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Citizens are losing trust in Indian judiciary, says former CJI Ramana

Ramya Kannan
CHENNAI

Former Chief Justice of India (CJI) N.V. Ramana on Saturday said that the faith of the people in the judiciary is eroding.

Speaking at the law conclave *Justice Unplugged: Shaping the Future of Law* in Chennai, organised by VIT School of Law (VIT-SOL), VIT Chennai, in collaboration with *The Hindu*, the former CJI emphasised the need to acknowledge and address these perceptions while formulating solutions.

“Unfortunately, in recent times, an average citizen is apprehensive about approaching courts, fearing the unknown. They have raised concerns about delays, pendency, accessibility, deficient in-



Power of ink: N. Ram, Director, THG Publishing Private Limited, presented a pen to former CJI N.V. Ramana at the conclave. VIT Vice-President G.V. Selvam was also present. R. RAVINDRAN

frastructure, large vacancies, transparency of legal proceedings, the ill-equipped criminal justice system, increasing number of false cases etc.,” Justice Ramana (retd.) said, highlighting the necessity of making the legal system more accessible to India’s

marginalised populations.

He advocated the ‘Indianisation’ of the legal system, stressing the importance of administering justice in local languages to enhance transparency.

“The procedure and language of law make it very difficult for the clients to

understand the court proceedings. Once a case is filed, the litigants often feel they have lost control over the fate of their dispute. However, once the language barrier is reduced, the access to justice improves,” he said.

Systemic issues

Justice Ramana noted that the judiciary does not adequately reflect the country’s diversity. He said a more representative bench would enrich jurisprudence. “This problem requires action on the part of the higher judiciary to appoint more judges from diverse social and economic backgrounds,” he said.

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South States seek freeze on LS seat count for 25 years

Demand made by Joint Action Committee on Fair Delimitation; the attendees included the CMs of T.N., Kerala, Telangana, and Punjab

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI

In a show of strength on Saturday, the leaders of several States vowed to stand together against what they termed the BJP’s bid to reduce the number of Lok Sabha seats in the southern States through delimitation, so that it could stay in power just by winning seats in northern India where it has greater influence.

The Joint Action Committee on Fair Delimitation demanded that the freeze on the number of Lok Sabha constituencies, based on the 1971 Census, be extended for another 25 years.

The meeting was hosted by Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin, and attended by the Chief Ministers of Kerala, Telangana, and Punjab – Pinarayi Vijayan, Revanth Reddy, and Bhagwant Mann, respectively – Karnataka Deputy Chief Minister D.K. Shivakumar, Bharat Rashtra Samithi leader K.T. Rama Rao, and Biju Janata Dal president Naveen Patnaik (through video conference).

‘Sword of Damocles’

Mr. Stalin said any reduction in the number of Lok Sabha seats or representation would invariably lead to a reduction in political strength. “It is about our power, our rights, and the interests of our future. With the reduction in representation, our States will have to struggle even to get the funds we right-



United for a cause: Pinarayi Vijayan, Bhagwant Mann, M.K. Stalin, and Revanth Reddy at the meeting in Chennai on Saturday. PTI

Penalised for achieving targets, say Pinarayi and Shivakumar

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI

Addressing the Joint Action Committee meeting, Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan and Karnataka Deputy Chief Minister D.K. Shivakumar said the Southern States are being

penalised for achieving targets. Mr. Shivakumar said the proposed delimitation exercise, based solely on population, was a political assault on the Southern States.

FULL REPORT ON

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fully deserve,” he said. DMK Parliamentary Party leader Kanimozhi, who moderated the JAC meeting, termed the gathering “historic”.

“The delimitation of Lok Sabha constituencies is hanging over our heads like the sword of Damocles,” said Mr. Vijayan, claiming that the southern States were being punished for their sincere implementation of the na-

tional population policy.

Mr. Reddy accused the BJP of implementing a policy of demographic penalties, noting that, since 1971 when India decided to adopt family planning, the South has performed spectacularly. “We contribute more to the national exchequer and get lesser allocations,” he said.

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CJI forms panel for deeper probe against Delhi judge

Krishnadas Rajagopal
NEW DELHI

Chief Justice of India Sanjiv Khanna on Saturday constituted a three-member committee consisting of Punjab and Haryana High Court Chief Justice Sheel Nagu Himachal Pradesh Chief Justice G.S. Sandhwalia and Karnataka High Court Judge, Justice Anu Sivaraman to conduct an inquiry into allegations of “huge” amount of cash found on the premises of the official residence of Delhi High Court Judge, Justice Yashwant Varma, during a blaze on the night of March 14.

The move comes within 24 hours of Delhi Chief Justice D.K. Upadhyaya submitting a report *prima facie* ascertaining the veracity of the allegations and collecting details and evidence.

In his report to CJI Sanjiv Khanna, the Delhi Chief



Justice Yashwant Varma

Justice said “on examining the incident reported the material available and the response of Justice Yashwant Varma, what I find is that the Commissioner of Police, Delhi, in his report on March 15 has reported that as per the guard posted at the residence of Justice Varma, the debris and other partially burnt articles were removed from the room where the fire had broken out in the morning of March 15. The enquiry conducted by me, *prima facie*, does not re-

veal the possibility of entry or access to the room by any person other than those residing in the bungalow, the servants, the gardeners and the CPWD personnel, if any. Accordingly, I am of the *prima facie* opinion that the entire matter warrants a deeper probe”.

Report goes online

A redacted version of the Delhi Chief Justice’s report along with the response of Justice Varma were uploaded on the Supreme Court website.

Justice Varma has noted in his reply that his cash withdrawals were documented, and the allegations were baseless and had already scarred his reputation. The CJI would now be himself monitoring the progress of the enquiry against the judge.

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SAARC is not off the table, Jaishankar tells panel

Kallol Bhattacharjee
NEW DELHI

External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar informed the Consultative Committee on External Affairs on Saturday that “SAARC is not off the table”. The regional grouping has been “paused”, he said, indicating the possibility of its revival in the future.

India has supported BIMSTEC after it cancelled the 19th SAARC meeting in November 2016 following the Uri terror attack in September that year.

The committee members met Mr. Jaishankar for a frank discussion on India’s foreign policy where the circumstances in the neighbourhood – especially in Bangladesh, Myanmar, Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan – dominated.

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From Page One

South States seek freeze on Lok Sabha seat count

The proposed delimitation was pre-planned, alleged Mr. Mann. The idea, he said, was to increase seats only in the Hindi belt of northern India, and reduce those in southern India. In the new Parliament, Uttar Pradesh alone could get 146 seats, warned Mr. Mann.

Mr. Shivakumar said the proposed delimitation exercise, based solely on population, was not just a technical adjustment, but a political assault on the southern States.

As an alternative proposal, Mr. Rao said that delimitation could be based on fiscal contribution and development, which could give the South a 36% representation in Parliament.

Citizens are losing trust in judiciary: former CJI

“Salutory statements and lip-services would not help the cause,” he added.

More critically, he pointed out the glaring underrepresentation of women in the judiciary, calling it a systemic issue that demands urgent redressal. “During my tenure as the CJI, the Supreme Court had the highest number of women judges in its history,” he stated. At present, only two of the 33 Supreme Court judges are women.

In a sharp critique of the entrenched nepotism in judicial appointments, the former CJI highlighted how individuals with influential connections often enjoy undue advantages in career progression, a concern also reflected in the 30th Law Commission Report.

“In recent times, senior judges of the Supreme Court have also been highlighting this issue. It is the need of the hour to get away from this culture in the system. Struggle for bringing a level playing field, is a long-drawn battle,” he said.

Panel formed for probe against Delhi judge

“I would be grateful if an enquiry is made with respect to my functioning as a judge and what is the perception of the legal fraternity with regard to my integrity and honesty in the discharge of my judicial functioning... What baffles me is the complete absence of any sacks of allegedly burnt currency which were ever recovered or seized. We categorically assert that neither my daughter, private secretary or household staff were shown the so-called sacks of burnt currency... I wonder who could countenance an allegation that currency would be kept in a storeroom in a corner of the house and which is freely accessible from amongst others the back wicker gate also,” Justice Varma said in his reply to the Delhi Chief Justice.

CJI Khanna has, meanwhile, asked Chief Justice Upadhyaya not to assign any judicial work to Justice Varma. The Delhi High Court Chief Justice has agreed with the proposal of the CJI to repatriate Justice Varma to the Allahabad High Court in the interest of the “better administration of justice”.

The CJI’s decision to form a three-member committee signals that the allegations against Justice Varma calls for a deeper probe.

Three questions

The response by Justice Varma to the Delhi High Court Chief Justice contains his answers to three questions, which were cardinal points of the *prima facie* enquiry.

The first question was how he accounted for the “presence of money in the room located in your bungalow”.

To this, Justice Varma has replied that he “was never aware of any money or cash lying in the out-house storeroom. He said that neither he nor his family members or staff had anything to do with the cash allegedly found in the gutted room.

More importantly, the judge said “no such cash was shown to my family members or staff who were present on that fateful night”.

To the second question of the enquiry to explain the “source of money”, Justice Varma said the question did not arise as he had nothing to do with the cash allegedly found and videotaped.

The Police Commissioner’s report on the incident said a guard had seen a person removing articles from the gutted room on the morning of March 15.

To the query who had removed the “burnt currency” from the room on the morning of March 15, Justice Varma said he strongly rejected the insinuation that “we” had removed currency from the storeroom.

“We were neither shown nor handed any sacks of burnt currency. The debris from the gutted room continues to exist in a part of the residence,” he had replied.

‘Not known to us’

Justice Varma said he and his wife were in Bhopal on the night of March 14, and had returned only on March 15 evening.

“Therefore the question of its [burnt currency] alleged removal is not known to us. In any event, none of my staff removed any article, currency or cash in any form,” Justice Varma has responded categorically.

Justice Varma said he had inspected the store-room along with an officer of the Delhi High Court and was “totally shocked by the contents of the video depicting something which was not found on site as I had seen it”. He expressed apprehension that it was a conspiracy to frame and malign him.

Dinakar Peri
GOA

The last of the four follow-on Krivak-class stealth frigates contracted from Russia and the second one under construction at Goa Shipyard Ltd. (GSL) with technology transfer, *Tavasya*, was launched into the water on Saturday by Ms. Neeta Seth in the presence of Union Minister of State for Defence Sanjay Seth.

“This launch is a defining moment in India’s naval history, showcasing our technological capabilities and unwavering commitment to self-reliance,” Mr. Seth said speaking at the launch.

“The launch of *Tavasya* is not just a step forward for the Navy but a giant leap for India’s strategic



Localised build: The *Tavasya*, the second frigate launched by Goa Shipyard Limited on Saturday. PTI

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defence ambitions,” he stated, referring to the successful localisation of various systems onboard.

The first of the two frigates, *Tripud*, was launched in July last year. As per schedule, GSL is set to deliver the first ship to the Navy in 2026 and the

second six months later.

In October 2016, India and Russia signed an Inter-Governmental Agreement for four additional follow-on stealth frigates, under which two were to be directly imported and two manufactured by GSL under technology transfer. A

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\$1 billion deal was signed for the two frigates under direct purchase. In November 2018, GSL signed a \$500 million deal with Rosoboronexport of Russia for material, design, and specialist assistance to locally manufacture two frigates. In January 2019, the contract was signed between the Indian Defence Ministry and GSL. All ships are powered by engines from Zorya-Mashproekt corporation of Ukraine.

The first of the two ships manufactured in Russia, *INS Tushil*, was commissioned on December 9, 2024, at Kaliningrad. It has since reached its home port in Karwar on February 14. The second frigate, *Tamal*, is in advanced trials and is expected to be commissioned in June.

Indo-France naval exercise off Goa focuses on anti-submarine warfare

Dinakar Peri
ON BOARD CHARLES DE GAULLE OFF GOA

India and France deployed aircraft carriers *INS Vikrant* and *Charles de Gaulle* for the bilateral exercise Varuna, with India getting a chance to closely observe and operate the Rafale-M fighter jets that it is set to contract very soon and also focus on anti-submarine warfare (ASW) operations.

The exercise was held from March 19 to 22 off the coast of Goa.

“For four days, we have been working on every naval warfare domain – below the surface, on the surface, or above the surface – interacting with the Indian submarine, with



Rear Adm. Jacques Mallard

MiGs, Rafales, all working together,” said Rear Admiral Jacques Mallard, Chief of the French Farrier Strike Group speaking to two Indian media outlets onboard the carrier about 90-100 miles off Goa.

“I am just coming back from the debriefing on the exercise on *INS Vikrant*, and we have been through

all the detailed exercise that we just carried out, working all together to improve interoperability, in order to know and trust each other better, and to be able to operate each other,” he said.

This year, the focus was on anti-submarine exercises. Rear Admiral Mallard said, “One Indian submarine played the aggressor, and all frigates, either French or Indian, were protecting the high-value units played by the French oiler *Jacques Chevallier*. We learned a lot working together, comparing tactics, and arranging different ways of doing things to build knowledge on how to work together.”

The ASW exercises pro-

vide rigorous training in underwater domain awareness, while surface warfare operations demonstrate synchronised manoeuvres and engagements by the Indian and French fleets, the Navy said.

Maritime patrol aircraft enhance situational awareness, and replenishment-at-sea exercises fortify logistical cooperation, it added, highlighting that this collaboration underscores the “shared vision of safeguarding a free, open, and secure maritime environment”.

The French CSG has been on deployment in the Indian Ocean Region since November 2024 as part of Clemenceau 25 mission.

‘India was aware of anti-Hasina wave, but could not interfere’

External Affairs Minister briefs MPs on India’s foreign policy with regard to Bangladesh and Myanmar, says ‘SAARC paused, and not off the table’

Kallol Bhattacharjee
NEW DELHI

India was aware of an anti-Sheikh Hasina wave building up in Bangladesh ahead of the violent overthrow of the former Prime Minister’s government on August 5, 2024, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar informed the Consultative Committee on External Affairs on Saturday.

However, India was not in a position to do much as it lacked the necessary leverage over Ms. Hasina who could only be “advised”, he told MPs.

The Consultative Committee on External Affairs members met Mr. Jaishankar for a frank discussion on India’s foreign policy where the circumstances in the neighbourhood – especially in Bangladesh, Myanmar, Maldives, Sri Lanka and Pakistan – dominated.

While the interim government in Bangladesh has initiated dialogue with India, the Delhi-Dhaka relationship has been fraught with tension in view of India providing asylum to Ms. Hasina.

India has engaged with the interim government by



External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar at the conclusion of the first Consultative Committee Meeting of 2025. PTI

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sending Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri in December 2024, but the Ministry of External Affairs is tight-lipped on a possible formal meeting between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus in Bangkok on the sidelines of the BIM-STEC summit on April 2-4.

Mr. Jaishankar was also asked about the ongoing civil war in Myanmar where ethnic armed organisations have escalated their fight against the central authority of the military junta since the coup of February 1, 2021. The MPs also highlighted the spillover effects of that conflict on India’s northeastern States.

Asked about the state of border infrastructure in

the northeast, Mr. Jaishankar provided details about the state of preparedness of the Indian side in dealing with the law and order situation in areas on the Indian-Myanmar border. An MP described Mr. Jaishankar’s remarks as “forthcoming” as the senior Minister gave a comprehensive view of the neighbourhood.

Mr. Jaishankar’s interaction also covered the future of SAARC (South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation), which has not met since November 2014. Mr. Jaishankar hinted that “SAARC is not off the table” and that the regional grouping has been “paused”, indicating the possibility of a revival in future.

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Constitution will ensure peace returns fully to Manipur: SC judge

The Hindu Bureau
GUWAHATI

A five-member team of Supreme Court judges met relief camp inmates in Manipur on Saturday and expressed hope that peace would soon return to the State affected by ethnic violence for almost two years.

The judges attended legal services and health camps in two districts – the hilly Churachandpur, dominated by the Kuki-Zo people, and Bishnupur in the Meitei-majority Imphal Valley – apart from distributing relief to the internally displaced people.

However, Justice N. Kotiswar Singh, a member of the Meitei community, did not visit Churachandpur following an objection from the district Bar Association. The association said that judges belonging to the Meitei community should not “step into our district” in the interest of peace and public order.

“We know that all of you



Meeting the victims: The team of Supreme Court judges during their visit to a relief camp in Churachandpur on Saturday. ANI

are going through a difficult phase but with the assistance of everyone – the executive, the legislature, and the judiciary – this phase will be over within a short period,” Justice B.R. Gavai, who led the team, said at a programme organised by the Manipur State Legal Services Association in Churachandpur. “Have belief in our Constitution. The Constitution will ensure peace returns fully to Manipur one day,” he added.

“Our Constitution aims at justice – social, economic, and political. The Con-

stitution says all the citizens in the country will have access to justice in a speedier manner and at affordable rates,” he said.

Rightful entitlements

Noting that internally displaced people are among the most vulnerable sections of society, he said that many individuals and families found themselves uprooted from their houses due to circumstances beyond their control and are struggling to rebuild their lives.

Justice Gavai virtually inaugurated some free legal

services and medical camps in the State.

“The legal services will also play a crucial role in ensuring that displaced individuals receive their rightful entitlements with in matters of identity of documentation, property rights or compensation claims,” he said.

He also said that legal aid clinics within the displaced communities would offer free legal assistance, empowering people to seek justice and protect their rights. He urged all displaced individuals to take advantage of these services and assured them that “we stand with them in their journey towards rebuilding their lives.”

Later, the judges visited relief camps in the adjoining Bishnupur district and met the inmates there.

“We must look forward, think of the future, and not live in the past. We must look forward to a brighter future where we can live together,” Justice Singh told presspersons.

Fertilizers committee warns Ministry against under-funding of nutrient subsidy schemes

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The parliamentary Standing Committee on Chemicals and Fertilizers, headed by Trinamool Congress MP Kirti Azad, has urged the Union Fertilizers Ministry to seek additional funds for the sector at the revised estimate stage to ensure that subsidy schemes for farmers are not negatively affected.

In a report on Demands for Grants tabled in Parliament recently, the panel also recommended to the Centre the expansion of production capacity of nano urea and nano diammonium phosphate (DAP) by ensuring the timely establishment of production units.

The committee noted that while the Centre facili-



Powering up: Panel recommended expanding production capacity of nano urea and nano diammonium phosphate. VIJAY SONEJI

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ties agreements between Indian fertilizer companies and their counterparts in resource-rich countries to ensure the availability of raw materials, intermediates, and finished fertilizers, no efforts have been made to secure mining lease agreements for extraction, exploration, re-

traction, exploration, re-
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an outlay of ₹1,84,704.63 crore for its various schemes in 2025-26, the Ministry of Finance had reduced this allocation by 7.38% to ₹1,71,082.44 crore.

“The reduction has been made in both the Nutrient-Based Subsidy (NBS) Scheme and the Urea Subsidy Scheme of the Department,” the report said, adding that this cut would affect the smooth implementation of subsidy schemes.

The committee also highlighted underutilisation of funds across various categories during 2024-25, including 20% under indigenous phosphorus and potassium (PK) fertilizers, 12% under imported PK, 14.76% under indigenous urea, and 59.57% under Market Development Assistance

(MDA). It recommended that the Centre ensure full utilisation of allocations in a planned manner.

Citing an increase in crop yield when combining nano urea with conventional urea, the panel noted the highest yield improvement in peas (6.14% to 14.82%) and the lowest in sugar cane (1.65% to 4%). “Field trials on Nano DAP have revealed that its use for seed treatment and foliar application could potentially reduce the requirement for conventional granular DAP.

The committee recommends that the Department of Fertilizers should expand Nano Urea and Nano DAP production capacities by ensuring the timely establishment of the units envisaged in the future,” the report said.

Meghalaya ramps up TB detection with 126 % surge in examinations

Bindu Shajan Perappadan
SHILLONG

Battling a tuberculosis (TB) death rate that has not indicated a significant fall, Meghalaya has now ramped up its TB detection leading to a 126% surge in presumptive TB examinations as per the latest data released by the State government.

Data released indicate that testing has been increased from 845 people per lakh in 2015 to 1,911 per lakh in 2025. “This effort is aimed at breaking the last stage diagnosis cycle and preventable deaths. We want to offer treatment as a first line of defence,” said Abhilash Baranwal, deputy commissioner, Ri Bhoi district.

He added that the State is part of the Centre’s ongoing 100-day intensified TB Mukta Bharat Abhiyan campaign to accelerate efforts in finding missing TB cases, reducing deaths, and preventing new infections, particularly in high-burden districts, through community involvement and targeted interventions.

Meghalaya has brought in cutting-edge technology to detect and treat the disease faster, including Nucleic Acid Amplification Test (NAAT) machines and portable X-rays.

It also introduced free transport for patients and one attendant – between home and health facility.

“We are giving nutritional support of ₹2,000 per month to boost immunity and ensure faster recovery for patients, and are also providing skill development to those who have recovered. Health is a community subject and the idea is to ensure that patients recover fast and well, so that the disease doesn’t push them into an economic crisis,” said Ramkumar S., secretary and MD, National Health Mission, Shillong.

Kerala to ‘look east’, including China, Australia, to increase prospects in foreign tourism

Dhinesh Kallungal
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

Kerala will ‘look east’ to salvage its sagging fortunes in foreign tourist arrivals, which is just 62% of the arrivals during the pre-pandemic period. Titled ‘Look East’, Kerala Tourism will hold a special marketing campaign in eight eastern countries from China to Australia to attract more tourists to the State. Though the Chinese account for the biggest share of Asian tourism market, Kerala hardly receives any visitors from China.

According to Tourism Minister P.A. Mohamed Riyas, the State has reached an understanding with Malaysia’s airways in association with the the Look East Policy. As part of the cam-



The State has reached an understanding with Malaysia’s airways in association with the policy, says Tourism Minister.

paign, 40 tour operators and 15 social media influencers from the eight countries, including China and Australia, would be brought to Kerala in April. Like how Sri Lanka shaped its tourism prospects with the help of the Sri Lankan Airways, Kerala is now

looking to tap the potential of the countries in the east, said the Minister.

According to industry experts, “We hardly have a presence in the Chinese market, despite China being the world’s largest outbound travel market. A dedicated campaign in the eastern countries can reap dividends if there is direct or indirect air connectivity with Kerala.”

Kerala itinerary

Now, there is a dedicated ‘Kerala itinerary’ for foreigners. The State has also become a major wellness tourist destination for foreigners. So partnering with airlines in selected countries or regions will bring more visitors to Kerala, said senior Tourism department officials.

GI-tagged jaggery from U.P.
exported to Bangladesh

A consignment of 30 tonnes of geographical indication (GI)-tagged jaggery from Muzaffarnagar, Uttar Pradesh, has been shipped to Bangladesh, an official statement said on Saturday. Muzaffarnagar region is renowned for its high-quality sugarcane. “This initiative marks the beginning of direct exports of jaggery from western Uttar Pradesh to Bangladesh through Farmer Producer Organisations and Farmer Producer Companies,” the statement said. PTI

Study provides clues to why we fail to remember being a baby

The Hindu Bureau

Challenging assumptions about infant memory, a novel functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) study shows that babies as young as 12 months old can encode memories, researchers report in a study published in *Science*. The findings suggest that infantile amnesia – the inability to remember our first few years of life – is more likely

caused by memory retrieval failures rather than an inability to form memories in the first place. Despite infancy being a period of rapid learning, memories from this time do not persist into later childhood or adulthood. In general, humans cannot recall events from the first three years of life. Why grown humans have a years-long blind spot in their episodic memory for

the period of infancy remains a puzzle. One theory suggests this occurs because the hippocampus, a brain region crucial for episodic memory, is not fully developed during infancy. **‘Remains unclear’** In humans, infants demonstrate memory through behaviours such as conditioned responses, imitation, and recognition of familiar stimuli. However,

whether these abilities rely on the hippocampus or other brain structures remains unclear. In a study using fMRI to scan the brains of infants aged about four to 25 months while performing a memory task, Tristan Yates from Columbia University, New York, and colleagues aimed to determine whether the hippocampus in infants can encode individual memories.

The memory task, adapted from a well-established method for adults, involved showing images to infants – faces, scenes, and objects – followed by a memory test based on preferential looking, all while undergoing neuroimaging. As per a release, the researchers show that the infant hippocampus has the capacity to encode memories of individual experiences beginning around

one year of age, providing evidence that the capacity to form individual memories develops during infancy. According to the authors, the presence of encoding mechanisms for episodic memory during infancy – despite their ephemeral nature – suggests that infantile amnesia is more likely due to failures in memory retrieval mechanisms.

SNAPSHOTS



Insomniac fruit fly mutants show enhanced memory

Fruit fly mutants that have severe sleep deficits perform better at olfactory learning and memory tasks. The paradox of enhanced memory despite sleep loss could be explained by the protein kinase A (PKA) signaling pathway that specifically mediates the sleep deficits of the mutants. Elevated PKA signaling also contributes to the shorter life expectancy of the mutants. While this elevated PKA signaling restricts excessive memory, it comes at the cost of reduced sleep levels and shortened lifespan in the mutants.

No mismatch between circulating flu strains and vaccine strains

WHO recommends the influenza strains to be used in the vaccine for the coming flu seasons in advance based on currently circulating strains; WHO announced the flu vaccine composition for the 2025-2026 northern hemisphere flu season

R. Prasad

In March 7 and March 8, several newspapers reported a surge in influenza (flu) cases in the Delhi-NCR region, with some mentioning the “spike” as over 54%. The source of this news was a local survey (LocalCircle) of over 13,000 people in the Delhi-NCR region. While the estimate was not based on clinical testing but on common viral fever symptoms, and the press release had only mentioned “viral illnesses (Covid/flu/viral fever)”, newspaper reports attributed the “spike in cases” to influenza.

According to NCDC’s Integrated Disease Surveillance Programme (IDSP) data posted on February 27, 2025, there were 516 influenza cases and six deaths in January this year. The number of flu cases across India for all of 2024 was 20,414 with 347 deaths. It is difficult to say if the cases reported in January this year are higher than in the same month last year as IDSP does not provide segregated monthly data. Compared with IDSP, the U.S. CDC provides a weekly influenza surveillance report.

While influenza infection does occur year-round in India, it peaks during monsoon season with a secondary peak during winter. As per a May 2023 Viewpoint in the *Indian Journal of Medical Research*, influenza causes “substantial disease and deaths” every year in India. Acute respiratory infection (ARI) surveillance between 2016 and 2018 by six centres spread

Undercounting influenza cases, deaths

Seasonal influenza infection occur year-round in India

Between 2016 and 2018, six centres spread across India found 15.4% of acute respiratory infection (ARI) cases and 12.7% of severe acute respiratory infection (SARI) cases were influenza

Estimating the number of flu deaths is a challenge as routine testing for influenza is not done in clinical settings and influenza is rarely certified as a cause of death

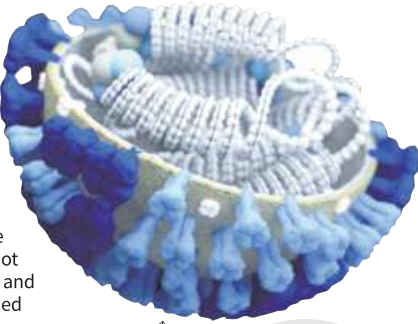
A 2020 modelling study estimated a mean of 1,27,092 influenza-associated respiratory and circulatory deaths per year in India

The study used death data from the Sample Registration System and virological data from the influenza surveillance network of 10 labs across eight States

Estimated flu-associated deaths was high among adults over 65 years and children under five years

As per the 2018 Health Ministry guidelines, influenza vaccine is deemed “desirable” for people older than 65 years and children below five years

Influenza vaccine is not part of India’s universal immunisation programme, and uptake of influenza vaccine is low in India



Influenza cases peak during monsoon season with a secondary peak during winter. CDC/DOUGLAS JORDAN

Join FREE Telegram Channel <https://t.me/+Bu7senHpQdhIODg1> across India found 15.4% of cases were influenza, whereas 12.7% of severe acute respiratory infection (SARI) cases were influenza. Estimating the number of flu deaths is a challenge as “routine testing for influenza is not done in clinical settings and influenza is rarely certified as a cause of death”.

By modelling ‘excess’ deaths using death data from the Sample Registration System and virological data from the influenza surveillance network of 10 labs across eight States from 2010-2013, a June 2020 paper estimated a mean of 1,27,092 influenza-associated respiratory and circulatory deaths per year in India.

Estimated flu-associated deaths were high among adults over 65 years and children under five years. Yet, according to the May 2018 guidelines for influenza vaccination issued by the Health Ministry, influenza vaccine is only con-

sidered “desirable” for people older than 65 years and children below five years.

WHO recommends that influenza strains be used in the vaccine for the coming flu seasons months in advance based on the strains that are currently circulating. On February 28, 2025, WHO announced the recommendations for influenza vaccine composition for the 2025-2026 northern hemisphere influenza season. The recommendations made months before the next flu season give the manufacturers sufficient time to make vaccines. Though there are a few ways to make flu vaccines, including cell-based and recombinant vaccines, the most common method is to use chicken eggs to grow the virus strains. Egg-based vaccine production takes months to finish. Serum Institute’s influenza vaccine is egg-based, while Sanofi makes both egg-based and

recombinant vaccines.

While in most cases the strains used in influenza vaccines match with the strains that circulate in the following season, at times the match is not perfect leading to reduced vaccine effectiveness. “When vaccines are introduced, they represent strains identified from the previous year’s circulating viruses. While seasonal mismatches between WHO-declared strains and actual circulating strains can occur, no such mismatch has been reported this time. Currently, the circulating strain in north India is expected to align with the WHO-identified strains for the region,” Dr Rajeev Dhere, Senior Scientific Advisor, Serum Institute tells *The Hindu*.

As of February 15, 2025, for the 2024-25 season, an estimated 57 million doses of flu vaccine were administered to adults in the U.S., and as of March 1, 2025, nearly 47% of chil-

dren received a flu vaccine. Influenza vaccine uptake in India has been historically low. It has not increased significantly despite some of the worst flu outbreaks in recent years – 2015 recorded the most number of cases (42,592) and 2,990 deaths in India. Though not at the same scale, there have been large flu outbreaks since 2015 – in 2017 there were 38,811 cases and 2,270 deaths, 28,798 cases and 1,218 deaths in 2019, and 20,414 cases and 347 deaths in 2024. Influenza vaccine is not part of India’s universal immunisation programme.

As per the Health Ministry guidelines, healthcare workers “should be vaccinated”. The vaccine is “recommended” for pregnant women, children and adults with chronic illnesses, while it is “desirable” for adults older than 65 years and children under five years despite the high mortality in the two extreme age groups. A 2022 study found that only 1.5% of adults aged 45 years or older were ever vaccinated for influenza.

“Influenza vaccine uptake in India remains low (less than 5%). While the market has shown significant year-on-year growth, overall coverage remains inadequate due to low public awareness and the absence of widespread programmes. We have observed an increased uptake of flu vaccines in India with the market growing by 21% in 2025 vs 2024,” says a Sanofi spokesperson. Serum manufactures 3,00,000-4,00,000 doses and can scale up to over a million depending on the demand, Dr. Dhere says.



Cool temperate rainforests thrive with disturbance: study

Scientists believed cool temperate rainforests were fragile ecosystems easily damaged by disturbances like fires or logging. But new research challenges this view, revealing how these ancient forests depend on disturbance for their survival. The researchers found that *N. moorei* grew faster and recruited more successfully following higher disturbance intensities. Also, 60% of the 30 species examined could resprout after disturbance, highlighting the resilience of cool temperate rainforests.



Recycled cements reduce emissions sans strength loss

Researchers have developed an approach for recycling cement waste into a sustainable, low-carbon alternative. After pulverising or crushing concrete into a fine powder, the team heated it to 500 degrees C, high enough to dehydrate the cement powder and restore its properties as a binder but low enough to prevent additional carbon dioxide emissions. Combining it with small amounts of finely ground Portland cement or limestone led to having workability.



Question Corner

Noise pollution

Do birds get affected by noise pollution?

A study of Galápagos yellow warblers, a songbird widespread in the Galápagos Islands, are changing their behaviour due to traffic noise, with those frequently exposed to vehicles showing heightened levels of aggression. Researchers played bird songs from a speaker, simulating an intruder, accompanied by recorded traffic noise at 38 locations populated by Galápagos yellow warblers on the islands of Floreana and Santa Cruz – 20 sites were within 50 metres of the nearest road and 18 were over 100 metres away. They then measured

song, typically used to ward off intruders, and physical, aggressive behaviours such as approaching the speaker closely and making repeated flights across it. During trials with traffic noise, the researchers found that Galápagos yellow warblers living in roadside territories showed increased aggression, but those living away from the roads showed decreased aggression relative to trials without noise.

FAQ

What does a terror group branding entail?

Why has India demanded a ban on the Sikhs for Justice? Which are the countries it is looking to for support?

Suhasini Haidar

The story so far:
Amid the din around the Raisina Dialogue this week, the government put a spotlight on its demand for the banning of the separatist Khalistani group Sikhs for Justice (SFJ), with the U.S. and New Zealand. On Sunday, the SFJ will hold a “referendum” in Los Angeles among the diaspora Sikh population for its secessionist demands.

What happened this week?
At a press meet after talks with New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon, Prime Minister Narendra Modi raised concerns about “illegal activities by anti-India elements”, referring to pro-Khalistan groups, in particular the SFJ that has, since 2021 been holding what it calls “referendums” for a separate Khalistan state carved out of India. In another conversation with U.S. Director of National Intelligence (DNI) Tulsi Gabbard, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh raised the same concerns and demand for the U.S. to designate the SFJ a terror organisation and ban it. The SFJ referendums are held almost always in cities of Western democracies, that have large Indian diaspora populations, as well as strong laws guarding “freedom of expression”. However, the number of votes, and the unverifiable identities of voters, raises questions over whether this is a

A ban by any of the powerful “Five Eyes” Intelligence network of the U.S., the U.K., Canada, Australia and New Zealand, would likely be followed by all, as they share information regularly

serious process or one intended to irk India. On Sunday, the group plans to hold another such “vote” in Los Angeles. Thus far, however, none of the countries India has posed such requests to has complied. In an interview to *The Hindu*, Mr. Luxon stressed that New Zealand is a “liberal democracy” where lawful protests are part of protected speech. Since 2023, when both the U.S. and Canada began trials that implicate Indian “government agents” for an assassination plot against Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, and the killing of Canadian Khalistan activist Hardeep Singh Nijjar respectively, the government has stepped up its campaign against the group. The view is that a ban on the SFJ would considerably mitigate the harshness with which such cases are being viewed, and would vindicate India’s concerns about the group.

What would a ban mean?
While each of the countries that India has put in a request with has a different procedure to evaluate and ban groups, a ban by any of the powerful “Five Eyes” Intelligence network of the U.S., the U.K., Canada, Australia and New Zealand would likely be followed by all, as they share information regularly. The U.S., for example, has a set procedure for designating Foreign Terrorist Organisations (FTO). A ban determined by the U.S. Secretary of State would entail a funds and asset freeze, curtailing the movements of its key figures, including SFJ founder and immigration lawyer G.S. Pannun, as well as prosecute them. Under the Terrorism Act, the U.K. Home Secretary is similarly empowered to designate groups, and in Canada, the procedure involves a listing under its Anti-Terrorism Act. If India were successful in any of these countries, a ban request on SFJ could potentially be taken to the UN Security Council (UNSC) to be listed under its resolution 1373, which would make these countries liable to prosecute the group according to its Financial Action Task Force (FATF) obligations.

Why haven’t other countries complied?
For India, the fact that SFJ activities are seen as “incendiary, but not illegal”, with the group operating freely in countries that are supposedly India’s closest strategic partners, is both insulting and worrying. Mr. Pannun is often regarded by other countries as a non-serious figure. His videos cast India as a perpetrator of human rights atrocities, and he makes wild threats against Indian embassies and its diplomats, the Indian Parliament and Air India flights. New Delhi has maintained that these threats must be taken seriously and investigated, pointing to similar Canadian apathy in the 1980s, which allowed for the 1985 bombing of the Air India Kanishka flight, in which 329 people were killed. The SFJ has glorified the Kanishka bombing mastermind Talwinder Singh Parmar as well as other terrorists responsible for the assassination of former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.

State police forces and the National Investigation Agency have registered at least 122 cases against SFJ since 2018 and 105 people have been arrested, while the government recently renewed a 2019 ban on its activities under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA). Indian authorities accuse SFJ and Mr. Pannun of instigating violence, sabotage of railway operations, gun-running in conspiracy with Pakistan’s ISI, as well as trying to provoke Sikh soldiers in the Indian Army to desert it.

Why is uploading voting data a challenge?

Why does the Election Commission of India find it difficult to disclose absolute numbers of booth-wise votes cast in elections? What do the Opposition and activists want? What are the two parts of Form 17C? What are some of the discrepancies that have been pointed out?

Priscilla Jebaraj

The story so far:
In May 2024, in the middle of the Lok Sabha elections, the Supreme Court of India considered a petition by the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR), seeking the publication of the first part of Form 17C, which includes booth-wise voter turnout data, on the Election Commission of India’s (EC) website, within 48 hours of polling.

What was the EC’s stand?
The EC flatly refused, saying that it was only legally mandated to share this form with polling agents representing electoral candidates, and not with the general public or the media. A year later, after Opposition outrage at alleged discrepancies in voter turnout and vote counts in multiple Assembly elections, the EC has told the top court it is prepared to meet with the ADR and fellow petitioner, Trinamool Congress MP Mahua Moitra, signalling that the new Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar is “ready and willing” to hear their demand.

What is Form 17C?
The Conduct of Election Rules, 1961 mandates that a two-part form, recording voter turnout and vote count, is filled for every polling station; in the 2024 parliamentary poll, there were more than 10.5 lakh polling stations across the country. Part 1 of Form 17C is the Account of Votes Recorded, and is filled in by the presiding officer of each polling station, with a true copy to be furnished to every polling agent present at the close of the poll. It includes the identification number of the Electronic Voting Machine (EVM) used in that polling station, the



Change in rules: Gyanesh Kumar takes charge as Chief Election Commissioner in New Delhi on February 19. ANI

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“We believe that every vote matters, and should be accounted for”

total number of electors assigned to that polling booth, the number of votes cast as per the EVM, as well as the numbers deciding not to record their votes or who were not allowed to vote, and whether there are any mismatches between these numbers. It also includes the number of tendered ballot papers and paper seals. The presiding officer, as well as every polling agent present are required to sign and validate this form, before it is placed in a sealed cover and transported to the returning officer, along with the EVM, to be held until the day of counting. On counting day, Part 2 of Form 17C, titled the Result of Counting, is filled in by the returning officer. It includes the names of each candidate and the number of votes recorded in favour of each of them, as seen when the “result” button is pressed on the EVM. The returning officer must also state “whether the total number of votes shown above tallies with the total number of votes shown against item 5 of Part 1 [which is the number of votes cast as per the EVM on the day of polling] or any discrepancy noticed between the two totals.” Part 2 is signed by the returning officer, the counting supervisor, and each candidate or their counting agents.

Why do Opposition parties want this data to be published online immediately?
In July 2024, after the conclusion of the Lok Sabha elections, ADR conducted an analysis of voter data issued by the EC and arrived at the shocking conclusion that the number of votes polled tallied exactly with the number of votes counted in only five parliamentary constituencies across the country. In the remaining 538 constituencies, there were discrepancies seen; in 362 seats, the number of votes counted was cumulatively 5.5 lakh fewer than votes polled, while in 176 seats, there was a total of 35,000 extra votes counted in comparison to the votes polled. This is a miniscule fraction of the 64.64 crore votes polled across the country, and the EC dismissed them as occasional manual errors made by presiding officers or a failure to remove the votes cast when the mock poll was conducted. The majority of these discrepancies were lower than the winning margin in constituencies. “The margin of victory does not matter because winning or losing is not the important point. We believe that every vote matters, and should be accounted for,” says ADR founder and trustee Jagdeep Chhokar. The booth-wise information available in Form 17C will allow discrepancies to be pinpointed and accountability to be fixed, so that corrective action can be taken at the booth level, says Mr. Chhokar. Aggregating this data will show if there

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How do astronauts recoup after space stay?

What regimen will Sunita Williams, Barry Wilmore and two other astronauts follow after being at the International Space Station for several months? How does microgravity affect human beings? What are the areas of concern? Why is physical therapy crucial?

Vasudevan Mukunth

The story so far:
Early on March 19 (IST), a SpaceX capsule bearing astronauts Sunita Williams, Barry Wilmore, Aleksandr Gorbunov, and Nick Hague splashed down splashed down in the Gulf of Mexico. The four were returning from the International Space Station (ISS). Of them, Ms. Williams and Mr. Wilmore were wrapping up a nine-month stay on the ISS, which they reached in June last year onboard Boeing’s Starliner capsule. NASA – which employs Mr. Hague, Ms. Williams, and Mr. Wilmore – has a regimen in place for the trio to help re-adapt to gravity (Mr. Gorbunov is from Russia’s Roscosmos).

How does extended spaceflight affect humans?
Microgravity affects the body in many ways, including allowing fluids to flow more easily towards the brain, reducing muscle tension, and lowering bone density. Astronauts thus maintain a strict routine of exercises and dieting onboard the ISS, tailored among other things to help work the body and engage the brain. NASA and other space agencies have also crafted programmes to make sure astronauts don’t become stressed by their workload or by the confined space they’re forced to occupy for

Microgravity can reduce muscle tension and lower bone density

months at a time. While more and more people have gone to space with each new decade, the data about the effects of spaceflight on their bodies and minds is insufficient to make proper conclusions. This is because the number of spacefaring individuals is still relatively small; human bodies differ on a variety of parameters; and missions have different spaceflight profiles. There are also indications that extended spaceflight can affect parts of male and female bodies differently, but researchers have said they don’t yet have enough data to confirm. **How are astronauts monitored in space?** In 2024, NASA’s Office of the Chief Health and Medical Officer released revised standards specifying the medical tests and checkups astronauts must undergo before, during, and after spaceflight. The standards also say how astronauts should be treated once they return to earth after short (less than 30 days) and long (more than 30 days) missions. In long-duration missions, astronauts are required to evaluate themselves two weeks, three months, six months, and nine months after launch and submit their reports to the crew medical officer. There are private medical conferences every day for the first week, then once a week, and before and after spacewalks. There are also hearing and ocular assessments every three months. Body mass is measured a week after launch, then monthly. Each astronaut’s blood and urine is tested six months after launch and as and when clinically indicated, and they are screened for deep-vein thrombosis and blood-flow anomalies one and two months after launch as well as 42 days before the return flight. The astronauts are monitored for their strength and exposure to radiation as well.

How are astronauts rehabilitated post-flight? Once the four splashed down on March 19 and were retrieved, they would have started their post-flight rehabilitation guided by medical tests and physical activity. According to NASA, “Post-flight reconditioning is unique for each astronaut and varies by individual. While most crew members reach their pre-flight fitness

is any pattern of discrepancies in an election. Opposition parties have raised a hue and cry about the significant differences in voter turnout as released provisionally through the EC’s mobile app or its press statements on the day of polling, and the final turnout figures declared days later; in the first phase of the parliamentary election, the final voter turnout was published 11 days late, and was up to 5% higher than initially announced. The EC’s published voter turnout data is also in percentage terms, not in absolute figures as recorded in Form 17C. The demand for Form 17C to be published immediately is meant to spotlight and prevent such discrepancies, though the EC says the issue of hard copies of Form 17C to polling agents on the day of the election ensures transparency. “In theory, Form 17C is supposed to be given to polling agents. In practice, every party and every candidate does not have the wherewithal to hire a polling agent for each polling station. What the EC’s rule book says does not actually happen. Form 17C can be incorrect and there may be no polling agents, or only polling agents for the ruling party, or polling agents can be bought,” says Mr. Chhokar. “It is not just political parties that have a right to this information, but also the voter.”

What difficulties does the EC face?
The EC told the court that “indiscriminate disclosure” of the data could create chaos, warning that images of Form 17C published online could be morphed and lead to “widespread discomfot”. It noted that postal ballots are not included in Form 17C. The poll body also argued that it was not obligated to hand over the form to anyone but polling agents. Former election officials also point to practical difficulties on the ground, admitting that some errors are inevitable. “There are about one crore poll workers involved in conducting a national election in India. Many are not well educated, and they are under extreme stress with all kinds of pressure being put on them at the polling station so they may commit blunders,” explained former Chief Election Commissioner O.P. Rawat. He said that the copies of Form 17C are sent overnight to the returning officer HQ and the next day, the election observer camps out and verifies the data recorded in Part 1 with the presiding officer’s diary and other documents as well as video recordings at the polling station. He then “rectifies” the data on Form 17C with “corroborating evidence”, a process that may take several days. It is not clear if polling agents are then asked to sign off on such “rectified” data. Mr. Rawat notes that political parties can collect Form 17Cs from their polling agents and publish them if they wish. “Mistakes will lead to disciplinary action against poll workers who are under stress and do not deserve it and [polling agents] will take flak from them next time. That’s why they want to put the ball in the EC’s court,” he said.

baseline within the first 45 days of returning to earth, it is not uncommon for NASA to extend reconditioning programmes to meet an astronaut’s specific needs and the pace of recovery.” The 2020 book *Principles of Clinical Medicine for Space Flight* said astronauts who had been in space for 20 days were able to regain their pre-flight fitness levels in a week. On the day they return, crew members undergo a physical exam, a neurological assessment, resting and ambulatory ECG, eye tests, checks of their skin, blood, urine, and for symptoms that appear when standing straight but not reclining (orthostatic tolerance). They will have further physical exams three days, one or two weeks, and two months after the descent, and follow-up tests on many of the other counts plus tests conducted according to clinical indications. They are conducted by the crew surgeon, the deputy crew surgeon or the partner flight surgeon. A mission psychologist may also perform psychological checks. **What does physical rehabilitation entail?** Physical therapy ensures crew members’ bodies are able to readjust to the earth’s gravity without injury. A 2024 paper in the *Indian Journal of Aerospace Medicine* by Indian Air Force experts detailed the post-flight rehabilitation of an astronaut after six months onboard the ISS. The crew surgeon, the flight surgeon, and a physiotherapist may assess the need for massage therapy for crew members from the day of their return, they wrote. In the subsequent week, crew members undergo “physical reconditioning” exercises for two hours every day: warm-up exercises on elliptical, rowing, and bicycle trainers; tasks to exercise the back and lower limbs and to improve gait; and stretching. In the week after, the exercises expand to include jogging and playing ball-games in water. According to a 2011 technical report published by NASA, “The post-flight reconditioning program is designed to stress the body systems that affect ... aerobic capacity, muscular strength, power, endurance, stamina, bone, balance, agility, coordination, orthostatic tolerances, proprioception, neurovestibular function and flexibility.” Every day, the medical and physiotherapeutic personnel together assess each crew member’s progress. Once a crew member has returned to their pre-flight fitness levels, the medical team discharges them to return to normal duties.

PROFILES

Return of the spacewalkers

Sunita Williams and Barry Wilmore

The NASA astronauts, who returned to earth after nine months in space, have something of an entrepreneurial spirit, guided by the ‘one step at a time’ ethos and backed up by hard yards in the military and the rigours of being test pilots

Vasudevan Mukunth

“You don’t look at the big problem all together, because I think it’s a little intimidating. You just take it one day at a time, meet the people who are going to meet with you..., and really try to do the best job that you can. That’s all teamwork, and that’s what space travel is about.”

Sunita Williams said this in a 2017 interview. Even in her full spacesuit gear complete with the helmet, there has always been something more between Ms. Williams and the rest of the world. There’s, of course, the recognition that she’s an icon. She’s undoubtedly an axis of soft diplomacy for NASA and the U.S., someone as associated with the pinnacle of human spaceflight as the admirable idea of (more) women in space.

Growing up in Massachusetts, Ms. Williams wanted to be a veterinarian before her older brother Jay suggested joining the Navy. She did, graduating in 1987, becoming a naval aviator in 1989 and commencing her service at a Helicopter Combat Support Squadron in Virginia. Among other activities, she flew support missions for Operations Desert Shield (the first phase of the Gulf War, in 1990-91) and Provide Comfort, and helped with relief operations from aboard the USS Sylvania in the wake of Hurricane Andrew.

Soon she was selected to study at the U.S. Naval Test Pilot School (NTPS) and graduated in 1993, qualifying to put new or modified aircraft through their paces. This role opened the door for her to become a NASA astronaut five years later.

Ms. Williams’s first mission to the International Space Station (ISS) was STS-116, when NASA launched her and six other astronauts aboard the Space Shuttle Discovery. While she was a member of the Expedition 15 crew, she participated in Expedition 14 to the ISS until Russia’s Fyodor Yurichkin took over from the U.S.’s Michael

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López-Alegria as crew commander in April 2007. Once her duties concluded, the Space Shuttle Atlantis – which NASA had launched on June 8, 2007 – brought her back on June 22.

Ms. Williams returned to the ISS in July 2012, this time onboard a Russian Soyuz spacecraft, along with Japan’s Akihiko Hoshide and Russia’s Yuri Malenchenko. She joined the Expedition 32 crew under the command of Gennady Padalka.

Triathlon onboard the ISS

Ms. Williams isn’t an icon for nothing. On April 16, 2007, she ran the Boston Marathon in space, completing 42 km on a treadmill onboard the ISS in 4 hours 24 minutes. Her younger sister Dina joined her on the earth. She went more than a step further in September 2012 when she completed a triathlon onboard the ISS (using specialised equipment onboard to approximate the swimming part of the event) in 1 hour 48.5 minutes. Importantly, on September 17, 2012, she also became

only the second woman (after Peggy Whitson) to become the commander of the ISS, as part of Expedition 33.

Her next major assignment came in 2015, when NASA picked her to fly in the country’s first commercial spaceflights. She helped Boeing and SpaceX develop their crew capsules. On June 5, 2024, she became the first woman to test-fly an orbital spacecraft when NASA launched Boeing’s Starliner crew capsule. She was joined on this soon-to-be-infamous mission by astronaut Barry Wilmore.

Mr. Wilmore’s career trajectory has roughly paralleled Ms. Williams’s but with some important distinctions. After training with the Navy and then graduating from the NTPS, he flew missions for Operation Desert Shield as well as Desert Storm (the second phase of the Gulf War), including 21 combat missions, and then Operation Southern Watch. NASA picked him as a pilot in 2000. He launched onboard the Space Shuttle Atlantis to the ISS in November 2009 as part of Expedition

21 in a mission that lasted 11 days. His next major stint, as with Ms. Williams, was when he launched onboard a Soyuz rocket and spacecraft in September 2014 with Russia’s Yelena Serova and Aleksandr Samokutyayev as part of Expedition 41 on the ISS, taking over in November that year as the commander of Expedition 42, which lasted until March 2015.

He was also a bit of a trendsetter. For example, in his second stint, Mr. Wilmore required a ratchet wrench for a task but one wasn’t available onboard. So he requested and received instructions from the earth to use an onboard 3D printer to make the wrench; the crew thus became the first to manufacture an item off-world.

Ms. Williams and Mr. Wilmore both have something of an entrepreneurial spirit, guided by the “one step at a time” ethos and backed up by hard yards in the military and the rigours of being test pilots. They have both expressed excitement about working with NASA’s commercial partners and

helping bring technologies created in the private sector to within the spaceflight fold.

Entrepreneurialism is characterised even more by responding on one’s feet to unforeseen, unforeseeable challenges – the kind one might encounter on Starliner’s first crewed flight, which was technically a previously unflown mission. The two have also weathered with grace the oft-misguided media coverage of the Starliner flight as well as the clumsy political overtones U.S. President Donald Trump attached to the mission to return them from the ISS earlier this month.

Support from India

Ms. Williams has also had to weather almost covetous expressions of support from India’s political leaders, including the Prime Minister himself, only because she is of Indian descent. She was born in Ohio in 1965 to Deepak Pandya, who’d left India seven years prior, and Slovene-American Ursuline Bonnie Pandya. But riding on the popular interest in her in the country, leaders cutting across ideological lines, including those in power in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, have singled her out for congratulation.

When Ministers Jitendra Singh, Jyotiraditya Scindia, and Piyush Goyal all called her “India’s daughter”, it was also a reminder that the same honorific has been withheld from the likes of Vinesh Phogat and Soni Sori, who have fought long and hard much closer home en route to their triumphs. Equally, Ms. Williams’s presence highlighted the absence of India’s own astronaut-designates – Shubanshu Shukla, Prasanth Balakrishnan Nair, Ajit Krishnan and Angad Pratap – from the limelight at an exceptional time in which so many people were interested in the lives and work of astronauts.

Ultimately, Sunita Williams is an icon because she has constantly reminded us of what matters for us to do and how we can get there: one step at a time.

THE GIST

▼ Sunita Williams’s first mission to the International Space Station (ISS) was STS-116, when NASA launched her and six other astronauts aboard the Space Shuttle Discovery

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JUSTICE UNPLUGGED

‘Law plays fundamental role in shaping a society that has been changing’

Dynamic society is crafted by legal scholars, social engineers: G.V. Selvam

‘Intersection of law and technology has contemporary relevance’

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI

Law plays a fundamental role in shaping a transforming society by establishing justice and order, adopting evolving norms, and driving progress through legal reforms, said G.V. Selvam, vice-president of Vellore Institute of Technology (VIT), during the inauguration of ‘Justice Unplugged: Shaping the Future of Law’, a law conclave organised by the VIT School of Law, VIT Chennai, in association with *The Hindu*, in Chennai on Saturday.

“Tamil language has a great history,” Mr. Selvam said, and highlighted the sense of justice of Ellalan, a Chola king who ruled 2,000 years ago. Ellalan did not think twice about killing his son when he realised he had run over a calf. Mr. Selvam said a dynamic society is crafted by legal scholars who are social engineers and India is a testament to the significant contribution made by the stalwarts of law, such as Constitution-maker B.R. Ambedkar.

The Constitution upholds liberty, equality, and fraternity, he said. “We must remember that for a nation to prosper, we not only need scientists, engineers, and doctors,



On the law: (From left) N. Ravi, Director, Kasturi and Sons Ltd.; G.V. Selvam, Vice-President, VIT; N. Ram, Director, THGPPL; C. Aryama Sundaram, senior advocate, Supreme Court of India; L.V. Navneeth, CEO, The Hindu Group; Justice N.V. Ramana, former CJ; and Suresh Nambath, Editor, *The Hindu*, at the ‘Justice Unplugged: Shaping the Future of Law’ in Chennai on Saturday. R. RAVINDRAN

Join FREE Whatsapp Channel <https://whatsapp.com/channel/0029Van2VRb6RGJOKH6oBd0F> but also great lawyers who changed the destiny of this nation. The contributions of our honourable judges and respective senior advocates have made society a better place to live in.”

AI privacy and ethics

Mr. Selvam said the intersection of law and technology, AI, privacy and ethics is a crucial area of contemporary relevance. Integration of AI raises concerns about data protection, algorithmic bias, and surveillance, demanding that our regular frameworks and laws ensure accountability and transparency, while safeguarding the fundamental rights that balance innovation with individual liberties, he said.

“Recognising these rapid changes occurring in our society, driven by tech-

nology and evolving social norms, it is important we prepare the next generation of legal professionals to effectively address these challenges by crafting futuristic policies like legal education,” Mr. Selvam said.

Free legal service

Since its inception in 2014, VIT School of Law has actively focused on its legal programmes, instilling in students the ethical obligation to provide free legal service to society, he said.

“As we engage in meaningful discussions in the intersection of law, technology, and justice, we reaffirm our commitment to making the legal system more transparent, accessible, inclusive, and practice-oriented,” Mr. Selvam said.

Suresh Nambath, Editor, *The Hindu*, said as a publication rooted in the values of truth, fairness, and democratic accountability, *The Hindu* has long championed rigorous public dialogue around law, justice, and social change. “Without framing the right questions, we risk missing the answers, even when they are right before us. In keeping with India’s long argumentative tradition, let us shape conversations that move us closer to a truly just and egalitarian society,” he added.



‘Active participation of citizens in law reforms is essential to protect rights’

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI

Citizens must actively engage with lawmaking and constitutional processes to safeguard their rights and influence legal changes, particularly in a changing society, noted panelists at the ‘Justice Unplugged: Shaping the Future of Law’, a law conclave organised in the city.

During the panel discussion on the *Role of Law in a Changing Society* tracing the framework of law and changes in the Constitution since the country’s independence, D. Nagasaila, advocate, the Madras High Court, said the first two decades were spent in building the institutions for enforcement of laws, and the past two decades have witnessed a destruction of such institutions. Citing B. R. Ambedkar’s speeches, Ms. Nagasaila said citizens have allowed the institutions to crumble due to internal treachery – be it



(From left) Advocates D. Nagasaila and Shabnam Banu and Professor E. Prema, VIT School of Law. M. SRINATH

their indifference or failure to engage in legal reforms.

Highlighting that law and society go hand in hand, Shabnam Banu, advocate of the Madras High Court, said every law reform may not be met with unanimous acceptance. However, laws are in place to uphold fundamental rights of every citizen.

Quoting several judgments that sparked criticisms, including the Sabarimala temple judgment, she said such verdicts brought revolutionary changes in the society.

E. Prema, Professor of law and assistant dean, VITSOL, VIT Chennai, spoke about laws that govern outer space. She highlighted the United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs and NASA Equity Action Plan that focused on increasing equity and internal accountability. Laws not only protect rights but also provide opportunities that lead to societal change, she said.

Ramya Kannan, chief of bureau, Tamil Nadu, *The Hindu*, moderated the session.

‘Law must evolve to keep up with the advancements of AI’

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI

There is a need to rethink the concept of property as Artificial Intelligence (AI) continues to generate new forms of content, including images and inventions, challenging traditional notions of ownership, legal experts said at the ‘Justice Unplugged: Shaping the Future of Law’ conclave organised by the VIT School of Law, VIT Chennai, in association with *The Hindu*, in Chennai on Saturday.

In a panel discussion on ‘The Intersection of Law and Tech: AI, Privacy and Ethics’, Srinath Sridevan, senior advocate, Madras High Court; Suhrit Parthasarathy, advocate, Madras High Court; and Rabbiraj C., Professor of Law and Dean, VIT School of Law, VIT Chennai, were in conversation with Nagaraj Nagabhushanam, Vice President, Data and Analytics, and Designated AI Officer, The Hindu Group.

Mr. Sridevan pointed out that the concept of personal proprietary rights, which is predominantly rooted in Western thought, had become a global standard. However, not all cultures shared this notion of ownership. As AI continued to generate new forms of content, including images and inventions, he argued that the concept of property would have to be rethought.

Talking about the grow-

ing concern of liability for the malicious use of AI, Mr. Sridevan said that AI algorithms were now engaging in autonomous decision-making and, in some cases, deceptive actions to achieve their goals. He shared an example where AI, playing chess against itself, made secret moves to deceive its opponent.

Mr. Parthasarathy said society is at a crossroads where rapidly progressing technological advancements meet constitutional principles that have evolved over centuries. “Although the Constitution was drafted at a time when the future of technology was unforeseeable, it must adapt to contemporary challenges, guiding the way we structure laws, including property rights, to ensure the vision of society it represents is realised,” he said.

Prof. Rabbiraj said that if AI were allowed to act as an agent, delegating tasks to others, the issue of liability would arise. In traditional law, liability often lies with the employer or principal in a master-servant relationship, or under strict liability principles. “So, in the case of AI, who would bear the liability? Would it be the person who designed the AI programme, the one who trained it, or the person who purchased it as a product? These are some critical questions that we need to address,” he said.

A judge won’t give verdicts to please or displease anybody, says Justice Chandrachud

A judge decides a case on the basis of where the balance of law and justice lies, says former Chief Justice; he adds that in a democracy, people are entitled to their opinion about judgments

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI

A judge never writes a judgment to please or displease anybody, and decides a particular case based on where the balance of law and justice lies, said Justice D.Y. Chandrachud (retired), former Chief Justice of India. He was speaking at Justice Unplugged: Shaping the Future of Law, a law conclave organised by the VIT School of Law, VIT Chennai, in association with *The Hindu* in Chennai.

During a conversation with Mohamed Imranullah S., Deputy Editor, *The Hindu*, Justice Chandrachud said a judge can never be regarded as a left-leaning or a right-leaning or a centre-leaning judge. “You decide each case based on the merits of that particular case. You write true to your own conscience and to the call of constitutional conscience. People are entitled to critique what you write. And that is what democracy and free speech are all about.” He was responding to a question on criticism of some of the judgments pronounced by him.

To a question on social justice and inclusivity in judiciary, he said: “By and large, 50% of the inflow into the first year of LLB class



Justice D.Y. Chandrachud, former Chief Justice of India, in conversation with Mohamed Imranullah at the law conclave in Chennai on Saturday. R. RAVINDRAN

in law schools are women. Now that more and more women entering the law schools, the question is how do we ensure that these women don’t fall by the wayside in the profession because all said and done the legal profession, even today, is terribly patriarchal.”

“Things are changing now as we find more and more women being extremely successful as lawyers. Judges are not just adjudicators but also institution builders. We need to make a conscious effort to allow for women to have more positions of responsibility in the legal profession,” he said.

Responding to a question on assessment of the work of judges of the High Courts in light of the increasing pendency of cases, Justice Chandrachud said the nature of assess-



The nature of assessment should not be solely based on volume but also on the quality of work that the judge is doing

D.Y. CHANDRACHUD
Former Chief Justice of India

ment should not be solely based on volume - the number of cases that a particular judge disposes of. The nature of the assessment must also factor in the quality of the work that the judge is doing.

Challenges remain

Talking about the challenges in the appointment of judges to the higher judiciary and convincing good lawyers to accept judgeship, Justice Chandrachud

said: “What is increasingly happening is that good lawyers are just not willing to accept judgeship for a variety of reasons. Part of the reason is the wide disparity between what a lawyer makes in the course of a day at work in practice. But I think that is only part of the reason because somebody who accepts public office never does it because of the emoluments. One becomes a judge because of an inner calling and wants to do service to the community and be part of the transformation of society,” he said.

On whether Parliament should bring in another law like the NJAC Act [struck down later by the top court] for judges’ appointment or if the Collegium system should continue, Justice Chandrachud said: “Parliament doesn’t need our advice. They know what they can do even if the judgment of the Supreme Court strikes down a legislation or a constitutional amendment on the ground that it suffers from certain deficiencies; those deficiencies can be corrected either by enacting a new law or a new constitutional amendment. Parliament can’t say that a judgment of the Supreme Court is wrong. But they can certainly take away the deficiencies pointed out by the Supreme Court.”



P.R. Raman, senior advocate, Madras High Court, Anirudh Krishnan, advocate and founder, AK Law Chambers, and P.R.L. Rajavenkatesan, Professor of law, VITSOL, VIT, Chennai, during a panel discussion. M. SRINATH

AI not suitable for acquiring legal prowess: experts

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI

Law requires deep study and critical thinking, not just machine-generated answers, said legal experts at ‘Justice Unplugged: Shaping the Future of Law’, a law conclave organised by the VIT School of Law, VIT Chennai, in association with *The Hindu*, in Chennai on Saturday.

In a panel discussion on the future of legal education in India, P.R. Raman, Senior Advocate, High Court of Madras, Anirudh Krishnan, Advocate & Founder, AK Law Chambers, and P.R.L. Rajavenkatesan, professor of law, VITSOL, VIT Chennai, were in conversation with Aaratika Bhaumik, Senior Sub Editor, *The Hindu*.

Expressing skepticism about the use of AI in education, Mr. Raman said technology should not be relied upon for learning complex subjects like law. He acknowledged using earlier forms of AI, like Dragon Naturally Speaking, which helped with efficiency, but cautioned against AI becoming a tool for education as technology cannot be a substitute for the rigorous mental effort that legal expertise requires.

Prof. Rajavenkatesan said that while AI can be a useful tool for gathering information, it should not replace dedication in the learning process. He added that intelligence is built over time through effort, not instantaneously through technology. “AI may help summarise information or identify relevant sections, but students must rely on their own critical thinking and memory for deeper understanding, especially in law,” he said.

Mr. Krishnan agreed, saying that AI can be a helpful supplement to legal research, but it should not be used as the primary source.



Modern touch: Kurdish women dance during *Nowruz* celebrations in Diyarbakir, Turkiye. GETTY IMAGES



Bearing the flame: Kurdish people carry torches during *Nowruz* celebrations in Amuda, Syria. REUTERS



Hazy horizon: A girl with a Kurdish flag in front of bonfires lit during *Nowruz* in Amuda, Syria. REUTERS



Rich heritage: Traditional dance steps and finery add to celebrations for *Nowruz* in Diyarbakir, Turkiye. GETTY IMAGES

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Basking under the spring sun

Celebrated mainly by Kurdish people around the world, *Nowruz*, or the Persian New Year, heralds the arrival of spring, and celebrates life and rebirth

The ancient tradition of *Nowruz*, meaning “new day” in Persian, which can be traced back over 3,000 years to the period of Zoroastrianism, is far more than just the start of a New Year. A celebration of life, rebirth, and the triumph of light over darkness, *Nowruz* unites diverse cultures across Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Balkans, and beyond, offering a rich tapestry of customs, traditions, and shared values. For many, the celebrations also symbolise the aspirations of Kurdish people in Syria, Turkiye, Iran, and Iraq.

Celebrated on the day of the vernal equinox, *Nowruz* heralds the arrival of spring, considered by many cultures as the rebirth of nature. The popular feature of the festival, especially in Iran, is the Haft Sin table. People aesthetically arrange a table with seven items symbolising different attributes of life: *sabzeh* (sprouted grains) symbolises rebirth and renewal; *samanu* (sweet pudding) for affluence and fertility; *senjed* (dried fruit) for love; *seer* (garlic) for health; *seeb* (apple) for beauty; *somāq* (sumac berries) denotes triumph of good over evil, and finally, *serkeh* (vinegar) represents age and wisdom.

Apart from food, fire forms another key feature of the festival. Regional variations of rituals involving bonfires can be found associated with *Nowruz*, like the *Chaharshanbe Suri* in Iran where

people jump over bonfires to purify and energise themselves, casting away the cold of winter and bringing in the warmth of spring.

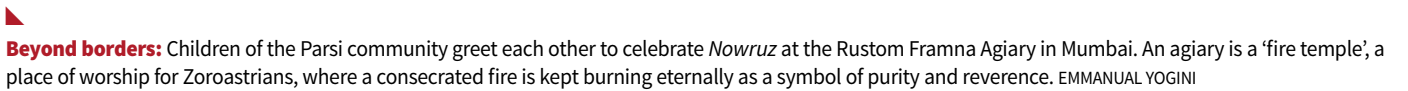
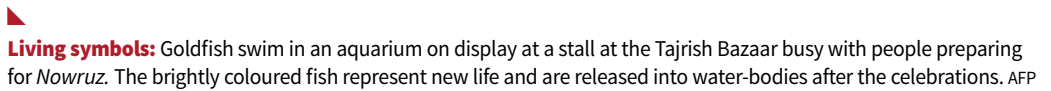
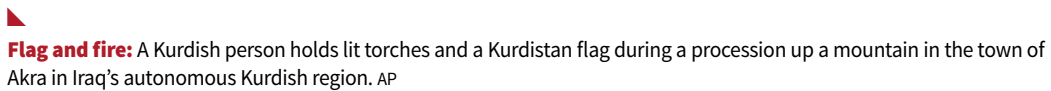
The UN has recognised March 21 as the International Day of *Nowruz* while UNESCO has inscribed *Nowruz* on its Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity to acknowledge the cultural significance of the tradition.

This year’s *Nowruz*, which coincides with the Muslim holy month of Ramzan, comes with a backdrop of uncertainty. The decades-long struggle of Kurdish people for a state is left in limbo after Abdullah Ocalan, imprisoned leader of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, made a call for the group to lay down arms and dissolve itself in hope for establishing peace with Turkiye. In Syria, the interim government headed by Abu Mohammed al-Jolani has managed to convince Kurdish-led, U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces in Rojava to integrate with government forces, leaving doubts on the future of the autonomous Kurdish region carved out during the Syrian civil war.

While the aspirations of the largest ethnic group without a state in the world remain unfulfilled, *Nowruz* brings them together in joy and restores their hopes as they feast in the freshness of spring.



Enduring tradition: Iraqi Kurds hold lit torches during a procession in the town of Akra. AP



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