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Protests trigger sweeping purge in NTA

From dismissals to fresh appointments, NTA begins restructuring after nationwide protests

DEEPAK KUMAR JHA
■ New Delhi

In major crackdown in any Government department in recent times, the National Testing Agency (NTA) on Friday terminated the services of 47 officials amidst the NEET-UG paper leak row followed by massive protests across the country. Late Thursday, education ministry also affected major reshuffle.

Apart from the dismissals, legal and criminal proceedings are also set to be initiated against some of the officials in NTA. The move is part of a broader push to reform the exam conducting agency functioning, with more corrective measures expected in the coming days.

"NTA has terminated 47 officials from their service. Legal and criminal actions will also be taken against some of these officials. This

CJP founder Abhijeet Dipke addressing the ongoing protest at Jantar Mantar demanding the resignation of Union Minister of Education, Dharmendra Pradhan over NEET paper leak issue on Friday

is part of a complete overhaul of NTA that has been in controversy over paper leaks. While further reforms are on the cards there will be complete overhaul of NTA," sources in the education ministry said.

Simultaneously NTA issued advertisements for a set of senior professional appointments at the level of General

Manager and has separately opened the engagement of sixteen Young Professionals through the Pratibha Setu portal of the Union Public Service Commission. These measures represent the first concrete step in the institutional rebuild of NTA that is being implemented in line with the recommendations of the High-Level Committee of Experts chaired by Prof K Radhakrishnan.

NTA was functioning with only 24 permanent employees against a sanctioned strength of 39 posts. The agency was relying on 73 contractual employees and 124 outsourced personnel to manage its operations.

A day earlier in a late night development, the Appointments Committee of Cabinet replaced Education Secretary Vineet Joshi with Naresh Pal Gangwar.

Tougher anti-paper leak Bill cleared

RAJESH KUMAR ■ New Delhi

The Union Cabinet on Friday approved an amendment Bill to the existing Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act, 2024, meant to prevent paper leaks and cheating in public examinations and to provide for fast-track courts for paper leak cases.

The Bill is expected to be tabled in the Parliament on Monday. Parliamentary affairs minister, Kiren Rijiju said PM Modi had directed that there should be no delay in bringing the Bill. "We are preparing to present the Bill, but after you receive the briefing on our Cabinet decision, we will inform you about our timing.

The Prime Minister has said that there should be no delay in the Bill we are bringing regarding students. The country also wants what the Prime Minister has said, so it would not be right to resort to any tactics to obstruct it... Congress will fall into this if

PM Modi addressing the nation through a video message on Thursday night, announcing stricter laws and fast-track courts to curb examination paper leaks

they continue to disrupt the parliamentary proceedings. We are taking important steps for the future of the students," Rijiju said.

During a briefing on Cabinet decisions on Friday, information and broadcasting minister, Ashwani Vaishnav was asked several

queries about the Government's plan for strict actions against paper leaks and move for constituting a fast-track court, but he did not to answer them.

The move comes after Prime Minister Narendra Modi's late-night video message promising more action, amid nationwide protests over alleged irregularities in the NEET examination and growing demands for stricter safeguards to protect the integrity of competitive exams.

According to sources, the proposed legislation provides for a maximum jail term of 10 years and a fine of up to ₹10 crore. It also seeks to increase the minimum imprisonment for individuals convicted in paper leak cases from the current three years to five years.

The Bill is aimed at preventing organised gangs and institutions that indulge in unfair means for monetary gains, while protecting the candidates from its provisions.

The Bystander

PIONEER IN SHORT

BANGLADESH PRESIDENT RESIGNS

Bangladesh President Mohammed Shahabuddin resigned on Friday, citing serious health complications, nearly two years before the end of his five-year term. Parliament Speaker Hafiz Uddin Ahmed assumed charge as Acting President for up to 90 days under Article 54 of the Constitution, during which a new President must be elected. In his resignation letter, Shahabuddin, 76, said he was suffering from heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, kidney complications and autonomic neuropathy, which causes occasional loss of consciousness, leaving him physically and mentally unfit to discharge his constitutional responsibilities. Ahmed, 80, cut short a medical visit to Bangkok to return to Dhaka and formally accepted the resignation.

Record 1 million witness Puri Bahuda Yatra

SAROJ KUMAR MISHRA ■ Puri

Amid religious fervour and gaiety, the Badadanda, the holy grand pathway of Puri, witnessed a record turnout of devotees in the history, consisting a million of people who participated in the grand return procession of the three colossal chariots on way to the Jagannath Temple from the Gundicha shrine, acclaimed as birthplace of the sibling deities.

The cloudy weather with small raindrops along the 2.5 km long Badadanda on Friday supported the pilgrims from

- Chariots pulled to Singha Dwar incident-free
- Suna Besha today

various parts of the country to throng Puri and take a glimpse of the Bahuda Yatra, the return ceremony of holy deities, Sri Jagannath, Balabhadra and Devi Suwara with their chariots.

Eyewitness described the crowd to cross a million people, who managed to watch the grandest religious festival of Odisha in the bay city. Reports of no major inci-

dents came from in the city.

The chariots already parked at Gundicha Temple, began journey at 4 pm where the rolling of Balabhadra's chariot 'Taladwaja' was made first, followed by Darpadanalan and Nandighosh, the chariots of Devi Suwara and Sri Jagannath respectively. Before the chariots were pulled, Pahandi Bijje rite of deities was made with the idols leaving the Gundicha Temple

from 11 am which took three hours to fix idols in their respective cars parked in front of the shrine. King Dibyasingha Dev performed the ceremonial Chherapahanra rites atop each chariot.

The rolling of chairots was underway when the report was being filed. A large number of police forces and devotees engaged in the pulling along the Grand Road even after sunset. The chariots are expected to reach Lions Gate of Jagannath Temple due to facilities of lighting system by

the administration along the Grand Road, so that the journey of those cars in the night suffer no problem.

Sources said despite religious restrictions on pullings of chariots after a sunset, the Suna Besha, the gold attire of deities scheduled on Saturday, has forced the administration to ensure their parking at Jagannath Temple in the night for installation of security barricades for over millions of visitors, who are expected to visit on Saturday.

US slaps 10% tariff on imports from India

SAGAR KULKARNI
■ Washington

The US has imposed a 10 per cent tariff on goods imported from India and 16 other countries as part of a wider action against products made using forced labour.

On June 3, when the US had proposed tariffs under Section 301 of the Trade Act, India was bracketed among countries attracting 12.5 per cent levies, but Washington took note of the amendment New Delhi made to its foreign trade policy prohibiting the import of goods produced using forced labour.

On July 14, India amended its policy to introduce that prohibition. The Government amended the foreign trade policy to prohibit the import of goods produced using forced labour, amid a US

US President Donald Trump holding a championship ring during an event to honor the 2025 World Series champions Los Angeles Dodgers on Thursday

investigation into forced labour practices in 60 countries, including India.

"As a result of these actions, the Trade Representative has advised me that the goods of these economies should be tar-

iffed at the 10 per cent rate to further encourage these economies to effectively enforce such prohibitions," US President Donald Trump said in a memorandum on the issue on Thursday.

US Trade Representative Jamieson Greer announced the new tariffs on 60 countries on Thursday, a day before the expiration of 10 per cent additional levies on all countries.

Countries that do not have laws barring goods produced using forced labour - such as China, the United Kingdom and Japan - will face tariffs of 12.5 per cent.

The forced labour tariffs will not apply to raw materials that would lead to unavailability of domestic supply; products that would cause economy-wide disruptions and on products that cannot be produced or grown in sufficient quantities in the US.

Of the 60 countries facing the tariffs, the 10 per cent rate applies to 17 countries, including India, Canada, the UK, Bangladesh and Pakistan.

13 killed in Himachal boulder tragedy

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Shimla

Thirteen people, including a six-month-old infant, were killed while two others had a narrow escape after massive boulders from a nearby hill suddenly fell on a moving taxi on the Udaipur-Pangi road in Himachal Pradesh's Lahaul and Spiti on Friday.

Fifteen people were in the SUV, which was on its way from Kullu to Killar when large boulders suddenly crashed onto the vehicle near Kadu nallah, completely crushing it. Following the impact, the rear section of the vehicle caught fire.

Bystanders and Army personnel attempted to extinguish the flames at the spot, about 70 km from district headquarters Keylong. Videos of the incident have

Wreckage of a vehicle after boulders fell on it from a hillside in Chamba district of Himachal Pradesh on Friday

also surfaced, showing the vehicle almost flattened and engulfed in fire.

A team was dispatched to the site immediately after the police received information about the accident. Relief and rescue operations are underway, and the administration is closely monitoring the situation, police said.

Apart from the infant, there were seven men and four women among the dead. One of the deceased was yet to be identified. The majority of them were from Pangi in Chamba district, police said.

GOVT MOVES TO CRIMINALISE INSULT TO VANDE MATARAM

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

The Union Government on Friday introduced a Bill in the Rajya Sabha seeking to make any obstruction or insult to the national song, Vande Mataram, a criminal offence. Minister of State for Home Affairs, Nityanand Rai introduced The Prevention of Insults to National Honour (Amendment) Bill, 2026, as several Opposition members, including those belonging to Left parties, opposed its introduction.

The Bill will amend the Prevention of Insults to National Honour Act, 1971, which makes desecration of or disrespect toward the country's national symbols — including the national flag, the Constitution, and the national anthem — a criminal offence, carrying a punishment of up to three years' imprisonment. It seeks to give Vande Mataram the same statutory protection as the national anthem.

Odisha signs MoUs with HCLTech, Sarvam AI

Rs15,000 Cr investment to create 6,000 jobs

PNS ■ Bhubaneswar

Odisha signed two Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) with global IT major HCLTech and indigenous AI startup Sarvam AI to strengthen the state's digital and artificial intelligence ecosystem. Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi, who attended the signing ceremony at Lok Seva Bhawan on Friday, described the partnerships as the beginning of a new technology



revolution in Odisha. Under the agreements, HCLTech will establish a Global Delivery Centre in Odisha with an initial investment of Rs 730 crore, creating over 6,000 direct jobs for skilled youth. HCLTech and Sarvam AI will also jointly set up an

AI-optimised Data Centre within a state-backed Sovereign AI Park. The combined investment in these initiatives is projected to reach Rs 15,000 crore over the next five years. Majhi said Odisha aims to secure a place among the top three states in NITI Aayog's

Investment Friendliness Index. He said the government is promoting emerging sectors such as semiconductors, artificial intelligence, information technology, textiles and pharmaceuticals alongside traditional industries. The Chief Minister said Odisha has received investment proposals worth over Rs 20 lakh crore, with projects exceeding Rs 10 lakh crore already approved and projects worth more than Rs 3 lakh crore under implementation. He added that reforms such as the new industrial policy, single-window clearance system and land bank mechanism have reduced the time between

signing an MoU and project execution to less than 100 days. Electronics and Information Technology Minister Mukesh Mahaling said the agreements marked a major milestone for Odisha's IT and electronics sector. HCL Chairperson Roshni Nadar Malhotra reaffirmed the company's commitment to investing in Odisha and announced plans for a dedicated AI Park. Sarvam AI said the proposed AI Park and Data Centre would enable AI services in Odia and other Indian languages to be delivered from Odisha, further strengthening the state's digital infrastructure.

SCB performs rare CAH surgeries

PNS ■ Cuttack

Doctors at the Plastic Surgery Department of SCB Medical College and Hospital have successfully performed rare reconstructive surgeries on four women suffering from Congenital Adrenal Hyperplasia (CAH), a genetic hormonal disorder. The surgeries are expected to significantly improve the patients' quality of life. The four patients—three from Odisha and one from Jharkhand—were admitted to the premier government hospital for treatment of CAH, a condition that affects hor-

mone production and can lead to reproductive and other health complications. Doctors said the disorder affects one in every 5,000 to 10,000 children. The surgeries were carried out by a team led by Prof. Dr Biswajit Mishra, Head of the Department of Plastic Surgery. Clarifying misconceptions surrounding the procedure, Dr Mishra said the surgeries were not gender reassignment procedures. "This is not a gender change surgery. The four individuals who underwent surgery were chromosomally female by birth, and all of them carried

the 46 XX chromosome," he said. Explaining the condition, Dr Mishra said CAH is caused by genetic mutations or deletions that disrupt the production of enzymes essential for steroid hormone synthesis. He said the disorder is linked to deficiencies in enzymes such as 21-hydroxylase, 11-beta-hydroxylase and 17-alpha-hydroxylase, which play a crucial role in hormone production. Any abnormality in these enzymes hampers steroid synthesis, resulting in the condition. Doctors said timely diagnosis and appropriate surgical and med

Maharshi unrest Police arrest three; vehicle seized

PNS ■ Bhubaneswar

Three persons have been arrested after a clash at the Maharshi College campus in Bhubaneswar where alleged reckless driving and abusive behaviour created panic among students. According to the Saheed Nagar police, the accused allegedly entered the campus in a vehicle, drove around recklessly to assert dominance and used obscene language, triggering tension on the college premises. The situation later escalated into a physical altercation between the two groups, during which one student sustained injuries. Following the incident, the Saheed Nagar police registered a case and launched an investigation. Three persons were ar-

rested in connection with the clash and later produced before a court. Police also seized the vehicle allegedly used during the incident. Preliminary investigation indicates that the arrested individuals were outsiders and not students of Maharshi College. Police are now probing how they gained entry into the campus and whether more people were involved in the incident. The clash has raised concerns over security on college campuses and the entry of outsiders into educational institutions. Police are examining CCTV footage and other evidence to establish the sequence of events and identify any additional persons linked to the violence. The investigation is continuing, and further action will be taken based on the findings of the probe.

ECoR to run special trains for Suna Vesha, Acharpana

PNS ■ Bhubaneswar

To ensure a comfortable and hassle-free journey for devotees and to manage the increased passenger demand during the world-famous Rath Yatra of Lord Jagannath, the East Coast Railway is operating special trains from various parts of Odisha as well as neighbouring States. In addition to the regular train services to and from Puri, East Coast Railway has arranged several special trains for Suna Vesha and Adharapana to facilitate the travel of thousands of pilgrims. These special services

have been planned from almost all regions of Odisha, ensuring convenient connectivity for devotees visiting Puri during the festive period. For Suna Vesha, special trains will operate to Puri from Paradip, Angul, Bhadrak, Talcher, Kendrapada Road, Dhenkanal, Baleswar, Brahmapur, Keonjhar, Khurda Road and Daspalla. Similarly, from Puri, special trains will run to Talcher, Badampahar, Dhenkanal, Bangiriposi, Rayagada, Bhadrak, Angul, Gunupur, Rourkela, Daspalla, Sambalpur, Palasa, Visakhapatnam and Shalimar.

To cater to the additional passenger rush during Adharapana, East Coast Railway will also operate special trains towards Puri from Brahmapur, Daspalla, Angul, Kendujhargarh, Paradeep, Bhadrak and Khurda Road. For the return journey, special trains will depart from Puri to Talcher, Dhenkanal, Bangiriposi, Bhadrak, Angul, Daspalla, Khurda Road, Brahmapur, Kendujhargarh and Paradeep. To ensure seamless travel, the Ministry of Railways and East Coast Railway have made comprehensive arrangements for the convenience of devotees and pilgrims. A

24x7 control room has been established to address passenger concerns and monitor smooth train operations. Additional ticket booking and mobile ticket counters, train enquiry and information counters, continuous public announcements, crowd management measures, video wall displays, UTS on Mobile facilities, dedicated pilgrim waiting areas, enhanced security, catering services, medical assistance with ambulances, and uninterrupted power supply, water supply, cleanliness, drinking water and adequate toilet facilities have also been provided.

The Holy Trinity returns to Sribanikshetra



PNS ■ Bhubaneswar

After completing their nine-day annual sojourn, Lord Jagannath, Lord Balabhadra and Devi Subhadra returned to Sribanikshetra on Friday the occasion of the Bahuda Yatra. The return car festival concluded with great religious fervour and grandeur. The day began with the performance of traditional rituals, including Mangala Arati, Rosha Homa, Surya Puja, Ratha Puja and Pahandi. After the completion of these rituals, the ceremonial Chhara Pahanra (sweeping of the chariots) was performed at 3 pm by Dr Achyuta Samanta, founder of KIIT and KISS. At 4 pm, devotees began pulling the chariots of Lord Balabhadra, Devi Subhadra and Lord Jagannath. A unique feature of the Rath Yatra at Sribanikshetra is that the

chariot of Devi Subhadra is pulled exclusively by women devotees. The three beautifully decorated chariots were taken from the Gundicha Temple back to Sribanikshetra. More than 30,000 devotees from the surrounding areas gathered to witness the Bahuda Yatra. They participated in pulling the magnificently adorned Taladhwaia, Darpadalana and Nandighosha chariots, seeking the divine blessings of the deities. The entire Ratha Danda (Grand Road) reverberated with the sounds of bells, Mardala drums and the joyous chants of devotees. The Suna Besha (Golden Attire) of the deities will be held on Saturday. Elaborate arrangements have been made by the KIIT Temple Trust to ensure that devotees can have a smooth and orderly darshan of the deities in their resplendent golden attire.

Devotee dies during Bahuda Yatra in Puri

PNS ■ Puri

A 56-year-old devotee from Cuttack died after reportedly falling ill amid the heavy rush during the Bahuda Yatra of Lord Jagannath and his siblings in Puri on Friday. The deceased was identified as Abhiram Das (56), a resident of Cuttack. According to reports, Das fell ill during the evening while

devotees were pulling the chariots on the Grand Road. He was immediately rushed to the Puri District Headquarters Hospital (DHH), where he died during treatment. The incident comes days after two devotees lost their lives in a crowd surge during the Rath Yatra of Lord Jagannath, Lord Balabhadra and Devi Subhadra in Puri on July 16.

Student protests Cong decries Odisha Law Minister's remarks

RAJEEV RATHAN ■ Bhubaneswar

The Odisha Pradesh Congress Committee (OPCC) strongly criticised the Law Minister over his reported remarks on students protesting at Jantar Mantar against the alleged NEET-UG question paper leak and irregularities in competitive examinations. Addressing a Press conference here on Friday, senior OPCC spokesperson Rajani Mohanty alleged that describing the protesting students as 'terrorists', 'anti-national ele-

ments' or the 'tukde tukde gang', and linking the agitation to China and Pakistan, was 'highly unfortunate' and an insult to students fighting for a transparent examination system. Mohanty said the students had been holding a peaceful protest for the past 26 days, demanding accountability over repeated examination paper leaks and reforms to prevent such incidents in future. He alleged that branding the protesters as anti-national reflected an attempt to divert

attention from the Centre's failure to address the issue. He also criticised the Union Government over repeated examination paper leaks, alleging that such incidents had jeopardised the future of lakhs of students. He claimed that NEET-UG question papers had leaked multiple times in recent years and demanded accountability from the Union Education Ministry. Referring to the police action against protesters at Jantar Mantar on July 20, Mohanty alleged that stu-

dents were subjected to excessive force and demanded an apology from the Prime Minister. The Congress reiterated its demand for the resignation of Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan, alleging failure to prevent recurring examination irregularities. It also urged the Centre to hold a Parliamentary discussion on reforms to the examination system and asserted that the student agitation would continue until their demands were addressed.

Short story collection 'Solitude Finds A Voice' released



By Chinmaya Kumar Jena
PNS ■ Bhubaneswar
Chinmaya Kumar Jena received a massive round of applause in the "launch event" of his short story book "Solitude Finds A Voice" here on Sunday, where his solitary endeavour blossomed into a compelling literary voice shaped by life, loss, resilience and an enduring curiosity about the world around him. Published by Notion Press, the book is more than just a

collection of short stories; it is a vivid extension of the author's imagination, inspired by real events and everyday lives unfolding around him. Through these narratives, he captures the subtle shifts and striking contradictions within today's socio-cultural landscape. Each story reflects the complexities, anomalies, and quiet struggles that shape our modern existence, revealing how ordinary moments often carry extraordinary meaning. Thought-provoking and relatable, the collection invites

readers to pause, reflect, and discover new perspectives on the challenges woven into contemporary life. Hosting the book launch event, Sophia and Karthik of Firefly Studio turned it into an enriched literary session. Many authors, literary persons and communication experts including Subash Barma, Mukunda Satpathy, Prof KC Dora, Sophia Simon, Elora B Dash, Gargi Bhattacharya, Shiva Priya, Nalini Ranjan Mohanty, Upadist Jena and Debendra Pradhan participated in the event.

SOA workshop focuses on resilient youth

PNS ■ Bhubaneswar

Issues like adolescent mental health, emotion and stress, positive mental health and life skills, problem-solving skills, digital health, mental well-being, resilience and healthy coping figured at a nine-day workshop organised at the SUM Nursing College, faculty of nursing of the SOA Deemed to be University here, which concluded recently. To promote experiential learning, the workshop titled 'Building Resilience among Young Adolescents: A Pathway to Holistic Health Promotion' under the theme 'Young Minds, Resilient Youth, Brighter Future', included simulation on un-healthy emotional behaviour, panel discussions on resilience and adaptation to healthy coping. The topics taken up in the workshop included 'When Silence Hurts', 'Peer Pressure vs. Personal Choice', 'From Emotional Breakdown to Emotional Balance', 'You Are Not Alone' and 'Misunderstood to Understood'.



The participants enthusiastically engaged in innovative activities such as the emotional wheel, stress balloon, resilience tree and vision board to identify emotions, manage stress, discover personal strengths, build support systems and visualise future goals across education, health, spirituality, emotional well-being, personal growth, career and family. The interaction was further enriched through case studies, books, journals, posters and newspaper articles. The workshop was inaugu-

rated in the presence of Prof Pravati Tripathy, Director, SUM Nursing College, Prof Sasmita Das, Dean, Prof.Tapati Saha, Additional Dean and Prof. Debjani Nayak, Associate Professor. The scientific sessions were conducted by experts who included Ms. Suchismita Pahanta Singh, Associate Professor, Dr. Amiya Krishna Panda, Dr. Riya Shetty, Dr. Kirti Anurag, Dr. Subhendu Narayan Mishra, Dr. Hiranmay Mahapatra, Ms. Rita Rani Nayak and Ms. Sephali Moharana.

The workshop, planned and conducted by the first year MSc Nursing students, was coordinated by Amit Sahoo and Payel Panda, both students, under the guidance of Additional Dean Prof Tapati Saha. It contained daily recapitulation sessions, participation interaction, group presentations, post-tests, workshop evaluations and feedback. The workshop concluded with a grand valedictory ceremony graced by Dr Pushparaj Samantasinghar, Medical Superintendent of the

Institute of Medical Sciences and SUM Hospital, who was the chief guest and Dr. Rashmimala Pradhan (guest of honour). Certificates were distributed to all eligible participants and organizing committee members, followed by appreciation of the faculty, report presentation, workshop analysis and participant feedback, marking the successful culmination of a unique initiative dedicated to empowering young minds with resilience, hope and holistic well-being.

Man held for sexual assault of minor girl

PNS ■ Baripada
Widespread outrage has erupted in Mayurbhanj district following the arrest of a young man on Friday accused of sexually assaulting a five-year-old girl under the jurisdiction of the Biso police station.

The accused, identified as Chamaka Paleya, was taken into custody following a formal complaint lodged by the victim's mother.

According to police sources, the incident occurred after classes concluded at a local Anganwadi centre on July 20. The suspect allegedly lured the young child with chocolates as she was making

her way home, coaxing her to his residence where the assault took place.

Upon returning home, the girl informed her mother of the ordeal. A village meeting was convened shortly thereafter, during which the suspect reportedly confessed to the act before community members. Rejecting localised mediation attempts, the victim's mother proceeded directly to the Biso police station to file an official report.

Following the complaint, police apprehended Paleya and initiated custodial interrogation alongside mandatory medical procedures.

"A formal written complaint was lodged regarding

the sexual assault of a five-year-old girl who attends the local Anganwadi centre. Based on the complaint, we registered a case under relevant statutory provisions and initiated an immediate investigation," a senior police officer stated. "The accused has been taken into custody and will be produced before the POCSO court."

The case has been registered under stringent sections of the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, along with corresponding provisions of the criminal code governing offenses against minors. Police authorities assured that strict legal proceedings will be pursued to ensure justice.

In Kandhamal

Minor rape victim denied facilities at hosp to deliver baby

NHRC broadens probe on health facilities across India

RAJESH BEHERA ■ Kendrapada

The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) on Friday sought for a detailed report from the Secretary, Department of Public Health and Service of all the States, UTs and Union of India, except Odisha, Haryana, and Punjab, within two weeks in a Kandhamal case involving the alleged rape of a minor and her delivery outside a government hospital. At the same time, the Commission

has broadened the inquiry to examine shortages in public healthcare facilities across India.

The complaint was filed on April 4, 2025 by Sagar Kumar Jena, rights defender of Kendrapada. He alleged that a minor rape survivor became pregnant and was denied delivery inside a government hospital, forcing her to give birth outside the medical campus. The complainant, Jena, further stated that although the accused was arrested following intervention by social workers, no action was taken against hospital staff and no relief or compensation was provided to the victim and her family.

Taking cognizance, the NHRC had directed the District Magistrate-cum-Collector and the Superintendent of Police, Kandhamal, to inquire and submit a report.

In its report submitted on October 9, 2025, the Collector stated that police had registered a case and arrested the accused. The report added that the victim later married the accused and both were living together. As the victim and her parents did not depose against him during trial, the Additional District and Sessions Judge, Kandhamal, acquitted the accused. No compensation was therefore awarded.

On the allegation against

medical authorities, the report said the victim reached Bamunigaon Primary Health Centre for delivery on April 1, 2025. Due to a shortage of hospital beds and delay in ambulance services, the delivery took place under those circumstances at the PHC.

Considering the report on July 24, 2026, the NHRC directed that a copy be given to the complainant and asked for his comments within two weeks. "If no response is received, the case will be decided on available records," the Commission said.

The NHRC observed that the case raised wider issues of public importance - lack of

hospital beds, inadequate ambulance services, and poor access to primary healthcare. Calling healthcare a fundamental right, it directed all States, UTs and the Union Government to provide data on free hospital beds, free ambulances, and availability of PHCs, polyclinics and dispensaries at panchayat, block and district levels.

Reports have so far been received from Odisha, Haryana and Punjab States only. The Commission has asked its Registry to obtain pending reports by August 17, 2026.

The matter will be heard further after the complainant's reply and receipt of remaining reports.

In Ganjam

Dacoity accused injured in police encounter

PNS ■ Brahmapur

A wanted dacoity accused was injured in a police encounter in Odisha's Ganjam district on Friday after allegedly hurling a bomb at police and opening fire while attempting to flee.

The injured accused was identified as Kalia alias Ghanashyam Behera of Naitada Sahi under Purushottampur police station. He was wanted in multiple robbery and dacoity cases.

Acting on a tipoff, a team led by Purushottampur IIC Kulamani Sethi launched an operation to apprehend him.

Police said Kalia, who was

riding a motorcycle with an associate, was chased along the forest road between Kinari and Chunchipada under the Kodala police station.

During the chase, Kalia allegedly hurled a bomb at the police team and opened fire in an attempt to escape. Police retaliated, with Inspector Sethi firing in self-defence, injuring the accused in his right leg.

Kalia was initially admitted to the Community Health Centre (CHC) at Kodala and later shifted to the MKCG Medical College Hospital in Brahmapur for further treatment. Police said the investigation into the incident was in progress.

Woman, 3 kids from K'handi detained by AP kiln owner

NHRC asks local Collector to submit ATR after probe

AJIT PANDA ■ Nuapada

The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) has issued a notice to the district Collector of Palnadu district in Andhra Pradesh over the issue of illegal confinement of a woman worker and her three children from Kalahandi district at a brick kiln in Macherla. The Commission has directed the Collector to submit a detailed Action Taken Report (ATR) within eight weeks.

The case relates to Rinku Jhara, a migrant labourer from Bhatel village under Narla block of Kalahandi dis-



trict. According to the complaint, Rinku, along with his family, was taken to work at a brick kiln owned by one Mahesh at Nehru Nagar in Macherla through labour contractor Ganesh Bag of the Kantabanji area in November 2025.

After Rinku fell ill, he reportedly sought leave from the kiln owner. However, the owner allegedly refused permission, recovered the ad-

vance paid to him and allowed Rinku to return home while illegally detaining his wife and three children.

After returning to Odisha, Rinku submitted a written complaint to the Labour Department on December 8, but no action was taken.

Following media reports highlighting the family's plight, human rights activist Dillip Kumar Das filed a petition before the NHRC seeking immediate intervention and directions for the rescue of the woman and children.

The Commission registered the case and after hearing the matter on July 22, directed the Palnadu District Collector to inquire into the allegations in accordance with Section 10 of the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976, and the

revised Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) issued by the Union Ministry of Labour and Employment on May 14, 2016.

The NHRC instructed the Collector to take action if bonded labour is established and submit a detailed Action Taken Report along with the inquiry findings within eight weeks.

The Commission further instructed that the investigation should strictly follow the guidelines laid down by the Supreme Court and the NHRC on bonded labour. It directed the authorities to record the statements of all affected workers, ensure their registration on the Government of India's e-Shram portal, and include details of these measures in the report submitted to the Commission.

Distinct Bahuda Yatra In K'pada village

Chariot pulled not with choir rope, but iron chain

As part of a long going tradition

PNS ■ Kendrapada

In a rare tradition that sets it apart from the rest of Odisha, devotees in the riverside village of Kakatpur under Mahakalapada block pulled Lord Jagannath's chariot with gleaming iron chains.

Amid conch shells, drumbeats and chants of "Jai Jagannath", the Bahuda festival at the historic Kakatpur Jagannath Temple unfolded in all its glory. While the rest of Odisha pulls the Lord's chariot today with sacred coir ropes, Kakatpur stands apart, binding the Almighty with unbreakable iron, a symbol of eternal allegiance and divine guardianship.

"This is not just a Rath Yatra. This is a covenant of faith," said Abhishek Dash, a servitor. "Here, we do not let the Lord go. We hold Him



close, with chains of love and reverence" he added.

The electrifying ritual traces its origin to a legendary 18th-century tale. According to local lore, Lord Jagannath journeyed to Kakatpur from Champagada village after cursing a tyrannical zamindar. Days later, the sea swallowed Champagada whole.

Haunted yet humbled by that divine warning, the God-fearing people of Kakatpur vowed never to let the Lord leave. To this day, the deity is

worshipped in shackles on the Ratna Singhasan and taken out in a grand, ritualistic procession, bound in iron chain, before ascending the chariot.

On Friday, the atmosphere was nothing short of celestial. Villagers from Kakatpur and adjoining hamlets surged forward, gripping the massive iron chains with pride, pulling the towering Rath inch by inch as drums roared and the air vibrated with devotion on the Bahuda Yatra.

Temple committee mem-

bers said the unique practice draws devotees from across Kendrapada district every year during Rath Yatra, making Kakatpur's car festival one of the most distinctive celebrations of Lord Jagannath in the State.

For the people of Kakatpur, the iron chains are more than metal. They are a promise - that the Lord will stay, bless, and protect this sacred land forever. In Kakatpur, faith is not just practiced. It is chained, celebrated, and carried forward in triumph.

SBI ATM looted using gas cutter in U'kote

Residents blame poor night patrolling to rising incidents of thefts in town

PNS ■ Umerkote

A daring late-night heist in Nabarangpur district has sparked fresh concerns over law and order after unidentified miscreants allegedly used a gas cutter to break open a State Bank of India (SBI) ATM on Kondagam Road in Umerkote town and fled with the cash.

The incident came to light early on Friday morning when local residents out for a morning walk noticed the ATM kiosk damaged and immediately alerted the police.

According to preliminary

investigation, the culprits took advantage of the darkness, forced their way into the kiosk, sliced open the cash vault using a heavy-duty gas cutter, and escaped before dawn. The exact amount of cash stolen is yet to be ascertained, with SBI officials conducting an audit.

Nabarangpur Superintendent of Police Partha Kashyap, along with Umerkote police, visited the spot and launched an investigation. Police are examining CCTV footage from nearby establishments and collecting forensic evidence to identify the gang. Investigators suspect the involvement of an organised criminal network.

The incident has, however, triggered sharp criticism from residents, who alleged that the ATM burglary is yet another reminder of deteriorating

night security in the town. They claimed that several house break-ins, temple thefts and other property crimes reported in recent months remain unsolved, with no major breakthrough in identifying or arresting the culprits.

Many residents attributed the recurring incidents to what they described as inadequate night patrolling and urged the police to strengthen surveillance in vulnerable areas. They demanded regular mobile patrolling, enhanced monitoring of ATMs and commercial establishments, and quicker investigation of theft cases to restore public confidence.

Police said the investigation is progressing on multiple fronts and assured that all efforts are being made to identify and apprehend the culprits.

In Nabarangpur

Youth hold protest against lathicharge on students in Delhi

Pradhan, Gond face sharp criticism for education mess

PNS ■ Nabarangpur

Thousands of students and youth took to the streets of Nabarangpur on Friday, staging a massive protest against recurring examination paper leaks and the recent police lathi-charge on students demonstrating in New Delhi.

The rally also witnessed strong criticism of Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan and Odisha's School and Mass Education Minister Nityananda Gond over alleged textbook errors and the handling of issues affecting the



education sector.

Carrying banners and placards, the protesters marched through the town's major roads, raising slogans demanding transparency in examinations, accountability for

paper leak syndicates, and protection of students' democratic right to peaceful protest. The rally disrupted traffic for several hours as hundreds of students and job aspirants participated.

The demonstrators alleged that repeated question paper leaks had shattered the hopes of thousands of candidates preparing for competitive and recruitment examinations. They also condemned the re-

cent police action against students protesting in the national capital, calling it an attack on democratic values.

The protesters demanded a complete overhaul of the examination system to eliminate paper leaks, immediate identification and stringent punishment of those involved in organised paper leak rackets, a fair inquiry into the police action against students in Delhi, and timely, transparent conduct of all competitive and recruitment examinations.

The student leaders warned that if both the Central and State Governments fail to take concrete steps to restore confidence in the education system and safeguard the interests of students, the agitation would be intensified across the region in the coming days.

Metro curbs leave thousands of commuters walking to work

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

Amit Kumar switched to walking shoes on Tuesday. Not because he wanted to. Because the Metro was shut, the bylanes of central Delhi were the only route left between him and his office near Connaught Place.

He has worn those shoes every morning since. "I build in an extra 45 minutes now," he said. "There is no other option." Amit Kumar did not come to Jantar Mantar to protest. He was simply trying to get to work. For three days now, thousands of people like him have been absorbing the cost of a standoff they have no stake in.

Repeated closures of metro stations and transport disruptions imposed by author-

ities in response to the Jantar Mantar protest have triggered backlash from commuters, who took to social media to question why thousands of daily travellers were being inconvenienced. For thousands of office-goers who once relied on the Delhi Metro and cab services to reach work in the Lutyens' zone, walking has become the only option, as barricading around Jantar Mantar in response to the ongoing protest continues.

This comes amid the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC) announcing on Friday the closure of the New Delhi metro station till further orders, adding to the disruption caused by the shutdown of 17 metro stations in central Delhi for the third consecutive day. The DMRC said in a post on X that the New Delhi metro

station had been closed till further instructions and that no interchange facility would be available at the station.

The latest closure comes even as 17 metro stations in central Delhi remained shut from 7.30 am on Friday due to security reasons. The closure of the New Delhi metro station, a key interchange connecting the Yellow Line and the Airport Express Line and providing direct access to the New Delhi Railway Station, is expected to inconvenience thousands of daily commuters and rail passengers.

Soon after the announcement, several users took to X to question the decision, with many expressing concern over the impact on office-goers, students and travellers, while others apprehended a spike in app-based cab fares. Reacting



to the DMRC's late Thursday night announcement that 16 stations would remain closed on Friday, one user wrote, "The easiest way to handle a protest is to make ordinary citizens suffer." Several users questioned why daily com-

muters travelling to offices, schools and hospitals were being inconvenienced, arguing that the restrictions would not deter protesters from reaching Jantar Mantar. Later in the evening, entry gates at Mandi House and

Central Secretariat metro stations were reopened.

With the metro shut and cab drivers reluctant to enter the cordoned-off stretch, commuters said they are trudging kilometres through bylanes every morning and evening just to get to work or back home.

"Since the metro is shut and police personnel are present in the area, even ride-hailing services are reluctant to accept rides here," a working professional said.

Thousands of protesters have gathered at Jantar Mantar over the past few days, prompting police to seal off Parliament Street, Tolstoy Road and Jai Singh Marg. A Google Maps check of the stretch on Friday showed a 'heavy traffic' alert across all three major roads.

Officials posted in the area said the closures are for security reasons, given the scale of the demonstration and its proximity to Parliament.

The disruption is not limited to civilians. Commuters said even police personnel posted

for duty are having to walk long stretches through bylanes to reach their postings, as the area remains under what many described as a complete traffic lockdown.

Adding to the difficulty, internet services in the area have remained suspended since clashes broke out between protesters and police on July 20, commuters said, leaving many unable to check real-time traffic updates or book cabs while already on foot. Workers in the area said they are inculcating extra walking time into their daily routine and switching to shoes better suited for walking kilometres on the pavement than a desk job — an unplanned consequence of a protest still playing out barely metres from their offices.

Facial recognition units deployed at CJP protest site

KHUSHI MEHROTRA
■ New Delhi

Delhi Police has deployed four Facial Recognition System (FRS) units around the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) protest site at Jantar Mantar as part of heightened security arrangements. Officials maintain that the technology is being used only to identify wanted criminals, absconders and history-sheeters, not ordinary protesters.



Demonstrators at the site amid rainfall during the ongoing protest at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi

Police sources said on Friday that the FRS units have been installed at key entry and exit points around the protest venue and are directly linked to the Delhi Police database. Police personnel monitor the system in real time, enabling them to verify the identities of individuals whose details are already in police records.

"The objective is to ensure that people with criminal backgrounds do not exploit the protest to create law and

order issues. The system is connected with the Delhi Police database and can identify wanted criminals, absconders, history-sheeters and Bad Characters (BCs)," a police source said.

Officials said the high-resolution cameras capture facial images in real time, including from a distance, and immediately match them against the police database. If a wanted or absconding accused is detected, the concerned police unit is alerted

for further legal action.

According to police, the deployment is intended as both a preventive and investigative measure to prevent anti-social elements from infiltrating large gatherings and creating disturbances.

Sources also clarified that the system does not access Aadhaar records or retrieve personal details from identity databases. They said the cameras scan faces in real time and compare them only with records already maintained by the Delhi Police. Officials added that similar facial recognition units have been deployed during previous large public gatherings and are not unique to the ongoing CJP protest.

The deployment comes amid heightened security at Jantar Mantar following recent clashes between protesters and police, which led to multiple FIRs and the installation of additional surveillance measures around the protest site. The use of facial recognition technology has, however, drawn criticism from protesters, civil liberties advocates and freelance journalists, who have raised concerns over privacy and mass surveillance. Several protesters argued that those participating in demonstrations should not be treated as "data bodies" and questioned the legality of live facial scanning at a public protest.

The issue has also reached the Delhi High Court through a public interest litigation

alleging unlawful surveillance of protesters. During the proceedings, Delhi Police denied carrying out any illegal snooping and submitted that any recording or monitoring was undertaken solely to maintain law and order and ensure public safety.

The CJP also criticised the deployment, alleging that police were "live-scanning peaceful protesters" and harvesting biometric data. In a statement, the organisation questioned the legal basis for the use of facial recognition technology, sought clarity on the source of the data the system matches, and demanded answers on how any collected facial data would be stored, used, and safeguarded.

Police, however, reiterated that the system is not designed to monitor ordinary protesters and is intended only to identify individuals with criminal antecedents who may attempt to exploit large public gatherings.

Videos, social media posts made during July 20 clash under police scanner

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

Delhi Police is examining thousands of videos, social media broadcasts and mobile phone records to identify those involved in the July 20 clashes and establish whether the July 20 violence was pre-planned or erupted spontaneously. Experts are analysing mobile phone recordings, CCTV footage, livestreams and social media content to identify individuals seen attacking police personnel and damaging public property, they said.

"Teams will investigate videos uploaded on various social media platforms, besides content circulated on messaging application groups," a police source said. The police are trying to match faces, clothing, movements and locations with surveillance footage and pho-



tographs captured during the violence.

"Every digital file is being authenticated to establish its originality and timeline before it can be used as evidence. Metadata, timestamps and geolocation details embedded in videos and photographs are also being examined wherever available," the source said.

The member of the force said investigators are also identifying people who went live on social media during

the protests, believing such broadcasts could provide an uninterrupted sequence of events and reveal the presence of individuals who later participated in violence.

The police are exploring whether data preservation requests need to be issued to major social media platforms to ensure that livestreams, deleted videos, and user account information relevant to the investigation are not lost before legal requests are processed.

Songs, seva and self-discipline: Inside the CJP protest at Jantar Mantar after dark

KHUSHI MEHROTRA
■ New Delhi

As one walks towards the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) protest site at Jantar Mantar, the atmosphere is marked not only by slogans demanding Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan's resignation but also by the sound of guitars, patriotic songs and performances of resistance.

On a humid Thursday night, groups of students waiting to enter the main protest venue gathered in circles, singing together. One student pulled out a guitar and began playing "Aarambh Hai Prachand Hai", while another group nearby broke into "Sabse Aage Honge Hindustani", with many joining in.

The musical gatherings have become a regular feature of the month-long protest. Beyond speeches from the stage and sloganeering, protesters have increasingly turned to music and art as a way of expressing their opposition to the alleged paper leak controversy.

"This may not look like a conventional protest to many, but this is our way of showing that we are peaceful and only demand accountability," said a protester who has been visiting the site for the past few days.

The emphasis on discipline extends beyond performances. Volunteers have organised the continuous dis-



tribution of drinking water and snacks while ensuring the protest site remains clean.

Dustbins have been placed at regular intervals across the venue, and around 9 pm on Thursday, groups of protesters formed human chains around areas that needed cleaning. Wearing gloves, masks and carrying brooms, volunteers swept the site and collected waste before allowing people to move through the area again.

Despite the heavy security deployment across Jantar Mantar and adjoining stretches, the atmosphere remained peaceful on Thursday night.

Protesters largely cooperated with police personnel and volunteers managing the crowds, with no visible signs of tension as people queued patiently to enter the main protest site, attended cultural performances and participated in the movement's activities.

Crowd management, too, has largely been handled by volunteers. Members of the Nirankari Sikh community,

who have joined the CJP movement, were seen assisting CJP volunteers along Tolstoy Marg, where the protest has expanded. Forming human chains and using loudspeakers, they guided people entering and leaving the venue while also distributing food and water to both protesters and security personnel as part of seva.

Although a video circulating on social media had claimed there was a scuffle between some protesters and the Nirankari volunteers, the situation appeared calm on Thursday night, with volunteers continuing to coordinate movement and relief efforts. As crowds continued to swell at Jantar Mantar, the protesters' principal demand remained unchanged: the resignation of Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan. The demonstrations continued even as activist Sonam Wangchuk ended his 26-day hunger strike late Thursday night in the presence of BJP Union Ministers JP Nadda and Jitendra Singh.

After DU, JNU advises students to stay away from protest

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

After Delhi University, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) on Friday advised students, faculty and staff to refrain from participating in or visiting gatherings at or around Jantar Mantar, urging them to prioritise their personal safety and exercise responsibility on social media amid the ongoing protests.

In an advisory posted on the university's official X

handle, the university said all stakeholders of JNU's "epistemic community" should act responsibly and avoid visiting demonstration sites around Jantar Mantar in accordance with the Supreme Court's directions on public demonstrations.

"All stakeholders of JNU's epistemic community are advised to act responsibly and prioritise their personal safety. In accordance with the Hon'ble Supreme Court of India's directions on public demonstrations, you are



requested to refrain from participating in or visiting gatherings at or around Jantar Mantar, New Delhi," the post read.

The university also cau-

tioned students and staff to exercise responsibility while using social media, warning that violations could invite legal consequences under applicable laws as well as disciplinary action under the university's code of conduct. "You are also encouraged to uphold the values of academic responsibility and responsible citizenship," it added.

The development also comes amid a series of messages issued by Delhi University colleges on the

controversy surrounding the protests.

DU's Aditi Mahavidyalaya appealed to students to stay away from violence and participate only through peaceful and democratic means, while Shyam Lal College posted a message expressing support for Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan. Earlier, Rajdhani College had withdrawn a similar post and issued a public apology after criticism from sections of students and teachers.

18-year-old spends savings to join protest from Jaipur

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

The money was supposed to buy an iPad before college. She had been collecting it since her 16th birthday, asking parents, grandparents, and relatives to contribute each year, setting it aside carefully, imagining the day she would unbox it as a proper beginning to her student years. When the protests started at Jantar Mantar, the 18-year-old from Jaipur thought about it for one day. Then she took the ₹15,000 and came to Delhi. "I thought I could always save for an iPad again," she said. "But I may not get another chance to stand up for something that will affect my future."

She is using the birthday money for food, travel, and

daily expenses while staying with a friend in the city so she can attend the demonstrations. "I don't feel like I've lost anything. If anything, I feel like I'm spending my birthday money on something that actually gives me hope," she said.

She is not the only one. As thousands continue gathering at Jantar Mantar each day, a growing number of teenagers and first-time protesters say they are funding their stay with personal savings accumulated over years and borrowed money from friends and family. Many are too young to vote. Most have never attended a protest before.

Shaurya, 18, had been saving nearly Rs 30,000 to buy a scooter before starting college. He arrived with a group of friends. "I kept



thinking I would need it to travel to colleges and go around with friends. But over the past few months, all we've spoken about is unemployment and what kind of future we're walking into," he said. "What is the point of buying a scooter if we're constantly worried about whether there will be opportunities after graduation? This spending felt more

important here."

Yashika, 17, said her parents were initially hesitant. "They told me to be careful. I told them this isn't just about today. Whatever happens now will affect people my age for years," she said. Her parents eventually agreed.

Between speeches and marches, the hours at the protest site pass differently

than outsiders imagine. Groups of students sit on plastic sheets or in patches of shade, pulling out Uno cards, Snakes and Ladders boards, and water bottles. One game has become an unexpected favourite. In circles scattered across the site, young protesters play the childhood game in which players raise a finger only if the object named can fly: sparrow, pigeon, crow. Then someone calls out "Dharmendra Pradhan." The circle erupts in laughter before the next round.

A 17-year-old protester explained the logic. "You can't shout slogans for 10 hours continuously. People think we spend the whole day protesting. Actually, there are long gaps between programmes. These games keep us awake, together and in good spirits."

Delhi Police cancels leaves of all personnel amid Jantar Mantar protest

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

Delhi Police has cancelled all routine leave for its personnel with immediate effect due to the current law and order situation in the Capital, according to police sources on Friday.

Police headquarters issued the order on Thursday and sent it to all district DCs, the Foreigners Regional Registration Office (FRRO), Indira Gandhi International Airport, and

other senior officers, they said.

The communication states that no routine leave, such as casual or earned leave, will be granted until further notice. Only genuine emergency leave will be considered after proper verification by the competent authority.

The order also imposed restrictions on police personnel attending training programmes or courses without prior approval from the Commissioner of Police.



"In view of the prevailing law and order situation, no routine leaves, i.e., casual, earned leaves, etc., would be granted to the police personnel, including GOs, with immediate effect and until further orders.

Leaves shall be sanctioned only in genuine emergency cases after being duly verified and approved by the sanctioning authority. All DCs are requested to ensure meticulous compliance," the order said.

It added, "No police personnel, including GOs, will attend/participate in any course without the approval of the commissioner of police until further orders."

The order was issued during ongoing protests in the capital led by the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP). Protesters are demanding reforms to the examination system and the resignation of Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan over the NEET paper leak, among other issues.

On July 20, thousands of protesters led by the CJP gathered at Jantar Mantar for a 'Sansad Chalo' march to press their demands, despite a heavy security presence.

As the crowds grew, police used lathis and tear gas on protesters when they tried to march towards Parliament on the first day of the Monsoon Session. The clashes left several police personnel and protesters injured.

MEA has no specific details on foreign funding claims linked to CJP protests

ASHOKE RAJ ■ New Delhi

The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) on Friday stated that it does not have any specific information or details to share regarding allegations of foreign funding connected to the ongoing local protests.

Replying to a question, whether the allegations of foreign funding in the ongoing protest is true, MEA spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said: “I have no information to share on this issue with you”.

The remarks come amid intense political and legal scrutiny of the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP)-led demonstrations, which began as a youth-driven response to alleged irregularities and paper leaks in competitive exams such as NEET.

Protesters have been camped at Jantar Mantar in Delhi, demanding the resignation of Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan, systemic reforms in examination processes, and related



Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal addresses a bi-weekly media briefing in New Delhi on Friday

accountability measures.

The agitation saw a major march toward Parliament on July 20 that resulted in clashes, injuries to security personnel and demonstrators, and subsequent calls for nationwide protests.

BJP leaders, including MP Nishikant Dubey, have alleged that “foreign forces” and anti-national elements

have sought to hijack genuine student outrage. References have been made to statements by banned Khalistani activist Gurpatwant Singh Pannun and other external actors. A public interest litigation filed in the Delhi High Court seeking a National Investigation Agency (NIA) probe into the protests and alleged foreign funding links

is scheduled for hearing, with the petition claiming the events form part of a broader conspiracy involving external financial influence.

CJP organisers have rejected such claims, maintaining that the movement is organic, driven by student and youth contributions, and focused on domestic grievances over unemployment, exam integrity, and governance. The group has continued protests and held talks with government representatives even as the Centre announced measures including fast-track courts for paper-leak cases and a proposed bill for stricter penalties.

The MEA’s measured response underscores that, as of now, the ministry is not in a position to confirm or elaborate on the funding allegations circulating in political discourse and social media. Domestic agencies and the courts are expected to examine the claims further as the protests and related legal proceedings continue.

Privilege motion against TMC MLA Kunal Ghosh

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ Kolkata

There was more problem for senior pro-Mamata Trinamool Congress MLA Kunal Ghosh with Bengal Parliamentary Affairs Minister Shankar Ghosh on Friday moving a breach of privilege motion against him for disrespecting the Speaker and decorum of the House.

The development comes close on the heels of the TMC leader being marshaled out the House for two successive days after he got embroiled in serious altercation with Speaker Rathindranath Bose and Akrujjaman and the ‘official’ Chief Whip of the (break-away section of) TMC.

“There is a conspiracy being hatched to suspend me permanently or even take away my membership of the



House through the backdoor... after they failed to defeat me in the elections... I don’t care being robbed off my membership... but as an honest soldier of Mamata Banerjee I will continue to raise my voice as and when required,” Ghosh said though inside the House he apolo-

gised to both the Speaker and the TMC Chief Whip saying “If any of my actions appeared disrespectful, I express my regret.” The Speaker had presently kept the issue with himself for consideration.

“The matter is currently under my consideration, and I will deliver my decision in

due course,” he said.

The altercation started when Ghosh protested against Akrujjaman’s decision to remove his name from the list of speakers. Akrujjaman is presently the official Chief Whip nominated by the larger faction of a 62-member strong break-away faction of the TMC.

Sobhandeb Chatterjee the leader of Mamata Banerjee section which has about 18 MLAs with them had nominated Kunal Ghosh deliver his speech for the TMC.

Kunal told the Speaker while putting across his plea, “since the other side has been designated as the ‘Opposition,’ we are being denied the opportunity to speak... this is injustice and should be addressed.”

Thousands attend students’ protest in Mumbai

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE

■ Mumbai

Thousands of protesters converged in Dadar area here on Friday under the banner of Shiv Sena (UBT) to seek Union minister Dharmendra Pradhan’s resignation over the NEET paper leak, with party leader Aaditya Thackeray saying he has urged CJP founder Abhijeet Dipke not to return until the demand is met.



Mumbai Police faced a fresh onslaught of criticism after a video showing an official allegedly handling a

woman activist inappropriately went viral. While police claimed that his action was being “misin-

terpreted”, the Opposition demanded his immediate suspension.

Holding tricolours and placards in their hands, thousands of students and activists gathered at the iconic Shivaji Park ground in Dadar area as part of a ‘Tiranga Morcha’ (procession) organised by the Uddhav Thackeray-led Sena (UBT).

The protest culminated with the playing of the national anthem.

Devotee dies due to suffocation during Puri Rath Yatra, toll mounts to three

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE

■ Puri (Odisha)

A devotee died allegedly due to suffocation while pulling the ‘Darpadalan’ chariot of Goddess Subhadra during the Bahuda Yatra, the return car festival, on Friday, police said. The deceased was identified as Abhiram Das (57) from Cuttack. He suddenly fell down while pulling the chariot near Bagala Dharmasala and was immediately rushed to Puri District Hospital, where he died during treatment, a police officer said.

“The deceased had hypertension and was under medication. He suddenly collapsed and died during treatment,” Director of Health Service (DHS), Mahesh Mohan Panda said. The medical officer said that about 100 people were brought to the district hospital in Puri. They complained of uneasiness and most of them were released after primary treatment and rest for some time.

Seven of them were admitted to the hospital and their condition is stable and they would soon be discharged, he said. Police said though there was no crowd rush near the chariot, the weather in Puri was hot and humid. The relative humidity level in the coastal town was recorded at 85 to 90 per cent in the evening.

Govt directs GitHub to remove Bitchat amid security concerns

PRAMOD KUMAR SINGH

■ New Delhi

The Indian Cybercrime Coordination Centre (I4C), under the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), has directed Microsoft-owned GitHub to remove repositories hosting Bitchat, a Bluetooth-based messaging application developed by former Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey. The notice, issued on 23 July 2026, required GitHub to restrict access to the source code, Android version and related software releases within three hours.

Bitchat is an open-source tool that lets people communicate offline when regular networks are not available. The government used the Information Technology Act, 2000, and related rules to issue its directive to GitHub.

The I4C stated that Bitchat’s technical architecture enables decentralised peer-to-peer messaging over Bluetooth mesh networks without relying on mobile networks, the internet or centralised servers. This design, the notice said, significantly impedes lawful interception, attribution and investigation by law enforcement agencies.

The reason being, the app poses a “substantial risk of misuse by anti-national elements, terrorist organisations and organised criminal



groups” seeking to evade lawful surveillance. Bitchat is precisely what its critics fear. It is a peer-to-peer tool that works without internet, cellular networks, phone numbers or central servers. Messages hop between nearby devices over Bluetooth Low Energy mesh networks: no registration, no logs, no single point of interception. Jack Dorsey designed it as a simple offline side-channel for classrooms, flights, or town squares.

Sources say there is a genuine security concern here. Law enforcement has legitimate needs to investigate real threats. An app that leaves no digital trail complicates attribution and is hard to trace.

This application allows anonymous communication without user registration, phone number verification or centralised message logging. Messages are transmitted directly between nearby devices, which the

government argued could facilitate the circumvention of lawful restrictions imposed during situations involving public disorder, riots, terrorism, organised crime or internet shutdowns.

Intelligence reports suggested that these platforms might be used to organise illegal gatherings, spread false information, encourage radicalisation, and support criminal activities that threaten India’s sovereignty, integrity, defence, security, and public order. The directive came after officials noticed that some participants in the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) protest at Delhi’s Jantar Mantar used Bluetooth-based messaging apps when internet access was temporarily restricted near the protest site.

The CJP has been organising demonstrations seeking the resignation of the Union Education Minister over issues related to competitive examinations. Dorsey shared a copy of the notice on X and stated that the Government of India does not like technologies like Bitchat and wants it taken down. The Internet Freedom Foundation has described the order as unconstitutional, arguing that it targets the application’s architecture rather than specific unlawful content and bypasses standard judicial procedures for content blocking.

Memorial to be built in Budgam for cop martyred on Amarnath Yatra duty



MOHIT KANDHARI ■ Jammu

A befitting memorial will be constructed in Lalpora village of Budgam district, in honour of Head Constable Ashiq Hussain Qureshi, who was martyred on Wednesday in a terrorist attack at Lal Chowk, Anantnag, while deployed on Amarnath Yatra security duty.

Leader of Opposition in the Jammu and Kashmir Legislative Assembly, Sunil Sharma, on Friday visited the family and paid heartfelt tributes. Sharma said the country would remain indebted to the family that has lost two generations in the service of the nation.

The Lieutenant Governor, Manoj Sinha, also paid heartfelt tributes to the brave policeman and conveyed his deepest condolences to the bereaved family. He said the entire nation is proud of braveheart Ashiq Hussain Qureshi, whose courage, sacrifice, and devotion to duty will remain etched in our collective memory.

Union Home Minister Amit Shah also conveyed his condolences directly to the family.

“The Home Minister had asked me that when I visit here, I should connect him with the family. He also said that when he comes to Kashmir, he will definitely visit them,” Sharma said.

Recalling the family’s history of sacrifice, Sharma said Ashiq Hussain’s father had also laid down his life in 1995. “Thirty-one years

ago, in February 1995, Ashiq Hussain’s father was martyred. Today, the son has also sacrificed his life while protecting the nation. Not just we, but the entire country is indebted to this family, and I do not think we can ever repay that debt.”

Responding to a demand from villagers that Lalpora be developed as a model village in recognition of its sacrifices, Sharma said efforts would be made to create a lasting memorial.

“This is a family of two martyrs. To keep their name alive and to give Lalpora its identity, we will make every effort to ensure there is some memorial — a statue, a ground, a school or some other mark of remembrance in this village,” he said.

Assuring the family of continued support, he added: “On behalf of my party and the Government of India, I have assured them that a family which has given two martyrs to the nation will never be left alone. This will not remain only in words; they will practically feel that the nation and the Government of India stand with them.”

LG Sinha also assured the family that the administration stands firmly with them and will ensure their well-being and dignity. The Lieutenant Governor also assured full support to the family until martyr Ashiq Hussain Qureshi’s son finishes his studies and becomes eligible for a compassionate government appointment.

Nation Focus



Odissi dancers pose for photographs in front of the chariots of Lord Jagannath, Lord Balabhadra and Goddess Subhadra before the ‘Bahuda Yatra’, or the return car festival in Puri, Odisha on Friday

Puri Bahuda Yatra begins, lakhs join deities’ procession

Lord Jagannath and his sibling deities began their Bahuda Yatra on Friday amid tight security, with lakhs of devotees thronging Puri to take part in the festivities.

The Bahuda Yatra marks the return journey of Lord Jagannath, Lord Balabhadra and Goddess Subhadra to the 12th-century Jagannath Temple after their week-long stay at the Gundicha Temple, about 2.6 km away.

The rituals commenced with servitors carrying the deities in the traditional ‘Goti Pahandi’ (procession in a queue) to the chariots stationed outside the temple.

Though the ‘Pahandi’ was scheduled to begin at noon, it commenced at 10.50 am. Amid chants of “Jai Jagannath” and “Haribol”, the deities were taken one after another to their respective chariots.



Students’ protest rocks Bihar Assembly on final day

A heated exchange between the ruling side and the opposition over students’ protests in various parts of Bihar disrupted the assembly proceedings for about an hour on Friday. As soon as the House assembled for the final day of the monsoon session, RJD’s Alok Mehta rose in his seat to demand a discussion on the unrest that began with protests in the state capital a couple of days ago and spread to various other districts on Thursday over the NEET paper leak.

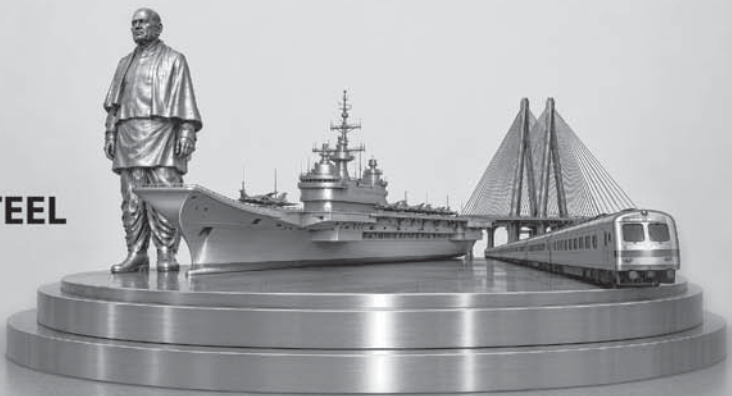
“Several students have been injured in lathi charge. In Jehanabad, police even fired gunshots on Thursday. There must be a discussion on attempts to repress students raising legitimate demands,” Mehta said.



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Extract of Standalone Unaudited Financial Results for the Quarter ended 30 th June, 2026					
(₹ Crore unless stated otherwise)					
Sl. No.	Particulars	STANDALONE			
		Quarter ended		Year ended	
		30 th June, 2026	31 st March, 2026	30 th June, 2025	31 st March, 2026
		Unaudited	Audited	Unaudited	Audited
1	Total Income from Operations	26245.64	30813.45	25921.46	110810.24
2	Net Profit / (Loss) for the period (before tax and exceptional items)	2302.80	2653.46	889.76	5002.08
3	Net Profit / (Loss) for the period before tax (after exceptional items)	2158.79	2323.68	889.76	4333.86
4	Net Profit / (Loss) for the period after tax	1636.00	1679.51	685.48	3233.48
5	Total Comprehensive Income for the period (comprising Profit / (Loss) for the period (after tax) and other Comprehensive Income (after tax))	1524.36	1958.91	567.86	3199.83
6	Paid-up Equity Share Capital (Face Value of ₹10/- each)	4130.53	4130.53	4130.53	4130.53
7	Reserves (excluding revaluation reserve)	55589.19	54064.83	52093.74	54064.83
8	Securities Premium Account	235.10	235.10	235.10	235.10
9	Net Worth	59719.72	58195.36	56224.27	58195.36
10	Paid up Debt Capital/Outstanding Debt	31969.95	31921.62	36074.92	31921.62
11	Debt Equity Ratio	0.54	0.55	0.64	0.55
12	Earnings per equity share (of ₹10/- each) (not annualised)				
	1. Basic (₹)	3.96	4.07	1.66	7.83
	2. Diluted (₹)	3.96	4.07	1.66	7.83
13	Debt Redemption Reserve	-	-	2.06	-
14	Debt Service Coverage Ratio (number of times)	1.66	7.26	2.74	3.84
15	Interest Service Coverage Ratio (number of times)	4.80	5.25	2.04	2.86

Extract of Consolidated Unaudited Financial Results for the Quarter ended 30th June, 2026

(₹ Crore unless stated otherwise)

Sl. No.	Particulars	CONSOLIDATED			
		Quarter ended		Year ended	
		30 th June, 2026	31 st March, 2026	30 th June, 2025	31 st March, 2026
		Unaudited	Audited	Unaudited	Audited
1	Total Income from Operations	26245.67	30813.49	25921.76	110810.84
2	Net Profit / (Loss) for the period (before tax and exceptional items)	2330.69	2831.58	967.81	5173.73
3	Net Profit / (Loss) for the period before tax (after exceptional items)	2186.68	2501.80	967.81	4505.51
4	Net Profit / (Loss) for the period after tax	1644.05	1835.47	744.58	3372.80
5	Total Comprehensive Income for the period (comprising Profit / (Loss) for the period (after tax) and other Comprehensive Income (after tax))	1586.29	2174.42	626.58	3433.65
6	Paid-up Equity Share Capital (Face Value of ₹10/- each)	4130.53	4130.53	4130.53	4130.53
7	Reserves (excluding revaluation reserve)	57807.86	56225.36	55401.67	56225.36
8	Earnings per equity share (of ₹10/- each) (not annualised)				
	1. Basic (₹)	3.98	4.44	1.80	8.17
	2. Diluted (₹)	3.98	4.44	1.80	8.17

Note:

1) The above Financial Results have been reviewed by the Audit Committee and approved by the Board of Directors at their respective meetings held on 24th July, 2026.

2) The above is an extract of the detailed format of Unaudited Financial Results for the Quarter ended 30th June, 2026 filed with the Stock Exchanges under regulation 33 and 52 of the SEBI (Listing Obligations and Disclosure Requirements) Regulations, 2015. The full format of these Financial Results are available on the Stock Exchange websites of NSE and BSE at www.nseindia.com and www.bseindia.com respectively and under the Investor Relations section on the Company's website www.sail.co.in.

For and on behalf of Board of Directors

Sd/-

(Dr. Ashok Kumar Panda)

Chairman & Managing Director

Place : New Delhi

Dated: 24th July, 2026

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States Focus



SIX-MONTH EXTENSION FOR BENGAL CHIEF SECRETARY: GOVT

The Centre on Thursday approved a six-month extension in service for West Bengal Chief Secretary Manoj Kumar Agarwal beyond his scheduled date of retirement on July 31, according to an official order.

The extension will take effect from August 1 and remain valid till January 31, 2027, following approval by the Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT), a senior official said on Thursday.

The state Government had forwarded a proposal to the Centre on July 15 seeking an extension for Agarwal, who assumed charge as the chief secretary on May 11 this year. A senior state Government official said the extension would ensure continuity in the administration at a time when several key policy decisions and developmental programmes are underway.

(PTI)



ANNAMALAI TO LAUNCH COASTAL CLEANUP DRIVE IN SOUTH TN

Former BJP chief K Annamalai, who launched the “We The Leaders” movement, is scheduled to visit a few southern coastal districts to launch a massive coastal cleanup drive, a source said on Friday.

He would visit Kanyakumari on August 2 in his capacity as leader of the movement to officially launch the state-wide initiative from the Kanyakumari Beach Road, and initiate a similar drive in Uvari in Tirunelveli district, Manapad and Tiruchendur in Tuticorin district.

Interestingly, Kanyakumari district has registered the highest number of volunteers for the “We The Leaders” that Annamalai had announced on June 5, an insider said.

(PTI)

Extended fast by 2 days as negotiations were on: Wangchuk

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

Sonam Wangchuk on Friday termed the end of his 26-day hunger strike the “beginning of accountability”, saying he decided to call off the fast only after receiving assurances from the Government and MPs across parties on his key demands for examination reforms and protection of the peaceful protesters.

The educator-activist also said that he extended his fast by two days because negotiations with the Centre were continuing.

“End of hunger... Beginning of accountability,” Wangchuk posted on X, where he shared a video explaining his decision to end the fast, which he began at the Jantar Mantar on June 28 in support of the Cokroach Janta Party’s (CJP) ongoing protest demanding accountability for paper leaks, Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan’s resignation, and reforms in the examination system, among others.

According to the post, Wangchuk ended his fast after 26 days upon getting assurance from the Government and MPs of all



Social activist Sonam Wangchuk with Union Health Minister JP Nadda, Union Minister of State Jitendra Singh and Apex Body of Ladakh at Medanta Hospital after Wangchuk ended his 26-day indefinite hunger strike at Medanta Hospital in Gurugram

PTI

political parties that the issue of accountability in the ‘failing’ examination system would be discussed in Parliament.

The Government also assured that the families of those students who took their lives after the NEET-UG paper leak in May would be adequately compensated, and no cases would be registered against the students and youth protesting peacefully.

In the video, Wangchuk also disclosed that he extended his hunger strike by two days because negotiations with the Centre were continuing.

“Negotiations were on for these assurances since the last two days, for which I had to extend my hunger strike. I could have extended it further if required,” he said.

Wangchuk also shared the text of the assurance letter that Health Minister J P Nadda read out at the hospital before he broke his fast.

“The Government is positive on not registering cases against those protesting peacefully at Jantar Mantar in Delhi and those who participated in the march to Parliament on July 20,” the letter said.

It also said that the Government had “already assured threadbare discussions to find solutions to paper leaks and educational reforms for exams in Parliament”, and was “positively considering suitable compensation for the suicide victims of recent NEET paper leaks”.

Wangchuk ended his hunger strike late on Thursday night in the presence of his wife Gitanjali Angmo, Nadda and Union minister Jitendra Singh at the Medanta Hospital in Gurugram.

RESIGNATION OF DHARMENDRA PRADHAN NON-NEGOTIABLE: CJP TO UNION MINISTERS

New Delhi: The Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) on Friday told the Government that its demand for Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan’s resignation is non-negotiable and asked for a public apology to the protesting students who were “brutally thrashed” on July 20.

In a meeting with Union ministers J P Nadda and Jitendra Singh, the CJP also demanded Rs 1 crore compensation for the families of those who committed suicide after the cancellation of the NEET test on May 3, its spokesperson Saurav Das said.

The two-hour meeting held at the Vithalbhai Patel House was aimed at finding an amicable solution to protests over the NEET paper leak and other irregularities in the exam system.

Nadda said the ministers heard their demands and conveyed that they will get back to the CJP. “We will again meet on Saturday,” he said.

“We told Union ministers that our demand for the resignation of Dharmendra Pradhan is non-negotiable,” Das told reporters after the meeting.

The CJP, which has been spearheading the protests that started at Jantar Mantar on June 20, was also represented by its spokesperson Ashutosh Ranka.

Besides the demand for Rs 1 crore compensation for families of suicide victims, Das said the CJP is also asking that FIRs against protesters should be withdrawn.

In a letter to the Government, the CJP spelt out its stand. It acknowledged the “Government’s eagerness to find a mutually beneficial solution” and said, “Over the last few days, we have held extensive consultations with supporters and members across the country and protesters at Jantar Mantar. We have arrived at a clear consensus that our demands, namely the resignation of Mr Dharmendra Pradhan, Rs 1 crore compensation for NEET victims, and no legal action against protestors, are non-negotiable.”

(PTI)

1st week of Monsoon Session washed out as Opposition sticks to Pradhan’s resignation demand

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

The first week of the Monsoon session of Parliament was washed out as the Government and the Opposition continued to be at loggerheads over the demand for Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan’s resignation before a debate on NEET paper leak issue in both Houses.

Hitting out at the Opposition, the Government said making “excuses” and attaching “pre-conditions” before a debate will send a wrong message to the country. In the first week of the session, both Houses

could not take up any legislative agenda except for introduction of a bill each in Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha.

In Lok Sabha, a bill to replace an ordinance which increased the number of judges of the Supreme Court from 34 to 38 was introduced but could not taken up for consideration and passage despite being listed every day. The bill has to be passed into an Act of Parliament before the session concludes on August 13 else the ordinance will lapse.

In Lok Sabha, Question Hour could not be held for even 15 minutes in five days.

In Rajya Sabha, a bill was



introduced on Friday to make insult to the national song Vande Mataram a criminal offence, despite being listed for introduction on multiple days.

When Lok Sabha met at 12

noon after an earlier adjournment, Parliamentary Affairs Minister Kiren Rijiju pointed to the Leader of the Opposition Rahul Gandhi and said the Government has

repeatedly reached out to Opposition parties to let debate on the paper leak take place. He said while several Opposition MPs are of the view that the debate should take place, Gandhi should make his party members understand the need for a discussion. Rijiju said making excuses and attaching pre-conditions before a debate will send a wrong message to the country.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has also assured of a stringent law on paper leaks and holding trial of the accused in fast-track courts, he said, while also noting that activist Sonam Wangchuk

has ended his hunger strike.

He said the Union Cabinet will take a decision on the proposed law on Friday.

However, the Congress and other Opposition parties continued to insist on resignation of Pradhan and shouted slogans like “Istifa do”, following which the House was adjourned for the day.

Similarly, Rajya Sabha was adjourned within minutes of assembly after Leader of Opposition Mallikarjun Kharge sought to raise the issue of lathi-charge on students who are protesting against the paper leak and pressing for the resignation of Pradhan.

Drugs worth ₹6.89 cr seized in 3 separate operations in Mizoram, 2 held



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Aizawl

Drugs worth more than ₹6.89 crore were seized in three separate anti-drug operations in Mizoram, police said on Friday.

Two persons, including one from Assam, were arrested in connection with the seizures, they said.

The biggest haul was made in the early hours of July 21 when two men riding a scooter were intercepted on the Zokhawthar-Melbuk road near Muallrawt in Champhai district, close to the India-Myanmar border, police said.

The suspects abandoned the scooter and fled after spotting the police patrol, they said.

A search of the vehicle led to the recovery of 6.73 kg of methamphetamine tablets, estimated to be worth ₹4.75 crore, they added.

A case was registered at the Zokhawthar police station under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act.

In another operation on July 23, a special police team intercepted a truck on the basis of intelligence inputs in Saitual district. A search of the vehicle led to the seizure of 2 kg of morphine, valued at around ₹2.09 crore in the illicit market, the statement said. The truck driver, identified as Kabir Hussain (30) of Tarapur village in Assam’s Cachar district, was arrested, police said.

On the evening of July 15, the Champhai Police Special Task Force intercepted a car at the Khankawn check gate and recovered 24 grams of heroin, valued at ₹4.8 lakh, from the possession of the driver, they said.

CBI brings Avinash Arjun Rathod back from UAE in joint operation

PRAMOD KUMAR SINGH
■ New Delhi

The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), along with the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), coordinated the successful deportation of Red Notice subject Avinash Arjun Rathod from the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Rathod arrived in Mumbai on 23 July 2026 and was immediately taken into custody by the Maharashtra Police. Rathod is the main suspect in a major financial fraud worth hundreds of crores. He avoided arrest for years after running an investment scam that took people’s savings.

The CBI says this case shows India is getting better at finding and bringing back economic offenders who escape overseas.

According to official reports,

Rathod is wanted for large-scale financial fraud. He and his team convinced people to invest in several schemes by promising fake fixed monthly returns. After collecting the money, he moved it through different bank and demat accounts, cheating investors.

Investigators say the scheme primarily operated through APS Wealth Ventures, a Pune-based company that Rathod started in 2011. He and his team promoted it as a stock market investment and targeted middle-class families, Government workers, and professionals across Maharashtra, including Pune, Mumbai, and Vidarbha. They promised high fixed returns and claimed investments could double in 20 months. People invested anywhere from a few lakhs to over a crore, with some putting in all their life savings.

To gain trust, the accused gave



small early returns to the first investors, using a Ponzi-style method that encouraged people to refer others and grow the

scheme. By early 2023, things started to fall apart. When investors asked to withdraw their money in March 2023, Rathod

said he was ill and asked for more time until 10 April.

During this time, his wife, Vishakha Rathod, ran the office and spoke with investors. But on the promised date, both disappeared. Investors then found out their money was gone and the couple had escaped to Dubai.

Numerous investors filed complaints with the Economic Offences Wing of Pune Police. An FIR was registered at Chaturshringi Police Station, and the investigation revealed the extent of the fraud.

Losses are estimated at ₹125 crore from over 600 investors, and the total could reach ₹700 crore over several years. No matter the final amount, many families lost their savings, retirement money, and financial security.

A non-bailable warrant was issued, and Indian authorities asked INTERPOL for help.

A Red Notice was put out for Rathod, making him wanted worldwide. Getting him back from the UAE took ongoing efforts by the MEA, coordination from the MHA, and steady follow-up by the CBI. He returned on 23 July 2026, ending years of work. After the suspect arrived in Mumbai, Maharashtra Police took him into custody and will present him in court.

The CBI may lead or closely monitor the investigation, focusing on tracing funds, identifying additional suspects, and recovering assets for victims.

This case highlights the persistent issue of investment fraud, which exploits public trust in financial markets and the allure of ‘assured returns.’ The APS Wealth Ventures case serves as a reminder of the risks associated with unregulated or inadequately vetted investments.

Road safety experts call for adoption of low-cost safety solutions to reduce accidents

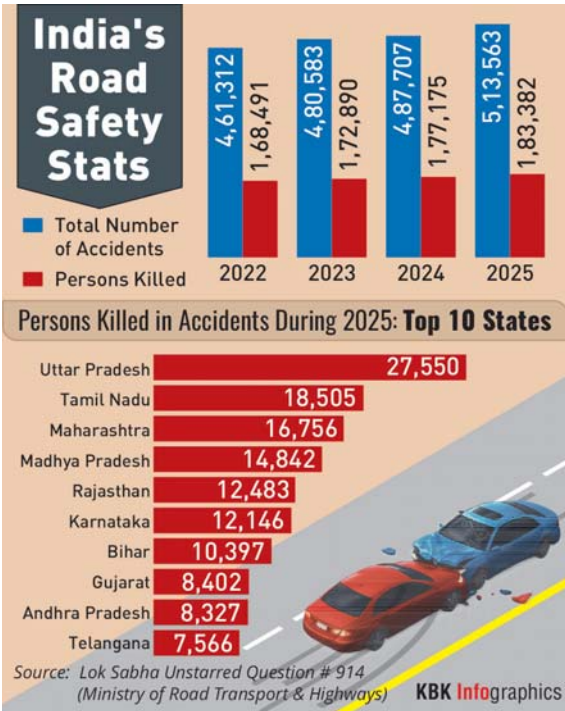
PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

Road safety experts on Friday highlighted the alarming state of road safety in the country and underscored the urgent need for practical, scalable and cost-effective solutions to prevent road accidents. They noted that India can significantly reduce road fatalities through affordable and evidence-based interventions in cities.

Speaking at a conference organised by the India chapter of International Road Federation (IRF), IIT Delhi professor emeritus Geetam Tiwari said road markings to enhance night-time visibility can substantially improve road safety in cities. Implementation of international best practices can reduce crashes while improving mobility for all road users, Tiwari added.

IRF president emeritus K K Kapila said most urban crashes occur due to everyday design deficiencies on ordinary roads operating at normal traffic speeds.

“Low-cost engineering measures such as roundabouts, raised pedestrian



crossings, traffic-calming measures, improved street lighting and safer intersection designs have been proven to reduce crashes by 20 to 80 per cent, often at a fraction of the cost of major infrastructure projects.

“Such interventions can be implemented much faster and deliver immediate safety benefits,” Kapila added.

Jitendra Kaushik, CEO, Onnyx Electronisys, showcased innovative technological solutions supporting urban traffic safety.

Rajasthan CM’s Gram Vikas Chaupal focuses on participatory rural governance

VIVEK SHARMA ■ Jaipur

Rajasthan Chief Minister Shri Bhajan Lal Sharma’s Gram Vikas Chaupal initiative is focusing on participatory governance by taking the administration directly to villages and facilitating interaction between the Government and rural citizens.

With an emphasis on strengthening governance at the grassroots, the Chief Minister has been visiting rural areas, holding open interactions with villagers, inspecting development projects, and reviewing the implementation of welfare schemes on the ground. The initiative aims to create a direct communication channel between policymakers and citizens to address public concerns and improve service delivery.

The Gram Vikas Chaupal serves as a platform where women, farmers, youth, livestock rearers, frontline workers, and local residents discuss issues ranging from agriculture and employment to water conservation, sanitation, animal husbandry, education, and rural infrastructure. Beneficiaries of



Government schemes have also shared their experiences directly with the Chief Minister, providing feedback on implementation.

One of the instances highlighted during the initiative involved schoolgirls informing the Chief Minister that their Government Senior Secondary School did not offer a Science stream. Following the interaction, Shri Bhajan Lal Sharma directed officials to address the issue, and the Science stream was subsequently approved and introduced, according to the state Government.

The Chief Minister has also interacted with children, women, and senior citizens while reviewing the condition of village schools,

Anganwadi centres, and other public facilities. These visits have enabled the Government to identify local challenges requiring administrative attention.

Beyond grievance redressal, Gram Vikas Chaupal has also been used as a mechanism for monitoring development projects. During village visits, officials present progress reports on ongoing works, while the Chief Minister reviews implementation, directs timely completion of projects, and seeks accountability from the concerned departments. Several local issues have also been addressed through discussions with officials during these visits.

In another instance cited by the Government, a woman

appealed for the transfer of her husband to a location closer to home because of their child’s special medical requirements. Acting on the Chief Minister’s directions, the transfer order was issued within hours, officials said.

According to officials, the programme is not limited to grievance resolution. Villagers are also encouraged to share ideas and suggestions for future development planning, with the objective of making them active participants in Rajasthan’s development process.

Political observers say the Gram Vikas Chaupal combines public participation, administrative accountability, and direct interaction between citizens and the Government. They note that the initiative seeks to strengthen rural governance by enabling the administration to respond more effectively to local issues.

As Rajasthan continues to focus on rural development, Gram Vikas Chaupal has become an important part of the state’s outreach efforts, with the Government presenting it as a model for citizen-centric governance.

Assam flood : 47 dead, 40 missing, 7.21 lakh people affected

TONY DAS ■ Guwahati

The flood situation in Assam remained critical on Friday with many rivers continuing to rise following incessant rains, while 47 people died in the deluge and over 7.21 lakh people are affected across 11 districts, officials said. Around 40 people are still missing and the toll might increase, Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said.

To review the rapidly deteriorating situation, Sarma will chair a video conference with district commissioners and senior officials stationed across the flood-affected districts to assess the administration's ongoing response in handling the crisis.

"The situation has improved slightly, but we still have not



Assam CM Himanta Biswa Sarma chaired a virtual review meeting with the District Commissioners of the flood-affected districts to assess the latest flood situation in Upper Assam with a special focus on accelerating rescue and relief operations PIONEER PHOTO

been able to reach around 20 per cent of the affected people. I believe we will be able to reach them by today," he told reporters.

According to information, around 40 people are missing, and the death toll is expected to rise further, Sarma said.

"The Government will stand by the flood victims and will help as far as possible. A central Government team will visit the state to assess the flood damage on July 25," he added.

A spokesperson of the Assam State Disaster Management Authority (ASDMA) said that the river Dikhow at Sivasagar town continues to flow "above the severe flood condition" at 9 am on Friday. "Due to the continuous increase in the water level of

Dikhow, citizens have been advised to stay away from the river," she added.

At present, the Buridihing river at Khowang, Disang at Nanglamuraghat, Dikhou at Sivasagar, Dhansiri at Numaligarh and Kushiara at Sribhumi are flowing above the danger level.

According to the ASDMA flood bulletin issued on Thursday night, six people have lost their lives in the deluge during the last 24 hours. Sivasagar district has witnessed four people, including one woman and one child, drowning in flood waters; followed by two, including one child, in Charaideo, it added.

With these fatalities, the total number of deaths in this year's

floods has increased to 47 across the state. According to the authority's flood report, more than 7,21,000 people have been affected in Charaideo, Dibrugarh, Golaghat, Hojai, Jorhat, Kamrup, Kamrup Metropolitan, Karbi Anglong, Nagaon, Sivasagar and Tinsukia districts.

Sivasagar is the worst-hit district with nearly 3.8 lakh people affected, followed by Charaideo with almost 1.9 lakh people and Jorhat with more than 1.2 lakh people reeling under floodwaters.

The flood situation has worsened significantly since Wednesday, when more than 6.53 lakh people were affected across 11 districts. The ASDMA stated that the administration has been oper-

ating 358 relief camps and relief distribution centres in nine districts, currently caring for 24,124 displaced individuals.

Multiple agencies like the Army, NDRF, SDRF, Fire & Emergency Service, police and civil agencies have rescued around 5,000 people from different parts of Golaghat, Jorhat and Sivasagar, it added.

At present, 883 villages are under water, and 25,375.44 hectares of crop areas have been damaged across Assam, the ASDMA said. Embankments, roads, bridges and other infrastructure have been damaged by flood waters in different districts of the state.

On account of widespread flooding, 3,71,609 domestic animals and poultry are affected across the state.

Rescue operations conclude in rain-battered Palghar

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ Palghar

Heavy rains claimed two lives in Maharashtra's Palghar district over the past two days, where the local administration and two National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) teams rescued 244 people from flooded areas, officials said on Friday.

Schools and educational institutions in the district have been directed to remain closed on Friday as well for safety reasons, they said. Vivekanand Kadam, chief of the district disaster management cell, said the multi-agency rescue and



A worker transplants paddy saplings at a field in Maharashtra PTI

relief operations concluded around 5 am. Several localities in Palghar went under water following intense rainfall, with Dahanu and Talasari among the worst-affected areas.

Kadam said the death toll rose to two after another

body was recovered in Dahanu on Thursday. The man who was washed away in floodwaters is yet to be identified, he said. Earlier, another man's body was found in a nullah.

The official said 244 persons were rescued from

various waterlogged locations across the district. These included 124 from Palghar town, 65 workers stranded at a factory in Talasari, and 25 people trapped at a farmhouse in Gundale. A relief team official described the deluge as the worst the district had faced in the past decade.

Several close calls were reported during the downpour. Four passengers narrowly escaped on Thursday when their car plunged into a waterlogged trench on Sun City-Ghas Road in Vasai West after the driver swerved to avoid a stray dog. Locals pulled all four

occupants safely out of the partially submerged car.

Six persons, including four passengers, were trapped inside an MSRTC bus stranded in rising floodwaters in Saivan. Local residents again stepped in, pulling them to safety with ropes.

As floodwaters receded, traffic resumed on affected roads and bridges.

Officials said they had prioritised carrying out panchamas (spot inspections) to assess the extent of monetary and property losses suffered by residents.

District Collector Indu Rani Jakhar monitored the situation, they added.

Modi Govt first to bring anti-paper leak law: Kerala BJP President



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ Thiruvananthapuram

Kerala BJP president Rajeev Chandrasekhar on Friday said that the Narendra Modi Government was the first in the country to bring a law to prevent question paper leaks.

In a Facebook post, Chandrasekhar, the MLA from Nemom constituency, said that it was the Modi Government which formulated the Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act of 2024.

The BJP leader also claimed that he was part of the ministerial committee that framed the legislation and was, therefore, clearly aware of the developments that the Modi Government has implemented for the youth of the country since 2014. "Therefore, we must reject the false propaganda being spread against Modi on this issue," he asserted.

His assertion comes amidst intense protests in Delhi by the Cockroach Janata Party (CJP) and students against the Centre and Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan over the alleged irregularities in various nationally-conducted exams, including NEET.

Ken-Betwa activist Amit Bhatnagar ends 18-day hunger strike on mother's request

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ Chhatarpur

Activist Amit Bhatnagar has ended his 18-day fast over displacement issues resulting from the Ken-Betwa river linking project and other irrigation schemes in Madhya Pradesh.

Their mother persuaded him to end his fast after he reached his hometown Bijawar in Chhatarpur district, following his discharge from the hospital, Bhatnagar's brother Ankit said. "He was not keeping well. Our mother made him break the fast after he reached home," Ankit said.

Chhatarpur Collector Parth Jaiswal said that Bhatnagar was shifted to his hometown after his health improved. He had been admitted first to Bijawar Civil Hospital and later to the ICU of the district hospital after the police removed him from the protest site.

The Chhatarpur police broke up the protest at Kupi village on July 19, citing rising water levels in the Barana river during the monsoon. Bhatnagar had then said that his fast would continue.



The protest began on July 3 beneath an under-construction bridge over the Barana river.

Protesters demanded an inquiry into alleged irregularities in rehabilitation and payment of compensation to those displaced by the Ken-Betwa Link Project and other irrigation schemes, besides seeking statutory rights for affected families. They alleged large-scale corruption in the implementation of rehabilitation pack-

ages and sought an impartial probe to ensure justice for families yet to receive benefits.

Bhatnagar had claimed that on the day the administration cleared the protest site, he was preparing to present documents to the media alleging irregularities worth ₹400 crore. Before Bhatnagar ended his fast with coconut water, local organisation Jai Kisan Sangathan, which participated in the agitation, alleged in a statement that his family, journalists, social activists and fellow protesters were not allowed to meet him during his hospitalisation.

It also claimed that women in several villages had launched a *chulha bandh* (no-cooking) protest in support of the agitation. The organisation quoted Bhatnagar as saying that his agitation was not directed against any individual, political party or Government but sought to protect the constitutional, environmental and legal rights of tribal communities and project-affected families.

NEET paper fallout: Congress, BJP hold protests, counter-protests in Karnataka

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ Bengaluru

Protests and counter-protests over the alleged NEET question paper leak and the political fallout from the issue were held across several parts of Karnataka on Friday, with police detaining protesters, preventing rival groups from clashing and stepping up security at multiple locations.

Student groups, Dalit organisations, Youth Congress activists and civil society groups held protests over the alleged NEET irregularities and the reported police action against students in Delhi. The BJP has been protesting against the attack on its leaders during their agitation near the Congress office

in Bengaluru on Wednesday. Congress workers reportedly threw eggs at BJP legislator BP Harish, when he took part in the agitation to protest the Congress demonstration in front of the BJP office at Malleswaram in the city.

In Vijayapura, the BJP, led by district president Gurulingappa Angadi, held a protest at Ambedkar Circle, accusing the Congress Government of "hooliganism" and later marched towards the Deputy Commissioner's office.

Simultaneously, Progressive Dalit organisations and Aam Aadmi Party activists opposed the BJP protest, raising slogans against the party. Police intervened to prevent a confrontation between the two groups, detained more



Police personnel detain Congress workers after they staged a protest over the NEET paper leak issue at Hubballi in Dharwad district, Karnataka PTI

than 15 Dalit activists and brought the tense situation under control.

In Hubballi, students and Youth Congress activists staged a demonstration outside the Karnataka Institute of Medical Sciences (KIMS), alleging that the Centre had failed to ensure transparency in the NEET examination. Protesters attempted to burn effigies of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union Home Minister Amit Shah, but police prevented the attempt and seized the effigies.

A brief verbal altercation followed before the protest ended peacefully amid heavy police deployment. In Kalaburagi, members of the Democratic Thought Forum organised a protest march at Jagat Circle, con-

demning the alleged lathi charge on students protesting at Delhi's Jantar Mantar over the NEET issue.

In a separate demonstration, the Sneha Jagruti Suraksha Manch submitted a memorandum to the Deputy Commissioner seeking a fair probe into the alleged NEET irregularities and comprehensive reforms in the education systems.

The BJP also organised a separate protest in Kalaburagi, blocking traffic at Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel Circle before attempting to march towards the district Congress office. Police stopped the protesters by erecting barricades and detained several BJP leaders and workers, including MLA Avinash Jadhav and former MLA Dattatreya Patil Revoor.

3-member team probes DGP's unnatural death in Tripura

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ Agartala

A three-member team headed by the West Tripura SP will investigate the unnatural death of DGP Anurag Dhankar, said a state Government order issued on Friday.

Dhankar, who led the CBI probe into the alleged ₹13,000 crore PNB fraud involving diamondaire Nirav Modi and the reinvestigation of the 1984 anti-Sikh riots, was found hanging in the washroom of his chamber at the state police headquarters here on Monday.

"The unnatural death of DGP Anurag Dhankar will be investigated by a three-member team led by West Tripura Superintendent of Police (SP) Namit Pathak. West Tripura Additional SP



Druba Nath and Sub Inspector (SI) and existing Investigating Officer (IO) Subhojit Deb will assist the SP in the investigation," the Tripura Government order said. In case of necessity, the SP may co-opt any other officer from the Tripura Police Crime Branch or any other unit.

For any technical support, the West Tripura district superintendent of police may seek help from the cyber crime unit, the order said.

"Progress report in connection with the investigation may be submitted on a weekly basis to Inspector General (IG), Law and Order, Manchak Ipper for perusal of the Director General of Police (DGP), Tripura," the order said. State Home Secretary Abhishek Singh said the

police have already received the post-mortem report but stopped short of disclosing its content.

"The police have received the post-mortem report of the DGP. Investigation into the unnatural death is progressing as per law," he said.

Earlier, DGP in-charge GS Rao had hinted at forming a team to supervise and investigate the unnatural death of Dhankar.

As part of the investigation, uniform, official vehicle and electronic devices of Dhankar were seized for forensic examinations, another officer said.

The last rites of the 1994-batch IPS officer were performed in his native village Baraut in Baghat, Uttar Pradesh, with full honour on July 22.

Tripura BJP chief asks leaders to minimise differences ahead of local body elections

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ Agartala

Tripura BJP president Abhishek Debroy urged party leaders to minimise their differences and work in unison to strengthen the organisation, asserting that internal factionalism would only weaken the party.

His remarks come as the BJP gears up for the elections to the Village Committees under the Tripura Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council (TTAADC) and urban local bodies, including the Agartala Municipal Corporation (AMC).

Addressing a party programme at Bishalgarh Town Hall in Sepahijala district on Thursday, Debroy



Abhishek Debroy

referred to the recent organisational reshuffle in which MLA Sushanta Deb was replaced as the BJP Yuva Morcha state president by Arindam Deb.

"Some may say Sushanta Deb has been sidelined because he is no longer the Yuva Morcha president. The same thing happened to me when I was removed as the

Gomati district president. At that time, some people said I had been sidelined. But today I am the state president. Had I not been removed from that post, I would probably not have become the state president," he said.

Describing the BJP as an inclusive organisation, Debroy said leaders are re-assigned to different responsibilities to strengthen the party, and a change in organisational position should not be viewed as a setback.

Issuing a warning against factionalism, he said he would not work for any particular group within the party. "I have been entrusted with the responsibility of leading the state unit for the next three years," he said.



Editor's
TAKE

Exam leak response shifts to fast-track courts

PM Modi's announcement of fast-track courts for exam paper-leak cases signals the Government's intent to strengthen accountability and expedite justice

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's announcement of fast-track courts for examination paper-leak cases is, technically, a way forward. However, to say it will pacify the protesters, the short answer is no. The Government's response has arrived 45 days into a sit-in at Jantar Mantar, three days after a "Chalo Sansad" march on Parliament ended in lathi charges, and a day before a nationwide strike called by the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP), the youth outfit leading the agitation. The demand on the street was never primarily about court speed. It was - and remains - the resignation of Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan.

That mismatch explains why the announcement has, if anything, hardened the standoff rather than softened it. CJP's national spokesperson dismissed it as a fix for the wrong fracture. Having said that, fast-track courts are still worth having: certain, swift punishment beats the slow cases that previously allowed leak networks to regroup. They can act as a deterrent and dissuade perpetrators from such adventurism. It may not be a remedy for paper leaks, but it is certainly one of the many steps required to fix the problem.

Parliament's Monsoon Session, which opened the same day the march was blocked, remains deadlocked over the issue. None of this looks like a movement preparing to stand down - CJP called another round of strikes explicitly to protest the police crackdown, not to welcome the court announcement.

There is also a credibility problem no single X post can fix. This is not India's first paper-leak reckoning. The 2024 NEET-UG leak produced near-identical protests, an identical resignation demand, a new central law criminalising exam fraud, and a seven-member expert panel under former ISRO chief K. Radhakrishnan that filed roughly sixty recommendations. Two years and one more compromised exam later - the same racket, investigators say, also breached the 2025 paper - the cycle repeated. Fast-track courts prosecute a leak after it happens. They do nothing to stop the next one. That is the more useful question buried under the resignation politics: what actually stops a paper from leaking? The evidence points to an insider problem, not a punishment gap: leaks trace back to the question-setting, printing and transport chain, where coaching-linked intermediaries buy access - not outside hackers.

The Radhakrishnan committee's central recommendation - which the Supreme Court is now pressing the ministry to implement - was structural: replace the National Testing Agency's dependence on contractual staff with permanent, professional staffing, and build identity-linked custody records for every hand a paper passes through. Separately, the ministry's own plan to shift NEET to a computer-based, possibly multi-stage format from 2027 would shrink the payoff of any single leak, but that does not happen overnight. CJP's demands now include compensation for the families of a dozen-plus students it says have died by suicide since the exam was scrapped and re-run - a grief no courtroom timeline addresses. Pacifying this protest will likely require visible proof that the Government is willing to listen to them and has a plan to fix the problem once and for all.

The price of Western pragmatism

As Riyadh consolidates its regional influence despite persistent human rights concerns and a complex ideological legacy, the Kingdom's rise reflects a broader truth: in international politics, strategic interests often eclipse professed principles



NILANTHA
ILANGAMUWA

Saudi Arabia and Iran were hardly natural allies during the reign of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, yet their rivalry remained largely contained within the conventions of statecraft. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 transformed that competition into something altogether different. From that moment onwards, West Asia became the arena for a struggle that extended far beyond borders, armies and diplomacy.

Over the following decades, sectarian identity became increasingly weaponised as political currency. Sunni and Shia communities that had coexisted for centuries across the region found themselves drawn into conflicts manufactured by states pursuing influence rather than reconciliation. Reports that circulated during the opening phase of Donald Trump's war on Iran suggested that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, rather than Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, had urged Washington that the moment had come to topple the already weakened government in Tehran. Whatever the extent of Riyadh's influence over Washington's decision-making, the broader strategic reality is unmistakable. The region has entered another dangerous phase, while Saudi Arabia finds itself emerging as one of its greatest geopolitical beneficiaries.

For decades, Western governments have presented themselves as guardians of democracy, human rights, freedom of expression and the international rules-based order. Yet these same standards have demonstrated remarkable flexibility whenever Saudi Arabia occupies the centre of the discussion. The murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi inside the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul was not merely another human rights violation; it became one of the most thoroughly documented acts of state violence in modern diplomatic history. Yet only a few years later, many of those same governments, businesses and political figures returned to the Kingdom with remarkable enthusiasm, demonstrating how moral language often survives only until sufficiently large strategic or commercial incentives appear.

Amnesty International's latest report documents widespread abuse of Filipino domestic workers in Saudi Arabia, alleging excessive working hours, unpaid wages, physical and sexual abuse, and severe restrictions on their freedom under the Kingdom's labour sponsorship system. The organisation has urged Saudi authorities to strengthen legal protections, dismantle the remaining elements of the kafala system, and ensure accountability for employers accused of exploitation. The historical record surrounding Saudi Arabia's religious establishment presents another uncomfortable



THE SEIZURE OF
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SAUDI RELIGIOUS
AND POLITICAL LIFE

The writer is a columnist
based in Colombo

reality. The ideological movement established by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab emerged not merely as a theological reform movement but as a doctrine that sharply distinguished between those regarded as authentic believers and those deemed to have fallen into unbelief. As David Commins demonstrates in *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia*, the alliance between religious doctrine and the House of Saud became one of the most enduring political partnerships in modern history.

The ideological infrastructure established through schools, charities and universities extended far beyond the Arabian Peninsula, with enormous resources invested in exporting a particular interpretation of Islam that profoundly shaped later generations of radical movements. The seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca in November 1979 exposed these contradictions. Yaroslav Trofimov's *The Siege of Mecca* presents the uprising as a moment that revealed the internal tensions of Saudi religious and political life. Juhayman al-Otaybi and his followers did not reject Wahhabi doctrine. They claimed to be restoring it to what they believed was its uncompromised form. Their rebellion emerged from accusations that the Saudi monarchy had abandoned genuine Islamic governance through its alliances with Western powers, growing wealth and accommodation with modernity.

Rather than fundamentally challenging the ideological assumptions that had nourished such radicalism, the monarchy strengthened many elements of the religious establishment in exchange for renewed political legitimacy. The global expansion of conservative religious institutions accelerated during precisely the same period that transnational jihadist movements were beginning to emerge.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan transformed this ideological current into an international military enterprise. Backed by the United States, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan during the Cold War, thousands of foreign volunteers, including Osama bin Laden, travelled to Afghanistan under the banner of jihad. Al-Qaeda emerged through a convergence of ideological, geopolitical and military circumstances rather than Saudi religious doc-

trine alone. Nevertheless, both bin Laden and fifteen of the nineteen perpetrators of the September 11, 2001 attacks were Saudi nationals, while al-Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State developed overwhelmingly within extremist Sunni traditions rather than Shia movements associated with Tehran. This does not absolve Iran of supporting armed proxies, a reality starkly illustrated by Yemen. It does, however, complicate simplistic narratives that portray one source of extremism as the exclusive threat.

Against this historical background, the newly signed civilian nuclear cooperation agreement between the United States and Saudi Arabia represents far more than an energy partnership. During the Cold War, Washington actively helped establish Iran's civilian nuclear programme under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, supplying its first research reactor, highly enriched uranium fuel and technical expertise through the Atoms for Peace initiative. That programme was presented as a peaceful endeavour, yet the infrastructure created with American support later became central to one of the world's most contentious nuclear disputes.

Reports indicate that the agreement departs from what has long been regarded as the American 'gold standard' for nuclear cooperation by not requiring Saudi Arabia permanently to renounce uranium enrichment and spent-fuel reprocessing. Those distinctions matter because civilian nuclear programmes and military nuclear capabilities exist upon a technological continuum. Not every country possessing civilian reactors pursues nuclear weapons, but every nuclear weapons programme requires technological foundations that civilian programmes may eventually provide. The issue is therefore not immediate weaponisation but future strategic options.

Perhaps the most revealing aspect of this agreement lies not within its technical provisions but within the broader political transformation that made it possible. History rarely rewards the most virtuous governments. More often, it rewards those that recognise that power is ultimately negotiated through interests rather than principles. Mohammed bin Salman appears to have understood this better than many of his counterparts. While liberal democracies continue to present themselves as defenders of human rights, democratic accountability and the international rules-based order, their policies towards Riyadh repeatedly demonstrate the exact opposite. Whatever history's final verdict on his legacy may be, one conclusion is difficult to dispute: Mohammed bin Salman has transformed Saudi Arabia's geopolitical position with remarkable effectiveness. In a region fractured by war, exhausted by proxy conflicts and increasingly shaped by transactional diplomacy, he has outmanoeuvred many of his rivals and critics alike. For now, he has the last laugh.

PIC TALK



A man looks towards the base camps for the Amarnath Yatra amid rain at Baltal in Ganderbal district. PHOTO: PTI



DEEBA
SALIM IRFAN

2ND OPINION

Few years back, at one of my writing retreats, a participant gave me a story.

"It isn't very good" she said quickly. "I haven't written in forty years."

Forty years. I looked at her. Wondered what had happened in those decades. Not because she hadn't written, but because she had stopped believing she could write. Life had happened, of course.

Marriage. Kids. School runs. Ageing parents. Deadlines. Responsibilities. The small acts of care that hold families together. As I listened to her I thought about all the things we give up.

The girl who wanted to write stories.
The young man who dreamed of opening a café.
The woman who wanted to start a business.



The traveller who kept postponing the trip. We don't stop wanting these things. We just think there will be time later. Later is a tricky word.

It sounds reassuring. Patient. Responsible. Years fly past fast. One day you put a dream on hold for a few months. The next twenty years have passed.

Lately I've noticed something changing. Friends in their fifties are taking courses they never took in their twenties. A neighbour is learning Arabic. Another started an online business from home. Someone I know started his PhD well into his 60's because education was unfinished.

These stories won't make headlines. They move me more than tales of quick success. Maybe because they're not about achievement. They're about giving yourself permission. Permission to start before you're ready. Permission to be bad at something. Permission to want more from life even when life has

given you much. We live in a culture that loves youth. Ads and social media content try to convince us that our best years are behind us by forty. That one cannot achieve much after. But, as I grow older, my faith in these claims is shaking. I've met women who became more confident with every passing year, well into their late fifties. More than they were in their twenties. I've seen people find purpose after retirement. I've seen friendships grow, marriages appear from places buried for decades.

Dreams return. Life is not a road. It's like a mountain path. There are bends. There are pauses.

Sometimes there are stretches where nothing happens. Then unexpectedly the view changes. The participant finished her story. Then she wrote another. Last year she sent me a message to say one of her pieces was published. I was happy, for her. What stayed with me was something else she wrote. "I wish I hadn't waited this long." I understand what she meant. Maybe there's another way to look at it. She started. And sometimes, that is the bravest thing a person can do.

The writer is an award-winning, Dubai-based author exploring themes of memory, identity and emotional truth through storytelling, and is the founder of TheWriteScene.com

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LIVE-IN RELATIONSHIPS CHALLENGE TRADITIONAL INDIAN VALUES

India is known to the world for its rich culture and traditions. This cultural richness has not emerged on its own. Hinduism has enriched the customs of the country and is not only a major religion of India but a civilisational strength that has defined its societal norms. Its ability to accommodate diversity has taught the world how different faiths can coexist without confrontation.

The Vedas, Puranas and Gita are not merely sacred texts but gateways to enlightenment that have helped a civilisation survive and excel through pragmatism, scientific reasoning and philosophical analysis. Holi, Diwali and Durga Puja are more than vibrant festivals; they provide opportunities for community gatherings where people from all walks of life

participate. Indian culture has traditionally considered marriage sacred. However, the growing practice of live-in relationships is changing centuries-old social traditions. Cohabitation without marriage has traditionally been considered contrary to Indian values. Live-in relationships can sometimes lead to conflict when partners disagree over marriage.

Our habit of importing Western technology, education and fashion has also influenced our way of living, which may not always suit Indian traditions and values. It is time to consider what example such practices will leave for future generations if the sanctity of Indian traditions is to be preserved.

KABIR AHMED SAIKIA | ASSAM

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

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KIRTI WADHAWAN | KANPUR

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Education reforms need accountability

It is heartening to note that activist Sonam Wangchuk has ended his 26-day-long hunger strike after assurances from the Centre on education reforms. It is a welcome move. As the student protest intensified, violence erupted, similar to what had happened earlier during the CAA and farmers' protests. Anti-social elements, allegedly with foreign support, took control of the situation. The Congress, too, wanted to score political mileage against the Modi Government. Sonam's decision to call off his fast before the violence spread further is to be appreciated.

The Government, on the other hand, should bring reforms to the education sector. Many students have died because of the pressure to pass the NEET examination to become doctors.

NEET provides a proper platform to select meritorious students and ensure quality medical education. There are some bottlenecks that should be overcome through experience; banning it altogether is unwanted and uncalled for. There must be accountability and transparency at all stages.

The Government can also consider nationalising the education and health sectors and moving them out of the clutches of politicians.

Nuclear safeguards must remain

Apropos the editorial 'The US ends its clear non-proliferation policy' (July 24), it rightly highlights the dangers of weakening long-standing nuclear safeguards for short-term strategic and commercial gains. By allowing Saudi Arabia access to civilian nuclear technology without the stringent restrictions imposed in earlier agreements, the United States risks undermining the global non-proliferation framework it once championed.

The omission of explicit limits on uranium enrichment and the absence of stronger IAEA oversight could encourage other countries in the region to demand similar concessions. At a time when tensions surrounding Iran's nuclear programme remain high, such a move may trigger a costly and destabilising arms race across the Gulf.

While every nation has the right to pursue peaceful nuclear energy, that right must be balanced with robust transparency and internationally accepted safeguards. Commercial interests and geopolitical competition should never take precedence over global security. Congress must carefully scrutinise the agreement to ensure that strategic partnerships do not come at the cost of weakening decades of efforts to prevent nuclear proliferation.

Assam struggles against the deluge

It is a matter of urgency for the Government to act on the current flood situation in Assam. Heavy rainfall has affected thousands of people, while the Disang river is flowing above the danger level in many areas. The rescue efforts of the Assam State Disaster Management Authority have not been sufficient, resulting in the Indian Army being called in for support.

So far, more than 6.5 lakh people have been displaced. In several places, entire villages are under water, causing immense hardship to residents. The situation in Sivasagar, Charaideo and Golaghat is particularly severe. Twenty-one people have already lost their lives due to the floods.

At this critical juncture, the Government must take all necessary measures to restore normalcy. We cannot halt rain or floods, but effective management and adequate preparedness can significantly reduce people's suffering.

The Centre, along with Assam's neighbouring states, should take the initiative to support affected communities, strengthen rescue and relief operations, and help residents deal with the flood crisis effectively.

Bundelkhand's long road from neglect to renewal

For decades, Bundelkhand remained on the margins of development. Today, however, the region is witnessing a remarkable turnaround. Backed by major investments in infrastructure, improved connectivity and new industrial initiatives, Bundelkhand is steadily emerging as a key growth centre for Uttar Pradesh



PRIYANKA SRIVASTAVA

Although Uttar Pradesh's Bundelkhand region is advancing towards becoming the state's second Noida today, for nearly seven decades after Independence it was condemned to a fate marked by bandits, drought and mass migration. Spanning roughly 29,000 Sq Kms and home to nearly 8.2 million people across seven districts, this vast territory was systematically kept outside the mainstream of development for a prolonged period. Under successive regimes of the Congress, the Bahujan Samaj Party and, above all, the Samajwadi Party, resource scarcity, neglect of schemes and administrative apathy remained the norm. Promises were routinely made, yet tangible change on the ground remained conspicuously absent.

This is the same land that, under the leadership of Rani Lakshmbai of Jhansi, raised the banner of self-respect during the Revolt of 1857. Stung by that uprising, the British administration deliberately set out to cripple Bundelkhand economically and socially as a punitive lesson.

After Independence there was hope that the land of these great warriors would finally receive its rightful due. Instead, successive Congress, BSP and especially Samajwadi Party governments converted colonial-era neglect into a permanent political arrangement. The old pattern was further entrenched so that the absence of development could always be excused by a ready-made narrative of backwardness and insecurity.

The artificial narrative of 'Dasyu Pradesh': A design to keep investment away

During the tenures of Mulayam Singh Yadav and Akhilesh Yadav, Bundelkhand's image was deliberately projected as the stronghold of the dacoits of Chambal and Bundelkhand. Rather than recognizing the region's latent potential, official policy reduced it to a mere "dacoit-affected zone."

This carefully constructed narrative sent a clear signal to industrialists and investors across India and beyond: Bundelkhand was unsafe for trade and capital. Dacoits received political patronage; their criminal pasts were glorified. Consequently, while new industries and infrastructure rose elsewhere in the state, Bundelkhand's public identity remained confined to chilling tales of outlaw gangs.

The criminalisation of a generation of youth

The greatest disservice under Congress, BSP and SP rule was inflicted on the future of Bundelkhand's young people. Hands that should have held quality education, modern skills and technical knowledge were steered instead towards pistols and the underworld, exploiting unemployment and despair.

With employment opportunities absent and the education system in ruins, local youth faced only two bleak choices: join mafia or dacoit gangs, or migrate to the slums of Delhi, Mumbai and Surat to work for subsistence wages. 'Under Samajwadi Party governance', youthful energy was channeled not into learning or livelihood but into muscle power and political muscle-flexing.

Government machinery as silent spectator and willing accomplice

During SP rule, successive dreaded dacoit gangs operated parallel administrations in full public view. The terror spread by figures such as Thokia, Dadua and Ragia was so complete that law and order simply ceased to exist in rural areas.

Most painfully, the state government and police administration remained passive onlookers instead of acting. Political patrons in power exploited these gangs for electoral advantage, booth capturing and 'vote-bank consolidation'.

Punishment postings and the free rein of the mining mafia

'Government machinery' in Bundelkhand was deployed 'not for public service' but to silence ordinary citizens and plunder local resources. Police and



administrative officers regarded postings there as "punishment postings." Those who arrived either capitulated to the corrupt system or chose silence. In return, under SP rule the mining and land mafias were granted open license to loot sand from the rivers. Illegal extraction from the Ken and Betwa drained the public exchequer while ordinary farmers feared even setting foot in their own fields.

The cost of limited political weight and step motherly fund allocation

A key political calculation behind this prolonged neglect was Bundelkhand's modest electoral footprint — only four Lok Sabha seats and nineteen Assembly seats. Whether under Congress, BSP or the SP of Mulayam and Akhilesh Yadav, electoral strategy always prioritised regions with larger seat shares or stronger captive vote banks. Because of its limited political leverage, Bundelkhand never received priority in budgetary allocations. The bulk of state resources was diverted elsewhere, while the region was dismissed with the label "backward area" and token announcements.

Farmers parched by drought and relief looted by corruption

Bundelkhand's natural geography is arid and plateau-like, yet successive governments left this structural challenge unaddressed. Between 2013 and 2015, under Akhilesh Yadav's government, severe drought drove farmers into starvation, debt and suicide. Irrigation projects remained buried in files for years. The ultimate betrayal came when drought-relief supplies and "relief packets" themselves became 'casualties of corruption'. The administration simply labelled the crisis a "natural disaster" and washed its hands of responsibility.

The end of neglect under the double-engine government

The arrival of the double-engine government—Narendra Modi at the Centre and Yogi Adityanath in Uttar Pradesh after 2017 — has brought an epochal shift. The Bundelkhand Expressway has linked the region directly to both the national and state capitals.

Mega projects such as the Defense Industrial Corridor (Jhansi node) and the Bundelkhand Industrial Development Authority (BIDA) are accelerating industrialisation. The centuries-old drinking-water crisis has been addressed through the 'Har Ghar Nal scheme', freeing mothers and sisters from kilometres-long walks for water. Power supply has been fully stabilised, and scheme benefits now reach citizens directly, free of middlemen.

The story of Bundelkhand is a stark reminder of how a historically and strategically significant region was systematically sidelined for political convenience. Neglect that began under British rule reached its zenith under Congress, BSP and especially Samajwadi Party governments. Arming the youth with pistols, allowing dacoits to flourish, and denying basic amenities had become the region's enforced destiny.

While the double-engine government since 2017 has begun writing a new chapter of development and has visibly transformed the atmosphere, the fact remains that the 'planned impoverishment of Bundelkhand' until 2017 is a documented chapter of history whose full redress will still require considerable time.

The author is an Assistant Professor at Allahabad Degree College, University of Allahabad

Dear youth, how about a real revolution?



ACHARYA PRASHANT

The state stands indicted. An administration under which question papers travel faster than justice has failed its first duty. The syndicates that sell children's futures for cash deserve the harshest prosecution the law can build. Nothing that follows dilutes that verdict by one drop. In every act of injustice there are two things, not one. First, the action; second, your understanding of the action and response to it. You are examining the minister with full ruthlessness. Now extend the same examination to the examiner. If the test is fair, why should anyone be exempt? Including you.

The paper leaked, somebody sold it, and somebody also bought it. Show me one buyer of the paper in the march. Ask yourself: the students whom the next leak reaches in time, will they be marching or memorising the leaked paper? Is it not the ego's oldest trick to shout about the action so that the actor is never discussed? Man acts from a corrupt centre, and no rearrangement of actions has ever cleaned a centre. Correction is the cleaning of the centre of the old one. Not that you leave the street, but that you clean the one who walks on it.

Look at what your placards demand. A fair examination, an accountable minister; in other words, a cleaner race. Not one placard in the whole capital asks the prior question: is this race so important that a young person takes his life for it? In 2022, this country recorded 13,999 student suicides. No paper had leaked in that year, and the children still died anyway. So the leak did not build the machine that equates a rank with a life.

A whole civilisation has told its seventeen-year-olds that their self-worth is tied to their scorecards. When the result collapses, the young person concludes that he has collapsed. That conclusion is the real killer. A movement that wins a resignation but leaves this machine untouched is preparing the next round of casualties.

A monkey entered the house and wrecked the room. Now the mother returns. Whom does she slap? The monkey, or the child who left the door open? I am only asking why one of them has ten million investigators and the other has none. Who opened the door? The people you now want to drag from their chairs were carried to those chairs by you. What exactly were you doing in the polling booth?

Outer revolution must follow inner revolution, or it is only an outing. Has your family's extra income, legally called black money, not been quietly set aside for your sister's dowry? On the morning of the great march: "Mummy, extra parathas today, I am off to do revolution." Whose money bought the flour, beta? Here is a qualifying exam for revolutionaries. Announce at home: I refuse the corrupt rupee. This exam does not cancel your march; it qualifies you for it. A revolution that reaches the road but never reaches the dining table has not begun. It begins as one unbearable question: why am I the way I am?

Half a century ago, this country saw its largest student uprising, against corruption itself. Its young heroes then ruled states for decades. The record of that rule includes the very corruption convictions their movement was born to prevent. Fifteen years ago, another anti-corruption wave electrified the nation. Its crusader became a governing politician and collected corruption cases of his own. The chair did not corrupt the pure. The chair only handed a bigger stage to an ego nobody had ever questioned. Rotate the patients as often as you like; the disease holds the ward. They do not prove that marching is useless; they prove that unfit marchers are useless. And nothing changed, because the winners were the same unexamined egos as the losers. The failure was never in the feet; it was in the centre the feet carried. That is why fitness comes first. Not instead of the march, but before it. Suppose you win, and the minister resigns. The ego does not weep because it was hurt. It weeps because it has not yet been paid for the hurt. The resignation is the payment. And a compensated victim never again faces the mirror. Prosecute the guilty. A scalp is a trophy, and trophies educate nobody. Krishna stood on a battlefield, not in a hermitage. He took one warrior, and he refused to let him shoot a single arrow until that warrior had self-knowledge. He refused to let him fire, and he equally refused to let him flee. He purified the fighter, and then he said: Now Fight! The bar is honesty, and honesty does not take years at all. I have a problem with blindness on the street. Educate yourself in the self: one hour a day with a text that questions the questioner, before the phone is touched. Then educate the voter beside you.

Then vote, then organise, then contest, and then march. The march of the awakened is not merely permitted; it is awaited. The word revolution means a complete turning. So turn, but turn fully: towards yourself. There is no revolution without love. Not slogan-love, but love as the ego's own decision to turn upon itself and dissolve. Rage rearranges the world and leaves the actor intact. Love alone changes the actor.

Dear youth, you want revolution, and you are right to want it. First the mirror, then the march. The real revolution is not housed in any ministry or maidan. It first lives in you. Then come out, and I will be marching in your middle.



Acharya Prashant is a philosopher and author whose work centres on self-inquiry and its application to contemporary life



BRAJESH KUMAR TIWARI

India today faces a striking paradox. Educated youth are struggling to find meaningful work, while firms are struggling to find job-ready technicians, mechanics, electricians, machine operators, repair workers and supervisors. This is not merely an unemployment problem; it is a capability mismatch. Degrees have expanded faster than usable workplace skills, and certificates have often grown faster than employer confidence. As Skill India completes eleven years on July 15, 2026, the central question is no longer whether India can train at scale. It is whether training can translate into productivity, wages, dignity and real bargaining power in the labour market.

What India did gain from Skill India Skill India's most visible achievement has been its large scale. Under PMKVY, from 2015 to 31 December 2025, 1.64 crore candidates were trained or oriented, while 1.29 crore were certified. Women's participation has also been notable, with 74.29 lakh women trained by 30 June 2025, accounting for nearly 45 per cent of total candidates. In the first three phases, where placement tracking was linked mainly to the Short-Term Training component, 56.89 lakh candidates were certified and 24.3 lakh were reported placed, reflecting a placement rate of about 42.8 per cent. PMKVY 4.0 has moved beyond basic placement reporting towards wider career pathways, including self-

employment, wage employment, on-the-job training and digital linkages. By 31 December 2025, it had trained 27.09 lakh candidates and certified 18.79 lakh. Its focus on future skills is visible through over 600 industry-aligned courses in AI, 5G, cyber security, green hydrogen and drones.

Yet the core criticism has become sharper: Skill India did better in mobilising candidates, issuing certificates and building scheme visibility than in transforming the labour market. PLFS 2025 shows why. Only 4.2 per cent of Indians aged 15-59 had received or were receiving formal vocational or technical training; among 15-29-year-olds, the share was just 5.0 per cent. The Economic Survey, using PLFS 2023-24, also noted that 65.3 per cent of the workforce had no vocational training, while only 4.1 per cent had formal training. The skilling architecture expanded, but its real penetration into the workforce remains shallow.

Quality has been an equally serious concern. The 2025 CAG audit of PMKVY found that 6.54 lakh certified candidates across 705 job roles did not meet the minimum entry age at the start of training. Many others were certified despite not meeting educational or technical eligibility norms. Field inspections found closed training centres, weak attendance compliance, and gaps in placement strategy, monitoring and recognition-of-prior-learning certification. The larger message was clear: India created a large certification system without fully protecting the credibility of certification.

Employer linkage remains the weakest link. NITI Aayog found that 94 per cent of surveyed employers were willing to hire more PMKVY-trained candidates, and IIPA reported that 70.5 per cent of sur-



veyed candidates were placed in their desired skill sector. Yet placement tracking was mainly linked to PMKVY's first three phases, not PMKVY 4.0. When tracking weakens, accountability also weakens. This is worrying for MSMEs, which need trusted hiring signals and easy apprenticeship routes, not just more course completions. The rural-urban divide also persists. PLFS 2025 shows youth unemployment at 8.3 per cent in rural India and 13.6 per cent in urban India. Secondary education attainment was 61.9 per cent in rural areas and 79.7 per cent in urban areas. Skill India has widened access, but structural gaps in schooling, connectivity, migration networks and local employer density remain unresolved. India's skilling strategy should not be based on a single model viewed only through the lens of a foreign system. Germany shows the importance of tying classroom instruction to practical workplace training. Almost 89 per cent of vocational upper-secondary students participate in programmes that blend school-based learning with on-the-job experience. In this way, some 94 per cent of recent vocational graduates get a job within two years. South Korea, meanwhile, demonstrates how robust academic rigour, institutional rigour and competent quality assurance

can enhance results, even when vocational education attracts comparatively fewer students.

Another key lesson from Singapore is to not see vocational education as a lesser or second choice. The Institute of Technical Education and the broader SkillsFuture ecosystem have given vocational skills more social recognition, career mobility and lifelong relevance. The Philippines shows how a national mechanism can broaden the horizons of competency-based assessment and certification, with 13.76 lakh enrolments and nearly 10.81 lakh workers certified in 2024.

The importance of legally supported apprenticeship programmes is underscored by Brazil. By April 2026, the nation boasted 7,26,025 active young apprentices, suggesting the efficacy of a system in which employers participate in workforce development. India does not have to follow the entire path of any of these models. The big takeaway is that we are going to need a trusted skilling system that enables meaningful employer involvement, stronger apprenticeships, portable qualifications, high-quality standards, and job outcomes - not just enrolment and certification numbers.

Viksit Bharat is not only a GDP target; it is a productivity target. India cannot become a major manufacturing hub, high-value services exporter, green-transition economy and digital public infrastructure leader when only about 4 to 5 per cent of its people are formally vocationally trained. Manufacturing needs technicians, machine operators, quality controllers, maintenance workers and supervisors. Services need coders, cloud-support staff, logistics workers, care workers, sales teams and hospitality professionals. Green growth will

require solar technicians, EV maintenance workers, building-efficiency specialists and workers for recycling, waste management and industrial retrofitting. PMKVY 4.0's shift towards electronics, IT-ITES and future skills is therefore welcome, but India needs a much wider base of applied workers, not only a small class of elite engineers.

AI can support this transition, but it cannot replace basic institutional reform. For most workers, the need is not advanced AI-building skills, but stronger digital ability, data awareness and problem-solving. AI should be used for personalised learning in Indian languages, adaptive practice and better matching of learners with jobs and apprenticeships. Used well, AI can improve assessment quality and make reskilling continuous; used poorly, it will create one more dashboard without creating one more employable worker. India now needs hard but practical reforms. PMKVY 4.0 should restore compulsory tracking of placement, wages and retention, publish district-wise outcomes, and link public payments more closely with verified employment results. Apprenticeships must become simpler for MSMEs through pooled agencies, standard contracts, digital stipend support and shared trainers. In the medium term, vocational education must enter schools, ITIs, polytechnics and universities as a mainstream pathway, with portable credits under NCF. Skill India's first decade proved it can certify at scale. Its second must prove that skills improve young Indians' bargaining power.

The writer is an Associate Professor at Atal School of Management, IITM



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Pet dog plays crucial role in solving 2021 Mohali murder



A Mohali court convicted and sentenced a man to life imprisonment in a 2021 murder incident with a pet dog of the victim playing a crucial role in cracking the case.

The court of Additional Sessions Judge Vikrant Kumar awarded a life term to Jagir Singh, a resident of village Parol, for the murder of goat farmer Sucha Singh, a resident of Chhoti Badi Naggal village in Mohali in June 2021. The court also imposed a fine of ₹1 lakh.

Two other accused Desraj and Satnam Singh were, however, acquitted in the murder case.

The court also rejected the prosecution's plea for capital punishment, stating that the case did not qualify as one of the "rarest of rare".

The court convicted the accused on July 17 and the sentence was pronounced on July 22.

According to the prosecution, Sucha Singh went missing on June 12, 2021, after leaving home to graze his goats.

The family came to know that Jagir Singh took Sucha to his house for making enclosure for goats. When Sucha did not return home that day, Jagir told the family that Sucha had gone with one Desraj. But Sucha did not return home, prompting the family to lodge a missing complaint with police. Despite the family carrying out search at their own level for over a week, Sucha Singh could not be found. Thereafter, the family members of Sucha Singh went to Jagir's farmhouse on June 20, 2021. The family also took along their pet dog Rocky.

When the family members were looking for Sucha Singh, their pet dog Rocky went towards a small pit. The family then started digging and found Sucha's T-shirt. Later police was called in and the headless body of Sucha Singh was exhumed from the spot. (PTI)

Delhi court acquits man in 2011 murder case

A Delhi court has acquitted a man in a 2011 murder case, saying the prosecution failed to prove the charges beyond reasonable doubt after key witnesses turned hostile and the forensic evidence did not support the case.

The court, however, convicted him for absconding after he pleaded guilty to the offence. Additional Sessions Judge Vandana was hearing the case against Amit Kumar, who was accused in the murder of property leader Ranbir Singh, who was shot in Bawana's Pooth Khurd area in June 2011. An FIR was registered against the accused under IPC sections 302 and 120B and the Arms Act. In the order dated July 14, the court said, "There is no hesitation in holding that the prosecution has failed to prove its case beyond reasonable doubt, and accordingly, the accused, Amit Kumar, deserves the benefit of doubt and hence stands acquitted."

The court noted that the complainant and other material witnesses did not support the prosecution during the trial and failed to identify the accused. It also said that the ballistic report did not link the recovered pistol with the bullets found in the deceased's body. "Even vide the forensic evidence, no incriminating evidence could be proved against the accused persons as discussed above. (PTI)

Centre assures strict steps to curb NEET paper leaks

The Supreme Court on Friday told the Centre that it will closely monitor the steps taken to curb NEET examination paper leaks, while underlining that ad hocism has caused trouble for years.

A bench of Justices PS Narasimha and Alok Aradhe, which was hearing a batch of petitions, including one by the Federation of All India Medical Association (FAIMA), told Solicitor General Tushar Mehta that the Government should indicate the steps taken towards transparency, implementation of recommendations of the Radhakrishnan Committee, and how the IIT model would be followed.

Mehta said there are some developments and the Government will file a detailed report, which may be beyond the recommendations of the Radhakrishnan Committee. "Students' futures can't be jeopardised. We are going beyond the Radhakrishnan Committee. I assure you that the Government is walking 10 extra miles. I can assure you everything is being supervised at the highest level," Mehta submitted. He added that two years back, a similar issue arose and right from printing to transportation, everything was explained to the court. The bench said that the Government deployed the Airforce to transport question papers for the NEET-UG retest, but all these measures are ad hoc. (PTI)



HC refuses to entertain PIL on NIA probe into CJP's *Chalo Sansad*

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

The Delhi High Court on Friday refused to entertain a PIL seeking a probe by the NIA or any "specialised agency" into the Cockroach Janta Party-led march to Parliament on July 20 to protest against the NEET-UG paper leak and other related issues.

A bench of Chief Justice DK Upadhyaya and Justice Tejas Karia said the alleged incidents of vandalism were given the knowledge and notice of the authorities, who would take action according to the law.

The bench also said it was for the Centre to refer any case to the National Investigation Agency (NIA) for investigation, and not the court.

In view of the court's observations, Solicitor General Tushar Mehta asked the petitioner's counsel to consider withdrawing the PIL, following which the petitioner



requested the bench to withdraw the same.

"The PIL is dismissed as withdrawn," the court ordered.

The petitioner, Satish Kumar Aggarwal, the ex-vice president of the Akhil Bharat Hindu Mahasabha, said in the PIL that the participation of activists and political leaders as well as the alleged involvement of foreign-funded organisations, has raised serious questions about the "true nature, purpose, and objectives of the protest".

It said these concerns call for a "comprehensive investigation" to ascertain if any "external elements were involved in activities prejudicial to public order, national security, and the sovereignty and integrity of India".

"In these circumstances, the petitioner seeks appropriate directions for registration of an FIR, a thorough and impartial investigation into the incidents connected to

Building contractor suicide: Ex-MLA, wife get anticipatory bail; no relief for MNS leader

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Pune

A sessions court in Pune has granted anticipatory bail to former MLA Ravindra Dhangekar and his wife in connection with the suicide of a building contractor, while rejecting a similar plea filed by MNS leader Bala Shedge.

Additional Sessions Judge Aniruddha Gandhi granted anticipatory bail to the Dhangekar couple on Thursday on a personal bond of ₹25,000 each with one surety of the like amount, subject to conditions.

The court, however, rejected the anticipatory bail application of Shedge, whose name allegedly figured in the suicide note and a video purportedly recorded by the deceased before taking the extreme step.

The case pertains to the suicide of Khalil Sheikh (65), a building centring contractor and labour supplier, at his residence in Gultekdi on July 16. Based on a complaint lodged by his wife Sultana Sheikh, the Swargate police registered a case against Shiv Sena leader Dhangekar, his wife Pratibha Dhangekar,



Shedge, Raghunath Gowda and eight others for abetment of suicide and other offences. According to the complaint, Khalil Sheikh had recorded a video before his death alleging that he had been cheated in business. A purported suicide note was also found pasted on the wall outside his house.

The complaint alleged the accused had failed to pay him dues, causing him severe financial distress. It further claimed Shedge threatened to kill Sheikh and had seized his centring material, a temporary structure that supports buildings or structural elements during construction, leading to sustained harassment that allegedly drove him to end his life.

While granting relief to the Dhangekar couple, the court observed that Ravindra Dhangekar's name did not appear in the suicide note and that he had no direct business dealings with the deceased.

The court also noted that Dhangekar's wife had retired from the partnership firm linked to the construction business on August 19, 2025, and therefore had no direct connection with the deceased or his business at the relevant time. On these grounds, the court held that custodial interrogation of the Dhangekar couple was not warranted and granted them anticipatory bail, while declining similar relief to Shedge.

SC proposes special courts for Manipur violence cases

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

The Supreme Court on Friday proposed setting up special courts to conduct day-to-day trials in criminal cases arising from the 2023 ethnic violence in Manipur. It also directed probe agencies to expeditiously complete pending investigations and ensure that victims receive copies of chargesheets.

A bench comprising Chief Justice Surya Kant and Justices Joymalya Bagchi and V Mohana took note of the fact that many victims and their families are yet to get copies of the chargesheets filed by the CBI and the state

SIT in criminal cases. The lawyers will have to be provided the chargesheets within one week of legal aid counsel contacting them, the court said.

More than 200 people have been killed, several hundred injured and thousands displaced since ethnic violence first broke out in Manipur on May 3, 2023, when a 'Tribal Solidarity March' was organised in the hill districts to protest against the majority Meitei community's demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status.

Hearing a batch of pleas relating to the violence, the apex court permitted the legal aid counsel represent-



ing the victims to approach the offices of the chief justices of the Gauhati and Manipur chief justices to seek copies of the chargesheets.

Senior advocate Vrinda Grover informed the bench

that despite previous directions, the families of two deceased victims had told her they had still not received the copies. She said one legal aid counsel had received the documents while another

SC restricts uploading proceedings online



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

The Supreme Court on Friday barred posting, reposting or uploading of audio-video recordings of court proceedings on social media and other digital platforms without prior permission of the concerned secretary general of the apex court or the registrar generals of the high courts.

A bench of Chief Justice Surya Kant and Justices Joymalya Bagchi and V Mohana also sought responses from the Centre and others on a plea raising the misuse of live-streaming and circulation of videos of

court proceedings on social media.

"As an interim measure, it is directed that there shall be no extraction, modification, dissemination posting, reposting and uploading of audio-video visual recordings of judicial proceedings on social media or other digital platforms without prior permission of the secretary general of this court or the registrar general of the jurisdictional high courts," the bench said.

Senior advocate Vikas Singh, appearing for the petitioner, highlighted the misuse of videos of court proceedings on social media and other digital platforms.

iPhone buyer gets beard oil; Flipkart, seller to pay ₹1.11 lakh

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Mumbai

A consumer court here has directed Flipkart and the seller to refund over ₹1.11 lakh to a customer who received beard growth oil instead of the Apple iPhone he had ordered, and to pay ₹70,000 in compensation and litigation costs.

The District Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission, Additional DCF, Mumbai (Suburban), in its order passed earlier this month, held that repeated closure of the customer's complaints without granting any effective relief amounted to "unfair trade practice". It noted that the order was placed through the online platform by making the necessary payments.

"Therefore, the opposite party No 1 (Flipkart) owed a corresponding duty to ensure that the consumer received the product ordered and to provide an effective mechanism for redressal of consumer grievances," the commission said.

An e-commerce entity cannot simply distance itself



from a transaction after facilitating the sale, particularly where the consumer immediately reports that a completely different product has been delivered, it said.

The failure to investigate the complaint, recover the wrongly delivered parcel, provide a replacement or refund and repeatedly close the complaint without granting any effective relief "amounts to a clear cut deficiency in service and also constitutes an unfair trade practice", the commission said. The panel also emphasised that the failure on the part of the seller, International Value Retail Pvt Ltd, to deliver the contracted product and rectify the grievance despite

repeated requests clearly establishes deficiency in service on its part.

Thus, both the platform and the seller are jointly and severally liable for the loss and inconvenience caused to the complainant, the commission ruled.

The complainant, a resident of Mumbai's Powai area, had purchased an Apple iPhone 14 Pro (128 GB) on April 22, 2023, via Flipkart for ₹1,11,793 using a no-cost EMI scheme.

While a separately ordered charger and cover were delivered successfully, the main package delivered the following day contained "beard growth oil" and packing material instead of the high-end smartphone.

Media reports reckless, no plea related to CJP protests filed: CJI Surya Kant

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

Chief Justice of India Surya Kant on Friday dismissed as "reckless" media reports that he had denied urgent hearing on a plea challenging the July 20 police action against students, saying it was only a representation and not a petition.

No such petition was filed, he stated. "In the last two days, a completely false statement was made that a matter was filed, and the media is absolutely free from all responsibility and falsely reporting that the Chief Justice refused to list the matter," he said. "Till morning 10 am, not a single page has been filed. It was one representation... sent by Mishra or someone. How can I treat the



representation as a writ petition? And people start recklessly reporting this," the CJI said while lawyers were mentioning their cases for urgent listing on Friday.

On Wednesday, a lawyer sought urgent hearing on the police action against students during the Cockroach Janta Party-led protest march here on July 20. "I have the

videos as well regarding police brutality... If it can be listed tomorrow (Thursday)... students are there," the lawyer had said.

He said the students had allegedly been subjected to police brutality during the protest. The CJI had declined the request and made it clear that the bench was not inclined to examine

video footage at the mentioning stage. "We are not interested in videos, we don't have time to watch... We don't want to watch videos," the CJI had said. When the counsel reiterated that students had been beaten up and again referred to the video evidence, the CJI had said, "Don't waste our time. We don't want to watch any videos."

The Cockroach Janta Party led march on July 20 witnessed clashes between protesters and security personnel, who used lathis and tear gas to disperse crowds attempting to move towards Parliament. The protestors were demanding the resignation of Union Minister Dharmendra Pradhan's resignation over NEET exam leak issue.

SC to hear pleas on police action against students

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

The Supreme Court on Friday agreed to hear on July 27 two separate petitions alleging police excesses on students protesting against the NEET paper leak. The matter was mentioned before a bench comprising Chief Justice Surya Kant and Justices Joymalya Bagchi and V Mohana. Senior advocates Shyam Divan and Gopal Sankaranarayanan mentioned the matter.

Urging the bench to list the matter for hearing, Sankaranarayanan said both the pleas have been filed and they have been numbered by the apex court registry. Students have been staging protests in several states against the paper



leak. The Cockroach Janta Party-led march on July 20 in Delhi witnessed clashes between protesters and security personnel, who used lathis and tear gas to disperse crowds attempting to move towards Parliament.

The protestors were demanding the resignation of Union minister Dharmendra Pradhan's resignation over NEET exam leak issue.

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Odisha: HCLTech to invest ₹14,257 cr to set up data center

IT major HCLTech, in partnership with AI firm Sarvam and the Odisha Government, will set up its first AI data centre in the upcoming Odisha Sovereign AI Park, with a planned capital outlay of ₹14,257 crore.

A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to this effect was signed by HCLTech, Sarvam, and the Odisha Government in the presence of Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi, HCLTech Chairperson Roshni Nadar Malhotra, HCLTech CEO & MD C Vijayakumar, and Sarvam Co-Founder Pratyush Kumar.

“... Relating to its proposed entry into the full-stack AI market, HCLTech... plans to set up its first AI data centre in the upcoming Odisha Sovereign AI Park.

“The AI data centre will be established in partnership with Sarvam and the Government of Odisha. The planned capital outlay for the project will be ₹14,257 crore, including financial assistance from the Government of Odisha.

Gold drops to ₹1.47 lakh/10g, Silver down ₹5,000 in Delhi

Gold prices dropped by ₹2,000 to ₹1.47 lakh per 10 grams in the national Capital on Friday due to profit-taking by traders.

The precious metal of 99.9 per cent purity depreciated by ₹2,000 to ₹1,47,200 per 10 grams (inclusive of all taxes), marking its second straight day of losses. Gold traded at ₹1,49,200 per 10 grams on Thursday, according to local traders.

Silver prices also declined by ₹5,000 to ₹2,24,700 per kg (inclusive of all taxes) due to heavy selling. The white metal had settled at ₹2,29,700 per kg in the previous session.

Traders said bullion prices remained under pressure in the domestic market amid weak buying sentiment.

However, in the international markets, spot gold gained marginally to trade at \$4,063.70 per ounce and silver rose nearly 2 per cent to \$58.59 per ounce.

“Spot gold traded higher marginally around \$4,060 per ounce in the overseas markets as Brent oil has retreated nearly 4 per cent following a spike of 12 per cent in five days,” said Praveen Singh, Head of Commodities at Mirae Asset ShareKhan.

Rupee recovers 18 paise to settle at 96.55 against US dollar

The rupee recovered 18 paise to close at 96.55 (provisional) against the US dollar on Friday amid likely intervention by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI).

A combination of factors, including heightened tensions in West Asia, FI outflows, and sustained negative sentiments at the domestic equity markets, maintained pressure on the local unit, according to forex traders.

At the interbank foreign exchange, the rupee opened weaker at 96.81 and traded in the range of 96.30-96.81 before eventually settling at 96.55 (provisional), up 18 paise from its previous close.

The rupee ended 20 paise weaker at 96.73 against the US dollar on Thursday. The US military announced the 13th night of strikes on Thursday against Iran as clashes escalated over shipping routes. The attacks came after Yemen's Houthi rebels said they attacked two Saudi oil tankers in the Red Sea, potentially widening the Iran war as international oil topped \$100 a barrel.

The Pioneer

BHUBANESWAR | SATURDAY | JULY 25, 2026

India engaged with US for negotiating trade pact: Govt

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

The Government is studying all the developments and remains engaged with the US in the framework of negotiating a bilateral trade agreement (BTA), Parliament was informed on Friday.

In a written reply to the Rajya Sabha, Minister of State for Commerce and Industry Jitini Prasada said that the Government remains in continuous consultation with relevant stakeholders, including farmers, agricultural exporters, industry bodies, ministries/departments and export promotion councils on issues related to import tariffs imposed by the US.

The Government has also taken into account inputs received from States on issues related to import tariffs imposed by the US, with a view to safeguarding India's trade interests, he said.

The India-US BTA negotiations were launched following the meeting of leaders from both sides in February 2025, where the two countries adopted the “Mission 500” objective of expanding bilateral trade to \$500 billion by 2030.

Negotiations continued through multiple rounds, and the two countries announced a framework for an interim trade deal on February 2, 2026.

Following the US Supreme Court judgement dated February 20, 2026, invalidating reciprocal tariffs, reciprocal tariffs are no longer in force.

However, the US Government has issued Executive Orders imposing 10 per cent tariffs on certain

File photo

products from all countries under section 122 of the US Trade Act 197.

“The Government is studying all the developments and remains engaged with the US

(June), and the recent visit of the US Trade Representative to New Delhi (22-24 June),” Prasada said.

Replying to another question, the minister said following the implementation of India-SAFTA (South Asia Free Trade Agreement), India's exports to SAFTA increased from about \$5.5 billion in 2005-06 (pre-FTA year) to \$25.8 billion in 2025-26.

Major export destinations include Bangladesh, wherein exports increased from \$1.7 billion in 2005-06 to nearly \$10.6 billion in 2025-26 (41.1 per cent share of SAFTA exports); Nepal, from \$0.9 billion in 2005-06 to \$7.4 billion in 2025-26 (28.9 per cent share); and Sri Lanka, from \$2 billion in 2005-06 to \$5.5 billion in 2025-26 (21.4 per cent share).

He also said ASEAN contin-

ues to be one of India's most important FTA blocs. This pact came into force in January 2010.

India's exports to ASEAN increased from about \$18.1 billion in 2009-10 (pre-FTA year) to \$38.4 billion in 2025-26, more than doubling over the period.

Major markets include Singapore, wherein exports increased from \$7.6 billion in 2009-10 to nearly \$11.9 billion in 2025-26 (30.9 per cent share of ASEAN exports); Malaysia, where exports increased from \$2.8 billion in 2009-10 to over \$6.8 billion in 2025-26 (17.8 per cent share); Vietnam, from \$1.8 billion in 2009-10 to \$6.7 billion in 2025-26 (17.3 per cent share); and Thailand, where exports increased from \$1.7 billion in 2009-10 to US 5.1 billion in 2025-26 (13.2 per cent share).

India, Israel conclude second round of trade pact negotiations

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

The second round of negotiations for the proposed free trade agreement between India and Israel covering multiple issues such as trade in goods and services, rules of origin, technical barriers, intellectual property rights, customs procedures and trade facilitations has been concluded this week, an official statement said on Friday.

The negotiations were held here during July 20-23.

“The discussions were constructive and forward-looking, with both sides undertaking detailed technical deliberations aimed at narrowing gaps and identifying areas of convergence,” the Commerce Ministry said.

It added that India and Israel share complementarities across several sectors and the proposed FTA presents an opportunity to further enhance bilateral trade and deepen economic integration.

“During this round, technical experts from both sides held dedicated techni-

cal sessions covering areas including trade in goods, trade in services, rules of origin, sanitary and phytosanitary measures, technical barriers to trade, intellectual property rights, customs procedure and trade facilitation, economic cooperation and other chapters under the proposed agreement,” it said.

The statement added that both sides remain committed to working towards the early conclusion of a balanced, comprehensive and mutually beneficial FTA which will further expand trade and economic ties between the two countries.

Total merchandise trade between the two countries stood at \$3.93 billion in 2025-26.

10% US tariff to raise landed cost of Indian products, says FIEO

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

The 10 per cent tariff imposed by the US on imports from India will increase the cost of Indian products in the American markets, though the overall impact should be viewed in the proper competitive perspective rather than through the headline tariff alone, according to exporters.

The United States has imposed a 10 per cent tariff on goods imported from India and 16 other countries as part of its efforts to combat the use of forced labour in the production of such items.

The Federation of Indian Export Organisations (FIEO)

has stated that “while the additional 10 per cent Section 301 tariff imposed by the United States on imports from India will increase the landed cost of Indian products, the overall impact should be viewed in the proper competitive perspective rather than through the headline tariff alone.”

SC Ralhan, President, FIEO,

said the fact that India has been placed in the lower 10 per cent tariff category, while several competing exporting nations including China, Vietnam, Thailand, Türkiye, UAE, Brazil, South Africa and others face a higher tariff of 12.5 per cent.

This has helped India secure a relatively favourable position compared to many of its global competitors, he said.

Ralhan added that many of India's direct competitors in labour-intensive sectors such as textiles, garments, leather and footwear, including Bangladesh, Cambodia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and Malaysia, have also been subjected to the same 10 per cent tariff.

Adani Energy Solutions bags ₹8,500 crore transmission project in Andhra Pradesh

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

Adani Energy Solutions Ltd (AESL) on Friday said it has secured a ₹8,500 crore transmission project in Andhra Pradesh.

The project was awarded through a tariff-based competitive bidding (TBCB) framework of the Centre where AESL emerged as the most competitive bidder, a company statement said.

The transmission system would facilitate integration and supply of power to the proposed green hydrogen and green ammonia projects in the Vizag area, catering to an estimated demand of 4,500 MW.

It will also support the growing load requirement expected from the Pendurthi-Vizag region, where a new wave of data centre and digital infrastructure investments is taking shape.

The project will be housed

under a Special Purpose Vehicle, Vizag Power Transmission Ltd.

Its scope involves the establishment of a 4×1500 MVA, 765/400 kV GIS substation at Pendurthi (Vizag) and a 3×1500 MVA, 765/400 kV Khammam-II substation.

With this, AESL will add 1,582 ckm (circuit kilometre) of transmission lines and 10,500 MVA of transformation capacity, taking its overall transmission network to 29,531 ckm and 1,33,675 MVA of transformation capacity.

“The Vizag transmission project is an important step in building the energy backbone for India's next generation of industrial growth. It will support the development of green hydrogen and green ammonia capacity in Andhra Pradesh, while also strengthening the grid for emerging digital infrastructure demand in the Pendurthi-Vizag region,” Kandarp Patel, CEO, AESL, said.

Crude oil futures ease 2% to ₹8,876/barrel on profit-booking

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

Crude oil futures fell 2 per cent to ₹8,876 per barrel on Friday as traders booked profits after the recent rally, even as global benchmark Brent hovered near the \$100-a-barrel mark amid geopolitical tensions in West Asia that kept supply concerns alive.

On the Multi Commodity Exchange (MCX), crude for the August delivery declined by ₹148, or 1.64 per cent, to ₹8,876 per barrel in a business turnover of 17,232 lots.

The September contract also eased ₹154, or 1.79 per cent, to ₹8,426 per barrel in 2,125 lots.

Traders said profit-booking capped gains after crude prices logged their strongest weekly rally in months on fears of supply disruptions.

In the international markets, Brent oil futures for September delivery traded marginally lower at \$100.28 per barrel on the Intercontinental Exchange,

while West Texas Intermediate (WTI) for the same month contract fell 0.53 per cent to \$91.70 per barrel on the New York Mercantile Exchange.

“Brent crude prices are holding near \$100 after crossing the level for the first time in two months this week,” said Anindya Banerjee, Head of Commodity and Currency Research, Kotak Securities.

He said the rally was triggered by Yemen's Houthi attacks on two Saudi oil tankers in the Red Sea, as well as US President Donald Trump's threat of a massive strike on Iran, and Kazakhstan's suspension of exports through the Caspian pipeline following drone strikes.

Banerjee said investors are watching the Babel-Mandeb Strait, warning that any significant disruption to shipping through the Red Sea could propel Brent towards \$120 per barrel, as global oil inventories have been depleted by months of continuous drawdown.

SEBI imposes penalties of ₹7.5 cr on 21 entities in Axis MF front-running case

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

Capital market regulator SEBI on Friday levied fines totalling ₹7.5 crore on 21 entities, including Axis Mutual Fund's former fund manager Viresh Joshi, and barred them from the securities markets for up to seven years in a case related to front-running allegations.

Front-running refers to an illegal practice in the stock market where an entity trades on the basis of advance information from a broker or analyst before the

information has been made available to their clients.

Also, the ₹30.56 crore impounded in compliance with the directions of the interim order dated February 28, 2023, shall be

treated as the disgorgement amount for all the entities, the regulator said in a 146-page final order.

The regulator has also directed these entities to pay 12 per cent annual interest on the disgorgement amount.

SEBI said it had concluded that “Viresh, Sumit Desai, Pranav Vora, Vaibhav and along with the other noticees, namely, the Kurani Group apart from Prijesh, the Marfatia Group and the Jajoo Group colluded to execute a scheme to front run the orders of the Big Client”.

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Mumbai

Market benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty ended lower on Friday, extending the losing streak for the fifth consecutive session, as investors remained cautious due to rising oil prices amid geopolitical tensions in West Asia and renewed concerns over US trade tariffs. Fresh foreign fund outflows and selling in blue-chip HDFC Bank also dented market sentiment.

The 30-share BSE Sensex declined 331.62 points, or 0.43 per cent, to settle at 76,059.77. During the day, it tanked 916.96 points, or 1.20 per cent, to 75,474.43. The 50-share

NSE Nifty dipped 102.15 points, or 0.43 per cent, to end at 23,767.45. From the Sensex

pack, Eternal, Mahindra & Mahindra, Bajaj Finance, Bharti Airtel, Asian Paints and

Infosys were among the major laggards. IT services company Infosys declined 1 per cent after it tempered the upper end of its full-year revenue forecast to between 1.5 per cent and 3 per cent amid continued macroeconomic uncertainty.

“Indian equity markets extended their losing streak to a fifth consecutive session as investors remained cautious amid lingering geopolitical tensions in the Middle East and renewed concerns over US trade tariffs. Weakness across Asian markets reinforced the risk-off mood, prompting broad-based selling despite signs of easing pressure in energy

markets,” Ponmudi R, CEO of Enrich Money, an online trading and wealth tech firm, said.

“Markets traded volatile and ended lower on Friday, extending their losing streak for the fifth consecutive session amid persistent geopolitical concerns, elevated crude oil prices and disappointing earnings from select large-cap companies,” Ajit Mishra — SVP Research, Religare Broking Ltd, said.

Brent crude, the global oil benchmark, dropped 3.66 per cent to \$96.98 per barrel on Friday, after surpassing \$100 per barrel in the previous session.

FROM THE WORLD

PAKISTAN

Imran son seeks global help

Former prime minister Imran Khan's son has urged the international community to intervene claiming his father, who has not been incarcerated for 1,100 days, urgently needs medical attention.

Currently lodged in solitary confinement at the Adiala Jail, Rawalpindi, the 73-year-old international cricketer turned politician was arrested on August 5, 2023 after an Islamabad trial court found him guilty of corrupt practices in the Tosha Khana (national treasury) case. Imran Khan has been subsequently arrested and convicted in several other cases leading to continued incarceration.

"It has now been around 1,100 days since my father, Imran Khan, was imprisoned, and my brother and I haven't heard his voice since March. For months, we've been denied contact with him," Kasim said. (PTI)

CHINA

Attacks Philippine ships again

Chinese coast guard ships fired powerful water cannons at two Philippine fisheries vessels on Friday in the South China Sea, the third confrontation in the disputed waters this week as Manila hosted annual ministerial meetings at which Asian and Western Governments renewed their alarm over China's maritime aggression.

The latest high seas faceoff happened near the Scarborough Shoal, the Philippine coast guard said, adding that a Chinese coast guard ship also approached a Philippine Government fisheries vessel, the BRP Datux Paduhinog, at a distance of seven meters (23 feet) in what it called a "reckless" maneuver that created a serious risk of collision.The Chinese coast guard reiterated China's sovereign control over the fishing atoll and said it took control measures against several Philippines vessels illegally operating in the waters. (AP)

Drones target US base in Iraq, conflict escalates

JULIA FRANKEL/ STELLA MARTANY

■ Irbil

Drones carrying explosives targeted a city in northern Iraq where US forces are stationed and sirens rang out in Bahrain on Friday, hours after the American military said it finished its 13th night of strikes against Iran.

The conflict has flared again over the past week, as the US pounded Iran while Tehran attacked ships in the Strait of Hormuz and targeted US assets and allies in the region.

The strait, which is a crucial passage for the world's energy supplies, is at the centre of the latest fighting since Iranian attacks can effectively shut the waterway, sending fuel prices soaring worldwide and causing widespread economic turmoil.



The Iranian-allied Houthi rebels added further pressure this week by targeting two Saudi tankers in the Red Sea, making good on a threat to cut off an alternative route for the region's oil.

Despite the war's unpopularity

— and its widespread damage to Iran and the global economy - the latest round of fighting has no clear off-ramp. Iran's Health Ministry said 55 people have been killed and over 600 wounded in strikes in recent weeks. The US and Israel

attacked Iran on February 28 and have offered shifting goals for the war, including toppling Tehran's Government and eliminating its nuclear programme. But the conflict has devolved into a fight for control of the Strait of Hormuz - with Iran apparently hoping to win concessions by inflicting damage on the global economy and the US trying to limit that damage.

US-led forces intercepted and shot down five explosive-laden drones over Irbil on Friday morning, according to security officials in northern Iraq. "Fortunately, the incident caused no casualties or damage," they said.

An Associated Press journalist heard at least seven blasts in the city, the capital of Iraq's semi-autonomous Kurdish region, and saw at least four plumes of black smoke rising from areas near or

inside a base at the city's airport that hosts US forces. Flights continued as normal at the airport, the state-run Iraqi News Agency reported, citing the facility's director.

US military officials in Iraq did not respond to a request for comment. In recent years, the US maintained about 2,500 troops in Iraq for training and to conduct operations against the Islamic State group with Iraq's military. Many of those have withdrawn, but a small contingent of military advisers and others remains - many of whom have moved to Irbil.

Iran's Revolutionary Guard urged people in neighbouring countries to stay away from bases with American troops while asking people to report the places where they are stationed, according to a statement read out on state TV.

As the US has bombed Iran, Tehran has targeted several countries in the region that host American troops. Bahrain, which is home to the US Navy's 5th fleet, said it intercepted and shot down Iranian aerial attacks on Friday. It did not say if there were any casualties or damage.

US strikes overnight hit a naval base for the paramilitary Revolutionary Guard in the north of Iran, the semiofficial news outlets Fars and ISNA reported Friday morning.

Blasts from US bombardment overnight were also reported on Iran's Qeshm Island, a base for naval assets including drone boats that Iran can use to attack vessels in the Strait of Hormuz, as well as in Isfahan province, home to a major Iranian air base and one of Iran's nuclear sites. (AP)

Sri Lanka welcomes US tariff reduction

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

■ Colombo

Sri Lanka on Friday welcomed the US decision of lowering to 10 per cent the tariff on goods imported from the island nation saying it will send a strong signal to investors about the country's economic reforms.

The US imposed the 10 per cent tariff on goods imported from Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and 13 other countries as part of a wider action against products made using forced labour. The decision to lower tariffs from 12.5 per cent to a minimum of 10 per cent was a result of Sri Lanka's decision to ban the import of goods produced using



forced labour. "The move is expected to deliver positive results for exporters, while reflecting Sri Lanka's ongoing commitment to fair trade, responsible business practices, and internationally accepted labour standards," a statement from the Ministry of Finance said. The tariff reduction will enhance the competitiveness of Sri Lankan exports in the US

market, sending a strong signal to investors and buyers about the country's dedication to sustainable economic reforms, it added.

The island's main trade chamber, reacting to the US decision, said, "The reduction will provide some relief to exporters navigating a highly competitive and uncertain market place."

Under the 'Trump Tariffs' announced in early 2025, Sri Lanka was billed to pay a reciprocal tariff rate of 44 per cent, which if implemented, was to have a devastating effect as the US is Sri Lanka's single largest export market.

The local exporters then feared that the 44 per cent tariff would have been non-competitive and would push

Sri Lankan exports out of the US. Later, Sri Lanka's tariff was brought down to 20 per cent alongside those of Vietnam, Bangladesh, Thailand, Indonesia, and Cambodia.

In February this year, the US Supreme Court struck down and invalidated the reciprocal tariffs.

In early June, the US imposed a 10 per cent tariff for 15 countries that had enforced forced labour import prohibitions and a 12.5 per cent for 45 countries with no such prohibitions.

On July 10, President Anura Kumara Dissanayake gazetted Sri Lanka's prohibition on the importation of goods produced using forced labour.



Delegates pose for a group photograph during the High-Level Conference of the High Contracting Parties to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) in Pasay City, Metro Manila, Philippines

PTI

Pakistan expresses concern over recent tensions in West Asia

SAJJAD HUSSAIN ■ Islamabad

Pakistan on Friday expressed concern over the recent West Asia tensions and called for dialogue, restraint and de-escalation by all sides to achieve peace in the region.

Pakistan Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar said this in a meeting with his Iranian counterpart Seyyed Abbas Araghchi on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Council of Foreign Ministers (CFM) in Cholpon-Ata, Kyrgyzstan, the Foreign Office said.

Pakistan, which previously mediated a ceasefire between the US and Iran, is making efforts to prevent the collapse of the Islamabad Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), which was signed last month between the two countries.

The Islamabad MoU is a 14-point interim peace deal aimed at ending the war between Iran and the US. The two countries have engaged in hostilities over the past week with the US attacking Iran and Tehran targeting ships



Pakistan Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar

in the Strait of Hormuz and American assets in the region According to the Foreign Office, the two ministers reaffirmed the close and long-standing ties between Pakistan and Iran and reviewed the evolving regional situation.

Dar, who is also Pakistan's deputy prime minister, expressed "deep concern over recent regional tensions and underscored the importance of dialogue, restraint, de-escalation by all sides, and sustained diplomatic engagement to achieve lasting peace and stability", it said. (PTI)

UK PM begins work from new No 10 North

ADITI KHANNA ■ London

British Prime Minister Andy Burnham began work from the new No 10 North in Manchester on Friday, which is designed to split the Government's power base out of 10 Downing Street in London.

The new northern England branch of the PM's office at Heron House in Manchester was declared "open for business" as Burnham arrived to chair the first meeting of the National Economic Council of senior ministers, mayors and business leaders.

He plans to spend at least one day a week at No 10 North, which he said would be more than just an office. "It's not just a new office. Through this place, power is



going to flow, energy is going to flow, new ideas are going to come through," said Burnham, in his address to the staff.

"I cannot tell you what a proud moment this is. I think this might be the best day of my life. "My generation of people growing up here, and it's true of places all over

the country, to get on in life you had to leave where you were because things weren't here... that is what No 10 North is all about: putting power in every postcode so that people can turn things around for themselves and make changes just as this great city has done and the other English cities are doing

through devolution. "Turning things round because of that ability to be able to do more for themselves," he said.

Burnham, who took charge as Prime Minister on Monday, was joined in Manchester by Chancellor John Healey and Louise Haigh, who is overseeing the "Office for the Prime Minister and Cabinet" - a new department that will encompass 10 Downing Street, No 10 North and the Cabinet Office. "This isn't about Government working in its old way, it's about the Treasury, No 10, close together, the heart of Government, then driving the same mission from here right out into all parts of the country," he stressed. (PTI)

Seaplane carrying 11 crashes into island north of Seattle, all aboard are rescued

ASSOCIATED PRESS ■ Seattle

A seaplane carrying 11 people crashed near an island tourist destination north of Seattle and caught on fire, prompting a quick, successful rescue by multiple agencies via boat and air to get injured passengers and the pilot to hospitals.

Videos posted on social media show the aircraft banking to one side as it flies low over the water near some boats close to shore. The plane makes a hard landing, first on one float, then briefly skips into the air before hitting the rocky coast. The person taking the video gasps as a crunching sound is heard when the plane



crashes just out of sight. Witnesses rushed to help. People can be seen getting out of the plane as smoke rises before bright orange flames engulf the fuselage, which came to rest partially submerged against a large

rock. "An Urgent Marine Information Broadcast was issued to mariners in the area, and numerous good Samaritan vessels responded to assist," the US Coast Guard said Friday in a statement about the crash, which hap-

pened. The crash, which involved a pilot and 10 passengers, happened more than two weeks after a seaplane carrying eight people made a rough landing in New York City's East River, causing minor injuries. In 2022, federal regulators ordered seaplanes to be inspected following a deadly crash in the waters of Puget Sound northwest of Seattle.

Thursday's crash happened in Shallow Bay near Sucia Island in the northern San Juan Islands. The archipelago between Washington and Vancouver, British Columbia, is a popular summer vacation spot known for its ferries, whale watching and hiking.

Poland's biggest Opposition party faces split over tensions about its direction

ASSOCIATED PRESS ■ Warsaw

Poland's main Opposition party faces a split in a disagreement over its future direction, with the party leader saying on Friday that more than 30 lawmakers have effectively left.

The conservative nationalist Law and Justice party ran Poland from 2015 to 2023, when the current liberal Government of Prime Minister Donald Tusk took power. During that time, it tightened control over the courts by appointing loyalist judges to higher courts and punishing critics with disciplinary action.

The Tusk Government's efforts to reverse those changes have repeatedly been blocked by two successive presidents sympathetic to Law and Justice.

Still, tensions within Law and Justice have simmered as a national election next year approaches, and it faces a challenge from parties further to its right. Longtime



leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski and Mateusz Morawiecki, Poland's prime minister from 2017 to 2023, have been at the centre of the spat.

Morawiecki represents a relatively moderate faction and in April set up an association called Development Plus, which many in the party view with suspicion.

South Africa mourns veteran freedom fighter Shanthie Naidoo

FAKIR HASSEN ■ Johannesburg

South Africa is mourning the passing of anti-apartheid activist Shanthie Naidoo, who died peacefully on Friday at the age of 91.

A central figure in the liberation struggle, Naidoo was one of the grandchildren of Gandhian lieutenant Thambi Naidoo, as the then young lawyer Mohandas Gandhi, later to become the Mahatma, led the fight against laws discriminating against Indians at the turn of the 19th century.

During the height of the apartheid-era state repression, Naidoo endured 371 days of solitary confinement and brutal interrogation, yet steadfastly refused to betray her comrades, most notably her friend and political sister, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, the former wife of Nelson Mandela. Naidoo was born in Pretoria on March 6, 1935, directly into the frontline of South African resistance.

Her grandfather, Thambi Naidoo, was a key lieutenant to Mahatma Gandhi during the early satyagraha campaigns, and her parents, Roy and Ama Naidoo, made their family home in Doornfontein. (PTI)



UNESCO adds West Bank site, Lebanese castles to World Heritage list

KIM TONG-HYUNG ■ Seoul

A United Nations committee voted on Friday to inscribe a major archaeological site in the West Bank and a set of castles in southern Lebanon as World Heritage sites, despite objections from Israel, which had urged the committee to reject the bids.

The decision at a UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation meeting in South Korea came days after Israel's Foreign Ministry urged the committee to reject efforts to designate the small West Bank town of Sebastia and the Lebanese castles, calling the nominations a "weaponisa-



tion of cultural heritage." At their meeting in Busan, members of the UNESCO committee decided to place Sebastia and five castles in Lebanon's Mount Amel area on both the World Heritage

List and the List of World Heritage in Danger after reviewing the nominations on an emergency basis.

Sebastia, a hilltop town about 10 kilometers (6 miles) northwest of Nablus in the

Israeli-occupied West Bank, is identified by scholars as ancient Samara, capital of the biblical Kingdom of Israel. The area's archaeological remains span the Iron Age, Roman, Byzantine and Islamic periods. Christian and Islamic tradition holds that John the Baptist was buried there, according to a UNESCO website.

Sebastia's nomination, first submitted by the Palestinian delegation to UNESCO in 2012, argued that World Heritage status was needed to help preserve the site, saying it remains largely undeveloped under Israeli control and requires additional conservation despite attracting

tourists. The designation comes as Israel, which does not recognize a Palestinian state, moves to expropriate large swaths of land around the site, even as it faces pressure to crack down on violence by Israeli settlers in the Palestinian territory.

The five castles in the Mount Amel region are recognized for their layered architectural heritage, combining Crusader, Ayyubid, Mamluk and local influences, reflecting the evolution of fortified architecture over nearly nine centuries, according to a UNESCO description. In Tuesday's statement, Israel's Foreign Ministry accused the Palestinian delegation of

waging a "hostile, one-sided campaign" at UNESCO by falsely portraying Sebastia as an area facing an emergency, calling the effort a political attempt to "erase the site's profound, well-documented Jewish and Christian history."

Israel withdrew from UNESCO in 2019, accusing the organization of being biased against it and of downplaying its historical ties to the Holy Land.

Israel's Foreign Ministry also took objection to efforts to list Beaufort Castle in southern Lebanon as a World Heritage site. The castle was part of the nomination covering five castles in the

Mount Amel area. The ministry said Hezbollah, an Iran-backed militant group, has turned Beaufort Castle into a military stronghold by building tunnels beneath the site and launching rockets from the area, and accused UNESCO of ignoring those developments.

UNESCO and the Lebanese embassy in South Korea declined to comment on the Israeli claims about Hezbollah.

The UNESCO committee placed another Lebanese site, Tyre, an ancient Phoenician city in the southern part of the country, on the list of world heritage sites in danger. (AP)

4 Palestinians, 1 Israeli dead after West Bank shooting

JULIA FRANKEL ■ Jerusalem

Four Palestinians and one Israeli were killed in a shooting in the northern West Bank, health officials said on Friday. Several more people were injured.

The circumstances of the shooting, which occurred near the city of Nablus, were not immediately clear. Violence in the Israeli-occupied territory has flared in recent days. The Palestinian Health Ministry in Ramallah said the four Palestinians were killed by Israeli forces.

Israel's Magen David Adom rescue services did not say who had killed the Israeli man. Palestinian health officials said they were treating four injured Palestinians, three in critical condition. Israel's rescue service said two injured Israelis were being airlifted out of the West Bank.

The Israeli military said in a statement that soldiers responded to a report of an attack on Israeli civilians hiking near the set-



tlement of Havat Gilad, west of Nablus. It said it had imposed a "temporary cordon" around Nablus and the nearby Palestinian village of Tell.

More than a dozen gunshots can be heard in the footage, which is less than a minute long.

The military said the suspect was one of the people killed in the field. It did not respond to questions about why soldiers killed the

other men — all of whom were related — or how long after the original altercation the killings took place.

Later, army chief Eyal Zamir said he was sending more troops to the occupied West Bank, where soldiers have encircled Tell and the nearby city of Nablus. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu also said Israel would "act forcefully" following the incident. (AP)

Bangladesh President Shahabuddin resigns

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Dhaka

Bangladesh President Mohammed Shahabuddin, a former ally of deposed prime minister Sheikh Hasina, resigned on Friday, two years ahead of the end of his tenure. "I am suffering from various health complications," the 76-year-old leader was quoted as saying by The Daily Star newspaper.

He was responding to a question about the reason for his resignation. A Bangabhaban — the president's house - spokesman said that Shahabuddin's representatives have left his office for the parliament carrying his resignation letter.

The resignation letter would be submitted to parliamentary Speaker Hafizuddin Ahmed, who would serve as Acting President in accordance with the Bangladesh Constitution until a new President is elected.

"I can't make any official comment on the resignation until the Speaker receives the letter," the spokesman said. His resignation



Mohammed Shahabuddin

comes amid speculations that Prime Minister Tarique Rahman's Government was uncomfortable with the largely titular head of the state, according to media reports.

A 1971 Liberation War veteran and former lower judiciary judge, Shahabuddin had taken the oath in April 2023 for a five-year term.

He was elected to the highest office by the previous parliament and is the only person still holding his constitutional position, long after the violent July-August 2024 student-led street protest that toppled Hasina's Awami League Government.

Guyana ferry death toll rises to 72 amid salvage effort



BERT WILKINSON ■ Georgetown

The confirmed death toll from the recent capsizing of a state ferry off Guyana's coast rose to 72, with more bodies recovered as a multinational team struggled to salvage the partially submerged vessel. Of the estimated 179 people aboard, 76 people were rescued. The Government has estimated that 100 may have died in the accident, which would make it the worst marine tragedy on record for the South American nation. Prime Minister Mark Phillips said late Thursday that crews have widened the search area and are determined to find all those who were aboard so loved ones can bury them with dignity. "The Government of Guyana continues to stand in solidarity with all those

affected during this difficult time and will ensure that every available resource is deployed until the operation is brought to a safe and dignified conclusion," he said.

The MV Barima departed the capital, Georgetown, on Saturday and was headed to Port Kaituma when it began taking on water and capsized in Atlantic waters off the Essequibo coast. Phillips said that the ferry was not insured, and that the Government is paying for the funeral and other related expenses.

Death toll rises as international crews try to salvage capsized ferry in Guyana Divers from countries including Brazil and Trinidad are trying to salvage the vessel, with officials saying they hope to inspect it for any possible damage that could shed light on what happened. (AP)

India to fund portal for United Nations for global ICT security

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ United Nations

India has said it will fund a portal for the UN for global ICT security, which will bridge the capacity gap that continues to separate developed and developing States.

India also said digital technology benefits can only be fully realised when accompanied by robust security and the capability to defend against emerging threats.

Scaled, demand-driven capacity-building for Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) for the

Global South is both achievable and effective when pursued with sustained political will, India's Permanent Representative to the United Nations Ambassador Parvathaneni Harish said.

He was addressing the Plenary Session of the Global Mechanism on ICTs in the Context of International Security on Thursday when he also welcomed the establishment of a Dedicated Thematic Group on cyber capacity building.

The first substantive plenary meeting from July 20-24 of the UN's permanent cyber mechanism advanced plan for the



global cyber capacity-building system with member states discussing topics, including funding, implementation and

fellowships for women.

"It is with particular happiness that my delegation recalls that the proposal for a

dedicated Global ICT Security Cooperation and Capacity-Building Portal was originally an Indian initiative, first tabled in 2022," Parvathaneni said.

"We are pleased to announce today that, having seen this idea through years of deliberation to consensus and eventual adoption, India will be providing the entire funding towards the operationalisation of this Portal as a Portal of the United Nations so that concrete, tangible action can finally follow years of discussion," he said.

India's support will help enable the technical estab-

lishment of the Portal and its maintenance, ensuring that the platform envisaged, comprising a repository of resources, a capacity-building calendar, a needs-based catalogue of opportunities and an interactive discussion board, can move from design to reality, he said.

CERT India will undertake the technical consultancy work required for the Portal's testing and infrastructure development, he announced. CERT-In is India's national nodal agency for responding to computer security incidents as and when they happen.

Deposed Türkiye's Opposition leader forms new party

ASSOCIATED PRESS ■ Ankara

The deposed leader of Türkiye's main Opposition party on Friday formed a new political party to challenge President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, months after he was removed from his post by a court order that his supporters slammed as a political move to weaken the Opposition.

Ozgur Ozel and 90 other legislators formally resigned from the Republican People's Party, or CHP, and then registered the new political party — named the "New Party" — with the Interior Ministry.

"May it be auspicious for our homeland, our nation, and our party," Ozel said in a video posted on X, showing him signing a document formalising his resignation from the CHP, Türkiye's oldest political party.

In May, a court of appeal annulled a 2023 party congress vote that appointed Ozel as CHP chair. The court decision, which cited alleged irregularities, reinstated the unpopular Kemal Kilicdaroglu as leader. Ozel's ouster sparked outrage among many CHP supporters.

Ozel, 51, had succeeded the 77-year-old Kilicdaroglu after



Ozgur Ozel

13 years of what many analysts described as ineffective Opposition to Erdogan.

Ozel's supporters view his ouster as part of a wider crackdown on the opposition. In the past two years, hundreds of elected mayors and other officials from CHP-run municipalities have been detained as part of criminal investigations, mostly into alleged corruption.

They include Ekrem Imamoglu, the mayor of Istanbul, who is widely considered the strongest potential challenger to Erdogan.

Imamoglu, who represents the CHP, has been imprisoned since March last year and faces criminal cases that could result in decades-long sentences.

German Chancellor Friedrich Merz reshuffles Cabinet

GEIR MOULSON ■ Berlin

German Chancellor Friedrich Merz reshuffled top posts on Friday as he tries to boost the fortunes of his deeply unpopular Government ahead of regional elections in which a far-right party could get its first state governor.

Merz took office less than 15 months ago with pledges to reform and turn around Germany's economy, Europe's biggest, after years of stagnation. But that economic turnaround has been slow to start. And the middle-of-the-road coalition of Merz's centre-right Union bloc and the centre-left Social Democrats, two traditional rivals, has yet to persuade voters that it can produce results.

That has resulted in Merz's popularity sinking to rock-bottom levels,



German Chancellor Friedrich Merz

while the far-right Alternative for Germany, or AfD, has gained support on the back of widespread discontent.

Merz took the opportunity to make a series of changes after a senior ally quit as the leader of his party's parliamentary group over personal conduct that undermined his credibility. Merz plans to put his chief of staff, Thorsten Frei, in

that job. The German leader said Health Minister Nina Warken will take Frei's place at the chancellery, a post that is key to the smooth functioning of the Government. She will be the first woman to take that job. Another close ally, Carsten , the general secretary of Merz's Christian Democratic Union party, will become health minister.

Merz said there will be further Cabinet changes, but didn't offer details. He said those decisions will take "a few days yet, and perhaps more time." "The personnel changes follow a clear line," he said. "We want a Government that works with great vigour and pleasure and also represents the personal diversity of our society and politics. We are a reform Government and want to continue showing that." (AP)

Democrats to finalise their 2028 presidential nominating calendar

JOEY CAPPELLETTI/MEG KINNARD ■ Washington

Democrats are poised to lock in the party's 2028 presidential nominating schedule on Friday, likely cementing a dramatic break from decades of tradition by keeping Iowa off the top of the calendar and elevating more racially diverse States.

Either South Carolina or Nevada is expected to go first, and each state has aggressively campaigned for the coveted spot.

The decision by the Democratic National Committee's Rules and



Bylaws Committee will need to be approved by the full organization, which is scheduled to meet in August. The overhaul reflects

Democrats' effort to give greater influence to states that better mirror the party's diverse coalition, particularly Black and Latino voters,

after years of a calendar led by Iowa and New Hampshire, two states with overwhelmingly white electorates. "I think that it is good that we don't take the order for granted, and just copy and paste it every cycle," said New York Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a progressive considered a potential 2028 candidate.

The decision will also shape the opening stage of what is expected to be a crowded Democratic presidential primary. Without an incumbent or clear frontrunner, the states that vote first could once again play an out-

sized role in determining which candidates gain momentum, attract donors and emerge as viable contenders. Republicans still need to do their calendar. They're expected to stick with their traditional early-state lineup led off by Iowa and New Hampshire.

President Joe Biden successfully pushed to move South Carolina to the front of Democrats' 2024 calendar after the state revived his struggling 2020 presidential campaign. South Carolina has long been the first Southern contest and has served as a key test of candi-

dates' support among Black voters. But with Democrats now preparing for a wide-open presidential primary, the fight over the calendar has become more contentious.

In May, Democratic leaders in a handful of southern states lobbied for South Carolina to reprise its role as the party's first-in-the-nation contest holder, arguing in a letter to the DNC that the state best represents the initial playing field for presidential candidates to build the coalitions needed to win and serves as "a moral and political compass for our party and our nation." (AP)

Murmu urges Romanian to participate in India's growth

ASHWINI SHRIVASTAVA ■ Bucharest

President Droupadi Murmu on Friday asked Romanian companies to participate actively in India's growth story, citing significant untapped potential in economic partnership between the two countries.

Addressing the India-Romania Business Forum, she said India is today one of the world's fastest-growing major economies.

"Our economic growth is driven by sound macroeconomic fundamentals, a vibrant entrepreneurial ecosystem, a large and skilled workforce, and sustained commitment to reforms," Murmu said.

India is undergoing a remarkable transformation, emerging as a global leader



President Droupadi Murmu paid tribute at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, at Bucharest, Romania. The monument embodies Romania's gratitude to its fallen soldiers and is a national symbol of patriotism, unity and peace

in technology, innovation, and sustainable development and experiencing significant success in sectors like renewable energy, digital technology, information technology, telecom, auto and auto-components, pharma and biotechnology, space and fintech, the President said. Romania, with its strategic location at the crossroads of Europe, highly skilled human resources, advanced industrial capabilities and strong integration with the European Union, remains a natural and valuable partner for India, she said.

Romania serves not only as an important destination for investment but also as a gateway to the wider European market, Murmu said. "There is significant untapped potential in our economic partnership.

Bilateral trade has expanded steadily over the years, but it remains well below its true potential," the President said.

Indian companies are exploring Romania as a strategic entry point to the European market, while Romanian businesses can explore new opportunities in India, she said.

"I am confident that our business communities will seize these emerging opportunities and transform them into successful commercial partnerships.

I also encourage Romanian companies to participate actively in India's growth story," Murmu said. She said our businesses can build resilient supply chains, generate employment, promote innovation and create sustainable prosperity for our peoples. (PTI)

Canada ready to respond if Trump's new tariffs go into affect: Carney

JIM MORRIS ■ Vancouver

Prime Minister Mark Carney said that Canada is intensifying negotiations with the United States to reach a comprehensive trade deal but is prepared to respond should President Donald Trump's threat of 50 per cent tariffs on Canadian goods comes into affect.

The new tariffs, announced by Trump on Monday, are scheduled to come into effect Aug 19. "If these tariffs, or other measures come into force, there's a full range of things that we can do in that regard," Carney said after meeting with Canada's premiers and territorial leaders in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island.

Carney said "everything's on the table" if an agreement can't be reached before the tariffs kick in. "We don't need to respond in advance," he said. "In fact, I think it would be counterproductive at this stage to respond in advance." The new tariffs cover a wide range of goods, including honey, liquor, cement, dairy products, some wood



products, hockey sticks and other items. They exclude energy products, potash, fish and critical minerals, but would include goods previously protected from import taxes by the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement, or USMCA.

That 2020 trade pact was not renewed by the US, triggering a new set of negotiations that could run until 2036. (AP)

PROSPECT



Former CAG Vinod Rai unveiling a coffee table book titled 'Vinod Rai, Essence and Times' which is a collection of photos, stories of the bureaucratic journey as well as his early life authored by former spokesperson of CAG BS Chauhan.

Flipkart partners with India Post for parcel delivery

E-commerce firm Flipkart on Friday said it has partnered with the Department of Posts for the delivery of parcels to consumers through India Post.

Through this partnership, Flipkart will gain access to the Department of Posts' vast network of over 1.6 lakh post offices. This will enable wider market reach, improved delivery efficiency and enhanced serviceability, particularly in remote and rural locations, the e-commerce platform said in a statement. "Under the agreement, the Department of Posts will provide last-mile delivery services for Flipkart shipments across India," the statement said.

As part of the collaboration, Flipkart will utilise India Post's extensive network for parcel delivery services across urban, semi-urban and rural areas, including remote and underserved regions.

Adani Group says no plans to launch an airline

Adani Group on Friday denied media reports and market speculation that it is planning to enter the airline business, calling the claims "entirely baseless and factually incorrect."

"We would like to categorically deny the recent media reports and market speculation suggesting that Adani Enterprises is planning to launch an airline. These reports are entirely baseless and factually incorrect," an Adani Enterprises spokesperson said.

The spokesperson added that Adani Enterprises is not evaluating any proposal to enter the airline business.

SAIL declares financial results for Q1 FY27

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

The Steel Authority of India Limited (SAIL) has declared its financial results on Friday for the quarter ending 30th June, 2026.

The company reported strong profitability in Q1FY27, with net profit rising by over 138 per cent compared to the corresponding period last year (CPLY). During Q1FY27, SAIL moderated volumes compared to CPLY by advancing certain scheduled repairs and maintenance during the quarter, a step necessitated by geopolitical volatility that disrupted the supply chain across the globe. This forward looking & planned interven-



tion is expected to support greater production stability and improved performance in the coming quarters.

Commenting on the results of the first quarter of the current financial year,

Chairman & Managing Director, SAIL, Dr Ashok Kumar Panda said, "Amid global uncertainties, the domestic steel industry demonstrated resilience backed by sustained demand

PERFORMANCE OF Q1 OF FY27 AT A GLANCE				
Particulars	Unit	Q1 25-26	Q4 25-26	Q1 26-27
Crude steel production	Million Tonnes	4.85	5.08	4.76
Sales volume	Million Tonnes	4.55	5.32	4.16
Revenue from operations	₹ Crore	25,921	30,813	26,246
Earnings before interest, tax, depreciation and amortization (EBITDA)	₹ Crore	2,925	4,762	4,356
Profit before exceptional items and tax	₹ Crore	890	2,653	2,303
Exceptional items	₹ Crore	0	(330)	(144)
Profit before tax (PBT)	₹ Crore	890	2,324	2,159
Profit after tax (PAT)	₹ Crore	685	1,680	1,636

in domestic steel consumption. SAIL, through enhanced operational efficiencies, prudent cost management and focused marketing initia-

tives, has delivered a significantly profitable first quarter in FY27. The company remains confident of leveraging robust manufacturing

capabilities and continues to strengthen performance while capitalising on the sustained domestic steel demand."

Inaugural Assam Premier League set to begin on August 1 with 8 teams in fray

TONY DAS
■ Guwahati

The stage is set for the inaugural season of the Assam Premier League (APL), with eight teams preparing to battle for the coveted title across a packed 23-day cricketing calendar from August 1 to 23, 2026.

The tournament will get underway on August 1, with Charaideo Sunrisers taking on Barpeta Braves in the opening encounter at 2:00 pm. The opening day double-header will then see Tezpur Titans face Dibrugarh Warriors at 7:00 pm.

Season 1 will feature 43 matches, including 40 league-stage encounters, two semi-finals and the grand finale. Each team will face every other side once during the league stage, along with three reverse fixtures, setting up several intriguing rematches and potential rivalries as the race for the top four intensifies. The opening weekend will continue with another exciting double-header on August 2, as Barak Legends take on Nagaon Rangers before Guwahati Royals begin their campaign against Jorhat Stallions in the evening fixture.

Among the matches to watch out for will be the battle between Dibrugarh Warriors and Guwahati Royals, with the two sides meeting twice, first under lights on August 10 and again



on August 18. Charaideo Sunrisers and Guwahati Royals will also face off twice, on August 11 and August 19, setting the stage for another potentially compelling rivalry.

The schedule also throws up a number of repeat contests that could develop into marquee rivalries during the inaugural season. Tezpur Titans and Guwahati Royals meet on August 8 before renewing their rivalry on August 15, while Dibrugarh Warriors and Jorhat Stallions clash on the same two weekends, on August 8 and August 16. Barpeta Braves and Nagaon Rangers will face each other on August 7 and August 16, while Charaideo Sunrisers and Nagaon Rangers meet on August 9 and again on August 17.

The Barpeta Braves-Barak Legends contest will also get a second chapter, with fixtures scheduled for August 9 and August 17.

The final day of the league stage on August 20 could

prove decisive in determining the semi-final line-up, with Tezpur Titans taking on Barak Legends at 2:00 pm before Dibrugarh Warriors face Nagaon Rangers in the final league encounter at 7:00 pm.

The top four teams at the conclusion of the league stage will progress to the semi-finals on August 21. The second and third-placed teams will meet in the first semi-final at 2:00 pm, while the table-toppers will face the fourth-placed side in the second semi-final at 7:00 pm.

Following a break day on August 22, the inaugural Assam Premier League champions will be crowned on Sunday, August 23, with the grand finale scheduled for 7:00 pm. With eight teams representing different parts of Assam and a schedule featuring several repeat match-ups, the inaugural season is poised to create new cricketing rivalries while offering players a competitive platform to showcase their talent.

REC LTD Q1 FY27 profit jumps 23%, declares ₹4.25 interim dividend per share

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

The Board of Directors of REC Limited on Friday approved the standalone and consolidated financial results for the quarter ended June 30, 2026. REC reported a net profit of ₹4,149 crore for Q1 FY27, up 23 per cent from ₹3,362 crore in Q4 FY26. Net interest income stood at ₹5,212 crore compared to ₹4,961 crore in the previous quarter, registering a growth of 5 per cent.

Despite a dynamic operating environment, the company sustained a healthy net interest margin of 3.34 per cent, reflecting the strength of its lending portfolio and disciplined financial management. REC delivered an annualised earnings per share of ₹63.04 for the quarter ended June 30, 2026.

REC's standalone loan book stood at ₹5.90 lakh crore as on June 30, 2026, the largest for any CPSU-NBFC in India. Net worth grew 15 per cent year-on-year to ₹91,836 crore as on June 30, 2026, aided by growth in profits. The renewable energy portfolio continued to witness robust traction and grew to ₹78,596 crore, constituting 13.32 per cent of the overall loan composition. This reinforces REC's commitment to fostering sustainable infrastructure development and accelerat-



ing the growth of green energy in India. The infrastructure and logistics portfolio grew to ₹59,289 crore, accounting for over 10 per cent of overall loan assets.

Driven by sustained initiatives to improve asset quality, the company reduced its Stage-3 loan assets to total loan portfolio ratio to 0.11 per cent. The Capital Adequacy Ratio stood at 23.06 per cent as on June 30, 2026, against the regulatory minimum of 15 per cent mandated by RBI, indicating ample opportunity to support future growth. In line with its consistent dividend distribution track record, the Board of Directors declared the First Interim Dividend of ₹4.25 per equity share of face value ₹10 each.

The strengthening fundamentals of the Indian power sector have contributed to improved financial position of power utilities, resulting in stronger credit profiles and, consequently, lower provisioning requirements. Reflecting its customer-

centric approach, REC proactively shared these benefits with borrowers by rationalising lending rates, resulting in a yield of 9.55 per cent in Q1 FY 2026-27.

The company was recognised with the 'NBFC of the Year' Award at the 3rd Annual Bharat NBFC & FinTech Summit & Awards 2026 and the 'AI & GenAI Adoption Excellence Award' at the 2nd Bharat PSU Manthan & Excellence Awards 2026, underscoring its strong business performance, digital innovation, and leadership in leveraging advanced technologies.

REC Limited said it is strategically broadening its business footprint through targeted investments in conventional power, renewable energy and infrastructure & logistics development in the country. The company also continues to be a strategic partner to the Government of India in implementing government programmes, policy and reforms and is steadily fostering long-term growth.

Delhi Registrar restores members' rights over stilt parking in Dwarka Housing Society

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

The Registrar of Cooperative Societies (RCS), Delhi, has set aside resolutions passed by Shakti Cooperative Group Housing Society Ltd, Dwarka, declaring them illegal and unenforceable insofar as they sought to extinguish members' vested rights over stilt parking spaces.

In its order dated July 7, 2026, the RCS held that stilt parking spaces allotted to members between 2000-2003, after payment of approximately ₹77,000 per slot, are transferable and inheritable along with the flats.

The dispute arose from resolutions adopted in the

Society's Annual General Body Meetings of 2019 and 2020, which mandated that stilt parking be treated as part of the common areas and required surrender of such spaces upon transfer of flats. Members led by Dr Aruna challenged these resolutions, contending that stilt parking had been separately allotted for consideration nearly two decades earlier.

RCS Krishna Kumar Singh (IAS) observed that the Society had collected separate payments, issued receipts and allotment letters, and permitted exclusive use of stilt parking for over 20 years. "Rights which have crystallised through contractual allotment, payment of consideration and long-

standing possession acquire a vested character and cannot subsequently be divested by a mere resolution of the General Body," said the order.

The RCS relied on the principles laid down in the Delhi High Court's ruling in Vijay Gupta vs Nav Nirman CGHS Ltd, which held that once a cooperative society has allotted parking spaces for consideration and such allotments have remained acted upon over a long period, the society cannot subsequently divest members of their accrued rights by passing a resolution. The RCS further clarified that reliance on the Supreme Court's judgement in Dr GN Khajuria vs DDA was misplaced, as the factual and

legal context was distinguishable. The order directs Shakti CGHS Ltd to restore original stilt parking allotments within 15 days; recognise such allotments in all future transfers, succession, or membership changes; and avoid any further action inconsistent with the Delhi Cooperative Societies Act, 2003 and Rules, 2007. The complaint was accordingly allowed, providing relief to members who had contested the society's attempt to redefine their property rights.

The decision underscores that cooperative governance must remain fair, reasonable, and consistent with statutory principles and cannot override vested contractual rights.

Ujjivan SFB to launch the third edition of its Rath Yatra flagship campaign

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Bhubaneswar

Ujjivan Small Finance Bank Limited (Ujjivan SFB) is set to launch the 3rd edition of its Rath Yatra flagship campaign, called 'Bhakti Ra Dori', across Odisha from 20th to 24th July.

This activity is an experiential activation where participants pull a virtual chariot, using the sacred journey of a 'Rath Yatra' experience, as a metaphor for purpose, direction and financial progress.

Ujjivan SFB aims to celebrate Odisha's rich cultural heritage while reinforcing its commitment to empower-



ing aspirations, fostering financial inclusion and build-

ing deeper connections with local communities. The five-

day activation will be hosted across six Ujjivan SFB branches in Odisha.

Commenting on the initiative, Lakshman Velayutham, Chief Marketing Officer, Ujjivan Small Finance Bank, said, "The response to last year's Mann Ki Rath was genuinely heartening. When you meet customers in a space they care about, the connections go far beyond a transaction. This year, we have woven technology into the cultural realm to make it more personal. We want to celebrate Rath Yatra alongside our customers and communities in Odisha, with a renewed sense of faith to realise one's aspirations."

DAILY SUDOKU

9648

2

43

316

2864

27

197

8379

DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★★★★

HOW TO SOLVE IT

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

SOLUTION (24.7.26)

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

DOUBLE CROSSWORD

SATURDAY | JULY 25, 2026

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

10 11 12 13 14 15 16

17 18 19 20 21 22 23

24 25 26 27 28 29 30

31

ACROSS

1 Studious exterior of certain males (5)

6 Rod or Kathy, perhaps (5)

9 Reg Cole as an artist (2,5)

10 She is in time (5)

11 Dance with an eccentric bachelor (5)

12 Some artists can make music with it (5)

13 Half the guides in Pennsylvania can't fly! (7)

15 Little chap in a horse box (3)

17 The hard stuff (4)

18 In the red, you want a price cut and a pay increase (6)

19 Where fruit's concerned, loses out (5)

20 Agreement not to fast during an

DOWN

2 Easter puzzle? (6)

3 Deigns to change one's intention (6)

4 Like a fox's grisly end? (3)

5 Bear disaster at Birkenhead (5)

6 Bad situations bringing superficial damage (7)

7 Travel erratically out to the right (4)

8 Tales of a fabulous fellow (6)

12 Brainless as Billy? (5)

13 People who made pictures without a bit of pleasure (5)

14 Explosive part detonated, as is well known (5)

15 Cross this out, roughly, in part (5)

SOLUTION (24.7.26)

27. Drilled	24. Drawing
30. D-re-ams	26. Time sharer
31. Follow	28. Collector
32. Cases	29. After-ed
35. Dates	30. De-D-uce
16. Past-I-ves	32. Cut-backs
17. Alitch	33. Sed-a-te
18. Get-up	10. Si-opes
20. Shrug	34. Ass-erts
22. Out-set	38. C-hains
23. Bowler	40. Ruby
25. L-1st-ing	21. Rai-me-nt

BRIEFLY

Volpato has tested positive for cocaine, says Police



Cristian Volpato, who represented Australia at the World Cup, has allegedly tested positive for cocaine and also for speeding, New South Wales state police said Friday.

They said the 22-year-old Volpato, who switched allegiances from Italy to Australia before the World Cup, was allegedly clocked at 50 kilometers per hour (30 miles per hour) over the designated speed limit when police stopped him on Sydney's Anzac Bridge early Friday morning.

He was subjected to a roadside drug test which returned a positive result for cocaine, police said in a statement on Friday.

Volpato made three appearances for the Socceroos at the World Cup.

British Open winner Ryan arrives back in New Zealand



Ryan Fox arrived back in New Zealand on Friday after carrying the British Open championship -winner's claret jug from one side of the world to the other, hankering for some sleep and a gourmet pie.

Fox was embraced at Auckland airport by his father, former All Blacks rugby player Grant Fox, as he arrived with his wife Anneke and two children. Fox birdied the final hole at Royal Birkdale last Sunday for his first major win.

"It's good to be back," he said.

A few hours later, media found the 39-year-old Fox at his local bakery, enjoying his favorite steak, bacon, jam and cheese pie. He hopes in coming days to be able to show off his trophy to New Zealand, to get in some fishing and maybe a round of golf.

But first, sleep. Fox has had a hectic schedule of travel and interviews since his win.

Glasgow 2026 gives CWG a fresh start

APARAJITA UPADHYAY ■ Glasgow

The OVO Hydro burst into a kaleidoscope of music, colour and Scottish pageantry on Thursday as the 23rd Commonwealth Games opened with an energetic indoor spectacle, celebrating Glasgow's heritage while signalling a fresh, more sustainable future for the Commonwealth movement.

King Charles III read aloud the message he had placed into the King's Baton at Buckingham Palace in March last year, which had since travelled through all 74 Commonwealth member nations during a 500-day global relay.

"It is my pleasure to declare the Games Open," King Charles III said before speaking on the theme of gathering and connecting for a common future with hope.

The British Monarch said the Baton had carried an additional message urging efforts to rid oceans and waterways of plastic pollution, "which can impact on human health."

"For these Games, the Relay has carried another message à



to help remove the plastic pollution that harms our oceans and waterways, and can impact on human health.

"Addressing plastic pollution

complements the immense global efforts required to protect thirty per cent of the world's ocean by 2030.

"Caring for the ocean's natural capital ensures our communities and businesses can continue to thrive and vital global food resources can be enhanced through the establishment of marine reserves and no-take zones, to



restore threatened marine ecosystems and diminished fish stocks."

The ceremony blended traditional Gaelic heritage with contemporary pop, rap, and electronic performance, drawing heavily on the creative identity of a city recognised as a UNESCO City of Music.

Moving away from expansive open-air stadium shows, organisers staged the opening ceremony entirely within the 14,300-capacity indoor bowl, a first in Commonwealth Games history.

In another first, athletes from the 74 nations paraded into the arena at the very beginning of the show

rather than at the the end. The Indian contingent was led by Olympic medalists Mirabai Chanu and Lovlina Borgohain.

With the male athletes dressed in navy blue suits and the female participants in sarees and blazers, the Indian contingent entered to a huge cheer from the audience.

As the 74 batons were planted into a 200-square-metre living stage garden featuring native Scottish flora, spotlit pipers encircled the perimeter to lead a rendition of "Flower of Scotland," providing one of the evening's central traditional moments. (PTI)

Glasgow CWG make history with first-ever braille design medals

APARAJITA UPADHYAY ■ Glasgow

When medals are draped around the necks of Commonwealth Games podium finishers here, some winners would notice something unusual beneath their fingertips.

For the first time in the Games' history, the medals feature braille and tactile elements, making them accessible to visually impaired athletes. The move ties in with Glasgow 2026's emphasis on inclusion, reflected in a record 47 gold medals across six Para sports — the biggest Para programme at a Commonwealth Games.

Overall, 215 gold medals will be on offer across 10 sports and six Para sports.

While every host city puts its own stamp on the medals, Glasgow's design is a departure from the familiar circular shape. The medals are fashioned as a Reuleaux triangle, inspired by the city's coat of arms.

The patterns on the surface are drawn from the Finnieston Crane, one of Glasgow's best-known landmarks and a reminder of its shipbuilding past. The textured finish is inspired by tartan, a symbol closely associated with Scotland, while the three levels

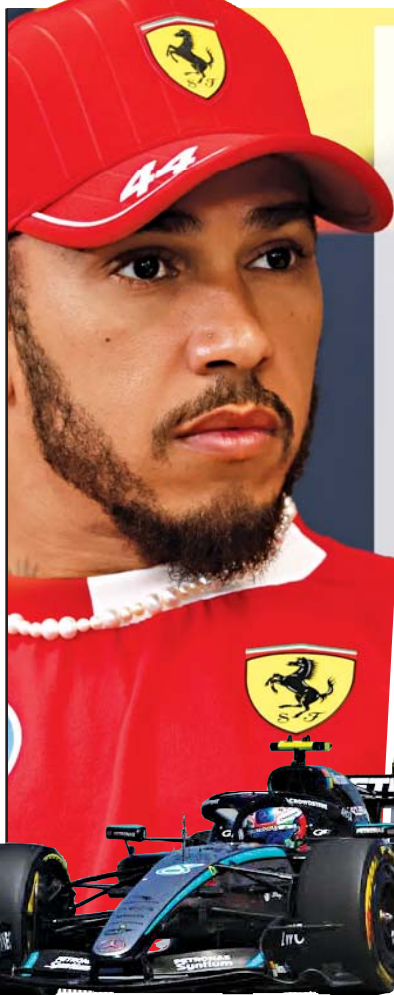


on the medal represent the three steps of the podium.

The medal was designed by award-winning Militsa Milenkova, a Bulgarian-born artist in residence at the Glasgow School of Art. Her design was chosen from entries submitted by artists from the school's Silversmithing and Jewellery programme.

"I wanted the medal to be a stand-out edition of the Commonwealth Games medals," Milenkova said.

"When I was thinking about the design, I wanted to try and fit Glasgow into one shape. I was naturally drawn to the symbol of the city — the coat of arms. That's where I took the distinctive shape from." (PTI)



Lewis Hamilton looks for a chance to pressure Antonelli

JAMES ELLINGWORTHAP ■ Mogyorod (Hungary)

Lewis Hamilton has a chance to pile pressure on Kimi Antonelli and Mercedes as the Formula 1 race heads to Hungary.

Hamilton has won the Hungarian Grand Prix eight times, making it his most successful event besides his

home British Grand Prix. It's a track where cornering ability, not raw power, tends to make the difference, which could suit his Ferrari.

"I think we've got a car that can compete. Mercedes is still the car to beat, and they won't be easy to beat this weekend, but I do think we've made subtle progress. Hopefully we can be fighting with them this weekend,"

Hamilton said on Thursday. It's the last race before F1's annual mid-season break, and the next race won't be until the Dutch Grand Prix on Aug. 23.

One Mercedes driver leads, the other is under pressure. "Still a lot of work to do, still a mountain to climb in the second half of the season, but I'm more focused than ever and really believe that we can fight," Hamilton said.

(AP)



Fernando Alonso links F1 future to better driving experience

ASSOCIATED PRESS ■ Mogyorod (Hungary)

Fernando Alonso has suggested his future in Formula 1 could depend on whether the cars become more enjoyable to drive.

Alonso and Aston Martin have struggled with a slow and unreliable car, the first produced with car design great Adrian Newey in charge. Alonso scored the team's only point so far this season at the Monaco Grand Prix.

The two-time F1 champion turns 45 next week and signed what was described as a "multiyear" extension in 2024. He confirmed he still has a contract for 2027 with Aston Martin, "so I'm not moving."

"For me, I'm relaxed. As I've said many times, I'm thinking. I need to know what I do next year and in the years to come. I feel fresh, I feel motivated, I feel fast, but I need to



enjoy also what I do," Alonso said ahead of the Hungarian Grand Prix.

Alonso was sharply critical of the last two races in Britain and Belgium, where the cars ran out of battery power on the long straights.

"I think it's not fun to watch, it's not fun to drive, and we've been

repeating the same thing every single Grand Prix," he said. "It's not the same adrenaline that I used to have driving a Formula 1 car. That's something that I need to put on the table. It's not a problem with the competitiveness of the team. It's just a problem of whether Formula

1 gives me the adrenaline that I need to live."

Aston Martin is bringing a major package of upgrades to its car for the Hungarian Grand Prix. An engine upgrade from supplier Honda is expected later, but Hungary's relatively slow and twisty track could make up for the Aston Martin's lack of power. Alonso said he still believed Newey and Honda could deliver a world-beating car and engine combination given time.

"I think I have a pretty clear picture of the team, that we will fix all the problems. They take time, but I have no doubts, zero doubts, that Adrian will provide the best car on the grid sooner or later," he said.

"I would like to see the first step with this package... and I think there's going to be more to come next year, that's for sure, and in the years to come. On the power unit, I have no doubts as well."

Formula 1 parent company agrees to \$3M Las Vegas GP settlement

MARK ANDERSONAP ■ Las Vegas

Formula 1 parent company Liberty Media, which also promotes the Las Vegas Grand Prix, has agreed to a settlement of about \$3 million to end a class-action lawsuit brought by spectators regarding the inaugural 2023 race.

The opening-night practice session on November 16, 2023, was halted after nine minutes when Carlos Sainz Jr drove over a water valve cover that severely damaged his Ferrari. Practice didn't resume until the early morning hours of November 17, ending at about 4 am local time.

Fans were removed from



the viewing areas before the 90-minute session took place.

Those who had tickets for only that practice session or bought three-night tickets are eligible for compensation under the settlement. Claims

must be filed by August 27.

Liberty Media and the Las Vegas Grand Prix did not admit fault under the settlement. A final approval hearing is scheduled for November 4 at US District Court of Nevada. (AP)

Joseph declined selection for Pakistan Tests, says Sammy

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Tarouba

West Indies head coach Darren Sammy has claimed that pacer Alzarri Joseph declined selection for the two Test home series against Pakistan beginning on Saturday. While announcing the squad for the series, Cricket West Indies said Joseph was unavailable due to personal reasons, Sammy divulged more details on the subject.

"Yeah, it is a big loss. Mr Joseph has declined selection. That's the reality of the situation," Sammy said at a press interaction ahead of the series opener.

"He was selected. I mean, he's now coming back from injury. And for reasons since, he has declined the selection. That is a decision that is way over my head. I leave that with the directors to come up with whatever solutions where contracted players get to decline selection," said the coach.

Joseph has played 42 Tests for



the West Indies, picking 130 wickets. He has played across formats for the regional team.

Despite Joseph's absence, Sammy remains confident of his side's bowling abilities. The attack includes Shamar Joseph, Kumar Roach, Jayden Seales and allrounders Justin Greaves and Keemo Paul. Spin options include Jomel Warrican, rookie Joshua Bishop and captain Roston Chase.



Spain coach De la Fuente says Argentina's conduct after World Cup final was unacceptable

GRAHAM DUNBARAP ■ Geneva

As FIFA investigates Argentina's conduct after the World Cup final, Spain coach Luis de la Fuente has described the incidents as "intolerable and unacceptable."

FIFA asked one of its disciplinary prosecutors Monday to report back on testy on-field confrontations after Spain's 1-0 win in extra time Sunday to dethrone the defending champion.

Argentina midfielder Leandro Paredes physically tangled with Spain players Eric Garcia and Gavi, and Spain captain Rodri was hit in the stomach as he ran past Argentina defender Nahuel Molina.

"It cannot be allowed," De la



Fuente told Spanish public broadcaster TVE on Thursday, adding he did not see the incidents at the time while "celebrating with other people."

"In any case, I find it intolerable and unaccept-

able from players of that caliber, whom I had been praising in the days before and who have a magnificent coach," the Spain coach said.

FIFA has given no details of the remit for its investigator, or if witness statements could be sought from

Spain players and staff. Argentina assistant coach Roberto Ayala apologised on Wednesday for his confrontation with Dani Olmo, which he described as a shove and not a punch.

Coach praises Spain's restraint: De la Fuente praised his players in the TVE interview for how they handled the situation at MetLife Stadium.

"I want to highlight our behavior in the face of that kind of aggression and provocation," the coach said. "Our players always kept their composure and behaved like true professionals." The Spain squad stood in a guard of honor for Argentina players walking to the podium to get their medals from US President Donald Trump. Minutes later, when Rodri lifted the trophy, most of the Argentina squad turned their backs on the ceremonial moment. (AP)



India, Pakistan get direct quarterfinal entry in Asian Games cricket draw

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

Defending champions India and Pakistan have been given direct entry into quarterfinals of both the men's and women's cricket competition of this year's Asian Games.

The Indian women's team will open its campaign against Japan, while the men's opponents will be decided after the preliminary stage. The women will be up against either Bangladesh or China in the semifinals.

The men's cricket competition will start on September 24 and conclude on October 1. The men's team might face



Pakistan in the semifinals.

The women's event will be held from September 17 to 22. The potential of a clash with Pakistan is not ruled out in the women's final. The men's competition features 10 teams.

The preliminary stage will feature Afghanistan, Japan, and Nepal in Group A and Hong Kong China, Malaysia and Oman in Group B. Both competitions will be played in

the T20 format at the Korogi Athletic Park in Aichi prefecture. Shreyas Iyer will captain the Indian men's team, while Harmanpreet Kaur will captain the Indian women.

Cricket is part of the Asiad schedule for a fourth time, having earlier featured in 2010 Guangzhou, 2014 Incheon, and 2023 Hangzhou Games.



WC medal, LA Olympics hockey star Manpreet's last 2 goals

SAUMJOJYOTI S CHOUDHURY ■ New Delhi

Talismanic Manpreet Singh has achieved plenty in his hockey journey, but the veteran midfielder still rues one missing trophy from his cabinet — a medal in the World Cup — a feat he wants to attain in the upcoming mega-event before drawing curtains to his illustrious career after the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics. To his credit, former captain Manpreet has two Olympic medals — back-to-back bronze in Tokyo and Paris — two Asian Games gold (2014 Incheon and 2022 Hangzhou) and a bronze (2018 Jakarta), besides multiple other titles.

But one goal the 34-year-old star midfielder is still chasing is an Indian podium finish at the World Cup after 51 long years. India's last medal at the World Cup was a gold at the 1975 edition.

And Manpreet is confident of breaking that jinx in the upcoming edition to be jointly hosted by The Netherlands and Belgium from August 15 to 30. "An athlete never stops, personally I want to represent my country for the longest time and win as many medals as possible," Manpreet told PTI.

"We won back-to-back medals in Olympics, but a World Cup medal is still missing and I want to achieve that and fill that gap because the only World Cup medal we won was back in 1975.

"I am pretty confident this time and I have belief in the team. The mindset we showed during last two Olympics to win medals, we have to approach the same way and we will go with the same mindset to win medal." Manpreet very well knows he is standing at the fog end of his career, but he is backing his fitness to continue till the Los Angeles Olympics.

"As an athlete my personal goal is to play till LA 2028, maintain my fitness and give my 100 per cent, never to give up." (PTI)

India U20 men to face Singapore in 2 friendlies



PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Bengaluru

The Indian U20 football team will play two international friendly matches against Singapore behind closed doors here, on August 3 and 6 as part of its preparations for the 2027 AFC U20 Asian Cup Qualifiers. The two matches will be played at the Centre for Sports Excellence here, the All India Football Federation (AIFF) said in a release on Friday.

India and Singapore have met twice earlier in official U20 men's competitions, in the AFC Youth Championship. India won both matches; a 4-1 victory in 1966 was followed by a penalty shootout triumph in the quarterfinals during their title-winning campaign in 1974.

The two sides also played a pair of U19 international friendlies in Goa in 2017, with India winning the first 7-2 before Singapore claiming the second 1-0.

Comeback from injury was very difficult: Mayank

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Harare

India pacer Mayank Yadav has described the two-year injury-enforced absence from international cricket as the most difficult phase of his young career, admitting that battling repeated setbacks at the age of 22-23 tested him mentally.

Playing his first game for India since October 2024, against Zimbabwe at the Harare Sports Club on Thursday, the injury-prone speedster cranked up serious pace from the get-go. He said the dream of representing the country kept him going during the difficult rehabilitation period.

"It was very difficult. The two-



year gap was very challenging for me as a person... I was only 22-23 years old at that time, so that always affected me that I had to go through so much at such a young age," Mayank said at the post-match press conference after helping India win the opening T20I comfortably.

Shreyas Iyer's look to continue revival, seal T20I series against Zimbabwe

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Harare

On recovery path with their maiden win under new captain Shreyas Iyer, India will look to sustain the winning momentum for an unassailable lead against Zimbabwe when the two teams face off in the second T20I here on Saturday.

After being swept away by Ireland (0-2) and England (0-4), three-time T20 World Cup winners India produced a far better show in their series-opener here on Thursday, beating Zimbabwe



by seven wickets to take a 1-0 lead.

Young batting sensation Vaibhav Sooryavanshi's 19-ball 50 and Mayank Yadav's fiery 4-0-18-2 set up an important win for India in the opening match here, against an opponent which has thrived in home conditions of late.

India chased down a modest 126 with more than six overs and seven wickets to spare, riding on Sooryavanshi's fifty, a quickfire 35 from Ishan Kishan and a measured 28 not out from skipper Iyer.

Abhishek Sharma, who began his T20I journey here at the Harare Sports Club and struck his maiden hundred in the format in the second game itself two years ago, would be keen to make amends after falling cheaply in the opening game.

Sooryavanshi set the record for being the youngest to score a T20I half-century. The young batter would have been relieved getting the monkey off his back, especially when he was specifically targeted with short balls on England tour.

India's F1 push: Sports Ministry grants NSF status to motor-sport body FMSCI



PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

The Sports Ministry has provisionally granted the status of National Sports Federation (NSF) to the Federation of Motor Sports Clubs of India (FMSCI), a significant upgrade for the body that is coordinating with the government to bring Formula 1 back to the country.

The FMSCI had applied for recognition on June 11 this year and the approval of its request means that it would now be eligible for financial grants from the

ministry. "...the request of Federation of Motor Sports Clubs of India (FMSCI) for provisional recognition as National Sports Federation (NSF) has been considered and it has been decided to grant provisional recognition to FMSCI as an NSF with effect from the date of issue of this letter," the Ministry order dated July 23 stated.

FMSCI has been in regular talks with the ministry on not just the issue of recognition but to also chart the way forward for F1's India comeback.

Viswanathan Anand becomes FIDE interim president

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

Five-time world champion Viswanathan Anand has taken over the interim presidency of world chess body FIDE after its incumbent president Arkady Dvorkovich stepped aside following his inclusion in the European Union's list of sanctioned individuals related to the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war.

Dvorkovich, who hails from Russia, has decided to challenge EU's decision "by all means". The EU action could lead freezing of his accounts and travel bans. Anand has been the Deputy President of FIDE since 2022.

"The FIDE Council accepts and



ratifies the decision of Mr Arkady Dvorkovich to suspend the exercise of his rights, duties and prerogatives as President of the FIDE," the world body said in a statement.

In his statement, Dvorkovich said the EU's decision was unfair.

Judoka Tulika Maan suspended, withdrawn from CWG

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

Birmingham Commonwealth Games silver medal-winning judoka Tulika Maan has been withdrawn from the ongoing Glasgow edition after being handed a provisional suspension by the National Anti-Doping Agency (NADA) for three whereabouts failures in the last 12 months.

Maan had won silver in the +78kg category in the 2022 edition and she was a strong medal prospect in Glasgow as well. She now stares at a two-year ban.

"She has committed three whereabouts failures in a 12-month period and NADA has sent notice to her. So, she will be withdrawn from the team," a judo coach told PTI on conditions of anonymity. The 27-year-old from Delhi is the second judoka to have been withdrawn from Glasgow CWG.

On Thursday, Arun Kumar, who com-



petes in the men's -73kg category, was pulled out of the Games after failing an out-of-competition dope test.

He was handed a provisional suspension by the NADA for testing positive for an anabolic steroid.

CRICKET AUSTRALIA OPEN TO HOSTING ASHES TEST IN INDIA



PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Melbourne

After deciding to take the Big Bash League opener to Chennai later this year, Cricket Australia is now considering the idea of having an Ashes Test in India at some point in future.

CA chief executive Todd Greenberg, however, ruled out any immediate plan. Australia is preparing to the host the Big Bash Opener in Chennai in December. "Our relationship with the ECB (England and Wales Cricket Board) but also the BCCI is very strong, and clearly there are opportunities in India to put more content into certain areas," Greenberg told BBC's Stumped podcast.

Greenberg also noted that a packed cricket calendar might come in the way of a proposal that would require immense logistical coordination.

Aston Villa sign Garnacho on loan after Rogers sale

ASSOCIATED PRESS ■ London

Argentina winger Alejandro Garnacho went to Aston Villa on loan from Chelsea on Thursday, joining a Champions League team from one that has no European action this season.

Garnacho made the move just days after Morgan Rogers went from Villa Park to Chelsea for a record transfer fee for an English player.

The 22-year-old Garnacho, who was a Spain youth international, was not picked for Argentina's World Cup squad. His eight games for Argentina include the title-winning team at the 2024 Copa America when he was a Manchester United player.

Garnacho's one season at Chelsea after a 40 million pounds (\$53 million) transfer saw coaches Enzo Maresca and Liam Rosenior fired as the 2025 Club World Cup winner placed 10th in the Premier League.

Villa enters its fifth season



under coach Unai Emery after a fourth-place finish in the Premier League and winning the Europa League title.

Also Thursday, Austria midfielder Xaver Schlager signed for Nottingham Forest on a two-year deal as a free agent after his contract expired at Leipzig.

The 28-year-old Schlager started all four of Austria's games at the World Cup, and reunites with Austrian coach Oliver Glasner whom he played for at Wolfsburg.

Colombia backs coach Nestor with contract extension

JOSE MANUEL VALLADARES ■ Bogota (Colombia)

Nestor Lorenzo will continue as Colombia soccer coach after the national team conceded only one goal in five games at the recent World Cup. The length of his contract extension with the Colombian Football Federation was not disclosed. Lorenzo, a 60-year-old Argentine, was initially hired in 2022 on a four-year contract.

The federation's executive committee confirmed the extension on Thursday after a meeting in Bogota.

Under Lorenzo, Colombia has 31 wins, 12 draws, and eight losses, scoring a healthy 96 goals overall and conceding 44.

Time to recharge'Colombia topped its group at the World Cup with wins over Uzbekistan (3-1) and Congo (1-0), and a 0-0 draw against Portugal. After defeating Ghana 1-0 in the round of 32, Colombia was eliminated in the last 16 by Switzerland, falling 4-3 in a penalty shootout following a goalless 120 minutes.

"Now is the time to recharge and



continue developing this project," Lorenzo told 365scores. "We will keep building a stronger national team, maintaining our attacking style and pursuing clear objectives."

Penalty painReflecting on the World Cup, Lorenzo praised the defensive performance of his squad while lamenting the penalty shootout against Switzerland.

"The penalties against Switzerland were the most painful moment because our World Cup dream came to an end," Lorenzo said. "The team took the initiative in every match; we played with an ambitious, attacking mindset. We created more scoring chances than any of the opponents we faced." (AP)

Jurgen Klopp expected to be named new Germany coach after WC failure

ASSOCIATED PRESS ■ Frankfurt (Germany)

Jurgen Klopp was expected to be named Germany's new coach Friday, tasked with bouncing back from another disastrous World Cup.

The German soccer federation was expected to announce at a news conference Friday morning that it has agreed a contract with Klopp for his first coaching job since he left Liverpool in 2024. German media reported his deal will run through the 2028 European Championship and 2030 World Cup.

The former Liverpool manager has been the preferred candidate ever since Julian Nagelsmann resigned following Germany's shock loss on penalties to Paraguay in the World Cup round of 32 on June 29.

Germany has not won a knockout game at any men's World Cup since it won the title in 2014.

Klopp held talks with Germany officials in New York while working there as a TV expert at the World Cup, and the federation said on July 11 they reached an agreement on "essential key points" of a contract.

