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'Development' at the cost of Nicobar Islands



**SPEAKING OF
SCIENCE**
D. Balasubramanian

The famous tree crusader and tree lover Shri 'Vanajeevi' Ramaiah who passed away last month was a firm believer that trees are vital for our lives. This Padma Shri awardee planted over one crore saplings across Telangana, thus making us live in unison with nature. But the current dispute between the Telangana State government and the University of Hyderabad about the area of Kancha Gachibowli would have disappointed Ramaiah. While the University wants the land as a green forested area, as a reservoir for 700 varieties of plant species, 200 varieties of birds, and 10-20 different mammals to be preserved as nature's gift, the State government wants this area for technology parks and related purposes. The 'fight' has reached the Supreme

Court, and we await its decision.

Unfortunately, several other States across India face the same predicament, with land being used for hi-tech cities, pharmaceutical zones, highways, fast trains, and airports. While all these are needed for the public good, the question is: should these be at the cost of losing greenery, flowery plants, and tribal people who subsist on these? Will this not be a betrayal of what Vanajeevi Ramaiah stood for?

We use the term 'betrayal' drawing from the perspective of Professor Pankaj Sekhsaria, who has over three decades of experience on the Nicobar Islands, examining environmental and wildlife conservation alongside the intricate connections between society, environment, science, and technology.

He has curated a book called *The Great Nicobar Betrayal*, chronicling how the Central government has proposed to use the Nicobar Islands for several purposes: a trans-shipment facility at the



The Centre's plans in the Nicobar Islands, especially land taken over for deforestation, will affect the native Shompen tribe. PUBLIC DOMAIN

Galathea Bay for access across the sea, building an international airport, and a power plant for electricity. In addition, a greenfield township is planned for increasing the population from the current 8,000 natives to about 3.5 lakh, by inviting people from mainland India to come and stay as citizens for these projects and to visit for holidays.

The book has raised several important issues concerning the ecological splendour, with over 2,000 species of fauna and 811 species of flora in the islands, plus the future of the

native people. All of these will be affected by the 'development' planned by the Central government. Furthermore, as the land is taken over for deforestation, the fate of the native Nicobarese tribe, particularly the vulnerable tribal group Shompen (see picture), which needs forests for livelihood, will be affected. Also, the giant leatherback turtles, found every season in the seacoast, will be in danger when the seacoast is taken over for development. The Ministry of Tribal Affairs is yet to answer this query.

But, in January 2023, a group of former civil servants had written to the President of India, pointing out how the Indian government is out to destroy the pristine habitat, which is home to various rare and endemic species. They further pointed out how the government will 'compensate' this loss by planting forests in Haryana, 2,600 km away from Nicobar.

India has, among the 200 countries across the globe, signed the Convention for Biological Diversity, which will 'reduce to near zero the loss of areas of high biodiversity importance, including ecosystems of high ecological integrity'. And, as the ex-civil servants have requested, the President and the Government of India should immediately stop the commencement of destructive projects in Great Nicobar.

For interested readers, the book *The Great Nicobar Betrayal* is available from Amazon and *The Hindu* Bookstore: <https://publications.thehindugroup.com/bookstore>



Microgravity increases core body temperature: IIST study

A 3D computational model of human thermoregulation developed by IIST researchers tracks how heat moves through the body, and accounts for mechanisms like sweating, shivering, and other factors that influence regulation of body heat

Shreejaya Karantha

The Voyager 1 spacecraft was 25 billion km away in February, somewhere in the outer edge of the solar system. It's the farthest a human-made spacecraft has gone from the earth. The hope is that in the distant future, a human astronaut will be able to go where Voyager 1 has been – a journey that could take several years of spaceflight.

An important factor that determines an astronaut's well-being on such journeys is thermoregulation: their body's capacity to maintain a stable internal temperature. In the unique microgravity environment of space, this process faces significant challenges.

Now, researchers at the Indian Institute of Space Science and Technology (IIST), Thiruvananthapuram, have published a study reporting that "microgravity consistently increases core body temperature, with fluid shifts playing a crucial role in thermal balance," in the words of Shine S.R., a professor of aerospace engineering at IIST and an author of the study.

Human bodies respond differently to temperature changes based on age, fitness level, and body fat, among other parameters. In environments with near-zero gravity like earth orbit, the human body changes significantly, affecting bones, muscles, the heart, the immune system, metabolism, even individual cells.

On the trail of body heat

In the microgravity of space, thermoregulation faces significant challenges



Exiting station: An astronaut taking part in a spacewalk. NASA

1 An important factor that determines an astronaut's well-being on space journeys is thermoregulation: their body's capacity to maintain a stable internal temperature

Some of the resulting complications can be severe, so space agencies and astronauts continuously monitor the spacefarer's body temperature.

Scientists using a computer model to evaluate the body's ability to regulate temperature in specific conditions must also account for "physiological changes observed in space, including blood shifts, metabolic variations, muscle atrophy, and environmental influences".

Mr. Shine said his team has developed a 3D computational model of human thermoregulation that "incorporates these changes to simulate the effects of microgravity on thermoregulation, including blood redistribution, reduced blood volume, changes in metabolism, and alterations in bone and muscle mass".

According to Chithramol M.K., PhD student at

IIST and first author of the study, the team's studies were limited by sufficient as well as accessible data on metabolic changes. In situations where data was unavailable, she said they tested how different factors changed their results and used their "best judgment and standard engineering practices" to assess their impact.

The model uses mathematical equations to track how heat moves through the body in three dimensions, and accounts for mechanisms like sweating and shivering, the impact of clothing, heat generated by vital organs, and other factors that have a say on how a body regulates its temperature.

Each factor is modeled separately and then combined to understand the overall impact of microgravity on thermoregulation.

The team published its

2 IIST Thiruvananthapuram researchers have used a model to find that "microgravity consistently increases core body temperature, with fluid shifts playing a crucial role in thermal balance"

3 Microgravity environments affect the human body's bones, muscles, the heart, the immune system, metabolism, even individual cells

4 Some of the resulting complications can be severe, so space agencies and astronauts continuously monitor a spacefarer's body temperature

5 The model simulates "the effects of microgravity on thermoregulation, including blood redistribution, reduced blood volume, changes in metabolism, and alterations in bone and muscle mass"

findings with the model in *Life Sciences in Space Research* on March 29.

"Our findings reveal that the redistribution of blood from the lower limbs to the upper body in microgravity environments significantly impacts the body's temperature distribution," Mr. Shine and Ms. Chithramol said.

Specifically, the researchers reported that while the feet and hands become cooler as the body spends more time in microgravity, the head, abdomen, and the core get warmer.

The model also indicated that when astronauts exercise in space, their body temperature rises faster than it does on the earth.

Over 2.5 months in microgravity, considering 30% lower sweating and 36% higher metabolism, the core body temperature may increase to around 37.8 C from 36.3 C before

flight. If one were exercising in the same conditions, the temperature would be closer to 40 C.

The researchers were able to confirm their model was able to predict real outcomes by using it to simulate astronauts' body temperature onboard the USSR's and Russia's erstwhile Mir space station and onboard the International Space Station, then compared its output to official reports. They matched.

As thermoregulation models indicate how a person responds to temperature changes, they are also used in many everyday situations. For example, clothiers use such models to fine-tune how their products keep people warm or cool. Architects use such models to design buildings to lower heat stress of their occupants. In medicine, especially during heart surgeries, thermoregulation models predict how a patient's body temperature changes, helping both doctors and patients avoid complications.

According to the IIST team, these models calculate the universal thermal climate index – a number that indicates how hot or cold it feels outside by considering factors like wind, humidity, and sunlight.

Mr. Shine said, "These models are valuable tools for enhancing safety, comfort, and performance in diverse real-world scenarios" in addition to astronaut health and safety in microgravity environments.

(Shreejaya Karantha is a freelance science writer.)



Shi's Star Catalogue in China world's oldest, says study

The Shi's Star Catalogue is China's oldest star catalogue. Researchers analysed 118 stars to reveal two distinct observational periods in its pages: around 355 BC and 125 AD. Their findings suggest the Catalogue's original observations date to the 'Warring States' period in China's history and that updates were added during the Eastern Han dynasty, possibly in the time of the philosopher and statesman Zhang Heng. Thus, the study confirmed that Shi's Star Catalogue is the world's earliest known star catalogue.



Marxism, market and nationalism

Communist Party of Vietnam

The ruling party, which recently commemorated the 50th anniversary of the reunification of the country after the withdrawal of U.S. forces, draws legitimacy from both its historical role in liberation and ending occupation, and its continuing role as an economic moderniser

Srinivasan Ramani

Vietnam recently celebrated the 50th anniversary of its triumph against the United States and its success in re-unifying the country in April 1975. This victory marked the apex of a long phase of revolutionary wars and struggles led by the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) and its different avatars against colonialism, French re-occupation, and later the U.S. intervention from 1925.

It was precisely in 1925 that the tallest leader of the CPV, Ho Chi Minh – then known as Nguyen Ai Quoc – established the Vietnamese Revolutionary Youth League or the Thanh Nien in Guangzhou, China, that aimed for national independence and a socialist government; these were the first organisational steps taken to form the Communist Party.

A 100 years later, today, the CPV governs Vietnam as a single party political system that is characterised by a strong market-based economy where, as its general secretary To Lam said in his speech at a massive parade commemorating the 50th anniversary of the reunification last week, the private sector remained the “most important driver of the national economy”.

The Vietnamese experience of blending market reforms and communist leadership – it still terms this model “socialist-oriented developmentalism” – was a consequence of its experience during the decade that followed the end of the Vietnam War.

Till 1986, the CPV practised orthodox socialist policies, which included a centrally planned economy, nationalisation of industries (including those in the conquered South), collectivisation of agriculture into cooperatives, implementation of five-year plans focused on production targets and resource allocation, and an emphasis on heavy industry.

The devastation of its economy due to the war, the continued U.S.-led embargo, the Vietnamese invasion of neighbouring Cambodia – a consequence of the depredations of the Khmer Rouge regime – and the



PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

Chinese invasion of Vietnam in the late 1970s all resulted in the economy remaining in doldrums. This situation was exacerbated by the inefficiencies of the planned model – the low productivity after collectivisation, the shortages of food and goods, and high inflation.

Economic transformation

This ultimately forced the hand of the CPV to undertake economic reforms, what it termed ‘Doi Moi’ or ‘Renovation’, featuring de-collectivisation of agriculture, price liberalisation, and allowing small-scale private enterprise in the first phase, followed by macroeconomic stabilisation, allowing foreign investment, international integration (including joining ASEAN), and state-owned enterprise (SOE) reform in Phase 2. By the late-1990s, the CPV promoted trade agreements, entry into the WTO, developed institutions to facilitate a functioning market economy, allowed the private sector to lead economic growth, and deepened SOE reforms which included “equitisation” or “partial privatisation”.

These steps were consequential. In

the late 1980s and early 1990s, Vietnam's poverty rate was close to 60%, its per capita GDP roughly \$430, and its Human Development Index (HDI) value 0.492, all of which corresponded to a poor country with low human development. In 2023, Vietnam's GDP per capita was \$4,347; the multidimensional poverty rate fell to just 1.9% by late 2024, and the HDI in 2022 was recorded to be 0.726, placing it in the “high human development” category and as a middle-income country.

Speaking to this writer in Ho Chi Minh City recently, Tuoc Huynh, a digital commerce expert who helped the entry of Google, and led Facebook in Vietnam, said how the reforms led to an “ice hockey stick” nature of the growth curve in the country. Mr. Tuoc was himself born into a family of Vietnamese immigrants to the U.S. and returned to the country to be part of the economic growth process.

But the rapid economic growth has not meant that it has been entirely inequitable – Vietnam's Gini coefficient (which measures inequality on a scale of 0 to 100) is 36, one of the lowest in Southeast Asia.

The transition of the country's

communist party leadership since 1986 also provides an indication of the economic and political trends. The relatively doctrinaire Le Duan led the party during the war after the demise of Ho Chi Minh in 1969 and till 1986, before Truong Chinh took over and supported the reformist wing in the party that laid the stepping stones for Doi Moi. Nguyen Van Linh, a leader from the South associated with reform and pragmatism, took over in December 1986, decisively leading the shift towards a market economy.

The era of reformism ushered in by Nguyen Van Linh has generally been the norm in the CPV since, but Nguyen Phu Trong's regime between 2011 and 2024 also featured a sweeping anti-corruption programme (called the “blazing furnace”) against senior party leaders and government officials.

To Lam, who succeeded him in 2024, was closely associated with the anti-corruption drive in the Ministry of Public Security but as his speech emphasised, he is also firmly committed to the Doi Moi path and towards Vietnam's quest of becoming an upper-middle income country by 2030.

Being a single party-state, Vietnam

has also tightly restricted political freedoms related to association and civil liberties. This makes it imperative for the CPV to link its legitimacy as the ruling party to the outcomes of its economic policies and to the perception of its leadership.

Collective leadership

The CPV is distinguished from other peers – the Communist Party of China is today dominated by Xi Jinping – by its adherence to collective leadership and decision making driven by consensus and the distinct lack of any personality cult. The parade on April 30 showcased the different wings of the armed forces, party, and government of Vietnam; only the visage of Ho Chi Minh was ever-present among images of leaders.

It is not surprising why – Ho Chi Minh was inextricably linked to the vicissitudes of the communist movement in the country. He was a nationalist who sought independence from colonialism while being a socialist. He believed Marxism-Leninism offered the surest steps for the anti-colonial struggle and to build an egalitarian nation. He also played a key role in setting up the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) across Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.

The communists of the ICP dominated the Viet Minh that led and won the anti-colonial struggle against the French, and after the ICP's dissolution into constituent parties across the three countries, they formed the Workers Party of Vietnam (WPV), which ruled North Vietnam [before the reunification]. The WPV's southern wing was the Peoples' Revolutionary Party of South Vietnam, which led the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam, more popularly known as the Viet Cong, which orchestrated the struggle against the South Vietnam regime and the U.S. forces in the war. Even after nearly 40 years of reform in a world where the socialist bloc no longer exists, Vietnam continues to pay tribute to Ho Chi Minh as its ideological fountainhead, mainly due to his foundational role in combining Marxism-Leninism and Vietnamese nationalism.

THE GIST

▼ In the second half of the 1980s, the Communist Party ushered in economic reforms (‘Doi Moi’), featuring de-collectivisation of agriculture, price liberalisation, and allowing small-scale private enterprise in the first phase.

▼ By the late-1990s, the CPV promoted trade agreements, entry into the WTO, developed institutions to facilitate a functioning market economy and allowed the private sector to lead economic growth.

▼ These steps were consequential. In 2023, Vietnam's GDP per capita was \$4,347, up from \$430 in the late 1980s; the multidimensional poverty rate fell to just 1.9% and the HDI in 2022 was recorded to be 0.726, placing it in the “high human development” category.



What are the key objectives of caste count?

Why is the BJP government's decision a surprise? What are the challenges the exercise will throw up? What are the complexities? What will it mean for the reservation ceiling? Which are the States that have already conducted a caste enumeration?

Priscilla Jebaraj

The story so far:

The Union Cabinet has decided that the next Census will include questions on caste to its enumeration of India's population, for the first time in almost a century. The decision, a reversal of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) stance so far, comes ahead of the crucial Bihar elections, and throws up myriad challenges.

Have Indians been counted by caste before?

When the British first started counting India's population in 1881, caste data was included in the information gathered. For the next half-century, the decennial censuses collected caste information. The last time that data was published was from the 1931 census, which counted 4,147 castes and sub-castes across the country. Though the wartime 1941 census also collected data on individual castes, it was never released. After India gained Independence, the government decided to avoid the question of caste in the census, only counting Scheduled Castes and Tribes (SCs/STs).

In his report on the 1931 census, then-Census Commissioner J.H. Hutton dismissed the arguments of those who did not wish to collect caste and religion data on the grounds that they would perpetuate divisions, noting that "the census cannot, however, hide its head in the sand like the proverbial ostrich, but must record as accurately as possible facts as they exist." He struck down previous British attempts to list a hierarchy of castes, in accordance with their perceived ranks in society, instead choosing to use occupations as the basis of classification, though this did not account for the fluidity of

No dates have been notified for the next Census, which will include the caste count

caste identities and the variations in caste names across time and geographies. The 1931 census data was also the basis for reservation efforts half a century later; its finding that 52% of the country's population belonged to castes later grouped under the Other Backward Class (OBC) category became the basis of the Mandal Commission's recommendation for a 27% quota for OBCs in education and government jobs.

In 2011, the Union Ministry of Rural Development kicked off a different kind of caste-counting exercise as part of its Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC). The data collected was meant to be used for research and policy making and to effectively design and implement development and welfare schemes. Though parts of the data were published in 2016, the raw data on specific caste populations was not included. As the SECC left its questions on caste open-ended rather than making them choose their caste from a set list, respondents often entered their surnames, meaning that the SECC enumerators counted more than 46 lakh different castes.

Have individual States counted castes?

At least three States have conducted caste censuses. Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar led the effort to survey the State's caste break-up in 2023, finding that OBCs and Extremely Backward Classes (EBCs) accounted for more than 63% of the State's population, stirring the political pot with demands for higher representation for these castes in politics, education, and employment. The Congress rode to power in Telangana in 2023, partly on the basis of its promise to conduct a caste survey, which was published in 2024 and showed that backward classes make up more than 56% of the State's population. Karnataka's caste survey was also commissioned by a Congress government, in Chief Minister Siddaramaiah's first term in 2015. The results, however, were published only a decade later, and showed that the State's OBC population stood at almost 70%.

What will this data be used for?

Apart from its use in academic research and policy making, the key import of caste data from a public and political viewpoint is what changes it will drive in affirmative action or reservation policies. The 27% OBC quota for education and government jobs was set on the basis of a projection from the 1931 census; a new caste count could well upend those estimates.

In Karnataka, for instance, where the caste survey found that the OBC population is significantly higher than estimated, there have been demands to increase their quota in the

State from 32% to 51%. The clamour for more reservation, backed by caste population data, is also likely to lead to a challenge of the Supreme Court-mandated 50% cap on reservation.

What is the context for this decision?

The BJP-led government's decision came as a surprise given that the demand for a caste census has been a major plank of the Opposition's poll campaigns. The BJP has long resisted the demand, accusing the Congress of using caste to divide Indians. Minister of State for Home Nityanand Rai even responded to questions in Parliament insisting that there were no plans to include caste in the next Census, terming it a "matter of policy".

The Bihar caste survey, however, set off a political tinderbox that carried over into the 2024 general election campaign. The Opposition, in its campaign for social justice also stoked fears among sections of voters that the BJP was seeking a large majority in order to be able to remove reservations and amend the Constitution, which led to lower vote counts for the BJP in many constituencies.

The decision to conduct a caste count "steals the thunder" from the Opposition's campaign just ahead of the Bihar Assembly elections, where it is sure to become a poll issue. The BJP is seeking to reframe the narrative, claiming that the Congress is all talk and no action, as it had never conducted a caste census at the national level while in power at the Centre. Though the Opposition is seeking to claim credit for pressuring the government into taking this decision, it is also pivoting to the logical next step, of demanding that reservations be hiked in response to the caste census findings, seeking to breach the Supreme Court's 50% cap.

What is the timeline for implementation?

The catch in the Centre's announcement is that no dates have yet been notified for the next Census. The last Census was held in 2011, with the 2021 Census being delayed indefinitely, initially due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The addition of a caste component involves more work for Census officials.

The next step will be to draft a code directory of castes to be used in the Census. Unlike the SECC, which had an open-ended query on the respondent's caste, the Census is likely to provide a drop-down list of castes for respondents to choose from. How castes will be listed is a thorny political question, given that the Centre and States have differing, and often contentious OBC lists. Linguistic and regional diversity in caste names, splitting of castes into sub-castes over time, and disagreements on whether specific castes fit into SC, OBC, or general categories, are likely to complicate the process. Religion adds another factor into the mix, with questions about how non-Hindu groups will be recognised and whether they will get benefits on the basis of the caste census.



Counting more: Bihar Congress president celebrates with supporters the decision to include caste in the upcoming Census, in Patna, on May 1. PTI

With 26 Rafales, aircraft carriers will have a full fighter strength

The jets and the flight deck of carriers will need slight modifications; as part of the contract, delivery of the aircraft will begin in the second quarter of 2028 and be completed by the end of 2030; crew will undergo training in France and India

Dinakar Peri
NEW DELHI

When all the 26 Rafale-Ms that India is buying from France join the Indian Navy, both its aircraft carriers will have a full complement of fighter jets.

The delivery of the jets will begin in the second quarter of 2028 and be completed by 2030-end under a deal inked by the two countries last week. However, the aircraft and the flight deck of the carriers will need slight modifications for the Rafale-M to fit on the lifts and perform optimally.

"The lifts would need some modifications for the Rafale-M to fit in and as the Indian carriers use a ski-jump, the overall system would also need some changes," a source said.

The wing pylons of the Rafales need to be taken off, which takes a few minutes, before they can be

moved on the lift, another source said. The lifts on board a carrier are used to move the jets and equipment between the hangar below and the flight deck above.

The consolidation of the capital allocation in the defence budget done two years ago, doing away with service-specific capital allocation, came in handy in prioritising the payments for the Rafale deal, which was earlier planned to be concluded in the previous fiscal.

India, France deal

On April 28, India and France concluded an Inter-Governmental Agreement for the procurement of 26 Rafale-Marine jets – 22 single-seater and four twin-seater – for the Navy.

The agreement includes training, simulator, associated equipment, weapons and performance-based logistics (PBL) for five years costing nearly



Fighter craft: A Rafale-M jet being secured on the lift on French carrier *Charles de Gaulle*. DINAKAR PERI

₹64,000 crore. The crew will undergo training in France and India.

The cost of the deal was not officially mentioned. It includes additional equipment for the existing 36 Rafale fleet of the Indian Air Force, which, officials said, includes some support and maintenance equipment.

Rafale-M will be capable of operating from both the carriers – *INS Vikramadi-*

tya and *INS Vikrant*. The country's first indigenous carrier, *INS Vikrant*, measuring 262 metres long and 62 metres wide, can operate an air wing of 30 aircraft comprising MiG-29K fighter jets and, in the future, Rafale-Ms, the Kamov-31 early warning helicopters, the MH-60R multi-role helicopters and the indigenous advanced light helicopters.

Both the carriers use the

STOBAR (short take-off but arrested recovery) method to launch and recover aircraft for which it is equipped with a ski-jump to launch aircraft and three "arrestor wires" for their recovery on landing.

The Navy and Defence Ministry were keen to conclude the deal in the financial year 2024-25. Funds were earmarked in the capital budget. However, as the deal got delayed, it would have meant that unspent money would be returned to the Finance Ministry.

To avoid that and to optimise the capital utilisation, the Union government cleared and concluded another mega-deal that was in the pipeline but was to be concluded early: the deal for 156 light combat helicopters (LCH) with Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd. (HAL) at a cost of ₹62,700 was advanced and concluded on March 28, 2025.



Chronic judicial vacancies, backlog of cases plague various High Courts

Soibam Rocky Singh
NEW DELHI

In a rare and candid observation, the Delhi High Court last week cited the “acute shortage of judges” as a key reason for its inability to hear all cases listed in its daily cause list. The comment serves as a sobering reminder of the systemic challenges confronting the judiciary.

Though incidental, the remark has drawn attention to a long-standing issue plaguing the judiciary – chronic judicial vacancies across India.

The Delhi High Court currently functions with only 36 judges, well below its sanctioned strength of 60. This means nearly 40% of judicial posts remain vacant. The court is simultaneously grappling with a staggering backlog of 1,34,090 pending cases.

According to the latest data from the Department of Justice, India's 25 High

Case file

The pendency of cases in various Indian courts is increasing every year



Name of court	Number of pending cases			
	Dec.31, 2022	Dec.31, 2023	Dec.31, 2024	As on Feb.7, 2025
Supreme Court	78,797	80,674	82,496	81,573
High Courts	53,92,031	54,42,547	55,40,682	62,35,242
District and subordinate courts	4,32,93,727	4,39,70,061	4,54,54,003	4,57,42,040

SOURCE: SUPREME COURT OF INDIA, NATIONAL JUDICIAL DATA GRID (NJDG)

Courts have a combined sanctioned strength of 1,114 judges. As of now, only 769 judges are in position, leaving 345 posts, or over 30%, vacant.

These 769 judges are responsible for clearing a backlog of 62,96,798 cases pending across the High Courts.

The Allahabad High Court leads with the highest number of vacancies – 81 out of 160 sanctioned posts. It also faces the heaviest caseload, with 11,76,229 cases pending, according to the National

Judicial Data Grid (NJDG). The Punjab and Haryana High Court follows, with 32 vacancies against a strength of 85. Only the Sikkim and Meghalaya High Courts report zero vacancies.

Except for 2019, when the High Courts disposed of more cases (23,53,736) than were instituted (22,01,442), case filings have consistently outpaced disposals. In 2024 alone, 24,06,178 cases were filed, while only 22,57,971 were resolved.

This widening gap high-

lights the increasing strain on the judiciary and the urgent need to fill vacancies to ensure the timely delivery of justice.

Stalled appointments

Responding to a query in the Rajya Sabha on April 3, Law Minister Arjun Ram Meghwal said 150 High Court judge appointment proposals were currently at various stages of processing between the government and the Supreme Court Collegium. For another 205 vacancies, recommendations from the High Court Collegiums are still awaited.

The “India Justice Report, 2025” underscores the depth of the crisis. Between 2020 and 2024, pending cases in Indian courts surged nearly 20%. Despite this sharp rise, judicial vacancies have remained persistently high, with the High Courts operating with about 33% of sanctioned posts unfilled.



ICAR to launch two genome-edited rich, tolerant rice varieties

A.M. Jigeesh

NEW DELHI

The Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) has successfully developed two genome-edited rice varieties, which will be formally announced here on Sunday by Union Agriculture Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan. The ICAR said the development of such seeds was the “first-ever such achievement” in the country using cutting-edge technology.

The first variety, named as DRR Dhan 100 Kamala, was developed from a popular high-yielding green rice Samba Mahsuri and the second variety is from Maharashtra Technology University 1010 (MTU1010), which is also widely used by farmers across the country.

The new variety developed from Samba Mahsuri

can be harvested 15-20 days ahead of its original. The yield is almost 25% more. Each panicle of the paddy will give 450 to 500 more grains in this variety than the original crop.

“This is climate-friendly as this variety uses water and minerals judiciously. This is tolerant to increase in temperature too,” ICAR said. The variety can be cultivated by direct seeding method too.

Named as Pusa DST Rice 1, the variety developed from MTU1010 is a ‘salinity tension tolerant’ crop. When cultivated under areas that have national average of salinity, the new variety produced 9.66% additional yield than MTU1010. Similarly, in alkaline conditions, the new variety gave 14.66% more yield and under ‘salinity tension’ conditions, the yield was 30.36% higher.



PM reiterates commitment to take 'firm' action against Pahalgam perpetrators

Suhasini Haidar
NEW DELHI

India is "committed" to take "firm and decisive action" against terrorists responsible for the Pahalgam terror attack and their supporters, said Prime Minister Narendra Modi, after talks with Angolan President Joao Manuel Goncalves Lourenco here on Saturday.

Mr. Modi's comments, more than 10 days after the attacks, where the terrorists responsible for gunning down 26 men have still not been apprehended, reiterate his previous statements on a strong response to the attack. "We both agree that terrorism is the biggest threat to humanity," Mr. Modi said as India and Angola exchanged five agreements, including a defence cooperation deal. "We are committed to take firm and decisive action against the

terrorists and those who support them. We thank Angola for their support in our fight against cross-border terrorism," he said after talks with Mr. Lourenco, who is also the current chair of the African Union.

Lavrov-Jaishankar call

In a call with External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, meanwhile, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov also discussed the situation following the attacks and the "aggravation of India-Pakistan relations". Echoing calls by the U.S., U.K., European Union, Saudi Arabia and other countries, Mr. Lavrov said that India and Pakistan should resolve their differences "by political and diplomatic means".

However, in what seemed to be a snub to Pakistan, that has threatened to put the Simla Agreement in abeyance, Mr. Lavrov said the differences



Angolan President Joao Manuel Goncalves Lourenco speaks during the joint press statement with PM Narendra Modi in New Delhi. ANI

should be resolved bilaterally "in accordance with the provisions of the Simla Agreement of 1972 and the Lahore Declaration of 1999". In a post on X about the call, Mr. Jaishankar said that the "perpetrators, backers and planners" of the Pahalgam attack must be brought to justice". The government has said it believed this was "cross-border terrorism" with linkages to Pakistan.

The conversation with Mr. Lavrov, that followed a week after Russian President Vladimir Putin called PM Modi is one of a series of calls where countries are calling for restraint in India's response, even as government sources said PM Modi had given the service chiefs a "free hand" in planning the manner and timing of a military operation against Pakistan. In a sign that the situation re-

mains the government's top priority, the Ministry of Defence announced that Minister of State for Defence Sanjay Seth would represent India at Russia's Victory Day Parade, after both PM Modi and Defence Minister Rajnath Singh are unable to travel there.

According to the readout of the Lavrov-Jaishankar calls the Ministers also discussed upcoming meetings at the Summit level between Mr. Modi and Mr. Putin, which is due later this year.

'Pursue dialogue'

On Friday, European Union High Representative for Foreign Affairs Kaja Kallas referred to the tensions as "alarming" and said she had spoken to Mr. Jaishankar and to Pakistan Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar to "show restraint and pursue dialogue to ease the situation", adding that "Escalation helps no one".



Australia's Albanese clinches a historic second 3-year term

Associated Press
Agence France-Presse
MELBOURNE

Anthony Albanese claimed victory as the first Australian Prime Minister to clinch a second consecutive three-year term in 21 years on Saturday and suggested his government had increased its majority in the next Parliament by not modelling itself on U.S. President Donald Trump's administration.

"Australians have chosen to face global challenges the Australian way, looking after each other while building for the future," Mr. Albanese told supporters in a victory speech in Sydney.

"We do not need to beg or borrow or copy from anywhere else. We do not seek our inspiration overseas. We find it right here in our values and in our people," he added.

His centre-left Labor Party had branded Mr. Albanese's rival Peter Dutton, the opposition leader, "DOGE-y Dutton" and accused his conservative Liberal Party of mimicking Mr. Trump and his Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE).

Analysts argue that mirroring Mr. Trump switched from a political positive for Australian conservatives to a negative after Trump imposed global tariffs.

Mr. Albanese had condemned Mr. Trump's tariffs as an act of "economic self-harm" and "not the act of a friend". Mr. Dutton had earlier conceded his alliance of conservative



Anthony Albanese

parties had been defeated in the election and that he had lost his own parliamentary seat that he had held for 24 years.

Majority to go up

Labor had held a narrow majority of 78 seats in the 151-seat house House of Representatives, the lower chamber where parties form governments.

Australian governments are usually elected for at least a second term, but are expected to lose seats at the second election. But the Labor party is on track to increase its majority in its second term.

The election took place against a backdrop of what both sides of politics describe as a cost of living crisis.

Mr. Albanese has promised to embrace renewable energy, tackle a worsening housing crisis, and pour money into a creaking healthcare system.

Mr. Dutton wanted to slash immigration, crack down on crime and ditch a longstanding ban on nuclear power.

India cuts trade, postal, port links with Pakistan

Delhi steps up action against Islamabad on a day Pakistan test-fired a nuclear-capable missile

'Direct or indirect' import of goods from Pakistan banned, ports closed for ships with Pakistan flag

J&K CM calls on Prime Minister, reiterates 'deep sense' of grief and outrage felt by people of J&K

Kallol Bhattacharjee
NEW DELHI

India announced a freeze on imports from Pakistan on Saturday, prohibiting the "direct or indirect" import of all goods "originating in or exported by Pakistan". The Indian government also suspended all postal links with Pakistan, and announced that ships bearing the national flag of Pakistan will not be allowed to dock in Indian ports.

These measures were announced on a day that Pakistan test-fired a nuclear capable missile, and days after India enforced a stringent visa regime targeting Pakistani citizens in response to the terror attack that killed 26 people in Pahalgam on April 22.

"Direct or indirect import or transit of all goods originating in or exported from Pakistan, whether or not freely importable or otherwise permitted, shall be prohibited with immediate effect, until further orders. This restriction is imposed in the interest of national security and public policy," the Directorate General of Foreign Trade said on Saturday.

Indian ships

The Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways announced that no ship bearing the national flag of Pakistan will be hosted by Indian ports. It also announced that Indian ships will not visit Pakistani ports and that these decisions taken in "national interest" will come into force



On alert: Indian Border Security Force personnel stand guard near the India-Pakistan Wagah border post on Saturday. AFP

"with immediate effect". The order added that exemptions will be issued on "case to case basis".

Announcing the measure on postal relations, the Department of Communications said: "The Government of India has decided to suspend exchange

of all categories of inbound mail and parcels from Pakistan through air and surface routes."

These announcements came on the same day that Pakistan test-fired its 450 km range nuclear-capable ballistic missile, called Abdali. Sources here de-

'Tourists were herded towards the attackers'

Vijaita Singh
NEW DELHI

Two terrorists who had mingled with the tourists ahead of the deadly attack in Pahalgam on April 22, herded the crowd, startled after the initial gunshots,

towards two other armed terrorists, who then segregated and killed the people based on religion, a senior government official said on Saturday.

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scribed the missile test by Pakistan as a "grave provocation", noting that the latest variant of the Abdali has a longer range. Military buildup has continued over the past few days as hostilities intensified on the Line of Control in Kashmir. India has already imple-

mented a restrictive visa regime with Pakistan and cancelled fourteen categories of visas for Pakistani nationals.

As of now, only the Long Term Visas (LTVs) and diplomatic and official visas issued to Pakistani officials are valid.

Meanwhile, Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Omar Abdullah called on Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday and discussed various key issues, including the Pahalgam attack, officials said.

The meeting at the Prime Minister's residence lasted around 30 minutes, they said.

This is the first meeting between the two leaders since the terror attack.

During the meeting, Mr. Abdullah briefed Mr. Modi on the prevailing situation in wake of the heinous terror attack, an official spokesperson said and added that the Chief Minister reiterated the deep sense of grief and outrage felt by the people of Jammu and Kashmir.

(With PTI inputs)

