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# Affidavit or apology: CEC

GYANESH KUMAR ISSUES AN ULTIMATUM OF A WEEK TO RAHUL GANDHI

**New Delhi:** Hitting back at Rahul Gandhi for his 'vote theft' charges against the Election Commission, Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar on Sunday served a seven-day ultimatum on the Congress leader to submit a signed affidavit to back his claims, else his allegations will be considered baseless and invalid.

In his first press conference after Gandhi levelled allegations of 'vote chori' in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections and several opposition leaders flagged issues about revision of electoral rolls in Bihar, a combative Kumar asked Gandhi to either apologise or back his claims with a signed affida-



Gyanesh Kumar

vit as required under electoral rules.

"Give an affidavit or apologise to the nation. There is no third option. If an affidavit is not given within seven days, this means that all allegations are baseless," said Kumar, flanked by Election Commissioners Sukhbir Singh Sandhu and Vivek Joshi.

The remarks by the Chief Election Commissioner

(CEC) came on a day when Gandhi-led opposition launched the 'Vote Adhikar Yatra' in Bihar and stepped up attack against the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls in the poll-bound state.

Kumar said the SIR exercise was aimed at removing all shortcomings in the voter list and it is a matter of grave concern that some parties are spreading misinformation about it, "firing from the Election Commission's shoulder".

"If one thinks that by making a PPT presentation with wrong facts, the ECI will act, that is not the case. EC cannot act without the affidavit in such a serious matter as it would be

against the law and the Constitution," Kumar said.

Levelled allegations of "vote chori", Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi had on July 31, through a presentation at a press conference, cited data from the 2024 Lok Sabha polls to claim that over 1 lakh votes were "stolen" in Mahadevapura assembly segment in Karnataka through five types of manipulation, including duplicate voters, fake and invalid addresses and single-address voters.

The chief electoral officers of several states had asked Gandhi to file an affidavit under oath on his claims, but he had refused to do so.

## What the CEC said?

Kumar peppered his 85-minute press conference with several points.

- The list of names deleted from Bihar's draft electoral rolls following SIR has been posted on the websites of district magistrates within 56 hours of the Supreme Court's orders.
- The voter list in machine-readable format cannot be shared with political parties. There was a difference between machine-readable and searchable formats. In 2019, the top court had sided with its stand that a machine-readable format cannot be shared as it

could compromise voters' privacy.

- More than one crore employees are engaged in the election exercise. Can 'vote chori' happen in such a transparent process?
- Knowingly, unknowingly, some people ended up having multiple voter cards due to migration and other issues. It is a myth that SIR has been carried out in haste. It is EC's legal duty to correct voter lists before every election.
- Even if a person has votes in two places, he goes to vote at only one place. Voting at two places is a crime and if

any person makes a claim of double voting, then proof is required. Proof was asked but was not given.

- Should the Election Commission share CCTV videos of voters, including mothers and sisters?
- EC does not distinguish between the opposition and the ruling party.
- Political parties firing from EC's shoulders.
- No matter which political party someone belongs to, the Election Commission will not shy away from its constitutional duty.



LoP in the Lok Sabha and Congress leader Rahul Gandhi with RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav during 'Voter Adhikar Yatra' in Sasaram.

## Rahul reiterates EC stealing polls allegation

By Asim Kamal

**Sasaram (Bihar):** Embarking on a 1,300 km 'Voter Adhikar Yatra' from here, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Sunday accused the Election Commission of "stealing" elections in collusion with the BJP and asserted that the INDIA bloc will not let their "latest conspiracy" to steal Bihar polls through SIR of electoral rolls succeed.

With barely three months left for the Bihar Assembly polls, Gandhi, along with RJD's Tejashwi Yadav and other leaders of Mahagathbandhan -- Vikassheel Insaan Party's Mukesh Sahani and CPI(ML) Liberation general secretary Dipankar Bhattacharya -- launched the yatra, sending a message that the Opposition is united in the state.

During the yatra aimed at highlighting alleged vote theft, the Congress leader was seen standing in a jeep driven by Yadav and accompanied by other leaders of Mahagathbandhan.

In his remarks at the yatra launch event here, Gandhi alleged that assembly and Lok Sabha polls were being "stolen" across the country and there was a "conspiracy" in Bihar to do the same through the

Special Intensive Revision (SIR) exercise.

He said while he was asked to submit an affidavit after his press conference exposing "vote chori", no such demand was made from BJP leaders who made claims in their presser.

"In the whole country, assembly and Lok Sabha elections are being stolen and their latest conspiracy is to delete and add voters through SIR to steal the elections in Bihar," Gandhi charged.

"We have come here to tell you that we will not let them steal the election in Bihar. People of Bihar will not let them steal elections. The poor only have the power of vote and we will not let them steal polls," the leader of opposition in the Lok Sabha said.

He said the whole country now knows what the EC is doing and the Congress showed how it is carrying out this "theft".

"Wherever this theft is happening, be it Bihar, Maharashtra, Assam, West Bengal, we will catch their theft and put it before the people," Gandhi said.

Supporters gathered at the launch event and chanted slogans against the EC and the BJP like "vote chor, gaddi chhor". -PTI



A transgender performs rituals at Hussain Sagar lake on the occasion of 'Ganga Teppotsavam' in Hyderabad on Sunday.

Pic: PTI

## Vice-Presidential Election

### CP Radhakrishnan NDA candidate

**New Delhi:** Maharashtra Governor Chandrapuram Ponnusamy Radhakrishnan (67), a seasoned BJP leader from Tamil Nadu with an RSS background, was on Sunday named the vice-presidential candidate of the ruling National Democratic Alliance.

BJP president J P Nadda made the announcement following a meeting of the party's parliamentary board, which included Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and consulting the party's allies.

Due to the comfortable



majority of the BJP and its allies in the electoral college, comprising Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha members, Radhakrishnan's election is all but certain, and the party hopes that his elevation will help it make fresh inroads in Tamil Nadu, where elections are due next year.

Radhakrishnan belongs to the influential Gounder caste, an OBC community, in Tamil Nadu.

Unlike his predecessor Jagdeep Dhankhar, who was also a governor like him before being named as the NDA's vice-presidential nominee in 2022, Radhakrishnan has refrained from cultivating a public profile on political issues and skirted any controversy. The last date for filing nomination is August 21.

If the Opposition also names its candidate, the election will be held on September 9. -PTI

## Man 'fires' at delivery person

**Mumbai:** A 35-year-old employee of a bank was booked for attempt to murder after he pulled the trigger of an air gun following an argument with a person over the delayed delivery of medicines at his flat in Mumbai, police said on Sunday.

The accused, Saurabh Kumar, is suffering from insomnia. He had ordered the medicine from a chemist's shop in Lower Parel on Friday midnight.

An argument ensued between him and the delivery person over the delay in receiving the medicines in the early hours of Saturday.

"The accused refused to accept medicines and locked the door of his flat from inside. The delivery person repeatedly knocked on the door and rang the doorbell, which enraged Kumar. He emerged with an air rifle", the official said. The accused pulled the trigger when the delivery person was standing with his back facing the flat door. Kumar was booked on the charge of attempt to murder under the BNS and the provisions of the Arms Act.

The official said the air gun was empty.

## Prithviraj Chavan's staff in soup

FORMER CM'S CLOSE AIDE HAS MULTIPLE ENTRIES IN VOTER LIST; CHAVAN SAYS APPLIED FOR REMOVAL OF NAMES

By Abhijit Mulye

**Mumbai:** The BJP has accused personal staff of former Maharashtra Chief Minister Prithviraj Chavan of voting multiple times after multiple entries of their names have been found in the voters list of the South Karad Assembly constituency. Chavan, however, has said that he has found over 6,000 duplicate names in his constituency and he is planning to move to court over the issue.

"We found that Gajanan Avalkar, the Personal Assistant (PA) of Prithviraj Chavan, Avalkar's wife and brother, have their names in the voter list twice. They are registered as voters in Vathar village as well as in Karad," said Mohan Jadhav, a BJP worker from neighbouring Saidapur village.

Jadhav had worked with Chavan for several years in the past.

"Part 295 of the voters' list of the 260-Karad assembly constituency has an entry in the name of Gajanan Shankar Avalkar (Age 63) with sr. no. 1359, while name of his wife Sangita Gajanan Avalkar



(Age 56) is on sr. no. 1358 and his brother's name Jayprakash Shankar Avalkar (Age 49) is with sr. no. 717. While, part 127 of the voters' list of the same constituency again has their names as Gajanan Shankar Avalkar (Age 62) with sr. no. 573, Sangita Gajanan Avalkar (Age 54) with sr. no. 574 and Jayprakash Shankar Avalkar (Age 48) is with sr. no. 425," Jadhav said.

He also accused Avalkar of purposefully registering his name at multiple places to facilitate multiple voting

and asked Chavan to explain whether he has blessed such fraud in the voters' list.

"While Chavan was the CM Avalkar had great influence on the district administration and using that influence he had even made one BLO resign. That is the reason why his name is still there on two voting booths of the constituency and he has voted in both the booths," Jadhav said.

Jadhav also accused Avalkar of using forged or bogus documents with registering himself twice in



the voters' list.

When contacted, Chavan was forthcoming over the issue. "This is a simple case of half work done by the administration," he said. Avalkar earlier stayed at Vathar and hence had his name in the list of that village. He registered his name in the list of Karad when he moved to the city. "He had given an application to remove his name from the old list. However, the administration doesn't seem to have done that," Chavan told 'The Perfect Voice'.

## HK activists granted asylum in Australia, Britain

**Taipei:** A Hong Kong pro-democracy activist and a former lawmaker who are wanted by the city's authorities have been granted asylum in Great Britain and Australia, respectively.

Tony Chung, an activist who was imprisoned under Hong Kong's sweeping national security law, and Ted Hui, a former lawmaker who was facing trial for his role in anti-government protests in 2019, both announced over the week-

end that they have received asylum in the countries where they now live.

They are among dozens of activists on the run from Hong Kong authorities.

Civil liberties in the city have been greatly eroded since Beijing in 2020 imposed a national security law essentially criminalizing dissent in the former British colony. Both Beijing and Hong Kong have hailed the security law as bringing stability to the financial hub.

Hui, who fled Hong Kong in December 2020, is part of a group of overseas activists who are targeted by police bounties of up to 1 million Hong Kong dollars (USD 1,27,800). The former lawmaker is now working as a lawyer in Adelaide.

He announced on Facebook on Saturday that he and his family have been granted protection visas.

"I express my sincere gratitude to the Government of Australia — both present and former — for



Tony Chung

recognising our need for asylum and granting us this protection," Hui wrote. "This decision reflects values of freedom, justice, and compassion that my family will never take for granted."

While in Hong Kong, Hui had been an outspoken pro-democracy lawmaker. He was also known for disrupting a legislative session after he threw a rotten plant in the chamber to stop a debate of the national anthem bill — contro-

versial legislation making it illegal to insult the Chinese national anthem.

He was subsequently fined 52,000 Hong Kong dollars (USD 6,600) for the act.

Chung, who had advocated for Hong Kong's independence, was sentenced to almost four years in prison for secession and money laundering in 2020. He was released on a supervision order, during which he travelled to Japan, from where he fled to Britain seeking asylum.

In a post on social media platform Threads on Sunday, he expressed his excitement at receiving refugee status in Britain along with a five-year resident permit.

He said that despite his challenges over the past few years, including persistent mental health problems, he remains committed to his activism.

British and Australian authorities didn't immediately comment on the activists' statuses.

Hong Kong's government did not comment directly on the cases but issued a statement on Saturday condemning "the harbouring of criminals in any form by any country."

"Any country that harbours Hong Kong criminals in any form shows contempt for the rule of law, grossly disrespects Hong Kong's legal systems and barbarically interferes in the affairs of Hong Kong," the statement read. -AP



### CJI inaugurates HC Kolhapur bench

**Mumbai:** Chief Justice of India B R Gavai on Sunday inaugurated the Bombay High Court's new circuit bench in Kolhapur district.

Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis and Deputy CM Eknath Shinde were present on the occasion.

The setting up of the fourth bench in Kolhapur comes amid demands from various quarters over the years so as to ease the burden on litigants and lawyers who have to travel to Mumbai, located 380 km away, for hearing of their pleas.

At present, apart from the principal bench in Mumbai, the HC has two more benches -- at Nagpur in Vidarbha region and Aurangabad (Chhatrapati Sambhajanagar) in the state's Marathwada region.

A third bench of the high court sits in adjoining Goa.

On August 1, a notification was issued by Bombay HC's Chief Justice Alok Aradhe appointing Kolhapur as a circuit bench.

The Kolhapur bench will be functional from Monday (August 18) with a division bench and two single benches.

The new bench will have jurisdiction over six districts - Satara, Sangli, Solapur, Kolhapur, Ratnagiri and Sindhudurg (last two located in coastal Konkan region).

The Kolhapur division bench will comprise Justices M S Karnik and Sharmila Deshmukh, while Justices S G Dige and S G Chapalgaonkar will preside over the single benches.

-PTI

# Why Pune matters to the balance of power

AS THE BJP GEARS UP TO DOMINATE PUNE'S CIVIC ELECTIONS, OPPOSITION PARTIES, HITHERTO FRACTURED AT THE STATE LEVEL, ARE FINDING COMMON CAUSE ON THE STREETS.

By Rajendra Pandharpure

**Pune:** The municipal elections in Pune, Maharashtra's cultural capital, are months away. Yet the city already feels like a political battlefield. Campaign machinery has been quietly whirring, alliances are being tested, and every civic dispute has taken on the air of a proxy war. For the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the contest is existential: the party aims to secure at least 110 seats in the Pune Municipal Corporation, thereby cementing its grip on one of India's most influential urban centres. For the opposition - divided between factions, egos and shifting loyalties - the stakes are equally high. Pune has become the testing ground for whether Maharashtra's opposition can overcome fragmentation and mount a credible challenge to the BJP's dominance.

Beneath the veneer of unity of the ruling Mahayuti - a coalition of the BJP, the Eknath Shinde-led Shiv Sena and the Ajit Pawar-led Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) - lies suspicion. Opposition leaders and political observers say that cracks are widening even if BJP stalwarts dismiss this as media mischief. In Pune, however, the lack of coordination is hard to ignore. The BJP's meticulous preparations for the polls have set off alarm bells among its allies, whose cadres complain of being sidelined in the ward-restructuring process, overseen by the city's administration. Pawar and Shinde loyalists, meanwhile, are scrambling for influence in the urban development department, fearful of ceding the city's levers to their



more muscular partner.

If the Mahayuti looks shaky, the rival Maharashtra Vikas Aghadi (MVA) - the opposition coalition of the Congress, Sharad Pawar's NCP (SP) and Uddhav Thackeray's Shiv Sena (UBT) - is finding uncharacteristic moments of unity. This moment of unusual cohesion came on August 6, when Kishor Shinde, a former corporator from Raj Thackeray's Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS), clashed with Pune's Municipal Commissioner. A police case against Shinde for obstructing official work swiftly spiralled into a citywide controversy. The MNS, long a fringe force, found unexpected solidarity from Congress, Shiv Sena (UBT) and Sharad Pawar loyalists.

Protest marches ensued, drawing in leaders across the opposition spectrum. Most strikingly, the episode brought together Raj Thackeray and his estranged cousin Uddhav whose newfound proximity hinted at a tactical rapprochement. For many observers, it was the clearest signal yet that Pune's civic skirmishes are knitting together disparate opposition strands.

**Other flashpoints**

Other flashpoints have fuelled



this sense of convergence. In Kothrud, the police were accused of detaining and harassing two young women while refusing to register their complaint. The Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi, a party representing Dalits and backward communities, staged a sit-in. Rohit Pawar of the Sharad Pawar faction joined the protest, spending the night at the police station. His presence, alongside activists, underscored how civic grievances are being weaponised as platforms for opposition unity.

The BJP, too, has leaned on agitation politics. Recently, BJP MLA Yogesh Tilekar led a protest over the construction of a dargah (Sufi shrine) in Pune's Mukund Nagar, despite lacking police permission. Muslim and Dalit groups staged counter-protests, citing the site's historical significance. The standoff echoed earlier communal tensions in Yavat, a satellite town, where clashes prompted police to fire tear gas. Ajit Pawar, in damage control mode, visited Yavat and urged residents to uphold its progressive traditions. His intervention calmed tempers, but also signalled how combustible reli-



gious disputes have become in the state's electoral climate.

The net effect of these episodes has been paradoxical. On the one hand, they reveal Pune's civic sphere being hijacked by partisan rivalry, where every administrative decision - from ward boundaries to police complaints - is filtered through the lens of political one-upmanship. On the other, they highlight a rare if fragile pattern: opposition parties that squabble elsewhere are, at least in Pune, beginning to align against a common adversary.

**Political bellwether**

This is hardly coincidence. Pune, with its educated middle class, deep networks of cooperative institutions, and growing corporate clout, is a bellwether of urban politics in Maharashtra. Whoever controls the civic body not only gains access to lucrative contracts and patronage networks, but also shapes the narrative of competence in a state that remains India's second-largest economy. For the BJP, a strong showing would signal that its formula of centralised planning, Hindutva mobilisation and ad-

ministrative muscle continues to resonate. For the opposition, a symbolic victory in Pune could serve as proof that the BJP's dominance is not invincible and that tactical unity, however uncomfortable, can pay electoral dividends.

Whether this unity will endure beyond street protests is uncertain. The MVA still suffers from trust deficits and the Congress lacks organisational muscle in many wards. The MNS, unpredictable as ever, could retreat from alliances as quickly as it embraces them. On the ruling side, Ajit Pawar and Eknath Shinde must balance their survival against a partner (BJP) adept at swallowing allies whole.

Pune's civic elections have become more than a contest over roads and drains. They are a microcosm of Maharashtra's political future: a state where protests over police apathy, religious shrines, or municipal turf wars quickly become dress rehearsals for larger battles.

As the campaign season heats up, the question that lingers is whether Pune is merely a stage for routine civic elections, or is it the crucible in which Maharashtra's next political realignment will be forged?

### Tehsildar suspended for singing in official chair

**Latur:** A tehsildar has been suspended after he was filmed singing a Bollywood song while seated in his official chair at his send-off function following transfer, officials said.

According to a viral video, Prashant Thorat passionately belts out 'yarateriyari ko' from 1981 Amitabh Bachchan-starrer 'Yaarana', with those around him clapping in sync. The board behind Thorat shows 'taluka magistrate'.

Thorat, who was posted in Umri in the Nanded district, was transferred to Renapur in neighbouring Latur and relieved on July 30. He took charge of his new posting the same day. Both districts are part of the Marathwada division.

On August 8, the Umri tehsil office organised a send-off event for Thorat. During this programme, Thorat sang the Kishore Kumar chartbuster 'yarateriyari ko' in the presence of the staff.

However, Thorat's musical performance found its way to social media, triggering sharp reactions, with many calling the behaviour inappropriate for someone holding a responsible government position, an official said.

After learning about the controversy, the Nanded collector submitted a report to higher authorities, stating that Thorat's conduct had tarnished the image of the administration and violated the Maharashtra Civil Services (Conduct) Rules, 1979, the official said.

Divisional Commissioner of Revenue Jitendra Palkar ordered Thorat's suspension on Saturday.

### Wife's Body Tied To Motorcycle Truck driver arrested using AI

**Nagpur:** A week after a viral video of a man carrying the body of his wife, who was run over by a truck, on his motorcycle triggered outrage, Nagpur Police traced and arrested the driver using artificial intelligence, an official said on Sunday.

The biker, Amit Yadav, had claimed that he was forced to tie his wife's body to the motorcycle as no-body came to his aid following the tragic accident on the Nagpur-Jabalpur national highway on August 9.

Deolapar Police initially had no clue about the truck driver. Police scanned footage from various CCTV cameras using AI-MARVEL (Maharashtra Advanced Research and Vigilance for Enhanced Law Enforcement), designed to assist the police in crime prevention and investigation, the official said.

"Subsequently, the driver was identified as Satyapal Rajendra (28), a resident of Farrukhabad in Uttar Pradesh. The truck was impounded on August 16, and the accused was arrested," he said.



According to the police, Yadav, who hails from Madhya Pradesh's Seoni district, was travelling with his wife Gyarsi, from Lonara in Nagpur to their village Karanpur in the neighbouring state when a speeding truck hit their motorcycle.

As Gyarsi fell on the road, the truck ran over her and sped away, they said.

Although Yadav pleaded for help from passing motorists, none of them stopped, and left with no choice, he tied Gyarsi's body to the two-wheeler to take her home, police said.

A police van later intercepted the two-wheeler and took the body to the Indira Gandhi Medical College in Nagpur for a post-mortem.

The video clip showed Yadav riding the motorcycle with his wife's body tied to the pillion seat.

-PTI

### 'Vote Theft' Protest Banners urge Hazare to lead

**Mumbai:** Veteran social activist Anna Hazare on Sunday expressed dismay over banners in Pune that urged him to "wake up" and lead an agitation against alleged "vote theft".

Speaking to reporters, Hazare said he had done what he could and it was time for the youth to carry forward his work.

The banners, bearing the name of local activist Sameer Uttarkar, have been put up in the Pashan area of the city.

"Anna, at least wake up now. Even Kumbhakarna woke up from deep slumber for Ravana and Lanka, so why don't you do the same for the country?" the banners read.

They also carried a message that the nation was eager to witness Hazare's "magic" again at Delhi's Jantar Mantar, urging him to speak out and lead an agitation against alleged electoral malpractices.

Reacting to the display, Hazare said, "I introduced 10 laws, but even after 90 years, if people expect me to keep doing everything while they remain asleep, that expectation is wrong. What I have done should be carried forward by youth."



Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis takes a selfie with Govindas during a 'Dahi Handi' event on the occasion of Janmashtami in Mumbai.

Pic: PTI

## Need for progressive movement

By Rajendra Joshi

**Kolhapur:** In India, stray dogs are protected under the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, 1960. Following petitions from animal welfare organisations against the killing of stray dogs, the government, in 2001, brought in the Animal Birth Control (ABC) Rules to legally address their growing numbers. These rules place the responsibility for sterilisation and vaccination on local self-governments. Stray dogs are also protected under Sections 428 and 429 of the Indian Penal Code.

Recently, the Supreme Court expressed concern over the alarming rise in the stray dog population and directed that shelters be created to manage them. However, most municipal bodies have failed to implement sterilisation programmes effectively. The result: dog bite incidents across the country are rising sharply, posing a serious public health challenge.

Against this backdrop, public Ganesh festival committees in Maharashtra can play a decisive role by initiating sterilisation drives. Such a campaign could be transformed into

a people's movement, helping to address a major health issue confronting the nation.

In many towns and cities across Maharashtra, stray dogs roam in packs, often making evening walks — especially in suburban areas — a frightening experience. Dogs, once seen as harmless companions, are turning aggressive due to food scarcity. Urban redevelopment has destroyed their usual habitats, while garbage trucks now remove leftover food with the waste. Even as food becomes scarce, their numbers keep growing, inevitably leading to more bite cases. Citizens struggle to access vaccines at government hospitals, and municipal assurances about sterilisation programmes rarely translate into visible results.

In Kolhapur, Ganesh festival committees could take the lead. Funds collected through public contributions for the festivities could be put to constructive use. If these committees take responsibility for securing their own localities, the initiative could help curb the stray dog population not just in Kolhapur but across Maharashtra — in keeping with the state's progres-

sive tradition that has inspired the entire country.

Unfortunately, in recent years, public Ganesh celebrations have become a contest of extravagance — marked by lavish electric lighting, deafening Dolby sound systems, laser shows, and open-air stages on tractor trolleys featuring costly dance performances. Crores are spent on such spectacles, despite growing awareness of their harmful impact on public health. Dolby sound has been linked to heart attacks during processions and permanent hearing damage. Lasers can cause vision loss. Scientists have been warning against these hazards, yet they continue to be used.

If the money collected from society is only going to harm society, it is time for a rethink. Instead of associating processions with Dolby and laser — a trend that has become almost a fixed equation in recent years — public Ganesh festival committees could channel that energy and funding into a sterilisation campaign for stray dogs. Such an initiative would not only serve a pressing social need but also infuse Maharashtra's progressive movement with a renewed and meaningful vigour.

## We toppled Vasantdada govt in 1978: Pawar



**Pune:** NCP (SP) president Sharad Pawar has said he led the move to topple the

Maharashtra government headed by Vasantdada Patil in 1978, but the same

leader proposed his name for the chief minister's post a decade later.

That was the kind of "large-hearted leadership" the Congress had at the time, Pawar, who had a long stint in the opposition party, said at an event here on Saturday.

Pawar snapped ties with the Congress in 1999 and co-founded the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP). In July 2023, the NCP split after Sharad Pawar's nephew Ajit Pawar joined the then Shiv Sena-BJP coalition government.

The 84-year-old Rajya Sabha member, who served as Maharashtra's Chief Minister four times, recalled that after Emergency, the grand old party split into the Congress (Indira) and Swarn Singh Congress.

Pawar said he remained in the Swarn Singh Congress with his mentor Yashwantrao Chavan at the time, but neither side had a clear majority in the elections that subsequently took place.

"Eventually, we came together and made Vasant-

dada the chief minister. However, many of us young workers had a resentment against Congress (I), since we were aligned with Chavan saheb. So there was a gap. Dada tried to bridge it, but we opposed it," the former Union minister said.

"I was among the key opponents. As a result, we decided to bring down the government and we did. I became the chief minister," he recalled.

"Why am I saying this? Because ten years later, we were all united again," Pa-

war pointed out.

When a meeting was called to decide the next CM, many names were discussed - Ramrao Adik, Shivajirao Nilangekar, he added.

"But dada said 'no more discussion...we have to rebuild the party. Sharad will lead it,'" Pawar said.

"Imagine the same leader whose government I brought down, he put all that aside and chose unity for ideology. That was the kind of large-hearted leadership we had in the Congress," the former CM said.

### QUOTE OF THE DAY

"How could 76 lakh votes increase (in the last hour of polling) in Maharashtra? I reiterate that the Assembly elections were managed. This government came to power by stealing votes. The EC won't accept allegations."



**Jitendra Awhad,** MLA, NCP (SP)



# “We suspect tinkering of 1-crore votes”

By Quaid Najmi

**Mumbai:** As the Congress Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi embarked on a high-voltage ‘Voter Adhikar Yatra’, the Maharashtra Pradesh Congress Committee (MPCC) President Harshwardhan Sapkal made a stunning claim that in the 2024 Parliament and Assembly elections, a stupendous ‘one-crore votes’ may have been manipulated to edge out the state Opposition parties. Excerpts from an exclusive chat.

**The Congress is tomtom-ing a lot about ‘Vote-Chori.’**

It’s not a mere slogan. For the last three months, we’ve done our own investigation - collecting inputs, deep diving into the Election Commission of India (ECI)’s data. We believe that nearly 78-lakh votes were manipulated during the November 20-23, 2024 state Assembly polls.

**Seventy-eight lakh?**



**That’s a massive number.**

If you consider the voter additions and deletions or unusual local swells in the 6-month gap between the 2024 Lok Sabha and Assembly elections, we strongly suspect the figure could touch One Crore votes. We aren’t just crunching numbers. There are other factors, patterns that make

this issue extremely serious.

**What remedial steps have you taken?**

Already, 50 writ petitions are before the courts, plus we’ve filed over 100 complaints with election Returning Officers. We’ve kept the State Election Commission fully informed. But this is not

stopping here.

**The civic bodies’ elections are due soon, what’s your preparation?** Watch, Scrutiny & Vigil! Our party activists will maintain a 24x7 hawk-eye on the EVM-VVPAT strong-rooms from the moment polling ends, until counting day. No more scope for mischief. In the next three months, we shall hold Division level brainstorming

sessions to finalise candidates, local alliances, electoral and political strategies.

**You are regarded as a stickler for accountability. Is that deliberate?** Absolutely. Accountability is non-negotiable. If a person is given a responsibility by the party, then how you spend your day, what activities you’ve taken up and the outcome, must be clear both to top leaders and grassroots workers. This isn’t about PR stunts. Claims can’t remain in the air, they must be backed by solid ground work.

**Does it percolate within the MPCC?**

As directed by the party high command, the work of each PCC Member will be reviewed annually. If they fall short, harsh decisions will be taken. Simply put, ‘everyone is on a one-year probation’, including me! (laughs). I have given my Report Card, others at all levels are expected to follow suit.

## ‘Accountability with Responsibility’

A soft-spoken, no-nonsense person with a dash of humour, MPCC President Harshwardhan Sapkal, 57, is known for his blunt talk, massive public outreach and an aggressive stance against the Mahayuti government on law & order, farmers, social harmony, plus other major issues. The 25th state party head in 65 years (1960 onwards), Sapkal came out with a half-yearly performance card – billed as unprecedented - after he took over in Feb. 2025, listing his activities and achievements, terming it as ‘Accountability’ with major ‘Responsibility’.

Though he says all his campaigns were equally significant, the ‘Sadhbhavna Padyatras’ for saving the Constitution, safeguarding Democracy, Communal Harmony, Social Unity and Peace, grabbed huge attention in multiple districts this year, somewhat unnerving the Bharatiya Janata Party-Nationalist Congress Party-Shiv Sena alliance. The Congress took out nearly four dozen ‘Jai Hind Tiranga’ rallies to salute the Armed Forces, candle-light processions focusing on irregularities in the 2024 Assembly polls, attacks on intellectuals and artists, several incidents of rape that raised questions

on public safety vis-à-vis law & order, unchecked hate campaigns unleashed by ruling party leaders targeting castes and religious communities. Sapkal spearheaded agitations on stalled infrastructure projects, farmers’ distress, skyrocketing inflation, unemployment among youth, opposing the new Maharashtra Special Public Safety Bill, the compulsion of Hindi at the primary school level, attempts to polarize the society and other topics of mass concern. Practically living in a suitcase, Sapkal hit the roads vigorously and toured 22

of the state’s 36 districts, engaging with party leaders-activists plus the common public, invigorating the Congress at the mass-level ahead of the civic polls. “The Sadhbhavna Padyatra was a campaign to safeguard Democracy and a historic initiative to curb corruption, communal politics and institutional collapse in Maharashtra. The MPCC will perform as the state’s ‘Watchdog’ to defend the people, from tense districts to urban flashpoints and reassure the masses that we are with them,” a determined Sapkal told *‘The Perfect Voice’*.

## ‘Child shouldn’t be denied natural guardian’s warmth’

**Mumbai:** A 7-year-old child should not be denied the “warmth of the natural guardian,” a court here has said while granting bail to a woman arrested for kidnapping another minor girl in 2013.

The accused is the mother of a seven-year-old girl and the latter has been staying at a children’s home in Mumbai’s Andheri area since her arrest.

The case pertains to the kidnapping of a 7-year-old girl in 2013. The victim was found almost a decade later, leading to the arrest of the accused woman and her husband in 2022.

Additional Sessions Judge S M Takalikar (Dindoshi court), while granting bail to the woman last week, noted the child of the accused had not met her parents for the last three years.

No doubt she is admitted in the Bal Bhavan, which is taking care of her and extending protection, the court noted.

“The warmth of the natural guardian would not be denied to the child of 7 years,” it said. The court took into



consideration that the accused is “deprived from the company of the child” as she has been behind bars for the last three years without the trial.

According to the prosecution, a missing report was filed by the victim’s mother on January 22, 2013 at DN Nagar police station in Mumbai, after her 7-year-old daughter failed to return home from school.

She remained untraceable until on August 3, 2022, a neighbour received a video call from a woman who showed a girl resembling the missing victim.

The neighbour identified the girl as the informant’s daughter, which led the mother to the location where her daughter was found, the police said.

Narrating her ordeal, the victim, in her statement, alleged that in 2013, the two accused took her away by promising her ice cream.

They took her to Goa and kept her there for several months. Thereafter, they came to Vile Parle in Mumbai, took a house on rent, and resided there for four months, before taking her back to Goa, the victim claimed.

The girl also stated the accused admitted her to a school in Karnataka and kept her there for a year.

In 2015, they came to Mumbai and had been residing in the metropolis since then, she claimed.

During this period, they confined her in a house and compelled her to do all the household work. They even forced her to work as a babysitter and collected the money earned by her, the victim alleged.

The accused woman’s lawyer, Nitin Hajare argued the chargesheet was filed in 2022 and charges framed on January 24, 2024, but no witnesses have been examined since.

-PTI

## Rs 1 cr fines imposed on vehicles

**Mumbai:** Mumbai Police have imposed challans on more than 10,000 vehicles with fines of over Rs 1 crore for violation of traffic rules during the Dahi Handi festival in the city, officials said on Sunday.

The festival, held to mark the birth of Lord Krishna, was celebrated on Saturday wherein a large number of troupes comprising young men and women formed human pyramids to break dahi handis (pots of curd) suspended in the air with ropes.

Several participants travelled in groups on two-wheelers and other vehicles during the festivities.

Mumbai Traffic Police, who were out on roads along with the local police to ensure a smooth vehicular movement, took action against people flouting norms during the festival and imposed fines.

A total of 10,051 spot e-challans were issued with penalties of Rs 1,13,57,250 on vehicles, which included fines for driving without helmet, wrong side driving, triple-seat driving and over-speeding, an official said.

-PTI

## Barvi dam, Tulsi Lake overflow; water woes end

Dr. Abhilash Dawre

**Badlapur:** The Barvi Dam, operated by the Maharashtra Industrial Development Corporation (MIDC), began overflowing, bringing much-needed relief to Thane district. With the reservoir now at full capacity, concerns over drinking and industrial water shortages across the district have been resolved. Barvi Dam is the primary water source for almost all municipal corporations, municipal councils, village panchayats, and industrial zones in Thane district. Its water is crucial for meeting both civic and industrial demand, which is why the reservoir’s filling is closely monitored each monsoon season by residents and government agencies alike.

This year, the dam began filling earlier than expected. Unseasonal showers in May, along with the early arrival of the monsoon, reduced evaporation losses and raised hopes of an early overflow. However, rainfall slowed in July and during much of August, delaying the process.



Meteorologist Abhijeet Modak had forecast stronger rains from mid-August, and consistent showers over the past few days rapidly raised the water level. By Friday, the dam was 98 percent full, and by Saturday morning it was just a few centimeters short of its full height of 72.60 meters.

According to the MIDC’s Barvi Dam office, the reservoir reached capacity by 3:25 p.m. on Saturday, with water now being discharged at a rate of 4 cusecs per second. The MIDC had already issued precautionary alerts to villagers and local administrations along the Ulhas River. Authorities confirmed that with the river’s water level currently low, there is no risk to nearby

villages from the controlled release.

With the Barvi Dam now full and overflowing, the perennial water anxieties of Thane’s residents and industries have, at least for this year, been laid to rest.

With heavy rains lashing Mumbai and its suburbs, the Tulsi lake, one of the seven reservoirs supplying drinking water to the metropolis, has overflowed, a civic official said on Sunday.

The Tulsi lake, situated in the Sanjay Gandhi National Park in suburban Mumbai, started overflowing at around 6.45 am on Saturday, the official said.

The seven reservoirs, which supply water to Mumbai, have more than 90 per cent water stock now, the official from the

Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation said.

Tulsi is the third reservoir which has overflowed after the Tansa and Modak Sagar dams, due to heavy rains in their catchment areas.

This year, the Tulsi lake overflowed almost 26 days later compared to last year, when it became full on July 20, the official said.

Tulsi is the smallest of the seven reservoirs that supply potable water to Mumbai and has a storage capacity of 8,046 million litres. The city gets 18 million litres of water from the lake every day.

“The catchment area of the lake has been receiving rainfall in the last few days, as a result of which the lake overflowed on Saturday,” the civic official said.

## QUOTE OF THE DAY

**“The government is positive about introducing a law to ensure the safety of advocates. We are committed to modernising and upgrading court infrastructure in the state so that justice is delivered to the common man expeditiously.”**

**Devendra Fadnavis, Chief Minister**



## ‘Even today, I get nervous before any project’

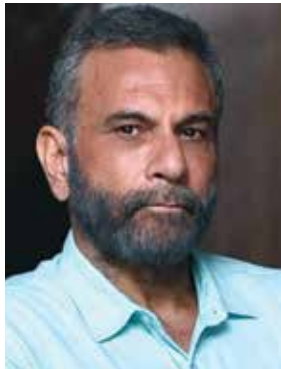
**Mumbai:** Actor Pavan Malhotra, best known for “Black Friday”, “Jab We Met” and “Bhaag Milkha Bhaag”, said he has managed to attain success through hard work and passion for cinema.

“I’m very lucky that something which started as a hobby became my profession, you can’t be luckier than this, and I’ve survived for 40 plus years. In 1982, I came to Bombay on the 15th of March, at 4 o’clock, I landed here, with the idea that I’ll stay here,” Malhotra told PTI in an

interview.

The 67-year-old actor said he had no idea while joining the theatre that he would end up in the film industry.

“When I started doing theatre, I didn’t know that one day I’ll land up in film industry in Bombay and I’ll be working in films and I’ll get main lead roles, wherein I’ll be there from the first to last scene,” he said adding that moving to a new city and profession, isn’t easy and that there’s nobody “waiting at the airport or railway station to



Pavan Malhotra

offer you work.”

Malhotra’s first-hand experience in movies was

as an assistant in the costume department of Richard Attenborough’s “Gandhi”. Thereafter, he served as a production assistant on films and TV shows like “Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro”, “Khamosh” and “Mohan Joshi Hazir Ho!” before venturing into acting.

He made his acting debut with Pankaj Parashar’s 1984 film, “Ab Ayega Mazaa”, and went on to feature in films like “Anantyaatra” and “Khamosh”, but it was Saeed Akhtar’s “Salim Langde Pe Mat Ro”, in which he played the titu-

lar role, that emerged as a career changer for him.

Reflecting on his career, Malhotra expressed gratitude for the accolades he has received, including two National Awards, for films “Fakir” (1998) and “Fouja” (2023).

“I’m thankful to God but at the same time I’m amazed, ‘This happened to me’. When I look back, I didn’t expect that I’ll get two national awards and be part of films where I’ll be in a title role, or that I’ll do an English film. Destiny plays a big role, but you

have to work so that you can get the results.”

The actor said past successes are not a crutch to rely on and instead, they are stepping stones toward new opportunities, waiting to be explored.

“I can’t live on that (past work), you’ve more stories to tell. For me every film and character is different. Even today, I get nervous before any project, your body language, your look, voice quality changes with the character, it can’t be the same with every character,” he said.



# Centre brought law to protect EC: Rahul

**Aurangabad (Bihar):** Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Sunday hit out at the Election Commission after its press conference, alleging that the Modi government brought in a law in 2023 to ensure that no one can take action against the poll body as it is "helping" the BJP and "indulging in vote chori" along with them.

Addressing a gathering here at the end of first day of his Voter Adhikar Yatra which began from Sasaram this afternoon, Gandhi also said while he was asked to submit an affidavit after his press conference exposing "vote chori", no such demand was made from BJP leaders who made similar claims in their presser.

The Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha also alleged that the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls in Bihar was a way to steal votes of the people of the state.

"Today they (EC) held a press conference. I want to ask them why did the government change the law on CCTV footage of election process.

"Do you know that no case can be initiated against the election commissioners. In no court in India can there be a case against them. This law was made in 2023. Why was this law made? It was made because Narendra Modi and Amit Shah want to ensure that no one can take any action against the EC as it is helping them and is indulging in voter chori along with them," Gandhi said.

He said it is a fight to



protect Ambedkar's Constitution and the principle of 'one person, one vote'.

Earlier, addressing a press conference in Delhi, Chief Election Commissioner Gynaesh Kumar said the electoral roll revision is aimed at removing all shortcomings in voter lists and it is a matter of grave concern that some parties are spreading misinformation about it and "firing from the EC's shoulder".

The CEC rejected as "baseless" the allegations of double voting and "vote theft" and asserted that all stakeholders are working to make SIR a success in a transparent manner.

**Kharge calls EC agent**  
In his address at the event,

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge charged the EC with acting like an "agent" of the "dangerous" Modi government at the Centre.

Kharge alleged that the Modi government poses a "threat" to the Constitution and the people's right to vote.

The veteran leader made the remarks before the flag-off of the yatra from Sasaram, a Congress stronghold in Bihar, which the party wrested back from the BJP in last year's parliamentary polls.

He alleged that with a view to ensuring that the poll panel remained pliant, the "Modi government decided to have a Union minister in the selection committee for the Election

Commission, ignoring the Supreme Court's advice that the Chief Justice of India be included".

Kharge also launched a frontal attack on PM Narendra Modi, saying, "He had the temerity to claim, from the ramparts of the Red Fort on the Independence Day, that RSS deserved credit for the country's freedom. RSS volunteers had worked for the British imperialists, whom they informed on about activities of the real freedom fighters and sought favours, like clemency, in return."

## Lalu at last

The final speech at the rally was delivered by RJD president Lalu Prasad, who had turned up despite failing health, accompanying his son Tejashwi Yadav, who is considered the front-runner for the chief minister's post if the INDIA bloc wins the upcoming assembly polls.

Prasad spoke barely for a few minutes seated in his chair, flanked by Gandhi and Kharge.

"I urge you people to stand united, drive out the BJP-RSS combine and strengthen democracy," said the RJD supremo.

In his inimitable style, Prasad also evoked a stanza from a Bhojpuri song, sending his supporters in a frenzy.

The septuagenarian ended his speech with chants of "Rahul Gandhi zindabad, Kharge ji zindabad, Tejashwi Yadav zindabad".

After 16 days, the yatra will conclude with a rally in Patna on September 1.



Narendra Modi with Union Minister Nitin Gadkari, Delhi Chief Minister Rekha Gupta and Haryana Chief Minister Nayab Saini during the inauguration of the Delhi section of the Dwarka Express.

PTI

## One-sided lover's parcel bomb plot foiled

### EXPLOSIVE SMUGGLING RACKET BUSTED

**Khairagarh (Chhattisgarh):** A 20-year-old electrician from Chhattisgarh allegedly planted an improvised explosive device (IED) in a music system speaker and sent it as a gift to the husband of a woman he was infatuated with, police said on Sunday.

The accused assembled the IED using online tutorials, designing it to detonate upon being plugged in. His Google search history showed "how to kill a person using a bomb without being caught by police", officials said.

With the arrest of the man, the police in Khairagarh-Chhuikhadan-Gandai district have not only foiled a planned murder but also unearthed an explosive smuggling racket which supplied gelatin sticks to the accused, they said.

In a similar case in April 2023, a newly married man and his elder brother were killed after a home theatre music system received as wedding gift from his

wife's former lover exploded in their house in neighbouring Kabirdham district.

In the latest case, the prime accused, Vinay Verma, and six others have been arrested, Khairagarh-Chhuikhadan-Gandai district Superintendent of Police (SP) Lakshya Sharma told PTI.

The others have been identified as Parmeshwar Verma (25), Gopal Verma (22), Ghasiram Verma (46), Dilip Dhimar (38), Gopal Khelwar and Khilesh Verma (19), as per the police.

The conspiracy came to light when a suspicious parcel, neatly gift-wrapped and bearing a fake India Post logo, was delivered three-four days back to a shop in Manpur village under Gandai police station limits.

The parcel was addressed to village resident Afsar Khan, the intended target. Finding it suspicious, Khan promptly alerted the police, the official said.

A bomb disposal team examined the package and found a 2-kg IED concealed inside a brand-new speaker, the SP said.

Technical analysis showed the IED was designed to detonate upon being plugged into a power source. The current would reach a detonator connected to the speaker's wiring, triggering the explosion, the official said.

Gelatin sticks were used as the primary explosive, and the speaker's outer casing would act as deadly shrapnel upon detonation, he said.

The investigation suggested that Vinay Verma, resident of Kusami village in Khairagarh, allegedly hatched the plot in a bid to murder Khan, the official said.

Verma, an electrician, procured the speaker and assembled the IED using online tutorials. His mobile phone's Google search history included "how to kill a person using a bomb without being caught by

police", Sharma said.

## One-sided love

The accused was in one-sided love with Khan's wife since her college days. After she married Khan a few months back, Verma allegedly plotted to eliminate him, he said.

Further probe indicated the explosives used in the device had been siphoned off from a stone quarry in Chhattisgarh's Durg district.

Durg resident Parmeshwar allegedly paid Rs 6,000 to procure gelatin rods from Gopal and Dilip, also natives of Durg. Ghasiram delivered the explosives, while Khilesh is accused of preparing the fake India Post logo used on the parcel, the official said.

Verma, with the help from Gopal, eventually delivered the explosive-laden gift to Khan's shop. Subsequent raids at the premises of Gopal and Dilip in Durg led to the seizure of 60 gelatin sticks and two detonators, he said. -PTI

## Shubhanshu Shukla returns to rousing welcome

**New Delhi:** Astronaut Shubhanshu Shukla returned to India early Sunday to a rousing welcome by a large number of people waving the tricolour and beating drums at the airport here to celebrate his historic visit to the International Space Station (ISS).

Shukla, who became the second Indian to undertake a spaceflight as part of the Axiom-4 mission, and his back-up astronaut-designate Prashanth Balakrishnan Nair were welcomed at the airport by Union Minister Jitendra Singh, Delhi Chief Minister Rekha Gupta, and ISRO Chairman V Narayanan.

"Thank you sir. Surely feels good to be back home," Shukla posted on X in response to Singh's post welcoming after receiving him at the airport.

Shukla's wife Kamna and son Kiash were also present at the airport to welcome him home after a nearly one-year stay in the US training for the space flight, which finally took place from June 25 to July 15.

A large crowd waving

the national tri-colour had gathered at the Indira Gandhi International Airport here to welcome Shukla to the sound of drumbeats.

The government has proposed a special discussion in the Lok Sabha on Monday on the subject 'India's first astronaut aboard the International Space Station -- Critical role of the space programme for Viksit Bharat by 2047 -- to mark Shukla's return to India.

Shukla is expected to meet Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday and travel to his hometown, Lucknow. He is also expected to return to the capital to participate in the National Space Day celebrations on August 22-23.

Shukla was part of the Axiom-4 private space mission that lifted off from Florida on June 25 and docked at the International Space Station on June 26. He returned to Earth on 15 July.

Shukla conducted over 60 experiments and 20 outreach sessions during the 18-day mission.



A Deodhani dancer performs during the annual 'Manasha Puja' at Kamakhya Temple in Guwahati on Sunday.

PTI

## Student found dead in BITS hostel

**Panaji:** A 20-year-old student of the BITS Pilani campus in Goa has been found dead in his hostel room, police said on Sunday.

The student, Kushagra Jain, was found lying unresponsive on his bed in a sideward sleeping position in the hostel room at Vasco in South Goa district at around 11 am on Saturday, a senior police official said.

"We have sent the body for postmortem and the exact cause of death would be known after that," he said, adding a case of unnatural death has been registered at Verna police station.

Jain, native of Uttar

Pradesh, was a third year student of economics and computer science at the Birla Institute of Technology and Science (BITS)-Pilani campus in Vasco.

Quoting students whose statements were record, the police official said the student played table tennis on the campus the previous night before returning to his room.

The room was locked from inside and when there was no response from him on Saturday morning, the authorities were informed who broke open the door to find him dead, the official said.

In a media statement issued here, BITS Pilani said they are deeply saddened by the loss of one of their students.

"Kushagra Jain (native of UP), 3rd year student of Economics and Computer Science, was found in an unresponsive state on his bed when his room was opened at around 11am, and the medical team confirmed that he had passed away in his sleep."

The police were informed and have initiated the required procedures to ascertain the cause of death, and "we are fully cooperating".

## Firing outside Elvish Yadav's home

**Gurugram:** Two masked men fired more than two dozen shots outside YouTuber Elvish Yadav's residence in Sector 57 of Gurugram early Sunday morning, police said.

The incident was captured on CCTV that showed two bike-borne masked men arriving outside the house and opening fire from a distance. After a few seconds, one of them leaned over the main gate and continued to shoot before both fled.

Yadav was not at home when the shooting happened around 5.30 am. However, some family members were inside but no one was injured in the incident, they said.

Meanwhile, 'Bhau gang' claimed responsibility for the firing.

After getting information, a police team reached the spot and collected forensic evidence, and are scanning CCTV footage from the area.

The attackers shot more than two dozen rounds at the YouTuber's home in Sector 57 and fled from the spot. The bullets struck the ground and first floors of the house, the police said.

In a post on social me-

dia, gangsters Neeraj Faridpur and Bhau Ritoliya, members of 'Bhau gang' claimed responsibility for the attack.

"...the bullets that were fired at Elvish Yadav's house today were fired by us. He has ruined many houses by promoting betting apps. Other social media influencers promoting betting may face bullets or calls," read the post shared by Ritoliya.

The police, however, have not given any confirmation about the claims in the post.

Elvish's father, Ram Avtar Yadav, said he heard a sound around 5.30 am.

"When we came outside, we saw that bullets had been fired here. After this we immediately checked the CCTV and found that there were two people involved and probably a third one too," he said. "We informed the police and the police came and started an investigation. The attackers fired more than 15 rounds. Elvish was not here and he is out for his work but we feel scared. I hope that the Gurugram police arrest the accused soon," Ram Avtar said.

## Chinese FM to meet Modi

**New Delhi:** Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi will meet Prime Minister Narendra Modi during his two-day visit to India beginning Monday, according to the Ministry of External Affairs.

The meeting, to be held on Tuesday, assumes significance as it is taking place days before Modi's planned trip to China to attend the annual summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).

Before calling on the prime minister, Wang will hold separate talks with External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar and National Security Advisor Ajit Doval that could see both sides deliberate on a range of key issues including border situation, trade and resumption of flight services.

The Chinese foreign minister's visit is largely seen as part of ongoing efforts by the two neighbours to rebuild their relationship after it came under severe strain following the deadly Galwan Valley clashes in 2020.

The two sides are expected to discuss new confidence-building measures for durable peace and tranquillity along their contested border during Wang's visit, people familiar with the matter said on Sunday.

Wang's trip is also seen as important as it comes amid increasing tensions in India-US relations following President Donald Trump doubling tariffs on Indian goods to 50 per cent that included an additional penalty of 25 per cent for purchasing Russian crude oil.

According to details released by the MEA, the Chinese foreign minister will land in New Delhi at around 4:15 pm on Monday.

CHANGE OF NAME

Lila verma is legally wedded spouse of No.13842429, Rank- Sep, Name- Daya Ram, residing at 601, Plot no 119, Bholenath residency, Collector Colony, Near Shankar Temple, Chembur, Mumbai -400074, have changed my name from Lila verma to Leela Dayaram Soni and date of birth from 19 yrs to 15/09/1957 due to erroneously endorsed. vide affidavit No.58AB 521498 dated 11-08-2025

## One man's solar dream lighting up Manipur

By Phanjoubam Chingkeingnanba

**Imphal:** As the sun dips behind the remote hills of Manipur, life in many villages once slipped into darkness. Women finished their chores early, children struggled to study under kerosene lamps, and health workers relied on noisy diesel generators to attend to emergencies.

But in recent years, the quiet glow of solar lamps has begun to change that story. At the centre of this transformation is Seth Moirangthem, a 38-year-old from Imphal East district.

His startup, SNL Energy Solutions Ltd, has brought clean, affordable electricity to thousands of households

scattered across the state's remote hilly areas and to the fishing communities living on the islands in the Loktak lake in Bishnupur district.

"Back in 2015, while travelling to Ukhrul, Tamenglong and Senapati, I realised how people struggled without access to power," Seth recalled.

"That was also when I met people associated with the Selco Foundation in Bengaluru, and the idea of solar energy solutions struck me," he told PTI.

Seth, an Arts graduate from Manipur University, said he was provided technical training by the Selco Foundation.

The challenges, he admitted, have been daunting. Solar equipment is pur-



chased in Guwahati and trucked in through Manipur's highways.

"Periodic blockades, bandhs and now the ethnic violence often disrupt supplies. Installation takes only a few hours, but getting the material there can take days," he said.

Still, by relying on local partners, Seth and his team have managed to continue lighting up homes in places few power lines reach.

For residents, the change has been dramatic. Luthui, a villager in Ukhrul, said solar energy has given women fresh opportunities. "They can run sewing machines and power looms late into the evening. Children, too, study without straining their eyes."

On the small islands in the Loktak lake, home to thousands of fisherfolk, the arrival of solar energy has been a blessing. "Candles and kerosene lamps were dangerous for our thatched huts," said fisherman P Keshojit Meitei. "Now our homes are safe, and the nights feel alive."

Beyond lighting homes, SNL Energy Solutions -- named after the biblical phrase 'Salt and Light' -- has provided street lamps in the remote hilly areas of Tamenglong and Churachandpur districts. To make the technology affordable, Seth has tied up with NGOs and microfinance institutions, offering families the option of paying in small monthly instalments. -PTI



# Cloudburst, landslide in Kathua leaves seven dead



**Jammu:** At least seven persons were killed and five others injured in two separate incidents of cloudburst and landslide in Kathua district of Jammu and Kashmir early Sunday, officials said.

The calamity struck Jodh Ghati village of Rajbagh and Janglote amid heavy overnight rains in the district.

District Development Commissioner, Kathua, Rajesh Sharma along with senior civil and police officers have rushed to the scene to supervise the rescue and relief operation.

While five persons lost their lives in Jodh Ghati which was hit by the cloudburst, snapping access to the village and causing damage to some houses, two persons lost their lives in landslide triggered by rains at Janglote area, the officials said.

They said five persons were evacuated to hospital from Jodh Ghati where a joint rescue operation by police, State Disaster Response Force

(SDRF) and local volunteers are continuing.

The officials said landslides also hit Bagard and Changda villages under the jurisdiction of Kathua police station and Dilwan-Hutli in Lakhampur police station area but there was no major report of damage.

The heavy rains have led to a sharp increase in the level in most of the water bodies with the Ujh river flowing near the danger mark, the officials said.

The district administration is closely watching the situation and has requested people to stay away from water bodies for their safety, the officials said.

Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Omar Abdullah expressed grief over the loss of lives and directed the administration to carry out relief, rescue and evacuation measures to ensure safety of people.

“Chief Minister has expressed grief over the tragic loss of lives and

damage caused by landslides in several parts of Kathua, including Jodh Khad and Juthana, which claimed four lives and left many injured.

“He conveyed heartfelt condolences to the bereaved families, prayed for the speedy recovery of the injured, and assured all necessary assistance,” the office of the chief minister said on X.

It said the chief minister has directed the administration to carry out immediate relief, rescue and evacuation measures to ensure the safety and support of affected families.

Union Minister Jitendra Singh said the civilian administration, military and paramilitary forces have swung into action to carry out rescue and relief operations in Kathua.

“Spoke to SSP Kathua Sh. Shobhit Saxena after receiving information about a cloudburst in the Janglote area,” Singh wrote on X.

-PTI

## ‘Crying no case of dowry harassment’

**New Delhi:** The Delhi High Court has held that mere fact that a woman was crying, cannot per se make out any case of dowry harassment.

Justice Neena Bansal Krishna made the observation while dismissing a petition against the discharge of a husband and his family from charges of cruelty and dowry harassment.

According to the prosecution, the woman, married in December 2010, faced harassment and dowry demands from her husband and in-laws.

Her family claimed that they spent nearly Rs 4 lakh on the wedding, alleging that later demands for a motorcycle, cash, and a gold bracelet were made by the husband and in-laws.

The woman, a mother of two daughters, died on 31 March 2014.

“Statement of the sister of the deceased under Section 161 Cr.P.C. was recorded wherein she also stated that on the occasion of Holi, she had called her sister and found her crying. However, merely because the deceased was crying, cannot per se make out any case of dowry harassment,” the high court said.

The trial court had discharged the accused noting that the death took place due to pneumonia. The HC also emphasised that the post-mortem report attributed the cause of death to pneumonia.

“In the present case, to bring in the clause of cruelty leading to the death of the woman, it may be noted that the deceased had died not because of any act of cruelty but for natural reasons... Therefore, Clause (a) to the Explanation annexed to Section 498A IPC is not attracted.”

-PTI



Muslim Rashtriya Manch (MRM) members take part in ‘Tiranga Yatra’ in Pahalgam on Sunday. Pic:PTI

## Twelve lakh women use free bus service

**Amaravati:** Over 12 lakh women used the free bus travel facility in Andhra Pradesh within the first 30 hours of the launch of ‘Stree Shakti’ scheme, an official source has said.

Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu launched ‘Stree Shakti’ (women’s power) on August 15 at Pandit Nehru Bus Station in Vijayawada. The scheme offers free travel on select bus services to all girls, women and transgender persons holding Andhra Pradesh domicile status.

“Stree Shakti free bus service launched by the Andhra Pradesh government is a grand success. In the past 30 hours, over 12 lakh women travelled free of cost in APSRTC buses,” the source told PTI on Saturday.

Incidentally, the Chief Minister is keenly reviewing the free bus service regularly while it has been estimated that the beneficiaries have saved up to Rs 5 crore on the first day of ‘Stree Shakti’ implementation.

‘Stree Shakti’ is estimated to cost Rs 1,942 crore annually and Rs 162 crore per month, with the Andhra Pradesh State Road Transport Corporation (APSRTC) set to recover the amount by submitting the issued zero-fare tickets to the state government for reimbursement.

This scheme will allow the beneficiaries to travel across the state in the five categories of Pallevulugu, Ultra Pallevulugu, City Ordinary, Metro Express and Express services of APSRTC.

Following requests from women, Naidu directed officials to extend free bus services on ghat routes as well, though this facility was not offered by APSRTC initially, owing to expected rush, the source added.

According to A Appala Raju, Executive Director (operations) of APSRTC, around 76,000 beneficiaries availed the free bus service on the first day and around five lakh by 3 pm on Saturday while the total free ridership in the first 30 hours was over 12 lakh.

The monetary value of the five lakh zero-fare tickets issued till 3 pm today, starting from 12 midnight, is about Rs 2.5 crore.

Raju said the response was good today. But noted that many beneficiaries may not have availed the free service owing to Janmashtami festival.

He anticipated a similar trend on Sunday and said Monday, being a working day, could reflect the scheme’s actual demand.

Starting Monday, August 18, the southern state is expecting a large number of women employees availing the free bus ride.

In addition to Aadhar cards, the government is expected to accept other identity documents which establish local domicile status of the beneficiaries for issuing the zero-fare tickets.

The APSRTC officials are also likely to accept photocopy of Aadhar while the government is considering allowing soft copies displayed on mobile phones, said the source.

Ration card and driving license are also accepted by bus conductors.

-PTI

## Dharmasthala Excavation BJP, Congress exchange spat

**Bengaluru:** The ruling Congress and opposition BJP traded charges on Sunday over the ongoing excavation in Dharmasthala, based on allegations of multiple murders, rapes and burials, particularly of young women and girls over the past two decades.

BJP state president B Y Vijayendra, leading a party delegation, visited Dharmasthala to pay obeisance to presiding deity Manjunatha Swamy and Annappa Swamy and sought the blessings of ‘Dharmadhikari’ Veerendra Heggade.

Vijayendra reiterated that the BJP has no objection to the Special Investigation Team (SIT) set up by the state government to probe the allegations, but demanded action against those spreading “false propaganda” about Dharmasthala.

“The BJP had never opposed SIT investigation by state government regarding the Dharmasthala matter. But now the issue is that the district in charge minister Dinesh Gund Rao has stated that due to the pressure of leftist groups, the state government was forced to constitute SIT,” the BJP state chief said.

He pointed out that Dep-

uty Chief Minister DK Shivakumar himself had acknowledged a “big conspiracy” behind the Dharmasthala episode. Vijayendra asserted that his party’s stand is “very clear.”

“We don’t want to interfere in this SIT investigation, but during the course of the SIT investigation, there is a lot of false propaganda in social media against Dharmasala Manjunatha Swamy and Annappa Swamy temple. We demand state government, our chief minister and home minister take up this propaganda very seriously and carry out a proper investigation,” he said.

He added that the allegations “cannot be a hit-and-run case.”

“Whoever may be the complainant, the veracity and persons behind this complaint and the forces working in this entire episode need to be investigated, because lakhs and lakhs of devotees have been hurt, their sentiments have been hurt because of this false propaganda,” the Shikaripura MLA said.

Vijayendra further argued that nothing concrete had emerged so far. “The

entire episode has to be thoroughly investigated, which means the person who has given the complaint, the leftist groups and the forces which are working behind this propaganda need to be investigated,” he said.

Asked about the BJP’s intention behind the visit, he said: “After the state government constituted the SIT or ever since the investigation started, crores and crores of devotees of this temple have been hurt due to propaganda. So our demand to the state government is to take this propaganda seriously, and a proper investigation has to be carried out. In this regard, we visited Dharmasthala.”

He also clarified that the BJP “was not interested in politics from day one.”

“Our stand is very clear. We have welcomed the state government’s decision to constitute the SIT. The only issue and the serious matter is that nobody can tolerate propaganda during the course of investigation,” he said.

Countering the BJP, Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar termed the visit as politically motivated.

-PTI



An animal lover holds a placard during a protest against the recent order by the Supreme Court to start picking up stray dogs from all localities and relocate them to dog shelters at Ramlila Maidan in New Delhi on Sunday. Pic:PTI

## Man killed in hit-and-run

**Jaipur:** A 64-year-old retired army officer died after allegedly being run over by a car while he was cycling in Jaipur’s Gandhi Path area, police said on Sunday.

The accused woman driver was released on bail while her vehicle was seized and driving licence cancelled as further probe is underway, they said.

The police said incident happened on August 15, retired Army Captain Narsa Ram Jajda was cycling on the Gandhi Path stretch when an SUV mowed him down before speeding away. The incident was captured on a CCTV that showed a car running over a man in white T-shirt and then fleeing from the spot. The footage helped in identification of the SUV and the driver.

Jajda, a resident of Maa Vaishnav Nagar, later succumbed to injuries at SMS Hospital. His son, who was also on a walk, later came and found his father in injured condition and took to the hospital with the help of locals.

Police said the accused woman was identified as Surbhi Maheswari.

## BTech student hangs self in hostel room

**Noida:** A second year engineering student at a private university in Greater Noida allegedly committed suicide by hanging at his hostel room, police said on Sunday.

In his suicide note, Shivam Dey held no one responsible for his death and requested the university to refund the fee to his parents. The student also mentioned that he was unable to bear the pressure of studies, they said.

A native of Purnia in Bihar’s Madhubani, Shivam was pursuing BTech in Computer Science from Sharda University in Greater Noida. He was found hanging in his hostel room on Friday night, they said.

According to the family, the 24-year-old student went back to college on August 2 after returning from family trip to Vaishno Devi.

Kartik Dey, the student’s father claimed that he was normal when he was at home and showed no signs of distress. Shivam was the lone son in his family, his father works in a private company and mother is a housewife.

The Knowledge Park police informed that a memo from a private hospital was received on August 15 that a 24 years old student was found hanging in HRM Hostel.

The body was sent for the post-mortem and a case has been registered, they said.

A spokesperson of the Sharda University said that the university has expressed condolences to student’s family and confirmed that fees would be refunded and all necessary support would be given to them.

Shivam Day enrolled in the B Tech computer Science programme in 2022. He completed his first year, but after that he struggled in his second year and failing to meet the minimum grade requirement of a 5.0 CGPA to progress to the third year, the spokesperson said.

“His mentor remained in his touch to support him and encouraged him to participate in internships, and other academics programmes,” he added, adding that Shivam was also given opportunities to improve his performance, but if could not he was offered to repeat the second year at reduced fees.

-PTI

QUOTE OF THE DAY

“When the EC chooses the right course, crores of Indians will stand behind it as its shield. When one walks the path of truth, people walk along. A single correct and bold step by it can ensure the future and well-being of endless generations.”

**Akhilesh Yadav,**  
President Samajwadi Party

## At 104, centenarian masters smartphones

By Lekshmi Gopalakrishnan

**Thiruvananthapuram:** At the age of 104, M A Abdullah Moulavi from Asamannoor in Ernakulam district is incredibly self-reliant in choosing his favourite social media reels and watching important news on YouTube.

While searching prayer songs swiftly on his son’s smartphone with his fragile fingers and pressing the video call button to talk to his grandchild abroad, Moulavi’s wrinkled face beams with pride and happiness.

He is one of about 22 lakh per-

sons in Kerala who have become digitally literate through the path-breaking “Digi Kerala” programme rolled out by the state government, which eventually paved the way for a digital revolution.

79-year-old Sarasu, a daily wage earner, was initially averse to digital learning. Later, she became a YouTube channel owner, and 80-year-old Sulochana in Moovattupuzha started to access government services on her mobile without anyone’s help.

With 99.98 per cent of learners achieving basic digital skills and passing out, Kerala is now all set to be declared as the “first digital



M A Abdullah Moulavi literate state” in the country. Launched on 22 September 2022 by the Local Self-Government Department (LSGD), Digi Kerala aimed to attain complete digital literacy in the state in line with the total literacy

campaign in 1991, authorities said.

As part of the drive, digitally illiterate people were identified and trained in tasks ranging from turning a smartphone on/off to using digital tools and accessing government services online.

LSGD Minister M B Rajesh said, as many as 21,87,677 digitally illiterate persons, identified through a survey conducted among 83,45, 879 families across the state, have been trained to use digital tools effectively.

Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan will officially declare the state as totally digitally literate

in a function to be held at the Central Stadium here on August 21, he said.

“The digital literacy programme has been implemented on the model of the historic total literacy movement in the state decades ago,” Rajesh told PTI.

He said the immediate necessity for digital literacy was felt when the government services, especially those of the LSGD Department, had completely become online.

If the benefits of the online services are to reach the common people, the digital gap in society should be bridged effectively, he said.

-PTI



# Left in the dark

Western UP's migrant workers lose light, faith with unmaintained solar panels



By Uzmi Athar

**Aligarh/Bulandshahr:** In a dusty brick kiln colony on the outskirts of Aligarh, 32-year-old migrant worker Kamal Singh stands beside a lifeless solar panel mounted on his hut. "Yeh toh roshni ka sahara tha. Par ab pehle jaise nahi chalta. (This was our source of light. But now it doesn't work like before," he said. Once a symbol of self-reliance that lit up his hut and powered a fan through scorching summers, the panel is now coated in grime, barely functioning -- a casualty of lack of maintenance, guidance and rising air pollution. As India expands its renewable energy footprint, stories like Kamal have revealed a troubling gap between solar adoption and solar maintenance. Many migrant workers across the dusty interiors of western Uttar Pradesh -- Hathras, Bulandshahr, Aligarh -- embraced solar as a lifeline to meet their energy needs but are now finding themselves disillusioned. Some even pooled mon-

ey to install small solar panels on their huts using their savings from months of labour under the sun and for a while, it even worked: two bulbs lit up their rooms, a fan offered respite from the heat, and mobile phones stayed charged. But today, the lights flicker weakly and the fan barely moves. "We don't know what went wrong. When we took it to the shop, they said dust had accumulated on it. Then we cleaned it properly with a cloth, but it's still not working like before," said Kamal's wife, Rashmi. Neeraj Jain, director at Solar Square, an Indian company focused on residential solar energy solutions, pointed out that cleaning must be done gently and correctly. "Leaning or scrubbing too hard can cause micro-cracks or damage the anti-reflective coating, which significantly reduces the panel's lifespan," he cautioned. But this knowledge hasn't reached the brick kiln workers of western Uttar Pradesh, who often

rely on second-hand information or trial-and-error methods. With little formal training and no local technicians to guide them, families clean panels with the same cloth and phenyl solution they use to mop floors or dust it the way they do dusting at home. Some lean directly on the glass surface while scrubbing, unaware they may be damaging the very panels they depend on for electricity. In these informal settlements, where electricity theft, outages, and diesel costs once made solar seem like a breakthrough, the lack of after-care and support has quickly turned innovation into frustration. "I saved Rs 3,000 on electricity last year. But now, the panel stopped working properly. No one ever told us how to take care of it," said Kishore Kumar, a migrant construction worker in Nanau village. **Similar stories** "We bought it thinking it would help during nights as we were either dependent on oil lamps or pilfering electricity, but it be-

came more headache than help," said Sangeeta, who migrated from Bihar's Gaya to work in a brick kiln in Nanau village of Uttar Pradesh's Aligarh district. Experts agree that while solar systems are marketed as low-maintenance, they are not maintenance-free. "Within 90 days, performance drops by up to 35 per cent if not cleaned," said Jain. "In rural, off-grid areas, the panels often face poor air quality, dust, bird droppings, and no guidance on upkeep. After a year or two, many just abandon them," he added. Shopkeepers in surrounding areas like Pilakhana and Bijauli also report declining use. "Earlier, families came to us to buy DC fans and LED bulbs for their solar setups," said Virendra Singh, who owns a shop in Pilakhana. "Now some of them come asking for kerosene lamps again." The problem isn't the technology but the lack of education and support. Like Jain said that solar panels do not need complicated maintenance. "But users must know not to rub too hard, not to use saltwater, and to avoid leaning on them. Even small cracks or residue can ruin them," Jain said. When PTI reached out to the shops selling solar panels, the shopkeepers said that they themselves are not sure how to ensure effective maintenance and just tell the people to wipe it properly with wet and dry cloth. -PTI

## BUSINESS SENSE



By  
Rahul Kulkarni

## The Missing Middle: The 15 to 50 Problem

A founder told me last week, "We've doubled headcount and revenue this year. Why does everything feel heavier?" Because the business outgrew a small-team way of working ... but the leadership system didn't. What changes with 20, 35, 50 people isn't just the number of seats. It's the number of decisions moving at once. If every decision still routes to one or two leaders, growth stops compounding. It starts lurching.

### What breaks first (and why)

When a company jumps from "tight crew" to "real team," three quiet failures show up: **1. Role fog:** Everyone is helpful, nobody is accountable. Work moves, outcomes wobble. People ask for "eyes" instead of taking decisions. **2. Decision vacuum:** Escalations are informal ("just ping me"). Approvals depend on presence, not rules. Leaders become the emotional backstop: trusted, but never free. **3. Rhythm drift:** Reviews happen when someone remembers. Handoffs depend on who's online. Dashboards show activity, not ownership. Teams look busy; nothing lands cleanly. None of this is incompetence. It's design debt.

### The leadership system you actually need

Scale doesn't come from more people. It comes from installing the middle ... not as titles, but as a system. Four pieces matter: **1) Role Charters (not job descriptions):** Write one page per manager-level role: scope, decisions they own,

**Headcount isn't a leadership system. If decisions still orbit you, growth will lurch ... no matter how many people you add.**

what "good" looks like, and where they escalate. If the team can't point to this without asking Slack, you don't have it. **2) Decision Ladders:** Define what gets decided where. Green = decide and inform. Amber = decide with consult. Red = escalate with context. When this lives in heads, leaders get dragged into amber decisions all week. **3) Escalation Windows:** Fixed slots where stuck work is surfaced and resolved ... inside the system, not around it. No more 11:17 PM pings. Predictability is what converts "I'll just check" into "the process will catch it." **4) Published Rhythm:** Weekly ops checks with a standing agenda. Ownership tagged on the board. "Work-in-progress" lanes visible to all. Visibility replaces supervision; leaders stop hovering because the system shows enough.

### A composite scene (you've seen this movie)

A services firm grew from 18 to 46 people in eight months. New managers were hired. Tools were set up. Yet everything still slowed unless the founder "looked once." We didn't add more meetings. We installed the middle: 

- Converted job descriptions into Role Charters with owned outcomes.
- Introduced a Decision Ladder for sales and delivery.
- Created two Escalation Windows a week.
- Shifted standups to a Published Rhythm with explicit handoffs.

Week 1 felt slower ... on purpose. By Week 4: fewer ad-hoc pings, shorter review loops, and most importantly, decisions moved without the founder's "final glance." The team didn't need more people. They needed a leadership system they could see.

### Control isn't clarity

Founders often confuse presence with performance. Your presence is valuable when the system is

young. As you scale, constant presence becomes distortion. People wait. They hedge. They hold back the last 10% because you might want to change it. Leadership at 50+ isn't about being in more rooms. It's about designing exits from rooms so the right decisions happen without you, and the right ones still find you on time.

### How to start this week

**One hour. Four moves.**

- Name the middle. List managers who should be catchers ... owning closure, not just tasks.
- Write one Role Charter. Pick your highest-friction lane. Clarify scope, decisions, and "done."
- Draw a Decision Ladder. What is green/amber/red for that lane? Publish it.
- Schedule two Escalation Windows. Lock both into the calendar. Announce that late-night DMs are now the exception. Run this for 14 days. Expect wobble. That wobble is your system learning to hold.

### The takeaways

- People add capacity. Systems add speed. Without the middle, headcount just multiplies coordination.
- Visibility beats supervision. When ownership is public, leaders can be strategically unavailable.
- Calm is scheduled. Rhythm isn't bureaucracy; it's how scale stops stuttering. If this sounds like your Monday mornings, send it to the person who keeps the wheels turning when you're in meetings. They're your first catcher. Build around them.

*(The writer is Co-founder at PPS Consulting, helping growth-stage founders install the leadership systems and operating rhythms their next stage demands. Views personal. Write to rahul@ppsconsulting.biz)*

## Bill to decriminalise certain minor offences

**New Delhi:** The Jan Vishwas (Amendment) Bill 2025 to decriminalise certain minor offences to promote ease of living and business will be introduced by Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal in the Lok Sabha on Monday. According to the list of business of the lower House posted on the Lok Sabha website, the minister will introduce the Jan Vishwas (Amendment of Provisions) Bill, 2025, "to amend certain enactments for decriminalising and rationalising offences to further enhance trust-based governance for ease of living and doing business". Over 350 provisions are proposed to be amended through this bill. According to an official, the move will help create a more conducive business and a citizen-centric environment in the country. The legislation is part of the government's effort to improve the business climate of the country. Earlier in 2023, the Jan Vishwas (Amendment to Provisions) Act was enacted, which decriminalised 183 provisions in 42 central Acts administered by 19 ministries and departments.

Through the Act, the government removed imprisonment and/or fines in some provisions. Imprisonment was removed and fine was retained in a few rules, while in some cases imprisonment and fine were converted to a penalty. In his Independence Day speech on August 15, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said: "There are laws in our country, astonishing as it may sound, that provide for imprisonment over trivial matters, and no one ever paid attention to them". "I have taken it upon myself to ensure that such unnecessary laws, which place Indian citizens behind bars, are abolished. We had introduced a bill in Parliament earlier; we have brought it again this time," he noted. The government has earlier abolished more than 40,000 unnecessary compliances. It has also scrapped over 1,500 obsolete laws. "We have gone to Parliament to amend dozens of laws to simplify them, always placing the interests of the public first," Modi said. -PTI



INS Tamal, the latest stealth frigate of the Indian Navy, called at Naples, Italy, from 13-16 August during her return passage to India.

### Laptops In India

## Samsung begins manufacturing

By Prasoon Srivastava

**New Delhi:** Korean electronics major Samsung has started production of laptops in India at its Greater Noida factory, sources aware of the development said. Samsung has been making feature phones, smartphones, wearables, and tablets at its Greater Noida factory. "Samsung has expanded its manufacturing portfolio. It has started manufacturing laptops in India at its Greater Noida factory.

It has plans to start manufacturing more devices in the country," a source told PTI. Union electronics and IT minister Ashwini Vaishnaw, after a meeting with Samsung Southwest Asia President and CEO JB Park, and Samsung Southwest Asia Corporate Vice President SP Chun, had said on Saturday that "Samsung continues to expand manufacturing of its advanced technology devices in Bharat, driven by talent and innovation." Samsung plant was one

of the first global electronics manufacturing facilities set up in India in 1996. Earlier this year, Samsung Electronics President and Head of Mobile eXperience (MX) Business TM Roh had shared that the company has started preparation for manufacturing laptops in India. Meanwhile, Taiwanese electronics giant Foxconn's Bengaluru factory, its second-largest manufacturing unit, has commenced operation with production of iPhone 17 recently at a small scale.

## Used cooking oil to produce aviation fuel

**New Delhi:** Cooking oil is often discarded after being used for frying at home or in restaurants. However, a refinery of Indian Oil has now won a certification to use the same oil to produce sustainable aviation fuel (SAF), the company chairman Arvinder Singh Sahney said. SAF is an alternative fuel made from non-petroleum feedstocks that reduces emissions from air transportation. It can be blended up to 50 per cent in conventional aviation turbine fuel (ATF or jet fuel), depending on availability. India has mandated 1 per cent SAF blending in jet fuel sold to international airlines from 2027. Indian Oil's Panipat refinery in Haryana has won the International Civil Aviation Organization's (ICAO) ISCC CORSIA certification (International Sustainability and Carbon Certification - ISCC - developed under the Carbon Offsetting and Reduction Scheme for International Aviation (CORSIA) to produce SAF from used cooking oil, he said. "We are the only company in the country to get

this certification," he said. "The refinery will start producing some 35,000 tonnes per annum of SAF from the end of the calendar year." The production will be enough to meet the mandated 1 per cent blending requirement for the country in 2027, he added. Explaining the process, agencies will collect used cooking oil from large users, such as hotel chains, restaurants, and snacks and sweets producing companies like Haldiram, and supply it to Panipat refinery. Large hotels and restaurant chains normally discard cooking oil after one use. At present, this used cooking oil is collected by agencies and exported. "There is a large amount of such oil available in the country. The only challenge is collection. While it is easy to collect from large hotel chains, a solution needs to be found for collection from small users, including households," he said. Parallely, the company has also set up a Rs 5,000 crore plant at its Koyali refinery in Gujarat to pro-

duce Butyl Acrylate (BA), which is used in making paints. The 1,50,000 tonnes per annum Butyl Acrylate plant, only second in India after BPCL's unit at Kochi refinery, will help end 3,20,000 tonnes of annual paint feedstock that the country currently imports, Sahney noted. **Substitute for import** Together with the Kochi plant, the new unit can substitute as much as 80-90 per cent of imports, he said. On green hydrogen, Sahney said the company awarded a tender for the country's largest green hydrogen plant to L&T. "The 10,000 tonnes a year green hydrogen unit at the Panipat refinery will be ready in 27 months," he said. Green hydrogen, produced from splitting water using renewable energy, is a clean energy source that only emits water vapour and leaves no residue in the air, unlike coal and oil. It can be used in industries and automobiles as fuel, but the prohibitive production cost has been a stumbling block. -PTI

## Tech for driverless vehicles, tests underway

**Hyderabad:** Aiming to develop India-specific smart mobility solutions, a team from IIT Hyderabad has come up with a technology for driverless vehicles to navigate through the institute's campus. The AI based concept has been created by the Technology Innovation Hub on Autonomous Navigation, or TiHAN in IIT Hyderabad. "We are exploring autonomous navigation technology, specific to Indian scenario in both aerial and ground vehicles. In ground

vehicles, we are looking at how the vehicle can be driven in the Indian scenario and how to drive keeping in view the limitations and challenges (related to) infrastructure," Santhosh Reddy, Hub Executive Officer, told PTI on Sunday. An autonomous (driverless) vehicle, developed by the team, has been running in the institute's campus since the last one and a half years on a normal road where the students and others travel and there have been no accidents till



date, he said. He said more than 10,000 passengers have already travelled in the vehicle and that the feedback from them has been good. The vehicle is not used on public roads at present.

The technology is viewed as suitable for deployment in locations such as airports, warehouses and large educational or industrial campuses. The 'autonomous navigation stack' can operate in any climatic conditions

and any vehicle, from electric to even IC (Internal Combustion) engine vehicle. It can be converted into autonomous vehicle, Reddy told PTI Videos. At present, a driver travels in the vehicle as a precautionary measure but he would not interfere with the vehicle's movement. He monitors the vehicle and reports any issues in its functioning to the team, Reddy said. The team, when it started working on the project, just wanted to go step by step without aiming for op-

erating the vehicle either in a controlled environment (like in the campus of an educational institute) or for commercial use. The first challenge was to set up the vehicle which can drive by itself. Later on, the team kept on adding features and safety enhancements, aiming to improve the vehicle's efficiency, he said. The technology developed by them can be fine-tuned according to the vehicle size and other parameters. -PTI

### QUOTE OF THE DAY

**"Overall, there is a consumer shift happening towards newer brands, regional brands... as large FMCG (companies) are not growing as strongly. We believe that the next three quarters will be better than what the first quarter has been."**



**Varun Alagh,**  
Chairman, Honasa Consumer



# Putin diplomacy puts Trump in difficulty

**New York:** President Donald Trump walked into a summit with Russia's Vladimir Putin pressing for a ceasefire deal and threatening "severe consequences" and tough new sanctions if the Kremlin leader failed to agree to halt the fighting in Ukraine.

Instead, Trump was the one who stood down, dropping his demand for a ceasefire in favour of pursuing a full peace accord — a position that aligns with Putin's.

After calls with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and European leaders, Trump wrote as he flew home from Friday's meeting in Alaska that it had been "determined by all that the best way to end the horrific war between Russia and Ukraine is to go directly to a Peace Agreement, which would end the war, and not a mere Ceasefire Agreement, which often times do not hold up."

It was a dramatic reversal that laid bare the challenges of dealing with Putin, a cunning adversary, as well as the complexities of a conflict that Trump had repeatedly boasted during his campaign that he could solve within 24 hours.

Few details have emerged about what the two leaders discussed or what constituted the progress they both touted. The White House did not respond to messages seeking comment Saturday.

While European leaders were relieved that Trump



did not agree to a deal that ceded territory or otherwise favoured Moscow, the summit allowed Putin to reclaim his place on the world stage and may have bought Russia more time to push forward with its offensive in Ukraine.

"We're back to where we were before without him having gone to Alaska," said Fiona Hill, who served as Trump's senior adviser on Russia at the National Security Council during his first term, including when he last met Putin in Helsinki in 2018.

In an interview, Hill argued that Trump had emerged from the meeting in a weaker position on the world stage because of his reversal. Other leaders, she said, might now look at the US president and think he's "not the big guy that he thinks he is and certainly not the dealmaking genius."

"All the way along, Trump was convinced he has incredible forces of persuasion," she said, but he came out of the meeting without a ceasefire — the "one thing" he had been pushing for, even after he

gave the Russian leader the "red carpet treatment."

Trump has "run up against a rock in the form of Putin, who doesn't want anything from him apart from Ukraine," she said.

## Consequences for Putin

At home, Democrats expressed alarm at what at times seemed like a day of deference, with Trump clapping for Putin as he walked down a red carpet during an elaborate ceremony welcoming him to US soil for the first time in a decade. The two rode together in the presidential limousine and exchanged compliments.

Trump seemed to revel in particular in Putin echoing his oft-repeated assertion that Russia never would have invaded Ukraine if Trump had been in office instead of Democrat Joe Biden at the time.

Before news cameras, Trump did not use the opportunity to castigate Putin for launching the largest ground invasion in Europe since World War II or human rights abuses

he's been accused of committing. Instead, Putin was the one who spoke first, and invited Trump to join him in Moscow next.

"President Trump appears to have been played yet again by Vladimir Putin," said Democratic Sen. Jeanne Shaheen of New Hampshire, ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. "The President rolled out a red carpet and warmly greeted a murderous dictator on American soil and reports indicate he got nothing concrete in return."

"Enough is enough," she went on. "If President Trump won't act, Congress must do so decisively by passing crushing sanctions when we return in the coming weeks."

Sen. Jack Reed, a Rhode Island Democrat who is the ranking member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, said he supports diplomacy but "peacemaking must be done responsibly."

"Instead of caving to Putin, the US should join our allies in levying tough, targeted new sanctions on Russia to intensify the economic pressure," he said.

## Little response

In Washington, the summit was met by little response from Trump's allies. Republican lawmakers who spoke out were largely reserved and generally called for continued talks and constructive actions from the Trump administration.

Sen. Lisa Murkowski, an Alaska Republican, wrote

on social media after the summit that "while the press conference offered few details about their meeting" she was "cautiously optimistic about the signals that some level of progress was made."

Murkowski said it "was also encouraging to hear both presidents reference future meetings" but that Ukraine "must be part of any negotiated settlement and must freely agree to its terms."

Sen. Lindsey Graham, a South Carolina Republican and close Trump ally, offered that he was "very proud" of Trump for having had the face-to-face meeting and was "cautiously optimistic" that the war might end "well before Christmas" if a trilateral meeting between Trump, Zelenskyy and Putin transpires.

"I have all the confidence in the world that Donald Trump will make it clear to Putin this war will never start again. If it does, you're going to pay a heavy price," he said on Fox News.

## Putin wins

But in Europe, the summit was seen as a major diplomatic coup for Putin, who has been eager to emerge from geopolitical isolation.

Former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, deputy head of Russia's Security Council, praised the summit as a breakthrough in restoring high-level dialogue between Moscow and Washington.

-AP



# Protesters go on strike in Israel

## Israeli airstrike hits power plant in Yemen

Israeli airstrikes hit Yemen's capital on Sunday, escalating strikes on Iran-backed Houthi, who, since the war began, have fired missiles at Israel and targeted ships in the Red Sea. Both the IDF and a Houthi-run television station in Yemen announced the strikes. Al-Masirah Television said they targeted a power plant in the southern district of Sanhan, sparking a fire and knocking it out of service, the Yemeni station said. Israel's military said Sunday's strikes targeted energy infrastructure it claimed was being used by the Houthis, and were launched in response to missiles and drones aimed at Israel.

While some projectiles have breached its missile defences — notably during its 12-day war with Iran in June — Israel has intercepted the vast majority of missiles launched from Yemen.

smoke. Some restaurants and theatres shuttered in solidarity.

Police said they had arrested 32 as part of the nationwide demonstration — one of the fiercest since the uproar over six hostages found dead in Gaza last September.

"Military pressure doesn't bring hostages back - it only kills them," former hostage Arbel Yehoud said at a demonstration in Tel Aviv's hostage square. "The only way to bring them back is through a deal, all at once, without games."

Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich on Sunday called the stoppage "a bad and harmful campaign that plays into Hamas' hands, buries the hostages in the tunnels and attempts to get Israel to surrender to its enemies and jeopardise its security and future."

National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, in a statement, accused protesters of trying to "weaken Israel." Like Smotrich, he said the strike "strengthens Hamas and delays the return of the hostages" -AP

# Bolivia heads to polls

**La Paz (Bolivia):** Bolivians headed to the polls on Sunday to vote in presidential and congressional elections that could spell the end of the Andean nation's long-dominant leftist party and see a right-wing government elected for the first time in over two decades.

The election on Sunday is one of the most consequential for Bolivia in recent times — and one of the most unpredictable.

Even at this late stage, a remarkable 30 per cent or so of voters remain undecided. Polls show the two leading right-wing candidates, multimillionaire business owner Samuel Doria Medina and former President Jorge Fernando "Tuto" Quiroga, locked in a virtual dead heat.

Undecided voters But a right-wing victory isn't assured. Many long-time voters for the governing Movement Toward Socialism, or MAS, party, now shattered by infighting, live in rural areas and tend to be undercounted in polling.

With the nation's worst economic crisis in four decades leaving Bolivians waiting for hours in fuel lines, struggling to find subsidized bread and squeezed by double-digit inflation, the opposition candidates are billing the race as a chance to alter the coun-

try's destiny. "I have rarely, if ever, seen a situational tinderbox with as many sparks ready to ignite," Daniel Lansberg-Rodriguez, founding partner of Aurora Macro Strategies, a New York-based advisory firm, writes in a memo.

Breaking the MAS party's monopoly on political power, he adds, pushes "the country into uncharted political waters amid rising polarisation, severe economic fragility and a widening rural-urban divide."

## Rightward trend

The outcome will determine whether Bolivia — a nation of about 12 million people with the largest lithium reserves on Earth and crucial deposits of rare earth minerals — follows a growing trend in Latin America, where right-wing leaders like Argentina's libertarian Javier Milei, Ecuador's strongman Daniel Noboa and El Salvador's conservative populist Nayib Bukele have surged in popularity.

A right-wing government in Bolivia could trigger a major geopolitical realignment for a country now allied with Venezuela's socialist-inspired government and world powers such as China, Russia and Iran.

-AP



Members of the Indian community during 'Bharat Parade' organised to celebrate India's 79th Independence Day at Brandenburg Gaten in Berlin.

Pic: AP/PTI

# 5.8 Magnitude Earthquake rocks Indonesia

**Palu:** A magnitude 5.8 undersea earthquake shook the eastern side of Indonesia on Sunday morning, injuring 29 people, including two in critical condition.

The quake struck 15 kilometres north of Poso district in Central Sulawesi province, according to the US Geological Survey, and was followed by at least 15 aftershocks.

No tsunami warning was issued by Indonesian authorities.

Indonesia's National Disaster Mitigation Agency

said most of the injured had been taken to the regional government hospital. Most of them were the congregation attending Sunday morning service at a church, said National Disaster Mitigation Agency spokesperson Abdul Muhari on Sunday.

"Amateur videos showing structural damage to the church have been circulating. Poso Disaster Mitigation Agency continues to conduct rapid assessments in the field to determine the initial impact of the earthquake,"

Muhari said.

Indonesia, a vast archipelago of more than 270 million people, is frequently struck by earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and tsunamis because of its location on the "Ring of Fire," an arc of volcanoes and fault lines in the Pacific Basin.

In 2022, a magnitude 5.6 earthquake at least 602 people in West Java's Cianjur city, the deadliest one in Indonesia since a 2018 quake and tsunami in Sulawesi killed more than 4,300 people. -AP

# Pakistan Gun Attack Seven friends killed

**Peshawar:** At least seven people were killed and another injured when unidentified gunmen ambushed a group of friends returning from a picnic in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, police said on Sunday.

The victims were attacked late Saturday in Regi Shino Khel, a suburban area of Kohat district, about 65 kilometres southwest of Peshawar.

They were on their way back from Tanda Dam to their native village Khara Ghari Muhammad Zai, when the assailants opened fire, police said.

Rescue 1122 officials assisted by police contingents shifted the bodies and the injured to District Headquarters Hospital Kohat.

The wounded man was later referred to a hospital in Peshawar for specialised treatment.

Police confirmed that the deceased and the injured were all friends.

The assailants fled the scene, while a search operation has been launched to trace them, officials said.

Authorities have registered a case and started investigations to determine the motive behind the killings.

# India to strengthen ties with Nepal

By Shirish B Pradhan

**Kathmandu:** India's Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri on Sunday called on Nepal President Ramchandra Paudel and Prime Minister K P Sharma Oli to discuss ways to further strengthen bilateral ties across multiple sectors. Misri, who arrived here earlier in the day for a two-day visit to the Himalayan nation, also met Nepal's Foreign Minister Arzu Rana Deuba.

During his meeting with Oli at the Prime Minister's Office at Singhdurbar, Misri "reaffirmed the deep civilizational ties and strong India-Nepal partnership, and discussed ways to further strengthen cooperation across various sectors," the Indian embassy here said in a post on X.

Indian Ambassador to Nepal Naveen Srivastava was also present at the meeting.

The foreign secretary separately called on President Paudel and conveyed "greetings of the Indian leadership, apart from briefing Hon'ble President on the progress in bilateral ties," the embassy said in a

separate post.

"Nepal, being a close neighbour, has benefited from the progress made by India in socio-economic and technological fronts and wants to get more benefit," President Paudel said during the meeting.

Paudel also appreciated Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 'Neighbourhood First' policy, saying that Nepal also accords high importance to its relations with India, according to the president's office.

Misri, who is visiting Nepal at the invitation of Nepalese Foreign Secretary Amrit Bahadur Rai, is here mainly to hand over a letter of invitation from PM Modi to PM Oli for his proposed visit to India tentatively on September 16 and 17, according to Foreign Ministry sources.

During Misri's meeting with Foreign Affairs Minister Arzu Rana Deuba at her office, "the discussion mainly focused on mutual interest, bilateral cooperation and matters of common concern while covering different dimensions of Nepal-India relations," Ek Raj Pathak, advisor to Deuba said.

-PTI

## QUOTE OF THE DAY

"The path to peace in Ukraine cannot be decided without President Zelenskyy. I welcome the openness of the US, alongside Europe, to provide robust security guarantees to Ukraine as part of any deal."



Keir Starmer, Prime Minister, Great Britain

# Trump wants to end UN peacekeeping in Lebanon

**Washington:** The future of UN peacekeepers in Lebanon has split the United States and its European allies, raising implications for security in the Middle East and becoming the latest snag to vex relations between the US and key partners like France, Britain and Italy.

At issue is the peacekeeping operation known as UNIFIL, whose mandate expires at the end of August and will need to be renewed by the UN Security Council to continue.

It was created to oversee

the withdrawal of Israeli troops from southern Lebanon after Israel's 1978 invasion, and its mission was expanded following the monthlong 2006 war between Israel and the militant group Hezbollah.

The multinational force has played a significant role in monitoring the security situation in southern Lebanon for decades, including during the Israel-Hezbollah war last year, but has drawn criticism from both sides and numerous US lawmakers, some of whom now hold



prominent roles in President Donald Trump's administration or wield new influence with the White House.

Trump administration

political appointees came into office this year with the aim of shutting down UNIFIL as soon as possible.

They regard the opera-

tion as an ineffectual waste of money that is merely delaying the goal of eliminating Hezbollah's influence and restoring full security control to the Lebanese Armed Forces that the government says it is not yet capable of doing.

After securing major cuts in US funding to the peacekeeping force, Secretary of State Marco Rubio signed off early last week on a plan that would wind down and end UNIFIL in the next six months, according to Trump adminis-

tration officials and congressional aides familiar with the discussions.

## Europeans push back

Israel has for years sought an end to UNIFIL's mandate, and renewal votes have often come after weeks of political wrangling. Now, the stakes are particularly high after last year's war and more vigorous opposition in Washington.

European nations, notably France and Italy, have objected to winding down UNIFIL. -AP



EDITORIAL

Monsoon Mayhem

The monsoon, once seen as a seasonal blessing, is fast turning into an annual reckoning. In Jammu’s Kathua district, a sudden cloudburst tore through hillsides, killing four people and sweeping away a railway track, a stretch of the national highway and even the local police station. In Jodh village, six people remain trapped under mud after a landslide obliterated roads and homes. Cloudbursts, flash floods and shooting stones are likely to be a fixture across the Himalayan foothills in the coming days.

Across the border in Himachal Pradesh, the skies have been just as merciless with flash floods in Mandi district washing away stretches of the vital Chandigarh–Manali highway. Hundreds of roads and power lines lie broken. The state disaster authority counts 257 dead since June, more than half from landslides and floods. Himachal’s famed mountains, once a refuge for tourists fleeing the plains’ summer heat, now look increasingly like death traps.

Such tragedies are presented as acts of God, unpredictable and unpreventable. Yet the pattern is too stark to dismiss as misfortune. Climate change is intensifying the monsoon, making cloudbursts heavier and landslides deadlier. Warmer air holds more water, which it unloads with catastrophic force in narrow valleys and along fragile slopes. The Himalayas, young and geologically unstable, bear the brunt of this violence. What once were considered ‘once-in-a-century’ downpours now strike with numbing regularity.

If climate is one culprit, poor planning is the other. India’s hill states have been disfigured by reckless construction. Roads are gouged into unstable ridges to accommodate cars and buses packed with tourists. Hotels mushroom on riverbanks in defiance of safety warnings. Hydropower dams alter river flows and destabilise mountainsides. The very development meant to bring prosperity is undermining the ecological foundations of these states.

Governments, aware of the dangers, issue advisories urging people to stay away from rivers or unstable slopes. Yet such warnings are of little use when communities depend on those very riverside roads, or when officials themselves sanction unsafe construction to court votes and revenue. Rescue operations are mounted after each calamity, but emergency teams find themselves cut off by the very landslides they are sent to manage.

The irony is bitter. The mountains that supply India’s rivers, sustain its farms and beckon its holidaymakers are being steadily eroded by the twin pressures of a warming climate and human folly. The season that once replenished fields and filled reservoirs is now synonymous with funerals and collapsed homes. The economic losses run into billions each year, dwarfing the costs of prevention.

India cannot halt the monsoon. But it can decide whether to keep meeting it with bulldozers and body bags, or with foresight. That means regulating construction in fragile zones, investing in slope stabilisation, and designing infrastructure to withstand the torrents that are no longer unusual but expected. It means recognising that ecological fragility is not a constraint on development but its precondition.

Unless that lesson is learnt, the Himalayas will continue to tumble.

GLOBAL AFFAIRS

Colombia at Crossroads: The Politics and Economics of a Regional Power



By Sumant Vidwans

Colombia, South America’s second most populous and fourth largest country, borders Venezuela, Brazil, Peru, Ecuador, and Panama, with coasts on both the Pacific and Caribbean, and is home to about 52 million people. Famed for coffee, emeralds, oil, and coal, Colombia is among the world’s most biodiverse nations, spanning the Amazon rainforest and Andean landscapes. As South America’s third-largest economy, it shapes regional politics, Amazon Basin governance, and security cooperation.

This country is at a decisive moment right now as President Gustavo Petro’s administration is entering its final year. Poverty figures are showing mixed progress, a long-standing border dispute with Peru has flared up, the energy sector is facing significant setbacks, and a former president has been placed under house arrest on corruption charges. Together, these developments underline the country’s current political and economic crossroads.

Political Landscape in Transition

President Gustavo Petro, Colombia’s

President Petro’s final year could determine whether Colombia consolidates its gains, tackles persistent challenges, and reinforces its role as a regional power.

first leftist leader, came to power with ambitious goals: advancing a “paz total” (total peace) process to end armed conflicts, implementing social reforms to reduce inequality, and steering the country toward greener economic policies. His government has reduced poverty and resumed talks with guerrilla groups, but faces stalled reforms, political fragmentation, and ongoing rural security challenges.

Petro’s approval has fallen from over 50% to around 30%, reflecting public dissatisfaction. His tense relationship with Vice President Francia Marquez, a fellow environmental activist and presidential contender, stems from unresolved differences on environmental policies. Colombia’s one-term limit bars Petro from running again.

In a separate development, former President Alvaro Uribe was sentenced to 12 years’ house arrest for corruption. Once one of Colombia’s most influential figures, his case underscores broader issues of political accountability, though it is unrelated to Petro’s government.

Border Dispute with Peru

A revived dispute with Peru over Santa Rosa Island in the Amazon near Leticia poses a key foreign policy challenge for Colombia. Peru’s recent unilateral designation of the island as a new district sparked protests, seen by Colombia as a sovereignty breach and a threat to Amazon access. Beyond territory, the island is vital for river transport, trade, and ecological preservation. The Petro government seeks a diplomatic resolution, possibly via the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organisation, highlighting how dormant border disputes can strain Latin American relations.

Energy Sector Setbacks and Policy Shifts

Colombia’s offshore oil and gas sector, once a major revenue hope, faces uncertainty. Despite heavy multinational investment over the past decade, re-



cent drilling has disappointed, and Petro’s regulatory tightening, including a halt on new contracts, has dampened investor interest.

The impact is already visible: Petrobras’ promising Sirius project has been delayed until at least 2030, and several international firms are scaling back their operations. Supporters of Petro’s policies argue that transitioning away from fossil fuels is essential for environmental and climate goals, while critics warn that reduced hydrocarbon revenues could limit funding for social programmes and infrastructure.

Social Policy Outcomes and Poverty Trends

However, Colombia has also recorded some progress when it comes to economic and social policy. Official figures show that the national poverty rate fell from 34.6% in 2023 to 31.8% in 2024, which is the lowest since 2012. Extreme poverty has also seen a modest decline. However, the gains have not been uniform: income has declined for the poorest 20% of the population, and rural

poverty remains stubbornly high. Critics also question the accuracy of official statistics.

The causes of falling poverty are debated, with some attributing it to higher remittances and rising sectoral wages rather than government action. Still, the figures will shape political narratives ahead of the 2026 elections, influencing perceptions of Petro’s legacy and his party’s prospects.

Regional and Global Significance

Colombia’s importance extends beyond its borders. It has been a close ally of the United States in security cooperation and anti-narcotics efforts, while also playing a key role in regional environmental governance through the Amazon Cooperation Treaty. In recent years, China has sought to expand its economic footprint in Colombia, mirroring broader trends in Latin America and adding a layer of strategic competition to the country’s foreign relations.

Domestically driven decisions on energy, social policy, and governance will inevitably affect Colombia’s ability to project influence regionally. In trade, climate negotiations, and security dialogues, its position as a relatively stable democracy in a turbulent region gives it both opportunities and responsibilities.

President Petro’s final year in office will be critical in determining whether the country can consolidate its gains and address persistent challenges. While Colombia may not dominate global headlines, its choices in the coming months could influence regional stability and certain global commodity markets. For a nation often overlooked in international discussions, this turning point offers a moment to shape its trajectory and reaffirm its role as a regional power.

(The writer is a foreign affairs expert. Views personal.)

CONTINENTAL DRIFT

The Open Society and the Gods That Return

It is nearly ten years since former German Chancellor Angela Merkel opened Europe’s borders in September 2015 in a gesture of boundless openness that now marks the unravelling of liberal society. This two-part series examines Islam, multiculturalism and migration in Europe and the forces reshaping the continent’s future.



By Christoph Ernst

I recently chatted with a Dutch acquaintance about cultural differences. He outlined his Calvinist ‘guidelines’ to me, and I told him about my secular Lutheran ones. We wondered why our societies are so polarised and seem to be losing their ability to compromise and show forbearance. For this to happen between people at all, it requires the assumption that the other person ticks similarly to oneself. It presupposes a common ‘we.’ This is the trust bonus that is necessary to open us up, lower our fear threshold and create the basis for a reasonably relaxed coexistence.

But this only happens if we assume that we will encounter a positive response in case of doubt. This is easier for us in culturally homogeneous contexts than in ethnically diverse ones. We are tribal animals that instinctively tend to associate ourselves with a group that appears similar. But as long as the respective ‘guidelines’ are reasonably compatible, external differences like skin colour or gender hardly play a role. It becomes much more difficult in a multicultural context where coexistence has to be renegotiated every day and no one feels at home anymore.

What Aydan Özoğuz - the Social Democratic Party (SPD) leader who served as Commissioner for Immigration, Refugees and Integration in the third government of Chancellor Angela Merkel - once heralded as a model for the future is rarely peaceful, but rather characterised by mistrust and latent hostility. Anyone who has ever lived in such a society knows this.

Trust is the magic word for civility, the essential ingredient that makes fear-free coexistence possible in the first place. This is precisely what the German and European ruling elites have been systematically ignoring for years, even though they would do well to take it to heart. In democracies, legitimacy is not based on denunciation, censorship and exclusion but on trust.

Civility is fragile. Incidentally, one can also call it ‘culture’ because it is a learned skill. Not everyone has access to it or knows how to appreciate it. In this respect, it makes a difference how and where someone grew up and what values they internalised in the process. Unlike in Syria or Afghanistan, Europe has achieved the miracle of uniting clans, tribes and principalities into larger entities that have developed a sense of belonging based on common customs, language and destinies over the last few centuries.

This has created a unique socio-cultural milieu that has given rise to, among other things, what is known as ‘civil society.’ However, this milieu has long been under existential threat because the people who are supposed to manage it and protect it from invasive dangers are deliberately creating these dangers by upholding multiculturalism and promoting mass migration from Islamic cultures. This is overwhelming for many native Europeans. While the elites are systematically dismantling their traditional commonalities, an increasingly aggressive competition is taking place at the grassroots between the young,



conquering, masculine immigrant culture and the ageing, feminised European culture. As a result, the goals of the European leadership and the basic needs of average Europeans are drifting further and further apart. The elites dream of globalised multiculturalism. They despise regional and national impulses as backward, while the natives realise that the large-scale social experiment of culturally alien immigration is at their expense and that they are on the losing side. Elites and the population have not been pulling in the same direction for decades. The locals want to limit migration. The elites feign understanding, but push for immigration.

As it becomes increasingly obvious that they no longer represent the interests of the population, their credibility is evaporating. Instead of correcting themselves, they seek to manipulate perceptions of reality and resort to moral and legal blackmail. The more their legitimacy erodes, the more repressively they react to anything that is critical of migration and conservative. They still have the power to interpret events and control the mass media and cultural institutions, but discontent is growing because the indigenous population is beginning to realise that their own future is at stake. Meanwhile, Islamic immigrants have long since challenged the

status quo.

In 2019, Catholic philosopher Russell Reno came out with ‘The Return of the Strong Gods: Nationalism, Populism, and the Future of the West’ in which he predicts the end of the ‘Open Society’ as famously formulated by philosopher Karl Popper. Reno argues that it is incapable of meeting the basic needs of the population and responding appropriately to the challenge posed by ‘Closed Societies.’

This creates a void that robs it of its raison d’être, while fatally threatening the freedom it supposedly represents. Sooner or later, this vacuum will be filled: either peacefully or violently. Reno sees the emergence of the Open Society as a consequence of the traumas of the 20th century.

After the carnage of two World Wars, the West committed itself to Popper’s ideals in order to create peaceful, prosperous communities with open borders, free from ideology, nationalism, intolerance and religious hatred. This was supposed to push back the ‘strong gods’ who had previously caused so much suffering, war and violence. Accordingly, open borders, open markets, diversity and tolerance were promoted. For a while, this worked brilliantly. But the project gradually went off the rails, acquiring dogmatic traits and turning totalitar-



ian by itself. At the same time, the intellectual and spiritual emptiness produced by the forced transformation is becoming increasingly painful.

The Open Society has dissolved traditional bonds, identities and feelings of belonging. Without the experience of family, closeness and community, however, very few people develop a sense of responsibility and solidarity. Social impoverishment not only drives individuals into isolation but also destroys the glue that holds societies together. It threatens their core existence because increased uprooting on the one hand and culturally alien parallel societies on the other are hopelessly overwhelming communities that have long been fragile.

But although this excess of openness is meeting with ever stronger resistance, the established forces are clinging to it desperately. They perceive any criticism of their ‘consensus’ as a threat and denounce it as ‘reactionary.’ When nationalist undertones emerge, they immediately paint a terrifying picture of fascism. In fact, according to Reno, they are merely fixated on the past because the threat of fascism is their only raison d’être. In truth, the rise of populism does not reflect a thirst for dictatorship, but rather an urge for self-assertion, fuelled by fear of foreign infiltra-

tion and totalitarian structures. Few people wish to be isolated individuals in a homogenised, multicultural mass; they seek belonging - a homeland and a shared sense of purpose. For those in power, such backward-looking nonsense is irrelevant. They consider their model of openness, tolerance and progress to be the only true one. They ignore the fact that this model has increasingly unpleasant consequences for those who are forced to accept it.

In the long term, this state of affairs is untenable, says Reno. For him, the open society has won itself to death. The void it has left behind cries out for content. It calls for ‘strong gods’ and sooner or later they will return - either as good spirits and a healing inspiration, or as a destructive force that sweeps away everything that exists. We still have the chance to strengthen the forces that appeal to the heart and mind and build on our better traditions. But the longer Popper’s epigones try to violently hold back the powerful gods, the more they invite the forces of darkness, thereby bringing about the very disaster they sought to prevent.

(The author is an historian and novelist. He is currently working on a book on Germany’s migration crisis. Views personal.)





**KALEIDOSCOPE**

1. A dove perches on the hat of an Indonesian Army soldier during a flag raising ceremony marking the 80th anniversary of the country's independence at Merdeka Palace in Jakarta.
2. Artists make idols of Lord Ganesha ahead of the 'Ganesh Chaturthi' festival in Kolkata on Sunday.
3. A woman looks at an idol of Lord Ganesha ahead of Ganesh Chaturthi festival in Moradabad, Uttar Pradesh on Sunday.
4. People perform rituals at the end of the Tamil month of 'Aadi' at Amman Temple in Chennai on Sunday.
5. Priests perform 'abhishek' of Lord Krishna and his divine consort Radha at ISKCON Temple in Patna on Sunday.

All Pictures: PTI, AP

READERS' VOICE

Cricket's Latest Gift to the Lazy Elite



By  
Waleed Hussain



In a move that's sure to revolutionize domestic cricket – or at least give senior players a golden excuse to lounge in the pavilion with a cold one – the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) has graciously introduced the “serious injury replacement substitute” rule for the 2025-26 season. Inspired, apparently, by heart-wrenching tales like Rishabh Pant's injury woes, this noble edict allows teams to swap out a player who's suffered a “serious” injury mid-match, preventing them from heroically hobbling on and risking further damage. How thoughtful! Because nothing says player welfare like handing over the reins to a fresh substitute from the bench, all while the umpires play doctor and decide if it's legit. On paper, it's a masterstroke of compassion. But let's peel back the layers, shall we? This rule is a sarcasm goldmine, ripe for rampant misuse by those grizzled veterans who've seen more IPL auctions than actual fitness drills.

Picture this: It's a sweltering afternoon in the Ranji Trophy, the pitch is a minefield, and your team's star senior batsman – let's call him “Captain Evergreen,” a 35-year-old legend whose knees creak louder than the stadium gates – faces a fiery young pacer. One bouncer whizzes past his helmet, and suddenly, oh dear, he's clutching his shoulder like he's been shot by a cannon. “Serious injury!” he wails, dramatic as a Bollywood death scene. The physio rushes in, the umpires confer, and poof! In comes a spry substitute from the reserves, while Captain Evergreen retires to the dressing room for an “extended recovery session” that suspiciously involves scrolling Instagram and sipping chai. Misuse? Perish the thought!

This is just the rule working as intended – if “intended” means giving seniors a get-out-of-jail-free card for when the going gets tough.

And why stop at genuine discomfort? Senior players, those wise old foxes who've mastered the art of selective participation, could turn this into a veritable art form. Imagine the excuses: “Ouch, my hamstring twinged while tying my shoelaces!” or “Doctor, it's a serious case of... selective amnesia about how to face spin.” The rule stipulates the replacement comes from the nominated substitutes at the toss, but who's to say teams won't stack their bench with all-rounders ready to step in at a moment's notice? It's like having a backup band for when the lead singer decides he's too “injured” to hit the high notes. Humorously, one could envision a scenario where the entire senior brigade coordinates “injuries” in rotation – today it's the opener's mysterious back spasm during a chase, tomorrow the all-rounder's sudden elbow flare-up when bowling uphill. The youngsters grind it out, while the vets preserve their bodies for those lucrative T20 leagues. Player welfare, my foot; this is welfare for the well-paid!

Let's not forget the wicketkeeper exception, that delightful loophole where teams might snag a specialist gloveman from outside the original subs if their keeper goes down. Brilliant! Now, a crafty senior keeper could “injure” himself early – say, by “diving” for a ball that was miles wide – and summon a fresh face while he kicks back. “Sorry lads, my gloves are giving me blisters... serious ones!” he'd quip, as the team suddenly fields two keepers for the price of one mishap. The potential for abuse is endless, especially in multi-day formats where fatigue sets in like an unwanted houseguest. Senior players, already masters of the “strategic rest” in international cricket, could exploit this to dodge the drudgery of fielding on day four or batting against a reversing ball. It's almost comical how this rule, meant to shield the brave, might instead empower the cunning. Teams could even game the system: Nominate a bunch of versatile subs, then “injure” a senior to unleash a tactical wildcard. Umpires and referees might as well carry stethoscopes alongside their light meters.

Of course, the BCCI assures us this is all above board, with umpires holding the veto power. But in the heat of domestic cricket, where passions run high and scrutiny runs low, how foolproof is that? We've seen players milk timeouts for “cramps” that vanish miraculously post-match; now amplify that with a full substitution. It's a recipe for hilarity – or hypocrisy, depending on your view. Senior players, those paragons of experience, might start viewing matches as optional excursions. “Why risk my golden years on this dusty track when I can invoke the magic rule and watch from the sidelines?” they'd chuckle. And let's be real: In a country where cricket is religion, fans might even cheer it on, mistaking it for “smart management.” But deep down, it's a farce that could erode the spirit of the game, turning domestic cricket into a senior citizens' spa retreat.

In conclusion, kudos to the BCCI for this “innovative” rule – it's sure to keep our veterans fresh, fabulous, and far from the fray. Who needs grit when you have substitutes? Perhaps next, they'll introduce “serious boredom replacement” for when the match drags on. Until then, let's watch as this well-intentioned safeguard becomes the ultimate loophole for the elite. Cricket just got a whole lot funnier – and a tad less fair.

(The Writer is a senior journalist based in Mumbai. Views personal.)

EXPLAINER

Why Land Swap for Ceasefire Still on the Table?

Hours before meeting Russia's leader Vladimir Putin in Alaska, Donald Trump said he wanted to see a ceasefire in Ukraine and was “not going to be happy” if it wasn't agreed today.

The US president appears to have left Alaska with no such agreement in place.

“We didn't get there”, Trump told reporters, before later vaguely asserting that he and Putin had “made great progress”. Trump is likely to return to the idea of engaging Putin in the coming weeks and months, with the Russian leader jokingly suggesting their next meeting could be held in Moscow.

A land-for-ceasefire arrangement, an idea Trump has repeatedly raised as an almost inevitable part of a peace settlement between Russia and Ukraine, could still reemerge as a possible outcome.

In fact, in an interview with Fox News after the summit where Trump was asked how the war in Ukraine might end and if there will be a land swap, Trump said: “those are points that we largely agreed on”.

Securing territorial concessions from Ukraine has long been one of Moscow's preconditions for any negotiations on a peace deal. Putin is likely betting that insisting on these concessions, while keeping Ukraine under sustained military pressure, plays to his advantage.

Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky, who was excluded from the Alaska summit, has maintained that Kyiv will not agree to territorial concessions.

Such a move would be illegal under Ukraine's constitution, which requires a nationwide referendum to approve changes to the country's territorial borders.

The assumption behind a land-for-ceasefire deal is that it would enhance Ukrainian and European security. Trump sees it as the first step in bringing Putin to the negotiation table for a broader peace deal, as well as unlocking opportunities for reconstruction. In reality, such a deal would do little to diminish the long-term Russian threat.

Moscow's efforts to shore up and modernise its defence capabilities

and neo-imperial ambitions would remain intact. Its hybrid attacks on Europe would also continue, and Ukraine's capacity to secure meaningful reconstruction would be weakened.

Whether or not Russia ever opts for a direct military strike on a European NATO member state, it has no need to do so to weaken the continent. Its hybrid operations, which extend well beyond the battlefield, are more than sufficient to erode European resilience over time.

Russia's disinformation campaigns and sabotage of infrastructure, including railways in Poland and Germany and undersea cables in the Gulf of Finland and Baltic Sea, are well documented.

Its strategic objectives have focused on deterring action on Ukraine and sowing disagreement between its allies, as well as attempting to undermine democratic values in the west.

Europe is under pressure on multiple fronts: meeting new defence spending targets of 5 per cent of GDP while economic growth is slowing, reducing the dependence of its supply chains on China and managing demographic challenges.

These vulnerabilities make it susceptible to disinformation and have deepened divisions along political and socioeconomic fault lines – all of which Moscow has repeatedly exploited. A land-for-ceasefire deal would not address these threats.

For Ukraine, the danger of such a deal is clear. Russia might pause large-scale physical warfare in Ukraine under a deal, but it would almost certainly continue destabilising the country from within.

Harder reconstruction

Ukraine's reconstruction will be costly, to the tune of USD 524 billion (387 billion pounds) according to the World Bank. It will also require managing a web of interconnected security, financial, social and political risks.

These include displacement and economic challenges brought on by the war, as well as the need to secure capital flows across different regions. It will also need to continue addressing governance and corruption challenges.

A permanent territorial concession would make addressing these risks even more difficult. Such a deal is likely to split public opinion in Ukraine, with those heavily involved in the war effort asking: “What exactly have we been fighting for?”

Reckriminations would almost certainly follow during the next presidential and parliamentary elections, deepening divisions and undermining Ukraine's ability to pursue the systemic approach needed for reconstruction. Ongoing security concerns in border regions, particularly near Russia, would be likely to prompt further population flight. And how many of the over 5 million Ukrainians currently living abroad would return to help reconstruct the country under these conditions is far from certain.

Financing reconstruction would also be more challenging. Public funds from donors and international institutions have helped sustain emergency energy and transport infrastructure repairs in the short term and will continue to play a role. But private investment will be critical moving forward.

Investors will be looking not only at Ukraine's geopolitical risk profile, but also its political stability and social cohesion. Few investors would be willing to commit capital in a country that cannot guarantee a stable security and political environment. Taken together, these factors would make large-scale reconstruction in Ukraine nearly impossible.

-The Conversation



# Bhatia gets hole-in-one, wins a car, bolsters chance

**Maryland (USA):** Akshay Bhatia shot a four-under 66 which included a birdie and a hole-in-one as he moved to tied-22 after the third round, giving himself a chance to stay in the top 30 of the FedEx Cup and qualifying for the Tour Championship next week.

Bhatia, who was on the edge at the 29th place at the start of the week, moved up from tied-37th to tied-22nd after the third round with a birdie on the 16th hole and hole-in-one in the 17th.

Bhatia's first hole-in-one on the PGA TOUR came with a 227-yard 5-iron to four-under 66. The ace will fetch Bhatia a BMW iX and it will also provide a full four-year Evans Scholarship in his name to a deserving young caddie.

Bhatia also holed out with a wedge on the par-4 seventh for eagle, and turned in a card that had scores of 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5.

Robert MacIntyre holed a final-hole birdie putt from 41 feet, three inches to card a 2-under 68 and set his career low 54-hole score on Tour. He was four shots clear of world No. 1 Scottie Scheffler (67).

MacIntyre (62-64-68) is 16-under and Scheffler (66-65-67) is 12-under.

Bidding to become the first player from Scotland to win a FedEx Cup Playoffs event, MacIntyre has two PGA Tour wins at the 2024 RBC Canadian Open and the 2024 Genesis Scottish Open and has five top-10 finishes in 21 starts this season, led by a runner-up finish at the US Open.

The reigning FedEx Cup champion and current points leader Scheffler is seeking his fifth win this season and 18th on Tour. He won seven



## Veer Ahlawat tied-28th at Danish Open

**Copenhagen (Denmark):** Veer Ahlawat played a steady third round of one-under 70 on a moving day to reach tied-28th at the Danish Golf Championship here at the Furesø Golf Klub. It was an interesting round as Ahlawat had 14 pars in a row from the start. He bogeyed the 15th but two pars later, Ahlawat finished the round with an eagle on the 18th for a one-under 71. Earlier, Ahlawat had rounds of 73-68 and is now two-under for three rounds.

A good finish will see him get at least a top-30 finish for the second week running on the DP World Tour.

times in 2024. His third-round 67 marked his 16th consecutive round under par. The 2024 BMW Championship runner-up Ludvig Åberg lies third at 10-under and is looking for his second victory this season after The Genesis Invitational. Lying tied-fourth is Sam Burns at eight-under alongside Harry Hall, who seeks to advance to the Tour Championship for the first time in his third season.

### Bhatia's pace

The 23-year-old Hero golfer Bhatia, who played the Tour Championship last year as well, had an opening 5-over 75 shot one-under in the third round and was two-under for his third round before the ace moved him to four-under for the day and even-par for the tournament.

Bhatia's tee shot landed just a few paces short of the front-right pin location and trundling into the cup.

Bhatia was 2-over for the tournament as he reached the 17th hole on Saturday and had dropped to 31st in the projected FedEx Cup standings.

"When that golf ball went in, it was the craziest thing in the world," Bhatia said. "My caddie was pointing at the car and I'm like, don't even know what to do. I couldn't even feel my body."

"Every shot counts," Bhatia said. "I don't want to just shrug it in and not make it to the finish line. I want to try everything I can."

It was Bhatia's first ace on the PGA Tour, but the sixth of his life. His first came when he was 11 years old at Pinehurst No 2. **-PTI**

## Pankaj, Aarushi emerge winners

By Correspondent

**Mumbai:** Pankaj Mahato and Aarushi Gupta emerged as winners in the Under-16 boys and girls categories in the Shivneri Road Race organized by Shivneri Seva Mandal in Dadar (East) on the occasion of Independence Day.

In the Under-14, Under-12 and Under -10 age groups, Ishant Sharma and Dinel Almeida, Aniket Sonar and Devashree Patil and Shlok Mondkar and Aarti Yadav won the first place in their respective groups.

More than 500 runners participated in the Shivneri Road Race, which was held with the approval of Mumbai City District Amateur Athletics Association. The event was held in various age groups of boys and girls under 10, 12, 14, 16 years.

Sachin Manjrekar, head of Dadar-based Speakwell, a renowned English conversation training institute, and Shiv Sena leader Nitin Pednekar provided financial support for this road race. The top three runners in each group were felicitated with certificates, and cash prizes.

### Results:

**Under-16:** Boys – 1. Pankaj Mahato, 2. Ritik Dangi, 3. Priyanshu Rajak; Girls – 1. Aarushi Gupta, 2. Muskan Sheikh, 3. Trisha Gupta.

**Under-14:** Boys – 1. Ishant Sharma, 2. Prem Pandit, 3. Kshitij Keni; Girls – 1. Dinel Almeida, 2. Jharna Bik, 3. Gargi Kadge.

**Under-12:** Boys – 1. Aniket Sonar, 2. Shrikant Pawar, 3. Sidhansh Sawant; Girls – 1. Devashree Patil, 2. Shaurya Mayekar, 3. Avni More.

**Under-10:** 1. Shlok Mondkar, 2. Satyam Gupta, 3. Shreyash Tamhankar; Girls – 1. Aarti Yadav, 2. Nikshika Barmera, 3. Shaurya Tamhankar.



A referee announces the winner of a Free Combat event during the World Humanoid Robot Games held in Beijing, China. Pic: PTI

## Sinquefield Cup Gukesh in familiar territory

### PRAGGNANANDHAA AIMS FOR PODIUM

**St Louis (USA):** World Champion D Gukesh returns to classical chess after a brief hiatus to face a star-studded field at the Sinquefield Cup starting Monday while R Praggnanandhaa will eye a podium finish in the fifth leg of the Grand Chess Tour to strengthen his overall fifth-place standing.

While many argue that the field feels incomplete without world No. 1 Magnus Carlsen, the Norwegian Grandmaster has openly admitted that he no longer enjoys classical chess.

Without Carlsen, the GCT was announced and this is the culmination point wherein the players would qualify for the grand finale slated later this year.

Fabiano Caruana of United States, Alireza Firouzja from France, and inform Armenian-turned-American Levon Aronian are most likely to pose a stiff challenge for the Indian duo but the rest of the field is also quite impressive as all the nine selected players for the Grand Chess Tour for this year will compete together.

Given his current form in faster version, Gukesh may not be one of the favourites here but one should be reminded that classical chess is the Indian GM's forte.

Praggnanandhaa, meanwhile, has already cemented his credentials by qualifying for next year's Candidates Tournament, which will decide Gukesh's challenger for the world title.

Both Gukesh and Praggnanandhaa have also chosen to compete in the Grand Swiss in Uzbekistan next month, underlining their intent to win everything.

In the GCT standings, Praggnanandhaa currently leads Gukesh, but consistency will be key as they face seasoned opponents.

Among them, Maxime Vachier-Lagrave remains the man to beat, while 42-year-old Aronian has rediscovered top form. The former world junior champion and World Cup winner has already bagged two titles in as many weeks --Freestyle Chess in Las Vegas and the St. Louis Rapid & Blitz. Now it's classical chess and an encore is what his fans are rooting for.

The event, to be played over nine rounds between ten players, has a total prize pool of USD 350,000.

### PARTICIPANTS

D Gukesh, R Praggnanandhaa (both India); Fabiano Caruana, Wesley So, Levon Aronian, Sam Savian (All USA); Maxime Vachier-Lagrave, Alireza Firouzja (both France); Duda Jan Kryzstof (Poland), Nodirbek Abdusattorov (Uzbekistan).

# Alyssa powers Aus A consolatory win

**Brisbane:** Star wicket-keeper-batter Alyssa Healy blazed away to an unbeaten 137 as Australia A picked up consolatory nine-wicket win in the inconsequential third women's ODI against India A here on Sunday.

India had already sealed the three-match series 2-0 after a two-wicket win in the second game on Friday, having also edged the opener by three wickets.

Opting to bat first, India rode on opener Shafali Verma's 52 and wicketkeeper Yastika Bhatia's 54-ball 42 to post 216 before being bowled out in 47.4 overs.

Australia A skipper Tahlia McGrath was the pick of the bowlers with 3/49 in eight overs.

Chasing 217, the spotlight belonged to Healy (137 not out off 84 balls), who made light work of the target, punishing the Indian bowlers to all parts of a ground named after her uncle and former Australian wicketkeeping great Ian Healy.

Blending brute power with trademark flair, the Australian national team captain, returning after foot and knee injuries, tore into the bowlers as she peppered the boundary 23 times and cleared it thrice,

including a straight six to seal the game.

She was dropped twice -- on 7 and 49 -- and made full use of the reprieves, powering Australia to victory in just 27.5 overs

The keeper-batter found an able partner in Tahlia Wilson, who played with composure and fluency for her 59. The duo added 137 for the opening stand. Wilson eventually fell to Radha Yadav.

Earlier, Shafali was at her free-flowing best, striking a polished half-century studded with seven boundaries while Nandini Kashyap (28) played the supporting role. The duo gave India a steady start, adding 86 for the opening wicket.

But the introduction of McGrath turned the tide as she removed Shafali to spark a collapse that saw Kashyap and Tejal Hasabnis (1) depart in quick succession, leaving India wobbling at 89/3.

Though Yastika held the innings together with support from Raghvi Bisht (18) and Tanushree Sarkar (17), McGrath returned to break the resistance, having Yastika caught by Healy as India slumped again, eventually folding for a below-par total. **-PTI**



Former WWE wrestler Dalip Singh Rana, popularly known as The Great Khali, during an event at Connaught Place in New Delhi on Sunday. Pic: PTI

## All India Chess Masters Varshney scores second win

By Correspondent

**Mumbai:** International Master Aaryan Varshney recorded his second successive win defeating Sunil Vaidya on the top board in the second round of the All India Chess Masters, Season 2 Mumbai FIDE Classical Tournament played at the Mumbai Chess Centre, Russian House, Pedder Road, on Sunday.

Darsh Shetty also enjoyed a successful day as he got the better of Deepak

Raina for his second straight win.

Pasbola Samvid was another second round victor as he outwitted Mohsin Yunus Shaikh to maintain his winning run.

Om Gada and AFM Sahil Prashant Chogle were the other two players to taste success. Gada, playing with the black pieces, defeated Shubh Patel while Chogle overcame Anil Suchit to post his second win.

Results top-10 round 2: IM Aaryan Varshney 2

beat Sunil Vaidya 1; ACM Arvind Iyer 2 beat Azad Marazban Irani 1; Deepak Raina 1 lost Darsh Shetty 2; Kabnurakar Rushikesh 1.5 drew AFM Idhant Vishal Parmar 1.5; Shubh Patel 1 lost Om Gada 2; AFM Sahil Prashant Chogle 2 beat Anil Suchit 1; Mohsin Yunus 1 lost Pasbola Samvid 2; Apurv Desmukh 2 beat Mayan S Jha 1; Manyal Balaani 2 beat Mauresh Parkar, 1; AIM Jaiveer Patil 1.5 drew with Kabir Choukshi 1.5.

**Shillong:** In a quiet corner of the northeast, 28-year-old Anissa Lamare is redefining what it means to go off the beaten track – both literally and metaphorically.

Hailing from Shillong, Lamare has earned the distinction of being India's first female downhill mountain bicyclist, a title she has earned through years of grit, resilience and unwavering passion.

Lamare began her mountain biking journey in December 2015, venturing into a sport that was virtually non-existent for women in the country at that time.

# Meghalaya's Anissa rides solo through steepest trails

With no professional infrastructure, female competitors, or national recognition, the odds were stacked high. Yet, the former literature student from Meghalaya persisted, becoming a pioneer in one of the most extreme and male-dominated cycling disciplines.

"I wasn't just racing, I was paving the way for others," Lamare told PTI.

Downhill mountain biking, a sport that involves racing down steep, rugged trails at high speed, demands strength, technical

skill and mental endurance.

### Master her own

Lamare had to master these on her own, often training without access to proper trails or coaching support.

She participated in her first competitive event in India with no separate women's category, racing against male riders as the lone female participant.

Her breakthrough on the international stage came in October 2023, when she represented In-



dia in the Elite Downhill category at the 28th Asian Continental Mountain Bike Championships held in Ponmudi, Kerala.

Competing against seasoned athletes from across Asia, Lamare finished ninth – a commendable feat for her debut on the continental stage.

She followed it up with a silver medal in the Open Women's category at the Pokhara Enduro Race in Nepal.

Lamare also competed in the EnduroLK race in Sri Lanka and was invited

to represent Team Al Waal in Oman – a testament to her growing reputation in the global mountain biking community.

"I have no plans to relax yet. I am preparing for the next race in Nepal again this December," she said.

### Biking community

Through Pedal Compass, Lamare also seeks to build a community around mountain biking in Meghalaya. She is currently working on a plan to develop dedicated biking trails in the region and

promote the sport among young girls.

In 2021, Lamare's inspiring journey was featured in a national advertisement campaign by Haier India titled 'Perform Big, Silently'. The campaign celebrated Indian women achievers across various fields, including mountaineer Arunima Sinha, special forces trainer Dr Seema Rao, and chess Grandmaster Harika Dronavalli.

Despite limited financial support and minimal institutional backing, Lamare has carved out a space for herself at the intersection of sport, business and advocacy. **-PTI**