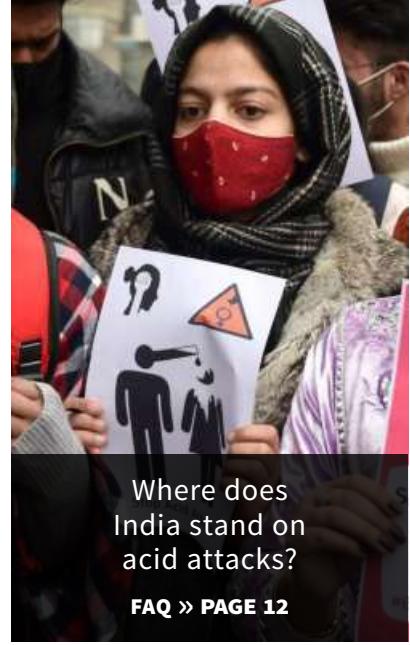
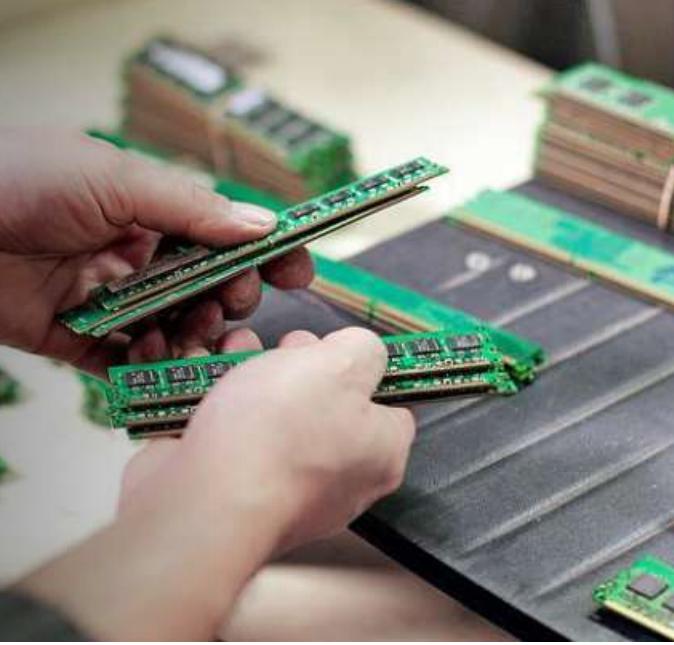


LOOMING CRISIS

Global chip crunch signs start to show in India

Prices of RAM sticks, SSDs surges with little precedent as AI hyper scalers crowd out supply chain globally

BUSINESS » PAGE 10



Gill to lead the Men in Blue in ODIs against New Zealand

SPORT » PAGE 15

IN BRIEF



SEC orders probe into 'unopposed wins' in civic polls

MUMBAI
The Maharashtra State Election Commission (SEC) has ordered a probe into reports of a large number of candidates in the municipal corporation polls winning unopposed. » Page 4

H.P. student's death: assistant prof. suspended

CHANDIGARH
The Himachal Pradesh government has suspended an assistant professor after he was booked for sexual harassment of a Dalit student, who died last month. » Page 7

CLASSIFIEDS » PAGE 5
MAGAZINE » 8 PAGES

U.S. forces capture Maduro after strikes on Venezuela

President of the South American nation, his wife aboard a U.S. warship headed to New York to be prosecuted, says President Trump; U.S. deciding next steps for the oil-rich country, he says

Associated Press
CARACAS

The United States captured Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and took him out of the country on Saturday after an extraordinary nighttime operation that was accompanied by a flurry of strikes following months of escalating pressure on the oil-rich South American nation.

The U.S. is now deciding next steps for Venezuela, President Donald Trump said on Saturday, adding: "We'll be involved in it very much."

The legal authority for the attack was not imme-



Shock move: Members of Venezuela's National Guard stand guard at a military complex in Caracas on Saturday. AFP

dately clear. The stunning military action, which plucked a nation's sitting leader from office, echoed the U.S. invasion of Panama that led to the surren-

der and seizure of its leader, Manuel Antonio Noriega, in 1990.

Mr. Trump said Mr. Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores, were aboard the

U.S. warship *Iwo Jima* and headed to New York, where they will face prosecution. U.S. Attorney-General Pam Bondi said the couple would "soon face the full wrath of American justice on American soil".

Vice-President Delcy Rodriguez would take power under Venezuelan law in Mr. Maduro's absence. There was no confirmation that had happened, though she did issue a statement after the strike, demanding proof of life for Mr. Maduro and his wife.

CONTINUED ON
» PAGE 7
MORE REPORTS ON
» PAGES 13 & 14

Bangladeshi pacer dropped from KKR on BCCI instructions

Kallol Bhattacharjee
NEW DELHI



Mustafizur Rahman and consultations, on the instructions of BCCI," said the KKR in a press note.

The move has triggered strong reactions from multiple quarters, with one Bangladeshi newspaper announcing it would boycott all IPL-related coverage.

CONTINUED ON
» PAGE 7

Hindu man dies 3 days after attack in Bangladesh

Press Trust of India
DHAKA/NEW DELHI

A Hindu businessman, who was hacked and set on fire three days ago, died on Saturday in Bangladesh, a minority faith group leader said.

Khokon Chandra Das, 50, was assaulted near Keurbanga Bazar in Shariatpur district, about 100 km south of Dhaka, on Wednesday night while returning home after closing his shop. This is the fifth death of a person from the Hindu community since December 2025, and radical groups in Bangladesh are visibly trying to intimidate the minority faiths,

Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council spokesman Kajol Deb Nath said.

14 Maoists killed in encounters in Bastar

Shubhomoy Sikdar
RAIPUR

At least 14 Maoists, including six women, were killed in two separate encounters in Sukma and Bijapur districts of Chhattisgarh on Saturday, the police said.

Two commanders, each carrying a reward of ₹5 lakh, are among the dead.

A senior police officer said that based on credible information about the presence of armed Maoists in the southern areas of the two districts, security forces launched simultaneous operations during which 12 Maoists were neutralised in Sukma and two in Bijapur. Both districts fall in the Bastar region.

Chief Minister Vishnu

Deo Sai called the twin operations a "decisive success".

Noting that the Maoist network was collapsing, Mr. Sai wrote on X: "Our government's message is clear: those who still choose the path of violence should surrender, adopt a rehabilitation policy, and return to the mainstream with honour. Otherwise, the government and security forces are fully capable of fulfilling their responsibilities."

Inspector-General of Police (Bastar Range) P. Sundarraj said Maoism was breathing its last in the Bastar region.

CONTINUED ON
» PAGE 7

Bull run



Straining at the leash: Youth jostle to grip a bull during the first jallikattu (bull-taming sport) of the season at Thatchankurichi village in Pudukkottai district of Tamil Nadu on Saturday. Jallikattu is a major attraction with bulls being trained for months together. R. VENGADESH

Kerala MLA sentenced to 3 years in prison for 'evidence tampering'

The Hindu Bureau
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

In a setback to former Kerala Transport Minister and ruling Left Democratic Front (LDF) legislator Antony Raju, a court in Thiruvananthapuram on Saturday sentenced him to three years' imprisonment for tampering with evidence related to a drug seizure case.

The Judicial First Class Magistrate Court, Nedumangadu, on Saturday found him guilty of forging and planting material evidence following the drug seizure case booked in 1990.

Although Mr. Raju, a leader of the Janadhipathya Kerala Congress, an LDF ally, was granted bail and one month's time to appeal against the verdict, he will be disqualified as an MLA on account of his conviction.

Under the Representation of the People Act, membership of the Legislative Assembly will be terminated if a court sentences a member to two years' imprisonment or more.

The verdict comes 19 years after the chargesheet was filed against him. Mr. Raju was a junior lawyer appearing in the 1990 drug case involving an Australian national, Andrew Salvatore. It was alleged that Mr. Raju tampered with the Australian national's undergarment, which was seized as material evidence. An FIR was filed in the evidence tampering case in 1994.

The court sentenced the



Antony Raju first accused in the case, court clerk K.S. Jose, and Mr. Raju to six months' imprisonment for criminal conspiracy, three years and a fine of ₹10,000 for destruction of evidence, and three years for fabricating false evidence. All sentences will run concurrently, the judge stated in the order. The court also rejected the prosecution's request to shift the case to the Chief Judicial Magistrate (CJM) court.

Slew of charges
The court found both the accused guilty of offences under Sections 120B (criminal conspiracy), 201 (causing disappearance of evidence), 193 (fabricating false evidence), 409 (criminal breach of trust by a public servant), and 34 (acts done by several persons in furtherance of common intention) of the Indian Penal Code (IPC). They were also slapped with a penalty of ₹10,000 each. A fine of ₹5,000 and one-year imprisonment was additionally slapped on first accused Jose under Section 409 of IPC.

T.N. announces assured pension scheme for State govt. staff

N. Sai Charan
CHENNAI

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin on Saturday announced the new Tamil Nadu Assured Pension Scheme (TAPS) for State government employees. Under the new arrangement, State government employees will be provided with an assured pension equal to 50% of their last-drawn basic pay.

The State government made the announcement after taking into consideration a report submitted recently to the Chief Minister by a three-member Pension Committee headed by Additional Chief Secretary (Rural Development and Panchayat Raj) Gagandeep

Singh Bedi, which studied various pension schemes and arrived at a suitable model for Tamil Nadu.

Under TAPS, employees will have to contribute 10% of their basic pay to the pension fund, while the additional fund required to provide the assured pension will be borne by the State government.

Pensioners will be given dearness allowance (DA) hikes twice a year on a par with serving government employees. In the event of death of a pensioner, 60% of the pension being received by the pensioner will be paid as family pension to the nominated beneficiary. At the time of retirement or in the event of death during service, go-

T.N.'s assurance

The Tamil Nadu Assured Pension Scheme is set to provide State government employees with an assured pension equal to 50% of their last-drawn basic pay

SOME KEY FEATURES OF THE SCHEME:

- 10% employee contribution to pension fund
- Additional funding to be borne by State government
- Dearness Allowance hike twice a year, on par with
- 60% family pension to nominee after pensioner's death
- Gratuity up to ₹25 lakh on retirement or death in service



As Tamil Nadu's financial position strengthens, the demands of all sections of society will be fulfilled

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister

the Contributory Pension Scheme without drawing a pension in the intervening period before the implementation of TAPS will be granted a "special compassionate pension".

State's contribution

With the introduction of TAPS, the Tamil Nadu government will have to incur an additional expenditure of ₹13,000 crore towards pension funds. In addition, the State will have to contribute approximately ₹11,000 crore every year as its annual contribution, an amount that is likely to increase based on the salary of employees.

Before making the announcement, Mr. Stalin held discussions with Mi-

nister for Public Works E.V. Velu, Minister for Finance Thangam Thennarasu, Minister for School Education Anbil Mahesh Poyyamozhi, Chief Secretary N. Muruganandam, and Additional Chief Secretary (Finance) T. Udhayachandran at the Secretariat.

Later, in a post on X, the Chief Minister said, "The Dravidian model government has fulfilled a 20-year-long demand of the government employees through TAPS. It has once again been demonstrated that the DMK government will always remain true to the people who placed their trust in us."

CONTINUED ON
» PAGE 7

SPOTLIGHT



Medha School in Bowenpally, Secunderabad — a familiar neighbourhood scene of traffic, vendors and people going about their daily routine, concealing an illicit operation that thrived in plain sight. RAMAKRISHNA G.

Illicit business behind an ordinary facade

From a school building in Bowenpally to a chemical unit in Cherlapalli, narcotics operations functioned undisturbed for months and years in different parts of Hyderabad, shielded by familiarity and public trust. This strategy of hiding in plain sight, according to investigators, blunts suspicion, delays intelligence gathering and allows criminal economies to expand quietly. **Naveen Kumar** delves into the networks, methods and audacity of these hidden hubs

Nothing about the lane outside Medha School in Bowenpally suggests that it should be remembered for anything more than the daily school rush. Located on the northwest fringe of Secunderabad, it is narrow, noisy and deeply ordinary. Auto rickshaws idle impatiently in the mornings, vendors selling stationery and snacks hover near the gate and parents linger long enough to ensure their children disappear safely inside the campus. The school building itself rises without drama, a functional concrete structure that blends seamlessly into a neighbourhood shaped by small businesses, rented houses and steady footfall. Nothing about it hints at secrecy. And that, investigators now believe, was precisely the point.

For nearly nine months, while classes were being taught for classes 1 to 10, parts of this same building were being used to manufacture alprazolam, a psychotropic drug that feeds addiction far beyond the lanes of Bowenpally. The facade finally collapsed on September 13 last year, when officers of Telangana's Elite Action Group for Drug Law Enforcement (EAGLE) raided the premises and uncovered a clandestine drug lab operating within the school.

Inside, police seized 3.4 kilograms of finished alprazolam, 4.3 kilograms of unfinished product and ₹21 lakh in cash. Investigators say the money reflected proceeds from just two days of sales. The accused was identified as Malela Jaya Prakash Goud, 39, a resident of Old Bowenpally and director of Medha School. According to investigators, Goud had been running the operation for months, deliberately using the school as a shield against scrutiny.

The building, officers say, had been meticulously compartmentalised to sustain the deception. The cellar housed classrooms, where children sat on benches reciting lessons. The ground floor had a bank, adding another layer of legitimacy and steady public presence. Parts of the first floor were also used for teaching. The rear portion of the structure, however, remained under Goud's exclusive control. "That is where the drug lab was set up. The second floor, which earlier served as a gym, remained locked and largely off limits," says an officer.

That physical separation, he says, ensured the operation ran without raising alarm. "Schools often have restricted areas. Locked rooms don't raise questions. He used that to his advan-

age," the officer adds.

When everything appears routine, suspicion fades, intelligence dries up and the drug trade gets breathing space. Cracking down in such situations takes time, patience and often a bit of luck.

A SENIOR POLICE OFFICER

Across the road, a middle-aged shopkeeper who sells notebooks, pens and school bags leans against his counter, still struggling to process the goings-on. He has been there for over a decade, watching batches of children grow taller and move on. "We did see boxes going in and out sometimes," he says, lowering his voice despite the street's constant din. "But every school has supplies — furniture, exam papers, computers. Who would even think of drugs?"

He recalls delivery vehicles arriving at odd hours, sometimes late in the evening. "They weren't secretive. That is what fooled everyone. If someone is hiding something, they act nervous. Here, everything looked normal. Too normal."

A parent who lives two lanes away says the revelation unsettled him in ways he struggles to articulate. "You drop your child at the gate and assume that inside, everything is controlled. Your worries stop at studies. You don't imagine chemicals and drugs," he says, requesting anonymity.

Investigators say Goud supplied the alprazolam to known contacts in Boothpur in Mahabubnagar district. His background, they found, lay far from education. He earlier operated a toddy shop in Mahabubnagar and had paid ₹2 lakh to one Guruva Reddy to obtain the manufacturing formula. Employees assisted in running the operation, and police have identified several chemical suppliers linked to the racket.

As the probe widened, officers say they identified 35 accused connected to the case and have arrested seven so far. Several have approached courts seeking bail and anticipatory bail. The EAGLE Force of Telangana is opposing these pleas, citing the commercial quantity involved.

"Under Section 36A(4) of the NDPS Act, bail cannot be granted for a minimum of 180 days in such cases, which can be extended by another 180 days if the investigation is ongoing. The case



The Medha School in Bowenpally, standing as an emblem of normalcy in a case where appearances proved deeply misleading. RAMAKRISHNA G.

is still under investigation and more arrests are likely," says Sandeep Shandilya, director of EAGLE-Telangana.

For residents living around Medha School, the aftermath has been unsettling, to say the least. The gate still opens each morning, but conversations stretch longer than before. Parents now look at the building differently. The familiarity, that was once reassuring, has begun to feel deceptive.

In 2025, the EAGLE Force, formerly the Telangana Anti-Narcotics Bureau, recorded its most aggressive year of enforcement since its inception, targeting both street-level supply chains and organised interstate and international drug networks. Operations extended across Telangana and multiple States, involving coordinated action with Central agencies, police forces and financial intelligence units.

Across Telangana, 2,542 NDPS cases were registered up to November 30 last year, involving 8,322 accused. Drugs worth ₹172.93 crore were seized, including consignments intercepted during inter-State operations and handed over to agencies in Goa, Maharashtra, Delhi and Ranchi.

The average number of accused per case stood at just over three, indicating a shift towards dismantling distribution networks rather than making isolated arrests.

Just days later, in Cherlapalli, about 14 kilometres north of Bowenpally, another discovery startled the local law enforcement. Hyderabad's drug trade, they realised, was not hiding in abandoned buildings or dark alleys; it was thriving in places engineered to appear legitimate.

The Cherlapalli industrial area sprawls across the city's eastern edge, wide and dusty, a dense patchwork of warehouses, chemical units and transport offices stitched together by narrow roads and routine. It is a zone built on movement. Tankers thunder past, carrying liquids few can pronounce. Workers clock in and out at irregular hours. Activity rarely pauses long enough to draw attention.

Vagdevi Laboratories fit neatly into this landscape. From the outside, it looked no different from its neighbouring units. Its walls were plain, its signboard modest. Trucks rolled in and out. Labourers arrived with lunch boxes slung over their shoulders. It was, by all outward measures, a functioning chemical factory.

At a small stall a few metres away, a man in his mid-50s pours countless glasses of tea every day. He knows the rhythms of the area intimately. "This place never sleeps," he says, wiping his hands on a cloth. "Some factories work day and night. So when vehicles move at strange hours, nobody notices."

Shipments from Vagdevi Laboratories, he says, appeared routine. "Tankers, cartons, chemicals... this is Cherlapalli. That is normal." What briefly caught his eye were the cars. "You would see fancy cars, coming fast and leaving fast; not what you expect for a small unit. But even then, you think maybe the owner is rich."

Behind those walls, investigators allege, operated a large scale mephedrone manufacturing unit that had been running quietly for years. The case came to light far from Cherlapalli.

Bus stop bust to global supply line

About a month before the raid, on August 8, Maharashtra police arrested Fatima Murad Shaikh, alias Molla, 23, at the Kashimira bus stop on Mira Road in Thane district. She was found with 178 grams of mephedrone and ₹23.97 lakh in cash. During questioning, she told investigators her

source was based in Telangana.

That disclosure triggered a chain of events that brought the Mira Bhayandar-Vasai Virar Crime Branch to Hyderabad. Officers arrived quietly, placed Vagdevi Laboratories under surveillance and began tracking patterns. When they raided the premises on September 5, their suspicions were confirmed.

Inside the unit, police recovered nearly 5.8 kilograms of finished mephedrone, 35,500 litres of precursor chemicals, 950 kilograms of chemical powder and specialised manufacturing equipment. An officer involved in the probe says the volume of precursor alone could have yielded around 6,000 kilograms of mephedrone. At an estimated international market price of ₹20,000 per gram, the potential output was valued at nearly ₹12,000 crore.

The prime accused, Srinivas Vijay Voleti, 34, owner of Vagdevi Laboratories Pvt Ltd, was taken into custody along with the firm's chemical analyst, Tanaji. During questioning, Voleti allegedly admitted to manufacturing and selling mephedrone since 2020, supplying markets in cities such as Mumbai and to buyers in Dubai and parts of Europe. Officers described him as tech savvy and highly cautious, avoiding mainstream communication platforms and relying instead on less-known applications.

Laboratory analysis conducted in Mumbai confirmed the seized substance as a scheduled chemical. Investigators say synthetic drug manufacturers across southern India have increasingly shifted towards compounds such as 3-Chloromethacathinone (3 CMC), underlining how quickly these networks adapt to enforcement pressure. Agencies including the Narcotics Control Bureau, air cargo operators and international counterparts have been alerted as police work towards tracing overseas buyers.

The Cherlapalli probe also intersected with the life and death of Azim Abu Salem Khan, 51, a history-sheeter wanted in multiple narcotics cases. Khan was tracked to a flat in Pune's Kondhwa area in October. When officers attempted to arrest him, he allegedly resisted, bit a constable and collapsed within minutes. He was declared dead on arrival at a hospital. An autopsy later pointed to head injuries and coronary atherosclerosis, and the State CID took over the probe as per protocol. Police said Khan had been a drug addict for over a decade and a heart patient for several years.

Investigators allege Khan was a key link in a larger trafficking network that connected manufacturing units, couriers and money handlers. His name also surfaced in parallel financial investigations.

In November, during an operation in Goa, the EAGLE Force busted a Nigerian cartel, seizing consignments worth ₹2.85 crore and uncovering a hawala network involving transactions linked to ₹65 lakh. Raids across multiple States led to the arrest of 20 hawala operators and the seizure of ₹3.08 crore. Police said drug proceeds were routed abroad through the purchase of goods shipped via cargo services.

At the tail end of the investigation, a senior officer sums up the challenge bluntly: "What makes cases like these so difficult is that nothing looks criminal at first glance — a school, a factory, a business operating in full public view. These are fronts hiding in plain sight, and that is what complicates enforcement. When everything appears routine, suspicion fades, intelligence dries up and the drug trade gets breathing space. Cracking down in such situations takes time, patience and often a bit of luck. By the time we see through the facade, the damage is already widespread."

That sense of ordinariness, officers say, is the most effective camouflage of all. When drugs operate behind school bells and factory sirens, detection becomes harder and the consequences stretch far beyond the places that first appear untouched.

Timings	
KOLKATA	
SUNDAY, JAN. 04	
RISE 06:17 SET 17:06	
RISE 18:08 SET 07:07	
MONDAY, JAN. 05	
RISE 06:18 SET 17:06	
RISE 19:14 SET 07:57	
TUESDAY, JAN. 06	
RISE 06:18 SET 17:07	
RISE 20:16 SET 08:40	

Kolkata Weather	max	min
Ranchi	23	12
Imphal	23	08
Kolkata	24	13

Kolkata Today
24°C The weather will be dry. Morning will be very cool with fog and mist. Day will be pleasant. Night will be very cool with haze and mist.

Kolkata Tomorrow
23°C Morning will be very cool with fog and mist. Day will be pleasant. Night also will be very cool. Dry weather to occur.

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CMYK

A CA-CAE

INBRIEF



4 accused in Zubeen Garg's death case file bail petitions

Four accused in singer Zubeen Garg's death case filed bail petitions before the court on Saturday. The Kamrup (Metro) District and Sessions Court, which is hearing the case, fixed January 17 as the next date of hearing when the bail objection by the public prosecutor will be filed. The bail pleas were moved by Garg's band member Amritprava Mahanta, his cousin Sandipan Garg, a police officer, and his two personal security officers, Nandeshwar Bora and Prabin Baishya. The singer-composer-actor had died on September 19 while swimming in the sea in Singapore, where he had gone to attend the Northeast Festival. PTI

Core library for minerals to be set up in Rajasthan

A state-of-the-art core library will be established in Rajasthan for the minerals obtained during drilling in the mines and geology sector. The modern library equipped with advanced resources will ensure scientific preservation of the available core samples and help in the mineral exploration. Principal Secretary (Mines and Geology) T. Ravikanth said on Saturday that the core library would use the latest technology for analysis of cores obtained as intact sections of rock, soil and sediment extracted from the subsurface. The exercise will help in the assessment of composition, structure and potential economic viability of mineral deposits.

Gandhinagar typhoid surge: 100 hospitalised

Press Trust of India
GANDHINAGAR

Gujarat Deputy Chief Minister Harsh Sanghavi on Saturday reviewed the situation at the Gandhinagar Civil Hospital after 104 patients, including children, were admitted with suspected typhoid.

Mr. Sanghavi said senior officials, including the Deputy Collector, were asked to assess the situation. Arrangements for food and other facilities have also been made for the families of admitted patients. A

team of 22 doctors has been constituted to treat the patients, he added.

Union Home Minister Amit Shah has discussed the situation with the District Collector thrice and will review the developments again in the evening, Mr. Sanghavi added.

Civil Hospital Medical Superintendent Mita Parikh said water samples have been collected from the affected areas, and reports show the water is unsafe. Officials have started a door-to-door survey in the affected sectors.

In India's 'cleanest city' Indore, trust in municipal tap water runs dry

Press Trust of India
INDORE

rathpura, which has a large population from low and middle-income groups. The death figures, however, vary. While Indore Mayor Pushyamitra Bhargava had said on Friday that he had information about 10 patient deaths linked to the outbreak, residents put the figure at 16, including that of a six-month-old child.

"We are now scared of drinking water from municipal taps. We need proof that the water is clean, only then will we drink it. My family is currently buying drinking water jars from the market, paying between ₹20 and ₹30 per jar,"



A man drinks water from a tanker amid a contaminated water crisis at the Bhagirathpura area in Indore on Saturday. PTI

Sunita, a resident of Marathi Mohalla, said on Saturday.

She claimed the area was getting "dirty water" from

taps for the past two to three years, but no one listened to the complaints of residents.

"For a long time now, we

have been adding alum (sulphate salt used for water purification) and also boiling water before drinking," Ms. Sunita added.

Such is the level of distrust in a city that has often been lauded for its cleanliness that stall owners are using bottled water to make tea to reassure customers of safety.

Indore has been recognised as India's "cleanest city" for multiple consecutive years, most recently for the eighth time in the Swachh Survekshan 2024-25 survey.

Meanwhile, around 45 Madhya Pradesh Congress

functionaries were detained on Saturday as a "precautionary measure" after a clash with ruling Bharatiya Janata Party workers when a fact-finding committee of the Opposition party was at the Bhagirathpura area.

'Dirty politics'
Congress leaders alleged the police acted at the behest of the ruling BJP and prevented the fact-finding team from meeting the affected families. This was rejected by BJP leaders who said the Congress was indulging in "dirty politics" over the water tragedy.

SPOTLIGHT

Vinaya Deshpande Pandit

On July 6, 2025, Maharashtra Navnirman Sena chief Raj Thackeray got front page space in *Saamana*, the Shiv Sena (UBT) mouthpiece. Showing the two cousins Uddhav and Raj arm-in-arm, the strap above the masthead of the broadsheet blared, "Historic! Joy in entire Maharashtra!" said the headlines. At the time, they had not formally announced their coming together.

The front page was dedicated to stories of the show of unity by the cousins, their appeal to Marathi people, and how the reunification is slated to impact the state. "We have come together to stay together!", "Thackerays have stood for mother Marathi!" said the headlines. At the time, they had not formally announced their coming together.

The previous day, the duo had met at the Worli Dome, a theatre-in-the-round, when they decided to mark the day as Marathi Vijay Diwas, to commemorate the Maharashtra government's withdrawal of the three-language policy in primary education, which would have forced children to learn Hindi.

Sanjay Raut, a Shiv Sena (UBT) leader, and common friend of the Thackerays, who played a significant role in bringing them back

together, says, "It was a moment the Marathi *manoos* (people) had been waiting for. The Thackerays should unite for Marathi, for Mumbai, for Maharashtra; is the sentiment among several Marathi households. That dream has been fulfilled." He called it an emotional moment in a break-up from two decades ago.

On Christmas Eve 2025, the cousins announced an electoral alliance between the Shiv Sena (UBT) and the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) for the January 15 municipal corporation elections. While these are to be fought in 29 cities, the cousins have primarily joined hands for Mumbai, Mumbai Metropolitan Region, and Nashik, in what is being seen as a battle for survival.

At the press briefing to announce their political alliance, the family turned up. Rashmi Uddhav Thackeray and Sharmila Raj Thackeray sat next to each other, on chairs next to the stage.

The family saga spanning three generations has all the masala of a Bollywood blockbuster: family drama, high emotion, suspense, distrust, and action. Based in Mumbai, the plot starts in erstwhile Bombay, 60 years ago, with the formation of a political party and a larger-than-life ideology. The charismatic Balasaheb Thackeray, who

built the Shiv Sena in 1966, on a 'sons of the soil' plank, had Bombay renamed to Mumbai, after the goddess Mumadevi.

Parivar, party, and the quest for power

The Thackeray cousins, whose acrimonious split two decades ago had led to a change in the dynamics of regional politics in Maharashtra, have reunited. Their combining forces on the 60-year-old Marathi *manoos* plank is significant against the backdrop of the upcoming civic polls



MNS chief Raj Thackeray and Shiv Sena (UBT) chief Uddhav Thackeray at an event in 2025. EMMANUEL YOGINI

by 'outsiders'. They talked of how these powers wanted to break Mumbai away from Maharashtra. The script was similar to Balasaheb's appeal during the formation of Shiv Sena amid what he pushed as the growing threat of livelihood and cultural identity loss for Maharashtra. The Marathi *manoos* plank unites people on linguistics rather than religion.

Rough estimates by political parties have put Mumbai's Marathi-speaking population at over 30%, in tandem with the 2011 Census.

The cousins did not field many questions about the alliance for the January 15 local-body elections. "Who will fight on how many seats, we will not tell you," Raj said, to a packed hall of journalists at a hotel on the

Worli promenade. The crowd cracked up.

Of particular importance to the Shiv Sena (UBT) is the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) election. Traditionally, the Thackerays have controlled the BMC, the country's richest civic body. Things changed in 2017, when the BJP got just two seats less than the Shiv Sena. The polls to BMC have been pending since 2022.

Sources say that in the BMC elections, Uddhav's party would contest 163 seats, Raj's on 53, of the 227 seats. Sharad Pawar's NCP, that has been with Uddhav, is also in the seat-sharing, with 11.

"They had wanted a respectable seat share. Our position is also challenging as we have sitting corporators at several of these places. But Uddhavji has decided that he will adjust," says a leader from the Shiv Sena (UBT).

"Raj saheb has told the party cadres, they should not stretch things. We are willing to compromise," an MNS leader says. A total of 2,869 corporators will be elected in these polls, the results of which will be declared on January 16.

The break-up years
Raj was seen to have inherited the aura and the oratory appeal of Balasaheb, his uncle. Uddhav, Balasaheb's son, was known as

the quiet organisation man who built discipline in the party. In 2003, Raj had supported Uddhav's name as the party's working president in Mahabaleshwar, despite growing tension between the cousins. This was a year after Balasaheb had named Uddhav as the executive president.

In 2005, Raj left the Shiv Sena after an acrimonious public fallout, when he called a press conference to announce his resignation, saying in an emotionally wrought voice, "All I asked for was respect.... All I got was insult and humiliation."

Most of the old leaders had stayed with Balasaheb and Uddhav, and a handful went with Raj. The following year, Raj founded the Navnirman Sena. In 2014, after a fallout between the Shiv Sena and the BJP, there were murmurs again, but Raj had then blamed Uddhav for failing to respond. In 2022, Eknath Shinde split from Uddhav, taking 40 MLAs to form the government with the BJP.

Uddhav and Raj have often traded barbs over the style of functioning, leadership qualities, and ideological strength.

From the first quarter of 2025 though, something changed. They said in separate public appearances that they were willing to put their problems aside 'in the interest of Maharashtra'.

tra'. With a BJP coalition now in power in Maharashtra, the statement came amid dwindling political fortunes for both.

In the first two phases of city local body elections last month, the Shiv Sena UBT got presidents elected on nine of the 288 municipal councils and Nagar panchayats. "We don't give importance to the elections fought with such money power. We had left these polls to our local cadres," says Raut.

On the last day for the withdrawal of candidature for the civic polls, January 2, Shiv Sena (UBT) MLA Aaditya Thackeray, Uddhav's son; and the MNS' Amit Thackeray, Raj's son, held a joint workshop for potential corporators. Their main campaign pitch is to be ₹1,500 monthly assistance for registered women domestic workers. They also announced support for the women of the Koli fishing community and relief on property tax.

The following day, 68 candidates in the Maharashtra civic polls from the Mahayati alliance – the BJP, Shiv Sena (Shinde faction), NCP (Ajit Pawar faction) – are unopposed. This has united the Opposition, including the cousins. Now, both Shiv Sena factions and the MNS are fighting for the same pie.

vinaya.deshpande@the-hindu.co.in

SEC orders probe into 'unopposed victories' in Maharashtra civic polls

Will check if other candidates withdrew under duress, says poll official; Oppn. claims candidatures were withdrawn due to threats; such large-scale withdrawals unheard of in 50 years: Londhe Patil

Vinaya Deshpande Pandit
ASHOKAMITHRAN T.

MUMBAI

The Maharashtra State Election Commission (SEC) has ordered a probe into reports of a large number of candidates in the municipal corporation elections winning unopposed.

Polling for 2,869 corporators in 29 municipal corporations, including the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC), will take place on January 15 and votes will be counted the following day.

"We have asked all the local authorities to submit a report to us. This is part of the routine process whenever other candidates withdraw nominations and only one candidate remains in the fray," an official of the SEC told *The Hindu*. He said the SEC will check whether nominations were withdrawn under duress or as a result of any allurement.

Hinting that results in such wards might be de-



Campaign mode: Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis at an election rally in Sangli, Maharashtra, on Saturday. PTI

layed, the official added that there was no deadline for the submission of these reports. "There is no deadline. The report can be submitted after January 16 as well. We will not declare the official results till these reports are submitted to us," he said.

Earlier in the day, Opposition parties, including the Shiv Sena (UBT) and the Congress, alleged that bribery and threats using Central agencies led to candidates in as many as 68 seats withdrawing their

candidatures, clearing the way for Mahayati candidates to win unopposed.

Though official data on such victories are not yet available, media reports have pegged the figure at over 60. "We do not yet have the official figure as the Returning Officers or Commissioners have not yet submitted their final report. We will come to know how many such cases have occurred, only once we get the reports," the official said.

"He (Ajit Pawar) should come back to Sharad Pawar. Now that he has allied in the Pune and Pimpri Chinchwad, he should leave the BJP-led government and merge with the NCP (with the original NCP)," Mr. Raut remarked.

"We have been proactive in forming a committee and met Chief Minister M.K. Stalin at his office a month ago. We are waiting and hopeful that DMK will take a decision. We are confident that they will close the issue at the earliest. We have a long-standing relationship with the DMK. Our tradition is that we conclude alliance negotiations for Tamil Nadu and Puducherry together," he said. When asked if the Congress was pushing for the sharing of power as a precondition for the alliance, Mr. Chodankar asked, "Will any political party say no to power [be-

Hopeful of DMK sealing seat-sharing deal soon: T.N. Cong.

The Hindu Bureau
CHENNAI



Girish Chodankar, All India Congress Committee in-charge of Tamil Nadu and Puducherry, on Saturday said the Congress was hopeful that the DMK would conclude the seat-sharing negotiations at the earliest.

Addressing a press conference at Sathyamurthy Bhavan here, Mr. Chodankar, said that Congress has been proactive in pursuing an alliance with the DMK and rejected the notion that the party was exploring other alternatives.

"We have been proactive in forming a committee and met Chief Minister M.K. Stalin at his office a month ago. We are waiting and hopeful that DMK will take a decision. We are confident that they will close the issue at the earliest. We have a long-standing relationship with the DMK. Our tradition is that we conclude alliance negotiations for Tamil Nadu and Puducherry together," he said. When asked if the Congress was pushing for the sharing of power as a precondition for the alliance, Mr. Chodankar asked, "Will any political party say no to power [be-

ing a part of government? "

He said the party had received close to 5,000 applications from aspiring candidates and the conclusion of the seat sharing negotiations was essential so the party could concentrate choosing the candidates, campaigning, and so on.

Asked about the decision of the Congress to miss MDMK chief Vaiko's recent *samathwa nadaiyayanam*, Mr. Chodankar backed TNCC president K. Selaveprunthaga's decision. "The TNCC president has taken the right decision of not participating in the function because of the photo (of LTTE Chief Prabhakaran)," he said, adding that he would not even want to mention Prabhakaran's name as the cadre would not like it.



Takahashi Muneo, Consul General, Consulate General of Japan, giving the award to Urmila Satyanarayanan, at the Music Academy, in the presence of Academy president N. Murali. M. SRINATH

Nritya Kalanidhi award conferred on Urmila Satyanarayanan

The Hindu Bureau

CHENNAI

Bharatanatyam exponent Urmila Satyanarayanan was presented the Nritya Kalanidhi award at the 19th Dance Festival inaugurated at the Music Academy in the city on Saturday.

Presenting the award, Takahashi Muneo, Consul-General, Consulate General of Japan in Chennai, said the honour recognised not only her artistic excellence but also her lifelong commitment to the preservation and propagation of Bharatanatyam.

Drawing parallels between Indian and Japanese dance traditions, he said classical Japanese forms such as Noh, Kabuki and Nihon Buyo emphasised controlled movement and discipline – aspects that resonate strongly with Indian classical dances. Both traditions, he said, share a deep respect for heritage and the teacher-disciple lineage.

Mr. Muneo said many Japanese students had tra-

velled to India to learn Bharatanatyam, while several renowned Indian dancers had taught and performed in Japan, serving as a powerful example of how culture can connect nations.

Accepting the award, Ms. Satyanarayanan expressed gratitude to her teachers, students and the Music Academy. Recalling that her *arangetram* was at the Music Academy, she said receiving the award from the renowned institution was a milestone in the life of a dancer.

Earlier, N. Murali, president of the Music Academy and Director of The Hindu Group of Publications, said the award to Ms. Satyanarayanan came at an important stage in her artistic journey – 50 years after her *arangetram* and 30 years since she founded the dance school ‘Natyam Sankalpa’. She is known for her improvisation and innovation, with several acclaimed thematic presentations and dance dramas to her credit, he said.

Mr. Muneo said many Japanese students had tra-

The Hindu Bureau
BENGALURU



Chief Minister Siddaramaiah, with Deputy CM D.K. Shivakumar addressing a press conference in Bengaluru. K. MURALI KUMAR

Chief Minister and KPCC chief D.K. Shivakumar and other Ministers, he demanded that the Centre repeal the new law to guarantee the right to work for the rural poor, labourers, and women.

He alleged that the NDA government, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, had “killed Mahatma Gandhi for the second time” by repealing the job scheme named after Gandhiji. While Mahatma Gand-

hi advocated Gram Swaraj, the Centre had “destroyed the panchayat system” by curtailing the rights of the rural local bodies to identify and allot work under the scheme.

Calling the move “unconstitutional and anti-federal”, he cited Articles 258 and 280, and the 73rd Constitutional Amendment to allege that the Centre had taken away the powers of the gram panchayats.

He argued that the repeal of MGNREGA would lead to increased unemployment, loss of minimum wage protection, exploitation of labour, reduced participation of women in labour, and hardship for Dalit families.

Maoist commander, 19 cadre surrender in Telangana, hand over 48 firearms, cash

The Hindu Bureau
HYDERABAD

ganisation.

Among those who surrendered are the commander of the PLGA battalion, Badse Sukka, alias Deva (49), and member of the Telangana State Committee member Kankanala Raji Reddy, alias Venkatesh (50). They also handed over 48 firearms and more than 2,200 rounds of ammunition.

Telangana Director-General of Police (DGP) Shivadhar Reddy said that

this marked the collapse of the last remaining PLGA battalion and left the Telangana State Committee with only one senior functionary still underground.

The officer also said that the weapons included light machine guns, AK-47 rifles, INSAS rifles, SLRs, a US-made Colt rifle, an Israeli-made Tavor rifle, grenades and other arms. Cash amounting to ₹20.30 lakh was also handed over.

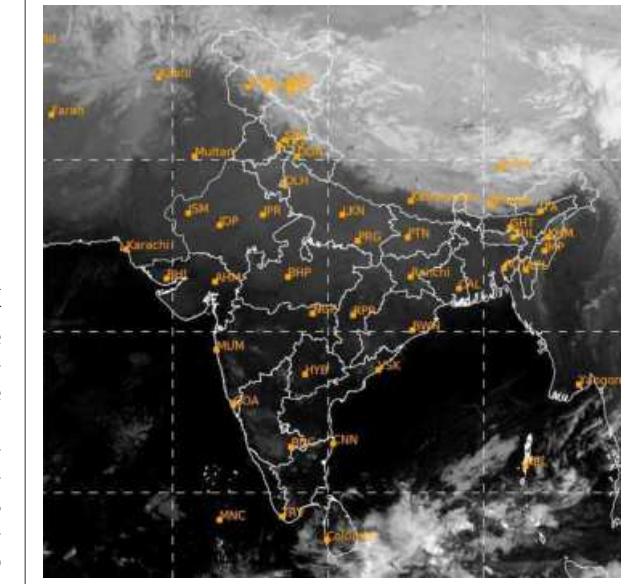
The police said that

Badse Sukka, a native of Sukma district in Chhattisgarh, was one of the most important tribal leaders in the CPI (Maoist) after the death of Madvi Hidma. He joined the organisation in 2003 and later rose through the ranks.

Kankanala Raji Reddy, a native of Peddapalli district in Telangana, joined the movement in 1997 and was elevated as a State Committee member in 2003.

WEATHER WATCH

Rainfall, temperature & air quality in select metros yesterday



TEMPERATURE DATA: IMD; POLLUTION DATA: CPCB; MAP: INSAT/IMD (TAKEN AT 19.15 HRS)

Forecast for Sunday: Cold wave conditions likely at isolated places over Punjab, Haryana, Delhi and Rajasthan. Dense fog likely at isolated places over Jammu & Kashmir, Ladakh, Gilgit-Baltistan, Muzaffarabad, Bihar, Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, Sikkim, West Bengal, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh

CITY	RAIN	MAX	MIN	CITY	RAIN	MAX	MIN
Agartala	—	20.8	11.5	Kozhikode	—	33.4	23.8
Ahmedabad	—	25.4	15.0	Kurnool	—	30.3	19.2
Aizawl	—	21.0	9.0	Lucknow	—	16.3	11.4
Allahabad	—	17.0	11.8	Madurai	—	32.2	21.5
Bengaluru	—	27.3	17.4	Mangalore	—	31.2	22.0
Bhopal	—	20.2	11.6	Mumbai	—	30.1	18.7
Bhubaneswar	—	25.0	15.0	Mysuru	—	29.2	18.4
Chandigarh	—	15.4	9.6	New Delhi	—	17.3	8.1
Chennai	—	29.2	24.2	Patna	—	14.4	10.8
Coimbatore	—	31.3	21.6	Port Blair	—	29.7	26.1
Dehradun	—	17.5	8.9	Puducherry	—	28.5	22.6
Gangtok	—	10.9	5.9	Pune	—	30.9	17.7
Goa	—	31.8	21.1	Raipur	—	28.1	15.9
Guwahati	—	24.3	15.5	Ranchi	—	22.8	12.0
Hubballi	—	31.0	18.0	Shillong	—	15.0	7.0
Hyderabad	—	27.3	19.6	Shimla	—	13.0	1.0
Imphal	—	22.9	10.1	Srinagar	—	9.2	1.5
Jaipur	—	18.0	11.8	Thiruvananthapuram	—	33.4	23.3
Kochi	—	32.3	23.8	Tiruchi	—	29.5	22.0
Kohima	—	12.8	5.0	Vijayawada	—	29.4	21.2
Kolkatta	—	24.2	12.8	Visakhapatnam	—	28.0	20.5

(Rainfall data in mm; temperature in Celsius)

Pollutants in the air you are breathing

CITIES	SO ₂	NO ₂	CO	PM _{2.5}	PM ₁₀	CODP
Ahmedabad	.79	.63	.72	110	110	132
Bengaluru	.5	.15	.25	142	156	110
Chennai	.6	.4	.20	160	103	103
Delhi	.36	.68	.121	329	.282	107
Hyderabad	.7	.17	.87	114	.133	107
Kolkata	.11	.130	.39	305	.214	107
Lucknow	.5	.44	.59	230	.179	107
Mumbai	.27	.76	.45	122	.112	107
Pune	.41	.51	.284	203	.107	107
Visakhapatnam	.16	.46	.38	224	.154	107

Yesterday

In observation made at 4.00 p.m., Talcher, Odisha recorded an overall air quality index (AQI) score of 332 indicating an unhealthy level of pollution. In contrast,

Damoh, Madhya Pradesh recorded a healthy AQI score of 17

Air Quality Code: ■ Poor ■ Moderate ■ Good (Readings indicate average AQI)

SO₂: Sulphur Dioxide. Short-term exposure can harm the respiratory system, making breathing difficult. It can affect visibility by reacting with other air particles to form haze and stain culturally important objects such as statues and monuments.

NO₂: Nitrogen Dioxide. Aggravates respiratory illness, causes haze to form and stain culturally important objects, causes acid rain, pollutes coastal waters.

CO: Carbon monoxide. High concentration in air reduces oxygen supply to critical organs like the heart and brain. At very high levels, it can cause dizziness, confusion, unconsciousness and even death.

PM_{2.5} & PM₁₀: Particulate matter pollution can cause irritation to the eyes, nose and throat, coughing, chest tightness and shortness of breath, reduced lung function, irregular heartbeat, asthma attacks, heart attacks and premature death in people with heart or lung disease

Husband of complainant lodges plaint against Palakkad MLA

The Hindu Bureau

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

The husband of a woman who has accused Palakkad MLA Rahul Mamkootathil of rape has lodged a complaint against him before the Chief Minister and the Director-General of Police. In an emotionally written complaint, the complainant said his family was being targeted with cyber-ticks. The MLA has not only tarnished the reputation of the family but also ruined the complainant's family life, he said.

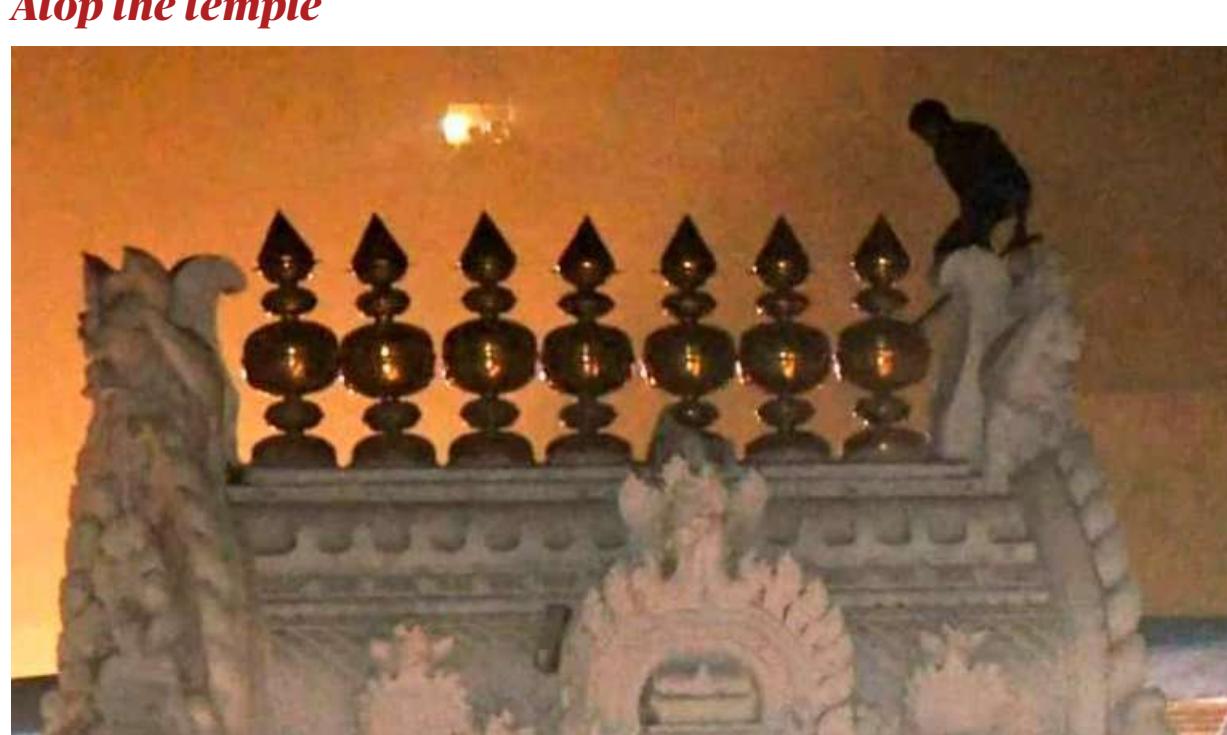
In the complaint, he alleged that the MLA established a relationship with his wife despite knowing that the woman was married. The complainant is demanding that a case be filed against the MLA under Section 84 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) (enticing, taking away, or detaining a married woman with criminal intent).

The complainant said that taking advantage of his absence, the MLA allegedly “lured his wife into the trap”. The MLA had been claiming that he was trying to sort out some of the issues between the couple. However, if the intention was to resolve issues, he should have contacted him, said the petition.

He alleged that he was “the real victim” in the case as he had to face a barrage of cyberattacks after the incident. Though he is “mentally weak,” he is ready to proceed with the case, it added.

Earlier, a special investigation team had recorded the statement of the husband in the wake of a complaint by the woman.

Atop the temple



A man, purportedly in an inebriated state, trying to remove the kalasam atop the Govindaraja Swamy temple tower in Tirupati on Friday night. After a three-hour effort, police and fire personnel brought him down and arrested him. K.V. POORNACHANDRA KUMAR

Telangana Assembly abolishes two-child ceiling for local polls

The Hindu Bureau

HYDERABAD

The Telangana Legislative Assembly passed a Bill to replace the existing law, enacted in 1994, that disqualifies people with more than two children from contesting local body elections.

The Bill supersedes the earlier Ordinance. The new Bill, Telangana Panchayat Raj (Amendment) Bill 2026, was moved by Minister for Panchayat Raj Danasari Anasuya Seethakka, who said the time had come to remove the two-child ceiling, given the changes in society and the fall in fertility rate.

After reviewing the poli-

Karnataka records highest-ever organ donations in 2025, ranks third nationally

Afshan Yasmeen

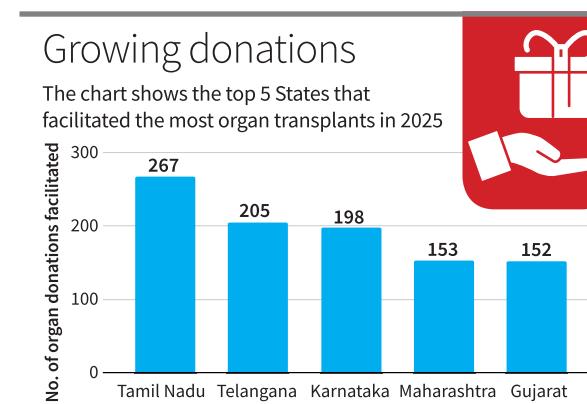
BENGALURU

Karnataka's State Organ and Tissue Transplant Organisation (SOTTO), the nodal agency that facilitates cadaver organ donations, has recorded 198 donations in 2025, the highest recorded in the State so far. This surpasses the previous peak of 178 donations in 2023. With this, Karnataka ranked third in the country in organ donations for the year, after Tamil Nadu with 267 donations, and Telangana with 205.

The steady rise in donations over the past five years reflects expanded hospital participation, growing awareness and improved systems, officials said. In 2024, the State re-

Growing donations

The chart shows the top 5 States that facilitated the most organ transplants in 2025



From Page One**U.S. forces capture Venezuelan President**

Mr. Maduro and other Venezuelan officials were indicted in 2020 on "narco-terrorism" conspiracy charges. The Justice Department released a new indictment on Saturday of Mr. Maduro and his wife for alleged role in narco-terrorism conspiracy.

Venezuelan ruling party leader Nahum Fernández said Mr. Maduro and Ms. Flores were at their home within the Ft. Tiuna military installation when they were captured. "That is where they bombed," he said. "And, there, they carried out what we could call a kidnapping of the President and the First Lady of the country."

Early on Saturday, multiple explosions rang out and low-flying aircraft swept through the Venezuelan capital. The attack itself lasted less than 30 minutes and the explosions – at least seven blasts – sent people rushing into the streets.

Some Venezuelan civilians and members of the military were killed, said Ms. Rodriguez, the vice president, without giving a number. Mr. Trump said some U.S. forces were injured in the strikes but that he believed "we had nobody killed". It was not known if more actions lie ahead, though Mr. Trump said in his post that the strikes were carried out "successfully".

Mr. Maduro's government accused the U.S. of attacking civilian and military installations, calling it an "imperialist attack" and urging citizens to take to the streets. Armed people and uniformed members of a civilian militia headed into the streets of a Caracas neighborhood long considered a stronghold of the ruling party.

Bangladeshi cricketer dropped from KKR

"BCCI will allow KKR a replacement player in line with IPL regulations, and further details will be communicated in due course," the franchise said further. The IPL season will start on March 26 and continue till May 31. The Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) had permitted Mustafizur to play for KKR during this duration. As per his schedule, the top Bangladeshi player was expected to return to Dhaka only for a week during the IPL season.

Mustafizur's exclusion from the KKR after he was picked for Rs. 9.20 crore at the IPL 2026 auction has sent a shockwave in a section of the Bangladeshi media. Bangladeshi newspaper *Amar Desh*, edited by the leading critic of India, Mahamudur Rahman, has announced that it would boycott all news related to the upcoming IPL season.

However, BCCI secretary Devajit Saikia told ANI that BCCI's instruction to KKR was prompted by "recent developments that are going on all across" indicating that the decision was taken in view of the breakdown of law and order in Bangladesh.

14 Maoists killed in encounters in Bastar

Sukma Superintendent of Police Kiran Chavan said the operation in the district was launched by the Sukma District Reserve Guards (DRG), and intermittent encounters between the security forces and Naxalites began around 8 a.m.

"Bodies of 12 Maoists, including five female Maoists, were recovered along with weapons such as AK 47, INSAS, SLR Rifles, from the encounter sites," he said. Among the slain Maoists were Konda Area Committee in-charge Vetti Mangadu, and Konda Area Committee secretary Madvi Hitesh, said Mr. Chavan.

Bijapur Superintendent of Police Jitendra Yadav said there was intermittent firing between the DRG Bijapur and the Maoists from 5 a.m. After the operation, the bodies of two Maoist commanders - Hunga Madkam and Aayiti Muchaki, - were recovered. Each was carrying a reward of ₹5 lakh.

T.N. CM announces new pension scheme

"TAPS is the New Year and Pongal gift for government employees. The good governance of the Dravidian model will continue. As Tamil Nadu's financial position strengthens, the demands of all sections of society will eventually be fulfilled," he said.

Following the announcement, the Joint Action Council of Tamil Nadu Teachers' Organisations and Government Employees' Organisations (JACTTO-GEO) and various other organisations of government employees and teachers called on the Chief Minister and thanked him for announcing TAPS.

The indefinite strike announced by JACTTO-GEO from January 6 has been withdrawn following the announcement. The DMK, in the run-up to the 2021 Assembly elections, had promised to restore the Old Pension Scheme (OPS). Various associations of government employees had been demanding that the State government fulfil this promise.

According to the release, under the new arrangement, government employees will receive pension and monetary benefits equivalent to those under the OPS. The announcement of TAPS by the DMK government gains significance in the light of the State Assembly elections around the corner.

Himachal govt. starts probe into college student's death

State sets up a committee to examine charges of sexual assault and caste-based abuse; it will submit a report in three days; assistant professor accused of sexual assault has been suspended

The Hindu Bureau
CHANDIGARH

The Himachal Pradesh government on Saturday suspended an assistant professor of a government college in Dharmsala following charges of sexual harassment and ragging linked to a 19-year-old Dalit student's death in December.

The police, on January 1, registered cases against the professor and three girl students of Government College, Dharmsala, on allegations of ragging and voluntarily causing hurt to the victim.

The State government has formed a four-member committee, led by Additional Director of Higher Education Harish Kumar, for fact-finding and conducting a preliminary inquiry into the death.

The inquiry will examine all aspects regarding the incident, including alleged sexual harassment by the professor and caste-based abuse, according to Director of Education Amarjeet Sharma's order.

Case file
A 19-year-old Dalit student from Government Degree College, Dharmsala, died on December 26, after alleged harassment and ragging incidents**ACCUSED**
Ashok Kumar,
Assistant Professor of Geography
Three students accused of ragging and assault**INQUIRY:** A four-member committee, led by Additional Director of Higher Education, formed for fact-finding.**POLICE ACTION:** FIR registered under sections of Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (sexual harassment, voluntarily causing hurt, common intention) and Himachal Pradesh Educational Institutions (Prohibition of Ragging) Act, 2009**VICTIM'S FATHER'S CHARGE:** On September 18, the victim was beaten and intimidated by the three students and was being sexually harassed by the professor. The victim fell ill, and died during treatment in Ludhiana

September 18, 2025, she was beaten up and intimidated by three students, and that Ashok Kumar, the professor, engaged in obscene acts with her.

Following these incidents, the girl was severely traumatised and fell seriously ill.

She was treated at multiple hospitals before she died during treatment.

The police have registered a first information report (FIR) under Sections 75 (sexual harassment), 115 (2) (voluntarily causing hurt), 3 (5) (common intention) of Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) and Section 3 of Himachal Pradesh Educational Institutions (Prohibition of Ragging) Act 2009, against the accused.

An investigation is underway.

CM assures action

Speaking with media persons in Kandaghat in Solan, Himachal Pradesh Chief Minister Sukhinder Singh Sukhu said strict action would be taken against all those involved.

UGC sets up panel to look into assault, ragging allegations**The Hindu Bureau**
NEW DELHI

The University Grants Commission (UGC) on Saturday said it had taken cognisance of the death of a college student in Dharmsala after it emerged that the police had registered a case over allegations that the 19-year-old victim was sexually assaulted by a professor and subjected to ragging by other students at the government college.

The UGC said, "Its anti-ragging helpline had registered a *suo motu* complaint over the matter, and that a fact-finding committee had also been constituted to investigate the incident. The 5-member fact-finding committee is chaired by UGC Member Professor Raj Kumar Mittal... It has been asked that a report be submitted within seven days."

This comes a day after the Himachal Pradesh police booked three women students of the college for ragging and voluntarily causing hurt and one professor for sexual assault.

The UGC's statement, noted that it had taken cog-

nisance of the incident as one of "alleged suicide" due to ragging, also noting that the college was denying this charge.

NCW takes cognisance
On Saturday, the National Commission for Women (NCW) in Delhi said that it had also taken *suo motu* cognisance of the case, condemning the "heinous, inhuman, and reprehensible act, which is a gross violation of the student's life, dignity, and rights.

It has sought an action-taken report from authorities in Himachal Pradesh within five days.

Further, NCW Chairperson Vijaya K. Rahatkar has written to the Director-General of Police in Himachal Pradesh, calling for the arrests of those responsible.

(For those in distress, counselling is available at TeleMANAS-14416)

Don't look at RSS through BJP's prism, says Bhagwat**The Hindu Bureau**
NEW DELHI

The Sangh cannot be understood by looking at the BJP, said Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) chief Mohan Bhagwat on Friday.

Mr. Bhagwat said that different narratives about the Sangh were being circulated and it was important to present the truth.

"The Sangh is a unique organisation in the world. Therefore, the Sangh cannot be understood by comparing it to anyone," he said. Mr. Bhagwat said that since the beginning, the Sangh was to become an organisation whose sole aim is to organise the entire Hindu society.

Odisha Police begin probe into 'violation' of powers by Naveen Patnaik aide V.K. Pandian**Satyasundar Barik**
BHUBANESWAR

The Crime Branch of the Odisha Police has begun an investigation into the alleged "excessive power" exercised by V.K. Pandian, the then close aide of former Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik.

Deputy Superintendent of Police Santosh Kumar Gauda, who has been entrusted with the task of investigating the allegations, has sought evidence in support of allegations made by Surendra Panigrahi, the petitioner in the case.

'No such department'
In 2023, Mr. Panigrahi, president of the Bharatiya Bi-kash Parishad, a non-go-



Close aide: File photo of former Odisha CM Naveen Patnaik with V.K. Pandian. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

vernment forum, had alleged that under the Odisha Government Rules of Business, 1956, which outlines the framework for the functioning of the Odisha government, there was no such department called '5T' in the State.

V.K. Pandian, the 2000 batch IAS officer who had taken voluntary retirement to join Biju Janata Dal, was private secretary to then Odisha CM. However, he was appointed as 5T Secretary by a notification issued in 2019. This is clearly

violation of rules," said the petitioner.

Mr. Panigrahi had first sent his petitions to the Governor, Chief Minister and Chief Secretary in 2023, but his petition was never taken up for investigation. He subsequently sent his allegations to the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) and the office of the President in 2024 and 2025.

Helicopter use

"Mr. Pandian moved alone by helicopter throughout Odisha without permission of then CM. As per RTI information, an expenditure of ₹9,03,60,346 was made towards hiring of helicopter. Subsequently, ₹8.18 crore was spent for helicopter use, taking the total expenditure to ₹17.21 crore.

Army to procure long-range rocket launchers in major deal backed by Israeli tech**Saurabh Trivedi**
NEW DELHI

The Suryastra multi-calibre rocket launcher system.

SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

integrating multiple rocket types including rockets striking at long ranges of 150 km and 300 km for a total consideration of ₹292.69 crore (inclusive of all taxes and duties)," the letter mentioned.

The development was confirmed by the Pune-based NIBE Ltd. in a letter to the Bombay Stock Exchange and National Stock Exchange on Friday.

"The company has entered into a supply contract with Indian Army, Ministry of Defence, Government of India for manufacturing and supply of ground equipment, accessories, ESP and ammunition for universal rocket launcher system capable of

gree of accuracy with a circular error probable (CEP) of less than five metres during trials.

In July 2025, the defence manufacturer has signed a Technology Collaboration Agreement (TCA) with Israeli defence major Elbit Systems to manufacture the advanced universal rocket launcher system (SURYA) in India.

This marks the first time a high-precision rocket launcher system with strike capability up to 300 km is being produced domestically.

EP provisions

On December 26, the Defence Acquisition Council (DAC) of the Defence Ministry cleared a proposal to allow defence forces to sign contracts under emergency procurement (EP) powers till January 15. Under the EP provisions, the armed services can procure weapons systems worth up to ₹300 crore on an urgent basis without any further clearances.

Designed to engage multiple targets simultaneously at varying ranges, the system achieves a high de-

SC to pronounce verdict on bail pleas of Umar Khalid and others tomorrow**Krishnadas Rajagopal**
NEW DELHI

The Supreme Court is on Monday scheduled to pronounce judgment on the bail pleas of former Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) student leader, Umar Khalid, and other accused persons in an Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act case related to the alleged "larger conspiracy" behind the February 2020 riots in the national capital.

A Bench headed by Justice Aravind Kumar had reserved its verdict in December 2025.

Gulfisha Fatima, Sharjeel Imam, Meera Haider, Shifa Ur Rehman, Mohammad Saleem Khan, and Shadab Ahmed.

Grounds for bail

They have sought bail chiefly on the ground of prolonged incarceration without trial for the past five years.

Mr. Khalid, Mr. Imam and the others were accused of being the "masterminds" behind the riots, which left 53 people dead and over 700 injured. Violence had erupted during

protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act and the National Register of Citizens.

The High Court had observed that hatching a conspiracy for violent acts under the garb of the right to protest could not be allowed.

Addressing the question of delay, the High Court had justified that a "hurried trial" would be detrimental to the rights of both the accused persons and the State of NCT (National Capital Territory), Delhi, which is the respondent before the apex court.

Senior advocate A.M. Singhvi, for the petitioner side, had wondered aloud in court what "public interest" would be served by the continued incarceration of a woman who had already spent close to six years behind bars as an undertrial.

Senior advocate Kapil Sibal, also for the petitioners, likened prolonged custody to pre-trial conviction.



A Bench headed by Justice Aravind Kumar had reserved its verdict in December 2025.

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Trinamool MP Mausam Noor returns to Congress

The Hindu Bureau
KOLKATA

In a major boost to the Congress ahead of the Assembly election in West Bengal, Mausam Noor, Rajya Sabha member of the Trinamool Congress, joined the party.

"West Bengal wants change," she said after joining the Congress. She had complete faith in the Congress leadership and was willing to shoulder any responsibility the party offered her, Ms. Noor said.

She hails from the family of Congress leader and the late former Union Minister A.B.A. Ghani Khan Chowdhury, whose name remains synonymous with the Congress in Malda district decades after his death. Ms. Noor was a two-time Lok Sabha member from Malda from the Congress, before she defected to the Trinamool seven years ago.

She rejoined the Congress in the presence of senior leaders Jairam Ramesh, Ghulam Ahmed Mir, and Bengal Congress president Shubhankar Sarkar.

Cong. to begin agitation against new rural jobs law on Jan. 10

Campaign to save the MGNREGA will kick off with district-level press conferences and culminate with four major rallies; Jairam Ramesh says VB-G RAM G Act represents 'dangerous centralisation'; party says it will challenge the new Act in court

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Congress will hold a nationwide agitation, the MGNREGA Bachao Sangram, from January 10 to February 25 to demand the withdrawal of the Viksit Bharat-Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (VB-G RAM G) Act, it announced on Saturday.

The party is pressing for restoration of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in its original, rights-based form.

"MGNREGA is not charity. It is a legal guarantee. Crores of poorest people got work in their own villages; MGNREGA reduced hunger and distress migration, raised rural wages, and strengthened women's economic dignity. VB GRAM G is designed to dismantle this right," Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge said in a post on X.

Addressing a joint press



Congress leader Jairam Ramesh and K.C. Venugopal at a press conference in New Delhi on Saturday. SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

conference with fellow Congress general secretary Jairam Ramesh, K.C. Venugopal alleged that the new law fundamentally altered the nature of rural employment by removing the legal guarantee to work and centralising powers that were earlier vested with States and panchayats. He declared that the party would challenge the Act in court.

The new legislation strikes at the federal structure of the country. No consultations were held with State governments, even though their finances and administrative authority will be directly affected," Mr. Venugopal said.

He added that under the new Act, employment would no longer be a legal right, unlike under

MGNREGA, and the authority of Panchayati Raj institutions would be weakened.

Common strategies

Asked whether Opposition-ruled States would refuse to implement the law, Mr. Venugopal said the Congress would consult its INDIA bloc partners to evolve a common strategy. "We will reach a consensus among Opposition-ruled Chief Ministers and explore all possible options going forward," he said.

Mr. Ramesh contended that the VB-G RAM G Act represented "dangerous centralisation" and undermined the constitutional balance between the Centre and the States.

"Despite its grand name, the only guarantee in this law is centralisation. There is no assured employment and no financial security for State governments," Mr. Ramesh said, adding that under the new framework, the allocation

of funds would be decided entirely by the Centre.

"Our demand is not modification but complete withdrawal of this Act and the restoration of MGNREGA as a rights-based programme," he asserted.

The Congress said the agitation would focus on defending the right to work, protecting Panchayati Raj institutions, and standing with women workers, Dalits, Adivasis, and the rural poor.

The campaign will begin with district-level press conferences on January 10, followed by day-long fasts and symbolic protests at district headquarters on January 11.

Panchayat-level meets and mass contact programmes are scheduled from January 12 to 29, with ward-level sit-ins planned for January 30.

Gherao of Vidhan Sabhas will be held between February 7 and 15, followed by four major rallies from February 16 to 25.



People checking their documents during an SIR hearing in West Bengal. PTI

being less than 15 years, 8.41 lakh cases of age difference with parents being over 50 years and nearly 3 lakh cases of age difference with grandparents being less than 40 years.

Trinamool Congress leaders, including the party's national general secretary Abhishek Banerjee, had raised questions on why the Election Commission is not publishing the list of electors with logical discrepancies in the public domain.

Other issues

The cases of logical discrepancies are in addition to 30 lakh 'unmapped' voters who could not establish a familial link with the voters' list of 2002 and the 58 lakh names that were deleted from the draft electoral roll on account of being absent, shifted, dead or duplicate.

Before the SIR exercise began in the State, there were roughly 7.66 electors listed on the voter list as of October 27.

Bihar govt. announces healthcare facilities for elderly at doorsteps

Amit Bhelari
PATNA

Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar on Saturday said he has directed the health department to provide healthcare facilities to the elderly citizens at their doorstep under the 'Saat Nishchay-3' programme.

"Our effort is to ensure that the needy senior citizens of the State can avail essential health services at their homes at the time of need. To ensure that health-related facilities are available, we have directed the health department to work swiftly," Mr. Kumar wrote on X.

The facilities include nursing assistance, pathology tests, blood pressure



Bihar CM Nitish Kumar inspecting the construction work at Lok Nayak Jaiprakash Narayan hospital in Patna. FILE PHOTO

checks, ECG tests, physiotherapy, and all types of medical assistance in emergency situations.

Mr. Kumar also sought suggestions from the people of Bihar regarding the initiative. "It is also necessary to identify what other

facilities can be provided to make the lives of the State's senior citizens easier. In this regard, if you wish to give any specific suggestions, you can submit your valuable suggestions through post, mail and QR code," he said.

"We have implemented the Saat Nishchay to include Bihar in the category of the most developed States for the period from 2025 to 2030," he added.

KARNATAKA STATE NATURAL DISASTER MONITORING CENTRE

(A Regd. Society of Govt. of Karnataka)
Major Sandeep Unnikrishnan Road, Near Attur Layout,
Yelahanka, Bengaluru - 560 064. Ph.: 080-67355000

No.: KSNDMC/ADM/MISC/50/2025-WFTG/ Date: 03.01.2026

Amended Notification regarding appointment of Technical Director for KSNDMC

Subject: Advertisement for appointment of Technical Director for KSNDMC under the Karnataka Water Security and Resilience Programme (KWSRP) for implementation of the World Bank funded Project

The amended detailed Terms of Reference (ToR), eligibility criteria and other conditions for engaging as Technical Director at KSNDMC is available at KSNDMC Web portal www.ksndmc.org. The Applicants may note the following:

- Last date for submission of applications along with relevant supporting documents through Registered Post / Courier or in Person, is extended until 5.00 pm of 20.01.2026
- Applications to be sent through proper channel to "The Office of Director, Karnataka State Natural Disaster Monitoring Centre (KSNDMC), Major Sandeep Unnikrishnan Road, Near Attur Layout, Yelahanka, Bengaluru - 560 064"
- Incomplete applications will not be considered and KSNDMC reserves the right to reject any application, without assigning any reason, whatsoever
- The qualified candidates will be shortlisted and called for Personal Interview for final selection to the post
- For further Queries, you may contact the Administrative Officer at 9611990357

Sd/- Director, KSNDMC

Shah-led panel meet focuses on issues of national security

Press Trust of India
SRI VIJAYA PURAM

Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Saturday chaired a Parliamentary Consultative Committee meeting of the Union Home Ministry in Sri Vijaya Puram.

The panel meeting, which started at 11 a.m. and ended at around 2.40 p.m., focused on issues of national security, disaster management, cybersecurity and regional infrastructure, sources said.

The meeting also emphasised use of latest technologies to fight crime and establishing more state-of-

the-art centres such as the Central Forensic Science Laboratory (CFSL) and the National Forensic Sciences University (NFSU) at the regional level, the sources said.

Importance of islands

A separate session on the strategic importance of Andaman and Nicobar Islands was held, they said. Union Ministers of State for Home Affairs Nitayanand Rai and Bandi Sanjay Kumar, members of the committee, Union Home Secretary Govind Mohan, and other officials attended the meeting.

MP POORV KSHETRA VIDYUT VITARAN CO. LTD.

OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDING ENGINEER (O&M), M.PPKVCL, MANDLA

Tel No: 07624-250209, 250902, e-mail: se9449500@yahoo.co.in

Mandla dttd: 02.01.2026

NOTICE INVITING TENDER

Online Tenders are invited for following works under (O&M) Circle MPPKVCL, Mandla.

Sr. No.	Tender Specification No.	Name of the Work/Services	APPROX. VALUE (Rs. in Crores)	TENDER FEE (In Rs.)	EMD (In Rs.)	Due date of opening from 14:00 Hrs (*)
1	SEM/08M/PUR/TS/4398 Date 02.01.2026 (e-tender No. 2026_PKVC_472 6301)	Outsourcing of Manpower Required for Miscellaneous Works under the jurisdiction of O&M Circle MPPKVCL, Mandla.	24.64	11800.00 (10000.00+ 1800.00 18%GST=1800)	1.00 Lakh	29.01.2026

*For updated/extended due dates for opening of tender (EMD in Cover-1 & Techno-commercial bid in Cover-2) please refer to the online key dates. Other details can be seen in the complete tender documents available on e-portal <https://nptenders.gov.in>

** SAVE ENERGY FOR BETTER TOMORROW **

"विद्युत नियन्त्रिता संरचित विद्युत के लिए वी मित्र ऐप डाउनलोड करें और पारं पक्ष 50,000 रुपये का इनाम!"

EC orders FIRs against 5 poll officials in W.B.

KOLKATA

The Election Commission has ordered registration of FIRs against five poll officials for alleged irregularities in the distribution and collection of enumeration forms during the ongoing special intensive revision (SIR) of electoral rolls in West Bengal, an official said on Saturday.

THE SPECIAL OFFICER AND COMPETENT AUTHORITY, (UNDER KPIDFE - IMA & OTHER SCAM)

3rd Floor, Podium Block, V.V Tower, Dr. Ambedkar Veedhi, Bengaluru-560001

NOTICE/INVITATION FOR E-AUCTION FOR IMMOVABLE PROPERTY

Pursuant to attachment of Immovable properties by the Government under the provisions of the Karnataka Protection of Interest of Depositors in Financial Establishments Act, 2004 (KPIDFE Act) and pursuant to the absolute attachment order by the Hon'ble Special Court, the Special Officer & Competent Authority is issuing notice for e-auction of the immovable property through e-auction on 'as is where is and whatever there is basis'. The intending bidders will be required to furnish Earnest Money Deposit (EMD) (as mentioned against each auction in the e-portal provided by the Service Provider/Karnataka Public Procurement Portal only).

Short description of the Immovable Property (SPLOCA/AUC(2)/CR/03/2025-26)

Properties are free of all encumbrances and are in the name of Competent Authority appointed by Government and confirmed by the Special Court under KPIDFE Act, 2004. and Hon'ble High Court Of Karnataka has cleared the title (Khata stands in the name of Competent Authority and Auctioning Authority)

Sl. No.	DETAILS OF THE SCHEDULE PROPERTY (Clear Title by Court in order No. MISC No. 688/2019)	Minimum Bid Price (Rs)	EMD (Rs)	Bid Increase Value (Rs)
1.	# 48, PID No. 64-86-48, 30th Cross, Bannerghatta Road, ward No: 46, Thilakanagar, Bengaluru- 560041. Measuring North to South 40 ft, East to West 90+92/2 ft Total 3500 Sq.ft Location: https://maps.app.goo.gl/WT1yZFT135vgjKv7	1,44,49,500/-	14,45,000/-	1,45,000/-
(a)	Ground Floor-1, Flat No.GF-01, UDS-417.53, SBA-1593.75 Sq.ft	1,44,49,500/-	14,45,000/-	1,45,000/-
(b)	Ground Floor-2, Flat No.GF-02, UDS-417.53, SBA-1593.75 Sq.ft	1,46,01,500/-	14,61,000/-	1,47,000/-
(c)	1st Floor-1, Flat No.FF-01, UDS-417.53, SBA-1593.75 Sq.ft	1,46,01,500/-	14,61,000/-	1,47,000/-
(d)	1st Floor-2, Flat No.FF-02, UDS-417.53, SBA-1593.75 Sq.ft	1,47,44,000/-	14,75,000/-	1,48,000/-
(e)	2nd Floor-1, Flat No.SF-01, UDS-417.53, SBA-1593.75 Sq.ft	1,47,44,000/-	14,75,000/-	1,48,000/-
(f)	2nd Floor-2, Flat No.SF-02, UDS-417.53, SBA-1593.75 Sq.ft	1,47,44,000/-	14,75,000/-	1,48,000/-
(g)	3rd Floor Merged Flat, Flat No.TF-01, UDS-835.06, SBA-3187.50 sq.ft	2,89,76,900/-	28,98,000/-	2,90,000/-
(h)	4th Floor, Office Space, UDS 359.77, SBA-1500 Sq.ft	1,36,80,000/-	13,68,000/-	1,37,000/-

Date of Pre-bid meeting & time and Place	Date of Inspection & time	Last Date of Submission of Bids &
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IN BRIEF



Left parties condemn U.S. aggression on Venezuela

Left parties on Saturday condemned the U.S. attack on Venezuela, and said the real target is its oil reserves. In a statement, the CPI(M) demanded immediate end to U.S. aggression and withdrawal of all its troops from the Caribbean Sea. The CPI(M) said it "strongly condemns the blatant act of U.S. aggression on Venezuela by bombing various sites in the country". The CPI(ML) Liberation also condemned the attack, and said it aimed to impose a U.S.-backed colonial order. It said the same lies used to justify the invasion of Iraq, the seizure of its oil, and the devastation of its people are now recycled as so-called "narco-terrorism". The Communist Party of India also condemned the attack. PTI

Man arrested for playing 'anti-national' songs at salon

A 25-year-old man has been arrested by the Mira Bhayandar Vasai Virar police in Palghar district of Maharashtra for allegedly playing "anti-national" songs related to Kashmir at his salon, officials said on Saturday. The accused, identified as Abdul Rehman Shah, originally from Azamgarh in Uttar Pradesh, has been operating his salon in Naigaon for several years. According to local people who complained to the police, he allegedly played provocative content regularly, ignoring previous warnings, an official said. He was produced before a local court, which remanded him in police custody, a police officer said. PTI

'NEP will bring Indian youth out of Macaulay mentality'

The National Education Policy will be the medium to implement Prime Minister Narendra Modi's call to bring the country's new generation out of the Macaulay mentality, Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan said on Saturday. Mr. Pradhan said that the NEP, which is in its sixth year now, will herald a paradigm shift. "Prime Minister Modi has said the country needs to come out of the Macaulay mentality," he said. The Union Minister further pitched for holistic assessment of studies, entrepreneurship and innovation in education, adding that youth should not be just job seekers but also job creators. PTI

Centre pushes States to speed up farm scheme fund release

Union Agriculture Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan on Saturday urged States to adopt a strategic approach to budget utilisation, warning that delays in spending allocated funds result in losses for States and hamper the timely release of subsequent central instalments. "If States are unable to spend their budgets on time, it only results in losses for them," the Minister said, adding that budget allocations are often held up due to minor administrative issues. Mr. Chouhan stressed the need for prompt verification of eligible farmers under the PM-KISAN scheme, and ensuring timely settlement of claims. PTI

SUDOKU



Solution to yesterday's Sudoku

9	3	1	2	4	5	6	8	7
2	6	4	7	8	1	3	5	9
7	5	8	3	6	9	2	4	1
4	9	7	5	2	8	1	3	6
6	2	3	4	1	7	8	9	5
8	1	5	9	3	6	4	7	2
1	7	6	8	5	3	9	2	4
3	4	9	1	7	2	5	6	8
5	8	2	6	9	4	7	1	3

DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★★★★

Peace and dialogue essential where there are 'only disputes', says Modi

PM speaks at exposition on Piprahwa relics related to the Buddha, he says Buddha's philosophy is India's guide to a global approach; some relics repatriated to India after the family of a colonial archaeologist sought to auction them

The Hindu Bureau

NEW DELHI

Strength is necessary against the "enemies of humanity", but where there are "only disputes", dialogue and peace are essential, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on Saturday, speaking at the inauguration of an international exposition of the sacred Piprahwa relics related to Lord Buddha in New Delhi.

Buddha's philosophy of "walking together instead of conflict and dominance" has been India's "core philosophy" and approach to the world in the 21st century, the Prime Minister said. "India is committed to 'Sarvajan Hitaya, Sarvajan Sukhaya (the welfare and happiness of all people)". This is what Lord Buddha taught us."

Mr. Modi said that the departure of the relics from India and their eventual return both held "significant lessons". Noting that slavery was not just political and economic, "but it also destroys our heritage", he added: "The



Prime Minister Narendra Modi attends the Grand International Exposition of Sacred Piprahwa Relics related to Lord Buddha, at Rai Pithora Cultural Complex in New Delhi on Saturday. ANI

same happened with the sacred relics of Lord Buddha".

Rescued from auction

For those who took the relics away and their descendants, these were just "lifeless antique pieces" and this was why they had tried to auction them off, he said. "But for India, these relics are a part of our revered deity, an inseparable part of our civilisation. Therefore, India decided that their public auction

would not be allowed," the Prime Minister said.

The exposition, being hosted at the Rai Pithora Complex in New Delhi, consists of relics from the 1898 excavation in Kapilavastu, other relics unearthed from excavations in the 1970s, reliquaries and jewelled treasures from the Indian Museum in Kolkata, a monolithic stone coffin which had originally contained the gem relics, and the most recently repatriated relics from

the family collection of William Claxton Peppé, who had led the 1898 excavation.

The Peppé family collection of relics was repatriated to India in July 2025 after a joint effort by the Ministry of Culture and private partners, just as they were about to be auctioned by Sotheby's in Hong Kong. Acknowledging the support of private partners in bringing back parts of the relics, the Prime Minister thanked

the Godrej Group for its cooperation in ensuring that they are returned to Lord Buddha's "land of karma, his land of contemplation, his Mahabodhi land, and his Mahaparinirvana land".

Shared heritage

Mr. Modi spoke of the "waves of devotion and faith" that were inspired by the relics wherever they travelled. Millions of people had visited the exhibition of these relics as they travelled across countries like Thailand, Mongolia, Vietnam, and Russia, he said, noting their appreciation of Indian officials just because they were "from the land of Buddha".

The government has worked to preserve relics and modernise sites important to Buddhism in India as well, he said, citing efforts to build a "Buddhist Circuit", connecting pilgrimage sites across the country, the promotion of Pali as a classical language, and multiple projects underway to make sites of Buddhism more accessible to the people.

'Correct use of technology can reduce court delays'

The Hindu Bureau

PATNA

Chief Justice of India Surya Kant on Saturday laid the foundation stones for seven buildings on the Patna High Court premises and attended the groundbreaking ceremony for the new campus of the Bihar Judicial Academy (BJA).

Asserting that the institution's strength is closely connected to technological capacity, Chief Justice Kant said, "Appropriate use of technology can reduce delay, improve transparency and make courts more approachable for the elderly, persons with special disabilities, and those who reside in remote areas. This is what we call access to justice."

He also dedicated an e-ACR platform for judicial officers designed to modernise the process of filing and processing Annual Confidential Reports online. He also e-inaugurated the Judges' guest house at Gaya Ji.

The seven new buildings in the High Court included an auditorium, administrative block, multi-level car park, residential complex and hospital.

Challenges aplenty for rural, tribal, migrant groups in fighting TB: report

Bindu Shajan Perappadan

NEW DELHI

India continues to bear a major portion of the global tuberculosis (TB) burden, accounting for about 27% of the cases worldwide, and faces challenges—including socio-economic disparities, malnutrition, comorbidities, and disruptions due to the COVID-19 pandemic—that impede elimination efforts.

A TB report titled 'India's Progress in Addressing the Challenges of Tuberculosis', published by stakeholders, including the Women's Collective Forum, has also identified India's rural, tribal, and migrant communities as those faced with multiple challenges when fighting tuberculosis.

"Migrant populations in India encounter critical obstacles to TB care due to high mobility, informal employment, and limited health access, often resulting in delayed diagnosis and disrupted treatment," said the report, adding that targeted intervention should include nationwide mapping of non-notified settlements to identify



The study says, migrant populations in India encounter critical obstacles to TB care due to limited health access. ISTOCKPHOTO

The report calls for a nationwide mapping of non-notified settlements to locate high-burden clusters

high-burden migrant clusters, as well as outreach programmes in educational institutions for early awareness and screening.

It also noted that addressing these challenges requires an integrated migrant health framework, combining various sectors such as HIV, non-communicable disease (NCD) and vector-borne disease services at common delivery points. Also, strengthening

data systems for frontline workers and establishing an online inter-state referral platform can improve tracking and continuity care, stated the report.

Highlighting the challenges faced by frontline workers, the report called for prioritisation of developing a robust employee welfare policy that encompasses incentives, travel reimbursement, health insurance, and salary standardisation for frontline workers.

"Operational research on work patterns, documentation processes and barriers to patient-centred service delivery among frontline workers may pro-

duce evidence-based strategies," said the report.

It notes that strengthening health infrastructure, embedding digital technology and equity, ensuring uninterrupted care in crises, and empowering communities through partnership models will be critical to overcome the existing barriers and achieve TB elimination targets," it said.

Call for framework

Additionally, research also indicates that a significant proportion of TB survivors exhibit chronic respiratory symptoms or structural lung damage such as fibrosis, bronchiectasis and airflow obstruction.

"Post-TB lung disease significantly impacts morbidity, disability and mortality rates. Establishing a national framework for post-TB care is crucial," said the report.

It added that nearly 60% of individuals with TB symptoms in India initially seek care from private providers, underscoring the critical need for robust and sustained public-private partnerships to meet national TB elimination goals.

NCC cadets assisted authorities during Operation Sindoor

Saurabh Trivedi

NEW DELHI

From disaster response during Operation Sindoor to shaping disciplined youth at the national level, the National Cadet Corps (NCC) continues to play a pivotal role in nation-building, NCC Director-General Lieutenant-General Virendra Vats said on Saturday.

Addressing the media, Lt. Gen. Vats highlighted the organisation's expanding footprint, with NCC units now present in over 90% of all districts nationwide, and emphasised its role in inculcating character, discipline and national integration among youth. He also highlighted the strong and growing participation of girl cadets, who now constitute 40% of the nearly 20 lakh-strong NCC.

The NCC Republic Day Camp (RDC) 2026 commenced at the DG NCC Camp, Delhi Cantonment. A total of 2,406 cadets, including 127 from Jammu & Kashmir and 131 from the north-eastern region, are participating in the camp. Cadets and officers from 25 friendly foreign countries are also taking part under the Youth Exchange Programme.



Lt. Gen. Virendra Vats speaks at the pooja for the Republic Day Camp recently.

social commitment. India launched the operation against Pakistan on May 7, 2025, in response to the Pahalgam terror attack. The conflict ended four days later.

The NCC Republic Day Camp (RDC) 2026 commenced at the DG NCC Camp, Delhi Cantonment. A total of 2,406 cadets, including 127 from Jammu & Kashmir and 131 from the north-eastern region, are participating in the camp. Cadets and officers from 25 friendly foreign countries are also taking part under the Youth Exchange Programme.

Live Events Development Cell to support expansion of 'concert economy', boosting tourism and employment

The Hindu Bureau

NEW DELHI

The Information and Broadcasting Ministry has established a Live Events Development Cell (LEDC) to facilitate the expansion of the "concert economy", boosting employment and tourism in the country.

India's live events industry is witnessing rapid expansion and is emerging as a key contributor to the media and entertainment ecosystem, an official said. The organised live events market was valued at ₹20,861 crore in 2024, registering a growth rate of

15%, outpacing several traditional media segments.

With an expected CAGR (Compound Annual Growth Rate) of 18%, the sector is poised to position India among the leading global live entertainment destinations by 2030, as per government estimates.

In his address at the WAVES Summit in May 2025, Prime Minister Narendra Modi highlighted the vast untapped potential of India's live entertainment sector, underlining its role as a key driver of employment, investment, tourism, and India's cultural and global influence.

Constituted in July 2025 under the direction of Union Minister for Information and Broadcasting Ashwini Vaishnaw, the LEDC serves as a single-window facilitation mechanism for the sector. It brings together representatives of the Central and State govern-

ments, industry associations, music rights societies and major event companies.

A single large-format live event generates more than 15,000 direct and indirect employment opportunities.

Entertainment hubs

According to a report, Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities are increasingly emerging as cultural and entertainment hubs. PTI

According to a report, Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities are increasingly emerging as cultural and entertainment hubs. PTI

fall, with increases of 213% in Shillong, 188% in Guwahati and 143% in Kokrajhar. Visakhapatnam recorded the highest growth at 490%, followed by Vadodara at 230%, the records show. A 17% rise in consumption of live entertainment across musical concerts, sports and theatre has also been noted. Over five lakh people travelled to other cities to attend live events, representing an 18% increase over the previous year. Attendance at theatre events rose by 45%, reflecting renewed public engagement.

IN BRIEF



Tea Board for 100% testing of imported crop: Dy. Chairman

Deputy Chairman of Tea Board C. Murugan assured 100% testing of quality of imports would be done to prevent inflows of the cheap variety into India. The industry had been complaining that cheap imports of inferior quality were entering India, which is destroying the industry. Speaking at the biannual general meeting of the Tea Association of India here, Mr. Murugan said the Board is formalising the procedure for 100% testing of quality of imports of the beverage. PTI

Sindhudurg Airport gets DGCA nod for 24X7 operation

The Sindhudurg Airport in the Konkan region of Maharashtra received aviation safety regulator DGCA's approval for round-the-clock operations, including during low visibility and adverse weather conditions, IRB Infrastructure Developers said. "The approval significantly enhances the airport's reliability and operational capability. This will support sustained traffic," said Jai S. Sadana, chief adviser and head at IRB Sindhudurg Airport. PTI

CIEL HR mops up ₹30 crore from Zoho, Pegasus, others

Human resources solutions provider CIEL HR Services raised ₹30 crore from 88 investors, including Zoho Corporation, Pegasus India and Standard Fireworks, ahead of its proposed initial public offering (IPO). In a public announcement, the Chennai-based firm said it carried out a pre-IPO placement of 27,27,272 equity shares at ₹10 apiece, aggregating to ₹30 crore. The fundraise was approved by the board on November 17. PTI

Still on exit mode, FIIs start 2026 by selling ₹5,349 cr. in all asset classes

Anupama Ghosh
MUMBAI

Foreign portfolio investors (FIIs) continued relentless selling in Indian markets, pulling out ₹5,349 crore across asset classes in the first two trading sessions of 2026, as per data from the National Securities Depository Ltd. (NSDL).

This marks the selling spree persisting for nine consecutive weeks.

On January 1, FIIs net pulled out ₹2,167 crore, followed by ₹3,182 crore on January 2. In the equity segment alone, FIIs sold ₹4,588 crore through stock exchanges on January 1 and ₹3,041 crore on January 2 though primary market investments of ₹20 crore provided marginal



Turbulent times: Men walk past a screen displaying market results outside the Bombay Stock Exchange (BSE) in Mumbai. REUTERS

relief, bringing the net equity outflow to ₹7,608 crore for the two sessions.

The selling pressure comes after a brutal December when FIIs dumped ₹30,333 crore worth equities via exchanges.

This took the total FII

with record FII selling in India. This is the worst selling by FIIs since they started investing in India," said V.K. Vijayakumar, chief investment strategist at Geojit Investments Ltd.

"The sustained selling by FIIs contributed significantly to the sharp 5% depreciation of the rupee vs the dollar in 2025."

DIIs cushion fall
Domestic institutional investors (DIIs) stepped in to cushion the blow. "Domestic institutional investors maintained strong support for the market, logging net inflows of ₹2,203 crore," said Ravi Singh, chief research officer, Master Capital Services Ltd.

(The writer is with The Hindu businessline)

Cotton prices firm up as import duty is restored

M. Soundariya Preetha
COIMBATORE

With the government not extending the 11% import duty exemption on cotton beyond December 31, the price of domestic cotton is firming up.

Price of the widely-used Shankar-6 variety of cotton stood at ₹52,500 a candy on December 15, ₹53,500 on December 27, ₹53,800 on December 30 and ₹54,000 on January 3.



A labourer working at a cotton farm in Gujarat.

cause of unseasonal rains and if the prices increase, Indian textile mills will not be able to compete globally. Farmers will not be affected by removal of the import duty as the Cotton Corporation of India (CCI)

Signs of global memory chip shortage emerge at PC shops

The build-your-own-PC market has become far more expensive due to surging memory chip prices, in what might foreshadow price increases elsewhere for Indian electronics

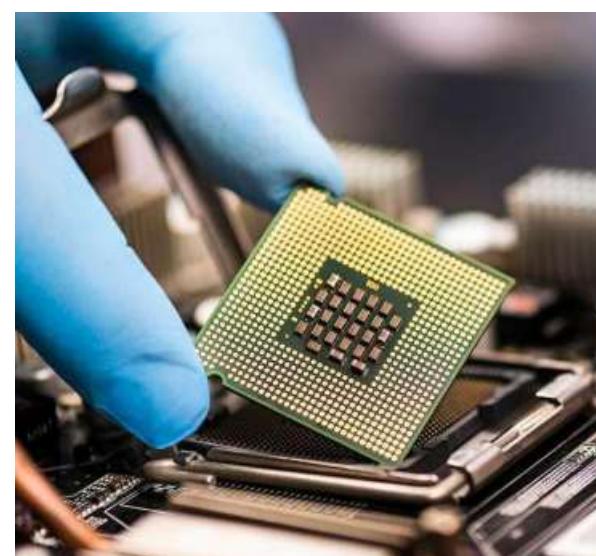
Aroon Deep
NEW DELHI

At Nehru Place in the national capital, the beginnings of a looming pricing crisis in personal electronics is taking shape, as customers and retailers in the sprawling market struggle to get hands on RAM sticks and SSDs used in desktop PCs, laptops and smartphones.

Over the last few weeks, prices of these components have surged with little precedent, beyond even the levels seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, as AI hyper scalers globally crowd out a supply chain that now has less room for consumer-grade products.

At Manoj PC Wala, a single stick of DDR5 16GB RAM – that until November was selling for about ₹5,000 at worst – now bears a fresh MRP sticker. The current price is ₹15,000. "SSD prices have doubled, and RAM prices have increased four times," Subhash, one of the store's attendants, said. Price data for these components reviewed by *The Hindu* confirm this assessment.

Early in December, one of the handful of importers for RAM sticks, which are usually pre-installed in pre-built PCs or laptops (and less commonly sold separately to enthusiasts or enterprises), offered retailers a chance to buy up stock in bulk at the prevailing prices of the time. Suppliers



Compute the cost: Cause of the problem is 3 firms have cornered the memory chip market's supply chain. GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

warned rates would only rise from there, Pramod, another attendant, said.

Most retailers balked, unable or unwilling to risk the down payment this offer entailed. Now, RAM and SSD prices are indeed skyrocketing and the climb in prices could persist in the months ahead.

Consumer electronics

The root cause of the problem is three firms have largely cornered the memory chip market's supply chain: SK Hynix, Samsung and Micron. These firms have been overwhelmed with orders for chips used in AI data centres by Big Tech that outbid consumer-grade electronics makers' prices. Micron has even announced that it will shut down Crucial, its RAM

brand for consumers. The full impact of the price shock this situation will lead to – in the absence of the trio ramping up production – will be felt in the coming months. Electronics markets such as the Nehru Place cater to a small portion of consumers, who build their own hardware. Large-scale original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) such as Dell, HP and Asus often have long-term supply agreements that protect them from immediate price jolts.

But even these firms are preparing for price adjustments. Dell has already announced plans for raising prices of laptops sold to enterprise clients, sparing individual buyers for now.

Long-planned computer procurements across go-

vernment and the private sector have been spared so far: a senior State government official told *The Hindu* Tamil Nadu's plan to distribute 10 lakh laptops to college students was not impacted by the chip price surge. A senior IT Ministry official said the price shocks had not reached large industry players yet, due to their existing reserves and supply deals with memory chip makers.

Even smartphone makers may have to scale down the level of RAM or memory they offer at a given price point, or hike prices. While smartphone prices are now only hit at low-budget line-ups, price shocks "could spread across the broader smartphone and consumer electronics ecosystem," Ivan Lam, analyst, Counterpoint Research, wrote in a note. As India's smartphone market is on the right side of a recovery in shipments, the shock may impact the recovery.

As far as the custom PC builders are concerned, driven as they are by a usually correct logic that assembling one's own PC is cheaper than paying for a pre-built one, they are less willing to invest in things needing a separate RAM purchase for the moment, Subhash said.

"What they thought they could build for ₹50,000 now costs ₹70,000," he says. "So they're not buying."

India's silk value chain to cross ₹1,10,000 crore'

Mini Tejaswi
BENGALURU



Neelam Shami Rao

Central Silk Board has an ambitious target of doubling the country's silk value chain, currently pegged at ₹55,000 crore, by 2030, said P. Sivakumar, Member Secretary, Central Silk Board, a body that works under the Ministry of Textiles and is responsible for the overall development of India's sericulture.

India currently produces 41,121 metric tonne of raw silk, of which over 70% is mulberry-based, while the remaining is eri, tasar and muga. The production outlook for 2030 was 54,000 metric tonne, he told *The Hindu*.

Huge value

"India produces high quality natural silk. The commodity has huge commercial value in the domestic as well as international markets. The board is looking at increasing the production of silk across the country by increasing land under cultivation and also enhancing productivity of existing silk farms across the country," he said.

According to him, to meet the targets, mechanisation and use of technology will be given priority. All States, except Rajasthan (because of its warm weather), are producing silk now, and Gujarat is the latest entrant with 100 farmers farming eri (castor plant-based) silk. Also, the board has conducted a survey in Rajasthan to explore

"We have added over 50 new districts on silk maps of the country over the last five six years and now we have some 476 producing districts," Ms. Rao said.

She further said, by investing in silk production, India would be able to enhance the size of its silk market and triple exports.

Ms. Rao said the Ministry was looking forward to increased participation from state government's to further penetrate the silk economy in the country.

India exported silk worth ₹2,300 crore last fiscal and expected to cross ₹2,500 crore in FY26.

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SCIENCE

Green paradox: planting trees will cool a megacity unless it's dry

Vasudevan Mukunth

Cities around the world are getting hotter for two reasons: the climate is warming and urban areas often trap heat more than the countryside. Planting more vegetation, especially trees, has become a popular 'nature-based' way to cool cities. But how much does this really help?

To answer this, researchers from Australia, China, Saudi Arabia, and Switzerland recently com-

pared the temperature over different kinds of urban land cover, including trees, grasslands, croplands, and built-up surfaces like concrete and asphalt, in 761 megacities in 105 countries worldwide, including India. They defined a measure called temperature regulation capability: the temperature of a vegetated area minus the temperature of a built-up area. If the number was negative, vegetation was cooler, and vice versa.

When they analysed the data, the researchers found a paradox. In many cities, vegetation cooled, but in dry places, it could warm. Across all cities, grasslands cooled built-up areas in 78% of cases and trees cooled in 98%. But in almost a fourth of cities, especially in places with under 1,000 mm of rain a year, urban grasslands and croplands were hotter than built-up areas, creating net warming. Even trees showed warming in 2% of

arid cities. The researchers published their findings in *Science Advances* on January 2. They used a combination of physical effects to explain the paradox. Vegetation can cool a surface by evapotranspiration, i.e., water evaporating from soil and transpiring from leaves, carrying heat away. But vegetation can also absorb more sunlight if it reflects less light than some built surfaces. In arid cities, the cooling weakens

because water is scarce, so evapotranspiration is limited. Then the warming could 'win', i.e. reflection-driven warming plus changes in stored heat could outweigh the weaker cooling.

The authors also examined what happened during extremely hot summers. In about 75% of cities, trees reduced how much the temperature rose compared to built-up areas. Grasslands and croplands often did the oppo-

site, worsening the heat increase in about 71% and 82% of cities. One reason was that extreme heat often came with a large deficit in the vapour pressure, which caused many grasses and crops to shut down water loss more strongly, reducing cooling from evapotranspiration.

As the authors concluded, planting trees is not a simple solution and "misguided greening risks are worsening urban warming".

SNAPSHOTS



Oldest-yet deliberate human cremation found in Malawi

Archaeologists have found an ash and charcoal feature dating to about 9,500 years ago in Malawi, with burnt bone fragments from a small adult within, making it the earliest evidence of an *in situ* adult pyre yet. The ash formed in layers, showing that people repeatedly relit and fed the fire with substantial amounts of deadwood, with uneven heating. People later returned to light more fires at the spot, making the shelter a memorial for later generations.



Microlensing used to weigh distant rogue planet

A study has used microlensing to weigh a rogue planet, i.e. not orbiting a star. A foreground object passes in front of a distant star and its gravity briefly magnifies the star's light. This brightening tells scientists about the object. The technique is difficult for rogues yet the study succeeded by combining observations from ground- and space-based telescopes. The team reported the planet, around 9,800 ly from the Milky Way's centre, weighed as much as Saturn.



Starvation forces leafcutter bees to start adulting

Larvae of many insects begin metamorphosis after reaching a critical weight. But a new study found the trigger in leafcutter bees is starvation, usually 24 hours after not getting food. Food removal reduced gene transcripts linked to making juvenile hormones and increased those linked to producing the molting hormone and to nutrient-sensing insulin. The findings suggest the hormonal machinery responds to food running out, also matching the fact that the adults provision food and larvae can't forage.

Earthlife is made of space stuff, studies of asteroid Bennu hint

OSIRIS-REx samples from Bennu show the asteroid carries ribose, glucose, amino acids, nucleobases; discovery includes nitrogen-rich polymers, presolar grains of supernova origin, raising questions about how earth acquired life's ingredients

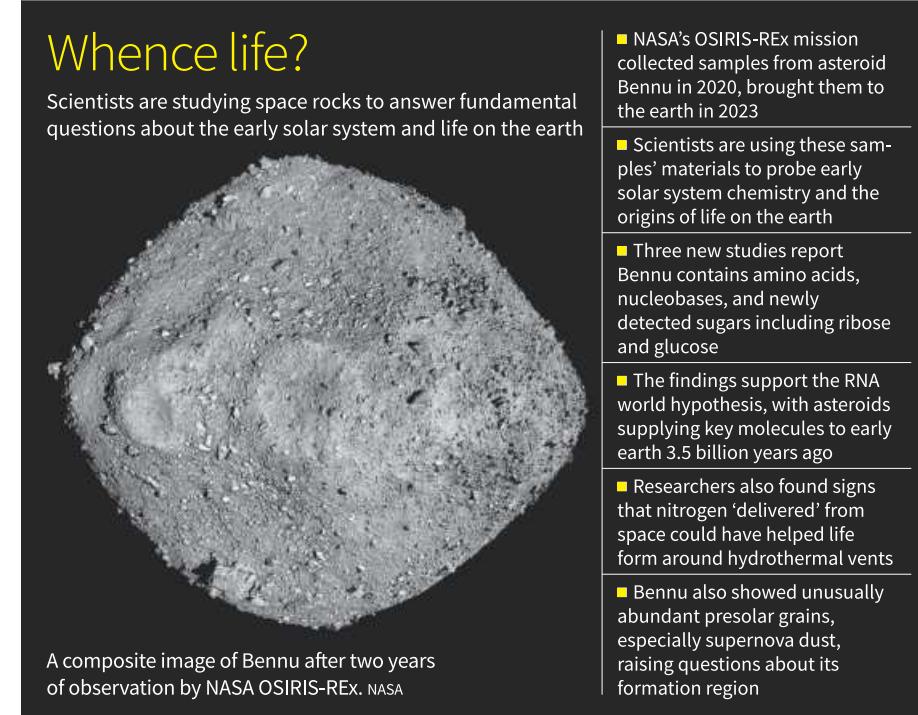
Sandhya Ramesh

In 2020, a spacecraft more than 3 lakh km away on a small asteroid called Bennu collected samples of its surface. The craft, part of NASA's OSIRIS-REx mission, then launched itself towards the earth, dropping off the canister of samples in September 2023. Since then, scientists in the US and Japan have been studying pieces of Bennu to answer fundamental questions about the formation of the early solar system and life on the earth.

On December 2, three teams published papers reporting Bennu contains sugar and other important molecules required to form RNA, and is also surprisingly abundant in supernova dust from a time before the sun formed.

When the solar system was forming from the cloud of dust and gas swirling around the sun, several smaller rocks were pushed around as well, and often clumped together. Bennu's larger parent asteroid formed in this way around the same time as the sun, 4.6 billion years ago, somewhere beyond Saturn. When Jupiter migrated to its present orbit, the parent was kicked into the asteroid belt, where it collided with other rocks. Over millennia, fragments from the parent gave rise to Bennu, which today orbits the sun between the earth and Mars.

In a *Nature Geoscience* paper, scientists led by Tohoku University in Japan



reported finding ribose, the sugar molecule present in RNA, and glucose, the sugar molecule required for metabolism, on Bennu.

Together with previous findings of amino acids and all the five nucleobases found in DNA and RNA, the entire inventory of molecules scientists believe are needed for life have now been confirmed on Bennu.

"For 5-C to convert to 6-C sugar, the optimal mix of environmental conditions such as very little but liquid brine, the right pH, and extremely low temperatures are required, which the asteroid possessed at formation," Kuljeet Kaur Marhas, professor and head of the Planetary Labs Analysis Section at the Physical Research Laboratory, Ahmedabad, who works with samples of the

asteroid Itokawa, said. The findings strengthen the 'RNA world' hypothesis: that early life used RNA as a source of genetic information and for catalytic functions, before DNA and proteins evolved. According to the study, the abundance of asteroids like Bennu in the inner solar system would have provided sugars and amino acids, leading to the formation of life on the earth more than 3.5 billion years ago.

Chemical reactions

Scientists have also reported evidence of chemical reactions between ices forming polymer molecules before the ices melted. In a *Nature Astronomy* paper, a second team from NASA thus explained the discovery of polymers of nitrogen- and oxygen-rich

materials on Bennu. This material, called carbamate, would have been soft and gummy when it formed, hardening since. Scientists haven't found this material in extraterrestrial samples before.

At the time Bennu's parent formed, volatile compound ices like frozen ammonia, known to accumulate on asteroids' primordial surfaces, could have been heated by random radioactive decay. This would have liquefied the ices, which seeped into rocky pores and deposited the salts and minerals dissolved in them there. Bennu could have 'inherited' a piece of this.

Dust and gas in the early presolar system were formed from other exploding stars. By analysing the dust, astronomers hope to

find clues about the elements that made up its counterpart in the early solar system, which could help understand how planets formed.

In a third paper also published in *Nature Astronomy*, a different NASA team showed the presolar grains on Bennu had indeed been disturbed and moved around by moving liquids on the asteroid's surface. The concentration of presolar grains was at least 6x higher than in other similar asteroid and meteorite samples.

The team also reported signs the grains had been singed by heat released when the great mass of dust collapsed to form our sun.

Studies of the grains revealed they originated from various types of stars and supernovae. Of these, the concentrations of grains of supernovae-origin were the highest, indicating it was present in abundant quantities in the part of space where Bennu's parent formed.

"Why exactly there is an abundance of supernova-origin presolar grains is the biggest question, as Bennu is just like plenty of other asteroids in its neighbourhood," Dr. Marhas, who also reviewed the presolar grains paper, said.

"Will we find similar concentrations if we sample previously studied asteroids in different locations or is there something specific that makes the ordinary-seeming Bennu extremely special?"

Sandhya Ramesh is a freelance science journalist

Here's how you're paying to use 'free' social media

DECODED**John Xavier**

A flurry of developments around artificial intelligence tools and applications in the past year might suggest a lull in social media patterns and usage. But a closer look at how people engaged on some of the top social media platforms tell a different story.

Current estimates show that over 5.6 billion people maintain at least one active social media account. The average user now juggles accounts across nearly seven platforms, from messaging apps to video feeds and professional networks. Each handle represents a carefully curated digital persona, maintained not just for self-expression, but to remain socially and professionally visible. What

began as a tool for connection has quietly evolved into a continuous obligation.

A persistent myth underpins this system: that social media is free. After all, there is no upfront payment, no monthly invoice, and no credit card required at sign-up. But the absence of a price tag does not mean the absence of a cost. Instead of money, we pay with something far scarcer: Time and attention.

Only a few years ago, average daily social media use hovered around two hours. This trend seems to be going up to two and a half hours per day, driven largely by short-form video and algorithmic feeds designed for frictionless consumption. That adds up to more than 75 hours per month, which is nearly two full workweeks devoted solely to scrolling.

The cost becomes clearer with a simple calcula-

tion. Take your monthly income and divide it by the number of hours you work to estimate your true hourly value. Now multiply that rate by the time you spend each day on social platforms. The result is the implicit "fee" you pay for scrolling through digital feeds. For many people, this hidden cost rivals discretionary expenses like dining out, watching a movie, or even a portion of

rent. The difference is that, unlike money, these hours are permanently gone.

Platform-level data makes the scale even starker. On TikTok, Android users globally average more than 30 hours per month, largely consumed in rapid-fire bursts of short videos. Similar dynamics exist across Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook, where recommendation algorithms are optimised for

user retention. The longer you stay, the more data you generate, and the more valuable you become to advertisers on those platforms.

This environment is now being fundamentally reshaped by generative AI content. The rise of what some call "AI slop" has dramatically increased the volume of content flooding social feeds. (AI slop is low-effort, mass-produced text, images, and videos generated at near-zero cost.)

AI makes it possible to publish hundreds or thousands of posts a day, often optimised for engagement signals rather than substance.

As a result, platforms are becoming frothier, noisier, and harder to navigate.

This explosion of content cuts both ways for engagement. On one hand, more content gives algorithms more material to

test, remix, and personalise, which can temporarily boost metrics like watch time and impressions. On the other hand, over-saturation risks diminishing returns. When feeds are dominated by repetitive, shallow, or misleading AI-generated posts, users can experience fatigue, mistrust, and disengagement.

Early signals already suggest a bifurcation: passive scrolling time may rise, while meaningful interaction declines.

In an ecosystem flooded with infinite, instantly generated media, focus itself becomes the most valuable commodity. What we choose to ignore may matter more than what we consume.

Social platforms can still be powerful tools for learning, collaboration, and creativity. But only if we remember that "free" has always been the most expensive price of all.



AI makes it possible to publish thousands of posts a day, optimised for engagement signals rather than substance. GETTY IMAGES

Q

Question Corner

For up, go this way

How does my smartphone know which way is up?

Your smartphone knows which way is up due to its accelerometer. It's a chip whose parts shift slightly when the phone accelerates or when

gravity acts along a particular direction. The phone's software reads the accelerometer's measurements along the x, y, and z directions and figures out which side is pointing towards the earth.

Social platforms can still be powerful tools for learning, collaboration, and creativity. But only if we remember that "free" has always been the most expensive price of all. Phones also have a gyroscope. This is a microelectromechanical sensor with a small vibrating mass on a chip. The phone drives this

mass to vibrate back and forth at a fixed frequency. When the phone rotates, the vibrating mass is deflected sideways due to the Coriolis effect. If the chip is vibrating in one direction and the phone rotates around a particular axis, the mass is pushed slightly in a direction perpendicular to the vibration. The sensor has microscopic springs and electrodes to detect this sideways motion and convert it into electric signals, from which the phone estimates the angular velocity, how fast the phone is turning and in which direction.

FAQ

What went wrong with a rabies vaccine batch?

Has the problem been rectified? Should patients repeat the doses?

Bindu Shajan Perappadan

The story so far:

The Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S., issued a health warning late last year about counterfeit human anti-rabies vaccine Abhayrab available in India and in circulation since November 1, 2023. The warning came after rabies cases were seen in travellers from India.

What did the CDC flag?

In its November 25, 2025, travel notice, the CDC said that a counterfeit Abhayrab vaccine for humans has reportedly been circulating in major cities in the country (India) and that this could be both harmful and fail to prevent rabies. Australia maintained that its travellers who had been administered Abhayrab in India after November 1, 2023, should consider the vaccination invalid and initiate a new course of vaccination.

What did the manufacturer say?

On December 27, 2025, Indian Immunologicals Limited (IIL), one of India's leading vaccine manufacturers, which produces Abhayrab, said a counterfeit batch of its human anti-rabies vaccine, Abhayrab, was no longer available on the shelves.

Sunil Tiwari, vice-president and head of quality management at IIL, added that every batch of the vaccine manufactured in India is tested and released by the National Control Laboratory (Central Drugs Laboratory), which is a WHO-Geneva pre-qualified laboratory under the National Regulatory Authority.

What is the protocol to be followed?

If patients suspect that they have received a counterfeit vaccine, the primary protocol is to consult a healthcare provider to determine if replacement doses of a verified, authentic vaccine are needed.

According to Tushar Tayal, associate director, Internal Medicine, CK Birla Hospital, Gurugram, "Repeat rabies vaccination is allowed and safe. The rabies vaccine is an inactivated vaccine, and as such, it does not contain a live virus. It, therefore, becomes safe to be given repeatedly if required. Revaccination is allowed by the health institutions in situations of suspected vaccine effectiveness or exposure."

He explained that following exposure from a bite or exposure as suspected, a complete series of post-exposure prophylaxis is administered. "Revaccination is recommended whenever there is a question of

vaccine quality, authenticity, or schedule compliance. In cases where there are doubts about vaccine authenticity, inappropriate dosages, lack of cold chain maintenance, or lack of records, revaccination is recommended," he said.

Doctors add that if a previously vaccinated individual faces fresh exposure with doubts about his/her immunity status, then repeating the dose is advisable. In cases where an immunocompromised person faces a situation where his/her immunity is inadequate, that person might need to be revaccinated. As a life-threatening disease, any question regarding ensuring immunity makes revaccination necessary.

What is the rabies revaccination regimen?

Without a valid vaccination, a person is considered to be previously unvaccinated and needs a full regimen – usually administered on days 0, 3, 7, 14, and 28. Rabies immunoglobulin should be administered in cases of severe exposure. But if a person has been vaccinated previously and there is proper documentation of the same, then only booster doses are needed.

How is India positioned in terms of rabies incidence and control?

The World Health Organization notes that India is endemic for rabies, and accounts for 36% of the world's rabies deaths. The true burden of rabies in India is not fully known; however, as per available information, it causes 18,000-20,000 deaths every year. About 30-60% of reported rabies cases and deaths in India occur in children under the age of 15 years, as bites that occur in children often go unrecognised and unreported.

Rabies deaths in humans are 100% preventable through prompt and appropriate medical care. Vaccinating dogs is the most cost-effective strategy for preventing rabies in people.

India has implemented the National Rabies Control Programme and the joint National Action Plan for Rabies Elimination to achieve the goal of eliminating dog-mediated rabies by 2030.

The WHO and its global partners aim at ending human deaths from dog-mediated rabies through a comprehensive One Health approach promoting mass dog vaccination, ensuring access to PEP, health worker training, improved surveillance, and bite prevention through community awareness.

Which are the airports being privatised?

How were the places selected? When is the tender process likely to begin? What are the privatisation goals a part of? When was the revenue-sharing model replaced by per passenger fee? How does it impact airfares? What are some of the issues being raised by airports?

Jagriti Chandra

The story so far:

The third round of airport privatisation, covering 11 airports to be opened for bids in five bundled groups, has moved a step forward with the Ministry of Civil Aviation sending a proposal to the Public Private Partnership Appraisal Committee (PPPAC) for its in-principle clearance and detailed scrutiny. According to government officials, the five bundles, each comprising metro and non-metro airports, include airports at Amritsar and Kangra; Varanasi, Kushinagar and Gaya; Bhubaneswar and Hubli; Raipur and Aurangabad; Tiruchi and Tirupati.

What is the process?

Once the PPPAC completes its appraisal and the Union Cabinet signs off on the plan, bids will be invited from private operators, with the government planning to launch the tender process by March 2026.

The 11 airports were selected from among all AAI (Airports Authority of India) facilities handling 0.1-1 million passengers annually. Projections of future traffic growth and investment requirements then narrowed the list to these top performers for the third privatisation round.

The development comes six years after the plan for privatising 25 airports was first shared by AAI on the conclusion of the privatisation of six airports, bagged by the Adani Group. Sources say the remaining 14 airports would be taken up for privatisation in subsequent rounds.

The privatisation goals are also part of the National Monetisation Pipeline (NMP) that aims at monetising operating public infrastructure to unlock idle capital and reinvest that in other assets. Launched in August 2021, the NMP set an aggregate indicative target of ₹6 lakh crore to be raised by leasing brownfield infrastructure

The aim should be to ensure the cost of air travel for smaller cities remains affordable

assets over the four-year period from FY 2022 to FY 2025.

The target for the airport sector through the privatisation of 25 airports was pegged at ₹20,782 crore, or nearly 4% of the overall NMP value. In all, 88.3% of the total NMP target has been achieved by various infrastructure ministries, of which roads and railways remain the top contributors, but the aviation sector remains a laggard. The Union Budget 2025-26 announced the launch of the Asset Monetisation Plan 2025-30 to plough back ₹10 lakh crore.

When did the privatisation of airports start?

Privatisation of airports started in 2003 under the NDA government. It approved the privatisation of two brownfield airports, i.e., Delhi and Mumbai airports, with 26% AAI stake and 74% stake owned by private JV partners. Delhi went to a GMR-led consortium in 2006, Mumbai to a GVK-led consortium in the same year via competitive bidding based on a revenue-share model. Two greenfield PPP airports followed, which included Bengaluru and Hyderabad in 2004.

In 2019, six more airports (Ahmedabad, Lucknow, Jaipur, Mangaluru, Guwahati, Thiruvananthapuram) were privatised, which were all won by the Adani Group. The revenue-share model was replaced by per passenger fee.

For the third round of privatisation, the PPPAC will evaluate key aspects, including revenue-sharing models versus per-passenger fees, cross-subsidisation between metro and non-metro airports in a bundle, and the need for a cap on the number of airports a single entity bags. It will also assess optimal land parcels for non-aeronautical revenue streams that are used to offset airline and passenger fees, and whether the User Development Fee collected from passengers as a component in the airfare will be determined for each airport independently or as a joint asset.

What are the concerns?

Recently, when IndiGo was forced to cancel nearly 5,000 flights in the first two weeks of December, widespread concern was raised about the risks of a duopoly in India's aviation sector. Similar dangers are now emerging in the airport sector, where a monopoly has steadily taken shape over the past five years, with the Adani Group bagging 8 airports – six through privatisation, followed by Mumbai and Navi Mumbai airports, where it acquired GVK's stake.

Consider the recent dispute involving telecom operators, who approached the Department of Telecommunications over what they describe as "extortionary" charges levied at the newly inaugurated Navi Mumbai Airport to allow the use of its in-building solutions and refusal of

right of way to set up infrastructure to provide cellular services.

Why are costs rising for both airlines and passengers?

Privatisation often raises concerns about rising costs for airlines and passengers, even as infrastructure investment increases. These concerns are magnified when a large monopoly emerges, leaving airline operators with limited bargaining power and passengers with virtually none.

Take the example of Thiruvananthapuram Airport, where, following its first tariff revision after privatisation to Adani, which was approved by the Airport Economic Regulatory Authority (AERA), the user development fee charged to passengers as part of the airfare increased from ₹506 to ₹770 for domestic travellers for one year, followed by further hikes in subsequent years. Aircraft landing charges were also sharply increased.

Additionally, the regulator pulled up the airport for under-reporting its projection of non-aeronautical revenues, which are meant to cross-subsidise charges levied on airlines and passengers. AERA noted that the projections submitted were based on pre-privatisation and pre-COVID figures from the AAI.

The common man's grievances include high taxi charges at airports, congestion within terminal buildings, limited access to wheelchairs, and being compelled to pay for porter services to overcome challenges of accessibility. A beginning has been made with the airport tariff regulatory body moving towards evaluating airports on service delivery benchmarks and proposing a penalty if these are not met. The service benchmarks include wait time at security gates, check-in time, availability of help desks, and time taken to travel between terminals, among others. It plans a third-party evaluation of these parameters and a penalty in the form of 5% reduction on airport tariff, so that it results in reduced user development fee for passengers.

What lies ahead?

Only about 6% of Indians currently travel by air, highlighting the enormous scope for growth in what is already the world's third-largest aviation market. While affordability remains a key factor, the low penetration rate makes it clear that air travel in India is far from saturated. To meet rising demand, the government has set a goal of building 50 new airports over the next five years and expanding the existing network of 163 airports. By FY2026, India's airports are expected to have a combined passenger-handling capacity of around 550 million passengers per annum (mppa), factoring in new facilities such as Navi Mumbai Airport and the upcoming Noida International Airport. Industry estimates suggest that airport capacity will need to grow to about 850 mppa within five years. Supporting this growth will require more than just new airports and will also depend on the presence of financially robust airlines.



On track: The airports were selected from among all Airports Authority of India facilities handling 0.1-1 million passengers annually. R. V. MOORTHY

Where does India stand on acid attacks?

What is survivor and social activist Shaheen Malik fighting for? What happened to her case in court? How many cases were reported in 2023, the latest National Crime Records Bureau data available? Why is the crime severely under-reported? Why is the conviction rate low despite laws?

Priscilla Jebaraj

The story so far:

When a Delhi court acquitted the three main accused in a vicious 2009 acid attack case on December 24, 2025, it was not just a devastating end to a 16-year battle for justice fought by survivor and social activist Shaheen Malik, but also shone a harsh light on the situation of acid attack survivors. Ms. Malik was a 26-year-old MBA student and counsellor in Panipat when she was attacked outside her workplace, resulting in the loss of vision in one eye and 25 reconstructive surgeries. She plans to appeal the verdict in the Delhi High Court but says it will discourage other survivors from seeking justice. Hers is not an isolated story; of 703 acid attack cases in Indian courts in 2023, the last year for which data is available, there were 16 convictions and 27 acquittals.

What are acid attacks?

An acid attack is an assault where a corrosive substance is thrown on or administered to a person with the intention of harming them. Sulphuric, hydrochloric, and nitric acids are the most commonly used substances. They can melt

In 2023, 57 reported acid attacks took place in West Bengal, 31 in Uttar Pradesh, and 15 in Gujarat, the three worst affected States

the skin and flesh, dissolve bones, causing severe burns, scarring, blindness, maiming, or even a permanent vegetative state, apart from psychological trauma and socio-economic harm.

The majority of victims are women and young girls, while perpetrators are almost always men. A 2024 analysis of 55 cases in India by the Acid Survivors Trust International (ASTI) found that motives were related to personal relationship issues in three-fourths of attacks against women, including revenge for spurning romantic or sexual advances, dowry-related disputes, suspicions of infidelity, and domestic abuse.

According to the National Crime Records Bureau, there were 207 reported cases of acid attacks in 2023, the last year for which data is available, an increase from 202 in 2022 and 176 in 2021. There were also 65 cases of acid attack attempts. The crime is severely underreported due to societal stigma, family pressure, and fear of retaliation. ASTI estimates that there are likely 1,000 attacks per year in India.

In 2023, 57 reported acid attacks took place in West Bengal, 31 in Uttar Pradesh, and 15 in Gujarat, the three worst affected States.

What are the laws against acid attacks in India?

Section 124 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sahita mandates a minimum punishment of 10 years in prison up to life imprisonment, and a "just and reasonable" fine to meet the victim's medical expenses. An acid attack attempt is to be punished by five to seven years' imprisonment. The law also requires all public and private hospitals to provide free treatment to victims.

In 2013, the Supreme Court mandated the regulation of acid sales, with a photo ID for buyers, and sellers required to keep a register of purchases, but this is poorly implemented.

In 2023, the NCRB reported that the police were investigating 113 acid attack cases, along with 53 cases pending from the previous year, and 86 cases were charged and sent for trial. There were 649 cases pending trial from the previous year. The accused were convicted

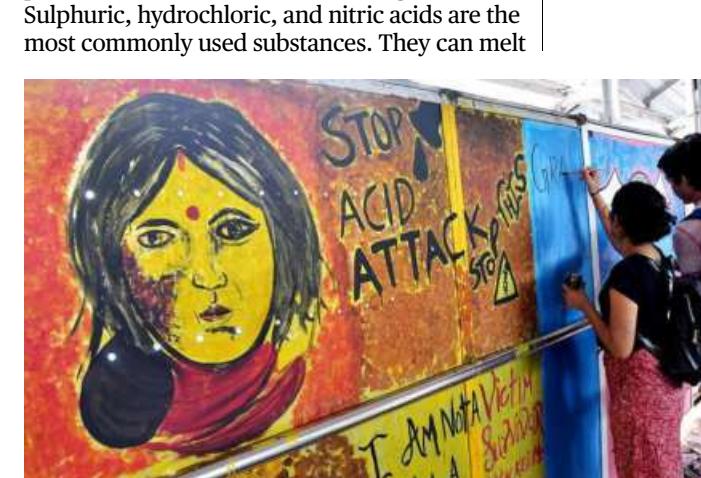
in only 16 cases, including pending cases, while 27 cases saw acquittal in the course of the year.

Ms. Malik's experience puts a human face on those statistics. "Just the fact that I did not get a verdict for 16 years when the case should have been completed in six months is a denial of justice. The police investigation was shoddy, there was evidence that was ignored, there was extreme judicial insensitivity... The judge even falsely accused me of having an emotional relationship with the accused," she told *The Hindu*. "The investigating officer pushed me to settle the case instead of taking it to court and the accused offered me crores of rupees. I did not take one paisa because I wanted my rights, not money... Who will be willing to go to court after this?" she asks, noting that not one of the 300 survivors supported by her Brave Souls Foundation has yet secured a conviction in their trials, though most have been offered out-of-court settlements. Ms. Malik also had to go to court to get the ₹3 lakh she is entitled to from the State as compensation, receiving the money nine years after the crime.

What steps are needed to end this crime and support survivors?

Survivors have called for a more comprehensive ban on the sale of acid and stricter implementation of the existing rules. "The sub-divisional magistrate is responsible for monitoring acid sale; has even one SDM been punished for illegal sales? In Bangladesh, a shop is sealed within 30 days if they are openly selling acid," says Ms. Malik. The neighbouring country passed stringent laws against acid sales and attacks in 2002, accompanied by large-scale public awareness campaigns, after which the number of reported attacks has fallen 15% to 20% each year, according to the Acid Survivors Foundation of Bangladesh; from 494 attacks in 2002, there were only 13 attacks in 2024.

Sensitisation of judges, public prosecutors and judges, fast track courts, legal support and counselling for victims, and penalisation of judicial delays are essential to improve conviction rates and create a stronger deterrent. The Justice J.S. Verma Committee's recommendations for a national fund to cover lifelong medical, psychological, educational, and skilling needs of survivors must be implemented for comprehensive rehabilitation.



Safety first: Survivors call for a more comprehensive ban on the sale of acid and stricter implementation of existing rules. FILE PHOTO

PROFILES

Monroe Doctrine reloaded

Strike on Venezuela

By bombing Venezuela, the U.S. is seeking to reestablish its primacy in the Western Hemisphere, check the influence of its rivals in the region and install a friendly regime in the country which has one of the world's largest proven oil reserves

Stanly Johny

Donald Trump had set his sights on Venezuela during his first term. Then, his administration formally charged President Nicolás Maduro and his top aides with alleged involvement in drug trafficking. Juan Guaidó, an opposition politician, was recognised by the U.S. and its Western allies as the acting President of Venezuela. After Mr. Trump returned to power in early 2025, his immediate foreign policy priority was Venezuela. The administration declared a 'war on drugs' and accused Mr. Maduro of being 'one of the largest narco-traffickers in the world'. It began bombing civilian boats off Venezuela claiming they were carrying drugs, and deployed jets, warships and thousands of troops to the Caribbean. Mr. Trump said he had authorised the CIA to carry out a clandestine operation inside Venezuela, and imposed a naval quarantine on oil tankers to and from the country.

Regime change

On January 3, a day after Mr. Maduro offered "serious talks" with Washington, the U.S. carried out large scale air strikes in the Latin American country. The Venezuelan government "denounced" the military aggression and declared a state of emergency. Mr. Trump acknowledged the strikes in a social media post and claimed that Mr. Maduro and his wife "were captured" and taken out of the country. While it is not immediately clear whether the abduction of Venezuela's sitting President would mark an end to the socialist regime, Mr. Trump seems to be moving fast with his plan of aggression. What he wants is clear: regime change. María Corina Machado, Venezuela's right-wing opposition leader who won this year's Nobel Peace Prize, "absolutely supports" Mr. Trump's policies.

Why does Mr. Trump want regime change in Venezuela, a country that doesn't pose any serious security challenges to America? Venezuela is



Skeletal remains: A destroyed anti-aircraft unit at La Carlota military air base in Caracas, Venezuela, after the U.S. attack on Saturday. REUTERS

not even a major source of drug production, and Washington hasn't provided any evidence to substantiate its claim that the Maduro regime was running cartels.

Three broad reasons can be identified for the U.S. aggression.

One, Mr. Trump wants to reimpose American primacy in the Western Hemisphere. President James Monroe declared in 1823 that the Americas were off-limits to future European interference and colonisation. What later came to be known as the Monroe Doctrine, the policy established U.S. hegemony in its backyard, carving out a sphere of influence.

The recently released *National Security Doctrine* of the Trump administration identifies Latin America and the Caribbean as a strategic priority – a Trump corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, which American media and experts dubbed the 'Monroe Doctrine', after Donald Trump. The document asserts that the U.S. must deny influence or control by outside powers [read China] in Latin America and ensure that the Western Hemisphere remains under American

political, economic and military influence.

Two, while reinforcing American primacy, the U.S. would also want to keep the Chinese and Russian influence in the region under check. China has already made huge investments in Latin America through its Belt and Road Initiative, which Beijing claims have 24 signatories in the region. China is also the largest or the second largest trading partner of most countries in the region.

In his second term, Mr. Trump has supported far-right figures in the continent, from Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil to Javier Milei in Argentina. In Honduras, Nasry Asturía, a Trump-endorsed right-wing candidate, won the presidency last month. With the return of the right-wing, the U.S. and its allies are rolling back South America's pink tide. While there are still a few left-wing governments in Latin America, two of them publicly defy American dominance and seek stronger strategic and economic ties with China and Russia – Venezuela and Cuba. Of the two, Venezuela holds a prime spot because of its vast

reserves of liquid gold.

China accounts for nearly 80% of Venezuela's oil purchases. China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) is also the largest foreign company with investments and operations in Venezuela's oil sector. Even though China has scaled back its investments in Venezuela due to American sanctions, in 2024, China Concord Resources Corporation, a private company, signed a \$1-billion agreement with PDVSA, Venezuela's state oil company, to develop two oilfields in Lake Maracaibo. Earlier in 2025, the Trump administration forced Panama to pull back from the China-led BRI. If the Maduro regime is forcibly brought down, the U.S. could send a strong message to other weaker powers in the region against economic and security cooperation with China and Russia.

It's about oil

The third reason could be oil. Venezuela has about 17% of the world's known oil reserves, or more than 300 billion barrels, nearly four times the reserves of the U.S. American

companies such as ExxonMobil and Gulf Oil were active players in Venezuela's oil sector until the 1976 nationalisation. When left-wing leader Hugo Chávez came to power in 1999, he tightened the state control over oil resources through another wave of nationalisation and used oil profits to launch poverty eradication projects. In 2002, there was a coup against Chávez, which was backed by the U.S. But Chávez was brought back to power within 48 hours in the face of mass protests against the coup plotters.

Last month, Mr. Trump demanded Venezuela return all the "stolen American oil, land and assets", in a direct reference to Venezuela's nationalisation of its oil resources. He also made it clear that he wanted Venezuelan oil for American companies – which would help the U.S. reduce its dependence on Persian Gulf oil and force China out of Venezuela.

Mr. Trump had said this earlier as well. In 2019, after the first Trump administration recognised Juan Guaidó as the acting President of Venezuela, Mr. Trump had ordered his aides to demand Mr. Guaidó to commit to giving the U.S. access to his country's oil and ousting China and Russia if he wrested power, John Bolton, Mr. Trump's former National Security Adviser, wrote in his memoir. In 2023, Mr. Trump said: "When I left [in 2021], Venezuela was ready to collapse. We would have taken it over. We would have gotten all that oil".

Now, with the strike on Venezuela and the claimed capture of Mr. Maduro, Mr. Trump appears close to achieving his objective. Ms. Machado, the West's favourite Venezuelan politician who could succeed Mr. Maduro should the regime collapse, has already promised to open up Venezuela's oil sector. "We will open all, upstream, midstream, downstream, to all companies," she said on a podcast hosted by Donald Trump Jr., the President's eldest son. She added that the minerals and power sectors would also be opened up for foreign [read American] companies.

THE GIST

▼ The recently released National Security Doctrine of the Trump administration identifies Latin America and the Caribbean as a strategic priority – a Trump corollary to the Monroe Doctrine

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Enigmatic mayor

Balendra Shah

The rapper-engineer architects his leap into national politics, eyeing the prime ministerial chair as Nepal heads to elections

Sanjeev Satganya

A known figure. But an unknown character.

That is how many describe Balendra Shah, the current Mayor of Kathmandu, Nepal's capital city.

Popularly known as "Balen", the rapper-turned-mayor has now officially made his foray into national politics. Last week, he joined the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP), which has projected him as its prime ministerial candidate for the general election slated for March 5.

Until the run-up to the 2022 local elections, when Balen decided to throw his hat into the ring for the highly coveted post of Kathmandu Mayor, he was known largely within a limited circle, mostly among the youth, as a rap singer.

Much of his mayoral campaign played out on social media, particularly Facebook. Running as an independent candidate, Balen was assigned a walking stick as his election symbol. Against expectations, he trounced candidates from established political parties – a feat many summed up with the refrain: Balen beat the parties with the stick.

He rarely gives speeches, avoids interviews, and maintains almost no direct engagement with the public. Instead, he communicates almost exclusively through social media.

In one such instance in



September 2023, after a vehicle from his office was stopped during a routine check, Balen wrote on Facebook that he would "burn Singha Durbar," a remark referring to Nepal's central seat of power. He later deleted the post but offered no clarification on the context or intent behind the statement.

Two years later, during the second day of the Gen Z-led protests against corruption, nepotism and misgovernance, several government buildings, including parts of Singha Durbar, were vandalised and set ablaze by demonstrators.

In a Facebook post ahead of the protests, he wrote that he fully supported the cause but would not take to the streets himself, noting that he was not part of Gen Z. It was the 35-year-old Mayor who later urged protest leaders to enter into dialogue with the Nepal Army, which had emerged as the chief negotiator between Gen Z representatives and President Ram Chandra Poudel.

After 19 – later revised

to 22 – people died on the first day of the protests on September 8, then Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli resigned the next day. Later that day, in a provocative social media post, Balen wrote, "...the resignation of your murderer has come," as he urged protest groups to "exercise restraint".

As someone who won independently, Balen did not have a party, and forming a new political outfit with elections just two months away would have been an uphill task. Mr. Lamichhane's offer to join his party, the RSP – which already has an organisational base – and become the prime ministerial face was too good to resist, analysts say.

In the past three years, his performance as Kathmandu Mayor has increasingly come under scrutiny. Critics point to his high-handed approach toward street vendors and landless squatters. Meanwhile, basic civic challenges, such as drinking water and waste management, remain unresolved.

For now, Balen remains what he has long been: a familiar face, but a sphinx-like enigma.

The junta in civilian clothing

USDP

The party in Myanmar functions as a strategic instrument of the junta within a multi-party system where the military retains ultimate power through constitutional guarantees

Srinivasan Ramani

Five years after staging a military coup that overthrew the 2020 election results and imprisoned elected leaders, including National League for Democracy (NLD) leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and President U Win Myint, Myanmar's junta is now attempting to legitimise its rule through elections. The poll has yet to be tested. His strength largely rests on personal mystique, which he may not be able to maintain once he starts going to the hustings.

How an off-standish Balen would fare in national politics – which demands public engagement, negotiation, and compromise – has yet to be tested. His strength largely rests on personal mystique, which he may not be able to maintain once he starts going to the hustings.

As someone who won independently, Balen did not have a party, and forming a new political outfit with elections just two months away would have been an uphill task. Mr. Lamichhane's offer to join his party, the RSP – which already has an organisational base – and become the prime ministerial face was too good to resist, analysts say.



tered along with 40 other parties. Collectively, they had won 90% of legislative seats in 2020.

Aiding the USDP's dominance was the junta's introduction of a proportional representation system, replacing the first-past-the-post method that had delivered the NLD's sweeping victories.

The first phase of the poll was held on December 28, 2025, with the remaining two scheduled for early and late January. However, these polls cover only about half of Myanmar's territory, with the rest beyond the junta's reach due to the ongoing civil war involving the NLD-led National Unity Government's Bamar-dominated People's Defence Forces and ethnic armed organisations across the country.

In results that were a foregone conclusion, the military's proxy Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) claimed victory in nearly 80% of contested seats. The USDP fielded over 1,000 candidates, far exceeding its closest rivals' tallies. Meanwhile, the NLD, which won landslide victories in 2015 and 2020, was deregis-

The military seized power again through a coup, and ruled until 2021 with Than Shwe as leader.

The USDP, in contrast to the BSPP, functions as a strategic instrument within a multi-party system while the military retains ultimate power through constitutional guarantees. If the USDP loses, the military doesn't collapse; it simply uses other mechanisms to maintain control, as demonstrated by the 2021 coup. Also, unlike the BSPP's "secular" and "socialist" pretensions, the USDP seeks legitimacy in an ideological blend of Bamar and Buddhist nationalism, by aligning with radical monastic groups like MaBaTha against perceived foreign and minority threats.

The USDP's current leader is U Khin Yi, a former senior military officer and police chief who also served as immigration minister in Thein Sein's government. Khin Yi conducted a series of pro-military rallies before the February 2021 coup, following the junta's false claim that the NLD's victory was due to fraud.

The party's candidate list for the current election is packed with generals and former ministers. The USDP now appears to be a vehicle to transition junta leader Min Aung Hlaing into a civilian presidency, providing a legal veneer to end the state of emergency declared after the coup.

Strategic instrument

In a way, the USDP is a successor to the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) that ruled Myanmar under a one-party dictatorship led by Ne Win following a military coup in 1962. The BSPP was inseparable from the state and collapsed in 1988 following the popular 8888 uprising.

BANGKOK

Military-backed party leads in early election results in Myanmar



Myanmar's military-appointed election body has begun announcing the winners of the first phase of its three-part general election, saying that the military-backed party has won the majority of seats, as widely expected. The Union Election Commission said on Saturday that USDP won 38 seats in the 330-seat lower house. AFP

PHNOM PENH

Cambodia demands Thailand withdraw troops, a week into truce



Cambodia called on neighbouring Thailand on Saturday to pull out its forces from areas Phnom Penh claims as its own, one week since a truce halted deadly clashes. The Thai army has rejected claims it had used force to seize Cambodia territory, insisting its forces were present in areas that had always belonged to Thailand. AFP

ISLAMABAD

Pakistan backs China's mediation claim during Operation Sindoor



Pakistan has backed China's claim that Beijing played a role in defusing tension with India during Operation Sindoor, calling it "diplomacy for peace" that was part of international efforts. India consistently maintained that there is no place for any third-party intervention in matters relating to India and Pakistan. PTI

DHAKA

Thirteen NCP leaders resign over alliance with Jamaat in Bangladesh



Thirteen central leaders of the student-led National Citizen Party (NCP) have resigned in the last eight days over its alliance with the Jamaat-e-Islami ahead of the elections in Bangladesh in February, a report said. Despite the objections, Jamaat chief Shafiqur Rahman officially announced the alliance with the NCP last week. PTI

Rioters 'must be put in their place', says Khamenei as toll touches 10

The remark signals approval for tougher crackdown on ongoing protests; the collapse of Iran's currency, rial, has intensified public anger leading to the biggest protest since 2022; the Supreme Leader says foreign powers were pushing the agitation

Associated Press
DUBAI

Iran's Supreme Leader insisted on Saturday that "rioters must be put in their place" after a week of protests that have shaken the Islamic Republic, likely giving security forces a green light to aggressively put down the demonstrations.

The first comments by 86-year-old Ayatollah Ali Khamenei come as violence surrounding the demonstrations sparked by Iran's ailing economy has killed at least 10 people. The protests show no sign of stopping and follow U.S. President Donald Trump warning Iran on Friday



Heavy hand: Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei speaks during a meeting in Tehran, Iran on Saturday. REUTERS

that if Tehran "violently kills peaceful protesters," the United States "will come to their rescue".

While it remains unclear how and if Mr. Trump will intervene, his comments

on Saturday that the U.S. military captured Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro, a long-time ally of Tehran.

The protests have become the biggest in Iran since 2022, when the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini in police custody triggered nationwide demonstrations. However, the protests have yet to be as widespread and intense as those surrounding the death of Amini, who was detained over not wearing her hijab, or headscarf, to the liking of authorities.

State television aired the remarks by Mr. Khamenei to an audience in Tehran that sought to separate the concerns of protesting Ira-

nians upset about the rial's collapse from "rioters".

"We talk to protesters, the officials must talk to them," Mr. Khamenei said. "But there is no benefit to talking to rioters. Rioters must be put in their place."

He also reiterated a claim constantly made by officials in Iran that foreign powers were pushing the protests, without offering any evidence. He also blamed "the enemy" for Iran's collapsing rial.

Hard-line officials within the country are believed to have been pushing for a more-aggressive response to the demonstrations as President Masoud Pezeshkian has sought talks to address protesters' demands.

Troops deployed to border with Venezuela: Colombia

Agence France-Presse
BOGOTÁ

Colombian President Gustavo Petro said on Saturday he ordered the deployment of military forces to the Venezuelan border, following U.S. strikes that, according to Donald Trump, ended with the capture of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro.

Mr. Petro described Washington's actions as an "assault on the sovereignty" of Latin America and said they would result in a humanitarian crisis.

While proposing that the situation could be resolved through "dialogue," the leftist President said on X that he had also ordered the "deployment of the security forces" to the Venezuelan border.

Mr. Petro made no mention of Mr. Maduro's cap-



Colombian military personnel deployed in Cucuta, stands guard at the border crossing with Venezuela, on Saturday. AFP

ture, despite the Venezuelan leader being one of his government's closest allies in the region.

Earlier, the Colombian leader had requested an "immediate" meeting of the Organisation of American States (OAS) and the UN to "establish the international legality of the aggression" by the United States.

Colombia holds a non-

'Saudi-backed forces make advances in Yemen's Hadramout'

Agence France-Presse
MUKALLA

Saudi-backed troops on Saturday made advances in Yemen's resource-rich Hadramout province, military officials said, as confrontations between forces backed by Riyadh and Abu Dhabi deepened a rift between the two Gulf allies.

The Saudis and Emiratis have for years supported rival factions in Yemen's fractious government. But a recent offensive by the UAE-backed secessionist

Southern Transitional Council (STC) to capture Hadramout angered Riyadh and left the oil-rich regional powers on a collision course.

In a statement, the military of the Saudi-aligned government announced that "all military and civilian facilities" in Mukalla, the capital of Hadramout province, had "been secured" by Riyad-backed forces. Earlier, two military officials said they had taken control of Mukalla's principal military base.

The resource-rich east of the Democratic Republic of Congo, which borders Rwanda as well as Burundi, has been beset by 30 years of continual violence. The situation has worsened since 2021 amid the resurgence of the M23.

Violent clashes break out between DRC forces, M23 group near key city of Uvira

Agence France-Presse
BUKAVU



There have been reports of intense fighting in the neighbouring North Kivu since Friday, where at least six were killed. REUTERS

Having seized the two main eastern cities of Goma and Bukavu late last year, the group launched a new offensive in December

in South Kivu province and gained control on December 10 of Uvira, a strategic city of several hundred thousand people near Bu-

rundi, DRC's ally.

"Since 3 a.m., violent clashes between M23 rebels and Wazalendo (pro-Kinshasa militias) and the armed forces of the Republic have been reported in several localities in the territory of Uvira," in South Kivu province, said Kelvin Bwija, Uvira civil society coordinator.

There have also been reports of intense fighting in the neighbouring province of North Kivu since Friday,

where at least six persons were killed and 41 wounded in a bombing attributed to the Congolese army.

Nagal faces Prajwal in round one; Aryan starts against Zhukayev

BENGALURU OPEN

Sports Bureau
BENGALURU

Sumit Nagal will open his Bengaluru Open ATP Challenger 125 campaign against wild card and local lad S.D. Prajwal Dev.

At the draw ceremony that was conducted on Saturday, it also emerged that the 28-year-old World No. 277 can potentially meet second seed Harold Mayot of France (No. 163) in the round of 16.

Aryan Shah will start against Kazakhstan's Beibut Zhukayev while Karan Singh - the third Indian to gain a direct entry - will take on Croat Borna Gojo, a Davis Cup winner in 2021.



Big hopes: Nagal will look to begin the new season on a strong note. KMURALI KUMAR

Even as top seed and World No. 92 Pedro Martinez of Spain drew a qualifier, Dan Evans, a former top-25 player, pulled out. Lloyd Harris, US Open quarterfinalist in 2021, will meet Czechia's Jonas Forejtak.

The qualifying rounds will begin on Sunday with the main draw matches scheduled from Monday.

Indian wildcards in 25-

Gritty Wawrinka leads Switzerland to win over France

UNITED CUP

Agence France-Presse
PERTH

Stan Wawrinka launched the final season of his career with a marathon 5-7, 7-6(5), 7-6(5) win to give Switzerland an unassailable 2-0 lead over France at the United Cup on Saturday.

The 40-year-old held off Arthur Rinderknech to join teammate Belinda Bencic as a winner after she began the tie 6-2, 6-4 over Leontine Jeanjean.

Later, the two teamed up to get the better of Tiantsoa Rakotomanga Rajao and Eduardo Roger-Vasselin in the mixed dou-

bles to make it 3-0. Wawrinka is competing in Perth for the first time in his long career. "After 20 years on the tour it's amazing to finally play here," he said.

Also on Saturday, in Sydney, Zhang Zhizhen led China to a 2-1 win over Belgium.

The results: Group B: China bt Belgium 2-1 (Lin Zhu lost to Elise Mertens 2-6, 2-6; Zhang Zhizhen bt Zlou Bergs 6-7(2), 7-6(3), 7-5; Zhu & Zhang bt Mertens & Bergs 5-7, 7-6(5), 10-6).

Group C: Switzerland bt

France 3-0 (Belinda Bencic bt

Leontine Jeanjean 6-2, 6-2; Stan

Wawrinka bt Arthur Rinderknech

5-7, 7-6(5), 7-6(5); Bencic &

Wawrinka bt Tiantsoa

Rakotomanga Rajao & Eduardo

Roger-Vasselin 6-2, 5-7, 10-2).

AFI announces the qualifying standards for Asian Games

Uthra Ganesan
NEW DELHI

The Athletics Federation of India on Saturday announced the qualifying standards for 2026 Asian Games, going beyond the Sports Ministry's selection criteria and making it tougher for athletes to book a spot in the event.

AFI spokesman and former president Adille Sumariwalla said the athletes have ample opportunities to peak at the right time and book tickets for the quadrennial event in Aichi-Nagoya, Japan.

"The AFI will select at least two eligible athletes in each of the events but the selection committee will take a final call on the total strength of the contingent for the Asian Games."

sengers. People might qualify with a mark matching the 6th place finish but if they will have no chance of a medal, they won't be taken. These people often become a liability to the rest of the prospects," Sumariwalla was categorical.

Interestingly, barring the men's 100m, most other marks have been achieved by Indians, although it will now be a matter of doing so in the qualifying period. He added that the qualifying marks had been shared with the ministry. He also revealed that a team from World Athletics would be visiting later this month to evaluate the facilities and possibilities of India hosting the 2028 World U20 Championships and the World Championships in 2031.

"We have gone to make things slightly more competitive in certain events. There have been over three months of discussions with coaches both foreign and Indian, athletes and our research team, keeping two things in mind. One, We should not miss a medal and two, we don't want to take any pas-

ALL SET

Shreyas to play in Mumbai's next couple of Hazare Trophy games



Having received a conditional clearance from the BCCI's Centre of Excellence in Bengaluru, Shreyas Iyer will be available for Mumbai's Vijay Hazare Trophy fixtures against Himachal and Punjab. "Shreyas will link up with the team on Sunday and will be playing in the next couple of games," said Mumbai's chief selector Sanjay Patil.

KEEP THE FAITH

Stokes urges England to stick with McCullum despite Ashes defeat



Ben Stokes has urged the England chiefs to keep faith with Brendon McCullum despite a stinging Ashes defeat. "There is no doubt in my mind that me and Brendon are the right people. I can't see there being someone else who could take this team to even bigger heights. We're both keen on continuing," Stokes said.

THE PRIORITY

No coasting in 'huge' final Ashes Test, says England skipper Stokes



Ben Stokes called the fifth and final Test against Australia a "huge game" for England and vowed there would be no coasting at the end of a long and draining Ashes tour. "I don't think it will happen, just sort of coasting through this game and seeing what happens," he said ahead of the SCG Test following a win in the fourth match.

NEW DIMENSION

'Would love to see one bowler getting a fifth over in T20s'



Former umpire Simon Taufel has called for a better balance between bat and ball in T20 cricket, suggesting that one bowler should be allowed to bowl five overs instead of the existing four-over quota. Taufel also said he does not endorse all recent rule changes, including the Impact Player rule and strategic timeouts.

Dragons scrape past Toofans in opener

Prince Deep produces a crucial save in the shootout for the home side; the Hyderabad outfit comes back thrice from behind to force penalties

HIL - MEN

K. Keerthivasan
CHENNAI

Midfielder Mohammed Raheel kept his composure, waited for goalkeeper Jean-Paul Danneburg to commit, and calmly rolled the ball past him to help Tamil Nadu Dragons edge Hyderabad Toofans 4-2 in the shootout after the teams were locked 3-3 at the end of regulation time in the inaugural match of the Men's Hockey India League at the SDAT-Mayor Radhakrishnan Stadium here on Saturday.

Michel Struthoff and Talwar Singh missed their attempts for Toofans in the shootout. Dragons' goalkeeper Prince Deep Singh, who replaced an impressive David Harte for the tiebreaker, produced a crucial save to deny Talwinder.

Dragons had raced to a 2-0 lead in the first quarter with two quick goals. Utam Singh opened the scoring by deflecting in a penalty-corner variation, before Thomas Sorsby produced a brilliant 25-yard run and finished emphatically past the goalkeeper.

Toofans responded



Keeping his cool: Raheel outwits Danneburg to clinch the tie for Dragons. R. RAGU

through Amandeep Lakra, who struck twice with two clean and precise drag-flicks.

Striker Selvam Karthi put the host back in the lead with an opportunistic finish, but defender Arthur De Sloover restored parity with a superb goal from a tight angle that caught Harte by surprise.

In the absence of injured drag-flick ace Gonzalo Peillat, the responsibility fell on Amandeep, and the 23-year-old rose to the occasion. However, Toofans were unable to get going in the shootout. For the Dra-

gons, the foreign contingent played a decisive role across the midfield, defence and attack, delivering key interventions at crucial moments.

The contest was billed as the one between Dragons' fluency in open play against the Toofans' strength in penalty corners, and it lived up to expectation.

The result: Tamil Nadu Dragons 3 (Uttam Singh 4-pc, Thomas Sorsby 9, Selvam Karthi 32) drew with Hyderabad Toofans 3 (Amandeep Lakra 12-pc & 18-pc, Arthur De Sloover 37). Dragons won the shootout 4-2.

Gill back as skipper for ODI series against the Black Caps

Amol Karhadkar

MUMBAI

Shubman Gill returns as the ODI captain for India's three-match series against New Zealand, while his deputy Shreyas Iyer has also been included – subject to fitness clearance – in the 15-member squad. Mohammed Siraj was recalled after being rested for the two home ODI series earlier in the season.

The squad was announced on Saturday afternoon after the selection committee, in consultation with captain Gill, held a virtual meeting in the morning.

Gill had missed the previous ODI series against South Africa due to a neck spasm.

According to a BCCI statement, Shreyas' availability is subject to fitness clearance from the BCCI Centre of Excellence. The middle-order batter is on the road to recovery after sustaining a serious abdominal injury during the Australia tour in October last year.

Gill and Shreyas have replaced Ruturaj Gaikwad and Dhruv Jurel from the squad that won the series against South Africa. Tilak Varma has made way for

Siraj, with the selectors opting to bolster the pace attack by adding a specialist fast bowler.

Ruturaj was unfortunate to miss out despite scoring a century while batting at No. 4 against the Proteas.

The BCCI release also clarified that Hardik Pandya was not considered for selection as the medical team at the Centre of Excellence has advised against him bowling 10 overs in a match, keeping in mind next month's T20 World Cup.

Siraj, who had been rested following a heavy workload in the Test format, is expected to spearhead the bowling attack as the selectors look to try out combinations ahead of the 2027 ODI World Cup in South Africa.

Rishabh Pant retains his place, with the selection committee opting to persist with him instead of bringing in Ishan Kishan. **The squad:** Shubman Gill (Capt.), Shreyas Iyer* (Vice-capt.), Rohit Sharma, Virat Kohli, K.L. Rahul (wk), Washington Sundar, Ravindra Jadeja, Mohammed Siraj, Harshit Rana, Prasidh Krishna, Kuldeep Yadav, Rishabh Pant (wk), Nitish Kumar, Arshdeep Singh, and Yashasvi Jaiswal. (*subject to fitness clearance).

Gill and Shreyas have replaced Ruturaj Gaikwad and Dhruv Jurel from the squad that won the series against South Africa. Tilak Varma has made way for

Under Jemimah, Capitals aim to cross the final hurdle

WPL COUNTDOWN**Vivek Krishnan**

For three seasons of the Women's Premier League, Delhi Capitals has stayed in the champion's shadow. To reach the final of the showpiece T20 league every year is a testament to the franchise's capability and consistency, but to not be rewarded for it with silverware even once must be difficult to digest.

When the tournament's fourth season commences in Navi Mumbai on January 9, the three-time runner-up will aim to chart a slightly different course that entails finding a way past the final hurdle.

The responsibility of steering DC through this challenge has been entrusted to a new skipper in Jemimah Rodrigues.

With franchises being allowed to retain a maximum of five players prior to November's mega auction, Capitals opted to let go of Australia's Meg Lanning. It has opened the door for Jemimah, who was one of the stars of India's triumphant ODI World Cup campaign in November, to take on the task of leadership for the first time in the WPL.

Having displayed the capacity to perform under pressure during the recent World Cup – her unbeaten 127 in the semifinal against Australia was the cornerstone of India's record chase of 339 – Jemimah seems to be ready to withstand the additional scrutiny that comes with captaincy.

With Lanning's move to UP Warriorz creating a void at the top of the order, it is imperative for South African opener Laura Wolvaardt to settle into her new surroundings in quick time. The 26-year-old was in phenomenal touch during the ODI World Cup – she was the tournament's leading run-getter with 571 runs in nine innings, which included a contribution of 101 against India in the final. Wolvaardt's opening partnership with Shafali Verma should make for de-



Big responsibility: Jemimah will look to swing it Capitals' way this time. FILE PHOTO: R.V. MOORTHY

lightful viewing.

Much of DC's fortunes will also depend on South Africa's Marizanne Kapp. Particularly with Australian all-rounder Annabel Sutherland pulling out of the tournament for personal reasons earlier this week, Kapp's ability with bat and ball lends much-needed balance.

Adding robustness to the spin department is Shree Charani. The 21-year-old left-arm spinner will be complemented by off-spinners Sneh Rana and Minnu Mani and leggie Alana King. The fourth edition of the WPL will be held from January 9 to February 5.

The squad: Jemimah Rodrigues (Capt.), Laura Wolvaardt, Tanya Bhatia (wk), Deeya Yadav, Chinelle Henry, Lizelle Lee, Madivali Mamatha (wk), Niki Prasad, Shafali Verma, Marizanne Kapp, Lucy Hamilton, Alana King, Sneh Rana, Minnu Mani, Shree Charani, and Nandani Sharma.

Capitals' schedule: Jan. 10: vs Mumbai Indians; Jan. 11: Gujarat Giants; Jan. 17: Royal Challengers Bangalore (all matches at Navi Mumbai); Jan. 20: MI; Jan. 24: RCB; Jan. 27: GG; Feb. 1: UP (all matches at Vadodara). Matches start at 7.30 p.m.

Pipers rally to put Soorma on the brink of elimination

HIL - WOMEN

Santadeep Dey
RANCHI

On Saturday, the denizens here came together to commemorate the 123rd birth anniversary of Jaipal Singh Munda. A distinguished politician, accomplished sportsman, and visionary leader, Jaipal's legacy endures through the iconic 5,000-seater AstroTurf Stadium in Morabadi that bears his name.

So, probably there could have been no better fitting stage for a night of top-class hockey when JSW Soorma Hockey Club, last year's Women's Hockey India League (HIL) runner-up, was effectively shown the door by the current edition's table-topper SG Pipers. Coach Jude Menezes would have heaved a sigh of relief when Soorma finally dispelled the hex after three games and 24 unsuccessful penalty corners, but his happiness turned out to be short-lived.

Penny Squibb's fiery swipe from the second battery beat Pipers' defender Lola Riera and sounded



Take a bow! Sunelita is the toast of her teammates after scoring Pipers' third goal. R.V. MOORTHY

the boards. But the latter was quick to make amends.

A drag-flick from the three-time Olympian in the very next minute clattered into the backboard to take her season tally to three goals – the joint-most alongside Shrahni Bengal Tigers' star Agustina Gorzelany.

Jyoti Singh brought more joy to the high-flying Pipers dugout in the second quarter, dispossessing Shihori Oikawa in front of the goal before burying the ball deep into the net.

The result: JSW Soorma Hockey Club 1 (Squibb 12) lost to SG Pipers 3 (Riera 13, Jyoti 18, Sunelita 58).

thwarted by an alert Cristiana Cosentino.

The Argentine shotstopper met the moment once again in the last quarter when a deft touch Salima Tete, momentarily threatened Pipers' lead.

With 10 minutes to go, Menezes took off goalkeeper Nidhi to have the services of an extra field player.

But the plan backfired, with Sunelita Toppi flying through the right flank to slot the ball into an empty goal and seal Soorma's fate.

"I've said it for a while, I'm taking it day-by-day, series-by-series, and we'll see

Smith bats away talk of retirement

THE ASHES

Agence France-Presse
SYDNEY

Australia skipper Steve Smith said on Saturday he had no end date to call time on his career, while keeping England guessing on how his team will line up for the fifth and final Ashes Test.

With the retirement of Usman Khawaja after the Sydney Test beginning on Sunday and Nathan Lyon out injured, Smith will be the oldest player in the Australian line-up alongside Scott Boland.

Asked if he would still be playing at the next Ashes in England in 2027, the 36-year-old was non-committal, but said he was enjoying his cricket.

"I've said it for a while, I'm taking it day-by-day, series-by-series, and we'll see



WTC points at stake: Smith insists that there will be plenty of motivation for the final Test. AFP

where things land," said Smith, who has played 122 Tests and scored more than 10,000 runs.

"I feel like I'm doing alright at the moment, I'm enjoying it. So there's no real end date for me."

In terms of Australia's team for Sydney, Smith said everything was on the table with another look at the wicket required.

"Could play a couple of

all-rounders, could play spinner, could play no spinner," he said.

Australia leads the five-Test series 3-1 after eight-wicket wins in Perth and Brisbane, before an 82-run victory in Adelaide ensured they retained the urn. Smith said there was still plenty of motivation with WTC points at stake.

(Match starts at 5 a.m. IST).

Japan's Susaki is the most expensive buy

PWL AUCTION

Sports Bureau
NEW DELHI

In the player auction for the 2026 edition of the Pro Wrestling League here on Saturday, Japan's Yui Susaki emerged as the most expensive buy as she attracted a bid of ₹60 lakh from Haryana Thunders. In the men's section, Poland's Robert Baran was roped in by Maharashtra Kesari for ₹55 lakh.

Wrestlers in the auction pool were classified into four categories: A+, A, B and C.

Among women in category A+, which mandated a base price of ₹18 lakh, Susaki was the most sought-after wrestler. Antim Panghal was

snapped up by UP Dominators for ₹52 lakh in the women's 53 kg category, while Puerto Rico's Ana Godinez fetched ₹46 lakh from Punjab Royals in the 62 kg division.

Delhi Dangal Warriors secured the services of Azerbaijan's Anastasiya Alayayeva for ₹27 lakh in the women's 76 kg category.

Among the men, Sujeet Kalkal, who was in category A, was picked by Delhi Dangal Warriors for ₹52 lakh. Aman Sehrat, who won bronze in the 2024 Paris Olympics, was acquired by Tigers of Mumbai Dangal for ₹51 lakh.

The fifth season of the league will be held from January 15 to February 1 at the Noida Indoor Stadium. The event, which features six teams, is resuming after a six-year hiatus.

IN BRIEF



Vivaan-Naisha duo causes a flutter, enters the u-15 final

Vivaan Dave and Naisha Rewaskar kept their nerve in a thrilling decider to shock top seeds Aditya Das and Ankolika Chakraborty 13-11, 5-11, 11-7, 5-11, 23-21 to reach the under-15 mixed doubles final of the WTT Youth Contender in Vadodara on Saturday. They will meet Reyansh Jalan and Tanishka Kalbhairav, who beat Sanjay Jagdish and Myraa Sangakkara 11-3, 15-13, 11-7. In the under-19 category, the No. 1 duo of P.B. Abhinandhi and Ananya Muralidharan beat Ritvik Gupta and Ahona Roy 9-11, 14-12, 11-7, 11-8 and set up a summit clash with Sarthak Arya and Syndrella Das, a 11-6, 12-10, 5-11, 11-5 winner over Sahil Rawat and Hardee Patel.

Pakistan submits provisional squad for T20 WC to ICC

Pakistan has submitted a provisional 15-member squad for the World T20 Cup to the International Cricket Council but is yet to make the list public, a reliable source said. According to the source, the provisional squad includes injured pacer Shaheen Afridi, former captain Babar Azam, and all-rounder Shadab Khan. Young batting sensation Brian Bennett features in a Zimbabwe squad led by Sikandar Raza while Namibia will be helmed by Gerhard Erasmus in what will be the nation's fourth consecutive appearance in the tournament. Not all teams have announced their provisional squads so far.



Fell sick over the Christmas holiday period, says Osaka

Four-time Grand Slam singles champion Naomi Osaka is feeling under the weather at the United Cup in Perth. After losing her first match for Japan against Greece's Maria Sakkari on Friday, Osaka said she got "really sick" over the Christmas holiday period and wasn't operating at 100% during the 6-4, 6-2 loss. "I have been dealing with some health stuff, so I'm kind of just happy to be out here right now," Osaka said.

LIVE TELECAST

HIL: Women: Sony Sports Ten 1 & LIV, 3 p.m. & Men: Sony Sports Ten 1 & LIV, 5 & 7.30 p.m.
Serie A: DAZN, 5, 7.30, 10.30 p.m. & 1.15 a.m. (Monday)
Premier League: SS Select 1, 2 & JioHotstar, 6, 8.30 & 11 p.m.
LaLiga: FanCode, 6.30, 8.45, 11 p.m. & 1.30 a.m. (Monday)
The Ashes: 5th Test, day 2, Star Sports 1 & JioHotstar, 5 a.m. (Monday)

Meenakshi, Jaismine, Hitesh to headline Natl. Boxing Championships

Uthra Ganesan
NEW DELHI

Most of the top Indian pugilists will be in action when the Elite men's and women's national boxing championships, delayed by a few days due to adverse pollution conditions, finally kicks off at the Gautam Buddha University, Greater Noida from Saturday.

Among those will be recently-crowned World Champions Meenakshi and Jaismine Lamboria, two-time former world champion Nikhat Zareen, Olympic medallist Lovlina Borgohain, Nitu Ghanghas and Pooja Ranji besides others in women's section.

Among men, World Boxing Cup gold medallists Hitesh Gulia and Sachin Siwach, Abhinash Jamwal, Amit Panghal and veteran Shiva Thapa will headline the

competition. This is the first time men's and women's events are being held simultaneously at the same venue. The week-long event, will see participation from 600 boxers across 10 weight categories each in men and women.

The BFI has announced that all medallists in Olympic weight categories and finalists from non-Olympic ones would be included in the national camp post the tournament. Newly appointed women's head coach Santiago Nieva is also expected to be present at the event.

"The upcoming Nationals provides both established boxers and youngsters a platform to stake claim in the national team ahead of the Asian Games and Commonwealth Games," BFI president Ajay Singh said.

Abhimanyu, Shami help Bengal beat Assam

The former's 116-ball hundred powers his side to 302 for seven; the latter's three-wicket haul and three run-outs see the losing side get bowled out for 217; Tilak's ton guides Hyderabad to victory

HAZARE TROPHY

Anish Pathiyil

RAJKOT

Abhimanyu Easwaran's controlled hundred guided Bengal to an 85-run win over Assam in their Vijay Hazare Trophy 2025 Group B match here on Saturday.

The Bengal skipper (102, 116b, 10x4) tied up one end for almost 40 overs to set up the springboard for some late-order fireworks that helped the side post 302 for seven.

Mohammed Shami's three-wicket haul and three run outs helped bowl Assam out for 217 in the 43rd over.

Bengal suffered an early jolt after being put in to bat on a chilly, misty morning as Abishek Porel offered a leading edge to cover on 11. Abhimanyu and Sudip Ghamari combined for a 64-run association, where balls too wide of off-stump were dispatched to the fence.

The boundaries dried up after the ten-over mark, with Abhimanyu and Anustup Majumdar look-



Skipper's day out: Abhimanyu and Tilak's knock played a crucial role, on a day when both the teams saw commanding victories. FILE PHOTOS: K.V.S. GIRI & VIJAY SONEJI

ing to take the game deep. Anustup perished in his attempt to play a slog sweep off left-arm spinner Avinav Choudhury. Notwithstanding a dropped catch at slip, Abhimanyu motored on to a century in 111 balls, but fell immediately after, caught and bowled by Avinav.

Shahbaz Ahmed (66 n.o., 57b, 6x4, 2x6), who had started his innings with two early boundaries, switched to the role of anchor, batting through till the end. Akash Deep and



Shami contributed five fours and three sixes between them as Bengal breached the 300-run mark in the final over.

In reply, Shami struck in his first over, removing Pradyun Saikia. Saurav Dihingia and skipper Sumit Ghadigaonkar (40, 54b, 4x4) stitched up a 45-run stand involving some wobbly running between the wickets, which eventually cost the former his wicket.

Ghadigaonkar tried to construct partnerships with the middle order be- fore he was undone by Shami yorker. Denish Das's stubborn knock (43, 52b, 3x4) could only delay the inevitable as Bengal sealed its fourth win in five matches to maintain its chance of qualifying for the quarterfinal.

Meanwhile, Tilak Varma scored a hundred in his first appearance in the domestic one-day competition this season to help Hyderabad beat Chandigarh by 136 runs and register its first points in the tournament.

VIJAY HAZARE TROPHY — SATURDAY'S SCORES

Group A (Ahmedabad):

Jharkhand 311/7 in 50 overs (Kumar Kushagra 143 n.o., Anukul Roy 72, M.D. Nidheesh 4/46) lost to Kerala 313/2 in 42.3 overs (Sanju Samson 101, Rohan Kunnummal 124, Aparajith 41 n.o., Vishnu Vinod 40 n.o.).

Karnataka 332/7 in 50 overs (Devdutt Padikkal 108, S. Smaran 60, Abhinav Manohar 73 n.o., Abhijith Sarkar 4/50) bt Tripura 252 in 49 overs (Rajat Dey 66, Swapnil Singh 100).

Madhya Pradesh 228 in 49.5 overs (Shubham Sharma 47, Akshat Raghuwanshi 73, Aryan Pandey 46) lost to Pondicherry 229/6 in 43 overs (Ajay Rohera 41, S. Parameswaran 65, Aman Khan 59 n.o.).

Rajasthan 225 in 46.5 overs (Deepak Hooda 70, Manav Suthar 43, Varun Chakravarthy 4/25) bt Tamil Nadu 215 in 41.4 overs (S.R. Athish 54, N. Jagadeesan 71, Ashok Sharma 5/58).

Group B (Rajkot): Bengal 302/7 in 50 overs (Abhimanyu Easwaran 102, Shahbaz Ahmed 66 n.o.) bt Assam 217 in 42.1 overs (Sumit Ghadigaonkar 40, Denish Das 43). Hyderabad 286/9 in 50 overs (Tilak Varma 109, Abhirath Reddy 71) bt Chandigarh 150 in 37.4 overs (Sanyam Saini 46).

Uttar Pradesh 322/5 in 48 overs (Dhruv Jurel 55, Priyansh Garg 54, Rinku Singh 41, Sameer Rizvi 80 n.o.) bt Jammu & Kashmir 264/8 in 48 overs (Shubham Khajuria 60, Yawer Hassan 85 n.o.).

Baroda 293/9 in 50 overs (Hardik Pandya 133, Yash Thakur 4/64) lost to Vidarbha 296/1 in 41.4 overs (Atharva Taide 65, Aman Mokhade 150 n.o., Dhruv Shorey 65 n.o.).

Group C (Jaipur): Maharashtra 366/4 in 50 overs (Prithvi Shaw 71, Arshin Kulkarni 114, Ruturaj Gaikwad 66, Ramakrishna Ghosh 60 n.o.) bt Mumbai 238 in 42 overs (Angkrish Raghuwanshi 92, Siddhesh Lad 52).

Himachal 320/8 in 50 overs

(Inness Mahajan 95, Pukhraj Mann 134) lost to Chhattisgarh 321/7 in 49.4 overs (Ayush Pandey 78, Amandeep Khare 72). Sikkim 75 in 22.2 overs (Arshdeep Singh 5/34) lost to Punjab 81/0 in 6.2 overs (Prabhhsimran Singh 53 n.o.).

Goa 270 in 49.1 overs (Snehal Kautharkar 105, Abhinav Tejara 54) lost to Uttarakhand 274/3 in 46.2 overs (Shashwat Dangwal 70 n.o., Aanjaneya Suryavanshi 115 n.o.).

Group D (Bengaluru): Services 178 in 42.5 overs (Harshit Rana 4/47) lost to Delhi 182/2 in 19.4 overs (Priyansh Arya 72 n.o., Rishabh Pant 67 n.o.).

Saurashtra 294/8 in 50 overs (Gajjar Sammar 147) bt Railways 263 in 49.1 overs (Upendra Yadav 86, Ashutosh Sharma 65).

Odisha 305/9 in 50 overs (Swastik Samal 101, Govinda Poddar 77, Biplob Samantray 47) lost to Haryana 309/6 in 48.4 overs (Parth Vats 157 n.o., Anuj Thakral 59 n.o.).

Gujarat 318/9 in 50 overs (Axar Patel 130, Vishal Jayswal 70, Satyanarayan Raju 4/53) bt Andhra 311/7 in 50 overs (C. Gnaneshwar 102, S.D.N.V. Prasad 48 n.o.).

Plate (Ranchi): Mizoram 258 in

45.4 overs (Joseph Lalthankuma 61, Codanda Ajit Karthik 73) lost to Bihar 262/5 in 34.1 overs (Ayush Loharuka 40, Bipin Saurabh 95, Kumar Rajnish 71 n.o.).

Meghalaya 238 in 45 overs (Kush Agarwal 47, Jaskirat Singh Sachdeva 74, Kishan Singh 5/68) lost to Manipur 241/7 in 43.3 overs (Langtongamba Metian Keishangbam 77, Johnson Singh 48).

Arunachal Pradesh 244/6 in 50 overs (Techi Doria 55, Nabam Kama 54, Devdatta Natu 56 n.o., Kamsha Yangfo 42) lost to Nagaland 245/1 in 39.2 overs (Joshua Ozukum 140 n.o., Dega Nischal 73 n.o.).

TN men, Railways women will look to defend their titles

BASKETBALL

Sports Bureau
CHENNAI

Defending champions Tamil Nadu (men) and Indian Railways (women) head the field for the 75th senior National basketball championship to be held at the Nehru Indoor Stadium here from January 4 to 11.

The championship – to be played in a league cum knockout format – will see 34 men's and 31 women's teams participate.

The teams are divided into Level 1 (top 10 teams) and the rest in Level 2. The

quarterfinals will begin on January 9. The winner will take home ₹5 lakh while the runner-up and third place will get ₹3 lakh and ₹2 lakh respectively.

The Groupings: Men: Level 1:

Group A: Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Services, Rajasthan, Gujarat.

Group B: Punjab, Indian Railways, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Chandigarh.

Level 2: **Group C:** Kerala,

Jammu & Kashmir, Jharkhand,

and West Bengal;

D: Madhya Pradesh, Goa,

Maharashtra, Uttarakhand;

E: Haryana, Chhattisgarh, Meghalaya, Tripura;

F: Himachal Pradesh, Bihar,

Telangana;

G: Andaman & Nicobar, Nagaland, Sikkim;

H: Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Odisha, Puducherry.

Women: Level 1: **Group A:**

Indian Railways Delhi,

Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra,

Karnataka.

B: Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat,

Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal.

Level 2: **C:** Punjab, Goa,

Haryana, Tripura, Uttarakhand;

D: Uttar Pradesh, Chandigarh,

Jammu & Kashmir, Telangana;

E: Rajasthan, Bihar, Jharkhand,

Sikkim;

F: Himachal Pradesh,

Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur,

Puducherry;

G: Andhra Pradesh, Assam,

Meghalaya, Odisha.

Gukesh pulls out of Tata Steel Chess due to personal reasons

Sports Bureau

CHENNAI

World champion D. Gukesh has pulled out of the Tata Steel Chess India tournament, to be held in Kolkata from January 7 to 11, due to personal reasons.

"Due to personal reasons, D. Gukesh will be unable to participate in Tata Steel Chess India this year," the organisers of the rapid and blitz event said on social media. Nihal Sarin will replace compatriot Gukesh in the tournament, the organisers announced.

Anand returns

The event will see the return of five-time World champion Viswanathan Anand as a player, after being the ambassador over the last few years.

The other Indians in the fray in the men's section are: R. Pragganandhaa, Arjun Erigaisi, Vedit Gujrathi

and Aravindh Chithambaram.

Wesley So, Wei Yi, Voldar Murzin and Hans Niemann complete the line-up.

In the women's section, the focus would be on World Cup winner Divya Deshmukh.



Show-starter: Escaping the harsh winter in Central Asia and Siberia, a little citrine wagtail, the first visitor this season, arrives in biodiversity-rich Assam. RITU RAJ KONWAR



Pasture hunting: In the iconic V-formation, a flock of bar-headed geese flies over a wetland in Assam. The birds will stay in the State till April.



Hungry guest: A black-necked stork searches for food in a wetland in the Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary in Morigaon district.



Roosting haven: Northern pintails at the Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary, which is a popular winter destination for migratory birds from Siberia, Central Asia, and the Himalayas.

A winter getaway in Assam's wetlands

To escape the freezing cold winters of the Siberian, Tibetan and European landscapes, every year several migratory birds flock to wetlands and Ramsar sites in Assam; this year too, these winged guests have made their way to birding spots in the northeastern State, boosting its biodiversity and ecotourism initiatives



Ritu Raj Konwar
rituraj.k@thehindu.co.in

With winter, tiny moving specks appearing on the sky over Assam mark the arrival of avian guests that flock to riverbeds, wetlands, and natural and artificial reservoirs. To escape the biting cold of Siberian, Tibetan, and European regions, these water birds spread their wings each year in search of warmer winter homes across the globe. Assam's wetlands and Ramsar sites welcome these migratory birds, which not only enhance the northeastern State's biodiversity but also support its ecotourism initiatives.

This year too, vibrant migratory species such as white-fronted geese, pied avocets, greylag geese, ruddy shelducks, falcated ducks, ferruginous pochards, northern pintails, great crested grebes, common pochards, and bar-headed geese – known for their high-altitude migratory flight – have arrived to roost in the State's wetlands.

Despite threats posed by unsustainable development activities to waterbodies and wildlife reserves, Assam remains an important seasonal hub for migratory birds.

Some of the popular birding destinations in the State include Deepor Beel in Kamrup Metropolitan district; Maguri Motapung Beel in Tinsukia; Pani Dihing Beel in Sivasagar; the lakes within the Kaziranga National Park and Tiger Reserve; and the largest of all, Son Beel in Karimganj district.

Apart from these regular stopovers, the winter visitors also explore new and picturesque locations each year. Assam has long hosted these long-distance travellers with sustained conservation efforts, which continue to be strengthened to protect their habitats.



Friends of a feather: A flock of glossy ibis takes a dip in Lake Deepor Beel, a Ramsar site, near Guwahati.



A regular: Arriving from their breeding grounds in Europe and Central Asia, greylag geese are a familiar sight at this time of year in Assam.



The day's catch: A purple heron, with a fish in its beak, flies back to its nest.



Fragile coexistence: Fishermen repair fishing nets on the bank of Lake Deepor Beel. Migratory birds and fishermen are often at odds over wetland use.



Cameo appearance: Eurasian wigeons make a stopover in Assam's wetlands in the Kaziranga National Park or Pobitora, on the Central Asian flyway.



Fascinating fowls: Northern pintail ducks, with their breeding range extending as far as the equator, visit the northeastern State every winter.