

MODERN-DAY SOLUTION
Co-living: a hit with Gen X-Y-Z
Amid rising rental costs and busy lifestyles, more Indian professionals opt for the ease of co-living, a means to combat the loneliness epidemic
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Why can't world leaders agree on a plastic ban?
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Kash Patel: Donald Trump's die-hard loyalist
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Australia has India on the mat in the second Test
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INSIDE

Special Bench to hear Places of Worship Act case

Three-judge SC Bench headed by Chief Justice Sanjiv Khanna to look into petitions seeking to 'reclaim' places of worship allegedly 'encroached' by 'fundamentalist invaders'; first hearing fixed on Dec. 12; 'grievances' against Mughal rulers not a valid ground to challenge validity of a legislative enactment, says group representing Gyanvapi mosque



SP to quit MVA over post on Babri Masjid

MUMBAI
Samajwadi Party (SP) MLA Abu Azmi said on Saturday that the party would quit the Opposition Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) in Maharashtra, citing a controversial social media post on Babri Masjid by a close aide of Shiv Sena (UBT) leader Uddhav Thackeray. » PAGE 3

U.P. bans protests by government staff for 6 months

LUCKNOW
The Uttar Pradesh government on Saturday invoked the Essential Services Maintenance Act (ESMA), banning strikes by government employees for six months. The Act gives police the power to arrest employees violating its provisions, without a warrant. » PAGE 3

Yoon escapes impeachment over martial law

SEOUL
South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol escaped impeachment on Saturday over his brief declaration of martial law, after lawmakers from his ruling People Power Party boycotted a vote despite huge protests outside the parliament. » PAGE 12

Krishnadas Rajagopal
NEW DELHI
Chief Justice of India Sanjiv Khanna has constituted a Special Bench to hear petitions challenging the validity of the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act of 1991, a statute that has protected the identity and character of religious sites as they existed on August 15, 1947. The three-judge Bench will be headed by Chief Justice Khanna, and also include Justices Sanjay Kumar and K.V. Viswanathan. The first hearing of the case is scheduled for 3.30 p.m. on December 12. The listing of the case

before the newly formed Special Bench was shown in the causerlist published by the court on Saturday. The case involves a slew of petitions challenging the validity of the 1991 Act. The petitioners, including advocate Ashwini Kumar Upadhyay, blame the 1991 law for barring Hindus, Jains, Buddhists, and Sikhs from approaching courts to "re-claim" their places of worship which were allegedly "invaded" and "encroached" upon by "fundamentalist barbaric invaders". Muslim organisations such as the All India Muslim Personal Law Board (AIMPLB) and the Jamiat

Ulama-i-Hind, however, have countered it. They say that these petitions, in the guise of public interest petitions, cannot challenge a Central law which has guarded the spirit of fraternity and secularism, virtues from the Preamble of the Constitution, as well as parts of the "Basic Structure" of the Constitution, through protection of the religious character of religious places. **Ayodhya verdict** The AIMPLB pointed out that even the Ayodhya judgment had observed that the 1991 Act spoke "to our history and to the future of the nation... In pre-

Act's ambit

The Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991 lays down the rules to prevent the conversion of religious places

SECTION 2(C) defines 'place of worship' to include "temple, mosque, gurdwara, church, monastery or any other place of public religious worship..."

SECTION 3 prohibits the conversion of any place of worship

SECTION 4 imposes a positive obligation to maintain the religious character of every place of worship as it existed on August 15, 1947

Eye of the storm: The Gyanvapi mosque committee has also sought to intervene in the challenge against the 1991 Act.

PARLIAMENT HAS MANDATED serving the character of places of public worship, in no uncertain terms that history and its wrongs shall not be used as instruments to oppress the present and the future".

The Gyanvapi mosque management committee has also sought to intervene in the challenge against the 1991 Act in the top court.

The Gyanvapi mosque is at the centre of multiple civil suits by Hindu plaintiffs claiming the presence of a temple under the mosque, and their right to worship. The Anjuman Intezamia Masjid Varanasi, which represents the Gyanvapi mosque, has argued that "purported grievances" caused by ancient rulers of the Mughal period cannot be grounds for challenging the validity of a legislative enactment like the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act.

Centre stays silent
The Union government has chosen to remain tight-lipped so far, promising to file a counter-affidavit in the pending challenge against the 1991 Act. The constitution of the Special Bench and listing of the case on a specific day by the top court has come amidst frenetic judicial interventions by local courts in States like Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh in civil suits challenging the origins and character of mosques.

PHOTO: R. V. MOORTHY

'Healthy India, Happy India' campaign begins



Deputy Chief Minister Udhayanidhi Stalin launching the campaign on Saturday. Also seen are N. Ram, Director, The Hindu Group; G.V. Sampath, Founder and Chairman, Naruvi Hospitals; Ministers Ma. Subramanian, Duraimurugan and R. Gandhi; L.V. Navneeth, CEO, The Hindu Group. C. VENKATACHALAPATHY

The Hindu Bureau
VELLORE
"Healthy India, Happy India", a joint initiative of *The Hindu* and Naruvi Hospitals, Vellore, to build awareness on preventive healthcare, was inaugurated by Deputy Chief Minister Udhayanidhi Stalin on Saturday. He appreciated the partnership to take the message on health to people. G.V. Sampath, founder and chairman, Naruvi Hospitals, explained the genesis of the project, while N. Ram, director, The Hindu Group, highlighted Tamil Nadu's leadership in healthcare initiatives. The partnership will feature a series of 15 webinars on a variety of topics emphasising prevention and holistic health, to build awareness among people and start them on a journey of prioritising their health. These will be anchored by *The Hindu's* editorial team, with participation of experts from Naruvi Hospitals, and specialists. The webinar series kicked off with an offline event at the hospital in Vellore, featuring experts, including pulmonary and respiratory medicine specialists, who weighed in on the twin burden of stress and sleep.



Gaining ground: Rebel fighters on a motorcycle in Homs, after Syrian rebels pressed their advance on Saturday. REUTERS

Militants 'close in' on Damascus; Syria denies Army retreat

Agence France-Presse
BEIRUT
Islamist militants on a lightning advance through Syria said on Saturday they have begun to encircle Damascus as government forces denied they had withdrawn from areas near the capital. "Our forces have begun the final phase of encircling the capital, Damascus," said militant commander Hassan Abdel Ghani, with the Islamist-led alliance that launched the offensive. The Defence Ministry flatly denied the Army had fled its positions. "There is no truth to news claiming our armed forces, present in all areas of the Damascus countryside, have withdrawn," it said. Earlier, a war monitor and Abdel Ghani said rebels were within 20 km of Damascus as government forces fell back in the face of the offensive gathering even more momentum. The Syria Observatory for Human Rights said government forces had ceded more key ground, losing all of southern Daraa province and evacuating posts in Quneitra, near the Israel-annexed Golan Heights. The monitor said government forces were al-

India advises citizens to avoid travelling to Syria
NEW DELHI
As Islamist-led rebels continue to make advances in Syria, India has advised its citizens to avoid travelling to the Arab nation and urged those staying there to exercise "utmost precaution" and restrict their movements. » PAGE 4
so pulling out of towns as little as 10 kilometres from Damascus. Abdel Ghani said earlier that "our forces were able to control the Saasaa (security) branch in the Damascus countryside. The advance towards the capital continues." Air strikes and shelling by government forces and their ally Russia killed at least seven civilians near the city of Homs. The astounding rebel gains have brought the Islamist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and its allies to the doorstep of President Bashar al-Assad's seat of power, just over a week into a renewed offensive in a conflict that had long seemed frozen. **MORE REPORTS ON** » PAGES 9 & 12

Myanmar fisherfolk rescued off T.N. coast



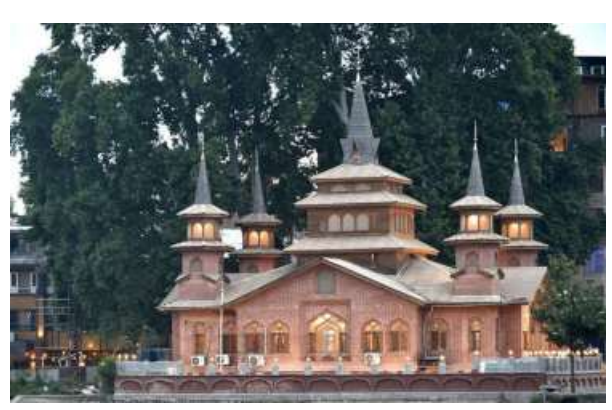
The Myanmar fishermen on their traditional bamboo raft being rescued off the Tamil Nadu coast. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

The Hindu Bureau
NAGAPATTINAM
Four Myanmar fishermen, who were stranded at sea for nearly three weeks, were rescued by the Indian Coast Guard and brought to the Nagapattinam port in Tamil Nadu on Friday morning. The fishermen, who only speak Burmese, had set out on a bamboo raft from Bogale, Myanmar, on November 7. Severe weather conditions and rough seas had caused their anchor to break, pushing their raft over 1,000 nautical miles into the Indian waters. The fishermen were found drifting on a 10-foot-long and 12-foot-wide bamboo raft without a motor. This traditional fishing method, common in Bogale, involves fishermen staying on the raft for days before returning to the shore. Reyaz Ameen Malik, an

Their unique architecture gives mosques in Kashmir Valley a place in the sun

Broad-sloped roofs of these places of worship are ideal for tapping solar energy: Chief Secretary Atal Dulloo has given the nod to include religious places under PM Surya Ghar Muft Bijli Yojana

Peerzada Ashiq
SRINAGAR
The uniquely multi-tiered and broad-sloped roofs of mosques in Kashmir are set to be part of an ambitious project to generate renewable energy in the Valley. J&K Chief Secretary Atal Dulloo, at a meeting held in Srinagar recently, gave the nod to include religious places, especially mosques in Kashmir, under the flagship 'PM Surya Ghar (sun house)-Muft Bijli Yojana (free electricity scheme)' to boost the generation of electricity in a region that faces long power cuts throughout the year. Reyaz Ameen Malik, an



Ambitious plan: With there being a mosque in every locality, Kashmir has a great potential for solar generation. IMRAN NISSAR

electrical engineer, feels the initiative could be a game-changer. "It has huge potential, given that there are mosques with wide roof surfaces in every locality in the Kashmir Valley. Religious sites have no load requirement at night, can easily become self-sufficient in the summers, and supply surplus electricity to the Power Department with an on-grid system. They can generate 3 KW (kilowatt) to 5 KW of electricity," he said.

IN BRIEF



Power lines being divided to stop overloading in Rajasthan

Power supply lines of 33 KV are being divided in Rajasthan, along with the construction of new 33 KV power sub-stations, to resolve overloading during rabi cultivation. Along with uninterrupted power supply to agricultural consumers, farmers have started getting electricity for irrigation during day time. Minister of State for Energy Heeralal Nagar said in Jaipur on Saturday that new agricultural power connections were also being released and power supply was being improved through agricultural feeders. He said the new power sub-stations were being constructed under the revamped distribution sector scheme. He said power supply would be ensured for a minimum of six hours a day for agricultural consumers and round the clock for domestic and industrial consumers.

Cong. govt. in Himachal most incompetent: Anurag Thakur

BJP MP from Hamirpur Anurag Thakur on Saturday termed Himachal Pradesh's Congress dispensation as one of the "most incompetent and corrupt governments" in the State since Independence. He accused the party of "making false promises" to gain power. Addressing the BJP's 'akrosh rally' in Una, he alleged that the Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu government had closed projects started by the previous BJP regime and lashed out at the Congress for "cheating" people by "making false promises" in the run-up to the Assembly polls in 2022. "Forget about the ₹1,500 promised to women and five lakh jobs as even those in government jobs are not being paid salaries on time," Mr. Thakur said. PTI

Court grants bail to suspended Jharkhand IAS officer

A special PMLA court in Ranchi on Saturday granted bail to suspended Jharkhand cadre IAS officer Pooja Singhal in a money laundering case. She was given bail on the condition of furnishing two bonds of ₹2 lakh each and depositing her passport. Ms. Singhal's lawyer said that she was granted bail after the court heard her bail petition for two days. She has been in custody since May 11, 2022, after raids were conducted at properties linked to her in connection with the money laundering case. The case relates to alleged corruption in implementing MGNREGA. The ED has accused Ms. Singhal, a former State Mines Department Secretary, of money laundering. The agency also seized over ₹36 crore in cash linked to alleged illegal mining in two money laundering cases. PTI

It's clear Centre does not want to talk, we'll resume 'Dilli Chalo': farmer leader

Punjab farmer leader Sarwan Singh Pandher says 101 farmers will march to Delhi on Sunday noon; we waited for a day to hear from the govt. about our demands but received no response, he adds

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

A day after suspending their 'Dilli Chalo' march, farm leaders at the Shambhu border between Punjab and Haryana on Saturday said a group of 101 farmers will start a peaceful foot march towards the national capital on Sunday afternoon. The farmers have gathered near Ambala, where prohibitory orders under Section 163 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita have been imposed.

The protesters had attempted to march to Delhi on Friday but called off the stir after some of them got injured from the tear gas shells used by the Haryana police to disperse them. Farmer union leaders decided to pause their agitation on Saturday to hear what the Centre had to say regarding their demands,



(Left) An aerial view of the Shambhu border between Punjab and Haryana; Kisan Mazdoor Morcha coordinator Sarwan Singh Pandher addressing the media on Saturday. ANI/PTI

which include a legal guarantee of Minimum Support Price (MSP) for all crops and also a farm loan waiver.

Addressing the media at the Shambhu border on Saturday, Kisan Mazdoor Morcha (KMM) coordinator Sarwan Singh Pandher said, "We are yet to receive any message from the Centre regarding talks. The BJP-led Central government is in no mood to hold talks."

"Had talks started, a so-

lution could have been found. For us, the ruling party (at the Centre) and the Opposition are the same — they all just engage in politics," added Mr. Pandher.

The farmers had earlier attempted to march into the national capital on February 13 and February 21, but they were stopped by security forces at Shambhu and Khanauri on Punjab-Haryana borders. They are also demanding a debt waiver, pension for farm-

ers and farm labourers, and a ban on power tariff hikes.

The reinstatement of the Land Acquisition Act, 2013 and compensation to the families of farmers who died during the 2020-21 agitation are also part of their demands.

Regarding the police action on Friday, the KMM leader said 16 farmers had suffered injuries, and one had lost hearing due to the tear gas shells fired by the Haryana police.

Oppn. must ensure all poll promises are met: Pawar

Press Trust of India
KOLHAPUR

Nationalist Congress Party (Sharadchandra Pawar) president Sharad Pawar on Saturday said the Opposition should not lose heart over its rout but go back to the people who do not seem to be enthused by the massive victory of the BJP-led Mahayuti in the Maharashtra elections.

The Opposition's priority would be to ensure that all the election promises made by the ruling alliance, including increasing the financial assistance to women under the Ladki Bahin scheme from ₹1,500 to ₹2,100 are implemented at the earliest, he said.

"It is true that we have been defeated. We should not fret over it but go back to the people as no enthusiasm is visible among the people about the election results. There is a lot of resentment," the senior politician told reporters here.

The ruling BJP-NCP-Shiv Sena alliance won 230 of the 288 seats in the November 20 elections. The Opposition's strength in the Assembly is low but many



NCP (SP) chief Sharad Pawar.

young Opposition MLAs will show their mettle after a couple of sessions, Mr. Pawar said.

To a question on Samajwadi Party State chief Abu Asim Azmi announcing that his party was pulling out of the Opposition's Maha Vikas Aghadi alliance after the Shiv Sena (UBT) hailed, in a newspaper advertisement, those who demolished the Babri Masjid, Mr. Pawar sought to play down the development.

The Central leadership of the Akhilesh Yadav-led party was of the view that Opposition unity is necessary, he said. Opposition parties cannot demand that a Leader of Opposition be appointed as they do not have the required numbers, Mr. Pawar added.

Five dead as car plunges into lake in Telangana

The Hindu Bureau
HYDERABAD

Five young men died in Yadadri Bhuvanagiri district of Telangana on Saturday when a car carrying six men plunged into Jalalpur Cheruvu lake. The Po-champally police have booked a case.

The victims, identified as Harsha, Dinesh, Vamsi, Balu, and Vinay, all aged between 20 and 25, are residents of Hyderabad. The group, all private employees, had started off on a drive from LB Nagar to Valigonda late Friday night.

Ready to row



All set: With the weather clear enough to go to sea, a group of fishermen getting ready with their traditional fishing boat on the Vettukadu beach in Thiruvananthapuram on Saturday. NIRMAL HARINDRAN

MUDA former chief moves HC against ED searches

The Hindu Bureau
BENGALURU

Former Commissioner of Mysuru Urban Development Authority D.B. Natesh has moved the Karnataka High Court questioning the legality of searches conducted by the Enforcement Directorate on his premises in connection with alleged illegalities in allotment of sites by the authority. He said the searches were conducted without any substantive, reliable data or material. The court adjourned further hearing till Monday and asked the ED to reply.

Naidu starts parents-teachers meeting in A.P. govt. schools, calls to revolutionise system

The Hindu Bureau
BAPATLA

Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu on Saturday launched a mega Parents-Teachers Meeting (PTM) across 45,000 government schools in the State. The meetings saw participation of 1.2 crore parents and students.

Speaking at the event organised at the Bapatla Municipal High School, Mr. Naidu emphasised the significance of collaborative efforts by the parents, teachers, and the government to revolutionise the education system. Stating that such initiatives would pave the way for transformative changes in the education system, the Chief Minister said December 7 would henceforth be observed as Parents-Teachers Day.

Reiterating the importance of education in ensuring a prosperous future for the students, Mr. Naidu advised the students to excel academically and engage themselves in sports



N. Chandrababu Naidu at the parents-teachers meeting held at a school in Bapatla town on Saturday. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

and games for holistic development.

He said every school would soon issue health and progress cards, besides updating the parents about their children's issues via mobile notifications. Speaking about cybercrimes, Mr. Naidu advised parents to monitor their children's use of technology.

He vowed to ensure completion of infrastructure facilities, including digital labs and library, at the high school by the next academic year.

Students and parents later shared their views with

the Chief Minister. While a student sought creation of sports courts, a mother of another student sought guidance on career options.

Mr. Naidu underscored his commitment to supporting the students' ambitions.

Stating that drugs and ganja menace had been ruining the lives of the students and their careers, Mr. Naidu said children should be aware of the ill-effects and stay away from such vices. He said the government was paying special attention to eradicate drugs in the State.

No one needs to talk about power-sharing formula: Shivakumar

The Hindu Bureau
BENGALURU

Karnataka Deputy Chief Minister D.K. Shivakumar on Saturday said that no Congress leader should talk about any power-sharing agreement or formula involving him and Chief Minister Siddaramaiah as he has clarified that there was no such thing.

Mr. Shivakumar appears to have issued an oblique warning to his party leaders after Food and Civil Supplies Minister K.H. Muniyappa on Friday said it was true that there was a power-sharing agreement between the Chief Minister and the Deputy Chief Minister.

Mr. Shivakumar had told a private news channel recently that there was a pact between him and Mr. Siddaramaiah before the party came to power in 2023. However, Mr. Siddaramaiah later said there was no such agreement, and that he would abide by the party's high command's decision.

Speaking to reporters, Mr. Shivakumar on Satur-

day said, "No one needs to talk about any agreement. There is no formula. We are both working with some political understanding. I have never spoken about any formula. All that I told the channel was that we have come to some understanding. The Chief Minister has been entrusted with some responsibility and I am entrusted with some. I am functioning accordingly." He further said, "I have already said that whatever the Chief Minister has said is final, and the matter is now closed."

According to party sources, a compromise is believed to have been reached based on the understanding that Mr. Shivakumar would be considered for the top post after two-and-a-half years of the government's term.

CAG report points to massive 'irregularity' in handling COVID-19 funds in Odisha

Satvasundar Barik
BHUBANESWAR

In an explosive report, the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India alleged that a chunk of funds earmarked to deal with COVID-19 pandemic was siphoned off during Naveen Patnaik's tenure in Odisha.

The CAG's report on 'Public Health Infrastructure and Management of Health Services in the State', which was tabled on Saturday, claimed that excess payments were made to dedicated COVID hospitals (DCHs) without verifying their claims. Dietary reimbursements did not tally with the number of doctors and paramedical staff. Besides, the hospitals submitted forged bills to buy personal protective equipment (PPE).

The top audit agency said ₹144.88 crore was paid to eight different hospitals without proper scrutiny. "The bills submitted by the eight DCHs, out of the 18, had not been properly scrutinised by the authorised Medical Officers



Dietary reimbursements did not tally with the number of doctors and paramedical staff, says CAG report. FILE PHOTO

(AMOs) for ensuring that the claims incurred towards the treatment of COVID-19 patients were in order and as per the guidelines," it said.

More than half the payment was made to SUM hospital. "The DCH (SUM Hospital) had submitted an abstract of the bills to the Bhubaneswar Municipal Corporation (BMC) without verification and countersignature by the AMOs. The BMC had approved the claims for payment without verifying the actual number of patients admitted, type of beds availed by the patients, and patient-

wise claims," the CAG said. The CAG stated that despite the PPE kits being supplied free of cost to the DCHs, by Odisha State Medical Corporation Limited (OSMCL), the DCHs had not deducted the cost of the PPE kits from their bills, which were submitted to the Collectors or municipal authorities.

"These irregular claims of consumable charges against the PPE kits had not been reduced from the bill amounts by the AMOs, while forwarding the claims. Resultantly, there had been an excess payment of

Show-cause notice sent to 86 IIT faculty members

Shrabana Chatterjee
KOLKATA

A section of faculty members at the Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur, is at loggerheads with the institute administration over the show-cause notice to 86 teachers. The rift began when the IIT Teachers' Association (IITTA) filed a complaint with the Union Education Ministry citing arbitrary recruitment, favouritism, and irregularities at the institute.

According to sources in the IIT, the issues began in September when the professors complained about "unprecedented nepotism, arbitrary faculty recruitment, failure in starting a multi-specialty hospital, and unlawful recovery of payment from faculty".

Four IITTA office-bearers were sent show-cause notices after filing the complaint and were asked to justify their claims. The situation became more tense when 86 other professors submitted another mass petition to the institute. The institute sent show-cause notices to these 86 professors and it snowballed into a row.

SP to quit MVA in Maharashtra over post on Babri Masjid

The Hindu Bureau
MUMBAI

The Samajwadi Party (SP) on Saturday announced its decision to quit the Opposition Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) in Maharashtra, citing a controversial post by a close aide of Shiv Sena (UBT) leader Uddhav Thackeray.

On Friday, Shiv Sena (UBT) MLC Milind Narvekar shared a poster on X featuring images of the Babri Masjid demolition along with a quote from Shiv Sena founder Bal Thackeray: "I am proud of those who did this."

The post also included photographs of Mr. Uddhav and his son Aaditya Thackeray. Reacting to the post, SP's Maharashtra unit chief Abu Azmi criticised the Shiv Sena (UBT), saying, "If anyone in the MVA uses such language, how are they different from the BJP? Why should we remain in this alliance? We are quitting the MVA. I am speaking with SP president Akhilesh Yadav. The Congress must decide whether it can align with such a party."

Samajwadi Party has two MLAs – Mr. Azmi and Raees Sheikh – in the 288-member Assembly

The Hindu Bureau
LUCKNOW

The Uttar Pradesh government on Saturday invoked the Essential Services Maintenance Act (ESMA), banning strikes by government employees in all State government departments, corporations, and authorities for six months.

In exercise of the powers under sub-section (1) of section-3 of the Uttar Pradesh Essential Services Maintenance Act, 1966 (U.P. Act No. 30 of 1966), the State government prohibited strikes for a period of six months from the date of the notification," reads the notification issued by the government.

The decision came amid the upcoming Maha Kumbh, which is going to be held in the State, and other important programmes. The Act gives the police the power to arrest the em-

U.P. invokes ESMA, imposes six-month ban on protests

Decision comes amid the upcoming Maha Kumbh and other events; the Opposition calls it 'undemocratic' and suppression of employees' rights

The Hindu Bureau
LUCKNOW

The Uttar Pradesh government on Saturday invoked the Essential Services Maintenance Act (ESMA), banning strikes by government employees in all State government departments, corporations, and authorities for six months.

The decision came amid the upcoming Maha Kumbh, which is going to be held in the State, and other important programmes. The Act gives the police the power to arrest the em-



Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath during a visit to review preparations ahead of the Maha Kumbh in Prayagraj on Saturday. PTI

ployees violating the provisions of the Act without a warrant. The punishment is imprisonment for a term which may extend to one year or a fine which may extend to ₹1,000 or both, to any person who instigated a strike which was illegal under the Act.

The Opposition described the decision as undemocratic, aimed at curtailing the right to protest. "The ruling BJP-led Uttar

Pradesh government is anti-people and anti-democratic to the core. Everyone, including government employees, has the right to protest. Such a decision shows that the present government is scared of listening to the grievances of any section of the population including its own employees. It is a black law, we condemn the move," said Anil Yadav, a senior Congress leader.

Rajnath to oversee commissioning of Tushil in Russia

Dinakar Peri
NEW DELHI

The first of two stealth guided missile frigates, *Tushil*, under construction in Russia, is set to be commissioned during the three-day visit of Defence Minister Rajnath Singh beginning on Sunday for the 21st meeting of the India-Russia Inter-Governmental Commission on Military and Military Technical Cooperation (IRIGC-M&MTC).

Mr. Singh and his Russian counterpart, Andrey Belousov, will co-chair the 21st meeting of the IRIGC-M&MTC in Moscow on December 10, a Defence Ministry statement said. "The two leaders will review the entire range of multi-faceted relations between the two countries in the field of defence, including military-to-military and industrial cooperation. They will also exchange views on contemporary regional and global issues of mutual interest."

Mr. Singh will travel to Yantar Shipyard in Kaliningrad for the commissioning ceremony of the frigate during which he will be accompanied by Navy



Rajnath Singh

chief Admiral Dinesh K. Tripathi.

In addition, he will pay tributes at 'The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier' in Moscow to honour the Soviet soldiers killed during the Second World War. He will interact with members of the Indian community.

Tushil is an upgraded Krivak III class frigate of Project 1135.6 of which six are already in service – three Talwar class ships, built at Baltiysky shipyard, St. Petersburg, and three follow-on Tega class ships, built at Yantar shipyard, Kaliningrad. The ship's construction was closely monitored by an Indian team of specialists from the Warship Overseeing Team stationed at Kaliningrad, under the aegis of the Embassy of India, Moscow, the Navy said in a statement.

BSF deployment moved to zero line along Bangladesh border in Bengal

Shiv Sahay Singh
KOLKATA

The Border Security Force has shifted the deployment of its personnel to the zero line along the border with Bangladesh in Murshidabad district of West Bengal. The border is a long stretch of char lands along the Padma river, and the forces had so far been deployed a few hundred metres from the border inside the Indian territory.

Farmers who have their farmlands in the chars until now had to register with the BSF to access and cultivate the lands.

"There are three battalions in Murshidabad, where there is a problem of char lands. Everywhere, we have deployed forces along the zero line from Farakka to Kakmarichar," Deputy Inspector-General Anil Kumar Sinha of the BSF Baharampur range told presspersons.



West Bengal shares a 2,216-km border with Bangladesh, and it is manned by three frontiers of the BSF. SHIV SAHAY SINGH

The official said the deployment has been made from three battalions – Battalions 73, 146, and 149 of the South Bengal Frontier of the BSF.

'Long-pending demand' While sources in the security establishment said that the turmoil in Bangladesh may have prompted the deployment, BSF officials said it was a long pending demand of farmers in the

area. Chars are pieces of land formed of sand and silt that appear and disappear depending on the flow of river.

The chars along the Bangladesh border are created by the Padma. They don't have power and water supply, which is why the forces had been stationed inside the Indian territory.

BSF officials said that the work on surveying and

erecting fences along the International Border will start soon.

Better protection

Julfikar Ali, secretary, Border Development Committee of Murshidabad, who has repeatedly demanded deployment of the BSF at the zero line in the chars, welcomed the move. He said it will benefit thousands of farmers.

"Now farmers can access their land without having to take permission from the BSF. This would also help in better protection of our borders," he said.

Mr. Ali said that two Indian nationals were arrested and are still lodged in prison in Bangladesh after they crossed over to work in their fields on September 2. West Bengal shares a 2,216-km border with Bangladesh, and it is manned by three frontiers of the BSF.

'Design phase of indigenous nuclear attack submarines to take 4-5 years'

Dinakar Peri
NEW DELHI

The design phase of the indigenous nuclear attack submarines (SSN) will take four or five years and the construction of the first one, building on the experience of the ballistic nuclear missile submarine programme (SSBN), will take another five years, officials in the know said.

The third SSN leased from Russia is expected to be delivered to the Indian Navy in 2028 after delays.

Last week, when asked about the indigenous SSN programme, Navy chief Admiral Dinesh K. Tripathi said that "as per their timelines, 2036-37 was the very realistic timeframe when the first SSN can be inducted followed by the second one in a couple of years".

The design and development should take four or five years, and the construction another five



INS Arihant with a displacement of 6,000 tonnes was commissioned into service in August 2016. FILE PHOTO

years, the sources said. An SSN is different from an SSBN but the experience of building the latter is helpful and the reactor and other specifications will be finalised considering the requirement of speed and endurance that SSNs need, the sources said.

India had leased two SSNs, *INS Chakra 1* and *2*, in the past from Russia. The third one, contracted on lease, has seen several

delays due to COVID, holding up the finalisation of the hull that was to be refurbished. It is now expected by 2027-end or early-2028, according to sources.

The SSNs are a critical requirement for the Navy to keep a watch over the Indo-Pacific as they give unlimited endurance to perform a variety of tasks.

October saw two major developments – the Cabi-

net Committee on Security approved the indigenous construction of two SSNs estimated to cost around ₹35,000 crore, while India's fourth SSBN referred to as *S4** was launched into the water at the Ship Building Centre in Visakhapatnam, as reported earlier.

India currently has two SSBNs in operation.

INS Arihant with a displacement of 6,000 tonnes and powered by an 83-MW pressurised light-water reactor with enriched uranium was commissioned in August 2016.

The second SSBN, *INS Arighaat* (S3), which retains the same reactor specifications and dimensions with several technological upgrades, was commissioned in August.

The third SSBN *Aridhaman* (S4) is currently undergoing sea trials and is expected to be commissioned into service next year, sources said.

'Disappointing,' U.S. says in response to BJP's accusations

Suhasini Haidar
NEW DELHI

The U.S. reacted sharply on Saturday to the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) allegation that the U.S. State Department was behind targeted attacks against Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Indian businessman Gautam Adani, denying the accusations and saying they were "disappointing".

In response to the series of posts by the BJP on 'X', which included accusations that it was behind an investigative reporting portal Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), the U.S. government said it had been a "champion of media freedom around the world", and does not influence editorial decisions by these organisations.

"It is disappointing that the ruling party in India would make these kinds of accusations," a spokesperson for the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi told *The Hindu*.

The U.S. Embassy spokesperson did not deny the allegation it was funding groups such as the OCCRP, but said the U.S. government "works with independent organisations on programming that supports professional development and capacity building training for journalists", adding that this "programming does not influence the editorial decisions or direction of these organisations". The strong statements exchanged indicate a new low in ties between New Delhi and Washington, that have been under a strain. The Ministry of External Affairs has so far refused to comment.

Kerala panel defers release of Hema Committee report's redacted parts

The Hindu Bureau
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

The State Information Commission (SIC) on Saturday deferred the release of the redacted portions of the 2017 K. Hema Committee report which documented incriminating details of systemic sexual exploitation, workplace harassment and gender inequality in the Malayalam film industry.

A complaint from an individual against releasing the redacted portions of the report precluded the SIC from taking a final call on the matter. Several RTI activists had moved the SIC accusing the Kerala government of showing 'overzealousness' in censoring parts of the report to allegedly protect "high-profile wrongdoers".

They said the panel had asked the government to



Members of cinema and serial artist workers union demanding the implementation of the Justice Hema Committee report. FILE PHOTO

blue-pencil 29 paragraphs regarding the identities of victims and alleged violators, citing privacy issues and future legal implications. However, the activists alleged that the government overstepped the SIC's directive and arbitrarily expurgated 130 paragraphs without assigning any reason. The SIC had also rebuked the officers for

overstepping their brief.

The report's "belated" publication sparked off a controversial reckoning of the 'misogyny' in the movie industry. It prompted many persons, including aspiring actors, junior artists, and performers from other States, to relate their "traumatic experiences" on conventional and social media.

The "disclosures" triggered a political controversy, with the United Democratic Front (UDF) and the Left Democratic Front government in the dock on the charge of pussyfooting around the Hema Committee report for seven years to save influential figures in the Malayalam film industry.

UDF and BJP workers singled out Minister for Culture Saji Cherian and A.K. Balan, a Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)] Central committee member and former Culture Minister, for ignoring the Hema Committee report and not initiating prosecution as mandated by the law.

The government had constituted a SIT to initiate prosecution based on the statements of those who were deposited before the Hema Committee.

ISKCON alleges its centre in Bangladesh capital set on fire

The Hindu Bureau
KOLKATA

"A centre of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) was set on fire in Dhaka in Bangladesh," a spokesperson of the religious order said on Saturday.

"Early morning today, miscreants set fire to the Shri Shri Radha Krishna Temple and the Shri Mahabhagya Lakshmi Narayan Temple, located in Dhour village, under the jurisdiction of Turag Police Station, Dhaka district," Radharaman Das, spokesperson of ISKCON Kolkata posted on X. He said the fire was initiated by lifting the tin roof at the back of the temple and using petrol or octane and all items inside the temple were burned down completely. According to ISKCON,

there are more than 100 centres of the religious order in Bangladesh and four of its monks including Chinmoy Krishna Das have been arrested. Mr. Das said ISKCON monks are in touch with Bangladesh authorities and security is being provided to some of the temples of the order.

Various Hindutva organisations have organised protests in Kolkata and other parts of the State demanding the release of Chinmoy Krishna Das.

Certain groups including Leader of Opposition Suwendu Adhikari had called for an economic blockade of Bangladesh by stopping the movement of goods from the land ports. The development comes ahead of the proposed visit of Indian Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri to Bangladesh on December 9.

Trinamool names Ritabrata as RS candidate

The Hindu Bureau
KOLKATA

The Trinamool Congress on Saturday nominated Ritabrata Banerjee as a candidate for the upcoming election to the Rajya Sabha from West Bengal.

"Under the inspiration of Hon'ble Chairperson Mamata Official, we are pleased to announce the candidature of Shri Ritabrata Banerjee for the forthcoming Rajya Sabha by-elections. We extend our heartfelt wishes to him. May he work towards upholding Trinamool's enduring legacy of indomitable spirit and continue advocating for the rights of every Indian," the Trinamool Congress said.

Mr. Banerjee heads the trade union wing of Trinamool, Indian National Trinamool Trade Union Congress (INTTUC). Once elected, this will be his second term in the Upper House. In 2014, Mr. Banerjee was nominated by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) to the Rajya Sabha from West Bengal. However, he was suspended from the CPI(M) in 2017 for anti-party activities and later joined the Trinamool.

Trinamool Congress general secretary Abhishek Banerjee described the nomination as "truly well-deserved, reflecting the tireless effort".

A vacancy was created after Trinamool Congress MP Jawhar Sircar resigned from the Rajya Sabha.

MLAs-elect of MVA skip oath, boycott first day of first session

Opposition legislators refuse to be sworn in, alleging 'EVM manipulation and suppression of democratic rights'; a total of 173 Mahayuti MLAs take the oath; Speaker's election tomorrow; Fadnavis government will seek trust vote soon after

Abhinav Deshpande
MUMBAI

Amid slogans of "Jai Shri Ram" and "Jai Bhavani, Jai Shivaji", 173 newly elected MLAs, including Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis and his deputies, Eknath Shinde and Ajit Pawar, of the Mahayuti alliance took oath on the first day of a three-day special session of the Maharashtra Assembly on Saturday.

However, the Opposition Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) boycotted the session, alleging misuse of electronic voting machines (EVMs) and questioning the massive mandate won by BJP-led Mahayuti.

Refusing to take the oath, Opposition leaders, including State Congress president Nana Patole, Shiv Sena (UBT) leader Aaditya Thackeray, and NCP(SP) MLA Jitendra Awhad, protested against the curfew and arrests at Markdwadi village in the Malhar constituency of Solapur district as people demanded a mock poll using ballot papers.

Speaking to *The Hindu* while exiting the Assembly, Mr. Patole and Mr. Aaditya said the boycott was a stand against "EVM manipulation and the suppression of democratic rights".

The leaders said they



New beginnings: Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis, his deputies, Eknath Shinde and Ajit Pawar, with other leaders on the first day of the Assembly Session in Mumbai on Saturday. EMMANUAL YOGINI

were not against taking oath as MLAs, but they had chosen not to do so on the first day. The boycott is in protest against EVM manipulation and curfew and arrests of villagers at Markdwadi, they said while heading to Matoshree for a meeting with Shiv Sena (UBT) leader Uddhav Thackeray.

Mr. Fadnavis, representing the Nagpur South-West Assembly constituency, was sworn in as a member of the Maharashtra Assembly for the sixth time, having been first elected in

1999. Pro-tem Speaker Kalidas Kolambkar, a nine-time MLA from Wadala, presided over the oath-taking ceremony that began at 11 a.m.

Senior MLAs

Chainsukh Sancheti and Jaykumar Rawal of the BJP, Manikrao Kokate of the NCP, and Ashish Jaiswal of the Shiv Sena were the first to take oath as they had been appointed members of the pro-tem Speaker's panel by Governor C.P. Radhakrishnan. The turn of Mr. Shinde, ex-Chief Mi-

nister and member of the House since 2004, and Mr. Ajit Pawar, who has been consistently re-elected since his first term in 1991, came later. Mr. Pawar, wearing a traditional red *pheta* (headgear) with a golden border, was greeted with cheers of "Ekach Dada, Ajit Dada [The one and only elder brother Ajit]" by his party members.

Seven BJP MLAs – Girish Mahajan, Seema Hire, Prashant Thakur, Sudhir Gadgil, Nitesh Rane, Pratap Adsad and Ram Kadam – took oath in Sanskrit. Ku-

mar Ailani of the BJP did so in Sindhi. Abu Azmi of the Samajwadi Party took oath in Hindi, and Mufti Mohammad Khalique of the All Indian Majlid-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen in Urdu. NCP leader Hasan Mushrif invoked Allah.

The Speaker's election will be held on Monday. The Fadnavis government, which was sworn in on December 5, will go for the trust vote later.

Election results

The Mahayuti, comprising the BJP, the Shiv Sena led by Mr. Shinde, and the NCP led by Mr. Pawar, retained power by winning 230 of the 288 seats. The BJP won 132 seats, the Shiv Sena 57, and the NCP 41. The MVA won only 46 seats, with the Shiv Sena (UBT) getting 20, the Congress 16, and the NCP(SP) 10.

During the proceedings, Mr. Aaditya and several Opposition MLAs remained seated until the top leaders from the ruling alliance took their oath. As they exited, ruling alliance members called out, "Respect democracy. Why are you leaving?"

Shiv Sena (UBT) leader Bhaskar Jadhav appealed to the ruling parties to honour legislative traditions by giving the Deputy Speaker's post to the Opposition.

Four Ministers take oath as Assam CM expands Cabinet

The Hindu Bureau
GUWAHATI

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma expanded his Cabinet by inducting four Bharatiya Janata Party MLAs as Ministers on Saturday, a little more than a year ahead of the 2026 Assembly elections in the State.

The MLAs – Prasanta Phukan (representing the Dibrugarh seat), Kaushik Rai (Lakhimpur), Krishnendu Paul (Patharkandi), and Rupesh Goala (Doomdooma) – were sworn in by Governor Laxman Prasad Acharya.

The Chief Minister and his Cabinet colleagues were present at the oath-taking ceremony.

Mr. Phukan, a four-time MLA since 2006, and the first-timer Mr. Goala are from the tea-growing belt of eastern Assam. Mr. Paul, in his second term, and Mr. Rai, a first-timer, represent the Barak Valley seat in southern Assam which is dominated by Bengali speakers.

"Congratulations to all my colleagues who have taken oath today. Looking forward to working with them to fulfil Adarniya Shri Narendra Modi's vision of a Viksit Assam," the Chief Minister posted on social media platform X.

Mr. Sarma now heads a 19-member Council of Ministers in the BJP-led coalition government, with the induction of the four

A four-time MLA, a legislator in his second term, and two first-timers are among the new appointees

MLAs. Three ministerial berths were vacant before Saturday's swearing-in.

While one was kept vacant, two were vacated by BJP veterans Parimal Suklabaidya and Ranjit Dutta, who were elected as MPs from the Silchar and Tezpur constituencies earlier this year. The fourth slot was created by dropping Sanjay Kishan as the Labour and Tea Tribes Welfare Minister. He was appointed Chairperson of the Assam Food and Civil Supplies Corporation. "Thank you for your exceptional work and best wishes for serving the people of Assam in your new role as Chairman of Assam Food and Civil Supplies Corporation," Mr. Sarma wrote, congratulating him.

"It is an honour that the party has found me worthy of the new assignment, which I hope to do justice to," Mr. Phukan, said.

A maximum of 19 Ministers can be inducted into the Cabinet in the 126-member Assam Assembly. The BJP heads the NDA government, which has 84 MLAs. The Asom Gana Parishad and United People's Party Liberal are the two other constituents.

Leave at the earliest, India tells its citizens living in strife-hit Syria

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI

As Islamist-led rebels continue to make further advances in Syria, India has advised its citizens to avoid travelling to the Arab country and urged those staying there to exercise "utmost precaution" and restrict their movements.

In an advisory, the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) asked the Indians living in the violence-hit country to leave by the earliest available commercial flights if they can.

The Islamist rebels had almost taken control of the central Syrian city of Homs on Thursday after capturing much of Aleppo, the country's largest city. Tens of thousands of people

have been fleeing Homs.

"In view of the situation prevailing in Syria, Indian nationals are advised to avoid all travel to Syria, until further notification," the Ministry said.

"Indians currently in Syria are requested to remain in touch with the Indian embassy in Damascus at their emergency helpline number +963 993385973 (also on WhatsApp) and email ID hoc.damascus@mea.gov.in for updates," it said.

"Those who can be advised to leave by the earliest available commercial flights and others are requested to observe utmost precaution about their safety and restrict their movements to the minimum," it added.

At pre-Budget meet, farmers seek increase in income support, industries call for tax breaks

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman met representatives of farmers' associations, agriculture-based industries and agricultural economists in New Delhi on Saturday as part of her customary pre-Budget consultations with stakeholders from various sectors.

Farmers asked her to double the income support under the PM Kisan Samman Nidhi to ₹12,000 and reduce costs on input materials, while industries sought tax breaks and subsidies for expanding their network of infrastructure.

At the meeting, Samyukt Kisan Morcha (Non-Political) leader Dharmendra Malik said the Centre



Major demands: Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman and others at the pre-Budget meeting in New Delhi on Saturday. PTI

had neglected the agriculture sector for long, and sought steps to ensure timely availability of seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, power and labour. Mr. Malik said the minimum support price arrived at under the present calculation system did not cover input costs,

and urged the Centre to implement the formula given in the M.S. Swaminathan Commission's report to calculate the MSP. He urged the Centre to bring more crops within the ambit of the MSP, and demanded that the PM Kisan Samman Nidhi assistance

be increased to ₹12,000 a year from ₹6,000 a year given at present.

The Sangh Parivar-backed Bharatiya Kisan Sangh's Badri Narayan Chaudhary said in a memorandum that the Kisan Nidhi amount had not been increased in the past six years. He asked the Centre to provide the facility of input tax credit in the Goods and Service Tax to farmers too. He demanded direct benefit transfer of fertilizer subsidy to farmers instead of providing it to fertilizer companies. The Kisan Sangh supported the policy on natural farming, and asked the government to make use of the livestock in the country to boost natural farming.

Farmers' Forum chairman Ajay Vir Jakhar said

the most problematic area is perishable fruits and vegetables. "Uniform taxation in agricultural markets across India (like GST) will pave the way for improved governance, systems efficiency, mitigation of food inflation and price fluctuations, ignite entrepreneurial spirits to drive competition to benefit farmers and consumers alike," he said.

Industries demanded GST exemption on agricultural machinery, fertilizers, seeds, and medicines. The PHD Chamber of Commerce and Industry asked the Centre to reduce GST on pesticide from 18% to 5%. Its chairman (agribusiness committee), R.G. Agarwal, urged the Centre to curb sale of smuggled and spurious pesticides.

Mayawati flays Congress, SP for 'exploiting' Sambhal issue

The Hindu Bureau
LUCKNOW

Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) president Mayawati on Saturday accused the Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Congress of exploiting communal tensions for political dividends in Sambhal and inciting divisions within the minority community.

"These two parties are pitting Turks and non-Turks in the Muslim community against each other in Sambhal. Muslims must remain cautious from such tactics," she said.

She also targeted the Congress for its silence on the plight of Hindus in neighbouring Bangladesh and committing historical blunders during Partition.

Christian MPs object to some provisions in Waqf Bill

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Christian community should highlight its positive points, the important role it played, and "not just be reactive to negative news", Christian MPs from the Opposition bloc are learnt to have told the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) at a recent meeting here.

The CBCI, the apex body of Catholics in India, called a meeting of all Christian MPs on December 3.

The meeting was attended by around 20 MPs, most of them from Opposition parties.

Multiple Opposition MPs raised strong objections to certain provisions



Derek O'Brien

of the Waqf (Amendment) Bill, now under the consideration of a Joint Parliamentary Committee.

'Changes composition' The Bill, among many clauses, changes the composition of the Central Waqf Council and Waqf Boards to include non-Muslim members. Trinamool Congress

parliamentary party leader Derek O'Brien, Congress MPs Hibi Eden, Dean Kuriakose, and Anto Antony, and CPI(M) MP John Brittas were among those who attended the meeting.

BJP leader and Union Minister George Kurian joined the meeting late, and most Opposition MPs were done speaking by then, a source said.

Two Christian MPs of the BJP were absent.

A MP from Kerala raised the issue of abolition of seats reserved for Anglo-Indians in the Lok Sabha and 10 Assemblies. Complaints were raised about the cancellation of FCRA licences of some Christian organisations in recent years. (With PTI inputs)

Over 100 farmers get notices from Waqf Board in Maharashtra

Press Trust of India
LATUR

More than 100 farmers in Latur district of Maharashtra on Saturday said the Waqf Board had sought to take over their land on which they have been cultivating for generations.

The claim has been filed in the Maharashtra State Waqf Tribunal in Chhatrapati Sambhajnagar and notices have been issued to 103 farmers having total land measuring 300 acres, they said.

Two hearings

"These lands have been passed down to us through generations. These are not Waqf property. We want

the Maharashtra government to give us justice. Two hearings on the matter have taken place in court and the next hearing is on December 20," said one of the farmers, Tukaram Kanwate.

'Efficient management' The Centre introduced the Waqf (Amendment) Bill in the Lok Sabha on August 8 to streamline the working of the Waqf Board and ensure efficient management of its properties.

The Bill has been referred to a Joint Parliamentary Committee. Waqf refers to properties dedicated exclusively for religious or charitable purposes under Islamic law.

CPI(M) slams Tripura govt. over plans to lease out palace

Syed Sajjad Ali
AGARTALA

The Communist Party of India (Marxist) has joined the opposition against the Tripura government's plan to lease out the old Raj Bhavan building located at the Pushpabanta Palace to a private hotel group with plans to turn it into a heritage resort. The Left party has also criticised Pradyot Kishore Debbarman, founder of TIPRA Motha and a member of the royal family, for his conflicting stance on the issue.

The property, which has been the residence of Lieutenant-Governors and Governors since 1949, has been a centre of controversy since the State government announced its plans.

While the government has not provided much information, Chief Minister Manik Saha and Tourism Minister Sushanta Chowdhury have both stated that the conversion of the palace into a heritage hotel is being considered, but nothing has been finalised. The Chief Minister has assured that the palace, built in 2017 by Maharaja Birendra Kishore Manikya, will retain its heritage character.

Historical importance

The palace, which hosted many historical figures including Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore, has been vacant since Raj Bhavan was relocated to a new location in the New Capital Complex here. There has

also been no progress in establishing a Museum and Library in memory of Maharaja Birendra Kishore Manikya at the site.

The issue of converting the Pushpabanta Palace into a hotel has become a sensitive topic for indigenous groups after Pradyot Kishore Debbarman made an emotional statement on November 26. Independent Twipra Student Federation (TSF), the youth and women's wing of TIPRA Motha, have been protesting against the government's reported plans.

However, Pradyot Kishore Debbarman has not made any new statements on the issue and two of his party Ministers, have remained silent.

IN BRIEF



Approval granted to open 85 new Kendriya Vidyalayas: PM

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday said his government has taken another big decision to make school education as accessible as possible with the Cabinet approving the opening of 85 new Kendriya Vidyalayas. "Our government has taken another big decision to make school education as accessible as possible. Under this, 85 new Kendriya Vidyalayas will be opened across the country. While this step will benefit a large number of students, many new employment opportunities will also be created," Mr. Modi said in a post on X. He said the government was committed to providing school education to every section of society. PTI

YouTuber Faizal Khan not arrested: Bihar Police

Educator and YouTuber Faizal Khan, popularly known as 'Khan Sir' of Khan Global Studies coaching institute in Patna, has not been arrested, and the coaching institute's X handle had a "misleading, baseless and provocative" post, the Bihar Police said on Saturday. "This handle has made a misleading post. 'Khan Sir' was not arrested or detained by the police. Legal action will be taken against the social media handle of Khan Global Studies coaching institute for propagating fake, baseless and provocative information regarding the 'arrest' of Khan Sir," Anu Kumari, Sub-Divisional Police Officer of the Patna Secretariat Police Station-1, said.

Mumbai Police get message warning of threat to Modi

The Mumbai Police on Saturday received a message threatening to kill Prime Minister Narendra Modi, an official said. The number from which the message was sent was traced to Ajmer in Rajasthan and a police team was sent there immediately to nab the suspect, said an official. The WhatsApp message, received on the helpline of the traffic police in the early hours, mentioned two ISI agents and a plot to carry out a bomb blast to target Mr. Modi, he said. The investigators suspect that the sender is a mentally disturbed person or was under the influence of alcohol but further probe was on, the official added. PTI

NMDFC, DICCI sign MoU to empower marginalised groups

The National Minorities Development and Finance Corporation (NMDFC) and the Dalit Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DICCI) on Saturday signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) to promote entrepreneurship among marginalised communities. Minority Affairs Minister Kiren Rijiju said, "This collaboration between the NMDFC and the DICCI is a significant step towards building an *Atmanirbhar Bharat*. By promoting entrepreneurship, we are empowering individuals to become job creators and role models, transforming lives and communities across the nation."

SUDOKU

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DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★★★★

Solution to yesterday's Sudoku

9	5	7	3	4	1	6	8	2
1	6	4	2	8	9	5	3	7
8	2	3	7	6	5	4	1	9
7	4	2	6	1	8	9	5	3
6	1	9	5	3	2	8	7	4
5	3	8	9	7	4	1	2	6
2	8	1	4	9	3	7	6	5
4	7	5	1	2	6	3	9	8
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T.N. tops health sector with its schemes: Udhayanidhi

Deputy CM says services are brought to the doorsteps of people to create a significant impact; he launches 'Healthy India, Happy India', a collaborative initiative by Naruvi Hospitals and *The Hindu*

The Hindu Bureau
VELLORE

Tamil Nadu Deputy Chief Minister Udhayanidhi Stalin on Saturday said the State's Health Department was the frontrunner in the country when it came to reaching out to people with its various flagship health schemes.

Mr. Udhayanidhi was speaking at the inauguration of "Healthy India, Happy India", a collaborative initiative by Naruvi Hospitals and *The Hindu*, in Vellore.

He said the Health Department was recently honoured with the U.N. Inter-Agency Task Force award for 2024 for one of its flagship schemes, "Makkalai Thedi Maruthuvam" (Healthcare at people's doorstep). "The scheme has created a significant impact on the lives of nearly two crore people in the State by providing them essential health services. In its report, the NITI Aayog stated that Tamil Nadu was the frontrunner in at least 13 key departments, including health, in the country," he said.

Mr. Udhayanidhi said Mr. Stalin had taken the Health Department in the State to the "next level" by introducing various schemes, including the



N. Ram, Director of The Hindu Group, presenting a framed front page of *The Hindu* to Tamil Nadu Deputy Chief Minister Udhayanidhi Stalin at an event in Vellore on Saturday. C. VENKATACHALAPATHY

"Inuyir Kappom-Nammai Kakkum 48", which funds the treatment of persons injured in road accidents for the first 48 hours. "In fact, such proactive measures have also led to the remarkable increase of 42% in the total number of organ donors in the State. Such initiatives will be amplified only when people and organisations such as *The Hindu* and Naruvi Hospitals come together to support them," he said.

Role model

In his special address, N. Ram, Director, *The Hindu* Group Publishing Pvt Ltd, said that in the annual ratings of the *India Today* magazine in its "State of States" report, Tamil Nadu topped the list of States in the country, especially in

the health sector. In that sense, the State's Health Department was not only a role model to the rest of the country but also to the world, he added.

"Under the inspiration of Chief Minister Stalin, 'Makkalai Thedi Maruthuvam' has become an internationally known health scheme as it bagged an award from the United Nations. The Health Department is also appreciated for its initiatives in non-communicable diseases," he noted, and lauded the efforts taken by the DMK government in the health sector.

G.V. Sampath, founder and chairman of Naruvi Hospitals, said the important partnership with *The Hindu* would take the message of awareness of health

and wellness to the people.

"It is the right step towards making informed decisions on health for the people," L.V. Navaneeth, CEO of *The Hindu* Group, said.

Health and Family Welfare Minister Ma. Subramanian and Handlooms and Textiles Minister R. Gandhi were present.

The "Healthy India, Happy India" initiative aims at promoting health and wellness as essential pillars of national strength. The initiative seeks to inspire individuals and communities to prioritise their health and adopt healthier lifestyles, contributing to a brighter and better future for India. To learn more about the campaign, visit healthyindiahappyindia.thehindu.co.in.

'Mobile phone addiction leads to sleep deprivation'

The Hindu Bureau
VELLORE

Fear of missing out on things that happen around them is making people of all age groups glue themselves to their mobile phones that deprives them of a good sleep, which should be seven or eight hours a day, said a group of experts on Saturday.

At a panel discussion titled "Stress and sleep: The twin burdens that deter us from achieving full potential", which was organised as part of "Healthy India, Happy India", a collaborative initiative of Naruvi Hospitals and *The Hindu* here, Maria Antony, specialist in child and adolescent mental health, said excessive usage of mobile phones is inimical to sleep.

"Mobile phone usage has become the new-age ailment for many people as they think smartphones are the only way of recreation," she said. The hour-long discussion was moderated by Ramya Kannan, Chief of Bureau (Tamil Nadu), *The Hindu*.

M. Satish Kumar, specialist in respiratory medicine, said that the concept of sleep hygiene is to have a set pattern of activities, including going to bed at a regular time. "Getting up during sleep and feeling sleepy during the day is referred to as sleep fragmentation - it should be avoided for better sleep hygiene with less stress," he said,



urging people to keep a diary of sleep and wake times and naps taken.

Pulmonologist Prince James said snoring is the result of obstruction to the smooth flow of oxygen into the lungs. Obesity is one of the main causes of obstructive sleep apnea, a condition that can turn out to be dangerous.

Mary Kurien, an otorhinolaryngologist, spoke of the physiological causes that cause snoring among children and prevent them from getting adequate sleep. While some causes might resolve themselves as the children grow up, others might need intervention, she added.

Relatives of women, children killed in Jiribam violence seek death penalty for perpetrators

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Family members of the six women and children from the Meitei community abducted and murdered in Manipur's Jiribam district last month were in New Delhi on Saturday where they made an appeal for justice, seeking swift identification of the perpetrators and the harshest of punishments to them under the law.

Sandhiya Begum, sister of the victims Telem Thoibi Devi and Laishram Heitonbi Devi, asked, "What could innocent women and children have to do with the war?" as she called for the death penalty against the persons responsible for the killings.

On Saturday, different coalitions of Meitei civil so-



Family members of the victims of violence perpetrated in Manipur's Jiribam narrate their ordeal in New Delhi. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

ciety organisations in New Delhi came together to organise a press conference in the city over the massacre in Jiribam last month. Telem Uttam Singh and his son Nongyai Meetei were among other family members of the victims who were in New Delhi for the press conference. Mr.

Singh's wife (Thoibi Devi) and their eight-year-old daughter were among the victims of the abduction-murder.

In Jiribam district, both the Meitei and Kuki-Zomi-Hmar communities are in a minority. The district had largely remained peaceful throughout the ethnic con-

Manipur extends ban on mobile data services

IMPHAL

The Manipur government extended the ban on mobile data services in nine restive districts till December 9, the order issued by the Home Department said. The order was issued after reviewing the prevailing law and order situation, the government said.

curity officials in Manipur reported an alleged attack by armed militants near the Borobekra police station in Jakuradhor on November 11, to which they responded with firing and killed 10 militants from the Kuki-Zomi-Hmar community. While the Kuki-Zo civil society outfits in Chura-chandpur insisted that the men killed in the gunfight with the CRPF were "village volunteers", the police reported that during the gunfight, six women and children from the Meitei community were abducted and two elderly persons burnt to death.

Days later, the bodies of the women and children, which included a 10-month-old child, were found floating in the Barak river, which borders Jiribam district.

Nadda opens 100-day campaign against TB

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

"The rate of TB (tuberculosis) decline in India has doubled from 8.3% in 2015 to 17.7% today, much ahead of the global average. Deaths due to TB have also reduced in India by 21.4% in the last 10 years," Union Health Minister J.P. Nadda said at the launch of the intensified national '100 day TB elimination campaign' on Saturday in Haryana.

The goal of the campaign, to be implemented in 347 districts across the country, is to find and treat 'missing TB cases', especially in high-risk groups, and reduce TB deaths significantly.

The Union Health Minister said that the campaign had been launched with the intention to provide new momentum to the goal of "TB-mukt (free) Bharat". He said that TB is now detected early due to a pan Indian network of over 1.7 lakh Ayushman Arogya Mandirs.

"The government has significantly scaled up diagnostic services by increasing the number of laboratories from 120 in 2014 to 8,293 laboratories today. It has also introduced a daily regimen of drug-sensitive TB, including a new, shorter and more effective regimen, which has improved TB treatment success rate to 87%," the Minister said.

The Health Ministry in its release added that it had now made it mandatory for even private medical practitioners to notify new TB patients, so that their treatment could be followed up immediately. "This might look like a small step but it has led to an 8-fold increase in the rate of TB notifications in the private sector," the release said.

UN declares December 21 as World Meditation Day

Press Trust of India
UNITED NATIONS

India was a member of the core group of countries including Liechtenstein, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Mexico and Andorra that guided the unanimous adoption of the resolution titled World Meditation Day in the 193-member UN General Assembly on Friday.

India's Permanent Representative to the UN Ambassador Parvathaneni Harish said in a post on X that India's leadership in overall human wellbeing stems from "our civilisational dictum of #VasudhaivaKutumbakam - the whole world is one family".

The Hindu journalist wins accolades at IPI India Awards for reporting on Manipur

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The *Hindu* journalist Vijaita Singh's reporting on Manipur's ethnic strife, raging for over 18 months now, won accolades at the International Press Institute India Award for Excellence in Journalism, 2024 on Saturday.

The IPI, in a statement, said that there were several entries in the print, digital, and broadcast categories, covering different angles of the strife in Manipur and as a result, the jury had decided to recognise the five best entries for cash prizes and citations as a "mark of appreciation and acknowledgement of the media's efforts to bring out the various facets of the human

tragedy caused by the civil strife".

The citation for Ms. Singh, Deputy Editor at *The Hindu*, came along with recognition of the reporting done on the conflict by other journalists and newsrooms, which included *The Print*, *The Caravan* (Greeshma Kuthar), *Scroll.in* (Arunabh Saikia and Torra Agarwala), and *India Today* (Ashutosh Mishra).

The IPI India Award for Excellence in Journalism, 2024, was awarded to photojournalist Bhanu Prakash Chandra for his account of the war in Ukraine - Sunflower fields and no man's land end - published in *The Week*.

This award comes with a cash prize of ₹1 lakh, a trophy and a citation.

The jury was headed by former Supreme Court judge Madan B Lokur. The members included Riyad Mathew, Chairman, IPI-India and Chief Associate Editor and Director, *Malayala Manorama*; Shobhaa De, columnist; and Vijay Joshi, Editor-in-Chief, *Press Trust of India*.

Human tragedy

Ms. Singh's reporting on the ethnic conflict in Manipur has spanned the length and breadth of the issues facing the north-eastern State - from the granular details of the brutality of the conflict to the broader themes of how it began and has been playing out over the past 18 months, including covering the human tragedy faced by tens of thou-

sands of civilians across communities in the strife-torn State.

Ever since the conflict began on May 3, 2023, over 250 people have been killed, thousands more injured, and over 60,000 people have been left internally displaced.

After the awards were announced, Ms. Singh said, "I am very grateful to *The Hindu* for consistently providing space to report on an issue that I believe ought to be etched in public memory." The IPI added, "The Jury was unable to select any entry in the broadcast category deserving the award."

The award was instituted in 2003 and has been given to 20 media organisations and journalists in print and electronic media so far.



Angry sea: Tidal waves hit the coast under the influence of the cyclone at the Kasimedu fishing harbour in Chennai. Boats were kept anchored at the harbour following the weather warning. B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM



Death and destruction: An earthmover being used for rescue on a landslide site at Tiruvannamalai in Tamil Nadu where seven members of a family died after being trapped in their house under debris and boulders. C. VENKATACHALAPATHY



In the eye: Strong winds blow near the Shore Temple in Mamallapuram ahead of Cyclone Fengal. B. VELANKANNI RAJ

Wrath of the slow cyclone

Cyclone Fengal remained a low-pressure system after forming in the far eastern Indian Ocean on November 14 and became a depression in the Bay only after 10 days; it moved leisurely, bringing heavy rain to parts of Tamil Nadu and Puducherry

While heavy rain during the northeast monsoon is common at this time of the year in Tamil Nadu, the State and the Union Territory of Puducherry did not expect Cyclone Fengal to cause such widespread devastation when it crossed the eastern coast on the night of November 30. On December 1, unusually heavy rainfall of 40 cm to 50 cm was recorded in many places in Puducherry and the northern and northwestern parts of Tamil Nadu.

The cyclone then slowly drifted westward, dumping rain, causing floods, submerging acres of crops, damaging civic infrastructure, and displacing thousands of people. When it later moved inland, it pummelled several districts. Mailam in Villupuram district received 51 cm of rainfall on December 1 and Uthangarai in Krishnagiri district received 50 cm on December 2. Some areas of Villupuram received more than 33 cm of rainfall on a single day.

While the effects of the cyclone was felt in

Andhra Pradesh on the eastern coast, which is normal for such weather systems, Cyclone Fengal in a rare occurrence crossed the Western Ghats, bringing rain to parts of Kerala.

It remained a low-pressure system after forming in the far eastern Indian Ocean on November 14 and became a depression in the Bay of Bengal only after 10 days. It moved relatively slowly for another week before the India Meteorological Department (IMD) said it had become a cyclone. On November 28, the IMD announced that Cyclone Fengal would cross the north Tamil Nadu-Puducherry coast on the morning of November 30. The cyclone moved at a leisurely pace. While fast-moving cyclones tend to retreat quickly, slow-moving ones weaken into a deep depression, dumping heavy rain.

A Central team visited Tamil Nadu and Puducherry to assess the damage. The Centre has approved the release of ₹944.80 crore to Tamil Nadu from the State Disaster Response Fund. (Text by K. Lakshmi)



Taking a toll: Vehicles that were swept away by flood water near the Uthangarai highway in Krishnagiri had to be moved with the help of cranes. N. BASHKARAN



On a war footing: Workers prepare sandbags as protection against high tidal waves on the Shanghumugham beach in Thiruvananthapuram. NIRMAL HARINDRAN



No way forward: A tree uprooted on East Coast Road at Marakkanam in Villupuram district following heavy rain and strong wind. S.S. KUMAR



Salvation drive: Damaged documents and certificates of students and staff of a private school left out to dry in Arakandanallur of Villupuram district. S.S. KUMAR



Safe haven: Fishing boats anchored at the Visakhapatnam fishing harbour following an alert ahead of Cyclone Fengal v. RAJU



On the job: Indian Army personnel rescue people from a flooded area in Pudukkottai. S.S. KUMAR



Worst affected: (clockwise from left) Farmers remove damaged saplings from a paddy field in Thrissur of Kerala; damaged paddy at Kalathur in Ranipet district of Tamil Nadu; an early harvest near Vijayawada city to salvage grain. K.K. NAJEEB, C. VENKATACHALAPATHY & K.V.S. GIRI



The row over tungsten mining near Madurai

Who had got the rights? Why have there been protests? What's the Tamil Nadu government's stand?

C. Palanivel Rajan

The story so far:

The Ministry of Mines recently announced it had granted tungsten mining rights to Hindustan Zinc Limited, a subsidiary of Vedanta Limited, through an auction on November 7. One of the areas chosen was a band in Melur in Madurai district. Following protests, the State government of Tamil Nadu said that it would soon pass a resolution to reject it.

What does the Ministry say about mining?

The Union government, through a statement on November 7, stated that the Ministry of Mines had successfully concluded the auction of eight critical mineral blocks, launched under Tranche IV of the auction of critical and strategic mineral blocks. It attributed the success of the auction to the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act, 1957, which leveraged the Union government's authority to grant mineral concessions for key minerals listed in Part D of the First Schedule. Following the issuance of the Notice Inviting Tender (NIT) on June 24 for 21 mineral blocks, 10 mineral blocks advanced to the second round of e-auction. They contained deposits of strategic minerals such as

phosphorite, graphite and vanadium, essential for high-tech and green energy applications. As the Nayakkarpatti tungsten block is one among eight blocks selected for mining, the Mineral Exploration and Consultancy Ltd. of the

Ministry of Mines in its report noted that the 2,015.51 hectares earmarked for tungsten mining was found to be rich in scheelite – an important ore of tungsten. The water source for mining in the area was listed as the Periyar canal.

Why is there opposition?

The public, environmental activists and politicians have staunchly opposed the move to start tungsten mining in the biodiversity-rich heritage area at Melur. Though the Ministry claimed that it had taken inputs from the Tamil Nadu government, which reportedly showed no opposition before the auction, Chief Minister M.K. Stalin urged Prime Minister Narendra Modi to cancel the mining rights awarded to the private firm before announcing that the State government would pass a resolution to cancel mining rights. The earmarked area for mining comprises Melur, Terkutteru, Muthuvelpatti, Kulaniyapatti, Kidariyapatti, Etimagamalam, Arittappatti, Vallalappatti, Sillippyapatti, Chettiyarpatti, and Nayakkarpatti.

Locals and environmental activists fear that mining would destroy its rich flora and fauna in addition to distorting its cultural significance. The major argument raised by opposing voices is the location's significance as a biodiversity heritage site, declared by the Tamil Nadu government through a notification in November 2022, to protect the site comprising 139.63 hectares in Arittappatti village (Melur block) and 53.8 hectares in Meenakshipuram village (Madurai East taluk) from quarrying and other developmental activities.

Though the Ministry had explained that out of the total area of 20.16 sq.km, only 1.93 sq.km within Arittappatti and Meenakshipuram villages had been notified as a biodiversity heritage site, activists are sceptical about the impact of mining on the environment and cultural sites like temples and Jain beds located around the area.

R.S. Mugilan, an environmental activist known for his protest against projects like Sterlite, Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant, hydrocarbon Project in Neduvasal, and Neutrino project, said, "Vedanta – the company that won the auction for tungsten mining, is known for pollution practices at its copper smelting unit in Thoothukudi." Highlighting issues from the climate change perspective, Poovulagin Nanbargal, an environmental organisation based in Tamil Nadu, notes that the tailings (the left-over materials from the processing of mined ore) when stored after the mining extraction, would release heavy metals like copper, cadmium, zinc, lead, arsenic, and would be detrimental to humans and the environment.

Is there a Centre-State rift?

Though the State government says it vehemently opposed the mining of tungsten block in Melur, the Union government alleges: "Since February 2024, when the block was first put to auction till the declaration of result of the auction of November 11, there was no communication from any quarter including the State government regarding any opposition to the auction. Nor did the State government request the Union government to drop the block from auction." However, the State Minister for Water Resources pointed out that repeated conversations were held with the Union government over mining. He clarified: "When the Union government sought the details of the land, we had pointed out that there was a biodiversity heritage site at the proposed area. Without taking into account such factors, the Union government has awarded the rights to the company."

Why can't the world agree on a plastic ban?

How much plastic waste is produced now? What is the most common type of plastic waste found in the environment? Why are several countries averse to tackling plastic pollution? Why did talks fail at Busan? Is another round of negotiations likely?

Jacob Koshy

The story so far:

The 5th Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC-5) on plastic pollution was a conclave of delegations from about 170 countries mandated to establish a legally binding treaty to end plastic pollution, informally called the Global Plastics Treaty. Despite a week of meetings, the INC-5 failed to meet its mandate.

What is the Global Plastics Treaty?

The United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) resolved in March 2022 to 'end plastic pollution, including in the marine environment.' To that end, INC committees were constituted and tasked with negotiating a treaty before the end of 2024. Over the last two years, countries met five times, and attempted to bridge divergent views on how to end plastic pollution. Several countries are enthusiastic about ways and means to encourage recycling and prohibit certain plastics that lead to littering – India for instance has banned single-use plastic since 2022 – but many of them are reluctant to limit plastic production. Several countries are either petro-states or those that have significant industries that manufacture plastic polymers. Before the latest, and what was expected to be the last round of negotiations, began in Busan, South Korea, the Chair of the INC-5, Luis Vayas Valdivieso, circulated a draft text called a 'non paper.' This was roughly a synthesis of the views of all countries on managing plastic production but in the end, it turned out that despite long negotiations, the chasm between countries who viewed addressing plastic pollution as a waste

Currently, the world produces about 400 million tonnes of plastic waste every year

management problem, and those that saw it as unachievable without cutting its production at source, was one that was too wide to bridge.

How bad is the problem of plastic pollution?

According to a United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) factsheet, plastic waste generation nearly trebled from between 1970 and 1990. In the early 2000s, the amount of plastic waste generated rose more in a single decade than it had in the previous 40 years. Currently, the world produces about 400 million tonnes of plastic waste every year. If historic growth trends continue, global production of primary plastic is forecasted to reach 1,100 million tonnes by 2050. There has also been a worrying shift towards single-use plastic products, items that are meant to be thrown away after a short use.

Approximately, 36% of all plastics produced are used in packaging, including single-use plastic products for food and beverage containers, of which 85% ends up in landfills or as unregulated waste. On top of that, about 98% of single-use plastic products are produced from fossil fuel, or "virgin" feedstock. The level of greenhouse gas emissions associated with the production, use and disposal of conventional fossil fuel-based plastics is forecast to grow to 19% of the global carbon budget by 2040. Of the seven billion tonnes of plastic waste generated globally so far, less than 10% has been recycled. Millions of tonnes of plastic waste are lost to the environment, or sometimes shipped thousands of kilometres to destinations where it is mostly burned or dumped. The estimated annual loss in the value of plastic packaging waste during sorting and processing alone is \$80-\$120 billion. Cigarette butts – whose filters contain tiny plastic fibres – are the most common type of plastic waste found in the environment. Food wrappers, plastic bottles, plastic bottle caps, plastic grocery bags, plastic straws, and stirrers are the next most common item.

What is India's position on the treaty?

India said that it would be "unable" to support any measures to regulate the production of primary plastic polymers as it has larger implications in respect of the right to development of member States. Indian delegation leader, Naresh Pal Gangwar, of the Environment Ministry, said at the concluding plenary session India had always been "committed" to the principle of consensus in decision-making in respect of substantive matters under multilateral environmental agreements. This principle reiterated collective decision-making and reflects shared

responsibilities and commitment. Elaborating on these points, India's position was that it had banned 22 kinds of single-use plastic and put in place an Extended Producer Responsibility regime. This means that companies had to ensure a certain percentage of their plastic-packaging waste was recycled and that the littering of some of the most common kinds of plastic waste was banned. However, virgin polymer production is one of India's major products and exports, with conglomerates such as Reliance having significant stakes in the industry. India viewed calls to cut plastic production and regulate its supply as akin to introducing barriers to trade. Its position was closer to that of China, Saudi Arabia and several other oil and petrochemical-refining states. At the talks, 85-100 of the gathered countries were supportive of cuts to plastic production, year-wise targets to achieve them and restrict supply and trade. Finally, India has strongly opposed proposals for countries to vote on propositions in draft texts that were produced at negotiations such as INC. In INC-like negotiations – like the Conference of Parties talks in climate – every single word and punctuation has to be agreed upon by all countries. This inevitably leads to deadlock that can take years to resolve. There have been proposals to include voting rights to engineer progress but countries have opposed this, on the ground that it violates the principle of equity.

Is this the end of the road?

By no means. It is expected that an "INC 5.2" will likely be convened sometime later next year to resume conversation and find common ground to firm a treaty. The final treaty, if agreed to, will lead to the beginning of a periodic Conference of Parties (COP) – just like in the climate talks. The UN talks in Rio de Janeiro, in 1992, was where countries decided to address carbon dioxide emissions. It took three years until the first COP was organised in Berlin and in the 29 years since, the world has moved at a glacial pace to address CO2 emissions.

According to an analysis by the Center for International Environmental Law, multilateral environmental agreements have taken varying amounts of time to negotiate treaty text due to a range of factors, ranging from just over a year to nearly five years between the start of negotiations and treaty adoption. In addition, depending on the number of countries required to ratify, it is not unusual for several years to pass between adopting the treaty and its entry into force. For example, the Intergovernmental Conference on an international legally-binding instrument under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) for the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction held five sessions over five years. It met seven times by holding a "resumed" fifth session and a "further resumed" fifth session.



Complete ban: An environmental activist wears a banner reading "No plastic" during a campaign to reduce plastic use in Seoul on December 3. AFP

How will martial law flip-flop affect S. Korea?

What led to the declaration, and the subsequent swift withdrawal, of emergency provisions? What are the key reasons for the development? How many times has martial law been imposed in the country? What happened to the impeachment motion against President Yoon Suk Yeol?

Adithya Narayan

The story so far:

For a brief while on December 3, South Korea, a country with a history of military rule, had fleeting visions of its past, as President Yoon Suk Yeol imposed emergency martial law. This would have curbed the activities of political parties, brought the media under the ambit of law, and required protesting workers to resume duties.

What followed the declaration?

Yielding to pressure, Mr. Yoon repealed the law within six hours after lawmakers braved Army troops to vote 190-0 against it at the 300-member strong Parliament. This included 18 members of Mr. Yoon's People's Power Party (PPP). The opposition filed an impeachment motion against the President. But on Saturday, lawmakers from the PPP staged a walkout when the National Assembly met to discuss impeaching the President, and therefore, the motion failed.

What is the history of the law?

South Korea's constitution states that martial law can be imposed to "cope with a military necessity, or to maintain the public safety and

The conservative President Yoon Suk Yeol has faced a series of challenges in his tenure

order, by mobilisation of the military forces in time of war, armed conflict or similar national emergency." The law can be repealed if overturned by a majority in the National Assembly. Between the end of the Second World War and South Korea's transition to democracy in 1987, martial law has been imposed 16 times.

Park Chung-hee, who came to power in 1961 through a military coup, had imposed martial law multiple times during his 17-year reign. Major General Chun Doo-hwan, who came after Park, oversaw one of the darkest chapters in the history of martial law when troops cracked down on a pro-democracy uprising in the city of Gwangju, killing at least 200 people in 1980.

What led to the decision?

At the time of Mr. Yoon's ascension to the President's chair in 2022 (with a razor-thin majority of 0.8 percentage-points), the National Assembly was already dominated by the opposition Democratic Party. A victory for them in this year's parliamentary elections landed Mr. Yoon in a precarious position, making him the first South Korean leader in decades without a majority in the National Assembly. This led to constant bickering, with the President vetoing Bills and accusing the opposition of filing 22 impeachment motions against his administration officials. Coupled with the latest argument over a Budget Bill, the stand-off culminated in Mr. Yoon declaring martial law to stop "shameless pro-North anti-state forces that plunder the freedom and happiness of our people", terming the Assembly a "monster that destroys the liberal democratic system".

What has been Mr. Yoon's track-record?

A prosecutor by profession, Mr. Yoon came to power succeeding Moon Jae-in from the Democratic Party. During his career, the 63-year-old has handled several high-profile cases, including the investigation and conviction of former President Park Geun-hye. In comparison to Mr. Moon, who struck a conciliatory tone with North Korea by meeting its leader Kim Jong-un, the Conservative Mr. Yoon has adopted a hawkish approach. He called for increased military drills and economic

sanctions on Pyongyang, in moves perceived as an overture to bolster ties with the U.S.

On the domestic front, increasing home prices and rising unemployment have kept his administration busy. The country is home to an ageing population and has the world's lowest birthrate. The government's efficacy was first put to test on October 29, 2022, at the Halloween weekend stampede where 159 people were killed at a popular nightlife district in Seoul. The authorities' response to the incident came under sharp criticism. The second challenge came in the form of the doctors' protest which began in February 2024, when the government decided to admit more medical students to address staff shortages. The medical workers wanted the government to address their harsh working conditions and dismal pay before recruiting more students. Another blot on Mr. Yoon's career was the bribery charges levelled against his wife, Kim Keon Hee, who was caught on camera receiving a \$2,200 Dior pouch as a gift. These factors, clubbed with his anti-feminist policies and attacks against the media for spreading 'fake news', led the President's approval points to drop to 17% last month.

What has been the aftermath?

While Mr. Yoon apologised, senior aides to Mr. Yoon offered to resign *en masse*. Defence Minister Kim Yong-hyun, who is believed to have recommended martial law to Mr. Yoon, resigned from his post. The opposition's impeachment motion had the backing of citizens and labour unions who have gone on strike in Seoul. Allies of Mr. Yoon such as the leader of his PPP party, Han Dong-hoon, termed the martial law imposition wrong and suggested withdrawing President Yoon's constitutional powers. However, lawmakers from the PPP staged a walkout during the discussion on the impeachment motion. The National Assembly is empowered to impeach the President if more than two-thirds of the members support the motion. The opposition currently holds 192 seats in the 300-strong Parliament while Mr. Yoon's party has 108 members. The opposition needed eight members of the PPP to break ranks and join its cause for impeachment to come through.

Under South Korean constitutional law, if a President is removed from office, his powers are suspended until the Constitutional Court makes a final decision. Once his or her termination is confirmed, the election for a new President must be held in 60 days.



In rage: A demonstrator holds a poster during a protest calling for the ouster of South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol in Seoul on December 7. AFP

PROFILES

Syria's jihadist-in-chief

Abu Muhammad al-Jolani

The man picked by slain Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to establish a branch of al-Qaeda in Syria is now leading the country's most potent militant organisation that has made dramatic territorial advances in recent weeks

Stanly Johny

“We deputised al-Jolani, who is one of our soldiers, with a group of our sons, and pushed them from Iraq to Syria to meet with our cells in Syria and set for them the plans and drew for them the policy of work,” Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the then-chief of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) announced on April 2, 2014, referring to al-Qaeda's Syria arm, Jabhat al-Nusra. Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, a Saudi-born Syrian jihadist was a lieutenant of Baghdadi. It was Jolani he turned to when he decided to expand his jihadist network into Syria, where a civil war broke out in 2011. “We supplied them with half of what is in the treasury every month, and supplied them with men who had battlefield experience from among the *muhajirun* [“emigrants”; foreign fighters] and *ansar* [“supporters”; local jihadists], so they did well next to their brothers from the ardent sons of Syria,” said Baghdadi, taking credit for the creation of a-Nusra.

Baghdadi was killed in an American airstrike in Syria in October 2019. The ‘caliphate’ he built, which at its peak had spread from eastern Syria's Deir Ezzor to Iraq's Mosul, was destroyed. The Islamic State, the jihadist organisation Baghdadi created and led, has been scattered and weakened ever since. But Jolani, the man Baghdadi chose to lead his network in Syria, is today the leader of Syria's armed insurgency. He is the ‘emir’ of the ‘Syrian Salvation Government’, which is based in the northwestern province of Idlib, and the leader of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the main opposition jihadist group. In the last week of November, when the whole region's focus was on a ceasefire deal between Israel and Hezbollah, Jolani's jihadists launched a surprise attack on Syrian forces from Idlib. Before most people understood what was actually happening, the HTS captured Aleppo, Syria's second-largest city.

Then his troops moved south towards Hama at breakneck speed as regime troops retreated without a fight. Now, Jolani's men are advancing

towards Homs, a strategically important city that sits at an intersection between Latakia and Tartus, the regime strongholds on the Mediterranean coast, and Damascus, President Bashar al-Assad's seat of power. “Our goal is to unseat Assad”, declared Jolani, after taking Aleppo. After years of tense calm, Mr. Assad is now facing a mortal threat from a surging jihadist movement.

Loyalty to al-Qaeda

Born in 1982 in Riyadh, where his father worked as an oil engineer, Jolani, whose real name is Ahmed Hussein al-Shara, grew up in the suburbs of Damascus. He moved to Iraq in 2003, weeks before the American invasion began. He was arrested by Iraqi authorities and put in Camp Bucca, the infamous prison where Baghdadi had spent months. After his release in 2008, Jolani went back to al-Qaeda, now headed by Baghdadi. The ‘emir’ made him chief of operations in Mosul. After he was sent to Syria by Baghdadi, Jolani built a brutal jihadist organisation that announced its arrival through suicide bombings. “The regime will never stop except by the power of Allah and the power of weapons,” al-Nusra said in February 2012 in a video message, justifying its suicide bombings.

Jolani split with Baghdadi when the latter wanted al-Nusra to join the Islamic State. Jolani wanted to retain his autonomy in Syria and he announced that al-Nusra was the true representative of al-Qaeda. “The sons of al-Nusra pledge allegiance to Sheikh Ayman al-Zawahiri,” Jolani said in a video message in 2014, referring to the then al-Qaeda chief. Al-Nusra's world view had largely been borrowed from that of al-Qaeda. Its immediate goal was to overthrow the Assad regime, the near enemy, and establish an Islamic emirate in Syria under Sharia law. The long-term goal was to create many more such states and eventually establish an al-Qaeda Caliphate. It had termed both Israel and the U.S. “enemies of Islam” and attacked non-Sunni communities in Syria, particularly the Alawites, President Assad's sect. They could attract thousands of foreign fighters into their



ILLUSTRATION: R. RAJESH

fold, including battle-hardened men from Iraq and Afghanistan. They also carried out harsh punishments in the name of Sharia, including beheading. Within a few years, al-Nusra emerged as the most powerful anti-regime militant group in Syria. When regional powers were focused on defeating the Islamic State, which had exported terror across the world, Jolani stayed below the radar, building his own empire in Syria.

By 2016, it was evident that the Assad regime had an upper hand. A year earlier, Russia had sent troops to Syria to help the regime. Iran had supplied Shia militias. Hezbollah had also deployed thousands of its fighters. The regime alliance took back Aleppo, and the lost territories in Hama, Homs and in the south. The militants from

different parts of the country moved to Idlib, Jolani's forte. Mr. Assad wanted to march his troops to Idlib but the Russians were not on board. Turkiye had strongly opposed any attack on Idlib. The Assad regime was forced into accepting a ceasefire when Russia and Turkiye entered into a detente.

Emir of Idlib

Jolani became the new emir of Idlib. The Free Syrian Army, a Turkish proxy (which is today called the Syrian National Army) also joined hands with him in Idlib. Having sensed an opportunity to retain power, Jolani realised that his al-Qaeda tag had become a burden rather than an advantage. He first renamed Jabhat al-Nusra as Fateh al-Sham. In 2017, he “dissolved” Fateh al-Sham and

announced the creation of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and said that the new organisation broke all links with al-Qaeda. He also said the HTS was not fighting against the West, but only against the Assad regime. “Syria will never be allowed as a launching pad for attacks against the West,” he said in an interview in 2015. During peacetime, Jolani built a strong army under the HTS's banner, which included jihadists from different regions – Arabs, Central Asians and Uighurs. He established a government, bureaucracy and Sharia-based judicial system. He adopted the Turkish lira as the official currency of his government. He sat on the fence as the regime's allies, Hezbollah and Iran, came under attack from Israel in Syria. Jolani was careful not to upset Israel and the U.S. And Israel and the U.S. did not target him either.

Jolani, a U.S.-designated terrorist, has never denounced his jihadist ideology. In the 2015 interview, he said Syria's Alawites would be left alone “as long as they abandon elements of their faith which contradict Islam”. He has called for an Islamic regime in Syria based on Sharia – that is the final goal of the HTS. In recent months, he said Syria's minorities have nothing to fear from the HTS. But he repeatedly emphasises the Salafi-jihadist character of his “revolution”. The secular Syria is no longer alive in HTS territories.

When the civil war was in a frozen stage, the HTS was busy preparing for the next phase of the showdown. In November 2024, Jolani made the move. Hezbollah had been weakened in the months-long war with Israel. Iran lost several of its commanders in Syria in Israeli air strikes. The Russians are busy fighting in Ukraine. Jolani sensed that the Assad regime was weak. And he pushed ahead.

“The solution is simple,” he said in an interview in February 2021. “I mean, we need to address the causes rather than the symptoms. The cause of this issue, this huge catastrophe, is this [Assad] regime. Once it is no longer there, this huge disaster would disappear. Therefore, the main issue would be toppling this regime, pushing to topple it in every possible way.”

THE GIST

Jolani moved to Iraq in 2003, weeks before the American invasion began, and joined al-Qaeda

He established Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qaeda's Syria branch, which emerged as a powerful jihadist entity in the midst of Syria's civil war

After capturing Idlib, he rebranded al-Nusra twice and announced that his main goal was to topple the Assad regime and not to fight jihad against other countries

HTS, the outfit Jolani commands, has taken Aleppo and Hama in recent weeks, and is marching towards the strategic city of Homs

The die-hard loyalist

Kash Patel

The Indian origin Republican, who once vowed to ‘shut down the FBI’, has been picked by Donald Trump to lead the Bureau

ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR



Part three of the children's book, *The Plot Against the King*, written by Kash Patel, President-elect Donald Trump's nominee for Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), talks about the “MAGA king” and his quest to “take down Comma-la-la-la and reclaim his throne”. One can safely assume that the ‘king’ here is Mr. Trump and ‘Comma-la-la-la’, the incumbent U.S. Vice-President Kamala Harris. This also gives us an idea of what Mr. Patel, who owns a charitable foundation called Fight with Kash which among other things funds defamation lawsuits, and a clothing line which sells a variety of merchandise with his logo ‘K\$H’, stands for – unabashedly brazen and unapologetically loyal to the incoming U.S. President.

Mr. Patel, who was born in 1980 to Indian immigrant parents (who first moved to Canada from East Africa in the 1970s and then to the U.S.) started his career as a public defender in the State of Florida, following which he joined the U.S. Justice Department as a counter-terrorism prosecutor. A member of the Republican party, he was then appointed to the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence

(HPSCI) in 2017. He worked as senior aide to Devin Nunes, the chair of the HPSCI and a staunch Trump supporter. Mr. Patel rose up the ranks within Mr. Trump's inner circle when he scathingly criticised the FBI's investigation into alleged Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election. He, along with Mr. Nunes, authored the ‘Nunes memo’ which accused the FBI of being politically motivated in its investigation.

From then on, Mr. Patel rose swiftly through administrative ranks. In 2019, he became a member of the National Security Council and was later appointed Chief of Staff to the interim Defence Secretary. President Trump in his last months in office wanted to promote Mr. Patel to deputy FBI director but then Attorney-General William Barr opposed it, writing in his memoir that he told the then White House Chief of Staff that such an appointment would be ‘over my

dead body’.

After Mr. Trump's first presidential term, Mr. Patel continued being a Trump loyalist as well as a decrier of intelligence bureaucracies. His experience within the Justice Department had made him deeply suspicious of the FBI and other intelligence agencies. He has repeatedly stated that these agencies are controlled by the ‘deep state’ – a term used to refer to allegations that actors within bureaucracy control and run the government. He authored a book called *Government Gangsters*, which is part memoir and part tirade against the ‘deep state’, and lists out individuals who are enablers of the system such as President Joe Biden, William Barr, Hilary Clinton etc.

Massive upheaval

He has stated in his book that top officials of the FBI need to be fired and the organisation be given a massive upheaval and reorganisation. He has been a

vocal proponent for reform within the FBI stating that the organisation's footprint has gotten too big. “I'd shut down the FBI. Hoover Building on Day 1 and reopen it the next day as a museum of the ‘deep state,’” Mr. Patel said in an interview. “And I'd take the 7,000 employees that work in that building and send them across America to chase down criminals.”

He has vowed to go after journalists who leaked intelligence reports and the officials who facilitated such leaks. In an interview with Steve Bannon last year, he stated “We're going to come after the people in the media who lied about American citizens, who helped Joe Biden rig presidential elections. We're going to come after you...we're putting you all on notice.”

Mr. Trump has repeatedly vowed to go after his political enemies and institutions which conducted investigations on him after his Presidential term in 2020.

Having Mr. Patel – a man who has appeared with him for hearings, testified for him and is also now serving on the board of the parent company of Truth Social, Mr. Trump's social network – at the helm of the FBI could give the President-elect access to potential and ongoing investigations.

The scion after ‘penance’

Sukhbir Singh Badal

The former Deputy Chief Minister of Punjab, who survived a bid on his life, seeks to revive the SAD, which suffered back to back electoral setbacks

ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR



Vikas Vasudeva

Sukhbir Singh Badal, the former Deputy Chief Minister of Punjab and president of the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), is at the centre of attention after he survived an assassination bid by a pro-Khalistan sympathiser.

Mr. Badal, who was found to be *tankhaiya*, or guilty of religious misconduct, was performing penance for his ‘mistakes’ at the Golden Temple, the central place for worship for the Sikhs in Punjab's Amritsar, on December 4 when a former militant, Narain Singh, opened fire at him. The two-time former Deputy Chief Minister escaped unhurt as the assailant was overpowered by security personnel.

On December 2, Akal Takht, the highest Sikh temporal seat, had pronounced religious punishment for Mr. Badal and several other Akali Dal leaders for the “mistakes” committed by the SAD government during 2007 to 2017.

Sukhbir's rise in politics was a foretold story. He became the youngest ever president of the SAD in 2008, after he took over from his father Parkash Singh Badal, the former Punjab Chief Minister. Born on July 9, 1962 in Punjab's Faridkot, Sukhbir completed his school education at The Lawrence

School, Sanawar, in Himachal Pradesh, and later completed MA (Economics) in Punjab University. He also has an MBA from California State University, Los Angeles. His political career kicked off in the late 1990s. Sukhbir firmed up his grip over the party by mid-2000. He stayed as Deputy Chief Minister from 2009-2017.

He remained a member of the Lok Sabha four times, and served as Union Minister of State for Industry during 1998-99 in the Atal Bihari Vajpayee-led government. He was a member of the Rajya Sabha during 2001 to 2004.

The Assembly elections in Punjab in 2012 proved a milestone in his political career as he was credited with steering the SAD-BJP alliance to a historic win, beating anti-incumbency sentiments. His agenda surrounding ‘development for all’ and making the SAD a ‘catch all party’ appeared to have paid favourable electoral outcome. Howev-

er, in 2017, when the SAD-BJP alliance was voted out, the same agenda came under scrutiny, and senior party leaders started pointing fingers at Sukhbir's leadership competency. After enjoying political dominance in Punjab for close to two decades, his journey started to witness new challenges amid controversies and a waning support.

Election defeat

Towards the end of its rule in the State, the SAD had to face severe criticism over several issues – including the pardon granted to Dera Sacha Sauda chief Gurmeet Ram Rahim in a blasphemy case and the Kotkapura-Behbal Kalan police firing incidents of 2015, which followed after the sacrifice of ‘Guru Granth Sahib’ at Bargari village. Two persons were killed in the police firing in Behbal Kalan of Faridkot district during protests.

After the SAD's dismal performance in the 2017 and 2022 Assembly elec-

tions, a sense among several senior (Taksali) leaders was that during the Akali Dal's 10 years (2007-2017) of rule in Punjab, the party had come under the sway of the “Badal family”. Sukhbir's attempt to change the basic character of the party, making it a “catch-all” party seeking votes in the name of the region (Punjab) instead of Sikh “panth” had not gone down well with many senior leaders, who felt that the party had deviated from its core ideology of giving voice to Sikh issues.

Sukhbir's acceptance of his “mistakes” and his plea for forgiveness from the ‘panth’ (the Sikh community) are being seen as a last-ditch effort to revitalise the party. In the recent Lok Sabha election, the SAD won only one seat out of the 13 parliamentary constituencies in the State. The loss was a grim reminder of the trouble that the SAD was facing, following its drubbings in the 2017 and 2022 Assembly polls.

The immediate challenge before Sukhbir, who has tendered resignation as party president, which is yet to be accepted, would be to win back the faith of the ‘panth’. Many believe it could only be possible through his selfless actions towards the cause of the ‘panth’ and Punjab, not just through apology and ‘penance’.

Intermittent fasting inhibits hair regeneration in mice: study

The Hindu Bureau

Intermittent fasting has proven benefits for metabolic health, but a new study shows that it could slow hair growth – at least in mice. Researchers report in the *Cell* that mice subjected to intermittent fasting regimens show improved metabolic health but slower hair regeneration compared to mice with 24/7 access to food. A

similar process might occur in humans, based on a small clinical trial that the team also conducted, but it's likely to be less severe since humans have a much slower metabolic rate and different hair growth patterns compared to mice.

In addition to its metabolic benefits, previous studies have shown that fasting can improve the stress resistance of stem cells associated with

blood, intestinal, and muscle tissue, but little is known about how it impacts peripheral tissues such as skin and hair. The researchers hypothesised that fasting might also be beneficial for skin tissue regeneration, the process by which old and damaged cells are replaced.

To test this, they examined hair regrowth in mice that were shaved and then subjected to different

intermittent fasting regimens. Some mice were fed on a time-restricted feeding (TRF) schedule that involved eight hours of food access and 16 hours of fasting each day, while other mice were subjected to alternate-day feeding (ADF).

They were surprised to find that fasting inhibited hair regeneration. While control mice that had unlimited access to food had regrown most of their hair

after 30 days, mice on both intermittent fasting regimens showed only partial hair regrowth after 96 days.

Phases of activity

The team showed that this inhibited hair growth occurs because hair follicle stem cells (HFSCs) are unable to cope with the oxidative stress associated with switching from using glucose to fat. HFSCs go

through phases of activity and dormancy, and hair regrowth depends on these cells becoming active. While the control mice's HFSCs began to become activated around day 20 post-shaving and remained active until their hair had regrown, the intermittent fasting mice's activated HFSCs underwent apoptosis (programmed cell death) during extended fasting periods.

SNAPSHOTS



Single mutation can make H5N1 spread among humans

A recent study led by scientists at Scripps Research reveals that a single mutation in the H5N1 virus – which has recently infected dairy cows in the U.S., causing a few mild human cases but retaining specificity for avian receptors – could enhance the virus' ability to attach to human cells, potentially increasing the risk of passing from person to person. A single glutamic acid to leucine mutation at residue 226 of the virus hemagglutinin was sufficient to enact the change from avian to human specificity.



A new catalyst can turn methane into useful polymer

Although less abundant than carbon dioxide, methane gas contributes disproportionately to global warming because it traps more heat in the atmosphere than carbon dioxide. MIT engineers have now designed a new catalyst that can convert methane into useful polymers, which could help reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The new catalyst works at room temperature and atmospheric pressure, which could make it easier to deploy at sites of methane production, such as power plants and cattle barns.



Coffee wilt disease linked to gene transfer from fungus

Researchers compared the genomes of 13 historic strains and multiple disease outbreaks of coffee wilt disease to investigate how the pathogen *Fusarium xylarioides* has adapted to coffee plants. They found that *F. xylarioides* is made up of at least four distinct lineages, and also found evidence that these strains had repeatedly received segments of DNA from another fungal pathogen, *F. oxysporum*, which enhanced *F. xylarioides*'s ability to infect coffee plants.

Preventing malaria using genetically modified parasites

Genetically modified malaria-causing parasites do not cause disease; they instead prime the immune system during the initial stage of their life cycle in the liver

R. Prasad

Two vaccines against malaria have been rolled out in some countries in Africa. Besides vaccines, scientists have been using genetically altered mosquitoes to stop the spread of malaria. One is the release of radiation-sterilised male mosquitoes to prevent eggs from hatching.

Another is engineering mosquitoes that slow the growth of malaria-causing parasites in the gut thereby preventing transmission of malaria to humans. The other method is using genetically modified mosquitoes that can spread resistance to malaria-causing parasites by thriving and mating with wild mosquitoes.

Now, in a radical approach, scientists have shifted their focus from genetic modification of malaria-causing mosquitoes to malaria-causing parasites. They have genetically modified malaria-causing parasites so that the parasites do not cause disease. Instead, they prime the immune system during the initial stage of their life cycle in the liver and before they enter the bloodstream. Malaria-causing parasites cause infection and symptoms begin to show only when they move into the bloodstream from the liver stage.

The priming of the immune system, like in the case of vaccines, by the genetically modified malaria parasites shields the individuals when malaria-causing mosquitoes bite them later. While the genetic modification kills the para-

Focus shifts to GM parasites

Mosquitoes are used to deliver genetically modified parasites

- Genetically altered parasite in the liver stage primes the immune system
- The genetic modification kills the parasites by completely arresting its growth on day one (early-arresting) or day six (late-arresting) during the liver stage
- Nine participants were bitten by mosquitoes carrying late-arresting parasites, eight by early-arresting parasites, and three belonged to the placebo group
- All participants were exposed to controlled human malaria infection three weeks after the third immunisation session



Genetic frontiers: Till now, scientists have been genetically altering the mosquitoes to stop the spread of malaria

- The late-arresting parasite group had 89% immune protection compared with 13% for the early-arresting arm
- The amount of antibody produced was the same immaterial of parasites being killed on day one or day six in the liver
- Parasites killed on day six produced certain T cells that were not seen in participants bitten by mosquitoes carrying parasites that died on day one

sites by completely arresting their growth on day six during the liver stage (late-arresting parasite), the parasites have sufficient time to prime the immune system far more effectively than when the parasites are killed on day one (early-arresting parasite) of entering the liver.

In a small trial, researchers exposed nine healthy adults who had not had malaria to 50 bites by mosquitoes that carried the genetically modified late-arresting parasites that were designed to die on day six of the liver stage, eight healthy adults with the early-arresting parasites, and three adults in the placebo group who were bitten by uninfected mosquitoes.

The 50 mosquito bites were considered as one immunisation session, and the participants were exposed to three such sessions in all. Each successive immunisation session was set at 28-day intervals.

Three weeks after the third immunisation session, all participants were exposed to controlled human malaria infection by means of five bites from mosquitoes infected with the genetically unaltered *P. falciparum* parasite. This was to test the efficacy of genetically modified malaria parasites in priming the immune system.

As per the results published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, the efficacy results were striking. While eight of nine (89%) participants primed by late-arresting parasites were protected from malaria when exposed to mosquitoes carrying unaltered *P. falciparum* parasite, only one of eight (13%) participants who were primed by early-arresting parasites was protected from malaria. No participants in the placebo arm were protected from malaria.

The titres of antibodies

targeting key *P. falciparum* antigens in both the early-arresting and late-arresting parasite groups were far higher than those observed in the placebo group and did not differ between participants in the two intervention arms. This suggests that the vastly different timings of killing the parasites in the liver did not affect the amount of antibodies produced.

However, there were differences in the cellular immunity in the two intervention groups. Though the overall cellular frequency T-cell lineages remained similar, certain *P. falciparum*-specific T cells were seen only in participants who were primed by mosquitoes carrying the late-arresting parasites. "This suggests an important independent role of late-liver-stage antigens in inducing gamma delta T-cell responses," they write. Sporozoites, which

New insights into how Long COVID affects the brain

Rajeev Jayadevan

Long COVID is a condition marked by multiple persistent symptoms that sometimes occur even after mild infections. Among these, memory loss, brain fog and sleep disturbances indicate brain involvement. MRI scans done before and after COVID-19 show shrinkage in certain brain regions, pointing to tissue loss. This raises crucial questions: how does a respiratory virus go on to affect the brain? And what drives brain inflammation in these patients? Two recent papers provide insights into how the virus might indirectly affect the brain.

A study published in *Cell Host & Microbe* concludes that the continued presence of the virus spike protein could be triggering inflammation and neurodegenerative changes in

the brain. The spike also activates inflammatory pathways. When researchers injected spike protein into the skulls of mice, they observed brain inflammation along with behavioural changes.

The authors found that spike protein-based vaccines do not have similar effects. They found that vaccinated mice infected with the virus had lower spike protein levels. Moreover, Long COVID symptoms are rarely linked to vaccination. This suggests that it is the immune response to the virus, not vaccination, that is responsible for the widespread presence of spike protein in the body.

In human studies, the researchers identified spike protein within the skulls of people who died of causes other than COVID. This indicates that spike protein stays in the



Evidence: Spike protein when injected into the skulls of mice caused brain inflammation. GETTY IMAGES

body long after the initial infection, which may have occurred several months earlier. Long COVID patients with persistent spike protein also had elevated levels of biomarkers such as tau protein in their cerebrospinal fluid.

These biomarkers are released when brain cells are damaged.

What is so special about spike protein being found within the skull? The hol-

low core of the skull houses a unique type of bone marrow which is different from that found inside other bones. Connected directly to the coverings of the brain through blood vessels, the skull bone marrow plays a role in brain health and disease. Immune activity within the skull's bone marrow can influence both the progression and recovery of various brain disorders.

The next question is how exactly these immune alterations lead to brain damage. A paper published in *Brain, Behavior, and Immunity - Health* examines the interaction between the virus and microglia, the brain's resident immune cells. These cells function similarly to macrophages found in the rest of the body, clearing debris, eliminating viruses, and coordinating immune responses. Like a gardener trimming a hedge to maintain its shape, microglia also prune unwanted connections between brain cells, a process essential for early brain development and neuroplasticity.

However, dysregulation of this pruning can contribute to various brain disorders. Under normal conditions, microglia remain at rest. However, when activated – such as after COVID-19 – they can trigger

prolonged brain inflammation, potentially leading to memory problems and other symptoms.

So it appears that this virus leaves a footprint in the body long after it has gone, resulting in persistent health problems in a few.

Currently, there is no definitive cure for Long COVID, though some individuals improve over time. The lack of specific treatment reflects an incomplete understanding of the involved mechanisms and the challenge of effectively targeting these complex pathways without harming the body.

Understanding these pathways could pave the way for treatments that prevent or alleviate symptoms, and restore quality of life for people living with Long COVID. (Rajeev Jayadevan is co-chairman of the National IMA COVID task Force)



Question Corner

Not a straw

How do hummingbirds drink nectar at frenetic speed?

Hummingbird bills look a little like drinking straws. The frenetic speed at which they get nectar out of flowers and backyard feeders may give the impression that the bills act as straws, too. But new research shows just how little water or nectar, that comparison holds. The team discovered that a drinking hummingbird rapidly opens and shuts different parts of its bill simultaneously, engaging in a highly coordinated dance with its tongue to draw up nectar at lightning speeds. By analysing the footage and combining it

with data from micro-CT scans of hummingbird specimens, researchers discovered the intricate bill movements that underlie drinking – 1) to extend its tongue, the hummingbird opens just the tip of its bill, 2) after the tongue brings in nectar, the bill tip closes, 3) to draw nectar up the bill, the hummingbird keeps the bill's midsection shut tightly while opening the base slightly, and 4) then it opens its tip again to extend the tongue for a new cycle.

Readers may send their questions / answers to questioncorner@thehindu.co.in

IN BRIEF



Suven Pharma to buy \$64.4 mn stake in U.S. firm NJ Bio Inc.

Global private equity major Advent International-owned firm Suven Pharmaceuticals will acquire 56% stake in NJ Bio Inc. for \$64.4 million. The acquisition is expected to be completed this month and help consolidate its position in the contract development and manufacturing organisation space, Suven Pharmaceuticals said on Saturday. Based in Princeton, NJ Bio is into cutting-edge solutions across the antibody-drug conjugates value chain.

Q3: Soaps, home insecticides hit, GCPL sees flat volumes

Impacted by an increase in soap prices and unseasonal rainfall slowing down sales of the home-insecticides segment, Godrej Consumer Products Ltd. (GCPL) expects a 'flattish' underlying volume growth and a mid-single-digit sales growth in the domestic market in the December quarter. Both segments jointly contribute to two-thirds of GCPL's standalone revenue – mainly income from operations from the domestic market. PTI

Need enforceable code of conduct for CoC: RBI's Rao

Reserve Bank Deputy Governor M. Rajeshwar Rao pitched for an enforceable code of conduct for the committee of creditors (CoC) under the insolvency resolution process. While emphasising the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC), which was introduced in 2016, had gained significant traction as a recovery and resolution mechanism, Mr. Rao also said significant improvements are needed with respect to the area of CoC. PTI

India's textile sector rattled by apparel GST hike proposal

A ministerial group's reported recommendation to raise the indirect tax rate on readymade garments priced over ₹1,500, has triggered concerns

M. Soundariya Preetha
COIMBATORE

A recent proposal reportedly mooted by a Group of Ministers (GoM) on GST rates' rationalisation, to amend the indirect tax levies structure for readymade garments has set off alarm bells in India's apparel and textiles industry with fears of a huge hit on jobs and Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs).

The GoM is said to be considering a hike in the GST rates to 18% from 12% for garments priced above ₹1,500, and 28% for those priced over ₹10,000.

"Take the case of woolen sweaters. It is not a luxury, but a necessity in northern States. It is not possible to get woolen sweaters at less than ₹1,500, and the proposal is to increase the GST on it by 50%," noted Rahul Mehta, chief mentor, the Clothing Manufacturers Association of India (CMAI). Garments currently attract GST rates in two slabs – 5% or 12%.

"Now, the plan is to add a 28% slab," he pointed out. For wedding clothing, the garments are all priced above ₹10,000 each. So the entire segment will either shift to the informal sector or get wiped out, the industry fears. All handwoven garments are priced at



Not yet: The CBIC has termed reports on GoM recommendations on GST rate changes as premature and speculative. BIJOY GHOSH

more than ₹1,500, and raising GST on them will also hit handloom weavers.

"Extending the 5% slab to garments priced up to ₹1,500 is a good move because it is almost eight years since the GST was introduced and only garments up to ₹1,000 attract the 5% rate," said Sanjay Jain, chairman of the national expert committee on textiles of the Indian Chamber of Commerce.

Impact on MMF

The Confederation of Indian Textile Industry (CITI) and the Southern India Mills Association (SIMA) pointed to the impact of inverted duty structure for manmade fibre (MMF) sector. The fibre attracts 18% GST, yarn 12% and fabric 5%. However, dyes and chemicals are taxed 18% or 28%, and textile processing taxed at 5%. This is an anomaly industry wants the

GST Council to address.

A majority of the textile and garment units are MSMEs, and a GST hike will have huge impact on them, SIMA chairman S.K. Sundararaman cautioned. "We fear any hike will disrupt the formal retail sector, driving consumers and firms to informal channels," said Rakesh Mehra, Confederation of Indian Textile Industry chairman.

The Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs (CBIC) has termed reports about the proposed GST rate changes for various goods and services as "premature and speculative".

The GST Council has not yet deliberated on any rate changes and the GoM is yet to finalise and present its recommendations to the Council, after which the Council will take a final view, the CBIC noted. The Council is slated to meet at Jaisalmer on December 21.



IRDAI slaps showcase notice on Star Health

N. Ravi Kumar
HYDERABAD

The Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDAI) has issued a show cause notice to Star Health and Allied Insurance Company for alleged violations of various IRDAI regulations and guidelines.

The notice follows an inspection IRDAI conducted for the period from January 31, 2022 to February 11, 2022 and the observations it made pertaining to the company's business and operational aspects. The company is in the process of submitting response to the observations, Star Health said in filings on Friday and Saturday.

The company has been advised to reply within 21 days from the date of receipt of the notice along with supporting documents. It is in the process of providing adequate replies to the alleged violations and believes that there will not be any impact. However, the outcome and related implications cannot be predicted with certainty at this stage, the insurer said.

After IndiGo suit, M&M switches new e-SUV brand



Brand war: The automaker, however, said it has decided to contest the brand right over BE 6e in a court. BIJOY GHOSH

Lalendu Mishra
MUMBAI

Mahindra & Mahindra Ltd. (M&M) said it was changing the brand name of its electric-origin SUV to BE 6 from BE 6e to avoid delays in product introduction owing to legal challenges by InterGlobe Aviation Ltd. (IndiGo) which could drag on for years.

But M&M has decided to contest the brand right of BE 6e in court. After M&M unveiled electric origin SUVs, the BE 6e and XEV 9e, on November 26, InterGlobe Aviation, which has the call sign 6E, filed a law suit to prevent M&M from using the brand 6e.

"Mahindra's mark is 'BE 6e' not standalone '6E'. We believe it differs fundamentally from IndiGo's '6E,' representing an airline," M&M said.

"Our registration application is for an entirely different industry sector and product and hence, do not see any conflict.

"In fact, we would like to point out in the past, Tata Motors had objected to

InterGlobe using the IndiGo mark, given their Tata IndiGo car brand. InterGlobe continues to use the mark IndiGo in a different industry and business. We therefore find their objection to BE 6e to be inconsistent with their own previous conduct," M&M said.

Stating its priority and focus were on ensuring an excellent experience for its customers as it takes its product to the market, it said, "We would not like to get distracted from our vision of popularising electric transport in India."

"We also find it unseemly that two large, Indian multinationals should engage in a distracting and unnecessary conflict when, in fact, we should be championing each other's growth and expansion," M&M said.

"We, however, do believe the claim by IndiGo is baseless and if not challenged, will set an unhealthy precedent. We will continue to strongly contest this in court and reserve our right to the brand name BE 6e," it said.

By 2030, ITC wants to bring 10 million farmers on its farm-services platform

N. Ravi Kumar
HYDERABAD

The \$8 billion in revenue, diversified ITC Ltd. is keen on 10 million farmers across 4,000 farmer producer organisations (FPOs) in the country accessing its Meta Market for Advanced Agriculture and Rural Services (MAARS) by 2030.

About 1.7 million farmers with about 1,700 FPOs now access ITCMAARS, the phytal ecosystem with a super app at its centre offering a bouquet of services from customised advisory on crops and weather, access to seeds and fertilizers, information on prices in the mandis to linkages with banks. The super app includes Krishi Mitra, a Gen-AI powered voice assistant for farmers.

For the company, ITCMAARS is the next level of its popular e-Choupal initiative and a step further to strengthen bonds with farmers who are the backbone of its agri business besides staying relevant through handholding measures and having in place a robust tech-driven system to ensure access to crop, traceability and quality.

Forging partnerships
The evolving ITCMAARS ecosystem has also meant ITC connecting with scores of start-ups, research institutions and other partners providing associated services such as soil testing, local weather information and drones. The firm expects the partnership to strengthen as it looks to onboard more farmers.

"We would like every farmer to have ITCMAARS... [it] has such



Securing future: Building climate resilience is also a focus for ITC in its engagement with farmers. N. RAVI KUMAR

For the diversified company, ITCMAARS is essentially the next level of its popular e-Choupal initiative

good quality information," ITC's agri business division's chief executive officer S. Ganesh Kumar said during a media interaction at Bhopal this week.

Scaling up and being precise about the information at every geography is now easier with the app, which now is available in seven languages.

"Our ambition is to take it to 4,000 FPOs from [the existing] about 1,700 FPOs... [also] we want to take this across to more value chain whether fruits, vegetables and spices," the CEO added.

Crop insurance
Among new services, crop insurance is likely to be added. The States where ITC wants to either roll out or

expand ITCMAARS include Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Bihar, and east MP. At present, the company procures three million tonne of agricultural commodities annually from 22 States, with FPOs roped in across 10 States. The focus is on traditional crops like wheat, paddy and maize. In Madhya Pradesh, ITC works with 550 FPOs to procure 2.5 lakh tonne of wheat.

Farmers in villages of Sehore district, who interacted with journalists, said that ITC procured produce from the farm gate, and at a price higher than what they would get in the mandis. At some places, ITC, as part of its climate-smart agriculture initiatives, has introduced farmers to smart practices such as the use of broad bed furrow, drones and water stewardship.

(The correspondent was in Bhopal at the invitation of ITC)

Fossil fuels to play crucial role in energy security, says Rosneft CEO

Lalendu Mishra
MUMBAI

Fossil fuels will continue to play an important role in global energy security despite the sharp growth in renewable energy basket to de-carbonise the globe, said Igor Sechin, CEO of Russian oil major Rosneft.

While speaking at the recently held XVIIth Verona Eurasian Economic Forum, he highlighted projections from Bank of America, which estimate economic growth in developing countries and the expansion of data centres will drive an annual increase of up to 9 million barrels of oil equivalent per day (boepd) in global energy consumption.

Meanwhile, renewable energy output is expected to grow by only 2 million boepd, underscoring the reliance on oil and gas.

Rising demand

By 2050, global oil demand is forecast to rise to 20 million barrels per day (bpd), supported by rising consumption in India and other developing nations. He further emphasised the need for significant investment in the energy sector.

As per OPEC, annual investments in oil production must rise by 50%, reaching \$550 billion by 2050, to meet demand and compensate for depletion of conventional reserves. He also questioned the feasibility of achieving net-zero targets, noting renewable energy capacity would need to surge tenfold by 2050 to 35 terawatts – a figure over four times the world's current installed energy capacity.

India our second headquarters, says U.S. general merchandise firm Target

Mini Tejaswi
BENGALURU

Target Corporation, Minnesota-based general merchandise retailer, said India is its second headquarters as every part of its U.S. business is already represented at Target in India (TII).

"We consider ourselves the second headquarters of Target and are unique as a Global Capability Centre in that every part of Target's U.S. business is represented here at TII," Andrea Zimmerman, SVP and President, Target in India told *The Hindu*.

She said, approximately 5,000 team members (employees) in India work across a wide range of capabilities that include marketing, merchandising, properties, digital, data



Andrea Zimmerman

sciences, finance, supply chain, technology and more. "Our teams are collaborating across geographies, solving problems, and impacting our strategy together," she said.

Crucial role

On India-U.S. collaborations of Target teams, she explained that TII has been

operating in India for close to 20 years and it has been playing an important role in Target's strategy and global roadmap for growth. It opened an office in Bengaluru in 2005 with 300 team members who then primarily focused on building skills and talent in technology.

"TII has a strong connection to our global headquarters. That means, ideas and innovations flow seamlessly across continents. We work in collaboration to build solutions that enhance the experience for our guests (customers), team members and vendors," she added.

According to her, Target Circle, one of the biggest loyalty programmes in the U.S. with more than 100 million members, was reintroduced earlier this

year with enhanced features with teams in India contributing to key elements including user interface, personalised offers and marketing initiatives.

Also, a Guest Data Platform, built in partnership with teams in India by leveraging data science, made identifying comprehensive shopping patterns and guest behaviour easier.

"This holistic insight enables us to design personalised experiences, whether in-store, online, or via our app," she added.

On India's contribution, she said, Roundel, Target Corporation's retail media business, used Target's rich insights to create smart, personalised advertising campaigns and 'helped bring products guests loved.'

'UPI led to significant expansion of credit among underserved'

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
NEW DELHI

Unified Payments Interface (UPI) has brought in a significant expansion of consumer credit among the underserved borrowers who had no credit history, a study said.

Since its launch in 2016, the Unified Payments Interface (UPI) has transformed financial access in India, enabling 300 million individuals and 50 million merchants to perform seamless digital transactions.

By October 2023, 75% of all retail digital payments in India were through UPI, according to a study titled Open Banking and Digital Payments: Implications for Credit Access.

UPI is a payment system built as an interoperable protocol that allows third-party vendors to build apps to provide payments as a service to all customers of participating banks.

It enabled underserved groups, including subprime and new-to-credit borrowers, to access formal credit for the first time.

India's funding winter thawing a bit: Axis Bank's Anand

Mini Tejaswi
BENGALURU

Funding winter in India has been seeing some signs of recovery in the last 6 to 12 months with family offices and domestic venture capital firms actively investing and bringing liquidity to the markets, said Rajiv Anand, deputy MD, Axis Bank.

Addressing a media round table, he said, in the U.S., venture capital and private equity players were not able to make exits because of various reasons

and therefore the industry was chocked, and this resulted in a reduction in the fund flow to India.

VC, PE exits

"But India, in the last over six to 12 months has shown ability to generate exits for PE and VC investors," Mr. Anand noted.

"We are seeing large deals happening and a slew of new economy firms getting listed. Markets have also matured and their acceptance of new economy companies have raised significantly," he added.

WASHINGTON

Indian-Americans to protest attacks on Hindus in Bangladesh



Several Indian-Americans plan to hold peaceful rallies in Washington and Chicago over the next two days to protest the attacks against Hindus in Bangladesh. Hindus in Muslim-majority Bangladesh has faced more than 200 attacks following the ouster of the Sheikh Hasina government on August 5. PTI

ABIDJAN

Burkina Faso junta chief dismisses PM and dissolves the government



Burkina Faso's ruling military leader Captain Ibrahim Traore on Friday dismissed the country's Prime Minister, Apollinaire Joachim Kyelem de Tambela, and dissolved the government. The sacked premier had served at the head of three successive governments, surviving each reshuffle. No reason was given for the dismissal. AFP

KYIV

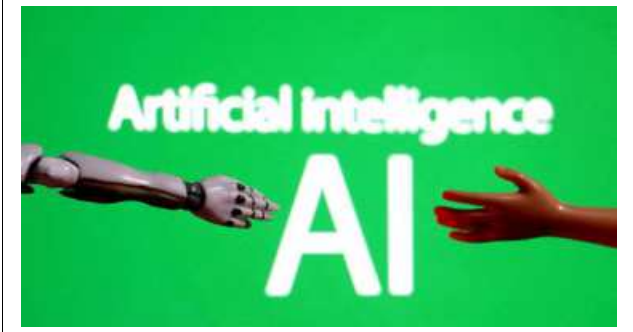
Ukraine confirms delivery of second batch of Danish F-16s



Denmark has delivered a second batch of F-16 fighter jets to Ukraine, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said on Saturday as he travelled to Paris to meet with top politicians and dignitaries. The announcement comes as Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia region marks a day of mourning for 10 persons killed in a Russian attack on Friday. AP

STOCKHOLM

Nobel laureates Hinton, Hassabis call for strong regulation of AI



Physics Nobel Prize winner Geoffrey Hinton and chemistry laureate Demis Hassabis insisted on a need for strong regulation of artificial intelligence, which played a key role in their awards. Mr. Hinton conceded that "I wish I'd thought about safety earlier," in allusion to his fears about the potential for AI to ramp up the arms race. AFP.

South Korea President Yoon escapes impeachment over martial law row

The motion, which needed a two-thirds majority to pass, failed as the ruling PPP boycotted the vote; Opposition party says it will try again amid protests; President apologised for the turmoil but said he would leave it to his party to decide his fate

Agence France-Presse
SEOUL

South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol escaped impeachment on Saturday over his brief declaration of martial law, after lawmakers from his ruling party boycotted a vote despite huge protests outside parliament.

Mr. Yoon stunned the nation and the international community on Tuesday night by suspending civilian rule and sending troops to parliament, but was forced into a U-turn after lawmakers nixed his decree.

Opposition parties pro-



Failed bid: Members of South Korea's main opposition Democratic Party at the National Assembly in Seoul on Saturday. GETTY IMAGES

posed the impeachment motion, which needed a two thirds majority to pass, but a near-total boycott by Mr. Yoon's People

Power Party (PPP) doomed it to failure.

"The number of members who voted did not reach the required two-

thirds majority," National Assembly Speaker Woo Won-shik said, adding that as a result, the impeachment vote was "not valid".

The country – and the world – was watching, he said, adding it was "very regrettable that a vote could not even be held on such a significant national issue".

He said it signified "a failure to engage in the democratic process" on the part of the ruling party.

The PPP claimed after the vote that it had blocked the impeachment to avoid "severe division and chaos".

The opposition has al-

ready vowed to try again as soon as on Wednesday, and many protesters vowed to continue demonstrations next weekend.

"I will impeach Yoon Suk Yeol, who has become the worst risk for South Korea, at any cost," Opposition leader Lee Jae-myung said.

Before the vote, Mr. Yoon, 63, apologised for the turmoil but said he would leave it to his party to decide his fate.

"I caused anxiety and inconvenience to the public. I sincerely apologise," he said in the televised address, his first public appearance in three days.

Terrorists should not run Syria, says Assad-ally Russia in meeting with Iran, Turkiye

Agence France-Presse
DOHA

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said on Saturday that Syria must not be allowed to fall into the hands of a "terrorist group" as Islamist-led rebels advance on President Bashar al-Assad's seat of power.

Mr. Lavrov spoke after talks in the Gulf state of Qatar on Saturday with fellow Assad-ally Iran and Opposition supporter Turkiye aimed at preventing Syria from collapsing into chaos after the lightning rebel advances of recent days.

"It is inadmissible to allow the terrorist group to take control of territory in violation of agreements," Mr. Lavrov said, citing a 2015 UN Security Council Resolution which he said "strongly reiterated sovereignty, territorial integrity and unity of the Syrian Arab Republic".

The Russian Minister was alluding to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the Islamist group which has headed the assault and is rooted in the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda. HTS has sought to soften its image in recent years but remains proscribed as a "terrorist organisation" by Western governments.

Mr. Lavrov and Iran's Abbas Araghchi met with Turkiye's Hakan Fidan on the sidelines of the Doha Forum, an annual gathering for political dialogue.

Mr. Araghchi said the three Ministers agreed on the need to launch "political dialogue between the Syrian government and



Little hope: A man rides a scooter with his children and wife in the Syrian city of Salamiyah in Hama on Saturday. AFP

legitimate opposition groups". The three countries since 2017 in the Astana process seeking to end the civil war that has persisted in Syria since 2011.

Despite repeated violations, a 2020 ceasefire agreement brokered by Russia and Turkiye had largely frozen the conflict for several years but it was blown apart by the shock offensive the rebels launched late last month.

Moscow and Tehran have offered military support to help Mr. Assad's forces hold off the rebels.

Ankara backs some of the rebel groups involved in the offensive and looks favourably on its success so far.

Surprise situation

However, the scale of the collapse of Mr. Assad's forces has taken observers by surprise with conflicting reports about how close the rebels have come to Mr. Assad's seat of power in Damascus.

Qatar – which gave early support to the rebels af-

ter Mr. Assad's government crushed a peaceful uprising in 2011 – remains a fierce critic of the Syrian leader but is calling for a negotiated end to the fighting.

'Assad's failure'

Speaking at the same event in Doha, Qatar's Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al-Thani said Mr. Assad had failed to "seize these opportunities" during a period of calm in the country's war both "on the return of the refugees or on reconciling with his own people".

Ahead of the three-way talks, Mr. Araghchi said he had "very frank and direct" bilateral meetings with his Turkish counterpart and the ruler of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan called on Mr. Assad earlier this week to "reconcile with his people". On Friday he said he hoped the rebel advance would "continue without incident".

Australia defends its action on anti-semitism

Reuters
SYDNEY

Australia's government defended its record on curbing anti-semitism on Saturday after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu accused it of anti-Israel policies, following an arson attack on a Melbourne synagogue.

Mr. Netanyahu accused Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's centre-left Labor government of encouraging crimes such as Friday's attack on the Adass Israel synagogue through policies including support of a recent UN motion backing a Palestinian state.

"Unfortunately, this criminal act cannot be separated from the anti-Israel spirit blowing from the Labor government in Australia," Mr. Netanyahu said.

Murray Watt, Australia's Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations, responded that "the Albanese Government has taken a range of strong actions to stand against anti-semitism and to stamp it out from our community".

Since taking office in May 2022, the government had provided \$25 million to Jewish organisations to upgrade security and safety at Jewish sites, including schools, banned the Nazi salute and was taking action against hate speech, Mr. Watt said.

Mr. Albanese condemned the attack on Friday, saying there was no place for anti-semitism in Australia.

Police said on Saturday they were still looking for two persons suspected of deliberately starting the synagogue fire that injured one and caused widespread damage in Melbourne.

Fiery spirit



Anti-government protesters stage a march in central Tbilisi on Saturday in support of detained fellow activists for a tenth consecutive day. Georgians have been protesting against the government's postponement of European Union accession talks until 2028. AFP

At least 30 killed in Gaza as Qatar holds hope for truce

Reuters
CAIRO

Israeli strikes in Gaza killed at least 30 Palestinians on Saturday, as Qatar voiced hope of fresh momentum in efforts to reach a ceasefire deal between Israel and Hamas.

The Israeli military did not immediately comment on the reported strikes in Gaza City and Rafah.

Palestinian health officials said dozens were also wounded across the enclave on Saturday.

The Israeli military said that on Friday it killed several Hamas militants who were identified as operating from a structure in Nu-seirat camp in central Gaza.

Palestinian health officials said at least 20 people, including six children and five women, were killed in that attack.

At least three dead persons as building explodes and collapses in The Hague

Agence France-Presse
THE HAGUE

At least three persons died on Saturday when an apartment complex in The Hague collapsed after a huge explosion and fire, authorities said, with little hope of finding survivors under the rubble.

The blast and resulting inferno destroyed at least five homes but it was not clear how many people were buried in the debris, Mayor Jan van Zanen said.

Police confirmed that three bodies had been pulled from the wreckage, as fears mounted that the toll could rise much higher. There was debris strewn across the street, accompanied by burned-out cars, blown-out windows and huge plumes of smoke.

Firefighters tackled the blaze from the ground and from huge cherry-pickers, as ambulances carried the injured to hospital and pol-



Sad end: Emergency services recover a body at the site of the explosion in The Hague on Saturday. AFP

ice helicopters circled overhead.

"It is not known how many people are still under the rubble. But the reality is that there is only a slim chance of survival for them," the Mayor said.

"It is unbelievable what happened there," the Mayor added.

The cause of the blast was not immediately clear but police appealed for in-

formation about a car seen speeding away from the scene shortly after the explosion.

Mr. Van Zanen said there was a small explosion followed by a larger one and a huge fire.

After firefighters had extinguished the blaze, heavy construction equipment moved in to try to clear the rubble.

Elite rescue workers trained to recover survivors from natural disasters scoured the debris, with the help of sniffer dogs.

'Huge bang'

"I was asleep and suddenly there was this huge bang," Adam Muller, a 14-year-old local resident, said.

Authorities warned locals to keep their windows shut and shut off ventilation systems due to the smoke.

Forensic investigators arrived on the scene to begin to probe a potential cause of blast. The three floors of the building consisted of shops on the ground floors and five two-storey apartments, authorities said, with living rooms on the second floor and bedrooms on the top.

The world is 'a little crazy', says Trump as he meets Macron

Agence France-Presse
PARIS

U.S. President-elect Donald Trump on Saturday said that the world was "a little crazy" as he met President Emmanuel Macron in Paris ahead of the re-opening of Notre Dame cathedral on his first international trip since his re-election.

The two men embraced and shook hands several times on the steps of the French presidential palace, with Mr. Trump given a full guard of honour.

"It seems like the world is going a little crazy right now and we will be talking about that," Mr. Trump told reporters as he prepared to sit down for talks with Mr. Macron which started around 45 minutes later than scheduled.

Despite tensions between the two men during

U.S. President-elect visits Paris ahead of the re-opening of Notre Dame cathedral on his first foreign trip since his re-election

his first term, Mr. Trump hailed his ties with the centrist French leader, saying: "We had a great relationship as everyone knows. We accomplished a lot."

Mr. Macron told Mr. Trump it was "a great honour for French people to welcome you" for the re-opening ceremony at Notre Dame, which was devastated by a blaze in 2019 during Mr. Trump's first term.

"You were president at that time and I remember the solidarity and the immediate reaction," Mr. Macron added.

NOSTALGIC

I have happy memories of my time in India, says Greg Chappell



FILE PHOTO: K.R. DEEPAK

The former India coach Greg Chappell spoke with clarity in the media enclosure at the Adelaide Oval on Saturday. "Do I miss the chaos and drama? Not really. But I miss a lot of India. I have very happy memories of my time in India. Sure, we had some ups and downs. And you guys (reporters), you love controversy."

A METHOD

'Be in a neutral position and play Bumrah as straight as possible'



AP

The Australian great Greg Chappell talked about how to tackle Jasprit Bumrah and the India pacer's tactical acumen at the Adelaide Oval on Saturday. "He is a smart guy and understands the game... I would play him as straight as I can, be in a neutral position and react appropriately," he said.

TIMING IT RIGHT

Can't leave call on exit to the players themselves: Chappell



AFF

On the exit of big players, Greg Chappell said it depends on the selectors more than the individual concerned. "You cannot leave it to the player, it is the call of a robust selection panel. As for the player, you would know when your time is up, the question is would you admit it?"

STEPPING UP

Gagan propels Yoddhas to crucial win against Puneri Paltan



SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Gagan Gowda shone in UP Yoddhas' 36-33 victory over Puneri Paltan in a Pro Kabaddi League match in Pune on Saturday. Gagan scored 15 points for the Yoddhas, while Pankaj Mohite got 11 points for Paltan. Telugu Titans posted a narrow 34-32 win over Bengal Warriors in the other contest of the day.

Better safe than sorry, say Ding and Gukesh

The championship sees the seventh consecutive stalemate as the holder and the challenger play out a draw in the 10th game; the score reads 5-5 with four games remaining



P.K. Ajith Kumar
SINGAPORE

Who will blink first? The question still begs the answer. The stalemate continues at the World chess championship.



High stakes: Both players will be happy with a draw as a loss will be detrimental at this stage. PTI

Ding Liren and D. Gukesh drew their seventh game in a row at World Resorts Sentosa on Saturday. The score is tied at 5-5. Just four games remain in the classical format. If it is a 7-7 draw, a tie-breaker of speed chess will have to be played.

With the stakes so high, and with so few games left to be played, it wasn't surprising to see both the men deciding to play it safe for the second game in a row. Games seven and eight were much sharper, though they both were drawn. But now, neither Ding nor Gukesh could afford a loss. For, it would be rather difficult to come back into the match.

Not much difference
Gukesh may be the slightly happier of the two, as he managed to get a draw with black pieces, though he insisted that there wasn't much of a difference these days between

the colours. Both have two games with white.

In Game 10, the opening was London System – not for the first time in this match. That was a bit of a deviation from the theme here, as both the men have looked keen to try out different openings.

Another major theme was also missing. Ding has been behind the clock for most of the time in the opening phase of the games, but on this occasion, he had a lead over Gukesh.

Not that it mattered much in a game that looked heading for a draw from early on.

The queens left the arena by the 14th move and, as former World No. 3 Anish Giri cryptically remarked, there were just one and a half moves between the

opening and the end-game. The ending had the same-coloured bishops, rooks and knight, with Gukesh saddled with doubled pawns, but that was no cause for even the faintest of headaches.

All the pieces except those bishops were then traded off, and the game ended with three-fold repetition, in 36 moves.

Shortly after the duel, Gukesh said the cost of the game was higher than before.

"But my approach and my goal are still the same – to play good games," he said.

Ding said there was not much room to make mistakes.

"We need to be careful with every move," he said. That was an understatement, in true Ding style.

GAME 10: MOVES

Ding v Gukesh

1. d4 Nf6 2. Nf3 d5 3. Bf4 e6 4. e3 c5 5. Be2 Bd6 6. dxc5 Bxc5 7. c4 0-0 8. 0-0 Nc6 9. Nc3 dxc4 10. Bxc4 Nh5 11. Bg5 Be7 12. Ne4 Nf6 13. Nxlf6+ Bxf6 14. Qxd8 Rxd8 15. Bxf6 gxf6 16. Rfd1 Bd7 17. Rac1 Be8 18. Rxd8 Rxd8 19. Kf1 Kg7 20. a3 f5 21. Ke1 Kf6 22. Be2 Ne7 23. g3 Rc8 24. Rxc8 Nxc8 25. Nd2 Nd6 26. Nc4 Nxc4 27. Bxc4 Bc6 28. f4 b6 29. Kd2 Ke7 30. Kc3 Kd6 31. b4 f6 32. Kd4 h6



33. Bb3 Bb7 34. Bc4 Bc6 35. Bb3 Bb7 36. Bc4 Bc6.

Game drawn

Head torments India again before Aussie pacers drive home the advantage

INDIA IN AUS

K.C. Vijaya Kumar
ADELAIDE

The faithful, who congregated at the Adelaide Oval, relished the local hero's exploits. Travis Head, back in his city, and against a familiar rival, turned on his aggressive mode. The south-paw's blistering hundred held Australia in good stead as the second Test swung the host's way here on Saturday.

If Head's 137 derailed India in the 2023 ICC ODI World Cup final at Ahmedabad, the latest 140 at his home ground, could help Australia spring back in the Border-Gavaskar Trophy series, in which Pat Cummins and his men trail at 0-1.

At close on the second day, after Australia scored 337 in its first innings and gained a 157-run lead, India wobbled at 128 for five in the second innings and trails by 29 runs.

K.L. Rahul tried to pull one down the leg-side off Cummins and feathered the ball straight to Alex Carey. Yashasvi Jaiswal and Shubman Gill found the odd four but the former succumbed to Scott Boland's nagging accuracy with Carey's gloves again coming into play.

The same pacer-keeper combine got the better of Virat Kohli and when Mitchell Starc scattered Gill's stumps, it was left to Rishabh Pant's chutzpah to lend some cheer to the Indian fans. Pant often toppled over while scooping Boland over third-man and fine-leg while skipper Rohit Sharma after surviving a Starc questionnaire, lost his citadel to Cummins.

Earlier in an afternoon of bright skies and persistent breeze, Australia res-



Local hero: Head entertained the Adelaide crowd with a blistering ton. GETTY IMAGES

SCOREBOARD

INDIA – 1ST INNINGS

180 in 44.1 overs.

AUSTRALIA – 1ST INNINGS

Usman Khawaja c Rohit b Bumrah 13 (35b, 2x4), Nathan McSweeney c Pant b Bumrah 39 (109b, 6x4), Marnus Labuschagne c Jaiswal b Nitish 64 (126b, 9x4), Steve Smith c Pant b Bumrah 2 (11b), Travis Head b Siraj 140 (141b, 17x4, 4x6), Mitchell Marsh c Pant b Ashwin 9 (26b, 1x4), Alex Carey c Pant b Siraj 15 (32b), Pat Cummins b Bumrah 12 (22b, 2x4), Mitchell Starc c Harshit b Siraj 18 (15b, 3x4), Nathan Lyon (not out) 4 (6b), Scott Boland b Siraj 0 (9b);

Extras (b-13, lb-1, nb-7): 21; Total (in 87.3 overs): 337.

FALL OF WICKETS

1-24 (Khawaja, 10.6 overs), 2-91 (McSweeney, 36.1), 3-103 (Smith, 40.1), 4-168 (Labuschagne, 54.3), 5-208 (Marsh, 63.4), 6-282 (Carey, 76.6), 7-310 (Head, 81.4), 8-332 (Cummins, 84.6), 9-332 (Starc, 85.1).

INDIA BOWLING

Bumrah 23-5-61-4, Siraj 24.3-5-98-4, Harshit 16-2-86-0, Nitish 6-2-25-1, Ashwin 18-4-53-1.

INDIA – 2ND INNINGS

Yashasvi Jaiswal c Carey b Boland 24 (31b, 4x4), K.L. Rahul c Carey b

Cummins 7 (10b, 1x4), Shubman Gill b Starc 28 (30b, 3x4), Virat Kohli c Carey b Boland 11 (21b, 1x4), Rishabh Pant (batting) 28 (25b, 5x4), Rohit Sharma b Cummins 6 (15b, 1x4), Nitish Kumar (batting) 15 (14b, 3x4); Extras (b-5, lb-2, nb-5): 9; Total (for five wks., in 24 overs): 128.

FALL OF WICKETS

1-12 (Rahul, 3.5 overs), 2-42 (Jaiswal, 8.1), 3-66 (Kohli, 14.3), 4-86 (Gill, 17.2), 5-105 (Rohit, 20.5).

AUSTRALIA BOWLING

Starc 9-0-49-1, Cummins 8-0-33-2, Boland 7-0-39-2.

Head on the marauder, Harshit Rana felt the scalding heat of the Aussie willows. The seamer lost his radar and the two batters cashed in.

R. Ashwin stepped in and Head, ever keen to mark his territory, hoisted a six. And Labuschagne motored towards his 50.

Hope

Bumrah's morning spell of 4-1-10-2 offered hope but the roar that greeted Head on his arrival, seemed to be a premonition of a dreary outing for the visitors. With Marnus Labuschagne being the eager beaver,

and Head the marauder, Harshit Rana felt the scalding heat of the Aussie willows. The seamer lost his radar and the two batters cashed in.

R. Ashwin stepped in and Head, ever keen to mark his territory, hoisted a six. And Labuschagne motored towards his 50.

The 65-run fourth-wicket partnership ended when Labuschagne slashed at Nitish Kumar and found a leaping Jaiswal. Australia 168 for four and perhaps nursing a good appetite ahead of the break.

After the intermission, Ashwin got one past Mitchell Marsh's bat and the bat-

ter instantly walked. Meanwhile, Head punched, slashed, pulled and stepped out too, while Carey and Cummins played the supporting roles. After hoisting Ashwin for a six, Head's repeat-act swivelled high but Mohammed Siraj could not hold on.

Having savoured the reprieve, Head charged towards his ton and the stands were agog with excitement. India pulled back through the new-ball and Siraj castled Head but the seamer's obnoxious send-off to the centurion evoked boos from the audience. By then Head had set Australia on a good platform.

Olonga – the conscience-keeper who stood up for what was right

K.C. Vijaya Kumar
ADELAIDE

Speedster, painter, musician, author and rebel. These diverse labels sit easy with Henry Olonga. However, the former Zimbabwean seamer and current Australian citizen, would rather be known as a man with a heart.

His fingers smudged with paint, Olonga, was busy drawing a picture of a stadium at the Adelaide Oval's Village Green area here on Saturday. Next to him a lone vocalist and a musician belted out songs. Olonga is comfortable in this universe of arts.

He also stays in touch with cricket, a game he played at the international level from 1995 to 2003. Twenty one years ago, Olonga and Andy Flower wore a black armband to protest the atrocities committed by the then Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe.

Their careers ended and Olonga moved to England,



Olonga.

and later to Australia.

This tale of exile is a constant: "I was born in Zambia and had a Kenyan father and I felt even when I played for Zimbabwe I was considered an outsider." He now feels at home Down Under: "I love Australia. I am married to an Australian wife and I have got two children."

He does multiple things, cuts music albums, delivers speeches, paints for causes, is a casual coach

with the South Australia Cricket Association and is an umpire at weekend games. "A lot of Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis play and much later they get to know who I am," he said.

A fast bowler with soft-skills may seem an anachronism but Olonga insisted that he was always into aesthetics: "I always had that soft side and I never saw it as different or odd. I always liked variety. I get bored doing one thing."

And the decision to protest and quit cricket? The answer is quick: "I stood up for what I believed. It meant the end of my career, but there are things more important than the game. When I lived in a country with a man (Mugabe), who slaughtered so many of his own people, I got to say something. No regrets."

For Indian fans, Olonga stirs a memory in association with Sachin Tendulkar. In the 1998 Coca-Cola

Cup at Sharjah, the pacer dismissed the maestro cheaply but in the final, it was payback time and a century (124 n.o.) was hammered. "Everyone remembers because it is on YouTube. I got him out and then in the final, he went crazy, I went for plenty of runs (6-0-50-0) and he smashed it," Olonga recalled.

As the conversation wound to a close, the 48-year-old conscience-keeper said: "A lot of people say, stay out of politics. But, sportspeople are human beings and have strong ideas. You should not be excluded from using your voice to convey strong feelings."

But cricket cannot be far when Olonga is around and he is quick to praise the Indian pacers: "They are amazing. (Jasprit) Bumrah is the best bowler, has got a bit of hyper-extension, which gives him a crack. He reminds me of Wasim (Akram) of the short run-up."

Head surprised by the reactions after his dismissal

K.C. Vijaya Kumar
ADELAIDE

A glorious century marred by the manner of departure was the theme when Travis Head squared upto the media here at the Adelaide Oval on Saturday night. The southpaw's 140 set Australia on a pedestal in the second Test, but talk centred around Mohammed Siraj's send-off to the batter after casting him.

"I was surprised at the reaction in terms of the situation of the game and the lead up, and there was no confrontation leading up to it, and I felt like it was probably a bit far at the time, and that's why I am disappointed in the reac-

tion that I gave back, but I'm also going to stand up for myself. We are pretty civil with each other as teams and that is why it was disappointing to see a couple of reactions after I was out," Head said.

Elaborating about his special hundred, the batter said: "Yeah, I was very pleased with the way I started. Very pleased with the way I was able to play against Ashwin. I guess at the start with the field up, I picked my moments and manoeuvred the field. And then sort of sensed where the game was at and I thought it was a great opportunity to put some pressure on before that new ball and try to maximise."

Bowlers did well before Head took the game away: Morkel

K.C. Vijaya Kumar
ADELAIDE

After a forgettable day for India on Saturday, bowling coach Morne Morkel turned up at the press conference for some fire-fighting. With a calm voice and a diplomat's grace, the South African deftly handled the queries.

The first volley was about Mohammed Siraj's needless send-off to centurion Travis Head and Morkel was ready: "We all know Siraj puts everything on the line, he is the kind of bowler, who will run in all day. There are some moments in a game. But I am sure off the field they will be the best of mates." Asked about India's

bowling in the second Test so far, Morkel offered his analysis: "Yesterday (Friday), the lines and lengths could have been better, there was some extra swing too. Thought they did well today (Saturday) morning before Travis Head played his innings. He put the bowlers under pressure but that's the way he plays."

And about Rishabh Pant's approach at the batting crease, the bowling coach said: "Just like Head, this is the way Pant bats, that's his approach. Always puts the bowlers under pressure. Seeing the scoreboard you won't expect the kind of shot he played from the first ball but that is how he is."

IN BRIEF



Batters rule the roost after Atkinson's hat-trick

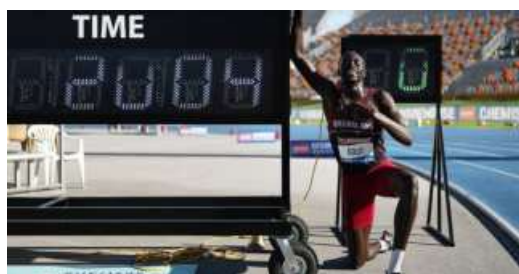
Gus Atkinson claimed a hat-trick before England's batters let loose to power the visitor 533 runs ahead of New Zealand on Saturday and in full control of the second Test at Wellington on day two.

The scores: England 280 & 378/5 in 76 overs (Bethell 96, Duckett 92, Root 73 batting, Brook 55, Stokes 35 batting) vs New Zealand 125 in 34.5 overs (Williamson 37, Atkinson 4/31, Carse 4/46).

South Africa seizes the initiative against Sri Lanka

South Africa was building a defensible total against Sri Lanka as it reached 191 for three in its second innings and a lead of 221 runs on day three of the second Test at Gqeberha on Saturday. Sri Lanka was bowled out for 328, short of South Africa's total by 30 runs, after a maiden five-wicket haul by medium-pacer Dane Paterson.

The scores: South Africa 358 in 103.4 overs and 191/3 in 55 overs vs Sri Lanka 328 in 99.2 overs (Nissanka 89, Paterson 5/71).



16-year-old Gout betters Bolt, smashes 200m record

Australian sprint prodigy Gout Gout clocked the fastest time ever by a 16-year-old to smash the national 200m record on Saturday and do something even Usain Bolt never achieved. The teenager ran 20.04 at the Australian All Schools Athletics Championships at his home track in Brisbane, breaking Peter Norman's national record of 20.06 from the 1968 Olympics. Gout also now holds the second-fastest time in history for athletes under 18, overtaking Bolt's 20.13.

Zeynep powers Yash Mumbai to the top of TPL

Zeynep Sonmez propelled Yash Mumbai Eagles to the top of the table with 265 points, even though the team shared honours with a 50-50 score against the eighth placed Bengal Wizards in the last league match of the Tennis Premier League at the CCI in Mumbai on Saturday.

The results (league): Punjab Patriots bt Hyderabad Strikers 51-49; Rajasthan Rangers drew with Bengaluru SG Pipers 50-50; Bengal Wizards drew with Yash Mumbai Eagles 50-50; Gujarat Panthers bt Chennai Smashers 52-48.

Profligate Chennaiyin sinks to its third straight defeat

C. Shyam Sundar
CHENNAI

A wasteful Chennaiyin FC went down 2-0 to East Bengal FC in an Indian Super League football match at the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium here on Saturday, its third straight loss.

P.V. Vishnu and Jeakson Singh were on target for the Red and Gold brigade as the home team failed to cash in on the opportunities that came its way.

Chennaiyin had the better of the exchanges in the opening half, but its forward-line couldn't find the back of the net.

Key role

Connor Shields played a key role in creating chances and stretching the East Bengal defence in wide areas.

The Kolkata team's defence managed to soak in the pressure and keep CFC at bay.

The best chance came when Laldinpuia Pachuau leapt to meet a Shields cor-



Happy times: Vishnu celebrates scoring East Bengal's opener. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

ner, but his header didn't trouble custodian Prabh-sukhan Gill.

Connor and Daniel Chima Chukwu made a few good moves but were found wanting in front of goal.

In the second half, CFC began well but couldn't break the deadlock.

In the 54th, East Bengal scored against the run of play when Vishnu slotted home after goalkeeper Mohammed Nawaz had saved Saul Crespo's shot.

F1 constructors' battle set to go down to the wire

McLaren leads Ferrari by 21 points; 1-2 finish nets 43 points, plus another one for the fastest lap

ABU DHABI GP

S. Dipak Ragav

In Formula One, two championships are handed out every year. While the drivers' title is the most prestigious, the other one awarded to the team with the most points – the constructors' title – is more significant for the team and its employees.

Though the drivers' crown has been part of the sport since its inaugural year in 1950, the first constructors' title was awarded only in 1958.

However, as the sport has grown in terms of fan base and commercial success, the constructors' title determines the prize money, which forms a crucial portion of a team's revenue.

This year, Max Verstappen sealed his fourth straight drivers' crown in Las Vegas a fortnight ago,



Advantage: With McLaren locking up the top two spots in the grid, the Woking based team is well-placed to come on top. AFP

but the battle for the constructors' title remains alive ahead of the finale in Abu Dhabi on Sunday.

McLaren leads Ferrari by 21 points, with 44 points up for grabs on Sunday. A 1-2 finish for a team nets 43 points, plus another one for the fastest lap in the race.

The last time the constructors' battle was alive till the season's final race was in 2021 at Abu Dhabi

when Mercedes pipped Red Bull.

McLaren is the odds-on favourite, considering its healthy cushion.

Even if the Ferraris finishes 1-2, McLaren can finish four and five, along with the fastest lap, to triumph.

If neither Ferrari nor McLaren wins the race and the teams are still tied, McLaren will emerge winners on countback.

The British squad will have five wins, the same as the Italian marquee, but it has 10 second-place finishes to Ferrari's four so far.

With McLaren locking out the front row led by Lando Norris and Oscar Piastri in qualifying and Ferrari starting only third (Carlos Sainz) and 20th (Charles Leclerc), the Woking-based squad looks good to clinch its first constructors' title since 1998.

Evergreen Chhetri fires BFC to the top with a hat-trick

ISL

Ashwin Achal
BENGALURU

Sunil Chhetri justified his place in the starting eleven with a hat-trick against Kerala Blasters in a 4-2 victory in an ISL match here on Saturday.

BFC moved to the top of the points table (23 points), three ahead of nearest rival Mohun Bagan.

Kerala, despite a lion-hearted showing, fell to a fourth loss in its last five outings.

The marquee clash began with a stronger header from Chhetri, who rose above his marker Sandeep Singh to put BFC ahead.

BFC's lead doubled in the 38th minute, when a clean left-footed strike from Australian Ryan Williams nestled into the top corner.

Kerala Blasters entered the second half with fire in the belly. Spanish forward



Going strong: Chhetri scores BFC's fourth. K. MURALI KUMAR

Jesus Jimenez made inspired runs, giving hope to the massive contingent of away supporters at the venue. Jimenez finally broke through in the 56th minute, slotting it home from close range.

The home faithful was stunned into silence when Freddy Lallawmawma's header brought Kerala level at 2-2.

BFC brought on Jorge Diaz, who had immediate impact. Diaz cut through the defence and found an

unmarked Chhetri. The veteran forward needed no second invitation to score, giving BFC the lead once again. In injury time, Chhetri put the game to bed with a goal from close range. After this incredible showing, it will take a brave coach to relegate this evergreen star back to the bench.

The results: BFC 4 (Sunil Chhetri 8, 73, 90+8, Ryan Williams 38) bt Kerala Blasters 2 (Jesus Jimenez 56, Freddy Lallawmawma 67).

Scheffler takes a two-stroke lead over Thomas and Bhatia

V.V. Ramanan
NASSAU

Scottie Scheffler was in a hurry to assert his supremacy as the second round of the Hero World Challenge got underway under bright skies at the Albany course on Friday.

The defending champion notched up seven birdies on the front nine (making par on the fifth and eighth) and one more in the 14th to return a card of 8-under-64 and a two-day total of 131 for a two-stroke lead over fellow-Major winner Justin Thomas and the fast-rising Akshay Bhatia.

"I didn't really have to make very many long birdie putts on the front nine. I just was really solid on the greens and was able to hit it close as well," was the World No. 1's matter-of-fact response to a query on making six birdies over the first seven holes.



Bhatia. AFP

While Thomas, second overnight, played characteristically well for a 67, with five birdies and a

dropped shot, it was the debutant Bhatia who caught one's attention.

The 22-year-old, wiry leftie with two PGA Tour titles to his name, made seven birdies with three of them on par-5 holes but also had a bogey on the eighth hole. With 14 birdies, he is tied with Scheffler for most birdies through two rounds.

For overnight leader Cameron Young, it was a round to forget. Starting at 64, he had to suffer the horrors of six bogeys and one double bogey (on the 18th) and a 75 pushed him down the leaderboard to tied-10.

Leading scores (after second round): 131: Scottie Scheffler (67, 64); 133: Akshay Bhatia (67, 66); Justin Thomas (66, 67); 135: Keegan Bradley (68, 67); 137: Sepp Straka (69, 68), Sungjae Im (69, 68), Ludvig Aberg (67, 70).

(The writer is in Nassau at the invitation of Hero MotoCorp)

Services wins six of the 10 Greco-Roman gold medals

N. Sudarshan
BENGALURU

Services dominated day two of the senior National wrestling championship at the Koramangala Indoor Stadium here on Saturday, claiming six of the ten Greco-Roman golds on offer.

Of the six, Vinayak Patil had the toughest bout, in the 67kg final against Haryana's Anil. The 23-year-old, a bronze medallist at the U-23 Asian Championship in June this year, eventually came through 2-1, stonewalling every spirited effort from Anil.

The results: Greco-Roman: Men: 55kg: Gold: Lalit (Ser) bt Manu Yadav (Chg) 7-0 (retd.); **Bronze:** Neeraj Patel (MP) bt Shivappa (Kar) 3-3, Nitin (Har) bt Rishav Chaudhary (UP) 7-3. **60kg: Gold:** Praveesh (Ser) w/o Sagar Singh (Pun); **Bronze:** Saurabh (UP) bt Shubham Sharma (Del) 9-0, Udit Patel (MP) bt Abhishek Nishad (Chg) 7-2. **63kg: Gold:** Umesh (Del) bt Vijay (Ser) 5-3; **Bronze:** Parth (Mah) bt Mukul Chauhan (UP) 2-0, Sunny (Har) bt Julfikar Malik (Utk) 8-0. **67kg: Gold:** Vinayak Patil (Ser) bt



Tough fight: Vinayak, top, stonewalled Anil's spirited challenge for the 67kg gold. SUDHAKARA JAIN

Anil (Har) 2-1; **Bronze:** Ankit (Del) bt M. Taibanganba (Man) 8-0, Amit Kumar (Raj) bt Badal Chauhan (UP) 11-0.

72kg: Gold: Ankit Gulia (Ser) w/o Aakash (Har); **Bronze:** Deepak (Del) bt Ravinder (Raj) 5-1, Gaurav (UP) bt Akash (Pun) 7-1.

77kg: Gold: Karan (Ser) bt G. Amit Kumar (Jhk) 11-2; **Bronze:** Sagar Thakran (Del) bt Shiv Kumar (Har) 10-7, Aurangzeb Khan (MP) bt Chhagan Meena (Raj) 5-2.

82kg: Gold: Aman (Har) w/o Rahul (Ser); **Bronze:** Bhagwant Singh (UP) bt Shiv Kumar (Utk) 10-0, Aryan Kamboj (Pun) bt Aakash Kumar (Bih) 8-0.

87kg: Gold: Sunil (Har) bt Dinesh Dhanda (Del) 8-0; **Bronze:** Rajesh Machra (Raj) bt Abhishek Yadav (MP) 8-0, Sushant (Ser) bt

Shamphoon (J&K) 9-0.

97kg: Gold: Sonu (Ser) bt Naman (Del) 3-0; **Bronze:** Abhimanu (Pun) bt B.H. Kiran (Kar) 8-0, Nataram Tetwal (Raj) w/o Nitesh Kumar (Chd).

130kg: Gold: Uttam Rana (UP) bt Digvijay (Mah) 5-4; **Bronze:** Jagdeep Singh (Pun) bt Kamesh Patil (Kar) 5-0, Prem (Ser) bt Mudassar Khan (MP) 8-0.

Women: 50kg: Gold: Shivani Pawar (MP) bt Vinita (Har) 12-4; **Bronze:** Nandini (Mah) bt Ritika Sharma (HP) 10-0, Preeti (Pun) bt Shweta Sanju (Kar) 2-2.

72kg: Gold: Priyanka (Har) bt Laxmi Pandey (UP) 4-0; **Bronze:** Kritika Jamwal (HP) bt Devu Sankar (Ker) 2-0, Bipasha (Del) bt Vaishnavi (Mah) 2-0.

Anshu and Amanat hog the limelight

ATHLETICS

Y.B. Sarangi
BHUBANESWAR

Anshu, the daughter of Paralympian and Asian Games silver medallist shot putter Virender Dhankhar, hurled the shot to a new national mark as she bagged the under-18 women's gold medal in the National junior athletics on Saturday.

A boxer-turned shot-putter, Anshu, hailing from Sonapat, achieved the feat with a mark of 16.85m in her third attempt. "After my shot was rejected, I managed with the one given to me," said Anshu.

Asian under-20 silver medallist Amanat Kamboj broke the 12-year-old meet record while claiming the under-18 gold. Amanat, born to athlete parents, unleashed a nice and flat throw to 52.89m in her first attempt before facing some issues with her release.

Asian under-20 silver medallist Vinod Singh won the gold by clocking his per-

sonal best 29:43.39.

Prachi Devkar made her 5,000m debut memorable by winning the title with 17:22.79. Abhinaya Rajarajan shattered Rashmi Shergar's nine-year-old meet record (11.89) as she equalled Dutee Chand's under-18 National record of 11.62 in 2013 in the heats.

The results: Finals: U-20: Men: 10,000m: 1. Vinod Singh (MP) 29:43.39, 2. Gaurav Bhosale (Mah) 29:43.46, 3. Arun (Har) 29:43.48; **Women: 1,500m:** 1. Vineeta Gurjar (UP) 4:29.26, 2. Chanchal Jakhad (Har) 4:29.36, 3. Manju Choudhary (Raj) 4:29.37; **5,000m:** 1. Prachi Devkar (Mah) 17:22.79, 2. Sonam Parmar (MP) 17:25.70, 3. Neeta Rani (UP) 17:27.47; **Discus:** 1. Nikita Kumari (Raj) 48.31, 2. Neha Jaglan (Har) 47.65m, 3. Akhila Raju (Ker) 47.41m; **4x400m mixed relay:** 1. Maharashtra 3:31.11, 2. Haryana 3:33.02, 3. Tamil Nadu 3:33.90. **Winners only: Under-18: Women: Shot put:** Anshu (Har) 16.85m (NR, Old 16.75m, Gurleen Kaur, 2023); **Discus:** Amanat Kamboj (Pun) 52.89m (NMR, Old 49.54m, Navjeet Kaur Dhillon, 2012); **U-14: Boys: Triathlon:** Imran Alam (Bih) 2,275 points; **Girls:** Devika (Raj) 2,519.

TAMIL NADU



The hunt for a home for women professionals in Tamil Nadu, otherwise known for its progressive ideas on gender, can be nightmarish. Many women say they feel vulnerable and unhappy with the scrutiny they are put through. **K.S. Swati** speaks to them to understand how difficult it is for women to find a home to rent

Turned away at the door

For women working in creative fields, the situation can be even more challenging. Niranjana Neithiar, 26, a part-time media professional and medical student from Coimbatore, says houseowners often harbour negative stereotypes about her field. "Houseowners are uncomfortable renting to media professionals. They make assumptions about the lifestyle of people in my field, which isn't fair. You can't generalise based on stereotypes," she says.

Similarly, Sowjanya Balaji, 24, a junior fashion designer from Bengaluru, encountered discrimination when landlords rejected her because of her night shifts. "Houseowners do not have the right to question or make assumptions about how I run my professional life," she adds. But the issue is not pertinent only for unmarried young professionals.

Door is shut on single mothers

Rani Gopalakrishnan, a small business owner in Tiruchi, found it difficult to rent a place after the death of her husband five years ago. "Landlords refused to let us see houses after they learned I was a single mother and a businesswoman," she recounted. "One senior couple even turned us down and they told us that they felt we were 'incomplete' without a man to help us in emergencies."

Women who do not speak Tamil or belong to a specific caste often run into additional barriers. Many houseowners prefer renting to people from Tamil Nadu or at least those who speak the language. Sweta Gupta, 25, a media professional from Kolkata, struggled to find a home because of her language. "The prejudice is deep-rooted. Some landlords refused to even talk to me because I didn't speak Tamil," she says.

The menace of peeping Toms is quite common, say many women professionals in Tiruchi. "I was shocked to see a stranger spying on me while I was in the shower, but I did not confront him because I was scared for my safety," says a teacher requesting anonymity.

K. Amarthiya, a part-time teacher in Coimbatore and native of Dharmapuri, who belongs to a Scheduled Caste, says, "Initially, the houseowner was kind, unaware of my caste. But after finding out that I belonged to the Scheduled Caste, the attitude changed. The result was frequent inspections. Uncomfortable with the discrimination, I chose to leave."

For others like Roshini Begum Farah, a 29-year-old Muslim transwoman, religious discrimination adds another layer of rejection. "I was told outright by houseowners that they couldn't rent to me because our religions didn't match," Roshini says. This overt discrimination is another harsh reality that many women, especially those from minority communities, face in the housing market.

Queer individuals often encounter more severe forms of discrimination. Luna Vishwa, 23, a transwoman, was rejected by landlords solely because she was open about her gender identity. Similarly, Zoya, who prefers to dress androgynously, faced rejection and stereotyping based on her appearance.



Houseowners do not have the right to question or make assumptions about how I run my professional life

SOWJANYA BALAJI, junior fashion designer from Bengaluru

Kavya, 25, an information technology professional from Coimbatore, kept her identity hidden from her houseowner until the day she and her friends prepared for a pride march. "I had dressed similarly before with no issues; but when we left with placards that day, the society association made a ruckus," she said. The situation worsened when the association head informed her owner about the march. Within a week, Kavya was asked to vacate.

Meaningless curbs

Apart from these blatantly discriminatory practices, women often face bizarre and unnecessary restrictions even when they manage to secure a rental home. Common rules include restrictions on pets, food preferences (such as no non-vegetarian food), and even prohibitions on having friends of either gender over.

These restrictions often stem from a desire to control the behaviour of women, treating them as persons who could not be trusted to decide on how they live. Riya asks, "Why should women be controlled in this way when families living in the same space enjoy complete freedom." This double standard highlights the gender-based prejudice that is prevalent in the housing market.

Riya and Kavya say they both faced strict no-pet policies imposed by their houseowners, further limiting their ability to create a comfortable and enjoyable living space.

For many women, the search for a home involves compromises on distance as well as rent. Kavya, for instance, commutes over 40 minutes to work from Perungalathur to Ekkattuthangal. Zoya, on the other hand, commutes more than an hour from Tambaram to her college near the Marina. Sweta has compromised on rent and location, living in a flood-prone area, for the peace of mind that comes by avoiding the daily hassles of dealing with houseowners.

Problems of paying guests

Paying guest accommodations pose their own challenges for women. They are often overcrowded, offer little privacy, and have strict rules for visitors and timings. Many women report unhygienic conditions and restrictions that make them feel uncomfortable. Single rooms in the paying guest accommodations are often prohibitively expensive, and unisex accommodations, while more liberal in timings, are primarily occupied by men, and women do not feel safe. While social media has made it easier to connect with potential landlords, it has opened the door for harassment and exploitation.

Sweta says, "I met a woman on Facebook who was also searching for a flatmate in a 3bhk. When I visited, a middle-aged man, who was never mentioned before, took over. He asked intrusive questions about my friends and family. When I inquired about a locked room, the woman admitted that it belonged to a man, despite her initial claim that it was an all-female flat."

For safety

Houseowners justify their scrutiny by citing safety as the primary reason for their intervention, often viewing women as a responsibility they are unwilling to take on.

T. Santhanam, a houseowner in Tiruchi, says, "I had told them [women] to be at home by at least 9 p.m., but sometimes they come later. I have to take extra care with women tenants." Another houseowner in Coimbatore, who manages 50 houses, says, "One tenant let her boyfriend stay in the house without permission. It turned into a police case, and she left abruptly. These incidents make us sceptical. Now, I take in women only in CCTV-equipped houses."

A house-broker in Chennai adds that men are easier to deal with, even with physical force. "With women, if we say anything, they will file a complaint. People are afraid," he says. However, he notes that in his experience, he has never encountered a fake harassment case.

As letting houses is a source of income, a houseowner at K.K. Nagar in Chennai says charging a hefty deposit is to ensure that the tenant does not damage the household equipment and leave the house abruptly.

Agreeing that generalising and stereotyping were wrong, a houseowner at Saligramam in Chennai says, "However, keeping an eye on who is coming and going is not wrong. You may know your friend very well, but he is still a stranger to us. Maintaining a register is more of a preventive measure than an intrusion."

Legitimate concerns and discrimination

C. Jyothimani, Coimbatore district head of the All India Democratic Women's Association, says, "While houseowners may have legitimate concerns, discriminatory practices based on caste, community, and religion are outdated and unacceptable. These prejudices, which persist in the city, must be challenged and eliminated."

The housing challenges faced by women bring out deeper issues of discrimination and control by society. While houseowners justify their actions citing safety concerns, such rules and regulations reduce women's freedom to a mere risk factor and ignore their autonomy. A middle ground must be attained for a just future.

(*Names changed for privacy.)

(With inputs from Nahla Nainar and Ancy Donal Madonna in Tiruchi, Sabari in Salem, and Sibi Sreevathson T. C. in Coimbatore.)

Tamil Nadu is often celebrated as one of the safest States in India with a history of progressive policies. But when it comes to finding housing for single women, things are less rosy. The State is known for its women-friendly initiatives, but many women face intense scrutiny while trying to rent a home here. Snaring a house on rent often involves questions about women's work, caste, food. This leads to a range of biases, surveillance, and unnecessary restrictions, making the search for houses a constant challenge.

Riya*, 23, of Indore, who has been living in Chennai for the past eight months, is moving into her third apartment at Alwarpet. Her initial experience was marred by unwanted attention from landlords.

"The houseowner of the first apartment tried to make sexual advances towards me and my flatmate under the guise of offering a friendly dinner. I am now forced to take this house, despite it being so expensive," she says.

Zoya*, 22, from Kanniyakumari, also had to compromise on her privacy while renting

at Tambaram. Her flatmate's brother had connections with the houseowner, and as a result, they faced surveillance. "My landlord spied on us and informed my flatmate's brother about every little thing," she says.

Work profile is valuable

In contrast, Ankita*, 23, from Indore, found a place at Nungambakkam because of her reputable work profile. "We were asked for our offer letters as proof of our credentials. Our professional background helped us secure the apartment," she says. However, such advantages do not guarantee an easy housing experience for all. S. Priya*, a private school teacher from Salem, explains the hurdles she faced while looking for a house.

"The first question from the houseowner was about my caste. If they were satisfied with my caste, the other questions would follow. To ensure that the rent is paid on time, they prefer a workplace with a good reputation. In some houses, I had to show my salary slip or bank statement as proof of financial stability," she says.

CHHATTISGARH

Sermon surveillance and pulpit politics

In Chhattisgarh, a rule has been issued by the State Waqf Board mandating that all sermons be vetted by it before being delivered at mosques during Friday prayers. **Shubhomoj SIKDAR** reports on how this fits into the larger narrative on religious freedom, political influence, and a new Bill to regulate Waqf properties

It is a Friday, November 29, and almost time for the weekly afternoon prayer or *Jumma ki namaz*. Haji Lal Mohammad, an elderly man in a white kurta-pyjama, with a flowing white beard and skullcap, stands outside one of the many shops lining the busy road outside Raipur's Ashrafuli Auliya Masjid, Chhattisgarh's biggest mosque. Around him in Moudhapara, a predominantly Muslim locality in the heart of the State capital, people are making their way to the mosque in a last-minute rush. Moudhapara's residents are mostly descendants of migrants from Uttar Pradesh.

Mohammad has paused to join a conversation about *taqreer* (the pre-prayer sermon) and a recent order by the State Waqf Board around it. "Cover *karne aaye ho toh dhyan se suno* (If you have come to cover this, then listen carefully)," he begins, raising his voice, not just to compete with the roar of passing vehicles and the steady hum of the *taqreer* emanating from the speakers. "Have you heard anything controversial in the past half an hour in this *taqreer*?" he says, emotion in his voice. "Our mosques, at least in Chhattisgarh, are not centres of politics that such an order was necessary," says Mohammad.

The order he refers to was issued on November 18 by the State Waqf Board. It directs all mosques across the State to submit the content of their Friday sermons to be vetted by the board to prevent political comments. The order, addressing *mutawallis* (caretakers) and mosque committee officials, stipulates that imams can take up any religious subject in their Friday sermons. For any other topic to be included, "it will be necessary to take permission from the Chhattisgarh State Waqf Board". Permission can be sought through the board's WhatsApp group and written correspondence.

Waqf rules

Salim Raj, the chairperson of the State Waqf Board, is firm. He has an over three-decade-long association with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) – which currently runs the government at the Centre and in the State – and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the BJP's ideological parent that expounds the Hindutva cause. "Thousands who gather at mosques for Friday prayers and sermons are influenced. We have come across instances of stone pelting after such sermons in Jammu and Kashmir, Kerala, Karnataka, and Madhya Pradesh. This disrupts communal harmony and we won't tolerate it," says Raj.

Chhattisgarh is the first State to have issued such an order, which comes against the backdrop of a debate raging around the Waqf (Amendment) Bill, 2024, introduced by the Union government in the Lok Sabha on August 8. The Bill proposes that the Central Waqf Council and State Waqf Boards include non-Muslim members, among other features. Waqf is property donated by Muslims for religious or charitable causes such as establishing mosques, hospitals, or educational institutions. Raj says he has come across over 20 videos of speeches at mosques with references to "zalim sarkar (tyrannical government)" in the past five to six months in Chhattisgarh, nudging him to take such action.

The latest order has faced criticism from the Opposition Congress and Asaduddin Owaisi, president of the All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen, who in a post on X termed it an infringement on religious freedom under Article 25 of the Constitution.

Raj disagrees. "This is not the case. We have kept *maulanas* and imams away from it. We have only included the *mutawallis* as we have authority over them," he says. However, only *maulanas* or imams are entitled to deliver religious sermons, with *mutawallis* following up with announcements related to the management or upkeep of mosques. Raj says in the videos, he found *mutawallis* delivering these speeches.

The State Waqf Board's office is opposite the Raipur Collectorate. Raj, who took over as chairperson in October following a no-confidence motion against his predecessor, flips through the pages of a book titled *Waqf Act, 1995*. Amid dealing with visitors and looking through files and media reports, he points out the provisions dealing with the power of the chairperson.

"I am not here merely to enjoy powers and draw my salary. I have a flourishing business – a steel plant – and can make a lot more money," he says. Raj claims that since assuming charge, he has had 25 FIRs registered against various staff members for alleged violations such as misappropriation of funds or not pulling up mosques for non-payment of money due to the board. He asserts that this is the first time a chairperson is exercising these powers.

There are 3,800-4,000 mosques in Chhattisgarh, but only 355 of them are registered with the board, according to Raj, who adds that any place where prayers are performed "automatically comes under the purview of the board and hence the order is binding on them".

Setting a narrative

November 29 was the first Friday that speeches were vetted. Till the previous day, nearly 150 mosque committees had sent the proposed content of their speeches to the board; none of them was found to be "insensitive". Ashrafuli Auliya Masjid, however, was not one of those.

After the Friday prayers, Ismail Gafoor, 68,



The Ashrafuli Auliya Masjid in Raipur, Chhattisgarh, the largest mosque in the State, where a new order around having the Friday sermon vetted by the State Waqf Board is being challenged by some. SHUBHOMOJ SIKDAR



Ismail Gafoor, the caretaker of the Ashrafuli Auliya Masjid. SHUBHOMOJ SIKDAR

We do not need permission to carry out our regular activities. I have not seen the order, but learnt about it through the press and I feel it is not binding

ISMAIL GAFOOR
Caretaker,
Ashrafuli Auliya Masjid, Raipur

who has been the *mutawalli* of the mosque since July 2023, remains defiant. "We do not need permission to carry out our regular activities. I have not seen the order, but learnt about it through the press and I feel it is not binding," he says.

Others, too, feel that Raj has overstepped his brief. Salam Rizvi, who was at the helm of the State Waqf Board from 2019 to 2020, says while the law does not allow issuing such an order, the board can issue guidelines from time to time. He adds that these guidelines are not binding on mosque management committees.

"There is no religious sanction to give any inflammatory speech or deal with any subject beyond the Koran or Hadith (teachings from the Prophet's life). The community itself doesn't like it. There were no prevailing circumstances for issuing such an order," says Rizvi.

In response to Owaisi's comment on X, Pankaj Jha, media adviser to Chief Minister Vishnu Deo Sai, backs the decision, while distancing the government from it, saying that the members of the State Waqf Board were appointed by the previous Congress government.

Sushil Anand Shukla, Congress spokesperson, and Amit Jogi, president of the Janta Congress Chhattisgarh (J), point out that the order should not be seen in isolation and is the "latest chapter in the wider narrative of the BJP and the RSS targeting Muslims".

The order came days after violence broke out in Uttar Pradesh's Sambhal amid a survey at the Shahi Jama Masjid to ascertain if it was built over a temple. Around the same time, the claim of a temple under the shrine of Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti in Ajmer, Rajasthan, came up, with a local court giving time to the Sufi shrine management to respond.

"There is definitely a common national thread, be it the Waqf issue or the issue of 'ghus-paithiyas (intruders)' that the BJP raised during our rule (until 2023). If infiltration is happening, what has the State government done to check it and is it not the Centre's failure?" Shukla says.

Muslims constituted 2.01% of Chhattisgarh's

population in the 2011 Census. Indirectly sourced data from a political strategy and consulting agency pegged the number at the time of the 2023 Assembly election at just over around 2.1%.

The most widely accepted narrative among historians and researchers studying early Muslim migration to the State identifies three phases: the medieval period when nobility arrived, whose descendants became landlords in some regions; the 19th-century Sufi saints, evidenced by shrines in Raipur and Bilaspur; and traders, including Gujarati merchants, who came during British annexation to exploit forest resources under new contracts.

Post-Independence migrations were linked to mining and industrialisation, and the area's strategic location along the Bombay-Howrah rail and road routes, though these developments attracted people of all faiths. The last migration, across the past couple of decades, was by workers employed in local enterprises.

It is these people whom the BJP accuses of being "infiltrators". Last September, in the run-up to the Assembly poll, BJP MP Brijmohan Agarwal alleged that the previous Bhpesh Baghel government spoke of Chhattisgarhiya pride but was "responsible for Rohingya and Bangladeshi Muslims settling in the State".

A widening gap

Politically, Muslims exert influence over a handful of urban seats in the State Assembly. One of them is Raipur South that recently had a bypoll, which the BJP won.

Jogi alleges that the BJP whips up sentiments in these areas. He cites the examples of the 2021 Kawardha communal violence when two communities had a dispute over where to hoist saffron and green flags; and the 2023 Bemetara incident when a clash between two teenagers escalated.

In the Assembly election that followed, the father of the Hindu youth killed in the Saja constituency of Bemetara contested as a BJP candidate and won. The election also saw Mohammad Akbar, the lone Muslim MLA and Minister in the pre-

vious regime, losing from Kawardha. Akbar attributed his defeat to the alleged misinformation that the Rohingya were settling in Kawardha. He challenged the BJP to prove the presence of even one Rohingya.

"Such things were unheard of in Chhattisgarh until a few years ago. There were controversial statements made about Akbar by Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma. The State Waqf Board order is in line with this policy," Jogi says.

Jogi, like some sections within the Congress, accuses the previous party-led government of "promoting soft Hindutva" and points out that even after losing the election, the Congress "deliberately kept Akbar out of the Lok Sabha election campaign in Rajnandgaon", from where Baghel unsuccessfully contested.

"Muslims face alienation and they do not see anyone raising their voices for them," says a source in the Congress.

Home Minister Vijay Sharma and the BJP's State leadership did not respond to *The Hindu's* questions on the issue.

Meanwhile, Rizvi, a former co-convenor of the RSS's Muslim Rashtriya Manch, constituted to "bridge the widening gap between Hindu and Muslim communities in India", as per its website, says the RSS is not against Muslims. "I joined the BJP in 1991 and faced opposition from the community as well as from my own family, but I continue to work with conviction," he says. The following year, an extremist Hindu mob destroyed the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya.

A few minutes after the buzz of the Friday prayers subsides at the Ashrafuli Auliya Masjid, Syed Roshan Ali, a 36-year-old dealer in second-hand vehicles, goes to the burial ground behind the mosque to pay tribute to his ancestors. As he walks past the crowd, he buys rose petals.

In contrast to the fragrance of the flowers filling the air with sweetness, Ali says sharply, "Never has anything controversial been said from this mosque, but I can share videos of controversial things said about Muslims from other places. Is anyone acting against them?"