

## IN JAGDEEP DHANKHAR'S SHADOW

## Justice Varma's removal: Process to begin, Speaker to name probe panel

Birla, officiating RS Chairman Harivansh meet; both will discuss panel composition

LIZ MATHEW  
NEW DELHI, JULY 23

THE PROCESS of removal of Justice Yashwant Varma will be set in motion in the Lok Sabha soon with Speaker Om Birla expected to announce the constitution of a statutory committee to investigate the grounds on which the removal of the judge is sought, *The Indian Express* has learned.

Birla and Rajya Sabha Deputy Chairman Harivansh met Wednesday with Secretaries General of both the Houses and the officials discussed the modalities to finalise the procedure. Union Home Minister Amit Shah also joined the meeting later.

The discussions took place on a day the Supreme Court said it will set up a bench to hear Justice Varma's plea challenging the legal validity of the in-house inquiry committee which confirmed charges of recovery of



Justice Yashwant Varma

unaccounted cash from his official residence in Delhi.

This comes in the shadow of Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar's surprise resignation Monday evening and, as *The Indian Express* reported Tuesday, hours after his decision to accept the Opposition's notice on Justice Varma had rubbed the government the wrong way.

This had created "confusion," government sources said, because Birla had received a similar notice from Lok Sabha MPs with 145 signatures around 12.30 pm Monday, hours before Dhankhar made the reference to the Opposition notice in the Rajya Sabha.

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Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla with Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge during a ceremony to pay tribute to Bal Gangadhar Tilak on his birth anniversary, at the Old Parliament Building on Wednesday. PTI

EC sets ball rolling for V-P election, says schedule to be released soon

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE  
NEW DELHI, JULY 23

THE ELECTION Commission on Wednesday announced that it had started the process for holding the election for the post of Vice-President, two days after Jagdeep Dhankhar's sudden mid-term resignation on Monday evening.

In a statement, the EC said the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) had notified Dhankhar's resignation on Tuesday. "The Election Commission of India, under Article 324, is mandated to conduct the election to the office of the Vice President of India. The election to the office of the Vice President of India is governed by the Presidential and Vice-Presidential Elections Act, 1952, and the rules made thereunder, namely the Presidential and Vice-Presidential Elections Rules, 1974. Accordingly, the Election Commission of India has already started the preparations relating to the Vice-Presidential Elections, 2025," the EC said.

It said that once preparations are complete, the election schedule would be announced as soon as possible. Among the activities that have commenced are the preparation of the electoral college, finalisation of the Returning Officer/ Assistant Returning Officer(s), and preparation and dissemination of background material on all previous

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## SETS STAGE FOR SR TALKS

## After 5-yr gap, India resumes tourist visas for Chinese; border meeting held too

Expressed satisfaction with peace, tranquility in border areas, says MEA

DIVYA A  
NEW DELHI, JULY 23

INDIA AND China on Wednesday reviewed the situation along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and prepared the ground for the next round of Special Representatives' talks to be held in India later this year.

In a related development, as part of the ongoing efforts to repair bilateral ties, India said it would resume issuance of tourist visas to Chinese nationals from Thursday, after a gap of five years. This comes almost a month after resumption of the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra on June 30.

The two sides reviewed the situation at the 34th meeting of the Working Mechanism for Consultation & Coordination (WMCC) on India-China border affairs in New Delhi, four months after the last such meeting was held in Beijing.

"The two sides reviewed the situation in the India-China border areas. They expressed satis-

**EXPLAINED**  
**E** Towards normal ties

THE LATEST move is part of a series of confidence-building measures that the two countries have been taking in recent months. Besides resumption of the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra, the two sides have also said that direct flights will restart soon. The de-escalation of troops on the LAC remains on the agenda.

faction with the general prevalence of peace and tranquility in the border areas, leading to gradual normalisation of bilateral relations," the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) said, adding that India and China agreed to maintain regular exchanges and

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## CBDT CHIEF INTERVIEW

## To nudge taxpayers, I-T dept tracks online visits and filters PANs

How many times taxpayer accessed statements, high-value transactions

AANCHAL MAGAZINE  
NEW DELHI, JULY 23

FROM TRACKING the number of online visits of users on its portal to flagging high-value transactions and filtering out PANs involved in wrongful claims, the Income Tax Department is now leveraging artificial intelligence to identify patterns in taxpayer behaviour.

For instance, repeated online access to Annual Information Statement, which is a detailed summary of a pre-filled Income Tax Return, could point to a tax return that needs to be filed, but is not being filed. Or, it is just possible that the taxpayer is unable to file returns correctly despite multiple attempts. The I-T Department can use this information to intervene and help the taxpayer.

The idea is to progressively create a 360-degree profile of taxpayers' transactions and identify patterns and nuances in the filing of tax returns, said Central



CBDT Chairman Ravi Agrawal

Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT) Chairman Ravi Agrawal in an interview to *The Indian Express*.

The department is a repository of rich data — as many as 40 crore AIS were generated from an estimated 650 crore financial transactions in the last financial year. Based on AI-linked data analysis, the Department is of the view there is scope for improvement in the total number of returns being filed.

While nine crore returns were filed by taxpayers last year, about 7.42 crore taxpayers are recorded as having viewed their AIS, returning as many as 3.5 times on an average to see their statements.

AI is also helping raise "red flags" in high-value transactions, but where returns are not being

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## ON 2-NATION VISIT

Prime Minister Narendra Modi leaves on a four-day visit to the UK and the Maldives, Wednesday. India and the UK are likely to sign the Free Trade Agreement during his visit. PTI P8



● India, China hold border talks

contacts on boundary affairs at the diplomatic and military levels through established mechanisms.

The Indian delegation was led by Gourangalal Das, Joint Secretary (East Asia), and the Chinese delegation was led by Hong Liang, Director General of the Boundary & Oceanic Affairs Department of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, it said. The two sides prepared for the next round of Special Representatives' talks to be held in India later this year, between National Security Advisor Ajit Doval and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi.

"With a view to advancing effective border management and sustaining peace & tranquility, the two sides deliberated on various measures as explored during the previous (23rd) round of SR (Special Representatives) talks and the 33rd meeting of WMCC," the MEA said.

The leader of the Chinese delegation later called on Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri, officials said. During the last meeting in March, the two sides had exchanged views on early resumption of cross-border cooperation and exchanges, including on trans-border rivers and Kailash Mansarovar Yatra.

Meanwhile, in a notification on Wednesday, the Indian Embassy in Beijing said Chinese nationals could apply for tourist visas from Thursday, and explained the required procedure, including the documents that have to be submitted at the Indian visa application centres in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou.

India had suspended issuance of tourist visas to Chinese nationals in 2020, in the wake of the Covid pandemic, but the restrictions continued in view of the military standoff along the Line of Actual Control in eastern Ladakh that began in May 2020.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry welcomed the move as a positive and beneficial step. "We take note of India's resumption of tourist visas for Chinese citizens. This is a positive move," China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in a post on X. "Easing cross-border travel is widely beneficial. China will maintain communication and consultation with India to further facilitate travel between the two countries," it said.

The developments come just

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over a week after External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar's visit to China for the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation) meet earlier this month. In the meeting with his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi, Jaishankar had said that while India and China had made good progress in the past nine months towards the normalisation of bilateral relations, they should work to address de-escalation on the border.

He had underlined that "differences should not become disputes" nor should "competition ever become conflict". Jaishankar had also called on Chinese President Xi Jinping and apprised him of the "recent development" in bilateral ties.

Xi and Prime Minister Narendra Modi also met on the sidelines of the BRICS Summit in Kazan, Russia, on October 23 last year, days after a border patrolling arrangement was announced on October 21, leading to disengagement on the ground. An estimated 50,000-60,000 troops are still stationed at the border. Since then, Doval has travelled to China twice; Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and Misri have also gone there for meetings.

The Kailash Mansarovar Yatra, which began on June 30 and will continue till the end of August, was on top of India's wishlist since the talks to normalise ties began last year. The two sides have also said that they will resume direct flights soon.

Before the suspension of tourist visas, about 2 lakh visas were issued to Chinese nationals in 2019, and about 1.63 lakh in 2018, according to official data. China does not rank among the top source countries for foreign tourist arrivals in India. For instance, in 2019, the total foreign tourist arrivals touched 1.09 crore, according to tourism ministry statistics.

In April this year, the Chinese Embassy in India had said that it had issued over 85,000 visas to Indian citizens between January 1 and April 9, 2025. "As of April 9, 2025, the Chinese Embassy and Consulates in India have issued more than 85,000 visas to Indian citizens travelling to China this year. Welcome more Indian friends to visit China, and experience an open, safe, vibrant, sincere and friendly China," Chinese Ambassador to India Xu Feihong had said in a post on X.

FROM PAGE ONE

FULL REPORTS ON  
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Justice Varma's removal: Process to begin soon

"The Speaker received the notices from the Lok Sabha MPs and he had told us that he would constitute a committee. That's what the law says," said a senior BJP MP who was part of the group that submitted the notice.

BJP sources said that Dhankhar, who resigned as vice president and Rajya Sabha chairman, did not "admit" the Opposition's notice. Pointing out that 63 Rajya Sabha MPs, from various Opposition parties, gave a notice for the removal of Justice Varma, Dhankhar did mention on Monday that it met the "numerical requirement of signing" by MPs for "setting in motion a process of removal of a High Court judge. But he added that according to the Judges (Inquiry) Act, when notices of a motion are submitted on the same day in both the Houses of Parliament, a committee to examine the charges levelled against the judge will be constituted by the Lok Sabha Speaker and the Rajya

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Sabha Chairman."

Former Lok Sabha Secretary PDT Achary said that when the Speaker received the notice from Lok Sabha MPs, the process of removal was set in motion. "The Speaker has to admit it. Then the Speaker will appoint a statutory committee, the Speaker does not have to bring it before the House. Because the House has no role at that stage," Achary said.

According to Achary, Dhankhar did not seem to have admitted the motion. "The Rajya Sabha Chairman has to admit the motion and then if simultaneously moved in both the Houses, the presiding officers would together constitute the statutory committee. But Dhankar just mentioned about the notice in the House on Monday, he had to admit it as per the law, which perhaps has not taken place," Achary added.

However, a senior minister said that the Rajya Sabha chair,

now deputy chairman Harivansh officiating as chairman, would be consulted for the constitution of the committee because Dhankar had mentioned it being in the chair.

Sources said the statutory committee – with one judge of the Supreme Court, one from the High Courts, and a distinguished jurist – will be announced soon. The committee will probe the charges against Justice Varma and submit a report to the Lok Sabha Speaker. If the committee finds him guilty, a motion will be taken up in the Lok Sabha and it will be discussed in detail. The motion will be put to vote and it requires a two-third majority to be passed. Once the process is over the same, will be repeated in the Rajya Sabha.

Meanwhile, the Supreme Court Wednesday said it would constitute a bench to hear Justice Varma's plea seeking to invalidate a report by an in-house inquiry panel, which

found him guilty of misconduct in the cash discovery row. Justice Varma has also sought quashing of the May 8 recommendation by then Chief Justice of India Sanjiv Khanna urging Parliament to initiate impeachment against him.

Justice Varma also challenged the conclusions of the report by the three-member in-house judicial panel. The three-judge panel, headed by Chief Justice Sheel Nagu of the Punjab and Haryana High Court, conducted the inquiry for 10 days, examined 55 witnesses and visited the scene of the fire that started at around 11.35 pm on March 14 at the official residence of Justice Varma, then a sitting judge of the Delhi High Court and now in the Allahabad High Court.

Acting on the report, then CJI Khanna wrote to President Droupadi Murmu and Prime Minister Narendra Modi recommending the judge's impeachment.

● EC sets ball rolling for V-P election, says schedule to be released soon

Vice-Presidential elections, the EC said.

The Vice-President is elected by an electoral college comprising members from both Houses of Parliament – Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha – including nominated members. Unlike in a presidential election, State Legislatures do not participate.

Under the Presidential and Vice-Presidential Elections Act, the EC is bound by a 30 to 32-day statutory timeline once it notifies the election schedule. The law allows 14 days for filing nominations, followed by one day for scrutiny and a two-day window for withdrawal of can-

didatures. If a poll is required, it must be held no earlier than 15 days after the withdrawal deadline – making it at least 32 days from notification to result.

Voting is held in Parliament House, by secret ballot, using the system of proportional representation with a single transferable vote. Each MP casts a vote by ranking candidates in order of preference. All votes carry equal value.

To be declared elected, a candidate must reach a required minimum number of votes -- called the quota. This is calculated by dividing the total number of valid votes by two, and adding one (fractions, if any, are

ignored). If no candidate crosses the quota in the first round, the one with the fewest first-preference votes is eliminated, and his/her votes are transferred to the remaining candidates based on second preferences. The process continues until one candidate crosses the quota.

Dhankhar, the former West Bengal Governor and a lawyer by profession, was elected to the post of V-P in 2022. His term was to end in August 2027. Citing health concerns, he wrote a resignation letter to President Droupadi Murmu on Monday evening, just hours after he had presided over the proceedings of the Rajya Sabha.

According to sources, the government was not happy about Dhankhar's decision to admit the Opposition's notice for an impeachment motion against Allahabad High Court judge Justice Yashwant Varma for the alleged cash found in his premises in New Delhi, even as the BJP was preparing a similar move in the Lok Sabha.

The only public statement from the government so far was Prime Minister Narendra Modi's post on X on Tuesday: "Shri Jagdeep Dhankhar Ji has got many opportunities to serve our country in various capacities, including as the Vice President of India. Wishing him good health".

● To nudge taxpayers, I-T dept tracks online visits and filters PANs

filed or the taxpayers are repeatedly committing a mistake in filing tax returns, prompting the Department to consider whether the taxpayer requires a "harder nudge", Agrawal said. The use of AI has also shown that there were gaps, and sometimes offered pointers to cases where the deductions and the exemptions that were claimed were not correct.

"On an average, taxpayers visited about 3.5 times to see their AIS. This means the visits to see their AIS, in aggregate, was 24 crore times. This becomes a reference point for the taxpayer to see their ledger and take a call on what tax is to be paid and whether advance tax has to be paid or not. This means there is a wide acceptance of the information and the ledger in the form of AIS. 9 crore people are filing the returns, and you have more than about 40 crore AIS. So, there is a scope for further increase in the number of returns. On an average, taxpayers visited about three and a half times to see their AIS. That means the visits to see their AIS, in aggregate, was 24 crore

times," Agrawal said.

The Income Tax Department has been taking measures for taxpayers to file returns correctly. In this direction, the Department on July 14 had initiated a large-scale verification operation across 150 locations in the country, targeting individuals and entities facilitating fraudulent claims of deductions and exemptions in ITRs that has resulted in identification of over 1.5 lakh PANs. "This was basically an exercise in that direction. The taxpayer reports certain income, and while calculating their income, reports certain exemptions or deductions which are taken on face value and the system processes. But what we found through AI was that there were gaps, and they were really patterns that emerged, which reflected that the deductions and the exemptions that were claimed were not the correct deductions/exemptions. So, therefore, our pan-India exercise was undertaken to also flag and bring home the point that while we trust the taxpayer, but then at the same time, incorrect claims of

deductions and exemptions is not acceptable," he said.

The CBDT Chairman said these actions were not specifically against the taxpayers but against the intermediaries or the facilitators who are misguiding the taxpayers. "Those could be professionals or intermediaries. Through those, more than 1.5 lakh PANs have been identified. The exercise is still going on," he said.

For filing updated returns, 19,501 taxpayers were nudged based on data received under automatic exchange of information, which resulted in 62 per cent of them revising their returns and a total of 30,161 taxpayers declared foreign assets worth Rs 29,208 crore and foreign income of Rs 1,089 crore. Over Rs 9,000 crore were also identified to have been claimed in excess deductions under Section 80GGC. Nudging taxpayers through SMS and emails led to a reduction of Rs 963 crore in deductions and payment of Rs 409.50 crore in additional taxes as of June 18. Around 89 lakh updated ITRs have also been filed, generating Rs 9,577.06 crore in

additional taxes as of June 18, 2025.

The data analysis has led the department to flag gaps by sending mails to taxpayers. "Whatever coordinates you have, you can inform. The second component is whosoever is filing the return, whether a correct return has been filed or not. In case, there is an obvious gap or something which needs to be flagged and from the taxpayer nudge him towards better compliance, and right compliance. And the third component is: if you find that the taxpayer is repeatedly committing a mistake, can there be a case of a harder nudge?" he said.

However, the department is facing a roadblock as the email addresses provided for communications are turning out to be those of intermediaries or temporary. "Since it is an end-to-end, e-enabled service that the Tax Department is providing, unless the taxpayer gives us the right coordinates of email and mobile, it becomes really very difficult for the department to correspond with the taxpayer," he said.



# Pakistan serial borrower, we are surging economy: India at UNSC

DIVYAA  
NEW DELHI, JULY 23

INDIA ON Tuesday told a UNSC meeting, presided by Pakistan, that there should be a “serious cost” to nations that foment cross-border terrorism, as it described the neighbouring country as a “serial borrower” that is “steeped in fanaticism”.

“As we debate promoting international peace and security, it is essential to recognise that there are some fundamental principles which need to be universally respected. One of them is zero tolerance for terrorism,” India’s Permanent Representative to the UN Ambassador Parvathaneni Harish said.

Harish delivered India’s statement at the open debate on ‘Promoting International Peace and Security through Multilateralism and Peaceful Settlement of Disputes’, which was also addressed by UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres. The debate was presided over by Pakistan, a non-permanent member of UNSC for 2025-26, as it currently holds the body’s rotating presidency for July.

Presiding over the debate, Pakistan Deputy PM and Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar raised the issue of J&K as well as the Indus Waters Treaty, which has been held in abeyance by India following the Pahalgam terror attack.

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Responding to Dar’s remarks, Harish said the Indian sub-continent offers a “stark contrast” in terms of progress, prosperity and development models. “On the one hand, there is India, which is a mature democracy, a surging economy and a pluralistic and inclusive society. At the other extreme is Pakistan, steeped in fanaticism and terrorism, and a serial borrower from the IMF,” he said.

Harish spoke about the April 22 Pahalgam terror attack for which The Resistance Front, a proxy of the Pakistan-based terror organisation Lashkar-e-Toiba, had claimed responsibility. He emphasised that there should be a “serious cost” to states that “violate the spirit of good neighbourliness and international relations by fomenting cross-border terrorism.”

He emphasised that India’s response to the attack was focused, measured, and non-escalatory in nature. “On achieving its primary objectives, a cessation of military activities was directly concluded at the request of Pakistan,” he said.

“In the recent decades, the nature of conflicts has transformed, with a proliferation of non-state actors, often propped up as proxies by state actors; and cross-border funding, arms trafficking, training of terrorists, and spread of radical ideologies, facilitated by modern digital and communication technologies,” he added.

## BEFORE EMBARKING ON TWO-NATION TOUR

# Modi says UK visit aimed at prosperity, job creation, growth

PM will also attend Maldives’ 60th independence day celebrations

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE  
NEW DELHI, JULY 23

BEFORE DEPARTING for the United Kingdom on Wednesday as part of his two-nation tour, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said his visit to the UK is aimed towards prosperity, growth and job creation in both countries. The two countries are expected to formally sign the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) during the visit, which is expected to double bilateral trade by 2030.

“During my meeting with Prime Minister Keir Starmer, we will have the opportunity to further enhance our economic partnership, aimed at fostering prosperity, growth and job creation in both countries. I also look forward to calling on His Majesty King Charles III during the visit,” the Prime Minister said in his departure statement.

Besides discussing the whole gamut of India-UK ties with his British counterpart, the PM will also take up issues of regional and global importance, including the Russia-Ukraine conflict and Gaza situation. The Cabinet had Tuesday approved the FTA between India and the UK, which will be signed in London on July 24.

Besides the expected signing ceremony of FTA with the UK, which was concluded in May this year, New Delhi will also raise the issue of pro-Khalistan

extremism and the fugitive economic offenders, officials said.

“India and the UK share a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership that has witnessed significant progress in recent years. Our collaboration spans a wide range of sectors, including trade, investment, technology, innovation, defence, education, research, sustainability, health and people-to-people ties,” Modi said.

After the UK, the PM travels to Maldives to participate as a Guest of Honour at the country’s 60th independence day celebrations. This year also marks the 60th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between India and Maldives.

“I look forward to my meetings with President Muizzu and other political leadership, to advance our joint vision of a Comprehensive Economic and Maritime Security Partnership, and to strengthen our cooperation for peace, prosperity and stability in the Indian Ocean Region,” Modi said on his two-day Maldives visit, a first by any heads of government during Muizzu’s presidency.

“I am confident that the visit will yield tangible outcomes, benefiting our people and advancing our Neighbourhood First Policy,” the PM said. The trip marks a reset of bilateral ties that had come under severe strain after Muizzu, known for his pro-China leanings, became president in November 2023.





# Only brute power rules



Across democracies, the silence and inaction over Gaza sends that message

PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

## THE WATER FRONT

After China's new project on Brahmaputra, India's plans to build storage facilities on the river must acquire urgency

LAST WEEK, THE Chinese government started work on the construction of a massive hydropower project on the Yarlung Zangbo, just before the river bends and enters Arunachal Pradesh, where it is called the Siang. The river then flows into Assam, where it is called the Brahmaputra. The \$170 billion project, linked to Beijing's developmental goals in the Tibetan region, is expected to generate 60 GW of electricity, roughly three times more than the Three Gorges Dam. The project has stirred old anxieties in the river's downstream, especially in Arunachal Pradesh and Bangladesh. Arunachal Chief Minister Pema Khandu has described the Chinese project as a "ticking water bomb". An increase in the Chinese capacity to manipulate the river's flows once the dam is constructed could increase the risks of floods in the country's Northeast, he has said. The fact that very little is known of the project's storage capacity has aggravated the unease. The risk could also stem from sudden surges in downstream flows — from unannounced water releases or from increased discharge as a result of the warming climate or even engineering errors. Hydrology experts fear that the Chinese project could disrupt water flow to the hydro projects proposed in the country's Northeast — the region holds nearly half of India's hydropower potential, over 80 per cent of which remains untapped.

India's Brahmaputra predicament is unlike that of most lower riparian states. The river gains most of its volume only after it enters Arunachal Pradesh, fed by largely river-fed tributaries in the Eastern Himalaya, such as the Lohit and the Dibang. In the Brahmaputra's lower riparian regions, the unpredictability of flood patterns is already a big challenge. The fears about inundation due to the river's changing flows are, therefore, not unfounded. In 2013, India and China signed a MoU on sharing information on river flows. But, by all accounts, Beijing has not always been open to sharing hydrological data. A more effective response to the Chinese dam would be to build up the defences of vulnerable regions in the Northeast. In 2017, when the Yarlung Zangbo dam was still at a planning stage, Niti Aayog had proposed a multipurpose project in the Siang region as a strategic counter to the Chinese hydro station. Besides generating electricity, the project's storage facility can cushion the Northeast from the risks of being flooded by water released from the Chinese dam. However, work on the Siang dam has progressed at a slow pace, largely because a section of the local population has opposed the project. The Ministry of Jal Shakti tasked the National Hydro Power Corporation to prepare a pre-feasibility report but vital investigations have not been conducted.

Fears about displacement and livelihood losses have found expression in the opposition to the Siang project. The political class and technical experts must come together to build safeguards and remove such apprehensions. The work on building storage facilities downstream of the Brahmaputra cannot be postponed.

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## BREAKING THE CHAIN

ICMR's push for TB diagnostic tests in primary healthcare centres could be crucial for early detection and treatment of infection

WITH THE AIM of making clinical testing for a wider range of diseases more accessible, the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) has updated its National List of Essential Diagnostics to include rapid diagnostic tests for sickle cell anaemia, thalassaemia, Hepatitis B and syphilis, among others. Significantly, there is a push for early detection of tuberculosis (TB) at the lower levels of the healthcare system — the list recommends collecting samples at the level of the sub health centre (SHC) for molecular TB testing in order to identify asymptomatic individuals, as well as the TB skin test in community healthcare centres, to detect the presence of the pathogen in those without an active infection.

WHO data shows that since 2015, India has made good progress in tackling TB. There has been a 17 per cent drop in the number of reported cases and a 20 per cent drop in the number of deaths. More than 85 per cent of those detected with the infection have received treatment and efforts to contain multi-drug-resistant TB are yielding results. It is evident that the TB problem is not intractable, but given India's massive disease burden, accounting for 27 per cent of the global cases, there is no room for complacency. The challenge is compounded by the problem of subclinical TB, where infected individuals do not yet present symptoms like persistent coughing. A study published in The International Journal of Tuberculosis and Lung Disease in 2024 found that 39 per cent of TB cases in India are subclinical, and therefore more likely to escape detection and continue spreading. This is why the attempt to tackle TB as early as possible matters. The ICMR's update, making molecular TB testing available at the level of the community health centre (CHC) — with sub-centres and primary healthcare centres (PHCs) also sending samples to be tested — could be crucial to providing timely treatment and breaking the chain of transmission.

Despite making significant progress, India is unlikely to meet its target of eliminating TB by the end of the year. The government has made the expansion of primary healthcare a key pillar of its policy, with the aim of bringing a broad spectrum of services closer to the people through the network of over 1.7 lakh centres around the country. The broadening of the TB diagnostics must be factored in, equipping SHCs and PHCs to identify and treat infected individuals as early as possible, even as initiatives to reduce the financial burden of treatment and improve access to nutrition are strengthened.

THE SILENCE AND denial around the moral catastrophe unfolding in Gaza only seems to grow in proportion to the scale of atrocity being inflicted on the Palestinian people. It is as if humanity is in moral regress. The fragile gains of international law — those slivers of humanitarian sensibility that once insisted atrocity on this scale must be unacceptable — are being steadily eroded.

There are signs of progress. The facts of what is happening in Gaza are more widely acknowledged, and the debate over how to legally and morally name the horror has intensified. Yet, paradoxically, the atrocity is also being made more invisible. Any ceasefire now will already be too late. The world will assuage its conscience only after mass death and destruction, and call the wreckage "peace".

But the silence around Gaza demands deeper analysis. Perhaps it was always naïve to believe that humanity was capable of sustained moral progress. As Bruce Robbins argues in *Atrocity: A Literary History*, moral indignation in the face of atrocity is historically rare. For much of human history, violence was treated like the weather — brutal, routine and morally unremarkable. Killing civilians was normal, and even the victims did not always think of themselves as morally wronged — only defeated. Often, mass violence was invested with redemptive meaning.

Even rulers with moral qualms about violence applied those doubts selectively. As a character in one of the few novels to confront moral culpability during wartime — Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* — says, "So it goes."

Robbins's powerful meditation exposes the many ways humanity evades confronting atrocity. Moral demands rarely override the narcissism of group identities. Even when atrocities are condemned, the critique is hemmed in: It must not destabilise existing hierarchies. Conservatives often fear mass violence not because of its human toll, but because it might disrupt order. Societies struggle to indict themselves; self-accusation is psychologically intolerable. Literature is saturated with violence, but most writers ultimately find it difficult to indict their own societies in the face of atrocity.

We are increasingly in a world in which moral concern is no longer trusted. It is pathological.

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Is there any precedent for this — where state after state not only denies the horror, but also actively expects silence? The US is effectively policing speech on Gaza, not just within its borders but globally. UN officials are being sanctioned with barely a murmur of protest from the international community. In India, criticism of Israel is now tantamount to being seen with the 'wrong side'. The states of West Asia now extensively regulate criticism of Israel. Australia is considering adopting a definition of anti-Semitism that, as Richard Flanagan noted in 'The Age', would render some of the most morally courageous Jewish voices — Joseph Roth, Tony Judt, Omer Bartov — effectively anti-Semitic.

ogised. Those who speak of atrocity are seen not as conscientious objectors but as the sort of people who feel superior in feeling bad about these things. They use it to make others feel bad. The function of atrocity talk is performing superiority, virtue-signalling, making others uncomfortable. Humanity's moral conscience, in the face of tribal loyalty, is shrinking terrain.

Yet there is still something alarmingly distinctive about Gaza. Is there any precedent for this — where state after state not only denies the horror, but also actively expects silence? The US is effectively policing speech on Gaza, not just within its borders but globally. UN officials are being sanctioned with barely a murmur of protest from the international community. In India, criticism of Israel is now tantamount to being seen with the "wrong side". The states of West Asia now extensively regulate criticism of Israel. Australia is considering adopting a definition of anti-Semitism that, as Richard Flanagan noted in *The Age*, would render some of the most morally courageous Jewish voices — Joseph Roth, Tony Judt, Omer Bartov — effectively anti-Semitic. Much of Europe has already made Israel its "reason of state". While some states are complicit, through sins of omission or commission, in failing to push back against the atrocities in Gaza, it seems that much of the world is becoming complicit in drawing a veil of silence over them.

One of the most important moral lessons of the Holocaust is being forgotten: That "never again" must be a universal ideal. To defend that principle is not to deny the Holocaust's specificity, but to protect its moral legacy. To reduce it to a licence for state violence is a betrayal of its memory. Anti-Semitism is a real and urgent problem. But its political weaponisation now threatens to empty the term of moral content. The most reactionary forces invoke it not to combat hate, but to silence criticism, stifle reflection, and protect impunity.

Most Western democracies are now sacrificing their democracy and civic freedoms — not for the Jewish people, but for the policies of the state of Israel. In West Asia, too, the discussion of Palestine is hemmed in by state repression. Fear of retaliation, of being seen on the "wrong side", chills public discourse. Even social movements seem unable

to articulate a language of universal principle: That no one should be targeted for who they are; that the mass killing of non-combatants is never justifiable. We are trapped in a nihilistic moment, where only one question matters: Which side are you on? Not: What are the limits of power, the principles that must bind all states and actors?

This tribalism is not new; nor is hypocrisy. But rarely in recent memory has there been such a drastic foreclosure of moral reflection. It is as if we now believe that vindication will not come from being humane, but from letting power operate unrestrained, whatever form that power takes.

The horror in Gaza is so palpable that explanation or contextualisation often feels obscene. These are now tools of evasion, not illumination. The evasions and silences are linked to the broader civic failures of democracy. In a powerful essay in *Harper's Magazine*, 'Speaking Reassurance to Power', Pankaj Mishra connects the silence over Gaza to the collapse of civic courage in democracies. He writes that "for all its claims to superior virtue, the American intelligentsia manifests very little of the courage and dignity it has expected from artists and thinkers in less fortunate societies".

Mishra sees this failure as rooted in complicity: The American intelligentsia, too close to the machinery of imperial power and too dependent on the largesse it doled out, was often disabled from speaking truth. It was meant to offer reassurance. Or rather the criticism that it permitted was costless. But the disquieting thought he offers is whether the willed silence over Gaza, and the relative lack of resistance to authoritarianism, are linked. They both speak of an easy adjustment to the realities of power. But this is not only America's problem. Across democracies, we are witnessing the ease with which civic discourse renders mass death invisible.

If Gaza's corpses can vanish from our conscience, how much easier it will be to ignore the quiet, shadowy encroachments of our own states, which are increasingly going after whoever they choose. What the silence and inaction over Gaza is saying is: Only brute power rules. As Vonnegut said, "So it goes."

The writer is contributing editor, The Indian Express



# The critical minerals contest

India cannot afford to anchor its tech aspirations on supply chains that remain opaque, concentrated and subject to political risk



AMITABH KANT AND ADIL RANA CHHINA

CRITICAL MINERALS ARE emerging as the defining geoeconomic axis of the 21st century. These are no longer peripheral to industrial development but lie at the heart of advanced manufacturing, clean energy systems, strategic technologies and national security. Energy transition, digitalisation and the pursuit of supply chain resilience are rapidly amplifying the demand for minerals such as lithium, cobalt, nickel, graphite and rare earth elements. Their availability and accessibility will determine the pace and quality of growth for all major economies. Unlike fossil fuels, critical minerals are characterised by high geographical concentration, limited transparency and complex value chains. China dominates the mid-stream processing stage for most key minerals, accounting for over 90 per cent of rare earth refining, 70 per cent of cobalt processing and close to 60 per cent of lithium conversion capacity. These are not incidental advantages but outcomes of decades of strategic investment, policy coherence and state-backed industrial planning. With China 20 years ahead in the supply chain race, India cannot afford to anchor its future energy, mobility or technology aspirations on supply chains that remain opaque, concentrated and subject to political risk.

In 2022, the Ministry of Mines identified 30 critical minerals based on their strategic importance to clean energy and future technologies, high import dependence, domestic resource constraints and relevance for agricultural and industrial needs. In January, the National Critical Mineral Mission (NCMM) was announced to secure critical mineral supply chains by ensuring mineral availability. Its success will rest on how effectively it translates intent into action.

Currently, India is 100 per cent import dependent for lithium, cobalt, nickel, rare earth elements and silicon. At the same time, India's domestic resource base for critical minerals is underdeveloped. The Geological Survey of India has ramped up exploration, with 195 projects underway over the past year and another 227 approved for the upcoming year. In response to the inclusion of critical minerals in the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act, the government launched four tranches of auctions for critical mineral blocks last year, and a fifth was concluded in January 2025.

However, the auctions revealed persistent challenges. A large number of blocks were annulled as high capital costs, limited domestic processing capacity and a shortage of technically qualified bidders dampened participation. These outcomes underscore the need for policy refinement to attract credible investment and build industry confidence in the viability of critical mineral development.

As India seeks to scale up domestic exploration, it must also confront a major structural limitation: Lack of sufficient capacity to refine and process minerals into battery-grade or component-ready materials. This midstream bottleneck risks locking the country into a dependence on foreign processors, especially for lithium, cobalt and

rare earths. To address this, the NCMM plans to set up dedicated mineral processing zones with modern infrastructure. Within these, production incentives modelled on PLI schemes could be used to catalyse private investment into refining, separation and chemical conversion facilities.

Amid growing concern over mineral security, recent export restrictions on rare earth elements by China have also exposed the vulnerability of India's automotive sector, with some firms already indicating potential production cuts. Rare earth magnets are essential to electric and internal combustion vehicles alike. To mitigate this risk, India must accelerate investments in independent supply chains, including targeted exploration, processing capacity and strategic partnerships.

Given the demand intensity and India's current reserves, international engagement and friendshoring will be vital to the creation of a diversified and resilient supply chain. India has taken steps by joining the Mineral Security Partnership and initiating collaborations with Australia, Argentina and others. These partnerships signal a deeper alignment with global efforts to diversify supply chains away from China. India should leverage geopolitical platforms such as the Quad and G20 to secure further stable mineral trade relationships, promote joint ventures and facilitate best-practice sharing. Developing a critical mineral stockpiling framework will also be essential to buffer against supply disruptions and price volatility. These efforts must remain strategically aligned with broader foreign policy objectives.

India must also build domestic self-sufficiency in critical minerals through more sustainable and circular approaches. Recycling offers a promising path to reduce import dependency. The recycling chain for batteries and electronics is fragmented and largely informal. Without investment in formal collection, dismantling and high-efficiency recovery, circularity will remain aspirational. India must also prioritise resource recovery by incentivising recyclers and by expanding formal infrastructure for waste collection.

Sustainable mining practices and responsible sourcing of critical minerals are crucial. Several critical mineral reserves lie in tribal or ecologically sensitive areas where inadequate environmental, social and governance (ESG) compliance has led to delays, protests and legal challenges. India must adopt comprehensive ESG frameworks in mining, incorporating community trust-building and third-party audit mechanisms. Strengthening community participation through local benefit-sharing and decision-making will be key to fostering enduring community trust and support for mining activities.

Polycymaking must be informed by rigorous, sector-specific assessments of future demand, supply and technological developments. India should periodically reassess its critical mineral list and adjust sourcing strategies in line with domestic and global shifts.

The contest for critical minerals will shape the contours of future economic resilience and technological sovereignty. India has the market scale, industrial ambition and diplomatic leverage to lead. It must now ensure timely execution, sustained institutional support and a clear commitment to self-reliance, sustainability and global alignment.

*Kant is former G20 sherpa of India and former CEO of Niti Aayog and Chhina is a policy specialist — climate and energy*

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# The silent epidemic

India's obesity crisis carries a threat that can no longer be ignored



SHALINI SINGH AND PRASHANT KUMAR SINGH

WHILE WE CONTINUE to battle malnutrition in many communities, a silent epidemic is spreading through our households — one that carries far graver consequences. Obesity, once considered a problem of the affluent, is now clustering within Indian families at an alarming rate, and with it comes a hidden threat that policymakers can no longer ignore: Cancer.

Recent national data paint a disturbing picture of India's nutritional transition. Nearly 20 per cent of Indian households now have all adult members classified as overweight, while 10 per cent have all adults classified as obese. This suggests shared environmental and behavioural factors. In states like Tamil Nadu and Punjab, two out of every five households have all adults classified as obese. Urban areas show clustering rates which are double those of rural areas, conveying a clear picture of how prosperity and urbanisation are transforming India's health landscape.

What makes this particularly concerning is its transgenerational nature. When obesity clusters within households, children grow up in environments that normalise unhealthy dietary patterns and sedentary lifestyles, creating cycles of risk that transcend generations.

The evidence linking obesity to cancer is overwhelming. The WHO's International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) has classified excess body weight as a significant risk for cancer. Obesity is directly associated with at least 13 types of cancer: Colorectal, breast (postmenopausal), endometrial, kidney, liver, pancreatic, ovarian, thyroid, meningioma, multiple myeloma, adenocarcinoma of the

esophagus, gastric cardia, and gallbladder cancers. An IARC study, published in 2023, the largest of its kind, showed that having a high body mass index increases cancer risk by 17 per cent for people who also have cardiovascular diseases. The American Cancer Society estimates that excess body weight accounts for about 11 per cent of cancers in women and 5 per cent in men in the US.

The biological pathways are clear. Hyperinsulinemia — chronically elevated insulin levels and insulin resistance — promotes obesity and diabetes. Insulin is also a growth factor and when chronically elevated, it can drive malignant transformation. Chronic inflammation associated with obesity represents another deadly pathway. Excess body fat cells (adipocytes) produce inflammatory factors, creating a state of chronic low-grade inflammation that damages DNA and interferes with immune surveillance — our body's natural defence system against cancer.

Hormonal disruption adds another layer of risk. Fat tissue produces excess estrogen, and dramatically increases risks for hormone-sensitive breast and endometrial cancers. Cardio-metabolic dysfunction completes this deadly quartet. Hyperinsulinemia/insulin resistance and altered glucose metabolism in the run-up to obesity creates a metabolic/inflammatory environment that favours development of cancer cells, their rapid growth and metastasis.

India's situation is particularly precarious because we face this obesity epidemic alongside existing healthcare challenges. The economic implications for patients are staggering.

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The household clustering of obesity presents both a challenge and an opportunity. Rather than treating obesity as an individual's problem, we must recognise it as a health problem that requires targeting the family as a unit for intervention.

The government's recent commitment to establishing Day Care Cancer Centres in all district hospitals over the next three years, with 200 centres planned for 2025-26, provides a crucial foundation. However, these centres must prioritise prevention alongside treatment. We must scale up existing programmes like the National Programme for Prevention and Control of Non-Communicable Diseases to specifically target high-risk households and individuals. The data show we need concentrated efforts in southern states, urban areas, and affluent households. Regulatory interventions have proved effective globally — implementing taxes on sugary beverages, mandating front-of-pack nutrition labelling, and restricting marketing of ultra-processed foods.

Obesity prevention programmes should target entire households, teaching families to shop for healthier ingredients; prepare meals at home consisting of fresh vegetables, leafy greens, whole grains and fruits; and engage in physical activities as a unit. Workplace and

school-based nutrition programmes can break the cycle by creating healthy food environments outside the home. These behaviours can dramatically transform household practices reversing altered metabolic pathways and cardio-metabolic risk factors in a matter of days and weeks.

However, it is crucial to understand that exercise alone cannot undo the harms of unhealthy food intake. While physical activity is essential for overall health, the metabolic damage from ultra-processed foods, excess sugar, poor dietary and inadequate sleep patterns cannot be "burned off" through exercise. Poor nutrition requires dietary intervention, with exercise as a vital but complementary component. Our cities must become laboratories for obesity prevention. This means creating walkable neighbourhoods, ensuring access to affordable fresh farm produce, and designing urban/ work spaces that encourage physical activity rather than sedentary lifestyles.

India's obesity crisis is not a distant threat — it's a present reality. Instituting practices to prevent obesity today mean preventing cancer tomorrow. The issue isn't whether we can afford to implement comprehensive obesity prevention strategies but whether we can afford not to do so. Our families, our healthcare system, and our economic future depend on the choices we make now.

*Shalini Singh is director, and Prashant Kumar Singh is senior scientist, ICMR-National Institute of Cancer Prevention and Research, Noida*



# 300 animals ‘vanish’ from Alipore zoo, HC to hear plea for probe today

TANUSREE BOSE & ATRI MITRA  
KOLKATA, JULY 23

THE CALCUTTA High Court Thursday is likely to hear a petition filed by a city-based voluntary organisation, Swazon, seeking a probe into alleged “overnight disappearance of over 300 animals” from the records of Alipore Zoological Garden, the country’s oldest zoo.

The petition claimed the number of animals in the zoo was 672 at the end of the 2023-24 financial year, and it came down to 351 by the beginning of the 2024-25 financial year. “...That is, 321 animals disappeared in just one night...The unexplained vanishing of animals, including those classified as endangered, suggests either gross negligence or intentional suppression of facts,” the petition stated.

The Swajon said that neither the Central Zoo Authority (CZA), nor the West Bengal Zoo Authority (WBZA), nor the administration of the Alipore Zoo has issued any public statement, filed any report addressing these discrepancies. “Given that the Central Zoo Authority (CZA) disburses funds to the West Bengal Zoo Authority (WBZA) for the management of zoos, and that both are publicly funded bodies, these unexplained disappearances of animals demand immediate audit and investigation,” it added.

The NGO said there are severe and unexplained inconsistencies in animal stock figures at the zoo.

“For instance, while the total number of animals as on 03.03.2011 was 1452, the number dwindled to a mere 672 by 31.03.2024. Furthermore, the annual inventory of the CZA shows that between the closing stock on 31.03.2017 (1,186 animals) and the opening stock on 01.04.2017 (910 animals), a total of 276 animals were unaccounted for overnight...” it said. “More recently, in 2022, the closing stock of endangered animals was reported as 190, but the opening stock on 01.04.2022 was merely 131, showing a difference of 59 animals of endangered species without any explanation.”

At a press meet on Wednesday, attended by former RS member and IAS officer, Jawhar Sircar, the Swajon, alleged the government was “intentionally downsizing” the zoo to auction off a section of its land.

“There is a deep conspiracy behind the reduction in the animal population. Allegations are that about 3 acres of land at 34A, Belvedere Road of Alipore Zoo is being sold for commercial use. However, this land is where the zoo’s veterinary hospital, rescue center, and a public aquarium are located,” Swajon’s Mahalaya Chatterjee said.

An e-tender posted by the West Bengal Housing Infrastructure Development Corporation last month invited bids for auction of a piece of land on 34A, Belvedere Road, Alipore, for “commercial use”, the NGO cited.

“The state government has to explain to the people what exactly happened? This is either a major negligence or discrepancy,” Sircar, who is associated with the ruling TMC, said.

Chatterjee said, “This is part of a greater conspiracy. The zoo means not only entertainment or animals. It is also necessary for ecological balance. In the Alipore zoo area, around 50 per cent of land is green or wetland. If we harm such an ecology, it will severely hurt our city.”

The director in-charge of the zoo, Arun Mukherjee, said, “Whatever information we have, we have submitted in court. We have the primary data source. It is a sub-judice matter. So, I do not wish to comment on it.”

The Forest Department sources said a report was sought from the Alipore zoo into the alleged discrepancies in the number of animals within two weeks.

## India, Israel to work towards deepening defence ties

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
NEW DELHI, JULY 23

INDIA AND Israel on Wednesday concurred to work towards developing an “institutional framework” for further deepening their defence ties.

Defence Secretary Rajesh Kumar Singh held a bilateral meeting with Director General, Israel’s Ministry of Defence, Major General (Res) Amir Baram in New Delhi during which the two sides agreed to further strengthen the bilateral defence cooperation with a “long-term perspective”, officials said.

“They concurred to work towards developing an institutional framework for further deepening of defence ties,” the Indian defence ministry said.

The Israel DG condemned the April 22 terrorist attack in Pahalgam and conveyed “full support for India’s fight against terrorism”, it said.

Singh reiterated India’s zero-tolerance approach to terrorism, condemned the October 7, 2023 terror attacks on Israel and called for the release of all hostages.

Both sides also reviewed the progress of the ongoing defence collaboration activities since the last Joint Working Group meeting held in India in July 2024.

This visit by the DG of Israel’s defence ministry marks a “pivotal step in India-Israel defence relations and reinforces both sides’ commitment to enhance their strategic partnership”, the statement said.



# EC asks West Bengal to create separate Election Dept, says CEO lacks autonomy

ATRI MITRA  
KOLKATA, JULY 23

CITING A “lack of administrative and financial autonomy” available to the state Chief Electoral Officer (CEO), the Election Commission has asked the West Bengal government to create a separate Election Department, completely delinked from any other state department.

In a letter dated July 17 and addressed to the West Bengal Chief Secretary, the Election Commission wrote: “The Commission has noted lack of financial and administrative autonomy available to CEO, West Bengal, in the existing arrangement, wherein CEO’s office functions with limited financial powers relying on a minor permanent advance from the Finance Department. Further, the CEO’s office has been categorized as a subordinate branch of the Home & Hill Affairs Department, which is led by a principal secretary-level officer, whereas the CEO himself is of ACS rank.”

The EC was referring to the West Bengal government’s April 3 notification, appointing IAS officer Manoj Kumar Agarwal as the CEO. He was also made ex-officio Additional Chief Secretary of the Home and Hill Affairs Department. Directing the state to create a separate Election Department, the EC said: “The Election Department should have a dedicated budget head. This will facilitate full financial and administrative autonomy to the CEO, as required for the effective and impartial conduct of elections.”

The letter also stated that “suitable financial powers at par

with ACS/Pr Secretary/Secretary of other department” be given to the state CEO. “A separate financial advisor needs to be posted in the Election Department to assist the CEO in effective discharge of his official duties,” it added.

While the state government has so far not commented on the EC’s letter, TMC and Left leaders condemned it, calling it an RSS conspiracy.

“The state will give funds, but can’t control, can’t give an opinion, it cannot be,” said TMC MLA and Speaker of the Assembly, Biman Banerjee.

Former Rajya Sabha MP Jawhar Sircar, who was also the CEO of West Bengal during Left rule, said, “It is basically a power-grabbing tool. When I was CEO, I worked with the state government and had no problem.”

Veteran CPI(M) leader Rabin Dev said, “This is nothing but a part of RSS’ conspiracy to grab power. They have already changed the selection of the Election Commissioner of India. The independent character of the ECI has been taken away.”

BJP state unit president Samik Bhattacharya, however, said the ECI wants to make the structure of the CEO more independent: “But our state government doesn’t want it. One can easily conclude who is trying to grab power.”

In most of the states, the CEO works in the state government. In Bihar, the Election Department is a separate department under the Chief Minister’s Office. Gujarat has a separate Election Department, not under any department of the state government, but the CEO is drawn from Gujarat IPS cadre.

# Cash row: SC to set up bench to hear Justice Varma’s plea

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE  
NEW DELHI, JULY 23

THE SUPREME Court said Wednesday it will set up a bench to hear Allahabad HC judge Justice Yashwant Varma’s plea challenging the legal validity of the in-house inquiry committee mechanism that indicted him following a probe into allegations of cash being found at his official residence in New Delhi.

Former Delhi High Court judge Justice Varma, who is facing an impeachment motion, moved the Supreme Court on July 18. Justice Varma called the in-house inquiry mechanism, which indicted him, “a parallel, extra-constitutional mechanism”.

Senior Advocate Kapil Sibal, who is leading a team of lawyers, mentioned the plea on Justice Varma’s behalf before a bench presided by CJI B R Gavai. “We have raised some constitutional issues. We request Your Lordships to list it as early as possible,” Sibal said.

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Justice Yashwant Varma

“I will have to constitute a bench. I think it will not be proper for me to take up that matter because I was part of that conversation. I will just take a call and constitute a bench,” said CJI Gavai.

In his plea, Justice Varma said, “Primarily, the In-House Procedure, adopted via a 1999 Full Court Resolution to handle complaints against judges and preserve judicial independence while maintaining public faith, unjustifiably extends beyond the intended scope of self-regulation and fact-finding”. “By culminating in recommendations for removal from constitutional office, it creates a parallel, extra-constitutional mechanism that derogates from the mandatory framework under Articles 124 and 218 of the Constitution, which exclusively

vest powers for removal of Judges of the High Courts in Parliament through an address supported by a special majority, following an inquiry under the Judges (Inquiry) Act, 1968,” it said.

The plea said administrative or self-regulating procedures adopted by the Supreme Court “cannot circumvent or override the constitutionally protected tenure of High Court judges or imbue the Hon’ble CJI with unregulated authority to act as the arbiter of the fate of other judges of the High Courts/this Hon’ble Court”.

The plea also raised questions over the SC decision to make public the purported video showing burnt currency notes at his residence as being “ex facie disproportionate and violative of the law”. It stated that this disclosure gave rise to a media trial, which the Supreme Court itself had barred in its own rulings.

“Unprecedented public disclosure of these unverified allegations via press release by this Hon’ble Court on 22.03.2025 subjected the Petitioner to me-

dia trial, resulting in irreparable damage to his personal reputation and career as a judicial officer,” the plea stated.

Justice Varma also challenged the conclusions of the report by the three-member in-house judicial panel.

Appointed by the Chief Justice of India on March 22, a week after cash was allegedly discovered at Justice Varma’s official residence where a fire broke out on March 14, the panel comprised Justices Sheel Nagu, Chief Justice of the Punjab and Haryana High Court; G S Sandhawalia, Chief Justice of the Himachal Pradesh High Court; and Anu Sivaraman, Judge of the High Court of Karnataka. The panel found credence in the allegations against Justice Varma.

With the argument that the findings of the report are without due process and inadequate, Justice Varma, in his plea, questioned every consequential action that flows from the report, including the CJI’s recommendation.



15 DIE OF HUNGER IN LAST 24 HOURS; ISRAELI STRIKES KILL OVER 100

# Dozens in Gaza dying of starvation: Palestinian officials & aid agencies

Crisis ‘man-made’ says WHO chief; Israel denies role in food shortage

NIDAL AL-MUGHRABI & DAWOUD ABU ALKAS  
CAIRO, GAZA JULY 23

SIX-WEEK-OLD YOUSEF’S lifeless body lay limp on a hospital table in Gaza City, his skin stretched over protruding ribs and a bandage where a drip had been inserted into his tiny arm. Doctors said the cause of death was starvation. He was among 15 people to starve to death in the last 24 hours in Gaza, according to doctors who say a wave of hunger that has loomed over the enclave for months is now finally crashing down. Yusef’s family couldn’t find baby formula to feed him, said his uncle, Adham al-Safadi. “You can’t get milk anywhere, and if you do find any it’s \$100 for a tub,” he said, looking at his dead nephew. Three of the other Palestinians who died of hunger over the last day were also children. Israeli forces have killed nearly 60,000 Palestinians since launching their assault on Gaza in response to attacks on Israel by Hamas that killed 1,200 people and captured 251 hostages in



Palestinians gather at a charity kitchen in Gaza City on Wednesday. Reuters

October 2023.

For the first time since the war began, Palestinian officials say dozens are now also dying of hunger. Gaza has seen its food stocks run out since Israel cut off all supplies to the territory in March and then lifted that blockade in May with measures it says are needed to prevent aid from being diverted to militant groups. At least 111 people are known to have died of hunger during the conflict, according to Palestinian

officials, including 80 children, most of them in the last weeks. Israel, which controls all supplies entering Gaza, denies it is responsible for shortages of food. It has blamed the United Nations for failing to protect aid it says is stolen by Hamas and other militants. The fighters deny stealing it. World Health Organization chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said Wednesday Gaza is suffering man-made mass starvation caused by a blockade on aid.

Meanwhile, more than 100 people were killed in 24 hours of Israeli strikes or gunfire, health officials said. More than half of those killed were women and children, health authorities said. Over 100 largely aid and rights groups on Wednesday called for governments to take action as hunger spreads in Gaza, including by demanding an immediate and permanent ceasefire and the lifting of all restrictions on the flow of aid. **REUTERS WITH AP INPUTS**

## AFP sounds alarm: Last reporters in Gaza will die, need intervention

ASSOCIATED PRESS  
WASHINGTON, JULY 23

A GROUP of journalists at the Agence France-Presse news agency is sounding the alarm about conditions faced by colleagues working in Gaza, saying that “without immediate intervention, the last reporters in Gaza will die.” In a war-torn territory where Israel generally forbids outside journalists to enter, international news organizations like AFP, AP and Reuters rely on local teams to get out the news. They’ve been hampered by safety concerns and hunger in Gaza, where an estimated 59,000 people have died in the conflict. The Society of Journalists at AFP, an association of professionals at the news agency, detailed what their Gaza colleagues are facing. AFP’s management said Tuesday that it shares concerns about the “appalling” situation and is working to evacuate its freelancers and their families. “For months, we have watched helplessly as their living

conditions deteriorated dramatically,” AFP said in a statement. “Their situation is now untenable, despite their exemplary courage, professional commitment, and resilience.” One of AFP’s photographers, identified as Bashar, sent a message on social media over the weekend that “I no longer have the strength to work for the media. My body is thin and I can’t work anymore.” Bashar has been working for AFP since 2010. Since February, he’s been living in the ruins of his home in Gaza City with his mother and other family members, and said one of his brothers had died of hunger, according to the journalists’ group. The journalists receive a monthly salary from AFP, but exorbitant prices leave them unable to purchase much food. The Al Jazeera Media Network has also called upon the journalistic community, organisations advocating press freedom and legal bodies to take “decisive action” to put an end to the “forced starvation” and crimes against media professionals in Gaza.

## Russia, Ukraine hold first peace talks in 7 weeks, Kremlin plays down expectations

DMITRY ANTONOV & MARK TREVELYAN  
MOSCOW, JULY 23

RUSSIA AND Ukraine have started a third round of peace talks in Istanbul, Russian state news agency TASS reported on Wednesday. This will be the first direct discussions between the warring sides in more than seven weeks. Russia had earlier in Tuesday played down expectations of any breakthrough at the meeting, which Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy said this week should focus in part on preparing a summit between himself and President Vladimir Putin. “Naturally, no one expects



Ukrainian delegation at the Ciragan Palace in Istanbul for talks with Russia, on Wednesday. Reuters

an easy road. Naturally, this will be a very difficult conversation. The projects (of the two sides) are diametrically opposed,” Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said. Previous talks in Istanbul on

May 16 and June 2 led to the exchange of thousands of prisoners of war and the remains of dead soldiers. But those meetings lasted less than three hours in total and made no breakthrough towards a ceasefire or a settlement to end almost three and a half years of war. US President Donald Trump last week threatened heavy new sanctions on Russia and countries that buy its exports unless a peace deal was reached within 50 days. On Wednesday, Russia said its forces had captured the settlement of Varachyne in Ukraine’s Sumy, where Putin has ordered his troops to create a buffer zone after Ukraine mounted a shock incursion into Russia last year and held onto a chunk of its territory for months. **REUTERS**

## The Hague: Countries obliged to take climate action, liable for compensation if they don’t

AMITABH SINHA  
NEW DELHI, JULY 23

IN A landmark decision, the International Court of Justice (ICJ), the main judicial arm of the United Nations, has ruled that countries were obligated under international law to take actions to reduce the emissions of greenhouse gases, and the failure to do so would constitute an “internationally wrongful act”. The court, based in The Hague, said countries which do not fulfil their climate obligations could be held liable to pay compensations. Join FREE Telegram Channel <https://t.me/+jUYKq0AFHBawMGQ1>

to other countries, particularly the small island nations, which bear the brunt of climate disasters. The ICJ ruling came in a case that arose out of a request from the UN General Assembly that sought its “advisory opinion” on the obligations of countries on climate change under existing international laws, and the legal consequences of those obligations. The court, in a unanimous ruling, said that countries that were party to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the 2015 Paris Agreement had an obligation to adopt measures that were aimed

at reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and adapting to climate change. It said that the rich countries had an additional obligation to take the lead on climate actions. The court examined the responsibilities of the countries under a wider set of environmental laws that have a bearing on the climate system. These include the UN Convention on the Laws of the Seas, the Montreal Protocol for protecting Ozone, the Convention on Biodiversity and the Convention to Combat Desertification. The ruling, though only advisory in nature, was hailed by cli-

mate activists worldwide. “The ICJ’s historic Advisory Opinion marks a watershed moment in the fight for climate justice. It’s a resounding declaration that the era of impunity for polluters and complicit states is over,” said Harjeet Singh, climate activist and founding director of Satat Sampada Climate Foundation. The ICJ ruling is not binding on the countries, but sets an important precedent for the thousands of climate lawsuits that have been filed in recent years across the world, seeking accountability from governments and corporates.



‘STATE OF THE ECONOMY’ ARTICLE PUBLISHED IN THE RBI’S JULY BULLETIN

Indian economy remains largely resilient despite global uncertainties: RBI article

HITESH VYAS  
MUMBAI, JULY 23

AMID GEOPOLITICAL tensions and tariff policy uncertainties, the Indian economy has remained resilient, aided by strong macroeconomic fundamentals, according to an article in the Reserve Bank of India’s July bulletin.

“Domestic economic activity held up in June, with high-frequency indicators pointing to improving prospects of the kharif agricultural season and continuation of strong momentum in the services sector,” according to the ‘State of the Economy’ article in RBI’s July bulletin. The article has been prepared by central bank officials. The RBI said views published in the article are of the authors and not of the institution.

It said that the growth in rural demand remained resilient and Join FREE Telegram Channel <https://t.me/+jUYKq0AFHBAwMGQ1>

was accompanied by a recovery in urban economic activity. The all-India unemployment rate remained unchanged from the previous month at 5.6 per cent with rural areas faring better as compared to their urban counterparts.

During April-May 2025, total expenditure grew by 19.7 per cent on a year-on-year (y-o-y) basis, accounting for 14.7 per cent of the Budget Estimates for FY26. Capital expenditure recorded robust growth during the first two months of the current fiscal and was at 19.7 per cent of the budgeted capital expenditure vis-à-vis 12.9 per cent during the same period a year ago, indicative of front-loading of capital spending by the Central government.

India’s merchandise trade deficit narrowed in June 2025, due to contraction in both oil and non-oil trade deficit.

De-escalating geopolitical tensions in the Middle East, optimism on trade deals and the easing of norms for infrastructure financing by the Reserve Bank buoyed up domestic financial market sen-

EXPLAINED

**Average tariff set to touch levels last seen in 1930s**

THE AVERAGE trade tariff rates are set to touch levels unseen since the 1930s. Moreover, risk of imposition of new high tariffs looms large for additional sectors, according to the article. The evolving pattern of global trade flows and supply chains are far from settled, and these uncertainties pose considerable headwinds to global economic prospects.

sions in the Middle East, optimism on trade deals and the easing of norms for infrastructure financing by the Reserve Bank buoyed up domestic financial market sen-

timents in the second half of June, the article said. In the first half of July, however, domestic markets traded with a negative bias as investor sentiment remained cautious amidst ongoing uncertainty over the potential India-US trade agreement and mixed corporate earnings results by companies in the first quarter of FY25.

The article said that easing inflation, front-loading of government expenditure, targeted fiscal measures and congenial financial conditions for faster transmission of rate reductions should support aggregate demand in the economy, going forward.

Headline inflation, as measured by y-o-y changes in the all-India consumer price index (CPI), declined to 2.1 per cent in June 2025 — the lowest since January 2019 — from 2.8 per cent in May. The retail inflation remained below the 4 per cent target for the

fifth consecutive month in June.

On the trade front, the article stated that as intense negotiations are underway for closing trade deals before the new import tariff rates kick in from August 1, 2025, the focus is back on US trade policies and their spillover effects globally.

Financial markets, however, seem to have taken trade policy uncertainties in their stride, possibly reflecting optimism on reaching trade deals that are less disruptive to the global economy. Even so, underpricing of macroeconomic risk by financial markets remains a concern.

According to the article, the average trade tariff rates are set to touch levels unseen since the 1930s. Moreover, the risk of imposition of new high tariffs looms large for additional sectors.

FULL REPORT ON [www.indianexpress.com](http://www.indianexpress.com)

NIPFP PAPER

‘Country’s bottom 50% of consumers face same GST burden as mid-30%’

SIDDHARTH UPASANI  
NEW DELHI, JULY 23

INDIA’S BOTTOM half of consumers face the same Goods and Services Tax (GST) burden as the middle 30 per cent, according to a new study that analyses the impact of the indirect tax regime using the statistics ministry’s Household Consumption Expenditure Survey (HCES) for 2022-23.

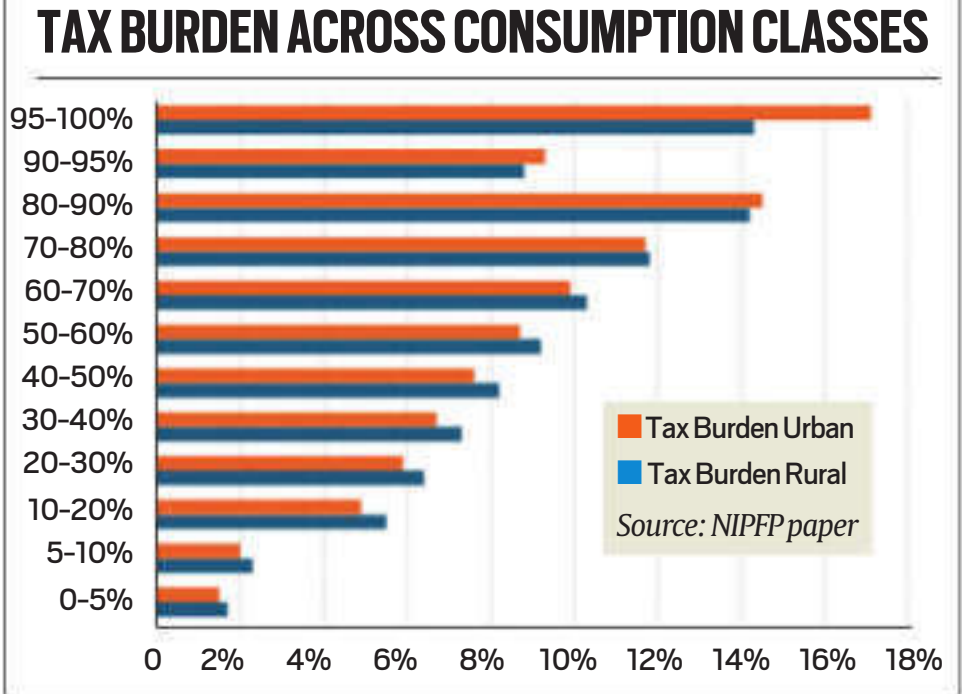
The study found that the bottom 50 per cent of Indian consumers living in rural areas bore 31 per cent of the GST burden — the same as the middle 30 per cent of rural consumers. The figures were similar for urban areas: the bottom 50 per cent faced 29 per cent of the burden, while the middle 30 per cent bore 30 per cent. In both cases, the top 20 per cent of consumers had to bear the bulk of the tax burden: 37 per cent in rural areas and 41 per cent in urban.

As per the 2022-23 HCES, the bottom 5 per cent of consumers in rural areas had an average Monthly Per Capita Expenditure (MPCE) of Rs 1,373, with the figure being Rs 10,501 for the top 5 per cent. The corresponding numbers for urban consumers were Rs 2,001 and Rs 20,824, respectively. The tax burden is the share of the GST estimated to have been paid by households.

GST ‘moderately progressive’

The findings of the paper, titled ‘Distributional Impact of Indian GST based on the NSSO’s Household Consumption Expenditure Survey of 2022-23’ authored by Sachchidananda Mukherjee, a professor at New Delhi-based National Institute of Public Finance and Policy, suggested the GST had positive redistributive effects as post-tax consumption inequality declined and is “moderately progressive”.

FULL REPORT ON [www.indianexpress.com](http://www.indianexpress.com)



A tax system is said to be progressive when higher-income individuals pay a higher rate of tax. Mukherjee told *The Indian Express* that recent literature shows that “most countries following multiple tax rates in GST or VAT system — the European Union follows a multiple tax rate system, for instance — are getting a similar kind of result: progressive, but moderately so”. The paper’s findings come amid talk of a major overhaul of the GST rate structure, with *The Indian Express* reporting earlier this month that Home Minister Amit Shah will begin talks with stakeholders to build consensus and resolve contentious issues, with one of the proposals on the table being the removal of the 12 per cent rate by shifting some items to the 5 per cent slab and others to the 18 per cent one.

Careful redesign needed

In his paper, Mukherjee allocated 390 items from the 2022-23 HCES — after excluding seven items that don’t attract GST, such as second-hand books — into broad buckets, with assignment of specific GST rates difficult as they also depend on marketing or physical features such as packag-

ing or labels and due to the presence of certain specific rates in addition to nil, 5 per cent, 12 per cent, 18 per cent, and 28 per cent.

The paper found that the bottom 5 per cent of consumers in rural areas spent more than 47 per cent of their MPCE on items either exempt from GST or attracting a rate of up to 5 per cent. This share fell before rising for the top two categories of consumers, suggesting increased consumption of more expensive and processed food items at higher consumption levels. As such, the paper warned that pruning the GST exempt list may increase the tax burden for least-consuming people in rural areas. The issue of rationalisation of GST rates has been pending for several years, with a Group of Ministers for the same set up way back in September 2021. However, talk of the need to make changes to GST rates has risen recently.

Earlier this month, Confederation of Indian Industry president Rajiv Memani called for a reduction in tax rates on certain goods, especially those that are purchased by people in lower-income categories. This, Memani argued, would hopefully boost consumption. **FULL REPORT ON** [www.indianexpress.com](http://www.indianexpress.com)

To issue manual for new Income Tax Bill’s digital searches, seizures, says CBDT Chief

AANCHAL MAGAZINE  
NEW DELHI, JULY 23

EVEN AS Parliament’s Select Committee on the new Income Tax Bill retained the digital search and seizure provisions without any significant changes in its report this week, the Income Tax Department is in the process of defining tighter procedures to protect the privacy of the taxpayer after concerns were raised by digital rights activists. In an interview with *The Indian Express*, Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT) Chairman Ravi Agrawal said the Tax Department is going to issue a manual that will outline the procedure for the analysis of digital evidence.

“From a regulatory point of view, statutory permissions are

there which mandate the Tax Department to actually not part with the data in an unauthorised manner. It’s a legal obligation...we have come out with the search and seizure manual. We are also coming up with the digital manual for analysis of digital evidence. There also we would be actually taking care of it. So, we will address it,” he said.

Stating that it is a “genuine concern” of the taxpayers, Agrawal said there is a mechanism wherein such information would be scrutinised in a sanitised environment by authorised people only. “We are in the process of defining procedures wherein these things could be made more tight to take care of a taxpayer. It is a genuine concern of the taxpayer,” he said. The tax authorities, however, may face an issue dur-

“... once you have captured the data, it’s the responsibility of the Tax Department to ensure that whatever investigation is done, only the relevant data is actually analysed, and the other data is redacted”

— RAVI AGRAWAL  
CHAIRMAN, CBDT

ing investigations as digital records would also include personal communications. For this, Agrawal said it would be the responsibility of the Tax Department to analyse just the relevant data and redact the rest.

“How do you investigate?

There’s a mobile, there is a personal chat also here, there’s a financial transaction also. So, say, it’s WhatsApp, it’s both (personal and financial). You got to maintain the evidentiary value of this mobile also. It cannot be that at that point in time, you say I’ll take this but I’ll not take the other part. There would be continuity. So, therefore, to maintain the evidentiary value, you have got to capture the data in toto. But then once you have captured the data, it’s the responsibility of the Tax Department to ensure that whatever investigation is done, only the relevant data is actually analysed, and the other data is redacted,” he said.

Apart from the key concern of an infringement upon the right to privacy, stakeholders, in their suggestions to the Select Committee on the new Income Tax Bill, had

flagged the need to define clear guidelines for the use of personal data obtained during searches; removal of the power to cover any person who is present in the premises of the search operation; and introduction of restrictions for protecting privileged communication such as those between husband and wife, with doctors/lawyers etc. The Income Tax Bill, which was tabled in Lok Sabha in February this year, had defined “virtual digital space” — in the powers to call for information during surveys, searches and seizures — as “any digital realm that allows users to interact, communicate and perform activities” through computer technology. It had also allowed tax authorities to break open, or “override” access controls, such as passwords.

FULL REPORT ON [www.indianexpress.com](http://www.indianexpress.com)

Asian Development Bank lowers India’s FY26 growth forecast to 6.5% over US tariffs

RAVI DUTTA MISHRA  
NEW DELHI, JULY 23

THE ASIAN Development Bank (ADB) on Wednesday lowered India’s growth forecast for FY26 to 6.5 per cent, down from 6.7 per cent projected in April 2025, citing the impact of US baseline tariffs and associated policy uncertainty.

The regional development bank’s revision comes as India remains engaged in high-stakes trade deal negotiations. However, finalising a deal before the August 1 deadline for reciprocal tariffs appears unlikely due to dif-

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Ind-Ra trims FY26 forecast

New Delhi: India Ratings & Research (Ind-Ra) on Wednesday trimmed India’s growth projection for the current fiscal (FY26) to 6.3 per cent y-o-y, 30bp lower than its earlier forecast of 6.6 per cent made in December 2024, citing uncertainties around US tariffs and weak investment climate. **PTI**

ferences over market access for agriculture.

“This revision is primarily due to the impact of US baseline tariffs and associated policy uncertainty, in addition to the effects of lower global growth and the direct impact of additional US tariffs on investment flows. Despite this, economic activity remains robust, with domestic consumption expected to grow strongly on the back of a revival in rural demand,” the bank said.

However, it added that India’s services and agriculture sectors are expected to be key drivers of growth, with the latter supported by a forecast of above-normal monsoon rains. The Central government’s fiscal position remains

strong, bolstered by higher-than-expected dividends from the Reserve Bank of India, and it is on track to meet its targeted reduction in the fiscal deficit.

The ADB also revised India’s inflation forecast for FY26 to 3.8 per cent, down from 4.3 per cent projected in April, due to a faster-than-expected decline in food prices following improved agricultural output.

Meanwhile, India’s GDP growth forecast for FY27 was revised down to 6.7 per cent, from the April 2025 projection of 6.8 per cent.

FULL REPORT ON [www.indianexpress.com](http://www.indianexpress.com)



## EXPLAINED SPORT

## DURAND CUP: HOW THE OLDEST FOOTBALL LEAGUE OUTSIDE BRITISH ISLES HAS EVOLVED OVER TIME



President Rajendra Prasad handing the Durand Cup to Mohun Bagan's Chuni Goswami in 1961. *Durand Cup website*

ARJUN SENGUPTA  
NEW DELHI, JULY 23

THE 134TH edition of the Durand Cup, the oldest extant football tournament outside the British Isles, began in Kolkata on Wednesday.

Established in 1888, Durand Cup was the most prestigious tournament in Indian football until the late twentieth century. Here's a brief history.

### Origins in British Raj

The tournament is named after Sir Mortimer Durand, a British diplomat best known for drawing the contentious international border between British India (now Pakistan) and Afghanistan. Durand instituted the tournament in 1888 as recreation for British troops: the first edition saw the participation of six British and two Scottish regimental teams.

Till 1940, the Durand Cup was held each September in Shimla, the summer capital of the Raj. Matches were played with full military pomp and pageantry in the picturesque meadow of Annandale.

"Smartly attired military bands played tuneless marching tunes before the match and during the interval. Pennants of the participating British regimental teams fluttered in the sun. The Viceroy of India would personally hand over the prizes," Novy Kapadia, the legendary Indian football writer, wrote in *Barefoot to Boots: The Many Lives of Indian Football* (2017).

### Entry of Indian teams

In 1922, Calcutta-based Mohun Bagan became the first civilian side to take part in the tournament, paving the way for Indian participation. But in these initial years, the mostly barefoot Indian teams could not cope with superior British opposition.

"Realising this, Durand authorities came up with a unique idea in 1937, to have a separate tournament for all teams knocked out in the first round. This competition was known as the Little Durand, or 'Chhoti' Durand, and was held concurrently with the main tournament," Kapadia wrote.

Another Calcutta-based club, Mohammedan Sporting, broke the British monopoly on the Durand Cup in 1940, the year the tournament moved to Delhi. In front of a 1,00,000-strong crowd at the Irwin Amphitheatre (now the Major Dhyan Chand National Stadium),

the team of 11 Muslims beat the Royal Warwickshire Regiment 2-1 in the final.

### Tournament's heyday

After a break due to World War II, Independence, and Partition, the tournament resumed in 1950. Beginning with Dr Rajendra Prasad, a football enthusiast, the President of India took over the role of the erstwhile Viceroy in the final.

"Six Indian Presidents, from Rajendra Prasad to Neelam Sanjiva Reddy graced the Durand final and watched the complete match. During half-time they would have tea with the captains... [and] chat about football and sports..." Kapadia wrote.

While regimental teams of the Indian Army continued to take part — the Army still plays a central role in organising the Durand Cup — civilian clubs have been more dominant the post-Independence era.

Mohun Bagan and East Bengal, with 17 and 16 wins respectively, have been the most successful teams in the tournament's history, followed by the Border Security Force team with seven wins. Punjab-based JCT has won five times. The Hyderabad City Police team was a formidable force in the 1950s and early-1960s, with four wins.

### 1990s onwards

"For about four decades, till the end of the 1980s, the greatness of a player and even clubs was judged by how many Durand finals they had played in and how many Durand titles they had won," Kapadia wrote.

In the 1990s, attendance at the games, held in the Delhi Gate Stadium (later renamed Ambedkar Stadium), began dropping, which coincided with a general decline in interest in Indian football. The reasons, according to commentators, include the exposure on television to vastly superior foreign leagues, and the surge in the interest in cricket.

As other leagues emerged — notably the I-League in the 1990s and the Indian Super League in the 2010s — big clubs such as Mohun Bagan and East Bengal gradually lost interest, often sending B-teams to Durand, or not sending sides at all.

Since 2019, the tournament has been primarily hosted by Kolkata which remains the bastion of football in India. Although recent editions have managed to attract big sides, Durand nowadays is effectively a glorified pre-season tournament, providing managers an opportunity to fine-tune tactics and players before the domestic season begins.

ANONNA DUTT  
NEW DELHI, JULY 23

THE INDIAN Council of Medical Research (ICMR) has announced a promising candidate vaccine for malaria, which it will now further develop, test and manufacture for commercial purposes in partnership with private companies.

Known as AdFalcivax, the vaccine mainly targets two parts of *Plasmodium falciparum*, a pathogen that is the most common source of malaria in humans. In India, however, the disease is caused by *Plasmodium vivax* against which AdFalcivax is ineffective.

### Why is this development significant?

Malaria is a parasitic infection transmitted by mosquitoes, typically causing symptoms such as fever, chills, night sweats, nausea, vomiting, and diarrhoea. In some cases, it can lead to severe complications such as seizures, fluid in the lungs, organ damage, and death.

Having claimed millions of lives, malaria has been one of the deadliest diseases in human history. Currently, the disease kills about four lakh people annually, according to World Health Organization (WHO) figures.

Malaria is most endemic in Africa — Nigeria, Congo, Tanzania, Mozambique, Niger, and Burkina Faso together account for more than half the yearly deaths.

The disease is also present in India, although malaria deaths have sharply reduced in the country in recent years. According to the National Vector Borne Disease Control Programme (NVBDCP), reported malaria deaths stood at 1,151 in 1995, and came down to only 93 in 2020 and 83 in 2022.

Note that these figures are much lower than the numbers provided annually by the WHO. The organisation's 'World Malaria Report' says there were 5,511 deaths due to the disease in India in 2022. This discrepancy is due to WHO providing estimates and NVBDCP providing only the number of confirmed deaths, which may not have been officially reported.

To combat malaria, scientists have been working to develop a vaccine for decades but with limited success. Recently, two vaccines — RTS,S and R21 — were approved for use, but their efficacy, at 75%, is quite low.

That's why the announcement about ICMR's candidate vaccine has given new hope in the fight against the disease.

SUJIT BISOIYI  
BHUBANESWAR, JULY 23

FORMER ODISHA Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik on Tuesday expressed concern over the "omission" of the Paika Rebellion from NCERT's new Class 8 history textbook, calling it a "huge dishonour" to the brave Paikas.

NCERT has clarified that "regional resistances" like the Paika Rebellion will be part of the book's second volume, expected to be released later this year.

### Paikas of Odisha

Through the 19th century, vast areas of rural India were alive with discontent that frequently erupted as armed resistance against old inequities and new hardships. The latter was the result of the military expansion of the East India Company, which disrupted social relations in peasant and tribal communities.

The Paika Rebellion or Paika *Bidroha* was one such uprising. The Paikas (pronounced "paiko", literally "foot soldiers") were a class of military retainers who had been recruited by the Gajapati rulers of Odisha since the 16th century to provide martial services in return for hereditary rent-free land (*nish-kar jagirs*).

Varanasi, Pura Mahadev Temple in Baghpat, and Aughamath Temple in Meerut.

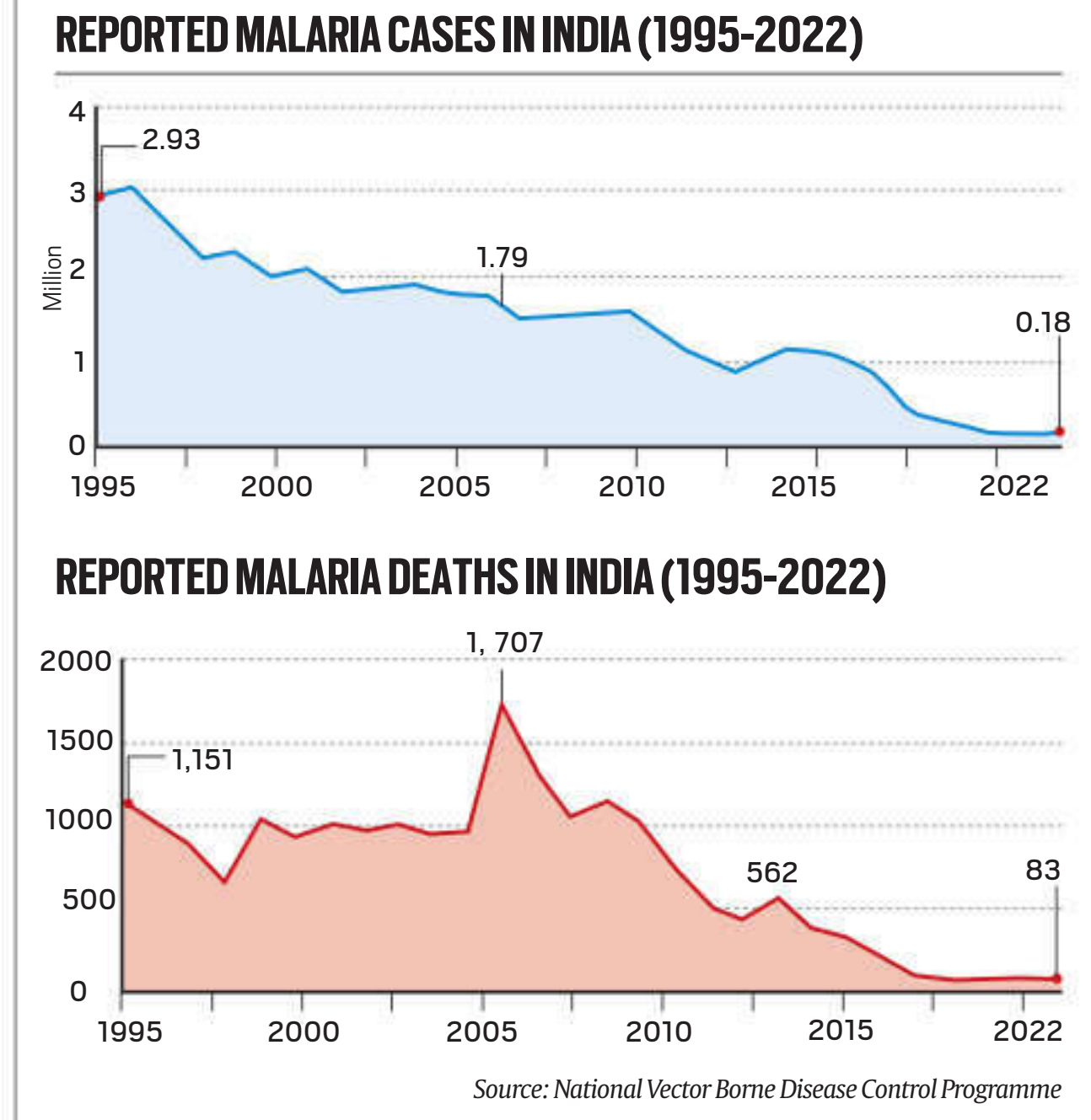
"But it is not necessary for a devotee to go to one of these temples. Ganga water can be offered in their local town or village Shiva temple. Traditionally, the journey has been undertaken on foot. Lord Shiva is an ascetic, so during the Kanwar Yatra, his devotees are supposed to practise the ascetic values of abstinence and discipline," Ramesh Kumar Upadhyay, president of the Bhartiya Jyotish Aadhyatm Parishad in Jamshedpur, said.

### Past and present of Yatra

Mentions of the Kanwar Yatra as we know it today are scarce in religious texts, even though there are legends of various mythological figures offering Ganga water to Lord Shiva — from the sage Parashuram

# Vaccine hope in malaria fight

Nearly 400,000 people worldwide succumb to malaria each year. For decades, scientists have struggled to develop a vaccine. ICMR has now made what could potentially be a game-changing breakthrough



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### How does AdFalcivax work?

AdFalcivax is a chimeric recombinant vaccine — a type of vaccine that uses different parts of the genes of a pathogen (in this case, *Plasmodium*) to create target proteins that trigger an immune response after being injected.

AdFalcivax uses two types of target proteins to prevent the spread of infection in two different ways.

■ It uses the circumsporozoite protein (CSP) to prevent infection in the person who has been immunised. The CSP is produced during the sporozoite stage (when a parasite can infect a new host) and the liver stage (when a parasite enters liver cells, multiplies, and then infects red blood cells) of the parasite.

Subhash Singh, project manager for development of the vaccine at the ICMR-Regional Medical Research Centre, Bhubaneswar, told *The Indian Express*: "Any immune response generated against these stages protects the im-

mune person from getting the infection."

■ The vaccine also uses the Pro6C protein, a fusion of parts of two different proteins — Pfs230 and Pfs48/45 — produced by *Plasmodium falciparum*. This protein prevents the spread of infection in the community.

"The Pro6C protein... stops further spread of the disease by disrupting the lifecycle of the pathogen. It disrupts the development of the parasite in the midgut of a mosquito preventing further transmission," Singh said.

### What are the advantages of AdFalcivax?

Unlike AdFalcivax, RTS,S and R21 only use the CSP protein, and can prevent infection only in vaccinated persons.

Unlike AdFalcivax, RTS,S and R21 vaccines also do not use full-length CSP proteins. This is why the ICMR's candidate vaccine is "likely to produce a stronger immune response and better protect against infection,"

but refused to give the four *parganas*. Rajaguru was captured and executed in December 1806, and the king was banished to Puri.

### Wave of discontent

After the British took control of Odisha, the Paikas lost political patronage, and with it, position and prestige. The land revenue settlements introduced by the Company drove Odia proprietors to ruin: many were forced to transfer their land to Bengali landlords, often for a pittance.

The British changed the currency system and demanded revenue payments in rupees. Landlords, who now had to pay taxes in silver, increased the pressure on dispossessed, marginal tribals.

In 1814, the British control over salt was extended to coastal Odisha, which led to great discontent and raids on the boats of salt agents near Puri.

### The rebellion

In March 1817, some 400 Kondh tribals bearing traditional arms marched from Ghumusar towards Khurda. They were joined by Paikas led by Bakshi Jagabandhu Bidyadhar Mahapatra Bhramarabar Ray, the former commander-in-chief of the king of Khurda, and the erstwhile holder of the Rodanga estate.

according to Singh.

Researchers have found that AdFalcivax provided more than 90% protection against infection in mice. The candidate vaccine has yet to undergo rigorous human trials, and the preliminary results have been obtained only through testing on animals.

Studies have also suggested that AdFalcivax produces an immune response that may last longer than that produced by the other two vaccines.

Singh said: "One of the challenges of existing vaccines is that the immune response is short-lived. People need a fifth booster shot even after four primary doses. We do not know how this will work in humans, but preliminary indications show that three doses of the ICMR candidate vaccine produced robust protection against infection in mice for more than three months. This roughly translates to a decade in human life."

AdFalcivax also contains an adjuvant — a substance used in vaccines to boost the body's immune response against the targeted disease — called alum. Singh says the use of alum is beneficial as it does not pose a risk of causing chronic inflammation, unlike adjuvants such as AS01 and Matrix M, which are used in RTS,S and R21. Alum is also known to be reliable, and has been used in numerous vaccines used in childhood immunisation programs over the years.

Another advantage is that alum in AdFalcivax can remain stable at room temperature for at least nine months, according to initial studies. This might make it possible to "transport the vaccines without maintaining the cold chain," Singh said.

### What conditions has ICMR set for private players?

The ICMR wants to partner with a company that can further develop its candidate vaccine, carry out human clinical trials, and scale up for commercial production.

Although the ICMR will share the technology of developing AdFalcivax with the chosen company, it will continue to hold the intellectual property rights. Any intellectual property rights generated during the collaboration will be held jointly by the ICMR and the company. The ICMR will also earn 2% royalty on any sales of the vaccine.

Authors from both the company and the ICMR will be credited in any research papers generated, and all data will be jointly owned.

# Paikas and the uprising against British



A mural depicting Paika rebellion at State Museum in Bhubaneswar. *Express*

### British annexation

In 1803, Colonel Harcourt, who led the Company's charge against the Marathas in Odisha, marched virtually unchallenged from Madras to Puri, and faced only feeble opposition onward to Cuttack. Harcourt had made a deal with Mukunda Deva II, the Gajapati king of Khurda, for passage through his territory in return for Rs 1 lakh and four *parganas* — Lem-bai, Rahanga, Surai and Chabiskud — which had been under Maratha control since 1760.

When the British did not fulfil these conditions, Jayee Rajaguru, the custodian of the Khurda king, marched to Cuttack with around 2,000 armed Paikas. Harcourt paid Rs 40,000,

but refused to give the four *parganas*. Rajaguru was captured and executed in December 1806, and the king was banished to Puri.

After the British took control of Odisha, the Paikas lost political patronage, and with it, position and prestige. The land revenue settlements introduced by the Company drove Odia proprietors to ruin: many were forced to transfer their land to Bengali landlords, often for a pittance.

The British changed the currency system and demanded revenue payments in rupees. Landlords, who now had to pay taxes in silver, increased the pressure on dispossessed, marginal tribals.

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### The rebellion

In March 1817, some 400 Kondh tribals bearing traditional arms marched from Ghumusar towards Khurda. They were joined by Paikas led by Bakshi Jagabandhu Bidyadhar Mahapatra Bhramarabar Ray, the former commander-in-chief of the king of Khurda, and the erstwhile holder of the Rodanga estate.

The rebels attacked the police station of Banapur, burnt government quarters, killed policemen, looted the treasury, and proceeded towards Khurda. In several bloody battles over the next few months, the Paikas killed a number of British officials. But the revolt was crushed, and Bakshi Jagabandhu escaped into the jungles. He remained on the run until 1825.

Invoking Paikas

The Paika Rebellion has long been used to invoke Odia subnationalism. In 2017, the 200th anniversary of the rebellion, Patnaik's government de-

clared the "first war of independence", given that it predated the Revolt of 1857.

Then Union Culture Minister G Kishan Reddy told Rajya Sabha in 2021 that the Paika Rebellion would be included in Class 8 history textbooks, as "one of the beginnings of popular uprisings against the British in India".

In 2017, Prime Minister Narendra Modi felicitated more than 200 descendants of Paika warriors. In 2019, then President Ram Nath Kovind laid the foundation stone of a Paika Memorial at Barunei near Khurda. After the BJP came to power, CM Mohan Charan Majhi announced that work on the Paika Memorial and Paika Academy would be expedited.

## EXPLAINED HISTORY

# Arc of the Kanwar Yatra: From Samudra Manthan to churn in society today

YASHEE  
NEW DELHI, JULY 23

WEDNESDAY WAS the last major day of offering *Gangajal* to Lord Shiva as part of the annual Kanwar Yatra.

Every year in the Hindu month of *Shraavan*/ *Saavan*, devotees clad in saffron and walking barefoot carry Ganga water to various Shiva temples in North India. The *Gangajal* is carried in decorated slings called *kanwars*, which give the pilgrimage and the pilgrims — *kanwariyas* — their names.

While the *yatra* can be undertaken any time in *Saavan* (July 11 to August 9 this year), the number of devotees dwindles after *Saavan* Shivratri, which was on July 23 this year.

### Mythology of the Yatra

Like many Indian festivals, Kanwar Yatra

is linked to *Samudra Manthan*, the cosmic churning of the ocean by the *devas* (gods) and *asuras* (demons), which produced, among other things, *halahal* — a poison so potent that if allowed to spread, it would end all life.

Lord Shiva swallowed the poison, which turned his throat blue, and earned him the name Neelkantha, or the blue-throated one. To cool his burning throat, Goddess Parvati and others gave him water from the Ganga.

Since *Samudra Manthan* took place in *Saavan*, devotees carry pitchers of Ganga water to Shiva temples as an offering in this month. Popular sites from where the water is collected include Sultanganj in Bihar, Prayagraj and Varanasi in UP, and Haridwar, Gaumukh, and Gangotri in Uttarakhand.

The Shiva temples that are considered to be of special importance are the 12 Jyotirlingas, Baidyanath Dham in Jharkhand's Deoghar, the Kashi Vishwanath Temple in

Varanasi, Pura Mahadev Temple in Baghpat, and Aughamath Temple in Meerut.

"But it is not necessary for a devotee to go to one of these temples. Ganga water can be offered in their local town or village Shiva temple. Traditionally, the journey has been undertaken on foot. Lord Shiva is an ascetic, so during the Kanwar Yatra, his devotees are supposed to practise the ascetic values of abstinence and discipline," Ramesh Kumar Upadhyay, president of the Bhartiya Jyotish Aadhyatm Parishad in Jamshedpur, said.

### Past and present of Yatra

Mentions of the Kanwar Yatra as we know it today are scarce in religious texts, even though there are legends of various mythological figures offering Ganga water to Lord Shiva — from the sage Parashuram

to both Lord Rama and Ravana. In the *Ramayana*, Shraavan Kumar took his parents on pilgrimage in what is understood to be a *kanwar*, but he is not recorded as carrying Ganga water to Shiva.

D P Dubey, retired professor of ancient history at Allahabad University, said, "In history books, descriptions of Kanwar Yatra are difficult to find. Even the British, who were good at documenting, did not describe a Kanwar

Yatra. In an account of travels in Central and North India during and after the Revolt of 1857, a Maharashtrian brahmin named Vishnubhat Godse wrote about carrying Ganga water to his village to bathe his parents — and his description of walking barefoot with the Ganga water in a sling is the closest to Kanwar Yatra as seen today." (The memoir, *Maza Pravas*,

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was published in 1907.)

Dubey said his own analysis of various local texts and accounts suggests that the Kanwar Yatra originated in Sultanganj in the 1700s. "From there, it spread," he said.

The popularity of the Yatra received a major boost in the 1980s. Scholars have linked it to improved connectivity and infrastructure, the popularity and increased accessibility of devotional music in cassettes, higher incomes in North India, and the rise of Hindu identity-assertion.

In his book *Uprising of the Fools: Pilgrimage as Moral Protest in Contemporary India* (2017), Vikash Singh, a sociologist at Montclair State University in the US, wrote that many of the *kanwariyas* are young, not-affluent men "at the margins of the economy", and "the religious phenomenon provided an open and freely accessible, yet challenging, stage...to practise and prove

their talents, resolve, and moral sincerity..."

"The religious event is also a means to contest the symbolic violence and social inequities of a hierarchical society now dominated by a neoliberal social ethic, as imposing as it is exclusive," Singh wrote.

Dubey pointed to the role that popular religious activities often play in breaking down barriers of caste.

"An important thing to note about pilgrimages, be it the Kumbh Mela or the Kanwar Yatra, is that they are a way to break the rigid boundaries of caste. Historically, pilgrims trailed the caravans of traders or even soldiers for security. Pilgrimages create bonds of community that are more inclusive than the generally airtight pockets of caste. State support also plays a role," Dubey said.

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