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Our flight is booked: Suryakumar on match against Pakistan



PIONEER IN SHORT

INDIA, GCC RESTART FTA TALKS

India and the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) on Thursday signed the terms of reference to formally launch negotiations for a free trade agreement, reviving talks stalled for over a decade. Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal presided over the signing with the GCC, which includes Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman and Bahrain. Goyal said the proposed pact would boost trade, investment and supply-chain stability between the two regions, which already share nearly USD 179 billion in annual trade. About 10 million Indians live and work in GCC countries, underlining deep economic and people-to-people ties built over centuries. The agreement aims to reduce tariffs and non-tariff barriers, encourage investment and enhance food and energy security. While India is a major food producer, GCC nations are key suppliers of oil and gas. Sectors such as infrastructure, petrochemicals and information technology are expected to benefit. GCC chief negotiator Raja Al Marzouqi said the pact sends a strong signal of cooperation amid global economic uncertainty. India and the GCC last held FTA talks in 2008.

The ByStander



HIMACHAL BANS PHONES IN SCHOOLS

Himachal Pradesh Chief Minister Sukhinder Singh Sukhu on Thursday announced a complete ban on mobile phones for students in all Government and private schools across the State, effective March 1, 2026. The announcement was made at the closing ceremony of the 69th National School Games Under-19 Girls Handball Tournament in Ghumari, Bilaspur district. Sukhu said the move aims to improve academic focus and students' social development, noting that mobile phone use during school hours and lunch breaks had become a major distraction. Under the new rules, students found carrying phones will be fined ₹500 and have their devices confiscated. Parents will also be required to attend mandatory counselling sessions. The Education Department has been directed to draft a standard operating procedure to deal with repeat violations.

WOMAN, PARAMOUR MURDER HUSBAND

A 23-year-old woman allegedly orchestrated the murder of her husband just three months after their wedding, in collusion with her long-time boyfriend and two accomplices in Sri Ganganagar, Rajasthan, police said on Thursday. Anjali (23), her lover Sanjay (25), and his friends Rohit (20) and Siddharth (20) were arrested on Tuesday, SP Amrita Duhani said. Ashish Kumar (27), a private school teacher, was killed on January 30 while walking with his wife after dinner. He was beaten with sticks and later strangled with a muffler when he did not die immediately. Police investigations revealed that Anjali had been in a 6-year relationship with Sanjay and resented her arranged marriage.

They can't dig my grave: PM attacks Opposition

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE

■ New Delhi



Prime Minister Narendra Modi replying to the Motion of Thanks to the President's address in the Rajya Sabha PTI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday launched a scathing attack on the Congress, saying the Opposition party is unable to digest its successive electoral defeats and will never be able to dig his grave despite nursing deep hatred towards him.

Replying to the debate on the Motion of Thanks to the President's Address, PM Modi regretted the disruption caused by the Opposition party in the Lok Sabha and said it was not just an insult to the President of India but to the Constitution of India.

Congress-led Opposition MPs raised slogans as PM replied and then staged a walkout and later protest in front of the Parliaments' Makar Dwar. As soon as the PM stood up for the reply, Opposition MPs urged the Chair to allow Rajya Sabha Leader of Opposition

Mallikarjun Kharge to speak. Chairman CP Radhakrishnan, however, did not allow him, and the PM started his reply amidst the ruckus.

Opposition in Upper House raised slogans against Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi not being

allowed to complete his speech in the lower house during the discussion on the President's address. Slogans, including "Tanashahi Nahi Chalegi", "Let Lop Speak" and "We will not tolerate insults" were heard from the Opposition benches.

In his speech lasting about 100 minutes, the PM also spoke about the recent trade deals with the European Union and the US and said the world is feeling more confident about stability after these developments.

CONTINUED ON ▶ P4

Rajpal Yadav sent to Tihar

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE

■ New Delhi



Rajpal Yadav WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Actor Rajpal Yadav on Thursday surrendered before the Tihar Jail authorities, after the Delhi High Court refused to extend the deadline in connection with his conviction in cheque-bounce cases. "He surrendered before the jail authorities at 4 pm on Thursday. Now the jail authorities will follow the standard operating procedure," a jail source said.

Earlier, the HC refused to recall its direction to actor Yadav to surrender before jail authorities in connection with his conviction in cheque bounce cases, saying it cannot

be expected to "create special circumstances" on account of his background or industry.

While recording her "strong disapproval", Justice Swarana Kanta Sharma directed Yadav to surrender immediately.

CONTINUED ON ▶ P4

Mine blast kills 18 in Meghalaya

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

■ Shillong



An illegal coal mine in Meghalaya WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

At least 18 miners were killed in a blast, and several others feared trapped in an illegal coal mining site in Meghalaya's East Jaintia Hills district on Thursday, prompting the State Government to order an investigation, officials said.

Rescue teams have been engaged in search operations, Director General of Police I Nongrang said, adding that the incident occurred in the Thanglung area in the morning. Teams of the National Disaster

Response Force (NDRF), State Disaster Response Force (SDRF) and a Special Rescue Team (SRT) have been deployed at the site, and rescue and recovery operations are continuing, police said.

CONTINUED ON ▶ P4

Goyal confirms timeline for India-US pact

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE

■ New Delhi



Union Minister of Commerce and Industry Piyush Goyal during the Budget Session of Parliament, in New Delhi PTI

India and the United States are close to sealing a trade agreement, with negotiations now in their final stage and remaining details expected to be wrapped up very soon, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar said on Thursday after extensive talks with US Secretary of State Marco Rubio in Washington DC.

Describing the proposed pact as a turning point, Jaishankar said the agreement would mark the beginning of a new phase in India-US relations, opening up significant opportunities

across trade, strategic cooperation, defence and energy. "The historic India-US trade deal is in the final stages of detailing that will be completed very soon. It opens up a new phase in our bilateral ties, with vast possibilities for the relationship," he said.

Jaishankar, who was in Washington to attend a US-led ministerial meeting on critical minerals, said cooperation in this sector was also progressing rapidly.

"Our critical mineral cooperation is advancing fast. Engagement on strategic issues, defence and energy can be expected in the coming days. Overall, there

is strong momentum," he said. Meanwhile, Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal reiterated that India and the US will formally sign the first tranche of the trade agreement by mid-March and would release a joint statement in the next four to five days. "Following the joint statement, the US tariffs will come down to 18 per cent via a White House executive order," Goyal said.

India-US relations had come under considerable strain after Washington sharply raised tariffs on Indian exports, including an additional levy linked to India's purchase of Russian crude oil.

SC orders NBCC to complete unfinished Supertech homes

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

Coming to the rescue of thousands of homebuyers waiting for almost two decades for the delivery of their dream homes, the Supreme Court on Thursday upheld an order of the National Company Law Appellate Tribunal (NCLAT) asking the State-owned National Buildings Construction Corporation (NBCC) to complete 16 housing projects of debt-ridden realty firm Supertech Limited expeditiously. The court also restrained all the tribunals and high courts from passing any order that may lead to the stalling of the construction work.

A bench of Chief Justice of India Surya Kant and Justice Joymalya Bagchi used its extra-

WIKIMEDIA COMMONS
ordinary power under Article 142 of the Constitution to uphold the December 12, 2024 order of the NCLAT, asking the NBCC to take over the projects in the interest of the homebuyers.

CONTINUED ON ▶ P4

Delhi airport gets a family upgrade

RAJESH KUMAR ■ New Delhi



WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Families travelling through the Delhi airport will no longer have to wait in long queues for various air travel related formalities. Delhi International Airport Limited (DIAL) on Thursday launched Family@DEL, a dedicated, passenger-centric initiative designed to enhance comfort, convenience, and ease for families travelling through Delhi's Indira Gandhi International Airport.

The programme, operational across terminals one, two and three for domestic departures, offers family travellers access to dedicated

entry gates, exclusive family check-in counters, priority security lanes and designated seating areas at food courts with curated kids' menus, and a host of family-friendly amenities ensuring seamless movement through the terminals.

CONTINUED ON ▶ P4

Cantonment roads renamed to honour war heroes

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE

■ New Delhi



WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Shedding colonial legacy, the Indian Army is renaming British-era roads and localities within its 62 cantonments to honour Indian war heroes and veterans. Roads such as Baird Place and King's Way are now renamed with Param Vir Chakra (PVC) awardees, including Captain Anuj Nayyar and Major Shaitan Singh.

As suggested by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, the renaming is taking place in major cantonments, including Delhi, Meerut, and Belagavi, where 34 roads

were recently renamed.

In Delhi Cantonment, Baird Place is now known as Anuj Nayyar Vihar, and Kirby Place becomes Keniguruse Vihar. The cantonment, set up in 1914, is located in

southwest Delhi. As part of the renaming, an old name, Parade Road, has been retained. The upcoming new Sena Bhawan is located on the road.

Sources said the following

names are scheduled to change: Tigris Road, Mall Road, Cassel Road, Maude Road, Lorry Road, Gymnasium Road, Probyn Road and Kotwalli Road.

These will be replaced with the following names: Hoshia Singh Marg, Arun Khetrapal Marg, Manekshaw Marg, Thimayya Marg Extn, Ramaswamy Parameshwaran Marg, Padmapani Acharya Marg, Shaitan Marg and Captain Anuj Nayyar Marg.

Major Ramaswamy Parameswaran was awarded a PVC for the Indian Peacekeeping Force in Sri Lanka.

CONTINUED ON ▶ P4



Forest dept plans plantation drive

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE

■ New Delhi



As part of the Green Action Plan (GAP) for 2026-27, the Delhi Forest Department is preparing for a large-scale plantation drive across the national capital, with plans to sow and maintain more than 7.19 lakh saplings across the south and west forest ranges worth more than ₹56.46 crore.

The department has floated a series of tenders for plantation and maintenance work like fencing. The overall proposal includes the plantation of 3.22 lakh trees and 3.96 lakh shrubs at multiple locations under the South and West forest divisions.

"The focus will be on planting native species with a longer shelf life to ensure better survival and long-term ecological benefits. The groundwork is expected

to begin soon after the bids are finalised. We are working towards making Delhi greener and improving the quality of its forests," a senior forest official said.

One of the key proposals under the South Forest Division relates to the Maidan Garhi land, where the department plans to raise 71,000 trees and 76,000

shrubs in 2026-27 at an estimated cost of around ₹10.28 crore. The tender also provides for the fencing of the plantation area to safeguard the saplings.

In another tender under the same division, a plantation has been proposed at the Dera land, involving 55,500 trees and 60,000 shrubs, with the total project

THE OVERALL PROPOSAL INCLUDES THE PLANTATION OF 3.22 LAKH TREES AND 3.96 LAKH SHRUBS AT MULTIPLE LOCATIONS

cost pegged at ₹10.37 crore.

Fencing around the plantation area is also part of the work. A separate major tender under the South Forest Division covers plantations across Tughlakabad, Devli and Bhatti. Under this proposal, 80,000 trees and 86,500 shrubs are to be planted at a total cost of more than ₹13.13 crore.

While Tughlakabad will see 22,000 trees and 24,000 shrubs and Devli 500 trees and 500 shrubs, the largest share is planned for Bhatti, with 57,500 trees and 62,000 shrubs, along with the fencing

of the plantation sites. The West Forest Division has also cleared a major proposal for the Southern Ridge, where 1.25 lakh saplings, including 50,000 trees and 75,000 shrubs, are proposed to be planted.

The tender, which includes the creation and maintenance of the plantation, carries an estimated cost of more than ₹10.69 crore. Meanwhile, the Central Ridge is set to receive 1.65 lakh saplings under a separate tender, comprising 66,000 trees and 99,000 shrubs. The plantation and maintenance work for this stretch has been estimated to cost ₹11.96 crore, officials said.

They said the plantations planned under the Green Action Plan 2026-27 are meant not just to add more trees but to build healthier and more sustainable forest ecosystems across the city.

No cause for panic over missing person cases: Police

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE

■ New Delhi



Days after releasing data showing that over 800 people went missing in the national capital during the first half of January, the Delhi Police on Thursday sought to allay public concern, stating there is "no cause for panic or fear" as the figures actually reflect a decline compared to the same period in previous years.

According to official Delhi Police data, a total of 807 people went missing between January 1 and 15, with an average of 54 people going missing every day. Of these, 509 were women and girls, and 298 were men. Among the total reported missing, 191 were minors and 616 were adults.

In an official statement, the police said that, while the data was recorded, January 2026 saw a "decline in the number of missing persons reports when compared with the corresponding period of previous years." The Delhi Police, however, did not share the specific total for the month in its statement.

The police maintained that they follow a transparent and impartial crime reporting

policy. All complaints related to missing persons are promptly registered and investigated. A missing person report can be lodged not only at a local police station but also through online platforms and the Emergency Response Support System (112).

"Standard operating procedures (SOPs) are strictly followed in all missing persons cases. Immediate efforts are initiated to trace the missing individual, with cases involving children being accorded the highest priority," the statement read.

To ensure focused action, dedicated missing persons squads have been deployed in all districts of the city. In addition, the Crime Branch's Anti-Human Trafficking Unit is actively engaged in handling cases related to missing persons, especially children, to ensure swift investigation and recovery, it added.

Delivery executive held for flashing illegal pistol on social media

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE

■ New Delhi



The Delhi Police arrested a 19-year-old delivery executive from Dwarka who was allegedly carrying a country-made pistol and displaying photographs with the weapon on Instagram and WhatsApp to create fear and influence among his peers. The arrest was made by the Anti-Auto Theft Squad (AATS) of Dwarka district following sustained social media patrolling and technical surveillance.

The accused, identified as Sameer, a resident of Suraj Vihar, Kakrola, was apprehended from Sector 17, Dwarka. A loaded country-made single-shot pistol and one live cartridge were recovered from his possession. Police said he was allegedly on the way to commit a crime when he was intercepted.

Dwarka district Deputy Commissioner of Police Ankit Singh said the arrest was part of a focused drive against budding criminals misusing social media platforms to glorify weapons. "We are keeping a close watch on individuals who flash illegal arms on social

media to intimidate others or project themselves as criminals. Such acts will not be tolerated, and strict legal action will be taken," he said.

According to police, the AATS team had been directed to monitor social media accounts, including profile pictures on Instagram and WhatsApp, where young individuals were seen posing with firearms. During routine monitoring, one such Instagram account displaying photographs of a youth holding a weapon came to the notice of the team.

Police said the accused disclosed that the country-made pistol had been arranged through a person identified as Monu, a resident of Mangolpuri. Efforts are underway to trace and apprehend the supplier of the weapon. Officials said the accused had no previous criminal record, but his online behaviour and possession of an illegal firearm posed a serious threat to public safety.

Police said Sameer was

apprehended after discreet surveillance. During frisking, officers recovered the illegal firearm and ammunition. A case under Sections 25, 54, and 59 of the Arms Act was registered at Dwarka North police station.

During interrogation, Sameer told police that he worked as a delivery boy with a private grocery delivery company. He claimed that he had procured the weapon for "personal safety" during late-night deliveries. However, investigators said he also admitted that he used to show the weapon to friends and upload photographs on social media to portray himself as a "badmash" and gain influence in his locality.

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CM outlines vision to position city as global hub for trade, industry

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE

■ New Delhi

Delhi Chief Minister Rekha Gupta on Thursday outlined an ambitious vision to position the national Capital as a global hub for trade and industry. She stressed responsible and sustainable growth at the 12th International Plastindia 2026 exhibition at Bharat Mandapam.

Addressing industry leaders and entrepreneurs, she said plastic must be transformed "from a problem into a solution" through innovation, recycling and a circular economy approach.

The Chief Minister visited several stalls at the exhibition and reviewed new technologies in plastic manufacturing, recycling and waste management. She said the Delhi government is taking concrete steps to strengthen industry


 REKHA GUPTA,
CHIEF MINISTER

“
DELHI MUST EMERGE NOT ONLY AS A CONSUMPTION CENTRE BUT ALSO AS A RECOGNISED TRADING AND DISTRIBUTION HUB
”

and entrepreneurship, with a focus on balancing economic growth and environmental responsibility. "Delhi must emerge not only as a consumption centre but also as a recognised trading and distribution hub," she said.

Highlighting support for small businesses, the Chief Minister said the Delhi govern-

ment is providing collateral-free loans of up to ₹10 crore to empower micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs). The initiative, she said, is aimed at improving access to finance and encouraging innovation-driven enterprises, particularly in sectors linked to sustainability and clean technologies.

MCD launches clean-up drive

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE

■ New Delhi



The Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) has rolled out an extensive plan to spruce up the city and ensure smooth civic arrangements as the India "AI" Impact Summit 2026 is set to bring global leaders and industry heads to the national capital later this month.

The summit, scheduled from February 16 to 20 at Bharat Mandapam, is expected to host heads of state, ministers, senior policymakers, global CEOs and academicians. Officials say the event, billed as the first global AI summit in the Global South, will draw significant international focus on Delhi.

Technology (MeitY), will also see a citywide branding exercise. "Old G20 stickers on dustbins and other civic assets will be replaced with AI Impact Summit branding, while authorised material will be displayed on digital screens in markets and other identified locations," an official said.

Giving details about the clean-up drive, officials said that they have been instructed to clear major routes of encroachments, illegal vendors, stray cattle and unauthorised advertisements.

"Impounding of stray cattle, dogs and monkeys from the key identified roads, venues, markets and tourist places to be ensured through deployment of round-the-clock teams with due manpower and machinery," the official order read. Besides this, the directions also include regular garbage

lifting to prevent open dumping, along with proper upkeep of streetlights and public toilets.

A special anti-defacement drive will remove illegal posters and banners from public spaces as the drive goes beyond routine sanitation, officials added. "Beautification has been listed as a key focus area, with the horticulture department tasked with improving green cover and visual appeal through plants and view cutters," officials said.

The civic body officials said that they had also been asked to explore converting makeshift vendor stalls into "model tehzabis" along key corridors to regulate street vending without causing clutter. Uniform wall paintings and murals are planned to improve the city's aesthetics.

A review meeting attended by the MCD senior officials on January 29 has set the deadline till February 12 for the completion of most of the key tasks. Officials said that there is a need for close coordination not only among MCD departments but also with agencies such as the PWD, NDMC, BSES and Delhi Police. A 24x7 control room will operate at the zonal level during the summit to deal with emergencies.

The Pioneer Classified

CHANGE OF NAME

I, Sarita Genwa (Existing Name) spouse of Prema Ram Genwa resident of SMQ-22/403, Tejas Enclave, Air Force Station Sohna Road have changed my name from Sarita Genwa to Sarita Kumari (Proposed Name) vide Affidavit dated IN-IDL46038801374266Y dated 02 Feb 2026 at Delhi.

PD(341)C

I, Radhey Shyam Arora S/O

Late Shri Udai Bhan R/O E-143, Netaji Subhash Marg, East Babarpur, Shahdara, Delhi-110032, declare that Radhey Shyam Arora and Radhey Shyam both are the names one & same person.

PD(342)C

I, RAFIKA W/O MOHD

AMJAD ALI R/O H. No.

4357/B-8, GALL NO. 21, SHANTI MOHALLA, GANDHI NAGAR, Delhi-110031, Declared that PARUL BIBI, RASIKI AND RAFIKA ALL THE THREE NAME ARE THE SAME PERSON AND SHALL HENCEFORTH BE KNOWN AS RAFIKA FOR ALL OFFICIAL DOCUMENTS PURPOSES."

PD(343)C

I, Kunvar Bahadur Yadav, Father of No.16024816L L/NK

Kuldeep Kumar, R/o- Vill- Sevara, PO- Darigapur, Teh- Dalmal, Dist- Raebareli, U.P- 229125, declare that in my Son's service record my name is wrongly recorded as Kunvar Bahadur Yadav whereas my correct name is Kunvar Bahadur Yadav, which may be amended accordingly.

PD(344)C

I, Asha, Mother of

No.16024816L L/NK Kuldeep

Kumar, R/o- Vill- Sevara, PO- Darigapur, Teh- Dalmal, Dist- Raebareli, U.P- 229125, declare that in my Son's service record my name is wrongly recorded as Asha Devi whereas my correct name is Asha, which may be amended accordingly.

PD(345)C

I, Shyam Kumar, Father of

No.6949197M Nk Gaud Sunil

Kumar Shyam Kumar R/o- Vill & PO- Khodiar Nagar, P.S- Odhav, Dist & Teh- Ahmedabad, Gujarat-382350, have changed my name from Shyam Kumar to Gond Shyamkumar, vide affidavit dated 05/02/2026 before Notary Public Delhi.

PD(346)C

I, Tara Devi, Mother of

No.6949197M Nk Gaud Sunil

Kumar Shyam Kumar R/o- Vill & PO- Khodiar Nagar, P.S- Odhav, Dist & Teh- Ahmedabad, Gujarat-382350, have changed my name from Tara Devi to Gond Taraben, vide affidavit dated 05/02/2026 before Notary Public Delhi.

PD(347)C

I, Meena Kumari, W/o-

No.8375577X WO Suresh

Singh, R/o- Vill & PO-

Makroli, Teh- Indora, Dist-

Kangra, H.P- 176022, have

changed my name to

Meena Kumari to Meena

Pathania, vide affidavit dated 05/02/2026 before Notary Public Delhi.

PD(348)C

I, Manudeep, W/o Arvinder

Singh Kohli R/o WZ-K-12A,

New Mahavir Nagar Tilak

Nagar New Delhi-110018, have

changed my name to

Manudeep Kaur.

PD(349)C

I Arvinder Singh S/o Apal

Singh Kohli R/o WZ-K-12A,

New Mahavir Nagar Tilak

Nagar New Delhi-110018,

have changed my name to

Arvinder Singh Kohli

PD(350)C

I Haryinder Singh Vasdev,

S/o Fateh Singh Vasdev R/o

110010, declare that in my

service documents, my

daughter's name is wrongly

written as Puza Singh

whereas her correct name

is Pooja Singh, which may

be amended accordingly.

PD(



Govt plans phase-wise installation of CCTV cameras to boost women's safety

In a move to strengthen women's safety in the national Capital, the Delhi Government has drawn up a plan for phase-wise installation of advanced CCTV cameras at a cost of around ₹646 crore. CM Rekha Gupta, in her maiden budget presentation in the Delhi Assembly last year, announced a 24X7 CCTV surveillance system for women's safety in the city, allocating ₹100 crore for the financial year for installing the closed-circuit cameras. The preliminary estimates by the PWD have pegged the cost of the project at ₹646.41 crore, including third-party quality assurance, contingencies and cess charges, said a senior government officer.



NDMC Chairman inaugurates Inter-Departmental Sports Competition

New Delhi Municipal Council (NDMC) Chairman Keshav Chandra, on Thursday, inaugurated the NDMC Annual Inter-Departmental Sports Competition 2025-26 for officers and employees at Talkatora Cricket Ground, marking the beginning of a vibrant celebration of fitness, teamwork, and sportsmanship. The inaugural ceremony was attended by Vice Chairman, NDMC Kuljeet Singh Chahal, Council Members Anil Valmiki and Sarita Tomar, Secretary, NDMC Rakesh Kumar, senior officers of NDMC, a large number of employees, and school children, reflecting wide participation and enthusiasm across the organisation.



Budget 2026-27 will unlock destiny of developed India: Manoj Tiwari

The Union Budget for 2026-27 is like "carving a line on stone" to unlock the destiny of India of 2047, BJP MP Manoj Tiwari said on Thursday. The budget presented by Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman is aimed at transforming India into a developed nation by 2047, said the North East Delhi MP at a press conference. "Anyone can draw a line on butter, but this budget is like a carving on stone to unlock India's destiny as a developed nation by 2047," Tiwari stated. Prime Minister Narendra Modi speaks of four key groups – youth, women, farmers and the poor – all of which were taken care of in the budget, he said.

Double-decker buses set for comeback after three decades

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE

■ New Delhi

After more than three decades, double-decker buses may once again be plying on Delhi's roads, this time as a dedicated tourism service connecting some of the Capital's most prominent attractions.

The initiative aims to offer visitors a smoother sightseeing experience, with routes covering the Pradhanmantri Sangrahalaya, the National War Memorial and Bharat Mandapam. The service is expected to begin in February, according to Delhi Tourism Minister Kapil Mishra.

Delhi Tourism Minister Kapil Mishra said that the service would begin in February as part of efforts to offer tourists an improved sightseeing experience in the national capital. Evening tours are also being planned, with the route largely finalised, an official said.

Two double-decker buses are planned to be operational around February 20, the one-year anniversary of the Government in Delhi, he said.

The department has sought time from the chief minister's office for the formal inauguration, he said. Measuring 9.8 metres in length and 4.75 metres in height, the bus offers seating for more than 63 passengers in addition to the driver's

the transport department before being handed over to the tourism department.

"The tourism department now plans to operate the bus from the Pradhanmantri Sangrahalaya to popular destinations such as Bharat Mandapam, the National War Memorial, the new Parliament complex, Dilli Haat and other sites," a senior official said.

The department has sought time from the chief minister's office for the formal inauguration, he said. Measuring 9.8 metres in length and 4.75 metres in height, the bus offers seating for more than 63 passengers in addition to the driver's



position. Officials said the service is aimed at both domestic and foreign tourists and can operate in Lutyens' Delhi without issues related to overhead wires or low tree canopies.

"Since the museum closes by 6 pm, the tour will start from there and then proceed to other destinations," the official said, adding that the

bus is likely to be decorated with images of major attractions such as India Gate, the Signature Bridge and Bharat Mandapam. The fare has been fixed at ₹500 for adults and ₹300 for children aged between six and twelve years. A guide will be on board to brief passengers about the historical and cultural significance of each location.

Targeted tours focusing on marketplaces and heritage monuments were also discussed, but officials felt the model would work better for historical sites than for commercial areas.

Double-decker buses were once a common sight in Delhi. The Delhi Transport

Corporation operated them as 'Suvidha' buses before phasing them out in 1989 due to an ageing fleet. With this new tourism service, the iconic buses are set to return to Delhi roads, this time with sightseeing firmly on the agenda. Attempts to bring them back for the 2010 Commonwealth Games and again in 2022 ahead of the G20 Summit did not materialise after feasibility studies raised concerns, said DTC officials. In 2011, the then Delhi government even considered the idea of using open-top double-decker

buses on tourist routes in the city as part of the "Hop On Hop Off (HoHo)" buses, which was active then. The HoHo buses were low-floor air-conditioned buses that ferry passengers to and fro 19 tourist spots in the city, allowing people to board on and off from the service at the tourist spots at their convenience.

In 2022, Convergence Energy Services Limited (CESL) had earmarked 1,500 electric buses, including 100 double-deckers, for Delhi in anticipation of an influx of officials and tourists from across the world. However, subsequent feasibility studies found the plan unviable. At present, DTC operates more than 3,500 electric buses, with the fleet expected to cross 6,000 by the end of the year.

Police arrest Al Falah University chairman

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE

■ New Delhi

Delhi Police have arrested Al Falah University chairman Jawad Ahmed Siddiqui in a case related to alleged fraud and irregularities.

The arrest follows recent action initiated by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) and comes after complaints were lodged by the University Grants Commission (UGC) regarding suspected violations and fraudulent activities linked to the institution. Based on the complaint submitted by the UGC, the Crime Branch registered two separate FIRs against Siddiqui, accusing him of fraud and other related offences under relevant legal provisions.

According to police officials, Siddiqui was taken into custody and subsequently produced before a Delhi court. The court granted the Crime Branch four days of police custody to allow investigators to question him and gather further evidence in the case. The police had registered two



separate FIRs against Siddiqui in the matter.

According to police, the accreditation of Faridabad-based Al Falah University lapsed in 2018, but it continued to invite students by not removing the expired UGC recognition from its official platforms.

The information surfaced during the ongoing probe against the university's chairman, Jawad Ahmed Siddiqui, who was arrested by the Delhi Police's Crime Branch on January 27 in connection with the two FIRs registered against him accusing him of fraud and related offences based on a complaint by

the University Grants Commission (UGC).

On January 31, a court sent him to 14 days of judicial custody, they said. The university came under the scanner of security agencies after three doctors associated with the university's medical institute were named as suspects in the blast near the Red Fort on November 10.

The suspects were alleged to be part of a terror module involved in the blast and included Umar Nabi, who was allegedly driving the car that exploded near the Red Fort.

According to police

sources, despite the accreditation period ending in 2018, the university continued to present itself as UGC-recognised on the university's website and other material, allegedly to lure admissions.

Police said Siddiqui was earlier taken into four-day police custody from January 27 for questioning regarding accreditation claims and courses offered by the university, including the B Ed and engineering programmes.

The action by the Crime

Branch followed earlier proceedings by the Enforcement Directorate (ED), which had arrested Siddiqui in November last year in a money laundering case linked to the institution.

The ED had earlier told a

Delhi court that the university generated alleged proceeds of crime worth ₹45 crore by dishonestly inducing students to enrol "using false claims". In January, the agency attached immovable properties worth ₹139.97 crore linked to the university while filing a chargesheet in the case.

Rajpal Yadav surrenders in Tihar jail after HC refuses deadline extension in cheque-bounce cases

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE

■ New Delhi

Actor Rajpal Yadav on Thursday surrendered before the Tihar Jail authorities here, after the Delhi High Court refused to extend the deadline in connection with his conviction in cheque-bounce cases. "He surrendered before the jail authorities at 4 pm on Thursday. Now the jail authorities will follow the standard operating procedure," a jail source said.

Earlier, the Delhi High Court refused to recall its direction to actor Rajpal Yadav to surrender before jail authorities in connection with his conviction in cheque-bounce cases, saying it cannot be expected to "create special circumstances" on account of his background or industry.

While recording her "strong disapproval", Justice Swaranjeet Kaur directed Yadav to surrender immediately and observed that his failure to surrender on February 4 despite court

orders reflected scant respect for law. Yadav's senior counsel made a "mercy plea" to the court to recall its earlier order to enable him to arrange money to repay the complainant, M/s Murali Projects Pvt Ltd. The counsel said that Yadav could not comply with the direction to surrender on February 4 at 4 pm, as he was trying to arrange the money and reached Delhi at 5 pm.

Law rewards its compliance and not its contempt, the court remarked, as it

opined that recalling its earlier direction would send a message that its orders could be disregarded repeatedly without any consequences.

"This Court cannot be expected to show or create special circumstances for any person merely because such a person belongs to a particular background or industry. Leniency, though sometimes necessary, cannot be extended endlessly, especially when it is met with continued non-compliance," said the court.

In June 2024, the high court had temporarily suspended his conviction, subject to him adopting "sincere and genuine measures" to explore the possibility of reaching an amicable settlement with the opposite party.

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Police said some victims were allegedly intimidated when they objected to the inflated bills or expressed their inability to pay. "In a few instances, the complainants also alleged physical assault inside or near the cafe," the source added.

Officials said the modus operandi appeared organised, with the cafe functioning as a fixed meeting point for such encounters.

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said," he said. The intervention was met with immediate and disproportionate violence. According to Mukesh, one of the men struck him on the head with a stone-like object, knocking him unconscious. The assault continued as he lay on the ground, but further escalation was prevented by a bystander. "One Muslim man saved me from further assault. I am very thankful to him... I would have lost my life if he didn't intervene," he said.

injuries all over his body. Those women and the man saved him and took him to the hospital."

Mukesh, a resident of Sangam Vihar, was returning from his maternal uncle's wedding at 5 am when he stopped for a tea and noticed a group of men allegedly harassing two to three women nearby.

"I asked those people to not do such things and told them it is not good to tease women." That's all I

GHAZIABAD SISTERS' DEATH CASE

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE

■ Ghaziabad

A day after three sisters jumped to their death from their ninth-floor home in the Sahibabad area here, residents of the residential complex were in shock, pondering how the girls' prolonged seclusion had gone unnoticed.

Residents of the Bharat City Society were seen huddled in small groups within the premises on Thursday, discussing the tragedy and the effects of online addiction on impressionable young minds. "It is very shocking. One can understand if someone takes such an extreme step owing to depression. But how could all three sisters do this together?" wondered Isha Tyagi, a resident.

The woman said she had never seen the girls going to school or playing in the society park with other children. Their isolation had gone unnoticed for years, she



been living in the society for about three years but largely kept to themselves.

Rahul Kumar Jha, the joint secretary of the residential society, said he had occasionally seen the girls going for tuition but was unaware of their schooling. "They spent most of their time confined to a single room. The children were never seen playing outside or interacting with others," he said.

A forensic team has found several sentences written on the walls of the girls' room. Some of those read: "Make me heartbroken", "I am very very alone" and "My life is very very alone", police said.

Jyoti Kasana, a resident of the society, said, "Children at this age are vulnerable. Even sudden actions like taking away a phone or tablet can deeply affect their mental state." Vice-president of the society, Ajay Kasana, told reporters that the children had not been attending school since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Locals said the family had remarked. Though details were sketchy, police said preliminary investigation revealed the girls were influenced by Korean content, especially a Korean game, and spent a significant amount of time on their mobile phones.

Deputy Commissioner of Police Nimesh Patil said the girls' education had been irregular and their academic performance was below par. "But it is evident that the girls were highly addicted to mobile phone usage," he said.

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Three FIRs against cafe owner for overcharging customers

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE

■ New Delhi

The Delhi Police have registered three FIRs against the owner of a cafe in east Delhi's Anand Vihar area on Thursday. The cafe owner is allegedly running a systematic overcharging racket in which customers were lured through dating applications and presented with inflated bills. Following the registration of the cases, the cafe has been sealed and its operations shut down.

According to the police, multiple complaints were received from young men who alleged that they were duped after being persuaded by women they met on dating apps to visit the cafe, located inside a mall in the Anand Vihar area.

"Three FIRs have been registered against the cafe owner after verification of complaints related to overcharging of food and beverages. The establishment has been closed," a senior police officer said.

Investigators suspect a "dating conspiracy" in which



women allegedly acted as decoys on popular dating platforms to target unsuspecting customers.

Police sources said the women would initiate conversations online, gain the trust of the men, and then insist on meeting at the same

cafe. Once inside, the victims were allegedly encouraged to order food and drinks that were priced far higher than standard rates.

"Several complainants stated that the menu was either not shown properly or prices were misrepresented. Bills eventually ran into unusually high amounts, far beyond what the customers had anticipated," a source said.

Police said some victims were allegedly intimidated when they objected to the inflated bills or expressed their inability to pay. "In a few instances, the complainants also alleged physical assault inside or near the cafe," the source added.

Officials said the modus operandi appeared organised, with the cafe functioning as a fixed meeting point for such encounters.

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Mukesh, a resident of Sangam Vihar, was returning from his maternal uncle's wedding at 5 am when he stopped for a tea and noticed a group of men allegedly harassing two to three women nearby.

"I asked those people to not do such things and told them it is not good to tease women." That's all I

of the attack that occurred in the early hours of February 3. He was returning from a wedding when he intervened to protect a group of women at a tea stall, only to be struck down and thrashed by four men.

"Even helping someone is a crime these days," lamented the mother of a 26-year-old man who was left with severe head injuries after he tried to stop a group of men from harassing women in south Delhi's Mehrauli area.



Sarvesh, whose son Mukesh is battling multiple injuries at the AIIMS Trauma Centre, said the family is traumatised by the brutality



IN FOCUS



Child slides downhill on a sledge after snowfall at Gauran village in Anantnag district Jammu and Kashmir

PTI

Mizoram Cabinet opposes Indo border fencing

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

Aizawl

The Mizoram Cabinet has reiterated its opposition to the Centre's plan to fence the Indo-Myanmar border, while acknowledging that it has no legal authority to block the move, an official said.

A meeting of the council of ministers, chaired by Chief Minister Lalduhoma, on Wednesday reaffirmed the State Government's stand against erecting a fence along the 510-km-long Mizoram sector of the international border. "The Cabinet maintains that the State Government stands by its original position.

However, as border fencing is a Union subject, the State Government does not have the power to oppose it," the official said. The Cabinet's



Chief Minister Lalduhoma

reiteration follows a resolution adopted unanimously by the Mizoram Assembly in February last year opposing the Centre's proposal to fence the border and scrap the Free Movement Regime (FMR) with Myanmar. The State Government's cautious stance comes amid mounting pressure from influential civil society organisations.

Akhilesh Yadav seeks Supreme Court intervention over minority vote deletion

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE

Lucknow

Samajwadi Party (SP) president Akhilesh Yadav on Thursday alleged a conspiracy to delete names of voters in Uttar Pradesh by misusing Form 7 and urged the Supreme Court to take immediate cognisance of the issue, saying "no other institution inspires confidence now".

In a post on X, Yadav accused the BJP and its allies of "behaving like criminals" and claimed that booth-level officers (BLOs) were being harassed, pressured and threatened to cut votes of the PDA (Pichhda, Dalit, Alspankhyak) society, particularly minorities, on the basis of forged documents.

He also shared a video of a man claiming to be a BLO, who narrated his alleged



harassment. Form 7 is the form used by voters to either object to someone's inclusion in the electoral roll or request deletion of a name already listed. Calling for urgent action, the former Uttar Pradesh chief minister demanded an immediate halt to the alleged misuse of Form 7 and protection of every voter's constitutional right to vote.

He sought registration of FIRs against those forcing BLOs, fast-track hearings, a

ban on the use of Form 7 until a "valid mechanism" is put in place, cancellation of all Form 7 submissions made so far, and an immediate stop to claim-objection activities. Yadav further demanded a judicial probe to identify "anti-national forces" allegedly active behind what he termed a conspiracy to delete citizens' votes.

He appealed to "honest journalists and officials" to come forward and join the fight against such forces.

Addressing "PDA Prahraris", made by the party to protect the interests of the PDA community, Yadav urged them to remain vigilant in protecting every valid vote, collect evidence of alleged irregularities and prepare FIRs, asserting that the ruling party's actions stem from "desperation over an impending defeat".

in a doubt-clearing session, the EC said. Senior officials of the Commission also briefed the observers on various aspects of the preparation of electoral rolls and the conduct of elections in the four poll-bound states and one Union Territory.

The observers were also briefed on the IT applications and platforms, and media-related matters during the sessions.

As the Commission's eyes and ears, the central observers were asked to familiarise themselves with all the election laws, rules and guidelines, and provide inputs directly to the Commission to ensure their strict and impartial compliance. The observers were instructed to remain fully accessible to political parties and candidates, and to promptly redress the grievances of voters.

They were also instructed to visit polling stations and ensure the implementation of the recent initiatives taken by the Commission for the convenience of the voters, especially ensuring the provision of assured minimum facilities (AMFs).



observers, CEC Kumar said they have been selected to serve as the beacons of the EC.

He said that the observers should ensure free, fair and transparent elections, and noted that their presence will energise the entire election machinery across 824 constituencies where elections are going to be held.

Sandhu said they should serve as a friend, philosopher and guide to election officials on the field. Their arrival must be well publicised, and they should remain accessible, ensuring that the grievances of the electors are swiftly redressed to avoid perceptions of favouritism.

Joshi said that the observers

must ensure that ECI instructions are implemented in letter and spirit, upholding impartiality and democratic values.

He also instructed that voter information slips (VIS) be distributed well in time to the voters so that they are not inconvenienced on the voting day. The Commission also interacted with the observers

in a doubt-clearing session, the EC said. Senior officials of the Commission also briefed the observers on various aspects of the preparation of electoral rolls and the conduct of elections in the four poll-bound states and one Union Territory.

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FROM PAGE - 1

They can't dig my grave: PM attacks Opposition

He said India is now on 'Reform Express' and will achieve the goal of a developed nation by 2047.

"India is signing future-ready trade deals with several nations. In the last few days, we have signed trade deals with nine big nations, including the 'mother of all deals' with the 27-nation bloc of the European Union," he said. He said the Opposition will have to one day reply to what they did to the nation in the past and added that lot of his energy was spent in rectifying the mistakes of the Congress-led governments. He also said that India has now become a strong voice of the global south.

Army renames cantonments to honour...

Lieutenant Arun Khetrapal and Colonel Hoshpal Singh are PVC awardees of the 1971 India-Pak war. Major Shaitan Singh was awarded a PVC for his bravery in the 1962 war with China.

Major Padmapani Acharya and Captain Anuj Nayyar were awarded the Maha Vir Chakra for bravery in the Kargil conflict with Pakistan in 1999. General KS Thimayya was the Army Chief from 1957 to 1961.

The renaming will also include a change of name for Baird Place, Kirby Place, Nicholson Line,

Nicholson Range, Kingsway Camp and Khyber Lines. The new names would be Anuj Nayyar Vihar, Keniguruse Vihar, Joginder Singh Vihar, Digendra Kumar Vihar, Taurus Range and Abdul Hamid Vihar. British Infantry Lines in Meerut is renamed Jawahar Nagar. Patterson Road Quarters renamed to Dhan Singh Thapa Enclave in Ambala. Training cradle of officers, Indian Military Academy, Dehradun (IMA) has renamed Collins Block to Nubra Block.

This initiative, managed by the Directorate General Defence Estates (DGDE), reflects a broader effort to solidify national identity within defense infrastructure.

SC orders NBCC to complete unfinished...

The CJI said the first and foremost consideration for the bench was to "protect the interest of homebuyers to ensure that they are able to secure the homes for which they are waiting for the last two decades" and their hard-earned money has allegedly been siphoned off by the real estate firm.

The CJI made it clear that the interest and dues of the financial and operational creditors of Supertech can be taken care of only after the delivery of fully-furnished houses to the hassled homebuyers. The bench also made it clear that the houses must contain all the assured facil-

ties like water, electricity, sewage connections, besides roads and parks in the neighbourhood.

It said the financial and operational creditors of Supertech will have to take the hair cut as found just and equitable by the tribunals — the NCLT and the NCLAT. Disposing of the pleas, it also allowed the parties to approach the SC in view of any development that may come in the way of the ongoing projects.

Mine blast kills 18 in Meghalaya

"Pained by the mishap in East Jaintia Hills, Meghalaya. Condolences to those who lost their loved ones. May the injured recover at the earliest," the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) quoted PM Modi as saying in a post on X.

Meghalaya Chief Minister Conrad K Sangma expressed grief over the incident and announced a probe.

During rescue operations, a total of 18 bodies were recovered from the site, East Jaintia Hills Superintendent of Police Vikash Kumar said.

One person who sustained injuries in the blast was initially taken to Sutenga Primary Health Centre before being referred to a Shillong hospital for better treatment.

"The exact number of labourers present inside the mine at the time of the explosion is yet to be ascertained. More people are feared trapped,"

the DGP said.

PM avoided Lok Sabha amid reports of threats...

The Lok Sabha on Wednesday witnessed dramatic scenes as women MPs from the opposition marched towards the Treasury benches holding banners ahead of the prime minister's scheduled reply at 5 pm. The Lower House has witnessed disruptions since Monday afternoon, when the Speaker disallowed Leader of the Opposition Rahul Gandhi, citing rules, from referring to an unpublished book by former Army Chief M M Naravane.

The Speaker then read out the Motion of Thanks to the President which was passed by a voice vote. Birla thanked PM Modi for acceding to his request and avoiding unpleasant scenes in the Lok Sabha by not coming to the House on Wednesday and again on Thursday.

Delhi airport gets a family upgrade

According to DIAL, the aims to simplify every stage of the airport journey by offering thoughtfully curated services tailored to the unique needs of families, thereby enhancing the overall passenger experience. The initiative also pro-

377 planes identified with recurring defects: Govt

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE

New Delhi

Minister of State for Civil Aviation Murlidhar Mohol told in the Lok Sabha in response to MPs question, of the total 747 aircraft, 405 aircraft belonging to IndiGo were analysed, of which 148 were identified for repetitive defects, as on February 3, this year.

Of the 166 Air India aircraft analysed, 137 planes were identified for repetitive defects, while 54 Air India Express aircraft were identified for repetitive defects of the 101 aircraft analysed, the data showed.

Taken together, a total of 267 aircraft of Air India Group (Air India and Air India Express) were analysed, of which 191 or nearly 72 per cent were identified for repetitive defects.

According to a data shared by the Ministry of Civil Aviation in the Lok Sabha, in all, 377 aircraft have been identified as having recurring defects since January last year, of the total 754 aircraft analysed for such deficiencies across six scheduled air-

Ethiopian artists at Surajkund highlight deep cultural ties with India: Ambassador



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE

Faridabad

The Ethiopian pavilion has emerged as one of the standout attractions at the 39th Surajkund International Crafts Mela 2026, drawing sustained crowds and sparking widespread interest in the country's rich artistic traditions and cultural heritage.

A 20-member delegation of Ethiopian artisans and performers is presenting an impressive array of handcrafted products, including intricately designed coasters, traditional motif T-shirts, decorative artefacts and other indigenous handicrafts. Visitors both Indian and foreign have responded enthusiastically, with many pausing to engage with artisans and purchase authentic handmade items.

Beyond handicrafts, the Ethiopian delegation is showcasing traditional dance, folk music and rhythmic performances that reflect the country's ancient civilisation and dynamic creative legacy. These presentations have played a key role in deepening cultural dialogue and strengthening mutual understanding between India and African nations.

India's Ambassador to Ethiopia, Anil Kumar Rai, lauded Ethiopia's participation in the Surajkund Mela, describing the event as a meaningful platform for cultural diplomacy.

The Surajkund International Crafts Mela is serving as a cultural bridge between India and

Ethiopia," Rai said. "The presence of Ethiopian artists and artisans reflects the strong historical bonds and shared cultural values between our two countries. Such platforms promote people-to-people engagement and give renewed momentum to bilateral relations."

Observers note that India and Ethiopia have witnessed growing diplomatic and cultural engagement in recent years, and Ethiopia's active participation at Surajkund is seen as a significant step in strengthening grassroots connections through art and culture.

Organised by the Haryana Tourism Department, the Surajkund International Crafts Mela is widely regarded as a premier forum for showcasing traditional crafts, music and performing arts from India and around the world. Officials expect visitor turnout this year to surpass previous editions, further cementing the fair's reputation as a global celebration of culture and creativity.

The presence of Ethiopian and other African cultural troupes has added a vibrant international dimension to the event, transforming Surajkund into a living confluence of artistic traditions and reinforcing its role as a symbol of global cultural harmony.

vides buggy assistance (if required) up to the boarding gates for those in need, ensuring a seamless, comfortable, and hassle-free journey from the terminal forecourt to the departure gate.

Family travellers, including those with infants, passengers with restricted mobility (PRMs), and elderly passengers, can enjoy complimentary baby strollers, private baby care rooms, PRM-friendly washrooms, and specially trained on-ground Family Assistance Buddies to guide and support families throughout their airport journey.

Rajpal Yadav sent to Tihar

"This Court cannot be expected to show or create special circumstances for any person merely because such a person belongs to a particular background or industry. Leniency, though sometimes necessary, cannot be extended endlessly, especially when it is met with continued non-compliance," said the court.

"In these circumstances, this Court finds no merit in the plea of the counsel for the petitioner to recall its order directing surrender of the petitioner before the Jail Superintendent, Tihar. He is directed to surrender the Jail Superintendent, Tihar, immediately today," it ordered. Yadav physically appeared before the court for the proceedings.



No plan to close Ernakulam loco shed: Vaishnaw to Kerala CM



Union Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw has informed Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan that there are no plans to close down the Ernakulam loco shed. Railway Minister Vaishnaw was responding to a letter sent by Vijayan regarding the loco shed, according to a statement by Southern Railways on Thursday.

Vijay condemns attack on journalists in Tamil Nadu

Actor-politician Vijay has condemned the attack on television journalists in Tamil Nadu's Karur allegedly by a group of men close to a local politician. The attack on Tiruchirappalli-based reporter and cameraman of a Tamil news channel, recently, is "attack on the fourth pillar of democracy," said Vijay.



India, Sri Lanka connected by deep spiritual bonds: PM

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE

■ New Delhi

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday said India and Sri Lanka are connected by "deep civilisational and spiritual bonds" as he thanked President Anura Kumara Dissanayake for inaugurating the exposition of the holy Devnimori relics of Lord Buddha in Colombo.

The first-ever international exposition of these sacred relics, which originate from the Devnimori archaeological site in Gujarat's Aravalli district, is taking place at Gangaramaya Temple from February 4-11.

It was inaugurated by Sri Lankan President Dissanayake along with Gujarat Governor Acharya Devvrat and the State's Deputy Chief Minister Harsh Sanghvi in the presence of Chief Incumbent Ven. Kirinde Assaji Thero at the Gangaramaya Temple, Colombo on Wednesday.

"Respectfully welcome the Sacred Relics of the Buddha to Sri Lanka today for public veneration until the 11th at Hunupitiya Gangaramaya Temple. I deeply appreciate PM @narendramodi and the



Government of India for honouring their promise and enabling this sacred exposition," the Sri Lankan president posted on social media on February 4. He also shared some photos of the exposition that will be open for public veneration from February 5 onwards.

Prime Minister Modi, while sharing his post, wrote on social media, "Gratitude to President Anura Kumara Dissanayake for inaugurating the Exposition of the Holy Devnimori Relics at the sacred Gangaramaya Temple in Colombo on Wednesday.

"Respectfully welcome the Sacred Relics of the Buddha to Sri Lanka today for public veneration until the 11th at Hunupitiya Gangaramaya Temple. I deeply appreciate PM @narendramodi and the

thus giving the opportunity for the people to pay their respects. Our nations are connected by deep civilisational and spiritual bonds. May Lord Buddha's timeless message of compassion, peace and harmony continue to guide humanity. @anuradisanayake," he said.

The exposition follows the announcement made by Prime Minister Modi during his State Visit to Sri Lanka in April 2025. It reflects the deep-rooted spiritual and civilisational ties between India and Sri Lanka, the Indian High Commission in Colombo said a day ago.

The arrival of the holy relics in Colombo, on

February 4, coinciding with Sri Lanka's 78th Independence Day, added "special significance to the occasion," it said.

This exposition is the first public veneration of the relics outside India. India had earlier organised the Exposition of Kapilavastu Relics in 2012 and Sarnath Relics in 2018 in Sri Lanka.

The holy Devnimori relics, which were ferried to Sri Lanka in a special aircraft of the Indian Air Force with full state honours, are originally enshrined at the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda in Vadodara.

Devnimori, located in Gujarat, is an important Buddhist archaeological site where excavations uncovered a Sharira Stupa containing relic caskets with sacred ashes, a copper box, and gold and silver foil, the High Commission said in a statement.

One casket bears an inscription in Brahmi script and Sanskrit reading "Dashabala Sharira Nilaya"—"the abode of the bodily relic of Lord Buddha"—making these relics among the most significant Buddhist archaeological discoveries in India, it said.

ISRO working on development of RLV technology: Narayanan



ISRO chairman Dr V Narayanan on Thursday said the space agency is currently working on the development of reusable launch vehicle (RLV) technology, underlining India's focus on cost-effective access to space.

Odisha police declares Koraput district Naxal-free

Odisha Police on Thursday declared Koraput district "Naxal-free" following the surrender of an area committee member of the banned CPI (Maoist), officials said. The surrendered cadre was identified as Mamata Podiam (26), also known as Mamita and Soni, a resident of Chhattisgarh's Bijapur district. DIG (South-Western Range) Kanwar Vishal Singh said the woman surrendered along with an SLR rifle.



Congress to go solo in West Bengal polls, to contest all 294 seats

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE

■ New Delhi

The Congress announced on Thursday that it will go solo in the upcoming West Bengal Assembly polls and contest all the 294 seats in the State. The decision was taken at a key meeting of the party's top brass with senior leaders of the West Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee (WBPC).

The meeting, held at Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge's 10, Rajaji Marg residence was attended by Kharge, Rahul Gandhi, Congress general secretary (organisation) KC Venugopal, State in-charge Ghulam Ahmed Mir, State unit chief Subhankar Sarkar, senior leader Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury and MP Isha Khan Choudhury.

Mir said the meeting featured important strategic discussions related to the West Bengal election, likely to be held in April-May.



RS witnesses walkout after Rahul disallowed to speak in Lok Sabha

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE

■ New Delhi

The treasury and the main Opposition party, Congress, were engaged in sharp exchanges in the Rajya Sabha when Leader of Opposition Mallikarjun Kharge claimed Rahul Gandhi was not allowed to speak in the Lok Sabha. The Congress later staged a walkout.

Soon after the House mourned the passing of a former MP and tabling of listed papers during the Zero Hour, Kharge raised the issue of his counterpart in the Lok Sabha, Gandhi, not being allowed to speak.

"He (Gandhi) wanted to speak about the country's interest," Kharge said.

Before he could complete, Chairman CP Radhakrishnan gave the floor to the Leader of the House and Union Minister Jagat Prakash Nadda, saying the proceedings of the Lok Sabha cannot be discussed in the Upper House as per the rulings of the Chair.

He said if the Congress party was interested, its leaders should advise their Lok Sabha MPs to join the debate on the Motion of Thanks to the President's Address to the joint sitting



Leader of the Opposition in Rajya Sabha Mallikarjun Kharge speaking in the House during the Budget session of Parliament in New Delhi PTI

of Parliament in the Lower House, and proceedings in the Rajya Sabha should be allowed to continue uninterrupted.

The Chairman thereafter called for the listed Zero Hour mentions to be taken up. At this point, Congress MPs started shouting slogans about democracy being "throttled".

The Chairman then gave the floor to Parliamentary Affairs Minister Kiren Rijiju, who said he was surprised by the issue being raised in the Rajya Sabha after three days of smooth debate on the Motion of Thanks to the President.

"We all are expecting everyone to follow the rules and traditions... All the members (MPs) are waiting to listen to the speech of the Prime Minister today. If the Congress party does not want to listen to the Prime Minister, (it is their) personal choice. We don't want to impose on them, but other members want to listen to the Prime Minister. How can they stop (that)," he said.

He repeated Nadda's submission that the proceedings of the Lok Sabha should not be mentioned in the Rajya Sabha with its own procedure and set of rules for the conduct of business.

ing decisions are driven by price, availability and broader market considerations.

Russia, for its part, sought to downplay the issue. Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said India has always procured oil from multiple suppliers and that Moscow had received no official communication from New Delhi on stopping Russian oil imports. Russian foreign ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharchova also described the energy trade between the two countries as mutually beneficial and based on pragmatic cooperation.

Union Minister Piyush Goyal echoed the MEA's position, underscoring that energy security remains a top priority for the government. He said India's choice of oil suppliers is shaped by objective market conditions and evolving international dynamics.

"All our actions are taken with the sole aim of ensuring long-term energy security for the country," Goyal said.

Energy security top priority, India says amid Trump remarks on oil imports

ASHOK RAJ ■ New Delhi

India on Thursday made it clear that its energy policy will continue to be guided by national interest and market realities, after US President Donald Trump claimed that New Delhi could cut back on Russian crude oil purchases and turn instead to suppliers such as the United States and Venezuela.

Responding to queries on the remarks, Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said ensuring uninterrupted energy supplies for India's population of 1.4 billion remains the Government's overriding concern, and that decisions on oil sourcing are taken independently, based on evolving global conditions.

The Government has stated on several occasions that ensuring the energy security of 1.4 billion Indians is the supreme priority," Jaiswal said. "Diversifying our energy sourcing in line with

objective market conditions and changing international dynamics is central to this strategy. All our decisions are taken with this principle in mind."

Trump had earlier suggested that Prime Minister Narendra Modi had agreed to halt Russian oil imports as part of a broader trade understanding, adding that India could increase crude purchases from the US and possibly Venezuela. Indian authorities, however, have not publicly confirmed any such commitment.

On Venezuela, the MEA said the country has historically been a key energy partner for India, though sanctions have repeatedly disrupted oil trade. Venezuela was among India's major crude suppliers until the 2019-20 financial year, after which imports were stopped following the imposition of sanctions. Purchases briefly resumed during 2023-24, before being halted again due to renewed restrictions.



Jaiswal noted that Indian public sector undertakings have maintained a long-standing presence in Venezuela's energy sector, including partnerships with the country's national oil company, PdVSA, dating back to 2008.

"Consistent with our approach to energy security, India remains open to exploring the commercial merits of all crude supply options, including those from

Venezuela," he said, adding that any future imports would depend on commercial viability and regulatory conditions.

On Russian oil, the MEA reiterated that India's diversification of energy sources is not a new development but part of a long-term strategy. Russia has emerged as a major supplier in recent years, particularly after global energy markets were disrupted, but officials stressed that sour-

India closely monitoring situation in Iran

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE

■ New Delhi

New Delhi is "closely monitoring" the situation in Iran, and there are no reports of any Indian national missing or being killed during recent protests in that country, the Government informed Parliament on Thursday.

In a written response to a query in the Rajya Sabha, Minister of State for External Affairs Kirti Vardhan Singh also said the Indian embassy in Tehran continues to be in "regular contact" with the Indian nationals, including students, in Iran, and is providing them suitable guidance.

The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) was asked about the number of Indians currently stranded in Iran amid the ongoing anti-Government protests, the number of Indians successfully repatriated since the start of the agitation and the number of Indians missing or killed during the protests.



"Based on current estimates, there are approximately 9,000-10,000 Indian nationals residing in Iran. The Government does not consider them stranded, as Iranian airspace remains open and commercial flights are operating. The Embassy of India in Tehran is in regular contact with the community and continues to provide guidance and support," Singh said.

The MoS further said that there are "no reports of any Indian national being missing or killed during the recent protests".

3,800 Indian nationals deported from US in 2025: Govt

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE

■ New Delhi

Over 3,800 Indian nationals were deported from the US in 2025, the Government informed the Rajya Sabha on Thursday. The figures include 3,414 Indians deported through Washington till mid-December, according to the data shared in a tabulated form in a written response to a query by Minister of State (MoS) for External Affairs Kirti Vardhan Singh.

Congress member Randeep Singh Surjewala asked the number of Indian nationals deported from the United States and other countries during the last five years, preventive measures including registration or licensing of travel agencies and border coordination taken to protect vulnerable youth, and whether any targets or timelines have been fixed to reduce the illegal "Dunki route" migration. The phrase "donkey route" or "Dunki route"



refers to the route used for illegal immigration, largely in context of North America.

In 2025, over 3,800 Indian nationals were deported from the US, according to the data shared in the written response. The tabulated data also included locations of Indian consulates in the US and the corresponding number of deportations in 2025, viz. consulates of India in New York (47), Atlanta (31), Houston (234), San Francisco (49) and Seattle (31).

Singh said the Government of India works

with respect to use of restraints on the deportees, especially women and children," the MoS said.

Based on the accounts and testimonies given by returning deportees, the central and respective state Governments along with the relevant law enforcement agencies have registered a number of cases, and investigations as well as actions are ongoing against several illegal recruitment agents, criminal facilitators and human trafficking syndicates that run these rackets, the Government said.

The Government accords utmost priority to the safety, security and well-being of Indian nationals proceeding for employment abroad. According to The Emigration Act 1983, no person or agency can function as a Recruiting Agent (RA) without a valid licence issued by the registering authority who is the Protector General of Emigrants.

Efforts are on to create a model tourist circuit in the Northeast and the Government is working in coordination with all eight States in the region for creating such a sustainable, inclusive and high-value tourism corridor, the Rajya Sabha was informed on Thursday.

Replying to supplementary questions during question hour, Minister of State for Development of Northeastern region Sukanta Majumdar said the Ministry of DONER is extending all its support to all eight NER States to ensure a faster grounding of the investment proposals received during the Rising North East investor summit. He said Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, and Meghalaya are top-three states which have received maximum investment proposals after the summit.

"Under leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Northeast is going through transformation and it will become one of the driving engines of the Indian economy," the minister said.

"I wish to inform the members that the Government under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi is working in coordination with all eight NE States for creating sustainable, inclusive and high-value tourism corridor and efforts are on to create such a model tourist circuit," he said, replying to a supplementary question from Nominated MP Harsh Vardhan Shringla.

The minister said the model tourist circuit has been carefully identified based on their cultural significance, ecological uniqueness, tourism potential and readiness for integrated infrastructure development.

"The overarching objective of the initiative is to create a world-class tourism infrastructure and visitor amenities, promote distinct regional experiences, ensure convergence and national schemes, faster community-led entrepreneurship and employment and enough tourism contribution to inclusive regional development. We have proposed eight tourism circuits," Majumdar said.

In his written reply, the minister said, "The initiative is aligned with the national vision of tourism-led economic growth, cultural preservation, and enhanced national and global visibility of the Northeastern Region."

Efforts on to create model tourist circuit in Northeast: Government tells Rajya Sabha

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE

■ New Delhi



Efforts are on to create a model tourist circuit in the Northeast and the Government is working in coordination with all eight States in the region for creating such a sustainable, inclusive and high-value tourism corridor and efforts are on to create such a model tourist circuit," he said, replying to a supplementary question from Nominated MP Harsh Vardhan Shringla.

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States Focus



BIHAR CM NITISH VOWS TO DOUBLE PER CAPITA INCOME

Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar on Thursday asserted that his Government has set a target of doubling the State's per capita income in the next five years, besides generating "one crore jobs and employment opportunities." The longest-serving CM of the State made the statement inside the Assembly, while replying to the debate on the Motion of Thanks to the governor's reply. "We have done a lot, but we wish to do more. We have set a target of doubling the per capita income of Bihar in the next five years. To achieve this target, we intend to boost industrial growth. Schemes like Mukhyamantri Mahila Rojgar Yojana would also do their bit in giving rise to entrepreneurship," said the 75-year-old leader.



CENTRE SUPPORT IN 10 YEARS TRANSFORMED NE: KHANDU

Arunachal Pradesh Chief Minister Pema Khandu on Thursday said the region has witnessed unprecedented transformation in the last 10 years, attributing it to sustained central support.

Participating in the Motion of Thanks on the governor's address in the Assembly, Khandu said Prime Minister Narendra Modi has made a conscious effort to compensate "for decades of neglect" faced by the Northeast after Independence.

Bengal Govt tables ₹4.06 lakh cr interim Budget

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE

■ Kolkata

The West Bengal Government on Thursday tabled a ₹4.06 lakh crore interim Budget in the State Assembly for the 2026-27 financial year, rolling out cash support and allowance hike measures targeting women, youths and frontline workers ahead of the polls due in less than three months.

In the heart of the budget lies a renewed push to consolidate women voters, nearly half of State's electorate and the Trinamool Congress's most dependable electoral base. The State Government proposed to hike the monthly grant in the 'Lakshmi Bhandar' scheme by ₹500 from February this year, allocating a hefty ₹15,000 crore. The allowance is at present ₹1,000 for general category women and ₹1,200 for SC/ST women.

Tabling the Budget, State Finance Minister Chandrima Bhattacharya also announced that the state government will launch a scheme — 'Banglar Yuva Sathi' — to

provide ₹1,500 monthly allowance to unemployed people in the 21-40 years age group till they get jobs or for a period of up to five years. The scheme will be launched from August 15 if the Trinamool Congress returns to power.

Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee said her Government had managed to prioritise welfare and development despite what she called "sustained financial deprivation" by the Centre.

"Our Budget is pro-people, not directionless and rudderless like the Union Budget," she said at a post-budget press conference, maintaining that the state had adhered to fiscal discipline even while expanding social sector spending.

The interim Budget also cast a wide net over politically influential grassroots workers.

Anganwadi and ASHA workers, civic volunteers, Green Police personnel and village police — all key touchpoints of the state's welfare delivery machinery — were granted monthly allowance



West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee shows a copy of budget statement during a press conference after the presentation of the State interim Budget for FY 2026-27 in the State Assembly in Kolkata

SUVENDU ADHIKARI CALLS BENGAL'S VOTE-ON-ACCOUNT FALSE DOCUMENT

Kolkata: Senior BJP leader Suvendu Adhikari on Thursday slammed the West Bengal Government's vote-on-account, calling it a "false and aimless document" filled with election-oriented promises that are legally impossible to implement.

Reacting to the interim Budget, the leader of the opposition in the State Assembly said that most announcements were misleading as they could not be executed once the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) comes into force.

The West Bengal Government on Thursday tabled a ₹4.06 lakh crore interim Budget in the State Assembly for the 2026-27 financial year, rolling out cash support and allowance hike measures targeting women, youths and frontline workers ahead of the Assembly polls due in less than three months.

"After publication of the final voter list (on February 14), the MCC can be enforced at any moment. Under the MCC, the Government cannot increase financial benefits or expand the number of beneficiaries," Adhikari said. He described the vote-on-account as merely a four-month arrangement meant to meet routine expenditure such as salaries, and asserted that promises slated for implementation from April were "nothing but deception".

The BJP leader termed the budget "anti-unemployed", alleging that it lacked any concrete employment targets.

He criticised the rebranding of the 'Yuvashree' scheme as 'Yuva Sathi', which offers a monthly allowance of ₹1,500, calling it "juggery and deception". Adhikari said earlier promises of job portals and youth allowances had been effectively abandoned through repeated renaming without delivery.

hikes, along with death compensation in the case of Anganwadi staffers.

Together, these measures signal a deliberate effort to secure the loyalty of a vast informal workforce that often shapes electoral mobilisation at the booth level.

Government employees, a constituency that has frequently expressed discontent over dearness allowance arrears, were offered a four per cent DA hike, even as the State reiterated its intent to

work towards implementing the 7th Pay Commission — a move aimed at tempering staff union resentment ahead of polling.

Alleging that the Centre owed West Bengal nearly ₹2 lakh crore in legitimate dues, Banerjee said funds for key schemes such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, rural housing, rural roads and the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan had been blocked for years.

SC directs West Bengal to pay DA dues; BJP slams Mamata Govt

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

■ New Delhi

The BJP on Thursday hailed the Supreme Court's directive to West Bengal to pay dearness allowance to State Government employees and called the order a "major blow" to Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee.

BJP co-incharge for West Bengal Amit Malviya also said the top court's verdict "exposes" the State Government's apathy towards its own employees and marks a "big victory" for

justice and accountability. In a relief to nearly 20 lakh Government employees, the Supreme Court on Thursday directed the West Bengal Government to pay dearness allowance to them for the 2008-2019 period, saying it is a legally-enforceable right.

A bench of Justices Sanjay Karol and Prashant Kumar Mishra directed the State Government to pay 25 per cent of the outstanding DA to its employees by March 6.

Commenting on the development, Malviya wrote on X, "Supreme Court delivers a

major blow to Mamata Banerjee."

"This verdict exposes the State Government's apathy towards its own employees and marks a big victory for workers," he added.

Despite clear court directions, the Mamata Banerjee Government kept dragging its feet on paying legitimate DA dues to the State Government employees, the BJP leader alleged.

NDA spent ₹40,000 cr to defeat us: Tejashwi Yadav

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE

■ Patna



"The people were defeated in the polls, which were won by the power machinery (lok haara, tantra jeeta).

You people have reduced lok tantra (democracy) to a rule of fear and intimidation (dar tantra)", alleged the young leader, who was allowed to deliver his speech while remaining seated in his chair because of a leg injury.

RJD working president Tejashwi Yadav on Thursday claimed that the ruling NDA in Bihar had spent a staggering ₹40,000 crore to defeat the Mahagathbandhan, led by him, in the 2025 Assembly elections.

Yadav, who is the leader of the opposition, made the indirect reference to a series of sops offered by the Nitish Kumar Government in the run-up to the polls, while participating in a debate on the motion of thanks to the Governor's reply.

Time to reopen closed tourist spots in J&K: CM

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE

■ Jammu

Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Omar Abdullah on Thursday said that he will raise the issue of closed tourism destinations with Home Minister Amit Shah during his upcoming visit to the Union Territory.

Responding to a supplementary question of Congress MLA Nizamuddin Bhat, Abdullah said it is correct that some tourist destinations are still closed post the Pahalgam terror attack in April last year.

"I believe the time has now come to reopen them. From the Government's side, discussions with the Government of India on this issue are ongoing. The home minister is scheduled to visit Jammu and Kashmir in the coming days, and I assure the House, and especially the MLA from Bandipora, that this issue will certainly be discussed with him," the chief minister, who also holds the tourism portfolio, said.

Nearly 50 tourist destina-



Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Omar Abdullah speaks during the Budget session of the State Legislative Assembly in Jammu

ptions were shut down by the LG administration after terrorists shot dead 26 tourists at Baisaran in the Pahalgam area on April 22 last year.

However, over a dozen destinations reopened in September, but many continue to remain closed. Earlier replying to the question raised by National Conference MLA Ali Mohd Sagar, Abdullah said since the rules governing the registration or renewal of all

tourism units have been framed in 1978 as such, the tourism department is in the process of revising the Jammu and Kashmir Tourist Trade Rules with a view to further simplify, rationalise and streamline the registration and renewal framework for all tourism units.

"The proposed revisions aim at making the entire process more transparent, user-friendly and strictly time-bound, thereby reducing pro-

cedural delays and improving ease of doing business in the tourism sector across the Union Territory," the chief minister said.

He said the tourism sector here remains a major source of both direct and indirect employment for local youth.

"The Department of Tourism is actively promoting the sector through the regular organisation of promotional events and festivals across the UT. These initiatives create diverse livelihood opportunities by engaging event managers, transport operators, digital content creators, hospitality workers, guides, artisans, and other service providers. Such activities also contribute meaningfully to skill entrepreneurship development, sustainable employment generation among the youth," the chief minister said.

Abdullah said the department outsources various assets like the cafeteria, huts, parking areas and entry tickets, which provide direct and indirect employment to youth regularly.

J&K: Over 2 lakh dog bite cases in 2 years

MOHIT KANDHARI

■ Jammu

There is no dearth of dog lovers in Jammu and Kashmir. But due to increasing number of dog bite cases the Union Territory is witnessing a precarious situation.

The statistics tabled by the Jammu and Kashmir government on Thursday revealed that more than two lakh dog bite cases were reported across the Union Territory in 2024 and 2025. The twin Capital cities of Jammu and Srinagar recorded the highest number of cases of dog bites despite taking several measures to prevent stray dogs from biting the residents.

The data was shared in the Jammu and Kashmir Assembly by Minister for Health Sakina Itoor in a written reply to a question by National Conference member Mubarak Gul. Sharing district-wise figures, the minister said that 2,06,460 dog bite cases were reported in the Union Territory during the two-year period, including 93,765 cases in 2024 and 1,12,695 cases in 2025. In the



Jammu division, 1,26,844 cases were recorded in 2024-25, with 54,863 cases in 2024 and 71,981 cases in 2025, the health minister revealed.

The Jammu district alone accounted for 76,824 cases, followed by Kathua with 17,129 cases and Udhampur with 8,179 cases. Other districts in the division reported 7,140 cases in Rajouri, 5,332 in Samba, 4,111 in Doda, 2,752 in Reasi, 2,023 in Poonch, 1,772 in Ramban and 1,582 in Kishtwar, she said.

The Kashmir division reported 79,616 cases during the same period, including 38,902 cases in 2024 and 40,714 cases in 2025. Srinagar recorded the highest number of cases at 35,174, followed by Baramulla with 12,882 and Anantnag with 10,818 cases, she said.

The minister said Budgam reported 5,523 cases, Kulgam 3,925, Kupwara 3,725, Bandipora 2,914, Pulwama 2,197, Ganderbal 1,695, and Shopian 462 cases, she added.

The minister said that the figures were compiled from the data received from the Directorate of Health Services (DHS), Government Medical Colleges and SKIMS, adding that the Government is taking measures to address the rising number of dog bite incidents and strengthen preventive and treatment facilities across the Union Territory.

The minister said that there is no report indicating an increase in the population of stray dogs within the limits of the Jammu Municipal Corporation (JMC). "However, she said that the Srinagar

minister said: Budgam reported 5,523 cases, Kulgam 3,925, Kupwara 3,725, Bandipora 2,914, Pulwama 2,197, Ganderbal 1,695, and Shopian 462 cases, she added.

The minister said that the corporation has acknowledged that existing efforts are challenged by the high fertility rate among dogs, and is therefore augmenting its capacity by establishing a third ABC-ARV centre at Ahal Chatterham. The facility is expected to enhance sterilisation and immunisation capacity by nearly ten-fold, she added.

"The SMC is actively working to comply with all legal frameworks and recent directives of the SC, which mandate sterilisation, vaccination and release back to the original habitat as the only legally permitted intervention to address the issue of stray dog overpopulation," the minister said.

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Top Naxalite Udhamp Singh killed in Chhattisgarh encounter

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE

■ Bijapur



A surrendered Maoist is presented a copy of the Indian constitution in Bijapur, Chhattisgarh on Thursday

12 MAOISTS WITH ₹46 LAKH BOUNTY SURRENDER

Rajput: Twelve Naxalites carrying a collective bounty of ₹46 lakh surrendered before the police in Chhattisgarh's Bijapur district on Thursday, a senior official said.

The cadres, including eight women, belonging to the 'south sub zonal buru' of Maoists, turned themselves in before senior police officials here under the Bastar police's 'Pooma Margem' (from rehabilitation to social reintegration) initiative, Bijapur Superintendent of Police Jitendra Kumar Yadav said. They also surrendered an AK-47 rifle, two Self Loading Rifles (SLRs), 250 gelatin sticks, 400 detonators, one plastic drum filled with gunpowder and one bundle of cordex wire, the official said.

backpack, tiffin bag and other Maoist items were seized from the encounter site," the SP said.

An native of Kottaguda village in Basuguda police station area of Bijapur district, Singh had joined the Maoist outfit as a party member in 2002-03 and had remained active along the Chhattisgarh-Telangana border. He was associated with the Pamed area committee for the past three years, the official said.

"The exchange of fire took place between security forces and the Maoists at around 7.30 am. After the gunfight stopped, the body of Udhamp Singh was recovered. An AK-47 rifle, two magazines with 28 rounds, cordex wire, a wireless set, a mobile phone, pouch,

oath as deputy chief ministers of Manipur.

Reacting to the development, the Joint Forum of Seven (JF7), a tribal organisation based in Churachandpur district, called for a "total shutdown" in Kuki Zo-dominated areas from 6 am to 6 pm on Friday.

Nemcha Kipgen, a BJP MLA who belongs to the Kuki community, and Naga People's Front legislator L Dikho, took

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Order Order

SC modifies 2017 order, says Anurag Thakur free to participate in BCCI affairs



In a relief to former BCCI president Anurag Thakur, the Supreme Court on Thursday cleared decks for his association with the board by modifying its January 2017 order that had barred him from the affairs of the cricket body.

The Supreme Court said Thakur, a former Union Minister, is free to participate in the affairs of the BCCI according to rules and regulations.

On January 2, 2017, the Supreme Court had directed Thakur, the then president of the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI), to forthwith "cease and desist" from being associated with the working of the board. While dealing with an application filed by Thakur seeking modification of the 2017 order, a bench of Chief Justice Surya Kant and Justice Jaymalya Bagchi on Thursday applied the doctrine of proportionality and modified the direction.

The bench also observed that Thakur had earlier tendered an unqualified apology which was accepted by the Supreme Court. The court had initiated contempt and perjury proceedings against Thakur on January 2, 2017 for filing a false affidavit regarding writing to the then International Cricket Council (ICC) chairperson Shashank Manohar on the issue of the BCCI's autonomy.

HC denies parole to Abu Salem; expresses inability to pay police escort charges



The Bombay High Court on Thursday rejected jailed gangster Abu Salem's plea for parole after he expressed inability to pay the police escort charges.

Salem, serving a 25-year sentence in the 1993 Mumbai blasts case, has sought emergency parole to visit his native place in Uttar Pradesh to mourn the death of his brother Abu Hakim Ansari.

A division bench of Justices Ajay Gadkari and Shyam Chandak rejected Salem's plea after his lawyer argued that he was unable to pay high security escort charges stipulated by the state prison authorities. In the previous hearing, the lawyer had told the court that Salem won't be able to pay more than ₹1 lakh towards the escort charges. The court had then orally commented that he "cannot bargain" and will have to pay the mandatory charges if he wants to go.

Salem further pointed out that since his arrest in November 2005, he has been in jail and was only granted parole leaves of a few days after the death of his mother and also after the demise of his stepmother. Salem, a convict in the 1993 Mumbai serial blasts case, was extradited from Portugal on November 11, 2005, after a prolonged legal battle. A special TADA court had separately awarded life imprisonment to Salem in another case for murdering Mumbai-based builder Pradeep Jain in 1995.

Gujarat HC dismisses Asaram Ashram's plea against land acquisition by Govt



The Gujarat High Court on Thursday dismissed a plea by an ashram founded by self-styled godman Asaram in Ahmedabad, paving the way for land acquisition to develop sports infrastructure ahead of the Commonwealth Games 2020.

The HC dismissed the plea by Sant Shri Asharam Ashram against a Government drive to free up a large land parcel in the Motera area of the city, not far from the Narendra Modi Stadium and the under-construction Sardar Patel Sports Complex.

Arguing against the plea, Government pleader GH Virk told the single bench of Justice Vaibhavi Nanavati that the land, originally granted decades ago for limited reli-



'Process to revise MOP on judicial appointments under consideration'

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE

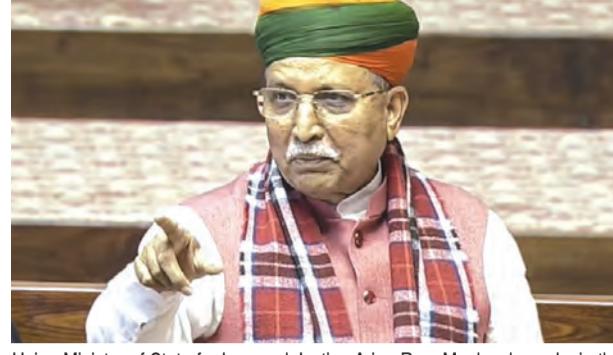
■ New Delhi

Law Minister Arjun Ram Meghwal on Thursday informed the Rajya Sabha that the process to revise the Memorandum of Procedure (MOP) for appointment of judges in higher judiciary is under consideration and further steps in this regard will be taken only after it is complete. Replying to supplementaries during the Question Hour, Meghwal said consultations are underway on setting up the All-India judicial service and in what form it should be brought in.

Replies to Congress MP Rajeev Shukla's query on whether the Government was bringing in judicial reforms and whether the NJAC would be brought in again, the minister said all know that the National Judicial Appointments Commission Bill was passed by Parliament and the Act was later challenged in the Supreme Court and was struck down.

"After that, a procedure to revise the MOP (Memorandum of Procedure) is under consideration and the next step will be taken up after that process is complete," Meghwal informed the House.

To another query on whether a national judicial service would be introduced in the country, the minister said, "Article 312 in our Constitution has a provision for the All-India judicial service and this issue has been dis-



Union Minister of State for Law and Justice Arjun Ram Meghwal speaks in the Rajya Sabha on Thursday

closed several times even during conferences of judges."

"This is an issue which is pending before the Supreme Court. Consultations on this are underway as to in what form this should be brought in. This matter is pending," Meghwal said.

The law minister said in our democracy, judiciary is an independent organ of the governance system and is competent to handle all issues. "Our Government is also committed to ensuring the independence of the judiciary. We are ensuring that jointly with the judiciary, judges get a conducive environment to help provide justice to people," he said.

The minister also said clearing pending cases is the right of the judiciary. He, however, said the Government has helped increase the strength of the lower judiciary.

"In 2014, total strength of the judges in district and sessions courts was 19,518 and we have added 6,376 posts after that. The present strength of the lower judiciary has been increased to 25,894 by our Government," Meghwal told the house.

To another query by AIADMK MP M Thambidurai on what the Government was doing to change the name of Madras High Court, the minister said, "There are several High Courts in the country which have old names. All these issues are under consideration."

In his written reply to the question on pendency of cases, the Law Minister said,

"Pendency of cases in courts

arise due to several factors, which inter alia, include complexity of the facts involved, nature of evidence, co-operation of stakeholders, viz., bar, investigation agencies, witness and litigants, the availability of physical infrastructure, supporting court staff, etc. Besides the shortage of judges." "The disposal of cases

is within the exclusive domain of the judiciary.

However, the Central Government is committed for speedy disposal of cases and reducing pendency as mandated under Article 21 of the Constitution and has taken several initiatives to provide an ecosystem for faster disposal of cases by the judiciary...

"The Government has been filling up vacancies of judges in the Supreme Court of India and the High Courts from time to time. From May 1, 2014 to January 19, 2026, 72 Judges have been appointed in the Supreme Court. 1162 new Judges were appointed and 820 Additional Judges were made permanent in the High Courts during the same period," he said.

He said the sanctioned strength of judges of High Courts has increased from 906 in May 2014 to 1122 to date.

Further, filling up of vacant positions of the judicial officers in district and subordinate courts is the responsibility of the High Courts and state Governments concerned, the minister said.

As per the constitutional framework, in exercise of powers conferred under the proviso to Article 309 read with Articles 233 and 234 of the Constitution, the respective state Government, in consultation with the High Court, frames the rules and regulations regarding the appointment and recruitment of judicial officers, Meghwal said.

SC directs West Bengal Govt to pay DA to its employees for 2008-2019

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE

■ New Delhi

In a relief to nearly 20 lakh Government employees, the Supreme Court on Thursday directed the West Bengal Government to pay dearness allowance to them for the 2008-2019 period, saying it is a legally-enforceable right.

A bench of Justices Sanjay Karol and Prashant Kumar Mishra directed the state Government to pay 25 per cent of the outstanding DA to its employees by March 6.

The court said once DA is defined by linking it to the All-India Consumer Price Index (AICPI) as in the statutory rules, the state could not modify the manner of calculating it through later office memoranda.

"To receive dearness allowance is a legally-enforceable right that has accrued in favour of the respondents-employees of the State of West Bengal....

The employees of the appellant-State shall be entitled to release of arrears in accordance with this judgment for the time period 2008-2019," the bench said, while holding that the employees are not entitled to DA twice a year.

The Supreme Court said dearness allowance emerges as a practical instrument of protection in the hands of a welfare

State, which safeguards its employees from the adverse effects of rising prices. DA is not an additional benefit but a means to maintain a minimum standard of living, it said.

Considering the financial implications involved, the bench also formed a committee comprising former Supreme Court judge Indu Malhotra, former High Court judges Tarlok Singh Chauhan and Goutam Bhaduri and the Comptroller and Auditor General of India or the seniormost officer in his establishment, nominated by him.

The court directed the financial implications involved, the bench also formed a committee comprising former Supreme Court judge Indu Malhotra, former High Court judges Tarlok Singh Chauhan and Goutam Bhaduri and the Comptroller and Auditor General of India or the seniormost officer in his establishment, nominated by him. The court directed the financial implications involved, the bench also formed a committee comprising former Supreme Court judge Indu Malhotra, former High Court judges Tarlok Singh Chauhan and Goutam Bhaduri and the Comptroller and Auditor General of India or the seniormost officer in his establishment, nominated by him. The court directed the financial implications involved, the bench also formed a committee comprising former Supreme Court judge Indu Malhotra, former High Court judges Tarlok Singh Chauhan and Goutam Bhaduri and the Comptroller and Auditor General of India or the seniormost officer in his establishment, nominated by him. 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Editor's TAKE

Recalibrating Indian agriculture

The fragility of Indian agriculture, now compounded by global exposure, demands a fundamental reset – or farmer distress will only deepen

Indian agriculture, a sector that supports half the workforce of the country, contributes barely one fifth of its GDP, yet it remains one of the most neglected and low on fiscal priority. The reasons are not difficult to find. The yield per hectare remains low, the input costs have only increased, while the prices of the produce remain abysmally low, sometimes not even enough to cover the input costs and the labour costs.

Though farm output growth has recovered modestly in recent years, with production growing over 4 per cent and food inflation remaining relatively low, farm distress has only grown. Barring a few states like Punjab and Haryana, agriculture in the country remains at a subsistence level.

At its core, Indian agriculture has been caught in low productivity, fragmented landholdings, and rising input costs. Most farmers operate on small plots, unable to exploit economies of scale or access modern technologies. Besides, most of the farmland is rainfed, and a bad monsoon is a cause of year-round misery. Price volatility further complicates livelihoods, as farmers face uncertainty in both input costs – from fertilisers to diesel – and output prices, often exacerbated by inadequate storage and market access.

Institutional support systems like the Minimum Support Price (MSP) cushion some producers, but only for a handful of crops. To add to farmers' woes, climate-change-induced pressures – erratic rainfall, heat stress, and pest outbreaks – eat into the livelihoods of farmers.

Given this rather precarious condition, the US-India trade deal adds another layer of complexity. The India-United States trade agreement announced recently will mean zero or no tariff on certain farm products. Though tariff relief can boost bilateral agricultural trade, it exposes the Indian market to US farm products that will directly compete with Indian produce. Indian exports to the US, particularly marine products, spices, rice, and processed foods, would surge.

However, the deal would also put Indian farmers on the receiving end, as several farmers' groups have said. Their concerns are not baseless, as when crops such as soybean, cotton, maize, and wheat enter the Indian market with zero tariffs, they would have a cost advantage, as several input costs in India, especially diesel, are far more expensive than in the US, which also enjoys economies of scale given its large farm sizes and mechanised operations. Thus, Indian agriculture needs an urgent recalibration to compete against imported farm produce.

Indian farmers must get some incentive to remain invested in agricultural activity. This would not only protect farmers but also enhance food security, support diversification, and increase rural incomes. The future of India is tied to the wellbeing of 65 per cent of the population that directly or indirectly depends on agriculture. Farm reforms that strengthen productivity, resilience, and value-chain integration are imperative. Trade deals should complement, not compromise, the livelihoods of millions who feed the nation.

Alliances, ambitions and the battle for power

As Tamil Nadu heads towards a high-stakes Assembly election in 2026, the state's famously bipolar politics is being tested by fragile alliances, bruised parties and the arrival of new challengers



KALYANI SHANKAR

As the Tamil Nadu Assembly elections approach, the main political parties feature two coalitions: the ruling DMK-led alliance with Congress and Left parties, and the AIADMK coalition with the BJP and smaller parties. Chief Minister M.K. Stalin continues to lead the DMK, highlighting the importance of these alliances in shaping the election outcome.

The AIADMK is struggling to survive in the wake of J Jayalalithaa's death. It is facing internal conflicts that threaten its stability. In the meantime, the expulsions of TTV Dhinakaran, O. Panneerselvam, and VK Sasikala highlight these issues and affect the AIADMK. Meanwhile, new political parties started by actor Vijay are gaining attention.

Despite being allies since 2004, the relationship between Congress and the DMK has seen some ups and downs recently. Now, ahead of the 2026 elections, Congress has demanded power-sharing, highlighting internal conflicts that could affect their strategies. O. Panneerselvam is yet to find a party that will accept him.

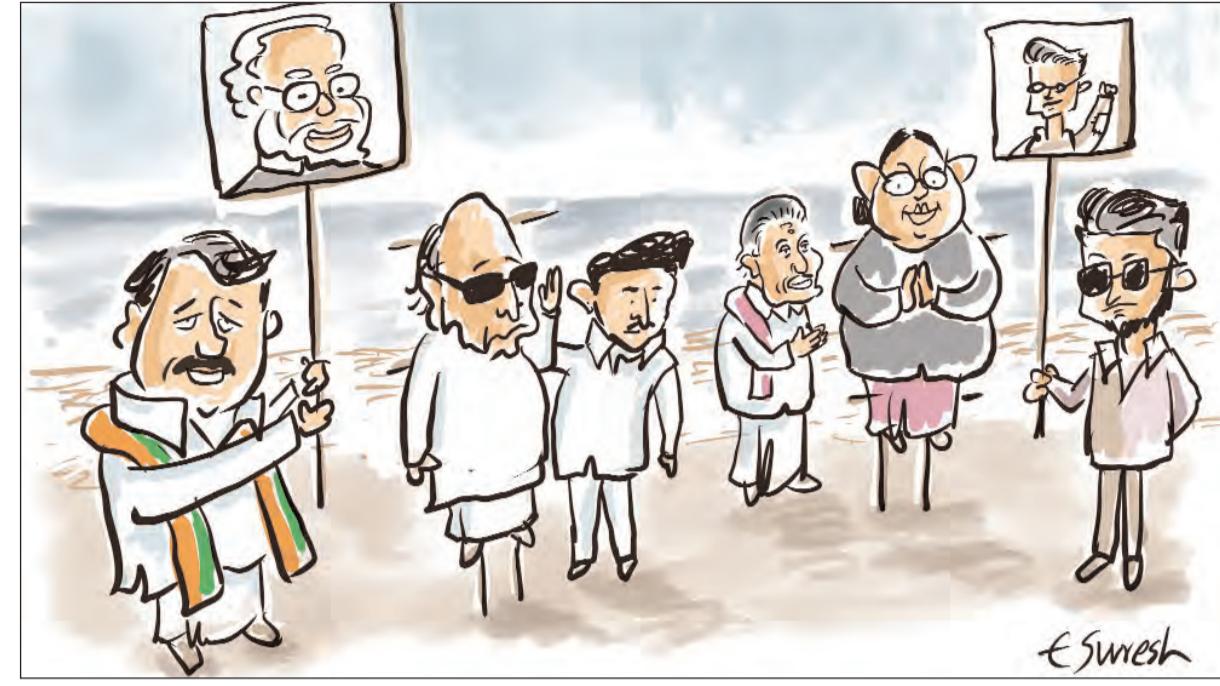
The DMK has never agreed to power-sharing. Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, Rahul Gandhi, and DMK leader Kanimozhi met on Wednesday at 10 Janpath to discuss the upcoming Tamil Nadu Assembly elections and their coalition politics, but no agreement was reached on seat-sharing.

Congress MP Manickam Tagore was among those who demanded power-sharing, stating, "We will continue to fight for power-sharing, and we will get it."

This shows the determination of Congress leaders. Rahul Gandhi also raised the issue with DMK leader Kanimozhi during their meeting last week. However, the DMK has rejected the idea. The DMK has clearly stated that it will not offer a Cabinet seat to Congress. However, it reaffirmed its commitment to continuing the alliance. The DMK is offering a Rajya Sabha berth to Congress to cajole the party. Still, Congress is hoping for the next.

The party's demands for more seats and power in the coalition highlight the importance of stability and the potential for alliances to shape a positive election outcome, inspiring confidence in political cooperation.

Dravidian parties often rely on smaller allies for votes but resist sharing power. For instance, last June, Edappadi K Palaniswami,



THE POLITICAL SCENE IN TAMIL NADU IS STILL HAZY, AND ONE WILL HAVE TO WAIT A LITTLE LONGER BEFORE IT BECOMES CLEAR. HOWEVER, THE TALK IN TAMIL NADU IS THAT THE DMK COALITION MIGHT RETURN

The writer is a popular columnist
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the AIADMK general secretary, stated that there would be no power-sharing agreement, arguing that coalition governments do not suit Tamil Nadu's political culture. He emphasised the party's commitment to single-party rule.

The NDA's seat-sharing plan shows a shift from exploring new ideas to implementing them, with a focus on winning more seats rather than expanding the coalition. Success depends on candidate quality, effective booth strategies, and the alliance's ability to secure anti-DMK votes, underscoring the importance of stability and strategic planning in the upcoming elections.

AIADMK leader E Palaniswami continues to reject O Panneerselvam and TTV Dhinakaran, emphasising the importance of party unity. OPS is eager to join the NDA, whether through the AMMK or by returning to the AIADMK. The key question is whether the AIADMK will welcome OPS back or leave him sidelined, and whether there are concerns about political stability and relevance. Another interesting aspect is Vijay, a popular actor, who launched his political party, Tamilaga Vettai Kazhagam (TVK), in 2024 and soon announced that he would retire from films to pursue politics full-time, inspiring admiration and curiosity about his political journey.

At 51, the star is stepping back from a successful film career while remaining one of the most popular figures in Indian cinema. He significantly influences festival releases and generates revenue. The million-dollar question

is whether he can get his fans to vote for him. Vijay's party will compete against established parties such as the Congress, DMK and AIADMK in the upcoming Tamil Nadu Assembly elections. His party aims to challenge both the DMK and the AIADMK and plans to contest alone. Vijay has a large fan base. NT Rama Rao and MGR too tapped this fan base and converted it into votes.

Kamal Haasan is a famous actor and the leader of the political party Makkal Needhi Maiam. He is growing his political presence in Tamil Nadu by moving from independent campaigns to aligning with the DMK. As of 2025-26, he is a Member of the Rajya Sabha, having been elected in June 2025. He focuses on centrist, anti-corruption politics and is an important ally for the DMK, especially ahead of the 2026 Assembly election. Many film stars in the state have become politicians. MG Ramachandran, known as MGR, and Jayalalithaa had very successful political careers. Earlier, CN Annadurai and M. Karunanidhi were notable figures. Both became Chief Ministers.

Stalin has realised the need for a coalition and supports keeping the DMK as the principal party within it.

The political scene in Tamil Nadu is still hazy, and one will have to wait a little longer before it becomes clear. However, the talk in Tamil Nadu is that the DMK coalition might return. The vote banks of the DMK and AIADMK have been consistent. Which way the pendulum swings will be known once the coalitions are finalised.

PIC TALK



Common mynas splash about in a shallow water body on a sunny day.

PHOTO: PANKAJ KUMAR

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US TARIFF CUTS OFFER HOPE, BUT CAUTION NEEDED

The reported reduction of US tariffs on Indian goods from 50 per cent to 18 per cent has understandably generated optimism among exporters. If it materialises, Indian manufacturers – particularly in textiles, electronics, and pharmaceuticals – could gain a competitive edge over countries like Bangladesh and Vietnam, which continue to face 19-20 per cent tariffs. However, enthusiasm must be tempered by reality. President Trump's public statements, while bold, have often preceded the negotiated fine print. Announcements generate headlines, but actual implementation can change shape or be delayed. Several uncertainties remain. There is little clarity on how much access the US will grant for its agricultural products, with

sensitive sectors such as dairy and poultry still in question. Likewise, India's imports of Russian oil continue at steady levels, and the \$500 billion commitment to purchase American goods over five years appears aspirational, given India currently imports only \$45-50 billion annually.

Businesses cannot plan inventories, pricing, or capacity on pre-statements alone. Supply chains take months to adjust, and contracts require firm numbers. The responsible path is a detailed, jointly signed agreement outlining tariffs, timelines, exemptions, dispute mechanisms, and sector protections. Until then, exporters should diversify markets and hedge risks. Clarity, not optimism, will determine if this truly benefits Indian trade.

A MYLSAMI | COIMBATORE

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

The growing influence of fitness on modern lifestyles



SAKSHI SETHI

2ND OPINION

Gyms and sports arenas have emerged as modern-day havens in today's fast-paced, technologically driven society, where screens dominate both work and leisure. No longer merely spaces for exercise, they have evolved into centres of healing, self-discovery, and personal growth. From senior citizens practising yoga to young adults lifting weights and sprinting on treadmills, fitness has transformed from a casual activity into a way of life. This growing enthusiasm reflects a shift in mindset – one that values health, confidence, and inner strength as much as academic or professional success.

A major reason behind this fitness revolution is the rising awareness among people across age groups. Individuals today are far more conscious of their physical well-being

and the long-term consequences of unhealthy lifestyle choices. Health is no longer defined solely by appearance or muscular build; instead, it is associated with vitality, mental sharpness, emotional balance, and self-confidence. The increase in lifestyle-related diseases such as cardiovascular and metabolic disorders has reinforced the understanding that neglecting health comes at a serious long-term cost.

As a result, gyms and sports facilities have become more than places to work out. They are spaces where people rebuild discipline, regain control over their lives and strengthen their sense of self-worth. Social media has played a crucial role in accelerating this movement. Platforms such as YouTube, Instagram and Facebook, along with fitness applications like Cult and Anytime Fitness, are filled with workout routines, nutritional advice and motivational content. Fitness influencers and trainers inspire millions through stories of perseverance and transformation. Although some portray unrealistic standards, they have made fitness appear accessible and rewarding. For many, gyms have also evolved into supportive communities that foster encouragement and a sense of belonging.

Alongside gym culture, sports participation has witnessed a global resurgence. From school leagues to professional tournaments and mass-participation marathons, engage-

ment has reached unprecedented levels. Sports are no longer seen merely as entertainment or a pursuit of trophies; they are recognised as tools for personal development. Participation cultivates discipline, teamwork, leadership, and resilience, helping individuals cope with both success and failure.

In today's stressful and competitive world, engaging in sports or exercise provides a much-needed emotional outlet. It promotes mental balance and social connection. Attitudes towards health have also shifted institutionally. In the past, physical fitness was often sacrificed for academic or career success. Today, society increasingly recognises that a healthy body leads to a sharper mind and higher productivity. Post COVID-19, organisations, educational institutions and families alike have begun prioritising wellness and physical activity.

The growing craze for gyms and sports is a hopeful sign for the future. It reflects a conscious choice to prioritise long-term health and happiness over short-term comfort. In an uncertain world, this commitment to fitness offers stability, confidence and control – reaffirming the timeless truth that a healthy body nurtures a healthy mind.

The writer is an educator

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Freebie culture harms public welfare

There is a clear distinction between genuine investment in welfare projects for the poor and the unabashed freebies offered by political parties during elections, as noted by the Supreme Court while admitting petitions seeking to declare such announcements a 'corrupt practice'. Promises are made because certain sections of society remain susceptible to tall claims. Political parties freely make pledges, yet rarely acknowledge the heavy burden these impose on the exchequer. On previous occasions, the Supreme Court has criticised this 'freebie culture', observing that it disturbs the level playing field during elections and gives parties promising such benefits an unfair advantage.

Is there any major political party in India that is not associated with offering freebies? Politicians themselves bear responsibility for the so-called fiscal disaster, which is a direct consequence of this culture. Despite the Court's suggestion to constitute an expert committee to examine and resolve the issue, no meaningful action has been taken.

Until such measures are implemented, election promises will continue to prioritise short-term political gain over long-term fiscal prudence, undermining both governance and public trust.

GANAPATHI BHAT | AKOLA

Politics behind electoral roll dispute

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's personal appearance before the Supreme Court on February 4, to oppose the Election Commission of India's Special Intensive Revision exercise was unprecedented. She alleged that the process aimed to disenfranchise certain communities by flagging voters under the Logical Discrepancy category for minor spelling variations and claimed that thousands of micro-observers were partisan.

The Election Commission, however, clarified that the exercise was intended to cleanse electoral rolls of illegal immigrants, deceased voters and duplications. It further stated that the deployment of external observers became necessary due to the state government's refusal to provide manpower. Such objectives are neither extraordinary nor undemocratic.

The Chief Minister's claim of appearing as a 'common citizen' appeared more performative than principled, especially with elections approaching. The Supreme Court acted prudently by not yielding to theatrics while reaffirming that all genuine voters must remain on the rolls. One hopes the matter proceeds in a calm, cooperative atmosphere, allowing institutions to function without political pressure.

V JAYARAMAN | CHENNAI

Parents must monitor screen time closely

The recent Ghaziabad tragedy involving the online Korean Romance game, which claimed the lives of three minor sisters, has once again highlighted the alarming dangers of gaming and smartphone addiction. The incident, in which girls aged between 12 and 16 reportedly jumped from a ninth-floor apartment after being stopped from playing the game, is deeply disturbing and heartbreaking. This case exposes the fragile mental state of adolescents increasingly vulnerable to excessive screen exposure and online dependency. Easy access to smartphones and the internet has accelerated this silent crisis in households across India. Gaming addiction is no longer a marginal issue; it is steadily affecting emotional stability, mental health and family relationships.

The loss of young lives due to self-harm underscores the urgent need for collective intervention. Parents, schools and policymakers must work together to promote responsible screen use, digital literacy and healthy alternatives. Clear boundaries, regular communication and awareness of online risks are essential. Unless addressed promptly, such tragedies may multiply, leaving irreversible scars on families and society.

KIRTI WADHAWAN | KANPUR



Budget bets on growth and green transition

In a period of macroeconomic stability, reforms such as customs clean-up, further liberalisation of the trade regime, and non-tariff barriers such as quality control orders should have been addressed in this budget. Nevertheless, it is not compulsory to implement these reforms in the budget; they can be introduced at any time during the year

**BK
SINGH**

Amid global uncertainties and geo-political tensions causing supply chain constraints and trade disruptions, the budget presented by India's Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman has maintained fiscal discipline and boldly increased capital expenditure from 11.2 trillion rupees in 2025-26 to 12.2 trillion rupees for 2026-27. A high-powered committee, "Education to Employment and Enterprise", is proposed to be set up to focus on the services sector as a core driver of economic development. It will track growth and may move to amend government policies if circumstances demand. A push for AI is also evident, as a tax holiday until 2047 has been announced for foreign companies using data centres in India to provide global cloud services.

In a period of macroeconomic stability, reforms such as customs clean-up, further liberalisation of the trade regime, and non-tariff barriers such as quality control orders should have been addressed in this budget. Nevertheless, it is not compulsory to implement these reforms in the budget; they can be introduced at any time during the year.

Apart from the generous tax holiday on data centres until 2047, a five-year tax holiday for foreign companies supplying capital goods and equipment encourages them to relocate manufacturing supply chains to India. On the issue of adjusting the budget for Trump's tariff, in the post-budget press conference, the Finance Minister said: "It is something that occupies the minds of the officials when we are preparing the budget, but I will not attribute it to the cause for any one step. Across the board, we kept that in mind."

India has recently signed a free trade deal with the EU. The Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) of the EU compels developing nations like India to either meet the standard or pay additional tariffs. Such barriers should be levied on developed countries, as India is one of the lowest per capita emitters of greenhouse



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gases. Further, the EU's nominal per capita GDP in 2025 was \$46,000, while India's was \$2,800. The European Commission has confirmed that the India-EU FTA does not provide any exemption from CBAM. The Union Budget has considered this and proposed an outlay of ₹20,000 crore for scaling up Carbon Capture, Utilisation and Storage (CCUS). This has been done to stay green while remaining competitive in the export market. The CCUS scheme is applicable across five industrial sectors—power, steel, cement, refineries, and chemicals.

This move to decarbonise under the CCUS programme aligns with the country's target of achieving net zero by 2070. The storage component of the scheme refers to processes that separate carbon dioxide generated in industries using fossil fuels as an energy source. The separated carbon dioxide is compressed, transported, and injected into depleted oil reservoirs or any geological structure with space.

The technologies are also available to utilise compressed carbon dioxide to produce consumer goods such as carbonated beverages. Carbon dioxide is

used as a refrigerant, in fire extinguishers, for blowing coal, in foam rubber and plastics, to inflate life rafts and life jackets, promote plant growth in greenhouses, and immobilise animals before slaughter. Morten Meldal, one of the three Chemistry Nobel laureates of 2022, visited India recently and explained how we are one reaction away from developing carbon dioxide as a fuel. The 2025 Nobel Prize in Chemistry was awarded for the development of metal-organic frameworks, which are porous and crystalline materials designed to trap or store molecules, offering groundbreaking solutions for carbon capture, hydrogen storage, and water harvesting from desert air.

Another solution proposed in the budget to decarbonise the economy is the creation of dedicated rare earth corridors to promote mining, processing, research, and manufacturing in mineral-rich states, namely Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala. Rare earths are critical for India's semiconductor push, a vital component in electronic devices. The alloy of neodymium, iron, and boron forms magnets that can

withstand 280°C and have a variety of uses in emerging technologies, such as drones, robots, missiles, aerospace, defence equipment, electric vehicles, semiconductors, computers, mobiles, and wind turbines. Dysprosium can sometimes replace neodymium in magnets. These magnets are 12 times as powerful as ferrite magnets used in household fridges. They are essential for drones, robots, and other equipment to increase torque and speed, enhancing precision and efficiency. Samarium-cobalt magnets are eight times as powerful. Rare earths and semiconductor chips are among the most critical items in global supply chains. The budget has also provided a push to the renewable energy sector. Basic customs duty exemptions on imports needed for nuclear power projects, manufacturing lithium-ion cells for energy storage, sodium antimonite for solar glass, and equipment for processing critical minerals have been extended. In response to the Paris Climate Accord 2015, India has committed to generating 500 GW of electricity from non-fossil fuel sources by 2030. In 2025, the

Union government passed the law "Sustainable Harnessing and Advancement of Nuclear Energy for Transforming India", opening the sector to private participation and aiming for 100 GW of nuclear energy generation by 2047. The budget announcement supports this goal.

The budget has also aimed to increase manufacturing's share of the economy from 13 per cent to 25 per cent by allocating ₹10,000 crore over five years for manufacturing containers, tunnel-boring equipment, high-capacity lifts, and fire-fighting equipment. Tunnel-boring machines are crucial for metro construction and high-altitude roads. India has relied on China, and progress slowed last year when China halted exports. Tunnel boring preserves surface vegetation, minimising carbon footprint and enabling development with less environmental damage.

It has been announced that cargo transport via coastal shipping will increase from 6 per cent to 12 per cent by 2047 by enhancing inland waterways. The Finance Minister added that 20 inland waterways, including National Waterway 5 along the Mahanadi River, will connect mineral-rich Talcher and Angul to industrial centres like Kalinga Nagar, Paradeep, and Dhamra Port in Odisha. Transporting minerals by inland waterways reduces fossil fuel consumption, minimises greenhouse gas emissions, and lowers the carbon footprint.

The budget also supports urbanisation. Capital expenditure will develop roads and infrastructure in new urban centres. Delhi NCR and other metropolitan areas face severe winter pollution due to smog from fossil fuel-based energy, vehicles, dust, and stubble burning. Relocating fossil fuel-based industries 400 km or more from cities is a long-term solution. Developing new urban centres is essential.

The Finance Minister should also be commended for strengthening India's global commitment to big cat conservation and for hosting the first-ever Global Big Cat Summit in India this year. Delegates from 95 range countries, along with leading conservation organisations and partners, will collaborate to strengthen biodiversity. Conserving tigers, lions, leopards, jaguars, snow leopards, cheetahs, and pumas protects habitats, making forests more climate-resilient.

The India-EU moment: Forging partnerships amid a fractured global order

**SWASTI
SACHDEVA**

India and the European Union have announced the conclusion of a Free Trade Agreement (FTA), described as 'a mother of all deals', and signed a New Security and Defence Partnership. These were announced during the landmark visit of the European Union (EU) Commission and Council presidents on the eve of India's Republic Day, coinciding with the 16th India-EU Summit held the following day. Both sides signed 13 outcomes in total, covering trade, economic, and defence relations, as well as a broad range of issues spanning skilling and mobility, disaster management, clean energy, science and technology, and connectivity. They also adopted a Comprehensive Strategic Agenda, which will define ties until 2030.

This recent upturn in the relationship between New Delhi and Brussels is not only a product of mutual interests, but equally of shared unease. The global order that shaped transatlantic and Indo-European relations for decades is fraying, as assumptions about security guarantees, economic interdependence, and alliance reliability are increasingly challenged. Efforts for an FTA date back to 2007, but recent geopolitical developments have brought the two closer.

The EU has been disappointed by the United States, feels increasingly threatened by Russia, and, coupled with growing scepticism towards China, has reconsidered its relationships. For New Delhi, the quest for multi-alignment, reinforced and sharpened by recent events, continues to dominate engagements.

The US is undergoing a transformation and redefining its global role. Its trajectory remains unclear and unpredictable, but it is likely to be less tethered to the institutions, patterns, ideas, and ideologies established in the wake of the Second World War. Though dominated by the US, this order benefited Europe and India, which had adjusted to its contours over time. However, no power has been as impacted by Trump's adventurism as the EU. His unpredictability, along with U.S. Vice President JD Vance's stark dislike of Europe, has brought transatlantic relations to a low point. The realisation that Europe can no longer rely on NATO's security umbrella or



economic and cultural ties with the US has rattled Brussels. This has accelerated its pursuit of strategic autonomy and new partners. For India, Trump 2.0 posed challenges to a bilateral relationship considered strategically important and central to its global outlook. Thus, Trump's America was a key factor pushing this India-EU FTA, as acknowledged by an EU ambassador in Delhi. India offers an ideal alternative for Europe—a large market, a growing defence ecosystem, a rising technology hub, and a moderate voice in global affairs.

These developments are also crucial in the post-Ukraine war period, as Moscow's attempts to weaken and divide Europe have pushed Brussels to enhance economic and defence capabilities. Russia is perceived as an existential threat. While a target of European criticism, India's rising economic and defence prowess is seen as a valuable partner as the EU charts a new trajectory.

India's decision to maintain ties with Russia despite immense pressure has been vindicated by recent events, exemplifying strategic autonomy—a model Europe increasingly admires. Brussels also welcomed that, during Putin's recent visit to Delhi, no major defence agreement was signed, and India continued to reduce dependence on Russian oil and defence supplies. Nonetheless, Russia will remain a point of disagreement.

India could also play a critical role in the EU's ReArm Europe Plan 2030, announced in response to the Russian threat, with various European capitals pledging massive defence packages. European publics face economic anxieties, pension concerns, and debates over burden-sharing, alongside renewed discussions, such as Germany's, on mandatory military service. A stronger partnership with India could help alleviate fiscal pressures. Defence ties with countries such as France and

Germany are already strengthening, contributing to cautious optimism.

Meanwhile, China is a special case where both sides broadly align in principle but differ in approach; the intensity, nature, and timing of the perceived threat vary. For Europe, China ranks below Russia and the US in foreign policy priorities. Notably, the EU is far from cohesive on China. For India, however, the Chinese threat is paramount, and New Delhi sees stability and predictability in its relations. China's emerging power shift, accelerated by Trump-era policies, underscores the urgency of preserving the remnants of a rules-based order—a shared concern for both India and Europe.

Thus, global unpredictability and geopolitical complexities have nudged India and the EU closer, setting aside differences. The FTA sends a message to old friends and new challengers: both sides capitalised on a crisis and seized the opportunity. The timing was highlighted by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen during the joint press conference, who stated: "The time is right for renewed, fresh momentum, and for opening a new chapter in EU-India friendship."

While the growing partnership benefits both sides, it also reflects the transactionalism that defines today's world. The agreements' intricacies are natural and solvable, but the relationship's foundation must be robust. It must aim to improve the lives of two billion people, not merely to address global anxieties. It must be a relationship of choice, not convenience. With the right intent and effective execution, the sky is the limit for India-EU friendship.

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Growing menace of online harassment of women

**DEVENDRA
KUMAR**

Growing up in Delhi's slums, I witnessed women endure catcalls and groping on buses, teasing at school gates, and unwanted advances in alleys. We fought back through community patrols and awareness campaigns, achieving small victories. Now those same predators have traded street corners for smartphone screens. Anonymity, instant messaging, and artificial intelligence have created new avenues for harassment, targeting women and girls in their homes, classrooms, and even temple courtyards.

Technology has become a double-edged sword. On one hand, mobile phones and social media connect young women to education, jobs, and networks. On the other, reports show that the majority of online abuse is directed at women. In India, complaints of cybercrimes against women have more than doubled in recent years. Globally, a staggering share of aggressive posts, deepfake images, and abusive messages target women and girls. Many abandon social media altogether due to harassment, widening the digital gender divide.

What makes this wave of violence particularly insidious is its intrusion into the lives of schoolgirls. In Rajasthan's Beawar district, men befriended teenagers on social media and gifted them smartphones, then recorded meetings to blackmail the girls, sparking outrage. In Lucknow, a university student who met a man on Instagram was gang raped by him and his friends. Such incidents are tragically common: promises of friendship or love often evolve into threats, extortion, or assault. I refuse to accept that keeping girls offline is the solution. Instead, we must create safe digital environments and equip young people to navigate them. The Ladli Foundation, in partnership with Girl Effect, has launched a Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TGBV) programme across 45 government schools in Delhi. Over the coming year, we will reach over 50,000 adolescent girls through sensitisation sessions, interactive workshops, and thematic classroom activities promoting positive online behaviour. Student Impact Clubs will sustain peer-led awareness, while exhibitions and participatory activities will allow students to express their understanding and promote a culture of digital safety and gender sensitivity.

The programme is ambitious: we aim to sensitise 45,000 students using structured modules and expert talks, provide legal literacy on India's criminal codes, the IT Act, and the POCSO Act, and

establish 45 digital safety clubs. More than 180 teachers will be trained to handle TGBV complaints sensitively, while parents will attend orientation workshops to understand online risks. Each school will also nominate five Digital Safety Ambassadors—225 peer leaders in total—to champion safe internet behaviour and act as first responders. All successes, challenges, and case studies will be documented to inform future advocacy. Online exploitation rarely stays online. Predators often begin by praising girls' posts or encouraging glamorous reels, coaxing them to share photos or personal details before threatening exposure. Victims are isolated and lured into in-person meetings under the guise of romance or jobs, sometimes resulting in sexual assault, trafficking, or forced prostitution. Schoolgirls, unprepared for such manipulation, are particularly vulnerable. Many hesitate to report abuse for fear of blame or mobility restrictions, while families often lack the digital awareness to recognise warning signs. We cannot respond by locking girls at home. Digital literacy must be part of school curricula, teaching children to protect data, spot fake profiles, and report abuse. Parents must stop treating technology as taboo and engage in open conversations about online friendships. Communities should form self-help groups and volunteer networks to support victims in filing complaints and removing abusive content.

Law enforcement agencies need specialised training and resources to investigate cybercrimes promptly, preserve evidence, and support survivors.

Technology companies also bear responsibility. Social media platforms must prioritise safety by design, with easy reporting mechanisms, stronger account verification, and local-language moderation. Deepfake detection and rapid removal of non-consensual images should be standard. Governments should update laws to specifically address online stalking, grooming, and sextortion, with criminal penalties and swift removal of abusive content.

As a social reformer who has dedicated my life to protecting uneducated women, I see this digital battle as an extension of the one we fought on the streets. Through programmes such as Saheli, Sashakti, and Shagun, we have empowered thousands of girls with education, vocational skills, and legal support. Now, with Girl Effect, we extend that empowerment online. The internet should be a platform of opportunity, not oppression. By working together—parents, teachers, police, technology companies, and civil society—we can transform screens from sites of exploitation to spaces of empowerment, ensuring every girl can safely explore the world online and offline.

The writer is Founder and Director of the Ladli Foundation
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BLASÉ CAPITAL

OLD IS GOLD



Forget gold prices, although they are important in this story. Forget buying gold, but that too is crucial. Remember selling gold, especially old gold that is lying with Indian households for years, decades, even a century or more. Over the past two years, and particularly in the past few months, Indians have begun to dust old gold, lying at home or in bank vaults, shining them up, and either selling it, or pawning it for loans. According to Experian India, as unsecured borrowing becomes expensive, as personal loans and credit become costlier, gold loans have made, and are making, a comeback, and with a vengeance. Today, gold is more of a "practical financial safety valve," and gold loans are among the "fastest-growing secured credit products." Apart from households, young professionals, and small businesses have joined the queue. Old, and new gold does not matter, as long as it shines and is yellow.

Apart from genuine gold, or gold that is backed by proper paperwork or provenance, 'black' gold is on an ascendant. Since raw-cut gold, which is cut from raw bricks, unlike the bars sold by the premium firms, is sold at discounts in the narrow lanes of Chandini Chowk in New Delhi, and similar bazaars in other cities, the demand has gone up. There is no paperwork to buy this gold, which is cut from a rough brick, much like the butcher cuts slices of meat from a hanging animal. Resale is on trust, and largely to the same seller since he or she knows the value, and has made a promise to buy it back, albeit at a discount. Such gold is kept in the vaults in the steel almirahs at home, rather in banks, and the expected price escalation is almost the same as genuine gold. People who earn a part of their incomes in cash, or have cash, prefer this mode.

At the same time, imports have zoomed, despite a nine per cent cut in import duties in 2024. Earlier, the differential between global and Indian prices was as high as 20 per cent, 15 per cent duty, plus sales tax. Despite the cut, it is still 8-9 per cent, which is enough to leave a minimum profit of five per cent for the smuggler, after adjusting for other costs, including bribes, if required. This implies a minimum margin of more than ₹8,000 per 10 grams, or ₹8,00,000 per kg. Imports of 100 kgs a year is about ₹8,00,00,000. If one talks in terms of tonnes, with India being the largest importer, the smuggling cartel can earn hundreds of crores of rupees. Recently, Customs and Enforcement Directorate have caught hundreds of Indian and foreign 'human mules', who ferret gold for the smugglers. There was a case of illegal imports of tens of tonnes from China across Tibet.

Before this year's budget, experts expected Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman to reduce the import tariff on gold by three per cent to reduce the smuggler's margins, and reduce the illegal inflow. However, she took another path, the one that was least expected, and was of least resistance, and favoured the consumers. Under the baggage rules, Indians could earlier import gold (20 grams for non-female, and 40 grams for female), with a cap on value. Since gold prices rose, and continued to rise over the years, the value caps became a squeeze. They were unable to cover the weight caps, which forced genuine buyers to bring in less quantities. Now, the value cap is gone. So, genuine imports under the baggage rules will rise. This is the finance minister's way to dissuade people from buying smuggled gold, and bring it officially. The flip side is evident. Smuggled gold is sold at a discount, just like the illegal raw-cut gold. In a price-sensitive economy, where papers do not matter, and corruption is rampant, people may prefer illegal gold. In essence, gold demand will go up, as Indians bring in more genuine gold, and buy more of the smuggled gold. In India, the appetite is unending.

In the recent past, gold futures have tumbled by 10 per cent, which may indicate some turbulence in the future. The same is true for silver. Investors are now caught between the devil and angel, as some feel the upward trend will continue after a break, and others worry if this is the beginning of the end of the gold cycle this time. The dollar and US economy hold the key. If the decline of the dollar reverses, as it did in the recent past, gold will stumble. If the US economy does better than expected, as it has done by not being as worse as estimated, gold will tumble. But if the geopolitical disruptions and tensions continue, investors will seek safety in the yellow metal. The signing of two big bilateral trade deals, India with the European Union and America, will be bad news for gold. But if the agreements hit India due to higher imports, gold will gain. There are too many ifs and buts, as is usual in a fast-changing world. The stock markets are spooked, as they rumble and tumble, 1,000 points here, 2,000 points there, with each day bringing fresh stories and narratives of why what happened.

'Deal' with protected nationalism

Bluster and bilateral buys, tariff and temperance boosted trade

OUR TAKE



Sutanu Guru
Author, Journalist
and Academician

There is much confusion over global trade, bilateral deals, and cross-border investment flows, even as there is a buzz about nationalism, protectionism, atma-nirbarta, and self-reliance. Experts appear befuddled and bedazzled. Despite the bluster and rhetoric of making their respective nations great again, a slogan that reverberates across the globe in Russia, China, Europe, America, India, Brazil, and elsewhere, the global economy witnessed a resurgence of bilateral trade deals. Yes, not many talk about the World Trade Organisation, and there is a tussle on how to save the multilateral entities, including the United Nations, or regional ones like BRICS and Quad.

Obviously, the logical predictions were that the new post-Trump 2.0 trends will dent global trade, make nations and leaders look inwards and deeper, and reverse the global patterns related to investments, supply chain linkages, and over-dependence. However, the results seem the opposite, although clearcut trends are still not visible, and the global economies are in a constant flux. For example, India's exports did not suffer much due to the American high tariffs, even as it darted here and there to seek new, alternative markets, and increase exposures in non-US ones. Import sources changed, especially in sensitive items.

In retrospect, one can safely contend that India played out a waiting game, and focused on non-US bilateral agreements with the UK, Australia, European Union (EU). Indeed, some experts say that the 'Mother-of-all-deals' with the EU pressured the US president, Donald Trump, to come to the table, and announce the India-US pact within a few days. Others feel that India signed the EU agreement under duress after nearly two decades because it wanted to force the American hands. One can get a whiff if one believes Trump's claim that he agreed to it because of the desire of India's Narendra Modi.

Whatever may be the truth, despite the bluff and bluster, the India-EU deal triggered a chain

of moves, discussions, negotiations, bargaining, and a final phone call between a president and a prime minister, which resulted in the announcement of a historic bilateral trade deal between the two nations. If one ignores the usual theatrics of Trump, the trade deal is no doubt encouraging for the longer-term benefits. But the two agreements, with the US and EU, even as other nations, especially China and Russia ink similar arrangements, raises questions about the coming era of bilateral trade, amidst higher and fearful decibel levels related to nationalism, jingoism, hyper patriotism, even protectionism.

Trump, when he talks about his pet theme to 'Make America Great Again', is basically talking about protectionism. It implies restricted imports, allowing local businesses to thrive and, if possible, export more, even as there is pressure on American giants to invest at home. Make a nation self-sufficient to reduce external dependencies. In the process, stall, ban, or stop the inflow of migrants, who 'steal' local jobs. Most leaders across the world, as mentioned earlier, from Latin America to North America, Europe to Asia, Africa to Australia, talk in the same language that is laced with nationalism and national interests.

But, beyond the hype and signals to the domestic political stakeholders, and potential voters, the real intentions are to improve global trade bilaterally, and woo cross-border investments bilaterally. Data confirms this. In 2024, the value of total global trade was a shade below \$33 trillion. Then came Trump with his tariff threats, trade tantrums, and investment invokations. There was a growing fear that the disruptive moves would lead to not just a decline in global trade, but trigger another, and more long-lasting 'Great Recession.' In 2025, global trade, at more than \$35 trillion, was higher than in 2024. It went up.

Similar was the trend in global investment

flows. In the era of growing, and more-acceptable bilateral pacts, MNCs have rotated money faster than ever before. Yes, it is true that geopolitics and geopolitics influence them more than ever, but this process started with the pandemic, and China+1 strategy. America has put out an official list of the hundreds of trillions of dollars that will be invested by American giants, and foreign investors in new factories, and expansion. India has seen high gross inflows, although they were dented by outflows through repatriation by MNCs, and outward investments by Indian MNCs. China's investments in Asia, Africa, and Europe are up.

Capital will seek high returns, and some economies will offer them if they incentivise investors with infrastructure, and less red tape. This is why East Asia outperformed India. But India is catching up. But there is, as usual, a sting in the tail. Despite the increase in trade flows, both values and volumes, and hikes in reciprocal investments across continents and economies due to the bilateral deals being inked by everyone and anyone, specific sectors and industries within specific economies will get hurt. This will happen, like it or not, believe it or not.

Consider agriculture and dairy access. There is a bit of a haze about whether India will allow access to American farm products. In the case of Australia, and the EU, the segments were protected, although Indian farmers protested about the possible imports of apples from Australia, and processed food, and wine, among others from the EU. But several manufacturing sectors may face the heat as cheaper imports enter the Indian markets. Exports may improve, but one is not sure about the shifts in bilateral trade surpluses. What is of concern is that while India may continue to export what it does today, the reciprocating partners will sell new, premium, modern, and high-tech products.

However, let us give the devil his (or her) due. Let us command Trump despite his disruptions. The US president proved two contradictory, and related things. Even behemoths, powerful and superpower-like ones, have limits. But these behemoths, including the lesser-ones like Russia's Vladimir Putin, can exercise power that leads to long-lasting and radical consequences. In my opinion, Trump inadvertently pushed the global economy towards bilateral trade agreements, even as his theatrics and threats failed to deliver concrete benefits for the US. The final gainer may be some other nations, including hitherto sleeping giants like Japan, Germany, and the UK. In Asia, as of now, the shining examples of China and India, apart from Vietnam, stand out. In the future, India needs to ensure that the investment environment is attractive. If this happens, the adverse implications of bilateral trade pacts can be written off as collateral damage. Survival of the fittest, or rather the survival of the meekest, who accepted the world as it is.

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The Tech Wrecker

Tech leads Nasdaq's stock slips

Valuation worries, AI concerns, and profit-taking dominate



recent slide in tech, major indices have yet to breach these thresholds. While this may be the case, the moves signal that investors are looking at how to factor future growth and profits into existing stock prices, particularly those tied to AI products and services. Traders and institutions may trim positions in firms whose earnings horizons are far off, and choose those with predictable near-term cash flows.

This episode reflects classic profit-taking after a strong rally. When stocks lead markets for extended periods, profit-booking is a natural outflow. At the same time, it does not signal financial instability or an imminent downturn. US consumer spending remains resilient, corporate earnings forecasts have not been systematically downgraded, and macro indicators have not trended toward recession. Core jobs data, inflation measures, and consumer confidence indices, backdrop against which market price risks, reflect stability rather than stress. As markets digest these shifts, several plausible scenarios may unfold. One scenario

is a rebound if the upcoming earnings reports from major tech firms provide stronger visibility into revenue growth and AI prospects. Alphabet, Amazon, Microsoft, and Nvidia are among those whose results and forward guidance can reset sentiments if they beat forecasts. Investors will wait for these signals, which may trigger further sell-off, and the backing out of the bears.

A second scenario involves rotation and consolidation, whereby tech stocks trade in a broader range as valuations reset to historical levels. In this view, profits will flow toward defensive sectors, value stocks, and industries with immediate cash flows, while growth equities consolidate before making a fresh attempt at heading higher. A third, more bearish, scenario will require evidence of slowing demand in core tech sectors or disappointing guidance from corporate earnings. If spending softens or firms highlight margin pressures tied to competition or broader economic concerns, the sell-off may deepen and broaden into other equity sectors. In the recent past,

when PayPal's earnings and forecast missed estimates, its stock tumbled over 20 per cent "against a background of an exodus from software stocks." But, as one analyst said, investors are "running away from a fortune." The numbers, he maintained, "show a cash-generating machine that is effectively buying itself back at a discount." As he explained, "After the blackout period ends, the weak sisters will be selling, PayPal will be buying."

Software faces the tech fallout, according to a few media reports. On Tuesday, the S&P 500 software and services index fell nearly four per cent, and a further nearly 0.75 per cent, and notched up the sixth straight session of losses. According to a report, the losses wiped out nearly \$830 billion since January 28, 2026. The AI factors have moved from being tailwinds to possible disruptions, and the "latest sell-off was triggered by a new legal tool from Anthropic's Claude large-language model." People worry that this tool can wreak havoc across segments from finance to law and coding. This can hurt businesses, and reminds investors of how Amazon destroyed several industries. Some analysts contend that the current sell-off is an extension of a trend that started last quarter, and "is a manifestation of an awakening to the disruptive power of AI." He adds, "The seemingly-wide moats of these firms feel a lot narrow today as competition from AI products intensifies."

According to other experts, investors have decided, at least for the moment, to bet on infra firms, and model developers, rather than software ones, which are seen as mid-term losers even if their businesses seem strong. But, as is evident, "chaos creates opportunity." If one can make the right bets, even among the players that may be on the losing side, but survive in the long run, there may be huge amounts to make. Remember the churn in the Internet firms during the 1990s, and early 2000s, especially after the tech stock shock at the turn of the century. Many names vanished in a blip. Others struggled to survive, and painfully lingered on. A few survived, thrived, and rode to the pinnacle of power. Some of them were not the pioneers, or innovators, but mere followers. Investors need to reflect, and determine who can be the winners this time, the next Google or Amazon.



Budget signals India's strategic bet on CCUS for deep decarbonisation



MANOJ KUMAR BANSAL

PRADEEP SINGHVI

economy. These sectors cannot be bypassed in the transition; they must be transformed. What makes this allocation particularly significant is both its scale and its intent. The funding is directed towards scaling CCUS projects and raising technology readiness levels, enabling wider deployment across end-use applications.

By targeting carbon-intensive sectors where direct electrification or renewable substitution remains technically difficult or commercially unviable, the Budget acknowledges the real constraints of industrial decarbonisation rather than offering idealised solutions.

The sequencing of support reinforces this pragmatism. The Budget introduces India's first dedicated CCUS budget line with an initial ₹500 crore allocation under the Ministry of Power, building on the CCUS Roadmap released in December 2025.

That roadmap outlines a phased approach, beginning with research and development, moving through pilot and demonstration projects, and ultimately progressing towards commercial deployment. The anticipated expenditure of approximately ₹4,500 crore over the next two years reflects a deliberate focus on de-risking early projects rather than forcing premature scale-up.

This design choice matters. Multi-year funding is less about immediate emissions reductions and more about long-term positioning. Sustained capital support helps absorb early-stage risk, enables demonstration facilities, and provides clarity for long-lead infrastructure planning. In doing so, it creates the



conditions for CCUS to evolve from pilot initiatives into a viable industrial solution, particularly as India develops its domestic carbon market.

The strategic context is equally important. Global carbon standards are tightening, and mechanisms such as the European Union's carbon border adjustments are turning emissions performance into a determinant of trade competitiveness. For India's export-oriented industrial sectors, CCUS is rapidly becoming a strategic

necessity rather than a discretionary climate option. Without it, Indian manufacturers risk facing carbon penalties even as they fuel domestic growth and employment.

The Economic Survey 2025-26 provides the analytical backbone for this shift. It highlights that India finances 83 per cent of its mitigation and 98 per cent of its adaptation domestically, underscoring the limits of international climate finance. This reality has pushed India towards solutions that align emis-

sions reduction with economic resilience. CCUS fits squarely within this framework, complementing energy efficiency and clean power expansion by addressing residual emissions that cannot be eliminated through electrification alone.

From a financial perspective, the CCUS allocation signals a maturing climate investment strategy. Sovereign green bonds and the anticipated push for municipal green bonds enhance capital availability, but emerging tech-

nologies like CCUS require more than balance-sheet funding. They need risk-sharing mechanisms, long-tenor capital, and predictable policy signals.

Equally critical is infrastructure planning. CCUS cannot succeed through isolated projects. Cluster-based hubs, shared transport networks, and common storage sites are essential to achieve cost efficiencies. India's geological potential is significant, but storage governance, liability frameworks, and monitoring protocols must evolve in parallel.

Taken together, the Budget's CCUS commitment reflects a pragmatic approach to climate action. By earmarking sustained support, the Government is signalling that CCUS is expected to become a structural pillar of India's industrial decarbonisation pathway rather than a niche or transitional tool. Following the renewable energy push that enabled India to meet its climate commitments ahead of schedule, CCUS now emerges as the next logical focus for hard-to-abate sectors.

Union Budget 2026-27 does not frame CCUS as a silver bullet. It positions it as a system enabler. Alongside support for energy efficiency, grid resilience, clean energy, and strategic minerals, it reflects a broader truth: India's climate transition will succeed not by dismantling its industrial base, but by modernising it with realism, discipline, and long-term intent.

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Union Budget 2026-27 marks a quiet but consequential inflection point in India's climate and industrial policy. While much of the global discourse continues to revolve around renewable capacity additions and long-term net zero pledges, this Budget signals something more structural.

It recognises that India's pathway to climate leadership will be determined not only by clean energy expansion, but by its ability to decarbonise hard-to-abate industries without eroding economic competitiveness. At the centre of this recalibration sits Carbon Capture, Utilisation and Storage (CCUS).

The commitment of ₹20,000 crore over five years positions CCUS not as an experimental add-on, but as a central instrument of India's deep decarbonisation strategy. As India pursues rapid economic growth alongside its net zero objectives, this allocation marks a clear shift away from incremental efficiency gains towards structural emissions reduction in sectors where alternatives remain limited. Steel, cement, power generation, refining, fertilisers, and chemicals account for a substantial share of industrial emissions and form the backbone of India's manufacturing

US wants to create critical minerals trading bloc

ASSOCIATED PRESS
■ Washington

The Trump administration announced that it wants to create a critical minerals trading bloc with its allies and partners, using tariffs to maintain minimum prices and defend against China's stranglehold on the key elements needed for everything from fighter jets to smartphones.

Vice President JD Vance said the US-China trade war over the past year exposed how dependent most countries are on the critical minerals that Beijing largely dominates, so collective action is needed now to give the West self-reliance.

"We want members to form a trading bloc among allies and partners, one that guarantees American access to American industrial might while also expanding production across the entire zone," Vance said at the opening of a meeting that Secretary of State Marco Rubio hosted with officials from several dozen European, Asian and African nations.

The Republican administration is making bold moves to shore up supplies of critical minerals needed for electric vehicles, missiles and other



high-tech products after China choked off their flow in response to President Donald Trump's sweeping tariffs last year.

While the two global powers reached a truce to pull back on the high import taxes and stepped-up rare earth restrictions, China's limits remain tighter than they were before Trump took office.

The critical minerals meeting comes at a time of significant tensions between Washington and major allies over President Donald Trump's territorial ambitions, including Greenland, and his moves to exert control over Venezuela and other nations. His bellicose and insulting rhetoric directed at US

partners has led to frustration and anger. The conference, however, is an indication that the United States is seeking to build relationships when it comes to issues it deems key national security priorities.

While major allies like France and the United Kingdom attended the meeting in Washington, Greenland and Denmark, the NATO ally with oversight of the mineral-rich Arctic island, did not.

A new approach to countering China on critical minerals:

Vance said some countries have signed on to the trading bloc, which is designed to ensure stable prices and will provide members access to financing and the critical

minerals. Administration officials said the plan will help the West move beyond complaining about the problem of access to critical minerals to actually solving it.

"Everyone here has a role to play, and that's why we're so grateful for you coming and being a part of this gathering that I hope will lead to not just more gatherings, but action," Rubio said.

Vance said that for too long, China has used the tactic of unloading materials at cheap prices to undermine potential competitors, then ratcheting up prices later after keeping new mines from being built in other countries.

Prices within the preferential trade zone will remain consistent over time, the vice president said.

"Our goal within that zone is to create diverse centres of production, stable investment conditions and supply chains that are immune to the kind of external disruptions that we've already talked about," he said.

To make the new trading group work, it will be important to have ways to keep countries from buying cheap Chinese materials on the side and to encourage compa-

nies from getting the critical minerals they need from China, said Ian Lange, an economics professor who focuses on rare earths at the Colorado School of Mines.

"Let's just say it's standard economics or standard behaviour. If I can cheat and get away with it, I will," he said.

At least for defence contractors, Lange said the Pentagon can enforce where those companies get their critical minerals, but it may be harder with electric vehicle makers and other manufacturers.

US turns to a strategic stockpile and investments: Trump this week also announced Project Vault, a plan for a strategic US stockpile of rare earth elements to be funded with a \$10 billion loan from the US Export-Import Bank and nearly \$1.67 billion in private capital.

In addition, the Government recently made its fourth direct investment in an American critical minerals producer, extending \$1.6 billion to USA Rare Earth in exchange for stock and a repayment deal.

The Pentagon has shelled out nearly \$5 billion over the past year to spur mining.

Amit Shah launches Bharat Taxi, first cooperative-led ride-hailing platform

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi



Union Cooperation Minister Amit Shah gives an address during the launch of 'Bharat Taxi' in New Delhi on Thursday

Shah on Thursday launched Bharat Taxi, the country's first co-operative-run ride-hailing platform, which will start services in Delhi-NCR and Gujarat initially and pan-India in the next three years.

Bharat Taxi platform, which has been established by India's top eight co-operative organisations including dairy major Amul, will enhance drivers' income significantly, besides giving them ownership, the minister highlighted.

Addressing an event after launching the service, Shah said the rival ride-hailing platforms have reduced commission and are offering many other incentives, including free rides to customers, seeing the success of Bharat Taxi during the pilot operation.

However, Shah emphasised that Bharat Taxi is giving ownership to drivers, which no other ride-hailing platform can offer.

"From today, Bharat Taxi

has been commercially launched in Delhi-NCR and Gujarat. Within three years, the service will be expanded to all states. Nobody should have any doubt about this," he said.

"You will be the driver, and you will be the owner of Bharat Taxi platform," Shah told the gathering.

Around 800,000 drivers attended the event held at Vigyan Bhawan in the

national capital. He said the profit will be shared with drivers associated with Bharat Taxi.

Shah said the platform would keep ₹20 out of every ₹100 earned, and ₹80 would go to the drivers' bank accounts.

Even the ownership of ₹20 would be with the drivers. Customers can hail cars, three-wheelers and two-wheelers through the platform.

Centre, States working on GST e-way bill reform, says Official

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
■ New Delhi

The Centre is engaging with States on revamping the e-way bill framework, which will come up in the next meeting of the GST Council, a source said.

The Economic Survey last week said that the next wave of GST reforms could focus on reimagining the e-way bill system as a facilitator of smooth logistics

and the source said. The GST Council, chaired by union Finance Minister and comprising state ministers, last met on September 3, 2025, in which it decided to cut tax rates on 375 items and rationalise slabs.

The e-way bill proposal will be placed before the GST Council once the consultations are over, the source added.

The Survey suggested wider use of e-seals and

India, Gulf Cooperation Council ink terms of reference to formally launch FTA

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
■ New Delhi

India and the six-nation bloc of Middle Eastern nations, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), inked terms of reference on Thursday for formally launching negotiations for a Free Trade Agreement (FTA).

The Terms of Reference (ToR) outline the scope and modalities of a proposed trade pact. Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal presided over the signing ceremony of the ToRs with GCC.

GCC is a union of six countries in the Gulf region — Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman and Bahrain.

Goyal said that the agreement will help boost bilateral trade and investments between the two.

"The two trading partners have

been trading amongst each other for over 5,000 years," he told reporters. He added that about 10 million Indians are living and working in the GCC region.

"It is most appropriate that we now enter into a much stronger and robust trading arrangement which will enable a greater free flow of goods, services, bring predictability and stability to policy, help encourage a greater degree of investments," Goyal said.

He said the agreement will also encourage the food and energy security of the GCC nations, as well as India. While India is a major food grain producer in the world, GCC nations are oil and gas exporters.

"We already have a very robust, nearly \$179 billion bilateral trade. I believe a number of products and services required by the GCC coun-



tries can be provided by our young, very talented and skilled Indians, as the GCC countries can help us with further diversification and growth of our energy sources," he said.

About 10 million Indians at

present are living and working in the GCC region, helping power the economies of the group.

Indian exports will get a boost from the proposed pact from the elimination of duties and non-tariff barriers. "We will also get a foothold to grow Indian infrastructure and the infrastructure in the GCC, together with the high-quality companies that are working in the space of infrastructure. Our petrochemical industry will hugely benefit with this partnership," Goyal said.

Further, he added that India's information and communication technology firms will get opportunities in the ever-growing GCC market. India has already implemented a free trade pact with the UAE in May 2022. India and Oman also signed a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) in Muscat on December 18,

2025. Goyal said that the Government has finalised as many as nine trade pacts in the last few years, covering 38 developed nations.

GCC's chief negotiator, Raja Al Marzouqi, said the pact is important at a time of global uncertainties.

"So it's a message, it's a signal for the whole globe, and it's important for us at this time to try to be more cooperative to avoid any risk that our global economy is facing as a result of uncertainty," he said.

Additional Secretary in the department of commerce Ajay Bhadoo is India's chief negotiator for the pact. Launch of FTA talks with the GCC would be a kind of resumption of the negotiations, as the earlier two rounds of negotiations were held in 2006 and 2008 between the two regions.



rather than only as a tool for enforcement and control.

The e-way bill reforms would amount to a significant deregulation of the logistics ecosystem, reducing costs and delays for trade while maintaining effective, non-intrusive oversight for tax administration.

"We are working with the states on e-way bill reform and will bring it before the GST Council,"

electronic locking systems, integrated with e-way bills and vehicle-tracking technologies, to ensure secure, end-to-end tracking of consignments without routine stoppages on the road.

State governments, which play a key role in field-level enforcement, would have to be a key partner in the transition to a risk-based, system-generated alerts and limiting discretionary checks.

tanked 666.07 points, or 0.79 per cent, to 83,151.62.

A total of 2,447 stocks declined while 1,737 advanced and 158 remained unchanged on the BSE.

The 50-share NSE Nifty declined 133.20 points, or 0.52 per cent, to end at 25,642.80.

"Indian equities saw consolidation, as weakness was followed by a sharp rally in recent sessions, driven by optimism around the US-India trade deal, suggesting profit booking was at play.

"Global cues added further pressure, with concerns over a broad-based tech sell-off in international markets and heightened US-Iran tensions

Intra-day on February 5, 2026
NSE NIFTY
Open: 25,755.90
High: 25,757.65
Low: 25,579.50
Close: 25,642.80
Previous close: 25,776.00
-133.20 (-0.52%)

BSE SENSEX
Intra-day on February 5, 2026
Open: 83,817.69
High: 83,784.17
Low: 83,151.62
Close: 83,313.93
Previous close: 83,757.54
-503.76 (-0.60%)

meeting, Nair added. The decision of the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) will be announced by RBI Governor Sanjay Malhotra on Friday. From the Sensex constituents, Eternel, Bharti Airtel, Bharat Electronics, ITC, Infosys, Reliance Industries, ICICI Bank and Asian Paints were among the major laggards. In contrast, Trent, Tata Steel, State Bank of India and Bajaj Finance were the gainers.

Among sectoral indices, capital goods dropped 1.07 per cent, metal (1.05 per cent), consumer durables (0.88 per cent), BSE Focused IT (0.78 per cent), IT (0.76 per cent) and telecommunication (0.72 per cent). BSE PSU Bank and oil & gas were the gainers.

In Asian markets, South Korea's Kospi ended nearly 4 per cent lower. Japan's Nikkei 225 index and Shanghai's SSE Composite index also ended in the negative territory, while Hong Kong's Hang Seng index settled higher.

European markets were trading lower.

US markets ended mostly lower on Wednesday. The Nasdaq Composite index



FROM THE WORLD

USA

Hospital fire in Pennsylvania

Emergency crews battled a blaze and evacuated patients from a hospital on Wednesday night in Pennsylvania as fire engulfed part of the facility, according to officials. All patients, staff and visitors were safely evacuated from Lehigh Valley Hospital in Dickson City, according to a hospital spokesperson. Emergency responders continued to work at the scene early Thursday. Governor Josh said that the police, emergency management agency and health department had responded to the fire. "Thank you to every first responder running toward danger to help their fellow," he said. "Lori and I are praying for the staff, patients, their families." In video and photos posted online, flames can be seen shooting out from the top of what appears to be the hospital's Orthopedic Institute.

USA

Niraj suspends Ohio campaign

Former Ohio State Senator Niraj Antani, a prominent Indian American Republican leader, has suspended his campaign for Ohio State Treasurer citing the growing dominance of self-funded candidates in US politics and said he will not seek any public office in the 2026 election. Antani said one of his opponents had already injected USD 1.5 million of personal funds into the race and was expected to spend significantly more. Referring to his 2024 US congressional race, Antani said he had raised more funds than all his opponents combined but lost to a millionaire self-funded candidate, making it difficult to justify seeking further contributions from supporters' circumstances. "I cannot ask my supporters to fund a campaign that would face the reality," Antani said.

US, Russia agree to re-establish military-to-military dialogue

ASSOCIATED PRESS

Kyiv

The US and Russia agreed on Thursday to reestablish high level military-to-military dialogue following a meeting between senior Russian and American military officials in Abu Dhabi, the United States European Command said in a statement.

The agreement was reached following meetings between Gen. Alexus Grynkevich, the Commander of US European Command -- who is also NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe -- and senior Russian and Ukrainian military officials, the statement said.

The channel "will provide a consistent military-to-military contact as the parties continue to work towards a lasting peace," the statement said. High level military communication was suspended in 2021, just before Russia's full scale invasion of Ukraine.

Grynkevich was in the



Workers cleaning up damage at Darnitsia Thermal Power Plant AP

capital of the United Arab Emirates where talks between American, Russian and Ukrainian officials on ending the war in Ukraine entered a second day and as Moscow escalated its attacks on Ukraine's power grid.

Russia continues to target Ukraine's electricity network, aiming to deny civilians power and weaken their

appetite for the fight, while fighting continues along the roughly 1,000-kilometre (600-mile) front line snaking along eastern and southern parts of Ukraine.

Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy revealed that 55,000 Ukrainian troops have died since Russia's invasion almost four years ago. "And there is

a large number of people whom Ukraine considers missing," he added in an interview broadcast by French TV channel France 2 late Wednesday.

The last time Zelenskyy gave a figure for battlefield deaths, in early 2025, he said 46,000 Ukrainian troops had been killed. The delegations from Moscow and Kyiv were joined Thursday in the capital of the United Arab Emirates by US special envoy Steve Witkoff and US President Donald Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, according to Rustem Umerov, Ukraine's National Security and Defence Council chief, who was present at the meeting.

They were also at last month's talks in the same place as the Trump administration tries to steer the two countries toward a settlement. At the time, Zelenskyy described the issue of who would control the Donbas industrial heartland of eastern Ukraine as key.

216 terrorists killed in Balochistan: Pakistan Army

SAJJAD HUSSAIN

Islamabad



At least 216 terrorists, 36 civilians and 22 personnel were killed in the days-long operation launched in response to terror attacks at multiple places in the restive Balochistan province, the Pakistan Army said on Thursday. The Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), the Pakistan military's media wing, announced in a statement that it has "successfully concluded" the operation, code named Radd-ul-Fitna-1, that was launched on January 26.

The Pakistan Army said that the operations were initiated in Panjgur and on the outskirts of Harnai district after credible and verified intelligence confirmed the presence of terrorists.

"During this phase, security forces undertook operations against identified terrorist hideouts, resulting in the elimination of 41 terrorists," it said. It said subsequently, aggressive and steadfast responses by the security forces effectively thwarted

the attacks. "As a result of these well-coordinated engagements and subsequent clearance operations, 216 terrorists have been sent to hell, significantly degrading the leadership, command-and-control structures and operational capabilities of terrorist networks," the ISPR said.

The army said 36 civilians, including women and children, and 22 personnel of the security forces and law enforcement agencies were killed in the operations. The statement alleged that "Indian-sponsored terrorist elements were seeking to

disrupt peace and development" in the region. India has earlier categorically rejected as baseless Pakistan's allegations of an Indian hand in attempts to disturb peace in Balochistan, and said it is Islamabad's usual tactic to deflect attention from its "internal failings".

Meanwhile, railway services have been restored in Balochistan province after remaining suspended for the last five days, a Pakistan Railways official said on Thursday.

Pakistan Railways spokesperson Muhammad Kashif said that after the out-

break of terror attacks in different parts of the province since Saturday, all railway traffic from Quetta had been suspended because of security reasons.

He said that during the attacks, several railway tracks were damaged which also led to the suspension of railway services. On Tuesday, Pakistan's National Assembly adopted a resolution urging the Government to adopt an "aggressive" national response to tackle the threat of external sponsors of militancy and their internal facilitators.

Balochistan, bordering Iran and Afghanistan, is

Indian teacher wins \$1 million Global Teacher Prize in Dubai

ASSOCIATED PRESS

Dubai



Indian teacher Rouble Nagi receiving the Global Teacher Prize trophy from Dubai Crown Prince Sheikh Hamdan at a ceremony in Dubai AP

An Indian teacher and activist known for creating hundreds of learning centres and painting educational murals across the walls of slums won the \$1 million Global Teacher Prize on Thursday.

Rouble Nagi accepted the award at the World Governments Summit in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates, an annual event that draws leaders from across the globe.

Her Rouble Nagi Art Foundation has established more than 800 learning centres across India.

They aim to have children who never attended school begin to have structured learning. They also teach children already in school.

Nagi also paints murals that teach literacy, science, math and history, among other topics.

The prize is awarded by the Varkey Foundation, whose founder, Sunny Varkey, estab-

lished the for-profit GEMS Education company that runs dozens of schools in Egypt, Qatar and the UAE.

Nagi plans to use the \$1 million to build an institute that offers free vocational training.

They have never attended school begin to have structured learning. They also teach children already in school.

Nagi also paints murals that teach literacy, science, math and history, among other topics.

The prize is awarded by the Varkey Foundation, whose founder, Sunny Varkey, estab-

non-violence and a Canadian educator who taught a remote Arctic village of Inuit students. Last year's winner was Saudi educator Mansour al-Mansour, who was known for his work with the poor in the kingdom. GEMS Education, or Global Education Management Systems, is one of the world's largest private school operators and is believed to be worth billions. Its success has followed that of Dubai, where only private schools offer classes for the children of the foreigners who power its economy.

Taiwan-US ties are rock solid, says President Lai

ASSOCIATED PRESS

Moscow



Taiwan's ties with the United States are "rock solid," the island's president said on Thursday, hours after President Donald Trump and Chinese leader Xi Jinping spoke on the phone about topics that included the self-ruled island's future.

"The Taiwan-US relationship is rock solid, and all cooperation projects will continue uninterrupted," Taiwan President Lai Ching-te told reporters during a visit to textile merchants in western Taiwan. The comments came after Xi, in his first call with Trump since November, warned the US president to be "cautious" about supplying arms to the self-ruled island, according to a readout of their call provided by China's Foreign Ministry.

Taiwan is a self-ruled democracy that China claims as its own territory, to be annexed by force if necessary. Beijing prohibits all countries it has diplomatic relations with - including the US - from having formal ties with Taipei. Still, while the US doesn't officially recognize Taiwan as a country, it is the island's strongest informal backer and arms supplier.

In December, the US State Department announced its largest-ever arms sales package to Taiwan, valued at more than \$11.1 billion and including missiles, artillery systems and drones. The package is yet to be approved by Congress.

Public Notice
This is to inform the general public that Mr. Ram Charan Lal Educational Trust is the owner of land situated in Khasra No. 20, area measuring 4.4480 Hectares Out of Khasra No. 20 situated at Manikpur Bissu, Pargana and district Etawah, U.P. through gift deed dated 22-11-1911 issued by Mr. Sankal Kumar in favour of Mr. Ram Charan Lal Educational Trust through his trustees (1) Mr. Shiv Kishor Dubey, (2) Mr. Kalash Chand Yadav and (3) Mr. Sunil Kumar.

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In real time, do the Epstein files question Western morality?


 SURJIT SINGH
FLORA

were held up as neutral. Elections were framed as the clean source of power. Equality was treated as an ideal that could be measured and exported.

This self-image didn't stay at home. It shaped global institutions, aid programs, and diplomacy. It also shaped punishment. When a non-Western Government was accused of corruption, political violence, or abuse, Western leaders often spoke as prosecutors, not peers. Sanctions were sold as moral medicine. Loans came with terms about governance. Military action was sometimes described as rescue. The irony sits in plain sight now. A culture that claims to protect children struggled to confront abuse when it ran through wealthy circles. A culture that praises equal justice tolerated systems where money bought silence. The West did not just fail at private virtue. It failed at public enforcement, which is where moral claims either stand or fall.

Exporting Values Through Power Plays

Western "values" were often packaged with pressure. A country might be told it must change its laws to get aid, or it might face trade limits until leaders complied. In daily life, this looked less like moral teaching and more like a landlord setting house rules.

Military action followed a similar pattern. Interventions were frequently described as defending human rights, even when civilian harm and broken states followed. The message to outsiders was consistent: Western states would judge, punish, and correct. The

message inside Western elite networks looked different, rules applied when convenient.

What the Epstein Files Really Uncover

The Epstein files are not one neat binder. They include court filings, depositions, contact records, flight logs, investigative materials, and claims from victims. Some documents are verified and unsealed; others circulate as summaries, leaks, or disputed compilations. That mix is part of the problem; it creates noise that can hide the clear-cut facts.

Still, enough is known to outline the core. Epstein was convicted in 2008 in Florida on charges related to soliciting a minor for prostitution and later faced federal charges in 2019 for sex trafficking of minors. He died in custody that same year. Victims have alleged years of abuse, recruitment, and trafficking, often facilitated by money, staff, and access to high-status spaces.

The public shock is not only the abuse. It is the social map around it. The case draws attention because Epstein cultivated ties with the rich and famous, then used that status as cover.

When records show powerful names, the question becomes simple: who knew, who benefited, and who looked away? Trump's name has appeared in widely reported contexts around Epstein, including social references and flight logs from the era. Those mentions do not prove criminal conduct. They do, however, underline the larger point, elite proximity is common, and account-

ability often arrives late, if it arrives at all.

Shocking Details from the New Documents

When new batches of documents become public, the same patterns surface again and again: Victim accounts that describe grooming, recruitment, and intimidation, often with similar methods repeated over time. Logs and contacts that suggest a wide web of relationships, with staff and intermediaries smoothing access.

Legal disputes and sealed records that show how long key details stayed out of public view. Media and image references that raise hard questions about what was recorded, stored, and used as pressure. The case reads like a manual for how power protects itself. Money hires lawyers, shapes narratives, and exhausts victims. Reputation works like armor until it suddenly doesn't.

Trump's Connections and the Bigger Picture

Trump's links to Epstein sit in the category of social contact that is common among wealthy circles in New York and Palm Beach. Photos, party talk, and reported comments have fueled years of argument. Flight logs have also been discussed in public reporting, adding to the sense that this was not a distant acquaintance.

At the same time, proximity is not the same as guilt. That distinction matters, and it should be applied to every name connected to the case.

The deeper issue is what the

connections reveal about class and consequence. When elite networks overlap, people share parties, introductions, and favors. That social web can also become a shield, even when rumors spread.

Trump remains a focal point because he is both a public figure and a symbol of a larger system. The Epstein saga did not depend on one politician. It depended on a culture where status could slow scrutiny and where victims had to fight to be believed.

Why This Ends the West's Moral Facade

The West's moral authority depends on one promise: the rules apply to everyone. The Epstein files, and the long chain of delays and settlements around the broader scandal, make that promise sound hollow. When abuse can persist near centers of wealth, and when consequences arrive only after years of warnings, lectures to the rest of the world ring false.

This is not just about anger. It is about influence. Western Governments have relied on moral language to justify sanctions, alliances, and interventions. If outsiders see that the West cannot police its own elites, they will treat Western "standards" as political tools, not principles.

The damage also lands at home. Trust

in courts, police, and media already runs low in many places. High-profile failures deepen the belief that there are two systems, one for ordinary people, and one for those with money and access. The lesson is brutal but clear: a society that markets itself as a guardian must prove it through consistent enforcement, not speeches.

Conclusion

Civilisations survive on stories, but stories must match behavior. The Epstein files have become a stress test for Western claims about rights, law, and protection of children. They show how status can mute alarms, how legal systems can move slowly when the accused are rich, and how victims can be pushed to the margins for years.

Trump's presence in the wider Epstein narrative is part of why the story hits so hard. It reminds readers that the social world of power is small, and that famous names often sit closer to scandals than the public expects.

The real demand now is accountability that doesn't stop at the edges of wealth or politics. If the West wants to speak as a moral tutor, it has to start by enforcing its own rules, in its own house, on its own elites.

Surjit Singh Flora is a freelance writer and journalist who lives in Brampton, Canada

After 1945, the West sold a clear story about itself. It was the teacher of human rights, the referee of the rule of law, and the protector of the weak. That story shaped speeches, schoolbooks, foreign policy, and even wars. It also set a test in the West often demanded others pass.

The Epstein files challenge that story at its roots. Public reporting and court-linked releases have described a flood of material tied to Jeffrey Epstein, sometimes framed as millions of pages alongside extensive video and image archives. The exact scope varies by source and by what is legally unsealed, but the theme doesn't change: a wealthy network, young victims, and a culture of impunity.

Trump appears early in this picture because he moved in some of the same social circles as Epstein. That proximity, and what records do and don't show, has become part of a larger question: if the West claims moral authority, why did so many powerful people seem protected for so long?

The West's Post-War Claim to Moral Superiority

In the decades after World War II, Western Governments built a public identity around rules and rights. Courts

Starmer apologises for Mandelson appointment

ASSOCIATED PRESS

■ London



British Prime Minister Keir Starmer

close relationship with Epstein.

"I was lied to," Starmer said. "It had been publicly known for some time that Mandelson knew Epstein, but none of us knew the depth and the darkness of that relationship," he

said. British police are investigating Mandelson over potential misconduct in public office. He is not accused of any sexual offences. Documents published last week by the US Department of Justice contain new revelations, including papers suggesting Mandelson shared sensitive Government information with Epstein after

the 2008 global financial crisis. There are also scores of chatty, jokey messages pointing to a much closer relationship than Mandelson had previously disclosed.

The newly released files also suggest that in 2003 to 2004, Epstein sent three payments totalling \$75,000 to accounts linked to Mandelson or his partner Reinaldo Avila da Silva, now his husband.

Mandelson, 72, has been a major, and contentious, figure in the Labour Party since the 1990s. He twice had to resign from senior posts in previous

administrations because of scandals over money or ethics.

He was chosen as ambassador because his trade expertise, network of contacts and mastery of the political "dark arts" were considered assets in dealing with President Donald Trump's administration. Critics say Mandelson's ties with Epstein made his appointment too risky and Starmer was, at best, naive.

"I think the prime minister has shown that his judgement is questionable," Labour lawmaker Paula Barker said. "I think he has questions to answer. I think he has a very long way to go to rebuild trust and confidence with the public, and trust and confidence within our party. Meanwhile The former Prince Andrew has moved out of his longtime home on crown-owned land near Windsor Castle earlier than expected after the latest release of documents from the US investigation of Jeffrey Epstein revived questions about his friendship with the convicted sex offender.

The 65-year-old brother of King Charles III, now known as Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor, left the Royal Lodge in Windsor

on Monday and is now living on the king's Sandringham estate in eastern England, Britain's Press Association reported. British media reported that Mountbatten-Windsor will live temporarily at Wood Farm Cottage while his permanent home on the estate undergoes repairs.

Mountbatten-Windsor's move to Sandringham was announced in October when Charles stripped him of his royal titles amid continuing revelations about his links to Epstein. But the former prince was expected to remain at Royal Lodge, where he has lived for more than 20 years, until the spring. The expedited departure came as Thames Valley Police announced they were investigating allegations that Epstein flew a second woman to Britain to have sex with Mountbatten-Windsor.

A lawyer for the alleged victim told the BBC that the encounter took place in 2010 at Royal Lodge. The allegations are separate from those made by Virginia Giuffre, who claimed she had been trafficked to Britain to have sex with Andrew in 2001, when she was just 17.

Epstein files rife with uncensored nudes and victims names despite redaction efforts

PHILIP MARCELO

■ New York



redactions that have revealed sensitive private information.

A photo of one girl who was underage when she was hired to give sexualised massages to Epstein in Florida appeared in a chart of his alleged victims. Police reports with the names of several of his victims, including some who have never stepped forward to identify themselves publicly, were released with no redactions at all. Despite the Justice Department's efforts to fix the oversights, a photo of one topless woman remained on the site, with her face in full view, on Wednesday evening.

But that lawyer, Brittany Henderson, said they were still weighing "all potential avenues of recourse" to address the "permanent and irreparable" harm caused to some women.

Some accusers and their lawyers called this week for the Justice Department to take down the site and appoint an independent monitor to prevent further errors. A judge scheduled a hearing for Wednesday in New York on the matter, then cancelled it after one of the lawyers for victims cited progress in resolving the issues.

But that lawyer, Brittany Henderson, said they were still weighing "all potential avenues of recourse" to address the "permanent and irreparable" harm caused to some women.

When contacted by The Associated Press for a response, an official from Yunus' press team declined to comment. The administration headed by Yunus has consistently denied claims that it has failed to ensure adequate protection for minority communities and insisted that most incidents aren't driven by religious hostility. Previous elections in Bangladesh have also seen increases in violence, with religious minorities often bearing the brunt.

Volker Turk laid out his office's needs after the United States and some other traditional top donors in the West cut back their outlays for humanitarian aid and many UN-related organisations in 2025, warning of damage to its monitoring of rights worldwide. "These cuts and reductions untie perpetrators' hands everywhere, leaving them to do whatever they please," he told diplomats at his office's headquarters overlooking Lake Geneva. "With crises mounting, we cannot afford a human rights system in crisis."

"I am thankful to our 113 funding partners - including Governments, private, and multilateral donors - for their vital contributions," Turk said. "But we are currently in survival mode, delivering under strain."

UN human rights chief warns of impunity for perpetrators



ASSOCIATED PRESS

■ Geneva

The UN human rights chief said on Thursday that his office is in "survival mode" as he presented an appeal for \$400 million to meet its estimated needs this year, after funding cuts last year hurt its work in 17 countries, including Colombia, Myanmar and Chad.

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Bangladesh's minority in fear as elections near

JULHAS ALAM, AL EMRUN
GARJON AND SHEIKH SAALIQ

■ Dhaka



about a dozen people were arrested. But human rights groups and Hindu leaders say the killing wasn't an isolated act, but part of a wider surge in attacks on the minority community, fuelled by rising polarisation, the reemergence of Islamists and what they describe as a growing culture of impunity. Among Hindus, fear has grown more pervasive as the Muslim-majority nation moves toward a national election on February 12. "No one feels safe

anymore," said Ranjan Karmaker, a Dhaka-based Hindu human rights activist. "Everyone is terrified."

Surge in attacks
Hindus make up a small minority in Bangladesh, about 13.1 million people, or roughly 8 per cent of the country's population of 170 million, while Muslims make up 91 per cent.

The Bangladeshi Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council, an umbrella group representing minority communities, says it documented more than 2,000 incidents of communal violence since the ouster of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in a mass uprising in August 2024. The group recorded at least 61 killings, 28 instances of violence and

women - among them rape and gang rape - and 95 attacks on places of worship involving vandalism, looting and arson. It has also accused the Yunus-led administration of routinely dismissing or downplaying reports of such violence.

When contacted by The Associated Press for a response, an official from Yunus' press team declined to comment. The administration headed by Yunus has consistently denied claims that it has failed to ensure adequate protection for minority communities and insisted that most incidents aren't driven by religious hostility. Previous elections in Bangladesh have also seen increases in violence, with religious minorities often bearing the brunt.

(PTI)

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PROSPECT

Now relish non-veg meal on train Howrah-Kamakhya Vande Bharat Express

The Indian Railway Catering and Tourism Corporation Ltd. (IRCTC), a Navratna-listed company under the Ministry of Railways, Government of India, serves as the professional hospitality and travel arm of Indian Railways. It is dedicated to upgrading catering services and promoting rail-bound domestic and inbound tourism across the country. The newly introduced Howrah-Kamakhya Junction and Kamakhya Junction-Howrah Sleeper Vande Bharat Express connect two of India's most revered and culturally significant destinations. This train is redefining rail travel through a strong emphasis on passenger comfort and superior onboard services. Drawing inspiration from the rich culinary traditions of Northeast India and Bengal, the onboard menu on this train features authentic regional flavors and the passengers are being served traditional Assamese preparations alongside popular Bengali dishes. Building on these delights, travelers can now also enjoy chicken-based non-vegetarian meals. This addition has been warmly received by passengers in the region, offering a true culinary delight to their journey.

This enhanced meal experience elevates passenger satisfaction while promoting region-specific culinary heritage in an inclusive way. By offering both vegetarian and non-vegetarian regional delicacies, the Vande Bharat Sleeper Express is setting a new benchmark in onboard hospitality.

SSB's 'Bharat Darshan' for J&K youths concludes in Delhi



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE

■ New Delhi

The 'Bharat Darshan' educational tour, organised by the Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB) for the youth of Jammu and Kashmir, concluded successfully on Thursday. The nine-day programme, held under the Civic Action Plan of the Ministry of Home Affairs, aimed to expose youth from remote border areas to India's diverse culture, history, and modern development.

The tour group, comprising 30 youngsters from districts including Kupwara, Rajouri, Kulgam, Pulwama, Bandipora, Budgam, Ganderbal, Baramulla, and Srinagar, began their journey on January 28. The initiative was designed to integrate these youths into the national mainstream while deepening the spirit of patriotism and national unity.

The itinerary covered major historical and cultural hubs across Rajasthan and the national Capital. During their stay in Jaipur on January 29 and 30, the participants visited iconic landmarks such as Jantar Mantar, City Palace, Hawa Mahal, and Nahargarh Fort, and also held a formal meeting with the Governor of Rajasthan, Haribhau Kisanrao Bagde. Following this, the group travelled to Udaipur on February 1 and 2, where they explored

the 'City of Lakes' through visits to the Lake Palace, Sajjangarh Fort, and the Bharatiya Lok Kala Mandal. The final leg of the journey took place in New Delhi on February 3 and 4, featuring visits to the National Science Centre, National Rail Museum, Red Fort, India Gate, and Kartavya Path, providing a comprehensive glimpse into India's glorious past and its journey toward becoming a modern power.

Marking the conclusion of the programme on February 5, the Director General of SSB, Sanjay Singh, interacted with the students at the Force Headquarters in New Delhi. The students shared their travel experiences, describing the tour as highly inspiring and beneficial. Addressing the group, the Director General referred to the youth as the builders of 'New India' and urged them to make discipline and hard work their guiding principles.

Addressing the gathering, the Vice Chancellor described Anugonj as more than a cultural fest, calling it "a living reflection of youth energy, creativity and social consciousness." Highlighting the Silver Jubilee milestone, he said that over the past 25 years, Anugonj has given a

platform to countless dreams and will continue to empower future generations to find their voice and confidence.

The Vice Chancellor also linked the spirit of Anugonj with the National Education Policy (NEP) and the growing recognition of the Orange Economy, emphasised in the Union Budget 2026, which

India-Kyrgyzstan joint forces exercise commences in Assam

TONY DAS
■ Guwahati

The 13th edition of the India-Kyrgyzstan Joint Special Forces Exercise KHANJAR, scheduled from 4 to 17 February 2026, has commenced in Assam. Exercise KHANJAR is an annual training event conducted alternatively between India and Kyrgyzstan.

The last edition of the exercise was conducted in Kyrgyzstan in March 2025. The Indian Army contingent comprising 20 personnel is represented by troops from the Parachute Regiment



(Special Forces) and the Kyrgyzstan contingent also comprising equal strength is represented by ILBRIS Special Forces Brigade.

Aim of the exercise is to exchange best practices and experiences in Counter

Terrorism and Special Forces Operations in urban and mountainous terrain. The exercise will also focus on developing advanced Special Forces skills of sniping, complex building intervention and mountain craft.

Exercise KHANJAR will provide an opportunity for both sides to fortify defence while addressing common concerns of international terrorism and extremism. The exercise reaffirms the commitment of India and Kyrgyzstan towards fostering peace, stability and security in the region.

Anugonj@25: GGSIPU campus comes alive as silver jubilee cultural fest begins

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ New Delhi

The campus of Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University came alive with colour, music and youthful energy as the University inaugurated the Silver Jubilee edition of Anugonj, its annual cultural festival, marking 25 years of celebrating student talent, creativity and expression.

The three-day festival was formally inaugurated in the presence of Mr. Shankar Sahney, renowned singer and performer, at the Dwarka Campus of the University.

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positions creative industries, digital content, performing arts and media as important drivers of youth employment and economic growth.

Mr. Shankar Sahney, whose performances blend Bollywood, Punjabi beats and contemporary pop, spoke about the power of music as both expression and discipline. He also sang a medley

of his popular punjabi songs.

Celebrating its Silver Jubilee, Anugonj has grown into one of Delhi's most anticipated university cultural festivals, bringing together students from over 100 affiliated institutions. Over the next three days, the campus will host a wide range of competitions and performances including music, dance, theatre, debate, poetry, storytelling, and contemporary creative arts.

Organised by the Directorate of Students' Welfare (DSW) under the leadership of Director, Prof Manpreet Kaur Kang, Associate Directors Dr. Gaurav Talan and Dr. Vinay Shah, with the support of faculty members and student volunteers, Anugonj continues to stand as a platform where talent meets opportunity and creativity finds direction.

PM SHRI schools in Assam participate in Rajasthan exchange

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE
■ Guwahati

Secondary School, Sambhar Lake, Jaipur, one of the best PM SHRI school of Rajasthan to observe innovative classroom practices and discuss best practices in school education. The team also visited the Sangamneri Print House, learning about traditional block printing techniques, and the Regional Science Centre, featuring interactive exhibits and theatres. The tour provided participants with a deeper appreciation of India's cultural diversity and shared heritage.

It is noteworthy that the group's arrival in Jaipur on January 28, 2026 followed by visits to Jaipur's iconic heritage sites, including Amer Fort, Nahargarh Fort, Jal Mahal, Birla Mandir, Hawa Mahal, and Jantar Mantar, enriching their understanding of Jaipur's cultural and scientific heritage.

Academic enrichment was a key component, with a visit to PM Darbar Government Senior



CDI: Redefining sustainable water solutions

GYANESHWAR DAYAL
■ New Delhi

If you ask for water in a upmarket hotel today, you are likely to be served a sleek glass bottle rather than a disposable PET one. The hospitality industry is slowly but steadily recognising how harmful single-use plastic bottles are. This awareness is now being shaped by sustainable solutions provided by CDI technology which provides healthier and more sustainable drinking.

The single-use plastic—particularly PET water bottles—remains one of the most visible and damaging environmental challenges. In fact, sometime back Prime Minister Narendra Modi had given a clarion call to do away with the single-use plastics. Which has resonated with the hospitality industry.

The impact of single-use plastic is damaging the environment like no other. From landfills to oceans, discarded plastic bottles have become a persistent threat to the environment, marine life, and human health.

Traditionally, hotels rely on PET bottles due to low unit costs and logistical convenience. Since the alternative—switching to glass bottles, was commercially unviable due to high upfront costs and hygiene concerns. But not anymore.

Capacitive Deionisation or CDI technology is addressing this challenge. It is up tick on scale, environment and commercial viability. With a few companies in India having been addressing this issue in recent years, the momentum to do away with PET bottles has gained momentum. Companies like PBP EcoAqua have been providing solutions to this by developing in-house, on-premise water treatment and glass bottling systems.

These systems treat raw water to meet BIS, ISO, and FSSAI standards. Since these glass bottles can be easily washed and reused, the per-use cost comes down less than plastic bottles.

These bottling systems ensure hygiene, safety, and regulatory compliance at every step.

Capacitive Deionisation

(CDI) is an emerging water-purification technology that removes dissolved salts and charged contaminants from water using electrochemical principles rather than heat or high pressure. In a CDI system, water is passed between two porous carbon electrodes.

When a low voltage is applied, positively charged ions (like sodium, calcium, and heavy metals) migrate toward the negatively charged electrode, while negatively charged ions (like chloride, nitrate, and fluoride) move toward the posi-

tively charged one. These ions are held on the electrode surfaces effectively extracting salts from the water without using membranes or chemical additives. Because CDI operates at low voltages and avoids high-pressure pumping, it consumes significantly less energy than reverse osmosis for low-to-moderate salinity water, making it a cost-effective and environmentally friendly solution for drinking water, industrial reuse, and groundwater desalination, especially in water-stressed regions.

The CDI is the future of water purification. It is increasingly being accepted by the hospitality sector in a big way and reflects the collective commitment of stakeholders who have chosen a more responsible path," said P. B. Prasad, Founder & CEO, PBP EcoAqua. "Our goal is clear—to accelerate the shift away from single-use plastics and build a cleaner, more sustainable future. And this is only the beginning."

To date, PBP EcoAqua has produced over 52 million reusable glass water bottles, enabling hotels and businesses to transition away from single-use plastic. This shift has led to the elimination of approximately 1.3 million kilograms of plastic waste that would otherwise have ended up in landfills or oceans. Beyond waste reduction, the company's sustainability initiatives have delivered tangible climate benefits. Through carbon offset contributions, the impact is equivalent to more than three lakhs trees planted in during its operations, while its energy-efficient ecosystem has helped avoid 7.8

million kilograms of CO2 emissions.

CDI technology, Rejects only 10-15 per cent of water, compared to up to 50 per cent wastage in RO and uses one-tenth the energy required by RO systems. It retains beneficial minerals while removing harmful contaminants intelligently. This innovation significantly improves both environmental performance and water quality. The CDI machines are being designed and manufactured in Chennai, making the solution entirely 'Made in India.'

Today, around 450-500 hotels in the country have adopted CDI technology with PBP EcoAqua operating in over 109 hotels across India. This is yet another case of 'think local, act Global' as India is now in a position to export this technology to other countries.

From eliminating millions of plastic bottles to setting new benchmarks in water treatment, India is slowly but surely adopting clean technology with the vision of the Prime Minister that is rapidly going global.

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Silent Screams

SHALINI MEHTA



Female Genital Mutilation or Female Khatna or Female Circumcision is a rarely discussed issue, yet one of the most serious threats to the rights and well-being of girls and women. It is carried out in silence, justified by custom, and endured long after the act itself. According to estimates by the World Health Organization and UNICEF, at least 230 million girls and women alive today have undergone FGM, most of them as children. Behind this figure are lives marked by lifelong pain and voices that were never heard.

The International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation, observed on 6 February, serves as a reminder that this practice persists and demands urgent action.

The physical consequences and long-term effects of FGM include excessive bleeding, infections, chronic pain, complications during childbirth, reproductive health issues, and psychological trauma, while reinforcing gender inequality over their own bodies and normalising control disguised as cultural or religious practice—a damage that extends beyond the body.

What makes FGM especially difficult to eradicate is that it often survives within communities through silence rather than force. Families may feel trapped between protecting their daughters and conforming to social expectations. Fear of exclusion, stigma, or diminished marriage prospects keeps the cycle alive.

Ending FGM requires action rooted in empathy and understanding, beyond awareness and alongside stronger legal protections. While many countries have passed laws banning the practice, FGM is often carried out in private, making enforcement difficult, as girls are unlikely to come forward.

In such environments, resistance requires courage and support through sustained sensitisation and community engagement, which are essential. Portugal has shown the impact of such efforts through campaigns like "Don't Cut the Future," a joint initiative by the Government and non-

Governmental organisations. Although over 50 countries have prohibited the practice, there is still a long way to go.

In India, in 2018, a three-judge bench led by the then Chief Justice Dipak Misra had famously remarked while hearing a PIL on a nationwide ban on FGM, that a woman's "bodily integrity" is central to her identity and questioned why the practice was performed "to please her husband". In response, the Ministry of Women and Child Development (WCD) stated that there was no official data on whether such practice existed, a remark that was dealt with through survivor-led stories

and backlash from all corners of the country. The case was then referred to a five-judge Constitution Bench.

The new bench noted that the matter involved a "seminal issue"

regarding whether the practice of khatna (female circumcision) is an essential religious practice protected under Articles 25 and 26 of the Constitution. Then again in November 2019, the matter was further referred to a larger seven-judge bench to examine FGM alongside other overlapping women's rights issues. However, COVID-19 stalled the progress, and the Supreme Court looked into other matters. Activists were left frustrated with the delay and with no specific laws criminalising FGM, even with the introduction of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sahita (BNS) in 2024.

The matter felt forgotten until, in October last year, then CJR BR Gavai remarked that FGM is a grave human rights violation and a persistent barrier to gender equality, a much-needed ray of light for the activists.

Later last year, a fresh PIL was filed arguing that FGM violates the POCSO Act and Fundamental Rights to Life under Article 21. In November 2025, a Supreme Court bench comprising Justices BV Nagarathna and R Mahadevan, while agreeing to examine a plea to ban the practice of FGM, issued notices to the Centre and the Ministry of Law. A response is yet awaited from the Government.

On this International Day of Zero Tolerance for Female Genital Mutilation, the message is clear: progress begins when we listen; change begins when we speak, and justice begins when we act. A society is judged by how it protects its most vulnerable and responds to even the faintest voices of injustice. FGM may not dominate public discourse, but it continues to exist, and this day is a moment to reflect on how far we have come and how far we still must go to end this inhuman practice.

The writer is a Director at the Sai Kiran Institute of Vedic Sciences

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(A step down wholly owned subsidiary of Punjab State Power Corporation Limited, PSPCL)

Tender Enquiry No. 121/GATP/CNI/2026/096 dated 05/02/2026
(Procurement of Supply of Consumables and other materials for PLC, DCS and LCP at 2X270 MW Guru Amardas Thermal Plant (GATP), Goindwal Sahib, Distt: Tarn Taran, Punjab as per details given in the tender specifications.
For detailed NIT & tender specifications, please refer to <https://eproc.punjab.gov.in> from 05/02/2026 from 17:00 Hrs onwards.
Note: Corrigendum and addendum, if any, will be published online at <https://eproc.punjab.gov.in>



BRIEFLY

Runner Pooja suspended by AIU for evading dope test



Little-known Indian long-distance runner Pooja Aatmaram has been provisionally suspended by the Athletics Integrity Unit (AIU) for evading a dope test. Pooja, who competes in the 5,000m and 10,000m events, had finished third in the Indian Grand Prix 2 in 2024 while representing Rajasthan, which remains her most noteworthy performance. Last year, the 30-year-old had competed in the National Cross Country Championships in Lucknow, finishing 25th. "The AIU has provisionally suspended Pooja Aatmaram (India) for Evading, Refusing or Failing to Submit to Sample Collection by an Athlete. Notice of Allegation Issued," the AIU said in a brief statement. Pooja has been suspended under Article 2.3 of the World Anti-Doping Agency's code.

Bilbao, Real Sociedad make it to Copa del Rey semifinals



Inaki Williams scored six minutes into stoppage time as Athletic Bilbao won 2-1 at Valencia to reach the semifinals of the Copa del Rey on Wednesday, and its Basque Country rival Real Sociedad made it to the last-four by winning 3-2 at Alaves. Athletic will be playing in its sixth Copa semifinal in seven seasons. It won the title in 2024 and was runner-up to Barcelona in 2020-21 and to Sociedad in 2019-20.

Williams scored the winning goal with a left-footed strike from the middle of the area after a cross by his younger brother Nico Williams following a breakaway. Athletic, which was winless in three matches across all competitions, had taken the lead in the 26th after an own-goal by Umar Sadiq, who also equalized for the hosts in the 35th.

Honoured to carry Olympic flame: Bindra



PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

■ New Delhi

Olympic gold medallist shooter Abhinav Bindra on Thursday said he is "truly humbled" and "honoured" after carrying the Olympic torch ahead of the Milan-Cortina Winter Olympics, describing it as a symbol of unity and perseverance.

The Winter Olympics begin on Friday at Milan and Cortina d'Ampezzo in Italy. "Honoured to carry the Olympic flame at @milancortina26. A symbol of unity, perseverance, and shared human aspiration," Bindra wrote on X along with a few pictures taken on a rainy day.

U19 WC: India keyed up for final vs England

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

■ Harare



In pursuit of a record-extending sixth title, the Indian Under-19 cricket team would bank on its swashbuckling batting line-up when it takes on a gritty England in what promises to be an evenly-matched summit clash of the ICC Under-19 World Cup on Friday.

India's successful chase of a massive total to humble Afghanistan in the semifinal where skipper Ayush Mhatre and opener Aaron George finally produced innings of substance, augurs well for the five-time champions, aiming to regain the trophy they last lifted in 2022.

India have shown tremendous resolve from the very first group match against the United States. In the semifinal, they decimated a hardened Afghanistan side to maintain an blemish-free record despite being in pursuit of a 300-plus target.

They now face another unbeaten team in England. India will be aware that England have reached this

far after knocking out defending champions Australia and will be high on confidence. To pull off the win, India will need a collective performance befitting the quality in their line-up, studded with batting prodigy Vaibhav Sooryavanshi, whose firestorm approach has left opposition teams struggling for answers.

Sooryavanshi, who turns 15 next month, has already struck three half-centuries and a blazing century in the final could be the driving force that propels India to

the title. However, he will need to exercise caution against an England side boasting of a strong pace battery, led by Manny Lumsden, who has been pivotal to their campaign. He could prove more than a handful if India's top-order batters indulge in nonchalant shot selection.

India's record in the finals of the global age-group tournament has been brilliant.

This marks their 10th appearance in the summit clash.

Having beaten England in

their only previous final meeting — in the 2022 West Indies edition — history is also on their side. The return to form of Mhatre, who finally broke his half-century drought in the semifinal against Afghanistan, has given India plenty to cheer about.

Adding more heft is a solid middle order with Vihann Malhotra contributing several fine innings and wicketkeeper-batter Abhigyan Kundu proving his worth with two half-centuries and assured work behind the stumps. India's pace attack of Deepesh Devendran, Henil Patel and R.S. Ambris has stood up well so far, but the challenge could be sterner against an England side that thrives on pace bowling.

India may therefore look to lean more on their spin duo of Kanish Chouhan and Khilan Patel for greater control, though the final call will depend on the pitch conditions. The absence of an Indian bowler in the tournament's top five wicket-takers, led by England's Manny Lumsden with 15 scalps, could be a mild

concern. However, India's strength has been collective bowling performances even though there have been occasional lapses, as seen when Afghanistan piled up a stiff 300-plus total in the semifinal. England will lean heavily on their prolific run-getters.

Ben Mayes is in sublime form after a highest score of 191 and two half-centuries, making him the tournament's second-highest run-scorer with 399 runs.

Skipper Thomas Rew has also been in good touch, smashing a century in the semifinal against Australia and adding two unbeaten half-centuries to tally 299 runs, the fourth-highest aggregate in the competition. But their openers, Ben Dawkins and Joseph Moores, have clearly been struggling.

On the bowling front, Lumsden has been incisive, and England will be hoping he receives crucial support from right-arm quick Sebastian Morgan and left-arm James Minto as they bid for their second U19 World Cup title, the first coming way back in 1998.

anchored by Rajinder Singh, Manmeet Singh, Vivek Sagar Prasad, Hardik Singh, Moirangthem Rabichandra Singh, Nilakanta Sharma and Rosan Kujur. Among the notable inclusions is 21-year-old Rosan Kujur from Odisha, who has earned his maiden call-up to the senior national squad. Kujur was part of the Indian junior team that won the bronze medal at the FIH Junior World Cup 2025 in Chennai. He also enjoyed a breakthrough domestic season, playing a key role for Vedanta Kalinga Lancers, who lifted the Hockey India League 2025-26 title.

Defender Amandeep Lakra also finds a place in the squad following an impressive outing in the recently concluded Hockey India League, where he was adjudged the Player of the Tournament.

The midfield will be

year and also featured for HIL CC during the Hockey India League. India's forward line comprises Abhishek, Sukhjeet Singh, Selvam Karthi, Mandeep Singh, Arai Jeet Singh Hundal and Aditya Arjun Lalage.

India, who finished eighth among nine teams last season, will open their campaign against Belgium on February 11, followed by a match against Argentina a day later. The Harmanpreet Singh-led side will then take on Belgium in the return fixture on February 14 before facing Argentina again on February 15.

The team will then travel to Hobart, where they will play Spain on February 21 and 24, and Australia on February 22 and 25. The European leg of the tournament will be held in June.

Manchester City vs Arsenal in English League Cup final

JAMES ROBSONAP
■ Manchester



It's Manchester City vs Arsenal in the English League Cup final. The current top two in the Premier League will go head-to-head at Wembley Stadium next month after City beat Newcastle 3-1 on Wednesday to complete a 5-1 win on aggregate in the semifinals.

Both City and Arsenal are still in contention for a clean sweep of trophies this season. The League Cup is the chance to lift the first piece of major silverware this term and to potentially inflict a psychological blow in the race for the title.

"We're here to win trophies and we give our best every day to reach these finals and win the silverware," City forward Omar Marmoush — who scored two goals on the night — told Sky Sports. Arsenal current-

ly leads the standings by six points ahead of second-place City. Both teams are through to the round of 16 in the Champions League and fourth round of the FA Cup. The League Cup final is on March 22.

"It's a pleasure to play against Arsenal, the best team right now in Europe, maybe the world," City manager Pep Guardiola said. "As much (as) we (can) play against them, it will make us

a better, better team." Two first-half goals from Marmoush at the Etihad effectively finished off Newcastle in a semifinal where City led 2-0 from the first leg.

Tijani Reijnders added another before the break. Newcastle scored a consolation through substitute Anthony Elanga and prevented what looked like being a rout after the first 45 minutes.

IOC open to earlier dates for future Winter Olympics



ASSOCIATED PRESS
■ Milan

first year of Kirsty Coventry's presidency and changing the winter edition dates is an option. "Maybe we are also discussing to bring the Winter Olympics a little bit earlier," the IOC member overseeing the sports program review, Karl Stoss, told reporters. "To do it in January because it has an implication for the Paralympics as well."

The Milan Cortina Paralympic Winter Games will be held March 6-15.

The IOC has long acknowledged under Coventry's predecessor Thomas Bach that changing climate is a challenge for finding future hosts and organising competitions.

Doubles is not a sideshow: Yuki Bhambri on re-invention and right support

AMANPREET SINGH
■ Bengaluru

For a player once tipped to be among India's finest singles exponents, Yuki Bhambri's career arc has followed an unexpected but instructive path. Injuries stalled his singles rise soon after he broke into the ATP top-100, sponsorship uncertainty compounded the challenges, and the promise many saw remained largely unfulfilled in that format.

Yet, at 30-something, Bhambri finds himself in the middle of the most productive phase of his professional life as India's leading doubles player.

In the last 18 months he won four ATP titles, made a Grand Slam semifinal and is a case study of what structured support can do for elite talent. In a candid conversation with PTI, Bhambri

pushed back against the idea that doubles is merely a consolation act, reflected on whether his singles career could have been different, and cautioned that India risks falling further behind countries like China and Japan unless systemic changes are implemented sooner rather than later.

Doubles deserves respect, not dismissal: In a sport where singles format commands the spotlight, Bhambri is firm that doubles must stop being treated as a "fallback" or a sideshow.

"When we grow up, everyone wants to be a singles Grand Slam champion, there's no denying that. That was my dream too," Bhambri said ahead of the Davis Cup tie against the Netherlands.

"But doubles exists because there is a market for it, people want to watch it, and excellence is required to succeed

in it." Drawing a comparison with cricket's multiple formats, Bhambri argues that tennis, too, should embrace plurality. "Cricket celebrates Test specialists, ODI players and T20 stars. Tennis has singles and doubles. It's the same sport, just a different format. One format shouldn't be disrespected because the other exists."

For Bhambri, the appeal of doubles lies not in compromise but in competitive opportunity. "In doubles, I walk into every tournament believing I can win the title, whether it's an ATP 500, a Masters or a Grand Slam. That expectation didn't always exist for me in singles, especially at the bigger events,"

said Bhambri who is now enjoying a career-best doubles rank of 20 in the world.

The last 18 months: proof of what support can change

Bhambri's four ATP titles —

the biggest being the ATP 500 Dubai Championships last year — and deeper Grand Slam runs, have coincided with the launch of the 'Doubles Dream Project', an initiative that provides India's top doubles players access to international coaching, trainers, analytics and logistical backing. "The biggest change in my career has been the support structure. For the first time, all I had to do was focus on tennis."

The arrival of former world Number 1 doubles player Raven Klaasen as a travelling coach, through Rohan Bopanna's project, proved transformative. "There was no trial and error anymore. You were shown clearly how doubles is supposed to be played... The movement, the positioning, patterns, accountability. When you follow that structure, results follow."

Bhambri pointed to the broader impact on Indian

doubles players over the same period as evidence. "In a short span, you saw different Indians winning ATP titles across the world. That doesn't happen randomly. Imagine what could happen if this kind of structure was implemented across the system."

Do Indians peak late?

It has been a never-ending debate in the country's tennis whether Indians peak late. After all, the results suggest so. Bhambri, at 33, has his take. "We do peak late, but the reasoning in my opinion is that I think we understand the game late, the knowledge that we get is late."

"It's not that we Indians don't work hard. We are the hardest workers in the world in any field, whether it is sports, or jobs. Even the Indian kids work extremely hard. "We just don't have access to what is required to be a world-class champion."

The singles 'what if': The conversation inevitably turns to the question Indian tennis followers have debated for years: could Bhambri's singles career have unfolded differently? "Maybe," he admits. "Injuries played a big role, but proper guidance also helps in preventing injuries and managing careers better." For the first time in the last 18 months, there were no problems, no confusion. Everything was taken care of. The results are there for everyone to see."

Bhambri does not dwell on regret, but the implication is clear: elite talent needs elite systems.

China, Japan and the widening gap: Bhambri says India is already playing catch-up with Asian rivals who have invested heavily in structured development.

"When I first went to China years ago, their men's tennis wasn't strong. Today, they

have Grand Slam performers, Olympic champions, and multiple top-200 players in both men's and women's tennis." Japan, he adds, has long had a steady pipeline of professionals, while China's rise over the past decade has been rapid and deliberate. "They brought in foreign coaches, educated local coaches, used former players, and created a proper structure. India has the resources, but we need collective commitment."

Japan has five players in the top-200 in both men's and women's singles while China has three men's singles players in the ATP chart and six in WTA rankings, led by Olympic champion Qinwen Zheng.

He felt, like many others, that state associations need to do more. "If their votes depend on it, their lives depend on it, the needle could move a little bit more."



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Decision to boycott India game appropriate: Pakistan PM

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

■ Karachi

Calling Pakistan's boycott of their T20 World Cup match against India an "appropriate decision, the country's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has said that it was a "considered stance" to support Bangladesh.

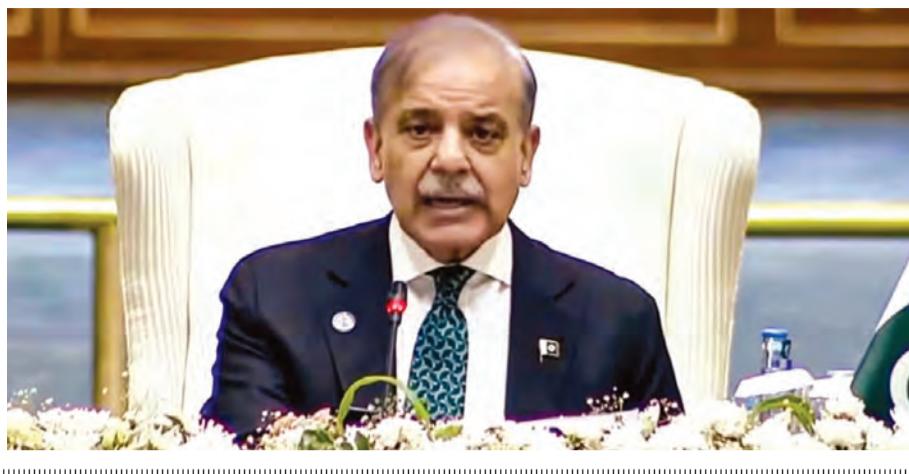
Pakistan's cricket team has been told by the government to skip the February 15 game in Colombo after Bangladesh were replaced by Scotland for refusing to play its games in India on

account of "security concerns."

"We have taken a very clear stand on the T20 World Cup that we won't play the match against India because there should be no politics on the sports field," Sharif stated after a government meeting here.

"We have taken a very considered stance, and we should completely stand by Bangladesh, and I think this is a very appropriate decision. We are with Bangladesh," he added.

In response, Bangladesh



sports advisor Asif Nazrul posted "Thank You, Pakistan" on his official Facebook page, while quoting Sharif's statement.

A livid ICC has warned the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) of serious consequences if it fails to show up for the high-profile match, which is a money magnet at the big event for sponsors, broadcasters and advertisers.

The world body has hoped that the PCB will "consider the significant and long-term implications for cricket in its own country as this is likely

to impact the global cricket ecosystem, which it is itself a member and beneficiary of."

Pakistan has reached Colombo for its other preliminary engagements, starting with a game against the Netherlands on Saturday.

The country's cricket board has already made it clear that it supports the government's position and would go by its advice even if a rematch against India crops up during the knockout stage.

PCB chief Mohsin Naqvi had stated that the decision to drop Bangladesh was not

fair and their security concerns should have been addressed.

The ICC's security assessment of Indian venues had placed the threat perception for Bangladesh in the low to moderate category.

Bangladesh's refusal to travel to India for its share of matches came after its pacer Mustafizur Rahman was ousted from the IPL on BCCI's instructions.

The Indian Board did not specify the reasons but it came amid increased attacks on Hindus there.

India game not in our control, it's Government's decision: Salman Agha

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

■ Colombo

Maintaining his cricket board's stance, Pakistan skipper Salman Ali Agha on Thursday stressed that the decision to boycott the T20 World Cup match against India was taken by their Government and was "not in our control."

Pakistan on Sunday announced a boycott of its high-profile men's T20 World Cup group league fixture against India on February 15 here. However, the Pakistani government cleared the national team's participation in the rest of the global event starting February 7.

"The India game is not in our control. It's the government's and the PCB's decision and we respect that. Whatever they are going to say, we will do that," Agha said during the captain's conference.

The T20 showpiece begins across venues in India and Sri Lanka on Saturday.

Agha said in the event of the two arch-rivals clashing in the knockouts, they will again abide by the decision taken by the Pakistan government.

"If we have to play them again in the semifinal or final, we will have to go back to them and act on their advice," Agha said.

Pakistan's decision, which was conveyed through an official government statement, is a political protest



against Bangladesh's removal from the tournament. The ICC declined Bangladesh's request to shift matches from India to Sri Lanka on security grounds.

During the press conference here, Agha was also reminded about Pakistan's embarrassing defeat to lesser-fancied USA in the last edition of the tournament in the Americas.

"Yes, we lost to the USA in the last World Cup, but that's history now. It's a new World Cup, a new team and a new combination, and we are very excited about it."

"It's my first World Cup as a captain, and I'm very excited about that. I don't know how to describe myself as a captain."

"As a captain, I just want to lead from the front and do as much as I can for the team, get the best out of the team, and prepare an environment where they can play at their best," Agha said.

Will ICC knock out India if it refuses to play in another country: Hussain

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

■ London

Calling for consistency in world cricket, former England captain Nasser Hussain has questioned the ICC's handling of Bangladesh's T20 World Cup ouster and asked whether the governing body would have been as strict if India had refused to play in a country at short notice.

The International Cricket Council replaced Bangladesh with Scotland in the T20 World Cup after the former refused to play their matches in India citing security issues.

"If India, a month before a

tournament, said 'our government does not want us to play in a country for a World Cup', would the ICC have been so firm and said, 'You know the rules, bad luck, we're knocking you out?'

Hussain asked on the 'Sky Sports Cricket Podcast'.

The 57-year-old stressed the need for equal application of rules.

"The only question all sides ask for is consistency. Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India must be treated the same. Yes, India fans may say, 'Cry more, we have the money!' But with power comes responsibility," he said. Bangladesh's refusal



Our flight is booked, we are going there: Suryakumar on match against Pakistan

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

■ Mumbai

India skipper Suryakumar Yadav on Thursday said his team will travel to Colombo for its ICC T20 World Cup match against Pakistan even though the neighbouring country has announced a boycott of the game.

India are scheduled to face the arch-rivals in February 15 but Pakistan's cricket team has been told by its government to skip the game after Bangladesh were replaced by Scotland for refusing to play in India on account of "security concerns".

"I feel their decision is not

in my control. I wish I could take their decisions call but it is their call. We had played in the Asia Cup as well and we played them three

times," Suryakumar said during the pre-tournament captains' press meet here.

The World Cup begins on Saturday and India will

take on USA in its opening match on the same evening.

"Our mindset is pretty clear. We have not said no (to playing against Pakistan). They have. ICC has given the fixture. Our flight is booked and we are going there (to Colombo)."

"The team discussion is that we are playing first on February 7, then we will go there," he added.

"We played some good cricket against them. We have been told that the game is on 15th, the game is at a neutral venue and if we get an opportunity we will play. It's a difficult call for them (Pakistani players) as well," he observed.

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The World Cup begins on Saturday and India will

T20 WC: Associate nations ready to shine

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

■ Mumbai

cricketing map," Italy captain Wayne Madsen, who played field hockey for South Africa said at the captains' press conference ahead of the World Cup.

For Scotland, the event presents a challenge of a different kind, having not known about their participation until late last month.

"The preparation has been different from other teams but we will look to make the most of playing at this level. It's a great opportunity in front of us," said Scotland captain Richie Berrington.

Playing their back-to-back T20 World Cup, Nepal are looking to make a substantial impact.

"This T20 World Cup is very important as we qualified after 10 years (in 2024). The next gen who will be watching us, we want to make an impact for them," Nepal captain Rohit Paudel, who calls himself a big fan of former India captain Rohit Sharma.

skipper, which paved the way for a memorable title triumph.

This was after skipper Jemimah Rodrigues rose to the occasion with a scintillating half-century and Chinelle Henry blazed away to a 15-ball 35 to lift Delhi Capitals to an imposing 203 for four.

Laura Wolvaardt (44 not out off 25 balls) and Lizelle Lee (37 off 30 balls) also made quick runs after DC were put in. Rodrigues slammed 57 off 37 balls. In reply, RCB completed the record chase with two balls remaining while joining Mumbai Indians as the most successful teams in

the WPL. In the stiff chase, RCB lost the big wicket of Grace Harris (9) early but skipper Smriti Mandhana and Georgia Voll kept them in the contest by scoring quickly and keeping pace with the required run rate.

Both Mandhana and Georgia drove anything that was pitched up with ease, pulled and cut the short balls with authority. The two continued to dominate until Voll gave her wicket away to Minnu Mani, raising DC hopes. However, RCB held their nerves to emerge winners.

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