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EC relents, to hear pleas to upload booth-wise turnout

Supreme Court Bench directs petitioners to make representation before poll panel in 10 days; they have sought authenticated, scanned, legible account of votes after each phase of polling

Krishnadas Rajagopal
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court on Tuesday asked the Election Commission to meet petitioners and hear their demand to upload on its official website authenticated, scanned, and legible account of votes recorded booth-wise after each phase of polling.

A Bench headed by Chief Justice Sanjiv Khanna directed Lok Sabha member Mahua Moitra and representatives of the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) to make their representation before the EC in 10 days. The panel agreed to grant the petitioners a hearing to resolve the issues.

The panel's willingness to do so signalled a mellow-

Case file

The demand for EC to publish booth-level voter turnout data follows other attempts to make the poll process more transparent. Here are the two sides:

Petitioners' stance

■ Delay in publishing voter turnout data followed by a sharp spike in figures from polling percentages in the 2024 Lok Sabha election

■ 'Wide discrepancy' between the count of voters at poll booths and the voter turnout published later on

■ Suspicions of switching of electronic voting machines

EC affidavit in May 2024

■ There was no 'legal mandate' to provide the data to any person other than candidates or their polling agents

■ Form 17C to be shared only with candidates and their agents



■ Turnout is being released through a voter turnout app, website, and press releases

EC begins steps to link voter ID with Aadhaar

NEW DELHI
The Election Commission (EC) on Tuesday set the ball rolling for linking Aadhaar with elector photo identity card (EPIC) numbers. The commission said that it would soon begin technical consultations with the UIDAI on the issue. The decision was made after a high-level meeting led by Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar. » **PAGE 11**

ing of its stance with a new Chief Election Commissioner, Gyanesh Kumar, at its helm. An affidavit filed by the EC in the Supreme Court in May 2024 had taken an uncompromising position against the public

disclosure of turnout data. It had argued there was no such "legal mandate" to provide the data to any person other than candidates or polling agents.

The ADR had primarily sought the uploading of

scanned copies of Form 17C (account of votes recorded) after every phase of polling in the 2024 Lok Sabha polls.

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Putin agrees to pause strikes on Ukraine energy targets

Agence France-Presse
MOSCOW

Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered a 30-day halt to strikes on Ukrainian energy infrastructure following a call with U.S. counterpart Donald Trump, the Kremlin said on Tuesday. But Mr. Putin said that for a wider truce to work, Ukraine must not be allowed to rearm and must halt mandatory mobilisation.

The Kremlin said the two leaders had a "detailed and frank exchange of views". Mr. Putin outlined a number of conditions for a possible ceasefire, in-

Russian President listed terms for possible ceasefire in detailed call with Trump, says Kremlin

cluding "the need to halt both forced mobilisation in Ukraine and the rearmament of the Ukrainian armed forces".

He also questioned how such a ceasefire could be monitored.

Mr. Trump proposed a 30-day halt on strikes on energy targets and "Putin responded positively and immediately gave the Russian military a correspond-

ing command", the statement added.

Russia and Ukraine will also swap 175 prisoners each on Wednesday, the Kremlin said.

Mr. Putin said the Ukraine conflict could only be resolved long-term if the West halted military and intelligence support for Ukraine. "The key condition for preventing an escalation of the conflict and working towards its resolution through political and diplomatic means should be a complete cessation of foreign military assistance and the provision of intelligence to Kyiv," the Kremlin said.

Supreme Court to see if Lokpal has powers over judges

Krishnadas Rajagopal
NEW DELHI

A Bench of the Supreme Court's senior-most judges headed by Justice B.R. Gavai on Tuesday decided to examine in detail if judges of constitutional courts come within the jurisdiction of the country's top ombudsman, Lokpal, as public functionaries including the Prime Minister, Union Ministers, Members of Parliament and Central government officials.

"We will consider the issue of the jurisdiction of

the Lokpal," Justice Gavai addressed the courtroom.

The court was hearing a *suo motu* case initiated after the Lokpal, through a January 27 order, assumed jurisdiction to investigate complaints against serving High Court judges. The ombudsman classified High Court judges as public servants who came within the ambit of the Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act, 2013 as Ministers and government officials.

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High base effect

A shrinking trade deficit, as seen in February, is no cause for cheer

India’s goods trade in February saw its steepest decline in nearly two years. Exports fell by 10.9% to \$36.91 billion, while imports dropped 16.3% to \$50.96 billion, resulting in the smallest trade deficit in over three years (42 months) at \$14 billion. While a shrinking trade deficit driven by rising exports would have been a positive development, the simultaneous decline in exports and imports is a cause for concern. Experts partly attribute this narrowing deficit to a high base effect, as exports in February last year, a leap year, stood at \$41.4 billion and imports at \$60.92 billion. However, exporters also report a trend of American importers holding back on orders, fearing the reciprocal tariffs set to take effect on April 2, as announced by U.S. President Donald Trump on February 13. This announcement came just before his meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, where they unveiled an ambitious plan to boost bilateral trade to \$500 billion by 2030 and finalise a free trade agreement (BTA) in the months ahead. Despite Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal’s diplomatic outreach to U.S. Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick this month, discussions yielded little beyond a commitment to continue BTA negotiations. The looming threat of reciprocal tariffs has unsettled Indian exporters, as the U.S. is India’s second-largest trading partner, accounting for \$118.3 billion in trade last fiscal year. It is also the only country among India’s top five trading partners with which India enjoys a trade surplus. Imports also declined sharply, led by a 62% plunge in gold imports compared to last February. This drop is linked to domestic gold prices surging to ₹87,886 per 10 grams last week, dampening consumer demand. Oil imports also fell nearly 30% as India diversified its supply sources in response to additional U.S. sanctions on Russian oil producers and tankers in early January. By mid-2023, Russia accounted for over 40% of India’s crude imports, a significant increase from less than 1% before western sanctions on Moscow following its 2022 invasion of Ukraine. If Washington moves to neutralise its trade deficit with New Delhi, India could face a 15% widening in its overall trade deficit, based on last fiscal year’s \$241 billion shortfall. India must diversify its goods and services trade to reduce its heavy reliance on the U.S. Two potential markets are China and the U.K. While imports from China have contributed to about a third of India’s trade deficit for over five years, India’s trade imbalance with the U.K. accounted for less than 3% of its total deficit last fiscal year. The free trade agreement negotiations with the U.K. are an opportunity for India to shift this balance in its favour.

A change now

The U.S. now seems more receptive to India’s concerns about Sikh extremism

In the first acknowledged discussion on the Pannun episode and anti-India activities by pro-Khalistani groups in the U.S. since the Donald Trump administration took office, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh raised the issue in a meeting with U.S. Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard. He urged the U.S. to designate Sikhs For Justice (SFJ), led by Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, as a foreign terrorist organisation, citing its anti-India activities on American soil and its alleged backing by Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). Ms. Gabbard was in India to also attend the annual Intelligence and Security Chiefs Conference, chaired by National Security Adviser Ajit Doval. The conference, now in its fourth edition, took place a day before the annual Raisina Dialogue, the flagship conference of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), co-organised with the Observer Research Foundation. Founded in 2007 by Pannun, a U.S.-based attorney, the SFJ advocates “self-determination” for Sikhs in their “historic homeland” of Punjab, seeking to establish a sovereign state of Khalistan. The Indian government banned the organisation in 2019 under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act for anti-India activities. The Khalistani insurgency remains a dark chapter in India’s history, having led to the assassination of a Prime Minister. Its resurgence in several western countries has been a growing concern for India. Pro-Khalistani protests, often turning aggressive, have become a pattern. Most recently, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar was heckled, with pro-Khalistan slogans being raised, during his visit to London earlier this month, prompting the MEA to lodge a strong protest with the U.K. Diplomatic efforts to address the issue, particularly with Canada and the U.K., have often been met with a lacklustre response, frustrating India. However, recent allegations that Indian agencies attempted targeted killings of Khalistani sympathisers have strained bilateral ties with Canada and the U.S. Relations with the then Trudeau administration in Canada were tense, while under the Biden administration, India faced significant diplomatic pressure after a U.S. investigation charged an Indian citizen – allegedly linked to the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) – with orchestrating a plot to kill Pannun. The issue became so serious that Mr. Doval refrained from accompanying Prime Minister Narendra Modi on an official visit. The Trump administration, so far, appears less inclined to escalate the matter and may be more receptive to India’s concerns. While India continues to push for action against anti-India and separatist groups, it must however ensure that its efforts do not impact the by and large cohesive Indian diaspora abroad, nor affect India’s diplomatic relationships with partners.

The 1960s and 1970s saw a significant shift in the academic landscape, particularly in the humanities and social sciences. This period marked the emergence of a counter-western narrative, where third-world literatures gained prominence, and the master narratives of the West were challenged. As a result, the idea of independence, rewriting histories, and promoting democracy and freedom became increasingly important, as is evident in the student uprisings in the volatile 1960s. Students sought freedom in the classroom and university, leading to massive demonstrations against the establishment as well as against the Vietnam War. Aimé Césaire’s *Discourse on Colonialism*, Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, and Edward Said’s *Orientalism* became the seminal works introduced in the humanities curriculum. These counter-narratives questioned the West’s idea of white supremacy, describing the strife between the coloniser and the colonised, and paving the way for a more inclusive and diverse academic environment. However, the Trump regime is attempting to undermine this progress by suppressing such discourses of marginalised communities with its impact on universities in mainly two key areas of concern: the defunding of certain critical courses that oppose right-wing ideology, and the clampdown on Palestinian students and supporters of the Palestinian cause. Both issues are closely tied to the university setting.

The rise of the far right

Mr. Trump’s administration has targeted university programmes and courses that focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) for defunding. Specifically, the subjects that may be impacted include: diversity and inclusion studies that promote multiplicity, equity, and inclusion on campus, and critical race theory that explores the intersection of race and power in society. Gender Studies, African American Studies, Latinx Studies, Asian American Studies and Native American studies may also face funding cuts, not only undermining academic freedom but also perpetuating a culture of ignorance and intolerance. The rise of the far-right ideology, consequently, poses a significant threat to academic freedom and intellectual dissent, a danger to the emerging world order. Trumpism, with its emphasis on white supremacy, misogyny, and virulent nationalism, symbolises this significant threat. Its agenda to suppress research in “left-wing” areas is a blatant attempt to silence centres of higher learning and stifle critical thinking. This silencing is not new, as universities have historically been

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Shelley Wallia

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The implications of Donald Trump’s orders extend to the world – supremacy, misogyny, and virulent nationalism threaten academic freedom, intellectual dissent and the emerging world order

sites of struggle for marginalised communities. But it is important to draw parallels between the current state of affairs and the post-independence era in universities worldwide, where there was a surge in studying African and Latin American literatures, gender studies and ecofeminism, Third World cultural studies and anti-war literature. These academic movements challenged dominant narratives and sought to dismantle the binary systems that perpetuated inequality and totalitarianism. Revisiting Mr. Trump’s last presidency, we see a strong leaning towards unilateralism, particularly in his immigration policies. His “America First” approach led to the implementation of several controversial measures, including the travel ban targeting predominantly Muslim countries and the construction of a border wall along the U.S.-Mexico border. And, more recently, he has gone after the Palestinian sympathisers. Understandably, Mr. Trump’s immigration policies are deeply rooted in his nationalist and populist ideology, which emphasises the need to protect American jobs and culture from perceived external threats. This ideology has been criticised for being discriminatory and xenophobic, with many arguing that it is a form of ultra-nationalism that borders on Nazism. Mr. Trump’s presidency has been marked by several contentious executive orders, two of which sparked widespread debate and criticism. The first order, signed in 2017, banned immigration from several Muslim-majority countries, prompting a strong reaction from university presidents across the U.S. In a joint letter, presidents of over 50 universities urged Mr. Trump to rescind the order, arguing that it contradicted America’s long-standing tradition of embracing diversity and welcoming people from various nations and faiths. They emphasised that immigrant students have significantly contributed to the country’s growth in various fields, including technology, research, and labour. **Chill in the campus** However, a similar outcry was noticeably absent when in his second presidency, Mr. Trump signed another order that effectively targeted individuals guilty of being Palestinian sympathisers. Clearly, Mr. Trump’s policies have had a profound impact on universities and international students, particularly those who speak out against injustice and promote diversity. The crackdown on Palestinian students and voices that counter Mr. Trump’s views on Israel has created a chilling effect on campuses, with many students and faculty members fearing repercussions for

speaking out. This silence is particularly concerning, as educational institutions should be promoting diversity, inclusivity, and free speech, rather than punishing those who speak out against genocide. The irony is that America has greatly benefited from immigrant contributions to its economic, intellectual, social, and cultural progress. But Mr. Trump’s ideology has led to a surge in anti-Palestinian sentiment, with some politicians calling for the deportation of foreign students involved in pro-Palestinian protests. This has created a culture of fear and intimidation on campuses. Many students and faculty members are hesitant to speak out against injustice, fearing that they will be targeted, harassed, or even deported. This is particularly concerning for international students, who may face visa restrictions, deportation, or other forms of retaliation for speaking out against Mr. Trump’s policies. The silencing of dissenting voices on campuses has far-reaching implications for democracy, free speech, and human rights. **Part of a narrative** Mr. Trump’s anti-immigrant discourse is not just about creating a scapegoat. It is part of a broader narrative that aims to re-establish nationalist patriotic values and targets globalisation. His opposition to uncontrolled immigration is linked to his critique of globalisation processes, which he sees as leading to job losses for American workers. This ideology has become a sort of new populist movement that is being embraced by right-wing movements in Europe and elsewhere. In this context, the role of intellectuals becomes crucial in countering Mr. Trump’s brand of leadership that rejects integration with other communities and promotes a selfish, self-centered agenda. It is essential for scholars, experts, and thinkers to mobilise public opinion, challenge discriminatory policies, and advocate progressive values, thereby recognising and taking a stand against the apartheid state engineered by Mr. Trump. As W.E.B. Du Bois asked, “If indeed what we confront is an apartheid state, then what is our responsibility as scholars and educators?” For him, universities are sanctuaries for marginalised communities, providing a forum for the public intellectual ready to speak truth to power and foster a culture of resistance and critical thinking, challenging dominant narratives, and developing pedagogies that promote social justice. Mr. Trump’s agenda to suppress radical research or mentally stress students is a form of despotism with implications that extend beyond the United States, with many regarding them as a threat to global social order and human rights.

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The dystopian side of Insta-commerce

In various urban centres, we often see a gathering of a range of *mazdoors* (labourers) with their tools early in the morning, waiting for someone to call them to work. When an employer or *thekedaar* turns up, huge numbers of these men and women swarm around him and he begins a negotiation process of getting the best deal for himself. From the point of view of the worker, who is a part of an enormous and growing unemployed work force, the deal is made in desperation. It is a supplier's market. The *thekedaars* are a creation of managerial facilitation where employers are able to get a 'middleman' to squeeze the greatest possible amount from labour, and offer them the greatest possible profits. Spend an hour in a labour chowk or a *mazdoor mandi* (job market) and you will understand how people's labour is sold in an auction on a daily or piece rate basis, where the lowest wage wins.

Doing dirty work virtually
This lesson has been learnt rapidly and more diabolically by employers of gig and digital platforms. The gig economy relies on a paradigm of piece rate work, offering so-called employment and 'choice' to workers, thereby shedding all responsibility vis-à-vis workers, their wages, their working conditions, and social security. The digital medium has been cunningly used to repurpose the work of the *thekedaar* (the middleman) by creating a platform that would do his dirty work virtually, and outside of the public eye. Every unemployed worker would now become part of your mazdoor mandi, desperately looking for work and supposedly exercising his/her choice by clicking on any option that might help them survive another day. The advantages of the mandi where the auction is a downward bid, with the lowest wage winning, have been multiplied virtually, exponentially, and seamlessly so that you don't see the unfair work practice that the *thekedaar* plays

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Nikhil Dey,
Founder, Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan



Rakshita Swamy,
Founder, Social Accountability Forum for Action and Research

Startup founders indulge in PR to show that they care for the rights of gig workers, and at the same time privately oppose any legislative framework that emerges to protect their rights in a State

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and the anguish on the worker's face. There is also no possibility of collective bargaining because the collective has been atomised into a million desperate workers individually checking their phones in search of employment. When they 'accept' a ride, delivery, or a service, the aggregator (*thekedaar*) holds it up as their great benevolent service to the nation of creating employment. The magic is all too real for them to know because they control it all through a disembodied app. They know how much to offer, on what terms, and under what conditions. Their algorithms help them maximise profits in a way that the worker can either choose to say yes to or perish in a market that is dominated by a consumer class that only sees the convenience of someone providing a service at the mere click of a button.

The consumer sees a worker, who has driven through pollution, rushed up the stairs, and is dripping from sweat or wet with rain, only for a brief moment. The worker's indignity is compounded when he is forced to desperately seek a five-star rating. The distressing story of exploitation has now reached a new high, with the introduction of 'Insta Maids'. This service offers a house help within 15 minutes to clean utensils and sweep the house for "₹49 an hour". Workers understand what is happening and are fighting back. Some of their slogans point to the poignancy of the situation - "*rating nahi, haq chaahiye* (we don't want ratings, we want rights!)" and "*insaan hai hum, ghulaam nahi* (we are human beings, not slaves!)"

Bill in cold storage

In India, beginning with Rajasthan, the workers made an important though limited breakthrough by advocating and pushing for legislation that would give them: i) a framework for social security that would help deal with atomised piece rate work; ii) access to their own data on a real-time basis; iii) a grievance redress mechanism that

would allow them some independent platform to raise their grievances, and a tripartite board where issues related to the sector could be discussed by all concerned. This breakthrough has been stymied with the new BJP government refusing to notify the Act with rules. The Congress government that got it passed promised more progressive legislation in Karnataka and Telangana, and put up a draft law with a promise to pass it immediately. But the collective power of the aggregators was further aggregated in the form of NASSCOM and CII-led representations to the State governments. These asserted that gig workers are 'partners' and should not be recognised as employees; cannot have a right to their data including the right to know the break-up of individual bills; cannot be promised protection against arbitrary termination; and should not have access to an independent grievance redress framework. The Karnataka government has formed a ministerial committee to deliberate further on these inputs, and contrary to assurances that progressive legislation would be passed, has put the Bill in cold storage. It is clear whose voices an elected government listens to.

It is no coincidence that the person who signed on behalf of the CII Unicorn Forum's submission to the Karnataka government is the founder of Urban Company. On LinkedIn he suggests that the Insta Maids service "will bring alive the promise of New India for service partners where financial security, professional recognition and dignity are within reach for all". The naked double speak is evident when founders indulge in PR to show that they care for the rights of gig workers, and at the same time privately oppose any legislative framework that emerges to protect their rights in a State. This hypocrisy must be exposed and the modern slavery of platform-based gig work must be brought to an end.

Kerala's drug menace is widespread and escalating

In 2022, every district in Kerala recorded at least 500 cases under the Narcotics Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act. This was not seen in any other State

DATA POINT

Sambavi Parthasarathy
Vignesh Radhakrishnan

Over the past three years, there has been a sudden surge in drug abuse in Kerala, sparking widespread concern. In March, the Kerala High Court warned of the "poisonous fangs of the drug mafia", while the Governor met with university Vice-Chancellors to address student drug use. The State Higher Education Department launched a 'Love-a-Thon' campaign against substance abuse, and Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan urged new Sub-Inspectors to take a lead in combating the drug trade. Last month, the State Assembly suspended regular business to discuss the growing crisis. The reactions are well-founded. **Chart 1** shows the State-wise number of cases filed under the Narcotics Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act, 1985, between 2017 and 2024. The number of cases under the Act surged from 5,695 in 2021 to 26,619 in 2022 and surpassed 30,000 in 2023. In 2024, over 27,701 cases were recorded. While drug abuse has long been a concern in Kerala and in States such as Punjab, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, and Uttar Pradesh, the recent spike is alarming. For instance, in 2023, Maharashtra, which had recorded the second-highest number of cases under the NDPS Act, recorded only half as many cases as Kerala. In 2024, the gap widened further, with Punjab recording the second-highest number of cases that year – yet only a third of Kerala's total. Several States appear to show a decline in cases in 2023 and 2024. This should be read with caution, as the latest data may be provisional. **Chart 2** highlights the severity of the crisis more clearly. It plots the number of cases filed under the NDPS Act in 2024 for every one lakh people in a State (case rate)

on the horizontal axis. It plots the absolute number of cases on the vertical axis. The circle sizes correspond to population estimates for 2022. With 78 cases per lakh people, Kerala stands as a stark outlier by a significant margin. Punjab, the nearest major State in terms of case rate, recorded 30 cases per lakh people. Mizoram, too, suffers from a high case rate. No other State had a rate more than 25 cases per one lakh people.

Unlike other States, the problem is not limited to urban centres in Kerala. In fact, every district in Kerala recorded at least 500 cases under the NDPS Act in 2022 – a distinction unmatched by any other State.

For instance, in 2022, Mumbai district accounted for 80% of all NDPS Act cases in Maharashtra, while Bengaluru district made up 63% of Karnataka's total. In contrast, no single district in Kerala recorded more than 10% of the State's cases. This widespread distribution makes policing particularly challenging.

The NDPS Act has two key provisions – one for possession of drugs for personal use and another for possession with intent to traffic. Notably, in Kerala, 94% of all the NDPS cases were filed for possession, while only 6% were related to trafficking in 2022. **Table 3A** ranks the top 25 districts with the highest cases of possession in 2022. It shows that 17 of them are in Kerala.

Notably, in **Table 3B**, which ranks the top 25 districts with the highest cases for intent to traffic, not a single district from Kerala features. However, 13 of them were in Punjab.

It is important to note that the districts mentioned in this analysis refer to police districts, which may not always align with administrative districts. In Kerala, for example, there are 20 police districts. While some are coterminous with administrative boundaries, others are smaller units.

An alarming situation

Data for the years 2017 to 2022 were sourced from the NCRB and for the years 2023 and 2024 from the Rajya Sabha Q&A



Chart 1: Number of cases filed under the NDPS Act

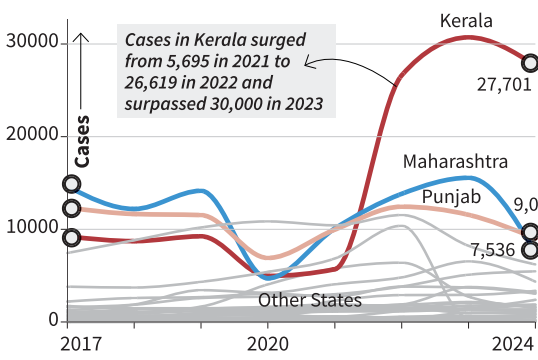


Chart 3A: Top districts for most cases of drug possession

State	District	Cases
Maharashtra	Mumbai	10264
Karnataka	Bengaluru	3457
Kerala	Malappuram	2724
Kerala	Ernakulam	2685
Kerala	Thiruvananthapuram Rural	1702
MP	Indore	1629
Kerala	Kollam	1584
Kerala	Kannur	1340
Kerala	Kottayam	1338
Kerala	Kasaragod	1299
Kerala	Wayanad	1278
Kerala	Kozhikode	1181
Kerala	Thiruvananthapuram	1173
Kerala	Alappuzha	1157
Kerala	Palakkad	1088
Kerala	Ernakulam Rural	1076
Kerala	Thrissur Rural	934
Tamil Nadu	Chennai	874
Kerala	Idukki	798
Kerala	Kollam Rural	754
Maharashtra	Mira Bhayandar	717
Kerala	Kozhikode Rural	696
UP	Ghaziabad	677
Punjab	Ludhiana	677
Punjab	Patiala	623

Chart 2: Rate of cases filed under the NDPS Act in 2024

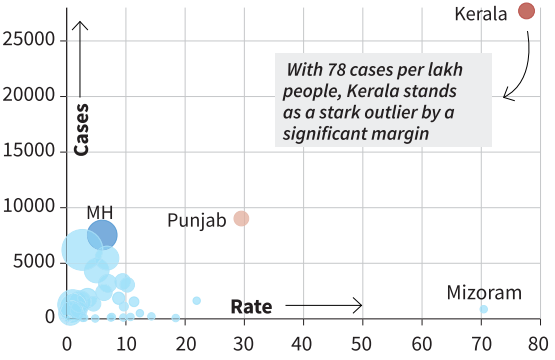


Chart 3B: Top districts for most cases of intent to traffic

State	District	Cases
Maharashtra	Mumbai	782
Punjab	Ferozepur	731
Punjab	Amritsar	671
TN	Cuddalore	667
Haryana	Sirsa	624
UP	Saharanpur	607
Punjab	Patiala	597
Karnataka	Bengaluru	570
UP	Barabanki	466
Punjab	Bathinda	449
Punjab	Moga	436
Punjab	Tarn Taran	432
Punjab	Muktsar	420
Punjab	Jalandhar Rural	399
Punjab	SAS Nagar	392
Punjab	Mansa	375
Assam	Nagaon	314
Punjab	Fazilka	300
J&K	Jammu	296
Punjab	Amritsar Rural	291
UP	Sonbhadra	291
Punjab	Jalandhar	285
Rajasthan	Hanumangarh	263
UP	Mathura	263
Rajasthan	Ganganagar	261

Text & Context

Cancer treatments performed under Ayushman Bharat

68 In lakh, Cancer treatments worth over ₹13,000 crore have been performed under the Ayushman Bharat health insurance scheme, with 75% of them undertaken in rural areas, Union Health Minister J.P. Nadda said. The benefits were given under the Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana. PTI

Annual aid received by Colombia from USAID for various programmes

440 In \$ million, for more than 80 programs, making it the largest recipient of the agency's funds in the western hemisphere. The suspension of USAID is shuttering anti-gang programs in Colombia's impoverished places. REUTERS
COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

What is happening in Balochistan?

Pakistan's domestic politics will broadly define the trajectory of unrest in Balochistan. However, considering the lack of legitimacy and confidence in Pakistan's military and government, serious negotiations between the insurgents and the military-civilian leadership seem to be out of the picture

WORLD INSIGHT

Sanjay Pulipaka

On March 11, militants of the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) hijacked a train with approximately 400 passengers in the mountainous region between Quetta and Sibi in Pakistan. After releasing the women and children, the BLA militants demanded the release of their compatriots from prison in exchange for the remaining passengers. The government of Pakistan refused to negotiate and launched a military operation to free the passengers, which lasted for well over 24 hours. Pakistan's Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) official stated that there were 21 civilian fatalities and that four Frontier Corps personnel lost their lives in the operation. However, various media outlets have hinted that the Pakistani forces may have incurred further significant losses. Subsequently, Pakistan's security forces came under heavy attack in different parts of Balochistan.

A united insurgency

Before the train hijacking, there were growing concerns about the deteriorating security situation in Balochistan. During a discussion in Pakistan's National Assembly, some members expressed anxiety that parts of Balochistan may secede from Pakistan. However, intelligence agencies failed to detect a large operation in the making.

The train hijack has demonstrated that insurgents have acquired operational capabilities to launch massive attacks on Pakistan's security forces and that they can withstand the firepower of special forces for well over 24 hours. Notably, during the stand-off, the militants also deployed effective social media strategies to convey their narrative to the wider world, which is indicative of the insurgents' increasing tactical sophistication. The episode also shows that there seems to be improved coordination between various Baloch insurgent groups.

As society in Balochistan is structured along tribal loyalties, numerous organisations and armed groups have emerged to articulate the grievances of the Baloch people. While tribal loyalties continue to endure, there seems to be a gradual shift in the composition of armed groups, with middle-class and educated youngsters joining them. The BLA is the most formidable group and has been declared a terrorist organisation by Pakistan and the U.S. While the Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF) is reportedly more popular among the younger population in southern regions of the province, the Baloch Republican Guards (BRG) is active in areas such as Bolan, Quetta, Sibi, and Naseerabad. A few years ago, these armed groups along with the Sindhudesh Revolutionary Army (SRA) decided to collaborate under the banner of Baloch Raji Aajoi Sangar (BRAS). The objective of the BRAS is to launch coordinated attacks on Pakistan's military infrastructure and its intelligence apparatus with greater ferocity.

Concerns of the Baloch people

The current insurgency in Balochistan is not the first of its kind. In fact, the province has witnessed multiple insurgencies, such as the ones in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, and mid-2000s.

It is important to note that, alongside armed insurgency, there exists a people's movement advocating for improved



Lingering tensions: Pakistan army soldiers stand at the tunnel where the train was attacked by militants, in Bolan, Balochistan, Pakistan on March 15. REUTERS

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access to basic necessities such as drinking water, tackling the rising costs of essential commodities like petrol and medicine, regulating the presence of Chinese fishing trawlers, and ensuring unhindered access to the sea for fishermen. Last year, Balochistan witnessed massive protests led by women who demanded the cessation of custodial killings and fake encounters. The defence forces have often deployed coercive measures such as enforced disappearances (illegal detentions/abductions).

Over the years, the Pakistani government has attempted to portray the discontent in Balochistan as a consequence of power contestations involving a few tribal chieftains in the province. However, there is no denying that Balochistan was subjected to political and socio-economic neglect. Many in Balochistan complain that their province was forcefully incorporated into Pakistan in 1948. Furthermore, the people of Balochistan rarely experienced political empowerment because of decades of military rule and centralised governance. The province has numerous natural resources, such as coal, copper, gold, and natural gas. However, the exploitation of these resources has not improved local people's livelihoods.

To compound such miseries of the local population, massive infrastructure projects (such as the Gwadar Port) as part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) were operationalised without adequate stakeholder consultation. The construction of these projects resulted in people migrating to Balochistan from different parts of the country, prompting concerns about demographic shifts that would adversely impact the interests of the local Baloch population.

Insurgent groups have often articulated their protest against the CPEC and have called upon China to withdraw from the province. Sadly, there were instances – such as the suicide bombing at Karachi University and the bombing of a bus near the Dasu hydropower project – in which

Chinese civilians were killed. There is, therefore, growing concern in Beijing about the Pakistan army's ability to provide security to Chinese personnel working on various CPEC projects. There are reports that China may consider a proactive approach, such as deploying private security companies, to protect its civilians and interests. While China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was criticised for pushing countries into debt traps, in Pakistan, which is Beijing's most valued strategic partner, the CPEC, a critical component of the BRI, has come under sustained physical attacks.

Regional complexities

The geopolitical context, thus far, has not been conducive to the success of the Baloch insurgent movement. While the province accounts for 44% of the country's landmass, it has approximately 5% of the country's population. It may be easy for security forces to contain the separatist movement, as they constitute a very small percentage of the population.

Additionally, the Balochistan independence movement has not received significant international support. The province is not geographically contiguous to India, and therefore, India is not in a position to provide material support to Baloch armed groups. The Baloch nationalist imagination also incorporates the Sistan province of Iran, which consequently makes Iran reluctant to support the Baloch separatist movement. Further, with the deterioration of the security environment in Pakistan, Tehran is worried that anti-Iranian groups are finding a haven in the neighbouring Balochistan province. Last year, Iran conducted missile and drone strikes targeting 'Iranian terrorists' in Balochistan.

The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan brought about significant geopolitical shifts in the region. There is a growing rift between the Taliban and the Pakistan army, with occasional skirmishes on the borders. Taliban representatives have often made statements which suggest that

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they would not recognise the Durand line that delineates the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. The Taliban has also, despite many demands from the Pakistan Army, refused to contain the presence of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). There has been a significant uptick in the activities of TTP in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in Pakistan. Many in Pakistan's security establishment perceive growing coordination between the TTP and the BLA. Pakistan's official statements that "terrorists were in direct communications with Afghanistan-based planners" suggest that all is not well between Pakistan and various armed groups in Afghanistan. The TTP, with its Pashtun cadres and the BLA, with its Baloch cadres, constitute a significant threat on Pakistan's western border. On the other hand, Pakistan has invested considerable security resources on its eastern borders with India. The India-Pakistan bilateral relationship continues to remain cold, and Islamabad's Kashmir policy has yet to factor in different ground realities. It is unclear how the new Trump administration would respond to the unrest in Pakistan.

Lack of popular support

Pakistan's domestic politics will broadly define the trajectory of unrest in Balochistan. Pakistan's military lost considerable respect because of its crude handling of a popular leader like Imran Khan. The current civilian leadership's hold on power is attributed to its closeness to the military rather than to its popularity among the masses. Given the legitimacy crisis of the military-civilian leadership, it is unlikely they would indulge in serious negotiations. It would be prudent of Pakistan's military-civilian leadership to decentralise power and share revenues from resource extraction with the people of Balochistan. Otherwise, the turmoil in Balochistan will continue to endure.

Sanjay Pulipaka is the Chairperson of the Politeia Research Foundation. The views expressed here are personal.

THE GIST

▼
The current insurgency in Balochistan is not the first of its kind. In fact, the province has witnessed multiple insurgencies, such as the ones in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, and mid-2000s.

▼
Over the years, the Pakistani government has attempted to portray the discontent in Balochistan as a consequence of power contestations involving a few tribal chieftains in the province. However, there is no denying that Balochistan was subjected to political and socio-economic neglect.

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The Balochistan independence movement has not received significant international support. The province is not geographically contiguous to India, and therefore, India is not in a position to provide material support to Baloch armed groups.

ABSTRACT

What factors influence women’s political participation?

While discussions on women’s participation often highlight the social and cultural biases that hinder their electoral success, less attention is given to how everyday women engage with the electoral process

Rebecca Rose Varghese

Deshpande R., ‘Shaping of the Woman Constituency in Indian Elections: Evidence from the NES Data’, Studies in Indian Politics, Vol 12 Issue No. 2, 303-317, November 16, 2024

The participation of women in Indian politics has been a subject of extensive discourse among scholars, especially given the paradox that while India has produced several influential women leaders, overall political engagement among women remains poor. Unlike many countries where the gender gap in political participation began narrowing in the 1990s, India saw this shift only in the 2010s.

While discussions on women’s participation often highlight the social and cultural biases that hinder their electoral success, less attention is given to how everyday women engage with the electoral process when opportunities arise. Their voting patterns, choices, and agency in shaping election outcomes remain under-explored. And, though political parties and women’s movements frequently celebrate women voters during elections, this recognition often treats them as a homogenous group, overlooking the intersections of caste, class, religion, and region that shape their political behaviour. Women’s support for Donald Trump in the 2016 U.S. elections, and their participation in the riots of the 1990s in India illustrate how women’s political engagement is far more complex and requires in-depth understanding.

It is within this context that Rajeshwari Deshpande’s study, ‘Shaping of the Woman Constituency in Indian Elections: Evidence from the NES Data’, becomes significant. Her analysis of National Election Studies (NES) data sheds light on the increasing voter turnout among women and their growing participation in the political sphere. By examining how women vote and whether their choices are influenced primarily by gender or by other social identities, her research provides a nuanced understanding of the evolving role of women in Indian elections. Her findings help to understand whether we are closer to shaping a women’s constituency in Indian elections. This study offers critical insights into the gendered dimensions of Indian elections, highlighting key patterns, contradictions, and challenges in women’s political agency and its broader socio-political implications.

Mere beneficiaries or active agents?
As mentioned earlier, it was only in 2010 that there was a significant increase in the share of women who voted; and all political parties sought to capitalise on this shift by introducing policies and schemes specifically targeting women. However, these policies often frame women as passive beneficiaries rather than political agents. Welfare programs like Ujjwala and the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana were pivotal to the Bharatiya Janata Party’s (BJP) victory in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, while schemes like ‘Ladli Behna’ and ‘Ladli Laxmi’ were credited for the party’s success in Madhya Pradesh. These initiatives reinforce the

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Women voters after casting their vote in the Lok Sabha elections in Prayagraj, on May 25, 2024. AP
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notion of women as dependents, with political leaders positioned as benevolent providers rather than recognising women as autonomous decision-makers.

Deshpande argues that high voter turnout does not necessarily translate to real political power. For years, women were considered marginal participants in politics, with efforts made to carve out a ‘non-political’ political constituency for them. Despite their growing presence at the polls, political parties and media continue to frame their votes as driven by welfare benefits. Analysing NES data helps assess whether the rise in women voters signals real political agency or mere surface-level inclusion.

Beyond voting
While the increasing turnout of women voters in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections is noteworthy, voting is not the only form of political participation. Participation in rallies, campaigns, political affiliations, and policy advocacy also indicates political involvement. In these areas, women still lag behind men. Only 14% of women report seeking advice from their spouses on voting decisions – indicating growing agency –but this remains significantly higher than men’s. This

suggests that despite increased voter participation, deeper political engagement faces social and structural barriers.

One explanation scholars offer for the increased turnout of women is the self-empowerment hypothesis, which suggests that rising literacy rates and employment opportunities have empowered women to vote independently. Efforts by the Election Commission to ensure women’s voter registration could also be attributed to the increased turnout.

However, the author challenges this explanation, pointing out two critical contradictions: women’s overall workforce participation remains low, weakening the argument that economic independence is driving higher turnout. Additionally, the proportion of registered female voters compared to male voters remains imbalanced, indicating that fewer women are being registered.

An alternative explanation for the increased women voter turnout could be the large-scale male migration of men contributing to higher turnout among women in States traditionally considered socially and economically ‘backward’. These trends highlight that while

turnout has increased, broader political participation remains limited.

Other identities
Women’s voting behaviour in India is not driven solely by gender identity but is also deeply shaped by regional, caste, and class dynamics. The NES data highlight that State-specific political and social contexts significantly influence electoral choices, undermining the idea of a unified, pan-Indian women’s voting bloc. Instead, women’s voting preferences are molded within the broader framework of their community identities.

State-level variations demonstrate this complexity. For instance, in States such as Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and West Bengal, where electoral politics have historically been shaped by strong regional parties, women’s preferences are often aligned with regional political movements rather than national gender-based voting trends. Caste and class divisions further complicate this narrative. The BJP’s voter base has traditionally been skewed toward urban, upper-class, and upper-caste groups, while Congress has drawn more support from the urban poor and marginalised communities. However, this alignment is also not absolute – many women, particularly from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, continue to vote based on the interests of their communities rather than on a broader gender-based agenda.

Women’s support for different parties
NES data indicate that Congress has historically maintained a gender advantage, consistently receiving more female support than male. This trend continued in 2024, except in 2014, when the party suffered a nationwide decline. Left parties also had a gender advantage, but their declining influence has diminished this effect on the national stage. The BJP, in contrast, has faced a gender disadvantage, with fewer women voting for the party compared to men. However, this gap has been narrowing. Previously, the gender gap in BJP support exceeded 20%, whereas in 2024, it reduced to approximately 7%. The BJP’s targeted outreach to women has contributed to this shift, though much of its support still comes only from welfare beneficiaries. Even within this group, men support the BJP more than women.

Region-specific variations further complicate women’s support for the BJP. In some non-BJP-ruled States, more women than men voted for the party, despite a lack of increased female voter turnout. Conversely, in other States, women showed a stronger preference for opposition parties, creating an uneven gender gap. This suggests that while the BJP has made inroads among female voters, gender alone does not define women’s electoral choices – other intersecting identities and political contexts remain crucial.

The data from past elections highlight three key trends in women’s political participation in India. First, while women’s voter turnout has steadily increased, their overall political engagement beyond voting remains lower than men’s. Second, women’s voting patterns and political involvement are not just shaped by gender identity; factors such as caste, class, and regional influences also play a significant role. Third, despite targeted outreach, the BJP has historically faced a gender disadvantage, with more men than women supporting the party. These developments indicate that we are still far from the formation of a distinct women’s constituency in Indian politics, as their electoral choices remain intertwined with broader socio-political factors.

Rebecca Rose Varghese is a freelance journalist.

THE DAILY QUIZ

India observes National Immunisation Day on March 16 every year to commemorate the launch of the Pulse Polio Immunisation campaign. A quiz on vaccines

Ramya Kannan

QUESTION 1
Which scientist is credited with developing the first successful vaccine?

QUESTION 2
Which is the only human disease to have been eradicated by vaccination in 1980?

QUESTION 3
In 1998, a fraudulent research paper by physician X and 12 coauthors was published in *The Lancet*. The paper

falsely linked the Measles, Mumps, and Rubella (MMR) vaccine and autism, derailing the MMR vaccination globally for years. Who is physician X?

QUESTION 4
To increase the body’s immune response, and help make vaccines more effective, adjuvants are added to many vaccines. What is a common adjuvant?

QUESTION 5
In 1986, the Recombivax HB vaccine for hepatitis B was approved for human use in several countries. What was special about this vaccine.



Visual question:
On March 27, 2014, the WHO certified India as polio-free. How many years of no reported cases of wild poliovirus transmission were required to get the certification?
LAKSHMI NARAYANAN E

Questions and Answers to the previous day’s daily quiz: 1. In late 1811 and early 1812, the New Madrid Earthquakes struck what is today the U.S. state of Missouri. Native Americans in the area interpreted the magnitude to be an omen to support _____ in his resistance to the U.S.’s expansion. **Ans: Tecumseh**
2. On November 1, 1755, an earthquake of magnitude 7.7-9 struck this city. **Ans: Lisbon**
3. When it struck, this earthquake had a magnitude of 9, and shifted the earth’s axis of rotation by 10-25 cm. **Ans: Tohoku earthquake**
4. Exactly 957 years ago, two earthquakes completely destroyed Aqaba in Jordan while the second left 15,000 people dead in this city. **Ans: Ramla**
5. The world’s second-most powerful earthquake since 1900 occurred in 1964 here. **Ans: Alaska**
Visual: This 1976 earthquake left more than 2.4 lakh people dead. The toll revealed Chinese scientists’ prediction of this nearby quake in 1975 to have been a fluke. **Ans: Tangshan; Haicheng**
Early Birds: Siddhartha Viswanathan| Jagrati Shukla| Dinesh Kumar| Varghese Joseph| Sandhya Rao

From Page One

EC to hear pleas on booth-wise turnout

Rule 49S and Rule 56C (2) of the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961 require the Presiding Officer to prepare an account of votes recorded in Form 17C (Part I) format.

The NGO had alleged an inordinate delay in publishing voter turnout details followed by a sharp spike in figures from the initial voter turnout percentages released by the EC in the 2024 Lok Sabha election. The development, according to the ADR, had rung alarm bells about the authenticity of the polling data available in the public domain, and raised suspicions on whether the electronic voting machines were switched.

On Tuesday, senior advocate Abhishek Singhvi, representing Ms. Moitra, submitted that the EC's reticence to divulge the total voter turnout data from all polling booths may be “to avoid a macro picture for analysis and disclosure”.

“Citizens have a right to know. The Supreme Court had intervened in other cases to ensure that citizens knew the criminal antecedents of candidates... In a democracy, we need to know, that's all,” senior advocate Prashant Bhushan emphasised.

Mr. Singhvi said there was a “wide discrepancy” between the count of voters at poll booths and the voter turnout published later on.

SC to consider if Lokpal has powers over judges

The Special Bench had stayed the Lokpal order on February 20, terming it “very disturbing” with a potential to impact the independence of the judiciary.

Appearing on Tuesday before the Special Bench also comprising Justices Surya Kant and A.S. Oka, Solicitor-General Tushar Mehta said the “limited question” was whether judges of constitutional courts were indeed public servants under the Lokpal Act.

Senior advocate Kapil Sibal, assisting the court, said he wanted to go a “little further” to urge the Bench to examine if criminal complaints against judges could be registered in police stations.

“Can a complaint be ever filed outside the remit of a constitutional authority. That is the fundamental issue. Can someone go to a police station and register a first information report (FIR)?” he submitted.

However, Mr. Mehta objected to extending the ambit of the *suo motu* case. He insisted the Bench should confine its present line of inquiry to whether the judges of constitutional courts were public servants under Section 14 of the Lokpal Act.

The top law officer contended that the top court's Constitution Bench had already, in a majority judgment in the *K. Veeraswami* case of 1991, settled the question of whether the police could register an FIR against a sitting High Court or Supreme Court judge.

Though the *Veeraswami* case had specifically dealt with the Prevention of Corruption Act in judiciary, the majority judgment had extended its ambit to “any criminal case”.

Judges of constitutional courts can also be removed by a parliamentary process on the grounds of “proved misbehaviour or incapacity”.

In its January 27 order, the Lokpal had found the argument that a High Court judge was outside the ombudsman's jurisdiction “too naive”. It concluded that a High Court judge came well within the ambit of clause (f) of Section 14(1) of the 2013 Act.

EC sets ball rolling on linking voter ID cards with Aadhaar

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Election Commission (EC) on Tuesday set the ball rolling for linking Aadhaar with elector photo identity card (EPIC) numbers. The poll body said it would soon begin technical consultations with the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) on the issue.

The decision was made after a high-level meeting of the full commission, led by Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar, an official statement said.

Commenting on the EC statement on its intent to link EPIC numbers with Aadhaar, the Empowered Action Group of Leaders and Experts (EAGLE) of the Congress in a statement said the EC must consult all political parties and other stakeholders and assure



Plan in motion: Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar and other officials during a high-level meeting in Delhi. PTI

them that “there are sufficient guardrails to not deny a single eligible voter the right to vote”.

The Election Commission, however, said linking of EPIC with Aadhaar would only be done under provisions of Article 326, which says voting rights can only be given to citizens. Aadhaar card only establishes the identity of a person.

It further said the linking would also take into effect as per the provisions of Sections 23(4), 23(5) and 23(6) of the Representation of the People Act, 1950 and in line with the Supreme Court judgment in WP (civil) No. 177/2023.

This in effect means that linkage would be done only in cases where Aadhaar has been submitted voluntarily by the elector.

India takes 24th spot in free speech survey

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

A new global survey by the Future of Free Speech, an independent U.S.-based think tank, has ranked India 24th out of the 33 countries surveyed on the question of support for free speech. Its report, titled “Who in the world supports free speech?” states that “while abstract support for free speech remains strong, commitment to protecting controversial speech is eroding in many parts of the world.”

The survey, conducted in October 2024, also revealed that “more countries have seen declines rather than improvements in free speech support since 2021, with some of the biggest drops occurring in democratic nations like the United States, Israel, and Japan”.

Scandinavia dominated



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the top rankings, with Norway and Denmark finishing at the apex of the Future of the Free Speech Index with scores of 87.9 and 87.0.

Disconnect flagged

Indonesia (56.8), Malaysia (55.4), and Pakistan (57.0) showed the biggest improvements, though they

remained at the lower end of the ranking. India, with a score of 62.6, was placed 24th, between South Africa (66.9) and Lebanon (61.8). At the same time, some authoritarian-leaning nations—such as Hungary (85.5) and Venezuela (81.8)—scored high, “suggesting a disconnect between government restric-

tions and public attitudes”.

As regards its findings concerning India, the survey found that while a majority of Indians consider it very important to speak freely without government censorship, support for criticism of government policies was below the global average.

For instance, 37% of Indian respondents supported the statement that “governments should be able to prevent people” from criticising government policies—the highest percentage among all the countries surveyed.

Public sentiment

In contrast, 5% of the respondents supported this statement in the U.K., while only 3% endorsed this sentiment in Denmark.

In general, nations that are more supportive of free speech tend to enjoy more freedom of expression in

practice and vice versa. But India was an exception to this pattern. “The most substantial disconnects from the general pattern are represented by India, Hungary, and Venezuela where the actual protection of free speech is very low compared to the popular support. These are all cases of democratic backsliding in countries that previously demonstrated high levels of respect for political liberties, including freedom of expression,” the report stated.

When asked whether their ability to speak freely about political matters has improved or worsened over the past year, “Indians and South Africans believe that they have undergone the most significant progress, although observers and rankings tend to agree that the situation in India has become worse, if anything,” the report noted.

‘America First’ doesn’t mean ‘America alone’: Gabbard

Strong India-U.S. partnership based on shared values and the leadership of Trump and Modi, who are ‘two great friends’, says U.S. spy chief; pitches for Trump’s bid to end Russia-Ukraine war

Dinakar Peri
NEW DELHI

U.S. President Donald Trump’s commitment to the principle of ‘America First’ should not be misinterpreted as ‘America alone’, U.S. Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard said on Tuesday, drawing parallels to Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s policy of ‘India First’.

Speaking at the annual Raisina Dialogue, Ms. Gabbard emphasised the need to work together to address the challenges of the Indo-Pacific region, and to achieve “collective goals”, also making a pitch for Mr. Trump’s bid to end the Russia-Ukraine war and prevent the risk of Third World War.

“President Trump is committed to America First, putting the safety, security and freedom of the American people at the forefront of his policies and his decisions. But this should not be misunderstood to mean that America First is America alone. The relationships that we build together are critical to advance our mutual interests,” Ms. Gabbard said, speaking on the second day of the event, which is jointly organised by the Ministry of External Affairs and the Observer Research Foundation.



Annual meet: U.S. Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard speaks during the Raisina Dialogue in New Delhi on Tuesday, AFP

“President Trump is committed to America First. PM Modi is committed to India First. Prime Minister [Christopher] Luxon is committed to New Zealand First,” she said.

Ms. Gabbard, who was in India on a three-day visit during which she met the country’s top leadership, left for the U.S. after the session.

She expressed confidence that the partnership and friendship between the two nations and their leaders would continue to grow. “The partnership between our two countries has been strong for decades and under the leadership of two great leaders and two great friends,

President Trump and Prime Minister Modi, and rooted in our shared values of peace and freedom, security and prosperity,” she said.

‘Commitment to peace’ Underscoring the importance of the Indo-Pacific, Ms. Gabbard said that ensuring order and stability in the region is critical, adding that it was not just a geographic space, but also the geopolitical centre of gravity for the 21st century.

“So ensuring peace and stability here is essential to our collective security, our objective of economic prosperity, and our ability to work together, to take on the great challenges of our time, and we must tackle these challenges together. Our ability to do so as nations, as leaders, as people, is critical towards achieving our collective goals,” she said.

Noting that this is a time of war and conflict in many parts of the world, Ms. Gabbard said that at such times, leaders must stand up for interests that affect us all and will affect generations. Unfortunately, she said, history has shown that simply calling for peace too often provokes attacks and smears. As an example, she pointed at how Mr. Trump “made it a pillar of his campaign to share his commitment to peace and to bring his leadership towards bringing about an end to the Russia-Ukraine war, to stop the killing, to prevent this risk of Third World War and nuclear war.”

“And for this commitment, he was attacked relentlessly, not only by his political opponents and legacy media in our own country, but even by those abroad,” Ms. Gabbard said. Despite these “attacks and smear campaigns”, the American people voted “overwhelmingly” for him to return to the White House and delivered a “very clear message and mandate for peace, which he is carrying out as we gather here today,” she said.

Pact signed for using Parliament data for AI model: Minister

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The India Artificial Intelligence (AI) Mission has signed a memorandum of understanding with Parliament to access its data for training an indigenous AI model, Union IT Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw said on Tuesday.

Speaking during a panel discussion on “Winning the AI marathon: India in the global AI race” at the Raisina Dialogue in New Delhi, Mr. Vaishnaw said that under the India AI Mission, 14,000 graphics processing units (GPUs) have been made available at a common compute facility.

“Parliament dataset will be a very good resource for training our model, similarly Doordarshan and All India Radio are other sources where large datasets are available,” Mr. Vaishnaw said.

“Whatever world says, a model, if its open source today, may not remain open source tomorrow, which we have seen in case of Open AI. So it is important to have our own large language models (LLM),” he said.

Plan rope in professors Mr. Vaishnaw said the government was working with industry to evaluate options and was planning to rope in professors and start-ups willing to contribute to the journey of building LLM for India.

Vaishnaw says India will develop capability to have GPUs up and running in three to five years

Citing examples of training students on 5G tech, he said that nearly 100 laboratories were set up in universities so that students could learn about the tech in real settings. “A similar approach will be adopted for AI,” he said.

Mr. Vaishnaw said in the next three to five years, India would develop capability to have GPUs up and running. “We are evaluating approaches with two different types of instruction sets for this purpose. Which one of the two, or both, we will finalise, will be left to the experts to decide.”

Despite escalation of tariff wars and export controls by the U.S., Mr. Vaishnaw said the goal was to focus on proprietary tech and models. “We have a rich resource for any country to be in race of AI and the way we have developed with U.S. where foundation of relationship is trust, respect for IP rights is to co-create and co-develop tech. That has happened over period of 10 years which is a strength for both countries.”

Demand for Grants for Railways passed in LS amid noisy protests

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Replying to a discussion on the Demand for Grants for Railways (2025-26), Union Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw said on Tuesday in the Lok Sabha that allocating ₹2.52 lakh crore as Gross Budgetary Support (GBS) for Railways was a historic decision.

Mr. Vaishnaw was speaking amid noisy protests by the Opposition over not being allowed to speak on Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s statement on the Maha Kumbh.

He said that despite challenges during COVID-19, the Railways had reached a healthy financial position. “The current situation is such that Railways is now able to meet



Ashwini Vaishnaw

almost all its expenditures through its own income, covering both major and minor costs,” he stated.

Breaking down costs, he said the largest expenditure component in the Railways was staff cost, which amounts to ₹1,16,000 crore. “There are nearly 15 lakh pensioners, and their pension cost is around ₹66,000 crore. The energy cost stands at ₹32,000 crore,

while financing costs amount to ₹25,000 crore. Adding all expenses together, the total expenditure of Railways is ₹2,75,000 crore, whereas the total income is approximately ₹2,78,000 crore,” he said.

Passenger fares

On passenger subsidy, Mr. Vaishnaw said that the cost of transporting a passenger per km was ₹1.38. However, the fare charged by Railways was only ₹0.71 per km. “This means Railways recovers only 53% of the cost, while the remaining 47% is subsidised. The total value of this subsidy amounts to ₹60,000 crore annually which is considered a social obligation,” he said.

Mr. Vaishnaw said pas-

senger fares have not been increased since 2020. “Compared to neighbouring countries, Indian railway fares are significantly lower. For example, for a 350 km journey, India (General Class) costs ₹121, while in Pakistan it is ₹436, in Bangladesh it is ₹323, and Sri Lanka it is ₹413,” he added.

The Lok Sabha later passed the Demands for Grants under the control of the Ministry of Railways for 2025-26.

Replying to concerns raised by Members of Parliament regarding discrimination against Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and West Bengal in railway infrastructure development, Mr. Vaishnaw stated that record budget allocations have been given to every State.

‘Pak. should vacate Indian territory under its illegal, forcible occupation’

Kallol Bhattacharjee
NEW DELHI

India on Tuesday hit out at Pakistan, asking it to “vacate” Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK). The External Affairs Ministry made the comment after the Pakistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs responded to Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s remarks in a podcast interview that India’s attempts to normalise relations with Pakistan had been met with “hostility and betrayal”.

Responding to Mr. Modi’s remarks, Islamabad had on Monday accused India of “fomenting terrorism in Pakistan” and of “state-sanctioned oppression” in Jammu and Kashmir.

“The world knows that



After the Second World War, the longest standing illegal occupation of a territory pertains to India – what we saw in Kashmir

S. JAISHANKAR
External Affairs Minister

Join FREE Telegram Channel <https://t.me/+Bu7senHpQdhlODg1> the real issue is Pakistan’s active promotion and sponsorship of cross-border terrorism. In fact, this is the biggest roadblock to peace and security in the region. Instead of spreading lies, Pakistan should vacate Indian territory under its illegal and forcible occupation,” the Ministry’s spokesperson, Randhir Jaiswal, said, calling upon Islamabad to withdraw from the PoK.

of a territory pertains to India – what we saw in Kashmir,” Mr. Jaishankar said, indirectly referring to the PoK while speaking at the Raisina Dialogue conference on Tuesday.

Mr. Jaishankar referred to the PoK while explaining Western policies at the UN that displayed shortcomings or contradictions in the West-dominated world order.

He also made an indirect reference to Western countries’ willingness to work with military dictatorships in Pakistan, while rejecting similar military coups in other countries citing democracy and freedom.

The Pakistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Monday said the Indian PM’s remarks were “misleading”.

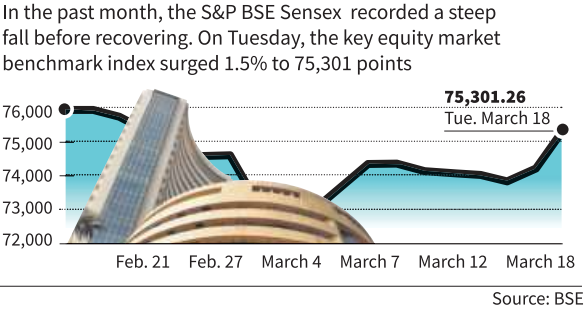
Sensex up 1.5% as auto, banks, financials rise on global cues

Broad-based buying across sectors elevated investor sentiment, pushing sectoral indices into positive territory; Nifty Media, Realty, Financial Services led the charge, each gaining more than 3%

The Hindu Bureau
MUMBAI

Key equity benchmark indices on Tuesday surged 1.5% on strong global cues and a robust rally in financial, auto, and banking stocks, analysts said. The S&P BSE Sensex gained 1,131 points, or 1.53%, to 75,301 points. The NSE Nifty-50 index too surged 326 points or 1.45% to 22,834 points. “This marks the highest one-day percentage increase [of Nifty] since February 4, 2025,” said Devarsh Vakil, head of prime research, HDFC Securities.

Fall and rise



After opening 154 points higher, Nifty maintained upward momentum throughout the trading session, finishing near the day's peak. “Broad-based buying

across all sectors elevated investor sentiment, pushing all sectoral indices into positive territory. The Nifty Media, Realty, and Financial Services sectors led the charge, each advancing by

more than 3%,” he added. NSE cash market volumes surged 18% over the previous day. The Nifty Midcap and Smallcap 100 indices outperformed benchmark Nifty, climbing 2.18% and 2.71% each. “After five consecutive sessions of negative advance-decline ratios, market breadth turned decisively positive, with BSE advance-decline ratio registering at 2.33,” he said. “Market participants will closely monitor the outcome of the upcoming U.S. Federal Reserve and Bank of Japan (BoJ) meetings in Wednesday’s session,” Bajaj Broking said.

SCIENCE

Chandrayaan-3 data says water ice easier to find on moon than believed

An instrument onboard the Vikram lander has found that the temperature at its location was 82° C and just a metre away dipped to 58° C. If the surface temperature can vary so much at metre scales, scientists have concluded there must be more areas where conditions are suitable for water ice to stabilise beneath the surface

Shreejaya Karantha

As countries like the US, China, Russia, and India develop plans for long-term stations on the moon, water available on the moon itself is emerging as a vital resource. Aside from meeting the drinking and sanitary needs of astronauts, scientists are also working on using moon water as fuel for rockets launched from the natural satellite.

In a new study, researchers from the Physical Research Laboratory (PRL) in Ahmedabad have found that the area of the moon where water ice can be easily accessed is greater than expected.

Their study aims to provide a more detailed understanding of the moon's thermal environment and ice distribution, laying the groundwork for future exploration and habitation strategies.

Data from Vikram

The first step to understand how much water there could be on the moon is to know the temperature on the surface.

Scientists also need this detail if astronauts are to withstand the moon's natural environs: moon-days are intensely hot while nights are frigidly cold, it lacks an atmosphere, and it is more threatened by deadly solar flares from the sun than the earth.

The new study marks a significant advance on this front. It is based on ground-level observations made by Chandrayaan-3, the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) mission whose Vikram lander touched down on the moon in August 2023.

A team of researchers led by PRL scientist K. Durga Prasad has uncovered insights into temperature variations on the moon's surface and at depths of up to 10 cm.

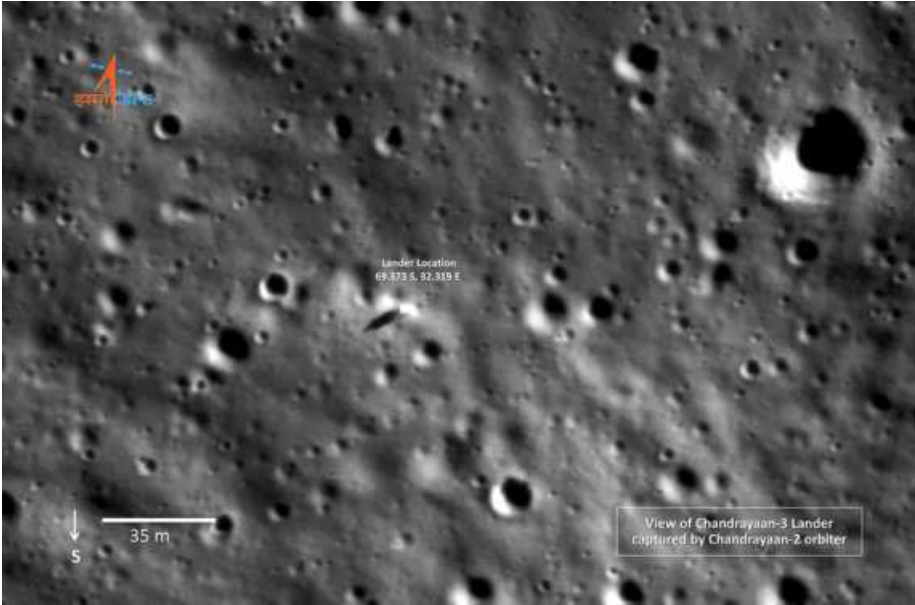
The findings were published in a March 6 paper in the journal *Communications Earth & Environment*.

Use of RTD sensors

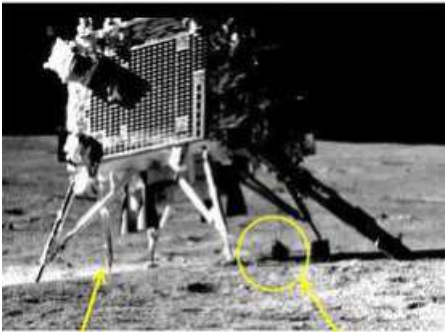
Using the Chandra's Surface Thermophysical Experiment (ChaSTE) onboard the Vikram lander, the researchers conducted an *in-situ* (directly at the site) experiment to measure the temperature of the top 10 cm of lunar regolith at 69.373° south and 32.319° east. This spot is Shiv Shakti point, where Vikram landed. It is located in the moon's south pole region.

The ChaSTE instrument is equipped with a thermal probe, which the lander deployed and penetrated into the lunar soil. According to Prasad, 10 “custom-designed platinum resistance

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This image captured by the Chandrayaan-2 orbiter shows the location of Shiv Shakti point, where the Vikram lander of the Chandrayaan-3 mission descended, and the surrounding terrain. The position of the sun is revealed by the orientation of the shadows. ISRO
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This image collage shows the location of the ChaSTE instrument onboard the Vikram lander. The lander was photographed by the Pragyan rover. ISRO

temperature detector (RTD) sensors with very high accuracy in the entire range of measurement” are mounted on the ChaSTE probe. RTDs are a type of temperature sensor that measure temperature by detecting changes in electrical resistance.

The team used ChaSTE to acquire RTD signals and convert them into digital data.

The team collected temperature data from ChaSTE for approximately 10 earth days, from August 24 to September 2, 2023, which is about eight hours of a lunar day. The diurnal lunar temperature values, i.e., the range between day and night, were obtained using an established 3D thermophysical model developed by PRL, Prasad added.

The ground truth

The team found the peak surface



This becomes an interesting finding as exploration of high latitude regions is less technically challenging than that of lunar poles, an important aspect for future *in-situ* exploration and human activities on the moon

temperature at the site to be 82° C. Prasad said, “The *in-situ* temperature profile itself was surprising” because it recorded higher temperatures than those predicted by the Diviner instrument onboard NASA's Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter (LRO).

The temperature was also found to drop drastically to roughly -181° C at night. “It was exciting to know that actual surface temperature at high latitude locations can go to both high and low extremes,” Prasad said.

Higher latitude regions are those located farther from the equator.

He added that a large temperature difference observed between day and night means the lunar surface could harbour unique thermophysical properties.

Significant change

The team attributed the higher-than-expected daytime temperature to the sun-facing slope of the location. But it was still intrigued enough to investigate the temperature at points that were sloped in other directions.

Due to their higher exposure to the

sun, water is not likely to be found in the sun-facing slopes.

To investigate lunar temperatures at different locations with different orientations, the team built a model based on the ChaSTE measurements. They found that the surface temperature at a flat site around a metre away from the ChaSTE instrument's position was 58.85° C. This value agreed with orbiter-based remote-sensing observations.

That the temperature at Shiv Shakti point was 82° C and just a metre away dipped to 58° C implied lunar surface temperatures vary significantly at metre scales. Further investigations by the team showed that larger slopes that faced away from the sun and had a tilt of more than 14° could maintain lower temperatures, creating conditions suitable for water ice to migrate and stabilise beneath the surface.

In other words, since water ice can exist within the shallow subsurface at certain high latitudes as well, the team's findings indicate the resource can be accessed from more places on the moon than previously believed.

First of its kind

The study presents the first *in-situ* measurements of temperature at a high latitude region on the moon, offering accurate data on surface and near-surface temperatures close to the polar regions, according to Prasad.

Scientists previously thought water ice existed in stable quantities only at the moon's poles. The study has shown that certain higher latitude locations may provide a similar environment as near the poles for water ice to accumulate at shallow depths.

“This becomes an interesting finding as exploration of high latitude regions is less technically challenging than that of lunar poles, an important aspect for future *in-situ* exploration and human activities on the moon,” Prasad said.

Based on the temperature profiles obtained from ChaSTE measurements, the team is currently studying the thermophysical properties of the lunar surface, including how it affects lunar temperatures. Through this, Prasad said, they can “model the migration and stability of the water ice for other different representative locations on the moon.”

This can lead to a comprehensive understanding of the moon's thermophysics and its near-surface and sub-surface water-ice distribution.

(Shreejaya Karantha is a freelance science writer and a content writer and research specialist at The Secrets of The Universe. shreejayakaranth@gmail.com)

THE GIST

Water on the moon is emerging as a vital resource. Aside from drinking and sanitary needs of astronauts, scientists are also working on using moon water as fuel for rockets launched from the natural satellite

Understanding how much water there is on the moon requires knowledge of the temperature. Scientists also need this information to help astronauts withstand the moon's environs: moon-days are intensely hot while nights are frigidly cold

Temperature was found to drop to roughly -181° C at night. ‘A large temperature difference observed between day and night means the lunar surface could harbour unique thermophysical properties’

Scientists thought water ice existed in stable quantities only at the poles. The study shows that certain higher latitude locations may provide a similar environment as near the poles for water ice to accumulate at shallow depths

BIG SHOT



Crocodiles, mostly rescued after encounters with people, inside an enclosure in Budong-Budong, West Sulawesi, Indonesia, on February 24. With crocodile attacks on the rise in the province, where the Budong-Budong River meets the sea, people are learning to coexist with the protected animals as they balance conservation with their own safety. AP

QUESTION CORNER

Pockets of insulated sound



Q. What are audible enclaves?

Audible enclaves are small pockets of sound that

are not disturbed by surrounding noise. They are produced by new technologies designed to deliver sounds that only one specific person can hear, even if they are in a crowd.

Sound consists of waves moving through a medium, moving the medium's particles back and forth. How fast this back-and-forth motion happens determines the sound's frequency. The faster they move, the higher the frequency of the sound. When sound waves are emitted from a source, like a speaker, they diverge as they pass through the air in a phenomenon called diffraction. Higher frequency sounds diverge more. Devices called parametric array loudspeakers are still able to create focused 'beams' of sound. They emit high-frequency waves modulated with an audio signal. As the waves travel through the air, they self-demodulate to produce a



When sound waves are emitted from a source, like a speaker, they diverge as they pass through the air in a phenomenon called diffraction. DESMOND LIAN/UNSPLASH

sound wave confined in a narrow beam, audible only to those in the beam's path.

Audible enclaves go a step further. In a study published on March 17 in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*, researchers in the US reported doing this by using two high-frequency waves of different frequencies. They are inaudible in this form. But when they intersect, non-linear interactions cause them to produce a sound wave at that spot, audible only to people nearby.

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