, the next generation of highly qualified workers will simply pursue their futures elsewhere.

The ghee keeping A.P. on the boil

Faith cannot be a battleground for electoral gains

STATE OF PLAY

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The alleged adulteration of the ghee used for the laddu prasadam at the Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams (TTD) has been in the news for more than a year for all the wrong reasons.

The controversy began in September 2024 when Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu alleged that adulterated ghee, laced with animal fat including beef tallow, had been supplied to the temple during the previous YSRCP regime. The charge triggered outrage.

In October 2024, the YSRCP approached the Supreme Court, seeking a probe. The Court constituted a Special Investigation Team (SIT) headed by the Central Bureau of Investigation, with members from the State police and the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI). After 15 months, the SIT filed its final supplementary charge sheet in mid-January 2026 before the Anti-Corruption Bureau Court in Nellore.

The contents of the charge sheet appear to have unsettled the NDA, as certain ingredients reportedly identified in samples tested by the National Dairy Development Board (NDDB) were not mentioned in the document. On the other hand, the YSRCP was quick to claim vindication, with some leaders projecting the SIT findings as a "clean chit" to the previous regime led by Y. S. Jagan Mohan Reddy.

Yet, the SIT report was far from exculpatory. It confirmed adulteration and went so far as to state that the product supplied was not ghee at all, but a sludge concocted by mixing palm oil and synthetic



substances, along with chemicals allegedly hazardous to human health, to replicate the texture and aroma of ghee. Leaders of the NDA held a press conference to counter the Opposition's narrative.

The controversy spilled into the Legislative Council, where the YSRCP used its numerical strength to stall proceedings. It also dragged Heritage Foods, owned by Mr. Naidu's family, into the controversy, alleging that it had attempted to benefit from the ghee supply contract.

Stripped of political rhetoric, however, the SIT's findings are shocking. The NDDB's Centre for Analysis and Learning in Livestock and Food at Anand, Gujarat, tested samples from four tankers supplied by one of the accused dairies. The low levels of butyric acid indicated a "very low" presence of milk fat, while the detection of lauric and myristic acids suggested the presence of coconut oil or palm kernel oil. The investigation concluded that several private dairies had colluded with officials in the TTD's procurement wing and with external experts engaged to inspect processing units. Some dairies allegedly submitted fabricated documents to secure eligibility. Procurement records showed purchases of palm kernel oil, refined palm oil, food-grade lactic acid, acetic acid ester, monoglycerides, beta carotene and artificial ghee flavour – all with the

apparent intention of manufacturing a "ghee-like" substance. The accused dairies had not procured any milk, yet managed to supply the concoction as ghee.

This is clearly a case of corruption, breach of trust, and collusion. The only direct political link cited in the charge sheet is Kaduru Chinna Appanna, who served as personal assistant to the then TTD Trust Board Chairman.

Neither side can claim moral triumph. The YSRCP asserts that it has been cleared of the gravest allegation – the presence of animal fat – and points out that none of its former TTD chairpersons has been named in the charge sheet. Yet it cannot evade accountability for the procurement of some 58 lakh kgs of fake ghee during its tenure.

Meanwhile, the NDA insists that corruption has been exposed. However, the absence of any reference to animal fat places it in an uncomfortable position. Also, its claim that policy changes under the YSRCP regime enabled dubious suppliers appears weak, since some of the same dairies operated during the earlier TDP government.

A one-man committee has now been appointed to examine the administrative lapses and procedural loopholes highlighted in the SIT's note to the State government. While the law must take its course, attempts to weaponise the controversy are disquieting. This is a case of blatant corruption, and most important, a matter of public health. Millions who have the Tirumala laddu as prasadam deserve answers. While institutions managing temple trusts must be insulated from political crossfire, the institutions themselves must be stringent about quality control.

How the Russia-Ukraine war is hurting the home front

From Russian rice to Ukrainian wheat, essential food prices have surged since 2022, forcing civilians to bear the brunt

DATA POINT

Sambavi Parthasarathy

The Russia-Ukraine war, which began with Russia's invasion four years ago, on February 24, 2022, has continued despite thousands of casualties and numerous rounds of peace negotiations. A joint report by the World Bank, European Union (EU), United Nations, and Ukraine, published on February 23, estimates the cost of post-war construction in Ukraine to be around \$558 billion over the next decade, nearly three times the country's estimated GDP in 2025.

The war has taken a toll on both countries. Russia, one of the world's largest economies, has been battered by sanctions imposed by the EU and the U.S. Its economy grew by less than 1% last year and is estimated to grow by another 1% in 2026 (Chart 1).

The economic condition of Ukraine, one of the poorest European nations even before the war, has worsened in recent years. The country is reeling under mounting government debt, rising reliance on aid, and heavy damage to infrastructure. Its GDP growth contracted by almost 30% in 2022. Its economy, which grew by just 2% last year, is estimated to recover to 4.5% in 2026.

Data show that people in both Russia and Ukraine have been feeling the pinch of the conflict. Consumer price inflation in both countries surged to a six-year high at the outset of the war in 2022. It has remained persistently elevated in the years since. For instance, in Russia, inflation surged to 14% in 2022, moderated to 5% in 2023, but subsequently increased to 9% in the last year (Chart 2).

The cost of essential items such as basic food products has risen substantially in both countries. In Russia, a kilogramme of bread increased by 13% this month compared to a year ago and increased

by over 50% compared to five years ago, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization's Food Price Index. Similarly, the price of a kilogramme of rice increased by 40% this month, compared to 2022 (Chart 3a).

In Ukraine, the cost of basic food products such as wheat and maize has increased by 15% compared to four years ago. The price of wheat flour increased from 12,633 Ukrainian Hryvnia (UAH)/tonne in February 2022 to 14,700 UAH/tonne in 2026 (Chart 3b).

High levels of defence spending also resulted in decreased allocation for social spending, education, and healthcare in both countries. In Ukraine, defence spending consistently accounted for more than half of the country's spending since 2022. In contrast, expenditure on education, health care, and social protection declined by more than half when compared to 2021 (Chart 4).

Defence spending surged to over 20% of the country's GDP in 2022 and was estimated to reach 26% by 2025. The sharp increase has widened the budget deficit, and the country's gross government debt accounted for over 109% of the country's GDP in 2025.

In Russia, defence spending accounted for almost 30% of the total expenditure. The country's social spending did not decrease drastically like Ukraine's (Chart 5). However, a research paper published by SIPRI notes that Russia's military spending is not always classified under 'national defence', but is sometimes recorded under other categories, such as social support. This makes it difficult to find out its exact non-defence expenditure.

The war has come at a severe human cost. Last month, the Centre for Strategic and International Studies estimated that 1.2 million people were killed, wounded, and missing in Russia between February 2022 and December 2025. The corresponding figure for Ukraine was 5 lakh-6 lakh.



Chart 1: Real GDP growth rate of Russia and Ukraine. Figures in %

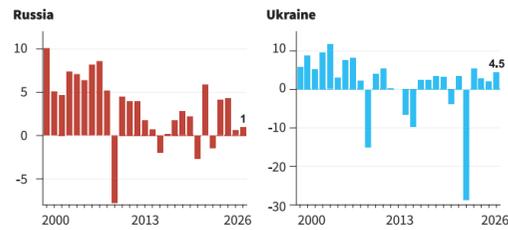


Chart 2: Annual inflation rates of Russia and Ukraine. Figures in %

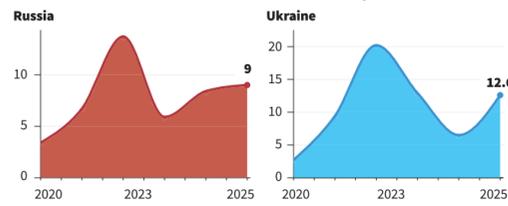
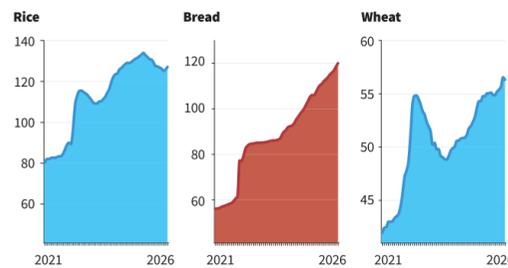


Chart 3A: Retail prices of select food items in Russia. Figures in roubles/kg



Cost of war

The data for the charts were sourced from the International Monetary Fund, Food and Agriculture Organization's Food Price Index, World Bank, OECD Economic Survey, and Stockholm International Peace Research Institute

Chart 3B: Retail prices of select food items in Ukraine. Figures in UAH/tonnes

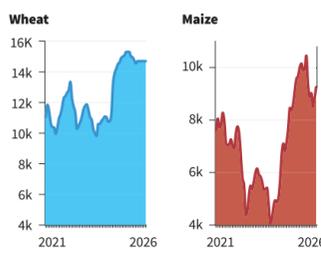


Chart 4: Sector-wise spending in Ukraine

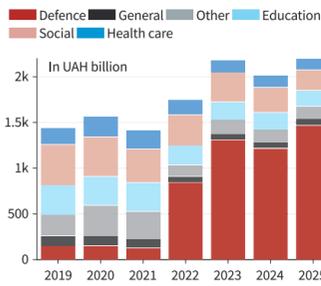
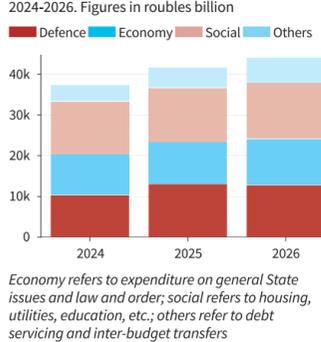


Chart 5: Sector-wise spending in Russia for 2024-2026. Figures in roubles billion



Economy refers to expenditure on general State issues and law and order; social refers to housing, utilities, education, etc.; others refer to debt servicing and inter-budget transfers

FROM THE ARCHIVES

The *Hindu*

FIFTY YEARS AGO FEBRUARY 25, 1976

Steps to free rice growth from weather constraints

Madras, Feb. 24: The Indian Rice Development Council which met here to-day focused attention on factors that can free rice production from the vagaries of weather.

Some measures were chalked out to minimise the impact of the climatic behaviour which was particularly felt here in the kharif season according to Dr. G.S. Kalikat, Agricultural Commissioner, Government of India, who presided over the discussions. Nearly one-third of the rice area, including a vast expanse in the Gangetic belt, was rain-fed and small deviations from the normal cultivation practice which can off-set the influence of weather would be worthwhile, he said.

One of the measures thought of was to have optimum plant population to make up for the low output of individual plants.

Raising community nurseries and distributing seedlings instead of seeds has also been recommended. This would eliminate the timelag between the period of water-arrival and the time of transplanting and make for fuller utilisation of the available rainfall.

It was also found necessary to design proper implements to prepare large areas quickly for planting or sowing and distribute them to farmers. Wherever possible, tractors, power-tillers and like equipment should be pressed into service to get the land ready in the shortest time possible.

Efforts will be made to improve the crop management capacity of farmers so that with less inputs they could get more yield.

Tamil Nadu has the highest yield of rice per hectare in India during the current year, producing 2200 kg per hectare. The all India average is just half of this.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO FEBRUARY 25, 1926

Kashmir's new ruler

Jammu, Feb. 24: Last night, Sir Hari Singh entertained all the ruling princes and their followers at a banquet at his palace, which was beautifully illuminated. There are now 3,500 Indian guests in Jammu, all being entertained by the State. The procession to-morrow at midday, when the big coronation event takes place will be a mile long.

The Maharajas of Kapurthala and Jhalawar arrived to-day.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Number of houses approved for displaced people in Manipur

5,000 The Centre has approved construction of 5,000 houses under the Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana-Gramin for internally displaced persons affected by violence in Manipur. The State aims to resettle 10,000 displaced families by March 31. PTI

The Jharkhand government's Budget for 2026-27

1.58 In lakh crore. The Jharkhand government tabled a ₹1,58,560 crore Budget for the 2026-27 financial year in the State Assembly, up from ₹1.45 lakh crore in 2025-26. Finance Minister Radhakrishna Kishore said the Budget focuses on inclusive growth. PTI

Number of people displaced by the RSF attack in North Darfur

2,690 An estimated 2,690 people were displaced from the town of Mustariha in North Darfur following an attack by Sudan's Rapid Support Forces. The assault on the militia stronghold left at least 28 people dead, eyewitnesses said. AFP

The value of development works launched in Mundka

264 In ₹ crore. Delhi Chief Minister Rekha Gupta laid the foundation for works covering 49 projects aimed at improving connectivity, water supply, education and healthcare facilities. The move is part of a push to bring villages on par with urban standards. PTI

Record number of tourist arrivals in Greece last year

37.98 in million. Greece set a new tourism record with 37.98 million travellers in 2025, marking a 5.6% increase from 35.95 million in 2024, as per the central bank. Tourism receipts rose to 23.6 billion euros. AFP
COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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The evolving nature of trade agreements

U.S. President Donald Trump's trade agreements create a new category within established international trade agreements. The fact, however, that these deals are not in accordance with the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade and the World Trade Organization make them legally suspicious

ECONOMIC NOTES

Prabhash Ranjan

U.S. President Donald Trump has signed several trade agreements with countries such as Malaysia, Cambodia, Argentina, and Bangladesh. These agreements have been signed under the shadow of intimidating and illegal tariffs. The U.S. has also announced a trade agreement with India, for which the two sides have issued a joint statement. Trade agreements exemplify the legalisation of international trade relations. But are all trade agreements the same? Can the India-U.S. trade deal, once finalised, be compared to India's recent agreements with the EU or the U.K.?

The U.S. refers to agreements signed by Mr. Trump as Agreements on Reciprocal Trade (ART), as opposed to Free Trade Agreements (FTAs). This creates a new category in international trade deals, which now consists of three typologies.

Multilateralism

At the core of international trade treaties is the robust multilateral trade agreement established by the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and the World Trade Organization (WTO). The GATT untethered the global American project of creating a non-discriminatory trading regime firmly grounded in the most-favoured-nation (MFN) rule (this WTO rule specifies that if a special favour is granted to one country, such as lower tariffs, then it has to be extended to all other WTO members as well).

The U.S. established a multilateral trading arrangement, based on an unconditional MFN rule, due to the pursuit of trade protectionism during the interwar years. Further, the formation of the WTO in 1995 provided an institutional architecture to this multilateral trade project. The WTO expanded trade beyond goods to include services and intellectual property, and established an



New terms: PM Narendra Modi with U.S. President Trump, at Hyderabad House in New Delhi in 2020. PTI

intricate dispute settlement mechanism. While some view the WTO as part of a global imperialist state, its one-country-one-vote principle provides developing countries with some agency and an opportunity to forge alliances and bargain with the developed world.

Preferential trade agreements

Interestingly, while the WTO establishes a trading regime based on non-discrimination, it allows its members to sign preferential trading agreements on a non-MFN basis. Two such arrangements are recognised in Article XXIV of GATT – free trade areas and Customs Unions (CUs). However, since these arrangements are an exception to the MFN principle, they are subject to stringent conditions. For instance, an FTA creating a free trade area should cover 'substantially all trade' between its constituents. Likewise, a CU

should not only cover 'substantially all trade' but also have a common external trade policy for non-members. These stringent conditions aim to make FTAs and CUs building blocks rather than impediments to trade multilateralism.

Until the 1980s, these arrangements were not popular among countries. However, in the last three decades, there has been a proliferation of FTAs. While most FTAs are bilateral, some are quite large, covering 10 to 15 countries, such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement. Many of these FTAs are WTO-plus, that is, they go beyond the topics covered by the WTO, by including rules on labour, environment, and foreign investment protection. These FTAs are criticised for thrusting new obligations on developing countries. However, as these FTAs are notified to the WTO as a mandatory legal

requirement, they provide countries adversely affected by them with an opportunity to raise questions and scrutinise them.

Agreements on reciprocal trade

The ARTs that the Trump administration has been signing with WTO members are not signed under Article XXIV of the GATT. This makes these agreements legally suspicious. While GATT Article XXIV-type FTAs have an institutional linkage with the WTO, ARTs are completely independent. The most alarming element of these ARTs is that they exemplify the Trump administration's 'America First' trade policy. While the U.S. continues to impose tariff rates inconsistent with its WTO obligations, its trading partner is strong-armed into either eliminating or drastically reducing tariff rates on U.S. goods. Moreover, in addition to WTO-plus characteristics, these ARTs contain several one-sided provisions aimed at bolstering U.S. interests. For instance, Article 4.1 of the U.S.-Bangladesh ART provides that if the U.S. adopts a trade measure to protect its economic or national security, and notifies Bangladesh of the same, the latter, too, in accordance with its domestic laws, shall adopt a complementary restrictive action in support of the former. A provision like this effectively ties the interests of the U.S.' partner to the U.S. Another key feature of these ARTs is that they restrict the data sovereignty of U.S.' treaty partners. For instance, Article 3.4 of the U.S.-El Salvador ART proscribes El Salvador from imposing customs duties on electronic transactions.

In sum, the U.S. ARTs are imperial in nature. Additionally, because these ARTs are not notified to the WTO, other countries can't scrutinise them. These agreements are an attempt to deracinate trade multilateralism and should be stoutly resisted by developing countries.

Prabhash Ranjan is Professor and Vice Dean (Research), Jindal Global Law School. Views are personal.

THE GIST

At the core of international trade treaties is the robust multilateral trade agreement established by the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and the World Trade Organization (WTO).

In the last three decades, there has been a proliferation of FTAs. While most FTAs are bilateral some are quite large, covering 10 to 15 countries, such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement.

The most alarming element of U.S. President Trump's ARTs is that they exemplify the Trump administration's 'America First' trade policy.

Does the Data Act dilute the Right to Information Act?

Why is a blanket exemption to any information which relates to personal information problematic?

Rangarajan. R

The story so far:

The petitions challenging the amendment to the Right to Information (RTI) Act that provides blanket exemption for personal information, through a section in the Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act, has been referred to a Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court.

How was the DPDP Act framed?

The Supreme Court in *Puttaswamy* (2017) had declared the right to privacy as a fundamental right primarily under Article 21 (right to life and liberty). It is also an overarching right that includes freedom of speech and expression (Article 19). In this judgment, the court had directed that the government must put forth a data protection regime.

The government had constituted a committee under the chairmanship of

Justice B.N. Sri Krishna to deliberate and report on the data protection framework. The committee submitted its report and a draft Bill on data protection in July 2018. Subsequently, in August 2023, Parliament passed the DPDP Act, 2023. The DPDP Act provides the legal framework for the protection of personal data of individuals (known as data principals) which they share with other persons, companies and government entities (data fiduciaries).

What is the controversy?

The RTI Act, 2005 was enacted to provide citizens with the right to seek information from public authorities. Section 8(1)(j) of the RTI Act stipulated that information which relates to personal information, the disclosure of which has no relationship to any public activity or interest, or which would cause unwarranted invasion of the privacy of an individual need not be provided. However, if the appropriate authority was satisfied that larger public

interest justified the disclosure of such information, the same could be provided.

Section 44(3) of the DPDP Act amends section 8(1)(j) of the RTI Act. It provides a blanket exemption to any information which relates to personal information without any exceptions. The statement of objects and reasons while introducing the DPDP Bill is silent about the aim of this amendment. It may be inferred that it is to protect the fundamental right to privacy of public officials that cannot be abridged or taken away by parliamentary law. However, this amendment has been challenged in the Supreme Court, through a series of petitions, on the ground that it is *ultra vires* the Constitution. This has now been referred to a Bench considering 'constitutional sensitivity' of the questions involved.

What can be the way forward?

The Supreme Court has in various cases viewed the right to information as integral

to Articles 19 and 21. The RTI Act has had a significant impact on increasing the transparency and accountability of public authorities. Previously, the personal assets and liabilities of public servants, which they are required to periodically submit to government, were disclosed by Public Information Officers under the RTI Act if it served larger public interest. This had been used to probe any allegation of corruption by public servants. However, with the current amendment, such information would be declined on the ground that it is related to personal information. It enables rejecting requests concerning even procurement records, audit reports or public spending on the premise that it could be 'personal information'. The court had remarked that it might lay down the guidelines as to what is meant by 'personal information.' This is a welcome step. However, the amendment of the RTI Act through the DPDP Act, 2023 should be repealed. It should revert to the earlier position which allowed the disclosure of personal information if it fulfilled larger public interest. This provision already contained the required proportionate balance, between the needs for privacy and disclosure, with respect to the personal information of public officials.

Rangarajan R is a former IAS officer and author of 'Courseware on Polity Simplified.' He currently trains at Officers IAS academy. Views expressed are personal.

THE GIST

The Supreme Court in *Puttaswamy* (2017) had declared the right to privacy as a fundamental right.

The RTI Act, 2005 was enacted to provide citizens with the right to seek information from public authorities.

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BUILDING BLOCKS



Lapis stones. ISTOCKPHOTO

The rise of blue: the colour that moved kings and the royals before poets

An exploration of the historical significance of blue reveals its evolution from sacred symbolism in ancient texts to its cultural impact and classification in modern society. Newton stabilised colour into a sequence that could be taught, reproduced, and enforced

Satwik Gade

When Isaac Newton wrote *Opticks*, published in 1704, he divided the colour spectrum into the now famous VIBGYOR, a set of seven colours (the decision was not, as such, scientific because Newton's choice was dictated by '7' being a significant number in alchemy.) What Newton observed was a series of hues merging into one another, rather than discrete parcels.

The Irish chemist Robert Boyle, who inspired Newton through his experiments, had observed the same spectrum when he pinched refined quicksilver in a "syrup of violets", but spoke of only five colours. Many of Newton's readers were not really sure if they could tell indigo from blue or violet at all. And yet Newton insisted that there were seven. The number was alchemically significant. It echoed the musical scale, the number of (visible) planets, and other harmonies of yore based on which Newton intended to structure what we now see as early modern thought.

Colour was being ordered, and this ordering was optical and administrative.

Newton, who later served the British crown as Warden and Lord of Mint, stabilised colour into a sequence that

could be taught, reproduced, and enforced.

A journey of the blues

Long before this abstraction, blue appeared in the Rig Veda, one of the earliest surviving bodies of liturgy, through Varuna, the god of cosmic order, oath, and surveillance. Varuna is described as *syama* and *krsna* (meaning dusk-coloured and dark), terms that signal depth and enclosure rather than surface hue. The Indologist Michael Witzel has described Varuna as a figure of an early vedic kingship, a "nocturnal sovereign" whose power lies in distance, binding, and the night sky.

What is striking is that this chromatic marker of sovereignty co-evolves with a profound religious transformation. In the Mahabharata and Itihasic-Puranic traditions, *syama* and *krsna* become the most common names of Vasudeva Krsna, who emerges not merely as a heroic figure but as the lord of the cosmos itself. Across this shift, from ritual order of the vedas to the bhakti of Puranas, blue remains a sign of totality and command.

The Greek world, by contrast, hesitated before blue. Karissa St. Clair, in her book *Secret Lives of Colours*, notes that in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, blue is conspicuously absent. The sea is "wine-dark," and the colour of the skies is

unmentioned. Nineteenth-century thinker and politician William Gladstone famously remarked that Greeks could not see blue. And of course, this is not true. Colour theorists and historians have pointed out that in Homer's epics, colour was organised around brightness, texture, and emotional force rather than hue.

But a few thousand years before ancient Greece, the value of blue was negotiated materially through stone, right from the earliest stages of the Bronze Age. Lapis lazuli, deep blue and flecked with gold, travelled thousands of kilometres from the mines of Badakhshan in present-day Afghanistan to connect Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Indus Valley and China in trans-continental trade. Archaeological finds at the earliest agricultural sites such as Mehrgarh and Bhirrana (6th Millennium BCE) include lapis beads imported through these long-distance trade routes. In ancient Sumer, lapis was sacred to Inanna, and in Egypt, it adorned divine brows and funerary masks apart from featuring in statuettes and seals. Lapis Lazuli marked divinity because it was rare, costly, and difficult to command.

Visibility co-evolves with value, but the tension which separates the two has always been observable. Even by the early Bronze Age, Egypt was successful in locally producing their own synthetic

colour pigments, Ceruleum, from copper, limestone and silica to reproduce the colour of lapis – marking the earliest known instances of synthetic colour production on an industrial scale under government regulation.

By the axial age, Mesopotamians were importing Indigo from distant India to colour their royal robes in the colour of Lapis while China created its own synthetic blue, from barium, copper, and silicon to colour its terracotta army in Lapis so the army could serve its emperor in the afterlife.

'Stimulation of nothingness'

Seen this way, Newton's spectrum marks not the beginning of colour, but the final abstraction of a long process. When blue became a wavelength, something older was lost: its connection to effort, danger, devotion, and power.

In an effort to preserve the values associated with the colour value, Goethe, in his *Theory of Colours* (1804) wrote, "The blue colour is a kind of contradiction between excitement and repose. It is a stimulation of nothingness. Hence we feel a certain pleasure in gazing at blue, because it draws us after it."

Satwik Gade is a Chennai-based writer and illustrator. This article is part of a series on the history and development of colours.



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

S. Upendran

"I came looking for you yesterday. Where were you?"

"Sridhar took me to see *Taal*."

"How was the movie?"

"I didn't like it."

"That's surprising. My friend said it was quite good."

"Sridhar's kids, on the other hand, thought it was rather good."

"'Quite good' and 'rather good'. What is the difference between the two?"

"'Rather good' is stronger than 'quite good'."

"So, if I want to compliment someone about something, I should say 'rather good' instead of 'quite good'."

"Right. When you say that something is 'rather good', you are implying that it is better than what you expected it to be."

"And you are surprised by the fact it is so good."

"Exactly! Some grammarians say that 'rather good' is the same as 'very good'."

"I see. Sujatha's Hindi is rather good. Many people think that she had her schooling in Delhi."

"The food served at the wedding was rather good. I was really surprised."

"What does 'quite good' mean?"

"When you say that the film is quite good, what you are implying is that the movie though not great, is worth seeing."

"In other words, the movie is not surprisingly good."

"It definitely is not. 'Quite good' is not as strong as 'rather good'."

"So when you say Sujatha's Hindi is quite good, it means that she can manage in most situations."

"I guess you could say that."

"Has your cousin decided where he is going for the holidays?"

"Yes. We had a lengthy discussion about it yesterday and he's decided..."

"...discussion about? Didn't you say some time ago that one shouldn't use 'about' after 'discussion'?"

"I don't think I ever said that. One can, in fact, use 'about' after 'discussion'. For example, during the lunch break, we had a lengthy discussion about *Taal*."

"Sujatha and I had a lengthy discussion about cricket. Can I say that?"

"You certainly can. Every morning, my boss and I have a discussion about our sales strategy."

"My friends and I discuss about movies."

"That's what I told you to avoid. I told you not to..."

"...not to use 'about' after 'discuss'. Now I remember. Let's discuss something else, shall we?"

"Certainly. What would you like to discuss?"

"Your cousin, Sridhar. He works during the weekends too, doesn't he?"

"That's right. He gets Thursdays off. He works Friday through Wednesday."

"Friday through Wednesday? Don't you mean 'to' Wednesday? Shouldn't..."

"...you can say 'I work Monday through Friday', or, 'I work Monday to Friday'. Both are acceptable."

"What's the difference?"

"As far as I know, 'Monday through Friday' is American and..."

"...Monday to Friday is British."
Published in *The Hindu* on September 13, 1999.

THE DAILY QUIZ

On February 25, 1964, Muhammad Ali won the world heavyweight boxing title for the first time. A quiz on the champion and civil rights icon

Mohammed Hidayat

QUESTION 1

Which boxer did Muhammad Ali (then Cassius Clay) defeat to win his first heavyweight title? How old was Ali?

QUESTION 2

What was the transitional name adopted by the boxer before becoming Muhammad Ali?

QUESTION 3

How many times did Ali win the world heavyweight title?

QUESTION 4

Ali, the civil rights icon, refused to join the U.S. Army to fight which country?

QUESTION 5

In which country did the "Rumble in the Jungle" event take place — the famous 1974 heavyweight championship match where Ali defeated George Foreman?

QUESTION 6

After Iraq invaded _____ in 1990, Muhammad Ali, the global humanist, played a key role in the release of American hostages held by Saddam Hussain. Fill in the blank

QUESTION 7

Ali, the pop culture megastar, was featured in a one-off 1978 DC Comics publication in which he teams up with _____ to defeat an alien invasion of Earth. Fill in the blank.



Visual question:

This photo, one among the many, shows why Ali was referred to as the people's champion. Describe what is happening here. AP

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz:

1. In September 1919, Adolf Hitler joined the German Workers' Party, a small nationalist group in Munich founded by _____. **Ans: Anton Drexler**

2. In 1921-22, the NSDAP set up the Sturmabteilung whose members were called this. **Ans: Brownshirts**

3. In 1923, this event led to the abolishing of the Sturmabteilung. **Ans: Beer Hall Putsch**

4. In 1925, Hitler created Y, whose name was German for 'Protection Squadron'. **Ans: Schutzstaffel (SS)**

5. Name the event of February 23, 1933, that Hitler used as a pretext to arrest communists en masse. **Ans: Reichstag fire**

Visual: Name this leader. **Ans: Paul von Hindenburg**

Early Birds: Suchit Narottam| Abhiroop Bose| Prashansa Lohumij| Maalavika Nair| Piyali Tuli

Word of the day

Deracinate:

move (people) forcibly from their homeland into a new and foreign environment; pull up by or as if by the roots

Synonyms: uproot, extirpate, root out

Usage: It is crucial to deracinate corruption from the government.

Pronunciation: newsth.live/deracinatepro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /dɪˈræːsɪneɪt/, /dɪˈræːsəneɪt/

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

IN BRIEF



OpenAI, Anthropic accuse Chinese rivals of AI data theft

AI firm Anthropic said it uncovered campaigns by three China AI firms to illicitly extract capabilities from Claude chatbot, in what it described as industrial-scale intellectual property theft. Anthropic said DeepSeek, Moonshot AI and MiniMax used "distillation" to rapidly boost the performance of a less capable one. Rival OpenAI, creator of ChatGPT, made similar accusations to U.S. lawmakers earlier this month. **AFP**

Public sector Canara Bank to raise ₹5,000 cr. via bonds

Canara Bank planned to raise ₹5,000 crore in bonds to strengthen its capital base and support future growth plans. Sale of Basel III - compliant tier 2 bonds is scheduled for February 26 on the National Stock Exchange. The proposed raise would comprise a base issue of ₹2,000 crore with a green shoe option of up to ₹3,000 crore, enabling the bank to respond flexibly to robust investor appetite, Canara Bank said.

SriLankan Airlines' 10th India destination to be Ahmedabad

SriLankan Airlines will add Ahmedabad as 10th destination in India from April and is also exploring raising frequencies on existing routes to the country. "This is our first launch in 5 years and chose India for it," head of commercial, Dimuthu Tennakoon told the media. The airline has 23 airworthy aircraft. Ahmedabad travellers will be able to connect to destinations such as Australia, countries in Far East as well as Europe.

Eris Lifesciences, Natco ink pact on Semaglutide

Eris Lifesciences has forged strategic partnership with Natco Pharma for commercialisation of semaglutide in India. Eris Lifesciences' announcement comes in the backdrop of Natco Pharma receiving Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation (CDSCO) nod to make semaglutide for Indian market. The approval for the product for Type 2 diabetes management paves way for a launch expected in March 2026.

Alembic Pharma gets U.S. FDA nod for antifungal drug

The Hindu Bureau
HYDERABAD

Alembic Pharmaceuticals has received final approval from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (U.S. FDA) for its abbreviated new drug application for antifungal drug Efinaconazole Topical Solution, 10%.

The approved ANDA is therapeutically equivalent to Jublia Topical Solution, 10%, of Bausch Health Americas, Inc.

Alembic was one of the first applicants to submit a substantially complete ANDA with a paragraph IV

Efinaconazole is indicated for topical treatment of onychomycosis of the toenails

certification. Efinaconazole Topical Solution, 10% had an estimated market size of \$500 million for twelve months ending December 2025, the company said. The drug is indicated for topical treatment of onychomycosis of the toenails due to Trichophyton rubrum and Trichophyton mentagrophytes.

Aurobindo sets up arm for contract manufacturing

The Hindu Bureau
HYDERABAD

Aurobindo Pharma has incorporated a wholly owned subsidiary, Engerra Biologics, to expand contract manufacturing. Besides contract manufacturing, the objective is also to expand other pharmaceutical manufacturing operations, it said in a filing.

Vivriti Group creates holding firm for growth

The Hindu Bureau
MUMBAI

Vivriti Group, a mid-market focussed financial services group, has announced the establishment of Vivriti Next, a new operating and holding company designed to consolidate the Group's businesses and accelerate future growth.

"This reorganisation will bring the lending business of Vivriti Capital and the private credit asset management business of

IT sell-off drags down indices; Sensex sheds over 1,000 points

Tech stocks declined due to trade-related uncertainties and concerns over AI-led disruptions, said analysts; Nifty-50 loses 288 points to 25,425

Lalendu Mishra
MUMBAI

Benchmark stock indices on Tuesday declined more than 1% amidst sell-off in technology stocks owing to trade related uncertainties and concerns over artificial intelligence (AI)-led disruptions, analysts said.

The 30-share BSE Sensex fell 1.28%, or 1,069 points, to 82,226 led by the fall in technology stocks. The top Sensex losers included Tech Mahindra, which was down 6.60%, HCL Tech (6.10%), Eternal (5.28%), Infosys (3.91%) and TCS (3.79%). The BSE Tech Index fell 3.82%. Mirroring the same sentiment, the broader 50-stock NSE Nifty-50 index slumped 1.12%, or 288 points, to 25,425 points.

The Nifty IT Index extended its losing streak to a fifth consecutive session, falling nearly 5%. "The benchmark indices corrected sharply. Among sectors, the IT index lost the most, shedding over 4.45%, whereas despite the weak market sentiment, the Metal index outperformed and rallied over 1%," Shrikant Chouhan, Head - Equity Research, Kotak Securities said.

"Technically, after a



On crash course: The top Sensex losers included Tech Mahindra, HCL Tech, Infosys and TCS. **FILE PHOTO**

gap-down open, the market has been facing consistent selling pressure at higher levels. A long bearish candle on the daily charts and a lower top formation in intraday charts indicate further weakness from the current levels," he pointed out.

"On February 24, coinciding with the monthly Nifty F&O expiry, Indian benchmark indices snapped their two-session rally and ended sharply lower, with the Nifty slipping below the 25,450 mark amid heavy selling in IT stocks on concerns over AI-driven disruption," Bajaj Broking Research said in a note. According to Ponmudi R., CEO, Enrich Money, due to a gap-down start, investors refrained from building aggressive

positions amid mixed global cues. "Escalating global macro uncertainty, particularly around U.S. trade and tariff developments, along with persistent concerns over AI-led disruption in the global technology space, weighed on overall risk appetite and prompted defensive positioning across most sectors," he said. "The IT sector bore the brunt of the selling pressure, with stocks declining sharply in line with weakness in global technology counters. Intensifying concerns that rapid AI advancements could disrupt traditional business models and valuation frameworks further dampened sentiment, triggering broad-based profit booking in technology names," he added.

IDFC First Bank pays ₹583 cr. to Haryana govt. departments to settle bank fraud

Lalendu Mishra
MUMBAI

In a swift move, fraud-hit IDFC First Bank Ltd. said on Tuesday it had paid out 100% of the principal and

interest to the relevant departments of the Haryana Government.

"Even though the investigation in the matter is ongoing, we have paid out 100% of the principal and

interest which works out to a net amount of ₹583 crore," the bank said in a filing.

The bank's stock on Tuesday gained 1.33% to close at ₹70.97 on the BSE.

AI: India must contend with basic constraints

NEWS ANALYSIS

Aroon Deep
NEW DELHI

As the AI Impact Summit drew to a close on Friday, it was clear the government sought to make India the centre of all things for AI in the world.

As per an OpenAI report on how Indians use AI, ChatGPT prompts take advantage of the firm's most advanced data analysis, writing and technical tools on the platform. This, the firm says, means Indians have largely closed the "capability overhang," the gap between what the latest large language models can do (LLMs) and what they're actually used for.

It is clear: India is addicted to the potential of AI. That will have massive consequences for how the Internet is used, how LLMs diffuse into firms and what lies ahead for knowledge work beyond the IT industry. As the implementation of Aadhaar, UPI and other such frameworks show, Indians either welcome or eventually embrace the use of digital technologies when it is possible to do so.

Infrastructure layer

A central problem is the infrastructure layer. AI has drastically disrupted the power efficiency of the Internet. The graphics processing units (GPUs) powering AI are expensive. The costs, however, are buried in the opex: AI needs millions of dollars' of power and inference in data centres add up hugely. Power costs are bound to be challenging.

India has the world's second largest AI user base, driven by wide Internet coverage. As such, inference costs may be huge. Availability of capital for local infrastructure development is a major chal-



PM Narendra Modi at India AI Impact Summit 2026.

lenge: U.S. hyperscalers estimate collective data centre spending in hundreds of billions of dollars a year. The biggest infrastructure investments within India are now an outpost of this spending leading to a risk of India staying a net inference importer via foreign data centres.

The India Semiconductor Mission and hardware assembly initiatives have been largely executed with efficiency. But due to a mix of historical and economic reasons, the electronics manufacturing ecosystem is not a heavy-hitter holding strategic leverage beyond de-risking by multinationals seeking to avoid volatile outcomes of overly relying on China.

Human capital

If there are any structural green shoots in India's AI ecosystem, it is human capital. India faces the investment appetite to pay competitive salaries and struggles in many parts of the country to offer a quality of life that can urge many to choose the homeland over a different home for their children.

In the IT industry, Claude's latest models - doing in minutes what would take a human coder a day - spooked investors and further undermined its ability to act as a path to the middle class. The government's stated path so far has taken many of these limitations into account.

MARKETS

MARKET WATCH

	TUESDAY	CHANGE
Sensex	82,226	-1.17
US Dollar	90.95	-0.06
Gold	1,63,200	0.24
Brent oil	71.12	-1.05

NIFTY 50

	PRICE	CHANGE
Adani Enter.	2183.00	-8.00
Adani Ports	1555.40	-0.40
Apollo Hosp	7720.50	27.50
Asian Paints	2413.10	-16.60
Axis Bank	1387.60	0.90
Bajaj Auto	5929.00	-76.50
Bajaj Finserv	2043.30	-8.30
Bajaj Finance	1023.55	-7.45
Bharat Elec	435.05	-4.70
Bharti Airtel	1941.00	-56.30
Cipla	1326.70	0.20
Coal India	430.95	-4.95
Dr Reddys Lab	1300.20	-7.20
Eicher Motors	7929.00	-109.50
Eternal Ltd.	254.00	-14.00
Grasim Ind.	2879.30	5.90
HCL Tech	1339.20	-87.00
HDFC Bank	910.50	-13.10
HDFC Life	734.75	-7.70
Hindalco	922.85	-6.65
Hind Unilever	2359.60	13.20
ICICI Bank	1384.80	-14.60
Int'l GlobeAvi	4850.30	-11.90
Infosys	1275.50	-52.00
ITC	323.50	-1.90
Jio Financial Services Ltd.	255.25	-2.55
JSW Steel	1254.50	14.00
Kotak Bank	427.70	-3.00
L&T	4259.20	-158.90
M&M	3433.20	-13.90
Maruti Suzuki	14926.00	-146.00
Max Healthcare	1086.40	2.80
NestleIndia	1320.00	4.90
NTPC	382.75	7.30
ONGC	276.50	0.85
PowerGrid Corp	304.80	1.45
Reliance Ind.	1428.80	0.80
SBI Life	2082.90	-26.70
State Bank	1223.30	-4.50
Shriram Finance Ltd.	1061.70	-3.00
Sun Pharma	1731.80	-0.50
TataConsumerProduct	1178.00	6.20
Tata Steel	209.13	-0.99
TCS	2573.70	-102.60
Tech Mahindra	1345.40	-95.50
Titan	4294.50	21.80
Tata Motors PV	377.55	-2.40
Trent Ltd.	3931.30	-123.60
UltraTech Cement	12960.00	-16.00
Wipro	200.14	-5.75

Kalyani firms pay ₹4.12 cr. to SEBI to settle funds misuse

The Hindu Bureau
MUMBAI

The Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) said three Kalyani Group companies including Kalyani Steels, have settled with it by paying ₹4.12 crore. The companies were investigated for misuse and diversion of funds to various group companies which later impaired the funds.

Caught in quagmire



Packing up: A traveller is seen repacking his bag near the ticketing desk at Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport on Tuesday in Atlanta, Georgia. More than 200 flights were cancelled at Atlanta Airport due to tensions in Mexico and winter weather in various areas of the U.S. **AFP**

AI's positives outweigh human, climate impact, says Nasscom president

Ashokamithran T.
MUMBAI

Positive outcomes of AI on employment will outweigh the adverse human and climate impact that it might have, said Nasscom president Rajesh Nambiar.

Addressing concerns of adverse human and climate impact of AI, he said that the job creation aspect of AI should outweigh such impacts. "There are clearly issues around conditions of the labour. The much larger part of the story is that it is creating employment at an unprecedented scale and for people who otherwise could not have been employed across a whole range of countries, including India but not including Africa and other parts of the world as well," Mr. Nambiar said while briefing the media on Tuesday at the annual summit. His remark assumes significance in the light of reports of women in rural India being subject to work that left them with mental trauma in the process of AI training, to make it safe for users.

Mr. Nambiar, however, maintained that responsible AI was part of the industry body's considerations. On concerns over

Mr. Nambiar maintained that responsible AI was part of Nasscom's considerations

climate impact of data centres, Nasscom said that the improvement in human conditions as an outcome of AI outweighed the adversarial climate impact. "We have to see the human condition improving versus some of the planetary impacts it may have," said Nasscom vice-chairperson Srikanth Velamakanni.

The industry body released statistics on the projections of the revenue from the IT industry as part of its strategic review. According to the report, India's information technology (IT) industry's revenue may improve 6% to \$300 billion in calendar year 2026, from \$297 billion in the year-earlier period.

On the effects of AI on hiring, Nasscom assured that Artificial Intelligence would continue to be a net hirer, but growth rate of new hiring grew at a slower rate of 2.23%, bringing in 1.33 lakh employees in 2026, slightly lower than the 1.35 lakh employees in the year-ago period.

U.S. retail investors fuel surge in leveraged ETF trading: study



New vista: A pedestrian walks outside the New York Stock Exchange during a snow storm in New York. AP

Reuters
PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND

Nearly 90% of all the trading in leveraged single-stock ETFs in the U.S. market can be traced to transactions by individual investors, according to a new study co-authored by Direxion, a provider of those ETFs, together with two analytical firms, Vanda Research and The Compound Insights.

The data shows the proliferation of these exchange-traded vehicles, which allow investors to speculate on short-term moves in an underlying stock, has been almost entirely driven by their allure for these retail investors. The study also found that last year trading in the leveraged single-stock ETFs accounted for 8% of total trading on all U.S. exchanges.

"The vast number of launches illustrates the market's growing reliance on speculation," said Bryan Armour, an ETF analyst at Morningstar.

According to data from Morningstar Direct, there are now 355 leveraged single-stock ETFs listed in the United States, all but 80 of which have been launched since January 2025.

"Interest in trading the volatility in markets has grown and competition has grown" among asset managers eager to tap into the surge in retail trader interest in leveraged products, said Mo Sparks, chief product officer at Direxion.

Changes in regulatory guidance on the use of leverage also have made it simpler to roll out such products, he added, even if that has had some "unintended consequences." In recent months, U.S. asset managers have pushed repeatedly for the SEC to permit them to offer single-stock leveraged products giving their owners the chance to capture three to five times the upside in the underlying stock in a single day. Just as repeatedly, the SEC has pushed back on those initiatives. On Friday, Direxion again filed to offer a suite of 20 ETFs tied to single stocks ranging from Nvidia to Palantir that, if approved, would give traders three times the exposure to the move in the underlying stock over a single trading day. Sparks said he is not able to discuss pending filings being reviewed by the SEC.

According to the study, trading volume of leveraged ETFs, which made their U.S. debut in late 2022, has grown at a clip of 29% annually, outpacing the rate of growth in trading of either stocks or options.

First litmus test

During the biggest market selloff in the last 12 months around the April 2 "Liberation Day" tariffs announcements by President Donald Trump, was their "first litmus test for retail traders under stress."

During that period, which culminated in a series of big market advances, retail investor trades in leveraged single-stock ETFs accounted at times for up to 40% of all trading activity in U.S. markets, the study concluded.

Reuters
WASHINGTON

Chinese AI startup DeepSeek's latest AI model, set to be released as soon as next week, was trained on Nvidia's most advanced AI chip, the Blackwell, a senior Trump administration official said on Monday, in what could represent a violation of U.S. export controls.

The U.S. believes DeepSeek will remove the technical indicators that might reveal its use of American AI chips, the official said, adding that the Blackwells are likely clustered at its data centre in Inner Mongolia, an autonomous region of China.

The person declined to say how the U.S. government received the informa-

tion or how DeepSeek obtained the chips, but emphasised that U.S. policy is "we're not shipping Blackwells to China."

Nvidia declined to comment, while the Commerce Department and DeepSeek did not respond to requests for comment.

The Chinese embassy in Washington said Beijing opposes "drawing ideological lines, overstretching the concept of national security, expansive use of export controls and politicising economic, trade, and technological issues."

U.S. government confirmation of DeepSeek obtaining the chips, first reported by Reuters, could further divide Washington policymakers as they struggle to determine where to draw the line on

Donald Trump's new tariffs shift focus to balance of payments

Trump's 15% replacement tariffs took effect on Tuesday for 150 days; Trump lawyers argued at Supreme Court that Section 122 not the right tool to address trade deficits; plaintiffs in IEEPA case focused on securing refunds for all importers; unclear who might take lead in challenging Sec 122 tariffs

NEWS ANALYSIS

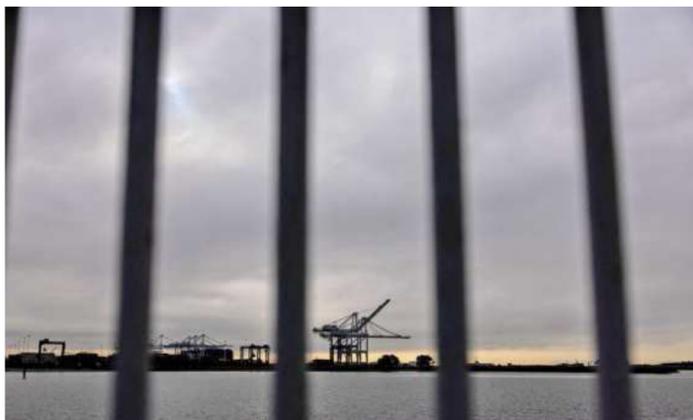
Reuters

President Donald Trump's temporary 15% tariffs to replace those struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court are meant to resolve a problem that many economists say does not exist: a U.S. balance of payments crisis, making them potentially vulnerable to new legal challenges.

Hours after the high court on Friday struck down a huge swath of tariffs Trump had imposed under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act, the President announced the new duties under Section 122 of the Trade Act of 1974 – a never-used statute that even his own legal team dismissed as irrelevant months ago.

Collections of the new 15% tariffs began at midnight on Tuesday as IEEPA tariff collections of 10% to 50% halted. The Section 122 law allows the President to impose duties of up to 15% for up to 150 days on any and all countries to address "large and serious" balance-of-payments deficits and "fundamental international payments problems."

Trump's tariff order argued that a serious balance of payments deficit existed in the form of a \$1.2 trillion annual U.S. goods trade



Cloudy outlook: Empty shipping containers terminal at the port of Oakland after SC order. REUTERS

deficit and a current account deficit of 4% of GDP and a reversal of the U.S. primary income surplus.

'No alarm'

Some economists, including former International Monetary Fund First Deputy Managing Director Gita Gopinath, disagreed with the Trump administration's alarm.

"We can all agree that the U.S. is not facing a balance of payment crisis, which is when countries experience an exorbitant increase in international borrowing costs and lose access to financial markets," Gopinath told Reuters.

Gopinath rejected the White House's claim that a negative balance on the U.S. primary income for



Trump's tariff order argued that a serious balance of payments deficit existed in the form of a \$1.2 trillion annual U.S. goods trade deficit current account deficit of 4%

the first time since 1960 was evidence of a large and serious balance of payment problem.

She attributed the negative balance to a large increase in foreign purchases of U.S. equities and risky assets over the past decade, which outperformed foreign equities over this period.

Mark Sobel, a former

U.S. Treasury and IMF official, said balance of payments crises are more associated with countries with fixed exchange rates, and noted that the floating-rate dollar has been steady, the 10-year Treasury yield fairly stable, with U.S. stocks performing well.

Josh Lipsky, chair of international economics at the Atlantic Council think tank, agreed, noting that a balance of payments crisis occurred when a country could not pay for what it was importing or was unable to service foreign debt. That was fundamentally different from a trade deficit, he added.

Brad Setser, a currency and trade expert at the Council on Foreign Relations who served as a senior adviser to the U.S.

Middle East oil exports push tanker costs to six-year-high amid threat of U.S.-Iran war

Reuters
LONDON/SINGAPORE

The cost of shipping oil has surged to the highest in six years, fuelled by a wave of crude exports from the Middle East as traders accelerate charters ahead of possible military conflict between the U.S. and Iran, industry sources said.

The cost of hiring a very large crude carrier (VLCC) to carry up to 2 million barrels from the Middle East to China more than tripled from start of the year to over \$1.70,000 a day on Tuesday, the highest since April 2020, LSEG data showed.

Middle East crude exports in February exceeded 19 million barrels per day, the highest since April



Grey area: Global tanker fleet has been reduced on hundreds of older vessels being sold into the shadow fleet. REUTERS

2020, data from shipping analytics firm Kpler showed, led by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Iran and as India's demand rose after it cut Russian imports.

"VLCC freight rates have

seen many positive fundamental drivers, starting with Venezuela barrels moving on legitimate freight vs. a dark fleet before, increased OPEC+ production and healthy crude demand from refineries,

particularly from India, which has moved from Russian to Middle Eastern barrels," said June Goh, a senior analyst at Sparta Commodities. "Suezmax and Aframax markets will soon receive the spillover effects in the dirty freight market," she said, referring to crude and fuel oil transported in smaller tankers than VLCCs.

War-risk premium

War-risk insurance premiums could move higher if Washington moves to strike Iran, and Tehran retaliates by potentially disrupting activity through the critical Strait of Hormuz, a major chokepoint for Gulf oil exports, adding to shipping costs.

"For crude tankers, the key point is that VLCC spot ... (rates do) not need barrels to disappear to move," broker Clarksons said.

"It can reprice quickly on perceived risk through higher war-risk premiums, owners demanding compensation to call the region, and charterers accelerating bookings further out in time to reduce schedule uncertainty."

Risk of jamming

Commercial maritime traffic in the Gulf of Oman and Strait of Hormuz is seeing an elevated risk of GPS jamming and spoofing of AIS ship tracking, directly linked to ongoing Iranian military exercises, maritime security risk management group Dryad Global said.

The global tanker fleet has also been reduced due to hundreds of older vessels being sold into the so-called shadow fleet, with unknown insurance cover, that is involved in the transport of sanctioned oil from Iran and Russia.

Oil majors will not use such vessels, tightening vessel availability until new ships join the fleet over the next three years, market sources said.

Meanwhile, South Korean shipping group Sino-Kor emerged as a major buyer of VLCCs, reducing overall supply of such ships in the open market enabling owners to raise rates for typical 30-day charters, the sources said.

'DeepSeek-trained AI model on Nvidia's best chip'

Reuters
WASHINGTON

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Chip in tales: DeepSeek logo is seen in this illustration. REUTERS

Chinese access to the crown jewels of American AI semiconductor chips.

White House AI Czar David Sacks and Nvidia CEO Jensen Huang argue that shipping advanced AI

chips to China discourages Chinese competitors like Huawei from redoubling efforts to catch up with Nvidia's and AMD's technology.

But China hawks fear

chips could easily be diverted from commercial uses to help supercharge China's military and threaten U.S. dominance in AI.

"This shows why exporting any AI chips to Chi-

na is so dangerous," said Chris McGuire, who served as a White House National Security Council official under former President Joe Biden.

'Brazen violation'

"Given China's leading AI companies are brazenly violating U.S. export controls, we obviously cannot expect they will comply with U.S. conditions that would prohibit them from using chips to support the Chinese military," he added. U.S. export controls, overseen by the Commerce Department, currently bar Blackwell shipments to China.

In August, U.S. President Donald Trump opened the door to Nvidia selling a scaled-down version of the Blackwell in

China. But he later reversed course, suggesting the firm's most advanced chips should be reserved for U.S. companies and kept out of China.

Trump's decision in December to allow Chinese firms to buy Nvidia's second most advanced chips, known as the H200, drew sharp criticism from China hawks, but shipments of chips are stalled over guardrails built into approvals.

"Chinese AI companies' reliance on smuggled Blackwells underscores their massive shortfall of domestically produced AI-chips and why approvals of H200 chips would represent a lifeline," said Saif Khan, who served as director of technology and national security at the White House's National Security

Council under former President Joe Biden.

The official declined to comment on how the latest news would impact the Trump administration's decision on whether to allow DeepSeek to buy H200s.

The model they helped train likely relied on the "distillation" of models made by leading-edge U.S. AI companies, including Anthropic, Google, Open AI, and xAI, echoing allegations made by OpenAI and Anthropic, the official added. The technique known as distillation involves having an older, more established and powerful AI model evaluate the quality of the answers coming out of a newer model, effectively transferring the older model's learnings.

TOKYO

Japan to deploy missile systems on island near Taiwan, says Minister



Japan's government plans to deploy surface-to-air missiles on one of its remote western islands near Taiwan by March 2031, the country's Defence Minister Shinjiro Koizumi said on Tuesday. It is the first time Japan has specified the timing of the deployment. The island already hosts a Japanese military base. AFP

KYIV

Putin has 'not broken' Ukrainians as war enters 5th year: Zelenskyy



President Volodymyr Zelenskyy declared on Tuesday that Russia has not "broken Ukrainians" nor triumphed in its war, four years after an invasion that has severely tested the resolve of Kyiv and its allies and fuelled European fears about the scale of Moscow's ambitions. Russia now holds nearly 20% of Ukraine. AP

BANGKOK

Myanmar's new Parliament to convene in March for first session



The newly elected parliament in Myanmar will convene for its first session on March 16, the country's state-run media reported on Tuesday after an election that critics said was neither free nor fair. It will also be the first parliament meeting in more than five years since the military in 2021 seized power. AP

ISLAMABAD

Imran Khan shifted back to jail after being in hospital for eye care



Pakistan's incarcerated former Prime Minister Imran Khan on Tuesday was taken from jail to a hospital here for treatment of an eye ailment and later shifted back, officials said. Mr. Khan was diagnosed last month with right central retinal vein occlusion (CRVO) affecting his vision. PTI

Former British envoy Mandelson released after arrest in Epstein case

The former Labour heavyweight was picked up by the Metropolitan Police on suspicion of misconduct in public office relating to the time he was an envoy in the Gordon Brown govt.; he is accused of sharing sensitive information with Epstein

Sriram Lakshman
LONDON

The U.K.'s former envoy to Washington, Peter Mandelson, was arrested and then released on Tuesday morning over his ties to convicted paedophile and financier Jeffrey Epstein.

Mr. Mandelson was picked up by the police on suspicion of misconduct in public office relating to the time he was a business envoy in the Gordon Brown-led Labour government and for allegedly sharing sensitive information with Epstein. Mr. Mandelson has denied wrongdoing. His arrest comes days after the police arrested Andrew



Brief detention: Peter Mandelson seen in a vehicle leaving a police station in London in the early hours of Tuesday. AP

Mountbatten-Windsor, the former Duke of York and younger brother of Britain's monarch.

A press release from the Metropolitan Police referred to him as a "former

government minister" and said a 72-year-old was released on bail and under investigation. Video footage showed officers escorting Mr. Mandelson out of his home on Monday after

noon and later, his return home at 2 a.m. on Tuesday.

The allegations against the erstwhile Labour heavyweight emerged after the U.S. Department of Justice released more than 3 million pages of files on January 30 relating to Epstein. The release included an email suggesting Mr. Mandelson had discussed the U.K. government's sale of assets in 2009 and a Euro bailout in 2010 just before it happened. Documents also showed that Epstein transferred \$75,000 to bank accounts of Mr. Mandelson or his partner (now husband) Reinaldo Avila da Silva.

The police launched a criminal investigation into

Mr. Mandelson earlier this month, causing him to resign from both the House of Lords and the Labour Party. The allegations also saw the exit of two key members of Prime Minister Keir Starmer's team, with several Labour politicians calling for Mr. Starmer to resign over his poor judgment in appointing Mr. Mandelson as the U.K.'s Ambassador to the U.S.

The former envoy was appointed to his role in Washington in February 2025, a post from which he was sacked in September after information on the depth of his links with Epstein, including photographs, emerged in the public domain.

Pak. accuses Afghanistan of 'firing' along the border

Press Trust of India
ISLAMABAD

Pakistan on Tuesday accused the Afghan Taliban of "unprovoked firing" along the border, while warning of a severe response to any further such attacks.

The firing came just days after Pakistan launched air strikes against the alleged hideouts of the militants inside Afghanistan after recent militant attacks within the country.

Prime Minister's spokesperson for international media, Mosharrar Zaidi, said in a post on X on Tuesday that the "Afghan Taliban regime initiated unprovoked firing along the Pakistan-Afghanistan Border in Torkham & Tirah sub-sectors". He said that Pakistan's security forces responded immediately



Strict watch: A soldier of Afghan Taliban forces stands guard near the Torkham border of Nangarhar province in Afghanistan. AP

and effectively to the firing, "silencing the Taliban aggression".

He warned that "any further provocation will be responded to immediately and severely" and added that "Pakistan will continue to protect its citizens and guard its territorial integrity." Earlier, the Afghan Taliban had vowed to respond to the air attacks.

On Sunday, Pakistan had claimed to kill 70 militants in the military strikes targeting at least seven militant hideouts in Afghanistan.

Relations between Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban have deteriorated due to the alleged failure of Kabul to stop terrorists from using its soil to attack Pakistan.

Flour frenzy



Revellers take part in the annual flour war, marking the end of the Carnival season in Galaxidi, about 200 km west of Athens, on Monday, starting the 40-day Christian Lent fast leading to Easter. AP

Tarique Rahman govt. announces changes in armed forces and the International Tribunal

Kallol Bhattacharjee
NEW DELHI

The Tarique Rahman-led government of Bangladesh carried out changes in the armed forces as well as the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT).

The government also said it will re-examine all the legal cases filed against journalists and business persons after the uprising of July-August 2024.

In an order issued by the Army Headquarters, the serving Principal Staff Officer (PSO) of the Armed Forces, Lt. Gen. S.M. Kamrul Hasan, has been sent on deputation to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs,



Bangladesh's President Mohammed Shahabuddin with PM Tarique Rahman at the South Plaza of Parliament in Dhaka. REUTERS

where he is expected to be appointed as an ambassador abroad.

Maj. Gen. Mir Mushfiqur Rahman took charge as the new Principal Staff Officer (PSO) in a ceremony on Fe-

bruary 23 when he was handed over the responsibility jointly by PM Rahman and Army Chief General Waker uz Zaman.

That apart, Brig. Gen. Mohammed Hafizur Rah-

man, who is the current Defence Attache at the Bangladesh High Commission in New Delhi, has been promoted to the rank of Major General and transferred back to Dhaka. *The Daily Star* has reported that Lt. Gen. Mainur Rahman, general officer commanding (GOC) of the Army Training and Doctrine Command (ARTDOC), has been made the Army's CGS (Chief of General Staff).

New Chief Prosecutor
The Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs appointed Mohammed Aminul Islam as the Chief Prosecutor of the International Crimes Tri-

bunal (ICT), ending the tenure of Tajul Islam, who served as the Chief Prosecutor when the ICT delivered a death sentence to former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and former Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal on November 17, 2025.

Mr. Islam, who was appointed Chief Prosecutor on September 7, 2024, gained prominence from 2011 to 2016 when he served as defence lawyer for several leading figures of the Jamaat-e-Islami who received life and death sentences for crimes committed during the crackdown on civilians by the Pakistan military in 1971.

Under pressure, Iran walks a tightrope between diplomacy and deterrence

NEWS ANALYSIS

Stanly Johnny

The Iranians are "not yet willing to actually acknowledge and work through the President's demands", U.S. Vice-President J.D. Vance said in an interview last week. On February 22, Steve Witkoff, Donald Trump's special envoy for West Asia, said the President was "curious" on why Iran had not capitulated under American pressure.

These remarks underscore growing frustration within the Trump administration over its inability to extract significant concessions from Tehran, despite substantial U.S. military build-up near Iran's shores, including the deployment of two aircraft carrier strike groups.

The U.S. and Iran have held two rounds of talks since tensions escalated in January, but no breakthrough has been achieved. Oman, which is mediating indirect negotiations between the two sides, has confirmed that a third round will take place in Geneva on February 26.

Mixed signals

Mr. Trump has repeatedly warned that he could resort to force if Iran fails to reach a deal. Iran's President Masoud Pezeshkian and Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi have said Iran is for a "fair and equitable" agreement on its nuclear programme, but have rejected Washington's coercive tactics. The U.S. has sent mixed signals about its objectives. Secretary of State Marco Rubio said earlier this month that

the U.S. wanted discussions to cover not just Iran's nuclear programme, but also its missile programme, its support for non-state actors in West Asia and its "treatment" of its own people. According to Mr. Witkoff, however, the President has given him and Jared Kushner, Mr. Trump's son-in-law, a clear direction that Iran should stop enrichment and agree to transfer its stockpile of highly enriched uranium out of the country.

The Iranians have so far, at least publicly, resisted both sets of demands. They say they are ready to talk about the nuclear programme, but only about the nuclear programme. Even on the nuclear programme, Iran says it would not give up its "right" to peaceful enrichment, and top officials, including Ali



Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi speaks at the European headquarters of the United Nations in Geneva. AP

Larjani, have resisted calls for transferring Iran's enriched uranium stockpile.

Last deterrent

"Iran will not be ready to abandon its missile programme," said a security analyst based in Tehran, who did not want to be named. "Even if Iran reaches a deal with the U.S. over its nuclear pro-

gramme, Israel would still call it a threat. If Iran agrees to surrender its ballistic missiles today to avert war with the U.S., Israel could bomb Iran anyway a few months down the line. So the question Iranians ask themselves is why should they give up their last deterrent?" he said.

In 2015, Iran agreed to place limits on its nuclear

programme and open its facilities for inspection as part of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Iran remained in compliance with the agreement until Donald Trump, in his first term as President, unilaterally withdrew the U.S. out of it in May 2018. In 2025, Iran was technically in talks with the U.S. over its nuclear programme when Israel bombed the country on June 13. A few days later, the U.S. joined the war and struck Iran's nuclear facilities. Mr. Trump then claimed that the U.S. attacks had "obliterated" Iran's nuclear programme.

"These back-to-back setbacks to the diplomatic option seems to have convinced the leader that diplomacy doesn't work," a Tehran-based diplomat told *The Hindu*, referring

to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. "There is some tension within the system, though the state is holding firm, for now. Reformists (led by President Pezeshkian and Mr. Araghchi) still believe a deal could be possible if it averts war and the U.S. agrees to lift at least some sanctions. The Iranians will be open to making concessions on enrichment and enriched uranium. But it also depends on what the White House has to offer. The hardliners are watching when the talks are unfolding."

Iran's leverage

A war, by most accounts, would be disastrous for Iran, which is already grappling with internal strain. The U.S. wields overwhelming firepower. Yet, Iran has its own leverage. It

possesses thousands of ballistic missiles capable of striking American bases and assets across the region, as well as Israel. Iran could also disrupt or block cargo traffic through the Strait of Hormuz, a critical international maritime chokepoint.

For Mr. Trump, there is no guarantee that he could swiftly conclude a war with Iran. Nor can Washington sustain an elevated troop presence in West Asia indefinitely, particularly as the U.S. is preparing to hold midterm elections later this year. "Iran wants to avoid war, but not at any cost," said the Tehran-based security analyst. "If the U.S. is pursuing gunboat diplomacy through a military build-up along with talks, Iran is responding in kind - talking while preparing for war."



The baby monkey Punch next to a stuffed orangutan at Ichikawa City Zoo near Tokyo in Japan. REUTERS

Rights group slams treatment of viral Japanese monkey

Agence France-Presse
TOKYO

The plight of a baby monkey in Japan, who has become an Internet sensation, shows the cruelty of zoos, an animal rights group said, as sales of the plush IKEA orangutan the animal clings to boomed.

Punch, a baby macaque abandoned by its mother, shot to stardom after being pictured getting bullied by other monkeys and seeking comfort from the orangutan toy at Ichikawa City Zoo outside Tokyo. "Zoos are not sanctuaries – they are places where animals are confined, deprived of autonomy, and denied the complex environments and social lives they would have in the wild," said People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA). "What some are calling 'cute' is actually a glimpse into the trauma of a young, highly social primate coping with isolation and loss," the group's Asia director, Jason Baker, said in a statement. "Until facilities stop treating sentient beings as attractions, animals like Punch will continue to suffer in captivity," Mr. Baker said, calling for Punch to be moved to a "reputable sanctuary, where he could live in a more natural environment".

Meanwhile, Swedish interior furnishings giant IKEA, the maker of the orangutan soft toy, said it was seeing "unprecedented" interest and "significantly" higher sales than usual.

In an update on Punch's plight on Sunday, the zoo said he "was meticulously groomed by two monkeys and is steadily fitting into the group". Fans are queuing for up to an hour to catch a glimpse of Punch, the Ichikawa zoo said, with more than 5,000 visitors recorded on Monday.

Severe casualties, slowing economies mark four years of Russia-Ukraine war

Over 15,000 civilians have been killed in Ukraine and around 5.9 million have left the country since the Russians launched the invasion on February 24, 2022; independent agencies say at least 1,77,000 Russian troops are dead; Kyiv's economy is decimated while Moscow's is under massive strain

Agence France-Presse
KYIV

Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, unleashing the deadliest war in Europe since the Second World War.

Four years on, the conflict remains and has led to several consequences for both countries.

The war has resulted in widespread destruction in Ukraine.

Entire cities in Ukraine's east and south, among them Bakhmut, Toretsk, and Vovchansk, have been reduced to rubble by fighting.

The World Health Organisation has verified more than 2,800 attacks on healthcare facilities since 2022, while Russian attacks on energy infrastructure have cut heating and power to millions.

Around a fifth of Ukraine is contaminated by mines or unexploded ordnance, according to the UN's Mine Action Service.

The total cost of reconstruction in Ukraine is estimated at around \$588 billion over the next decade, the World Bank reported on Monday.

Death toll

The United Nations has verified over 15,000 civilian deaths in Ukraine since 2022, although it says the actual number is likely considerably higher as it



Tribute day: Ukrainians at a memorial in Kyiv on Tuesday to mark four years since Russia's invasion. AFP

has no access to areas under Russian occupation, like the port city of Mariupol where thousands are reported to have died in a Russian siege.

Ukrainian retaliatory attacks on Russian border regions have also killed hundreds.

Around 20,000 children have been forcibly displaced or kidnapped from Russian-occupied Ukrainian land, according to estimates by Kyiv.

Forced to flee when Russia invaded, around 5.9 million Ukrainian refugees live outside the country and another 3.7 million are displaced internally, the UN Refugee Agency says.

Neither side releases re-

liable data on military casualties.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said earlier this month 55,000 of his soldiers had been killed – a toll widely believed to be an underestimate.

Russia has not given an official update on losses since September 2022.

The BBC and Mediazona, an independent Russian site, have verified the deaths of at least 1,77,000 Russian soldiers through public obituaries and announcements by family and local officials – a toll also believed to be below the real number.

The Center for Strategic and International Studies

(CSIS) think tank estimates as many as 3,25,000 Russian soldiers may have been killed since 2022, while putting the number of Ukrainian soldiers killed at 1,00,000-1,40,000.

Moscow occupied around 19.5% of Ukraine as of mid-February, according to data from the Institute for the Study of War (ISW). Around 7% – the Crimean peninsula and part of the eastern Donbas region – was already occupied before the invasion.

Moscow's advances last year were the biggest since 2022, although they have slowed considerably since the opening months of its campaign, according to ISW data.

The Kremlin is pushing for full control of Ukraine's eastern Donetsk region and a ban on Western military support for Kyiv.

Ukraine says giving in would leave it vulnerable to future attack, is constitutionally impossible, and unacceptable to much of Ukrainian society.

Since Donald Trump returned to the U.S. White House, several rounds of talks – in Istanbul, Abu Dhabi, and Geneva – have failed to secure a deal.

The war has decimated Ukraine's economy and put Russia's under massive strain.

Stretched thin

After growing strongly on the back of massive military spending – up to 9% of GDP – Russia's economy has slowed, posting just a 1% expansion last year.

Oil and gas revenues – which provide roughly a quarter of state budget income – fell to a five-year low last year, as a wave of Western sanctions and Ukrainian attacks on oil facilities crimped exports.

Ukraine's economy shrank by almost a third in the year after Russia's invasion. It has clawed a little of that back, but its government now depends on the International Monetary Fund and other foreign lenders to cover day-to-day spending.

The war has had a deep impact on politics and society in both countries.

Ukraine has suspended elections due to martial law and lately been rocked by a corruption scandal in the war-battered energy sector.

In Russia, authorities have orchestrated a domestic crackdown on dissent unprecedented since the Soviet era.

Russian prosecutors have opened more than 10,000 cases against people accused of criticising its armed forces, Mediazona reported in 2024.

Returning veterans in Russia, many of them former convicts recruited to fight, have been blamed for an increase in violent crime.

Ukraine is heavily dependent on Western weapons, intelligence, and finance.

Europe has delivered 201 billion euros in aid since 2022, according to figures from Germany's Kiel Institute.

The United States has supplied \$115 billion in total, but Mr. Trump has partially suspended arms deliveries and is pushing Europe to pick up the tab.

North Korea sent thousands of soldiers to fight with the Russian Army and is widely reported to have sent millions of artillery shells to Moscow.

Iran has supplied drone technology to Moscow, and China has become its vital economic partner, accused in the West of helping the Kremlin avoid sanctions.

Sparks in the rubble



Little light: A displaced Palestinian playing with fireworks after breaking his fast, outside a damaged building at the Jabalia refugee camp in the northern Gaza Strip, during Ramzan on Tuesday. AFP

Kim Yo-jong, sister of North Korea's leader, gets a stronger role in the party

Agence France-Presse
SEOUL

Kim Yo-jong, the younger sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, has emerged as one of the most powerful figures in the country, playing a leading role in its diplomatic efforts and nuclear posturing.

Long seen as one of her brother's most trusted lieutenants, Ms. Kim has been promoted to department director within the central committee of the Workers' Party, state media said on Tuesday.

The Workers' Party congress offers a rare glimpse into the political workings of reclusive North Korea, and is widely seen as a forum for Mr. Kim to flex his grip on power.

The elevation to a key position in the nation's rul-



Kim Yo-jong's elevation to a key position in the nation's ruling party shows a sign of her clout within Pyongyang. FILE PHOTO

ing party shows a sign of her clout within Pyongyang.

Little is known about Ms. Kim – believed to be in her late 30s – given her prominent role in North Korea's dealings with the outside world. Born in the late 1980s, according to the South Korean government, she is one of three children born to late Kim Jong-il,

and his third known partner, former dancer Ko Yong-hui.

She was educated in Switzerland alongside her brother, and rose rapidly up the ranks once he inherited power after their father's death in 2011.

North Korea frequently uses her name to issue statements outlining foreign policy or criticising Seoul and Wash-

ington. She has effectively become Pyongyang's official mouthpiece for diplomacy with two nations typically viewed as "enemies".

"Kim Yo-jong is one of the very few people Kim Jong-un can trust and rely on," said Ahn Chan-il, a researcher originally from North Korea.

Ms. Kim burst onto the international scene in 2018, when she visited South Korea for the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics. Every detail of her Olympic visit was closely scrutinised, from the clothes she wore to the bag she was carrying and even her handwriting.

There is keen interest in whether the congress might also promote another woman close to the leader – his teenage daughter Kim Ju-ae, widely seen as his successor.

Hegseth and Anthropic CEO meet as debate intensifies over the military's use of AI

Associated Press
WASHINGTON

U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth plans to meet the CEO of Anthropic on Tuesday, with the artificial intelligence company the only one of its peers to not supply its technology to a new U.S. military internal network.

Anthropic, maker of the chatbot Claude, declined to comment on the meeting but CEO Dario Amodei has made clear his ethical concerns about unchecked government use of AI, including the dangers of fully autonomous armed drones and of AI-assisted mass surveillance that could track dissent.

The meeting between Mr. Hegseth and Mr. Amodei was confirmed by a defence official who was not authorised to comment publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity.

Concerning role

It underscores the debate over AI's role in national security and concerns about how the technology could be used in high-stakes situations involving lethal force, sensitive information or government surveillance. It also comes as Mr. Hegseth has vowed to root out what he calls a "woke culture" in the armed forces.

"A powerful AI looking across billions of conversations from millions of peo-

ple could gauge public sentiment, detect pockets of disloyalty forming, and stamp them out before they grow," Mr. Amodei wrote in an essay last month.

The Pentagon announced last summer that it was awarding defence contracts to four AI companies – Anthropic, Google, OpenAI, and Elon Musk's xAI. Each contract is worth up to \$200 million.

Anthropic was the first AI company to get approved for classified military networks, where it works with partners like Palantir. The other three companies, for now, are only operating in unclassified environments.

By early this year, Mr.



The U.S. Defense Secretary seeks military AI systems that operate 'without ideological constraints that limit lawful applications'. AP

Hegseth was highlighting only two of them: xAI and Google. Mr. Hegseth said in a January speech at Mr. Musk's space flight company, SpaceX, in South Texas that he was shrugging off any AI models "that won't

allow you to fight wars."

Mr. Hegseth said his vision for military AI systems means that they operate "without ideological constraints that limit lawful military applications," before adding that the Penta-

gon's "AI will not be woke."

In January, Mr. Hegseth said Mr. Musk's AI chatbot Grok would join the Pentagon network, called GenAI.mil. The announcement came days after Grok – which is embedded into X, the social media network owned by Mr. Musk – drew global scrutiny for generating highly sexualised deepfake images of people without their consent.

OpenAI announced in early in February that it, too, would join the military's secure AI platform, enabling service members to use a custom version of ChatGPT for unclassified tasks.

Anthropic has long pitched itself as the more

responsible and safety-minded of the leading AI companies, ever since its founders quit OpenAI to form the startup in 2021.

The Trump administration and Anthropic also have been on opposite sides of a lobbying push to regulate AI in U.S. States.

Mr. Trump's top AI adviser, David Sacks, accused Anthropic in October of "running a sophisticated regulatory capture strategy based on fear-mongering."

Mr. Sacks made the remarks on X in response to an Anthropic co-founder, Jack Clark, writing about his attempt to balance technological optimism with "appropriate fear" about the steady march toward more capable AI

systems.

The uncertainty with the Pentagon is putting those intentions to the test, according to Owen Daniels, associate director of analysis and fellow at Georgetown University's Center for Security and Emerging Technology.

"Anthropic's peers, including Meta, Google and xAI, have been willing to comply with the department's policy on using models for all lawful applications," he said. "So the company's bargaining power here is limited, and it risks losing influence in the department's push to adopt AI."

"The use of AI in military contexts is already a reality and it is not going away," he said.

FAMILIAR VENUE

Hope hopes IPL experience will help Windies in Ahmedabad



EMMANUAL YOGINI

West Indies captain Shai Hope banked on the IPL experience of his teammates to come in handy for Thursday's Super Eight clash with South Africa. "Most of the guys in our team have played in Ahmedabad several times. A lot of them have been involved in the IPL, some even against India there, so it wouldn't be alien to us".

ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

Batting coach Rathour wants Lankan batters to be clinical



AFP

Batting coach Vikram Rathour opened up about Sri Lanka's dismal batting display in the loss against England. "It's a T20 game, so obviously you come into a match looking to score as many runs as you can. When the ball is not coming onto the bat, it's easier said than done," he said ahead of the match against New Zealand.

TOUGH CHALLENGE

Sri Lanka is a very strong side at home, reckons NZ skipper Santner



AFP

Sri Lanka is a very strong side at home. They are missing a couple of players, but there's quality in that line-up. We are lucky that we have played them a lot in recent years, and there are no secrets — New Zealand captain Mitchell Santner ahead of the Super Eight game against Sri Lanka.

AT THE HELM

Afghanistan appoints Pybus as its new head coach



REUTERS

Afghanistan, on Tuesday, announced the appointment of Richard Pybus as its head coach. Pybus guided Pakistan to the final of the 1999 Cricket World Cup and later served as director of cricket for the West Indies, overseeing a golden period in 2016 when the men's, women's, and under-19 sides all secured World Cup titles.

Brook's special knock guides England into the semifinals

The skipper's sensational hundred paves the way for a thrilling two-wicket win; Pakistan's hopes of advancing to the knockout phase hanging by a thread; Farhan and Afridi's efforts go in vain

T20 WORLD CUP

Abhishek Saini
PALLEKELE

Harry Brook fancied a promotion to No. 3 and struck a superb century (100, 51b, 10x4, 4x6) to drag England to a two-wicket win over Pakistan in their T20 World Cup Super Eight match at the Pallekele International Cricket Stadium here on Tuesday.

Brook became the first captain to notch up a ton in the history of the tournament, ensuring his team was not left to rue the three wickets it lost in the Power-Play. England reached the 165-run target with five balls to spare and sealed its place in the semifinals.

Standing tall

Walking in after Phil Salt was caught behind off Shaheen Afridi off the first ball of the innings, Brook added 41 of the 53 runs in the first six overs and was unfazed despite a flurry of wickets.

He picked 17 off Shadab Khan in the 11th over, which included a heave into the sightscreen and two boundaries with a sweep and a slog sweep.

By the time Brook lofted successive deliveries over covers off Afridi in the 17th over to bring up a 50-ball hundred, and perished one ball later to the same bowler, the result was merely a formality.

England, however, had



Leading from the front: Brook could not have chosen a better time to score his maiden T20I ton. AFP

Brook became the first captain to hit a century in T20 WC history

to survive a few anxious moments to register its second successive win in the Super Eight. Pakistan, on the other hand, has just a solitary point from two games and is staring at elimination.

That Pakistan was in the game at the innings break was again down to Sahibzada Farhan's single-handed effort. He negotiated the skiddy bounce of Jofra

Archer, launching him over point with a slash before riding the bounce inside his crease to pummel through midwicket.

Taking note of the crashing tempo after a 23-ball boundary drought, Farhan and Fakhar Zaman provided timely momentum by taking 27 off Will Jacks's two overs.

Farhan's impending change in gears was averted by Jamie Overton, who trapped him in front. Usman Khan and Mohammad Nawaz perished slog-

ging against Liam Dawson, starting a slump that brought Pakistan crashing from 146 for five to 149 for eight. Shadab's 11-ball 23 ensured Pakistan lasted the 20 overs and got to 164 for nine, but in the end that was not enough.

The scores: Pakistan 164/9 in 20 overs (Sahibzada Farhan 63, Jofra Archer 2/32, Jamie Overton 2/26, Liam Dawson 3/24) lost to England 166/8 in 19.1 overs (Harry Brook 100, Shaheen Afridi 4/30, Mohammad Nawaz 2/26, Usman Tariq 2/31).

Toss: Pakistan; **PoM:** Brook.



Limbering up: Samson went after the pacers in the practice session. B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM

Samson's long net session a sign of India's top-order rejig?

K.C. Vijaya Kumar
CHENNAI

Less than 48 hours after wilting against South Africa, the Men in Blue limbered up at the M.A. Chidambaram Stadium here on Tuesday night. With the Proteas and the West Indies staying way ahead in their Net Run Rate, India has to be at its ruthless best in its next two Super Eight Group 1 games.

As the ICC T20 World Cup cruises towards the business end, India will take on Zimbabwe in this coastal metropolis busy adjusting to the early stirrings of summer. Thursday's clash is a must-win game for the defending champion, and a batting rejig seems to be in store.

In the nets on either side of the main pitch, the quartet of Ishan Kishan, Sanju Samson, Suryakumar Yadav and Tilak Varma batted for long. This may well be the top-order while initially Abhishek Sharma piled his left-arm spin. With a meagre 15-run yield from four outings in this cham-

pionship, the talented opener is awaiting a change in fortune.

Samson cut loose against pace, picking the stands as targets. Set to slip into the yellow shade for Chennai Super Kings in the forthcoming Indian Premier League, he is bound to be a regular fixture at Chepauk. Kishan, Suryakumar and Tilak too freed their arms, and at times the net bowlers were scampering to pick high-catches.

At one point, Kishan let his wicket-keeping instinct get the better of him. Standing as a non-striker, he dropped his bat and caught a hit zooming in from the other net. The nets, split into pace and spin, witnessed steady action.

Rinku misses training

Even as the squad trained, Rinku Singh was a notable absentee. Apparently he had to return home for a family emergency. And this may well mean that vice-captain Axar Patel could get his spot in the playing XI.

Sri Lanka, New Zealand meet in a crucial fixture

Abhishek Saini
PALLEKELE

Marred by early setbacks, Sri Lanka and New Zealand will fight to salvage their campaigns when they meet in a Group 2 clash of the T20 World Cup Super Eight at the R. Premadasa Stadium in Colombo on Wednesday.

For Sri Lanka, the optimism brought by the resounding win over Australia has been chipped away by the consecutive losses to Zimbabwe (final group match) and England (Super Eight). For New Zealand, the solitary point from its washed out game against Pakistan was barely a consolation.

A loss in its second match will leave the Kiwis clinging on to permutations for its qualification — still a better prospect than Sri Lanka's, for which a reverse will draw the curtain on its semifinals hopes.

The host has the greater task at hand after its batting meltdown against England. Sri Lanka has



Impact player: Sri Lanka has turned to Nissanka for rapid starts at the top. AFP

turned to Pathum Nissanka for rapid bursts at the top, and New Zealand could prevent that by exploiting his weakness against the pace of Lockie Ferguson.

A lack of runs has rid-

dled the middle-order until now, and the only batter with a decent run-tally, Pavan Rathnayake, could also find himself tied down by Mitchell Santner and Ish Sodhi. Scores of 170 or

more have been chased down twice at this venue, and irrespective of when it bats, Sri Lanka would want the runs to stay in the reckoning.

As it is, New Zealand has

SUPER EIGHT

Today's match



Colombo (RPS), 7.00 p.m.
HEAD-TO-HEAD
Played: 28
Sri Lanka 11
New Zealand 16 | NR 1

LIVE ON STAR SPORTS 1, 2 & JIHOTSTAR

enough batting resolve to deal with Sri Lanka's upbeat spinners, who have shouldered the added responsibility amid injuries to the pace unit.

Maheesh Theekshana and Dunith Wellalage were a handful for the England top-order, but will face stiff resistance from Glenn Phillips, Mark Chapman and Daryl Mitchell, whose strike rates inch close to 200 against spin.

If it can shake off the rust, having last taken the field last Tuesday, New Zealand looks well-equipped to see off Sri Lanka's challenge.

They are not going to hold back: Zimbabwe coach Sammons braces for India test

Amol Karhadkar
MUMBAI

Hurricane Hetmyer may have hit Zimbabwe hard at the Wankhede Stadium on Monday.

But Zimbabwe coach Justin Sammons isn't expecting anything less in its next Super Eight match of the T20 World Cup against India in Chennai.

"We know the way India is going to come out, and it's going to be very similar to the way West Indies approached their innings.

"They are not going to hold back, so there will be good learnings from that and how we deal with that, under pressure, in the moment, how do we stay calm and just think on our feet and also just try and change things up a little bit, disrupt the rhythm of the batters.

"We were a bit predicta-



Raza. EMMANUAL YOGINI

babwe by 107 runs. With India having suffered a huge loss to South Africa in its Super Eight opener, the defending champion finds itself in a must-win situation. Sammons hoped the slightly bigger outfield at the M.A. Chidambaram Stadium would help Zimbabwe counter the batting onslaught better.

"Chennai will be a bit bigger and it probably will be a little bit more at ease in that aspect there.

"Not only with the ball but also with the bat. We shifted away from the process that we have tried to stick to and we got unstuck through that," Sammons said.

More comfortable

"We will be a little bit more comfortable, but we know India are going to come out playing (positively)".

ble, we can be a little bit smarter in that regard," Sammons said after West Indies annihilated Zim-

Pundir and Yawer help J & K take first-day honours against Karnataka

The No. 3 batter's unbeaten hundred and the opener's 88 steer the visitors to 284 for two; Samad excels after skipper Dogra retires hurt

RANJI TROPHY FINAL

N. Sudarshan
HUBBALLI

The Jammu and Kashmir dressing room this season has had a revolving door of stars. On day one of its maiden Ranji Trophy final, versus Karnataka at the KSCA Rajnagar Stadium here on Tuesday, it found two more entrants in opener Yawer Hassan and one-drop Shubham Pundir.

Yawer, 22, had totalled just 61 runs from eight innings coming into this all-important contest. Pundir, 27, had fared better with 205 runs –including one solitary knock of 165 – from five visits to the crease.

But Yawer made a fine 88 (150b, 13x4) before Pundir scored his fourth First Class century (117 batting, 221b, 12x4, 2x6) to help the visitors reach a more-than-healthy 284 for two. At stumps, Pundir had the free-stroking Abdul Samad (52 batting, 67b, 5x4, 1x6) standing vigil alongside.

J & K lost the seasoned Shubham Khajuria and young all-rounder Vanshaj Sharma to injuries prior to the match. Skipper Paras Dogra retired hurt after



Rising to the occasion: Pundir notched up his fourth First Class century. K. MURALI KUMAR

speedsters Prasadh Krishna and V. Vyshak roughed him up on the neck and right hand, respectively. In that context, Yawer's and Pundir's efforts came like a godsend.

It was, admittedly, a good batting surface and Dogra called it right at the

toss. It also helped that despite possessing a formidable attack that was cheered on by a nearly 5,000-strong, ticketed crowd, Karnataka used the red cherry well only in patches.

On a pitch where there was good bounce and the

occasional off-the-seam movement, Prasadh and Vyshak threatened from time to time. But Yawer and Pundir displayed admirable mettle, and interspersed it with bursts of attacking mojo.

Shreyas Gopal (171-79-0) and Vidyadhar Patil (16-0-

66-0) were the outlets as the J & K duo combined for 139 runs after Qamran Iqbal fell early, caught by K.L. Rahul at second slip off Prasadh.

Pundir was reprieved on 53 when Kruthik Krishna missed a stumping off left-arm spinner Shikhar

Shetty. As if to rub salt in the wound, Pundir creamed the next ball through cover for four.

Prasadh ended the association by excising Yawer, 12 runs short of a deserved century, with Rahul completing another fine catch. That marked the start of a period of sustained pressure as Karnataka didn't allow a boundary for nearly 10 overs.

Missed chance

But the closest it came to taking a wicket was when substitute K.V. Anesh dropped Dogra at gully off Vyshak. Dogra did leave the field injured, but an unruffled Pundir completed his hundred by hitting Shikhar for a fierce six over deep mid-wicket.

If Karnataka does not pull up its socks, Wednesday can be damaging.

The scores: Jammu & Kashmir — 1st innings: Qamran Iqbal c Rahul b Prasadh 6, Yawer Hassan c Rahul b Prasadh 88, Shubham Pundir (batting) 117, Paras Dogra (ret. hurt) 9, Abdul Samad (batting) 52; Extras (b-2, lb-8, w-2): 12; Total (for two wkts. in 87 overs): 284.

Fall of wickets: 1-18, 2-157. **Karnataka bowling:** Vidyadhar 16-0-66-0, Vyshak 18-6-25-0, Prasadh 16-5-36-2, Shreyas 17-1-79-0, Shikhar 20-0-68-0. **Toss:** J & K.



Cashing in: Yawer played his favourite cut shot to great advantage. K. MURALI KUMAR

I remained positive and played my natural game: Yawer

N. Sudarshan
HUBBALLI

Yawer Hassan couldn't have timed his return to form better.

The Jammu & Kashmir opener's highest score in eight innings prior to this was 30. On Tuesday, he made 88 golden runs to put his side in the driver's seat against Karnataka on the opening day of the Ranji Trophy final here.

"Yes, I was not getting runs but I remained positive and played my natural game," Yawer told reporters after play.

"I was sure that runs would come and it did on this stage.

"Everyone in the dressing room supported me. We have all been playing together for the last three-

four years and we know each other well. We know what to do at what time and we all support each other," the 22-year-old added.

Yawer was compact in his batting, driving only the really full deliveries and relying more on shots square of the wicket.

"On a red-soil pitch, there is good bounce, and when we drive, there is a chance of it taking the edge," he explained. "My cut shot is a little strong, so I was backing it."

Yawer reckoned that J & K will need another 300 runs to bat Karnataka out of the game.

"I think around 650-700 runs will be good. We will have to get it because Karnataka has a good batting line-up."

Nominees for Sporting Moment of the Year



Sports Bureau

The Anderson-Tendulkar Trophy delivered moments that would go on to add sheen to the men's campaign in England.

The Old Trafford crowd had risen as one to greet Rishabh Pant when the wicketkeeper-batter, advised six weeks of rest after fracturing his foot, returned to bat during the fourth Test. Hobbled yet resolute, he scored his 18th Test fifty. In the fifth Test, Mohammed Siraj removed Jamie Smith, Jamie Overton, and Gus Atkinson in a five-over burst to snatch victory.

In women's cricket, there was Jemimah Rodrigues, who compiled a match-winning 127 not out in the semifinal of the ODI World Cup. And Amanjot Kaur, who held on to a breathtaking catch to dismiss South Africa's Laura Wolvaardt in the final, as India went on to secure its first title.

In the chess world, Magnus Carlsen became a meme template, slamming his fist on the table before storming out of the playing hall after going down to D. Gukesh at Norway Chess. Divya Deshmukh won the Women's World Cup against all odds.

The 19-year-old, seeded 15th, upset higher-ranked opponents en route to the crown. All of the above have been nominated for the coveted Sporting Moment of the Year honour at the eighth edition of the Sportstar ACES Awards, co-presented by Casagrand. Vote for your favourite nominee by scanning the QR code below until February 28. Additionally, there are 19 Jury Awards, which will be deliberated on by an elite panel comprising Sunil Gavaskar, Abhinav Bindra, M. M. Somaya, Viswanathan Anand, Anjali Bhagwat, and Aparna Potpat.

There will also be a separate Chairperson's Award for Sports for Social Good.



India's Nagal and Dhamne advance

TENNIS

Sports Bureau

India's top-ranked player Sumit Nagal made short work of seventh seed Rio Noguchi 6-1, 6-2 to sail into the second round of the Maha Open ATP Challenger tournament at the Shiv Chhatrapati Kreedha Sankul, Mahalunge, Balewadi Tennis Stadium in Pune on Tuesday.

Local lad Manas

Dhamne, a wild card entrant, continued his impressive progress on the Challenger circuit, battling past the winner of last week's Delhi Challenger, Stefanos Sakellariadis of Greece 6-4, 7-6(4).

Important results: Singles (first round): Edas Butvilas (Ltu) bt Aditya Balsekar 6-0, 6-1; Frederico Ferreira Silva (Por) bt Petr Bar Biryukov 6-3, 6-4; Iliia Simakin bt Mitsuki Wei Kang Leong (Mas) 4-6, 6-2, 7-6(10); Maks Kasnikowski (Pol) bt Karan Singh 6-3, 6-1.

Gardner, Mooney star as Australia draws first blood

INDIA IN AUSTRALIA

Press Trust of India
BRISBANE

Australia women outplayed reigning world champion India in all departments to register a comfortable six-wicket win in the first ODI here on Tuesday.

India put up an ordinary performance with the bat to be bowled out for 214 despite solid fifties from Smriti Mandhana (58 off 68) and captain Harmanpreet Kaur (53 off 84).

Spinner Ashleigh Gardner was the standout bowler for the home team, returning figures of three for 33 in seven overs.

Australia chased down the modest target with lit-

tle difficulty following fifties from skipper Alyssa Healy (50 off 70), who is in the middle of her farewell series, and Beth Mooney (76 off 79).

Harmanpreet sustained a knee injury while batting and did not return to the field in the second innings of the match. Smriti took charge of the side in her absence.

The multi-format series is now locked 2-2, with India winning the preceding T20 series 2-1.

Megan Schutt took just two balls to strike, trapping Pratika Rawal in front with a sharp inswinger in the first over of the match.

Batting at No.3 for the first time, Shafali Verma failed to get going. She eventually offered a return catch to Darcie Brown.

The Australian spinners maintained the pressure in the middle overs as Gardner had Jemimah Rodrigues caught behind with a full ball that straightened a fraction to take the outside edge.

After Smriti and Deepti Sharma fell to the sweep shot, Harmanpreet took time to stabilise the innings. She too, however, fell to the sweep shot in the deep off Gardner.

Kashvee Gautam (43 off 44) took the total past 200. But it proved too little in the end.

The scores: India 214 in 48.3 overs (Smriti Mandhana 58, Harmanpreet Kaur 53, Kashvee Gautam 43) lost to Australia 217/4 in 38.2 overs (Alyssa Healy 50, Beth Mooney 76, Annabel Sutherland 48 n.o.).

Toss: India; **PoM:** Mooney.



Picture of concentration: Mooney hit five fours and two sixes in her 79-ball 76. GETTY IMAGES

Bucknor regrets wrong decision against Tendulkar

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI

More than two decades after making what was then widely seen as a 'dreadful' decision against Sachin Tendulkar, respected umpire Steve Bucknor has finally expressed regrets and accepted that "it was a mistake."

Bucknor, who retired in 2009, made a few contentious calls involving Tendulkar, the most shocking being an LBW dismissal during an India-Australia Test match at Brisbane's Gabba 22 years ago.

In an interview with the West Indies Cricket Umpires' Association, when Bucknor was asked about one of the most difficult decisions he had to live with as an umpire, he said, "Giving Sachin Tendulkar out leg before wicket, and it's a matter of knowing that it was a mistake, but until this day, every day, people



Unfortunate exit: Gillespie and teammates celebrate the dismissal of Tendulkar for a duck at the Gabba in 2003. AFP

talk about it. Why did I give him out? Was he out and so on? But then in life, mistakes happen. I have accepted that it was a mistake, and life goes on."

Television replays later confirmed the ball was clearly going over the stumps. In the commentary box, the late Tony

Greig had referred to it as a "dreadful" decision.

Also, in a match against Pakistan at Eden Gardens in 2005, the Jamaican adjudged Tendulkar caught behind off Abdul Razzaq despite a half-hearted appeal. Replays, however, showed a wide gap between the bat and the ball.

India's poor run continues as it loses in shootout to Spain

PRO LEAGUE

Press Trust of India
HOBART

India's dismal run in the FIH Men's Pro League saw it go down 3-4 in a shootout against Spain after a tense 1-1 draw in regulation time here on Tuesday.

Despite holding a 1-0 advantage until the 59th minute, courtesy a brilliant strike from Maninder Singh, India conceded a late equaliser when Spain's Bruno Font found the net to take the match into shootout.

Spain started strongly, controlling early possession and testing the Indian defence. It won its first penalty corner in the fourth minute, but the drag-flick was comfortably saved by Mohith.

The breakthrough arrived in the 19th minute. Skipper Hardik Singh set



Closely fought: The match saw some intense action. FIH

up Maninder, who smashed a tomahawk into the net to give India a 1-0 lead.

Spain immediately responded by winning a penalty corner, but Pepe Cunnill's shot was saved by Suraj Karkera.

The final quarter saw India being reduced to 10 men after Sanjay received a

green card in the 45th minute.

A costly defensive lapse allowed Font to strike a superb equaliser. In the ensuing shootout misses from Abhishek and Hardik Singh proved costly.

The result: Spain 1 (Font 59) drew with India 1 (Maninder 19); Spain won 4-3 in shootout.

It's a difficult thing to know when a player should move on

Belgium's head coach sheds light on team environment, keeping up with the times and why the team is so successful at the highest level; the 57-year old New Zealander is a soft-spoken father figure but a firm taskmaster entrusted with the team's fortunes



GETTY IMAGES

INTERVIEW

Shane McLeod

Uthra Ganesan

Talent wins games but teamwork and intelligence win championships."

It's a phrase Shane McLeod doesn't just say; it's the motto he lives by and is a big reason for Belgian hockey head coach prioritising his team over an individual talent, regardless of how brilliant it may be.

In an era of quick results, fickle patience levels and sky-high expectations, McLeod is a throwback to the old times when a coach was more than just the man with the whiteboard and a plan. The 57-year old New Zealander, who has been at the helm of Belgian men's hockey for more than a decade now, is as much a soft-spoken father figure to the players as the firm taskmaster entrusted with the team's fortunes.

And he has delivered the goods, creating the golden generation of Belgian hockey with results burnishing his reputation – Olympic, World Cup and European Championship titles along with multiple medals at the aforementioned events.

But McLeod's association with hockey goes a lot further back than 2015, when he took charge of the side. Having played at the highest level for New Zealand and coached them through two Olympic cycles, he was also in charge of the Belgian women's team for four years before moving to Waterloo Ducks club.

With the country co-hosting the 2026 World Cup for the first time with the Netherlands, McLeod is keen on ensuring the legacy continues with a new generation coming through in an interaction with *The Hindu*:

You've been with them for a long time now, how has Belgian hockey developed over years?

There's a couple of things that work very

well in Belgium. One, they have a very strong domestic competition. The clubs are strong and each week they play a very high standard of hockey. Alongside, there is the Be Gold programme. It is a project to prepare players for integration with the senior national teams.

The programme captures a lot of talented kids from each of the clubs at the Under-14, Under-16, Under-18 levels and tries to get them into as high a high-performance programme as is suitable for that age group while also taking care of their education. What we see is players coming through with good skills but more importantly a desire to play for the Red Lions, and then we pick them up and try to grow them a bit further.

How different is it from New Zealand and what makes it unique among the rest of European nations?

The location of Belgium, it's kind of the perfect storm. So in a weekend, you can play Germany and Holland and England and Spain, your access to top hockey is great. New Zealand is a paradise but it's an island and it takes a long time to get that type of competition. It's also expensive; if you want to play those types of teams, you have to fly over to Europe and base yourself there for a period of time. Also Belgium is a small country, we can run a centralised programme with the benefits of players still living at home and that means a lot, because high performance is not necessarily a balanced life. If we can make it as balanced as possible, we try to do that.

How do you see the team changing over the years? It's practically the third generation since you took over, all playing together, how do you see the players changing?

We've been lucky to have that kind of three generational type of team for quite some time and the reason we're lucky is you kind of grow through the team. So you start off as a newbie and you're learning the trade, you're learning how to be disciplined, you're learning the



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lifestyle that's needed to be lived to be a high performing athlete and that is role-modelled by the oldest guys. They become the statesmen and they mentor, they guide the youngsters as they come in and they set the standards, and so it kind of becomes a conveyor belt of producing good players but also good players that have the right values and strive to be the best that they can.

So how important are the seniors, not just as role models on field, but in terms of having a lifestyle that suits a professional athlete at an elite level?

Very important. They kind of illustrate that it can work and that if you put in the effort, you can get there and if you don't have that type of role-modelling, then it's always a bit of a mystery. One of the questions a young athlete comes in with is, is it worth it? Is it worth the sacrifices that you have to make as a high performing athlete? And when they see the life that the older players live, how mature they are, what they've gained from hockey and being in our culture and our environment, it gives them confidence that they are on the right path.

Does it also put pressure on the seniors? Because

the youngsters get to learn a lot but at the same time, the senior players know that the more they give, the easier it will be for the youngsters to push them out.

There's a super nice Greek saying, 'A society grows great when old men plant trees that they will never sit under'. It's a bit like that. I think they are the ones that have gone through this and stepped aside, they're really proud of what they've left behind, and they hope the next generation will take their turn to do the same thing. It's a very giving and very supportive culture that we try to create.

And, you know, that's kind of where we are and why we are who we are.

And are you proud of being a part of creating this giving culture in the side?

Yeah, but I'm only a little part of it. Some of your questions reveal how easy my role becomes sometimes, because a lot of the coaching and support gets done from within the group and by the group itself and I'm the guardian of it in a way. I just keep the vision clear and make sure that we don't derail along the way, when we're in pressure situations, that's when you see the character of the group come through.

And how do you see your own role, given that a lot of younger coaches are coming into the sport now? Do you see yourself also under pressure as a coach?

Well, I look old and I've been around hockey for a long, long time but I'm not that old! But yeah, is it a young man's role? I think there's an energy

that comes from youth and you need to have energy to drive programmes. If there's an area where I feel I need support, I'm more than willing to reach out. I've got a young staff who are incredibly talented and maybe they drive a bit of that energy. But I'd hope that because of my experiences and things like that, I bring a wisdom and a kind of comfort that we're heading in the right direction.

A lot of people don't realise that hockey is a technology-heavy sport. How important or easy or difficult is it for a coach to also stay updated?

Oh, you kind of get swept along with it. Like, how we communicate with our young athletes has changed since I first started, the groups and they take a lot of media. To give a simple example, it's quite easy for us to send a game plan or some reminders to their phones and they can plan when they do that. We certainly still keep team meetings but just for some logistic things, it becomes very easy. And I'd like to think that I'm not leading the way in tech-savviness but I hope I'm keeping up!

A lot of talk at the elite level, at some point or the other starts revolving around finding replacements for a senior player. Age, fitness, skills, instincts, what do you think matters most?

It's a whole thing and not simple because what people often have a window into how a team is doing is the 60 minutes they watch. But there is a whole hidden world behind and it's very difficult to see what a senior player brings to a group of younger players. Everyone wants to see how things are going and in our sport, like every sport, everyone's a coach, a selector, everyone has an opinion but the only thing they don't have is that day-to-day connection with what's actually going on. There's a bit that needs to happen behind the scenes and that's why it's such a difficult thing to know when a player should move on or not, it's really a balancing act.

