

TERROR RETURNS TO KASHMIR, TOURISTS MASSACRED AFTER NEARLY FOUR DECADES, PAHALGAM CARNAGE RIPS APART SEMBLANCE OF NORMALCY

MOHIT KANDHARI ■ Srinagar

At least 26 tourists, holidaying in the famous tourist hotspot of Pahalgam in the Kashmir valley, were killed and several others were injured when a group of heavily armed terrorists, dressed in combat uniform, opened indiscriminate fire on them after verifying their religious identities on Tuesday afternoon.

After the February 14, 2019, Pulwama attack on a CRPF convoy, in which 40 jawans were martyred, Tuesday afternoon's attack is the most provocative strike on Indian soil by the terrorists sheltered by their Pakistan-based handlers operating from across the Line of Control. The tensions between India and Pakistan may further escalate as the attack comes close on the heels of recent posturing by the Pakistan Army Chief, Asim Munir, on Kashmir. Last week, India rubbished Munir's remarks describing Kashmir as the "jugular vein" of Pakistan and said Islamabad's only link with Jammu and Kashmir is the vacation of illegally occupied parts of the union territory.

Condemning the terror attack on tourists in Jammu and Kashmir's Pahalgam, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Tuesday said that those behind the heinous act will be brought to justice. PM Modi also directed Home Minister Amit Shah to visit the attack site in Pahalgam.

In a post on X, the prime minister said, "They (terrorists) will not be spared! Their evil agenda will never succeed. Our resolve to fight terrorism is unshakable, and it will get even stronger."

The attack also coincided with the first official visit of US Vice President JD Vance to India.

According to eyewitness reports, the 'grooming' attack took place around 1430hrs when a large number of tourists, after taking horse rides and absorbing themselves in the pristine beauty of Kashmir valley, were relaxing and breaking bread with their loved ones in the pic-



Security personnel rushing to the spot after terrorists attacked a group of tourists at Pahalgam, in Anantnag district of Jammu and Kashmir on Tuesday, April 22 (left); Injured being shifted to a hospital in Anantnag district (right)



turesque Baisaran meadow, half-an-hour trek from Pahalgam. In a viral video, one of the attack survivors claimed that while they were having snacks, an armed man, dressed in a combat uniform, arrived and sprayed bullets at them after verifying the religious identities of the tourists present. Tourists, with their heads punctured with bullets, were also seen writhing in pain in the picturesque meadow of Baisaran.

As gunshots rang out, there was panic, and tourists ran for cover, but there was no place to hide in the wide, open space, said another woman tourist.

It appears the terror attack was broadly aimed at shattering the peace prevailing in the Valley at a time when tourist footfall was skyrocketing and common Kashmiris were reaping rich dividends of peace after the abrogation of Articles 370 and 35-A. In 2023, 2,11,80,011 tourists visited J and K, and in 2024, the number increased to 2,35,90,081.

Since March 26, over 8.25 lakh tourists have visited Asia's largest tulip garden in

CHRONOLOGY OF RECENT TERROR ATTACKS
- August 14, 2024: Doda encounter (one officer, one terrorist killed)
- August 10, 2024: Anantnag encounter (four jawans killed and four injured)
- July 27, 2024: Kupwara encounter (one security personnel killed)
- July 22, 2024: Rajouri encounter (one security personnel injured)
- July 15, 2024: Doda encounter (four soldiers, one policeman killed)
- July 9, 2024: Kathua encounter (five jawans killed)
- June 13, 2024: Gandoh encounter (one policeman injured)
- June 12, 2024: Chattergala encounter (one terrorist killed)
- June 9, 2024: Reasi terror attack (nine pilgrims killed)

CHRONOLOGY OF RECENT TERROR ATTACKS

- August 14, 2024: Doda encounter (one officer, one terrorist killed)
August 10, 2024: Anantnag encounter (four jawans killed and four injured)
July 27, 2024: Kupwara encounter (one security personnel killed)
July 22, 2024: Rajouri encounter (one security personnel injured)
July 15, 2024: Doda encounter (four soldiers, one policeman killed)
July 9, 2024: Kathua encounter (five jawans killed)
June 13, 2024: Gandoh encounter (one policeman injured)
June 12, 2024: Chattergala encounter (one terrorist killed)
June 9, 2024: Reasi terror attack (nine pilgrims killed)

Srinagar to see the blooming flower carpet of 17 lakh tulips of 74 varieties.

Tourists camping in Pahalgam vacated their hotel rooms in the aftermath of the gruesome terror attack. The local authorities facilitated their safe travels to instill confidence among them.

The terror attack ahead of the beginning of the Amarnath yatra is bound to affect the tourist season in the coming weeks.

The entire district administration and police force were mobilised and ambulances pressed into service. A chopper also helped evacuate those injured.

Till late Tuesday evening, the exact number of tourists killed in the terror attack was not confirmed by the police. The toll is still being ascertained, Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Omar Abdullah said while describing the terror attack as "much larger than anything we have seen directed at civilians in recent years".

"I'm shocked beyond belief. This attack on our visitors is an abomination. The perpetrators of this attack are animals, inhu-

man and worthy of contempt. No words of condemnation are enough. I send my sympathies to the families of the deceased," he said.

Before heading to Srinagar, Union Home Minister Amit Shah briefed the prime minister, who is on a visit to Saudi Arabia, said he was leaving for Srinagar to hold an urgent security review meeting with all agencies.

"Anguished by the terror attack on tourists in Pahalgam, Jammu and Kashmir. My thoughts are with the family members of the deceased. Those involved in this dastardly act of terror will not be spared, and we will come down heavily on the perpetrators with the harshest consequences," Shah said in a post on X.

Amit Shah also chaired a meeting at his home in Delhi, which was attended by Intelligence Bureau Chief Tapan Deka and Union Home Secretary Govind Mohan, the sources said. CRPF chief Gyanendra Pratap Singh, J and K Director General of Police Nalin Prabhat and some Army offi-

cials also joined the meeting through video conferencing. Mr Shah also spoke to Chief Minister Omar Abdullah and Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha, they added.

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh in a post on X said Deeply anguished by the news of terrorist attack in Pahalgam (Jammu and Kashmir). This dastardly attack on innocent civilians is an act of cowardice and highly reprehensible. My thoughts and prayers are with the innocent victims and their families.

Meanwhile, a massive anti-terrorist operation has been launched to hunt down the assailants, and security forces have fanned out in all directions.

Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha, who accompanied the Home Minister in a special flight from New Delhi Tuesday, said, "I strongly condemn the cowardly terror attack on tourists in Pahalgam."

I assure the people that those behind this despicable attack will not go unpunished."

Govt declares summer vacation for students from today

RAJEEV RATHAN ■ Bhubaneswar

In light of the prevailing heat wave conditions across Odisha, the State Government on Tuesday announced early summer vacation for all schools and colleges effective from April 23. The decision comes after Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi conducted a high-level review of the weather situation and prioritised the health and safety of students.

All government and private educational institutions from

Anganwadi Centres and Shishu Vatikas to Class-XII will remain closed from Wednesday onwards until further orders. Additionally, a five-day holiday has been declared for students of both government and private colleges starting the same day.

The Chief Minister has instructed that Anganwadi children continue to receive their nutritional support at home in the form of dry food rations during the closure period. The CM emphasised the need to protect schoolchildren

from extreme heat. However, pre-scheduled examinations will continue as planned, with officials asked to ensure necessary arrangements are in place.

The decision was taken during a review meeting attended by Revenue and Disaster Management Minister Suresh Pujari, Law and Works Minister Prithviraj Harichandan, School and Mass Education and ST & SC Development Minister Nityananda Gond and Chief Secretary Manoj Ahuja.

No power cuts this summer: Singh Deo

PNS ■ Bhubaneswar

Even as Odisha is reeling under intense heat wave conditions, Deputy Chief Minister Kanak Vardhan Singh Deo on Tuesday assured consumers that there would be no power cuts during peak hours of the summer season this year.

Singh Deo, who holds the Energy portfolio, ordered the Discoms not to cut power supply especially during the day time in summer.

"Even as power disruption is occurring due to thunderstorm activities at some places, the power is being restored immediately. Power is being supplied even after the electric poles fall," he said.

He also assured the consumers that unpaid bills would not lead to power disconnection during summer this year. "No power disconnection will occur due to unpaid bills. However, the consumers would have to pay the bills," he clarified.

Notably, by 11.30 am on the day, the maximum temperature touched 42.6 degrees Celsius in Jharsuguda. Hirkud, Sambalpur and Rourkela recorded 40 degrees, 39.6 degrees and 39 degrees, respectively, during the period. The temperature in Bhubaneswar was 35.4 degrees.

Odia tourist killed in Kashmir terror attack

PNS ■ Bhubaneswar

In a tragic and barbaric act of terror, militants carried out an attack on innocent tourists in Pahalgam, Kashmir on Tuesday, resulting in multiple casualties. Among the deceased was Prashant Satpathy

(43) from Surakhapura in Odisha, whose death has cast a pall of gloom over the State. Satpathy, an accounts assistant with the Central Institute of Petrochemicals Engineering & Technology (CIPET), was on vacation with his family in Baisaran

valley near the popular tourist spot of Pahalgam, when the attack occurred.

Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi said, "We will extend all necessary assistance to bring back the mortal remains and support the family during this difficult time."

Kotia residents seek refuge in Andhra as tensions escalate

RAJEEV RATHAN ■ Bhubaneswar

Residents of Kotia village under Pottangi block in Koraput district, a region embroiled in a prolonged territorial dispute between Odisha and Andhra Pradesh, have expressed their intention to align with Andhra Pradesh. Frustrated by the Koraput administration's inaction and the Odisha government's inability to fulfill their developmental needs, the people of Kotia have sought refuge in Andhra Pradesh. Hundreds of villagers from Neridibalsa, Tadibalsa and Sthipad have made their way to Andhra,

where they met former Deputy Chief Minister Peedika Rajanna Dora.

During the meeting on Tuesday, the villagers candidly voiced their displeasure with Odisha's Government, declaring their preference to remain in Andhra Pradesh. They appealed for extension of Andhra's development schemes to the three panchayats that comprise villages from Kotia, stressing that these areas should receive dedicated attention and resources. Responding to the villagers' plea, Peedika Rajanna Dora issued a statement expressing

concern over the ongoing neglect of the region. He highlighted that when the YSR Congress was in power, the region saw more focused attention and resources for its development. Dora appealed to Andhra Pradesh's current Chief Minister and Deputy Chief Minister to intervene and facilitate a resolution to the ongoing territorial dispute, urging both States to ensure fair treatment for the people of Kotia. Dora also criticised the Odisha Government for preventing Andhra officials from implementing welfare schemes in Kotia. He stressed

that the Odisha Government must take immediate notice and action to address these challenges. Dora further committed to personally addressing the issue with the concerned authorities in the coming days.

The situation has heightened tensions between the two States, with Kotia residents now turning towards Andhra for their developmental needs. As the territorial dispute remains unresolved, the residents' decision to seek refuge in Andhra Pradesh poses serious challenges to Odisha's claims over the region.

KALINGA INSTITUTE OF INDUSTRIAL TECHNOLOGY (KIIT) Deemed to be University. KIITEE 2025 PHASE - 2. APPLY ONLINE through KIIT Websites www.kiitee.ac.in / www.kiit.ac.in. ACADEMIC PROGRAMMES AVAILABLE: UG (3 years/4 years)/Integrated (5 years) Programmes, B.Tech Programmes, UG Programmes in other Disciplines, PG (1 year/2 years)/Integrated (5 years) Programmes, CAMPUS PLACEMENT 2024 HIGHLIGHTS: 700+ Companies, 5585+ Job Offers, ₹8.50 LPA Average CTC, 1500+ Paid Internships, ₹53 LPA Highest Salary Offered, 1000+ Students with multiple job offers.

Minor girl gang-raped in Sundargarh

The 3 accused still at large

PNS ■ Sundargarh

A minor girl was allegedly gang-raped by three youths in a remote forest area under the Talsara police station in Sundargarh district on Monday.

The incident has triggered shock and outrage in the local community.

According to reports, the girl had gone to attend the traditional 'Ekosia Bhoji', a

community feast held in many parts of rural Odisha.

After the event, she was returning home with two other minor girls when the accused intercepted them.

Under false pretences or coercion, the three youths allegedly forcibly took the victim into a nearby jungle and raped her.

Meanwhile, the two other girls managed to escape from the spot and informed villagers about the horrific incident. It is alleged that the

youths had come in an SUV and gang-raped the girl after abducting her. Later, they dropped the victim near another village. The matter came to light after the victim narrated the ordeal to her parents.

A police complaint has been lodged in connection with the incident.

Sources said that the accused youths were known to the girl. However, police said everything would be clear after investigations.

Rs 8-cr SBI fraud: EOW arrests 4 persons

PNS ■ Bhubaneswar

The Economic Offences Wing (EOW) of the Crime Branch on Monday arrested four persons in connection with a Rs 8.1 crore bank fraud.

The arrested were identified as Smruti Ranjan Sathy, M Dibyashree Jyoti Ranjan, Niranjana Behera and Debasish Behera.

The four accused were arrested in connection with a case registered by the EOW based on the complaint of Shiba Sundara Sahoo, Regional Manager, State Bank of

India (SBI), Regional Business Office, Bhubaneswar, on April 7.

Sahoo in his complaint alleged that the accused by entering into a conspiracy availed 234 Xpress credit loans amounting to Rs 8.1 crore from different branches of the SBI during 2021 and 2023 using fake and fabricated documents.

They produced forged employment records as employees of different organisations like Capital Trust Ltd, Corporate Infotech Pvt Ltd, Falcon Marine Exports Ltd., G4S Se-

curity Solutions Pvt Ltd., Global Innovsource Solutions, Innovsource Services Pvt Ltd, Muthoot Microfin Ltd, Narayana Hrudayalaya Ltd and Orion Security Services Solutions Pvt. Ltd.

"The accused persons in connivance with the loanees and others managed to avail 234 Xpress Credit loans meant for the corporate sector in favour of 234 different ineligible individuals by producing fake or fabricated employment records like salary certificate, employment details, bank statements and

KYC documents. After availing the loan by fraudulent means, the loanees stopped making payment of the EMI and the loan accounts became NPA leaving the outstanding amount of Rs 4,77,96,009," the EOW said.

During the investigation, the agency also ascertained that Rs 19,08,385, Rs 2.42 lakh, Rs 94,000 and Rs 50,000 have been transferred to the accounts of Smruti Ranjan, Dibyashree, Niranjana and Debasish respectively, from the loan account of the loanees.

The police also added that the accused were acting as middlemen in preparing the fake documents for financial gain.

Police during the arrest of the accused have also seized many incriminating materials like one laptop and five mobile phones, from their possession.

The accused were produced before the Odisha Protection of Interests of Depositors court in Cuttack and sent them to 14-day judicial custody after their bail pleas were rejected.

Woman, son electrocuted in K'handi

PNS ■ Bhawanipatna

A woman and her son were electrocuted on Tuesday morning at Turchi village under the Rampur police station in Madanpur of Kalahandi district.

Sources said that the woman was laying wet clothes over a wire to dry outside her house premises. Unknown to her electric current was flowing through that same stretch of wire, and she came in contact with an exposed part of it.

Hearing her screams, her son rushed to her aid but tried to remove her from the spot using his hands, causing him to be electrocuted as well. The shock proved fatal and the duo died on the spot.

However, locals had managed to retrieve the bodies and inform the Energy Department regarding the damaged cable. Meanwhile, an air of tension prevailed in the area, with irate locals expressing resentment over the overhanging cables and wires close to their houses.

Wishes pour in for JEE Main topper Odia guy Om

PNS ■ Bhubaneswar

After Om Prakash Behera from Odisha secured AIR 1 in JEE Main, wishes poured in from people belonging to all sections of the society.

The prominent dignitaries who congratulated him include Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla, Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi, and BJP national vice-president and Kendrapara MP Baijayant Panda.

In a ceremony held in Kota, Rajasthan, where Om is currently pursuing his education, Lok Sabha Speaker Birla personally congratulated him. Birla highlighted his success as a demonstration of his dedication and the conducive academic environment provided in Kota, known for its preparatory coaching.

"I would advise the JEE aspirants to thoroughly read NCERT prescribed books for Chemistry and Physics. However, one has to practice in detail the previous years' question papers for Mathematics. Going



through the syllabus will help to identify the areas where one has to put in extra efforts," OM said.

CM Majhi took to his social media handle to express his pride in Om's achievement, calling it a moment of honour for the State.

"Congratulations and best wishes to Om Prakash Behera for his outstanding achieve-

ment of securing 100 percentile (perfect score) at the All India level in the JEE Main 2025 (Session-2) examination. His success is a matter of pride for Odisha. Wishing him a bright and successful future ahead," the CM stated.

Praising Om for his achievement, Kendrapara MP wrote, "A matter of pride for Odisha. Heartfelt congratulations and

best wishes to Om Prakash Behera from Odisha for securing the top position at the all-India level by scoring 100% in the Joint Entrance Examination (JEE) Main 2025 - Second Session. Wishing him a bright future." Om Prakash scored a perfect 100 percentile, distinguishing himself among 24 top scorers in the 2025 Session-2 of the exam.

In Gajapati

Serious patient not shifted for 21 hrs

As ambulance reaches late

PNS ■ Paralakhemundi

A serious patient referred to Brahmapur from the Ramgiri PHC of Gajapati district could not immediately be shifted due to lack of ambulance.

Roito of Marlaba of Rayagada block was admitted at Ramgiri PHC. After acknowledged as serious, he was referred to Brahmapur. So, family members contacted for ambulance but in vain.

Later, Dr Brajaraj Kar contacted for ambulance. After 21 hours, the ambulance came from Chandragiri which is hardly 35 km.

IIT BBS partners with Numeros Motors



To pioneer rare earth-free motor tech

PNS ■ Bhubaneswar

Numeros Motors, a new-age OEM specializing in indigenous electric mobility solutions, has entered into a strategic research collaboration with the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Bhubaneswar.

The two entities have signed an agreement to jointly undertake a two-year research initiative focused on exploring and evaluating various non-magnet or rare earth-free (RE-free) motor topologies. Aimed at revolutionising the electric mobility space, the innovation will identify robust, cost-effective, and sustainable motor technologies catering to India's rapidly growing elec-

tric vehicle market.

The agreement was signed in presence of Prof Dinakar Pasla, Dean (Sponsored Research & Industrial Consultancy), IIT Bhubaneswar.

The collaboration is intended to support India's clean mobility goals by reducing dependence on rare earth materials-key components in traditional EV motors-and by encouraging local innovation in EV manufacturing.

By combining IIT Bhubaneswar's academic expertise in electrical engineering with Numeros Motors' practical knowledge of electric drivetrain systems, the project will focus on developing motor solutions that are both efficient and affordable. The initiative is aligned with India's vision to promote self-reliant, sustainable EV technologies.

Koraput DM receives PM Award

PNS ■ Koraput

Koraput district Collector V Keerthi Vasani recently getting the Prime Minister Award for Excellence in Public Administration for the year 2024 has made the State proud.

Koraput district has been recognized for its outstanding work in the category of 'Holistic Development of Districts'.

The Prime Minister's Award for Excellence in Public Administration is a prestigious recognition of outstanding work in public administration. The award aims to promote excellence and innovation in governance, and Koraput district's selection is a testament to its commitment to holistic development.



Under the stewardship of Vasani, Koraput district has made significant strides in various areas, including healthcare, education, and infrastructure development.

The district administration has implemented innovative

governance models, including the use of technology to improve service delivery and citizen engagement.

Vasani is an IAS officer of the 2018 batch. He has been serving as the Collector & District Magistrate of

Koraput since his recent transfer and posting. Prior to this, he served as CDO-cum-EO, Zilla Parishad, Ganjam. He received the award from the PM on the Civil Services Day at Vigyan Bhawan, New Delhi.

2 die, 4 injured in two road mishaps in JSpur

PNS ■ Jagatsinghpur

Two persons were killed and four others were injured in two separate road mishaps that occurred on Cuttack-Machhagaon NH55 on Monday.

The report said that a Scotty rider, Arta Charana Sahu, a resident of Nabapatana village under Jagatsinghpur block, died on the spot at Nuapola Bazaar when a speeding car rammed into his two-wheeler. Soon after the mishap, thousands of residents and villagers of Nabapatana staged a road block at the spot, putting the body on the road, demanding compensation for the deceased's kin. Jagatsinghpur police reached the spot and dis-

cussed with the agitated villagers. Later, the roadblock was withdrawn.

Meanwhile, police have picked up the errant car driver, and further investigation was on, police said.

In the other case that occurred at Ichhapur near Madhuri Bazar under Balikuda block on Monday, a person was killed and four others were injured when two bikes collided head-on at the spot. The deceased was identified as 42-year-old resident of Panchapally village under Erasama block, and four injured persons are from the Balikuda area. Police seized the body and sent it for postmortem, and all injured persons were undergoing treatment at the District Headquarters Hospital.

Fire Safety Awareness Week concludes at PPA

Host of events held

PNS ■ Paradip

The Fire Safety Awareness Week, observed across Paradip Port with the aim of enhancing public understanding and preparedness for fire-related emergencies, concluded here.

Throughout the week, starting on April 14, the Paradip Fire Department, in collaboration with local organisations and community volunteers, conducted a series of impactful initiatives to educate residents, businesses, and institutions on crucial fire safety measures.

This year's campaign focused on the theme "Unite, to ignite a fire safe India", emphasizing the importance of proactive measures and community involvement in preventing fires and ensuring swift and safe responses when they



occur. Key highlights of the Week included educational workshops and seminars, fire safety drills and demonstrations, public awareness campaigns and community engagement programmes.

At the valedictory function held at Gate No.-4, Deputy Chairman, PPA Nilabhra Dasgupta said, "Fire safety is not just the responsibility of the fire department; it requires the active participation

of every individual. The knowledge and preparedness gained during this week will undoubtedly contribute to making Paradip a safer place for everyone." Commandant, CISF Sanat

Kumar Patel gave the welcome address. Assistant Commandant, CISF, Akash Jaiswal offered the vote of thanks.

The winners of various competitions such as school children, housewives, PPA

employees, port beneficiaries and general public were awarded with the prizes.

Fire rescue and disaster management demonstrations were also conducted by the CISF Department.

PM Modi's aircraft escorted by F-15 jets of Saudi Arabia

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

Signifying close ties between the two countries, in a special gesture, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's aircraft was escorted by F-15 jets of Saudi Arabia when his special flight entered the airspace of the Gulf nation on Tuesday, officials said. Modi is paying a two-day visit to Saudi Arabia.

Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) also released a video of the Saudi jets escorting Modi's aircraft. The gesture is being seen as deepening of Defence cooperation between the two countries.

The Prime Minister on Tuesday said India deeply values its long and historic ties with Saudi Arabia, asserting that their relations have acquired a strategic depth and momentum in recent years.

In his departure statement ahead of his two-day visit to the kingdom on the invitation of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, he said both countries have developed a mutually beneficial and substantive partnership, including in the domains of defence, trade, investment, energy and people-to-people ties.

"We have shared interest and commitment to promote regional peace, prosperity, security and stability," Modi said, noting that it will be his third visit to the country and the first one to the historic city of Jeddah.

He said he looked forward to participating in the second meeting of the Strategic Partnership Council and building upon the highly successful state visit of Mohammed bin Salman to India in 2023. Modi described the crown prince as "my brother".

He said he is also eager to connect with the "vibrant" Indian community in Saudi Arabia that continues to serve as the living bridge between the two nations and makes an immense contribution to



Prime Minister Narendra Modi looks at the fighter jets of Royal Saudi Air Force escorting his aircraft as it arrives in Jeddah

strengthening the cultural and human ties.

Officials noted that all prime ministers before Modi together visited Saudi Arabia three times in close to seven decades. This is also Modi's 15th visit to a country in the Gulf region, they added.

In an interview with Arab News, ahead of his visit Modi said "India and Saudi Arabia have a natural interest in safeguarding peace and stability in the region and the growing defence and security collaboration between the two countries is a reflection of deep mutual trust."

Modi described Saudi Arabia as "one of India's most valued partners, a maritime neighbour, a trusted friend and a strategic ally."

"We consider Saudi Arabia as a force of positivity and stability in the region. As

maritime neighbours, India and Saudi Arabia share a natural interest in safeguarding peace and stability in the region," he said.

"The growing defence and security engagement and collaboration between the two countries is a reflection of deep mutual trust," he said.

"It is also a testament to our shared commitment to regional stability, and our mutual resolve to address the evolving challenges in our extended neighbourhood," Modi added.

In their talks on Tuesday evening, Modi and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman are expected to focus on boosting defence ties apart from enhancing engagement in many other crucial sectors.

Haryana CM to dedicate 18 road projects in Gurugram

PARVESH SHARMA ■ Gurugram

Haryana Chief Minister Nayab Singh Saini will dedicate 18 road development projects worth over ₹115 crore related to the Public Works Department (PWD) in Sohna and Pataudi Assembly constituencies in Gurugram on Wednesday, officials said. The CM will also inaugurate the first modern street of Haryana at Udyog Vihar during his visit.

Executive Engineer of PWD Charandeep Singh Rana said that Chief Minister Saini will inaugurate the Loh Singhani to Chamanpura Road, Nuhra from BPDS Road, and Alipur Hari Heda from Loh Singhani to Chamanpura Road, built in the Sohna assembly constituency.

At the same time, the foundation stone of the renovation work of the Sohna-Abhayapur-Lohtki-Khedla and Damdama to Rithoj road from Sohna-Abhayapur-Lohtki-Khedla and Damdama to Rithoj road from Dhumaspur via Nayagaon will be laid.

Charandeep Singh Rana said that in this sequence, the Chief Minister will also give various road development projects in Pataudi Assembly on Wednesday.

He informed us that the Chief Minister will also lay the foundation stone for the renovation of the Kheda Khurmpur road in the Pataudi Assembly. The estimated cost of these different projects would be around over 115 cores.

Deputy Commissioner Gurugram, Ajay Kumar, informed that the Chief Minister will also preside over the 14th meeting of the Gurugram Metropolitan Development Authority (GMDA) in Gurugram on Wednesday.

Pegasus row: Supreme Court sets April 29 to hear pleas

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

The Supreme Court on Tuesday fixed next week to hear a batch of pleas seeking a probe into the alleged unauthorised use of Pegasus spyware for the surveillance of journalists among others. A bench of Justices Surya Kant and N Kotiwar Singh posted the hearing on April 29 for want of time. Senior advocate Shyam Divan, appearing for some petitioners, said the top court previously directed for supply of reports of a technical panel but no such report was shared.

"This court will have to pass some directions because we have not received the reports. Kindly hear it urgently," Divan said. The bench directed for listing the matter next week.

On March 7, the top court fixed April 22 for hearing the pleas.

On August 25, 2022, the top court said the technical panel appointed by it to probe the unauthorised use of Pegasus found some malware in five of 29 examined cell phones but it could not be held that the Israeli spyware was used.

After perusing the report submitted by former apex court Justice RV Raveendran, the top court said the Central government did not cooperate with the Pegasus probe.

The top court in 2021 ordered a probe into the allegations of the use of Israeli spyware by government agencies for targeted surveillance of politicians, journalists, and activists and appointed technical and supervisory committees to examine the matter.

The overseeing panel submitted a "lengthy" three-part report, one of which suggested amending the law to protect citizens' right to privacy and ensure the nation's cyber security.

The technical panel, which included three experts on cyber security, digital forensics, networks, and hardware, was

asked by the top court to "inquire, investigate and determine" whether Pegasus spyware was used for snooping on citizens and their probe would be monitored by Raveendran.

The panel members were Naveen Kumar Chaudhary, Prabakaran P, and Ashwin Anil Gumaste.

Justice Raveendran, who headed the panel, was assisted by former IPS officer Alok Joshi and cyber security expert Sundeep Oberoi in monitoring the inquiry of the technical panel. The apex



court order said the probe panel would be empowered to enquire and investigate the steps or actions taken by the Centre after reports in 2019 claimed the hacking of WhatsApp accounts of Indian citizens using the Pegasus suite of spyware.

It also directed the panel to ascertain if any Pegasus suite was acquired by the union of India, or any state government, or any central or state agency used against the citizens of India.

An international media consortium reported over 300 verified Indian cell phone numbers were on the list of potential targets for surveillance using the Pegasus spyware.

Row over Bills: SC to examine if Tamil Nadu verdict covers issues raised by Kerala

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

The Supreme Court on Tuesday said it would examine whether the recent judgement on a plea of Tamil Nadu, which granted the grant of assent to bills, covered the issues raised by the Kerala government in its pleas. A bench comprising Justices PS Narasimha and Joymalya Bagchi agreed to hear on May 6 the pleas of the Kerala government against Governor over the delay in approving bills passed by the state assembly.

"We will look into that judgement and see whether issues raised here are covered," the bench said when Attorney General R Venkataramani and Solicitor General Tushar Mehta, appearing for the Centre and the Governor's office, said the recent judgement delivered by a bench headed by Justice JB Pardiwala did not cover the issues raised by the Kerala government.

A bench comprising Justices Pardiwala and R Mahadevan on April 8 delivered a significant verdict on the plea of Tamil Nadu and set aside the reservation of the 10 bills for President's consideration in the second round holding it as illegal, erroneous in law.

The bench, for the first time, also prescribed that President should decide on the bills reserved for her consideration by

Governor within a period of three months from the date on which such reference is received. Kerala seeks similar directions in its case. On Tuesday, senior advocate KK Venugopal, appearing for Kerala, said the pleas of the state were covered by the recent judgement. "What is the timeline for making a reference to the President by the Governor and this issue is dealt with by that judgement and there are no other questions," he said. He urged the bench to allow the pleas of the Kerala government in terms of the Tamil Nadu judgement.

Mehta, however, insisted on making submissions saying the case of Kerala was not covered by the Tamil Nadu judgement.

"The (Tamil Nadu) judgment does not cover certain issues in this case on facts which are essentially different," the bench said and fixed the pleas for hearing on May 6. The bench asked Venugopal to mention the third and subsequent plea of the state government, challenging the withholding of assent by President, before the CJI so that it can also be referred to it.

Venugopal said the Chief Justice of India directed listing of the petition on May 13.

The bench said a mention had to be made before the CJI for tagging the other petition with the present one.

In 2023, the top court expressed displeasure over the then Kerala Governor Arif

Mohammed Khan "sitting" for two years on bills passed by the state legislature.

Khan is currently Governor of Bihar.

The top court, on July 26, last year, agreed to consider the plea of opposition-ruled Kerala alleging the denial of assent to bills passed by the legislative assembly.

The Kerala government alleged that Khan referred certain bills to President Droupadi Murmu and those were yet to be cleared. Taking note of the pleas, the top court issued notices to the Union Ministry of Home Affairs and the secretaries of the Kerala Governor. Venugopal said, "This is the most unfortunate situation."

The state said its plea related to the acts of Governor in reserving seven bills, which he was required to deal with himself, to President. Not one of the seven bills had anything to do with Centre-state relations, it argued.

The bills were pending with Governor for as long as two years and his action "subverted" the functioning of the state legislature, rendering its very existence "ineffective and otiose", the state added.

"The bills include public interest bills that are for the public good, and even these have been rendered ineffective by the Governor not dealing with each one of them 'as soon as possible', as required by the proviso to Article 200," the plea said.

Neither Parliament nor executive but Constitution is supreme: Opposition

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

Neither Parliament nor the executive but the Constitution is supreme, opposition leaders said on Tuesday as they hit back at Vice-President Jagdeep Dhankhar who slammed his critics for questioning his remarks on a recent Supreme Court order and proclaimed the supremacy of Parliament. The opposition leaders' assertions came after Dhankhar said every word spoken by a constitutional authority was guided by supreme national interest.

In a social media post, Rajya Sabha MP Kapil Sibal said, "Supreme Court: Parliament has the plenary power to pass laws. Supreme Court has the obligation to interpret the Constitution and do complete justice (Article 142)."

"Everything the court said is: Consistent with our constitutional values; guided by national interest," the Independent Rajya Sabha MP and former Congress leader said. In another post, Sibal said, "The law: Neither Parliament nor the Executive is supreme, the Constitution is supreme. The provisions of the Constitution are interpreted by the Supreme Court. That's how this country has understood the law so far!" AIMIM Chief Asaduddin Owaisi also reacted

sharply to Dhankhar's remarks, saying the judiciary would intervene if a wrong law was made and constitutional articles were misused.

"It is his limited understanding. Parliament is definitely supreme and independent. The judiciary and executive are also independent. This is why the stereo separation of powers is part of (the) basic structure of our constitution... If you make wrong laws, if you misuse the constitutional articles, then judiciary will intervene," Owaisi told reporters.

RJD leader and Rajya Sabha MP Manoj Jha said, "The vice-president is a respected constitutional authority but I would urge him to revisit the Constituent Assembly debates where the importance of balance between the judiciary and the legislature was discussed... The Constitution remains our ultimate guide."

Congress spokesperson Supriya Shrinete said there was a strict division of powers in the Constitution among the legislature, executive and the judiciary.

"The judiciary in this country is meant to do judicial review. Yes, Parliament makes the law but the Supreme Court of India is the supreme authority to review those laws to find if those laws meet the norms of the Constitution. Should the judiciary be shut down? Is judicial review

wrong? So what is the vice-president talking about? The vice-president should talk about how governors across the country have become puppets of the BJP," she said.

Reacting to Dhankhar's remarks, Congress leader and former Lok Sabha MP Danish Ali said the Constitution belonged to the people and not any "elected king" sitting in power. "Public representatives are servants of the people, not their masters. Now that the judiciary is looking them in the eye and showing them the truth, these 'masters' have started feeling the Constitution to be a burden. The country knows who is the 'master' who appoints these people 'who follow orders,'" Ali said in a social media post in Hindi.

"For Vice-President Dhankhar ji, a particular person may be of utmost importance but for us the Constitution is supreme. The country will not forgive the campaign being run to make a particular person all-powerful by ignoring democratic norms under the garb of Parliament or the executive," he said.

The vice-president is occupying a very high constitutional post and will be aware but is not saying that the Supreme Court has the power to review the laws passed by Parliament, Samajwadi Party MP Dharmendra Yadav said.

"How can you snatch that right?"

Mallikarjun Kharge condemns Pahalgam terror attack



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge on Tuesday condemned the terror attack on innocent tourists in Pahalgam, saying it is a blot on humanity. He also said the country's national security is paramount and urged the central government to take corrective measures. "I strongly condemn the cowardly terror attack on innocent tourists in Pahalgam, Jammu & Kashmir. The entire nation is united in fighting the scourge of cross-border terrorism.

"These dastardly targeted attacks are a blot on humanity. News reports indicate that precious lives have been lost. On behalf of the Congress party, my heartfelt condolences to the families of the victims. Our thoughts and prayers are with the injured," the Congress president said in a social media post.

"India's National Security is paramount and we urge the GOI to take corrective measures to ensure the same," Kharge said.

Congress general secretary Priyanka

Gandhi Vadra also denounced the attack as a highly condemnable and shameful act, and said the country stands united against terrorism. "Targeting unarmed and innocent civilians is a crime against humanity. This is completely unacceptable. The whole country stands united against terrorism and strongly condemns it," she said in a social media post in Hindi.

"According to reports, many tourists have been killed in this attack. May God grant peace to the departed souls. I pray for the speedy recovery of the injured," she said. Terrorists struck a prime tourist location of Pahalgam in south Kashmir on Tuesday, killing multiple people and injuring at least 20. The incident occurred around 3 pm when terrorists came down from the mountain in Baisaran valley and started firing at tourists, who frequent the place which is often dubbed as "mini Switzerland" because of its lush green meadows.

The terror attack came at a time when US Vice President JD Vance is on a four-day visit to India along with his family. He was in Rajasthan on Tuesday.

India's heritage sites see 19 per cent rise in footfall in 2023-24

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

India's centrally protected ticketed monuments experienced an over 19 per cent surge in footfall in 2023-24 compared to the pre-pandemic levels but this did not translate into higher revenue from ticket sales, which dropped by 2.83 per cent, official data shows.

An analysis of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) data, presented in the Rajya Sabha, covering 143 monuments shows a complex recovery picture for these key heritage sites, contextualised by broader national trends reported in the Ministry of Tourism's 'India Tourism Data Compendium 2024'.

The total footfall across these listed monuments increased by 19.35 per cent from approximately 4.60 crore in 2019-20 to 5.49 crore in 2023-24, the data showed.

However, despite the surge in the number of visitors, the combined revenue from ticket sales at these monuments saw a decline of 2.83 per cent during the five-year period, dropping from ₹312.54 crore in 2019-20 to ₹303.70 crore in 2023-24.

This suggests a shift in the visitor composition at these sites. A direct comparison of visitor data for centrally protected ticketed monuments between 2019-20 and 2023-24 reveals divergent trends.

While domestic tourist visits surged by 21.75 per cent, from 4.36 crore in 2019-20 to 5.31 crore in 2023-24, foreign tourist visits decreased by 16.03 per cent, from 27.56 lakh in 2019-20 to 23.15 lakh in 2023-24, according to the data.

The increase in the domestic visitor segment, coupled with a decline in the number of higher-paying foreign visitors compared to the pre-pandemic levels, appears to be the primary factor behind the stagnant overall monument revenue



despite higher total footfall. This trend mirrors the national picture, where Foreign Tourist Arrivals (FTAs) in India in 2023 (95.2 lakh) recovered to only about 87 per cent of the 2019 levels.

The resulting lower average revenue per visitor at the monuments, likely stemming from this altered visitor mix and the ASI's differential pricing structure, aligns with the broader national context where Foreign Exchange Earnings (FEEs) from tourism overall stood at \$28.08 billion in 2023, lower than the 2019 peak of \$30.72 billion.

The broader tourism sector remains a significant economic contributor nationally, with its total (direct + indirect) share

estimated to be 5 per cent of the GDP and supporting 7.62 crore jobs in 2022-23, according to the Tourism Satellite Account data. Performance varied dramatically across individual monuments.

While sites like Rajarani Temple (301 per cent), Ashokan Rock Edict (251 per cent) and Konark Sun Temple (53.5 per cent) saw massive revenue growth (2023-24 vs 2019-20), others like Tirumalai Nayak's Palace (98.2 per cent), Moovarkoil (90.1 per cent) and Agra Fort (47.2 per cent) saw sharp declines.

These stark differences likely stem from various site-specific factors which could range from restoration activities impacting access, changes in regional tourism promotion and infrastructure, or shifts in popular visitor circuits. Specific reasons for each monument's performance are not detailed in the analysed data.

The performance of iconic monuments underscores the trend.

The Taj Mahal saw the footfall jump by 31.27 per cent but the revenue rose only 1.48 per cent. Qutub Minar's footfall surged by 45.1 per cent and revenue by 18 per cent. Conversely, Humayun's Tomb saw footfall increased by 16.6 per cent while revenue dropped by 29.8 per cent.

According to the 'India Tourism Data Compendium 2024', the Taj Mahal was the most popular among visitors in 2023-24 with 61 lakh domestic and 6.8 lakh foreign tourists.

Konark Sun Temple (32 lakh) and Qutub Minar (31.2 lakh) were the next most popular among domestic tourists. For foreign visitors, it was Qutub Minar (2.2 lakh) and Agra Fort (2.18 lakh).

Visitor numbers, however, did not directly correlate with revenue generation.

The highest revenue earners among these monuments in 2023-24 were Taj Mahal (₹98.55 crore), Qutub Minar (₹23.80 crore), Red Fort (₹18.09 crore), Agra Fort (₹15.27 crore) and Konark Sun Temple (₹12.66 crore), according to ASI data. The data specific to India's protected monuments paints a picture of resilient visitor appeal, particularly drawing huge numbers of domestic travellers post-pandemic.

However, the financial recovery at these sites, measured by ticket revenue, still lags behind pre-pandemic benchmarks, reflecting the significant impact of the reduced number of foreign visitors compared to 2019 and the overall altered tourism landscape.

Editor's TAKE

A cultural gesture or a strategic reachout?

JD Vance's 3-day visit to India is more than a family trip. It's a message

United States Vice President JD Vance's three-day visit to India might appear on the surface as a cultural homecoming for his family, but beneath the surface lies a layer of strategic nuance that reflects the evolving dynamics of India-US relations — particularly amid the backdrop of Donald Trump's sanctions policy.

However, even such personal diplomacy carries weight. As the highest-ranking US official to visit India under the current administration, his presence alone sends a strong signal: despite recent tensions and Trump-era trade policy headwinds, the US values its long-term strategic relationship with India.

While the official itinerary includes only one major formal engagement — a meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi followed by a state dinner — the subtext of that conversation is expected to be significant. Trade negotiations between the two nations remain in a delicate phase, especially with Trump's reciprocal tariffs on Indian goods paused only temporarily until July.

Vance's visit comes just weeks after Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard's trip to India, indicating a deliberate staggered engagement from Trump's key officials.

His presence also comes at a time when Modi is preparing for a high-profile visit to Saudi Arabia, underscoring how both nations are recalibrating their global engagements and seeking balance in a multipolar world order.

By prioritising a family-led cultural immersion alongside limited political engagements, Vance is walking a fine line. It's a display of soft power — highlighting shared values, people-to-people ties, and the significance of diaspora connections — while also reaffirming the transactional, interests-based nature of current US foreign policy under Trump.

The symbolic guard of honour, shopping trips for Indian handicrafts, and visits to Jaipur's heritage sites are diplomatic gestures that soften the harder edges of policy friction. This duality makes Vance's visit a potent blend of optics and opportunity.

In a time of strained alliances and recalibrated partnerships, JD Vance's India visit is a quiet assertion: that while policy may shift, relationships endure — and sometimes, it's the personal visits that pave the way for political resets.

Deeply Pained by the Passing of His Holiness Pope Francis. Pope Francis will always be remembered as a beacon of compassion, humility, and spiritual courage by millions across the world.

Leaderspeak section featuring a quote by Prime Minister Narendra Modi about Pope Francis. Includes a small illustration of a crowd of people.

India bolsters ties with Sri Lanka

As China deepens its presence through major investments, India is doubling down to protect its strategic interests — offering aid, infrastructure to send a message that it is Sri Lanka's most reliable partner

Amid the intensifying India-China battle for influence in Sri Lanka, New Delhi has reason to be satisfied following the recent two-day state visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the island nation during which economic, defence, and energy ties with an important neighbour were shored up.

The underlying message herein being that China isn't one. It was also conveyed to Colombo once again that protecting India's security interests as well as its own should be of paramount importance.

To New Delhi's undoubted relief, President Dissanayake reiterated that he will not allow Sri Lankan territory to be used in any manner that will threaten India's security interests. For now, the Dissanayake Government appears to be walking the talk on this account going by news reports that Sri Lanka cancelled a joint naval exercise with India's arch-foe Pakistan.



lanes, New Delhi knows that Chinese expansionism can pose a strategic threat to both India and Sri Lanka.

The spreading tentacles of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Sri Lanka too have given New Delhi sleepless nights. As China's footprints in Sri Lanka increase, New Delhi knows well that it cannot afford to let its guard down vis-à-vis Beijing as the latter builds deep inroads into India's immediate and extended neighbourhood.

This has forced India to redouble its efforts to ramp up its engagement and provide all manner of development assistance to countries in its neighbourhood so that they remain within its sphere of influence.

In the case of Sri Lanka, India provided financial assistance totalling \$4.5 billion in 2022 and 2023 to it during its post-pandemic economic meltdown. This played a vital role in helping Sri Lanka obtain an IMF bailout.

Despite pursuing a policy of 'Neighbourhood First', India's strategic space in the IOR is increasingly shrinking amidst a relentless Chinese onslaught. Though India has coined the new term 'Mahasagar' (Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions) replacing the earlier coinage of 'Sagar' (Security and Growth for All) for countries in the IOR, containing China's influence remains a challenge.

In the case of Sri Lanka, the Left-leaning Dissanayake has adroitly managed to balance his country's diplomatic ties with the two Asian giants in the six months since he took charge. It also means that the island nation for now is seeking to reap the benefits from the fierce India-China rivalry in Sri Lanka and the wider IOR.

It will be developed by the Trincomalee Power Company, which is a joint venture

between Ceylon Electricity Board and India's NTPC. To boost the island nation's energy security, all the more imperative as it went through a crippling forex crisis post the pandemic — which meant huge fuel shortages — the visit saw a tripartite agreement between India, Sri Lanka, and the UAE to develop Trincomalee as a regional energy hub.

After all, China's hegemonic ambitions present a real and present danger to India and indeed the entire IOR.

(The author is Senior Journalist. Views are personal)



PARUL CHANDRA

Overthinking is injurious to mental health

SECOND Opinion

BY SAKSHI SETHI

Overthinking is a subtle but destructive habit that many people silently suffer from. It often disguises itself as caution or deep reflection, but in truth, it's a mental loop that traps individuals in cycles of worry, doubt, and inaction.

What begins as a desire to make the right choice or prepare for future outcomes quickly spirals into obsessive thinking. The mind replays conversations, dissects every detail, and invents endless "what ifs" and "should haves."

Instead of arriving at clarity, individuals find themselves stuck in a loop of mental noise that prevents real progress. A 2013 study published in the Journal of Abnormal Psychology found that overthinking is closely linked with anxiety and depression.

self-trust, making even small choices feel high-stakes. When someone begins to believe that every decision must be perfect, they become paralysed by the fear of imperfection, holding themselves back from growth, both personally and professionally.

Often, these fears stem from past experiences where mistakes were punished or outcomes were unpredictable. As a coping mechanism, the brain tries to take control by playing out every possible scenario. Ironically, this attempt at control results in more chaos and mental fatigue.

action. Journaling is another powerful tool. Writing down your thoughts gets them out of your head and onto paper, immediately reducing their emotional charge.

Cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), a scientifically supported method, is built around this very idea — challenging irrational thoughts and replacing them with more realistic, balanced perspectives.

We begin to see that the consequences of our decisions are rarely as catastrophic as we imagine, and even when things go wrong, we gain experience and resilience. Building trust in yourself is crucial. Each small, confident decision reinforces your capability.

(The writer is an educator. Views are personal)

Letters to the Editor

SY Quraishi and the politics of identity

Madam — Former Chief Election Commissioner SY Quraishi responded firmly to BJP MP Nishikant Dubey's recent remark labelling him a "Muslim Commissioner."

A proud member of the Haryana cadre of the IAS, Quraishi's public service career is a model of integrity and dedication. His work has been recognised by many, including Dr Gopalkrishna Gandhi, the distinguished grandson of Mahatma Gandhi and C Rajagopalachari.

BHAGWAN THADANI | MUMBAI

Rohit Sharma's wankhede moment

Madam — There could be no better timing than this for Indian cricket captain Rohit Sharma. Soon after the Mumbai Cricket Association honoured him by naming a stand after him at Wankhede Stadium, he delivered a stunning unbeaten 76-run knock against Chennai Super Kings, featuring four boundaries and six sixes.

His performance not only secured victory but also pushed Mumbai Indians up to sixth place on the IPL points table. From a young boy in Borivali known for breaking window panes to a cricketer legend who has broken records on the global stage, Rohit's rise is truly inspirational.

His success stems from a passion for the game and an unrelenting commitment to his team, not personal milestones.

What sets Rohit apart is his leadership, consistency, and ability to inspire. He is the only Indian cricketer to win two T20 World Cups — once as a player, once as captain — and has led the team to multiple ICC titles.

He is also the only player with three double centuries in ODIs and holds records for the most international sixes and the highest ODI score.

A fearless and flamboyant cricketer, Rohit Sharma's name now fittingly graces a stand at Wankhede. When he bats, it's nothing short of a festival for fans — an experience of joy, energy, and unforgettable moments.

G DAVID MILTON | MARUTHANCODE

Nurturing emotional bonds

Madam — Recent scientific research lends weight to poet William Wordsworth's timeless observation that "the child is father of the man." A study conducted by King's College London, Duke University, and the University of Oslo emphasises that children given the right emotional support can positively influence society as a whole.

In the 21st century, children are often subjected to rigid schedules and academic pressure, leaving little time for meaningful connection with their parents. Given the rise in societal violence, insecurity, and alienation, even small acts of kindness — whether a warm gesture, kind word, or embrace — can serve as seeds for empathy and resilience.

As technology and pressure erode connection, small acts of love within families can counteract alienation and help shape a more compassionate, unified future.

RANGANATHAN SIVAKUMAR | TAMIL NADU

A BREWING CRISIS THREATENING KERALA'S COMMUNAL HARMONY

Munambam, the jewel of Vypeen Island in Kochi, is a picturesque suburban area nestled along the Arabian Sea. However, it has now become the Achilles' heel of Kerala. In 1902, Abdul Sattar, a prominent member of the Kutchi Memon community — a Muslim trading group from Gujarat that had migrated to the state — was granted a lease for over 400 acres of land in Munambam by the princely state that governed the area.

Over time, the college sold portions of the land to various encroacher-occupants. In 1971, the Paravur Sub Court ruled that the land was covered under a formal waqf deed. This decision was upheld by the Kerala High Court in 1975. Reports submitted by the Emakulam Collectors to the High Court in 2008 and 2009 also confirmed the land's waqf status.

Subsequently, in 2019, the Kerala Waqf

Board formally registered the property as waqf, effectively nullifying all previous land sales. Amid the ensuing confusion, numerous tourist resorts have been established on the disputed land. The residents of the area — primarily Latin Catholic fisherfolk — have been staging a relay hunger strike for over 175 days, demanding recognition of their revenue rights over the land they have long inhabited.

— HARIDARSAN RAJAN | KOZHIKODE

Why India must cut GST on farm equipment?

As rural labour dwindles and food security demands rise, mechanisation is no longer optional — it's imperative. Yet the very tools needed to modernise farming are taxed more than luxury items, placing an unjust burden on small and marginal farmers

FIRST Column

India's agricultural sector, the backbone of rural livelihoods, is at a critical juncture. The transition to modern and mechanised farming is no longer a choice but is necessary to ensure food security, optimise productivity, and improve farmers' incomes. Yet, a significant bottleneck hampers this transition — the irrational Goods and Services Tax (GST) structure on tractors and other agri-implements.

Today, farm equipment is taxed at 12 per cent, more than a luxury watch is taxed at 5 per cent. For a small or marginal farmer purchasing a low-horsepower tractor costing ₹5-7 lakh, this means paying ₹60,000 to ₹84,000 upfront as GST alone — a prohibitive cost for most. This, in turn, delays the mechanisation process in areas where it is needed the most.

Pre-GST Scenario Was More Farmer-Friendly

Before the implementation of GST on July 1, 2017, tractors and most agri-implements were exempt from excise duties and subject to only 4-6 per cent Value Added Tax (VAT), depending on the state. Fertilisers, an essential element of agriculture, were previously taxed at 6 per cent (1 per cent excise and 5 per cent VAT). In the GST regime, the introduction of a 12 per cent GST rate on fertilisers was reduced to 5 per cent. However, on agricultural machinery still, 12 per cent GST disrupted the affordability landscape, disproportionately impacting small and marginal farmers, who make up over 86 per cent of India's total landholdings and are responsible for producing more than 60 per cent of the country's food grains.

While GST has unified the country's indirect tax system, it has also inadvertently penalised these vulnerable farmers by making essential farm tools more expensive. Rationalising GST to 5 per cent or even zero for tractors, their components, and agri-implements would significantly ease their financial burden and accelerate rural mechanisation.

Haryana's Chief Minister Nayab Singh Saini has recently written to the Union Finance and Agriculture Minister seeking GST exemption on 10 essential farm implements like rotavators, zero-till drills, super-seeders, straw-balers, and tractor-mounted spray pumps — a move and other states CMs should also collectively endorse.

Policy Contradictions: Subsidise on One Hand, Tax on the Other

The contradiction is glaring. The Government's flagship schemes, like the Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana (RKVY) and the Sub-Mission on Agricultural Mechanisation (SMAM), offer subsidies of up to 50 per cent on machinery such as tractors, combine harvesters, sugarcane harvesters, cotton pickers, for establishing custom hiring centres (CHCs) and also to individual farmers for buying pump sets, tractor mounted sprayers, zero till and seed drills. Yet, these efforts are undermined when the same equipment attracts a steep GST rate.



A reduced GST rate on farm machinery will empower smallholder farmers and reduce the Government's subsidy burden. Lowering upfront taxes means farmers can buy machines at more reasonable prices, translating into more minor subsidy requirements for the Government.

Inconsistencies in the Green Energy Push

The policy incongruities extend to the renewable energy sector as well. Renewable energy devices such as solar panels, biogas plants, and windmill components attract only 5 per cent GST to promote sustainability. Electric vehicles (EVs) also enjoy a 5 per cent GST and a 15 per cent discount on third-party insurance premiums. Yet, electric tractors — vital for reducing agriculture's carbon footprint — are taxed at 12 per cent GST, the same as diesel tractors, and do not qualify for any insurance premi-



AS MITTAL

INDIA'S AGRICULTURAL FUTURE HINGES ON WIDESPREAD MECHANISATION, YET HIGH GST RATES ON ESSENTIAL FARM EQUIPMENT ACT AS A MAJOR ROADBLOCK. SMALL AND MARGINAL FARMERS — ARE UNFAIRLY BURDENED BY THE 12 PER CENT GST ON TRACTORS AND IMPLEMENTS, A RATE HIGHER THAN THAT ON LUXURY ITEMS.

um relief. According to a study by the International Council on Clean Transportation (ICCT), aligning electric tractors with EV incentives could reduce the price gap between electric and diesel tractors by nearly 40 per cent, helping India make a greener shift in agriculture.

The Urgency for Mechanisation

Mechanisation is the key to addressing India's agricultural productivity paradox. Despite India being the world's second-largest agricultural producer, only 47 per cent of its farming processes are mechanised, compared to 95 per cent in the United States, 75 per cent in Brazil, and 57 per cent in China. At this pace, India will need at least 25 more years to reach comparable levels.

Labour shortages due to rural-to-urban migration have further exacerbated the crisis. The share of the agricultural workforce has dropped from 59 per cent in 1991 to just 39 per cent in 2023. Mechanisation is essential to offset this shrinking labour force, increase yields, reduce drudgery, and make farming more attractive to rural youth.

Limited uptake

Tractors dominate India's farm equipment market,

while implements such as harvesters, seed drills, tillers, and planters account for only 15-20 per cent of the market share. This limited uptake is due to the prohibitive costs and a lack of awareness about the productivity benefits of modern equipment.

The Government and multilateral agencies are already focusing on mechanisation schemes. However, these interventions will not reach their full potential unless complemented by lower taxation.

Farm mechanisation is not merely about replacing manual labour; it is about optimising inputs, improving efficiency, and securing rural incomes in a challenging agrarian landscape. It is time for the GST Council to undertake an urgent review of agri-implement tax slabs. A uniform GST rate of 5 per cent or zero on all agricultural machinery and their components would make mechanisation affordable for small and marginal farmers, stimulate demand in under-mechanised regions, encourage the adoption of green technologies like electric tractors, and reduce Government subsidy outflows in the long run. The 'magical' character of farm mechanisation needs a booster dose. Rationalising GST will empower farmers, create rural entrepreneurship opportunities via CHCs, and help India achieve sustainable development goals. It will bridge the mechanisation gap and unlock the true potential of Indian agriculture. Mechanisation is the future, but affordability is the key.

India's agricultural future hinges on widespread mechanisation, yet high GST rates on essential farm equipment act as a major roadblock. Small and marginal farmers — who form over 86 per cent of India's agrarian base — are unfairly burdened by the 12 per cent GST on tractors and implements, a rate higher than that on luxury items. This policy contradiction undermines Government subsidies offered through schemes like RKVY and SMAM, inflating costs and stalling progress. Haryana's call for GST exemption on key implements is a step in the right direction that other states must support. The mismatch extends to green technologies too — electric tractors face the same GST rate as diesel ones, with none of the incentives that electric vehicles enjoy. This hinders both affordability and sustainability goals.

Meanwhile, India's mechanisation rate lags behind other major agricultural economies, slowed further by rural labour shortages and high upfront machinery costs. Rationalising GST to 5 per cent or zero for all agricultural equipment is critical. It would ease financial pressure on farmers, reduce Government subsidy burdens, and accelerate the adoption of both conventional and green technologies. Mechanisation is not a luxury — it's a necessity. Affordability, enabled through fair taxation, is the key to unlocking a more productive, sustainable, and prosperous agricultural future.

(The writer is Chairman of ASSOCHAM Northern Region Development Council. Views are personal)

RTI amendment erodes transparency

By removing the public interest safeguard from Section 8(1)(j), the amendment now imposes a blanket exemption on all personal data — even when linked to public duties — thereby crippling the citizen's ability to hold public officials accountable

The recent amendment to the Right to Information (RTI) Act, 2005, through the Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act, 2023, marks a pivotal retreat from the transparency regime that India painstakingly built over nearly two decades. By shielding personal information under a blanket exemption, the Modi Government has altered the balance between privacy and the public's right to know.

The operation of the RTI Act — informed by several judgments by the Supreme Court and High Courts — has shown that personal information not related to public activity was already protected.

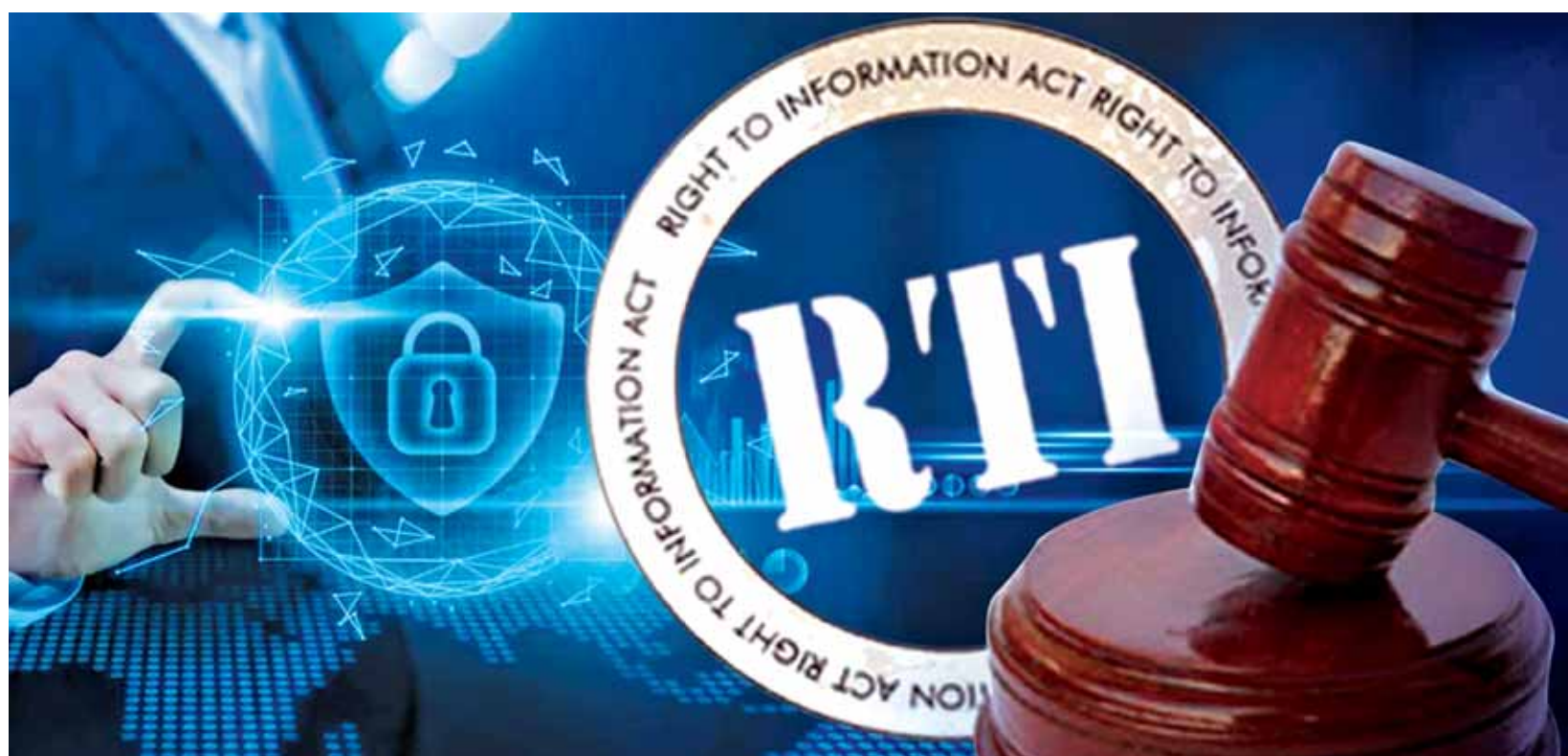
It underlines that there was already sufficient judicial restraint in place to protect genuinely private data. Landmark rulings like *Girish Deshpande vs CIC* (2013), and the *Puttaswamy* (2017) privacy judgment, drew clear boundaries between personal data and information relevant to public interest. Courts consistently held that unless the disclosure of personal information served a larger public cause, it should be denied.

Therefore, the amendment was not needed and shows legislative overreach, reflecting mistrust in judicial discretion. It signals a shift from a principle-based regime to a bureaucratic shield where no scrutiny is possible. The amendment now legalises the denial of information that courts had earlier allowed when public interest was evident — setting a regressive precedent that may encourage arbitrariness and corruption.

The SC judgment reinforces that safeguarding personal privacy and promoting institutional transparency are not mutually exclusive but are jointly essential.

This point underscores a vital democratic balance. The Supreme Court, especially in the *Puttaswamy* case, held that privacy is a fundamental right but not an absolute one; it must be balanced with transparency, especially when public interest is involved. The original RTI Act embodied this balance by permitting the release of personal information where larger institutional accountability or public interest was at stake.

The amendment breaks this balance by giving unchecked primacy to privacy, even when it is used as a smokescreen to hide inefficiency, nepotism, or corruption. For instance, public access to officials' attendance, disciplinary records, or property



details — which can reveal disproportionate assets — would now be blocked. The implication is that institutions become unanswerable to the public, reducing the citizen's role from a watchdog to a mute spectator.

The sweeping changes have been introduced through the Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act, 2023, which amended Section 8(1)(j) of the RTI Act. Earlier, this section exempted disclosure of personal information unless there was an overriding public interest. The amendment removes this public interest override and comprehensively exempts all personal data from disclosure under RTI, regardless of its connection to



KS TOMAR

THE AMENDMENT BREAKS THIS BALANCE BY GIVING UNCHECKED PRIMACY TO PRIVACY, EVEN WHEN IT IS USED AS A SMOKE-SCREEN TO HIDE INEFFICIENCY, NEPOTISM, OR CORRUPTION.

public duties. It is a fundamental shift from a "case-by-case" evaluation to an "absolute bar" on access to personal information, thereby hollowing out the core of the RTI regime.

The implication is grave: details about the conduct, performance, assets, and public duties of Government officials — even when crucial to detect corruption — can now be shielded from public scrutiny under the excuse of "Privacy". It turns the RTI from a transparency-enabling instrument into a tool riddled with opaque exemptions, undermining citizens' ability to hold officials accountable.

This proviso was a crucial equaliser — it mandated that any information which cannot be denied to Parliament or a State Legislature should not be denied to a citizen.

Its removal gives disproportionate access to legislators while stripping ordinary citizens of equal standing in accessing information. It opens the doors for selective transparency, where MPs and MLAs can

access sensitive Government information while citizens are stonewalled. This defeats the spirit of the RTI Act, of 2005 which was built on the idea that transparency is not a privilege but a right.

The move indicates a central tendency to empower the political class at the cost of democratic equity. It also allows the bureaucracy to selectively disclose information to suit political interests while denying the same to activists, journalists, or public-spirited individuals.

This technical change has a wide-ranging impact. By using the DPDP Act to amend Section 8(1)(j) of the RTI Act, the Government has effectively introduced a data protection regime that overrides the RTI's foundational purpose — access to public information. The phrase "all personal information" is undefined and absolute, allowing information officers to deny almost anything under the guise of personal data.

Details such as educational qualifications, performance appraisals, transfer postings, and reasons for disciplinary action can all

now be denied, even if such data expose abuse of power or fraud. This will embolden non-performance, discourage whistle-blowers, and limit the ability of journalists, lawyers, or citizens to demand accountability. In essence, it turns a democratic law into a bureaucratic fortress.

The Modi Government claims that legal obligations under RTI remain unaffected but this assertion is misleading. Section 44(3) of the DPDP Act directly amends the RTI Act itself, thereby altering the legal obligation.

There is a common perception amongst the citizens having consciousness about the RTI Act that the center should pause and review the amendment which reflects a broader democratic concern as it will dilute the purpose of the entire process of seeking information. The vociferous demand to reconsider the amendment is a red flag from the opposition and civil society as these changes are not about protecting privacy but about restricting scrutiny.

The repeal demand stems from fears that the Government is creating an architecture of secrecy behind the smokescreen of data protection. If allowed to persist, this may institutionalise opacity and convert public institutions into information black holes — something antithetical to participatory democracy.

The RTI Act was a landmark law that was an unprecedented achievement of the people's movement under Magsaysay winner, Aruna Roy that democratised access to governance and brought the citizen to the center of accountability. By altering its core provisions, the Modi Government risks reversing this progress.

While data protection is necessary in the digital age, it should not come at the cost of institutional transparency. Instead of finding a nuanced balance, the Government has chosen to impose blanket opacity.

The implications go far beyond legalese — they erode the foundations of a transparent republic, where the citizen has the right to question power. This amendment must be revisited, reviewed, and if necessary, repealed to restore the sanctity of the RTI Act.

(The writer is a senior political analyst and Ex-Chairperson of the Standing Committee of All-State Public Service Commissions in India. Views are personal)

SRH desperately need win against Mumbai Indians

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Hyderabad

The misfiring Sunrisers Hyderabad (SRH) will hope for a happy homecoming when they take on a resurrected Mumbai Indians (MI) here on Wednesday...

last outing here against Punjab Kings to record the highest individual total for any batter in this IPL. There will be, however, some concerns around Head who hasn't gone all guns blazing like he usually does and SRH will want their Australian star to be at the top of his game.



Jasprit Bumrah has not been at his menacing best when it comes to taking wickets but the ace India bowler has begun nailing his line and lengths perfectly. This could be a warning sign for the SRH batters given MI tend to use Bumrah more strategically...

KKR batters are low on confidence: Bravo

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Kolkata

Kolkata Knight Riders (KKR) batsmen are "low on confidence" right now, the team's mentor Dwayne Bravo conceded after the franchise slumped to its fifth loss in eight IPL matches this season but refused to blame the much-talked about Eden Gardens pitch for the side's woes.



successful player. Actually as a team we're not batting properly. So that's just the reality. "But as a group, we have to make sure that the players keep putting in their work and practice, keep preparing well, try to keep them mentally focused," he explained.

"He's one of our better players. He's been doing very well for us throughout the season. But when you're chasing 200, you try to maximise as much as possible and try to get the guys who have the ability to really hit the ball in the middle."

Kolkata Knight Riders struggling in IPL 2025: Morgan after loss to GT

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Kolkata

Defending champions Kolkata Knight Riders (KKR) have struggled with batting issues throughout this IPL season and the changes made for the home game against Gujarat Titans (GT) were not effective, feels former captain Eoin Morgan.

in chase of 199 as they finished at an ordinary 159 for eight. "It was interesting to hear Ajinkya Rahane talk about 199 being a chaseable score because towards the back end of Gujarat Titans' innings, we thought the ball held up more than we expected (and) that made finding boundaries harder," Eoin Morgan said.

Novak Djokovic returns to Madrid Open



PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Madrid

Former champion Novak Djokovic has returned to the Madrid Open for the first time in three years in hopes of achieving his 100th tour-level title. Djokovic is seeded fourth in the same half of the draw as second-seeded Carlos Alcaraz, the home favorite who arrives at the Caja Magica this week with fitness concerns after reaching consecutive clay-court finals.

The 100-title club features only Jimmy Connors (109) and Roger Federer (103). Over the last two weekends, Alcaraz has won the Monte Carlo Masters and lost in the Barcelona Open final, where he needed treatment on his upper right leg on Sunday.

he did week after week," Alcaraz said. "You have to respect that." Alexander Zverev, number 2 in the world after winning in Munich at the weekend, was the top seed in Madrid and Taylor Fritz was the third seed. Defending champion Andrey Rublev was the seventh seed. Djokovic has a 30-9 record in Madrid, with titles in 2011, 2016 and 2019. He beat his coach Andy Murray in the 2016 final.

Government of Odisha Office of the Superintending Engineer, Sambalpur (R&B) Division-I, Sambalpur. BID IDENTIFICATION NO: SE / R AND B / SBP / 01 / 2025-26. Order No. 1495 Dtd. 17/04/2025.

ODISHA HYDRO POWER CORPORATION LTD., O/o Sr. GENERAL MANAGER, HIRAKUD HYDRO ELECTRIC PROJECT, POST BOX. NO. 5, BURLA - 768017, DISTRICT: SAMBALPUR (ODISHA), INDIA. TENDER CALL NOTICE NO. HHEP-17/2025.

GOVERNMENT OF ODISHA DEPARTMENT OF WATER RESOURCES, OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDING ENGINEER MINOR IRRIGATION DIVISION, KANDHAMAL e-Procurement Notice. BID IDENTIFICATION NO-01/2025-26.

obcc ODISHA BRIDGE & CONSTRUCTION CORPORATION LIMITED. No. 4065 File: SMT-2041. Corrigendum-1 to Bid Identification No. 31/Tender/OBCC/2024-25 of the work "Improvement of Jaydev Vihar-Nandankanan Road with Flyovers at junctions" issued vide letter No.2505 dtd.10/03/2025.