


FROM DEHRADUN TO EGMORE

The mega Indian railway makeover

Is the Railways' ₹24,500-cr. modernisation project signalling the end of the country's landmark heritage structures?

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Police use water cannons, tear gas on farmers

CHANDIGARH
The Haryana Police on Saturday used tear gas and water cannons to disperse farmers and farm-labourers after they attempted to enter the State as part of their 'Delhi Chaloo' march in support of their demands. » PAGE 3

Protests return to Kolkata streets over R.G. Kar case

KOLKATA
Protest demonstrations and rallies seeking justice for the doctor raped and murdered at the R.G. Kar Medical College and Hospital returned to Kolkata on Saturday, a day after a court gave bail to two accused in the case. » PAGE 3

Georgia chooses far-right loyalist as new President

TBILISI
Georgia's ruling party on Saturday installed Mikheil Kavelashvili, a far-right loyalist, as President, amid deepening constitutional crisis that broke out since the Georgian Dream Party claimed victory in polls held in October. » PAGE 12

Prime Minister says Congress subverted spirit of Constitution

During Lok Sabha debate on 75 years of the Constitution, Modi accuses the Nehru-Gandhi family of 'subversion attempts'; Constitution is 'basis of our unity', BJP-led government's amendments only strengthened the spirit of the Statute, he says

Nistula Hebbar
NEW DELHI

The Constitution is the "basis of our unity", Prime Minister Narendra Modi said in the Lok Sabha on Saturday, accusing the Congress and its past governments of attempting to subvert its spirit.



Sharp words: Narendra Modi speaks in the Lok Sabha during the discussion on the 'glorious journey' of the Constitution. PTI

Speaking for over an hour and 45 minutes at the end of a two-day debate on the 75-year journey of the Indian Constitution, the Prime Minister emphasised that — unlike past Congress governments — any amendments made by his government and the previous NDA governments had been done to strengthen the spirit of the Constitution.

Mr. Modi said that former Congress Prime Ministers had repeatedly raised objections to reservations for marginal communities, while his government had extended it to the economically weaker sections (EWS), with "no objections" from any section of society. Significantly, a major plank of the Opposition during the recent Lok Sabha election was the accusation that the BJP-led government was seeking to subvert the Constitution through a big majority, with plans to end reservations in jobs and educa-

tional institutions. Launching a sharp attack on the Nehru-Gandhi family, Mr. Modi said that the first amendment to the Constitution, made to the fundamental right to expression by former Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in 1951, was the beginning of this "subversion" of the document. The Congress's first family, having "tasted blood", then repeatedly wounded the Constitution, Mr. Modi said.

Stating the case
The Prime Minister cited several examples of this: the imposition of the Emergency by former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi; the passage of the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights Under Divorce) Act under the Rajiv Gandhi government, reversing a Supreme Court verdict on post-divorce

'Your supreme leader preferred Manusmriti'

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

Hindutva ideologue Vinayak Damodar Savarkar believed that there was "nothing Indian" about the

maintenance for Muslim women; and the setting up of the National Advisory Council under the UPA government which he said asserted the power of then-Congress president Sonia Gandhi over then-Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. He claimed that the Congress was fond of the "word *jumla*", especially the slogan "*Garibi Hatao* (remove poverty)", which

Constitution of India and preferred the religious text *Manusmriti*. Leader of the Opposition Rahul Gandhi said in the Lok Sabha.

FULL REPORT ON » PAGE 4

had brought them to power though the situation of the poor remained the same.

"Their next generation is also into the same game," he said. Without naming Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi, he said that an "arrogant" person had torn up the decision of the Cabinet when the Manmohan Singh-led UPA govern-

ment was in power. Mr. Modi emphasised that leaders like him who came from ordinary families could never have reached where they did but for the strength of the Constitution.

His government, Mr. Modi said, had repealed Article 370 to unify the country and bring Jammu and Kashmir under the ambit of the Indian Constitution more fully, brought in GST to roll out a "one nation, one tax" regime, along with digital architecture... health insurance for the poor, as well as free food grains.

Mr. Modi ended his speech by asking parliamentarians to take 11 *sankalps* (resolutions). These include a resolve to honour the Constitution and not weaponise it politically, a swipe at the Opposition campaign.

S. Korean President Yoon impeached over martial law bid

Agence France-Presse
SEOUL

South Korean lawmakers on Saturday impeached President Yoon Suk Yeol over his failed martial law bid, with the Opposition declaring a "victory of the people".

The vote capped more than a week of intense political drama in the democratic South following Mr. Yoon's failed attempt to impose martial law on December 3.

Hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets of the capital Seoul in rival rallies for and against Mr. Yoon on Saturday.

In a televised address following the vote, the impeached Mr. Yoon said he would "step aside" but did not apologise for his botched bid to impose martial law.

Out of 300 lawmakers, 204 voted to impeach the President on allegations of insurrection while 85 voted against it. Three abstained whereas eight votes were nullified.

Mr. Yoon has now been suspended from office while South Korea's Constitutional Court deliberates on the vote.

The court has 180 days to rule on Mr. Yoon's future and Chief Justice Moon Hyung-bae vowed to hold "a swift and fair trial".

Two hundred votes were needed for the im-



Protesters gather outside the National Assembly in Seoul on Saturday. AFP

peachment to pass, and opposition lawmakers needed to convince at least eight parliamentarians from Mr. Yoon's conservative People Power Party (PPP) to switch sides.

'Betrayal of values'
PPP lawmaker Kim Sang-wook told broadcaster JTBC that Mr. Yoon had "completely betrayed the values of conservatism".

"That is why we, as ruling party lawmakers, have decided to remove him ourselves," he said.

Prime Minister Han Duck-soo — now the nation's interim leader — said in an address to the nation that he "deeply acknowledges the heavy responsibility for the current situation" and "sincerely apologises to the people".

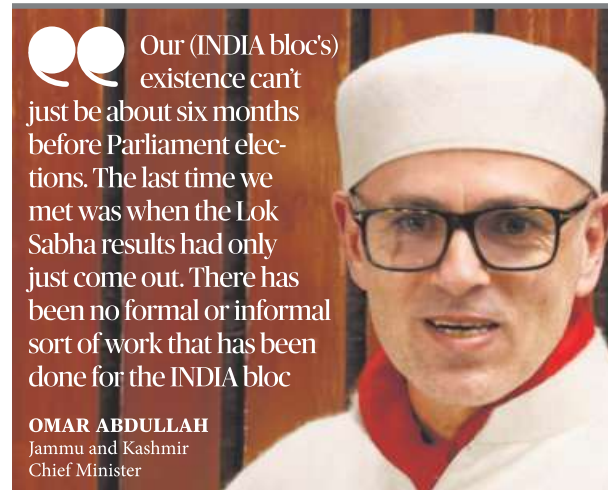
Cong. should 'justify' leadership role in INDIA bloc as there is 'disquiet': Omar

Press Trust of India
NEW DELHI

Acknowledging growing discontent among INDIA bloc partners with the Congress, Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Omar Abdullah has asked the party to justify its leadership role in the alliance.

In an interview with PTI, he emphasised that leadership "has to be earned" and could not be taken for granted. He suggested that the party raise the issue of restoration of Statehood to Jammu and Kashmir.

"By virtue of being the single-largest party in Parliament, and also having the [positions of] Leader of Opposition in both the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha, the fact that they have a pan-India footprint, which no other party can lay claim to, they are natural sort of leaders of an Opposition movement," he said. Yet there is a sense of disquiet among some of



Our (INDIA bloc's) existence can't just be about six months before Parliament elections. The last time we met was when the Lok Sabha results had only just come out. There has been no formal or informal sort of work that has been done for the INDIA bloc

OMAR ABDULLAH
Jammu and Kashmir
Chief Minister

the allies because they feel the Congress is "not doing enough to justify it or to earn it or to keep it (the position of leading the INDIA bloc)". "That's something the Congress might wish to consider," he said. Mr. Abdullah stressed the need for sustained interactions beyond the electoral cycle, noting that the alliance's current approach appeared sporadic and ineffective.

"Our existence can't just be about six months before Parliament elections. Our existence has to be something more than that. The last time we met was when the Lok Sabha results had only just come out. There has been no formal or informal sort of work that has been done for the INDIA bloc," he said. Mr. Abdullah's comments suggest underlying

tensions within the Opposition alliance, indicating that infrequent meetings could potentially magnify minor disagreements.

"If we had a more regular process of interaction, perhaps these smaller irritants wouldn't assume larger proportions," he said.

He praised former Congress president Sonia Gandhi, describing her as a leader of unparalleled stature within the Opposition alliance. "She plays an important leadership role," he said.

Mr. Abdullah chose not to give a direct answer to a question on the statements made by some leaders including Sharad Pawar and Lalu Yadav, in favouring West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee as the better leader, but highlighted the INDIA bloc's lack of consistent engagement, warning that the coalition risked becoming a mere election-time convenience.

Commission accuses Sheikh Hasina of forced disappearances in Bangladesh

Kallol Bhattacharjee
NEW DELHI

In a new turn of events, the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearance set up by the interim government of Bangladesh filed a report on Saturday stating that it found the "involvement of Ex-PM Sheikh Hasina" in enforced disappearances of individuals during her tenure.

The report recommended disbanding the anti-terror outfit Rapid Action Battalion that was instrumental in crackdown against terror suspects and was accused of human rights abuse. The commission said it has recorded 1,676 cases of disappearances and that the total number of such cases during the Hasina-era could cross 3,500.

Earlier in the day, the authorities arrested four persons in connection with attacks on the minority Hindu community on December 3. The arrests



Drawing ire: The commission said the total number of cases of disappearances during the Hasina-era could cross 3,500. REUTERS

came days after the Indian Foreign Secretary visited Dhaka and urged the authorities to "acknowledge" the attacks on minorities in Bangladesh.

The case of violence against Hindus involved a social media post by one Akash Das which created communal tension in Sunamganj district, leading to attacks against Hindu-owned businesses and a places of worship. Those

arrested in this incident are Ali Hossain (19), Sultan Ahmed Raju (20), Imran Hossain (31) and Shajahan Hossain (20).

'Officials involved'
On the inquiry, a statement from Chief Adviser's Office said, "The commission chairman said they had found the prima facie involvement of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and some high-ranking of-

ficials of security forces and her government, including her defence adviser, Major General (retd.) Tarique Ahmed Siddique, in the enforced disappearances."

The commission said that it would bring out another interim report in March and would require another year to complete the scrutiny of all the complaints received so far.

Apart from Ms. Hasina and Mr. Siddique, the commission also found the involvement of former director general of the National Telecommunication Monitoring Centre and sacked Major General Ziaul Ahsan, senior police officers Monirul Islam and Md. Harun-Or-Rashid with "several incidents of enforced disappearance".

Submitting the report, the commission's chairman said it had detected a "systematic design" to avoid detection of the cases of enforced disappearances.

INBRIEF



Punjab women's commission summons SGPC chief Dharampal

The Punjab State Commission for Women issued a notice to Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) president Harjinder Singh Dharampal on Saturday for his alleged derogatory remarks against his predecessor, Bibi Jagir Kaur. Commission chairperson Raj Lali Gill has directed Mr. Dharampal to appear before the panel in person and submit a written explanation by December 17. Mr. Gill took *suo motu* (on his own) notice of the matter involving alleged derogatory remarks targeting Ms. Kaur. PTI

AAP launches campaign for Jalandhar civic body polls

Ruling AAP in Punjab launched its poll campaign for the Jalandhar Municipal Corporation on Saturday. Elections to five municipal corporations and 44 municipal councils and nagar panchayats are scheduled to be held on December 21. The Punjab unit chief of AAP, Aman Arora, said a manifesto has been prepared for Jalandhar following extensive public consultations. Mr. Arora promised to introduce 100 electric buses with charging stations to tackle rising pollution and improve the public transport situation in the city. PTI

RJD promises to launch monthly cash transfer scheme for Bihar women

Women will get monthly assistance of ₹2,500 under Mai-Behan Maan Yojana if party is voted to power next year: ex-deputy CM Tejashwi Yadav; pledges scheme within a month of govt. formation

Amit Bhelari
PATNA

Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) leader and former Bihar Deputy Chief Minister Tejashwi Yadav on Saturday announced that his party would launch a cash transfer scheme for women within a month of forming the government if it wins the Assembly election due next year.

In neighbouring Jharkhand, the Maiya Samman Yojana - a similar cash transfer scheme for women - is said to have helped the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM)-led Hemant Soren government retain power. In Maharashtra, the recent victory of the BJP-led Mahayuti alliance was also aided by its Mukhyamantri Mahi Laddi Bahin Yojana, under which women got a monthly assistance of ₹1,500. Similarly, the Madhya Pradesh go-



A step ahead: RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav at a press conference in Darbhanga on Saturday. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

vernment's Mukhyamantri Laddi Bahin Yojana helped the BJP continue in power in 2023.

Mr. Yadav, who is also the Leader of Opposition in the Bihar Assembly, called a special press briefing in Darbhanga to make the announcement. Under the proposed scheme - Mai-Behan Maan Yojana - eligible women would get a monthly assistance of ₹2,500 each, he said.

"We want to empower

every woman of Bihar. During my visits, I realised one thing - that people are suffering from inflation and price rise. People are expressing their pain about the daily struggle for their livelihood," Mr. Yadav said. "With the blessings of crores of mothers and sisters of Bihar, today I have taken this decision that when our government is formed in 2025, we will give ₹2,500 per month to the women of the State un-

der the Mai Bahin Maan Yojana."

Benefits entire family

The RJD leader said the foundation of the reconstruction of Bihar would be incomplete without the prosperity of women. "When women receive cash, they will invest more money in their family's well-being, such as nutritious food for the whole family, healthcare, and children's education. The positive effect of cash transfers is significant in terms of improved economic conditions for women, and benefits the entire family and community," he said.

Mr. Yadav said the cash transfer scheme would be designed with complementary support such as financial literacy training, which would further promote women empowerment and long-term economic independence.

Former Tamil Nadu Congress president Elangovan no more

T. Ramakrishnan
CHENNAI

Erode (East) MLA and former Tamil Nadu Congress Committee (TNCC) chief E.V.K.S. Elangovan died in Chennai on Saturday after a brief illness. He was 73. He is survived by his wife and a son.

Mr. Elangovan, a former Union Minister of State, would have turned 74 next Saturday. He was admitted to MIOT Hospital, where he breathed his last.

Mr. Elangovan had represented the Erode (East) Assembly constituency - a seat that was previously held by his son E. Thirumahan Everaa, who died in January 2023.

Hailing from a prominent political family of Tamil Nadu, Mr. Elangovan was the son of E.V.K. Sampath, one of the founder-members of the DMK who broke ranks with the Dravidian major in 1961 and subsequently joined the Congress. The former Union Minister was also a grand-nephew of 'Periyar' E.V. Ramasamy.

Mr. Elangovan held the post of TNCC president



E.V.K.S. Elangovan

twice - from 2000 to 2002, and 2014 to 2016 - when the party was increasingly getting marginalised in the State politics. He was elected from the Sathyamangalam Assembly constituency in 1984.

Twenty years later, he was elected from the now-abolished Gobichettipalayam Lok Sabha constituency. It was then that he was made a Union Minister of State, holding the subjects of Petroleum and Natural Gas, and Commerce and Industry.

Despite being a school-mate of Jayalalithaa at Church Park and his mother Sulochana Sampath being in the AIADMK, Mr. Elangovan's ties with the leader of the AIADMK were not always smooth.

Dadar Hanuman temple will be regularised, says Fadnavis

Press Trust of India
MUMBAI

BJP leaders on Saturday claimed that a demolition notice issued by the Railways to a temple outside Mumbai's Dadar station has been stayed, with Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis saying it would be regularised as per rules.

The assertions by the ruling party leaders came a day after Shiv Sena (UBT) chief Uddhav Thackeray slammed the BJP over the notice.

BJP legislator Mangal Prabhat Lodha said the Dadar Hanuman temple will be protected. Mr. Lodha visited the shrine near Platform No. 12 at Dadar East, adjacent to Central Railway Station, and interacted with the temple trustees.

Mr. Lodha said he had spoken with Union Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw and an order has been issued to halt the demolition.

Mr. Thackeray on Friday claimed that the Railways had issued a 'fatwa' (edict) to bring down the 80-year-old Hanuman temple built

by porters. Taking a dig at the BJP's "ek hai to safe hai" slogan, he said even temples are not safe in the saffron party's regime.

Responding to a question about the temple, Mr. Fadnavis, who was at the 'Pune Book Festival 2024', pointed out: "The process of classification of temples is under way. Ancient temples are preserved. The issue of Dadar Hanuman temple will be discussed with the railway administration and a solution will be found. We will regularise it as per the rules."

Wife of techie who ended his life files anticipatory bail plea

Press Trust of India
PRAYAGRAJ

Engineer Atul Subhash's estranged wife and her family members, whom he had accused of harassment, have filed anticipatory bail pleas in the Allahabad High Court.

Subhash, a 34-year-old engineer, ended his life in Bengaluru on Monday, allegedly due to harassment by his estranged wife and her family members. A case of abetment to suicide

has been filed against his wife and her relatives.

The anticipatory bail applications have been filed by Subhash's wife, her mother, brother and uncle.

The bail pleas came after Bengaluru City Police on Friday issued summons to his wife and asked her to appear before it within three days.

Those in distress may contact Sanjivini, Society for Mental Health, suicide prevention helpline 011-40769002.

BJP govt. working for women's empowerment: Rajasthan CM

The Hindu Bureau
JAIPUR

Rajasthan Chief Minister Bhajan Lal Sharma on Saturday said the "respectable status" of women in the State was a symbol of a strong society, even as his government had been working for women's empowerment since he assumed office a year ago.

Mr. Sharma said women had played an important role in bringing the BJP to power in the 2023 Assembly election.

Mr. Sharma was address-



Bhajan Lal Sharma

ing a *Mahila Sammelan* (women's conference) in Udaipur, organised as part of the BJP government's first anniversary celebrations. He launched new schemes for women's welfare and released loans worth ₹100 crore to wo-

men's self-help groups (SHG) through the Mahila Nidhi Bank, besides transferring the revolving fund of ₹15,000 each to 10,000 SHGs.

Mr. Sharma said crimes against women had decreased under the BJP's regime as significant actions had been taken in accordance with the promises made in the ruling party's manifesto.

"The Kalika patrolling units, 250 of which have started operating, are providing round-the-clock security to women," he said.

Everyone is equal before law, says Telangana CM

The Hindu Bureau
HYDERABAD

Telangana Chief Minister Revanth Reddy has defended actor Allu Arjun's arrest, saying that the "law applies equally to all citizens, irrespective of their status".

During a discussion, organised by a media organisation in New Delhi, on Friday, the Chief Minister spoke about the stampede during the premiere of *Pushpa 2* at Sandhya theatre that resulted in a woman's death.

Mr. Reddy clarified that police acted according to law and denied any political reasons for the arrest. "A movie star or a political star, our government doesn't care. We only care about who committed the crime. A woman died in the incident. Who is responsible for this?" he asked.

"Allu Arjun arrived at the theatre without informing the police, leading to chaos among fans. If he had come to the theatre quietly and watched the movie without creating a commotion, this tragedy could have been avoided,"

Revanth Reddy says actor Allu Arjun could have reached the theatre quietly and watched the movie Pushpa 2

he said, adding that the actor's rally-like arrival caused fans to rush, resulting in the fatal stampede.

He also dismissed allegations of personal bias.

I respect law: actor Meanwhile, Allu Arjun, who was released on Saturday from the jail, thanked his followers and others across the country for their love and support and said he "is a law-abiding citizen and respects the law".

"I'll cooperate with them and I'll do the needful. And very importantly, I would like to give my condolences once again to the family. It (death of a woman) is very unfortunate," he told the media. Allu Arjun said he was watching the movie along with his family when the unfortunate incident happened. He said it was a challenging time for his family. (With inputs from PTI)

Frozen block



Winter album: Tourists pose for photographs near a frozen waterfall in Lahaul-Spiti district of Himachal Pradesh on Saturday. A cold wave has swept the hill State with temperatures continuing to drop. PTI

Agencies to probe leak of question papers in Kerala

The Hindu Bureau
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

The Director of General Education has lodged a complaint with the Kerala Police Chief in connection with the leak of question papers for the half-yearly examinations in State schools.

At a press conference here on Saturday, Minister for General Education V. Sivankutty said the leak of SSLC English and Plus One Mathematics question papers on YouTube channels ahead of the examinations was a serious issue and a challenge to the education sector. It would be investigated by various agencies.

Mincing no words, he said the question papers could not leak without the knowledge of teachers who prepared them or school authorities who were responsible for its distribution. Question papers of some subjects were leaking more often. The matter would be examined considering past experiences.

On the nexus between teachers and tuition centres, he said all assistant education officers and deputy education officers would be asked to inquire about the teachers who taught at private tuition centres. Action would be taken against the YouTube channels too, he said.

Case against Satish Jarkiholi for remarks on word 'Hindu' quashed

The Hindu Bureau
BENGALURU

The Karnataka High Court quashed a defamation case filed against Congress leader and Public Works Minister Satish Jarkiholi for allegedly defaming and hurting feelings of Hindus by his

public statement made in 2022 in which he said that "the word Hindu has a dirty and insulting meaning" in Persian language.

"This is a case where not a definite class of people is alleged to be defamed, but an indefinite class. The very concept of

defaming an indefinite class cannot lead to the offence punishable under Section 500 (punish for defamation) of the Indian Penal Code, as the purport of Section 499 (defamation) and the Explanation-II is that it should be against a definite class of people,"

the court said.

Justice M. Nagaprasanna passed the order while allowing a petition filed by Mr. Jarkiholi challenging the private complaint filed by Bengaluru-based advocate Dilip Kumar.

The court said the offence of defamation can-

not be laid against an indeterminate group as it is a settled principle of law interpreted by the top court way back in 1972 in the case of *G. Narasimhan and others vs T.V. Chokkappa*.

On invoking Section 153 (wantonly giving provocation with intent to cause

riot) of the IPC in the complaint against Mr. Jarkiholi, the court said the petitioner's statement nowhere would meet the ingredients of Section 153".

Mr. Jarkiholi made the statement during a rally held at Nippani in Belagavi district in November 2022.



Bee magnet: A mustard field in full bloom in Morigaon district of Assam. Honeybees are drawn to the abundant nectar of the flowers.



Breakfast time: A honeybee dips in for the nectar in mustard flowers. Every day they travel up to five km for nectar.



Delicate task: Beekeepers lifting trays out of a bee box to extract honey.

As busy as a bee

Itinerant workers from other States flit from one location to another in Assam to plant bee boxes and let the honey flow, in a win-win deal for them and local farmers



Ritu Raj Konwar
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Sushanta Mandal from Malda, West Bengal, has been in the beekeeping business for over eight years. Since 2016, he has been travelling from his home State to Morigaon district of Assam with 250 bee boxes, drawn to the abundant nectar of the vibrant mustard fields there. He is not alone in this journey. Several groups of beekeepers from Bihar and West Bengal converge in Assam every winter, and their numbers are steadily growing. Barpeta, Bajali, Bilasipara, Nagaon and Morigaon districts in Assam witness this trend every year.

Mustard flowers cannot self-pollinate and need the help of insects to carry pollen between flowers. This is where the bees come in.

Rearing *Apis mellifera*, the most common of the honeybee species around the world, requires a team of at least four or five persons to ensure the smooth operation of the honey production process – scouting, camping, and production. Therefore, a farmer needs to maintain at least 200 bee boxes for the work to be financially viable.

There is a growing industry of migratory beekeeping in Assam where beekeepers move

from one location to another, across the State, in search of blooming flowers for nectar. Assam's extensive mustard cultivation and low competition attracts an increasing number of farmers to the State each year.

Mustard blossoms early in Assam, prompting beekeepers to shift there. The journey is not set to a specific route and can vary based on the availability of flowers. The migration process involves scouting potential sites for suitable flowers and accommodation. Once the promising locations are identified, beekeepers conduct inspections and engage with the local residents to assess flower availability and the feasibility of housing the apian colonies.

Production of crops such as mustard, coconut, areca nut, lychee and mango is increasing in the village due to the presence of bees. The role of honeybees and other insects is not limited to agriculture, food security, and nutrition. Without them, wild plants and the ecosystems that make the planet habitable would collapse.

Even farmers who do not keep bees have benefited as the bees' activities have increased the fertility of the region's crops and fruit trees.



Honey hunt: Workers check the trays in the bee boxes.



Combing out: Beekeepers take out the trays to retrieve honey. They can extract honey once a week under favourable conditions.



Fertile ground: Assam's extensive mustard cultivation and low competition is attractive for migratory beekeepers.



By the bucket: Beekeepers transport containers of honey from a mustard field.



Golden produce: Freshly extracted honey being poured into storage containers.



Group effort: A team of beekeepers have lunch in their temporary shelter.



Fresh and sweet: A beekeeper from West Bengal extracts honey in the middle of a mustard field.

What lies ahead for Syria after Assad's exit?

How was the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham led by ex-al Qaeda leader, Abu Muhammed al-Jolani, able to defeat the Syrian armed forces? Why did the priorities of Syria's greatest allies, Russia and Iran, change in recent years? What has been the role of Turkey in the fall of the Syrian President?

Stanly Johny

The story so far:

Bashar al-Assad, President of Syria for 24 years, has fallen. He and his family have taken refuge in Russia. Syria now has a transitional government, headed by the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), an Islamist militant group that was controlling the northwestern province of Idlib. Many Syrians are celebrating the collapse of Mr. Assad's dictatorial regime, but remain anxious about what is to come. Turkey, as the main backer of the HTS, sees an opportunity to expand its influence in West Asia, while Iran and Russia, the main backers of the Assad regime, have taken a setback. Israel, in the meantime, is exploiting the vacuum in Syria to grab more territories.

Why did the Assad regime fall?

Mr. Assad held on to power for 13 years after the civil war broke out in 2011, only for his regime to collapse in 12 days. By 2017, the Assad regime had taken over most of its lost territories, with help from Russia, Iran and Hezbollah. But he hadn't defeated the militants. The strongest of them was the HTS, which was formerly called Jabhat al-Nusra, the al-Qaeda arm in Syria. Abu Muhammed al-Jolani, today the 'emir' of the HTS, was an al-Qaeda leader. The HTS-controlled Idlib emerged as a rebel stronghold. Jolani established a mini-administration in Idlib – the Syrian Salvation Government. He had been planning a large-scale offensive against the regime forces for months, if not years.

On the other side, a host of domestic, regional and international factors weakened Mr. Assad's position. Syria's economy is in a very bad shape. Its GDP shrank by 87% in the past 13 years, from \$68 billion in 2011 to just \$9 billion in 2023. Western sanctions stifled an already deteriorated economy further. The poorly paid

Syria has immense geopolitical significance. It hosts Russia's Mediterranean naval base, its only naval base outside the former Soviet territory

soldiers of the Assad regime lacked motivation to preserve it. Syrian armed forces were also weakened by repeated Israeli air strikes, which picked up pace over the past year, after Hamas's October 7, 2023 attack. Mr. Assad was heavily reliant on his external allies for security. However, their priorities also changed in recent years. Russia's focus is now on the Ukraine war. Iran is involved in a hot and cold war with Israel. Hezbollah lost most of its leaders and thousands of fighters in its year-long war with Israel. The militants knew Mr. Assad was weak.

They launched an offensive on November 27 in the western outskirts of Aleppo, probably aimed at cutting the underbelly of his decaying regime. What happened next was a rapid collapse of the regime itself.

Who is in charge now?

Syria today has roughly four militant coalitions. The first one is the HTS, led by Jolani. The HTS says it has broken its ties with al-Qaeda, and promises to respect Syria's ethnic and religious diversity. But its rank and file comprise transnational jihadists, who travelled to Syria from across the world, to fight "jihad" against the Assad regime. The HTS's main ally is the Syrian National Army (SNA), another northern militia. The core of the SNA is the Free Syrian Army, a Turkish proxy that was formed with defected Syrian soldiers and officers. The HTS and the SNA launched the November 27 offensive together.

The second group is the Southern Front, a loose coalition of dozens of militias in Syria's south (Daraa and Quneitra). Some of them were backed by Jordan, which shares a border with southern Syria. When the HTS-SNA combine advanced towards regime-held cities from the north, the southern militias started an offensive from the south. And they reached Damascus first, on December 8. The third main group is the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The core of the SDF is the People's Protection Units (YPG), the armed wing of Syrian Kurdistan. The SDF enjoys relative autonomy in the Syrian Kurdish region. The SDF was armed by the U.S. in the past in its fight against the Islamic State. The fourth group is the Alawite militias in the coastal region. Alawites are Mr. Assad's sect, who enjoyed power for over five decades in the country. The HTS, a Sunni Islamist group, had in the past targeted Alawites, who make up roughly 15% of Syria's population. The HTS has asked the Alawite community to cut ties with the fallen regime. Of these four, the HTS is the most powerful force now. The transition government in Damascus is a replica of the HTS Salvation government in Idlib.

Why does geopolitics matter?

Syria has immense geopolitical significance. It hosts Russia's Mediterranean naval base in Tartus, its only naval base outside the former

Soviet territory. Russia also has built an air base in Syria. For Russia to project force, from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean and then to the Atlantic, it is essential to retain access to the Tartus base. It could also be one of the reasons Russia made a military intervention in Syria in 2015, to protect the Assad regime. Now that the regime has collapsed, Russia's focus would be on protecting its bases. For Iran, a sworn enemy of America and Israel, Syria was its only state ally in West Asia. Syria was also a key conduit between Iran and Hezbollah, the Lebanese militia. The fall of the Assad regime could disrupt Iran's supply networks in the region, which could invariably weaken the country's deterrence.

Turkey, on the other side, appears to be stronger. For years, it had tried to pull down the Assad regime. When the Russian intervention made it immediately impossible, Turkey shifted its focus towards playing a long game with its proxies. Now that Mr. Assad is gone and the HTS-SNA coalition is in Damascus, Recep Tayyip Erdogan seems to have outwitted Vladimir Putin, and extended his influence from Ankara to the borders of Iraq, Jordan and Israel.

Will the militants build a new Syria?

Many think the fall of a dictatorial regime would lead to a new dawn. For now, Syria's militants have made the right noises – about respecting the country's diversity and rebuilding its dilapidated institutions and welcoming back refugees. But Syria still remains a complex case – with or without Mr. Assad. Before Hafez al-Assad, Bashar's father, captured power in 1971, Syria had seen multiple coups and counter-coups. It was Hafez and his Ba'ath party that stabilised the country and built its modern institutions. Today, the challenge the militants face is to rebuild the country once again, by demobilising the militias. But the HTS neither has ideological clarity for an inclusive Syria nor the resources to demobilise other militias. The HTS is a Salafi-jihadist outfit, which wants to remake secular Syria and retain its tight grip over state institutions. If the HTS's rule in Idlib is an example, the group is not any less dictatorial than Mr. Assad. The southern militias, backed by Jordan, would want to get their due share of power. And in the east, the SDF, the Kurdish militia, wants to keep their hard-earned autonomy. But Turkey sees the SDF as a terrorist outfit, and Turkish-backed militias have already started attacking the SDF.

In Afghanistan, throughout the 1980s, the U.S. and Pakistan-backed Mujahideen fought together against the communist regime as well as the Soviet troops. But after the Soviet withdrawal and the collapse of the communist rule, Afghanistan fell into deeper chaos. In Libya, NATO made a military intervention in 2011 to "liberate" the country from Mohammed Gaddafi. After Gaddafi's regime, one of the most stable governments in Africa, was toppled and he was killed, the country fell into a bloody civil war – which is still going on. Iraq never recovered from the scars of America's regime change war of 2003. None of these examples are encouraging for Syria.



In session: Rajya Sabha Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar conducts the House proceedings on November 25, 2024.

Can the Vice President be impeached?

Why did the Opposition submit a notice to move a no-confidence motion against Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar?

Aaratrika Bhaumik

The story so far:

On December 10, the Opposition submitted a notice to move a no-confidence or impeachment resolution against Vice President and Rajya Sabha Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar. The notice accuses him of engaging in "partisan" conduct and being an "impassioned spokesperson" of the government's policies at public fora. A similar motion had been considered by the Opposition during the Budget session in August but was ultimately shelved as the session drew to a close.

What is the procedure for impeaching the Vice President?

As the second-highest constitutional authority (after the President), the Vice-President draws his or her powers from Article 63 of the Constitution. Article 64 further confers upon the post the power to serve as the "ex-officio Chairman of the Council of States (Rajya Sabha)." Thus, the Vice-President discharges the duties of both the Vice-President and Chairperson of the Rajya Sabha.

The process for the removal of both the Vice President and Rajya Sabha chairperson has been laid down under Article 67. The provision stipulates that the Vice-President will hold office for a term of five years from "the date on which he enters upon his office". However, he or she may leave mid-term by submitting a resignation letter to the President.

Additionally, Article 67(b) provides for the removal of the Vice-President if a majority of Rajya Sabha members pass a resolution to that effect, which must then be "agreed to" by the House of the People (Lok Sabha).

However, the provision specifies that no such resolution can be moved unless at least a 14-day notice has been given. "The resolution can only be considered for discussion once the constitutionally mandated 14-day notice period has elapsed"

For instance, in 2020 then Rajya Sabha Chairman M. Venkaiah Naidu dismissed a no-confidence motion against Deputy Chairman Harivansh on the ground that it required a 14-day notice. Even if the motion is taken up in the House, it is unlikely to yield any result since the Opposition lacks the requisite numbers for its passage. Ultimately, this move appears to be more of a symbolic protest against Mr. Dhankhar's purported partisan conduct.

Will the no-confidence motion be taken up?

It is unlikely that the no-confidence motion will be taken up for discussion in the House since the Winter Session of Parliament is scheduled to conclude on December 20, which is less than 14 days away.

For instance, in 2020 then Rajya Sabha Chairman M. Venkaiah Naidu dismissed a no-confidence motion against Deputy Chairman Harivansh on the ground that it required a 14-day notice. Even if the motion is taken up in the House, it is unlikely to yield any result since the Opposition lacks the requisite numbers for its passage. Ultimately, this move appears to be more of a symbolic protest against Mr. Dhankhar's purported partisan conduct.

"Since it is a constitutional resolution, it does not lapse when the session is prorogued. It can be taken up in the next session of Parliament, or even in a special session convened specifically for that purpose," Mr. Achary clarified.

Can the Vice President preside over the motion in the Upper House?

Notably, even if the motion is taken up in the House and the Opposition's grievances are discussed, it would be difficult for Mr. Dhankhar to preside over those proceedings in the Rajya Sabha. Mr. Achary pointed out that Article 92 of the Constitution explicitly bars the Chairman or Deputy Chairman from presiding over proceedings while a resolution for their removal is under consideration. However, the provision permits the Chairperson to speak and participate in the proceedings although he or she is barred from voting "on such resolution or any other matter" during it.

These provisions however come into effect only if the motion is accepted by Deputy Chairman Harivansh Narayan Singh.



Sudden ouster: A shoe rests on top of a bust of Hafez al-Assad, as militants inspect the damage at a site in Damascus, Syria, on December 14. REUTERS

How can gene therapy cure haemophilia A?

What is replacement theory and how effective is it as a form of treatment for haemophiliacs?

What is Roctavian? How is using a lentivirus as the vector in gene therapy different from using an adenovirus? Are medicines for treating haemophilia affordable and accessible?

Jacob Koshy

The story so far:

Medical researchers at the Christian Medical College, Vellore have reported successfully applying gene-therapy to treat severe haemophilia A, a rare, hereditary condition that results from a faulty gene which triggers severe, spontaneous and fatal bleeding episodes.

What is the usual treatment?

The primary approach to treating haemophilia is called replacement therapy. As the disease is a condition resulting from low levels of clotting factor – necessary to prevent bleeding – replacement therapy involves slowly dripping, or injecting into a vein, concentrates of clotting factor VIII (for haemophilia A) or clotting factor IX (for haemophilia B). Clotting-factor concentrates can be derived and manufactured from human blood, which must be properly tested and screened to prevent the spread of diseases, such as hepatitis. It is also possible to

A March 2024 study estimates the per-patient cost of treating a haemophiliac in India to be \$3,00,000 over a 10-year period

use clotting-factor concentrates that aren't made from human blood reducing, the albeit very small risk, of contracting diseases from injecting blood. These are called recombinant clotting factors and can be easily stored, mixed, and used at home. Haemophiliacs can regularly inoculate themselves with replacement therapy to prevent bleeding, and is meant to protect against unexpected bleeding episodes. Among the challenges with clotting factors is that the body's own antibodies can destroy the clotting factor before it has a chance to work and defeats the whole idea of replacement therapy. Other forms of treatment include desmopressin (DDAVP), a man-made hormone used to treat people who have mild haemophilia A. DDAVP isn't used to treat haemophilia B or severe haemophilia A. This hormone increases the level of clotting factor in the blood.

What is gene therapy in haemophilia?

Among the emerging approaches to fix diseases such as haemophilia, which is due to a defective gene on the X chromosome, is gene therapy. Here copies of a 'corrected' gene are introduced into the cells of a patient, the idea being that this would result – in the case of haemophilia – normal expression of the necessary clotting factor. So far there is only one U.S. Food And Drug Administration-approved gene therapy for haemophilia. Called Roctavian, it is an adeno-associated virus vector-based gene therapy and approved only in 2023 for treating adults with severe haemophilia A, and that too only for those without pre-existing antibodies to adeno-associated virus. Roctavian consists of a viral vector carrying the necessary gene for clotting Factor VIII. The gene is expressed in the liver to increase blood levels of FVIII and reduce the risk of uncontrolled bleeding. The effectiveness of the treatment was established based on results from 112 patients followed up for at least three years after Roctavian treatment. Following the infusion, the mean,

annualised bleeding rate decreased from 5.4 bleeds per year at baseline to 2.6 bleeds per year. The majority of patients who received Roctavian also got corticosteroids to suppress the immune system for the gene therapy to be effective and safe. Treatment response to Roctavian may decrease over time.

How was the Vellore trial different?

The main difference in this approach is the use of a lentivirus as the vector, instead of an adenovirus. Because adenovirus infections are fairly common in people, the chances of having antibodies are fairly high and this could actually be counter-productive to those using treatments such as Roctavian. Lentivirus infections being less common, it is expected that fewer people will have antibodies to them, making them more effective in treatment. Further the Indian approach relies on gene transfer into adult stem cells with the lentiviral vector that integrates with the body's cells instead of in vivo transfer to a hepatocyte, or a liver cell, through a non-integrating AAV vector. The advantage of this approach is expected to be a reliable, life-long production of the clotting factor in necessary quantities without side-effects. Though tested in only five patients in Vellore, none of them reported bleeding episodes over an average follow-up period of 14 months.

Is haemophilia treatment affordable?

A March 2024 research study in the journal *Heliyon*, estimates the per-patient cost of treating a haemophiliac in India to be \$3,00,000 over a 10-year period. Based on various estimates, there may be about 1,00,000 haemophiliacs with type A and type B conditions, with the former being more common. This is the reason why treatments can be expensive. Roctavian is also not cheap and costs nearly \$2 million. Whether the gene-therapy product tested in the India will be affordable remains to be seen, though that is the hope. "It is too early to talk about costs but in principle it will need to be something that will make sense in the Indian healthcare system," Dr. Alok Srivastava, Head, Haematology Research Unit, St John's Research Institute, Bangalore, told *The Hindu*. He led the trial at Vellore.



GETTY IMAGES

PROFILES

President's gambit declined

Yoon Suk Yeol

The impeached leader of South Korea was able to manage a successful transition from state prosecutor to national politician, but could not learn the give-and-take of democratic politics, nor give up thinking like a prosecutor

G. Sampath

Around half past ten on the night of December 3, Yoon Suk Yeol, South Korea's President and leader of the conservative People Power Party (PPP), appeared on national television to declare "emergency martial law". The decree meant that all political meetings, rallies, and strikes would be banned and media would come under military censorship. Local media reported that law enforcement and intelligence agencies got instructions to round up Opposition lawmakers and seal the National Assembly. Mr. Yoon, 63, justified the move by claiming that the Opposition, the liberal Democratic Party of Korea (DPK) was engaged in "anti-state activities" and collaborating with "North Korean communists".

But the news was received by ordinary Koreans with shock, for they believed they had put the days of military rule firmly behind them. It is a testament to how deeply the democratic ethos had taken root in the country that the martial law lasted barely six hours. During this dramatic interlude, Lee Jae-myung, the leader of the DPK, rallied his party members, asking them to rush to the National Assembly building. He also began a live stream from his mobile, getting the general public directly involved as his party scrambled to save the country from a looming dictatorship.

The live stream helped. Soldiers despatched to secure the National Assembly were held up by thousands of protesters blocking their way and demanding immediate restoration of democratic government. The delay and the consequent confusion enabled 190 of the 300 members the National Assembly to sneak into the premises, with some even climbing in through the windows. In a special session, all the 190, including members of Mr. Yoon's PPP, voted against the martial law. As per the Korean constitution, if the legislative majority strikes down martial law, the President must comply. Left with no alternative, Mr. Yoon withdrew his proclamation by 4.30 a.m. on Wednesday.

The Opposition brought an

impeachment motion against him on December 7, but it was thwarted by a mass boycott by all the PPP lawmakers. The PPP has 108 members in the 300-member National Assembly, and a two-thirds majority vote (200) is required for an impeachment. The Opposition put the impeachment to vote again on December 14, and this time, 204 voted in favour. As a result, Mr. Yoon's presidential duties have been suspended, and Prime Minister Han Duck-soo will serve as acting President.

Review by court

Korea's Constitutional court will now review the Assembly's impeachment decision and has 180 days to deliver its verdict. If it strikes down the impeachment, Mr. Yoon will return to office. If it upholds it, Mr. Yoon will be permanently removed from office and elections must be held within 60 days. Simultaneously, Mr. Yoon also faces an investigation into whether his martial law decree amounts to insurrection, a crime that carries a death penalty.

As per the Constitution, martial law can only be invoked in extreme circumstances, "to cope with a military necessity or to maintain the public safety and order by mobilisation of the military forces in time of war, armed conflict or similar national emergency." These conditions were not in evidence when Mr. Yoon made his move. Given that members of his own party spoke out against his decree, Mr. Yoon seemed to have misread the fiercely democratic culture of his people, for whom the very idea of 'martial law' evokes traumatic events from the past, such as the 1980 Gwangju Uprising and the massacre of pro-democracy activists.

In fact, the public mood became evident almost instantly on social media, which was replete with 'trending' posts that questioned Mr. Yoon's mental fitness, with users suggesting he might require psychiatric evaluation for "delusional disorder" and "paranoia". So, what explains Mr. Yoon's extraordinary act of overreach, one that has not only derailed his political career but has the potential to land him in jail or worse?

Korean politics in recent times has



ILLUSTRATION: R. RAJESH

been marked by extreme polarisation, with political incumbents often using their tenures to seek vengeance on their rivals. For Mr. Yoon, frustration with his prime rival, Mr. Lee, had been building up for a long time.

Unlike Mr. Lee, Mr. Yoon never held elected office until he became President. Again, unlike Mr. Lee, whose parents were sanitation workers, Mr. Yoon comes from a privileged background. He studied law at an elite university before embarking on a stellar career as a prosecutor, sending two former Presidents to jail for abuse of power. In March 2021, Mr. Yoon resigned as the prosecutor general. In June, he announced his candidacy for the 2022 Presidential

race. And by March 2022, he defeated Mr. Lee by the closest margin in Korean history (48.56% to 47.83% of the vote) to become President. His campaign, and political posturing, especially on issues related to gender parity, have prompted comparisons with Donald Trump.

In stark contrast to Mr. Yoon's political trajectory of privilege to conservative politician, Mr. Lee began as a factory worker, and worked as a labour lawyer, following the path of rights-based politics to the centre-left of the DPK. Not surprisingly, the personality clash and political rivalry between Mr. Yoon, a conservative, and Mr. Lee, a liberal, also had an ideological edge.

Under Mr. Yoon's presidency, the political cleavage between the two sides found expression in state prosecutors vigorously pursuing bribery and breach of trust investigations against Mr. Lee, who has denied these charges, terming them politically motivated. Mr. Yoon also rebuffed Mr. Lee's attempts for a direct meeting to figure out a working relationship.

Mr. Lee, having lost the Presidential race to Mr. Yoon, bounced back with a seat in the National Assembly where he has emerged as the dominant figure in the Opposition. He has used the DPK's Parliamentary majority to repeatedly block Mr. Yoon's Budgets and impeach several of his key administrative officials – a tactic Mr. Yoon has described as "legislative dictatorship".

Lame duck President

Mr. Yoon did not enjoy a Parliamentary majority when he became President in 2022. He had a chance to get it in the general elections in April this year but failed, as the DPK won a landslide. South Korean Presidents are limited to one five-year term, and Mr. Yoon was facing the dubious prospect of serving out his entire term as a lame duck President – without a majority, or even a working relationship, in the National Assembly. For most of this year, Mr. Yoon has complained bitterly about a non-cooperative National Assembly controlled by the Opposition, whom he has called "monsters" and a "den of criminals". It would appear that mounting frustration over "legislative dictatorship" was weighing heavily on Mr. Yoon's mind, and perhaps triggered the impulse for a tit-for-tat – executive dictatorship, in the form of martial law.

In South Korean history, prosecutors have generally served as useful weapons for authoritarian leaders – they are typically not viewed as friendly to democracy. Mr. Yoon has demonstrated why. He was able to manage a successful transition from state prosecutor to national politician, but could not learn the give-and-take of democratic politics, nor give up thinking like a prosecutor.

THE GIST

South Korean politics in recent times has been marked by extreme polarisation, with political incumbents often using their tenures to seek vengeance on their rivals. For Mr. Yoon, frustration with his prime rival, Mr. Lee, had been building up for a long time.

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'Popular' suspect

Luigi Mangione

The 26-year-old Ivy League graduate, who allegedly shot the CEO of a medical insurance company in the U.S., has found support among many, while it shows the public's eroding trust in institutions

Adithya Narayan

Not long after an election that polarised the nation, civil society in the U.S. stands divided yet again over a man: 26-year-old Luigi Mangione, who allegedly shot UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson outside a hotel in Manhattan on December 4.

Mangione was picked up from a McDonald's outlet in Pennsylvania, on December 9 when a member of the restaurant staff spotted and identified him.

From ridiculing the employee and McDonalds to lionising Mangione as an "anti-capitalist" hero and describing his act as "vigilante justice", social media was awash with reactions that glorified the killing of the father of two.

So much so that Pennsylvania Governor Josh Shapiro felt compelled to spell out the morality: "He is no hero. The real hero in this story is the person who called 911 at McDonald's." "We do not kill people in cold blood to resolve policy differences," Mr. Shapiro said.

That it took a Governor's statement for people to see through a crime that happened in broad daylight is a telling sign. Regardless, observers and columnists attribute the sympathy pouring in for Mangione to the hatred re-



ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

served by the public for insurance companies.

Recovered from the crime scene were bullet casings that had the words 'Deny', 'Defend' and 'Depose' written on them – a play on the phrase 'Delay, Deny, Defend', tactics used by insurance firms to refuse claims. Also found in his possession was a handwritten manifesto that criticised corporate greed. "Frankly these parasites simply had it coming," the note stated. UnitedHealthcare, however, has said Mangione was not its customer.

As police try and figure out if Mangione, who had a back problem and did correction procedure, acted out of self-interest or handed out "vigilante justice", public support has swelled. His X account grew by 4,00,000 followers since the shooting, \$31,000 was raised on GiveSendGo and "#FreeLuigi" and "hot assassin" tags spread on social media.

In Mangione, people

found a "folk hero" who stood up for them against an industry that has long become a target of public ire. With a market valuation of \$560 billion, UnitedHealth ranks 19th on Forbes' list of the world's biggest companies. However, look past the insurance firm to see that the individuals involved are mired in a strange paradox.

According to a Reuters report, Thompson had a modest working-class upbringing in rural Iowa. He graduated with a Bachelor's degree in business administration from the University of Iowa in 1997. He is a certified public accountant and worked for six years at the accounting firm PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) before joining the United Group in 2004, according to Forbes.

This is in stark contrast to the privileged upbringing of Mangione, someone believed to have carried out an "anti-capitalist" attack. Born into a prominent real-estate family in

Baltimore, Mangione received Bachelor's and Master's degrees from the Ivy League University of Pennsylvania. He also served as head counsellor at a pre-college programme at Stanford. He worked as a software engineer at TrueCar, an online marketplace based in California.

Six months ago, he fell off the public radar with his mother filing a missing complaint in November.

Investigators are scouring his social media accounts for further clues and a concrete motive. Save for a goodreads account where he posted a review commending the "prescient" nature of Unabomber Ted Kaczynski's *Industrial Society and its future*, Mangione's political standing can be described as heterodox at best.

The fact that Mangione's motive and ideology have not been deciphered so far is worrisome for it then leaves only one plausible explanation. Much like the 2021 Capitol attack, it shows the public's eroding trust in institutions. A fallout of that is the common man disregarding civic sense and becoming emboldened to take the law into his own hands. Mangione, who spoke about a "symbolic takedown" in his manifesto, then becomes a hero for those disenchanted with the system.

The new boss at Mint Street

Sanjay Malhotra

RBI's 26th Governor took charge this week in the midst of a growing clamour for monetary policy makers to ignore high inflation and cut interest rates

Vikas Dhoot

December 9 began as a routine day for North Block mandarins, with questions pertaining to the Finance Ministry to be answered in the Lok Sabha. But for avid observers of the economy and financial markets, the big question of the day was neither starred nor unstarred. It revolved around the Governorship of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI). The incumbent Shaktikanta Das, in his sixth year at the RBI, had just delivered a monetary policy that disappointed a government rooting for an interest rate cut, particularly after GDP growth slipped to just 5.4% between July and September.

Mr. Das, whose tenure was to expire on December 10, said the growth-inflation balance was off but asserted persistently high inflation also hurt consumption and growth. By Monday, reporters who had been running stories about another extension for him, had changed course in the absence of any official communiqué, floating names of senior bureaucrats who may replace Mr. Das. None had an inkling that name would turn out to be Union Revenue Secretary Sanjay Malhotra.

They were not the only ones surprised – even Mr.



ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

Malhotra is learnt to have been informed just hours before his appointment was made public. The Rajasthan cadre, 1990-batch IAS officer is not the usual Finance Ministry insider picked for the top role at Mint Street. Like his predecessor, most such appointees had handled departments such as Economic Affairs, or held the Finance Secretary's role, like the late R.N. Malhotra, who was the 17th RBI Governor.

Mr. Malhotra, who has spent almost all his life in North India, is a computer engineering graduate from IIT Kanpur, with a Master's degree in Public Policy from Princeton University. His new role brings him to the heart of India's financial markets Mumbai for at least three years.

"Not a whole lot is known about Mr. Malhotra's views on current economic issues, so he is a relatively unknown figure from that perspective," economists at Nomura Securities said. Others

echoed the sentiment, chiming in with stuff like "we don't know how he feels about growth and inflation but if the government has chosen him at this juncture, he could oblige them with a quicker and bigger rate cut cycle".

Soft-spoken, inquisitive
A cricket and coffee aficionado, Mr. Malhotra is one of the most affable and soft-spoken, yet no-nonsense officials in service, known not just for his crystal-clear responses to questions, but also for his inquisitiveness. In media interactions, after one's queries are done and dusted and if time permits, he would extend the chat over a cup of Coffee Board brew to glean some ground-level feedback on issues and perceptions doing the rounds.

On his Day One in office, Governor Malhotra revealed no bias towards either growth or inflation, saying he does not like to start playing his shots from

the first ball of a match. But he promised to "put the best foot forward in public interest" once he gets a clear sense of the pitch, with an eye on the four policy pillars that mattered for people – growth, stability, certainty and trust, he noted.

Mr. Malhotra may be a mystery for Mint Street watchers, but having served as the Department of Financial Services Secretary, he has been on the central bank's board, and is an authority of sorts on banking and financial sector reforms. Moreover, his Revenue role probably affords him a unique vantage point of the economy's growth and consumption impulses, having overseen not just direct tax flows from corporates and households, but also the trends in goods and services trade that only granular details of GST, Customs and Excise trends can reveal. It is then not for nothing that the Centre's revenue math (that hinges on growth assumptions) he has worked on in recent Budgets, has generally been spot on.

Mr. Malhotra knows a lot more about the economic terrain than many realise, and in his new innings, where constant communication plays an important role, the world is about to find that out – with or without rate cuts.

Solid phase alloying can turn metal scrap into high-value alloys

The Hindu Bureau

Metal scrap can be directly transformed and upgraded into high-performance, high-value alloys without the need for conventional melting processes, according to a new study published this week in the journal *Nature Communications*. The study demonstrates that scrap aluminum from industrial waste streams can produce high-performance metal alloys.

The upcycled aluminum performs on par with identical materials produced from primary aluminum, indicating that this approach can provide a low-cost pathway to bringing more high-quality recycled metal products to the marketplace. By converting waste into high-performance aluminum products, the new method, called solid phase alloying, not only enhances material properties but also contributes to environmental sustainability.

The innovative solid-phase alloying process converts aluminum scrap blended with copper, zinc, and magnesium into a precisely designed high-strength aluminum alloy product in a matter of minutes, compared to the days required to produce the same product utilizing conventional melting, casting, and extrusion. The research team used a PNNL-patented technique called Shear Assisted Processing and Extrusion, or ShAPE, to achieve their results. However, the researchers noted that the findings should be reproducible with other solid-phase manufacturing processes.

Longer lifespan
Within the ShAPE process, a high-speed rotating die creates friction and heat that disperses the chunky starting ingredients into a uniform alloy with the same characteristics as a newly manufactured aluminum wrought product. The solid phase approach eliminates the need for energy-intensive bulk melting, which combined with the low-cost feedstocks originating from scrap, has the potential to sharply reduce the cost of manufacturing these materials. For consumers, this means recycled aluminum products will have a longer lifespan and better performance at a lower cost, whether they are part of a vehicle, a construction material, or a household appliance.

According to the researchers, the solid phase alloying process could be used to create custom metal wire alloys for various 3D printing technologies. "Solid phase alloying is theoretically applicable to any metal combination that you can imagine, and the fact that manufacturing occurs wholly in the solid state means you can begin to consider totally new alloys that we've not been able to make before," Cindy Powell, a researcher at the Pacific Northwest National Laboratory, U.S. and a coauthor of the study said in a release.

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SNAPSHOTS



Why deep sleep is helpful for long-term memory

It has been known for nearly 20 years that slow, synchronous electrical waves in the brain during deep sleep support the formation of memories. Why that is so was previously unknown. While we sleep, our brains replay the events of the day, moving information from the location of short-term memory, the hippocampus, to the long-term memory located in the neocortex. According to a study, the slow waves make the neocortex, the location of long-term memory, especially receptive to information.



Exposure to air pollution linked to blood clots in veins

A large longitudinal study of over 6,600 U.S. adults who lived in or near one of six major metropolitan areas found that exposure to long-term air pollution was linked with increased risks for blood clots that can occur in deep veins, which, if untreated, can block blood flow and cause serious complications, even death. About 248 adults (3.7%) developed blood clots in deep veins. Participants with greater overall exposure to tiny air pollution particles had a 39% increased associated risk for blood clots in deep veins.



Detecting premalignant pancreatic lesions with MRI

Precursor lesions of pancreatic cancer are very difficult to characterise with magnetic resonance imaging (MRI). But now, in a new study, researchers have shown, for the first time, that a particular form of MRI called Diffusion Tensor Imaging (DTI) is capable of robustly detecting premalignant lesions in the pancreas. Their study could open the way to early clinical diagnosis in people at risk, and to treatment assessment of pancreatic cancer.



Question Corner

Limiting factor

Do giraffes really struggle with slopes?

A new study analysing the movements of 33 GPS-collared giraffes across five reserves in South Africa has found that giraffes avoid steep terrain and are unable to navigate slopes with a gradient of more than 20 degrees, most likely due to the energy required and the risk of falling. Researchers found that giraffes will tolerate terrain of up to 12 degrees, but only if it leads to favourable vegetation. The findings highlight a mismatch between the ideal, flat habitats of giraffes and the areas they're being conserved

in. Using the newly discovered 20-degree gradient threshold, the researchers were able to calculate the proportion of habitats in key African countries where giraffes are currently found that are inaccessible to the animals. They found that of all the countries that were mapped, one in three had more unusable areas in protected areas than outside of protected areas. Giraffes are currently found in 21 African countries but despite their wide distribution, populations have been declining.

Readers may send their questions / answers to questioncorner@thehindu.co.in

Bovine H5N1 displays pronounced neurotropism in many mammals

Pronounced neurotropism of the 2024 H5N1 virus belonging to the 2.3.4.4b clade is highlighted by high viral loads in the brain and minimal or no viral presence in the lungs of several species, suggesting a significant shift in virus behaviour

R. Prasad

A study investigated and compared the tissue tropism of a 2004 H5N1 strain isolated from a fatal human case and the 2024 bovine strain of H5N1 that is currently circulating in mice and found that the two strains displayed significantly different abilities to infect different tissues. While replication of the 2004 virus was largely in the respiratory tract with "limited" replication in the central nervous system, the 2024 bovine strain successfully replicated in the respiratory tract as well as various regions of the brain. Also, mice challenged with the 2024 bovine H5N1 isolates exhibited clinical signs consistent with central nervous system infection, and infectious viruses were detected in the brain tissue. The 2004 H5N1 virus was used for comparison as the virus strain has been extensively studied in animal models.

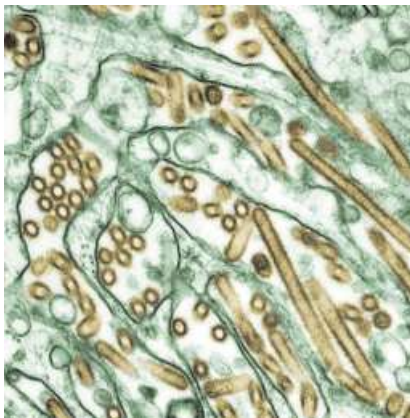
The study demonstrated that both the 2004 and the 2024 H5N1 isolates were uniformly fatal in mice when infected through aerosol exposure. But the tissue tropism was vastly different – the 2004 strain was largely restricted to the respiratory tract and predominantly caused respiratory disease, while the 2024 bovine strain showed preference to both the respiratory tract and the brain and caused inflammation in the brain and nasal cavity.

"Our findings reveal that the bovine isolate exhibits enhanced neurotropism, unlike the respiratory-restricted replication observed with the H5N1 isolate from 2004. This difference in tissue tropism, accompanied by distinct cytokine responses in the brain, underscores the potential for altered disease outcomes in other mammalian hosts," the authors of a study posted in a preprint server BioRxiv write. Preprints are yet to be peer-reviewed.

The H5N1 clade 2.3.4.4b has caused widespread infection in over 90 species of wild and domestic birds and more than 21 mammalian species, including several human infections. The virus has caused fatal infections in many different mammals. In March 2024, the 2.3.4.4b clade was first detected in dairy cattle in Texas. The virus has since spread rapidly; as of December 12, the virus has spread to 832 cattle herds across 16 States in the U.S., with 617 herds in California alone.

Shift in tissue tropism

Replication of the 2004 H5N1 isolate was largely in the respiratory tract with "limited" replication in the central nervous system



The clade 2.3.4.4b of 2024 H5N1 virus has spread to 832 cattle herds across 16 States in the U.S. CYNTHIA GOLDSMITH

- The H5N1 clade 2.3.4.4b has caused widespread infection in over 90 species of wild and domestic birds and more than 21 mammalian species, including several human infections
- Unlike the 2004 H5N1 virus, the 2024 bovine strain successfully replicates in the respiratory tract as well as various regions of the brain in mice

- Mice exposed to the 2024 bovine isolate exhibited clinical signs consistent with central nervous system infection; infectious viruses detected in the brain tissue

- Aerosol exposure to 2004 and 2024 H5N1 strains was uniformly fatal in mice
- The difference in the tissue tropism of the 2024 bovine isolate underscores the potential for altered disease outcomes in other mammalian hosts

- The 2.3.4.4b clade of H5N1 virus is strongly linked to respiratory and neurological signs in cats

- Dolphins, skunks, minks, red foxes, and sea lions have displayed significant neurological signs and viral presence mainly in the brain

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Mice were exposed to

one of the two H5N1 isolates via aerosols to mimic a more natural route of infection. Upon exposure, mice in both groups displayed reduced activity, rapidly lost weight, and died. While the mice exposed to the 2024 bovine strain showed neurological signs of disease, neurological disease was absent in mice exposed to the 2004 isolate. Therefore, unsurprisingly, the virus titers were high in the brain tissue of mice exposed to the bovine strain compared with mice exposed to the 2004 strain.

'Heavily linked'

In April this year, 10 cats died in a rural South Dakota residence, showing respiratory and neurological symptoms. Lab testing of two cats confirmed H5N1 clade 2.3.4.4b infection. As per a paper accepted for publication in the journal *Emerging Microbes & Infections*, dead cats

showed systemic infection with lesions and viral antigens in multiple organs. "Higher viral RNA and antigen in the brain indicated pronounced neurotropism," they write.

The authors note that while earlier H5N1 clades in cats caused subclinical infections or clinical disease characterised by pneumonia and encephalitis, the 2.3.4.4b H5N1 virus strain has also been "heavily linked to respiratory and neurological signs in cats in France, Poland, South Korea, and the U.S."

The authors note that animals infected with clade 2.3.4.4b H5N1 viruses commonly exhibited pneumonia and meningoencephalitis, with neurological signs predominating in several animal species. Mammals such as dolphins, skunks, minks, red foxes, and sea lions have displayed significant neurological signs such as tremors, convulsions, and

ataxia, with viral presence mainly in the brain. "Though neurotropism and neurological signs were observed during the outbreaks of previous clades of H5N1 viruses, the pronounced neurotropism of the current H5N1 clade 2.3.4.4b is highlighted by high viral loads in the brain and minimal or no viral presence in the lungs of several species, suggesting a significant shift in virus behaviour," they write.

It must be noted that unlike in mice, central nervous system involvement has not yet been reported for dairy cows, either via natural or experimental infection by the bovine H5N1 strain (2.3.4.4b clade). The H5N1 transmission within and between cattle herds is hypothesised to be associated with milking practices. In cows, the H5N1 virus replication has been limited to the mammary glands when lactating cows were inoculated via the mammary gland.

Notable shift

"The growing list of susceptible mammalian hosts highlights the virus's ability to cross species barriers, raising concerns about its potential impact on wildlife and domestic animal populations," the authors of the accepted paper write. "There is a notable shift in the neurotropism of H5N1 viruses, particularly with the emergence of clade 2.3.4.4b in cats and wild carnivores like foxes... These cases have documented viral adaptations that facilitate central nervous system involvement, with some infections exhibiting viral mutations indicative of enhanced neurotropism."

Writing by hand is better for learning, memory



SPEAKING OF SCIENCE
D. Balasubramanian

Time was when we elders wrote our letters and other correspondence using pen and paper and sent them across through the post office. Today, other than sending greeting cards by post, we have even started using digital devices such as smartphones and digital computers, typing out the alphabet and numbers for sending applications, messages, and responses. Even today, when we are in the e-age, primary and secondary school children while learning to write lessons, do homework, answer tests, and write essays by

hand, and once done, use their smartphones to talk to friends and use WhatsApp.

An article by Charlotte Hu, in the *Scientific American* citing some research publications says that writing by hand activates a wide range of interconnected brain regions responsible for learning and memory. Let me cite the findings of some of these publications. Studies in education research by a group of technologists from Trondheim, Norway, in the journal *Frontiers in Psychology* point out that handwriting but not typewriting leads to widespread brain connectivity. In other words, handwriting affects the brain in more positive ways than typing the same material on a keyboard. First, hand-



Gains: Writing by hand facilitates better memory. GETTY IMAGES

writing training not only improves spelling accuracy but also facilitates better memory and recall.

They studied a group of schoolchildren, attached electronic sensors to their heads, and monitored the brain activity while the students were writing by hand, and when they were

using a computer. Such an electroencephalographic study revealed that writing or drawing by hand causes more activity and involves larger areas of the brain, as opposed to typing on a keyboard. Writing was thus seen to 'light up' more brain regions than typing. When the students were al-

so given a challenging word game (e.g., 'scrabble', 'wordle'), their memory levels were found to be higher.

Handwriting also helps in recognising and understanding the shapes and sizes of letters of the alphabet. In a study involving about 30 students, they asked the participants to use a digital pen to write in cursive by hand directly on the touchscreen and a keyboard to typewrite the presented words. Here too, the shape and size of the letters written by hand were better than typing.

Languages where the alphabets differ from those in English (for example those in the Middle East, Far East, and some Indian languages as well) are easier written by hand and are not easily available on

most commercially available computers.

In most schools across India, the medium of instruction in most schools is the local language for students from primary all the way up to the tenth class, and English is taught as an additional language from the secondary school level. However, the children already use mobile phones which have English alphabets in them. Some Indian languages have unique letters and alphabets that the English alphabets do not.

Likewise, some Urdu/Arabic words used in Hindi and Punjabi are not typable on a keyboard. And when we in India use mobile phones or computers to write something, we find it hard since these devices have only English alphabets.

WASHINGTON

Time has come for U.S. to act on Dhaka: Congressman Thanedar



Raising the issue of attacks on minority Hindus in Bangladesh, Indian-American Congressman Shri Thanedar has said that the time has come for the U.S. Congress to act. "The time has now come... every possible tool in our hands needs to be used to ensure that such atrocities in Bangladesh stop right away," he said. **PTI**

BRASÍLIA

Brazil ex-Defence Minister arrested as part of coup plot probe: police



Brazilian authorities on Saturday arrested Braga Netto, a former Defence Minister and close ally of ex-President Jair Bolsonaro, as part of an investigation into an alleged coup plot, a police source said. Brazil's Federal Police said it had detained "people who would be obstructing" the investigation. **AFP**

WASHINGTON

Trump calls for end to 'spring forward, fall back' clock changes



President-elect Donald Trump said on Friday he would work to end the "inconvenient" custom of moving clocks forward one hour every spring, which he said was imposing a financial burden on the U.S. "The Republican Party will use its best efforts to eliminate Daylight Saving Time," Mr. Trump posted on Truth Social. **AFP**

WASHINGTON

Pelosi undergoes hip replacement surgery in Germany after a fall



Former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi had hip replacement surgery on Saturday at a U.S. military hospital in Germany after falling while at an event in Luxembourg with other members of Congress. Ms. Pelosi, 84, "is well on the mend," said Ian Krager, a spokesperson for the California Democrat, in a statement. **AP**

Georgia chooses far-right loyalist as its new President

Mikheil Kavelashvili, known for his vehement anti-West diatribes, is the leader for a five-year term; Opposition denounces the poll as 'illegitimate'; sitting President Zurabishvili refuses to step down

Agence France-Presse
TBILISI

Georgia's ruling party on Saturday installed a far-right loyalist as President in a controversial election process, amid a deepening constitutional crisis and weeks of mass pro-EU protests.

The Black Sea nation has been in turmoil since the governing Georgian Dream party claimed victory in contested October parliamentary elections. Its decision last month to delay European Union membership talks ignited a fresh wave of mass rallies.

An electoral college, controlled by the ruling Georgian Dream party and boycotted by the Opposition, elected Mikheil Kavelashvili with 224 votes as the country's next figurehead leader for a five-year term, central election commission chair Giorgi Kalan-darishvili said.

The Opposition has denounced Saturday's election as "illegitimate" and said the sitting President,



Crisis deepens: An electoral college controlled by the Georgian Dream party elected Mikheil Kavelashvili with 224 votes. **REUTERS**

Salome Zurabishvili remains the country's sole legitimate leader.

Pro-Western Zurabishvili – who is at loggerheads with Georgian Dream – has refused to step down and is demanding new parliamentary elections, paving the way for a constitutional showdown.

On Saturday morning, protesters began gathering outside the Parliament building – which was cordoned off by police – ahead of a rally scheduled for the evening.

A former diplomat, Ms. Zurabishvili is a hugely

popular figure among protesters, who view her as a beacon of Georgia's European aspirations.

Ahead of Saturday's vote, Ms. Zurabishvili called it "a parody. It will be an event entirely devoid of legitimacy, unconstitutional and illegitimate," she told a press conference.

Opposition groups accuse Georgian Dream of rigging the October 26 parliamentary vote, backsliding on democracy and moving Tbilisi closer to Russia – all at the expense of the Caucasus nation's constitutionally mandated

bid to join the EU.

Mr. Kavelashvili, 53 – the sole candidate for the largely ceremonial Presidential post – is known for his vehement anti-West diatribes and opposition to LGBTQ rights.

Georgian Dream scrapped direct Presidential elections in 2017.

With Ms. Zurabishvili refusing to leave office, Opposition lawmakers boycotting Parliament, and protests showing no signs of abating, the legitimacy of Mr. Kavelashvili's election has been undermined from the outset.

On Friday, Amnesty International said protesters had faced "brutal dispersal tactics, arbitrary detention and torture". There have also been raids on the offices of Opposition parties and arrests of their leaders.

Washington has imposed fresh sanctions on Georgian officials, barring entry for around 20 people accused of "undermining democracy in Georgia", including ministers and parliamentarians.

UN envoy warns against Syria collapse at crisis talks

Agence France-Presse
AQABA

A UN envoy on Saturday urged foreign powers to work to avoid a collapse of vital Syrian institutions following the downfall of leader Bashar al-Assad, as diplomats gathered in Jordan for a conference on the crisis.

Geir Pedersen, the UN's special envoy for Syria, also backed a "credible and inclusive" political process to form the next government as he met U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

"We need to make sure that state institutions do not collapse, and that we get in humanitarian assistance as quickly as possible," Mr. Pedersen said.

Syria war monitor reports Israeli hits on military sites

Agence France-Presse
BEIRUT

A Syria war monitor said Israel launched strikes early on Saturday targeting military sites in Damascus and its countryside, in the latest such raids since rebels brought down Bashar al-Assad almost a week ago.

"Israeli strikes destroyed a scientific institute" and other related military facilities in Barzeh, in northern Damascus, and targeted a "military airport" in the capital's countryside, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

Strikes also targeted "Scud ballistic missile warehouses" and launchers in the Qalamun area, as well as "rockets, depots and tunnels under the



A fighter of the ruling Syrian body inspects the damage at a military site after an Israeli strike in Damascus on Saturday. **REUTERS**

mountain", according to the Britain-based Observatory.

The Observatory said several rounds of bombardment targeted "military sites of the former regime forces, as part of destroying what is left of the future Syrian Army's capabilities".

Since Mr. Assad's fall, Israel has launched hundreds of strikes against Syrian military sites, targeting everything from chemical weapons stores to air defences. Israel also seized a UN-patrolled buffer zone on the Syrian Golan Heights just hours after the rebels took Damascus.

Seven killed in Israeli strike on Gaza school

Reuters
CAIRO

At least seven Palestinians were killed and 12 wounded after an Israeli strike on a former school that was sheltering displaced people in Gaza City, the civil emergency service said on Saturday.

The Israeli military is looking into the report, a spokesperson said.

Earlier on Saturday, the Israeli military said it had

targeted Hamas militants who were operating within a school compound in Gaza City and that it had taken measures to reduce harm to civilians.

The dead include a woman and her baby, accord-

ing to medics. It was unclear whether the other fatalities were Hamas fighters.

The Palestinian Islamist group denies embedding its fighters among civilians in Gaza.

Russia battles blaze after Ukraine claims strike on oil terminal

Agence France-Presse
MOSCOW

Russian authorities said on Saturday that firefighters were battling a blaze caused by a drone attack in the western Oryol region after Ukraine said it struck a major oil terminal there.

Ukraine has been targeting fuel depots in Russia in retaliation for Moscow's bombardments that have wreaked massive damage on its power generation

network. The Ukraine military's General Staff said on Saturday morning that Kyiv's forces had attacked a major oil depot in Stalnoi Kon, about 165 km into Russian territory.

"It is one of the largest oil terminals in Oryol" and is part of a "military industrial complex" that supplies the Russian Army, the General Staff said.

Governor Klychkov said there were no casualties in the attack.

Fatal impact



The French Civil Security in Mayotte, one of the overseas departments of France, out of tackle impact of Cyclone Chido, which resulted in at least two deaths and extensive damage on Saturday. This cyclone is reported to be the most violent in the territory since 1934. **AFP**

U.S. has made 'direct contact' with Syria's HTS, claims Blinken

Agence France-Presse
AQABA

The United States has made "direct contact" with Syria's victorious Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) rebels despite designating the group as terrorists, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Saturday, as he sought international unity on a peaceful transition.

"We've been in contact with HTS and with other

parties," Mr. Blinken told reporters after talks on Syria in the Jordanian Red Sea resort of Aqaba. He did not give details about the contact, but when asked if the U.S. reached out directly, he said: "Direct contact – yes."

Mr. Blinken said that the contact was partly related to the search for Austin Tice, the United States journalist who was kidnapped in 2012 near the start of the brutal civil war.

OpenAI whistleblower found dead in his San Francisco flat

Press Trust of India
NEW YORK

A 26-year-old Indian-origin former employee of the artificial intelligence giant OpenAI has died by suicide in San Francisco, authorities said.

Suchir Balaji was found dead inside his Buchanan Street apartment in San Francisco on November 26 on Thanksgiving Day.

The medical examiner's office determined the manner of death to be suicide and police officials said there is "currently, no evi-



Suchir Balaji

dence of foul play". "The Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME) has identified the decedent as Suchir Balaji, 26, of San Francisco," the office's Ex-

ecutive Director David Serrano Sewell said.

OpenAI was "devastated" that Balaji had passed away, the San Francisco Chronicle reported.

Balaji, known for whistleblowing against OpenAI, died three months after accusing the company of violating U.S. copyright law while developing ChatGPT, a generative artificial intelligence programme.

"The Philippine side, with U.S. support and solicitation, has been stirring up trouble in many spots in the South China Sea," Wu Qian, a spokesperson for

'Philippines provoked trouble in South China Sea with U.S. backing'

Reuters
BEIJING/MANILA

China accused the Philippines on Friday of having "provoked trouble" in the South China Sea with U.S. backing, which Manila denied, as tensions between the two neighbours continue.

"The Philippine side, with U.S. support and solicitation, has been stirring up trouble in many spots in the South China Sea," Wu Qian, a spokesperson for

China's Defence Ministry, said on its official WeChat account.

The Philippines denied China's claims. "Such statements coming from the Ministry of Defence are clear evidence of bullying," Jay Tarruela, Philippine Coast Guard spokesperson said.

Beijing and Manila have faced multiple confrontations this year over contested reefs and outcrops in the South China Sea, which China claims almost entirely.

Iran confirms increase in IAEA nuclear inspections at Fordo

Agence France-Presse
TEHRAN

Iran confirmed on Saturday that it has allowed watchdog the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to increase the number of inspections it carries out into Tehran's nuclear programme, state media reported.

"We have increased capacity – it is natural that the number of inspections should also increase," the official IRNA news agency quoted the country's nuclear chief Mohammad Es-

lami as saying.

"When we carry out nuclear activities, and where we deal with nuclear materials, changing the scale will naturally change the monitoring level," he added.

Mr. Esلمي's comments came after an IAEA report said that Iran had agreed to increased monitoring.

Last week, the UN nuclear watchdog said Iran had revamped Fordo enrichment plant so it could "significantly increase the rate of production of uranium enriched up to 60%", close to the 90% needed to make a nuclear weapon.

Iran insists on its right to nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, and denies it is seeking an atomic weapons capability.

Britain, France and Germany had on Tuesday "condemned" Tehran's latest steps to expand its nuclear programme.

TAMIL NADU

Empowerment drive

Under the Moovalur Ramamirtham Ammaiyar Higher Education Assurance Scheme, also known as the *Pudhumai Penn* scheme, girl students who studied from Class 6 to 12 in government schools would receive ₹1,000 per month, which would be deposited directly into their bank accounts until the completion of their undergraduate, diploma, ITI, or any other recognised course. Former Finance Minister Palanivel Thiaga Rajan announced this scheme during the Budget speech at the Legislative Assembly on March 18, 2022.

PERCEPTION OF THE SCHEME

Beneficiaries perceive the scheme positively regarding enrolment in **higher education**, feeling that it has significantly encouraged them to pursue **further studies**

Beneficiaries believe the scheme has improved their prospects for better employment and higher income, contributing to their long-term financial stability



The scheme is seen as crucial in meeting supplementary educational expenses, reducing the **financial burden** on families

The scheme is perceived as a catalyst for personal growth, enabling beneficiaries to avoid early marriage and focus on career advancement

UTILISATION PATTERN

Beneficiaries primarily use the funds to cover

- College expenses
- Supplementary educational expenses
- Transport expenses



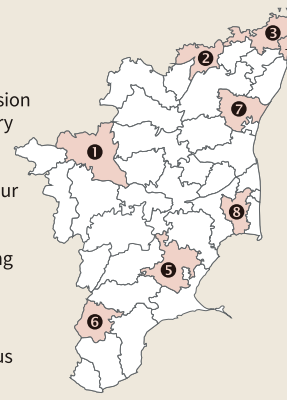
In several instances, girl students are enrolling in paid courses, such as **English language training and computer courses**, which can help them acquire skill sets that are in demand in the market

Many beneficiaries also save the amount to use for future expenses

ASSESSMENT CONDUCTED

The State Planning Commission recently carried out a primary survey from November 2023 to February 2024 in

- 1 Erode
- 2 Vellore
- 3 Tiruvallur
- 4 Chennai
- 5 Sivaganga
- 6 Tenkasi
- 7 Villupuram
- 8 Tiruvarur districts, covering



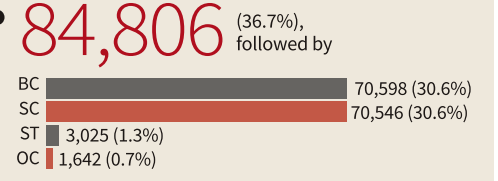
5,095 students belonging to various streams from 84 institutions

It aimed to analyse the implementation process and its challenges, awareness among students, utilisation patterns, and socio-economic implications of the scheme

Among 38 districts, Salem had the highest number of beneficiaries with **17,032** (7.38%) students

A total of 13,681 additional students joined college/diploma courses in 2022 and 2023, increasing the scheme's beneficiaries by 6.9%. Among them, 38.6% were from SC households, 34.4% from MBC, and 24.8% from BC

Students from MBC households accounted for the highest share of beneficiaries at



Among this, Salem had the highest college enrolment at **8.9%**, followed by



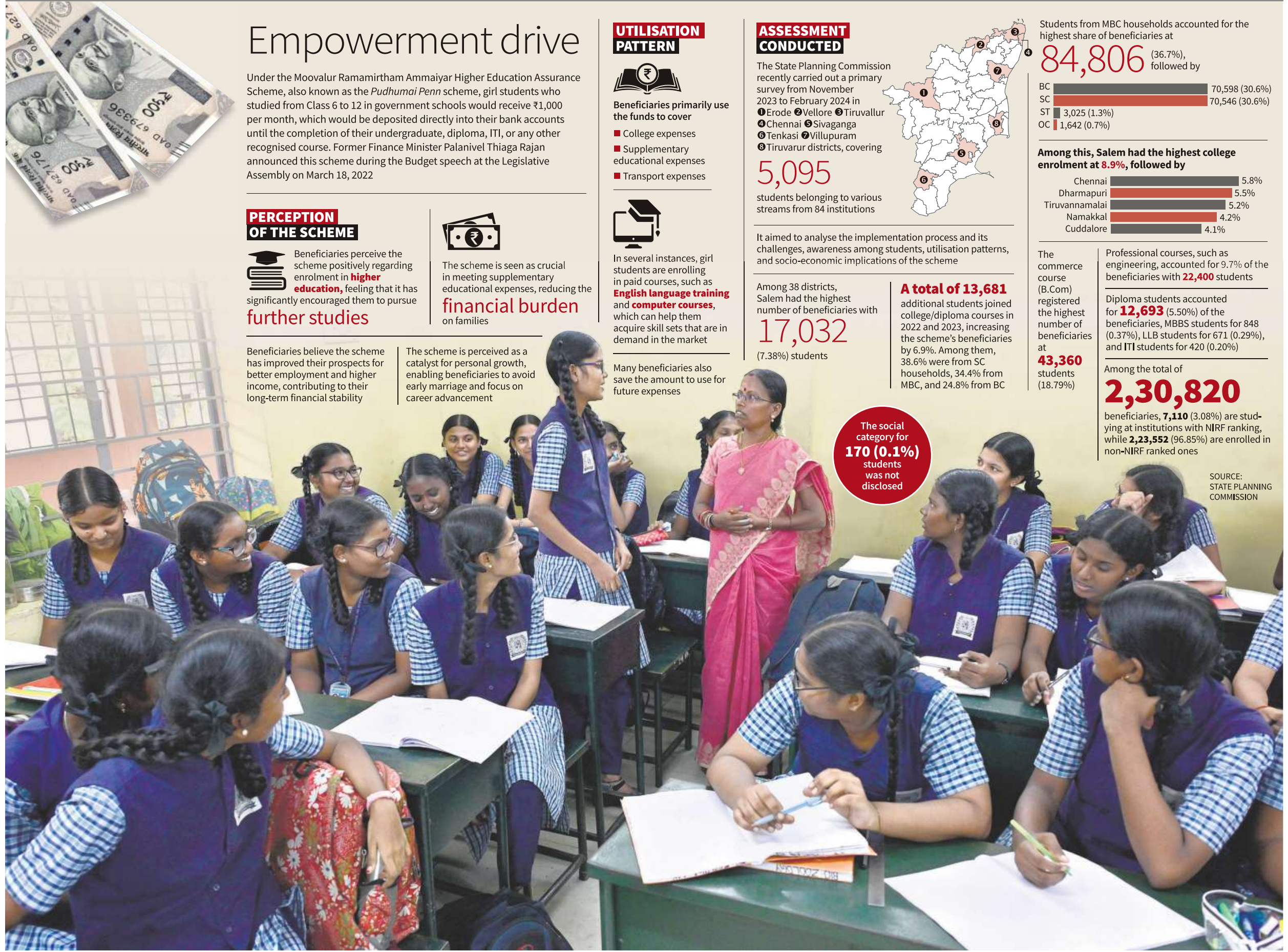
The commerce course (B.Com) registered the highest number of beneficiaries at **43,360** students (18.79%)

Professional courses, such as engineering, accounted for 9.7% of the beneficiaries with **22,400** students

Diploma students accounted for **12,693** (5.50%) of the beneficiaries, MBBS students for 848 (0.37%), LLB students for 671 (0.29%), and ITI students for 420 (0.20%)

Among the total of **2,30,820** beneficiaries, **7,110** (3.08%) are studying at institutions with NIRF ranking, while **2,23,552** (96.85%) are enrolled in non-NIRF ranked ones

SOURCE: STATE PLANNING COMMISSION



The social category for **170 (0.1%)** students was not disclosed

Reaching out: According to data from a recent study carried out by the State Planning Commission across Tamil Nadu, around 2,30,820 girl students had benefited from this scheme as on May 2023. B. VELANKANNI RAJ

Arming women with higher education

The monthly stipend scheme of the Tamil Nadu government – *Pudhumai Penn* – has come as a gift for many girl students who otherwise might have missed the opportunity to take up higher education. Through this initiative, the govt. has aimed to bring about a transformative behavioural change. **Sangeetha Kandavel** and **Meghna M.** investigate the extent of benefits the scheme confers

For 21-year-old S. Pandiyammal, a native of Theni district, higher education would have remained an unattainable dream but for timely support. She was married at the age of 19 and moved to Coimbatore, her husband's hometown, and soon had a child. "When I expressed my desire to continue my education, my in-laws agreed because of the ₹1,000 monthly financial support from the *Pudhumai Penn* scheme. Without it, I would not have pursued my degree and would have remained financially dependent on my husband. This scheme now covers all my college expenses and even allows me to have some money in hand for personal needs," said Ms. Pandiyammal, now a third-year B.A. Tamil Literature student at the Government Arts and Science College for Women in Coimbatore.

For 20-year-old M. Devadarshini, becoming a Chartered Accountant had been a long-standing aspiration. However, as she entered Class 12, it became clear that pursuing her dream would be unfeasible due to the high examination cost. When she sought support from her parents, they informed her that they could only afford to fund one basic degree. Her father, a painter with a modest income, and her mother, a homemaker, were unable to provide further financial assistance. Additionally, her brother, who recently completed his degree, had assumed responsibility for the family's loans and was unable to support her education. "I had nearly given up on my dream, but then I learned about the *Pudhumai Penn* scheme through my college," said Ms. Devadarshini, who is currently in the third year of her B.Com course at a government-aided college in Tiruvallur district. "For the past two years, I have been saving money to cover the costs of my CA exam. While I won't be able to afford coaching, I plan to self-study and at least pay the exam fees while working part-time to support my family," she said.

Pudhumai Penn scheme

The Tamil Nadu government launched the Moovalur Ramamirtham Ammaiyar Higher Education Assurance Scheme, also known as the *Pudhumai Penn* scheme, to enhance the enrolment of girls from government schools in higher education institutions. Former Finance Minister Palanivel Thiaga Rajan, who is now the Minister for Information Technology and Digital Services, announced this scheme during his Budget speech in the Assembly on March 18, 2022.

Under this scheme, all girl students who studied from Classes 6 to 12 in government schools

It will be better if the government offered to cover the entire fee instead of just providing ₹1,000. For many, it's like pocket money unless the student is from a very poor background

SHEELU FRANCIS
President, Tamil Nadu Women's Collective

would receive ₹1,000 per month, which would be deposited directly into their bank accounts until the completion of their undergraduate, diploma, ITI, or any other recognised course. By offering financial support, the State government aims to bring about a behavioural change by reducing the incidence of early marriage, increasing enrolment in higher education, and more importantly, retaining girl students in higher education.

According to data from a recent study carried out across Tamil Nadu by the State Planning Commission, around 2,30,820 girl students benefited from this scheme as on May 2023.

According to the study, among 38 districts, Salem had the highest number of students who benefited from the *Pudhumai Penn* scheme, accounting for 17,032 (7.38%) beneficiaries. Salem was followed by Namakkal with 13,312 (5.77%), Dharmapuri with 11,915 (5.16%), Chennai with 11,468 (4.97%), Tiruvannamalai with 11,146 (4.83%), and Coimbatore with 10,777 (4.67%) beneficiaries.

Higher Education Minister Govi Chezhiaian said the scheme had helped girl students in rural pockets. He pointed out that even students from the remotest villages benefited, and many children from single-parent households also received support through the scheme. He further highlighted that efforts were under way to raise awareness and educate more students about *Pudhumai Penn*. Minister for School Education Anbil Ma-

Students say the money from the scheme has taught them how to manage their finances and budget their spending efficiently

hesh Poyyamozhi emphasised the critical importance of educating children, with a particular focus on empowering girls. He added that since the launch of this scheme by Chief Minister M.K. Stalin, enrolments in schools had increased, and dropout rates had decreased.

He also said the School Education Department, in collaboration with headmasters, was providing career guidance to students regarding higher education opportunities. "We organise field visits to colleges for school students, where we showcase the available facilities, including laboratories and sports grounds. During these visits, we engage with students to understand their preferred courses of study after school, which motivates them to aspire for higher education," Mr. Anbil Mahesh said. Since its launch, the scheme has led to a 34% increase in the enrolment of girl students in higher education, he added.

"With the rising cost of commodities and essentials, managing educational expenses was a struggle. However, now that my daughter's education is taken care of, I can focus on supporting my family," said S. Mani, an autorickshaw driver from Chennai, whose family had benefited from the scheme. Ani Vishalini, a second-year B.A. Tamil student in Tiruchi, said the *Pudhumai Penn* aid had come as a blessing and also helped her with household expenses. She further hoped to pursue a postgraduate degree. F. Sindhuja, a third-year B.A. Tamil student of Nagapattinam Government Arts and Science College in Sellur, said: "I get the money by the 10th of every month and give it to my mother, who uses it for gold savings."

S. Malar, a second-year chemistry student at the Government Arts College, Salem, said she used the money to

purchase books. In Madurai, M. Divya Bharathi, a first-year B.B.A. student and K. Anushya, a second-year B.Sc. student, shared that the money deposited into their bank accounts had taught them how to manage their finances and budget their spending efficiently.

Access to banking

The *Pudhumai Penn* scheme has been instrumental in empowering girl students by also helping them open bank accounts and gain knowledge about the banking ecosystem. Banks have also benefited with many students opening new accounts. Indian Bank said 74,700 beneficiaries of the *Pudhumai Penn* scheme hold accounts with them. Additionally, a total of 50,000 RuPay cards were issued to the beneficiaries, further enhancing their access to financial services. When asked about the challenges, the bank said: "Aadhaar seeding in the beneficiary accounts is a herculean task, which is a hurdle in direct transfer through the Aadhaar Payment Bridge system." In cases where the Aadhaar would be seeded to one account and the beneficiary had given the same Aadhaar for other accounts held by them, the amount is credited to the old account, defeating the objective of targeted money transfers, it added. "Also, some beneficiaries were minors, and the accounts were opened by their guardians years ago. Banks had to help the beneficiaries realign the accounts in order for them to receive the benefits," it said.

Naseem John, principal of the Government Arts and Science College in Kangayam, said the scheme had motivated dropouts to rejoin the college as it eased the financial burden on them. "An increasing number of students are enrolling in certificate courses that interest them. The availability of additional funds is allowing them to explore various options," said G. Kalvikkarasi, principal of the Dharmamurthi Rao Bahadur Calavala Cunnan Chetty's Hindu College.

Social activists, however, have flagged that ₹1,000 is not enough for the students. "It will be better if the government offered to cover the entire fee instead of just providing ₹1,000. For many, it's like pocket money unless the student is from a very poor background," said Sheelu Francis, president of the Tamil Nadu Women's Collective. However, experts agree that the scheme has made a significant contribution to the overall empowerment of women in Tamil Nadu.

(With inputs from Sabari M. from Salem, Sibi Sreevathson T.C. from Coimbatore, B. Tilak Chandanar from Madurai, Nahla Nainar and M. Nacchinnarkkinyan from Tiruchi)



MEGHALAYA



Students on a hunger strike that was called off after 16 days in November, at the North Eastern Hill University in Shillong, Meghalaya. RITU RAJ KONWAR

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold

The North Eastern Hill University in Shillong, Meghalaya, faces a crisis as students, teachers, and non-teaching staff allege that the Vice Chancellor is making biased appointments and hindering tribal representation; while a committee probes the turmoil, **Rahul Karmakar** reports on the university's cultural and political tensions

Lum Sohpetbng, lording over the man-made Umiam lake about 20 kilometres short of Meghalaya's capital Shillong, is one of the most revered peaks for the matrilineal Khasi tribe. Sohpetbng, meaning 'navel of heaven', is believed to have had a mythical umbilical cord connecting heaven and earth before human birth and sin severed the link. Every second Sunday of February, the Khasi community, adhering to the indigenous faith, trek 7 km to the peak, pledging to keep their unique traditions alive.

Everything else that bears the peak's name in Meghalaya is expected to be sacred. Occupying an uneven glade surrounded by pine trees, the Sohpetbng Hostel is no longer ethereal. It used to be a coveted accommodation for some 500 postgraduate students of the North Eastern Hill University (NEHU) at Umshing-Mawkynroh on the outskirts of Shillong. Today, the hostel blocks stand like haunted houses, the walls and roofs covered with moss and an outgrowth of plants. Chhinlung, the adjoining hostel named after a mythological place believed to be the ancestral origin of the Mizo and Chin people, looks similar. "The boarders of these two blocks were evacuated more than three years ago, after the buildings were marked unsafe. This sums up what's wrong with our university," says Ram Toi, adviser of the NEHU Students' Union (NEHUSU).

Students say the hostels fell into disrepair around the time Prabha Shankar Shukla took over from S.K. Srivastava as NEHU's Vice Chancellor, in July 2021. In the early 1990s, the university — the first Central institution in the Northeast and the oldest in Meghalaya — shifted to its present address from two prime locations in Shillong.

On November 5, 2024, the students temporarily locked the gates of the university to protest Shukla's alleged mismanagement. The crumbling infrastructure was not the only reason. The irregularities, they say, made NEHU slide from the list of India's top 100 universities, from 59th spot on the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) in 2021 to 66 in 2022 and 80 in 2023, before dropping off the list in 2024.

"In the past, we produced brilliant students who are occupying top positions in government and corporate jobs across the globe. A decade ago, we had our best NIRF ranking of 15," says Nirmalendu Saha, the Dean of Life Sciences. He has been asked to fill in for Shukla until a two-member inquiry committee constituted by the Education Ministry submits its report by December 13. Shortly after the hunger strike that was called off on the 16th day, Shukla and other administrative officials in the line of fire were asked to go on leave during the probe by the panel headed by former University Grants Commission Chairperson D.P. Singh.

The students were not the first to revolt against Shukla who they alleged hand-picked incompetent officials, including the Registrar, Colonel (retired) Omkar Singh; and Deputy Registrar (Academics) Amit Gupta. Weeks before the students went on strike demanding the removal of the trio, the NEHU Teachers' Association (NEHUTA) wrote to the Prime Minister's Office underscoring the need to save the academic atmosphere in the university by taking action against the Vice Chancellor.



The Registrar started interfering in academic matters, and writing comments on the files of teachers and researchers despite not being qualified to do so

PRASENJIT BISWAS
Professor of Philosophy and NEHUTA vice president

The NEHUTA also petitioned Nirupam Chakma, a member of the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes, saying in the letter: "He [Shukla] has attempted to completely change the harmonious tribal, ethnic, and other Indian character of NEHU into a monolith of a Hindu Brahmanical university."

Questioning appointments

The NEHUTA says the Vice Chancellor appointed Col. Singh about a year ago as the Controller of Examinations by keeping out qualified and academically experienced candidates of ethnic origins from Meghalaya. It says Singh did not have any experience of working in a college or university and his "serious lack of understanding of the functioning of the university system" led to delays in the declaration of results of the CUET exams. After six months into his job, Singh was made the Registrar and he appointed himself the supervisor of the university's CUET centre.

"The Registrar started interfering in academic matters, and writing comments on the files of teachers and researchers despite not being qualified to do so," NEHUTA vice president and Professor of Philosophy, Prasenjit Biswas says. He adds that Gupta was brought from a private institution and made the Deputy Registrar (Academics) without any qualification to handle the responsibility. "He made it difficult for the teachers and non-teaching staff to work and created a suffocating scenario for usual welfare activities by not clearing bills, including leave travel concessions," says Biswas.

Both the students' and teachers' organisations claim that Shukla denied qualified tribal teachers their right to be appointed as Deans. They allege he appointed 87 teachers in 2023, most non-tribal and from outside Meghalaya. This led to court cases for procedural lapses and bias towards candidates from northern India.

Their claim is that Shukla constituted selection committees with members outside of the empanelled list approved by the statutory bodies of the NEHU; that he arbitrarily fixed a two-year probation period for newly appointed tribal faculty members in violation of the University Grants Commission (UGC) Regulation of 2018. This denied pay fixation and service protection to the newly recruited tribal teachers.



The poor condition of the hostels in North Eastern Hill University in Shillong, Meghalaya, causing those to be abandoned. RITU RAJ KONWAR

He allegedly also did not fill up vacancies in some departments like Botany and vetoed NEHU's research collaborations with foreign universities such as Heidelberg, Kyoto, Bologna, and Indiana, and scotched a move to set up an offshore campus in Thailand's Chiang Mai. They say the V-C stayed away from the university often, resulting in denying promotions to 18 senior professors who retired without getting their dues, a NEHUTA dossier on the Vice Chancellor revealed.

The non-teaching staff, too, have been unhappy with the V-C's style of functioning. The confrontation began with the appointment of Rohit Prasad as a technical officer from outside the State in 2022, without any advertisement, constitution of a screening committee, interview, or terms and conditions of employment. The appointment was cancelled in 2023 after a Joint Action Committee (JAC) of the students, teachers, and non-teaching staff protested the violation of the model cadre recruitment rules for non-teaching posts of Central universities.

A day before the students started their indefinite hunger strike on November 5, the NEHU Non-Teaching Staff Association went on an indefinite pen-down strike.

"There has been an inordinate delay in the recruitment and promotion of the non-teaching staff. According to the UGC norms, the employment ratio of the teaching to non-teaching staff should be 1:1.1. Our strength is now 250, much less than the sanctioned posts that need to be filled up for academic excellence," the association's president W.R. Synrem says. The NEHU website claims the teaching faculty strength is more than 300.

Right and left

Congress MLA Ronnie V. Lyngdoh says the graph of NEHU, as with a few other higher education institutions in the northeast, began nosediving after the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power at the Centre. "There has been an attempt to place unqualified people in posts only because of their RSS [Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh] and BJP backgrounds. NEHU should remain a centre for learning and academics, not a platform to bolster any political ideology," he says.

The Meghalaya unit of the BJP, a constituent of the State's coalition government, threw its weight behind the agitating stakeholders of the university but dismissed allegations that the RSS and BJP were behind the ongoing turmoil in NEHU. "A conclusion cannot be drawn when the matter is under investigation," senior BJP leader and the State's Animal Husbandry and Veterinary Minister, Alexander Laloo Hek says.

The JAC did not delve into Shukla's ideological background, but said NEHU needs a V-C with empathy and a track record of leadership. They want the person to have an understanding of the cultures of the tribes of the Northeast, most of who follow Christianity and indigenous faiths.

The NEHU fraternity said the rot in the university set in during the tenure of the previous V-C, whose administration ran from 2015 to 2021. Shukla said in his letter to the Principal Secretary of Higher Education in New Delhi on November 27: "Before my tenure, nearly 50% of the faculty positions at NEHU were vacant, which were significantly affecting the university's academic and research capabilities."

In his letter, Shukla attempted to debunk various accusations. He denied flouting guidelines to appoint administrative officials and said his "commitment to creating a positive atmosphere in teaching and learning" despite difficult conditions saw NEHU earning a "perfect score of 100" in the QS World University Rankings Asia 2025, one of only two Indian universities to achieve the feat. He attributed the low research output to the reliance on "a small group of dedicated faculty members" and "underperforming" teachers.

He said efforts to improve the low PhD graduation score of 18.14 (out of 40) were "often disrupted by strikes and interruptions" and blamed the "significant drop in NIRF ranking in the peer perception parameter" on some teachers who

spread false and fabricated news about NEHU with the "aim to harm the university's reputation... to gain political advantage and enter electoral politics."

He also accused a coterie of NEHUTA members of hatching a plan in September to "create chaos on the campus". He said they disrupted a crucial Academic Council meeting, instigate the students to lock the offices of the "rightfully appointed" Registrar and Deputy Registrar (Academics), and push the non-teaching staff association to revolt against him. He singled out NEHUTA president Lakshon Kma for his political ambition, referring to his failed attempt to bag the Shillong Lok Sabha seat in April as an Independent. He also said the NEHUTA vice president has a "strong leftist ideology" while trashing theories that he toes the RSS-BJP line.

The NEHUTA trashed Shukla's letter as a web of lies spun to cover his administrative blunders and autocratic style of functioning.

Community support

NEHU initially catered to Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, and Nagaland apart from Meghalaya. Its jurisdiction over the other three States ceased after the establishment of their respective universities over the years. Largely specific to Meghalaya today, its activities are divided unequally between two campuses, one in Shillong and the other in Tura, the headquarters of the State's western half dominated by the Garo tribe. The 1,225-acre Shillong campus, a "gift from the Meghalaya government" as per the NEHU website, is a community reserve forest within the territory of the *dorbar* (traditional village council) of Mawlai town.

The turmoil within NEHU spilt beyond its walls midway through the students' hunger strike when the Mawlai Town Dorbar declared Shukla a persona non grata. Herlambok War, the *dorbar's* president, says, "The NEHU campus falls within the jurisdiction of our *dorbar* (area) and we do not want the Vice Chancellor to come back and further complicate things in the university," he says. He adds that much of Meghalaya's land, including the forest in which NEHU was established, is managed by the community and their *dorbars*.

"Under the Sixth Schedule, the Mawlai Town Dorbar wields constitutional authority and it stepped in only when the Vice Chancellor was non-responsive

HERLAMBOK WAR
President, Mawlai Town Dorbar

Under the Sixth Schedule, the Mawlai Town Dorbar wields constitutional authority and it stepped in only when the Vice Chancellor was non-responsive to appeals to address the grievances of the students who were falling sick with fasting," he says. He adds that the involvement of the local community was to help find an acceptable solution to the problem.

Besides the Mawlai Town Dorbar banning Shukla's entry into NEHU, the Meghalaya Indigenous Tribes Constitutional Rights Movement — a conglomeration of tribal village heads, women's groups, and civil society organisations — resolved to boycott him across Meghalaya. It conveyed its resolution in a letter to President Droupadi Murmu while seeking her intervention as the university's Visitor to help clear the mess in NEHU.

Shukla hinted at his detractors trying to take advantage of the Sixth Schedule. "As far as I know, NEHU is a Central university. The land had been transferred to it. So, Central rules will be applicable," he says. His priority is to ensure the postgraduate students and research scholars complete their assignments, he says. "I am an academician. I don't know what their [those against him] agenda is," he said.

The students, teachers, and non-teaching staff of NEHU feel reviving the university is tougher than the climb up the steep Sohpetbng.