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U.S. launches air strike against IS forces in Nigeria

WEST PALM BEACH

U.S. President Donald Trump said on Thursday that the U.S. launched air strikes against Islamic State (IS) forces in Nigeria, after spending weeks accusing the country of not stopping the persecution of Christians. » PAGE 12

CBI moves SC after MLA gets bail in rape case

NEW DELHI

Days after the Delhi High Court gave conditional bail to former BJP MLA Kuldeep Singh Sengar, convicted in the Unnao rape case, the CBI filed a special leave petition before the Supreme Court on Friday. The move comes amid continuing protests. » PAGE 3

Two BJP workers killed in West Bengal; six held

KOLKATA

Two BJP workers were killed in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal on Thursday. BJP leaders called it a targeted political attack. However, local Trinamool Congress leaders blamed it on an internal family feud. Six persons have been arrested. » PAGE 4

Prevent attacks on Christians: churches to govt.

NEW DELHI

The National Council of Churches in India (NCCI) on Friday appealed to the Government of India to take strong action against those attacking Christians, their places of worship, and traditional religious symbols. » PAGE 5

India flags attacks on minorities in Bangladesh

- External Affairs Ministry condemns the killing of Dipu Chandra Das in Mymensingh city
- Reports claiming over 2,900 incidents of violence against minorities can't be brushed aside, it says
- New Delhi reiterates call for inclusive election, indicating opposition to barring any political party

Kallol Bhattacherjee
NEW DELHI

India on Friday said that more than 2,900 violent incidents targeting minority communities had taken place in Bangladesh under the interim government led by Muhammad Yunus, and that these incidents could not be dismissed as "political violence" or "media exaggeration".

External Affairs Ministry Spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal condemned the killing of Dipu Chandra Das in Mymensingh city and reiterated India's call for holding an "inclusive" election, indicating its opposition to excluding any political party from participating in the upcoming election.

"The unremitting hostility against minorities in Bangladesh, including Hindus, Christians, and Buddhists, at the hands of extremists is a matter of grave concern. We condemn the recent gruesome killing of a Hindu youth and expect that the perpetrators of the crime would be brought to justice," he said in the weekly briefing of the Ministry.

Minorities targeted

The remarks came in response to a number of questions on the recent spurt in violence against the minority Hindu community in Bangladesh, especially after the death of Islamist leader Sharif Osman Hadi on December 18. In the aftermath of Hadi's death, several reports of arson attacks against the minority community and the brutal lynching of Das in Mymensingh and Amrit Mandal in Rajbari near Dhaka have cropped up in the media.



Coming together: Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Bajrang Dal activists protest , in Prayagraj on Friday over the killing of a Hindu youth in Bangladesh. PTI

In this context, Mr. Jaiswal cited the reports published by the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council and other independent organisations and said, "Over 2,900 incidents of violence against minorities, including cases of killings, arson, land grab, have been documented by independent sources during the tenure of the interim government."

"These incidents cannot be brushed aside as mere media exaggerations or dismissed as political violence," he added.

'Responsibility of govt.'

He reminded Dhaka that the law and order situation and the developments in Bangladesh are "the responsibility of the government" of Bangladesh.

The violence against minorities triggered a diplomatic confrontation between Dhaka and New Delhi after protesters targeted India's missions and visa centres in Bangladesh, alleging that the killers of Hadi too had fled to India like the leaders of the Awami League.

In this regard, Mr. Jaiswal said India rejected the "false narrative" that had been circulated in Bangladesh.

Earlier, Bangladesh had also summoned India's envoy Pranay Verma after protests were held outside its missions in Delhi, Kolkata, Agartala and visa centre in Siliguri.

Responding to a question on Bangladesh's leading daily *Prothom Alo* calling upon India to act "responsibly" by reining in Sheikh Hasina and other leaders of the Awami League who are allegedly operating from the Indian territory, Mr. Jaiswal did not clarify whether India would recognise the upcoming election as genuine as it will exclude the Awami League but reiterated India's resolve to strengthen ties with the "people of Bangladesh".

He further said New Delhi will support "free, fair, inclusive and participatory elections in Bangladesh".

'Free, fair elections'

He also responded to the massive welcome that the acting chairman of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party Tariq Rahman received in Dhaka on his return from London after prolonged exile, saying Mr. Rahman's return "must be seen" within the "context" of India's support for "free, fair and inclusive elections in Bangladesh".

Annual rings



Tree of life: The century-old, 80-foot raintree at Veli Maidan in Fort Kochi, Kerala, is decorated with stars on Friday as part of the Christmas and New Year celebrations. Over the years, the tree has become an iconic image. THULASI KAKKAT

Centre raises H-1B interview cancellation issue with U.S.

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI

India on Friday said it had expressed its concern to the U.S. over the mass cancellation of scheduled H-1B visa interviews of Indian applicants and that it was "actively engaged with the U.S. side to minimise disruptions caused to our nationals".

The interviews of thousands of H-1B visa applicants scheduled in the middle of December have been abruptly postponed by several months to scrutinise their social media posts and online profiles. Some of the applicants, whose appointments were scheduled last week, received mails from U.S. immigration authorities informing them that their interviews are being pushed back to May.



"The Government of India remains actively engaged with the U.S. side to minimise the disruptions caused to our nationals"

RANDHIR JAISWAL
External Affairs Ministry spokesperson

The government has received several representations from Indian nationals facing problems with rescheduling of visa appointments, External Affairs Ministry spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said at a media briefing.

Visa-related issues pertain to the sovereign domain of any country, he said. "We have flagged these issues and our concerns to the U.S. side, both here in New Delhi and in Washington, DC," he said.

The U.S. move has resulted in significant delays for the visa applicants in their return to the U.S. The rescheduling of the interviews is for applicants who were given appointments from December 15.

Centre's experts had failed to define Aravallis for over a year before SC warning

Jacob Koshy
NEW DELHI

The assignment was to define the Aravallis, an ancient range of weathered hills rambling across four States, from the outskirts of Delhi to Gujarat. Despite three committees labouring over the task for over a year, armed with satellite imagery and expertise from multiple institutions, the Centre could not decide on uniform technical criteria to define the range.

It was only after the Supreme Court warned of initiating contempt proceedings against officials of the Environment Ministry that a new sub-committee was formed in August 2025, which then gave up trying to define the Aravallis and focused instead on evolving a definition that would "balance" ecological consideration and the Centre's 2019 National Mineral Policy that encourages mining of critical minerals for the "nation's economic growth", according to a 2,000-page affidavit by the Ministry, submitted to the Supreme Court, which was perused by *The Hindu*.

The definition of the range has sparked an environmental and political row over the last week, with charges that the final definition only protects hills higher than 100 metres from mining.

Danger of mining

That leaves the remaining hills – which make up the vast majority of the 700 km range spanning from Haryana to Gujarat, with the bulk of it in Rajasthan – open to the dangers of mining and degradation.

Under fire from environmental activists, Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav has stressed that no new mining licences would be awarded until a detailed Management Plan for Sustainable Mining (MPSM) covering the entire Aravalli range is prepared by the Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education.

In 2024, thelp decide on a uniform definition for the Aravalli hills, the Supreme Court constituted a Committee, comprising representatives from the Environment Ministry, the Forest Survey of India, State Forest Departments, the Geological Survey of India and the Central Empowered Committee of the SC. After constituting two sub-committees of its own, and facing a rap from the top court, the Committee finally submitted its findings in October 2025, after which the SC passed an order on November 20.



Safeguarding nature: People take part in a 'Save Aravalli' demonstration in Jaipur earlier this week . PTI

Perusal of the Committee's documents showed that while the Forest Survey of India in 2010 had a criterion for defining the Aravalli hills in Rajasthan, based on the slope – and importantly, not on the height – the Committee was quite concerned that areas that were "not Aravalli" not be included.

"It is again reiterated that using only elevation and slope as criteria to demarcate the boundary of the Aravalli Hills and Ranges may lead to inclusion errors, as a significant part of Hilly area fall within the identified districts is non-Aravalli. In plain terms, not all areas of Aravalli have Hilly terrain and not all Hilly terrain in these 34 districts are necessarily Aravalli in terms of its Geological profile and extent," the panel noted.

A technical sub-committee of the main Committee, chaired by the Director General of the FSI, and including representatives from the Survey of India and the Geological Survey of India, in 2024 started on an exercise to define the 'hills' for all of the Aravallis beyond Rajasthan.

Slope and local relief

This exercise for the first time relied on standard resolution-maps prepared by the Survey of India. Even the FSI, the records show, concurred that the slope was not the sole determining criteria.

"The Survey of India (SoI) and the Forest Survey of India (FSI) were not in agreement with the approach of hard... based solely on slope and local relief," a report of the Committee noted. "They emphasised that other local and regional morphometric parameters may also need to be considered. Since the nature of Hills varies across different terrains, it may not be practical to apply uniform criteria of slope and relief across the entire region. This observation was further substantiated during the detailed slope and relief-based analysis carried out by the Technical Sub-Committee."

Despite six meetings from May 2025 to August 2025, these experts could not agree on a uniform definition. On August 12, 2025, the Supreme Court warned of contempt of court proceedings against the members of the Committee over delay.

It was following this that the Committee started to focus on getting the views of States and getting a definition that would support sustainable mining. In its report, the Committee cited "significant potential for critical minerals" and stressed the need for a framework that enables systematic, scientific, and environmentally sustainable exploitation of critical, strategic, and atomic minerals within the region."

CONG. STEPS UP PROTESTS
» PAGE 2

INBRIEF



Shimla doctor-patient brawl: indefinite strike by doctors

The Resident Doctors' Association of Indira Gandhi Medical College in Shimla announced that they would go on indefinite strike from Saturday morning to press for their demand to revoke the termination orders of a medic, following a brawl with a patient. According to a statement issued on Friday evening, during the strike, routine services, elective operation theatres and outpatient departments will remain closed. Only emergency services will remain functional. The decision was taken after a meeting of the joint action committee of various medical associations. PTI

Newly built ropeway collapses during trial in Bihar's Rohtas

A major accident was averted on Friday when a newly constructed ropeway in Bihar's Rohtas district collapsed during trial, officials said. No casualties were reported. The incident occurred when the ropeway from Rohtas block to Rohtasgarh Fort and Rohiteshwar Dham gave way along with an attached tower. Four trolleys used during the trial were damaged, but workers present at the site managed to protect themselves, authorities said. Talking to reporters, Khursheed Karim, senior engineer of the Bihar Rajya Pul Nirman Nigam Limited said, "Trial and testing work was underway. While increasing load, a wire got stuck leading to the incident." PTI

Thar desert could expand up to Delhi, says Pilot as he joins march for Aravallis

Former Rajasthan Deputy CM takes part in National Students' Union of India demonstration in Jaipur, warns that Centre's new definition of range could exclude 1.18 lakh hills from protection

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Senior Congress leader Sachin Pilot on Friday warned that the Centre's redefinition of the Aravalli hills could strip nearly 90% of the range of protection, posing grave ecological risks, including the expansion of the Thar Desert up to Delhi.

Mr. Pilot joined the Congress-affiliated National Students' Union of India (NSUI)'s 'Save Aravalli – Save the Future' march in Jaipur, accompanied by his son, Aaran, who made his first appearance on a political stage. The Aravallis, the Congress leader stressed, act as a natural shield against air pollution, preserve groundwater, and sustain biodiversity.

"If the Aravallis are destroyed, the desert could reach Delhi," he said.

The police stopped the march at the Government Hostel intersection in Jaipur, citing permission limits, after which the protest concluded peacefully.



Sachin Pilot at the rally in Jaipur on Friday. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

The controversy stems from recommendations of a committee under the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change on the definition of the Aravalli hills, submitted to the Supreme Court, which the court accepted on November 20.

As per the new definition, the Aravalli hill is a landform with an "elevation of 100 metres or more above its local relief". Union Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav has rejected the Congress's claim that over 90% of the hills would lose protection under the redefinition.

'Official data'

Mr. Pilot said as per Forest Survey of India data, the Centre's definition would exclude most of the hill range. "There are 1.18 lakh hills below 100 metres and only 1,048 above 100 metres. This means nearly 90% of the Aravalli area would lie outside the definition and become unprotected," he said.

Mr. Yadav had on Thursday rejected a similar claim made by Congress leader Jairam Ramesh.

The former Deputy Chief Minister of Rajasthan dismissed government assurances that no activity would take place without permission as "misleading", noting that similar restrictions have been in place for two decades without curbing illegal mining. "Despite these bans, mining continues under the government's nose. What steps are being taken to stop it?" he said.

'Flawed' arguments

Congress's Rohtak MP Deepender Hooda also hit out at the Central government over its "flawed" arguments and "malicious" intent in the Supreme Court regarding the issue of Aravallis. The Centre's motive behind pushing for the new definition, he alleged, was part of its bid to "sell" the range. "The government should not consider the hills as unclaimed property. People of Haryana, and Rajasthan will fight to save the Aravalli hills and the environment," he said.

Ruhullah threatens street protests over quota issue in J&K

Peerzada Ashiq
SRINAGAR

The confrontation within J&K's ruling National Conference (NC) over the reservation issue resurfaced on Friday with senior Minister Sakina Itoo and Member of Parliament (MP) Aga Syed Ruhullah taking divergent stands.

Warning of a street protest in the coming days in Kashmir over the issue, the MP, in a post on X, said he will walk with 'Open Merit' aspirants and sit with them on December 28 at the same place as he did last year on December 23 to make their voices heard, referring to a sit-in outside the CM's Office.

"I have neither forgotten nor left the students alone. I urge the government once again to talk to the students and apprise them about the measures and decisions taken to resolve this issue. If that does not happen till Saturday, I will not leave our youth and students helpless," said the Srinagar MP.

Reacting to Mr. Ruhullah's plans, the Minister said, "Some people are misleading the youth and students on the reservation issue and unnecessarily calling shots on the government."



NC MP from Srinagar Aga Syed Ruhullah

After assuming power in October 2024, Mr. Abdullah had set up a Cabinet subcommittee to rationalise the open category share to 50%. He has submitted the proposal to the Lok Bhavan. After a revision of quotas in the Union Territory in 2024, the share of seats for open category applicants in government educational institutes and vacancies in government departments was reduced to 30%. In 2024, the L-G approved an additional 10% reservation for newly included tribes in the ST category, and added 15 new communities in the OBC category, reducing the proportion of open seats and prompting a major street campaign by general category applicants.

Rajasthan town on edge after anti-encroachment drive turns violent; Internet shut down

The Hindu Bureau
JAIPUR

Tension prevailed in the Chomu town, situated 40 km away from Jaipur, on Friday after a mob allegedly hurled stones on the police personnel who were removing iron railings erected as an encroachment outside a mosque. Four policemen sustained injuries in the incident and three others received minor injuries.



Police lobbed teargas shells and used mild force to disperse the crowd. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Police lobbed teargas shells and used mild force to disperse the crowd, officials said. Teams from the Special Task Force and riot control units were deployed in the town, mobile Internet services were suspended for 24 hours, and over 100 suspects were rounded up by the evening for questioning in connection with the stone-pelting incident.

The Muslim community members had earlier agreed to remove some stones placed on the road outside the mosque, near the bus stand, for ensuring a smooth traffic flow. After the stones were removed, some people allegedly began installing iron railings to create a boundary, which led to fresh objections.

Forces rushed

Though an agreement was reached late on Thursday night to maintain status quo at the site, the police brought a bulldozer to remove the iron railings on Friday morning, which reportedly angered the locals and triggered the stone-pelting. After the clash with the police, additional forces were rushed from Chomu, Harmada, Vishwakarma, Daulatpura and other nearby police stations.

While the situation was brought under control by the afternoon, the police personnel conducted flag marches in the town to maintain law and order.

HC grants interim bail to YouTuber in 17 criminal cases

Mohamed Imranullah S.
CHENNAI

The Madras High Court on Friday granted interim bail to YouTuber 'Savukku' Shankar alias A. Shankar in 17 criminal cases after observing that repeated curtailment of his personal liberty by the Tamil Nadu Police can only be construed as an "abuse of process of law."

A Christmas vacation Bench of Justices S.M. Subramaniam and P. Dhanabal granted the conditional interim bail for a period of 12 weeks after taking into consideration that he was a cardiac patient implanted with two stents due to a 95% block in his coronary arteries besides being a chronic diabetic. "Article 21 (Right to Life and Personal Liberty) includes the right to health, which is an important facet of the Constitution. It extends to prison inmates too and is widely recognised as a fundamental human right," the Bench said. It took serious note of various instances of mental harassment allegedly meted out to the YouTuber in prison.



YouTuber 'Savukku' Shankar

Petition by mother

The orders were passed on a habeas corpus petition filed by Mr. Shankar's mother A. Kamala to forbear the Superintendent of Puzhal Central Prison from isolating her son and subjecting him to solitary confinement.

Opposition spreading lies about BJD disintegration, party will survive for generations: Naveen

The Hindu Bureau
BHUBANESWAR

Former Chief Minister and Biju Janata Dal (BJD) supremo Naveen Patnaik on Friday hit out at the Opposition, accusing some sections of spreading misinformation that the BJD would break apart, and asserted the party would endure and remain relevant for more than 100 years.

Addressing BJD's 29th Foundation Day here, Mr. Patnaik said, "In a democracy, there are victories and defeats. Now, some people and some parties are spreading misinformation about us. Rumours are being spread that the BJD will break apart."

"I want to make it clear that the BJD is not about one or two leaders. It is a people's movement, deeply connected to Odia aspirations and pride. The BJD exists and will continue to be the voice of the people of Odisha for the next hundred years," he said.



Former CM and BJD chief Naveen Patnaik at the party's foundation day celebration in Bhubaneswar on Friday. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Later, the BJD held a press conference here saying misinformation about possible announcement about successor to Mr. Patnaik was nothing, but a mischief by some Opposition parties and section of the media.

The former CM said, "the BJD is a successful regional party of the country. Since 1997, we have been serving the people of Odisha by following the ideals of Biju Babu (legendary Biju Patnaik)."

Taking a dig at Bharatiya Janata Party government, he said, "At present, a so-called double-engine government is running in Odisha. But where is the development? Farmers are not getting fertilisers. Mission Shakti women are being harassed and it is better not to even speak about the law and order situation."

Yadavs mum but murmurs of a 'quiet exit' from 10 Circular Road set Patna abuzz

Amarnath Tewary
PATNA

Nearly two decades after moving into 10, Circular Road in Patna, the family of former Chief Minister Lalu Prasad Yadav is reported to have begun vacating the bungalow. After the State Building Construction Department issued a notice on November 25 asking the family to vacate the premises, leaders of the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) had asserted that the family would not move "come what may".

However, a purported video from Thursday, showing pick-up vans loaded with household belongings and flowerpots exiting the residence, which has gone viral on social media, suggests the process may already have started.



Iconic address: Rabri Devi was allotted the bungalow in 2005.

New allotment

The bungalow was allotted to Rabri Devi in 2005 and has been associated with the Yadav family ever since. In its notice last month, the department allotted her 39, Hardinge Road as the Leader of the Opposition (LoP) in the Legislative Council, though it did not specify a deadline for vacating the Circular Road property.

Building Construction Minister Vijay Kumar Choudhary said the new allotment had "enough space and is designated for high-ranking officials".

'Political malice'

However, the RJD hit back at what it described as an "attempt to target the family", asserting its right to retain the property.

RJD State president Mangani Lal Mandal said Ms. Rabri, who lives at the bungalow with her ailing husband, Mr. Prasad, and their son Tejashwi Yadav, currently the LoP in the State Assembly, and his family, would not move out "at any cost". He termed the notice an "act of political malice" against the party chief. In a recent social media post, Ms. Rabri's Singapore-based daughter Rohini Acharya also criticised the Nitish Kumar-led government for "targeting" the family and "insulting" her father.

While the family has stayed mum on the issue, party insiders said it was likely to shift in January after the inauspicious month of *kharmas* (mid-December to mid-January) to a private residence in Mahuabagh, near the Phulwarisharief and Danapur localities, rather than to 39, Hardinge Road.

Teach children about heroes from Indian epics, not Spiderman or Batman: Naidu

The Hindu Bureau
TIRUPATI

Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) chief Mohan Bhagwat have unequivocally agreed upon the fact that modern science and traditional knowledge are never at loggerheads, and they mostly run in a concurrent manner.

Speaking after inaugurating the seventh edition of Bharatiya Vigyan Sammelan, national-level science conference, at National Sanskrit University in Tirupati on Friday, Mr. Naidu called for a balance between modern science and traditional learning, as "India's ancient knowledge systems must remain central to its scientific pursuits."



A.P. CM N. Chandrababu Naidu with RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat at a national-level science meet in Tirupati on Friday. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

He called upon scientists, administrators, scholars and policymakers to ensure India's progress on the track of science and technology, without deviating much from its established civilisational traditions. Mr. Naidu wanted society to introduce India's cultural narratives to its youth at an early age so as to help them stay connected to their roots.

"Parents and teachers will have to narrate the noble characters from our epics, and not the western fictional characters like Spiderman or Batman to our children. This helps inculcate qualities like honesty, courage, commitment, responsibility and wisdom in them," was his advice.

Organisers hailed

The Chief Minister hailed the organisers for presenting the Indian knowledge systems in a structured form, thus facilitating a meaningful dialogue with its modern counterparts.

Mr. Bhagwat called as "misplaced" the perceived divide between science and spirituality, and said both ran concurrent in their own trajectories towards understanding the truth.

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Mediation is a successful, cost-effective tool, says CJI

Press Trust of India
PANAJI

Mediation is not a sign of the law's weakness, but rather its highest evolution, Chief Justice of India Surya Kant said here on Friday.

He was addressing the conference "Mediation: How significant in the present-day context", organised by the India International University of Legal Education and Research at Sancoale in South Goa.

"Mediation is a true transition from a culture of adjudication to a culture of participation where we cultivate harmony," he said. The Chief Justice said he envisioned a transition towards a multi-door courthouse where the court is a comprehensive centre for dispute resolution and not merely a place for trial.

Earlier in the day, the CJI took part in a symbolic walk for "Mediation Awareness" near Kala Academy in Panaji. "Mediation is being accepted as successful and cost-effective. It is a win-win situation for both parties," he said.

He added that the top court had launched the "Mediation for Nation" initiative. "(The message is) not only for the consumers of justice but also for direct stakeholders," he said.

Analyse past year's terror cases and boost capabilities, says Shah

He says India must be prepared to stem the threat from use of technology in terror incidents; urges States to work together with Central agencies; praises probe in Pahalgam and Delhi blast cases as 'outstanding examples of watertight investigation'

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI



Home Minister Amit Shah, Union Ministers of State Nityanand Rai and Bandi Sanjay Kumar, and Union Home Secretary Govind Mohan at the Anti-Terrorism Conference-2025 in New Delhi on Friday. ANI

Union Home Minister Amit Shah said on Friday that the police and Central agencies should analyse all terrorist incidents that occurred in the country and the world in the past year to enhance the counter-terrorism capabilities.

The Minister said the April 22 terror attack at the Baisaran Valley in Pahalgam shook the entire country. Terrorists wanted to disrupt the communal harmony in the country through the attack and deliver a blow to the new era of development and tourism that had begun in Kashmir, he said, after inaugurating the two-day Anti-Terrorism Conference-2025 organised by the National Investigation Agency (NIA) on Friday.

Updated crime manual

The Home Minister also unveiled the NIA's updated crime manual, the Organised Crime Network Database and the Lost/Looted and Recovered Weapon Database. The conference is being attended by senior police officers from the States, officers from the Central agencies/departments dealing with issues related to counter-terrorism, and experts from related fields such as law, forensics, and technology.

He said that worldwide, the landscape of terrorism is now changing due to the use of technology in terrorist incidents. India too must be prepared to prevent them. He said that it is the responsibility of the conference to anticipate invisible future challenges and to prevent them.

Speaking on the updated database on organised crime networks, he said such such groups initially operate for the purpose of ransom and extortion. However, when their leaders flee abroad and settle there, they automatically come into contact with terrorist organisations and then use the proceeds from ransom and extortion to spread terrorism in the country. He said that every State must, under the guidance of the NIA and the Central Bureau of Investigation, and with the cooperation of the Intelligence Bureau, utilise this database and eliminate such networks from their jurisdiction.

Mr. Shah said that the Jammu and Kashmir Police conducted a thorough investigation into the blast that occurred in Delhi. "All our agencies did an excellent job in investigating the entire network. ....the investigations into the Pahalgam and Delhi blast cases are not ordinary policing but outstanding examples of watertight investigation," he said.

Common ATS structure

He said that the NIA has worked hard to create a common Anti-Terrorism Squad (ATS) structure and sent it to the police forces of the States. "When we establish a common ATS structure across the entire country, it provides us an opportunity for uniform preparation at every level." All Directors-General of Police from the States should implement the ATS structure as soon as possible. He said all ATS units should get into the habit of using the National Intelligence Grid (NATGRID) for investigations, he said.

He added that the Central agencies and the State police had made good use of technology at their respective levels, but technology developed in silos and data collected in silos were like "a gun without bullets". For this purpose, the Ministry of Home Affairs, the NIA, and the IB should hold discussions to develop a seamless national-level framework for technology and data, and support the States in strengthening it, he said.

Will not allow BJP to create communal disharmony: T.N. CM

The Hindu Bureau
KALLAKURICHI


M.K. Stalin

Chief Minister M.K. Stalin on Friday said he would not allow the BJP to succeed in its attempt to "create communal disharmony" in Tamil Nadu.

"As long as Stalin and the 'Dravidian Model' government are there, the BJP will never succeed in its attempts to create communal disharmony in the State. The people will chase them away," he said, after inaugurating the Integrated Collectorate Complex at Veeracholapuram near Kallakurichi.

Pointing to various achievements of Tamil Nadu, he said these denoted a developed India. On the other hand, he claimed, "the scenario is different in States ruled by the BJP, where poverty, communal clashes, lynching, unemployment, and attack on education persist."

He alleged that the BJP had created a situation where even children and differently-abled persons were attacked during Christmas. This was the model the BJP was trying to introduce in the State, but the people of Tamil Nadu were very cautious, he added.

Against the backdrop of the row over the lighting of the Karthigai Deepam in Thirupparankundram, Mr. Stalin said the devotees of Lord Muruga offer worship at the [Sultan Sikkandar Avulia] dargah atop the hillock, while "Muslim brothers" offer rose milk to Hindus during the Chithirai festival in Madurai, and Christians offer Pongal during the first day of the Tamil month of *Thai*.

"The unity and harmony among Tamil Nadu's people – who affirm that every religion is equally acceptable – are what keep pricking the eyes of the BJP, which wants to divide the people by engaging in communal politics," he said. Mr. Stalin, who also laid the foundation for projects worth ₹386.48 crore, said Tamil Nadu was the number one State in all sectors, thanks to the work accomplished during the last four-and-a-half years of the 'Dravidian Model' government.

Bengal BJP leader visits Bangladesh mission, seeks end to attacks on Hindus

Shiv Sahay Singh
KOLKATA

The Leader of the Opposition in the West Bengal Assembly, Suvendu Adhikari, on Friday met the officials of the Bangladesh Deputy High Commission in Kolkata and sought an end to the attacks on Hindus in the neighbouring country. He told the officials that protests would continue outside the Bangladesh Deputy High Commission if the attacks do not stop.

The BJP leader, who led a five-member delegation, said the authorities at the Bangladesh Deputy High Commission assured him that the Bangladesh government would stand by the family of Dipu Chandra Das, killed by a mob there, and would ensure that the family members get justice.


Suvendu Adhikari

"They [Deputy High Commission officials] told us that 10 people have been arrested and that they will not get bail," Mr. Adhikari said. The BJP leader said the officials of the Deputy High Commission had avoided meeting him since Monday but agreed to the interaction only after he warned of a large protest outside the office.

Demonstrations are being held outside the commission since December 22 over the killing of Das. On December 23, the police used force on the protesters and arrested 19 people.

Mr. Adhikari added that the "100 crore Hindus" of India cannot remain silent on the attacks on Hindus in Bangladesh.

Coming down on the Trinamool Congress government for acting against protesters, Mr. Adhikari dubbed the government "anti- Hindu". "Mamata Banerjee has turned the Bengal Police into her personal force," he said.

A court on Friday granted interim bail to 12 members of the Bangiyo Hindu Jagaran Mancha arrested on December 23 for staging a demonstration outside the Bangladesh Deputy High Commission. The remaining seven protesters - all women - were granted bail on December 24.

Tripura Assembly Speaker dies; 3-day mourning in State

The Hindu Bureau
AGARTALA

Tripura Assembly Speaker Biswa Bandhu Sen passed away in Bengaluru on Friday. He was 72.

Sen was undergoing treatment for some months in Bengaluru after suffering a massive cardiac arrest in Agartala.

Sen, who had been with the Congress, switched to the BJP ahead of the 2018 Assembly election. He was elected to the Assembly several times from the Dharmanagar constituency in north Tripura.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi said in a social media post that Sen will be "remembered for his efforts to boost Tripura's progress and his commitment to numerous social causes". Several Central government Ministers, Chief Ministers, and leaders from the Opposition parties paid tributes.


Biswa Bandhu Sen

Tripura Chief Minister Manik Saha said the passing away of Biswa Bandhu is an irreparable loss for the people of the State. Governor Indrasena Reddy Nallu also extended his heartfelt condolences to the bereaved family.

The State government has declared a three-day mourning. All government offices and educational institutions remained closed on Friday. His last rites will be held on Saturday in his hometown Dharmanagar.

Mirwaiz drops 'Hurriyat chairman' title from X, says pressed by authorities

Peerzada Ashiq
SRINAGAR

Kashmir's chief cleric and separatist leader Mirwaiz Umar Farooq's decision to drop the title of "Hurriyat chairman" from his X handle after an "official warning" evoked a range of reactions in the Valley. The Mirwaiz was not allowed to join the Friday congregation at the Jama Masjid in the city.

In a post on X, Mr. Farooq said, "For some time now, I was being pressed by the authorities to make changes to my X (formerly Twitter) handle as Hurriyat chairman, as all constituents of Hurriyat Conference, including the Awami Action Committee that I head have been banned under the UAPA, making Hurriyat a banned organisation, failing which they will take down my handle."


Mirwaiz Umar Farooq.

He said it posed a "Hobson's choice".

"At a time when public space and avenues of communication stand severely restricted, this platform remains among the very few means available to me to reach out to my people and share my views on our issues with them, and the outside world," Mr. Farooq, who was the first person to lead Hurriyat in 1993, said.

The All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC), as it was called in 1993, was an amalgam of more than 20 organisations in the 1990s, comprising separatist political groups, traders' bodies, and civil society groups. The APHC termed Kashmir a "disputed territory" and demanded implementation of UN resolutions on Kashmir.

Peoples Democratic Party president Mehbooba Mufti said it was Mr. Farooq's personal decision to drop the title. She, however, added that Hurriyat was "an idea and represented the alienation felt by people".

Ruling National Conference leader Tanvir Sadiq urged the authorities to review the decision.

"If a respectable person like the Mirwaiz says he has been pressurised, this should be re-examined by the government," Mr. Sadiq said.

Jagtap joins Congress after quitting Sharad Pawar-led NCP faction

The Hindu Bureau
MUMBAI

Days after quitting the Sharad Pawar-led Nationalist Congress Party (Sharadchandra Pawar), former Pune Mayor Prashant Jagtap joined the Congress on Friday, amid speculation that the two NCP factions may come together ahead of the Pune Municipal Corporation elections.

"The 135-year-old Congress has stood like the Himalayas despite facing many storms. I am grateful for this opportunity, and I will pursue this as a progressive worker, carrying the thoughts of Gandhi, Nehru and Shahu-Phule-Ambedkar," Mr. Jagtap said, adding that his fight was against communalism and the politics of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh.

AMr. Jagtap joined the Congress in the presence of Maharashtra Congress president Harshwardhan Sapkal and senior leader Vijay Wadettiwar at Tilak Bhavan in Mumbai. He joined the party ahead of the civic elections scheduled for January 15.

The former Mayor blamed the BJP for rising crime and worsening traffic conditions in Pune, alleging that the government had failed to take effective measures to address these issues.

CBI moves SC against bail to Sengar in Unnao case; protests continue

Devesh K. Pandey
Alisha Dutta
NEW DELHI

The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) on Friday filed a special leave petition before the Supreme Court after studying the recent Delhi High Court order granting conditional bail to former BJP MLA Kuldeep Singh Sengar in the Unnao rape case, officials said.

The order dated December 23 suspended the sentence pending disposal of the appeal and granted bail to Sengar with certain conditions. "However, he will remain in jail as he is also convicted and sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment in another CBI case for murder," said a source.


Social activists stage a protest in support of Unnao rape survior in front of High Court in New Delhi on Friday. SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

Sengar was convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment in December 2019. He filed an appeal against the conviction in January 2020 and a petition for suspension of sentence in March 2022 before the Delhi High Court. "This petition was vehemently opposed by the CBI and the victim," said the source.

Protests against the High Court's order continued on Friday.

One placard carried by a protester outside the court read,"Unnao sister I'm sorry".

Though the people were protesting peacefully, the Delhi Police announced over a speaker that they should vacate the premises. "We request the protesters to vacate the premises or there will be legal action," said an officer.

Meanwhile, Mehmood Pracha, the advocate representing the Unnao rape survivor, told the media that irrespective of what the CBI does, they will be moving the Supreme Court. "We are also making preparations to go to the Supreme Court with a strong case, but the CBI is the main party," he said.

ED registers money laundering case against preacher

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) has registered a money laundering case against Islamic preacher Maulana Shamsul Huda Khan, currently living in the U.K., the agency said on Friday.

The ED action is based on a first information report registered by the Uttar Pradesh Anti-Terrorism Squad (UP ATS).

As per available records, Mr. Khan was appointed an assistant teacher in a government-aided madrasa in 1984. He acquired British citizenship in 2013. However, it is alleged that he continued to draw salary from 2013 to 2017, despite neither being an Indian citizen nor discharging his duties as a teacher, while residing abroad.

In the past two decades, he is alleged to have received substantial funds amounting to several crores of rupees through seven to eight bank accounts maintained in India. He allegedly acquired over a dozen immovable properties, with an estimated value exceeding ₹30 crore.

"Shamsul Huda Khan is accused of promoting radical ideology and engaging in illegal funding activities under the guise of religious education," the agency said.



Parno Mittra

Bengali actor Parno Mittra switches to Trinamool

Moyurie Som
KOLKATA

Bengali actor and former Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader Parno Mittra joined the Trinamool Congress on Friday, ahead of the West Bengal Assembly election scheduled for 2026.

Ms. Mittra, who joined the BJP in 2019, had contested the 2021 Assembly election from the Baranagar constituency.

She lost to then Trinamool candidate Tapas Roy, who switched to the BJP in 2024.

"I joined the BJP six years ago. People often make mistakes, but I feel the time has come to rectify mistakes. That is why I am joining Trinamool today," she said.

Ms. Mittra added that her political journey with the BJP did not progress in the manner she had envisaged.

2 BJP workers killed in Bengal; Trinamool member among 6 held

Six people injured in the clashes in Cooch Behar; deaths due to family feud and had no political motive, say local Trinamool leaders and police

Shrabana Chatterjee
KOLKATA

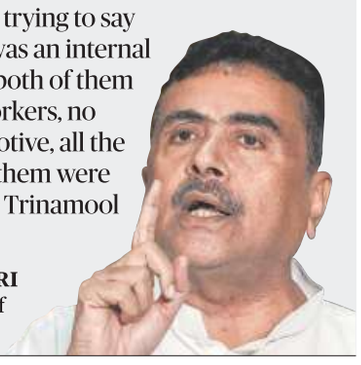
Two Bharatiya Janta Party workers were killed at Mathabanga in Cooch Behar district of West Bengal on Thursday. BJP leaders said this was a targeted political attack.

However, local Trinamool Congress leaders denied the claims, and said the deaths were due to an internal family feud.

The two deceased were identified as Madhab Sarkar, 38 and Jadav Sarkar, 27. Mr. Jadav was the nephew of Mr. Madhab. Six people were injured in the clashes, out of which two sustained serious injuries and are undergoing treatment in a local hospital.

"Police are trying to say that this was an internal family matter. But both of them were active BJP workers, no matter what the motive, all the people who killed them were known faces of the Trinamool Congress," Leader of the Opposition in the West Bengal Assembly Suvendu Adhikari said on Thursday evening. He added that Madhab Sarkar was a registered member of the BJP and was a local youth wing leader.

> Police are trying to say that this was an internal family matter. But both of them were active BJP workers, no matter what the motive, all the people who killed them were known faces of the Trinamool Congress
>
> **SUVENDU ADHIKARI**
> West Bengal Leader of Opposition



A local Trinamool leader from Mathabhanga, Girindranath Barman, denied the claims and said the clash was between two families and the BJP was trying to politicise the matter.

An FIR has been registered, and six people have been arrested in connection with the crime. One of the arrested men is a Trinamool booth president, the police confirmed.

"There is no political angle in this. One of the accused person's daughter and one of the victims had a love affair and the death was due to a feud related to this issue," Sandeep Karra, Superintendent of Police, Cooch Behar, told *The Hindu* on Friday. He said the six accused would be produced in court on Friday.

The local people rushed all the injured to the local hospital where the two members of the Sarkar family were declared dead. They said two groups attacked each other with sharp weapons.

CPI chief calls for Left unity, warns of 'fascist threat' to Constitution

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Communist Party of India (CPI) general secretary D. Raja on Friday said the country's parliamentary system was "becoming redundant", and warned that the BJP-RSS combine posed a grave threat to the Constitution and India's existence as a united federal nation.

Speaking at the concluding ceremony of the CPI's centenary year celebrations, Mr. Raja said the party, now entering its 101st year, faced "big challenges" and needed to intensify its struggle "not just to save the party, but to save the nation".

"The Left movement stands divided today. During British rule, we fought together against colonial forces. How long can communists remain split in the current political situation," Mr. Raja asked, recalling that the Chandigarh Party Congress had discussed ways to strengthen the CPI and unite the Left.



Major challenges: Members of the Communist Party of India taking out a rally in Kolkata on Friday to mark the party's centenary. ANI

He reiterated the CPI's consistent appeal for reunification of the communist movement, saying, "When fascist forces are fracturing the country, how long can communists remain divided? We are the mother party, founded on the soil of India, and we have reached out to all sections of people."

Mr. Raja accused the BJP of having "no respect for the Constitution", and said the ruling party never accepted the Tricolour or the constitutional framework. "The BJP-RSS combine is a threat not only to the Constitution but to the very existence of India as a nation," he said, adding that the challenge before the CPI is on "how to save the Constitution and the country".

"The BJP and its allies do not allow Parliament to function. If the Parliament doesn't function, democracy dies and electoral autocracy replaces it. We fought the British, French and Portuguese. Now we have to fight BJP raj," he said.

As the party marks its 101st anniversary, Mr. Raja pledged to strengthen the CPI's commitment to building a "classless, casteless, socialist India" and to lead the fight against communal and fascist forces.

"We will be at the forefront of the struggle and ensure these forces are thrown out of power," he declared.

NDA 'working' to send back illegal migrants: BJP working president

Press Trust of India
GUWAHATI

Bharatiya Janata Party national working president Nitin Nabin on Friday said the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance would not allow the rights of citizens over voting, land or welfare schemes to be taken away by anyone.

Addressing the inaugural session of the Assam State BJP executive meeting, Mr. Nabin said infiltration had earlier been passed off as "normal" in the State as previous governments remained silent due to "vote-bank" politics. He added that the BJP and the NDA were now "working" to send back illegal migrants.

"There are some who depend on infiltration to win elections, but the NDA will not allow it. People will be allowed to choose their own government," Mr. Nabin said. "Those who love this land, the *tiranga* (tricolour), and the Constitution are citizens of this country, and their rights over vote, land or schemes will not be taken away."



Regarding citizens' rights: BJP working president Nitin Nabin greeting people during a roadshow in Guwahati on Friday. PTI

Referring to earlier governments in Dispur and Delhi, he said they had remained silent on the issue of infiltration, which had adversely affected the rights of genuine citizens. "But the public has placed its trust in the NDA and the BJP, and we are taking steps to send back infiltrators. I thank the people of Assam and the Northeast for this trust. The government alone cannot achieve this; people also have to be conscious," he added.

Referring to the recent Bihar Assembly election, Mr. Nabin said allegations of "vote *chori*" had been decisively rejected by the electorate.

With Assembly polls due in Assam next year, he said the party was prepared to face any challenge and stressed the importance of organisational strength in securing another term. "There is no threat to the BJP-led coalition in the State. We have to work together to ensure the victory of all alliance partners," he said. "Candidates may change, but our commitment to the party and the alliance remains. Our leader Atal Bihari Vajpayee led the largest alliance in the country, and we are taking that legacy forward," he added.

The inaugural session was attended by Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, Union Minister Sarbananda Sonowal, BJP national vice-president Baijayant Jay Panda, Union Minister Pabitra Margherita, national general secretary (organisation) B.L. Santosh among other leaders.

Government to continue with its reforms, boost 'ease of living': PM

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday said the government's reform trajectory will continue with even more vigour in the coming times as it is committed to boosting 'ease of living'.

The Prime Minister made this observation on a series of posts by the Union government on its various reform initiatives. "Ours is a government committed to boosting 'Ease of Living' and this thread below gives examples of how we have worked in that direction. Our reform trajectory will continue with even more vigour in the coming times," Mr. Modi said.

The Centre, in a series of posts, said the real test of reform is whether it reduces stress for people and 2025 marked a clear shift in governance, with reforms focused on outcomes, not complexity.

Simpler tax laws, faster dispute resolution, modern labour codes, and decriminalised compliance reduced friction for citizens and businesses alike. The emphasis was on trust, predictability, and long-term growth, the posts by *MyGovIndia* said.

For millions of Indians, tax relief became real. Incomes up to ₹12 lakh attract zero tax. Middle-class families now retain more of what they earn, giving them flexibility to spend, save and invest with greater confidence, the posts stated.

It said the Income Tax Act, 2025 streamlined compliance and brought clarity to the direct tax system, making it more taxpayer friendly and aligned with today's needs.

It observed that workers no longer need to navigate dozens of laws as 29 labour laws were simplified into four clear codes covering wages, safety, social security, and relations.

Congress alleges ₹112 crore kickback benefited former Prasar Bharati chairman

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Citing a recent media report and confidential 254-page document of the Directorate of Income Tax (Investigation), the Congress alleged that former Prasar Bharati chief Navneet Kumar Sehgal was the biggest beneficiary of a kickback network that siphoned off nearly ₹112 crore from Uttar Pradesh government schemes between 2019-20 and 2021-22.

The party questioned Prime Minister Narendra Modi's silence on the matter.

Mr. Sehgal resigned as Chairman of Prasar Bharati on December 2, with a year still remaining in his tenure. According to a report published by the news portal *Newslaundry*, based on the confidential income tax document, Mr. Sehgal was identified as the largest alleged beneficiary of the kickback network.

Senior Congress leader Pawan Khera, who heads the party's Media and Publicity Department, said in a statement that despite these "serious allegations, there is no publicly known criminal prosecution or departmental action following the sharing of the findings".



Navneet Sehgal resigned on December 2 with a year still remaining in his tenure.

He added that the Income Tax Department had closed the case after accepting Mr. Sehgal's explanation. Subsequently, he was appointed Chairman of the Prasar Bharati in March 2024.

Mr. Khera addressed a press conference on the issue at Congress headquarters in Delhi.

Link to PM's Office

While the official reason for Mr. Sehgal's resignation is not known, Mr. Khera said, "Speculation is rife that his resignation is linked to his past association with Hiren Joshi and the betting app controversy." Mr. Joshi currently serves as Officer on Special Duty (OSD) for Communications and Information Technology in the Prime Minister's Office (PMO). Mr. Khera said that "reports now suggest Hiren Joshi is being replaced" by Mr. Sehgal, a 1988-batch IAS officer from Uttar Pradesh.

He questioned Mr. Modi's silence on the issue. "What other rackets are operating in the PMO, and who is accountable? If officials linked to betting app scams can function at the heart of the PMO, what does this say about PM Modi," he asked.

Mr. Khera also raised questions about the "current status" of Mr. Joshi, asking whether he had "been formally removed, suspended, or placed under investigation? Is PM Modi personally shielding him from scrutiny?"

He accused Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath of shielding Mr. Sehgal, claiming the State government failed to act even after the I-T Department shared its findings.

"Is this not an outright whitewashing of corruption?" Mr. Khera said.

Siddaramaiah may seek Cong. top brass nod for reshuffle

The Hindu Bureau
BENGALURU

As uncertainties over a possible change of Chief Minister in Karnataka continued to dominate political discourse, Chief Minister Siddaramaiah reached New Delhi to participate in the Congress Working Committee (CWC) meeting on Saturday.

"Yes, I am going to the CWC meeting," the Chief Minister said in reply to a question by mediapersons in Davanagere on Friday.

Deputy Chief Minister and Karnataka Pradesh Congress Committee (KPCC) chief D.K. Shivakumar has not been invited to the CWC meeting. However, Mr. Shivakumar met All India Congress Committee (AICC) chief Mallikarjun Kharge at the latter's residence in Bengaluru on Thursday.

Sources in the Congress said the CWC meeting was unlikely to take up the leadership change issue. However, the issue could be discussed with central leaders either before or after the CWC meeting.

While Mr. Kharge maintained that the matter should be resolved at the local level, Mr. Siddaramaiah has strongly advocated that he will continue in the post as long as the party high command's blessings are with him. Mr. Shivakumar downplayed the leadership change issue, and said he would continue to be a loyal party worker.



Siddaramaiah

Meanwhile, it is being speculated that the Chief Minister might place a request for the appointment of a new KPCC president if he gets to meet Congress leader Rahul Gandhi.

The Chief Minister is also likely to seek the party high command's nod for a Cabinet reshuffle, which is long overdue.

Mr. Siddaramaiah has been mentioning that he will undertake a Cabinet reshuffle if the party's central leaders clear the proposal.

Congress remembers former PM Manmohan Singh on his first death anniversary

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI

Congress leaders on Friday paid tributes to former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on his first death anniversary, saying his humility, honesty and legacy would continue to inspire the future generations.

Describing Singh as a transformative leader, Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge said he had reshaped the country's economic path and expanded opportunities for millions through economic reforms and lifted millions out of poverty.

"Known for his humility, integrity, and wisdom, he led with dignity and compassion, ensuring that progress remained inclusive and welfare reached those most in need. The rights-based paradigm is a testament to that approach. We had built a stronger India under his vision," he said.

"We pay our heartfelt tribute to a statesman whose legacy of honest public service and lasting reforms shall continue to inspire generations," the Congress chief said in a post on X.



Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi paying tribute to former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in New Delhi. PTI

Party leader Rahul Gandhi also paid tributes to Singh. "Through his visionary leadership, he empowered India economically. His historic efforts and bold decisions for the underprivileged and poor gave India a new identity on the world stage," Mr. Gandhi said.

Inspiration for all

"His humility, hard work, and honesty will always be an inspiration to all of us," he said.

The Congress said on X, "We remember a statesman of integrity, humility, and vision."

"His leadership strengthened India's economy and democracy. Tributes to the Prime Minister who served the nation selflessly and with determination," the party said.

Priyanka Gandhi Vadra said, "Manmohan Singh ji was a strong believer in equality, a strong, courageous, and dignified figure, truly dedicated to the nation's progress. His simplicity, honesty, and dedication to his country will always inspire us all."

Singh, who served as Prime Minister from 2004 to 2014, died last year at the age of 92

INBRIEF



Indian student shot dead near University of Toronto campus

A 20-year-old Indian doctoral student has been shot dead near the University of Toronto Scarborough campus (UTSC) in Canada, with authorities probing the case as a homicide, officials said. The shooting took place on December 23, and the Toronto police on December 24 identified the victim as Shivank Avasthi, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation reported. The police were called to the area of Highland Creek Trail and Old Kingston Road at about 3.30 p.m. on Tuesday for a report of an injured person lying on the ground, said Duty. Inspector Jeff Allington. PTI

Woman shot at in Gurugram for rejecting proposal

A 25-year-old woman was shot at inside a club in Gurugram after she allegedly refused a proposal from a man, the police said on Thursday. The police said they had received information about a woman injured in firing and found her admitted to a private hospital. The woman's husband lodged a complaint stating that his wife, Kalpana, 25, was shot by Tushar, alias Jonty, 25, a resident of Sangam Vihar in Delhi. He said that Kalpana had gone to work on December 19 and around 1 a.m., called him to say she had been shot. After investigation, the police arrested two accused, Tushar and his friend Shubham, alias Jony, 24, both residents of Sangam Vihar. PTI

CEO among three arrested for gang rape of woman

Press Trust of India
JAIPUR

Three people, including the CEO of a private IT company, have been arrested for the alleged gang rape of a woman manager of the company after a birthday party in Udaipur, Rajasthan, the police said on Friday .

According to the police, the accused CEO, Jitesh Sisodia, had organised a party on his birthday last Saturday, in which the manager was also a guest.

The other accused in the case were a woman executive head of the company and her husband Gaurav Sirohi of Meerut.

All three accused were arrested on Thursday and produced before a court, which remanded them in four-day police custody.

According to the woman's complaint, after the party, she was offered to be dropped back home by the woman executive head in her car, in which Sisodia and Sirohi were also seated. On the way, they allegedly bought a cigarette-like substance and offered it to her, after which she lost consciousness. She later woke up and found she had been sexually assaulted, the complaint said.

HC seeks Centre's reply on plea to cut GST on air purifiers

Court grants 10 days to file affidavit amid concerns over the air quality in Delhi; PIL plea says air purifiers must be classified as 'medical devices'

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Delhi High Court on Friday directed the Centre to submit a detailed affidavit on a petition seeking a reduction in the goods and services tax on air purifiers in view of the worsening air quality in the national capital.

A Vacation Bench of Justice Vikas Mahajan and Justice Vinod Kumar granted the Centre 10 days to file its reply to the petition, while posting the case for further hearing on January 9.

During the hearing, Additional Solicitor-General N. Venkataraman, representing the Centre, stated that meetings of the GST Council had to be held physically and that it was not possible to convene such meetings through video conferencing.

The ASG further highlighted that the GST Council was a constitutional body and that voting had to be done only in person. He sought time to submit a detailed affidavit from the government in response to the petition.



Taxed air: The PIL plea asks the Centre to bring the goods and services tax from 18% to 5% on air purifiers. FILE PHOTO

Tax reduction

The public interest litigation petition filed by advocate Kapil Madan sought directions to the Centre to classify air purifiers as "medical devices" and reduce the goods and services tax to the 5% slab. Air purifiers are currently taxed at 18%. The petition stated that purifiers cannot be treated as luxury items in view of the "extreme emergency crisis" caused by air pollution in Delhi.

On December 24, the court directed the GST Council to meet at the earliest and consider lowering or abolishing GST on air purifiers.

The matter was listed on Friday to inform the court when the Council could meet and whether it was possible for it to convene virtually, if not physically.

Church body seeks action against those attacking Christians

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The National Council of Churches in India (NCCI) on Friday hailed the visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the Cathedral Church of the Redemption in New Delhi on Christmas. The organisation also appealed to the Government of India to take strong action against those attacking Christians, their places of worship, and traditional religious symbols.

Rev. Asir Ebenezer, general secretary, NCCI, in a statement, said that the Prime Minister's visit to the church, particularly at a time when attacks on Christians were reported from various places of the country, could be perceived as a reassuring signal to the community.

"It can suggest that the Government of the day and the political leadership of the National Democratic Alliance-led Union Government stand with the Christian community of India. While welcoming this gesture by the PM, NCCI places on record its repeated earnest appeal to the Government of India and its NDA allies to unequivocally distance themselves from acts of violence and intimidation perpetrated by ill-informed miscreants," the statement read.

The organisation also called upon the government to condemn attacks on Christians in the strongest possible terms and take strongest action against those responsible for the attacks. It added that actions against those attacking the Christians would ensure that the goodwill gestures extended by the PM on Christmas Day, and by other representatives of the ruling dispensation on various other occasions, were seen as meaningful commitments rather than symbolic appearances.

Four held for vandalism in Assam school

Four people associated with the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Bajrang Dal were arrested for vandalising decorative items at a school on Christmas eve and damaging festive articles in shops in Assam's Nalbari district, the police said. The arrests were made on Thursday, a senior officer said. PTI

Invasive mosquito species threatens India's 2030 malaria elimination goal

Bindu Shajan Perappadan
NEW DELHI

Urban malaria, driven largely by the spread of the invasive vector *Anopheles stephensi* in metropolitan areas such as Delhi, has emerged as a national concern threatening India's goal of eliminating the mosquito-borne disease by 2030, according to the Health Ministry's recently released "Malaria elimination technical report, 2025".

The report said asymptomatic infections, difficult terrain, and population movement continued to drive transmission, while high-burden pockets persisted in the districts of Odisha, Tripura, and Mizoram. Cross-border transmission from Myanmar and Bangladesh continued to affect border districts in northeastern India.



India's malaria cases fell from 11.7 lakh in 2015 to about 2.27 lakh in 2024.

Besides the malaria elimination goal, the country has assigned itself an intermediate goal of achieving zero indigenous cases by 2027, aligning with the World Health Organization's global strategy.

Anopheles stephensi is a mosquito species, now recognised as an invasive threat due to its ability to thrive in urban environments, that breed in artificial containers (tanks, tyres), and efficiently transmit the *Plasmodium falciparum* and *P. vivax* parasites, challenging current malaria control efforts worldwide. In India, urban transmission presents unique challenges related to container breeding, construction sites, informal settings, high population density and fragmented healthcare delivery, necessitating city-specific vector control and surveillance strategies.

"Strengthening surveillance systems, enhancing vector monitoring and improving supply chain reliability emerged as the top priorities," the report noted.

High-burden pockets

While India has now largely entered the pre-elimination phase, malaria is no longer uniformly distributed across large geographical areas, the report said. Instead, the disease persists in limited pockets shaped by local ecological conditions, human mobility, occupational exposure, health-system access, and vector dynamics. The report added that active surveillance has been intensified in tribal and forest areas, border regions, and migratory population settings, where residual transmission risks remain high.

Drop in cases

India has reduced its malaria burden significantly over the past decade, and the number of cases has dropped from 11.7 lakh in 2015 to around 2.27 lakh in 2024, with deaths reducing by 78%. Key challenges that need urgent attention include inconsistent private-sector reporting, limited entomological capacity, drug and insecticide resistance, operational gaps in remote tribal areas, and sporadic shortages of diagnostics and treatment commodities.

Operational research has emerged as a key enabler for elimination acceleration, the report said.

UIDAI to expand full-service Aadhaar centres to 473 by September: CEO

Aroon Deep
NEW DELHI

The Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) will increase the number of full-fledged Aadhaar enrolment and update centres for adults to 473 from the current 88 by September 2026, its CEO, Bhuvnesh Kumar, told *The Hindu*.

While children can be enrolled for Aadhaar at post offices, adult enrollees have fewer places to go.

Since adult applicants may have to travel past multiple districts to reach a centre, the expansion will help them, Mr. Kumar said. Such centres offer all modification and enrolment services. Some Aadhaar details can be updated online, but changes in biometrics and updating one's name after a certain limit require a visit to a centre.

Mr. Kumar said the UIDAI wants to ensure that there is at least one centre in two districts.



UIDAI CEO says parents who falsified their children's date of birth during Aadhaar enrolment risk criminal action. REUTERS

The number of adult enrollees is likely a small percentage of Indians (the precise share cannot be calculated due to the lack of a nationwide Census since 2011), but even a small percentage could translate to lakhs of people due to India's population. "We are working with Google and we will soon have Google locations for Aadhaar centres," Mr. Kumar said.

Field verification

Mr. Kumar said that due to concerns of illegal immigration, Aadhaar has been issued in recent months "only after field verification" by district administrations. Most adult applicants include non-resident Indians or overseas citizens of India, the latter being foreign nationals with ties to India either by marriage or parentage. Foreign nationals who live in India are permitted to have an Aadhaar as it is not a proof of citizenship.

The UIDAI is working on the integrity of data by restricting changes in date of birth of Aadhaar holders. "If someone has two different dates of birth in two different documents, one is false," Mr. Kumar said. People who had to change the date of birth once will be allowed to do so after filing an affidavit admitting a clerical mistake but doing so twice will not be allowed, he said.

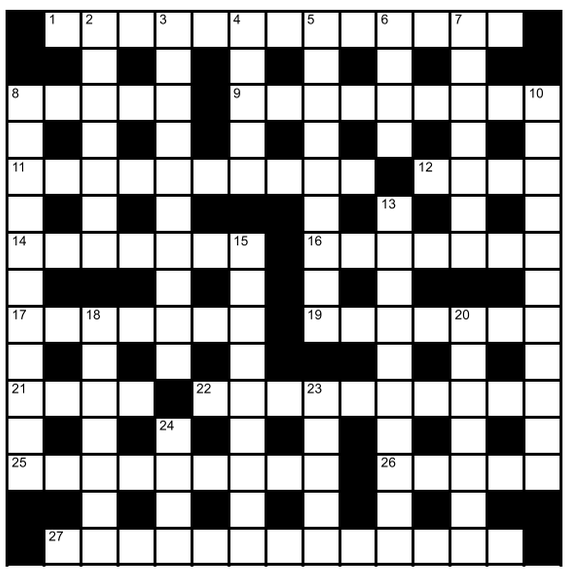
Parents who falsified their children's date of birth during Aadhaar enrolment risk criminal action, Mr. Kumar said, referring to a case in which the Allahabad High Court ordered the filing of an FIR against a parent over irregularity surrounding a child's date of birth.

TH CROSSWORD + 14676

(set by Dr. X)

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

SCAN TO PLAY



Across

1 Dynamic gaoler surely has good collection of mugshots (6,7)
8 Hot escort in retreat entertaining fifty scoundrels (5)
9 Kids of India's top detective inspector caught breaking laws (9)
11/7 What billiards player will do to make the first move (3,3,4,7)
12 Chemical element extracted from quartz in colliery (4)
14 Mask for each lad and gal at centre (7)
16 One collecting hard pebbles on a beach (7)
17 Uproar in trial involving oriental politician (7)
19 Excellent associate tackling good boy's recurrent neurological disorder (7)
21 Stop bowler crossing line (4)
22 Pop a capsule to gain power and energy? Nonsense! (5,5)
25 Director's explanation about year with ultimately horrendous period of low rainfall (3,6)
26 Individual, tense about season's first outbreak (5)
27 Unintentional errors by doctor ultimately worsened fissure in pal (8,5)

Down

2 Row about retreat getting poor rating, perhaps (3-4)
3 One's old chum struggling without money is not educated (10)
4 Woody plant or bush perhaps? About right (5)
5 Asian lad wandering around posh Spanish region (9)
6 Lady getting excellent thong (4)
7 See 11 Across
8 Intoxicated prince irritated soprano (4-7)
10 Spy rebellious teenagers consuming cocaine near bar (6,5)
13 One supporting key player tottering in a spot near restroom in retreat (5,5)
15 Accepted suggestion to have new wine and Italian appetisers (9)
18 Start to make film about a city in Iran (7)
20 Tree in ordinary park outside ancient city (7)
23 Soviet leader accepted by revolutionary men in election (5)
24 Live with a posh boyfriend (4)

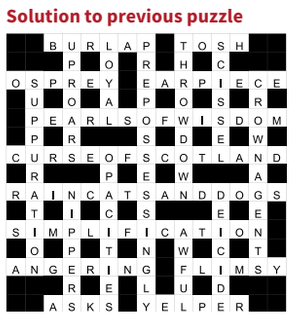
SUDOKU

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

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DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★★☆☆

Solution to previous puzzle



Solution to yesterday's Sudoku

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

FAITH

His decision is supreme

The Supreme One takes pity on *jivatma*s (living beings), and gives them a body, according to their karma. We must use the body to worship Him. Our hands must be used to offer *anjali* to Him. *Anjali* (putting palms together in prayer) is praised as the most important gesture of worship, said Akkarakkani Srinidhi in a discourse.

On the greatness of *anjali*, it has been said: "*anjalihi paramA mudrA kshipram deva prasAdini*." Thus, *anjali* is the best mudra. But what does *anjali* mean? *Anjali* is defined thus – *am jalayithi iti anjali*. The *akshara* 'a' is a reference to Vishnu, for it is said – *akarArthO Vishnuh*. Just saying 'a' is like saying the Lord's name. His heart melts (*jalayithi*) if His devotees do an *anjali*. If *anjali* is such an easy means of obtaining His mercy, then why did we not do it in our previous birth? Our presence on this earth now shows we did not resort to such an easy means of reaching Him. From this, it becomes clear that even to do something so simple, He must will it. The *Ramayana* clearly demonstrates this. Dasaratha wanted Rama to succeed him as king. Kaikeyi wanted her son Bharata to become the king. Bharata himself wanted Rama to return to Ayodhya and ascend the throne. But were the wishes of any of these people fulfilled? Rama went to the forest, and thus Dasaratha's wish was not met. Bharata refused to accept kingship, and so Kaikeyi's desire was not fulfilled. Bharata pleaded with Rama to return to Ayodhya and become the king, but Rama refused. Eventually, it was Rama's sandals that ascended the throne. Thus only what the Lord decides will happen. That is why we must pray to him to give us the sense to do even an *anjali*. We cannot do it on our own.

Gates and windows

One round of appeals cannot fix the large-scale deletions in electoral rolls

The Election Commission of India (ECI)'s Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls has a reasonable aim: to prune the duplicates, outdated addresses and entries for people who have died or moved, which India's electoral rolls have a tendency to gather. But the ECI's design of the ongoing SIR, modelled on the one in Bihar, infuses systemic flaws in the process that the body seems unwilling to address or even acknowledge despite many of the same problems in Bihar reappearing in multiple States. The process is happening at great speed that, together with the burden of inclusion being shifted from the state to the voter, suggests that the ECI is treating the exclusion of eligible voters as an acceptable risk. The speed would be justifiable given the availability of digital technologies today but they have their own tendencies to exclude, exemplified by the fact that the 2002-2005 electoral rolls, details from which the ongoing SIR expects citizens to invoke, are not machine-readable and the ECI has treated even minor mismatches as cause for deletion. The scale of exclusions reported in the phase I draft rolls should thus be read as a warning sign. It is not obviously reasonable to expect that one round of appeals will fix this in the final rolls.

The claims and objections processes correct errors only to the extent that affected voters detect and pursue them. That is, the appeals stage only adds a new filter, selecting for those with the time, literacy, connectivity, social support and confidence to deal with the state. If a person does not realise they have been deleted, cannot take time away from work, travel to an office, assemble documents or navigate forms and hearings, the error will become an official fact. Important information is not consistently available in a form that enables real-time public scrutiny, such as the precise reasons for deletions at granular levels and demographic breakups, including gender-wise patterns, preventing civil society, smaller political parties, journalists and voters from identifying where the process is failing while it can still be corrected. Finally, the SIR depends on house-to-house work, form distribution and collection, digitisation and repeated visits executed by State staff who simultaneously have other duties. When they are further constrained by tight deadlines, the risk of chasing targets instead of completing tasks becomes great. The current SIR in sum comes across as a form of administrative gatekeeping that stratifies the electorate into two tiers: those who can continuously re-prove themselves in the state's preferred format and those who cannot. That outcome will not be corrected by a single-appeal window because the window is itself part of the gate.

Social scourge

Child marriages lead to poor outcomes in health, education, poverty alleviation

India has committed to end child marriage by 2030 through the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), and while it has made comprehensive strides, there are still miles to go to achieve the target. The Union government recently marked the first anniversary of its Bal Vivah Mukt Bharat Abhiyan with a 100-day awareness campaign for a country free of child marriage. It is a fact that child marriages have been consistently dropping, from 47.4% in 2005-06 to 23.3% in 2019-21, according to National Family Health Survey (NFHS) data. But in a diverse country of a population of 146 crore, the ground reality is that progress is varied and uneven across States and socio-economic demographics. While the highest child marriage rates among women aged 18 to 29 years are prevalent in West Bengal, Bihar and Tripura, States such as Jharkhand, Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Telangana, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan are not far behind. There is a direct co-relation between child marriage, poverty and education, as the UN Population Fund's analysis of NFHS data shows. While 40% of girls from the lowest quintile of the household wealth index married before they became adults, in comparison to just 8% of those from the highest quintile, 48% of girls with no education were married below 18 years in comparison to only 4% among those with higher education.

The Prevention of Child Marriage Act, 2006, is the flagship law to end the practice, but figures from National Crime Bureau Records indicate infrequent application of the law and a low conviction rate. Also, the use of laws such as the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, which are stringent and provide no leeway for consenting sexual adolescents, has led to other concerns. Afraid of triggering harsh punishments from the criminal justice system, many underage girls are turning to unregistered, unprofessional help, endangering their health further. Already, it is established that child marriages can lead to poor maternal and child health. In this backdrop, it is imperative to study why States such as West Bengal, which incentivises girls to study with a cash scheme, still has a high incidence of child marriage. The Centre's '*Beti Bachao Beti Padhao*' campaign has to do much more to reach the most vulnerable communities, and ensure that infrastructure, including clean toilets and safe public transport, are in place to keep girls at school. According to Girls Not Brides, a global partnership, at least nine of the 17 SDGs will not be achieved without ending child marriage. In India, unless the several factors driving child marriage – poverty, and education, health and gender inequality – are addressed, it will be impossible to bridge the gap between policy and practice.

Health care does not need the PPP route



Kannuru Sujatha Rao

is former Union Health Secretary, Government of India

Public policies have single or multiple objectives. Policy for public-private partnerships (PPP) in medical education could be many: the desire to ensure quality education at affordable rates; helping the investor make profits; to show people symbols of development by a 'happening' state; rent seeking on contracts in these multi-crore projects and so on. The design of the policy framework indicates the policy objective that is being sought to be achieved.

An expansion of numbers

Three years ago, the Andhra Pradesh government expanded the number of medical colleges by six, taking the total to 17 in the government sector. There are another 19 in the private sector. The government is now seeking to add another 10 under the PPP mode. The total number of seats in all these colleges, when functional, is expected to be over 6,500. For these 10 new colleges, initiated by the Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy government, 835 acres of land have been acquired and the colleges are at different stages of development.

At the average rate of about ₹450 crore a college, the total project cost was estimated to be ₹4,500 crore, to be mobilised from the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD), government and Government of India schemes. Each college was expected to have 150 seats attached to a 650-bed district hospital by suitably upgrading it. In normal course, government colleges provide subsidised education. But for ensuring fiscal sustainability, a three-tier fee structure was designed: 50% of total seats for ₹15,000 a year; 35% at ₹12 lakh and 15% earmarked for non-resident Indians at ₹20 lakh. The total revenue from fees could amount to ₹11 crore a batch a year, which means a total recovery of about ₹55 crore in the fifth year. In addition, these colleges would be eligible for another 28 post-graduate seats from the second year, going up to over 50. Post-graduate seats are at least three times more expensive.

In 2024, the new N. Chandrababu Naidu government engaged KPMG to prepare feasibility reports for the 11 medical colleges under a PPP mode that NITI Aayog is pushing vigorously. Under the PPP model, the entire land is proposed to be on a 33-year lease, extendable for another 33 years at ₹100 an acre, along with the district hospital; provide viability funding of 25% of the estimated project cost; empanel the hospital under the State health insurance programme and obtain the National Medical Commission's and other statutory clearances; and ensure 70% bed occupancy. In return, the investor is expected to complete the civil works within two years; provide free outpatient and earmark 70% of the beds for free inpatient treatment for "special" patients or those referred to by the government to be reimbursed at package rates of the Ayushman Bharat health insurance scheme. Commercial rates can be applicable for the remaining 30% beds. To ensure time-bound construction, the government has to depute a full-time engineer at the site. Two rooms, measuring 500 square feet each, would also be provided for free to set up a Jan Aushadhi pharmacy and for medico-legal work.

> It is unwise to get into the privatisation of public assets in critical areas such as health without building the institutional capacity to enforce contracts in the first instance

The need for evidence-based assessment

There have been protests and much disquiet over the proposed policy, with the allegation of "privatisatising" what is envisioned to be a public asset. There is apprehension that middle class and poor students would lose out on opportunities to study, lose job opportunities as the private investor would be under no obligation to adhere to quotas for recruitment, and pay out of pocket for services that are currently free.

The contract seems faulty as the risks do not appear to be evenly shared. The risk of delayed payments, earmarking virtually the whole hospital – 70% of the beds – for patients to be referred by the government and treated at Ayushman Bharat rates and all outpatient treatment free, may only lead to incentivising the private investor to game the system by charging under the table capitation fees; resort to shortcuts in appointing the full complement of faculty (who are also very difficult to find); make compromises on the quality of care, and deny care, on various pretexts, so as to divert the earmarked beds on the plea that demand is low. The risk is greater for the government in case the investor fails, as the only remedy is the judiciary which in turn could take several years to adjudicate.

The idea of giving away all control over the district hospital, and for 66 years, needs to be reconsidered and better justified. Evidence shows that with comprehensive effective primary care, 30% of hospitalisation can be averted, besides the fact that with advancing technology, the list of day surgeries not requiring hospitalisation is increasing.

Technology is rapidly disrupting known delivery systems and arrangements. Thus, there is a need for a more thorough evidence-based assessment, keeping in view the shifts in disease burden, demographic profile and technology, to justify the need for 650 beds uniformly across the State.

Besides, the PPP arrangement at the district level only fragments the public health system and in the long run, harms its organic development. System efficiencies need vertical integration of primary, secondary and tertiary care to ensure a strong referral system and the smooth patient pathways required for continuum of care. This is central to coping with chronic diseases and good patient management.

Inefficiencies in the system

The health system in Andhra Pradesh has several inefficiencies due to inadequate infrastructure in turn linked to chronic underfunding and a large number of vacancies, particularly among specialists and in rural areas. The worry is that the already critical situation of vacancies in rural areas and government facilities will be further exacerbated if medical education is commercialised (as evidence shows that students after paying huge fees are more inclined to go abroad, work in the private sector and live in urban cities). Therefore, it is necessary for the government to invest in ensuring doctors and specialists at subsidised rates (instead of the present model of selling 50% seats) so that the government can build a pool of doctors who are willing to work in public health, in rural areas and in public hospitals.

Given these serious concerns, opting for the PPP route on grounds of financial stringency seems facetious as there are several options available to raise capital. The PPP route is also cause for concern as privatisation requires a strong state with institutional capacity to enforce laws and contracts. Andhra Pradesh, like the rest of the country, does not have that capacity. The earlier Telugu Desam Party regime fragmented the primary health-care system with almost half a dozen contracts. Poor enforcement resulted in chaos. Andhra Pradesh has not even been able to enforce the relatively benign Clinical Establishments (Registration and Regulation) Act. Given that the state in India is soft, it is unwise to get into the privatisation of public assets in critical areas such as health care that directly impact the lives of the poor.

Medical education is in a crisis and is also rapidly changing. At the current rate of the thoughtless expansion of colleges without faculty, the day may not be far when many medical colleges may have to shut down as engineering colleges did after the first flush of the IT boom. Quality of education and equitable access are more serious issues to address than opening medical colleges. The PPP model as a means of delivering welfare does not inspire confidence.

Decoding air pollution concerns in Delhi-NCR



Anwar Sadat

is an Associate Professor in International Environmental Law at the Indian Society of International Law (ISIL)

In Delhi's National Capital Region (NCR), vehicular emission is the primary source of air pollution, especially in terms of fine particulate matter ($PM_{2.5}$) and toxic gases such as carbon monoxide, benzene and nitrogen oxides. Unfortunately, officials, un-official agencies, citizens and the higher judiciary have held stubble burning farmers of neighbouring Punjab and Haryana responsible for Delhi's deteriorating air quality.

On PPP

The principle widely recognised to determine liability for polluted water, air and land is the 'polluter pays principle' (PPP) which envisages that the person or firm who damages the environment must bear the cost of such damage. In *Vellore Citizens Welfare Forum vs Union Of India and Ors.* (1996), the Supreme Court of India held that the PPP is part of the law of the land, which paved the way for statutory recognition of the principle in the National Green Tribunal Act, 2010. The application of the principle of PPP (a principle of cost allocation and cost internalisation) is replete with complexity in a situation consisting of both multiple point and non-point sources of pollution that are directly or indirectly involved in the air pollution. The latter has a transboundary angle which cannot be addressed by PPP alone which is contingent on cooperation among neighbouring entities.

The jurisprudence laid down in the Standley case decided by the European Court of Justice in 1999 is very relevant. The case was about the implementation by the United Kingdom government of the so-called EU Nitrates Directive. This directive was aimed at reducing water pollution from nitrates discharged into waters from agricultural sources. In the U.K., the action programmes initiated by the local authorities in certain nitrate vulnerable zones led to a limitation on the agricultural activities in those areas. The farmers of these areas opposed it on the ground that they could not be held liable for nitrates released from the industrial sources into waterbodies.

> In India, the polluter pays principle has shifted to the government-pays principle

The Standley judgment adds the proportionality dimension to the PPP which amounts to saying that seasonal stubble burning by the farmer cannot be held liable for the air pollutants created by other sources.

The narrative relating to the long-range trans-boundary effect of air pollution in India and in this part of the world has yet to acquire traction that air pollution is not simply local in nature but is subject to regional and global influences. The Trail Smelter case (1941) held sulphur spewing smelters based in British Columbia (Canada) responsible for damage of properties in the State of Washington, U.S. There is growing evidence of the global and regional impacts of air pollution (*Q Zhang et al.*, *Nature*, 2017).

Zhang mentions that the trans-boundary health impacts of $PM_{2.5}$ pollution related to international trade are even higher than those linked with long-distance atmospheric transport of pollution. The Convention on Long-Range Trans-boundary Air Pollution (CLRTAP, 1979) (51 parties and eight protocols), and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Agreement on Trans-boundary Haze Pollution (2002) are examples of air pollutants travelling long distance. The Gothenburg Protocol to the CLRTAP Convention was amended in 2012 to include $PM_{2.5}$ as a pollutant, making it clear that $PM_{2.5}$ is also a long-distance air pollutant.

Government-Pays Principle

The judiciary in India has not been able to suggest precise contours in terms of the valuation choice to be deployed to determine the quantification of exact damage. In the Indian Council for Enviro-Legal Action case, the Court recognised that the precise scope of the principle and its implications for those involved in polluting activities have never been satisfactorily agreed. Instead, the Court, in *Indian Council For Enviro-Legal Action vs Union Of India and Ors. Etc.* (1996), *Vellore Citizens Welfare Forum vs Union Of India and Ors.*, and *S. Jagannath vs Union Of India and Ors.*, leaned on the formula of compensation to human victims of pollution and environmental restoration. This is more aligned with corrective justice and less with PPP.

In India, PPP has shifted to the government-pays principle. India has used the Water Act 1974, Air Act 1981, the Environment Protection Act 1986 and Articles 48A and 51A(g) incorporated through constitutional amendments, to create specialised authorities and vested them with wide powers. These include the closure of industries and the power to give any directions to protect the environment.

Activist judiciary

These authorities suffer from administrative failures like the rest of the bureaucracy and the executive. In India, the increasingly activist judiciary tends to take greater note of these standards and creates an obligation on governments to bear the entire costs of monitoring air pollution and only secondarily to impose liability on the polluters.

On counts of welfarism, the Indian judiciary takes special interest in such matters, since most of the victims of such environmental degradation have little means possible of individually suing polluters to enforce the PPP. This approach projects the government's welfare-maximising nature but does not fully internalise the costs of pollution prevention and public health benefits to the people. Last but not the least, the environmental duties of individuals as compared to their rights are seldom discussed in detail in India.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Turmoil in Bangladesh

To defuse the Bangladesh situation, what is required is a goodwill visit by senior Ministers and the External Affairs Minister, followed by the Prime Minister if necessary. Reciprocal visits need to be followed up because the turmoil has been going on for long. Meanwhile, irresponsible statements made by certain politicians and the frenzy being built up by the visual media should be nipped in the bud.

A.V. Narayanan,
Chennai

There is a need for strong action on the part of the international comity of nations to bring stability in Bangladesh.
Fresh elections are awaited to curb tyranny and create a democratic hue across the nation.

Manas Agarwal,
Shahjahanpur, Uttar Pradesh

Tarique Rahman's return after nearly 18 years in exile has the potential to reshape the political landscape ahead of the 2026 polls. While projecting unity and stability, his absence during years of turmoil raises questions. With unrest, minority concerns and strained India ties persisting, voters must choose carefully, judging leadership by proven actions rather than lineage, so that the nation does not regret it later.

R.S. Narula,
Patiala, Punjab

Ukraine war and peace

Had U.S. President Donald Trump been certain about creating peace between Russia and Ukraine, he would have exercised more caution in devising his plans right from the beginning. The Kremlin's adamant attitude is also something that is difficult to digest. As discerning political observers will note, passing the buck appears to be what these powerful nations seem to be more interested in than finding permanent peace.
My fond hopes that Ukraine will have a peaceful future, at least in the New Year, are slowly and steadily diminishing.

Mani Nataraajan,
Chennai

Tourist-friendly measure

During the holiday season, the area surrounding the Brihadeeswarar (Big) Temple becomes severely congested for lack of adequate parking space. Vehicles spill over onto adjoining streets, forcing visitors — this includes foreign tourists, senior citizens and children — to walk long distances under the scorching sun. This situation affects the city's image. It is unfortunate that the large open ground, formerly used as a paid parking area, was converted into a children's play zone under the banner of tourism development. However, the installation remains unused, overgrown with weeds and filled with rusted play equipment. The old court complex, lying in disuse, can be turned into a paid parking facility and improve the visitor experience.
Pro-active actions will promote Thanjavur as a tourist-friendly heritage city.

S.P. Anthonisamy,
Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu

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



A view of hotels in Doodhpathri's Raiyar village. Doodhpathri is among the 48 destinations that closed for tourists after the terror attack in the Baisaran meadow in Pahalgam earlier this year. IMRAN NISSAR

The quiet, deserted meadows of Kashmir

Only 28 of the 48 destinations in the Kashmir Valley that were closed after the April 22 terror attack in Pahalgam have been reopened. While waiting for the Lieutenant Governor to give clearance to the rest to resume operations, locals who are dependent on tourism for their livelihoods worry about unpaid loans and unsteady jobs. **Peerzada Ashiq** reports on how the incident continues to impact tourism

The upper reaches of the Pir Panchal mountain range in the Lesser Himalayas is covered with fresh snow, forcing large-billed crows to fly downhill in search of food. One village they often flock to is Raiyar, a hamlet in the hillocks adjacent to Doodhpathri in the Budgam district of central Kashmir. This is around 43 kilometres from Srinagar, the capital of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). Watching the crows perched on leafless apple and walnut trees, Rafiqa Jan, 38, complains that they keep cawing at a high pitch – considered a bad omen.

With its sprawling meadows, crystal clear streams, and evergreen pine trees, Doodhpathri has been an increasingly popular choice for both domestic and international tourists over the last few years. However, this year, it remains deserted and quiet. It is among the 48 destinations that closed for tourists after the terror attack in the Baisaran meadow in Pahalgam left 26 people dead on April 22 earlier this year.

Jan and her husband, a labourer, live on the border of Doodhpathri. She has had a tiring day, scaling the nearby forests dotted with dense pine trees to collect wood for cooking.

In 2024, Jan would make enough money from her tea stall to buy cooking gas cylinders. Her stall catered mostly to tourists – couples in love, honeymooners, and friends and families yearning to see and touch snow on the slopes.



"I would earn a profit of ₹500-2,000 a day, depending on the footfall. There are more tourists during the winter months because this place is covered by a thick blanket of snow," she says. "But all that came to a halt this year. All our plans, from conducting weddings to renovating our homes, from buying new winter clothes to getting new furnishings for our houses, have been ruined," says Jan, whose son got selected last year for the MBBS course in a government medical college in Jammu.

Jan raised a loan of ₹60,000 to pay the fees for her son's first year in college. "I thought I would repay the amount this year. I expected booming business from tourists," she says. "But the year is almost over and I have failed. We are now staring at the most stressful winter months of our lives."

Changing the status of women

By September, Jammu and Kashmir Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha had reopened 28 of the 48 destinations in the Kashmir Valley in a phased manner. The rest await clearance from his office.

The places reopened included Pahalgam, where the attack took place, and popular tourist sites such as Gulmarg and Sonamarg. Doodhpathri, located more than 126 km away from Pahalgam and walled by a series of mountain ranges, remains closed, along with other prominent destinations such as Yusmarg, Tosamaidan, Drang, Nilnag, and Aharbal. This decision has impacted thousands of locals in these places, who earn their living from tourism.

According to official sources in the Governor's Office, a security audit is still underway and the destinations will be re-opened after the audit is completed. As of now, Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) personnel are manning Doodhpathri and the J&K Police have set up a barricade to ensure that outsiders, including journalists, do not enter these destinations.

> We don't understand why Doodhpathri is closed, while Pahalgam is open.
>
> **GHULAM HASSAN SHEIKH**
> Restaurant owner

Doodpathri recorded less than 50,000 tourists in 2011; this increased to the highest-ever figure of 18 lakh in 2024. This year, according to the Tourism Department's figures, only 1.25 lakh visited the place in the first four months.

The earlier booming tourism in Doodpathri not only changed the economy of the place, but also the status of women. Jan is one of the 200 women from Raiyar and its adjoining villages who broke the glass ceiling by becoming the first owners of roadside tea stalls in Kashmir.

"For the first time in our lives, we were like the working men of our villages, who earned their own money and met their own needs. We also started buying new clothes without pressing our husbands for it, and ate what we wanted to," says Naseem Bano, 40, who was among the first few women in 2020 in the area to sit on the streets serving roasted corn to visitors.

With the number of tourists rising over time, more women set up tea stalls in and around Doodhpathri. Social media 'influencers' soon turned up at these stalls to shoot Reels of *kehwa*, a piping hot brew of crushed almonds, saffron, cardamon, and cinnamon. The stalls also popularised home-made collard greens, chutney of onions and walnut, pickles, and corn flour rotis.

"In ones and twos, we started selling roasted corn to tourists in 2021. That business slowly picked up. Despite the initial reluctance and opposition from men, we continued to do this and carved a niche for ourselves," says Bano.

A tourist hub waits with bated breath

According to the 2011 Census, Raiyar has a population of 1,937. Ghulam Hassan Sheikh owns the popular Lal Baab restaurant here. He says his 32-year-old son, Bashir Ahmad Sheikh, who used to drive a taxi till 2021, began earning more from the restaurant business. "Many labourers of Raiyar village, who worked as carpenters and plumbers in Srinagar, also switched to the tourism sector to earn their living," says Sheikh.



A woman prepares maize flour flatbread and sells salted tea to locals at her roadside stall in Raiyar village. IMRAN NISSAR

Officials of the Doodhpathri Development Authority (DDA) say Raiyar has around 400 families of which 80% depend on tourism. "We don't understand why Doodhpathri is closed, while Pahalgam is open. It seems like we are being punished for somebody else's sins," adds Sheikh.

There is growing distress among those who raised loans to invest in the tourism sector. Bashir Ahmad, 21, raised a loan of ₹5.5 lakh and invested in an all-terrain vehicle (ATV) in September 2024, seeing the leap in tourist numbers. Since April 29, a snow shield has been covering it.

"I am supposed to pay around ₹10,000 as monthly EMI (Equated Monthly Instalment). This growing economic distress will force us to sell our land to repay the loan," says a worried Ahmad.

He lives with his older brother, two sisters, and parents in a single-storey house. "I used to earn even up to ₹2,000 per day. These days, I sell spices to survive," he says.

According to the DDA, 1,500 locals were registered as labourers and horse owners, 200 as tea stall owners, and 50 as ATV operators in 2024. The government tenders out parking and ticketing to private players. The ticketing counter, tendered at ₹1.5 crore, has not generated any revenue this year, and the payment remains outstanding.

"Doodhpathri was emerging as a major winter destination. We had been receiving a lot of queries from prospective tourists and filmmakers," says Riyaz Ahmad Beigh, Chief Executive Officer of the DDA. "We have not been able to grant permission because of the current status of the destination. We get a lot of representations from various stakeholders too, to re-open it for the winter. We are hopeful that it will re-open soon."

In 2024, the DDA granted 29 permissions to shoot films and music videos at the destination. The government intended to introduce activities such as skiing and paragliding to entertain visitors this year. These plans have been put on hold.

The situation is equally grim at Kulgam's Aharbal, around 50 km away from Doodhpathri. Aharbal is home to a 25-metre-high waterfall, popularly known as the 'Niagara Falls of Kashmir', on the Veshu river. Junaid Dar, an arts graduate, and his two friends raised a loan and invested in a guest house in Kulgam to cater to the rush of tourists visiting the waterfall. Dar says he is not able to sleep because of the anxiety.

Woes at the epicentre

The Pahalgam attack has struck a major dent in Kashmir's tourism industry this year. "Kashmir has not even been able to touch 25-30% of the record number of tourists (26 lakh) who visited in 2024," says Farooq Kuthoo, president of the Travel Agents Association of Kashmir.

Official figures say that Kashmir received 7.53 lakh tourists, including 15,319 foreigners, and 7.38 lakh visitors in the first six months this year. This is a dip of over 52% compared to the 15.65 lakh for the same period in 2024.

The continued closure of major destinations has impacted both itineraries as well as the number of days of stay for tourists. "For a week-long trip, tourists get to travel to the golden triangle of Gulmarg, Pahalgam, and Sonamarg. However, we could not make an elaborate itinerary that includes major off-beat destinations such as Doodhpathri and Aharbal. The closure has impacted tourists who want two weeks of stay and enjoy off-beat destinations more," says Kuthoo.

There has been a steady retrenchment of hotel staff in Pahalgam after the attack. "Most hotels have a retrenchment rate of 40-50% this year," says Kuthoo, who is also an executive member of the Kashmir Chamber of Commerce and Industries, a major traders' body of the Valley.

Pahalgam has a population of around 10,000. Without orchards or rice fields, its economy is driven by tourism. Several people say most of the unemployed youth in and around Pahalgam bank on tourism to earn their livelihood. "Many of them formed groups and raised loans to take properties on rent for a year. They are the worst affected. The situation has pushed many into depression," says Kuthoo.

> For the first time in our lives, we were buying new clothes without pressing our husbands for it, and eating what we wanted to eat.
>
> **NASEEM BANO**
> Corn seller, Doodpathri

Around 12 destinations were re-opened in September this year, including the famous trekking base of Aru, around 15 km away from Pahalgam. From Aru, tourists go to high altitude lakes such as Tarsar and Marsar. Several hotel owners in Aru village, with a population of around 4,000, claim that the closure has shattered the confidence of foreign tourists who visited frequently to trek.

Kursheed Ahmad, owner of Aru Heights, says this is the worst-ever tourism season this year since the 1990s. He says, "Aru has never been closed in the past for tourists. It has attracted foreign tourists for years and remained peaceful by and large. We had earned the faith of tourists over a period of time by offering a safe and secure environment. All that has gone to waste."

The Union Ministry of Tourism had declared Aru as one of the winners of the Best Tourism Villages Competition 2024 on World Tourism Day.

The closure of key destinations has impacted local taxi operators, guides, and travel agents in many places too. In Srinagar, Tanvir Dar, who runs The Kashmir Cabs, says, "We have been serving tourists for the past three decades with two taxis. In 2023, we raised a bank loan to add three more, to create a fleet for new or lesser-known destinations. All the drivers and cars earmarked for these places have failed to make any profit."

Several Srinagar-based travel companies have reduced their staff number because of the prolonged closure. "We receive several queries round the year for destinations such as Aharbal and Yousmarg, but we have had no guests. We had to cut the staff number due to decreased footfall," says Akhtar Khan, a tour operator.

Many locals associated with adventure tourism are also idle because trekking in most mountain passes surrounding the Kashmir Valley has been stopped too.

Not on the same page

The elected government of J&K, headed by Chief Minister Omar Abdullah, is not on the same page as the Lieutenant Governor's administration on the prolonged closure of tourist destinations. Abdullah says the J&K government, even at the peak of militancy in 1996, did not take any drastic measures, keeping tourist destinations out of bounds. He has repeatedly requested the Lieutenant Governor's administration to re-open all the destinations.

"The policy of closure of destinations sends a wrong message to the people. Kashmir has faced far more difficult circumstances. Unnecessary closures hurt local stakeholders, including hoteliers, tour operators, transporters, and thousands of families dependent on the sector," said Abdullah, who inaugurated tourism projects including Asia's longest ski drag lift and a rotating conference hall at an altitude of 4,390 meters on December 13. "Claims of normalcy ring hollow because of closed tourist destinations," he added.

In Raiyar, Jan says the continued closure of Doodhpathri is not only shattering dreams, but also affecting the hard-earned esteem and economic *azadi* (independence) that many women tasted for the first time. "I pray five times a day that the destination be re-opened soon and we start earning again," says Jan.

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Farm labourers work to nurture the early crop in an opium field in Luhari village in Madhya Pradesh's Ratlam district. The nets overhead protect the fields from birds, especially parrots. A.M. FARUQUI

Tightening the opium belt

The Madhya Pradesh High Court's remark that a case against an 18-year-old man, arrested for illegal opium possession, was 'rather suspicious', led to the suspension of six police personnel. It also brought the focus back on Malwa region's historic opium cultivation. **Mehul Malpani** reports on how farmers find themselves caught between drug smuggling and crackdown by government agencies

On the morning of August 28, a bus heading to Pratapgarh in Rajasthan was stopped soon after it began its journey from Madhya Pradesh's Mandsaur district. A group of policemen in mufti entered the vehicle and deboarded an 18-year-old boy. Sohanlal Mirasi, a resident of Sarnon Ki Dhani village in Rajasthan's Balotra district, was detained and later booked for illegally possessing 2.71 kilograms of opium.

He was charged under Sections of the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act, 1985. The event was recorded on the CCTV camera fitted on the bus. Sohanlal's family approached the Madhya Pradesh High Court in Indore for his bail, armed with the 23-second footage, claiming that Sohanlal was empty-handed.

On December 5, the High Court granted Sohanlal bail after his lawyer presented the footage. Justice Subodh Abhyankar remarked that the case filed at Mandsaur's Malhargarh police station is "rather suspicious". He summoned Mandsaur Superintendent of Police (SP) Vinod Kumar Meena to appear in the next hearing.

On December 6, Meena suspended six police personnel, including the Malhargarh Station House Officer (SHO) Rajendra Panwar, two Sub-Inspectors and three constables, due to "procedural lapses", while detaining and arresting Sohanlal. The case prompted the High Court to remark that the State police had "conveniently forgotten" the provisions of Sections 105 and 185 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023, which lay out the procedures for search and seizure and audio-video recording of the process. It has now summoned the Principal Secretary of the State's Home Department on January 12 "to apprise this Court about the steps taken to implement the aforesaid provisions".

While the M.P. police has faced backlash after the High Court's stance, the case has brought into focus the opium cultivating regions of Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, and the challenges the people engaged in the generations-old livelihood are now facing.

One challenge is the illegal trade of opium and crushed poppy straw, locally known as *doda chura*. Farmers and other locals say that they live under the constant fear of getting booked on charges of illegal possession or being named as part of a smuggling chain. They allege that people are also caught on fake charges and money extorted from them even if they are innocent.

Sohanlal's older brother, Khartaram Jaat, also alleges that his brother was "held in illegal custody, beaten and tortured" for about five hours after he was detained, and "₹12 lakh was demanded from him". He says Sohanlal had finished school a few months before and wanted to start preparations for the civil services. "He had gone to Mandsaur to visit the Pashupati Nath Temple," he says, adding that his brother has been "depressed" since the bail and barely talks to anyone.

> They (the police) demanded money and a deal was struck for ₹22 lakh. After he paid the money, he was assured that the case would be over in a few months
>
> **RELATIVE OF FARMER KRISHNA PAL SINGH RATHORE**

Madhya Pradesh's Malwa region – Mandsaur, Neemuch, and Ratlam – is under scrutiny of four enforcement agencies: the opium regulatory body the Central Bureau of Narcotics (CBN), the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB), the M.P. police, and the Narcotics Wing. The CBN had lodged 114 cases under the NDPS Act in 2023. This increased to 145 in 2025 (until December 18). The other agencies have registered separate cases under the same Act.

Opium-growing lands

The Malwa region in M.P., and Pratapgarh, Chittorgarh, and parts of Kota and Jhalawar districts in Rajasthan's Mewar region, are known as the opium belt of India.

The region produces nearly 85% of India's legally-grown opium with licences issued by the CBN that functions under the Department of Revenue (DoR) of the Union Ministry of Finance. Some parts of Uttar Pradesh also grow opium.

Opium, locally called *afeem*, is tied to family tradition and prestige. There's a local saying: *Afeem ka patta ladke se badhkar hai*," (an opium licence is bigger than a son). Farmers, some of who have inherited the growing and trade from over 200 years ago, say the licence betters marriage prospects. Across villages in the area, land parcels are protected with fencing and sarees, and nets cover the plots from the top, so parrots do not get at the poppy seed. Cultivation begins after Deepavali and ends in March, close to Holi.

The CBN issues licences and procures opium, and is also engaged in enforcement of licit production. Licences are of two types: opium gum (latex) and the concentrate of poppy straw (CPS). With the gum licence, farmers extract the opium latex by lancing poppy seed capsules, and sell it to the government. This is the traditional practice in India. In a CPS licence, the CBN procures the capsule on the poppy straw of about eight inches, including the stem and leaves. This was introduced by the Union Government in 2020-21.

As per the data obtained from the CBN, 1,15,416 licences were issued to farmers in the three States in 2025. Of this, 75,333 were for gum and 40,083 were CPS ones. In Madhya Pradesh alone, 56,349 licences – 38,801 gum and 17,548 CPS – were issued this year.

After procurement, the products are sent to the Government Opium and Alkaloid Works, Neemuch, a plant for processing opium and manufacture of alkaloids.

Illicit networks and extortion

In Bajhkhedi village of Mandsaur's Sitamau, Krishna Pal Singh Rathore, a 36-year-old farmer, allegedly killed himself in February 5, 2024, months after he was booked by the CBN in September, 2023, for alleged illegal possession of 11kg of poppy straw. His family says that in addition, about 2.4 quintal *doda chura* was found at his elder brother, Narendra Singh Rathore's house. Neither had the required licences.

"Narendra was suffering from cancer at the time. The officers threatened Krishna Pal that the entire quantity would be shown in the FIR lodged against him. This scared him. They demanded money and a deal was struck for ₹22 lakh. After he paid the money, he was assured that the case would be over in a few months," a family member says on the condition of anonymity. "But the officer he had paid got transferred soon and the new person then demanded more money," he says. After locals and members of the Rajput collective Karni Sena staged protests, about ₹15 lakh was returned after his death, he adds.

In Ayodhya Basti of Mandsaur's Piplia Mandi, Bhavna Kunwar, 48, runs a small *kirana* (daily needs) shop next to her tin-roof house. Her husband, Govardhan Singh Songara, 51, was arrested on November 19, 2025, by the CBN for allegedly being part of a smuggling chain of *doda chura*.

Songara, who works as a driver for a local construction company, was booked under the NDPS Act, and was accused of driving a car as a pilot vehicle to a truck that was caught carrying 1,177 kg of *doda chura* in May.

"My husband had no connection with opium. The red car he was driving crossed a nearby toll plaza twice on May 5, within half an hour of that truck's crossing. There was no recovery from his vehicle or any other link," Kunwar says.

Jokchand, a former Congress leader, says that such cases put fear in people who feel they could be detained any time, and that threats are also made "just to settle scores". "The local police contact everyone whose name pops up during an investigation. If a farmer's name comes up, he mostly chooses to pay a hefty sum rather than having his name in a case and risk losing his opium licence. Others pay the money because they know they can be in jail for a long time and the conviction rate is high in these cases," Jokchand explains, saying that the practice of 'settling' is locally called *khada tod* (instant deal).

In Luhari village of Ratlam's Jaora, Ambaram Singh, a 68-year-old farmer, says that due to the risks involved with opium cultivation, farmers have to take various precautionary and safety measures to avoid any legal troubles. "Once the crop begins to grow, 2-3 of us sleep there so that someone does not steal even a single plant or seed," he says, pointing to his field where two women are working.

Piling up of cases

In 2024, the Mandsaur police arrested 377 people in 146 NDPS Act cases. Until November 30, 2025, up to 448 people have been arrested in 163 cases. The police denies the allegations of extortion, while highlighting a crackdown on smuggling rackets involving multiple states. Nikhil Kumar Gandhi, Deputy Narcotics Commissioner, CBN Neemuch, also denies charges of any fake cases by his officers.

Mandsaur SP Meena says that Sohanlal's case is not fake and he did not admit to that in the court as reported by various media outlets. "All I admitted to was some procedural errors by some personnel who have been suspended. We have also arrested the man, Chandra Prakash Patidar of Piplia Mandi, who sold him the opium, and a man named Vikas Chaudhary from Jodhpur, who had sent Sohanlal here. These men have two NDPS cases each against them," Meena says. The procedural lapses include late FIR filing and not informing the local police station after detaining Sohanlal from their jurisdiction.

Another officer involved with the investigation cites evidence that Sohanlal visited Mandsaur eight times in the past month and a half. "We have gathered CCTV footage and human intelligence. He did not go to the temple but did visit about 50 villages in the region. Why would a student come here alone so many times and visit villages he claims to have no connection with?" the officer says.

He adds that boys and men between 16 and 22 are being employed by smugglers to carry opium and *doda chura*. As per police data, at least 26 men around this age, including one minor, have been arrested by the police of Malhargarh sub-division in 2025. Many of them hail from Rajasthan.

Dilip Patidar, founder of the Malwa Kisan Sangathan farmers' collective and district president of the Kisan Sangharsh Samiti, says, "People here are so scared that if you ask someone to hold your bag on the roadside for a minute and say that you have to use the bathroom, they won't do it. They fear that you could be carrying opium and they could get caught."

In Neemuch's Kanawati sub-jail, out of the 441 convicted and under-trial inmates, 291 are lodged in cases under the NDPS act as of December 18, as per data obtained from the jail.

A multi-State nexus

The police and CBN officers from the region say the major substance smuggled out of the region is *doda chura,* while opium is sold in smaller amounts. "A 10 *are* plot with gum licence produces opium latex between 8 and 12 kg. Some farmers only sell 7-8 kg to the CBN. This is the required amount. They keep the remaining amount to sell in the black market," an officer says, requesting anonymity. The government rate is ₹1,500-2,000 per kg of opium latex. The black market pays ₹1.5-2 lakh, he adds.

Doda chura used to be bought by the State's excise department until 2016, when it was brought under the purview of narcotics laws and banned by the Union government. Police officers and farmers say the main problem began after poppy straw was banned.

Officers explain that the destination of most of the *doda chura* smuggled out of the region is Punjab and Haryana, where it has been traditionally consumed as a drink. "Most cases are linked to four States: this region of M.P. where it's bought, Punjab and Haryana where it is sold, and Rajasthan where most rackets operate from. Since this region is close to some prominent national highways, transport trucks are one of the main carriers used in smuggling," the officer says, adding that due to the crackdown on trucks, smugglers have also started using smaller cars. Officers also highlight various challenges in tracking smugglers saying that they use fake identities, virtual or international numbers, or even communicate through gaming apps.

Officers say local farmers get caught in the middle of smuggling and crackdown through lucrative offers from smugglers and extortion by police personnel. "The *doda chura* they sell for ₹2-3 lakh (per quintal) is sold at much higher rates later. The prices shoot up massively as you move up the smuggling chain for opium and poppy straw. The farmers barely get any share of this, but end up getting caught in the mess," he says.

One officer agrees that some personnel have been involved in "extorting" money from those whose names come up in the smuggling chain.

Gandhi says that the task of destroying the poppy straw does not fall with the CBN. "We are currently working on a proposal for the State Government to address this issue and take the responsibility of disposal of poppy straw in its control," he adds.

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Bhavna Kunwar's husband, Govardhan Singh Songara, was arrested in an NDPS case this year. She runs a grocery in Piplia Mandi in Madhya Pradesh's Mandsaur district. A.M. FARUQUI



Illustration : SATHEESH VELLINEZHI

The silent scourge strangling childhoods in Andhra

Nearly 18 years since the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006 came into force, Andhra Pradesh continues to report high incidence of the practice. Though the State has joined the Centre's *Bal Vivah-Mukt Bharat* campaign, stakeholders engaged in eliminating the social evil highlight how poverty, lack of awareness and limited access to social support compel many families to see child marriage as a coping mechanism, finds **P. Sujatha Varma**

At her home in Vaddera Colony in Rajiv Nagar on the outskirts of Vijayawada city, 16-year-old Sushma is getting ready to leave for school. She looks smart in her green-white uniform and long braided hair neatly folded and tucked behind her ears. Around her, the colony, a dense grid of modest, one-room houses packed tightly against one another along narrow lanes, drowns in the din of morning rush.

Hardly six months ago, however, Sushma was married off to a 22-year-old day labourer from Devarapalli village in Rajamahendravaram district. It was after the intervention by a team of volunteers from an NGO and government officials, who arrived at her home soon after the 'wedding' on June 11, that she was put back in school.

"I have been instructed to ensure that the two live apart until she turns 18," says Bathina Penchalamma, her mother. The groom, who fled the scene in panic that day, returned later to sign an undertaking, agreeing to wait until she attained the age of 18. Sushma was produced before the Child Welfare Committee and later shifted to a Child Care Institution (CCI) at Krishnalanka for two months.

At the time of marriage, Sushma was just 15 years old, says O. Sowjanya, a volunteer from the NGO Vasavya Mahila Mandali (VMM), which works in collaboration with Delhi-based Just Rights for Children (JRC) to end child marriages in Andhra Pradesh. The JRC is a network of over 250 organisations working to protect, promote and advocate for the rights and welfare of children, especially those in vulnerable situations.

An entrenched practice

It has been 18 years since the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006, came into force in India, but the practice continues to take its toll on countless children, at times with the tacit approval of officials. Sowjanya recalls an incident to this effect. When she learnt that a 17-year-old was being married off to a 30-year-old man at Luna Centre of Singhnagar, she rushed to the venue along with local anganwadi staff and police personnel to stop the wedding.

"I would have reached in time to prevent the marriage, but some local staff, apparently under political pressure to overlook the case, misled me by giving me the wrong address," says Sowjanya.

> Special vigilance drives are being organised during auspicious periods such as Akshaya Tritiya and the Sravana and Megha months, during which period a high number of weddings takes place.
>
> **A. SURYA KUMARI**
> Principal Secretary, Andhra Pradesh Women Development and Child Welfare Department

A local secretariat staff, who requested anonymity, says that there is little that can be done in cases wherein the entire family appears complicit in violating the law. "Their indifference to the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act was evident from their two earlier failed attempts to marry the girl off to the same man, a relative, when she was just 15 years old." The girl's paternal grandmother expressed her anger at the volunteer and the government officials, accusing them of "unnecessary interference" in what she described as a matter that concerns only her family.

30-year-old groom with two children

In another case, a team comprising a volunteer and mahila police personnel swooped in on the house of B. Lakshmi Prasanna at Old Rajarajeswaripeta on August 14, a day before the wedding of her 17-year-old daughter, Puja, with a 30-year-old man, who already had two children from his previous marriage. Prasanna, who separated from her husband 14 years ago, eked out a living as a fruit vendor while raising three of her four children as a single mother. Puja, the eldest, had been living with her father, a lorry driver in Karnataka. After his death due to a heart attack in 2023, however, she joined her mother and three siblings in Vijayawada.

Officials learnt of the wedding through a tip-off from Prasanna's sister, who was reportedly upset after her sister declined a match she had proposed for Puja. "I thought that since the man seemed good, he would take care of her, and I could focus on my three other children," says Prasanna.

Puja was shifted to a home for two months and allowed to return home after her mother signed a written undertaking that Puja would not be married off before she attains 18 years of age. Puja's younger sister dropped out of school after completing Class 10 and stays at home. Another sister is studying in a government residential school. The youngest sibling, a boy, is academically bright but suffers from a liver ailment.

Like in the case of Puja, a vicious cycle of poverty lies at the heart of many child marriages among the poorer sections of society. Families caught in this trap often perpetuate child marriages out of desperation, unintentionally harming the very children they seek to protect. "It's tragic that the practice continues to endanger the health, education and future of young girls," says president of VMM B. Keerthy.

Strength from adversity

There are, however, stories of transformation that show change is possible, she says, citing the case of a woman in her 30s who was married off at 15 and subjected to domestic violence. Through VMM's training programme in fashion designing, she acquired the skills that transformed her into a confident entrepreneur who now exports garments and has emerged as a change-maker.

In Anantapur district, the NGO Rural and Environment Development Society (REDS) documented another exemplary case wherein a father prevented the marriage of his 16-year-old daughter, an Intermediate student. Despite pressure from maternal relatives to marry her off to an older, alcoholic cousin in the name of tradition and "security," the father opposed the proposal, insisting on his daughter's education and legal age of marriage. When the mother left home with the girl against his wishes, he sought help from the NGO and the police and lodged a missing-person complaint. Prompt action by the police and the NGO resulted in the girl's rescue within 10 days. Following sustained counselling by REDS, the Child Welfare Committee, and the police, her mother acknowledged the legal and social consequences of child marriage and agreed to support her education.

> It's tragic that the practice continues to endanger the health, education and future of young girls.
>
> **B. KEERTHY**
> President of VMM

Government efforts

Principal Secretary, Andhra Pradesh Women Development and Child Welfare Department, A. Surya Kumari says the government is trying to achieve lasting results. Without explicitly referring to child marriage, efforts are being made to educate adolescent girls on related issues, enabling them to arrive at their own understanding of the harms of the practice, she says.

The government revised the 'Andhra Pradesh Prohibition of Child Marriage Rules, 2012' in 2023 for effective implementation of the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006. District Collectors have been designated district-level Child Marriage Prohibition Officers (CMPOs) and nodal officers for the implementation of the Act and Rules, and extensive awareness campaigns are being organised, engaging all stakeholders, including religious leaders, managements of wedding halls, catering services and event managers.

"Special vigilance drives are being organised during auspicious periods such as Akshaya Tritiya and the Sravana and Megha months, during which period a high number of weddings takes place, to prevent child marriages," says Surya Kumari.

Education is key

Girls in the age bracket of 15-18 years and boys between the ages of 15 and 21 are being identified and enrolled into open schools, open intermediate and other distance education programmes. Also, skill development training programmes for out-of-school adolescent girls and awareness programmes on child rights, child protection and child helpline services are being conducted.

Surya Kumari says that 47,047 CMPOs have been appointed so far, and 10,541 Child Marriage Prohibition and Monitoring Committees have been constituted to ensure continuous and community-level vigilance. The department data shows that since 2023, 3,967 child marriages were reported, and 3,828 of them were prevented. A total of 116 First Information Reports were filed in various police stations across the State.

"Child marriage prevalence in Andhra Pradesh is high but what sets the State apart is the collective resolve to change this reality. The State government, district administrations, local communities and grassroot partners work in close coordination with one another to make Andhra Pradesh a child marriage-free State by 2030," says Ravi Kant, convenor of the JRC, which is working with 17 NGO partners in the State.

(Names of the girls and their family members have been changed to protect their identities.)

Glimpses of 2025



A new beginning: Deputy Chief Minister D.K. Shivakumar, along with officials, during inauguration of the newly-formed Greater Bengaluru Authority. K MURALI KUMAR

The year going by, 2025, will remain a landmark year for Bengaluru, as the year its governance structure was innovatively rehauled, almost two decades after a similar reboot in 2007. But all the rest of the problems remained the same - parts of the city were flooded in May, the city's streets remained rid with potholes, almost throughout the year, there was chatter of Bengaluru becoming unviable for business due to its notorious traffic and infrastructure gaps, neighbouring States trying to woo industry from here. The Ejipura flyover is still under construction. Not much changed. The opening of the Namma Metro's Yellow Line was a silver lining.

What scarred the city the most this year was the highs of a Royal Challengers Bengaluru victory, finally after 17 years of wait, turning sour in a matter of hours. As fan frenzy reached its zenith, 11 fans died in a stampede at the M. Chinnaswamy Stadium trying to get in for the celebrations. Some heads rolled, cricket has stopped at the stadium, but the 11 lives lost are not going to come back.

Meanwhile, speculations over leadership change of the State kept everyone busy.



Musical chair?: Chief Minister Siddaramaiah and Deputy Chief Minister D.K. Shivakumar at Bengaluru Tech Summit 2025. The two senior Congres leaders have been involved in a game of power tussle. SUDHAKARA JAIN



From joy to sorrow: Fans stand next to abandoned shoes after a stampede outside the M. Chinnaswamy Stadium, during the celebrations to mark the Royal Challengers Bengaluru's victory in the Indian Premier League Twenty20 final cricket match, claimed 11 lives. AFP

Celestial spectacle: A combination picture shows the full moon moving through the shadow of the earth during a 'Blood Moon' Lunar Eclipse 2025 on September 8. K. MURALI KUMAR





Unsung heroes: Metro workers inside the under-construction Namma Metro underground station at M.G. Road Metro Station tunnel on the Pink Line. K. MURALI KUMAR



Hooked: Children watch a phone while lying under a groundnut pushcart during the Kadalekai Parishe in Malleswaram. ALLEN EGENUSE J.



A 25-foot bronze statue of Goddess Bhuvaneshwari was unveiled at the western entrance of the Vidhana Soudha. K. MURALI KUMAR



Sunbathing: Two Indian white-eye (*Zosterops palpebrosus*) birds in a playful mood. K. MURALI KUMAR



Worshipping the river: The Cauvery Aarti, modelled on Varanasi's Ganga Aarti, is part of the Karnataka's efforts to promote water conservation and to honour river Cauvery, at Sankey Tank, in Bengaluru. K. MURALI KUMAR



Ruling the skies: The IAF's Surya Kiran Aerobatic Team showcases breathtaking manoeuvres during the final dress rehearsal ahead of AERO INDIA 2025 at the Air Force Station. K. MURALI KUMAR





Dog on duty: To protect a gas cyclinder from being stolen, a man ties his pet to it in Nayandahalli. SUDHAKARA JAIN

Rain rain go away: Houses in Sai Layout get flooded after heavy overnight rains. SUDHAKARA JAIN



Hats off: The Karnataka police went for an overhaul in their uniform by shunning the old hat and adopting the Peak cap. SUDHAKARA JAIN



Friendly gesture: Trained Kumki elephants were handed over to Andhra Pradesh, to tackle man-elephant conflict along the Karnataka-Andhra Pradesh border. K. MURALI KUMAR



Deft hands: An artisan prepares an idol of Goddess Durga ahead of the Navratri festivities. K. MURALI KUMAR

INBRIEF



Titan to enter lab-grown diamond via 'beYon' brand

Titan Co, the country's leading jewellery maker, on Friday announced its entry into the lab-grown diamond segment, under the brand name of "beYon". Focusing on the emerging segment of affordable lab-grown diamonds in the country, the company will open a store in Mumbai on December 29, according to a regulatory filing from a Tata group-managed firm. The brand 'beYon' will offer a curated range of Lab Grown Diamond (LGD) jewellery. PTI

Barrier-free tolling, safety top agenda of Transport Ministry

The implementation of seamless, barrier-free tolling on national highways across the country and the passage of a new Road Safety Bill will be the top priorities of the Road Transport Ministry in 2026 to substantially reduce the road fatalities, which currently claim around 1.8 lakh lives every year. The Ministry has drawn an impressive list of national highways and expressways, which will be inaugurated next year. These include the long-delayed Delhi-Mumbai Expressway. PTI

Copper futures surge over 8% to hit record ₹1,249.95/kg

Copper prices rallied for the fifth straight session to hit a new record high of ₹1,249.95 per kg in futures trade on Friday, tracking firm global cues amid tight supply conditions. On the Multi Commodity Exchange (MCX), copper futures for December delivery jumped ₹93.35, or 8.07%, to hit a record of ₹1,249.95 per kg. The January contract climbed ₹105.5, or 9% to touch a lifetime high of ₹1,277.95 per kg. Over the past five sessions, copper prices have rallied 12.43%. PTI

Will Indians still ride gold wave in 2026?

Experts warn these returns may not sustain in the coming year as the run so far has been historical; Gold ETFs continue to log huge inflows

Ashokamithran T.
MUMBAI



Safe and solid: Gold is considered a safe-haven asset that investors move to during global uncertainties. AFP

Indian investors had a tumultuous year as the benchmark Nifty returns dipped to negative with overall market turnover hitting a low in December 2025. However, investor interest in gold exchange traded funds (ETFs) increased this year.

Exchange Traded Funds (ETF) are those that track the performance of an underlying asset. A gold ETF tracks the performance of bullion gold.

Gold ETFs shine

The net inflows into gold ETFs increased to ₹25,566 crore between January and November 2025, nearly thrice of what it was in the same period of 2024, going by data from Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy(CMIE).

The share of net inflows into Gold ETFs, in all open-ended schemes, increased to 3.2% between January and November 2025.

This number was less than 1% in the corresponding periods since 2021-22 , making this the best year for the gold ETFs yet. The net inflow into all open-ended schemes fell 4.8% to ₹7.9 lakh crore up to November 2025. This measure increased 1.5 fold from November 2024, which clearly shows gold ETFs rose in popularity while general mutual fund investment interest was tempered. A lot of this has to do with the Indian investors' behaviour, global factors and local market conditions.

Regular purchases

Gold has always been a regular purchase as Indian households expect prices to increase. Gold prices climbed 61% to ₹3.8 lakh a kg in November 2025 from about ₹2.4 lakh a kg in November 2024 making it a historical run. At the same time, Indian stocks were giving sub-optimal returns, expensive and many of the much hyped stocks listed in 2024 were trading below the price they debuted.

Gold is considered a safe haven asset which investors move to during global uncertainties. This time, the uncertainties were triggered by the tariff war the U.S. President Donald Trump waged, making global markets shaky.

Moreover, central banks all over the world have continuously increased their gold reserves to diversify holdings and reduce dependence on the dollar, which in effect reduces volatility that could flow from decisions taken under the Trump Administration.

Gold ETFs are simple, cheap and secure way to invest in gold. A unit of gold ETF would cost about ₹140 to ₹150 , which is inexpensive compared to buying gold in grams.

Meanwhile, experts warn these returns may not sustain in the coming year as the run so far has been historical.

"Gold has run up significantly, so next year, we expect the returns to moderate." said Siddharth Srivastava head of ETF products and fund manager, Mirae Asset Investment Managers (India), adding a rally as high as 60% in a year cannot be expected to go on forever. However, in the long term, gold ETFs will continue to be a diversifying investment and find investor interest, he said.

'Housing sales drop 14% in 2025'

The Hindu Bureau
MUMBAI



Housing performance in 2026 hinges on many key factors.

Housing sales in the top 7 cities of India witnessed a 14% decline in 2025, with about 3,95,625 units sold in the year against 4,59,645 units in 2024 according to ANAROCK Research data.

However, the overall sales value of housing units saw a 6% yearly jump - from about ₹5.68 lakh crore in 2024 to more than ₹6 lakh crore in 2025.

Highest sales

Mumbai Metropolitan Region (MMR) witnessed the highest sales of about 1,27,875 units, registering an 18% decline. Pune followed with about 65,135 units sold, declining by 20% year-on-year (YoY).

The two western markets together led residential sales in 2025, comprising a 49% overall share, ANAROCK data shows.

New launches in the top 7 cities saw a 2% annual rise - from about 4,12,520 units in 2024 to about 4,19,170 units in 2025.

MMR and Bengaluru saw the maximum new launches, together accounting for an almost 48% of the new supply in 2025.

"[Year] 2025 has been a year of broad-spectrum upheaval including geopolitical turmoil, layoffs in the IT sector, tariff tensions and other uncertainties," said Anuj Puri, chairman, ANAROCK Group.

"The year's trend was of sale volumes stabilising at around 4 lakh units across the top 7 cities, but growth in overall sales value. Our data shows that more than 21% of the new supply was launched in the above ₹2.5 crore price bracket."

'Price growth tapers'

"Interestingly, the average residential price growth rate has tapered down from double digits in previous years to single digits in 2025," Mr Puri said.

"Prices in the top 7 cities collectively rose 8% annually and only NCR saw double-digit growth at 23% – largely due to a higher new supply of pricier homes. Out of NCR's total new supply of 61,775 units during the year, over 55% was priced over ₹2.5 crore," he added.

"The sector's performance in 2026 hinges on several key factors, most notably rate cuts by the RBI and price control by developers. Amid the currently favourable economic outlook, further repo rate cuts leading to lower home loan interest rates can cause demand to revive significantly."

The share of new supply of homes priced ₹2.5 crore in the top 7 cities was a significant 21% in 2025, against 18% in 2024.

MARKETS

MARKET WATCH

	FRIDAY	% CHANGE
Sensex	85,041	-0.43
US Dollar	89.90	------
Brent oil	61.55	------

NIFTY 50

	PRICE	CHANGE
Adani Enter	2229.90	7.20
Adani Ports	1487.10	-7.20
Apollo Hosp	7156.00	-16.00
Asian Paints	2746.50	-39.00
Axis Bank	1228.20	1.90
Bajaj Auto	9064.50	-105.50
Bajaj Finserv	2017.60	-18.10
Bajaj Finance	1000.00	-11.70
Bharat Elec	398.45	-1.55
Bharti Airtel	2105.40	-18.30
Cipla	1506.00	9.70
Coal India	402.15	-0.20
Dr Reddys Lab	1269.30	3.50
Hindustan Unilever	40.20	0.00
Eicher Motors	7324.00	11.50
Eternal Ltd.	281.75	-3.10
Grasim Ind	2817.70	-9.20
HCL Tech	1660.90	-13.80
HDFC Bank	992.10	-5.10
HDFC Life	748.45	-6.90
Hindalco	872.90	8.45
Hind Unilever	2285.40	3.20
ICICI Bank	1350.40	-9.40
IntGlobeAvi	5074.00	-7.50
Infosys	1656.10	-7.30
ITC	404.15	-2.45
Jio Financial Services Ltd.	296.95	-1.95
JSW Steel	1094.40	3.10
Kotak Bank	2164.20	0.50
L&T	4047.30	-6.30
M&M	3623.10	-13.60
Maruti Suzuki	16596.00	-107.00
Max Healthcare	1074.30	-7.10
NestleIndia	1272.60	12.90
NTPC	324.10	1.55
ONGC	234.53	0.76
PowerGrid Corp	265.45	-2.60
Reliance Ind	1559.20	1.00
SBI Life	2019.10	-6.30
State Bank	966.30	-2.65
Shriram Finance Ltd.	960.25	-13.45
Sun Pharma	1719.50	-17.50
TataConsumerProduct	1175.70	-3.50
Tata Steel	169.12	-0.95
TCS	3280.00	-39.00
Tech Mahindra	1612.30	-19.20
Titan	3992.00	82.70
Tata Motors PV	358.80	-0.40
Trent Ltd.	4285.30	-4.30
UltraTech Cement	11794.00	30.00
Wipro	266.30	-1.76

Govt. to focus on steel, input

The Centre will prioritise higher steel output and input security as India enters the final five years of journey towards steel-making capacity of 300 million tonne (MT) by 2030.

'India's small business credit resilient and perked up'

The Hindu Bureau
MUMBAI



Sole proprietors continued to dominate credit ecosystem.

India's small business credit environment was strengthening while remaining resilient according to CRIF-SIDBI Small Business Spotlight Report (December 2025).

The credit portfolios continued to expand, formalisation was progressing gradually, more lenders were participating actively, and asset quality was remaining healthy, according to the report which analysed data in small businesses with credit exposure of up to ₹5 crore.

According to the report, the aggregate small business credit exposure had reached ₹46 lakh crore, up 16.2% year-on-year.

Active loan accounts up

Active loan accounts had grown by 11.8% to 7.3 crore backed by policy support and multiple government credit schemes for MSMEs.

Sole proprietors continued to dominate the credit ecosystem. They accounted for around 80% of total credit and nearly 90% of borrowers.

The fastest-growing segment was sole proprietors with an entity presence. This segment had grown by 20% YoY led largely by loans against property.

As of September, 23.3% of borrowers were new to credit and 12% new to enterprise borrowing indicating rising formalisation.

Private banks continued to lead enterprise lending, closely followed by public sector banks. NBFCs were seen steadily increasing their presence. For enterprises, working capital loans dominated and accounted for nearly 57% of outstanding credit.

Next generation transport



New track: Egyptian workers carry out construction on the Green Line Electric Express railway in the New Administrative Capital east of Cairo. Workers have started laying tracks in the desert east of Cairo for Egypt's first high-speed train, which will link the Red Sea and the Mediterranean in the latest attempt to modernise transport in the vast country. AFP

Stonepeak, CPPIB set for open offer for Castrol India

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI

Canada Pension Plan Investment Board and US private equity firm Stonepeak will launch an open offer to buy up to 26% stake in Castrol's Indian unit at a premium to the current trading price, according to a filing.

The open offer for 25.71 crore shares is being made following the deal to buy the firm from parent BP.

Stonepeak and CPPIB will offer Castrol India shareholders ₹194.04 a share, representing a 2.5% premium to Wednesday's closing price. Castrol India shares closed at ₹191.60 on the BSE on Friday.

Norms for opening coal mines notified

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI



Firms can save up to 2 months in operationalisation of mines.

The government notified rules that dispense with the Coal Controller Organisation's (CCO) nod for opening a coal mine, individual or sections of a seam in a bid to boost efficiency in approval process for hastening coal output.

The amendment entrusts the board of the concerned coal firm with the authority to accord the requisite permissions.

This would also apply to permission for re-starting mines that were nonoperational for 180 days or more.

The notified rules mandate the board would be able to give approvals only after it received the requisite approvals from Central or State governments and/or statutory bodies. Also, the board would have to submit information to CCO about the opening of mine.

The Coal Ministry expects firms to save up to two months in the operationalisation of a mine.

IndiGo faces ₹13 lakh GST-related penalty

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI



Indigo said there was no significant hit to financials.

IndiGo has been slapped with a penalty of little over ₹13 lakh in relation to the Goods and Services Tax (GST) and the company will contest the ruling.

The Office of the Assistant Commissioner of State Tax, Excise and Taxation Department, Punjab has imposed the penalty of ₹13,28,255 pertaining to the financial year 2021-22.

"The department has raised GST demand along with penalty. The company believes that the order passed by the authorities is erroneous. Further, the company believes that it has a strong case on merits, backed by advice from external tax advisors.

"Accordingly, the company will contest the same before the appropriate authority," InterGlobe Aviation, the parent of IndiGo, said in a filing.

It also said there was no significant impact on finan cials or operations.

Tata Steel gets €1.4 bn legal notice over Netherlands environment hit

Suresh Iyengar P.
MUMBAI



Centre of controversy: Smoke is seen coming out of a chimney at the Tata steel plant in Ijmuiden, Netherlands. (File) REUTERS

Tata Steel and its subsidiaries in Europe have received a legal notice seeking damages of €1.4 billion from Stichting Frisse Wind.nu (SFW) for polluting the environment. The writ petition has been filed against Tata Steel and its subsidiaries Tata Steel Nederland BV and Tata Steel IJmuiden BV (TSN) in the District Court North Holland on December 19.

Collective action

The proceedings initiated by SFW concern a collective action under the Dutch Act on Collective Settlement of Mass Claims.

SFW has claimed that it was acting on behalf of residents living in the vicinity of TSN. The proceedings pertain to allegations by SFW, holding TSN liable for alleged damages caused by TSN's operations in Velsen-Noord.

SFW has sought about €1.4 billion in compensation on account of increased susceptibility to health issues and the loss of enjoyment of homes, as the average home value in the region demonstrably lags behind that of comparable regions.

As per TSN, SFW provided no supporting evidence for the claim, making it unsubstantiated and speculative. The proceedings under the WAMCA regime are conducted in two phases – admissibility and merits. Each of the phases will take about two to three years to conclude, said Tata Steel. As the proceedings are initiated under the WAMCA, the debate on the quantum of claims is not expected in the upcoming years, said Tata Steel.

(The writer is with The Hindu businessline)

JERUSALEM

Israel targets 'Hezbollah weapons depot' in series of Lebanon attacks



REUTERS

The Israeli military announced a series of strikes on Hezbollah targets in Lebanon on Friday. "A number of weapons storage facilities and terrorist infrastructure sites were struck, which were used by Hezbollah to advance terror attacks against the state of Israel," a military statement said. AFP

KYIV

Zelenskyy says he will meet with Trump in Florida on Sunday



AFP

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said on Friday that he will meet over the weekend with U.S. President Donald Trump in Florida. Mr. Zelenskyy said that the two leaders will discuss security guarantees for Ukraine during Sunday's talks, and that the 20-point plan under discussion "is about 90% ready". AP

JERUSALEM

Palestinian kills two in stabbing and ramming attack: Israeli police



AP

A Palestinian killed two persons in a stabbing and car-ramming attack in northern Israel on Friday, triggering the Defence Minister to threaten a crackdown on the assailant's village in the occupied West Bank. The attack came a day after an Israeli military reservist rammed his vehicle into a Palestinian man in the West Bank. AFP

DHAKA

Activists block key Dhaka junction seeking justice for Hadi's killing



REUTERS

Bangladesh's Inquilab Mancha activists blocked Dhaka's Shahbagh intersection on Friday, demanding justice for slain leader Sharif Osman Hadi. The protest, joined by students and citizens, halted traffic for hours as leaders vowed to continue the blockade until justice was ensured for Hadi's killing. PTI

Blast at Alawite mosque in Syria's Homs kills eight

Reuters
DAMASCUS



The damaged interior of Imam Ali bin Abi Talib mosque after an explosion rocked it, in Homs, Syria on Friday. REUTERS

Eight people were killed in an explosion at a mosque of the Alawite minority sect in the Syrian city of Homs on Friday, the Syrian state news agency SANA said. SANA cited Syrian Health Ministry official Najib al-Naasan as saying 18 others were wounded and that the figures were not final, indicating they could rise.

The city's press office said an explosive device had detonated inside the Imam Ali bin Abi Talib mosque and that security forces had cordoned off the area.

Local official Issam Naameh told Reuters the blast occurred during Friday noon prayers.

Syria's Foreign Ministry condemned the blast as a "terrorist crime". Regional countries including Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and Qatar also condemned the attack.

Meanwhile, an Islamist militant group claimed responsibility for the bombing. In a statement on Telegram, the Saraya Ansar al-Sunna said its fighters "detonated a number of explosive devices" in the Imam Ali Bin Abi Talib Mosque.

The group was formed after the ouster of ruler Bashar al-Assad, who is a member of the Alawite community. The militant group had previously claimed responsibility for a Damascus church bombing in June.

(With AFP inputs)

U.S. struck IS forces in Nigeria after group targeted Christians: Trump

Strikes were carried out in cooperation with the Nigerian government, says official; the West African nation confirms intelligence sharing and coordination consistent with international law; the air strikes reportedly targeted Lakurawa group

Associated Press
WEST PALM BEACH

U.S. President Donald Trump said on Thursday that the U.S. launched a "powerful and deadly" strike against Islamic State forces in Nigeria, after spending weeks accusing the West African country's government of failing to rein in the persecution of Christians.

In a Christmas evening post on his social media site, Mr. Trump did not provide details or mention the extent of the damage caused by the strikes in Sokoto state.

A Defence Department official, who insisted on anonymity to discuss details not made public, said the U.S. worked with Nigeria to carry out the strikes, and that they had been approved by that country's government.



Christmas hit: The police and an anti-bomb squad secure the scene of a U.S. air strike in Jabo, Nigeria on Friday. AP

Nigeria's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said the cooperation included exchange of intelligence and strategic coordination in ways "consistent with international law, mutual respect for sovereignty and shared commitments to regional and global security".

Mr. Trump said the air strikes were launched against Islamic State militants "who have been targeting and viciously killing, primarily, innocent Christians". Residents and security analysts have said Nigeria's security crisis affects both Christians, predominant in the south, and Muslims, who are the majority in the north.

Nigeria is battling multiple armed groups, including at least two affiliated with the Islamic State – an offshoot of the Boko Haram extremist group known as the Islamic State West Africa Province in the northeast, and the less-known Lakurawa group prominent in the northwestern states like Sokoto where the gangs use large swathes of forests connecting states as hideouts.

Security analysts said the target of the U.S. strikes could be the Lakurawa group, which in the last year has increasingly become lethal in the region, often targeting remote communities and security forces.

Nigeria's population of 220 million is split almost equally between Christians and Muslims.

China hits U.S. defence firms with sanctions over arms sale

Reuters
BEIJING

China's Foreign Ministry announced sanctions on Friday targeting 10 individuals and 20 U.S. defence firms, including Boeing's St. Louis branch, over arms sales to Taiwan.

The measures freeze any assets the companies and individuals hold in China and bar domestic organisations and individuals from doing business with them, the Ministry said.

Individuals on the list, including the founder of Anduril Industries and nine senior executives from the sanctioned firms, are also banned from entering China, it added.

Tackling head-on



Bolstering response: Taiwanese police officers confront a knife-wielding mock attacker as a man playing the role of a wounded victim lies on the ground during a security drill, following a deadly stabbing rampage, in Taipei on Friday. AFP

'Putin indicated that Russia could be open to a territory swap'

Reuters
MOSCOW

President Vladimir Putin told some of Russia's top businessmen that he might be open to swapping some territory controlled by Russian forces in Ukraine but that he wanted the whole of Donbas, the *Kommersant* newspaper reported.

Andrei Kolesnikov, the Kremlin correspondent for the Kommersant, one of Russia's top newspapers, said that Mr. Putin briefed top businessmen on the details of the plan at a late-night Kremlin meeting on December 24.

"Vladimir Putin asserted that the Russian side is still ready to make the concessions that he made in Anchorage. In other words, that 'Donbas is ours,'" *Kommersant* reported.



Vladimir Putin

In essence, Mr. Putin wants the whole of Donbas but outside that area "a partial exchange of territories from the Russian side is not ruled out," it said.

South Korea prosecutor seeks 10-year term for Yoon

Reuters
SEOUL

South Korea's special prosecutor requested a 10-year prison sentence on Friday for former President Yoon Suk Yeol on charges including attempted obstruction of his arrest following his failed bid to impose martial law.

Prosecutors have accused the ousted President of trying to block investigators seeking to arrest him in January by barricading himself inside the presidential compound.

"He has not apologised or shown remorse to the public, but instead tried to shift blame to his aides," the prosecutor said.

Thai PM says Minister to attend truce talks with Cambodia as Phnom Penh claims new strikes

Reuters
Agence France-Presse
BANGKOK/PHNOM PENH

Thailand's Defence Minister will join ongoing talks with Cambodia on Saturday that could lead to a truce, the Thai premier said on Friday, as border clashes between the two Southeast Asian neighbours continued for a third week.

If the Defence Minister is able to come to an agreement with his Cambodian counterpart, the two countries will make a deal in line with a previous pact brokered with the help of U.S. President Donald Trump following a previous round of clashes in July, he said.

"What is important is that both of us have to keep the promises that both will not threaten, offend, and instigate, and to reduce hostility between the two countries," Anutin Charnvirakul told presspersons in Bangkok, referring to a potential deal.

Thai and Cambodian officials have been holding parleys at a border crossing since Wednesday as hostilities between the two countries continued. The ceasefire broke down in early December, with at least 98 people killed on both sides and more than half a million on displaced.

Since the conflict restarted, neither Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim – chair of the ASEAN bloc that facilitated the previous ceasefire – nor Mr. Trump have been successful in halting hostilities.



Prevailing tension: The Thai military firing artillery towards Cambodia, in Sa Kaeo province in Thailand, on Friday. AP

Meanwhile, Cambodia's Defence Ministry said Thailand's military carried out a heavy bombardment of disputed border areas in Banteay Meanchey province on Friday morning.

"From 6:08 a.m. to 7:15 a.m., the Thai military deployed F-16 fighter jets to drop as many as 40 bombs, to intensify its bombardment in the area of Chok Chey village," it said in a statement.

Thai media said on Friday that Cambodian forces had launched heavy attacks overnight along the border in Sa Kaeo province, where several homes were damaged by shelling.

The two countries blame each other for instigating the fresh fighting, which has spread to nearly every province along their border.

Both countries also claim to have acted in self-defence and accuse the other of attacking civilians.

The conflict stems from a territorial dispute over the colonial-era demarcation of their 800-km frontier.

Fuel shortage forces Gaza hospital to suspend services

Agence France-Presse
KHAN YOUNIS

A major Gaza hospital has suspended several services because of a critical fuel shortage in the devastated Palestinian territory, which continues to face a severe humanitarian crisis.

Devastated by more than two years of war, the Al-Awda Hospital in the central Gaza district of Nuseirat cares for around 60 in-patients and receives nearly 1,000 people seeking medical treatment each day.

"Most services have been temporarily stopped due to a shortage of the fuel needed for the generators," said Ahmed Mehanna, a senior official involved in managing the hospital.



Palestinian babies receive treatment inside incubators, amid a cold wave affecting displaced families, in Khan Younis. REUTERS

"Only essential departments remain operational: the emergency unit, maternity ward and paediatrics."

To keep these services running, the hospital has been forced to rent a small generator, he added.

Despite a fragile truce observed since October 10, the Gaza Strip remains engulfed in a severe humanitarian crisis.

While the ceasefire agreement stipulated the entry of 600 aid trucks per day into Gaza, only 100 to 300 carrying humanitarian assistance can currently enter, according to the UN and non-governmental organisations.



A worker points to the damage caused to the containment vessel in a Russian drone attack in February. AFP

Ukraine scrambles to repair radiation shield at Chernobyl

Agence France-Presse
CHERNOBYL

The 1986 meltdown at Ukraine's Chernobyl nuclear power plant was the world's worst ever nuclear incident. Since Russia invaded in 2022, Kyiv fears another disaster could be just a matter of time.

In February, a Russian drone hit and left a large hole in the New Safe Confinement (NSC), the outer of two radiation shells covering the remnants of the nuclear power plant.

It functions as a modern high-tech replacement for an inner steel-and-concrete structure – known as the Sarcophagus, a defensive layer built hastily after the 1986 incident.

Ten months later, repair work is still ongoing, and it could take another three to four years before the outer dome regains its primary safety functions, plant director Sergiy Tarakanov told AFP in an interview from Kyiv.

"It does not perform the function of retaining radioactive substances inside," Mr. Tarakanov said, echoing concerns raised by the International Atomic Energy Agency.

The strike had also left it unclear if the shell would last the 100 years it was designed to.

The gaping crater in the structure, which AFP journalists saw this summer, has been covered over with a protective screen, but 300 smaller holes made by firefighters when battling the blaze still need to be filled in.

Boys recount 'torment' at the hands of IS-affiliated armed rebels in DR Congo

Two minors freed from the Allied Democratic Forces say they were subjected to incessant corporal punishment such as whipping, getting thrown into pits for weeks; boys and girls were forced into taking part in combat and were taught how to 'steal food, clothing and medicine', the boys reveal

Agence France-Presse
BUNIA



Rehabilitation under watch: A psychologist playing with the two former child soldiers in Bunia. The minors, freed from the Allied Democratic Forces, revealed the torture perpetrated by the ADF. AFP

Forcibly recruited into a rebel militia affiliated with the Islamic State group, two boys revealed the "torment" of living in its camps as members committed massacres in the Democratic Republic of Congo's northeast.

The two minors freed from the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) gave AFP an unprecedented account of the shadowy group, notorious for its extreme brutality.

Paluku, a frail 12-year-old, spent two months with the ADF after rebels killed his mother during an attack on his village in eastern North Kivu province. His brother and sister were also captured.

Edouard, 17, spent a gruelling four years with the ADF – formed by Ugandan rebels who took refuge in DRC – after he was kidnapped at age 12.

'We suffered terribly'

The two boys, using pseudonyms, spoke on condition of anonymity at a centre specialising in the care of minors recruited by armed groups in the region, whose location AFP has chosen not to disclose to avoid potential reprisals.

Their accounts were confirmed by health and security sources.

Round-faced Edouard, a fast-talker, did not mince his words in describing his years of "torment" within the ADF. "We suffered terribly," he said.

After their capture, Edouard and Paluku were sent to ADF bases hidden in the dense forest of northeast DRC where the elusive rebels avoid patrols by the Congolese army and Ugandan forces deployed there since 2021.

The bases consist of simple tents and tarps, easy to move in the event of an attack. Most occupants are women and children, according to security sources, contributing to the group's operations – but also serving as human shields.

New recruits are swiftly forced to convert to Islam and learn Arabic, but also English and Swahili, Edouard said. "I was also trained in medicine to treat the wounded, and we learned how to handle weapons and clean them," he said.

Paluku said he underwent similar training, as well as learning how to "steal food, clothing and medicine to bring back to the ADF camp".

Floggings

Children play a central role in supplying the group, security sources said. Those who fail to bring back loot face severe punishment.

The wives of the ADF commanders, some of whom are particularly influential, also exercise power over the young recruits.

When the fighters went out on "operations", the youngest among them like Paluku, were "supposed to bring something back for the chief's wife," he said, like soap, cooking oil or fabric.

"To get it we have to loot people's belongings, and if a chief's wife accuses you to her husband of not bringing back what she asked for, she can demand that you be killed," he said.

Edouard and Paluku said they were subjected to incessant corporal punishment. Girls and boys were whipped or thrown into pits for several weeks over the slightest misbehaviour.

"I was punished with lashes because I refused to go kill people," Paluku said with a long stare.

Edouard took part in combat with the group at least three times against the Congolese army or local militias. "They beat us mostly when we lost our weapons and ammunition, claiming we had wasted them for nothing or lost them on the front," he explained.

Faced with such an accusation, Edouard said a chief ordered that he be whipped.

"I fell ill because of those lashes. I told the chief outright I was no longer able to go fight on the front, I begged him to send others who were capable, but that made him even more angry, and I was whipped once again," he said.

Trauma

About 10 children freed from the ADF arrive on average each month at the reception centre in the troubled northeast Ituri province. "These children have suffered psychological trauma and torture, and when they arrive here, most are aggressive," said Madeleine, a psychologist at the centre.

After a few weeks spent around other children and staff, their aggression fades, she said.

But there are other scars to contend with.

Edouard became addicted to drugs administered by the rebels after he was wounded in combat.

Suffering from speech disorders, he talks constantly and sometimes incoherently, disturbing other residents, Madeleine said.

After a year at the centre receiving ongoing treatment, Edouard recounted the horrors of his experience with a shy smile and a lively, excitable gaze.

Paluku meanwhile had a darker expression, recalling his sister who remains a hostage. "She has become the wife of one of the ADF chiefs," he said.

Fiery protest



Cooling down: A protester speaks on the phone sitting beside wood and hay set on fire during a farmers' demonstration to protest the government's mandatory culling protocol for cattle herds affected by lumpy skin disease in Cestas, south-western France, on Friday. AFP

Stateless Rohingya call out an election 'in absence of inhabitants' in Myanmar

Agence France-Presse
COX'S BAZAR, BANGLADESH



Evicted from homeland: Rohingya refugees at a market at the Kutupalong refugee camp in Bangladesh's Ukhia. AFP

Myanmar's military portrays its general election as a path to democracy and peace, but the vote offers neither to a million Rohingya exiles, robbed of citizenship rights and evicted from their homeland by force.

"How can you call this an election when the inhabitants are gone and a war is raging?" said 51-year-old Kabir Ahmed in Bangladesh's Kutupalong, the world's largest refugee camp complex.

Heavily restricted polls are due to start on Sunday in areas of Myanmar governed by the military, which snatched power in a 2021 coup that triggered civil war.

But for the Rohingya minority, violence began well before that, with a military crackdown in 2017 sending legions of the mostly Muslim group fleeing Myanmar's Rakhine state to neighbouring Muslim-majority Bangladesh.

The month-long election will be the third national poll since they were stripped of their voting rights a decade ago, but comes amid a fresh exodus fuelled by the all-out war.

Mr. Ahmed once served as chairman of a village of more than 8,000 Rohingya in Myanmar's Maungdaw township, just over the border from Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh.

'Send us back'

The area is now a "wasteland", he told AFP. "Who will appear on the ballot?" he asked. "Who is going to vote?"

Today 1.17 million Rohingya live crammed in dilapidated camps spread over 8,000 acres in Cox's Bazar.

The majority came during the 2017 crackdown, which is now the subject of a UN genocide court case, with allegations of rampant rape, executions and arson.

Civil war has brought fresh violence, with the Rohingya caught between the warring military and separatist group the Arakan Army, one of the many factions challenging the junta's rule.

Both forces have committed atrocities against the Rohingya, monitors say. Some 150,000 people fled the persecution to Bangladesh in the 18 months to July, according to UN analysis.

Kosovo snap poll unlikely to end deadlock but bleed the poor nation's coffers

Agence France-Presse
PRISTINA

Before the first vote is even cast in Kosovo's snap election on Sunday, experts predict it is unlikely to end the political crisis that has been gripping Europe's youngest country for almost a year.

The Balkan nation has been politically deadlocked since the inconclusive vote in February, which outgoing premier Albin Kurti's Vetevendosje (VV) party won but without enough seats to form a government.

After months of wrangling in a stalled parliament, the caretaker prime minister is going back to the electorate in a vote that analysts say will change very little.

"I think that the December 28 elections will not bring any clarity," economist Mehmet Gjata told AFP as he predicted Mr. Kurti's party would come out on top again.

Political analyst Fatime Hajdari agreed that "chances were high" that VV would secure the most votes, but said little else was clear.

Charismatic Kurti

If anyone can secure a majority, Mr. Kurti, once dubbed Kosovo's Che Guevara for his radical past, has a rare record.

His party swept to power in 2021 in the largest electoral victory since the country's independence from Serbia in 2008, taking over 50% of the vote.

From a student radical to a political prisoner, Mr. Kurti's long path to the prime ministership has made him one of the most recognisable and influential politicians in Kosovo.

His blend of nationalism and a reform agenda has proven popular in a country whose sovereignty is still contested by Serbia, more than two decades after its war for independence ended.

But Mr. Gjata says things may have changed since Mr. Kurti's last term. "I'm afraid that the current political crisis will repeat itself, because VV will not get more than 50 percent of the votes," the economist said.

"We will have no winner again."

The largest opposition parties have refused to join a Kurti coalition, all but assuring a fragmented parliament.

The only realistic challenge to VV would be "cooperation" between the three major opposition parties, former foreign minister and opposition candidate Enver Hoxhaj said.

"I think that only they can offer stability," he said.



A man pushing a cart passes an election poster of Kosovo Prime Minister and leader of the Vetevendosje party, Albin Kurti, in Pristina. Kosovo is heading for early elections on December 28. AFP

For Mr. Kurti and his party, countering Serbian influence in Kosovo has long been a focus, drawing support at home but criticism abroad.

When Serbian forces withdrew under NATO bombardment in 1999, it left many of its state structures in place for ethnic Serbs who live mainly in the north.

Mr. Kurti has labelled these services "instruments of intimidation, threat and control" and spent nearly his entire second term uprooting the system – and angering Belgrade in the process.

The resulting tensions in the north, which last flared into violence in 2023, have drawn sanctions from the European Union and caused Washington to accuse Mr. Kurti's government of increasing "instability".

But among his voters, the removal of Serbian influence remains popular, Ms. Hajdari said. "The extension of sovereignty there is perceived by the citizens as a major success," she said.

Most opposition parties avoid the issue, but the Serb List – which contests and retains most of the 10 reserved Serb seats in parliament – regularly clashes with Mr. Kurti's agenda in the north.

The minor party, with close ties to Belgrade, has previously called the government's moves in the north "ethnic cleansing" and has said they are willing to work with other parties to keep Mr. Kurti out of power.

'Colossal damage'

Without a parliament, key international agreements have not been ratified, putting hundreds of millions of euros in assistance funds at risk.

Two national polls and a local election have cost one of Europe's poorest nations at least 30 million euros ($35 million) this year.

Over a dozen government institutions and agencies have also been left leaderless, as the mandates of their managers expired without new ones being appointed.

Mr. Gjata said "colossal damage" had been done to the economy by divided lawmakers over the past months.

"They have put Kosovo in a state of anarchy," he said.

While lawmakers bickered, the cost of the crisis would be felt by the Balkan nation's citizens, Ms. Hajdari warned.

"That is precisely why Kosovo needs a stable and functional government that would focus on development and welfare," the political analyst stressed.

NEW HIGH

Deepti joins Schutt as the highest wicket-taker in T20Is



NIRMAL HARINDRAN

Deepti Sharma's haul of three for 18 in the third match against Sri Lanka took her tally to 151 (in 131 matches) as she became the joint highest wicket-taker in T20Is with Megan Schutt. She also became the third highest wicket-taker (333) in women's international cricket behind Jhulan Goswami (355) and Katherine Sciver-Brunt (335).

BENCHMARK

Harmanpreet becomes captain with the most T20I victories



FILE PHOTO: R.V. MOORTHY

India's win in the third T20I against Sri Lanka on Friday took the tally of victories for Harmanpreet Kaur to 77 from 130 matches, making her the most successful captain in women's T20Is. She overtook the former Australia captain Meg Lanning's record of 76 wins in 100 matches.

PROLIFIC

Brook fastest to reach 3,000 Test runs in terms of balls faced



AFP

Harry Brook completed 3,000 runs in Tests, becoming the fastest to reach the milestone in terms of balls faced during the fourth Ashes Test at Melbourne. In 34 Tests, Brook has scored 3,034 runs at an average of 54.17, with 10 tons and 14 fifties in 57 innings at a strike rate of over 86. He reached the landmark in just 3,468 deliveries.

AT THE HELM

Midfielder Hardik named captain of HIL Governing Council squad



PTI

Hardik Singh has been appointed as the captain of the HIL Governing Council team for the men's Hockey India League beginning on January 3. HIL Governing Council will begin its campaign on January 5 against SG Pipers at the Mayor Radhakrishnan Hockey Stadium in Chennai.

Renuka, Deepti do the star turn as India seals series

The former makes an impressive comeback to T20I cricket with figures that read 4-1-21-4; the latter chips in with three wickets; dashing opener Shafali smashes an unbeaten 42-ball 79

SRI LANKA IN INDIA

P.K. Ajith Kumar
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

The Women in Blue are getting increasingly ruthless. Ask Sri Lanka.

The Lankans were crushed by Harmanpreet Kaur's women yet again. The Lankan batters had crawled to below-par scores in the first and second T20Is at Visakhapatnam, leaving little for their bowlers to defend. It was no different in the third T20I at the Greenfield Stadium here on Friday.

After restricting the visitors to 112 for seven, India reached home with eight wickets and 6.4 overs to spare.

They have thus won the five-match series 3-0 with two games in hand. Not a bad show at all to follow up that spectacular ODI World Cup victory last month.

This match too began with Harmanpreet winning the toss. Can the Indian captain do any wrong these days? Just as the Lankan women can't do anything right. They did get a decent start on this night, though.

Hasini Perera and Chamari put on 25 inside five overs for the first wicket,



Shehani dismisses Malsha. PTI

with the skipper opting to play the supporting role. Hasini seemed in good nick, as she hit a couple of fours in the first over on the off-side, off Renuka Singh, who, in fact, went for 12.

This was the Queen of Swing's comeback to the T20I cricket after a year. And she made it count, taking four for 21 from her four overs, one of which was a maiden. She began by removing the dangerous-looking Hasini, who played away from her body and edged to Deepti Sharma at short third-man.

This would be Deepti's night, too. She claimed three for 18 to equal Megan Schutt's record as the world's leading wicket-taker in women's T20Is.

They have 151 wickets each. Among her victims was Kavisha Dilhari, whose 40-run partnership for the fifth wicket with Imesha Dulani was the highest of the Lankan innings.

The question was how soon India's star-studded batting line-up would chase that target down and who would shine the brightest.

Opener Shafali Verma was not going to let that opportunity go. She smashed an unbeaten 42-ball 79 (11x4, 3x6) to delight a goodly crowd.

She was involved in two significant partnerships that batted the Lankans out of the match, and the series - 40 for the second wicket with Jemimah Rodrigues and 48 for the unbroken third wicket with Harmanpreet.

When Shafali gets going, there aren't too many better sights in women's cricket.

SCOREBOARD

SRI LANKA

Hasini Perera c Deepti b Renuka 25 *(18b, 5x4)*, Chamari Athapaththu c Harmanpreet b Deepti 3 *(12b)*, Harshitha Samarawickrama c & b Renuka 2 *(4b)*, Imesha Dulani c Jemimah b Renuka 27 *(32b, 4x4)*, Nilakshika Silva lbw b Renuka 4 *(9b)*, Kavisha Dilhari c Amanjot b Deepti 20 *(13b, 2x4, 1x6)*, Kaushani Nuthyangana (not out) 19 *(16b, 2x4)*, Malsha Shehani b Deepti 5 *(11b)*, Malki Madara (not out) 1 *(5b)*; Extras (b-1, lb-2, w-3): 6; Total (for seven wkts. in 20 overs): 112.

FALL OF WICKETS

1-25 (Chamari, 4.3 overs) 2-31 (Hasini, 5.3), 3-32 (Harshitha, 5.6), 4-45 (Nilakshika, 9.3), 5-85 (Kavisha, 13.5), 6-90 (Imesha, 15.2), 7-98 (Malsha, 17.4).

INDIA BOWLING

Renuka 4-1-21-4, Kranti 4-0-22-0, Deepti 4-0-18-3, Vaishnavi 3-0-14-0, Amanjot 4-0-23-0, Shree Charani 1-0-11-0.

INDIA

Shafali Verma (not out) 79 *(42b, 11x4, 3x6)*, Smriti Mandhana lbw b Kavisha 1 *(6b)*, Jemimah Rodrigues b Kavisha 9 *(15b, 1x4)*, Harmanpreet Kaur (not out) 21 *(18b, 2x4)*; Extras (w-3, lb-1, nb-1): 5; Total (for two wkts. in 13.2 overs): 115.

FALL OF WICKETS

1-27 (Smriti, 3.2 overs), 2-67 (Jemimah, 8.0).

SRI LANKA BOWLING

Malsha 2.2-0-28-0, Malki 2-0-11-0, Nimasha 2-0-29-0, Kavisha 3-0-18-2, Inoka 4-0-28-0.

Toss: India; **PoM:** Renuka.

India won by eight wickets with 40 deliveries remaining to lead five-match series 3-0.

Fourth T20I: December 28, Thiruvananthapuram, 7 p.m.





Dominant display: Renuka's fiery spell and Shafali's knock left the Islanders high and dry. NIRMAL HARINDRAN

Australia has its nose in the front after 20 wickets fall on the opening day

THE ASHES

Agence France-Presse
MELBOURNE

An astounding 20 wickets fell on a frantic day one of the fourth Ashes Test on Friday with Australia all out for 152 before storming back to dismiss England for 110 and leave the clash on a knife-edge.

England skipper Ben Stokes won a key toss on a green track and his quicks feasted under overcast skies at the Melbourne Cricket Ground.

Tongue's five-for

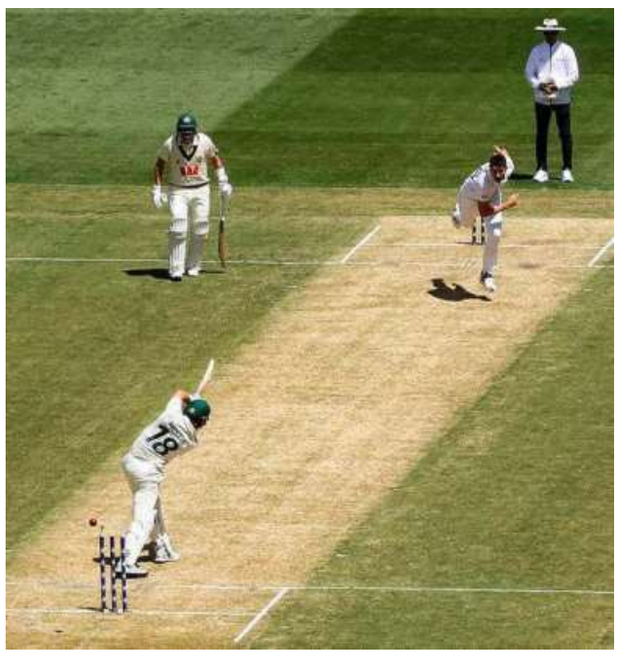
The biggest cricket crowd ever at the cavernous arena witnessed the home side collapse with Josh Tongue grabbing five for 45. But England fared even worse, slumping to 16 for four and never recovering, leaving Australia to face one over before stumps, which nightwatchman Scott Boland safely negotiated with Travis Head at the other end.

Australia was 4-0 at the close with Boland on four, 46 ahead, with Head yet to face a ball.

"I feel like anyone could have taken a 'five-fer' today," said Tongue, who became the first Englishman to take five wickets in an innings in a Test at the MCG since Dean Headley and Darren Gough in 1998.

Australia bowler Michael Neser, who took four for 45, was not making any predictions for the second innings after a day when the ball dominated the bat.

"We saw how tough it was when we batted. The ball was nipping around and we needed to bowl in the right areas," Neser said.





Bowlers' day out: Tongue, the pick of the English pacemen, sends Neser's bails flying while the Australian has a measure of revenge by leading the host's riposte with the dismissal of Bethell. AFP, AP

SCOREBOARD

Australia — 1st innings: Travis Head b Atkinson 12, Jake Weatherald c Smith b Tongue 10, Marnus Labuschagne c Root b Tongue 6, Steven Smith b Tongue 9, Usman Khawaja c Smith b Atkinson 29, Alex Carey c Crawley b Stokes 20, Cameron Green run out 17, Michael Neser b Tongue 35, Mitchell Starc c Stokes b Carse 1, Jhye Richardson (not out) 0, Scott Boland c Brook b Tongue 0; Extras (b-4, lb-8, nb-1): 13; Total (in 45.2 overs): 152.

Fall of wickets: 1-27, 2-31, 3-34, 4-51, 5-89, 6-91, 7-143, 8-152, 9-152.

England bowling: Atkinson 14-4-28-2, Carse 12-3-42-1, Tongue 11.2-2-45-5, Stokes 8-1-25-1.

England — 1st innings: Zak Crawley c Smith b Starc 5, Ben Duckett c Neser b Starc 2, Jacob Bethell c Carey b Neser 1, Joe Root c Carey b Neser 0, Harry Brook lbw b Boland 41, Ben Stokes c Smith b Neser 16, Jamie Smith b Boland 2, Will Jacks c Carey b Boland 5, Gus Atkinson b Green 28, Brydon Carse c Boland b Neser 4, Josh Tongue (not out) 1; Extras (lb-4, nb-1): 5; Total (in 29.5 overs): 110.

Fall of wickets: 1-7, 2-8, 3-8, 4-16, 5-66, 6-68, 7-77, 8-83, 9-91.

Australia bowling: Starc 6-0-23-2, Neser 10-1-45-4, Boland 9-1-30-3, Richardson 4-1-8-0, Green 0.5-0-0-1.

Australia — 2nd innings: Scott Boland (batting) 4, Travis Head (batting) 0; Total (for no loss in one over): 4.

England bowling: Atkinson 1-0-4-0.

Toss: England.

Indian teenager IM Goutham starts well

Press Trust of India
DOHA

Teenage International Master Krishna Goutham emerged an unlikely joint leader with three consecutive wins, while star Indian players D. Gukesh and R. Praggnanandhaa got their campaigns off to a slow but steady start in the FIDE World Rapid Championships here on Friday.

The 15-year-old from Kerala shared the lead with the likes of World No. 1 Magnus Carlsen, top Indian player Arjun Erigaisi, and Vladislav Artemiev, a leading Russian GM with a 2700-plus rating.

However, the day belonged to Goutham, who overcame Serbian GM Indjic Aleksandar with black pieces, before getting the better of one of the top Indian GMs Aravindh Chithambaram with white and then outmanoeuvring Azerbaijan's Radjabov Teimour.

In the women's section, GM R. Vaishali caused a major upset by defeating former women's World classical and rapid champion Tan Zhongyi as she scored full points after the first three rounds.



Top-class: Harmanpreet feels the standard across franchises is very high. FILE PHOTO: SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

Harmanpreet eyes good show in HIL

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI

India's leading men's hockey players Harmanpreet Singh and Hardik Singh are eyeing good performances in the Hockey India League (HIL), beginning early next year, to fine-tune their skills and build confidence ahead of a busy international season.

The Indian team has a busy schedule next year with the FIH Pro League, World Cup and the Asian Games in Japan line up one after the other. The upcoming men's HIL, beginning on January 3, will be a stepping stone for players to get into the rhythm for the season ahead.

India captain Harmanpreet, who plays for JSW Soorma Hockey Club, said the standard of HIL could be compared to international events and it would help players find form quickly.

"The HIL comes at the perfect time for all of us in the Indian team," said Harmanpreet.

"The standard across franchises is very high, so every game will feel like an international match, which is exactly what we want before the Pro League, World Cup, and Asian Games."

"This HIL season is massive for me and for our HIL Governing Council team," said Hardik.

"The league always offers high-intensity, high-pressure games, and that is exactly what is needed before a year packed with big tournaments. Our expectation is to play bold, attacking hockey, and build a strong identity as a group."



GETTY IMAGES

Twenty20 vision: SKY the limit after India's Gill course correction

In its bid to win the format's pinnacle event back to back, the team management has resorted to a last-ditch reshuffle at the top. Dropping the Test and ODI captain is a tacit admission that the think tank's strategy was not quite in order. But despite the drastic measure and T20I skipper Suryakumar's poor form, the squad has the batting muscle and bowling venom to defend its title

Vivek Krishnan

Eight editions of the T20 World Cup have followed 2007's inaugural spectacle. Not once in all these years has a team lifted the sleek, silver-plated prize in successive campaigns – a fair reflection of the challenge of attaining consistency in a format inclined to fickleness.

Can India buck the trend? Can the two-time champion, on the back of winning the 2024 T20 World Cup in the Caribbean, manage another serious tilt at the title on home turf?

Stacking wins

The results since that heady afternoon in Bridgetown have provided little reason to doubt India's credentials. A change of captain and coach from Rohit Sharma and Rahul Dravid to Suryakumar Yadav and Gautam Gambhir unfolded soon afterwards, but victories have continued to stack up at an impressive rate in the 18 months since the previous iteration.

Of its 36 T20Is this cycle, India has won 29 (two in Super Overs) and lost just five (two no-results). Furthermore, it has won all seven bilateral series. At September's eight-team Asia Cup in the UAE, Suryakumar and Co. stitched together an undefeated run.

Those are among the good bits. With just five T20Is against New Zealand to go before India's T20 World Cup campaign kicks off on February 7, what has not been so good is the form of the captain, who has scored a meagre 448 runs in 31 matches at 17.92 since taking the reins. Suryakumar's last half-century (75 vs. Bangladesh) dates back to October 12, 2024.

> We've come to a point, Gauti *bhai* and I, that we're not looking for left-right [batting combinations]. It's actually a little overrated
>
> **SURYAKUMAR**

The 35-year-old's pedigree isn't up for debate. He is one of only four batters to amass four or more T20I centuries and has won the ICC T20I Cricketer of the Year award twice (2022, 2023). At his free-flowing best, he has an inimitable repertoire of strokes that accesses every nook and cranny of the outfield, and he is as adept at attacking pace as he is at dismantling spin.

Even so, his lean stretch has gone on for far too long to not arouse concerns. True to Suryakumar's easy-going demeanour, he took pointed queries on the chin during the announcement of India's T20 World Cup squad. "*Ye waala patch thoda lamba ho gaya* [this patch has stretched a bit too long]. I'm sure everyone has seen this in their respective careers. I will also overcome it. I know what to do," he grinned reassuringly.

Even more of a talking point, of course, is the last-ditch reshuffle at the top of the order. Having reposed faith in Shubman Gill as Suryakumar's deputy and opening batter just ahead of the Asia Cup, the selection committee has abandoned that idea by dropping the Test and ODI skipper from the 15-member T20I squad entirely. Doing so at the eleventh hour is a tacit admission on the part of the selectors and team management that they were wrong to disrupt the opening association between Abhishek Sharma and Sanju Samson in the first place.

It would be altogether understandable if Samson has encountered cobwebs of self-doubt in the process. Despite smashing three hundreds as opener in 2024, he was shunted down the order and even out of the team recently. If he can overcome the latest hiccup, his tendency to tee off straightaway, coupled with Abhishek's free-spirited aggression, should help India set the PowerPlay overs ablaze.

By deciding that a wicketkeeper at the top is the way to go, India has essentially opted for greater flexibility in the middle and lower order. While Hardik Pandya and Axar Patel are the primary seam- and spin-bowling all-rounders respectively, the multi-faceted traits of Shivam Dube and Washington Sundar will come into the equation based on the surfaces and opponents. Rinku Singh may not have as many strings to his bow, but as a finisher with ice in his veins, he is as good as they come. Such a wide spread enables India to have batting depth till No. 8 while also allowing for more than six bowling options at all times.

That has been Gambhir's way ever since he transitioned to a role in the dugout. The 44-year-old's predilection for players with multiple skills has probably hindered the Test team on occasion, but his excellent record as white-ball coach leaves no room to find fault.

> The captain and coach know what combinations they want to play. We've got a lot more options to play at different positions, which is what the team management is always looking for
>
> **AJIT AGARKAR**
> Chief selector

"The captain and coach know what combinations they want to play. We've got a lot more options to play at different positions, which is what the team management is always looking for," chief selector Ajit Agarkar said.

Another of Gambhir's core beliefs in T20 cricket seemed to be the importance of left-right combinations in the middle and flexible batting line-ups. As recently as the Asia Cup, the coaching staff repeatedly stressed that other than the opening pair, every batter would have to be ready to slot in anywhere. But, like with Gill, there seems to have been a rethink here too. Much to Tilak Varma's benefit, it frees up the southpaw to exhibit his flair at No. 3 regardless of whether Abhishek or Samson gets dismissed first.

"We've come to a point, Gauti *bhai* and I, that we're not looking for left-right. It's actually a little overrated. We've fixed the No. 3 position for Tilak, I want to bat at 4. We want to fix it so that Tilak is comfortable, he knows what his role is, and he's enjoying that position," Suryakumar said.

Conversely, there were no late modifications to the bowling pack. It points to the fact that Jasprit Bumrah, Arshdeep Singh, Varun Chakaravarthy, Kuldeep Yadav and Harshit Rana comprise a bunch of bonafide wicket-takers equipped to handle high-pressure scenarios.

All the same, a lot will predictably rest on Bumrah. Take, for example, India's most recent outing against South Africa in Ahmedabad. Defending India's 231 on a shirtfront, the 32-year-old spearhead returned extraordinary figures of 4-0-17-2 even as most other bowlers were met with a stern beating.

Between now and the start of the 20-team event, India should ideally have Bumrah wrapped up in cotton wool, so that his back, which takes much of the load of his unique action, is in the best possible shape to deal with the exertions of the biennial tournament. Does it need reminding how India shaped up in the 2022 T20 World Cup when he was missing with injury?

Cloak and dagger

Adding a tinge of intrigue to India's attack this time is Varun's mystery spin. With Gambhir being a vocal admirer, the 34-year-old from Tamil Nadu forced his way back into the set-up 14 months ago and hasn't looked back. As 55 scalps in 33 games signify, the ability to strike at various stages of a T20 innings is his distinguishing characteristic.

For all intents and purposes, then, this Indian squad has the belligerence with the bat and the bite with the ball to mount a robust title defence. Will they all coalesce into a conquering force one more time? It is part of the allure of the T20 game that one can never quite tell.



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	5,160	24
4	Novak Djokovic	38	4,830	20
5	Felix Auger-Aliassime	25	4,245	28
6	Taylor Fritz	28	4,135	23
7	Alex de Minaur	26	4,135	23
8	Lorenzo Musetti	23	4,040	23
9	Ben Shelton	23	3,970	23
10	Jack Draper	24	2,990	17
11	Alexander Bublik	28	2,870	29
12	Casper Ruud	27	2,835	21
13	Daniil Medvedev	29	2,760	24
14	A. Davidovich Fokina	26	2,635	26
15	Holger Rune	22	2,590	21

Top Indians ▶



Sumit Nagal
Rank 277 ▲ No change



Aryan Shah
Rank 403 ▲ 2 spots

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 331 ▼ 27 spots



Shrivalli Bhamidipaty
Rank 481 ▼ 83 spots

English Premier League Standings

#	Team	GP	W	D	L	GF	GA	GD	PTS
1	Arsenal	17	12	3	2	31	10	21	39
2	Man. City	17	12	1	4	41	16	25	37
3	Aston Villa	17	11	3	3	27	18	9	36
4	Chelsea	17	8	5	4	29	17	12	29
5	Liverpool	17	9	2	6	28	25	3	29
6	Sunderland	17	7	6	4	19	17	2	27
7	Man. United	17	7	5	5	31	28	3	26
8	Crystal Palace	17	7	5	5	21	19	2	26
9	Brighton	17	6	6	5	25	23	2	24
10	Everton	17	7	3	7	18	20	-2	24
11	Newcastle	17	6	5	6	23	22	1	23
12	Brentford	17	7	2	8	24	25	-1	23
13	Fulham	17	7	2	8	24	26	-2	23
14	Tottenham	17	6	4	7	26	23	3	22
15	Bournemouth	17	5	7	5	26	29	-3	22
16	Leeds United	17	5	4	8	24	31	-7	19
17	N. Forest	17	5	3	9	17	26	-9	18
18	West Ham	17	3	4	10	19	35	-16	13
19	Burnley	17	3	2	12	19	34	-15	11
20	Wolves	17	0	2	15	9	37	-28	2

Italian Serie A Standings

#	Team	GP	W	D	L	GF	GA	GD	PTS
1	Inter Milan	15	11	0	4	34	14	20	33
2	AC Milan	15	9	5	1	24	13	11	32
3	Napoli	15	10	1	4	22	13	9	31
4	Roma	16	10	0	6	17	10	7	30
5	Juventus	16	8	5	3	21	15	6	29
6	Bologna	15	7	4	4	23	13	10	25
7	Como	15	6	6	3	19	12	7	24
8	Lazio	16	6	5	5	17	11	6	23
9	Atalanta	16	5	7	4	20	18	2	22
10	Sassuolo	16	6	3	7	21	20	1	21
11	Cremonese	16	5	6	5	18	18	0	21
12	Udinese	16	6	3	7	17	27	-10	21
13	Torino	16	5	5	6	16	26	-10	20
14	Lecce	15	4	4	7	11	19	-8	16
15	Cagliari	16	3	6	7	17	23	-6	15
16	Parma	15	3	5	7	10	18	-8	14
17	Genoa	16	3	5	8	16	24	-8	14
18	Verona	15	2	6	7	13	22	-9	12
19	Pisa	16	1	8	7	12	22	-10	11
20	Fiorentina	16	1	6	9	17	27	-10	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	887	932
2	Kane Williamson	822	919
3	Steve Smith	815	947
3	Travis Head	815	884
5	Harry Brook	813	898
6	Kamindu Mendis	781	784
7	Temba Bavuma	775	806
8	Yashasvi Jaiswal	750	858
9	Alex Carey	737	737
10	Saud Shakeel	734	787

Test Bowling

#	Player	Rating	Career best
1	Jasprit Bumrah	879	908
2	Pat Cummins	849	914
3	Mitchell Starc	845	852
4	Noman Ali	843	853
5	Matt Henry	836	853
6	Marco Jansen	825	825
7	Kagiso Rabada	807	902
8	Josh Hazlewood	791	864
9	Scott Boland	777	785
10	Nathan Lyon	768	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

GETTY IMAGES



Very good sign when a player can actually win events, not just keep a high rating

As the world's third-best chess player at the moment — also the third-highest-rated player in history — Caruana has lofty standards. It's perhaps why he says he isn't happy with his 2025, despite winning big events. In this chat, he also speaks about the Global Chess League, the Candidates, India's young prodigies and the origin of his fascination with tennis

INTERVIEW

Fabiano Caruana

P.K. Ajith Kumar

Fabiano Caruana arrived in Mumbai just a few weeks after winning the United States Chess Championship. In a tournament that featured some of the world's top players, such as Wesley So and Levon Aronian, he came a clear first. A couple of months before that, he had won the Grand Chess Tour. Still, the World No. 3 isn't exactly pleased with his year.

Caruana is also the third-highest-rated player in history, behind Magnus Carlsen and Garry Kasparov. He had challenged Carlsen for the World title in 2018 but lost out in the tie-breaks. He is now eyeing another crack at the World Championship: he will be playing the Candidates in March-April in Cyprus. Before that gruelling event, where he has been a regular since 2016, he played in the Tech Mahindra Global Chess League for the first time.

> I have liked the big guys of the past — Djokovic, Nadal and Federer. All three of them have been great, and it is hard to choose. And Agassi as well. His book 'Open' got me interested in tennis

And he led Alpine SG Pipers to the title at Mumbai's iconic Royal Opera House, with a commanding win in the final over Triveni Continental Kings, the champion in both previous editions. Excerpts from an exclusive interview Caruana gave *The Hindu* on a cool December morning, by the poolside of Trident Hotel, just a stone's throw away from the Arabian Sea:

Your thoughts on your maiden Global Chess League?

It was nice. I wanted to play previous years, but there were always some scheduling issues. So I was excited when I got contacted for this year's league. And actually, I didn't really expect it, because I knew all the teams had their players, but one spot opened up for this team. We have two of the best players in the world [Anish Giri and

> I said Arjun would be the first to cross 2800, and it ended up being correct, but Gukesh has been the most successful, at least currently. Gukesh and Pragg have been the most accomplished. But Arjun is also very accomplished and has had the highest rating

R. Praggnanandhaa], along with many-time World champion for women [Hou Yifan] and one of the best junior players in the world [Leon Mendonca]. And Nino [Batsiashvili] is also a great player. I think the GCL is a very interesting tournament. It is nice to have so many strong players [14 of the world's top 15] in one place. It took a while to get used to the time control [increment of two seconds after the 40th move].

How do you look back at your wins at the Grand Chess Tour and the US national championship, which you won for the fourth year in a row?

Those two were my major successes this year. Besides that, it wasn't a great year, but of course that does brighten it quite a bit. The US championship is always very strong for a national tournament, similar to what the Soviet Union championship used to be. This year, it was very close.

Your compatriot Hikaru Nakamura says he has already started preparing for the Candidates. What about you?

Yeah, well, definitely thought has already gone into preparation for the tournament. The concrete preparation hasn't really started yet, but it will start pretty soon.

How close do you think it is going to be in Cyprus? You must be an expert on the Candidates, having played in every edition since 2016.

Every time it is close. The only question is how close. I think the only exception was in 2022, when Ian [Nepomniachtchi] was clearly first, but that was also a strange year because the runner-up [Ding Liren] ended up qualifying as well.

I was speaking to So a few days ago, and he picked you as the favourite. Who do you think could be your toughest rivals?

Anyone potentially. By rating, it is clear: it is Hikaru and Praggnanandhaa. And Anish [Giri], as well, is up there because he recently also gained a lot of rating. There are other players who can also be dangerous.

Somebody like Wei Yi, or Javokhir Sindarov...

Wei is such a strong player, though it is his first time in the Candidates. He is a very capable player, for sure.

Talking of the Candidates, are you happy with the way the players are selected?

I think the only change I would really make is to change the qualification for the spot given to the highest-rated player. Let's say you have to play opponents that have an average rating of 2600 Elo rating, for example. But Hikaru has deserved his spot, for sure.

Now Candidates slots are also going to be filled from the newly announced Total Chess World Championship...

I generally don't like the name of that tournament. We already have the total World Championship, you know, the classical World Championship. That is the ultimate goal for a player. Then you have this new world championship and then the confusion.

A few years ago, you had made an interesting study of the young Indian players. Was Gukesh moving ahead of the pack and winning the World title a surprise for you?

Well, when I did this in 2022, Gukesh was still very young, clearly going to be very strong, but I think he was a little bit less known compared to Arjun [Erigiasi] or Praggnanandhaa. I said Arjun would be the first to cross the 2800 rating, and it ended up being correct, but Gukesh has been the most successful, at least currently, of the bunch. It was hard to predict, and we didn't predict, of course, that he would be World champion.

Gukesh and Pragg have been the most accomplished. But Arjun is also very accomplished and has had the highest rating. In terms of his chess, I think what impresses most people is that it feels like he is kind of a very natural player. While Gukesh is a very prepared player, very focused, very professional. His mentality is his strongest suit. Pragg is also very focused, very prepared. He works very hard, which is very good. It is going to take him far along with his talent. And this year, he's won a lot of tournaments. When a player can win tournaments, not just keep a high rating, but actually win – that is always a very good sign for them.

You are hugely popular here. Are you getting recognised in India more than back home?

Probably yes, I mean even at the airport I was getting recognised a few times. It happens in the US, but usually more in the major cities, like New York for example. Here you can see the interest in chess from the public.

Your earliest memories of chess?

I have some very early childhood memories from when I was five, playing my first tournament. I grew up in New York, where there was a vibrant chess scene then. That was where the main hub for chess in the US was and now it has changed a lot. It's gone to St. Louis. You know I also have some fond memories from my teenage years when we moved to Europe and I started to travel to get better and chase my norms.

Which other sports do you follow?

Tennis.

Any favourite players?

Currently Alcaraz. Of course, I have liked the big guys of the past – Djokovic, Nadal and Federer. All three of them have been great, and it is hard to choose. And Agassi as well. His book 'Open' got me interested in tennis in the first place. I have always enjoyed watching Agassi.



GCL

GAME THEORY

Olyslagers vs. the best high jumpers in history

Nicola Olyslagers claimed the field athlete of the year award at the World Athletics Awards 2025. In an incredible season, the Australian high jumper won both the world indoor and outdoor crowns.
She also bagged the Diamond League title with a jump of 2.04m, breaking her own Oceanian record. That effort made her the joint-16th-highest jumper of all time. It's a list headed by her rival and Olympic champion Yaroslava Mahuchikh, who broke Stefka Kostadinova's 37-year-old world record in 2024.



Yaroslava Mahuchikh

BEST HIGH JUMPS BY ATHLETE

Rank	Mark (m)	Competitor	Venue	Date
1	2.10	Yaroslava Mahuchikh	Paris	07 Jul 2024
2	2.09	Stefka Kostadinova	Roma	30 Aug 1987
3	2.08	Kajsa Bergqvist	Arnstadt (i)	04 Feb 2006
3	2.08	Blanka Vlasic	Zagreb	31 Aug 2009
5	2.07	Lyudmila Andonova	Berlin	20 Jul 1984
5	2.07	Heike Henkel	Karlsruhe (i)	08 Feb 1992
5	2.07	Anna Chicherova	Cheboksary	22 Jul 2011
8	2.06	Hestrie Cloete	Paris-St-Denis	31 Aug 2003
8	2.06	Yelena Slesarenko	Athina	28 Aug 2004
8	2.06	Ariane Friedrich	Berlin	14 Jun 2009
8	2.06	Mariya Lasitskene	Lausanne	06 Jul 2017
12	2.05	Tamara Bykova	Kiev	22 Jun 1984
12	2.05	Inga Babakova	Tokyo	15 Sep 1995
12	2.05	Tia Hellebaut	Birmingham (i)	03 Mar 2007
12	2.05	Chaunte Lowe	Des Moines	26 Jun 2010
16	2.04	Silvia Costa	Barcelona	09 Sep 1989
16	2.04	Alina Astafei	Berlin (i)	03 Mar 1995
16	2.04	Venelina Veneva-Mateeva	Kalamata	02 Jun 2001
16	2.04	Antonietta Di Martino	Banska Bystrica (i)	09 Feb 2011
16	2.04	Irina Gordeyeva	Eberstadt	19 Aug 2012
16	2.04	Brigetta Barrett	Des Moines	22 Jun 2013
16	2.04	Nicola Olyslagers	Zurich	27 Aug 2025



Stefka Kostadinova



Nicola Olyslagers

SOURCE: WORLD ATHLETICS | NOTE: IN COLUMN 'VENUE', (I) DENOTES AN INDOOR JUMP

PICTURE THIS



GETTY IMAGES

Winter-sun run

In this photograph, a skier competes in the individual sprint finals of the FIS World Cup Cross-Country Davos in the Alpine resort town in Switzerland.

The World Cup usually follows a November-March schedule, with competitors attempting to accumulate the most points during the season. The annual competition, organised by the International Ski Federation, has a history of more than four decades.

Races are held in two disciplines: distance and sprint. Sprints, as the name suggests, are short bursts — no longer than 1.8 km — skied in either the classic or free technique.

The classic style involves striding forward, but the faster, more modern skate-skiing style, which involves side-to-side motion, is preferred.

Courses should test both the technical and physical abilities of the skiers. The ideal is to have smooth transitions among the uphills, downhills and undulating terrain.

Cross-country skiing, which evolved from being a means of transport several thousand years ago, has been an integral part of the Winter Olympics since the inaugural edition of the Games in 1924.