The Editorial Page: Neither government nor Opposition can look youth in the eye on education 10

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DAY AFTER LOK SABHA, RAJYA SABHA PASSES BILL BY VOICE VOTE AS OPPOSITION WALKS OUT

House clears anti-paper leak Bill, PM says nobody will be spared

Kharge raises police action on protesters: 'If Shah cannot answer, he should resign'

Leader of Opposition Mallikarjun Kharge in Rajya Sabha, Thursday. PTI

Divya A, Nikhil Ghanekar, Damini Nath & Jatin Anand
New Delhi, July 30

A DAY after it was cleared by the Lok Sabha, the Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Amendment Bill, 2026, which provides for stricter punishment for paper leaks, was discussed and passed by the Rajya Sabha through voice vote on Thursday.

Hours later, Prime Minister Narendra Modi posted a video on Instagram in which he assured that "any paper mafia, paper leak gang, gang which tries to play with the future of the youth of the country would not be spared".

Underlining that his government had delivered on its promise to bring a tough law, he said: "We are taking step after step towards creating a reliable education system, whether it is the creation of a task force, fast-track courts, taking suggestions from states... A nationwide reform in education sector has become compulsory... work in this direction will continue."

Earlier, before Union Minister Jitendra Singh could respond to the debate on the Bill in the Rajya Sabha, INDIA bloc MPs walked out, demanding that Home Minister Amit Shah make a statement on the police action against protesting students last week. Singh said it was unfortunate that the MPs who had spoken most vociferously during the debate had walked out.

Referring to the Opposition members raising the issue of police action on students,

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Police rules allow pellet gun use, can look at specific cases, says SC

CJI bench to Govt: Preserve ammunition log of RAF personnel on Delhi protest duty

Ananthakrishnan G
New Delhi, July 30

STATING THAT the existing police regulations allow the use of pellet guns in exceptional circumstances for crowd control, the Supreme Court on Thursday said they can only be banned if these rules are found to be unconstitutional. The court, however, said it was open to examining specific allegations of misuse on a case-by-case basis.

The bench, led by Chief Justice of India Surya Kant, was hearing petitions — filed by Yashovardhan Azad, former Intelligence Bureau Special Director and Central Information Commissioner, and two persons who allegedly sustained pellet gun injuries during the recent student protests in the Capital — seeking a ban on the use of pellet guns when dealing with civilian crowds.

The bench, which included Justices Joymalya Bagchi and V Mohana, also directed the Centre to preserve the ammunition log of the Rapid Action Force (RAF) personnel deployed during the protest march to Parliament on July 20. The court issued notices to

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-:FOR UPSC IAS ASPIRANTS:-
"AVOID POLITICAL & IRRELEVANT ARTICLES"
Please Try To Read This Completely in 40 Minutes If You Can't So Then You Have To Increase Your Efforts
All the topics of this UPSC IAS Edition are directly or indirectly important for the prelims & main examination. There are some topics which can be coded in answer writing of other topics in the main exam.

Shouldn't there be show of fairness: SC on PM panel choosing CEC

Office of PM has sanctity attached to it, counters Centre

Ananthakrishnan G
New Delhi, July 30

QUESTIONING THE appointment of the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and Election Commissioners (ECs) by a three-member committee comprising the Prime Minister, a Union Minister and the Leader of Opposition, the Supreme Court on Thursday asked "should there be no show of fairness" in the procedure.

The bench of Justices Dipankar Datta and S C Sharma was hearing petitions challenging the Chief Election Commissioner and Other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Service and Term of Office) Act, 2023, which provides for their selection by the three-member panel.

Defending the law, the Centre, represented by Solicitor General Tushar Mehta, said it would be wrong to assume that the PM and the minister would "not act in the interest of democracy" because they have a "numerical majority" in the selection procedure.

Mehta submitted that the office of the PM has a "sanctity attached" to it and doubting the decision of the selection committee would undermine the

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Fudged records to political meddling: CAG red-flags cyclone relief under TMC

Raises questions over classification of 'damaged houses', grants to those rejected

Atri Mitra
Kolkata, July 30

THE USE of identical photographs for multiple claims, incorrect classification of damaged houses, duplicate transactions worth Rs 18.07 crore, and grants sanctioned on the recommendations of local political leaders.

These are some of the irregularities that the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) has flagged in its report on relief distribution and restoration work in West Bengal following Cyclone Amphan in 2020.

The CAG has noted that the Trinamool Congress (TMC) government's estimates of damage were "not supported by proper evidence".

The auditor analysed 31,457 photographs and found that in 3,126 cases identical photographs were uploaded against the names of multiple beneficiaries. This suggested that undue house-building grants might have been extended, though the exact amount could not be quantified because the photographs were not linked to beneficiary forms, the CAG said. Using a data analytics tool to parse through the records of

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

• CM HIMANTA SEEKS CENTRAL RELIEF AND REHABILITATION PACKAGE

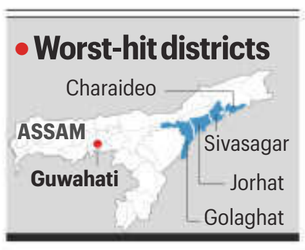
'Not even our grandfathers saw this': Upper Assam reels as floods wash away villages

Swati Mishra & Rajat Sain
Nepalikhuti (Sivasagar), July 30

"THE 19TH is cursed for Assam," sighs cab driver Sumu on the way from Dibrugarh to Sivasagar. "Zubeen Da (singer Zubeen Garg) left us on the 19th... and then, on the 19th, came this flood that swept everything away."

In Lower Assam, flooding is practically a season. It arrives every year, sometimes forgiving, sometimes merciless. But

In Nepalikhuti village in Assam's Sivasagar district. RAJAT SAIN



Upper Assam doesn't know that rhythm. So, when heavy rains in the Naga Hills broke over the region on July 19, it caught everyone completely off guard.

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Bill passed

Singh said: "There was also mention of the so-called brutality unleashed on the children. It is not so. There has not been any casualty reported".

Initiating the discussion in the afternoon, Leader of Opposition Mallikarjun Kharge demanded Shah's resignation. "*Paper churane wale bachte rahe, mehnat karne wale pit te rahe. Yeh kaisa nyay* (Those behind paper leaks kept escaping, those who worked hard kept getting beaten up. What kind of justice is this)," he said, alleging that the government had ignored demands for a strong law against paper leaks in 2024.

Singh, who moved the Bill in the House, said the amendments reflect the government's willingness to "learn from experience" after the implementation of the 2024 law.

However, Kharge said the amendments merely enhanced penalties and created new enforcement mechanisms without addressing the root causes of recurring paper leaks.

Amid repeated interruptions by the treasury benches during his hour-long interjection, Kharge questioned the use of force against students and sought accountability for the police action. "Who authorised the use of lathicharges, tear gas and pellet guns on students? Who were the people in plainclothes beating up students? Under whose orders do the RAF and CRPF operate? The country wants answers. If the Home Minister cannot answer, he should resign," he said.

"This government wants to protect Home Minister Amit Shah, but it will not be able to protect him for long," he added.

Kharge claimed that over 100 students were injured and several were hospitalised during the protest last week. "Many students are admitted to hospitals in critical condition. Many children have suffered pellet gun injuries on their bodies and eyes. Several students are hospitalised; some have lost their eyesight, while many have suffered broken limbs. Home Minister Amit Shah is responsible for this," he said.

Amid sloganeering from the treasury benches, Opposition MPs sought an apology from Union Minister Giriraj Singh as he alleged foreign funding during protests.

"What the government is doing today, we had suggested back in 2024, but at that time the government did not listen to us. Back then, the Lok Sabha elections were approaching, and the government wanted to play politics while Rahul Gandhi was raising questions about paper leaks during the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra," Kharge said.

The Congress president also accused the Centre of weakening academic freedom and promoting ideological appointments in higher educational institutions. He said educational institutions were being filled with people affiliated to the RSS.

Earlier in the day, as the House was informed that the Bill would be taken up for consideration, Congress MP Pramod Tiwari, Deputy Leader of the Opposition, said they wanted Shah to issue a statement on the police crackdown on protesters.

While Opposition members raised slogans of "Amit Shah *sadan mai aao* (come to the House)", Union Minister J P Nadda said: "I want to tell the House that the Opposition's stance has been negative since this session began. They only want to interrupt; they want to shift goalposts."

The Opposition staged a walkout before the House reconvened in the afternoon.

During the discussion on the Bill, several Opposition MPs raised the demand to do away with NEET altogether, returning to a decentralised system.

DMK MP Tiruchi Siva asked how one exam system could work in a diverse country like India. He said through NEET, the "criteria to become a medical student is money."

SP MP Ram Gopal Yadav, too, demanded that the exam be handed back to the states. CPI(M) MP John Brittas and RJD MP Manoj Kumar Jha called for the NTA to be abolished.

Meanwhile, defending Shah, BJP MP Brij Lal, who is a retired Uttar Pradesh DGP, said: "Whenever there is a law and order situation, the magistrate decides, along with police officers, on the use of force."

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CAG

19.38 lakh beneficiaries in six districts, the CAG also found that house-building grants were credited more than once — in some cases up to nine times — into the bank accounts of 9,226 beneficiaries through 18,891 transactions. No mechanism existed to prevent duplicate payments, the report noted.

The report also confirms *The Indian Express*'s report at the time on local leaders with ties to political parties benefiting from relief disbursal. The CAG found that the districts of North 24 Parganas and South 24 Parganas withdrew Rs 1,383.23 crore out of the total house-building grant of Rs 1,948.51 crore — nearly 71% — from the treasury and parked it in commercial bank accounts, before making DBTs. This was "highly irregular" under the West Bengal Treasury Rules, the auditor noted. These grants were often sanctioned based on the recommendations of local leaders without mandatory field inspections and the reports of local inquiry committees were ignored, the auditor said.

For instance, in South 24 Parganas, Rs 22.84 crore was disbursed in the Magrahat-I block and Maheshtala Municipality based on single-page applications that did not have Aadhaar or voter ID details, bank passbooks, inspection reports, or photos of damaged houses.

Among other things, the audit questioned the classification of damaged houses. "It is evident that either many partially damaged houses were included in the category of fully damaged houses during assessment or these households were included later for reasons not on record," the report said. It flagged Purulia as an anomaly, noting that although the western district was not among the worst affected, all damaged homes there were categorised as "fully damaged".

The audit also identified doubtful transactions worth around Rs 5 crore. Using the auditing software, the CAG found that Rs 93.95 lakh was paid to 1,576 beneficiaries whose claims had already been rejected.

Sixteen of West Bengal's 23 districts were affected in Amphan. The government, in a memorandum submitted in June 2020, estimated losses at Rs 1.02 lakh crore and sought Rs 35,018 crore NDRF assistance.

IMCT, in its September 2020 report, recommended relief of Rs 2,500.29 crore. After deliberations of National Executive Committee, relief of Rs 2,707.77 crore was approved. MHA released Rs 2,250.28 crore from NDRF after adjusting available SDRF balance.

CEC

constitutional trust reposed in elected institutions. He said that if the PM was not to be trusted in the discharge of his constitutional duties, should he be asked to consult "outsiders, including a former judge of this Hon'ble Court," while selecting his Cabinet members too.

"Now, we are not dealing with a case of appointment of a minister as such. We find the minister is already there. Now, it's time for the PM to select one of his Cabinet members. It becomes 2:1, two on the side of the Cabinet, one on the side of the Opposition," Justice Datta said.

Mehta urged the court to refer the matter to a Constitution Bench, saying it involves questions of constitutional importance. "This needs examination by a larger bench, why independence is being talked about of only one office, and why only one organ can be trusted and others cannot be," he said.

The bench reserved its decision on this request.

"Is it not the PM's choice of minister in this committee... he may appoint the home minister, animal husbandry minister or fisheries minister or minister without portfolio... the moment Your Lordship says because there is two versus one, Your Lordships are expressing a potential lack of faith," Mehta said.

"...Not lack of faith... Election Commissioner has to be an independent person. Who is selecting him? We find that yes, a committee framed under a law under Article 324 is selecting him. But should that committee not consist of persons... should there be no show of fairness? We are not saying that no fairness is being achieved by this committee. Just like justice is not only to be done, it has to be shown to be done, we are on that second part," Justice Datta said.

Mehta said a "five-judge bench of this court in Manoj Narula vs Union of India has stressed the importance of the constitutional trust which is reposed in the PM to choose and appoint the right person as a minister and therefore... have a direct bearing on prejudicial arguments raised about the composition of the committee in question." "It is not a question of appointment of a minister... who should be in his Cabinet is only PM's prerogative. Now, that prerogative has been exercised, somebody is there in the Cabinet. Now you go a step further... You have 25 Cabinet ministers, and the PM is conferred the authority to select 1 among these 25," Justice Datta said.

"The law laid down in Manoj Narula is that the office of the PM has a sanctity attached... It is not on him selecting the home minister as part of his committee... I am saying if his decision is not to be trusted... then why not have that, even while selecting his Cabinet, he must consult some former judge or some outsider," Mehta responded. He said his point was that "whether one organ of the state would have lack of faith in the decision" of the PM-led panel, as such lack of faith "would necessarily be based on the fact that the PM and the other minister would... not act in the interest of democracy, ..."

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Pellet gun

the Centre, Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) and RAF. "Prayers (in the petitions) are not to use pellet guns. In exceptional cases, police regulations permit the use of pellet guns. If you are interested in phasing out pellet guns, you will have to challenge that very provision as ultra vires to Article 21," Justice Bagchi said.

The petitioners sought the decommissioning of wholly or partly metallic kinetic projectiles, including pellets fired from pump-action rifles or projectile action guns, for crowd dispersal by law enforcement agencies during civilian assemblies.

They argued that although these guns are described as "less lethal" or "non-lethal" alternatives to firearms, firing them at close range could cause fatal or severe injuries. Appearing for the petitioners, Advocate Vrinda Grover said a document of the BPRD, which prescribes the SOP for crowd control, does not include the use of pellet guns.

Justice Bagchi, however, said the document "is a proposal". The judge said the graded response starts with a declaration of a crowd as an unlawful assembly, an announcement for dispersal, and then the application of appropriate force. "One of those graded approaches includes the use of pellet guns," he said.

Grover argued that the choice of weapon and level of force would have to be based on the "principles of reasonableness, necessity and proportionality". Justice Bagchi reiterated that the prayer for decommissioning of pellet guns was "vague", saying that the rule permitting it would have to be declared ultra vires first. "Here, we are not averse to examining the use of pellets in a particular incident. But when you say that at no stage metallic pellet can be used, you must demonstrate before us that this is (not) a permissive use as per the extant rules governing a graded response to force," Justice Bagchi said.

"Secondly, this graded response to force must clearly remove the use of pellets, when graded response... may permit even the use of bullets in extreme cases," he said, adding, "(allowing) the use of bullets and no use of pellets cannot be on the same plane." The CJI said the petitioners could seek a court order for framing a protocol. Justice Bagchi said the petitioners must indicate any provision in Delhi, or elsewhere, to establish "that the use of pellets appears to be arbitrary, unreasonable and inappropriate... that it must first be rubber pellets and then only metallic pellets." SC asked petitioners to challenge any relevant standing orders.

Assam

The official death toll in the flood-ravaged state this year stands at 78. At its height, the number of people affected by these floods was over 7 lakh, but as the floodwaters gradually receded, it came down to around 3 lakh. Thousands have been displaced — at its peak, over 1.15 lakh were taking shelter in relief camps, which has now come down to 16,556.

For his part, Assam CM Himanta Biswa Sarma has sought a Central relief and rehabilitation package after the Inter-Ministerial Central Team concluded its four-day assessment of the flood-hit districts Wednesday. "Our Double Engine Govt will mitigate sufferings of our people," Sarma said on X.

In Nepalikhuti village in Sivasagar's Nazira block, right along the Assam-Nagaland border, Hari Sarma stands under a banyan tree some 200 metres from the Dikhow River, knee-deep in mud and wearing nothing but a pair of shorts. He's lost everything: his tin-roofed house, his clothes, furniture, documents and 15 of his cattle.

"Over 1,200 cows and calves were swept away in an instant across the village," Sarma, a resident of Nepalikhuti, in the revenue village Garhmurmiri, tells *The Indian Express*. He looks down at his shorts. "This is all I have left."

With the IMD issuing an Orange Alert across parts of the Northeast for next three days, residents are an anxious lot. "Not even our grandfathers have witnessed a flood this catastrophic," one resident of Nepalikhuti says.

Nepalikhuti, on the banks of the Dikhow River, which flows from Nagaland into Assam before joining Brahmaputra near Dikhowmukh, bears witness to the devastation of the floods. On July 19, the river that was its lifeline engulfed this village of at least 500, sweeping into homes, breaking down walls and tearing through lives, its surging current taking away everything — clothes, beds, utensils, and cattle.

Residents, many of whom are dairy farmers, say they had little time to think. Many scrambled to rooftops, but even those were swept away.

That's how Krishna Karmakar died. "He scrambled to the rooftop, but water reached that height too," says his cousin Kiran Karmakar. "He was trying to save his son but got swept away."

Several are still missing. But it was when the water receded that the village confronted its biggest challenge: accounting for what it had lost and picking up the pieces.

A suffocating blanket of mud and debris covers the village, and a heavy stench of decay hangs in the air. Roads and houses are coated with quicksand-like sludge. "No one knows what lies beneath the mud around them: decaying livestock or human remains," says Hari Sarma, gesturing towards a mound of sludge.

For many, their entire existence has shrunk into one exhausting, hopeless battle: digging mud out of their homes, bucket by bucket.

That's what Anupal Baruah and his family are now doing. Baruah has two houses by the main road: an old one where the family lives, and a new one, finished only a month ago.

Both houses have now turned to sludge. In the new house —a long-cherished family dream — two feet of heavy mud now coats the floor, and high up on the wall, a dark water stain marks the place where the river peaked at six-and-a-half feet.

Assam government has announced an ex gratia of Rs 9 lakh for kin of those who have died in the floods; and an interim amount of Rs 15,000 for families severely affected in the four worst-hit districts of Sivasagar, Charaideo, Jorhat and Golaghat. **WITH INPUTS FROM SUKRITA BARUAH**

EXPRESS special

Likely before fast-track court: Paper leak cases impacted after judge moved out at key stages

Nirbhay Thakur
New Delhi, July 30

THE FAST-TRACK court of Special Judge Anu Grover Baliga will take up the CBI's 20,000-page chargesheet in the NEET-UG 2026 paper leak case on Monday.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the setting up of fast-track courts to ensure swift and stringent punishment for exam fraud in the midst of the students' protest demanding accountability for the NEET leak.

Besides the NEET case, Judge Baliga's court is also likely to take up other exam fraud cases.

Here are three cases which had come before Additional Chief Judicial Magistrate (ACJM) Neetu Nagar of Rouse Avenue Courts before the judge was deputed to the National Green Tribunal last month.

2003 CAT paper leak

STATUS: Still at the stage of "arguments on charge" before a Rouse Avenue Magistrate Court. This is the stage before the framing of charges. Trials start after charges are framed.

AFFECTED CANDIDATES: More than 1.25 lakh candidates had applied for the Common Admission Test scheduled for November 23, 2003. The test was cancelled, and held in February 2004.

WHAT HAPPENED: On November 22, a day before the exam, the Delhi Police was tipped off that the paper had been leaked. The CBI, which took over the probe, zeroed in on a hotel in Mahipalpur in southwest Delhi, where it seized various sections of the alleged question paper from individuals.

Investigators recorded the statements of candidates who claimed that Rs 2 lakh to Rs 4 lakh had been demanded from them for the "leaked paper".

The CBI submitted the chargesheet in 2004.

PROGRESS OF CASE: From May 2019, when the case was transferred to the Rouse Avenue Court, to May 2026, there were nine hearings every year on average. The Covid-19 pandemic contributed to the delay.

On June 3 this year, ACJM Nagar reserved her order on the charges due to the "heavy cause list" and because "no time was left". The ACJM said the order would be passed on June 26. However, on June 22, she was deputed to the NGT's Principal Bench in New Delhi, where she is currently Deputy Registrar. The case is now before a 'link' judge, who is also a Magistrate at the Rouse Avenue Court.

2023 AIIMS NORCET-4 leak

STATUS: Arguments on charge were heard for about a year, but not completed. They will now be heard afresh by the fast-track court.

AFFECTED CANDIDATES: Around 90,000.

WHAT HAPPENED: The exam to recruit nurses in AIIMS and four other hospitals in Delhi was held on June 3, 2023. Two days later, a leak was alleged on social media. Screenshots, allegedly of a candidate's console, were posted. On June 6, the Associate Dean (Exams), AIIMS, filed a complaint against one Ritu, and Gian Jyoti Institute of Management and Technology, Phase-II, Mohali. The CBI filed an FIR alleging that a computer at the institute was used by or on behalf of Ritu for the "purpose of cheating".

The recent protest at Jantar Mantar over 2026 NEET paper leak. FILE

The CBI alleged a criminal conspiracy to "rig the examination process by using unfair means in favour of accused candidates against illegal monetary consideration". It claimed that the accused had informed others that they "would get the answers before 30 minutes of completion of the examination".

PROGRESS OF CASE: On August 28, 2023, Magistrate Deepak Kumar 2 took cognisance of the chargesheet. Later, the case came to ACJM Nagar, who had replaced Kumar.

ACJM Nagar was hearing arguments on charge when she was deputed to the NGT last month. She last heard arguments on June 9.

2024 UGC NET paper leak

STATUS: CBI has filed a closure report, which the court has refused to accept.

AFFECTED CANDIDATES: The alleged leak impacted more than 9 lakh candidates who appeared for the exam in 317 cities.

WHAT HAPPENED: The eligibility exam for entry-level teaching jobs in colleges and admission to PhD courses was held on June 18, 2024. On June 19, the Education Ministry cancelled the exam after "inputs from National Cyber Crime Threat Analytics Unit of Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre (I4C)...prima facie indicate[d] that the integrity of the...examination may have been compromised".

In July, the CBI found that the alleged evidence on which the Education Ministry had acted was "doctored". This alleged "evidence" was a purported screenshot of the paper that was circulated on Telegram around 2 pm on the day of the exam, with messages and comments suggesting the paper had been leaked before the first session of the exam.

PROGRESS OF CASE: The CBI filed a closure report in January 2025, saying it had found no evidence of a leak. It said that forensic experts had established that the purported screenshot was created by a school student using a mobile phone application. After the report was filed, 13 hearings were held. On May 15, 2026, ACJM Nagar asked CBI to explain why it had filed a closure report even though its own findings showed that a suspect had collected money from candidates by "luring them with leaked question papers".

The explanation furnished by the investigating officer is yet to be considered by the court. After ACJM Nagar was deputed to NGT, the case was heard once by a link judge. The next date of hearing is August 6.

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Govt plans random, door-to-door visits to verify women eligible for Lakshmi Yojana

Gayathri Mani
New Delhi, July 30

THE DELHI government is planning to conduct door-to-door, random verification of women found eligible for the Delhi Lakshmi Yojana, under which beneficiaries will receive a monthly financial assistance of Rs 2,500, *The Indian Express* has learnt.

As part of the verification process, the government will check whether applicants meet the scheme's eligibility conditions – whether they have more than three living children, if they are residents of Delhi and registered voters of the city, if they pay income tax, are they in the 21-60 years age group, whether their family's income is up to Rs 2.5 lakh per annum and if they receive any other financial aid from the Centre or the state, among others.

The three-child cap is a first-of-its-kind exclusion criteria introduced by the Delhi government for its social welfare schemes.

"The application process is very simple and easy. People can submit their information from anywhere. Verification is necessary to ensure only eligible beneficiaries receive the assistance," a senior government functionary said.

The functionary added that the Women and Child Development (WCD) department might engage a third-party agency to conduct the random checks. "The objective is to ensure that the scheme reaches the needy and deserving beneficiaries while maintaining transparency in the implementation process."

Asked about the three-child cap, the senior functionary said, "Some Opposition parties are trying to give it (three-child cap) a religious angle but they are wrong. Be it a Hindu or Muslim, it is one's choice on how many children they want to have..."

Besides, this might be a step towards better family planning and population control, the functionary said. "People these days are educated and follow family planning. But in many lower middle class families, women are still pressured to have four-five children until they have a boy..."

"For family planning and population control, you have to take steps somewhere... The government has come up with a proper financial plan with two bifurcations – the woman can either invest the Rs 2,500 and get an lumpsum amount with interest after three years or she can invest Rs 1,500 and spend the rest through a digital card," the functionary said.

"This gives her the right to decide where she wants to spend her money... In many families, husbands pressure them... take their money to buy alcohol and tobacco... We want our mothers and sisters to independently use their money," the senior functionary added.

According to officials, Chief Minister Rekha Gupta, who holds the WCD portfolio, has specially said that the scheme should empower women and also that their health is a priority.

The scheme, approved by the Cabinet on Tuesday, was one of the major poll promises made by the BJP in the run-up to the Assembly elections in 2025.

A portal for registration under the scheme will be launched on August 1 and the disbursal of first instalment will begin from Raksha Bandhan, said officials.

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MCD signs deal with OIL to set up 2 compressed biogas plants

Mishal Mussaddique
New Delhi, July 30

TO CONVERT 800 tonnes per day (TPD) of wet waste into biogas and organic fertilisers, the Municipal Corporation Delhi (MCD) and the Oil India Limited (OIL) on Thursday signed an MoU in the presence of the Delhi Chief Minister Rekha Gupta and Mayor Pravesh Wahi for the establishment of two bio-methanation based compressed biogas (CBG) plants, officials said.

According to an official statement, two Bio-CBG plants with a combined processing capacity of 800 TPD will be established in the first phase. A 500-TPD plant will be developed on 10 acres of land at Tehkhand, while a 300-TPD plant will be set up on seven acres at Okhla, an official said.

These facilities will scientifically process segregated organic waste to produce CBG and organic fertiliser, contributing to cleaner and more sustainable waste management, the official added.

Gupta said that addressing Delhi's civic challenges "requires coordinated efforts by the Centre, the Delhi government, local bodies, public sector enterprises, the private sector and civil society".

"Delhi generates nearly 13,500 metric tonnes of solid waste every day, while the existing processing capacity remains inadequate, leading to the accumulation of landfill mountains over the years. The two CBG plants with a combined capacity of 800 TPD will provide a sustainable solution by converting wet waste into biogas and organic fertiliser, benefiting the environment, promoting clean energy, and supporting the agricultural sector," Gupta also said.

Wahi said, "Not a single rupee will be spent by the MCD. The cost of around 400 crores and operation of the plants will be borne by OIL and MCD will provide land for the plant site."

Citing need for Central funds, Kerala UDF reverses stand on PM SHRI

Shaju Philip
Thiruvananthapuram, July 30

KERALA'S RULING Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF) Thursday decided to implement the Union Government's Pradhan Mantri Schools for Rising India (PM SHRI) scheme in state-run schools — a significant U-turn for a coalition that had once strenuously opposed it.

After a UDF meeting on Thursday, alliance convener and Congress MP Adoor Prakash said the coalition had decided to implement the Bharatiya Janata Party-led Centre's PM SHRI in Kerala schools. "The previous LDF government had signed an MoU with the Centre. Hence, the present government cannot withdraw from it. The UDF government will take forward the project to get the fund, which is not a magnanimity of the Centre. A UDF sub-committee will finalise the schools where the project has to be implemented," he said.

It is a significant departure from the UDF's previous stance. As Opposition, it had criticised the scheme, accusing the previous LDF government of facilitating the Sangh Parivar's "saffronisation" of education by signing the MoU with the Centre.

Ally IUML's, one of the scheme's most vocal critics, stance is also softened, which now holds the education portfolio. In the run-up to the polls, the IUML had warned that the scheme would be "abandoned" if it was voted to power. They justified this by arguing that Kerala needs the central funds while safeguarding the rights in the field of education.

The shift comes at a time of financial constraints and rising education arrears in Kerala, which stand at Rs 1,466 crore. It has prompted the LDF and UDF governments to change their previous positions.

In Kerala, 33 Kendriya Vidyalayas and 14 Navodaya Vidyalayas are part of the scheme. Under PM SHRI, states have to bear 40% of the project expenditure. So far, 13,095 schools, from primary to higher-secondary level, across 776 districts have become part of the scheme.

Amid Opp protests, House clears Bill criminalising insult to Vande Mataram

Centre calls it a 'Bill of national pride'; DMK says it reflects 'communal outlook'

Deeptiman Tiwary
New Delhi, July 30

THE LOK Sabha on Thursday passed the Prevention of Insults to National Honour (Amendment) Bill, 2026 amid protests by the Opposition over the police "excesses" on protesters at Jantar Mantar and the Ram Temple donation theft row.

The Bill was cleared in about 15 minutes during the post-lunch sitting after repeated adjournments since morning amid the din. Throughout the brief debate, Congress and Samajwadi Party members continued sloganeering from the Well of the House. The DMK was the only Opposition party to participate in the discussion.

Moving amendments to the Bill, DMK MP A Raja alleged that the Bill reflected a "communal outlook".

"Today is a very dangerous day for Parliament and the country. I have carefully gone through the reasons and objects of the Bill... One person and one song [are] important for this country having a communal outlook. Why did Partition happen? One person... and one song...," he said.

Raja sought to make "a legal point", but the Chair did not allow him to continue and put his amendment to vote, which was defeated.

Joining the debate, DMK MP Kanimozhi alleged that the Bill was a "Hindutva agenda masquerading as nationalism" and accused the government of trying to "impose nationalism through law". She argued that the Constituent Assembly had consciously accepted only the first two stanzas of Vande Mataram and said making all six stanzas mandatory would undermine the country's secular character. Referring to Tamil Nadu's long-standing state song, she said the legislation disrespected states with their own official songs and accused the government of using the issue to polarise the country.

Minister of State for Home Nityanand Rai rejected the criticism, asserting that the legislation was "a Bill of national pride" and was "not against any state, ideology or person". He said the government respected all state songs and insisted that the amendment only sought to ensure that the National Song received the same respect as the National Anthem. Rai also accused India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru of accepting only two stanzas of Vande Mataram in 1937 "for appeasement politics", claiming that the decision encouraged the ideology that eventually led to Partition. "Now, for Ek Bharat, Shreshtha Bharat, the entire song is needed," he said.

Participating from the Treasury Benches, BJP MP Sambit Patra said the amendment was "not an ordinary Bill" but one that intended to ensure that people, particularly school students, could express respect for both the National Anthem and the National Song "without any hurdle". He said the president of the Constituent Assembly, Dr Rajendra Prasad, had given an assurance that Jana Gana Mana and Vande Mataram would enjoy equal respect, but the promise has not been fulfilled over the past 76 years because of the Congress leadership.

Earlier, while introducing the Bill, Rai had described it as "not just a statutory amendment" but "a commitment to India's soul, cultural heritage, national consciousness and the ideals of the freedom struggle". Invoking Vande Mataram composer Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Swami Vivekananda and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, he said Prime Minister Narendra Modi was fulfilling the vision of according Vande Mataram its rightful place in national life. Rai recalled that Patel had asked classical vocalist Omkarnath Thakur to sing the full Vande Mataram on All India Radio on the morning of August 15, 1947, and said freedom fighters, including Chandrashekhar Azad, Ram Prasad Bismil and Ashfaqullah Khan, had gone to the gallows with "Vande Mataram" on their lips.

The Prevention of Insults to National Honour (Amendment) Bill is the first legislation to be passed by both Houses of Parliament in the ongoing Monsoon Session, which has seen frequent disruptions by the Opposition mainly over the NEET paper leak issue.

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MoS Nityanand Rai (above) and DMK MP A Raja (right) speak in Lok Sabha on Thursday. ANI

Real Creator IAS Edition https://whatsapp.com/channel/0029Van2VRb6RGJOKH6oBd0F

E20 petrol can reduce fuel economy by 2-6%: Gadkari

New Delhi: Petrol blended with 20% ethanol (E20) can reduce fuel economy by 2 to 6% depending on the vehicle category and vintage, Road Transport and Highways Minister Nitin Gadkari informed Parliament on Thursday.

The Union Minister, however, argued that tests for engine durability on a dynamometer and on-road vehicle tests have not shown any failures due to E20.

In a written reply to the Lok Sabha, Gadkari said E20 fuel provides better acceleration, improved ride quality and approximately 30% lower carbon emissions compared to E10 fuel.

"The fuel efficiency of vehicles may be reduced by 2 to 6% depending on the vehicle category and vintage. The tests for engine durability on a dynamometer and vehicle tests on road have not shown any failures due to E20," the minister said. **PTI**

EXPRESS special

Why govt is holding back key Bills as Parliament logjam continues

Liz Mathew
New Delhi, July 30

WITH THE Opposition intensifying its protests against alleged police excesses against student protesters and the alleged theft of donations at the Ram Temple in Ayodhya, the government appears to be slowing down on its legislative agenda for the moment. The government, insiders said, is waiting for the Opposition to get back to allowing Parliament to function before taking up crucial pieces of legislation next week.

The Centre on Thursday managed to get the Prevention of Insults to National Honour (Amendment) Bill, 2026 — also known as the Vande Mataram Bill — passed amid the din in the Lok Sabha. The Bill saw a brief discussion involving only two members: Union Minister of State for Home Nityananda Rai and DMK MP Kanimozhi. While Rai defended the legislation saying all six stanzas of the song were needed to ensure "Ek Bharat, Shreshtha Bharat (One India, Best India)", Kanimozhi termed it "a Hindutva agenda masquerading as nationalism".

"It is against federalism. You cannot impose nationalism by bringing a law, the song goes against the secularism of the country. The founding fathers had the wisdom to stop only with two stanzas, but today you are trying to polarise the country by...making it a criminal offence if we do not sing all the six stanzas," she said.

The government deferred the consideration and passage of the Supreme Court (Number of Judges) Amendment Bill. According to sources, the Bill, which was deferred on the request of the Opposition, is now likely to be taken up in the Lower House on Monday. It proposes to increase the SC's sanctioned strength from 33 to 37 judges.

"Many Opposition parties did not want a detailed discussion on the Vande Mataram Bill as the optics of vehemently opposing it could have been politically damaging, while backing it would have hurt their support base," a BJP leader said.

The Prevention of Insults to National Honour (Amendment) Bill, passed by the Rajya Sabha on Wednesday, makes the intentional disruption of the national song a criminal offence, punishable with up to three years' imprisonment. The Bill has placed several parties, including the Congress and the SP, in a difficult position, with Muslim organisations strongly opposing it.

BJP sources said the Treasury benches are expected to introduce the MSME Development Act, 2006 (Amendment) Bill and the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Amendment Bill next week. "We do not want to rush these Bills. We want the Opposition to discuss crucial pieces of legislation such as the FCRA Bill. That is why the government is taking its time before bringing it up," a BJP leader said.

The FCRA Bill seeks to amend the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act, 2010, which regulates the acceptance and utilisation of foreign contributions and foreign hospitality to "ensure that such inflows do not adversely affect national interest... or national security". The Opposition and minority groups have alleged that the proposed amendments would adversely affect institutions run by minority communities, including Christians.

The proposed amendments to the MSME Development Act seek to introduce mandatory digital invoicing, strengthen safeguards against delayed payments and ensure faster settlement of disputes. The changes are aimed at improving liquidity and reducing the long payment delays that often leave small businesses short of working capital.

Government sources also indicated that repeated adjournments and the loss of working hours could delay the government's plans to take up the 131st Constitution Amendment Bill, which seeks to increase the number of seats in the Lok Sabha. The Bill is linked to the implementation of the Women's Reservation law and the Delimitation Bill during the ongoing Monsoon Session, scheduled to conclude on August 13.

Two other key legislations — the 130th Constitution Amendment Bill and the Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan Bill, 2025 — have also been delayed.

Senior BJP leader and Lok Sabha Chief Whip Sanjay Jaiswal said the government would be compelled to pass the Bills amid the pandemonium if the Opposition continued its protests.

During the debate on Vande Mataram Bill on Thursday, DMK MP Kanimozhi said it is against federalism, and the song goes 'against secularism'. ANI

Modi reviews safety of seafarers, supply chain constraints in extended CCS meet

ENS & PTI
New Delhi, July 30

PRIME MINISTER Narendra Modi on Thursday discussed with a group of senior ministers the prevailing geo-political situation in West Asia and measures to keep supply chains uninterrupted despite conflicts surrounding the Strait of Hormuz, the Black Sea, the Red Sea, and the Gulf of Aden.

The extended Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) meeting in Parliament House, chaired by the PM, was attended by permanent members, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, Home Minister Amit Shah, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar, and Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, as well as special invitees, Chemicals and Fertilisers Minister J P Nadda, Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal, Shipping Minister Sarbananda Sonowal and Petroleum Minister Hardeep Puri, official sources said.

"Prime Minister Narendra Modi today chaired a meeting of the Cabinet Committee on Security to review the situation in the context of the ongoing West Asia conflict and measures taken by various Ministries and Departments. This was the 4th special CCS meeting on the issue," a statement issued by the PMO said.

Cabinet Secretary T V Somanathan briefed the CCS about the present geo-political situation and spoke about the initiatives taken to ensure adequate supply of petroleum products, including LNG/LPG and fertilisers, it said. The Cabinet Secretary told the CCS that sources for procurement of LPG have already been diversified and the overall stock and supply positions of major petroleum products remain adequate.

Availability of adequate crude oil has enabled Central Public Sector Enterprise (CPSE) refineries to operate at utilisation levels exceeding 100 per cent, ensuring continued production of petrol, diesel and other petroleum products.

Initiatives have also been taken to expand Piped Natural Gas (PNG) connections, which have resulted in a substantial increase in subscriptions. The government is also facilitating industrial substitution of LPG through expansion of the National Gas Grid, augmentation of LNG import and re-gasification infrastructure, expansion of City Gas Distribution networks, and time-bound pipeline and last-mile connectivity approvals under the Pipeline Infrastructure Order, 2026.

"During the meeting, requirements for the fertilisers for the ensuing Rabi season were assessed, and alternative sources of fertilisers were also discussed. The PM said that all measures be taken for ensuring uninterrupted supply of fertilisers," the statement said.

The ministers gave presentations on their respective ministries and steps taken by them to ensure uninterrupted import of all goods, including petroleum, natural gas and fertilisers, they said. The PM is learnt to have given certain directions to the ministers to ensure the safety of Indians, India's economic interests and find ways to clear the supply chain hindrances.

Minister in RS: Potential conflict of interest in RDI Fund disbursement

Express News Service
New Delhi, July 30

THE COMMITTEE responsible for selecting companies for receiving money from the newly-created Research, Development and Innovation (RDI) fund had picked at least 15 companies in which members of the committee themselves had a personal stake, according to information provided by the government in Parliament on Thursday.

In a written answer in the Rajya Sabha, Science and Technology Minister Jitendra Singh provided a list of seven members of the committee who had personal stakes in these 15 companies that have been among those chosen for receiving money from the RDI Fund. The RDI Fund is a Rs 1 lakh crore corpus created by the Centre last year to promote research and development activities and innovation in the private sector, particularly in high-priority areas like deep-tech. The fund is meant to provide long-term low-cost financing to the private sector. The funds are channelised through what are known as second-level fund managers (SLFMs).

These are a few selected organisations which have been empowered to invest in private sector companies in the form of equity, debt or both, using money from the RDI Fund. Current SLFMs include Technology Development Board under the Department of Science and Technology, and Biotechnology Industry Research Assistance Council under the Department of Biotechnology. Every SLFM is supposed to have an investment committee for assessing and vetting investment proposals from the private sector companies seeking funding from the RDI Fund.

In response to a question by Rajya Sabha member Praveen Chakravarthy, Singh gave names of seven members of the Investment Committee of the Technology Development Board who had made investments in at least 15 entities selected for receiving money from the RDI Fund. Singh said that the TDB had a conflict-of-interest policy for members of the investment committee, but did not specify what this policy was, or whether the selection of these companies constituted a violation of the policy. The implementation guidelines for the RDI scheme say that the investment panel "must be constituted in a way that avoids potential conflicts of interest".

It added that the SLFM must take care to ensure that there was no conflict of interest in the choice of specific projects for financing, "given the likelihood of domain experts on its IC (investment committee) being investors in ideas and companies". It is also not clear if any of the members of the investment panel named in Singh's response in the Rajya Sabha participated in the decision-making process that led to the selection of the company in which they had investments, or they recused themselves in any manner.

ISRO & Japanese scientists review mission Chandrayaan-5 preparation

Anjali Marar
Bengaluru, July 30

A JAPANESE space delegation on Wednesday held discussions with their counterparts at Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) to take stock of the progress being made on Chandrayaan-5 — a joint mission to the Moon scheduled for 2028.

Scientists from Japan's Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) visited the UR Rao Satellite Centre in Bengaluru on Wednesday. The two countries have been working on Chandrayaan-5 also known as Lunar Polar Exploration Mission (LUPEX), a first-of-its-kind joint rover mission to the Moon. For this project, ISRO is building the lander module, while JAXA is developing the rover, the one which will come out of the lander module after landing and move around on the surface of the Moon, surveying the topography and collecting data.

The mission will take off on a Japanese rocket, H3, and is planned to carry seven scientific instruments for carrying out different kinds of experiments. The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) of the US and the European Space Agency (ESA) are also participating in this mission, and will be mounting their payloads on the rover. The ESA is developing the mass spectrometer and NASA is developing the neutron spectrometers. Chandrayaan-5 is planned to stay on the Moon for 100 days i.e. 3 and five months.

During their Wednesday meeting, scientists of ISRO and JAXA discussed the technical co-ordination required for Inter Spacecraft Communication of Chandrayaan-5. This mission aims to study water and water-ice both on the lunar surface and the subsurface.

The two agencies took stock of the onboard payloads and on the possible launch window, which is likely to be in 2028. Last week, JAXA successfully performed the second Payload Operations Simulation at Tsukuba Space Center. The complex operational scenario, involving both spacecraft bus and payload operations, were tested in parallel.

Chandrayaan-5 was approved by the Government in March 2025 in the backdrop of India's landing on the lunar south pole with the Chandrayaan-3 mission in August 2023. ISRO's immediate next mission to the moon will be the Chandrayaan-4 mission.

Gaganyaan-1 in progress

Bengaluru: The assembly, integration and testing of the Crew and Service Modules of the Gaganyaan-1 human spaceflight mission are nearing completion, Science and Technology Minister Jitendra Singh said in a written reply in Lok Sabha on Wednesday. He detailed the mission's status, and completed tasks in his reply to Jaipur MP Rao Rajendra Singh.

Gaganyaan-1 uncrewed mission was originally scheduled for launch in late 2025. It was later pushed to the first quarter of 2026. Singh had, during the Winter Session of House, 2025, said that the G-1 launch would take place before March 2026. But, ISRO is yet to release the revised launch date. **ENS**

ISRO's NavIC system can no longer provide navigation data independently: Govt

Anonna Dutt
New Delhi, July 30

FOR THE first time since positioning data from one of its satellites was lost in March, the government has accepted in the parliament that the seven-satellite navigation constellation (NavIC) can no longer independently aid people in navigation.

The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) earlier this year informed that IRNSS-1F satellite, which was launched in March 2016, completed its designed mission life of 10 years and the on-board atomic clock stopped functioning.

"...presently the NavIC constellation has three satellites for providing PNT (Positioning, Navigation, Timing) services — IRNSS-1B, IRNSS-1I and NVS-01. To provide basic positioning service, minimum four operational satellites are required in orbit. Hence, the NavIC constellation cannot provide standalone positioning service, however timing service is functional," union minister of state for space Dr Jitendra Singh replied in a written answer in Parliament.

The reply said that the armed forces continue to use NavIC signals as part of the multi-constellation GNSS — Global Navigation Satellite System that uses data from US' GPS, EU's Galileo, and Russia's Glonass among others to navigate.

When asked whether it compromises accuracy for navigation or real-time mapping, the reply stated: "Since NavIC is being used in multi constellation environment for most of the use-cases, there is no vulnerability for the users."

While end-user applications were developed for utilising NavIC signals in aviation, shipping, railways, and even in everyday cell phones, all of these devices carry a GNSS receiver, meaning they can continue to get positioning data from other constellations.

The reply also stated: "Next NavIC satellite NVS-03 is ready for launch and two more satellites NVS-04 and NVS-05 are in advanced stage of realisation."

The constellation can still provide accurate time signals for digital devices as well as broadcast emergency messages.

The Indian Regional Navigation Satellite System (IRNSS) — also referred to with the operational name of Navigation with Indian Constellation (NavIC) — was planned to be a seven-satellite system to provide positioning data over the Indian subcontinent and 1500 km around it. Ever since its inception, however, it has been plagued by problems affecting its positioning data.

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'How are you keeping unelected minister?' SC asks Bihar govt

Ananthakrishnan G
New Delhi, July 30

THE SUPREME Court on Thursday questioned how the Bihar government could retain a minister who has remained unelected beyond the six-month constitutional limit and asked the state to explain its position.

A three-judge bench, presided over by Chief Justice of India Surya Kant, was hearing a request to fix a date for hearing a plea challenging the appointment of Deepak Prakash as Panchayati Raj Minister in Bihar for the second time, without having been elected as an Assembly member. "It is a pure legal issue. How are you retaining a minister beyond 6 months when he is not elected?" CJI Kant asked the counsel appearing for the Bihar Government.

Article 164(4) allows a non-member to remain minister for six months, subject to getting elected as a member within that period. The counsel appearing for Rakesh Kumar Singh, a petitioner from Bihar, said that when the matter came up for hearing on July 15, the state sought time, stating it wanted to file a counter-affidavit but had not done so yet.

"Seven months and 22 days have passed, and he is still continuing as the minister," he said.

CJI Kant said that whether the state files a counter or not, the court will not give any more time. The court fixed the next hearing date for August 4.

Deepak Prakash, the son of Rashtriya Lok Morcha (RLM) leader Upendra Kushwaha, was made Minister of Panchayati Raj on November 20, 2025, in the then Nitish Kumar government, even though he was not a member of the Bihar Legislative Assembly or the Legislative Council. However, after a fresh council of ministers was constituted following Kumar's exit, and Samrat Choudhary became the Chief Minister, Prakash was once again made Panchayati Raj Minister on May 7, 2026.

Singh, the petitioner, has argued that it was a one-time opportunity and cannot be utilised every time there is a change of government. He had to get re-elected between November 20, 2025, when he was first sworn in, and May 20, 2026, the plea pointed out. Singh contends that the re-appointment was in circumvention of constitutional safeguards and undermines representative democracy. He argued that it undermines the principles of parliamentary democracy, representative government, collective responsibility and electoral accountability.

The plea urged the Supreme Court to declare Prakash's reappointment and continuance in office unconstitutional, illegal, and void, and to restrain him from exercising the powers vested in the ministerial office.

Appoint Polar Ambassador, join Arctic Council, suggests panel

Express News Service
New Delhi, July 30

THE PARLIAMENTARY committee on External Affairs in its report has recommended that India should appoint a Polar Ambassador and urged the government to seek "full-fledged membership" of the Arctic council so that India can engage in its activities more effectively.

India is currently one of the 13 observer countries of the Arctic Council, whose full membership is restricted to 8 nations that have landmass in the region. The observer countries do not have decision making powers. They also can't make financial contributions or undertake research in the arctic directly.

The committee, in its recommendations said: "...it is imperative that India also has such an Ambassador at a level equivalent to other countries exclusively to deal with polar regions. Creating such a position will not only help India project the importance given to these regions in its foreign policy architecture but will also help put across its policy stance in relation to polar areas or pursue polar diplomacy in a more effective manner."

With several Russian research activities in the Artic region having been paused following the conflict with Ukraine, the committee recommended that India through its diplomatic channels impress upon the seven other countries of the need for having Russia on-board for the scientific work in the region which is experiencing drastic climate change — the impact of which will be felt across the globe. The committee also recommended that government explore the possibility of accessing the Russian Arctic Research Stations.

Govt to House panel: Hasina not allowed to conduct political activities from India

Divya A
New Delhi, July 30

Former Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina

IN THE wake of former Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's recent remarks that she might return to Bangladesh by the end of this year, the government has told a Parliamentary panel that the former Bangladesh PM is not permitted to conduct political activities from India.

On Thursday, Bangladesh Law Minister M Asaduzzaman said that Hasina is likely to be arrested instantly on her return from India.

Meanwhile, the Ministry of External Affairs told the panel, "The extradition request (sent by Dhaka for Hasina) is being examined by the competent authorities of the Government of India in accordance with applicable law and established procedures."

The Committee - led by Congress MP Shashi Tharoor — noted that Hasina's stay and India's approach in this regard is guided by "its civilisational ethos and humanitarian tradition of offering refuge to individuals facing circumstances of grave distress or existential threat".

The panel noted that while extending such humanitarian consideration, India has strictly adhered to the principle that no political activity is directed against any other country from our territory.

In its latest report on the 'Future of India-Bangladesh Relationship', the Committee recommended that "the government should continue to uphold its principled and humanitarian approach... while ensuring that such situations are managed with due sensitivity".

The parliamentary committee also sought an early normalisation of visa processing for Bangladeshi nationals, expressing concern that reduced visa processing volumes for Bangladesh nationals harm public perception and bilateral ties. India resumed tourist visa services for Bangladeshi nationals on June 28, 2026, ending a two-year suspension that began in July 2024 following political unrest and security concerns.

With the Ganga Water Treaty of 1996 between India and Bangladesh set to expire this year, the panel has urged the government to initiate discussions with Dhaka "without further delay".

Noting that the treaty is set to expire in 2026 and that bilateral discussions on its renewal had not yet commenced, the committee has recommended early initiation of renewal discussions, guided by updated hydrological data and climate change projections, and in consultation with the state governments of West Bengal and Bihar, the report said.

The committee also recommended that the MEA should continue to prioritise the protection of minorities in Bangladesh as a core element of its diplomatic engagement.

SC strikes balance on ecology, public interest

INDIA'S ENVIRONMENTAL Impact Assessment is grounded in the precautionary principle — it prioritises the integrity of ecosystems over minimising harm or compensating for damage later. From 2017, the government has tried to dilute this safeguard by allowing developers to apply for ecological clearance after commencing a project. A notification issued that year provided a one-time window to defaulters to comply with due procedures. It inaugurated a regime of post-facto clearances, which was consolidated in 2021 when the Centre issued an Office Memorandum (OM) to regularise violations. On Wednesday, the Supreme Court set aside this OM and closed the door on blanket regularisation of projects that have not complied with environmental safeguards. However, the Court also departed from its May 2025 position that prohibited ex-post facto environmental clearances "in any form". Instead, it held that a "narrowly tailored amnesty scheme" may be permissible where it is justified by "public interest".

The judgment is significant because it clarifies the Court's own position on post-facto environmental clearances. In its 2020 decision in *Alembic Pharmaceuticals Ltd v Rohit Prajapati*, the SC held that retrospective clearances are contrary to the philosophy of environmental regulation. The May 2025 verdict reiterated that such relaxations would incentivise developers to violate the law first and seek regularisation later. However, the Court appeared to move in the opposite direction six months later. Following review petitions filed by the Centre and industry bodies, a three-judge bench recalled the May 2025 judgment.

Wednesday's verdict now places the onus on the government to make a reasoned selection of projects that may be excused from the requirement of environmental clearance. The Court's insistence on proportionality is consistent with the broader trajectory of environmental jurisprudence in India. For more than two decades, the SC has interpreted constitutional provisions expansively to affirm that a healthy environment is intrinsic to the right to life. In the same vein, it has now required the state to demonstrate that the public interest served by a project is sufficiently compelling, that any relaxation is strictly necessary, and that the environmental costs have been weighed against the anticipated public benefits. The verdict thus transforms what had become an open-ended administrative discretion under the post-2017 regime into a narrowly circumscribed constitutional exception. The flexibility recognised by the Court could prove valuable in cases involving national defence, when healthcare facilities are urgently needed in underserved areas, or highway projects become imperative to improve connectivity in remote regions. However, at a time of climate change and accelerating ecological degradation, the government, too, must recognise that environmental protection is an integral component of public interest.

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On Vande Mataram, a law in search of a crime

PARLIAMENT PASSED the Prevention of Insults to National Honour Act on December 23, 1971. Barely a generation removed from colonial rule, India since the late 1960s bore signs of erosion of its early idealism. The victory against Pakistan in the Bangladesh War earlier that month had provided a moment of national triumph. The law, which purportedly sought to give legal backing to a Directive Principle of State Policy, criminalised insults to the national anthem, flag and Constitution. Then as now, however, it is likely that few believed that respect and reverence can be enforced through punitive legislation. The law was meant, arguably, to capture a political moment and give expression to it. Now, the Prevention of Insults to National Honour (Amendment) Bill, 2026 — passed in Parliament this week — makes an "insult" to the national song punishable by up to three years' imprisonment, placing 'Vande Mataram' at par with the national anthem. In essence, it is a law in search of a crime. At best, it is superfluous and at worst, a blunt instrument in the hands of an overzealous prosecutorial machinery.

According to data from the National Records Bureau, there were 1,102 arrests under the 1971 Act between 2014 and 2024, with just 60 convictions. Acquittals outpaced convictions each year, and an average of 48 cases were pending investigation and 221 cases pending trial in the same period. The rate of "crimes against national symbols" per lakh population is extremely low. By all accounts, then, the amended law expands the ambit of criminality with little justification. In the current context, too, the government frequently invites accusations of weaponising the criminal justice system to target opponents. The 2026 Amendment can only deepen apprehensions of its misuse.

In the Budget Session, the Union government tabled, and Parliament passed, the Jan Vishwas (Amendment of Provisions) Bill, 2026. It built on the 2023 Jan Vishwas Act by decriminalising and removing several economic offences. That legislative scheme indicated the government's commitment to its slogan of "minimum government, maximum governance", especially welcome, given that the state is a litigant in over half the pending cases in India's overburdened courts. In letter and spirit, the 'Vande Mataram' law is a backsliding on that commitment.

Neither government nor Opposition can look youth in the eye on education

SUHAS PALSHIKAR

ONE DOES not need social scientists to explain the meaning and significance of what happened on July 20. It was a protest alright, but it was also an outburst. It is apparent that the government yielded to that pressure with poor grace. This was exemplified by the "welcome" accorded to the minister who had resigned. That act of showing contempt for the protests fits into a pattern — while the government buckled under pressure, the pro-BJP ecosystem has been busy spreading all kinds of explanations for the outburst, conspiracy and "foreign hand" included.

Whether the Cockroach Janta Party is a tool for someone, whether some parties sought to hijack the agitation, or whether the Prime Minister's midnight message on Instagram hit record views are irrelevant tidbits worthy of corner columns in newspapers. The real — and admittedly intriguing — aspect of the CJP protests has been the unexpected and unanticipated spontaneity, right from the first post by Abhijeet Dipke about cockroaches. Instead of examining this aspect, the government seems content with either damage control or talking of the specious issue of "intelligence failure". When you mute all voices, except those reflecting narcissistic praise, intelligence failures are bound to happen.

Besides, on the watch of the current regime, there is a clear lack of reliable empirical data on what people think. This is for two reasons: Methodologically, when public opinion is permeated by extreme toxicity and pressure of social desirability bias, data from public opinion studies can be somewhat distorted. And secondly, this regime has been anti-data and has ensured that no independent actors will be able to collect public opinion. Post-2014, there is a singular lack of data leading to the "all is well" cacophony of the partisans.

No wonder everyone was taken unawares by the extent and intensity expressed during the CJP protests. While pro-government media is still circulating news about the alleged misbehaviour of participants and the weight of the waste left behind, they are oblivious to the real weight in political terms that these protests have left behind for politicians to tackle. Unfortunately, the regime seems to be unwilling to even read these signals properly.

Three issues are flagged by the protests that engulfed politics over the past four or five weeks. For starters, they were pegged around the NEET and exam-leaks, but by no means were they just about that. The government, sheepishly and wrongly, responded to only the technology of conducting the exam. Even before the protests erupted, this intellectual bankruptcy was evident in deploying the Air Force for delivering exam papers. That same mentality has surfaced again in the appointment of the committee to ensure leak-proof exams.

Yes, we have made a mess of exams, but that is not merely because greed and deceit lead to paper leaks. The real elephant in the room is the education system itself. A meaningless system that merely works as boring time-pass or as creches for young adults is the root cause — this malady leads to a senseless premium on exam results, meaningless exams and the coaching industry. Neither the government nor the Opposition can look youth in the eye and explain the meaning of wasting years in the name of education. The latest protests are symptomatic of that larger malaise.

> While pro-government media is still circulating news about the alleged misbehaviour of participants and the weight of the waste left behind, they are oblivious to the real weight in political terms these protests have left for politicians to tackle

Secondly, the protests and the striking energy they displayed represent the utter meaninglessness of life that confronts the youth. This is not merely about employability but about a future that holds only uncertainty. It would be foolhardy to respond to this issue only by throwing numbers — that so many jobs will be created when a corporate house is granted some largesse by the government. Overall life conditions and the deeper inequalities that characterise Indian society are factors that shape the clouds of uncertainty. If at one stage, capitalism was accused of producing the lumpen element, the economy today produces what sociologists have described as the "precariat".

Life is precarious, irrespective of whether you belong to low-income groups or the so-called middle class. This government has discovered a politically advantageous palliative to that — to use the evocative phrase employed by the Prime Minister himself, the *revdis*. But the loss of dignity involved in *revdi* politics and the continued uncertainty of life would surely push large sections into dissatisfaction notwithstanding the heavy rainfall of *revdis*. The CJP protests may not have touched upon these larger aspects of social unrest. But it would be at our own collective peril to ignore these underlying frustrations that are not easily defined. The protests are over for the time being, but these conditions remain and, if not attended to, they are bound to produce more cockroaches than the system can afford to suppress.

Finally, the police action. It represents the political response and tells us what ails our politics. It is not sufficient to smugly say that all protests face some police excesses. Large numbers of handles on social media have been gleefully telling us that the police have video recordings and participating persons will be hounded. This threat — most likely backed by clandestine police follow-up — tells us what is wrong with politics. By invoking election victories, the victors claim carte blanche; by counting votes, politicians denude citizens of agency; by throwing legislative majorities in our face, governments duck both constitutional morality and routine democratic accountability.

In sum, the prelude, the actual protests and now their aftermath tell a common story — protests have stirred many minds but not our political leadership. Because the regime is bent on not learning anything from the protests except the technology to suppress the next round of protests.

The writer, based in Pune, taught Political Science

For renewable energy answers, ask the right questions

SANJIV SAHAI

INDIA'S RENEWABLE energy sector is facing institutional challenges that need flexible solutions. Propelled by falling solar module prices and government policy, solar capacity has expanded to 162 GW by June 2026. Yet at the very moment this transformation demands smarter, more flexible market products, India's regulator is moving the opposite way, proposing to hand control of the power exchanges to Grid-India, a government utility whose institutional DNA is built for managing transmission systems, not commercial decisions.

Between May and December last year, over two billion units of solar electricity, enough to power several million homes, were curtailed because the grid could not absorb them. The solution requires transmission investment to convey electricity, flexible power plants that can ramp quickly, battery storage to absorb excess generation and discharge during lean hours, and above all, well-designed electricity markets that send the right price signals to the right players at the right time.

Surplus generation in one region can be traded to regions facing shortage. A robust, functional electricity market, one with products that sellers and buyers want, is essential to manage this. Prices should fall when power is abundant at noon and rise when it is scarce in the evening, attracting whatever flexible generation or storage can respond. Good market-design is what keeps a complex, renewable-heavy grid balanced without wasting energy or overloading equipment.

Contrary to this need, in July 2025 and January 2026, CERC proposed that Grid-India become Market Coupling Operator (MCO), pooling bids from all three exchanges – IEX, PXIL and HPX -- into a single clearing algorithm that would produce a uniform national price. The stated logic is that the market is fragmented and consumers are losing out. What does the data say?

Most electricity is traded in the Day-Ahead Market (DAM) and Real-Time Market (RTM), both short-term spot products. IEX handles roughly 80-85 per cent of trading volumes which is hardly a fragmented market. CERC's own shadow pilot recorded a welfare improvement of just 0.3 per cent over four months; a longer dataset puts the gain at only 0.013 per cent.

> The real danger is not IEX's market share but what happens to market innovation once a government-owned entity controls the central clearing algorithm

Behind CERC's stated reasons lies the question of IEX's dominance. But dominance is not the same as abuse: There is no documented allegation of excessive fees, discriminatory access, predatory pricing, or manipulation of price discovery against IEX. So which problem is CERC actually solving?

The real danger is not IEX's market share but what happens to market innovation once a government-owned entity controls the central clearing algorithm. For example, when exchanges developed user-defined hourly contracts in the Term-Ahead Market, matched to the variable generation profile of solar and wind assets, CERC ordered them discontinued within a week in April last year.

In July 2025, CERC suggested a round-robin model under which exchanges would take turns as Market Coupling Operators month to month. By April 2026, its draft second amendment regulations abandoned this in favour of Grid-India as sole MCO. Grid-India itself, in a submission dated June 8, has urged CERC to reconsider and has asked for a round-robin system, institutional ring-fencing and a steering committee to guard against single-point failures, even though round-robin approach would force every exchange to duplicate the capital cost of a central algorithm and add to the regulator's oversight burden.

Grid-India's preference for administrative simplicity is rational for a system operator: Its job is to balance the grid in real time, not to compete for customers or bear commercial risk. But under full coupling, every new trading product will require rewriting an algorithm Grid-India controls, tethering market innovation to the pace of a public utility — a pace the TAM episode shows is slow and tilted towards uniformity.

India's renewable sector needs a market architecture that rewards flexible capacity with real-time pricing, opens competitive markets for frequency-regulation services, and lets storage investors price their business case. These are the real regulatory priorities rather than imagined problems of market dominance.

The writer is former secretary, Ministry of Power

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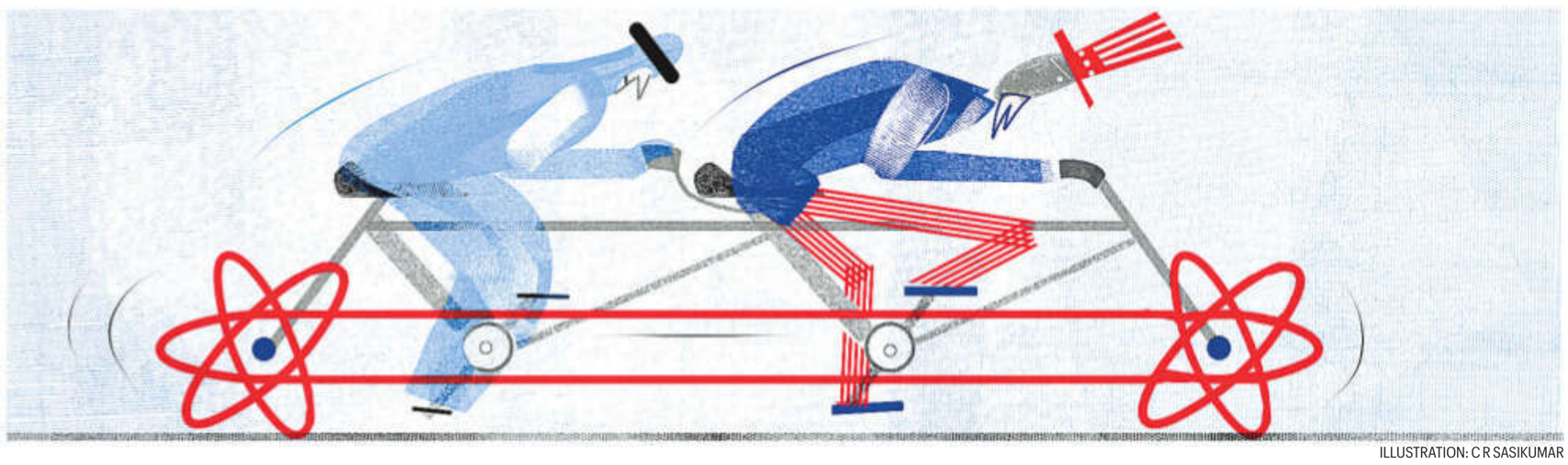
DIS/AGREE
THE BEST OF BOTH SIDES

A weekly column, which offers not this-versus-that, but the best of both sides, to inform the debate



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Does the US-Saudi nuclear deal increase the risk of an arms race in West Asia?

A Saudi reactor is not a Saudi bomb

SYED AKBARUDDIN

THE VERDICT on the Saudi civil nuclear agreement arrived before the text itself. On July 22, Washington and Riyadh signed a Section 123 agreement and a safeguards accord. Their texts remain unpublished, and the agreement awaits congressional review. President Trump then said there would be no enrichment and that he would not proceed unless Saudi Arabia joined the Abraham Accords, leaving the deal's meaning and future more uncertain.

Washington and Riyadh began the process in 2008 with a memorandum on peaceful nuclear cooperation. Negotiations continued under Barack Obama, the first Trump administration and Joe Biden. That continuity reflects a resilient partnership despite periodic political strains. The concern is that the agreements may enable American reactor sales while leaving open the possibility of Saudi enrichment. Reactors, enrichment capacity and access to centrifuge technology are different questions. The agreements should be judged by who controls the technology and what inspectors can see. Talk of a "gold standard" can obscure the international legal baseline. The term is a policy label drawn from the UAE agreement, not an IAEA category or universal norm. Saudi Arabia is a party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and has a Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement in force with the IAEA. The treaty prohibits it from manufacturing or acquiring nuclear weapons. It requires neither an Additional Protocol nor renunciation of safeguarded enrichment. The Protocol improves information and access, especially concerning undeclared activities, but is not a universal legal requirement.

The reported terms do not immediately authorise an enrichment plant. They first envisage a study lasting two years. If the study establishes a commercial case and Washington agrees, American companies could build a facility using a "black box" model without transferring the underlying centrifuge technology. If Washington rejects enrichment, Riyadh would reportedly undertake for 10 years not to enrich independently or through another supplier. The question is deferred, not decided.

Saudi Arabia has a credible civilian case for nuclear power. Nuclear power could conserve oil for export and complement renewables. Riyadh links domestic enrichment to fuel cycle autonomy, uranium development and industrial capability. Domestic enrichment would not create an independent fuel cycle. No Middle Eastern commercial plant fabricates power reactor fuel assemblies. Enriched uranium would therefore go abroad to become reactor fuel unless Riyadh later built such a plant. This limits the autonomy enrichment would provide without removing the proliferation concern attached to centrifuges.

Five of the 31 states operating nuclear power reactors lack an Additional Protocol in force: Argentina, Belarus, Brazil, Iran and Pakistan. Belarus has signed one but not brought it into force. Iran has unresolved safeguards issues and Pakistan is outside the NPT. Argentina and Brazil combine IAEA safeguards with the Brazilian-Argentine Agency for Accounting and Control of Nuclear Materials. Brazil enriches at Resende; Argentina retains pilot and research enrichment capabilities.

As an international civil servant with the IAEA, I accompanied Director General Mohamed ElBaradei to Resende. Brazil owns its centrifuge technology and shields parts of its cascade design, while IAEA and ABACC inspectors verify material flows, samples and output. The reported Saudi model would not transfer the supplier's centrifuge technology to the host. In that narrow respect, it would be more restrictive than Resende. It would not eliminate operational learning. Resende taught me to resist both alarmism and complacency.

Any enrichment arrangement should combine IAEA material accountancy and inspector access with bilateral limits on enrichment, technology controls and consequences for breach. The IAEA has said it awaits a formal request to undertake the proposed verification. Any bespoke arrangement would then go to its board of governors for approval. US participation would add consent rights, export controls and congressional scrutiny. American refusal would not necessarily end Saudi nuclear plans. Riyadh could turn to another supplier offering Washington less visibility and leverage. Iran and Israel will shape how any Saudi programme is read. Saudi leaders have linked their nuclear choices to Iran, making verification essential. A Middle East Nuclear Weapon Free Zone remains a distant prospect. The 1988 India-Pakistan agreement offers a modest precedent for protecting nuclear installations from attack, but a Gulf equivalent remains unlikely.

India should support access to peaceful nuclear technology, insist on verification that can detect misuse and reserve judgement on enrichment until the study is complete and any governing terms are public.

The world gains little by treating Saudi nuclear power as a weapons programme simply because enrichment remains unresolved. What matters is whether the agreement limits the spread of sensitive technology and enables early detection of diversion of safeguarded nuclear material. A Saudi reactor is not a Saudi bomb.

The writer is former permanent representative of India to the UN, and dean, Kautilya School of Public Policy, Hyderabad

It's a recipe for nuclear proliferation

FEISAL AMIN AL-ISTRABADI

CURRENT US policies seem tailored to engender a nuclear arms race in the Middle East. Donald Trump recently approved an agreement with Saudi Arabia (KSA) nominally for the transfer of nuclear energy technologies, but one that notably lacked the types of safeguards against non-proliferation that the US normally attaches to such agreements. There has thus been unease that there are no controls in place preventing KSA from enriching fissile materials, especially in light of reports that KSA has announced it would match Iran's nuclear programme.

Does the President know about the apparent deficiencies in this agreement regarding non-proliferation safeguards? Part of the difficulty in answering this question is that this administration famously eschews those with technical or scientific expertise. The US Secretary of Energy, who signed the agreement with KSA, is a former oil executive and major donor to the Republican Party with no known expertise in non-proliferation issues. This is in sharp contrast to Barack Obama's Secretary of Energy, who helped negotiate the Iran nuclear deal. He was a nuclear physicist and a professor at MIT before being appointed to the cabinet. Meanwhile, Trump has not had an ambassador in Riyadh since he returned to office.

The US-Israeli war on Iran, too, threatens to increase proliferation in the region. It must have dawned on the current leaders in Tehran that it was a blunder for their late Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, not to order the building of a nuclear arsenal with all due haste. Instead, he authorised an agreement with the Obama Administration that limited Iran's enrichment and included a rigorous inspections regime by the International Atomic Energy Agency. Iran remained in compliance, putting whatever nuclear ambitions it may have had on hold, only to see Trump withdraw from that agreement during his first term. Then, without any credible imminent threat, Trump undertook a bombing campaign in June 2025 and a more comprehensive war in February 2026, which is still ongoing.

This situation is in sharp contrast with Trump's treatment of North Korea's Kim Jong Un, who sits atop a nuclear arsenal amassed in violation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Trump met repeatedly with Kim in his first term and never mentions North Korea now. The message is clear: If you want respect, build a bomb.

Leaders in other Middle Eastern capitals are no doubt also taking note. Israel is currently the only country in the Middle East known to be a nuclear-armed state, and it has been for at least 40 years, having developed its nuclear capabilities in collaboration with apartheid-era South Africa. So long as the US provided the security guarantees for allied Middle Eastern states, those states could be relatively sanguine about Israel's nuclear arsenal. But since the beginning of Trump's second term, Israel has attacked at least seven countries in the region, including Qatar, which houses America's largest air base in the region. The US has not uttered a peep.

Egypt and Turkey may well come to the same conclusion as Saudi Arabia and Iran. To safeguard against Israel, America, or other regional players, the safest bet is to adopt the nuclear option. The UAE already relies on nuclear energy for 25 per cent of its electrical grid. Jordan has significant uranium deposits and certainly would not need to rely on any outside power. Even Iraq, which denounced the acquisition of WMDs in its current constitution in light of its execrable history of using poison gas on its own Kurdish citizens as well as Iranian forces during the Iran-Iraq War, could reconsider if the entire region begins to explore the nuclear option.

Trump did, in the end, have second thoughts. The day after announcing the US-Saudi nuclear agreement, he announced he would only honour the agreement if KSA normalised with Israel. No doubt Benjamin Netanyahu had something to do with it. This means the Saudi deal is stalled for the foreseeable future. Before Hamas's October 7 terrorist attack, it had been Netanyahu, not KSA, who was dragging his feet on normalisation. And after Israel's response — which a UN commission characterised as genocide in Gaza — since October 7, KSA likely cannot normalise with Israel for the foreseeable future due to domestic considerations and the extreme unlikelihood of Israel recognising a Palestinian state anytime soon. But that will not necessarily delay KSA's nuclear ambitions, whatever they may be. Russia or China will be willing to fill the void on the theory they are merely transferring energy technology — as the US has claimed. And if those states are too queasy to provide the necessary resources, perhaps Pakistan, which has just signed a mutual defence treaty with KSA, might step in.

Some security specialists have argued that nuclear proliferation makes the world safer because nuclear-armed states are less likely to go to war with one another. If US policy remains on the path Trump has set, that theory may be tested in the not-distant future. Given the history of conflict in the Middle East in the last century, one can be forgiven for viewing these prognostications with trepidation.

The writer is founding director of the Centre for the Study of the Middle East at Indiana University, Bloomington

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• HISTORY

Ravidas: Icon of Dalit resistance in Punjab, beyond

Manraj Grewal Sharma
Chandigarh, July 30

SEVEN MONTHS before Sant Ravidas's 650th birth anniversary, the BJP launched a nationwide commemoration campaign Wednesday at his birthplace near Varanasi, in the presence of UP CM Yogi Adityanath. Punjab's AAP government, too, launched a campaign in February.

Centuries after his lifetime, Guru Ravidas continues to shape religious thought, social reform, politics and Dalit assertion in India, particularly Punjab. A Bhakti saint, philosopher and poet, he challenged caste hierarchies while remaining rooted in his occupation as a cobbler, preached dignity of labour and envisioned an equal society.

Unique among Bhakti saints

Guru Ravidas was a 15th-16th century saint whose teachings emphasised devotion to a formless God. He belonged to the chamar community of leather workers.

Ronki Ram, a professor emeritus at the Institute for Development and Communication, Chandigarh, and an eminent scholar of Guru Ravidass, told *The Indian Express* that the saint neither renounced his religion nor abandoned his hereditary occupation. In doing so, his life itself became a form of peaceful social protest at a time when the Bhakti movement sought to challenge social hierarchies.

While he rejected ritualism, accounts say he wore the sacred thread (*janeu*) and applied the *tilak*. Ram said these actions symbolically challenged the upper castes' monopoly over religious symbols.

A Ravidas statue in Varanasi. PTI

Ravidas became widely revered through his devotional poetry and reformist philosophy. He wrote in Sadhukari — blending Awadhi, Braj, Khari Boli, Punjabi, Rajasthani and Sanskrit. According to Professor Yog Raj Angrish, who heads the School of Punjabi Studies at Panjab University, his verses were simple and easy to sing. "While Kabir's poetry is marked by rhetoric, resistance and poetic deconstruction, Ravidas writes with philosophical depth and humility."

A central idea of his philosophy was of Begumpura, an ideal society founded on principles of equality, justice and freedom. Prof Angrish says Guru Ravidas was among the earliest thinkers to imagine a society free from caste, class and hierarchy. His famous hymn, included in the Guru Granth Sahib, begins: "*Begampura sehar ko naau; dookh andoh nahi tih thaau* (Begumpura is the name of the city. There is no suffering or anxiety there)." The hymn describes a city free from sorrow, fear, oppressive taxation and discrimination, where all people enjoy equality, dignity and unrestricted movement.

Prof Ram says Begumpura represents a society free of caste hierarchy, poverty and oppression, where everyone has enough to live with dignity and God alone is sovereign. Scholars including Gail Omvedt have described it as one of India's earliest visions of a casteless, classless society.

Raising Dalit consciousness

Guru Ravidas occupies a unique place in Sikhism. Forty of his hymns (*shabads*) and one *shloka* are included in the Guru Granth Sahib, alongside compositions of Kabir, Sheikh Farid and other Bhakti and Sufi saints. Prof Sarabjit Singh of Punjabi University said these saints lived before Guru Nanak Dev, who carried forward many of their ideas.

Prof Ram described him as one of the earliest voices of Dalit resistance, who transformed personal experience into a universal message of equality without hatred or revenge. His influence became more visible during Punjab's Ad Dharm movement of the 1920s, which adopted Ravidas as its patron saint to champion an independent socio-political consciousness. As he put it: "*Aisa chahoon raaj main jahaan milai sabhan ko ann; chhot bado sab sam basai, Ravidas rahai prasann* (I long for such a kingdom where everyone has enough to eat, where the small and the great live as equals; then Ravidas shall be content)."

For millions of Dalits, Ravidas is the foremost spiritual figure. His followers, the Ravidassias, are a Dalit community of whom the bulk — around 12 lakh — live in Punjab's Doaba. The politically influential community separated from Sikhism in 2010 and follows its own scripture.

• LEGAL

SC sets 'public interest' test on retrospective green nod

The judgment has sought to strike a middle path, closing the door on blanket regularisation but leaving limited room for government action

JAY MAZOOMDAAR

THE SUPREME Court's judgment on Wednesday striking down the Centre's 2021 Office Memorandum (OM) that allowed retrospective approval for projects that had already commenced construction without environment clearances (ECs), now closes the door on blanket and open-ended regularisation of such projects. It leaves limited room for government action under statutory authority.

The judgment has sought to strike a middle path in the top court's evolving environmental jurisprudence, distinguishing between the source of executive power and the limits of regularisation.

The court held that ex-post facto ECs cannot be created through an OM, but recognised that the government may, in exceptional circumstances and in public interest, provide such a mechanism through a statutory notification issued under delegated legislative powers.

The test will depend on how narrowly the government frames any future amnesty scheme and whether it meets the Supreme Court's benchmark of "public interest".

An OM is an administrative instruction issued by a ministry or department and does not have the force of law. A statutory notification, by contrast, is issued under authority granted by a statute — the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986, in this case — and notified in the Gazette.

Applying this distinction, the court set aside the Environment Ministry's July 2021 OM, which introduced a standard operating procedure (SOP) for granting ex-post facto ECs to "violation cases". The court held that the OM had created a continuing or "perpetual" regime for condoning violations. It did not invalidate the March 2017 notification, which provided a limited, one-time six-month amnesty window.

The judgment also departed from the court's May 2025 position that prohibited ex-post facto ECs "in any form or manner". Instead, it held that a "narrowly tailored amnesty scheme" may be permissible where justified by "supervening public interest".

• SC's EVOLVING ENVIRONMENTAL JURISPRUDENCE

MAR 14, 2017: The Environment Ministry issues notification establishing a six-month window for non-compliant projects or activities to apply for environmental clearance (EC).

AUG 2, 2017: In *Common Cause v. Union of India*, the Supreme Court declares retrospective ECs invalid and 'completely alien to environmental jurisprudence'.

APR 1, 2020: In *Alembic Pharmaceuticals Ltd v. Rohit Prajapati*, the Supreme Court reiterates 'ex post facto clearance is alien to environmental jurisprudence'. But adopts a 'balanced approach' by imposing penalties instead of ordering closure of long-operating units.

MAY 24, 2021: The National Green Tribunal, in *Tanaji B. Gambhire v. Chief Secretary, Govt of Maharashtra*, directs Environment Ministry to formulate a proper SOP to address frequency of projects without prior EC.

JUL 7, 2021: Ministry issues office memorandum (OM) establishing an SOP for projects that failed to obtain prior EC to get regularised after paying penalties.

DEC 9, 2021: In *Electrosteel Steels Ltd v. Union of India*, Supreme Court says ex post facto ECs can be granted in 'exceptional circumstances' to protect livelihoods and the economy.

MAY 16, 2025: In *Vanashakti v. Union of India*, Supreme Court strikes down 2017 notification and 2021 OM as illegal. It rules that they were in violation of the principles laid down in *Common Cause* and *Alembic*.

NOV 18, 2025: In review petition, the Supreme Court recalls May 2025 ruling. Then-CJI BR Gavai holds that the *Vanashakti* order went against the *Electrosteel* judgement and that a 'balanced approach' is necessary to avoid waste of money spent on building projects. SC orders fresh adjudication of the matter.

JUL 29, 2026: Supreme Court upholds 2017 notification but quashes 2021 OM, holding that post facto EC can be granted only through statutory notifications, not administrative actions.

– COMPILED BY VINEET BHALLA

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Already benefited

After Mumbai-based environmental NGO Vanashakti approached the Supreme Court, the July 2021 OM was stayed, suspending the SOP route for violation cases, by a bench of Justices B R Gavai and Sandeep Mehta in January 2024.

By then, as reported by *The Indian Express* on February 20, 2024, the Environment Ministry had issued ex-post facto ECs to more than 100 projects and issued terms of reference for environmental impact assessment (EIA) to at least another 150 projects under the violation category since March 2017.

These projects included coal, iron, and bauxite mines, a greenfield airport, distilleries, steel and iron plants, industrial estates, cement plants, limestone quarries, chemical units, and buildings.

Among the project proponents were Singareni Collieries Company Ltd, Mahanadi Coalfields Ltd, Jaypee Cement, UltraTech Cement, Ramco Cements, Bhushan Steel Ltd, Steel Authority of India, Godrej Agrovet Ltd, Hindustan Copper, Lloyds Metals & Energy Ltd, Hindustan Marble, Artemis Hospital, Pushpawati Singhania Hospital, Spaze Towers, Hotel Leela Venture Ltd, and the Special Protection Group.

> **No blanket amnesty or bar**
>
> The court held that ex-post facto environmental clearances can't be created through an office memorandum.
>
> •
>
> But it recognised that the government may, in exceptional circumstances and in public interest, provide such a mechanism.

Scope of amnesty

Under the Environmental Impact Assessment Notification, 2006, projects requiring EC must obtain approval before starting operations. Several projects, however, began work or expanded operations without prior clearance.

In March 2017, the ministry issued a statutory notification offering a one-time six-month opportunity to such projects to disclose violations and seek appraisal for EC, subject to environmental assessment and other legal consequences.

After the window expired in September 2017, the Madras High Court disposed of challenges to the notification after recording the Union government's undertaking that it was a "one-time measure".

Subsequently, in *Appaswamy Real Estates v. Puducherry Environment Protection Association*, the Madras High Court granted a limited extension in March 2018.

The ministry issued an OM the same month allowing eligible projects that were already in violation as of March 2017 to submit applications within 30 days. The policy shifted in July 2021 when the Ministry issued an OM introducing an SOP as an ongoing mechanism for violation cases.

Judicial evolution

In *Common Cause v. Union of India* (2017), a bench of Justices Madan B Lokur and Deepak Gupta held that mining operations requiring EC could not commence without prior approval. It emphasised that the EIA regime is preventive and intended to assess environmental consequences before irreversible harm occurs.

In *Alembic Pharmaceuticals v. Rohit Prajapati* (2020), a bench of Justices DY Chandrachud and Ajay Rastogi held that ex-post facto EC was inconsistent with fundamental principles of environmental jurisprudence. The court observed that retrospective approval undermines the precautionary principle by allowing project proponents to commence activities first and seek approval later.

However, in *Pahwa Plastics v. Dastak* (2022), a bench of Justices Indira Banerjee and J K Maheshwari adopted a more pragmatic approach that closure was not always the appropriate remedy, particularly where regulatory uncertainty existed and environmental compliance remained possible. The court held that regulation and remediation could, in some cases, better serve environmental protection than immediate closure.

Vanashakti litigation

In *Vanashakti v. Union of India*, a bench of Justices Abhay S Oka and Ujjal Bhuyan in May 2025 struck down both the March 2017 notification and the July 2021 OM, holding that ex-post facto ECs were impermissible "in any form or manner". The court also held that the one-time amnesty introduced in 2017 had exhausted itself and could not justify future regularisation.

Following review petitions by the Union government and industry bodies, a bench comprising then Chief Justice of India B R Gavai and Justices Vinod Chandran and Ujjal Bhuyan recalled the May 2025 judgment by a 2:1 majority, holding that the earlier decision had failed to consider binding precedents and required fresh adjudication.

The subsequent judgment now draws a distinction between a limited statutory amnesty justified by public interest and a continuing administrative mechanism that permits routine regularisation of environmental violations.

• POLICY

New paper leak Bill: Bigger fines, longer jail terms, fast-track courts

Damini Nath
New Delhi, July 30

AFTER DAYS of disruptions in both Houses of Parliament over the NEET paper leak and the police action on protesting students on July 20, Lok Sabha on Thursday passed the Public Examination (Prevention of Unfair Means) Amendment Bill, 2026 by voice vote. Rajya Sabha, which took the Bill up for discussion on Thursday, also cleared it by voice vote.

Why was the Bill introduced?

Parliament had passed the Public Examination (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act, 2024 in 2024 to provide strict punishments for those involved in unfair means, including leaking of question papers, in examinations conducted by the Union Public Service Commission, the Staff Selection Commission, the Railway Recruitment Board, the Institute of Banking Personnel Selection and the National Testing Agency, which conducts the NEET exam. The Act came into effect in June 2024.

Amid the students' movement against paper leaks, sparked by the leak of the NEET UG paper in May this year, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in a late-night social media post on July 23, announced that the government would bring a Bill with stringent measures against paper leaks. On July 24, the Cabinet approved the Bill amending the 2024 Act.

In the statement of objects and reasons of the Bill, Minister of State for Personnel, Public Grievances and Pensions Jitendra Singh wrote: "In recent years, there have been some incidents of question paper leakages and malpractices in examinations conducted by public examination authorities, which tend to affect the transparency and fairness of the public examinations system. Hence, in order to further strengthen the fairness, to enhance the credibility of the public examinations system and to facilitate speedy trial and ensure time bound investigations of offences under the said Act, it is necessary to make amendments in the said Act."

What are its key features?

The amendment Bill, as passed by Lok Sabha, enhances punishment for individuals, organised groups and service providers found guilty of adopting unfair means in a public examination.

The following is the structure of punishments laid out in the Bill:

> **Track record**
>
> • Cases registered in fast-track courts has gone up from 81,471 in 2023 to 88,902 in 2024 and 1,43,936 in 2025, according to a Parliamentary reply.
>
> • The number of pending cases, too, has gone up from 2.02 lakh in 2023 to 2.04 lakh in 2024 and 2.45 lakh in 2025.
>
> • Cases disposed of have increased from 76,319 in 2023 to 85,595 in 2024 to 66,500 in 2025.

INDIVIDUALS
- **2024 law:** Imprisonment of three to five years; fine upto Rs 10 lakh
- **New Bill:** imprisonment to five to 10 years, fine upto Rs 50 lakh

SERVICE PROVIDERS
- **2024 law:** Fine upto Rs 1 crore; ban on being assigned any responsibility relating to a public examination for four years
- **New Bill:** Fine upto Rs 5 crore; ban on being assigned any responsibility relating to a public examination for eight years

DIRECTORS, SENIOR MANAGEMENT OR PERSONS IN-CHARGE OF SERVICE PROVIDER FIRM FOUND GUILTY
- **2024 law:** Imprisonment of at least three years; fine of Rs 1 crore
- **New Bill:** Imprisonment of at least five years, fine of Rs 5 crore

ORGANISED CRIME
- **2024 law:** Imprisonment of five to 10 years; fine of Rs 1 crore
- **New Bill:** Imprisonment of least seven years; fine of Rs 10 crore.

Apart from enhancing the existing punishments, the Bill also gives statutory backing for fast-track courts to be set up to try offences under the Act.

The Bill also mandates a five-month timeline for the investigation and trial of such offences by fast-track courts.

The Bill gives the Union government the power to establish a Special Task Force to investigate offences under the Act.

How have other fast-track courts performed?

The government has announced that fast-track courts would be set up in the four High Courts where cases related to the NEET leak are ongoing. If the Bill is passed and comes into effect, any offence under the Act would also be tried by fast-track courts.

In the past, the government has set up fast-track courts to try crimes under different laws, including the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012. In a reply in Lok Sabha on July 24, Law and Justice Minister Arjun Ram Meghwal said there were 775 fast-track courts in the country as on April 30, including 398 exclusive POCSO courts. As on December 31, 2025, there were 2.45 lakh cases pending with these fast-track courts, the Minister's reply showed.

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• GLOBAL

How US-Iran conflict is forcing Gulf states to rethink their security strategies

EXPERT EXPLAINS

BASHIR ALI ABBAS
SENIOR RESEARCH ASSOCIATE, COUNCIL FOR STRATEGIC AND DEFENSE RESEARCH, DELHI

AFTER NEARLY two weeks of the Iran war, of US strikes on Iran and Iranian retaliation against targets in Gulf Arab states, both sides ceased their attacks by July 25.

The region is now coming up with strategies to deal with this conflict's fallout.

Kuwait ratified a June 2023 Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA) with Pakistan on July 26 for a five-year period, while Qatar committed to deepening its security cooperation with Pakistan during bilateral talks in Doha the following day.

Meanwhile, the US-Iran war has also reignited the war between the Yemeni Houthis and Saudi Arabia, which had been dormant since 2022. The subsequent Houthi attacks on Red Sea shipping have meant that both the sea and the strait flanking the Arabian Peninsula were simultaneously under fire, for the first time in history, until the US-Iran exchanges ceased on July 25.

US-Iran: State of play

On July 27, Washington's UN Ambassador said President Donald Trump wanted to give negotiations a chance again, with Trump himself stating "friendly negotiations" were underway on Iran's request. Tehran rejected this characterisation.

Since early July, as Iran rejected American efforts to push through a new shipping channel through Omani waters and targeted ships that did not coordinate with Iran, the US resumed kinetic action with a focus on degrading Iran's ability to enforce the Memorandum of Understanding's Article 5, which allowed joint Iranian and Omani administration of the Strait. This was supposed to weaken Iran's bargaining power during nuclear negotiations.

Neither has occurred. Iran's control of Hormuz remains, Tehran and Muscat have continued holding negotiations to finalize arrangements to enforce Article 5, and Iran has broadened talks to include Saudi Arabia. Moreover, Iran would deem its own case for nuclear enrichment to be strengthened by Saudi Arabia's pact with the US on July 22 to begin nuclear energy cooperation.

So, the US will likely be again incentivised to hit Iranian nuclear targets as well as its Hormuz infrastructure until it is satisfied with the degradation of Iranian capabilities.

Fallout one: Kuwait-Pakistan

The recurring fighting between the US and Iran, as well as pauses between kinetic action, have reinforced an old learning in key Arab states, that regardless of their current dependence on foreign arms, internal capability development as well as improved military training is an inescapable long-term need. Hence, Kuwait's DCA with Pakistan focuses on military training, education, intelligence sharing, logistics, defense technology, research and exchanges of expertise.

The agreement does not mimic the Saudi-Pakistan Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement (SDMA), signed in September 2025, given that it does not bind either party to the other's defence when attacked.

But SMDA has also shown that true mutual defence commitments are not the main objective of Arab states with Pakistan — neither has Pakistan struck Iran or Houthi territories nor has Saudi Arabia struck Afghanistan. Rather, it is meant to entrench Pakistan's role in Saudi capability build-up in the long term, while Riyadh adopts a mix of means to tackle present threats.

For Kuwait and Qatar (along with other GCC states), intra-Gulf geopolitical divergences are secondary to the objective of securing long-term defence partners whose expertise can be used to build up domestic capability. This means even if Pakistan is viewed differently by each of these states, its value as a security partner overrides these differences. That Pakistan is reliant on these states for economic stability adds a unique layer of assurance and leverage.

Fallout two: Houthi-Saudi

Among the most crucial fallouts of the US-Iran war is the return of Saudi-Houthi fighting since July 14, when the Saudi-based Yemeni government in exile bombed the Houthi-controlled Sana'a Airport to reportedly prevent an Iranian plane from landing. In response, the Houthis fired ballistic missiles into Saudi territory and declared a naval blockade of Saudi Arabia in the Bab-el-Mandeb strait. Both sides have since targeted each other's infrastructure.

Despite this US-Iran triggered Saudi-Houthi escalation, it is unlikely that Riyadh wants to proactively return to full-scale fighting in Yemen. It was Houthi attacks against Aramco facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais in 2019 that had prompted a shift in Saudi strategy towards both Yemen and Iran, prioritising engagement as the path to stability.

For perspective, despite the Yemeni Houthis claiming responsibility for the 2026 Aramco attack, Riyadh participated in US strikes on Iran-backed militias in Iraq on July 29. This reflects the Saudi desire to satisfy its deterrence needs by acting against other parts of Iran's Axis of Resistance, instead of risking a larger war with the Houthis.

Now, Riyadh's need for regional stability increases significantly due to the 123 Agreement and its long-due quest for nuclear power. A Houthi attack on a future Saudi nuclear power plant could be more dangerous than strikes on oil facilities.

What now

The Donald Trump administration is seemingly focused on preventing Iran from materially gaining from the MoU's provisions, which leaves room for more strike exchanges before substantial negotiations for a final deal begin. For regional states, this predicament is as untenable as a potential return to full-scale war.

CONSUMPTION CREDIT, LIKE PERSONAL LOANS & CREDIT CARDS, HAS EMERGED AS DOMINANT SEGMENT

Overleveraged borrowers jump 3x, credit expansion slows: CIBIL

George Mathew
Mumbai, July 30

INDIA'S DECADE-long expansion in formal credit has brought millions of first-time borrowers into the banking system, but the next phase of growth could be far more challenging as rising consumer indebtedness, slowing borrower growth and shrinking participation by first-time borrowers emerge as key concerns, according to a TransUnion CIBIL study.

A big warning sign is the steady increase in financially stretched borrowers. The share of overleveraged consumers rose threefold — from 5% in FY17 to 18% in FY24 — before easing marginally to 15% in FY26 after industry intervention, says the CIBIL report, *Unlocking Access: Journey of Credit Expansion in India*.

The excessive borrowing is concentrated largely among younger consumers, who have also been the fastest-growing segment of India's retail credit market. Another concern is the sharp slowdown in the pace of expansion of active borrowers. The proportion of credit-active consumers within the credit-eligible population also increased during this period, from 11% in March 2017 to 28% in March 2026. However, the compounded annual growth rate of the credit-active consumer base moderated from 14% during the March 2017–March 2019 period to 9% during March 2024–March 2026 period, suggesting that the easy gains from financial inclusion may be tapering off, CIBIL said.

The pipeline of new borrowers is also shrinking. New-to-Credit (NTC) consumers accounted for 32% of retail loan originations in 2017 but their share has fallen to just 13% by 2026. This indicates that lenders are increasingly relying on repeat borrowers instead of expanding the formal credit net to households that have never borrowed before. "These numbers indicate significant opportunity to both deepen engagement with those already within the credit fold, and to bring new consumers into the formal credit ecosystem," CIBIL said.

The nature of borrowing has also undergone a significant shift. Consumption credit—including personal loans, credit cards and consumer durable finance—has emerged as the dominant segment, with the share of active borrowers holding such products increasing from 34% to 51% over the period.

The study also flags concerns in the commercial lending ecosystem. Further, the share of entities that have accessed commercial credit declined from 50% to 41%, the credit-active share dipped from 10% to 9% and NTC also went down from 60% to 39% between quarter ended March 2021 and quarter ended March 2026. This indicates further capacity to bring eligible enterprises and medium, small and micro entrepreneurs into formal credit, it said.

This also shows that millions of micro and small enterprises continue to remain outside the organised credit system despite improved creditworthiness.

Geographically, the report finds that India's credit map is undergoing a structural shift. Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Bihar have recorded faster growth in credit participation than traditional markets such as Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu.

While this reflects widening financial inclusion beyond the country's established economic centres, it also places greater responsibility on lenders to maintain underwriting standards as lending expands rapidly into relatively newer markets.

The report nevertheless highlights the remarkable expansion of formal finance. The share of credit-eligible Indians who have borrowed at least once has increased from 35% in 2017 to 74% in 2026, while credit monitoring has risen sharply, pointing to growing financial awareness. Women borrowers increased their share from 22% in March 2017 to 30% in March 2026, while that of young borrowers rose from 33% to 39% in the same period.

"What also stands out is how India's state-wise credit heatmap has undergone a gradual but clear shift. While the traditionally dominant states in west and south India continue their strong credit uptake, states in north and central India have seen a remarkable rise in credit participation," said Bhavesh Jain, MD and CEO, TransUnion CIBIL.

FULL REPORT ON WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

• EMERGING HEADWINDS?

THE SHARE of over-leveraged consumers has risen threefold, from 5% in FY17 to 18% in FY24, before easing marginally to 15% in FY26 after industry intervention, the report said

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THE SHARE of entities that have accessed commercial credit declined from 50% to 41%

RBI tightens transparency norms on bulk deposit rates, allows LCR-linked pricing

George Mathew
Mumbai, July 30

THE RESERVE Bank of India (RBI) has tightened disclosure norms for deposit interest rates while simultaneously giving banks greater flexibility to price such deposits based on liquidity risks, a move that comes on the heels of HDFC Bank facing questions over the pricing of bulk deposits in the Maharashtra State Road Development Corporation (MSRDC) case.

The interest rates offered on deposits, including bulk deposits, should be uniform across all branches and for all customers and there should be no discrimination in the matter of interest paid on the deposits, between one deposit and another deposit of similar amount, accepted on the same date, at any of its offices, the RBI said while amending the guidelines.

Under the revised rules, banks will now be required to publish interest rates applicable to all deposits, including bulk deposits, on their websites in advance. More importantly, interest rates for bulk deposits must be displayed every business day by 10 AM, with a maximum grace period until 10.10 AM, the central bank said.

The exception

However, a bank will have the freedom to offer differential interest rate on bulk deposits, by considering the differential run-off rate applicable to deposits or unsecured wholesale funding under the LCR (liquidity coverage ratio) framework, as specified in the Reserve Bank of India (Commercial Banks – Asset Liability Management) Directions, 2025, the RBI said.

This will be applicable on rupee deposits of non-residents as well. If a liquidity crisis occurs, run-off rate is the proportion of the fund/ deposits likely to leave the bank. The bank must hold enough High Quality Liquid Assets (HQLA) like cash held, government bonds and central bank reserves, to cover such stressed outflows.

The current run-off rate is 12.5%, including 2.5% of the deposits raised through digital channels. Higher run-off rates increase the bank's expected cash outflows, reduce the LCR (liquidity coverage ratio) ratio and require the bank to hold more liquid assets.

LCR indicates whether a bank has enough high-quality liquid assets.

The central bank on Thursday issued the Reserve Bank of India (Commercial Banks- Interest Rate on Deposits) Second Amendment Directions, 2026, which will come into effect from October 1, 2026.

On May 27, *The Indian Express* reported that the private sector lender had conducted an internal vigilance investigation into interest payments of Rs 45 crore, "camouflaged" as marketing expenditure, made to MSRDC for 2023-24 and 2024-25. The report further pointed that the internal investigation was ordered on March 12 by the Audit Committee of the board, just six days before Atanu Chakraborty abruptly resigned as the bank's part-time chairman, saying "certain happenings and practices within the bank are not in congruence with my personal values and ethics".

The internal audit of the bank's marketing department had flagged these payments and rated the department's performance as "unsatisfactory", investigation by The Indian Express showed. These payments were disguised as contributions to a road safety awareness campaign through local vendors.

The latest RBI move is likely to make it harder for banks to negotiate rates for select clients without publicly reflecting those rates in their published schedules.

The requirement for daily disclosures creates a transparent benchmark against which deposit pricing can be scrutinised by regulators, auditors and depositors.

Banks can now distinguish between categories of wholesale deposits based on how sticky or stable they are from a liquidity management perspective.

FULL REPORT ON WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

• TIGHTER NORMS

UNDER THE revised rules, banks will now be required to publish interest rates applicable to all deposits, including bulk deposits, on their websites in advance

INTEREST RATES for bulk deposits must be displayed every business day by 10 AM, with a maximum grace period until 10.10 AM

THE LATEST RBI move is likely to make it harder for banks to negotiate rates for select clients without publicly reflecting those rates in their published schedules

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Govt: No pressure on automakers to back E20 petrol or hide info

Sukalp Sharma
New Delhi, July 30

THERE IS no pressure from the government on vehicle manufactures to support E20 petrol or to hide any facts about the fuel, the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas (MoPNG) said Thursday, rejecting certain claims doing the rounds on social media. Amid the public backlash over E20 fuel — 80 parts petrol and 20 parts ethanol — the ministry also rejected claims that automakers have privately indicated that E20 is not desirable.

India achieved 20% ethanol blending in petrol last year and E20 is the standard petrol variant available across the country. There has been a public backlash over the E20 fuel, with claims ranging from notable reduction in mileage and engine component wear and tear in older vehicles whose engines were not designed for higher ethanol blends.

On its part, the government has been attempting to allay fears, saying that the drop in mileage in older vehicles would be 3-5% at most, and would be outweighed by the benefits like higher octane rating, superior anti-knock characteristics, faster combustion, better pickup, smoother acceleration and cleaner engine operation. The government has also consistently rejected claims that E20 fuel could damage engine components, saying that the extensive testing and field validation was done before E20 petrol was rolled out.

"Had automobile manufacturers not been satisfied with the scientific validation, they would neither have certified E20-compatible vehicles, nor continued to honour warranty obligations. Manufacturers continue to honour warranties for vehicles operating on specification-compliant E20 fuel because they have confidence in the extensive testing that preceded the rollout," the MoPNG said.

"India's automobile manufacturers are independent listed companies with legal and regulatory obligations to their customers. They cannot conceal widespread vehicle defects without exposing themselves to warranty claims, product liability, regulatory action and serious reputational damage," it added.

According to the government, vehicle manufacturers wouldn't have honoured vehicle warranties after E20 rollout had they believed that the fuel was fading systemic engine damage. Warranty decisions are based on engineering validation and field experience, not political considerations, it said. The MoPNG also referred to a July 4 press conference, in which senior executives from top automakers said that E20 was introduced only after rigorous testing and extensive validation.

FULL REPORT ON WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

EU FTA has enough safeguards to cushion CBAM impact, says Centre

ENS Economic Bureau
New Delhi, July 30

THE FREE Trade Agreement (FTA) with the European Union (EU) has enough safeguards built-in to cushion the impact of the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) on Indian companies and ensures that they also benefit from any future relaxations in the carbon tax regime, a senior official said Thursday.

"CBAM (carbon border adjustment mechanism) took a lot of negotiating capital...In the text, there is a separate Annexure on dealing with CBAM. The first pillar is that in case of flexibility in future (in CBAM), that will be available to India," additional secretary in the Department of Commerce Darpan Jain said at Indo-German Chamber of Commerce (IGCC) Industry Dialogue.

Jain also is the Chief negotiator of India-EU FTA.

CBAM compliances are a concern among Small and Medium Enterprises in terms of verification, in terms of finding out what is the value of embedded carbon and ensuring that the verifiers are recognized by the EU authorities.

The agreement also has a provision in which India can engage with EU authorities on taking into account the carbon price, which is paid in India and adjusting it against the final carbon tax liability in the 27-member bloc.

"India is currently developing its own carbon pricing mechanism. So, how to offset what is paid in India from what is paid in Europe, so even that is part of it," he said. **FE**

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Wildfires rage across Europe even as France and Spain see some respite

Reuters
Bordeaux, Madrid, Athens, July 23

FRANCE, SPAIN and Greece battled major wildfires on Thursday, with Spain bringing one blaze under control but facing new threats as intense heat, dry vegetation and powerful winds kept much of southern Europe on alert.

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez downgraded the emergency level for a major fire on the border between Madrid and Castilla y Leon, but warned the danger had not passed as at least 10 other blazes caused concern across the country.

In France, two people were arrested on suspicion of arson as crews contained a vast fire near Bordeaux, while fires in Greece killed three firefighters and forced tourists and residents to flee parts of Crete, some by boat.

"We barely made it... we were running and the fire was behind us, chasing us," said Lia Galata, a Greek seasonal tourism worker who found shelter in an indoor gym and had to be evacuated by boat as a blaze tore through the hills above a resort on Crete late Wednesday.

"We have difficult days ahead of us," Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said.

Emergency crews have faced barely a pause between heatwaves and fire fronts this summer across an increasingly tinder-dry Europe, the world's fastest-warming continent.

In eastern England, firefighters were tackling a significant wildfire at Dunwich Heath, prompting the evacuation of about 200 caravans from the area, a significant biodiversity site. Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service called the blaze one of the most challenging incidents.

Clooney family forced to flee 'beautiful home'

Paris: George Clooney has said his family has been forced to evacuate their home in southeastern France as a wildfire burned nearby, his agent said Thursday. The Hollywood star behind the *Ocean's Eleven* franchise and other films made the statement in a letter to Didier Bremond, mayor of Brignoles, publicist Guido Gotz said.

"At this point we have no idea whether our beautiful home makes it through this terrible moment"... Amal and I are committed to making sure that whatever happens to our village" Clooney wrote, referring to his wife Amal. **REUTERS**

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From crutches to podium: Sreeshankar's comeback

Long jumper won his second CWG silver in a row

Pritish Raj
New Delhi, July 30

SREESHANKAR MURALI jumped 8.09m to clinch the men's long jump silver at the 2026 Commonwealth Games on Wednesday. He had won the same medal at the 2022 edition with an effort of 8.08m.

After the final jump, which was a foul, Sreeshankar looked disappointed, knowing that he could have won the gold which went to Tajay Gayle of Jamaica with a mark of 8.15m.

However, the two silvers four years apart and the improvement of 0.01m have been accompanied by a lot of change for the jumper from Palakkad, Kerala. Sreeshankar, who also won the 2023 Asian Games silver, ruptured the patellar tendon in his knee, that too in his take-off leg, ruling him out for the 2024 Paris Olympics.

The Glasgow silver is Sreeshankar's first major medal after making a comeback a year ago. "Him competing now and winning a major medal again is a blessing in itself. When he was walking with the help of crutches after surgery, all I wished was that he could walk freely," Sreeshankar's father Murali told *The Indian Express* from Glasgow.

Surgeons had warned before the surgery that he might not be able to run again.

"It looked dangerous. When I first broke my knee and had the MRI report in my hand, it looked over for me. I never thought that I would be able to jump 8m again," Sreeshankar had said before leaving for Glasgow. Following a lengthy rehabilitation, Sreeshankar made his comeback and managed to qualify for the World Championships.

"Last year was a crazy ride for me. I had just five competitions but somehow managed to make it to the Worlds. Competing there was like a dream at that time," he said.

Sreeshankar was injured during a training session before the Olympics, and the fear of hurting the knee again kept coming back to him.

"Even after I was cleared to train, I was afraid. It took a lot of self- talk and convincing for me to get back to the field," the 27-year-old said.

"My knee is not 100 percent even now. It remains swollen. There are three anchor screws in it, so I need to ice it regularly and take a deep tissue massage. But, I have got used to the new training regime now."

After returning from injury, Sreeshankar worked with renowned Strength and Conditioning coach Wayne Lombard, who helped him finalise a training regime.

"Wayne is very efficient. He understands what my knee needs and with his help, I have figured out a training regime that allows me to compete with a surgically repaired tendon," explained Sreeshankar.

Path to consistency

Since his return to the international arena, Sreeshankar has been extremely consistent. In the 2026 season, he has crossed the 8m mark in every competition he had featured in with his best jump of 8.38m coming last month at the Inter-State Athletics Championships in Bhubaneswar.

"There are two reasons behind my consistency: better understanding of my body and quick adaptability to conditions," Sreeshankar had said there. "During my injury, I completed a course on kinesiology which helped me in understanding my body. Even during competition, if something happens, I can adjust my technique according to the situation."

He has acquired this adaptability from his years of travelling around the world, competing with the best in the business.

"The likes of Miltiadis Tentoglou (former Olympic champion) don't care what the weather is: whether the wind is strong or if it's raining. They just go for the jump. I have inculcated the same habits where I ignore the conditions. All of this has really helped me remain consistent," Sreeshankar said.

With another Commonwealth Games silver medal in his pocket, Sreeshankar is eyeing the Asian Games, which start in September, where the long jumper will look to upgrade his silver from the last edition.

Sreeshankar Murali came second to Tajay Gayle of Jamaica, with an effort of 8.09m. PTI

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• Top five

Name	Nation	Best
T. Gayle	JAM	8.15m
M. Sreeshankar	IND	8.09m
S. Mackenzie	SCO	8.08m
C. Mitrevski	AUS	8.02m
L. Sathyanathan	IND	7.97m

> **Him competing now and winning a major medal again is a blessing in itself. When he was walking with the help of crutches after surgery, all I wished was that he could walk freely"**
>
> **MURALI,** SREESHANKAR'S FATHER ON HIS CWG 2026 SILVER

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Le Clos sets new record with 21st Games medal

Reuters
Glasgow, July 30

VETERAN SOUTH African swimmer Chad le Clos won a 21st Commonwealth Games medal late on Wednesday to overtake Australia's Emma McKeon as the most decorated athlete in the Games' history.

The 34-year-old swam the butterfly leg as South Africa took bronze in the men's 4x100 medley relay for his third of the 2026 Games after silver in the mixed 4x100 medley and bronze in the men's 4x100 freestyle relay.

His record tally is made up of seven golds, five silvers and nine bronzes across the last five Games, starting in Delhi in 2010 at the age of 18 where he earned five medals, and then followed by seven medals in Glasgow in 2014.

He continued with five more on the Gold Coast in 2018 and one in Birmingham four years ago.

"It was emotional, but I think those first two medals (in Glasgow 2026) were just a little bit more just because I had to get over the hump and tonight I just had to stay cool and bring it home," he said after Wednesday's relay.

"The way the boys and girls swam ...they swam their hearts out. They kept saying 'we're doing this for Chad' before they walked down and it just means the world to me."

Chad Le Clos overtook Emma McKeon's 20 medals. REUTERS

Le Clos is also an Olympic champion. He stunned the sporting world when he pipped Michael Phelps by 0.05 seconds to win the 200m butterfly gold at the 2012 London Games.

At the time, American icon Phelps was a 14-time Olympic champion and he had not lost in the event since 2001.

Le Clos won medals at the Olympics in Rio in 2016 and has since competed in Tokyo and Paris. He has previously said he hopes to qualify for his fifth Olympics in Los Angeles in two years' time.

COMMONWEALTH GAMES

'Adopted' by coach when he was 11, Gavit pays him back with sprint gold

'Today is *Guru Purnima* and there is no better gift than this gold medal', says para athlete who won 100m T47 gold

Pritish Raj
New Delhi, July 30

WHEN DILIP Gavit produced the last dash to win gold in the men's 100m T47, a burst over the final 30 metres to cross in 10.71 seconds, his childhood coach Vaijnath Kale, watching from the stands, remembered the years of struggle behind it. Coach and athlete embraced; emotions took over.

Two months before the Commonwealth Games, Gavit was not even certain he would compete in Glasgow.

His actual event, the 400m T47, was not on the programme. At the insistence of a Paralympic Committee of India official, he switched to the 100m, a distance he had barely raced. Wednesday's run, on a rain-soaked track in Lane 7, was his first major race over it.

"Today is Guru Purnima and there is no better gift than this gold medal. But whatever I do, it won't even get close to what Kale sir has done for me," Gavit said. Kale told *The Indian Express* from Glasgow, more simply, "When dreams come true, such emotions come out. The medal is a testament that a boy from a non-descript village of Nashik can dream and then achieve that dream."

Five years earlier, an 18-year-old Gavit had said of his coach, "If he asks me to leave running and try jumping, I will do it without asking a question."

He was not speaking about the 100m. But he might as well have been.

It was also a redemption. The 400m T47 was the event he had built his career around, an Asian Para Games gold in 2022, a Paralympic final in Paris in 2024, where he finished last, eighth of eight, in 49.99 seconds. Glasgow came in a discipline he had never seriously run. He became the first Indian to win a Commonwealth Games gold in a para athletics track event, and only the second Indian ever to win one in para athletics, after Sharmila Dhankar's shot put gold days earlier in the same city.

Gavit was born to a farming tribal family in Toran Dongri, near Nashik, one of six children the household was struggling to feed. He lost his right arm at around four or five, accounts he has given have varied slightly, after falling from a mango tree. "My parents took me to an ayurvedic practitioner instead of a proper hospital," he has said. "They just applied some medication and bandaged my arm." The wound turned septic before proper treatment came. "If my parents had gone to a proper doctor in the first place, they could have saved my arm."

The amputation made him, in the family's own reckoning, one more mouth they could not afford. Kale spotted the 11-year-old at a school meet.

"I saw the talent and then his conditions," Kale said. "I decided to adopt him. His family said that they have nothing to give but I convinced them to send Dilip with me." It took him more than a month. The family agreed only once he promised to cover whatever the boy would need.

Gavit moved into Kale's home. "My sir has two children and now I am like the eldest son," he has said. "Coach sir is everything to me. I trust him blindly."

Navigating lows

Kale was a technical official for the Maharashtra Olympic Association, running his own small academy on the side, when he took Gavit in. "I was struggling myself but I thought that I have enough to survive while this guy has nothing. Let me help him," he said.

During and after the pandemic, Kale sold his land to fund Gavit's foreign trips. "Whatever problems came, we navigated it together like a father and son would," he said. "I sold my land but I don't have any regrets."

Asked if he had imagined Gavit would come this far, Kale said, "All I wanted was a good life for this kid because he had the talent and seeing his family conditions broke my heart. But I had never thought that one decision would take us so far."

The 2022 Asian Para Games gold was proof the sacrifice had meant something. "That one medal showed that our hard work hasn't gone to waste," Kale said. "It just fuelled us up for more and more glory."

"These medals are the result of that moment," Gavit says of the day Kale took him in. "For me, he is my father, mother and everything."

He has one target left. "I have won the Asian Games, now I have CWG gold. Now, I want to win a Paralympics medal." Kale says he simply wants to cherish the moment with the boy he calls his son.

Basil shines

Behind Gavit at the finish was Mohammed Basil Morssinganakath, of Malappuram, Kerala, born without a right hand, who took silver in 10.83 seconds.

It was Basil, not Gavit, who had won their head-to-head at the Commonwealth Games trials, clocking 10.64 seconds to Gavit's slower time. "I have seen Basil since his younger days," Para-Athletics head coach Satyanarayan said. "He joined SAI Trivandrum as a kid and has been constantly progressing since then." Trials are not Games. On Wednesday, in a final that had nothing to do with what either of them had done before it, India finished one and two.

Para athlete Dilip Gavit celebrates after winning gold in Glasgow. PTI

(Top) A young Dilip with his coach Vaijnath Kale during his early years. (Above) Dilip with silver medallist Mohammed Basil Morssinganakath.
SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT/PTI

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