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OVER 1,000 AFFECTED

'Contaminated' water leaves 5 dead in M.P.

NEWS » PAGE 6



AHEAD OF JAPAN

India world's fourth largest economy, says government

NEWS » PAGE 4



ACCIDENT IN ALMORA

7 killed as bus falls into gorge in Uttarakhand

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DATA POINT

Programming falls behind as GenAI flourishes

AI proficiency outpacing traditional coding

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MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

Harmanpreet shines as India sweeps series

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NEARBY



Iran risks further strikes over nuke facilities: Trump

PALM BEACH

U.S. President Donald Trump warned Iran on Monday that the U.S. could carry out further military strikes if the country attempted to reconstitute its nuclear programme as he held wide-ranging talks with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at his home in Florida. » PAGE 14

Court discharges Revanna in sex harassment case

BENGALURU

A special court in Bengaluru has discharged Janata Dal (Secular) leader and former Karnataka Minister H.D. Revanna from a sexual harassment case, citing a four-year delay in filing the complaint. He had been accused of sexually harassing a 47-year-old domestic help in Hassan in 2020. » PAGE 3

NESO demands death sentence for Anjel killers

GUWAHATI

The North East Students' Organisation (NESO) has demanded capital punishment for the assailants who caused the death of Tripura student Anjel Chakma in Uttarakhand's Dehradun. It also joined other organisations and rights bodies to seek an anti-racism act, which it believed would act as a deterrent. » PAGE 4

59 more named in Chhattisgarh liquor scam case

NEW DELHI

The Enforcement Directorate (ED), in its supplementary prosecution complaint, has named 59 new accused persons, taking the total number of accused to 81 in what it described as a "massive corruption" of ₹2,883 crore in the Excise Department of Chhattisgarh between 2019 and 2023. » PAGE 6

Khaleda Zia, first woman PM of Bangladesh and the main rival of Hasina, is no more

Associated Press
DHAKA



KHALEDA ZIA (1945-2025)

Former Bangladeshi Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, whose rivalry with the deposed Premier Sheikh Hasina defined the country's politics for a generation, died on Tuesday, her Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) said in a statement. She was 80.

Ms. Zia was the first woman elected Prime Minister of Bangladesh.

Bangladesh's interim government announced a three-day mourning following her death. A general holiday was announced for Wednesday when Ms. Zia's funeral prayers are scheduled to be held in front of the country's national Parliament building in Dhaka. Ms. Zia will be buried with full state honours beside her husband, former President General Ziaur Rahman, the interim government said.

Bangladesh's interim leader Muhammad Yunus issued a statement on Tuesday citing Ms. Zia's contributions to the country. "Her role in the struggle to establish democracy, a multi-party political culture, and the rights of the people in Bangladesh will be remembered forever," Mr. Yunus said.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi offered condolences in a statement, noting that "as the first woman Prime Minister of Bangladesh, her important contributions toward the development of Bangladesh, as well as India-Bangladesh relations, will always be remembered."

Irreparable loss: Hasina

Ms. Hasina issued a statement from exile in India, where she has been staying since her ouster in August 2024, saying Ms. Zia's death was "an irreparable loss" for politics in Bangladesh and recalled her contributions in establishing the nation's democracy.

Ms. Zia was sentenced to 17 years in jail in two separate corruption cases for misuse of power in embezzling funds meant for a charity named after her late husband. Her party had said the charges were politically motivated to weaken the Opposition, but the Hasina government said it did not interfere and the case was a matter for the courts.

Bangladesh's Supreme Court, in January this year, acquitted Ms. Zia in the last corruption case against her, which would have let her run in the general election in February 2026.

The BNP said that after she was released from prison due to illness in 2020, her family sought permission for treatment abroad at least 18 times from Ms. Hasina's administration, but the requests were rejected.

MORE REPORTS
» PAGES 5 & 14

EC gives one more week for U.P. SIR in another extension

Draft list to be published on January 6, final list on March 6; claims and objections will be invited from January 6 to February 6; more than one crore voters in draft list are 'unmapped', say officials

Sreeparna Chakrabarty
NEW DELHI



Keeping track: Booth-level officers during the enumeration process for the SIR in Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh. The draft roll is expected to contain nearly 12.55 crore voters. FILE PHOTO

The Election Commission of India (EC) on Tuesday revised the schedule for the ongoing special intensive revision (SIR) of electoral rolls in Uttar Pradesh yet again, extending it by a week. Now the draft list will be published on January 6, instead of December 31, and the final list on March 6, instead of February 28. Claims and objections from voters will be invited from January 6 to February 6, while the notice stage, disposal of claims and objections, and decisions on enumeration forms will continue from January 6 to February 27, after which the final electoral roll will be published on March 6. The SIR process in the State began on November 4.

2.89 cr. deletions likely

The draft roll is expected to contain around 12.55 crore voters, with about 2.89 crore names deleted from the pre-SIR list for reasons such as death, change of residence, or duplication, officials said. They added that more than one crore voters on the draft list fall under the "unmapped" category and will be required to submit documents prescribed by the EC to retain their names in the final roll.

Earlier this month, the EC had extended the schedule by 15 days, after which the draft rolls were to be published on December 31. Before that, on November 30, the EC had extended the process in 12 States and Union Territories by a week.

'HIT-AND-TRIAL PROCESS'
» PAGE 5

EC relaxes SIR hearing for Bengal's ailing, elderly

Shiv Sahay Singh
KOLKATA

Amid outrage among a section of the electorate over elderly and ailing voters being summoned for hearings under the special intensive revision (SIR) in West Bengal, the Election Commission of India (EC) has, in a notification issued on Monday, directed officials not to call such electors – particularly those aged 85 years and above – for physical hearings. In cases of notices being issued to such electors, officials have been instructed to carry out the verification at their residences.

FULL REPORT ON
» PAGE 4

Tribal festival



In step: Kota tribeswomen celebrate *Aiyanoor Ammanoor* festival at Solur Kokkal near Udhagamandalam on Tuesday. SATHYAMOORTHY M.

Ministry tells social media platforms to block 'obscene and pornographic' content

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI



The advisory comes a month after the Supreme Court urged the Centre to take action on 'obscenity' on the Internet. FILE PHOTO

The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology has issued an advisory to social media platforms, directing them to proactively take down "obscene" and "pornographic" content.

Large platforms in particular (defined as those who have more than 50 lakh users) are required to use technology to automatically detect and remove such content, said the advisory issued late on Monday, pointing to the IT Rules, 2021.

Platforms and intermediaries will face action if they do not comply with the IT Rules that bar display of such objectionable content, it said. A senior official told *The Hindu* that the government had noticed that "there seemed to be more obscene content which [large social media platforms] were missing out on screening".

The advisory comes a month after the Supreme Court urged the Centre to take action on what it called "obscenity" on the Internet. The government has so far blocked nearly 25 home-grown OTT platforms specialising in erotic content, and filed a note in the Supreme Court proposing the insertion of broad language that would prohibit obscenity on the Internet in India.

It is unclear if there was any specific trigger for Monday's order. The IT Rules "require [social media and other] intermediaries to make reasonable efforts to ensure that users of their computer resources do not host, display, upload, modify, publish, transmit, store, update or share any information that is obscene, pornographic, paedophilic, harmful to a child, or otherwise unlawful," the advisory said.

No exemption

"Failure to observe such due diligence obligations shall result in the loss of the exemption from liability under Section 79 of the IT Act," the advisory added. It warned of consequences, including prosecution, for non-compliance with the provisions of the IT Act and/or the IT Rules, 2021.

That extract refers to safe harbour, the legal principle that platforms are not responsible for content put out by their users. The IT Rules enforce much of their social media regulations by setting the terms under which they may enjoy this safe harbour – such as by ensuring that they have grievance redressal officers based in India to receive complaints, and comply with government orders. Without safe harbour, social media platforms risk being liable in court for their users' speech.

11 held over alleged links to Bangladesh radical group

The Hindu Bureau
GUWAHATI

Guwahati Police Commissioner says their aim was to destabilise the northeast

A Special Task Force (STF) of Assam on Monday night arrested 11 people in two northeastern States for their alleged links with a radical offshoot of the Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), an extremist group banned in India.

The members of the Imam Mahmuder Kafila (IMK) – 10 from Baksa, Barpeta, Chirang, and Darrang districts in Assam and one from West Tripura district – were arrested in a coordinated operation with the local police, based on inputs from Central agencies, STF chief and Guwahati Police Commissioner Partha Sarathi Mahanta said.

"These jihadist elements were working under the direct orders of Bangladesh-based groups. Their main aim was to destabilise the northeast," Mr. Mahanta told presspersons in Guwahati on Tuesday.

As per information collected by the Indian security apparatus, the IMK was formed in 2018 by Jewel Mahmud, also known as Imam Mahmud Habibullah, an ex-JMB member.

Apart from the JMB, leaders of the Ansarullah Bangla Team and Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent helped activate the IMK after the regime change in Bangladesh in August 2024, and expand its Indian module.

System to radicalise

Most of the leaders and members of these radical groups were released from prisons across Bangladesh after the fall of the Sheikh Hasina government.

"The activities are coordinated through secure social media platforms. One of these, Purva Akash, functions as the principal platform to radicalise, recruit, and finance people in Assam, Tripura, and West Bengal," the dossier on the IMK read.

It said that one Nasim Uddin of Barpeta Road town heads the Assam cell of the IMK.

The dossier said that the IMK module employs a systematic process to radicalise and recruit followers.

INBRIEF



Sunita Williams to participate in Kerala Literature Festival

Former NASA astronaut Sunita Williams is set to participate in the ninth edition of Kerala Literature Festival (KLF), starting January 22, announced organisers on Tuesday. Ms. Williams, 60, who has spent over 300 days in space, is expected to reflect on her journeys beyond earth and speak about science, exploration, leadership, resilience, and the enduring power of human curiosity. "The Kerala Literature Festival has always believed in expanding the idea of the fest to include science, discovery, leadership, and the human spirit," said Ravi DeeCee, managing director of DC Books and chief facilitator at KLF. PTI

Forest officer held for taking ₹50,000 bribe through GPay

A Vigilance Department team has arrested a Forest Department officer for accepting a bribe of ₹50,000 through Google Pay from a contractor in Bilaspur district, officials said on Tuesday. The accused, identified as Sameer Muhammad, who was posted as a forest beat officer in Bilaspsur, allegedly demanded ₹3 lakh from a contractor for marking his Khair trees. After negotiations, the deal was finalised at ₹1 lakh, officials said. The contractor transferred ₹50,000 to the officer's bank account via GPay as an initial installment. Following this, the contractor informed the Vigilance Department and the officer was arrested. PTI

Churn in ruling alliance as nominations close for Maharashtra civic polls

Sena Minister Shirsat terms BJP 'arrogant' while BJP's Save calls out alliance partner's 'never-ending demands' on last day of filing nominations for State's 29 civic bodies, including 227-member BMC

Snehal Mutha
MUMBAI





MNS and Shiv Sena (UBT) candidates posing together before filing nominations; a BJP roadshow in Mumbai. EMMANUAL YOGINI, PTI

The tussle over seat-sharing for the upcoming civic polls in Maharashtra ended on a bitter note for the ruling Mahayuti alliance on Tuesday, with the Shiv Sena snapping ties with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in nearly half a dozen civic bodies and announcing its decision to fight solo in Pune, Pimpri-Chinchwad, Nashik, Navi Mumbai and Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar, among others.

The announcement came on the last day of filing nominations for the 29 civic bodies, including the 227-member Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC), which will go to the polls on January 15. The counting of votes will take place the following day.

Shiv Sena Minister Sanjay Shirsat announced the break while criticising the BJP for its "arrogance and the assumption that they can do anything".

"The BJP is distributing nomination forms even as its leaders are discussing seat-sharing with us. They were trying to break the alliance, and they were successful," he said.

Hitting back, BJP Minister Atul Save hit out at the Sena over its "never-ending demands".

'Denied respectful share'

Sena's Pune unit chief Nana Bhangire said the party had decided to fight alone because the BJP did not give it a "respectful share".

"We have distributed nomination forms to all 165 candidates. So there's no going back," he said.

On Monday, after talks between the Sena and the BJP broke down, Sena leader Ravindra Dangekar met NCP chief Ajit Pawar to discuss a potential alliance. As the discussion with Mr. Pawar fell through, the Sena decided to go solo.

Shiv Sena Minister Uday Samant sought to downplay talk of a rift in the ruling alliance. "It is wrong to say that the Mahayuti is breaking up in the municipal corporation elections. The parties are contesting polls solo in only a few places due to a lack of consensus. Our teams have already distributed the forms. However, the date for withdrawal of applications is still two to three days away, and we will resolve the disputes by then," he said on Tuesday.

In Navi Mumbai, the BJP and Shiv Sena reportedly ran into a deadlock in 111 wards. "We had urged them to clear the seats of their sitting corporators as well as ours. Some issues remained unresolved, so we had to part ways," said Navi Mumbai BJP leader Sanjay Naik.

Meanwhile, Shiv Sena (UBT) leader Sanjay Raut termed the Shinde Sena's position "shameful".

"Shiv Sena has never stood at anyone's door or bowed down in Mumbai in the last 60 years. Shiv Sena always gave seats to the BJP. But today they [Shinde Sena] are receiving seats because of [senior BJP leader and Union Home Minister] Amit Shah," said Mr. Raut.

T.N. weighs options as President returns Madras varsity Bill

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI



Minister Govi. Chezhiaan

After President Draupadi Murmu returned the University of Madras Amendment Bill, 2022, which sought to empower the State to appoint the Vice-Chancellor, the Tamil Nadu Government is weighing its options, and will take a decision soon.

The State Government was informed that the "President of India has withheld her assent from the Bill" without stating any reason or objection.

Higher Education Minister Govi. Chezhiaan told *The Hindu* that there were options available and the final decision would soon be taken by the Chief Minister. The appointment of Vice-Chancellors should be the State Government's prerogative, he said, and added that the State Assembly had passed the Bill in April 2022.

The delay on the part of Governor R.N. Ravi forwarding of the Bill by over a year was condemnable, Dr. Chezhiaan said. Mr. Ravi reserved the Bill for the President's consideration, stating that it would go against the UGC regulations and established norms. "This shows the partisan behaviour on the part of the Governor proving that he is not fit to hold the post," the Minister claimed.

The Bill sought to replace the word, 'Chancellor', with the word, 'Government', in Section 11 of the Madras University Act, 1923, which deals with the appointment of Vice-Chancellors, thus seeking to establish greater control of the State government in the affairs of the university.

While the Tamil Nadu government considers its next move, a section of government officials feel that a deadlock has been reached and there are very few options available for Tamil Nadu. Had the Governor returned the Bill, the Assembly could have sent it back, thus making it binding on the Governor. However, there is no such precedent for the President's consideration.

M.P. Cong. claims national water conservation award won with AI images; teachers issued notice

Mehul Malpani
BHOPAL



M.P. Congress chief Jitu Patwari

At least 20 teachers, including the District Education Officer (DEO), have been served notices in Madhya Pradesh's Khandwa for allegedly uploading AI-generated images as part of a water conservation project after the Congress alleged that the civic body won a national award based on fake images.

On Monday, State Congress president Jitu Patwari accused Madhya Pradesh government of corruption, claiming that the Khandwa district administration won the national water conservation award using AI-generated images.

Khandwa district administration, however, rejected the allegations.

The district had secured first place for outstanding work in water conservation under the Centre's 'Jal Sanchay, Jan Bhagidari' (JSJB) campaign.

"Where the BJP government should teach our children the proper use of AI, it is itself indulging in corruption using AI. In Khandwa, officials of the BJP government turned two-foot-deep pits into wells using AI, and uploaded AI-generated images of various development works across the area on the portal. Based on these images, they even took an award from the President," Mr. Patwari said in a post on X.

"When the ground reality came to light, fields and empty grounds were found there. Clearly, this was not water conservation, but a game of technology-created images," he claimed, alleging that even corruption had become "smart under the BJP government".

Speaking to *The Hindu*, Jila Panchayat CEO Nagarjun B. Gowda denied the charges.

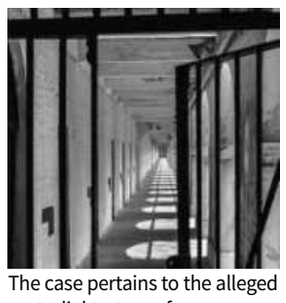
"In June, a team from the Ministry of Jal Shakti conducted physical verification of more than 1,500 random sites. The award was declared after all the scrutiny," he added.

The CEO added that the JSJB portal was closed about six months ago and the AI-generated images were posted on the Catch the Rain portal in October for information, education and campaign purposes.

Shared celebration



All are welcome: Women perform the traditional folk dance Kolattam during a procession to celebrate Vaikunta Ekadashi near the Charminar in Hyderabad on Tuesday. PTI



The case pertains to the alleged custodial torture of a policeman in Kupwara in February 2023. Image for representational purpose. GETTY IMAGES

J&K custodial torture: six policemen, two others granted bail

The Hindu Bureau
SRINAGAR

A court in Jammu and Kashmir on Tuesday granted bail to eight persons, including six policemen, in connection with the alleged custodial torture of a policeman in Kupwara in 2023.

Directing the accused to "remain present before the trial court on each and every date of hearing unless exempted", the court said, "Any breach of the conditions shall be viewed seriously and shall warrant cancellation of bail." It added that bail bonds of ₹1 lakh with one surety had been furnished and accepted.

The court also directed the accused to deposit their passports and barred them from leaving the territorial jurisdiction of the court "without prior permission".

Further, the court warned the accused against "intimidation, hampering or tampering with the prosecution evidence".

The case pertains to the alleged custodial torture of a policeman in Kupwara in February 2023. Two civilians and six policemen, including Deputy Superintendent of Police Ajaz Ahmad Sheikh, were accused by policeman Khurshid Ahmad Chohan of subjecting him to custodial torture.

'Staff threw water from wine glasses as blaze raged': Goa victims' kin seek fast-track trial

Press Trust of India
PANAJI



Charred remains of the nightclub after a fire broke out on December 6, claiming the lives of 25 people, in Arpora. FILE PHOTO

The staff at the Birch by Romeo Lane nightclub in Goa tried to control a massive blaze on the night of December 6 by throwing water from wine glasses and bottles in the absence of fire extinguishers, recalled Bhavna Joshi, who lost four members of her family in the tragedy.

Kin recall horror

Battling emotional trauma and anger over the alleged apathy of the nightclub management, the kin of some of the 25 victims have demanded that the investigation and trial be fast-tracked.

"I have seen my family members suffocating to death in the fire. What was their fault? You cannot imagine what it is like to retrieve four bodies of your family members from a fire," Ms. Joshi told reporters outside the Mapusa court on Tuesday, her voice choking with emotion.

She lost her husband and three sisters in the fire, believed to be caused by fireworks during a performance. Officials had said that narrow exit routes increased the number of fatalities on the fateful night.

"The incident occurred just 15 minutes after we entered the nightclub. My husband was busy calming down the people when the fire occurred. I survived because I was pushed out by people rushing outside the nightclub. I tried to go back to search for my family, but they stopped me," said Ms. Joshi, a resident of New Delhi.

Vikas Munda, originally from Jharkhand, lost his brother in the fire tragedy. "We want justice for our family members. The accused should not be spared," he told reporters outside the court.

The Goa Police have so far arrested eight persons, including three owners of the nightclub, while another owner, Surinder Khosla, is yet to be held.

25-year-old raped by 2 men, thrown out of moving van on deserted road in Haryana

The Hindu Bureau
GURUGRAM

The survivor, a mother of three, was returning from her female friend's home around midnight on Monday when she took a lift in the van

A 25-year-old woman was allegedly raped inside a van in Haryana's Faridabad after she was offered a lift by two men in the early hours of Tuesday.

The police have detained the two accused after the registration of the case.

The woman was allegedly thrown out of the moving vehicle after the assault on a deserted road three hours later and suffered injuries on her head and face. She is under treatment at a private hospital.

According to the police, the woman, a mother of three, was returning from her female friend's home in Sector 23 around midnight on Monday when she took a lift in the van.

"She was waiting for a transport near a Metro Chowk in Kalyanpuri area when the accused offered her lift.

The two drove towards Gurugram, parked the vehicle in the hills and raped her," said Faridabad spokesperson Yashpal Singh.

The victim called her sister after she was dumped on the roadside and told her about her ordeal. She was then taken to a civil hospital and late referred to Delhi. But her family admitted her to a private hospital.

'Unfit for statement'

Mr. Singh said the victim was declared unfit for statement. The case has been registered based on her sister's complaint, he said.

The victim is separated from her husband and lives with her mother, officials said.

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SIT questions former Devaswom Minister in gold theft case

The Hindu Bureau
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM


Kadakampally Surendran

The Special Investigation Team (SIT) probing the criminal misappropriation of gold from the Sabarimala Ayyappa temple has questioned CPI(M) State committee member and former Devaswom Board Minister Kadakampally Surendran.

Officials said the SIT recorded his statement at a Crime Branch "safe house" last week.

They said the SIT also questioned former Travancore Devaswom Board (TDB) president P. Prasanth.

Mr. Surendran was the Devaswom Minister when the crime unfolded in 2019. The SIT sought to determine whether Mr. Surendran, as Minister, had any role in allowing prime suspect Unnikrishnan Potti to take possession of the gilded coverings on the pretext of restoring them.

Mr. Surendran reportedly told the SIT that the government's role in TDB administration was limited to policy and sweeping administrative oversight.

Court discharges Revanna from sexual harassment case

It says former domestic help took over four years to file complaint; dismisses the claim that she feared Revanna's political power; says she failed to provide specific dates of the alleged crime

The Hindu Bureau
BENGALURU


H.D. Revanna

A special court in Bengaluru has discharged Janata Dal (Secular) leader and former Karnataka Minister H.D. Revanna from a sexual harassment case, citing a four-year delay in filing the complaint.

Mr. Revanna had been accused of sexually harassing a 47-year-old domestic help when she was working at his house in Hassan in 2020. The complaint was filed in 2024.

The Special Court of Magistrate for criminal cases against former and present MPs and MLAs said both the complainant and the prosecution had failed to provide reasonable explanation for the court to take cognisance of the alleged offence under Section 354A (sexual harassment) of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) by condoning the delay (under Section 473 of Code of Criminal Procedure) of over four years in lodging the complaint.

Specific dates

The court pointed out that the woman failed to provide specific dates or year for when the incidents happened.

K.N. Shivakumar, judge of the special court, in his verdict, declined to accept the claim of the prosecution that the complainant took over four years to file the complaint due to the fear of Mr. Revanna's political power.

The court said the domestic help had stated in her complaint that after she had left her job at Mr. Revanna's residence, a house granted to her under a State government housing scheme was demolished. Following this, she had lodged a complaint against Mr. Revanna.

"When she had no fear of Mr. Revanna while approaching the Deputy Commissioner and the district police against him when her house was demolished allegedly at his instance, how come she had such a fear when it came to lodging a complaint or taking legal action or disclosing the incident of alleged sexual harassment?" the special court asked.



Job done: The committee submitting its final report to Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin at the Secretariat. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Pension Committee weighs options for T.N. govt. officials

T. Ramakrishnan
CHENNAI

The three-member Pension Committee, which submitted its report to the Tamil Nadu government on Tuesday, was said to have analysed different options to arrive at a suitable pension model for the government employees.

It appears the committee has only studied the Old Pension Scheme (OPS) and the existing Contributory Pension Scheme (CPS), in addition to the Unified Pension Scheme, which has been in force for the Union government employees since April 1, 2025. Its recommendations will be studied by Finance and other department officials, after which Chief Minister M.K. Stalin is expected to make a statement.

The committee's chairperson-cum-Additional Chief Secretary (Rural Development and Panchayat Raj), Gagandeep Singh Bedi, submitted the final report to Mr. Stalin in the presence of Finance Minister Thangam Thennarasu, Chief Secretary N. Muruganandam, and Additional Chief Secretary (Finance) T. Udhayachandran. The other two members of the committee – former Director of the Madras School of Economics K.R. Shanmugam and Deputy Secretary (Budget) Pratik Tayal – were also present. The interim report was submitted a few months ago.

Strike announced

On December 22, the Joint Action Council of Tamil Nadu Teachers' Organisations and Government Employees' Organisations (JACTTO-GEO) announced that the government employees would go on an "indefinite strike" from January 6. Their grouse is that the ruling DMK had promised to restore the OPS in the run-up to the 2021 Assembly election but has not kept the assurance.

The OPS, also called the defined benefit pension scheme, does not involve any mandatory contribution from employees.

After demolition, Karnataka govt. yields to AICC diktat

NEWS ANALYSIS

Nagesh Prabhu
BENGALURU


Citing encroachment, more than 150 houses at Kogilu Layout in Bengaluru were demolished. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

By taking swift action to rehabilitate families, largely Muslims, after the demolition of their illegally built houses on government land in Kogilu Layout near Yelahanka in Bengaluru, the ruling Congress in Karnataka appears to have yielded to the diktat of the All India Congress Committee.

The issue took national attention after Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan hit out at the Congress government's demolition drive, terming it "bulldozer raj" and comparing it to the alleged "anti-minority" drive implemented by the BJP government in Uttar Pradesh.

Political observers view AICC general secretary (organisation) K.C. Venugopal's post on X as a directive to the Congress dispensation in the State to take hurried action to safeguard the "interest of minorities". It is also seen as "undermining" the authority of the elected government headed by Chief Minister Siddaramaiah.

The Congress-led State government appears to be serving the party's interests in Kerala, which is expected to vote for the Assembly in 2026.

Earlier in February 2024, the State government paid compensation of ₹15 lakh to the family of a person from Wayanad in Kerala, who died after being attacked by an elephant from Karnataka.

In August 2024, the government announced that it would construct 100 houses for victims of a landslide in Wayanad; the constituency was then represented by Rahul Gandhi and now by Priyanka Gandhi. The Opposition BJP accused the government of doing it at the behest of the Gandhi family.

The real issue for the larger public is why the Congress's central leaders remained silent when a large number of houses constructed on Raja Kaluve or government lands in Bengaluru were demolished in the past, and houses were not given to them? Why had the party high command not expressed similar sensitivity for the rehabilitation of thousands of families who had lost houses in monsoon floods in Karnataka?

Though the government claimed that it would provide houses to families on humanitarian grounds, the public perception was that the ruling dispensation had taken a quick decision to keep the minority community's vote bank intact.

CPI upset about CM's ties with Vellappally

The Hindu Bureau
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

The State Council meeting of the Communist Party of India (CPI) on Tuesday reckoned Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan's close association with Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana (SNDP) Yogam general secretary Vellappally Natesan as one of the reasons for the Left Democratic Front's (LDF) sub-par performance in the local body elections.

The meeting took strong exception to Mr. Natesan's communally charged statements at frequent intervals even as he was seen alongside Mr. Vijayan at public events and concluded that this might have contributed to a consolidation of Muslim votes against the Left front.

Spiritual life and social life cannot be separated, says Vice-President

The Hindu Bureau
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM


Vice-President C.P. Radhakrishnan pays homage at the samadhi of Sree Narayana Guru at the Sivagiri Madhom on Tuesday. ANI

The Sivagiri pilgrimage teaches us the powerful truth that spiritual life and social life cannot be separated, Vice-President C.P. Radhakrishnan said. He was speaking after inaugurating the 93rd Sivagiri pilgrimage at Sivagiri Madhom at Varkala in Thiruvananthapuram on Tuesday.

"If any faith does not uplift society, then it remains incomplete. Faith can heal society. Here spirituality is not isolated from the world, but it is integrated with the world. Faith when guided by reasoning and compassion becomes a force for social unity and collective growth. Institutions inspired by Sree Narayana Guru have a vital responsibility to guide the youth, foster harmony, resist extremism and strengthen the nation," he said.

'Greatest contributions'

He said Sree Narayana Guru and Adi Sankara were the greatest contributions of Kerala to Indian society. "If there was no Sankaracharya, India could not have been as united as it is today. If there was no Narayana Guru, there would be no reformation and no Sanatana Dharma in Kerala. Guru neither provoked nor divided society; he transformed it," he said.

Mr. Radhakrishnan said when Narayana Guru conceived the pilgrimage, he did not imagine mere rituals or traditions, but about awakening the people. "He wanted to awaken through education, cleanliness, better organisation, skill training and building self-respect. It is a pilgrimage for the comprehensive betterment of man, which is a perfect blend of spiritual seeking and economic and social progress. The Sivagiri pilgrimage, in which people of all religions and castes take part, is a living example of harmony," he said.

Mr. Radhakrishnan said that through the Union government's Pilgrimage Rejuvenation And Spiritual Augmentation Drive (PRASAD) scheme, pilgrimage sites were being upgraded.

Shashi Tharoor's latest book, *The Sage Who Reimagined Hinduism: The Life, Lessons, & Legacy of Sree Narayana Guru*, was released at the function.

At least 15 hospitalised following heavy rush at rapper Vedan's concert

The Hindu Bureau
KASARAGOD


Vedan

A heavy rush of people at rapper Vedan's concert during the Bekal International Beach Festival in Kasaragod district of Kerala on Monday night led to chaos at the venue, with as many as 15 people, including children, hospitalised after experiencing breathing difficulties.

The police said the crowd swelled unexpectedly, overwhelming security arrangements.

The people were admitted to private hospitals and discharged after preliminary medical examinations, according to the District Police Chief.

An estimated 25,000 people attended the concert. The organisers, Bekal Resorts Development Corporation, said the crowd swelled around 9.30 p.m, leading to some people in the audience fainting due to suffocation.

Missing children

Despite the efforts by security personnel, the surge of attendees could not be brought under control. Several children went missing amid the rush but were later traced and reunited with their relatives with police assistance.

Authorities decided to stop the music programme after about an hour in view of the tense situation, bringing an abrupt end to what had begun as a festive evening on the beach.

Youth hit by train

In a separate incident near the festival area, a 19-year-old man, Sivananda of Poinachi, was found dead after being hit by a train while walking along the railway track adjacent to the beach.

The police said preliminary findings suggest the death was accidental. A case has been registered and an investigation is under way.

Pilgrims flow picks up as Sabarimala temple opens for Makaravilakku

The Hindu Bureau
PATHANAMTHITTA


The head priest opening the temple in Sabarimala on Tuesday. LEJU KAMAL

The Ayyappa temple at Sabarimala opened on Tuesday evening for the Makaravilakku festival season.

Melshanti E.D. Prasad reopened the *sanctum sanctorum* at 5 p.m., accompanied by Tantri Kandararu Mahesh Mohanaru. This was followed by the opening of the Malikappuram Devi temple.

Even before the ceremonial opening, a steady stream of pilgrims, especially from neighbouring States, began their ascent to the temple via Pampa and Pullumedu. The temple, which closed after the Mandalam pilgrimage season on December 27, will remain open until January 19. The Makaravilakku festival is scheduled for January 14.

Tension prevails

Security arrangements have been significantly stepped up, with a 1,593-member police force deployed under the leadership of Crime Branch Superintendent of Police M. Krishnan.

The Travancore Devaswom Board has also put in place extensive arrangements to manage the expected surge in pilgrim inflow during the period.

Tension flared along the traditional forest route from Erumely on Monday evening after devotees were prevented from entering the forest, with officials stating that the path would open only at 7 a.m. on Tuesday.

At Koikkakkavu and Azhuthakkadavu, devotees, frustrated by prolonged waiting, broke through restrictions and continued their journey. Similar scenes unfolded at Perurthodu, where protests erupted following disruption to the pilgrimage.

Overall crime rate in Telangana fell by 2.33% in 2025; 509 Maoists surrendered

Naveen Kumar
HYDERABAD



DGP B. Shivadhar Reddy at the release of Telangana Police annual report in Hyderabad on Tuesday. SIDDHANT THAKUR

A total of 2,28,695 cases were reported across Telangana during 2025 as against 2,34,158 in 2024, registering an overall decline of 2.33%, according to the annual report released on Tuesday.

The data were shared by Director-General of Police (DGP) B. Shivadhar Reddy during the Telangana State Annual Round-Up, which reviewed crime trends, law and order and public safety indicators across the State. Total cases stood at 1,67,018 in 2025, marginally lower than the 1,69,477 reported in 2024.

Murders declined to 781 cases in 2025 from 856 in 2024, while rape cases dropped from 2,945 to 2,549. Robberies reduced from 703 to 512 cases and rioting incidents fell from 324 to 186. Kidnapping and abduction cases came down from 1,525 in 2024 to 1,145 in 2025. Thefts decreased from 19,480 cases in 2024 to 17,700 in 2025.

The annual review also flagged road safety trends. There was an increase of 5.68% in road accident cases in 2025 compared with 2024. In 2025, 24,826 road accident cases were reported.

Highlighting the decline of left wing extremism, the DGP said that in 2025, a total of 509 underground CPI (Maoist) cadres surrendered before the Telangana Police.

DGP Shivadhar Reddy said, "Law and order has been maintained well in the State, with effective checks on violent crimes, activities of Maoists, communal and terror outfits."

India is now the fourth largest economy: Centre

With GDP valued at $4.18 trillion, India has surpassed Japan and is poised to displace Germany from the third rank in the next few years with a projected GDP of $7.3 trillion by 2030, it says

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI

India has surpassed Japan to become the world's fourth largest economy with a size of $4.18 trillion and is poised to overtake Germany to become the third largest by 2030, the government said on Tuesday.

With continuing good growth numbers, India is also the world's fastest-growing major economy, it said.

India's real GDP grew 8.2% in the second quarter of 2025-26, up from 7.8% in the first quarter and 7.4% in the fourth quarter of the last fiscal.

"With GDP valued at $4.18 trillion, India has surpassed Japan to become the world's fourth largest economy and is poised to displace Germany from the third rank in the next 2.5 to 3 years with a projected GDP of $7.3 trillion by 2030," said the government in a statement providing a snapshot of reforms in 2025.


Domestic drivers, led by robust private consumption, played a big role in supporting this expansion, the government has said. AFP

The U.S. is the world's largest economy, and China occupies the second spot.

The growth momentum further surprised on the upside, with GDP expanding to a six-quarter high in Q2 of 2025-26, reflecting India's resilience amid persistent global trade uncertainties, it said.

Domestic drivers, led by robust private consumption, played a central role in supporting this expansion.

The release said international agencies have echoed this optimism and cited projections made by various entities. The World Bank has projected a 6.5% growth in 2026, and Moody's expects India to remain the fastest-growing G20 economy with a growth of 6.4% in 2026 and 6.5% in 2027. The International Monetary Fund has raised its projections to 6.6% for 2025 and 6.2% for 2026, and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development forecasts 6.7% growth in 2025 and 6.2% in 2026. Also, the S&P anticipates a growth of 6.5% in the current fiscal and 6.7% in the next, the Asian Development Bank has lifted its 2025 forecast to 7.2%, and Fitch has raised its FY26 projection to 7.4% on stronger consumer demand.

"India is among the world's fastest-growing major economies and is well-positioned to sustain this momentum. With the ambition of attaining high middle-income status by 2047 - the centenary year of its independence, the country is building on strong foundations of economic growth, structural reforms, and social progress," the government said.

The release highlighted that inflation remains below the lower tolerance threshold, unemployment is declining, and export performance continues to improve. Furthermore, financial conditions have stayed benign, with strong credit flows to the commercial sector, while demand conditions remain firm, supported by a further strengthening of urban consumption.

Students' group wants capital punishment for Anjel Chakma's attackers

The Hindu Bureau
GUWAHATI

The North East Students' Organisation (NESO) has demanded capital punishment for the assailants who caused the death of Tripura student Anjel Chakma in Uttarakhand's Dehradun.

The apex students' body of the region also joined other organisations and rights bodies to seek an anti-racism Act, which it believed would act as a deterrent.

Exclusive station sought
In a memorandum addressed to Uttarakhand Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami on Tuesday, the organisation further demanded the establishment of at least one special police station to deal with cases related to racial discrimination and atrocities on people from the northeast.

The organisation said the 24-year-old Anjel and his brother Michael were assaulted and stabbed on December 9, resulting in the former's death on December 26.


The delegation of students that met Tripura Chief Minister Manik Saha in Agartala on Monday seeking justice for Anjel Chakma. PTI

It said this happened because "they looked different from the rest of the Aryan race and were hurled with racial abuses, which were demeaning and degrading".

Condemning the attack, the NESO said people from the northeast had been facing such harassment in different parts of the country. It urged Mr. Dhami to immediately intervene so that authorities take effective measures for the security and mental well-being of the students and people from the northeast studying and residing in Dehradun and other parts of Uttarakhand.

The All India Chakma Students' Union wrote to the Chief Minister on Monday, seeking the transfer of the probe into Anjel's death to the Central Bureau of Investigation and the shifting of the trial outside Uttarakhand, preferably to Delhi.

Father's appeal
Tarun Prasad Chakma, the father of the deceased, urged the Uttarakhand government to ensure the protection of people from the northeast.

"My appeal is that what happened to my son should not happen to other children from the northeast. The northeast is also a part of India. We are also Indians," he said.

Racial slur should be a separate hate crime: plea

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

A plea has been filed in the Supreme Court to issue comprehensive guidelines recognising 'racial slur' as a separate category of hate crimes and determine punishment, amid the outpouring of shock and public grief over the attack on a 24-year-old MBA student from Tripura, by a group of men in Uttarakhand.

The petition, filed by Supreme Court advocate-on-record Anoop Prakash Awasthi, recounted Anjel Chakma's tragic words to his attackers, "We are Indians. What certificate should we show to prove that?" Hate crime is still seen as an "ordinary" offence, Mr. Awasthi, who is petitioner-in-person, said.

"Direct respondents to create a nodal agency or a permanent body or commission or directorate at the Central level as well as at the level of each State where such racial crimes can be reported and redressed," the petition pleaded.

It sought the formation of a special police unit, metro area or district wise, to tackle racial crimes.

PM voices concern over targeting of Putin's house

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Tuesday voiced "deep concern" over the reports of the targeting of the residence of Russian President Vladimir Putin and urged Russia and Ukraine to focus on diplomatic efforts to end hostilities.

"Deeply concerned by reports of the targeting of the residence of the President of the Russian Federation," Mr. Modi said in a post on X. Russia claimed on Monday that 91 long-range Ukrainian drones attempted to attack Mr. Putin's country residence in the Novgorod region, north of Moscow.

Mr. Modi said the ongoing diplomatic efforts offer the most viable path towards achieving peace.

"We urge all concerned to remain focused on these efforts and to avoid any actions that could undermine them," Mr. Modi said.

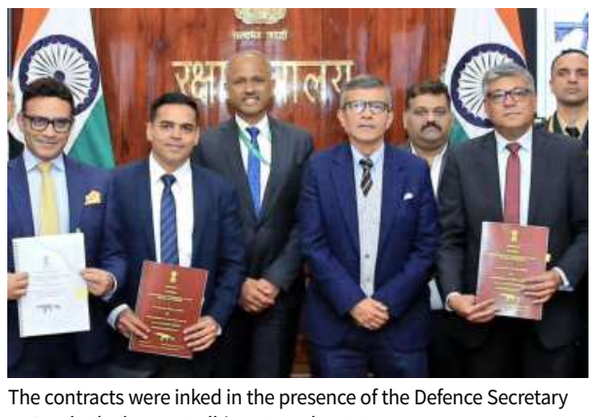
Defence Ministry inks contracts for procurements for Army and Navy

Saurabh Trivedi
NEW DELHI

The Ministry of Defence on Tuesday signed defence procurement contracts worth ₹4,666 crore for the acquisition of Close Quarter Battle (CQB) Carbines for the Indian Army and Navy and Heavyweight Torpedoes for the Indian Navy, in a major push towards modernisation and operational preparedness of the armed forces.

The contracts were inked in the presence of Defence Secretary Rajesh Kumar Singh at South Block, New Delhi, officials said.

According to Ministry of Defence, under the first contract, over 4.25 lakh CQB Carbines along with accessories, valued at ₹2,770 crore, will be procured for the Indian Army and the Indian Navy from Bharat Forge Ltd. and PLR Systems Pvt Ltd. The induction of these indigenously manufactured carbines marks the culmination of a long-standing effort to replace legacy small arms with modern, high-lethality weapons in line with the 'Aatmanirbhar Bharat' vision.


The contracts were inked in the presence of the Defence Secretary at South Block, New Delhi, on Tuesday. PIB

A decisive advantage
Designed as a key component of the modern infantry arsenal, the CQB Carbine offers a compact design, high rate of fire and enhanced lethality, providing a decisive advantage in close-combat and confined-space operations. The project also underscores growing government-private sector synergy, strengthening the Make in India initiative while boosting employment, supporting MSMEs, and deepening India's indigenous defence manufacturing ecosystem, the Ministry added.

The second contract, valued at approximately ₹1,896 crore, was signed with WASS Submarine Systems S.R.L., Italy for the procurement and integration of 48 Heavyweight Torpedoes along with associated equipment for the Indian Navy's Kalvari Class (Project-75) submarines. The acquisition will significantly enhance the combat capability of the Navy's six submarines under the class.

To begin by 2028
Officials said delivery of the heavyweight torpedoes will start from is scheduled to commence from April 2028 and will be completed by early 2030. Equipped with advanced technological features and robust operational capabilities, the torpedoes will strengthen the Navy's underwater warfare prowess.

In the Financial Year 2025-26, the Ministry of Defence has so far signed capital acquisition contracts worth ₹1,82,492 crore, reflecting a sustained focus on the modernisation and indigenisation of India's defence forces.

India-Pakistan tensions 'mediated' by China: Wang

Press Trust of India
BEIJING

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi on Tuesday said "tensions between India and Pakistan" were among the list of hotspot issues "mediated" by China this year.

"This year, local wars and cross-border conflicts flared up more often than at any time since the end of WWII. Geopolitical turbulence continued to spread," Mr. Wang said in Beijing.

"To build peace that lasts, we have taken an objective and just stance, and focused on addressing both symptoms and root causes," he said. "Following this Chinese approach to settling hotspot issues, we mediated in northern Myanmar, the Iranian nuclear issue, the tensions between Pakistan and India, the issues between Palestine and Israel, and the recent conflict between Cambodia and Thailand," he said.

Gig, platform workers to go on strike today to protest 'exploitation'

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Gig and platform worker unions have announced a strike on Wednesday against "systemic exclusion from core labour entitlements" of the workers in the segment.

In a letter to Union Labour Minister Mansukh Mandaviya, they urged the Centre's immediate intervention to stop "exploitation" of workers by platforms in the food delivery and taxi service sectors.

The Gig and Platform Services Workers Union (GIPSWU) said in the letter that a nationwide strike by delivery workers on December 25 underscored the severe implications for India's growth if the issues of workers went unaddressed.

"Gig workers continue to face systemic exclusion from core labour entitlements under Indian law and constitutional guarantees. Reports document pervasive harassment, discrimination, and violence against workers. This strike unites gig workers and allies to demand immediate government intervention," the letter said.

'Scrap quick delivery'
In a demand charter submitted to the Minister, the GIPSWU said the '10-20-minute service delivery mandates' should be urgently discontinued to prioritise worker safety.

"Fix minimum per-kilometre rates at ₹20 for Zomato, Swiggy, Blinkit, Zepto, Flipkart, and BigBasket workers; ensure workplace safety for women; grant emergency leave and comprehensive maternity protection to women service workers; eliminate arbitrary ID blocking and punitive rating systems; and guarantee minimum monthly earnings of ₹40,000," the charter added.

AAP claim on teachers being told to count stray dogs incorrect: govt.

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Education Minister Ashish Sood on Tuesday accused the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) of spreading misinformation over its allegation that the government had assigned teachers the responsibility of counting and managing stray dogs.

Addressing a press conference, Mr. Sood said AAP leaders were resorting to false claims after having lost the Assembly election. "Instead of accepting defeat, AAP leaders are spreading lies for social media traction," he said, denying that teachers had been given any such duties. The Minister challenged the party to make public any order supporting its claim.

Later, AAP chief Arvind Kejriwal reiterated the allegation in a post on X.



> Instead of accepting defeat, AAP leaders are spreading lies for social media traction. They relied solely on noise, politics of allegations
>
> **ASHISH SOOD**
> Education Minister

"Will teachers in Delhi's government schools teach children, or will they count dogs on the streets instead? This order from the BJP's Delhi government exposes their thinking and priorities," he wrote, accusing the government of "insulting teachers and ruining schools".

Mr. Kejriwal cited a November 20 order issued by the Education Department, which stated that the "primary focus" of the directive was the "identification, vaccination and sterilisation of stray dogs to ensure safety for students and the public".

Responding to this, Mr. Sood said the order did not assign teachers any counting or animal-control duties.

"We decided that schools should be aware of how to report complaints related to stray dog attacks and ensure that dogs do not enter school premises," he said.

Mr. Sood accused AAP of making similar "false claims" in the past. He referred to a tweet from December 25 that alleged the government had ordered action against children who came to schools dressed as Santa Claus. "If AAP has any such order, why is it not making it public?" he said.

'Politics of lies'
The Minister claimed that the Opposition party had neither carried out substantial work in the education sector nor contributed meaningfully to the city's development.

"They relied solely on lies, noise and a politics of allegations and counter-allegations," he said.

EC directs home verification for elderly, disabled persons in Bengal

Shiv Sahay Singh
KOLKATA

Amid outrage among a section of the electorate over elderly and ailing voters being summoned for hearings under the special intensive revision (SIR) in West Bengal, the Election Commission has directed officials not to call such electors – particularly those aged 85 years and above – for physical hearings.

In a notification issued on Monday, the Additional Chief Electoral Officer asked all District Magistrates to ensure that electors aged 85 and above, as well as those ailing and persons with disabilities, are not required to appear in person. If notices have already been issued, officials have been instructed to contact the electors over the phone and carry out the verification at their residences.


SIR hearings began in West Bengal on December 27, causing anguish after notices were sent to the elderly and PWDs. PTI

Hearings for SIR began in West Bengal on December 27.

Notices sent to a large number of elderly persons as well as persons with disabilities, had created anguish among the people.

Earlier this week, the EC issued fresh instructions to district election officials (DEOs) in the State not to summon for hearings those who have been identified as 'unmapped' but whose names or ancestral connections are present in the 2002 voter list.

Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Tuesday questioned why booth-level agents (BLAs) were not allowed during the SIR hearing process. Protests erupted in different parts of the State over the demand to allow BLAs at the hearing centres. On Monday, the hearing was halted in Hooghly district's Chinsurah after Trinamool Congress MLA Asit Majumdar objected to the exclusion of BLAs during the process.

Ms. Banerjee said that the SIR was a huge "scam" being conducted with the help of artificial intelligence (AI). "They have allegedly used AI to delete 54 lakh names, falsely attributing these actions to Electoral Registration Officers (EROs). The ERO association has sent letters saying they did not carry out this work," she said.

SAARC leader Khaleda Zia had a constant engagement with India's neighbourhood

From finding a mention as the wife of Bangladesh President in the diplomatic records of a 1979 banquet to hosting the Indian Prime Minister in SAARC summits, the Bangladeshi leader has a long history of interactions with the Indian leadership; her last noted interaction with Indian leadership was in 2015 when she met Modi in Dhaka

Kallol Bhattacherjee
NEW DELHI

Apart from deposed Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Khaleda Zia was the only Prime Minister from Bangladesh whose political and institutional interactions with the Indian leadership stretched back to the 1970s and continued till the 21st century.

Begum Zia, as she was known to the people of Bangladesh, started her public life as the spouse of then President of Bangladesh General Ziaur Rahman, and she was a witness to the diplomacy between India and Bangladesh during a difficult period in the 1970s.

Ms. Zia first found mention in Indian diplomatic records when Prime Minister Morarji Desai acknowledged her presence during a banquet in Dhaka during his visit to Bangladesh on April 16, 1979.

It was a visit that took place during a rough patch in bilateral relations. Just three-and-a-half years ago, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was assassinated in Dhaka along with most of his family members and Indira Gandhi, a well-wisher of Mujib, was out of power after being overthrown in the 1977 election.

Earlier, President Nilam Sanjiva Reddy had held a banquet for President Rahman on December 19, 1977, when he visited Delhi (without Ms. Zia) and was welcomed at the New Delhi airport by Desai.

The Rahmans were met by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi when they became the first foreign guests that Indira met after being sworn into office for her last term in office in January 1980. The high-level visits between the two sides came at a sensitive period during 1977-1980 as Sheikh Hasina, one of the two surviving children of the slain Mujib, was based in India during this time. As relations improved between the two sides after President Rahman's meeting with Indira, Ms. Hasina returned to Bangladesh on May 17, 1981.

On May 30, 1981, President Rahman was assassinated in a failed military coup while he was on a visit to Chittagong. Hearing of the violent death, Indira said, "The shocking assassination of President Ziaur Rahman shows the instability which many developing countries are facing. We in India are vigilant and shall take all necessary steps to safeguard our interests."



Rich history: Former Prime Minister of Bangladesh Khaleda Zia with Prime Minister Narendra Modi and former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. ANI/FILEPHOTO

First woman PM

In the first six months of 1991, the subcontinent witnessed several shockers. On April 29, Bangladesh was hit by one of the most destructive cyclones in history of the region and then on May 21, as India was getting ready for the election, former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated. But prior to these developments, on March 20, Ms. Zia took charge as the first female Prime Minister of Bangladesh.

On March 7, 1991, the Ministry of External Affairs had said, "Any government in Bangladesh as much as any government in India, realises the importance of good relations between the two neighbours. We had welcomed the return of democracy, when the results of the elections were announced a few days ago, and expressed our hope and intention to work with Bangladesh, to strengthen our bilateral relations, based on our mutual national interests."

India, like Bangladesh, was witnessing a transition and the outreach therefore was aimed at ensuring a working relationship with Prime Minister Zia. In the last week of May 1992, Ms. Zia was hosted by Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao. She made it clear that SAARC, a dream project of her late husband, was close to her heart.

She was a witness to diplomacy between India and Bangladesh during a difficult period in the 1970s

Next year, during April 10-11, 1993, Rao visited Dhaka when Ms. Zia hosted the seventh SAARC summit and welcomed the King of Bhutan Jigme Singye Wangchuck; President of Maldives Maumoon Abdul Gayoom; Nepal Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala; Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif of Pakistan and the Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa. What made this outreach significant was that India and Bangladesh tried to put relations back on track after the regional tension spiked because of the demolition of Babri Masjid by Hindu karsevaks in Ayodhya.

Despite the tension, ties were maintained during this time and next year when a cyclone hit Bangladesh, India reached out with relief.

In her second full-fledged term during 2001-2006, the Gujarat riots of 2002 cast a shadow on bilateral ties and that apart, India's concerns on terrorism and insurgency did not attract sufficient attention from Bangladesh.

Yet, before the onset of political uncertainty in the second half of 2006, Ms. Zia visited India and held talks with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and signed a revised trade pact. Prior to that, she had hosted the 13th SAARC summit in November 2005. Her last visit to India took place during October 28-November 3, 2012, when she was the Leader of the Opposition in the Jatiya Sansad.

She met Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. She started that trip by meeting her counterpart, then Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, Sushma Swaraj.

Her last noted interaction with the Indian leadership was in June 2015 when she came to Hotel Sonargaon in Dhaka where Prime Minister Narendra Modi met several Bangladeshi leaders after the India-Bangladesh Land Boundary Agreement was sealed.

Jaishankar to visit Dhaka for funeral of Khaleda Zia

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Centre on Tuesday announced that External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar will visit Dhaka on Wednesday for the funeral of former Bangladeshi Prime Minister Khaleda Zia.

This is the first visit by Mr. Jaishankar to Bangladesh since the interim government took charge after the fall of the Sheikh Hasina government.

Pakistan Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar will also travel to Dhaka for the funeral. Chinese Prime Minister Li Qiang has also conveyed China's condolences on her passing.

Congress chief Mallikarjun Kharge and Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi too expressed condolences.

"Throughout her long public life, she played an important role in shaping the nation's political journey. My sincere condolences to her family, supporters and the people of Bangladesh," Mr. Kharge said.

"Saddened by the passing of Begum Khaleda Zia. Over her long career in public life, she played a significant role in Bangladesh's political journey," Mr. Gandhi said.

(With PTI inputs)

Poll body carrying out SIR process in a 'hit and trial' manner: Congress leader

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Congress on Tuesday questioned the Election Commission, accusing it of making arbitrary changes to the process of conducting the special intensive revision (SIR) of electoral rolls, and demanded full transparency. It flagged the "targeted deletion" of votes in West Bengal and Tamil Nadu.

Addressing a press conference here, Tamil Nadu MP and former bureaucrat Sasikanth Senthil said that the EC had made several "U-turns" in its protocols for the SIR.

Citing one such instance, Mr. Senthil said the "de-duplication" software that was used till 2023 to detect any duplicate voter ID had been discontinued during the SIR exercise in Bihar, with the EC claiming it was not foolproof. It had been reintroduced for the ongoing revision underway in 12 States and Union Territories, he said.



Sasikanth Senthil

Deleted voters

Referring to emerging figures from the ongoing revision, he said over 32 lakh voters in West Bengal had been "unmapped", while logical discrepancies involved more than 1.7 crore entries. In Tamil Nadu, he said, around 97 lakh names had been deleted, including nearly six lakh in his constituency (Tiruvallur). The EC was carrying out the SIR process in a 'hit and trial' manner as it had not issued any clear instructions to the booth-level officers (BLO), nor had they been given any training. The BLOs did not have any instructions on what to do with regard to duplicate voters, and it had been left to their own judgment, the Congress leader said.

"The EC needs to come out with clear and transparent instructions about the SIR, particularly about the process and yardstick for deleting voters from the electoral rolls," he said.

"The worst hit in this experiment are going to be the poor and marginalised sections of society," Mr. Senthil said, questioning the rush shown by the EC as opposed to the staggered manner in which electoral rolls were revised in the past.

Bengal govt. allowing infiltration to boost vote bank, says Shah

Shiv Sahay Singh
KOLKATA

Alleging that the Mamata Banerjee government was allowing illegal infiltration as a policy to strengthen its vote bank, Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Tuesday said that the demography of West Bengal was changing dangerously, and the future appeared worrisome.

The BJP will drive out illegal immigrants once it came to power in the State after the coming Assembly election, he said.

"Once there is a BJP government in the State, we will not only identify infiltrators, we will also drive them out. We will build such a strong national grid, it will end infiltration from Bengal. Leave alone humans, even birds will not be able to cross the borders," the Union Minister told presspersons here.

Countering the Trinamool Congress's charge that the Border Service Force was deployed at the borders and, hence, the agency should be held accountable for infiltration, Mr. Shah said Bengal would have to make land available for erecting fences along the border.

Demography of the State is changing dangerously, the Union Minister says in Kolkata

"As long as there is no fencing, the BSF cannot provide security. I want to ask the Trinamool Congress government – why are you afraid of giving land?" he said.

Reassuring representatives of the Matua community that they did not have to fear, Mr. Shah said the BJP would ensure protection for all refugees persecuted for their religion.

Mr. Shah is on a three-day visit to the State.

Adhir Ranjan meets PM, flags attacks on Bengali speakers across country

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Senior Congress leader Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury met Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Tuesday to highlight what he described as a spate of "attacks" on Bengali-speaking people across the country, particularly in BJP-ruled States.

The meeting comes ahead of the West Bengal Assembly election scheduled for March-April next year. Amid speculation about his political future within the Congress, Mr. Chowdhury sought to downplay the significance of the interaction. "There is no political angle. I came to Delhi a few days ago; coincidentally, I got to meet him [Mr. Modi]," he told reporters.

Mr. Chowdhury, who lost the 2024 Lok Sabha election, resigned as the West Bengal Congress chief soon after. In September, the party replaced him with Subhankar Sarkar.



Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury

His strained ties with the Congress's central leadership stemmed from his strong anti-Trinamool Congress stance and remarks against Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, which often embarrassed the party at the national level.

The former five-time MP said he had raised issues concerning the Matua community. He had earlier accused both the Trinamool Congress and the BJP of exploiting the backward Matua community as a vote bank while failing to address their concerns, particularly the uncertainty surrounding their inclusion in the Special Intensive Revision of voter rolls.

PM's assurance

Mr. Chowdhury said the Prime Minister assured him that the Centre is closely monitoring the situation in West Bengal.

On the attacks against Bengali speakers, Mr. Chowdhury also wrote to Mr. Modi, stating: "Their only offence is that they speak the Bengali language. They are often mistaken by the administration for people from neighbouring Bangladesh and treated as infiltrators."

He urged Mr. Modi to ensure that State governments are sensitised to stop such discrimination.

Punjab Assembly passes resolution against move to replace MGNREGA

The Hindu Bureau
CHANDIGARH

The Punjab Assembly on Tuesday passed a resolution decrying the Union government's move to replace the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) with a new law named Viksit Bharat - Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) [VB-G RAM (G)].

Accusing the Bharatiya Janata Party-led Centre of "taking away" the livelihoods of the poor and Dalit labourers under a "deliberate conspiracy", the House recommended that the Punjab government seek from the Centre to immediately restore the rural job scheme to its original form.



AAP MLA Manwinder Singh Giaspura arriving to attend the Assembly session with protest letters from rural workers. ANI

Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann said the Centre has killed the basic spirit of the scheme by changing its name to VB-G RAM (G), which takes away the right to guaranteed wages-employment from poor workers, women, and lakhs of job card holding families and imposes an additional financial burden on the States.

Hasty passing

"Earlier MGNREGA, which was carefully conceived by former Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh, was introduced after years of deliberations. However, now VB-G RAM G has been passed by Parliament only within a few hours," he said in the House.

Unfortunately, Mr. Mann said, the Centre has changed the basic character of the scheme.

The MGNREGA was a demand driven scheme whereas VB - G RAM G is a norm based scheme, which is not in the interest of people.

The Punjab Chief Minister said the provisions of the new Act are aimed at weakening both Scheduled Caste people and women socially and economically, resulting in the widening of inequality, causing further avoidable distress.

Resolution against new rural jobs Act is undemocratic, says Union Minister

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Union Rural Development Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan on Tuesday criticised the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) government in Punjab for passing a resolution against the Viksit Bharat G-RAM G Act, calling it "undemocratic" and contrary to the spirit of the Constitution.

Addressing a press conference, Mr. Chouhan said the States were constitutionally bound to implement laws enacted by Parliament. "Passing a resolution against a parliamentary law in a State Assembly goes against our constitutional framework," he said. The Punjab Vidhan Sabha, during a one-day session, had adopted a resolution opposing the new rural employment law, alleging that it diluted safeguards under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA).



Shivraj Singh Chouhan

Mr. Chouhan accused the Opposition of indulging in "blind opposition politics". Targeting Congress leader Rahul Gandhi, he said, "Speaking whatever comes to one's mind is not responsible politics. Mr. Gandhi lives in a world of imagination."

He was referring to Mr. Gandhi's remarks comparing the VB-G RAM G Act to demonetisation and alleging that it was drafted by the Prime Minister's Office without consulting the Cabinet or the Ministry concerned.

The Union Minister reiterated that both the Centre and the States were duty-bound to implement laws passed by Parliament. "What the Punjab government and some political parties are doing is improper and undemocratic," he said.

Citing official findings, Mr. Chouhan alleged large-scale corruption in the implementation of the MGNREGA in Punjab. "Social audits were conducted in only 5,915 of the 13,304 gram panchayats. The report mentions 10,653 cases of financial embezzlement, but no action was taken," the leader said.

He further alleged that irregular expenditure had been incurred on activities not permitted under the scheme and that workers had complained of non-payment of wages.

"No effort is being made to curb corruption. Instead, resolutions are being passed against parliamentary laws. This reflects an undemocratic mindset," he said.

INBRIEF



4 killed as BEST bus crashes into pedestrians in Mumbai

Four people – three women and a man – were killed after a Brihanmumbai Electric Supply and Transport (BEST) bus rammed pedestrians near Mumbai's Bhandup West railway station late on Monday. Nine others were injured in the accident. Calling the incident "extremely unfortunate", Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis on Tuesday announced an ex-gratia of ₹5 lakh to the families of the four deceased. The crash occurred around 10.05 p.m. on Station Road when the bus was reversing, according to the Mumbai Fire Brigade control room. The police confirmed that the bus driver was taken into custody for questioning.

VPN barred in four Kashmir districts over security threat

Using magisterial powers, several district administrations in Jammu and Kashmir have banned the use of virtual private networks (VPNs) for security reasons. In the past 24 hours, the four districts of Shopian, Kulgam, Budgam and Srinagar have, in separate orders, suspended the usage of VPNs, which allow Internet users to mask their locations and identity. In the order issued by Budgam administration on Tuesday, various VPN services were suspended for two months. Such orders have been implemented over the year owing to heightened activity by militants in J&K's valleys.

HAL enters civil market with Dhruv NG helicopter

Designed and manufactured in India, the 5.5-tonne, light twin-engine, multi-role chopper has been engineered to operate across diverse terrains; maiden flight inaugurated by Civil Aviation Minister

Saurabh Trivedi
NEW DELHI



State-of-the-art machine: Civil Aviation Minister K. Rammohan Naidu, HAL Chairman and Managing Director D.K. Sunil, and others with the Dhruv NG helicopter in Bengaluru on Tuesday. J. ALLEN EGENUSE

Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd. (HAL) on Tuesday marked a breakthrough in India's civil aviation ecosystem as the Dhruv New Generation (NG) helicopter successfully undertook its maiden flight at the HAL's Helicopter Division in Bengaluru.

This signals the PSU's formal entry into the civil helicopter market and a significant step towards self-reliance in civil aviation.

The inaugural flight was flagged off by Union Civil Aviation Minister K. Rammohan Naidu in the presence of D.K. Sunil, Chairman and Managing Director, HAL; Maneesh Kumar, Joint Director-General, DGCA; Sanjeev Razdan, CMD, Pawan Hans Ltd; and senior HAL officials.

During the event, HAL received the DGCA certification for indigenous manufacturing of the Shakti civil engine, a first-of-its-kind achievement in Indian aviation. This marks the first aero engine certified by the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) for indigenous production, representing a significant leap in India's self-reliance in critical aviation technologies. The milestone was achieved with the participation of Safran engines and close coordination with the DGCA.

The HAL said the Dhruv NG was progressing steadily towards full civil certification within the next three or four months, positioning it as a key platform for India's growing civil helicopter market.

Describing the occasion as a "flight of Aatmanirbhar Bharat", Mr. Naidu said the maiden sortie reflected India's growing confidence and capability in aviation manufacturing.

"HAL has successfully conducted the inaugural flight within a year of showcasing the demo. Dhruv NG has emerged as a platform for several operators, and 'Make in India' is now a seal of global quality," Mr. Naidu said.

Mr. Sunil termed the Dhruv NG the cornerstone of the company's civil aviation expansion.

Designed and manufactured in India, the Dhruv NG is a 5.5-tonne, light twin-engine, multi-role helicopter, engineered to operate across diverse and challenging Indian terrains.

5 dead, over 1,000 fall ill due to 'unsafe water' in Indore

Mehul Malpani
BHOPAL

The deceased have been cremated by families so there is no way of confirming the causes of deaths, says a medical officer

At least five persons died and more than 1,000 fell ill after allegedly consuming contaminated water supplied through a government pipeline in a locality in Indore city of Madhya Pradesh, officials said on Tuesday.

According to officials, several residents of the Bhagirathpura area have been admitted to various hospitals since December 24 after complaints of vomiting and diarrhoea. Indore has been awarded as the country's cleanest city for eight consecutive times by the Centre. Indore Chief Medical and Health Officer (CMHO) Madhav Prasad Hassani told *The Hindu* that 111 patients were currently admitted to various government and private hospitals and that more than 1,000 people had been treated for minor symptoms.

"All the deceased have been cremated by the families. So, we have no way of confirming the causes of deaths. One of them was paralytic for about two years while two were more than 70 years old...," the CMHO said.

Local reports suggest that the residents had been complaining about "dirty water" supplied from the Narmada river through the Indore Municipal Corporation (IMC) pipeline for weeks.

Chief Minister Mohan Yadav announced financial aid for the families while terming the incident "extremely tragic". "The families of the deceased will be provided with financial assistance of ₹2 lakh each. The government will bear the full cost of the patients' treatment," Mr. Yadav said on X. Cabinet Minister for Urban Development and Housing Kailash Vijayvargiya visited patients in hospitals and issued instructions to officials.

IMC Commissioner Dileep Yadav said, "During inspections, we found a leakage in the main line where there was a toilet nearby. The toilet has been discontinued and repaired."

Himachal apple growers oppose reduced import duty on New Zealand

The Hindu Bureau
CHANDIGARH



The Centre has proposed to slash duty from 50% to 25%. PTI

Apple growers in Himachal Pradesh fear that the Centre's proposal to slash the import duty on New Zealand apples from 50% to 25% following a trade deal will severely impact their livelihoods, and have sought Governor Shiv Pratap Shukla's "intervention to safeguard livelihoods".

In a memorandum to the Governor on Tuesday, a group of apple growers led by Kuldeep Singh Rathore, the Congress MLA from Theog constituency in Shimla district, raised concerns about the proposed reduction in import duty from 2026-27.

Mr. Rathore said the reduced duty would cause a significant loss of market share for Indian apples and bring down prices, pushing growers, struggling with climate change-induced uncertainties, rising input costs, labour shortages, and shrinking margins, into deep economic distress.

He said the apple industry formed the "backbone of Himachal Pradesh's rural economy" and contributed approximately ₹5,500 crore annually and supported over 1.5 lakh families, most of whom were small and marginal farmers. "The State produces around 6.5 lakh tonnes of apples every year, accounting for nearly 25% of India's total apple production. With average landholdings of only one to two acres and limited scope for diversification due to the hilly terrain, apple cultivation remains the primary source of livelihood for these farmers," Mr. Rathore said.

He said implementation of the free trade agreement in its "present form" would set a "dangerous precedent". "Other major apple-exporting nations such as the U.S., Chile, and Italy which together account for over 40% of global apple exports are likely to demand similar concessions, which will be disastrous to farmer community of Himachal Pradesh," he said.

ED names 59 more in Chhattisgarh liquor scam case

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Enforcement Directorate (ED), in its supplementary prosecution complaint, has detailed what it described as a "massive corruption" in the Excise Department of Chhattisgarh between 2019 and 2023, allegedly resulting in the generation of proceeds of crime worth about ₹2,883 crore.

The agency has named 59 new accused persons, taking the total number of accused in the case to 81.

The ED said its investigation uncovered a well-organised criminal syndicate that subverted the liquor policy for personal gain through a multi-layered mechanism involving illegal commissions and the sale of unaccounted liquor.

The syndicate, involving senior bureaucrats and political figures, allegedly generated illegal earnings through four distinct channels. "Bribes were charged from liquor suppliers on official sales, facilitated by artificially increasing the 'landing price' paid by the State, effectively financing the bribes through the State exchequer," it said.

Another method involved a parallel system to sell "off-the-books" country liquor through government shops using duplicate holograms and bottles procured in cash, bypassing excise duties and taxes. Annual bribes were also allegedly paid by distillers to maintain market share and secure operational licences in the State. "A new licence category was introduced to extort commissions from foreign liquor manufacturers, with 60% of profits diverted to the syndicate," the agency said.

Seven killed as bus falls into 200-metre-deep gorge in Uttarakhand's Almora

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI



People gather around the damaged bus that plunged into the deep gorge in Almora district, Uttarakhand, on Tuesday. PTI

At least seven people were killed and 10 critically injured after a bus fell into a gorge in Almora district of Uttarakhand on Tuesday.

According to officials in the State Disaster Response Force (SDRF), the accident occurred in the Bhikiyasain area when the bus was *en route* to Ramnagar in Nainital from Almora.

Teams of district administration, police, and the SDRF reached the accident site immediately and the injured people were taken to a hospital in Bhikiyasain.

"Among those dead are four men and three women between 25 and 80 years of age. The gorge was around 200 metres deep, and it took hours to pull out the injured," an SDRF official said. The authorities are yet to ascertain the cause of the accident but *prima facie* it looked like a technical fault, he added.

Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami directed the officials to ensure that injured persons get proper treatment and that those with serious injuries are referred to higher medical centres.

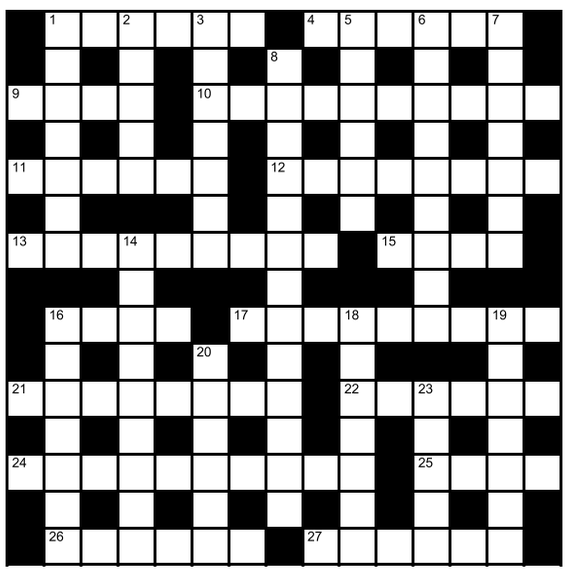
"This incident is painful and heart-wrenching. I pray to God for the peace of the departed souls. I am personally monitoring the rescue operations and in constant contact with the local administrative authorities," Mr. Dhami said.

TH CROSSWORD + 14679

(set by Hypatia)

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

SCAN TO PLAY



Across

1 Stretches promises (6)
4 Oddly planned gifts for scholar (6)
9 Killer whale leads in openly ruthless calculated assaults (4)
10 Household item massaging the cop's leg (7,3)
11 Dehradun is only conducting concert (6)
12 Busy forever? (8)
13 Spooner's blank call to conservative party group (5,4)
15 Chant of discontented holy man (4)
16 Dumpling in two seconds (4)
17 Thorough search making Middle Eastern VIP reportedly upset (9)
21 Lighter female hit by boyfriend (8)
22 Watch dad curbing online bully (6)
24 Little kid recalled actor behind royal palace (10)
25 Nothing lost from fixing bogus software issues (4)
26 Cool staff tackling an attack (6)
27 Indian legislation protecting politician's influence (6)

Down

1 Playing ragas in musical instrument (7)
2 Miss supporting old American in tests (5)
3 Fortune gained returning to city (7)
5 In mixed metaphor mostly covering page (2-4)
6 Departed, bored by cycling games shown (9)
7 Betrayal in the conclusion of Grant's "About a boy" (7)
8 Preoccupied tonight..uh? (4,2,7)
14 Me? Am ok, actively nurtured by that woman - the one in charge of the house (9)
16 Find out Gulf army regularly set up fictional location (7)
18 What the younger brother did in "Deewar"? Stayed silent! (4,3)
19 Eschew rough Tarantino films made (7)
20 Ambassador runs in a scary condition (6)
23 Maestro ably performing in Mysore with this set of drums (5)

SUDOKU

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

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DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★☆☆☆

Solution to previous puzzle

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

Solution to yesterday's Sudoku

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

FAITH

Experience of Azhwars

Azhwars, the mystic saint-poets, immersed themselves entirely in the infinite and auspicious attributes of God and, through their divine experiences, blessed humanity with sacred hymns. To express the many dimensions of their devotion, the Azhwars established various spiritual relationships with the Lord, each revealing a unique facet of bhakti.

In a discourse, Dr. Venkatesh explained their devotion through various bhavas (devotional moods). One such mood is Saanta Bhavam, the devotion of serene contemplation and inner tranquillity.

Tirumazhisai Piran, in his Thiruchanda Virutham, renowned for its musical cadence, exemplifies this Saanta Bhavam. He perceives the Lord as the Antaryaami, the indwelling controller who governs all states of existence – including sleep, ignorance, and the awakening of wisdom.

Tirumangai Azhwar beautifully expresses Sakhya Bhavam (the devotional mood of friendship) in Periya Thirumozhi. In this bhava, the devotee relates to God as an intimate and trusted friend. Tirumangai Azhwar affectionately pleads with Lord Ranganatha, addressing Him as Sri Rama, and seeks acceptance not as a distant worshipper but as a close companion, just as Sri Rama lovingly accepted Guha, the tribal chieftain, as His dear friend. Dasya Bhavam (the devotional mood of servitude) is expressed by Tirumangai Azhwar, who humbly requests the Lord to accept him as His servant. In this mood, the Azhwar seeks the same grace with which Sri Rama accepted Hanuman – the ideal servant whose life was wholly dedicated to the Lord's service.

Microbe might spark first stages of ulcerative colitis: new study

If future tests can confirm that distinct groups of ulcerative colitis patients harbour the toxin-producing *Aeromonas* strain, clinicians could classify patients by microbial subtype; in mice, antibodies that neutralised aerolysin prevented the onset of colitis, pointing to interventions focusing on the toxin as a possible strategy

Anirban Mukhopadhyay

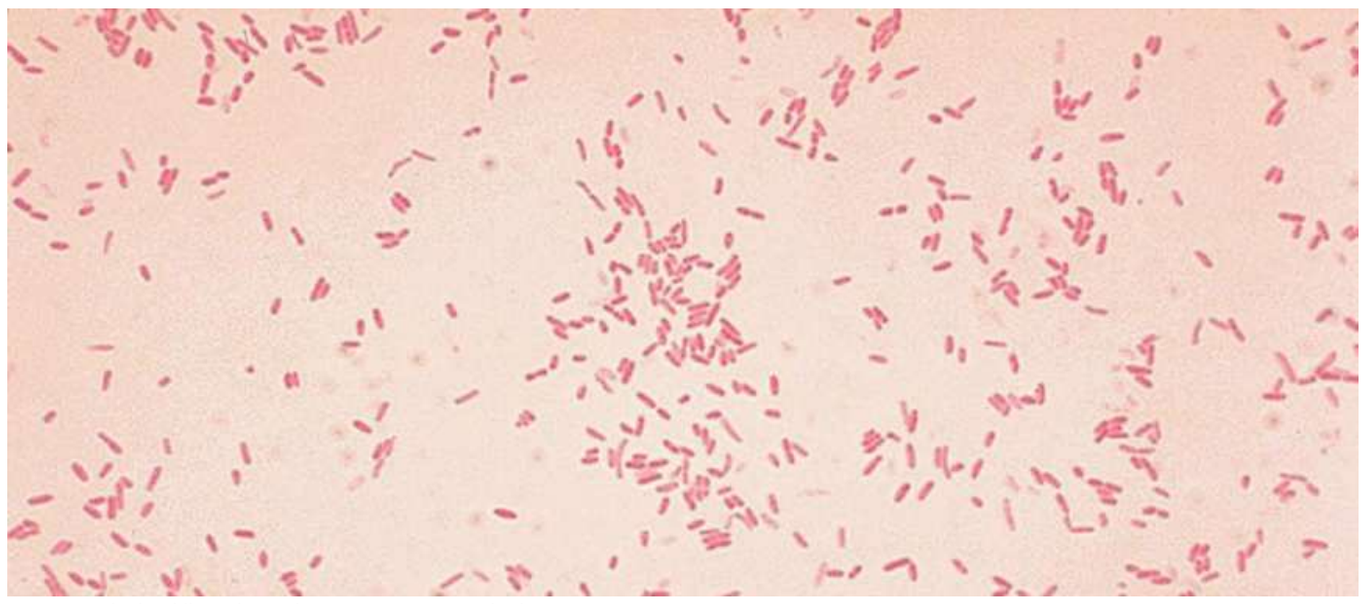
Medical researchers have traditionally viewed ulcerative colitis as a disorder driven by an overactive immune response or damage to the gut's epithelial barrier.

But a new study has argued that the disease may actually start earlier, when a normally hidden layer of immune cells just beneath the gut lining begins to become thinner. Specifically, the study – published in *Science* and led by scientists at Nanjing University, China – identified a strain of *Aeromonas* bacteria that selectively damaged the macrophages that reside in this layer.

Nanjing University Medical School gastroenterology professor and study co-author Minsheng Zhu said the aerolysin produced by the *Aeromonas* bacteria could be an initiating factor in ulcerative colitis by disrupting the macrophage barrier.

AIIMS Delhi gastroenterologist Vineet Ahuja called the work "a landmark study" that indicated how well microbial triggers could shape inflammatory bowel disease (of which ulcerative colitis is one form).

"The microbiome may or may not be the primary cause but it is nevertheless a very significant trigger," he said.



Aeromonas hydrophila under a microscope. Representative image. US CDC

First strike

The researchers obtained surgical colon samples from 17 patients with ulcerative colitis. There, they found that the density of macrophages in regions that appeared intact under the microscope had actually dropped by about 67% compared to healthy controls.

Because these cells sat just beneath the gut lining, their loss wasn't visible on routine scans or endoscopy, making the early damage easy to miss. These sentinel cells ordinarily clear bacteria that penetrate the epithelial surface and help maintain immune balance. Their depletion, the study's authors suggested, represents an early breach that could set the stage for later inflammatory cascades.

The team traced this vulnerability to a subset of *Aeromonas* bacteria that could produce aerolysin, a pore-forming toxin that proved dramatically more potent against macrophages than against epithelial cells. The toxin also left the gut's surface cells largely intact at first, targeting macrophages long before any epithelial damage could be detected. Laboratory tests showed that a substantial proportion of faecal samples from the patients released macrophage toxic factors and follow-up checks pointed to aerolysin as a major driver.

In a larger screening study, researchers found *Aeromonas* in 72% of ulcerative colitis patients but in only 12% of healthy controls and that a subset of patients may carry harmful versions of the bacterium. For them, therapies targeting *Aeromonas* or its aerolysin could represent a personalised treatment approach, Prof. Zhu said.

Noting that the authors "designed an elegant series of experiments" to test their hypothesis, Gilaad Kaplan, gastroenterologist and epidemiologist at the University of Calgary in Canada, also emphasised the human data was cross-sectional. This means researchers can't yet say whether aerolysin-producing *Aeromonas* appears before the disease or proliferates because of it. Factors such as smoking, diet, and antibiotic exposure could also influence microbial patterns.

How the shield falls

To understand the aerolysin's effects, the team used mouse models. Exposure to aerolysin rapidly depleted intestinal macrophages and rendered the animals highly susceptible to chemically induced colitis, which led to inflammation, diarrhoea, and weight loss. Mice colonised with an aerolysin-deficient version of the bacterium didn't develop severe disease, however, nor did germ-free mice. This suggested both the toxin and a permissive microbial environment mattered.

The findings fit a broader pattern researchers have observed in microbiome research. Rutgers University professor of applied microbiology Liping Zhao said a healthy gut ecosystem naturally resists colonisation by harmful invaders because of a stable ecological structure he called the "two competing guilds". In healthy individuals, the "foundation guild" of microbes that ferment fibres and produce short-chain fatty acids maintains acidity, sustains the mucus barrier, and consumes oxygen – all conditions that exclude organisms that produce toxins.

The study points to a new way of thinking about how the disease begins: one where vulnerability takes shape long before symptoms appear, reinforcing the idea that 'treating' the microbiome may one day be as important as suppressing inflammation

"When this system is disturbed through infection, antibiotics or long-term low-fibre diets, the foundation guild weakens and the pathobiont guild expands," he said.

His team's analysis of 38 datasets across 15 diseases published last year in *Cell* concluded that this shift creates metabolic and immune conditions that favour opportunistic bacteria associated with inflammation. In these conditions, even rare environmental invaders such as the particular *Aeromonas* strain can colonise.

Prof. Zhu said this pattern of destabilisation was also mirrored in their own mouse experiments.

New treatment paths

Prof. Ahuja said the work also strengthens the case for microbiome-based therapies for ulcerative colitis, including targeted strategies like antibodies that neutralise toxins. This is an important prospect because current drugs that modify the immune system are expensive, have significant side effects, and benefit only 50-60% of patients.

The findings of the new study also open potential diagnostic avenues. If future tests can confirm that distinct groups of ulcerative colitis patients harbour the toxin-producing *Aeromonas* strain, clinicians could one day classify patients by microbial subtype. In mice, antibodies that neutralised aerolysin prevented the onset of colitis and even partially improved established disease, pointing to interventions focusing on the toxin as a possible strategy.

Finally, experts said, the study points to a new way of thinking about how the disease begins: one where vulnerability takes shape long before symptoms appear, reinforcing the idea that 'treating' the microbiome may one day be as important as suppressing inflammation.

Much also remains uncertain, however. Although Prof. Kaplan said the results were provocative and added "an interesting dimension to ongoing research into microbial drivers of inflammation", there is currently no epidemiological evidence linking *Aeromonas* exposure to ulcerative colitis. Researchers will need long-term studies to clarify whether the bacterium helps set the disease in motion or is "simply a passenger along for the ride", in his words.

According to Prof. Ahuja, India is also conducting large clinical trials of faecal transplants and diet modification for inflammatory bowel disease, funded by the Indian Council of Medical Research. This infrastructure could establish early platforms on which future mechanistic insights, such as those raised by the new study, can be explored.

(Anirban Mukhopadhyay is a geneticist by training and science communicator from New Delhi. anirban.genetics@south.du.ac.in)

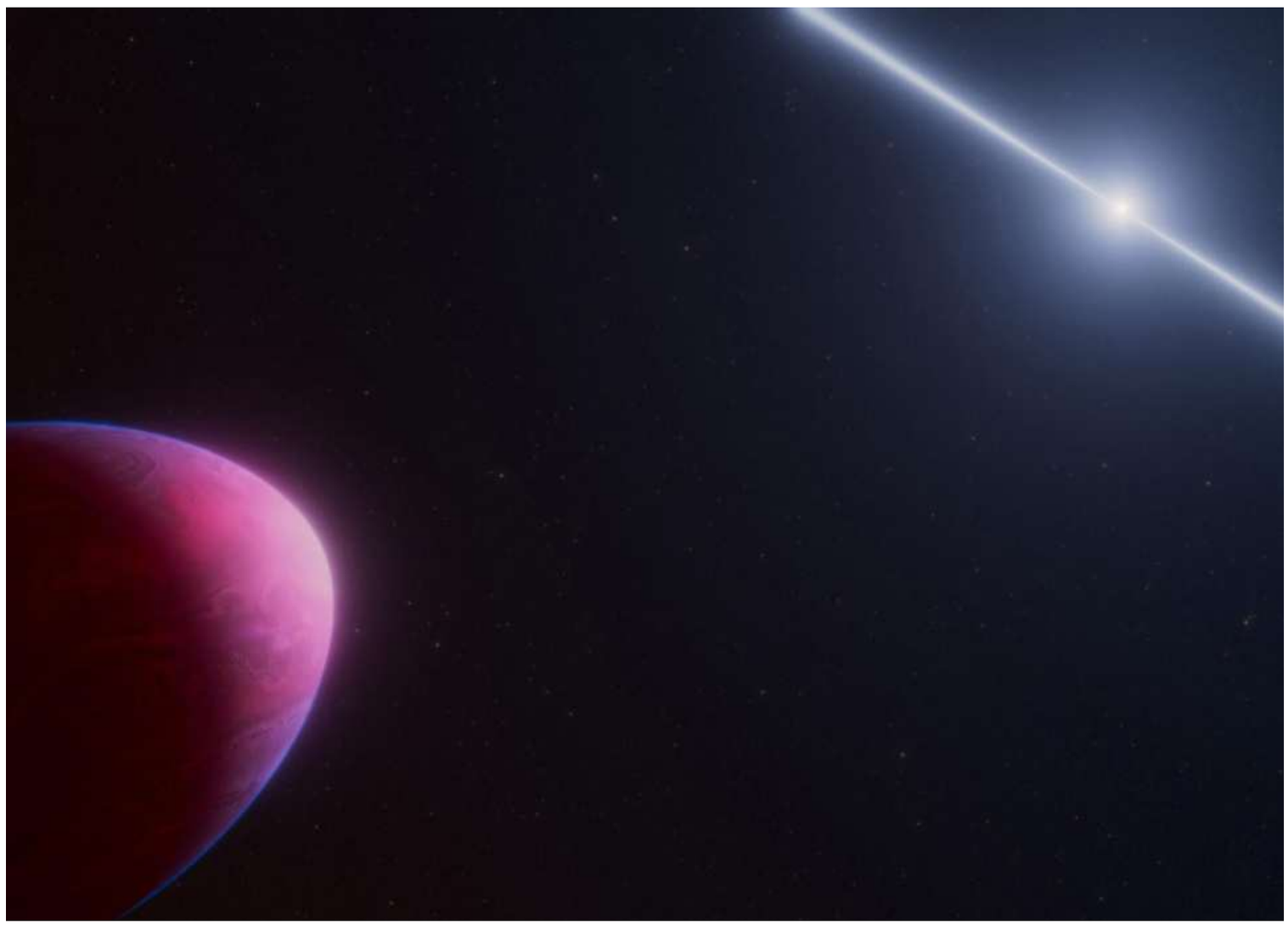
THE GIST

A new study has suggested that ulcerative colitis may be triggered when a normally hidden layer of immune cells, located just beneath the gut lining, becomes thinner. The study specifically identified a strain of *Aeromonas* bacteria that selectively damaged macrophages in this layer

A healthy gut resists colonisation because of a structure one expert called the 'two competing guilds'. The 'foundation guild' of microbes excludes organisms that produce toxins. When this is disturbed through infection, antibiotics or poor diet, the foundation guild weakens and the 'pathobiont guild' expands

There is currently no epidemiological evidence linking *Aeromonas* exposure to ulcerative colitis. Researchers will need long-term studies to clarify whether the bacterium helps set the disease in motion or is simply a passenger along for the ride

BIG SHOT



This artistic concept developed by NASA based on data from the James Webb Space Telescope shows the exoplanet PSR J2322-2650b (left) as it orbits a pulsar (right) emitting twin radio beams. The pulsar's gravitational pull has distorted the planet into the shape of a lemon. How it came to be is a mystery. JWST/NASA

QUESTION CORNER

The biology of a headache

Q: Why do we get headaches?

A: A headache happens when tissues in and around the head that are sensitive to pain become irritated or pushed out of balance. While the brain tissue itself doesn't feel pain, structures nearby such as blood vessels in the coverings around the brain (the meninges), nerves that carry sensation from the face and scalp, muscles in the neck and jaw, and the sinuses do. When these tissues are stretched, inflamed, squeezed or chemically "activated" in some way, they send signals to the brainstem and higher brain areas, which interpret them as pain.

Different headaches start in different ways. In tension headaches, prolonged muscle tension and stress-related changes in pain processing can make the scalp and neck feel sore and tight. In migraines, the nervous system becomes unusually sensitive: brain networks that regulate sensory input, blood vessel tone, and pain can shift into a hyper-responsive state. This can trigger a cascade involving inflammatory molecules around nerves and changes in brainstem circuits, producing throbbing pain, nausea, and sensitivity to light or sound. (Scientists have unearthed many clues about why the sensitivity increases but they haven't determined a single cause yet.) Dehydration, missed meals, poor sleep, alcohol, infections, and bright light can all be triggers for headaches because they alter hydration, blood sugar, hormones and/or immune signals.



Dehydration, missed meals, poor sleep, alcohol, infections, and bright light can all be triggers for headaches. USMAN YOUSAF/UNSPLASH

Finally, while most headaches are not dangerous, a sudden and really bad headache, a headache with fever and stiff neck, weakness, confusion or one after a head injury deserves urgent medical attention.

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

Too good to last

The headwinds facing the economy are not going away soon

India's relatively strong industrial performance in November 2025, especially driven by the manufacturing sector as it was, was more likely a flash in the pan than the start of a consistent trend. The Index of Industrial Production (IIP) grew 6.7% in November, the fastest growth rate in 25 months. Within this, the manufacturing sector grew 8%, which also was the fastest in 25 months. On the face of it, this would look remarkable and heartening, especially since October 2025 had seen growth slow to a 14-month low. However, this surge in growth was more likely due to seasonal and one-off factors. According to economists, the strongest push for growth came from sellers re-stocking their supplies following the festive season. The second factor is that the government timed the Goods and Services Tax (GST) rate reductions to coincide with the festive season. This temporary bump in demand would have further eroded stock levels, which then need to be replenished. In fact, the consumer durables and non-durables sectors saw growth in November rebounding to 10.3% and 7.3%, a 12-month and 25-month high, respectively. The third factor that seems to have worked in November is the bounce back of the mining sector following two months of contractions due to an unseasonably long monsoon. The mining sector saw growth come in at a reasonably strong 5.4% in November 2025. All of these are legitimate reasons for growth to pick up, but are not sustainable ones. The electricity and mining sectors will be bound by the vagaries of the weather. Overall consumer demand has been sluggish and industry players are talking of the GST-related boost already ebbing. And the festive season will not come back around until October-November 2026.

In fact, the IIP grew just 3.3% in the longer April-November period, the lowest for these eight months in any of the post-COVID-19 pandemic years. The consumer non-durables sector contracted 1% during this period, showing that the boost in November is not indicative. That the strong growth in November is more an anomaly than a sign of things to come should not come as a surprise. The Reserve Bank of India, earlier this month, predicted that growth in Q3 would slow to 7% from an average of 8% in the first two quarters. The fourth quarter is predicted to slow even further, to 6.5%. All of the previous headwinds still exist. The 50% tariffs by the U.S. are still in place, private investment remains sluggish, foreign capital is pulling out of the country, the weakening rupee is making imports more expensive for an import-dependent economy, real wages are not growing fast enough, and consumer demand remains tepid. Ironically, November's positive industrial data bring into focus the headwinds the economy is really facing.

Track record

The Indian Railways must spare no expense in installing safety features

The Tatanagar-Ernakulam Express fire accident in Andhra Pradesh was a major one, in terms of severity if not the extent of casualties. Chance, quick thinking and timely action by railway staff and other agencies as well as enhanced safety measures adopted by the railways over time likely contributed to a low toll – one passenger. That the accident happened in the train's air-conditioned (a/c) coaches, however, points to the need for increased requirements in these coaches in terms of fire safety and response. At around 12.40 a.m. on Monday, as the train approached Yelamanchili station, a passenger sounded the alarm after apparently noticing a fire. The use of the emergency chain alerted the train crew who took the train to the loop line which had a platform. The train was not scheduled to stop at Yelamanchili. This helped passengers alight safely. The insides of two a/c coaches were gutted in the fire that agencies put out in about two hours.

Over the years, the safety record of the Indian Railways has improved. The total number of accidents in 2024-25 was down by more than 70% compared to 10 years ago. Major accidents have, however, seen ups and downs year on year without an appreciable fall. Fire accidents account for some 10% to 20% of accidents in a typical year. Fires are triggered by rolling stock defects and errors on the part of the railways as well as by passengers who carry inflammable, even explosive articles. The cause of the Tatanagar-Ernakulam Express fire is not decisively known as yet and an inquiry has been ordered. Fire in a/c coaches has been a cause of concern and the railways has focused on them for fitment of fire warning and fighting systems such as portable extinguishers. The *Indian Railways Annual Report & Accounts 2023-24* notes that fire and smoke detection systems have been fitted in some 20,000 a/c coaches; the goal is to fit all a/c coaches, including new ones, with such systems. The report says that all a/c as well as non-a/c coaches in passenger trains have fire extinguishers. Railway authorities say that the fire alarm system in the Tatanagar-Ernakulam Express coach activated upon detection of smoke/fire, adding that the coach mechanic, bedroll staff and the travelling ticket examiner alerted the passengers and used the fire extinguishers, which helped control the fire. Perhaps fixed fire extinguishing systems, which can also be used in electrical fires, can be considered for a/c coaches in all trains. These activate automatically in case a fire is detected and douse it completely. No safety feature is too expensive.

A multipolar world with bipolar characteristics



Stanly Johny

As 2025 draws to a close, a highlight is that the United States has undertaken its largest troop mobilisation in the Caribbean in decades. Its Navy has deployed its most advanced aircraft carrier, along with fighter jets, amphibious vessels, attack submarines and tens of thousands of troops, as it intensifies its pressure on Venezuela in an effort to force President Nicolás Maduro from power.

The Trump administration's National Security Strategy (NSS), released in early December 2025, identifies Latin America and the Caribbean as a strategic priority. Reviving the 19th century Monroe Doctrine, the document asserts that the U.S. must deny influence or control by outside powers (read China) in Latin America and ensure that the Western Hemisphere remains under American political, economic and military influence.

The push to reinforce American primacy in Latin America coincides with U.S. President Donald Trump's waning interest in Europe, another long-standing U.S. sphere of influence. Since the end of the Second World War, the U.S. has served as Europe's primary security guarantor. If Washington kept western Europe together through a tightly knit alliance during the Cold War, it expanded this security umbrella to eastern Europe after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, creating a large transatlantic bloc. Under Mr. Trump, however, the U.S. is no longer interested in shouldering the burden of European security – a position explicitly articulated in the NSS. Why is America, at a moment when Russia and China are seeking to overturn the U.S.-built and U.S.-led security and economic order, stepping back from Europe while moving to consolidate its influence in the Western Hemisphere?

It is difficult to discern a cohesive doctrine in Mr. Trump's foreign policy, marked by the President's impulses and unpredictability. Yet, even these impulses, this unpredictability and his ideological orientation rooted in Christian nationalism and America's might cannot ignore the structural shifts reshaping the international order. Mr. Trump is not the 'President of peace' that he claims to be – he has already bombed six countries, even if he has stopped short of a full-scale war.

At the same time, Mr. Trump, despite his rhetoric about American military and economic dominance, recognises that he no longer lives in a unipolar world. His reluctant aggression and strategic recalibration are reflections of the changes now taking shape in the global balance of power.

Three great powers

When the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991, a new order emerged with the U.S. at its centre. There was no other great power positioned to challenge American primacy. The unipolar moment, however, has since passed. While future historians may better identify the precise point of rupture, one such moment was Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. The ensuing conflict in eastern Ukraine, the tepid western response, and Russia's ability to endure despite sanctions reinforced the limits of the 'rules-based order'.

> The three great powers understand that the world is no longer organised around a single centre of authority

The end of unipolarity, however, does not mean the end of American dominance. The U.S. remains, and will remain, for the foreseeable future, the world's pre-eminent military and economic power. What has changed is that Washington is no longer the sole great power shaping geopolitical outcomes. China and Russia now occupy that space as well, deepening what Realist thinkers describe as the inherently anarchic nature of the international system.

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union was America's principal rival, and in the 1970s, Washington reached out to China to exploit fissures within the communist bloc. Today, the U.S. identifies China as its principal and systemic challenger. This, in turn, leaves open the possibility of a reset in ties with Russia – an idea embraced by Mr. Trump's MAGA (Make America Great Again) ideologues, who frame Russia as part of a shared 'Christian civilisation'.

The reigning power versus the rising power

The U.S. faces a unique challenge in China. The Soviet economy, in its prime in the early 1970s, reached about 57% of the U.S. GDP, before it began slowing down. China's economy, now the world's second largest, already amounts to about 66% of the U.S. economy. China continues to grow at a faster pace, steadily narrowing the gap.

As China's economic power expands, it is being converted into military capability (it has already built the world's largest Navy, by number of ships). Like other great powers, Beijing is seeking to establish regional hegemony and global dominance. So, a prolonged contest between the U.S., the reigning power, and China, the rising power, appears unavoidable. The situation is comparable to 19th century Europe, when a rising imperial Germany threatened to upstage Britain during Pax Britannica, unsettling the 'Concert of Europe'.

Russia is the weakest link among the three powers. It is a relatively smaller economy with a shrinking sphere of influence. But Russia's nuclear arsenals, expansive geography, abundant energy and mineral resources and its demonstrated willingness to use force to achieve its strategic objectives keep it in the great power constellation. From Moscow's perspective, the country drifted into the wilderness in the 1990s before announcing its return in 2008 with the war in Georgia. Since then, it has sought to rewrite the post-Soviet security architecture in Europe. As the West, having expanded the North Atlantic Treaty Organization into the Russian sphere of influence, responded to Vladimir Putin's war in Ukraine with sweeping sanctions on Russia and military support for Kyiv, Moscow moved ever closer to China. Russia and China have found common ground in opposing the western 'rules-based order' – Russia thinks that the order denies it its rightful place in the world and seeks to revise it accordingly, while China, by contrast, as Rush Doshi argues in *The Long Game*, wants to replace it with a China-centric order.

Fluid multipolarity

All three great powers today understand that the world is no longer organised around a single centre of authority. In that sense, the world is already multipolar. But unlike the post-Second World War and post-Cold War transitions, the structures of the new order have yet to fully emerge. During the Cold War, the world was divided into two ideological blocs and two largely separate economic systems. Today, China lacks the kind of satellite state networks that characterised the 20th century superpowers, while the U.S. is reassessing the sustainability of its alliance frameworks, including its commitment to Europe.

Russia, with its own great power ambitions, is wary of being seen as a Chinese ally irrespective of its close strategic partnership with Beijing. This opens a window for a Washington-Moscow reset. But the war in Ukraine remains a stumbling block. Russia may not want to challenge America's global leadership, but it certainly wants to re-establish its primacy in its sphere of influence.

Thus, there are three great powers with divergent interests that are pulling the global order in different directions, rendering the emerging multipolarity fluid rather than as a structured system akin to the post-Second World War order. This also means that middle powers, including superpower allies such as Japan and Germany, and autonomous actors such as India and Brazil, would continue to hedge their bets.

Mr. Trump wants Europe to shoulder greater responsibility for its own security, reset relations with Russia and reassert American primacy in its immediate neighbourhood even as Washington prepares for a prolonged great power competition with China. The idea is to return to the classic offshore balancing. Even if Mr. Trump fails in executing it, future American Presidents may not be able to ignore the shifts that he has initiated. Russia, for its part, seeks to carve out a sphere of influence. China aims to preserve its close strategic partnership with Russia to keep the Eurasian landmass within its orbit, while establishing regional hegemony in East and Southeast Asia – moves that would cement its status as a long-term superpower, much as the U.S. did by asserting its hegemony in the Western Hemisphere in the 19th century, and across the Atlantic in the 20th century. In this fluid landscape, Russia has emerged as the new 'swing great power' between the two superpowers, paradoxically lending the emerging multipolar order a distinctly bipolar character.

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The India-New Zealand FTA — unlocking growth



Chandrajit Banerjee

is Director General, Confederation of Indian Industry (CII)

At a time when developing and developed countries alike are navigating an increasingly unpredictable global trading regime, India is at a crossroads, fast emerging as a resilient player in international trade and as an increasingly reliable economic partner. The conclusion of the India-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement (FTA), announced by Prime Ministers Narendra Modi and Christopher Luxon on December 22, 2025, is a clear signal of this growing confidence. Coming soon after India's FTAs with the United Kingdom and Oman, this agreement reflects a broader global shift toward diversifying trade partnerships and strengthening engagement with India. Domestically, the fast-tracked negotiations concluded within nine months, reflecting a political will to forge mutually beneficial global partnerships which concomitantly further India's national goals and its global vision for a just, equitable and rules-based trading system.

Complementarity without compromise

Primed to be signed early next year, the India-New Zealand FTA emphasises services and labour mobility – areas where India enjoys a clear comparative advantage, but which have remained underleveraged in trade agreements. From both sides, there have been firsts, with India extending duty concessions on apples, and New Zealand offering India the widest service access so far, covering sectors such as IT, education, fintech, telecom, tourism and construction. There is also a commitment by New Zealand to invest $20 billion in India over 15 years.

Mobility provisions for skilled professionals in IT, engineering, health care, and education, and post-study work opportunities for Indian students, would increase the competitiveness of service providers, positioning India as a key supplier of high- and semi-skilled workforce. Moreover, amid policy unpredictability in several advanced economies posing headwinds for skilled mobility, they offer alternatives and stability for India's youth and knowledge workers.

> The free trade agreement reflects confidence in India as a resilient player in international trade and also a reliable economic partner

New Zealand has agreed to eliminate duties on 100% of its tariff lines, giving duty-free access to all Indian exports, while India has offered market access on 70% of its tariff lines. Benefits could accrue to India in labour-intensive sectors: textiles, apparel, leather, engineering goods, pharmaceuticals and farm products. Also, duty-free intermediate inputs such as wooden logs, coking coal, metal waste and scrap would lower manufacturing costs for final products, especially in steel, engineering goods and construction.

Inclusion of an annex on health and traditional medicine services creates new opportunities for India's pharmaceutical and health-care sectors, giving them an edge over competitors such as China and the European Union. It would also reinforce India's growing role as a global health partner.

Agriculture, often a sensitive area in trade negotiations, has been handled with balance. The FTA envisages value chain development through knowledge transfers and agri-technology collaboration on apples, kiwifruit, and honey. The livelihood of farmers, however, will not stand compromised since no duty concessions have been made in dairy, sugar, spices and edible oils.

Challenges in optimal utilisation

Overall bilateral trade, which was approximately $2.4 billion in 2024-25, is projected to double by 2030, post implementation of the FTA. However, it must be heeded that the success of any FTA lies in how it is utilised. In the past, India has exhibited a low utilisation rate of only about 25%, as in contrast with developed economies touching 70%-80%. FTAs often remain underused due to awareness gaps, compliance challenges, and non-tariff barriers (NTBs). However, the India-New Zealand FTA has provisions to address technical barriers to trade through enhanced regulatory cooperation, streamlined customs procedures and transparency.

Once implemented, the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) recommends optimally leveraging the trade pact, with business associations, large enterprises and policymakers sharing responsibility to build awareness and developing capabilities to translate the negotiated benefits into effective market access. They should also look beyond tariffs and expand services trade, deepen skills and education linkages, and leverage mobility and diaspora networks.

A strong foundation exists

The FTA can build on the strong foundations of a growing middle class, a skilled workforce, and a reform-driven, innovation-based Indian economy. It carries elements of global integrated production and service export growth (India already ranks among the top five globally), both of which can propel Indian firms up global value chains and towards the $7 trillion economy goal by 2030. Notably, with the India-New Zealand FTA deal, India has now concluded economic partnership agreements with all Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) members, except China.

Notwithstanding the modest quantum of bilateral trade, the significance of the India-New Zealand FTA lies not just in trade data. Rather, it marks a coming of age in the way India is viewed on the world stage. The kind of access in terms of labour mobility and services that New Zealand is willing to extend to India, reflects growing strategic trust from developed economies in bilateral economic engagements. This is a particularly welcome development amid India's trade talks with other partners, including the European Union, lending credence to India as a country with a stable trade policy, and capable of establishing norms of effective cooperation through balanced, high-quality agreements that protect domestic interests while promoting openness and growth.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Save the Aravalli ranges

Reducing an ancient mountain system to a metric definition threatened to destroy a vital ecological system (Front page, "SC pauses judgment on Aravalli, moots new panel", December 30). Mining permissions, once granted, are rarely reversible. The fresh look at the Aravalli ranges must begin from the basics — ecosystems function as connected gradients, not isolated hillocks. 'Sustainable mining' exists only on paper. Precaution must guide outcomes.

K. Chidanand Kumar,
Bengaluru

Wheels of justice

The top court did well to stay the suspension of the sentence of former MLA and expelled BJP leader Kuldeep Singh Sengar in the Unnao rape case (Front page, December 30). The case highlights the blatant disregard for law and authority. It serves as a powerful symbol of the struggle for gender justice and accountability, particularly when crimes are perpetrated against women by those who are powerful. One should appreciate the survivor's perseverance to draw attention to her plight. Unfortunately, it also highlights the measures survivors must sometimes take to initiate action against powerful people.

R. Sivakumar,
Chennai

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

Prioritising cleft care as a health issue



Soma Basu

More than 7,50,000 cleft surgeries were performed in India in the last 25 years by the international NGO Smile Train. This amounts to 30,000 surgeries annually. It is the highest by any organisation in the private or public sector. But the figures don't shine in India where one in 700 children are born with lip and/or palate deformity every year and there is a backlog of 7,000 corrective surgeries annually.

Smile Train India is among the NGOs that support and partner with skilled surgeons to provide free cleft surgeries and related care. While its contribution has benefited 7.5 lakh children so far, others, including Mission Smile, Operation Smile, Transforming Cleft and Healing Smile Foundation, have collectively benefited another 15 lakh children in the last 20 years. Their efforts deserve appreciation. However, they still fall short in India, which, despite recording the highest number of cleft births globally, has no national epidemiological data on cleft lip/palate.

Cleft lip/palate is a facial birth defect that occurs when certain tissues and structures do not fuse during pregnancy due to genetic factor or maternal nutrition deficiencies. It leaves newborns with a gap in the upper lip and the roof of the mouth. Independent surveys estimate that 36,000 babies are born with cleft abnormalities in India every year. About 68% of them rely on government hospitals for initial diagnosis, yet there are 17.5 lakh children with unrepaired clefts.

The situation in India

The situation is complex: there is lack of documentation of birth anomalies, and parental counseling on care and treatment is woefully inadequate. Also, the high cost of surgery deters families from seeking help. A decade ago, the Lancet Surgery Commission estimated a burden of 18.7% untreated Orofacial Clefts (OFC) in India. A 2022 report of the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, University of Washington's School of Medicine, stated that children with OFCs in India were 1.5 times more vulnerable to severe malnutrition compared to other children under five. It also says one-third of the cleft lip and palate-related malnutrition deaths can be prevented with timely surgical treatment and proper nutrition.

Free or subsidised surgery and follow-up treatment are provided by NGOs in collaboration with mostly city-based private hospitals because government hospitals lack specialised infrastructure and trained personnel. The fragmented cleft care offered by government hospitals are not aggregated in public databases, maybe because India is yet to nationally recognise craniofacial anomalies as a notifiable disease.

The World Health Organization has formally recognised craniofacial anomaly in the Global Burden of Disease initiative. This is what perhaps led the NITI Aayog to initiate conversations around birth defects. The National Birth Defect Awareness Month launched in August 2024 on the theme 'Breaking Barriers: inclusive support for children with birth defects including clefts' helped discuss prevention, early identification, and timely management of common congenital malformations.

Surgeons play a key role in minimising birth defects. While people think of cleft lip and/or palate as a cosmetic deformity, it impacts a child's ability to speak, swallow, hear, and breathe. If not surgically corrected, babies with a cleft lip have difficulty nursing and require special feeding techniques. Children with a cleft lip get bullied and struggle with school and with communication. Employment and marriage become challenging. All this leads to psychological trauma and affects confidence. Ignorance and superstitions strengthen the stigma surrounding the disfigurement, and treatment is marked by a rural-urban divide.

Every health challenge requires collaboration. Smile Train India and others address the gaps in cleft services with a sustainable and scalable global health model. This empowers local doctors as equal partners by providing support in training and covering surgical costs. As per the 2011 Census, 68.8% of the population in rural areas need to be covered aggressively. Collaborating with the Rashtriya Bal Swasthya Karyakram and ASHA for clear communication on early screening of birth defects and deficiencies is a way forward. In the absence of hospital partners in interior areas, timely medical intervention, with incentives that cover travel cost, surgery and hospital stay, and post-operative support including speech therapy, is imperative.

The way forward

UNICEF estimates that about 2.5 crore children are born in India annually. The 2022 National Family Health Survey states that 1.35 crore children are born in government hospitals, where cleft care in detected cases can ideally start at birth and life-transforming surgery can be done after three months of birth. It is time for policymakers to recognise cleft deformity as a health issue and opt for better management at the grassroots level, where there is limited awareness and access. The government can devise a multi-level approach to address under served communities. NGOs are trying to expand the footprint but government hospitals, where almost 50% of India's children are born, need to upgrade.

Health experts say cleft missions help strengthen government healthcare systems by improving surgical infrastructure, increasing access to affordable care, training the local workforce, and breaking social taboos. The success of cleft surgeries is measured by improved functionality, which depends on the age at which the child is brought for treatment.

Comprehensive cleft care for children in India is driven by the non-profit private model. The government has achieved little in creating awareness or making cleft surgeries accessible and affordable to all

Deaths most dishonourable

Laws alone may not be enough as long as notions of caste superiority exist

STATE OF PLAY

S. Bageshree
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In one of the most sinister crimes in the year drawing to a close, 19-year-old Manya Vivekananda Doddamani was lethally attacked by her father and his supporters at Inam Veerapur village in Dharwad district in north Karnataka on December 21. The grievously injured woman, married a few months ago and pregnant, died in the hospital.

What provoked the attack was the marriage of an "upper" caste woman to a "lower" caste man, thereby bringing "dishonour" to her family and clan. Manya (née Manya Patil) was a Lingayat, and her decision to marry a Madiga (Scheduled Caste) man had incurred the family's wrath.

The couple had married in May despite strong opposition. The tahsildar and the police had intervened, calling both families for a truce. The police registered a case as a precautionary measure. Perceiving threat, the couple had shifted to neighbouring Haveri. However, assuming that tempers had cooled, a pregnant Manya and her husband had returned to her native village in December only to learn in the most tragic way that they were wrong.

Manya's father, Prakashgouda Patil, and five co-accused are now in custody, while the police are on the lookout for the others among the 15 accused. Two police personnel and a panchayat development officer have been suspended for dereliction of duty. Manya's husband and in-laws also sustained injuries in the attack and are now recovering.



Though there is no segregated data on "honour" killings for 2025 in Karnataka, there were some widely reported cases. In August, 52-year-old Shankar Kollur was arrested from Melakunda village in Kalaburagi district for allegedly murdering his 18-year-old daughter, Kavita. A nursing student from the Lingayat community, she was in love with a Kuruba boy.

In February, the death of a 21-year-old woman, from the Kuruba caste, by drowning in Harohalli on the outskirts of Bengaluru was flagged by her boyfriend, a Naidu, as "honour" killing, though the police recorded it as an accident.

In January, a district court in Gadag in north Karnataka sentenced four men to death for murdering an inter-caste couple – Gangamma Rathod from the Lambani community ('touchable' SC) and her husband Ramesh Madar, from the Madiga community (SC 'Left') – in 2019. The circumstances leading to the death were similar to Manya's. The couple had married in 2017 despite the family's opposition and left their native village Lakkalakatti in Gadag district. They had returned under the false notion that old wounds had healed.

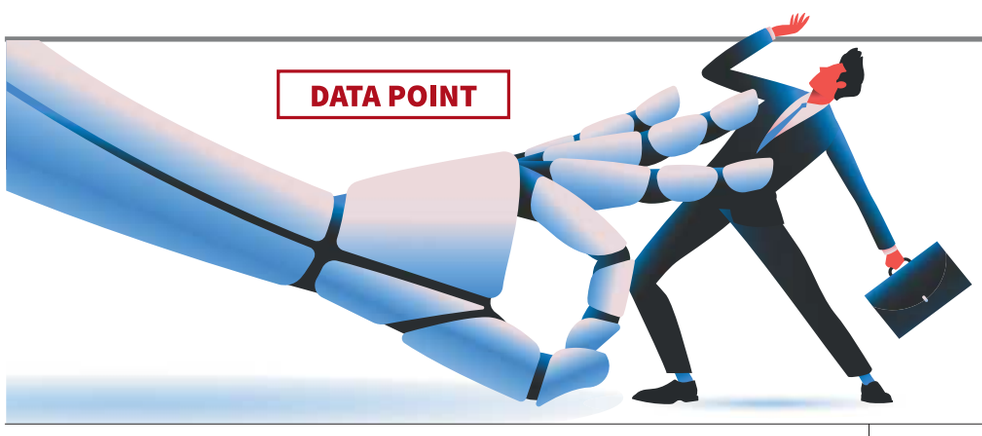
Even though northern States such as Haryana, Jharkhand, and Uttar Pradesh typically hit headlines for "honour" killings, "progressive" States such as Karnataka are clearly not above such crimes. In a paper titled, "In the name of 'Honour'" published in 2024, the People's Union for Civil Liberties-Karnataka recorded 13 cases of "honour" attacks from January-2022 to December-2023 where 12 people were murdered. "These killings have taken place in seven districts across Karnataka. Each case is a shocking reminder of the brutal lengths that people have gone to oppose inter-caste and inter-faith fraternising," read the paper. "In most of the killings in 2022-23, the victim was a woman belonging to the more dominant community. The perpetrators were men in her family."

Since the incident in Veerapur village earlier this month, there have been protests by Dalit and other progressive organisations. One of their principal demands is a separate law to tackle "honour" crimes and name it after Manya. In the recent winter session of the Legislature, Karnataka passed the Karnataka Protection of People from Social Boycott (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Bill, 2025, for preventing social boycott and discrimination by caste or community panchayats.

While there are provisions in existing laws to prevent caste-related violence, it could be argued that special laws add another layer of fortification. But such fortifications are not hard to breach as long as caste hierarchies and notions of caste superiority have social acceptance. One of the arguments against the caste survey in Karnataka (and elsewhere in India as well) by the "upper" castes has been that such an exercise resurrects archaic practices that have no currency in Viksit Bharat. Manya's death is a tragically eloquent testimony to the fallacy of this argument.

Why programming is losing its 'gold standard' status to GenAI

AI proficiency is outpacing traditional coding in both demand and dollar value



Change in tech hierarchy

Generative AI is rewriting the tech career playbook. Programming, once the gold standard for high-paying jobs, is now viewed as a secondary skill that is 'less essential' to the future workforce. Because learning AI is more accessible to beginners, the disruption to traditional coding has multiplied. With AI/ML roles commanding significantly higher salaries than standard development jobs, the industry's transition is only gathering speed. The above conclusions are based on the World Economic Forum's "New Economy Skills: Building AI, Data and Digital Capabilities for Growth". By **The Hindu Data Team**

CHART 1: While skills like programming, mathematics, and teaching are receding in importance, 'AI & Big Data' and 'Creative Thinking' are taking centre stage as core requirements for the future. Amid this change, technology literacy — defined as the ability to adapt digital tools to solve real-world problems — remains a critical asset for the modern workforce

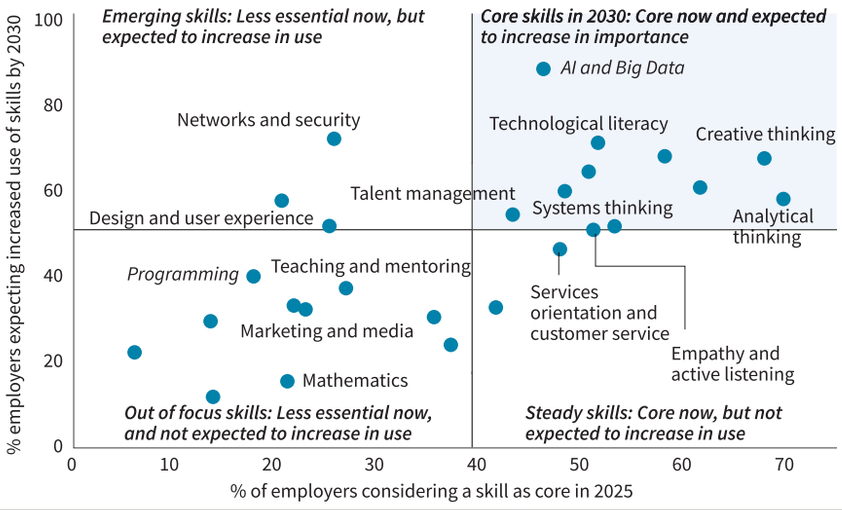


CHART 2: With AI and Big Data requiring fewer than half the learning hours of programming to reach beginner proficiency, the tech landscape is shifting rapidly. This transition is being driven by young challengers who are entering the field thick and fast, leveraging their ability to master new tools far more quickly than the established workforce. The chart shows the **average learning hours needed** to achieve various proficiency levels

Mean 0% — 150%

	Beginner	Intermediate	Advanced
AI and Big Data	30.4	**83.8**	**136.8**
Design and user experience	32.0	**72.4**	**107.9**
Networks and cybersecurity	57.3	**107.8**	**155.3**
Programming	67.3	**116.3**	**144.0**
Technological literacy	61.2	**116.2**	**143.5**

CHART 3: While AI and Big Data skills can be acquired in half the time it takes to learn programming, Coursera's 2025 data reveals that the total hours spent on AI-related learning is six times higher than for programming. This signals that millions are pivoting toward AI to future-proof their careers

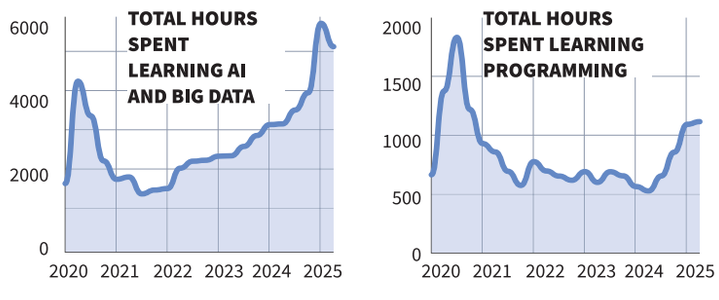


CHART 4: Within the broader field of AI, Gen AI-specific learning has seen explosive growth. Following an initial surge during the pandemic, interest in AI competencies accelerated sharply in 2022. While core AI skills continued their expansion, demand for Gen AI skyrocketed following the release of ChatGPT

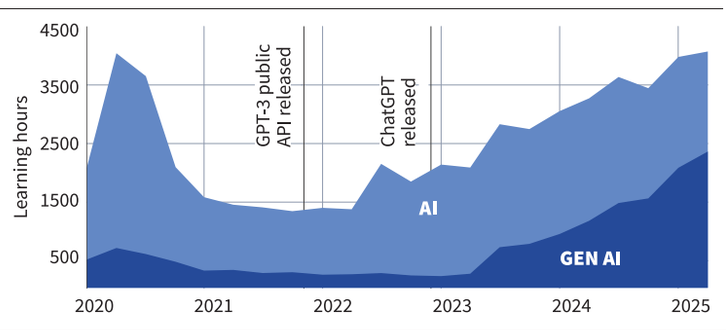
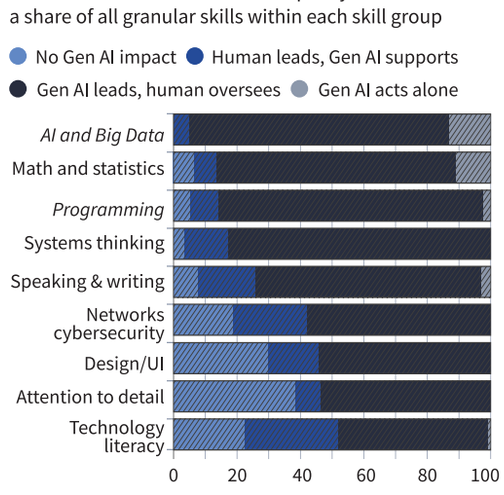
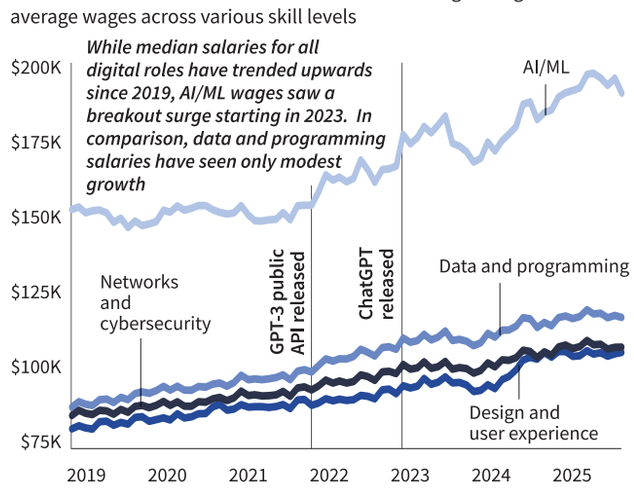


CHART 5: The chart shows the capacity of GenAI to transform a given skill as a share of all granular skills within each skill group



An analysis of 2,900 Indeed skills (July 2025) via GPT-4.1 and Claude 4 reveals that programming skills are most ripe for transformation as Gen AI automates routine tasks. Conversely, technology literacy remains largely shielded, as it relies on human judgment and adaptation

CHART 6: The chart shows the seven-month moving average of average wages across various skill levels



FROM THE ARCHIVES
The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO DECEMBER 31, 1975

Declarations cross Rs. 600 crore mark: Big rush

New Delhi, Dec. 30: Declarations under the voluntary disclosure scheme had crossed the Rs. 600 crore mark in the country by this evening, official sources said.

With just 24 hours to go, there had been heavy declarations all over the country, the sources added.

Declarations in Delhi alone amounted to Rs. 83 crores.

In Rourkela police had to intervene to pacify the declarants when the State Bank of India staff, unable to cope with the rush, refused to accept their payments after 2 p.m. according to information reaching the Income-Tax headquarters in Bhubaneswar.

There was an unusually long queue of persons waiting at receiving counter of the bank since the morning. When the staff refused to accept payments after 2 p.m., the crowd stormed the counters.

The Rourkela Income-Tax officers sought police help to control the situation and persuaded the bank official to accept the payments.

Tamil Nadu: As many as 1,420 persons in Tamil Nadu to-day, disclosed concealed wealth and income amounting to Rs. 15 crores.

An official spokesman said the disclosures had so far amounted to Rs. 57 crores in the State.

Kerala: A sum of over Rs. 13.6 crores of concealed income and wealth has been disclosed so far in Kerala under the voluntary disclosure scheme.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO DECEMBER 31, 1925

Philadelphia exhibition

London, Dec. 29: Plans are being rapidly completed for Indian representation at the Sesquicentennial Exposition at Philadelphia, for which an area of 132,000 square feet has been allotted. The pavilion, which covers an area of 52,000 square feet, will have a handsome facade reminiscent of the best type of Moghul architecture with a stall space for the exhibitions of 120,000 sq. feet, half of which has been provisionally booked. Stall rents have been fixed at two pounds sterling per square foot which covers the cost of erection of the pavilion and overhead charges. The features will include a tourist section, an Indian restaurant and a theatre in which Indian conjurers, acrobats and Burmese dancers will give displays.

Text&Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Amount pledged by United States for UN humanitarian aid

2 in $ billion. Instead of handing funds to individual agencies, the U.S. will funnel its contributions through the UN aid agency OCHA, headed by Tom Fletcher, which earlier this year launched a so-called Humanitarian Reset to improve efficiency and accountability. The U.S. funds — welcomed by UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres —will then be distributed to 17 selected countries. AFP

Suspects detained by Turkiye police in raids against Islamic State

357 The raids came a day after a deadly clash in the northwestern province of Yalova, where three police officers and six IS militants were killed. Eight other officers and a night guard were wounded when police stormed a house used as a hideout. Turkiye has launched a series of operations against suspected IS cells in the past week. AP

Telangana sees a downward trend in crime rate in 2025

2.33% Crime rates in Telangana saw a slight downward trend in 2025, with total cases dropping to 2.29 lakh — a 2.33% decrease — from the 2.34 lakh cases reported last year. According to police data released on Tuesday, over 500 underground CPI (Maoist) cadre, surrendered in the outgoing year. PTI

Dip in registration of residential properties in Indian cities in 2025

5% Registration of residential properties declined 5% to 5.45 lakh units till December 25 this year across nine cities, while value rose 11% to ₹4.46 crore, according to Square Yards. The real estate consultant released the data of properties registered in Pune, Thane, Mumbai, Navi Mumbai, Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Noida, Greater Noida and Ghaziabad. PTI

Number of flights cancelled due to fog conditions in Delhi

118 About 16 flights diverted and 130 services delayed at the Delhi airport on Tuesday as dense fog disrupted operations. The Indira Gandhi International Airport handles around 1,300 flights daily. An official said 60 arrivals and 58 departures were cancelled while 16 flights were diverted at the airport. PTI

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Law on 'suspension of sentence'

In life imprisonment cases like Kuldeep Singh Sengar's, what factors must appellate courts weigh before suspending a sentence? Does the Delhi High Court's view that an MLA is not a 'public servant' under the POCSO framework expose a gap that weakens protection against aggravated abuses by elected representatives?

LETTER & SPIRIT

Kartikey Singh

On December 29, a three-judge vacation bench of the Supreme Court, comprising CJI Surya Kant, Justice J.K. Maheshwari and Justice A.G. Masih, issued notice and stayed the Delhi High Court's judgment suspending the life sentence of a former four-time MLA, Kuldeep Singh Sengar and granting him bail pending appeal in the 2017 infamous Unnao rape case. The intervention came just six days after the High Court, on December 23, suspended Sengar's life sentence, which triggered intense public debate.

The case stems from allegations that in June 2017, the survivor, then a minor, was raped by the convict, the then-sitting MLA, at his residence. Amid allegations of police inaction and intimidation, the probe was transferred to the CBI in April 2018, and the trial shifted to Delhi pursuant to the SC's directions. On December 16, 2019, the trial court in Delhi convicted Sengar, and by a separate order on December 20, 2019, sentenced him to imprisonment for the remainder of his natural life.

Once a trial concludes, an accused is either acquitted or convicted. A conviction displaces the "presumption of innocence" and renders the sentence operative, requiring the convict to undergo the awarded punishment. However, the conviction remains appealable, and during the pendency of appellate scrutiny, the convict may, under Section 389 of the CrPC, 1973 (now Section 430 of the BNSS, 2023), seek suspension of the execution of the sentence and consequential bail if in custody, keeping its enforcement in abeyance. Importantly, 'suspension of sentence', which is a discretionary judicial power, halts only the punishment and not the finding of guilt.

When do courts suspend a sentence?

The law draws a clear distinction between 'suspension of sentence' in cases involving short-term or fixed-term sentences, where it is the norm, and in serious offences, often punishable with life imprisonment, where it is an exception. In *Bhagwan Rama Shinde Gosai vs. State of Gujarat (1999)*, the SC held that when a fixed-term sentence is under appeal, appellate courts must liberally exercise their discretion to suspend the sentence, barring exceptional circumstances. Conversely, in serious offences or those punishable with life imprisonment, such as Sengar's case, 'suspension of sentence' under Section 389 CrPC is rare and must follow an objective assessment of factors including the nature and gravity of the offence, the manner of its commission, and the desirability of releasing the convict on bail, as reiterated by the top court in *Shivani Tyagi vs. State of Uttar Pradesh (2024)*, an acid attack case.

In allowing Sengar's 'suspension of sentence' application, the High Court focused primarily on his conviction under Section 5(c) of the POCSO Act, which criminalises 'aggravated' penetrative sexual assault by a "public servant" on a child and attracts punishment under Section 6. Under the criminal law framework, offences committed by persons in positions of trust or authority, such as police or armed force personnel, public servants, and staff of institutions including hospitals, jails, or educational establishments, are treated as 'aggravated' and subjected to enhanced punishment, reflecting legislative recognition of abuse of power and heightened victim vulnerability.



Public voices: Women stage a protest demanding justice for the Unnao gangrape victim outside Delhi High Court in New Delhi. ANI

Definition of public servant

Importantly, the POCSO Act does not define the term "public servant." Under Section 2(2) of the POCSO Act, undefined expressions shall draw their meaning from the IPC (1860), CrPC (1973), the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, or the Information Technology Act, 2000. Among these, only the IPC defines "public servant" under Section 21, encompassing categories such as judges, military officers, and arbitrators, etc., but not elected legislators. Relying on this statutory scheme and the top court's ruling in *R.S. Nayak vs. A.R. Antulay (1984)*, the HC held that an MLA does not qualify as a "public servant" under the IPC and, consequently, the POCSO Act. This is a departure from the trial court's approach, which had sustained Sengar's conviction under Section 5(c) by importing the broader definition of "public servant" from Section 2(viii) of the Prevention of Corruption Act (PCA), 1988, which includes any person holding an office to perform a public duty.

Consequently, the HC held, prima facie, that Sengar's case did not fall within the category of rape committed by a "public servant" under Section 5(c) of the POCSO Act or Section 376(2)(b) IPC. This finding formed the central basis for suspending his sentence and granting regular bail. The HC also noted that Sengar had undergone over seven years of imprisonment, and, relying on *Kashmira Singh vs. State of Punjab (1977)*, observed that prolonged incarceration could cause injustice if the conviction or sentence were ultimately modified.

Addressing the survivor's apprehension of threat, rooted in a documented history of systemic intimidation, the custodial death of her father (for which Sengar stands convicted under Section 304(II) IPC), police callousness, and the 2019 truck-car accident that critically injured her and her lawyer and killed her two aunts, the HC noted that the SC had granted her CRPF protection in August 2019. Nevertheless, the HC held that 'suspension of sentence' could not be denied solely on the apprehension that police or paramilitary forces might fail in their protective duties, as such a premise would undermine their role.

In a case that laid bare a prolonged struggle for justice, structural barriers and deep institutional failures in confronting entrenched power, the suspension of a life sentence raises serious concerns.

First, while the HC is legally correct in holding that it could not expand the statutory definition of "public servant" by amending the legislation to import the broader meaning under the PCA, its interpretation could have been more purposive. The resulting anomaly is troubling: while a *patwari* (village accountant) or police constable qualifies as a "public servant" and attracts punishment under the POCSO Act, an elected MLA does not. This ambiguity in the POCSO framework was also flagged by the SC bench. By narrowing the scope of the POCSO Act, a special, victim-centric statute designed to protect children, the HC accorded insufficient weight to its object and intent. Offences under Section 5(c) are undoubtedly graver than corruption offences by MPs or MLAs: while corruption undermines governance, offences under the POCSO Act involve the direct abuse of children, causing severe physical and psychological trauma with lasting social consequences.

The apex court has repeatedly cautioned against interpretive literalism that weakens POCSO's protective core. In *Attorney General for India vs. Satish (2021)*, it rejected the Bombay HC's untenable narrow interpretation that groping a minor through clothing, without direct "skin-to-skin" contact, did not amount to "touch" or "physical contact" so as to attract the offence of "sexual assault" under Section 7 of the POCSO Act. Similarly, in *Independent Thought vs. Union of India (2017)*, the SC harmoniously and purposively interpreted child-protection law by reading down Exception 2 to Section 375 IPC, which had exempted non-consensual sexual intercourse with one's wife aged between 15 and 18, from the offence of rape. Together, these rulings affirm that when child protection is at stake, statutory interpretation must advance, not dilute, the law's protective purpose.

Second, the HC's decision rests primarily on the prima facie inapplicability of Section 5(c) of the POCSO Act and the period of incarceration already undergone. However, the SC has held that in cases involving life imprisonment, 'suspension of sentence' under Section 389 CrPC requires the appellate court to assess whether the convict has a fair chance of acquittal. Recently, in *Chhotelal Yadav vs. State of Jharkhand (2025)*, the apex court set aside a 'suspension of sentence', holding that in life imprisonment cases, suspension is warranted only where the convict demonstrates a palpable or gross error in the trial court's judgment sufficient to show that the appeal may succeed and result in acquittal. In Sengar's case, the HC ought to have examined whether the non-applicability of Section 5(c) would lead to his complete acquittal. Further, in *Shivani Tyagi vs. State of Uttar Pradesh (2024)*, the SC clarified that long incarceration alone cannot justify 'suspension of sentence' in life imprisonment cases.

In the same vein, in *Jamna Lal vs. State of Rajasthan (2025)*, involving a POCSO conviction carrying a 20-year sentence, the SC set aside an order suspending sentence, holding that once the trial court has found the victim to be a minor, such a finding cannot be lightly unsettled at the suspension stage.

Third, the HC should have accorded greater weight to the undisputed record of intimidation and violence, including the survivor's father's death, alleged witness tampering, and the exceptional security measures required during trial.

What is next?

The HC's literal interpretation highlights a statutory framework that recognises authority only when formally mentioned, not when exercised through entrenched political power, as seen in the definition of "public servant." This limitation is legislatively inherited, not judicially created. While legality and justice often align, they do not always converge.

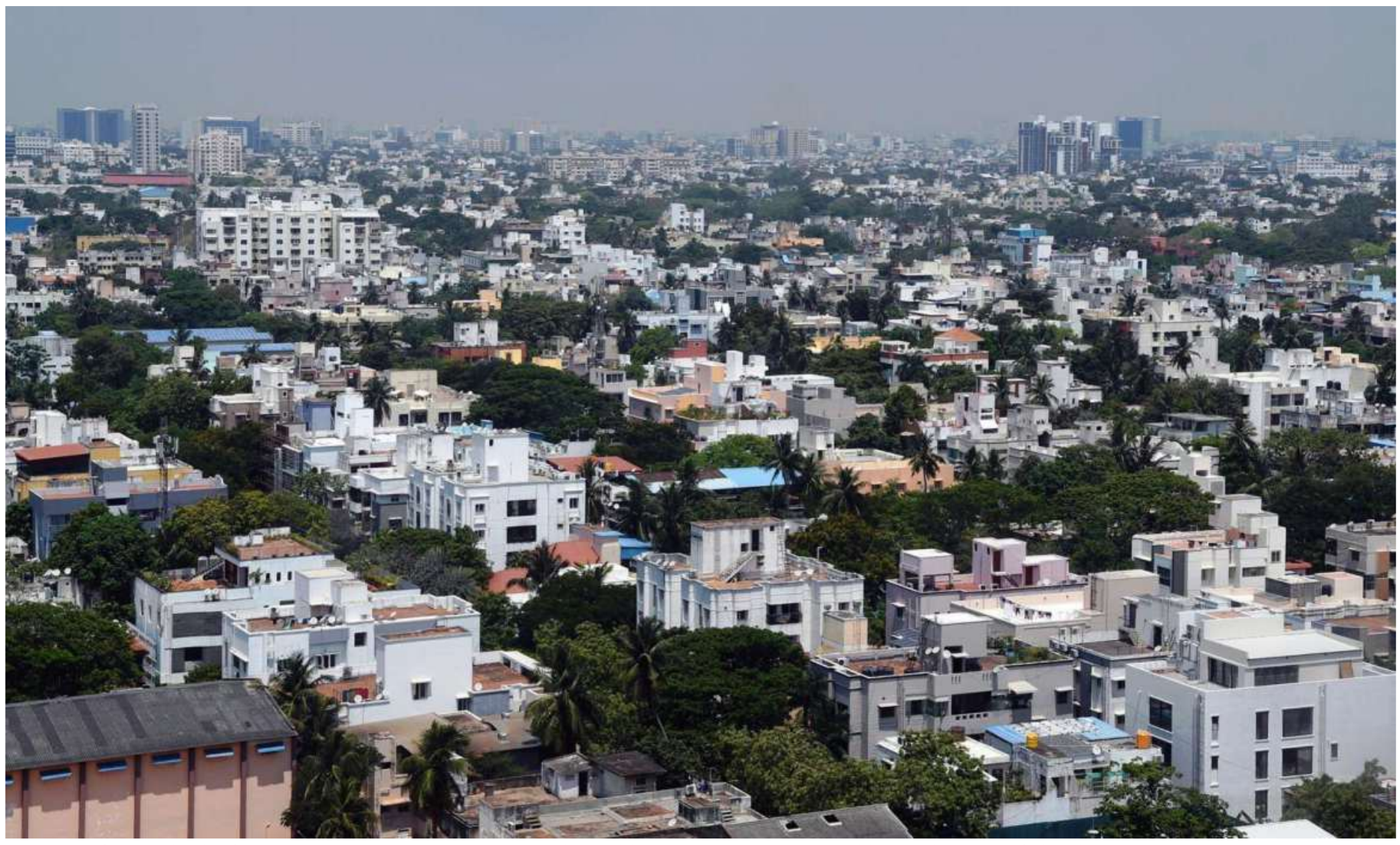
Beyond legal questions, the case also exposes how the criminal justice system operates for survivors of sexual violence. It lays bare the fact that, in reality, the fundamental right of equality before law and equal protection of laws under Article 14 of our Constitution is not truly treated as equal for every individual. Yet, these courageous survivors bear the cost not to vindicate the system, but to reveal its limits and expand justice for all.

Kartikey Singh is a lawyer based in New Delhi. Views expressed are personal.

THE GIST

- The law draws a distinction between 'suspension of sentence' in cases involving short-term or fixed-term sentences, where it is the norm, and in serious offences, where it is an exception.
- 'Suspension of sentence', which is a discretionary judicial power, halts only the punishment and not the finding of guilt.
- The POCSO Act does not define the term "public servant." The Act says undefined expressions shall draw their meaning from the IPC, CrPC, the Juvenile Justice Act, 2015, or the IT Act, 2000.

FISCALS AND FACTS



Between the lines: Tamil Nadu is far more urbanised, which matters because it correlates with higher tax capacity, better service delivery, and more diversified employment. RAGHUNATHAN SR

The curious case of Tamil Nadu where big debt numbers tell the wrong story

Why the State's borrowing looks less 'alarming', once growth, per capita income and human development are taken into account; moreover, when 75% of revenue comes from the State's own resources, how should debates on outstanding debt factor in tax capacity and cooperative federalism?

Salman Soz

A Congress party colleague's recent post has stirred up quite a debate. The claim is stark, the language urgent, and the conclusion dramatic: Tamil Nadu's debt situation is "alarming."

The comparison is eye-catching too. In 2010, Uttar Pradesh had more than double the debt of Tamil Nadu. Today, Tamil Nadu's outstanding debt is higher than Uttar Pradesh's. On the face of it, that sounds damning. A single indicator. A clean before-and-after. A tidy verdict.

But public finance is rarely tidy and single-indicator stories, however viral, often hide more than they reveal. I am not about to dismiss concerns on debt. Debt shapes fiscal space, future budgets, and policy choices. However, debt, by itself, is not a moral failing, nor is it a sufficient summary of a State's economic health. To understand what Tamil Nadu's numbers actually mean, we need to step back, widen the lens, and place that one indicator inside a larger economic story.

Let us begin where the criticism begins. As of 2025-26, Tamil Nadu's outstanding debt is estimated at 26.1% of gross state domestic product (GSDP), down from 26.4% in 2024-25 and 26.6% in 2023-24. The State's debt ratio has been on a gradual downward path since its COVID-19 peak, though it remains above pre-Covid levels.

Uttar Pradesh, by contrast, is estimated to end 2025-26 with outstanding liabilities of 29.4% of GSDP, also declining from 30.8% in 2024-25. U.P. remains more indebted than Tamil Nadu relative to the size of its economy, even though Tamil Nadu's absolute debt stock is now higher. Tamil Nadu's economy, at ₹35.7 lakh crore GSDP in 2025-26, is significantly larger per capita than Uttar Pradesh's ₹30.8 lakh crore economy, despite U.P. having nearly three times the population. Absolute comparisons without denominators make for good headlines, but weak analysis.

What about the interest burden, another charge raised in the post? Tamil Nadu does spend a high share of its revenue receipts on interest payments, about 21% in 2025-26. That places it among the higher-interest-burden States. Yes, interest costs constrain budgets. But no, the numbers do not indicate a debt spiral. In fact, Tamil Nadu's fiscal deficit is projected at 3% of GSDP in 2025-26, lower than the 3.3% revised estimate for 2024-25, and fully within the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) framework. The direction of travel matters as much as the level.

A more meaningful way to assess debt sustainability over the last decade is to step away from headline stock numbers and look instead at the mechanics of debt accumulation. Over the ten-year period from 2012-13 to 2021-22, Tamil Nadu's average real GDP growth has exceeded its average real effective interest rate by about 2.1 percentage points, while even in the more recent five-year window, which includes the pandemic shock, the growth-interest differential remains positive at 1.3 percentage points. This matters because when growth persistently exceeds the effective cost of borrowing, debt ratios stabilise or decline unless primary deficits are very large, which in Tamil Nadu's case have been below 2% of GSDP.

So, what distinguishes Tamil Nadu is not that its debt rose, but what happened alongside that rise. Notably between 2020-21 and 2023-24, Tamil Nadu

A meaningful way to assess debt sustainability is to step away from headline stock numbers and look instead at the mechanics of debt accumulation

maintained real GSDP growth averaging above 7%, with services and manufacturing consistently expanding. The economy did not stagnate under debt. It expanded through it.

Tamil Nadu's per capita GSDP in 2023-24 stood at ₹3.53 lakh, more than three times Uttar Pradesh's ₹1.07 lakh. This reflects decades of higher productivity, industrialisation, and human capital formation. Tamil Nadu is far more urbanised, which matters because it correlates with higher tax capacity, better service delivery, and more diversified employment. Human development indicators reinforce this picture. Tamil Nadu consistently outperforms most States on literacy, health access, and demographic transition. These outcomes reduce long-term fiscal pressures by lowering dependency ratios and improving labour productivity.

Where Tamil Nadu's story becomes most forward-looking is in investment and economic composition. In 2025-26, Tamil Nadu planned a 22% increase in capital outlays, with especially sharp increases in transport, urban development, and energy. The State has also committed resources to the Tamil Nadu Semiconductor Mission, fintech hubs, R&D ecosystems, and advanced manufacturing. Debt that finances future productivity is not the same as debt that merely fills revenue gaps. The composition of expenditure matters, and Tamil Nadu's capital-heavy budget tilt suggests an economy still investing its way forward.

There is a deeper political economy question hiding behind the debt debate. Tamil Nadu raises 75% of its revenue receipts from its own resources. 25% comes from its share in central taxes and via grants. Uttar Pradesh, by contrast, depends on the Centre for over half of its revenue receipts. This reflects stronger tax bases, higher compliance, and denser economic activity in Tamil Nadu.

Yet, fiscal debates cannot ignore past performance, present capacity, and fiscal transfers. States that industrialised early, invested in human development, and controlled population growth, now face tighter borrowing constraints and lower transfers, even as they continue to contribute disproportionately to national growth and tax collections. If debt alone becomes the yardstick, the incentive structure gets inverted. Good performance gets punished, and catch-up States get permanent support with little accountability. That is not cooperative federalism. It is a recipe for discord.

One indicator can spark a debate. It cannot settle it. The real story is not about who overtook whom on a debt chart. It is about what States did with their borrowing, what economies they built, and what futures they are financing. On that score, Tamil Nadu's story remains far more resilient, and far more relevant, than a single line on a graph would have us believe.

Salman Soz is a member of the Indian National Congress and co-author of 'Unshackling India: Hard Truths and Clear Choices for Economic Revival'. Views expressed are personal.

THE DAILY QUIZ

A quiz on popular traditions seen around the world to usher in the New Year

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

Vighnesh P. Venkitesh

QUESTION #1
In which country can one normally see people throwing dishes against the door and banging pots to scare away 'bad spirits'?

QUESTION #2
In this Spanish tradition that has recently become popular around the world, what fruit do people eat 12 of for good luck in the New Year?

QUESTION #3
In which country is New Year's eve called 'Hogmanay' and celebrated with customs such as 'first-footing'?

QUESTION #4
Name the spiced apple drink served in parts of England to toast good health for the New Year?

QUESTION #5
What do the Greeks hang on their doors on New Year's eve to symbolise rebirth?

QUESTION #6
Name the country where one could see people observing 12 seconds of silence at midnight as a tribute to the year gone by?



Visual Question:
Name this effigy and the place in Kerala where it is burned at the stroke of midnight on New Year's eve. THULASI KAKKAT

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1. Where did the summit between Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin take place? **Ans: Anchorage, Alaska**
2. The Prime Minister of this Western European country resigned after less than a month in office, only to be reinstated. **Ans: France**
3. The Preah Vihear Temple remains a point of contention between which two Southeast Asian countries. **Ans: Cambodia and Thailand**
4. Where did the mass shooting attack on tourists occur that led to a military escalation between India and Pakistan? **Ans: Pahalgam, Jammu and Kashmir**
5. Which African city hosted this year's G20 Summit? **Ans: Johannesburg, South Africa**
6. Which country enforced the world's first social media ban for children under 16? **Ans: Australia**
7. Where was the year's deadliest earthquake recorded? **Ans: Sagaing Region, Myanmar**
8. The United Nations Security Council supported an autonomy plan for the disputed Western Sahara territory under the sovereignty of which country? **Ans: Morocco**
9. The 2025 Nobel Peace Prize winner was from this South American country. **Ans: Venezuela**
10. This sparsely populated Arctic region was referenced in global discourse after a major power assigned it a special envoy. **Ans: Greenland**
Visual: This narrow water body bordering the Arabian Peninsula appeared frequently in the news this year in connection with drone and missile attacks on commercial shipping. Can you name the strait? **Ans: Bab el-Mandeb**

Early Birds
Piyali Tuli | Tito Shiladitya | Sunil Madhavan | Diya Goyal | Pranab Biswas



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

S. Upendran

What are you doing here? Why aren't you in school?"
"We have a holiday today. The staff is on strike."
"I see. What are you planning to do? Are you..."
"...why didn't you correct me? I said, the staff is on strike. Shouldn't I have said, the staff are on strike'?"
"Both the sentences are grammatically correct. You see, some nouns can be followed by either a singular verb or a plural verb. It all depends on how you look at them and..."
"...how I look at them? What do you mean?"
"Well, take for example, the noun, staff. If you look upon all the members of the staff as coming together and forming a single unit, then you use a singular verb. For example, the staff is going on a picnic tomorrow."
"The staff wants coffee to be provided during the lunch hour."
"That's a good example. If, on the other hand, you look upon the staff as consisting of individual members and..."
"...and not as forming a single unit?"
"Right! If your focus is on individual members, then you use a plural verb. For example, the staff want coffee to be provided during the lunch hour."
"The staff have decided to reject the Principal's proposal. Does that sound OK?"
"Sounds good to me. Let me give you another example. The family was of the opinion that no loan should be given to Mohan. The family were of the opinion that no loan should be given to Mohan. What's the difference between these two sentences?"
"When you say, the family was of the opinion...', what you're implying is that you are thinking of all the members of the family coming together and forming a single unit. The family is a single entity."
"That's right! You're not looking at them as separate individuals, but as a single group."
"If, on the other hand, I say, 'the family were of the opinion...', then I guess I am focussing on the individual members of the family. I am not..."
"...right again! You're not looking at them as a single unit. Here are a few more examples. The jury has asked for more time. The jury have asked for more time. Now then, can you think of any more examples?"
"How about this example? East Bengal is at the top of the table. East Bengal are winning the game. They have just scored another goal."
"Tell me, if there is no school, why are you all dressed up? Going somewhere?"
"My father, along with his four friends, are taking me to the planetarium."
"Is."
"What?"
"My father, along with his four friends, is taking me to the planetarium. What you are saying is, my father is taking me to the planetarium along with his four friends."
"I see. The former Chief Minister of Bihar, along with the Ministers, is sitting in the President's office."
"By the way, you said that your father was taking you to the planetarium today. Doesn't he have to go to the office?"
"NO!"
"No! Why not?"
"The management is on strike!"
Published in The Hindu on February 23, 1999

Word of the day

Panoply:
a complete and impressive array

Synonyms: display, exhibit

Usage: *The government has promised a whole panoply of social and economic improvements.*

Pronunciation: newsth.live/panoplypro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /pænəpli/

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

INBRIEF



Hyundai Motor India enters commercial mobility segment

Hyundai Motor India Ltd. (HMIL) announced its entry into the commercial mobility segment with the launch of its dedicated taxi offerings under the 'Prime Taxi' range. Purpose-built to address the evolving needs of fleet operators and taxi entrepreneurs, the Prime range offers reliability, low cost of ownership and superior comfort with strong earnings potential, HMIL said. PTI

Some EPM guidelines said to be issued this week

The government is likely to issue guidelines for at least some of the schemes under the recently-approved Export Promotion Mission (EPM) this week, according to sources in the know. The Union Cabinet approved the EPM in November. The mission was announced in Budget 2025. EPM would have an outlay of ₹25,060 crore for the period 2025-26 to 2030-31.

IndiGo parent faces GST penalty order of ₹458 crore

IndiGo's parent company InterGlobe Aviation Limited faces a massive ₹458.26 crore GST penalty order from the central authorities, it informed the BSE on Tuesday calling the order "erroneous". InterGlobe said it " strongly believes the order passed by the GST department is erroneous and not in accordance with law, backed by advice from external tax advisers. Accordingly, the company will contest the same and shall take appropriate legal remedies against the aforesaid order."

Small value retail digital payments on the rise: RBI report

UPI interface accounted for a majority share in transaction volume while real time gross settlement accounted for the largest share in value terms

Lalatendu Mishra
MUMBAI



Going digital: In volume terms, growth in digital payments was much higher at 35%, says RBI in its report. ALLEN EGENUSE J

The share of small value payments are seen growing faster, according to a report by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI).

"During 2024-25, digital payments grew by 17.9% in value terms, accounting for 97.6% of India's total payments. In contrast, payments through paper-based instruments (cheques) declined during the year, representing the remaining 2.4%," the RBI said in its Report on Trend & Progress of Banking in India in 2024-25.

"In volume terms, growth in digital payments was much higher at 35% amidst increasing usage of digital methods for small value payments. The average value of retail digital payments decreased to ₹3,830 during 2024-25 from ₹4,382 during 2023-24," the RBI said.

The unified payments interface (UPI) accounted for a majority share in the volume of transactions, while real time gross settlement (RTGS), which facilitates high value transactions, accounted for the largest share in value term.

India has boarded the 'Reforms Express', says PM Modi in a post

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Year 2025 will be remembered as one where India "focused on reforms as a continuous national mission", PM Narendra Modi said in a LinkedIn post, listing reforms the government had implemented this year.

"I have been telling many people India has boarded the Reform Express," Mr. Modi said. "The primary engine of this Reform Express is India's demography, our young generation and the indomitable spirit of our people. 2025 will be remembered as a year for India when it focused on reforms as a continuous national mission, building on the ground covered over the past 11 years."

'Open access to AI infra key in India'

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI



Data centres currently account for roughly 0.5% of India's total electricity consumption.

The office of the Principal Scientific Advisor to the government said in a working paper that making Artificial Intelligence (AI) infrastructure available to all players would be essential.

In the paper, the PSA said it would be important to make "foundational AI resources such as compute capacity, high-quality datasets, and enabling tools, available beyond a limited set of large firms and major urban hubs so that a wider range of actors can build, test and deploy AI responsibly

As India gears up to host the AI Impact Summit in February, the government has set democratising access as a key plank, as much of the world's AI infrastructure is being built by Western technology giants. Officials have reacted with concern over the concentration of power this situation could lead to.

Under IndiaAI Mission, for instance, the government has provided thousands of graphics processing units (GPUs), essential components of AI infrastructure, to researchers and local startups.

The working paper echoes those concerns, and suggests India should work to integrate its own digital public infrastructure (DPI) into AI systems and open the gates for small players to participate. DPIs are projects such as Aadhaar and UPI, which have been referred to under this umbrella term as a way to push other developing economies to come up with digitised identity, payments and governance systems.

"A significant challenge arising from AI development is resource efficiency," the paper says, pushing for India to contribute to a less energy-intensive future for AI infrastructure. "Scaling AI data centres will require an additional 45-50 million square feet of real estate by 2030, underscoring the need to integrate sustainability planning with compute expansion ... Data centres currently account for roughly 0.5% of India's total electricity consumption, a share that could rise to nearly 3% by 2030 as capacity and workloads expand.

The report further said "Ecosystem-wide efforts are needed for expanding access to data and computing" in sectors such as agriculture and education.

MARKETS

MARKET WATCH

	TUESDAY	% CHANGE
Sensex	84,675	-0.02
US Dollar	89.75	0.26
Brent oil	62.02	-1.61

NIFTY 50

	PRICE	CHANGE
Adani Enter	2214.70	11.50
Adani Ports	1461.20	6.80
Apollo Hosp	6990.00	-94.50
Asian Paints	2758.30	-17.10
Axis Bank	1246.00	14.00
Bajaj Auto	9282.00	195.00
Bajaj Finserv	2026.40	14.30
Bajaj Finance	989.30	-8.70
Bharat Elec	393.30	0.05
Bharti Airtel	2099.80	18.20
Cipla	1492.50	-1.50
Coal India	398.00	-2.65
Dr Reddys Lab	1265.80	-2.80
Hindustan Unilever	40.20	0.00
Eicher Motors	7192.50	-79.50
Eternal Ltd.	277.10	-5.75
Grasim Ind	2841.70	-0.70
HCL Tech	1615.20	-15.60
HDFC Bank	990.90	-0.80
HDFC Life	743.00	-3.45
Hindalco	884.15	19.15
Hind Unilever	2290.20	-3.10
ICICI Bank	1342.50	-0.80
IntGlobeAvi	5018.00	-67.50
Infosys	1621.60	-23.10
ITC	400.60	-2.00
Jio Financial Services Ltd.	292.50	-1.45
JSW Steel	1111.60	19.00
Kotak Bank	2152.70	-5.90
L&T	4052.00	13.30
M&M	3660.30	68.20
Maruti Suzuki	16647.00	105.00
Max Healthcare	1040.80	-23.30
NestleIndia	1274.10	-5.90
NTPC	324.90	-0.60
ONGC	234.68	-0.14
PowerGrid Corp	260.35	-0.25
Reliance Ind	1539.80	-5.80
SBI Life	1995.50	-14.30
State Bank	973.45	8.40
Shriram Finance Ltd.	979.40	23.90
Sun Pharma	1720.20	3.00
TataConsumerProduct	1179.00	-16.20
Tata Steel	175.80	3.50
TCS	3246.80	-4.70
Tech Mahindra	1604.60	-7.80
Titan	3974.10	-9.60
Tata Motors PV	361.75	3.15
Trent Ltd.	4207.70	-18.30
UltraTech Cement	11705.00	-94.00
Wipro	263.65	-0.59

Sagarmala board approves ₹4,300-cr. of maritime loans

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI

SMFCL is aiming to build the loan book size of ₹8,000 cr. in FY26 to further boost maritime financing

Sagarmala Finance Corporation announced its foray into maritime financing with its board sanctioning loans of ₹4,300 crore for disbursement in the current fiscal.

Sagarmala Finance Corporation Ltd. (SMFCL) was inaugurated as India's first Non-Banking Financial Company (NBFC) in the maritime sector.

"Including this loan sanction of ₹4,300 crore scheduled for the disbursement in the present fiscal year, the company is aiming to build the loan book size of ₹8,000 crore in FY 2025-26, to further strengthen its position in maritime financing," SMFCL said in a statement.

The rating assignment by the major rating agencies is expected shortly which will further enhance in leveraging the borrowing cost, it added.

SMFCL said the ambitious strategy charted by the company is further backed by the strong support and trust shown by the Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, which has designated SMFCL as the nodal agency for the setting-up and operational co-ordination for flagship Maritime Development Fund of ₹25,000 crore. The fund shall include Maritime Investment Fund (MIF) with a corpus of ₹20,000 crore, and the Interest Incentivisation Fund (IIF), with a corpus of ₹5,000 crore.

Tough times



Expensive life: People walk through a local market as the value of the Iranian rial drops, in Tehran, Iran. VIA REUTERS

Russian oil imports dip in Dec. but trade structurally intact

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI



Russian-flagged oil tanker transits Bosphorus in Istanbul.

India's imports of Russian crude oil are set to register a sharp pullback in December, but the decline reflects short-term disruptions rather than a structural shift in sourcing patterns.

According to real-time data analytics company Kpler, Russian crude imports into India are expected to fall to around 1.2 million barrels per day (bpd) in December, down from 1.84 million bpd in November, marking the lowest level since December 2022.

Indian refiners continue to buy Russian crude from non-sanctioned entities.

The drop, flagged by analysts as early as October, has been driven by disruptions resulting from U.S. action on top Russian exporters, Rosneft and Lukoil, as well as due to the impact of EU sanctions on Russian-linked product flows.

"India's appetite for Russian crude cooled sharply in December, with imports falling to lowest levels since 2022 as major refiners cut intake following sanctions on Rosneft and Lukoil. This appears to be a near-term adjustment," said Sumit Ritolia, lead research analyst, refining and modeling, Kpler.

EU CBAM to crush aluminium,steel exporters' margin

Suresh P. Iyengar
MUMBAI

The rollout of Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) by the European Union from Thursday will have a major impact on the margins of steel and aluminium exporters. This comes even as Indian metal companies are reeling under the 50% duty on exports to the US. India is the second-largest exporter of steel and aluminium to the EU after China.

Under the EU's new rules, steel and aluminium imports will be taxed based on the volume of emissions associated with production. Though CBAM covers other polluting industries such as cement, electricity, fertilizers and a number of other goods, India does not export much of the products to the EU.

Steel firms are exploring alternative markets, primarily in Africa and West Asia, with exports to EU becoming almost unviable.

High emissions

Most of the steel produced in India is via blast furnaces, which generate more carbon dioxide emissions.

"We are still studying the impact as it is not yet clear whether CBAM will be company-specific or country-related," said a steel company executive.



Dirty steel?: Employees work at a steel processing production line of a factory in Punjab. REUTERS FILE

In fact, the government is also seeking an exemption from CBAM under the new free trade agreement being negotiated.

Ajay Garg, director & CEO, SMC Global Securities, said under CBAM, EU importers will be required to pay a carbon cost equivalent to what European producers bear under the EU's emissions trading system, making high-emission imports more expensive.

"This could compress the margins for Indian exporters or reduce their price competitiveness, unless producers improve energy efficiency or shift towards cleaner production technologies," he said.

CBAM expansion

Over time, the scope of CBAM may expand to include more sectors and downstream products, increasing compliance and reporting requirements for exporters, he added.

Overall, CBAM is likely to accelerate decarbonisation efforts among Indian manufacturers targeting the European market, according to Mr. Garg.

Naveen Mathur, director - Commodities and Currencies, Anand Rathi Shares and Stock Brokers, said steel and aluminium exporters to Europe will incur extra costs based on the carbon emission, which will raise landed costs, lower margins and improve the competitiveness of low-carbon producers in the EU market.

"In the first phase, CBAM also includes cement, fertilizers, electricity and hydrogen. "The scope will likely grow to cover downstream products over time," he said.

Overall, CBAM raises costs for carbon-intensive exports to Europe, and will gradually change trade patterns in favour of cleaner production, he added.

(The writer is with The Hindu businessline)

India's cement industry to grow 6-7% in FY27: ICRA

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI

The Indian cement industry is anticipated to sustain mid single-digit growth journey in the next fiscal, helped by factors including steady demand from housing and infrastructure projects, said rating agency ICRA in its report.

It expects the industry to grow about 6-7% in FY27 and touch 6.5 to 7.5% growth in FY26. ICRA also expects the industry "to add 85-90 MTPA capacity during FY2026-FY2027.

China said to mandate 50% local gear for chipmakers



Self reliance: The 50% rule is leading Chinese manufacturers to choose domestic suppliers. REUTERS

Reuters
SINGAPORE

China is requiring chipmakers to use at least 50% domestically made equipment for adding new capacity, three people familiar with the matter said,as Beijing pushes to build a self-sufficient semiconductor supply chain.

The rule is not publicly documented, but chipmakers seeking State approval to build or expand their plants have been told by authorities in recent months that they must prove through procurement tenders that at least half their equipment will be Chinese-made, the people told *Reuters*.

The mandate is one of the most significant measures Beijing has introduced to wean itself off reliance on foreign technology, a push that gathered pace after the U.S. tightened technology export restrictions in 2023, banning sales of advanced AI chips and semiconductor equipment to China.

Local suppliers preferred

The 50% rule is leading Chinese manufacturers to choose domestic suppliers even in areas where foreign equipment from the U.S., Japan, South Korea and Europe remain available. Applications failing the threshold are typically rejected, though authorities grant flexibility depending on supply constraints, the people said.

India's domination of global rice trade stokes looming water crisis

Rice has become key agricultural export for India, but rice farming depletes groundwater in already water-stressed States, forcing deeper borewells; subsidies encourage water-intensive rice cultivation; some States have fledgling efforts to encourage growers to substitute for less thirsty crops

NEWS ANALYSIS

Reuters
NEW DELHI



Too costly: Farm workers plant rice saplings in a field during the monsoon season, in Chikmagalur. PTI

When India overtook China as the world's largest producer of rice this year, the country's politicians and agriculture lobby marked the moment by praising resilient farmers and innovative government policy.

India has nearly doubled the amount of rice it exported over the past decade, with shipments crossing 20 million metric tons in the latest fiscal year.

But many rice farmers in the country's agricultural heartlands are in a less celebratory mood. Interviews with growers, government officials and farm scientists, as well as a review of groundwater data, reveal widespread concern that thirsty rice crops are unsustainably draining India's already-low aquifers, forcing farmers to borrow heavily to drill ever-deeper borewells.

Deeper borewells

In the rice-basket States of Haryana and Punjab, groundwater was reachable at around 30 feet a decade ago, according to 50 farmers and eight water and agriculture officials.

But drainage has accelerated in the past five years and borewells must now go between 80 and 200 feet, according to the farmers, whose accounts were corroborated with government data and research by Punjab Agricultural University.

"Every year, the borewell has to go deeper," said Balkar Singh, a 50-year-old farmer in Haryana. "It's getting too expensive."

At the same time, government subsidies that incentivise rice cultivation discourage farmers from switching to less water-intensive crops, said Uday Chandra, a South Asia politics expert at Georgetown University in Qatar. The subsidies —some of them a legacy from past decades when India struggled to feed its growing population - include a state-guaranteed minimum price for rice that has climbed by around 70% over the past decade, as well as heavy power subsidies that encourage extracting water for farm use.

> The subsidies include a State-guaranteed minimum price for rice that has climbed by around 70% over the past decade

The net effect, said Avinash Kishore at the International Food Policy Research Institute think-tank in Washington, is that one of the world's most water-stressed countries is paying farmers to consume vast amounts of precious groundwater.

The Indian Ministries of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare and of Water Resources did not respond when presented with *Reuters'* findings.

Farm law reforms

Prime Minister Narendra Modi previously attempted to reform agricultural laws, including measures that would incentivise more private-sector crop purchases. But that raised fears that the government might reduce the quantity of grain it purchases at guaranteed prices, prompting protests by millions of farmers that paralysed the nation five years ago and forced Mr. Modi into a rare retreat.

India accounts for 40% of the world's rice exports, so any changes in production will have global implications, Kishore said. In addition, India grows far more rice than it needs to feed its domestic population, which overtook China's in 2023 to become the world's largest, at more than 1.4 billion people.

"The sheer volume of rice India produces and exports gives it a pivotal role in global trade," Kishore said. "But it also raises a question: should the country be growing and selling so much rice?"

Punishing costs

While farmers in much of India rely on a mix of surface and groundwater irrigation, growers in the northern states of Punjab and Haryana, which are the nation's leading rice producers, typically depend on groundwater.

That dependence makes rice farmers in both States particularly vulnerable to climate change, since aquifers aren't fully recharged when monsoon rains are weak.

Even though monsoon rains have been strong for the last two years, farmers have been extracting so much water that aquifers in large parts of Haryana and Punjab are classified by the Indian government as either "over-exploited" or at "critical" levels.

Policy changes?

There are some signs that Indian officials are hoping to break the vicious cycle between rice subsidies and groundwater extraction. The Haryana government last year began offering a subsidy of ₹17,500 per hectare to encourage farmers to switch to crops such as millets, which require significantly less water.

The incentive offered by the Haryana government to promote crops such as millets, however, is available only for one growing season and has so far failed to drive large-scale adoption.

'Falling too short'

The one-off incentive is too short, according to Gulati, who thinks at least five years are needed to encourage farmers to make a long-term switch from rice to millets.

The Haryana Department of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare did not respond to questions about the programme.

Gulati said his research indicates that the state could incentivise farmers to switch to less water-intensive crops without increasing spending on subsidies.

Punjab spends about ₹39,000 on fertilizer and power subsidies for each hectare of rice grown, but redirecting ₹35,000 to pay farmers who grow less thirsty crops would be enough to let them maintain their income levels, he said.

U.S. President Donald Trump's funding reductions put America's consumer watchdog on the brink of collapse

Reuters
WASHINGTON



Crumbling edifice: The removed signage on the door of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) headquarters. REUTERS

When Bianca Jones, a 33-year-old special education teacher in Memphis, Tennessee, decided a couple of years ago that she wanted to buy a house, she started digging into her Experian credit report. She was shocked by what she found.

Her student debt had been double-counted, making it look as though she owed a quarter of a million dollars and putting home ownership out of reach. Jones disputed the items with Experian, one of the major credit reporting agencies, multiple times in writing and on the phone, but got nowhere.

"They kept saying it's been verified, it's been verified...They never investigated. They never tried to remove it," Jones said in an interview.

Eventually, Jones complained to the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, a federal watchdog created by Congress in 2010 to protect consumers in their financial dealings, helping her lawyers show a judge the lengths she'd gone to mitigate damage to her credit, according to her attorneys, legal papers and a copy of the complaint. That paper trail eventually helped Jones successfully sue Experian to correct her record.

Jones closed on a house purchase in the Memphis suburb of Millington for $3,00,000 in January.

"If I didn't have this agency to go to, I don't think I'd be in the house right now," said Jones. "It actually changed my life."

Experian and the CFPB did not respond to a request for comment on Jones' case.

Facing shutdown

In interviews, consumers who had fallen on hard times or known difficulty, lawyers who work with the poor and credit counselors told *Reuters* the CFPB had been a lifeline for people facing hardship and they feared that, without it, many consumers would be left unprotected from financial predators.

Conceived by Senator Elizabeth Warren to police the type of lending that fuelled the 2008 financial crisis, the CFPB has long been a target of conservatives and industry. Congress created the agency as part of post-crash reforms in 2010 as the sole federal body primarily charged with protecting consumers' rights in the financial marketplace.

The CFPB now faces extinction under President Donald Trump's second administration, which says the agency is a political weapon for Democrats and a burden on free enterprise.

'Get rid of agency'

Speaking to reporters at the White House in February, Trump said it was "very important to get rid of the agency," claiming, without spelling out evidence, that Warren had "used that as her little personal agency to go around and destroy people."

In an interview, Warren dismissed the criticism as a sign the CFPB was doing its job. "This is not about vendettas. This is about enforcing the law as it is written, so that billionaires and billionaire corporations don't cheat American families. I think that's a pretty good thing," she said. White House Budget Director Russell Vought, a staunch CFPB critic and the agency's acting head, told "The Charlie Kirk Show" podcast in October he plans to shutter the CFPB. The administration is fighting in court to fire up to 90% of its workers, while planning to move pending investigations and litigation to the Justice Department. The agency says it is due to run out of money in early 2026 and Vought says he cannot legally seek more until the Federal Reserve returns to what the administration deems "profitability," a position experts dispute. Congressional Republicans also slashed the CFPB's maximum allowable funding in July. Together, the administration, congressional Republicans and industry-backed lawsuits have undone a decade's worth of CFPB rules on matters ranging from medical debt and student loans to credit card late fees, overdraft charges and mortgage lending. The agency has also dropped or paused its probes and enforcement actions, and stopped supervising the consumer finance industries, leading to a string of resignations.

The CFPB and the White House did not respond to requests for comment.

Weak protection

Warren said that as a law professor studying bankruptcy she saw that consumer protections were weak and fragmented, and that America needed a single federal agency dedicated to protecting consumers from unfair, deceptive and abusive practices."I was stunned by the number of people in financial trouble who had lost a job or got sick but who had also been cheated by one or more of their creditors," she told *Reuters*. "For no agency was consumer protection a first priority, it was somewhere between fifth and tenth, which meant there was just no cop on the beat. If the CFPB is not there, people have nowhere to turn when they get cheated."

Critics say overreach

Republicans said the agency was redundant, with federal bank watchdogs, like the Office of the Comptroller of the Currency and Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, and state regulators already looking out for consumers, and that its funding and leadership structure were unconstitutional. Like other banking regulators, the CFPB's funding is not set annually by Congress and does not come directly from taxpayers. Rather, the agency draws on the Federal Reserve and its director was until recently protected from removal at will by the President. Republicans accused the CFPB's first director Richard Cordray, a Democrat, of using those powers to crush small banks and businesses via overzealous enforcement and complex regulations, and of overstepping the agency's legal authority by trying to regulate companies Congress had exempted from its oversight, such as auto dealerships.

Conservative and industry groups tried several times to curb its powers or extinguish it altogether via the courts. In 2020 the Supreme Court handed the president the power to fire the director, which he has since used. Critics on the political right accused former director Rohit Chopra, a Democrat, of exceeding his authority, flouting the federal rulemaking process, and harming consumers with an ill-conceived crackdown on financial firm fees.

Thomas Hoenig, who served as vice chair of the FDIC from 2012 to 2018, said he was skeptical of some of the CFPB's work under prior administrations, but that it still served an important purpose.

'Very important'

For some, though, the agency has been a lifeline. Millions of Americans like Jones who are struggling with credit reporting errors, predatory lenders, debt collectors, fraud, discrimination or other challenges, are now filing complaints every year with the agency, which prompts companies to fix the issues, sometimes by paying the complainants, or explain themselves.

When companies repeatedly break the rules, the CFPB punishes them and tries to make their customers whole. To date, it has returned $21 billion to consumers, according to CFPB data.

Morgan Smith, a 31-year-old single mother and social services worker in Issaquah, Washington, turned to those resources when she realised she had been a victim of identity theft. After her wallet and ID were stolen from her car, she learned that someone had opened up a string of accounts in her name, she said: a rental car that ended up in a crash, an unpaid storage unit and a hotel room at an amusement park. *Reuters* was unable to confirm Smith's account independently.

"I went straight to the CFPB and I was navigated there to their consumer education tab where I was able to find out how to deal with fraud and scams. It gave me all the information I needed to know... my rights," she said.

"That was very important for me to have this resource." Without the CFPB, borrowers would once again rely on a hodgepodge of federal, state and other local agencies which lack the CFPB's resources, expertise and legal powers, say consumer groups.

"Prior to the CFPB coming around, we'd have to say, 'write your attorney general, write to the FTC,' whoever it was, and it became this sort of letter-writing campaign," said Sam Hohman, who runs the Nebraska nonprofit Credit Advisors Foundation, which helps people get out of debt.

As a result, people like Virginia resident Michael Johnson, 49, may have fewer options in future when they fall into trouble.

After a kidney transplant and leg amputation several years ago left Johnson unable to work, he racked up credit card debt paying for basic expenses, he said. This summer he received court summonses from creditors seeking to collect on that old debt, according to court records.

"I got in over my head unintentionally," Johnson said in an interview. Using a CFPB database of credit card terms and conditions-,Johnson learned that his creditors were required to use arbitration rather than sue in court, which could cost more than the underlying debts. Johnson represented himself in court and says so far one creditor has dropped its complaint while the other is considering its options.

"It adds credibility to your defence that you understand your rights," Johnson said.

DUBAI

Saudi Arabia bombs Yemen port over weapons shipment from UAE



REUTERS

Saudi Arabia bombed Yemen's port city of Mukalla on Tuesday after a weapons shipment from the United Arab Emirates arrived for separatist forces in the war-torn country, and warned that it viewed Emirati actions as "extremely dangerous". The bombing followed days of tensions over the advance of the separatist forces. AP

TEHRAN

Iran designates Royal Canadian Navy a terrorist organisation



The Iranian Foreign Ministry designated the Royal Canadian Navy a terrorist organisation on Tuesday in what it said was retaliation for Canada's 2024 blacklisting of Iran's Revolutionary Guards. Ottawa broke off diplomatic ties with Tehran in 2012, calling Iran "the most significant threat to global peace". AFP

PALM BEACH

Trump says U.S. hit docking area for Venezuela 'drug-laden boats'



REUTERS

The United States hit and destroyed a docking area for alleged Venezuela drug boats, President Donald Trump said on Monday, in what could amount to the first land strike of the military campaign against trafficking from Latin America. Mr. Trump would not say if it was a military or CIA operation or where the strike occurred. AFP

YANGON

Myanmar junta accuses rebels of 'malicious, brutal' election attacks



AP

Myanmar's junta on Tuesday accused rebels of "malicious and brutal" attacks on the day and eve of military-run elections, wounding at least five civilians with drones, rockets and bombs. The junta also accused the groups of "issuing threat letters" and "blocking" would-be voters from travelling to cast ballots. AFP

Between the Begums, a bitter rivalry, vengeful past

With former Bangladesh Prime Minister and BNP leader Khaleda Zia's passing, her decades-long feud with Sheikh Hasina, another former PM and Awami League leader, who is now in exile in India, will also be put to rest; during the 'Battle of the Begums', the two women leaders alternated in power, taking turns to prosecute each other and trade accusations of orchestrating violent attacks

NEWS ANALYSIS

Suhasini Haidar

In the years that their public rivalry was most bitter, few could have predicted such an end to the 'Battle of the Begums' in Bangladesh. With former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's passing, her decades-long feud with former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, now in exile in India, will also be put to rest. During that time, the two women alternated tenures in power, taking turns to prosecute the other, and accusing each other of orchestrating violent attacks on the other.

Condoling her death on Tuesday, Ms. Hasina issued a statement extolling Ms. Zia's contribution to establishing democracy in Bangladesh. Those words hark back to the late 1980s where the two 'Begums' had last worked together – one the daughter of the slain founder of the country Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and the other the widow of his successor Gen. Ziaur Rehman, who was also assassinated, six years after Mujib.

United against military

Both Mujib and Gen. Zia had fought on the same side during Bangladesh's war of liberation. Ms. Hasina and Khaleda, the leaders of the Awami League and the Bangladesh National Party (BNP), respectively, fought on the same side just once, to oust the autocratic President, Gen. Muhammad Ershad (1982-1990) from power. They both boycotted the 1988 elections, when Ershad's Jatiya Party won a whopping and obviously manufactured mandate of 251 out of 300 seats.

As women, the two leaders could not be more different – Ms. Hasina lived with the grief of losing her entire family, and was a scrappy politician, not afraid of taking her battle to the streets.

Zia, who also lived with the grief of her husband's assassination at their home, described herself as a "shy housewife" of a military officer, ruled more from her living room, while her party men hit the streets. Both engendered the undying loyalty of her followers.



Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia allied once against Gen. Ershad in 1990, ending his autocracy before their rivalry began. AP/PTI

Gen. Ershad eventually agreed to step down in 1990, in the face of massive pro-democracy protests held jointly by the Awami League and the BNP, paving the way for free and fair elections. In the elections in 1991, the BNP won and Khaleda Zia became Bangladesh's first woman Prime Minister, and Sheikh Hasina the leader of the Opposition, while Gen. Ershad was imprisoned on corruption charges. One of her first actions as PM was to turn Bangladesh into a parliamentary democracy, diluting the power of the President of the country.

PM Zia did not, however, reverse the Islamisation of Bangladeshi politics that had followed after Sheikh Mujib, including the shift away from a secular republic to an Islamic one, that Gen. Ershad enshrined through a Constitutional amendment. As relations with Sheikh Hasina soured, Zia grew more beholden to Jamaat-e-Islami. This also strained ties between India and Bangladesh during Zia's tenures, as training camps for extremist groups targeting India began to grow.

As it became clear that Zia would not prosecute Mujib's killers, and was even gaining political support from them, Ms. Hasina began to target her more directly. The entire Opposition resigned from Parliament and decided to boycott general elections held in February 1996, which Zia won with ease as a result. Zia regretted the election almost immediately, saying in an interview to this correspondent that she had pleaded with Ms. Hasina to reconsider the boycott.

Awami League protests followed, forcing Zia to step down in less than a month, and Ms. Hasina won the next election a few months later. In 2001, the tables turned again, with Zia being elected back to power, and in 2008 Ms. Hasina returned to power.

Fall of Hasina

When Ms. Hasina had to flee the country in August 2024, something Zia predicted would happen, the rivalry endured, and the BNP welcomed the conviction and death sentence that was handed down to Ms. Hasina in absentia in November this year.

Reports suggested the BNP was preparing to field her as a candidate in the coming elections in February.

With her death, and Ms. Hasina's exile, Bangladesh now faces an election without either of its two Begums. The real beneficiaries then are Bangladesh's radical Islamists and fundamentalists seeking to overthrow centrist politics in the country. The question is whether their parties can chart a different course in the future, or continue down the same vengeful path.

After accusing Kyiv of attack, Russia says it will toughen stance

Reuters
MOSCOW/KYIV

The Kremlin said on Tuesday its position would toughen in talks on ending the war in Ukraine after accusing Kyiv of attacking a Russian presidential residence, an allegation that Kyiv said was baseless and intended to prolong war.

Kyiv has said Russia's accusations are "lies" aimed at justifying more attacks on Ukraine, and its Foreign Minister said on Tuesday that Russia had not provided any evidence "because there's none". Russia said on Monday Kyiv had attacked a presidential residence in the Novgorod region with 91 long-range attack drones. It said it would retaliate and review its negotiating stance but would not quit talks on a possible peace deal.

"This terrorist action is aimed at collapsing the negotiation process," Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov told presspersons on Tuesday. "The diplomatic consequence will be to toughen the negotiating position of the Russian Federation."

He said the military knew when and how to respond. A tougher negotiating stance would complicate efforts led by U.S. President Donald Trump to end the deadliest war in Europe since the Second World War.

Contested recognition



Strong protest: Residents wave Somali flags as they attend a rally denouncing Israel's recent announcement recognising the breakaway Somaliland region, during a gathering calling for Somalia's territorial unity at Mogadishu Stadium in Mogadishu on Tuesday. AFP

Trump warns Iran of strikes if it revamps nuclear programme

Associated Press
PALM BEACH

U.S. President Donald Trump warned Iran on Monday that the U.S. could carry out further military strikes if the country attempts to reconstitute its nuclear programme as he held wide-ranging talks with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at his home in Florida.

Mr. Trump had previously insisted that Tehran's nuclear capabilities were "completely and fully obliterated" by U.S. strikes on key nuclear enrichment sites in June. But with Mr. Netanyahu by his side, Mr. Trump raised the possibility that suspected activity could be taking place outside those sites.



Donald Trump

"Now I hear that Iran is trying to build up again," Mr. Trump told presspersons gathered at his Mar-a-Lago estate. "And if they are, we're going to have to knock them down. We'll knock them down. We'll knock the hell out of them."

China fires missiles on second day of live-fire military drills around Taiwan

Agence France-Presse
BEIJING

China launched missiles and deployed dozens of fighter aircraft and navy vessels around Taiwan on Tuesday for a second day of live-fire drills aimed at simulating a blockade of the self-ruled island's key ports and assaults on maritime targets.

The two-day war games code-named "Justice Mission 2025" have been slammed by Taipei as "highly provocative and reckless".

China claims Taiwan as part of its sovereign territory and has refused to rule out military action to seize the island democracy.

AFP journalists in Pingtan – a Chinese island at the closest point to Taiwan's main island – saw a volley of rockets blast into the air at around 9:00 a.m. on Tuesday, leaving trails of white smoke.



Military equipment of the ground forces of the PLA deployed in live-fire drills targeting waters south of Taiwan on Tuesday. REUTERS

At least 10 were launched in quick succession, sending a booming sound reverberating across the sky and drawing tourists towards the seafront to snap photos and videos on their phones.

China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) said in a statement shortly afterwards that it had "conducted long-range live fire drills in the waters to the north of the Taiwan Island and achieved desired effects".

The show of force follows a bumper round of arms sales to Taipei by the United States – Taiwan's main security backer – and comments from Japan's Prime Minister that the use of force against Taiwan could warrant a military response from Tokyo.

China's top diplomat Wang Yi said on Tuesday that Beijing would "forcefully counter" large-scale U.S. weapons sales to Taiwan, adding that any attempt to obstruct China's unification with the island "will inevitably end in failure".

Syrian authorities arrest 21 linked to Assad rule as curfew covers port city

Agence France-Presse
DAMASCUS

Authorities in Syria's Latakia province arrested 21 people allegedly linked to ousted leader Bashar al-Assad's rule on Tuesday, state media reported, as a curfew blanketed the provincial capital after sectarian violence the previous night.

Monday's attacks in predominantly Alawite neighbourhoods of Latakia city came after three people including a security force member were killed a day earlier, as thousands protested in the minority's coastal heartland over a deadly mosque bombing.

State television said security forces in coastal Latakia province arrested 21 "former regime remnants who are involved in criminal acts, sectarian incitement and targeting internal security forces".



Violent attacks: Thousands protested in the minority's coastal heartland over a deadly mosque bombing. REUTERS

The report came after an overnight curfew entered into effect until 6:00 a.m. on Wednesday in Latakia, a mixed city in Syria's Alawite coastal heartland that also has several Sunni-majority neighbourhoods.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitor reported that a young Alawite man was shot dead during the unrest "after being chased" by several men.

Security reinforced

Syrian authorities on Monday said security forces reinforced their deployment in Latakia.

Interior Ministry spokesperson Noureddine al-Baba said on Tuesday that Syria rejected "any acts of sabotage or attacks that affect the dignity of citizens or their property... and the necessary legal measures will be taken against their perpetrators".

Since the ousting in December last year of Mr. Assad, himself an Alawite, the minority group has been the target of attacks.



Trauma recovery: Ukrainian military medics gather during a tea ceremony at the RePower programme. AFP

Loss, laughter: war medics heal in west Ukraine mountains

Agence France-Presse

Ukrainian war medic Roma Zukh has learned a hard rule during the Russian invasion – don't get too close to your colleagues. They could be killed at any moment.

Since Russia invaded in February 2022, the former truck driver, with light blue eyes and a ginger beard, had lost too many people to see any new friends suffer the same fate.

"You remember each one... the ones you were wounded with, the ones that enlisted at the same time – those you definitely won't forget," the 37-year-old said.

"Now I try to keep my distance, as I get very attached," he said, having recently joined a new battalion. "I don't sit at the same table for lunch, for example."

The gruesome toll of the war is a daily reality for Ukraine's hundreds of combat medics – with the sights, sounds and smells of the front weighing heavily on their mental health.

Over 1,000 km away from the battlefield at a 10-day mountain retreat, designed to help them recover, Roma's rule was being put to the test.

Taking place in wooden chalets in the Carpathians, the RePower programme was much like a children's holiday camp, featuring pottery classes, hikes and even sushi-making lessons.

For some, the relief is instant.

When the car carrying Dmytro Kunytskyi started climbing into the mountains, bright with autumnal orange and green trees, the 20-year-old medic was struck by a long-forgotten feeling.

"We opened the windows and the air filled with the smell of pine," he said. "We were just very happy, like little kids."

But completely leaving the front line was not easy. Mr. Kunytskyi was often on the phone, delegating tasks to his team on the front.

He has been serving for two years in a role that requires him to retrieve and examine the corpses of comrades killed in battle.

The psychologists working with the medics at the camp say they face a difficult challenge.

The medics would soon go back to the front, making in-depth therapy risky.

Narva, a Russian-speaking Estonian city, united in fear, divided in politics

Half of Narva are Estonian citizens, 33.2% Russian citizens, and 12.5% without any citizenship — those stateless people with memories of homes in Crimea, Georgia or other conflict zones; an uneasy calm prevails here with many choosing silence over discussing the war and political alignments

Smita Sharma
NARVA, ESTONIA



Link to a past: A small nostalgic Friendship Bridge over the river connects the Hermann's castle on the Estonian side built by the Danes in the 13th century to the Ivangorod Fortress in 1492. SMITA SHARMA

Kirik is a 41-year-old real estate agent. His older brother, Ilja, is a journalist. Unlike many other people in this distant town of Narva in Estonia, the brothers are approachable and speak to a foreign journalist in English with ease about their lives in the shadow of a neighbouring war.

Some 201 km away from capital Tallinn, Narva is the most Russian speaking town of Europe with over 96% Russian speakers among its roughly 53,000 residents. The Narva river flows into the Russian Federation barely 101 metres away, and the forests lead to highways nearly 250 km away from St. Petersburg.

A small nostalgic Friendship Bridge, over the dark grey river with white foam, connects the magnificent Hermann's castle on the Estonian side built by the Danes in the 13th century to the Ivangorod Fortress built by Russian Tsar Ivan III in 1492. Both historical monuments were controlled by different conquering forces until the Estonians broke free from five decades of Soviet occupation in 1991, and the river border divided the countries.

Lived reality

But polarisation, instead of 'friendship', is the lived reality here today. Half the population in Narva are Estonian citizens, 33.2% are Russian citizens and 12.5% without any citizenship – those stateless citizens with grey passports issued to ethnic Russians who were relocated during the Soviet era, but post Estonian independence refused to sign up for either nationality. Many of them belong to Crimea, Georgia or other conflict zones in the region.

Mr. Kirik and Mr. Ilja avoid speaking to their parents. "The war has pulled people apart," says Mr. Ilja. "Many families don't even talk to each other. The older people avoid talking about the war because they favour Russian President Putin. Young people like me mostly support Ukraine," adds Mr. Kirik. The young feel the older generation is swept by the propaganda narratives on Russian TV which is watched here through a simple antenna despite a ban on its transmission in Europe.

"Four years ago, it was scary as journalists from different channels and countries came here and started saying, "You will be next, how will you live with that?" Now I see most of the people are not worried about any invasion because we are NATO members," says Mr. Kirik. Though an uneasy calm prevails in the town with many choosing silence instead of discussing the war and uncomfortable political alignments.

"I had Russian friends but not anymore. But most of them have moved to other countries," says Mr. Kirik with a smile.

Interestingly, in 2021, this historic town chose a new slogan for itself: "Europe begins here". And with the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, this slogan brought home the traumatic question – "what if we are next?"

Narrowing passage

This question forced several changes to the Border Check Points (BCPs) across the country, including in Narva, which facilitate movement of people on both sides. Before the pandemic hit, four million record numbers of people were crossing the check point in 2019. Around 27,000 people daily. But post Covid, and with the beginning of the war, the volume dropped by almost 95%. Some 1,600-1,700 people now cross daily even as the timings have changed from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. The border earlier operated 24/7. Tourist visas have been stopped. Only those with some residential rights within European Union are allowed permits to travel.

And with a suspected air space violation in Finland by the Russians, all vehicular, truck and bus operations were suspended at the BCPs in May last year.

The vigil was also sharpened to prevent border smuggling. Russian gasoline, alcohol and cigarettes would often find their way into Narva earlier while Estonian cheese and dairy were in demand on the other side.

Indrek, listed among Estonia's top chefs, runs a quirky restaurant close to the border. He has a Russian wife. Asked about the impact of the war on personal relationships, he says, "Relationships are always challenging, nationality does not matter." Russian tourists do not frequent his restaurant anymore, where wolf paws are on display and bull testicles on the menu.

The Narva Museum, housed inside the Hermann's castle, is at the centre of a narrative battle. Its director Maria Smorzhevskikh Smirnova was 14 years old when the Soviet Union collapsed. Her grandparents were in the Soviet army during the Second World War. She points to Mr. Putin's speech in June 2022 referring to Narva as a potential target when he seemed to compare himself to the 18th century Russian Tsar 'Peter the Great' in drawing a parallel between the historic quests to win back Russian land and his military action. "Peter the Great waged the Great Northern War for 21 years. It would seem that he was at war with Sweden, he took something from them. He did not take anything from them, he returned [what was Russia's]," Mr. Putin said.

Culture in war time

A poster put up across the museum on the other side of the river in Ivangorod in 2023 announced "Russia's borders do not end anywhere." In May this year, the flag tower of the Narva castle hit back with a poster referring to Mr. Putin as 'Putler - war criminal'. Smirnova is today a wanted criminal for the Russians. "Culture cannot remain silent in war time," she responds.

Estonia, which lived through Russian and Nazi occupation, has today increased its defence spending like the rest of Europe has been forced to. Before the war, the Nordic NATO nation was spending 2% of its GDP on defence. It went up to 3.5% during the full war and will be increased to 5% in 2026.

"If you want peace, you must prepare for peace...and you must prepare smartly", quipped Kaimo Kuusk, Permanent Secretary at the Estonian Defence Ministry in capital Tallinn earlier. A former intelligence official, he was the Ambassador to Ukraine when Russian ballistic missiles announced the start of the invasion on February 24, 2022. He stressed that Estonia does not have the resources to buy squadrons of fighters and hence the NATO membership is so crucial and 450 million people in the EU is an added value and collective strength for a small country. A sentiment that resonated strongly by Foreign Minister Margus Tsahkna who told this author that Russia poses an existential threat to Europe. And this is what needs to be explained to India and Prime Minister Modi who he hoped could help build pressure for truce. Interestingly, the Estonian newsrooms chose to cover the lack of major defence agreements during the recent Putin visit to Delhi as India's 'snub'.

It is an information war out there as the game of throne continues. Narva for now is calm on the surface. But a resident who chose to remain anonymous expressed his nervousness that Russian speakers are under the microscope to gauge their allegiances. And people choose to stay silent than discuss the war and ask for trouble.

(Smita Sharma is an independent journalist reporting on Foreign Affairs. She was in Estonia as part of an Indian media delegation invited by the government.)

Play time



Ice building: An ice slide built in the shape of the Kremlin for the Icy Moscow festival at Victory Park in Moscow, Russia, on Tuesday. The monument to the Heroes of the First World War is in the background. AP

Removal of panels on Black soldiers of Second World War draws backlash

Associated Press
MARGRATEN

Ever since a U.S. military cemetery in the southern Netherlands removed two displays recognising Black troops who helped to liberate Europe from the Nazis, visitors have filled the guestbook with objections.

Sometime in the spring, the American Battle Monuments Commission, the U.S. government agency responsible for maintaining memorial sites outside of the United States, removed the panels from the visitors centre at the American Cemetery in Margraten, the final resting place for roughly 8,300 U.S. soldiers, set in rolling hills near the border with Belgium and Germany.



Place of honour: The graves of more than 8.300 soldiers at the Netherlands American Cemetery in Margraten, Netherlands. AP

The move came after U.S. President Donald Trump issued a series of executive orders ending diversity, equity and inclusion programs. "Our country will be woke no longer," Trump said in an address to Congress in March.

The removal, carried out without public explanation, has angered Dutch officials, the families of U.S. soldiers and the local residents who honour the American sacrifice by caring for the graves.

U.S. Ambassador to the Netherlands Joe Popolo seemed to support the removal of the displays. "The signs at Margraten are not intended to promote an agenda that criticises America," he wrote on social media, following a visit to the cemetery after the controversy had erupted. Popolo declined a request for comment.

One display told the story of 23-year-old George H. Pruitt, a Black soldier buried at the cemetery, who died attempting to rescue a comrade from drowning in 1945. The other described the U.S. policy of racial segregation in place during World War II.

Chinese homeschool students embrace freer youth in cut-throat market

Agence France-Presse
SHANGHAI

Fourteen-year-old Estella spends her weekdays studying Spanish, rock climbing or learning acupuncture in her living room as part of her homeschooling since she left China's gruelling public school system.

Her parents withdrew her from her Shanghai school three years ago, worried she was struggling to keep up with a demanding curriculum they believe will soon be outdated in the era of artificial intelligence (AI). They are among a small number of parents in China who are rethinking the country's rigorous education system, in which school days can last 10 hours, with students often working late into the evening on extra tutoring and homework.

Changes in curriculum

"In the future, education models and jobs will face huge changes due to AI," Estella's mother Xu Zoe told AFP, using a pseudonym.

"We wanted to get used to the uncertainty early."

Homeschooling is banned in China, although authorities generally overlook rare individual cases.

Just 6,000 Chinese children were homeschooled in 2017, according to the non-profit 21st Century Education Research Institute. By comparison, China had roughly 145 million primary and middle school students that year.

But that number of homeschoolers had increased annually by around 30% from 2013, the institute said. Supporters say looser schedules centred around practical projects and outdoor activities help nourish creativity that is squashed by the national curriculum.



Personal routine: Estella, 14, a homeschooled student, in a rock climbing arena in Shanghai. AFP

In Shanghai, Estella's school day ended at 5.00 p.m., and she often spent around four hours a night on homework.

"Instead of just doing a stressful exam in school, I will do the things I was interested (in)," said Estella, who, unlike many students her age, will not be cramming for high school entrance exams she would take next year.

Her parents have hired tutors in science, maths, Spanish and gym, and together with Estella decide her schedule.

On a Tuesday afternoon, she was the youngest at a nearby climbing gym, hoisting herself up the wall after a day of online Spanish studies from her living room and an acupuncture lesson taught by her mother.

'More confident'

Ms. Xu, 40, said her daughter has grown more confident since leaving the highly competitive public school system.

"We don't use societal standards to evaluate ourselves but rather, what kind of person we want to be," she told AFP.

Experts say Chinese people are increasingly questioning the value of traditionally prized degrees from elite universities in an oversaturated market.

In 2023, fewer than one in five undergraduates from Shanghai's prestigious Fudan University found jobs immediately after graduation. The country's unemployment rate for 16- to 24-year-olds reached a two-year high of 18.9 percent in August, according to the National Bureau of Statistics.

NEW HIGH

Deepti Sharma becomes top wicket-taker in women's T20Is



NIRMAL HARINDRAN

Deepti Sharma became the top wicket-taker in women's T20Is on Tuesday. The Indian off-spinner trapped Sri Lanka's Nilakshika Silva leg-before in the fifth and final match in Thiruvananthapuram to go past Australian pacer Megan Schutt's tally of 151 scalps in the shortest format. Deepti has 152 wickets from 133 games.

RARE MEMORABILIA

Bradman's cap from 1947-48 series against India up for auction



LLOYDS AUCTIONS

A 'Baggy Green' worn by Sir Donald Bradman during the 1947-48 series against India is being auctioned by Lloyds Auctions. Bradman gifted the cap to Indian all-rounder Sriranga Wasudev Sohoni during the series, which marked independent India's first international tour. As of Dec. 30, there was a bid of A$315,000.

BACK IN THE MIX

Sri Lanka appoints Malinga as consultant fast bowling coach



AFP

Sri Lanka has appointed former pacer Lasith Malinga as a consultant fast bowling coach, on a short-term basis, ahead of the ICC Men's T20 World Cup 2026. Malinga brings a wealth of experience in the fast-bowling department. He also played the role of Sri Lanka's bowling strategy coach in 2022.

THUMPING WIN

Ranchi Royals steamrollers Bengal Tigers in Women's HIL



SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Ranchi Royals outplayed Shrachi Bengal Tigers 5-0 in the Women's HIL in Ranchi on Tuesday. Hannah Cotter scored in the 10th minute while Beauty Dung Dung doubled the lead in the 14th. Lucina Von der Heyde made it 3-0 in the 33rd. Sangita Kumari struck in the 44th and Lucina Von der Heyde completed the tally in the 57th.

Harmanpreet dazzles as India completes 5-0 rout

The skipper's 43-ball 68 and a late blitzkrieg from Arundhati lift the home side to 175 as the Sri Lankan bowlers lose the plot at the death; Hasini and Imesha's fighting fifties in vain for the islanders

SRI LANKA IN INDIA

P.K. Ajith Kumar
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM



Signing off in style: Skipper Harmanpreet came good when India needed her the most and later the home bowlers did the job as the Women in Blue made a clean sweep to end the year on a high. NIRMAL HARINDRAN

They finally made a match of it, but it still wasn't enough.

The Sri Lankan women, after being outplayed in the first four outings, tested India with both the bat and ball in the final T20I at the Greenfield Stadium on Tuesday night.

The Women in Blue, however, won by 15 runs to complete a 5-0 whitewash.

Chasing India's 175 for seven, the islanders could only make 160 for seven. Two fine innings had kept them in the chase, but neither Hasini Perera (65, 42b, 8x4, 1x6) nor Imesha Dulani (50, 39b, 8x4) could stay long enough at the wicket. Their 79-run stand for the second wicket, after the early loss of skipper Chamari Athapaththu, had given the visitor hope.

Sadly for Sri Lanka, no other batter made any contribution, as the Indian bowlers came back strongly.

Deepti Sharma's wicket of Nilakshika Silva was her 152nd and she is now the leading bowler in women's T20I cricket, going past Australia's Megan Schutt.

Earlier, captain Harmanpreet's Kaur's 68 (43b, 9x4, 1x6) and a late blitzkrieg from Arundhati Reddy (27 not out, 11b, 4x4, 1x6) helped India recover from a shaky start.

The host had a new opening pair, with G. Kamalini making her debut in place of Smriti Mandhana, who was rested.

The other opener Shafali Verma has been the leading scorer of the series, but the law of averages caught up with her, after knocks of 69 not out, 79 not out and 79. In the second over, she stepped out to hit Nimasha Meepage over long-on and fell to a tumbling catch by Imesha. Kamalini, after a couple of promising hits, was trapped in front, trying to sweep Kavisha Dilhari's first ball.

Harleen Deol then lost her leg stump off Rashmika Sewwandi's second ball. And India slid to 41 for three in the seventh over.

Richa Ghosh and Deepti didn't last long either. But in Amanjot Kaur, Harmanpreet found a dependable partner and the two added 61 runs for the sixth wicket.

Harmanpreet walked in at 27 for two. Then, half the side was back in the dressing room past the halfway mark of the innings, with just 77 on the board.

But Harmanpreet didn't seem to bother about what was happening at the other end. She danced down the track against the spinners and never missed an opportunity to show off her hard-hitting skills.Later, Sneh Rana and Arundhati put on 33 for the unbroken eighth wicket. Those runs would prove crucial.

SCOREBOARD

INDIA

Shafali Verma c Imesha b Nimasha 5 (*6b, 1x4*), G. Kamalini lbw b Kavisha 12 (*12b, 2x4*), Harleen Deol b Rashmika 13 (*11b, 2x4*), Harmanpreet Kaur b Kavisha 68 (*43b, 9x4, 1x6*), Richa Ghosh c Kaushani b Chamari 5 (*6b, 1x4*), Deepti Sharma c Nimashai b Chamari 7 (*8b*), Amanjot Kaur c Kavisha b Rashmika 21 (*18b, 1x4, 1x6*), Arundhati Reddy (not out) 27 (*11b, 4x4, 1x6*), Sneh Rana (not out) 8 (*6b, 1x4*); Extras (nb-1, w-8): 9; Total (for seven wkts. in 20 overs): 175.

FALL OF WICKETS

1-5 (Shafali, 1.1 overs), 2-27 (Kamalini, 4.1), 3-41 (Harleen, 6.2), 4-64 (Richa, 8.3), 5-77 (Deepti, 10.4), 6-138 (Amanjot, 16.5), 7-142 (Harmanpreet, 17.4).

SRI LANKA BOWLING

Malki 4-0-37-0, Nimasha 3-0-25-1, Kavisha 2-0-11-2, Inoka 4-0-39-0, Rashmika 4-0-42-2, Chamari 3-0-21-2.

SRI LANKA

Hasini Perera b Shree Charani 65 (*42b, 8x4, 1x6*), Chamari Athapaththu c Deepti b Arundhati 2 (*5b*), Imesha Dulani c Shafali b Amanjot 50 (*39b, 8x4*), Nilakshika Silva lbw b Deepti 3 (*5b*), Kavisha Dilhari b Vaishnavi 5 (*4b, 1x4*), Harshitha Samarawickrama c Harleen b Sneh 8 (*9b*), Kaushini Nuthyangana run out 1 (*3b*), Rashmika Sewwandi (not out) 14 (*8b, 2x4*), Malki Madara (not out) 5 (*5b*); Extras (b-4, w-3): 7; Total (for seven wkts. in 20 overs): 160.

FALL OF WICKETS

1-7 (Chamari, 1.5), 2-86 (Imesha, 11.1), 3-100 (Nilakshika, 13.3), 4-107 (Kavisha, 14.3), 5-132 (Hasini, 16.4), 6-140 (Kaushini, 17.4), 7-140 (Harshitha, 17.5),

INDIA BOWLING

Deepti 4-0-28-1, Arundhati 2-0-16-1, Sneh 4-0-31-1, Vaishnavi 4-0-33-1, Shree Charani 4-0-31-1, Amanjot 2-0-17-1.

Toss: Sri Lanka.
PoM: Harmanpreet.
PoS: Shafali.
India won by 15 runs to sweep the series 5-0.

Archer in England's T20 WC squad

Agence France-Presse
LONDON



Archer. GETTY IMAGES

Fast bowler Jofra Archer was included in England's provisional T20 World Cup squad announced on Tuesday, despite suffering a left side strain that ruled him out of the final two Ashes Tests, but there was no place for wicketkeeper Jamie Smith.

Archer's fellow quick Josh Tongue has been called up to the T20 squad for the first time in a 15-man party to be captained by Harry Brook for the tournament in India and Sri Lanka beginning on February 7.

Archer will sit out the warm-up tour of Sri Lanka next month to continue his rehabilitation following the injury he sustained during the third Ashes Test in Adelaide earlier this month.

Brook will lead his first World Cup campaign as white-ball captain, with England facing Bangladesh, West Indies, Italy and Nepal in Group C.

The T20I squad for World Cup and Sri Lanka tour: Harry Brook (Capt.), Rehan Ahmed, Jofra Archer, Tom Banton, Jacob Bethell, Jos Buttler (wk), Sam Curran, Liam Dawson, Ben Duckett, Will Jacks, Jamie Overton, Adil Rashid, Phil Salt, Josh Tongue, Luke Wood, Brydon Carse (Lanka only).

ODI squad for Lanka tour: Brook (Capt.), Rehan, Banton, Bethell, Buttler (wk), Carse, Zak Crawley, Sam Curran, Dawson, Duckett, Jacks, Jamie Overton, Rashid, Joe Root, Luke Wood.

Jatinder to lead Oman in World Cup

ANI
NEW DELHI

Oman on Tuesday announced its 15-member squad for the upcoming T20 World Cup with Jatinder Singh at the helm and wicketkeeper Vinayak Shukla his deputy.

There was no place for Aamir Kaleem, the 43-year-old player who was one of their star performers in the T20 Asia Cup earlier this year.

Jatinder is one of Oman's most experienced players and the leading run-scorer in the format.

Oman is placed in Group B with Australia, Sri Lanka, Zimbabwe, and Ireland with its first match against Zimbabwe scheduled on February 9.

The squad:
Jatinder Singh (Capt.), Vinayak Shukla (Vice-capt.), Mohammad Nadeem, Shakeel Ahmad, Hammad Mirza, Wasim Ali, Karan Sonavale, Faisal Shah, Nadeem Khan, Sufyan Mehmood, Jay Odedra, Shafiq Jan, Ashish Odedra, Jiten Ramanandi and Hasnain Ali Shah.

Sayali, King and Knott named as replacements

WPL

Press Trust of India
MUMBAI

Australian all-rounders Ellyse Perry of Royal Challengers Bengaluru and Annabel Sutherland of Delhi Capitals on Tuesday withdrew from next month's Women's Premier League, citing personal reasons.

The WPL announced in a release that India all-rounder Sayali Satghare will join RCB as a replacement for Perry, while Australian leg-spinner Alana King has been named by Delhi Capitals as the replacement for Sutherland.

"Australian all-rounders Ellyse Perry (Royal Challengers Bengaluru) and Annabel Sutherland (Delhi Capitals) have withdrawn from the upcoming edition of the league due to personal reasons," WPL stated in a release.

"RCB have named Sayali Satghare as a replacement for Perry. Satghare will join RCB at her reserve price of ₹30 lakh. DC have named Alana King as a replacement for Sutherland.

"The Australian leg-spinner, who represented UP Warriorz in the previous season, has featured in 27 T20Is and picked up 27 wickets. King will join DC at a reserve price of ₹60 lakh," it added.

Left-arm seamer Tara Norris has also been replaced by Australian all-rounder Charlie Knott in the UP Warriorz's camp.

Norris, who played for Capitals in the inaugural edition in 2023, has been named in the USA squad for next year's Women's T20 World Cup qualifier to be held in Nepal.

"Knott has been signed at a reserve price of ₹10 lakh," WPL said.

The fourth edition of the WPL will be held in two legs at Navi Mumbai and Vadodara from January 9 to February 5.

Carlsen and Assaubayeva triumph; Arjun gets a bronze in World blitz also





Champion stuff! Carlsen underlined his class as the world's premier player with a remarkable display to best Arjun's conqueror Abdusattorov while Assaubayeva claimed her third blitz crown. FIDE

CHESS

Sports Bureau

Magnus Carlsen and Bibisara Assaubayeva emerged as the World blitz chess champions here on Tuesday.

It was a fine double for Carlsen, as he had won the rapid title a couple of days earlier.

Arjun Erigaisi also got a double, though he had to settle for the bronze.

After finishing third in the rapid event, he took the bronze in the blitz tournament, too.

Arjun had in fact finished on top of the league phase, scoring 15 points from 19 rounds, one point more than the second-placed Carlsen.

He, however, lost to Nodirbek Abdusattorov in the semifinal. In the other semifinal, Carlsen defeated Fabiano Caruana, to set up the final clash with Adbudsattorov. Carlsen won the final 2.5-1.5.

In the women's final, Assaubayeva beat Anna Muzychuk, 2.5-1.5.

In the semifinals, Assaubayeva prevailed over Zhu Jiner while Muzychuk overcame Eline Roebers.

INBRIEF



Roma routs Genoa to keep pace with the top three

Roma scored three times in a one-sided first half to beat Genoa 3-1 on Monday and move into fourth place in Serie A.

The result: Roma 3 (Soule 14, Kone 19, Ferguson 31) bt Genoa 1 (Ekhator 87).

Teenager Addya clinches junior trap gold

Delhi teenager Addya Katyal clinched the junior women's trap gold with 42 hits in the National shooting championships in New Delhi on Tuesday. Uttar Pradesh's Sabeera Haris took silver with 41 while Tanisska Senthilkumar of Tamil Nadu secured the bronze with 28 hits. Delhi also claimed the junior women's trap team gold (Addya, Bhavya Tripathi, Ananya Yaduvanshi) with a combined score of 323. Tamil Nadu (Tanisska, Nilaa Rajaa Baalu, Anthra Rajsekar) finished second with 295.

MBE award for ex-England medium-pacer Isa Guha

Isa Guha, the first woman of South Asian descent to appear for England in any sport, was awarded an MBE in the King's New Year's Honours for services to inclusivity and cricket. Isa, a two-time World Cup winner, played eight Tests, 83 ODIs and 22 T20Is. She took 148 wickets with her bustling medium-pace before retiring in 2012.

LIVE TELECAST

Vijay Hazare Trophy: JioHotstar, 9 a.m.
HIL: Sony Sports Ten 1 & LIV, 7.30 p.m.

Kohli's presence added motivation for all players: coach Rajkumar

The Dhronacharya awardee is mentor for Assam; the former Delhi player is hopeful he can help the talented group take the next step forward

HAZARE TROPHY

Anish Pathiyil
RAJKOT





Coachspeak: Rajkumar, whose relationship with Kohli, has stood the test of time and fame feels that it's a great pleasure for the boys to sit next to the talismanic batter or play with him.

Rajkumar Sharma is no stranger to Indian cricket. He has trained thousands of budding cricketers at his West Delhi Cricket Academy in the national capital. But his name stands out for nurturing one of India's greatest match-winners – Virat Kohli. The two share a deeply affectionate, personal bond that has stood the test of time and fame.

Kohli has featured in two matches of the ongoing Vijay Hazare Trophy 2025 so far, scoring 131 and 77. The last time the former India skipper featured in the domestic one-day tournament was in February 2010. Rajkumar says his presence on the field would have undoubtedly given added motivation to players on both teams.

"He [Virat] was so excited and happy to help them. It's a great pleasure for the boys to sit next to Virat Kohli or play with him. Everybody is calling me, telling me they enjoyed it and want him to play more matches with him," the coach said.

"He has been an inspiration for the whole country. Almost every day, we keep talking to each other about what he's doing. I am really happy for him that he is doing so well," he said.

The Dhronacharya awardee is currently playing the role of mentor to the Assam team. Under his watch, the team earned a stunning four-wicket win over Hyderabad in its latest encounter, chasing down a demanding target of 311 in the last over. The coach says he is enjoying his time with the players.

"They are a really talented lot. They slightly lack mental toughness, for which Devajit Saikia (BCCI secretary) has brought me here. My role is to guide them through crunch situations," the former Delhi cricketer said. As Assam looks to build on its performances this season, Rajkumar is hopeful he can help the talented group take the next step forward.

VIJAY HAZARE TROPHY — WEDNESDAY'S FIXTURES

Elite: Group A (Ahmedabad): Jharkhand vs. Tamil Nadu, Kerala vs. Rajasthan, Karnataka vs. Pondicherry, Madhya Pradesh vs. Tripura.
Group B (Rajkot): Bengal vs. Jammu & Kashmir, Baroda vs. Hyderabad, Assam vs. Uttar Pradesh, Chandigarh vs. Vidarbha.
Group C (Jaipur): Chhattisgarh vs. Sikkim, Himachal Pradesh vs. Punjab, Goa vs. Mumbai, Maharashtra vs. Uttarakhand.
Group D (Bengaluru): Andhra vs. Saurashtra, Gujarat vs. Railways, Delhi vs. Odisha, Haryana vs. Services.
Plate (Ranchi): Bihar vs. Nagaland, Manipur vs. Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh vs. Meghalaya.

Jaiswal's return a big boost: Mumbai's bowling mentor and coach Kulkarni

Shayan Acharya
JAIPUR

Yashasvi Jaiswal hit the nets much before his teammates arrived at the Jaipuria Vidyalaya ground on a misty Tuesday morning. Jaiswal looked at ease as he played the spinners and pacers for more than an hour.

Having missed out on the first three games of the Vijay Hazare Trophy, as he was recovering from acute gastroenteritis, Jaiswal is set to be available for Mumbai's next three to four games of the tournament, beginning with the one against Goa on Wednesday.

He is set to open the innings, along with Angkrish Raghuvanshi, while Ishan Mulchandani could sit out.

Mumbai's bowling mentor and coach Dhawal Kulkarni made it clear that the team is taking one game at a time.

"The team is looking good, the guys have been in a good frame of mind, and one can see the results. We have just asked the boys to think about what's coming up immediately, rather than thinking about the future," Kulkarni told *The Hindu*.

With the BCCI making it mandatory for all India internationals to feature in domestic tournaments when not on national duty, Mumbai was boosted by the presence of Rohit Sharma in the first couple of games. And now, with Jaiswal, too, available, the batting department will be bolstered.

"Rohit playing a couple of games after a long time has really boosted the morale of the entire unit. With Yashasvi coming back, and also other international pros expected in the next few games, it really boosts the morale of the unit," said Kulkarni.

Selections for TVS OMC from Jan. 17

MOTORSPORTS

Sports Bureau
CHENNAI

The nationwide selections for the Petronas TVS India One Make Championship (OMC) 2026 will be conducted between January 17 and February 7, 2026, across Bengaluru, Pune, Delhi and Kolkata, followed by final trials at the Madras International Circuit (MIC), here.

There are three categories – women's (under-40), Rookie (15-21 years) and TVS Apache RR310 (participant should be a National championship rider with a minimum one podium finish or a one-make championship rider with at least one podium finish and must be under-30).

Visit https://www.tvsmotor.com/tvsracing/program/rookie-training-and-selection.

Sethu overcomes Sribhumi; East Bengal routs Sesa, first win for Gokulam

IWL

Sports Bureau
KOLKATA



Happy times: Sethu players celebrate their win over Sribhumi. DEBASISH BHADURI

Sethu FC overcame a stiff challenge from local favourite Sribhumi FC before scoring a 4-2 win in a fourth-round match of the Indian Women's League at the Kalyani Stadium on Tuesday.

Lynda Kom Serto scored a hat-trick while Abigail Antwi netted one for Sethu. Substitute Karishma Purushottam Shirvoikar netted twice to bring Sribhumi back in to the contest.

The Madurai-based side established a 3-0 lead by the 46th minute before Karishma's brace. Sethu clung on to the slender lead for the last few minutes before Serto scored a penalty in added time and helped Sethu secure the win after two successive draws.

East Bengal FC, meanwhile, registered its biggest-ever IWL win outclassing Sesa Football Academy 9-0.

Fazila Ikwaput (four goals) and Soumya Guguloth netted a hat-trick each while Sulanjana Raul and Resty Nanziri scored one goal each.

Gokulam Kerala FC secured its first win of the tournament beating Bengaluru's Kickstart FC by a solitary goal.

The results: At Kalyani: Sethu FC 4 (Lynda Kom Serto 10, 18, 90+5-pen, Abigail Antwi 46) bt Sribhumi FC 2 (Karishma Shirvoikar 50, 87); East Bengal FC 9 (Soumya Guguloth 6, 54, 86, Fazila Ikwaput 9, 22, 25, 72, Sulanjana Raul 17, Resty Nanziri 40) bt Sesa Football Academy 0.

At NCE: Nita Football Academy 1 (Pyari Xaxa 7) bt Garhwal United FC 0; Gokulam Kerala FC 1 (Asem Roja Devi 52) bt Kickstart FC 0.

Kerala pacer Eden working hard to improve his white-ball skills

M.R Praveen Chandran
AHMEDABAD

On the grandest stage of Indian domestic cricket – the Ranji Trophy final last season – a young fast bowler from Kerala thrust himself into the collective consciousness of the fans by bowling with sustained hostility.

It was his first First Class match after recovering from a career-threatening stress fracture on his back. The then 19-year-old Eden Apple Tom devoured Vidarbha's batting stars like Dhruv Shorey, Yash Rathod and Akshay Wadkar in the first innings. It was a spell which earned praise from former India fast bowler Prashant Vaidya and underlined his immense potential.

However, having set high standards, Eden wasn't able to live up to the expectations in the first leg of the Ranji Trophy season, though the bowler insists he was closer to his best in the last league match against Madhya Pradesh.



Eden. FILE PHOTO: NIRMAL HARINDRAN

In the season opener, Eden came on to bowl with Maharashtra reeling at 55 for five, but he failed to make use of the excellent bowling conditions and sprayed the ball around. He showed signs of regaining form in the match against Saurashtra, but dropped catches didn't help his confidence.

"It's not that I was struggling. I bowled close to my best in the last league game against Madhya Pradesh. But I admit I was a bit confused and wasn't calm when I bowled against Maharashtra. Now I have realised my mistake and with every match I am learning and improving," said Eden.

He didn't have a great time in the Kerala Cricket League (KCL) and failed to get an IPL contract. But Eden has taken the setback in his stride and is working hard to improve his white-ball skills.

"I'm still struggling to find my feet in white-ball cricket, I didn't play much of it when I was with the Kerala junior teams. My first experience with the white ball was while attending the under-19 India camp. Mostly I bowl hard lengths and I have to learn to control the movement with the white ball. I am working on my variations with help of my coaches and senior bowlers," he said after the Vijay Hazare Trophy game against Madhya Pradesh. It was only Eden's second List A match after having made his debut against Baroda last year.

Former Kerala captain Sony Cheruvathur, who coached Eden in his formative years, said: "The hard length he bowls in white-ball cricket makes him predictable. He has to develop variations and use them intelligently," said Sony.

Ministry task force recommends framework to professionalise sports administration

Uthra Ganesan
NEW DELHI



Abhinav Bindra. FILE PHOTO: SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

While the primary stakeholders in sports development remain the athletes, the Sports Ministry has initiated an ambitious plan to upgrade and strengthen India's sports administration.

A task force constituted for Capacity Building of Sports Administrators, under the chairmanship of Abhinav Bindra has submitted its report to design a framework to professionalise India's sports administration ecosystem.

Among the key recommendations of the Task Force is the setting up of a National Council for Sports Education & Capacity Building (NCSECB), an autonomous statutory body under the Ministry to regulate, accredit and certify sports administration training.

"India's sporting success requires not just world-class athletes but also world-class governance and sports administrators are the backbone behind high-performance systems and international competitiveness," Sports Minister Mansukh Mandaviya said on Tuesday.

"The plan is to provide training through government and private sports universities and engage IIMs and IITs among others for the same," he said while appreciating the recommendations and adding that revision of existing sports curricula to make it more current and future-centric was an important part of the plan.

The 170-page report reinforces the view that professional, accountable, and forward-looking sports administrators are critical to raise India's position in the global sporting order and accelerate excellence.

It also recommends integrating sports governance with the induction and advanced training of IAS and State Civil Service officers, recognizing their role in implementation of sports policies, rotational postings, setting up apprenticeship models, innovation labs and partnerships with federations and the private sector.

The task force, which includes people like former AFI president Adille Sumariwalla and former TOPS CEO Cdr. Rajesh Rajagopalan, has highlighted systemic deficits including ill-equipped athletes for governance roles and provides a comprehensive roadmap for reform across the Sports Authority of India (SAI), National Sports Federations (NSFs) and state sports departments.

It also recommends creating athlete-to-administrator pathways to ease transition into administration and governance post-retirement.

Bethell keen to lock the No. 3 spot for England after memorable win at MCG

THE ASHES

Agence France-Presse
MELBOURNE

Jacob Bethell is keen to lock down the number three spot for England, but admitted Tuesday he has "a lot more to do" to make the position his own.

The 22-year-old was recalled for the fourth Ashes Test in Melbourne to replace the under-performing Ollie Pope and impressed.

He hit a gritty 40 in difficult batting conditions in the second innings to help steer England to a four-wicket victory and its first win in Australia since 2011.



Vital knock: Bethell hit a gritty 40 in a difficult chase. AFP

Bethell is likely to get another opportunity in the fifth and final Ashes Test in Sydney starting on Sunday.

"I like three," he told English media in Melbourne.

"You come in when the ball is new and in some scenarios the ball's going all over the shop. But in other scenarios it presents opportunities to score when bowlers are trying to take wickets and the field is attacking, there's loads of gaps. I've still got a lot more to do to call it my position," he added.

"I would like to (make the spot his own). I would like to just nail down any role in the team."

While Bethell has no guarantee of retaining his place for an extended period, skipper Ben Stokes was full of praise after Melbourne.



I always believed I could be in F1 when I started this journey

British teen Lindblad, who also has Indian heritage, will make his debut for Visa Cash App Racing Bulls on the circuit next year. The rookie, who is widely tipped as the one with the potential to become the next big star, opens up about his journey and expectations about the biggest challenge of his career

GETTY IMAGES

INTERVIEW

Arvid Lindblad

S. Dipak Ragav

In 2025, Formula One (F1) saw six rookies make their debuts, ushering in a generational change. Next year, one more driver will join the list. Widely tipped as the one with the potential to become the next big star, Arvid Lindblad will make his debut for Visa Cash App Racing Bulls. The British teen, who also has Indian heritage, has risen rapidly through the junior categories. Recently, Lindblad was in India, and *The Hindu* caught up with the new kid on the block, who spoke about his journey and anticipation for the upcoming challenge.

It has been a rapid rise from karting, and now you have made it to F1. How have you coped with the challenge?

I don't know. To be honest, I think I just take it in my stride. I think some challenges have come with it. I've come very quickly, which means I've been inexperienced compared to the people I've been racing against in the last couple of years, and will be even more so next year in F1. But there's nothing I can really do to change that. It is what it is, so I'm just focused on working hard with the team, on the sim, in the factory, with the engineers, trying to do everything I can to get prepared for next year, because that's all I can do. The rest, there's nothing I can do about it.

You famously told Lando Norris that you would meet him in F1 in five years. Now that you have kept up with that timeline, how prepared do you think you are?

I think it's not an easy question to answer. It's funny you pick up on the Lando story and how it's all come back around.

I always believed I could be in F1 when I started this journey, and I had that same belief and determination on that day, and I still do today. If I'm being honest, I don't really know. I don't know if I'm fully prepared.

Maybe I'm not 100% ready, but what I will say is that I'm very used to being thrown in the deep end. Every year, I've had to be pushed into a new category. So I'm used to being in this position where, as I said, I'm in the deep end, and I have to figure a way out.

So I don't know if I'm fully ready, but I have complete confidence in myself that I'll figure it out and find a way to deal with it.

Can you talk about your background and how that has shaped you as a person?

I'm very lucky to have been brought up in a very multicultural background. I think that's really shaped who I am. I carry a lot of my parents' values from India, England, and Sweden, like hard work, determination, always giving your best, and staying humble. I think it comes from that sort of background and culture that I've been brought up in, and that diversity that has really shaped who I am today.

You have spoken about dreaming about this since you were five years old. What made you realise this is what you want to do?

It all started through my paternal side of the family. My paternal grandfather is an avid motorsports fan. He would watch anything with wheels and an engine. He absolutely loves it. And when my dad was in his teens, they started racing motocross together.

Unfortunately, they didn't really have the money, so my dad had to stop very early. So he only did it for a little while, but that sort of passion was passed down to my dad. So when I was three, my dad bought me a motocross bike, and I didn't really have an instant love for it. It was a bit too much for my mum as well, so that sort of died out quite quickly. But then, when I was five, I went karting for the first time. And I don't know, I loved it from the beginning, and I don't really know why, but I just loved it, and I always had this belief that I could be in F1, and it was always what I was working towards.

I get a lot of questions about when the dream felt real, all that sort of stuff. And for me, it's always hard to answer. I mean, for sure, when I was in F3 or F4, it started to feel more real.

But to me, when I started this journey, it was a hobby, but at the same time, not really. I always had this goal and dream of being in F1, and that was what I was always working towards. I was determined to make it.

How much of a role has the Red Bull Junior Programme played in shaping your career, and how was the culture and expectations growing up with a lot of drivers who were also looking to do the same thing?

I'm grateful to the whole Red Bull and the Red Bull Junior Programme for the support they've given me. I joined the programme at the end of 2020, so this was my fifth year, and they've really helped me develop into the driver I am today. I've risen through the ranks very quickly as a Red Bull Junior.

I did my first two years in karting, so when I came through the single-seater ladder, it was really with the programme. And I wouldn't have been

> I'm grateful to the whole Red Bull and the Red Bull Junior Programme for the support they've given me. I joined the programme at the end of 2020, and they've really helped me develop into the driver I am today

able to take the steps I have without the sort of guidance, knowledge, and expertise of, especially, Dr. (Helmut) Marko and Rocky (Guillaume Rocquelin, former race engineer for four-time World champion Sebastian Vettel). I will always be extremely grateful to both of them because the help they've given me has enabled me to take the steps I've taken and given me this opportunity.

What sort of role did Dr. Marko personally play in your life in shaping you?

I have a perfect relationship with Dr. Marko. We've always got along very well. It's funny because I hear stories about how he's not the easiest for some drivers and stuff, but for me, he's always been really good. I've always had a good relationship with him. We've always been very open with one another, you know.

I don't think either of us really likes excuses, and we just say the truth and how it is, and because of that sort of honest relationship we had, it really helped me develop, and I've learned a lot from him.

How were your FP1 sessions this year, and what were the learnings from them?

Yeah, my first one was at Silverstone, which was obviously a very special moment. To participate in my first F1 session at home with my whole family there as well was a very, very special moment. I'm very grateful to everyone at Red Bull for the opportunity.

It wasn't very easy, also because it was an F2 weekend, so I was sort of jumping between the categories. I remember it was stressful, running between the F2 and the F1 paddock. So it wasn't easy, and also because, you know, the cars are so different. I don't think people appreciate the step, just because F2 is the penultimate run on the ladder, but it's massively different.

It's impressive how fast the F1 cars are. Everything is on a whole other level. It feels like everything's happening at twice the speed.

So it was a fantastic driving experience. There were so many vibes, we loved it in the car. It was a very special moment to share the garage alongside Max (Verstappen), just because of what he's doing at the moment in the sport.

How would you reflect on the F2 season? You closed out with a win in Abu Dhabi. What were your learnings and challenges that you faced?

I'm not very happy with the F2 season, to be honest. I think, yes, there were some good moments, but there were a few too many difficult days. There was a lot that I learned throughout the year, especially about myself and how to get the best out of myself, what I need and all that sort of stuff.

I think on the on-track side, F2 is so unique and so different to F1, especially since it's hard to really pick out things that I learned in F2 that are really easy to translate to F1, other than the obvious things. It wasn't an easy year, but I also think that's good because you learn more through difficult moments than the good ones. I had a little bit of everything.

So it wasn't always the most enjoyable, but I've learned a lot, and I'm really grateful for the year I had and the lessons I can now carry forward.

Compared to the categories you have raced so far, F1 is going to be a longer, physically and mentally taxing season. So, what are your preparations for that?

It will be very different. It's going to be very different to what I'm used to on all sides. The year is longer; it's a lot more taxing.

The life of an F1 driver is generally busier. Then, on top of that, obviously, the sport is going to change a lot next year. There are new regulations on the chassis and power unit side.

So it's a significant change for everyone, and it won't be easy. There are a lot of things that I'm going to have to get up to speed with, even on the basic stuff, how busy the season is, to be able to deal with that, always to be fresh. But then also working very closely with the team, because the regulation change is massive, because it's both the power unit and chassis, I think it's going to be like starting from the beginning for everyone.

Which is not easy, at the same time, it's an opportunity. The team have been really welcoming and really friendly so far, and they're used to working with young drivers. So I'm very excited to be working with them.

It's going to start from zero, which is an excellent opportunity to work closely with them, build a strong relationship, and collaborate effectively to get the best out of each other. I think there's going to be a lot of opportunities next year, because everything will be so new and so different.

You will be the only rookie next year. Is there any driver you would advise going to?

I think it's not easy in the sense of sports, because we're all going to be competing against one another. It's a bit of an awkward relationship of asking for advice, because you also want to beat everyone.

But I'd say the one person who's always been really helpful on that side, and I don't think will change, has been Max.

I've known him now for a few years, and whenever I've had a question or wanted some help with something, he's always been really willing to help out. And it was the same this year. I think I'm lucky enough that I have really good people around me, with the whole of the Visa Cash App Racing Bulls, the whole team, my internal team as well, that I think there'll be a lot of people to help me work through the year.

But I'm sure that if there's anything I'm really struggling with, also because we're going to be sharing the same engine, which is also an exciting new project working with Ford, if there's anything that I need, I'm sure I can go to Max for a bit of help.

So what is your personal target for the next year?

I haven't really thought so much about an outcome goal, of saying I want to finish here or there, because for me, it's very difficult at this time. It's almost a bit pointless speculating about it. So all that I'm focused on is working hard with the team over the winter, on the sim, in the factory with the engineers, to also really utilise the three tests, because I'm lucky that there's going to be more pre-season testing than usual. So really trying to utilise that, to be as ready as I can for the first race in Melbourne, and then we'll see.

It's going to be a busy season; it's a busier life. Will you be finding some time to come back to India?

I'm not sure during the season itself, because as you said, it's going to be really busy. And I think India is quite a busy place as well.

So, during the season, I'm not sure, but for sure, I'd really like to make an effort once the season is done to come back. And obviously, I'll also be coming in March for the Red Bull Moto Jam. I'm really looking forward to that. I think it's going to be a fantastic event.

It's going to be super exciting for me to be driving an F1 car on the streets of Delhi and to have my first show run as a n F1 driver here in India, given my connection and relationship with the country. So it's something I'm really looking forward to. I've really enjoyed my two visits to India so far, so I'm looking forward to coming back to Delhi in March and, hopefully, coming again later in the year.