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India denies role in Pakistan train attack

Kallol Bhattacharjee
NEW DELHI

Islamabad should “look inwards” instead of pointing fingers and shifting blame, India said in its first official comment after an attack on a Quetta-Peshawar train by the Baloch Liberation Army left 21 passengers dead. At least 33 Baloch rebels were killed by the Pakistan security forces.

India pushed back against allegations made by the Pakistan Foreign Office and military establishment, who claimed that the Baloch militants were receiving support from India and Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. This was the largest attack by the Baloch rebels in nearly two decades.

“We strongly reject the baseless allegations made by Pakistan. The whole world knows where the epicentre of global terrorism lies. Pakistan should look inwards instead of pointing fingers and shifting the



Soldiers board a relief train headed to Bolan, Pakistan, on Friday. REUTERS

blame for its own internal problems and failures on others,” the Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said on Friday.

Earlier, Pakistan Foreign Office spokesperson Shafqat Ali Khan blamed the attack on India, claiming that “the terrorists had been in contact with their handlers and ring leaders in Afghanistan”.

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Tamil Nadu govt. to establish 25 Anbucholai centres to ensure well-being of senior citizens

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI

The Tamil Nadu government will establish 25 *Anbucholai* centres (daycare centres for the elderly) to ensure the well-being of senior citizens. “Old age is an inevitable stage of human life, and is often accompanied by challenges of loneliness, medical care, and financial dependence,” Finance Minister Thangam Thennarasu said on Friday. The *Anbucholai* centres will be established in the Municipal Corporations, including Madurai, Coimbatore, Tiruchi, Salem, Tiruppur, Erode, Thoothukudi, Vellore, Thanjavur,



Each centre will provide various services, including day-care assistance, arrangements for essential medical care, and recreational activities, with the support of voluntary organisations.

and Dindigul, with a financial allocation of ₹10 crore. The elderly can engage in companionship and meaningful activities at these

centres. Each centre will provide various services, including day-care assistance, arrangements for essential medical care, and

recreational activities, with the support of voluntary organisations, he said while presenting the Budget. Pointing out studies that had shown that the attendance of students and their nutritional levels and learning abilities had improved significantly following the implementation of the Chief Minister’s Breakfast Scheme, the Minister said the scheme, the first initiative of its kind in the country, would be further expanded in the next academic year to government aided schools in urban areas. “It will benefit an additional 3.14 lakh students enrolled from Classes I to V

and a sum of ₹600 crore has been allocated for its implementation in the coming financial year,” he said. Mr. Thennarasu said that to provide anganwadi centres with essential facilities, new buildings would be constructed for 500 centres currently operating on rented premises. The allocation is ₹83 crore. He said ₹3,676 crore would be allocated for the Integrated Child Development Scheme in the Budget Estimates 2025-26. A sum of ₹8,597 crore has been allocated for the Social Welfare and Women Empowerment Department.

Budget lines up archaeological excavations, new museums, Indus Valley Cultural Gallery

B. Kolappan
CHENNAI

Finance Minister Thangam Thennarasu said that in continuation of the government’s efforts to showcase Tamil culture to the world, archaeological excavations would be carried out at Keezhadi in Sivaganga district, Pattanam in Tiruvarur district, Thoothukudi district, Karikal in Karaikal, Nagapattinam in Nagapattinam district, Manikkollai in Cuddalore district, Adichanur in Kallakurichi district, Vellalur in Coimbatore district, and Thelanganur in Salem district in the 2025-26 financial year.

Presenting the Budget for 2025, he said the journey in search of the cultural identities of ancient Tamils had also expanded to regions in the neighbouring States: Palur (Odisha), Vengi (Andhra Pradesh), and Maski (Karnataka). “The archaeological artefacts unearthed during excavations will undergo advanced technological analyses, including ancient DNA analysis, metallurgical analysis, pollen analysis, and optically stimulated luminescence dating, in collaboration with world-renowned research institutions. A sum of ₹7 crore will be earmarked for archaeological excavations and scientific research in the coming financial year,” he said. The Minister said a series of deep-sea archaeological excavations along

Push for excavation

The Tamil Nadu government plans on investing in archaeological excavation projects and new museums across the State



ARCHAEOLOGY, ART, CULTURE & MUSEUMS
Archaeological excavations (8 places in Tamil Nadu and 3 in other States)
Archaeological museums ₹43 crore (Noyyal in Erode district and Navai in Ramanathapuram district)
Aimpon and bronze statue gallery in Egmore Museum **₹40 crore**

the coast of Tamil Nadu were being planned to bring out the ancient Tamils’ excellence in maritime trade with Southeast Asia, the Mediterranean region, the Arabian Peninsula, and the Roman Empire. “In the first phase, a comprehensive deep-sea excavation will be carried out this year from Kaveripoompattinam to Nagapattinam, in consultation with renowned archaeologists and with the support of leading technological institutions,” he said. The Minister said the government believed that showcasing the artefacts unearthed across Tamil Nadu through state-of-the-art museums would effectively proclaim the glory of the Tamil culture to the world. Hence, a ‘Noyyal Museum’ would be established in Erode district at an estimated cost of ₹22 crore. It would focus on the Kodumanal excavations. A ‘Naavaai Museum’ in Ramanathapuram district would highlight the

maritime trade excellence of the Pandyas during the Sangam period. It would cost ₹21 crore. An Indus Valley Cultural Gallery would be established at the Egmore Museum in Chennai to commemorate the centenary of the discovery of the Indus Valley Civilization. “Moreover, with a view to showcasing the uniqueness of the antiquity and continuity of Tamil heritage to tourists from other States and from around the world, Tamil Cultural Museums will be created in Mamallapuram and Tiruvannamalai,” he said. The Egmore Museum houses more than 2,000 bronze statues, meticulously crafted from *Aimpon* (an alloy of five metals) by the great master artisans of the past. “To showcase these sculptural masterpieces, a gallery will be constructed with a traditional architectural design in the museum complex at an estimated cost of ₹40 crore,” he said.



A voluntary mandate

The APAAR ID should not be imposed without a law in place

The introduction of an Automated Permanent Academic Account Registry (APAAR) ID by the Ministry of Education, to digitise the academic transcripts of every student, aims to ensure a “single source of truth” for all their records throughout their life in the academic ecosystem in India. Linked with Aadhaar, APAAR is far from the first such step towards a rapid digitisation of school records in India: since the implementation of the National Education Policy, 2020, education authorities have pushed the Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+) and the Student Database Management Information System. While these radically novel technocratic overhauls of record-keeping are one thing, the blatantly unlawful ways in which they are being pushed on parents and wielded as weapons at the State level are quite another. The description of APAAR as unlawful is no mere interpretation: the Education Ministry’s website is clear that the programme is not mandatory, with no law mandating its usage. But schools and district education administrators do not seem to be operating within that reality.

In Uttar Pradesh and Karnataka, schools have been given an unambiguous target: 100% “saturation,” or complete enrolment of all students. In their fervour to attain this target, schools have warned parents of consequences in the event of non-enrolment, and State education authorities have ratified their sabres at religious minority institutions and even at fellow administrators, alleging a mismatch of enrolment data between APAAR and existing records. In the initial days of what has now been rechristened as Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI), the government had similarly been all too keen to propagate Aadhaar and services such as Digi Yatra to an unsuspecting (and too often non-consenting) public, achieving such broad coverage that a formal mandate later becomes a *fait accompli*. All-too-familiar issues such as name mismatches, leading to failure of enrolment, have also emerged. It is important for informed consent to be the bedrock of any DPI. Else, it risks being mandated de facto. Collecting and digitising this data – with tall claims of security and convenience – should be alarming when the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 has yet to take effect. More importantly, the Supreme Court of India has ruled, in its right to privacy judgment, that Aadhaar cannot be mandated for basic education. APAAR is an ill-disguised proxy that steers clear of the text – but not the spirit – of that judgment. If the government wishes to undertake the goal of improving the reliability and accessibility of education records, it should back its administration of that effort with legislation.

Identities and symbols

Cultural markers need not be seen as a challenge to nationalism

Even as the ruling DMK government in Tamil Nadu engages in a political discourse with the BJP-led regime at the Centre over the delimitation of parliamentary and Assembly constituencies and the implementation of the National Education Policy (NEP), its use of the Tamil letter ‘Roo’ (ரூ) instead of the Indian currency symbol ‘₹’ in the promotional logo for the State budget has drawn nationwide attention. The logo, which was unveiled by Chief Minister M.K. Stalin, has been seen by political opponents as an attempt to place regional identity in opposition to national identity. However, the use of ‘Roo’ is more a symbolic representation of Tamil – one of India’s many languages – than an outright rejection of the currency symbol ‘₹’. The Tamil Nadu government, like many others, continues to be flexible in adopting different symbols – ‘₹’, ‘Rs’, and ‘ரூ’ – in its official documents. In fact, the widespread use of ‘₹’ in the State’s first Economic Survey reinforces the idea that cultural and linguistic diversity, rather than political intent, governs such choices.

While Tamil Nadu has taken longer than other southern States to release an Economic Survey, the document is a valuable addition to literature on the State’s economy. Forecasting a growth rate of over 8% in 2024-25, the Survey contextualises the State’s economy within global and national economic trends. As a major exporter of automobiles, textiles, leather and IT services, Tamil Nadu is more sensitive than many other States to global market fluctuations, making its growth trajectory more volatile. The Survey’s observations on demographic trends are particularly relevant, given that Tamil Nadu’s population growth is slowing. The challenge lies in consolidating and building upon industrial gains for long-term sustainable growth. Additionally, the Survey underscores the vulnerability of certain coastal districts in terms of climate change/natural disasters. The Survey also has a strong focus on sustainable water management practices – a subject that has historically received insufficient attention. However, the Survey could have had a more detailed analysis of the State’s finances and the socio-economic challenges faced by Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, who make up over one-fifth of the population. As more States publish their own Economic Surveys – the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir tabled its Survey recently – there is an opportunity now for economists, public policy experts and academics to conduct comparative analyses. Such studies, shared in public forums, could encourage other States that have yet to attempt similar reports to undertake their own economic assessments, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of India’s diverse economic landscape.

Across the world, there is broad agreement, including in the area of politics and diplomacy, that a strong leader can be useful. The term, no doubt, carries more than one interpretation, but is generally taken to mean a leader who concentrates a great deal of power in his hands and dominates both a wide swathe of public policy and also the political party to which he or she belongs.

In today’s world, United States President Donald Trump and India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi are presumed to fall into this category. Confirming this perception very recently, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni (addressing a Conservative Political Action Conference in Washington via video link) mentioned Mr. Trump and Mr. Modi as two strong leaders who are now shaping ‘A New Conservative Movement’. Both leaders also appear more than willing to engage in modern day summit diplomacy, even though it contains both positives and negatives as far as outcomes are concerned. Wielding power decisively has its benefits. However, belief in one’s sole judgment can have many negative consequences or fallout. Nevertheless, summit diplomacy has increasingly become the stock-in-trade of ‘maximum leader’ when it comes to issues such as war and peace.

From the past to the present

Most commentators link the beginning of summit diplomacy to the Congress of Vienna (1814-15), which sought to reshape the map of Europe after the Napoleonic Wars. More recently, summit diplomacy has been resorted to in conflict resolution and peace building. The Camp David Accords, signed in 1978, which led to a tentative peace between Egypt and Israel, is a conspicuous example of the success of modern day summitry. Another significant instance of the advantage of summit diplomacy was the interaction between U.S. President Ronald Reagan and General Secretary Mikhail S. Gorbachev, leader of the Soviet Union, which helped to significantly reduce Cold War tensions. However, there are many more instances of failures than successes in the course of resorting to summit diplomacy. More often than not, the desire for visible success at a summit leads to superficial agreements or compromises that lack substance.

This is more true in the case of leaders who, notwithstanding the real outcome, are anxious to sustain their image of being a strong leader. A classic instance of this was how the West misinterpreted reality in the case of Iraq under Saddam Hussein, viz., regarding the possession of nuclear weapons by him. Summit diplomacy is, hence, fraught with several complexities.

The perils of ‘pseudo’ summit diplomacy are clearly evident in the backdrop of recent exchanges between Mr. Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Their heated

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Despite obtuse exercises such as the Trump-style meets, summit diplomacy could continue to occupy a vital place in modern international relations

exchanges in the White House, on February 28, 2025, showcase summit diplomacy at its worst. Summitry is normally conducted in private. The Zelenskyy-Trump summitry took place instead in the glare of publicity, and what it achieved was providing Mr. Zelenskyy another opportunity for ‘grandstanding’ rather than finding a solution or a mutually acceptable outcome for the Ukraine conflict. Seldom has a discussion between leaders degenerated to levels that were seen during the Trump-Zelenskyy exchanges, much of it on television. With Mr. Zelenskyy almost ‘daring’ Mr. Trump, well aware of his nature, this could have but one result. Mr. Trump’s response was, therefore, not unexpected, and his diktat to Mr. Zelenskyy to accept the deal or else have the U.S. opt out of the Ukraine-Russia imbroglio was a ‘*fait accompli*’.

Mr. Zelenskyy’s embarking on a new variant of summit diplomacy was by going to Washington with an offer to seal an agreement with the U.S. on handing over many billions of dollars worth of ‘mineral rights’, in repayment for past U.S. military aid to Ukraine.

The sequel to this is in some ways even more problematic. Europe, caught in the cross hairs of the Trump-Zelenskyy exchanges, was seen scrambling to put in place an alternative. A hurriedly arranged meeting, in London, of 19 European leaders, put forward a fresh menu of sentiments, but which was lacking in substance. The declaration by the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom that Europe must “do the heavy lifting” for the future defence of Ukraine at a summit which took place “at a crossroads in history today”, further adding that his country was ‘willing to put boots on the ground and planes in the air to support a deal’, which was met with acclaim. He did not, however, forget to add – possibly as an afterthought – that no two countries were more closely aligned than the U.K. and the U.S. The latter sentiment is, perhaps, more real. The dominant sentiment in Europe, meanwhile, appears to be that the U.S. under Mr. Trump is in no mood to pursue former U.S. President Joe Biden’s strategy of supporting Zelenskyy’s Ukraine.

India and a working visit

The Trump-Zelenskyy exchanges are seen in some quarters as further enhancing Mr. Trump’s reputation in the realm of global politics today as being a ‘bully’, but this may not be all too true. In the meeting held between Mr. Trump and Mr. Modi during the Indian leader’s brief working visit on February 13, 2025, there was little evidence of ‘bullying’ despite Mr. Trump’s opposition to India’s tariffs and tariff barriers. The U.S. President did, however, lash out at the tariff barriers erected by India, warning that there could be serious consequences as a result. The exchanges were, however, civil and did not tantamount to ‘bullying’. No doubt, the U.S. side

sought concessions and Mr. Modi did make some, but there is no evidence that he buckled under a Trump onslaught. The general consensus among analysts worldwide is that as far as the Modi-Trump meeting is concerned, the latter was not the obvious winner in the exchanges. Instead, the two ‘strong leaders’ seemed to adhere to Newton’s ‘Third Law of Motion’, in which there are no winners or losers. One should not, however, overlook ‘the bait’ the U.S. President held out to India – the sale of F-35 fighter jets to India.

The Joint Statement issued at the end of the Modi-Trump talks was, however, ‘a masterpiece in obfuscation’, long on possible collaboration while containing a gratuitous nod to India’s security concerns across Asia. The hidden agenda was, no doubt, on how best to increase U.S. defence sales to India. The offer of possibly the best aircraft in the world, the F-35 (which has so far not been available to India) was the ‘icing on the cake’ since this was a proposal that the Indian Air Force could be expected to use to pressurise the civil administration into accepting it as a counterweight to China. All in all, this was the best of possible outcomes, but given Mr. Trump’s penchant for producing surprises, the outcome of the first meeting between Mr. Modi and President Trump (in his second avatar) is probably yet to be determined.

The Indian Prime Minister did resort to various stratagems to prepare the ground for his meeting with Mr. Trump. The meetings with the U.S. Director of National Intelligence, Tulsi Gabbard, the National Security Adviser, Michael Waltz, and industrialist and Tesla CEO, Elon Musk, prior to the Trump meet reveal a degree of careful preparation, given the U.S. President’s image as someone who makes few concessions. In any case, there are no set guidelines for a summit meeting of this kind. Further, in summit diplomacy, there are seldom clear cut winners or losers.

In perspective

Mr. Trump’s initial forays into summit diplomacy, however, do not quite fit the mould of summitry in diplomacy, which is principally aimed at conflict resolution and peace building at one level, and building relationships and trust at another. The truth is that notwithstanding sharp divergences in national interests and power imbalances, most world leaders today embark on summit diplomacy without adequate preparation. It often turns into a public relations exercise without worthwhile outcomes. Nevertheless, summit diplomacy will continue to occupy a vital, and often indispensable, place in modern international relations. It is even possible that summit diplomacy will become even more crucial in a world facing increasingly complex challenges which demand collective actions and cooperation.

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A school closure that must be called out



Anshul Trivedi

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The order to close down Maharashtra’s only Gondi-medium school is also an affront to the Constitution

their own genius. His view was informed by the historical experience of the past two centuries which saw many tribal communities being driven to the verge of extinction as a result of the vicious violence unleashed by the colonial state across the world.

Therefore, the Constitution has provisions to preserve and protect the tribal way of life – rights over land, language, culture and customs. These provisions are intended to enable tribal communities to participate in the process of nation-building while guarding against the loss of their identity.

Forces of absorption

However, the forces of absorption, which operate in the secular and religious realms, have had an immensely deleterious impact on the tribal communities since Independence. In the secular realm, absorption is carried out by the state and the market, while in the religious realm, absorption is carried out through the denigration, distortion and erasure of tribal religious beliefs. Both these forces of absorption complement each other.

This particular case, of the school’s possible closure, is one of absorption through the state which is operationalised through the non-recognition of the elements of tribal culture. This is reflected most clearly in the current status of Adivasi languages in the Constitution. Out of the 22 languages included in the Eighth Schedule, major tribal languages such as Gondi and Bhili are absent.

Gondi, which according to the 2011 Census, is spoken by more than 29 lakh people primarily across six States, is not included within the Eighth Schedule. Therefore, the state has no obligation to promote it at the national level.

On the contrary, Sanskrit, which is considered

the *Devbhasha* or the language of the gods, is spoken by less than 25,000 people across the country, is listed in the Eighth Schedule. The contrast between Sanskrit and Gondi is necessary in this context because both are minority languages. Both are unlikely to be amplified by the market nor can they be considered necessary in getting employment. However, both these minority languages have contrasting fates due to the socio-political power wielded by the community which seeks to promote them – one is recognised by the state while the other is neglected.

Specificity of Adivasi languages

The need to confer state recognition becomes all the more important in the case of Adivasi communities because their culture has an oral tradition which includes their originary myths, religious beliefs and tales of the past. In the present context, given the rapid erosion of the Adivasi identity due to the clearing of forests, increasing urbanisation and rampant marketisation of society, the primary site of the construction of the Adivasi identity (historical memory which is transmitted orally) may face danger. The extinction of an Adivasi language might cause irreparable loss to that identity. Therefore, Adivasi languages must be accorded special status to ensure their protection.

It is ironic that those who claim to follow the Constitution, which derives its legitimacy from ‘we, the people’, recognise and promote the *Devbhasha* but neglect the *Janbhasha* (language of the people) of the Adivasi people. This gross moral failure must be addressed. It can be remedied, with the first step being the recognition of the Gondi-speaking school in focus and then expanding such schools. This would be in line with the spirit of the Constitution as well.

From Page One

India denies role in
Pakistan train attack

Pakistan continued this refrain on Friday, with the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) Director General Lt. Gen. Ahmed Sharif Chaudhry amplifying the Pakistan Foreign Office's attempt to blame India as the main sponsor of terrorism in Balochistan. In a media briefing, Mr. Chaudhry alleged that the BLA's fighters had used Afghan and Indian weapons in the attack against the Jaffar Express, which connects Quetta with Peshawar. Mr. Chaudhry claimed that none of the hostages were harmed during the two-day operation that began on Tuesday and concluded on Wednesday.

However, Pakistani media had earlier cited sources to report that at least four members of the Frontier Corps died while clearing the rebel fighters from the ambushed train.

‘Cover up of lies, defeat’

BLA spokesperson Jeeyand Baloch disputed Mr. Chaudhry's remarks about the operation, terming it an “attempt to cover up lies and defeat” in an email to *The Hindu*. On March 11, Mr. Baloch had announced the dramatic escalation in the group's activities in a statement, claiming that nearly 182 passengers were taken hostage after the Jaffar Express was forced to stop. The BLA alleged that at least 100 of the passengers were “active-duty personnel from the Pakistan military, police, Anti-Terrorism Force (AtF), and Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).” Mr. Baloch had added: “During the operation, BLA fighters have released women, children, and Baloch passengers, ensuring that all remaining hostages are serving personnel of the occupying forces.”

The BLA was declared a terrorist organisation by the United States during the first presidency of Donald Trump on July 2, 2019. Insurgency in Balochistan – Pakistan's largest province, which has rich petroleum and natural gas resources – is an old problem that goes back to the country's inception. The Baloch have traditionally resisted the State, with various clans and tribes joining hands, including the Marris, Bugtis and Bizenjos.

Hike MGNREGS wages to match price rise: parliamentary panel

Govt. is yet to take action despite multiple recommendations, says committee headed by Cong. MP; it seeks uniform wage rates across the country and criticises Centre for the delay in release of pending wages to States, including West Bengal

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI/KOLKATA

A parliamentary committee has strongly argued for the revision of wages under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) in view of the rising cost of living.

In its report tabled in the Lok Sabha on Wednesday, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Rural Development, headed by Congress MP Saptagiri Sankar Ulaka, also sought uniform wage rates across the country.

Currently, the per day wages vary from ₹234 in Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh to ₹374 in Haryana and Sikkim. The panel expressed disappointment that despite its multiple recommendations on this matter over the years, the government had not implemented any significant changes.

The wages currently are linked to the Consumer Price Index for agricultural



Suspension of funds has resulted in severe consequences in West Bengal, including an increase in distress migration. DEBASISH BHADURI
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labourers. “The committee believes that this index does not fully capture the real impact of inflation, and therefore, the method of wage calculation must be reviewed and updated on a priority basis to reflect the actual economic conditions at the ground level,” it said.

The panel urged the government to implement a “uniform wage rate” across all States and Union Territories, since the scheme is primarily fund-

ed by the Union government. “This would help ensure fairness and consistency in wage payments under the scheme,” said the panel, while reviewing the budgetary allocation of the Department of Rural Development.

Payments delayed

The panel also criticised the government for the delay in disbursement of wages to the States. As per the report, till February 15, the total pending liabilities

stood at ₹23,446.27 crore, including ₹12,219.18 crore in wage dues.

The panel report pointed out that one-fourth of the allocated funds (₹86,000 crore) will go in clearing the last financial year’s dues. “Consequently, the actual working budget for the current financial year is reduced to ₹62,553.73 crore, significantly limiting the scheme’s capacity to function effectively and meet its primary objective of preventing rural distress and ensuring livelihood security,” the report said.

West Bengal’s case

The report mentioned the case of West Bengal, which has not been receiving funds for MGNREGS activities since March 2022. The Centre stopped the funds to the State over allegations of corruption in the implementation of the scheme. “The continued suspension of funds has resulted in severe consequences, including a sharp increase in distress migra-

tion and disruptions in rural development initiatives. This has had a significant adverse impact on the livelihoods of rural populations, exacerbating economic hardships in the State. The committee strongly recommends that West Bengal receive its rightful dues for all the eligible years, except for the year currently under dispute in court.”

Strained ties

The Centre froze the funding after invoking Section 27 of the MGNREGA, 2005, which allows for stoppage of funds for violation of rules in implementation of the scheme. This has strained the Centre-State ties with the Trinamool Congress holding protests both in Delhi and in West Bengal. Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee has written several letters to the Centre over the issue of the release of funds and announced a separate scheme – Karmashree – to provide jobs to the rural population in the State.

House Democrats press Rubio for details of ‘voter turnout’ funds to India

Sriram Lakshman

Two Democrats in the U.S. House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee (HFAC) have written to U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio seeking details of the alleged \$21 million spent by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) on “voter turnout” in India.

They also ask for details on how the Department for Government Efficiency (DOGE) cancelled the programme and communicated the cancellation to stakeholders.

The letter, dated March 13, 2025, refers to the “\$21 million for voter turnout in India” – an alleged programme cancelled by DOGE, led by billionaire and Trump administration adviser Elon Musk.

U.S. President Donald Trump had repeatedly cited the alleged programme as an example of wasteful foreign assistance.

Mr. Trump’s claims had led to an uproar in Parliament with the BJP and the Congress trading charges.

The committee has



Under pressure: The lawmakers asked Marco Rubio for a response to their letter by March 21. REUTERS

oversight over the U.S. State Department and the authors of the letter say they had written to Mr. Rubio three times in February seeking details of the funding, but had not received a reply. The letter is signed by HFAC’s Ranking Member (i.e., a Democrat) Gregory Meeks and the ranking member of its South and Central Asia subcommittee, Sydney Kamlager-Dove.

“The President’s [Mr. Trump’s] statements, including his unsubstantiated claim that the Biden Administration used these funds to ‘get somebody else elected’ ignited a political firestorm in India,” the

U.S. lawmakers say in their letter.

Citing examples such as the USAID had provided for the setting up of IIT-Kanpur, the letter says Mr. Trump’s “inflammatory statements” had created suspicion around the development agency’s work in India and jeopardised a long-lasting partnership.

“India is a key strategic partner and sustaining this relationship requires skilled diplomacy,” it says.

The lawmakers ask Mr. Rubio for a response to their letter by March 21, 2025. *The Hindu* has reached out to the State Department for a comment.

Centre sanctions 116 new tourist spots across the country

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Centre has sanctioned 116 new tourist destinations across the country under various schemes in partnership with State governments which would be developed at a cost of ₹4,088 crores.

Out of these, 34 have been sanctioned under the *Swadesh Darshan 2.0* scheme, 42 have been identified under the “Challenge Based Destination Development (CBDD)”, a sub-scheme of *Swadesh Darshan*, and 40 would be developed under Special Assistance to States for Capital Investment (SASCI).

The *Swadesh Darshan* scheme aims to develop sustainable and responsible tourism destinations by focusing on theme-based circuits and providing financial assistance to State governments for infrastructure development. The scheme was revamped as *Swadesh Darshan 2.0* (SD2.0) with the objective to develop sustainable tourism destinations.

The Ministry has also formulated CBDD as a sub-scheme under SD2.0 aiming for holistic development of destinations to enhance tourist experience.



The *Swadesh Darshan* scheme aims to develop sustainable tourism destinations.

The Centre, through the Union Finance Ministry, sanctioned 40 projects in 23 States for ₹3,295.76 crore in 2024-25 under the ‘SASCI - Development of Iconic Tourist Centres to Global Scale’ scheme with the objective to comprehensively develop iconic tourist centres in the country, branding, and marketing them at global scale, Union Minister for Culture and Tourism Gajendra Singh Shekhawat informed Parliament earlier this week.

Tribal homestays
The Centre has also approved the initiative to develop tribal homestays under the *Swadesh Darshan* scheme as part of the *Pradhan Mantri Janatiya Unnat Gram Abhiyan*.

Aditya-L1 mission: scientists observe a flareless coronal mass ejection

Hemanth C.S.
BENGALURU

Scientists from the Indian Institute of Astrophysics (IIA) have reported observations of a flareless coronal mass ejection (CME) from the solar atmosphere with the Visible Emission Line Coronagraph (VELC) instrument onboard Aditya-L1 mission.

The Aditya-L1 mission is India’s first scientific mission dedicated to studying the sun and the VELC payload was developed by the Bengaluru-based IIA.

Scientists associated with the IIA said that using the VELC payload, it was possible to observe the corona not only closer to where its base is located in the solar atmosphere, but also obtain data at shorter time intervals compared with other existing coronagraphs in orbit.

The VELC team observed the onset of a CME that erupted from the sun on July 5, 2024, with no association to any flare.

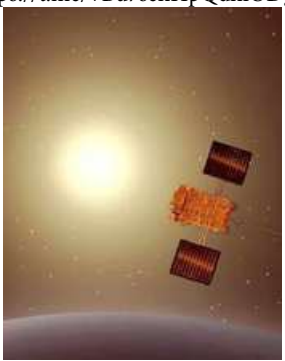
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Magnetic instability
They said that the data obtained provide valuable clues to understand and differentiate the magnetic instabilities on the sun that causes the flares and the CMEs.

The results of the study will be appearing soon in the *Astrophysical Journal*, an international peer-reviewed scientific journal.

“Observation of CMEs as and when they originate on the sun and understanding their association with flares is one of the major science goals for VELC, and we are happy that the instrument is doing that,” said R. Ramesh, senior professor at the IIA and the principal investigator for the VELC.

Prof. Ramesh added



The Aditya-L1 mission is India’s first scientific mission dedicated to studying the sun.

that with the sun approaching the maximum phase of the current solar cycle 25, the CMEs are expected to occur frequently.

Closer monitoring
“Hence, uninterrupted monitoring of the sun with VELC for CMEs is expected to provide valuable data to the Indian and international scientific community. The unique design of VELC

helps to observe the CMEs close to the limb of the solar surface, and their onset time. These advantages facilitate better investigation of the association between CMEs and flares near the solar limb,” Prof. Ramesh added.

Flares and CMEs are explosive events in the sun. They are due to magnetic reconnection during which magnetic field lines rearrange.

During a flare, energy is released primarily as electromagnetic radiation from the heated plasma. Compared with flares, the CMEs are massive eruptions of plasma and magnetic field weighing about trillion kilograms that race outwards from the sun through the interplanetary space at speeds up to 3,000 kilometres per second. The association between flares and CMEs is ambiguous till date.

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