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Vol. 4 • No. 3



ON TERRORISM

India has the right to defend itself: Minister

NEWS » PAGE 3



BULLET TRAIN PROJECT

First mountain tunnel completed

NEWS » PAGE 5



ELECTRONIC PARTS MANUFACTURING

Centre okays 22 more projects under scheme

BUSINESS » PAGE 11

THE FATE OF ARAVALLIS

An ancient range stands battered by machinery

And the people of the foothills bear the brunt

GROUND ZERO » PAGE 7



MARCHING ON

Royals register a 2-0 win over Soorma HC

SPORT » PAGE 14

INSIDE



Maduro holds out an olive branch to U.S. President

MADRID
Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro has extended an olive branch to President Donald Trump, proposing talks on combating drug trafficking and offering U.S. companies ready access to Venezuelan oil. He said Venezuela was a "brother country" to the U.S. » PAGE 12

Centre to relax open schooling norms, back AI

NEW DELHI
The Centre plans to liberalise the open schooling framework, introduce guidelines to encourage the use of AI in teaching, and draft technical education standards focused on ensuring employment for graduates. » PAGE 5

Proposal to grant ST status to more tribes opposed

GUWAHATI
The Coordination Committee of Tribal Organisations of Assam has rejected the "illegal" recommendations of the Group of Ministers to grant ST status to six communities — Chutia, Koch-Rajbongshi, Matak, Moran, Tai Ahom, and "Tea Tribes". » PAGE 3

'Land policy on acquisition not being changed'

NEW DELHI
Land acquisition remained a major issue to resolve in infrastructure development, Cabinet Secretary T.V. Somanathan said here on Friday. He said the Union government had no plans to change the existing land acquisition policy. » PAGE 5

U.S. will come to rescue of Iranians: Trump

- Officials react sharply in Tehran, warning that their forces would retaliate against U.S. bases
- U.S. interference would destabilise the region and destroy American interests, they adds
- Mossad eggs Iranians to take to the streets by assuring them they were with them in the field

Stanly Johny
CHENNAI

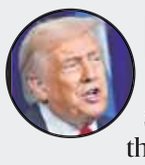
U.S. President Donald Trump on Friday threatened to intervene if Iran used lethal force against protesters, drawing swift and angry responses from Iranian officials who warned that American troops and bases in West Asia would become legitimate targets if Washington interfered.

"If Iran shoots and violently kills peaceful protesters, which is their custom, the United States of America will come to their rescue. We are locked and loaded and ready to go," Mr. Trump wrote in a social media post.

Mr. Trump's threat came at a time when protests over poor economic conditions in Iran turned deadly on Thursday with multiple casualties. Iran's *Fars* news agency said at least five people were killed in clashes, including one security official.

"With the statements by Israeli officials and Donald Trump, what has been going on behind the scenes is now clear," Ali Larijani, Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, wrote on social media in response to Mr. Trump's post. "We distinguish between the stance of the protesting shopkeepers and the actions of disruptive actors, and Trump should know that U.S. interference in this internal matter would mean destabilizing the entire region and destroying America's interests," he added.

The protests began last Sunday in Tehran when shopkeepers downed shutters over a sharp fall in the value of the rial. Iranian officials initially acknowledged the economic pressure and promised to address their grievances. But protests spread across the country leading to deadly clashes between the security personnel and protesters, whom state media and officials dubbed "rioters".



If Iran [shoots] and violently kills peaceful protesters, which is their custom, the United States of America will come to their rescue

DONALD TRUMP, U.S. President

Trump must realize that U.S. intervention in this internal matter will lead to destabilizing the entire region and destroying American interests



ALI LARIJANI, Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council

On Thursday, *Fars* news agency reported that two people were killed in clashes in the city of Lordegan and three in Azna.

On Monday, Mossad, the Israeli spy agency, wrote on social media in Farsi encouraging Iranians to protest against the government.

"Go out together into the streets. The time has come," the Mossad wrote. "We are with you. Not only from a distance and verbally. We are with you in the field."

Iran's economy has faced sustained pressure ever since Mr. Trump, during his first term as President, unilaterally pulled the U.S. out of the 2015 nuclear deal and reimposed sanctions on Tehran. In June 2025, Israel bombed Iran's nuclear facilities, triggering a 12-day war between the two countries.

The U.S. had joined Israel in striking the nuclear plants, and Iran retaliated by attacking an American base in Qatar on June 23 before a ceasefire. Since then, Iran's economic situation has become worse.

In October, Iran's food inflation reached 64.2%, the second-highest level in the world after South Sudan, according to the World Bank. The rial has lost 60% of its value since the June war.

Mr. Trump, who claimed in June that he had "obliterated" Iran's nuclear facilities, threatened new attacks against Iran earlier this week after meeting Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Florida. If Iran replenished ballistic missiles and rebuilt its nuclear programme, "we are going to have no choice but very quickly to eradicate that build up," Mr. Trump had said on December 29 in a joint press conference with Mr. Netanyahu. The U.S. President's latest threat of intervention in Iran over the protest crackdown has escalated tensions between the two countries.

"The American people should know – Trump started this adventurism. They should be mindful of their soldiers' safety," said Mr. Larijani. Ali Shamkhani, a close aide of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, said any interfering hand "will be cut off".

"Iranians know well the U.S. 'rescue' record – from Iraq and Afghanistan to Gaza. Any intervening hand approaching Iran's security under any pretext will be cut off with a response that induces regret. Iran's national security is a red line, not material for adventurist tweets," he said.

'Will respond militarily'

Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, Speaker of Parliament, issued a statement saying Tehran would respond militarily to any U.S. attacks.

"The disrespectful President of America should know that with this official admission, all American centers and forces across the entire region will be legitimate targets for us in response to any potential adventurism," he said.

Winter veil



Smokescreen: Dense smog hangs over Kartavya Path as rehearsals for the Republic Day Parade are held in New Delhi on Friday. ANI

Pakistan jails journalists, YouTubers for 2023 violence

Associated Press
ISLAMABAD

A court in Pakistan's capital sentenced seven persons, including three journalists, two YouTubers and two retired army officers, to life imprisonment on Friday, after convicting them of inciting violence during riots in 2023 and spreading hatred against state institutions. An anti-terrorism court judge, Tahir Abbas Sipra, announced the verdict in Islamabad.

None of the accused were present in court. They have been living abroad after leaving the country to avoid arrest.

FULL REPORT
» PAGE 12

Centre orders X to check use of Grok to morph images

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology on Friday directed social media platform X to undertake a "comprehensive technical, procedural and governance-level review" of its chatbot Grok, which allegedly has been responding to user requests to undress or alter clothing in women's photos. Shiv Sena (UBT) MP Priyanka Chaturvedi raised an alarm over the issue in a letter to Union Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw earlier in the day.

X did not have an immediate response. Grok operates as a separate artificial intelligence (AI) firm under X's holding firm, but maintains an account on the platform, interacting with users. Elon Musk, X's owner, has often praised Grok's relatively unfiltered responses, which incorporate few safeguards that other Big Tech firms have used on their large language models.

In a four-page letter to X's Chief Compliance Officer for India, the Ministry stated it has "been observed that [Grok] is being misused by users to create fake accounts" to generate or share obscene visuals of women.

The letter said that "compliance with the IT Act and the IT Rules, 2021 is not optional, and that the statutory exemptions under section 79 of the IT Act are conditional upon strict observance of due diligence obligations."

Pointing out that even outside the IT Act, acts of this nature "may independently attract penal action," the Ministry said X would have to "remove or disable access, without delay, to all content already generated or disseminated in violation of applicable laws, in strict compliance with the timelines prescribed under the IT Rules, 2021, without vitiating the evidence in any manner."



Elon Musk has frequently praised Grok's relatively unfiltered responses.

'Send report'

By Monday, the firm must send an action-taken report in response to these directions, the letter said. "It is reiterated that non-compliance with the above requirements shall be viewed seriously and may result in strict legal consequences against your platform, its responsible officers and the users on the platform who violate the law, without any further notice, under the IT Act, the IT Rules, the BNSS, the BNS and other applicable laws."

Earlier in the day, Mr. Vaishnaw pointed out that the Parliamentary Standing Committee on IT had recommended a strict law for obscene content on social media.

The IT Ministry had sent an advisory earlier this week to all social media platforms directing them to proactively take down "obscene" and "pornographic" content.

Cong. alleges 15 deaths in Indore as official toll stands at 5

Mehul Malpani
BHOPAL

The Madhya Pradesh Congress has alleged that at least 15 people have died so far after drinking contaminated water supplied by the Indore Municipal Corporation (IMC), even as the BJP-led State government maintained the official death toll at five, including a woman who died on Friday.

Late on Friday night, following a State-wide review meeting, Chief Minister Mohan Yadav suspended two senior IMC officials and transferred the IMC Commissioner, as the Congress called for accountability and action to be taken against all those responsible.

"The State government will not tolerate negligence in the incident that occurred in Bhagirathpura due to contaminated drinking water. Strict decisions are being taken in this regard. The corporation's Additional Commissioner Rohit Sisoniya and the in-charge Superintending Engineer of PHE Sanjeev Shrivastava have been suspended. Instructions have also been given to remove Indore Municipal Corporation Commissioner Dilip Kumar Yadav," Chief Minister Yadav said on X.

In a status report submitted to the Madhya Pradesh High Court, the district administration and the State Health Department said that four people, all above 60 years of age, have died so far in Bhagirathpura due to water-related problems. Indore District Collector Shivam Verma later updated the death toll to five. "The administration issues the figures on the basis of medical confirmation and so far, five deaths have occurred in the incident," Mr. Verma said.



Citizens' plight: Family members of a victim mourn in Bhagirathpura, Indore on Friday. PTI

"We have also constituted a team of senior doctors which will analyse the death figures which were received from other sources such as public representatives or media and then we will update our official death figure report. Till yesterday, 201 people were admitted; today, nine more people have been admitted, and the number has risen to 210."

Delayed response

After a morning review meeting, the Chief Minister had directed Mr. Sisoniya's transfer to the agriculture department, relieved Mr. Shrivastava of the charge of the water distribution department, and issued a show-cause notice against Mr. Yadav.

Mr. Sisoniya, who had handled multiple departments at the civic body, faced accusations of stalling work on a new water supply line for Bhagirathpura following residents' complaints of dirty water. "Complaints of dirty water had been coming from the area for more than a year now. This is why the project for a new supply line was added in a note-sheet in November 2024, and the tender was issued in August 2025. But work remained stalled," an official at the IMC said.

'Mere cover-up'

After the morning transfer order against Mr. Sisoniya, the Madhya Pradesh Mahila Congress's chief Reena Bourasi termed the State's actions "a mere cover-up".

"The government is trying to protect the accused responsible for the 15 deaths. This government did not take any action even on the demands of its own departmental Minister and the city's mayor," she said, adding that the transfer of one official is not enough to fix accountability for the tragedy.

INBRIEF



Eight killed in road accidents in Jharkhand in 24 hours

Eight persons were killed and several others injured in road accidents in different parts of Jharkhand over the past 24 hours, officials said. Four persons, including a schoolgirl, were killed in a head-on collision between an autorickshaw and an oil tanker on Barhait- Barharwa road on Friday. Two persons were killed in Palamu and two others injured when the motorcycle they were riding skidded off the road. In Ranchi, a 26-year-old biker died near a fuel station at Birsa Chowk after being hit by a speeding car. In Godda, a youth died and another injured in a head-on collision between a car and a truck. PTI

Hotel manager among 3 held for assaulting policemen in U.P.

A hotel manager and two more men were arrested for allegedly assaulting policemen during a New Year's eve raid in Bareilly, an officer said on Friday. The incident happened on December 31 night when the police asked the hotel management to shut the music system down which was on allegedly till after the stipulated time. Baradari Police Station SHO Dhananjay Kumar Pandey said the three men, and at least three more unnamed people, were booked on charges of attempted murder and assault. The three arrested were hotel manager Masi Alam, accountant Pavneshand Raghav Kapoor, a resident of Civil Lines area of Bareilly. PTI

Civic polls: high drama as BJP workers lock candidate inside his house in Nagpur

34 BJP and Shiv Sena candidates win unopposed on last day of withdrawal of candidature; Shinde says saffron alliance set to hoist flag in Thane civic body; Fadnavis urges rebels to withdraw forms

Snehal Mutha
MUMBAI

High drama was reported across Maharashtra on Friday, the last day for the withdrawal of candidature for the January 15 civic polls, with parties trading accusations of bribing and threatening each other's candidates while trying to persuade their own rebel candidates to withdraw.

While addressing a Marathi literary event on Friday, Chief Minister and senior Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader Devendra Fadnavis urged rebel candidates to withdraw their forms. "I never answer calls from dais, but today I have to as rebel candidates will not withdraw without speaking to me."

Dissent among the BJP rank and file was reported from various parts of the State. In Solapur, two groups of BJP members vandalised the liaison office of former corporator Shankar Shinde. In Nagpur, Kisan Gawande and Vijay Hole received nomination forms from the BJP, only for the party to ask Mr. Gawande to step back, which caused his supporters to allegedly lock him inside his house.



Colourful contest: Campaign merchandise of various parties at a shop in Nagpur on Thursday. ANI

"I understand supporters' feelings, but party orders need to be followed," said Mr. Gawande after withdrawing his candidature. Fifteen BJP candidates won unopposed in the Kalyan-Dombivli Municipal Corporation. Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) city president Manoj Gharat withdrew his candidature and BJP candidate Mahesh Patil was declared the winner. Shiv Sena's Ram Repale won after the Congress candidate and the Independents withdrew from the polls. Nineteen Shiv Sena candidates won unopposed across three civic bodies.

Congratulating the winners, Shiv Sena chief and Deputy Chief Minister Eknath Shinde said, "There is no doubt that the saffron alliance will hoist the flag on the Thane Municipal Corporation on the 16th (the day of counting). An unopposed election is a testament to the work done. Where the Opposition is sure of defeat, they retreat, and unopposed elections are held."

'Candidate theft'

Congress leader Atul Londhe criticised the Election Commission and the ruling Mahayuti for "candidate theft". "The ruling party, including Eknath Shinde, are threatening candidates from the Opposition parties and Independents to withdraw their candidature," Mr. Londhe alleged. MNS candidate in Panvel Yogesh Chile accused his Congress rival of offering ₹60 lakh to withdraw. Several Shiv Sena (UBT) candidates who did not receive nomination forms, including Chandrashekhar Wingankar, filed nomination as Independents.

Polling for 2,869 corporators in 29 municipal corporations will take place on January 15.

Speaker meddling in nomination process for BMC poll: Cong.

The Hindu Bureau
MUMBAI

The Congress has sought action against Maharashtra Speaker Rahul Narwekar for "violating the model code of conduct (MCC)".

Party's Maharashtra president Harshawardhan Sapkal on Friday wrote to the State Election Commissioner as a video went viral on social media purportedly showing the Speaker threatening an Opposition leader. Mr. Sapkal also demanded action against the officers and employees of the Speaker's office, alleging that they were involved in campaigning for his relatives.



Harshawardhan Sapkal

'File criminal case'

Terming the alleged threat by Mr. Narwekar as "serious", Bharatiya Janata Party MLA from Colaba, the Congress demanded the registration of a criminal case against him.

"As many as 70 officers and employees from his office are actively participating in election campaign of candidates who are his relatives. Cases should also be registered against all of them for violating the Model Code of Conduct and strict action should be taken," it said in a statement.

In his complaint, Mr. Sapkal alleged that three relatives of Mr. Narwekar have filed their nomination papers as BJP candidates.

"At the time of filing the nominations, Rahul Narwekar himself was present. Around 5 p.m., while the nomination process was under way, Rahul Narwekar allegedly, through the police, threatened Opposition candidates who were filing nominations against BJP candidates and prevented them from filing their papers," Mr. Sapkal wrote in his complaint.

The Speaker did not receive calls despite repeated attempts. After the complaint was sent to the State Election Commissioner Dinesh Waghmare, the panel sought a written report from the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation Commissioner.

Haryana expands aid to benefit more women, but with riders; Opposition criticises decision

The Hindu Bureau
GURUGRAM

The amendments made by the Haryana's Bharatiya Janata Party government to its monthly financial aid scheme for women has drawn sharp criticism from the Opposition for "imposing conditions after conditions" instead of offering it to all women as promised in the party's manifesto.

The government has announced to extend the benefits of the Deen Dayal Lado Lakshmi Yojana to women with annual income limit of up to ₹1.80 lakh, but with additional criteria of academic excellence and health of their children. The scheme's expansion will benefit over one lakh new women.

Besides the women with annual income of less than ₹1 lakh currently being given ₹2,100 per month under the scheme, the Haryana government has now brought more beneficiaries under its preview integrating social development-linked eligibility criteria with the income-based eligibility.



Congress's Kumari Selja said the policy shows a mindset aimed at humiliating women. FILE PHOTO

For the increased limit, only those women whose children are studying in government schools and have demonstrated academic excellence by securing over 80% marks in Class 10 or 12 board examinations, or have achieved grade-level competency under the NIPUN Bharat Mission in Classes 1 to 4, will be considered eligible. Similarly, mothers who have successfully rehabilitated their children from Severe Acute Malnutrition, as verified by the Women and Child Development Department, will also be covered.

'Deliberate conditions'

Congress' Sirsa MP Kumari Selja has condemned the new sets of conditions saying, "This policy does not reflect women's empowerment, but rather a mindset aimed at humiliating women". Leader of Opposition Bhupinder Singh Hooda said the government is deliberately imposing such conditions so that most women are automatically excluded from the beneficiaries list.

Former AIADMK legislator Prabhakar joins Vijay's TVK

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI

Former legislator of Villivakkam and veteran AIADMK member, J.C.D. Prabhakar, joined the Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK) in the presence of party founder Vijay in Chennai on Friday.

Mr. Prabhakar, who was elected from Villivakkam on the AIADMK ticket in 1980 and 2011, met the TVK leader at his residence in Foreshore Estate here.

The 73-year-old leader, an alumnus of the Loyola and Law Colleges, defeated the firebrand legislator, K. Suppu, in 1980, and then sitting Finance Minister K. Anbazhagan in 2011.

In the mid-1980s, he was the AIADMK secretary of the composite Chengalpattu district. At the time of the AIADMK's split in 1988, he was with the faction led by Janaki Ramachandran and contested unsuccessfully in Villivakkam the next year.



J.C.D. Prabhakar with Vijay in Chennai on Friday.

In 2016, then Chief Minister Jayalalithaa fielded him in Kolathur against the present Chief Minister M.K. Stalin.

At the time of the party's second split in 2017, Mr. Prabhakar stood by the party's former coordinator O. Panneerselvam. Five years later, he was expelled along with Mr. Panneerselvam and a few others. For about a year, he tried to bring about rapproachement among different groups of the AIADMK.

Madras High Court imposes restrictions on Santhanakoodu Urus fest with 50 participants

The Hindu Bureau
MADURAI

The Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court on Friday directed the authorities of Hazrat Sultan Sikandar Badusha Dargah on the Thirupparankundram hill to conduct only the Santhanakoodu Urus festival and restrict the total number of participants to 50.

Justice S. Srimathy restrained the dargah authorities from carrying out animal sacrifice, carrying meat and non-vegetarian food, and cooking non-vegetarian food. The direction should be enforced from the foothills to the top, the court said.

The official respondents, including the district administration, were directed to strictly enforce the directions. The police were directed to maintain law and order.



The High Court ordered the official respondents, including the district administration, to strictly enforce the directions. FILE PHOTO

The court was hearing a petition filed by M. Manickamoorthy of Madurai, who sought a direction to the authorities to prohibit the dargah authorities from performing 'Kandhoori' on the hill.

The State government submitted that permission would be granted only for the Santhanakoodu festival scheduled for January 6. Permission was granted in 2023, and the same would be followed this year too. It also submitted that permission would not be granted for 'Kandhoori Mahautsav'. Animal sacrifice, carrying meat and non-vegetarian food, and cooking non-vegetarian food would not be permitted, it said.

The court posted the matter to January 20 for the filing of a counter-affidavit.

How language issue led to one of Assam's most volatile conflicts

Rahul Karmakar
GUWAHATI

Decades after blood was spilt on the streets of southern Assam's Silchar, a new academic study examines how language, power and identity converged to produce one of the State's most volatile conflicts.

The study, published in *Contemporary South Asia*, analyses the 1961 violence to argue that the crisis was not inevitable but the result of political choices, policy failures and deep-seated historical anxieties.

It contends that language in Assam has never been merely a means of communication but has functioned as a marker of belonging and, at times, a trigger for violence.

The authors of the study are Md. Chingiz Khan of the Centre for Comparative Religions and Civilisations at Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, Ravi Shankar of the School of Global Affairs at B.R. Ambedkar University, Delhi, and Bharti Shokeen of Sri Karan Narendra Agriculture University, Jobner, Rajasthan.

The study traces the flashpoint to 1961, when the Assam government amended its Official Language Act to recognise Assamese as the sole official language, while allowing limited use of Bengali in parts of the Barak Valley. The decision triggered widespread protests across the region.

Firing by security forces at demonstrators in Silchar left 11 people dead on May 19, 1961, a moment that remains deeply etched in the collective memory of the Barak Valley.

The study argues that reducing the episode to an "Assamese versus Bengali" conflict obscures its deeper complexity. Assam, it notes, has long been a multilingual and multi-ethnic society, home to diverse communities, whose coexistence was disrupted by rigid language policies.

Colonial policy

"An intersectional approach, considering temporality, ethnicity, region, culture, and politics, offers a more nuanced understanding [of the issue]. Assam's identity has been shaped by centuries of migration, cultural exchange, and layered histories, making rigid categorisations reductive," the study observes.

The study underlines the decisive role of colonial policies in shaping linguistic hierarchies. British administrators classified and ranked languages through censuses and surveys, transforming fluid identities into rigid categories.

Study revisits 1961 Silchar violence to examine how policy, identity and power shaped linguistic conflict

The imposition of Bengali as the language of administration in 19th century Assam marginalised Assamese speakers in courts and government employment. When Assamese later regained official status, the balance shifted, fuelling resentment among Bengali speakers, particularly in Bengali-majority regions such as Cachar.

According to the study, language became closely tied to access to power. Official recognition translated into employment opportunities, control over land records and political influence. Communities that felt excluded came to view language policy as an existential threat.

In Cachar, where Bengali speakers formed an overwhelming majority, the enforcement of Assamese was perceived as cultural domination. In the Brahmaputra Valley, concessions to Bengali speakers were seen as undermining Assamese identity.

The study notes that the violence of 1961 reflected both popular anger and institutional failure, with the Centre and the Assam government underestimating the depth of the crisis. Interim measures such as the Shastri Formula failed to address underlying tensions. Political parties were divided, bureaucracies were paralysed, and sections of the media, particularly newspapers published from Calcutta, were accused of aggravating the situation.

The study rejects the notion that the movement was communal in nature. Protesters on all sides included Hindus, Muslims and tribal groups, underscoring that language solidarity often cut across religious lines.

The authors conclude that the fault lines exposed in 1961 continue to shape contemporary debates around citizenship, belonging and indigeneity, particularly in the context of the National Register of Citizens and the Citizenship (Amendment) Act.

Odisha police arrest fraudster accused of swindling ₹120 crore

The Hindu Bureau
BHUBANESWAR

The Economic Offences Wing (EOW) of Odisha police arrested one Amit Mandal accused of defrauding investors to the tune of ₹120 crore from Odisha and West Bengal. Mandal was arrested from Bankura in West Bengal.

"The accused collected more than ₹120 crore from about 500 depositors from Odisha and West Bengal during the period from 2020-2024," said the EOW in a statement on Friday.

The police acted on a case registered on the written complaint by Sushant Kumar Das of Khordha district. It was alleged that the accused and his associates induced Mr. Das to invest with them in share trading for high returns in the range from 3.5% to 7% per month.

"In order to win the confidence, the accused executed agreement apart from issuing post-dated cheques. Mr. Das deposited ₹8.5 Lakhs during the period 2022-2024. The deposit was taken through the personal accounts of the accused Mandal," the complaint said.

Mandal was operating through the firm "Kalpana Financial Services". The accused paid investors some returns. However, he stopped it subsequently and absconded.

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Tribal body opposes bid for ST status by six Assam communities

The Hindu Bureau
GUWAHATI

The Coordination Committee of Tribal Organisations of Assam (CCTOA) has rejected the "illegal and unconstitutional" recommendations of the Group of Ministers to grant Scheduled Tribe (ST) status to six communities – Chutia, Koch-Rajbongshi, Matak, Moran, Tai Ahom, and "Tea Tribes" (Adivasis).

The CCTOA represents 14 tribes of Assam. In its report submitted to the 126-member Assam Assembly in November 2025, the Group of Ministers suggested dividing the six communities into three categories – ST (Plain), ST (Hill), and ST (Valley).

'Unconstitutional move'

The Consultative Group of the CCTOA, chaired by New Delhi-based rights activist Suhas Chakma, on Friday said the recommendations, apart from being illegal and unconstitutional, would "affect and destroy the political rights" of the existing tribes at all levels from the panchayats to the Lok Sabha.

The CCTOA pointed out that while the Scheduled Castes are identified based on their status in the Hindu caste system, the STs are identified based on tribal characteristics – indications of primitive traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, shyness of contact with the community at large, and backwardness for the community as laid down in the Lokur Committee report of 1965.

The umbrella tribal body said that in 1993, the Assam Institute of Research for the Tribals and Scheduled Castes recommended the Other Backward Classes tag for the six communities, and the National Commission for Backward Classes notified them as Other Backward Castes.

"Once identified as SC, a community cannot be reclassified as ST by the same government for political expediency," CCTOA leader Sukumar Basumatary said, citing the August 1947 Joint Report of the Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas (other thans Assam) and the North-East Frontier (Assam) Tribal and Excluded Areas Sub-Committee as well as the Lokur panel report that recommended against ST status for tea plantation workers.

"The granting of ST status to these communities will destroy the political reservation of the existing STs in addition to affecting the reservation from the Central government's pool," CCTOA coordinator Tilak Doley said.

ED arrests IAS officer over money laundering

The Hindu Bureau
AHMEDABAD

An Indian Administrative Service officer and former Collector of Gujarat's Surendranagar district, Rajendrakumar Patel, was arrested by the Enforcement Directorate in connection with a bribery-linked money laundering case, officials said on Friday.

A senior police official said the ED took Mr. Patel into custody as part of its ongoing probe into alleged money laundering arising from bribery.

Mr. Patel, a 2015-batch IAS officer, was serving as the Surendranagar Collector until he was transferred without a new posting last week. The transfer came days after the ED arrested a deputy mamlatdar from Mr. Patel's office in the same case.

The Central agency is probing alleged money laundering involving the deputy mamlatdar, Chandrasingh Mori, and others, following the registration of an Enforcement Case Information Report under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA).

The Gujarat Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB) has also registered an FIR against Mr. Patel and three others based on a complaint filed by the ED.

(With inputs from PTI)

India has the right to defend itself against terrorism: Jaishankar

India cannot be a good neighbour to a country that supports terrorism; signing of Indus Waters Treaty was a gesture of goodwill, says Minister

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI


External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar interacts with students in IIT-Madras on Friday. R. RAGU

Launching a scathing attack on Pakistan on Friday, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar said that India cannot be a good neighbour to a country that supports terrorism.

"You can also have bad neighbours... unfortunately we do. When you have bad neighbours... if you look to the one to the West – if a country decides that they will deliberately, persistently, unrepentantly continue with terrorism, we have a right to defend our people against terrorism," he said, while answering queries from the student fraternity at the Indian Institute of Technology-Madras after launching the IITM Global Research Foundation.

"We will exercise that right. How we exercise that right is up to us. Nobody can tell us what we should do or not," he added.

Mr. Jaishankar also spoke about the Indus Waters Treaty. "Many years ago, we agreed to a water-sharing arrangement. The belief was that it was a gesture of goodwill... but if you have decades of terrorism, there is no good neighbourliness and [in return] you don't get the benefit of good neighbourliness," he said. "You can't say... please share water with me but I will continue terrorism."

He also told the students that India was blessed with a lot of good neighbours. He pointed out that during the pandemic, most neighbours got the first shipment of vaccine from India.

He then highlighted another example pertaining to the Ukraine conflict.

"Because of the Ukraine conflict, there were food shortages, fuel shortages and financial crises – we helped our neighbours with fuel, food and fertilizers. And in a sense, we were sharing what we had," Mr. Jaishankar said.

The Minister also said some neighbours went through exceptional stress, the notable example being Sri Lanka.

"They had an acute financial crisis and we stepped up with a package of $4 billion," he said.

Unplanned SIR led to multiple deaths, says Trinamool leader

Shrabana Chatterjee
KOLKATA


Abhishek Banerjee

Trinamool Congress national general secretary Abhishek Banerjee on Friday said the party will win at least one more seat in the 2026 Assembly election than its tally in 2021 in West Bengal. He also claimed the Bharatiya Janata Party was responsible for the "unplanned" special intensive revision (SIR) exercise that led to many deaths in the State.

"I have promised to increase the vote percentage and seats of Trinamool compared to 2021. In 2021, we won 214 seats. We will have to win at least one more seat this time. You need to promise me that one seat will come from South 24 Parganas," he said while addressing a rally in Baruipur, South 24 Parganas district.

The Lok Sabha MP and second-in-command in the Trinamool also threw a challenge to the Opposition leaders in BJP-ruled States. He said that if anyone can manage to start a scheme like the flagship Lakshmir Bhandar in any other State, he will quit politics. Lakshmir Bhandar is a direct cash transfer scheme under which women from across West Bengal receive ₹1,000 a month from the government. Over 2.21 crore women benefit from this scheme. "CM Mamata Banerjee gives Lakshmir Bhandar without any criteria of eligibility to the women of Bengal," Mr. Banerjee added.

"Who will take the responsibility for the deaths due to unplanned SIR?" he asked, raising questions about the "hurried and unplanned" SIR process that, he claimed, led to multiple deaths across the State.

He also said they met Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar and asked for the list of alleged "Bangladeshi nationals" who were found in the SIR process. This came after BJP had claimed that there were over one crore illegal immigrants in West Bengal who will be deleted in the SIR process.

On December 16, the Election Commission published the draft voter list, which saw around 58 lakh deletions including deceased, shifted, doubtful, and other voters.

Wooden wonders


Enthusiasts get down to work during a 15-day wood carving workshop at Lalbagh Botanical Garden in Bengaluru on Friday. K. MURALI KUMAR

Chhattisgarh HC gives bail to Chaitanya Baghel in two cases linked to liquor 'scam'

The Hindu Bureau
RAIPUR

Chaitanya Baghel, son of former Chhattisgarh Chief Minister and senior Congress leader Bhupesh Baghel, was granted bail by the Chhattisgarh High Court on Friday in two cases related to the alleged liquor scam. The liquor scam surfaced during Mr. Bhupesh Baghel's tenure as Chief Minister.

While the State Anti-Corruption Bureau/Economic Offences Wing (ACB/EOW) has been probing the liquor scam, the Enforcement Directorate (ED) is investigating the alleged money laundering linked to the case.

ED counsel Saurabh Kumar Pande said that Mr. Chaitanya was granted bail in both the cases. According to the ED, he was at the helm of the syndicate involved in the alleged liquor scam and personally handled nearly ₹1,000 crore in proceeds of crime generated from it. The ACB/EOW has claimed that, in addition to managing the proceeds of crime, he received around ₹200-250 crore as his share.


Chaitanya Baghel

In the ED case, the court noted that the allegations, as they stand, are premised primarily on broad assertions regarding influence and proximity, rather than concrete acts of commission. As per the order, the prosecution narrative proceeds on the premise that the alleged syndicate was managed operationally by public servants and private intermediaries, with day-to-day execution allegedly handled by certain named officials and associates.

"The applicant is not shown to have held any statutory position in the Excise Department, CSMCL, CSBCL, or any licensing authority. Nor is he alleged to have issued any administrative direction, policy decision, or official order forming part of the scheduled offences," it added. In the EOW bail order, the court mentioned that Mr. Chaitanya was not named in the FIR and that he was never arraigned as an accused in the original or five supplementary chargesheets.

Anantnag's key trekking spots shut for tourists

The Hindu Bureau
SRINAGAR

Popular trekking spots in Anantnag in Jammu and Kashmir were declared out of bounds for tourists on Friday, following inputs from security agencies.

On the banned list are Margan Top, Chauhar Nag, and Sinthan Top. The areas are at an altitude of around 3,696 metres and have traditionally attracted adventure lovers to the high-altitude meadows and glacier lakes they are known for.

According to an order issued by the Sub-Divisional Magistrate (SDM), Kokernag, inputs from the police and security agencies indicated security vulnerabilities in certain high-altitude and forested areas falling under the sub-division.

"The order will remain valid for two months unless withdrawn or extended," it said.

Assam CPI(M) flags 'verbal' order for voters' survey

The Hindu Bureau
GUWAHATI

The Communist Party of India (Marxist) has flagged a "verbal" order on survey of voters across 115 Muslim-majority polling booths in western Assam's Bajali district.

In a letter on Friday to the State's Chief Electoral Officer, Suprakash Talukdar, Secretary of the party's Assam State Committee, said directing other government servants to carry out voter verification, bypassing the BLOs appointed under the rules of the Election Commission, amounted to the gross violation of special revision procedure.

Ghaziabad police warn officer over intimidation during verification drive

Mayank Kumar
LUCKNOW

The Ghaziabad police on Friday issued a warning to the officer in charge of the Kaushambi police station after a video circulated on social media showing him allegedly intimidating the residents of a slum cluster while claiming to use a device to determine their nationality.

In the video, the officer is seen placing what appears to be a smartphone on the back of a man and questioning him about his nationality. "Are you a Bangladeshi? Put the machine. The machine shows that you are, doesn't it?" the officer is heard saying. The man responds that he is from Araria in Bihar.

In the video, the officer is seen placing a device on the back of a man and questioning him about his nationality

"A viral video has come to light through social media. Upon investigation, it was found that the video is from an area domination operation being conducted by the local police team in the Kaushambi police station area. During the area domination, residents living in temporary settlements and slums were being questioned and verified. The Kaushambi police station in-charge was speaking with the residents. The officer has been issued a strict warning to ensure such behaviour is not repeated. Further action is being taken after investigating all the facts," Abhishek Srivastava, Assistant Commissioner of Police, Indirapuram, said.

The police said the drive was not aimed at verifying nationality but was part of a routine exercise to identify suspected individuals in temporary settlements.

The Opposition Congress demanded judicial intervention in the matter.

SC slams denial of bail to give accused a 'taste of imprisonment as a lesson'

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court has said the presumption of innocence of an undertrial does not dissolve merely because a law enforcement agency says his alleged offence is "serious" or if he happens to be booked under a stringent law.



A Bench headed by Justice J.K. Maheshwari marked the court's disapproval of agencies resorting to ways to prolong the incarceration of undertrials without bail for the "purpose of giving him a taste of imprisonment as a lesson".

The judicial order reminded enforcement authorities that every accused who applied for bail before the top court was presumed innocent.

'Bail is the rule'

"Pre-trial incarceration cannot be allowed to degenerate into punishment without adjudication, and courts are constitutionally obliged to intervene where long custody becomes disproportionate, arbitrary or excessive," it said.

The court said the norm "bail is the rule and jail is an exception" was etched in the ethos of criminal jurisprudence.

"Generally an undertrial prisoner ought not be placed behind bars indefinitely unless there is clear threat to society, [possibility of] influencing witnesses/inquiry or he is a flight risk etc. This rule also ensures that the process is also not made a punishment by which a person is jailed for very many years pending trial. Bail is a qualified right of an accused before conviction, wherein the accused is not guaranteed bail, rather it puts onus on the prosecution to establish as to why the undertrial prisoner should not be enlarged on bail. Any deviation in the above proposition is constitutionally circumspect," the apex court observed. The order referred to precedents that had laid down that "once it is obvious that a timely trial would not be possible and the accused has suffered incarceration for a significant period of time, the courts would ordinarily be obligated to enlarge them on bail".

The observations were part of a recent order granting bail to Kapil Wadhawan, Managing Director of Dewan Housing Finance Limited (DHFL), and his brother Dheeraj Wadhawan in connection with the ₹34,000-crore bank fraud case registered by the Central Bureau of Investigation on a complaint by the Union Bank of India.

Telangana adopts resolution for restoration of MGNREGA

CM Revanth Reddy says new Act — VB G RAM G — tramples upon the poor's right to wage work and weighs against women; he says the Act is against the federal spirit in terms of contribution of funds; members of Opposition BRS boycott session

The Hindu Bureau
HYDERABAD

The Telangana Legislative Assembly on Friday adopted a unanimous resolution demanding that the Centre restore the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) as it is.

The Centre had recently replaced the MGNREGA with Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) or VB-G RAM G.

Chief Minister A. Revanth Reddy moved the resolution and said the new Act tramples upon the poor people's right to wage work and is against their rights.

He added that 90% of the beneficiaries under the MGNREG Scheme were from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Backward Classes communities, and of them, 62% comprised women. The new Act dilutes the spirit of NREGS and is against the provision of wage work on demand and weighs against women workers, he said.



Crucial lifeline: The CM pointed that 90% of the beneficiaries under the MGNREG Scheme were from SC/ST, Backward Classes communities, and of them, 62% comprised women G. MOORTHY

The MGNREGS provided wage work on demand as a right since its launch at Bandameedipalle village of Anantapur district (in then Andhra Pradesh) in 2005. It also provided much relief to wage work seekers in Mahabubnagar and Medak districts.

Demanding restoration of the old scheme, the CM said the new Act was also against the federal spirit in the matter of contribution of funds, as it mandates 40% funding by the State as against 100% wage component provision by the Centre in the old Act.

Seeking restoration of Mahatma Gandhi's name to the scheme, he said a 60-day break to the scheme during peak farm season be removed as it would lead to exploitation of wage seekers and all the 266 types of works be continued.

Except those from the Opposition Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) who boycotted the session, members of ruling Congress, CPI, All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) and BJP spoke on the issue earlier.

Deputy Chief Minister M. Bhatti Vikramarka and Minister for Rural Development D. Seethakka said the new Act was aimed at helping the corporate companies get cheap labour.

Kharge questions Modi's silence, says Centre failed to ensure clean water, clean air

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi kept trumpeting the Jal Jeevan Mission but was silent on deaths caused by contaminated water in Indore, Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge alleged on Friday.

In a post on X, the Congress chief claimed that the Modi government and the BJP failed to provide either clean water or clean air to the country.

"Narendra Modi ji, who never gets tired of trumpeting the Jal Jeevan Mission and Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, is maintaining his silence on the deaths caused by drinking contaminated water in Indore," Mr. Kharge said.

"This is the same Indore city that has clinched the 'Cleanest City' title for the eighth consecutive time in the Central government's Swachh Sarvekshan survey. It's a shameful state of affairs that, due to the BJP's incompetence, people here are desperate for clean water," he added.



Mallikarjun Kharge

The Congress chief said for 11 years, "the country was fed nothing but long speeches, lies and deceit, empty promises, and boasts about the double-engine government".

'Arrogance of power'

"When Ministers are questioned, they resort to abuses and intimidation. Drunk on the arrogance of power, they turn the tables on the journalists. The entire machinery swings into action to cover up the misgovernance of BJP governments," he said.

Mr. Kharge alleged that all the government's schemes were mired in corruption, and said that 10% of the Jal Jeevan Mission fund was allocated for purifying contaminated water. "The Modi government and the BJP have failed to provide either clean water or clean air to the country," the Congress chief said.

His party colleague and Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi accused the government of providing "poison instead of water".

"Not water, but poison was distributed in Indore, and the administration remained in deep slumber," Mr. Gandhi said in a post on X.

"Every home is filled with mourning, the poor are helpless – and on top of that, BJP leaders are making arrogant statements. Those who lost their lives and livelihoods needed solace; the government offered arrogance," the Opposition leader said.

BJP alleges 'maha jungle raj' in Bengal, says Mamata 'threatened' Amit Shah

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) on Friday alleged that there was "maha jungle raj" in the Trinamool Congress-ruled West Bengal, and that Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee had threatened Union Home Minister Amit Shah.

Addressing a press conference, BJP spokesperson Gaurav Bhatia said: "In West Bengal, we see how jungle raj is flourishing throughout under the patronage of Mamata Banerjee."

Constitutional violation

"A Chief Minister, who takes an oath to uphold the Constitution, threatens the Home Minister of India. She says 'if I do not want it, the Home Minister of India cannot enter West Bengal'," he claimed, adding that it was a "violation" of Article 19 of the Constitution. "And she says 'if I want, he cannot even come out of his hotel room. This means if a citizen, exercising his constitutional rights, wants to go and communicate and interact with people, if the Home Minister of the country wants to go, you are threatening him," he said.

"What is 'jungle raj', 'maha jungle raj', 'goonda raj' like? It is exactly like Mamata Banerjee...where she feels that the Rohingya, who are infiltrators, are her vote bank," alleged Mr. Bhatia.

"And since we are talking about West Bengal, and I mentioned the baseless allegations of vote theft that Rahul Gandhi repeatedly makes after losing elections. Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury is a respected leader of the Congress... He says that in West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee does not steal votes, she commits vote dacoity," he said.

Health scheme for ex-servicemen facing crisis due to govt. apathy, says Congress

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Accusing the Centre of weakening the Ex-Servicemen Contributory Health Scheme (ECHS) through budget cuts and administrative curbs, the Congress on Friday announced a nationwide "Save ECHS" campaign to highlight pending medical bills of ex-servicemen and disruptions in medical treatment they face.

Colonel Rohit Chaudhry (retd), chairman of the AICC Ex-Servicemen Department, said ex-servicemen would start an agitation in the national capital unless the government released ₹14,000 crore for the ECHS by January 30.

The scheme covers around 72 lakh beneficiaries, but medical bills of more than 20 lakh ex-servicemen were pending, with outstanding dues exceeding ₹9,000 crore, he said.

As part of the month-long campaign, the Congress would reach out to over 400 ECHS polyclinics across the country to gather data on unpaid bills and assess operational challenges, Mr. Chaudhry said at a press conference.

Mounting backlog

He said the scheme needed ₹13,500 crore in 2023-24 but got an allocation of ₹9,831 crore, despite an existing backlog of ₹3,500 crore. The backlog rose to ₹5,400 crore in 2024-25 and has touched nearly ₹6,000 crore in the current financial year, forcing several empanelled hospitals to stop providing treatment to beneficiaries, the Congress said.

The Congress demanded clearance of all pending bills immediately, restoration of the ECHS's administrative powers, and bringing the scheme under the Chief of Defence Staff.

Remarks by Minister's husband trigger row

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

A controversy has erupted over a recent statement by the husband of an Uttarakhand Cabinet Minister that "girls are sold for ₹20,000 to ₹25,000 in Bihar".

The remark was made by Girdhari Lal Sahu, BJP leader and husband of State Women and Child Development Minister Rekha Arya, at a public event in Uttarakhand's Almora earlier this week.

Seeks apology

While the Minister and the Uttarakhand BJP are silent on the issue, the party's Bihar unit has demanded an apology from Mr. Sahu for disrespecting women of their State.

The Congress has also condemnded the remarks.

A video of the BJP leader's comments at the event has gone viral on social media. In the conversation, he was trying to persuade some young BJP members, present in the audience, to get married at the "right time". "You are young now, when are you getting married? In old age? If you're unable to get married....we will bring a girl for you from Bihar. There, you get girls for ₹20,000-₹25,000.".

Bihar State Women Commission chairperson Apsara condemned his statement and said the board had taken *suo motu* cognisance and issued a notice seeking an apology.

Himachal student dies after ragging, assault; 3 women, professor booked

The Hindu Bureau
CHANDIGARH

Three women students of a government college in Dharamshala in Kangra district have been booked for ragging and voluntarily causing hurt while a professor from the same institute has been booked for sexual harassment in connection with the death of a 19-year-old girl student last month, the police said on Friday.

The first information report (FIR) has been registered under Sections 75 (sexual harassment), 115(2) (voluntarily causing hurt), 3(5) (common intention) of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita and under Section 3 of the Himachal Pradesh Educational Institution (Prohibition of) Ragging Act, 2009, based on the statement of victim's father on Thursday, said an officer.

The complainant told the police that on September 18, his daughter was beaten and intimidated by the three students even as the professor engaged in obscene acts with her.



The police have launched a probe into the death of the student on December 26, nearly 100 days after the alleged assault. FILE PHOTO

The incident left her deeply traumatised leading to a rapid deterioration in her health, stated the victim's father, adding that she was treated at multiple hospitals before succumbing during treatment on December 26.

Her father said they could not report the matter to the police earlier due to her deteriorating health and psychological distress.

Kangra Superintendent of Police (SP) Ashok Ratan said, "The matter is being investigated, and the accused will be questioned."

Uproar in State

The incident caused uproar after a purported video shot by the victim, in which she accused the professor of sexual misconduct and threats when she confronted him about the assault, surfaced online.

Former Chief Minister and Leader of the Opposition in the Himachal Pradesh Assembly Jairam Thakur demanded a high-level and impartial investigation into the case, which he said was necessary to uncover all the facts and ensure justice for the victim.

A delegation of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) met the Director General of Police and submitted a memorandum demanding an impartial probe by a senior officer.

The Himachal Scheduled Castes Commission Chairperson, Kuldeep Kumar, has reportedly sought a report in the matter from the Kangra SP.

A social activist, Ravi Kumar Dalit, sat on a dharna at the Ridge in Shimla on Friday demanding a judicial inquiry into the girl's death.

(With inputs from PTI)

BJP, Shiv Sena leaders target Shah Rukh Khan after KKR inducts Bangladeshi player

The Hindu Bureau
MUMBAI

The inclusion of Bangladeshi cricketer Mustafizur Rahman in the IPL franchise Kolkata Knight Riders (KKR), co-owned by actor Shah Rukh Khan, has sparked a controversy in Maharashtra.

Politicians and spiritual leaders slammed the actor for selecting a Bangladeshi player, given the attacks on Hindu minorities in Bangladesh.

Calling Bangladeshis "enemies", the Shiv Sena (UBT) said that if the actor retained the player in his team, it would mean that he did not understand the nation's sentiments.

"They [Bangladeshis] are terrorising the country, and Shah Rukh Khan should use this time to show gratitude towards the country. Boycott these players; choose Indian players," party spokesperson Anand Dubey said.



Shah Rukh Khan

The BJP criticised the KKR move as "treason". "In Bangladesh, Hindus are being tortured, killed, they are being thrown out of their homes, naked and beaten... Buying players from there is treason against the country. People like Shah Rukh Khan are traitors," BJP leader Sangeet Som said.

Sanjay Nirupam of the Shiv Sena criticised Mr. Khan and said, "For the last few months, the atrocities have hurt the sentiments of India. The Indian government needs to intervene in this. If Shah Rukh Khan doesn't want to get targeted, then he should remove the player."

Hindu spiritual leader Jagadguru Swami Rambhadracharya called Mr. Khan a "traitor".

There were voices in support of the *Chak De! India* star.

"Shah Rukh Khan is being targeted because he is Muslim; we still play cricket with Pakistani cricketers after Operation Sindoor. This is BJP-RSS' double-faced policy," Congress leader Bhai Jagtap said.

According to Trinamool Congress spokesperson Kunal Ghosh, not every issue needs to be politicised. "What will they achieve by targeting Shah Rukh Khan," he asked.

(With inputs from PTI)

War of words between SNDP, CPI intensifies in Kerala

The Hindu Bureau
KOCHI/
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

The spat between Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana (SNDP) Yogam general secretary Vellappally Natesan and Communist Party of India (CPI) State secretary Binoy Viswam intensified on Friday, with Mr. Natesan accusing the CPI of taking money from him.

Mr. Natesan also charged the CPI with taking stances inimical to the interests of the Left Democratic Front (LDF), citing its strident criticism of the government signing up for the PM SHRI scheme, which he alleged had created an impression of lack of unity within the alliance.

Mr. Natesan's tirade against Mr. Viswam formed part of a series of exchanges triggered by the CPI's assessment that Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan's public bonhomie with Mr. Natesan damaged the Left front's prospects in the local body elections.

Responding to Mr. Viswam's remarks that he would not let Mr. Natesan board his official car (as was done by Mr. Vijayan), Mr. Natesan said he did not want to get into Mr. Viswam's vehicle. "Why should I board his car? [CPI leaders] T.V. Thomas and M.N. Govindan Nair had travelled in my car many a time," he said.

Rebutting the comments, Mr. Viswam said while the CPI might have collected funds from Mr. Natesan for elections, it had not accepted any illegal money from him. "Nobody has entrusted Vellappally with giving grades to parties in the LDF or judging who's right or wrong," he said.

HC bars use of Pawan Kalyan's image, voice

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Delhi High Court has protected the personality rights of popular actor and Andhra Pradesh Deputy Chief Minister Pawan Kalyan, restraining several websites and e-commerce platforms from using his name, image, voice, and likeness without his consent.

Justice Manmeet Pritam Singh Arora passed the direction on a plea by Mr. Kalyan.

INBRIEF



BJP accuses New York Mayor of interfering in India's affairs

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) on Friday accused New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani of "interfering" in India's internal affairs after he wrote a note to jailed activist Umar Khalid. Addressing a press conference, BJP spokesperson Gaurav Bhatia said India would not tolerate such actions and questioned Mr. Mamdani's *locus standi* to comment on the country's internal matters. Mr. Bhatia said the people of India had complete faith in the country's judiciary and asserted that if India's sovereignty were challenged, the nation would stand united under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Kashmir cricketer faces probe for displaying Palestine flag

The Jammu and Kashmir Police on Friday initiated a 14-day preliminary inquiry against a Kashmiri cricketer who displayed a Palestinian flag on his helmet during a match in Jammu. The move has drawn criticism from several political parties. The inquiry has been instituted under Section 173(3) of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita. The cricketer has been identified as Furqan Ul Haq, a resident of Tangipuna in Pulwama district. He was representing the JK11 team and was playing against Jammu Trailblazers during the ongoing Jammu and Kashmir Champions League.

Centre has no plans to change land acquisition policy: Cabinet Secretary

Land acquisition a major issue in infrastructure development, says Somanathan; over 3,300 projects worth ₹85 lakh crore were taken up during review meetings under PRAGATI, he adds

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Land acquisition remained a major issue to resolve in infrastructure development, Cabinet Secretary T.V. Somanathan said here on Friday.

He was briefing reporters after the 50th meeting of the Pro-Active Governance and Timely Implementation (PRAGATI), a mechanism to review implementation of infrastructure projects, chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Mr. Somanathan said the Union government had no plans to change the existing land acquisition policy. The Cabinet Secretary, Secretaries of various Ministries dealing with infrastructure development, and the Railway Board's Chairman said in their presentations to the media that land acquisition was one of the major reasons for the pendency of various infrastructure projects across the country. Mr. Somanathan said PRAGATI reviewed over 3,300 projects worth ₹85 lakh crore. A total of 7,735 issues were raised during its meetings and 7,156 of them were resolved.

> There is no plan to change the land acquisition policy... All States, irrespective of the political dispensations, want to complete their projects and all chief secretaries have been very responsive in resolving issues
>
> **T.V. SOMANATHAN**
> Cabinet Secretary



Timely monitoring

Mr. Somanathan said that although the government had not calculated the savings due to the timely monitoring of the schemes, several projects – some started as early as the 1990s – were completed after the PRAGATI system was launched. Of the 7,156 issues resolved, the Cabinet Secretary stated that 35% were related to land acquisition, 20% to forest, wildlife, and environmental issues, and 18% to right of use/way. Other projects were delayed due to law and order, construction, power utility approvals, and financial issues.

"There is no plan to change the land acquisition policy," he said when asked if the government plans to change the law against the background of hurdles created by issues in land acquisition for infrastructure projects. "All States, irrespective of the political dispensations, want to complete their projects and all Chief Secretaries have been very responsive in resolving issues," he added.

He said initially issues were addressed at the Ministry level, while complex and critical issues were escalated through defined institutional mechanisms for higher-level review, culminating at PRAGATI meetings chaired by the Prime Minister.

"The escalation framework ensures coordinated inter-ministerial action, timely decision-making, and focused resolution of implementation bottlenecks in projects of national importance," he said, adding that PRAGATI ensured coordination between Central Ministries, coordination between States, Centre, and local governments, and coordination within the State governments.

Govt. to help teachers use AI; will ease open schooling framework

Abhinay Lakshman
NEW DELHI

The Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan Bill will go a long way in making these changes possible

The Union government plans to liberalise the country's open schooling framework, introduce guidelines to encourage the use of artificial intelligence in teaching, and draft technical education standards focused on ensuring employment and entrepreneurship for graduates. The Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan Bill, 2025, which aims to overhaul the regulatory framework for higher education, will go a long way in making some of these changes possible, Education Ministry officials said on Friday.

"There is a need to ensure that standards for technical education are set with a focus on centering it around equipping students with the skills to acquire jobs and start entrepreneurships. Similarly, in teacher education, artificial intelligence is something that must be accounted for," a senior Ministry official said.

The official said that such changes will be enabled through the overhaul proposed under the VBSA Bill, 2025, which will also subsume the functions of the National Council for Teacher Education.

The VBSA Bill was introduced in the 2025 Winter Session of Parliament and was met with objections from the Opposition, after which the government proposed that the Bill be sent to a Joint Committee of Parliament. While this committee is yet to be constituted, officials maintained that their hope was to bring the Bill for passage in the House by the end of this year's Budget Session.

The senior official added that a similar approach will be necessary for open schooling, which accommodates individuals of all age groups seeking to complete their secondary and higher secondary certifications. To this end, a second official said that talks are under way within the Education Ministry to "expand and liberalise" the National Institute for Open Schooling system.

First mountain tunnel breakthrough achieved in bullet train project: Minister

Snehal Mutha
MUMBAI



The 1.5-km tunnel is the longest among the seven planned in Maharashtra for the bullet train corridor. PTI

The first mountain tunnel breakthrough of the Mumbai-Ahmedabad High Speed Rail (MAHSR) project was achieved in Maharashtra's Palghar district, Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw announced on Friday. The 1.5-km tunnel is the longest among the seven planned in Maharashtra for the bullet train corridor.

"On completion, the project will reduce travel time between Mumbai and Ahmedabad to just one hour and 58 minutes. It has facilitated the generation of employment and will integrate the economies of major commercial centres," Mr. Vaishnaw said. He added that India is likely to get its first bullet train on August 15, 2027.

Calling it a "milestone", Mr. Vaishnaw said, "This is the first mountain tunnel of the project in the State. The breakthrough has been achieved in an approximately 1.5 km long mountain tunnel (MT-5), located between Virar and Boisar bullet train stations."

According to the official statement, "The MT-5 tunnel was excavated from both ends, and the excavation was completed within 18 months using a cutting-edge drill and blast method." The 508-km MAHSR project has an overall tunnel length of 27.4 km. Among this, 21 km is underground tunnels, while 6.4 km is surface tunnels. Overall, the MAHSR has eight mountain tunnels, with seven tunnels alone in Maharashtra having a combined length of about 6.05 km, and one tunnel of 350 metres located in Gujarat.

Two arrested for raping 2 children of tribal labourers in Maharashtra

Vinaya Deshpande Pandit
MUMBAI

The accused were arrested on December 30 and have been sent to judicial custody

The Maharashtra Police have arrested two men for allegedly raping two minor girls, both children of migrant labourers belonging to the Gond community who had come from Chhattisgarh to Maharashtra's Beed to work in the sugar cane fields, on December 24.

Although the Beed police registered an FIR on December 29, the families are being pressured to withdraw the complaints, said activist Jeewan Rathore who is helping the families.

The accused, Ganesh Rajebhau Ghatul and Ashok Bhaskar Pawar, were arrested on December 30 and have been sent to judicial custody. The statement of the two girls will be recorded in the Majalgaon court on Saturday.

Mr. Rathore said that the two girls did not speak about the incident for four days as the two accused had threatened them with dire consequences.

The incident came to light when one of them needed medical attention after complaining of pain. Currently, the girls are in the custody of the Child Welfare Committee in Beed. The police have evoked sections of Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, POCSO, and Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act in the complaint.

According to the FIR accessed by *The Hindu*, 14 people from the tribal community had come from Chhattisgarh's Rajnandgaon to Roshanpuri in Beed's Majalgaon, two months ago to work in the plantations. The two girls, aged 13 and 14, were part of the same group and accompanied their father and uncle respectively.

"They used to cook for the father and the uncle. They did not work in the fields. On December 24, the two accused youth – one a local shopkeeper, and the other a tractor driver who ferries labourers – came to their huts and dragged them to the fields. After raping them, they threatened the girls with dire consequences if they spoke about it," said Ashok Tangade, president of the Child Welfare Committee, Beed.

Mr. Rathore, member of a union fighting for the rights of sugar cane workers and transporters, said that he has been threatened for helping the family.

"The family is under pressure. They are poor landless labourers belonging to the Gond community. They are being forced to withdraw the complaint. I was threatened by people from the dominant caste and told not to interfere in this matter, that the labourers are from outside the State, that they have no power, and that I will have to be here among these people (accused)," he told *The Hindu*. He said the labourers lack access to clean water, healthcare, and shelter, adding that more than 5,000 landless labourers from Chhattisgarh move to Beed every year to harvest sugar cane.

When asked about the incident, Beed Superintendent of Police Navneet said, "The children are in Bal Graha. The accused are in magisterial custody. We will make sure that they are free from fear. They have not given any complaint so far about any threat. We will do everything legally and ensure that justice is served."

Kashmir chief cleric calls for dialogue to end conflict

The Hindu Bureau
SRINAGAR

Kashmir's chief cleric Mirwaiz Umar Farooq was barred from leading prayers at the Jama Masjid in Srinagar on Friday and delivered a sermon online, where he said "the Kashmir conflict continues to keep the region in an unsettled state".

In his sermon, the Mirwaiz reflected on the year 2025. "Despite making unilateral changes in 2019, the reality is that the Kashmir conflict continues to keep the region in an unsettled state that can erupt anytime. That is why wars are paused, not ended, and dialogue finds no takers," he said.

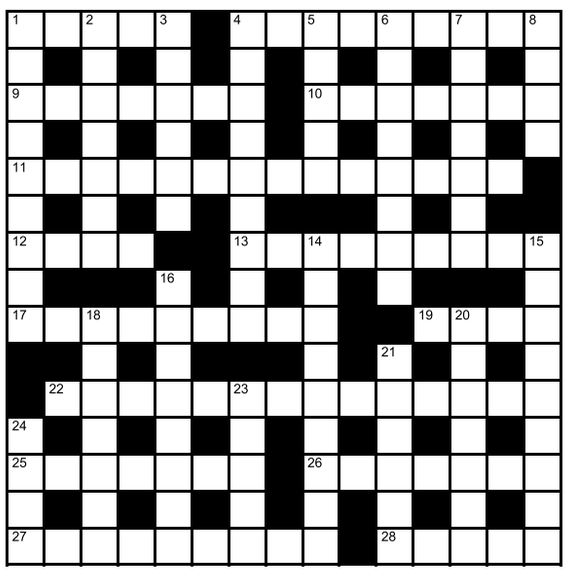
"I am committed to sincere efforts of dialogue. My path remains the same. Dialogue has worked elsewhere and our hope remains alive," the Mirwaiz added.

TH CROSSWORD + 14682

(set by Gussalufz)

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

SCAN TO PLAY



Across

1 Munch quietly on cold meat (5)
4 Glands prone to release second dash of rheum before end of sneezes (9)
9 Painter's angrier production (7)
10 Tandoori chicken cooked without onion had flopped, that's fair (7)
11 November observance organised in December and May, mistakenly (11,3)
12 Woman set out after pocketing diamonds (4)
13 Minor U.S. assets restricting one's source of tax breaks (9)
17 Drug havens minus dope? Bizarre! (5,4)
19 Pasta, pizza win British, Irish hearts (4)
22 Reject gnu clone after trial in synthetic habitat (8,6)
25 Leaving body writhing, in goes killing squad's leader (7)
26 Popular team, now called "WI", backed regularly (7)
27 Startles Slytherin insiders with honesty (9)
28 Pulls rank, replacing premier with unknown assistant, essentially (5)

Down

1 Hot garlic oil that can be smoky? (9)
2 Frightened gangster with weapon (7)
3 Some cameraman apparently capsized in canal (6)
4 Bird's role on hill (9)
5 Old review in old language (5)
6 Time to join race-fit running group (small one) (8)
7 Line up crosshairs and attack veganism occasionally (4,3)
8 Provide reference over the phone, for position (4)
14 Was beverage wrongly emptied jamming a sink? (5,4)
15 Mean behaviour is rising (partially lessened in September) (9)
16 Is this setter guy friendly? (8)
18 Smooth transformation that turns female into male? (4,3)
20 In Germany, radicals at extreme left have matured towards centre? (7)
21 English writer, upper-class, by and large boring attention-grabber (6)
23 Numbers filmed by Steven Spielberg (5)
24 Pointless wager over origin of artifact in tourist destination (4)

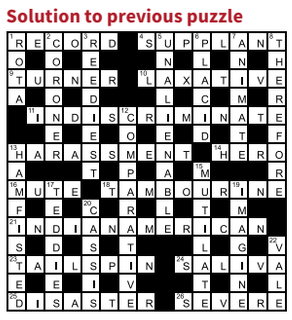
SUDOKU

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

DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★★★★

No.SS6750 Distribution: www.knightfeatures.com

Solution to previous puzzle



Solution to yesterday's Sudoku

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

FAITH

Andal shows us the way

Sri Koorathazhwan states that we commit mistakes and sinful acts in a moment, but it may take thousands of years to erase them. Only by the grace of God can these sins be removed and purified. Velukudi Sri Krishnan Swami said in a discourse that we need the grace of the Acharyas, for they recommend us to the Lord, seeking His acceptance and forgiveness. Liberation is possible only through surrender – self-effort alone cannot save us. Nammazhwar teaches that one should first offer obeisance to Vedic scholars and celestial beings, and only then worship the Lord.

In the 16th verse of Tiruppavai, Andal stands before the Dwarapalakas and Kshetrapalakas, requesting them to let her enter the house of Nanda Gopa to wake up Lord Krishna. Scriptures tell us that eight Dwarapalakas and eight Kshetrapalakas guard the abode. Andal, assuming the role of a simple cowherd maiden, reminds them that during the Rasa Krida, Krishna Himself invited the Gopikas to come to Him whenever they wished. With this assurance, she pleads that they should not stop her. She adds that she has come only to render service to the Lord, just as Thondaradippodi Azhwar once sang Tiruppalli Ezhuchi to awaken the Lord from His divine sleep.

The inner message behind Andal's humble plea to the Dwarapalakas is to convey that one can attain the Lord only through the guidance, support, and blessings of the Acharyas. Their recommendation paves the way to reach God. Andal's humble appeal shows us that reaching God is not merely by one's own effort; it becomes possible only through the grace of Acharyas and noble guides. Their blessings and recommendations open doors to the Divine.

Unenviable choice

Growth-generating capital expenditure can affect fiscal targets

The Goods and Services Tax (GST) revenue of ₹1.74 lakh crore in December 2025 confirms just how narrow the government's fiscal policy space is. The December data reflect the economic activity in November, the second month under the new, reduced GST rates. December's revenues were marginally higher than the ₹1.7 lakh crore collected in November. This was expected. Any belief that the rate reductions would lead to an immediate and sustained increase in demand, and hence GST collections, was pure optimism. In reality, people are more likely to use that extra money to pad up savings or pare down debt, with increased consumption a more medium-term outcome. This happened following the income-tax rejig in Budget 2025 too, when the government effectively exempted people earning up to ₹12 lakh a year from income-tax. The GST and income-tax decisions were both welcome relaxations. However, at least for this year, they are going to cause the government more pain than gain. The most recent data on the government's accounts reflect this. Total tax revenue stood at ₹13.9 lakh crore at the end of November 2025, 3.4% lower than in the same period of 2024-25. On the other hand, the Centre's capital expenditure stood at ₹6.58 lakh crore in the April-November 2025 period, 28% higher than in the same period of the previous year. This jump in capital expenditure was balanced out by a much slower growth in revenue expenditure of 2.1%. However, of the two types of spending, the government has much less discretion over revenue expenditure, which comprises expenses such as salaries, pensions and interest on loans. These cannot be kept subdued for long.

The government has valiantly tried to bolster its earnings through the new excise and GST rates on tobacco products, not to mention the health and security cess on the manufacture of pan masala. However, since all these new rates and cesses will come into effect only on February 1, their full benefit will be felt only in the next financial year. Yet, the troubles for the government's finances do not end there. The remarkably low levels of wholesale inflation this year – averaging -0.08% so far – have also meant that the size of the nominal GDP would likely be smaller than initially budgeted. This means that several ratios pegged to it, most pertinently the fiscal deficit and debt-GDP, would automatically come in larger than earlier estimated. The Centre has displayed commendable fiscal discipline over the last few years. However, this year, it has placed before itself the unenviable choice of either pulling back on growth-generating capital expenditure, or risking missing its fiscal targets.

Dangerous turn

Moscow and Kyiv must step back from escalation and push for peace

Russia's allegation that Ukraine launched a massive drone attack on President Vladimir Putin's country residence in the Novgorod region marks a deeply concerning moment in the nearly four-year-long war. Moscow claims that 91 long-range drones targeted the heavily fortified protected residence in northwestern Russia, a site previously used by Soviet leaders Joseph Stalin and Nikita Khrushchev. Russia has released a video of what it says is a downed drone and handed drone data to the U.S. claiming that it "proves" that Ukraine targeted Mr. Putin's home. Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has dismissed the allegation as fabricated. American media have reported, citing CIA officials, that Ukraine did not target the residence. But the CIA is an ally of Ukraine in the war and its assessment may not be viewed as entirely impartial. Ukraine has previously carried out sabotage operations within and outside Russia. Take, for example, the bombing of the Nord Stream pipelines in September 2022. It was initially blamed on Russia but led to the arrest of Ukrainian nationals in Poland and Italy last year. At the same time, it is Russia's responsibility to present credible evidence that Ukraine targeted the residence. But regardless of where the truth lies, the damage is already done. The fact that such accusations are being made – and believed by some world leaders – signals that the war has entered an alarmingly volatile phase.

The timing of these allegations is also significant. Russia's claim came close on the heels of Mr. Zelenskyy's meeting with U.S. President Donald Trump in Florida during which Washington reportedly offered security guarantees to Ukraine as part of a peace agreement. Mr. Trump had initially proposed a 28-point plan to which Ukraine responded with a 20-point plan. There were marathon talks involving U.S., Russian, European and Ukrainian officials. The alleged Ukrainian attack in Novgorod has dealt a blow to the fragile peace effort. Moscow has already said it will harden its negotiating position. Meanwhile, on New Year's eve, three Ukrainian drones struck a cafe and a hotel in Khorly in the Russian-held Kherson region, killing at least 27 people, including a child, and injuring over 50 others. Russia has intensified its strikes on Ukraine in recent months, leaving the country facing severe power shortages at the peak of winter. Taken together, the escalating attacks and the controversy surrounding Mr. Putin's residence should serve as urgent reminders to all parties that de-escalation cannot be delayed. If the war spirals, it poses grave risks to Europe and the world given the involvement of nuclear powers on both sides. The U.S., which is driving the peace talks, must redouble diplomatic efforts while maintaining pressure on Moscow and Kyiv to step back.

Transforming a waste-ridden urban India



Akshay Rout

is former Director General, Swachh Bharat Mission

At the 30th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP30), at Belem, in November 2025, host Brazil quite fittingly placed waste at the heart of the climate agenda. Sizeable funds were committed to a new global initiative, No Organic Waste, NOW, to cut methane emissions. The Conference noted Circularity as the way to inclusive growth, cleaner air, and healthier populations. COP30 called upon cities to accelerate circularity initiatives where waste is recognised as a resource. Mission LiFE (Lifestyle for Environment), espoused by India at COP26, in Glasgow in 2021, calling for "deliberate utilisation, instead of mindless and destructive consumption" was strongly premised on the idea of circularity as well.

Urban India, its growing problem of waste

Expanding cities and towns are an irreversible reality in growing India. The choice is between good and bad cities. Often, this choice gets translated into clean and pollution-free cities or waste-ridden, ugly urban areas. A number of studies suggest that Indian cities do not match up to global standards in providing a clean and healthy environment. Pollution is the talk of the town, posing questions to an aspirational India.

The National Capital Region (NCR) as well as many other cities in the country are also among the world's most polluted. Governments and regulators are at work, with courts also stepping in, but with limited effect. Citizen grievance is at its peak. The Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM), that ended open defecation in India within a specific timeframe, has the active goal of making the cities clean and garbage free.

It is estimated that cities in India will generate 165 million tonnes of waste annually by 2030, and emit over 41 million tonnes of greenhouse gases. By 2050, as the urban population grows to about 814 million, the waste burden could rise to 436 million tonnes. Without early solutions, these will result in grave levels of emissions, and creating havoc with peoples' health, the economy and the overall climate. The goal of Garbage Free Cities (GFC) by 2026 is an existential necessity, not a matter of aesthetics.

Under SBM Urban 2.0, about 1,100 cities and towns have been rated free of dumpsites, if not exactly free of garbage. Complete freedom from garbage, fortified by sustainable waste management and resource optimisation, is possible when all 5,000 cities and towns adopt the circular economy model, which underlines waste as a resource. India needs to move away from a linear to circular mode of waste management, with the twin objectives of minimising waste and recovering energy and other resources.

> India needs to move away from a linear to a circular mode of waste management, minimising waste and also recovering energy and other resources

Plastic, construction and demolition waste

The good thing is that more than half of municipal waste is organic that can be managed through composting from a house to large bio-methanation plants. Compressed Biogas Plants (CBG) have created possibilities of generating green fuel from municipal wet waste, whereas complete combustion of this also yields power. More than a third of the waste piled in cities is dry, all of which is not recyclable. The demon in this category is plastic, posing a threat to the ecosystem and human health.

Plastic waste also poses the toughest challenge to waste management. Dry waste is dependent on the critical habit of efficient segregation at households before recycling is done through material recovery facilities, which need to be constantly augmented with the rise in the waste burden. Refuse derived fuel from dry waste, as a source of energy for cement and other industries, is still under consolidation. But there is much distance to cover for entrepreneurship and market linkages in these modes of circularity.

Construction and demolition waste – about 12 million tonnes is generated in a year – is a major city spoiler, as it causes pollution in urban centres. It is collateral damage from relentless construction, at times unplanned, in India's fast-growing economy. Unauthorised dumping of construction discards wherever there is space, by the roadside, or even city lanes, is a common sight in India.

Much of this waste can be reused or recycled as cost-efficient raw materials of substantial value. This will also cause less damage to the environment. Minor construction and demolition waste mixed up with other unsegregated household waste and dumped in waste bins do not help processing. The recycling capacity in India is rising but is not sufficient to match the rate of construction and demolition waste being generated.

What could help is ensuring more serious compliance with the Construction and Demolition Waste Management Rules, 2016, which seek to levy a charge on generators of high volumes of construction and demolition waste, besides setting out other parameters. The Environment (Construction and Demolition) Waste Management Rules, 2025 are to come into effect from April 1, 2026.

Wastewater is the other thread in waste management and circularity. Water and sanitation are state subjects and States need to take proactive steps to recycle wastewater and reuse it in agriculture, horticulture, and for industrial purposes. Water security in cities has a causal link with complete used water and faecal sludge management, as outlined under urban missions such as Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT) and SBM. With India's water stock inadequate to meet the needs of its population, recycling and reuse are the only ways out to meet increasing water demand.

Hurdles before circularity

The path to achieving circularity is not an easy one, considering the multiplicity of actors. The smooth functioning of segregation of waste at source, collection logistics and processing, and aggregation and distribution are far from ideal. Recycled products face quality issues, marketing challenges and consequential financial feasibility.

Besides infrastructure, there are shortfalls in testing and monitoring. Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) has yet to extend to all categories of dry waste. Construction and demolition waste has issues of identification, tracing and tracking of its origin. This is an issue that has not been integrated in an ideal way with construction and building laws to ensure proper accountability. Inter-departmental coordination, stakeholder awareness, and incentive and penalty systems must vastly improve, with sharper focus to make meaningful circularity possible in city societies.

Resource shortfalls with municipalities for taking up circularity projects require early resolution. It is heartening that policymakers, experts and industrial houses deliberated on these issues at a national urban conclave in New Delhi recently while working out an agenda for urban rejuvenation. Last year, Asia-Pacific nations, at their meeting in Jaipur endorsed an Indian initiative of 'Cities Coalition for Circularity (C-3)' for efficient knowledge and expertise sharing among cities and institutions of the region.

Citizens need to get a clear sense of profit and a true cause in order to be partners in the circularity movement. In a society that is becoming increasingly consumerist, the first R of the three Rs – 'Reduce, Reuse, Recycle' – looks a difficult proposition to achieve. With products and consumable items arriving in new incarnations each day, 'reuse' may become a tall order too. 'Recycling', aided by technology and private enterprise and with sound policy backup, could emerge as a pillar of circularity. It could also be an assured way of helping India's cities and towns move away from swamps of waste while adding to national resources.

The views expressed are personal

Recasting sanitation with urban-rural partnerships

When the Swachh Bharat Mission ('Clean India Mission') was launched in 2014, its vision was both simple and transformative; to ensure that every household in India had access to a toilet. In just a decade, this vision has become reality. More than 12 crore household toilets have been built in rural India, and every village has declared itself Open Defecation Free (ODF). This achievement has improved public health, reduced indignities faced by women and vulnerable groups, and marked a turning point in India's development journey.

Focus on waste management

Yet, the success of the sanitation mission has also revealed the next frontier. Toilets are only the starting point. The real challenge lies in managing the resultant faecal waste. In most rural households, septic tanks and pits serve as the primary form of containment. Over time, these fill up and must be desludged at regular intervals. Without safe systems for collection, transport, and treatment, the gains of the ODF movement risk being undermined. It is this challenge that defines the transition to Swachh Bharat Mission (Grameen), or SBM-G, Phase II, with its focus on ODF Plus.

ODF Plus goes beyond toilet construction to ensure the sustainability of outcomes through solid and liquid waste management, behavioural change, and safe sanitation service chains. The progress has been encouraging. As of October 2025, more than 5.68 lakh villages, nearly 97% of India's total, have been declared ODF Plus. But faecal sludge management remains one of the most critical gaps in the sanitation chain, especially in peri-urban and rural areas.

Maharashtra has been at the forefront of experimenting with innovative approaches to address this gap. The State has invested in more than 200 faecal sludge treatment plants in urban areas and encouraged co-treatment in 41 sewage treatment plants. These facilities are a backbone of treatment infrastructure to cities, but the challenge lies in extending their benefits to the villages that surround them. It is here that urban-rural partnerships show great promise.

Aasim Mansuri

is Principal Researcher and Center Head-Strategy, Center for Water and Sanitation, CRDF-CEPT University

Dhruv Bhavsar

is Principal Researcher and Center Head, Center for Water and Sanitation, CRDF-CEPT University

Upasana Yadav

is Senior Program Lead, Center for Water and Sanitation, CRDF-CEPT University

Kasturi Joshi

is Program Lead, Center for Water and Sanitation, CRDF-CEPT University

Jinal Chheda

is Senior Research Associate, Center for Water and Sanitation, CRDF-CEPT University

> The model in Satara district in Maharashtra is an innovative experiment

At the gram panchayat level

In Satara district, Maharashtra, such a partnership was put into practice. Satara city's faecal sludge treatment plant, with a capacity of 65 kilo litres a day (KLD), was operating below full capacity. Recognising this, four villages, Jakatwadi, Songaon, Kodoli, and Degaon, have been brought under an arrangement that will allow them to access the city's treatment plant.

Their septic tanks, often never desludged or emptied only at exorbitant rates by informal operators, will be serviced at regular intervals and in a safe way. A private service provider is to be engaged by the gram panchayats, under a contract, to provide scheduled desludging services every five years.

The costs will be recovered through a modest sanitation tax levied by the gram panchayats, ensuring affordability and accountability. A formal agreement between the Satara Panchayat Samiti and the Satara Municipal Council will allow authorised desludging vehicles from the gram panchayats to access the faecal sludge treatment plant and treat the sludge at no cost , making the arrangement sustainable and mutually beneficial.

But not every village can be linked to a treatment system of a city. Some will have to treat their waste independently. An example is Mayani, a large village in Khatav taluka. With the high demand for desludging services, the gram panchayat has agreed to introduce scheduled desludging every five to seven years, managed by either a private operator or local self-help groups.

In addition, Mayani has been selected for the development of a cluster-level faecal sludge treatment plant under the SBM-G, designed to serve around 80 surrounding villages. This approach shows that rural clusters can pool resources to develop standalone treatment infrastructure that meets their needs, while remaining financially and technically viable.

The demonstration of urban-rural linkages and the standalone faecal sludge management business model in Satara district will promote the adoption and the institutionalisation of safe, sustainable sanitation services across rural Maharashtra. It also aims to show that sustaining the gains of ODF and effectively integrating faecal sludge management into rural sanitation require strong collaboration between urban and rural governments, private and public actors, and citizens and institutions.

A model that can be scaled up

If scaled up, such models have the potential to transform not only villages in Maharashtra but also rural communities across the country. By doing so, India can ensure that its sanitation gains are not only celebrated today but can be sustained for generations to come. The true measure of Swachh Bharat will not only be the toilets built but also the systems created to manage them – systems that protect peoples' health, preserve the environment, and uphold the dignity that this mission set out to achieve.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Learning and attendance

I am a professor and found the article, "Mandating student presence, erasing learning" (Editorial page, January 2), thought-provoking. The refusal of stasis is the moot point to judge whether we are facilitating discovery or merely disseminating information. The question of curiosity versus compliance, quality of teaching and surveillance, coercion and dialogic encounters are bound to stir the mind. Ensure engagement of the mind.

Udai Bhan Singh,
Rae Bareli, Uttar Pradesh

As a college student, I found the reflections on transforming student attendance rules to be accurate and a refreshing take. I would not miss a day if classes were engaging and worth the time they take. The experience of my friends in other institutes echoes how physical presence seems to be the priority for the administration in colleges while learning takes a back seat and critical thinking is forgotten. My peers and I often spend lecture time studying from YouTube or finishing pending assignments. It would be transformative if more time was spent teaching students how to think, and not what to.

Avvishi Saxena,
Agra, Uttar Pradesh

Contamination, right to life

A state that fails to protect its water sources from contamination cannot credibly claim to uphold the right to life under Article 21. The Supreme Court of India has repeatedly held that this right includes access to clean water and a healthy environment. When these are compromised, the constitutional guarantee becomes illusory. The incident in Indore exposes the fragility of our executive machinery and the persistent disconnect between policy announcements and ground-level implementation. Flagship programmes such as the Jal Shakti Abhiyan, Swachh Bharat Mission and the National Water Mission risk being reduced to slogans in the absence of monitoring and accountability.

Suchhanda Banerjee,
Chandannagar, West Bengal

Women's emancipation

The judgment of the Supreme Court, in *Belide Swagath Kumar vs. State of Telangana & Another*, stating that financial dominance of a husband over his wife will not amount to cruelty and certain other findings will leave women in despair. Describing the situation of the wife, an engineer who was asked to resign and remain a housewife, and who had to plead with her husband to meet her daily needs, as a reflection of the "daily wear and tear of marriage", fails to recognise women's rights and constitutional guarantees. Further, to describe a man's wife as a mirror reflection of Indian society is refusing to see ground realities. The Court seems to be oblivious to the plight of the women and its refusal to come out of the past reinforces male chauvinism. To describe the actions of the wife seeking action against the husband as "a gateway or a tool to settle scores" is refusing to see the helpless nature of women whose emancipation the Constitution seeks.

N.G.R. Prasad,
Chennai

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



Villagers stage a protest demanding that the Aravallis be saved, at Kotputli in Rajasthan. R.V. MOORTHY

The hills are shaken with the sound of machinery

A 2-billion-year-old range has been battered and bruised by mining, waste dumping, and encroachment, say environmentalists and those who live in its shadow. The Supreme Court order accepting the changed definition of the Aravalli hills caused further worry, though it has since been stayed. **Ishita Mishra** reports on the people living in the foothills, who believe that decisions about the Aravallis should involve and benefit communities

In December 2025, to cope with the bitter cold in Haryana's Nuh disrict, a group of young men tried to light a bonfire outside an Aadhar service centre in Jimrawat village. Nuh is part of the Mewat region, which is characterised by the rugged Aravalli hills, agrarian plains, and rural landscapes.

It was a windy day. Trucks carrying stones hurtled by every five minutes, kicking up clouds of dust. The men were unable to light the fire. One of them yelled at a driver to slow down; another immediately shushed him.

"They belong to the mining mafia who are busy cutting the Aravallis day and night," said Kasim Khan, a septuagenarian.

The Aravallis stretch about 650 kilometres across Delhi, Haryana, Rajasthan, and Gujarat. In 2009, the Supreme Court had ordered a blanket ban on mining and quarrying in the Aravalli hills of Haryana's Faridabad, Gurugram, and Nuh (Mewat) districts. "Despite the ban, these trucks fearlessly make the rounds here," Khan said.



Khan remembered the time when the Aravallis were surrounded by green forests, housing diverse fauna. He said he has witnessed how human greed has exploited the hills.

This 2-billion-year-old geological formation is endowed with sandstone, limestone, marble, granite, and minerals such as lead, zinc, copper, gold, and tungsten. Mining and quarrying in these hills is not new. Since the 1990s, the Union government has laid down restrictions on these practices on several occasions.

The same issue made it to the headlines once again after the Supreme Court of India, on November 20, 2025, upheld a definition of an expert panel constituted by the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change. The panel said that an Aravalli hill had to rise at least 100 metres above local relief, while a range comprised hills, slopes, and hillocks that are within 500 metres of each other.

Environmentalists criticised the order and expressed worry. They alleged that the lower ranges would no longer have the environmental protection they currently enjoy. They said that the new rule would leave the doors open for reckless exploitation of the hills, which regulate the climate of the region; support the recharging of groundwater; and serve as the "lungs" for the Delhi-National Capital Region (NCR) by preventing sand and hot winds from the Thar Desert from spreading eastward. After widespread protests, the Supreme Court stayed its November order on December 29.

> Mining has lowered the water level in the area and climate change has adversely impacted rains. Due to this, agricultural produce has reduced.
>
> **RAJUDDIN MEO**
> Chairperson, Mewat Right to Information Manch

Life and livelihood in the foothills

Mohd. Habib, 63, from Ghaghas village in Nuh, is passionate about writing. "*It* Dilli *ut* Agra…Nuh, Jaipur *aur* Bairat…*kalo pahad suhavano jaa ke saath base* Mewat (It's Delhi, then Agra…Nuh, Jaipur, and Bairat…Mewat lies along the foothills of the dark mountains)," he said, reciting the first poem he had penned about the Aravallis, his home and his source of living.

Rajuddin Meo, chairperson of the Mewat Right to Information (RTI) Manch, a citizen group that uses the RTI Act, 2005, to promote transparency in governance, said that most people in Nuh are either employed in agriculture or cattle farming. Niti Aayog has classified Nuh as one of the most backward districts of India.

"Mining has lowered the water level in the area and climate change has adversely impacted rains. Due to this, agricultural produce has reduced considerably in the region," he said.

Meo, who is part of one of the most marginalised groups in the area, added that rampant quarrying has left the hills deserted. He said no plant grows on it. This deprives animals of their grazing space and burdens the pockets of their masters. "If the Aravallis are not saved, over 100 villages in Mewat will have nothing to do for their survival," said Meo, who has written a letter to the Prime Minister, the President, and the Home Minister, to put a blanket ban on mining in the Aravallis.

Following the Supreme Court order of 2009, Mufisa, a resident of Nuh who is a mother of five, said her husband began working at an illegal mining unit, a practice that continues due to strong local lobbies and administrative apathy. He died during the COVID-19 pandemic.

With no farming land, Mufisa has revamped the backyard of her house, to make coal out of wood. She places wood inside 10-12 feet tall, round structures covered with mud. The wood is burnt under controlled temperatures until it turns into coal which is sold at ₹25-20 to hotels on the Haryana-Rajasthan highway. In December, the Delhi government banned the use of coal and wood in tandoors, to curb pollution.

"We are uneducated people," Mufisa said. "If there are no animals and no farming, what can we do to survive?"

Nuh, a region dominated by Meo Muslims, has seen communal clashes recently. The people of this area are afraid of sending their men to work in neighbouring NCR and Western Uttar Pradesh or even Rajasthan.

"No one can ensure the security of our children in the current environment. We have to keep them with us," said Shamima. Her son works as a daily wager and another takes animals to graze in the hills.

Arshad, from Baniyabaas Chaupra, is upset with the recent hue and cry over mining in the Aravallis. For years, he has been employed in a job that requires him to cut through the hills. Now, the forest department administration and the police remain on strict vigil after the matter became sub judice in the Supreme Court.

"I feel that the government should not give big tenders for mining in the Aravallis," Arshad said. "However, poor people like me should be allowed to cut stone. I sell one tractor of stones a day and earn merely ₹400-500. This is after the tractor rent, diesel charge, and labour charge are deducted. Most of my stone is either used by my own villagers or goes to the neighbourhood. It is our hill, why can't we use it."

Arshad added, "If we are not be allowed to cut the hills, our children will either become thieves or commit petty crime to earn their living."

Rajiv Saini, from Sammanwala in Naugaon, a cluster of nine villages which is emerging as a farmhouse hub due to its proximity to Delhi and Gurugram, disagreed. "The men of my village always did just one job and that was to break the Aravalli hills and sell stone. That risky job has left many dead, while several others have suffered permanent disabilities. All this was for a daily income of just ₹400-500. When we created awareness to stop mining in the hill, young men started studying. Many of them have recently got government jobs," he said.

Covered in dust

The residents of Ajitpura Kalan and Kujota village in Kotputli district of Rajasthan had been sitting on an indefinite strike to save the Aravallis. Their protest had lasted 145 days.

Ajitpura Kalan is home to one of the biggest cement manufacturing companies in Rajasthan. Though spread over several acres, the factory appears dwarfed by the deep pits carved into hills.

"In some places, they have dug so deep that the pits are now filled with groundwater. They use heavy motors to empty the pits and let out the water in our fields, flooding them and rendering them useless. Most pits are of the height of 4-5 storey buildings. People are afraid to even go near these pits," said Netram Takhar, head of Ajitpura Kalan village.

Takhar alleged that the company blasts the hills, which leaves the entire area, with over 500 homes, shaken. At many places, he said the company asks people to vacate their homes before the blasting, which mostly occurs at night. "The houses which are close to the mining area have developed cracks. But if we complain to the company officials or administrative officials, they slap cases on us for 'disturbing law and order'," he said.



A protest at Kotputli in Rajasthan. The poster reads, "The Aravallis are our heritage and our breath." R.V. MOORTHY

Anushka Kumari, a student of Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya in Pawana Ahir village of Kotputli, said students remain awake through the night fearing that the school might collapse due to the continuous blasts. Her school was part of the government's initiative to provide free residential education, boarding, and lodging for adolescent girls from disadvantaged communities in rural and educationally backward areas.

In Alwar's Lalawandi village, the trees, which look snow clad but are actually covered in dust, bear testimony to the ordeal of the people. Tejwan Kumar, whose house is next to the village temple, said half the villagers were either suffering from respiratory diseases or skin allergies.

Rajasthan produces 70% of the country's sandstone. It has a high burden of silicosis cases, particularly in mining areas. In the State, more than 1,000 mining leases have been given in the Aravallis, according to government data. Environmentalists say if the new definition of the hills, as initially approved by the Court, is allowed to stay, only 1,048 Aravalli hills out of a total 12,081 in Rajasthan would meet the 100-metre elevation criteria, leaving the entire range exposed to miners.

"Many people have left their homes as there is no solution to our problems. Those who decided to stay only spend their days at doctors' clinics. No one here dares wear white as clothes turn grey from the dust within minutes," said Panni Lal from Lalawandi. He claimed that his phone sometimes shows an AQI of 800, nearly double that of the AQI in Delhi.

Sandhya, whose porch cracked after a recent blast, said that administrative officials blamed her for it, alleging that her home was made up of poor construction material. "Poor people's houses are built like this. If you destroy that as well, where will we go," she asked.

The villagers also said that mining units never help them in any way. They argued that the units simply exploit natural endowments, which belong to the people living around them.

"They never hire villagers to work in the factories of these mining units. They think locals will form unions and stop them from over-exploiting their resources," said Vineet.

Fighting for rights

On December 29, due to a public outcry, the Court paused its order. It proposed the constitution of a high-powered committee to analyse whether "sustainable mining" or "regulated mining" within the newly demarcated Aravallis, notwithstanding regulatory oversight, would result in any adverse ecological consequences.

After its decision, members of the Aravalli Virasat Jan Abhiyan, a citizen-driven campaign aimed to protect the range, issued a statement. They said that whatever is left of the Aravallis must be declared an ecologically sensitive region and that no destructive activities should be allowed any more.

> India's oldest mountain range does not need 'sustainable mining' plans. It needs to be protected and conserved. No mining is sustainable.
>
> **NEELAM AHLUWALIA**
> Environmentalist

"India's oldest mountain range does not need 'sustainable mining' plans. It needs to be protected and conserved. No mining is sustainable. Plus, all the definitions which seek to limit the Aravallis need to be scrapped," said Neelam Ahluwalia, an environmentalist who is part of the people's movement to save the Aravallis.

The Aravalli Virasat Jan Abhiyan also demanded that the Supreme Court direct an independent, cumulative social and environmental impact study of the entire Aravalli range across four States to ascertain the damage caused by mining, real estate, encroachments, and waste dumping, and to evaluate its role as a critical water recharge zone, climate regulator, pollution sink, and wildlife habitat. They said that the study should also assess the extent of damage inflicted on the people's health and livelihoods across the range.

On December 30, the Aravalli Virasat Jan Abhiyan continued with its protests to save the hills. At Ambedkar ground in Kotputli, women held up placards demanding that the Aravallis be declared as Rashtriya Dharohar (a national asset). Some of them held the death certificates of their loved ones, who had succumbed to silicosis or accidents while mining. The People's Union for Civil Liberties and Rajendra Singh, known as the 'water man of India', also attended the protest.

"You all have seen how the Supreme Court stayed the Delhi High Court order granting bail to Kuldeep Singh Sengar in the Unnao rape case. The woman had protested for her rights. When all of you protest for your rights, the Court will meet our demands to save the hills," said Mahesh Yadav, a retired veterinary doctor, affiliated with the Congress, the Opposition party in Rajasthan.

Preserving resources

Kailash Meena, 60, an environmentalist who led the protest in Kotputli, said India needs to learn how to protect its natural resources. "Only countries that have preserved their natural resources and found alternative construction methods, which are now considered synonymous with development, have truly become developed. In India, we are exploiting all our natural resources just for the pleasure of the 5-7% of rich people, while the rest of the country is struggling to survive," said Meena.

In his three-decades-long fight to save the environment, Meena said he has never felt so restless.

"*Mai chahta hu Dilli ka jitna dum ghute…tabhi Dilli ko samajh aayega humara dard* (I think only if Delhi gasps for breath will they understand our condition)," he said.

ishita.mishra@thehindu.co.in

In Haryana, folk music has given way to Haryanvi pop over the past decade, marking a generational shift and taking the local music industry to international platforms. Part of this trend are themes of guns, gangs, and hooliganism, with many such songs garnering millions of views, leading to police complaints and ban orders by courts, finds **Ashok Kumar**

Provocative pop picks guns and goons



Mukesh Jaji calls himself a "writer, storyteller, dream weaver" on social media. Around 50 km north of Delhi, India's capital, he sits on a charpoy, leaning against a wall in his farmhouse-cum-music studio on the outskirts of Sonipat. Green fields of prosperity surround the 32-year-old bespectacled lyricist, who writes Haryanvi songs.

Confined to a wheelchair for a decade following a road accident, he speaks about the rapid growth of Haryana's music industry over the past decade. "*Pehle* Haryana *mein shadiyon mein dus gane* Punjabi *to ek* Haryanvi *bajta tha. Ab ulta ho gaya hai! Ab dus* Haryanvi *to ek* Punjabi *bajta hai,* (Earlier in Haryana, at weddings, 10 Punjabi songs would play for every one Haryanvi song. Now it's the other way around! Now 10 Haryanvi songs play for every one Punjabi song)," he says.

Five years ago in the middle of the pandemic, two Haryanvi chartbusters '52 Gaj Ka Daman' (52-foot skirt) and 'Chatak Matak' (a smart woman) were released. To date, both, sung by Renuka Panwar, have more than 1 billion views on YouTube. Mukesh, who wrote '52 Gaj...', says there is a shift in the State's regional music landscape.

The music video featured Pranjal Dahiya, a Haryanvi actor and social media influencer, while 'Chatak..." featured Sapna Choudhary, an actor and performer. Both have over 5 million followers on Instagram, while Mukesh has written about 120 songs, 40 of which have crossed the 1 million mark streams.

Both music videos feature women wearing traditional shin-length gathered skirts and shirts, with dupattas covering their heads. Now, major music players like Saregama India Limited, T-Series, and Sony Music are producing and distributing Haryanvi tracks on streaming platforms like JioSaavn, Spotify, Gaana, and Apple Music.

Pop music and money

This boom has led to local musicians earning anywhere from 10 to 100 times what they would have 5-10 years ago. Mukesh himself charges up to ₹10 lakh for writing a song. "Earlier, artists from Punjab looked down on those from Haryana. Now, they're eager for collabs," he says, using social media speak for collaborations.

Kuldeep Rathee, who has directed songs like the 2019 hit 'Rx 100' featuring muscular men, reveals that song shoot budgets have jumped from ₹20,000 to ₹20 lakh.

"We used to shoot at one spot with basic cameras. The actors brought their own costumes. Now, we're going big: multiple locations, 2-3 day shoots, Bollywood-level cameras with rent as high as ₹35k per day, costume designers, and choreographers. It's a whole production," he explains. "The cash influx is drawing in top talent. Qualified pros are joining Haryanvi music; the industry is thriving," Rathee says.

Musicians also wear Haryana on the sleeve. Shiva Choudhary, for instance, sings 'Belong to Haryana', glorifying its agrarian, rough culture: "We belong to Haryana and are Jats. We only believe in the rule of *khaps* (community leaders), and are not scared of anyone. We are in this world just to have fun. We are not scared of police stations and posts. We drink freely and don't measure pegs," she sings. Her songs feature prominently on VYRL Haryanvi that has playlists of artists who sing in the language.

With this generational shift, guns, gangs, and hooliganism are part of the songs. Ten songs by Masoom Sharma, one of the most popular Haryanvi singers, including 'Chambal Ke Daku', 'Tuition Badmaashi Ka', and 'Jailer', have collectively hit over 100 million views. 'Illegal' by Dhanda Nyoliwala amassed over 2.2 million views within a few days of its release in 2024. Despite the success of the genre, the glorification of violence in music has invited criticism.

The storyline and lyrics of some tracks present the police and judiciary in poor light, while portraying the larger-than-life main protagonists as more powerful than law enforcement agencies. 'Tuition Badmashi Kaa', for instance, depicts a woman police officer smitten by the protagonist, a wrestler-turned-criminal. Each time she and her force try to catch the male lead, he tricks her and escapes.

The video of another controversial song, 'Court Mein Goli', released in 2022, shows a dramatic scene where the protagonist shoots a witness inside the court room in the presence of the police and the judge, who hides behind the bench. In 2023, a public interest litigation was filed in the Gujarat High Court claiming that the song "targeted the integrity of the justice system" and called for it to be pulled from YouTube.

> A few months after the meeting with the police, lyricists avoided such content but the trend has resurfaced. Now though, the storyline is tweaked to show that the truth and the good prevail at the end
>
> **MUKESH JAJI**
> Lyricist, Sonipat, Haryana

Multiple incidents of firing inside court complexes, including in Bhiwani, Ambala, Hisar, and Gurugram, have occurred over the years. This has raised concerns over the impact of the songs that seemingly glorify violence and gun culture.

In 2019, a Punjab and Haryana Court order, in response to five writ petitions filed, observed: "The court can also take judicial notice of the fact that glorification of liquor, wine, drugs and violence in the songs in the States of Punjab, Haryana and Union Territory, Chandigarh, has increased in recent times. These songs affect children of impressionable age."

In a 30-page order, the court directed the Director Generals of Police in the two States and UT to "ensure no songs are played glorifying liquor, wine, drugs and violence... even in live shows".

Murder at a wedding

Panditrao Dharennavar, 51, an associate professor of sociology at a Chandigarh government college, moved the court against songs promoting violence after the murder of a 23-year-old woman dancer at a wedding in Punjab's Bhatinda in December 2016.

Dharennavar, originally from Karnataka, was posted in Chandigarh after his appointment through the UPSC examination more than two decades ago. He was gradually drawn to the local language, literature, and culture.

"I felt very sad about this incident. Being a teacher, I thought this could not be true Punjabi culture: a woman dancing at a wedding at night and being shot dead by a guest in excitement, while the Diljit Dosanjh song 'Shraab Wargi' was being played," says Dharennavar.

He prepared the petition on two grounds: noise pollution and the subject matter of songs. All three governments – Haryana, Punjab and Chandigarh – were made party to the case. "More than 15 hearings were held for three years, before the judgement came in 2019," Dharennavar says. "A question was raised about vulgar songs being played on online platforms as well. Though the court in its ruling did not particularly mention an online or offline ban, the spirit of the order is that such songs should not be played anywhere, whether at live shows, on the internet, or on any other platform."

Songs taken down

Over the past two years, the Haryana police asked YouTube and other social media platforms to take down about 60 songs that allegedly promoted violence and gun culture, says Inspector-General of Police, Special Task Force, Satheesh Balan. This was part of an effort to de-glorify crime in Haryana.

While the impact of such songs is hard to quantify, Balan notes that some may be influenced by content that fuels aggressive masculinity.

In 2025, two concerts, including one in Gurugram, were halted midway for playing these songs. The action, however, prompted strong protests from the music industry, and some artists accused the police of targeting a few singers. Masoom Sharma appeared on different platforms saying there were hundreds of songs promoting violence but the police had asked for six songs sung by him to be taken down. He hinted at a conspiracy.

Social media content creator Rakhi Lohchab, with over 6 lakh followers on her Instagram account, also came out in support of the singer and posted videos demanding that the police act in an unbiased manner.

In the Monsoon Session of the Haryana Assembly in 2025, the Congress's Shahdara MLA Ramkaran Kala sought a statement from Chief Minister Nayab Singh Saini on the "excess" of song deletion against three singers: Masoom Sharma, Narendra Bhagana, and Ankit Baliyan. Social Justice Minister Krishan Kumar said these singers had "done a lot for the pride of Haryana" and asked the CM to take a sympathetic view.

However, many of the 'deleted' songs are still available online. Dharennavar says the police deletes the songs from the original accounts of the singers and the production houses but appears helpless in removing them from multiple other accounts. "For the songs reposted from multiple other accounts, it is the social responsibility of the people to lodge a formal complaint with the police or the authorities concerned seeking action," he says.

He speaks about how FM radio channels in and around Chandigarh would continue to play banned songs despite the court orders, prompting him to write to the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. The Union government then issued an advisory in 2022.

Dharennavar says there is both violent and vulgar content in songs across Haryanvi, Punjabi, and Bhojpuri. "After some MPs and representations from organisations received these references, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting wrote to Online Curated Content Publishers and self-regulatory bodies of OTT platforms, to adhere to Indian laws and to follow the Code of Ethics under the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021," says Dharennavar.

The Special Task Force has held meetings with the music industry to highlight the risks of promoting violence, not just to society but to the artists themselves.

Balan says some artists who gain fame through such content end up as victims, receiving requests – or threats – from gangsters to create songs praising them or sell them content at low prices, which is then posted for profit on *benami* channels owned by the gangsters.

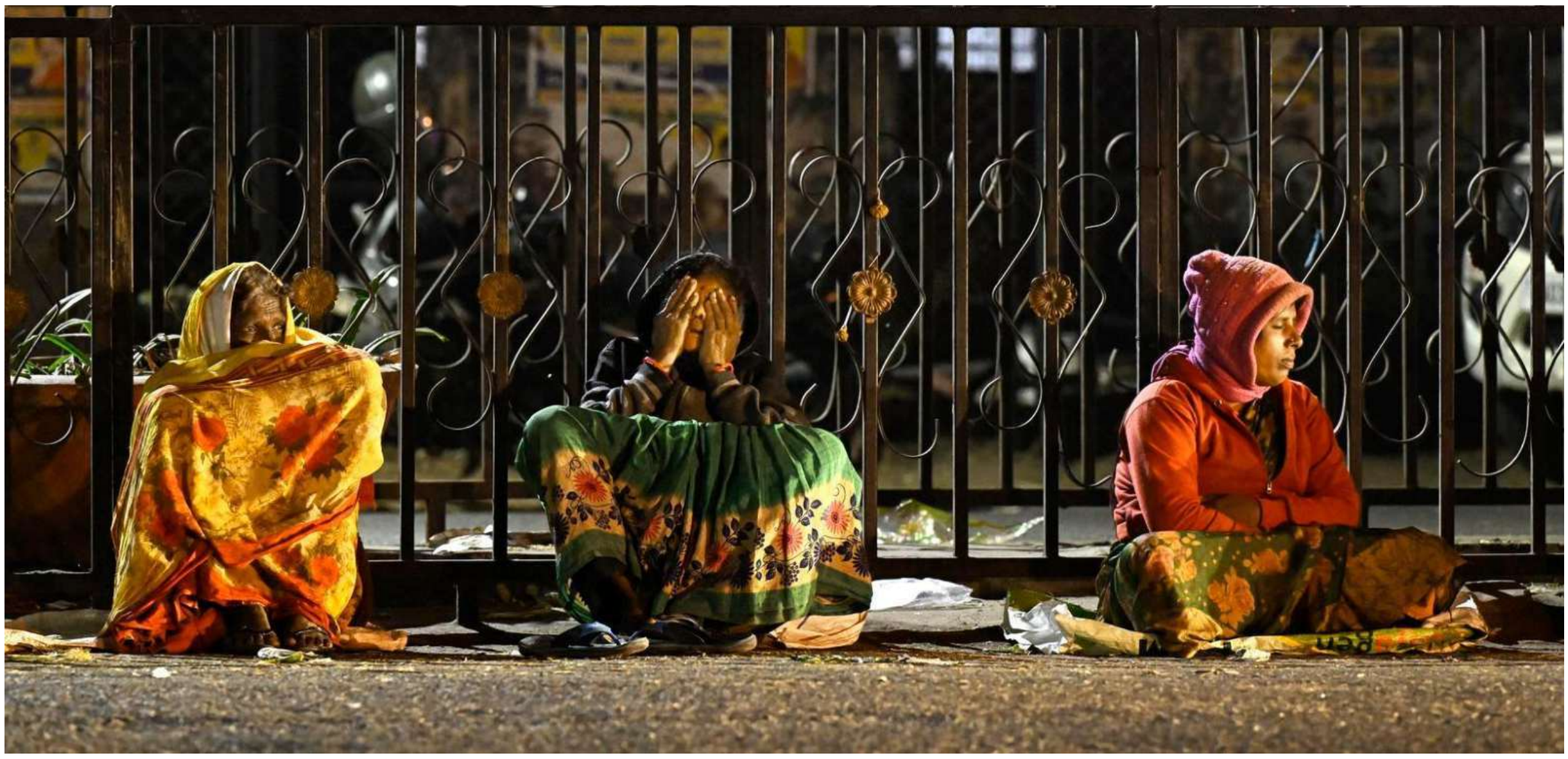
"A few months after the meeting with the police, lyricists avoided such content but the trend has resurfaced. Now though, the storyline is tweaked to show that the truth and the good prevail at the end," Mukesh notes. He has written several reflective songs, including 'Maa Babu', as well as compositions on themes like cows, the army, and inter-caste marriage. However, these have failed to gain traction with audiences. "I write two or three such songs annually. My peers do too, but it's largely for personal fulfillment. These songs don't generate an income. It's the high-energy tracks, with provocative lyrics and themes of indulgence and aggression, that resonate with the youth," he says.

"Jo thali chahiye parosani padegi, nahi to koi restaurant mein nahi aayega (We will have to serve a plate the customer wants, otherwise no one will come to the restaurant)," says Mukesh.

ashok.kumar@thehindu.co.in



Mukesh Jaji (seated) with his nephew and singer Aman Jaji at Jaji village in Sonipat district of Haryana. SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR



Nowhere to go: Under the NULM policy, civic bodies are responsible for ensuring basic infrastructure such as water supply, sanitation, safety, and security for the homeless people. . ALLEN EGENUSE J

Out in the cold

While Bengaluru City Police data reveal that the city has witnessed the deaths of more than 15 homeless people over the last 40 days, there are only 48 shelters when the city should have at least 120, writes ***Chetan B.C.***

At 12.40 a.m. on December 26, near K.R. Market in the heart of the city, a small crowd began gathering around a goods vehicle. Four men were distributing blankets. The temperature was 16 degrees Celsius.

Beneath the Mysuru Road flyover, several people had taken shelter, wrapping themselves in blankets or gunny bags to protect themselves from the biting cold. A beat police officer stationed there said two homeless people had died under the flyover within just four days.

The Bengaluru City Police data revealed that the city witnessed the deaths of more than 15 homeless people over the last 40 days, who were sleeping on the streets, all registered as Unnatural Death Reports (UDR). Police stations such as Malleshwaram and City Market, areas with major transport hubs, hospitals, and markets, have recorded four deaths each.

While there is no confirmed direct connection, Bengaluru police say such deaths generally increase during winter, and this year has seen more, possibly due to the drop in temperature. Notably, December recorded temperatures as low as 13 degrees Celsius in Bengaluru, according to the India Meteorological Department.

C. Vamsi Krishna, Joint Commissioner of Police (West), told *The Hindu* that such deaths occur during winter as well as extreme summer conditions, according to the number of UDRs registered. "Deaths might not be directly connected to the weather, but it may exacerbate existing health conditions, leading to fatalities. These homeless people mostly lack access to warm clothes and other safety gear," he said.

Arvind Kasthuri, Professor in the Department of Community Health at St. John's Medical College, explained that the drop in temperature in Bengaluru is unlikely to cause hypothermia leading to deaths, but it can aggravate underlying health conditions and result in serious situations.

"In Bengaluru, falling temperatures, combined with usual factors such as poor air quality and the consumption of low-quality food and water, can prove fatal for people with health issues," he added.

However, many NGOs have stepped in this winter, distributing blankets, food packets, and other healthcare essentials, along with individual donors. In areas such as Yeshwantpur and Vidyaranyapura in north Bengaluru, a few police officers and civil defence personnel have also contributed by providing winter essentials and food to the homeless.



A homeless man takes chelter under the flyover at K.R. Market in Bengaluru. ALLEN EGENUSE J.

> Very rarely do we see homeless people involved in rag-picking or begging joining shelter homes
>
> **MOHAN (NAME CHANGED),** manager of a shelter home

Under the Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana-National Urban Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NULM), a central scheme, civic bodies are required to create infrastructure and enrol homeless people. However, the erstwhile Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagra Palike (BBMP) and the newly formed corporations have done little.

Although shelter homes conduct bi-weekly surveys of homeless people to increase enrolment, NGOs running these homes say there is little support from civic bodies, pointing to scarce fund allocation. On the other hand, many homeless people are reluctant to join shelter homes, which social activist R. Kaleemullah attributes to underlying "fear" and a feeling of being in an "open jail". He also pointed to the existence of "social divisions" within shelter homes.

Although the State has housing schemes, there is nothing exclusively for homeless people who lack or have lost documents such as Aadhaar cards, leaving gaps in the central scheme.

Battling weather, stink, stray dogs

When *The Hindu* travelled across the city to review the conditions faced by homeless people and how they are coping with plummeting temperatures, most had sought shelter under flyovers, near religious institutions, transport hubs, hospitals, and, dangerously, under old trees.

Near K.R. Market, hundreds have taken refuge under the flyover. However, the place itself is uninhabitable. Many sleep in corners of bus stops that stink, often surrounded by leftover food.

"They don't move from here, and many have been living here for years because they work at the market in the mornings and sleep under flyovers at night. Many people give them daily essentials, some just to make videos of themselves giving, but it still helps the poor," said Mohammad Shafeeq, an autorickshaw driver.

A police beat officer added that fights sometimes break out under the influence of alcohol. Many quarrel over "their place to sleep" and even over blankets.

Bala said he earns ₹100 to ₹200 a day by helping traders carry vegetable bags at the market, which he spends on food. "On lucky days, some traders pay ₹50 instead of ₹20. I save that for liquor. I sleep here itself. I don't go anywhere," said Bala, who is originally from Mandya.

As the night progressed, near Vani Vilas Hospital, a few more people had taken shelter near a bus stop, sleeping on the ground. A man from West Bengal, who refused to reveal his name, said, "The bench becomes colder at night, so we sleep on the footpath." When asked why he did not join a shelter home, he replied, "People ask us to move there, but I don't want to go because I am free here. Those who went there told me inmates fight unnecessarily."

Mohan (name changed), manager of a shelter home run by an NGO that operates four other such centres across the city, said people who have separated from families or run away from home usually join shelters on their own. "Very rarely do we see homeless people involved in rag-picking or begging joining shelter homes," he added.

Human rights activist T. Narasimhamurthy said he had encountered homeless women who feared being pushed into the flesh trade. "They are often traumatised and groped on the streets, yet feel safer in open spaces than in shelter homes," he said.

Around Adugodi, NIMHANS, Koramangala, Madiwala, and HSR Layout, homeless individuals were mostly found sleeping alone rather than in groups. For those sleeping alone, stray dogs pose a major threat.

Only 48 shelters instead of 120

Under the NULM policy, civic bodies are responsible for ensuring basic infrastructure such as water supply, sanitation, safety, and security for the homeless. This reporter visited four shelter homes, most of which lacked basic facilities such as adequate lighting, proper beds, water, and sanitation.

The policy mandates that each shelter cater to 50 or more people, barring exceptional situations, yet barely any shelter has more than 40 beds. As per policy requirements, Bengaluru should have at least 120 shelters. Currently, there are only 48 shelters: North City Corporation (12), South City Corporation (7), Central City Corporation (16), East City Corporation (6), and West City Corporation (7).

The scheme mandates four types of shelters – for men, women, families, and special shelters for the mentally challenged, physically challenged, and recovering patients. Bengaluru has no special shelters.

The policy also mandates systematic third-party surveys to assess shelter needs at appropriate locations. Although surveys are conducted, there has been no expansion of shelter homes since 2023, nor any strategic planning. For instance, shelters in Yeshwantpur are always full and need more shelter homes, yet there are only two in the area. In contrast, Mahadevapura and nearby localities have over six shelters, with occupancy rarely exceeding 50%.

A GBA official told *The Hindu* that the Health Department has agreed to provide space in some hospitals to set up shelters, and a few new homes have been commissioned and are expected to become operational soon. "A foundation called Aaladamara has expressed interest in setting up a special shelter home, and the file has been moved," the official added.

The scheme's mandate goes beyond building shelters, as it requires ensuring that no one is deprived of a safe and secure roof. Agencies running shelters are responsible for identifying homeless persons and persuading them to move into shelters. Despite this, a 2023-24 third-party survey identified 1,329 homeless people. Agencies say they conduct biweekly surveys, but many homeless people resist relocation and sometimes even become violent during persuasion attempts.

Narasimhamurthy said the civic body must explore alternative solutions in such cases. "They barely consult activists or social workers to brainstorm ideas or implement schemes effectively. There is general negligence," he said.

Challenges in running shelter homes

"In many centres, beds haven't been replaced for three to four years. Pest control is needed to eliminate bedbugs, but we haven't received funds even for small works, surveys, or logistics for health camps," a shelter home manager said on condition of anonymity.

> Women are often traumatised and groped on the streets, yet they feel safer in open spaces than in shelter homes
>
> **T. NARASIMHAMURTHY**
> Human rights activist

He further said that funds, including salaries for staff, have not been sanctioned to several shelter homes for the past two years. There are also issues with local residents opposing shelter homes.

A GBA welfare wing official admitted that funds had not been released for some shelters. "These shelters needed fresh work orders after contracts ended, but they continued operating without them, so bills were not cleared," he said. When asked about the lack of follow-up, the official acknowledged delays from former zonal offices as well.

Vulnerability, mental health, and solutions

Akshay Hakay Machhindra, DCP, Central Division, said homeless people are highly vulnerable to crimes such as theft and robbery and sometimes even become accused unintentionally.

Homeless people, constantly exposed to harsh weather, also face mental health challenges. "Extreme weather discomfort can increase psychological distress, especially in people with pre-existing anxiety, depression, or trauma-related disorders. Those with poor coping mechanisms are particularly affected," said Suresh Bada Math, Professor of Psychiatry at NIMHANS.

While these concerns are serious, solutions lie in civic bodies taking interest in and empowering their welfare wings. Narasimhamurthy stressed that Human Rights Commissions exist to address such issues and should take note of poor scheme implementation and ensure accountability.



Many NGOs have stepped in this winter, distributing blankets, food packets, and other healthcare essentials, along with individual donors ALLEN EGENUSE J



Medha School in Bowenpally, Secunderabad — a familiar neighbourhood scene of traffic, vendors and people going about their daily routine, concealing an illicit operation that thrived in plain sight. RAMAKRISHNA G.

Illicit business behind an ordinary facade

From a school building in Bowenpally to a chemical unit in Cherlapalli, narcotics operations functioned undisturbed for months and years in different parts of Hyderabad, shielded by familiarity and public trust. This strategy of hiding in plain sight, according to investigators, blunts suspicion, delays intelligence gathering and allows criminal economies to expand quietly. **Naveen Kumar** delves into the networks, methods and audacity of these hidden hubs

Nothing about the lane outside Medha School in Bowenpally suggests that it should be remembered for anything more than the daily school rush. Located on the northwest fringe of Secunderabad, it is narrow, noisy and deeply ordinary. Auto rickshaws idle impatiently in the mornings, vendors selling stationery and snacks hover near the gate and parents linger long enough to ensure their children disappear safely inside the campus. The school building itself rises without drama, a functional concrete structure that blends seamlessly into a neighbourhood shaped by small businesses, rented houses and steady footfall. Nothing about it hints at secrecy. And that, investigators now believe, was precisely the point.

For nearly nine months, while classes were being taught for classes 1 to 10, parts of this same building were being used to manufacture alprazolam, a psychotropic drug that feeds addiction far beyond the lanes of Bowenpally. The facade finally collapsed on September 13 last year, when officers of Telangana's Elite Action Group for Drug Law Enforcement (EAGLE) raided the premises and uncovered a clandestine drug lab operating within the school.

Inside, police seized 3.4 kilograms of finished alprazolam, 4.3 kilograms of unfinished product and ₹21 lakh in cash. Investigators say the money reflected proceeds from just two days of sales. The accused was identified as Malela Jaya Prakash Goud, 39, a resident of Old Bowenpally and director of Medha School. According to investigators, Goud had been running the operation for months, deliberately using the school as a shield against scrutiny.

The building, officers say, had been meticulously compartmentalised to sustain the deception. The cellar housed classrooms, where children sat on benches reciting lessons. The ground floor had a bank, adding another layer of legitimacy and steady public presence. Parts of the first floor were also used for teaching. The rear portion of the structure, however, remained under Goud's exclusive control. "That is where the drug lab was set up. The second floor, which earlier served as a gym, remained locked and largely off limits," says an officer.

That physical separation, he says, ensured the operation ran without raising alarm. "Schools often have restricted areas. Locked rooms don't raise questions. He used that to his advantage," the officer adds.

Across the road, a middle-aged shopkeeper who sells notebooks, pens and school bags leans against his counter, still struggling to process the goings-on. He has been there for over a decade, watching batches of children grow taller and move on. "We did see boxes going in and out sometimes," he says, lowering his voice despite the street's constant din. "But every school has supplies – furniture, exam papers, computers. Who would ever think of drugs?"

> When everything appears routine, suspicion fades, intelligence dries up and the drug trade gets breathing space. Cracking down in such situations takes time, patience and often a bit of luck.
>
> **A SENIOR POLICE OFFICER**

He recalls delivery vehicles arriving at odd hours, sometimes late in the evening. "They weren't secretive. That is what fooled everyone. If someone is hiding something, they act nervous. Here, everything looked normal. Too normal."

A parent who lives two lanes away says the revelation unsettled him in ways he struggles to articulate. "You drop your child at the gate and assume that inside, everything is controlled. Your worries stop at studies. You don't imagine chemicals and drugs," he says, requesting anonymity.

Investigators says Goud supplied the alprazolam to known contacts in Boothpur in Mahabubnagar district. His background, they found, lay far from education. He earlier operated a toddy shop in Mahabubnagar and had paid ₹2 lakh to one Guruva Reddy to obtain the manufacturing formula. Employees assisted in running the operation, and police have identified several chemical suppliers linked to the racket.

As the probe widened, officers say they identified 35 accused connected to the case and have arrested seven so far. Several have approached courts seeking bail and anticipatory bail. The EAGLE Force of Telangana is opposing these pleas, citing the commercial quantity involved.

"Under Section 36A(4) of the NDPS Act, bail cannot be granted for a minimum of 180 days in such cases, which can be extended by another 180 days if the investigation is ongoing. The case is still under investigation and more arrests are likely," says Sandeep Shandilya, director of EAGLE-Telangana.

For residents living around Medha School, the aftermath has been unsettling, to say the least. The gate still opens each morning, but conversations stretch longer than before. Parents now look at the building differently. The familiarity, that was once reassuring, has begun to feel deceptive.



The Medha School in Bowenpally, standing as an emblem of normalcy in a case where appearances proved deeply misleading. RAMAKRISHNA G.

In 2025, the EAGLE Force, formerly the Telangana Anti-Narcotics Bureau, recorded its most aggressive year of enforcement since its inception, targeting both street-level supply chains and organised interstate and international drug networks. Operations extended across Telangana and multiple States, involving coordinated action with Central agencies, police forces and financial intelligence units.

Across Telangana, 2,542 NDPS cases were registered up to November 30 last year, involving 8,322 accused. Drugs worth ₹172.93 crore were seized, including consignments intercepted during inter-State operations and handed over to agencies in Goa, Maharashtra, Delhi and Ranchi.

The average number of accused per case stood at just over three, indicating a shift towards dismantling distribution networks rather than making isolated arrests.

An industrial belt offering deception

Just days later, in Cherlapalli, about 14 kilometres north of Bowenpally, another discovery startled the local law enforcement. Hyderabad's drug trade, they realised, was not hiding in abandoned buildings or dark alleys; it was thriving in places engineered to appear legitimate.

The Cherlapalli industrial area sprawls across the city's eastern edge, wide and dusty, a dense patchwork of warehouses, chemical units and transport offices stitched together by narrow roads and routine. It is a zone built on movement. Tankers thunder past, carrying liquids few can pronounce. Workers clock in and out at irregular hours. Activity rarely pauses long enough to draw attention.

> Some factories work day and night. So when vehicles move at strange hours, nobody notices.
>
> **A TEA STALL OWNER NEAR THE CHERLAPALLI DRUG BUST AREA**

Vagdevi Laboratories fit neatly into this landscape. From the outside, it looked no different from its neighbouring units. Its walls were plain, its signboard modest. Trucks rolled in and out. Labourers arrived with lunch boxes slung over their shoulders. It was, by all outward measures, a functioning chemical factory.

At a small stall a few metres away, a man in his mid-50s pours countless glasses of tea every day. He knows the rhythms of the area intimately. "This place never sleeps," he says, wiping his hands on a cloth. "Some factories work day and night. So when vehicles move at strange hours, nobody notices."

Shipments from Vagdevi Laboratories, he says, appeared routine. "Tankers, cartons, chemicals... this is Cherlapalli. That is normal." What briefly caught his eye were the cars. "You would see fancy cars, coming fast and leaving fast; not what you expect for a small unit. But even then, you think maybe the owner is rich."

Behind those walls, investigators allege, operated a large scale mephedrone manufacturing unit that had been running quietly for years. The case came to light far from Cherlapalli.

Bus stop bust to global supply line

About a month before the raid, on August 8, Maharashtra police arrested Fatima Murad Shaikh, alias Molla, 23, at the Kashimira bus stop on Mira Road in Thane district. She was found with 178 grams of mephedrone and ₹23.97 lakh in cash. During questioning, she told investigators her source was based in Telangana.

That disclosure triggered a chain of events that brought the Mira Bhayandar-Vasai Virar Crime Branch to Hyderabad. Officers arrived quietly, placed Vagdevi Laboratories under surveillance and began tracking patterns. When they raided the premises on September 5, their suspicions were confirmed.

Inside the unit, police recovered nearly 5.8 kilograms of finished mephedrone, 35,500 litres of precursor chemicals, 950 kilograms of chemical powder and specialised manufacturing equipment. An officer involved in the probe says the volume of precursor alone could have yielded around 6,000 kilograms of mephedrone. At an estimated international market price of ₹20,000 per gram, the potential output was valued at nearly ₹12,000 crore.

The prime accused, Srinivas Vijay Voleti, 34, owner of Vagdevi Laboratories Pvt Ltd, was taken into custody along with the firm's chemical analyst, Tanaji. During questioning, Voleti allegedly admitted to manufacturing and selling mephedrone since 2020, supplying markets in cities such as Mumbai and to buyers in Dubai and parts of Europe. Officers described him as tech savvy and highly cautious, avoiding mainstream communication platforms and relying instead on lesser-known applications.

Laboratory analysis conducted in Mumbai confirmed the seized substance as a scheduled chemical. Investigators say synthetic drug manufacturers across southern India have increasingly shifted towards compounds such as 3-Chloromethcathinone (3 CMC), underlining how quickly these networks adapt to enforcement pressure. Agencies including the Narcotics Control Bureau, air cargo operators and international counterparts have been alerted as police work towards tracing overseas buyers.

The Cherlapalli probe also intersected with the life and death of Azim Abu Salem Khan, 51, a history-sheeter wanted in multiple narcotics cases. Khan was tracked to a flat in Pune's Kondhwa area in October. When officers attempted to arrest him, he allegedly resisted, bit a constable and collapsed within minutes. He was declared dead on arrival at a hospital. An autopsy later pointed to head injuries and coronary atherosclerosis, and the State CID took over the probe as per protocol. Police said Khan had been a drug addict for over a decade and a heart patient for several years.

Investigators allege Khan was a key link in a larger trafficking network that connected manufacturing units, couriers and money handlers. His name also surfaced in parallel financial investigations. In November, during an operation in Goa, the EAGLE Force busted a Nigerian cartel, seizing consignments worth ₹2.85 crore and uncovering a hawala network involving transactions linked to ₹65 lakh. Raids across multiple States led to the arrest of 20 hawala operators and the seizure of ₹3.08 crore. Police said drug proceeds were routed abroad through the purchase of goods shipped via cargo services.

At the tail end of the investigation, a senior officer sums up the challenge bluntly: "What makes cases like these so difficult is that nothing looks criminal at first glance – a school, a factory, a business operating in full public view. These are fronts hiding in plain sight, and that is what complicates enforcement. When everything appears routine, suspicion fades, intelligence dries up and the drug trade gets breathing space. Cracking down in such situations takes time, patience and often a bit of luck. By the time we see through the facade, the damage is already widespread."

That sense of ordinariness, officers say, is the most effective camouflage of all. When drugs operate behind school bells and factory sirens, detection becomes harder and the consequences stretch far beyond the places that first appear untouched.

INBRIEF



Maruti produces more than 22.55 lakh vehicles in CY2025

Maruti Suzuki India Ltd. said it had produced more than 22.55 lakh units in calendar year (CY) 2025, its highest-ever production in a calendar year. "This is the second consecutive year that the company exceeded 20 lakh units in annual production," it said. The production includes vehicles for domestic sales, exports and OEM supplies. The top five models by production volume during the year were Fronx, Baleno, Swift, Dzire and Ertiga.

LIC rolls out revival campaign for individual lapsed policies

The Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC) has launched a special revival campaign for individual lapsed policies. Under the campaign, from January 1 to March 2, up to 30% concession will be extended on late fee for all non-linked insurance plans up to a maximum of ₹5,000 if they are eligible for revival. Policies in a lapsed condition during the premium paying term and not completed policy term are eligible to be revived.

Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal can directly buy coal from CIL

State-owned CIL on Friday said buyers from neighbouring nations Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal can now join online coal auctions directly, skipping the Indian middlemen. The move will help in utilising the surplus coal resources better and promote transparency. Earlier, access to Coal India Ltd.'s (CIL) dry fuel by consumers across the borders was only through domestic coal traders who were allowed to buy and sell without any end-use restrictions. PTI

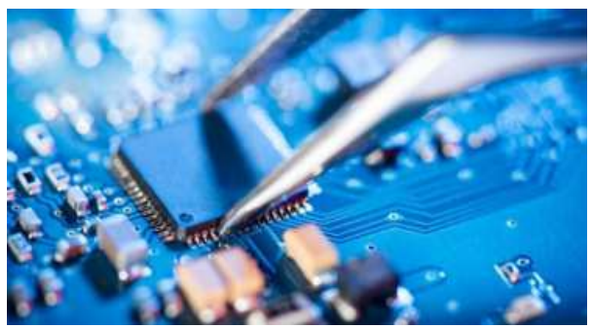
MeitY okays 22 more projects for electronic part sops

Projects approved amount to an investment of ₹41,863 crore; scheme is designed to push firms to be first to finish line to avail of the incentives

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) approved 22 new projects under the ₹22,919 crore Electronics Component Manufacturing Scheme (ECMS).

Under ECMS, companies making electronic parts will receive payouts based on incremental production and employment. The projects approved under Friday's tranche amount to a combined investment of ₹41,863 crore, the IT Ministry said.



Electronic boost: Small firms as well as established heavyweights would receive the incentives, says Vaishnaw. GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

Small firms in India as well as established heavyweights such as Tata Electronics Pvt. Ltd. would receive the incentives, according to IT Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw.

The payouts are likely to be a race, as the government will award incentives to firms who finish production roadmap first.

NTPC exploring international collaborations for nuclear plans

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI

NTPC is exploring multiple international collaborations in the area of technology and fuel to push its nuclear ambitions to diversify energy generation.

NTPC is looking to set up around 30 GW of company-owned nuclear projects across various locations in the country in line with the government's ambition of having 100 GW nuclear capacity by 2047.

Sources said the firm is eyeing 2 GW of nuclear capacity as early as 2032.

Tech agreements

For technology, NTPC has entered into non-disclosure agreements with global energy players Rosatom and EDF to explore collaboration on deploying large pressurised water reactor projects in India, they said. Besides, NTPC and Holtec International are exploring the deployment of small modular reactors (SMRs) in future nuclear projects.

SMRs offer potential advantages in terms of modular construction, enhanced safety and suitability for phased deployment. NTPC is also evaluating a minority equity investment in U.S.-based Clean Core Thorium Energy.



Lacking lustre: HSBC India Manufacturing Purchasing Managers' Index fell from 56.6 in November to 55.0 in December. REUTERS

Manufacturing PMI at 2-year low in Dec. on easing new orders

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Expansion in India's manufacturing performance slowed to a two-year low in December, with the rate of new business orders, production, and employment growth all slowing, as per a private sector survey.

The seasonally-adjusted HSBC India Manufacturing Purchasing Managers' Index fell from 56.6 in November to 55.0 in December. The last time it was lower was in December 2023, when the index value had touched 54.9.

"The end of the 2025 calendar year was characterised by a loss of growth momentum across several measures tracked by the HSBC India Manufacturing PMI survey," HSBC India said in the report. "Positive demand trends continued to underpin sharp increases in new business intakes and production, but rates of expansion eased on the back of competitive pressures and subdued sales of specific items."

Specifically, the report said new work orders rose at the weakest pace since December 2023, output levels at the slowest pace since October 2022 while employment climbed at the slowest pace in the last 22 months.

"We have seen a steady spell of softer growth in new export orders," Pollyanna De Lima, economics associate director at S&P Global Market Intelligence, said. "In fact, the share of companies signalling higher international sales in December was about half of the average for 2025."

The data showed new export orders rose the least in 14 months in December 2025. The report added, in the few cases where growth was anticipated, the orders came from clients in Asia, Europe and the Middle East.

"Indian goods producers foresee an increase in output during 2026 relative to present levels, but the overall level of sentiment faded to its lowest in close to three-and-a-half years," the report said.

MARKETS

MARKET WATCH

	FRIDAY	% CHANGE
Sensex	85,762	0.67
US Dollar	90.20	-0.24
Gold	1,39,440	0.80
Brent oil	60.26	------

NIFTY 50

	PRICE	CHANGE
Adani Enter	2279.80	19.80
Adani Ports	1489.50	8.40
Apollo Hosp	7129.50	18.00
Asian Paints	2772.60	20.60
Axis Bank	1266.90	-7.50
Bajaj Auto	9502.50	-55.50
Bajaj Finserv	2038.40	1.40
Bajaj Finance	990.45	17.35
Bharat Elec	403.15	5.45
Bharti Airtel	2106.30	-4.10
Cipla	1511.60	10.70
Coal India	427.90	27.45
Dr Reddys Lab	1256.10	2.70
Hindustan Unilever	40.20	0.00
Eicher Motors	7334.50	-13.50
Eternal Ltd.	284.15	0.35
Grasim Ind	2856.40	4.70
HCL Tech	1640.20	5.70
HDFC Bank	1001.60	10.45
HDFC Life	754.85	4.75
Hindalco	925.70	30.75
Hind Unilever	2348.00	25.00
ICICI Bank	1355.40	17.40
IntGlobeAvi	5106.00	-4.50
Infosys	1640.40	10.60
ITC	350.05	-13.80
Jio Financial Servic-es Ltd.	301.70	6.00
JSW Steel	1180.70	9.20
Kotak Bank	2195.10	-22.70
L&T	4163.40	23.00
M&M	3802.40	41.40
Maruti Suzuki	16960.00	252.00
Max Healthcare	1062.60	13.20
NestleIndia	1279.70	-15.30
NTPC	352.10	15.80
ONGC	241.46	3.52
PowerGrid Corp	270.95	4.15
Reliance Ind	1592.30	16.70
SBI Life	2067.40	27.00
State Bank	998.95	14.20
Shriram Finance Ltd.	1010.35	-9.35
Sun Pharma	1728.00	6.90
TataConsumerPro-duct	1170.70	-6.20
Tata Steel	182.88	0.99
TCS	3250.70	23.30
Tech Mahindra	1612.00	4.30
Titan	4051.70	2.40
Tata Motors PV	370.35	2.80
Trent Ltd.	4409.60	112.20
UltraTech Cement	11899.00	-2.00
Wipro	269.00	1.65

NHPC to raise ₹2,000 crore

NHPC announced plans to raise ₹2,000 crore via issuance of bonds in single or multiple tranches. The amount will be part of its borrowing plan for the ongoing financial year. PTI

Export Promotion Mission: Govt. unveils 2 more credit-linked plans

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Government introduced two new components in the Export Promotion Mission (EPM) aimed at easing and reducing the cost of the credit-access process for exporters.

This comes days after the Ministry of Commerce and Industry notified guidelines for a market access scheme under the EPM. With Friday's announcement, three of the 11 schemes under the EPM have been operationalised.

The two schemes would entail an outlay of ₹5,181 crore over six years until 2030-31. The two schemes were under the Niryat Protsahan category, which is meant to lower the cost of credit for exporters.



Export boost: The two schemes would entail an outlay of ₹5,181 cr. over six years until 2030-31. GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

Interest Subvention for Pre- and Post-Shipment Export Credit scheme will reduce the cost of export finance and "strengthens MSME liquidity, improve competitiveness and supports India's integration into global value chains, while ensuring fiscal prudence and compliance," the Ministry of Commerce said in its announcement.

Interest subvention

"Eligible MSME exporters can avail interest subvention on rupee export credit (pre- and post-shipment) extended by scheduled banks, in accordance with RBI Master Directions," it added. The second subscheme – Collateral Support for Export Credit – is aimed at giving MSME exporters the ability to access bank credit even with limited collateral or third-party guarantees.

The scheme would be implemented through the Credit Guarantee Fund Trust for Micro and Small Enterprises (CGTMSE) on a pilot basis and be applicable to export-linked working capital loans.

MSME exporters exporting notified tariff lines will be eligible for the collateral support.

Micro & small exporters would be eligible for up to 85% guarantee, while medium exporters would be capped at a 65% guarantee.

Adani Enterprises launches ₹1,000-cr. third public issue of NCDs,

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI

Adani Enterprises Limited (AEL), the flagship company of the Adani Group, has announced its third public issue of secured, rated, listed non-convertible debentures (NCDs), targeting a total size of ₹1,000 crore.

The issue, opening on January 6 and closing on January 19, 2026, offers an effective yield of up to 8.90% per annum, the company said. The base size is ₹500 crore, with a green shoe option of an additional ₹500 crore.

NCDs are proposed to be listed on BSE and NSE and will be allotted on a first-come, first-served basis. Rated 'AA-' with a stable outlook by ICRA and CARE Ratings, the NCDs offer competitive yields compared with similarly rated debt and fixed deposits, giving retail investors an opportunity to participate in India's infrastructure growth. AEL's second NCD issuance of ₹1,000 crore in July 2025 was fully subscribed in just three hours on the first day, reflecting strong investor confidence.

Proceeds from at least 75% of the issue will be used to repay existing debt, while the balance may be deployed for general corporate purposes, the statement said. The NCDs are available in 24, 36 and 60 month tenors, with quarterly, annual, and cumulative interest payment options across eight series. AEL continues to expand its infrastructure footprint.

Customs, CGST deficit to hit FY26 indirect tax target

Sourashis Banerjee
CHENNAI

The spotlight is now on the decline in income tax collections and falling direct tax revenue. But indirect tax collections of the Centre are also under stress in FY26.

A *businessline* analysis of Controller General of Accounts (CGA) data shows Customs duty collections declined 7.3% in April-November 2025 to ₹1.43 lakh crore compared with ₹1.54 lakh crore a year-earlier.

CGST collections also registered only 5.4% growth in this period, much below the budgeted 10.9% rise.

Actuals vs budgeted

The Customs duty currently account for 6.1% of the Centre's gross tax revenue. The Union Budget had pencilled in 2.13% growth in Customs receipts for FY26 but the YTD drop of 7.3% indicates that the target is likely to be missed.

CA Neha Beriwala, partner at SK Patodia & Associates LLP, says the shortfall is linked to "tariff rationalisation over the last few Budgets, which reduced the effective duty rate though volumes stay steady. Going forward, sustained growth in Customs duty will depend more on a recovery in demand and trade, rather than further compliance tightening."

Visible moderation

Moderation is also visible in CGST collections, which recorded a moderate rise, well below the growth assumed in the FY26 Budget. According to Manoj Mishra, tax controversy management leader at Grant Thornton Bharat, "CGST



The Union Budget had pencilled in 2.13% growth in Customs receipts for FY26.

growth has moderated, compared with the double-digit growth in earlier years, largely because the rate rationalisation under GST 2.0 lowered the tax burden on several goods and services making it unlikely the CGST will meet its budgeted target without a late-year surge."

Excise bucks the trend

The outlier among indirect taxes is Union Excise Duty, which outperformed the Budget Estimate. Receipts have increased 9.25% YTD, higher than the 3.9% growth budgeted for FY26.

The turnaround follows the April 7, 2025, hike in excise duty on petroleum products, which ended a three-year stretch of sliding excise revenues and restored the category as a meaningful contributor to Centre's indirect tax kitty.

"Taken together, these point to an indirect tax system moving towards a more calibrated, policy-led revenue model, where stability will increasingly depend on sustaining domestic demand and keeping trade and tax policies aligned with growth," says Mishra.

(The writer is with The Hindu businessline)

UCO Bank reports 13% growth in Q3 total business to ₹5.54 lakh cr.

Press Trust of India
KOLKATA

Public sector lender UCO Bank on Friday reported a 13.29% growth in its total business to ₹5.54 lakh crore for the third quarter of the current fiscal. The bank's total business stood at ₹4.89 lakh crore in the corresponding period of the previous year.

According to a regulatory filing, the Kolkata-head quartered bank's total advances rose by 16.27% to ₹2.43 lakh crore during the quarter that ended in December, compared with ₹2.09 lakh crore in the year-ago period.

Local advances

Domestic advances during the quarter saw a higher growth of 17.49%, climbing to ₹2.15 lakh crore from ₹1.83 lakh crore.

On the deposits front, UCO Bank registered a 10.71% increase, with total deposits reaching ₹3.10 lakh crore from ₹2.80 lakh crore in the quarter that ended in December 2024.

Local deposits

Domestic deposits grew 10.19% to ₹2.92 lakh crore during the quarter under review.

The bank's domestic CASA (Current Account Savings Account) ratio, a key indicator of low-cost funds, improved to 38.41%, compared with 37.97% in the same quarter of the previous fiscal. The Credit-Deposit (CD) ratio of the lender stood at 78.61% at the end of the December 2025 quarter, up from 74.45% in the year-ago period.

'Anticipating risks before they surface'

Lalatendu Mishra
MUMBAI

The next phase of market development would be defined not just by scale, but by quality and sophistication, Securities & Exchange Board of India (SEBI) Chairman Tuhin Kanta Pandey said on Friday.

"Our priorities include continued strengthening of corporate governance standards, promoting sustainable finance and long-term value creation, encouraging innovation while keeping investor protection at the centre and responsible use of technology and data in market operations and supervision,"



Tuhin Kanta Pandey

he said. "As markets evolve emerging technologies– particularly artificial intelligence– along with deeper global linkages, bring new efficiencies but also fresh complexities. The next frontier therefore lies in anticipating risks before they surface," he emphasised.

'Gig economy reflects systemic inequality'

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Days after the New Year's Eve protest by gig and delivery workers across the country, Zomato founder Deepinder Goyal on Friday said that the gig economy is a "reminder of systemic inequality", crediting it for purportedly "shattering" the "invisibility" of the poor's labour in India.

In what Mr. Goyal referred to as his "last one on the topic" in his series of statements on social media over December 31 protests, he argued this was the "first time in history at this scale" the working class and consuming class are



Deepinder Goyal

interacting face-to-face.

He went on to argue before gig work, "the rich could enjoy luxury without moral discomfort", adding that this "discomfort with our own selves is why we are uncomfortable about the gig economy". "Visibility is the price of progress", he posited.

SEOUL

Kim Jong-un's daughter makes public visit to state mausoleum



AFP

North Korean leader Kim Jong-un's daughter, Ju Ae, who is likely being prepared as his successor, accompanied her parents on her first public visit to the Kumsusan mausoleum to pay respects to former leaders. Ms. Ju Ae has been making increasingly prominent appearances in state media over the past three years. REUTERS

COLOMBO

Sri Lanka launches probe over English syllabus' gay website link



AFP

Sri Lanka launched a criminal investigation on Friday after a government syllabus for 11 and 12-year-olds directed pupils to a gay chat website to improve their language skills. The Grade Six English syllabus suggested pupils could find a pen-pal to improve their language skills via *buddy.net* — an online chat website. AFP

KARACHI

Pakistan permits Biman Airways to start direct flights to Karachi



AP

Pakistan's aviation authorities have issued permission to the Bangladesh national airline, Biman Airways, to start direct operations on the route of Dhaka-Karachi. According to a report on Friday in the *Jang* newspaper, permission has been given on a test basis for a period that will last until March 30. PTI

KYIV

Ukraine's Zelenskyy names spy chief Budanov as new top aide



AFP

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Friday named military intelligence chief Kyrylo Budanov as the new head of his office, after his previous top aide resigned in November over a corruption scandal. Mr. Budanov, 39, said he had accepted the nomination and would "continue to serve Ukraine". AFP

Pak. court awards life sentences for journalists, YouTubers over protests

The anti-terrorism court sentences seven persons to life for inciting violence and spreading hatred against state institutions during the 2023 riots; they were tried and convicted in absentia; rights groups and media organisations condemn verdict

Associated Press
ISLAMABAD

A court in Pakistan's capital sentenced seven persons, including three journalists, two YouTubers and two retired army officers, to life imprisonment on Friday, after convicting them of inciting violence during riots in 2023 and spreading hatred against state institutions.

An anti-terrorism court judge, Tahir Abbas Sipra, announced the verdict in Islamabad after completing trials held in absentia.

None of the accused were present in court. They have been living abroad after leaving the country in recent years to avoid arrest.



Journalists protest against 'curbs on press freedom' and 'excessive control of the digital landscape', in Karachi, in January 2025. REUTERS

Those convicted include former editor Shaheen Sehbai; two other journalists, Sabir Shakir and Moeed Pirzada; YouTubers Wajahat Saeed Khan and Haider Raza Mehdi; and retired army officers Adil Raja and Akbar Hussain.

According to the court order, the charges against the men stemmed from the violent unrest that erupted in May 2023 following the arrest of former Prime Minister Imran Khan in a graft case.

At the time, thousands of Mr. Khan's supporters attacked military installations, torched government property, ransacked the residence of a senior army officer and damaged the state-run *Radio Pakistan* building.

Mr. Khan was also indicted in 2024 on charges of inciting violence against military and government targets. He has denied the allegations. He was ousted from power by his political opponents through a no-confidence vote in Parliament in April 2022.

According to the prosecution, the seven men, who are known for publicly supporting Mr. Khan, had incited people to violence during the riots on May 9, 2023, when demonstrators targeted military installations, because Mr. Khan repeatedly blamed his removal on the United States and Pakistan's military.

The U.S. government, the Pakistani military and Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, who replaced Mr. Khan after his ouster, have denied the allegations.

Human rights defenders and representatives of journalists' unions say freedom of speech is shrinking in Pakistan.

Yemen separatists declare independence transition

Agence France-Presse
MUKALLA

Yemen's UAE-backed separatists announced a two-year transition to an independent state on Friday after seizing swathes of territory in a lightning offensive that triggered deadly air strikes by a Saudi-led coalition.

The surprise announcement means Yemen, which was divided into North and South from 1967 to 1990, could again be split by January 2028. The separatists plan to call the new country "South Arabia".

Southern Transitional Council (STC) president Aidaros Alzubidi said the transitional phase would include dialogue with Yemen's north – controlled by Iran-backed Houthi rebels – and a referendum on independence.



Supporters of the UAE-backed separatist Southern Transitional Council during a rally in Aden, Yemen, on Thursday. REUTERS

But on a day when seven separatist fighters died in air strikes, he warned the group would declare independence "immediately" if there was no dialogue or if southern Yemen again came under attack.

"We announce the commencement of a transitional phase lasting two years, and the Council calls on the international community to sponsor dialogue between the parties concerned in the South and the North," Mr. Alzubidi said in a televised address.

"This constitutional declaration shall be considered immediately and directly effective before that date if the call is not heeded or if the people of the South, their land, or their forces are subjected to any military attacks," he added.

Speedy recovery



Rescue workers use heavy machinery to clear rubble where a 16-storey residential building under construction collapsed, leaving at least four persons believed to be trapped, near a shopping centre in the South C neighbourhood of Nairobi, Kenya on Friday. REUTERS

Denying medical assistance to civilians unacceptable, says MSF on Israeli ban

Agence France-Presse
JERUSALEM

International charity Doctors Without Borders on Friday condemned a "grave blow to humanitarian aid" after Israel revoked the status it needs to operate in Gaza for refusing to share Palestinian staff lists.

Israel on Thursday confirmed it had banned access to the Gaza Strip to 37 foreign humanitarian organisations for refusing to share lists of their Palestinian employees.

Doctors Without Borders (MSF), which has 1,200 staff members in the Palestinian territories, the majority of them in Gaza, said in a statement that "denying medical assistance to civilians is unacceptable under any circumstances".



A Palestinian woman holds a child as she speaks to a member of staff at the Doctors Without Borders, in Gaza City on Wednesday. AFP

The medical organisation argued that it had "legitimate concerns" over new Israeli requirements for foreign NGO registration, specifically the disclosing of personal information about Palestinian staff.

It pointed to the fact that 15 MSF staff had been "killed by Israeli forces", and that access to any given territory should not be conditional on staff list disclosure. "Demanding staff lists as a condition for access to territory is an outrageous overreach," the charity said.

MSF also denounced "the absence of any clarity about how such sensitive data will be used, stored, or shared", charging that Israeli forces "have killed and wounded hundreds of thousands of civilians" in Gaza during the war.

It also charged that Israel had "manufactured shortages of basic necessities by blocking and delaying the entry of essential goods, including medical supplies".

Israel controls and regulates all entry points into Gaza, which is surrounded by a wall that began to be built in 2005.

Felipe Ribero, MSF head of mission in the Palestinian territories, said that all of its operations were still ongoing in Gaza.

"We are supposed to leave under 60 days, but we don't know whether it will be three or 60 days" before Israeli authorities force MSF to leave, he said.

Prominent humanitarian organisations hit by the Israeli ban include the Norwegian Refugee Council, World Vision International and Oxfam, according to an Israeli ministry list.

Russian strike injures 19 in Kharkiv housing area, says Ukraine

Agence France-Presse
KHARKIV/KYIV

A Russian strike Friday on residential buildings in the major Ukrainian city of Kharkiv wounded at least 19 people, Ukrainian officials said.

The attack came a day after Russia accused Kyiv of a strike on a hotel and a cafe in Khorly in Ukraine's occupied south, killing 28 people, and warned of "consequences" – but Ukraine said the attack targeted a military gathering that was closed to civilians.

Kharkiv regional governor Oleg Synegubov said on Telegram after Russia's attack on Friday that "a total of 19 people suffered blast injuries, glass wounds, and abrasions", adding that a six-month-old baby was among them.

Ukraine has also ordered the evacuation of more than 3,000 children and their parents from 44 frontline settlements in the Zaporizhzhia and Dnipropetrovsk regions, a Ukrainian official said on Friday.

'Fountain candle' sparklers likely started Swiss bar fire which killed 40: prosecutor

Reuters
CRANS-MONTANA

A fire that tore through a bar at a Swiss ski resort killing at least 40 people likely started when "fountain candle" sparklers were held aloft too close to the ceiling, the region's chief prosecutor said on Friday.

Investigators are combing through the blackened ruins of the venue, examining videos on social media and interviewing survivors for clues on how the fire began in the early hours of New Year's Day in the bar and spread so fast.



Mourners gather near the site of a fire that ripped through a bar in Crans-Montana, during a New Year's celebration, on Friday. AFP

Witnesses have recounted seeing bar staff carrying sparkling fountain candles attached to bottles of champagne. The Valais canton's chief prosecutor, Beatrice Pilloud, said the sparklers were a leading line of enquiry that looked to be firming up.

"Everything suggests that the fire started from the burning sparklers ... that had been attached to champagne bottles and were moved too close to the ceiling," Ms. Pilloud told a news conference. "From there, a rapid, very rapid and widespread blaze ensued."

The probe will also focus on previous renovations at the Constellation bar and the materials used, the availability of adequate fire extinguishing systems and escape routes, and the number of people who were in the bar.

Maduro holds out olive branch to U.S., suggests serious talks

Reuters
MADRID

Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro has extended an olive branch to U.S. President Donald Trump, proposing serious talks on combating drug trafficking and offering U.S. companies ready access to Venezuelan oil.

Mr. Maduro said Venezuela was a "brother country" to the United States and a friendly government. He noted that when he and Mr. Trump last spoke in November, the U.S. President had acknowledged his authority by addressing him as "Mr. President".

The comments represent a shift in Mr. Maduro's tone towards the United States since the latter launched a large-scale military build-up in the southern Caribbean.

Mr. Trump has accused the "illegitimate" Maduro of running a narco-state and threatened to remove him from power. Mr. Maduro has vehemently denied links to crime.



In one voice: An activist shouts slogans during a protest against new criminal code. REUTERS

Indonesia replaces Dutch-era law with new criminal code

Associated Press
JAKARTA

Indonesia on Friday began enforcing its newly ratified penal code, replacing a Dutch-era criminal law that had governed the country for more than 80 years and marking a major shift in its legal landscape.

Since proclaiming independence in 1945, the Southeast Asian country has continued to operate under a colonial framework widely criticised as outdated and misaligned with Indonesia's social values. Efforts to revise the code stalled for decades as lawmakers debated how to balance human rights, religious norms and local traditions in the world's populous Muslim-majority nation.

The 345-page Indonesian Penal Code, known as the KUHP, was passed in 2022. At the time, then-U.S. State Department spokesperson Ned Price said the U.S. was "closely monitoring the revised criminal code" of its democratic partner.

It criminalises sex outside marriage and reintroduces penalties for insulting the President and state institutions. It comes into force following a three-year transition period.

The enforcement of the new penal code marks "the end of the colonial criminal law era and the beginning of a more humane, modern, and just legal system rooted in Indonesian culture," said Coordinating Minister for Law, Human Rights, Immigration, and Corrections Yusril Ihza Mahendra.

"This is a historic moment for the Indonesian nation," he said.

However, Human Rights Watch warned that the morality-based provisions could lead to invasions of privacy and selective enforcement.

Tent fire kills grandmother, grandson in Gaza as humanitarian crisis deepens

Winter rains, flooding and unsafe nylon tents expose displaced Palestinians to deadly risks, with children among those dying from hypothermia, fires and collapsing buildings; aid groups warn that insufficient shelter materials, limits on humanitarian access are worsening conditions on the ground

Associated Press
GAZA STRIP

A grandmother and her five-year-old grandson burned to death in Gaza when their tent caught fire, as thousands of Palestinians battle harrowing winter conditions in flimsy makeshift housing and the humanitarian crisis deepens.

The nylon tent in Yarmouk caught fire on Thursday night from cooking, a neighbour said.

'No signs of abating'

As 2026 begins, the shaky 12-week-old ceasefire between Israel and Hamas has largely ended large-scale Israeli bombardment of Gaza. But Palestinians are still being killed almost daily by Israeli fire, and the humanitarian crisis shows no signs of abating.

Over the past weeks, cold winter rains have repeatedly lashed the sprawling tent cities, causing flooding, turning Gaza's dirt roads into mud, and causing buildings damaged in Israeli bombardment to collapse.

UNICEF says at least six children have now died of weather-related causes, including a four-year-old who died in a building collapse.

At least three children have died of hypothermia, according to Gaza's Health Ministry.



After the flames: Fatima Abu al-Bayd looks over the remains of her mother's tent after her mother and her grandchild were killed when it caught fire overnight at the Yarmouk displacement camp on Friday. AP

Aid groups say not enough shelter materials are getting into Gaza during the truce. Figures recently released by Israel's military suggest it has not met the ceasefire stipulation of allowing 600 trucks of aid into Gaza a day, though Israel disputes that finding.

There is also concern that Israel's recent suspension of more than three dozen international aid groups from operating in Gaza will make it even harder to get supplies like tents in.

Call for mobile homes

Palestinians have long called for mobile homes and caravans to be allowed in to protect them against living in impractical and worn-out tents. In Yarmouk, people live in nylon tents near a garbage dump.

Ashraf al-Suwair said he woke up to the sound of screaming as his neighbours shouted "fire! fire!" He said the nylon is like fuel, easy to ignite.

"We need a good place that suits the people and the children of Gaza, instead of burning to death," he said.

On Friday, the Foreign Ministers of Arab and Muslim countries, including Egypt, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, expressed concern about Gaza's deteriorating humanitarian situation.

The Israel-Hamas war began with the Hamas-led attack in southern Israel on October 7, 2023, that killed about 1,200 people and saw 251 taken hostage

The situation has been "compounded by the continued lack of sufficient humanitarian access, acute shortages of essential life-saving supplies, and the slow pace of the entry of essential materials," said the joint statement.

Since the ceasefire between Israel and Hamas began, 414 people have been killed and 1,142 wounded in Gaza, according to the Health Ministry. The overall Palestinian death toll from the war is at least 71,266.

The Ministry, which does not distinguish between militants and civilians in its count, is staffed by medical professionals and maintains detailed records viewed as generally reliable by the international community.

The Israel-Hamas war began with the Hamas-led attack in southern Israel on October 7, 2023, that killed about 1,200 people and saw 251 taken hostage.

Meanwhile, Israel continues operating in the occupied West Bank.

On Friday, the Palestinian Prisoners' media office said Israel carried out wide-scale raids across the territory, including Ramallah and Hebron. Nearly 50 people were detained.

Israel's military said there were arrests made of people "involved in terrorist activity."

This follows the arrest of at least 50 other Palestinians on Thursday, most of those occurred in the Ramallah area.

The Palestinian Prisoners' Society says that Israel has arrested 7,000 Palestinians in the West Bank and Jerusalem this year, and 21,000 since the war began on October 7, 2023. The number arrested from Gaza is not made public by Israel.

Rise in violence

Violence in the West Bank has surged during the war in Gaza, with the Israeli military carrying out large-scale operations targeting militants that have killed hundreds of Palestinians and displaced tens of thousands.

There has also been a rise in Israeli settler violence and Palestinian attacks on Israelis.

Faces of survival



Safe aboard: Migrants pose onboard the rescue ship *Ocean Viking*, operated by SOS Mediterranee, in international waters near Malta on Thursday. The crew rescued 33 migrants who had been stranded for five days on the oil tanker Maridive 703 in the Mediterranean. AFP

Australia's Northern Territory plans legislation on doctor-assisted dying

Associated Press
MELBOURNE

The first place in the world to legalise voluntary euthanasia 31 years ago could this year become the last part of Australia to secure the same legal reform, as the Northern Territory government on Friday announced plans to legislate for doctor-assisted dying for a second time.

The Northern Territory's world-first laws, passed in 1995, were overturned by the Australian Parliament two years later and after four terminally ill patients were legally helped to die. Since then, all six Australian states have passed assisted dying laws and the Australian Parliament has lifted the ban on the two territories, the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory, passing such laws of their own.



Northern Territory Attorney-General Marie-Clare Boothby says that lawmakers in her jurisdiction will consider a Bill by mid 2026. AP

The Australian Capital Territory passed its voluntary euthanasia laws in 2024 and Northern Territory Attorney-General Marie-Clare Boothby said on Friday that lawmakers in her jurisdiction would consider a Bill by mid 2026.

Lawmakers would be allowed to vote on it according to their own consciences rather than being expected to follow a party line. "Legislating for the rights of the terminally ill is one of the most sensitive and complex reforms any government can undertake," Ms. Boothby said in a statement. "We're taking the time to get this right. We're working carefully and consultatively – not rushing it – and we are committed to getting the balance right." A parliamentary committee recommended in September 2025 that a doctor-assisted suicide law be adopted by the Northern Territory, as well as recommending a public education campaign be launched to raise awareness and counter misinformation, particularly in remote and Indigenous communities.

Drafting of the Bill was underway, Ms. Boothby said.

Northern Territory Legislative Assembly Speaker Robyn Lambley said establishing adequate education about the assisted dying law for Indigenous people, many of whom don't speak English as a first language, was "probably unrealistic."

"I don't think we're ready," Ms. Lambley said in an online post. "Maybe we'll never be ready in the Territory. Aboriginal people have reluctance around accessing health services for anything, even having babies." "It will be a disaster. We just need to take it at our own pace," she added.

South Koreans now free to read North's newspaper, once banned as seditious

Agence France-Presse
SEOUL

Packed with missile tests, propaganda hailing the great leaders and tirades against the United States, North Korea's top newspaper was long considered so incendiary that South Korea banned its citizens from reading it.

No application

But dovish President Lee Jae Myung is now seeking better ties with Pyongyang and has joked that he doesn't believe the public will "become commies" by reading the *Rodong Sinmun*.

That means from this week, South Koreans can access the publication – whose name means "Workers' Newspaper" – at select locations without state approval.

Prospective readers no longer have to identify themselves and submit an application explaining their purpose, though they still must visit public libraries to view a copy.

Opinions in the South Korean capital Seoul were divided on allowing free access to propaganda from Pyongyang.

All media in North Korea is tightly controlled by the government, and the *Rodong Sinmun* is the mouthpiece of the repressive ruling Workers' Party.

"It's like giving people access to ISIS propaganda," said Park Si-won, a 22-year-old university student, referring to the militant group also known as Islamic State.

"You wouldn't do that unless you wanted them to join the terrorist group."

'Extremely unsettling'

Hong Se-wung, 81, called the change "undesirable".

"To allow people to read the newspaper of a hostile country, or to lead them towards reading it, the very idea itself is extremely unsettling."

But others were skeptical that South Koreans would go out of their way to seek out the paper.

"Many people these days don't even read physical newspapers anyway. I doubt they'll make the effort to read Rodong Sinmun," said Son Yu-jin, 27, a graduate student.



Between lines: A visitor reads *Rodong Sinmun* at the National Library of Korea in Seoul. FILE PHOTO

South Korea and the nuclear-armed North remain officially at war, and Seoul long banned all access to Pyongyang's propaganda on security grounds.

Many restrictions remain in place – North Korean websites are still inaccessible from South Korean IP addresses.

'Symbolic change'

At Seoul's national library on Friday, there were a handful of people flipping through copies of *Rodong Sinmun*, its pages replete with photos of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un – whose name is always carried in bold type.

But elsewhere, AFP struggled to find a library that had actually implemented the new rules.

"Practically speaking, this is really a symbolic change," said Chad O'Carroll, whose specialist website, NK News, hosts a platform for reading North Korean media.

"Overall, it would be much easier for students of North Korea studies to work with these materials if the South Korean government made the websites of North Korean state media accessible."

That, he said, would require politically difficult changes to Seoul's security law.

'Own standards'

Seoul has vowed to "steadily expand access" to information on North Korea as it works to improve ties that are at their worst levels in years.

The move is not reciprocal – North Koreans remain banned from accessing any South Korean content at all and risk heavy penalties if caught doing so.

Mr. Lee has described the relaxation of Cold War-era censorship as an "opportunity to understand the reality of North Korea accurately".

And businesswoman Bae Jee-woo agreed.

"Even if South Korean citizens can access the *Rodong Sinmun* directly, they would be able to interpret it based on their own standards and philosophies," she said.

"It's highly unlikely that they would be significantly influenced by North Korea's propaganda or anything like that."

THE MIX

Markram to lead SA in T20 WC; De Kock and Nortje included



FILE PHOTO: R.V. MOORTHY

South Africa announced its 15-member contingent for the ICC T20 World Cup. **The squad:** Aiden Markram (Capt.), Quinton de Kock, Tony de Zorzi, Dewald Brevis, David Miller, Donovan Ferreira, Marco Jansen, Keshav Maharaj, Kagiso Rabada, Kwena Maphaka, Lungi Ngidi, Jason Smith, George Linde, Corbin Bosch, and Anrich Nortje.

BETTER NEWS

'Positive signs' on hospitalised Martyn, reveals Gilchrist



FILE PHOTO: S. SUBRAMANIUM

Former Australia Test batter Damien Martyn is showing "positive signs" after being hospitalised in an induced coma with meningitis, ex-teammate Adam Gilchrist said. "He's still in hospital. There'll be more details coming out as they come to hand but certainly in the last 24 hours there are some positive signs," Gilchrist said.

COLLECTIVE APPEAL

Indian footballers urge FIFA to intervene in ISL impasse



FILE PHOTO

India's leading footballers, including Sunil Chhetri, along with several foreign players featuring in the ISL, made a collective appeal to FIFA, urging the world governing body to intervene as the country's top-tier league remains suspended indefinitely. The players voiced concern over the prolonged uncertainty.

WILDCARD ENTRY

Venus, 45, set to become oldest woman to play at Australian Open



AP

The 45-year-old Venus Williams was handed a wildcard to the Australian Open, becoming the oldest woman ever to play at the season-opening Grand Slam. The American will compete in the main draw for the first time since 2021. "I'm excited to be back in Australia and looking forward to competing," said Venus.

Royals hand Soorma third straight loss

Rutuja draws first blood for the Ranchi outfit while Sakshi's strike, six minutes from time, seals the deal; Madhuri saves a penalty stroke



Opening salvo: Rutuja showcased superb skill to put Royals ahead. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

WOMEN'S HIL

Sports Bureau

Ranchi Royals defeated JSW Soorma Hockey Club 2-0 in their Women's Hero Hockey India League encounter in Ranchi on Friday. Rutuja Pisal (30) and Sakshi Rana (54) found the mark as Royals notched up their second win while Soorma slumped to its third loss in a row.

Soorma showed great attacking intent in the opening quarter.

It won the first penalty corner of the evening, but Penny Squibb's shot was stopped by the first rusher.

In the 25th minute, Royals' Ishika committed a foul inside the circle, giving away a penalty stroke. However, Squibb was denied by Madhuri Kindo. With seconds left in the first half, Royals drew first blood. Agostina Alonso played a powerful pass into the circle from midfield and Rutuja showcased superb skill to poach the ball perfectly and deflect it in.

Royals doubled the lead with a superb field goal as Sakshi unleashed a powerful strike from a tight angle into the top right corner of the goalpost with six minutes remaining.

Marijne back as India women's team coach

Uthra Ganesan
NEW DELHI



Sjoerd Marijne. FILE PHOTO

Indian hockey would be hoping to turn over a new leaf in the new year after Hockey India on Friday officially confirmed former chief coach Sjoerd Marijne's return to the national women's team.

This comes a month after Harendra Singh had quit following complaints of harassment and ineffective training by the players.

Marijne, who led the Indian women to a historic fourth place finish at the Tokyo Olympics in 2021, had been spoken of as a possible replacement even before Harendra's resignation happened.

The Dutchman will have the unenviable task of repeating his magic in three months, when the women participate in the Hyderabad World Cup qualifiers in March. More interesting, however, is the support staff he will be bringing with him in his second term with the team, which will officially be till the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics as per the contract.

Former Argentina defender and Olympian Matias Vila will join as the analytical coach, while Wayne Lombard, widely credited with the Indian team's impressive fitness standards four years ago, will come on board as the head of athletic performance. Lombard will be assisted by South Africans Rodet Yila and Ciara Yila as scientific advisors.

Fresh energy

"It's great to be back. After nearly four and half years, I return with fresh energy and a clear vision to support the team's growth and help the players achieve their full potential on the world stage," Marijne said in a statement.

He is scheduled to arrive on January 14 and take immediate charge with the preparatory camp beginning January 19.

Hockey India, meanwhile, is also on the lookout for a new junior women's team coach following the exit of Tushar Khandker after similar accusations of sexual, mental and physical misconduct.

Ideal platform to showcase talent, feel HIL captains



The big prize: The captains pose with the trophy on Friday. B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM

K. Keerthivasan
CHENNAI

You don't inspire your teammates by showing them how amazing you are. You inspire them by showing them how amazing they are – Robyn Benincasa, adventure racer and motivational speaker.

For the eight Indian captains of the Hockey India League (HIL), which begins at the Mayor Radhakrishnan Stadium here on January 3, the league offers an ideal platform to do exactly that – bring out the best in their teammates, both Indian and foreign.

The Chennai leg of the league will conclude on January 9, after which the action shifts to Ranchi (January 11 to 16) and Bhubaneswar (January 17 to 26).

For Harmanpreet Singh, captain of India and JSW Soorma HC, expectations are understandably high. Whether representing club or country, the objective is to win, he said.

"There is no added pressure, to be honest. On the contrary, it's good that one gets the opportunity to play with juniors, and it's good for them too," he said.

The captains were unanimous in their view that the HIL provides a crucial opportunity for youngsters to showcase their talent and push for national selection, with major tournaments such as the FIH Pro League, Asian Games and World Cup on the horizon.

"This is a very important step for us and HIL will help identify the best players," said Manpreet Singh, captain of Ranchi Royals. "In the next few months, we will have major International tournaments, including the World Cup (August) and Asian Games (September). So we will try and field our best team for the two big events."

Manpreet also underlined the importance of spreading the league across multiple venues. SG Pipers features the highest number of players – four – who took part in the Junior World Cup held in Tamil Nadu last month.

Gill set to return; Kishan in the race

Amol Karhadkar
MUMBAI



Gill. FILE PHOTO: K.R. DEEPAK

Shubman Gill is set to return as India's ODI captain, while his deputy Shreyas Iyer is likely to remain on the sidelines when the national senior selection committee finalises the squad for the three-match series against New Zealand.

The selection panel is scheduled to meet online on Saturday. *The Hindu* understands that Gill, who missed the recent ODI series against South Africa after suffering a neck spasm during the opening Test, will also attend the first official selection committee meeting of the calendar year.

Gill's return is expected to result in Dhruv Jurel – who was drafted in as a reserve batter for the South Africa series – making way for the opener.

Shreyas, out of action since hurting his abdominal muscles in the third ODI in Australia in October, had been targeting a comeback, but delay in his rehabilitation means that the middle-order batter is yet to receive medical clearance from the BCCI's Centre of Excellence.

The only other possible change could be the return of Ishan Kishan in place of Rishabh Pant as the reserve wicketkeeper-batter. Kishan has already been recalled to India's squad for the five-match T20I series against the Kiwis later this month as well as the T20 World Cup.

The Kishan case

It is understood that the selection panel feels that Kishan, despite proving his credentials in the 50-over format during the ongoing Vijay Hazare Trophy, should be given sufficient time to settle down in the Indian dressing room following a two-year absence.

The bowling department is unlikely to see any changes, having delivered consistently in the six ODIs so far this season.

Fit-again Nagal hopes for a golden reset in the new year

N. Sudarshan
BENGALURU



Rectify and revise: Nagal closed his 2025 campaign early to tweak his training and preparation. FILE PHOTO: K. MURALI KUMAR

On December 30, Sumit Nagal put out on X a photograph of him getting out of a car and captioned it: "Thanks for the bumpy ride, 2025".

It aptly reflected a period during which he did not win a single title and slid from being inside the top-100 in January to No. 277 by December.

In a sense, his whole career has been one long bumpy ride. Injuries, illnesses and below-par form have ensured that he has completed very few seasons without breaking down.

The 28-year-old, however, is hoping that 2026 would be different. He has tweaked his training and preparation methods by closing his 2025 campaign earlier than normal and giving himself a sufficiently long pre-season.

"It is one of the best preseasons I have had," Nagal told select media ahead of the Bengaluru Open ATP 125 Challenger which begins on Monday. "It was five-six weeks long and we worked a lot on my body and tennis."

The jam-packed ATP calendar doesn't give a player enough space between tournaments. This aspect appears to have hindered Nagal from building on his highs.

At the 2024 Australian Open, he beat World No. 27 Alexander Bublik. Then, he won the 2024 Chennai Challenger to break into the top-100.

And at the 2024 Monte Carlo Masters, he dragged World No. 7 Holger Rune to three sets. But the follow-up acts in 2025 never materialised.

"I'm not very gifted with height [to get a big serve in]. So I need to work a lot on my points. This could be one reason that the body gets tired," Nagal opined.

"So we are going to do small training blocks throughout the year so that I don't lose the base [level of fitness and tennis skill]. Earlier, I would play as many tournaments as I could. I am not going to make that mistake again," he added.

At 28, tennis careers tend to plateau. But Nagal feels he still has a lot left.

"I would love to compete for the next six, seven years at the high level, where I am playing Slams," he said. "If I don't [play Slams], I don't really know. But as of now at least till 35."

In that quest, a repeat of his title-winning run in the Garden City from 2017 will signal a golden reset.

SNAPSHOTS

Bashir, Potts included for final Ashes Test

Seamer Matthew Potts and spinner Shoaib Bashir were included in the 12-member England squad announced on Friday for the fifth Ashes Test against Australia to be played in Sydney from Sunday.

The squad: Ben Stokes (Capt.), Shoaib Bashir, Jacob Bethell, Harry Brook, Brydon Carse, Zak Crawley, Ben Duckett, Will Jacks, Matthew Potts, Joe Root, Jamie Smith, Josh Tongue.

Greece too good for Japan; Argentina topples Spain

Stefanos Tsitsipas found his winning touch on his return to action from injury as he led Greece to a 3-0 win over Japan in group play at the ATP-WTA United Cup in Perth on Friday. Earlier, Sebastian Baez and Solana Sierra led Argentina to a 3-0 defeat of Spain.

The results: Group A: Argentina bt Spain 3-0
(Sebastian Baez bt Jaume Munar 6-4, 6-4; Solana Sierra bt Jessica Bouzas Maneiro 6-4, 5-7, 6-0; Maria Carle & Guido Andreozzi bt Yvonne Reimers & Inigo Cervantes 7-6(6), 6-2).
Group E: Greece bt Japan 3-0
(Maria Sakkari bt Naomi Osaka 6-4, 6-2; Stefanos Tsitsipas bt Shintaro Mochizuki 6-3, 6-4; Sakkari & Tsitsipas bt Nao Hibino & Yasutaka Uchiyama 6-3, 6-3).

PWL auction today

Several top wrestlers, including Aman Sehrawat, Antim Panghal, Yui Susaki, Yusneylis Guzman Lopez and Iryna Koliadenko, will be among the 250-plus grapplers who will go under the hammer at an auction in New Delhi on Saturday for the Pro Wrestling League, scheduled from Jan. 15.



First strike: Baez starred in Argentina's win over Spain with a victory against Munar. AFP



Khawaja with wife Rachel and daughters Aisha and Ayla. AP

Khawaja to retire after Sydney Test

Associated Press
SYDNEY

Veteran Australia batter Usman Khawaja has announced he will retire from international cricket after the fifth Ashes Test beginning on Sunday at the Sydney Cricket Ground.

The Pakistan-born Khawaja, who became the first Muslim to play for Australia, used his retirement announcement to criticise the "racial" stereotyping he experienced.

Khawaja said he felt he was treated "a little bit different even now" because of his Muslim background. "Different in the way I've been treated, different in how things have happened," he said.

It will be the 39-year-old's 88th and final Test at the ground where he began his First Class career.

Xabi Alonso's pivotal week in the Madrid hot seat

Managerial life in the Spanish capital can be challenging when the results dry up, as Alonso is discovering. Despite a promising beginning, a form slump has led to the 44-year-old dealing with boardroom drama, superstar egos and fickle fan sentiment. Given club president Florentino Perez's impatience with managers, Alonso's future hinges on how his side starts the new year

Reuters
Agence France-Presse

When Xabi Alonso was unveiled as the manager of Real Madrid in May last year, there was palpable excitement not just in the Spanish capital but also across the football world at large.

This, after all, was a former Bernabeu midfield general, loved by Madridistas for his trophy-laden playing years. As emotional arcs go, there are few more popular than a club legend's return.

Building a reputation

Moreover, after retiring, Alonso – coached by Pep Guardiola, Jose Mourinho and Vicente del Bosque among others – had quickly earned the reputation of being an elite manager.

He guided Bayer Leverkusen to a historic German league and cup double in 2023-24 in his first full season after taking over. His team became the first to complete a Bundesliga campaign unbeaten, disrupting powerhouse Bayern Munich's monopoly.

Alonso also demonstrated his prowess as an adroit tactician. Having to combat a Bayern side with more accomplished players and richer resources, he fashioned inventive solutions. His ideas were modern and progressive, bolstered by a rigorous structure.

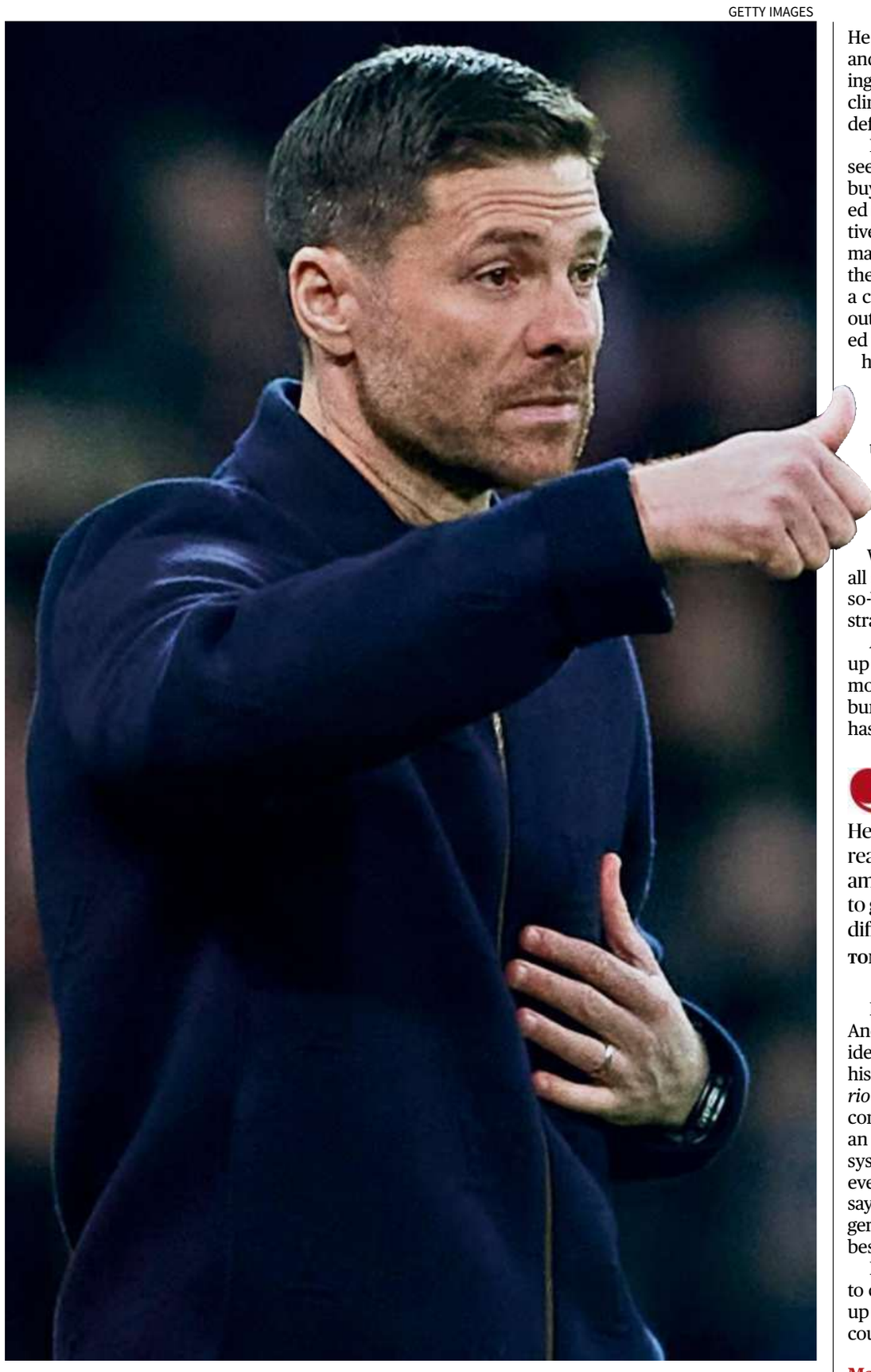
In short, Alonso's move to Madrid appealed to the partisan, the neutral and the 'tactico'. But charged with reviving a Real side that ended last season without a major trophy, how would he fare? Amid the excitement, there were also reservations. Coaching Real Madrid involves navigating high-stakes boardroom politics, superstar egos and fickle fan sentiment. Carlo Ancelotti managed it with great success, winning 15 trophies in two spells, but even he faced criticism in 2024-25. His methods were thought to have outlived their utility.

Alonso's stint began promisingly. Although his side was knocked out of the semifinals of the Club World Cup in the summer, he showed tactical flexibility, utilising both a four-man and three-man defence, whereas his predecessor Ancelotti was criticised for not being adaptive enough. By contrast Alonso was keen to adjust things during matches, including where his players were positioned and how they pressed.

He spoke of playing an "ambitious" game with "emotion and energy", and when the season began, the results were encouraging. Madrid won 13 of the first 14 games, including a Clasico conquest of bitter rival Barcelona. After four consecutive defeats to Barcelona across competitions last season, Madrid entered the match desperately in need of a statement win to validate Alonso's project and it duly snapped its losing streak.

> My mood doesn't change from one day to the next. We need to improve in several areas. We need to give the game a different intention and rhythm, and combine control with verticality
> **XABI ALONSO**

GETTY IMAGES



But things took a turn in November and December. After a win over Valencia, which established Madrid firmly on top of LaLiga, Alonso's side failed to win four of the next seven games, allowing Barcelona to displace it. It also lost Champions League games against Liverpool and Manchester City, as the Basque coach began to feel the heat. Speculation was rife that Alonso would be shown the door, with reports questioning whether he would survive till Christmas.

Two successive wins in the league have ensured Alonso will stay in the hot seat when Madrid faces Real Betis on Sunday, its first match of the new year. But his situation remains perilous, with *ESPN* reporting recently that Madrid was considering its options. The club, under president Florentino Perez, is known to be impatient when the results dry up: the number of coaches who have lasted between three months and just under a year is in double digits.

Growing frustration

If reports from the Spanish capital are to be believed, the upcoming week could prove pivotal for Alonso's future. After the Betis fixture, Madrid travels to Saudi Arabia to face city rival Atletico in the semifinals of the Super Cup. Anything other than a win could put the cat among the pigeons. As recent whistles from the Bernabeu stands have shown, the frustration in Madrid is growing.

One of Alonso's primary tasks when he took charge was to find the balance that Ancelotti failed to achieve last season following Kylian Mbappe's arrival from PSG. He needed to put together a formula for Mbappe and Vinicius Jr. to work together without sacrificing too much out of possession, given their disinclination to repeatedly press and track back in defence.

Indeed, it was always going to be interesting to see whether Alonso could get his superstars to buy into his system. Madrid managers have tended to allow the individual to supersede the collective. The sheer quality of talent at the club has made this work. But in the modern game, where the spaces are more intensely contested, this isn't a consistently reliable method, as Madrid found out last season. Ancelotti was at times exasperated with his forward line's unwillingness to work hard enough for the sake of the team as a whole.

"What I am certain of is that we need and want everyone to defend – the 11 players on the pitch have to be involved defensively," Alonso said before the season started, but it's fair to say he hasn't cracked it just yet. If anything, this requirement has contributed to some bad blood in the dressing room. While Mbappe's scintillating form – 29 goals in all competitions – has carried the side, the Alonso-Vinicius relationship has not been straightforward.

Alonso has left Vinicius out of the starting lineup on occasion and subbed him off on others, most notably in the Clasico. The Brazilian's outburst has contributed to gossip that the manager has lost the dressing room.

> Here even if you win matches, no one is really happy, there are few teams like that. I am positive that Xabi is very good. You have to give him time and stay calm, but this is difficult at Madrid
> **TONI KROOS**

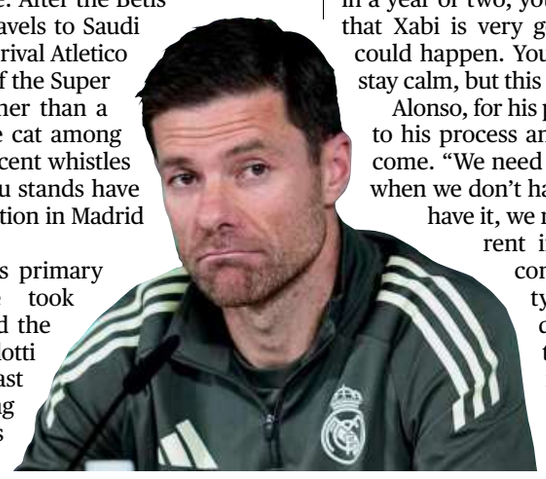
Francesco Mauri, former assistant coach to Ancelotti, refuted this idea. "Xabi's situation isn't ideal, but I don't think it has anything to do with his relationship with the players," Mauri told *Diario AS*. "It isn't easy to coach Madrid and change concepts. It's intelligent not to be stubborn with an idea if it isn't working. It's about finding the system that makes you win, because if you win everything else becomes easier. It's nonsense to say players try to get a coach sacked. It's an exaggeration. Madrid is like that. Xabi is right now the best possible coach for Madrid."

It must also be mentioned that Alonso has had to contend with an injury crisis, at times missing up to 11 first-team players – Mbappe's knee injury couldn't have come at a worse time.

Madrid's unique pressure

Madrid legend Toni Kroos threw his weight behind Alonso, speaking on Brazilian great Romario's YouTube channel. "Here even if you win matches, no one is really happy, there are few teams like that," he said. "The coach has little time. You can't think about how you want to play in a year or two, you need results. I am positive that Xabi is very good. He already knew this could happen. You have to give him time and stay calm, but this is difficult at Madrid."

Alonso, for his part, knows he needs to stick to his process and trust that the results will come. "We need to improve in several areas: when we don't have the ball and when we do have it, we need to give the game a different intention and rhythm, and combine control with verticality," he said. "My mood doesn't change from one day to the next. I'm also critical in a constructive way, but I put it in context with where we've come from and what's coming in January."



STACKING UP



ATP Men's Top 15

#	Player	Age	Points	Events
1	Carlos Alcaraz	22	12,050	19
2	Jannik Sinner	24	11,500	18
3	Alexander Zverev	28	5,110	24
4	Novak Djokovic	38	4,820	20
5	Felix Auger-Aliassime	25	4,190	28
6	Taylor Fritz	28	4,085	23
7	Alex de Minaur	26	4,080	23
8	Lorenzo Musetti	23	3,990	23
9	Ben Shelton	23	3,960	23
10	Jack Draper	24	2,990	17
11	Alexander Bublik	28	2,845	29
12	Casper Ruud	27	2,825	21
13	Daniil Medvedev	29	2,710	24
14	A. Davidovich Fokina	26	2,585	26
15	Holger Rune	22	2,580	21

Top Indians ▶



Sumit Nagal
Rank 277 ▼ No change



Aryan Shah
Rank 402 ▲ 1 spot

WTA Women's Top 15

#	Player	Age	Points	Events
1	Aryna Sabalenka	27	10,870	21
2	Iga Swiatek	24	8,395	21
3	Coco Gauff	21	6,763	21
4	Amanda Anisimova	24	6,287	23
5	Elena Rybakina	26	5,850	23
6	Jessica Pegula	31	5,583	23
7	Madison Keys	30	4,335	21
8	Jasmine Paolini	29	4,325	19
9	Mirra Andreeva	18	4,319	19
10	Ekaterina Alexandrova	31	3,375	26
11	Belinda Bencic	28	3,119	21
12	Clara Tauson	23	2,770	23
13	Linda Noskova	21	2,641	25
14	Elina Svitolina	31	2,606	16
15	Emma Navarro	24	2,515	25

Top Indians ▶



Sahaja Yamalapalli
Rank 330 ▲ 1 spot



Shrivalli Bhamidipaty
Rank 480 ▲ 1 spot



English Premier League Standings

#	Team	GP	W	D	L	GF	GA	GD	PTS
1	Arsenal	19	14	3	2	37	12	25	45
2	Man. City	19	13	2	4	43	17	26	41
3	Aston Villa	19	12	3	4	30	23	7	39
4	Liverpool	19	10	3	6	30	26	4	33
5	Chelsea	19	8	6	5	32	21	11	30
6	Man. United	19	8	6	5	33	29	4	30
7	Sunderland	19	7	8	4	20	18	2	29
8	Everton	19	8	4	7	20	20	0	28
9	Brentford	19	8	3	8	28	26	2	27
10	Crystal Palace	19	7	6	6	22	21	1	27
11	Fulham	19	8	3	8	26	27	-1	27
12	Tottenham	19	7	5	7	27	23	4	26
13	Newcastle	19	7	5	7	26	24	2	26
14	Brighton	19	6	7	6	28	27	1	25
15	Bournemouth	19	5	8	6	29	35	-6	23
16	Leeds United	19	5	6	8	25	32	-7	21
17	N. Forest	19	5	3	11	18	30	-12	18
18	West Ham	19	3	5	11	21	38	-17	14
19	Burnley	19	3	3	13	20	37	-17	12
20	Wolves	19	0	3	16	11	40	-29	3

Italian Serie A Standings

#	Team	GP	W	D	L	GF	GA	GD	PTS
1	Inter Milan	16	12	0	4	35	14	21	36
2	AC Milan	16	10	5	1	27	13	14	35
3	Napoli	16	11	1	4	24	13	11	34
4	Roma	17	11	0	6	20	11	9	33
5	Juventus	17	9	5	3	23	15	8	32
6	Como	16	7	6	3	22	12	10	27
7	Bologna	16	7	5	4	24	14	10	26
8	Lazio	17	6	6	5	18	12	6	24
9	Sassuolo	17	6	4	7	22	21	1	22
10	Atalanta	17	5	7	5	20	19	1	22
11	Udinese	17	6	4	7	18	28	-10	22
12	Cremonese	17	5	6	6	18	20	-2	21
13	Torino	17	5	5	7	17	28	-11	20
14	Cagliari	17	4	6	7	19	24	-5	18
15	Parma	16	4	5	7	11	18	-7	17
16	Lecce	16	4	4	8	11	22	-11	16
17	Genoa	17	3	5	9	17	27	-10	14
18	Verona	16	2	6	8	13	25	-12	12
19	Pisa	17	1	8	8	12	24	-12	11
20	Fiorentina	17	1	6	10	17	28	-11	9

Spanish LaLiga Standings

#	Team	GP	W	D	L	GF	GA	GD	PTS
1	Barcelona	18	15	1	2	51	20	31	46
2	Real Madrid	18	13	3	2	36	16	20	42
3	Atletico Madrid	18	11	4	3	33	16	17	37
4	Villarreal	16	11	2	3	31	15	16	35
5	Espanyol	17	10	3	4	22	17	5	33
6	Real Betis	17	7	7	3	29	19	10	28
7	Celta Vigo	17	5	8	4	20	19	1	23
8	Athletic Club	18	7	2	9	16	24	-8	23
9	Elche	17	5	7	5	23	20	3	22
10	Sevilla	17	6	2	9	24	26	-2	20
11	Getafe	17	6	2	9	13	22	-9	20
12	Osasuna	17	5	3	9	17	20	-3	18
13	Real Mallorca	17	4	6	7	19	24	-5	18
14	Alaves	17	5	3	9	14	20	-6	18
15	Rayo Vallecano	17	4	6	7	13	20	-7	18
16	Real Sociedad	17	4	5	8	21	25	-4	17
17	Valencia	17	3	7	7	16	26	-10	16
18	Girona	17	3	6	8	15	33	-18	15
19	Real Oviedo	17	2	5	10	7	26	-19	11
20	Levante	16	2	4	10	17	29	-12	10

German Bundesliga Standings

#	Team	GP	W	D	L	GF	GA	GD	PTS
1	Bayern	15	13	2	0	55	11	44	41
2	Dortmund	15	9	5	1	26	12	14	32
3	Leverkusen	15	9	2	4	33	20	13	29
4	RB Leipzig	15	9	2	4	30	19	11	29
5	Hoffenheim	15	8	3	4	29	20	9	27
6	Stuttgart	15	8	2	5	25	22	3	26
7	Eintracht	15	7	4	4	30	30	0	25
8	Union Berlin	15	6	3	6	20	23	-3	21
9	SC Freiburg	15	5	5	5	25	26	-1	20
10	Werder	15	4	5	6	18	28	-10	17
11	Cologne	15	4	4	7	22	24	-2	16
12	M'gladbach	15	4	4	7	18	24	-6	16
13	Hamburg	15	4	4	7	16	25	-9	16
14	Wolfsburg	15	4	3	8	23	28	-5	15
15	FC Augsburg	15	4	2	9	17	28	-11	14
16	St Pauli	15	3	3	9	13	26	-13	12
17	Heidenheim	15	3	2	10	13	34	-21	11
18	Mainz	15	1	5	9	13	26	-13	8



Test Batting

#	Player	Rating	Career best
1	Joe Root	867	932
2	Harry Brook	846	898
3	Kane Williamson	822	919
4	Travis Head	816	884
5	Steve Smith	811	947
6	Kamindu Mendis	781	784
7	Temba Bavuma	775	806
8	Yashasvi Jaiswal	750	858
9	Saud Shakeel	734	787
10	Shubman Gill	730	807

Test Bowling

#	Player	Rating	Career best
1	Jasprit Bumrah	879	908
2	Noman Ali	843	853
2	Mitchell Starc	843	852
4	Pat Cummins	841	914
5	Matt Henry	836	853
6	Marco Jansen	825	825
7	Scott Boland	810	810
8	Kagiso Rabada	807	902
9	Josh Hazlewood	783	864
10	Nathan Lyon	760	812

ODI Batting

#	Player	Rating	Career best
1	Rohit Sharma	781	882
2	Virat Kohli	773	909
3	Daryl Mitchell	766	782
4	Ibrahim Zadran	764	764
5	Shubman Gill	723	847
6	Babar Azam	722	898
7	Harry Tector	708	767
8	Shai Hope	701	802
9	Charith Asalanka	690	725
10	Shreyas Iyer	679	710

ODI Bowling

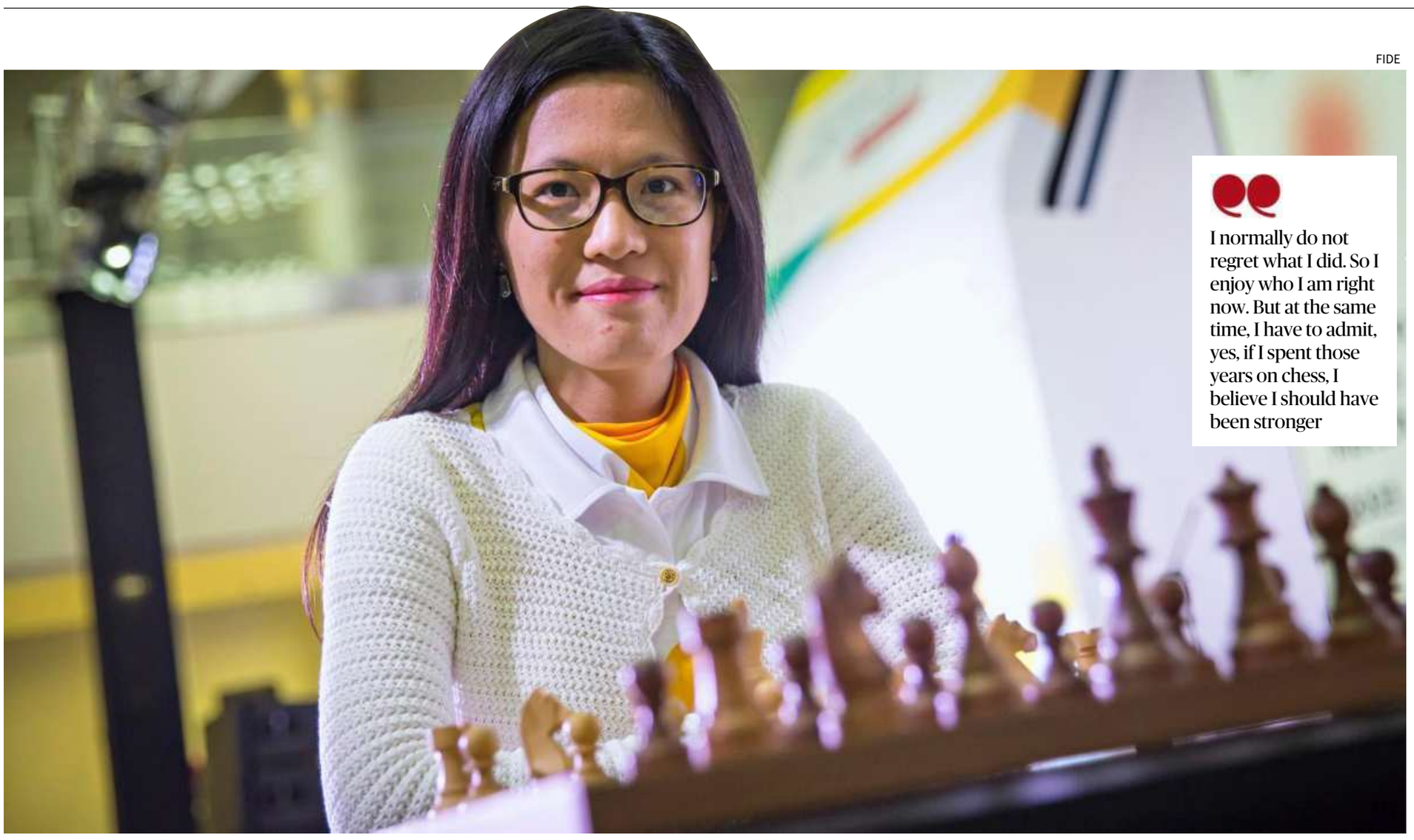
#	Player	Rating	Career best
1	Rashid Khan	710	799
2	Jofra Archer	670	683
3	Kuldeep Yadav	655	761
4	Maheesh Theekshana	647	686
5	Keshav Maharaj	646	741
6	Bernard Scholtz	645	648
7	Mitchell Santner	636	657
8	Josh Hazlewood	628	727
9	Abrar Ahmed	624	630
10	Matt Henry	619	691

T20I Batting

#	Player	Rating	Career best
1	Abhishek Sharma	908	931
2	Phil Salt	849	881
3	Tilak Varma	805	845
4	Pathum Nissanka	779	794
5	Jos Buttler	770	794
6	Sahibzada Farhan	752	776
7	Travis Head	713	885
8	Mitchell Marsh	684	694
9	Tim Seifert	683	727
10	Dewald Brevis	680	685

T20I Bowling

#	Player	Rating	Career best
1	Varun Chakaravarthy	804	818
2	Jacob Duffy	699	750
3	Rashid Khan	694	828
4	Abrar Ahmed	691	703
5	Wanindu Hasaranga	687	809
6	Adil Rashid	686	747
7	Akeal Hosein	675	726
8	Mustafizur Rahman	665	718
9	Nathan Ellis	660	678
10	Adam Zampa	655	746



FIDE

I normally do not regret what I did. So I enjoy who I am right now. But at the same time, I have to admit, yes, if I spent those years on chess, I believe I should have been stronger

The world is huge, right? It's not just a chessboard and pieces

As a child prodigy, a dominant World champion and a university professor, Hou Yifan has lived many lives — and she is just 31. Still the top-ranked woman, she intends to study neuroscience to understand the connection between the brain and chess patterns. She continues to awe the sport's fans from time to time, like she did at the Global Chess League recently. She opens up in this conversation about her unique relationship with the game

INTERVIEW

Hou Yifan

P.K. Ajith Kumar

Hou Yifan became the women's World chess champion at 16 and abdicated her crown seven years later. In all her title matches, she never lost a game. She is the second-strongest female player of all time, behind Judit Polgar. Chess may no longer be her only interest in life: she is a professor at Peking University and is planning to pursue a PhD in neuroscience.

But Hou still remains the women's No. 1. She occasionally reminds the world of that fact. Like she did recently in Mumbai, where she played a stellar role in Alpine SG Pipers' triumph in the Global Chess League. She won her last four games in the league phase to help her team make the final. Excerpts from an exclusive interview Hou gave *The Hindu*:

You have been a regular at the Global Chess League.

This league is very important for the chess world, no matter the format, which is innovative. It is not just the world's top male players, there are women and juniors. In an elite event, girls and juniors usually don't get the chance. There is the entertainment aspect of chess too, while keeping intact the professionalism of the sport. This was my second time with SG Pipers, and it was nice being a teammate of players like Fabiano Caruana, Anish Giri and R. Praggnanandhaa.

Chess for me represents not just the results. For instance, there is the beauty and philosophy of chess. That I find is more attractive than winning a game

And how did you find working with coach Pravin Thipsay?

He is an experienced Grandmaster and has really good theoretical knowledge. We were surprised by some of his understanding of the position, especially the endgame. We later found out that Mumbai is his hometown. This is my first visit and I have liked the city, the hotel, the location and the food.

You don't play as often as you used to.

Chess is not my entire life now. I have the passion for it, but it is mainly like a hobby instead of a profession. I am trying to participate in the events in the way I can. Sometimes you miss the game and also you miss the people.

Do you miss that winning feeling as well?

Not really. Personality-wise, if you're not talking about chess, I think I am not that competitive. Of course, when I play, I fight for that win, but outside the chess world, I am not like that. Chess for me represents not just the results. For instance, there is the beauty and philosophy of chess. That I find is more attractive than winning a game. Imagine if you luckily win a couple of games, when the position was not winning. So you win by chance, or luck. Let us imagine you are a professional player and you play chess for decades. You won maybe half of them. You didn't win half of them. That is suffering. Yes, I have relatively attained a certain level in my career. I have won most of the games.

You never lost a game in a World title match. After winning your first championship, in the knockout format, you won three title matches without dropping a single game.

Yes, actually I was surprised. All my three matches, yes. And I finished the match even before all the games had to be played.

You have not just been the World champion but one of the best of all time. So stepping away from that, when you were still in your prime and very young and beginning a new career... How did you find that transition?

It is not difficult. I am just following my heart to make the decision at the moment I want. Let us say I know that chess is part of my life, but I also understand that my life could not be lived only with chess. That is why I felt like, you should remember first you are a human, then you are a chess player. The world is huge, right? It is not just a chessboard and the pieces. I do not want, you know, when you visit a place, when you think about something, when there are some stories, you connect only with chess. I know some of the others may not be like that, and I fully respect them, but I enjoy this kind of lifestyle more.

Do you remember when you made that decision? Was lack of motivation after winning successive World titles a factor?

A bit, but I think I didn't really reach my maximum potential. My rating could have been higher. I just thought that I should get a certain education and explore. Maybe that had also something to do with my family background. But I didn't think making such decisions were hard because I always kept in mind that if I wanted, I could come back to the chess world at any time. I normally do not regret what I did. So I enjoy who I am right now, pretty much. But at the same time, I have to admit, yes, if I spent those years on chess, I believe I should have been stronger; my peak should have been at least a bit higher.

Why international relations?

I am interested in diplomacy. So I thought that international relations, when it connected with geopolitics and negotiations, maybe there was something in common. But later I did my Masters in public policy. Now I am working for the physical education department. And I am actually applying for my PhD in neuroscience. I know it is a little cross-field. The subject I want to research is the connection between the brain and chess patterns. If you wanted to find something scientifically connected with chess, this is one of the obvious parts. As a chess player, I felt such research could be beneficial to the players, too.

How do you look back at your first World title?

The first title is always more meaningful and exciting. It was something special for me. More so because I broke the [32-year-old] record of Maia Chiburdanidze as the youngest champion. And she was a legend who inspired a lot of girls. But I didn't really aim for the record, but the coach and my team kept telling me about it. I thought, OK, if I can try, that is good, but that is not easy, to be honest, because most of the players, if you want to achieve it at 16 or 17, it means you study chess for about 10 years. So that is why I thought D. Gukesh was amazing, because to win in the open section at a very young age is even much more difficult. Before my World Championship, I had played a rapid match with Anatoly Karpov in China, and he said I could win the World title. Coming as it did from a legend, it was very inspiring.

In 2011, you beat Koneru Humpy in the match to defend your World title.

That match was the toughest. Not just rating-wise, Humpy was at her peak. She had a very good home preparation, because I remember most of the games, after the opening, I was really in trouble. But I think I was lucky, I tried my best to fight back in the middle game.

Are you surprised that Humpy hasn't won the classical World Championship yet?

Yes, she is one of the strongest players not to have won the World title. But she still has chances. She is playing the next Candidates [in March/April], isn't she?

GAME THEORY

The year that was: best in Tests

Mitchell Starc and Shubman Gill led the way with ball and bat respectively during the year in Test cricket. A look at the top performers in the game's classical format in 2025:



Mitchell Starc



Mohammed Siraj



Shubman Gill



Travis Head

MOST WICKETS IN 2025

Player	Team	Tests	Wkts	Ave	SR	5-fors
Mitchell Starc	Australia	11	55	17.32	28.4	3
Mohammed Siraj	India	10	43	27.20	43.5	2
Blessing Muzarabani	Zimbabwe	10	42	26.80	42.8	3
Ben Stokes	England	9	33	23.12	40.9	2
Taijul Islam	Bangladesh	6	33	26.57	52.8	2
Josh Tongue	England	6	33	27.15	37.9	2
Scott Boland	Australia	6	32	15.00	30.2	1
Jasprit Bumrah	India	8	31	22.16	47.1	3
Simon Harmer	South Africa	4	30	14.30	34.3	2
Noman Ali	Pakistan	4	30	17.50	30.8	3

MOST RUNS IN 2025

Player	Team	Tests	Runs	Ave	SR	100s
Shubman Gill	India	9	983	70.21	63.7	5
Travis Head	Australia	11	817	40.85	79.4	2
K.L. Rahul	India	10	813	45.16	48.5	3
Joe Root	England	10	805	50.31	57.7	4
Harry Brook	England	10	771	45.35	82.5	2
Alex Carey	Australia	11	767	47.93	75.9	2
Ravindra Jadeja	India	10	764	63.66	53.5	2
Yashasvi Jaiswal	India	10	745	39.21	66.2	3
Ben Duckett	England	10	735	40.83	88.2	2
Devon Conway	NZ	5	697	87.12	61.3	3

SOURCE: ESPNCRICINFO.COM

PICTURE THIS



Cycling steeplechase

In cyclo-cross, riders race over several laps of a 2.5-3.5km course which can have sections of pavement, grass, inclines, wooden trails, ditches, very deep mud, and even obstacles.

Described as 'the steeplechase of cycling', it severely tests a rider's aerobic endurance, physical strength and bike-handling skills.

Given the harshness of the conditions, riders are allowed to change bicycles and receive mechanical assistance from a pit crew during the race. They are also permitted to dismount, carry their cycles over or around a hurdle, remount and continue racing.

Cyclo-cross bicycles are light, with fairly narrow tyres and drop handlebars. The tyres are tubular and use knobby tread for traction. The braking mechanism involves disc brakes.

Although not a traditional snow or ice sport, a large part of the competitive season unfolds during winter, which means races can be held on icy or snowy ground.

Many of the best riders cross-train — and often compete — in other cycling disciplines.

But cyclo-cross has grown to such a level that many specialise in it.