

Ram Madhav, Smriti Irani, Biplab Deb in

BJP's new national team

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

The BJP on Monday announced its new national team under party president Nitin Nabin, appointing 13 vice presidents, including Ram Madhav, Lok Sabha MP D. Purandeshwari and former Uttarakhand Chief Minister Tirath Singh Rawat. Union Minister Piyush Goyal has been made national treasurer.

The party has retained B.L. Santhosh as National General Secretary (Organisation) and brought in former Union Minister Smriti Irani and ex-Tripura Chief Minister Biplab Kumar Deb in its team of eight national general secretaries, according to the list released by the party.

Vinod Tawde and Sunil Bansal are the only two national general secretaries that the BJP has retained in its new team.

The BJP has brought in many new faces, including Kavita Patidar, K. Surendran, Sandeep Pathak and Manoj Tigga, in its team of 16 national secretaries from different states.

Former Rajasthan Chief Minister Vasundhara Raje Scindia, Baijyant Jay Panda and Rekha Verma have been retained as vice presidents.

To ensure that every major faith in India is respected and accommodated, a place has been given to one Sikh member, two Christian members and one member



Ram Madhav



Smriti Irani



Biplab Deb

comprehensive social inclusion. "The new appointments ensure widespread representation, accommodating voices from 23 states and Union ter-

ritories across the country. Such balanced appointments empower the incoming national president's executive team to operate with a

profound awareness of the nation's vast geographical landscape and regional nuances," the BJP said in a statement.

Surendran's return puts Kerala in focus

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Thiruvananthapuram

The appointment of former Kerala BJP president K. Surendran as national secretary, along with the continuation of Anil Antony in the post, gives Kerala two representatives in the BJP's national organisation at a crucial stage for the party in the state.

Surendran's return to the national team is significant as the BJP seeks to consolidate its political gains in Kerala following the 2026 Assembly elections. Having headed the state unit from 2020 to 2025, he brings extensive experience on the party's organisational and electoral strategy in Kerala.

Antony's continuation, meanwhile, gives the state another national-level voice

and reflects the BJP's effort to combine its established organisational leadership with newer political faces.

The reshuffle also saw A.P. Abdullakkutty dropped from the national vice-presidential post, altering Kerala's representation at that level.

For the Kerala BJP, the new arrangement places the sitting state president Rajeev Chandrasekhar, former president Surendran and national secretary Antony in different but significant roles, potentially giving the state unit greater access to the party's central leadership.



Rs 1 crore drugs seized three people, including couple held

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Palakkad

A joint team of the DANSAF (District Anti-Narcotics Special Action Force) squad and police arrested three alleged drug traffickers, including a couple, near the Olavakkode bus stand in Palakkad at around 6 a.m. on Monday. The arrested persons have been identified as Muhammad Nisin of Kanjirappally, Azarudeen of Vengara, and his wife, Beefathima, a native of Mangaluru.

Police seized a large consignment of narcotics, including MDMA, hybrid cannabis, and cocaine, with the total value estimated at around Rs 1 crore. According to the police, the drugs were being brought targeting the increased demand expected during the Onam season.

The arrests followed a

three-day-long investigation into an interstate drug trafficking network. The probe received a major breakthrough when police obtained crucial information about the operation from a person who had arrived at the railway station carrying cannabis.

The information led police to a key financier, who was arrested by the DANSAF team in a luxury car in Olavakkode on Sunday night. Based on his lead, police tracked the drug consignment and arrested the three suspects the following morning.

According to the police, the drugs were sourced from Bengaluru and transported to Kerala through Coimbatore. The suspects reportedly travelled from Bengaluru to Coimbatore before continuing...

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NTA removes 50 staff exam system set for overhaul

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

The National Testing Agency (NTA) has removed more than 50 of its staff members and is onboarding professionals for key leadership positions as part of measures to reform the overall examination system, the Education Ministry said on Monday.

The development came a day after the NTA ordered a re-test for three subjects of the UGC-NET exam for scholars due to several errors in those papers, and within months of the cancellation of the NEET-UG 2026 for medical admissions over allegations of paper leak.

The Union Education Minister Pralhad Joshi held a meeting with the secretary of the Department of Higher Education, the NTA director general and other senior officials on Monday, during which he was apprised of the steps taken by the agency in the wake of recent issues for the overall reform of the exam system. "The Minister was apprised about the steps taken by the NTA..."

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Crop damage no excuse to block elephants: SC

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

Crop damage cannot be used as a justification for obstructing the natural movement of elephants, the Supreme Court said on Monday, as it directed the Centre to conduct a fresh nationwide survey of elephant corridors and submit a comprehensive report on measures needed to keep wildlife movement routes free of obstacles.

A Bench comprising Chief Justice of India Surya Kant and Justices Joymalya Bagchi and V. Mohana made it clear that states cannot erect barriers in elephant corridors merely because herds damaged crops while moving through their traditional ranges.

"We are very clear that there cannot be obstacles in the way of wildlife. Elephant

herds have a practice of travelling long distances. No state can say that just because crops are getting destroyed, there have to be obstacles in their path," CJI Kant observed.

The Bench was hearing a matter concerning obstruction of elephant corridors across several states.

The court noted that mandatory guidelines already existed to facilitate unobstructed elephant movement. However, local factors had resulted in some routes being impeded, blocked or otherwise obstructed.

It consequently directed the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change to undertake a fresh survey of elephant corridors across the country and place a comprehensive status report before the court.

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SC stays hearing in DA case against Rahul Gandhi

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

In a major relief to Rahul Gandhi, the Supreme Court on Monday asked the Allahabad High Court not to proceed with a case involving allegations of disproportionate assets against the Congress leader.

The top court also asked the CBI and the ED not to file any report in pursuance of the directions of the High Court in the case lodged against the Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha. A bench comprising Chief Justice Surya Kant and Justices Joymalya Bagchi and V. Mohana took note of the submissions of senior advocate Kapil Sibal, appearing for Gandhi, and issued notices to Karnataka resident S. Vignesh Shishir, who filed the plea in the High Court, the CBI and the ED. The bench was hearing a plea filed by Gandhi against the High Court order. It directed the High Court to defer the next hearing till the hearing in the Supreme Court. Gandhi had earlier moved the Supreme Court challenging the order of the High Court, which directed the CBI and ED to verify the allegations of disproportionate assets against him.

Rahul urges Soren to meet protesting students

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi has written to Jharkhand Chief Minister Hemant Soren, urging him to personally meet representatives of protesting students and take appropriate action towards the resolution of the issue.

Gandhi said the students' protest had been peaceful and their demands legitimate. The Congress is part of the ruling JMM-led government in Jharkhand.

In his letter to Soren dated August 14, Gandhi said that the Congress party believes

that the right to peaceful protest is enshrined in the Constitution of India and is one of the central pillars of India's democracy.

"We have, therefore, offered our full support to students protesting paper leaks and irregularities in the education system over the last few months," the Leader of the Opposition in Lok Sabha said.

The Congress leader said he appreciated that the Jharkhand government has initiated a dialogue with the students through a committee set up by the Chief Minister and that...

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Rahul wants NTA held accountable for cancelling exam

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Monday targeted the Central Government over the UGC-NET re-exam, and demanded that the National Testing Agency's leadership must be held accountable for it.

In a post on X, he alleged that "this is no longer an education system. It is an extraction machine".

"Modiji, look at what your NTA has just done. UGC-NET exams for Sociology, English and Commerce were held between 22 and 30 June. Nearly two months later, NTA has cancelled all three because it set faulty papers and repeated old questions," he said.

Gandhi said thousands of candidates who prepared

for years, filled forms, paid the fees, travelled to distant centres, must now do it all again in September.

"NTA makes the mistake but the student serves the sentence," he said.

"I said this in Kota, in Dehradun, in Prayagraj, and I will keep saying it - this is no longer an education system. It is an extraction machine. It takes your money, your years, your mental health, and your confidence and returns nothing. Not even a job," the Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha said.

The Congress leader said Dharmendra Pradhan's resignation was the first step, not the last. "NTA's leadership must be held accountable too," he demanded.

Breaking the silence on normalised abuse

SARITHA S. BALAN
■ Thiruvananthapuram

In February 2025, the deaths of 42-year-old Shiny Kuriakose and her two daughters, Aleena (11) and Evana (10) - residents of Paroliikkal near Ettumanur, Kottayam - left many sleepless for days. The trio were found dead on the railway tracks. Nine months earlier, Shiny and the children had moved into her parents' home after alleged domestic abuse at the hands of her husband, Noby Lukose. For a group of women activists, simply moving on from the news of the deaths was impossible.

Driven by a shared conscience to stay vigilant and prevent domestic violence, they came together to form a dedicated platform: the Forum Against Domestic Violence, established in September 2025.

Data collected by the Forum from reported cases reveals a grim reality: 40 women between the ages of 25 and 40 died as a result of domestic violence between 2024 and 2026.

"This does not reflect all instances of domestic violence or abuse; these are the cases reported by the media. It's



A gathering organised by the Forum on the eve of Independence Day

scary if we think about how many cases would go unreported," Mercy Alexander, the Forum Convener, told The Pioneer. The Forum also consists of K. Ajitha, a pioneer of Kerala's feminist movement, R. Parvathy Devi and Geetha Nazeer as Patrons. Suja Susan George is the co-convenor while advocate J. Sandhya provides legal guidance. The Forum has been relentlessly highlighting domestic violence when it goes unnoticed, reaching out to survivors, helping them to rehabilitate, engaging in discussions with the police to register a First Information Report (FIR), sometimes to register it properly so there are no loop-

holes. The Forum maintains consistent engagement with stakeholders and conducts regular gatherings of its members. The latest was on the eve of Independence Day with the slogan "Freedom from Violence".

If a woman dies by suicide or is killed by her husband in domestic violence, the Forum members reach out to the children. The Forum's interactive meetings have become platforms for free-wheeling conversations among survivors. "This is a place where we can open up; there is someone to listen. It offers free legal help. Its members offered me a hand when I was almost dead due to physical torture from my husband," said Jessy S., a native of Pulluvila in Thiruvananthapuram.

For Joe, NTBR is not a race, it's the rhythm of life

SABLOO THOMAS
■ Thiruvananthapuram

For Joe Joseph Thayamkary of Kuttanad, the historic cradle of snake boat races, water and the noise were never just part of life but its very rhythm. The festive atmosphere and the grandeur of the races fascinated him from childhood, and what drew him closer was the magic of live commentary. The voices of Nagavally R. S. Kurup, P. D. Luke, Ravindran Nair, and Prof. G. Balachandran on All India Radio transformed the spectacle into theatre for listeners across Kerala. "Their voices carried the pulse of the

backwaters," Joe Joseph told The Pioneer, recalling how those broadcasts shaped his early fascination.

Chance played its role in his journey. In 1985, while at his sister's house in Thiruvananthapuram, he came across Doordarshan's advertisement for commentators. He applied, cleared the test, interview, and audition, and was selected. Two years later, he made his debut with the Champakulam Moolam Boat Race coverage. His work with Doordarshan opened the doors to All India Radio,



Joe Joseph Thayamkary

where he shared the commentary box with legends like Kurup and Luke. "To sit alongside them was one of the greatest blessings of my

life," Joe Joseph said. Doordarshan's early coverage was limited to recorded and edited half-hour programmes under Kalikkalam.

But in 1992, history was made when the Nehru Trophy Boat Race was telecast live for the first time. From then until last year, Joe Joseph's voice became inseparable from the spectacle, guiding viewers through the thunder of oars and the surge of boats.

A postgraduate in journalism and communication, Joe retired as Publication Director of Kerala University. Yet his identity remains tied to Thayamkary in Kuttanad, the historic heartland of snake boat races. His journey from a degree student who passed an audition in 1985 to a commentator with four decades of experience is a

testament to passion and perseverance.

Traditionally held on the second Saturday of August, the Nehru Trophy Boat Race has in recent years been shifted to the fourth week due to floods. This year's race is scheduled for August 22, a Saturday. As the boats line up once again, the legacy of voices like Kurup, Luke, and Joe Joseph will echo across the backwaters.

"The race is not just about speed, it is about spirit, tradition, and the sound of words that carry it forward," Joe Joseph said, his words a reminder of the sport's timeless bond with Kuttanad's water and commentary.

Pinarayi calls Guv summoning SPC anti-democratic

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Thiruvananthapuram

Leader of Opposition Pinarayi Vijayan on Monday criticised the Governor for directly summoning the State Police Chief without consulting the Chief Minister or the concerned minister, calling it a blatant violation of democratic and constitutional principles.

He said the Governor has no unrestricted discretionary powers under Article 163 of the Constitution, as affirmed by the Supreme Court in the 2016 Nabam Rebia case. Any attempt to bypass the elected government and interfere directly in the administration could

create a dangerous precedent and undermine the state's federal rights.

Pinarayi alleged that the UDF Government's silence was encouraging the Governor's growing interventions in the state's affairs. He said the government's failure to resist such moves was "shameful" and amounted to surrendering the constitutional rights of an elected government.

He recalled that the previous LDF Government had firmly resisted similar interventions from Lok Bhavan and said the present government should also protect the authority and dignity of the elected government.

Vizhinjam Opens Kerala's Doors to the World

The same Arabian Sea that shaped our people for centuries, carried spice traders to distant shores, and welcomed travellers from across the globe with open arms is now opening a historic gateway for the developmental leap of a new-era Kerala. Marking Kerala's name in golden letters on the international maritime trade map, the Vizhinjam International Seaport is entering its most crucial phase. The official commencement of full-fledged overland Export-Import (Ex-Im) cargo movement from Vizhinjam will take place today. Alongside this will take place, the announcement and logo release of 'Mission Samudra', a comprehensive development scheme set to transform Kerala's coastal and port-led economic growth. Having initiated trial operations on July 12, 2024, and commercial operations on December 3, Vizhinjam Port has achieved rare milestones in a short span. Quietly and without fanfare, Vizhinjam secured its place in the global shipping network at a pace unmatched by any other port

in India. Today, Vizhinjam has established direct maritime connectivity (via regular and ad-hoc services) with over 110 major ports across 50 countries in six continents. As of July 31, 2026, 1,057 massive vessels have berthed at Vizhinjam, efficiently handling over 2.2 million containers (2.24 Mn TEUs). Equipped with state-of-the-art automation systems and an extraordinary natural draft of 20 to 24 meters, Vizhinjam effortlessly accommodates the world's largest container motherships, rivaling leading global terminals in technical capability. What does it truly mean to say Kerala has a port directly connected to 110 ports across six continents? It means there is now a direct path from Kerala to any continent in the world. Until now, that route catered primarily to external cargo; 60% of the containers we handled were transshipments from other countries. In short, we built the port, and the world used it as a transit stop, paying fees and passing through.



Chief Minister V.D. Satheesan

However, what begins today is far greater: this direct connection to 110 global ports is now opening up for Kerala's own products. Delivering goods swiftly to foreign ports without a single transhipment will cut transit time and logistics costs nearly in half. This will serve as a massive encouragement for manufacturers and exporters to establish new enterprises within Kerala. This is what transforms Vizhinjam from a mere transhipment hub into a global commercial gateway driving the comprehensive industrialisation of Kerala. To facilitate seamless Ex-Im operations, the Customs Commission-nerate has issued an official Public Notice. The temporary road connecting the port road to NH-66 is complete. To address the absence of a Container Freight Station (CFS) in Thiruvananthapuram, a dedicated customs-bonded area for Ex-Im containers has been set up right inside the port.

Our Strength: Three Pillars

To fully leverage this global opportunity, Kerala possesses three unique domestic strengths:

High Human Capital: Our greatest asset is an enlightened populace with 94 percent literacy and the highest Human Development Index in India. The high-tech expertise we foster through the Electronics and Semiconductor Mission, AI Mission, and Future Tech Mission, combined with traditional craftsmanship like Balaramapuram handloom, will empower modern exports. **Expanding Logistics Network:** NH-66, NH-544, the under-construction Outer Ring Road, National Waterway-3, and inland waterways have already taken shape. In Kerala, which accounts for nearly 11 percent of India's main coastline, an integrated transport network combining 17 minor ports along with Vizhinjam is becoming a reality. **Existing Industrial Ecosystem:** The state already boasts fully functional KINFRA parks, a high-tech manufacturing framework for semiconductors, robotics, and aerospace, and an IT policy targeting 10 per cent of Indian IT exports and 500,000 jobs.

Connecting these to Vizhinjam's proximity is all that remains. This momentum will not remain confined to boardrooms or statistical reports; it will bring development to every corner of the state. Priority is given to high-potential sectors such as food products, apparel manufacturing, Ayurveda, pharmaceuticals, electrical and electronics, rubber and plastics, and high-tech manufacturing. **Seafood Sector:** India's seafood exports have crossed \$8.4 billion and are moving toward a \$30 billion target by 2030. Kerala's value-added seafood exports stand at Rs.2,074 crore. Envisaging a modern seafood park at Vizhinjam run through fishermen's cooperative societies, aims to deliver the benefits of this unprecedented growth directly to the coastal community that made the port possible. **Statewide Momentum:** The cashew industry in the Kollam-Thiruvananthapuram belt

will receive fresh vitality; Vizhinjam will open enhanced export channels for the petrochemical sector in Kochi and agro-processing and Ayurveda in Palakkad. **Industrial Growth Targets:** Starting with approximately 45 new industrial units in the first year, the government aims to expand to over 1,500 units and increase land utilisation from 20 hectares to over 420 hectares by 2040. **Mission Samudra** The government formulated 'Mission Samudra' to extend the economic momentum of Vizhinjam Port across the entire state: **Port City and Clusters:** A 'Port City' vision integrating 8 industrial clusters, 3 new towns, and an extensive coastline into a comprehensive Maritime Economic Region. Rs.400-Crore Stimulus Fund: A Rs.400-crore stimulus fund has been allocated across 14 sub-projects under three key categories: port connectivity, logistics

development, and industrial clusters. **Integration of Minor Ports:** Along with connecting minor ports to Vizhinjam, ship repair units, Multi-Modal Logistics Parks (MMLPs), and Container Freight Stations (CFS) will be realised in a time-bound manner through Public-Private Partner-ships (PPP) and private investment. Through this mission, the state aims to attract over ten times the public investment in private capital by 2031 and spark a large-scale, sustainable employment revolution. Situated just 10 nautical miles from the East-West international shipping channel, Vizhinjam is rapidly evolving into a strategically vital commercial hub for the nation. The first Ex-Im container will be flagged off at a grand ceremony held at the port gate at 10:45 AM today. We have opened a grand door to six continents. Through that door, it must now be Kerala's own sweat, skill, and products that reach every corner of the world. Let us march together into this new era of prosperity opened up by Vizhinjam.

Flower prices: Demand, supply and everything in-between

GEETHIKA GIREENDRAN
■ Thiruvananthapuram

As Onam approaches, flower markets are filling with colour, freshness and warmth and so are headlines about rising prices. But according to wholesale traders, attributing the increase entirely to Onam demand misses the larger picture. The price of flowers is shaped by a chain of factors, from weather and labour shortages to transportation, packaging and supply risks. Karamana Ganesh of GK Flowers, a wholesale flower trader, says both excessive rain and a lack of rainfall can affect flower production and prices. The challenges continue after harvesting. Flowers transported from growing centres such as Hosur (Bangalore) and Rayakottai (Tamil Nadu) can take around 14 hours to reach Kerala. If the flowers are packed with moisture content, they may arrive safely, but there are instances where the flowers get damaged even if they are wet. According to him, suppliers generally consider the sale final once the bill is issued. This means that if flowers are damaged during transportation, the loss is often absorbed by the local wholesaler or retailer. The cost of transportation itself has also increased. He says the rise cannot be blamed solely on petrol or diesel prices. Labour short-



ages in Tamil Nadu have pushed up wages, while driver salaries and vehicle costs have increased. Toll charges along routes such as Hosur-Nagercoil are another expense that eventually reaches the trader. The packaging has also become more expensive. Flowers that were earlier transported in sacks weighing around 45 kg are now increasingly packed in smaller 5 to 10 kg crates. However, handling charges do not necessarily fall with the reduced weight, increasing the logistics cost per kilogram. The labour shortage is par-

ticularly significant. Workers in other states are demanding higher wages, and some are no longer willing to continue this profession as well. These changes in the production process can eventually affect the price paid by consumers. Current market prices also vary sharply between flower varieties. Yellow and orange flowers are selling at around Rs100 – Rs130, while white chrysanthemum, or jamanthi, is currently being supplied at around Rs 350 and is expected to cross Rs 400. Roses are also expected to become more expensive. Newer varieties, including purple- and

chocolate-coloured flowers, are attracting demand but remain limited in supply. Yet a high market price does not necessarily translate into high profits for traders. He says wholesalers may operate on margins of only Rs1 – Rs3 per kilogram, leaving them vulnerable to losses from damaged consignments or unsold stock. The Onam season itself is a financial gamble. After the traditionally sluggish Karkidakam month, traders depend on Onam sales to recover losses. The traders may borrow lakhs of rupees to finance their seasonal

business. Suppliers also increasingly demand quick payments and, during the peak season, advance payments amount to Rs 1 lakh to Rs 5 lakh to guarantee supplies. This means traders invest heavily before knowing how the market will perform. He also challenges the perception that flowers are automatically cheaper in Tamil Nadu. He claims that flowers sold for around Rs 70 in Kerala may sometimes be sold to Malayali buyers travelling to Tamil Nadu for Rs 75 – Rs 80. He also alleges that some buyers may face discrepancies in weighing. The bigger concern is the changing agricultural workforce. Children of farmers are increasingly reluctant to continue farming, adding to existing labour shortages. Onam certainly brings additional demand for flowers, but the market's prices are determined by much more than the festival. By the time a flower reaches a Kerala market, it has already passed through farmers, labourers, packers, transporters and wholesalers, each adding costs and risks. For consumers looking at a Rs 350 or Rs 400 kilogram of flowers this Onam, the price tag represents not just festival demand, but the economy of an increasingly complex supply chain.

Arjun Ayanki remanded in police custody

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Kochi

Arjun Ayanki, who was arrested in connection with cases alleging that he threatened police officers through social media, has been remanded in police custody for two days by the Kothamangalam Magistrate Court. Ayanki has been handed over to the Kothamangalam police for further investigation. He was brought to

Kothamangalam after being taken into custody from Thalassery and had earlier been remanded by the court. The police sought his custody when he was produced before the court on Monday. The case concerns allegations that Ayanki threatened and challenged former Kothamangalam SHO K.R. Prashanth Kumar and former Oonukul SHO B.S. Adarsh through social media. The

Kothamangalam case was being investigated by the Oonukul police. According to the police, Ayanki went into hiding after both the District Court and the High Court rejected his anticipatory bail pleas. He reportedly stayed for two to three days at an apartment in Kadavanthra with two friends before fleeing to Kannur via Thrissur. The two friends were subsequently arrested by the police.



As Onam draws near, the marigold fields of Gundlupet bloom into a breathtaking sea of gold. Stretching endlessly towards the horizon, these vibrant fields send their blossoms to Kerala, where they become part of the colours and fragrance of countless Onam pookalams. With harvest just around the corner, travellers flock to witness this enchanting spectacle

Rahul urges Soren to meet protesting students

there was agreement on several of their demands. However, he noted that the protests continued and some students remained on indefinite hunger strike. "I am writing to suggest that you personally meet with representatives of the protesting students. This will help reinforce the government's commitment to resolve their remaining concerns," the former Congress chief said. Led by the JPSC-JSSC Reforms Manch, the protesters are demanding a CBI probe into the alleged irregularities in recruitment exams and the cancellation of the JSSC-CGL examination. The agitators had on Saturday announced that they would gherao the Chief Minister's residence on August 20, and appealed to students from across Jharkhand to assemble in Ranchi for the demonstration. The Jharkhand government has sought to reassure the job aspirants by announcing measures aimed at making the recruitment process more transparent and secure. The government

has also launched a campaign to seek suggestions from students, teachers, educationists and parents on reforms in the examination system.

Crop damage no excuse to block elephants: SC

"We direct the Union of India, the Ministry concerned of the Union of India, to conduct a fresh survey and submit a comprehensive survey report, including the initiatives and necessary steps taken by them to prevent such obstructions," the court said. The direction assumes particular significance for Kerala, where recurring human-elephant conflict, cultivation along forest fringes and fragmentation of traditional movement routes have become major conservation and public-safety concerns, especially in Wayanad, Palakkad and Idukki. The court also sought details on the use of firearms or other coercive measures against elephants. The CJ directed that appropriate measures be taken and that the Centre inform the court about them in its status

report. The case will be heard again after six weeks.

NTA removes 50 staff

in the wake of recent issues, particularly with reference to reforming the overall system. He was apprised that more than 50 staff have been removed from the NTA," the ministry said. "Ten new professional leadership positions, including chief technology officer, chief finance officer, CISO, GM (test security) and GM (R and D and psychometrics), have been advertised and are being onboarded," the ministry said. Domain specialists are also being brought in from the private sector for cybersecurity, psychometrics, question-paper design and other specialised areas, it said. The Minister directed that strict compliance be ensured with the established exam protocols and also directed that a complete overhaul of the confidential operations (CONOPS) architecture, secluded rooms, air-gapped systems, and device deposit protocols be implemented on a war footing, the ministry said. The NTA has been directed to conduct a thorough audit of all

exam processes and submit a report on the corrective actions taken, the ministry said. The meeting followed after the NTA on Sunday night announced retest for three papers of the UGC-NET June 2026 – English, Commerce and Sociology – following complaints about several errors in those papers. The English and Commerce papers will be held on September 9, while the exam for Sociology will be conducted on September 10. The NTA conducted the UGC-NET June 2026 from June 22 to 30 across 87 subjects for the award of junior research fellowship, eligibility for assistant professors, and admission to PhD programmes.

Rs 1 crore drugs seized

their journey to Palakkad in a taxi. The vehicle had been rented in Tamil Nadu, and police said the suspects misled the taxi driver while using the vehicle to transport the drugs. Police are continuing their investigation to identify other people involved in the operation and trace the full extent of the network.

"Resolving Differences Within the Congress Party Is My Responsibility"

Nagar Kurnool MP
Dr. Mallu Ravi

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Hyderabad

"Our fight against corruption by Union Ministers will continue. Under the leadership of Rahul Gandhi, we will continue our protests for the rights of the 140 crore people of the country. We will not rest until we defeat the BJP and make Rahul Gandhi the Prime Minister," said Nagar Kurnool MP and Chairman of the Congress Disciplinary Committee, Dr. Mallu Ravi. He said that resolving differences within the Congress Party is the responsibility of the Disciplinary Committee. Whenever differences arise, the problems of both sides should be heard patiently. An appropriate solution should be found and efforts should be made to resolve the issue completely. "Differences within a political party are natural. But suspending everyone cannot be considered the responsibility



ty of the Disciplinary Committee. A true leader should identify and correct the mistakes that have happened or are happening, while bringing everyone together. At the same time, party leaders and workers should be guided in a disciplined manner. Only then can we do justice to the positions we hold," he said. He stated that people-oriented governance is currently being carried out in the state. Under the leadership of Chief Minister Revanth Reddy, the government is working to provide several welfare schemes to the people. The party and the government are introducing several reforms so that the

Congress Party can return to power in the coming elections. MPs and MLAs are also participating in these efforts. "BJP rule is prevailing in the country. The Centre is trying to benefit itself through corruption and leaks. The people will teach the BJP a lesson in the coming elections. All of us, as MPs, will continue fighting until the Congress wins and Rahul Gandhi becomes Prime Minister," Mallu Ravi said. The Nagar Kurnool MP and Chairman of the Disciplinary Committee spoke to The Pioneer about national politics, differences within the Telangana Congress Party and political developments in Nagar Kurnool. The following are his views: **QUESTION:** Did the INDIA alliance support the dharna organised by Gen Z in Delhi? **ANSWER:** Union Ministers in the BJP government at the Centre are facing several allegations of corruption. The BJP, which has come to power three times, made several promises to the people but failed to imple-

ment them. The BJP, which is at the top when it comes to corruption, is also continuing the same trend with regard to leaks. The protests organised by Gen Z against corruption by Union Ministers have shocked the people of the country. The people are appreciating the support extended by Congress leader Rahul Gandhi and the members of the INDIA alliance to the genuine demands of Gen Z students. During the recent Parliament session, when lakhs of Gen Z students staged a peaceful protest at Jantar Mantar, following Gandhian principles and within the framework of the Constitution, demanding the resignation of Union Minister Dharmendra Pradhan over the NEET paper leak, the BJP government at the Centre allegedly resorted to lathi-charge and firing against the protesting students, leaving several students hospitalised. Taking responsibility for the incident, all the MPs of the INDIA alliance protested in Parliament.

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CM announces 'Land Reforms 2.0'

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Kochi

Chief Minister V.D. Satheesan announced key agricultural policies aimed at supporting farmers affected by climate change and natural disasters, marking the state-level Farmers' Day (Karshaka Dinam) celebrations at Kalamassery here on Monday.

Describing farmers as the backbone of the state, the CM outlined three major policy initiatives designed to modernise and protect the state's agricultural sector. The government will amend outdated land laws to address modern challenges and facilitate the revival of long-closed plantations.

Eco-friendly tourism will be promoted in plantation regions, alongside encourag-



Chief minister V D Satheesan inaugurating the State Farmers' Day celebration in Kochi on Monday . Cheruvayal Raman , Ministers Roji M. John , V. E. Abdul Gafoor , T Siddique and MLAs Anwar Sadath, Muhammad Shiyas and T. J. Vinod are also seen.

ing multi-crop farming for high-value produce such as avocado and rambutan. To help farmers secure better

prices, value-added agricultural products will be packaged and marketed nationally and globally under a unified 'Kerala Brand'.

The government plans to leverage the full-scale operations of the Vizhinjam International Seaport for faster, cost-effective exports of farm produce and spices. An integrated system powered by Artificial Intelligence (AI) will be deployed in hilly and forest-border regions to protect farmers and crops from wild animal attacks. He also announced plans to expand warehouse networks so farmers can store their yields and sell when market prices are favourable.

The CM said that all long-pending arrears due to paddy farmers were cleared within two months of the UDF

Government taking office, ensuring timely disbursements for agricultural produce. Necessary funds were sanctioned despite ongoing state financial constraints. To prevent future delays, the government is establishing a permanent mechanism to guarantee immediate, reliable payouts for all future paddy procurements.

The CM presented the state farmers' awards and felicitated Padma Shri Cheruvayal Raman, recipient of the maiden Oommen Chandy Memorial Lifetime Contribution Award- honouring his decades of dedicated work in preserving Kerala's native seed varieties and traditional agricultural heritage.

Minister for Agriculture T. Siddique was also present.

'Rs 10 L for Adimali landslide victims before Onam'

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Idukki

Revenue Minister A.P. Anil Kumar has said that the families affected by the Adimali landslide will receive the Rs 10 lakh compensation announced by the government before Onam.

Addressing a Revenue Department review meeting at the Idukki Collectorate on Monday, the Minister instructed officials to prevent administrative lapses and ensure that people do not face unnecessary difficulties.

He said the government was working to address Idukki's complex land-related issues, which require solutions different from those in other parts of Kerala. Several land laws dating back more than 60 years would be reviewed and amended to meet current needs, he said.

An expert committee will be formed to recommend necessary changes as part of the government's proposed second phase of land reforms. The Minister also said barriers preventing eligible people from obtaining land titles would be removed, while strict action would be taken against encroachment on government land.

Minister promises to restore Kollam's water transport glory

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Kollam

Minister for Labour, Women and Child Development Bindu Krishna, launched a new passenger vessel for the district on Monday. The minister inaugurated the boat service by flagging off the catamaran at a function held at the Kollam Boat Jetty.

Speaking on the occasion, the Minister said that prompt measures will be taken to restore the district's water transport network. Emphasising that



Minister Bindu Krishna flags off the passenger vessel from Kollam Boat Jetty on Monday.

Kollam once held a renowned legacy in inland navigation, she affirmed that the government aims to

bring back the past glory of the sector. The newly inducted catamaran vessel, sanctioned by the State Water Transport Department, will operate on the Kollam-Sambrankodi route. The Minister further noted that the government will implement time-bound projects for the protection of Ashtamudi Lake and the promotion of regional tourism, with a primary focus on community-driven development. The event was presided over by Mayor A.K. Hafeez. Kollam MP N.K. Premachandran was the Chief Guest. Ward Councillor Kuruvilla Joseph and government officials were present.

Suresh Gopi releases 'Peeli', album by differently-abled artist Shreyas

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Thrissur

Union Minister Suresh Gopi on Monday released Peeli, a devotional music album featuring young Thrissur-based artist Shreyas Kiran, who has carved a niche for himself in music and the arts while overcoming the challenges associated with autism.

A native of Punnunnam in Thrissur, Shreyas has been active in music, acting, painting and other creative fields from a young age. He has received national and state-



level recognition for his achievements in music and painting, including awards in 2025. A vocational student at the Autism Centre, Peringavu, Shreyas is pursuing training in Hindustani music at Manav Sangeetha Vidyalaya and Carnatic music at Chetana Sangeetha Natya Academy.

He has also gained attention through his musical albums and acting performances.

Shreyas has built a following by sharing his artistic works through social media and his YouTube channel, Shreyas Kiran's Spectrum. In Peeli, he has both lent his voice and acted in the devotional album.

The lyrics and music for the album are by P. Madhusoodanan Panjal, who has composed music for several songs sung by noted playback singers including Madhu Balakrishnan and Ravishanker.

Son hacks mother to death in unprovoked attack

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Thrissur

A 71-year-old woman, Dolly, was hacked to death by her son at their home in Pavaratty on Monday, in an attack police say appears unprovoked. According to police, Dolly, a resident of the

Takaran (Kozhipparambil) house in Vengara, Pavaratty, was tending to her garden around 10:30 am when her son, Benhar (46), approached her from behind and slit her throat with a small knife. He then went back into the house, retrieved a machete, and struck her repeatedly on the head.

A neighbour, Arakkal Davis, who was working nearby, rushed to intervene and was injured on the hand

when Benhar turned the weapon on him. Dolly was first taken to a private hospital in Pavaratty before being shifted to the Government Medical College Hospital, Thrissur, where she was pronounced dead around 11:30 am.

Pavaratty police arrested Benhar at the scene and registered a murder case, along with charges over the assault on Davis. Officers said preliminary investigation has found no apparent motive or dispute behind the attack, and have pointed to the accused's history of mental illness as a factor.

He is expected to undergo a court-ordered psychiatric evaluation before being remanded. "An FIR has been registered and investigations are ongoing," police told The Pioneer.

Ganesh playing with fire, says NSS Cherthala Union

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Alappuzha

The Nair Service Society (NSS) Cherthala Taluk Union has passed a resolution strongly criticising former MLA K.B. Ganesh Kumar. Taluk Union Secretary Jayachandran moved the resolution during the union's annual meeting held on Monday.

The resolution stated that Ganesh Kumar is playing with fire and warned that he would face severe backlash if he does not cease making unsubstantiated statements

against NSS General Secretary G. Sukumaran Nair.

The resolution pointed out that Ganesh Kumar had attained all his positions and honours through the NSS, but ultimately lost his position due to his own actions. It also accused him of having turned into an ally of divisive elements.

K.B. Ganesh Kumar is the Chairman of Kerala Congress (B), an ally of the Left Democratic Front. He was the transport minister in the second Pinarayi Vijayan government.



T Siddhique lifting Adithyan, a sixth-grade student at Areeparamba School, Cherthala who won the award for the best child farmer in the state at Kochi

Fire breaks out at hotel

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Ernakulam

A fire broke out at Grand Malabar Hotel in Athani, Nedumbassery, on Monday morning while customers were inside having food, triggering panic. Customers and employees immediately rushed out of the hotel averting a major disaster. No casualties were reported.

ed. Fire and Rescue Services units from Aluva and Angamaly reached the spot and brought the fire under control. Preliminary information suggests that the fire may have originated at a tea shop located in front of the hotel before spreading to the Grand Malabar premises. The exact cause of the fire remains unclear.

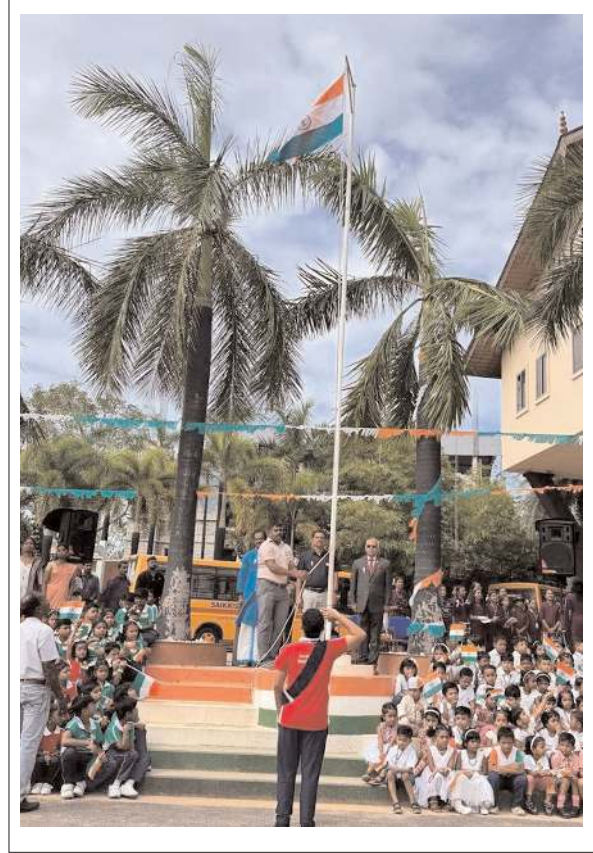
Sai Krishna Public School celebrates 80th Independence Day

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Thiruvananthapuram

Sai Krishna Public School in Chenkal celebrated India's 80th Independence Day with a series of programmes held on the school campus on August 15.

The celebrations began at 9 a.m. in the school courtyard with Retired Air Marshal I.P. Vipin inaugurating the event by hoisting the national flag. In his keynote address, he highlighted the significance of India as a sovereign nation and spoke about the responsibilities and duties of the younger generation in shaping the country's future. Academic Director Radhakrishnan delivered the Independence Day message, followed by greetings from School Manager Mohankumar.

The celebrations featured various performances, including an Independence Day parade, aerobics, patriotic songs, fancy dress, dance performances, and a pyramid formation.



FRAMES OF JOY



Students taking a selfie during the Onam celebration event organised under the leadership of SFI unit, University College Thiruvananthapuram - Prathyash Vipanchika

Man found dead and tied up, police suspect robbery

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Kochi

A 67-year-old man was found dead and tied up inside a rented house in Karuvatta under suspicious circumstances, with police suspecting the case could be linked to a robbery attempt.

The deceased has been identified as Sivan Kutty, a native of Karuvatta, who had been living alone in the rented house for the past few days. His wife was away at a hospital at the time,

attending to their daughter's delivery. According to police, Sivan Kutty's hands and legs were found tied when the body was discovered inside the house. Police also found chilli powder scattered at several spots in the house, including near the door.

Police said preliminary investigation has found out that six sovereigns of gold jewellery were missing from the house, suggesting that robbery may have been the motive. Officers have not

yet confirmed whether the crime took place at night or in the early morning hours.

Haripad police, who are investigating the case, said the fact that the victim was alone in the house at the time may indicate the involvement of someone familiar with his routine or the household. "Investigations are ongoing. Our primary assumption at this stage is that this was a robbery attempt," a police official told The Pioneer.

Milma announces Rs 3.66 cr incentive for dairy farmers

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Thiruvananthapuram

Milma's Thiruvananthapuram Regional Co-operative Milk Producers' Union (TRCMPU) has disbursed Rs 3.66 crore as an Onam incentive to dairy farmers and milk cooperative societies across four districts. Farmers affiliated with

milk societies under TRCMPU in Thiruvananthapuram, Kollam, Pathanamthitta, and Alappuzha have benefited from the initiative.

As part of the incentive, milk societies received an additional Rs 5 per liter of milk procured in July 2026. Of this, Rs 3 per liter was allocated

to farmers, Rs 1 to the respective milk societies, and Rs 1 was deposited as an additional share contribution of the societies, said TRCMPU Administrator Sinila Unnikrishnan.

The incentive amount was disbursed to the societies along with the first milk bill for August 2026.

Rape accused threatens survivor's family, arrested

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Malappuram

The Tirurangadi police arrested Abdul Azeem, a native of Tirur booked in several previous cases, on Monday for issuing death threats to a sexual assault survivor and her family in Munniyur, days after the survivor accused him of assault and extortion. According to the survivor's family, Azeem warned that he "would not spare them if he found them in the dark, even if they cried and begged for mercy." The family also alleged he sent the survivor direct messages threatening to kill her.

The survivor had earlier accused Azeem of sexually assaulting her and recording the act on his mobile phone. She alleged that he then used the footage to extort seven sovereigns of gold jewellery from her by threatening to make the visuals public. A family friend told reporters that Azeem, after learning the family had gone to the police, threatened to "wipe out the family" once he was released.

The family further alleged that Azeem boasted the assault was part of a larger, organised network, and that being an accused under the Kerala Anti-Social Activities (Prevention) Act (KAAPA), "such matters were not a big issue for him." He reportedly also warned them that "the world won't end in one day," which the family took as a threat of long-term retaliation.

The survivor's father alleged that police were initially reluctant to register a case when the assault and extortion were first reported, and that action was taken only after the death threats escalated and alarmed the local community.

Ramesh says govt. insulted country by omitting Vande Mataram

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Thiruvananthapuram

BJP state general secretary M.T. Ramesh has accused the state government of insulting the country by not including Vande Mataram in the official Independence Day celebrations. Ramesh questioned why Kerala, under a Congress-led government, did not include Vande Mataram in its official programme when Congress-led governments in Himachal Pradesh, Telangana and Karnataka had included the song in their Independence Day celebrations.

"Chief Minister V.D. Satheesan should explain why Kerala alone stayed away from it. Has the Congress abandoned even its national posi-

tion under pressure from the Muslim League and others?" Ramesh asked. Ramesh further alleged that the Muslim League had earlier raised demands related to the state's administrative structure and was now taking a position against Vande Mataram. He accused Satheesan of helping the League push the country towards another phase of "divisive politics". He said the approach would cause concern across the country and alleged that the government's decision had brought "disgrace" to Malayalis.

The BJP leader's remarks came amid a wider political controversy over the inclusion of Vande Mataram in official Independence Day programmes.

12-year-old's body recovered from lake after two-day search

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Kollam

The body of a 12-year-old boy who went missing over the weekend was recovered on Monday morning from under the Kothumukku bridge in Kannetti Lake. The deceased has been identified as Muhammed Bilal, a Class 7 student at Patanayar kulangara South Government Welfare UP School, and son of Noushad and Shemima.

According to police, Bilal left his home 'Noushad Manzil' in Padanayar-kulangara South on Saturday afternoon telling his family that he was going to play football with friends. CCTV footage from the Karunagapally Municipality's camera network later showed him cycling alone toward the waterfront, indicating he may have gone to the lake to bathe or swim after leaving home.



Muhammed Bilal

When he failed to return by Saturday night, his family and local residents launched a search, during which his bicycle, football jersey and slippers were found abandoned near the boat race pavilion at the Kannetti backwaters. The discovery prompted a full-scale water rescue operation involving the Karunagapally Fire and Rescue Services, a scuba diving team from Kollam, the NDRF, and local volunteers.

The search continued through Sunday night before the Fire Force's scuba team recovered Bilal's body from under the Kothumukku bridge on Monday morning. Police have shifted the body to the hospital morgue for an inquest and post-mortem examination. Preliminary findings point to accidental drowning, though officers said a formal investigation is under way to rule out foul play.

Default on EMI can partially block your mobile

NADEESH KAREEMADATHIL
■ Thiruvananthapuram

As state enters one of its biggest festive shopping seasons, consumers rushing to buy smartphones, laptops and other gadgets on EMI have a new reason to read the loan agreement carefully: from January 1, 2027, banks financing a device will be permitted, under specified conditions, to use technology to restrict certain functions if the borrower defaults.

The festive financing push is already visible in the market, with retailers and financial institutions promoting EMI options for smartphones and other gadgets. Some retailers offer financing tenures extending up to 60 months.

But the Reserve Bank of India's new framework puts



important conditions behind that convenience.

A bank cannot simply lock a consumer's phone because of a loan default. The mechanism applies when the particular device was financed through the loan, and the loan agreement clearly discloses the possibility of restricting the device, the recovery process and the stages at which restrictions may be imposed.

The restrictions also cannot be imposed immediately

after a missed EMI. Under the framework, no restriction can be activated until the account becomes 30 days past due. Restrictions must then be introduced gradually, while complete restrictions are permitted only after the loan remains unpaid for 60 days. Outgoing calls cannot be blocked before that point.

"So, consumers should calculate the total cost of an EMI purchase, rather than looking only at the monthly instalment", said Sajeesh Menon, a financial expert from Kochi.

The distinction is significant. A festive advertisement may highlight an EMI of ₹2,000 or ₹3,000 a month, but buyers should also examine the loan tenure, processing charges, interest, insurance and the consequences of default.

The RBI framework also places strict limits on the data that can be accessed through such technology. Banks and third-party technology providers are prohibited from accessing personal data stored on the borrower's device, including contacts, photographs, messages, call logs and location history.

"Consumers should understand how device-locking technology works and what permissions and controls they are agreeing to when buying a device on EMI", said Deepti Ari, a technology professional from Bengaluru.

The framework also protects essential functions. Banks cannot disable incoming calls, SMS services or emergency SOS functions, and not interfere with activities necessary for the borrower's work or employment.

Borrowers must also be able to view the status of restrictions placed on their device.

There is also a time-bound protection for consumers who clear their dues. Once overdue amounts are paid, the bank must restore functionality within one hour. If restoration is delayed because of the bank, compensation of ₹250 per hour is payable until access is restored, subject to a ceiling equal to the loan amount.

The framework comes into force on January 1, 2027, and forms part of a broader RBI effort to regulate loan recovery practices, including the conduct of outsourced recovery agents.

For consumers, however, the most important protection begins before the purchase: knowing exactly what they are agreeing to.



Police arrest and remove activists, including SFI All India President Adarsh M. Saji, as they block the road during the Kollam District Committee march to Chinnakada Head Post Office in Kollam on Monday protesting against the anti student policies of the central government.

KSFE's 'inflated' salary hike may be cut back

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Thiruvananthapuram

A dispute has erupted in the Kerala State Financial Enterprises (KSFE) over the calculation of revised salaries, with allegations that excess payments were made to employees in violation of government orders.

Traditionally, KSFE had calculated fitment benefits after merging dearness allowance (DA) with the basic pay. However, the government order issued on March 15, 2026 — implementing the August 2022 salary revision — directed that the new basic pay should be fixed by adding the existing basic pay, 31 percent DA, and 10 percent fitment benefit. Contrary to this, KSFE distributed salaries from March onwards by merging DA with the old basic pay and then calculating



ing 10% fitment, leading to inflated payouts.

The Finance Department later clarified that the March 15 order had not been followed correctly, and a fresh directive was issued. With its implementation, employees will see reductions ranging from Rs 1,230 to Rs 7,200 in their revised salaries.

With the LDF Government replaced by a new UDF-led administration after the

elections, the government has decided to probe irregularities in the KSFE salary revision.

The Financial Enterprises Employees Association (FEEA), aligned with the Congress, has accused the management of deliberately disbursing excess salaries before the Assembly elections to woo employees. The association claims it had already written to the management on March 23, 2026, warning against irregular payments. It has now demanded a vigilance probe, alleging that the move amounted to an attempt to influence votes.

The association further argued that if recovery of excess salary is attempted, the management alone must bear responsibility, since the payments were made without clarity in the government order.

Be careful, with second-hand phones

A second-hand smartphone may look like a festive bargain, but buyers hunting for deals this Onam could be walking into an unexpected trap: the phone may still be tied to someone else's financing agreement and could later be remotely restricted if the original borrower defaults. The risk is not merely theoretical. Samsung's Knox Guard, for instance, is a cloud-based system designed for device financing that allows authorised financial institutions and carriers to remotely control or lock Samsung devices. Samsung says its system can also detect unauthorised SIM changes and apply restrictions. For buyers in the booming festive second-hand market, the warning is simple: check the phone's financing history before paying for it.

"A second-hand buyer should treat the financial clearance of a device as seriously as its physical condition. A clean screen and a working camera do not establish that there is no financial claim attached to the handset," said Anita Rani B., a financial expert from Kozhikode. The first question a buyer should ask is whether the phone was originally purchased through EMI or another device-financing arrangement. If so, the seller should be asked to produce proof that the loan has been fully settled.

This is particularly important because some device-financing systems are designed specifically to prevent resale of financed handsets. Samsung's documentation says Knox Guard can remotely control devices during instalment plans

and includes features intended to discourage unauthorised resale. "Technology has made it possible for financing companies to maintain control over a device even after it has physically changed hands. A second-hand buyer therefore needs to verify the device's management status, not just reset the phone and create a new account," said Deepti Ari, a technology professional from Bengaluru. A factory reset should not be considered proof that a phone is free from financing restrictions. Samsung says Knox Guard's financing domain uses security mechanisms designed to protect enrolled devices, while its current documentation allows authorised organisations to lock or restrict devices remotely.

Buyers should therefore

inspect the phone's settings for Device Management, Device Administrator or Work Profile configurations. The exact terminology varies by manufacturer and Android version. An unfamiliar corporate or finance-related management profile should be investigated before purchase. However, the presence of device management does not automatically mean that the phone has an outstanding EMI. Enterprise-management systems can have legitimate uses. The phone's 15-digit IMEI can be obtained by dialling *#06#. Samsung's Knox Guard documentation confirms that enrolled devices can be managed using identifiers including IMEI and serial numbers. But consumers should not assume that every online IMEI-checking website

can reveal whether a handset has an outstanding loan. There is no universal public database that establishes the financing status of every second-hand phone. The safest evidence remains a loan-closure document or confirmation from the original financing institution or authorised retailer. The risk could become more relevant as India's device-financing market expands. The RBI's new framework, coming into force on January 1, 2027, allows banks financing a specific device to use technology to restrict its functions after prescribed stages of default, subject to safeguards.

For consumers, the lesson this Onam is straightforward: before buying a used phone, check not only whether it works, but whether someone else's EMI still has a claim on it.

HC says govt 'inconsistent' over inaction against DySP

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Kochi

The Kerala High Court on Monday sharply criticised the state government over alleged lapses in the arrest of Dr Ram, an accused in the case linked to the death of Nithin Raj, and questioned why DySP Sudheer Kallan, the investigating officer in the case, had not been suspended despite evident shortcomings in the probe.

The court said Kallan's continued service reflected a failure on the part of the Home Department to act on the lapses in the investigation, and expressed strong displeasure at the government's stance of citing procedural rules to justify inaction against the officer. Pointing to the state's track

record in other cases, the court noted that the government had acted swiftly to suspend officials elsewhere but had remained inactive in this instance. It recalled how a teacher who set a question paper on Savarkar and an official who issued a letter at the Thiruvananthapuram Corporation were both suspended without delay.

The court also referred to the promotion of an ADGP to DGP despite a pending vigilance complaint, followed by the immediate suspension of Ajith Kumar in a separate matter. Calling out the inconsistency in the government's approach, the court warned that it may be compelled to order a departmental inquiry into the handling of the case if the lapses are not addressed.

Chintha's road to DYFI presidency not smooth

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Thiruvananthapuram

With the DYFI state conference scheduled to begin on Wednesday, discussions over a change in the organisation's leadership have gained momentum. With the age limit of 38 years being strictly enforced for state-level leadership positions, the incumbent leadership is expected to make way for a new team.

The CPI(M) leadership is reportedly keen on bringing state committee member Chintha Jerome to the post of DYFI state president. CPI(M) state secretary M.V. Govindan and some members of the state secretariat are understood to be backing her candidature. However, a sizable section within both the party and DYFI is opposed to Chintha taking over as state president. Her critics point to the controversies surrounding her in recent years and argue that her track record could prove a liability for the organisation. Some leaders are of the view that she lacks the organisational capacity to lead DYFI from the front and that her elevation could further weaken the organisation.

There is also a view within the organisation that the

current generation of top leaders, including Chintha, lacks the political and communication skills required to engage effectively with the younger generation in a changing social and political environment.

If the CPI(M) leadership insists on having a woman as state president, former Thiruvananthapuram Mayor Arya Rajendran is reportedly another option being considered. However, she is said to have limited support within the party. The absence of another strong female contender could consequently work in Chintha's favour.

If the leadership decides against appointing a woman, P.M. Arsho is among those being considered for the president's post. For the state secretary's post, the leadership is reportedly considering M. Vijin, MLA from Kalliasseri. His performance as an MLA is seen as a factor strengthening his candidature. However, no final decision has been taken. The leadership question is expected to be settled through discussions in the party faction meeting, in which state committee members and other concerned leaders will participate, ahead of the state conference.

Thousands throng Sabarimala as new Malayalam year begins

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Sabarimala

Thousands of devotees thronged Sabarimala on the first day of the Malayalam month of Chingam, seeking the blessings of Lord Ayyappa as the temple opened for darshan at 5 am on Monday. The Sannidhanam witnessed heavy footfall from the early hours, with devotees arriving



for darshan from all over south India.

Following the Usha Puja, a draw was held to select the Sabarimala Ullkashakam for

the 2026-27 period. B. Ganesh Prasad, santhi of Kavallurkonam Devaswom under the Ullloor group of the Travancore Devaswom Board, was selected for the post. The draw was held in the presence of Devaswom Commissioner B. Sunilkumar, Sabarimala Special Commissioner J. Jayakrishnan and Sabarimala Executive Officer P.S. Santhakumar.

She Fest held, Ghosh attends despite 'no' by varsity

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Kannur

The Students' Federation of India (SFI) held a 'She Fest' at Kannur University's Palayad campus on Monday despite the university denying permission for the programme featuring SFI All India Joint Secretary Aishe Ghosh.

The university had refused permission to use the campus seminar hall, citing the absence of prior approval from the Vice-Chancellor or Registrar. The campus director had also

directed the student organisers to remove the banners, flags and decorations put up for the event.

Defying the university's directive, the SFI-led campus union went ahead with the programme at the seminar hall, with Aishe Ghosh attending as the chief guest and addressing the gathering.

While speaking at the programme, Aishe Ghosh said that the Vice-Chancellor's decision to ban the programme was not surprising. She said those in power have always had a problem

with people who speak the truth and do not want students to engage in critical thinking on campus. However, she said the students had directly demonstrated that they were not ready to bow down.

Speaking to the media outside the venue, Aishe said, "This is not Nagpur. This is a campus. A campus is a place for students to discuss and debate ideas. If the Vice-Chancellor has a problem with us, we invite him to come and debate with us. I would be happy to debate with him."

SFI alleged that the programme was denied permission because of Ghosh's participation and accused the university administration of attempting to interfere with student activities. The university, however, maintained that programmes held on its premises require prior permission and said the organisers had not obtained the necessary approval. The incident has triggered a fresh confrontation between the university administration and the SFI-led student union on the Palayad campus.

Uniforms not must for school Onam celebrations

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Thiruvananthapuram

Schoolchildren across the state will celebrate Onam in colourful attire this year, as General Education Minister N. Samsudheen has announced that uniforms will not be compulsory for the festivities scheduled on August 21. Students have been given the freedom to wear clothes of their choice, ensuring that the spirit of the festival is reflected in their celebrations.

In a Facebook post, the Minister stated: "Make Onam Colourful children. The Director of General Education has been tasked with issuing a directive to schools in the state to allow children to wear non-uniform clothes on August

21, the day of this year's Onam celebrations."

The directive aims to make the celebrations more vibrant and inclusive, allowing children to enjoy the occasion without restrictions.

The decision also comes with a relief for Class 8 students. The examination scheduled for August 21 has been postponed, following strong demands to reschedule it in view of the festival. Authorities clarified that the exam will now be held after the Onam vacation. Schools across the state will celebrate Onam on August 21 and then close for the holidays, making it impractical to conduct examinations on the same day.

The postponement ensures that students can

The decision also comes with a relief for Class 8 students. The examination scheduled for August 21 has been postponed.

participate wholeheartedly in the festivities without the burden of academic pressure. With schools closing for the Onam vacation immediately after the celebrations, the move has been widely welcomed by parents, teachers, and students alike. The minister's announcement has set the stage for a joyous and colourful Onam in schools this year.

Wild elephant destroys car; father, son injured

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Pathanamthitta

A wild elephant attacked a car with father and son in it along the Vadasserikara - Kumbalamthanam route in Pathanamthitta on Monday morning, leaving both injured and severely damaging the vehicle.

The victims were identified as John M. George and Lijin John, a cancer patient. They were returning from hospital after treatment when the elephant attacked their car. The animal reportedly attacked the vehicle repeatedly, causing extensive damage and leaving both occupants with severe injuries. They were rushed to Ayyappa Medical College Hospital, Vadasserikara, where they are currently undergoing treatment.

The Vadasserikara-Kumbalamthanam road extends towards Malayalapuzha and Konni and



is also connected to the Sabarimala route. Georgekutty Vazhapillathu, a former ward member in the area, said frequent wild elephant movement has been a concern for residents for several years here. According to him, around 30 elephants pass through the region, with some entering Vadasserikara town. He recalled that an elephant had attacked a man in the same area last year, with the victim narrowly escaping.

"Residents have been raising the issue for a long time, but no effective action has been taken," Georgekutty told The Pioneer. He said constructing

a trench along the roadside could help prevent elephants from crossing into the road.

However, he said that solar power panels installed along the stretch had made it difficult to construct such a trench. While residents were against the installation of solar panels, it was made by the funds approved by NABARD (National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development). These panels also reportedly suffer damage when elephants push down trees in the area. Residents are demanding immediate measures to prevent further human-wildlife conflicts along the route.

■ States Focus ■



CID RAIDS JHARKHAND STAFF SELECTION COMMISSION OFFICE

The Criminal Investigation Department (CID) on Monday began conducting raids at the Jharkhand Staff Selection Commission office in connection with its probe into alleged irregularities in recruitment exams, an officer said. Job aspirants have been protesting for 24 days now against the alleged anomalies in various recruitment tests in Jharkhand. “We are conducting raids at the JSSC office in connection with alleged irregularities in various examinations,” CID ADG Manoj Kaushik said. The protesting students have been demanding cancellation of the JSSC-CGL exam conducted in September 2024, claiming that “out of 135 questions, 120 were leaked”. (PTI)



BENGAL CM LAYS STONE FOR ₹4,000-CRORE STEEL PROJECT

West Bengal Chief Minister Suvenud Adhikari on Monday laid the foundation stone for Amit Metaliks Ltd's ₹4,000 crore greenfield integrated steel manufacturing project at Raghunathpur in Purulia district. The project, which is expected to generate over 5,000 jobs, will expand the company's manufacturing capabilities and feature integrated steelmaking operations supported by advanced manufacturing technologies and sustainable infrastructure. The proposed facility is expected to create significant employment opportunities in the region, the company said. Amit Metaliks is the flagship company of Amit Alliance, a group with about ₹2,000 crore in revenue and interests spanning steel, mining and infrastructure sectors. (PTI)

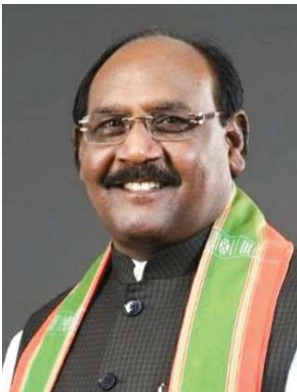
MP gets 8 leaders in BJP’s new national team

GIRISH SHARMA
■ Bhopal

Madhya Pradesh has secured a strong representation in the BJP's new national organisational team, with eight leaders from the State being assigned important responsibilities across the party's national structure. The appointments cover key areas including organisation, social outreach, farmers' affairs and media, underlining the importance being given to the State in the BJP's national setup.

Lal Singh Arya has been appointed national vice-president of the BJP. A senior Dalit leader, Arya has previously served as an MLA from Gohad and as a minister in the Madhya Pradesh Government. He has also served as national president of the BJP Scheduled Caste Morcha.

Khargone MP Gajendra Singh Patel has been appointed national general secretary. Patel, 51, is serving his second consecutive term as a Lok Sabha member. He has held several organisational positions, including responsibilities in the BJP Scheduled



Lal Singh Arya, Gajendra Singh Patel

Tribe Morcha at both state and national levels.

Rajya Sabha member Kavita Patidar has been appointed national secretary. Patidar, 52, has previously served as president of the Indore district panchayat and as a BJP state general secretary. Her appointment adds representation from the OBC community to the party's national organisational structure.

Khajuraho MP Vishnu Dutt Sharma has been appointed national coordinator of the cells cluster. Sharma served as Madhya Pradesh BJP president from February 2020 to

9 killed in hotel blaze in West Bengal’s Tarapith

SAUGAR SENGUPTA
■ Kolkata

At least 9 people were charred to death, and some others sustained burn injuries when a massive fire broke out in a four-storey hotel at Tara Peeth, a famous pilgrim centre dedicated to Goddess Tara (another form of Mother Kali), in Birbhum district, police said.

The victims, mostly pilgrims, choked to death before they were literally singed helplessly as they could not come out of the hotel as the doors were locked, police said, adding the fire might have broken out from a short circuit. The incident occurred in the small hours of Monday.

Out of the nine dead, five are from Meghalaya and



Rescue personnel carry out operations after a fire broke out at a private hotel in Tarapith, West Bengal on Monday PTI

Union minister Rijiju slams Congress over Chidambaram’s *dimagi* Naxal remark

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

Union minister Kiren Rijiju on Monday fired a fresh salvo at the Congress over its MP P Chidambaram's swipe at Prime Minister Narendra Modi for his “*Dimagi* Naxal” remark, saying the party must apologise to the family of ex-Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, who had said the Maoist problem was the single biggest internal security challenge ever faced by India.

On Sunday, Rijiju had reacted to Chidambaram's “I am proud to be a *Dimagi* Naxal” comment, which followed after Modi, in his Independence Day speech, said “we have succeeded in getting rid of armed Naxals, but ‘Dimagi Naxals’ (intellectual Naxals) are looking for opportunities to create violence, unrest...”

Speaking from the ramparts of the Red Fort, Modi said the country had succeeded in removing armed Naxalism from the forests but warned that its ideological supporters were seeking opportunities to promote violence and anarchy.



Chidambaram had also said that the term ‘*Dimagi* Naxals’ was the new variant of the old BJP accusations of “Urban Naxals”, “*Andolanjeevi*” and “*Tukde Tukde* gang”.

“Who were the Urban Naxals? Who were the *Andolanjeevis*? Who were the ‘*Tukde Tukde*’ gang? The old abuses were directed against the members of the Opposition. *Dimagi* Naxals is a new variant of those abuses,” Chidambaram said. Rijiju on Monday said that Manmohan Singh had highlighted the

Naxal problem as the prime minister in 2006. “It would not be an exaggeration to say that the problem of Naxalism is the single biggest internal security challenge ever faced by our country,” Singh had said on April 13, 2006,” Rijiju said.

“The Congress must apologise and say sorry to the family of Dr Manmohan Singh ji,” the Parliamentary Affairs Minister said in a post on social media.

On Sunday, Rijiju said that by ‘*Dimagi* Naxals’, Prime Minister Modi did not refer to the opposition leaders but only to those who support Maoists and separatists and reject the Indian Constitution.

“Very unfortunate and highly damaging statement by the respected former Home Minister of India. PM Narendra Modi ji didn't say that opposition leaders are ‘Dimagi Naxals’.

“Only the following are ‘Dimagi Naxals’: 1. Who support Maoists and reject the Indian Constitution; 2. Who stand with separatists and support Article 370; 3. Who want to cut the chicken neck to separate North-East from India,” Rijiju had said in a social media post.

Jarange demands Kunbi certificates for 58 lakh Marathas

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar

Quota activist Manoj Jarange on Monday alleged that the Maharashtra Government wants to slash the number of Kunbi caste certificates for eligible members of the Maratha community and demanded that certificates be issued as per the data of 58 lakh records.

He appealed to the Maratha community to become aggressive in pursuing its demands and raise its voice against injustice. “They should not come under pressure from any political party or individual,” he said.

Reiterating his call for a protest, Jarange said he would embark on a tour of Marathwada and parts of the Vidarbha region from August 20 to 25. He had announced an indefinite fast from August 29, seeking OBC quota for eligible members of the Maratha community.

“The agitation will take place for pending demands of the Maratha community. The Government should issue all the certificates based on the 58 lakh records found earlier. The



Government wants to curtail this figure of 58 lakh, but I will not let it happen,” he told reporters in Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar.

He demanded that the (Kunbi) caste certificates issued so far should be validated.

His other demands include a GR of Satara, Kolhapur, Aundh and Bombay gazettes, revocation of cases against Maratha protesters, and wrapping up the process to grant Government appointments for candidates selected under SEBC and EWS quotas before August 29.

“The Government should release pending dues and complete the process to appoint kin of those who sacrificed their lives for the

three from Alipurduar, Bengal. The ninth person is a local — the night guard of Hotel Videshini where the fire broke out. The police said 28 people were rescued and admitted to various hospitals.

Locals said the fire started around 4.30 am and rapidly lapped the upper floors. The flames leapt faster due to false ceilings and fibre interior panelling, sources said. Every year lakhs of pilgrims visit Tara Peeth to offer prayers to Goddess Tara and his disciple Bama Khepa, a 20th-century hermit who resided in the temple and the adjacent burning ghat.

“The residents were screaming for help... but were helpless as the doors were locked,” locals said, adding that many took refuge in balconies and even tried to

jump down as they were choking. Fire Brigades and local police carried out the rescue operations.

State Fire Minister Koushik Chowdhury said, “I am giving all information to the Chief Minister... A detailed investigation will be conducted... and action will be taken.” Vidit Raj Bhundesh, Superintendent of Police, said the owner of the hotel had been arrested.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Narendra Modi too expressed his condolences. “Anguished to hear about the loss of lives due to a fire tragedy in Birbhum, West Bengal.

I extend my condolences to those who have lost their loved ones. May the injured recover soon. The local administration is assisting those affected in the mishap,” he said.

Sukhu urges Centre to approve industrial parks, Rail links

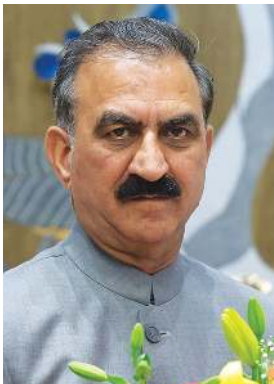
PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
■ Shimla

Himachal Pradesh Chief Minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu on Monday urged the Centre to accord early approval to industrial parks and to strengthen railway connectivity in the State.

He was participating in the third meeting of the Apex Monitoring Authority of the National Industrial Corridor Development and Implementation Trust organised in New Delhi via virtual mode from Shimla.

The meeting was chaired by Union Minister for Finance and Corporate Affairs, Nirmala Sitharaman.

During the meeting, Sukhu apprised the state government's efforts to develop world-class industrial infrastructure to accelerate industrial development and attract large-scale



investment in Himachal Pradesh.

He said that under the first phase of the Bharat Audyogik Vikas Yojna (BHAVYA), the State Government had already submitted two proposals to the National Industrial Corridor Development and Implementation Trust for developing investment-ready industrial parks.

Narco-terror accused held in J&K

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Jammu

The State Investigation Agency (SIA) has achieved a significant breakthrough in its sustained efforts to dismantle the active narco-terror ecosystem in Jammu and Kashmir with the arrest of an absconding operative who had been evading arrest for nearly four years.

The arrest is an important development in the investigation of a wider narco-terror conspiracy allegedly backed by Pakistan/PoK-based operatives of the terrorist organisation Hizbul Mujahideen (HM).

According to the SIA spokesman, the operative has been identified as Manoj Kumar Bhat @ Pintu, S/o P.K. Bhat, R/o Rehari Colony, Bakshi Nagar, Jammu.

The accused was wanted in connection with FIR No. 13/2022 of SIA Kashmir, regis-



tered on June 3, 2022, concerning the smuggling of narcotics from across the LOC and the alleged channelisation of proceeds from their sale towards financing terrorist activities.

The SIA spokesman said that Manoj Kumar Bhat alias Pintu has been evading arrest for almost 4 years since the case was registered.

The arrested accused is alleged to have played a role in facilitating the sale and distribution network of narcotics in the Jammu division, thereby contributing to the

financial pipeline of the larger narco-terror network.

The investigation has also established linkages with Pakistan/PoK-based terrorist handlers, including Imtiyaz Ahmad Kandoo @ Kandoo, S/o Ab. Khaliq Kandoo, R/o Kralteeng, Sopore, and Manzoor Ahmad Khan, S/o Late Ab. Majeed Khan, R/o Braman Panzala, Baramulla.

These individuals have arranged and facilitated the trafficking of narcotics from PoK, which were subsequently collected, distributed and sold through the network operating within J&K.

By targeting the entire chain- from cross-LoC narcotics trafficking and local distribution to the financial proceeds generated there — SIA Kashmir is pursuing the broader objective of financially strangling and dismantling the support structures that sustain terrorism.

Karnataka Assembly stalled over demand to sack minister Nagendra

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Bengaluru

The Karnataka Legislative Assembly proceedings witnessed disruption on Monday, with the Opposition staging a protest demanding the removal of Minister B Nagendra, who is facing charges in connection with the alleged embezzlement of crores of rupees at a State-run corporation, from the Cabinet.

As soon as the Speaker G S Patil called for question hour, the Opposition BJP and JD(S) raised the issue.

Leader of Opposition R Ashoka and BJP MLA Sunil Kumar raised the issue and questioned how they can participate in question hour with a “corrupt



Karnataka minister B Nagendra

minister” here.

Demanding that Nagendra should be removed, Ashoka declared that, “We will not let the house function until he is dropped. The CM should remove him from the Cabinet immediately.”

The BJP has already announced that it would not allow the proceedings of the Monsoon Session if he is not sacked.

Nagendra is now the Minister for Planning and Statistics.

Nagendra, who resigned from the previous Siddaramaiah-led Cabinet following the allegations of embezzlement of taxpayer money at the Karnataka Maharsi Valmiki ST Development Corporation, was inducted into the D K Shivakumar-led Ministry on August 3.

“When Siddaramaiah was CM, he had taken Nagendra's resignation; why has he been taken into the Cabinet now?” Ashoka asked.

ED arrested Nagendra in the Valmiki Corporation scam case in July 2024, and a Special Court in Bengaluru in October that year, granted bail to the MLA from Ballari.

Did PLA block Indian Army patrols, Owaisi asks Govt

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Hyderabad

AIMIM president Asaduddin Owaisi on Monday posed several questions to the NDA Government over the “situation” on the China border in Arunachal Pradesh, including the PLA.

He asked whether the People's Liberation Army (PLA) blocked army patrols from accessing the area where they have been patrolling so far.

In a post on ‘X’, he asked whether the PLA destroyed a temporary structure created by our army patrol in an area in India's territory.

“Has the PLA pitched tents in the area where our patrols were going earlier and is clearly Indian territory?” he asked.

He further asked whether



the Government is pushing the army not to press too strongly for patrolling rights in the area where China is creating trouble because it is keen to portray normalcy to facilitate Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Delhi next month.

He asked whether the Modi Government decided to keep the people of the country in the dark about what happens with China on the border, “as it tried in Doklam in 2017 and in Ladakh in 2020”.

Editor's
TAKE

Vande Mataram does not deserve political slugfest

The song united Indians in the freedom struggle. Today, however, its legacy risks becoming another fault line in a deeply divided political discourse

On August 13, all six stanzas of *Vande Mataram* were sung inside the Lok Sabha for the first time in parliamentary history, as the Monsoon Session drew to a close. Two days later, from the ramparts of Red Fort, the full song was heard for the first time at an Independence Day ceremony - the 80th since 1947. The timing was crucial: 2025-26 marks 150 years since Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay composed the song, later woven into his novel *Anandamath*, and it comes days after a new law made insulting or disrupting *Vande Mataram* a criminal offence, on par with the National Anthem.

Few songs carry this kind of weight. It was a rallying cry from Bengal's 1905 partition through the Quit India movement, sung by revolutionaries who faced lathis and prison for it. Yet its journey was never simple. In 1937, the Congress Working Committee – Gandhi, Nehru, Patel, Subhas Bose and Maulana Azad among them – resolved that only the first two stanzas, evoking the motherland's rivers and orchards, would be sung at national gatherings. The later verses invoke the goddess Durga; Tagore, consulted on the matter, advised that the opening stanzas could stand alone as a national song without carrying that religious charge into a plural nation. It was accommodation, not erasure – a considered decision to hold a diverse freedom movement together.

That history is exactly what is being contested now. Inaugurating the anniversary commemorations in November, Prime Minister Modi said the 1937 trimming had “sowed the seeds of Partition” – a charge Congress calls a distortion that insults both the Working Committee and Tagore himself. The row has since curdled: a Kerala Congress MP's intemperate vow never to sing the full version; a disputed video from a Congress Independence Day event that the BJP seized on as proof Sonia Gandhi and Mallikarjun Kharge had tried to cut the song short – something Congress disputes; a public demand from Amit Shah for an apology; police complaints in Delhi and Karnataka.

Even as MPs from the NCP, Shiv Sena and YSRCP urged that the song not be reduced to a political football, that is precisely what it has become. Would the country not be better served letting this song simply be sung and revered, without a running scorecard? A hymn that moved millions across faiths during the freedom struggle needs no statute to secure its place in the national imagination – it earned that, unaided, over 150 years.

Legislating reverence, and mining history for a partisan point, both cheapen a symbol that once asked only for love of country, nothing more. The flag, the anthem, this song - none of them belong in any single party's custody. The most patriotic thing today's politicians could do is stop competing over who loves *Vande Mataram* more, and simply let it keep doing what it has always done best: unite, rather than divide, without anyone needing to be told to sing it.

The Makkah triangle and the Iran test

The Makkah Agreement is best understood as an ambitious strategic triangle with enormous potential but incomplete strategic convergence. And Iran sits precisely where those interests collide



BHOPINDER SINGH

The temptation to describe the Makkah Joint Defence Agreement as an “Islamic NATO” is understandable. Signed by Saudi Arabia, Türkiye and Pakistan on August 7, 2026, the agreement declares that an armed attack against one member will be regarded as an attack against all. It brings together Saudi Arabia's financial and energy power, Türkiye's formidable conventional military and defence-industrial capabilities, and Pakistan's nuclear deterrent.

Yet the NATO analogy is premature. The greatest reason is Iran.

Iran represents the ultimate test of whether the Makkah Agreement can evolve from a strategically impressive partnership into a genuinely integrated collective-defence alliance. The problem is that the three members have fundamentally different relationships with Tehran.

For Saudi Arabia, Iran has traditionally been the principal regional strategic competitor. Riyadh remains concerned about Iranian missiles, drones, regional networks and the vulnerability of Gulf energy infrastructure. Türkiye's relationship with Iran is far more complicated. Ankara and Tehran compete for influence across Syria, Iraq, the Caucasus and the wider Middle East, but also maintain diplomatic and economic ties. Türkiye has generally preferred managed rivalry rather than permanent confrontation, preserving its strategic flexibility. Pakistan's position is more constrained still. It shares a border with Iran and has strong incentives to maintain workable relations with Tehran, given sectarian tensions (Pakistan hosts the second-largest Shia population in the world). Islamabad must consider its western frontier and the danger of creating another security problem alongside its longstanding confrontation with India.

This creates the fundamental question hanging over the Makkah Agreement: What happens if Iran attacks Saudi Arabia?

On paper, the answer appears straightforward. If an attack on one is an attack on all, an Iranian attack on Saudi Arabia should trigger collective defence. In practice, however, would Pakistan enter a direct war with Iran? Would Türkiye deploy combat forces? Or would the two instead provide intelligence, air-defence support, weapons and diplomatic backing? That distinction matters because the agreement establishes the principle of collective defence without yet possessing NATO's



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The writer is a former Lieutenant Governor of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Puducherry, and a military veteran

decades-old command structures, intelligence architecture, interoperability and military planning.

Iran therefore exposes the difference between collective defence as a declaration and collective defence as an operational doctrine.

The problem becomes even greater if “Islamic NATO” is interpreted literally. NATO was built around a relatively clear strategic threat: the then Soviet Union. The Makkah grouping has no equivalent single adversary. Saudi Arabia is primarily concerned with Gulf security; Pakistan remains heavily focused on South Asia and India; Türkiye's strategic concerns extend across the Middle East, Black Sea, Caucasus, Eastern Mediterranean and NATO. Iran matters to all three, but not in the same way.

An explicitly anti-Iranian alliance could make the pact more militarily coherent but would create serious problems. Pakistan would face complications with its neighbour, Türkiye would lose strategic flexibility, and Saudi Arabia could become locked into permanent confrontation with Tehran. Yet avoiding an Iranian focus creates another problem - weaker credibility in precisely the scenario most likely to test the pact.

There is also a conceptual contradiction. Iran is itself a Muslim-majority country. Calling the arrangement an “Islamic NATO” therefore risks transforming a defensive partnership into the perception of a Saudi-Turkish-Pakistani bloc confronting Iran. The

three governments have consequently been careful to describe the agreement as defensive rather than directed against any particular state.

The more the Makkah pact develops into a military bloc, however, the harder it becomes to maintain that ambiguity. Conversely, explicitly defining Iran as the threat would expose the very differences among the three members that the alliance is supposed to overcome.

There are also competing external alignments to consider. Türkiye is a NATO member; Pakistan maintains a particularly close strategic relationship with China; and Saudi Arabia retains deep defence ties with the United States. These relationships are not necessarily incompatible with the Makkah Agreement, but they demonstrate that the three states operate within different strategic ecosystems. A

common defence framework must therefore coexist with, rather than replace, their existing alliances and partnerships.

The most realistic future may therefore be a flexible strategic-security framework rather than an Islamic NATO: deeper intelligence-sharing, joint exercises, missile and drone defence, maritime security, interoperability and defence-industrial cooperation, without requiring identical foreign policies. The pact does not need to become ‘NATO’ to be consequential. Its strength lies in combining three complementary forms of power: Saudi financial capacity, Turkish conventional and industrial capability, and Pakistani strategic deterrence. But Iran remains the unavoidable stress test.

If Tehran attacks one member and the other two respond decisively, the Makkah Agreement will gain credibility that no diplomatic declaration can provide. If the members instead revert to separate national calculations, the limitations of the “Islamic NATO” concept will become equally clear.

For now, therefore, the Makkah Agreement is best understood as an ambitious strategic triangle with enormous potential but incomplete strategic convergence. And Iran sits precisely where those interests collide. The ultimate test is therefore brutally simple:

If Iran attacks one, will the other two truly fight? Until that question has a credible answer, “Islamic NATO” describes the pact's potential and not its reality.

PIC TALK



Wrestlers compete during a traditional mud-wrestling match on 'Nag Panchami' festival, in Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh. PHOTO: PTI



SAKSHI SETHI

2ND OPINION

There was a time when boredom was simply part of existence. People waited at bus stops, stood in lineups, ate meals, travelled short distances and even sat alone without needing to be entertained every second. Today, screen time, attention spans, the death of reading - parents raise these issues at every meeting, and they are not wrong to worry. But the conversation almost always points in one direction, from adult to child, as though the problem were something children caught on their own, like a cold, and the adults were merely trying to cure it.

The truth is less comfortable. Children do not learn their relationship with the phone from the phone. They learn it from their parents. A child asked to put the device away at the dinner table, while a parent checks a message 'just

once', receives two lessons at the same time and picks the one that is demonstrated rather than the one that is stated. Parents should understand that they are the first screen a child studies.

Long before they hold their own phone, they have watched, hundreds of times, what a face does when it hears a notification; how conversation pauses, how attention lifts and travels somewhere else, how the person in the room quietly becomes less important than the person on the screen. That is the curriculum which parents deliver every day without meaning to. Digital platforms are built around this precious commodity termed attention. Infinite scrolling makes no natural stopping point; autoplay removes the need to make another decision; continuous notifications pull users back, while likes, messages and new content offer small and unpredictable rewards. One may assume they are casually checking their phones, but the reality is that their attention is being competed for, seized and monetised.

Doomscrolling makes this interaction even more difficult. During stress, loneliness, anxiety or boredom, the phone offers immediate escape. We scroll hoping to feel better, informed or connected, yet often emerge more restless than before. Bad news sends us searching for more bad news.

Social media provides other people's lives as exciting, productive and happy, feeding the fear that something important is happening somewhere without us. Perhaps the most worrying consequence is not the number of

hours spent online, but what those hours displace. Parents scroll while children seek their attention, and children copy what they see.

Friends sit beside each other, yet their minds are far away in other digital rooms. Many of us surrender our first waking moments and our final sleepy minutes to a mobile screen. Nostalgia is not the answer. The pre-digital world was not perfect and is not coming back. Technology has transformed education, employment, healthcare and communication in remarkable ways.

What one needs is not digital rejection but digital discipline. Small boundaries can restore surprising amounts of control. One does not have to check their phone right when they wake up. Meals can be eaten without looking at screens.

Reading a book, writing a list by hand or sipping a cup of coffee in peace can reclaim moments which these devices have gradually occupied. We often ask what smartphones are doing to children. Adults/parents must ask what their own habits are teaching them. Digital behaviour is shaped as much by example as by instruction. Remember, technology was created to make life easier, not to become life itself. The real challenge of the digital age is no longer learning how to use technology; rather, it is learning when to stop and remember that real life still happens beyond the screen.

The writer is an educator and a councillor

RAHUL GANDHI PRAISES STUDENTS' COURAGE AGAINST PAPER-LEAK PROTESTS

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Sunday praised young people who protested against alleged examination paper leaks, saying their courage and resilience in demanding accountability deserved recognition.

He shared a video of his interaction with students who had protested last month seeking the resignation of then Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan over the allegations.

The students had faced alleged police excesses during the July 20 protest and later spoke about what they described as police “brutality” and harassment after raising their voices.

Gandhi said the youngsters had demonstrated courage by standing firm against what he called Prime Minister Narendra Modi's “violent regime”. He said

the students had raised their concerns peacefully, with “peace, love and humour”. Gandhi also announced that “Chhatron ki Goonj”, an event where he interacts with students, would be held in Pune on August 22 and would be exclusively for girls.

On August 5, Gandhi had addressed a press conference after meeting the students.

Five appeared alongside him, including model Rhiya Ahir, whose photograph blocking a police van during protests in Mumbai had gone viral.

Ahir has also approached police alleging online harassment. The students are not doing anything illegal. Protest in a democracy is a valid political-social tool!

BHAGWAN THADANI | MUMBAI

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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Patriotism should not become a memory test

Granting *Vande Mataram* a status at par with the National Anthem is a significant symbolic step, but it also raises a fundamental question: are we prepared to meet the standard we seek to impose?

A revealing exercise would be to ask political leaders to sing both *Vande Mataram* and *Jana Gana Mana* independently and consecutively, without prompts. The results could provide an unexpectedly honest measure of preparedness. Extending the same exercise to the wider population might be equally revealing. The proportion able to sing both correctly may prove surprisingly modest. This is not an argument against patriotism or either national song. Rather, patriotism should encourage participation, not become a test of rote memorisation. Before making such observance mandatory across the country, the government should first ensure that citizens understand, learn and can confidently sing both national compositions. National symbols command the greatest respect when they unite people voluntarily rather than become instruments of compulsion. India should therefore focus on building familiarity and understanding first, and prescribing obligation later. True patriotism is strengthened by informed participation, not enforced performance.

RS NARULA | PATIALA

Netanyahu faces a tough electoral battle

Recent opinion surveys suggest that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu could face a difficult battle in the elections scheduled for October 2026. His policies on Gaza, along with Israel's military presence in Syria and Lebanon, were initially expected to strengthen his position as the leader Israel needed after the October 2023 Hamas attack. However, recent concessions reportedly made under pressure from the United States and the international community appear to have affected his standing. Former army chief Eizenkot has reportedly emerged as a strong challenger in several surveys and is only a few seats away from enabling his alliance to secure a parliamentary majority. For Netanyahu, the stakes are particularly high. His political legacy is closely tied to the Gaza war, while his ongoing graft case adds another layer of pressure. He is therefore likely to use every available political and diplomatic avenue to strengthen his position before the elections. The Gaza conflict could remain central to his strategy, particularly because public opinion in Israel remains deeply shaped by the October 2023 attacks and subsequent war.

If tensions escalate or Israel adopts more aggressive measures, the coming months could prove especially volatile, with both domestic politics and the regional conflict influencing each other.

YASHASWI BAIRAGI | UJJAIN

More MPs do not mean better governance

The proposal to substantially increase the strength of the Lok Sabha to 850 raises an important question beyond the arithmetic of political representation: will more MPs necessarily mean better governance? The concern becomes sharper when Parliament itself struggles with effective functioning. With nine Bills reportedly passed without adequate debate during the current session, merely increasing representation may not improve legislative scrutiny, accountability or governance. Parliament first needs greater seriousness in debate, scrutiny and oversight. If funds already allocated are delayed, underused or spent without sufficient scrutiny, additional expenditure should not automatically be justified. Any expansion of the Lok Sabha must therefore be examined through public accountability and fiscal prudence.

More MPs would mean recurring expenditure on salaries, allowances, staff, offices, accommodation, security and parliamentary infrastructure. The effectiveness of government delivery also depends heavily on States in areas such as education, healthcare, policing, agriculture, water, sanitation and local development. Greater representation should ultimately produce greater efficiency, not simply a larger Parliament.

BRIJ BHUSHAN GOYAL | LUDHIANA

The next phase of India’s digital payments revolution

Why RBI is betting on plastic in a UPI economy

UPI has given India one of the strongest digital institutions of the twenty-first century. The challenge now is not merely to celebrate its remarkable success, but to deepen it through complementary institutions that make digital finance an integral part of everyday economic life



ASHUTOSH KUMAR THAKUR

'Institutions are the rules of the game in a society.' Nobel laureate Douglass C. North made this deceptively simple observation while explaining why some nations prosper and others struggle. Economic progress, he argued, is rarely the result of technology alone. It depends on institutions that reduce uncertainty, build trust and make everyday transactions easier. India's digital payment revolution is perhaps the finest contemporary illustration of this principle. The country's greatest innovation has not been a smartphone application. It has been the creation of a new institutional architecture for moving money.

Few countries have transformed the everyday act of payment as rapidly as India. Since its launch in 2016, the Unified Payments Interface has altered the financial behaviour of millions of citizens. It now processes more than 20 billion transactions every month and accounts for nearly half of all real-time payment transactions in the world. In a remarkably short period, UPI has become one of India's most successful digital public goods, admired by governments, multilateral institutions and central banks alike.

These achievements deserve recognition. They also invite a more difficult question. Has India reached the limits of its digital payments revolution, or is it merely completing its first phase?

The answer lies beyond transaction volumes. Despite UPI's spectacular success, cash continues to account for a significant share of household spending, particularly outside metropolitan India. Most UPI transactions are of low value, reflecting impressive inclusion but also revealing that digital payments have yet to dominate larger everyday commercial activity. India has solved the problem of scale. The next challenge is to achieve depth by embedding digital payments more comprehensively into transport, credit, commerce and international finance.

This is where the experiences of Japan, the United Kingdom and Singapore become instructive. None offers a template to copy. Each demonstrates how strong institutions evolve by solving the next problem rather than celebrating the previous achievement.

Japan's experience reminds us that payment systems become powerful when they become invisible. The Suica card began as a transport ticket for Tokyo's railway network. Over time, it evolved into a universal payment instrument accepted at convenience stores, restaurants, vending machines and neighbourhood retailers. Millions of commuters developed the habit of making digital payments not because they consciously embraced technology, but because technology quietly simplified everyday life.

That insight has particular relevance for India. Every day, millions of Indians travel by metro, suburban railways and city buses. Yet urban transport payments remain fragmented across cities, with different cards, tokens and ticketing systems coexisting. The National Common Mobility Card was conceived to address precisely this challenge by creating a single interoperable platform for mobility payments. Its progress, however, has been slower than originally envisioned.

A genuinely universal mobility payment system would do far more than improve urban transport. It would make digital payments an effortless daily habit for millions of commuters. Japan demonstrated that transport is not merely a public service. It is one of the most effective gateways to building a cashless economy. Significantly, Japan itself is now preparing to accept UPI at merchant outlets through collaborations between NPCI and NTT Data, reflecting the growing convergence between two countries that have approached digital payments from different directions.

If Japan teaches the importance of habit, the United Kingdom demonstrates the value of regulatory courage.

Open Banking in Britain did not emerge because banks voluntarily embraced competition. It emerged because regulators concluded that entrenched institutions had insufficient incentives to innovate. By requiring major banks to share customer data securely through standardised application programming interfaces, subject to customer consent, policymakers



DOUGLASS C NORTH REMINDED US THAT INSTITUTIONS DETERMINE THE LONG-RUN PERFORMANCE OF ECONOMIES BECAUSE THEY SHAPE INCENTIVES, REDUCE UNCERTAINTY AND BUILD TRUST

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created an entirely new ecosystem of financial services. Consumers gained greater control over their financial information, while fintech companies found space to innovate without compromising trust.

India's Account Aggregator framework rests on a similar philosophy. It allows individuals to share financial information securely and with explicit consent across banks and financial institutions. The framework has expanded rapidly and represents one of the world's most sophisticated consent-based financial data architectures.

Yet the real challenge lies ahead. Adoption remains uneven across smaller banks, cooperative institutions and rural financial networks. The businesses that stand to benefit most from easier access to formal credit, including small enterprises, self-employed workers and gig economy participants, often remain outside the system's reach. The lesson from Britain is that digital public infrastructure must be accompanied by consistent regulatory execution. Institutions become transformative only when participation is broad rather than selective.

Singapore offers a different lesson, one centred on simplicity. Its SGQR system unified multiple payment platforms into a single QR code that could be used by consumers regardless of their preferred payment application or bank. For merchants, particularly small businesses, the complexity of managing multiple payment systems disappeared almost overnight. The elegance of the reform lay not in inventing new technology but in eliminating unnecessary friction.

India's Bharat QR embodies much the same philosophy in principle. It is an interoperable acceptance solution designed to work across UPI, RuPay, Visa and Mastercard, giving merchants a single QR-based route for receiving payments rather than forcing them to manage different payment-specific codes. In practice, however, many neighbourhood merchants continue to display multiple QR codes linked to different payment providers. Technical failures, inconsistent customer support and uneven merchant awareness continue to weaken confidence, particularly in smaller towns. Singapore's experience illustrates that interoperability is not merely a technical standard. It is a governance objective requiring continuous implementation and monitoring.

India has already begun extending its payment architecture beyond national borders. The UPI-PayNow linkage with Singapore has demonstrated how inexpensive and instantaneous cross-border transfers can replace slower and more expensive conventional channels. UPI is now operational in several countries, while Japan's planned acceptance of UPI represents another important milestone. These developments point towards a larger strategic possibility. India can move beyond exporting technology and begin shaping the architecture of international retail payments, particularly across the Global South.

The broader lesson emerging from these three countries is not that India has fallen behind. On the contrary, India has established one of the world's most successful digital payment ecosystems in less than a decade. What distinguishes mature institutions, however, is their capacity to evolve. Scale creates opportunity, but institutional depth sustains leadership. The coming decade should therefore focus less on counting transactions and more on expanding their economic significance. Digital payments should seamlessly integrate with public transport, credit delivery, small business finance, cross-border commerce and government services. Success should increasingly be measured not simply by the number of payments made but by the range of economic activity those payments enable.

India's digital payment revolution has already changed how money moves. Its next phase should change how the economy functions.

Douglass C North reminded us that institutions determine the long-run performance of economies because they shape incentives, reduce uncertainty and build trust.



AARUSHI SHANKAR

The Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) latest currency experiment may seem counterintuitive at first glance in an economy rapidly digitising on the back of real-time payment rails. The central bank, through its printing arm Bharatiya Reserve Bank Note Mudran Private Limited (BRBNMPL), has floated a Global Expression of Interest for 68,000 reams of polymer substrate, with 34,000 reams earmarked for ₹10 notes and another 34,000 reams for ₹20 notes. This global tender has been the central bank's most decisive move yet in a long-debated pilot rollout of plastic banknotes. This may seem like an over-engineered solution to a problem that digital payments already solve, but on the surface, it's not an unthinkable move for market observers. India is the world's largest player in the real-time digital transactions space, with the Unified Payments Interface (UPI) processing over 24,000 crore transactions annually and the Central Bank Digital Currency (e-Rupee) expanding its footprint. Why spend regulatory bandwidth and capital on upgrading physical banknotes when paper cash seems to be on a path towards structural decline? The answer lies in a nuanced understanding of cash velocity, life-cycle economics and the continuing reality of India's vast informal economy.

The economic case for polymer is entirely based on longevity, where the velocity of money is highest. The traditional cotton-pulp notes, especially the lower denominations of ₹10 and ₹20, are subject to constant wear and tear. Paper notes rapidly wear out in tropical humidity and rough treatment due to daily use. The RBI spent ₹5,101 crore in FY2023-24, ₹6,373 crore in FY2024-25 and ₹4,875 crore in FY2025-26 on security printing of currency. This was done to collect, shred and reprint billions of soiled paper notes to maintain its Clean Note Policy. Polymer substrate has an upfront production premium over traditional paper; however, its structural durability changes the cost equation over time. Polymer notes last much longer, so the break-even point is reached after a few years of deployment. On a multi-year horizon, fewer print runs translate directly to lower recurring bills for paper procurement, lower overhead for security printing, and lower transport and destruction costs. In addition, polymer banknotes enable the RBI to incorporate advanced security features such as transparent windows, metallic numerals, shadow images and complex optical effects that are very difficult for counterfeiters to reproduce with normal printing equipment.

Why cash coexists with the UPI surge

The core phenomenon of monetary macroeconomics: the divergence between payment transaction velocity and the base stock of money. Rapid digital adoption has not replaced physical cash; rather, the two channels show complementarity. This structural need for cash is evident from the recent monetary data. While setting records in terms of the volume of UPI transactions, the country's Currency in Circulation (CIC) crossed the historic level of ₹40 lakh crore, recording a strong rise of 11.9 per cent in FY26, which is its fastest growth pace since FY21. This is evident graphically from the upward-sloping CIC graph. The trend is explained by the fundamental dichotomy of functions, where UPI takes care of high-frequency, low-value transactions on a daily basis, and cash acts as the main store of value and precautionary fund. Important factors responsible for the growth of cash include an increase in nominal GDP, economic activity, income growth in the informal and rural segments, and high interest rates, which lead to increased precautionary saving.

Geopolitical safeguards and cultural lessons

The global tender parameters rolled out by the RBI reveal sharp parallels drawn from past international rollouts and India's geopolitical scenario:

- Cultural Sensitivity: The tenders obligate suppliers to state explicitly that there is absolutely no animal tallow or animal DNA present in the substrate. The requirement is related directly to the public relations issue that the Bank of England faced in 2016 due to the presence of small traces of tallow in the new £5 polymer banknotes, which led to strong protests from religious organisations and vegans.
- Geopolitical Boundaries: Procurement requirements include strict security conditions whereby suppliers should ensure total separation from any sites located in China or Pakistan, as well as ensure that they use no raw materials whatsoever from these countries.

Operational friction and global benchmarks

However, despite these benefits, switching to polymer presents operational challenges. Polymer-based notes are more slippery and have a static charge that may cause them to get stuck in automatic note-counting devices and ATMs. There will be a need for commercial banks to adjust their automatic sorting machinery to prevent mistakes in dispensing cash. Moreover, the special Biaxially Oriented Polypropylene (BOPP) polymer substrate is mostly supplied by foreign sources. However, over 50 central banks have provided clear empirical benchmarks:

- Australia: In 1988, it was the first to adopt polymer notes commemoratively, before fully mandating them over 1992-96. The Reserve Bank of Australia realised net financial savings of nearly \$1 billion over 25 years from reduced reprint costs.
- United Kingdom & Canada: Switching to polymer in both countries resulted in substantial drops in counterfeiting, as well as a reduction in the life-cycle carbon footprint relative to traditional paper currency. The Bank of England found its £5 note had a 16 per cent lower impact and its £10 note an 8 per cent lower impact, while the Bank of Canada found a 32 per cent reduction in global warming potential.

A pragmatic middle path

This measure taken by the RBI, where it decided to confine its pilot project to only the ₹10 and ₹20 notes, is indeed an astute move that will ensure no risk is involved. In this way, there is no need for a costly attempt to modify all high-denomination banknotes, but rather to focus on the most circulated notes where the value is best in relation to the lifespan of these notes. While the UPI system gradually gains momentum by handling micro-transactions in the major cities, physical cash plays a critical role in ensuring that financial inclusion, transaction privacy and economic security are achieved for millions of people in rural India. Modernising the physical infrastructure of low-denomination banknotes is not a replacement for digital transactions but rather a complement to them.

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RAHUL KAUSHIK

ary success against armed Naxalism. But the defeat of an armed insurgency does not automatically mean the disappearance of the ideological ecosystem that sustained it.

For decades, armed Naxalism did not survive merely because cadres operated from forests. Every insurgency needs an ecosystem: narratives that legitimise violence, networks that amplify those narratives, organisations capable of mobilising resources, and intellectual voices willing to portray attacks on the constitutional state as revolutionary justice. The armed Naxal was visible. He carried a weapon, occupied territory and attacked the state openly. That made the threat identifiable and ultimately easier to confront.

The dimagi Naxal is harder to confront precisely because there is no uniform or gun by which he can be identified.

The ideological battle can take place in universities, activist networks, cultural organisations, publications and sections of civil society. The problem is not criticism of the government. Criticism is indis-

pensible to democracy. The problem begins where intellectual activism crosses into legitimising political violence, deliberately spreading hostility towards the nation and its constitutional institutions, or providing material, organisational or propaganda assistance to violent or unlawful movements. This distinction is essential. Otherwise, "dimagi Naxal" becomes an indiscriminate political label rather than a description of a genuine security and ideological challenge.

Another dimension of this ecosystem deserves scrutiny. Certain activist organisations and advocacy networks have repeatedly placed themselves at the forefront of movements directed against major decisions of elected governments. Participation in an anti-government protest is, by itself, neither illegal nor anti-national. Indeed, peaceful protest is a democratic right.

The legitimate question arises when political mobilisation intersects with opaque financing, foreign funding, coordinated misinformation, unlawful activity or networks associated with extremist causes.

This is precisely why the financial architecture surrounding advocacy organisations matters. Where organisations receive substantial funding from abroad while simultaneously participating in campaigns intended to influence India's political and social environment, the Indian state has both the right and the responsibility to demand complete transparency regarding the origin, destination and utilisation of that money.

It is equally important not to collapse all such organisations into one category. Thousands of civil-



society organisations perform legitimate humanitarian, educational and social work. The case for scrutiny must therefore rest on evidence of financial or legal violations rather than ideological disagreement. There is also a political dimension to this ecosystem.

Opposition parties frequently find themselves supporting the same protests and campaigns championed by activist organisations opposed to government policies. That convergence does not, by itself, prove an organisational or financial nexus. But it does help explain the political resistance that often follows attempts to regulate these networks: activist groups can generate narratives, mobilisation and institutional pressure that coincide with the political objectives of parties seeking to challenge the government.

The relationship can therefore become mutually reinforcing even without a formal alliance. Activist networks provide intellectual arguments, litigation, campaigns and street mobilisation; opposition parties can provide political amplification and parliamentary legitimacy. Where their objectives converge, each strengthens the reach of the other. This is where the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA) assumes importance.

The 2020 amendments substantially tightened India's foreign-funding architecture. They prohibited recipients of foreign contributions from transferring such funds onwards to other organisations, reduced the permissible ceiling for administrative expenditure from 50 per cent to 20 per cent, strengthened identification requirements and required foreign contributions to enter through a designated FCRA account at the State Bank of India's New Delhi Main Branch.

These changes made the movement of foreign money considerably more traceable.

Earlier, a complicated chain of transfers between organisations could make it difficult to establish precisely where foreign contributions ultimately went and for what purpose they were used. Greater transparency disrupts precisely the kind of opaque ecosystem within which illegitimate political or extremist activity can potentially hide. The government should strengthen this framework further where regulatory gaps remain.

The government's success against armed Maoism illustrates the difference between the two challenges. An armed movement can be defeated geographically; an ideological movement reproduces itself intellectually. For years, sections of the ideological ecosystem surrounding radical movements have portrayed the Indian state as inherently oppressive and undeserving of allegiance. Universities are particularly important here. They must remain places where governments, ideologies and institutions can be questioned. But intellectual freedom cannot mean freedom from intellectual challenge. Ideas that romanticise rev-

olutionary violence, excuse terrorism or portray India's fragmentation as liberation must be confronted through scholarship, debate and facts.

The same principle applies across civil society, media, culture and academia.

India therefore needs something considerably more sophisticated than another security crackdown. The support system of violent extremism must be dismantled wherever evidence establishes its existence, while the ideological arguments sustaining extremism must be defeated openly.

Financial networks require transparency. Illegal activity requires prosecution. Foreign funding requires scrutiny. Propaganda requires rebuttal. Universities require genuine intellectual pluralism rather than domination by any single ideological tendency. And political parties, irrespective of ideology, must recognise a fundamental distinction: opposing the government is entirely legitimate; weakening the constitutional state is not.

The armed Naxal sought to weaken India with the gun. The ideological extremist can pursue the same objective through narratives, networks, institutions and the radicalisation of young minds.

India has demonstrated that it can defeat the first. Prime Minister Modi's warning about the "dimagi Naxal" is ultimately a warning that victory against insurgency will remain incomplete unless India also develops the intellectual confidence, financial transparency and institutional vigilance necessary to dismantle the ecosystem from which extremism repeatedly regenerates itself.

The writer is a commentator on socio-political issues

Sonia, Rahul spreading anarchy, Chidambaram pure naxal: Himanta

TONY DAS ■ Guwahati

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Monday accused Congress leaders Sonia and Rahul Gandhi of openly “engaging in anti-national” activities and trying to “spread anarchy” in the country in an attempt to return to power.

Sarma also took a swipe at former Union Home Minister P Chidambaram over his ‘dimagi Naxal’ remark, claiming that the senior opposition leader is a “pure Naxal” and an enquiry should be done to find out if he knowingly didn’t take steps against Maoists when he was in the Union Cabinet.

“Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi are nearly on a mission to oppose the nation. Whether it is by instigating protests in the name of Gen Z, they have vowed to spoil the atmosphere of the country,” Sarma said at a press conference.

Asked about the two



Assam CM Himanta Biswa Sarma addressing the media PIONEER PHOTO

Congress leaders purportedly opposing full rendition of ‘Vande Mataram’ during Independence Day celebration, the CM said, “Sonia Gandhi’s behaviour shows that if the Congress returns to power by some mistake, what will the condition of the country be?”

“They are openly engaging in anti-national activities and provoking people to agitate, sit on dharna, all for the sake of anarchy.

The ‘Ma-Beta’ (mother-son) attempt to stop the ‘Vande Mataram’ manifests what will be the country’s future if the Congress comes to power,”

the BJP leader asserted. On Chidambaram calling himself a ‘dimagi naxal’ after PM Narendra Modi used the term during his Independence Day speech, Sarma mentioned that it was during his tenure as Union Home minister that senior Congress leader VC Shukla and others were killed in an attack in Chhattisgarh, and “still Congress did nothing to eradicate Naxalism.”

“With Chidambaram calling himself ‘dimagi naxal’, there should be an enquiry whether he knowingly didn’t take steps against Naxals when he was the Home minister,” Sarma said. “I think Chidambaram is not just a ‘dimagi naxal’, he is a ‘pure naxal’ who wants anarchy in the country,” he claimed.

Sarma maintained that it is under PM Narendra Modi and Union Home Minister Amit Shah that a “naxal-mukt” India has been possible and there is all-round peace, including smooth national day celebrations in Assam.

BJP spokesperson Shehzad Poonawalla quits party

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

BJP national spokesperson Shehzad Poonawalla on Monday said he has resigned from all positions and primary membership of the party. Poonawalla stated that he has submitted his resignation letter to BJP national president Nitin Nabin, requesting that he accept it.

He also posted his resignation letter on social media, which stated that he had written to Nabin, offering “to resign unconditionally” from all positions and primary membership of the BJP on July 30 due to “pressing financial and personal circumstances.”

In his letter to Nabin, Poonawalla expressed how moved he was by the party’s reluctance to accept his resignation promptly, as they requested him to reconsider his decision.

“But after long and hard contemplation, I have arrived at a final decision that I would like to press for relieving me from my role as National Spokesperson and active primary membership of the BJP. The events of the last few days, courtesy of certain individuals about whom I have told you in great detail, have forced me to reinforce and stand by my earlier decision,” he added.

On July 31, Poonawalla updated his bio on social media, omitting any



mention of the BJP, which sparked speculation about his potential departure from the party. But there was no official confirmation from the party at that time.

In his latest resignation letter submitted to the BJP chief on Monday, Poonawalla said, “As stated earlier, due to pressing emergency financial and personal circumstances, I will move into the private sector, but wherever possible and in whatever format possible, I will continue to support the vision and work of Prime Minister Modi and the BJP. “As I said, I am only leaving the Vyavastha, not

the Vyakti or Vichar,” he added.

In a post, Poonawalla also expressed gratitude towards Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Home Minister Amit Shah, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, Union Minister Nitin Gadkari, the BJP president and all senior leaders of the party and the “Sangh Parivaar” for their “guidance, love, respect.”

“In no other country and no other party would a story like mine, of a young, Pasmanda Muslim, non-dynast, even be possible,” he said.

Poonawalla joined the BJP in December 2017 after quitting the Congress.

TN CM announces full waiver of cooperative farm loans upto ₹75,000

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ Chennai

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister C Joseph Vijay on Monday announced full waiver of cooperative farm loans up to ₹75,000. Also, he announced a waiver up to ₹75,000 for loans ranging up to ₹one lakh. The waiver beyond ₹1 lakh will be ₹35,000.

The latest waiver will entail an additional expenditure of ₹953 crore to the exchequer, CM Vijay said.

Emphasising that agriculture is the backbone of the State and that the prosperity of the nation depended on supporting farmers, he said that despite the State facing financial constraints, his Government decided to extend the additional support worth over ₹900 crore to farmers. Making an announcement under Rule 110 in the Assembly, Vijay said the Government previously waived agricultural loans up to ₹50,000 within 15 days of taking office in May.



This was later expanded to provide full waivers for loans up to ₹75,000, and a ₹35,000 waiver for loans exceeding ₹75,000, benefiting over 14.44 lakh farmers.

Following consultations with agricultural unions on August 7, 2026, the Government decided to provide additional relief despite current financial constraints and Reserve Bank of India guidelines that required rapid settlements with cooperative banks, the chief min-

ister said, announcing additional benefits.

As per his announcement, cooperative farm loans up to ₹75,000 will now be provided with a 100 per cent waiver.

“This initiative will provide additional support to over 1.38 lakh farmers, representing an additional financial commitment of approximately ₹953.06 crore by the Government, with a total waiver amount reaching ₹6,220 crore for 13.34 lakh farmers,” the CM said.

ABVP slams NTA over UGC-NET errors, demands action

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

The ABVP on Monday said the National Testing Agency (NTA) must be accountable for serious factual, typographical, translation and language-related errors in the UGC-NET question papers, asserting that students’ future cannot be compromised. In a statement, the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) expressed serious concerns over the re-examination of the English, Commerce and Sociology papers of UGC-NET 2026.

The student wing of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) said such serious errors in a national-level examination raise questions over the quality and credibility of the entire process, and asked the NTA to explain how the errors occurred and why those were not detected during the preparation of the question paper and the review process.

“Serious errors in a national-level examination like UGC-NET are deeply concerning. Students should not have to pay the price for NTA’s lapses. Playing with the future of students must stop,” ABVP national general secretary Virendra Singh Solanki was quoted as saying in the statement. “NTA must ensure proper examination-centre allocation and



Members of the Krantikari Yuva Sangathan raise slogans and hold placards from inside a bus after being detained during a protest outside Shastri Bhawan in New Delhi PTI

adequate travel arrangements for students appearing in the re-examination, so that they do not face additional financial or mental stress,” he added.

Solanki said the agency must also ensure that such lapses are not repeated and fix clear accountability for every stage of the examination process. The ABVP firmly cautions that if students’ concerns are not addressed within a stipulated time and necessary reforms are not implemented, it will strongly raise these issues with students across the

country, he said. Solanki asserted that the ABVP is committed to the students’ demands and will continue its efforts until a credible, transparent and reliable examination system is ensured.

The ABVP said students are being made to bear the cost of repeated examinations in terms of their time, money and academic plans. It further said merely conducting a re-examination cannot be the solution and the NTA must strengthen question-paper preparation, expert review, translation, proofreading and final quality checks, while fixing clear accountability for lapses.

The organisation said it is gathering suggestions from students, academicians and other stakeholders for examination reforms.

“Meetings have already been held in Chandigarh, Delhi and Patna, and the suggestions will be placed before the high-level committee constituted for examination reforms. ABVP stands firmly with students and will continue to raise their concerns until they are resolved,” it said.

The NTA on Sunday announced a retest for three papers — English, Commerce and Sociology — of the UGC-NET examination that was held in June, following complaints of several errors in these papers.

CPI(M) DEMANDS SCRAPPING OF NTA, NEP 2020

New Delhi: The Polit Bureau of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) on Monday reiterated its demand to scrap both the National Testing Agency (NTA) and the National Education Policy (NEP), 2020, terming them the “root cause of the decay in the education system.”

The left party’s demand comes in the wake of errors discovered in three UGC-NET examination papers recently conducted by the NTA. In a statement issued from its central committee office, the CPI(M) said the “disgraceful episode” has once again exposed the entrenched rot in the country’s education system and laid bare the NTA’s “abject incompetence” to conduct national-level examinations.

Deplored the response of the ruling establishment, the CPI(M) alleged that instead of remedying the disastrous consequences of the NEP, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its affiliates are targeting those who question the system. Highlighting a recent incident in West Bengal, the party pointed to the murder of Janab Mafik in Bankura district — who was allegedly killed for drawing attention to the lack of infrastructure in a local school — calling it the “epitome of their intolerance.” (PNS)

Defence ministry inks ₹1,943 cr drone lease



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

Ministry of Defence on Monday signed a contract with US defence major General Atomics Aeronautical Systems to lease two MQ-9B Sea Guardian high-altitude long-endurance unmanned aircraft for the Indian Navy. The deal is worth ₹1,943 crore. The Navy already operates two Sea Guardian drones, which were leased a few years ago.

The ministry said it signed a contract with General Atomics Aeronautical Systems for the remotely piloted aircraft for a period of

30 months.

The MQ-9B Sea Guardian remotely-piloted aircraft are equipped with advanced systems, state-of-the-art sensors and sophisticated payloads. They will significantly enhance the Indian Navy’s maritime domain awareness capabilities, the ministry said in a statement.

The systems will provide persistent intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance coverage over vast areas of the maritime domain, strengthening India’s ability to monitor and respond to developments across the Indian Ocean Region.

TG-SAFE launch to ensure food, drug safety in Telangana: CM

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ Hyderabad

Telangana Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy on Monday said the creation of TG-SAFE reflects the State Government’s commitment to ensure safety, security and overall well-being of citizens in every aspect of life.

“Today, as Telangana Standards Authority for Food and Essential Drugs (TG-Safe) comes into force, with a single department to ensure safety and standards in our food & medicines, I hope all citizens join me in welcoming and taking its services for a safe Telangana,” he said in a post on X.

According to a Government Order (GO) issued recently, the Food Safety Department and the Drugs Control Department share common objectives relating to public health, consumer safety, quality assurance and effective regulatory enforcement.

A unified administrative framework is required to improve surveillance, intelligence, enforcement, legal support and regulatory outcomes, it said.

Therefore, the Government has decided to establish a unified administrative structure for the Food Safety Department and the Drugs Control Department. The order further said the Food Safety Department



and the Drugs Control Department would be merged under a unified administration known as the TG SAFE.

The unified administration shall preserve the statutory provisions under the Food Safety and Standards Act, 2006 and the Drugs and Cosmetics Act, 1940. The Commissioner, TG SAFE, shall function as unified administrative control for the Food Safety and Drug Control Departments, it said. Senior IPS officer Avinash Mohanty, who was earlier posted as Director General, Drugs Control Administration, has been posted as Commissioner, Telangana SAFE, in addition to his normal duties, an official release said on August 16.

Andhra CM defends Mega DSC-2025 teacher recruitment

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ Amaravati

Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu on Monday defended the Mega DSC-2025 teacher recruitment drive, asserting that the selection process was conducted with transparency.

Addressing the Assembly, the Chief Minister said every candidate’s selection is traceable and accountable.

“Everything was transparent... every candidate selection is traceable and accountable,” he said, adding that there was zero compromise while conducting the



examination. Naidu said the teacher’s recruitment through ‘Mega DSC’ fulfilled one of the core poll promises. He said 3.3 lakh aspirants had applied for the

DSC examination which offered 15,941 Government teacher jobs. Noting that the entire examination procedure was completed in 148 days, the CM said 89 test ses-

sions were conducted, and 42,000 questions were compiled from 13 subjects.

Naidu said the people who bagged jobs were happy and underlined that their stories were moving, adding that some aspirants had prepared for seven long years.

The CM said the southern state had implemented a sports quota in DSC – 2025, adhering to the guidelines implemented by the Centre.

Hitting out at YSRCP supremo YS Jagan Mohan Reddy, Naidu accused the previous YSRCP Government of having “failed” to fill a single teaching post.

According to the CM,

between 10 lakh and 12 lakh students had quit Government schools under the previous administration while one lakh students transitioned from private to Government schools under the current political dispensation.

Though there was no deviation from the teacher recruitment notification, he accused the Opposition party of filing more than 300 cases against DSC-2025.

Moreover, Naidu expressed astonishment that YSRCP was the “only” party which did not attend the House for more than two years.

India, Thailand to hold joint military drill

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

A bilateral military exercise involving troops of the Indian Army and the Royal Thai Army, aimed at enhancing combined capabilities to execute joint counter-insurgency and counter-terrorist operations in jungle and semi-urban environments under the United Nations Charter, will be held from August 18 to August 31, officials said on Monday. Exercise Maitree will be conducted at Vibhavadi Rangsit Camp, Surat Thani in Thailand.

The Indian Army contingent left for Thailand on Monday to participate in the 15th edition of this India-Thailand joint military exercise, the defence ministry said in a statement. The Indian Army and Royal Thai Army contingents comprise 85 personnel each.

“The Indian Army contingent is represented primarily by troops from 9 Gorkha Rifles,



Personnel of the Indian Army contingent pose for a group photograph in front of an Indian Air Force aircraft before departing for Thailand to participate India-Thailand Joint Military Exercise PTI

while the Royal Thai Army contingent comprises personnel from the 3rd Battalion, 25th Infantry Brigade, 5th Division,” the statement said. The exercise will involve company-level joint training focused on operations in jungle and semi-urban terrain, the officials said. The aim of Exercise Maitree is to foster military cooperation between India and Thailand.



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FROM THE WORLD

PAKISTAN

Foreigners to be deported

Pakistan will deport 284 foreign nationals - mostly from China, Vietnam and Indonesia - for their alleged involvement in sextortion and other cybercrimes, an official said on Monday.

Most of them arrived in Pakistan on tourist visas in Islamabad, Federal Investigation Agency said. The suspects were arrested last week, and some of them were shifted to Adiala Jail in Rawalpindi for deportation, said Anwar. "The Ministry of Interior has cancelled the suspects' visas and they are soon going to be deported."

The suspects were running a sextortion racket by posing as women online, the FIA chief said. "They lured victims into fraudulent business and investment schemes by promising unusually high returns."

MOROCCO

Security forces nab 300 migrants

Hundreds of migrants trying to reach the Spanish exclave of Ceuta by land and sea were arrested by Moroccan security forces, Moroccan state television reported, as authorities tightened security along the border following calls for a new mass crossing.

Moroccan state broadcaster Medi 1 TV on Sunday said 294 migrants from sub-Saharan Africa were arrested Saturday while attempting to enter Ceuta. Authorities also arrested 61 Moroccans accused of facilitating the migration attempts, the broadcaster reported.

The attempted crossings followed a surge in social media posts calling on migrants to make their way to Ceuta, a Spanish city on Morocco's northern coast. In response, Moroccan and Spanish authorities beefed up security and limited movement toward the area.

Trump terms Saudi-Turkiye-Pak defence pact big, bold step

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
■ Washington/Islamabad

US President Donald Trump has termed the Saudi Arabia-Turkiye-Pakistan defence agreement a "big, bold and important first step" towards defending themselves in a "more meaningful way".

Signed in Makkah on August 7, the pact establishes a framework for collective deterrence and stipulated that an armed attack on any one of the three countries would be considered an attack on all three.

The agreement was signed by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif.

Sharif on Monday lauded Trump's "kind words" on the tri-nation defence agreement, saying

that Islamabad would continue to work in ensuring its defence and the wider region.

Trump, in a post on his Truth Social network, said, "Very happy to see that Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Pakistan have recently, and finally, signed the Mecca Joint Defence Agreement. It shows how the West Asis is coming together, and how countries will finally be able to defend themselves in a more meaningful way."

"Congratulations to the Great Leadership of the three Nations mentioned. THIS IS A BIG, BOLD, AND IMPORTANT FIRST STEP - WOW," Trump wrote.

Sharif, in a post on X, said, "Deeply appreciate President Donald Trump's kind words of support on the signing of the Makkah Joint Defence Agreement."

"Together with the brotherly



President Donald Trump waves to the media as he walks from Marine One to his limousine upon his arrival at the Ellipse just outside of the White House (AP)

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Republic of Turkiye, Pakistan will continue to play a constructive role in ensuring the defence of our own countries as well as the entire region."

Days after the agreement was signed, India said it is assessing the implications of it through the point of view of its own national security as well as regional peace and stability.

"India remains fully committed to safeguarding its national interests and will take all necessary measures in this regard," External Affairs Ministry Spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said in a press briefing in New Delhi on August 11.

A new strategic alliance between Turkey, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia was finalised after nearly a year of negotiations, against the backdrop of the ongoing US-Iran conflict,

Reuters reported. The conflict has heightened instability across the region, including attacks by Iran-backed Houthi rebels, prompting the three nations to deepen defence cooperation. Under the pact, each country will contribute distinct capabilities. Pakistan will provide military personnel and defence manufacturing support.

Turkey, which has NATO's second-largest military, will bring operational strength. Saudi Arabia will contribute financial resources and strategic influence in the Gulf region. Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan likened the agreement to NATO's Article 5 mutual defence clause, while clarifying that the alliance does not target Iran.

Fidan added that President Recep Tayyip Erdogan envisions expanding the bloc, with Egypt named as a potential future member.

Iran working to finalise Strait of Hormuz agreement with Oman

ASSOCIATED PRESS ■ Dubai

Iran said on Monday it is working to finalise a joint statement with Oman on a plan to manage the transit of ships through the Strait of Hormuz. Fully reopening the waterway to commercial shipping has been a key demand of the United States, but it remains unclear whether the deal will meet Washington's criteria.

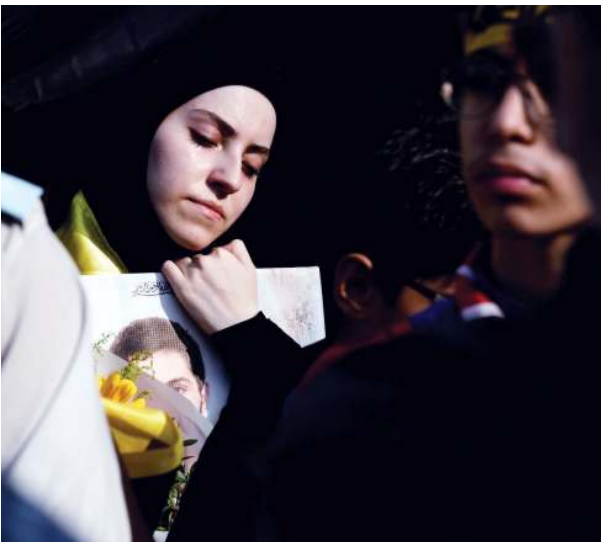
The announcement came as the 60-day negotiating period to find a peace deal between the US and Iran was expiring, with no word of an extension and both sides seemingly as far apart as they were two months ago.

Iranian Foreign Affairs spokesperson Esmail Baghaei told reporters in Tehran that "an understanding has been reached regarding the map of the transit route."

He did not elaborate, but details that have previously emerged suggest the deal would reopen the strait with ships entering through a route close to Iran and exiting through a route close to Oman. Ships would transit without paying fees or tolls during the interim period.

The US has sought an acceptable deal on opening the strait before ending its blockade of Iranian ports and it was not clear whether this would meet Washington's expectations.

Iran effectively closed the strait — through which roughly one-fifth of the world's traded oil supplies passed before the war — after Israel and the US



A woman mourns during the funeral of Hezbollah member Ali al-Haj Hassan, his wife and four children who were killed the previous day by an Israeli airstrike, in the southern suburb of Beirut, Lebanon (AP)

attacked the country on February 28.

Baghaei conceded the talks with Oman have gone slowly, "but we had planned, and still plan, to finalise the understanding in the form of a package: the map plus a joint statement."

His comments came as a 60-day deadline for finding an agreement to end the war expired, with no signs of a deal between the US and Iran.

Kushner meeting with Netanyahu

Mideast negotiator Jared Kushner, US President Donald Trump's son-in-law, was holding meetings with Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the day after he had talks with Hamas

chief Khalil al-Hayya in Egypt on disarmament.

The meetings with Netanyahu come after the Israeli leader rejected a 15-point, US-backed road map to move the truce deal forward in Gaza.

Hamas says it has agreed to the road map, which includes disarmament, and the group is urging mediators and the US-created Board of Peace to "compel" Israel to sign on as well.

But Israel, which under the road map must withdraw from Gaza, says Hamas must fully disarm before any Israeli withdrawal will occur.

Israeli troops occupy about 60 per cent of the strip and Netanyahu has previously threatened to advance further.

CPC members must uphold party leadership, says Xi

KJM VARMA ■ Beijing

Chinese President Xi Jinping on Monday said it is "imperative" for the members of the ruling Communist Party of China (CPC) to uphold the party's overall leadership, as he paid tributes to former president Jiang Zemin on his birth centenary.

Jiang served as CPC general secretary from 1989 to 2002 and as Chinese president from 1993 to 2003. He died in 2022 at the age of 96.

Addressing a grand ceremony at the Great Hall of the People here to commemorate Jiang's birth centenary, Xi urged party members to learn from the former leader's



firmness in handling crises, political conviction, adherence to communist ideals and loyalty to the party.

"On the new journey, it is imperative to uphold the overall leadership of the party and the centralised, unified leadership of the CPC Central Committee, unswervingly strengthen the full and

rigorous party self-governance, and ensure the party remains the strong leadership core in the cause of socialism with Chinese characteristics," Xi was quoted as saying by the state-run Xinhua news agency.

Thousands of party officials attended the ceremony, including all seven members of the Politburo Standing Committee, the CPC's highest decision-making body, as well as several retired state leaders.

Former premier Wen Jiabao and former vice-presidents Wang Qishan and Zeng Qinghong were among those present. However, former president Hu Jintao

was absent, the Hong Kong-based South China Morning Post reported. Jiang stepped down as CPC general secretary in 2002 and handed over the presidency to Hu in 2003. He remained chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), the top command of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), until 2004, overseeing a gradual transition to a new generation of Chinese leadership.

Jiang took charge following the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown, when Chinese security forces moved against student-led protests demanding democracy and greater political freedoms.

2 killed as Russian missile strike hits ArcelorMittal steel plant in Ukraine

ADITI KHANNA ■ London

Two people were killed after a Russian missile strike hit the ArcelorMittal steel plant in Ukraine, partially disrupting operations at the country's largest steelworks owned by Indian billionaire Lakshmi Mittal. ArcelorMittal Kryvyi Rih, a Public Joint Stock Company (PJSC) located at Kryvyi Rih in central Ukraine, strongly condemned the "insidious enemy attacks" in a statement that said its plant was "hit by a missile strike from an aggressor country" on Sunday night.

After initially confirming one fatality and 13 injuries sustained by employees and contractors, the company later updated its statement on the "hostile missile attack".

"Unfortunately the second victim of the aggressor's attack has been unearthed. There are two casualties this night's attack to date," PJSC ArcelorMittal Kryvyi Rih stated. "The search and rescue operations continue. An emergency response plan has



been put into effect. Firefighters, the Department of Labour Protection, rescuers, and medical workers are working at the scene. Those affected by the hostile missile strike are receiving all necessary medical care in the city's medical facilities.

"All our thoughts are with the families and loved ones of our colleagues who suffered from the hostile attack," the company said.

Belgian wildfire approaches Germany despite rain

ASSOCIATED PRESS
■ Sourbrodt

One of Belgium's biggest ever wildfires blazed out of control Monday even as cooler weather and rain eased conditions for firefighters, while in Greece a fire briefly flared up near the main airport on the outskirts of Athens.

Europe is sweltering through one of its hottest and driest summers on record, which a recent study said was fuelled by climate change.

Belgium's King Philippe interrupted his summer vacation to visit emergency services fighting the wildfire in the eastern Hainaut, about eight kilometres from the German border, as it spread east after moving into a pine forest on Sunday.

The fire in Liege province has burned an estimated 30 square kilometres, leaving blackened trees and smoldering ground. The scent of wood smoke drifted through the fog-drenched forest early on Monday.

Dozens of firefighters were aided by aircraft sent from Norway, Sweden, Germany and the Netherlands and local police with drones monitoring the fires after a much-welcomed cold front brought overnight rain.



South Korea hopes for US-North Korea talks as Trump scales drills

HYUNG-JIN KIM ■ Seoul

South Korea on Monday expressed hopes for resumption of diplomacy between the US and North Korea to ease animosities on the Korean Peninsula, hours after US President Donald Trump said he ordered annual US military exercises with South Korea to be scaled back.

Trump cited his good relationship with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un for the decision. The announcement baffled many in South Korea, a key US ally in Asia where national security is a top priority due to threats from nuclear-armed North Korea.

The 11-day, summertime Ulchi Freedom Shield exercises began Monday morning as scheduled and it wasn't known which parts of the training were being downsized.

North Korea did not immediately respond to the announcement.

North Korea previously threatened strong responses to the US-South Korean exercises, which it views as an invasion rehearsal.

Experts say Trump's step signals his willingness to reengage with Kim, but the North Korean leader, now emboldened by his advancing nuclear arsenal and expanding military cooperation with Russia, won't likely return to talks unless he is assured of serious US conces-



sions. Trump said in a social media post that the exercises are not only costly but "send a signal that is totally inappropriate and hostile" to North Korea, which he said "has been unthreatening and respectful" during his time in the White House.

Trump instructed Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth to "substantially reduce" the exercises, he said, adding that he recently asked South Korean President Lee Jae Myung if they would join the US in the "denuclearisation" of Iran, "and they said, No thanks!"

Trump's move is the latest example of the American president appearing to turn against an ally in favour of a leader cast by previous administrations as an adversary. Trump and others in his administration also have railed against NATO allies over a perceived lack of support for his war against Iran, even as they seek to confront an increasingly aggressive Russia in the Baltic region.

Dhiraj Seth receives honorary Nepal Army General rank

SHIRISH B PRADHAN ■ Kathmandu

Indian Army Chief General Dhiraj Seth was conferred the rank of Honorary General of Nepal Army by President Ramchandra Paudel during an investiture ceremony at Sheetal Niwas on Monday.

General Seth arrived in Nepal on Sunday on a four-day official visit at the invitation of his Nepalese Army counterpart General Ashok Raj Sigdel. Nepal Vice President Ram Sahaya Prasad Yadav, Foreign Minister Shisir Khanal, India's Ambassador to Nepal Naveen Srivastava and high officials of Nepal Army and the Nepal government were present during the ceremony, according to a press release by the Secretariat of President Paudel.

The conferral of the honorary rank continues a long tradition that started in 1950, under which Nepal and India confer the honorary rank



Nepal President Ramchandra Paudel shakes hands with Indian Army Chief General Dhiraj Seth during an investiture ceremony at Rashtrapati Bhavan in Kathmandu (PTI)

of general on each other's army chiefs. General Seth also met General Sigdel at the Nepal Army headquarters on Monday, and the two leaders

discussed matters of mutual interest and ways to strengthen bilateral military relations. The visit of the Indian Army chief to Nepal reaffirms

Thousands in Indonesia await aid after quake kills 68, overshadowing Independence Day

FIRDIA LISNAWATI/
NINIEK KARMINI ■ Reo

Thousands of people were still waiting for aid on the Indonesian island of Flores as the country marked its 81st Independence Day on Monday, days after a powerful earthquake killed at least 68 people, injured more than 200 others and damaged hundreds of homes and other buildings.

Many residents on Flores island in East Nusa Tenggara province spent the day mourning victims and waiting for aid to arrive to communities still cut off by the deadly quake.

During Indonesia's



A man walks building collapsed during an earthquake in Reo, East Nusa Tenggara province, Indonesia (AP)

Independence Day ceremony in the capital Jakarta, President Prabowo Subianto asked participants to pray for people affected by disasters in East Nusa Tenggara and

other parts of the country, while leading a nationwide moment of silence honouring the nation's independence heroes.

More than 1,300 homes

were damaged when the quake struck East Nusa Tenggara province on Saturday, with nearly 250 destroyed on Flores alone.

Some 5,000 people were forced into temporary shelters and 213 people were injured, according to the National Disaster Management Agency or BNPB.

The province's governor declared a 14-day state of emergency on Sunday.

The quake occurred at a depth of 10 km (6 miles) shortly before 6 am Saturday, according to the US Geological Survey, and residents fled in panic as tsunami warnings were issued but

later lifted. Authorities have since recorded 1,576 aftershocks into Monday, though only a small proportion were felt by residents. Thousands of people on Flores camped outside collapsed homes under tarpaulin tents overnight into Monday, sleeping outside because of the danger of more aftershocks.

An Associated Press photojournalist saw widespread devastation across the island, with fallen trees blocking roads, giant boulders hurled down slopes by landslides, and homes left shattered or heavily damaged. Buildings collapsed onto parked cars.

For many residents, the disaster revived painful

memories of a powerful earthquake and tsunami that struck Flores in 1992, killing about 2,500 people.

"My house is just rubble now," said Rasyid Jafar, a clothing trader in the village of Reo, the hardest-hit area in Manggarai regency, "We need food, medicine and clean water urgently."

Nearly 1,500 military and police personnel have been deployed across the disaster zone, supported by 10 aircraft to distribute 275 tonnes of aid to the area as logistical challenges have slowed deliveries to some hard-hit communities, said Abdul Muhari, the BNPB's deputy chief, in a video statement.

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Optimus Pharma gets DCGI nod for psoriasis drug

Optimus Pharma, an arm of PE firm PAG-backed Sekhmet Pharmaventures, on Monday said it has received approval from the Drugs Controller General of India to manufacture and market tapinarof bulk drug and cream, used in the treatment of plaque psoriasis in adults. Optimus Pharma said it is the first company in India to receive permission from the Drugs Controller General of India (DCGI) to manufacture and market "tapinarof cream 1 per cent w/w" and the tapinarof bulk drug. Tapinarof cream 1 per cent w/w is a non-steroidal topical treatment for plaque psoriasis in adults, the company said in a statement.

Psoriasis is a chronic, non-communicable skin condition that the World Health Organization estimates affects at least 100 million people worldwide.

The Indian market is currently not served by the innovator, and Optimus, through its partners, will be the first to introduce this product to patients in India, the company said. (PTI)

Govt invites applications to fill 2 member posts in CCI

The Government has invited applications for filling posts for members at the Competition Commission of India (CCI). The appointments will be for five years from the date of joining or till the age of 65 years, whichever is earlier, according to a notice by the Ministry of Corporate Affairs. The members will receive a consolidated monthly salary of ₹5 lakh and will not be entitled to a house or car, according to a notice.

Eligible candidates can apply until September 28. Applicants should have at least 15 years of professional experience and special knowledge in areas, including international trade, economics, commerce, law, finance, accountancy, management, industry, technology, public affairs or competition matters, including competition law and policy. (PTI)

Unemployment rate dips to 5.1% in July: Govt survey

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

Overall unemployment rate among persons aged 15 years and above declined to 5.1 per cent in July 2026 from 5.5 per cent in the previous month, according to a Government survey.

According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) conducted by the National Statistics Office (NSO), released on Monday, the Unemployment Rate (UR) among persons aged 15 years and above was 4.5 per cent in rural areas, down from 5 per cent in the previous month. The urban UR remained almost steady at 6.7 per cent in July 2026 compared to 6.6 per cent in June 2026.

Compared with July 2025, the overall UR and rural UR remained broadly stable in July 2026, whereas the urban UR decreased by 0.5 percentage point from 7.2 per cent in July 2025.

Rural UR across genders and urban male UR

The Pioneer

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM | TUESDAY | AUGUST 18, 2026

Bring back E10 for older vehicles: CEA

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

India should bring back a petrol variant with a lower ethanol blend to protect millions of older vehicles, according to a Government adviser, marking one of the strongest calls yet from a senior official for greater consumer choice amid growing concerns over the country's ethanol policy.

E20 petrol, containing 20 per cent ethanol, was rolled out last year and has been the only petrol variant available for sale at fuel stations across India since April 1 as part of efforts to cut India's dependence on imported oil, support domestic agriculture and reduce emissions.

Some users, particularly of

non-BS-VI vehicles, have, however, reported a drop in vehicular performance and damage to auto parts — a claim the government has repeatedly dismissed as far from the truth. Oil Ministry has maintained that it's not feasible to build and maintain infrastructure to supply multiple grades of fuel.

Chief Economic Advisor (CEA) V Anantha Nageswaran, alongside Akash Poojari, who is a consultant in the Department of Economic Affairs, in an opinion piece said the evidence did not support widespread claims that E20 damages vehicle engines, but argued that the policy could pose problems for India's large fleet of older two-wheelers.

Dismissing complaints outright would be "a mistake because beneath the noise lies a real problem and a much larger question," they wrote in the Indian Express.

With a disclaimer that the opinion they were expressing

was personal, the two authors said India has roughly 75 to 80 million older two-wheelers built before BS-IV that run on carburetors. A carburettor cannot sense the extra oxygen in the blend and adjust for it, so on

India expands agri-food exports to new markets

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

The commerce ministry has facilitated a number of fresh agricultural and processed-food items in July that have found buyers in new overseas markets, underlining the country's widening export palette, an official said.

Shipments of goods such as Amrapali mangoes, premium Areko cherries, frozen French fries, Ginger, pineapple, honey, GI-tagged Lakadong turmeric, Scentrose plums, Purabi Ice Cream, Neelam and Totapuri mangoes and flavoured makhana (fox nuts) were among the consignments shipped to destinations such as Singapore, Iraq, the UAE, Canada, Bhutan and Maldives.

The development comes as exporters and government agencies step up efforts to diversify markets and move

beyond traditional commodities, tapping rising demand for value-added and speciality food products abroad.

According to the commerce ministry, Amrapali mangoes from Gumla and

Deoghar in Jharkhand have been shipped to Dubai; Neelam and Totapuri mangoes from Karnataka were exported to the Maldives.

While Premium Areko cherries and Scentrose plums from Jammu & Kashmir were exported to the UAE and Singapore, Frozen French fries produced in Kashipur, Uttarakhand, were shipped to Iraq.

Similarly, consignments of ginger, pineapple, honey and GI-tagged Lakadong turmeric from Ri Bhoi in Meghalaya reached Singapore, and Flavoured makhana from Darbhanga, Bihar, found buyers in Canada.

Meanwhile, Purabi ice cream from Assam was exported to Bhutan, marking another processed-food item making inroads into neighbouring markets.

IRFC celebrates 80th I-Day with patriotic fervour

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

Indian Railway Finance Corporation Ltd (IRFC) celebrated the 80th Independence Day with great enthusiasm, dignity and patriotic spirit. On the occasion, Manoj Kumar Dubey, Chairman & Managing Director (CMD), IRFC, unfurled the National Flag and addressed the officers and employees, calling upon everyone to connect the spirit of freedom with the larger goal of nation-building.

The celebration was attended by Ranjay Chaudhary, Director (Finance), Manish Chandra, Executive Director (HR), Deepa Kotnis, Executive Director (Finance), along with senior officers and employees of IRFC. In his inspiring

address, CMD Manoj Kumar Dubey quoted the powerful lines of renowned poet Dushyant Kumar. He emphasised that performing our responsibilities with honesty, efficiency, transparency and dedication is also an important form of service to the nation.

The CMD said that today's India is a nation of confi-

dence, aspirations and immense possibilities. At such a time, every institution needs to think beyond its defined role and continuously explore new ways to contribute to the country's development journey.

He said that IRFC's journey is not limited to providing finance; it is also about providing financial strength and

momentum to India's development aspirations. Every responsibility undertaken by IRFC should therefore be seen not merely as an official assignment, but as a meaningful contribution towards nation-building.

On the occasion, Manish Chandra, Executive Director (HR) appreciated the talent, enthusiasm and dedicated efforts of the participants and announced attractive awards for them.

His encouraging gesture went beyond recognising the participants-it reflected IRFC's positive culture of appreciating every effort and encouraging every talent. The announcement brought additional energy and warmth to the celebrations and further motivated the participants.

Sensex drops 281 points, Nifty falls for 5th day amid rising crude prices

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Mumbai

Benchmark Sensex dropped by 281 points, while the broader Nifty fell for the fifth straight session on Monday, due to selling in IT, FMCG, and telecom shares amid rising crude oil prices and persistent geopolitical tensions in West Asia.

The 30-share BSE Sensex declined 281.09 points, or 0.36 per cent, to settle at 77,728.16. During the day, it dropped 555.5 points, or 0.71 per cent, to 77,453.75.

Falling for the fifth consecutive day, the 50-share NSE Nifty declined 78.35 points, or 0.32 per cent, to end at 24,287.65, taking the losses to the fifth day.

From the Sensex pack, Infosys, HCL Tech, Sun Pharma, Tata Consultancy

Index	Open	High	Low	Close	Change	% Change
NSE NIFTY	24,343.45	24,360.10	24,226.95	24,287.65	-78.35	-0.32%
BSE SENSEX	77,892.92	77,928.68	77,728.16	77,453.75	-281.09	-0.36%

Services, Tech Mahindra and ITC were among the biggest laggards.

Tata Steel, Axis Bank, Reliance Industries and Bharat Electronics were among the winners.

Brent crude, the global oil benchmark, climbed 1.11 per

cent to USD 89.50 per barrel.

"Indian equity markets ended marginally lower on Monday, extending last week's cautious tone as persistent uncertainty surrounding the US-Iran conflict and the absence of meaningful progress toward reopening

the Strait of Hormuz kept investors on the sidelines," Ponmudi R, CEO of Enrich Money, an online trading and wealth tech firm, said.

The BSE SmallCap Select index was up 0.38 per cent, while MidCap Select index dipped 0.11 per cent.

Among sectoral indices, IT dropped 1.74 per cent, followed by Focused IT (1.56 per cent), Telecommunication (1.16 per cent), Hospitals (0.94 per cent), FMCG (0.79 per cent), Healthcare (0.56 per cent), Services (0.48 per cent) and Consumer Durables (0.44 per cent).

Really climbed 1.38 per cent, followed by Metal jumped 1.03 per cent, Capital Goods (0.78 per cent), Industrials (0.60 per cent) and Commodities (0.45 per cent).

Among the Tata Group

stocks, TCS dropped 1.87 per cent, Tata Investment Corporation edged lower by 1.68 per cent, Trent declined 1.34 per cent, Tata Motors Passenger Vehicles was down 1.09 per cent and Tata Chemicals fell 1.04 per cent on the BSE amid reports that the Tata Sons annual general meeting scheduled for August 18 may not take place after Sir Ratan Tata Trust, a key shareholder in the holding company of the Tata Group, was unable to nominate a representative due to a regulatory restriction imposed by Maharashtra's Charity Commissioner.

Also, Tata Consumer Products lost 0.46 per cent, Tata Power dipped 0.44 per cent, Tata Communications skidded 0.40 per cent and Tata Elxsi slipped 0.13 per cent.

Cybersecurity now also board room issue, need caution in AI deployment: SEBI

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Mumbai

Cybersecurity is no longer only an IT-related challenge but also a board-level issue, SEBI Chairman Tuhin Kanta Pandey said on Monday, cautioning that proper care should be taken while deploying artificial intelligence in critical infrastructure.

Pandey underlined that automation in cyber defence introduces more risks, and AI for cyber security must "itself be secure, governed and accountable."

Speaking at the inauguration of a symposium for cyber defence organised by SEBI at

its capacity-building body, the National Institute of Securities Markets near here, Pandey said: "We need to look at cybersecurity more from a collective perspective than merely an individual lens."

"Cybersecurity is no longer only an IT issue. It is a board-level issue. It is a business-continuity issue. It is a market-integrity issue. It is an investor-confidence issue," Pandey said.

He urged fellow regulators, as well as countries, to share best practices when he said that any good practice, when developed, should become a reference point for others.

"In cyberspace, our collective resilience depends on the strength of the connections between us," he said.

Artificial intelligence, agentic systems, automation, advanced analytics and eventually quantum technologies will change the way cyber defence is conducted in the future, Pandey said.

"We ought to use these technologies responsibly to build systems that can identify anomalies, correlate intelligence, prioritise vulnerabilities, recommend actions and, where appropriate and properly governed, initiate defensive responses," Pandey said.

"But as we introduce more

autonomy, we also introduce new risks. Therefore, AI for cybersecurity must itself be secure, governed and

accountable," he said.

He highlighted the risks to cybersecurity in the era of quantum computing, and

added that SEBI as well as other regulators have started to build defences as computing itself undergoes a huge

change. Quantum computing may challenge some of the cryptographic assumptions on which today's digital systems are built, Pandey said.

"...the concern is not only about the day when a sufficiently powerful quantum computer becomes available. The concern is also about data that can be captured today and potentially decrypted in the future. That is why post-quantum cryptography cannot remain a research topic for tomorrow," he said.

"We need to use "crypt agility", or the ability to change cryptography algorithms without redesigning the entire system," he said,

underlining that "quantum readiness is a resilience programme, not a science-fiction exercise".

The regulator has launched a revamped 'SEBI Incident Reporting Portal' designed to make reporting more structured, timely and actionable, and the 'Cyber Suraksha Portal' initiative is intended to create a central hub for sharing cyber security knowledge, vulnerability warnings, policy measures and incident insights across the securities market ecosystem.

He urged the system to cooperate, prepare and respond to cyber threats with the aim of developing faster evolution of cyber defences.

BUSINESS 10

a vehicle travels on a litre of fuel. But the authors estimated the overall energy penalty at around 6-7 per cent, rather than the much larger reduction sometimes claimed online.

Testing in the United States and India has also found no evidence of increased engine wear in vehicles compatible with E20, the authors said.

However, older two-wheelers that use carburettors may face separate challenges because their fuel systems were not designed to adjust automatically to the higher oxygen content associated with ethanol-blended petrol. Older rubber seals that are not ethanol-compatible may also deteriorate when exposed to the fuel.

Rupee falls 19 paise to close at 95.61 against US dollar

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Mumbai

The rupee depreciated 19 paise to close at 95.61 (provisional) against the US dollar on Monday, amid weak domestic equity markets and a surge in crude oil prices.

Forex traders said the USD/INR pair is likely to trade with a slight negative bias, pressured by the delay in the deal between the US and Iran, rising crude oil prices and broader dollar support.

Moreover, investors' sentiment turned cautious after the Reserve Bank of India on August 14 said that its swap facility for FCNR (B) deposits will be available only for deposits mobilised till August 31.

Date	Rate (₹ per US \$)	Change
10	95.30	-0.13
11	95.33	+0.03
12	95.36	-0.06
13	95.45	-0.12
14	95.42	+0.03
17	95.61*	-0.19

*Provisional
(Inverted scale) KBK Infographics

At the interbank foreign exchange, the rupee opened at 95.50 against the greenback and traded in a range of 95.49-95.62 during the session. It eventually settled at 95.61 (provisional), lower by 19 paise from its previous close.

On Friday, the rupee appreciated 3 paise to close at 95.42 against the US dollar.

Earlier, the cut-off date for Foreign Currency Non-Resident (Bank) or FCNR (B) deposits was September 30.

Under the FCNR (B) scheme, banks offer attractive interest rates to mobilise foreign currency deposits.

The Reserve Bank on Friday said its concessional swap facility, introduced to encourage foreign currency inflows, has attracted \$56.84 billion till August 13.

The Indian rupee declined on weak domestic markets and a surge in crude oil prices. However, a soft dollar cushioned the downside, Anuj Choudhary, Research Analyst, Mirae Asset Sharekhan said, adding, "we expect the rupee to trade with a slight negative bias on delay in the deal between the US and Iran and rising crude oil prices."

Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading at 99.40, down 0.26 per cent. Brent crude, the global oil benchmark, was trading higher by 0.99 per cent at \$89.40 per barrel in futures trade. On the domestic equity market front, Sensex dropped 281.09 points to settle at 77,728.16, while the Nifty closed lower by 78.35 points at 24,287.65.

Foreign institutional investors purchased equities worth Rs 508.12 crore on a net basis on Friday, according to exchange data.

▼ BRIEFLY

East Bengal drub Rajshahi Stars of Bangladesh in AFC Women’s Champions League



Ghanaian attacking midfielder Olivia Anokye scored a brace as East Bengal drubbed Rajshahi Stars FC of Bangladesh 4-0 to begin their AFC Women’s Champions League Preliminary Round campaign in style here on Monday.

Anokye struck in the ninth and 38th minutes, while India internationals Astam Oraon (26th) and Soumya Guguloth (71st) netted once each to wrap up a dominant victory.

East Bengal next face Guam’s Rovers FC on Thursday and hosts Sabah FA on Sunday. Only the group winners will qualify for the group stage of the main tournament.

East Bengal started strongly and were 1-0 up with Anokye stroking home a penalty despite the best efforts of goalkeeper Rupna Chakma. The IWL champions extended their lead when Rimpa Haldar floated a cross beyond Rupna, with Sulanjana Raul reacting quickest at the back post to cut back the ball for Anokye to grab her second of the day.

Rajshahi regrouped after the break, but even though they offered more resistance, they had only one long-range strike from Monika Chakma, which Panthoi Chanu Elangbam saved. The Moshal Girls played the patient game with the advantage in their hands, capitalising on a defensive mistake to add to their scoreline, with Sulanjana playing Soumya through to slot it home. (PTI)

Colombia defender Jhon Lucumi moves to Juventus



Colombia defender Jhon Lucumi signed for Juventus on Monday for 19.5 million euros (\$22.6 million) after impressing at the World Cup.

Juventus said the 28-year-old center back had signed a four-year contract and the fee paid to Serie A rival Bologna could rise above 22 million euros (\$25.5 million) with performance bonuses.

Lucumi played almost every minute of Colombia’s five games at the World Cup, where the team conceded just one goal, in an opening 3-1 win over Uzbekistan.

Colombia lost in the round of 16 to Switzerland in a penalty shootout, after a 0-0 draw where Lucumi’s header struck the bar in extra time. He was substituted ahead of the shootout. Lucumi played four years at Bologna, including in the Champions League two seasons ago, having first arrived in Europe to join Genk in Belgium.

Juventus plays in the Europa League this season after a sixth-place finish in Serie A. (AP)

Praggnanandhaa draws with Aronian; remains joint 2nd

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
■ St Louis (USA)

India’s R Praggnanandhaa played out another draw with GM Levon Aronian of United States in the sixth round of the Sinquefeld cup, part of the Grand Chess tour.

The Indian GM remained in joint second spot with 3.5 points with just three rounds remaining.

Wesley So of United States remained in sole lead on four points that saw just one decisive game out of a possible five in the \$475,000 prize money tournament. For the record, Wesley drew with Maxime Vachier-Lagrave of France. GM Praggnanandhaa, along with Vachier-Lagrave and German Vincent Keymer shares the second spot while the American trio of top seed Fabiano Caruana, Sevia



Samuels and Aronian are sharing the fifth spot on three points each.

Anish Giri of Holland is next in queue with World Championship contender

Indian women’s team eyes big win over South Africa

MONA PARTHSARATHI
■ Amstelveen

High on confidence after holding Olympic silver medallists and world No. 4 China to a draw, India will look to strengthen their bid for a top-two finish in Pool D when they face South Africa in their second Women’s Hockey World Cup match here on Tuesday.

India, ranked ninth in the world, produced a disciplined display to secure a 2-2 draw against a fancied Chinese side in their tournament opener. The result has given them a valuable point and put them in a good position to qualify for the second round.

England currently lead Pool D following their 4-0 win over South Africa, with China and India next in the standings, while South Africa are fourth.

For the semifinal race the top two teams from each pool will be divided into two



groups (E and F) of four teams each. Each team will play matches against the opponents they did not face in the first round.

A team’s result in the first round against the progressing team from its pool will be carried forward in second

round. It means that India and China will not play each other if they reach the second round and their one point each from the draw will be carried forward.

For India, Tuesday’s game is, therefore, an opportunity to put themselves firmly in

control of their qualification hopes. A win over 18th-ranked South Africa would not only boost their chances of finishing in the top two but also provide momentum ahead of their final pool game.

“We don’t have to worry

This is probably my last year in football, says Cristiano Ronaldo

ASSOCIATED PRESS ■ Riyadh

Cristiano Ronaldo says this Saudi Pro League season is likely to be the last of his professional career.

The 41-year-old superstar’s contract with Riyadh club Al-Nassr, signed in December 2022, expires next June, and he has told Vogue magazine that another is unlikely.

“This is probably my last year of football, and I want to leave a spectacular legacy,” Ronaldo said.

The Portugal forward, who has scored 976 career goals, married long-time partner, Georgina Rodriguez, earlier this month.

“I have my future all mapped out,” he said. “I have so many things to keep me busy that to tell you just one thing is hard. Because football could leave a big hole, you have to fill your time in various ways, not just one.

“And also have more fun, travel more, watch and play padel, which I really like, and continue to enjoy what I’ve earned — what we’ve earned. Because after all, it’s been 25 years with a lot of sacrifice.”

The 2026-27 SPL season is Ronaldo’s 25th as a professional. During his career, he has won five Ballon d’Or awards and five UEFA



Champions League titles.

Ronaldo’s 28 league goals last season helped Al-Nassr become champion of Saudi Arabia in May to secure his first trophy since arriving in Riyadh, and a first league title for the club since 2019.

After returning from his wedding, he missed Al-Nassr’s first game of its title defense on Saturday, watching from the sidelines as it opened with a 3-0 win over Al-Fateh. “Cristiano is here today, and he is always present with us,” Al-Nassr coach Ange Postecoglou said after the game.

Ronaldo could play against

Al-Diriayah in the King’s Cup on Tuesday.

“The most important thing now is recovery, especially as we have only two days after this match,” former Tottenham Hotspur and Nottingham Forest coach Postecoglou said.

Ronaldo’s comments came days after long-time rival Lionel Messi revealed that, following his father’s death, he may soon retire.

“I don’t know how to carry on,” Messi, 39, said. “I used to just play football, and now I’m really not sure if I’ll carry on doing it for much longer.”

Badminton has now become a chess game: Kirsty Gilmour

SAUMOJYOTI S CHOUDHURY
■ New Delhi

Badminton has become as much a mental game as it is physical, said reigning European women’s singles champion Kirsty Gilmour as she compared the modern playing style to a game of chess.

She said badminton has evolved over the years to become a sport in which mental fortitude plays as big a role as physical tenacity.

“There is a man-to-man match happening and there is also a chess game happening at the same time. Just trying to stretch one area and open up another area. I am really working on the mental side of my game along with physical side, which has become crucial,” the world number 35 Scottish shuttler said.

Gilmour crashed out of the World Championships after losing to fifth seed Han Yue of China 22-20 13-21 13-21 in the opening round that began here on Monday.

Describing the ongoing event as markedly better than the India open held at the same venue earlier this year, the 32-year-old Gilmour said she was pleased to see



the availability of sanitary napkins in women’s washrooms. This is Gilmour’s 10th appearance at the world event since her debut in 2013.

“I think it’s great. We plan as much as we can for that but sometimes our bodies have different ideas and plans, different hormones. So I think just we have toilet rules, we should have sanitary products as well.

“I am very proud to come from Scotland because it is the first country in the world to make it mandatory for public places to have sanitary products. I would really love to see uptake here and in other countries,” she said. She is quite pleased with

the upgraded arrangements for the ongoing mega-event. The India Open was marred by images of pigeon poop on playing courts and the spotting of a monkey in the spectator stands. Adding to the chaos was Delhi’s poor air quality and the freezing conditions inside the venue.

Stung by the criticism that came from players as well as observers of the game, the Sports Authority of India (SAI) along with the Badminton Association of India (BAI) carried out renovation of the Indira Gandhi Indoor Stadium.

Gilmour said the drift is an issue in the ongoing event but it is the same for all shuttlers. (PTI)

Premier League is back and uncertainty pervades start of post-Guardiola era

STEVE DOUGLAS
■ London

The post-Pep Guardiola era is getting underway in English soccer amid uncertainty and upheaval - not just at Manchester City but across the whole of the Premier League.

Get this: Heading into the new top-flight season beginning Friday, nine clubs have new permanent managers - an unprecedented number at the start of an English top-flight campaign. At age 33, Fabian Hürzeler is the fifth longest-serving coach in the Premier League ... and he has been at Brighton for just two years.

The biggest vacuum needing to be filled is at City, following the departure of

Guardiola after 10 record-breaking years in charge. Good luck following that, Enzo Maresca — especially after the team’s lamentable performance in the Community Shield loss to Arsenal on Sunday. Among the other top clubs with new coaches are Liverpool (Andoni Iraola), Chelsea (Xabi Alonso) and Newcastle (Matthias Jaissle) — all of which competed in the Champions League last season.

Heck, it makes Roberto De Zerbi — appointed by Tottenham on March 31 to escape relegation — and Michael Carrick - installed as interim manager at Manchester United for the second half of last season - seem like veritable



veterans.

It also makes Arsenal, the reigning champion, appear a haven of stability as Mikel Arteta goes into his seventh full season at the helm as by far the league’s longest-serving manager.

Yet, there’s a big question mark hanging over the Gunners, too: Will there be a

hangover after winning the league for the first time in 22 years?

The non-stop roller coaster that is the Premier League begins in earnest Friday night when Arsenal hosts promoted Coventry, which has a compelling backstory of its own after being out of the big time for 25 years. (AP)

Mission Olympics: How PVL is helping Indian volleyball create its own pathway

SANSKRITI GAUBA
■ Panjim

India’s growing franchise volleyball ecosystem and dedicated Under-21 tournaments are creating a clearer pathway for young players to progress from the grassroots to the professional game and eventually the senior national team, with the ultimate ambition of Olympic qualification.

The recently-concluded inaugural Guardians Trophy, organised by Goa Guardians, brought together Under-21 players from across the country, giving them an opportunity to compete at franchise level and showcase their talent to coaches and scouts.

Goa Guardians coach Viral Shah believes sustained investment in youth is essential for India’s long-

term prospects. “The future of India is in these players. If we don’t give them exposure and teach them at this level, then the future of Indian volleyball will suffer. This is the level where we can work with them and build them,” Shah told PTI.

The tournament also exposed youngsters to players from different regions, helping them adapt to different cultures, languages and playing styles.

“Players from South, North, East and West are all here. Every culture, behaviour and playing style is different. When they stay together, they learn and communicate. Our aim is to bring them together and build a team,” Shah added.

For the players, the objective is to use these opportunities to



develop their skills and earn a senior India call-up.

Hyderabad Black Hawks U-21 captain Deepak, who led his side

to the inaugural Guardians Trophy title, said his immediate focus was on continuing his development.

“We have to develop our game

further. I want to come to India and play for the senior team,” he said.

Deepak began playing volleyball in his village at the age of 10 or 11, inspired by his grandfather and father, who were also spikers.

Goa player Suraj said the expanding league structure was giving youngsters more opportunities to compete and learn.

“Volleyball is getting a lot of attention in India. There are a lot of leagues and new platforms. There is U-21 for the youth, there are nationals, there is the league and there is PBL,” he said.

He also highlighted the value of playing alongside experienced athletes.

“We get to learn a lot. There are senior players in our team, so we get experience from playing with

them. We gain confidence. It is very good,” Suraj said.

Yogesh Kumar, a Goa player and retained player of Mumbai Meteors in the Prime Volleyball League, believes the growth of youth tournaments could eventually strengthen India’s international prospects.

“If the youth players progress, they will represent India very well at the senior level. That’s why our Indian team can qualify for the Olympics,” Yogesh said. He said the Guardians Trophy also provided a platform for young players to be noticed.

“Every team has an Under-21 player and every team has seen them. Players can be picked from here. It was a very good opportunity for us,” he said.

The tournament’s significance

extends beyond the competition itself. The trials conducted by the franchise teams have widened the pool of players competing for opportunities, while academies and grassroots programmes are providing a more sustained development structure.

Prime Volleyball League CEO Joy Bhattacharjya said the creation of such pathways was central to the league’s long-term vision.

“For the last four years, the Prime Volleyball League has been conducting the main tournament and we have seen a lot of interest from kids and young players. Then the Goa Guardians took this important decision to have a youth Under-21 tournament and invite all the teams to bring their own squads,” Bhattacharjya said. (PTI)



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