



## BJD stalls Assembly proceedings over Polavaram 'Naveen leaning towards INDI bloc'

Cong boycotts House for 2nd day on Bahinipati issue

**PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR**  
 Opposition BJD on Thursday disrupted proceedings in the Odisha Assembly demanding a debate on the controversial Polavaram Project being constructed by the Andhra Pradesh Government. The House was in turmoil from the very beginning

with the BJD members storming into the Well of the House and raising slogans for a discussion on the Polavaram issue right from the start of Question Hour at 10:30 am. The party also submitted an adjournment notice seeking a debate on the project, but it was rejected, leading to continued protests from the BJD members. BJD Deputy Leader Prasanna Acharya expressed strong objection to the rejection of their adjournment

notice by Speaker Surama Padhy. As the BJD members continued their protests, the Speaker adjourned the House at 10:35 am, scheduling a break until 11:30 am. However, subsequent adjournments followed, preventing any business from being conducted for the rest of the session. The BJD said the Polavaram Project, after implementation, would submerge several villages in Odisha. It demanded that the issue be discussed in the

House in the interest of the State's people. BJP MLA Irashish Acharya, speaking to the media, defended the Speaker's decision to reject the BJD's adjournment notice, citing the Rules of Procedure of the Odisha Legislative Assembly, which prohibit the discussion of matters that are sub judice (pending in court). Meanwhile, Congress members chose to boycott the Assembly for the second consecutive day demanding revocation of the suspension

order against their party colleague Tara Prasad Bahinipati. Instead of participating in the session, they staged a dharna near the statue of Mahatma Gandhi in the Assembly premises voicing their support for Bahinipati. Congress legislators also wore black armbands as a symbol of protest. Odisha Pradesh Congress Committee (OPCC) president Bhakta Das joined the protest, calling for an immediate withdrawal of the suspension.



**Claims BJP MLA**  
**PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR**  
 BJD president and former Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik is now seeking support from the INDIA (Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance), called as INDI bloc, claimed BJP MLA Saroj Padhi on Thursday. Padhi stated that Patnaik's

move towards the INDI bloc is to sustain the BJD following its setback in the 2024 elections. The BJD is now perhaps facing major organisational challenges. According to Padhi, Patnaik has shown signs of aligning with the opposition bloc after meeting a Tamil Nadu Minister. Patnaik reportedly expressed willingness to join a

meeting of the INDI bloc. "To save his party, Naveen Patnaik is now looking for support. He takes help from someone and later works to destroy them. He stayed with the BJP but ultimately tried to weaken the party," said Padhi. Meanwhile, there has been no official response from the BJD regarding these allegations.

## Keonjhar mining scam: EOW arrests Raja Chakra

2 screening plants, 42 vehicles seized

**PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR**  
 The Economic Offences Wing (EOW) of the Crime Branch on Friday arrested BJD leader Soumya Shankar Chakra alias Raja Chakra in connection with a multi-crore scam connected to the Gandhamardhan Loading Agency and Transporting Co-operative Society Ltd in Keonjhar. On the basis of a complaint filed by a villager residing near the Gandhamardhan mines in Keonjhar district, the EOW had registered a case under Sections 406, 409, 420, 467, 468, 471 and 120-B of the IPC on February 7 and started an investigation into the matter. The complainant alleged large-scale irregularities in the functioning of the Gandhamardhan Loading Agency and misappropriation



of cooperative funds meant for villagers affected by mining activities. The investigation revealed that the loading agency had earned around Rs 185 crore from 2017-18 to March 2024, the EOW said. It was found that loading agency president Manas Barik and secretary Utkal Das, along with some influential local persons, defrauded huge sums. Rs 34 crore was taken under the pretext of peripheral development, but no such work was done. Rs 9.1 crore was diverted to Maa Kali Petrol Pump, which did not supply fuel to Gandhamardhan Mines but instead supplied fuel to vehicles belonging to Raja Chakra, the agency said.

Rs 33 crore was distributed to local villagers to obtain their support for Chakra. Around Rs 74 crore was shown as loading charges and labour payments, but the muster roll and vouchers showed major discrepancies. The period is set for audit as the society has not conducted audits from 2012-13, said the EOW. Though Chakra was not officially associated with the society, he controlled its operations through his associates Sadashiv Samal, Sudhansu Shekhar Naik and Samir Jena. Chakra established Shankar Mineral, Shankar Transporting, Shankar Roadways and Shankar Project to run his business empire, the investigating agency added. As many as 42 vehicles belonging to Chakra and two screening plants have been seized by the EOW. Based on financial investigation, several bank accounts have been frozen, and Rs 25 lakh deposited in banks has been seized.

## HC stays IRB constable recruitment

**PNS ■ CUTTACK**  
 The recruitment of constables for the India Reserve Battalion (IRB) was stayed by Orissa High Court on Thursday. The recruitment has come to a halt following allegations of preferential treatment related to age eligibility, official sources said. Those applicants, who were previously considered 'over-

age', claimed they were unfairly excluded from consideration. A prior directive from the High Court had ensured that these candidates would be provided an opportunity. The examinations were conducted for these 'overage' candidates in compliance with High Court's directions. However, the results of these exams are yet to be announced. Initially, the recruitment for over 1,800 constable positions in IRB was set to commence on March 17. The High Court has now halted these proceedings with a subsequent hearing scheduled for March 20.

**Holiday Notice**

The Pioneer wishes its readers a Happy Holi Dola Purnima and Holi being holidays in the Bhubaneswar offices of The Pioneer, the next edition of the paper will appear on March 17, 2025.

## India faces acute shortage of kidneys

**PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR**  
 India faces a severe shortage of kidneys with only about 10,000 available against a staggering demand of 1.5 lakh. Addressing this pressing issue on the World Kidney Day at the Kalinga Institute of Medical Sciences (KIMS) here, senior professor of the Department of Nephrology Shashi Bhusan Rout emphasised that only about 1 per cent of the population in India donates

kidneys. He stressed propagating awareness and encouraging organ donation. Speaking on the criticality of chronic kidney disease (CKD), HoD, Department of Nephrology Dr Nikunja Kishore Rout shared alarming statistics, stating that 9 out of 10 individuals with CKD remain unaware of their conditions, delaying crucial treatment. He stated that CKD is currently the third fastest-growing cause

of death and is projected to become the fifth highest cause of years of life lost globally. "With one in three diabetics and one in five hypertensive individuals at risk of CKD, early screening is imperative," Dr Rout said. He advocated for timely screening through Estimated Glomerular Filtration Rate (eGFR) and urinary albumin-to-creatinine ratio (uACR) tests to prevent disease progression.

DSPL-104

**MESSAGE**

Holi, the festival of colours is an occasion of joy, happiness and festivity. On this auspicious occasion, I convey my heartfelt greetings and good wishes to the people of Odisha. May this festival fill the life of all Odias staying in the State and outside with peace, joy and happiness.

*(Signature)*  
 (Hari Babu Kambhampati)

OIPR-15001/13/0448/2425

**POWER UP YOUR CELEBRATIONS WITH SAFETY AND JOY**

Do not play near electricity lines. Keep hands dry before touching electrical appliances. Play a dry Holi to save water.

**HAPPY HOLI**

**TPC@DL | TPN@DL | TPS@DL | TPW@DL**  
 (Joint Ventures of Tata Power and Government of Odisha)

# Over 1,800 snakebite deaths in State in 2 yrs

Highest in Baleswar Cuttack  
PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Revenue and Disaster Management Minister Suresh Pujari on Thursday provided alarming statistics on snakebite-related fatalities over the last two years in Odisha.

Among them, 1,022 affected families received ex-gratia compensation from the government. The district of Baleswar recorded the highest number of snakebite deaths during this period followed by Cuttack and Ganjam.

with the highest number of snakebite deaths followed closely by Ganjam and Keonjhar. Experts have emphasised the need for effective awareness campaigns, timely medical intervention and better-equipped healthcare facilities in rural areas to address this growing issue.

## In State 505 deaths in accidents in Road Safety Month

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

The issue of road safety in Odisha has come under sharp focus as alarming statistics on road accidents and fatalities were presented in the State Assembly on Thursday.

The annual statistics paint an even grimmer picture. As per official records, a total of 5,433 people are losing their lives in road accidents across in a year.

The government has been making efforts to curb such incidents, and Rs1.89 crore has been spent towards road safety awareness campaigns. Despite the government's initiatives, the rising number of road accidents highlights the urgent need for stricter enforcement of traffic laws, improved infrastructure and enhanced public awareness programmes.

## Youth Cong gheraoes CM residence



### Protests 'attack' on party MLA in Assembly

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Members of the State Youth Congress led by its president Ranjit Patra held a demonstration here on Thursday alleging hooliganism by the BJP MLAs in the State Assembly.

The Youth Congress president Yasir Nawaj said the Congress MLAs led by Tara Prasad Bahinipati raised their voices in the Assembly against the surging atrocities against women in the State. But MLA Jayanaryan Mishra and other BJP MLAs created unprecedented scenes in the House. Even, Mishra attacked Bahinipati. He further said the BJP MLAs and ministers are creating terror in the premises of the Assembly to prevent Opposition MLAs from raising their voices against corruption. Former State Youth Congress president Yaser Nawaj said the incident proves that the BJP is anti-women.

## Rajiv quits Tata, may join Vedanta



PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

Rajiv Kumar, Vice-President (Operations) at Tata Steel Kalinganagar, has resigned from his position. He reportedly submitted his resignation to TV Narendran, Tata Steel Managing Director and CEO, on Wednesday.

nation comes at a challenging time for Tata Steel as he played a key role in the success of the Kalinganagar project and has been a prominent figure within the company. Having served Tata Steel for over 25 years, he has held various important positions. The reason for Kumar's departure was simply listed as "resignation" with no additional details provided regarding the circumstances or any future plans for him. Rajesh Rajan, Head of Corporate Communications at Tata Steel, stated, "Rajiv Kumar has resigned from the post of Vice President (Operations), Tata Steel Kalinganagar. We won't be able to provide any more details as of now." Sources say that Kumar is slated to join the Vedanta Aluminium as its CEO.

## Action against Bangladeshis, Rohingyas demanded



### 3 lakh infiltrators have settled in Odisha: BRM

PNS ■ BHUBANESWAR

The Bharat Raksha Manch (BRM), a national-level social organisation, on Thursday raised alarm over the alleged rising number of Bangladeshi and Rohingya infiltrators in Odisha. It urged the State Government to take immediate action to identify and de-

port illegal immigrants to prevent further demographic changes. BRM Odisha president Subrat Mishra claimed that over three lakh Bangladeshi and Rohingya infiltrators have settled in various parts of the State, including urban and rural areas. They are engaged in various occupations, from labour work to small businesses. Mishra expressed gratitude to Chief Minister Mohan

Charan Majhi for his government's recent steps to identify and deport illegal immigrants. However, more needs to be done to detect infiltrators, he said. Dr Ashok Acharya, national general secretary of BRM, alleged that some local politicians and lower-level government officials in border districts are assisting infiltrators in obtaining Aadhaar and ration cards. Dr Arun Nayak called for

sustained efforts to prevent further illegal infiltration and secure the State's borders. BRM general secretary Puranjan Padhi and vice-president Sudam highlighted that the infiltrators are encroaching on land belonging to poor locals. The BRM urged the government to introduce stricter border controls, enhance intelligence gathering and take swift action against those aiding and abetting illegal infiltration.

## Probe launched into fake caste certificates in S Odisha

RAJEEV RATHAN ■ BRAHMAPUR

A large-scale investigation has been launched into the cases where individuals have allegedly secured government jobs using fraudulent family proof documents. Some have become professors, guided their children in research or held sensitive positions in departments like the military. While some of the accused have retired or passed away, many continue to serve in government positions, enjoying benefits despite the alleged irregularities. Notably, in eight districts of south Odisha, no complaints

have been filed against individuals from backward caste and tribal categories regarding such fraudulent appointments. A special investigative unit has been set up in the SP offices at the district level to probe cases of fraudulent caste certificates. The investigation is being led by a Key Special Prosecutor (KSP), focusing on cases involving individuals from the general and backward caste categories. As of January 2024, official records indicate that 1,459 complaints have been registered across eight districts. Among these, 915 cases have



been forwarded to the District Vigilance Cell with 639 currently under investigation while 820 remain unresolved. Of the total cases, 831 involve individuals from the Scheduled Tribe (ST) category with 462 cases already resolved.

In the Scheduled Caste (SC) category, 628 individuals stand accused of securing government jobs using fraudulent caste certificates. Additionally, 140 ST and 39 SC cases are pending trial in the Supreme Court and various district

courts. District-wise, 811 cases have been reported from a single district in south Odisha, 156 from Nabarangpur and 181 from Koraput. Earlier, delays were reported in addressing sensitive cases related to fraudulent caste certificates. However, under the directive of Southern Division Revenue Divisional Commissioner Roopa Roshan Sahoo, Deputy Director Ashok Kumar Satpathy has taken urgent steps to expedite the investigation process, prioritising 6,800 pending cases. Amidst these developments, BJP tribal leader

Prasant Kumar Mallik has raised concerns over the deprivation of the Suddha Sabar community. He pointed out that more than 80,000 members of the indigenous Suddha Sabar tribe in southern Odisha have been unable to obtain ST caste certificates. "How is it that people from other communities are acquiring caste certificates and securing government jobs while genuine tribal people are being denied their rights? I urge the government to take immediate steps to distinguish between tribes and non-tribes to ensure justice for the tribal communities," he stated.

## In Cuttack Illegal firearm unit busted by STF



### 30 guns seized; 4 arrested

PNS ■ CUTTACK

The Special Task Force (STF) of Crime Branch busted an illegal gun manufacturing unit in the Bayalis Mouza area in Cuttack district on Thursday. The STF seized more than 30 guns from the spot and arrested four persons in connection with the case. A joint team of the STF and the Bayalis Mouza police raided the unit on the wee hours of Thursday and seized items used in the manufacturing of guns. The factory was discreetly

located near a cattle shed at the edge of a village, just two kilometers from the local police station. It was being run inside a makeshift hut, where police discovered gun-making machines, tools, and raw materials. The STF has launched an investigation to uncover the entire network behind this illicit arms trade, including the potential involvement of middlemen and the use of these firearms in criminal activities. However, serious questions are being raised now from where the raw materials and machinery were procured. Who were the buyers of these illegal weapons? How far did the supply chain extend?

## SOCIAL CANVAS

# Strengthen the poll process for a strong democracy

Role of political parties is important.

One of the foremost roles of the Election Commission of India (ECI) is to conduct free and fair elections, but there is a controversy raised by political parties relating to duplicate electoral photo identity cards (EPIC) and large scale voter list manipulation and many such poll discrepancies. Such manipulations are being used locally to win elections. In order to strengthen democracy it is equally important to strengthen the poll process but this is not enough, the EC must move to larger electoral reforms where political parties have a key role to play.

A transparent, decentralised and accountable legal framework is needed to strengthen the election system under Article 325 of the Constitution of India. As part of a proposal for electoral reform and engagement with political parties, the ECI has proposed that the political parties in our country need to qualitatively improve their func-



MANAS JENA

tioning in adopting democratic values and norms of the Constitution in their internal party organization, besides a self-adaptive code of conduct to follow. It also said to build institutional mechanisms within the party for planning, thinking and research on crucial socio-economic issues before the nation along with training for socializing party cadres and preparing them for responsibilities of

governance while assuring social inclusiveness through legal provisions with fair representation of women and weaker sections in party positions. These are being proposed based on the recommendations of various commissions' reports such as the National Law Commission and National Commission to review the working of the Constitution, etc. Political parties have an increasing role in modern democracies as they are selecting the representative of the people to govern. The implementation of the Constitution lies in their hands. If the parties themselves do not follow the constitutional principles; how are they going to deliver the mandate of the Constitution? So, complete adherence to the Constitution must be the first step to form a political party which must be exhibited in practice within the party and outside in public. The party leaders and cadres must bring into practice the established democratic and constitutional values in their personal and family life and become a model for other citizens to

follow in public life for building an egalitarian society. But it has been noticed that during elections many of the parties do not follow the democratic values and constitutional provisions but adopt such easy means of mobilization using caste, community and religion cards and do physical violence to influence the voters in their support to get elected. In a country like ours with such diversity, continued existence of thousands of castes, communities and practice of different kinds of religions, the casteist and communal mobilization has a deeper impact on the marginalised sections, poor and caste discriminated communities and religious minorities, especially over their political participation as a voter/citizen. The process of communal divide further widens our continued socio-religion difference by posing a threat to human relationship, social unity and our collective co-existence as a nation. It is against the founding vision of makers of modern India, the freedom fighters, members of the Constituent As-

sembly, and contrary to the principles of our Constitution that still keeps us united as a nation in the world. During last 75 years of practice of democracy as a nation, the first election of independent India was held in 1951-52. It has been found that the democratic values are deteriorating with increasing poll violence and communal mobilizations, and formation of parties in caste and communal line, besides using religion, caste and ethnic symbols and names to seek votes. The political parties in every society are change agents. They must act without any communal interest, casteist mindset and gender bias, beneficial to any particular caste, religion or social group and region. Rather than dividing people, the political parties must play a role in connecting people for realization of justice, liberty, equality and the parties are to be responsible to build up themselves as an inclusive secular place by bringing people from different walks of life as socio-religious groups with gender neu-

trality. So it is expected that the parties themselves must stand above the narrow political motive. The second most important concern is the intellectual engagement of political parties in the socio-economic and socio-political issues of the nation in terms of understanding the issues and finding possible solutions based on research, debate and discussions involving the larger masses in the interest of the nation. We are the largest democracy in the world but all our voters are not literate and educated enough to behave as responsible citizens/voters as they easily fall into traps of all kinds of disruptive forces. Political education of the masses is highly required to build up a healthier democracy and political parties have a major role in spreading political literacy among the vast masses. As a first step the parties must prepare themselves as political educators of the masses. It is expected that the party cadres and leaders must have sound knowledge over the economic and social issues, governance and political

science. They must have adequate information about the Constitution and laws being in practice. In order to do that it is suggested that the political parties must make institutional arrangements within the party for research on vital issues affecting the country and arrange for training activities for its cadres to raise their standards. It must be mandatory for all political parties to impart training to all their cadres on Constitution of India and the laws relating to representation such as the Representation of Peoples Act 1950 and 1951, Registration of Electoral rules 1960, Conduct of Election rules 1961, Election Symbol Order 1968, and Anti-defection Law 1985 etc. The intellectual engagement of the parties will encourage people from different educational and professional backgrounds to join the parties which will qualitatively improve the politics and attract more people in serving the nation and restrict the entry of vested interest groups, goons and criminal and uneducated people in public life. (manasbtr15@gmail.com)

# In Nayagarh Man held for killing 2 sons over remarriage

Boys' grandmother also arrested  
PNS ■ NAYAGARH

Police on Thursday arrested a man on the charge of killing his two minor sons at Dhanchangada village under the Fatehgarh police station in Nayagarh district on Monday after they opposed his second marriage.

The accused Prakash Mohanty later hanged the boys to show it as cases of suicide, police said. Shockingly, he was assisted in the heinous crime by the boys' grandmother.

The Nayagarh Superintendent of Police disclosed details of the case, which have shocked the residents of the

district. Prakash Mohanty's wife passed away three years ago. He wanted to remarry. But his two sons did not want a step-mother. Seeing his sons as the obstacle to his marriage, he strangled them to death.

To mislead the police, he with the help of his mother hanged the boys and tried to show it as cases of suicide. Initially, they claimed before police that the boys killed themselves.

Later, police detained Mohanty under suspicion and he then confessed to the crime.

However, the uncle of the boys alleged, "We suspect the involvement of six people in the killings. While two of them have been arrested, four others have remained scot-free. So, we demand their arrest."

# In Baleswar Drunk man stabs minor son to death

PNS ■ BALESWAR

A drunken man stabbed his minor son to death in Narama village under the Khaira police station in Baleswar district on Wednesday.

The accused, identified as Jogendra Singh, is absconding after the incident.

Jogendra, a native of Udla in Mayurbhanj district, was residing in the Khaira area with family for about six years. On Wednesday night, after returning home in an inebriated state, he had a fight with his

wife over some domestic matter.

Jogendra lost his cool and tried to attack his wife with a knife. Seeing this, Jogendra's son tried to intervene, but in the process he was critically injured.

Hearing the commotion, the neighbours rushed to the spot and sent the injured boy to the Oupada hospital. Later, he was shifted to the Soro Hospital, but he succumbed to the injuries. Getting information, police reached the spot and began an investigation.

Meanwhile, police investigation was underway to gather

more information in connection with the case.

# CISF cycling expedition reaches Kanika

All praise for royal family for safeguarding coast

RAJESH BEHERA  
KENDRAPADA

A 50-member CISF coastal cyclists' team which had started its journey from Bakkhali in South 24 Parganas, West Bengal (eastern coast) reached at Kendrapada on Tuesday. The locals led by the king of Kanika, Shivendra Narayan Bhanjdeo, welcomed the CISF coastal cyclothon team.

An awareness meeting was organized near Kanika Royal palace where CISF coastal cyclothon team, King Bhanjdeo, the tehsildar and the IIC of Rajkanika created awareness and praised the efforts of the CISF for spreading awareness on 'Safe Coasts, Prosperous India' with their



expedition.

The CISF personnel praised the then kings of Kanika for their role in safeguarding the coast for national security earlier as the predecessors of Kanika king used to engage themselves in guarding the coast to ensure the coastal security with boats at the river mouth and sea.

The team also praised the then kings of Kanika for their voyage to Java, Sumatra and

Bali with boats. Even, the former kings of Kanika also worked for the population growth of reptiles and Estuarine crocodiles and also played an important role for the growth of dense mangrove forest.

The CISF personnel later felicitated Bhanjdeo with a citation and shawl for the contribution of Kanika Royal family for coastal security in past.

The CISF coastal cyclothon team later visited to the museum of Kanika Royal family and were excited after seeing the 24.9 inch giant crocodile skull stored at Kanika museum, which is the world's largest skull of a crocodile.

After 25 days of traversing the coastal roads of India, they will converge at the symbolic Vivekananda Rock Memorial in Kanyakumari, Tamil Nadu, on March 31.

# Fin wizard Sahoo addresses Tibetan entrepreneurs



TATHYA ■ BHUBANESWAR

When financial wizard Rajib Sekhar Sahoo presented his innovative ideas to the audience present in the Diamond Jubilee Celebrations of Tibetan Presence in Odisha, everyone lauded the presentation.

Recently, Sahoo visited Tibetan settlement of Chandragiri to address the ceremony.

Sahoo, known for his philanthropic initiatives and positive ideas in entrepreneurship and investment was appreciated by the Tibetan entrepreneurs, who are hardworking and honest.

As Indian Chamber of Commerce (ICC) Chief Of Odisha, Sahoo said that he is ready to support any industrial, business and entrepre-

neurial initiatives. As ICC Chief Of Odisha, Sahoo has been active in promoting industrial ventures and easing the doing business efforts in the State.

Khenpo Pema Tenphell, Head Of Administration of the Tibetan settlement, Chandragiri, lauded the presentation of Sahoo as very interesting and informative, adding he said these tips are useful for the Tibetan entrepreneurs.

With USAID recently having stopped its support for the Tibetans, several initiatives of the settlement is going to face financial hurdles including education, health and old care.

Now, Tibetan settlements across the country will be looking for the support of philanthropists to carry on such humane initiatives.

# 'B'swar AIIMS unit to be made fully operational soon'

PNS ■ BALESWAR

The AIIMS satellite centre at Baleswar would be made fully operational with allocation of additional funds and improvement of infrastructure, informed Union Health and Family Welfare Minister JP Nadda responding to a request made by the Baleswar MP Pratap Chandra Sarangi.

On the issue of the AIIMS centre at Baleswar, Sarangi had written a letter on February 13.

"Regarding operationalisation and additional fund allocation the matter is being examined by the division concerned," Nadda replied to Sarangi.

Notably, a strong discontentment is snowballing among the residents of Baleswar as the much hyped AIIMS satellite centre has not functioned full-fledged. Although the building is ready yet it is working weekly twice,



on Friday and Saturday, while doctors of only three departments visit the centre and they only provide OPD service and advice. It is also alleged that junior physicians visit the place on weekends.

It is a great disappointment for patients not only of Baleswar but also of neighbouring Mayurbhanj,

Bhadrak and West Bengal border districts as the satellite centre hardly serves any purpose. While literally it provides OPD services the patients have to go to Bhubaneswar to avail other healthcare facilities. 'Balasore Government Medical College and Hospital Action Committee' which takes up all

health issues had earlier threatened to undertake agitation if the AIIMS centre was not made fully operational with adequate doctors, paramedics and infrastructure. Further, it has been demanding establishing a nursing college and AYUSH hospital, besides making the satellite centre a super specialty one.

# ATM services in limbo in Bargarh

AAP warns stir  
PNS ■ BARGARH

The ATM services in Bargarh district have been completely disrupted for the past three months, causing significant inconvenience to the residents, farmers, businessmen, students, and patients' families.

In response, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) has submitted a memorandum to the Chief General Manager of the State Bank of India (SBI), urging immediate action to restore the services.

According to reports, most of the SBI ATMs in the district remain non-functional, leaving customers frustrated. Despite Bargarh's reputation as a key agricultural and com-

mercial hub with extensive banking facilities, the ATM services have collapsed since the Dhanu Yatra festival, creating hardships for the public.

AAP leaders, including district convener Bhabani Sahu, along with secretary Swarupa Bhoi, Maryam Barla, and Asit Sahu, have demanded swift restoration of the ATM network.

They warned that if the issue is not addressed urgently, they will escalate their agitation with public support.

The disruption of essential banking services has sparked growing discontent among the people of Bargarh, with many urging authorities to intervene and resolve the crisis at the earliest.

# Rapist of minor gets 10-yr RI in K'mal

PNS ■ PHULBANI

A Phulbani court sentenced a 29-year-old man to 10 years of rigorous imprisonment for raping a 13-year-old girl in Kandhamal district.

The incident happened in April 2016, when the girl was 13, and nine years later, the court sentenced the accused to 10 years of rigorous imprisonment.

The court of Special POC SO Judge Rajesh Kumar Das in Phulbani also imposed a fine of Rs 11,000 on the convict, who is now 29.

If the convict fails to pay the fine, he will remain in jail for

another five months, the court ordered on Tuesday.

The verdict was delivered after examining 11 witnesses, said Special Public Prosecutor Asim Praharaj.

The District Legal Services Authority (DLSA) was directed by the court to pay Rs 7 lakh to the survivor as compensation.

The girl was trying to speak to her sister, who lived in Chennai, and in search of a better network, she reached a secluded spot near her village in the Daringbadi police station area. Finding her alone, the convict dragged her behind a bush and raped her.

# State's highest No. of dolphins in Rajnagar Dvn

PNS ■ KENDRAPADA

Odisha's highest number of dolphins was spotted in the Rajnagar Mangrove Wildlife Division during a State-wide census drive recently.

While there are total 710 dolphins in the State, as many as 505 dolphins were spotted in Rajnagar alone.

As per the dolphin census report, as many as 505 dolphins of four types were spotted at Rajnagar Mangrove wildlife Division. The drive was carried out for three days from January 27 to 29.

Of total 505 dolphins in Rajnagar, 22 were irrawaddy, 5 Bottle Nose, 470 humpback and 8 were spinner dolphins.

It has once again proved that the Rajnagar Mangrove Wildlife Division is the home



of the State's largest dolphin population.

While highest number of Humpback dolphins were sighted at Rajnagar, highest number (159) of Irrawaddy dolphins were spotted in Chilika.

According to official

sources, out of 710 dolphins across the State, irrawaddy dolphin population is 188, bottle nose dolphin population is 16, humpback dolphin population is 498, spinner dolphin number is 8. But not a single finless porpoise

dolphin was spotted by the enumerator during census.

Notably, the dolphin census was carried out at six places in the State, including Chilika, Rajnagar, Puri, Brahmapur, Bhadrak and Baleswar wildlife divisions.

# 120-km march from Mar 16 to save Rushikulya

Proposed dam, sand mining to be opposed  
RAJEEV RATHAN ■ BRAHMAPUR

The Rushikulya river, the lifeline of Ganjam district, faces a grave threat from the Odisha Government's proposed dam at Pipalpanka in Sorada block and rampant sand mining. The Rusikulya Surakhya Abhijan here on Thursday highlighted the dangers posed by the project.

The dam, estimated to cost thousands of crores, aims to divert 60 million gallons of water daily through a 100-km pipeline to private industrial corridors near Chhatrapur and Gopalpur, benefiting companies like Tata and Adani.



accelerate the depletion of the already drying Rushikulya river, severely impacting irrigation and drinking water supply in Brahmapur, Aska, Chhatrapur, Gopalpur and Ganjam. Over a hundred villages depending on the river will suffer while 2,000 hectares of dense forest along the Ganjam-Kandhamal border will be destroyed. Additionally, the displacement of tribal communities from 23 villages will be inevitable. During a

public hearing last December, locals vehemently opposed the dam, and several appeals have been made to the Chief Minister and officials. But the government remains firm on its plan.

The Rusikulya Surakhya Abhijan has decided on a 120-km-long foot march from March 16 to 25 demanding cancellation of the project and an end to unregulated sand mining. The march will commence from Pipalpanka and

conclude at Purunabandha near the Ganjam estuary. Farmers, intellectuals and environmentalists will participate in it, holding public meetings en route to mobilise support.

Prominent activists, including Prafulla Samantara, Sudhir Raut, Simanchal Nahak, Pratap Nayak, Shyam Sundar Khadanga, Subash Raut, Aditya Rath and Bhalachandra Sadangi will lead the march.

# Brahmapur Thakurani Jatra scheduled from Apr 3

Subhakhunti Sthapana performed  
RAJEEV RATHAN ■ BRAHMAPUR

The much-awaited biennial journey (Jatra) of Brahmapur's revered deity Maa Budhi Thakurani is scheduled to commence on April 3. The auspicious Subhakhunti Sthapana, marking the commencement of preparations, was performed late Wednesday night with traditional rituals.

The festival schedule, determined by Pandit V Basudeb Shastri, was announced at a gathering. Residents were informed through a daytime drumbeat (Dhendura) and a formal nighttime meeting.

The Subhakhunti ritual, signifying the official start of the Jatra, was conducted in the presence of members of the



Desibehera family, local Sahivas and businessmen. The sacred khunti was carried in a traditional procession to the Thakurani temple for rituals before being installed in front of the Desibehera house.

This year, the Jatra will span 26 days compared to 28 days in 2023. The city is now immersed in devotion as lakhs of devotees eagerly await the grand procession.

In Desibehera Sahi, the journey's chief priest Durga Prasad Desibehera led the

Subhakhunti installation. Traditionally, Aga Sahir performs the sacred bamboo carving, but due to his illness and his son's recent demise, his relative Sura Nahak took over the responsibility. The nine-foot-high bamboo with nine knots was adorned with sacred items and worshipped before being carried to Desibehera Sahi and installed in a grand ceremony. The ritual culminated with the log for the journey being taken to the Maa Budhi Thakurani's temple in a

palanquin, marking the spiritual commencement of the Jatra.

With the Jatra set to commence, Brahmapur is preparing for weeks of religious fervour, cultural performances and a deep connection with its heritage. The event was attended by Brahmapur MLA K Anil Kumar, former MP Chandra Sekhar Sahu, former MLA Bikram Panda, former MLA Dr Ramesh Chandra Chyau Patnaik and other dignitaries, who extended their best wishes for the grand festival.

## Only surviving INA vetran celebrates 99th birthday

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

Madavan Pillai, one of the last surviving veterans of the INA, celebrated his 99th birthday on Thursday with a visit to the National War Memorial and had a special message for India's youth — embrace the unity, faith and sacrifice espoused by Netaji.

Several officials of the Indian Army were also present when Pillai arrived at the memorial in a wheelchair to pay homage to fallen heroes at the National War Memorial and to Subhas Chandra Bose at his statue at India Gate.

Holding a walking stick, he was helped by an Army official to the 'Amar Jawan Jyoti' to lay a ceremonial wreath and pay his tributes to the fallen bravehearts. Despite age-induced infirmity, he looked up and saluted with pride writ large on his face. Bespectacled Pillai later also wrote his thoughts in a visitor's book. The ceremony, hosted by the Army, stood as a powerful reminder of India's enduring legacy of sacrifice and patriotism.

"Youth must work for the country and take the nation forward. Netaji taught us unity, faith and sacrifice, follow these three (values), then you can make a strong nation. Work by staying together... Number one, even ahead of America, we (India) should be (in growth)," he said after paying tributes. "Lt R Madavan Pillai, born on March 13, 1926, in Swryan Township, Burma (now Myanmar), is one of the last surviving INA veterans. He belongs to a family originally from Tamil Nadu and joined the Indian Independence League as a civilian before enlisting in the Azad Hind Fauj (INA) on November 1, 1943," an official said.

The INA veteran commemorated his birth anniversary with the wreath-laying ceremony at the National War Memorial as



Lt R Madhawan Pillai (Indian National Army) a World War II Veteran, lays wreath at the National War Memorial on his 100th birthday in New Delhi PFI

he entered the 100th year of his eventful life.

After laying a wreath at the solemn memorial, he paid tribute to Netaji at Bose's statue under the India Gate canopy. A wreath was placed next to the reflecting pool surrounding the canopy by the INA veteran. Serving as a recruiting officer and a fund-raiser, Pillai mobilised support for the INA across 32 locations in Burma (now Myanmar), including Hantawaddy, Sawbawgale, Ywadanshe, Swryan, Yangan and Mayongone.

His active involvement in the freedom

struggle led to his imprisonment in a Rangoon (now Yangon) jail from May to December 1945, officials said. "Later, he served in the Administrative Branch at the INA Headquarters in Rangoon under Major General K P Thimayya (elder brother of General K S Thimayya).

He was officially recognised as a freedom fighter by the government of India on August 1, 1980," a senior official said. In 2021, on the 125th birth anniversary of Netaji, he was awarded a silver medal for his role in the INA and India's Independence

movement.

On January 23, 2024, Prime Minister Narendra Modi felicitated him at the Parakram Diwas celebrations at the Red Fort, they said. Even at 99, the INA veteran remains an active advocate for keeping Netaji's and the INA's role alive.

The Azad Hind Fauj was first formed by Mohan Singh in 1942 and later revived by Netaji on October 21, 1943. United by the powerful war cry of 'Chalo Delhi', the INA aimed to secure India's complete independence from British rule, the officials said.

## India announces \$1 Billion fund to boost creators' economy



Pioneer photo

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

A \$1 Billion fund is being created to boost the India creators' economy, said Ashwini Vaishnaw Union Minister of Information and Broadcasting, Railways and MeitY at Global Media Dialogue ahead of the World Audio Visual and Entertainment Summit (WAVES) on Thursday. The function took place at Sushma Swaraj Bhawan, New Delhi, to encourage participation from various governments before the WAVES Declaration in Mumbai on May 2.

In his keynote speech, Minister Vaishnaw announced that a \$1 Billion fund will be created for the creators' economy. This fund will be dedicated to ensuring that the energetic creators, who are using the latest technologies today, will be able to access capital, hone their skills, upgrade their production levels, and reach the global market.

The Union Minister also clarified that the Global Media Dialogue will not focus on regulation but will serve as a

platform for exchanging views and sharing perspectives.

Speaking on Cabinet approving the establishment of the Indian Institute of Creative Technologies (ICT), similar to IITs, IIMs, and AIIMS — Vaishnaw said that ICT will be established in Film City, Goregaon Mumbai, and to establish ICT, ₹391 Crore has already been sanctioned.

Vaishnaw shared that over 25 Lakh submissions were received, more than 80000 creators participated and out of which only 1000 will be selected. "...so, it is a democratic online process. The vision behind this initiative, as stated by the Prime Minister, is to bring together the creative world and modern technological usage to create unique content," he said.

The Minister also highlighted that over 100 countries are participating in it and it is a confluence of tech, media and entertainment. "Technology will serve as the base for this (WAVES) platform, bringing creators together from diverse fields," he added.

## Fire breaks out in Gurugram's KOD



Firefighters douse a fire which broke out in Kingdom of Dreams, in Gurugram, Thursday PFI

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ Gurugram

A major fire broke out in Gurugram's Kingdom of Dreams (KOD) in Sector-29 on Thursday morning.

Officials said that there were no casualties in the fire accident that took place around 11 am on Thursday. An electrical short circuit inside the KOD is suspected to be the cause of the fire. In July 2022, the Haryana Urban Development Authority (HUDA) sealed the KOD due to outstanding dues of crores of rupees. Since then, there have been no theatre shows or other entertainment and cultural programs in it, and it was closed for two years.

More than 10 fire tenders were pressed into service to douse the flames, and the fire-

fighting operation went on for one and a half hours before the blaze was completely doused. According to the fire brigade officials, a security guard in the KOD reported the fire, but by the time the fire-fighters arrived at the spot, the blaze had engulfed the Cultural Lane inside the KOD. Investigations are underway to ascertain the losses and damage caused in the fire accident.

"When we reached the spot, they were engulfed in fire. Fire tenders were immediately called from different fire stations. As furniture was inside, the fire spread rapidly through the KOD," said a fire official. Gulshan Kalra, Deputy Director (Technical) of the Fire Department, said a short circuit is suspected to have caused the fire, the exact reason is yet to be ascertained.

## President Murmu, PM Modi extend Holi greetings to citizens

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

President Droupadi Murmu and Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday extended greetings to the fellow citizens on the eve of Holi.

"This festival nurtures the spirit of unity and brotherhood in our lives. The diverse colours of Holi reflect the values of unity in diversity.

This festival also symbolises the triumph of good over evil. It teaches us to spread love and positivity around us. "May this festival of colours fill your lives with joy and prosperity," President Murmu said.

Prime Minister Modi greeted people on the eve of Holi, wishing the festival further deepens the colour of unity among the citizens.

He wished that the auspicious festival full of joy and celebration infuses fresh enthusiasm and energy in everyone's life. Holi will be celebrated on Friday.

## Committee suggests expanding health coverage

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

A parliamentary committee has recommended that the age criterion of 70 years and above for Ayushman Vay Vandana Cards should be rationalised to 60 years and above irrespective of the people's socio-economic status in order to widen the coverage of the Ayushman Bharat health insurance scheme.

Keeping in view the huge expenditure on critical healthcare, the Department-related Parliamentary Standing Committee on Health and Family Welfare in its 163rd report presented in Rajya Sabha on Wednesday also recommended revising healthcare coverage from the existing ₹5 Lakh per family per year to ₹10 Lakh per family per year.

It also pointed out that several high-end interventions/procedures and even high-end diagnostics are not included in Ayushman Bharat-Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (AB-PMJAY).

The panel thus recommended that the number of packages, procedures covered under the Yojana should be reviewed and the fresh packages, procedures related to treatment of critical illness with high cost of treatment and expensive high-end investigations, diagnostics like radiological diagnostics (CT, MRI and imaging including nuclear imaging) be incorporated in AB-PMJAY instead

of leaving the same to be booked as add-on packages.

The committee appreciated that the government has recently expanded the AB-PMJAY to cover six crore senior citizens of age 70 years and above belonging to 4.5 Crore families under the Vay Vandana scheme, irrespective of their socio-economic status.

An amount to the tune of ₹1,443 Crore has been earmarked for the treatment of senior citizens of the age of 70 years and above holding Ayushman Vay Vandana Cards. "The Committee is of the view that the age criteria of 70 years and above for Ayushman Vay Vandana Cards should be rationalised to 60 years and above irrespective of their socio-economic status for widening the coverage of the scheme in the better interest of common masses," the panel said in its report.

The committee, however, pointed out a persistent trend of underutilisation of allocated funds, particularly in the previous year as well as in the current financial year.

It stated that the AB-PMJAY is a pivotal and visionary health initiative aiming to provide financial protection and healthcare access to a large number of India's vulnerable population.

While the scheme has seen substantial growth in terms of state participation, card creation and hospital admissions, several key areas require attention

like budget utilisation and state participation. The committee observed that in the FY 2023-24, ₹7,200 Crore was allocated as budget estimates (BE) 2023-24 which was reduced to ₹6,800 Crore at revised estimates (RE) stage, however, the actual expenditure was ₹6,670.47 Crore.

In 2024-25, ₹7,300 Crore was made in BE 2024-25 which was revised to ₹7,605.54 Crore at RE 2024-25, however, the actual expenditure was to the tune of ₹5,034.03 Crore till January 9.

In 2025-26, the enhanced amount of ₹9,406 Crore has been allocated as BE 2025-26.

This indicates potential inefficiencies in fund disbursement or implementation bottlenecks. The committee, therefore, recommended a thorough review of the fund release mechanisms to states and Union Territories (UTs). This review should focus on identifying and eliminating bottlenecks that contribute to underutilisation.

The department should implement a system of proactive monitoring of fund utilisation by states, coupled with targeted support to address any implementation challenges. Furthermore, the committee suggested that the release of funds be linked to the performance of states in terms of card creation, hospital admissions and beneficiary feedback, ensuring that funds are directed to areas of greatest need and impact.

## CBI probes gold smuggling case involving Ranya Rao

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) has launched a probe into the alleged role of public servants in facilitating gold smuggling from Dubai following a complaint by the Directorate of Revenue Intelligence (DRI), which recently made two arrests, including that of actor Ranya Rao, from Bengaluru, officials said on Thursday.

The DRI arrested Ranya Rao from the Kempe Gowda International Airport in Bengaluru on March 3 for allegedly trying to smuggle over 14 kg of gold from Dubai.

The action was followed by the arrests of two foreigners (Omani and UAE nationals), also coming from Dubai, from the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj International Airport in Mumbai while attempting to smuggle 21.28 kg of gold into India valued at Rs 18.92 crore on March 6. "These two foreign nationals previously arrived at the Mumbai airport multiple times," the DRI complaint to the CBI said.

Searches at Rao's residence led to the recovery of gold jewellery worth Rs 2.06 crore and Indian currency amounting to Rs 2.67 crore. She also made multiple international travels, including to and from Dubai, officials said.

These arrests in "quick succession" involving alleged smugglers with large quantities of gold coming from Dubai and the high frequency of these visits involving Indian and foreign nationals sent the alarm bells ringing about a "coordinated smuggling syndicate", possibly operating from Dubai, the officials said.

The DRI roped in the CBI because of the larger national and international ramifications.

## 96 districts hit by water contamination: Parliamentary panel

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

A parliamentary panel has raised concerns over water contamination issue in the country, highlighting that 11,348 habitations in 96 districts across seven states have not been provided with short-term measures for pollutants such as iron, nitrate, and heavy metals.

In its report tabled in Parliament on Tuesday, the Standing Committee on Water Resources has urged the Centre to take swift action to ensure safe drinking water in these vulnerable regions.

The report further revealed that uranium contamination remains a pressing issue in Punjab, where 32 habitations across nine districts are affected. Despite interim measures in 22 of these

areas, 10 habitations still await any mitigation efforts, it said. The committee has called for urgent and long-term interventions to safeguard public health.

"The Committee notes that all arsenic and fluoride affected habitations have been covered by community water purification plants as an interim measure. However, they (panel) further observe that there are 11,348 quality affected habitations (iron, salinity, nitrate, and heavy metals) spread over 96 districts of seven states where short-term measures have not been provided," the report said.

The government has also extended the Swachh Bharat Mission (Grameen) Phase II until 2025-26, maintaining an annual budget of ₹7,192 Crore.

This phase focuses on sustaining Open Defecation Free (ODF) status and achiev-

ing comprehensive solid and liquid waste management (SLWM) in rural India, the panel said.

As of January 2025, 5.62 Lakh villages have declared themselves ODF Plus, with 4.21 Lakh achieving the advanced 'Model' category.

However, the committee raised concerns about underutilization of funds during the financial year 2024-25, where only 33 per cent of the revised budget was spent.

Delays in adopting the new 'just-in-time' fund release system, integrated with the Reserve Bank of India's e-Kuber platform, have been cited as a major bottleneck, according to the report.

The Department of Drinking Water and Sanitation is planning a structural shift from a "Department-based"

approach to a "service delivery" model that emphasizes community participation through "Jan Bhagidhari" (people's involvement), according to the report.

To ensure long-term sustainability and reliable water service delivery, the government plans to sign memorandums of understanding with states and Union Territory administrations, the report said.

The standing committee has emphasized the importance of better pre-budget planning to prevent drastic reductions at the revised estimate stage.

It has also called for increased efforts to accelerate water coverage and mitigate contamination, ensuring that the Jal Jeevan Mission and Swachh Bharat Mission meet their ambitious targets and improve quality of life in rural India.

## Rahul calls exam paper leaks a systematic failure

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi

Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi on Thursday said examination paper leaks were a "systematic failure" and asserted that the "serious problem" would be eradicated only when all political parties and governments forget their differences to take strict steps together.

The former Congress chief said the future of 85 lakh children in six states is at risk as paper leak has become the most dangerous "padmavyuh" for our youth.

"Paper leaks put hardworking students and their families into uncertainty and stress, taking away the fruits of their hard work. It also sends the wrong message to the next generation that dishonesty can be better than hard work, which is completely unacceptable," he said in a social media post in Hindi.

"It has not even been a year since the NEET paper leak shook the country. After our protest, the Modi government hid behind a new law and called it a solution, but so many recent leaks have proven that to be a failure as well," he said.

"This serious problem is a systematic failure, Rahul Gandhi asserted. It will be eradicated only when all political parties and governments forget their differences and take strict steps together, the Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha said.

"The dignity of these exams is the right of our children and it has to be protected at all costs," Rahul Gandhi said.

Using the 'chakravayuh' metaphor as a leitmotif, he had last year claimed that an atmosphere of fear prevails all around with a group of six trapping the entire country in a 'chakravayuh' he promised would be broken by the INDIA bloc.

## IIT-Guwahati unveils plan to prevent student suicides

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

Ice-breaking sessions for freshers during their first week on campus, morning walks with faculty members, mandatory counselling sessions and comprehensive medical check-ups, and stress escape room workshops are part of IIT-Guwahati's plan to ensure students' mental wellbeing and prevent suicides.

The measures come after the institute faced massive protests last semester following back-to-back student suicides.

According to Indian Institute of Technology (IIT)-Guwahati Director Devendra Jalihal, the institute has chalked out a comprehensive plan to prevent suicides among students. "We have established a dedicated mental health and counselling system in the form of a Center for Holistic Wellbeing. SAATHI Counselling Club, a part of this centre consisting of student volunteers, sup-

ports fellow students in their mental and overall wellbeing with the help of professional counsellors," he said.

"We are exploring roping in retired army personnel as hostel special stewards who will routinely interact with the students to make them comfortable and share their observations with the counsellors. All of this will be done in a confidential manner and while ensuring that the students do not feel intimidated or there is no violation of their privacy," Jalihal said.

Nutritionists are also being hired to help the students with diets that can help address anxiety and stress, he added.

Faced by suicides among students, several IITs are taking different measures to address concerns over their mental health.

Perumal Alagarsamy, the dean of student affairs at IIT-Guwahati, is spearheading the mental wellbeing initiatives on campus. "We have decided that for the first week, when the freshers arrive

on campus, there will be no classes but an acclimatisation programme so they do not feel out of place. The students will be invited for morning walks with faculty members so they are able to build a rapport with each other before entering the classroom," Alagarsamy said.

"The Peer Mentorship Programme aligns with this notion by assigning peer mentors to the new students. These mentors (will) play a pivotal role in providing relevant information, clearing doubts, and assisting with various challenges, serving as guiding lights for the newcomers when they feel lost," he added. As soon as the freshers arrive on campus, an ice-breaking session will be conducted to establish a warm and inclusive atmosphere and facilitate connections, Alagarsamy explained.

"These sessions aim to raise awareness about mental health and overall wellbeing while acquainting the students with the resources and the support available through the Counselling Cell and the

Center for Holistic Wellbeing," he said. "These ice-breaking sessions will be conducted within each hostel to help expand the students' social networks, enabling them to connect with their peers through enjoyable games and activities," he added.

To help the students cope with the pressure of semester examinations, the SAATHI Counselling Club recently conducted a stress escape room workshop aimed at sharing knowledge on dealing with and manage stress and exploring entrepreneurship and career choices.

The institute has four full-time counsellors while Your Dost a start-up incubated at IIT-Guwahati has been roped in to provide round-the-clock access to the counsellors.

Mandatory interactions will be scheduled with the counsellors for all students so any early signs can be identified and mandatory comprehensive health checks conducted.

# UP gears up for Holi, Friday prayers amid tight security

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ Lucknow

As Uttar Pradesh prepares to celebrate Holi on Friday, which coincides with the holy month of Ramzan and the offering of Friday prayers (Jumma), the state administration is leaving no stone unturned to ensure communal harmony and peaceful celebrations.

To prevent any tension between the two communities, the government, in coordination with religious leaders, has made special arrangements, including altering the timing of Friday prayers and enhancing security across the state.

In a precautionary measure, the Uttar Pradesh Police have directed authorities to cover mosques with tarpaulin in most districts where Holi processions pass through sensitive areas. So far, 189 mosques have been covered with tarpaulin across UP. The move aims to prevent any untoward incident and maintain religious harmony during the festivities. In Sambhal district, where communal tension has flared up in the past, the administration has covered at least ten mosques with tarpaulin to avoid any damage during Holi processions. The district is considered sensitive due to its demographic composition and history of communal clashes.

Sambhal District Magistrate Rajendra Pensa emphasised that robust security arrangements are in place. Multiple peace committee meetings have been held, and 27 Quick Response Teams (QRTs) have been deployed in sensitive areas. The city has been divided into six zones and 29 sectors, each overseen by a magistrate and senior police officer. PAC (Provincial



Police conduct a flag march on the eve of Holi festival in Prayagraj on Thursday

PTI

Armed Constabulary) battalions have been stationed as part of a three-tier security plan. To enhance monitoring, 250 CCTV cameras have already been installed, with an additional 100-150 cameras set up for real-time surveillance. Drone technology is also being used to track movements in crowded areas. Similarly, in Shahjahanpur, mosques located on the routes of Holi processions have also been covered to prevent any provocative incidents.

To further ease the situation, the Shahi Imam of Lucknow's Eidgah, Maulana Khalid Rashid Farangi Mahali, announced that Friday prayers will be offered at 2 pm instead of the usual 12:45 pm. This decision has been welcomed by Muslim religious leaders across the state, including Ayodhya, where the chief cleric has also decided to conduct *namaz* after 2 pm.

The Uttar Pradesh Police have issued strict guidelines, urging citizens to celebrate Holi in a peaceful manner and avoid any new traditions that could spark tension. Additional police forces have been deployed in sensitive areas, and drone surveillance will be conducted in districts like Kanpur, Aligarh and Meerut to monitor crowd movement. Yogi Adityanath has appealed to people to respect each other's religious sentiments. "Holi comes once a year, but Friday prayers is held every week. Those who wish to avoid the festive chaos can offer prayers at home," he said.

The administration is also keeping a close watch on social media platforms to prevent the spread of fake news and inflammatory content. With these proactive measures, the state hopes to celebrate Holi and Friday prayers in an atmosphere of peace and brotherhood.

# ASI team inspects Jama Masjid in Sambhal

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ Prayagraj

Acting on the directives of the Allahabad High Court, the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) team visited the historic Jama Masjid on Thursday to assess the site for whitewashing and decoration ahead of the holy month of Ramzan.

The court's intervention came after the Jama Masjid Committee filed a petition seeking permission for whitewashing and decoration, a tradition that has been followed every year during Ramzan. However, this year, the local administration denied the request, prompting the mosque committee to approach the High Court.

During the initial hearing, the High Court directed the ASI to conduct a site inspection and submit a report on the condition of the mosque. In its report, the ASI stated that there was no need for whitewashing, and only cleaning work could be done. However, after hearing the arguments presented by the mosque committee, the court ordered the whitewashing and decoration of the mosque, with the condition that the process would be carried out under the supervision of the Archaeological Survey of India.

On Thursday, the ASI team arrived at the mosque for measurements and assessment. Jama Masjid Committee office bearer, Advocate Zafar Ali, stated that the team will identify the specific areas where whitewashing is required. If the team provides instructions by today, the work will begin immediately. Otherwise, the whitewashing process will commence from Monday.

"After the whitewashing is done, the decoration work will also be carried out

as part of our tradition during Ramzan," said Zafar Ali. The mosque committee revealed that every year, the mosque is whitewashed and decorated before the holy month of Ramzan. However, this year, the local administration refused to grant permission for the same, leading to legal action.

The High Court, after reviewing the ASI report and hearing the arguments from the mosque committee, granted permission for the whitewashing and decoration of the mosque. However, the court instructed that the entire process

## The Allahabad High Court's intervention came after the Jama Masjid Committee filed a petition seeking permission for whitewashing and decoration

would be monitored by the ASI to ensure that no structural or historical damage is caused to the heritage site.

The ASI's role will be crucial in determining the extent of whitewashing and decoration. The team will assess the condition of the walls and other structures and specify the areas that can be whitewashed. The mosque committee expressed satisfaction with the court's decision and assured full cooperation with the Archaeological Survey of India team.

This decision comes as a relief to the Muslim community, as the beautification of the mosque ahead of Ramzan holds great religious and cultural significance. The mosque committee hopes that the whitewashing and decoration will be completed before the start of the holy month.

# Maharashtra's police to address each other without surnames

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Chhatrapati Sambhajnagar

Police personnel in Maharashtra's Beed district will now put up their name plates without surnames, in an attempt to eliminate caste-based discrimination, an official said on Thursday. Nearly 100 such name plates have been distributed across police stations and other offices of the department in the central Maharashtra district, the official said. Earlier, Beed Superintendent of Police (SP) Navneet Kanwat in January directed the officials to address each other by their first name, and not surname, with an aim to curb the caste bias. Now, the SP's office has distributed name plates, for display on tables in the offices of the security personnel, which do not have a mention of their surname, the official said. The small name plates put up by police on their uniforms will have to be made individually without them displaying their surnames, the official said.

Kanwat was posted as the SP of Beed in December last year after the murder of Massajog village sarpanch Santosh Deshmukh, who was abducted, tortured and killed for trying to stop an extortion attempt against an energy firm operating a windmill project there.

Deshmukh's murder on December 9, 2024, had acquired a caste angle as the victim was a Maratha, while most of the accused are Vanjari, a dominant community in the Beed region.

# 17 Naxalites surrendered in Chhattisgarh

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Bijapur

Seventeen Naxalites, nine of them collectively carrying cash rewards of ₹24 Lakh on their heads, surrendered in Chhattisgarh's Bijapur district on Thursday, a senior police official said. The cadres, including a couple, turned themselves in before senior police and Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) officials here, he said.

The Naxalites cited disappointment with the "hollow" and "inhuman" Maoist ideology, exploitation of innocent tribals by senior cadres and increasing influence of security forces, Bijapur Senior Superintendent of Police Jitendra Kumar Yadav said. They were also impressed with the 'Niya Nellanar' (your good village) scheme under which security forces and administration have been striving to provide basic amenities and carry out development works in interior areas, he said.

All the surrendered Naxalites were active in different capacities in the Gangoor area committee of the outlawed Maoist organisation, he said.

Of them, Dinesh Modiam (36), a divisional committee member of Maoists, was wanted in 26 cases in Bijapur district and carried a reward of ₹8 Lakh, the senior police official said.

Modiam's wife Jyoti Tati, alias Kala Modiam (32), and Dula Karam (32), both active as area committee members, carried a reward of ₹5 lakh each, he added.

# Threat to Adhikari life: Bengal BJP leader

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ Kolkata

A section of the Bengal BJP leadership has claimed that there is a threat to the life of State Opposition Leader Suwendu Adhikari. This, after more than one Trinamool Congress MLAs including a Minister threatened him with dire consequences after Adhikari said that the BJP would throw out all the Muslim MLAs from the State Assembly after coming to power in 2026.

"Opposition Leader Suwendu Adhikari's life is in threat ... he may be murdered any day ... even inside the Assembly House ... only today a man in black robes had entered the Assembly area ... before he was identified he was mingling with the BJP MLAs who too were donning black clothes as a mark of protest," BJP's Chief Whip inside the Assembly Shankar Ghosh said demanding an apology from Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, senior Minister Firhad Hakim and party MLA Humayun Kabir "who had issued the threats."

While Kabir remained defiant saying his community was dearer to him than his party Ghosh said, "This man Humayun Kabir has issued physical threats to Suwendu Adhikari ... he and Firhad Hakim should immediately apologise for this ... but before this the Chief Minister should offer an apology ... whatever has been going on in Bengal signifies a black chapter in the States political history ... the ferocity exhibited by some of their MLAs is deplorable ... where do they get this audacity from."



Opposition Leader Suwendu Adhikari

Kabir however remained defiant regarding the statement he made on Wednesday. "Whatever I have said has been said deserves no apology ... to me my community is ahead of my party ... I will not apologise," Kabir said going to the extent of asking "why the police have not taken suo motu cognizance against his statements insulting members of other religion ... why the Government has not taken any action against him for making such irresponsible, communal remarks."

Earlier issuing a 72 hours' ultimatum to Adhikari he had said that, the Leader of Opposition had crossed all limits and "he has brought down the dignity of his office by threatening to assault the

Muslim MLAs ... if he does not publicly apologise for his remarks then all the 42 Muslim MLAs will assemble outside his chamber and give him what he deserves." Another senior TMC leader and Minister Siddiquilla Chowdhury too threatened of physical attack saying "Suwendu Adhikari has conducted in a most undemocratic manner ... he has defied the Constitution and the penal laws and should be penalised for this ... his legs should be broken for what he has said."

Adhikari had while protesting against Bengal Speaker Biman Banerjee's decision denying the BJP legislators chance to speak against alleged desecration of temples and attack on shops and houses of Hindus at various place on Tuesday said that if his party would come to power in 2026 it would not let the Muslim MLAs enter the Assembly.

"Mamata Banerjee will be defeated in the next year's Assembly elections and when we come to power in 2026 we will throw all the Muslim MLAs out the Assembly," Adhikari said attracting immediate reaction from some minority MLAs. Meanwhile, the Opposition Leader on Thursday said that he was not attaching much importance to Kabir's threats and he would go to the Assembly House alone daring him to touch and face the consequence.

Referring to Kabir as an "eccentric person deserving no attention," Adhikari said, "I will go alone to the Assembly House ... there will be no security forces with me ... I will go to my office and do my work ... I dare him to touch me and ... then see the consequence."

# Polavaram Dam case: Odisha Assembly adjourned twice

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Bhubaneswar

Odisha Assembly was adjourned twice on Thursday due to a din created by opposition BJD MLAs over the controversial Polavaram Dam project in neighbouring Andhra Pradesh. As soon as the House assembled for Question Hour, the BJD members rushed to the well and staged a protest after their notice for a discussion on the Polavaram issue was rejected by Speaker Surama Padhy.

They shouted anti-BJP slogans and accused the saffron party of sacrificing the interest of Odisha for the sake of its political gains in Andhra Pradesh.

Keeping in view the noisy scene in the House, the Speaker first adjourned the proceeding for about an hour till 11.30 am and later till 12.15 pm.

When his party members were shouting in the Well of the House, BJD's deputy leader in the Assembly Prasanna Acharya claimed that Odisha will be severely affected after completion of the Polavaram project. "Andhra Pradesh government's unilateral and forceful construction of Polavaram project has become intolerable for Odisha. Therefore, we demand a discussion on the matter," Acharya said.

The state government rejected the BJD's notice for a discussion on the Polavaram project stating that the House cannot debate over the matter which was sub judice.

Senior BJD MLA Arun Kumar Sahoo rejected the BJP's argument and said that the Polavaram project's design was changed during the NDA government though it was sanctioned during the UPA government. He rejected the BJP's argument that the matter under sub-judice cannot be discussed in the House.

"Odisha is in deep trouble over the Polavaram project. Should we wait silent-

## As soon as the House assembled, the BJD members rushed to the well and staged a protest after their notice for a discussion on the Polavaram issue was rejected by Speaker

ly till the dam project inundates our villages because the matter is sub judice?," Sahoo said.

BJD member Irashish Acharya justified the Assembly rejecting the notice for discussion on Polavaram issue. "The Rules of the Business of Odisha Legislative Assembly clearly says that the matter under sub judice cannot be discussed in the House," he said.

The Opposition Congress MLAs were sitting on dharna near the Mahatma Gandhi statue on the Assembly premises protesting the suspension of its senior member Taraprasad Bahinipati. The Congress members wear black badges as a mark of protest.

# ASI dies after scuffle in Bihar

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Araria (Bihar)

An assistant sub-inspector (ASI) died after a scuffle between police personnel and a group of people broke out in Bihar's Araria district, a senior officer said on Thursday.

The incident occurred in Lakshmiapur area under the jurisdiction of Phulka police station on Wednesday night when a police team went there to nab a person, and subsequently a brawl broke out between the personnel and those protesting the arrest, Araria Superintendent of Police Anjani Kumar said.

"The incident took place when the ASI along with other police personnel went to Lakshmiapur to nab Anmol Yadav, wanted in a case. When the police team arrested Yadav, locals started protesting.

The accused was taken away by locals and the ASI fell unconscious during the scuffle," the SP said.

The ASI was immediately taken to the nearest hospital where he died during treatment, Kumar said. The deceased has been identified as Rajeev Ranjan.

The body of the ASI has been sent for post-mortem examination, the SP said. "The body did not bear any external injury marks. Preliminary investigations have revealed that the ASI was not assaulted by the locals. Investigation is on...And the exact cause of death can only be known after the post-mortem report," he said.

A manhunt has been launched to nab Yadav, and efforts are on to identify those who forcibly freed him from the clutches of police, the SP added.

# ₹100 Crore scam: Drone empanelment rigged in Andhra

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ Hyderabad

In a startling revelation, the drone empanelment process has been allegedly rigged by the Department of Agriculture, Andhra Pradesh and its Technical Team headed by Dr Sambiah Angirekula has allegedly favoured two local firms namely Drogo Drones Private Limited and Vihanga Technologies Private Limited in the process.

According to a complaint letter to the Principal Secretary, Department of Agriculture, AP, the Vihanga Technologies did not have the mandatory Type Certification even after the EOI submission deadline, however they were selected. The complaint mentioned, Drogo Drones lacked the mandatory technical specifications such as the 'Detect and

Avoid Capability' as per their certificate but was selected without any scrutiny. Vihanga Technologies is also acting as a Benami Company for Drogo with the sole intention to create an illusion of competition for the empanelment, alleged the letter. It alleged the trials conducted by Dr Sambiah and the technical team issued heavy restrictions on speed and battery recharging which was not mentioned in the EOI. This was followed with objective of disqualifying all companies except Vihanga and Drogo Drones that had a higher battery capacity, read the complaint a copy of which is with The Pioneer.

The other companies, as furnished in the complaint with more than 250 pages of annexure, were disqualified without any valid reasons stating that the drones suffered deviations from their Type

Certification which is completely false. Moreover, the drones of Drogo in fact suffer significant gaps from the Type Certification as per the test reports they submitted. The battery capacity, life cycles are below the minimum requirements and their software is completely different from the certification approved by the DGCA, highlighted the complaint.

"All drone manufacturers except Drogo and Vihanga were subjected to intense scrutiny and were disqualified without valid reasons, whereas, the firms that did not have a type certification and mandatory technical features were selected and qualified through a biased process. The project is worth ₹100 Crore for supply of 875 drones which has been awarded through an unfair and rigged selection process," said an industry insider.

# After Maha Kumbh, agricultural, economic boom in Prayagraj

BISWAJEET BANERJEE ■ Prayagraj

With the successful conclusion of the Maha Kumbh, new avenues of employment and economic growth are emerging in the Ganga-Yamuna belt, including areas like Ganga Paar, Yamuna Paar, Jhansi, Phaphamau, and Jasra. Local farmers are now turning to large-scale cultivation of watermelon, cucumber, muskmelon, and sponge gourd, aiming to transform their fortunes.

Taking advantage of the sandy soil and the pure water of the Ganga and Yamuna, farmers have already begun sowing crops along the banks of the Sangam. This farming boom is not only expected to yield a bumper harvest but also create thousands of job opportunities for local youth.



On the directions of Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, a record amount of water has been released into the Ganga and Yamuna rivers, ensuring uninterrupted irrigation for farmers. With the increased water availability, farmers have started sowing crops without worrying about water scarcity. According to Dr Himanshu Singh, a horticulture scientist from Prayagraj, the sandy soil of this region is ideal for growing watermelons, cucumbers, and muskmelons. He believes that with proper irrigation and guidance, farmers can earn up to ₹5 lakh within a month from these crops.

The post-Maha Kumbh agricultural shift is expected to provide a significant boost to the local economy. Apart from farming, new opportunities in packaging,

transportation, and marketing are emerging, creating employment for thousands of local youth. The initiative has also received support from the Krishi Vigyan Kendra (Agriculture Science Centre) in Prayagraj. Dr Anurag Singh, a senior scientist, is providing special training to farmers to enhance productivity and adopt modern farming techniques.

The Maha Kumbh may have elevated Uttar Pradesh's economy to new heights, but now, the fertile land along the Sangam is set to write a new success story in agriculture. With the blessings of Mother Ganga and the support of the government, farmers are hopeful that their hard work will bear fruit in the coming months, filling their lives with prosperity and joy.

# No pressure to withdraw CID probe into Ranya Rao case, says Parameshwara

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Bengaluru

Karnataka Home Minister G Parameshwara on Thursday said there was no pressure on him to withdraw a CID probe into the gold smuggling by Kannada actress Ranya Rao.

Karnataka government withdrew its order for a CID investigation into the lapses and dereliction of duty by police personnel deployed at the Kempegowda International Airport (KIA) with regard to Ranya, within 24 hours after pronouncing it. The Minister said since the Department of Personnel and Administrative Reforms (DPAR) ordered appointing Additional Chief Secretary Gaurav Gupta to probe the possible role of Ranya's step father K Ramachandra Rao, a DGP rank officer, a parallel investigation was not needed.

He insisted that he was the one who immediately ordered CID investigation into the protocol lapses as soon as the matter came to light. "In the meantime, the Chief Minister's Office also gave direction to the Department of Personnel and Administrative Reforms since he (Ramachandra Rao) is an IPS officer. So we decided not to order inquiry by our (police) department and let the DPAR probe it," Parameshwara told reporters here.

Hence, the DPAR order is retained. We withdrew because two separate investigations should not take place, he explained.

**Editor's TAKE**

## Balochistan on the Boil

The deadly train hijacking episode has brought the region's struggle to the fore

The recent hijacking of the Jaffar Express in Balochistan marks another deadly episode in the decades-long struggle for Baloch independence. The attack, orchestrated by the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), underscores the escalating insurgency in Pakistan's largest but most neglected province. The Pakistani military's swift operation to neutralise the hijackers may have ended the immediate crisis, but it has done little to address the underlying grievances that continue to fuel the Baloch nationalist movement.

On March 11, armed militants targeted the Jaffar Express, a passenger train traveling from Quetta to Peshawar. The BLA demanded the release of Baloch political prisoners and individuals allegedly abducted by Pakistani security forces. Pakistani military forces swiftly launched a rescue operation. The successful yet costly operation highlights the deteriorating security situation in Balochistan and the growing boldness of separatist groups.

The hijacking is not an isolated incident but rather a continuation of the Baloch people's longstanding quest for self-determination. Balochistan, rich in natural resources but historically marginalised, has seen multiple uprisings since Pakistan's creation in 1947. The roots of the conflict date back to what many Baloch consider a betrayal by Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Pakistan's founder. At the time of Partition, the princely state of Kalat, a major part of present-day Balochistan, opted for independence. However, in 1948, under pressure from Pakistan and with little international support, Kalat was forcibly annexed. This fueled deep resentment among the Baloch people and led to an armed insurgency that has resurfaced in different forms over the decades.

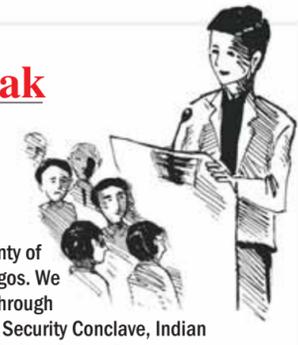
Balochistan, despite being rich in resources such as gold, copper, and natural gas, remains the most impoverished province in Pakistan. Baloch nationalists argue that the region's wealth is exploited by the central government, with little benefit to the local population.

The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has further intensified tensions, as Baloch rebels view Chinese investments and infrastructure projects as a means of increasing Pakistan's control over their land without addressing local grievances. Adding to the discontent are widespread allegations of human rights abuses, including enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings of activists and civilians. The Pakistani state has often responded with heavy-handed military crackdowns, further deepening resentment.

While the Baloch nationalist movement has waxed and waned over the years, recent developments suggest it is gaining momentum. The BLA and other militant groups, such as the Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF), have intensified their attacks on security forces, government infrastructure, and projects associated with CPEC. Targeted assaults on Chinese nationals working in Pakistan further indicate a strategy aimed at destabilising foreign investments and pressuring the Pakistani state. The hijacking of the Jaffar Express is a testament to the insurgents' evolving tactics and growing audacity. By targeting civilian infrastructure and taking hostages, the BLA has demonstrated its capability to conduct large-scale operations, signaling an emboldened separatist movement.

A military response alone will not quell the insurgency. Addressing the root causes—political disenfranchisement, economic marginalisation, and human rights violations—is crucial for any long-term resolution. The ongoing struggle in Balochistan is a reminder of the consequences of neglecting ethnic and regional grievances. Without meaningful dialogue and political solutions, Pakistan risks further destabilisation in its most resource-rich yet volatile province. The recent train hijacking may have been neutralised, but the broader Baloch insurgency remains far from over.

### Leaderspeak



**“**

We fully respect the sovereignty of Mauritius with regard to Chagos. We will extend our cooperation through forums such as the Colombo Security Conclave, Indian Ocean Rim Association, and Indian Ocean Conference. Be it the Global South, the Indian Ocean, or the African continent, Mauritius is our important partner. We have come up with SAGAR vision for the stability and prosperity of this entire region. India shall also assist in setting up of National Maritime Information Sharing Centre in Mauritius

**”**

NARENDRA MODI, PRIME MINISTER OF INDIA

# Towards a Fit and Trim India

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's latest initiative to combat obesity and curb excessive oil consumption is timely as obesity rates are rising sharply, underscoring urgent need for preventive healthcare and dietary reforms

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent initiative to combat obesity and reduce excessive cooking oil consumption has ignited nationwide discussions on health and nutrition. The campaign underscores the importance of preventive healthcare and dietary changes in addressing India's growing obesity crisis. Given the alarming rise in obesity worldwide, this initiative is both timely and necessary and has received support from healthcare professionals, sportspeople, and the World Health Organisation.

India is witnessing a sharp increase in obesity, with the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) reporting that 23% of men and 24% of women are now overweight or obese. Urban areas show even higher numbers due to sedentary lifestyles and unhealthy diets. By now, we all know that obesity increases the risk of diabetes, heart disease, hypertension, and certain cancers, placing a heavy burden on India's healthcare system. The WHO has identified obesity as a major global health crisis, and India is rapidly catching up with Western countries in obesity rates.

However, while addressing obesity through lifestyle changes is essential, an even more pressing concern needs urgent attention—food adulteration. In 2018-19, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) found that almost one-third of food samples tested in India failed quality checks due to adulteration. Media reports highlight alarming instances of harmful substances being added to food, such as urea, starch, and detergent in milk; synthetic dyes and artificial ripening agents in fruits; chalk in common salt; artificial colors in spices; formalin in fish; iron filings or colored leaves in tea; synthetic whiteners, chalk powder, or soapstone in rice and wheat; and lead chromate in pulses. These adulterants pose serious health risks, including food poisoning, kidney damage, cancer, and neurological disorders.

Food adulteration is now so rampant that, at times, we don't even need food inspectors to detect it. Walk through any vegetable market, and you will see unnaturally shiny apples, bright green peas, pointed gourds, and glossy brinjals. These are not signs of freshness but of harmful chemicals like wax, artificial dyes, and pesticides. Soak vegetables in water, and you may see colors leaching out—clear evidence of adulteration.

While obesity can be managed by raising awareness about the dangers of consuming processed foods with unhealthy



ingredients or overconsuming edible oil and encouraging lifestyle changes, avoiding adulterated food is far more challenging. It is difficult to detect adulteration, and the issue is deeply rooted in systemic flaws in food production and regulation. Unless food adulteration is effectively tackled, even so-called "healthy" choices can be hazardous, exposing consumers to harmful substances despite their best efforts to maintain a nutritious diet.

Due to the widespread issue of food adulteration, many people have stopped eating fruits with their peels or raw salads, fearing pesticide residues and chemical coatings. This shift highlights how food adulteration forces people to compromise on natural and healthier eating habits, ultimately hindering efforts to promote a balanced diet and combat obesity.

With adulteration becoming so prevalent, it's no surprise that people are turning to organic food. The organic food market is expanding rapidly worldwide. In India, it was valued at around \$1.5 billion in 2023 and is projected to reach \$8.9 billion by 2032. However, organic food in India is much costlier than conventionally grown food, making it less accessible to middle—and lower-income groups. To make matters worse, fake organic labels

have become a growing concern. As demand rises, many brands and sellers misuse the "organic" tag, passing off conventionally grown food at a premium price under the guise of organic produce. If left unchecked, this defeats the very purpose of switching to organic food, leaving us right back where we started.



PM Modi's past campaigns, such as Swachh Bharat Abhiyan and the promotion of yoga through the International Day of Yoga, have demonstrated his ability to mobilise public participation and drive meaningful change. His efforts to combat obesity are also likely to strike a chord with the masses. However, while his past initiatives have successfully influenced public hygiene and global health trends, his latest campaign against obesity will have a meaningful impact only if the issue of food adulteration is effectively addressed.

In the fight against obesity, food adulteration is the elephant in the room. Addressing it first will ensure that when

Indians make healthier choices, they are truly consuming safe and nutritious food.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's initiative to combat obesity and reduce excessive cooking oil consumption is a crucial step toward improving public health in India.

Indeed, rampant food adulteration undermines even the best health-conscious efforts, exposing consumers to harmful substances despite their intent to eat well. The presence of hazardous chemicals in everyday foods, from fruits and vegetables to dairy and staples, poses severe health risks.

PM Modi's past campaigns have successfully driven large-scale behavioral changes, and his anti-obesity initiative holds similar promise. However, its success depends on a holistic approach that includes stringent food safety regulations, public awareness about adulteration and affordable access to truly healthy food.

Strengthening regulatory frameworks, enforcing stricter penalties for food fraud, and promoting verified organic practices can help bridge the gap.

(The writer is Additional Director, Research Division, Rajya Sabha Secretariat. Views expressed are personal)

## Four-Day Workweek: Challenges and Promises

**SECOND Opinion**



The concept of a four-day workweek has taken the world by storm, promising enhanced work-life balance and efficiency. However, implementing such a model in a heterogeneous and populous nation like India—home to over 1.4 billion people—presents significant challenges.

India's labor market has distinct complexities, making a four-day workweek more of an aspiration than an immediately achievable solution. The country's economic landscape encompasses sprawling informal sectors alongside emerging knowledge industries, creating a stark divide in working styles and employment patterns.

The informal economy, which employs approximately 90% of India's workforce, operates beyond conventional employment paradigms. Agricultural laborers, small business owners, and daily wage earners typically work based on demand rather than a fixed schedule. For such workers, a four-day workweek may hold little relevance, as their earnings are directly tied to the number of hours worked.

Conversely, India's expanding service and technology sectors may be better positioned to experiment with compressed workweeks. Some e-commerce organisations have already tested four-day workweeks, reporting promising results in employee satisfaction and productivity. However, these

remain exceptions rather than the norm.

Cultural perceptions of work in India present another significant hurdle. The deeply ingrained belief that long hours demonstrate commitment and dedication fosters resistance to reduced workweeks. This cultural mindset suggests that even if policies change, shifting attitudes may take considerably longer.

Infrastructure challenges further complicate the feasibility of a four-day workweek. Many Indian workers endure long commutes due to inadequate transportation networks and urban congestion. As a result, even with a compressed work schedule, the actual time available for leisure and personal activities might remain limited.

Despite these challenges, there are compelling reasons to explore pathways toward introducing a four-day workweek in India. Research suggests potential benefits, including reduced burnout, lower absenteeism, and improved mental health—factors that could address key workplace issues currently affecting Indian employees.

A sector-specific approach may offer the most viable path forward. Pilot programs in knowledge-intensive industries could serve as testing grounds, allowing successful models to be gradually expanded to other sectors. Additionally, government incentives for businesses willing to adopt such programs could accelerate broader acceptance.

The pandemic has already reshaped work arrangements worldwide, including in India. Remote and hybrid work

models have demonstrated that productivity is not necessarily dependent on physical presence or rigid schedules. This shift in perspective creates opportunities for workplace innovations, including compressed workweeks.

Rather than viewing the four-day workweek as a universal, short-term solution, India could integrate it into a broader movement toward more flexible, worker-oriented employment practices. While full-scale implementation across industries may be a distant goal, selective adoption in specific sectors could lay the groundwork for wider acceptance as the economy and infrastructure continue to evolve.

The journey toward workweek reform in India will be long, culturally complex, and closely tied to the nation's economic landscape. However, initiating the conversation is a crucial first step in the right direction.

The four-day workweek presents both opportunities and challenges for India. While its informal economy and cultural perceptions pose obstacles, the growing service and technology sectors offer a testing ground for its feasibility. Infrastructure limitations and deep-rooted work traditions may slow widespread adoption, but pilot programs and government incentives could drive gradual acceptance. The pandemic has already reshaped work models, highlighting flexibility's potential. Rather than an immediate, universal solution, a sector-specific approach could pave the way for broader implementation.

(The author is a motivator and freelance writer. Views expressed are personal)

## Letters to the Editor

### PRIME MINISTER MODI IN MAURITIUS

Madam — Prime Minister Modi's second visit to Mauritius on its National Day, following his 2015 trip, has revitalized the previously weakened ties between the two nations. The ritual of pouring Gangajal into Mauritian waters symbolizes the cleansing of past grievances and has led to the signing of eight Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs), including a strengthened strategic partnership focused on artificial intelligence, set to begin soon. Once under British rule, Mauritius saw the arrival of Indian laborers who endured harsh conditions and exploitation. These laborers, known as 'Girmityas' or 'People of Agreement', share a common history and cultural ties with India. This enduring rapport is expected to foster mutually beneficial developments in the region. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's second visit to Mauritius on its National Day, following his 2015 trip, has significantly strengthened the ties between the two nations. Historically, Mauritius and India share deep-rooted cultural and historical connections. Modi's visit included a symbolic ritual of pouring Gangajal into Mauritian waters, signifying the cleansing of past grievances. This visit resulted in the signing of eight Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs), including a strategic partnership focused on artificial intelligence, set to commence soon. This visit marks a new chapter in their enduring relationship.

RS NARULA | PATIALA

### EUROPE FIGHTS TRUMP TARIFFS

Madam — The European Union announced on Wednesday, March 12, that it would impose retaliatory trade measures, introducing new duties on U.S. industrial and agricultural products. This decision came just hours after the Trump administration increased tariffs on all steel and aluminum imports to 25 percent. As the world's largest trading bloc, the EU had anticipated the U.S. tariffs and prepared accordingly. However, the measures still place significant strain on already tense transatlantic relations. Just last month, in February, Washington warned Europe that it would need to take responsibility for its own security in the future. The EU's retaliatory measures will initially target U.S. goods worth approximately 26 billion euros (USD 28 billion). These measures will not be limited to steel and aluminum products but will also affect textiles, home appliances, and agricultural goods. Additionally, items such as motorcycles, bourbon whiskey, peanut butter, and jeans will face renewed tariffs. With this, an open trade war has erupted between the European Union and the United States, which may escalate into a serious and dangerous situation in the coming days. The economic impact could extend beyond these regions, affecting countries like India, which may be particularly vulnerable due to its weaker economy. This escalating trade war between the EU and the US threatens global economic stability, with potential ripple effects on various nations.

BHAGWAN THADANI | MUMBAI

### TRUMP PUSHING INDIA INTO TRADE WAR

Madam — President Donald Trump, who champions the slogan "America First," has drawn India into his trade war. He has threatened that if India does not reduce import tariffs on American goods, the US will impose equivalent tariffs on Indian goods starting in April. This has placed India in a difficult position. Calling India the "Tariff King," Trump argues that the taxes India imposes on American goods are unfair. When he took a similar stance against China, the Chinese government responded aggressively, demonstrating its readiness not only for a trade war but for any kind of confrontation. However, the situation between India and the US is different, raising the question: Is India prepared for such a scenario? Last year, trade between India and the US amounted to \$118 billion, with India exporting goods worth \$77 billion and importing \$40 billion. The major imports from the US include crude oil, pearls and precious stones, nuclear reactors and related materials, boilers, machinery, and other equipment. On the other hand, India's major exports to the US consist of automobiles, textiles, and metals. If Trump's tariff threat becomes a reality, these three Indian industries could suffer a significant blow. The US is struggling with a \$1.2 trillion trade deficit and a market flooded with Chinese products, which has become a major concern. Trump's policies aim to address this issue. Trump's background as a businessman is evident in the strategic moves he is making.

DATTAPRASAD SHIRODKAR | MUMBAI

### TRAIN HIJACKING IN BALOCHISTAN EXPOSES PAKISTAN'S FAULTLINES

The recent hijacking of the Jaffar Express in Balochistan has once again highlighted the deep-rooted insurgency in the region. The Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) seized control of the train, which was carrying over 500 passengers, including 214 Pakistani soldiers.

The group issued a 48-hour ultimatum, demanding the release of Baloch prisoners and the withdrawal of Pakistani forces. In response, the Pakistani military launched a rescue operation, deploying Special Service Group (SSG) commandos. Reports indicate that 104 hostages have been freed, while 16 militants were killed. However, several hostages also lost their lives during the operation, further escalating tensions.

The local population has long accused the government of exploiting their resources while denying them political and economic rights. This discontent has fueled multiple insurgencies over the decades, with separatist groups like the

BLA leading armed resistance against the state. The Pakistani military's heavy-handed response, including enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings, has only intensified the unrest.

A major factor driving the insurgency is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which includes the strategic Gwadar Port, is seen as an effort by Pakistan and China to exploit Balochistan's resources without benefiting the local population. Baloch insurgents have repeatedly attacked CPEC infrastructure and Chinese investments, viewing them as symbols of foreign occupation.

The BLA's warning after the hijacking—demanding that Pakistan and China leave Balochistan—reinforces this narrative. The crisis in Balochistan poses a significant challenge for Pakistan. A sustainable solution requires dialogue, economic inclusion, and an end to military repression.

SACHIN TRIPATHI | BHOPAL

# Carney: From Central Banker to Prime Minister

Mark Carney's rise from a globally respected central banker to Canada's Prime Minister signals a dramatic shift in the country's political landscape. Among his most urgent tasks is repairing Canada's strained relationship with India, a key economic and geopolitical partner

FIRST Column

Mark Carney's transition from a globally acclaimed central banker to Canada's Prime Minister marks a profound shift in leadership dynamics. Renowned for his crisis management at the helm of the Bank of Canada and the Bank of England, he now faces the uncharted terrain of political leadership. Taking charge of a deeply divided political landscape, he must navigate a strained Indo-Canadian relationship and the resurgence of protectionism in a Trump-led America.

## From Central Banker to Political Leader

While his economic acumen lends him credibility in managing fiscal policy and trade relations, his greatest challenges will be diplomatic—repairing strained ties with India, navigating a hostile White House, and restoring public trust in Canada's institutions. His leadership style, devoid of political baggage but rooted in financial pragmatism, will determine whether he succeeds in stabilising Canada's position on the global stage.

## Repairing Indo-Canadian Relations

It is well known that former Prime Minister Justin Trudeau alienated much of the Indian community in Canada by openly supporting Khalistani elements, severely straining relations with India. Carney has indicated that he favors stronger ties with India, a move that would benefit both nations. Unlike Trudeau, who pursued a self-serving political agenda at the cost of diplomatic relations, Carney must now leverage his skills and experience to mend fences with New Delhi.

One of Carney's most urgent foreign policy tasks will be repairing Canada's damaged relationship with India. Rebuilding trust through direct talks with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and senior officials—while avoiding public accusations that could further aggravate tensions—will be crucial.

- Key measures include:
1. Addressing India's concerns about pro-Khalistani extremism operating from Canadian soil.
  2. Strengthening counterterrorism collaboration with India.
  3. Reviving discussions on the stalled Canada-India Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA).
  4. Encouraging Canadian investments in India's technology and infrastructure sectors.
  5. Attracting Indian investments into Canada's energy and AI industries.
  6. Easing visa restrictions for Indian students and professionals to reinforce diaspora-driven relations.

## Tackling Khalistani Extremism

Managing the presence of Khalistani elements in Canada remains a significant challenge. Trudeau's perceived leniency toward these extremists led to a diplo-



KS TOMAR

matic crisis, especially after the Nijjar controversy. If Carney aims to restore relations with India while maintaining domestic stability, he must strike a balance between national security and democratic freedoms.

- Potential steps include:
1. Directing CSIS and the RCMP to closely monitor extremist groups.
  2. Increasing surveillance on pro-Khalistani funding networks.
  3. Implementing stricter regulations on events that glorify violence against India.
  4. Enhancing intelligence-sharing with India's RAW and IB.
  5. Considering the deportation of individuals involved in terrorist financing or inciting violence against India.
  6. Establishing a bilateral security task force to monitor extremist activities.

Carney must also distinguish between moderate Sikhs and extremist Khalistanis, ensuring that law enforcement targets violent elements rather than peaceful Sikh advocacy groups. His approach must be security-driven rather than politically motivated—unlike Trudeau's strategy of appeasement.

**GARNEY MUST ALSO DISTINGUISH BETWEEN MODERATE SIKHS AND EXTREMIST KHALISTANIS, ENSURING THAT LAW ENFORCEMENT TARGETS VIOLENT ELEMENTS RATHER THAN PEACEFUL SIKH GROUPS**

## Balancing Indo-Canadian Relations and Domestic Politics

Restoring trust with India while managing domestic political sensitivities will require a delicate balancing act. Carney's lack of political baggage allows him to take a fresh approach, while his global reputation ensures India takes his diplomatic overtures seriously.

Leveraging economic incentives to reset relations with India could provide him with a major diplomatic victory early in his tenure. However, he will face opposition from pro-Khalistani groups in Canada, accusations of suppressing free speech and resistance from left-leaning Liberals who supported Trudeau's stance. If he implements a balanced policy—cracking down on extremists while protecting legitimate Sikh voices—he can repair Indo-Canadian ties without shaking domestic instability.

## The Indian Diaspora's Influence

The Indian community in Canada, comprising approximately 1.86 million individuals according to the 2021 census, represents about 5.1 per cent of the national population. This demographic has significantly influenced Canada's multicultural landscape, particularly in urban centers such as Toronto, Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, and Montreal.

- Notable political figures from this community include:
- Jagmeet Singh: Leader of the New Democratic Party (NDP) since 2017 and the first person of Indian descent to lead a major federal party.
  - Harjit Singh Sajjan: MP for Vancouver South and former Minister of National Defense.
  - Anita Anand: Appointed Minister of National

Defense in 2021.

- Bardish Chagger: Former Minister of Diversity and Inclusion and Youth.
- Chandra Arya: MP for Nepean, Ontario, and advocate for economic development and immigrant integration.

## Political Engagement and Diplomatic Tensions

The Indian community's active political participation underscores its commitment to Canada's democratic processes. However, relations between Canada and India deteriorated following the October 2024 murder of Sikh separatist Hardeep Singh Nijjar in British Columbia.

Trudeau accused the Indian government of orchestrating violence against dissidents in Canada, leading to reciprocal diplomatic expulsions and further straining bilateral ties. This crisis has raised concerns among the Indian diaspora, particularly regarding immigration, education, and economic exchanges. For Carney, engaging constructively with the Indian community is crucial. Addressing their concerns, fostering inclusive policies and working toward diplomatic reconciliation with India will be essential steps in strengthening Canada's social and economic fabric.

## Domestic Political Challenges

Carney assumes office amid deepening political divides. The Liberal Party has suffered declining public confidence, particularly in Western Canada, where Trudeau's policies alienated oil-dependent provinces like Alberta and Saskatchewan. Meanwhile, right-wing populism has gained traction, mirroring global trends.

While Carney's lack of electoral experience may be a vulnerability, his credibility as an economic strategist could help him regain voter trust.

Managing inflation, stabilising interest rates, and addressing affordability concerns will be immediate priorities. Gaining support from both progressive and conservative voters will be crucial for effective governance, while restoring confidence within his party and among centrist voters will determine his political longevity.

## Conclusion

Carney's leadership will be defined by his ability to steer Canada through complex domestic and global challenges.

A strategic recalibration of ties with India could elevate his stature, but any misstep—particularly on the Khalistani issue—risks deepening tensions and undermining economic prospects in South Asia. India will also have to understand the prioritise and compulsions of the new Canadian prime minister to reboot the relations

(Writer is a strategic affairs columnist and senior political analyst. Views expressed are personal)

# Ramzan and Navratri: A Shared Journey of Self-Restraint and Purity

Ramzan and Navratri symbolise the essence of all that is good, pure, and noble in the two religions: Islam and Hinduism. The common message for devotees of these respective religions is to achieve excellence in behavior through introspection and self-restraint.

The Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi, once said, "There are limits to self-indulgence, none to self-restraint." Truly, self-restraint plays an important role in shaping human behavior in different societal and cultural settings. The entire concept of social control is based on the type, range, and depth of restraint exhibited in human behavior. More often than not, we see laws being violated, manipulated, and disobeyed because they are externally imposed. In contrast, by practicing self-restraint, we become the masters of our actions and, in turn, our destiny.

Ramzan, the ninth lunar month in the Islamic calendar, is a period of spiritual reflection and piety, observed through fasting from dawn to sunset and increased charitable deeds by Muslims worldwide.

The objective behind this month-long exercise is to cultivate self-control and self-restraint through fasting, with the goal of achieving excellence in behavior and guarding against evil. According to the Quran (Verse 2:183):

"O you who believe, fasting is prescribed for you as it was prescribed to those before you so that you may become righteous."

Ramzan is seen as a time for introspection and strengthening one's connection with God. One night during Ramzan, known as Laylat al-Qadr, is believed to be a night of exceptional blessings, during which the Quran was revealed to Prophet Muhammad. The first revelation of the Holy Quran took place on Laylat al-Qadr.

However, fasting does not mean abstaining only from food and water; it also necessarily includes refraining from all evil actions and thoughts. One must not indulge in falsehood, gossip, backbiting, or foul language while fasting.

Once, as Prophet Muhammad was passing through a street with his followers, he heard a woman shouting and abusing others. The Prophet asked, "Who is this woman? Is she a Muslim?" His followers replied, "She is a Muslim and is observing the fast." The Prophet then instructed his followers to offer dates to the woman to break her fast, explaining that by using vulgar language and expressing anger, she had rendered her fast meaningless.

In essence, a fasting person must exercise utmost control to eliminate even the slightest traces of unworthiness in behavior and demeanor. The observer of a fast must ensure that their thoughts and deeds remain pure, noble, decent, and benevolent toward others, including all of humanity.

There are two types of sinners:

2. Fasiq-ul-Aqeeda - One who commits sin and does not believe it is wrong.

Fasting can refine and purify those in the first category. During Ramzan, believers are given the opportunity for repentance and forgiveness. If a person sincerely seeks pardon from the Lord for their misdeeds, the Lord listens to their prayers during this holy month.

The faithful are instructed to adopt taqwa (refraining from sin and guarding against evil). If those observing the fast do not adhere to this principle, their fast will not be accepted by Allah. As the Quran (79:40-41) states:

"As for him who fears to stand before his Lord and restrains himself from low desires, Paradise is surely the abode."

Fasting detoxifies the body when observed properly. Namaz (prayer), besides being an act of worship, is similar to yoga and meditation. Prophet Muhammad's daughter, Hazrat Fatima Zehra, highlighted the benefits of fasting during Ramzan, stating that one of its purposes is to help the rich understand the pangs of hunger experienced by the poor. For this reason, Zakaat (charitable alms-giving) is prescribed during this period.

The Quran states: "And spend in the way of Allah and cast not yourself to perdition with your own hand." It further clarifies: "He loves those who purify themselves." Someone once asked Hazrat Ali Ibn Abi Talib, the Caliph of Islam, "How do we know that Allah has accepted our prayers during Ramzan?" Hazrat Ali replied, "If, between the sighting of the moon at the beginning of Ramzan and the sighting of the moon for Eid, you notice a positive change in your behavior, your prayers have been accepted."

Similarly, in Hinduism, Chaitra Navratri is observed between April 2-11, while Sharad Navratri is celebrated in the autumn season, around October-November. According to the Shastras, devotees observing Navratri fasts must practice Brahmacharya (celibacy), as it helps in reducing negative qualities such as anger, pride, deceit, and greed.

It also aids in keeping and honoring different vows and commitments in life. Devotees observing the fast should also abstain from falsehood and refrain from using intoxicants like gutka, tobacco, and wine. Consumption of non-vegetarian meals is also prohibited during these periods.

Currently, the month-long Ramzan is being observed, and Chaitra Navratri will be celebrated from March 30 to April 7, 2025. From a cultural

perspective, Delhi has a unique character of celebration, as people from all corners of the country reside here.

The great Urdu poet, Mirza Ghalib, beautifully captured the fervor of the holy month of Ramzan in Delhi in a letter to his close friend, Mir Mehdi Husain 'Majroh':

"How did you presume that during the month of Ramzan, I would be staying in Rampur? Although Nawab Sahab insisted that I stay in Rampur, tempting me with mangoes, I left and, by 'Chand Raat' (the night before Ramzan), reached Delhi, for Delhi is a place where people feel the pulse of absolute bliss.

"In Delhi, during Ramzan, I have three commitments: At dawn, I go to Masjid Hamid Ali Khan, at Kashmiri Gate, to listen to the soulful recitation of the Holy Quran by Hazrat Qari Jafar Ali Jarhavi; in the evening, I break my fast at Mehtab Bagh, near Jama Masjid; and at night, I perform Namaz-e-Isha at Jama Masjid. How mirthfully life is passing here!"

Ramzan and Navratri, two sacred observances in Islam and Hinduism, exemplify the virtues of self-restraint, introspection, and spiritual elevation. Both are deeply rooted in religious traditions and serve as periods of reflection, discipline, and devotion, guiding individuals toward moral and ethical excellence.

**Spiritual fasting**

Ramzan, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, is a time for fasting, prayer, and increased charitable acts. It is believed that during this holy month, the first revelation of the Quran was bestowed upon Prophet Mohammad on Laylat al-Qadr, a night of immense blessings.

Fasting during Ramzan is not merely about abstaining from food and drink but also about refraining from falsehood, anger, and immoral behavior. The objective is to cultivate 'taqwa'—a heightened sense of God-consciousness and righteousness. Acts of charity, such as 'Zakaat' (alms-giving), further strengthen the bond of empathy between the rich and the poor.

Similarly, Navratri, a Hindu festival observed twice a year, emphasises devotion, purity, and self-discipline. Devotees engage in fasting, prayer, and abstinence from material indulgences, aiming to purify the mind and body. Observing celibacy and refraining from falsehood, intoxicants, and non-vegetarian food are integral to this practice.

In a culturally diverse city like Delhi, these spiritual occasions are observed with great fervor, reflecting the city's unique ethos of religious harmony. Ultimately, both Ramzan and Navratri remind us that true devotion lies in self-restraint, moral conduct, and a compassionate heart.

(The author is a lawyer. Views expressed are personal)

# India's fragile trade deal with the US

India is currently in a tight spot regarding its economic relations with the United States. In less than two months since the new US President took office, high-level Indian officials, led by the Prime Minister himself, have visited Washington, D.C. Last week, India's Commerce Minister was in Washington for discussions with the newly appointed US Trade Representative and Commerce Secretary. According to news reports, Piyush Goyal is expected to return to Washington towards the end of March. The reason? President Trump's simultaneous announcement, during Goyal's visit, of imposing reciprocal tariffs on all countries with high import duties, including India.

President Trump has consistently targeted India as a high-tariff nation since taking office. His public outbursts against various allies and friendly countries have become a near-constant spectacle, akin to a reality show streaming across the globe. Several world leaders who managed early meetings with Trump were relieved that they were spared the harsh treatment that the Ukrainian President faced in the Oval Office. Trump's confrontational style is now well known, and global leaders fear reputational damage from their bilateral conversations with him. He employs his blunt, undiplomatic rhetoric to put foreign leaders in a difficult position, compelling them to return with lucrative economic deals for the US.

It was no surprise, then, that after meeting India's Commerce Minister, US Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick stated, "We would like to focus on a bilateral conversation just between India and the United States—to bring down the tariff levels that India has, which protect some of its sectors." Following Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the US last month, discussions on a bilateral trade agreement have been actively initiated, with expectations of finalisation by the end of the year. Intense consultations are underway in Delhi, with all relevant ministries contributing their recommendations.

One of India's key priorities is retaining control over the agricultural sector, which has significant domestic political implications. The US is pushing for greater access to the Indian agriculture market, while India seeks reciprocity without jeopardising its small farmers. American farmers, who are generally more prosperous and own larger farmlands, rely on advanced machinery to boost crop output. However, the US Commerce Secretary made it clear that access to India's agriculture market remains a top priority. He stated, "Maybe certain products have quotas. Maybe certain products have limits... And then we do the same thing on the other side and craft an agreement that makes sense for both of us. The Indian agriculture mar-

ket has to open up. It can't just stay closed."

Meanwhile, back in India, the government is considering reducing import duties on certain products, including electronics. India currently imposes nearly 16.5 per cent import duties on several ICT hardware products, while the US maintains rates well below 1 per cent. Many experts believe that lowering duties on electronics could benefit India by encouraging US companies to shift their supply chains to the country. However, there seems to be some confusion over the definition of "US-manufactured" and "Made in the US" when determining tariff reductions. At present, many US technology companies do not manufacture in the US but operate their largest factories in China or Southeast Asia.

President Trump, meanwhile, is pressuring American companies to relocate their manufacturing bases back to the US, threatening consequences if they fail to do so. This move could further complicate the already fragile global supply chain. India is closely monitoring these developments and must remain agile in its decision-making.

## Conclusion

India and the United States have shared a complex yet evolving economic relationship, marked by cooperation and contention. Over the years, India has worked towards strengthening trade ties with the US, which remains one of its largest trading partners. However, friction has persisted over issues such as tariffs, market access, and trade imbalances. With the new US administration taking a firm stance on protectionist policies, India faces increasing pressure to lower its trade barriers and open its markets to American goods, particularly in agriculture and technology. President Trump's aggressive trade policies, including reciprocal tariffs and demands for reduced Indian duties on US imports, have added new challenges to negotiations.

As India navigates these complex trade dynamics, it must strike a balance between fostering economic cooperation with the US and protecting its domestic industries, especially agriculture and manufacturing. While a bilateral trade deal could provide long-term benefits, hasty concessions could threaten small businesses and farmers. At the same time, global supply chain shifts present opportunities for India to attract investments from US firms. With careful negotiations and strategic decision-making, India can work towards a trade agreement that ensures mutual benefit while safeguarding its economic interests. The coming months will be crucial in shaping the future of India-US economic relations.

(The writer is a political analyst. Views expressed are personal)



KUMARDEEP BANERJEE

# Russia says it has retaken Kursk's biggest town from Ukraine



Ukrainian serviceman of Khartia brigade known by call sign "Krystal" fires M101 Howitzer towards Russian positions in Kharkiv region, Ukraine

PTI

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Moscow

Russian forces have driven the Ukrainian army out of the biggest town in Russia's Kursk border region, officials claimed Thursday, as US officials sought the Kremlin's response to a proposed 30-day ceasefire in the three-year war that Ukraine has endorsed.

The Russian Defence Ministry's claim that it recaptured the town of Sudzha, hours after President Vladimir Putin visited his commanders in Kursk and wore military fatigues, could not be independently verified. Ukrainian officials made no immediate comment on the claim.

The renewed Russian military push and Putin's high-profile visit to his troops came as US President Donald Trump presses for a diplomatic end to the war. The US Tuesday lifted its March 3 suspension of military aid for Kyiv after senior US and Ukrainian officials made progress on how to stop the fighting during talks held in Saudi Arabia.

Trump said Wednesday that "it's up to Russia now" as his administration presses Moscow to agree to the ceasefire. The US president has made veiled threats to hit Russia with new sanctions if it won't engage with peace efforts.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Thursday that US negotiators were on their way to Russia, but he wouldn't comment on Moscow's view of the ceasefire proposal.

"Before the talks start, and they haven't started yet, it would be wrong to talk about it in public," he told reporters.

Senior US officials say they hope to see Russia stop attacks on Ukraine within the next few days.

White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt told Fox News that national security adviser Mike Waltz spoke Wednesday with his Russian counterpart. She also confirmed that Trump's special envoy, Steve Witkoff, will head to Moscow for talks with Russian officials, possibly including Putin.

By signaling its openness to a ceasefire, Ukraine has presented the Kremlin with

a dilemma at a time when the Russian military has the upper hand in the war — whether to accept a truce and abandon hopes of making new gains, or reject the offer and risk derailing a cautious rapprochement with Washington.

The Ukrainian army's foothold inside Russia has been under intense pressure for months from a renewed effort by Russian forces, backed by North Korean troops. Ukraine's daring incursion last August led to the first occupation of Russian soil by foreign troops since World War II and embarrassed the Kremlin.

Speaking to commanders Wednesday, Putin said he expected the military "to completely free the Kursk region from the enemy in the nearest future."

Putin added that in the future "it's necessary to think about creating a security zone alongside the state border," in a signal that Moscow could try to expand its territorial gains by capturing parts of Ukraine's neighboring Sumy region. That idea could complicate a ceasefire deal.

Ukraine launched the raid in a bid to

counter the unceasingly glum news from the front line, as well as draw Russian troops away from the battlefield inside Ukraine and gain a bargaining chip in any peace talks. But the incursion didn't significantly change the dynamic of the war.

The Institute for the Study of War, a Washington-based think tank, assessed late Wednesday that Russian forces were in control of Sudzha.

Ukraine's top military head, Gen. Oleksandr Syrskiy, said late Wednesday that Russian aviation had carried out an unprecedented number of strikes on Kursk and that as a result Sudzha had been almost completely destroyed. He did not comment on whether Ukraine still controlled the settlement but said it was "maneuvering (troops) to more advantageous lines."

Meanwhile, Major General Dmytro Krasnylnikov, commander of Ukraine's Northern Operational Command, which includes the Kursk region, was dismissed from his post, he told Ukrainian media outlet Suspilne on Wednesday.

# Imran Khan's party slammed for spreading 'fake narrative'

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Islamabad

Defence Minister Khawaja Asif on Thursday slammed jailed former premier Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party for spreading a "fake narrative" regarding the deadly terrorist attack on a train in Balochistan.

At least 21 passengers were killed in the attack by the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) terrorists on the Jaffar Express in Bolan areas of Balochistan on Tuesday. The stand-off with the militants ended after the security forces killed all 33 terrorists.

Speaking in the National Assembly, Asif accused PTI-affiliated social media accounts of misrepresenting the tragic incident and undermining national unity by promoting misinformation, instead of acknowledging the sacrifices made by the armed forces in the rescue operation.

"What's more upsetting is the way PTI's social media interpreted the situation," he said. "In yesterday's tweets, and otherwise as well, they target the armed forces. When the armed forces impose martial law, then they stand with them," Asif said, recalling that Khan supported Pervez Musharraf in his 2002 referendum.

Asif said Pakistan would emerge victorious in the war on terrorism with the nation's support for the armed forces.

"Our war against terrorism is a big milestone that the entire country can be proud of. If the entire nation stands proud like this with our armed forces, then there is no doubt we will be successful in our war (against terrorism)," the minister said.

The Parliament on Thursday unanimously passed a resolution to condemn the train attack and all acts of terrorism

that endanger people and public order.

Minister for Parliamentary Affairs Tariq Fazal Chaudhary moved the resolution that appreciated the armed forces for their unwavering commitment, bravery and sacrifice in safeguarding the lives of the citizens and protecting the integrity of Pakistan.

The House expressed the "resolve to take every possible measure to eliminate terrorism from every corner of the country, affirming that no group, individual and ideology that seeks to undermine the nation's security, prosperity and sovereignty will be allowed to spread fear, hatred and violence within the territorial limits of the country."

## At least 21 passengers were killed in the attack by the Balochistan Liberation Army terrorists on the Jaffar Express in Bolan areas of Balochistan on Tuesday

It expressed the commitment to working relentlessly to root out terrorism in all its forms and manifestations.

The House called upon the people regardless of their ethnicity and religion to unite in the fight against terrorism and reject extremism, ensuring peace, safety and prosperity for future generations.

Chairman Pakistan People's Party Bilawal Bhutto Zardari strongly condemned the terrorist attack.

He said the terrorists, enjoying the backing of some foreign forces, only want to kill innocent people and impede the progress of Pakistan. He emphasized the need for unity in political ranks and consensus to once again defeat the terrorists.

# Maintenance hole explosion at Texas Tech University causes fire

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Texas

An explosion inside a maintenance hole on the Texas Tech University campus in Lubbock set off fires and power outages, leading school officials to issue evacuation orders for several buildings and cancel classes for the rest of the week, university police said.

The explosion happened Wednesday night at the Engineering Key section of campus, which was evacuated.

Power was being shut down to the entire campus while repairs were underway, said Caitlynn Jeffries, a spokesper-

son for the university's police department. She asked that all public and unofficial personnel avoid campus.

"You can go ahead and go home for spring break. We are closing school down for the next couple days," Jeffries said at a news media briefing.

Firefighters responded to campus at about 7 p.m. For a possible gas leak, Lubbock Fire Rescue Capt. Jon Tunnell said at the briefing. They found "multiple manhole covers with active fire and smoke issuing from them," he said.

No injuries were reported, Tunnell said.

# Musk, DOGE may get rid of programme that made tax filing free

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Washington

Mia Francis, a 22-year-old barista from Boston, filed her taxes on her own this year for the first time, using a free government tax filing programme that made it easy because it did most of the work for her.

Francis said it took 45 minutes to finish her taxes with the IRS Direct File programme, an electronic tax return filing system that the IRS made permanent last year and that has rolled out to 25 states.

Francis is expecting a \$530 refund. And because she saved cash by not using a commercial tax preparation company to file her taxes, "that money will go a long way," she said. She plans to use it for a trip to Amsterdam this year.

Despite its popularity with Francis and other members of the American public, the IRS Direct File's fate remains unclear as Elon Musk and the Department of Government Efficiency cleave their way through the federal bureaucracy.

So far, the programme is still available for use ahead of the April 15 tax filing deadline, and Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent committed during his January confirmation hearing to maintaining it, at least for this tax season.

Representatives from the Internal Revenue Service and DOGE did not respond to requests for comment from The Associated Press on their plans for Direct File. But one Republican tax expert says the IRS never got congressional authorization to create Direct File.

And Republican lawmakers and commercial tax preparation firms complain the programme is a waste of money because free filing programs already exist, although they are hard to use.

Direct File was rolled out as a pilot program in 2024 after the IRS was tasked with looking into how to create a "direct file" system as part of the money it received from the Inflation Reduction Act signed into law by President Joe Biden in 2022. Last May, the agency announced that the programme would be made permanent.

The IRS accepted 140,803 returns filed by taxpayers using Direct File in the 12 states where it was available last tax season. It's been expanded to include half the country this year. It is unclear how many taxpayers have used Direct File this year.

Mercia Vinton, an original architect of Direct File from the US Digital Service, noted the ease and accessibility of the programme and called it "a great example of how people should interact with the government in the 21st century."



the IRS," she said. "It was built by an in-house product team, in an iterative manner, and we ship updates to the software to improve user experience in real time based on feedback. If we continue to invest in it, both taxpayers and the IRS can benefit." Musk posted last month on his social media site that he had "deleted" 18F, a government agency that worked on technology projects such as the IRS' Direct File programme.

This led to some confusion about whether Direct File is still available to taxpayers. However, conversations inside the IRS indicate that no decision has been made on whether to cut the program, two people familiar with these conversations tell the AP.

Former IRS Commissioner Daniel Werfel, who oversaw the rollout of the programme, said Treasury officials considering the future of the program should take into account "the voice of the taxpayers."

"My reflection is that taxpayers are in very different situations and have very different preferences for how they want to file," he said. "Those whose preference is to file electronically direct with the IRS for free, it's a good option to have on the menu. But it should not replace other options."

Derrick Plummer, a spokesperson for Intuit, one of the country's largest commercial tax preparation firms, said free tax preparation had been available for years before Direct File came along.

"IRS Direct File is a solution in search of a problem, a waste of taxpayer dollars and a drain on critical IRS resources," he said. A June 2024 Treasury Inspector General for Tax Administration report estimates that the annual costs of Direct File may range from \$64 million to \$249 million.

"The IRS should focus on its core mission including data privacy and customer service while policymakers in Washington

focus on simplifying the tax code," Plummer said.

However, other taxpayers, like 31-year-old Aquiel Warner in Austin, Texas, say they want to avoid using commercial tax preparation software.

Warner filed her taxes with Direct File in 10 minutes using her phone and a chatbot that the IRS provides. She likes the program's convenience, that it prepopulated her tax forms and that it allowed for free filing. Although she has some concerns about data privacy in the government — DOGE is reported to have access to some of the IRS' internal systems — she feels more secure going through the IRS than commercial tax preparation services.

"I don't want to be a product. I don't want my information sold when I file my taxes," she said. "I have to file my taxes, and I don't want to be put in a situation where, in order to file my taxes, I have to pay to get the help I need because I'm not a professional tax preparer."

Grover Norquist, president of Americans for Tax Reform, said the IRS never got explicit permission from Congress to create the Direct File system.

"It really doesn't matter if it's a good idea. It was done illegally," he said, calling on Congress and the Justice Department to look into what he says is unauthorized spending that went into the creation of Direct File.

Democratic lawmakers in January asked Bessent and IRS commissioner nominee Billy Long to preserve the program. They wrote in a letter that "ending Direct File would hurt everyday Americans." Long has not yet received a nomination hearing.

In the meantime, Musk and his cadre of computer programmers could decide to wield their tech skills to boost the programme — or use the very same digital savvy to delete it.

# Pak PM Shehbaz Sharif visits Balochistan after BLA insurgents attack train



A special train, organised by the army for the wounded and survivors rescued by security forces from a passenger train attacked by insurgents, arrives at a railway station in Much, in Pakistan's southwestern Balochistan province

PTI

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Karachi

Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif on Thursday visited the restive Balochistan province to review the law and order situation and to express solidarity with the people there following the Jaffar Express hijacking incident in which 21 civilians and four soldiers were killed.

Sharif's visit comes a day after security forces killed all 33 Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) militants who on Tuesday hijacked the Jaffar Express.

Sharif is accompanied by Deputy Prime Minister Muhammad Ishaq Dar, Federal Minister for Information and Broadcasting Attaullah Tarar, Federal Minister for Planning, Development Ahsan Iqbal, Federal Minister for Science and Technology Nawabzada Mir Khalid Magsi and others.

The incident occurred when the train, travelling from Quetta to Peshawar and carrying 440 passengers, was ambushed by BLA militants near the mountainous terrain of Gudalar and Piru Kunri in a tunnel. They opened fire

on the train and held the passengers hostage, prompting the security forces to initiate an operation that lasted two days. Announcing the completion of the operation, Director General Inter-Services Public Relations Lieutenant General Ahmed Sharif Chaudhry on Wednesday said the armed forces took part in the action against militants who "remained in contact with their facilitators and mastermind based in Afghanistan via satellite phone". Units from the Pakistan Air Force (PAF), Special Services Group (SSG), Army, and Frontier Corps (FC) took part in the operation, the army's spokesperson said.

Chaudhary said no one can be permitted to make innocent people of Pakistan the victim of their barbarism in the streets, trains, buses or markets because of their misleading ideas and instructions and facilitation of foreign masters.

"Whoever does this, let me say it very clearly, will be hunted down and brought to justice. Let me also say that this incident of Jaffar Express changes the rules of the game," he said.

The bodies of those killed in the attack will be sent to their native areas after necessary administrative prerequisites. Defence Minister Khawaja Asif on Thursday lambasted former prime minister Imran Khan-led Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) for "politicising" the incident and misinterpreting the situation on social media.

"We need to rise above political interests and demonstrate national unity (on such occasions)," said Asif.

Asif slammed the former PTI-led government's decision to relocate thousands of fighters from the outlawed Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) to the country.

On the Jaffar Express rescue operation, the minister said, "God forbids, there could have been a lot of casualties, but the security forces eliminated the terrorists."

"Our war against terrorism is a big milestone that the entire country can be proud of. If the entire nation stands proud like this with our armed forces, then there is no doubt we will be successful in our war (against terrorism)," the minister asserted.

## Syria under Islamist group's rule

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Damascus

Syria's interim president on Thursday signed a temporary constitution that leaves the country under Islamist rule for five years during a transitional phase.

The country's interim rulers have struggled to exert their authority across much of the country since the Islamist former insurgent group, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, or HTS, led a lightning insurgency that overthrew former leader Bashar Assad in December.

Former HTS leader Ahmad Al-Sharaa is now the country's interim president — a decision that was announced after a meeting of the armed groups that took part in the offensive against Assad. At the same meeting, the groups agreed to repeal the country's old constitution and said a new one would be drafted.

While many were happy to see an end to the Assad family's dictatorial rule of over 50 years in the war-torn country, religious and ethnic minorities have been sceptical of the new Islamist leaders and reluctant to allow Damascus under its new authorities to assert control of their areas.

Abdulhamid Al-Awak, one of the seven members of the committee al-Sharaa tasked to draft the temporary constitution, told a press conference Thursday that it will maintain some provisions from the previous one, including the stipulation that the head of state has to be a Muslim, and Islamic law is the main source of jurisprudence.

However, Al-Awak, a constitutional law expert who teaches at the Mardin Artuklu University in Turkey, also said the temporary constitution includes provisions that enshrine freedom of expression and the press. The constitution will "balance between social security and freedom" dur-

ing Syria's shaky political situation, he said. A new committee to draft a permanent constitution will be formed, but it is unclear if it will be more inclusive of Syria's political, religious, and ethnic groups.

Al-Sharaa on Monday reached a landmark pact with the US-backed Kurdish authorities in northeastern Syria, including a ceasefire and a merging of their armed forces with the central government's security agencies.

The deal came after government forces and allied groups crushed an insurgency launched last week by gunmen loyal to Assad. Rights groups say that hundreds of civilians — mostly from the Alawite minority sect to which Assad belongs — were killed in retaliatory attacks by factions in the counter-offensive.

A key goal of the interim constitution was to give a timeline for the country's political transition out of its interim

phase. In December, Al-Sharaa said it could take up to three years to rewrite Syria's constitution and up to five years to organise and hold elections.

Al-Sharaa appointed a committee to draft the new constitution after Syria held a national dialogue conference last month, which called for announcing a temporary constitution and holding interim parliamentary elections. Critics said the hastily-organised conference was not inclusive of Syria's different ethnic and sectarian groups or civil society.

The United States and Europe have been hesitant to lift harsh sanctions imposed on Syria during Assad's rule until they are convinced that the new leaders will create an inclusive political system and protect minorities. Al-Sharaa and regional governments have been urging them to reconsider, fearing that the country's crumbling economy could bring further instability.

## Bangladesh extends military's magistracy power

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Dhaka

Bangladesh's interim government led by Muhammad Yunus on Thursday extended the magistracy power of the military forces for 60 more days for the third time amid a nationwide law and order situation.

"Commissioned officers holding the rank of captain and above in the Bangladesh Armed Forces have been granted special executive magistrate powers across the country," a Public Administration Ministry statement said here.

According to the statement, navy and air force officers too would hold the authority of executive magistracy while performing duties in aid of civil administration, including the military and navy officers serving on deputation in paramilitary Bangladesh Coast Guard and Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB).

The renewal of the government order came as a nationwide operation called Operation Devil Hunt is underway as the country vandalism afresh since February 5.

Protestors that day first demolished the 32 Dhanmondi residence of Bangladesh's founding father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman using excavators coinciding with a scheduled virtual speech by his daughter and deposed prime minister Sheikh Hasina from India, where she fled last year after the students' massive protest that ousted her Awami League government.

The protesters subsequently attacked or set on fire the houses and business establishments of Awami League leaders and activists throughout the country. They were confronted while attacking a fugitive former minister's village home in suburban Gazipur on the outskirts of the capital.

The armed forces were first granted magistracy power on September 17, 2024, a little over a month after the fall

Bangladesh has called out military in aid of civil administration, especially, during elections but were never granted magistracy power

of Hasina's Awami League regime in a student-led mass protests when police were in a dilapidated state as the main law enforcement agency.

A large number of policemen were lynched or critically wounded and police stations were attacked by protestors for their role in protecting the ousted regime while the government said the police was gradually regaining its morale with a massive restructuring exercise.

In line with the authority, the armed forces' officers could arrest or issue orders to arrest any crime suspect. But army chief General Waker Uz Zaman last month said the military forces were eager to return to their barracks as soon as possible saying army troops were not trained for policing.

Zaman also said that he ordered troops to use minimal force in discharging policing duties as part of joint forces and stressed the need for reorganisation of police to take their original responsibilities in the quickest possible time.

Bangladesh, in the past two decades, has called out military troops in aid of civilian administrative authorities particularly to enforce vigil during national elections and handle law order situations but they were never granted magistracy power.

The military, however, was given the magistracy authority in 2002 during former prime minister Khaleda Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) government to carry out an anti-crime security clampdown called Operation Clean Heart when at least 40 people were killed in security custody.

## UN secretary-general visitz Rohingya refugee camps, push for aid

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ DHAKA

UN Secretary-General António Guterres arrived in Bangladesh on Thursday on a four-day visit to review the situation of more than 1 million Rohingya refugees amid the fear of aid cuts that could seriously affect them.

Bangladesh's foreign affairs adviser, Touhid Hossain, received Guterres at Dhaka's main airport.

Guterres's visit, which is his second to the country, is seen as crucial after the announcement of possible aid cuts by the World Food Programme, or WFP, and others following the decision by Washington to shut down USAID operations.

The interim government, which came to power in August after the ouster of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in a mass uprising in Bangladesh, is hopeful that the visit will strengthen international efforts to mobilise aid for the Rohingya refugees and attract new global attention to the Rohingya crisis.

The WFP, the main UN food agency, said in a letter to the refugee authorities earlier this month that cuts to food rations could take effect from April 1 in Cox's Bazar, where dozens of camps are inhabited by Rohingya refugees.

The agency said that the food rations could be half, or USD 6, from the existing USD 12.50 per month.

In a message to The Associated Press, the WFP said recently that whether the fund cuts would be effective from next month would depend on getting adequate funding that it requires to run their operations.

WFP spokesperson Kun Li said that they were "actively mobilising funds" to prevent any reductions in food assistance for Rohingya refugees. If the agency is unable to secure sufficient funding — USD 81 million to sustain operations through the end of the year, including USD 15 million needed for April — they will have no choice but to reduce rations starting in April.

Guterres and Bangladesh's chief adviser, Muhammad Yunus, are scheduled to visit Rohingya camps in the southern Cox's Bazar district on Friday.

On Saturday, Guterres will hold a meeting with Yunus at his office in Dhaka, the capital.

## 'We will just die in silence': US aid cuts hit Ethiopia's fragile Tigray region

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Mekele

As a displaced person in Ethiopia's northern Tigray region, 76-year-old Haile Tsege is no stranger to hunger.

During its war with Tigray fighters that devastated the region in 2020-2022, Ethiopian government restrictions on the rebellious region reduced aid flows to a trickle. Then in 2023, US and UN aid distributions of grain were halted for months over a corruption scandal.

Now the Trump administration's dismantling of the US Agency for International Development, or USAID, has again halted food deliveries to a sprawling camp of over 20,000 people outside Tigray's regional capital, Mekele.

"We will just die in silence," said Tsege, one of the 2.4 million people in Tigray who depend on humanitarian grain, most of it provided by the US.

Ethiopia with its over 125 million people had been the biggest beneficiary of US aid in sub-Saharan Africa, receiving \$1.8 billion in the 2023 financial year. In addition to life-saving food, the funds were spent on HIV medications, vaccines, literacy programs and jobs creation, as well as services for 1 million refugees hosted by Ethiopia.

Most of these programs have been stopped. The USAID staffers who oversaw them have been placed on administrative leave and told not to work, as they face the threat of termination. The US Embassy didn't respond to questions.

Emergency food was exempted from President Donald Trump's executive order, signed on his first day in office, suspending foreign aid during a 90-day review amid the administration's allegations of waste.

Aid agencies in Ethiopia had to apply to USAID for waivers to continue handing out US grain. These have been

secured, but USAID's payments system is still not functioning.

As a result, a consortium of aid agencies in Tigray has had to stop distributions to the over 1 million people it has been responsible for feeding with US-provided grain. It has no money to pay for fuel, trucks and drivers to distribute existing food stockpiles.

That includes 5,000 metric tons of sorghum — enough to feed 300,000 people for a — stuck in a storage facility in Mekele that could rot before it reaches those in need.

"This is just one warehouse. There are several others across the region," said Teklewoini Assefa, head of the Relief Society of Tigray, part of the consortium. "This will create malnutrition, disease. If this situation continues, what follows? Death."

He added: "Everything boils down to the payment system."

The effects of the aid cuts are widespread, with many USAID contracts terminated. Already, Ethiopia has been forced to lay off 5,000 local healthcare workers who were working on its HIV response.

Tigray relied heavily on US funds. More than two years after the war killed hundreds of thousands, full-scale recovery efforts are yet to start. The region's health system is in ruins and hundreds of schools remain closed.

In 2024, child malnutrition stood at 21% in some areas, according to a survey reviewed by The Associated Press — far above the World Health Organization's threshold of 15% at which a situation is classified as an emergency. Now, aid workers say many programs to improve nutrition have halted. Projects to deliver medicines and vaccines have stopped. Dozens of camps for displaced people have had water sources cut off. "The impact has been

Tigray relied heavily on US funds. More than two years after the war killed hundreds of thousands, full-scale recovery efforts are yet to start. The region's health system is in ruins and hundreds of schools remain closed

huge," said Ashenafi Asmelash, executive director of Mena for Mums, which has had two USAID-funded programs terminated. One helped build long-term resilience among farmers. The other helped improve the nutrition of children and new mothers.

Management Sciences for Health, another Tigray organization, has halted a project to combat tuberculosis and told its staff to expect mass layoffs in March, according to a senior executive, who spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisals. Efforts to assist thousands of women who were raped during the war have been derailed, said Rigat Bishaw at Ayder Hospital, Tigray's biggest healthcare facility.

This includes counselling and physiotherapy sessions for survivors run by the US-based Center for Victims of Torture, which received a stop-work order from the Trump administration in February and furloughed its staff.

CVT also halted a program to train health workers to recognize sexual abuse cases and refer survivors to appropriate health services.

"This sudden disruption is having a huge impact on the healing of traumatized people," said Yohannes Fisseha, a CVT manager.

**VERY SHORT TENDER NOTICE**  
IIM Ranchi invites tender from eligible bidders for 'Supply and Installation of Aluminum Composite Panel and 3D Acrylic Letters at IIM Ranchi'. The last date for submission of the sealed bid is up to 03.00 PM on 20.03.2025. For More details, please refer to our website: [www.iimranchi.ac.in](http://www.iimranchi.ac.in).

**THE PIONEER CLASSIFIEDS**  
CHANGE OF NAME  
I, Sangeeta, W/o Rinku Kumar Giri R/o Flat No 423, 4th Floor, Tower T8, Dream Homes, Wavecity, Ghaziabad have changed my name to Sangita Kumari for all Purposes.  
PD(1666)A  
I, Sanam Pudi Ramesh Babu S/o Sivasankaraiya, Permanent R/o 00, Sankaranagaram, Revuru, PO-Revuru, Sub District-Ananthasagaram, District-Nellore, AP-524303, Present R/o Qtr-129, Type-2, Sector-9, R K Puram, New Delhi-110022 have changed my name to Sanampudi Ramesh Babu.  
PD(1675)C

**कार्यालय नगर निगम, भोपाल**  
विद्युत शाखा  
आई.एस.बी.टी. मोविन्डपुत्रा  
निविदा आमंत्रण सूचना  
दिनांक 07/03/2025  
क्रमांक 124/वि.शा./2025  
निम्नलिखित कार्य हेतु दो लिफाफा पद्धति के अनुसार परसेन्डेज/आयटमरेंट मोहरबंद निविदायें निर्धारित प्रपत्र पर आनलाईन आमंत्रित की जाती हैं।  
दिनांक 07/03/2025  
निम्नलिखित कार्य हेतु दो लिफाफा पद्धति के अनुसार परसेन्डेज/आयटमरेंट मोहरबंद निविदायें निर्धारित प्रपत्र पर आनलाईन आमंत्रित की जाती हैं।  
क्र. आन लाइन टेंडर नं. कार्य स्थल का नाम अनुमानित राशि धरोहर राशि निविदा की कीमत टेकेदार की श्रेणी कार्य हेतु निर्धारित एस ओ आर कार्य की अवधि  
1. 2025\_UAD\_407899\_1 Supply, installation, testing and commissioning of LED Street light/LED flood light 45 watt, 60 watt, 90 watt, 120 watt and 250 watt in all Vidhan Sabha area in Bhopal 84591000/- 425000/- 20000/- Original manufacturer or their authorized dealer who registered Electrical contractor in centralized registration system in MPPWD having valid electrical license Non SOR item 1 मा 06 Months (including Rainy Season)  
निष्पत्ति व शर्तें :- निविदा प्रपत्र की निर्धारित राशि, धरोहर राशि एवं अन्य आवश्यक दस्तावेज आनलाईन प्रस्तुत करने होंगे। समस्त विस्तृत जानकारी [www.mptenders.gov.in](http://www.mptenders.gov.in) पर देखी जा सकती है। यदि किसी प्रकार का संशोधन होता है तो वह website पर प्रदर्शित होगा। वह पृथक से सामाचार पत्र में प्रकाशित नहीं किया जाएगा।  
कार्यालय नगरी (वि.) नगर निगम भोपाल  
नि.क्र. 1482/024/025

**Office of the Superintending Engineer**  
**1st Circle, Public Works Department, Almora**  
Phone/Fax: 05962-230295 Email: [sepwdalm@rediffmail.com](mailto:sepwdalm@rediffmail.com)  
Letter No. : 1036(i)/Nivida-01/2024-25 Dated : 11/03/2025  
**NATIONAL COMPETITIVE BIDDING (E-Tendering)**  
**E-TENDER NOTICE**  
The Superintending Engineer, 1st Circle, PWD Almora invites tender through E-Tendering (Two Bid System) on behalf of Honourable Governor of Uttarakhand for following works. All other information will be available from dated 18/03/2025 & onwards on website <http://www.uktenders.gov.in>  
SI. No. Name of Work Cost of Tender Form Earnest Money (Rupee in lakh) Validity of Tender Time of Completion Contractor's Category of Registration for tendering  
1 Construction of Bageshwar-Amsarkot Motor Road to Nadigaon Motor road in district and Constituency Bageshwar Under State Sector. Rs. 5000.00 + 18% GST ₹ 14.86 Lakh 120 Days 15 Month (Including Rainy Season and Winter Season) Class "A" & Higher in Road work in Central Govt./Any state Govt./Any Govt. Undertaking.

**PUBLIC NOTICE**  
This is to inform the Public at large that Sh. Kritivas Mukherjee S/o. Sh. Basudip Mukherjee and Smt. Teja Arun Baidya W/o. Kritivas Mukherjee both are the joint 'Title Holders' in possession of Entire Ground Floor of Freehold Built up Residential Property Bearing Plot No. I-1636, Chittaranjan Park, New Delhi-110019 measuring 251.00 sq. yards, hereinafter referred to as 'Schedule Property' vide Sale Deed dated 28th October, 2022 duly registered as Regn. No. 8814, Book No. 1, Vol. No. 16739, pp. 51-96 on 01.11.2022 in the Office of the Sub Registrar - V, Mehrauli, New Delhi. That original documents of the aforesaid plot owners, i.e. (1) Lease Deed dated 01.11.1987, (2) Letter for Conversion dated 24.12.1999, (3) Conveyance Deed dated 23.12.2019 (Registered) of Willingdon Properties Gupta dated 03.03.2000, (5) Death Certificate of Paresh Ranjan Gupta dated 14.04.2000, (6) Collaboration Agreement dated 17.04.2014, (7) Will (Registered) of Smt. Pratima Gupta dated 30.05.2014, (8) Relinquishment Deed dated 30.05.2014, (9) Sanction for Construction Letter dated 25.08.2014, (10) Mutation Letter dated 03.09.2021 and (11) Special Power of Attorney dated 07.09.2021 w.r.t. the Schedule Plot (Plot No. I-1636, Chittaranjan Park, New Delhi) have all been filed with the Public at large, i.e. any lease Deed on date, in lieu of which Information Report dated 13.03.2025 bearing LR No. 2666639/2025 has been filed with Delhi Police. This notice is thus issued to the Public at large, i.e. any lease Deed, Company(i.e.), Authority(i.e.), Society(i.e.), Organisation(s), Financial Institution(s), Bank(s), HUFs etc. having any knowledge, custody or possession of the above mentioned lease/ misplaced/untraceable original documents or otherwise having any claims, rights, title, interests, possession etc. in the Schedule Property, by way of SF Ownership, Succession, Inheritance, Sale, Mortgage, Exchange, Charge, Lien, Gift, Trust, Encumbrance etc., may come forward with supporting documents to be delivered to the undersigned within 15 days from the date of this Publication, post expiration of which, any claim(s) or objection(s), if raised or received, shall be treated as null and void and unavailing.  
Joni Kashyap, Advocate  
Address: Chamber No. 6, Block-E, Karkardooma Court New Delhi-110032. Contact No. +91 99119 25467

**PROVISION OF IOCL SIDING & ELECTRICAL WORKS**  
Tender Notice No. : Sr.DEE/LMG/40 of 2024-25, dtd. 10-03-2025. E-Tender are invited by the undersigned for the following work; SN-1; Tender No.: EL/LM/24-25/49; Name of Work : At Sekerkote-Provision of IOCL siding. Tender Value: ₹ 2,40,36,774.56/-; Earnest Money: ₹ 2,70,200/-; SN-2; Tender No.: EL/LM/24-25/48; Name of Work : (i) At Guwahati & Kamakhya: Electrical works of segregation of essential load and (ii) Provision of 30%/70% lighting of Railway station. Tender Value: ₹ 2,65,17,503/-; Earnest Money: ₹ 2,82,600/-; Date & time of closing of above tenders at 11:00 hrs. and opening at 11:30 hrs. on 02-04-2025. For complete information with the tender document of above e-tender will be available up to 11:00 hrs. on 02-04-2025 in website <http://www.ireps.gov.in>.  
Sr. DEE, Lumding  
NORTHEAST FRONTIER RAILWAY  
Serving Customers With A Smile

**GOVERNMENT OF HARYANA TENDER NOTICE**  
SR.No. NAME OF BOARD/CORP./AUTH. NAME OF WORK NOTICE TENDER. OPENING DATE CLOSING DATE (APPROX.) IN RUPEES. AMOUNT / EMD (APPROX.) IN RUPEES. WEBSITE OF THE BOARD CORP./AUTH. NODAL OFFICER/CONTACT DETAILS/EMAIL.  
1 GURU JAMBHESHWAR UNIVERSITY HISAR LASER CLASS 4 (HIGH POWER LASER) 15.03.2025 22.03.2025 6.10 LACS <http://www.gjust.ac.in> 01662-263169 physiotherapy@gjust.org  
FOR FURTHER INFORMATION KINDLY VISIT : [www.haryanaprocmgmt.gov.in](http://www.haryanaprocmgmt.gov.in) or [www.etenders.hry.nic.in](http://www.etenders.hry.nic.in) RO 32817-1-27-7

**verka**  
Har Din Da, Har Din Da  
THE PUNJAB STATE COOPERATIVE MILK PRODUCERS FEDERATION LTD.  
SCO 153-155, SECTOR 34-A, CHANDIGARH-160022. EPABX NO. 0172-5041812,66  
Notice Inviting Tender [www.verka.coop](http://www.verka.coop)  
e tenders are hereby invited for the purchase and supply of following items:-  
Sr.No. Name of Work/Item Period/Tentative Qty  
1. For Verka Bathinda Dairy Manpower required for job contract i.e. for processing, manufacturing, packing of milk & milk products & panjiri and loading & unloading of milk, milk products, edible, non edible & packing material. 01.05.2025 to 30.04.2026  
2. For Verka Gurdaspur Dairy a) Labour contract for different jobs in Prod. Engg., Mktg, Cleaning & Housekeeping of factory. Annual b) Providing of security manpower as per required Verka Gurdaspur Dairy. Annual  
3. For Verka Hoshiarpur Dairy a) Hiring of vehicles for i. Road milk tanker for lifting of raw milk from various BMC/MCC to Verka Hoshiarpur Dairy. 04 No's (Cap.09 to 15 MT) ii. Lifting of milk from various MPCs to concerned MCC/ Verka Hoshiarpur Dairy, (Mahindra Bolero, Pick-up/Max-pick-up, Tata 407/ Tata 207). 20 No's (Cap.1.5 to 2 MT & above) b) Construction of hall for CIP system and allied civil works at verka Hoshiarpur dairy on labour rate. One job c) Construction/ fabrication of new milk & milk product cold store as per technical specification laid down in tender document at Verka Hoshiarpur Dairy. One job d) Sale of unserviceable machineries & scrap items lying at Verka Hoshiarpur Dairy. One job e) Allotment of Milk Booths for :- i. Padrana Milk Bar ii. Balachaur Milk Bar iii. Civil Hospital, Garshankar iv. Civil Hospital, Dasuya v. Municipal Corporation Office, Hoshiarpur vi. Khara Kotli Park, Dasuya Three Years  
4. For Verka Jalandhar Dairy Disposal of unserviceable scrap material one time basis and annual rate contract. As per site  
5. For Verka Ludhiana Dairy Pest control service at verka ludhiana dairy and MCCs which include control of flies, mosquitoes, lizards, rodent etc. Annual/ One job  
6. For Cattle Feed Plant, Bhatlani (Khanna) Annual for Ktn Qty in MTs Annual for GKB/Qty in MTs  
i. Niacin 2.0 0.120  
ii. Red alae based buffer with prove buffering action in cattle feed. 350 90  
iii. Beta carotene 1.0 0.450  
iv. Calcium propionate 2.5 1.1  
v. Sodium borate 3.0 5.5  
vi. Zeolite 15 27  
vii. Biotin 1.0 0.400  
viii. Cobalt sulphate 2.0 0.330  
ix. By-pass fat 150 100  
7. For Cattle Feed Plant Ghaina-ke-Banger Wall/shop painting in the state of Punjab, Himachal Pradesh and Jammu area. 2,00,000 sqft  
NOTE:  
1. For complete details regarding above tender (NIT), please visit our website i.e. [www.verka.coop](http://www.verka.coop) & e-proc.punjab.gov.in.  
2. Corrigendum, if any, will be uploaded on website only.  
NA/12/28675/2023/42542 Dated CHD :- 3/13/2025 Dy. General Manager (Purchase)

# India launches first exploration licence auction for minerals

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Panaji

Union Coal and Mines Minister G Kishan Reddy on Thursday launched the nation's first-ever auction of Exploration Licences (ELs) for 13 exploration blocks for critical minerals.

Reddy launched the ELs in the presence of Goa Chief Minister Pramod Sawant in Dona Paula near here, a major reform aimed to unlock India's untapped critical and deep-seated mineral resources.

The licenses are for the exploration blocks for minerals like REE (rare earth elements), zinc, diamond, copper, PGE (platinum group minerals) and others.

The programme also featured a roadshow on the 5th Tranche of Critical Mineral Blocks and the launch of AI Hackathon 2025, a Mineral Exploration Hackathon focused on "Mineral Targeting

using AI" (Artificial Intelligence).

Addressing the gathering, Union minister Reddy said that in the last 10 years, India's mining sector has achieved many milestones and emerged as one of the fastest and most dynamic sectors of the country.

Today marks another milestone in the industry, he said. "We are laying the foundation for new era in mineral exploration," he said adding that the era is faster, more technologically-driven and globally competitive.

"We have established ourselves as a serious player in the global mineral landscape, it has also opened flood gates of opportunities for the private sector," he said.

Reddy said even greater milestones will be achieved in the coming years and it will pave the way for the rise of India as a global leader.

"Today we are launching 13 blocks for

various critical and deep-seated minerals," the minister said.

The exploration possibilities have been contemplated from multiple states like Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan and Karnataka, he said.

The exploration access would be granted exclusively, which would empower private companies to explore up to 1,000 square metres per licence, Reddy said.

This new framework will encourage transparency, efficiency, innovation, ensuring that only the most promising areas remain for a detailed exploration, he said.

"In the first 10 years (of Narendra Modi government), we increased the exploration activities manifold. The biggest reform is the introduction of a transparent auction regime and the involvement of private sector," Reddy said.

The minister said India's legal frame-

work for mining exploration was limited until now.

"There was a crucial gap. There was no structural mechanism for the private companies. Recognising this, the Government of India introduced amendment to the MMDR Act in 2023. This is a reform that will open doors for a systematic exploration of minerals," he said.

Addressing the gathering, CM Sawant thanked the Union Mines Ministry for choosing Goa for the roadshow and the launch of the ELs. Sawant said mining has always been integral part of the economy, contributing significantly for employment, industrial growth and development.

"As we stand at the cusp of a new era of mineral exploration, this initiative reflects the government's firm commitment in self-reliance in critical minerals," he said.

"These minerals are an integral part of

our electronic industry, green industry and others," Sawant said, adding that a lot of countries are yet to explore for the mineral availabilities.

The chief minister said there is a need to increase the pace of exploration in the country. The amendment in the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) (MMDR) Act is a bold step which will help to tap the untapped mineral wealth of the country, he said.

Goa will immensely benefit from such an initiative, the CM said.

As India moves for a green energy future, securing the supplies of critical minerals will play a key role, he said.

Referring to the Hackathon 2025, Sawant said that Goa, with its mining legacy, stands to benefit from such technology advancement.

Mines Secretary V L Kantha Rao said this is a big event for the Union Ministry

of Mines. "Today there are 4 to 5 important initiatives that are showcased here, including critical mineral auction. Some of the critical minerals which are 100 per cent imported currently are part of the auction," he said.

These blocks, once they are auctioned and mined, will ensure self-reliance for minerals in India, the official said. "This is a very important event in our journey towards Atmanirbharta," he added.

Kantha Rao said the way in foreign countries people go and do exploration on their own, the same concept is introduced here.

"A private company will do the exploration and if they find the deep-seated or critical mineral, then they will get an income for 50 years," he said.

"If nothing found in the exploration, 50 per cent of the risk is borne by the Government of India," he added.

# Rupee surges 22 paise to settle at 87 against USD

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Mumbai

The Rupee surged 27 paise to settle at 87 (provisional) against the USD on Thursday following robust macro-economic data and easing crude oil prices.

Besides, recent weakness in the US dollar index also supported the local currency, forex dealers said.

However, losses in domestic equities and unabated foreign capital outflows capped the sharp gain, they added.

At the interbank foreign exchange, the Rupee opened at 87.13 and hit the intraday high of 86.94 against the greenback. The unit touched the day's low of 87.15 before ending the session at 87 (provisional), 22 paise higher from its previous closing level.

In the previous session on Wednesday, the rupee settled 1 paise lower at 87.22 against the US dollar.

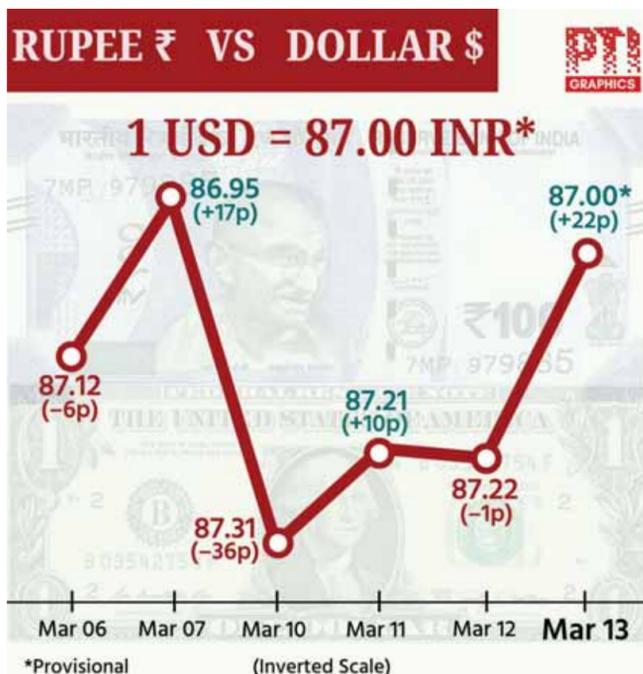
Anuj Choudhary, Research Analyst at Mirae Asset Sharekhan, said the Rupee recovered on upbeat macroeconomic data and a soft US dollar.

However, weak domestic markets capped sharp gains.

Choudhary further said that weak domestic markets, the ongoing trade tariff issue and Foreign Institutional Investment outflows may cap a sharp upside.

"Traders may take cues from PPI and weekly jobless claims data from the US. USD-INR spot price is expected to trade in a range of ₹86.80 to ₹87.25."

Meanwhile, the dollar index, which



gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading higher by 0.12 per cent at 103.70.

Brent crude, the global oil benchmark, traded 0.37 per cent lower at \$70.69 per barrel in futures trade.

# SEBI expands unpublished price sensitive information's scope

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

Markets regulator SEBI has widened the ambit of the scope of Unpublished Price Sensitive Information (UPSI) by including any proposed fundraising activities agreements which can impact the management or control of the company, restructuring plans, and one-time bank settlements.

The move is aimed at enhancing regulatory clarity, certainty and uniformity in compliance in the ecosystem.

To give this effect, SEBI, in a notification issued on March 11, amended insider trading regulations. The new rules would come into force from June 10.

In its notification, SEBI said that any proposed fundraising activity, upward or downward revisions in credit ratings, other than ESG ratings, and agreements affecting the management or control of the company would be considered as UPSI.

Further, developments relating to corporate insolvency processes, including the clearance of resolution plans, one-time settlements, or restructuring of loans and borrowings from banks or financial institutions would fall under the UPSI ambit.

SEBI said that fraud or defaults by the company, its promoter, director, key managerial personnel, or subsidiary or arrest of key managerial personnel, promoter or director of the company,

whether occurred within India or abroad would be classified as UPSI.

Any initiation of forensic audits or receipt of final forensic audit report; with regards to financial mis-statements, misappropriation, siphoning, or diversion of funds by the company would come under the scope of UPSI.

Any action initiated or orders passed within India or abroad, by regulatory, statutory, enforcement authority or judicial body against the company or its directors, key managerial personnel, promoter or subsidiaries would be categorised as UPSI.

In addition, flexibility has been provided to make entries in the structured digital database on a deferred basis, within two days, as well as to not have mandatory trading window closure.

"Entry of information, not emanating from within the organisation, in structured digital database may be done not later than 2 calendar days from the receipt of such information.

For unpublished price sensitive information not emanating from within the listed company, the trading window may not be closed," SEBI said.

With this amendment now events that are deemed to be UPSI have increased from the earlier five events to 16 events, Makarand M Joshi, Founder partner MMJC and Associates, a corporate compliance firm, said. This will lead to a decrease in litigations on whether a particular event is UPSI or not.

# Sensex falls by 200 points on sell-off in realty

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Mumbai

Benchmark BSE Sensex reversed its early gains to close lower by 200 points on Thursday, marking its fifth straight session of losses due to selling in realty, IT and auto counters.

The 30-share BSE Sensex declined by 200.85 points or 0.27 per cent to close at 73,828.91 with 22 of its constituents ending lower and eight with gains. The index opened higher and hit a high of 74,401.11 in the late morning session.

The index failed to hold onto gains due to persistent selling in select bluechips and shed 259.17 points or 0.35 per cent to hit a low of 73,770.59 later.

The NSE Nifty fell 73.30 points or 0.33 per cent to settle at 22,397.20. In the session, the benchmark declined by 93.15 points or 0.41 per cent to hit an intraday low of 22,377.35.

From the 30 Sensex companies, Zomato, Tata Motors, IndusInd Bank, Asian Paints, Bajaj Finance, Maruti Suzuki India, Adani Ports, Hindustan Unilever, Reliance Industries, Bajaj Finserv, UltraTech Cement and Infosys were among the laggards.

In contrast, State Bank of India, ICICI Bank, Tata Steel, NTPC, Tata Consultancy Services, PowerGrid, Kotak Mahindra Bank and Sun Pharmaceuticals were the gainers. "Shortened trading week and sell-off in the US short market are providing a hiccup to the global market. However, India is withstanding with resilience and healthy outperformance, by a narrow negative trend," Vinod Nair, Head of Research, Geojit Financial Services said.

Ajit Mishra, SVP, Research, Religare Broking Ltd, said, "On the weekly expiry day, markets remained range-bound and closed slightly lower. While positive global cues initially drove an uptick, selling pressure in heavyweight stocks across sectors pulled the Nifty into the red."

In Asian markets, Tokyo, Shanghai, Hong Kong and Seoul settled lower. European markets were trading higher in the mid-session deals. US markets closed on a positive note on Wednesday.

Meanwhile, global oil benchmark Brent Crude traded 0.34 per cent lower at USD 70.71 a barrel.

Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) sold equities worth ₹1,627.61 Crore, while Domestic Institutional Investors (DIIs) purchased equities worth ₹1,510.35 Crore on Wednesday, according to exchange data.

# South Africa to host first G20 trade and investment meeting

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Johannesburg

South Africa will host the first G20 Trade and Investment Working Group (TIWG) meeting under its presidency from March 18 to March 20, the Department of Trade, Industry and Competition (DTIC) announced here on Wednesday. South Africa officially assumed the presidency of the G20 in December 2024 for the year 2025 under the theme "Solidarity, Equality, Sustainability".

The TIWG meeting, which will be held virtually, will bring together senior officials from G20 member countries as well as the European Union (EU) and the African Union (AU).

The deputy director-general of trade at the DTIC, Ambassador Xolelwa Mlumbi-Peter, said this would be the first of the four proposed meetings of the TIWG, which will culminate in the G20 trade ministers' meeting to be hosted by South Africa in October.

Mlumbi-Peter said the first session will also be attended by international organisations, such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the United Nations Trade and Development (UNTAD), the Organisation for Economic Cooperation

and Development (OECD) and African regional communities. "We have identified four focus areas for the TIWG. The first is trade and inclusive growth, with an outcome being principles to promote trade and inclusive growth that aim to address common or shared challenges resulting from distributive effects of trade with adverse outcomes for economically-vulnerable regions, both within and between countries," she said.

"The second focus area will be looking at the responsive trade and investment agenda to address the challenge of global commons," Mlumbi-Peters added. She said other critical areas of focus are the G20 framework on green industrialisation and investments, with a view to promoting value addition of critical minerals close to the source as well as the development of low-carbon manufacturing value chains to support global decarbonisation and industrial adaptation. Inclusive economic growth, industrialisation, employment and reduced inequality are some of the high-level deliverables for South Africa during its year-long presidency of the bloc.

The G20 members include the world's major economies, representing 85 per cent of global GDP.

# Temasek acquires stake in Haldiram's

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

Temasek, Singapore's sovereign investment firm, is acquiring a minority 10 per cent stake in Haldiram Snacks Food - India's largest packed snack and sweets company and restaurant operator - at a valuation of USD 10 billion, according to industry sources.

It has signed a definitive term sheet agreement earlier this week at a valuation of USD 10 billion (around ₹85,000 Crore), which is considered to be the largest for the Indian packed food industry, they said.

The Agarwal family, promoters of Haldiram Snacks Food, may rope another investor for selling some more stake in the company which had a revenue of over ₹12,500 Crore in FY24.

The agreement with Temasek came after months of negotiations as several PE firms, including Blackstone, Alpha Wave Global and Bain Capital-led consortiums, were in the race to pick up a stake in Haldiram Snacks Food.

The Agarwal family may also opt for IPO (Initial public offering) route next year to capitalise on India's buoyant stock market.

Earlier, the promoters were intending



Temasek, Singapore's sovereign investment firm, is acquiring a minority 10 per cent stake in Haldiram Snacks Food: PTI

to divest a larger portion. However, they have decided to offload a minority stake only.

The National Company Law Tribunal has already approved the process of merger of the two fractions, while other regulatory approvals are awaited. Established in 1937 as a retail sweets and namkeen shop in Bikaner, Rajasthan by

Ganga Bhishen Agarwal, Haldiram products are now sold in over 80 countries.

In 2022, it was announced that the packaged snacks businesses of Delhi-based Haldiram Snacks and Nagpur-based Haldiram Foods International would be first demerged and then merged into an entity named Haldiram Snacks Food.

# GenAI to drive productivity in Indian banking

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ New Delhi/Mumbai

Generative AI (GenAI) is reshaping India's financial services landscape, driving significant advancements in customer engagement, operational efficiency, and risk assessment.

The EY report titled "How much productivity can Generative AI unlock in India?"

The Aldea of India: 2025", highlights that Generative AI is poised to improve productivity levels of Indian financial services by 34 percent to 38 percent by 2030 and up to 46 percent, specifically for banking operations.

The EY study reveals that 74 percent of financial firms have initiated proof-of-concept projects, and 11 percent have moved to production-level deployments. Investment in Generative Artificial Intelligence is also increasing, with 42 percent of organizations actively allocating budgets toward Artificial Intelligence initiatives.

They are rapidly adopting Generative AI across key areas such as voice bots, email automation, business intelligence, and workflow automation.

Customer service is the top priority,

with 68 percent of firms prioritizing it for Generative AI implementation, followed by operations (47 percent), underwriting (32 percent), sales (26 percent), and IT (21 percent).

These investments are already delivering measurable results: 63% have seen improved customer satisfaction levels, while 58 percent of firms report cost reductions.

Reflecting on the report findings, Pratik Shah, Partner and National Leader - Financial Services, EY India said, "The financial services industry has moved beyond innovation pilots to real-world implementation in 2024-25.

Firms are integrating Generative AI with core banking systems, including CRM, loan origination, card management platforms, among other areas.

These efforts have led to a significant reduction in operational costs, with Artificial Intelligence-driven solutions slashing the cost per unit of normal business activities to as low as 1/10th of traditional manual processes."

"As firms move from pilots to large-scale implementations, the focus must shift from isolated use cases to enterprise-wide integration.

The key to unlocking Generative AI's

full potential lies in building robust AI governance, ensuring data security, and aligning technology with core business objectives.

While NBFCs and mid-sized banks have demonstrated early success, large banks are now accelerating adoption.

The coming years will define how effectively financial institutions can balance innovation with regulatory compliance to drive sustainable growth, operational excellence, and superior customer experiences," he added.

The EY study, which analysed over 700 roles in the sector (more than 300 in banking and 400 in insurance) projects that Generative Artificial Intelligence will drive a 34 percent to 38 percent productivity improvement by 2030, paving the way for growth and operational transformation in the industry.

It is poised to significantly impact banking operations, customer service, and credit and collections.

As per EY's industry labor efficiency analysis, Artificial Intelligence-driven efficiencies are projected to contribute an additional 9 percent to labour productivity in financial services by 2030, raising overall productivity levels in the sector to 34per cent-38 per cent.

## IN BRIEF

### REC SIGNS ₹18,360 CRORE MOU WITH GOVERNMENT OF KERALA FOR PUMP STORAGE PROJECTS

GURUGRAM: REC Limited, a Maharatna CPSE under the Ministry of Power and a leading NBFC, has signed an MOU with the Energy Management Centre (EMC), Government of Kerala, for collaboration and financing of Pumped Storage Projects (PSP) in Kerala. The MOU was signed during the Global Green Hydrogen & Renewable Energy Summit 2025.



### SRMIST RISES IN QS UNIVERSITY WORLD RANKINGS BY SUBJECT (2025)

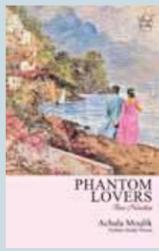
Chennai: SRM Institute of Science and Technology (SRMIST) proudly announces its significant rise in the prestigious QS University World Rankings by Subject, further solidifying its position as a global leader in higher education.

### QS WORLD UNIVERSITY RANKINGS BY SUBJECT 2025

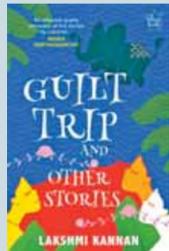
Vellore Institute of Technology (VIT) has been named as one of the World's top Universities for study of 14 subjects in the latest edition of the QS World University Rankings by Subject 2025. For the first time, Data Science & Analytics, Artificial Intelligence (AI) has been ranked under the top 100 subject in the World.

Subject	World Rank	India Rank
Engineering & Technology	113	9
Computer Science & Information Systems	142	4-7
Data Science and Artificial Intelligence	11-150	5-9
Engineering - Electrical & Electronic	151-200	2-13

**MARCH READS**



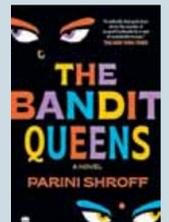
Book: Phantom Lovers  
Author: Achala Moulik  
Publisher: Niyogi books  
Price: ₹595



Book: Guilt Trip and Other  
Author: Lakshmi Kannan  
Publisher: Niyogi books  
Price: ₹395



Book: Quarterlife :  
A Novel  
Author: Devika Rege  
Publisher: HarperCollins  
Price: ₹599



Book: The Bandit Queens:  
A Novel  
Author: Parini Shroff  
Publisher: Harper Collins  
Price: ₹499

'Ratan Tata: A Life by Thomas Mathew,' offers a compelling tribute to India's legendary industrialist and philanthropist, says **KUMAR CHELLAPPAN**

## The Architect of India's Aspirations

The demise of an 87-year-old human being is neither shocking nor does it bring everlasting grief to the mind. If the deceased happens to be our father, mother, brother, or sister, we may be in a sense of bereavement for a couple of months. The general feeling among us is that each day that one gets after crossing the age of 60 is a bonus from Yama Raj. But there are certain persons for whom we pray to God Almighty to bless them with a much longer life. Ratan Tata, India's legendary industrialist topped the list of such people who made this world a much better place because of their presence.

The entire Indian society, barring a Malayalam satellite news channel, received the news of Ratan Tata's demise with a pang in their hearts. Born into a Zoroastrian family (popularly known as Parsees), Ratan Tata lived a life based exclusively on the essence of Zoroastrianism-Humata, Hukta, and Huvarsta (good thoughts, good words, and good deeds). For Ratan and the Tata Group, industry and business were means to serve humanity, either through philanthropy or social service. The catchphrase "We Also Make Steel" campaign launched by TISCO, the flagship company of the group, speaks volumes about the mission of this industrial conglomerate.

No doubt, the central government had honoured J.R.D. Tata and Ratan Tata with Bharat Ratna and Padma Vibhushan, respectively. But it is still doubtful whether the powers that be gave these great sons of India the honour they truly deserved. J.R.D. Tata, predecessor to Ratan

Tata, did all he could to elevate the country economically and socially, despite the outdated socialist ideology that prevailed from 1947 to 1991. He had been pleading with the policymakers to loosen the government's shackles over the economy, which would have made India competitive in the global arena.

It is said that for every industry launched by them, the Tata Group set up institutions like schools, colleges, vocational training institutes, hospitals, and old-age homes.

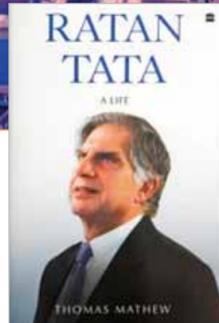
During the 1980s, I do remember watching J.R.D. Tata interviewing the then World Population Council chairman who visited India. It is rated as one of the best interviews in Indian television. Imagine the numero uno of our industry, who is held in awe by the world, appearing on Indian TV to interview a guest!

The second TV programme featuring J.R.D. Tata was also broadcast by Doordarshan-it was an interview by Rajiv Mehrotra in the famous series "In Conversation," a popular talk show. Interestingly, those were

the days when there were no satellite TV news channels and "angry young anchorpersons" who interrogated the interviewees instead of interviewing them.

There are exceptions, like "Rendezvous with Simi Garewal," in which the diva of Hindi cinema interviewed the crème de la crème of Indian society. They were all talk shows shot inside aesthetically designed studios and, hence, the series could not always capture the real person being interviewed. But with all due respect, it has to be said that Simi Garewal did a wonderful job. She successfully brought to our drawing rooms personalities like Ratan Tata (the first time I saw Ratan Tata appear on a TV show).

**Ratan Tata: A Life** authored by **Thomas Mathew**, a former IAS officer. I do not know whether there are any other books on Ratan Tata. The 666-page book is a moving tribute to Ratan, who was once described as the Most Eligible Bachelor of India. Ratan reached the zenith of Indian industries not just because he was born with the surname



**ABOUT THE BOOK**

Book: Ratan Tata: A Life  
Author: Thomas Mathew  
Publisher: HarperCollins  
Price: ₹1499/-



Ratan Tata receiving the Padma Vibhushan from the then President Pratibha Patil at the Civil Investiture-II Ceremony



Young Ratan Tata shares a heartfelt moment with his beloved dog, showcasing his lifelong bond with animals

## CAG ex-DG diagnosis malaise with Top Auditor

BY DEEPAK KUMAR JHA

Auditors most often cite the statement of B. R. Ambedkar that the **Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG)** of India is the most important official. Over the decades, the CAG emerged as India's highly respected institution. The people also look upon the CAG to keep a check on the executive by preparing no-holds-barred reports. **P. Sesh Kumar** spent decades in the office of the CAG. Hailing from the Indian Audit and Accounts Service (IAAS), **Kumar** gained a ringside view of the functioning of the CAG. He, thus, has expectations on him to reveal if the CAG is facing new challenges.

The CAG made a comeback to the popular discourse over tabling of reports in the Delhi Assembly. Else, the CAG had almost faded from the popular discourse in the recent years. **Kumar** examines sharp reduction in number of reports of the CAG since 2011. He notes that the CAG reports peaked in 2015 when a total of 52 reports were submitted on Union government. Afterwards, reports turned to trickle, coming down to just 15 in 2018. **Kumar** after retirement has come out with an inside account of the functioning of the CAG. His book 'CAG Ensuring Accountability Amidst Controversies: An Inside View' deals with several turning points in the journey of the top auditor of India. The book also dwells upon the tenure of Vinod Rai and takes a critical view of the famous "presumptive losses to the exchequer" shown in the reports during the last few years of the Manmohan Singh-led UPA government. **Kumar** indeed also cites the gains made by the government with the course corrections in policy making after the CAG reports were made public.

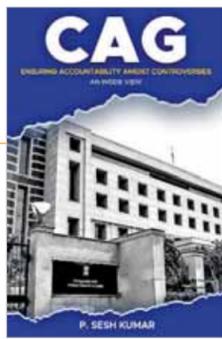
In 17 chapters, **Kumar's** book gives an exhaustive account of the history, current controversies, challenges, and also a reform roadmap. The book critically examines the tenures of Rajiv Mehrishi and GC Murmu as CAG. The author also brings out concerns in the IAAS cadre over the manner in which some of the CAG reports were handled. He details unhappiness in the cadre of auditors over the manner in which the report on the collections of tolls on national highways were handled by the CAG. **Kumar** stresses that the CAG report on the collections of tolls on national highways listed timely reform roadmap also for policy actions by the government.

But the people are genuinely concerned over the CAG not going public with its reports. **Kumar** answers the people's curiosity by examining in details the Supreme Court judgment that termed the CAG reports as "mere views" until they are tabled by Public Accounts Committee (PAC) of parliament or Assemblies. This explains why the CAG is not going public with reports after submitting them to parliament or Assemblies.

Taking a ringside view, the book argues that the CAG is not mandated to be a property of the PAC that its reports can wait endlessly to go public. The CAG is accountable to the people, and, therefore, the top auditor should move to the Supreme Court to review the judgment. **Kumar** details that almost half the reports of the CAG are awaiting action on the parts of the PAC of parliament and Assemblies for the people to know about them. If the CAG reports are not made public, the Constitution's arrangements of checks and balances for the healthy functioning of democracy too gets affected, suggests the book. It argues that the people need to know about the CAG reports to make informed decisions.

Besides, **Kumar** also raises a pertinent question on the appointment of the CAG. A single member CAG may be susceptible to personal biases, he argues, while suggesting that a multi-member top auditor body should be constituted. **Kumar** calls for Constitutional changes so that an appointment committee on the lines of the Election Commission and the Director of the CBI can also decide the members of the CAG. **Kumar** revisits some of the major controversies over the CAG reports. The CAG report on Bofors Scam in 1989 sets the backdrop for the political slugfest in the PAC in not recommending actions on the report to parliament. The book also exhaustively dwells upon the CAG reports on 2G spectrum allocations, Coal blocks, Rafale deal, and many others.

**Kumar's** book, published by White Falcon Publishing, is a complete account of the functioning of the CAG, while also seeking space as a historical document. Until 1978, CAG was appointed from among IAS and IAAS, writes **Kumar** in the book, while making a case for reopening the post for non-IAS officials also. The book makes for an interesting read while also being an important document on the functioning of the CAG.



**ABOUT THE BOOK**

Book: CAG  
Author: P. SESH KUMAR  
Publisher: White Falcon Publishing  
Price: ₹799/-

HOW SOCIAL MEDIA SHAPES CONVERSATIONS

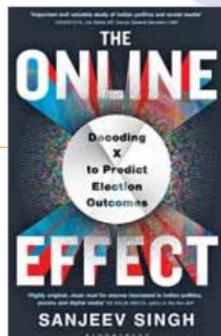
## The New Ballot Box?

BY SHALEEN KUMAR SINGH

In **The Online Effect**, **Sanjeev Singh**, a seasoned journalist and academic, delves into the intricate relationship between social media and political communication in India, offering a compelling narrative that is both scholarly and accessible. With a sharp analytical focus on X (Formerly Twitter) influence on electoral outcomes, Singh presents the fascinating story of the Singh-Srivastava Vote Predictor (SSVP) model, a groundbreaking tool he co-developed with data scientist Rishabh Srivastava. The preface sets the stage with a personal anecdote, recounting **Singh's** early encounters with X and its transformative potential. The book meticulously examines how X evolved from a microblogging site into a critical tool for political communication.

A significant portion of the book is dedicated to the development of the SSVP model, a pioneering effort to correlate X engagement metrics—such as tweets, retweets, likes, and interactions—with electoral outcomes. **Sanjeev Singh** provides a detailed account of the challenges involved, from navigating the complexities of data collection via X APIs to employing advanced statistical analyses and rigorous testing to validate the model.

The study's findings are striking—in six out of seven states analysed, there was a strong correlation between X engagement and vote share. He emphasises the shrinking digital divide between rural and urban India, highlighting the model's relevance across diverse demographics. He also critiques traditional sentiment analysis methods, advocating for a



**ABOUT THE BOOK**

Book: The Online Effect  
Author: Sanjeev Singh  
Publisher: Bloomsbury India (2024)  
Price: ₹479/-

more nuanced approach to studying political communication in the digital age.

Despite the technical nature of the subject, **Sanjeev Singh's** engaging and conversational tone makes complex concepts accessible to both academics and general readers. The book is enriched with empirical data, case studies, and real-world examples, offering a comprehensive exploration of X impact on Indian politics. By weaving together insights from journalism, political science, and data analytics, he provides a holistic understanding of the digital transformation in electoral campaigns. As India approaches

its next general election, the book serves as a practical guide for psephologists, political strategists, and voters alike, offering tools to navigate the evolving landscape of digital political communication. The book also prompts deeper reflection on the ethical implications of using social media data for electoral predictions. While author briefly touches on the limitations of sentiment analysis, he does not fully address pressing concerns about data privacy, misinformation, and algorithmic biases.

**The Online Effect** is a thought-provoking and timely exploration of how X has transformed Indian politics. By demystifying the SSVP model, the author offers valuable insights into the intersection of technology, communication, and democracy. The book is an essential read for scholars, journalists, and anyone interested in the digital future of electoral politics.

Shaleen Kumar Singh teaches English at Swami Shukdevanand College, Shahjahanpur, India, edits creativesaplings.in an online journal.

# I am comfortable in top order, feels natural to me: KL Rahul

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

KL Rahul has been performing consistently irrespective of his position in the batting order but given a choice, the stylish keeper-batter would be "most comfortable" occupying one of the top-order slots.

Rahul, who usually bat No 5, was pushed down a position lower in the Champions Trophy, and made 174 runs in five innings in Dubai. Rahul's success was a reflection of his preparedness for this new challenge and dedication to keep working on his game.

"I have grown up playing in the top order. From my first competitive match in Mangalore at the age of 11 to my early days playing for India, and for most of my career, I have been a top-order batter. It is the position I am most comfortable in and the one that feels most natural to me," Rahul said.

"That said, when you play a team sport, you don't always get to choose what you want. You have to be flexible and willing to adapt to the team's needs. Over the years, I've learned to embrace that and give

my best in whichever role I'm assigned," he added during an interaction with JioHotstar.

Rahul, who has led Punjab Kings and Lucknow Super Giants in the past, has reportedly turned down an opportunity to captain his new franchise Delhi Capitals in the upcoming IPL.

Speaking about the IPL auction, he said it can significantly impact a player's future in the game.

"Having been a captain for the last three seasons, I have been actively involved in the process of building a team. I understand the kind of pressure franchises face when assembling a squad.

"But from a player's perspective, it's even tougher because your career is at stake. The auction can shape a player's future or present unexpected challenges.

"I was definitely nervous, even a little anxious (during the last auction). But at the same time, I knew this was the right step for my career. There was excitement too, though it didn't last very long because reality sets in quickly."

If not Rahul then spin-bowling all-rounder Axar Patel is the favourite to lead



DC this season. After a forgettable season at LSG last year, Rahul is looking for a fresh start at the Capitals.

"I'm really happy to be joining Delhi Capitals. Parth Jindal, the team's owner, is a close friend, and we have spent a lot of time outside of cricket discussing various things.

"I know how passionate he is about the sport, and I'm thrilled to be a part of this team. We have a strong squad, and I'm looking forward to the season ahead. This will be a new experience for me joining a new franchise, possibly my fourth or fifth team in the IPL. I feel both excited and a little nervous.

"Every time you step into a new team environment, a lot of thoughts cross your mind - how the players will be, how the owners run the team, how the fans will respond all of that. So, it's a mix of emotions," he added.

DC have never won the IPL, but Rahul is optimistic of putting up a good show with a "solid team."

"Looking at the squad and how the management has built the team, it looks like a well-balanced side with most areas covered. There's a great combination of experienced players and young talent, and I'm excited to play alongside some incredibly skilled youngsters and learn from them as well.

"With players like Mitchell Starc, Axar Patel, Kuldeep Yadav, many of whom I have played with before, we have a solid squad. I can't wait for the IPL to begin."

Rahul, who has maintained an impressive average in recent times, remained out on a fluent 34 in the final of the Champions Trophy against New Zealand on Sunday, also reflected on his journey in international cricket.

"The journey has been filled with challenges there have been highs and lows, and I have experienced everything an athlete possibly can. But looking back, it has been a beautiful ride, and I wouldn't want it any other way.

"Now, I am excited for the next 10 years of my career. I want to build on everything I have learned in my first decade, apply that experience, and continue evolving. My focus is on improving every day, growing as a player, and winning more matches for my team," he added.

# Sport ministry updates draft NCAAFS, invites suggestions from general public

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

Uniform penalties, amnesty scheme, and a whistle-blower mechanism are some of the key features of the Draft National Code Against Age Fraud in Sports (NCAAFS) which was released for public consultation by the Sports Ministry on Thursday. The Draft NCAAFS 2025, which is a significant update to the existing framework, invites suggestions and comments from the general public till March 31.

"The Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports has put in the public domain the Draft National Code Against Age Fraud in Sports (NCAAFS) 2025 for inviting comments/suggestions from the general public and stakeholders, as part of the consultation process," the ministry said in a statement. This addresses age fraud comprehensively, aiming to protect genuine athletes and uphold the integrity of sports competitions nationwide.

"This revision has been undertaken almost after 15 years marking a significant update to the existing framework to ensure fair competition, ethical governance, and enhanced accountability in Indian sports." The Draft Bill has 10 salient features, including Mandatory Age Verification & Digital Locking, Medical

Examination for Age Discrepancies, Two-Tier Appellate Mechanism, Dedicated National Database and QR-Enabled ID Cards.

According to Draft NCAAFS, "Athletes found guilty on the first violation will face a two-year ban from all competitions, along with forfeiture of any titles or medals won. A second violation will result in a lifetime ban and initiation of legal proceedings under the penal code. Coaches and other officials found guilty will also face suspension and debarment from their roles," the statement said. As part of the amnesty scheme, a one-time amnesty window of six months will be provided, "allowing athletes to voluntarily declare their correct age without penalties."

"Athletes who participate in this amnesty program will undergo a performance review and subsequently be reassigned to the appropriate age group," the ministry said. There will also be a Whistle-blower Mechanism where "a secure and confidential platform will be created for stakeholders to report cases of age fraud anonymously. Additionally, a reward system will be implemented to encourage and incentivise whistle-blowers to come forward with genuine reports."

There will also be a Two-tier Appellate Mechanism to "handle disputes related to

age determination" and a "centralised digital portal linked with the National Sports Repository System (NSRS) will be established to securely store all age verification data of athletes."

The draft also says "athletes will receive ID cards embedded with QR codes" after verification. "These ID cards will be made accessible digitally through the DigiLocker platform and must be presented mandatorily for participation in all sporting events," the statement said.

"A robust monitoring framework will be established to ensure effective implementation of the Code." As per the draft Bill, "all athletes must submit three mandatory documents during the registration process. Upon verification, the athlete's age will be securely recorded in a centralised digital database, permanently locking their verified age to prevent any future manipulations." Also for cases involving age discrepancies, "medical examinations will utilise the TW3 method, MRI scans, and general physical and dental examination."

"Further, AI-based bone assessments to accurately determine an athlete's age will be done in pilot phase. Any disputes arising from these examinations may be appealed through designated appellate medical panel for further review."

# DC ready for WPL final, says Rodrigues

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

Delhi Capitals vice-captain Jemimah Rodrigues emphasised that the long gap between the last league match and the Women's Premier League final has revitalised the team, and said it will work to her side's "advantage" in the title clash.

The Capitals have qualified for their third straight WPL final after Mumbai Indians were defeated by Royal Challengers Bengaluru in the last league match at Mumbai on March 11.

The Capitals had finished their league engagements on March 7 with a defeat against Gujarat Giants. Hence, they had to wait until the match between RCB and MI to decide the group leaders.

"It's (the gap) actually working for our team. We've had a lot of team bonding sessions and at the same time, this WPL was a bit hectic for us. We did play back-to-back games, we traveled and we played too," Rodrigues said in a virtual press meet on Thursday. Rodrigues said the DC have had good training sessions in the last six days, and that will stand her team in good stead.

"I think getting this break is, honestly, how I look at it and I think how the team is looking at it, that it's working to our advantage," she said.

The Capitals will meet the winner of the Eliminator between Mumbai and Gujarat Giants in the title clash on March 15. "So I think sometimes it's nice

to have this break and yes, you know, we're ready for the finals. They are looking forward to it. We're prepared well. You know, like the other two years, this year has not been like the smoothest sailing for us.

"But like I said in one of the interviews that this team just doesn't know how to give up and we're going to come back stronger this year," she noted.

However, the WPL draw meant that the Capitals advanced to the final without having played a single league match at the Brabourne Stadium.

Rodrigues did not read too much into that. "The thing is that everyone in our team has played on these pitches (in Mumbai). Everyone's pretty familiar with the conditions and the pitches.

"And like I said, we've been having good practice sessions on these off days, which is preparing us well enough to adjust to the conditions. "The Mumbai pitch is a batter's dream. The outfield's fast. So yeah, I mean, we are really looking forward to it and so are our bowlers. They've come up with their plans," she said.

Rodrigues said the experience of skipper Meg Lanning will help DC in landing their maiden WPL title after defeats in the last two editions.

"I think Meg is someone who wants to win, who wants to win every game. The thing I love about Meg, and this is something that I would like to add in myself also. She's calm but aggressive at the same time. And I think as a leader,

that's a very, very crucial quality to have.

"She told me last year that as a captain, it's very important that I set the tone for the team. If I stay calm and because everyone's looking up to me and if I am calm, I know the team is calm." Shafali Verma made a bright return to her run-making ways after a slew of disappointing moments last year, where she was also dropped from the Indian team.

Rodrigues patted the opener for keeping her composure during tough times.

"Shafali is such an inspiration in the way she's come back. The kind of strike-rate and the kind of impact she's been having for the team. I think it just shows her character," she said. Shafali has made 300 runs from eight WPL 2025 matches with four fifties and made those runs at a strike-rate of 157.

"But to be dropped and to come back the way she did, I think hats off to her. I can't wait to see her. I'm sure she'll be back soon in the Indian team too," said Rodrigues. Veteran pacer Shikha Pandey has also contributed heavily to DC's win, taking 11 wickets from eight matches at an acceptable economy rate of 7.01.

In fact, she is currently holding the fifth place in the wicket-taker's list, and Rodrigues lauded Pandey for continuing to churn out impressive performances. "She's always bowled those crucial overs, always nailed her yorkers, always been so crucial in DC winning. She wants the tougher overs.



# Toto Wolff denies rumours of signing Verstappen for 2026

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Melbourne

Mercedes team principal and chief executive Toto Wolff has denied rumours on the eve of the Australian Grand Prix weekend that he's still seeking to sign reigning F1 world champion Max Verstappen for 2026.

Mercedes, which has a new driver line-up this year that sees rookie prospect Andrea Kimi Antonelli join George Russell, is hoping to emerge from its recent lean spell in F1 that has seen it score just five wins from the last three seasons, four of which came in 2024.

But while Verstappen was reportedly on Mercedes' shopping list last year as a top-gun replacement for its then-outgoing star Lewis Hamilton, Silver Arrows' team boss Wolff says extending Russell's contract beyond 2025 is the priority. "I think we've said it pretty clearly last year, and (Verstappen) said the same, we need to concentrate on our driver line-up, we need to do (the best with) that we have," Wolff said Thursday in Melbourne.

"I don't flirt outside if I'm in a good relationship, and that is true for this year, too. So, at the moment that is not on any, let's say, radar and I don't plan to shift my concentration away from these guys and make sure that George has a contract (extension) pretty soon and we agree on the final things."

Plenty of decisions to come Wolff's future driver lineup came into focus this week after McLaren extended its deal with Australian Oscar Piastri, which puts him out of reach during the sport's next big expected grid shuffle in 2027.

"We have had a chat (with Russell) a few weeks ago about what the right timing would be to liaise, and I'm naively or not someone that sticks to what he says," Wolff said.

"These three (including reserve driver Valtteri Bottas) are the combination that I want to go forward with Mercedes, and I have no reasons to doubt that. We're going to find some time, I guess, before the summer."

Russell, a long-time Mercedes protégé who joined the works team in 2022 fresh from three years at Williams, is keen to stay in silver.

"We've had such a long-term relationship, and there's so much trust," Russell said. "We are focused on getting Mercedes back on top and trying to win races, and championships, and to be honest in this sport, the performance speaks."

Hamilton: "most exciting period of my life" Hamilton made it clear in Melbourne that he's moved on, following his record-breaking stint with Mercedes, with the seven-time F1 world champion enjoying life at Ferrari as he prepares for his maiden start with the Scuderia.

# Satwik-Chirag pair enters All England second round

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Birmingham

India's Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty advanced to the second round of the men's doubles competition at the All England Championships, registering a straight-game victory over Denmark's Daniel Lundgaard and Mads Vestergaard.

Returning to the court after his father's loss last month, Satwik, along with his doubles partner Chirag, put on an impressive display, securing a 21-17, 21-15 win in just 40 minutes late Wednesday.

Moments after sealing the victory, Satwik raised his finger to the sky, his gaze fixed skyward perhaps reaching out to his father, searching for him in the beyond.

"It's tough, but that's how life is," said Satwik. "It wasn't expected."

The 24-year-old from Amalapuram expressed his gratitude to his partner for

**During hard times he (Shetty) came to my home town, we practised there a bit, and for that I'm thankful. He was there during my injury**

— SATWIKSAIRAJ RANKIREDDY, PLAYER

being there during this challenging time. "During hard times he (Shetty) came to my home town, we practised there a bit, and for that I'm thankful. He was there during my injury; his parents came down and sssour coach also came down to my home town.

"My father always wanted to bring them there."

Reflecting on the sudden turn of events in the past fortnight, Chirag said: "Credit to Satwik, what he's gone through and how he's come back and decided to play here, nobody could do that.

"Kudos to him, he's a strong-willed person to come out of it, and keep it all

aside, because that's what his dad would've wanted him to do. I'm proud to be his partner."

The duo, seeded 7th, will next take on China's Hao Nan Xie and Wei Han Zeng in the round of 16 on Thursday.

In other matches involving Indian players, Lakshya Sen will face Indonesia's Jonatan Christie, while Malvika Bansod takes on Japan's third seed Akane Yamaguchi, a two-time World Champion.

Malvika had earlier stunned Singapore's Yeo Jia Min in her debut match at the prestigious tournament.

World No. 9 Treasa Jolly and Gayatri Gopichand, who reached back-to-back semifinals at this event, will meet the eighth-seeded Korean pair of Hye Jeong Kim and Hee Yong Kong.

Rohan Kapoor and Ruthvika Shivani Gadde will square off against the fifth-seeded Chinese duo of Yan Zhe Feng and Ya Xin Wei.

# Special Olympics Games: India win five medals on Day 2

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ New Delhi

India secured two gold, two silver, and one bronze medal across two sporting disciplines to extend their medal tally to nine on the second day of the Special Olympics World Winter Games in Turin, Italy. Snowboarding, which brought India four medals on the opening day of the tournament, added two more accolades to the tally. Bharti (division F25) clinched a gold medal in the Novice Slalom Final, while Harshita Thakur (division F26) secured a bronze in the same event. This marked Bharti's second gold medal in the tournament, while Harshita had previously won a silver on the inaugural day. The Indian contingent also made its mark in Alpine Skiing, securing one gold and two silver medals in the discipline.

# Real Madrid thrashes Atletico Madrid in Champions League

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ■ Madrid

Real Madrid beat Atletico Madrid in a Champions League penalty shootout again to keep its title defense alive Wednesday and advance to the quarterfinals.

Defender Antonio Rüdiger scored the decisive spot-kick in a 4-2 shootout win after two Atletico players missed. Marco Llorente's shot struck the bar after Julián Álvarez's score despite slipping was disallowed on video review because he touched the ball twice.

Madrid also beat Atletico in a shootout to win the 2016 final part of a streak of eliminating its city rival in the knockout rounds for four straight years. That hard-luck run started with the 2014 final when Atletico gave up an equalising goal in stoppage time.

Madrid moves on to the quarterfinals to face Arsenal, which also advanced Wednesday along with Aston Villa and Borussia Dortmund. The quarterfinals lineup was completed with Madrid's win in a tense derby that had ended 2-2 on aggregate score.

Atletico led 1-0 after 90 minutes and extra time in a typically tenacious performance at its Metropolitan Stadium to cancel out Madrid's 2-1 advantage from the first leg last week.

"When you get knocked out, it is not easy to digest." Atletico coach Diego Simeone said, "but I go out with a feeling of peace." Two key incidents defined reg-



ulation time. Atletico Madrid scored within 30 seconds and Real Madrid missed a penalty in the 70th minute.

Atletico took the lead with its first attack when England midfielder Conor Gallagher pounced on the ball from close range when a cross by Rodrigo De Paul was deflected into the goalmouth.

Madrid star Vinicius Júnior blazed a penalty kick high over the Atletico goal when he could have sent the 15-time champion through. He was substituted in extra time for his teenage fellow Brazilian, Endrick. Kylian Mbappé and Jude Bellingham stepped up to score Madrid's first two spot-kicks, and Fede Valverde also scored before Lucas Vazquez's kick was saved by Jan Oblak.

It was more relaxed in London, where Arsenal rested some regulars in a 2-2 draw with PSV Eindhoven to run up a 9-3 aggregate score.

Aston Villa also had a stress-free evening at home to ensure England has two teams in the quarterfinals, one night after Premier League leader Liverpool was beaten at Anfield by Paris Saint-Germain in a shootout. Villa won 3-0 against Club Brugge, which played with 10 men from the 17th, after a 3-1 win in Belgium last week. Brugge defender Kyriani Sabbe was sent off for pulling back Marcus Rashford when running clear on goal.

Substitute Marco Asensio, on loan at Villa from PSG, scored twice in the second half to ensure his temporary club will

meet his parent club next.

Borussia Dortmund rallied with two second-half goals to win 2-1 at Lille and advance 3-2 on aggregate. The beaten finalist last season now faces Barcelona.

**Quarterfinals draw**

The quarterfinals pairings are: Arsenal vs Real Madrid, Paris Saint-Germain vs. Aston Villa, Barcelona vs. Borussia Dortmund, Bayern Munich vs. Inter Milan

First-leg games are on April 8-9 and return games are one week later.

**England's unexpected challenge**

There's only one former European champion from England left in the Champions League. Villa's unbeaten home record has driven its run to the quarter-final, with wins against Bayern, Bologna, Celtic and now Brugge.

Liverpool's exit to PSG followed Manchester City being pushed out of the knockout playoffs last month by Real Madrid. Without the Champions League winners in 2019 and 2023, respectively, England's challenge halved to just two.

Villa's 1982 European Cup title is perhaps a less-remembered one in the competition's 70-year history. Arsenal's only time in the final was a loss to Barcelona in 2006.

Villa manager Unai Emery now goes back to Paris where his two seasons as coach there until 2018 seemed to be unsatisfactory for both parties.