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PIONEER IN SHORT

T20 WC: INDIA BEAT ENGLAND IN THRILLER

Defending champions India national cricket team defeated England national cricket team by seven runs in a thrilling second semifinal to enter the final of the ICC Men's T20 World Cup on Thursday. Asked to bat first, opener Sanju Samson produced a blistering 89 off 42 balls, smashing seven sixes and eight fours to power India to a formidable 253 for seven in 20 overs. He was well supported by Shivam Dube (43), Ishan Kishan (39), Hardik Pandya (27) and Tilak Varma (21), as India maintained a brisk scoring rate throughout the innings. Chasing a daunting 254, England mounted a strong reply thanks to a sensational 105 off 48 balls by Jacob Bethell. His aggressive strokeplay kept England in contention, but the target ultimately proved just out of reach as they finished at 246 for seven. Pandya returned with the ball to claim two wickets for 38 runs, while Jasprit Bumrah, Arshdeep Singh, Axar Patel and Varun Chakravarthy picked up a wicket each to keep India narrowly ahead in a tense finish. For England, Will Jacks and Adil Rashid claimed two wickets apiece. India will now face the New Zealand national cricket team in Sunday's final.

## Nitish's reign ends in Bihar, BJP to get a chief minister

DEEPAK KUMAR JHA  
New Delhi/Patna

JD(U) patriarch Nitish Kumar filed nomination for the Rajya Sabha from Bihar on Thursday. He is likely to step down as the Chief Minister of the State by April 10, 2026, sources said. As Bihar's longest-serving Chief Minister for nearly a quarter century, Nitish had earned reputation as *Sushan Babu*, despite his shifting political alignments. His nomination was kept a secret by the NDA, anticipating resentment from within the JD(U). Kumar filed his nominations flanked by Home Minister Amit Shah, and the newly elected BJP president, Nitin Nabin, who also filed his nomination for the upper house of the Parliament.

With the NDA now facing backlash from JD(U) workers, the BJP has a major challenge in Bihar to 'install' a CM. As the single largest constituent of the alliance in the State, the BJP is likely to put up its own candidate as the CM, which



Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar files his nomination for the Rajya Sabha polls in the presence of Union Home Minister Amit Shah and BJP National President Nitin Nabin, in Patna

will be a first for the party in the State. Among the names doing the rounds for the CM's post is Samrat Choudhary, whom Union minister Shah, the BJP's principal strategist, had vowed to make "a big

man," during the Assembly poll campaign, and Shah's son Nishant Kumar who has just forayed in active politics is appointed as deputy CM to counter the resentment from and within the JD(U).

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## TARANJIT SANDHU APPOINTED DELHI LG

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE/  
MOHIT KANDHARI  
Kolkata/New Delhi/Jammu

A host of Governors and LGs, including those of Bihar and Delhi, were given new assignments late Thursday evening following the resignation of Governor of West Bengal, CV Ananda Bose, days before Assembly election in the State. Bose resigned on Thursday evening without disclosing the grounds of his resignation.

Ladakh LG Kavinder Gupta also resigned on Thursday and was later appointed as Governor of Himachal Pradesh.

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The reshuffle followed the resignation of CV Ananda Bose

## India condoles death of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei



Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri signs the condolence book at the Embassy of Iran in New Delhi

ASHOKE RAJ  
New Delhi

India on Thursday expressed condolences over the death of Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, marking the country's first formal response days after the 86-year-old Iranian leader was killed in a joint military operation carried out by the United States and Israel. Indian Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri signed the condolence book at the Iranian embassy on behalf of the Government of India.

In a separate diplomatic outreach, External Affairs

Minister S Jaishankar held a telephone conversation with his Iranian counterpart Seyed Abbas Araghchi. Jaishankar later confirmed the interaction on a social media post.

India had initially maintained silence following reports of Khamenei's death and has not directly condemned the US-Israeli military action. However, Prime Minister Narendra Modi earlier spoke with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, urging efforts toward an early end to hostilities in the region.

The Bystander



Plumes of smoke rise as strikes hit the city during the US-Israeli military campaign in Tehran Iran

## Iran warns US as war expands across Asia

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE/  
ASSOCIATED PRESS  
New Delhi

The conflict between Iran and Israel intensified dramatically on Thursday as Tehran launched a new wave of attacks across the Middle East, targeting Israeli territory, American military bases and several regional countries. The escalation came with a stern warning to the United States that it would "bitterly regret" sinking an Iranian warship earlier this week.

The expanding war, now in its sixth day, has drawn in at least 14 countries across the region and beyond. Iranian strikes and retaliatory military actions by Israel and the United States have widened the battlefield from the eastern Mediterranean

to the Persian Gulf and parts of Central Asia.

Air raid sirens sounded across major Israeli cities as incoming missiles were reported. Israel carried out new strikes against Iranian ballistic missile launch sites in response.

Elsewhere, Gulf States reported attacks near US military facilities. In Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates, a drone was shot down near the Al Dhafra Air Base, which hosts American forces. Debris from the interception injured six people. Authorities in Doha, Qatar temporarily evacuated residents near the U.S. Embassy following reports of a missile attack. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia said its air defenses destroyed a drone in a province bordering Jordan.

CONTINUED ON >> P4

## PM Modi calls for swift end to conflicts in Ukraine, West Asia

ASHOKE RAJ  
New Delhi

Prime Minister Narendra Modi called for a swift end to ongoing global conflicts, including the crises in West Asia and Ukraine, stressing that military confrontation cannot provide lasting solutions to international disputes.

The remarks came after PM Modi held extensive talks with visiting Finnish President Alexander Stubb in New Delhi. Addressing the media after the meeting, the PM that dialogue and diplomacy

remain the only sustainable path to resolving international disputes.

"India and Finland believe in dialogue, diplomacy and respect for international law. Whether it is Ukraine or West Asia, we support all efforts aimed at bringing conflicts to a swift end and restoring peace," the PM said. Escalating tensions in West Asia were a key focus of the bilateral discussions.

President Stubb also voiced concern over global instability and highlighted the need for a durable peace



Prime Minister Narendra Modi, right, with Finland President Alexander Stubb, at Hyderabad House in New Delhi

in Ukraine. Referring to the ongoing war involving Russia and Ukraine, he said any lasting settlement must be based on the principles of the United Nations and respect international law.

During the talks, Stubb reiterated Finland's strong support for India's long-standing bid for a permanent seat at the United Nations Security Council. He said reforming global institutions to reflect current geopolitical realities was of "utmost importance".

CONTINUED ON >> P4

## NEPAL VOTES AFTER GEN Z UPRISING

Tens of thousands voted on Thursday in Nepal's first general election since Gen Z-led protests toppled the coalition Government of K P Sharma Oli last year. Corruption and demands for generational change dominated the campaign in the politically fragile Himalayan nation. Acting Chief Election Commissioner Ram Prasad Bhandari said the poll was conducted "peacefully and enthusiastically", with an estimated turnout of about 60 per cent. The newly formed Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP), led by former rapper and Kathmandu mayor Balendra Shah, has emerged as a strong challenger to the traditional parties.

## SECOND IRANIAN VESSEL NEAR SL

Sri Lanka said Thursday it is considering its response after a second Iran-linked vessel sought entry into its waters, a day after an Iranian frigate was sunk near the island nation. Government spokesman Nalinda Jayatissa told Parliament that authorities were assessing the situation after the ship was spotted off Panadura, outside Colombo. "We are aware of it and are contemplating action to safeguard all lives on board," he said, adding the government was acting to maintain regional stability. The development comes a day after the Iranian frigate IRIS Dena sank about 40 nautical miles off Galle following what Pete Hegseth, the US war secretary, said was an attack by a United States submarine in international waters. Sri Lankan authorities said 84 bodies of Iranian sailors were recovered, while several survivors are receiving treatment in hospitals in Galle with mostly minor injuries. The 16th census will also

## Shah unveils mascots as countdown for census 2027 begins

RAJESH KUMAR  
New Delhi

Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Thursday soft-launched four digital tools and formally unveiled the mascots, Pragati and Vikas, for census 2027. "The mascots symbolise equal participation of women and men in fulfilling the resolve to make India a developed nation by 2047. Through these mascots, information, objectives and key messages related to Census-2027 will be disseminated in an effective and citizen-friendly manner across diverse sections of society," a Government statement read.



Home Minister Amit Shah launching digital tools and mascots for census 2027 in New Delhi

include caste enumeration. The first phase of one of the largest administrative exercises in the world, the Census

of India 2027, will start on April 1, 2026. The entire exercise is expected to cost ₹11,718 crore. Originally

scheduled for 2021, the decadal exercise was not conducted due to the COVID19 pandemic.



Hardik Pandya with ground staff after winning the ICC Men's T20 World Cup 2026 second semifinal match between India and England in Mumbai. India beat England by 7 runs to enter T20 World Cup

## PM Modi speaks with French President Macron

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
New Delhi

Prime Minister Narendra Modi held a telephonic conversation with Emmanuel Macron, President of France, to discuss the rapidly escalating crisis in West Asia and the need for urgent diplomatic efforts to restore stability in the region.

According to officials, the two leaders exchanged views on the deteriorating security situation and emphasised the importance of dialogue and diplomacy to prevent further escalation. Modi later said the dis-



WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

ussion focused on shared concerns about the evolving regional tensions and the need for coordinated international efforts to bring back peace.





# PM Modi to launch metro projects worth ₹18,300 cr on Sunday

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
New Delhi

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will inaugurate and lay the foundation stone for several important projects of the Delhi Metro on Sunday. According to Chief Minister Rekha Gupta, Prime Minister Modi will inaugurate two new corridors of the Delhi Metro: Majlis Park to Maujpur-Babarpur (Pink Line) and Deepali Chowk to Majlis Park (Magenta Line) on March 8. In addition, he will also lay the foundation stone for three new corridors under Delhi Metro Phase-V (A). The total cost of these metro projects exceeds Rs 18,300 crore, and they are expected to further strengthen public transport in Delhi.

minister said that these initiatives will play an important role in transforming the national capital into a truly Viksit Delhi. The expansion of the metro network will improve public transport, make daily travel easier for citizens, reduce the number of vehicles on the roads and help control pollution. She informed that the programme will be held at DDA Utsav Sthal-3 (in front of Nirankari Mandal).

The Chief Minister said that the Majlis Park to Maujpur-Babarpur section is 12.3 kilometres long and includes eight elevated stations. This corridor forms part of the already operational Majlis Park-Shiv Vihar Pink Line. With the addition of this section, the total length of the Pink Line will increase to

approximately 71.56 kilometres, making Delhi home to the country's first fully operational Ring Metro.

Stations on this corridor will include Majlis Park, Burari, Jharoda Majra, Jagatpur-Wazirabad, Soorghat, Nanaksar-Sonia Vihar, Khajuri Khas, Bhajanpura, Yamuna Vihar and Maujpur-Babarpur.

The chief minister said the Deepali Chowk to Majlis Park corridor forms part of the Magenta Line, with a length of 9.92 kilometres and seven elevated stations. This corridor is an extension of the already operational Botanical Garden-Krishna Park Extension-Magenta Line. With its addition, the total length of the Magenta Line will increase to around 49 kilometres. Stations on this section



will include Deepali Chowk, Madhuban Chowk, Uttar Pitampura-Prashant Vihar, Haiderpur Village, Haiderpur Badli Mor, Bhalswa and Majlis Park.

The Chief Minister added that these metro corridors are also significant achievements from an engineering

perspective. A portion of the Deepali Chowk-Majlis Park corridor reaches a height of approximately 28.36 metres, making it one of the highest elevated sections in the Delhi Metro network. Construction of the Majlis Park-Maujpur-Babarpur corridor required the building of a new bridge

over the Yamuna River and a double-decker viaduct, integrating both a metro track and a road flyover. This bridge will be the fifth Delhi Metro bridge across the Yamuna River.

According to the Chief Minister, Prime Minister Modi will lay the foundation stone for three metro corridors under Phase V (A), which will further ease travel for residents of the Capital. These include the Central Vista Corridor from Ramakrishna Ashram Marg to Indraprastha, the Golden Line extension from Aerocity to Indira Gandhi Airport Terminal-1, and the Golden Line extension from Tughlakabad to Kalindi Kunj.

The Central Vista Corridor, from Ramakrishna Ashram Marg to Indraprastha, will

be 9.913 kilometres long and constructed underground. It will include nine new stations: R.K. Ashram Marg (under construction), Shivaji Stadium, Yuge-Yugeen Bharat, Central Secretariat, Kartavya Bhavan, India Gate, War Memorial-High Court, Baroda House, Bharat Mandapam and Indraprastha.

This corridor will provide metro connectivity to important locations such as Kartavya Bhavans, Bharat Mandapam and the Yuge-Yugeen Bharat Museum. The Golden Line extension from Aerocity to IGD Airport Terminal-1 will be 2.263 kilometres long and constructed underground. It will include one new station and connect two already operational stations.

The Golden Line extension

from Tughlakabad to Kalindi Kunj will be 3.9 kilometres long and will be an elevated corridor. Stations on this route will include Sarita Vihar Depot, Madanpur Khadar and Kalindi Kunj.

The Chief Minister added that these projects will also benefit cities across the National Capital Region (NCR). Residents of Faridabad and Ballabhgarh will be able to reach Tughlakabad via the Violet Line and then travel directly to IGD Airport Terminal-1 through the Golden Line.

Similarly, passengers from Noida will be able to reach Kalindi Kunj through the Magenta Line and then travel conveniently to the airport and various parts of South Delhi through the Golden Line.

# Rithala fire: Girl killed, 100 shanties gutted in blaze

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
New Delhi

A 17-year-old girl was killed and more than 100 shanties were gutted after a massive fire broke out in Delhi's Rithala area in the early hours of Thursday. The blaze left dozens of migrant families homeless as it ripped through the densely packed cluster. The Delhi Fire Services (DFS) received a call regarding the fire at 4.15 am. More than 18 fire tenders were sent to the spot to combat the flames, which had spread rapidly across the settlement.

Firefighters recovered the charred body of the teenager, identified as Rozina Khatun, from the

debris after the blaze was brought under control. Her body was sent to the BSA Hospital and later shifted to the mortuary for a post-mortem examination.

Officials said the fire intensified quickly due to the close proximity of the huts and the presence of highly inflammable materials like plastic sheets, wooden planks and cloth. The fire also spread to an adjacent godown containing paper rolls and cardboard, while the doors and windows of nearby houses were also damaged.

The shanty cluster, known as Bengali Basti, housed migrant labourers from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal who worked as



daily wage earners at local factories and construction sites. "Our teams reached the location soon after the call and began operations. The fire had already engulfed several shanties," a fire official said. The blaze was brought under control by

around 6.30 am. Residents said they lost all their belongings, including clothes, savings and identity documents. "We ran out to save our lives when the fire started. Within minutes, everything started to burn. Our hut, clothes, money and

documents, everything is gone," said Ramesh Kumar, a labourer from Bihar. A woman labourer from West Bengal said the fire destroyed everything within minutes, leaving the families with nothing but the clothes they were wearing. "We woke up to screams and saw fire everywhere. We somehow managed to take the children outside. We could not save anything," she said.

Some of the residents were seen searching the debris, hoping to find salvageable items. "We worked for years to build this small hut and collected household items. In just a few minutes, everything we had earned was destroyed," said

a worker from Uttar Pradesh. Police personnel from the Budh Vihar station cordoned off the area and assisted in the evacuation of the residents to prevent further casualties. Around 10 ambulances were also deployed to the site.

A case has been registered under sections 287 (negligent conduct with respect to fire or combustible matter), 125(a) (act endangering life or personal safety of others) and 106 (causing death by negligence) of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita. "While the fire is now under control, cooling operations are still ongoing. The cause of the fire is yet to be determined," a senior police officer said.

# DTC bus gutted in fire on Mehrauli-Badarpur road

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
New Delhi

A Delhi Transport Corporation's (DTC) electric bus caught fire near a hospital on the Mehrauli-Badarpur road in south Delhi on Thursday afternoon, officials of the Delhi Fire Services said. All passengers were evacuated safely on time, with no injuries reported, they added.

According to DFS, a call regarding the blaze was received at 12.57 pm, following which fire tenders were dispatched to the location. The bus, operating on route number 544 from RK Puram to Badarpur Border, was completely engulfed in flames, it said. The firefighters reached the spot and successfully extinguished the flames,

the officials said. The bus conductor, Arvind Kumar, said he witnessed smoke coming out from the dashboard area.

"I immediately asked the driver to stop the bus and asked all the passengers to vacate the vehicle. We tried to stop the smoke using fire extinguishers from our and some other vehicles. But the fire spread rapidly," Kumar said. Kanti Devi, a passenger, said that she takes the same bus every day to reach Badarpur. "I was going to work when the bus conductor asked everyone to vacate the bus.

15 passengers were travelling in the bus when the incident occurred. I also helped everyone exit the bus safely, and ensured to run away to a safer distance," she added.



# Two charred to death in Sadar Bazar godown blaze

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
New Delhi

Two charred bodies were recovered, while six others were rescued from a multi-storey building after a fire broke out in north Delhi's Sadar Bazar area.

A call was received at 4.38 pm on Wednesday, regarding a blaze in a toy godown operating from a temporary tin shed on the top floor of the building located on Bahadurgarh Road near Bara Tooti Chowk, a Delhi Fire Services (DFS) officer said. The bodies were identified as Durkheli Sharma alias Shakar (60) and Rampravesh Ray (46), natives

of Bihar. They were workers in the building which also houses several shops selling bangles, toys and purses.

Six other workers residing on the top floor of the building were rescued, the officer said. Police said that locals started stone pelting, demanding that the DFS officers show them the charred bodies. The windshield of a Government vehicle was damaged in the stone pelting, they added.

"Twenty-five fire tenders were pressed into service upon receiving the call," the officer said. The blaze was brought under control at 3.20 am on Thursday, he added. Police personnel

on patrol in the Sadar Bazar area rushed to the spot after receiving information and alerted the fire brigade. Initial reports suggested that several people were trapped inside the building, the police said.

Using access through an adjacent building and a nearby mosque, the personnel managed to rescue six people safely from the premises, they added.

The police further said that four Centralised Accident and Trauma Services (CAT) ambulances were also deployed at the site during the rescue operation. The bodies were shifted to the Subzi Mandi mortuary.

# At 34.3°C, Delhi records season's hottest day so far

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
New Delhi

In one of the warmest beginnings to March in recent years, Delhi recorded its highest average minimum temperature since 2023 — 16 degrees Celsius — within just five days of the month, as unusually warm nights and high daytime temperatures pushed mercury well above seasonal normal. The last time the average minimum temperature for this period was higher was in 2023, when it stood at 16.2 degrees Celsius.

Thursday also marked the hottest day of the season so far, with the maximum temperature rising to 34.3 degrees Celsius, a sharp 6.9 notches above normal, according to the India Meteorological Department (IMD). The minimum temperature was recorded at 18.2 degrees Celsius, 4.8 notches above the season's average. Explaining the conditions, Mahesh Palawat of Skymet said there is no significant weather activity expected over Delhi and neighbouring states like Punjab for at least the next 10



days. "There are indications of clear skies and bright sunshine in the coming days, which may lead to a gradual rise in both morning and evening temperatures. Wind speeds are also likely to increase in the coming days," Palawat said. According to the IMD, Safdarjung, the city's base station, recorded a maximum of 34.3 degrees Celsius, while the minimum temperature settled at 18.2 degrees Celsius.

At Palam, the maximum temperature was recorded at 32.5 degrees Celsius, 5.5 notches above normal, while the minimum stood at 16.1 degrees Celsius, 3.5 notches above normal.

# Delhi Police chief reviews security, meets staff on Holi

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
New Delhi

Delhi Police Commissioner Satish Golchha on Thursday visited several police deployment points across the national Capital during Holi celebrations to review security arrangements and boost the morale of officers on duty. The police chief interacted with personnel stationed at different locations, extended Holi greetings, and appreciated their commitment to maintaining law and order during the festival.

Officers said the visit was aimed at ensuring that security arrangements across the city were functioning smoothly while also recognising the efforts of police staff working away from their families during the celebrations. During the interaction, Golchha praised the dedica-



tion of the deployed personnel and encouraged them to remain vigilant throughout the day. He also distributed sweets to officers and staff at various duty points as a gesture of appreciation for their service during the festival. Senior police officers said elaborate security arrangements had been made across the Capital to ensure that Holi celebrations remained peaceful and incident-free. Police teams maintained a

strong presence in markets, residential areas, and busy intersections to prevent any untoward incidents. Officials said extensive ground visibility was ensured through continuous patrolling and the setting up of multiple checking pickets across the city.

Personnel from district police units, traffic police, and PCR teams were deployed at key locations to monitor public activity and prevent unruly behaviour.

## OVER 1,200 FINED FOR DRUNK DRIVING ON HOLI

**New Delhi:** Delhi Traffic Police issued more than 1,200 challans for drunk driving during a special enforcement drive conducted across the city on Holi, with the western range recording the highest number of such violations.

According to data released by the traffic police, a total of 1,204 challans were issued for drunk driving during Holi celebrations on Wednesday, a marginal decline of from 1,213 cases recorded during the festival last year. Overall, traffic violations also saw a significant drop this year. A total of 4,929 challans, including drunk driving cases, were issued during the enforcement drive, nearly 32 per cent less than 7,230 violations recorded last Holi. The western range, which covers Dwarka, Outer and West districts, recorded the highest number of drunken driving cases this year at 297.

The central range reported 257 such violations, followed closely by the northern range, covering Rohini, outer and outer north Delhi, with 256 cases.

The eastern range, which includes Shahdara, east and northeast Delhi, recorded 208 cases, while the southern range, covering south and southeast Delhi, reported 117 drunken driving challans.

The New Delhi range, which includes the southwest and New Delhi districts, registered the lowest number with 69 cases, the data showed. Police said multiple checkpoints were set up across key roads and intersections where drivers were subjected to breath analyser tests to ensure road safety during the festival.

# PWD to install anti-pollution mist sprayers on 1,000 street lights

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
New Delhi

In a bid to combat air pollution, the Public Works Department (PWD) of Delhi Government plans to install water mist spraying systems on 1,000 streetlights across the Capital, Minister Parvash Sahib Singh said on Thursday.

In the past year, similar projects have been taken up in Narela, Anand Vihar, ITO and New Delhi Municipal Council (NDMC) areas. Now, the PWD plans to expand the project, installing mist sprinklers on 1,000 streetlights citywide, the PWD minister said in a statement detailing the department's achievements during one year of BJP rule in the Capital.

"Dust is one of the major factors of air pollution, and to control it, several steps are being taken. So far, 305 mist spray systems have been installed on PWD roads over the past year. Now,



we plan to install the systems on 1,000 additional streetlights," Singh said. The existing systems, which spray a mist of RO water, have a capacity of 2,000 litres per hour.

The misting systems mostly operate in two shifts 6 am to 2 pm and 2 pm to 10 pm. Further, plantation is underway at 47 roundabouts, with the PWD also looking to

increase green cover along roads and central verges, he added. "The PWD has undertaken extensive greening and beautification work at 47 major roundabouts in the city to improve the quality and aesthetics of urban transport infrastructure.

Environment-friendly green cover has been developed at each roundabout to create a pleasant and sus-

tainable landscape," the statement said. At these, roundabouts, native plants and shrubs suitable to the local climate and soil conditions have been selected, it said, highlighting that green cover plays a key role in curbing road dust and pollution. The PWD is appointing specialised horticulture vendors in three zones of Delhi to facilitate greening drives on roadsides and dividers, officials said.

Among other measures, the PWD has also approached companies like Indian Oil Corporation, DIAL, DLF, Godrej under Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities to adopt and maintain road stretches and flyovers, the statement said.

Further, to ensure prompt and transparent redressal of citizens' complaints, the PWD Service App has been developed for reporting complaints related to roads, footpaths, streetlights, and other infrastructure, it added.

# Government invites entries for 1st International Film Festival Delhi

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
New Delhi

The Delhi Government has invited submissions from filmmakers and content creators for the inaugural edition of 'International Film Festival Delhi' (IFFD) to support the emerging talent.

According to a statement, the organising platform for the festival, IFFD CineXchange, has extended the deadline for film submissions to March 10 from March 3, following an enthusiastic response from filmmakers in India and abroad.

Delhi is set to position itself as a global hub of cinema, art and culture, with an international film festival from March 25 to 31. Under the "Rough Cuts" segment, feature films of 60 minutes or longer that are in the early or intermediate stages of editing can be submitted. Selected projects will receive



structured mentorship and feedback from industry professionals to help refine the films before completion, the statement said.

Another segment, "Viewing Room", will showcase films that are completed or nearing completion and are seeking festival selection, distribution or financing opportunities, it said.

The statement added that the programme will provide dedicated viewing terminals for accredited industry professionals, including festival programmers and distributors.



## IN FOCUS



Indian palm squirrel feeds on flower petals of Red Silk Cotton Tree or Bombax ceiba in New Delhi PTI

# CM Yogi attends RSS closed door meeting in Ghaziabad

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
■ Ghaziabad/

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on Thursday attended a closed-door coordination meeting of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh in Ghaziabad, officials said.

The meeting was held on the premises of the Saraswati Shishu Mandir in Nehru Nagar, in which the general secretary (organisation) of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and senior office-bearers were present.

Ghaziabad BJP MLA Sanjeev Sharma said that such coordination meetings are organised across Uttar Pradesh throughout the year. After the meeting,



Adityanath went to the helipad at the Police Lines, where he met several local leaders, including BJP MP Atul Garg and state minister Sunil Kumar Sharma.

Sharma said the chief minister reviewed the law and order situation in the district and sought feedback from the elected representatives.

Adityanath later left for

Greater Noida and is scheduled to fly to Lucknow on Thursday evening from the Hindon airport.

### CM warns officials against negligence

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on Thursday directed officials to resolve public grievances with urgency and sensitivity, warning that any laxity

in this regard would be "unpardonable".

The chief minister issued these instructions during a 'Janata Darshan' programme held at the Gorakhnath Temple premises. According to an official statement, the chief minister met around 150 people during the interaction and assured them that the state government remains committed to ensuring that the problems of every distressed person are resolved through appropriate action.

"Any laxity or negligence in this regard will be inexcusable. Every complaint must be resolved in a quality-driven, transparent and satisfactory manner," the chief minister said.

# Navy joins search for Iranian warship survivors

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
■ New Delhi

The Indian Navy on Thursday said it joined search and rescue operation after learning about a distress call from Iranian warship IRIS Dena which went down off the coast of Sri Lanka after being hit by a torpedo fired by a US submarine.

The Iranian warship was returning home after participating in the Milan multilateral naval exercise hosted by India. At least 87 Iranian sailors were killed in the attack, according to Sri Lankan authorities.

In a statement, the Indian Navy said it promptly launched its search and rescue (SAR) efforts with a long-range maritime patrol aircraft at 10 am on Wednesday to augment the rescue operations led by Sri



Lanka. "Another aircraft with air droppable life rafts was also kept standby for immediate deployment. INS Tarangini which was operating in vicinity was deployed for aiding the rescue efforts and arrived in search area by 4 pm," it said.

"By this time search and rescue had been undertaken by Sri Lankan Navy and other agencies," it said.

The Indian Navy said a distress call from IRIS Dena was received at the Maritime Rescue Coordination Centres Colombo in the early hours of Wednesday as reported by the Sri Lankan Navy.

# Ex-CM Atishi pushes for live-streaming in Phansi Ghar row

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
■ New Delhi

A day before former chief minister Arvind Kejriwal is scheduled to appear before the Delhi Assembly's Privileges Committee over the *Phansi Ghar* (execution chamber) issue, Leader of Opposition Atishi on Thursday reiterated demand for live-streaming of the proceedings.



Atishi said the Delhi government was far more focused on abusing Kejriwal than addressing pressing civic concerns such as electricity, water, roads, schools and hospitals.

"If the BJP has courage, it should live-stream hearing of Arvind Kejriwal before the Privileges Committee on Friday so that public can see truth. The committee has asked him to clarify whether a British-era gallows existed in the Delhi Assembly or not," Atishi said.

The Privileges Committee is examining the significance of a British-era Phansi Ghar replicated inside the Delhi Assembly by the AAP government. The AAP claims that the building housed a secret gallows during the British rule while the BJP claims that it was only a tiffin room.

When Ram Niwas Goel became Speaker of the Delhi Assembly, Atishi said, several

# India's rising global confidence reflected in new national survey

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
■ New Delhi

India's growing strategic confidence and evolving global outlook were highlighted in a new national survey released at the Constitution Club of India in New Delhi. The report indicates that Europe and Germany are increasingly seen as India's most trusted partners in an uncertain geopolitical environment.

The survey report, titled "Navigating India's Role: Perspectives on Economy, Security, and Geopolitics," was released by the Kalinga Kusum Foundation (KKF) in



collaboration with the Friedrich Naumann Foundation (FNF) and research organisation Rajneethi. The event brought together diplomats, policy-makers, scholars, journalists and industry leaders to examine how India's strategic community perceives the country's expanding role

in global affairs.

Among the distinguished attendees was Philipp Ackermann, Ambassador of Germany to India, highlighting the growing significance of India-Germany and India-European relations. The discussion also came against the backdrop of the recently concluded India-EU

Free Trade Agreement, widely described as a milestone in strengthening economic and strategic cooperation. The survey, conducted among 1,396 respondents from politics, business, academia, media and civil society, provides a detailed snapshot of how influential and informed citizens interpret global developments. Nearly 70 per cent of respondents believe India will become a global power within the next two decades, while economic growth, jobs, technology and trade emerged as the top priorities for India's foreign policy. The findings also underline India's long-

standing preference for strategic autonomy in global affairs. Notably, Europe ranked highest on India's trust index, ahead of the United States, Russia and China. Germany received particularly strong ratings for technological leadership, regulatory stability and climate-conscious industrial policy.

Delivering the keynote address, Sujeet Kumar, Member of the Rajya Sabha, said the survey reflects India's evolving strategic consciousness, particularly among young professionals and the expanding urban middle class.

# Model Town murder case solved: 8 held

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
■ New Delhi

Delhi Police have solved a sensational murder case in Model Town with the arrest of a habitual criminal and the apprehension of seven juveniles. The victim, an 18-year-old youth identified as Ishant alias Isha, was shot dead near MCD Colony in Azadpur last month.

The main accused, Mohit Pal (28), a resident of Jahangirpuri, was arrested by a joint team of Police Station Model Town and the Special Staff of the North-West district.

Additional Commissioner of Police (North-West) Bhisam Singh said the case was solved through coordinated investigation and technical analysis. The

main conspirator has been arrested, and seven juveniles have been apprehended. The murder took place on February 22 near the main gate of MCD Colony, Azadpur. The victim, aged around 20 to 22 years, was found lying in a pool of blood with visible gunshot injuries. He was rushed to BJRM Hospital by an Emergency Response Vehicle team, where doctors declared him dead on arrival.

During the investigation, the scooter was identified by Amrita, a resident of Jahangirpuri, as belonging to her nephew Ishant alias Isha. She told police that the youth had come to attend a wedding with friends at MCD Colony when he was allegedly shot by unknown

persons. During interrogation, the accused revealed that they had originally planned to kill a man named Narendra Om Pal. According to police, Mohit and his associates had a long-standing enmity with Narendra and his group. They believed Narendra's associates were responsible for the murder of their associate Deepak Prakar in 2024. On the day of the incident, the accused allegedly met at Bhalswa village and hatched a conspiracy to attack Narendra Om Pal, who they believed would attend a wedding function at MCD Flats near Azadpur Terminal. However, when they reached the venue, they spotted Ishant standing outside the gate.

# Fire breaks out in girls' hostel of Palghar ashram

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
■ Palghar

A fire broke out in a girls' hostel of a state-run ashram school in Maharashtra's Palghar district on Thursday, though there are no reports of injuries as all 87 inmates were successfully evacuated, a civic official said.

The blaze erupted at 5.20 pm at the hostel of the school located in Kandawadi village in Dahanu taluka, Palghar District. Disaster Management Cell chief Vivekanand Kadam said.

"A total of 87 girls were staying in the hostel. All of them have been safely evacuated. There are no report of



injuries. After authorities were alerted by teacher Chitra Chougule, fire brigade teams from Dahanu rushed to the spot and started relief and rescue operations at 6:03pm. The process of dousing the fire is underway," he said.

The extent of damage and cause would be known after the blaze was brought under control, Kadam added.

# Family mourns seafarer killed on oil tanker off Oman coast



PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
■ Mumbai

The Solanki family in north Mumbai is coming to terms with two deaths in as many months, after its youngest member was killed when a bomb-carrying drone boat struck an oil tanker in the Gulf of Oman. Dixit Amritlal Solanki, a 33-year-old seafarer from Kandivali, died after the oil tanker was hit by an unmanned boat 52 nautical miles off the coast of Muscat Governorate on Monday.

Dixit had come to Mumbai over a month ago for his mother's last rites, according to Suresh Solanki of National Union of Seafarers of India (NUSI). "His father Amritlal, a former seaman, is not in a position to speak after this double tragedy," Solanki said. Dixit Solanki was working as an oiler on the tanker and was initially reported missing after the blast.

His elder sister lives in Dubai. The seafarer's neighbours said he had only recently resumed work at sea after taking time off following the death of his mother.

# CISF to develop its capacity to deal with drone, cyber threats: Director General

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
■ Bhubaneswar

The Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) will develop its capacity to tackle possible threats of drone and cyber attacks on vital installations, a senior officer said on Thursday.

"In the next modernisation plan, we will take up drone and anti-drone training in a big way," CISF Director General (DG) Praveer Ranjan said while referring to drone attacks during 'Operation

Sindoor' and the prevailing conflict in Iran.

Addressing media persons on the eve of the 57th Raising Day of CISF, Ranjan said they have established a drone training and anti-drone capability training centre in their unit at Behror in Rajasthan and MHA granted approval for establishing the Remote Pilot Training Organisation (RPTO) for training on drone operation and anti-drone systems.

The CISF has been designated as the nodal agency for aerial threat at vital installa-



Praveer Ranjan

tions, he added.

Similarly, nowadays, every sector is facing cyber threats.

So, the system (software applications) security has become very important as everything is done by the system, he said.

"CISF is also going a big way to develop its capacity in cyber security. We have already developed some cyber commandos," the DG said.

Under its modernisation plan for 2026-30, the CISF has identified 76 items, amounting to ₹819 crore, which include training on drone solutions, establish-

ing an integrated cyber security lab, a dedicated data centre, and a zero-trust network to safeguard its digital infrastructure, officials said. Union Home Minister Amit Shah would grace the Raising Day celebration at CISF's Mundali unit and inaugurate two residential projects of the force. Shah is scheduled to inaugurate a modern residential complex at Rajarhat, Kolkata (₹72.46 crore) and another housing project at Maidan Garhi, Delhi (₹253.10 crore).

He will also lay foundation stones for the 9th Reserve Battalion at Nagarbera, Assam (₹124.73 crore); the 11th Reserve Battalion at Nashik, Maharashtra (₹195.29 crore); and the 12th Reserve Battalion at Sehore, Madhya Pradesh (₹243.73 crore).

Today, with a strength of two lakh personnel, the central force provides security cover to 361 vital installations spread across 25 states and five UTs.

The CISF is guarding 71 airports, Delhi Metro Rail, 10

chemical & fertilizers, 105 power plants, 18 nuclear installations, 16 establishments of department of space, 47 government buildings housing major ministries of Government of India, 15 seaports, 6 defence units, 36 oil & natural gas units, 17 steel plants and 10 coal mines, 9 private sectors, etc, he said.

The Special Security Group (SSG) of CISF provides security to over 156 protectees.

The CISF special fire wing with nearly 9,700 personnel provides fire management

services to 114 units spread across 23 states of the country. Eight precious lives were saved by the CISF personnel during medical contingencies, fire incidents and by preventing suicide attempts across the country during last year, he said.

During Operation Sindoor, amid heavy shelling by Pakistani forces, CISF personnel analysed shell trajectories, and evacuated nearly 250 civilians-including women, children and NHPC staff-to safety, Ranjan said.

## FROM PAGE - 1

# Iran warns US as war expands across Asia

In the Caucasus, Ilham Aliyev, president of Azerbaijan, accused Iran of launching drones toward the country after one crashed near an airport in the exclave of Nakhchivan, injuring four airport workers. Tehran denied responsibility for the incident. Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi condemned the US Navy for sinking the Iranian frigate IRIS Dena earlier in the week near Sri Lanka, calling the incident an "atrocious act at sea" that killed at least 87 sailors.

"Mark my words: The US will come to bitterly regret the precedent it has set," Araghchi said on social media. The conflict has also disrupted global shipping routes. A tanker reportedly came under attack off the coast of Kuwait, according to the United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations center run by the British military. Commercial ships have already been targeted in the Gulf of Oman and the Strait of Hormuz, through which roughly one-fifth of the world's oil supply passes, pushing global oil prices sharply higher.

Israel also issued a mass evacuation warning for residents of the southern suburbs of Beirut in Lebanon, signaling the possibility of heavy bombardment of areas where the Iran-backed militant group Hezbollah operates.

The Israeli military said it struck about 80 targets in Lebanon over the past 24 hours, including command centers used by Hezbollah. The United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) reported that peacekeepers observed ground combat near the border village of Kfar Kila, as well as airstrikes and explosions around the town of Khayam. Since the war began Saturday, officials say the fighting has killed at least 1,230 people in Iran, more than 70 in Lebanon, and about a dozen in Israel. The United States has confirmed six American troops killed.

# PM Modi calls for swift end to conflicts...

Beyond geopolitical issues, both leaders focused on expanding cooperation in emerging technologies and sustainable development. Modi announced that India and Finland are elevating their collaboration in digitalisation and sustainability to a strategic partnership.

He said the partnership will strengthen cooperation in cutting-edge sectors such as artificial intelligence, 6G telecommunications, clean energy and quantum computing. The two sides also agreed to expand collaboration in defence, space technology, semiconductors and critical minerals. Highlighting the broader context of

India's relations with Europe, Modi said ties between India and the continent are entering a "golden period" at a time when global uncertainty is increasing.

The prime minister also pointed to Finland's long-standing presence in India's telecommunications sector through the company Nokia, noting that its mobile technology and network infrastructure have connected millions of Indians. He added that Finland remains a key partner for India in the Nordic region and that both countries are expanding cooperation in Arctic and polar research, reflecting growing collaboration in science and climate-related fields.

# Nitish's reign ends in Bihar, BJP to get a...

Besides Nitish and Nabin, other NDA candidates who filed RS nominations from the State were Union Minister Ram Nath Thakur of the JD(U), RLM minister Upendra Kushwaha, and BJP state general secretary Shivshankar Kumar, a former MLA who hopes to make a debut in Parliament. NDA enjoys a brute majority in the Assembly, though its tally of 202 in the 243-member House falls three short of the number needed to bag all five Rajya Sabha seats.

RJD national working president, Tejashwi

Yadav, the Leader of the Opposition in the Assembly, said, "BJP has done a Maharashtra in Bihar. It is a party that has always been opposed to Dalits and OBCs. Now, it will seek to implement its agenda in the socialist stronghold."

In Bihar, nomination papers were also filed by RJD's Amarendra Dhari Singh, a sitting MP and businessman turned politician, who was accompanied, among others, by the party's national working president, Tejashwi Yadav, to the Vidhan Sabha secretariat.

The RJD held two of the five Rajya Sabha seats from Bihar for which polls are being held. But in view of its decimation in the 2025 Assembly polls, in which it managed only 25 seats, it has chosen to contest only one, dropping Prem Chand Gupta, a former Union minister and key aide of party supremo Lalu Prasad.

# Taranjit Sandhu appointed Delhi LG

While former Delhi LG Vinai Kumar Saxena was appointed as the LG of Ladakh. With these changes former Ambassador to United States Taranjit Singh Sandhu was appointed as the new LG of Delhi.

The President of India accepted the resignation of Dr Bose as the Governor of West Bengal

while appointing RN Ravi, Governor of Tamil Nadu as the Governor West Bengal. Rajendra Vishwanath Arlekar, Governor of Kerala will discharge the functions of Governor of Tamil Nadu. Meanwhile, Shiv Pratap Shukla, Governor of Himachal Pradesh being appointed as Governor of Telangana while Jishnu Dev Varma, Governor of Telangana would take over as Governor of Maharashtra.

Nand Kishore Yadav was appointed as Governor of Nagaland, Lt. General (Retired) Syed Ata Hasnain was appointed as new Governor of Bihar who will replace Arif Mohammad Khan. "The above appointments will take effect from the dates they will assume charge of their respective offices," read a press release from the Rashtrapati Bhavan.

West Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee expressed shock at Bose's resignation and alleged that Bose may have resigned "under pressure" from Union Home Minister Amit Shah before the elections, expressing concern over the sudden development and her uncertainty regarding the motives.

The CM further alleged that although Shah informed her about Ravi replacing Bose, she was not consulted in the matter. Banerjee maintained that such actions undermine the spirit of the Constitution and strike at the foundation of the country's federal structure.



## Not yet elected new supreme leader: Top Iranian official

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
New Delhi

Iran has not yet elected the successor of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Syed Ali Khamenei, who was assassinated in a joint US-Israeli air strike last week, a senior Iranian official said on Thursday. Ayatollah Dr Abdul Majeed Hakeemela, the representative of Iran's supreme leader in India, also said that the process to elect a new leader is still underway.

"This news is not true because, till now, they (the council) have not chosen or nominated anyone, and the process is still underway," Hakeemela told PTI when asked about some media reports claiming that Ayatollah Khamenei's son, Mojtaba Khamenei, has been elected as his successor.

"There are several candidates for this position, and Ayatollah Mojtaba is one of them. It is not because he is the son of Ayatollah Khamenei. Rather, because of his qualifications, they may consider choosing him. But it is not finalised, and they are still assessing to find the qualified person for this position," he said.



said. Explaining the process of the election of the supreme leader of Iran, Hakeemela said an 88-member Assembly of Experts council is elected by vote during the elections in Iran.

"One of the responsibilities of this council is to elect the supreme leader. Now they have started negotiating to get a qualified person for this position," he said.

"They (council members) did a lot of discussion, but the situation is not good

because we are under attack by the US and Israel. So when they get the good situation, and they gather, they will choose the one who is qualified for this position," he added.

The supreme leader is the highest political and religious authority of Iran. He has a final say over policy matters. He is also the commander-in-chief of the armed forces.

When asked if Iran is ready to take the risk of publicly naming the new supreme leader in view of Israeli Defence Minister Israel Katz's threat to target him, Hakeemela said, "Iran is ready to defend itself."

Israeli and US strikes recently targeted a building of the Assembly of Experts in Qom city. TV footage by local media showed the building severely damaged in the strikes. Iran's state media later reported that the building was no longer being used for meetings.

Recalling Khamenei, Hakeemela said, "He used to tell people to study about India. 'If you want to know the history of Iran, you cannot understand it without understanding and studying the history of India'."

## Amit Shah to lay foundation for NFSU campus in Bhubaneswar

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
New Delhi/Bhubaneswar

Union Home Minister Amit Shah will lay the foundation for a campus of the National Forensic Sciences University in Bhubaneswar on Friday, besides inaugurating a three-day exhibition on the new criminal laws being organised by Odisha Police.

Shah, who is scheduled to reach Bhubaneswar on Thursday evening on a two-day visit to Odisha, will also attend the 57th Raising Day ceremony of the Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) as the chief guest on Friday, besides virtually inaugurating the transit campus of the National Forensic Sciences University (NFSU).

The Home Minister will also perform a *Bhumi Pujan* of the Central Forensic Science Laboratory (CFSL) located alongside the NFSU campus in Bhubaneswar.

Odisha DGP YB Khurania said Shah is scheduled to



Union Home Minister Amit Shah

inaugurate a three-day exhibition on the new criminal laws, organised by Odisha Police, on Friday. During the programme, Shah will also virtually inaugurate 20 new cyber police stations, the DGP said. According to an official statement issued in New Delhi, the home minister will also flag off a mobile forensic van on the occasion.

The Shah and minister of cooperation will also virtually inaugurate many police station buildings aimed at strengthening police infrastructure under initiatives related to the Ministry of Home Affairs.

## Nation Focus



### CHANGE OF GUARD CEREMONY RESCHEDULED: PRESIDENT'S OFFICE

The change of guard ceremony will shift to a new timing, from 8 am, beginning this Saturday, the President's office has said. The ceremony is a military tradition held every week (on Saturday) to enable a fresh group of the President's Bodyguard (PBG) to take charge. "The change of guard ceremony, which takes place every Saturday at the forecourt of the Rashtrapati Bhavan, will shift to a new timing, ie, from 8.00 am to 9.00 am from this Saturday (March 7, 2026)," it said in a statement. The PBG, raised in 1773, is the seniormost regiment of the Indian Army. It is a regiment carrying out ceremonial duties for the President of India. The PBG personnel are excellent horsemen, capable tank men and paratroopers.



### UNION JAL SHAKTI MINISTER REVIEWS WATER CONSERVATION

Union Jal Shakti Minister CR Patil on Thursday chaired a meeting with district officials from Madhya Pradesh to review the progress of the Jal Sanchay Jan Bhagidari 2.0 initiative that seeks greater public participation in water conservation. Jal Sanchay Jan Bhagidari (JSJB) 2.0 aims to create one crore artificial recharge and storage structures by May 31. According to an statement, Patil reviewed the progress of the programme with district collectors and divisional commissioners of Madhya Pradesh.

## India needs steady hand at wheel but has compromised PM: Rahul

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
New Delhi

A day after a US submarine torpedoed and sank an Iranian warship in international waters off Sri Lanka's coast, the Congress on Thursday questioned the Government's silence with Rahul Gandhi saying that while the country needed a steady hand at the wheel, it has a "compromised PM who has surrendered our strategic

autonomy". Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge said the Modi Government's "reckless abdication" of India's strategic and national interests is there for all to see.

"An Iranian ship, a guest of India was returning, unarmed from the International Fleet Review 2026, hosted by us, and was torpedoed in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). No statement of concern or condolence. PM Modi remains mute," Kharge said on X.

"Why lecture us on the doctrines of MAHASAGAR and India being a 'Net Security Provider' in the IOR, when you can't react on what is happening in your own backyard? As many as 38 Indian Flag commercial ships along with 1100 sailors are stuck in Gulf of Hormuz," he said.

"Indian sailors, including Captain Ashish Kumar have reportedly died. Why is there no maritime rescue or relief operation in place? You say



Union Home Minister Amit Shah

only 25 days of crude and oil stocks left. With rising oil prices, what is our energy contingency plan, especially in the wake of GOI virtually accepting the demand to stop import of Russian oil?," the Congress chief said.

As per MEA statement on March 3, "some Indian nationals have lost their lives or are missing", he said. "There are one crore Indians in the gulf region countries. Medical students are releas-

ing desperate video messages seeking help. How is the GOI securing their wellbeing? Is there any evacuation plan in place from the affected areas?" Kharge said.

"Clearly, Modi Ji's SURRENDER is both political and immoral! It demeans India's core national interests and destroys our foreign policy carefully and painstakingly built and followed by successive governments over the years!" Kharge said.

## Cost escalation of bullet train project not entirely on railways: NHRCL

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
New Delhi

The National High Speed Rail Corporation Limited on Thursday said the cost escalation burden for the upcoming 508-km-long Ahmedabad-Mumbai bullet train project will not be borne entirely by the Indian Railways. The NHRCL, which is constructing the country's first high-speed corridor, issued a clarification on social media in response to a post by Congress Kerala unit, which alleged, that the railways will bear an additional ₹90,000 crore out of the cost escalation of the project from the original ₹1.1 lakh crore to ₹1.98 lakh crore now.

"The commentary circulating on the Mumbai-Ahmedabad High Speed Rail Project relies largely on conjecture and selective interpretation rather than verified facts. Several of the claims made are factually wrong," the NHRCL said. Justifying the current cost assessment, it stated that the updated project cost estimates are comparable to global benchmarks.

"The initial estimate was prepared at a preliminary stage nearly a decade ago. As is standard practice in major infrastructure projects worldwide, costs are refined once detailed design, engineering, land acquisition and construction contracts are finalised," the corporation said.

It added, "India has undertaken projects of similar scale in highways, metro rail and airports where revised esti-



mated followed detailed project reports and tendering." Responding to Congress Kerala unit's claim that the Japanese agency, JICA, which agreed to fund 81 per cent of the original estimated cost, will not fund the escalation, the NHRCL said, "The agreement between India and Japan for funding the project is comprehensive, and the speculations made have no base."

"The project continues to be backed by one of the most concessional sovereign loans ever extended for infrastructure, with extremely low interest and long repayment periods. Such financing terms are precisely why the project was structured as a bilateral partnership. Assertions to the contrary appear speculative rather than factual," it added.

Dismissing the reports that the railway will have to fund a big chunk of the escalated amount, the corporation stated, "It is also incorrect to state that the burden is being placed on Indian Railways.

The project is implemented through the dedicated entity National High Speed Rail Corporation Limited (NHRCL),

which has its own financing structure involving the Government of India and the participating state Governments."

"Treating it as an operating liability of Indian Railways reflects a misunderstanding of the institutional framework," it said. According to NHRCL, the national transport infrastructure is evaluated worldwide by looking at economic benefits.

It maintained that the high-speed rail corridors generate value through time savings and productivity gains, reduction in aviation and highway congestion, regional economic development along the corridor, technology transfer and domestic manufacturing capability. "These wider economic multipliers are the basis on which such projects are evaluated internationally," it said.

Regarding allegations about an increase in ticket prices from ₹3,000 to ₹6,000-₹7,000, the NHRCL said, "Ticket pricing will be affordable. The speculative numbers have no basis and are meant to mislead people."

## Birla to be present in House but not chair proceedings

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
New Delhi

The Lok Sabha will witness a rare moment, most likely next Monday, when Om Birla will not chair the proceedings but will be seated amongst the members as the House takes up a notice seeking his removal from office.

As Parliament meets for the second phase of the Budget session on March 9, the Lok Sabha is likely to take up the resolution moved by the Opposition against Birla for allegedly acting in a "blatantly partisan" manner.

According to the rules and laid down procedure, Birla will have the right to defend himself when the resolution is discussed by the lower house. He will also have the right to vote against the resolution, Constitution expert PDT Achary explained.

The expert said that while Birla will not chair the proceedings when the resolution comes up before the House, he will be seated in the prominent rows in the Treasury benches.

The day the notice was submitted, Birla had stopped chairing the House, taking a stand.

"Though he could have chaired the House till the day the notice came up before the Lok Sabha, he took a stand and decided not to be present in the House till the resolution against him was settled. He upheld the highest standards of morality," a Lok Sabha Secretariat functionary said. Past speakers against whom such resolutions were planned had

continued to attend the House, the functionary pointed out.

At least 118 Opposition members had submitted a notice for moving a resolution to remove Birla from office for not allowing Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi and other Opposition leaders to speak in the House on the Motion of Thanks to the President's address, as well as for suspending eight MPs.

Congress member and chief whip K Suresh submitted the notice to the Lok Sabha secretariat on behalf of several opposition parties, including his party, the Samajwadi Party and the DMK. TMC MPs, however, did not sign the notice.

Achary, a former Lok Sabha secretary general, told PTI that the "allocation of the seat, which the Speaker occupies under such circumstances, is not mentioned in the Rules".

He said Birla will also not be able to vote on the resolution using the automated vote system, but will have to fill out a slip to register his vote. Achary presumes that a seat belonging to a Union minister, who is from the Rajya Sabha, could be given to him as only Lok Sabha members will be able to cast their votes for or against the resolution.

Deputy speaker of the Lok Sabha and deputy chairperson of the Rajya Sabha have their earmarked seats in their respective Houses when they are not presiding over. Front seats in the Opposition benches are allocated to them. Article 96 of the Constitution bars a



Lok Sabha speaker Om Birla

speaker or a deputy speaker from presiding over the House while a resolution for his removal from office is under consideration.

The speaker has a constitutional right to defend himself in the House if the resolution is discussed in the Lok Sabha.

At least two Lok Sabha members have to sign the notice to move a resolution for the speaker's removal. Any number of members can sign the notice, but a minimum of two is mandatory. The speaker can be removed from office by a resolution passed by the House through a simple majority. Article 94C of the Constitution has provisions for such a move.

"All the members of the House are counted to compute the majority, not

speaker run the House in his or her absence.

"The speaker examining a resolution that seeks his removal looks absurd," Achary said, adding that the rule is silent on the subject.

Once the processing part is over, the resolution reaches the House. But it can go to the House after 14 days, Achary said. The chair then places it in the House for consideration. It is actually the House which admits it, or as the rule says, "grants permission".

Achary further said, "The chair then asks members in favour of the resolution to stand up. If 50 members stand up in support of it and if that criterion is fulfilled, the Chair announces that the House has granted permission."

"Once the House grants permission, it has to be taken up for discussion and disposed of within 10 days."

Lok Sabha sources said the notice will be taken up for discussion on Monday itself. There are precedents of resolutions being moved. However, none has been adopted so far. "The reason — Governments have a majority," Achary said.

The resolution alleges that Speaker Birla had acted in a "blatantly partisan" manner in conducting the business of the House and "abused" the constitutional office he occupies.

Three Lok Sabha speakers — GV Mavlankar (1954), Hukam Singh (1966) and Balram Jakhar (1987) — had faced no-confidence motions in the past, which were negated. The panel helps the

## BJP's earning accounted for 85% of total income of national parties in 2024-25: ADR Report

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
New Delhi

The BJP has declared an income of ₹6,769.14 crore in FY 2024-25, the highest among national parties, while the Congress was a distant second, declaring an income of around ₹918.28 crore. According to a report by the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR), six national parties (BJP, INC, CPI(M), AAP, BSP and NPEP) declared a total income of ₹7,960.09 crore in 2024-25, and the BJP accounted for 85.03 per cent of it. The report is based on the declarations made by political parties to the Election Commission.

The BJP spent around 55.76 per cent of its income, amounting to ₹3,774.58 crore, while the Congress spent around ₹1,111.94 crore,

which is 21.09 per cent (₹193.66 crore) more than its total income.

The Communist Party of India (Marxist) reported a total income of ₹172.60 crore during the year, while its total expenditure amounted to ₹173.86 crore, ₹1.26 cr (0.73 per cent) less than its income.

The BSP's total income was ₹58.58 crore, while its expenditure for the year was ₹106.30 crore. The party's expenditure for that year exceeded its total income by ₹47.71 crore (81.45 per cent).

AAP reported a total income of ₹39.28 crore and a total expenditure of ₹36.46 crore, meaning the party spent 92.83 per cent of its total income. The National People's Party (NPEP) declared a total income of ₹2.18 crore and a total expenditure of ₹1.19 crore,



indicating the party spent 54.72 per cent of its total income. The six national parties have declared a total income of ₹7,960.09 crore, collected from all over India.

The Congress was second with an income of ₹918.28 crore, which forms 11.53 per cent of the total income of national parties, while the NPEP declared the least

income of ₹2.18 crore, which forms 0.02 per cent of the total. Between 2023-24 and 2024-25, the BJP's income increased by 55.95 per cent (₹2,428.6768 crore), while the CPI(M) registered a marginal rise of 2.96 per cent (₹4.96 crore).

During the same period, the income of the Congress declined by 25.05 per cent (₹306.83 crore), and the BSP's income decreased by 9.56 per cent (₹6.19 crore). AAP's income witnessed a significant growth of 73.20 per cent (₹16.60 crore).

In FY 2024-25, national parties declared a total income of ₹7,960.09 crore, of which 85.08 per cent (₹6,772.53 crore) came from donations/contributions and 14.92 per cent (₹1,187.56 crore) from other sources. The BJP derived 90.48 per cent of its total income

from donations amounting to ₹6,124.85 crore, while AAP received 99.85 per cent (₹39.22 crore) and NPEP received 97.74 per cent (₹2.14 crore) of their total income through contributions.

In contrast, the BSP reported 100 per cent of its income (₹58.58 crore) from other sources with no donations, whereas INC received 56.86 per cent (₹522.13 crore) from donations and 43.14 per cent (₹396.15 crore) from other sources, and CPI(M) received 48.77 per cent (₹84.17 crore) from donations and 51.23 per cent (₹88.42 crore) from other sources.

National parties that received the highest income from donations/contributions include the BJP (₹6124.85 crore), Congress (₹522.13 crore), CPI(M) (₹84.17 crore), AAP (₹39.22 crore) and

NPEP (₹2.14 crore). The collection from issuing coupons, ₹350.12 crore declared by the Congress, formed 38.12 per cent of its total income during 2024-25. The report said the most common and popular items of expenditure for national parties are the election expenses and administrative/general expenses.

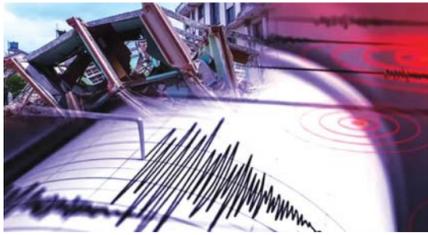
The BJP spent ₹3335.36 crore on election/general propaganda, followed by ₹323.05 crore for administrative costs. The Congress spent ₹896.22 crore on election expenditure, followed by expenses towards administrative and general expenses of around ₹159.68 crore.

CPI(M) spent ₹78.11 crore on administrative and general expenses followed by ₹51.03 crore on Employee Cost.



## States Focus

# Sanatana Dharma can never be erased: VP



### TREMORS RECORDED IN THREE GUJARAT DISTRICTS

Tremors of 3.4 and 2.5 magnitude were recorded in Kutch, Dahod and Botad districts of Gujarat on Thursday, officials said. No casualties or damage to property were recorded anywhere.

The first tremor of 2.5 magnitude was registered 34 km west-southwest of Dahod in eastern Gujarat at 11.55 am, said the Gandhinagar-based Institute of Seismological Research (ISR). It was followed by a 3.4 magnitude tremor that struck 12 km north-northwest of Bhachau in Kutch district in the west at 1.43 pm.



### TRIPURA SIGNS PACT WITH GNRC FOR HOSPITAL: CM

Chief Minister Manik Saha on Thursday said the State Government has signed an agreement with the Guwahati Neurological Research Centre to set up a superspecialty hospital at Hapania in West Tripura district.

Earlier, the Government had signed a pact with Srija Hospitals and Research Institute, an Imphal-based medical institution, to set up a super-specialty hospital and medical college at RK Nagar in the same district.

**PRESS TRUST OF INDIA**  
■ Belagavi (Karnataka)

Sanatana Dharma may be tested by time, but it can never be erased, Vice President CP Radhakrishnan said here on Thursday.

He said this while participating as the chief guest at the inauguration of the Rajagopuram at the Sri Veerabhadreshwar Temple in Yaduru in this district, according to a press release.

Describing the occasion as a moment of spiritual resurgence and civilisational reaffirmation, the vice president, while addressing the gathering, said that Bharat is not merely a nation but a living civilisation—a continuous flow of consciousness from the Indus Valley to Kanyakumari. He noted that this is the sacred land where the eternal wisdom of the Vedas was first



Vice-President CP Radhakrishnan during the inauguration of the Rajagopuram at Sri Veerabhadreshwar Temple in Yaduru, Belagavi district, Karnataka

heard and where the profound message of the Bhagavad Gita continues to guide humanity to act with courage, live with righteousness and surrender with faith.

Stating that Hindu consciousness is not confined to rituals but is a way of life, he highlighted the timeless philosophy of "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam"—the world is one

family—and India's spiritual vision that sees divinity in nature and in every human being. Referring to the Veera-Shaiva Lingayat tradition, the vice president underlined its significant contribution to spiritual, educational, cultural, and social upliftment in Karnataka and neighbouring Maharashtra.

He noted that the Veera-Shaiva maths and temples have played a transformative role in nurturing the values of faith, seva and social harmony.

According to the release, Radhakrishnan paid tribute to Shiva Yogi Shri Kadasiddheshwar Swamiji, a prominent Lingayat religious leader and social reformer from Karnataka. "Sanatana Dharma may be tested by time, but it can never be erased," he said.

The vice president lauded the successive pontiffs of Shri

Kadasiddheshwar Math for their tireless efforts in preserving daily worship, rituals, renovation works and spiritual service. Referring to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision of 'Vikas Bhi, Virasat Bhi' (progress along with preservation of heritage), the vice president said India's development and heritage must go hand in hand.

He noted that Bharat today is progressing as a technologically advanced, economically strong and globally influential nation, while remaining firmly rooted in its civilisational ethos.

Describing the inauguration of the Rajagopuram as a reaffirmation of faith and the continuity of tradition, Radhakrishnan said the revival of sacred spaces is not merely about architecture but about restoring cultural self-confidence and spiritual awareness.

## Pilot urges Govt to take stand on West Asia conflict

**PRESS TRUST OF INDIA**  
■ Jaipur

Senior Congress leader Sachin Pilot on Thursday said the ongoing conflict in West Asia should end soon and urged the Government of India to uphold its tradition of diplomatic neutrality while taking a clear stand on developments affecting its strategic region.

Pilot said India has historically maintained a balanced and mature position in global affairs and should continue to do so.

"I hope the ongoing violence ends soon and the loss of lives and property stops. The developments have unfolded very rapidly. India has always maintained neutrality and globally its position has been that of a sensible, serious and mature nation," he said.

Referring to a US strike on an Iranian vessel in international waters off the Sri Lankan coast, Pilot said India should not remain silent when such incidents



Senior Congress leader Sachin Pilot

occur close to its area of influence. "America has carried out an attack and a ship has been sunk. I believe our government and the country should take a stand on this. If a war is happening elsewhere but such one-sided activity takes place in our area of influence, then remaining silent is not right," he said. Pilot pointed out that the

ship had come to participate in a military exercise with Indian forces and was destroyed very close to India.

He said the country must "stand up and say what is right and what is wrong," adding that the silence of the Ministry of External Affairs and the Ministry of Defence is being watched by the world and is not in the national interest. The Congress leader also said that India has historically spoken clearly on global issues and maintained relations with multiple countries.

"Whether it is Iran, Afghanistan, Europe or Russia, India has long-standing cultural and historical bilateral relations with many countries. We should not deviate from our diplomatic principles, our self-interest and the tradition of neutrality," he said. Pilot further alleged that the government appeared to be accepting one-sided conditions in international dealings and seemed to be "under pressure".

## 3 Assam Congress MLAs join BJP ahead of polls



Congress MLAs Kamalakhya Dey Purkayastha and Basanta Das in the presence of Assam BJP President Dilip Saikia join BJP on Thursday

**TONY DAS** ■ Guwahati

Three Congress MLAs — Kamalakhya De Purakayastha, Sashikanta Das and Basanta Das — on Thursday joined the ruling BJP in Assam, along with two others, ahead of the Assembly polls. All of them were inducted into the party by State BJP president Dilip Saikia in the presence of Union Minister Pabitra Margherita at a function here. The two others who joined the BJP are former Congress joint secretary Parsha Bob Kalita and former Trinamool Congress general secretary Kangkan Nath.

The development comes close on the heels of former Assam Congress president Bhupen Borah joining the saffron party. Elections are likely to be held in April. Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said that for the last two years, the MLAs were supporting his Government in the legislative Assembly, and "today, they have formally joined the party and I welcome them to the BJP".

Asked whether they will be given tickets in the upcoming Assembly elections, Sarma said the matter had not been discussed yet, but the party's State election committee "would now consider it". "Their names will be in the panel, but the Central Parliamentary Board will take the final decision regarding ticket allotment," he said. Sarma said it has already been discussed with them that nobody joins the BJP for election tickets, but at the same time "there is no hurdle in seeking the same and it will be given on the basis of their prospects". "They have joined the BJP unconditionally, and there is nothing like new or old members... we are all the same within the party," the CM said. He also said that the three MLAs had openly supported the BJP during the last Lok Sabha elections. Purakayastha represents Karimganj (North), while Sashikanta and Basanta are sitting MLAs from the Raha and Mangaldoi (SC) constituencies, respectively. The Congress had suffered a jolt, with Borah joining the BJP on February 22, while two other MLAs Abdul Rashid Mondal and Sherman Ali Ahmed switching over to the Rajior Dal last month. Both Mondal and Ahmed are three-time legislators from Goalpara (West) and Baghbar.

## Kerala CM urges media to report West Asia conflict responsibly

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
■ Thiruvananthapuram

Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan on Thursday urged the media to report developments related to the West Asia conflict with utmost care, saying accurate and balanced coverage can help ease concerns among expatriates and their families. He was speaking at an online meeting with editors of various media organisations.

"In the backdrop of the West Asia conflict, the media have an important role in providing reassurance to expatriates and their family members," the CM said.

Vijayan noted that almost every family in Kerala has, directly or indirectly, some connection with Gulf countries. "News of conflict in the region can increase fear and anxiety among families here.

Therefore, every report related to the conflict must be presented with seriousness and caution. This is a time for visual, print and online media to act with utmost responsibility," he said. Vijayan stressed that such reports should be based only on information received through official channels.

"Facts should not be allowed to slip. Even slight exaggeration can affect expatriates and their families in many ways," he said.

The CM underlined the need to ensure the credibility of news reports. "Unverified information and rumours on social media must not, under any circumstances, be published as news," he said.

Vijayan said reports should rely only on credible sources such as the Ministry of External Affairs, Indian embassies and official communications from the countries concerned.



Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan

Referring to the rush to report breaking news, Vijayan said: "There is often competition to break news. At the leadership level itself, there must be intervention to prevent situations where facts go wrong in the name of competition."

He also warned against sensational presentation. "Highly emotional reporting of missile strikes, drone attacks, fires and

explosions can create unnecessary fear among expatriate families," he said, adding that balanced reporting explaining the actual extent of the conflict is essential.

"Reports should not create a general impression that all Gulf countries are equally at risk," he said, suggesting that discussions should include assessments by experts and those experienced in diplomatic matters. The CM asked media organisations to prioritise the safety of expatriates.

"Personal details such as workplace and address should not be disclosed except when absolutely necessary. Those working in high-risk areas should not be presented in a sensational manner," he said.

Instead, the media should focus on safety advisories, official announcements and guidelines, and regularly publicise official

assistance mechanisms, Vijayan added. He urged media houses to help share helpline numbers and support systems, including emergency contacts of Indian embassies, assistance centres of the Ministry of External Affairs, and services of NORKA Roots. Highlighting the need to counter misinformation, Vijayan said fact-checking systems must be strengthened to prevent fake images and old videos from being circulated as new incidents.

He added that the media can help bring expatriates' issues, including employment problems, travel restrictions and security concerns, to the attention of authorities. Matters related to airfares could be taken up with the Central government, and maximum information would be shared through Non-Resident Keralites' Affairs, Vijayan said.

## Youth must become job creators, says CM Abdullah



Chief Minister Omar Abdullah

**PRESS TRUST OF INDIA**  
■ Jammu

Chief Minister Omar Abdullah on Thursday highlighted the immense potential of agriculture and allied sectors in Jammu and Kashmir and urged the youth to transition from being job seekers to job creators by harnessing innovation and entrepreneurship in the sector.

He said initiatives such as the Jammu and Kashmir Competitive Improvement of Agriculture and Allied Sectors Project (JKCIP) are playing a crucial role in nurturing a vibrant startup ecosystem and promoting innovation-driven enterprises in the Union Territory.

"The youth must transition from being job seekers to job creators by harnessing innovation and entrepreneurship in agriculture and allied sectors in Jammu and Kashmir," Abdullah said while addressing a startup outreach programme organised under JKICP at Sher-e-Kashmir University of Agricultural Sciences and Technology (SKUAST)-Jammu.

## BJP set to strengthen grip on Rajya Sabha with expected gains

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
■ New Delhi/Kolkata/Mumbai

Bihar CM Nitish Kumar and BJP president Nitin Nabin are set to enter Rajya Sabha unopposed, while NCP-SP supremo and veteran politician Sharad Pawar will return to the Upper House once again after they filed their nomination papers on Thursday. The BJP is set to increase its tally in the Upper House, where it will have the maximum number of seats after this round of elections.

The leaders were among the 40 candidates who filed their papers on the last day of nomination for 37 seats that are falling vacant in 10 states, leading to a keen contest for one seat each in Bihar, Odisha and Haryana.

Among others who are set to return to the Upper House in this round of biennial election include Union ministers Ram Nath Thakur and Ramdas Athawale, besides former Deputy Speaker of Lok Sabha M Thambidurai of DMK and noted lawyer Abhishek Singhvi of the Congress.

While Kumar and Nabin filed their nomination in Patna in the presence of Union Home Minister Amit Shah, Pawar's papers were filed in Mumbai on his behalf by his daughter, Supriya Sule.

Seven seats are falling vacant in Maharashtra, six in Tamil Nadu, five each in Bihar and West Bengal, four in Odisha, three in Assam and two each in Haryana, Telangana and Chhattisgarh, besides one seat in Himachal Pradesh. The scrutiny of papers will take place on Friday, and the nominations can be withdrawn till March 9. If needed, polling will be held on March 16. In Tamil Nadu, West Bengal and Assam, assembly elections are likely to be held in April. Bihar will also witness a keen



contest for one seat as sitting RJD MP Amarendra Dhari Singh, a businessman turned politician, has been renominated by the party, and he filed his papers accompanied by Tejashwi Yadav. The RJD has 25 MLAs along with 10 others of the Mahagathbandhan, including Congress and Left, and hopes to make up for the deficit of six votes with the help of AIMIM and BSP.

RLM president Upendra Kushwaha, who seeks a second consecutive term, and BJP state general secretary Shivesh Kumar, a former MLA who hopes to make a debut in Parliament, also filed their papers.

Odisha too shall have a contest for one seat, as two candidates each of ruling BJP — state unit president Manmohan Samal and sitting Rajya Sabha MP Sujeet Kumar and opposition BJD's Santrupt Misra and eminent urologist Dr Dattesar Hota, filed their nomi-

nations, while Dilip Ray filed as an independent with BJP's support, sparking the possibility of cross-voting. Another keen contest is awaited for one seat in Haryana, which has seen cross-voting in the past, too. Though the Congress has 37 MLAs, to win one seat, the opposition party needs only 31 first preference votes.

Satish Nandal, who had unsuccessfully contested the 2019 assembly polls as a BJP nominee, filed as an independent, becoming the third entrant in the contest after BJP's Sanjay Bhatia and Karamvir Singh Boudh of the Congress.

In Maharashtra, six candidates of the ruling Mahayuti Alliance, including Union minister Athawale and BJP leader Vinod Tawde, and Opposition Maha Vikas Aghadi nominee Sharad Pawar, are set to get elected unopposed. They filed their nominations on the last day.

Pawar, 85, was not present at Vidhan Bhawan owing to ill-health.

His daughter Sule filed the papers on his behalf. Besides Athawale and Tawde, the BJP fielded Ramrao Wadkute and Maya Ivnate, a former mayor of Nagpur who comes from a tribal background. The Eknath Shinde-led Shiv Sena fielded party spokesperson Jyoti Waghmare amid speculation that former Lok Sabha member Rahul Shewale might be nominated. From the Nationalist Congress Party, former deputy chief minister Ajit Pawar's son Parth Pawar has filed his nomination.

In poll-bound West Bengal, ruling TMC and the opposition BJP filed nominations for five Rajya Sabha seats from West Bengal, setting the stage for a largely predetermined Upper House election. Four candidates of the TMC — "minister Babul Supriyo, former West Bengal DGP Rajeev Kumar, senior Supreme Court advocate Menaka Guruswamy and actor Koel Mallick" submitted their nomi-

ination papers in the assembly. The BJP fielded former state unit president Rahul Sinha as the lone contender. With the TMC commanding an overwhelming majority in the 294-member Assembly, the party is comfortably placed to win four of the five seats.

In Assam, three aspirants from the ruling NDA — "BJP's Jogen Mohan and Terash Gowala along with UPPL's Pramod Boro" filed their nominations and are likely to be elected unopposed.

In Telangana, Congress candidates Abhishek Singhvi and Vem Narender Reddy filed their nominations. They are likely to be elected unopposed. Singhvi has been renominated from Telangana after completing a term of one and a half years. In Tamil Nadu, AIADMK sitting MP M Thambidurai and PMK leader Anbumani Ramadoss filed their nomination papers for the biennial election. The PMK (Anbumani faction), which is part of the AIADMK-led alliance in the state, was allotted the seat by the AIADMK on March 4.

Ruling DMK candidates Tiruchi Siva and J Constantine Ravindran too filed their papers, besides Congress candidate M Christopher Tilak, and DMK treasurer LK Sudeesh. DMK's allies — the Congress and Premalatha Vijayakanth-led DMDK, which joined the DMK's alliance recently, have been allotted a seat each by the Dravidian major.

While in Chhattisgarh, BJP's Laxmi Verma and Congress candidate Phulo Devi Netam filed their nomination papers, both of whom will be elected unopposed. In Himachal Pradesh, the Congress picked an unlikely candidate for the lone Rajya Sabha seat from Himachal Pradesh — president of Kangra district Congress Anurag Sharma.

## 45 villages yet to be electrified in Mizoram, says Minister

**PRESS TRUST OF INDIA**  
■ Aizawl

Forty-five villages in Mizoram have remained classified as un-electrified or de-electrified, Power and Electricity minister F Rodingliana informed the State Assembly on Thursday.



Power and Electricity minister F Rodingliana

In a written reply to queries from opposition BJP member Prova Chakma, the minister said that efforts are on to provide electricity to households in these villages under the Revamped Distribution Sector Scheme (RDSS). He said that sanctions have been secured and three contractors, including two from outside, have been finalised for the electrification of these remote villages.

"The Guaranteed Technical Particulars (GTP) drawings for supply of materials have already been approved, and initial supplies have already begun reaching some of the designated sites," Rodingliana said. He said that there are reports of many transformer damage across the state, and 71 are awaiting allotment for repair.



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### Order Order

## Justice SA Dharmadhikari appointed Chief Justice of Madras High Court



Justice Sushrut Arvind Dharmadhikari was on Thursday appointed the chief justice of the Madras High Court. He was till now a judge of the Kerala High Court. His name was recommended to the post by the Supreme Court Collegium last month. He replaces Justice Manindra Mohan Shrivastava, who demitted office Thursday evening upon attaining the age of 62 years.

His parent High Court is the Madhya Pradesh High Court. Born on July 8, 1966, in Raipur, Justice Dharmadhikari began his legal career in 1992. He practised before the Madhya Pradesh High Court for over two decades, handling civil, criminal and constitutional matters.

During his time at the Bar, he served as Standing Counsel for the Union of India from 2000 to 2015. He also represented several Government bodies and public sector institutions, including the Income Tax Department, the Reserve Bank of India and the Central Excise Department as Senior Standing Counsel.

Justice Dharmadhikari was appointed as an additional judge of the Madhya Pradesh High Court on April 7, 2016, and was confirmed as a permanent judge on March 17, 2018. He was transferred to the Kerala High Court on April 23, 2025, before being elevated as Chief Justice of the Madras High Court.

## HC declines to entertain PIL against 'The Kerala Story 2'



The Kerala High Court on Thursday declined to entertain a PIL seeking to change the title of the film 'The Kerala Story 2-Goes Beyond' and pulled up the petitioners for casting aspersions on the division bench, which paved the way for the movie's release.

A bench of Chief Justice Soumen Sen and Justice Syam Kumar VM was severely critical of certain remarks in the public interest litigation by Chandramohan KC, a retired teacher and social activist, and Mehnaz P Mohammed, a lawyer.

When the matter was taken up, the bench pointed out that petitions related to the movie were pending before a single judge bench and a division bench and therefore, it would not be appropriate for it to take up the PIL.

Chief Justice Sen said it would be better that the division bench, which is hearing the appeal by the film's producers, hears the instant matter.

## Trust is the bedrock of justice and education must protect it



**TAPESH  
RAGHAV**

Somewhere in a classroom in Lucknow, Bhopal or Coimbatore, a Class 8 student has just finished reading a chapter on the Indian judiciary. They now know about case backlogs, about corruption, about disputes that drag on for decades. What they may not fully know, because the emphasis did not rest there, is what courts in India have built, protected and preserved over seventy-five years of constitutional democracy. That gap between what was highlighted and what was underplayed has now become the subject of serious judicial scrutiny.

The Supreme Court of India did not wait for a formal petition. In ReSocial Science Textbook for Grade-8 (Part 2) published by NCERT and ancillary issues, it acted on its own motion, banning the Class 8 Social Science textbook published by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), ordering physical copies to be seized and digital versions to be withdrawn, and seeking accountability from those involved in drafting the chapter. The Court

even observed that if the framing amounted to a deliberate attempt to scandalise the institution, the law of contempt could come into play.

The chapter reportedly began with familiar constitutional ground, the Preamble's promise of justice and the importance of judicial independence. But when it turned to "challenges," it leaned heavily on the phrase "justice delayed is justice denied," cited pendency figures, and referred to corruption within the judiciary. Backlogs and complaints were foregrounded; structural reasons such as judicial vacancies, infrastructure deficits and the State's role as the largest litigant received comparatively brief treatment.

The problem was not that challenges were mentioned; democracies must confront their imperfections honestly. The difficulty lies in imbalance. Raising concerns without adequate context risks creating a first impression that lingers long after the page is turned.

Courts do not command obedience through force. Alexander Hamilton famously described the judiciary as possessing "neither force nor will, but merely judgment." Its authority rests on public confidence. John Locke argued that institutions endure only as long as the people

accept their legitimacy; courts are no different. Remove trust, and the institution becomes symbolic rather than functional.

Indian constitutional thought echoes this reality. Dr BR Ambedkar warned that constitutional morality must be cultivated; it cannot be assumed. Justice VR Krishna Iyer repeatedly emphasised that justice must be accessible to the common person, not confined to legal theory. When a fourteen-year-old first encounters the judiciary primarily through references to delay and corruption, the impression formed may shape their civic outlook for years.

Corruption, where it occurs, is a human failing; it is not an institutional identity. A judge who errs commits a personal moral breach, yet the constitutional design of the court remains intact. No institution composed of human beings is immune from individual misconduct; however, the Indian judiciary has expanded fundamental rights, pioneered public interest litigation, struck down unconstitutional laws and held Governments accountable. It has often stood as the last refuge for the powerless.

The experience of countries such as Poland and Hungary offers a cautionary tale. Judicial authority there

was not dismantled overnight; it was gradually weakened through sustained narratives that portrayed courts as inefficient, compromised or elitist. Once public confidence thinned, institutional independence became easier to erode; rebuilding trust proved far harder than questioning it.

None of this means that criticism should be suppressed. Scrutiny is the lifeblood of democracy; however, there is a difference between acknowledging flaws and defining an institution by them. Young readers deserve a full picture, one that recognises backlogs and reforms, shortcomings and safeguards, errors and achievements.

Trust does not arise automatically; it is built slowly, often beginning in classrooms. Civic education carries the responsibility of informing without distorting and questioning without undermining foundational confidence. Courts function because citizens believe in their legitimacy; that belief is fragile. If we want future generations to respect the rule of law, we must ensure that their first lessons about the judiciary are balanced, contextual and complete. Justice depends not only on judgments delivered in courtrooms, but also on trust nurtured in schools.

The writer is an Advocate



## Rajasthan HC warns Govt on zero cut-off for reserved categories

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
■ Jaipur

The Rajasthan High Court recently asked the State Government to explain why it had fixed cut-off marks as low as zero for recruiting Class IV Government employees under reserved categories. Terming the situation as shocking, Justice Anand Sharma said the matter requires serious consideration as it raises concerns about maintaining basic standards in public employment.

"The State, as the appointing authority, is expected to ensure minimum standards in recruitment even for reserved category, so that selected candidates are capable of performing basic duties satisfactorily, may be of Class-IV employee. A person who



secures near zero or negative marks cannot reasonably be considered suitable," the Court said.

The HC passed the order on a writ petition stating that in a recent recruitment process for Class-IV Employees in a Government department, the cut-off marks for some

reserved categories were as low as 0.0033. Interestingly, the petitioner's grievance was that his candidature was rejected only because he secured negative marks (below zero), even though no minimum qualifying marks were prescribed.

Calling the situation unac-

ceptable, the Court observed that either the examination was unnecessarily difficult for such entry-level posts or that proper standards were not maintained. The HC also noted that no explanation has been given for not fixing minimum qualifying marks. The HC directed the State counsel to file an affidavit of the Principal Secretary of the concerned Department explaining this serious lapse and the reasons behind fixing such cut-off marks, and the steps proposed to improve "such objectionable situation."

"If no satisfactory explanation is given, the Court may take it seriously and pass strict orders while drawing adverse inferences," the Bench warned. The matter will be heard next on March 9.

## CJI Surya Kant suggests technology reforms for Bhutan judiciary, offers internship to students

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
■ New Delhi

Chief Justice of India Surya Kant on Thursday batted for technology-driven reforms in the judicial system of Bhutan, and said access to justice depended critically on the optimum utilisation of technological advancements.

Delivering a keynote address at the Royal University of Bhutan in Thimphu on 'Access to Justice in the 21st Century: Technology, Legal Aid and People Centred Courts', CJI Kant also said that he had conveyed to Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay that the Supreme Court of India, along with the high courts, would be delighted to offer internship opportunities to Bhutanese students.

"Let us remember that technology is merely the modern vessel in this era, and our task is to ensure that while the tools of the 21st century are sophisticated, they remain as humble and accessible as the tongue of the people."

"In the end, what we must unflinchingly understand is that justice is not a cloistered



CJI Surya Kant met Bhutan Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay in Thimphu

virtue locked behind the heavy wooden doors of a courtroom; instead, it is a living presence that must be allowed to walk out into the world, into the high valleys and the bustling markets, and into the very homes of the people," the CJI said.

He added that it would be a privilege for the Indian judiciary to facilitate student exchanges, including provid-

ing boarding and lodging where necessary, so that financial constraints do not stand in the way of meaningful legal exposure.

"Experiencing the workings of the court firsthand is an essential part of quality legal education," he said on offering internships to Bhutanese students. "The road ahead demands a robust resolve to stay committed to pious goals

and maintain ethical standards in the judiciary while harnessing technology in the service of fairness, transparency and human dignity.

"In the 21st century, a 'people-centred court' is one where the complexity of the law is simplified by the elegance of technology, ensuring that the majesty of the courtroom is accessible from the palm of one's hand."

"If we are to be true to our heritage, our technological reforms must not merely digitise the status quo, but democratise the very essence of the judicial process," CJI Kant emphasised.

The Indian judicial system originally consisted of traditional files containing handwritten pleadings, oral witness depositions, oral submissions, seldom documented evidence, and only a written judgment, he said.

"These files were bulky, leading to space constraints for record-keeping, often in inadequate courtrooms where the judicial officer, the presiding judge, would often be found hidden behind the files."

## CJAR flags concerns over State-sponsored trips for SC Judges

**PIONEER NEWS SERVICE**  
■ New Delhi

The Campaign for Judicial Accountability and Reforms (CJAR) on Thursday expressed concern over the use of State and privately arranged aircraft for official visits undertaken by the Chief Justice of India and several sitting judges of the Supreme Court. The CJAR led by noted lawyer Prashant Bhusan said that trip and chartered flights sponsored by Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh Governments ques-

was used by judges and their staff for travel from Delhi to Ahmedabad. The Chief Justice thereafter travelled in the aircraft of the Government of Gujarat from Ahmedabad to Tirupati.

The Government of Andhra Pradesh arranged two special aircrafts for onward travel of six Supreme Court judges and some family members from Tirupati to Vijayawada and from Vijayawada to Delhi.

We at CJAR raise this concern because both the



tions the perception of independence of judiciary as both States are frequent litigants before the apex court.

The CJAR's statement is produced below :

Statement on the Use of State Resources for Official Visits by the Chief Justice of India and Other Supreme Court Judges 5th March 2026

CJAR notes with serious concern the recent visits of the Chief Justice of India and several sitting judges of the Supreme Court of India, to Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh. The manner in which these visits have been arranged and publicized, raise concerns regarding judicial independence, institutional propriety, and compliance with established ethical standards for the conduct of judges in office.

It is a matter of record through publicly available information that: A chartered aircraft operated by a private aviation service

State of Gujarat and the State of Andhra Pradesh are frequent and active litigants before the Supreme Court of India. In such circumstances, if acceptance of state-sponsored transport and logistical arrangements, beyond lawful entitlements and protocol measures is indeed true, this raises serious concerns regarding judicial propriety and independence. Further, the aspect of judges travelling by a privately chartered aircraft from Delhi to Ahmedabad also gives rise to potential public perception of 'special privilege', and undue influence or compromised judicial independence.

The "Restatement of Values of Judicial Life" adopted by the Supreme Court in 1997 requires judges to maintain high standards of probity and to avoid both impropriety and the appearance of impropriety in all activities.

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### 1. TENDER NOTICE

**E-Tender Notice No-2026-AMCA-1283163-1**

Development of Commercial Complex (Shops & Offices), Banquet Exhibition Hall on Build Operate and Transfer Basis situated at CTS No.3208, Nehru Bhavan, Buddilane. Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar Municipal Corporation, Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar.

Details Such as bid document last date of submission, date of Pre bid conference etc. will be available from 2/3/2026 from 17.00 hrs. On <https://www.mahatenders.gov.in> portal. All interested bidders may apply online through this portal.

Sr. No.	Description	Details
01	Name of Work	Development of Commercial Complex (Shops & Offices), Banquet Exhibition Hall on Build Operate and Transfer Basis for 30 years (extendable add on 30 years, total up to 60 years), situated at CTS No.3208, Nehru Bhavan, Buddilane, Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar Municipal Corporation, Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar.
02	Department	Build Operate and Transfer (BOT)
03	EMD (Online payment only)	Rs. 40,00,000.0 (Rupees Forty Lakhs-only)
04	Bid Validity	120 Days
05	Form Fee (Online payment only)	Rs.11,800/- (Including GST)
06	Time Limit of Work	12 Months
07	Performance Bank Guarantee (For successful bidder only)	5% of Project cost in the form of Bank Guarantee of Nationalized bank.
08	Date & Time of Publishing Downloading of Tender	2/3/26 Time 17:00 Hrs
09	Date of pre-bid meeting	12/3/26 Time 13:00 Hrs
10	Date & Time of Submitting the Tender	25/3/26 Time 17:30 Hrs

Date: 02-03-2026  
जा.क्र. मन्पा./बी.ओ.टी./2026/91

Municipal Commissioner & Administrator,  
Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar Corporation

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No./CSMC/2026/902 Date: 2/3/2026

### TENDER NOTICE

**E-Tender Notice No-2026-AMCA-1283181-1**

Development of CSMC land bearing CTS.No.3749, Quile - e-ark (Naubat gate) by Construction of Residential cum Commercial complex on Design, Build, Finance, Operate, Lease and Transfer Basis at Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar.

Details Such as bid document last date of submission, date of Pre bid conference etc. will be available from 2/3/2026 from 17.00 hrs. on <https://www.mahatenders.gov.in> portal. All interested bidders may apply online through this portal.

Sr. No.	Description	Details
1	Name of Work	Development of Residential cum Commercial complex on Design, Build, Finance, Operate, Lease and Transfer Basis situated at CTS S.No.3749 Quile - e-ark (Naubat gate), Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar.
2	Department	Design, Build, Finance, Operate, Lease and Transfer (DBFOLT)
3	EMD (Online payment only)	₹ 22.00 Lakh
4	Bid Validity	180 Days
5	Form Fee (Online payment only)	₹ 30,000/- (Including GST)
6	Time Limit of Work	24 Months
7	Performance Bank Guarantee (For successful bidder only)	₹ 2.5 Crore in the form of Bank Guarantee of Nationalized bank.
8	Date & Time of Publishing / Downloading of Tender	2/3/26 Time 17:00 Hrs
9	Date of pre-bid meeting	12/3/26 Time at 13:00 Hrs
10	Date & Time of Submitting the Tender	25/3/26 Time up to 16:00 Hrs
11	Date for Power Point Presentation (Proof of Concept) by bidders	01/4/2026 from 16.00 hrs to 18.00 hrs

Date: 02-03-2026  
जा.क्र. मन्पा./बी.ओ.टी./2026/93

Municipal Commissioner & Administrator,  
Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar Corporation



## Editor's TAKE

### Nepal's vote tests the old political order

The Gen Z has changed the rules of the game; the election results will show whether Nepal's political establishment has understood the message.

It has been 20 years since Nepal overthrew its monarchy and charted its course in parliamentary democracy. However, the end of monarchy was not the end of Nepal's woes. These twenty years have been tumultuous, to say the least. The political establishment that took over has not lived up to the expectations of the people. The governments were mostly keen to secure their place and survive rather than to deliver on the development of the country. Corruption, coalitions and internal feuds have defined the parliamentary democracy for all these years. Power alternated mainly among the Nepali Congress and various communist factions, including the CPN-UML and the Maoist Centre, often through fragile coalition governments, but not much changed for the people.

Unemployment and corruption grew, as did the frustration amongst the youth, who finally came on the streets in September last year to protest and changed Nepal politics forever. The elections underway in Nepal are no ordinary elections, it is going to be a litmus test for the old political establishment and also people's view of the Gen Z uprising. With nearly 19 million voters deciding the 275-member House of Representatives, the election has become a referendum on whether Nepal's long-dominant political class can regain legitimacy or whether a new generation will reshape the country's political trajectory. Political instability has marked the democracy and allegations of corruption have eroded public trust.

This election, therefore, marks a turning point. The most visible sign of change is the emergence of younger candidates and unconventional political figures who have captured the imagination of Nepal's urban youth. Among them is Balendra Shah, the rapper-turned-politician and former mayor of Kathmandu, who has positioned himself as a symbol of generational change. His challenge to veteran Marxist leader and former prime minister KP Sharma Oli in Jhapa district has become one of the most closely watched contests of the election. At the same time, established parties have attempted to adapt to the new political mood.

The Nepali Congress, one of the country's oldest parties, has chosen the relatively younger Gagan Thapa as its leader, signalling a cautious attempt at renewal. Traditional leaders are emphasising experience and stability, arguing that governance requires institutional knowledge rather than political experimentation. Structural realities of Nepal's electoral system make a dramatic political overhaul unlikely. The mixed system of first-past-the-post and proportional representation often produces fragmented results and may lead to yet another coalition government. Nevertheless, the politics of Nepal have changed for sure. The Gen Z uprising has set the agenda—one centred on accountability, transparency, and economic opportunity. Whether led by veterans such as Oli or younger leaders like Thapa—or influenced by new voices such as Shah—Nepal's next government will face a restless and politically awakened generation.

## From Indian rootedness to global Competence

The implementation of NEP-2020 has ushered in a positive transformative shift, positioning the Indian higher education system to align more closely with the evolving demands of the 21st-century economy



**RAMA SHANKER DUBEY**

The Indian higher education system is undergoing a massive transformation, shifting from a theoretical, colonial-era mindset and rote-learning model to an India-centric framework that takes pride in nation's rich cultural heritage while embracing experiential learning, skill development, innovation, and entrepreneurship. This shift fosters a more dynamic, self-reliant, and globally competitive academic ecosystem.

The focus of the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) on the holistic development of students by incorporating Indian values, ethics, duties, and the integration of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) into curricula, has significantly influenced the development of national consciousness and cultural rootedness among students, thereby strengthening nationalistic feeling and pride in Indian identity.

The great educational institutions of ancient India Taxila, Nalanda, and Vikramshila were founded upon the principle of holistic development of students - the development of mind, body, intellect and soul. Famous Indian educational philosophers such as Swami Vivekananda, Madan Mohan Malaviya, Sri Aurobindo, and Rabindranath Tagore consistently emphasised that the central aim of education should be the holistic development of students.

The IKS is the most ancient and the most richly endowed heritage in the world. It embodies an extraordinary confluence of spirituality, science, art, logic, and a profound philosophy of life. It has always been devoted to the pursuit of truth and the welfare of humanity. The principal pillars of IKS are the Vedas, the Upanishads, and the philosophical systems (Darshanas).

India has offered the world six distinct ways of seeing and understanding reality—these are its six classical schools of philosophy. On the one hand, we rose to the loftiest heights of spiritual realisation; on the other, our revered Rishis and Acharyas laid the foundational principles of mathematics, chemistry, physics, astronomy, medicine, economics, governance, environmental ethics and various domains of knowledge.

It is widely recognised across the globe that the Vedas constitute primary source of both spiritual and worldly knowledge. With the incorporation of the great inventions and intellectual contributions of ancient India into present-day curricula, such as the reference to the discovery of fire by Rishi Atharva in the Rigveda and Yajurveda; the surgical principles of Acharya Sushruta in the Sushruta Samhita (600 BCE); the concepts of atomic theory, gravitation, and motion described by Maharshi Kanada in the Vaisheshika Darshana



BY FOSTERING FLEXIBLE CURRICULAR STRUCTURES AND ENABLING CROSS-DISCIPLINARY MOBILITY, NEP-2020 EQUIPS STUDENTS WITH A WIDE RANGE OF COMPETENCIES, INCLUDING CRITICAL THINKING, EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION, DIGITAL LITERACY, AND ADVANCED PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS

(600 BCE); students are developing greater national pride, courage, self-reliance and confidence in the richness of our national intellectual heritage and respect for India's civilisational legacy. Beyond reinforcing awareness of India's civilisational contributions to global knowledge, the rapid integration of IKS into academic curricula will help preserve and revitalise the country's rich intellectual traditions across diverse fields.

The implementation of NEP-2020 has significantly reoriented the skill development landscape within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The integration of vocational education into mainstream curricula, along with the introduction of skill enhancement courses, experiential learning, internships, apprenticeships, and project-based learning, has strengthened skill competency acquisition, helped bridge industry skill gaps, and enhanced self-reliance, innovation, and employability. The Pradhan Mantri National Apprenticeship Promotion Scheme (PM-NAPS) has been crucial in promoting structured apprenticeship programs, imparting industry-linked practical training to the students.

By promoting entrepreneurial skills among students, NEP-2020 has fostered a strong startup culture within HEIs. Initiatives such as Startup India, the National Innovation and Startup Policy (NISP) of the Ministry of Education, Government of India, the Atal Innovation Mission (AIM), and various State Startup Policies have collectively accelerated the development of vibrant entrepreneurial ecosystems on campuses. From approximately 400-500 startups in 2016, India has grown to over 2 lakh DPIIT (Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade)-recognised startups as of December 2025, making India the third-largest startup ecosystem in the world.

By fostering flexible curricular structures and enabling cross-disciplinary mobility, NEP-2020 equips students with a wide range of competencies, including critical thinking, effective communication, digital literacy, and advanced problem-

solving skills. The credit accumulation mechanism enabled by the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC) facilitates lifelong learning and continuous skill upgradation, thereby enhancing learner mobility and adaptability. Twenty-first century skills such as digital proficiency, creativity, leadership, and ethical reasoning are essential competencies for effective participation in a knowledge-driven global economy.

To cultivate students with global competencies, it is imperative to produce high-quality graduates specialised in critical fields such as artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning, data analytics, cybersecurity, semiconductors, green energy transitions, etc.

This requires reorienting our curricula to incorporate intensive practical, hands-on training in these areas. India is home to numerous HEIs that consistently produce exceptional talents in AI and computer science and many of such graduates are currently among the leading innovators and technologists in Silicon Valley. Encouragingly, this long-standing trend of outward migration is beginning to reverse and we have to retain this highly skilled talent pool, enabling them to drive innovation and create long-term value within India.

AI innovation labs are being established across major Indian technology hubs, positioning the country to emerge as a global centre of excellence in AI-powered consulting, advanced analytics, cyber defence operations and education. This underscores India's growing strategic role in the global AI ecosystem. AI-led cyber research hubs established in leading Indian tech cities have the potential to play a pivotal role in safeguarding critical digital infrastructure and strengthening national cyber resilience. AI possesses significant transformative potential in higher education, enhancing the quality of teaching and learning, strengthening research capabilities, improving administrative efficiency, and expanding accessibility.

AI can assist in curriculum design, real-time skills assessment, and the effective management of smart campuses. However, as a matter of caution one has to remember that the Indian vision of education does not rest solely on the transmission of information; rather, it emphasises holistic development, mentorship, empathy, moral guidance, and the cultivation of critical thinking, the qualities that are inherently human.

The implementation of NEP-2020 has ushered in a positive transformative shift, positioning the Indian higher education system to align more closely with the evolving demands of the 21st-century economy. It seeks to nurture students who take pride in Indian heritage while simultaneously developing global competencies and critical twenty-first century skills essential for meaningful employment, entrepreneurial leadership, and the effective resolution of complex global challenges.



The writer is Former Vice Chancellor, Central University of Gujarat

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## PIC TALK



An artiste dressed as 'Vishnumurthy' deity performs 'Ottekola', a dance ritual, at the Kukke Subrahmanya Temple, Kulkunda, in Dakshina Kannada district

PHOTO: PTI

## Unlocking the mystery of chanting



**AJIT KUMAR BISHNOI**

### 2ND OPINION

I have been chanting God's names for close to four decades. I do because it helps me in many ways. I will give details later in this article. I continued chanting because it was working...but I never knew how. I tried to repeat the name of my friend, but it gave me no benefit whatsoever. Then, something had to be different with God's names. Recently, one early morning, I prayed to my Lord about disclosing the mystery of chanting His names and its effect on us.

As usual, my Lord guided me as I had sincerely prayed for an answer. A hint came about the source of the mind: who created it? How was easy—God has. Then, it clicked; He must know how to calm the mind, being its creator. Chanting God's names does that. Not only calms the mind, but it also gives all kinds of benefits.

Chanting God's names has that power over the mind and the rest of the body.

I was thrilled beyond belief. Surely, I began to search for supporting evidence. I remembered verse # 10.25, in which Lord Krishna has specifically mentioned that He is chanting among the yajnas and the single syllable "Aum" in speech. The word "yajna," translated into English, means "sacrifice."

The word 'sacrifice' is explained as giving up the fruits of one's 'karmas' (acts) to benefit others. Lord Krishna has glorified this as the highest yajna; it is better than even meditation, which is superior to knowledge. (12.12) Now returning to the benefits of chanting God's names and, yes, Aum, it connects with God. In the case of a person, that person has to be within hearing distance or willing to respond.

In the case of God, He, being omnipresent, God will definitely hear and in case of chanting His names, will be much pleased. In the famous case of Hanumanji chanting Rama, Rama, Rama... Lord Ramachandra asked Hanumanji about the reason for chanting His name. Hanumanji replied that it made Him blissful. Lord Ramachandra was much pleased.

In another famous instance, Draupadi was in grave danger of being dishonoured, getting disrobed in the royal court. She chanted, "Krishna, Krishna, Krishna..."

in utter desperation. We know what the Lord did for her. How does chanting God's names or Aum work? How does a sanitiser work on an infected surface? Chanting has a similar effect on the mind; it calms it down, removes other thoughts, especially negative ones. Chanting is surrender to the Divine, and God is bound to take notice. God is much pleased as one is doing what He has instructed us to do, which is chanting, being the highest yajna. Chanting is a spiritual activity and must be done sincerely and regularly to experience its benefits.

Believe me, I have found chanting as the best way to get sleep, whether at night or during the day, as just one benefit among many. Why don't you try to wash your mind clean like soap washes a cloth? Just keep washing and feel the difference. After chanting God's names for nearly four decades, I realised its calming power arises because the mind itself is God's creation.

Chanting connects us with the Divine, quiets restless thoughts, and nurtures inner peace. Practiced sincerely and regularly, it purifies the mind—much like cleansing—bringing spiritual strength, clarity, and deep, lasting tranquillity.



The writer is a spiritual teacher

## DIGITAL EXPERIENCE

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## SILENCE AMID ESCALATION: QUESTIONS OVER THE US-ISRAEL STRIKE ON IRAN

The world seemed to know the reason for the latest escalation even before US Secretary of State Marco Rubio publicly acknowledged it. American strikes on Iran were triggered by Israel's plan to attack. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had earlier claimed that Iran was building new underground facilities that could soon make its ballistic missile and nuclear programmes immune to external strikes.

Without an independent assessment of whether these Iranian sites posed an imminent threat, US President Donald Trump moved swiftly, outlining war aims that included destroying Iran's ballistic missile capability and naval strength, preventing Tehran from developing nuclear weapons, and curbing its support for proxy forces across the Middle East. US

Vice-President JD Vance echoed this position, asserting that Washington's goal was to ensure Iran could never possess nuclear weapons. For many observers, the sudden Israel-US offensive defies logic and raises troubling questions about the use of force. Equally striking has been the muted response from much of the international community. Apart from Vladimir Putin, most world leaders have remained largely silent. The continued helplessness of the United Nations has also drawn concern. India, too, faces a delicate choice. Whether Prime Minister Modi will endorse such escalation remains uncertain. New Delhi's silence risks appearing less like neutrality and more like a missed opportunity to use its diplomatic credibility to prevent further deterioration.

BIDYUT KR CHATTERJEE | FARIDABAD

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Merkel's tribute to Manmohan Singh

During a visit to New Delhi, former German Chancellor Angela Merkel once paid a thoughtful tribute to former Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, remarking that he gave her the courage to ask questions. Her comment reflected the intellectual depth, humility and openness that defined Dr Singh's leadership. His scholarly temperament created an environment where meaningful dialogue could flourish, encouraging discussions guided by logic and substance rather than political theatrics. Dr Singh's reform-oriented and pro-globalisation policies significantly strengthened ties between India and Germany. Through economic liberalisation, encouragement of foreign investment and support for technology partnerships, he helped lay a durable foundation for bilateral cooperation.

The impact of those policies is visible today. Germany has emerged as one of India's most important trading partners in Europe. Collaboration in areas such as renewable energy, climate technology and green hydrogen has expanded steadily. German companies including Siemens and Volkswagen have deepened their presence in the Indian market. Merkel's remarks serve as a reminder that the seeds of partnership sown through vision and patience in the past are today yielding meaningful results.

VRN NARULA | PATIALA

### Samson's knock that redefined his career

Apropos "Sanju needed a break after NZ series: Gambhir" (The Pioneer, March 3), India may have finally discovered a true match-winner in Sanju Samson. His scintillating unbeaten 97 off just 50 balls at Eden Gardens was not merely a fine innings but perhaps a turning point in his international career. Without that knock, Samson might well have drifted into obscurity after the World Cup. Interestingly, Samson's quiet and unassuming personality contrasts with the enigma that his cricketing journey has often been. His talent was never in doubt, but chronic inconsistency frequently held him back. While he displayed flashes of brilliance early on, they seldom translated into sustained performances. His intermittent presence in the team cannot be blamed entirely on circumstances; consistency is the only way a player can claim a permanent place.

However, Sunday's innings suggested a more mature and composed Samson. Playing with remarkable calm and clarity, he anchored India's charge into the semifinals. At his best, the 31-year-old makes batting look effortless. There was hardly any sign of nerves, and his confident body language spoke volumes. As coach Gautam Gambhir rightly observed, the Eden Gardens knock could well prove to be a "career-defining" moment for Samson.

GANPATHI BHAT | AKOLA

### India's quiet culture of everyday giving

A survey by the Centre for Social Impact and Philanthropy at Ashoka University reveals the remarkable generosity embedded in Indian society. Nearly seven in ten Indians donate to charity in some form, demonstrating that philanthropy in the country is not limited to wealthy benefactors but is sustained by ordinary citizens. The report estimates that India's total household charitable giving stands at around ₹540 billion annually, covering cash donations, in-kind contributions and volunteering. Among the 68 per cent of respondents who reported giving, the largest share (48 per cent) donate in kind—such as food, clothing or household goods—followed by cash donations (44 per cent) and volunteering (30 per cent). Everyday giving has also grown steadily, rising from ₹34,000 crore in 2019 to ₹37,000 crore in 2023. The patterns of giving are distinctive. Nearly 46 per cent of individual donations flow to religious organisations, while 42 per cent go directly to beggars or the destitute. Only about 15 per cent reaches non-religious non-profit organisations. A striking feature is the largely informal nature of giving: just 10 per cent of donations passed through formal channels in 2019. This contrasts sharply with the West, where philanthropy is highly institutionalised. India's philanthropy, by comparison, is personal.

YASH PAL RALHAN | JALANDHAR

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



## Open letter to Justice Ujjal Bhuyan

Constitutional morality, if it is to retain credibility, must be applied uniformly – unaffected by the identity of either the victim or the perpetrator, and courageous enough to confront uncomfortable truths across communities and institutions alike

FIRST Column



BALBIR PUNJ

Respected Justice Bhuyan, On 21 February last, addressing a seminar in Hyderabad, your Lordship reflected on what you described as India's enduring "deep societal faultlines" that persist even after seventy-five years of constitutional democracy.

In illustrating this proposition, your honour cited two separate and seemingly "random" instances: first, that of a PhD scholar in Delhi allegedly denied accommodation after her Muslim identity became known; and second, an incident from Odisha in which school-children were reportedly prevented by their parents from partaking of a mid-day meal prepared by a Dalit woman.

Let me state at the outset, without reservation, that discrimination based on religion or caste is morally indefensible and constitutionally impermissible. Yet, the question that inevitably arises is whether the articulation of "deep societal fault-lines" can remain selective?

It is in this context that I was struck by a contemporaneous development that received comparatively muted attention within the very circuits that routinely and justifiably raise concerns over caste-based oppression. Around the same time that your remarks were widely reported, an incident of violence involving Dalit victims surfaced in Bulandshahr, Uttar Pradesh.

The complainant, Akash Kumar, alleged that a social gathering, which featured DJ music and dance, had paused for local Muslim residents to perform prayers. After prayers, the music resumed, but around 15 to 20 men allegedly barged in with sticks, assaulting attendees, including women. He added that the assailants used casteist slurs and vandalised the property.

An FIR was registered under relevant provisions of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita and the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act against individuals, including village head Moyeen Khan, Matlub Ali, Mohd Adil, Akram Khan, among others.

The silence that followed in certain sections of civil society raises uncomfortable but necessary questions. Why is it that caste atrocities acquire differential moral urgency depending upon the religious identity of the



EXPRESSIONS OF SOLIDARITY AGAINST INJUSTICE MUST NOT BE CONTINGENT UPON THE IDENTITY OF EITHER VICTIM OR PERPETRATOR

The writer is an eminent columnist, former Chairman of the Indian Institute of Mass Communication (IIMC), and the author of 'Tryst with Ayodhya: Decolonisation of India' and 'Narrative ka Majajjal'.

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accused? If the perpetrator is presumed to belong to the so-called "upper-caste Hindu" category, the outrage is immediate and national; yet when the accused emerges from a minority community, there is silence.

Surely, constitutional morality of which Your Lordship spoke so eloquently demands a rejection of precisely such selective indignation.

You also observed in your address, as media reports, that constitutional morality requires democratic institutions to exercise restraint and adhere to foundational values rather than bulldoze through on the strength of numbers, authority and power. This is, without doubt, a salutary reminder.

However, it would be equally apposite to acknowledge that constitutional morality also demands intellectual honesty in confronting patterns of coercion, deception, or exploitation-irrespective of the ideological discomfort such acknowledgement may generate.

The recent controversy surrounding the film 'The Kerala Story 2: Goes Beyond' has brought into public discourse the vexed question of coercive religious conversion through romantic entanglement, popularly termed 'love jihad'.

At a press conference in New Delhi on 23 February, the filmmakers were joined

by 33 women from different parts of the country, survivors of forced religious conversion, including cases allegedly facilitated through deceptive interfaith relationships.

Several of these unfortunate women recounted experiences of physical abuse, coercion, and forced consumption of beef following marriage, an act that, for many Hindu women, carries deep civilisational and religious significance.

Among those who narrated her ordeal was Tara Shahdeo, a national-level shooter from Ranchi. Her case dates back to July 2014, when she married 'Ranjeet Singh Kohli,' whom she later discovered to be 'Raqibul Hasan.' According to her testimony, within days she was subjected to physical and emotional abuse, alongside sustained pressure to convert.

Tara further stated that her marriage had been arranged following recommendations from influential quarters. In her words: "In my case, a judge brought the marriage proposal for that

person... At the judge's request, we agreed to the marriage."

In October 2023, a Special Court of the Central Bureau of Investigation in Ranchi delivered its verdict: Raqibul Hasan was sentenced to life imprisonment; his mother, Kaushar Rani, was awarded ten years' rigorous imprisonment; and Mushtaq Ahmed, then Registrar of the Jharkhand High Court, was sentenced to 15 years in prison.

The issue is not merely that an individual concealed his identity in order to perpetrate a criminal act - for individuals of criminal disposition exist across communities. The deeper concern arises when such deception appears to be facilitated or normalised within broader local networks, including clerical intermediaries and, in certain allegations, family complicity.

Most of such crimes aren't committed by lone wolves but, in most cases, by organised social and familial networks. What's the doctrinal glue that binds such a team for this sort of evil activity? Shouldn't civil society reflect on this?

There have been numerous cases described as 'love jihad'. This social menace has assumed the characteristics of an organised criminal enterprise. A newspaper article, constrained by limited

space, barely scratches the surface of this complex issue.

Interfaith marriages in India are neither novel nor unlawful. Religion should never impede consenting adults acting in good faith. Yet when religious identity is intentionally concealed as part of a structured strategy to convert through deception, the matter transcends personal autonomy and becomes a matter of societal concern.

Expressions of solidarity against injustice must not be contingent upon the identity of either victim or perpetrator. Unless every instance of discrimination, irrespective of community, is subjected to consistent scrutiny, the perception of selectivity will persist, corroding public confidence in the neutrality of moral discourse.

Your Lordship, when talking of "societal faultlines", can one ignore the dispensation of our law courts? A 2007 survey by 'Transparency International' found that "77per cent of Indian respondents" perceived the "judicial system" to be "corrupt" at the time.

During contempt proceedings in August 2020 before the Supreme Court, the then Attorney General K. K. Venugopal submitted that nine former Supreme Court judges had publicly spoken about corruption in the higher judiciary-seven of them immediately after retirement-before the Bench declined to hear him further on the issue.

More recently, Union Law Minister Arjun Ram Meghwal informed Parliament on 13 February 2026 that the Office of the Chief Justice of India had received 8,630 complaints against sitting judges over the past decade, which are processed internally through the judiciary's in-house mechanism. The revelation came in response to a written question posed by DMK MP V.S. Matheswaran.

Your Lordship, corruption is a ravenous termite, steadily eating away at and hollowing out our system from within. To combat this menace, the system must identify corrupt politicians, expose venal officials, discipline unscrupulous businessmen, and punish them suitably.

But can we achieve all this without a fair, honest, and efficient judiciary? Judges, by virtue of their office, speak not only through their judgments but also through the normative reflections they occasionally offer in public form. Selective outrage and amnesia don't serve any purpose.

With respectful regards, — Balbir Punj

## How Assam's sisters are rewriting the State's economic script



UMESH RAJ

SAMRIDDIH PRAKASH

Post-covid Assam has been one of the fastest-growing states in India, with a nominal rate of growth of 13 per cent in 2024-25 and average per capita income growth of more than 10 per cent over the past 3 years. While the pursuit of sustained growth is often seen to be driven by industrial corridors and infrastructure, the most potent lever for growth in modern Assam is not made of steel or concrete, but of "Nari Shakti."

Data from the most recent Annual Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) reveal a dramatic acceleration in women's economic engagement. By 2023-24, Assam's overall Female LFPR surged to 50.2per cent, a figure that stands in stark contrast to the national average of 41.7per cent. This momentum is most visible in rural areas where participation jumped from a modest 29per cent in 2021-22 to a staggering 52.8per cent by 2023-24. (Assam Economic Survey, 2025-26)

As the state aims to become a USD 143 billion economy by 2030, the transition of women from passive beneficiaries of welfare to active economic agents has seen to be moving from the periphery to the very heart of the state's economic strategy. With a female labour force participation rate (FLFPR) that now significantly outstrips the national average, Assam is charting a unique course of empowerment that balances quantitative surges with the need for deep, qualitative structural shifts.

The rise in FLFPR is not merely a product of business-as-usual trends but the outcome of deliberate and targeted policy interventions. The flagship Mukhyamantri Mahila Udyamita Abhiyaan (MMUA), popularly known as the "Lakshmi Baideu" mission, represents one of the most ambitious attempts to formalise rural entrepreneurship in India's history. Targeting 40 lakh women associated with Self-Help Groups (SHGs), the mission aims to ensure an annual income of at least Rs 1 lakh for every member.

As of early 2026, 8.8 lakh women have already achieved this "Lakshmi" status. Success stories from districts like Nalbari and Sivasagar showcase the potential of this model: women like Bijumoni Devi are earning ₹1.80 lakh annually through pickle-making, while others like Anita



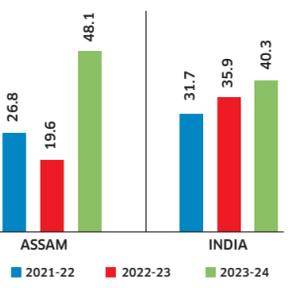
Thakuriya have reached incomes of ₹2.23 lakh through animal husbandry. The program follows a structured approach, starting with Rs 10,000 seed capital and progressing to ₹50,000 based on performance, shifting the narrative from one-time grants to sustained business growth. Also, empowerment in Assam is increasingly being defined by the removal of operational barriers to human capital. The "Nijut Moina" scheme 2.0 aims to provide monthly stipends to over 10 lakh girl students, bridging down the gap of the financial agent, which directly impacts educational continuity. (The Hindu, 2026)

### No reason for complacency

Although recent data point to a rise in FLFPR, this is not always an unambiguously positive development. In many cases, an increase in female labour force participation is interpreted as a sign of household distress, where stagnating or inadequate male wages compel women to enter the workforce to supplement family income. Moreover, a look beyond the headline numbers shows participation spike is almost entirely driven by a massive shift into self-employment. In rural Assam, the share of women engaged in self-sustained ventures skyrocketed from 18.5 per cent to 77.3 per cent over a seven-year period from 2017-18 to 2023-24. A distress sign also comes from the data that salaried positions in rural women fell from 58.8 per cent to just 15.2 per cent (IWWAGE, 2025). To ensure that this is not merely "distress entrepreneurship" driven by compulsion, the state must focus on scaling these micro-activities into viable, high-growth rural enterprises. Even if the current rise in FLFPR is partly distress-led, policy should aim to create conditions that enable women to remain in the labour force, sustain gainful employment, and contribute meaningfully to the economy, while simultaneously strengthening their economic agency.

**Way forward**  
There are clear pathways to make this happen.

### FEMALE WORKER POPULATION RATIO



Women's Capability Index (WCI) indicates that 31per cent of women in Assam still experience multidimensional deprivation in health, dignity, and autonomy.

A critical barrier is the prevalence of anaemia, which affects 65.9 per cent of women aged 15-49, making Assam one of the most impacted states in the country. This health crisis is a serious concern, as calculations suggest that anaemia among females in India is estimated to cost nearly 1.2 per cent of the country's GDP. (Government of Assam, Women's Conditions in Assam, 2025)

Furthermore, safety remains a primary concern for workforce entry. Approximately 12per cent of women feel unsafe while using public transport, with the fear being significantly more acute in rural enclaves (14 per cent) compared to urban centres (7 per cent). (DES Assam, 2025) In such a scenario, true empowerment, therefore, requires a "Credit-Plus" approach, which pairs financial capital with improved health outcomes, safer transit corridors, and also dismantling of the gendered care burden that keeps millions of women at home.

While Assam's GSDP has expanded by 45per cent over the last five years, far outpacing the national average of 29per cent, the state's vision of a USD 143 billion economy rests also on the continued mobilisation of the women empowerment schemes put forth.

By focusing and leveraging the state's traditional family value systems and also aggressively tackling modern infrastructural and health deficits, Assam is proving that gender-responsive policy is one of the most effective forms of economic stimulus. The transformation is already visible; the challenge now is to ensure it becomes universal.

Authors are Research Assistant and Research Associate respectively, associated with Pahl India Foundation

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## Middle East: A dangerous return to the 'just war' era



SIDHARTH MISHRA

The recent US and Israeli airstrikes in Iran, which resulted in the death of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, have dramatically escalated tensions in the Middle East. Iran's retaliation through attacks on Israeli targets and several American military bases across the region has further intensified the crisis.

American President Donald Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu have defended the military operations by accusing Iran of long-standing anti-American and anti-Israeli activities. They allege that Tehran has consistently supported militant groups and has been secretly developing nuclear weapons capabilities that could eventually be used against Israel and the United States.

On this basis, Washington has described the strikes as acts of anticipatory and pre-emptive self-defence. Trump has also accused the Iranian leadership of turning against its own people. He has argued that the Khamenei regime suppressed freedoms and violently crushed protests during successive uprisings in recent months, leading to the deaths of thousands of Iranians. For some observers, the strikes may be viewed as a form of justice against an authoritarian regime accused of destabilising the region.

However, such actions also set a troubling precedent. Unilateral military operations carried out without broad international approval risk legitimising vigilante justice in a world that still claims to operate under an international legal order shaped by the United Nations. In the aftermath of these strikes, the international community appears increasingly divided. Some countries have strongly condemned the attacks as violations of international law and national sovereignty, while others have supported them as justified responses to security threats.

The growing number of conflicts in recent years has also exposed the limitations of the multilateral legal order established under the United Nations. Despite its mandate to maintain international peace and security, the UN system has often appeared ineffective in preventing wars or mediating disputes between powerful nations. This perceived helplessness has raised serious doubts about the relevance and effectiveness of existing international institutions and has prompted calls for reform in their structure and functioning.

Another emerging trend is the shift from multilateral diplomacy toward bilateral, trilateral and

regional arrangements. Countries increasingly rely on strategic alliances and friendly nations to resolve disputes rather than turning to universal institutions such as the United Nations.

From an ethical perspective, unilateral military operations targeting political leaders raise serious concerns. Such actions undermine the principle of state sovereignty and risk normalising extrajudicial killings and unilateral punishment by powerful states. While regimes such as those in Iran and Venezuela have faced accusations of human rights violations, bypassing international legal procedures undermines due process and global norms. Civilian casualties resulting from such strikes further intensify moral and humanitarian concerns. Critics also argue that these actions reveal a pattern of double standards in international affairs.

This has led to accusations of hypocrisy and of America positioning itself as a self-appointed arbiter in global affairs. The current situation also evokes memories of the pre-World War I era, when war was widely accepted as a legitimate method of resolving disputes between nations.

During that period, states frequently resorted to unilateral military action, reprisals and countermeasures without a clear legal prohibition on the use of force.

It was only after the devastation of the Second World War that the United Nations Charter established a clear legal framework restricting the use of force. Article 2(4) of the UN Charter prohibits nations from using force against the territorial integrity or political independence of other states, except in cases of self-defence following an actual armed attack. The UN Security Council was entrusted with the responsibility of maintaining international peace and security.

However, the recurrence of wars and unilateral military actions suggests that the world may be drifting away from these foundational principles. Conflicts in the Middle East, the Russia-Ukraine war and other regional tensions have already inflicted immense human suffering and destruction. If such conflicts continue unchecked, they could push the world toward a larger humanitarian catastrophe. The international community must therefore confront a critical question: whether it will passively accept such conflicts as inevitable or work collectively to strengthen global institutions, reform existing mechanisms and develop effective alternatives for peaceful conflict resolution. Only through such efforts can the world hope to avoid a return to the destructive era of unrestrained

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India's informal sector has invariably been demised as being a huge contributor to the black economy since it remains outside the official reckoning, or downgraded as contributing low-value, low-skill, and low-productive elements to an emerging economy. Now that the nation shifts to a new GDP series, with wider, more authentic, and transparent data, apart from a new yearly base, the 'informal' may acquire sheen, and more acceptance. Experts contend that in several ways, the lowly-graded unorganised sector may become more crucial in the policy-makers' arithmetic, calculations, and decisions. This may happen for varying, and the following reasons.

One of the surprises thrown by the new GDP series is the growth in manufacturing. The once-wayward, mysterious, and inexplicable annual growth rates in this sector seem stable. Under the old series, growth averaged a not-so-high eight per cent between 2023-24 and 2025-26, bolstered by 12.3 per cent in 2023-24 due to base effect, or extremely low figure in the previous year. Under the new one, according to a media report, the "sector has expanded by 11.2 per cent on average in each of the three years." Thus, manufacturing did way better.

Possibly the main reason for this unexpected hike in manufacturing growth is because of the better-than-before data from the informal sector. Under the old series, the data for this sector was merely extrapolated from the formal or organised one. In effect, what happened with the registered firms mirrored the unregistered ones. Hence, the growth figures for the sector were dominated by the trends in the formal sector, which was uneven and spiky. More even figures under the new series, which does not extrapolate but seeks real-ground data about the informal sector through a specific annual survey, and the yearly labour force survey, reveal new insights.

If the overall manufacturing grew in a more-or-less stable manner, it indicates that the informal sector more than made up for the downtrend in formal one in some years, and the opposite happened when the formal sector did well. In 2023-24, manufacturing grew by 12.3 per cent under the old series, and the informal was equated with formal. Under the new series, the growth was lower at 11.2 per cent, which implies that the informal did not do as well as the formal, as the growth in the latter may have been higher at over 12 per cent.

In the other two years, the growth was lower under the old series, and the informal sector was estimated to grow at the same lower pace as the formal sector. But since the overall growth under the new series was higher, this implies that the informal grew at a much-faster clip to make up for the low figures in the formal. The inverse relation seems counterintuitive as the formal sector may perform badly for reasons like inflation, external factors, and availability of inputs. The same reasons are likely to propel consumers to seek refuge in the informal sector.

Hopefully, as the data from the informal sector, especially through a specific annual survey of unincorporated firms, becomes better and robust over the years, the discrepancies and differences with the formal sector will be more visible and distinct. It may highlight other features that show the interplay between the two, and the circumstances under which each intersects with or diverges from the other. Indeed, this is crucial since India has a larger informal sector, with more people employed with it, compared to the registered firms. It will provide the policy-makers with better decision-making tools, and avoid the blunders like demonetisation, and forceful imposition of GST.

Look at another insight from the new series. Media reports highlight that while the informal may be more significant in the growth of manufacturing, its share may be over-exaggerated in some segments. For example, the new series devalues the gross value-added in trade, hotels, transport, storage, and communication by a quarter on an average in the past four years, from 2022-23 to 2025-26. Since a bulk of these segments lie in the informal sector, their size was overestimated. Hence, according to the officials, the new data is more robust and realistic, and represents a truer picture of the ground reality.

If one looks at the same data through a different lens or prism, the lower gross value-added may indicate either a shift from the informal to formal, or a saturation in consumption, or both. If the informal was equated with the formal under the old series, the new series implies that the informal is smaller than the formal in these segments. This may imply that consumption habits have shifted. People prefer to go to better and formal hotels and restaurants. Or they wish to get their communication needs from a registered and official store, rather than a streetside one. This may be because of more prosperity, and aspirations.

Yet another negative aspect of the new series is that despite the hoopla about manufacturing, Made-in-India, local production, and exports, the size of manufacturing, as a share of GDP, is lower by almost 1.5 per cent. Hence, the perception among experts, economists, and policy-makers that there is a shift from agriculture to manufacturing may not be true. Instead, there is a shift to services, and possibly more people find lucrative opportunities in niche areas like cash crops.



## Services save Indian exports

Overseas sales of merchandise goods were barely up by two per cent

India's cumulative exports (services and merchandise) grew by more than six per cent between April 2025 and January 2026, or the first 10 months of the financial year. According to an official press release, this "reflects India's resilience, with high-value commodities, widening global partnerships, and policy reforms supporting a more balanced, and globally-integrated trade trajectory." However, a dissection reveals huge gaps, and challenges in the export journey. Product exports nearly plateaued, weaknesses marked services, and huge hikes happened in agriculture commodities, not manufactured goods.

Let us start with the good news. Despite the geopolitical disruptions in 2025, which escalated now due to the Iran-Israel-US war, amidst the trade tariffs, exports did not falter. A six per cent growth in such an external environment is commendable, given that GDP growth in 2025-26 is likely to 7.4 per cent, as per the new GDP series. There were pockets of good news. For instance, there were positive signs of diversification in destinations, which implied expansion across geographies. "India ranks among the top five economies for the diversity of its traded products, and among the top three for the diversity of its trade partnerships," according to UNCTAD's trade diversity indices for Global South.

In the services sector, market diversity was forced due to the US' trade policies, and punitive tariffs. Indeed, the process started before Donald Trump became America's president for the second time. "While the US remains the largest export destination (in services via software) ... Europe's share rose (by two percentage points) ... to 32.8 per cent between FY-24 and FY-25. In products, the diversity was visible in the number of products exported "across multiple key categories." Double-digit growth was recorded in agriculture, and engineering

goods, and high ones in refinery products, and ores and minerals.

Services proved to be high-flyer in exports, as the figures in the first 10 months of this financial year were 10.57 per cent higher year-on-year. Indeed, the sector, whose contribution remains lower than products, was nearly at par. The more than \$350 billion it earned was a tad lower than merchandise exports of more than \$365 billion. It is services exports, with huge trade surpluses (almost \$190 billion in 2024-25) that enable India to manage the overall trade deficit. With the onslaught of artificial intelligence, the trend may not persevere.

There are other not-so-visible uncertainties. Exports via Global Capability Centres (GCCs), which allows the global giants to use India to provide crucial services to the parents, and which are being touted as the 'next big thing' after software, grew at a compounded annual rate of seven per cent in the past few years. In comparison, the overall services exports grew by 13.6 per cent in 2024-25, and 10.57 per cent in the first 10 months of this financial year. Although Stanford's AI Index Report (2025) "places India second globally in AI skill penetration," AI may emerge as a prominent reason to curb exports in the future.

Merchandise exports are where the weaknesses are stark. In the first 10 months of this financial year, they inched up by a mere 2.2 per cent year-on-year, or an addition of less than \$8 billion. In January 2026, the highest-growth areas were other cereals (88.49 per cent), coffee (36.03 per cent), iron ore (31.54 per cent), meat, dairy, and poultry (17.92 per cent), and marine products (13.29 per cent). These include either agriculture products, or low-value ores. Engineering goods (10.37 per cent), and refinery products (8.55 per cent) provided a breather.

But the growths in much-highlighted areas such as electronics (0.32 per cent), pharma (0.96 per cent), textiles (1.01 per cent), and processed cereals and other items (1.12 per cent) were abysmal. This is despite other milestones in these segments. Electronics was the third-largest and fastest-growing export category in 2024-25, and contributed more than \$20 billion in the first six months of this financial year.

In the first five months of the year, the exports of smartphones grew by a massive 55 per cent. India ranks 11 in global pharma exports, with a three per cent share, and is the sixth-largest exporter of textiles and apparel.

Automobiles witnessed strong export growth, but the number of vehicles shipped grew by just over 1.2 million units in four years between 2020-21 and 2024-25. In the first half of 2025-26, there was a double-digit growth, but the numbers and value are low. Defense is possibly an impressive sector, with exports zooming from ₹1,000 crore in 2014 to nearer to ₹24,000 crore in 2024-25. But one needs to accept that this is on a small base, although India ships defense products to more than 100 nations, which include the US and France. Remember, India purchased 36 Rafale aircraft from France a few years ago.

Hopefully, merchandise will pick up in the future. The India-European Union trade deal, and a possible India-US one, apart from the one with the UK, may spur exports. They may lead to huge investments, which will boost India's local production, and add to the exports. However, the investment inflows will take time, and have a lag effect of several years. It took a similar time for smartphones overseas sales. Experts fear that the recent trade deals may lead to higher imports, despite a growth in exports, and further distort the country's trade deficit.

What is crucial is that the unstable state of merchandise exports is despite the slew of policy measures to boost local production, and exports. In electronics, the semiconductor mission, with an outlay of ₹76,000 crore, aims to provide 50 per cent financial support for semiconductor fabrication, assembly, testing, and chip design. There are efforts to integrate India's AYUSH systems with the global health intervention framework to push pharma exports. In defense, the target is to hike production to ₹3,00,000 crore, with exports of ₹50,000 crore by 2030. A large part of both will come from the private sector.

However, the Government seems optimistic. As an official press release states, "India's experience demonstrates that import substitution and export strength can move together when approached strategically. Across sectors, from mobile phones and medicines to automobiles and defense, the push is to build in India not only for domestic needs, but for global markets.

As local capacity expands, and import reliance falls, many industries also gain scale to export more, strengthening the external sector. Looking ahead to Viksit Bharat 2047, India's self-reliance will go hand-in-hand with deeper global integration. This will help expand 'Made-in-India' products, create jobs, (and) boost growth."

OUR TAKE



**JHAPA (NEPAL):** Yesterday, Nepal went to polls, and the results will start coming in from today evening. There are several issues involved, and many former prime ministers are in the fray. Along with the talks of internal democracy, Gen Z's demand, which toppled the previous regime amid protests, and India-Nepal relations, what is at stake is the future ties with China. The last one becomes crucial because Balen Shah, an engineer-rapper-Kathmandu-Mayor-politician, who emerged as the face of Gen Z demands, and may become the next prime minister, has already dropped a China-linked economic bombshell.

In February, 2026, when Shah's party, Rastriya Swatantra Party, released its election manifesto, it did not list a major project in the eastern district of Jhapa. "The multi-billion-rupee Damak Industrial Park, Jhapa, later renamed the Nepal-China Friendship Industrial Park, is in the spotlight," reported The Kathmandu Post newspaper. "The project is part of the Belt-and-Road Initiative (BRI), an ambitious multi-continent infrastructure programme initiated by the Chinese President Xi

Jingping. In February 2021, (KP Sharma) Oli (former prime minister who was forced to step down due to students' protests in September 2025) laid the foundation stone of the project in the district's Kamal Rural Municipality," the report added.

Oli's Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist, UML), with a visible tilt towards China, did list the construction of the industrial park in its 41-point "commitment paper." The Park is spread across 2,200 bighas, and represents a major undertaking under the BRI framework. Economically, it is projected to catalyse regional development, generate 45,000 direct jobs, and a total of 1,60,000 jobs, and enhance diversification in sectors such as agriculture, electronics, textiles, and IT. Media reports indicate that it may involve foreign investment of more than ₹64 billion from China.

In New Delhi, the park's location near the Nepal-India border, or an area of strategic sensitivity, raised concerns, which were expressed to Kathmandu. The specific problem is the proximity to the Indian-side Siliguri Corridor, or 'chicken-neck' area, a 22-km-wide and 60-km-long land that connects the Indian mainland (West Bengal) to

## Beijing's problems in Kathmandu

Will the bilateral ties with China snap after Nepal's elections?



the North East. In Nepal, there are questions about environment sustainability, transparency in decision-making, and compliance with the legal and social safeguards. For China, the project may provide geopolitical dominance in the region, where it claims parts of Arunachal Pradesh.

Media reports indicate that the Jhapa project creates unnecessary, and possibly unwarranted, issues between India and Nepal due to the former's strategic location. Even Nepali officials wonder about the commitment to a mega project on the border, especially since it has related sensitive issues. The Park is being promoted by the Chinese firms as a joint venture, which seeks to access the Indian market through the dry ports situated at the West Bengal and Bihar borders. In December 2024, Nepal signed nine deals with China, including the "Framework for Belt and Road Cooperation," during Oli's visit.

"The revised 'understandings' were able to insert Nepal's priorities in the economic development cooperation. The current agreement lists 10 potential projects to be negotiated on an individual basis, and outlines cooperation in five areas, namely economic cooperation; financial sector

cooperation; transport, connectivity, and logistics cooperation; trade, industrial capacity, and investment cooperation; and customs cooperation," according to a June 2025 brief from the think-tank Centre for Social Innovation and Foreign Policy (CSIFS). The modalities of how to fund the mega projects have created a political row.

"The Nepali Congress and the UML (Oli's party) had contradictory positions over whether Nepal should go for loans or not. According to those who are privy to the negotiations, originally, China had proposed several funding modalities ranging from blended financing models to commercial loans. Nepali Congress had been insistent that it would not be taking commercial loans under BRI, but the final agreement adopted the phrase 'aid financing modalities' in place of the 'grant financing modalities' insisted upon by the Nepali Congress party," added the non-profit

research entity about the politics of BRI. Apart from financial and diplomatic concerns, there are allegations related to the environment damage due to several BRI-linked projects. Some reports highlight the significant delays in implementation. None of the 10 projects are finalised, which allows the

critics to question the efficacy and effectiveness of the initiative. There are sections which, like the non-profit entity quoted above, caution against the huge financial implications, keeping in view the difficulties that Sri Lanka faced due to the Chinese investments. In Sri Lanka, there was major debt distress due to Chinese loans, with charges of high costs, corruption, and low returns. These, in part, led to the nation's economic crisis in 2022.

According to a paper, a significant hurdle for Kathmandu is Beijing's request for substantial tax exemptions, which the Nepal's finance ministry earlier resisted, since the incentives are limited to the construction phases but continue for years after completion. Many feel that this will put undue fiscal burden on Nepal. Despite the misgivings, the previous regime, via the Investment Board of Nepal, which was chaired by Prime Minister Oli, decided to accelerate the Jhapa project. India put its foot down, and told Nepal that it constituted a "red line," and advised both the Nepali Congress and UML not to move ahead.

According to India's ministry of commerce and industry, Nepal was the fourteenth largest export destination for India in 2024-25, up from 28 in 2014. The main Indian exports include petroleum, iron and steel, automobiles, machinery, and cereals. Exports from India constitute almost 16 per cent of Nepal's GDP. Open border and connectivity projects facilitated bilateral trade. Yet, the ties nosedived once Kathmandu veered towards Beijing, and left New Delhi in the lurch. For the past few years, the relations are tense. New Delhi hopes for a possible change after the current elections in Nepal.

While a section of the workers in Shah's RSP seem unsure about the non-mention of the Jhapa project in the party's manifesto, they feel that it is a contentious issue, and possibly needs to be left alone for the moment. For political observers, it hints at Shah's doubts about BRI, as also the Chinese investments. One will know the state of Jhapa and other BRI projects only when a new regime takes over. At present, as the counting continues, the proposed Jhapa project site in its eastern fringes seems barren with patches of overgrown grass and bushes.

(The author has more than three decades of experience across print, TV, and digital media)



## West Asia crisis may hit trade if disruption persists: Crisil Ratings

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
New Delhi

A prolonged war in the West Asia could adversely affect several Indian sectors with direct trade exposure to the region, including basmati rice, fertilisers, diamond polishing, airlines and travel operators, according to Crisil Ratings.

The rating agency said sectors dependent on imported Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG), such as ceramics and fertilisers, may also face near-term production disruptions, while crude-linked industries including oil refiners, tyres, paints, specialty chemicals, flexible packaging and synthetic textiles could see cost pressures if energy prices remain elevated.

Countries in the West Asia account for about 30 per cent of global crude oil and 20 per cent of global LNG production, most of which is transported through the Strait of Hormuz. India imports roughly 85 per cent of its crude oil and about half of its LNG, with 40-50 per cent

of crude oil and 50-60 per cent of LNG shipments routed through the strait.

According to Crisil, most shipping vessels have halted passage through the Strait of Hormuz since March 1, 2026, citing heightened risks.

"Any prolonged disruption of this trade route will have a bearing on global crude oil and LNG availability, and their prices," it said.

**Energy Prices Surge:** Brent crude prices have already risen to \$82-84 per barrel from an average of \$66-67 in January-February 2026, while Asian spot LNG prices have surged from about \$10 per million British thermal unit to \$24-25 per mmbtu.

"A further surge would widen India's current account deficit and stoke inflation. It will also impact India Inc's profits, given the critical role of energy across sectors," Crisil said.

India also imports about two-thirds of its Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG) requirement, largely from the West Asia. However, the impact on industry is expected to be



limited as only about 10 per cent of LPG consumption is industrial, with the rest used by households. Freight and insurance costs have also increased amid the tensions, which may affect export- and import-oriented sectors with large global trade exposure.

**Moderate Trade Exposure:** India's direct merchandise

trade with the West Asia accounts for around 15 per cent of total exports and 20 per cent of imports during the first nine months of the current fiscal year.

Apart from crude oil and petroleum products, key trade items include basmati rice, fertilisers and rough and polished diamonds, along

with certain capital goods and spices.

Service sectors such as airlines and travel operators also have significant exposure to the region.

**Sectoral Impact:** Crisil said basmati rice exports, of which 70-72 per cent go to West Asia, could face shipment delays and possible payment

delays if tensions persist, potentially stretching exporters' working capital cycles. The fertiliser sector, which imports around 30 per cent of its requirement, could see supply-chain disruptions as the West Asia supplies roughly 40 per cent of India's fertiliser imports and a substantial share of key raw materials such as rock phosphate and phosphoric acid. Higher global prices and rising LNG costs could increase the Government's fertiliser subsidy burden.

For diamond polishers, the West Asia is a major trading hub, with Israel and the UAE accounting for about 18 per cent of India's diamond exports. However, alternate trading centres such as Belgium and Hong Kong may partly mitigate the impact.

In aviation, around 10 per cent of Indian airline flights transit through the West Asia. Airspace restrictions and airport closures, including at Dubai, have disrupted operations. Airlines may also face higher fuel costs due to longer routes to Europe and

the United States. Travel operators may see cancellations and postponements for West Asia destinations, though insurance coverage limits direct financial losses. Demand could shift to alternate destinations such as Southeast Asia.

In the ceramics sector, limited availability of LNG and LPG could force plants to reduce utilisation, while exports — about 40 per cent of sector revenue — may be affected as the West Asia accounts for over 15 per cent of shipments.

For city gas distributors, LNG supply disruptions could mainly affect industrial customers that rely heavily on imported gas, potentially reducing sales volumes.

Meanwhile, sectors such as oil refining, tyres, paints and specialty chemicals may face margin pressure as higher crude-linked input costs may not be immediately passed on to customers.

Flexible packaging and synthetic textile producers may see a relatively moderate impact due to improved

demand-supply dynamics and partial pass-through of costs.

**Potential Beneficiaries:** According to Crisil, higher crude prices could benefit upstream oil companies, which may see increased revenues with largely fixed costs. Shipping companies could also gain from higher charter rates amid reduced vessel availability and longer shipping routes.

Crisil also cautioned that further disruptions in key maritime routes, including the Red Sea corridor via the Suez Canal, could amplify the impact on global trade, shipping costs and energy prices. While the immediate impact on most Indian companies is expected to remain limited due to strong balance sheets, prolonged geopolitical tensions could intensify supply-chain disruptions, sustain high oil and gas prices and increase inflationary pressures.

Crisil said it will continue to monitor the developments and assess the credit impact on individual companies.

## West Asia conflict poses near-term challenges to Indian economy, says RBI MPC member

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
Mumbai

Conflict in the Middle East poses some immediate-term challenges for the Indian economy but is unlikely to dent long-term economic growth momentum, an external member of the RBI's rate-setting panel has said.

Going forward, there is a need for fiscal and monetary policies to work in a coordinated manner to push GDP growth to a higher trajectory, Nagesh Kumar has said.

In the present scenario, a hike in oil prices, exports disruptions and impact on remittances have been identified as the immediate challenges on the growth front, he said.

"The breakout of the Middle East conflict poses some immediate-term challenges for the Indian economy by raising oil prices, disrupting exports destined to the region and the potential loss of remittances, besides threatening security of the Indian diaspora in the region," Kumar told PTI in an e-mailed interview.



In the immediate short run, he noted, the conflict is escalating with US-Israel strikes and oil prices are likely to harden.

"Hopefully, the crisis will be resolved soon, given the high stakes that the world has in the region," he said.

Kumar added that diversification of oil sourcing could help mitigate risks. "The opening up of Venezuelan oil supplies for India is also likely to be helpful, as it diversifies the options," he said, adding that in the event the Middle East crisis ends quickly and sanctions on Iran are lifted,

longer, barring immediate-term challenges posed by the conflict.

"The upshot of these trends, namely brightening economic growth outlook amid a continued benign inflationary trend, provides an opportunity for India to stay in the 'goldilocks' zone for longer, except for the challenges posed by the conflicts in the immediate-term," Kumar said.

He emphasised that India has a real opportunity to move to a higher trajectory of growth from around 7 per cent to around 8 per cent, underpinned by an accelerating manufacturing sector alongside service sector dynamism.

"Going forward, fiscal and monetary policies should work in a coordinated manner to support the transition of the economy to a higher GDP growth trajectory. It is this higher growth trajectory underpinned by a robust manufacturing sector that will be needed for the creation of adequate decent job opportunities and durable prosperity," he said.

"The inflation outlook is not showing any concerns of overheating," he said.

He said that together with a brightening growth outlook, the benign inflationary trend provides an opportunity for India to stay in the "Goldilocks" zone for

## No significant upside to \$63/bbl Brent price estimates for 2026: Fitch

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
New Delhi

The \$63/bbl estimation for average Brent crude price for 2026 is unlikely to see any significant upside as the Strait of Hormuz closure would be only temporary and global oil market oversupply should limit oil price rises, Fitch Ratings said.

Fitch said the strait is not formally closed but vessels are increasingly avoiding it given the risk of attack by Iran or its proxies. Oil majors have halted shipments for

safety reasons, and insurers are cancelling war risk cover for vessels.

"We do not expect significant upside to our December 2025 assumption of an average Brent oil price of USD63/bbl for 2026," Fitch said, adding it expects this effective closure of the strait to be temporary.

Also, global oil market oversupply, should limit oil price rises and mitigate any potential disruptions to Iranian oil supply, it added.

Brent crude prices have already risen to \$82-84 per



barrel from an average of \$66-67 in January-February 2026. The US and Israel jointly launched military strikes on Iran on February 28. Iran responded by firing drones

and missiles at Israel and US military installations around the Gulf, and also at the global business hub of Dubai.

The Strait of Hormuz is a vital artery for seaborne oil

transportation, with limited alternative routes.

The crisis in West Asia has led to spiralling prices of global oil and natural gas. The Strait is a narrow 33-kilometre passage connecting the Persian Gulf to the Arabian Sea.

Fitch said prior to the conflict, around 20 million barrels per day (MMbpd) of crude oil and petroleum products transited the strait, accounting for about a quarter of global seaborne oil trade and a fifth of global oil consumption. About half of

the oil volumes transported through the strait are exports from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, with the remainder from Iraq, Kuwait and Iran. About half of these exports go to China and India.

"A protracted closure would affect both exporting and importing countries and therefore is not our baseline assumption. If the strait were to remain effectively closed for a protracted period, naval protection for tanker navigation could be considered, as occurred during the 1980s Iran-Iraq war," Fitch said.

## Rice exporters seek urgent relief as Iran crisis disrupts exports, shipping

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
New Delhi

Rice exporters have sought urgent Government support to mitigate the impact of shipping disruptions triggered by the Iran crisis and instability across key maritime routes, according to a representation submitted by the Indian Rice Exporters Federation (IREF).

The Federation, in its representation to the Agricultural and Processed

falling about 7-10 per cent in the past 72 hours, intensifying working-capital pressures for exporters.

"Our exporters cannot absorb abrupt freight, fuel and insurance shocks while shipments are delayed or rolled," IREF vice-president Dev Garg said. He called for time-bound relief measures and clear advisories to safeguard export contracts, cash flows and India's export commitments. Among the key measures sought are waiver

of port-related charges, including storage and demurrage, in cases where cargo is rolled due to vessel cancellations or steep freight increases beyond exporters' control.

The federation has also requested facilitation for cargo in transit to be returned, redirected or diverted, with support from customs authorities and the Reserve Bank of India for documentation and payment adjustments.

Further, exporters have sought an official advisory from the Government or APEDA recognising the disruption as a force majeure-type event, which they say would help prevent contractual penalties.

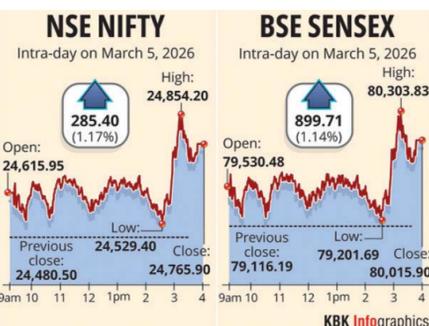
## Stock markets rebound tracking rally in global peers

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
Mumbai

Benchmark stock indices Sensex and Nifty bounced back on Thursday, closing higher by more than 1 per cent in line with a rebound in global equities after recent sharp losses due to the conflict in West Asia.

Snapping its four-day decline, the 30-share BSE Sensex rebounded 899.71 points or 1.14 per cent to settle at 80,015.90. During the day, it surged 1,187.64 points or 1.50 per cent to 80,303.83. The 50-share NSE Nifty climbed 285.40 points or 1.17 per cent to end at 24,765.90, ending its three-day falling streak.

From the Sensex pack, Adani Ports, Larsen & Toubro, NTPC, Reliance Industries, Bharat Electronics and InterGlobe Aviation were among the major gainers. Tech



Mahindra, HCL Tech, Hindustan Unilever and ICICI Bank were among the laggards. Brent crude, the global oil benchmark, jumped 1.84 per cent to \$82.90 per barrel. In Asian markets, South Korea's Kospi rebounded sharply by 9.63 per cent. Japan's Nikkei 225, Shanghai's SSE Composite index and Hong Kong's Hang Seng index also ended

higher. Markets in Europe were quoting higher. The US market ended in positive territory on Wednesday. Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth ₹8,752.65 crore on Wednesday, while Domestic Institutional Investors (DIIs) bought stocks worth ₹12,068.17 crore, according to exchange data.

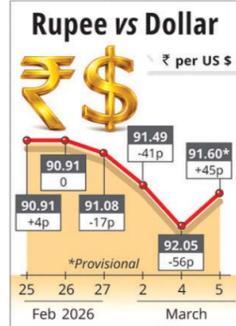
## Rupee rebounds from lowest level to settle 45 paise higher at 91.60 against US dollar

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
Mumbai

The rupee rebounded from its lowest level and settled with a gain of 45 paise at 91.60 (provisional) against US dollar on Thursday on the back of a buying trend in domestic equity markets and reports of Reserve Bank intervention.

According to forex analysts, the Reserve Bank seems to have intervened to help the local currency from extreme volatility due to uncertainties on the ongoing war involving the US, Israel and Iran. However, a firm dollar, rising crude oil prices and intense withdrawal of foreign funds kept the rupee under pressure, they said.

At the interbank foreign exchange, the rupee opened at 92.16 and touched an intra-day high of 91.30 against the greenback. The currency ended the session at 91.60 (provisional) against the dollar,



registering a gain of 45 paise from the previous closing level. The Indian currency slumped 56 paise to close at its all-time low of 92.05 against US dollar on Wednesday, after logging a steep loss of 41 paise on Monday. The forex market was closed on Tuesday on account of Holi. Anuj Choudhary, Research Analyst, Mirae Asset ShareKhan, said

the rupee bounced back from record low levels on reports of intervention by the Reserve Bank of India and positive tone in the domestic markets. However, a strong dollar and surge in crude oil prices capped sharp gains.

"FII outflows and rising crude oil prices may also weigh on the rupee. However, any RBI intervention may support rupee at lower levels. Traders may also take cues from weekly unemployment claims data from the US. USD-INR spot price is expected to trade in a range of ₹91.30 to ₹92.10," Choudhary added.

Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading 0.13 per cent higher at 98.86. Brent crude, the global oil benchmark, was up 1.83 per cent at \$82.89 per barrel in futures trade, after escalating threats of disruptions in the flow of crude through the Strait of Hormuz.



## FROM THE WORLD

### BELGIUM NATO condemns Iran attack

NATO spokesperson Allison Hart on Wednesday condemned "Iran's targeting of Turkey" but she did not confirm whether the military organisation's air defences were used to down the missile. "NATO stands firmly with all allies, including Turkey, as Iran continues its indiscriminate attacks across the region," she said. "Our deterrence and defense posture remains strong across all domains, including when it comes to air and missile defence." Asked whether NATO air defences were used, Hart said she "can't get into operational details." NATO has parts of a broader European ballistic missile defence system on Turkish soil, including an early warning radar at the Kurecik base which can detect missiles from Iran.

### WEST ASIA CONFLICT Spain denies cooperation

Spanish Foreign Minister Jose Manuel Albares on Wednesday denied that the Government had changed its position on supporting the US military operations against Iran, contradicting a White House spokesperson. "I can refute (the White House spokesperson)," Albares told Spanish radio station Cadena Ser. "The position of the Spanish Government regarding the war in the Middle East, the bombing of Iran and the use of our bases has not changed one iota." Albares spoke in Madrid shortly after White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt had said that Spain had changed its position and "they've agreed to cooperate with the US military." Meanwhile White House on Wednesday said Spain has agreed to cooperate with US operations in the Middle East.

# Iran hasn't asked for military aid: Russia

ASSOCIATED PRESS  
■ Moscow/ Dubai

The Kremlin said Thursday that Iran hasn't asked Russia for military assistance as it faces the US and Israeli attacks.

Asked whether Russia could go beyond rhetoric and offer military assistance to its ally, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov responded that "there have been no requests from the Iranian side."

He added that "our consistent position is well known, and there have been no changes to it."

Russian officials have said that a "strategic partnership" treaty Moscow signed with Tehran in January 2025 doesn't envisage military assistance.



Plumes of smoke rising as strikes hit the city during the US-Israeli military campaign in Tehran

### Azerbaijan's Foreign Ministry accuses Iran

Azerbaijan's Foreign Ministry on Thursday

accused Iran of carrying out a drone attack against its exclave of Nakhchivan. One drone crashed near the

airport in Nakhchivan and another one near a school, the ministry said in a statement. Two civilians were

injured, the ministry said. Iran has not acknowledged targeting Azerbaijan, but its attacks have spread erratically as the war has gone on involving regional countries and beyond.

### 1,230 people killed in war: Iran Government

The death toll in Iran from the ongoing war with the United States and Israel has reached at least 1,230 people, an Iranian Government agency said on Thursday.

The Iran's Foundation of Martyrs and Veterans Affairs offered the toll. The Israeli military issued an evacuation notice on Thursday calling for all residents of Beirut's southern suburbs to "save your lives and evacuate your homes immediately."



Ultra-Orthodox Jewish men celebrate the festival of Purim in Jerusalem

## Modi very focused on delivery: Canada PM

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
■ Sydney

Prime Minister Narendra Modi is "very focused" on delivery of welfare programmes to the common people and has been successful in bringing "hundreds of millions" of them into the formal economy through "financial reforms" in India, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney has said.

Carney was speaking on Wednesday during an interaction at the Lowy Institute, Australia's leading think tank, where he was asked to speak about his assessment of Prime Minister Modi, days after the two leaders met in New Delhi.

The Canadian prime minister was in India from February 27 to March 2, during which India and Canada sealed key pacts on supplies of Uranium and critical minerals and agreed to conclude a comprehensive economic partnership agreement soon.

"Just on a personal level the impressions which is, he is a person who is very... and I have known this from before, but it is interesting just the interaction over time... very focused on delivery to, I would say, the rural household," he said and invoked a French phrase to say, "to the person on the street." "So a huge motivation for the financial reform transformations, the



payment system transformation, the UPI and other things... was to get money directly to individuals without leakage... shall we say, in the system in real time, and to bring people, hundreds of millions of people, into the formal economy," Carney said.

Modi has been successful in delivery of welfare programmes to the common people despite challenges, he said.

"He (Modi) is very focused on that aspect of delivery. So here he is... up at this global level operating, India rising much, I mean challenges, but much much positive, but a leader who keeps bringing it back down to that level.

"So there is much, too much to see there," he said. PM Carney also said Prime Minister Modi has not taken a day off in the last 25 years ever since he first became chief minister of Gujarat in 2001 and then prime minister of India in 2014.

"Well, I mean, there is... look the guy is, he is unique. I would say, 25 years... this 25 years and he has not taken a day off," he said.

## Iran cleric calls for shedding blood of Israelis, Trump

ASSOCIATED PRESS  
■ Dubai

Iranian state television aired a message on Thursday from an ayatollah in Iran calling for the "shedding" of blood from Israelis and US President Donald Trump.

The message came from Ayatollah Abdollah Javadi Amoli and represented one of the few clerical statements coming from Iran as it faces a combined airstrike campaign from Israel and the US. "We are now on the verge of a great



Ayatollah Abdollah Javadi Amoli

test and we must be careful to fully preserve this unity, Trump's blood." "The Imam to fully preserve this alliance," he said in the statement. He called for "the shedding of Zionist blood, the shedding of Trump's blood." "The Imam of the time says, Fight the oppressive America, his blood is on my shoulders," the ayatollah added.

## Second Iranian ship awaits entry, says Sri Lanka

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
■ Colombo

Sri Lanka on Thursday said it is deliberating appropriate action after a second Iranian ship has sought entry to its territorial waters, a day after a frigate belonging to the Islamic country was attacked near the island nation.

Sri Lanka said it had recovered over 80 bodies of Iranian sailors killed after a US submarine attack sank the Iranian frigate - IRIS Dena - off Galle, the island's southern coastal town.

Government spokesman and minister Nalinda Jayathissa was on Thursday responding to a query by the main opposition leader Sajith Premadasa in parliament about the second Iranian ship. "We are aware of it and are contemplating action to safeguard all lives on board," Jayathissa said. "We are intervening to resolve this issue to safeguard regional peace."



Nalinda Jayathissa

The ship, according to Jayathissa, awaits in Sri Lanka's Extended Economic Zone (EEZ) but is out of its territorial waters. Sources said the ship had requested emergency assistance.

Meanwhile, in Galle, the crew of the ship torpedoed by the US were receiving treatment. Their injuries are not of serious nature, the

hospital sources said.

The inquests on the 84 bodies of the perished Iranian sailors would be conducted Thursday at the Karapitiya hospital in Galle where the injured are receiving treatment.

The ill-fated ship was returning home from Visakhapatnam after a naval fleet review exercise.

While the Sri Lanka Navy refused to give reasons as to what caused the vessel to make a distress plea, US War Secretary Pete Hegseth said on Wednesday that it was a US submarine that sank the Iranian warship in international waters.

Earlier in the day, Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Vijitha Herath had told

## 'War with Iran to cost Israel \$3 billion a week'

HARINDER MISHRA  
■ Jerusalem

The ongoing war with Iran could cost Israel an estimated NIS 9.4 billion (\$3 billion approximately) per week under current restrictions on economic activities, the Israeli Finance Ministry has warned.

"In a letter sent to the Home Front Command chief, Major General Shai Klapper, Finance Ministry Director General Ilan Rom asked to ease restrictions to allow for a gradual, partial reopening of businesses and workplaces as early as Thursday," the Times of Israel reported.

"There is no dispute about the need to preserve a defence policy adapted to the security situation, but at the same time, shutting down the economy on a broad scale carries heavy economic costs," Rom warned.

"We need a solution that addresses both the security needs of the Home Front and the needs of the economy, after two and a half years in which the economy has been paying a heavy economic price in light of the increase in security needs and the repercussions of the war," the top Finance Ministry executive reportedly said. (AP)

## Iran warns US after frigate sinking

ASSOCIATED PRESS  
■ Dubai

Iran's foreign minister said on Thursday that America "will come to bitterly regret (the precedent it has set) after a US submarine sank an Iranian frigate off the coast of Sri Lanka.

The comment by Abbas Araghchi represents the first Iranian Government acknowledgement of the sinking of the IRIS Dena in the Indian Ocean.

Araghchi made the comment on X, saying "the US has perpetrated an atrocity at sea, 2,000 miles away from Iran's shores." "Frigate Dena, a guest of India's Navy carrying almost 130 sailors, was struck in international waters without warning," he wrote.



## Canada, Australia leaders urge de-escalation

ROD MCGUIRK  
■ Melbourne

The Canadian and Australian prime ministers on Thursday called for a de-escalation of the Iran war but added the Iranians must never gain a nuclear weapon.

Canada's Mark Carney and his Australian counterpart Anthony Albanese discussed the war during their meeting in Australia's Capital, Canberra.

The meeting came after news that a US submarine sank an Iranian warship in the Indian Ocean and Turkiye said NATO defences intercepted a ballistic missile launched from Iran before it entered Turkiye's airspace.

"We want to see a broader

de-escalation of these hostilities with a broader group of countries than just the direct belligerents involved," Carney said at a press conference with Albanese.

"We stress that that cannot be achieved unless we're in a position that Iran's ability to acquire a nuclear weapon, develop a nuclear weapon, and to export terrorism, is ended. So that process must lead to those outcomes," Carney added.

He said the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council, which were "showing tremendous restraint," should become involved in the de-escalation process.

Albanese said: "The world wants to see a de-escalation and wants to see Iran cease



to spread the destinations of its attacks." "We're seeing Gulf states, that have not been involved, attacked across the board, including

the attacks on civilian and tourist areas as well.

But we also want to see the objectives achieved. I want to see the possibility of

Iran getting a nuclear weapon removed once and for all," Albanese said.

Questioned by a reporter, Carney could not rule out the Canadian military ever becoming involved in the conflict.

"You've asked a fundamental hypothetical in a conflict that can spread very broadly," Carney said.

"So one can never categorically rule out participation. We will stand by our allies when it makes sense," he added.

Carney is in Australia on a trade-focused, three-nation visit that began in India last week. He addressed the Australian Parliament on Thursday and will fly to Japan on Friday. (AP)

## Kurdish dissident groups say they are preparing to join fight against Iran with US support

ASSOCIATED PRESS  
■ Irbil (Iraq)

Kurdish Iranian dissident groups based in northern Iraq are preparing for a potential cross-border military operation in Iran, and the US has asked Iraqi Kurds to support them, Kurdish officials said.

The Kurdish groups are widely seen as the most well-organised segment of the fragmented Iranian opposition and are believed to have thousands of trained fighters. Their entry into the war could pose a significant challenge to the embattled authorities in Tehran and could also risk pulling Iraq further into the conflict. Khalil Nadiri, an official with the Kurdistan Freedom Party, or PAK, based

in northern Iraq's semi-autonomous Kurdish region, said Wednesday that some of their forces had moved to areas near the Iranian border in Sulaymaniyah province and were on standby.

He said Kurdish opposition group leaders had been contacted by US officials regarding a potential operation, without giving more details.

Asked about reports that the Trump administration was considering arming Iranian Kurdish groups, Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth told reporters on Wednesday: "None of our objectives are premised on the support or the arming of any particular force. So, what other entities may be doing, we're aware of, but our objec-

tives aren't centred on that."

Before the US and Israel attacked Iran on Saturday, triggering a new war in the Middle East, the PAK had claimed attacks on the paramilitary Revolutionary Guard in retaliation for Tehran's violent crackdown on protests. But an official with the group said it had not sent forces from Iraq into Iran.

If the Iranian and Iraqi Kurdish groups were to join the war, it would be the first entry of a significant ground force into the battle. The Kurdish groups have battle experience from the fight against the Islamic State group. An official with Komala, another of the Kurdish Iranian groups, said Wednesday that their forces are ready to cross the border



within a week to 10 days and were "waiting for the grounds to be suitable." He spoke on condition of anonymity out of security concerns.

Kurds in Iran have a long history of grievances and uprisings against both the current Islamic Republic and

the monarchy that preceded it. During the rule of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Kurds were marginalised and repressed and sometimes rebelled. After Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution, the new theocracy also battled Kurdish insurgents. Iranian forces destroyed Kurdish

towns and villages in fighting that killed thousands over several months. While they share a desire to see the current authorities ousted, the Kurdish groups have also butted heads with other opposition groups - notably the faction led by the former Shah's son, Reza Pahlavi, who has accused the Kurds of being separatists aiming to carve up Iran.

Iraqi Kurds hesitant to join the fray The potential operation has put leaders of the Iraqi Kurdish region in a delicate position.

Three Iraqi Kurdish officials told the AP that a call took place Sunday night between US President Donald Trump and Masoud Barzani and Bafel Talabani - the heads of the Kurdistan Democratic

Party, or KDP, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, or PUK, the two main Kurdish parties in Iraq - to discuss the situation in Iran.

They spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorised to comment publicly.

One of the officials said Trump had asked the Iraqi Kurds to militarily support the Iranian Kurdish groups in operations in Iran and to open the border to allow the Iranian Kurdish groups to move freely back and forth.

When asked about the call and reports that Trump has sought military support for Iranian Kurdish groups, White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt said: "He did speak to Kurdish leaders with respect to our base that we

have in northern Iraq," but denied that Trump had agreed to a specific plan.

The Iraqi Kurdish official said the Iraqi Kurds were concerned that getting directly involved in the conflict would draw a harsh Iranian response. Already, the Kurdish region has seen a string of drone and missile attacks by Iran and allied Iraqi militias in recent days, targeting US military bases and the US Consulate in Irbil as well as the Kurdish groups' bases.

While most of the attacks have been intercepted, civilian homes have been damaged, and the region is suffering from electricity cuts after a key gas field halted operations due to security concerns.

## Voting concludes peacefully in Nepal

SHIRISH B PRADHAN  
Kathmandu



Elderly woman casting a vote in the Nepal general elections. PTI

Tens of thousands of Nepalese voted on Thursday in the crucial parliamentary elections to elect a new prime minister, six months after violent Gen Z protests toppled the KP Sharma Oli-led coalition Government. The election is being closely watched by India, which hopes for a stable government in the politically fragile Himalayan nation to take forward the developmental partnership between the two sides. The voting, which began at 7 am, concluded in a peaceful and orderly atmosphere at 5 pm, officials said. Election Commissioner

Janaki Kumari Tuladhar said voters who had already queued at polling centres by 5 pm were still allowed to cast their ballots. The counting will start immediately after the ballot boxes are collected. The newly formed

Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) led by former rapper Balendra Shah, who was also the mayor of Kathmandu, is posing a tough challenge to two traditional political parties - the Nepali Congress party and the Communist

Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist). The RSP, formed in 2022, has received significant support during the campaign, and Shah is said to be a strong candidate for prime minister. On the other hand, the Nepali Congress and CPN (UML) were part of the government toppled by the Gen Z last year. Nepali Congress president Gagan Thapa is the prime ministerial candidate of his party, whereas the CPN (UML) has projected Oli as its PM face. Around 39 per cent of voters exercised their franchise till 3 pm, officials said. There were some minor incidents reported in a few places, Election Commissioner Sagun

Shumsher Rana was quoted as saying by The Kathmandu Post newspaper. Nepal's 18.9 million voters are eligible to elect 275 members of the House of Representatives. They will elect 165 HoR members through first past the post (FPTP) or direct voting system, and 110 members through proportionate voting. Around 3,400 candidates are vying for 165 seats under direct voting, and 3,135 candidates for 110 seats through proportionate voting. Nepal Police confirmed that apart from minor disagreements at a few locations, no serious problems had occurred. "Some jostling is expected during elections,

but no major issues have arisen. We are ensuring that the voting process remains peaceful throughout the day," Police spokesperson Abi Narayan Kafle said. "Voting started in all the constituencies, including the southern plains, hilly area and the mountain region at 7 am," Election Commission spokesperson Narayan Prasad Bhattarai said. "The election started in a peaceful environment across the country," he added. In Kathmandu, the weather was fine, the sky was clear, and people were enthusiastically queuing up to cast their votes. Interim Prime Minister Sushila Karki cast her vote from Kathmandu-5 constituency.

## Texas shooting: Indian student remembered at US university



PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
Houston

Hundreds of students gathered at the University of Texas for a candlelight vigil to honour the victims, including a 21-year-old Indian-origin student, of the deadly mass shooting at a US city. The vigil was held near the university's iconic tower to remember those killed and injured in the mass shooting incident at the West Sixth Street entertainment district in Austin. Savitha Shan, an Austin native and a dual-degree senior at the University of Texas at Austin, was fatally shot when a gunman opened fire in the crowded entertainment district on March 1. Late on Wednesday evening, the university students stood together holding candles and observing moments of silence for the victims of the weekend

shooting that left three people dead and more than a dozen injured. Savitha Shan's death has drawn particular attention among members of the Indian diaspora and international student community, with classmates and community members expressing grief over the loss. Students attending the vigil shared memories of the victims and called for support for those affected by the tragedy. University officials said counselling services and other support resources are being made available to students and staff. Fundraising efforts have been launched to assist the families of the victims and those injured in the shooting. Online campaigns and community initiatives have raised tens of thousands of dollars to help cover funeral expenses.

## US Secretary Burgum to discuss critical minerals

REGINA GARCIA CANO  
Caracas



Doug Burgum

US Secretary of the Interior Doug Burgum met in Venezuela with acting President Delcy Rodriguez in the latest sign of the Trump administration's intent to exercise control over the South American country's natural resources. Burgum, who leads US President Donald Trump's National Energy Dominance Council, and Rodriguez met with representatives of more than two dozen US mining and minerals companies, many of which had previously operated in Venezuela. The two-day visit comes as the administration seeks to defend against China's hold on critical minerals - some of which are abundant in Venezuela - and advances its phased plan to turn around the long-troubled country. "When we are working together in can only mean two things, which is prosperity for the people of Venezuela and for the citizens of the United States, and it also brings peace and stability for the world," Burgum told reporters standing next to Rodriguez, whom he praised for her efforts "to cut the red tape and allow capital investment to flow."

following the capture by US forces of then-President Nicolas Maduro two months ago. His trip follows a February visit by Energy Secretary Chris Wright, which was focused on the country's oil potential. 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 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. In addition to oil, Venezuela is rich in gold, copper, coltan, bauxite, diamonds and other precious mined resources, while unsafe working conditions are common in the poorly regulated industry. The elements niobium and tantalum, both considered critical minerals and crucial for smartphones. (AP)

represent billions of dollars in investment and thousands of dollars in high-paying jobs." Burgum became the latest US official to travel to Caracas to meet with Rodriguez, who was sworn in

## India calls on international community to act together against ISIS, Al Qaeda

YOSHITA SINGH  
United Nations



Raghoo Puri

India has called on the international community to act together against ISIS and Al Qaeda and their proxies, underlining that terrorism is an "existential threat" to international peace and security. "Terrorism is an existential threat to international peace and security. It knows no borders, nationality, or race, and is a challenge that the international community must combat collectively," First Secretary in the Permanent Mission of India to the UN Raghoo Puri said. In

remarks to the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT) annual ambassadorial level briefing to Member States, Puri recalled the April 2025 terror attack in Jammu and

Kashmir's Pahalgam, carried out by The Resistance Front, a proxy of Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba, a UN listed terror organisation. The terror attack led to the loss of lives of 26 tourists. "We must act together against ISIS and Al Qaeda and their proxies," he said, adding that as a country which itself has been a victim of cross-border terrorism for the past nearly three decades, "India is acutely aware of the socio-economic and human cost of terrorism, especially for its victims." India added its voice in stressing on the importance

of the Global Counter Terrorism Strategy (GCTS) as a central instrument for multilateral cooperation. Puri said India will remain steadfast and engaged in the consultations for the 9th review of the GCTS, assuring full cooperation to co-facilitators Finland and Morocco during negotiations in the process. Puri also highlighted that as Chair of the Counter Terrorism Committee in 2022, India has striven to bring these principles into the counter-terrorism architecture of the UN and into the debate on terrorism at the United Nations. (PTI)

## China hikes defence budget by 10% to \$ 275 billion

KJM VARMA  
Beijing



China on Thursday hiked its defence budget by a little over 10 per cent to \$275 billion, about \$25 billion more than last year as it ramped the modernisation of armed forces to catch up with the US military. Roughly 1.9 trillion yuan (about \$275 billion) will be allocated to national defence, Chinese Premier Li Qiang announced in his work report presented to the National People's Congress (NPC) on Thursday. The report said China's defence spending remains comparatively modest across key relative indicators, including its share of

GDP, per capita defence expenditure, and defence expenditure per military personnel. Last year China announced a 7.2 per cent increase for its national defence budget to \$249 billion for 2025 which is a \$17 billion rise compared to 2024. China's defence spending, only second to that of the US, has been

growing over the years putting enormous pressure on India and other neighbouring countries to scale up their defence budgets in the face of economic challenges. In 2024, China increased its defence budget by 7.2 per cent to about \$232 billion (1.67 trillion yuan) - over three times that of India - as it continues with the massive modernisation of all its armed forces. China's defence budget figures are viewed with scepticism in the light of massive military modernisation, including building aircraft carriers, rapid construction of advanced naval ships and modern stealth aircraft being carried out at a feverish pitch by the Chinese military. Meanwhile, China on Thursday lowered its GDP target to 4.5 to 5 per cent for this year in the face of Trump's trade tariff war, the worsening global crisis following the US-Iran war and headwinds in the domestic economy, owing to property market slump and unemployment crisis. (PTI)

## North Korean leader Kim inspects new warship



ASSOCIATED PRESS  
Seoul

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un inspected his new destroyer for two straight days ahead of its commissioning and observed a test of cruise missiles fired from the warship, vowing to accelerate the nuclear armament of his navy, state media said Thursday. The North's official Korean Central News Agency said Kim, during his visits to the western shipyard of Nampo on Tuesday and Wednesday, also inspected the construction of a third destroyer of the same class as his 5,000-ton warship, the Choe Hyon, first unveiled in

April 2025. Kim has hailed the development of Choe Hyon as a significant advancement toward his goal of expanding the operational range and preemptive strike capabilities of his nuclear-armed military. State media says the ship is designed to handle various weapons systems, including anti-air and anti-naval weapons, as well as nuclear-capable ballistic and cruise missiles. South Korean military officials and experts say Choe Hyon was likely built with Russian assistance amid deepening military ties, but some have raised doubts about whether it's ready for active service.

## Haitian man dies in US immigration custody

ASSOCIATED PRESS  
Florence



A Haitian man confined at an Arizona immigration detention centre for months died at a hospital after a tooth infection was left untreated, the man's brother said. Emmanuel Damas, 56, told medical personnel at the Florence Correctional Centre that he had a toothache in mid-February, but he was not sent to a dentist, said Damas' brother, Presly Nelson. Nelson believes the staff at the facility did not take his brother's complaints seriously even though it was a treatable condition. Nelson said he would expect such a death in countries with less access to health care, but not the United

Haitian American who is a registered nurse, said she was contacted by Damas' family after his death. "As a medical person, I am absolutely appalled that there were medical-licensed people that were working there and allowed those things to happen," Ellis said. "It does not make sense to me." A report from the Maricopa County Medical Examiner's Office listed Damas' cause of death as "pending" as of Wednesday. Damas was taken into ICE custody in September and was soon transferred to the medium-security Florence Correctional Centre, where he was held for several months, including after his asylum application was denied, Ellis said. ICE had said it hoped to issue a news release. ICE officials announced the death of Mexican national Alberto Gutierrez-Reyes, who had been in a California ICE detention centre and died in the hospital Feb. 27 after reporting chest pain and shortness of breath. Chandler City Council member Christine Ellis, a

## In a first, bust of Mahatma Gandhi unveiled in US state of Montana

YOSHITA SINGH  
New York/Seattle



In a first, a bust of Mahatma Gandhi has been unveiled in the US state of Montana, as authorities underscored that the ideals of nonviolence espoused by him are much needed in the current world order. Montana Governor Greg Gianforte, along with Consul General of India in Seattle Prakash Gupta jointly unveiled the bust, which is a gift from the Government of India to the state of Montana. The bust has been installed at the prestigious Mike Mansfield Centre of the University of Montana in

While acknowledging strengthening ties between India and Montana, Gianforte praised the ideals of nonviolence that Mahatma Gandhi espoused, as much needed values in the world order today, the release said. Founded by an act of US Congress in 1983, the Mansfield Centre at University of Montana aims to foster globally minded leaders of integrity and supports youth and communities through civic and international education guided by ethical leadership, civic responsibility and unconditional commitment to public good, it added. (PTI)

## 3 police officers injured in scuffle at US Capitol Hill



ASSOCIATED PRESS  
Washington

A protester and three US Capitol Police officers were treated for injuries in a Senate office building on Wednesday after the protester resisted arrest for disruptive behaviour and grabbed onto a doorway as the officers and a Republican senator tried to drag him out of the room. The protester, Brian C McGinnis of North Carolina, was arrested and faces three counts of assaulting a police officer and three counts of resisting arrest and unlawful demonstration, the Capitol Police said in a statement. "This afternoon, an unruly man who started to illegally protest during a hearing put everyone in a dangerous position by violently resisting and fighting our officer's attempts to remove him from the room," Capitol Police said in a statement. Multiple videos show that McGinnis stood up and started shouting during the Senate Armed Services hearing, and that police officers immediately grabbed him and tried to remove him from the room.

## Millions left without power after major blackout hits Cuba's western region

ASSOCIATED PRESS  
Havana



A blackout left millions of people without power in Havana and the rest of western Cuban the latest outage on an island struggling with dwindling oil reserves and a crumbling electric grid. Government radio station Radio Rebelde quoted an energy official as saying that it could take at least 72 hours to restore operations at one of Cuba's largest thermo-electric power plants, where a shutdown sparked the outage. The Government's electric utility said on social platform X that the outage affected

people from the western town of Pinar del Rio to the central town of Camaguey. Energy and Mines Minister Vicente de la O Levy wrote on X late Wednesday that the Government was powering

critical infrastructure in the affected region as two power plants came online. Such infrastructure includes hospitals and medical clinics. "We are working to restore the National Electric System

amid a complex energy situation," he wrote earlier on X. The US Embassy warned people to "prepare for significant disruptions" and conserve fuel, water, food and mobile phone batteries. "Cuba's national power grid is increasingly unreliable, and scheduled and unscheduled power outages are prolonged and a daily occurrence across the country, including Havana," it said on X. By late afternoon, the Government said crews had restored power to 2.5 per cent of Havana, or some 21,100 customers, noting that efforts were gradual and tied to what the system's conditions would allow. It did not provide updated numbers

by late Wednesday night. "We trust in the experience and effort of the electrical workers to overcome this situation in the shortest possible time," Prime Minister Manuel Marrero Cruz wrote on X. As night fell, people across Havana lingered on doorsteps and used wood or charcoal to prepare "caldosas," a popular soup shared among neighbours who contribute items including vegetables, chicken and meat. A group of musicians along the city's famed seawall played into the night. Others played dominoes by a rechargeable lightbulb. "With the power outages, this is the only thing we

young people have to distract ourselves," Jefferson Silvera said. Daily, prolonged outages have become so common in Cuba that 66-year-old Genoveva Torres was waiting for power to return at night as usual to cook dinner. She was perturbed when told about the massive blackout. "My God, until when?" she exclaimed. "Then we won't eat. We'll have to eat bread again." State media reported that the outage was caused by a shutdown of the Antonio Guiteras thermo-electric power plant east of Havana following a leak in its boiler. Radio Rebelde quoted the plant's technical director Roman Perez Castaneda as

saying that crews must first locate the fault before repairing it and restarting the unit. Perez Castaneda said that a pipe burst in the boiler, causing a water leak and subsequent fire that was extinguished without major damage, according to Radio Rebelde. The outage caught 63-year-old Odalis Sanchez out on the street with her grandson. She was unable to walk because of a recent operation, so she called someone for a ride home. Some 200 people waited at a bus stop near her, but buses were not running given a lack of fuel, so they tried to get a ride via any means available, including hitchhiking.



## PROSPECT

# All India Association of Industries urges calm over West Asia row

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
■ Mumbai

Expressing grave concern over the escalating geopolitical developments in the Middle East, the Indian trade and industry fraternity on Wednesday called for immediate de-escalation to safeguard global trade and energy security.

The industry body emphasised that the region remains a vital hub for international commerce, hosting maritime corridors essential for the movement of nearly one-fifth of the world's daily oil supply.

Speaking on the volatility, Vijay Kalantri, President of the All India Association of Industries (AIAI) and Chairman of World Trade Centre Mumbai, noted that the global business community is closely monitoring the situation. "Stability in this region is vital to ensure the uninterrupted movement of goods and energy resources. Any disruption in shipping routes, particularly the Strait of Hormuz, will have direct implications for global



Dr Vijay Kalantri, President, All India Association of Industries (AIAI) and Chairman, World Trade Center Mumbai

energy markets and supply chain stability," Kalantri cautioned.

Despite the global jitters, Kalantri offered a reassuring outlook for the domestic market, categorising the current fluctuations in equities, gold, and crude as "panic reactions" rather

than shifts in economic fundamentals. He asserted that India's diplomatic neutrality and diversified sourcing strategy provide a significant safety net.

"India is in a position of relative resilience. With strategic petroleum reserves covering 40 to 45 days of requirements and crude sourced from over 40 countries, our supply flexibility is stronger than ever," he stated, urging the business community to avoid decisions driven by short-term fear.

The AIAI President also highlighted the humanitarian aspect, noting that nearly nine million Indians reside in the Gulf and Middle Eastern nations. He reiterated that the safety of this diaspora remains a primary concern for the industry, given their contribution to regional economic cooperation.

The trade body concluded by calling upon the international community to prioritise diplomatic engagement, ensuring the Middle East remains a gateway for commerce rather than a source of global economic uncertainty.

# BoB raises ₹10,000 cr via green infrastructure bonds

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
■ New Delhi

State-owned Bank of Baroda (BoB) on Thursday said it has raised ₹10,000 crore through the issuance of long-term green infrastructure bonds, becoming the first bank in India to issue such an instrument domestically.

The issue garnered overwhelming investor demand, receiving bids aggregating ₹16,415 crore, over three times the base issue size of ₹5,000 crore, BoB said in a statement. The seven-year bond was placed on the Electronic Debt Bidding platform of NSE with base issue of ₹5,000 crore and a green shoe option of ₹5,000 crore, it said.

Despite current market volatility, the bank secured a competitive cut-off coupon of 7.10 per cent, reflecting strong investor



confidence, it said. Given the tight pricing achieved, the bank has realised a "Greenium" from the market, due to its commitment to sustainable and green finance, as well as the strong positioning of its ESG roadmap.

The proceeds from the green infrastructure bonds will be deployed towards eligible green projects in line with the bank's green financing framework and applicable regulatory guidelines, enabling long-term funding of critical sectors such as renewable energy and other environmentally sustainable infrastructure projects, it added.



SBI Chairman CS Setty calls on Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Thursday

# Nexus Select Mall Management settles allegations of REITs violation with SEBI



Nexus Select Mall Management has settled allegations of flouting REIT (Real Estate Investment Trust) norms with markets regulator Sebi after paying ₹24.37 lakh settlement fee.

In its order on Wednesday, Sebi said Nexus Select Mall Management remitted the amount to settle the allegations of failing to maintain the required net worth and failing to inform the regulator about the change in the net worth.

After receipt of the settlement amount by Sebi, the adjudication proceedings initiated against the applicant vide SCN (show cause notice) dated June 11, 2025 is disposed of in terms of the Settlement Regulations, the order noted.

# Khonsa Battalion Organises Camp Distribution of Hearing Aids under Operation Sadbhavana

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
■ Itanagar

Khonsa Battalion of Assam Rifles organised a humanitarian outreach programme for distribution of hearing aids under Operation Sadbhavana on 03 March 2026 at Khonsa for beneficiaries of Tirap and Longding districts, Arunachal Pradesh.

The initiative was undertaken with the aim of assisting specially-abled individuals suffering from hearing impairment to improve their quality of life. A total of 17



beneficiaries from Tirap and Longding districts were identified and were provided hearing aids during the programme. The recipients who were in need were identified in coordination with local authorities to ensure timely

and genuine support. The event witnessed active participation of local community members and



representatives. The recipients and their families expressed heartfelt gratitude towards Assam Rifles

for the thoughtful gesture and continued support to the people of the region. The initiative reflects the commitment of Khonsa Battalion towards community welfare and its dedication towards fostering goodwill, trust and strong civil-military relations.

Through such initiatives under Operation Sadbhavana, Assam Rifles continues to contribute towards the socio-economic upliftment and well-being of the local populace in Tirap district.

# IRFC courts Japanese investors to diversify funding

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
■ New Delhi/Tokyo

A high-level delegation from the Indian Railway Finance Corporation (IRFC) successfully concluded a strategic two-day External Commercial Borrowing (ECB) roadshow in Tokyo on February 26-27.

The initiative aimed to tap into the Japanese regional investor base to mobilise long-term funds at competitive rates while diversifying the corporation's currency profile. The delegation, led by Deepa Kotnis, Executive Director (Finance), and Sunil Kumar Goel, Executive Director (Business Development), engaged in a series of intensive one-on-one meetings with leading regional investors.

The roadshow, facilitated by Mandated Lead Arrangers (MLAs) Sumitomo Mitsui Banking Corporation (SMBC) and Mitsubishi UFJ Financial Group (MUFG), is part of IRFC's calibrated strategy to optimise borrowing costs.

During the interactions, the officials highlighted IRFC's robust asset-liability management framework and its integral



role in India's railway infrastructure expansion. Investors reportedly showed keen interest in the corporation's core financing business, citing its stable cash flow model and sovereign linkages as key attractions.

Beyond traditional railway financing, the delegation showcased IRFC's recent foray into high-quality PSU and broader infrastructure exposures. This pivot reinforces the corporation's evolving identity as a diversified infrastructure financing institution.

The strong response from the Japanese market underscores global confidence in IRFC's credit profile, which continues to be rated at par with the Government of India by the Japan Credit Rating Agency (J CRA).

The successful engagement is expected to bolster IRFC's presence in the Japanese capital market, ensuring a steady stream of cost-effective, diversified funding to meet the growing requirements of India's infrastructure sector.

# IRFC woos global investors in Singapore roadshow

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
■ New Delhi

In a strategic move to diversify its funding sources and tap into global capital markets, the Indian Railway Finance Corporation (IRFC) successfully concluded a high-profile two-day roadshow for External Commercial Borrowings (ECB) in Singapore.

The delegation, led by Senior General Managers (Finance) Ajay Swami and Rakhi Dua, held intensive one-on-one meetings on 2-3 March with key Japanese and Taiwanese regional investors. The visit marks a significant step in IRFC's "Version 2.0" strategy, which seeks to broaden its lender base and mobilise long-term funds at competitive rates while strategically managing its currency profile.

The roadshow highlighted



IRFC's evolving role in financing India's vast railway ecosystem. Beyond its traditional mandate, the corporation has now diversified into funding infrastructure projects with forward and backward linkages to the Railways, including: Dedicated Freight Corridors, Metro Rail Networks, and Port Connectivity Projects.

During the interactions, the delegation emphasised IRFC's robust financial health, noting its Nil Non-Performing Asset (NPA) status, low operating costs, and strong sovereign linkages. This "whole of Government" approach aims to finance India's infrastructure expansion in the most cost-effective manner possible.

The roadshow, supported by Mandated Lead Arrangers (MLAs) Sumitomo Mitsui Banking Corporation (SMBC) and Mitsubishi UFJ Financial Group (MUFG), saw keen interest from regional lenders. Investors reportedly expressed satisfaction with IRFC's expansion into high-quality PSU and infrastructure exposures outside the Ministry of Railways.

Potential lenders assured their support for IRFC's future ECB borrowings, reposing confidence in the corporation's credit profile and its strategic shift towards a more diversified customer base.

The successful engagement in Singapore is expected to bolster IRFC's presence among regional investors, ensuring a steady stream of diversified funding lines to meet the corporation's future growth requirements.

# Beyond Chatbots: How 'Agentic AI' is Becoming the New Fund Manager



SHOWROJEET CHUGH

For the past few years, artificial intelligence in the financial sector has largely been conversational. We marvelled at chatbots that could summarise earnings reports, draft emails, and answer customer queries with uncanny human likeness. But as we move deeper into 2026, the era of "AI evangelism" has given way to a new paradigm: "Agentic AI." This is no longer about machines that just talk; it is about machines that act. From the towering financial hubs of Wall Street in the United States to the bustling, tech-driven corridors of Dalal Street in India, autonomous AI agents are quietly stepping into roles that were once the exclusive domain of human fund managers and wealth advisors.

## The American Catalyst: Autonomy at Scale

The shift towards Agentic AI finds its strongest catalyst in the United States, where heavy capital investment and a mature regulatory environment have allowed tech giants and Wall Street titans to experiment aggressively. In the U.S., financial institutions are deploying AI agents capable of executing complex, multi-step financial operations autonomously. These aren't simple algorithms following pre-pro-

grammed "if-then" rules; these are sophisticated agents that can analyze global news in real-time, assess geopolitical risks, negotiate vendor contracts, and dynamically rebalance institutional investment portfolios without requiring a human to click "approve" on every transaction.

This autonomy is fundamentally rewiring corporate governance. AI agents are now being trusted to optimise liquidity and manage risk with a precision that humans simply cannot match at scale. By reducing bureaucratic friction and operational latency, the U.S. market is proving that Agentic AI is the ultimate engine for capital efficiency, setting a benchmark that the rest of the world is rushing to emulate.

## India's Opportunity: Democratizing Wealth Management

If the United States is writing the playbook for institutional AI, India is poised to be the proving ground for its democratization. The Indian financial ecosystem is unique, characterized by a massive, digitally native middle class, a booming retail investment culture, and world-class digital public infrastructure. Here, Agentic AI presents a transformative opportunity not just for corporate efficiency, but for financial inclusion.

For decades, personalised wealth management and active fund management were premium services reserved for high-net-worth individuals.

Today, Indian fintechs and forward-looking banks are beginning to leverage Agentic



The intersection of global capital and autonomous neural networks

AI to offer "family-office" level financial planning to the everyday retail investor.

Imagine an AI agent that doesn't just remind a user to invest, but actively monitors the Indian equities market, assesses the user's risk appetite, automatically harvests tax losses, and executes trades across mutual funds and stocks; all while adapting to sudden market corrections or RBI policy shifts in milliseconds.

## The Paradox of Automation: Why Human Judgment is More Valuable

Than Ever Naturally, the rise of autonomous financial agents brings widespread anxiety about job displacement. If an AI can execute trades and manage portfolios, what happens to the human finance professional? The reality, as noted by leading global financial institutes, is deeply counterintuitive: the

automation of execution actually increases the demand for human judgment.

As Agentic AI takes over the mechanical heavy lifting of data processing and routine trading, the role of the finance professional is pivoting from "number cruncher" to "strategic interpreter." In both the U.S. and India, human managers are needed more than ever to define the ethical boundaries, set the overarching strategic goals, and interpret nuanced macroeconomic signals that AI still struggles to contextualize. In the Indian context, where a massive IT and BPO workforce supports global finance, this presents an urgent imperative for upskilling. The future belongs to reduction in bureaucratic friction, setting a benchmark.

## Navigating the New Frontier

As we navigate 2026, the transition from conversational AI to Agentic AI represents the most significant technological leap in modern finance. The United States is demonstrating the sheer power of autonomous systems at an institutional level, while India stands ready to deploy these tools to democratise wealth creation for over a billion people.

The defining challenge moving forward will not be whether these agents can outperform humans, but how seamlessly regulators, institutions, and individuals can integrate them into a secure, thriving global economy.

Showrojeet Chugh is a finance professional with experience in foreign exchange trading, liquidity management, and financial analysis

# Tata AIG CSR Powers SLF's School Zone Safety at Prayagraj

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE  
■ New Delhi

SavelIFE Foundation (SLF), supported by the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiative of Tata AIG General Insurance Company Ltd., has implemented a comprehensive school zone safety treatment at JBS Public School, Prayagraj. As part of this intervention, SLF today conducted a multi-

The programme focuses on mitigating engineering risks, strengthening enforcement, improving post-crash emergency response, and building institutional and community capacity.

Developed in collaboration with the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH), Government of India, the ZFD Programme is being scaled nationally



stakeholder school zone safety walkthrough to review the effectiveness of the measures and strengthen on-ground coordination. The school zone safety treatment at JBS Public School is the most recent among several interventions implemented by SLF in Prayagraj under its Zero Fatality District (ZFD) Programme, whereby SLF works with district administrations to eliminate preventable road crash fatalities through a data-driven, systems-based approach.

across the 100 most high-risk districts identified using a composite road crash severity index.

SLF's safety intervention at the stretch near JBS Public School, Prayagraj, on Rewa Road (NH-30) aims to address the lack of essential road safety infrastructure. SLF's other interventions in Prayagraj under the ZFD Programme include similar safety measures comprising rigorous road infrastructure improvements at 'blackspots' or high-fatality locations/corridors.



## BRIEFLY

### Colombia downs Argentina 1-0



Linda Caicedo scored the lone goal in the second half and Colombia defeated Argentina 1-0 in the SheBelieves Cup tournament. The United States was set to play rival Canada in the later match at ScottsMiracle-Gro Field on Wednesday. Caicedo, who plays professionally for Real Madrid, scored in the 64th minute to put Colombia in front. It was her 18th international goal and came off an assist from Leicy Santos. The United States downed Argentina 2-0 in the SheBelieves opener on Sunday in Nashville. Colombia fell 4-1 to Canada in its tournament opener. Shortly before the match, Bay FC announced that it had acquired Argentina defender Aldana Cometti from French club FC Fleury. Cometti joins the National Women's Soccer League club on a two-year contract with a team option for a third. Argentina, ranked No. 30 in the world, made one other SheBelieves Cup appearance in 2021, finishing fourth. Colombia, ranked No. 20, previously played in the tournament last year and finished third. Colombia will face the United States on Saturday in the tournament finale in Harrison, New Jersey. Argentina will play Canada in the early game.

### Brazil's Flamengo hires Leonardo Jardim as coach



Defending Brazilian and South American champion Flamengo hired Portuguese coach Leonardo Jardim after shocking fans by firing Filipe Luis the day before. The 51-year-old former Monaco coach signed a deal until the end of 2027, the Rio de Janeiro club said on Wednesday. Luis was fired hours after Flamengo beat tiny Madureira 8-0 in a Rio state league semifinal. This year his team lost the trophies of the Brazilian Supercup to local rival Corinthians and the South American Recopa to Argentina's Lanus, triggering the supporters' anger. Many fans, pundits and former Flamengo players expressed support for Luis after his firing and expressed disbelief with the decision of club chairman Luiz Eduardo Baptista. Only two months ago, Luis extended his contract at Flamengo through 2027. He had 101 matches as Flamengo's coach with 63 victories, 23 draws and 15 defeats. Five of those losses took place this year. Jardim coached Cruzeiro last year and took the team from Minas Gerais state to a third-place finish in the Brazilian league. He left the club after the end of his contract in December, pledging never to coach another Brazilian team. Flamengo's executives hope for another strong season for the club, which recently signed midfielder Lucas Paqueta for a reported fee of 35 million euros (USD 40.5 million).

## United's defender Maguire gets suspended sentence

DEREK GATOPOULOS  
Athens (Greece)

Manchester United defender Harry Maguire was given a 15-month suspended sentence over a nightclub scuffle involving police officers on the Greek island of Mykonos in August 2020, court officials said. On Wednesday, lawyers for the plaintiffs called on Maguire's club and the English FA to sanction the player.

The England international originally was handed a 21-month suspended sentence shortly after the incident, but he appealed the ruling, which triggered a new trial at a court on the island of Syros, the region's administrative Capital. The appeals trial had been



delayed several times, including once because of a lawyers' strike. Maguire, who turns 33 on Thursday, was convicted on charges of causing minor

bodily harm, insulting police officers, attempted bribery, and unlawful violence against police officers.

The sentence was suspended for three years. Maguire can challenge Wednesday's decision at Greece's Supreme Court in Athens.

**action against Maguire:** The centre-back, who was not present at the trial Wednesday, has denied wrongdoing. In 2020, he said: "If anything, myself, family, and friends are the victims."

But a lawyer representing police officers involved in the 2020 incident accused Maguire of displaying arrogance and a lack of remorse. "He has never apologised — not even once. Not a single apology," lawyer Ioannis Paradissis told The Associated Press on Wednesday.

"As of today, he has a criminal record. We hope that his club and the Football Association of England take action against him," he added. "How is it possible for

someone who now has a criminal record and has been convicted of acts of violence against police officers to continue to participate in national teams and in the England team? It's unacceptable."

Paradissis also issued a statement on behalf of the police officers, who had hoped for an apology as "an elementary gesture of respect." "It is incompatible with the values of sport, and with the role-model status that elite athletes are expected to embody, for a person with a criminal record for violence to continue to appear as a Premier League player and as a public figure looked up to by young fans across the world," it added.

## Mexican authorities meet FIFA to review World Cup security protocols

ASSOCIATED PRESS  
Mexico City

FIFA representatives met with Mexican authorities to assess security for the World Cup matches to be played in Mexico. Concerns arose following violent incidents last week in several Mexican states after a military operation led to the capture and death of drug lord Nemesio Oseguera Cervantes, alias "El Mencho," leader of the Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generacion Cartel. "We reviewed the intelligence, prevention, and operational deployment protocols that will be implemented during this international event," Federal Security Secretary Omar Garcia Harfuch



said on his social media accounts on Wednesday.

Mexico, the United States and Canada are co-hosting the World Cup. Mexico is scheduled to host 13 matches, distributed among three cities: Mexico City, Guadalajara, and Monterrey. The tournament's opening match — Mexico vs South Africa — will be played June 11 at Azteca Stadium in Mexico City. In addition to the

FIFA representatives and Garcia Harfuch, Wednesday's meeting also included members of the Security Cabinet and authorities from Mexico City and the states of Jalisco and Nuevo Leon.

Earlier, President Claudia Sheinbaum stated that thanks to the efforts of federal and state forces, security will be guaranteed for all those visiting the country during the tournament. "Security is guaranteed, and there is sufficient surveillance and inspection to ensure that absolutely no problems occur, (so that) it will be a great, peaceful World Cup where visitors come to have fun," Sheinbaum said in her daily briefing.

## Goalkeeper hospitalised after firecracker explodes near him in German soccer game

ASSOCIATED PRESS  
Essen (Germany)

A goalkeeper was taken to the hospital and a German soccer game was suspended for around 40 minutes after a firecracker thrown from the stands exploded near him, his team said.

Felix Wienand was playing for Rot-Weiss Essen against Waldhof Mannheim in the German third division when the firecracker exploded "in his immediate vicinity" after being thrown from an area of the stands containing Mannheim fans, Essen said on Wednesday.

The club added that Wienand was taken to hospital with a suspected



acoustic trauma and acute stress reaction, and coach Uwe Koschnat expressed concern that Wienand could experience long-term damage. The game was eventually resumed after a long delay and the 23-year-old goalkeeper's team won 1-0. The incident comes just over a year after another

goalkeeper was injured by a lighter thrown from the stands in a top-division German game.

That game ended in farcical circumstances with both teams agreeing not to try to score after the referee resumed the game against the wishes of the injured player's team.

## Young players impress as Leverkusen gets a much-needed win at Hamburg in Bundesliga

ASSOCIATED PRESS  
Hamburg (Germany)

Two of Bayer Leverkusen's young players combined for a breakthrough goal to beat Hamburg SV 1-0 in the Bundesliga and boost the team's fading challenge for Champions League qualification. Leverkusen was having a frustrating game on Wednesday, with a goal ruled out for handball and a penalty decision overturned on video review, before 20-year-old midfielder Ibrahim Maza and 19-year-old forward Christian Kofane combined for the only goal in the 73rd minute.

Maza drew in Hamburg players before flicking the



ball on for Kofane, who lashed it into the top-left corner. Hamburg's own young star Luka Vuskovic threw his boots against the end. The 19-year-old defend-

er, on loan from Tottenham, had a shot blocked by Leverkusen goalkeeper Janis Blaswich in the final seconds and headed the rebound onto the crossbar. Hamburg is 11th and winless in three

games. Leverkusen remained sixth in the Bundesliga but cut the gap to fourth-place Stuttgart, the last team in the Champions League places, to three points.

Leverkusen coach Kasper Hjulmand made five changes to his lineup, partly due to injuries, and handed a first senior start to 18-year-old German-American winger Montrell Culbreath, who played 80 minutes.

The game was originally meant to be played in January but it was rescheduled when Hamburg's stadium roof suffered structural damage following heavy snow and required urgent repairs.

## Iraq faces visa difficulties for World Cup playoff



ASSOCIATED PRESS  
Baghdad

Iraq's hopes of World Cup qualification are being impacted by the Iran war because players cannot secure visas for the playoff tournament in Mexico and the team's coach is stranded in the United Arab Emirates.

"Because of airspace closures, our head coach, Graham Arnold, is unable to leave the United Arab Emirates," the Iraqi soccer federation said in a statement on Instagram on Wednesday.

"In addition, several embassies remain closed at the present time, preventing several professional players, technical and medical staff members from obtaining entry visas to Mexico."

Mexico's foreign affairs ministry said late Wednesday in a statement that the visa complications arose because Mexico does not have an embassy in Iraq, but the Mexican embassy in the United Arab Emirates has been in contact with the Iraqi federation.

The statement added that the visas could be granted in any European country and that they have asked Iraq's federation for the names of

the people traveling to Mexico to expedite visa issuance procedures.

Iraq is scheduled to play either Bolivia or Suriname in Monterrey, Mexico on March 31 for one of the last two qualification places for the World Cup in the United States, Mexico and Canada.

The federation said it is in "constant communication with FIFA regarding the arrangements for our national team's participation" in the match. It said the Asian Football Confederation is also "fully aware of every development regarding our team's situation." If Iraq fails to qualify through the playoff, it could take another path if Iran is unable to take part in the tournament because of the US and Israeli attacks on the country. "We cannot be expected to look forward to the World Cup with hope," Iran's top soccer official Mehdi Taj said. Should Iran pull out — still hugely speculative — Iraq or the United Arab Emirates would be likely replacements as the ninth and 10th-ranked Asian teams in qualifying. But FIFA's legal regulations are vague and appear to give FIFA president Gianni Infantino wide powers to shape any decision.

## Arsenal beats Brighton to move ahead in title race

ASSOCIATED PRESS  
London

Arsenal moved seven points ahead of Manchester City at the top of the Premier League after scraping a 1-0 win at Brighton while its title rival drew 2-2 at home to struggling Nottingham Forest.

City almost won it eight minutes into stoppage time when substitute Savinho had a shot cleared near the line on Wednesday.

Right winger Bukayo Saka's ninth-minute goal was enough for Arsenal, which has played one game more than City. Saka broke down the right and his scuffed strike from the edge of the penalty area went through the legs of goalkeeper Bart Verbruggen. Manchester



United's unbeaten run under new coach Michael Carrick ended at seven games following a 2-1 defeat at Newcastle, which had midfielder Jacob Ramsey sent off in first-half stoppage time and scored in the 90th minute through substitute William Osula.

**Haaland flops:** Erling Haaland returned for City after having sat out the 1-0 win at Leeds on Saturday with a minor injury but was ineffective.

City struggled to break Forest down until Rayan Cherki made a fine run down the right and floated over a

cross which Antoine Semenyo expertly volleyed in at waist height with his left foot.

But Forest hit the home side in the 52nd with a classic counterattack which went almost the length of the field. It culminated in a brilliant back-heeled finish from midfielder Morgan Gibbs-White after Brazil forward Igor Jesus had nodded down a right-wing cross.

Forest's joy was short-lived when former Ballon d'Or winner Rodri rose to head home from a corner six minutes later.

Forest stunned City again, however, when midfielder Elliott Anderson curled in a superb shot from just outside the penalty area into the bottom right corner with 13 minutes left.

## Lazio and Atalanta draw 2-2

ASSOCIATED PRESS  
Rome

Lazio and Atalanta traded four second-half goals in a 2-2 draw in the first leg of the Italian Cup semifinals.

Fisayo Dele-Bashiru took advantage of a through pass from former Atalanta midfielder Daniel Maldini to put Lazio ahead two minutes after the break on Wednesday.

Mario Pasalic equalised four minutes later for Atalanta by knocking in a rebound. Boulaye Dia took advantage of a defensive error by Pasalic and quickly found the target from the center of the area in the 87th. Then United States international Yunus Musah equalised



again for Atalanta in the 90th. Como and Inter Milan drew 0-0 in the other semifinal on Tuesday.

The second legs are scheduled for April 21-22 and the final is May 13. Atalanta has reached the final three times in the last seven seasons but has won the trophy only once - back in 1963. Lazio is a seven-time champion, having beat Atalanta for its most recent title in 2019.

## It's a shame Jon Rahm rejected European peace offering: McIlroy

ASSOCIATED PRESS  
Orlando

Rory McIlroy says it's "a shame" Jon Rahm is the only LIV Golf player unwilling to accept the terms of a European tour deal to eliminate future fines, and he brushed off concerns the Spaniard might not be eligible for the Ryder Cup team.

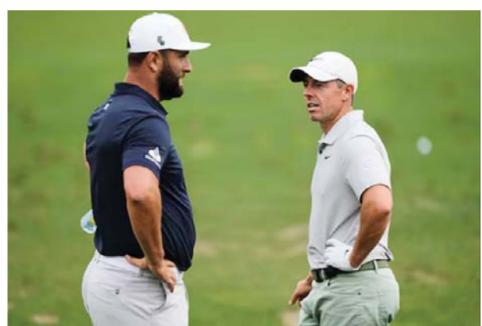
"The Ryder Cup is bigger than any one person," McIlroy said on Wednesday. Rahm's future in the matches was placed in doubt this week when he refused the terms of the European tour offer — pay previous fines for not getting a release to play LIV Golf events, drop any appeals and add two

tournaments to the minimum four required for European tour membership.

Rahm said at LIV Golf Hong Kong on Tuesday that the DP World Tour, as it is known commercially, was "extorting players" by forcing them to play two additional tournaments. Rahm said if the deal was to pay fines, drop appeals and play the minimum four events, he would have signed.

"I just don't like the situation," Rahm said. "I think we should be able to freely play where we want and have the choice to play where we want and not be dictated what we do."

Tyrrell Hatton and seven other Europeans who play for



Saudi-funded LIV Golf agreed to the conditions. The European tour would help decide which tournaments to play in an effort to boost the tournaments on the sched-

ule. "In my opinion, it's a really generous deal," McIlroy said, adding that it was "much softer" than what the PGA Tour required of Brooks Koepka to return. Koepka

had to pay \$5 million to charity, was ineligible for PGA Tour equity shares for five years and did not have access to FedEx Cup bonus money this year. He also could not play in the USD 20 million signature events unless he qualified.

"The European tour can only do so much to accommodate these guys," McIlroy said. "If you want to play on the Ryder Cup you have to be a member of the DP World Tour. ... You have to abide by the rules and regulations."

He said those rules meant being subject to fines if players don't get a release to play LIV Golf events when the European tour has a tournament that week.

## Marseille faces another trophy-less season

ASSOCIATED PRESS  
Paris

Marseille's long wait for a trophy continues after it twice threw away the lead against Toulouse before losing on penalties in the French Cup quarterfinals.

Following a 2-2 draw Marseille lost the shootout 4-3 with 18-year-old loan signing Ethan Nwaneri in tears after missing the decisive kick on Wednesday.

Some fans threw flares onto the field at the final whistle as Marseille's players went off to a chorus of boos.

The club has not won any silverware since the League Cup in 2012 and last won the French Cup in 1989. In Wednesday's other quarter-



final, Nice won 6-5 on penalties following a 0-0 draw with Lorient. Nice won the last of its three French Cups in 1997.

**Marseille's defense collapses again:** Marseille has not been past the quarterfinals since 2016, when it lost to bitter rival Paris Saint-

Germain in the final.

Boosted by a dramatic win over Ligue 1 rival Lyon on Sunday, Marseille opened the scoring in the second minute through Mason Greenwood's penalty after being fouled by defender Rasmus Nicolaisen.



# Samson, Bumrah help India tide over England challenge

**BHARAT SHARMA**  
■ Mumbai

Sanju Samson's sublime fifty and Jasprit Bumrah's spell, touched with unearthly genius on a batting beauty, helped India secure a seven-run win over England, as the defending champions powered to the T20 World Cup final on Thursday.

Sanju Samson (89 off 42) overcame the Jofra Archer challenge through a slice of luck for his second successive fifty, firing India to a mammoth 253 for seven, and the highest total in a knock-out game in the tournament's history. It was an above-par total at Wankhede, but Jacob Bethell (105 off 48) led England's fightback with a

sublime hundred after they lost three wickets in the powerplay for 68 runs.

In the end, critical contribution from Bumrah (1/33 in 4 overs) in the death overs allowed India to stop England at 246/7 in 20 overs.

India will now face New Zealand in the title clash in Ahmedabad on Sunday.

Tom Banton (17 off 5) was the fourth wicket to fall, but sixes kept coming, propelling England to 119 for four at the halfway stage, equalling India's mark after 10 overs.

Varun Chakaravarty was again the weakest link in the attack as he failed to find the right length on an unforgiving surface to leak 64 runs in his four overs.

Bumrah had got rid of the



dangerous Harry Brook in the power play with a slow cutter, and Axar Patel took a sensational backwards running catch from the cover region.

With Will Jacks (35 off 20) and Bethell on the offensive in the middle overs, it was another brilliant work of fielding from Axar in the deep that saw the former's back, ending a 77-run stand off 39 balls.

Curran joined Bethell in the middle, and the equation was brought down to a gettable 45 off the last three overs, forcing Suryakumar Yadav to bring Bumrah for one final time in the game.

The Indian wizard delivered once again by conceding only six runs. With both Arshdeep and Bumrah not available, Shivam Dube was

called upon to defend 30 in the final over.

England's hopes ended with a heartbreaking runout of Bethell, who played a memorable innings.

Samson wins Archer's battle with a fair share of luck

After single-handedly taking India to the semifinals, a supremely confident Samson (89) bludgeoned the England bowling attack, including Archer, who had dominated his battle against the Indian opener in last year's bilateral series.

Having lost the toss at a ground with short boundaries, India had to put up a big total, and Samson helped them do that after being dropped by Harry Brook on 15 off Archer in the third over.

England had already removed Abhishek Sharma the over before, and a Samson dismissal would have put India under pressure, but Brook dropped a sitter at mid-on, leaving Archer in disbelief.

That was all the luck Samson needed to make England pay, hammering seven sixes and eight fours in his sizzling knock.

Dismissed thrice by Archer last year when he did not have the answers for short balls into the body, Samson subdued the England pace spearhead with a flurry of pull shots. He picked up length quickly and was aided by a wayward Archer, who was too short in his opening spell of two overs. (PTI)

## NZ took 'bull by horns' to stop SA juggernaut: Allen

**TAPAN MOHANTA** ■ Kolkata

The recipe to halt the South African juggernaut was simple: win the toss and "take the bull by the horns", said explosive New Zealand opener Finn Allen after powering the Kiwis into the T20 World Cup final with the fastest ever hundred of the tournament.

South Africa had entered the semifinal as the form side of the tournament, being the only unbeaten team in the competition with seven successive wins. The Proteas had even defeated New Zealand in the group stage and also topped tournament hosts and favourites India in the Super Eights.

But New Zealand were at their ruthless best as they knocked out the last edition's runners-up from the semifinal with a nine-wicket win that came with 43 balls to spare at Eden Gardens here on Wednesday.

"We just hoped (skipper Mitchell) Santner would win a toss to start and he did that so that was the first part done and from then onwards it was just take the bull by the horns... Take the game on and not shy away from any challenge," Allen, who slammed a 33-ball unbeaten 100, said in the post-match media interaction.

Put in, South Africa failed to get going in the powerplay with off-spin all-rounder Cole McConehie taking the wickets of Quinton de Kock and Ryan Rickelton in successive deliveries in the second over.

Thereafter, it was the turn of Rachin Ravindra and Matt



Henry to tighten the noose to restrict South Africa to an under-par total at a venue where India chased down West Indies' 196 the other day.

"The bowlers...set the tone for us and taking early wickets on what we thought was going to be a really good batting wicket, was extremely important. They've (South Africa) got an incredibly powerful batting line-up and hats off to the boys. They set it up for us with the bowl and as I said we didn't really have a plan..." said Allen.

The Kiwis also analysed their board stage defeat to the Proteas in Ahmedabad and built on the positives.

"We looked closely at that first game against them," he said. "They've been outstanding all tournament, backing up performances. But playing them earlier gave us a bit of insight into their plans and we tried to use that to our advantage." Allen said while the Eden Gardens had a largely neutral crowd, his parents were likely among the few watching live back home in New Zealand, where the semifinal was being played in the wee hours. (PTI)

## Baby joy, T20 WC final entry make it special week for NZ's Matt Henry

**TAPAN MOHANTA** ■ Kolkata

From celebrating the birth of his son back home to delivering a crucial final over in the T20 World Cup semifinal, New Zealand pace spearhead Matt Henry capped a whirlwind week of emotions as the Black Caps stormed into the title clash with a nine-wicket demolition of South Africa here.

Henry, who had returned home after New Zealand's match against England on February 27 for the birth of his child, rejoined the squad in Kolkata just hours before the semifinal against South Africa on Wednesday.

Despite the exhausting travel, the pacer delivered when it mattered most,

returning figures of 2/34, with both wickets coming in the final over to ensure the Proteas were restricted to 169 for 8, a total that New Zealand chased down with ease.

"Pretty special to be able to get home for that (child birth)," Henry said of the extraordinary week in a media interaction after their win.

"Obviously Holly's doing really well and Jack's really good as well and Annabelle's enjoying being a big sister so it's all good. So yeah, no, it was pretty special to be home for that."

Getting back to India in time for the semifinal needed a gruelling travel schedule, which was complicated by global travel disruptions amid tensions in the West Asia.



"Yeah, there was a lot of sleep happening on the way back, to be honest... So for me just focusing on obviously my family to get home — that was important for me and then if it worked out that I could get home in time. I was always going home but to get back for the semifinal,

it's great to be here."

Having played second fiddle to Trent Boult and Tim Southee, Henry now has become one of New Zealand's best all-format bowlers in the last three years with 179 international wickets since January 2023, which is the most by any bowler in that period and eight ahead of India's Jasprit Bumrah. Henry barely had any preparation time for the semifinal but said he relied on experience and trust in his skills.

"We've had lots of cricket so I think at this point it's true. Obviously if there's rain you can't train either so just going for that approach where making sure they're mentally fresh, mentally

ready and just being confident in your skills that you possess. So for me it was getting here and doing a job for the team and thankfully we did that."

Henry had endured heartbreak last year when injury ruled him out of the Champions Trophy final, but this time he was determined not to miss out.

"No, yeah, it's pretty special to be able to obviously reach another final... The guys are really excited but for now it's to enjoy this. I think the guys have been playing some really good cricket and some special innings from Finn (Allen). Just unbelievable so enjoy that and then we can move on and get ready for what's to come," he said. (PTI)

## First batch of Zimbabwe players leave India after ICC works out air routes

**PRESS TRUST OF INDIA**  
■ New Delhi

Stranded here due to the closure of Gulf airspace, a batch of Zimbabwe's cricketers left for home following the end of their T20 World Cup campaign after the ICC reworked their travel arrangements to avoid the region immersed in conflict right now.

Zimbabwe, who had a memorable T20 World Cup, beating Australia and Sri Lanka to make it to the Super Eights, couldn't progress beyond that and were eliminated last week.

They were scheduled to leave on March 2 but were



stuck in Delhi owing to the closure of airspace in the Gulf region following the US and Israeli strikes on Iran. The first batch of players finally left for home on Wednesday in alternate flights.

"Zimbabwe Cricket confirms that the Zimbabwe senior men's team participating in the ICC Men's T20 World Cup 2026 are on their way home from India after the International Cricket Council secured alternative travel arrangements following recent transit disruptions," the board said in a statement on 'X'.

"Due to flight availability and revised routing, the squad will return to Harare in batches. The first group of players departed India today, Wednesday, while the final group is scheduled to leave on Friday afternoon," it added.

Zimbabwe's original travel route was via Dubai on an Emirates flight but it had to be altered. It has been learnt that Zimbabwe are now travelling to Harare via Adis Ababa, Ethiopia. (PTI)



## Sri Lanka hints SLC revamp after poor T20 WC show

**PRESS TRUST OF INDIA**  
■ Colombo

Sri Lanka's dismal performance in the T20 World Cup might trigger an overhaul of the country's cricket board with Sports Minister Sunil Kumara Gamage saying on Thursday that an interim committee to "rebuild" the game is under consideration.

Sri Lanka were knocked out of the tournament after losing all their Super Eight games. "Discussions are underway with the ICC (International Cricket Council) to hand over the administration of SLC (Sri Lanka Cricket) to an interim committee to rebuild the sport," Gamage told reporters.

Current SLC chairman Shammie Silva's tenure is till May 2027.

Prior to their Super Eight crash, Sri Lanka had lost to lower-ranked Zimbabwe in the preliminary round. The SLC headquarters saw a public protest last week demanding the resignation

of the Silva administration.

The Minister said President Anura Kumara Dissanayake is also involved in the ongoing talks with the ICC.

"We can't risk having a ban again from the ICC so must do everything in concurrence with the ICC," Gamage said referring to the past sanctions that the country has copped. In 2024, the ICC suspended Sri Lanka's membership when the then Sports Minister Roshan Ranasinghe sacked Silva based on corruption allegations.

The ICC had also shifted the 2025 Under-19 World Cup in Sri Lanka to South Africa, citing government interference in the functioning of the sport. Sri Lanka's sports law of 1973 allows the Sports Minister to discipline sports bodies.

Gamage said the government was keen to rebuild the game to the pre-2014 levels when Sri Lanka was a top international performer.

The island nation was the 2014 T20 World Cup champion besides being a runner-up in two other previous editions.

## It wasn't a choke but a walloping: South Africa coach Conrad

**TAPAN MOHANTA** ■ Kolkata

Not the one to mince words, South African head coach Shukri Conrad said his team's nine-wicket defeat to New Zealand in the T20 World Cup semifinal here was "not a choke but a walloping".

Chasing a tricky 170, New Zealand cantered home in 12.5 overs, powered by their openers on Wednesday night here. While Finn Allen's 100 not out off 33 balls was the fastest century in the event's history, equally explosive was Tim Seifert with a 33-ball 58.

The ouster added to South Africa's growing list of heartbreaks in ICC world tournaments. The 2024 runners-up had entered the semifinal as

the tournament's only unbeaten side with seven wins on the trot including handing out defeats to New Zealand (group stage) and home favourites India (Super Eights).

"I don't know if tonight was a choke. I thought it was a bloody walloping," Conrad said bluntly when the 'C' word was brought up given South Africa's past record of imploding in high-pressure games.

"In order for you to choke, you must have had a sniff in the game. We didn't have a sniff. In South Africa, we'd say we 'got moered (violent assault)'," he added in his inimitable style.

He then used his native Afrikaans to best sum up



the defeat. "Tonight, we got a proper 'snotklap' — that's an Afrikaans word for a real hiding, a smack you don't see coming. That's what it felt like," said Conrad, who had courted controversy during last year's Test series in India with fiery comments about wanting the Indian team to

"grovel".

The literal meaning of Afrikaans term 'snotklap' is "snot smack", referring to a blow to the face or nose, so severe that it knocks the 'snot out of the nose.

The New Zealand bowlers set up the contest nicely with Cole McConehie removing Quinton de Kock (10) and Ryan Rickelton (0) in consecutive deliveries in the second over after they won a good toss.

Later, Rachin Ravindra and Matt Henry stifled South Africa in the middle overs as none of their star batters — Aiden Markram (18 off 20), David Miller (6), Dewald Brevis (34) — could swing their bats.

It was Marco Jansen (55 not out; 30 balls) and Tristan Stubbs (29) who lifted their total in the death overs.

"We recovered nicely with Stabo and Marco but I thought New Zealand were excellent. They exploited conditions really well with their spinners up front and we just never got out the block. So, yeah, full marks to them," Conrad conceded.

"They were a hell of a lot better than us tonight. We just spoke about it, that it seemed like everything went right."

With their dream run crashing in the semifinal, he said South Africa did everything right but "chose a really crappy time to have a bad night." (PTI)

## Ahead of Australian GP, Max Verstappen says technical changes are complicated

**STEWART BELL** ■ Melbourne

Four-time world champion Max Verstappen has again taken aim at F1's new technical regulations ahead of the new season, calling them "pretty complicated" and that "it's a bit late" for last-minute rule tweaks.

F1 heads into a new era this year starting Sunday at the Australian Grand Prix, with unprecedented

changes. Verstappen has been the most outspoken against the change so far, calling the new cars "anti-racing" and "Formula E on steroids" during testing.

But at Melbourne's Albert Park, Verstappen said there was simply no point for the sport to try and regulate against the myriad of unknowns, which includes the start on Sunday, when it is expected that some drivers

will have to rev their engines for around 10 seconds to spool up their turbos before lights out.

"Yeah, a bit late with that, right," Verstappen said.

"The amount of money that has been invested as well into these regulations, they will be around for a while. I mean, you could have seen this coming - and suddenly now things are raised."



## India bank on recent form to upstage Australia

**PRESS TRUST OF INDIA**  
■ Perth

Hammered in the ODIs, the Indian women's cricket team would expect the senior players to step up with inspiring performances when it faces Australia in a day-night Test for the first time in nearly five years, starting here on Friday.

India would be brimming with confidence having remained unbeaten in their last five Tests. The Harmanpreet Kaur-led side



won won three consecutive Tests between December 2023 and July 2024 defeating England, Australia and South Africa

respectively, but all those wins came on home soil. India's last two overseas Tests ended in draws against England and

Australia in 2021. The game against Australia in September-October of that year was a day-nighter that the visitors drew. A major highlight of that match was Smriti Mandhana, who scored the second of her two Test hundreds at that time.

The pink ball Test will conclude the multi-format series between the two rivals. India won the T20Is before being blanked in the ODIs, giving Australia an 8-4 lead in the points tally.