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Chahal noted that NDMC's initiatives are in line with the broader goal of building a cleaner and greener Capital. He added that efforts are being made to expand green cover while also encouraging citizens to take responsibility for environmental protection.

Government allocates ₹22,236 crore for green push in Budget

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The Delhi Government has earmarked ₹22,236 crore for environmental initiatives under its 2026-27 Budget, with Chief Minister Rekha Gupta announcing a comprehensive “Green Budget” aimed at tackling pollution and building a sustainable future for the Capital.

The allocation accounts for about 21.44 per cent of the total state budget of ₹1,03,700 crore, marking a significant policy shift towards environment-focused governance. The plan assigns responsibility to 17 departments and mandates that all Government spending be aligned with green objectives.

Announcing the initiative, the Chief Minister said the Government is moving from intent to execution by linking expenditure directly with envi-

ronmental outcomes. She said all departmental spending will now be mapped against green goals to ensure accountability and measurable impact.

The Yamuna clean-up and water infrastructure have received the highest allocation, with ₹6,485 crore assigned to the Delhi Jal Board. The funds will be used to improve water treatment capacity and address pollution in the river.

The Transport Department has been allocated ₹4,758 crore to expand electric bus services and promote cleaner public transport. Officials said the move is aimed at reducing vehicular emissions, one of the major contributors to air pollution in the city.

The Public Works Department (PWD) will receive ₹3,350 crore to address dust pollution and develop green infrastructure. Measures



include improving road conditions and implementing systems to reduce dust levels. To ensure coordinated planning, ₹2,350 crore has been allocated to the Planning Department for designing and streamlining green projects.

The Urban Development Department and the Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board will jointly receive ₹2,273 crore for targeted environmental interventions.

The Power Department has been allotted ₹1,410 crore to

DEPARTMENT-WISE BUDGET ALLOCATION	
● Delhi Jal Board: ₹6,485 crore	Department: ₹258 crore
● Transport Department: ₹4,758 crore	● Forest Department: ₹181 crore
● Public Works Department: ₹3,350 crore	● Tourism Department: ₹102 crore
● Planning Department: ₹2,350 crore	● Education Department: ₹100 crore
● Urban Development (DUSIB): ₹2,273 crore	● Industry Department: ₹42 crore
● Power Department: ₹1,410 crore	● Health Department: ₹31 crore
● Environment Department: ₹558 crore	● Revenue Department: ₹23 crore
● Irrigation & Flood Control: ₹305 crore	● Training & Technical Education: ₹7 crore
● Development	● Higher Education: ₹2 crore

promote renewable energy, including solar power. The government aims to expand clean energy adoption across sectors.

A dedicated “Green Fund” will support several other departments. The Development

Department has been allocated ₹258 crore to promote environmentally sustainable growth in rural areas.

The Forest Department will get ₹181 crore for afforestation and wildlife conservation efforts. In addition, ₹102 crore has been earmarked for the Tourism Department to promote eco-friendly tourism. The Education Department will receive ₹100 crore to introduce green initiatives in schools.

Other allocations include ₹42 crore for the Industries Department to address industrial pollution, ₹31 crore for environmental improvements in hospitals under the Health Department, and ₹23 crore for disaster management and green surveys under the Revenue Department.

The Government has also focused on capacity building. The Training and Technical Education Department has

been allocated ₹7 crore for green skill development, while ₹2 crore has been set aside for the Higher Education Department to support environmental research.

The Chief Minister said the Green Budget represents a structured and phased approach to tackling environmental challenges. She emphasised that “Clean Delhi, Green Delhi” is now a policy framework rather than a slogan. She said the initiative establishes a system to address pollution, climate change and resource depletion through targeted spending. The Government aims to align public investment with sustainable development and biodiversity protection.

Officials said the Green Budget is expected to drive coordinated action across departments and deliver long-term environmental improvements in the national Capital.

Govt bans sale of LPG cylinders directly from godowns

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■ New Delhi

In a bid to make the LPG distribution system more transparent and efficient, the Delhi Government has imposed a complete ban on the sale of cylinders directly from godowns. Oil Marketing Companies (OMCs) have issued clear instructions to all distributors, stating that any such sale is illegal and will attract strict action.

At the same time, the government has significantly expanded the availability of 5-kg LPG cylinders across the city to improve consumer access. These smaller cylinders can now be purchased easily from gas agencies by showing a valid ID, with no requirement for address verification.

To further assist migrant workers, 11 dedicated help desks have been set up at select HPCL outlets, where people can get information about nearby LPG distributors. According to the chief



minister's office, Chief Minister Rekha Gupta said the supply is being closely monitored to ensure there are no disruptions and that all regulations are strictly followed.

Residents have been advised to avoid visiting gas agencies or storage points or gathering in crowds, as all booked cylinders are being delivered directly to homes within the stipulated time.

According to data from April 4, a total of 114,679 LPG bookings were recorded in

Delhi, while 131,335 cylinders were delivered by OMCs. The fact that deliveries have exceeded bookings indicates that pending demand is being cleared at a steady pace and the system is functioning effectively. At present, the average delivery time for domestic LPG cylinders stands at 4.24 days, ensuring timely and reliable service for consumers.

The Chief Minister also said the Government has operationalised a dedicated control room (helpline: 011-

23379836 / 8383824659) to curb illegal activities such as hoarding and black marketing. Stepping up enforcement, Delhi Police recently conducted raids at 17 locations, while officials from the Food and Supplies Department inspected 76 gas agencies and storage sites. Reassuring residents, the Chief Minister said LPG supply in Delhi remains fully stable and under control.

Citizens have been urged to stay calm, avoid rumours, and cooperate with the administration while relying on the established delivery system.

Meanwhile, the sale of small 5-kg LPG cylinders — available over the counter at LPG distributorships on showing valid ID proofs — has been stepped up, with about 6.6 lakh bottles sold since March 23 as the government ramps up supplies to meet demand. Unlike the subsidised domestic 14.2-kg cylinders, the 5 kg bottles, called FTL cylinders, are

priced at market rates and do not require any address proof for procurement from a nearby LPG distributorship. “Yesterday (April 4), more than 90,000 5 kg FTL cylinders were sold. Since March 23, 2026, about 6.6 lakh, 5 kg FTL cylinders have been sold,” the oil ministry said in a statement.

The five-kg FTL cylinders, widely used by students, campers, and small food businesses, have long been marketed as accessible alternatives. Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Ltd (HPCL) sells them as Appu, Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd (BPCL or BharatGas) markets them as Mini, and Indian Oil Corporation Ltd (IOC or Indane) brands them as Chhotu. These cylinders are available through gas distributorships, select retail outlets, kirana stores, and utensil shops, with an initial purchase requiring the cylinder and regulator and subsequent refills costing only the price of gas.

Residents protest LPG shortage outside Babarpur agency

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The shortage had been simmering for weeks. On Sunday, it spilled out onto the streets of northeast Delhi's Kardampuri, where angry residents gathered outside a local gas agency, accusing it of failing to supply cooking gas for months and pushing households into daily hardship.

The protest outside the Babarpur gas agency in the Babarpur Assembly constituency followed what locals described as two to three months of erratic LPG supply. For many families, the disruption has gone beyond inconvenience and begun to affect basic living. “We are not asking for anything extra. We just want our regular gas supply,” said Shabnam, a resident who joined the protest. “Our cylinder got over five days ago. Since then, we



have been cooking on a small stove using whatever fuel we can arrange.”

Residents said repeated complaints to the agency have yielded few results. Many claimed that despite booking cylinders on time, deliveries are either delayed indefinitely or not made at all. “There is no proper response from the agency,” said Prabhat Kumar, another local resident. “When we call, either no one answers, or

they simply say there is no stock. This has been going on for weeks.”

The situation, according to residents, has left several households without cooking gas for days at a stretch. Women, in particular, have been bearing the brunt, forced to find alternative ways to cook meals. “We are managing somehow with borrowed stoves or by cooking less,” said Fatima, a homemaker.

Kejriwal files recusal application against Justice Swarn Kanta Sharma in liquor scam case

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■ New Delhi

Former Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal, along with other former accused, on Sunday moved a recusal application before Justice Swarn Kanta Sharma in the Delhi High Court in the alleged liquor scam. According to the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), Kejriwal will appear and argue in person on Monday.

This comes days after the high court gave a final opportunity to Kejriwal and others to file their stand on a plea by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) to expunge “unwarranted” remarks made against it by the trial court while discharging them in the liquor policy case.

Kejriwal and others had later also written to Delhi High Court Chief Justice



Devendra Upadhyaya, requesting that the matter be transferred to some other bench rather than the single bench of Justice Swarn Kanta Sharma. The HC has, however, declined the request. Now, Kejriwal will argue the matter before the court of Justice Kanta and appear personally to say why he is requesting the judge's recusal.

In a representation made on March 11, Kejriwal, as well

as AAP leader Manish Sisodia, along with other accused in the excise policy case, claimed there was a “grave, bona fide, and reasonable apprehension” that the hearing in the matter before Justice Sharma would not be impartial and neutral.

On March 9, Justice Sharma's Bench stayed the trial court's recommendation on the initiation of departmental action against the CBI's investigating officer

in the liquor policy case. Issuing notice to all 23 accused on the CBI's plea against their discharge, Justice Sharma said certain observations and findings of the trial court at the stage of framing of charges prima facie appeared erroneous and needed consideration.

Kejriwal claimed in the representation that his apprehension was based on Justice Sharma's past conduct and said that on the very first day of the CBI's revision petition against his discharge, she proceeded to record a prima facie view that the trial court's detailed order was “erroneous”, even without hearing the other side.

Justice Sharma, Kejriwal's representation contended, did not disclose any “specific perversity” when she stayed the trial court's directions against the CBI official.

Police bust international cyber fraud syndicate

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

The Delhi Police has busted a major international cyber fraud syndicate — linked with over 2,000 complaints and scams worth over ₹300 crore — with the arrest of its alleged mastermind and 10 others. During the investigation, police uncovered a well-organised network operating across multiple states with links to international cyber fraud syndicates, particularly in Cambodia.

“We have so far identified over 260 bank accounts linked to more than 100 fictitious companies used to channel the proceeds of crime. The total number of complaints linked to the syndicate stands at 2,567,” police said. The key accused, Karan Kajaria, was apprehended at Kolkata airport on April 3 after a look-out circular was issued against him.

He was brought to Delhi a day later for further investiga-



tion, Deputy Commissioner of Police (Crime Branch) Aditya Gautam said.

The case came to light following a complaint by a city resident, Sultan, who alleged that he was duped of ₹31.45 lakh after being lured into an investment scheme.

Police said the victim was persuaded to download a fake trading application and invest money with promises of high returns. However, when he attempted to withdraw the profits, the application stopped functioning, and the group became inaccessible. “An FIR was regis-

tered at the cyber police station in the northeast and later transferred to the crime branch for a detailed probe,” the officer said.

The syndicate created fake investment platforms and messaging groups to lure victims. They used mule bank accounts arranged through intermediaries and deployed malicious applications to capture sensitive banking details, including OTPs. Funds collected from victims were routed through a complex web of bank accounts and shell companies to conceal the trail, police said.

“Kajaria, who is believed to be the main coordinator, maintained direct links with foreign-based operators and facilitated the movement of funds through cryptocurrency channels,” the DCP said.

He acted as a bridge between Indian operatives and international cyber criminals. He was also involved in procuring mule bank accounts and sharing sensitive banking details via encrypted social media platforms, the DCP added.

Police said Kajaria frequently travelled abroad to establish and strengthen links with overseas fraud networks and had attempted to evade arrest by staying outside India.

Technical surveillance helped investigators trace the network to Kolkata, where several bank accounts and shell entities were found to be operating. Upon his arrival in India, Kajaria was intercepted at the airport and taken into custody.

19-year-old killed in DTC bus hit-and-run in Azadpur

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

A 19-year-old man was killed after being hit by a Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC) bus in northwest Delhi's Azadpur area on Sunday evening, with the driver fleeing the scene immediately after the accident. According to the police, the victim, identified as Akash, a resident of Sahipur village in Shalimar Bagh, was found critically injured on the road and later declared dead.

The officials said the incident was reported around 5:30 pm when a PCR call alerted police at Adarsh Nagar police station about a fatal road accident. The call was logged as DD No. 73 and transferred from the Model Town police station. When police reached the spot, they



found the victim lying on the road in a severely injured condition. He had sustained fatal injuries after being allegedly hit by a speeding DTC bus.

Police said the driver fled the scene, leaving the vehicle behind. The sudden collision caused panic in the area, with locals gathering at the site shortly after the incident. A crime team was immediately called to inspect the scene. Forensic examination of the accident spot was carried out as part

of the initial investigation. The body was later shifted to the BJRM mortuary for preservation and post-mortem examination. “The family members of the deceased have been informed,” police said in a statement.

Preliminary inquiry suggests that the accident took place on a busy stretch in Azadpur, which witnesses heavy traffic movement, especially during evening hours. Investigators are looking into whether the victim was crossing the road at the time of the incident or if other factors contributed to the accident.

Police have also launched a probe to identify the offending bus and trace its driver. Multiple teams have been deployed as part of the investigation.

Two members of Doodh Chor gang arrested

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■ New Delhi

Two members of a so-called “Doodh Chor” gang were arrested after a purported video showing theft of dairy products in southwest Delhi's Uttam Nagar area surfaced online. The accused would trail milk supply vehicles and steal crates left unattended during deliveries, transporting the stolen goods using stolen vehicles, police said.

A team analysed over 300 CCTV clips and developed leads with the help of local intelligence, eventually identifying two suspects — Mohit alias Patha (27) and Ayush Maan Pandey alias Pandit (19), both residents of Ranhola, Deputy Commissioner of Police (outer) Vikram Singh said.

“The video, dated March 26, had been widely circulat-

ing on social media, prompting the launch of a targeted operation to track down those involved in the thefts of milk crates and dairy products,” he said.

On April 3, police received specific information that the duo would be arriving near a church in Vikas Nagar. “A trap was laid, and the two were apprehended while travelling in a three-wheeler,” he added.

During checking, 14 empty milk crates were recovered from the vehicle, which was later found to be stolen from the Prem Nagar area in Rohini. The accused failed to produce ownership documents, and verification through ZIPNET (Zonal Integrated Police Network) confirmed its stolen status. Subsequent interrogation revealed their involvement in recent milk and curd thefts reported in Uttam Nagar, the DCP said.

Delhi cop clears 155 cases, named best investigator

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

In a system often weighed down by backlogs, a head constable from Outer North Delhi has quietly set a benchmark. Head Constable Sanjay Kumar Vashist has been declared the best investigating officer of the district after disposing of 155 cases in just three months.

The recognition was conferred by Deputy Commissioner of Police (Outer North) Hareshwar Swami during a district-level review of the Investigation Wing for the first quarter of 2026, covering January to March. “The integrity and speed of investigations are the pillars of public trust,” DCP Swami said. “HC Sanjay Vashist's ability to resolve 155 cases in a single quarter



sets a benchmark for the entire Investigation Wing.” Vashist, posted at Samaypur Badli police station, was selected after a comprehensive performance audit of investigating officers across multiple police stations in the district. His disposal rate stood out among officers from subdivisions including Bawana, Narela, Samaypur Badli, and Swaroop Nagar.

Officials said the evaluation process considered the performance of several officers, including sub-inspec-

tors, assistant sub-inspectors, and head constables from different police stations. Despite stiff competition, Vashist emerged as the top performer due to his consistent and high-volume case disposal.

Police said his work reflects a strong focus on clearing pending cases while maintaining the quality of investigation.

The achievement is being seen as a significant step toward improving efficiency in the criminal justice process at the district level.

Alongside Vashist, other officers were also recognised for their performance. Inspector Shailender Singh Jhaakhar, also from the Samaypur Badli police station, was declared the best Station House Officer for achieving the highest disposal rate.

IN FOCUS



Bishops performing a baptismal ritual on a baby during a mass prayer on Easter Sunday at St Joseph's Cathedral Church in Prayagraj

PTI

Over 6,000 UP workers in Israel safe: Govt officials

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Lucknow

Over 6,000 workers from Uttar Pradesh currently in Israel are safe despite the prevailing tense situation, with the State Government maintaining continuous contact with Indian authorities on the ground, officials said on Sunday.

Principal Secretary Labour and Employment Department, Uttar Pradesh, Shanmuga Sundaram, is in regular contact with the Indian Embassy in Israel to track developments and ensure the safety of Indian nationals, particularly those from the state.

According to information received from the embassy, all Indian workers in Israel



are safe, with no report of any emergency or major threat so far.

Acting on the directions of Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, the state Government is closely monitoring the well-being of all workers. Officials said the state Government is in constant communication with India's Ambassador to Israel, JP Singh, who has shared periodic updates. In communications dated

March 11, 17 and 28, the ambassador confirmed that all Indian workers, including those from the state, are safe.

While there is a natural sense of concern due to the situation, there has been no significant demand or pressure from workers seeking to return to India, officials said, adding that the embassy remains in close contact with them and is addressing their needs.

The envoy also informed that some workers from UP recently hosted visiting Indian journalists, indicating that the situation remains under control and normal life continues. The embassy's First Secretary, Dr Garika Tejeshwar, according to the statement, has also con-

firmed that all workers from the state are safe and no untoward incident has been reported so far.

Sundaram said some Indian nationals, mainly traders and students, have returned voluntarily via Jordan with assistance from the embassy, and similar arrangements can be made for workers if required.

Officials added that the embassy's control room has not received any serious or emergency messages, and all workers are adhering to local safety advisories.

The UP Government continues to keep a close watch on the situation and has conveyed to workers that it stands firmly with them and will facilitate their return if they wish to come back.

Five killed, 3 injured in Bareilly road accident

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
■ Bareilly

Five people were killed, and three others, including two children, were injured when an SUV hit a motorcycle from behind, and then crashed into a tanker parked on the roadside on the Delhi-Lucknow National Highway here on Sunday, police said.

Superintendent of Police (city) Manush Pareek said that on Sunday afternoon, near Pardholi village, under the CB Ganj police station area of Bareilly city.

A speeding Bolero travelling from the direction of Lucknow rammed into a motorcycle moving ahead of it, lost control, and crashed into the rear of a tanker parked along the roadside. He said that the accident

was so horrific that the front section of the Bolero and the motorcycle were completely mangled. The deceased have been identified as Sikandar (28), Mannohan (42), and an unidentified individual — all occupants of the Bolero, along with motorcyclists Shamsad (45) and Mumtaz (65). They all died on the spot, the SP (city) said.

Pareek added that the driver of the SUV and two children have suffered injuries. SHO of CB Ganj police station Pradeep Kumar Chaturvedi said that the injured have been rushed to a hospital for immediate medical treatment.

Preliminary investigations suggest that the negligence of the Bolero's driver, specifically the excessive speeding, is the primary cause of the accident.

Gujarat: 9,597 hit-and-run cases reported in 5 years

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Ahmedabad

Rising incidents of rash driving and hit-and-run accidents have raised serious concerns over traffic management and road safety in Gujarat, with as many as 9,597 such cases reported between 2020 and 2024.

According to data presented by the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways in the Lok Sabha, Gujarat has witnessed a steady increase in hit-and-run incidents over the years, averaging more than 1,800 cases annually.

Despite multiple measures claimed by the State Government and road safety authorities, the numbers indicate persistent gaps in enforcement and driver accountability. The worrying trend comes against the backdrop of rapid motorisation in the State.

Gujarat, with an estimated population of around 7.22 crore, has witnessed a massive surge in vehicle ownership, with the total number of registered vehicles—both transport and non-transport—reaching approximately 3.5 crore. Experts believe this sharp rise in vehicles has significantly contributed to increased traffic congestion and accident risks.

However, concerns have also been raised over the lack of updated official data.



The website of the Transport Commissionerate Gujarat reportedly reflects vehicle statistics only up to 2018-19, and figures have not been updated in the post-COVID-19 pandemic period, indicating gaps in data transparency and monitoring.

Year-wise data shows a troubling trend: 1,552 cases in 2020, 1,720 in 2021, 2,208 in 2022, 2,214 in 2023, and 1,902 cases reported in 2024. The figures underline how the rapid rise in the number of vehicles on roads has been accompanied by an increase in negligent driving.

Gujarat ranks 11th among all States and Union Territories in the country in terms of hit-and-run incidents. However, the State continues to witness significantly higher numbers compared to several others such as Kerala and Delhi, raising questions over the effectiveness of traffic regulation mechanisms.

Haryana CM Saini unveils projects worth ₹253 crore in Jind

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Chandigarh

Haryana Chief Minister Nayab Singh Saini on Sunday unveiled development projects worth ₹253 crore in Jind, significantly enhancing irrigation, roads, health services, and water supply in the region.

Saini laid the foundation stones for 12 projects worth over ₹140 crore and inaugurated three projects with a combined cost of over Rs 112 crore, an official statement said. Among the key inaugurations are the reconstruction of Jind Distributory No 4, completed by the Irrigation



and Water Resources Department for ₹16.28 crore. Additional projects inaugu-

rated included modern micro-irrigation systems at the village level, solar-

powered irrigation facilities, and a balancing reservoir for water storage in Intal Khurd village, constructed for ₹56.36 crore. Saini, who addressed a public rally in Jind, also dedicated the Dr BR Ambedkar Library building at Chaudhary Ranbir Singh University, built for ₹56.36 crore.

Furthering the infrastructure initiative, the chief minister laid the foundation stone for projects covering agriculture marketing, housing, roads, health, drainage, and water supply. This includes a purchase centre at Manoharpur village, developed by the Haryana

State Agricultural Marketing Board for ₹3.18 crore, as well as 56 residential units for revenue officers in the officers' colony, to be constructed by the Public Works Department for ₹16.61 crore.

Saini also laid the foundation for the widening and strengthening of the Nirjan approach road and the Kandela route via Safidon, covering the villages of Haibatpur, Khokhri, Bohatwala, and Dalamwala, from Parshuram Chowk to the bypass. This work will be undertaken for ₹4.56 crore.

To enhance drainage infrastructure, the Irrigation and Water Resources

Department has commenced the Manoharpur drain excavation project for ₹1.09 crore.

The chief minister also laid the foundation for Public Health Engineering Department projects worth over ₹35 crore. These include three canal-based water supply schemes in Jalalpura Kalan, Intal Kalan and Intal Khurd villages, along with the expansion of two existing schemes.

Under these works, water supply will be provided to Sangatpura, Jajwan and Dhanda Khori villages through a common pumping station and the laying of DI (ductile iron) pipelines.

Judges must be guided by conscience, not algorithms: Justice Vikram Nath

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Ahmedabad

Emphasising the primacy of human judgment in the justice delivery system, Supreme Court Judge Justice Vikram Nath has cautioned against over-reliance on Artificial Intelligence (AI) in judicial processes, stating that judges must be guided by their conscience and not by algorithms.

Speaking at a legal services event organised by



the Gujarat Legal Services Authority, Justice Nath underscored that AI should only serve as a tool to assist

judges and must never replace judicial decision-making. He warned that excessive dependence on technology risks reducing the adjudication of disputes to a mechanical exercise.

Raising concerns about algorithmic bias, Justice Nath noted that AI systems often replicate the prejudices embedded in the data they are trained on. "The delivery of justice must be guided by human conscience and not algorithms," he asserted.

Film City to boost local talent: Yogi



PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
■ Gorakhpur

Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on Sunday asserted that once Film City is established in Uttar Pradesh, the state's young talent will no longer have to go elsewhere to find work opportunities.

"Before 2017, who could have imagined that a Film City would be established in Uttar Pradesh (Film producer) Boney Kapoor visited me yesterday and sought time on April 24 for laying the foundation stone of Film

City. I told him that I would have to check my schedule as I have prior commitments due to the ongoing elections. "Just imagine: Had there been a Film City in UP back then, Ravi Kishan would not have had to go all the way to Mumbai.

After all, he was an artist and an artist deserves to be accorded due respect," Adityanath said. He was addressing a 'Yuva Samvad' programme organised by the BJP's city unit. "Today, with Film City located in Uttar Pradesh, the youth of the state no longer need to go elsewhere.

Union Bank's magic wand rectifies large...

According to CBI, Videocon paid a bribe of ₹325 crore (10% to the husband's company) to get loans from the wife, Chanda Kochhar, who headed ICICI in 2018. As per many bankers, Videocon, with its political clout, took more than ₹75,000 crores from many banks, based on a project of importing oil from Mozambique in 2012. Later, Videocon sold its Mozambique oil project to ONGC. Videocon's telecom and Dish TV project collapsed after the Supreme Court cancelled licences in connection with the 2G Scam.

The fourth largest defaulter of Union Bank is Hyderabad-based IVRCL Ltd with a dues of ₹23, 418 crores, followed by fugitives Mehul Choksi and his nephew Nirav Modi companies, including Gitanjali Gems, Nakshtra World, Firestar Diamonds, with a dues of ₹18,309 crores.

Next in the list is an interesting company, based in Guntur, named Transstroy India Limited. This Russian kind of company is owned by former TDP MP Rayapati Sambasiva Rao. This company and its linked companies owe Union Bank ₹10,355 crores and owe huge amounts of money to many PSU Banks, ranging to more than ₹50,000 crores.

Vociferous MP Rao (84 years) was charged by CBI in 2018 for cheating banks by making a lot of shell companies and posting his drivers, maids, cooks, servants, and gardeners as directors. Rao's company has floated many Toll Companies, and in many companies, one Russian, Oleg Sergeev, has been made a director. This Russian citizen is shown as a personal guarantor by many PSU Banks. The million-dollar question is, how Indian banks can recover from Russian citizens, while they can't even touch powerful Indian Citizens. The sixth largest defaulter of Union Bank is the Essar Group with ₹10,161 crores, followed by noted working company PC Jewellery with dues of ₹6,243 crores, Mumbai-based Pandhe Infracons (₹6,003 crores), Kolkata-based Simplex Infrastructures (₹5,993 crores), Zoom Developers (₹5,287 crores) and Delhi-based Jay Polichem (₹5,148 crores).

Major defaulters of Union Bank from ₹2,000 crores to ₹5,000 crores are: Mumbai-based GTL Ltd and its linked firms (₹4,505 crores), big defaulter in real estate Supertech (₹4,203 crores), Kolkata-based Concast Steel & Power (₹4,054 crores), Sahara Hospitality (₹3,774 crores), Anil Ambani's Reliance Group (₹3,587 crores), Solapur Tollways (₹3,398 crores), Hyderabad-based VMC Systems (₹3,222 crores), Chennai Elevated Tollway (₹3,219 crores), Sai Renewable Power (₹3,139

crores), Pratibha Industries (₹3,117 crores), Indore-based Bhatia Global Trading (₹3,054 crores), Mumbai-based Krishna Knitwear Technology (₹2,975 crore), Chennai-based Zylog Systems (₹2,906 crores), Kolkata-based PC REI Agro (₹2,889 crores), Mumbai-based companies PS� Limited (₹2,865 crores), Siddhi Vinayak Logistics (₹2,824 crores).

Other prominent defaulters are: Hyderabad-based Gayatri Projects (₹2,730 crores), SKUMARS (₹2,623 crores), and media company Deccan Chronicle Holdings (₹2,217 crores), Sohna-based Kings Canyon SEZ (₹2,025 crores) and Bengal India Global Infrastructure (₹2,014 crores). Banks have no recoverable collateral from many of these companies, except their shares, which have no value, as these companies are facing insolvency procedures.

Interestingly, some companies which plundered ₹1,000s of crores from many PSU banks have shown mercy to Union Bank. Fugitive Sivasankaran's Siva Industries took only ₹288 crore, fugitive Jatin Mehta's Winsome Diamond has dues of ₹261 crore, and insolvent Jaypee Cement took only ₹167 crore from Union Bank.

Ladakh opens skies wider for Apricot...

"This season, visit Ladakh for an unforgettable experience," Saxena reiterated.

Meanwhile, stakeholders from Ladakh's tourism sector and civil society groups have adopted a resolution voicing concern over the increasing entry of outside investors and seeking to safeguard the region's fragile ecosystem.

The resolution, adopted at a joint meeting of the Ladakh Travel Trade Alliance and civil society groups on Saturday, emphasised that the tourism sector should remain primarily reserved for local stakeholders to ensure ownership and decision-making remain within the community.

It was signed by representatives of over a dozen groups, including the Ladakh Travel Trade Alliance, All Ladakh Adventure and Tour Operators Association, All Ladakh Hotel and Guest House Association, Ladakh Taxi Cooperative Society, Maxi Cab Operators Cooperative Society and Ladakh Bike Rental Cooperative Society.

It was also endorsed by civil society groups such as the Ladakh Buddhist Association, Ladakh Gonpa Association, Anjuman-e-Moin-ul-Islam, Anjuman Imamia, Christian Association Leh and the Goba Association.

The Ladakh unit of the Indian National

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Congress also endorsed the two-page resolution, which called for preserving the region as a unique and sensitive tourist destination, with development aligned with its ecological limits and cultural heritage.

The resolution said Ladakh lies deep in the Indian Himalayas and for centuries remained geographically isolated, connected only by high mountain passes. "As a cold desert with limited natural resources, Ladakh represents an extremely fragile ecosystem, marked by harsh winters and a short working season, remaining cut off from the rest of the country for several months each year.

Chouhan orders crop loss assessment after storms

According to a primary assessment based on the State agriculture department, the damage spans a wide range of crops, including wheat, onion, maize, jowar, bajra, pulses and vegetables, along with fruit crops such as grapes, pomegranate, mango, banana, papaya, citrus fruits and flowers.

The India Meteorological Department (IMD) warned that a fresh Western Disturbance will affect Northwest India from April 7, triggering widespread rainfall, thunderstorms and hailstorms across Jammu-Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Punjab, Haryana, Delhi and Uttar Pradesh through April 10. Thunderstorms gusting up to 70 kmph are likely over parts of Northwest and East India.

In line with the IMD forecast, the Agrometeorology Department has issued crop safety advisories for farmers in the affected regions, saying harvested produce should be covered with tarpaulin or moved indoors, while horticultural crops should be staked against winds.

Hailstorms — the primary driver of crop losses — are forecast over Jammu-Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana, Delhi and Rajasthan on April 7-8, and over East Madhya Pradesh, Vidarbha, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Maharashtra and Marathwada on Sunday. Bihar, Jharkhand and Gangetic West Bengal remain in the hailstorm zone through April 8.

Heavy rainfall warnings remain in force for Tamil Nadu, Puducherry, Karaikal, Kerala and Mahe through April 6, and for Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Meghalaya through April 9-10. Interior Karnataka, Telangana and Rayalaseema face continued thunderstorm activity through the week.

Himanta hits back after Congress attack

He said that "documents being circulated show multiple glaring inconsistencies, suggesting a crude and poorly executed attempt at digital manipulation".

Sarma said his wife and he will be filing both criminal and civil defamation cases within the next 48 hours against Khera for making "reckless and defamatory statements". CM's wife Riniki Bhuyan Sharam replied to Pawan Khera in X: "Aapki sirf tapasya mein hi nahi, AI generation aur photoshopping mein bhi kami reh gayi. I expected a spokesperson of a national party to exercise basic due diligence, rather than circulate poorly fabricated images of imaginary passports and documents. I will now be letting the law take over. Criminal charges are being initiated. We can continue this in court."

In his press conference in Delhi, Khera said Assam Chief Minister Sarma and his wife "have faced numerous allegations over time — such as land grabbing, misappropriation of temple donations, siphoning off Government subsidies". "However, the documents we are presenting before you today pertain to matters extending beyond India's borders," Khera said.

"Riniki Bhuyan Sharma, the wife of the Assam Chief Minister, holds three passports," he alleged. Khera claimed that she has a UAE Passport, which was issued on March 14, 2022 and expires on March 13, 2027. He claimed that the second passport in her name is from Antigua and Barbuda, which was issued on August 26, 2021, and expires on August 25, 2031. Khera also alleged that the third passport in her name is from Egypt, which was issued on February 13, 2022 and expires on February 12, 2029. "Himanta Biswa Sarma's entire politics is predicated on hatred against Muslims; yet, his wife holds passports from two Muslim countries?" Khera alleged. "Are they making preparations to flee the country in the event of an electoral defeat?" Khera said.

Khera also alleged that Sarma's wife owns two properties in Dubai. "Many people own properties abroad; however, when a spouse contests an election, these assets must be disclosed in their affidavit. Yet, there is no mention whatsoever of these two Dubai properties in Himanta Biswa Sarma's affidavit," Khera said. Why did he fail to disclose his wife's Dubai properties in his affidavit, the Congress leader asked. The Congress spokesperson also alleged that Sarma's wife owns a company based in Wyoming, USA. The list of members for this company includes the names of the couple and their son, he claimed.

"Himanta Biswa Sarma has stashed his money in Wyoming by setting up shell companies," he alleged. Home Minister Amit Shah must answer as to whether he will constitute an SIT to investigate these matters, Khera said. "When will CEC Gyanesh Kumar take cognisance of the concealment of information in the affidavit?" he said.

Countering Khera, CM Sarma said, "Today's press conference by Pawan Khera reflects the deep frustration and panic within the Congress party. As Assam moves decisively towards a historic mandate, such desperate and baseless attacks only expose their sinking ground." "I categorically reject every allegation made by him. These are malicious, fabricated, and politically motivated lies aimed at misleading the people of Assam," Sarma said on X.

"My wife and I will be filing both criminal and civil defamation cases within the next 48 hours against Shri Pawan Khera. He will be held fully accountable for his reckless and defamatory statements," he said, adding that life of Khera will end up in Assam jail.

Open Hormuz or face consequences: Trump

The aircraft involved was a US F-15 fighter jet that had been downed earlier in the week, prompting a complex rescue operation deep inside Iranian territory. Trump highlighted the risks involved, calling the mission unprecedented in both scale and execution.

However, Iranian authorities presented a starkly different account. According to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, at least five individuals were killed during the US operation, and several aerial assets, including a transport aircraft, were destroyed. These claims, reported by Iranian media, could not be independently verified. Tehran swiftly rejected Trump's ultimatum, with officials dismissing his remarks as "unbalanced" and vowing not to yield to pressure. Senior commanders from the Khatam al-Anbiya Central Headquarters criticised the US President's statements as provocative, warning that any military action would trigger severe retaliation. The exchange of threats marks a significant deterioration in US-Iran relations, with both sides adopting increasingly confrontational positions. Analysts warn that any disruption in the Strait of Hormuz could have far-reaching consequences for global energy security and regional stability.

Trump is expected to address the media alongside senior military officials at the White House, where further details of the rescue operation and Washington's next steps are likely to be outlined.

GRAPEVINE

Upar Wala Sab Dekhta Hai

In last week's major bureaucratic transfers, an interesting gossip has emerged from the corridors of Seva Teerth. In one case, a Secretary was moved to a different department as his reporting boss (Minister) was annoyed due to large-scale complaints of his idiosyncratic behaviour. In another case, the top IAS who made it to a plum posting by the Appointments Committee of the Cabinet (ACC) had expressed his willingness to move out as he was annoyed by the hegemony of his Minister. "Upar wala sab dekhta," quipped a top officer in the Seva Teerth. The ACC had approved 25 civil servant appointments and transfers across crucial ministries and departments of the Central Government.



Why Church is so agitated over FCRA Bill

Church is very agitated with the new amendment bill to FCRA. The Catholic Bishop Council of India (CBCI) head wrote a letter to Home Minister Amit Shah to withdraw the bill and even warned of global outrage, including from America. Within hours after the letter and Arch Bishop's media interaction, the Central Government just paused the presentation of the bill. The talk of the town is why the Church is so agitated, while other regions are keeping quiet. It is a known fact that Indian churches are getting a lot of money from Christian sects of the USA, like the Seventh Day Adventist and this money is used for religious conversion in tribal areas and the North East. The question is, will the Central Government, led by the BJP, succumb to the Church's pressure.



Bangladesh Diplomacy Reset

Bangladesh's Independence Day celebrations this year carried more than ceremonial significance, subtly reflecting the continuing engagement between India and Bangladesh. The presence of Minister of State for External Affairs VK Singh, Foreign Secretary Vikram Misra, along with other senior officials at the Joint Secretary level and the MEA spokesperson, was seen as a noteworthy gesture. Such high-level participation at a national day reception is relatively uncommon and drew quiet attention in diplomatic circles. Unseen heroes from Intelligence wings also attended. The event was hosted by Bangladesh's Ambassador Riaz Hamidullah on March 25. Observers noted the presence of officials from various government wings underlines broader institutional interest in the relationship.



800 tourists stranded in Sikkim's Lachen as road closed due to breach

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Gangtok

Around 800 tourists are stranded at Lachen in Sikkim's Mangan district as the road connecting it to Chungthang has been closed due to a breach, officials said on Sunday.

The breach occurred near the Tarum Chu Bridge on the Lachen-Chungthang Road, they said. The Mangan district administration has issued a public advisory announcing the temporary closure of the road near Tarum Chu Bridge, leaving the 800 tourists stranded in Lachen, they said.

According to officials, all tourists currently in Lachen have been instructed to remain where they are and avoid any movement for the night due to unsafe weather conditions and potential risks along the route. Authorities have planned an



evacuation operation for stranded tourists on Monday morning, subject to improvement in weather conditions and successful snow clearance along the Dongkya La axis. The evacuation route is expected to pass through L a c h e n - D o n g k y a La-Lachung-Gangtok.

The district administration is working in close coordination with multiple agen-

Chadha shares video proof of raising Punjab issues in RS

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

Days after his removal as the Aam Aadmi Party's Deputy Leader in Rajya Sabha, Raghav Chadha on Sunday hit back at his party colleagues' allegation that he did not raise Punjab's issues in Parliament with a video of him mentioning matters related to Punjab in the Upper House.

To counter the allegations made against him, the sidelined Member of Parliament shared a compiled video of his speeches in the Upper House on Punjab-centric issues, including pressing for a Nankana Sahib corridor, seeking legal guarantees for Minimum Support Price (MSP) for farmers, recommending a Bharat Ratna for Bhagat Singh, and demanding the return of the royal throne of



Maharaja Ranjit Singh, among others on the social media.

To substantiate his argument, the Rajya Sabha MP wrote on X, "To my colleagues in AAP who were forced to issue videos saying that 'Raghav Chadha failed to raise Punjab's issues in Parliament', here is a small trailer...Picture Abhi Baaki

Hai. Punjab isn't a talking point for me. It is my home, my duty, my soil, my soul." Chadha was removed as the Aam Aadmi Party's Deputy Leader in Rajya Sabha last week, following months of frosty ties with the party leadership, including national convener Arvind Kejriwal. Chadha has traded barbs with

Ayodhya's transformation reflected in continuous process of cultural awakening: Champat Rai

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

The transformation of Ayodhya is not just reflected in its development, but also in a continuous process of its social and cultural awakening. Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust general secretary Champat Rai said on Sunday.

In his address at the closing ceremony of the three-day Ayodhya Parv, hosted by the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA), Rai also said it is important for people to imbibe the ideals and values that Lord Rama had espoused. Rai said India's fundamental identity has



been rooted in prosperity, sensitivity and social harmony. Despite being under "foreign rule" for a long time, Indian society preserved its self-respect. After independence, continuous efforts have been made to "restore the nation

to its natural ethos", in which saints and the Ram Janmabhoomi movement have played a significant role, a statement issued by the IGNCA quoted Rai as saying. He noted that the movement arose from the need to awaken society and the construction of the Ram temple is a "result of that awakening". Rai said Ayodhya has undergone significant transformation over time. The transformation of Ayodhya reflects not just in its development but also in its continuous social and cultural awakening, he said.

A Supreme Court judgement in 2019 paved the way for the construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya.

Congress criticises PM Modi's plan to increase Lok Sabha seats

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

The Congress on Sunday strongly criticised Prime Minister Narendra Modi over the proposal to increase Lok Sabha seats, saying he is "bulldozing" the move that will work more to the benefit of larger and populous States and is nothing but a "Weapon of Mass Distraction (WMD)".

The Opposition party also alleged that the prime minister is "hoodwinking" the people of the country and is making misleading statements that are meant to deceive. In a social media post, Congress general secretary in charge of communications Jairam Ramesh said, "The PM is up to his usual tricks of making misleading statements that are meant to deceive. He says South Indian states will not be hurt in any way if the strength of the Lok Sabha is increased by 50 per cent and the number of seats of each state in the Lok Sabha



Jairam Ramesh

is also increased by 50 per cent." "This is hoodwinking the people of the country in which the PM has unique expertise," Ramesh said.

For example, the difference between UP's and Kerala's seats in the Lok Sabha is now 60 and Modi's proposal will increase it to 90, he said. Similarly, the difference between UP and Tamil Nadu will increase from 41 to at

least 61, Ramesh said and added that such examples can be multiplied. "Modi is bulldozing a proposal that will work more to the benefit of larger and populous states since their already large numbers will get further magnified," the Congress leader said.

It is not just South India but states like Punjab and Haryana and those in the North East, that will also see

Kumbh Mela reflects spirit of Sanatan culture, says Fadnavis

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Nashik

Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis on Sunday described the Kumbh Mela as a symbol of India's cultural ethos and said that the mega congregation represents the inclusive spirit of Sanatan culture, where people gather without discrimination based on caste or ideology.

Addressing the closing ceremony of the Akhil Bharatiya Sant Samiti, he stated that the State Government has made extensive arrangements in Nashik to manage large crowds at the Simhastha Kumbh Mela 2027 and ensure smooth arrangements for devotees.

He emphasised that the Kumbh was a unique occasion where everyone partic-



ipates equally and seeks spiritual purification through sacred rivers like the Ganga and Godavari.

"No one asks about caste or beliefs; all come together in a spirit of unity," he said. Calling the festival a symbol of India's cultural ethos, he said any form of social discrimination is a later distortion, which is gradually diminishing.

Conflict is not only external, but also within, says Vice President

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

Vice President CP Radhakrishnan on Sunday said meditation can help bring peace, clarity and a positive outlook and underscored that conflict is not only external but also lies within an individual. He also underlined that the true power of meditation lies in transforming human beings.

Meditation helps reduce stress, improve focus, enhance emotional resilience, and address issues such as overthinking and overworking, he said.

Addressing an event on meditation, the vice president said the world today is



grappling with multiple challenges and noted that conflict is not only external but also exists within individuals.

According to an official statement, he said that meditation can play a transformative role by bringing peace, clarity, and a positive outlook,

while fostering the ability to listen and understand others.

Recalling the teachings of Tamil sage Thirumoolar, Radhakrishnan highlighted that meditation is akin to lighting an inner lamp that dispels ignorance and leads to truth and peace.

Ladakh deserves rights over its resources: Wangchuk

MOHIT KANDHARI
■ Jammu

Climate activist Sonam Wangchuk reiterated on Sunday that the rights that Ladakh deserves, democratic rights, constitutional rights, and rights over its resources, should be ensured just like in the rest of the country.

Wangchuk, who visited Kargil for the first time after he was released from Jodhpur jail on March 14, said unity between regions like Leh and Kargil has given strength to the movement in support of their demands, including statehood for Ladakh and extension of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution to the region.

"It is for the first time that people from different parts of Ladakh came together and raised their voice in unity. This spirit must be preserved," he emphasised.

Accompanied by Leh Alex Body (LAB) co-chairman Chering Dorje, Sonam Wangchuk was earlier accorded a warm welcome by the Kargil Development Authority (KDA) leadership,

including its co-chairman Asgar Ali Karbalai, Member of Parliament Haneefa Jan and prominent leader Sajjad Kargili.

Thanking the people and leadership of KDA, Wangchuk emphasised unity across Ladakh and the country, urging people to rise above divisions and work collectively for a better future.

"What should unite us is humanity and a shared sense of being Indian. We should not get divided into 'this side' or 'that side,' nor into religion or sect; we must come closer to one another, not drift apart," he said.

Highlighting Ladakh's ongoing demands, he said the issue concerns the entire region and must be addressed collectively.

Calling for a broader vision, Wangchuk said, "If we move forward seeing each other simply as human beings, leaving behind divisions, then not just Ladakh but the whole country can become more peaceful and prosperous."

In his address, Ladakh MP termed the release of Wangchuk "a victory of our



honesty and our truth" and stressed that while the movement has been firm, its core approach remains rooted in dialogue, urging the government to engage sincerely with the people of Ladakh.

"We have always wanted a solution through dialogue, but this dialogue must be sincere and genuinely reflect the aspirations of the people of Ladakh," he said.

Jan appealed to the Union Home Minister Amit Shah to resume talks at the earliest, emphasising that discussions should lead to concrete outcomes. "There must be honest deliberation on our

demands, and a solution should be worked out in accordance with the wishes of the people."

At the same time, Jan cautioned against using dialogue as a delaying tactic, noting that Ladakh's people have been raising their demands for five to six years without meaningful resolution.

"We are peace-loving people and have always expressed our protests in a calm and dignified manner, but our patience should not be tested," he said.

Reiterating the need for unity to strengthen negotiations, he warned against

attempts to divide the region and dilute the movement. "We must stay united and not allow any forces to create differences among us," he said, adding that a united Ladakh would be better positioned to achieve a just and lasting solution through dialogue.

Dorje expressed gratitude to the people for their support, saying the warm reception reflected public solidarity with the movement. He warned that efforts were being made to create divisions and urged the public of both districts to remain vigilant and united. "Do not allow anyone to make us fight among ourselves," he said, underlining that unity is essential to sustain the movement.

Asgar Ali Karbalai said the movement remains open to dialogue but rejected any attempt to use talks to dilute its demands.

"The movement is not afraid of dialogue, it is ready with an open mind and sincerity, but it should not be used to impose one's will," he said, asserting that Ladakhis "will never bow down."

India accounts for 25% of global groundwater use, says Panel

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

India accounts for around 25 per cent of global groundwater withdrawals, the Public Accounts Committee has flagged, and urged the Jal Shakti Ministry to persuade states to curb excessive extraction.

The observations were made in the panel's 41st report 'Ground Water Management and Regulation,' presented in the Lok Sabha on April 1 by its chairperson, KC Venugopal, and laid in the Rajya Sabha the same day.

The report, an action taken account of the committee's earlier recommendations, said India is the largest user of groundwater in the world, with extraction estimated at 245 billion cubic metres (BCM), accounting for about 25 per cent of global withdrawals, fulfilling nearly 80 per cent of drinking water needs, and around 64 per cent of irrigation



requirements. The committee stressed for translating existing initiatives into concrete results to ensure sustainable use of the resource. "The fact that four states had exceeded 100 per cent extraction and 267 districts had a stage of extraction ranging from 64 per cent to 385 per cent is a clear indication of the failure to prioritise sustainable water use," the report said.

"The Committee strongly urge the ministry to persuade the state governments to take immediate and stringent measures to curb excessive extraction of groundwa-

ter and ensure long-term viability of groundwater resources," it added.

The panel noted that between 2004 and 2017, the stage of groundwater extraction in the country increased from 58 per cent to 63 per cent. Delhi, Haryana, Punjab, and Rajasthan recorded extraction levels of more than 100 per cent, meaning groundwater withdrawal exceeded recharge, while at the district level, 267 districts across 24 states and Union Territories reported extraction ranging from 64 per cent to 385 per cent.

States Focus



POLLS ARE TO IMPROVE KERALA'S FUTURE: AMIT SHAH

Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Sunday said the upcoming Kerala Assembly polls are not merely for changing the Government, but to improve the State's future. Shah, at a public meeting in Kunnathunadu constituency, noted that NDA vote share in Kerala increased since the 2014 Lok Sabha polls and its time for a Government of the BJP-led front in the State. He wished the Christian community on Easter and called on them to support the NDA to form Government in Kerala. The Home Minister further said that justice for all and appeasement of none is the stand of the BJP-led NDA across the country. Taking a dig at Kerala CM Pinarayi Vijayan, he said the Marxist leader has started a new startup of changing names.



LDF DOESN'T WANT RELIGIOUS FANATICS' VOTES: CPI'S VISWAM

CPI State secretary Binoy Viswam on Sunday said that the ruling LDF has maintained a consistent stand that it does not want the votes of religious fanatics. Responding to queries on whether there has been any shift in the Left Democratic Front's position regarding backing from the Social Democratic Party of India (SDPI) – the political arm of the banned Popular Front of India – Viswam asserted that there was no change in the front's ideological stance. "Ideologically, there is no change in our stand. We respect all religions. We don't want the votes of religious fanatics."

Puducherry CM banks on welfare to win 5th term

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
■ Puducherry

'Arivai tharuvathu booku, nalatchi tharuvathu jaggu,' (Book gives knowledge, jug symbol that provides good governance) echoes the campaign slogan as AINRC cadres distribute pamphlets seeking support for Chief Minister N Rangasamy. As the campaign for the April 9 Assembly polls peaks, cadres are in a rush and criss-cross the lanes and bylanes of Thattanchavadi and Mangalam constituencies, where Rangasamy is contesting. The AINRC-BJP Government is heavily banking on the popularity of the 75-year-old Rangasamy, famous as a simple man, to win polls and retain power. The longest serving CM, who is in the race for a 5th term, in an interview to PTI, listed the welfare initiatives of his Government, including the distribution of free laptops to Class 11 and 12 students. He said, "We are ready to do whatever is needed to support our children so that they learn well and make progress in life." Asked if the ₹2,500 monthly financial assistance scheme for women will be expanded if his alliance wins polls and retains power, he said, "We are now providing the assistance to 73,000 women, and after winning the election, it will be provided to all those who need it; as such, there is no upper limit or ceiling." The cash aid for women is among the several initiatives and welfare measures the Rangasamy-led AINRC-BJP

Vote to take revenge for deleted voter names, says Mamata

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Samserganj

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Sunday urged people to cast their votes to "take revenge" for the deletion of people's names from the electoral rolls. The Trinamool Congress chief urged people whose names have been deleted from the voter list during the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls to move appeals before the tribunal.

Addressing an election rally at Samserganj, which was the epicentre of violence during the protests against the Waqf (Amendment) Act in Muslim-majority Murshidabad district in April 2025, she said, "Cast your votes to take revenge for deletion of people's names, and against the SIR so that the results reflect that."

Banerjee asked the TMC workers to remain vigilant till the counting date on May 4. Murshidabad witnessed violence during the implementation of the Waqf (Amendment) Act, leading to the death of some persons, including a father-son duo who were hacked to death by a mob, with the BJP accusing the TMC of engineering violent agitations in various parts of the district.

Claiming that development work has stalled owing to the Assembly polls, she said, "They (EC) have transferred nearly 500 officers, but this is only for a month; work will begin again after that."

The chief minister accused the EC of "deleting names of some, while intimidating some others", in the name of SIR of electoral rolls. Banerjee asked why the Assembly polls could not be conducted with the same electoral rolls used in the



West Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee waves to the gathering during an election campaign in support of TMC candidates for Samserganj and Farakka constituencies, Nur Alam and Amirul Islam, respectively, ahead of State Assembly elections in Murshidabad district

support of Mohammed Nur Alam in Samserganj and Mohammed Amirul Islam in Farakka, Banerjee accused the BJP of spreading canards against her that she did not do much for the interest of the Muslims, maintaining that she has fought hard against the implementation of the Waqf (Amendment) Act. Murshidabad witnessed violence during the implementation of the Waqf (Amendment) Act, leading to the death of some persons, including a father-son duo who were hacked to death by a mob, with the BJP accusing the TMC of engineering violent agitations in various parts of the district.

Claiming that development work has stalled owing to the Assembly polls, she said, "They (EC) have transferred nearly 500 officers, but this is only for a month; work will begin again after that."

The chief minister accused the EC of "deleting names of some, while intimidating some others", in the name of SIR of electoral rolls. Banerjee asked why the Assembly polls could not be conducted with the same electoral rolls used in the

2024 general elections. "If the voter list contained names of infiltrators, the Prime Minister and the Home Minister also won with their votes earlier, so they should have resigned first," she said. Claiming that she and her party will never allow the establishment of detention camps in the name of NRC, Banerjee said, "That is why you are being vengeful against me."

She sought to remind that the Election Commission's authority over the State's administration is till completion of the election process. Addressing another public meeting in Murshidabad district's Jiaganj, Banerjee said that in her own constituency, Bhabanipur in Kolkata, 40,000 names have been deleted from the electoral rolls.

"All those who get to vote will cast their vote in favour of the TMC," she asserted, maintaining that even the BJP's supporters will not vote for the saffron brigade, and instead support the ruling party in Bengal. Claiming that names of Hindus were also deleted in the SIR exercise, Banerjee

said, "I am from a Hindu family; names of my family members have also been deleted."

She also alleged that the BJP was "spreading venom" in the name of religion, which stands for humanity.

The TMC chief asserted that migrant workers from Bengal staying in other States were being deported after being branded as Bangladeshis. "I believe the ills perpetrated by the BJP will cause their downfall in 2026 itself," she said.

Pointing to the ECI's action over clashes during a rally for BJP leader Suvendu Adhikari's nomination from Bhabanipur, Banerjee claimed that it was not a political matter and that locals protested when saffron party supporters were "making derogatory gestures". "But at the behest of the BJP, four police officers, including a deputy commissioner, have been suspended," she alleged. Asserting that she has fought all her life, Banerjee said, "I will not let go an inch of land without a fight." The CM said the fight is between her and the BJP in all 294 constituencies in the state.

Superstar of 2026 election is DMK manifesto: Stalin

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Virudhunagar (Tamil Nadu)

Calling the DMK's election manifesto the "superstar of the 2026 polls," Tamil Nadu Chief Minister MK Stalin on Sunday asserted that while anyone can give promises, the public only trusts those made by his party. Addressing a massive public meeting of the Secular Progressive Alliance here, he said, "From age six to 60, from women to men, from youth to the elderly — everyone likes the DMK election manifesto. There cannot be anyone who dislikes it."

"I introduced this as the superstar of the 2026 electoral field," Stalin told the crowd here, noting that its appeal spans all demographics. He emphasised that the credibility of a promise depends on who makes it, stating, "Whoever wants to can give a promise. But people only believe the promise given by the DMK. Whatever others say, there is no value to it." Stalin, who is also DMK president, detailed several "superstar" highlights, most notably the '*Illatharasai*' (Homemaker) scheme. He described this as an "ultimate announcement" involving a ₹8,000 coupon



for women to purchase household appliances. "As far as I am concerned, the household workload of our family heads will be greatly reduced. That is the main objective of this scheme," he said, adding that women could choose anything from washing machines and fridges to micro-ovens at a store of their choice. He also pledged to double the 'Maghalir Urimai Thogai'

monthly assistance from ₹1,000 to ₹2,000.

Stalin also launched a scathing attack on the Opposition, framing the upcoming election as a battle between the "Tamil Nadu Team" and the "Delhi Team". Stalin accused AIADMK chief Edappadi K Palaniswami of basing his campaign on "slander and low-level talk". He labelled him a "liar" and the "image of betrayal". "If you give a form to betrayal, it is Palaniswami," Stalin claimed, citing how the former CM has betrayed everybody from his party — from J Jayalithaa to VK Sasikala and O Panneerselvam. Stalin also countered Palaniswami's claims that the DMK had "cheated" Government employees.

Like Zubeen Garg, Congress works to unite Assam: Rahul Gandhi



Congress leader Rahul Gandhi holding a bow and an arrow during a public meeting ahead of Assam Assembly election

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Guwahati

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Sunday said the philosophy of his party is that of the celebrated musician Zubeen Garg, who worked his entire life to unite Assam.

Addressing an election rally in Assam's Biswanath district, he alleged that Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma is the "most corrupt CM" in India and action will be taken against him after the Congress forms Government in the State.

"Zubeen Garg worked his entire life to unite people of Assam; he never misbehaved with anyone. The Congress philosophy is also like that, to spread love against hatred," Gandhi said.

He alleged that the BJP Government led by Sarma is spreading hatred against people and communities.

"Let him speak for some more days. After that, the Congress will form Government in Assam, and legal action will follow even if he asks for forgiveness," Gandhi said.

Congress bringing suitcases of cash for bypolls, alleges Yediyurappa

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
■ Bagalkot (Karnataka)

Veteran BJP leader BS Yediyurappa on Sunday alleged that Congress leaders came to campaign for bypolls in two Karnataka constituencies with "suitcases full of money", under the illusion that they can win with cash, liquor and muscle power.

But people will "teach them a lesson," the former Chief Minister told reporters.

He also accused the Congress Government in the state of indulging in corruption, "intoxicated by power".

"There is no need to have any doubt. They (ruling Congress leaders) have come with suitcases full of money under the illusion that they can win the election with money, liquor and muscle power," Yediyurappa said, taking a dig at CM Siddaramaiah and his Cabinet for camping in poll-bound constituencies for about a week now.

People have decided to ensure the victory of BJP candidates, and will reject the Congress' allurements, he added. "By ensuring the



victory of BJP's candidates in both Bagalkot and Davanagere South, people have decided to teach a lesson to the corrupt Congress Government and CM Siddaramaiah, who have indulged in large-scale corruption intoxicated with power," he said, and claimed that the BJP is getting a good response from the public during the campaign.

Bypolls for the Bagalkot and Davanagere South Assembly constituencies will be held on April 9.

The polls were necessitated following the deaths of senior Congress MLAs HY Meti and Shamanur

Shivashankarappa, respectively. Yediyurappa alleged that the Congress was indulging in a "daylight robbery" by emptying the Government's treasury.

Responding to a question, he said, the minority Muslim community is also aware of the Congress' "true colours", and will not fall for their allurements. "I think they, too, will stand by us," he added.

The BJP leader said that Siddaramaiah knows Congress is certain to lose in the bypolls and has therefore been campaigning in both constituencies for about a week now.

Stalin wants to clean out rivals for Udhayanidhi: Adhav Arjuna

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Chennai

TVK leader Adhav Arjuna claimed on Sunday that the DMK alliance is no longer "natural" but is instead maintained through "pressure and financial influence to clean out competition" and make way for Udhayanidhi Stalin to hold high office.

He also accused DMK chief MK Stalin of abandoning the principles of social justice in favour of "monarchy" and "money power". The DMK has shifted from an ideological party to one dominated by authority and corruption, he alleged.

"Stalin wants to clean everyone, and without any competition, he wants to make Udhayanidhi the chief minister after 2026," Arjuna told reporters.

The TVK general secretary highlighted grievances within the DMK alliance, specifically mentioning the "pressurising" of veteran leaders like Vaiko of the MDMK.

MDMK was forced to contest under the DMK symbol, which effectively erases their party's pres-



ence in the Assembly. Also, senior Congress and Dalit leaders are "upset" and "suppressed" by the current administration's tactics, he claimed.

He further expressed "sadness" over reports that VCK leader Thol Thirumavalavan was "being pressured by DMK-linked individuals" to withdraw from state-level politics.

He made a personal request to Thirumavalavan to participate in the State election. "Thirumavalavan has to participate in the State election for the sake of Dalits; to ensure Dalit and minority voices are represented in the Assembly," Arjuna said.

Thirumavalavan on Saturday clarified that he had wanted to enter the Assembly, but changed his mind to ensure the unity of the DMK alliance. The Chidambaram MP confirmed that he has now opted not to file his nomination for the Kattumannarkoil seat.

Turning to the TVK's own efforts, Arjuna noted the massive public turnout at recent events in Puducherry — estimating crowds of over 50,000 — that was addressed by TVK chief Vijay. He confirmed that a full campaign schedule through April 21 is being finalised, pending police permissions and NOCs for specific locations.



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Neutrality of polls can not be assured if EC dependent on contestants: Justice Nagarathna

New Delhi: Supreme Court judge Justice BV Nagarathna, while highlighting that the Election Commission is the primary institution entrusted with maintaining the integrity of polls, has said if those who conduct elections are dependent on those who contest them, the neutrality of the process cannot be assured.

The apex court judge raised a critical concern regarding the structural independence of those tasked with overseeing the ballot while delivering the Rajendra Prasad Memorial Lecture at the Chanakya Law University in Patna on Saturday.

Citing a 1995 verdict where the Supreme Court recognised the Election Commission as a constitutional authority of high significance, entrusted with ensuring the integrity of elections, she said, "The concern, once again, was structural: if those who conduct elections are dependent on those who contest them, the neutrality of the process cannot be assured."

Justice Nagarathna said elections are not merely periodic events but a mechanism through which political authority is constituted. "Our constitutional democracy has amply demonstrated smooth changes in government due to elections being held on a timely basis. Control over that process is, in effect, control over the conditions of political competition itself," she said. The Supreme Court judge said power is not exercised only through formal institutions but also through the processes that sustain them, including elections, public finance, and regulation. "A constitutional structure that seeks to restrain power must therefore go beyond its classical forms and address these fourth-branch institutions. A set of institutions, while not always fitting within the classical tripartite scheme, is nonetheless central to the maintenance of constitutional order," she said.



'The Institutional Erosion of the Lokpal of India'



PRASHANT
TEWARI

Corruption, in its myriad forms such as bribery, fraud and embezzlement, has universally plagued public and private institutions alike. The concept of the Lokpal, which literally means "caretaker of the people", is borrowed from the Swedish model of ombudsman, an independent, parliamentary-appointed official established in 1809 to protect citizen rights by overseeing government administration and investigating abuses of power.

India's long and arduous battle against corruption reached the defining moment with the passage of the Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act, 2013. Born out of unprecedented public pressure and widespread frustration against entrenched institutional corruption, the legislation was envisioned as a powerful, independent watchdog to hold the highest offices accountable. Yet, nearly a decade later, the reality of the Lokpal stands in stark contrast to its founding promise. What was meant to be a sturdy and steadfast pillar of transparency risks becoming a symbolic institution, impaired by neglect, structural weaknesses, and a lack of political and institutional support.

Its Traceable Origins in Public Anger and Political Compulsion

The Lokpal legislation did not emerge in a vacuum. It was the inevitable product of a powerful nationwide movement that galvanized citizens across social and political spectrums. Public outrage against corruption scandals had reached a veritable tipping point, forcing the then United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government to act decisively. The subsequent National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government valiantly carried forward the implementation, reflecting a rare bipartisan acknowledgment of public sentiment. The Act was thus less a voluntary reform and more a political necessity—an attempt to restore the sinking public faith in

governance. It represented the collective demand for an efficacious mechanism that could function independently of political influence and interference and investigate corruption at the highest levels, including ministers and senior bureaucrats. However, the letter and spirit of the legislation appears to have weakened over time, as the institutional backing necessarily required to sustain it has remained inadequate.

Despite its independent statutory authority, the Lokpal of India continues to operate under significant debilitating constraints that undermine its effectiveness. One of the most glaring issues is the absence of a permanent institutional framework. Even years after its establishment, the Lokpal lacks a dedicated office space, functioning instead from a temporary setup that does little to inspire confidence in its permanence or authority. Equally disconcerting is the abject shortage of trained personnel. With a limited workforce—reportedly capped at around sixty individuals, many of whom lack specialized training—the institution is ill equipped to handle



SINCE 1865

A significant moment highlighting this tension was when the Supreme Court stayed a Lokpal order seeking to probe allegations of corruption within the High Courts. This development raises fundamental questions about institutional accountability. While the Lokpal had in clear and unequivocal language clarified that it did not intend to investigate Supreme Court judges, its attempt to address corruption within the broader judicial system reflected its commitment to its avowed mandate. However, the judicial pushback suggests an unresolved conflict regarding the very scope of the Lokpal's authority. The absence of a clear constitutional alignment between the Lokpal and the judiciary creates a grey area that weakens the institution's credibility. If certain domains remain beyond scrutiny, the principle of equal accountability is compromised. For an anti-corruption body to be effective, its jurisdiction must be both clearly defined and uniformly respected.

Perhaps the most significant factor contributing to the Lokpal's current state of affairs is the apparent reluctance of successive governments to fully and meaningfully empower it. While the creation of the Lokpal was driven by public demand, its operationalisation has been marked by delays and half-measures. This suggests a strategic approach to compliance—meeting the minimum requirements of the law coupled with genuinely strengthening the institution. Governments, by their very nature, exercise control over investigative agencies such as the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) and the Enforcement Directorate (ED). These agencies report to the executive, allowing the government to retain an appreciable degree of influence over their functioning. In contrast, the Lokpal was designed to operate independently, free from the shackles of executive control. This independence, while essential, may also explain the lack of enthusiasm in empowering the Lokpal. A truly

autonomous anti-corruption body poses a grave and compelling challenge to established power structures. By limiting its resources and scope, the institution can be rendered fruitless without overtly dismantling it. Such an approach allows governments to claim adherence to anti-corruption norms while retaining practical control over investigative processes.

The Broader Implications for Democracy

The weakening of the Lokpal is not merely an institutional concern; it has profound implications for India's democratic fabric. Corruption erodes public trust, distorts policy decisions, and impedes the rule of law. An effective anti-corruption mechanism is therefore not a luxury but a necessity for democratic survival. India, as the world's most populous democracy, faces unique governance challenges. The scale and complexity of its administrative systems make it particularly vulnerable to corruption. In this context, the Lokpal was conceptualised as a corrective mechanism, a viable means to ensure accountability at the highest levels. However, a weakened Lokpal hazards sending wrong signals. It suggests that accountability is negotiable and that institutional safeguards can be diluted over time. This not only diminishes public confidence but also emboldens corrupt practices. When oversight mechanisms fail, the consequences are invariably felt across all sectors, from public service delivery to economic development.

Reviving the Lokpal requires more than rhetorical, lip-service commitment; it demands concrete action. The first step must be to establish a permanent institutional framework, complete with adequate infrastructure and resources. This would signal a long-term commitment to the institution's role in governance. Equally important is the need to strengthen its human resources. Recruitment of skilled professionals, coupled with specialized training, is essential to enhance the Lokpal's investigative capacity. Investing in technology and data analytics can further improve its efficiency and effective-

ness. On the legal front, greater clarity is needed regarding the Lokpal's jurisdiction, particularly in relation to the judiciary. A balanced approach that respects judicial independence while ensuring accountability must be accomplished through dialogue and legislative refinement. Finally, political will remains the most clinching factor. Without genuine support from the government, even the most well-designed institutions cannot succeed. Strengthening the Lokpal should not be perceived as a threat but as an opportunity to reinforce democratic credibility.

The Lokpal represents more than just an independent statutory body; it embodies the aspirations of millions of Indians who demanded a cleaner, more accountable system of governance. Its current challenges reflect a disconnect between that aspiration and institutional reality. Protecting the Lokpal is not just in the interest of the public but also in the larger interest of the political and judicial ecosystem. A credible anti-corruption framework enhances legitimacy, fosters trust, and strengthens governance. Conversely, a weakened Lokpal undermines all three. India's fight against corruption is a delicate and ongoing process.

It requires vigilance, commitment, and above all, strong and robust institutions. The Lokpal, despite its visible shortcomings, remains a vital component of this framework. Ensuring its effectiveness is not merely an administrative task—it is a democratic imperative. The Lokpal must be allowed to spread its wings to attain full flight and the people of India must ensure with all the strength at their command to thwart any conceivable attempt to clip its wings! Rigoberta Menchú Tum, the redoubtable Guatemalan human rights activist, feminist, and Nobel laureate, aptly remarked, "Without strong watchdog institutions, impunity becomes the very foundation upon which systems of corruption are built. And if impunity is not demolished, all efforts to bring an end to corruption are in vain."

Writer is a policy expert and columnist

SC comes to aid of man whose credit score remained 'negative' for years

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

■ New Delhi

The Supreme Court has come to the rescue of a man whose credit score remained "negative" for years despite having no outstanding loan or default in payment.

A bench of Justices JB Pardiwala and KV Viswanathan was hearing a plea filed by Uttarakhand resident Rajendra Singh Panwar, who submitted that he had an adverse CIBIL score since 2020 despite not having any loan or default.

CIBIL Score is a 3-digit

numeric summary of credit history that indicates a person's creditworthiness.

In his petition, Panwar submitted that his credit profile showed a negative score which prevented him from availing financial facilities.

Panwar contended that two other individuals with the same name had been issued the same PAN number and payment default committed by them were allegedly appearing in his CIBIL records

Even after getting a new PAN, his high-risk score persisted due to the linkage



between the new and old PANs. The top court then sought responses from major

banks, including SBI and PNB, asking them to clarify whether Panwar had any

outstanding loans or defaults.

In an affidavit filed in the apex court, Punjab National Bank (PNB) informed that it had not reported any default against Panwar and that records reflected no adverse credit information.

The State Bank of India (SBI) told the court that its reporting to CIBIL was limited strictly to facilities actually availed by the petitioner and linked to his updated PAN details.

CIBIL then informed the court that Panwar's records have now been corrected in light of the clarifications.

Allahabad HC berates growing 'gun culture' in state

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

■ Prayagraj

The Allahabad High Court, in an order, has sought comprehensive data on arms licences issued in Uttar Pradesh, taking note of a growing 'gun culture' in the state.

Passing the above order, Justice Vinod Diwakar observed that individuals with political ambitions or questionable backgrounds are using licensed firearms to assert authority, cultivate a dominant image, and indirectly intimidate others, creating an atmosphere of fear.

The court specifically criticised the display of firearms on social media platforms, such as



Instagram reels, noting that such behaviour seeks attention, social validation, and reinforces identity through the amplification of gun culture.

"Such misuse contributes to a culture of fear rather than adherence to the rule of law. It undermines public confidence in legal institutions and normalises violence within

society," the court remarked in its order dated March 23.

"It reflects the persistence of feudal power structures, the inadequate enforcement of norms governing the public display of firearms and the influence of a media-driven peer-validation culture. The interplay of power, perception and social media further exacerbates the issue," the court added.

In light of these concerns, the court has directed the additional chief secretary (Home) to clarify whether the UP Government has established a database for arms licences. The state must also specify if there is a formal arms policy in place to guide

district magistrates in making informed decisions regarding the granting, refusal, or renewal of licences.

Furthermore, the court sought details on whether Rule 16 of the Arms Rules, 2016, which mandates updating approved transactions on the NDAL system, is being complied with.

The court also took a stern view of the fact that multiple members of a single family, such as a husband, wife, son, daughter, and daughter-in-law, hold individual arms licences and sometimes possess multiple weapons and stressed that this practice requires serious judicial scrutiny.

Right to Education does not include right to choose school: Delhi HC

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

■ New Delhi

A child's right to education does not encompass the right to select a particular school for it, the Delhi High Court has held. A bench of Chief Justice D K Upadhyaya and Justice Tejas Karia said the Right to Education (RTE) Act was a beneficial legislation, enacted to achieve the objectives of social inclusion and ensuring that schools become a common space which was not differentiated by barriers of caste, ethnic group or caste lines.

"However, such a right to education cannot be translat-

ed into right to select a particular school," the court ruled on March 25.

The court's verdict came on a mother's appeal seeking to admit her ward in Class 2 under the EWS category in a private school for the academic session 2024-2025.

The appellant had earlier approached a single-judge bench of the high court for admission of her ward under the EWS category in Class 1 of the private school for the 2023-2024 academic session.

In the appeal, the appellant assailed the single judge's order, which said that although the school lacked a

legitimate basis for refusing admission to the appellant's ward, the conclusion of the relevant academic year precluded the court from issuing an order for her ward's admission in the subsequent academic year, i.e. 2024-25.

The single judge, however, had said that the unfilled EWS seats in Class 1 for the academic year would be carried forward next year for the same class and would be available to any EWS candidate, including the appellant's ward, if they choose to apply. The appellant, however, argued before the division bench that her ward ought to be given admission in



Class 2 in the school for the academic year 2024-2025.

Refusing to grant relief in the appeal, the division bench

stated that in the absence of any interim order of provisional admission or reserving of a seat during the pendency of

the petition, the right of the student to be granted admission in the school would perish once the academic year was over.

It further noted that when the school refused to grant admission, the Directorate of Education (DoE) accommodated the appellant's ward in another school, which was amongst the preferred schools selected by the appellant at the time of filing the application form. However, the second school was not accepted by the appellant, noted the court.

The appellant stated that during the draw of lots conducted by the DoE in March

2023, her ward's name was selected for admission in the private school.

She alleged that when she approached the school for verification of the documents and to complete the admission process, she was denied entry and advised that she would receive further communication. The appellant was subsequently informed that admission for EWS children could not be granted until all seats for the general category were filled, and therefore her ward was placed on a waiting list, the court was informed.

She therefore filed the writ petition seeking direction to

the school to grant admission in terms of the list of selected candidates through the draw of lots conducted by the DoE.

During the course of the hearing in the appeal, the counsel for the DoE offered to provide admission to the appellant's ward in any municipal school.

The counsel for the appellant, however, declined the proposal. He said the appellant was unwilling to accept admission at any institution other than the allotted school since her ward was denied admission despite there being no fault of their part.



Editor's
TAKE

Rewriting the Moon Mission legacy

With the launch of Artemis II, humanity's return to the Moon is no longer just about revisiting past glory—it is about redefining the future of exploration

Neil Armstrong, the first human being to touch the moon, said: "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." It was on July 20, 1969, when man set foot on the Moon for the first time. It was a giant leap indeed, as many Moon missions followed, but somewhere down the line, man lost interest in the Moon and strived for bigger challenges, such as the Mars mission, probes farther into the solar system. However, the Moon remains on the horizon, and its explorations continued, but man-missions to the Moon were not planned. That was perhaps the need to show that space supremacy was not there, as the Apollo moon mission was America's way of telling the Russians that they had an edge in space. But now there is renewed vigour to explore the moon once again with human touch. The launch of Artemis II marks more than a return to the Moon; it signals a profound redefinition of space exploration post-Cold War era. Apollo 11 was technological bravado, and national prestige of America. It was all male all white mission.

The realities have changed since. Over half a century later, Artemis II is not merely revisiting the lunar frontier; it is rewriting the narrative of exploration itself. The inclusion of astronauts like Christina Koch and Victor Glover is not incidental symbolism but the outcome of structural changes in education, military access, and institutional policy that have expanded the pipeline of talent in the US. During the Apollo era, the astronaut were military test pilots. Today's astronaut corps reflects decades of social evolution, making Artemis II a mission that carries the weight of representation alongside scientific ambition. But the mission's significance extends far beyond its historic crew – the people of colour.

Artemis II is a critical step in space exploration. Unlike robotic probes, human missions generate complex, real-time data about the physiological and psychological effects of space travel. Artemis II will expose its crew to deep-space radiation and isolation, which will help prepare for a longer manned mission to Mars. What has fundamentally changed since the first Moon missions is the purpose of exploration itself. While the earlier missions aimed to demonstrate technological supremacy and secure geopolitical advantage, Artemis, by contrast, is designed for sustainability. Its long-term goal is not merely to land astronauts on the Moon but to establish a lasting human presence, particularly around the lunar south pole, where water ice could support future habitation. Equally important is the shift from competition to collaboration.

While Apollo was a distinctly American endeavour, Artemis is inherently international. Artemis II affirms that exploration must be inclusive and that its benefits—scientific, technological, and symbolic—must resonate across countries. The Moon remains unchanged, but humanity's approach to it has evolved dramatically—and that may be the mission's most lasting legacy.

Unsubstantiated conflation of Taliban and India

Pervez Hoodbhoy remains one of Pakistan's few enduring voices of reason and reform, long warning that the country's entrenched portrayal of India as a perpetual adversary has come at the expense of much-needed self-reflection



BHOPINDER SINGH

Today that rote obsession of unsubstantiated blaming India has crossed all known levels of plausibility and absurdity. It has reached a stage where even their "own" are not just questioning the Pakistani State about their India-fixation, but are also taking on the Pakistani State for persisting with instincts that disallow thinking beyond India when reflecting on the crippling woes that beset their narrative. The most recent act of Pakistan consistently disowning its own acts of commission and omission, is the violent regression in its relations with its own creation, i.e., Taliban, onto Delhi.

In a surreal accusation, Pakistan suggests that somehow the radicalised, supremacist, and ultra-nativist phenomenon of the Taliban is actually working hand-in-glove with India! Such a baseless accusation is counterintuitive from so many lenses, most importantly from the prism of foundational and ideological facts. It is clearly established that the Taliban are a product of the deliberately incubated force in the religious schools (madrasas), along the Durand Line in the townships of Pakistan. Historically, they were carefully nurtured, financed, trained, armed, and given safe havens by Pakistan's infamous spy agency, i.e., Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) to its bidding in Afghanistan towards ensuring Islamabad's "Strategic Depth" with a beholden Afghan government.

However, Pakistan mistook the tactical support accepted by the Afghans during the anti-Soviet Mujaheddin movement of the 1980's for allowing permanent control. Culturally and historically, the Afghans could never be a proxy force as they saw themselves as a Afghan nationalist movement. Their past as the "Graveyard of Empires" is instructive as they could never be controlled by any foreign power and would inevitably seek independent decision-making, and never accept a vassal status.

This tension of fundamental dissonance between Pakistanis and Afghans became more pronounced post the Taliban re-takeover in 2021. Since then, the gradual assertion by the Aghan Taliban and the patronage of its co-ideological brethren (albeit Pakistan-facing) Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) became a strong lever in the hands of Kabul, which was otherwise conventionally (militarily) inferior to the Pakistanis. Soon, the Afghan-based forces started resorting to the same asymmetric ways which had been taught by the Pakistani Military for so long -



LEGITIMATE
RESISTANCE
AGAINST
PERCEIVED
STATE
OPPRESSION,
THEREBY
DILUTING MORAL
CONDEMNATION
AND
SUSTAINING
SYMPATHY
FOR THE
CAUSE.

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The Pioneer

but only this time, the tables had turned, and the Taliban and its co-ideological affiliates started striking at Pakistan, with deadly consequences.

However, to be fair to the Afghan Taliban, they weren't initially trying to spite Pakistan unwarrantedly. They only reacted after they imagined Pakistan trying to "control" the narrative and diminish their sovereign pride. Islamabad also wrongly underestimated the resilience and determination of its own creation in taking on its progenitor.

Today, there is a no-holds-barred "war" (Operation Ghazab lil-Haq) with both sides openly hitting the weak spot of the other. Obviously, the militarily superior Pakistanis are striking from the safety of skies with sheer impunity, disdain and recklessness. All this is further fueling the Afghan animus and sense of vengeance against Pakistan. They are ironing their resolve by knowingly harbouring terror groups that could be Balochi secessionists or Pashtun secessionists, or of any other ideological and tribal/ethnic composition.

The most barbaric and deadliest attack by the Pakistanis was the recent bombing of a drug rehabilitation centre that killed an unprecedented 410-odd Afghans. Unbelievably, the Pakistanis designated the air strike as "precision, deliberate and professional", no Afghan or right-thinking person can believe that this site would have had any militaristic value, but for a sheer attempt to bludgeon the Afghan resolve and spirit. But the bizarreness continued with the further Pakistani suggestion that a clearly radicalized and extremist force like the Afghan Taliban

was acting at the behest of a secular India! Pakistani Foreign Office noted, "India's active sponsorship of terrorism directed at Pakistan from Afghan soil, as well as its historical role as a spoiler". This Pakistani disingenuity of conflating Taliban and India aside, the mood on the streets of Kabul against the Pakistanis is at an all-time low. No amount of fraternal spiel a la "brother Muslim nation" will cut ice with the unforgiving Taliban ranks, going forward.

Situation has deteriorated to such an extent for the Pakistanis that their own preferred faction with the larger Taliban community, i.e., Haqqani faction, too has virtually slammed the door on Islamabad. With that snapping, the Pakistanis have lost their most powerful pivot in Afghanistan.

Haqqani faction leader, Sirajuddin Haqqani, who was once pitched by the ISI as Afghanistan's Interior Minister when Islamabad had sway with the Afghan Taliban called the recent attackers (read, Pakistan) as "criminals". Sirajuddin Haqqani coldly warned, "We will take revenge," and added, "We are not weak and helpless. You will see the consequences of your crimes."

With the inevitable impact of the global energy crisis crippling the already wounded Pakistani economy, the ability of Pakistan to brace against the dangerously asymmetric ways of the forces from across the unrecognised Durand Line will be very limited. Pakistan has invited Afghan fury, and the Afghans will pay with interest. No untoward conjoining of the issue with India will establish credibility or save Pakistan.

The Pioneer
SINCE 1865

The heroes we do not name

holding together an emotional balance that often goes unnoticed because it is so constant. My daughters, in their own ways, reflect a similar strength, revealed not in display but in continuity.

Beyond the home, too, there are stories that remain largely untold. There is a woman in our residential society who was the first girl in her village to be sent to school. She lives in Gurgaon, often away from her husband who serves in a transferable government job, while she anchors her children's education. Alongside this, she serves on the governing body of the society, contributing to improving living conditions for others. There is no narrative, no formal recognition, and yet she is managing multiple roles, each carried out with a quiet sense of purpose.

These are not after-hours heroes, because their work does not begin after the day ends. It runs through the day, and beyond. My wife, without formal training, has immersed herself in environmental work and teaching underprivileged children. She helps shape a future that is more conscious and responsible.

I have often spoken about a young boy whose education we supported from Class 7, and who has appeared for his Class 12 examinations. It is easy to recognise his journey as one of determination, but behind that journey lies another story—that of his parents.

For a self-respecting parent, the act of seeking support

is not easy. It involves a negotiation with one's sense of dignity, a willingness to step beyond discomfort for the child's future. That decision, though rarely acknowledged, is an act of courage.

When one begins to look at the world through this lens, such stories seem to appear everywhere—parents making difficult choices, individuals contributing quietly, women holding together multiple responsibilities without pause. These are not exceptional lives; they are simply lives that have not been named as such.

Perhaps, then, the question is not merely about identifying heroes, but about recognising the role we can play in enabling them. Often, it is not a grand intervention that alters the course of a life, but a small and timely act of support—a decision taken, a hand extended, an opportunity created.

In doing so, we do not simply support one individual; we contribute to the creation of many more who carry forward that possibility.

And perhaps that is where the idea of heroism must be expanded—not limited to those who create after hours, but inclusive of those whose hours are never truly their own, and yet who continue, without pause, to create, to sustain, and to give.

The writer is founder of Kala - Crazy About Literature And Arts, is an author, speaker, coach, arbitrator, and strategy consultant

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Grave escalation demands restraint

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, while addressing rallies in Kerala on April 4, 2026, launched a sharp attack on the ruling Left Democratic Front (LDF), accusing it of widespread corruption. He asserted that if the BJP-led NDA comes to power in the state, corruption would be eliminated and development would take precedence. I find this claim difficult to reconcile with the BJP's own track record. It is widely perceived that the party has inducted leaders with questionable reputations from other parties and rewarded them with influential positions. This trend has led critics to label the BJP as a "washing machine," suggesting that allegations of corruption fade once individuals join its ranks. Over the past decade, the BJP has also secured electoral victories across states by promising welfare benefits and freebies, a strategy that has encouraged other parties to follow suit.

This has contributed to the normalization of what many view as indirect inducements to voters, often framed under appealing labels such as empowerment schemes. In this context, the Prime Minister's promise of clean governance appears contradictory, raising concerns about consistency between political rhetoric and practice.

AVINASH GODBOLEY | DEVAS

Fears of wider India-Pakistan conflict

Tensions between India and Pakistan have intensified following a stark warning from Defence Minister Khawaja Asif, who cautioned that any future conflict could extend far beyond border areas, with cities such as Kolkata potentially becoming targets if hostilities escalate. His remarks suggest a shift in posture, indicating that a new confrontation may not remain limited to traditional flashpoints but could involve deeper strikes into Indian territory. He emphasized that Pakistan would respond more forcefully than in previous episodes, signalling the possibility of a broader and more aggressive engagement.

The current strain traces back to April 2025, when a deadly attack in Pahalgam triggered a brief yet intense military standoff. In response, India launched Operation Sindoor, targeting militant infrastructure across Pakistan and Pakistan-administered Kashmir using missiles and drones. These developments come amid a fragile regional climate. Pakistan is also grappling with tensions along its western frontier, with Afghanistan alleging airstrikes in multiple areas. Although independently unverified, such claims further heighten uncertainty in an already volatile security environment.

BHAGWAN THADANI | MUMBAI

Unlocking India's maritime potential

India is yet to fully realise the vast potential of its maritime sector. Every year, April 5 is observed as National Maritime Day, underscoring the importance of safeguarding and strengthening the nation's maritime interests. With a coastline stretching over 11,000 km, maritime development can serve as a powerful engine of economic growth, trade expansion, and employment generation.

Inland waterways, often referred to as "waterways trade," can significantly ease the burden on road and rail networks by providing a cost-effective and sustainable mode of transport. While seaports currently play a crucial role in cargo movement, greater emphasis must be placed on seamlessly linking them with road and rail infrastructure to improve efficiency.

The government's goal of doubling port capacity is a welcome step, but equal attention must be given to modernising existing ports and upgrading infrastructure.

Expanding seaport capacity will naturally drive broader improvements in logistics and trade. However, this requires prudent use of funds and effective implementation of policies. Strengthening maritime infrastructure will not only elevate India's global trade position but also create thousands of jobs and boost overall economic development.

GANPATHI BHAT | AKOLA

PIC TALK



A purple sunbird perches amid blooming yellow trumpet flowers, in Ahmedabad
PHOTO: PTI

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BALANCING REPRESENTATION AND TRUST IN INDIA'S PARLIAMENTARY REFORMS

The Union government's proposal to increase the number of seats in Parliament reflects the undeniable reality of India's population surge. Today, representation is deeply uneven—while a Member of Parliament from Malkajgiri represents over 30 lakh people, Lakshadweep's MP represents barely 48,000. Though based on population, the current formula lacks rational balance, raising concerns about fairness.

However, any move to recalibrate representation has triggered unease, particularly in southern states. Having effectively implemented population control measures, these states have achieved better outcomes in education, health, and overall development.

Yet, they now fear a dilution of their political voice if parliamentary seats are

redistributed purely on population growth, which has been higher in northern states.

Assurances from Union ministers that no state will lose its existing strength offer some relief. But a significant increase in seats for northern states could still tilt the federal balance, deepening existing fault lines. Such a shift risks fuelling political discord and regional resentment.

A similar concern surrounds the Women's Reservation Bill, perceived by many as a hurried measure lacking immediate implementation.

On both fronts, the government must prioritise wider consultations with political parties and civil society. Durable reforms demand consensus, not haste, to preserve both federal harmony and public trust.

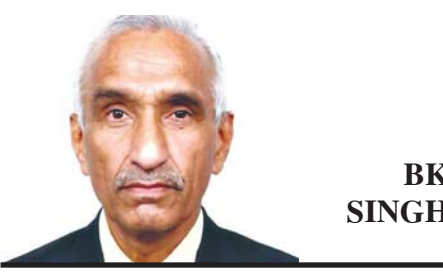
AG RAJMOHAN | ANANTAPUR

Please send your letter to the info@dailypioneer.com. In not more than 250 words. We appreciate your feedback.

War, warming, and the race to an overheated planet

From burning oil fields to attacks on energy infrastructure, conflicts are unleashing vast greenhouse emissions and toxic pollutants into the atmosphere. The convergence of war and warming is pushing the planet toward a perilous ‘hothouse’ state-one that could redefine the future of human civilisation

FIRST
Column



BK SINGH

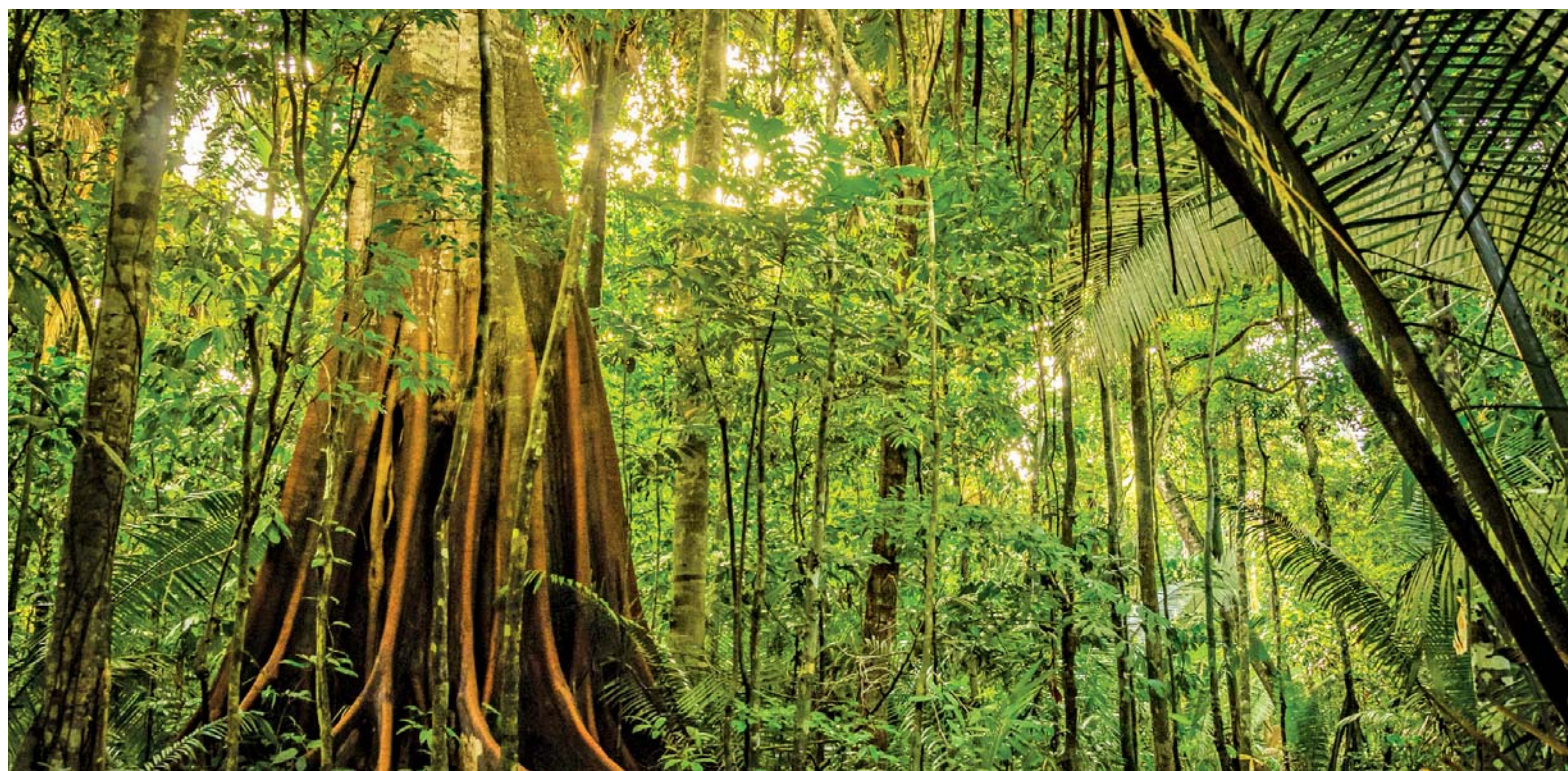
Though the climate on earth has regularly been influenced by forces generated from meteor impacts, volcanic eruptions and changes in the Earth's orientation and spin, the change in global average temperature has not been so sudden. The temperature change has been gradual over thousands/millions of years, pushing the planet to hot high/ frigid low. The Holocene climate, at present, has been lasting for nearly 11,700 years, when moderate warming forces offset earth's natural tendency to move towards another severe ice-age. Use of fossil fuel since industrialization begun in 1870 have overwhelmed the interglacial cycle and greenhouse gases emitted in the process has been trapping heat that has caused a 1.4-degree Celsius rise in average global temperature in 150 years.

The sudden rise in average global temperature is human-induced, be it not transitioning towards renewable energy at speed and scale, be it burning 10 to 12 thousand tons of explosives in first month of West Asia conflict, be it hitting each other's nuclear sites, exposing the population with the risk of radiations etc.

A new trend is observed in the current war between Israel and US on one side and Iran on the other. They are hitting at each other's gas fields, oil refineries and depots. Besides greenhouse gas emissions, the burning fields release toxic plumes of smoke, cause acidic rain, destroy critical infrastructure and trigger economic crisis. Burning oil fields release toxic cocktail of pollutants including the oxides of Sulphur and Nitrogen and black carbon soot, hazardous for human health in the region as well as globally.

Taking the cue from this war, Ukraine has also intensified hitting Russia oil refineries. The latest in the series of attack has been Yaroslavl refinery, about 282 km from Moscow. The annual production of the refinery is 3 lakh barrels per day. One can imagine the extent of damage to the earth's climate.

The greenhouse gases emitted on account of war has been phenomenal. To bring a relative comparison here, the total emission in four years of the Russia-Ukraine war is of the order of 350 million tons of CO2 equivalent, which is equal to the greenhouse gas



IF ANY OF THE TIPPING ELEMENTS CROSSES THE THRESHOLD TEMPERATURE THE HUMANITY WOULD REACH 'HOTHOUSE' STATE, AND THAT WOULD BE THE BEGINNING OF OUR END

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emission by France in one year. World leaders are not paying any attention to such environmental catastrophes and have ignored all safeguards prescribed by world bodies/ Scientists to slow down the warming of the planet.

Annual Conference of the Parties under the auspices of the United Nations' Convention for Climate Change have been failing to cut down emissions and also failing to transition away towards renewable energy at speed and scale. US President Donald Trump finds climate as hoax and has withdrawn from all such accords, where World leaders have to take action to cut emissions. He has not exhibited any semblance of a rule-based international order. His attack on Iran is without the approval from US Congress, UN and NATO, and the economic and environmental consequences is for everyone to see.

After the planet crossed from Pleistocene to Holocene age about 11,700 years ago, the temperature has been distinctly stable. In last 150 years, the temperatures have been rising more quickly than at any time in known history. This could trigger a series of events that would put Earth on a hothouse earth trajectory. In a study conducted by William J Ripple, Oregon State

University Corvallis, OR, USA; Christopher Wolf, TERA, Corvallis, OR, USA; Johan Rockstrom, Potsdam Institute of Climate Impact Research, Germany; and their 5 other associates across Europe, it has been concluded that the climate is now departing from stable conditions that supported human civilisation for millennia.

Crossing critical temperature threshold may amplify warming and destabilise distant earth systems components. Crossing tipping thresholds could commit the planet to a hothouse trajectory with long lasting and potentially irreversible consequences.

Scientists have identified dozens of loops where warming increases without humans' current role. Of course, warming has been triggered by excessive use of fossil fuel, changing land use patterns, industrialization, mining and deforestation etc., but even if we start cutting greenhouse gas emissions, the planet's warming would not stop. For instance, when Arctic ice melts, the white surface area covered by snow recedes, thereby reducing the reflectivity of the Sun rays. If the Sun's rays are not reflected, they will be absorbed in the Earth as well as water

bodies. The planet is bound to be heated up, which causes the melting of more ice. Thus, the warming accelerates without any human intervention. Scientists have identified more than a dozen such loops and call it as 'amplifying feedback loops'. The thawing of permafrost and release of stored Carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is another such loop. As the emission is accelerated, the planet continues to warm up.

The deforestation and dying forests no longer absorb Carbon dioxide. Large scale wildfires that causes burning of forests make the system net emitter of carbon, as degraded forests continuously lose its carbon sequestration potential. Scientists have identified important forest systems like Amazon as another 'amplifying feedback loop'.

The changes in cloud cover that permits more solar radiation to reach earth is another loop. The study paper indicates how individual loops are connected to a broader theory of catastrophic change, and sixteen elements are identified as a sure indicator for warming of the planet 'earth', which pushes it to pass a threshold temperature, bringing a new state abruptly and

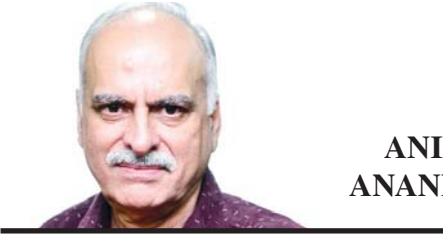
permanently. Scientists have named elements as 'tipping elements'.

Among the sixteen elements identified are Greenland and West Antarctic Ice Sheets, Permafrost regions where abrupt thawing begins, Amazon rain forests, Boreal forest die-back, Tropical Coral-reef die off etc. The Atlantic Ocean's great overturning currents, which are the conveyor belts of the ocean's water that keep northern Europe relatively mild is another tipping element identified. The collapse of the Atlantic Meridional Circulation (AMOC) can impact global heat distribution. The tipping elements are interconnected; the collapse of one could trigger the other. "Greenland" is in the eye of the storm, which the current US administration is inclined to grab for oil, gas and rare-earth extraction. The disappearance of thick ice sheets from this autonomous island could trigger the disruption of AMOC.

The tipping cascades have the potential to drive self-sustaining climate change. If tipping points come at lower temperatures, a modest future warming could send Earth to a 'hothouse'. Global average temperature has already crossed 1.5 degrees Celsius in 2024. The planet was warming at the rate of .05 degrees Celsius per decade in the mid-twentieth century, which has currently surged to .31 degrees per decade. Though the study has not specified the temperature at which each of the tipping elements flips, but the study says that it is not a reason to delay the precautionary measures.

UN Environment Program, based on the national pledges of the countries, has assessed that the planet is on a trajectory to reach 2.8 degrees Celsius above the pre-industrial era by the turn of the century. Atmospheric carbon dioxide has reached 422.5 ppm, 50% higher since industrialisation began. World leaders are advised to design policies considering the risk factors explained and bring down the anthropogenic pressure on the climate. The warming must be slowed down early and countries emitting greenhouse gases should achieve net zero far too early than what they have pledged. While the countries may have their own compulsions to fight, can they avoid committing the war crimes such as hitting each other's energy, nuclear and economic infrastructures? Burning explosives, oil & gas, and causing nuclear radiation sends an enormous amount of poison in the atmosphere. If any of the tipping elements crosses the threshold temperature the humanity would reach 'hothouse' state, and that would be the beginning of our end.

Battle beyond ballots: Assembly polls that could shape 2029 General Elections



ANIL ANAND

Post 2014, since the advent of Narendra Modi phenomena at the national stage, every single election, held ever since, has assumed a different proportion. Even as the BJP under him is fixated on electoral victories using all possible means available and with a grand success rate, every poll, nevertheless, has a different connotation and meaning so far as the national polity is concerned. And every election is different from the previous one though all electoral battles are woven mostly around Modi-factor which is the BJP's sole winning formula.

However, the current round of assembly elections being held in Assam, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal and the Union Territory of Puducherry are not only being held on a different political canvas but also attached to it is the possible future contours that electoral politics can take in the run up to the 2029 Lok Sabha elections. What makes this round of elections interesting, both from the BJP and Congress-led I.N.D.I.A combine point of view, is the strong potential to strengthen or weaken any of the two camps.

The significance of this round of elections lies in the fact that three of the poll-going states- Kerala, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal- are ruled by the opposition alliances, variedly led by one or the other regional parties. Assam, though, is governed by the BJP but it has a strong imprint of former Congresspersons and smaller regional or sub-regional groups. The overwhelming influence of the ex-Congress leaders and sidelining of the committed saffronites has caused serious consternation within the BJP, heightened by the high-handed approach and over-bearing presence of chief minister Mr Himanta Biswa Sarma, a former Congressman himself.

In politically insignificant Puducherry also, BJP is piggy-riding a breakaway group of the Congress to be in power. Apart from Karnataka, the only state in Southern India where BJP could strongly entrench itself, the party created an opening for itself, through political machinations, to enter Kerala-Tamil Nadu axis via Puducherry.

There is a school of thought which has been toutng that a victory in these states will open new territories, hitherto out of bounds, of influence for the BJP and thereby a big advantage for next general elections. They are also of the view that inability to form maiden governments in Kerala, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu will in no



way hinder the party's future journey or impact Mr Modi's standing in any manner.

This hypothesis is sizably incorrect. As a matter of fact, and as is the BJP's wont, the party has attached greater significance to this round of elections with Mr Modi spearheading the campaign. The reason behind this is the fact that three, all important, of the five states-Union Territories going to polls are ruled by I.N.D.I.A combine in its different formations- with or without its mainstay the Congress. Also, these have been the forbidden territories for the BJP so far and the current dispensation is making all out efforts to expand their domain.

What if BJP is unable to unsettle the opposition alliances in Kerala, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal? The answer to this question has to be sought in the light of the fact that the saffron party had failed to secure a simple majority in 2024 Lok Sabha elections and is precarious perched on the shoulders of allies such as Mr Chandrababu Naidu's Telegu Desam Party and Mr Nitish Kumar-led Janata Dal (u), for the survival of the Modi government.

While a victory in these states will definitely enliven spirits of the BJP and more so that of Modi-Amit Shah duo with new territories in their kitty, a loss, which is a strong probability, will make the BJP more vulnerable. The net result will be its greater dependence on allies to the disliking of the party's top brass. With Ms Mamta Banerjee, in West Bengal, Mr M K Stalin (DMK), in Tamil Nadu and either Congress-led UDF or CPM-led LDF emerging victorious in the three states, it will have an unsettling effect on BJP at the national levels.

There is no denying the fact that there is much at stake in the ongoing round of assembly elections. Certainly, the stakes are higher for the opposition parties and that is the real story. It will be a misnomer to say that BJP has no stakes and that an electoral loss will not impact it. If the stakes are higher for the opposition, certainly these are high for the BJP.

The BJP is already constrained in its strongholds where it has been winning continuously, with a declining trend as witnessed in 2024 Lok Sabha polls, since 2014. It is direly in need of new greener

pastures to offset the saturation effect faced by it in the party's familiar territories. So, the significance of southern and eastern parts of the country for them. And hence the need to retain Assam, the gateway to North-East India and make inroads in Kerala, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal which despite their best efforts in the past eluded them.

Although on many scales, particularly when facing Congress, the fight is unequal on many parameters including the huge resources, organizational strength and the administrative advantage which the BJP enjoys and exploits to the hilt, the regional opposition leaders in these states match Mr Modi move by move even on these counts. Notwithstanding the anti-incumbency (being the sitting chief ministers), most of them have the stature and organizational backup, without any factional strains which has become Congress's perennial problem with no end in sight, to take on the BJP.

The opposition I.N.D.I.A combine is not contesting these elections in its original form and the alliance differs from state to state. In West Bengal, Kerala and Assam the Congress is pitted against the loosely associated combine partners. The Congress-DMK alliance in Tamil Nadu is unitedly facing the NDA combine wherein BJP plays a poor second fiddle to AIADMK splinter group and the sundry regional outfits. This alliance is also intact in the neighbouring Puducherry.

What will be the impact of I.N.D.I.A bloc emerging victorious in these states along with Congress winning Assam and Puducherry?

It will give a huge boost to the splintered opposition ahead of the next Lok Sabha elections. Regional leaders such as Ms Banerjee and Mr Stalin emerging strong and retaining their turf despite Mr Modi pulling all stops, and, more so, Congress even scraping through in Assam giving a boost to Mr Rahul Gandhi's leadership, will really perk up the sagging opposition syndrome. There are many ifs and buts between victory of either the BJP or the Opposition alliance. There are certain new factors, such as the role of Election Commission of India in hurriedly ordering Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls in the poll-bound states to remove "false or fake" voters, and the overenthusiasm shown by it, particularly in West Bengal, by transferring top administrative and police officials, which have come into play. The outcome will also depend on how these factors impact or influence the elections.

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Strengthening India's energy security through bioenergy

SANJAY GANJOO
NIDHI SAHU
BINI SAMAL

Key policy interventions by the Government of India have resulted in turning points for scaling up certain Bioenergy sectors like Ethanol, CBG & Biomass. Such proactive and forward-looking interventions are essential to mainstream the different Bioenergy options and strengthen our energy security. Geopolitical conflicts, particularly in the Middle East, continue to expose the fragility of global energy systems through supply disruptions, trade uncertainties, and price volatility. For India, importing nearly 85 per cent of its crude oil and around 50 per cent of its natural gas, these disruptions translate into inflationary pressures, rising fuel costs, and an expanding import bill, impacting industry, and agriculture. In this context, domestically produced biofuels are emerging as strategic buffers to enhance energy security and economic resilience.

Ethanol: A Proven and Scaled Success

India's Ethanol Blending Programme (EBP), launched in 2003, has achieved the 20 per cent blending target ahead of 2025-26. Enabled by the National Policy on Biofuels, interest subvention schemes and amendment to the Industries (Development & Regulation) Act, the programme leveraged feedstock diversification, GST reduction from 18 per cent to 5 per cent, supportive pricing and long-term offtake mechanisms. It has resulted in foreign exchange savings of ₹1.63 lakh crore, income support of over ₹1.44 lakh crore to farmers, and substitution of 277 lakh metric tonnes of crude oil. Ethanol supply has grown from 38 crore litres in 2013-14 to over 1,050 crore litres in 2025-26, supported by nearly 380 distilleries with an annual capacity exceeding 2,000 crore litres. Feedstock diversification from C-heavy molasses to B-heavy molasses, sugarcane juice, surplus rice, maize, and damaged grains-along with streamlined procurement, has been central to scaling production.

The Next Growth Engine

Compressed biogas (CBG) offers significant potential as a domestic substitute for natural gas. Produced from agricultural residues, cattle dung, press mud, and municipal organic waste, it can be directly used in transport, industry, and city gas distribution. To promote the sector, the Government of India launched the SATAT initiative in 2018, targeting 5,000 CBG plants with an annual production capacity of 15 MMT. These measures, along with blending mandates and gas grid expansion, have strengthened feedstock supply, financial viability, and offtake, leading to 1,645 registered projects, 201 commissioned plants, and 319

under construction as of mid-March 2026.

Under the National Policy on Biofuels, India has set a 5 per cent biodiesel blending target. However, progress has been limited due to challenges in mobilising feedstocks such as used cooking oil and non-edible oilseeds at a certain price point. This can be overcome by a progressing pricing mechanism driven by an strategic thinking and environmental commitments. Densified biomass, including pellets and briquettes, is emerging as a viable coal substitute. Under the SAMARTH Mission, a 5 per cent co-firing target has been set for thermal power plants. With India's large coal consumption base, biomass demand could reach nearly 150 million tonnes annually.

The Way Forward

In the past we have achieved progress in some of the Bioenergy sectors, including Ethanol, CBG & Biomass due to certain important turning points in policy, pricing support and financial incentives:

- Although the Ethanol Blending Programme (EBP) was launched in 2003, it gained momentum with the reintroduction of the administered pricing mechanism introduced in 2014, opening of alternative pathways for ethanol production allowing multiple feedstocks through the National Biofuel Policy 2018, along with subsequent schemes and incentives.
- The growth in CBG Sector though sluggish in the initial years picked up since last couple of years by key interventions of Government, including CBG-CGD Synchronization (2021), Central Financial Assistance under the National Bioenergy Programme Phase-I (₹998 crore), the Biomass Aggregation Machinery (BAM) scheme (₹564.75 crore), the Development of Pipeline Infrastructure (DPI) scheme (₹994.5 crore), and Market Development Assistance (₹1,500/ton of FOM).
- For biomass, the SAMARTH mandate of 5 per cent co-firing from FY 2025-26 has created a strong and assured demand signal.

The benchmarking of the off-take price proved a major turning point in streamlining the tendering process. A similar out-of-the-box approach is required to make all options of Bioenergy sustainable and viable. A pricing support & financial incentive is extremely essential to make the Bioenergy sector successful. Other immediate steps that the Government should take is to expand usage of Ethanol and explore options of higher blending, introduce Flex Fuel Vehicles, test its applicability for cooking and blending with diesel. Speed up Iso Butanol, DME testing. Promote usage of biomass and biogas in rural areas to replace LPG.

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IT'S A STRAIT MATTER

Amul UNSTOPPABLE

In 2025-26, the annual turnover of dairy major, Amul, crossed the ₹1,00,000 crore milestone. The polka-dotted Utterly-Butterfly girl is ecstatic, both with the revenue mark, and longest-running advertising campaign in the world. The annual growth in the last financial year was 11 per cent, which took the topline figure from ₹90,000 crore in 2024-25. According to a press release of the Gujarat Cooperative Milk Marketing Federation (GCMMF), “The surge is powered by a massive product portfolio of more than 1,200 product packs, a vast distribution network, and a rapid adaptation to the evolving needs of modern consumers.” For most consumers, across generations, including Gen Z, the brand marks possibly the most successful Indian-global entity, apart from, say the Tata and Reliance groups. If the Tata products are used by Indians, from morning till night, as one writer said, the Amul portfolio, as is the punchline, represents the taste of India, and possibly the world. The products are exported to more than 50 nations, which include the US, Gulf nations, and parts of Africa and Asia.

Most people may not know that Amul started a year before India's independence, in 1946, when Tribhuvandas Patel approached Sardar Patel on how to combat the unfair trade practices of the traders and agents in Gujarat. The latter Patel asked the former one to start a cooperative to combine the strengths of the farmers. Morarji Desai, who decades later became the prime minister, advised on how to achieve this objective. Three years later, the legendary Verghese Kurien, joined as a general manager, and later created the Milk Revolution, and took the brand to unprecedented heights. In 1955, the original Kaira cooperative became Amul, or the acronym for Anand Milk Union Ltd. The polka-dotted ad campaign began with the entry of Sylvester da Cunha, the master-creative advertiser, who came up with the idea of a naughty, mischievous little girl as the buttery mascot. In the 1970s, Amul, the cooperative became part of GCMMF, with Patel as the chairman, who was replaced by Kurien in the early 1990s.

Hence, Kurien's leadership coincided with the reforms period. During the 1990s, as liberalisation came in, thousands of Indian brands were either decimated, or shrank into the background. Foreign brands, whose imports were restricted due to unusually-high import duties, ruled the roost. Indian business families scurried from one end to the other of their corner rooms in a bid to come up with a survival-profitable strategy. Many old firms died, or were paralysed, new firms entered the fray, and some of the iconic business groups managed to sail through. Amul was one of the success stories. It held on its own, despite the growth of foreign brands. Indeed, as prosperity grew, incomes were higher, the Amul products expanded in volumes and values. Kurien guarded the citadel with his might, and used politics, economics, and business insights to compete with the foreigners. He won many battles in the corridors of power, corner rooms, board rooms, and marketplaces. He was never afraid of competition, even as he used every tactic in the book, and under the sun, to keep the foreigners at bay.

For example, a Google search indicates that before he became the chairman, and when Amul was in its infancy as a business, Kurien was among the proponents to save Indian brands. He argued against the 'dumping' of milk powder via cheap imports, which hurt the farmers' interest. He used the cultural effects to change the nation from eating cow-based products to buffalo-based ones. This proved to be a hit in a nation because of religious connotations. In the 1950s, when an iconic foreign brand refused to manufacture condensed milk locally, Amul did it, which allowed the Government to ban imports. Even when Europe wished to 'gift' milk powder to India, with allegations that it wanted to capture the market, Amul persuaded the Government to allow regulated imports through NDDB, which would sell it at market rates. This saved Amul from cheap imports, and the profits were used to finance the White-Milk Revolution, which enhanced the powers and profitability of the farmers and cooperatives. Thus, Amul, in some senses, led the cooperative revolution, along with NDDB.

During the reforms period, there was political pressure to allow free entry of the MNCs, and private state-owned and state-funded entities. As the public sector went under the private hammers, and were sold out, Kurien lobbied strongly to save the dairy sector from the MNC onslaught. He urged that this would result in backdoor privatisation of the dairy sector. His loyalists emphasised the politics of the dairy sector, and how the farmers were a huge vote bank. “Through these efforts, Kurien created a system where India stopped importing milk, and started exporting it, transforming a cooperative of small farmers into a multi-billion-dollar entity,” shows a Google search. From there, it was only a matter of time before the Amul brand clocked the ₹1,00,000 crore annual turnover. One needs to remember that even today, even as India discusses a bilateral trade deal with the US, and inks similar ones with the other nations, the protection of the dairy sector from imports is a top priority among the policy-makers.

The Pioneer

NEW DELHI | MONDAY | APRIL 6, 2026

BUSINESS10

HDFC's drama raises questions

Did the bank's former chairman deliberately resign publicly?

What is it that they say about a coin? There are two sides to it, like is the case with most issues, controversies, and debates. The same is true about the ongoing HDFC Bank drama, which resulted in the resignation of a chairman, media headlines about what was wrong with the bank, interesting takes by experts and regulators, and a steep decline in the stock price. Let us consider the two scenarios of what the case is about, and what it is not. The fact remains that the sudden exit has cast a long shadow, and raised more questions.

In Scenario 1, let us agree with the former chairman, Atanu Chakraborty, who led the bank for two years, and resigned because he saw practices that were ethically troubling. But one can easily contend that why did he not formally raise the same concerns when he was at the bank? He did not escalate the matters to the board, and neither did he alert the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), or the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi). There was nothing on record.

Instead, the so-called problems, which were never explained, described, or articulated during Atanu's subsequent interviews to the media, were only hinted at, both in the resignation letter, and statements. Indeed, many of the comments to a TV interview asked if anyone understood what he said or meant, and his language was so bureaucratic. Obviously, in the confusion, the stock market reacted quickly. The stock fell sharply, which impacted investors' wealth, and forced the bank to reassure both the depositors and investors about governance and financial strength. Since the resignation drama, the share price is down by ₹90, with the lowest being ₹110, or 13 per cent

down. This year, the decline is 25 per cent.

Of course, one can ask a legitimate question. How should a senior executive, like the chairman, MD, or CEO, of an important firm, like HDFC Bank, which was once the bank with the largest market cap, and the third-largest on the Indian exchanges, behave in such situations? One can adopt the whistleblower's approach, and do the right thing as per the law, and through the proper channels. If one stays silent during the tenure, and then resigns to raise a brouhaha without details, it does create confusion and risk, as was the case here.

However, accountability is never a one-sided sword. There is another way to look at the same scenario, and reach a different conclusion. Much of the criticism of Chakraborty's exit focuses on the vague wording of the resignation letter, statements that hint at issues but stop short of making clear allegations. But this may not be accidental, but a well-thought-out and deliberate strategy. Think about the alternative. If he had mentioned the issues related to the unethical practices, the impact would be worse. Apart from the deep plummet in the share price, it could have created a run on the bank, which might trigger panic across the banking and financial system.

In a country like India, where trust in banks is critical, even the perception, or a whiff, of a problem spreads quickly. People rush to withdraw money. Long queues form outside the bank's branches. One has witnessed such situations during banking crises, when the RBI needed to assuage the feelings, and put a cap on withdrawals of deposits. Liquidity pressure

rises immediately. As fear envelopes one of the largest banks, it is inevitable that it will spread, and spill over to the other banks. That is why Atanu's choice of words mattered.

As one of the comments to his interviews stated candidly, and categorically that the former chairman tried to balance the pulls and pressures, and the positives and negatives. By raising the concerns, without direct, pertinent, and pointed charges, Atanu flagged the issues, but avoided a panic. Well, at least, he restricted the latter to the stock price, and stock market. Hence, he squarely put the spotlight, as he should, on the regulators, RBI and Sebi. It is up to them to investigate the issues thoroughly, and clearly communicate the out-

comes. In the end, a system built on trust can collapse due to the words from the top, but they can also inform and prevent panics.

Sebi needs to request a detailed explanation from Chakraborty, which include facts, timelines, and specifics. This is what the regulator seems to have done, or at least indicated what it will do. At the same time, the RBI must check if there were lapses in governance, risk management, or compliance that were not reported earlier. What is at stake is more than an individual, even if he was the former chairman, and a bank, even if it had one of the largest market caps. What matters in this case is the trust of millions of depositors and investors, whose wealth and value depend on the stability of the banking system.

Indeed, the statement by the bank employees is revealing. More than the RBI and Sebi, the association wants the finance minister to intervene, and involve agencies like the Central Vigilance Commission, and Central Bureau of Investigation. According to its statement, it wants the matter to be examined by the "relevant parliamentary committees, given its systemic implications, and public interest." More importantly, there needs to be public disclosure of the various findings, whether it is by the RBI, Sebi, or CBI. This is crucial.

One needs to understand that in the developed nations, whistleblowers are given undue importance, and their charges are pursued by the regulators and investigators in most cases. In India, especially when it concerns public, policy, and regulatory matters, the whistleblowers are buried, if they do not go public. The allegations vanish. Even when questions are raised publicly against either seniormost regulatory officials, or firms, the outcomes are clean chits, puny fines, and out-of-court settlements. We have seen this happen often enough in the past, and there are no guarantees that they will not be repeated in the future. Atanu's actions reflect this.

One of the wheels has already swung into action. Media reports indicate that HDFC Bank "does not intend to file a legal suit or seek damages against its former non-executive chairman.... The lender is instead focused on improving its third-party sales practices, and enhancing governance standards...." Clearly, the bank's focus is to restore confidence. It may seem that it does not wish to open a Pandora's Box, if it exists. It wants the buck to stop here, right now.

The Tech Wrecker

Worried about AI jobs paradox?

AI can create the same number of jobs as software did. Will it?

their nature will change dramatically, which can be easily addressed by new skills, and reskilling old ones. The confusion possibly stems from three different aspects of AI. One of them includes new jobs in AI as a sector, as its adoption grows. This is akin to what happened in IT and software when new kinds of jobs came into existence.

In addition, some of the old jobs will incorporate AI tools, which means that the employees will need new skills to retain their jobs. If they do, they will survive. If they do not, they will be replaced. A churn will happen as new skills become paramount. This may be addressed by learning new skills, and reskilling. The third element includes jobs that will most likely disappear, and be replaced by tech. It will not be a zero-sum game. Either it will lead to positive-sum, or net creation of jobs, like what the WEF and Indian policy-makers think, or it may be a negative-sum one, as pointed out by the other estimates.

In the first layer too, AI may add nearly five million jobs (47 lakh, as estimated), but this will decimate the software and IT sector. A large part of the latter's more than five million jobs may be replaced by AI-skilled workers. The adjustment is visible in the hiring data.

In the first nine months of 2025-26, India's five largest IT firms, TCS, Infosys, HCLTech, Wipro, and Tech Mahindra, added a combined total of 17 employees. Yes, just 17 employees, if one includes the hirings and layoffs. In the same period the previous year, their net addition was 17,764 jobs.

At present, the hirings and layoffs relate to AI. The latter include redundant, or displaced jobs. The former may be in line with requisite AI skills. Layoffs are up, and hirings are down. In Q2-26, the six largest IT firms added less than 4,000 jobs, or a more than 70 per cent decline from the previous quarter. Entry-level hirings, according to TeamLease Digital, is 50 per cent below the pre-pandemic levels. The India Skills Report 2025 shows that the intent to hire freshers or newcomers is down from nearly 19 per cent in 2024 to 14 per cent in 2025.

"With cost optimisation being the key driver, clients are asking for productivity benefits. This requires IT firms to do more work with the same number of employees, or the same work with fewer," says Akshat Agarwal, a Jefferies analyst. AI-led productivity allows the firms to deliver equal or higher output with fewer employees. India's large IT firms employ more than 4,30,000 professionals with 13-25 years of experience, described by

staffing firm, Xpheno, as the "big fat middle layer." Compression of routine work due to AI increases pressures on mid-layer roles. Their jobs and salaries face threats.

The parliamentary report identifies data entry, ticketing, and standard query handling as functions being automated or augmented. These categories historically absorbed large volumes of fresh graduates. In addition, as outcomes and results become more important for clients, rather than manpower employed, mid-level or the fat middle-layer, will face unique problems and stress. Entry-level roles require retraining to operate AI tools. High-skill roles require deeper expertise, longer training cycles, and significantly lower supply.

At present, the AI-related risks appear low because of the state of Indian industry. According to a survey by ICRIER of 650 IT firms, generative AI is not yet causing widespread layoffs in the IT sector. This is because only four per cent of the firms had trained more than half their workforce in AI. The IT ministry contends that only 16 per cent of the software professionals are currently AI-skilled. If the trend is not accelerated, the jobs market will be in turmoil. Imparting new skills, or reskilling is not an easy task. Nor is any transition.

The Pioneer

SINCE 1865

FROM THE WORLD

NEPAL

Dol Prasad elected Speaker

Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP), leader Dol Prasad Aryal was elected as the Speaker of Nepal's Parliament. President Ramchandra administered the oath of office and secrecy to the newly elected Speaker of the Parliament, Aryal, at a special function at his office on Sunday afternoon.

Aryal, also the Vice President of RSP, was elected unopposed during a meeting of the members of the House of Representatives (HoR), the Federal Parliament, according to a notice issued by the Parliament secretariat. Rabi, chairman of the RSP and a Parliament member, had presented a proposal seeking Aryal's election as the Speaker. The senior-most member of the HoR, Arjun Narsingh KC, announced that Aryal was elected as the Speaker after the meeting.

CONGO

US negotiates deportation ties

Congo will receive some migrants as part of a new deal under the Trump administration's third-country program, its government said on Sunday, the latest such African nation to receive migrants being deported from the US. The deportees will start arriving in Congo this month, the Congolese Ministry of Communications said in a statement, without further details on the date or the number of deportees expected. It described the arrangement as a "temporary" one that reflects Congo's "commitment to human dignity and international solidarity." It would come with zero costs to the government with the US covering the needed logistics, it said. The US has struck such third-country deportation deals with at least seven other African nations, many of them among countries hit the most by the US administration's policies.

UAE: Fire erupts at petrochemical plant

ASSOCIATED PRESS
Dubai

Authorities say a fire has broken out at a petrochemicals plant in the United Arab Emirates(UAE) following an attack on Sunday. Abu Dhabi authorities responded to multiple fires at the Borouge petrochemicals plant. They say the fires were caused by falling debris following successful interceptions by air defence systems, but production at the plant has halted.

The plant is in Ruwais, near the UAE's western border with Saudi Arabia. The plant is a joint venture of the Abu Dhabi National Oil Corporation and Borealis of Australia.

Indian-origin couple jailed for operating UK companies despite ban

ADITI KHANNA
London

An Indian-origin couple has been sentenced for breaching a disqualification order to operate companies in the UK for over five years despite a ban following tax fraud claims.

Bharat Jogia, from Englad's West Midlands region was disqualified as a company director for 13 years in 2014 after not disputing that he caused Jogia Jewellers (UK) Limited to wrongfully claim more than 2 million pounds from HM Revenue .

The UK's Insolvency Service discovered that he ignored that ban to continue to control pharmaceutical companies Diamond Pharma Limited and BHJ Consulting Ltd. His wife, Louise Jogia, was found to have "aided and abetted" him in breaching the disqualification and acted as the official director of BHJ Consulting.

"Bharat Jogia showed complete contempt for the law by breaching his director disqualification ban for more than five years," said Mark Stephens.

"Louise acted as a front to shield her husband, providing signed documentation . "Ignoring a disqualification is a serious criminal offence that undermines the entire system designed to keep rogue directors out of positions where they can cause further harm to creditors, employees," he said. (PTI)



A man looking at a destroyed building within the Grand Hosseiniyeh complex in Zanjan, Iran

Iran threatens more retaliation

The threats came after Trump said last week that the US had "decimated" Iran and would finish the war "very fast."

Two days later, Iran shot down two US military planes, showing the ongoing perils of the bombing campaign and the ability of a degraded Iranian military to continue

to hit back. The other jet to go down was a US A-10 attack aircraft. Neither the status of the crew nor exactly where it crashed was immediately known. On Sunday, Iran's

Air India suspends flights to Israel till May 31

HARINDER MISHRA
Jerusalem

Amid the ongoing war in West Asia, Air India has suspended its flights to Israel till May 31.

An Air India executive confirmed to PTI that the airline has suspended flights on the New Delhi-Tel Aviv route till May 31.

Most of the leading airlines have suspended their operations on the Tel Aviv route with only Israeli carriers like El Al, IsraAir, Arkia and Air Haifa operating under severe restrictions.

The suspension of flights has caused major worries among more than 40,000 Indians living in Israel who wish to travel to India for



personal or professional reasons, or even to escape the escalating tensions in the region.

Indians looking to leave Israel have to go through Jordan or Egypt by entering the two countries through the land crossings.

The Indian mission in Tel Aviv has been assisting those looking to travel

through various means.

The embassy has also maintained regular contact with the community during the period, opening a 24x7 emergency line and also launching a massive registration drive.

Ambassador J P Singh and the embassy team on Saturday held virtual discussion with Indian workers

Aid groups warn Iran war is hindering food, medicine from reaching millions

SAM MEDNICK/ SAMY MAGDY
Tel Aviv

Aid groups are warning that the war in the Middle East has upended their ability to get food and medicine to millions of people around the world in need, and that the suffering will deepen if the violence continues.

Not only has the conflict cut off vital shipping routes, creating a global energy crisis, it's also disrupting supply chains for aid groups, forcing them to use costlier, more time-consuming routes. Key pathways such as the Strait of Hormuz have been effectively shuttered and routes from strategic hubs such as Dubai, Doha and Abu Dhabi have also been impacted. Transport

costs have spiked with higher fuel and insurance rates, meaning less supplies can be delivered with the same amount of money.

The World Food Program says it has tens of thousands of metric tons of food heavily delayed in transit. The International Rescue Committee has \$130,000 worth of pharmaceuticals intended for war-torn Sudan stranded in Dubai and nearly 670 boxes of therapeutic food meant for severely malnourished children in Somalia stuck in India.

The UN Population Fund says it's delayed sending equipment to 16 countries. Steep US cuts to foreign aid already had hobbled many aid groups, who say the war is exacerbating the problem.

The United Nations says this is the most significant supply chain disruption since COVID, with up to a 20 per cent cost increase on shipments and delays as goods are rerouted.

And the war is creating new emergencies, such as in Iran, and also in Lebanon where at least one million people have been displaced.

"The war on Iran and disruption to the Strait of Hormuz risk pushing humanitarian operations beyond their limits," said Madiha Raza, associate director for public affairs and communications for Africa for the International Rescue Committee. Even when the fighting stops, the shock to global supply chains could



continue to delay lifesaving aid for months, she said.

The war has forced organizations to find new ways to transport goods, with some bypassing the Strait of Hormuz and the Suez Canal and rerouting vessels around Africa, adding weeks to the delivery. Others are

using a hybrid of methods, including land, sea and air, increasing costs.

Jean-Cedric Meeus, chief of global transport and logistics for UNICEF, said his agency is using a mix of land and air routes to send vaccines to Nigeria and Iran in order to get them there in time for the

vaccination campaigns, but the costs have soared.

Before the war, UNICEF sent vaccines to Iran by plane directly from vendors around the world. Now it's flying the vaccines to Turkey and driving them into Iran, which has increased costs by 20 per cent and has added 10 days to the delivery time, he said.

Save the Children International, which would normally send supplies by ocean freight from Dubai to Port Sudan, will now have to truck the goods from Dubai through Saudi Arabia and then by barge across the Red Sea, it said.

The route adds 10 days and increases costs by about 25 per cent, at a time when over 19 million Sudanese face acute food insecurity. (AP)

45, including 23 children, dead in Pakistan in rain-related incidents

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
Peshawar

At least 45 persons have lost their lives and 105 sustained injuries in rain related incidents across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in northwest Pakistan over the last 10 days, the PDMA said on Sunday.

In a report that covers damages caused by persistent rains since March 25, the Provincial Disaster Management Authority (PDMA) said that among the total 45 fatalities, 23 are children, 17 men and 5 women while the injured comprised 45 men, 16 women, and 44 children.

The heavy rainfall resulted in roof and wall collapses in multiple districts of the province, the PDMA report said, highlighting widespread human and material losses across the province. At least 442 houses have been affected, of which 382 were partially damaged and 60 were completely destroyed in over two dozen districts. The PDMA report further



stated that rescue and relief operations are ongoing, with PDMA, Rescue 1122, district administrations, and other relevant agencies working in close coordination.

Meanwhile, the PDMA Director General has warned that a fresh spell of rain is expected across various parts of the province till April 9 and advised the tourists to avoid unnecessary travel, particularly to vulnerable and sensitive areas, and to strictly follow official advisories and alerts issued by the Government agencies.



People raising their hands during a protest calling for an end to the war in Tel Aviv, Israel

Lebanon's Christians face Easter displacement crisis

KAREEM CHEHAYEB/ ISABEL
Jheideh

It was not how the Rev Maroun Ghafari had envisioned this Holy Week - for years, he had held Easter sermons in his predominant Christian village of Alma al-Shaab in southern Lebanon, near the border with Israel.

This year, he is preaching from a Beirut suburb, beside a cardboard cutout depicting his church in Alma al-Shaab, now caught in the crossfire between Israeli forces and Hezbollah fighters.

Since hostilities erupted last month between Israel and Lebanon's Iran-backed Hezbollah militant group — in the shadow of the wider, US-Israeli war on Iran — over 1,400 people have been killed in Lebanon, and more than 1 million have been forced to flee their homes.

Among those displaced from the war-torn south are thousands of Christians. They now find themselves far from their ancestral churches in Lebanon, where Christians have maintained a strong presence through centuries of Byzantine, Arab and Ottoman conquest and plenty of modern-day crises.

Christians are estimated to make up around a third of Lebanon's population of roughly 5.5 million people. With 12 Christian sects, the country is home to the largest proportion of Christians of any nation in the Arab world.

Christian villagers who stayed behind in southern Lebanon, ignoring Israel's



blanket evacuation warnings for the area, have increasingly hardened into enclaves surrounded by fierce clashes.

And though villagers in Alma al-Shaab had been uprooted before, in the 2024 Israel-Hezbollah war, this time around, they were adamant they wouldn't leave, even as airstrikes came closer and closer.

The villagers huddled in their church for protection as Israeli warplanes pounded both Hezbollah and Israel for the suffering wrought by the war.

"The country is going through a critical situation due to Iranian interference through Hezbollah and Israeli aggression," he said. "Our hearts bleed for the victims of the conflict imposed on Lebanon."

Ghafari's brother, 70-year-old Sami Ghafari, was among the villagers who sought refuge at the church in Alma al-Shaab. (AP)

Pope Leo marks first Easter as pontiff with a call for hope amid global conflicts

ASSOCIATED PRESS
Vatican City

Pope Leo celebrated his first Easter Mass as pontiff with a call on Sunday to exercise hope against "the violence of war that kills and destroys," saying "we need this song of hope today" as conflicts spread around the world.

With the US-Israeli war on Iran in its second month and Russia's ongoing campaign in Ukraine, Leo has repeatedly called for a halt in hostilities.

In his Easter homily, the pope singled out those who wage war, abuse the weak and prioritise profits. Leo, the first US-born pope,



Pope Leo XIV greeting the faithful at the end of Easter in St Peter's Square at the Vatican

addressed the faithful from an open-air altar in St Peter's Square flanked with white roses, while the steps leading down to the piazza where the faithful gathered

were filled with spring perennials, symbolically resonating with the pope's message of hope.

The pontiff implored the faithful to keep their hope in

the face of death, which lurks "in injustices, in partisan selfishness, in the oppression of the poor, in the lack of attention given to the most vulnerable.

"We see it in violence, in the wounds of the world, in the cry of pain that rises from every corner because of the abuses that crush the weakest among us, because of the idolatry of profit that plunders the earth's resources, because of the violence of war that kills and destroys," he said.

He quoted his predecessor Pope Francis in warning against falling into indifference in the face of "persistent injustice, evil, indifference

and cruelty," because "it is also true that in the midst of darkness, something new always springs to life and sooner or later produces fruit."

He will later deliver the traditional "Urbi et Orbi" message - Latin for "to the city and the world."

Traditional ceremonies at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, revered by Christians as the traditional site of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, were scaled back under an agreement with Israeli police.

Authorities have put limits on the sizes of public gatherings due to ongoing missile attacks. The restrictions also

dampened the recent Muslim holy month of Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr holiday, as well as the current weeklong Jewish festival of Passover. On Sunday, the Jewish priestly blessing at the Western Wall - normally attended by tens of thousands - was limited to just 50 people.

The restrictions have strained relations between Israeli authorities and Christian leaders.

Police last week prevented two of the church's top religious leaders, including Latin Patriarch Pierbattista Pizzaballa, from celebrating Palm Sunday at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

West Asia war may cut Ukraine support: Zelenskyy

ASSOCIATED PRESS
■ Istanbul

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy expressed concern that a prolonged US-Israeli war on Iran could further erode America's support for Ukraine as Washington's global priorities shift and Kyiv braces for reduced deliveries of critically needed Patriot air defence missiles.

Ukraine desperately needs more US-made Patriot air defence systems to help it counter Russia's daily barages, Zelenskyy said, speaking to *The Associated Press* in an exclusive interview late Saturday in Istanbul.

Russia's relentless pounding of urban areas behind the front line following its full-



scale invasion of Ukraine more than four years ago has killed thousands of civilians.

It has also targeted Ukraine's energy supply to disrupt the industrial production of Ukraine's newly developed drones and missiles, while also denying civilians heat and running water in

winter. "We have to recognise that we are not the priority for today," Zelenskyy said. "That's why I am afraid a long (Iran) war will give us less support."

The latest US-brokered talks between envoys from Moscow and Kyiv ended in February with no sign of a

breakthrough. Zelenskyy, who has accused Russia of "trying to drag out negotiations" while it presses on with its invasion, said Ukraine remains in contact with US negotiators about a potential deal to end the war and has continued to press for stronger security guarantees.

But, he said, even those discussions reflect a broader loss of focus from Ukraine.

His most immediate concern, Zelenskyy said, is the Patriots — essential for intercepting Russian ballistic missiles — as Ukraine still lacks an effective alternative. These US systems were never delivered in sufficient quantities to begin with, Zelenskyy said, and if the Iran war doesn't end soon, "the

package — which is not very big for us — I think will be smaller and smaller day by day." "That's why, of course, we are afraid," he said. Zelenskyy had been counting on European partners to help make the Patriot purchases despite tight supply and limited US production capacity.

But the Iran war, now in its sixth week, has sent shock waves through the global economy and pulled in much of the wider West Asia region, further straining these already limited resources, diverting stockpiles and leaving Ukrainian cities more exposed to ballistic strikes. For Kyiv, a key objective is to weaken Moscow's economy and make the war prohibitively

costly. Surging oil prices driven by Iran's closure of the Strait of Hormuz are undermining that strategy by boosting the Kremlin's oil revenues and strengthening Moscow's capacity to sustain its war effort. In his interview with the *AP*, Zelenskyy said Russia draws economic benefits from the Mideast war, citing the limited easing of American sanctions on Russian oil.

"Russia gets additional money because of this, so yes, they have benefits," he said. To keep Ukraine on the international agenda, Zelenskyy has offered to share Ukraine's hard-earned battlefield expertise with the United States and allies to develop effective countermeasures against Iranian attacks.

France condemns China's execution of French citizen



ASSOCIATED PRESS
■ Paris

France said China has executed a French citizen convicted of drug trafficking after keeping him on death row for more than 15 years.

Chan Thao Phoumy, 62, was executed in the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou, despite French authorities' clemency appeals, the French Foreign Ministry said in a statement late Saturday. It didn't say when the sentence was carried out. A Chinese court sentenced him to death in 2010. The ministry's statement expressed "consternation" and added: "We particularly regret that Mr. Chan's defence did not have access to the final court hearing, which constitutes a violation of his rights." "We

extend our condolences to his family, whose grief we share," it said. In a short statement Sunday that didn't mention Chan by name, the Chinese Embassy in Paris said that China "treats defendants of all nationalities equally, handles all cases impartially and strictly in accordance with the law." France abolished the death penalty by act of parliament in 1981, and has become a vigorous campaigner against its use and for its abolition everywhere.

China's use of executions — carried out by firing squads or lethal injections — is shrouded in secrecy but has long been extensive. Amnesty International says China is the world's lead executioner, believed to sentence and put to death thousands of people annually.

Mpox outbreak: 4 infected infants die in Pakistan

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
■ Karachi

Seven infants, four of whom tested positive for mpox, have died in southeastern Pakistan, in what health officials described on Sunday as the country's first local outbreak of the infectious viral disease.

The mpox cases were reported in Sindh province's Khairpur town. A spokesperson for the health department said that blood samples of seven infants were tested in Karachi and initial findings confirmed that four of them were affected by mpox. The spokesperson, Dr Ahmed Sheikh, said that the infants died in two hospitals in Khairpur after



being admitted for painful lesions, flu-like symptoms and fever.

The virus spreads through close contact with infected humans or even animals.

Sheikh said it is the first local outbreak of the zoonotic viral infection in the country. In a statement on

Saturday, the health department said that the deaths were "not directly caused by mpox".

"All children who died were premature, too weak and had low birth weight. They were already suffering health complications caused by malnutrition," it said.

However, it said that to "prevent spread of the virus, the neonatal intensive care units of the Khairpur Medical College, Hospital and a private hospital have been temporarily closed down".

"An expert team has identified the index case and the possible sources of virus transmission and infection," it added.

According to the statement, the department is currently engaged in contact tracing and has directed all hospitals to enforce infection control protocols.

The Pakistan Medical Association, which also sent a team to Khairpur and other places in Sindh province, reported that at least 15 children with unusual skin

pimples and lesions were admitted to hospitals in Sukkur, Khairpur, Mirpurkhas and Hyderabad and are receiving treatment.

Dr Abdul Ghafoor Shoro of the medical association said that several cases have surfaced at Sukkur Children's Hospital and other private facilities in Khairpur.

He said urgent measures were required to prevent further spread of the contagious virus in the community. "The local authorities, in coordination with the health department, have set up isolation centres in different hospitals in places where such cases are being reported," Khairpur deputy commissioner Altaf Ahmed said on Sunday.

Vehicle hits revellers during Lao New Year celebration



ASSOCIATED PRESS
■ Louisiana

Several people were injured when a vehicle struck revellers at a parade celebrating the Lao New Year in rural Louisiana, authorities said.

Video shared on social media showed multiple people on the ground at the annual event in Broussard and New Iberia. The videos showed firefighters tending to one person trapped beneath the car, which wound up in a ditch along the parade route. Around 15 people were hurt, some seriously, according to the Iberia Parish Sheriff's Office. The driver was in police custody. "Based on the preliminary investigation, this does not appear to be an intentional act," said a spokesperson for the sheriff's office, Rebecca Melancon.

Acadian Ambulance, a ambulance company, said on social media that it responded to the emergency around 2.30 pm and sent 10 ambulances and a helicopter to aid the injured. Two patients were airlifted, it said.

Artemis II crew speeds toward moon to break Apollo 13's record



ASSOCIATED PRESS
■ Houston

Now more than halfway to the moon, the Artemis II astronauts prepared for their historic lunar fly-around to push deeper into space than even the Apollo astronauts.

On the downside, their toilet is on the blink again.

The three Americans and one Canadian are set to reach their destination Monday, photographing the mysterious lunar far side as they zoom around. It is the first moon-bound crew in more than 53 years, picking up where NASA's Apollo programme left off.

"The Earth is quite small, and the moon is definitely getting bigger," pilot Victor Glover reported.

Until the Orion capsule's bathroom is fixed, Mission Control has instructed the astronauts to break out more of the backup urine collection bags. The so-called lunar loo malfunctioned following Wednesday's liftoff and has been hit-and-miss ever since.

A version of the Artemis II toilet was tested on the International Space Station several years ago.

Sweden releases sanctioned tanker Flora 1

ASSOCIATED PRESS
■ Frankfurt

Swedish authorities have released a tanker sanctioned by the European Union that had been boarded and detained on suspicion of causing an oil spill in the Baltic Sea.

The Swedish Coast Guard said they had not found sufficient evidence that the Flora 1 tanker was at fault for the 12-kilometre long spill that had been discovered.

Investigators also established that Cameroon had confirmed the vessel was sailing under that country's flag, which had not been clear when the vessel and its 24-member crew were stopped Friday,



the coast guard said.

The Flora 1 was put on the EU's list of sanctioned vessels for carrying Russian oil while "practising irregular and high-risk shipping practices." Unsafe practices can include turning off the automatic tracking system that transmits the vessel's

location to other ships. The sanctions are aimed at the "shadow fleet" that emerged in response to a price cap on Russian oil imposed by the Group of Seven democracies to limit the revenues that fund Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The cap was enforced by

barring insurance and shipping companies from handling oil above the cap. The fleet is made up of ageing tankers with ownership and insurance based in countries that are not observing the price cap.

The age of the vessels and their lack of Western insurance have raised safety concerns about oil spills and who would get the cleanup bill. The Flora 1 was owned by a Hong Kong company as of late 2025 and has also been sanctioned by the UK, Canada, Australia, Switzerland, and New Zealand, according to the Ukrainian Government. It has changed its name six times and its flag country nine times.

Cameroon Parliament reintroduce vice president position

NGALA KILLIAN CHIMTOM
■ Yaounde

Cameroon's Parliament overwhelmingly approved a constitutional amendment to reintroduce the vice president position, a move the opposition says will further strengthen President Paul Biya's grip on power.

Biya, 93, is the world's oldest leader and has led the central African nation since 1982. He won a widely disputed election last year, his eighth term in office. The widely criticised bill, which Biya is expected to sign into law, was approved Saturday in a joint session of the National Assembly and Senate and boycotted by the main opposition party; 200 voted in favour, 18



against and 4 abstained. The newest amendment gives the aging president absolute authority over the office of the vice president, as he can appoint and

dismiss them at will and the deputy can only exercise powers delegated by Biya.

If the president dies, resigns, or becomes incapacitated, the vice presi-

dent will serve as interim president for the remainder of the seven-year tenure.

Members of the ruling Cameroon People's Democratic Movement

(CPDM) hailed the legislation as a measure to ensure institutional stability.

Critics, however, said the new law undermines democratic principles by replacing electoral legitimacy with presidential appointment.

The opposition Social Democratic Front (SDF) said in a statement that the amendment "fails to guarantee democratic legitimacy, inclusiveness, and proper institutional balance."

Fusi Namukong, an SDF member of parliament, told *The Associated Press* that the law paves the way for a monarchy. "It's not democratic. This is a republic, and in a republic, those who wield power at the highest level of the state should be elected and not appointed," Namukong said. The Cameroon Bar Association also warned the amendment "erodes the democratic legitimacy (of) the presidential office" and undermines the country's constitution.

The office of the vice president was scrapped in 1972 following a constitutional referendum.

Biya's health has been a topic of speculation as he spends most of his time in Europe, leaving governance to key party officials and family members.

His reelection in 2025 sparked widespread protests that left at least four people dead, signalling growing tensions between the mostly young population and its aging leader. (AP)

Southern California wildfire mostly contained



ASSOCIATED PRESS
■ Riverside

A smoky wildfire in southern California that broke out a day earlier and prompted evacuation orders was mostly under control, fire officials said.

Encompassing roughly 16 square kilometres in Riverside County, about 103 kilometres east of Los Angeles, the Springs Fire was no longer growing and at least 75 per cent contained Saturday, said Terra Fernandez, public safety information specialist for the Riverside County Fire Department.

It was 25 per cent contained on Friday.

Fire officials also lifted evacuation orders for a large swath of neighbourhoods Saturday morning. Fernandez said she expected the rest will be lifted by the end of the day.

"It's pretty much under control," Fernandez said.

The fire was fuelled by strong Santa Ana winds with gusts predicted to get up to 72 kph on Saturday. But winds had "dissipated a bit" since Friday, helping the efforts of fire crews, Fernandez said.

Oxford University Library marks bicentenary of sacred Hindu text Shikshapatri with UK tour

ADITI KHANNA
■ London

The University of Oxford's Bodleian Libraries has launched a historic UK-wide tour of *Shikshapatri*, one of the world's most significant and rare Hindu scriptures, to mark its 200th anniversary.

The sacred manuscript began its bicentenary journey earlier this year to travel to major temples around the country in collaboration with leaders of the Swaminarayan faith to offer an expected 20,000-30,000 people a rare opportunity to view the sacred text.

Composed in Vadtal in Gujarat in 1826 by Sahajananda Swami — Lord



People offering prayers as confetti is showered during the display of the original manuscript of Shikshapatri at a temple in London

Swaminarayan, the *Shikshapatri* — or "a letter of teachings" — is devised as a guide to ethical and spiritual living. "By sharing this historic manuscript with temples and communities across the UK, the Bodleian Libraries hope to honour both its cultural significance and its enduring message," said Dr Gillian Evison, Keeper of Asian and Middle Eastern Collections at the Bodleian.

"Two centuries after it was first written, the 'Shikshapatri' call for compassion, ethical living and social harmony continues to resonate in an increasingly complex world," he said.

Said to have been written on the "fifth day of the bright

half of the month", the manuscript contains 212 Sanskrit shlokas that distil key principles from Hindu scriptures. Recited daily by Swaminarayan followers, the text has been printed millions of times globally.

The Bodleian claims its manuscript holds historical significance as one of the oldest known copies of the text provided by the author himself. "The manuscript carries a profound historical legacy. On February 26, 1830, Sahajananda Swami personally presented this copy to Sir John Malcolm, the then Governor of Bombay.

At a time of colonial upheaval, the text offered guidance for ethical conduct

and living," Oxford University said. "Today, the 'Shikshapatri' continues to shape the daily lives of millions of devotees, promoting principles including non-violence, vegetarianism, honesty, and the avoidance of sinful behaviours," it notes.

Usually on display in the Bodleian's Weston Library, the manuscript's 2026 tour has been dubbed a rare moment when the important object will be shared directly with the communities for whom it holds deep spiritual significance.

The tour is expected to attract tens of thousands of visitors and will offer an opportunity for reflection on a text that continues to

guide religious life around the world, the university said. The tour, scheduled until August, will cover Swaminarayan temples across different parts of London and Wales.

The Bodleian Libraries at the University of Oxford is the largest university library system in the UK, including the principal Bodleian Library as a legal deposit for 400 years as well as 23 libraries across Oxford.

Together, the libraries hold more than 14 million printed items from around the world, over 80,000 e-journals and outstanding special collections including rare books and manuscripts, music, art, and printed ephemera. (PTI)

PROSPECT



Stop e-commerce misdeeds:
MP Praveen Khandelwal

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ NEW DELHI

Member of Parliament and Secretary General of CAIT, Praveen Khandelwal today strongly urged the Government to take immediate and decisive action to curb the growing malpractices of certain e-commerce and quick commerce companies, stating that such activities are severely distorting India's retail trade ecosystem.

Welcoming the passage of the Jan Vishwas Bill 2.0, Khandelwal said that under the visionary leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Government has reinforced its commitment towards trust-based governance and ease of doing business. He stated that this progressive reform will go a long way in boosting confidence among traders and entrepreneurs across the country.

However, Khandelwal expressed serious concern over the unchecked and unfair practices adopted by certain foreign-funded e-commerce entities, which are creating an uneven playing field for India's more than 9 crore traders, who form the backbone of the nation's supply chain and employment ecosystem.

He highlighted that practices such as predatory pricing, deep discounting, dark patterns, inventory-led models disguised as marketplaces, preferential treatment to select sellers, and the rapid expansion of dark stores are not only anti-competitive but are also threatening the survival of small and medium traders.

"These companies cannot be allowed to operate in a manner that undermines India's economic sovereignty and disrupts fair competition. A level playing field between offline and online trade is essential for a balanced and sustainable growth of the economy," Khandelwal said.

He strongly demanded the immediate finalisation and implementation of a comprehensive National E-commerce Policy, along with stringent regulatory frameworks and robust enforcement mechanisms to curb such malpractices and protect the interests of domestic trade.

Emphasising the need for institutional reforms, Khandelwal also called for the establishment of a National Retail Development Council, which would provide structured representation to the trading community in policymaking.

BJP at 46: From Margins to Dominance



DR JAGMOHAN
SINGH RAJU

Few political transformations in independent India rival the journey of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). What began in 1980 as a modest political formation with limited electoral presence has, over four and a half decades, evolved into the central pole of Indian politics. At 46, the BJP is no longer merely a participant in the political system—it is its defining force. This rise is not accidental; it is the outcome of ideological persistence, organizational discipline, and a capacity to adapt to shifting political currents.

From Margins to Mobilisation

The early years of the BJP were marked by conviction but constrained by circumstance. Emerging from the churn of post-Emergency politics, the party struggled to convert its ideological clarity into widespread electoral appeal. Throughout much of the 1980s, it remained on the margins, overshadowed by dominant national narratives and entrenched political forces.

Yet, even in this phase of limited success, the BJP distinguished itself through an unwavering commitment to long-term organizational building. Unlike parties that relied heavily on charismatic leadership or opportunistic alliances, it invested in constructing a disciplined cadre and a coherent ideological identity. This patient groundwork—often overlooked at the time—would later prove decisive. The emphasis on grassroots organization, ideological consistency, and internal cohesion created a foundation that allowed the party to scale rapidly when political opportunities emerged. It also fostered a culture of internal accountability and clarity that helped sustain the party through periods of electoral uncertainty.

The National Expansion

The 1990s marked a decisive turning point. Through sustained mass mobilization and strategic coalition-building, the BJP transitioned from the periphery to the mainstream. Its emergence as the leader of coalition governments at the Centre demonstrated not only electoral viability but also governance capability. This phase



reshaped public perception: the BJP was no longer a fringe force, but a credible national alternative.

Over time, this expansion acquired a distinctly pan-Indian character. From the northern frontiers to the southern coasts, and across the Northeast to the western seaboard, the BJP's footprint now spans regions once considered politically inaccessible. This geographical spread is not merely the result of electoral victories; it reflects sustained organizational penetration and an ability to adapt messaging to diverse socio-political contexts. The party's ability to integrate regional aspirations within a broader national narrative has been central to this expansion.

Leadership as Force Multiplier

While the BJP's rise is rooted in decades of groundwork, the acceleration of its dominance in the past decade owes much to leadership. Under Narendra Modi, political communication has become sharper, more direct, and more expansive—reaching citizens beyond traditional intermediaries.

This shift has also redefined the relationship between governance and politics. Welfare delivery is no longer viewed in isolation; it is integrated into a broader narrative of aspiration and national progress. The articulation of an inclusive development framework—captured in the idea of "Sabka Saath, Sabka

Vikas"—has allowed the party to bridge diverse voter expectations. Leadership, in this context, has functioned as a force multiplier, amplifying organizational strength rather than substituting it.

Having joined the party in 2022 after a career in the civil services, I have had the opportunity to observe first-hand the emphasis on organizational discipline and delivery-oriented governance that underpins this political trajectory. This internal coherence, often less visible in public discourse, remains one of the party's enduring strengths.

Governance and the Politics of Decisiveness

The consolidation of the BJP's position has been shaped by an emphasis on decisiveness in governance. A series of high-impact decisions have contributed to shaping its image as a party willing to undertake politically complex and often contentious measures. Whether in matters of constitutional change, national security posture, or economic reform, these decisions have reinforced a perception of clarity and resolve.

Economic initiatives such as the implementation of a unified tax regime, expansion of digital governance, and sustained investment in infrastructure have further strengthened the narrative of structural transformation. These measures are not without debate, but they have contributed to a sense of

forward momentum. Importantly, the emphasis on direct benefit transfers and financial inclusion has sought to create a more immediate interface between the state and citizens, reducing leakages and enhancing delivery efficiency. Coupled with a more assertive global presence, these developments feed into a broader story of India's rise on the world stage.

Dominance and Democratic Debate

The scale of the BJP's success has inevitably generated scrutiny. Prolonged political dominance raises questions about the balance between central authority and federal dynamics, the health of democratic institutions, and the space available for dissenting voices.

These concerns are not unique to any single political formation. They reflect the natural tensions within a democracy adjusting to a new centre of gravity. Electoral success, repeatedly validated through democratic processes, reflects public endorsement. Yet, the durability of that endorsement depends on continued engagement with institutional norms, pluralism, and the expectations of an increasingly aware electorate.

The challenge, therefore, lies not in the existence of dominance itself, but in how it is exercised. Strength must not translate into rigidity, and authority must not overshadow accountability.

Beyond Elections: Structural Factors

To view the BJP's rise solely through the prism of leadership or electoral strategy would be incomplete. Its growth has been underpinned by structural factors: a cadre-based organization, disciplined messaging, effective use of communication platforms, and the ability to align governance delivery with political narrative.

Equally, the fragmentation and inconsistency of opposition forces have contributed to this consolidation. Political dominance is rarely created in isolation; it is shaped by both internal strengths and external dynamics. The BJP's experience illustrates how organizational continuity, when combined with adaptive strategy, can reshape the contours of national politics.

Towards 50: The Next Phase

As the BJP approaches its 50th year, the nature of its challenge is set to evolve. The journey from marginal presence to political dominance is, in many ways, complete. The more complex task now lies in transitioning from dominance to durable institutional legacy.

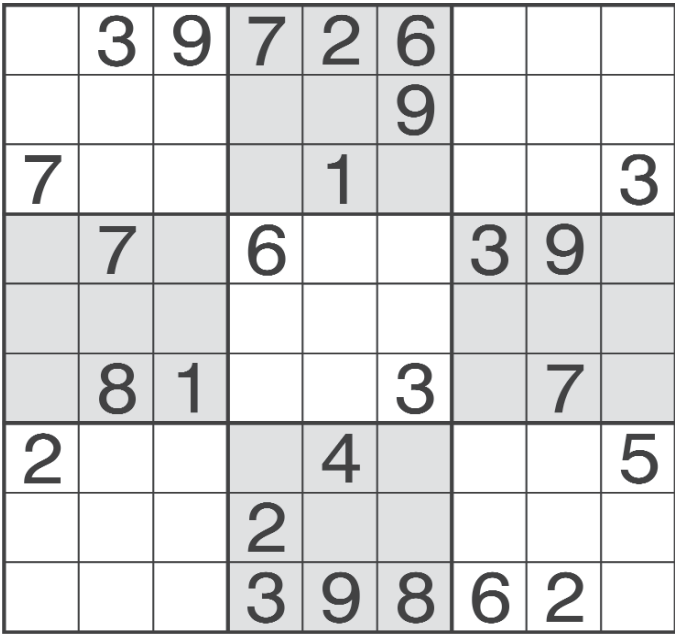
This transition will require a continued emphasis on inclusive growth, ensuring that economic progress translates into broad-based opportunity. It will also demand a careful balance between decisiveness and deliberation in a diverse and federal polity. Strengthening institutional autonomy, fostering cooperative federalism, and sustaining social cohesion will be critical. Equally important will be the ability to respond to emerging challenges—economic inequality, technological disruption, and shifting voter expectations—without diluting the coherence of its core political narrative.

In a political landscape defined by rising expectations and rapid change, adaptability will remain key. The BJP's success has thus far been built on its ability to evolve without losing coherence. The coming years will test whether it can sustain this balance while deepening its institutional footprint.

At 46, the BJP stands as a case study in political transformation—an organization that has moved from the margins of Indian politics to its very centre. The road ahead will determine not just the extent of its dominance, but the depth and durability of its legacy.

(Author is General Secretary BJP, Punjab. views are personal)

DAILY SUDOKU



HOW TO SOLVE IT

Sudoku is a logic puzzle where you fill a 9x9 grid so that numbers 1 to 9 appear once in every row, column, and 3x3 box, using elimination and logical deduction—no maths involved.

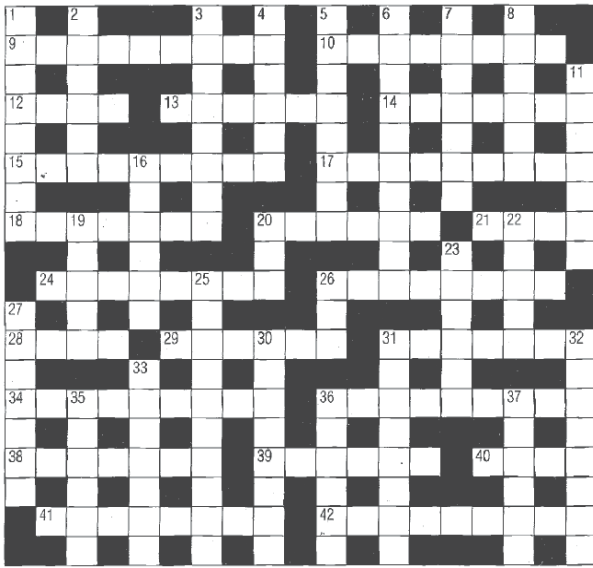


DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★★★★

SOLUTION (04.04.26)

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

DOUBLE CROSSWORD
MONDAY | APRIL 6, 2026



ACROSS

4 These people can set a shining example (6)

7 Talk in opposition (8)

8 A case of one and two not making three (6)

10 Rich, having some wealth, nevertheless mortal (5)

13 A win in a wagon (4)

14 A spare tyre? (4)

15 Determination not to be intestate? (4)

16 Member of a popular movement (3)

17 The disgrace of a big-headed clique? (4)

19 It goes a little way to stave off starvation (4)

DOWN

1 Mock one's food? (5)

2 Insanitary female? (5)

3 One is presumably properly drilled (4)

4 To break a plate is a bit of a bloomer (5)

5 Legal right to a number of points (4)

6 It's hard to reverse, perhaps, without starting! (6)

9 The brotherly Mr. Wright? (6)

11 Everything in show would be superficial (3)

12 Though good, he makes a bad start in a faulty boat (5)

13 Weakens, but keeps her wits about her! (7)

21 Have raw recruits never been there? (9)

23 Legendary lovers of pipe music (4)

24 Goes astray badly in outer Serbia (4)

26 There's precious little of it! (3)

27 Foreigner returning from Breslau (4)

29 Exploits us two ways (4)

32 He gets conflicting directions from females (4)

33 Was inclined to have a bit of fun when let out (5)

34 Some more pasta to make a meal of (6)

35 Building in Crete, possibly, with German capital (8)

36 Gentle as nurse (6)

15 Initially works well as a cooking utensil (3)

16 Consumed some water! (3)

18 Can be severe, or maybe less so (6)

20 One can take it to be disputative (5)

21 A moving part, albeit mechanical (3)

22 In "Major Barbara", an associate of royalty (3)

23 Think awfully highly of Paul (6)

25 Keen desire for money (3)

28 Go into forbidden territory (5)

30 Nominally shaky ideas (5)

31 Drama coach? (5)

32 It's tough being deceived outright (4)

33 Defeat at a good speed (4)

SOLUTION (04.04.26)

ACROSS

1. Potter

7. Ex-citing

8. Di-Al

10. R-e-ally

11. Resign

14. Coe

16. R-emit

17. Tier

19. Toast

21. Me-tre

22. Yacht

23. Loom

26. Late-r

28. Lip

29. Alas-Ka

30. Cave-RN

31. O-wen

32. Kare-Nina

33. Trying

DOWN

1. Parrot

2. To-ile-r

3. R-Ely

4. Di-verse

5. Mini-m

6. Age-NT

8. D-ace

9. Ale

12. Set

13. GI's-MO

15. Moths

18. I-deal

19. Tec

20. Art

21. Marking

22. Yes

23. Livery

24. Open

25. Mining

26. L-acks

27. Tarry

28. Law

30. Co-at

NCPCR fortifies Safety Net for Children, landmark achievements in 2025-26

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

In a landmark achievement, the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) during the financial year 2025–26 has resolved nearly 36,000 pending complaints which amounts to more than 70 percent of its decade long backlogs.

Another significant step is the "Sugar Board" initiative of Prime Minister Narendra Modi which has been adopted by NCPCR across 24 States and Union Territories, covering nearly seven lakh schools. The measures demonstrates how simple, preventive messaging can have a nationwide impact on child well-being. Its recognition at the highest levels underscores its relevance, added the official.

According to make officials in Ministry of Women and Child Development, this is not just an administrative milestone; it represents thousands of children whose voices were finally heard and acted upon. "Timely grievance redressal is often the first step in restoring dignity and protection," officials led. The WCD ministry in the third tenure of Narendra Modi government is being led by Minister Annapurna Devi.

"Equally significant has been the NCPCR renewed push against child trafficking—one of the gravest threats to child rights. Through two coordinated, pan-India rescue and rehabilitation drives, around 4,000 children were rescued from exploitative situations, with over 2,700 successfully rehabilitated. These numbers reflect not just enforcement, but the power of coordination between national and state agencies, civil society, and law enforcement," another senior WCD department officer informed.

Rehabilitation, however, goes beyond rescue. The GHAR (Go Home and Reunite) initiative has enabled the repatriation of more than 2,200 children to Child Care Institutions in their



Under the initiative of WCD Minister Annapurna Devi, two abducted children were rescued from Ranchi, Jharkhand recently.

NCPCR ACHIEVEMENTS
IN 2025-26

- Backlog Reduction
- Pan-India Anti-Trafficking Drive
- Repatriation through GHAR Portal
- "Sugar Board" Initiative
- Anti-Trafficking Campaign
- Capacity Building & Awareness
- Digital Transformation
- International Child Protection Initiative

home districts. By reconnecting children with familiar socio-cultural environments, the initiative strengthens the prospects of long-term recovery and reintegration.

At the same time, the Commission has embraced technology as a force multiplier. The integration of 16 legacy websites into a single, unified digital platform marks a significant leap in accessibility and transparency. For a body that deals with vulnerable populations, ease of access can make the difference between neglect and intervention.

The launch of a dedicated portal to address international parental child abduction cases is another forward-looking step. As cross-border mobility increases, so do complex custody disputes. Providing a

structured digital mechanism to address such cases reflects an understanding of emerging challenges in child protection. Public health and awareness have also found a place in the Commission's priorities. Meanwhile, the campaign "Bal Taskari Se Azadi 3.0" implemented across 200 districts, signals a deepening of grassroots engagement. Such district-level interventions are crucial in a country where vulnerabilities often vary by region.

Beyond enforcement and campaigns, the Commission has invested in capacity building. Through 61 conferences and workshops held across the country, stakeholders at every level—from district officials to policymakers—have been engaged on critical legislations like the POCSO Act, JJ Act, and RTE Act. Strengthening institutions ultimately depends on strengthening the people who run them.

"Taken together, these efforts point to a broader shift in approach: from reactive to proactive, from fragmented to integrated, and from procedural to outcome-oriented governance. Yet, challenges remain. Sustaining momentum, ensuring uniform implementation across states, and addressing emerging digital risks to children will require continued vigilance," added the official.

BRIEFLY

Chelsea player Oscar retires from soccer after heart issue



Former Chelsea midfielder Oscar has retired from soccer five months after being admitted to the hospital with a heart issue, Brazilian club Sao Paulo said. Sao Paulo said the 34-year-old Oscar finalized the termination of his contract with the team this week. The deal was set to run until the end of 2027. Oscar hasn't played for Sao Paulo since experiencing vasovagal syncope – a common cause in fainting after a sudden drop in blood pressure or heart rate – in November, requiring surgery. He collapsed during preseason testing and was reportedly unconscious for about two minutes. Sao Paulo said at the time he “presented a complication with cardiac changes.” Oscar returned to his boyhood club on a free transfer late in 2024 after a long spell in China. “I wanted to do more for Sao Paulo, I wanted to play more,” Oscar said in a club statement. “I think I had both the footballing ability and the age to play more, but unfortunately this happened. Now I’m going to retire and continue supporting Sao Paulo, continue my life as a fan.” Oscar won one Europa League title and two Premier League trophies with Chelsea, which he joined in 2012. He moved to Shanghai in the middle of Chelsea’s 2016-17 season for a transfer fee reported to be \$73 million. He won three Super League titles in China and became a fan favorite in Asia.

De Gea’s saves lift Fiorentina to a tense win over Verona



Fiorentina goalkeeper David De Gea starred with several huge saves to preserve a 1-0 win against Hellas Verona and pull further away from the Serie A relegation zone. The former Manchester United shot-stopper kept his side in the match before teammate Nicolo Fagioli scored the winner eight minutes from time, against the run of play. Jack Harrison, on loan from Leeds United, got down the right and laid it off for an unmarked Fagioli to fire in off the inside of the right post. The tension spilled over four minutes later when Verona midfielder Tomas Suslov and Fiorentina counterpart Albert Guãmundsson got into a brawl, leading to both of them getting sent off with ripped jerseys. Fiorentina spent most of the first half of the season mired to the foot of the table but has lost only two league matches in 2026. It moved to five points above the drop zone. Verona remained nine points from safety.

REAL MADRID LOSES TO MALLORCA IN LA LIGA



TALES AZZONIAP
■ Madrid

Real Madrid could drop further behind La Liga leader Barcelona after a 2-1 loss at Mallorca on Saturday.

Madrid conceded in stoppage time and stayed four points behind ahead of the Catalan club's match at fourth-placed Atletico Madrid later Saturday.

Mallorca has risen out of the relegation zone after its second win in three league matches. The host opened the scoring thanks to Manu Morlanes in the 42nd minute. Madrid equalised in the 88th through Eder Militao, who was back in the squad after an injury layoff of nearly four months. The winner came from Vedat Muriqi one minute into added time.

Mallorca moved to 17th place, two points clear of the bottom three. Madrid suffered its third defeat in its last six league matches. The club has five league losses all season. Also, Real Sociedad beat Levante 2-0 at home.

IPL’s Billion-Dollar Signal: Why RCB and Rajasthan Royals Sales Reflect a Robust Global Sports Brand



SHAKYA MITRA

The recent successful bids for Royal Challengers Bengaluru (RCB) and Rajasthan Royals (RR) serve to reaffirm that the Indian Premier League (IPL) is one of the most valuable sporting properties in the world. The staggering valuations achieved by both these franchises underline the league's commercial strength, cultural influence, and long-term investment appeal.

At the heart of this story lies the sheer scale of value appreciation. RCB, originally purchased in 2008 by Vijay Mallya's United Spirits for \$111.6 million, has now been sold for approximately \$1.78 billion (approximately ₹16,600 crores), marking nearly a 15-fold increase in dollar terms and even more in rupee terms. Rajasthan Royals, bought for a modest \$67 million in 2008, has similarly witnessed exponential growth, with recent valuations hovering around \$1.635 billion (approximately ₹15,000 crores).

The buyers themselves reflect the IPL's global pull. RCB has been acquired by a consortium that includes the Aditya Birla Group and

will be chaired by Aryaman Vikram Birla. Rajasthan Royals, meanwhile, have attracted interest from international investors led by US-based tech entrepreneur Kal Somani, further underscoring the league's cross-border appeal.

This surge in valuations is not an isolated phenomenon. It builds on a trend that was evident during the IPL's expansion in 2021, when two new franchises Lucknow and Ahmedabad were sold for ₹7,090 crore and ₹5,625 crore respectively. These figures, which seemed astronomical at the time, now appear almost conservative when compared to the recent RCB and RR deals. The rapid escalation in franchise values within just a few years highlights the IPL's accelerating growth trajectory. There are two key points though that must be given as a caveat, both Royal Challengers Bangalore and Rajasthan Royals are existing franchises who already have dedicated fanbases and they have other franchises that come under their umbrella. Royal Challengers Bangalore has a Women's Premier League team while Rajasthan Royals have a team in the South African T20 as well as a men's and women's team in the Caribbean T20 league.

But what makes franchises like RCB and RR such compelling investments? For RCB, the answer lies significantly in brand equity driven by superstar appeal. The presence of Virat Kohli arguably the most marketable cricketer globally and one of the most marketable sportspersons



across all sports has been central to the franchise's identity. His long association with the team has created a loyal fan base, amplified digital engagement, and attracted sponsors. Beyond individual stardom, RCB's consistent visibility, strong merchandising, and recent on-field success (including an IPL title) have strengthened its brand proposition. Kohli, 37, although retired from T20 internationals and Test cricket, still remains a formidable force and is one of the fittest cricketers in the world, which could allow him to play in the IPL for a few more years, an added bonus for the new owners of the franchise.

Rajasthan Royals present a slightly different but equally attractive model. Historically known for spotting and nurturing young talent, the franchise has built its value on a sustainable cricketing philosophy. Young Indian players like Yashasvi Jaiswal symbolise this approach, blending performance potential with future marketability. RR's emphasis on youth development, analytics-driven

decisions, and global scouting has positioned it as a forward-looking sports business, appealing to investors seeking long-term growth rather than immediate returns.

When placed in a global context, the valuations of RCB and RR become even more striking. At roughly \$1.6-1.8 billion, these franchises are now in the same conversation as mid-tier European football clubs. IPL teams may still be a far cry from the Dallas Cowboys (valued at \$13 Billion) and the most valuable football teams like Real Madrid (\$6.75 billion) and Manchester United (\$6.6 billion). But their valuation is very close and even greater than Italian football giants like Juventus, AC Milan and Inter Milan. This is quite a feat for a league that has been in existence for just 18 years.

Data from Forbes list of most valuable sports teams: Indeed, the IPL itself has evolved into a commercial powerhouse. Its overall valuation has crossed \$18 billion according to a study done by Houlihan Lokey, driven

by lucrative media rights deals, central revenue sharing, and a tightly structured franchise model. The doubling of broadcast rights to over \$6 billion in 2022 further cemented its status as a premium sports product. Unlike many traditional leagues, the IPL combines the intensity of a short tournament with year-round engagement, making it highly attractive for broadcasters, sponsors, and investors alike. It is therefore fair to argue that the IPL now belongs among the world's top sports properties. Its ability to attract global capital, generate massive viewership, and create billion-dollar franchises places it alongside the NFL, NBA, and English Premier League in terms of commercial relevance if not yet in absolute scale. Ultimately, the blockbuster sales of RCB and Rajasthan Royals are a testament to the IPL's robust brand value. They reflect not just the league's current strength, but also investor confidence in its future growth.

In less than two decades, it has transformed from a bold experiment into a billion-dollar sporting juggernaut. The latest franchise deals are not just milestones, they are signals that the IPL has arrived as a global sporting and business powerhouse, even as it continues to reshape the economics of sport in India.

Shakya Mitra is a sports management consultant with over a decade of experience in sports promotion and development. His work across both the private and government sectors gives him a well-rounded view of India's sports ecosystem.

Haaland hat-trick propels Man City to 4-0 win

STEVE DOUGLAS
■ London

Erling Haaland's 18-minute hat trick powered Manchester City to a 4-0 win over Liverpool and into the FA Cup semifinals for a record eighth straight season on Saturday. Mohamed Salah's failure from the penalty spot added to the woes of Liverpool, whose meltdown at Etihad Stadium will put more heat on under-pressure manager Arne Slot.

Haaland converted a penalty in the 39th minute, headed home a cross from Antoine Semenyo in first-half stoppage time, and swept in a finish off the crossbar in the 57th to score his first hat trick of the season for City and 12th since he joined the club in 2022. Semenyo scored the other goal in the 50th for City, which was playing its first match since winning the English League Cup two weeks ago by beating Arsenal in the final at Wembley Stadium. City will



be heading back there later this month for the FA Cup semis. “This club has to win trophies,” said Haaland, who was described after the game as a “machine” by City assistant coach Pep Lijnders — deputizing in the dugout while Pep Guardiola served a touchline suspension. Salah, who announced during the international break he's leaving Liverpool after nine trophy-filled seasons, was beginning his long goodbye to the Reds but couldn't mark it with a goal.

The best of the many chances he spurned came from a penalty, which City goalkeeper James Trafford palmed away in the 64th.

It was a record 18th straight home win for City in the FA Cup, dating to 2017. Guardiola's team shared a record with Clapham Rovers for reaching seven consecutive FA Cup finals but now holds it outright.

Many Liverpool fans were seen leaving the stadium after the fourth City goal. “The fighting spirit wasn't

there enough, the mentality wasn't there enough,” Liverpool midfielder Dominik Szoboszlai said.

“None of us were there to be honest as much as we could. “It's a hard time but we have to stick together.” **Chelsea dispatches Port Vale:** Like City, Chelsea romped to a big win in the quarterfinals — though this one was expected. Playing without Argentina midfielder Enzo Fernandez for disciplinary reasons, Chelsea still had more than enough to dispatch third-tier Port Vale 7-0 at Stamford Bridge. Jorrel Hato, Joao Pedro, Tosin Adarabioyo, Andrey Santos, Estevao and Alejandro Garnacho scored for Chelsea, along with an own-goal. Chelsea has won the FA Cup eight times, most recently in 2018.

Arsenal also in action: Arsenal visited second-tier Southampton in the late game on Saturday. The draw for the semifinals takes place on Sunday after West Ham hosts Leeds in the final match in the last eight.

Arsenal in difficult phase: Arteta

ASSOCIATED PRESS
■ London

Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta acknowledged his team is going through its first tough period of the season after being stunned by second-tier Southampton in the FA Cup quarterfinals, two weeks after losing in the final of the English League Cup.

A shocking 2-1 loss at St. Mary's stadium left Arsenal with just the Premier League and Champions League as trophy targets.

A knee injury to Gabriel Magalhaes, which forced off the Brazil center back in the second half, added more misery for Arteta, who suggested there were



players who took the field against Southampton despite having fitness problems of their own.

What Arteta wasn't prepared to do was criticize his squad. “I love my players and what they've done for

nine months,” he said. “What am I going to do now? Criticize them because we lost a game here in the manner that they tried and the way they are putting their bodies through everything?”

Some of them probably didn't even have to be here today. “No, I'm not going to do that. I'm going to defend them more than ever. If someone has to take responsibility that's me and we have the most beautiful period of the season ahead of us. And now it's a moment in the season - you always have moments, usually two or three. This is the first moment that we have with a certain level of difficulty.”

Barcelona overcomes 10-man Atletico and boosts La Liga lead



TALES AZZONIAP
■ Madrid

Barcelona came from behind away from home to beat 10-man Atletico Madrid 2-1 and take a big step toward winning La Liga after Real Madrid lost at Mallorca.

It was the first of three matches between the teams in 10 days. Barcelona and Atletico will meet twice more in the quarterfinals of the Champions League. They also met in the semifinals of the Copa del Rey in February and March when Atletico advanced to the final 4-3 on aggregate. The Spanish rivals will face each other five times in less than two months.

“We are happy with the victory,” Barcelona's Dani Olmo said. “We hadn't forgotten the last Copa match here ... we wanted to win and get the three points, which were very important.” Robert Lewandowski scored the decider in the 87th minute with his shoulder from a parried save by the Atletico goalkeeper. Barcelona, which has won eight of its last nine games in all competitions, has a seven-point lead over Madrid, which lost at Mallorca 2-1 earlier.

Atletico, 19 points off the lead in fourth place, opened the scoring at Metropolitano Stadium through Giuliano

Simeone in the 39th. Marcus Rashford equalized in the 42nd, and Atletico went a man down in first-half stoppage time when Nico Gonzalez was sent off for a second yellow card.

“We played a good game,” Atletico coach Diego Simeone said. “We have to focus on the Champions League game now.” The winning goal was almost by accident. Joao Cancelo made a nice run through the left side of the area with a couple of cutback moves to get past defenders but his shot was parried by keeper Juan Muso and rebounded in off Lewandowski's shoulder.

Barcelona has 301 official goals in 107 matches under coach Hansi Flick. Atletico has lost three in a row in all tournaments and stayed one point behind third-placed Villarreal, which visits Girona on Monday. Barcelona defender Gerard Martin was sent off in the second half but the decision was overturned by video review.

Madrid's loss: Real Madrid dropped further behind Barcelona after conceding in stoppage time. Host Mallorca opened the scoring thanks to Manu Morlanes in the 42nd minute. Madrid equalized in the 88th through Eder Militao, who was back after an injury layoff of nearly four months.

Police chase fans off in clashes at Dresden

ASSOCIATED PRESS
■ Dresden (Germany)

Large groups of fans invaded the field and threw flares before being chased away by police in a German second-division soccer game between Dynamo Dresden and Hertha Berlin.

Dresden fans in the club's yellow and black colors ran the length of the field toward a section containing fans of visiting team Hertha, who also jumped a fence and moved toward the field. Lit flares were thrown from both sides, some of them landing near spectators, and some fans seemed to trade blows. Police then stormed



onto the field from an entrance in the corner of the stadium and chased dozens of Dresden supporters back toward the other end.

It was not immediately clear if anyone was injured or if there had been arrests.

Referee Sven Jablonski stopped the game and took the players off for over 15 minutes.

After 13 years, David Beckham’s dream comes true with Inter Miami

ASSOCIATED PRESS
■ Miami

Don Garber remembers the earliest days of David Beckham's plans to bring Major League Soccer to Miami, the quest that started more than a dozen years ago. There were twists. There were turns. Eventually, there was Lionel Messi, too.

But there was never Miami — until now. “We believed in Miami,” Beckham said. “And Miami believed in us.” Inter Miami finally played a game in its namesake city on Saturday night, hosting Austin FC after more than six years of calling Fort Lauderdale its home. Garber — the MLS Commissioner — was there for the ribbon-

cutting of Miami Freedom Park, a complex with construction still very much in progress and one that needed temporary approvals from civic officials just so Saturday's match could be held. Beckham picked Miami as his spot in 2013, the league made it official in 2014 when he formally exercised his option for an expansion franchise, and now, there's a home. “We made a commitment to him that he would have an option on the team, and he exercised that in Miami,” Garber said.

“And it was a journey. And that journey, in many ways, didn't end when Leo Messi joined the club. The journey really came to its conclusion today with the opening of



this building.” The team says the stadium holds 26,700 seats. A public golf course near Miami International Airport was plowed under to make room for the stadium, and tons of construction equipment - from cranes to hard hats and everything in between — is still scattered

all over the site. The lack of certain aesthetics didn't stop some fans from spending more than \$1,000 on the resale markets for the best seats on Saturday, which was Inter Miami's first “home” match since winning last season's MLS Cup championship. “It's a great day for

the club,” Inter Miami coach Javier Mascherano told Apple TV before the match. “It's our dream day.”

By the time Messi came onto the field for warmups, most of the seats were filled. Beckham and the rest of Inter Miami's ownership group came out to applaud the fans moments earlier, even mingling with some in the most ardent supporters' section behind one of the goals. It was an event, with pink glow sticks being waved in the stands and music icon Marc Anthony performing “The Star-Spangled Banner.”

Let the record show that Messi didn't score the first goal in the stadium; that distinction went to Austin defender Guilherme Biro.

Messi got the first Inter Miami goal, a header four minutes after Biro's goal. “There were times of trouble, you know, but David, he's an optimist,” Garber said. “I think he was an optimist as a player. Again, he's got a lot of courage. You've seen that throughout his career. He has that same courage as a businessperson.” Beckham is a global icon when it comes to soccer, entertainment and fashion — and in many ways, MLS changed forever when he came to the US to play for the LA Galaxy. It was through that deal that he got the option for an expansion franchise, which ultimately meant Miami.

“When I came to America and the MLS 20 years ago, my

dream was to win championships, help raise the game of soccer that I love so much and to build my own team,” Beckham said. “Thirteen years ago, I announced Miami was my choice. We had no name. We had no fans. We had no stadium. Today, I stand in our new home. We are champions of the MLS. We have the best player in the history of the game playing in Miami. Dreams really can come true.” Beckham's celebrity level got things started. Messi put the team onto a global stage. And others now will try to replicate it - including Austin, which has actor and producer Matthew McConaughey as part of its ownership group.

Shami sizzles, Pant dazzles as LSG opens account

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
■ Hyderabad

Mohammed Shami asked probing questions not only to Sunrisers Hyderabad batters but also to the national selection committee with an opening spell for ages while skipper Rishabh Pant upped his game when it mattered to headline Lucknow Super Giants' thrilling five-wicket victory in an IPL match on Sunday.

In a spell that oozed skill and class in equal measure, Shami bowled an astounding 18 dot balls to finish with 2 for 9 in four overs which largely became responsible for Sunrisers Hyderabad being restricted to 156 for 9.

LSG rode on Aiden

Markram's 27-ball-45 and skipper Rishabh Pant's 50-ball-68 not out to surpass the target with one ball to spare.

The chase got a touch tricky towards the end with 9 needed off the final over but Pant smote Jaydev Unadkat for two straight boundaries — second a fore-hand tennis like slap before another lofted boundary over mid-off to finish the game in style.

It was an innings that had nine boundaries and his choice of strokes was measured on a slowish track where SRH spinners Harsh Dubey and Shvang Kumar made the ball talk.

But it was Shami, the 35-year-old artist, who set up the match in the LSG's



bowling Powerplay itself. His scalps were the crack opening pair of Abhishek Sharma and Travis Head, dismissed off successive deliveries across two overs with

was the ball of the match.

While Pant would have fancied bowling SRH out for less than 100 after restricting them to 26 for 4 at one stage, Heinrich Klaasen (62 off 41 balls) and all-rounder Nitish Kumar Reddy (56 off 33 balls) counter-attacked to add 116 runs for the fifth wicket.

But there was a third act to the tale as SRH had another batting collapse losing five wickets for 14 runs in last 2.2 overs. During the chase, LSG did stutter in phases but Pant, who curbed his impetuosity showed glimpses of his vintage self but also concentrated on crossing the line. Overlooked time and again, 35-year-old Shami sent a stern reminder to the national selection committee with

an opening spell for the ages that was pivotal to Lucknow Super Giants choking Sunrisers Hyderabad despite the Klaasen-Reddy stand.

The cerebral operator in Shami quickly understood that he would have to take the pace off the deliveries on this track and did so promptly. He bowled four fullish blockhole deliveries to Head and allowed a single. When Abhishek took strike, the final delivery of the opening over was a loopy fuller delivery on the fifth stump which the opener tried to pitch.

Instead of a conventional slip, a 'fly slip' or short third-man on the circle was stationed and Manimaran Siddharth took a smart diving catch.

Need to be cohesive in our run chases, Hayden as GT squander chances



PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
■ Ahmedabad

Gujarat Titans batting coach Matthew Hayden wants a more cohesive effort from his batters following the team's second loss in as many games in the Indian Premier League here. Gujarat Titans, a team that over relies on its top-order, could not chase down 211 against Rajasthan Royals at home on Saturday night despite being at 107 for one in the 11th over.

The 78-run opening stand between Sai Sudharsan (73 off 44) and Kumar Kushagra (18 off 14) provided the hosts an ideal launchpad but a cluster of wickets in the middle saw them slip to 161 for seven. "Washy Sundar, he had a pretty big decision to make at that point around if you're going to attack someone like Bishnoi, who was on a roll.

"That was maybe a choice that he can look at and will look at as well in terms of just trying to be a little bit more cohesive in our run chases, because it has to be said there wasn't a lot that went wrong in that first 12 overs,"

said Hayden in the post match interaction. After Washington fell to Ravi Bishnoi, the run out of Shahrukh Khan also cost Gujarat Titans dearly.

"The run out (of Shahrukh Khan) was something that, again, was a decision which Shahrukh and Rashid had to make at the time. I haven't broken down that play because as a coach you tend to kind of look at the ball, but I'll be interested also to see the approach when we get back to vision of how that run was executed. "It certainly looked at from the sideline that Jaddu (Ravindra Jadeja, at the extra-cover boundary) bumped the ball quite a long way away from him and to regather, as we know, he's so quick and he's so good at getting and releasing the ball. "But there's two wickets straightaway that would have been the difference.

Again, we're talking about six runs. So those little things in T20 cricket, when you're chasing down a big total, which we were, they become vital in the decision-making process of a batting unit," added the Australian.

Kochhar finishes fifth at International Series Japan



PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
■ Chiba (Japan)

India's Karandeep Kochhar hit a late hat-trick of birdies in the thrilling fourth round to finish fifth at the International Series Japan, here Sunday.

Australia's Travis Smyth clinched the title with an eagle on the last hole at the Caledonian Golf Club.

Kochhar remained bogey-free on the final day after a tumultuous third round and hit birdies on the 4th, 16th, 17th and 18th holes to finish the tournament with 12-under 272, three shots behind winner Smyth.

Meanwhile, Smyth's dream run continued when he made an eagle putt on the par-five 10th to sensationally win the tournament by one.

In a riveting finish, he drained a 20-footer to narrowly avoid a play-off with Thailand's Pavit Tangkamolprasert and Ryosuke Kinoshita from Japan. The Australian's brilliant final putt saw him shoot a seven-under-par 64 to move to 15-under, with Pavit and Kinoshita both in the clubhouse on 14-under.

It's also his second victory on the Asian Tour.

The Asian Tour now heads to the Singapore Open.

All-round RCB outclass CSK by 43 runs

G UNNIKIRISHNAN
■ Bengaluru

Tim David, skipper Rajat Patidar and Devdutt Padikkal went ballistic with marauding knocks while bowlers maintained fine lines as Royal Challengers Bengaluru crushed Chennai Super Kings by 43 runs in an IPL match here on Sunday.

Padikkal (50, 29 balls) and David (70 off 25b) gave a towelling to the clueless Super Kings bowlers in an exhibition of mind-blowing range-hitting, and Patidar supported them with an unbeaten 19-ball 48.

The end result of their collective belligerence was RCB's imposing total of 250 for three.

The Super Kings continued to be wimpy with the bat too, finishing at 207 all out in 19.4 overs as the five-time winners sank to their third straight defeat this season. Once Sanju Samson, captain Ruturaj Gaikwad and Ayush Mhatre walked back with just 30 on the board, CSK's chase was doomed.

Pacer Jacob Duffy (2/58) did the bulk of damage in this phase, getting rid of Samson and Gaikwad as both fell to Padikkal at first slip. Samson continued to misfire in the IPL for his new franchise post his inspired batting in the T20 World Cup.

The Kerala batter tried to be cute against Duffy, steering



the ball with a perpendicular bat, whereas he should have attempted the easier option of a cut from that particular body position. He just managed a feeble nudge to Padikkal.

Mhatre's wicket gave veteran pacer Bhuvneshwar

Kumar his 200th IPL wicket, the second bowler to achieve the feat after Yuzvendra Chahal.

Sarfraz Khan offered brave resistance with a 25-ball 50 but the target was way beyond them on the night.

Sarfraz was taken out by Krunal Pandya (2/36) and Bhuvneshwar (3/41) returned to oust Prashant Veer (43) to end a 57-run alliance between him and Jamie Overton (37) as as the storied Southern Derby ended without any real spark.

Earlier, Royal Challengers' march towards their second win on the bounce started when Devdutt constructed two crucial stands - 56 (37b) with Phil Salt (46) for second wicket and 58 (21b) for the third wicket with Patidar.

They were important alliances for RCB on a Chinnaswamy track with a hint of slowness in the beginning after CSK asked them to bat first.

Beleaguered KKR seek spark to halt slide against Punjab Kings

TAPAN MOHANTA ■ Kolkata

A beleaguered and increasingly rudderless Kolkata Knight Riders will need a strong turn-around to halt their poor start when they face an in-form Punjab Kings in their IPL clash here on Monday.

The three-time champions may point to the absence of frontline pacers Mustafizur Rahman, Harshit Rana, Akash Deep and Matheesha Pathirana for their early struggles, but the larger issue lies in a flawed team strategy that has left them staring at a third successive defeat.

The decision not to retain Shreyas Iyer, who led them to the 2024 title, raised eyebrows, and it has only looked worse in hindsight. Iyer went on to vindicate himself by

leading Punjab Kings to a runners-up finish in 2025, becoming the first captain to guide three different franchises — Delhi Capitals (2020), KKR (champions 2024) and PBKS (2025) — to the finals.

In contrast, KKR endured a forgettable campaign last season, finishing eighth for the first time since 2009.

Ajinkya Rahane, brought in as captain despite being out of favour in the T20 scheme of things, did silence critics to an extent by emerging as their leading run-getter. But the team's thinking including the elevation of Abhishek Nayar as head coach in place of Chandrakant Pandit, has come under scrutiny. Nayar was incidentally the coach of UP Warriorz in this year's WPL in their bottom-placed



finish. The muddled strategy is most evident in their team combination. Despite having three top New Zealand players — Finn Allen, Tim Seifert and Rachin Ravindra — KKR have failed to utilise

their resources effectively. Allen has been the only one to get a look-in, while Seifert, the second-highest run-getter in the last T20 World Cup, and Ravindra, a proven spin-bowling all-rounder,

continue to warm the bench.

Instead, KKR's persistence with Sunil Narine — a franchise regular since 2012 — despite his diminishing returns, has raised questions.

The situation is further complicated by the inclusion of all-rounder Cameron Green, who has been restricted from bowling by Cricket Australia, leaving the side with two overseas players not fully contributing.

Add to that the presence of Rovman Powell, another proven T20 performer, on the sidelines, and KKR's selection calls appear increasingly baffling. Even their high-profile support staff — Shane Watson, Dwayne Bravo and Andre Russell — has not been able to provide clarity, making one ponder who is

actually calling the shots at KKR? While their bowling was expected to be a concern, the batting has fared no better. Rahane's move to promote himself to open has yielded mixed results, and the lineup looks thin beyond No. 5.

In their first home match, they were bowled out for 161 in just 16 overs while chasing 227 against Sunrisers Hyderabad on a freeflowing Eden. The lower middle order, comprising Ramandeep Singh and Anukul Roy, lacks the firepower, while Narine has been pushed down to No. 8, reflecting the lack of a settled plan. In stark contrast, Punjab Kings have everything going their way. Led by Iyer, who knows the Eden conditions

well, they come into the match with two wins in two matches. Young Cooper Connolly has been a revelation at No. 3 with 108 runs from two matches, while Priyansh Arya and Prabhsimran Singh have provided explosive starts.

Iyer has anchored the middle overs with assurance. Their bowling unit, featuring Arshdeep Singh, Marco Jansen and Vijaykumar Vysyak looks balanced, while veteran leg-spinner Yuzvendra Chahal adds further bite.

For KKR, among the few positives have been the efforts of Kartik Tyagi and young Angkrish Raghuvanshi, but those sparks alone may not be enough against a well-oiled Punjab unit.

Win against GT to boost Parag's confidence

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
■ Ahmedabad

Former India pacer Irfan Pathan reckons the bold decisions taken by Riyan Parag at the death in Rajasthan Royals' thrilling win over Gujarat Titans will significantly boost his confidence as a leader.

Parag, who took over RR's captaincy this season, made a key tactical call in the final moments, handing Jofra Archer the 19th over while entrusting Tushar Deshpande with the last one.

"This was the best game of the season so far. It was very important for Rajasthan that Riyan Parag commands that respect while leading the side," Pathan said on JioStar.

"He made that difficult call in the last over, and that decision went in favour of Rajasthan, which will give him a lot of confidence as a



leader. He went to Jofra Archer to bowl that 19th over, and generally, you go with your more experienced bowler in the penultimate over." Archer justified the move with a superb over, conceding just four runs and applying the brakes on Gujarat's chase.

Deshpande then held his nerve to defend 10 runs in the

final over as Rajasthan Royals edged Gujarat Titans by six runs.

"Jofra used his experience, used his pace, and didn't give any room to either Rabada or Rashid Khan, who were going strong. That over set it up nicely for Tushar Deshpande, because if GT had gotten 10 runs off it, the game would have been done

then. It was a special over from Jofra."

"And credit to Tushar Deshpande, who held his nerve and bowled accurate yorkers, one after the other, to get his side home," Pathan added. Gujarat Titans, on the other hand, continue to rely heavily on their top three of Sai Sudharsan, Shubman Gill and Jos Buttler to shoulder the scoring responsibility.

Former India spinner R Ashwin noted that Sai Sudharsan stepped up in Gill's absence against RR.

Opening the innings, Sudharsan scored a 44-ball 73 to give his team a perfect platform to chase 211. However, a cluster of wickets in the middle saw them lose the game by six runs.

"Sai Sudharsan knew that Shubman wasn't playing today, so he had to do the heavy lifting himself.

Tushar's performance must attract attention: Steyn

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
■ New Delhi

South Africa fast-bowling great Dale Steyn is impressed by Tushar Deshpande's performance this IPL season, saying the Rajasthan Royals seamer's composure and execution in the final over against Gujarat Titans must attract the national selectors' attention.

Deshpande has started the 2026 IPL season strongly for the Rajasthan Royals, delivering a match-winning performance against the Gujarat Titans by defending 10 runs in the final over in Ahmedabad on Saturday.

On how Deshpande out-smarted Rashid Khan in the last over, Steyn told broadcaster Star Sports, "The final over bowled by Tushar Deshpande was exceptional. He executed his yorkers per-



fectly under pressure, did not give any chances to a player like Rashid Khan to find the boundary and he ensured his team did not suffer any hiccups in the final over of a 200-plus run chase.

"It is very difficult for a bowler to stay calm in such a high-pressure situation because a lot of things go through your mind. But, to ensure your plans are executed perfectly without

feeling the pressure is a rare skill." Steyn added, "Tushar bowled four inch-perfect yorkers, then he changed his line and delivered the length ball and by doing that, he baited Rashid Khan into hitting a big shot on that delivery and he ended up getting caught on the boundary line. Wonderful display of game sense."

"Tushar Deshpande bowled in a fearless manner

and this bowling performance will ensure that the Indian selectors don't take their eyes off him this IPL season." Bought for 6.50 crore, he has established himself as a key bowler for RR, building on his previous success as a leading wicket-taker that held him get into the Indian team in 2024 for a T20I series against Zimbabwe.

RR won the thrilling match by six runs and Steyn termed it the game of the season so far. "This match between GT and RR is easily the best game of IPL 2026. In the latter half of the season, when the playoff spots will be decided, GT will look at this match and wonder how many opportunities they had to win it. But they did not capitalize and let the match slip away. "RR are going to be really happy with this win.

Vyshak wants to consistently hit the 150kmph mark, add variations

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
■ Kolkata

Vijay Kumar Vyshak's stock is rising in the Indian Premier League and to remain relevant in a highly scrutinised environment, the Punjab Kings pacer wants to consistently hit 150 kmph mark besides adding to his variations. With five wickets in two games, Vyshak has already

been more productive than the four wickets in five games he managed last season. He began his IPL journey with RCB in 2023 before moving to Punjab Kings. The 29-year-old from Karnataka has impressed with his wide yorkers and slow bouncers this season. In the previous game against CSK in Chennai, he removed the in-form Ayush Mhatre and Sarfraz

Khan to limit the opposition at 209 for five, a total his team chased down comfortably.

Punjab Kings have been using Vyshak in all three phases of the game and the pacer is relishing the challenge. With so much video analysis around, he feels there is no other way to succeed other than by constantly improving on his craft. "I'm not as fast as people are



bowling now. People are bowling 154, 155. I'm someone who can bowl 140, 143, 144. But yeah, for me, I think I love challenges. So it doesn't matter where I bowl.

"It doesn't matter if you have to bowl three overs in the powerplay or four overs in the death overs. As long as I am contributing to the team," said Vyshak in a select media interaction ahead of

the away game against KKR here on Monday.

As someone who plays all formats, Vyshak got his maiden India call for the T20 tour of South Africa in 2024 but did not get a game. His dream is to play Test cricket but would also love to play for India in the shortest format. "When you start playing cricket, you always look to play Test matches for

the Indian team. I think that is something that still gives me chills that, when I think about wearing that Indian cap for playing a Test for my country.

But I think now the format that we're playing, yes, I want to do well in that," said Vyshak who has been inspired by his Punjab Kings teammate Arshdeep Singh 'a lot'. In the off season,

Vyshak said he worked hard with his coaches and Karnataka teammates to prepare for the IPL.

"Without working, you can't be playing in such a big, big stage. I seriously think that whatever you've been practising and whatever you've been doing the right things, I think that is what is going to reflect in your games as well.